



Title

Photography's neoliberal realism

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Photography's neoliberal realism

by Lisa Stein • 01.04.2021

When Boris Johnson was filmed in a laboratory in January 2021 wearing a white coat, face mask and safety goggles, using a multi-channel pipette, the internet caught on quickly. Twitter users mocked the British Prime Minister, who seemingly struggled to dispense equal amounts of a mysterious blue liquid. One scientist retweeted the clip with the caption 'Our thoughts and prayers are with the pipette at this difficult time'. In 2018 photographs of Ivanka Trump 'conducting a scientific experiment' during her visit to a job training and science facility elicited a similar reaction on social media, with many users pointing out that both her loose hair and her turtleneck were safety violations. How these images were read was very different to the message they intended to convey, suggesting that we have learned to see through staged political photo-opportunities. In fact, we associate images of world leaders visiting hospitals or laboratories and inspecting equipment with autocratic regimes and believe that, as citizens of Western democracy, we have become immune to such propaganda.¹

In *Photography's Neoliberal Realism* – part of a series of small inexpensive books on photography and visual culture published by MACK, London – the writer and photographer Jörg Colberg argues that liberal, free-market democracies rely on their own form of visual propaganda, which is 'largely produced by the private sector' (p.7).² Colberg equates what he refers to as 'neoliberal realism' – which is disseminated in the form of photographs in advertising, fashion magazines as well as art galleries – with the state-sanctioned propaganda in the Soviet Union. Like Socialist Realism, the role of neoliberal realism is to legitimise and perpetuate the dominant ideology of the political system it is a part of, in our case 'global neoliberal capitalism' (p.7). Although their intentions are not always clear, the photographers analysed in this book create images that Colberg argues form a natural part – and thus serve to uphold ideals – of our capitalist society.



Fig. 1 The cover of the 2018 *Vanity Fair* Hollywood Issue, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, featuring Nicole Kidman, Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, Tom Hanks, Michael B. Jordan, Zendaya, Michael Shannon, Jessica Chastain, Claire Foy, Harrison Ford, Gal Gadot, Graydon Carter – a former editor of *Vanity Fair* – and Robert De Niro.

In his analysis of works by Annie Leibovitz, Gregory Crewdson and Andreas Gursky, Colberg draws on writers and cultural critics ranging from Boris Groys and Mark Fisher to Siegfried Kracauer, John Berger and Roland Barthes. Colberg's approach is especially reminiscent of Barthes' writings on 'mythologies', in which the social and literary critic deciphers messages that are transmitted by popular culture.³ Similarly, Colberg argues that 'to be able to understand the extent with which we are being subjected to propaganda in service of neoliberal capitalism we need to be able to detect and decipher the photographs that are employed in its service' (p.7). Colberg views the images created by Leibovitz, Crewdson and Gursky as cultural products conditioned by an ideology, one that is not concealed but presents itself as 'natural' in the eyes of the viewer.⁴



Fig. 2 The cover of the August 2020 issue of British *Vogue*, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, featuring Simone Biles.

Colberg first made the connection to the Soviet Union after reading about the removal of James Franco from the cover of the 2018 Hollywood Issue of *Vanity Fair* [Fig.1](#) – shot by Leibovitz – following allegations of sexual misconduct made against the actor.⁵ Colberg draws parallels between this process of erasure and the manipulation of photographs during the Great Purge, when Stalin ordered the removal of political dissenters from archival imagery. Commenting on Franco’s absence Colberg notes that the ‘cover might also be approached as a portrait of the industry’, one ‘that has been rattled by numerous reports of sexual misconduct and/or harassment’ and asks whether ‘excluding such an important and relevant aspect of the industry in a year when the underlying issue is being hotly debated’ would ‘make that issue simply disappear’ (p.11). However, drawing on Groys’s writing on Stalinist art, Colberg explains that asking if this photograph is a representation of reality is ‘beside the point’. What matters is that its ‘intended spectators’ can decipher the encoded message. Central to Groys’s

argument is the idea that rather than being a reflection of reality, the Socialist Realist work of art is a 'hieroglyphic text, an icon', which provides 'hagiographic, demonological, and other such depictions of transcendental events and their world consequences' and can only be 'read by spectators familiar with the appropriate codes' (pp.13–14). The message to viewers of Stalinist art was that only one political ideology was deemed acceptable, and the archival photographs continue to serve as a stark reminder of what would happen to those who disagreed. The cover of *Vanity Fair* functions in the same way; rather than showing Hollywood for what it is – an industry plagued by abuse scandals – it shows Hollywood how it wants to be seen.

It is well known that the 2018 cover of *Vanity Fair* is a composite image. The celebrities were shot separately or in smaller groups and later edited together, which also meant that Franco's removal did not require a reshoot.⁶ Colberg points out that such images have triggered a debate on whether they count as photographs. The fact that this high level of artificiality in Leibovitz's cover did not discourage readers from buying the magazine further underscores his argument that today's viewers not only 'decode' such images but also buy into this fabricated 'reality'.⁷ Like Leibovitz, Crewdson and Gursky use equally high levels of post-production and are commercially successful. However, while their photographs differ in terms of subject-matter, Colberg believes the message being communicated is one and the same. He argues that these three artists 'can be seen as the main proponents of a type of photography which has the implicit purpose of propping up global neoliberal capitalism and its consequences, namely vast inequality in increasingly fractured societies' (p.16).

Colberg begins with an analysis of Leibovitz's seemingly simple but often elaborately staged images of famous individuals, proposing that the photographs 'mimic conventions in classical painting, in particular paintings of powerful people' and that they suggest that Leibovitz's subjects are to 'be seen as part of this art-historical lineage' (p.17).⁸ In addition to the photographer's questionable decision-making when portraying women and Black athletes **FIG.2** **FIG.3** **FIG.4**,⁹ the 'overall heroism that pervades' (p.17) her images legitimises and perpetuates inequality. According to Colberg the heroism of her subjects is often not earned, but 'one that is being inherited or assigned' (p.20). The message here is that one has to be rich or powerful to be photographed by her.¹⁰ Colberg offers a perceptive reading of an image that is unlike Leibovitz's elaborately staged photographs. In a portrait of Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein and COO Gary Cohn, used in the 2010 January issue of *Vanity Fair* **FIG.5**, it is precisely the relaxed posture taken up by the subjects that Colberg argues speaks to their wealth and power: what is blatantly communicated in this photograph is that these men 'can afford to not care what anyone thinks of them' (p.20).



Fig. 3 The cover of the April 2008 issue of *Vogue*, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, featuring LeBron James and Giselle Bündchen.

If Leibovitz's photographs represent the United States' wealthiest one per cent, Crewdson's elaborately staged tableaux of small-town America portray the country's least wealthy fifty per cent. Although Colberg acknowledges the stark differences between their images he argues that Crewdson's cinematic and often melancholic scenes of suburbia equally reinforce ideas of gender, race and class in the United States without offering an alternative to the 'country's dominant cis-gendered heterosexual model' (p.23)

FIG.6. Colberg rightly notes that in Crewdson's photographs people of colour are 'almost completely absent'; his is a white, working-class America, romanticised in all its bleakness.

Commenting on *The Basement* **FIG.7** and *Mother and Daughter* **FIG.8**

Colberg points out the distance between Crewdson's characters ('Where people are pictured together, they seem worlds apart'), the state of the interiors they find themselves in ('With the general environment always being in disrepair or [. . .] in urgent need of some improvement') and how these inadequacies seem to be tied to their 'economic status' (p.25). According to Colberg, the neoliberal realist message underlying Crewdson's images is that 'regular people are failures' (p.26). However, the author's assertion that the artist positions his subjects in a way that suggests their plight is of their own making as opposed to a result of 'the system' is not entirely convincing. To this reviewer, part of what makes these photographs so dreary is the felt presence of something larger, outside of the subjects' control. In Crewdson's interiors, such as the one depicted in *Mother and Daughter*, this is often hinted at through open cupboards, windows or doors.

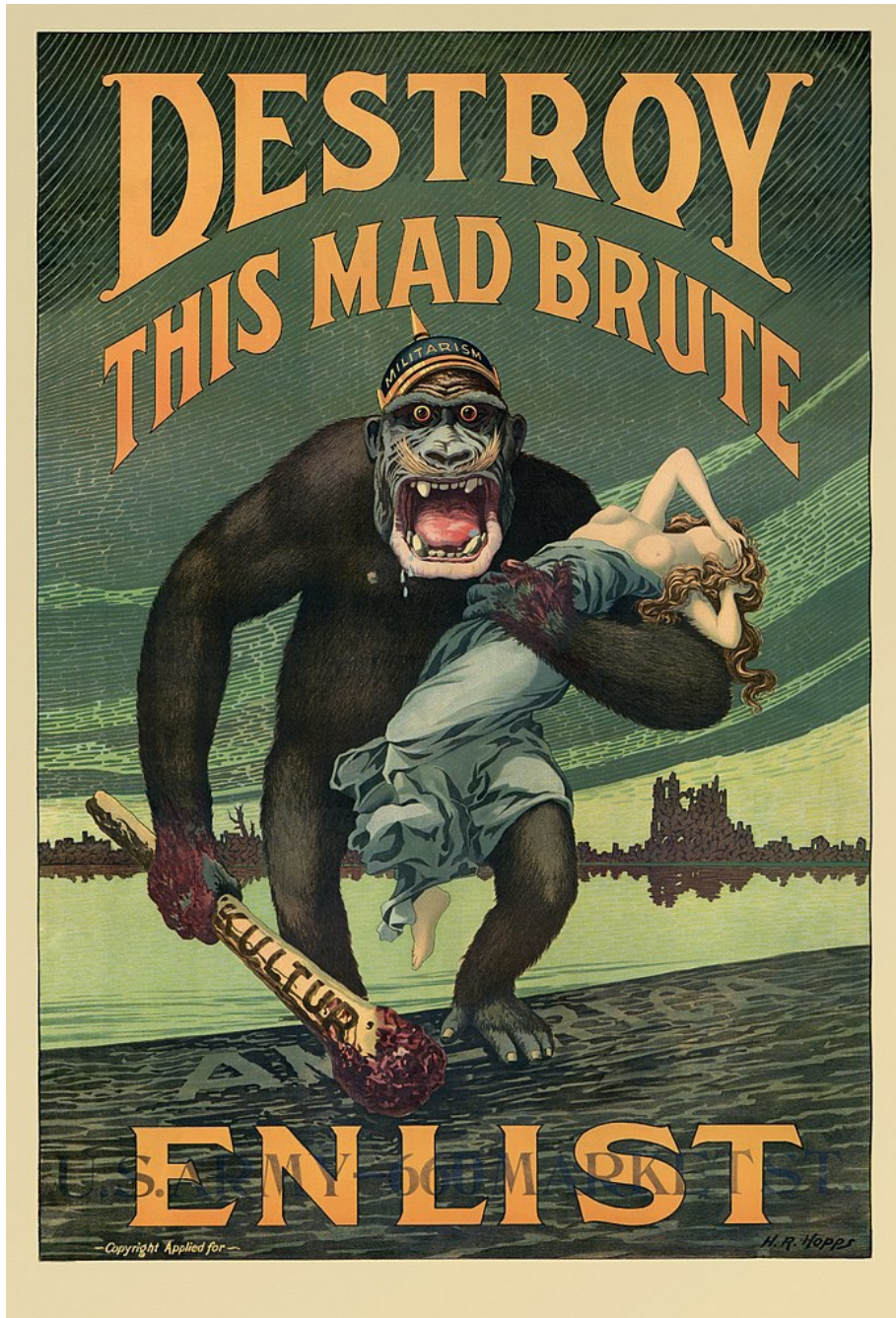


Fig. 4 *Destroy this mad brute Enlist - U.S. Army*, by Harry R. Hopps. 1918. (Courtesy Wikimedia Commons; collection of the Library of Congress, Washington).

Whereas in Leibovitz's and Crewdson's photographs the focus is more or less on the individuals depicted, in Gursky's images 'human figures are either absent, or there are so many of them that the role of the individual doesn't matter at all' (p.27). As with Leibovitz, Colberg draws parallels between Gursky's monumental, digitally manipulated photographs and historical paintings, viewed from overhead, also indicating the presence of something larger – 'essentially, God' (p.27) **FIG.9**. However, contrary to how Gursky's work is commonly discussed,¹¹ Colberg notes that his constructions, which 'go beyond temporal or spatial restrictions' (p.27), would be invisible even to God. For Colberg, Gursky

operates on different level to Leibovitz, not only because his photographs sell for larger amounts of money,¹² but because the worlds he conceives surpass – visually and logically – places that speak of ‘the ultimate power of capital’. For example, his well-known *Bahrain I* (2005), a bird’s-eye view of a race track in the desert, was manipulated to the point where the stretches of road depicted would be undriveable. Gursky’s photographs are visually overwhelming. As Colberg notes, while this is part of their enduring appeal, it also has an immobilising effect on the viewer. Awed by the spectacle, they are no longer able to act: ‘resistance is futile’ (p.28).

Photography’s Neoliberal Realism is an indispensable contribution to photography theory at a time when digitalisation continues to have a significant effect on the status of photography as a ‘discrete medium’, demanding ever higher levels of visual literacy.¹³ One need only think of the sophistication of deepfakes and the rise in popularity of smartphone apps that make use of this technology, such as MyHeritage.com.¹⁴ It is no longer enough to simply look at photographs, whether they are published in a newspaper, on a billboard or, as Colberg points out, displayed in an art gallery. Whereas the images of Ivanka Trump were likely a straightforward exercise in propaganda, one cannot help but think of Boris Johnson’s regular, buffoonish performances for the camera as a tactical distraction. At a time when small businesses in the United Kingdom are still reeling from the effects of Brexit and over 120,000 people have died from a pandemic that has even further damaged the economy, images of Johnson carelessly painting a banana seem to say, ‘don’t worry, keep smiling, everything is just fine’.



Fig. 5 Spread from the January 2010 issue of *Vanity Fair*, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, featuring Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein and COO Gary

Cohn. The photograph was taken around one year after the 2008 financial crisis, during which Goldman Sachs misled investors and profited from the collapse of the mortgage market.



Fig. 6 *Untitled*, by Gregory Crewdson. 2004. Digital pigment print (© Gregory Crewdson; courtesy Gagosian).



Fig. 7 *The Basement*, by Gregory Crewdson. 2014. Digital pigment print, 95.3 by 127 cm. (© Gregory Crewdson; courtesy Gagosian).



Fig. 8 *Mother and Daughter*, by Gregory Crewdson. 2014. Digital pigment print, 95.3 by 127 cm. (© Gregory Crewdson; courtesy Gagosian).

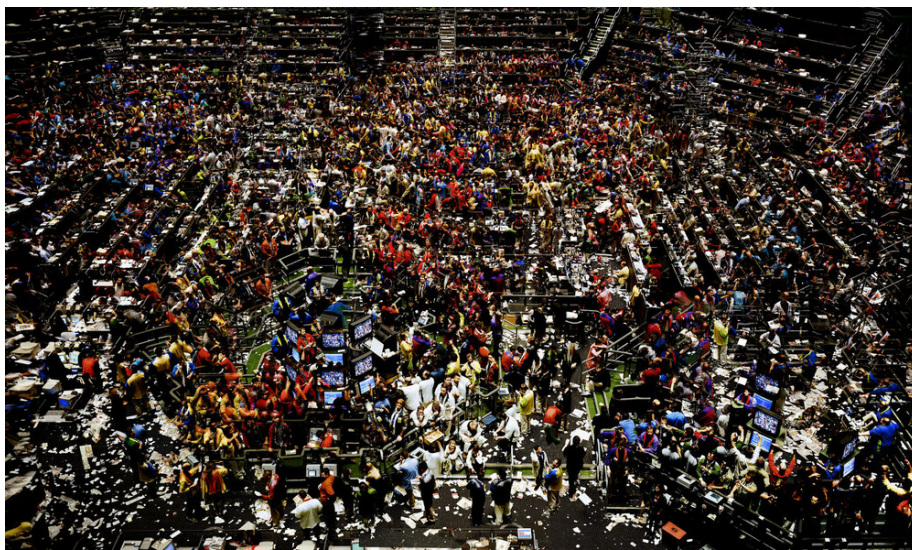


Fig. 9 *Chicago Board of Trade III*, by Andreas Gursky. 1999. Chromogenic print, 185 by 254 by 7 cm. (framed) (© Andreas Gursky / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy Gagosian).

About this book

PHOTO- GRAPHY'S NEOLIBERAL REALISM

Photography's Neoliberal Realism (Discourse 004)

By Jörg Colberg

MACK, London, 2020

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Footnotes

- 1 In 2010 the Portuguese art director João Rocha launched the blog 'Kim Jong Il Looking at Things'. By publishing photographs of the North Korean leader visiting various villages, factories, farms and army barracks with matter-of-fact captions ('Looking at a Juice Box'), Rocha rendered this propaganda device for the North Korean regime absurd, see kimjongillookingatthings.tumblr.com, accessed 1st April 2021.
- 2 Contrary to Mark Fisher's assertion that while it is 'impossible to conceive of fascism or Stalinism without propaganda [. . .] capitalism can proceed perfectly well, in ways better, without anyone making a case for it', Colberg explains that West Germany's social market economy ('*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*') as well as the Reagan/Thatcher model of capitalism, which has 'now morphed into the neoliberal globalised capitalism we live with' (p.15) both relied heavily on propaganda, see M. Fisher: *Capitalist Realism*, Alresford 2009.
- 3 Barthes famously analysed a magazine cover depicting a Black soldier saluting the French flag, which he argued signified ideas of France as a great inclusive empire, see R. Barthes: 'Myth today', in *Mythologies*, London 2009, p.139.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.154.
- 5 See B. Lee: 'James Franco accused in lawsuit of sexually exploiting women', *The Guardian*, 3rd October 2019, available at www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/03/james-franco-lawsuit-los-angeles-acting-school, accessed 28th March 2021.
- 6 See J. Wolcott: 'The 2018 *Vanity Fair* Hollywood Portfolio: 12 extraordinary stars, one momentous year', *Vanity Fair*, 25th January 2018, available at www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/01/hollywood-issue-portfolio, accessed 28th March 2021.
- 7 That the level of artifice in Leibovitz's photographs is not only understood but also desired is skilfully summed up in an episode of the series *Schitt's Creek* (2015–20), when one of the main characters describes his ideal wedding photograph: 'looking for understated, Annie Leibovitz for *Vanity Fair*, I want us to look like two very rich people that have just woken up after fainting on a dusty old couch'.

- 8** Leibovitz's process of combining multiple portraits in one photograph also has a long history. In 1857 George Washington Wilson created a group portrait depicting over one hundred individuals, which involved the first known use of photo montage or collage.
- 9** Colberg discusses two controversial cover photographs taken by Leibovitz for US *Vogue*. Her portrait of the gymnast Simone Biles (August 2020) was criticised for her treatment of the athlete's skin tone and *Vogue* subsequently faced repeated calls to hire more Black photographers. See D.L. Cade: 'Vogue slammed for hiring Annie Leibovitz for Simone Biles cover instead of Black photographer', *Petapixel*, 13th July 2020, petapixel.com/2020/07/13/vogue-slammed-for-hiring-annie-leibovitz-for-simone-biles-cover-instead-of-black-photographer, accessed 28th March 2021. Leibovitz's portrait of LeBron James and Giselle Bündchen (April 2008) was heavily criticised for bearing a striking resemblance to a propaganda poster from the First World War, which featured an aggressive gorilla carrying a limp, topless woman.
- 10** Using Leibovitz's photographs also comes at a considerable cost. When this reviewer sought permission to use her images, she was asked whether the review in question was positive, before being told that Leibovitz was a 'premium photographer' and that digital use for her images started at a minimum of \$750 per image.
- 11** See C. Gunti: 'Andreas Gursky's expanded realities', in *idem: Digital Image Systems: Photography and New Technologies at the Düsseldorf School*, Bielefeld 2019, pp.175–94, at pp.175–76.
- 12** At the time it was sold at auction Gursky's *Rhine II* set a new record for a photograph, see M. Kennedy: 'Andreas Gursky's Rhine II photograph sells for \$4.3m', *The Guardian*, 11th November 2011, available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/nov/11/andreas-gursky-rhine-ii-photograph, accessed 28th March 2021.
- 13** See M. Durden and J. Tormey: 'Introduction', in *idem*, eds: *The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory*, London and New York 2020, pp.1–18, at p.1.
- 14** See www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia, accessed 1st April 2021.

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