

Jews and Germans, Aspects of the True Self.

The photographer Mark W. Berghash has published, in 1985, a book of photographs, accompanied by texts, under this title. The University of California sponsored the publication. The book consists of a series of portraits of Jewish and German persons of approximately the same age, the portraits are commented by texts which register interviews with those persons, and there is an introduction by the author. The introduction explains the hypotheses upon which the book rests, and these hypotheses may be resumed as follows:

According to a theory by the psychologist Dr. Preston G. McLean the facial expression of a subject will reflect deep, usually hidden layers of consciousness, the "true self", if the subject is stimulated by very meaningful words like "Father" or "Mother". This revealing expression may be registered in a photo, if the photographer leaves the subject to himself, and if he asks him to press upon an automatic releaser the moment he has succeeded in concentrating upon the word in question. The photos thus produced may be compared to other similarly produced photos of other subjects, which would permit comparisons between various "true selves" stimulated by the same word. If the subjects to be thus compared were Jews and Germans which have somehow passed through the experience of the holocaust, such a comparison would permit to seize the deep experience which those two groups had with regard to this event

The author does not seem to have much confidence in those hypotheses, because he does not limit himself to showing photos, but adds interviews with the subjects he experiments with. He is right in this lack of confidence: the violent impact of the book upon the reader stems from the texts, and the pictures become eloquent only after the texts had been read. To appreciate this impact, consider what two subjects have to say concerning the stimulus "Father", (pages 18/19):

Jewish woman:

German woman: ; ; ; ; ;

The photos which accompany those texts will reveal the abyss which separates the two women only through the texts, but they will do it violently.

The problem here to be discussed is the relation between text and image. But unfortunately such a discussion is out of the question. After having gone through the blow against one's stomach, one must vomit instead of philosophizing. Of course: the theoretical basis on which the book stands is open to criticism. But how can one criticize this in the face of the enormity which the book tells us? Would not such a critical attitude amount to cynicism? What we have to do under the impact of that unspeakable thing which tries to articulate itself in this book is to shut up; unless, of course, we were capable of praying.