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'(Migration) background': Considerations from an art historical perspective

The German notion 'Migrationshintergrund'—which finds its equivalent in the similarly widespread English 'migration background' - was introduced as an empirical category by German scholars in the late 1990s in order to be able to refer to a biography linked to immigration, regardless of nationality. The professor of education, Ursula Boos-Nünning, for example, used the term in 1998 in the *Kinder- und Jugendreport der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Children and Youth Report of the Federal Republic of Germany), among other reasons, in order to point out the need for children, here of 'Russian-German' parents, to be given language training.[1] After the reform of the German citizenship law in 2000, the expression 'foreigner' has no longer been suitable for identifying numerous individuals, and 'Migrationshintergrund' (migration background) has become a category of official state population statistics (e.g. German Microcensus 2005).[2]

At the same time, 'migration background' has also become part of everyday language. While the notion initially served to name and to make visible the histories of migration, it is now used quite inflationary. Almost arbitrarily it seems to refer to individual needs, characteristics and properties, but also to social challenges, dangers or even potentials, which are to be explained in this way. The use of the notion thus tends to ignore complex interrelationships such as exclusion, racism and discrimination and to individualize problems of society in general. Comedians and cabaret artists have parodied it and its definitions in different ways, making clear not only its unwieldiness but also its deficient attribution and unspecific use. Precisely these aspects are

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[1] Bernhard Perchinig und Tobias Troger, „Migrationshintergrund als Differenzkategorie. Vom notwendigen Konflikt zwischen Theorie und Empirie in der Migrationsforschung," in *Zukunft. Werte. Europa. Die europäische Wertestudie 1990 – 2010. Österreich im Vergleich,* ed. Regina Polak (Vienna: Böhlau, 2011), 283–319, 12f.

[2] For the dissemination of official definitions in Germany and their revisions see the Wikipedia article on 'Migrationshintergrund'.

criticized by various scholars,[3] while from the migrant perspective itself the notion is often rejected as an identification-political external attribution. On the other hand, the association of the "Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen," NdM (New German Media Makers"), suggests "Personen mit Migrationsvordergrund" ("persons with a migration foreground") – as a politically over-correct alternative that is not to be taken entirely seriously.

Image Background

But neither the problem of (statistical) categorizations nor the ambivalence of self- and-other- attributions used by identity-politics will be discussed again here. Rather, from an art scholarly perspective and with a view to the professional use of the notion 'background', some reflections on the metaphorical dimension of the composite 'migration background' are to be made: In art history, a distinction is generally made in the formation of images between foreground, middle- and background. This differentiation has been particularly significant for paintings since the European Renaissance, when the perspective construction of pictorial space was introduced. The so-called central perspective claims that the three-dimensional visual space (Sehraum) can be represented mathematically correct on a two-dimensional surface and can thus serve to depict *the* reality. In the meantime, however, both the analogy between the human gaze and central perspective image construction[4] as well as the claim that its invention is of European origin have been questioned.[5] But what is of primary interest in this context is the question what effect a pictorial space (and space of imagination) structured in this way has on the viewer and what conclusions can be drawn from this for the extended metaphorical use of the term 'background,' which is under negotiation here.

The central perspective assigns the viewer a position from which the pictorial space opens up. All elements are aligned with a (vanishing) point that lies on the horizon line in the background. This has the effect of suggesting an infinite movement into the distance to the viewer. At the level of the image structure, however, the background

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[3] In social sciences or educational studies f.e. Krassimir Stojanov, „Der Migrationshintergrund als Topos in gegenwärtigen Diskursen über Bildungsgerechtigkeit", in *Spannungsverhältnisse: Assimilationsdiskurse und interkulturell-pädagogische Forschung*, ed. Paul Mecheril, Inci Dirim, Mechthild Gomolla, Sabine Hornberg and Krassimir Stojanov (Münster: Waxmann, 2011), 79–90; from the perspective of linguistics e.g. Claudio Scarvaglieri und Claudia Zech, "'Ganz normale Jugendliche, allerdings meist mit Migrationshintergrund.' Eine funktional-semantische Analyse von 'Migrationshintergrund'," *Zeitschrift für angewandte Linguistik* 58, no. 1 (2013): 201–223.

[4] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* [1927] (New York: Zone Books, 1996).

[5] Simon Gérard, *Der Blick, das Sein und die Erscheinung in der antiken Optik* (München: Fink, 1991); Nader M. El-Bizri, „Classical optics and the perspectivae traditions leading to the Renaissance," in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, ed. John Shannon Hendrix, Charles H. Carman (London: Routledge 2010), 11-30.

closes the picture. The viewing subject is thus placed in a position that seems to open a window to the world, a position from which he or she can think of himself or herself as sovereign, i.e. as independent and self-reliant. In colonial historical contexts such representations visualized the conquest of foreign spaces. The viewers were able to imagine themselves in the perspective of the commander or the colonizer, for example on François-Charles Cécile's frontispiece of the *Description de l'Égypte* (*Description of Egypt*, 1809 – 1828), with which one could virtually recreate the French army's campaign in Egypt along the Nile.[6]

The background is highly relevant for the construction of the image subject as well as for the viewer. At the same time – and this is also made clear by the specialized terminology as well as everyday idioms – it is also that which is far away, which is often rather unclear and obscure, blurred and thus ultimately remains as subordinate as it is uncertain. In traditionally constructed paintings, the background only forms the backdrop for the main scene, main characters and primary elements in the foreground and middle ground. The background itself, in a figurative sense, is therefore 'in the background.' Nevertheless, it is necessary in order to locate the essential and the intrinsic in the image, to set it in relation to each other and to anchor it on a shared, albeit hierarchical, 'ground'.

This establishes an understanding of space according to which the background appears to be only peripheral and less significant, but is nevertheless constitutive for the essential - in this case: that which is depicted in the foreground. By moving away from the central perspective and refusing the wandering view into the distant future, modern artists have not only questioned the visual relevance of traditional spatial concepts, but also refused to accept the traditional hierarchization of pictorial spaces into foreground, middle and background. Which pictorial elements are essential and meaningful, which are framing or subordinate, is shifted to other criteria according to this understanding of space and image.

'Background' as a Metaphor of Time

But what if the notion 'background', which is actually meant to be spatial, is used as a metaphor to designate something that actually dates back in time? Something that in most cases happened a long time ago but which is supposed to shape the present up until today. With reference to individuals, the term is used to refer to a background that someone *has* or *possesses*, since the person addressed or, for example, his parents and ancestors experienced or achieved something that allegedly still determines this person to a large extent today. This idea or even the 'knowledge' seems to be inscribed

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[6] Melanie Ulz, *Auf dem Schlachtfeld des Empire. Männlichkeitskonzepte in der Bildproduktion zu Napoleons Ägyptenfeldzug* (Marburg: Jonas, 2008), 21ff.

in the background in such a way that the background constitutes the foreground. It means, that the background, which has been recorded here in time, represents something like a subordinate scenery or foil, which, however, essentially shapes the foreground in the end.

What seems to get lost in this metaphorical transfer is that the background of the image can also suggest sights into an opening expanse - an expanse that can encompass a horizon and space of possibility as well as a potential for the future. The idea is not lost, however, that the observing subject standing outside is able to recognize something through the 'background' called up here, something that characterizes the person in the foreground, identifies him or her and becomes so evident.

In everyday language the originally spatial and now temporal 'background' thus throws the person back to past experiences, episodes and extended contexts and anchors him or her there. Depending on context and combination, this has different consequences and effects. For example, if one speaks of an 'academic background', it is referred to the fact that the person has studied. According to this formulation, the background is relatively 'clear,' unambiguous and, moreover, positive in terms of the achievements made. It also becomes clear in this context that nobody would reduce the person thus characterized to only this background and aspect. In other constellations, however, the background seems to appear rather nebulous to the detriment of the individual in question and, similar to a romantic picture background, contributes to an ambiguity and dubious allocation from which the person in question can no longer be separated.

In the composite term 'migration background', contradictory contexts are called up: While the first notion emphasizes migratory movement, the second, '(back) ground' rather suggests something fixed or even rigid and thus implies a certain *grounding*, which counteracts the first component of the compound. The idea that 'background' – here usually less due to a personal than to a generational history – can have a formative influence on the present, is well agreed from the perspectives of the art and cultural studies. With reference to the term 'migration background', however, the question arises: *Which* history exactly is called up in *what way*?

It can be assumed that less attention is paid to the family 'background' and the experiences of the (perhaps already) migrated parent or grandparent generation here, which may have been made with a 'dominant culture'[7] and its racist exclusions – and, which in some contexts can be understood as an experience of discrimination. Obviously, 'positive' stories are not expressed either, such as those that may already involve the building of social networks and families, school-leaving qualifications or

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[7] For the concept of 'dominant culture' see Birgit Rommelspacher, *Dominanzkultur. Texte zur Fremdheit und Macht* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1995); Iman Attia, Swantje Köbsell and Nivedita Prasad, ed., *Dominanzkultur Reloaded. Neue Texte zu gesellschaftlichen Machtverhältnissen und ihren Wechselwirkungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015); Sabine Hark and Paula Irene Villa, *The Future of Difference. Beyond the toxic entanglement of racism, sexism and feminism* (London: Verso, 2020), 17ff.

flourishing businesses. Rather, there are indications that the term 'migrant background' places the person in a more distant, uncertain and rather dubious past. For usually associated with a non-European country of origin, but (e.g. from a German/Western European perspective) also with a 'Southern or Eastern European' home country, the term tends to articulate the discriminatory idea of supposed backwardness. A person with a 'migration background' is, as it were, fixed in a movement and at the same time permanently linked to an anachronistic place, fixed in an anachronistic time. Ultimately, he or she is thus simultaneously held in abeyance 'forever',[8] in vague spaces, between places and in shifted time spheres that can be captured neither cartographically nor in the factual detail of their history.

Similar determinations can already be made out in photographic representations of 'Gastarbeiter' ('guest workers') from the 1970s and 1980s, the migrant workers from Italy, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, etc. (e.g. in Germany) in 'places of transit' such as pedestrian zones or railway stations.[9] In these visualizations, too, the migration of migrant workers is not shown as being completed in the past, but as an ongoing process as well.

Against this *background* a look at the photo series Heimat (Home) by the by the Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli which was created in 2016-17 for documenta 14 in Kassel, is to follow. Everyday architectural motifs, such as houses, workshops and small factory buildings, graves and monuments, but above all individuals in work situations, groups celebrating festivals, practicing various religious faiths, doing sports, or presenting personal memorabilia are captured in the photographs.

Some of the moments taken seem familiar, similar to our own lives, some may seem rather strange. Thus Shibli adds short explanations to the photographs, giving insight into the places, the people and the contexts shown. It is only through these additions that we learn more about the individual motifs, which absorb the associated stories of flight and migration. We read about the experiences of the so-called 'expellees' ('Heimatvertriebene'), who came to Hessen at the end of the Second World War, and of those who were recruited as 'guest workers' ('Gastarbeiter') in the 1960s and 1970s in Germany. We learn how they were confronted with prejudices among the local population, but also how they built up an existence and a life for themselves and how they remember their past and origins today. Some of the stories are similar, others differ considerably from each other and some also evoke unease because of the articulated beliefs about home or belonging.

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[8] If this can be traced back to insights from art history, it would be a still image that represents a movement and thus, paradoxically, 'captures' it.

[9] As Burcu Dogramaci has shown in her contribution among others: "Fotografische Ihr-Bildung. Migration in der Bundesrepublik der 1970er und 1980er Jahre im Blick der Kamera," in *Migration ein Bild geben. Visuelle Aushandlungen von Diversität*, ed. Christoph Rass and Melanie Ulz (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 9–33.

But why is Shibli's art work worth mentioning here and how do her photographs and stories relate to the term 'migration background' and its semantics? For the photographs capture a present into which – and the written explanations make this clear – the past is inevitably inscribed, but not necessarily recognizable as the 'background' that is supposed to make the past recognizable or even an insight evident.

In fact, the image of migration that Shibli's photo series creates is not a consistent one. Rather, it is diverse, fragmentary and composed of different stories and narrative contexts – deliberately fragmentary and incomplete. This image necessarily includes histories of a past and an 'old home', past experiences of distress, displacement and exclusion. Above all, however, the photographs capture the life of the migrant communities today, showing a here and now.

The images are snapshots. They focus on places and individuals in the present. Their perspective is never 'from above', they never give a perspective of surveillance or seemingly neutral distance. The photographs do not claim to be representative, do not want to provide a 'background', nor do they come too close to the people shown. Rather, Shibli creates images that treat the migrant protagonists with respect and sensitivity, and they do so without wanting to explain past situations, contexts or even the peculiarities of the group of people shown or to make their past and present completely visible in all their complexity. Even the metaphor 'migration background' is not capable of doing this; its use outside of statistical categorizations therefore seems completely absurd.