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Iconographic Exploitation of Photographs Agency Fonds: the Example of Black Star in the USA during the 1960s and the 1970s¹

“The indispensable Emma Gurry was in charge of the photo library – the back inventory of prints accumulated for years of assignments. She had been with Black Star from the very beginning and she knew every picture. When a client called with a request, Emma singlehandedly did the research, made the selection, generated the paperwork and packed it all up. The material would then be turned over to Fred Viertel, who would ferry it to its destination².”

Photographic press agencies are much studied from a news perspective, a specificity they claim and on which the history of photojournalism is built for the most part, especially from the second half of the 20th century. Black Star, “a major photographic press agency”³, is one of the flagships in this prestigious American history: and was, in Matt Herron’s words, “a major force during those years”⁴. The presentation of the Black Star Collection kept at the RIC⁵ underlines both the diversity of the production is highlighted and the commercial aspect of the agency⁶ (by assigning a special place to the Corporate⁷). However, these agencies, which are responsive to multiple news items (news, politics, culture, etc.), i.e. are sensitive to the date of the events photographed, paradoxically adopt a classification of images by theme, including for news, reduced to keywords. The thematic management of images and/or Emma Gurry’s work in the Black Star Agency’s photo library still are two poles of a blind spot in the history of photojournalism: the iconographic exploitation of these collections. Most of the Werner Wolff archive held at the RIC concerns his production of for Black Star (AG02.02, 1,125 files)⁸. Partly classified into two sub-series “Commissioned for Corporations” and “Commissioned for The Press”, most of his production (658 files) remains unallocated⁹. What does it correspond to?

¹ I would like to thank Anna Jedrzejowski and Charlene Heath for the quality of their answers to my requests.

² TOROSIAN, Michael, *Black Star. The Historical Print Collection of the Black Star Publishing Company*, Toronto, Lumiere Press/The Ryerson Image Center, 2013: 46.

³ POPESCU, Doina, “Envisioning the Ryerson Gallery Research Centre”, Claude Baillargeon, *Ciel Variable*, n°88, printemps-été 2011 : 56-63 : 59. <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/64862ac>.

⁴ TOROSIAN, Michael (2013): 59.

⁵ <https://ryersonimagecentre.ca/collection/black-star-collection/>

⁶ « Black Star was based on a European model of agency management, handling the printing, pricing and billing of the photographs, as well as operating as a stock agency », MANCO, Sara, “Finding Wolff: Intellectually arranging the Werner Wolff Fonds at the Ryerson Image Centre”, BA Kansas State University, 2012: 37. COLEMAN, Allan Douglass, « Archive and Artefact. The Black Star Photo Agency », *Border crossings : a magazine for the arts*, vol. 32, n°1, 2013: 3. PANZER, Mary, “The Meaning of the Twentieth-Century Press Archive,” *Aperture* 202 (Spring 2011): 46-51.

⁷ “Annual reports and corporate accounts had never been considered a part of BS’s business ; at most, they serviced the occasional needs of a few companies who wanted pictures for their in-house magazines.”, TOROSIAN, Michael (2013): 51.

⁸ MANCO, Sara, “Finding Wolff: Intellectually arranging the Werner Wolff Fonds at the Ryerson Image Centre”, BA Kansas State University, 2012: 33.

⁹ “With so many different types of clients, the series was one of the most difficult to arrange. With over 1,100 files in the series, breaking the files into smaller, more manageable groups was necessary. [...] Therefore, corporate assignments are grouped into their own subseries and work commissioned for the press is grouped into a different subseries. *But not all work was able to be divided into these two categories. The remaining files have been kept in the main Black Star series*”, MANCO, Sara (2012): 14.

“The “Public” Life of Photographs analyzes how our understanding of both the role and the content of photographs depends on the way we access them¹⁰”. This research project wishes to focus on professional practices that disclose of other ways in which photographs produced in agencies are disseminated and contribute to the conditions of image visibility: the iconographic exploitation of the collections. Except for professions that are almost absent from the history of photography, such as iconographers and archivists, these practices are less described and little known. The operating archives of the companies that are the agencies form an often-missing documentation and favor a conservation of the collections concentrated solely on photographs¹¹. Giving space to the narrative of other professional actions makes it possible to understand how fonds are managed and used in less visible ways.

Affiliated to the technical services in the branch¹², iconographers and archivists leave marks of their actions in the collections, which can be read in particular in the ranking of images. These professionals manage the daily sales of the image fonds, customer requests and explain the filing choices for an efficient global exploitation of these fonds. Their testimony is both an entry point to describe other uses of the latter and a way to enable the production of other photojournalism narratives. The marks of their management also make it possible to work on the articulation of the links and coordination between the agency's various productions. In the news flow, photographs that had not been chosen by the editorial (mainly associated with the news) fall into the iconographic collection, available for all uses (and no longer only those related to their newsworthiness for a specific moment) and join the iconographic management of the collection¹³. Similarly, current photographs reutilized over time for anniversaries or commemorations are also sold for other iconographic occasions. Since image production is extremely expensive, this global management meets the need for maximum profitability. Finding and multiplying the profitability possibilities of the photographs produced is an economic necessity for agencies; including to those that define themselves as news agencies, and are focused on current and therefore immediate issues. The recycling and re contextualization of images so as to multiply their uses (and therefore sales) is similar to the problems of illustration and photo libraries¹⁴. Thus, working on these aspects gives, in return, information on current issues and news. In the years 2000-2005, these professions had again gained an important role in the selection of disseminated images through databases¹⁵, at the time of the digitalization (or even the sale) of silver collections and their imposing mass and costly preservation¹⁶.

¹⁰ GERVAIS, Thierry (ed.), *The "Public" Life of Photographs*, Cambridge, The Mit Press/RIC books, 2016: 11.

¹¹ POTTER, Lauren, *A Journey in Collections Management: The Creation of a Finding Aid for The Black Star Ephemera Collection At the Ryerson Image Centre*, BA, Agnes Scott College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2013 : 23-24

¹² LEBLANC, Audrey, DUPUY, Sébastien, « Le Fonds Sygma exploité par Corbis. Une autre histoire du photojournalisme », *Études photographiques* n°35, printemps 2017 : 88-111, 96-98.

¹³ LEBLANC, Audrey, DUPUY, Sébastien, (2017): 88-111. <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01619171>. Also, Interview with EB, archivist at Magnum Agency, 2017.

¹⁴ In a different context, “Javitz measured value in terms of “usefulness”—she sought to make it possible for photographs to be used, and used again and again. The first use or first publication of a photograph was for her merely a springboard for subsequent uses.”, PANZER, Mary, “Pictures at work. Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library Picture Collection”, in GERVAIS, Thierry (ed.) (2016): 128-151. 132.

¹⁵ “In the process, these deals and many others have generated lots of work for appraisers, archivists, and catalogers who advice both buyers and sellers.”, PANZER, Mar (2011): 46 (about Magnum). Interview with IM, iconographer at *L'Express*, 2019.

¹⁶ “The Library that Emma Gurry had once tended was now a vast treasury containing approximately one million black and white prints and some ten million color slides”, TOROSIAN, Michael (2013): 60.

How can we evaluate, appraise, and assess this management in the activity of an agency like Black Star? The proposed method consists in focusing on the years 1960-75 to compare the indexations of different parts of the collections (whose original classification has been preserved¹⁷ by the RIC) with those of other similar collections: photographs of the AFP, AP, UPI agencies that served as editorial support for the ORTF¹⁸ television news (1964-74)¹⁹, and to cross-check these observations with information obtained through interviews with iconographers and agency archivists as part of an ongoing research project supported by the Institut Pour la Photographie des Hauts de France²⁰. Finally, we would use the RIC in-house database to carry out comparative research in the Black Star Collection: by date for comparisons with the fonds identified news over this period (proportion of images, for example); analyze whether the "unknown" fields (date, author, place, etc.) correspond to iconographic uses; search by name of valued photographers from this period and analyze their production (diversity of images, diversity of their destinations, proportions news, etc.).

The years 1960-75 correspond to the takeover of the management of the Black Star agency by Howard Chapnick (January 1, 1964). Little known in the agency's history (unlike its creation and launch by its three charismatic founders), these years belong to one of the most glorified moments in the world of photojournalism due to the very dense news coverage²¹. Therefore analyzing the place and impact of the agency's iconographic activity during this period contributes to a thick description of the history of photojournalism as a whole.

¹⁷ "We have the prints of the BSC carefully catalogued and stored exactly as they were in the agency, with important materials from the hanging files in which the photos were originally housed.", POPESCU, Doina (2011): 60.

¹⁸ Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française.

¹⁹ It is stored in the same the way it was stored in the ORTF's library. The housing of the prints is very similar to that of those of Black Star Agency (envelops with keywords). See also the ranking of AFP's archives: ANR (2007-2011), Mickael Palmer (dir.), Laboratoire de recherche Communication, Information, Medias, University Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle: <http://www.univ-paris3.fr/anr-archives-afp-23267.kjsp?RH=1505727285324>

²⁰ <https://www.institut-photo.com/programme-recherche-creation/>. In collaboration with les Archives nationales, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, EHESS Paris/Université de Lille.

²¹ "A legion of photographers [...] distinguished themselves in their reportage of the personalities, the spectacles and the tragedies of the decade: the cold war, manned space flight, campus unrest, the assassinations of Kennedy and King, the war in Vietnam.", in TOROSIAN, Michael (2013): 59. (For the 1980s : 60). See also the Front pages of *Life magazine* from the 1960s to 1975 : https://books.google.fr/books/about/LIFE.html?id=R1cEAAAAMBAJ&redir_esc=y

COLLECTIONS and ARCHIVES

1) WERNER WOLFF ARCHIVE [AG02]

a) AG02.02 Black Star Series

- **Ca. 1945-1989 > ca. 658 files** [B&W, color. Canada Europe, The Middle East, Central America, United States]
- Comparisons with ranking of AG02.02.01 (Corporate) and AG02.02.02 (Press).

b) AG02.04 Ephemera Series

2) THE BLACK STAR COLLECTION OF PRESS PRINTS

a) Werner Wolff Press prints held in the Black Star Collection at RIC (~ 2,276)¹.

b) Inventories and databases

- Black Star Subject Catalogue: Excel spreadsheet [Penelope Dixon and Associates Black Star Inventory Spreadsheet] and browser by Black Star Subject²

“The following lists the subject headings the Black Star photo agency used to catalogue their photographs in the photo agency library. This original order has been maintained by the Ryerson Image Centre and is searchable alphabetically.”
- Excel spreadsheet that outlines how the 206 filing cabinet drawers were stored in the Black Star office.
- The in-house database of the RIC: to search by year, to work on the “unknown” (author, date, place, etc.), ...

3) THE BLACK STAR EPHEMERA COLLECTION (1935-[ca.1990])

- **“Series 4: Subjects”** Drawers 142-206³
 - Working mainly on those concerning the 1960s-1975. For example:
 - 4.2 Sub-series [Drawers 143: Animals, Archeology...] Date : 1953-1972
 - 4.7 Sub-series [Drawers 148: Civil Rights] Date 1962-1968
 - 4.8 Sub-series [Drawers 149: Civil Rights...] Date 1960s-1970s
 - 4.9 Sub-series [Drawers 150: Demonstrations] Date 1936-1969
 - 4.31 Sub-series [Drawers 172: Streackers [sic]...] Date 1965-1985 [...]
 - Comparisons with the Black Star Collection of Press Prints⁴
- Comparisons with “Series 1: Countries and Places” and “Series 3: Personalities”

¹ “Approximately 2,276 prints from negatives taken by Werner Wolff are held in the Black Star Collection at the Ryerson Image Centre. Corresponding negatives and assignment information are in the Werner Wolff fonds. The individual prints in the Black Star Collection have been linked to Werner Wolff in the Ryerson Image Centre database Mimsy XG.”, MANCO, Sara L. (2012) : 32.

² <http://mira.imagearts.ryerson.ca/collections/browse.php?module=objects&id=15&index=A>

³ POTTER, Lauren (2013): 87-103.

⁴ “The sub-series that follow are grouped by the drawer in which they were found, and the number of envelopes in each drawer varies. The title of the sub-series begins with the drawer number from the original filing order of the agency and then moves into a description of what is in the drawer. The description is based on a spreadsheet that was created by Penelope Dixon and Associates during the appraisal process of the Black Star collection, which provides subject headings for all the prints. *By combining these two names it creates a bridge between the ephemera and photographic collections.* This allows researchers to look at a glance at what is in the drawer, but also how the overall archive was arranged by Black Star.”, POTTER, Lauren (2013): 12.

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