

Horror vacui: Racial Misalignment, Repair and Imperial Legitimation in German National Socialist Portrait Photography

Conférencière : Anna Skarpelis, University of Basel

National Socialist Germany premised its claims to European dominion on racial purity and supremacy. At the same time, their very own scientific research into racial belonging revealed most Germans to be mixed-race and barely « Nordic ».
How did they resolve this contradiction and retain domestic legitimacy to rule ? Drawing on German-language archival records and fifteen volumes of a photobook series portraying the « German face » published between 1932 and 1945 by Erna Lendvai-Dircksen, I suggest that an inward-turning racialization of the Christian German face domestically legitimated the National Socialist empire. Compared to the usual injurious and pernicious characteristics of racialization, the horror vacui form of overmarking has few adverse effects on the population it targets, but becomes crucial in stabilizing racial difference-based rule.
Second, photography and its accompanying anthropological narratives provided a way out of racial misalignment by means of three strategies of racial repair: implementing racial relativism, consolidating racial heterogeneity, and deferring racial purity to unspecified futures.

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Bâtiment Géopolis
Salle 2137 et en ligne

Informations :
florian.jaton@unil.ch, loic.riom@unil.ch

Animateur·trice·s : F. Jaton et L. Riom, Ph. Sormani

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