

## **Photography as a mode of enquiry: on the perception of children with educational needs<sup>1</sup>**

### 1 Introduction

In the Kingdom of Württemberg, children from the lower social classes were first perceived as a growing social problem during the agricultural crises of the early 19th century, and later during the process of structural change that accompanied industrialization. In the south of Germany, attempts to define and address this issue resulted above all from a cooperation of state social policy and religiously inflected bourgeois charity in the tradition of Christian charitable activity. Between 1823 and 1843 alone, 15 child rescue centres with a Pietistic orientation were founded in Württemberg; once established, these bourgeois associations remained the most important pillars of public alternative education until well into the 20th century (cf. Priem 1994).

The underlying principle of this approach was that social problems were not to be addressed with political or economic measures but rather through ethical and moral education. The secular religious mode of enlightenment, namely the establishment of order and prosperity through pedagogical techniques that were intended to act in the long term as a constraint towards self-constraint, entered into an alliance with Pietistic religiousness, where the belief in the watchful eye of God as a persistent, invisible form of observation was likewise – albeit for different reasons – meant to guarantee self-discipline. It was no coincidence, therefore, that the rising generation from the lower strata of society emerged as the target group. Childhood as a particularly sensitive period for educational influence of all kinds became the focus of the fight against poverty, in which state initiatives and the bourgeois charitable activities of Pietistic circles in Württemberg worked hand in hand throughout the 19th century. The educational concept of the child rescue centres proved very durable through periods of historical transformation, and persisted almost unchanged until the 1960s. It was not until then that problem definitions and analytical frameworks for ‘educational need’ based on social science principles became widely acknowledged and led to conceptual changes in educational practice in children’s homes.

### 2 Attempts to describe children with educational needs

During the foundation period of the institutions, numerous attempts were made to describe and identify children with educational needs. For example, the state’s desire for control resulted in the precise bureaucratic registration of those children from the poorest areas of Württemberg who were deemed to be especially neglected, and for whom free places in the rescue centres were to be funded. To this end, records were drawn up by local authorities in the years between 1838/39 and 1852/53 (cf. StAL E 191/Bü 4188, 6064, 6049), which contained – in addition to general information on the existence of schools and the regularity of school attendance in the various municipalities – individual descriptions and information on the respective family circumstances of the children in question. In all probability, the only lists that have survived from this period are those for the years 1847, 1849 and 1852, which provide information on 272 children. It can be determined from these lists that the data entry forms had a uniform structure and were intended to provide information on the child’s state of health, intellectual capacity and ‘moral condition’, on legitimate or illegitimate birth, on the death of one or indeed both parents, on the father’s and/or mother’s profession or occupation, as well as on the parents’ financial circumstances and reputation. Even with no knowledge of the individual results, the intended scope of the survey gives an indication of how – or using what indicators – ‘educational need’ could be caused and determined in the eyes of the leading

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<sup>1</sup> A similar article has been published in German language in Meike S. Bader/Elke Kleinau/Helga Kelle (eds.), *Bildungsgeschichten* (Cologne: Böhlau 2006) 11-24.

charitable body. With the exception of the great poverty suffered by all the families, however, the findings of the local surveys conducted on the basis of these classifications frequently showed a somewhat divided picture (cf. Priem 1994: 107–131).

In the records for the years 1847, 1849 and 1852, the state of health of around 71% of the 272 children was described as good. Intellectual capacity was positively rated in approximately 50% of the children; 58% were legitimate and 42% illegitimate; and only 29% of the children came from incomplete families. As mentioned above, the parents' financial circumstances were described as poor in all cases. As far as their reputation was concerned, 25% of the mothers were positively rated, approx. 2% were described as average and approx. 73% were negatively rated. The majority of fathers – 78% – were also given a negative rating in this respect. This shows that the social background and the social climate in the parental home did not necessarily lead to a negative evaluation of the child's intellectual capacity or state of health. Further information on the type of evaluation criteria used can be gained from the individual classifications of the children's intellectual capacity. Besides relatively neutral-sounding terms such as 'good', 'fair' or 'low', there are some more strongly emphatic descriptions. At the positive end of the scale, these include on the one hand attributes that are more directly related to the child's intellectual capacity, such as 'bright', 'alert' and 'gifted', and on the other – albeit in rather rare cases – terms that are more closely related to the child's personality and express moral approval, such as 'neat' or 'diligent'. At the negative end of the scale, however, the descriptions remarkably often involve – besides quantifying data – terms that express moral disapproval, such as 'slovenly', 'flighty', 'wayward', 'rough' or 'lazy'. Only in one instance – but nevertheless – is a child's low intellectual capacity related to its social background, as indicated by the remark 'inhibited by poverty'. The classifications imposed by the state reveal a trend in that although poverty was a consistent feature and could be regarded as a fairly reliable indication of the negative reputation of the parents, it was not taken to be necessarily connected to the intellectual disposition of a child with educational needs. Low intellectual capacity, however, was often associated with character flaws and moral weaknesses. As far as 'moral condition' itself was concerned, around 35% of the 272 children were judged positively in this respect, a further 35% were judged negatively, and the majority of those remaining were not assessed at all. In the negative evaluations, the term most frequently used is 'verwahrlost' (neglected or wayward). In addition, it is often noted that the negatively rated children beg, steal and lie. Other terms used in the negative characterization are for example 'depraved', 'wild' and 'rough'. It is important to note that only a good third of the children classified as having educational needs were given negative evaluations of personality or morals by the local authorities.

As far as the child rescue centres themselves were concerned, whose perception and descriptions of their clientele are preserved above all in the form of annual reports, the image of a sinful, wayward child lacking in character and morals and therefore in need of education became firmly established over the course of the 19th century. The annual report of the Mathildienstift in Ludwigsburg, for example, states that, "The children who are brought to our institution, however, are neglected or have been abandoned to a state of neglect. It is not only the emotional side of these children that has degenerated, but rather the whole structure of their soul that must first be brought out of disorder and corruption and then educated," (31st year, 1866: 12; for a more detailed analysis see Priem 1990 and 1994). From the last third of the 19th century onwards, penal legislation and compulsory education laws led above all to a focus on the delinquent juvenile as the main target for institutional education. As a result, despite the fact that the 1922 National Youth Welfare Law (RJWG) placed juvenile welfare and care in a common legal framework for the first time, the negative image of the delinquent and morally corrupt youth largely determined the educational methods employed by these institutions, and had a lasting and standardizing effect on the perception of their clientele (cf. Roth 1983).

The fact that every mode of classifying and describing children with educational needs was determined and clouded by cultural templates and models of childhood and youth<sup>2</sup> is however particularly evident in photographic material from the period, and it is to this issue that I would now like to turn my attention.

### 3 Photography as a visual method of observation<sup>3</sup>

Photography has traditionally been associated with the notion of making a precisely accurate reproduction of historical reality. However, at least since its recent 'discovery' as a historical source and artistic product, a wide range of points of departure for a more intensive exploration of this genre have emerged. On the whole, the approaches to image analysis, which are generally applicable to all genres of image-making, can be divided into five branches: (1) firmly established in the art-historical realm is Erwin Panofsky's method of iconographic and iconological interpretation. It places the main emphasis on the decoding of symbols as bearers of meaning (Panofsky 1979). (2) In addition, since the mid-1980s a number of approaches have been developed, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu among others, which explore images as social and discursive praxis (cf. Jäger 2000: 79–87). (3) Emphatically introduced into the art-historical debate in the German-speaking realm by Wolfgang Kemp (1985: 7–20) under the heading of "Kunst als Beschreibung (The Art of Describing) is on the other hand a proposal by Svetlana Alpers (1983). Central to this method of interpretation are not the objectified assertions, meanings and documentary character of the visual product, but rather visual modes of production as an epistemological practice. The approaches developed subsequently by Jonathan Crary (1990) and Hans Belting (2001) can be regarded as complementary to this method, in that the decisive aspects relate to viewer orientation and the history of perception or media history and the anthropology of the image respectively.

These last-mentioned approaches seem promising with regard to the interpretation of photographic records from the perspective of educational history for the following reason: unlike texts, the status of pictures is primarily visible, which in turn is due to instruments or techniques of image production. As far as photography is concerned, this means that the importance of the camera as an instrument of perception, as a means of visually describing social facts and a specific technique of image production is emphasized. This then casts a different light on the question as to the objectivity and authenticity of phototechnical perception and of seeing through the 'eye of the camera', which in turn has consequences for the analysis of visual sources.

"The history of vision," writes Ralf Konersmann (2nd edition, 1999: 18) in the introduction to a published collection of texts, was "from the very beginning" closely tied to the "critique of vision". Sensory vision was regarded on the one hand as a means of disclosure, exposure and production of evident proof; it stood for empirical precision, evidence, loyalty to the facts, and the establishment of certainty and authenticity. On the other hand, however, vision was equally associated with illusion, delusion, limitedness, untruth and deceptive appearance. In this respect, Konersmann's reference to the "dual structure of vision" (ibid. 14) is accurate; from an epistemological point of view he considers this duality to be due to lasting differences between intellectualism and empiricism. However, he points out that "modern pictorial art" (Bildkunst der Moderne), as well as the ongoing modification of optical instruments, mean that vision itself is questioned time and time again, whereby "the critique and rehabilitation of vision" can be dialectically reconciled (ibid. 30, 45, see also Crary 1990). It seems reasonable to

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<sup>2</sup> On various cultural models of childhood and youth, see for example Baader 1996 and Roth 1983. Christa Berg (2000) makes the point that although social reality and ideology of childhood are interconnected, they can nevertheless differ distinctly.

<sup>3</sup> In an article on 'Fotografie als epistemologische Praxis: Aspekte des Bilderwissens über Familie' ('Photography as an epistemological practice: aspects of pictorial knowledge about the family'), published in Rudolf W. Keck/Sabine Kirk/Hartmut Schröder (eds.), *Das Bild in der Historischen Forschung* (Hohengehren: Schneider 2006) 124-139, I examined the significance of visual methods of researching social facts in the same way.

assume, therefore, that photography likewise combines both aspects, in that it not only records the interaction and discrepancy between the image and social reality, between accurate perception and ideal, between individually and culturally preformed models; it also subjects these to critical evaluation. The claim that photography, because it does not resolve this duality but instead plainly makes use of it, must therefore be regarded as a pure means of deception – Jonathan Crary refers to the “denial of the body, its pulsings and phantasms, as the ground of vision” through photography (1990: 136) – can be refuted with arguments put forward by the scientific theorist Ludwik Fleck (1983: 147–174) in his 1947 essay “Schauen, sehen, wissen” (Looking, seeing, knowing). Fleck pointed out that scientific knowledge (and this also applies to the natural sciences) is subject to particular social conditions and conventions of perception, the individual expression of which he describes as “Denkstile” (styles of thought). For example, he provides an impressive description of how, following the invention of the microscope, the scientific definition of bacterial groups at first oscillated between different possible classifications before one scientifically accepted visual image asserted itself and became firmly established, which in turn determined subsequent research. However, this in no way meant that the development process was complete, because according to Fleck, such positively sanctioned forms and markings also lead to the discovery of new shapes and structures, ones which diverge from these norms and also appear initially in a state of oscillation. In this respect, the results of natural scientific research are always fundamentally determined – in both a positive and negative sense – by pre-existent conventions as well as by the invention of particular measuring instruments and devices. As such, every piece of scientific knowledge is in Fleck’s view “a process between the individual, his style of thought, which ensues from the fact of belonging to a social group, and the object.” (Ibid. 168) Applied to photography, the following conclusion can be drawn on the basis of what has been presented so far: similar to the situation found in an experimental laboratory, the photographic gaze isolates and fixes its object of study, and it is this process which exposes the object to attentive perception. The result is influenced by prevailing social conditions in both cases, but this by no means makes it a deceptive illusion. Viewed from this perspective, “visual discovery through art”, as Ernst Gombrich (1982) once described it, is produced under similar conditions as scientific knowledge. In both situations it has to do with styles of thought or conventions of perception as well as their continuation, differentiation and possible correction using methods of isolation and detachment that are in turn wholly subject to social, cultural and technical conditions. For this reason, the accusation that is made with respect to photography, namely that it isolates details from their wider context in order to – echoing Walter Benjamin – “strip the make-up from reality”, can definitely also be viewed in a positive light (Benjamin 1931/1980: 208). A particular characteristic of photography is in fact its potential to question the epistemic value of realistic depiction that is deemed to be objective. For “visual discoveries” are made, according to Gombrich (1982: 37), when “the normal relationship of recognition and recall is reversed between the picture and reality, so that we genuinely recognize pictorial effects in the world around us, rather than the familiar sights of the world in pictures.”

With respect to institutional photography, the significance of the camera thus becomes a key issue, not only as an instrument of perception and observation but also as a visual means of subjecting cultural formulae of childhood and youth as well as notions of educational need, ability and success to reciprocal scrutiny.

From the collection of surviving institutional photographs relating to the child rescue centres in Württemberg (cf. Priem 1990 and 1994), three photographs dating from around 1920 which were taken by an unknown photographer in the child rescue centre in Tuttlingen have been selected as examples for analysis in terms of the visual questioning, perception and inspection of children with educational needs. Similar kinds of photographs from other institutions in Württemberg do exist but are seldom of such high quality.



Fig. 1 Boys from the Tuttlingen child rescue centre (c. 1920)

The first illustration shows 14 boys from the Tuttlingen rescue centre. The photograph was most likely taken in daylight with a large-format camera, whose complex technology required careful planning. The exposure of an image took around two to four seconds, depending on the weather conditions. To prevent blurred images, the sitters therefore had to assume and hold a fixed pose, looking into the camera, until the exposure time was up. The photographer placed the children in front of a light background, which not only produced clear, sharply defined contours on the resulting black-and-white print of the image, but also makes the depicted scene appear like a scientific specimen. The photographic composition can be divided into two halves that are connected by a boy in sharp focus who is sitting roughly in the centre of the group. Although simple, the children's clothing does not appear uniform. With only one exception, their jackets do not have lapels and are neatly buttoned up. All of those depicted are wearing well-worn, sturdy, yet surprisingly neatly laced shoes, in addition to their simple trousers or knee-length shorts. Five boys are wearing headgear in the form of caps with no peak or brim, one of which even resembles a fez. A noticeable detail is that almost all of the children are holding agricultural tools. One boy is clasping what appears to be a hen, while another has both arms wrapped firmly around the head of a sheep. This is also a reference to the pictorial tradition of Christian art, in which the lamb is understood as symbolizing Christ. At first glance the group seems lively and animated; this impression is created above all by the open, cheerful expression on the face of the boy sitting in an almost relaxed pose in the centre of the picture. A further positive effect may not have been fully achieved until during the development stage in the lab, when the photographer brightened up the smiling, carefree figures in the right half of the picture, drawing them into the light for the viewer to see more clearly. By contrast, the left-hand group, made up of five children, is considerably darker and more serious in expression. All of these boys are holding heavy tools. The boy on the far left presses his lips together firmly, while the boy fourth from the left is leaning on a dangerous-looking axe, which gives him a slightly threatening appearance. Taken as a whole, however, the left-hand group does not look sinister or even forbidding – in fact the opposite is the case. This is due to the innocent, docile expression of the sheep and the way one of the boys is giving it a friendly hug. Looking more closely, there is one element in particular that stands out from the rest of the composition: the determined, firm grasp with which the boy sitting on the right and partially

hidden from view is holding a stick pointed towards the foreground. The two halves of the photograph are therefore contradictory not only in their confrontation of light and dark, cheerful and serious, innocent and threatening aspects; each half also contains its own contradictions.



Fig. 2 Girls from the Tuttlingen child rescue centre (c. 1920)

The second illustration shows an interior scene where girls are being taught needlework. Like the first image, this photograph was probably taken with a large-format camera. As the spatial conditions most likely offered no other solution, the photographer has chosen an angle very close to the sitters, positioning his camera roughly at the height of the table in order to be able to depict the group relatively clearly and in full portrait. Almost all of those depicted have interrupted their needlework while the picture is being taken, and are looking into the camera. The group consists not only of female pupils from the rescue centre, but also of an elderly woman and several young women who almost certainly belong to the staff of the institution. They are all neatly dressed; simple cotton garments with no lace trimming or other decoration predominate. Their hairstyles are surprisingly uniform: it seems very likely that with the single exception of the elderly woman in the left half of the picture, all the adult women and children have a neat centre parting and wear their hair in pigtails wound around their heads. The overall impression conveyed by the group is of modesty, cleanliness and neatness achieved with simple means, which adds a touch of homeliness to the bare furnishings and stiff-backed chairs. However the most striking features are above all the three girls shown in particularly sharp focus on the far right of the picture. The photographer has cropped one of them, which gives the image a contrasting note of spontaneity despite the long exposure time and the apparent cosiness of the scene. With her open gaze directed at the viewer, the girl third from the right adds a further, almost disconcerting sense of liveliness to the picture, while the old woman's alert gaze strikes a balance between the two halves of the composition.



Fig. 3 Boys' dormitory in the Tuttlingen child rescue centre (c. 1920)

The third and final illustration shows a dormitory. The text "Alle Abend, alle Morgen / Wirst du Herr dein Kind versorgen" (Every evening, every morning, you, oh Lord, will provide for your child) is emblazoned on the wall, indicating a moral-religious context. The cold austerity of the room is heightened by the curtainless window in the background. The angle chosen by the photographer for this shot provides a diagonal view of the space. In this way he creates a distinct, near-monotonous grid of individual pictorial elements, which in turn emphasize the aspect of orderly arrangement and simultaneously allow each child to be seen. The beds are placed in long rows, the head of one directly behind the foot of another, with a narrow passageway between the rows to allow access. The children sit upright in their beds with their hands placed on the smoothed bedspreads, presumably as an indication of sexual hygiene. The faces of the pupils in the foreground of the picture are out of focus; two have been severely cropped, which serves to emphasize the serial continuation of the dormitory scene. At the back of the picture we see a tutor standing – diminished somewhat by foreshortening – with his arms folded behind his back; for the children, his presence acts as an invisible controlling body. Incidentally, some of the children are identical to those portrayed in fig. 1; here, however, contrasted with the motto of provision or care written on the wall and presented in a situation aimed specifically at control and supervision, their depiction is more stereotypical.

#### 4 Summary and outlook

The photographic examples show how visual techniques of perception and observation apply a comparative method that is already inherent within them. All of the photographs reference the wide range of accepted models and projections of evil, corrupt, wayward children and similarly of alert, innocent, well-behaved and morally reformed children that are collectively subjected to visual comparison and reciprocal scrutiny. On the one hand, the photographs emphasize the institutions' need to establish and preserve order in view of their neglected clientele: the depicted children's clean, simple clothing, their neatly buttoned jackets, the girls' tightly combed hair and uniform hairstyles, the upright sitting posture and the principle of maximum uniformity make clear reference to existing forms and formulae of neglected children with educational needs by the very fact that they place particularly strong emphasis on positive deviations from this comprehensive concept. On the other hand, the

unambiguousness of the formulae and the concept of the child with educational needs is decisively relativized by the visual ambiguity and equivocalness of the depicted individuals and scenes. It can clearly be seen that different variants and facets of the child with educational needs, and similarly of the innocent or reformed child, are mutually examined and contrasted using photographic means. Viewed in this way, photographs can be regarded as visual experiments in which cultural formulae are tested, compared and differentiated.

While it had long been the dominant belief on the part of the state that educational need was generally the result of poverty and the social climate in the parental home, the rescue centres themselves mainly classified their clientele in morally derogatory terms, and the knowledge of photographic imagery was in turn able to supply widely differing and oscillating specimens. A clear line is drawn here, in particular against the unambiguous use of classifications such as sinister, lazy, obdurate, malicious or inhuman. In this respect, photography not only challenges the records in the books of moral conduct, but also the assessments in the institutions' annual reports. Any possible accusation that reality is being glossed over with visual means can be countered by the fact that even just in terms of pictorial technique, institutional photography is characterized by clear and sharply defined contours, the elaboration of structures and the precise definition of selected pictorial elements. On the whole, life in the institutions appears to be fairly basic but not fundamentally uniform, and the individual scenes raise topics such as innocence and cheerfulness versus threat and danger (fig. 1), petty bourgeois frugality and order versus disturbance and spontaneity (fig. 2) and control and supervision versus welfare (fig. 3) in a contrasting manner.

Photography as a means of questioning social facts thus reveals many aspects of cultural models of childhood and youth, as well as of education, educational ability, educational need and forms of successful education. It could therefore be described as a practice that isolates, contrasts, prepares and structures elements of social reality. Such parallels were already noted by Walter Benjamin: "Concern with structure, cell forms, the improvement of medicine through these techniques: the camera is ultimately more closely related to these than the moody landscape or the soulful portrait." (Benjamin 1931/1980: 203) Vilém Flusser describes the photographer's work as a search for information which, in the form of a "combination game", also puts constantly changing technical possibilities to the test. (Flusser 1983: 24) Photographs from educational institutions can therefore be regarded as visual specimens that do not provide an unambiguous representation but rather open up possibilities for the criticism and correction of an occasionally stereotypical notion of children with educational needs and their correctional requirements within a cultural and historical context.

Unlike prison photography (cf. Regener 1999: 296 ff), where the cycle of "seeing, depicting, describing and interpreting" is much more firmly interlocked and as a result polarizes between norm and deviation in a far less ambiguous way, the examples of institutional photography discussed here present some quite contradictory and oscillating images of children with educational needs, their need and their capacity for reform.<sup>4</sup> Differentiated visual analysis, as is made possible here by the photographic specimens of pupils from the rescue centres in Württemberg, stands in opposition to an essentially unambiguous and morally based evaluation, and subjects the educational theory of the rescue centres in Württemberg to critical analysis. Photographic perception and its implicit comparative method can reveal that educational classification systems are based on cultural forms and formulae. In many respects, it is precisely by relinquishing the claim to objectivity that photographic methods are able to undertake critical analysis of this scientific construct, and photographic analyses should take this factor into account.

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<sup>4</sup> Susanne Regener (1999: 297) outlines the following distinguishing aspects of prison photography: "(1) the issue of the photographic image as a surface for projections of meaning, (2) the normative distinction between normal and abnormal and how it is connected to visual signs on the body (image production) and finally (3) the institutional power over the interpretation of the depictions."

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Photographic credits

Figs. 1 – 3: StAL E 191 Bü 3644