



## HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

Insights into Research

Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung  
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# Photographing ironically?

## Humor, Parody, and Social Realism in the History of Emotions

by Thomas Lindner



*Tina Modotti and Edward Weston (Mexico City, 1924).* Photographer unknown, Bertram D. Wolfe Papers, Box 174, Folder 33, Hoover Institution Archives.

This photograph was taken in 1924 by an unknown man. At first glance, the viewer is presented with a classical love scene that corresponds to the conventions of the time. The pictured woman is wearing a long skirt and a conservative-looking blouse. Nestled against a bouquet of flowers, she looks directly into the camera. The man, somewhat stiffly seated in suit and tie, holds her hand in admiration. A couple apparently celebrating their wedding day and self-confidently displaying their love for each other - and thus also their own heterosexual bourgeois lifestyle. The photograph thus appears to be a typical scene of a time supposedly marked by seriousness and sincerity.

But this first impression of the scene is deceptive. Knowing the context in which it was created, one sees irony, a pinch of humor and a pronounced desire for role-play behind the façade of tradition and convention. The attempted display of traditional emotional practices make the photograph a promising source for the history of emotions. In the following article, I will use the photograph and its historical analysis to illustrate the benefits of the history of emotions for historians.

The two people depicted in the photograph are the American photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. The art of Modotti and Weston stands exemplary for the hopes and disappointments of the twentieth century, and both are today considered to be immensely influential for modern art.<sup>1</sup> Tina Modotti, born in 1896 in Italy, emigrated as a child with her family to the United States, where she worked as a model and silent film actress. In San Francisco, Modotti met Edward Weston, ten years her senior, who had already made a name for himself as a portrait photographer. Together with Weston's son Chandler, the couple - both still married to different partners - moved to Mexico in 1923, where Weston wanted to practice photography and train Modotti as a photographer. Weston's exhibitions were enthusiastically received and discussed in Mexico City and the artist developed his style, partly through the influence of the now world-famous Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo. From then on, Weston concentrated on what he called "straight photography," a consciously realistic, aesthetically sober way of taking photographs that fitted in well with the zeitgeist of the 1920s. Modotti adopted the sober photographic style of her mentor Weston and even refined it considerably. She emphasized the realism in her photographs and thus worked towards a photographic variation of a socialist realism. Modotti and Weston took pictures of everyday objects such as sugar cane, marionettes, corn on the cob, or typewriters,

as well as everyday scenes of the Mexican urban and rural population in a decidedly straightforward manner. They were thus part of the artistic avant-garde of the 1920s and consciously broke with traditional aesthetic conventions. In contrast to the rather apolitical Weston, Modotti became an increasingly convinced communist. For her, the break with bourgeois photography had always had a decidedly political component: the new, sober-realistic photography was intended to unmask the traditional pictorial language of bourgeois photography with all its decorations. The camera became an instrument with which ideas could be conveyed.<sup>2</sup>

Only through the knowledge of this political context can one interpret the photograph. Two avant-garde artist from the United States clash with the traditional aesthetics of the conservative urban bourgeoisie in Mexico. The irony with which the couple confront the supposedly outdated aesthetic horizon of bourgeois staging - the paper flowers, the obviously painted forest background, the fake wall - only becomes clear through contextual knowledge and through additional source findings. Fortunately, Edward Weston kept a diary and recorded the entire scene of the creation of the photograph that took place on the fourth of August of 1924. According to Weston, he and his lover were walking the streets of the Mexican metropolis when they wanted to experience "another lark" and implement an idea they had been flirting with ever since Weston had laid eyes on the "ludicrously funny 'portraiture'" in the displays of the "cheap photographers".<sup>3</sup> Weston recounts the visit to the photo studio in detail, including some ironic comments on the Mexican studio owner's choice of light and scene. Through this account, Weston also reveals his arrogance toward his Mexican colleague when he describes "the romantic temperament of the Mexican", which incited the photographer to use increasingly exaggerated background images.<sup>4</sup> Weston closes the description of the procedure in the photo studio with the words of his partner Modotti, who exclaimed outside on the street "I thought I must explode with laughter. How did we keep a straight face?"<sup>5</sup>

Whether we consider the prank to be a successful or a silly action by the two "gringos", the first thing we are left with is the handed-down result of the action: the photos that were taken.<sup>6</sup> And when looking at the pictures, the question arises: can we read emotions out of them? And to what extent does the history of emotions provide us with starting points for a deeper understanding of the anecdote and its context?

First of all, it is striking that a large part of the emotional appeal of photography derives from its genre. As a portrait of a couple, the image arouses different expectations and evokes emotions that are directly linked to its particular genre. Double portraits of a couples followed a rather narrow genre convention at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a convention that resulted from the European painting tradition that became democratized and popularized with the advent of photo studios.<sup>7</sup> As was previously the case with royal portrait painting, additional objects in particular were charged with great symbolic significance: while the royal scepter, for example, had stood for great power, the bouquet of flowers now symbolized great love. The background in the photo studio was of great importance, too. It often consisted of a natural landscape, such as a wide field or a sun-drenched forest clearing, and was intended to emphasize the naturalness of the depicted love scene. The photograph of Modotti and Weston meticulously follows the guidelines of the genre of lovers' portraits: the woman extends her hand to the man, who holds it lovingly.<sup>8</sup> While Modotti looks confidently into the camera, Weston's gaze rests proudly on his lover. Both persons seem to possess an aura of seriousness, which is reinforced by their rather stiff postures.<sup>9</sup> The (in this case ironic) seriousness underscores the couple's claim to express and portray their bourgeois, heterosexual, and notarized relationship: the staged bourgeois appearance works because it can tie in with familiar emotions and viewing habits.

Historian Peter Burke has explained in detail what purpose the photographic portrait was intended to serve: "Camouflaging the differences between social classes, the photographers offered their clients what has been called 'temporary immunity from reality.'<sup>10</sup> Burke thus addresses an essential characteristic of photographic portraits: they are supposed to disguise their own performance character and thus create their own social reality. This insight may sound banal at first - no group picture by a professional photographer is really a spontaneous "snapshot" - but it is additionally unmasked as farce by Modotti and Weston. The two artists make less fun of the photographer than they do of the genre of portrait photography and its inherent claim to represent a more beautiful, harmonious, lovable version of reality.<sup>11</sup> For Modotti and Weston, a "hard" social realism was considered the ideal to be aspired to, in contrast to the social illusion of bourgeois photography and the emotions that went with it. Like other avant-garde photographers of the 1920s, they strove for a new grammar of seeing, which should result from the technically perfect mastery of the camera. It is thus not portraiture that is being ridiculed by Modotti und Weston, but rather the

adherence to painting traditions in a different media. <sup>12</sup> Modotti's own photographs in particular reflected this claim: despite some aestheticization, they always showed the harsh reality of poverty and emphasized the potential of photography to make grievances visible in the first place.

For historians of emotions, concepts from cultural studies and postcolonial theory offer some explanatory power, even if their transfer to a non-colonial context should be done with extreme caution. For the photo of Modotti and Weston, the concept of mimicry can potentially help us grasp some emotions. For the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhaba, who references Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon, mimicry is dangerous for the existing (colonial) order because it reveals the vulnerability of colonial discourses and thus always potentially endangers them. <sup>13</sup> For Bhaba, mimicry refers to various forms of behavior of exhibited submission and authority, where it is no longer possible to distinguish between seriousness and exaggeration. Modotti and Weston also create such a moment of irritation: are they serious about their effort or are they satirizing the genre? This irritation alone is enough to question traditional conventions and viewing habits and thus shows that bourgeois art and, ultimately, even bourgeois society can be changed. However, we must also ask: to what extent can persiflage succeed if it does not start from the powerless (the subalterns), but from successful persons who are by no means oppressed in their sexuality? And does the Mexican photographer in this case really represent a conservative bourgeois order against which to rebel in the name of social realism? <sup>14</sup>

Besides this political dimension of irony, there is undoubtedly also a humorous level. The photo is first of all a joke. A consensus about what humor is or how concepts such as joke, gag, mop, *Witz*, *blague*, or *broma* differ from each other does not exist, at least not in the discipline of history. The only consensus among historians of emotions is that there is no ontology of humor—that humor cannot be transcultural and ahistorical. <sup>15</sup> Rather, humor depends on a concrete context to unfold its effect and requires contextual knowledge and a certain historical understanding: it is only because of the precise knowledge of the bourgeois photographic tradition that parodist exaggeration can succeed at all. For contemporaries of Tina Modotti and Edward Weston, the humor in the photographs was immediately recognizable. Ella Wolfe, a communist American who worked for the Soviet embassy in Mexico City, received a copy of one of the ironic anniversary photos as a gift. On the back of the photo, Ella Wolfe noted that Modotti and Weston were "poking fun at traditional photography". <sup>16</sup> For the artistic and political bohème in post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s, the context was clear: an unconventional couple making fun of the traditions of marriage, photography, and bourgeois society, ironizing themselves in the process. The fun lies in the absurd obviousness of the joke, which is, however, not immediately recognizable to outsiders.

For the history of emotions, photographs continue to offer for applying and developing existing concepts. The same applies to the role of humor and irony within the field. Granted: researching a joke may feel like explaining a joke. It takes too long and in the end, nobody laughs. And yet it is precisely the history of emotions that offers exactly the means to get to the bottom of humor, irony, and persiflage in a way that is specific to context.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One of Weston's photographs was sold for 1.6 Million Dollars in 2008, making it one of the most expensive in history, see <sup>②</sup> **"Edward Weston's Nude Sells for \$1.6 Million at Sotheby's Setting a New Record For the Artist,"** *artdaily* (accessed 12 April 2020),

<sup>2</sup> See Christina Lodder. <sup>②</sup> **"Revolutionary Photography,"** in *Object: Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949*, Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, und Maria Morris Hamburg, Hrsg. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Newhall, ed., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston, Volume I Mexico* (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1961), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>6</sup> A whole series of photographs was taken, I will focus on the pictured photo for this article.

<sup>7</sup> See Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>8</sup> See, as fitting example, the essay by [Christa Hämmerle](#) on this portal.

<sup>9</sup> Pascal Eitler and Monique Scheer have argued for a stronger emphasis on the history of the body within the history of emotions. See Pascal Eitler and Monique Scheer, "Emotionengeschichte als Körpergeschichte. Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 35, 282-313.

<sup>10</sup> See Burke, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> It was not without reason that the movements in Germany were called Neues Sehen and New Vision: the aim was to create a new way of seeing that decoupled the photograph from painting. See also the classic László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (München: Albert Langen, 1925).

<sup>13</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 88 and, for background, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> These questions always need to keep in mind the power relations between US Americans and Mexicans as well as the central role of Latin American anti-imperialist thought. For an introduction, see for example Nicola Miller, *Reinventing Modernity in Latin America: Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900–1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and Alexandra Pita González and Carlos Marichal Salinas, eds, *Pensar el Antiimperialismo: Ensayos de Historia Intelectual Latinoamericana, 1900–1930* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, „Introduction: Humour and History,” in *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Bertram Wolfe Papers, Box 174, Hoover Institution Archives.

## Contact

✉ thomas.lindner@uni-wuerzburg.de

## Further Reading

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