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Facing the daily life of photojournalism: the Black Star agency's photography library and its 'métiers de femmes'¹

Photographic press agencies are much studied from a *news* perspective, a specificity by which they claim the historical role of their images and on which the history of photojournalism is built for the most part, especially from the second half of the 20th century². Black Star is one of the flagships in this prestigious history, especially known for civil rights cover in USA³. But this prestigious narrative of the agency's history comes up against an archive in which known images of Black Star are poorly represented and which original indexing, kept becoming the Black Star Collection at the RIC, is organized by subject, location, and author. "Appropriate and efficient in the commercial environment of a press agency, [...] this organization rarely responds to researchers' expectations", according to Thierry Gervais and Vincent Lavoie⁴. My first methodological choice is facing this heterogeneous set of black and white prints, getting back to the materiality of the collection, and considering it as an object to be apprehended as a whole⁵. It is then difficult to understand alone the meaning of the classifications and marks of which it is important, moreover, to distinguish the various temporal strata to read their function. However, these elements of organization of the collection (indexes, keywords, inventories...) outcome of the work of lesser known professions in the history of photojournalism⁶: they leave few traces in the narratives or in the archives – apart from the results of their professional actions. Facing these jobs with diverse names – librarians, researchers, picture editor and later, because of « the displacement of the Black Star Collection from a corporate press agency to a public cultural institution⁷ », archivist, documentalist...⁸ –, is my second methodological choice to better understand the collection as it is accessible today.

A genealogy of women then appears. The first ones managed the Black Star picture library of the agency, composed of prints for black and white and slides for color. They were **replaced/ succeeded** by other women when the black and white part of this library was transferred to the RIC, becoming The Black Star Collection. These women have been invisibilized – rarely mentioned in narratives of the agency's history or evoked

¹ I warmly thank all the women who helped me: Valérie Matteau, Gaëlle Morel, Charlene Heath, Anna Jedrzejski, Denise Birkhofer at the RIC ; Nadya Bair and Bibia Pavard

² HILL, Jason E., SCHWARTZ Vanessa R. (dir.) (2010) : *Getting the Picture. The Visual Culture of the News*, Londres, New Delhi, New York, Sidney, Bloomsbury, 2015. LAVOIE, Vincent, *Photojournalismes – Revoir les canons de l'image de presse*, Paris, Hazan

³ SEALY, Mark, MATTEAU (2013) ; NEUBAUER, Hendrick (1997) ; SMITH, C. Zoe. (1984) ; TOROSIAN, Michael, HIGDON, Peter (2013). And CHAPNICK, Howard (1994) ; MORRIS, John G. (2002). See bibliography and chronology by Valérie Matteau and Alexandra Gooding

⁴ GERVAIS, Thierry, LAVOIE, Vincent, Symposium *Open up the Morgue! How press archive are enabling a New history of Photojournalism*, 2 July 2021, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

⁵ MAUJARIN, Anaïs (2020): "Images for Sale: Cards and Colours at the Photothèque of the Musée de l'Homme", in J. Bärnighausen et C. Caraffa, S. Klamm, F. Schneider, P. Wodtke (ed.). *Photo-Objects. On the materiality of Photographs and Photo-Archives in the Humanities and Sciences*, Berlin, Max-Planck-Institut

⁶ BIHL, Laurent, DOGUE, Philippe L.-J. (2020) : « Dans la caverne de l'iconographe. Entretien avec Philippe L.-J. Dogué, réalisé par Laurent Bihl », *Sociétés & Représentations*, n° 50, p. 119-139. LUGON, Olivier (2019) : *Nicolas Bouvier iconographe*, Genève, Bibliothèque de Genève/Gollion, Infolio. *Photographica* n°4, « Derrière l'image », Paris, Ed. de la Sorbonne, avril 2022

⁷ GERVAIS, Thierry, LAVOIE, Vincent (2021)

⁸ LUGON, Olivier, « Iconographe indépendant : émergence d'un métier dans les années 1960-70 », Journée d'étude « Iconographe et documentaliste dans les médias depuis les années 1960 », Audrey Leblanc (dir.), 10 juin 2021, Institut Pour la Photographie, Lille ; INA ; Université de Lille <https://clinoeil.hypotheses.org/2890>

through the prism of seduction⁹. These “métiers de femme”¹⁰ are indeed considered ancillary to other activities that are presented as central to the funds. However, their interviews and their reports document (the history of) **this ensemble/this whole**, each being the heir to the previous ones¹¹. The black and white prints Black Star Collection of the RIC thus **asserts/assumes** itself as part of a tool for the exploitation of visual production by the Black Star agency for the years 1935-1990: its photo library. Set up at **the beginning/early days**, the photo library **collected/recovered** the photographs produced with the commercial partners of the agency. Its classification was organized more systematically during the 1970s and 80s. It fell into disuse with the start in 1997 of the digitization of the items that the agency continues to sell. From this point of view, evaluated in the name of its historical importance for the visual history of the 20th century, this part of the library - which, for the black and white, circulated at the time in the form of prints - became, at the time of its institutional acquisition, an incomplete, useless, outdated object, expensive **to preserve/to keep** and cumbersome for the agency¹². Black Star disposes of it in a general context of sales of these photo libraries by the media companies and of restructuring of the press images markets in the early 2000s¹³.

The despised testimonies of the women who managed the photo library and then the collection, highlight a daily history of this photography market. This oral¹⁴ and feminine history reveals a gendered distribution of tasks, ignored by the history of photojournalism, hierarchical and largely constructed by men on the photographers and agency managers of the period, who were also men. However, the strategies adopted by the company to multiply markets, to make the whole production profitable and to limit the losses, testify to an empirical relationship to photographs, whose interpretation of the visual content and the dissemination on the markets of the illustration depend entirely on the work of these women's teams.

A genealogy of unknown women, recipients of the history of the Black Star agency's photo library

Emma Gurry is part of the staff of the agency in its early days as head of the picture library Emma¹⁵. Yukiko Launois, wife of photographer John Launois, begins working as a researcher at the library in 1964, when Howard Chapnick became president of the agency. She gradually increases her working time, participated in a more systematic structuring of the classification of images, becomes editor and then, shortly

⁹ Panel Discussion with photographs Dennis Brack, Jim Pickerell and the salesman Larry Levin, May 7, 2010 ; held at the Canadian Embassy, Washington, D.C. USA, by Valérie Matteau

¹⁰ PERROT, Michelle (1987) : « Qu'est-ce qu'un métier de femme ? », *Le Mouvement social* n°140, p. 3-8

¹¹ Interviews with Yukiko Launois, conducted by Nadya Bair for the RIC, 2016, New York City ; Black Star 2003 Donation Appraisal, by Penelope Dixon & Associates Inc., 2003 ; interview with Valérie Matteau, conducted by Audrey Leblanc, 2021, at the RIC. And interview with Benjamin J. Chapnick, conducted by Michael Torosian, « Black Star founders research » (binder 2), 2012

¹² COLEMAN, Allan Douglass (2013): « Archive and Artefact. The Black Star Photo Agency », *Border crossings : a magazine for the arts*, vol. 32, n°1: 64-73

¹³ PANZER, Mary (Spring 2011), “The Meaning of the Twentieth-Century Press Archive,” *Aperture* 202: 46-51; BLASCHKE, Estelle (2016)

¹⁴ DESCAMPS Florence (2019) : *Archiver la mémoire. De l'histoire orale au patrimoine immatériel*, Paris, Ed. EHESS

¹⁵ BC : 3

after the departure of Emma Gurry, takes over the responsibility of the photo library in 1973 until the end of the 1980s, early 1990s¹⁶.

VISUEL n°1 : Yukiko director of the photo library, devant ses tiroirs en remerciant NB pour le partage d'archives

Managed by women at Black Star, the library is taken in hand by other women at the time of its institutional patrimonialization. These women become the custodians of the memory of the past uses and functioning of the library. In 2003, Penelope Dixon and Associates is commissioned by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board¹⁷ to appraise Black Star's collection of black-and-white prints, with RIC becoming responsible for the care of the collection¹⁸. She recommends/advocates maintaining the collection as a whole in order to add cultural – and therefore economic – value to the transaction. The collection is officially donated to the RIC in 2005, however it is stored at the offsite warehouse until 2012 when the building is completed. Valérie Matteau¹⁹ becomes responsible for it (2005-2012) and maintains the link with Benjamin Chapnick, the president of Black Star Agency. She organized six exhibitions between 2006 and 2009. Then, she participated in the installation of the collection in the final building of the RIC in 2012, at their opening after renovation work. In this transfer, and thanks to the expertise of these professional women, the order of the drawers is scrupulously respected. Original craft envelopes and folders, revised one by one, are kept in their initial classification, with their key words written in marker, as soon as they contain the slightest document (tear sheets, order forms, typed stories, detached captions, etc.): they form the Black Star Ephemera collection at the RIC, whose materiality "allows researchers to look at a glance at what is in the drawer, but also how the overall archive was arranged by Black Star"²⁰. Especially since, according to Yukiko Launois "black and white's system didn't evolve too much from the beginning. I guess it stayed in a primitive state"²¹.

VISUEL n°2: craft envelopes

The library: an autonomous operating tool that recycles assignments for other markets

The well-known narrative of the history of photojournalism in which Black Star's fame fits suggests that the library would be the archive of its production; in particular of that valued in the stories, the *news*. But the library does not have a conservation function: it is another instrument of exploitation of the images produced on assignment, whatever they are, which it recovers to sell them in otherwise, on other markets. In the flow, indeed, photographs fall into the library, available for all uses and no longer only those related to their newsworthiness for a specific moment:

¹⁶ YL part avant la mise en place de la section Prostock en 1997, qu'elle ne connaît pas

¹⁷ <https://www.ccperb-cceebc.gc.ca/en/index-en.html>

¹⁸ Explanation of Outstanding Significance and National Importance, To Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, From Peter Higdon, Curatorial Manager, Ryerson University's Mira Godard Study Centre, School of Image Arts, 10 November, 2004

¹⁹ after a Master of Arts in Photographic Preservation and Collections Management à Ryerson, graduated in 2006

²⁰ POTTER, Lauren (2013): , *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: 12

²¹ YL : 28

“The agency’s holdings developed in large part through commissioning or, less frequently, through purchase of work produced by photographers on speculation. The best of these pictures subsequently became part of the working picture collection and were maintained by the Black Star agency and re-used in future”²²

As Benjamin Chapnick explains, the library is autonomous and has its own activity:

“There were two aspects to the business, one was assignment, and one was existing material, our library was almost always developed from material that was left over from assignment, nobody in those days shot for library sales”²³

The two sales channels for the photographs produced do not overlap or reflect each other: each operates according to its own logic. The assignment is an economic agreement between companies with sharing of the expenses at the time of the production of the images – at Black Star “[they] always tried to do it as an assignment”²⁴. The press editorial staff, a priori the most frequent partner, bears the cost of developing the films in exchange for the scoop on the images. It does its own editing and most often keeps its own prints. The rest is sent to Black Star, which edits these leftovers to offer them to other distribution channels²⁵, such as foreign sales (by building new stories) and library’s files. The library is intended to respond to iconographic requests²⁶: they came in the form of letters from publishing companies mostly but also from press magazine. The OA – “On Approval” – mark on the back of some of the prints in the collection means that the prints were considered by the editors of *Life* for reproduction in the magazine²⁷. The proportions of published photographs from the Black Star collection found in *Look* (1937-1971) and *Life* (1936-1972) indicate that these types of sales (illustrations, series) massively irrigate these publications²⁸.

VISUEL n°3 : camemberts workshop TG

The iconographic exploitation is an important daily activity that requires the agency to adapt its team and premises to respond to it²⁹. The agency cannot be satisfied only with “good shots”: the librarians, at the interface of the daily sales, multiple and regular over time, also make it live. Presented as secondary for its business – “at no point was the library worth more than 25% of our annual income, minimum 75% came from the assignments, and even though it created a cash turnover, it wasn’t a profit center”³⁰ –, the agency does not however make the economy of this activity and the various markets – in which it makes profitable an

²² Explanation: 9

²³ BC: 3

²⁴ BC: 34. “The assignments were the sales department (...) If the photographer and agency initiates the story we call it a spec story”, YL

²⁵ YL : 44

²⁶ LEBLANC, Audrey, DUPUY, Sébastien (2017) : « Le Fonds Sygma exploité par Corbis. Une autre histoire du photojournalisme », *Études photographiques* n°35 : 88-111

²⁷ John Morris told it to VM

²⁸ Black Star Research Workshop led by Thierry Gervais with students (2010 – 2012), on Publications of Credited Black Star Photographs, in *Life* (p. 41), *Look* (p. 39)

²⁹ “as the stock grew, librarians staff grew (...) at one point we had 42 or 43 people and 25 or 27 of them were working directly with the library”, BC : 11

³⁰ BC : 13

expensive production – are strategically thought out together. The library recycles images produced once the assignment time has passed – and the assignment concerns all image productions:

- You said that stock was never more than 25%
- I'm pretty sure that's accurate yes.
- That's mean the other 75% is editorial
- *The other 75% was assignment*, the editorial could corporate, but it was assignment work³¹

The Black Star Ephemera Collection contains, in fact, the same type of accompanying documents (list of captions for example) for photographs of Birth of a Delphin, Atomic Blast Explosion, Roller disco, etc. Reminders of reports sold in news; remnants of reports produced for the internal reports of companies which the agency has made a specialty in corporate; portraits of celebrities; returns of shipments abroad... Contrary to its apparent homogeneity, the library brings together very diverse prints in their production dates, their initial functions, their circulation, their status and their generations. Upon entering this operating tool, all are relieved of their assignment production description in favor of a new description in accordance with the needs of the library's activities: subjected to the same system of keywords established according to their content iconographic, the library permanently assigns all photography to its illustrative dimension. A photographer like Charles Moore thus sees his images classified for a quarter under the generic word "civil rights" when the rest becomes "women, telephone, motoring, school, indians...". However, this classification is the result of actions and human decisions of women who, on the one hand, receive the different prints for the files and, on the other hand, respond to the iconographic requests for which these prints of the library are intended.

Women at the origin of our visual culture

"I mean big lists of requests used to come from textbooks, and one researcher was assigned to filed their request. So for instance, they would say they want to illustrate infinity – some image which signifies infinity"³². The library team chooses the prints that could correspond to this request, sends them to the client who makes his choices and then returns them : they are reintegrated into the library – possibly as is under the term "infinity".

"The collection is divided into four series based on the original arrangement by the agency found in the filing cabinet drawers. These series are: 1. Countries and Places (drawers 1-63 or boxes 1-32); 2. World War II (drawers 64-72 or boxes 32-39); 3. Personalities (drawers 73-141 or boxes 40-71); and 4. Subject (drawers 142-206 or boxes 72-81 and portfolio) with corresponding sub-series following each series description."³³

VISUEL n°4 : schéma de Laura Potter

Of the four large sections that compose it, "Countries and Places" (3.62m linear) and "Personalities" (3.82m) occupy three times more space than the other two and largely dominate the whole. They testify of the

³¹ BC : 46

³² YL

³³ POTTER, Lauren: 25

important proportion of banal images produced and diffused as well as of the mass of potential requests to which they correspond. All are sub-organized by thematic keywords:

« Within these there are a myriad of finer categories, ranging from astronomy to demonstrations, ecology to industry, military to urban renewal, Brando to Odetta, Nastase to Thatcher, Eisenhower to Reagan, Argentina to Zimbabwe, etc. »³⁴

At the time of Emma Gurry, there is no indexing system: everything was in Emma's head and Howard's head. Yukiko Launois initiates a cataloguing of her husband's photographs. Then Emma Gurry generalizes this principle and builds a catalog card which allows, in addition to classifying them, to track down each image of the photo library to monitor its commercialization³⁵. The resale potential of the images guides the structure of the photo library and the interpretation of the images. In order to meet the widest range of requests, the thematic keywords chosen by the librarians remain as general as possible and depend on their interpretation of the images:

*"The most appropriate place to file a photography by subject is also a matter of interpretation and current application. For instance, a photograph of Martin Luther King arrested at a demonstration could be filed under Demonstrations, Martin Luther King, or Civil Rights. Had the demonstration just taken place and was a topic of current news stories, it would make sense to file under Demonstrations. After King was assassinated, it would make more sense to file it under the general category of the subject's name. In more recent years, as the Civil Rights era has become an important historic subject, it would be logical to file the image under Civil Rights. A photo-researcher at Black Star would also know to look for photographs of King (or negative and contact sheets) under the name of Charles Moore, the most well-known of the Civil Rights photographers, whose photographs were in some cases files separately at Black Star as they were so frequently requested."*³⁶

VISUEL n°5 : exemple de BSE ex. NASA "do not file under industry"

Only few of them – as Yukiko Launois – edited for files but all the picture librarians are those who created the folder categories and chose the keywords. If a picture came in and that category did not exist, they create a new file and label it. The researchers could take initiative, but the librarian would know when that happened without monitored it neither documented how the subject headings changed: there was no ledger or list, "it was very physical going through"³⁷. The organization of the library is done organically, as requests come in, without any real plan, in an empirical classification of the prints – several envelopes sometimes **following/succeeding** each other under the same keyword, without chronological order. The date is not necessarily associated with the visual content: it is only useful for the agency's photo library if it facilitates the availability of the image. Otherwise, it gets lost.

NB: *Not all the pictures are dated.*

YL: No, that's very primitive.

NB: So was there any system or code to dating some and not others?

³⁴ PD: 7

³⁵ The catalog card was thrown away, VM

³⁶ PD: 21

³⁷ "Still even colour photographs, which were filed under each photographer, researchers had to resort to the imagination and memory a lot", YL

YL: I don't know. At some point they started including the date. In my time there was no system. We had a numbering system but *it didn't correspond with the date the picture was taken*; it was about the date the picture was put in the file so that doesn't help very much. We had a number system like 31978xxxx – it meant it was put into the file in March 1978.

NB: And what would the other four numbers (xxxx) have correlated to?

YL: That would be consecutive numbering of the take, I guess. But *that has nothing to do with the subject matter or day of the event*.

Librarians filter the production and, in this description of the images reduced to their visual content, generate the added value that allows them to be sold; they select them to propose their dissemination and keep the memory of them:

Larry Levin (sales man) - But we were pack (...) because you never knew what was going to sell. And never knew what we needed. (...) when a librarian left, they didn't know where all your work was. And then your sales went down. (...) But the best researcher, I mean the best computers that we had, were the researchers. When I said, Oh I need a picture of such and such, I would go to one of the researchers, to Lynn or to Annie or Ann, and they note, or Joyce... (...)

Dennis Brack (photograph) - (...) I think that half the money that I made from Black Star was because they knew my files so well, and the Presidents, and you know, "I need a red-headed juggler on a bicycle." (...)

Jim Pickerell (photograph)- But it was filed under some different story name. That had nothing to do with it.

DB- Oh yeah, they never went to the index cards unless they really had to."³⁸

Whether at the time of the classification of the photograph or at the time of its selection to be proposed in response to a request, it is the library staff who interprets the content of the images put into circulation on the illustrated markets, anticipated in the long term. Dependent on the expertise of these women, still largely ignored by the history of photojournalism, our visual culture has been established, at least as much as by photojournalists, by these shadowy, professional figures whose names and importance should be made known.

[VISUEL n°6 : la fiche de circulation de Yukiko à Enid, de 1993](#)

The preservation of the media past, a question of gender

The iconographic requests for which the agencies set up a photo library correspond to a daily office activity, unspectacular, described as secondary in their economic life by the professionals who hardly mention them. Transmitted by an ephemeral oral history, more difficult to make known and minimized, it has been neglected by historians of photojournalism who have preferred spectacular, punctual events and heroised male figures. However, it is the images exploitation tool linked to these activities that stands out here as a central archive in the history of photojournalism. Howard Becker demonstrated it in *Art Worlds*³⁹, these "small" trades, affiliated to the technical services in the branch, could not be **held/considered** as secondary. Librarians tell the daily sales of the image fonds, manage customer requests and explain the filing choices for an efficient global exploitation of these fonds ; when they are not at the initiative very often of the good

³⁸ Panel Discussion (2010): 8-9

³⁹ BECKER, Howard S. (1982): *Art Worlds*, Berkeley: University of California Press

conservation of the funds of media images for historical purposes⁴⁰. As a true memory of still image collections, they ensure, regardless of their cultural (de)valuation, the durability of photojournalism images on the illustrated markets over time. Thus actively contributing to the structuring of the visible, the archive here renews the history of photojournalism, including at the level of the gender.

⁴⁰ TIBLE, Anna (2019) : « Les documentalistes audiovisuel.les et la création des formats à base d'archives », Congrès de la Société Française de l'Information et de la Communication « Création, créativité et médiations », Actes vol. 2 « Modèles et stratégies d'acteurs »