

Ideal Syllabus: Linda Fregni Nagler

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Italian artist Linda Fregni Nagler discusses the books that have influenced her



Photograph: Linda Fregni Nagler

Julio Cortázar

***Bestiario* 1951**

Las Armas Secretas

(The Secret Weapons) 1959

***Rayuela* (Hopscotch) 1963**

I deeply admire Cortázar's ability to depict fear in its purest state. In 'Casa tomada', the opening tale of his short story collection *Bestiario*, the main characters, a brother and sister, find themselves forced to flee their home from a non-violent yet unrelenting force, which the writer leaves undefined, expressed only through noise. Cortázar claimed that he sat down to write this intense story after a nightmare caused him to tumble head-first out of bed. While not intended as a commentary on the political situation in the writer's native Argentina at the time, the nature of the tale – which concerns an intense and claustrophobic relationship between siblings – means it has been interpreted by many readers as an allegory for Peronism. Many years after reading 'Casa tomada', I created my own version of the story as a short film.

'Las Babas del Diablo' (The Droolings of the Devil), a short story from Cortázar's *Las Armas Secretas*, served as Michelangelo Antonioni's inspiration for his 1966 film *Blow-Up*. While the correlation between story and film may not be apparent immediately, both explore the impossibility of verifying every representation of reality.

Cortázar loved photography and his writing often draws on the metaphor of the lens as a means of capturing and distorting the world. In his novel *Rayuela*, for instance, he describes a lovers' game: 'You look at me, you look at me closely, each time closer and then we play cyclops, we look at each other closer each time and our eyes grow, they grow closer, they overlap and the cyclops look at each other, breathing confusion, their mouths find each other and fight warmly, biting with their lips, resting their tongues lightly on their teeth, playing in their caverns where the heavy air comes and goes with the scent of an old perfume and silence.'

Ando Gilardi
Storia Sociale della Fotografia
(The Social History of Photography)
1976

This pioneering work offers an alternative history of photography that considers vernacular imagery as well as social and non-art uses of the medium to relay how society has evolved, and how it has chosen to depict itself, from the dawn of the photographic era until recent times. Unique in its field, Gilardi's book is the result of years of researching rare and bizarre images in categories seldom found in regular historiographies – images he later also collated and published, together with Roberto Clerici, in *Phototeca* magazine. The first issue, in 1980, *Thieves, Prostitutes and Reprobates*, sold out in just a few days. Some subsequent (wonderful) titles included: *Hunting for the Thief among the Image-Makers*, *Delight in the Age of Technical Reproduction* and *The Shameless Woman in the Unashamed Figure*. Gilardi's hand shows clearly in the selection and placement of the images, as well as in the scathing headings and irreverent humour. The title of one of his recent books, *Better to be a Thief than a Photographer* (2007), is a motto with which I can readily identify.

Bertold Brecht
Kriegsfibel (War Primer)
1955

A cult book for the pacifist movement, this was Brecht's last published work. Carefully selected images cut from newspapers are accompanied by poems forming epigrammatic compositions that the author termed 'photograms'. Although not printed until 1955 – a year before Brecht's death – the earliest version of the book dates back to 1938. From an aesthetic perspective, I consider *Kriegsfibel* to be a masterpiece that, as Brecht's lover Ruth Berlau noted, 'teaches the art of reading images. Since, for those who aren't used to doing it, reading an image is more difficult than deciphering hieroglyphics.' In each poem, Brecht identifies with the subject of the photograph, whether victim or oppressor, rendering the images universal, authorless, such that any one of us might have taken them. In *Kriegsfibel*, the German playwright invents a new language that, beyond the mere description of facts, aspires to suggest there is only one possible interpretation of history: 'the truth'.

Geoff Dyer
The Ongoing Moment
2005

This book opens with the declaration: 'I am not a photographer [...] I don't even own a camera.' Often, I find myself becoming irritated when I read essays on photography, since they generally focus on proposing theories rather than examining the frequently undervalued practical aspects of the medium. That isn't the case with *The Ongoing Moment*, however: a deeply considered and highly original reading of photographic imagery, in which works by the most significant exponents of the great American school of documentary photography are given a new and highly personal interpretation that explores common motifs and subjects. By closely investigating a series of improbable coincidences, the author unearths the 'why' behind these works. *The Ongoing Moment* has certainly earned its place in the literary canon. Dyer's reflections on the 'blind beggar' as an antithetical but recurrent photographic subject have inspired me to develop a new strand in my own practice.

Thomas Mann
Tonio Kröger
1903

I adore German-language literature – Wolfgang Borchert, Franz Kafka, Joseph Roth, Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Werfel – but my favourite author is Thomas Mann. I read his novella *Tonio Kröger* for the first time as a teenager and it had a huge impact on me. Exploring the torment of the 'frosts of creation', as seen through the eyes of a young man who grows up to become an artist, the book is one I have re-read numerous times over the years, finding it increasingly profound and complex with each reading. The dichotomy between individuality and uniformity, between the lone voice and the chorus, is a theme that remains pertinent to issues of human sensibility to this day. Kröger focuses on his 'imperfection', his inability to integrate within the bourgeois environment in which he has grown up, especially when faced with the 'blonde, beautiful, proud, unapproachable, unattainable' perfection of the two objects of his affections: Hans Hansen and Ingeborg Holm. From time to time, I encounter people who I find myself comparing to Kröger's two (beloved) nemeses and likewise defining as 'invincible'. However, it is through experiencing these failures, doubts and frustrations that Kröger comes to the realization he can only find true happiness when he is able to 'plumb the depth of things'.

Translated by Rosalind Furness

Linda Fregni Nagler

Linda Fregni Nagler is an artist living in Milan, Italy. She teaches photography at the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo, Italy. In 2013, she participated in the 55th Venice Biennale, Italy, and The Hidden Mother, an artist book comprising the 1,002 images of her Biennale project was published by mack. This year, she is a finalist for the maxxi Prize and in 2015 she will curate a major exhibition on Hércules Florence at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco.

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