

Littoral Aesthetics in the Šķēde Atrocity Photographs

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This paper argues that the Šķēde photographs taken near Liepāja on December 15, 1941 horrify not only because they graphically document atrocity, but also produce uncomfortable aesthetic responses due to their setting. Unlike Holocaust photographs produced in camps, ghettos, ravines, forests, and other familiar spaces of the Nazi genocide, the Šķēde images are set on a beach, a profoundly atypical space given the subject matter. As such, the photographs necessarily engage the history of visual representations of beaches, shores, and other so-called “littoral” spaces. Contemporary scholars such as historian Alain Corbin and photographic theorist Allan Sekula have argued the popular views of beaches and seashores as sites of recreation and escape only emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. This image of littoral space evolved in tandem with modernity itself as labor reforms and new modes of transportation enabled masses to visit the shore. In pre-modern times, however, beaches were visually coded as spaces of death, doom, separation, and melancholy. Thus precisely because of this tension between the atrocities they depict and the otherwise pleasant space in which they occur, the photographs’ horrific effect is compounded.

Through readings of several photographs that interpret them as grotesque variations of contemporary beach photographs, this essay shows how the Šķēde photographs have historical value that transcends their utility as documentation. They radically recode the beach and expose the historicity of littoral photography itself.