

PLAY AND RITUAL – ONTOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT. *Play and Ritual – Ontological Aspects of Photography.* This research aims to analyse the ontological aspects of photography that relate to its lack of objectivity, namely the concepts of ‘play’ and ‘ritual’ that are important parts in photography’s being in the world. Acknowledging that what appears on the surface of the picture is the result of distortions caused by the technical praxis or by the photographer’s intentional intervention, one should be bound to question photography’s realism. My claim is that the apparently objective picture depicts, in fact, a constructed image that implies a creative process in which the photographer, the model and the spectator are involved. The paper follows Andre Bazin, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes’ discourses about the ontology of photography, through an analysis of its ritualistic aspect, which involves a process of recreating reality through play. The importance of this paper can be highlighted by the fact that it offers an insight into a problem that is often overlooked: the photographic image’s lack of objectivity is rarely questioned on one hand, and on the other, subjectivity can be noticed through the way in which one relates to the photographic image, since it has the ability to depict a person or a scene that can trigger some sort of a personal response to that image in the spectator.

Keywords: *photography, ontology, objectivity, play, ritual*

Introduction

The idiom “a picture is worth a thousand words” best describes the common trust that humans have in the technical images’ objectivity. Starting from this empirical observation, I will argue that the photographic image may be just as arbitrary as language, and thus it is more ‘subjective’ than one might incline to think. In order to organize the visual discourse of the world, one may discern between

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‘sensory images’ that are affecting nerve organs, ‘mental images’, such as memories, and images that have a physical support or projections.¹ In this sense, a distinction between the terms ‘image’ and ‘picture’ should be made: a picture is an image that has a material support (canvas, glass, film, paper). Therefore, the photograph classifies as the latter category. This is particularly relevant while discussing the difference between analogue and digital photography, which does not present any interest to this research.

Despite this difference between the terms ‘image’ and ‘picture’, I noticed that in the English translation of Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media” by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others from 2008, the term ‘picture’ appears in the text a single time, describing ‘moving pictures’.² Benjamin uses the term ‘image’ in order to describe the content of the picture, which is the subject of his study. In the essay “A Short History of Photography” the term ‘picture’ occurs more often, but only to denominate the physical photographs. The same issue can be noticed while reading Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* in the *European Photography* journal, where ‘picture’ occurs two times: ‘to draw a picture of freedom’³ and ‘a picture of machines as slaves’⁴ seem to evoke a ‘mental picture’ rather than an image with a physical support.

Thus, ‘image’ is preferred to ‘picture’. Following these two authors’ reasoning, I will use Flusser’s concept of ‘technical image’ in order to denominate the content of the photographic picture. In comparison to the ‘mental image’, that is by default personal, thus ‘subjective’, the ‘technical image’ appears to be ‘objective’. Actually, the so-called ‘objectivity’ comes after the ‘realistic’ feature of the photograph. Therefore, the reasoning behind it is the following: because the visual content that is perceived while looking at any picture seems to resemble ‘reality’, then it must be ‘objective’. It is ‘realistic’ when compared to painting, for example, but does that grant the picture objectivity? One of the reasons for this deficiency is the fact that we relate to photographs in different ways than with paintings. This is well illustrated by André Bazin in terms of anthropological and psychoanalytical theories, which point out the human desire of surviving death, on one side, and the need of creating ‘an ideal world in the likeness of the real’.⁵ On a different note, because language is

¹ Codoban, Aurel, *Imperiul comunicării. Corp, imagine, relaționare*, Idea Design & Print, 2011, p. 27. (translated by myself)

² Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 53.

³ Flusser, Vilem *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, European Photography, 1984, p. 173.

⁴ Flusser, Vilem *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, European Photography, 1984, p. 17.

⁵ Bazin, André, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1960, p. 6.

subjective, one is inclined to believe that other means of representing reality, such as the technical images, might not be. Having into consideration the way in which the photographic picture is made, namely knowing the input and the output, but having no power over the black box of the apparatus, gives us the first hint of the lack of objectivity of the image. Another important argument to be considered is the way in which the subject as *operator* relates to the ‘world’ – what makes the decision to photograph something and exclude something else?

On a less obvious note, a question that needs to be taken into consideration is in what ways do the photographs change the ways in which we relate to the world? In the case of post-production images are manipulated not in order to render reality better, but in order to change it, to intrude the ‘real world’. In this context, Jean Baudrillard claims that the technical images are witnessing the disappearance of the world. I agree with his thesis to the extent that if we perceive pictures as real (as depicting reality) it affects our own relation with reality. Are technical images ‘copies’ of ‘reality’ or is ‘reality’ reconstructed according to ‘pictures’? Following Baudrillard’s reasoning, I claim that photography, or any technical image for that matter, is not merely a means of representation, but a means of creation. In this context, photography is neither ‘realistic’ nor ‘objective’, because its purpose is to change reality. If we perceive it as ‘real’, it is affecting our relation with the world. It is a vicious circle in which ‘photography’ and ‘reality’ have come to determine each other.

Some ontological aspects

In order to outline the actors involved in the photographic process I am going to use Barthes’s terminology, namely *operator* and *spectator*, to denominate the photographer and the viewer of the picture. Additionally, by the term *image* I mean what the spectator sees in a picture, a “three dimensional projection on a flat surface”.⁶ Thus, I will refer to the image as the visual content of the picture.

Having the possibility to capture a unique moment in time, photography is conditioned by several requirements demanded by its users and its spectators. Most of the time, the belief commonly associated with the analysis of a photographic image is the objectivity of that image, that is implied because of the apparatus’s possibility of reflecting a fragment of reality. Even if this constitutes the operator’s

⁶ Codoban, Aurel, *Imperiul comunicării. Corp, imagine, relaționare*, Ideea Design & Print, 2011, p. 32. (translated by myself)

intention or it is just an expectation from the spectator, a closer analysis shows us that the representation of a fragment of reality is usually mistaken for reality itself.⁷ My claim is that what can be seen in the picture as an objective rendering of reality is in fact a scene, a trim, a cut-out scape intentionally selected by the operator in order to satisfy his/her aesthetic or conceptual ambitions. As Sergei Eisenstein points out,

Photography is a system of reproduction to fix real events and elements of actuality. These reproductions, or photo-reflections, may be combined in various ways. Both as reflections and in the manner of their combination, they permit any degree of distortion - either technically unavoidable or deliberately calculated. The results fluctuate from exact naturalistic combinations of visual, interrelated experiences to complete alterations, arrangements unforeseen by nature, and even to abstract formalism, with remnants of reality.⁸

In order to enter the ontological substratum of images, Flusser proposes dividing images into two categories: on one side, there are traditional images, made by man, and on the other side, there are the technical ones, manufactured through an automated process with a minimum human input.

Ontologically, traditional images are first-degree abstractions, since they were abstracted from the concrete world. Technical images, for their part, are third-degree abstractions; they are abstracted from texts, which- in turn are abstracted from images which were themselves abstracted from the concrete world.[...] Ontologically, traditional images mean phenomena, while technical images mean concepts.⁹

What is the basis of Flusser's claim according to which texts are abstracted from images? His main argument is drawn from a close examination of the meaning of the verb 'to express' – basically because when we write, we express something. Thus, 'to express' could mean either 'to press from somewhere against something', or, on a less obvious note, 'to press out from inside'.¹⁰ In other words, in order to write, a certain mental image or concept needs to be expressed into words.

⁷ Susan Sontag in the introduction to her book *On Photography* (pp. 1–2) claims the following “To collect photographs is to collect the world.”, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.” & “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.”, which are hyperbolized statements used in order to emphasize the extent to which our relation with the world mediated by the lens of the apparatus goes.

⁸ Eisenstein, Sergei, *Film Form. Essays in Film Theory*, Hancourt Brace Janovich, 1949.

⁹ Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, European Photography, 1984, p. 10.

¹⁰ Flusser, Vilem, *Gestures*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, ‘The Gesture of Writing’, p. 21.

Furthermore, etymologically speaking, ‘to express’ as in ‘to press from the outside’ can be applied to photography, as the gesture of taking a photograph implies pressing the shutter release button in order to create a picture with the purpose of expressing the operator’s ideas. In this context, one can consider painting a representative of traditional images and photography a representative of technical images. With the purpose of acceding to a better understanding of photography’s being-in-the-world, its comparison with painting is mandatory because the latter is a medium that at a certain point in time was preoccupied with trying to copy reality onto the surface of its support.

Painting and photography – matters of realism

André Bazin explains how at a certain stage of its evolution, more precisely in the XV-th century, “Western painting began to turn from its age-old concern with spiritual realities expressed in the form proper to it, towards an effort to combine this spiritual expression with as complete an imitation as possible of the outside world.”¹¹ In order to deliver a representation as close to reality as possible, a new means had to be invented to respond to the requests of that certain stage. Thus,

The decisive moment undoubtedly came with the discovery of the first scientific and already, in a sense, mechanical system of reproduction, namely, perspective: the camera obscura of Da Vinci foreshadowed the camera of Niepce. The artist was now in a position to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them.¹²

In this framework, the mimetic expectation of painting has been exceeded by the invention of *camera obscura* that led to the invention of photography. “In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with the likeness. [...] Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.”¹³ If one were to make a comparison between the painter’s and the operator’s specific skills, one would observe that, the difference lies in the demand of mirroring reality. Osip Brik, a member of the Russian formalist school, claims that the painter’s duty is subordinated to requirements that are specific to the medium of painting, namely maintaining a certain distance from trying to reproduce reality.

¹¹ Bazin, André, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1960, p. 6.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

Should these requirements not be respected, the consequence is the possibility of being confused or associated with the operator of a photographic apparatus. The latter seems to perform according to the programme of the apparatus that grants the possibility of a fragmentary mirroring of reality, not as much to his own intention. In other words, the operator's creative intention must adapt to the apparatus's programme.

The painter's task certainly does not consist in showing an object as it is but rather in recreating it in a painting according to different, purely painterly laws. What do we care for how an object looks? Let observers and photographers deal with that, we – the painters – make pictures in which nature is not the subject but merely an initial impetus for ideas. The painter not only has the right to change reality, it is virtually his duty to do so; otherwise he is not a painter but a bad copyist, a photographer.¹⁴

Limiting photography to a means of reproduction of reality was a widespread assumption in the XIX-th century, when artists rejected any technical intrusion in their works.¹⁵ Because of its contribution to science, photography used to be removed, at its dawning, from the art world. The main reason why photography was considered a threat was the possibility of making endless copies of the same image, thus threatening originality. Ergo, artists were deliberately avoiding technical means of producing images. Even so, W. Benjamin admitted that a “very precise technique might offer a magical value to its products”,¹⁶ a value that one cannot find in a painting. The magical element resides in the accurate representation of the human subject, which can grant the photograph access to the *auratic art*.

This category includes, according to Benjamin, art works that still keep a component in their ontology that can be traced back to the age-old liaison between art and ritual. The *aura*, a key concept in Benjamin's philosophy, is a point of reference for the work of art in the transition to the age of mechanical reproduction. The *aura* is “the unique value of the »authentic« work of art” which has a religious substructure, “which was, originally, the support of its past use value”.¹⁷

¹⁴ Brik, Osip, Photography versus Painting, 1926, p. 455, in *ART IN THEORY: An Anthology of Changing Ideas 1900-1990*, Ed. By Charles Harrison & Paul Wood. pp. 454–457.

¹⁵ Benjamin, Walter, “A Short History of Photography”, *Screen*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 1 March 1972, p. 5–6.

¹⁶ „the most exact technique can give its products a magical value which a painted picture can no longer have for us.” In Benjamin, Walter, “A Short History of Photography”, *Screen*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 1 March 1972, p. 7.

¹⁷ Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p 24.

For Benjamin, photography is a means of reproducing more than an artistic possibility, because of the absence of *aura*. The lack of aura is given by the ontological distance from the 'cult value'¹⁸ of the technical image. Despite the fact that it may seem that only the technical image lacks the *auratic* component, all works of art are lacking it more or less, starting from the secularization of art in general. The main consequence in this context was the substitution of the concept of *aura* with that of *authenticity*.¹⁹ A first reading of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" might concede that Benjamin excludes the possibility of photography having an *aura*, a trace found only in the high arts. However, "in photography, the exhibition value makes the cult value take a secondary place".²⁰ The cult value and its essential component, the *aura*, are maintained just in portrait photography, which can have the purpose of commemorating a subject that is no longer alive. "But as the human being withdraws from the photographic image, exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to cult value."²¹

Baudrillard also associates photography with ritual, but on a less positive note, calling photography's phenomenology a 'negative theology'.²² The reason why he does so is that he associates the means by which one can know the world with the ways in which photography works.

It is 'apophatic', as we used to call the practice of proving God's existence by focusing on what he wasn't rather than on what he was. The same thing happens with our knowledge of the world and its objects. The idea is to reveal such a knowledge in its emptiness, by default rather than in an open confrontation (in any case impossible). In photography, it is the writing of light which serves as the medium for this elision of meaning and this quasi-experimental revelation (in theoretical works, it is language which functions as the thought's symbolic filter).²³

On a different note, when painting's concern turns towards something besides the imitation of reality, the painter and the photographer's peculiarities are growing further apart. Accordingly, the idea of the bad copyist, that is the photographer, is adopted and overstated by the painting schools of the mid-nineteenth century

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p 25.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²² Baudrillard, Jean, *Photography or The Writing of Light*, a translation of: „La photographie ou l'écriture de la Lumière: Littéralité de l'image", in *L'Échange impossible*, Galilee, Paris, 1999, p. 175–184.

²³ *Ibidem*.

such as Impressionism, Cubism, Suprematism, and so on.²⁴ Thus, „the painters' repudiation of the idea of reproducing nature marked a decisive divide between photography and painting.”²⁵

Returning to the question of objectivity, Terence Wright, in his article “Photography: Theories of Realism and Convention”, presents the hypothesis according to which realism in photography is rarely questioned, along with the arguments that sustain this theory. The main reason for photography's affiliation to realism occurs mostly because of the way in which the making of the image resembles the way in which the human eye works. Thus, “the instrument itself, the camera, is called on to explain the mechanics of visual perception.”²⁶ Following the eye-camera analogy, those that stand by the objectivity of the photographic image perpetuate the theory according to which the “instrumentality” of the photograph is given by a causal relation between the environment and the photographic image, that is “»transcribed« from Nature”.²⁷ Actually, because “the retinal image is flat and reduced in size suggests we learn to perceive by association, making unconscious inferences from the retinal image.”²⁸ As Wright observes, “these theories, assuming two-dimensional vision to be immediate, primitive or sensory, suggested that any experience of an objective world is secondary, derived or perceptual.”²⁹

As an outcome to these hypotheses, negative responses from the psychological theorists emerged in a short time. “Psychological theory now rejects the retinal image as the basis of visual perception.”³⁰ Consequently, Wright calls forth James Gibson's critique of the ‘eye-camera analogy’ that “shift the emphasis from the passive registration of retinal images to perception based on an active engagement with the environment. [...] The perception of the world does not depend on a succession of retinal snapshots.”³¹ Thus emerged a series of iconoclastic theories that went against the grain, contesting the universal beliefs praising the objectivity of the photographic image.

An important point of view is that of Nelson Goodman who „believes that photographs, and other pictorial images based on linear perspective systems, are so unlike »normal« perception that they are entirely conventional. Closely akin to

²⁴ Brik, Osip, *Photography versus Painting*, 1926, p. 455, in *ART IN THEORY: An Anthology of Changing Ideas 1900-1990*, Ed. By Charles Harrison & Paul Wood. pp. 454–457.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Wright, Terence, “Photography: Theories of Realism and Convention” in *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920*, Ed. by Elizabeth Edwards, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19–20.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

language, as arbitrary systems of representation, they only appear realistic because we have learned to see them as such.”³² Basically, „representation is a matter of choice on behalf of the artist and habit on the part of the observer.”³³ These assumptions lead us to consider the reading of the photographic image to be a learned habit. The acquired habit can be very well linked to the functionality of the *black-box*, a concept that is used to describe technical devices that we know how to use, but know nothing about the ways in which they function. Regarding the way in which a technical image is perceived – we know the input, namely what is photographed, and we know the output, namely what comes out of the black-box as something similar to the input, the picture – gives insight into how there are taken into consideration only the two (input and output), leaving aside the actual black-box, what remains hidden from the human eye. The relation between the input and output leaves us thinking that photography is a mirror or a window. Nevertheless, acknowledging the specificity of the black box, namely leaving things in the dark, we cannot accept as easily that the photograph is just a representation of reality any longer.

As Flusser claims, in order to be critical of the objectivity of photography we must be critical of what is inside the black box.³⁴ The fact that it is habitual of not being critical and just accepting the input/output as the basis of how a camera works, strengthens the hypothesis that the way in which humans relate to technical images is culturally determined. The set of rules that link the input to the output, that the black box consists of, is accepted as it is, without the need of verification. Regardless, the way in which the apparatus serves its purpose, in this case to take pictures, is transmitted through documents such as user guides that are made by technical experts. Still, the operator and the spectator have no control over the contents of the black box.

Another problematic issue is that, at least concerning photography, there can be two types of black boxes: one of the analogue apparatus and the other of the digital camera. Regarding the analogue apparatus, one can notice an actual connection between the input and the output that is given by the support material, for example, the film. If we take into consideration the film, we might find it easier to identify how the *camera obscura* works, and thus, shed some light onto the black box, literally and figuratively.

The way in which light interacts with the photosensitive pellicle proves that there is some sort of continuity between the input and the output and gives us a hint about the meaning of the word ‘photography’ – the writing of light, as Baudrillard

³² *Ibidem*, p. 24.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

³⁴ Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1984, p. 11.

pointed out in his article with the same name.³⁵ However, when it comes to digital photography the process of creating images is entirely different because of the lack of a single material support. The support is replaced with data, which is not tangible.

The digital image is made out of pixels (pieces of data), which is the smallest structural unit of the image, such as the phoneme is for language. As long as there can be traced similarities between the digital image and language, proves once more that the technical image is something that is produced on one hand, and something that is perceived by means of analogy.

As Bazin points out,

“The quarrel over realism in art stems from a misunderstanding, from a confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological; between true realism, the need that is to give significant expression to the world both concretely and in its essence, and the pseudo realism of a deception aimed at fooling the eye (or for that matter the mind).”³⁶

An accurate example is the case of socialist realism in which what was portrayed as ‘real’ was far from ‘reality’, but was, at the same time, a model for how ‘things should be’. Then, “photography became the most important artistic tool in shaping the collective consciousness with the purpose to create a New Soviet Man.”³⁷ According to Boris Groys, in spite of the elites’ effort to impose socialist realism to the masses, the latter were more attracted towards another form of fictional life, namely Hollywood films and popular music that were more entertaining and easier to relate to, rather than dialectical materialism or avant-garde art.³⁸

In fact, the ‘realism’ in ‘social realism’ was just as fictional as film and ‘popular culture’ because it was imposed by the elites as something that the masses would be attracted to, in order to adhere to the avant-garde ideal of life. An example of socialist propaganda can be seen in the artwork for “Soviet Union” magazine that was distributed to non-socialist states.³⁹

³⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *Photography or The Writing of Light*, a translation of: „La photographie ou l’écriture de la Lumière: Littéralité de l’image”, in *L’Échange impossible*, Galilee, Paris, 1999, p. 175–184.

³⁶ Bazin, André, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1960, p. 7.

³⁷ <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/staging-staging-happiness-the-formation-of-socialist-realist-photography> – accessed 30. 07. 2017.

³⁸ Groys, Boris, “The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond”, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 8.

³⁹ <https://sovietbooks.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/soviet-union-magazine/>

Ritual and play

Bazin affirms art's ritualistic value through an analogy with the cult of the dead and with the human desire of not perishing along with the corporeal body. "If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation."⁴⁰ This can be directly related to photography, a fact confirmed by Barthes, which implies a "micro version of death"⁴¹ of the subject. Thus, the photographic image could be ontologically defined by the concept *imago*,⁴² which assumes maintaining an appearance of being alive, aside from the fact that the corporeal body is alive or not. Art's ritual function is aimed against death, and "the image helps us to remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death".⁴³ Considering photography's concern with death in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, one is likely to observe that there is something specific about the language used. Sarah Sentilles, in her article "The Photograph as Mystery: Theological Language and Ethical Looking in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*", analyses exactly that specificity: she argues that Barthes's language that is used to investigate photography's ontology is a theological one.

For example, concepts such as "revelation", "resurrection", "*acheiropoietos*", "transcendence" and "soul"⁴⁴ used to describe photography confirm that its specificity can be traced back to the origin of all that can be called art, namely the ritual.

On the same note as Barthes, Baudrillard insists on the fact that the act of taking a photograph of a subject (human) contributes to that subject's symbolic death. His main arguments include photography's capacity to coercing the subject to silence and immobility, by freezing its appearance into the image. "Photography helps us filter the impact of the subject. It facilitates the deployment of the objects's own magic (black or otherwise)." Additionally, it is worth mentioning that Baudrillard takes the objectivity issue even further, claiming, that the world lacks it completely. According to Baudrillard, there are a number of facets of the image that need to be considered: (1) "reflecting a profound reality", (2) "disguises and distorts a profound reality", (3) "disguises the absence of a profound reality", (4) "it does not have any

⁴⁰ Bazin, André, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1960, p. 4.

⁴¹ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p. 14.

⁴² 'mască mortuară' in Codoban, Aurel, *Imperiul comunicării. Corp, imagine și relaționare*, Idea Design & Print, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, p. 42.

⁴³ Bazin, André, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1960, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Sentilles, Sarah, "The Photograph as Mystery: Theological Language and Ethical Looking in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 90, No. 4, University of Chicago Press, Oct 2010, pp. 507.

contact with reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum".⁴⁵ There is an interchangeable play between the image and the world in Baudrillard's theory, insisting on the fact that the experience of the world is mistaken for the experience of the image. Starting from the creation of the technical image the experience of the world is not direct anymore, but it is mediated by a certain medium (photography, film).

The miracle of photography, of its so-called objective image, is that it reveals a radically non-objective world. It is a paradox that the lack of objectivity of the world is disclosed by the photographic lens (*objectif*).⁴⁶

Along these lines, one can observe that the magical aspect that Baudrillard associates with photography is different from Barthes's – while the latter is focused on reducing photography's purpose to 'embalming' the dead, the former is more concerned with the relation between photography and reality. What they have in common is that photography is a trace for something that no longer exists – for Barthes it is a trace of a person that no longer exists, and for Baudrillard it is a witness of the dispersion of the world.

Against meaning and its aesthetic, the subversive function of the image is to discover literality in the object (the photographic image, itself an expression of literality, becomes the magical operator of reality's disappearance).⁴⁷

As to the concept of play, Baudrillard claims that through the photographic lens (that is supposed to be objective) the world itself (which is non-objective) may come to appear as objective. This complicity between the world and the apparatus constitutes the play:

Technique becomes an opportunity for a double play: it amplifies the concept of illusion and the visual forms. A complicity between the technical device and the world is established. The power of objects and of 'objective' techniques converge.

⁴⁵ "it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum." in Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Baudrillard used a wordplay on the French 'objectif', which means 'lens' and the fact of being 'objective' in order to highlight the dissonance between the name of the component and its actual function. Baudrillard, Jean, *Photography or The Writing of Light*, a translation of: „La photographie ou l'écriture de la Lumière: Littéralité de l'image", in *L'Échange impossible*, Galilee, Paris, 1999, p. 175–184.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

The photographic act consists of entering this space of intimate complicity, not to master it, but to play along with it and to demonstrate that nothing has been decided yet.⁴⁸

In this context, the concept of ‘play’ can also include a sort of ‘performance’ on a smaller scale (it is not just the world as a whole that is caught acting). Both Barthes and Baudrillard agree that photography involves acting on behalf of the person that is being photographed. The fear of ‘not looking good’ in the photograph compels one to act in front of the camera. Even the whole idea of ‘modelling’ is based on ‘play’, not as an action that has its own purpose, but as ‘playing dead’ by being still, a stillness that involves controlling gestures and facial muscles in order to satisfy the apparatus’ purpose of objectifying everything that is alive. Therefore, the ‘model’ is acting out first of all for the apparatus, and secondly for the spectator.

That is why, this whole scene resembles a ritualistic act on behalf of the model – acting in order to compel the almighty apparatus to be kind and give back a good picture. If the subject does not act in any way, chances are the apparatus will not be so kind as to make a ‘good picture’. The operator in this context has their own purpose, that of an intermediary between the model and the apparatus. Like a priest, he is the mediator between the human subject and something beyond human control, not for the sake of good fortune, but for the sake of aesthetics. The final result is, accordingly, the picture as *acheiropoieta*. Drama, like any other art form, emerged from ritual and so, acting out in order to make something come true becomes part of the play the human subject has to perform in front of the apparatus. Because the pictures are ubiquitous and because the photographic lens is inescapable in society nowadays, a mutual determination between the world and photography has been established.

Therefore, events happen in the world in order to be documented by the apparatus and archived by humans in order to be ‘shared’ as trophies of personal experience. In order to be worth keeping and sharing, the world must present itself in a certain way for the apparatus, and that is why Baudrillard acknowledges that a form of complicity between photography and the world exists, through which they influence one another in a vicious circle. Consequently,

photography is also a drama, a dramatic move to action which is a way of seizing the world by »acting it out«. [...] Through photography, it is perhaps the world itself that starts to act and imposes its fiction. Photography brings the world into action (acts out the world, is the world’s act) and the world steps into the photographic act (acts out photography, is photography’s act).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*

Final remarks

“Realism” and “objectivity” are two concepts that have been associated with photography since the invention of the medium. The first aspect that contributed to this association was its comparison to painting, facilitating to see that photography depicts the outside world more accurately than the media that preceded it, hence making it easier to describe it as ‘realistic’. Another important feature is the fact that the picture is not directly man-made, and so it has *anacheiropoietia* peculiarity that would grant its ‘objectivity’. Although there are reasonable arguments for photography’s ‘realistic’ and ‘objective’ traits, such as the eye-camera analogy, we must take into consideration elements such as the ‘black-box’ that disables us to control what is going on inside the apparatus.

Thus, following Flusser’s reasoning, photography is not a mirror of ‘reality’, but a conceptualization of it. An important thing that was considered in this research was that the perception of the image itself is problematic. If it is the same as the perception of the real world or if the reading of the image is learned by association determines whether one can correlate ‘realism’ and ‘objectivity’ with photography. Some authors, such as Wright and Goodman believe that the reading of a picture is similar to using language, therefore, a learned habit. The reason I agree with this association is that the structure of language and of the picture seems to be similar, to the extent that they are constituted by small meaningless (by themselves) units such as the phoneme and the pixel, that make sense only as a whole. I do not personally agree with the fact that the photographic product, namely the picture, can be mistaken for reality, as Sontag claims, but I do believe nonetheless that photography has a substantial role in our relationship with the world.

This construction that is the photograph is a blending of a reflection of reality and a trace of the operator’s view on the world. In my opinion, the purpose of photography is to create and preserve a scene that is in accordance to the operator or the spectator’s view on reality. Not merely a reflection of reality, but a model for reality. Nowadays, with photography’s pervasiveness and with social media depending on it, we interact with it in a sort of ritualistic way: we take our daily dive into social media where we have a different persona and we communicate through pictures and ‘likes’. By means of ‘play’, we recreate reality according to our social belief system. Although the ‘ritual’ in photography was mostly associated with death and remembrance in the past, I believe nowadays it is much more concerned with immortality. Due to various media, we compare ourselves not to others, but to the representations of others, and some of us even resort to body modifications in order to be ‘picture perfect’.

Having into consideration that ‘real life’ has started to change in order to ‘look good’ on screens proves that our experience of the world is not direct anymore, but it is mediated by our relation with pictures and social media. Hence, Baudrillard’s claim about the disappearance of reality is not farther from the truth, since there is an interchangeable play between the world and the technical image of the world provided by photography and film.

In conclusion, photography’s ‘objectivity’ and ‘realism’ is relative to the concept of ‘play’ which is demanding a form of acting on behalf of the model or even the whole world, and which sets into motion a vicious circle in which one is uncertain whether the world determines the technical image or otherwise.

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