

COMMUNICATING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES

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Abstract: A number of false ideas circulate at the level of common sense in connection with the photographic image. The most frequent ones are those referring to the so-called photographic language, to the hidden grammar of the photographic image, or to the amount of truth contained in a photograph. The fact that the photography does not have a language in the proper sense of the word, does not have a grammar and does not claim to reveal the truth does not diminish in any way its dignity as a medium of expression. My article aims to demystify the photographic expression in order to clarify its specificity

Keywords: photographic image, universality, interpretation, perspective.

1. Introduction

Communication through photographic images is a type of visual communication that has gained a huge share. It seems that we are experiencing a "civilization of the image" that we must survive. From now on, the speech becomes axiological, a part of the speakers agreeing that this is a drop from the previous "civilization of the word," while the other part celebrate the colorful fripperies of the discourse of a new era. Unfortunately, the conceptualization of this type of expression was usually avoided in the academic discourse despite its frequency of use and even in the opposite direction. The reason seems to be a series of preconceptions about photography. Its iconic character makes it susceptible to a quick "what you see is what you get" classification. Everything is on the surface, the image takes the place of any hermeneutics, the image is the hermeneutics. The photographic way of seeing seems to be an extension of the utilitarian perspective, a biological function with survival role.

Phrases such as *photographic language* and *grammar of photography* are often used in the discourse on photography when it is desired to draw the audience's attention through references to hidden (potentially mysterious) elements. This kind of essentialist discourse is often used, but few of those enchanted by it realize that the emperor's clothes are, in fact, nonexistent. Filled with a particular type of rhetorical euphoria, those who employ these expressions beyond the metaphorical domain, claiming that the terms *language* or *grammar* actually have a reference, do not realize that they have committed a forbidden projection.

A language is a complex system containing a syntax, a grammar and a vocabulary. From a semiotic point of view, the language is a sign system operated by a series of rules for fixing, processing and transmitting information. The sign represents everything that is substituted for something else according to certain rules. There are three types of rules: syntactic (concerning the relationships between signs), semantic (concerning the relationships between the signs and their meanings), and pragmatic (concerning the use of signs by those who employ the language).

In photography, we cannot speak about a syntax, semantics or pragmatics of signs. What we are dealing with here are natural icons or figurative iconic signs which directly represent objects or spatial relationships through a mimetic type of representation. The only rules we can find in photography are the rules of composition that guides us in achieving a harmonious framing and a "good" picture. And the only kind of information we can find in photo images is the visual information that does not refer to ideas or knowledge: "The photographic information is the amount of detail in an image, the ability to distinguish barely perceptible spaces" (Hurn, Jay 2013, 32). The photographs are holistic, not discursive, they present the entire information simultaneously.

Photographic images convey sensations, feelings, emotions, rather than statements or ideas. In the case of the latter, the natural languages are the most appropriate ways of communication. In this perspective, visual communication is rather ambiguous and polysemantic. It does not have the precision of a natural language (and even less of a formal language) for what it wants to transmit. It is precisely in this sense that the phrase: "a picture is worth a thousand words" must be interpreted. On one hand, the richness of the visual information, the amount of detail in a picture are almost impossible to be translated into words or, in the best case, can only be expressed through a multitude of statements describing what is captured in that photograph. On the other hand, the states that they convey to the viewer may lie on the boundary of the expressible, may therefore be ineffable. The process of decoding a photographic image is very similar to the process of deciphering an image of visual arts. As such, photography shares a common visual *instrumentarium* with arts.

Having an iconic or pictorial character, photography is a universal means of communication (Feininger 2015, 15). It is the universality of seeing and of recognizing what is seen, process that comes before the words: "the child looks and recognizes before he can speak" (Berger 2008, 7). Seeing establishes our place in the world. We explain the world with words, but they can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by this world. Moreover, as Berger says, the way we see things is contaminated by what we know and what we believe. Every photographic image incorporates a perspective, a way of seeing.

Seeing is an active operation, an act of choice. The photographs are not mechanical records of the reality, but perspectives selected from an infinity of other perspectives. "Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing" (idem, 10). In other words, although perception is universal, pertaining to the act of seeing itself, the process of representation is relative to the viewer. The image is never univocal, but always subjected to an act of decryption and interpretation. The intentions of the artist may differ from the representations of the viewer due to different cultural contexts, to the viewer's biases or to her/his lack of knowledge about the visual codes specific to an era.

One of the features of photography, discussed by David Hurn, is its lack of narrative character. Photography is a universal iconic medium which, by its very nature, is not meant to tell stories: "Photos do not chronicle and have no narrative function. Instead they make a verbal account seem real. In other words, they evoke the feeling of reality as a substitute for the direct confrontation with the subject [...] only photography, unlike all other arts and means of communication, requires the actual presence of the thing itself in front of the camera lens. Which means that the subject,

as long as it is faithfully recorded, maintains a special relationship with the reality. From a psychological point of view, the viewer accepts that the photo is a valid substitute for the original "(Hurn, Jay 2013, 31-33).

Anchored in the purest concrete, the photography is a mimetic rendering of the intended subject. Therefore, asking photographs to convey concepts, constructs or abstract ideas is a mistake (as Susan Sontag says, a photo cannot transcend its subject as a painting can do). All images pretending to convey philosophical reasonings or deep understandings are merely results of an erroneous, unjustified interpretation. The abstract is at the opposite end of the immediacy of photography. It is inaccessible to perception and obtained through a mental process of generalization upon common attributes of a class of objects or phenomena. By contrast, photography is strongly imbedded in the real, in the here and now of the historical moment. Photos can accompany the text, but in this situation, they will have an illustrative role and their meaning will be text-driven and borrowed from it.

There is also a gnoseological function of photography as a way of knowing and understanding the world. Photography is used in science as a tool, supplementing the discursive. To this effect, it does not act independently of the word. Scientific photography involves a visual mapping and coding of the reality according to scientific criteria. Let's only think of aerial photographs used for military purposes, medical photographs or astrophotographs. In the absence of the code, these images are opaque, almost impossible to read.

Further, as Susan Sontag shows, the photographs provide evidence, they are "documents" that incriminate, instruments of surveillance and control of the population. Here we have the photos which are attached to identity documents that are intended to certify that a particular identity can be attributed to the person who has the appearance of the photographed subject. The pictures taken by the police at the scene of the crime or accident have the same function, they are the unquestionable evidence that a certain thing has happened.

"The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph - any photograph - seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects" (Sontag 2014, 14).

2. Photographic truth?

Another problem concerns the truth of the photographic image. To what extent can we talk about the truth contained by a photo? Is the statement "The camera never lies" correct? To what can we assign the quality of being true? According to the Aristotelian logic, only statements or sentences have truth value, so only about them we can meaningfully say that are true or false. According to the correspondence theory of truth, a proposition is true if what it asserts actually takes place and is false if there is no such correspondence between the statement and the reality: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (Aristotel 1996, 156) și "there is truth when between the subject and the predicate there is an union corresponding to reality and there is no truth when this union does not correspond to reality" (Aristotel 1996, 360).

Because they are not sentences, photographic images don't affirm or deny anything. They are rather on the other side of the discursive and seem to represent the very reality that is taken as a test or a criterion for our sentences. Thus, the photographs as such are not true or false (to the extent that they are actually pictures, they can only represent a state of things as it presents itself at a given moment), but only the interpretation of a photo made by the viewer. Also, when an image is used in a certain context to support an idea, although it portrays a completely different reality than the one suggested by the text, we should say that its use is deceitful and fraudulent and not that the image "lies" or it is false. Being a faithful copy of the reality, a photograph cannot be false just as reality cannot be true or false. Reality only exists, it appears to our perception and is susceptible to be captured in a photograph.

Rather than true (or false), photographs can be considered strong (or not) in the sense that they contain (or don't) tensions and powerful elements that direct the attention of the viewer, have an impact on him, make the most of the subject and transmit an emotional message, easy to be deciphered.

As I shown before (Suciu 2017), there have been attempts, since the beginning of photography, to use photos in order to present counterfeited scenes as reality, to manipulate the image in order to portray things that were not present at the moment of immortalization on film ("The Cottingley Fairies" images, made by Elsie and Frances Griffiths in 1917 or Robert Doisneau's photo "Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville" from 1950). More recently, the post-truth phenomenon could not spare the field of photography. Not only did it use all the possible communication channels, but it also employed all the available tools. One paradigmatic example is a photograph taken at the inauguration of US President Donald Trump. The image does not contain any alterations or manipulations, but it was taken from a favorable angle which leaves the impression that the boulevard was full of people acclaiming the vice president Mike Pence during the inaugural march. Another photograph, this time from an unofficial source and taken from a wider angle, reveals an almost deserted, lifeless boulevard, with the exception of the vice president, his family and guards. We are not dealing here with truth versus false, reality versus fiction, but with a potentially infinite ways of seeing and with a demagogic discourse supplemented with a photograph presenting a convenient perspective from a possible multitude.

For a long time photography has maintained a special relationship with the truth. Due to its immediate mechanical character, it seemed that the truth is woven into its very ontological fabric. Photography was considered a true, uninterpreted copy of reality: "When, photography was invented, it was thought to be an equivalent to truth. It was truth with a capital T "(Goldberg 2009). The post-truth rhetoric confiscated this special relationship between reality and the photographic image and used it to build its manipulative discourse. She presents as photographs imaginary constructions and constructs fictional identities that have all the visual traits of a captured reality. This technique becomes a more perfidious manipulative tool as it appeals to the nature and specificity of photography subverting them from within. If we are no longer convinced that the photos convey the reality, then we will no longer be able to distinguish between photography and computer generated imagery. In other words, we will witness the death of photography and, along with it, the erasing of the boundary between reality and fantasy.

There are currently algorithms that can take the appearance of some people (preferable public persons) and build imaginary scenes that look as realistic as an

actual photo (this also works for videos). The viewer has such a strong sense of reality that he has no reason to doubt. There are also algorithms that can create extremely realistic portraits of people who don't even exist and never existed. Using an artificial intelligence algorithm designed through the machine learning method, Phillip Wang, a software engineer, created a website (thispersondoesnotexist.com) where, with every refresh of the page, you can get the face of a person who doesn't exist. These images are so realistic that they actually cannot be distinguished from real photo portraits.

3. Conclusions

Considering photography as a language includes an essential error. Namely, what is illustrative is taken as discursive and what is perspective is taken as truth. Only accompanied by words the photographs can serve a narrative purpose and even in this situation they retain a specificity that goes beyond the storytelling, creating an emotional impact similar to the visual arts. At the same time, photography is not, from the very beginning, art. Photography represents a medium of expression that can be used for the most different purposes (Sontag 2014, 154-155). Just as language can be used to make shopping lists or love poems, photography can be used to make id pictures as well as images displayed in galleries or printed in albums purchased by art lovers. This makes the term "photography" have an intension as rich as others philosophical concepts, and, like these, it should receive the same attention from the philosophy of culture.

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