FASCINATION, COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTIONS OF A THEORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY[1]

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Abstract:

Photography is one of the ways we have to fight against the decadence and death that time inevitably brings to everything human, and to each of us as individuals. Its discovery and now its generalisation through the digital system, with the possibility of being produced instantaneously through the most different means, and laboratory-processed, creates infinite possibilities of reality. It has implications in all areas of human life. It also corresponds to a democratisation of plastic artistic expression, as it allows a cultivated person to produce works of aesthetic value from a set of relatively easy-to-obtain means. In this sense, in the society of spectacle in which we live (G. Debord) and in the proliferating world of images in which we are immersed as compulsive consumers of what we see on screens, photography is central, whether at an amateur or professional level. More than denoting realities, photography creates, like other art forms, new realities, which at the same time are fleeting, impossible to fix by the retina, but which also remain, in the photo, imprisoned forever and ever. It is in this sense that it is a contradictory activity since it stagnates and "kills" what it records, but at the same time makes the fleeting instant live, endure. Photography corresponds to a scopic drive, to a compulsive desire to see, which is at the same time a reason for pleasure and disillusionment. Because we always want to see more, jouissance is never complete, by definition, because it only ends with death.

Resumo:

A fotografia é uma das formas que temos de lutar contra a decadência e a morte que o tempo inevitavelmente traz a tudo o que é humano, e a cada um de nós enquanto indivíduos. A sua descoberta e agora a sua generalização através do sistema digital, com a possibilidade de ser produzida instantaneamente através dos mais diferentes meios, e transformada laboratorialmente, cria infinitas possibilidades de realidade. Tem implicações em todos os domínios da vida humana. Corresponde também a uma democratização da expressão artística plástica, pois permite a uma pessoa culta produzir obras de valor estético a partir de um conjunto de meios relativamente fáceis de obter. Neste sentido, na sociedade do espetáculo em que vivemos (G. Debord) e no mundo proliferante de imagens em que estamos imersos como consumidores compulsivos do que vemos nos ecrãs, a fotografia é central, seja a nível amador ou profissional. Mais do que denotar realidades, a fotografia cria, à semelhança de outras formas de arte, novas realidades, que ao mesmo tempo são fugazes, impossíveis de fixar pela retina, mas que também ficam, na fotografia, aprisionadas para todo o sempre. É neste sentido que é uma atividade contraditória, pois estagna e "mata" o que regista, mas ao mesmo tempo faz viver, perdurar, o instante fugaz. A fotografia corresponde a uma pulsão escópica, a um desejo compulsivo de ver, que é ao mesmo tempo motivo de prazer e de desilusão. Porque queremos sempre ver mais, o gozo nunca está completo, por definição, porque só termina com a morte.

Opening

Photography fascinates us because now - with the cell phone and the digital - it is practically available to everybody, it can produce nice images, and we live in a world that is slowly being conquered by images and screens vis a vis traditional reading on paper where the image was just an illustration, a complement of the text.

Even the use of PowerPoint documents in classrooms, or presentations such as this, represents the transformation of knowledge into images and small phrases that are a complement or a comment on the images. That is, we are assisting to an inversion of traditional values even at the level of how we approach knowledge and thought.

Image condenses ideas and realities but also often simplifies them to an extreme. That is its danger. Not only in photography but in cinema as well. Notice for instance the case of some filmmakers who started doing documentaries to try to understand and record certain social realities, for example, and at a certain moment they turned to fiction because they understood that fiction would give more accurately the complexity and singularity of a given person or a given situation. Otherwise, "docufiction" is a word coined to refer to movies that combine documentary and fiction…

This is why I do not trust social nets or other fast ways of generating and transmitting "information". "Information" is a very impoverished notion of human experience. This may sound like an anachronistic proposal, but I do think that we need to return to the idea of Spirit – *Geist* - in the sense of Hegel, the great German thinker of the beginning of the 19th century. We need to fight against thinking like a "fast thinker" as we should avoid consuming fast food.

Fast in this sense is always toxic. And the fascination for images may turn into a toxic voyeurism as well.

Memoir, heritage, archive: photography is one of the ways we have to "fight against" decadence and death

Today, with the mobile phone and widespread tourism, we are all "photographers".

And, through social networks, we have the possibility of immediately disseminating the images we produce in this way. It is not so much about quality; it is about instantaneity. This instantaneity is linked to narcissism: we often like to show an image that provokes a certain "envy" in our recipients.

That attitude is about showing that we are happy, living fantastic experiences, connected to places/experiences/people that are not accessible to everyone and that are giving us pleasure. The principle is the same as the live TV: communicating what is happening to us now. This obsession for the "now", for the staging of a magnificent, complete, full present, serves as an imaginary and symbolic compensation for a fluid reality, lived by the only animal (human) that knows that it is going to die, and that seeks completeness, both of the experience and of the register of that experience. It seeks to fill a gap that is intrinsic to humans. Actually, that gap is an important one: it is precisely what allows the possibility of subjectivity, that constitutes the subject itself as such.

That is why society, at another level, creates museums, archives, heritage sites, etc. The obsession for conserving and producing heritage (natural or cultural, material or immaterial) is a compensation for the awareness of the fluidity of reality at all levels.

Because human experience is tied to the loss, both at the individual and the collective levels.

The archive or the museum would preserve a whole identity that, in reality, escapes us, because such an archive is always incomplete, just like reality, whether at an individual or a collective level. Reality is not totalizable – it is also crossed by a gap - and the life of the human being, as a "being towards death", is always fragile and unpredictable. Hence the histrionic and hysterical valorisation of the instant, as seen for example at big pop music festivals. Alienation (in the current sense of the word, and of all kinds...) is compensation for the loss of the father, for the death of god (Nietzsche).

Therefore, photography is present in all of this, in all aspects of our contemporary lives.

Intermezzo

This question, formulated by Christ on the cross, is, in my view, the most tragic and at the same time the most representative (and sublime) of our Western, Christian culture: the last appeal to the Father for protection and help: Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27: 46-54 [3]

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[3] Cf. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2027%3A46-54&version=NIV

The representation of the crucifixion, Christ in the cross, is by far the most common image of our Western art history... until today.

Reality has the structure of fiction: photography creates infinite possibilities of reality, infinite realities

Modern Western consciousness, from the 17th century onwards (but already before that in art, with the invention of perspective in Italian painting, and with particular attention to detail in the art of Northern European countries), in conjunction with the progressive predominance of rationalism and science (versus the previous explanations of the world based on the transcendent and the divine, God) marked a difference, well expressed in Descartes, between subject (*cogito*, thought matter) and object (*res extensa*, thoughtful matter).

Hence a particular attention to the object, which is universal (especially in "hard" sciences), and an extreme valorisation of objectivity on the part of the subject, according to protocols and with the use of an increasingly refined technology, including that of vision.

However, on the one hand, the very extreme complexity to which science has led us denies the possibility of reducing reality to an organised and predictable cosmos (just think of quantum physics and its debates), and on the other, it places the subject or the scientific community also in the same situation of confronting aporias and unpredictability (just think of Artificial Intelligence).

Moreover, the old dialectic, which had already been intuited by Heraclitus and was expounded by the German philosopher Hegel, shows that subject and substance (i.e., supposedly fixed reality) are in constant mediation, that is, they determine each other mutually, so the idea of being able to embrace reality as an "outside" to the subject is mythical, wrong, and after all, it is still a legacy of religion.

From an imagetic point of view, so important for the process of "objectification", photography is showing us this every day: far from being mimetic, from reproducing an object from an "objective" point of view conceived as a perfect double of it, both at the moment of the click and afterwards in the laboratory manipulation, photography shows us unsuspected realities (actually, the gap that constitutes reality), not only because we could not see them before due to the insufficiency of our technical apparatus, but above all because reality multiplies itself, changes continuously as we observe it. That is why a

totalised reality is evidently a wrong metaphysical idea. The observer and the observed are in mutual dependency, they are in a mediated relationship. That implicit gap is what allows human subjectivity.

Lacanian psychoanalysis: Photography corresponds to our scopic drive

A drive (human phenomenon) is not an instinct (animal phenomenon). A drive is a strong "motivation" for a certain kind of behaviour. "Scopic" derives from "scope" which is related to the act of viewing.

From about 6 months to 18 months of age, infants (a child that can not yet speak) may have the experience of looking at his/her image in the mirror. Lacan called this experience "the mirror stage". It corresponds to the beginning of self-recognition when the person does not yet have the capacity to coordinate his/her body and the symbolic capacity of saying "I" or "it is me"; but this first intuition marks the experience of vision for the rest of his/her life. The mirror gives us a laterally inverted image of the person, an experience of strangeness: a reflection that corresponds to me and, at the same time, is "other", the image is not me. This is crucial for every image theory and understanding.

Lacan considers three instances (not chronological phases) in human experience: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. They are interconnected in the so-called Borromean knot.

Imaginary is related to the mirror stage that repeats all along individual life. There is always a gap between the image and what it is supposed to represent. **Symbolic** is tied to the acquisition of language (humans are talking subjects). But the linguistic sign is also crossed by a gap: between the sound (signifier) and the meaning (signified). **Real** is not a substance but denotes everything that cannot be captured by the symbolic, and therefore cannot be symbolised.
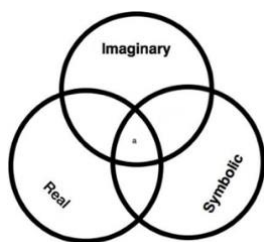
Fig. 1 - Borromean knot (simplified: the object petit a, the object-cause of desire, is at the center of the scheme)

Mirrors have a great importance in Lacan, especially in his first moment, when he concentrates on the Imaginary and the constitution of imaginary and symbolic subjects. That is this way each one of us imagines possessing a coherent identity. To express that graphically, he uses the optical scheme of the inverted vase. On a box, there is an empty vase, and below, hidden by the box, some flowers. If the subject is posited in a point marked by the image of an eye it is because he/she will see the vase with the flowers inserted in it, as a normal vase of flowers. The vase symbolises the body; and the subject has the illusion that his/her body constitutes a unity if seen from a certain point in the space. That image corresponds to his/her imaginary ego ideal, the person that he/she wishes to be.
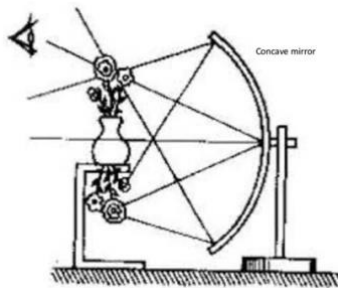
Fig. 2 - Optical scheme of the physicist Henri Bouasse, adopted by Lacan from 1953 on (experience of the inverted bouquet)

Complicating this first general scheme, Lacan introduces a second mirror, this time not concave but flat. Now, the vase is in an inverted position inside the box. The observer is located in a different position from the side of the concave mirror. Thus, the observer cannot see the real vase in an inverted position inside the box but he can see the imaginary ensemble of the flowers inside the vase in a "normal position". Not that this scheme will be more and more integrated into the general theory of Lacan (and therefore complexified) in a text of 1961 and, again, in the Seminary on *Angoisse* (translated as "*Anxiety*") (1962/63).
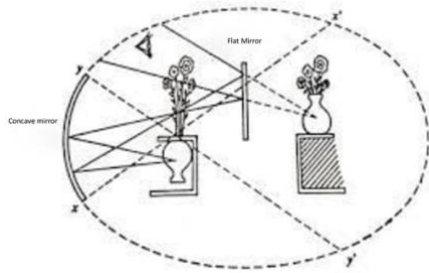
Fig. 3 - Scheme of two mirrors, Lacan (1954)

In the scheme of 1961, it is clearer the relationship between it and the articulation the author makes between two basic concepts: the imaginary "ego ideal" and the symbolic "ideal of the ego" (this one is very much determined by the valued image of the other). In this scheme, several symbols would demand a long commentary/explanation: $ - barred subject; A – the Other, represented here by the flat mirror; C (the vase) – the body (in Portuguese, *corpo*); I'a = i(a) = ego ideal; flowers = a, corresponding to object petit a; the line $ - S,I represents the relation between the subject and the "ideal of the ego"…
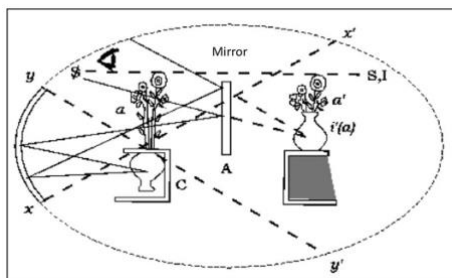

Fig. 4 - Scheme of two mirrors, developed by Lacan (1961)

Lacanian psychoanalysis and Photography

As we can see, it is impossible, in this brief context, to explain the complex Lacanian theory on the constitution of the subject and, in it, the place of the gaze and vision. It is only a matter of strongly alerting here to the fact that the image, and in particular the photographic image, is incomprehensible, in all its complexity and richness, without the in-depth study of Lacanian psychoanalysis, a study that should be accomplished by all social scientists and all those people who want to understand what the image represents, beyond the vertigo of much of what is constantly written and said about it, in a more or less intuitive or essayistic way, and which are more or less banal variants of the same thing.

Lacan, following Freud but far beyond him, entirely subverted our understanding of the human, and consequently how we conceptualise the scopic drive, using the laws of optics to understand the formation of that entity called "subject", a subject that he aphoristically defined as "a signifier for another signifier" (here too we can see how linguistics was another determining element in Lacanian theory). So, to speak of the image without paying attention to this general perspective is like, for example, continuing to speak of physics as if Einstein's theory of relativity had not occurred or the new questions of quantum physics had not arisen.

For Lacan, the gaze is an object, but not in the ordinary sense of object, since every object is a lost object, and it would be necessary to explain what he means in particular by the small object a (as opposed to the capital A, which designates the great Other, *Autre* in French), the object-cause of desire. Lacan once said that this small object had been his great discovery. But the whole complex fabric of Lacanian work can only be understood by reading and re-reading it "line by line", letter by letter. The human being, who is a failed being, a symbolic castrated one (let us say, to simplify, by language), and for this reason is represented thus - \$, s of subject - has a relation - given graphically through a small lozenge- with the object a, object cause of desire - which symbolises the phantasm, the fantasy. $^{\$}\lozenge^{a}$ Without the fantasy, reality itself, which has the structure of fiction, would decompose.

Anthropology of figuration: naturalism and Western modernity

French anthropologist Philippe Descola (retired Professor at the Collège de France, Paris) discovered that our Western way of organising the world, since the advent of rationalism and science in the 17th century, is only one of (at least) four possible ways of thinking about it, which he called ontologies. This resulted in a celebrated book, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2005, English translation 2022). That Western ontology of ours, which he called "naturalist", is as "exotic" as the other three, the animist, the totemist, and the analogist.

He then went on to study the figurative modes to which each of these ontologies corresponds and found that his quadripartite classification also holds at the imagetic level, resulting in the book "*Les Formes du Sensible. Une Anthropologie de la Figuration*" (2021), whose English edition will appear soon. It is a crucial work for the (structuralist-

rooted) understanding of reality and the image, including, of course, the photographic image that we endlessly produce. Descola's method was based on the following: to see how the different peoples of the world (still alive in the present or just recorded) conceptualise the opposition between exterior/physicality/appearance – and interior (what we would call spirit, or soul, or essence) according to the binomial equal/different. For us, Westerns, since the beginnings of modernity, the exterior (the body) is of the natural, biological domain, like all living reality, but inside (in our spirit), we are different (animals provided with speech, living in a symbolic reality, with self-awareness, including that of mortality). In animism, an ancient word that Descola recovered to designate the way of composing the world of the Amazonian indigenous people he studied, the opposite is true. The inner or spiritual reality is common to men and animals (and even to other living beings; only the way they present themselves to humans is different (monkey, jaguar, snake, etc.), but it is only an appearance as if they were "masked". Their spiritual substance is identical to ours.

Animism	Naturalism	Totemism	Analogism
similar interiorities (continuity of souls)	**different interiorities** (discontinuity of minds)	**similar interiorities** (soul essences are Identical in all members of a class)	**different interiorities** (gradual discontinuity of the components of beings
different physicalities (discontinuity of forms)	**similar physicalities** (continuity of matter)	**similar physicalities** (substance and behaviour are identical)	**different physicalities** (gradual discontinuity of the components of beings

Fig. 5 - Adapted (simplified) from Philippe Descola's presentation (cf. bibliography)

The classification we find in Australia and other totemic worlds is completely different: exterior and interior are the same in humans and natural beings, but these are divided into different groups according to whether they descend from beings who inhabited the world in its beginnings ("Dreamtime") and left certain signs on the ground that relate to the (totemic) places through which they disappeared into the depths of the earth. But each of these places is seminal, that is to say, contains the germs of the whole group of humans and non-humans derived from it; it is a sacred place (which may be a place of no apparent interest to our eyes) which, if destroyed, will cause the extinction of the whole group linked to it (hence the tensions that have existed since the invasion of Australia by Europeans who could not understand this way of thinking and decimated the natives). It was, therefore, a peculiar way of thinking about the relationship between beings and certain places.

The last way of composing the world, or ontology, that is, of relating what is human and what is natural, is the one that existed even among us Europeans until modernity (among many other cases). Reality is made up of an infinite, atomised diversity of beings, of beings, completely different from each other both in physical and in spirit (to use words/concepts that we are used to) that can be brought closer or distinguished from each other by the presence/absence of certain correspondences, correspondences between discontinuous elements, and that allow a certain order to be attributed to reality.

As can be understood, I can not develop here the consequences of these four ontologies at the level of figurative organisation, but it becomes very clear that photography could only have appeared in our modern Western way of thinking, the naturalist way, and therefore it is decentred about other possibilities of living life and therefore of conceiving reality, the meaning of action, etc. our world.

What we, Westerns, have done throughout the world is to try to convert others to our way of conceptualising and figuring it (for example, by scattering religious monuments throughout the world, the sign of the cross, images of all kinds, etc.), wrongly convinced that it was the only right vision, with all the complications and injustices that resulted.

Only a comparative anthropology of figuration can help us understand the reaction, strangeness, and sometimes resistance of others to being photographed. But as we know, even in the universal, colonial, etc. exhibitions held in the great cities of Europe, the natives of other countries were brought in as exotic curiosities and exhibited in authentic "human zoos" to the avid gaze of the voyeuristic crowds that characterise our way of being civilized.

Image, media, politics: persuasive communication

The photograph, giving an impression of reproducing "the" reality, a visible reality, true, independent of the observer, verifiable by all, and apparently unsubstantiated, is particularly important in what some authors, referring to the media, have called "the manufacturing of consensus" (Chomsky *et al*, "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media", 2011). Most people naively "believe" what they see in the image as if it were an "objective", neutral, trustworthy document, as if it reproduced aspects of an unequivocal reality, not realizing the character of symbolic construction inherent in every image, its persuasive rhetoric. No image is naive, no image reproduces or mirrors a reality outside of it. As a matter of fact, the very reality as it is mirrored in our gaze is itself already a symbolic entity, the product of semiosis. Having this capacity to convince, the photographic image has an enormous potential for manipulation, because it seems to identify itself with a "truth" that is external to it. Now, we know well that the best way to "lie", that is, to transmit a meaning that is intended to be unquestionable, is to tell "the truth", organized in a certain way. That is what the media does every day.

This rhetoric divides opinions from facts. What is a fact is incontestable, and it hides its constructed character in the most skilful and sophisticated way. Of course, it is enough

for people to realise that they are being photographed, voluntarily or not, for them to immediately "pose". But even if they are not aware of it, there is the choice of the subject/author, there is all the framing done by the author of the photograph, who chooses a reality, "paints it" in lighter or darker colours, intuitively selects a whole series of figures that he wants to enter the photograph, eliminating (at the moment of the click or later) everything that he considers to be too much. None of this presupposes great technological instruments at our disposal today, which make the moment of the click only a transitory instant of a whole process of choice and construction, previously and subsequently. Rather, the most rudimentary photographic act is already an act of construction of reality, which always escapes in its detail from all the intervening parties, photographed and author, object, and subject, since all are, once inserted into the photographic world, inherent in the same semiotic, fluid and complex universe.

As Samuel Mateus and Ivone Ferreira write at the very beginning of a book they coordinate[4] (p. 2), "photography is an indexical inscription that persuades us about what we observe (...)". An index, in this sense, is a representation that has some form of correspondence, of relation (negation, opposition, similarity, or contrast) with its object; it is integrated, as is known, in the well-known notion of "secondness" of Peirce's semiotic theory.

Photography, anthropology, colonialism

It is common knowledge how photography, discovered in the first part of the 19th century and disseminated mainly from the second half of that century onwards, was everywhere an instrument of power. Power in the most political, state sense of the term, linked from the outset to police reorganisation. In fact, pictures of prisoners, taken from the front and the side, accompanied by their identification number, come immediately to mind as a way for biopower to identify, classify, and organise those submitted to the prison regime. Allowing a quick way to index people through their facial image, it even preceded the use of the fingerprint ("dermatoglyphics"), as we know it is also a highly powerful instrument in the control of individuals, as it presents a different shape in each one of them. The fingerprint is still important in modern machines, be it computers or "time and attendance" machines to record workers' hours, etc.

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[4] Cf. "Retórica Mediatizada. A Comunicação Persuasiva Através dos Media", 2022.

Independently of photography also being an art form, which at a certain point competed with painting in several genres and namely in the portrait, which it democratised and even, at a level now already purely functional and not artistic, functionalised (passports, identity cards, etc.), photography was being linked to a lot of other activities typical of the 19th century, and that continued in the 20th century and until today.

One of them was the one that aroused curiosity about the populations of other regions of the world that the Europeans were encountering and colonising, taking care to classify them into cultural, ethnic, and racial types through photographs, and being much easier, for their records and reports, to do so through photography than through drawing. The same could be said concerning other manifestations of power of the great colonial powers regarding landscapes considered worthy of note, archaeological investigations (in principle made according to a very destructive methodology), and in general to scientific expeditions of all kinds in which photography gradually completed and replaced drawing, even in the magazines consumed by the bourgeoisie in the comfort of their homes. Photography is thus linked to a typically modern process of the will to classify the world and, at the same time as using it for commercial and economic purposes in general, reduce it to a great album where exotic realities could be seen, as through globes and atlases one could fly over the whole world with one's gaze. Photography, anthropology, and colonialism are thus deeply interconnected [cf. Juan Naranjo, ed., the book "Fotografía, Antropología y Colonianismo (1845-2000), 2006], and articulated with Western curiosity but also with the record of explorations and military achievements all over the world.

More generally, photography was the mirror in which everyday life - staged, of course, as today in social networks and the media - entered everyone's visual world, as a souvenir, souvenir of a holiday, postcard, memories of important steps in individual life (weddings, family photos, etc.) mirroring the different social classes in scenery and in the posture of bodies and clothing, as it progressively became accessible to everyone. Today, with mobile phones, everyone photographs everyone and everything, but always to convey a staged image of themselves and the environments they go through.

Creator of a new iconography, of a new industry, infiltrated in all environments in which everyone places themselves and others in chosen situations and positions, photography is linked to the modern taste in collecting and the nostalgia of possessing, of seeing the whole, a position so typical of the West, and of monotheisms in general, I believe. But of these monotheisms, it was the Christian one that by far was most expressed in the figurative image, particularly Catholicism (Christ figure, Virgin Mary, etc.). Even today

we still go around churches all over the world photographing these sublime images, which from the Romanesque to the Baroque, Catholicism has created.

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