

POLY(CON)TEXTUALITY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE (On the philosophical aspects of photography)

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Some philosophical aspects of photography are indicated, chiefly the relation between the real object and its photographic image, between reality and fiction within it, as well as between the “truth” and “untruth” of the photograph. The author’s contemplations on the indicated (and other) questions focus on the so-called family photograph, some factors that have impact on the formation and the interpretation of the photographic constellations. Contemplations are based on the idea that there is no “innocent” eye of the photographer/camera, every photographic image is (by the formation but also by every perception–interpretation) situated in a particular social, historical and cultural context and is co-determined by this polycontextual situatedness. In spite of the relative cognitive credibility, the author regards photography as an important means of representation of people and/or things and events.

The birth of photography opened the field of new topics for philosophy mainly associated with the character of the complicated relationship between reality and its photographic image, with the problem of “photographic truth”, but for instance also with the temporal dimension of being, with the possibility of maintaining the presence for any future time. In one of the most impressive writings about photography, Roland Barthes, in reply to the question what a photograph is “in itself”, stresses that photography shows tendencies to escape from any classification attempt and remains unclassifiable. In contrast to a picture, a photograph is, according to Barthes, strongly bound to its referent: it is always the photograph of something or somebody, it does not show a fiction but something that really was (Barthes 1994, 69). Because of its participation in something unique, concrete, this French philosopher and writer characterizes it as absolute uniqueness, as a sovereign randomness (Barthes 1994, 10).

The absolute uniqueness has, I think, a very complicated (and relative) character, it does not only portray fiction, but in its portraying the real, there is always (on purpose or accidentally) present also something fictitious. Fictitious components enter the photograph both through the eyes of the photographer at the moment the photograph is taken and (to a still larger extent) at the moment of its interpretation through the eyes of the person looking at the photograph. The

photograph reports on the seen (what once was real), but it also leaves space for prescient, felt, anticipated (and perhaps also unreal). Opening up our imagination and pointing out to what is visible and present, evokes a desire for something that is beyond the photographic image, beyond the border of the immediately seen, experienced, present. A photograph is, however, directed not only beyond the horizon of the seen but also beyond the horizon of what is possible to see: looking at photographs, we often have the feeling of the opening of the entirely new space of a sort of “double” existence that transcends itself and, with its over-content or overhang, it cannot be seen in reality outside the photograph.

Photography succeeds in something that is very difficult to reach: in immobilizing the flowing time but also bringing back the irretrievable (the past) to the ever new present, in grasping and sustaining the ungraspable and unsustainable, relating (at least in the imagination of the person looking at the photograph) what had been before and/or what entered memory as part of its content. The phenomenon of photography and the phenomenon of time are closely intertwined: the photograph wants to conserve time and/or topicality of the portrayed, it wants to conserve reality itself: it presents what it was, and, at the same time what it is no longer. It aims at the present time, but it shows only what has been before (either a shorter or longer time ago). It captures something that happened only once, reproducing this uniqueness *ad infinitum*, convincing of its steadiness every time we take it into our hands (Barthes 1994, 10). It wants to prove the continuity of actions, but in fact, by recording just a slice of the action, a moment, the photographic image interrupts it itself. It “eternalizes” a fragment of time, but this “eternity” is denied by each looking at the photograph because it is exposed to new interpretations every time, which at least partly change the form of the “eternal”; they bring it up to date and portray it at every “non-eternal” moment. One of the paradoxes of a photographic image is the fact that in spite of its immobilizing effect on the temporality of being, the photograph itself shows a tendency to be a mobilizing, dynamic, variable, open, and malleable event and not a thing given once and for all, ready and unchangeable.

Photography makes possible not only a new kind of contact with the past, with the bygone time but also a new type of contact with memory (its verifying), even a new type of contact with life history, life story. Thanks to photography, we gain new experience (aesthetic, psychological, but also ontological, epistemological and ethical); among other things, also experience with one’s own identity (varying with time and developing), with the form and the meaning of the self, or, more precisely, the whole spectrum of various, often not mutually resembling, even controversial selves recorded and fixed by a photograph; every time, when we take it into our hands, the photograph challenges us to new self-interpretation.

A photograph (mainly a “family photograph”, which is the most fascinating for me as a “document” preserved in family albums) widens the circle out of feelings in relation to the topicality of being: of our being and the being of others, deepens

our sensitivity to it, our sense of its eternal flow and of its irreversibility; this is why we experience, according to Susan Sontag, something that can be denoted as "elegiac mode") (Sontag 1977, 16). We are overcome with nostalgia when looking at the people, places or things belonging now to the past; we get excited when looking at the paper that brings back what is no longer reality, what disappeared or significantly changed. Absorbed in the photograph we experience revivifying of the "dead" being with emotion, taking part in their "resurrection"; we try to remember through the pictures captured by a camera lens, we recall them by photographs and something entirely new enters our horizon of experiences: a different view on these messages of the "past" being and/or the past forms of the present; our desire to touch the portrayed people, events, things, to touch their flow itself, to watch them in individual transformations is strengthening: up to the ultimate disappearance. From a particular angle, it is really valid that 'all photographs are memento mori' (Sontag 1977, 37). Through photographs as if we take hold of the being of other people in the particular instant and expose it to strange looks, enforcing our participation in the often already absent being, visualizing its vulnerability and the vulnerability of its fleeting time because, as Sontag puts it: "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability,..." (Sontag 1977, 15).

Looking at (particularly family) photographs a question arises, a question, we have probably not posed earlier: it is connected not only with a search for the past form of the portrayed "object", trying to fill the gap in the time continuum of its forms with imagination but also with a quest for a sort of the "right", "real" face, "true" form of what they represent. The question is, whether we have ever had a better opportunity for the "real" knowledge of the figures portrayed: at the time when they formed a mobile, malleable part of our life, our daily routine, our real experience or now, looking at their photographic images exposed to our eyes, immobilized, powerless. This is one of the crucial questions that may be posed when thinking about the possibility of knowing other people—and this is also one of the questions which can probably never be answered with absolute certainty.

The photograph can be perceived as a specific form of "writing" (or, simply "visualizing") of the life story; contemplation on the "truth" of this "photographic writing" raises a question who, from what perspective, when and how is looking at the life story, who visualizes it by reconstructing it in a specific way; who and in what situation, what is his or her life story, his or her intent as well as mood when holding the camera through which s/he "writes" us (another person). These questions (and a search for answers) cast doubt on the possibility of the existence of the "unsituated" innocent eye of a photographer (and through it also the camera eye). Every photographer is socially, historically, culturally situated and gender-determined being with his or her life experience and perspective and thus his or her look can never be "a perspective from nowhere", it is always "a perspective of the particular context" (sets of all relevant contexts). If, moreover, we realize that the

photographer is always an active subject who decides what and in what form it will become the object of a photograph (personal interests, values and relationships also play a role in this process of choice and decision-making), we come to the conclusion that the photograph is something much more than a result of a sheer representation. It is also much more than sheer tautology: it is at least a result of the photographer's self-expression, his or her selection, imagination and interpretation as well as an outcome of an attempt at self-expression of the person on whom the camera is focused and, of course also the result of his/her imagination and self-interpretation.

Photographic images never speak "only for themselves", and/or for the reality "remembered" by camera but at least they also speak for their creators and percipients, for circumstances under which they were taken, for the aims or motives of their creation. The process of photographing ("writing") itself is in a sense interpretation (let us call it "primary interpretation") and imaginative complementarization of reality, let alone the process of 'reading' of accounts, which photographs carry in themselves (we could speak about "secondary interpretation"). These interpretations are (in both cases) limited and their horizon is determined on the one hand by a set of photographic conventions, canons of the period style relatively binding or at least preferred in the particular period; (these are "assignments" that can be perceived as objective, or at least intersubjective and which are, to some extent, usually respected by each photographer—these canons are visible on classical family snaps—on their common configurations indicating relations within the family, their posing, clothing, etc.). On the other hand, there is the subjectivity of the creator of the photograph and of the person looking at the photographs: their previous experiences with photographs as well as with their aesthetic, emotional and their whole life experience. This frame of perceptual experiences is also determined by the fact to what extent the photograph is regarded as "true" or "realistic". The American philosopher Nelson Goodman pointed out that photographs perceived as most realistic are those with which we have grown up, i.e. those from which we learned to perceive the relation between the real and the portrayed (Goodman 1992). It is important for determining the extent of realism of the particular photographic image which criteria taught us to define the "live similarity" with the real model. Even in the most realistic photograph, reality intertwines and merges in a specific way with fiction, objectivity with subjectivity. Although the photograph often pretends a high measure of objectivity, it is also very subjective because of the selectiveness of its (personal) view, perspective, distance, focus on a particular detail and with its trustworthiness and reliability it is also a very vulnerable representation.

Forms, situations or relations which had never existed in reality often appear on a photograph; the photograph, e.g. a studio photograph, creates constellations only for the very moment of photographing and often also our pose, face, look or smile were only for this particular moment, it is not part of our "everyday face"; it does

not express how we look in real life or life experience (it even partly denies it with intent); our close people or we ourselves do not usually see such a stylized expression on our faces. The photograph offers us an image in which as if our actual looks merged with the looks we would like to aim at, which we would like to manifest before others. We are here and it is our "otherness", a mirror with our projections; the photograph transcends us also by this very moment of our self-projection, leading to the process of the "birth of the self as the other" (Barthes 1994, 16).

If we take these facts into account, it will shake our certainty that photography (and the camera) offers the truly remembered, that it is a reliable "witness" to reality and its representation is in any circumstances trustworthy. Should we then succumb to suspicion that photography is based on a lie, a deception, which could be denoted as a "realistic deception"? The polarized understanding of truth and lies as components of a photograph seems to be misleading (I mean "innocent" not intentional lies, "deceptions", produced by our desire for self-stylization, the limited ability to remember, and also our fantasy stimulated by returns to the past, by the intention "to correct" it). A certain degree of self-stylization before the camera cannot be regarded as intentional, intended deception. We should rather say that we delegate (unconsciously) our effort to be a little "different" than we are in reality to the photograph and that the photograph captures also something of our desire to keep our real existence at a minimum distance, to express a sort of dissatisfaction with our real appearance: with the one that differs from our imaginings, from our ideal self-images. By "posing", "stylizing" for the camera, we can express our desire for "otherness", for "re-writing" our life story; also a desire to be seen like this by others. Maybe also some new hopes, resolutions that in the future we shall attempt new, more optimal (non-photographic) self-creation. I think that the photograph often makes not only new configurations, new relations, new forms of the "photographic lives" but it can also influence real lives and can be an inspiration for one's own change. The photograph is able not only to say about myself something I would not probably realize without it, but it can also add the components of my ideal self created by imagination to my real self. It can also stimulate me by this ideal self-image (tending to idealization). The photograph can also become an effective vehicle for communication and this is not negligible either: I can use it for conveying information about myself to others, for transmitting my self-image that I carry in myself and which I would like to insert in the images of others about myself, to affect them, perhaps correct what I regard in their images as incorrect or improper.

We are able to "read" photographs and interpret them with patience and empathy, similarly as we read a text. The photograph is, in a sense, the "text" itself: it has its own structure and own meanings which are to some degree a result of other "texts" (among other things also of the photographs of the particular period and the particular genre). It is also an outcome of interactions between these "texts" as well as their contexts. The photograph thus represents a textual and intertextual

construction (and also photographic and non-photographic, i.e. cultural and social textuality). This “photographic construction” incorporates components of the real and the imaginative, the factual and invented, elements of reproduction and projection. The complexity of interaction increases if a photograph has a verbal “subtext”, whose function can consist in orienting the percipient in the interpretation of the photograph (e.g. by references to time, space, connections of its creation or to other photographs and/or texts relevant from the point of view of this connection) or in focusing on its selected elements, strengthening but also shifting its meaning—for instance by creating tension (contrasts) between the image and verbal components. Also with regard to this complicated (interactive) character of the photograph, its “truth” cannot be different, only relative, determined to a great degree by the whole context (more precisely, by many contexts), dependent on this contextuality. Therefore, although the photograph refers to reality and “represents” it, the representation is always to some extent incomplete, partial, partly true, partly untrue.

We can also look at a photograph as a kind of the “visual memory”, objectified, mediating access to the past at any time. But not only a photograph (at the moment the photograph is taken) is the product of selection, memory is selective itself: it silences, conceals, makes invisible something that was part of the past and shifts something else to the fore, creates hierarchy which need not necessarily correspond to the real arrangement of things (events) in a particular real time. The photograph is usually understood as a vehicle of reminding, reviving memory, but only part of our experiences can be revived in memory, only part of our life journey, life story can be illuminated by recollecting; by recalling one part, we forget the other ones. It is one of the limits of human existence, which helps us partly to facilitate it because living with the absolute memory recording and preserving all, would be as difficult as living without memory. Browsing through the family album is a good opportunity for realizing that the act of photographing and looking at photographs contains such a necessary interaction of remembering and forgetting, and, simultaneously completing the remembered with fantasy. We concentrate, recollect (intentionally or unintentionally) through photographs some events, we bring them to light and highlight them to “silence”, repress or at least reduce the others. I can never be absolutely sure of my own memory, my reminiscences can never be absolutely identical with real events, stories, their actors, or with my own past appearances. It was Aristotle who said that memory cannot exist without imagination: it is really difficult to draw lines of demarcation between the internal images, which represent something really experienced and between those which are the fruit of imagination. The recollecting imagination and fantasizing memory are two sisters, conjoined twins sharing one heart and blood circulation. Memory cannot therefore confirm itself, it cannot provide a guarantee of what we regard as a true recollection of what (and how) it was really like. As the English philosopher and sociologist Liz Stanley wrote, the pathway of memory is narrow, twisting and

turning across the wide plains of the past; memory ties events, people, and feelings in a knot, which, in real life, could have had an entirely different form, or, they need not even have been connected in reality (Stanley 1992, 62). A recollection (also the one evoked through photographs) is therefore always creative and to some degree a fantasy reconstruction of what happened in the past. Our subjective dimension has also its place there in at least such a measure as objective events: only subjectivity can be the place for recollection. I have already said that neither the "memory of the photograph" taken by somebody else, nor our own memory is an absolutely reliable witness to the past. It is always only its imaginative grasp, it cannot be anything else, our imagination is activated by committing to memory and still more by recollecting, or more precisely, it is a necessary ally of both. Memory, in a similar vein to a photograph, can only lead us to images (our own or to the images of other people), which are to some degree always de-constructed and again re-constructed images: always only partial, fragmentary, selective images. If neither photographs nor memories talk (cannot talk) "for themselves", they are also, in a sense—similarly as photographs—"false representations" of the really experienced. However, no images talk (can talk) only for themselves: neither literary nor scientific facts; even our "ordinary" everyday words do not talk only for themselves. Expectations that photographs could talk in this way would be therefore also false and unjustified.

In connection with the family photograph, we also face arguments that it is not only a "false representation" but also a "false icon". We should, therefore, also try its subversion by means of radical rejecting and deconstructing the dominant period photographic conventions which are too stereotyped and moving away from real life, covering it up. For example, a feminist theorist Jo Spence arrives with such a criticism speaking up for deconstruction of such confusing dominant conventions. Her goal is both to make the earlier invisible (not captured by the camera) aspects of everyday life (particularly feminine) visible and make them transparent in a new, unconventional manner. According to Spence, such a way will enable more aspects to be seen, more dimensions of life, more fragments of the self and thus to come to a more complex perspective on real existence (for details, see Spence 1986; Spence, Holland 1991). Spence's point is, however, not an achievement of "the only truth" by means of a photograph but the revelation "of a complex of several truths". The deconstruction of the photographic conventions and stereotypes can lead to the construction of the "a myriad of anti-truths" and thus to get closer to the complexity of real life (Spence 1986, 172).

Truths, anti-truths, lies and "fantasy deceptions" or "tricks" of a family photograph: can they be separated one from the other, do they live in family albums independently or do they condition and complete one another? Liz Stanley (1992) disagrees with the position that conventional photographs do not contain anything valuable and nothing that would not mediate anything except lies and deceptions. By contrast, according to Stanley, lies and "false representations" can be equally

interesting and useful as truth. They can contribute to the revealing of the complicated relations between the real "living self" and the "photographic self" (Stanley 1992, 51). I also think that the family snaps, although stylized and exposed to conventions and stereotypes, can suggest something about the real life of a family and its members, what is/was their "living self" like, what were their mutual relations like. If, on the one hand, we have to give up an idea of the possibility of creating the "photographic self" or a photographic life story that would be identical with the real "self" and the real life story on the other hand, we should not give in the hope that through photographic (but also through literary, theoretical) images, we can grasp at least a part of the really lived. According to Stanley, lies in a family snap—paradoxically enough—function in the same way as the "truths of photography", they even use the same means, they exist next to each other and they are intertwined (Stanley 1992, 51).

What is equally paradoxical on the photograph is that a lie can sometimes contain more "truth" than the "truth" itself: sometimes, a lie does not eliminate the possibility of mediating "truth", telling the truth occasionally even presumes the use of the "lie", the narrator's (photographer's) "deceit". There are complicated strategies (the use of contrast, focus on detail, fragmentation, etc.), which sometimes effectively help to disclose the complexity of our lives, whether in literature or on a photograph. Life with its controversies and entanglements is usually too complicated, too short and transient to be described by an unambiguous and the only "straightforward" "truth" following the chronological line; its countless meanders are often easier to grasp by tiny fictitious supplements and "lies", by digressions from the main object, a "cunning" play with light and shade, play with different perspectives, shifts in space or by ambivalent insertions or different details enforcing different interpretations of the "main" object. Because of this complexity, for evaluating the truth of the photographic representation neither realism nor its entire rejection will do (Stanley 1992, 242–243).

With regard to the social embedment of the photograph we can speak about a certain ideological charge and about photographing as about a process where an "ideological product" is created (Stanley 1992, 204–211). Since life "written" by the camera is always within the particular established ideas, stereotypes and patterns appreciated (preferred) by society related both to the level of the photographic image and to the level of real living, it creates not only a new arrangement of "photographic reality", but also an instruction for "re-arrangement" and "re-creation" of the real life itself in agreement with the preferred stereotypes and patterns. In this sense a photograph can be understood as a vehicle for social manipulation and can be assigned some specific regulative (also ideological) functions. Photographs of "beautiful/successful" women in the commercially-oriented magazines can serve as eloquent examples. Such magazines do not offer an account, a sheer advertising presentation of "model images" of women, an "innocent transfer" of beauty ideals but also a sort of coarse normativity; I would

say, together with Naomi Wolf, they offer a cunning image dictatorship, controlling and disciplining women through the beauty myth (also photographically objectified—E. F.) as a power instrument (for details, see Wolf 2000).

The evidently justified parting with the belief that the “photographic self” can be identical with the “alive self” that has been a model for the photograph and/or that the camera is an “innocent” instrument for “remembering” and “representation”; also for this reason “the truth of photography” has always been historically, culturally, discursively (in the broadest sense of the term socially) constructed. It is always relative with respect to several contexts (both the contexts of photographic conventions and the real life contexts). Although the photograph is “only” an imaginative remembering, “only” imaginative grasping, imaginative ownership of the past and therefore it is (partly) unreal as the life story captured on photographs is (partly) unreal, this (partly) non-identical and non-referential character of the photograph does not eliminate the possibility of conveying some information to us and bringing us some news about what it portrays. Paraphrasing Nelson Goodman, I would like to say that although there is not one form of our life, our identity, there are its several forms. And although there is not one point (one photographic image—E. F.) from which we could see and encompass the complexity of real life and its stories, there are many points (photographic images), each of them allowing to see one piece, one part of them (Goodman 1992). News gained by “reading” the photographs are true, half-true and false, sometimes even deceptively so.. But we can read something from them if we are able and willing to listen to their particular contexts sensitively, to lean on our own experiences and to look at what they reveal with sympathy and with empathy and also to look “behind” the horizon of the disclosed. Truth really does not have the form of a thing with finished shapes and dimensions. Truth as Adrienne Rich put it in a poem, is neither a thing nor a system, it is an ever increasing complexity; the poet says that the carpet pattern is its surface, with tiny fibers intertwined to make the pattern, leading to a number of knots which remain hidden at the bottom of the carpet (Rich 1979, 187). In spite of this, I think that this need not lead to epistemological pessimism as it could seem at first sight: we can only sense many such complex fibers, we can touch them only in our imagination, yet we can weave again (in our own way) patterns, images of what we want to know: even by means of a photograph.

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