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Personal Photographs: Exhibition Value, Memory Preservation and Self-Representation Potentiality

La photo n'est pas seulement une image [...], c'est aussi, d'abord, un véritable acte iconique, une image si l'on veut, mais en travail, quelque chose que l'on ne peut pas concevoir en dehors de ses circonstances [...]: une image-acte étant entendu que cet 'acte' ne se limite pas, trivialement, au seul geste de la production proprement dite de l'image (le geste de la 'prise') mais qu'il inclut aussi bien l'acte de sa réception et de sa contemplation.

Philippe Dubois, *L'acte photographique* (1983)¹

This contribution is concerned with the changing in the uses of personal photographs in the transition from analogue to digital age (with specific attention to the circulation of images on the Internet). My starting point will be the sociologic analysis proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (1965). I will point out the French thinker's assumptions that may or may not still stand today in light of the characteristics of the new media landscape.

The present essay rests on the conviction that, today, the study of images in general, and of photographic images in particular, cannot be reduced to the analysis of a visual object anymore. While analysing an image's formal configuration and specific meanings can still be useful and necessary, in most cases it is no longer enough "to understand how we actively interact with images"² and to comprehend the real degree of effectiveness of an image. In light of the new media landscape, an image's effectiveness lies less and less in the image itself and more and more in the kind of

relationships an image establishes both with other images and the subjects acting with it in different ways. A study on contemporary visuality cannot abstract from this aspect.³

This is why I decided to open my contribution with a quote from Philippe Dubois' *L'acte photographique*. On a theoretical level, the photographic image could already be seen as an active object in the early eighties: something to be understood and analysed only through the *circumstances* of its creation and reception (and therefore within a series of complex interrelations between subjects, images and medium). Full realization of this photography's relational potential, however, has only been exploding in the last few years, after a redefinition of the media universe we are immersed in and, in particular, after an increase in the use of smartphones and tablets, which has led to an exponential growth in the circulation of personal photographic images through the social networks.

In our digitalized media landscape, the image ceases to be a pure iconic presence to become a socio-cultural object of analysis that involves the subjects identity both directly (i.e. users producing and sharing personal images) and indirectly, with people seizing and recontextualizing pre-existing images (photographs, film sequences, TV commercials and clips, music videos).

Either way, most of the time, the circulation of images is encompassed within a broader relational fabric that I'm going to at least partly explore in the following pages, focusing primarily on the current framework of that typology of images once defined as "family photographs".

Once Upon a Time Family Photo

Bourdieu's analysis is aimed at identifying a series of socio-cultural dynamics related to the occasional practice of photography. The purpose of his study seems to be condensed in the opening question of the first chapter of the book: "How and why is the practice of photography predisposed to a diffusion so wide that there are a few household, at least in towns, which do not possess a camera?"⁴

According to Bourdieu, the answer lies in a series of survey instruments that end up marking off his methodological proposal, which he develop in antithesis to certain analyses he consider reductive. These analysis are based on the idea of some sort of natural urge towards the act of taking photographs, as if it is the resultant of two forces: the motivations prompting the act, and the (mostly financial) restraints preventing it. Such a hypothesis is not compatible with Bourdieu's firm belief that a deep interpenetration exists between *objectivity* and *subjectivity*, always regulating human behaviour and making the individual's actions inseparable from the dynamics of the context in which they act.⁵

In light of such a theoretical system, an explanation based solely on the urge to take photographs – something Bourdieu calls "psychological explanation" – appears unlikely. In his opinion, psychologists confuse the effects with the causes: the

motivations they cite are not so much the cause behind the usage of photography, as the reasons functioning as a cover for deep-seated social conditioning, which turns photography in a “need” that is experienced as such. This need, therefore, is not the cause of individual actions, but rather a consequence of a series of social dynamics.

On the basis of the results of a “psychological study on photography” that had been undertaken during those years by an organization specialized in market and motivational studies, Bourdieu lists some motivations behind photographic activity, including the overcoming of the anguish both of death and the passing of time, the promoting of communication between people by sharing past moments, and the expressing of a sort of “artistic intention”.⁶ These motivations are identified by psychologists as the causes of the urge for the practice of photography.

Bourdieu, however, concludes that the individual needs listed above provide no satisfactory answer to his starting question. He does not deny that such motivations exist, he simply rejects the idea of them as the main causes behind the great spread of photography.

Factors neglected by a psychological analysis are to be acknowledged in order to track down the actual causes. The first of these factors is among the most relevant and is certainly related to the *circumstances* in which the amateur photographic practice takes place.

In the years in which Bourdieu conducts his investigation, the occasional practice of photography is heavily confined to specific situations. Photographs are taken whenever it is deemed justifiable to do so with noticeable differences regarding the choice of the occasions (and of the photographed subjects) and the frequency of the activity, as both depend on social classes.

The *family function* is at the base of the occasional practice of photography, bringing a strong sociological connotation to the issue at hand. The main motivation behind photography is shifted from a subjective plane to an interindividual dimension:

[...] solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, in short, of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity.⁷

Behind the amateur photographic practice are therefore a solid need for self-representation and the subject’s willingness to fixate an accurate image both of the self and their own group. This image is strictly tied to the social conventions characterizing the context in which the subject acts.

Here is how the methodological issue previously addressed results in a concrete application: while the psychological approach clings to a subjective range, the sociological approach intends to combine subjective and objective plane, exploiting the latter to analyse the internalization processes concerning it.

Picture's Exhibition Value and Memory Preservation

Now I would consider the second moment of the photographic act: that of the consumption of the pictures. To do so, many aspects should be taken into account. I'll focus my attention on just one in particular: the strictly private use of family photographs throughout the years.

Two are the aspects that stick out the most in Bourdieu's reflections: one is about the reluctance to show the family image publicly; the other one relates to the idea of some sort of *ritualism* that is somehow connected to the existence and the consumption of these photos: "it is considered indecent or ostentatious to show pictures of members of the family to just anyone".⁸ Anyone, after all, remembers the habit of collecting photographs in family albums. Albums that most of the time were leafed through only in front of a small circle of relatives and friends and during those moments of domestic life where the exercise of memory and the recollection of past events became relevant.

This example share a decisive factor in the progress of my musings: the degree of suitability for exhibition of an image. As is well known, Walter Benjamin speaks about the relationship between *exhibition value* and *cult value* of the image in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). In examining certain dynamics that characterize visual contemporary culture, his reflections may certainly prove interesting and useful if removed from an exclusively artistic field and thus used as interpretative categories not only for artistic images.

The cult value and the exhibition value of an image are to be considered as two inversely proportional parameters – or "polar types".⁹ The cult value is related to an use of images that is as intimate as possible and can be directly traced back to some form of ritualism: it prompts to keep the image as hidden as possible. This idea seems to be easily attributable to the subjects' relationship with the family photos described by Bourdieu, bound to ritualism and to a remarkably limited exposure.

Today, a remarkable change seems to have taken place in the dynamics involving the circulation of the images that can be defined as 'familiar' because they belong to that kind of 'occasions' Bourdieu classified as such. The strong tie with intimate memory seems to be abruptly severed by this significant increase in the exhibition value, which fosters an use of personal photography that is oriented towards forms of sheer auto-representations or statements of an experience that is currently happening. Temporal referentiality seems to shift sharply from contemplating the past condensed in a photo to observing an ongoing present. A present that is immediately exhibited through the sharing of personal photos with a large number of people.

But is such a shift truly that sharp? Is memory preservation completely annihilated because of the new uses of private image?

I will try to answer these questions adding new evaluation elements and new interpretative tools inspired by Dutch scholar José Van Dijck, who is particularly

attentive to the processes of memory mediation¹⁰ and thus to the pivotal role of the *medium* in allowing the subject to access memory, be it individual, transindividual or collective.

Van Dijck reflects on the deep redefinition of sociality forms that was happening on the Internet during the early years of this new century (Van Dijck, 2008). She acknowledges a series of elements that characterized the personal photography in the analogue age. I already mentioned plenty of these elements extensively in the previous pages and I will leave them aside. Van Dijck states that the formation of personal identity was an element that was present but only secondary to the function of preserving memory in the private photos of the analogue age. She argues that, in recent times, the growing presence of cameras within devices designated for communication provoked a series of shifts to the function of private photography: “from family to individual use, from memory tools to communication devices and from sharing (memory) objects to sharing experiences”.¹¹

The first of the three shifts that Van Dijck considers seems to relate exactly to what Bourdieu had identified as the *family function* of amateur photography, undermining its centrality. However, I will put this aside to focus on the other two instead.

I would like to compare two images to analyze the balance between memory preservation and communicative function. The first image is a black-and-white family photo that was taken in 1961 (fig. 1).¹² The other one is colour family photo taken in 2013 and posted on Facebook on the same day (fig. 2). Except for the number of children shown, one could argue that these photos are absolutely alike: both were taken on the occasion of a first birthday party; both depict a family unit (mother, father, child/children); both were taken frontally, with clear references to the festive atmosphere (cake with candle in the first case, balloons in the second).



FIG.1



FIG.2

A striking difference setting apart the two images is the way they have been used, or rather their predominant function. The 1961 photo was presumably taken to be treasured in a family album in order to remember the event even after many years had passed. On the other hand, in the second case the picture were immediately shared on Facebook with the function of *communicating* an event that was currently happening (or had just happened a few minutes or hours before), thus revealing the possibility of a new immediate application.

Analysing the more recent photo, what appears far from secondary are the 113 'likes' and the eleven comments scored, many of which are birthday wishes or brief thoughts expressing great happiness for an event deemed of considerable importance.

These elements highlight the prevalently communicative use of this photo enhanced by the possible more or less immediate feedback that can be *acclamatory* (as with the 'likes') or *discursive* (as with the textual comments).

Of course, this is just an example. Nevertheless, Van Dijck highly stresses that a photo's communicative function does not completely replace memory preservation. On one hand, it is true that these functions have reversed their relative strength; on the other hand, they continue to coexist within a photographic image.

An example could be Facebook's auto-generated movie application "A Look Back" that was created to celebrate the social network's 10th year anniversary. It was a hit for days on users' walls from all over the world, and it worked on the principle that I'm trying to analyse: reevaluating in a minute the memory preservation function for images that were made with a mainly communicative function.

As is known, this application was able to assemble texts and images posted by users since their Facebook registration to the moment the movie was created, clearly with the intention of *remembering* the many moments they had chosen to share on their own timelines. What emerges from viewing some of these movies is that numerous images refer to ordinary situations where *memory preservation* could have never been the primary role for production (and even for sharing them). And yet, nonetheless, a high number of users commented on how that short movie had touched them, or how it had made them relive the joy of some forgotten moments. Others chose not to watch their own movies for fear of facing what they had once instantly shared as ordinary happy moments that had turned into painful memories in the meanwhile.

Beyond the immediate purpose that is at the base of the production and distribution of a personal photo, what remains untouched in time is its ability to preserve – and restore – the memory of gestures, places or people constituting our private memory.

My Own Image. Self-Representation in Personal Photos

As I move towards the conclusions, I would like to focus on the first of the three 'shifts' Van Dijck identified and that I had initially neglected. This shift concerns, as will be recalled, the passage from a mainly domestic use of photography to a more markedly individual use.

Van Dijck's considerations over this facet of her analysis start from her studies on everyday photography, which led her to the conclusion that over the past two decades, the individual has gradually become the nucleus of *pictorial life*:

[...] Self-representation – rather than family representation – is now major function of photographs. [...] Cameras are used less for the remembrance of family life and more for the affirmation of personhood and personal bonds.¹³

Indeed, while examining certain fundamental aspects of Bourdieu's reflections, I noticed more than once the centrality of 'family function' in his analysis. Nonetheless, to prevent any risk of simplifying and envisioning excessively sharp passages, I want to emphasize that Bourdieu also considers certain elements of the photographic picture as a form of *objectification of the self-image*, identifying once again strong relationships between the image productive-receptive process and a series of deeply rooted social conventions.

Instead of just ascertaining the predominance of an *individual* (or individualistic) function in the contemporary age, some observations have to be made on the changes that have taken place on the processes of objectification of the self-image. Private photography and its distribution over social networks seem to be often tied to a need for self-representation, if not to the construction of an individual identity on the Internet.

Bourdieu writes that the awkwardness of some peasants posing in front of the camera can be interpreted as a tangible sign of a severe discomfort felt in the moment the photograph is being taken; as a result, the peasant ends up internalizing "the pejorative image that the members of other groups have of them".¹⁴ The sociologist identifies a restless relationship the subject has with their own body and posture as a constant element of these photographs.

Bourdieu emphasizes the subject's concerns to "give the best image of oneself, the image most in keeping with the ideal of dignity and honour".¹⁵ This assertion by Bourdieu brings my memory back to a fascinating consideration by Roland Barthes in his book *La chambre claire*. As is known, in writing this text Barthes resorts to his personal experience to analyse what his own relationship with photography is in the first place.

Setting out in black and white what he feels in the instant of being photographed, Barthes writes:

Si je pouvais « sortir » sur le papier comme sur une toile classique, doué d'un air noble, pensif, intelligent, etc. ! Bref, si je pouvais être « peint » (par le Titien) ou « dessiné » (par Clouet)!

Mais comme ce que je voudrais que l'on capte, c'est une texture morale fine, et non une mimique, et comme la Photo-graphie est peu subtile, sauf chez les très grands portraitistes, je ne sais comment agir de l'intérieur sur ma peau.¹⁶

Being so much more linked to a 'mechanical reproduction of reality' than other image typologies (painting, drawing), photography's nature contributes to make – in this sense – amateur photographic practice "anything but subtle". Taking this into account,

the subjects' centrality in front of the lens can thus be justified with the responsibilities they have to manage all those micro-actions interfering (for better or worse) with the production of their own image.

Barthes comes to identify four image-repertoires intersecting and influencing each other in the instant the photograph is taken: "celui que je me crois, celui que je voudrais qu'on me croie, celui que le photographe me croit, et celui dont il se sert pour exhiber son art".¹⁷

It is my intention to note how the concerns related to the processes of self-representation in portrait photography are different in current amateur photography, and how these differences can once again be traced back to the media environment where these images act, as well as to the different weight of the social (and even "aesthetic") conventions they abide by.

Let us take the current most popular amateur portrait photography as an example: selfies. It is obvious how only two of the four repertoires Barthes defined intervene in their production: the first two in the list, the most markedly individualistic and self-referential. It should also be noted how the posture problems, which were so essential in Bourdieu's analyses because of their close involvement into conveying a socially acceptable self-image, no longer apply here, replaced by that fundamental sense of immediacy that this kind of representation wants to transmit.

I can therefore state that, rather than being founded on a series of external conventions that historically imposed the rules for a good photographic (even amateur) self-representation, the selfie itself imposes the guidelines for a creation of new self-representative models. The selfie allows to violate a series of aesthetic rules concerning also (but not only) the production of a portrait photograph, especially the highly reduced distance between the subject and the filming device and the exposure of the outstretched arm within the photo (fig. 3).

In the past, it was the amateur practices that absorbed the representative models arising in the arts or from photo reports and fashion images spread by magazines; today, because the exhibition value of amateur images is so high, even the reverse seems to be happening.



FIG.3

Countless are the public figures (politicians, musicians, film stars, and so on) spreading their selfies on the Internet, catching sometimes the attention of newspapers from all over the world, and countless still are the images of celebrities just about to take a selfie, so as to confirm the centrality of the practice itself over the deriving photograph (figs 4-5). While once the common individual's 'pose' tended to emulate patterns that led them to feel equal to movie celebrities and photo models, today the implied message in celebrities' selfies seems to be 'We are just like you'.



FIG.4



FIG.5

The most famous example to this effect is certainly the selfie taken by Bradley Cooper during the latest edition of the Academy Awards (fig. 6), which quickly became the most retweeted image of all time. This example is even more interesting when considering that such a simple practice that was born as amateur is now a powerful promotion tool for both one of the most important events in the world and, at the same time, a tech giant like Samsung, which is apparently the true mastermind behind this gargantuan advertising campaign entirely based on the familiarity of a simple gesture.



FIG.6

My considerations want to highlight how important it is not to degenerate in some sort of technological determinism that alone would only give partial, and therefore, not exhaustive answers in investigating the phenomena underlying contemporary visual culture. I agree with José Van Dijck about the need to stress the strong interpenetration between markedly technological aspects and those tied to a series of social and cultural transformations.¹⁸ Only carefully evaluating the specific ways these variations interrelate with each other can lead to a reliable analysis of our society's visual media use and function. And photography, certainly, has a primary role within our visual landscape.

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- ¹ Dubois, Philippe (1983), *L'acte photographique*. Paris-Bruxelles: Nathan-Labor, pp.9-10
- ² Rogoff, Irit (2002), "Studying Visual Culture", in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, p.26
- ³ Manghani, Sunil (2013), *Image Studies. Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- ⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.) (1990), *Photography. A Middle-Brow Art*. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press; orig. *Un art moyen. Essais sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1965, p.13
- ⁵ *Ibid.* pp.2-5
- ⁶ *Ibid.* pp.14-15.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p.19
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p.24
- ⁹ Benjamin, Walter (2008), *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). London: Penguin Books, p.14.
- ¹⁰ Van Dijck, José (2007), *Mediated Memories in The Digital Age*, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- ¹¹ Van Dijck, José (2008), 'Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory', *Visual Communication*, 7, 57, p.60
- ¹² <http://www.archiviodelle voci.eu/>. (Courtesy of prof. Paolo Sorcinelli, director of Laboratorio di Memorie 'Archivio Multimediale delle Voci)
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p.60
- ¹⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre (ed.) (1990) *Op. Cit.* p.83.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.83.
- ¹⁶ Barthes, Roland (1980), 'La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie', Paris: *Cahiers du Cinéma* – Gallimard, pp.25-26
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* p 29
- ¹⁸ Van Dijck, José (2008) *Op. Cit.* p.70