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The Anthropology of Picture. The Reason to History of Picture*

Abstract

Thanks to the expansion of the new media the modern aesthetics have faced the necessity of redefinition of the picture, its meaning, functioning in the antroposphere, relation to what it represents, presents and refers to. The new technologies generating the mechanical pictures have disturbed the certain, lasting for centuries, tradition in comprehension the picture. The new media have assigned a different order of icon-type comprehension, it has introduced the different semiotic codes describing the relation between the reality, its picture and memory. They are responsible for the drift of oral-written culture and entering into the visual culture. The visual character of modern culture is based mainly in the invention of photography. The invention of photography is a key moment to the rise of the new media and a huge changes on the art grounds.

As the result of new media expansion¹ the redefinition of picture, its meaning, place in culture, functioning in antroposphere, relation to what it represents,

* The original version published in *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia*, 4 [3] (2009), pp. 71–80

¹ The media experts have not so far developed a common definition of new media. There is no agreement when the new media originated (L. Manowich claims the development of universal new-media machine which is computer to be the origin for new media, but the post-Luhan school claims it is the invention of daguerreotype and the possibility of mechanical reproduction of picture), as well as recognizing specific inventions. The reason for multiple definitions of new media may be also the fact of multiple terminologies used in a definition such as a mean, medium or carrier. T. Globan-Klas while referring to contemporary definitions of new media recognizes minimum six different meanings of a term mean in the context of new media (mean understood as a natural language used in order to communicate, a mean in a semiological comprehension as all language and beyond-language signs such as mimics, gestures, dress code, a mean understood as a code (both Morse alphabet and traffic lights), a mean as a material signal carrier (both air vibrations or light waves as well as paper, film reels or CD-rom), a mean understood as material instruments allowing transmitting and receiving and also carriers allowing duplication of transmission and the mean as many different institutions creating the transmission) (*vide* T. Goban-Klas *Komunikowanie masowe: zarys problematyki socjologicznej* (Kraków 1978), p. 78). A certain solution to this semantic multi-meaning is J. Bolter's and R. Grusin's proposal to limit definition of medium to something which remediates, that is transforms and changes

presents and what it refers to has become necessary in aesthetics. New technologies generating mechanical pictures have disturbed the certain tradition that for many centuries governed the tradition of picture comprehension. The new media have developed a different order of iconic comprehension, they introduced different semiotic codes describing relations between reality, its picture and memory. They are responsible for withdrawal from oral-written culture and entering into the visual culture. The visual sketch of modern culture, according to one of the biggest media theoreticians M. McLuhan, requires re-definition of a term civilization. "The term 'civilization' should now be used in technical sense, in relation to the unfortunate man who had lost his tribal appurtenance and to whom the visual values are superior in his way of thinking and behaving".²

The visual character of modern culture is rooted mainly in invention of photography. The photography and its capability of multiplication of picture has caused a big expansion of picture in a form of photographs, posters, leaflets, magazines, advertisements and others. The photography at its very beginning strongly corresponded to technological revolution: it was mobile (small size of the camera itself as well as its reprints), it was also immediate (the shortened time of picture producing compared to drawing, sketch or painting). The photography possessed also practically unlimited possibilities of multiplication as well as their low reproduction costs compared to traditional techniques. Therefore, since the invention of photography, the picture playing so far the role of language supplement started to constantly force it out, becoming a constitutive tool for comprehension, transfer or archiving the information. Since photography the picture is not only a supplement to a written work but it is becoming the autonomic medium itself. Introducing photography in high volume press enforced also the process of "shrinking of the world". Many years before McLuhan wrote about a computer as a generator of a process called Global Village, E. Lacan (writing about change in perceiving of reality) indicated photography to be one of the main factors to transition between local level to global level. According to Lacan basic function of photography is

both form and meaning of transmission (*vide* J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin *Remediation: Understanding of New Media*, Cambridge 1999, p. 19). Apart from this evident multi-meaning of used terms in definition of new media, the next obstacle is too big pressure, too big focus on material carriers of information at total exclusion of social and artistic aspects. We need to remember that neither television without auditorium nor newspapers without readers, nor internet without users would ever aspire to be mass media, they could also never be perceived as tools creating artistic space or systems of meanings. The mass communication means are not only technical possibilities or complicated IT structures closed in technological solutions, they catalyze (or in some cases they constitute) the new forms of artistic declarations, the systems of meanings, new semiotic codes, they also sculpture communicative landscape indirectly influencing the sphere of aesthetics, ethics, ideology, politics or religion. Any attempt of new media definition cannot miss few fundamental questions. Such terms as virtuality, immersion or multi-media are to be accurately defined and analyzed. The basic question is also setting a clear demarcation between term mass media and new media. The attempt to answer this question can be establishing clear demarcation to what distinguishes new media from old media, what is their essence and material, what are the forms and conventions commonly used in new media structures, what differentiates the new media language from traditional media language, and finally what are the individual characteristic features of new media aesthetics.

² M. McLuhan, *Wybór pism*, trans. E. Różalska, J.M. Stokłosa (Poznań 2001), p. 172.

“breaking the chain which ties you to your narrow household”.³ The appearance of photography can therefore be acknowledged as *signum temporis* of industrial revolution, as a Weber tool for disenchantment of the world,⁴ as technical possibility for reality archiving. Since the very beginning of photography everybody stressed its mechanical character (forestalling or even totally reducing the artistic aspect). When analyzing first theoretical concepts of photography it was easy to observe a certain binary analytical scheme between technology and art⁵, between representation and interpretation, between artists and manufacturers. The appearance of photography as a clear sign of industrial revolution places photography as a tool, the instrument for clear record of immediate socio-technical changes. Photography was therefore treated as a tool of new social order, as a form of immediate documentation of sudden changes. Perceiving photography as a threshold for our civilization, which initiates graphic revolution in culture and re-orientes basic aesthetic paradigms is represented by V. Flusser. Opposed to already classical aesthetical thought built around aesthetical consequence of invention of photography (R. Barth, S. Sontag, J. Baudrillard) Flusser constructs a new way of describing this medium. According to him the invention of photography can be treated as beginning of new media era because it commenced certain intimate relation between a man and a machine contributing to fundamental changes – since that moment we can talk about new form of forming new post-historical society characterized mainly by change in its way of thinking. Photography ousted processing model of thinking replacing it with formal model of thinking. It is related to the transition – from iconic character of our culture based on traditional pictures to a model founded on technical pictures. The camera is therefore the prototype of later machines producing technical pictures. Technical pictures possess totally different system of codes, meanings, symbols transforming themselves to human perception system. Traditional way of iconic communication was in a way a supplement, a comment to a text and in such context exhausting its capabilities. The pictures reproduced with technical aids substitute separate communication structures which can function totally independently in the context of meaning and symbol. Traditional thinking is characterized by linearity, by certain adoration of a text. With invention of photography the meaningful nature of written text had been ousted by new, visual model of reality shaping. Written text had lost its significance ousted by digitalization of picture, certain perceptive collage comprising human mind and technological abilities of machines. Several years before mass personal computer production Flusser formulated the thesis about the dominance of technological pictures which is the reason to numeric society creation, for which the computer calculation capacity is the final interpretation of reality. The formal concept based on numerical structure ousted traditional concept based mainly on mythical comprehension of a text supplemented with picture.

³ E. Lacan, *Esquisses photographiques* (Paris 1997), pp. 22–23.

⁴ Cf. M. Weber, *Polityka jako zawód i powołanie*, trans. A. Kopacki, P. Dybel (Kraków 1998), p. 122.

⁵ It is obvious, that world of visual arts was aided with technical world, enough to mention such inventions as *camera obscura*, *camera lucida*, magnifying glass, Renaissance *veduta*, *physionotrace* 'a, but such inventions only aided artist's works, not determined his act of creation.

The invention of photography in periodization of modern era is regarded a breakthrough moment, mainly in technical context. However such thesis needs to be supplemented by statement that the invention of photography is also a starting point in the world of artistic creation. The appearance of daguerreotype is for some art theoreticians the beginning of new media era, photography in a way opens totally different comprehension of visuality, *mimesis* paradigm, similarity, artistic *realis*. Indirectly – photography had assigned different meaning to other artistic arts. With the appearance of photography we can observe the end of certain multi-century tradition of technique mastering in these arts in which the *mimesis* paradigm played major part.

When analyzing the appearance of photography both in artistic world and as technical invention we can notice certain multi-levelness in its reception, evaluation or social assimilation. Although today the topologies excluding photography from arts are marginal at the time it appeared the discussion over whether photography is or is not a new form of art was a serious debate. The supporters of treating photography as fully righteous arts debated fiercely with technology oppositionists who wanted to define arts mostly on the basis of paradigm of originality, uniqueness of piece of art and artist's talent, which needed to correspond directly to artist's immaculate work abilities. Although in the scientific-technical circles the invention of photography (as optical-chemical invention) was received enthusiastically, the invention itself polarized drastically the artists' and art theoreticians' circles. The benefit to accepting photography into artistic world was the fact that photography fulfilled the long lasting artists' dream to perfectly reflect and picture the reality. At the end of XIX century the tradition rooted in theoretical assumptions of Italian Renaissance when Leonardo da Vinci situated painting at the highest post in the hierarchy of arts due to its close form to reflecting the object was still very strong. The major Renaissance dispute on definition of arts also pointed out certain necessary technical element in artistic capabilities, Renaissance artists no longer wanted to be treated equally to manufacturers, they leaned more to the new artistic model where talent needed to be reinforced with theoretical paradigm of knowledge of basic science and technique rules. It was the *sine qua non* condition to exercising arts (the rule assumed knowledge of optical geometry, aesthetic of color, perspective, chromaticity etc). Since the Renaissance the *imitation* paradigm was constantly being improved by each next generation of artists in operation with chromaticity, research on perspective, composition work of foreground and background. Since the times of Italian *Quattrocento* artistic eye judgment has elaborated tools for arranging visible world and the possibility for its true presentation. Such actions had one goal: as close approach to the presented object as possible. Should we assume such arguments as Arts constitutive conditions, the photography becomes the crown to multi-century visual-aesthetical tradition.

Theoreticians who enthusiastically received and qualified photography as Arts formulated various arguments defending their position. One of the main objections against daguerreotype was the dominance of technology over the act of creation. The supporters of photographic art claimed however that this act of technical

supremacy over act of creation is very welcome. The hand of an artist aiming to reflect reality was according to them too whimsical, too much dependant on physical condition of the artist, was too fragile tool connecting imagination to its clear presentation. According to supporters of photography as form of artistic creation, the sense of observation is very often influenced by interpretation pressure and will for subjective comment, which very often distances the presented object from its original. In traditional Arts artist very often, not only at the composition stage but also at chromaticity setting, perspective setting, brightness usage, selects the presented reality, positions, removes or exposes. The camera was free of such faults, not influenced by whims and subjective comments, truly imitating reality. According to the supporters of treating photography as Arts the invention of daguerreotype is holistic invention not subjective to pressure of artistic likes or dislikes. The apologists of this form of art pointed out that in such context photography is not only the presentation of an object but more its exact inventory. Therefore the objectivity of presentation in photography situates it in the context of traditional art copying nature at its very tip. The tip of a camera, its "heart" and its "eye", is named the objective for a reason. The photography therefore draws a new relation between the object and its picture, it creates not only the new aesthetic-semiotic dimension but also the new ontological reference relation. The photography apologists supporting photography as artistic act focused on multi-century admiration of mirror and its exact reflection. The only defect of a mirror was that the reflection was tightly attached to the present; mirror reflects but does not record. With the invention of photography the category of reflection itself became the past. Therefore, despite purely aesthetical motifs, the photography became in a way a new machine for observing and commenting history. The enthusiasts regarding photography in the context of art stressed its positive value to painting. The proof for that was the character of photography which could be utilized for archiving therefore releasing painting from its reporting and historical documenting functions.

Such enthusiasm on this new form of reality recording was common in the scientific circles, the new form was received as an invention perfectly documenting changes related to industrial revolution. The tone of discussion was however totally different when it came to analyzing photography in artistic context. Only marginal portion of art theoreticians regarded photography as new tool for artistic creation. The majority of art representatives treated photography as technical invention which would have disastrous impact on visual arts. They compared photography and painting, pointing out different character of each. The arts were correlated to *imitation* paradigm and the photography (raw, non-hierarchy, produced by soulless machine) was deprived of author's interpretation of the presented object, was not selected by artist's eye, and as a result lost the artistic value. The original reasons for rejecting photography as new form of art were resulted by its too innovative form of representation characterized by highly mimetic character. The final effect of "photography production" was too close to reality, choosing the theme of photography, frame, exposition, all became less important, they were not so strong element to allow act of photographing to be recognized as artistic

creation. At the beginning the obstacles on recognizing photography as art were also resulted by impossibility of separating the real world from a photographed world, there was too much concentration on exactness of pattern on the reprint, that's why there was no clear demarcation line elaborated between the reproduced element and reality. As the drawing was regarded as iconic the photography possessed only index record, it was a form of an imprint, trace, luminous technical sign. Until the end of XIX century the Arts were connected to the manufacturing know-how, were strongly tied to the artists' talent. In case of photography only pointing the camera objective to the object was recognized as act of creation. All remaining process was strictly technical, totally deprived of creative predicate, and the reprint itself was treated as a form of archiving the reality. For this reason photography was recognized as a form of reporting work, as the equivalent of the real world, as action deprived of subjectivism, individual character assigned to creation momentum, as documentary work deprived of expression, interpretation or creative act. And the photographers themselves were not recognized as artists but only as operators of "chemical-optical machine"; if in arts we can talk about artists then in photography we can only talk about the operator of photographic machine. In arts there are the creators, in photography there are copyists or documentary makers. The 'machine pictures', as photographs were called at their early stage of development, were only the surrogate of reality, its equivalent, the act of photographing was deprived of aesthetic value. Such view definitely separated two structures: artistic creativity and reporting work. The photography was treated as *ab-nihilo* work (creation out of nothing) and accused of artistic transience bordering nihilism, situating this invention only in the context of technical novelty totally deprived of aesthetic sphere. Skeptics such as Benjamin Walter, regarded the arrival of photography as the end of real art because they defined art in the context of uniqueness and unrepeatability. In such context the question raised by Benjamin Walter regarding the original reprint is as much rhetoric question as it is ironic. But despite the attempts of eliminating photography from the art context this invention changed certain visual tradition. The invention of photography allowed mechanical mass production of pictures unknown so far in history. The massiveness of the reproduced reprints significantly weakened one of the basic artistic paradigms: the originality and unrepeatability of the creation. The artistic privilege in visual arts based among others on the fact that artist was capable of (within his theoretical competence) bringing to life the alternative worlds, not so much producing (as constructor) but creating (*ex nihilo*, in godly manner). In case of photography, according to its critics, there is only passive recording involved, and this does not meet the creativity requirement. So according to critics of photography – in photography the artistic production has been ousted by reproduction. So the critics stated that photography is condemned to lack of picture autonomy, will always remain the copy, as R. Barthes pointed – something that happened. However strange it may seem today, many artists and critics at the end of XIX century considered the invention of photography ancillary to true art, something which can only function as the tool for art archiving by recording on the photography the painting, sculpture, architecture, and not as the act of

independent artistic creation. Critics were also pointing out the multi-century intimate relation between the artist's eye, his imagination and intellect. In case of photography this relation is forced out by the relation eye – optical mechanism. Machine ousts such tools as pencil, pen, chisel or paintbrush. Painter's studio is replaced with chemical laboratory. The Arts are regarded as presentation structures while the photography is regarded as certain time embalming mechanism. In the context of art we can talk about the catalyst of our imagination, in the context of photography we can talk only about certain technical context aiming for exact presentation of the photographed reality. This dispute on recognizing photography as art was often understood as mutually exclusive structures: art and science, artistry and technique, originality and reproduction represented at the end of XIX century by photography.

Photography as art was acknowledged quite late. Second decade of XX century appreciated both documentary character of photography as well as its expressive values. The vast popularity of photography and its use in so called graphic revolution contributed to this situation. It resulted in the evolution of critical view to recognition and approving photography as art. People recognized in photography the invention somehow demarcation, which possesses the medium with the unknown before means of presentation, own language and codes. They also noticed the permanent imprint of technical background in the context of artistic expression. As R. Barthes said "it is often said that the painters invented photography (conveying cropping, perspective, and *camera obscura* optics). But I say: no, the chemists did that".⁶

Never before the world of artistic creations approached the original so close, but at the same time assigned the different symbolic and semantic dimension to the photographed reality thus introducing the perceptive dualism on reality and its picturing. The iconic character of photography separates and selects only fragment of reality, static and unique, appraising at the same time the fragment chosen by the photographer, which in the final effect (reprint) gains totally different meaning, context, system of codes. Photography in a certain way replenished the empty space after painting started to experiment with form and composition (futurists, cubists, Dadaists) departing from mimetic paradigm in art. The artistic avant-garde of first decade of XX century with its program of anti-mimetic, resigning from any stigma of imitation ousted the object from the artistic interest. That is why today the invention of photography is regarded as direct imprint in the wider context of renaissance of reality in art. Certain common social anathema characterizing avant-garde art ousted this form of art in the context of critics, artistic bohemia and narrow group of professionals. The need for realism in art was appreciated in the invention of photography which replenishes the artistic grounds in that period. Along with the need for reality people anew appreciated in photography the admiration of material world, the care for exact reflection of reality or contemplation of the object, abandoned by the avant-garde painting. This new interest in reflection and recreation of reality had been fulfilled in photography.

⁶ R. Barthes, 'Światło obrazu', trans. J. Trznadel, *Arka*, 5 (1993), p. 97.

In photography people also discovered again the admiration of everyday reality. It was most significantly observed in the pop-art which by its program aimed to draw art near the common life, effacing demarcation created by multi-century tradition. That is why in pop-art we encounter the photographs of municipal sceneries, machinery, photographs of food products, domestic equipment, clothes, pop idols portraits. It is worth noticing that the photography of that period was not imitating painting, it created its new composition models, its codes, forms, artistic statement platforms. The mimetic power in photography had crushed the barrier impassable before for earlier artistic practices. Photography caused the spectacular return of object into the art circle. The meaning of photography to the whole culture (defined as visual) is fundamental. As M. Hopfinger notices "today photography not only presents but also means. Its fast semiotisation is the effect of its visual novelty, of how it managed to broaden our purview and what's visible".⁷ In 1861 C.K. Norwid wrote about this new invention: "Many already noticed that this invention, by merging the truthfulness of the whole and the perfection of details, must influence art. As I further assume; it may also influence memory".⁸

And it was exactly this analogy of photography to memory which influenced significantly the social reception of this new medium. When analyzing it as totally new artistic practices it is worth noticing that it is treated as depository of truth, medium possessing not only artistic inclination but also representative and truth revealing function in the manner not encountered before. The contemporary man's mind has been dominated by picture exactly thanks to photography. Photography in a certain way revealed the need for *mimesis* immanent to man. This natural need of *mimesis* is described by H. G. Gadamer as "joy of recognizing things by man".⁹ Describing the world with verbal tools does not possess such strong illusory and truthfulness paradigm as photograph which almost balances, freezing the real word in a frame; the word does not possess such abilities. In a certain way photography appropriated reality. Contemporary culture (for reason described as visual culture) is much more influenced by iconic character than by word; thus photography in a certain way became the representation of reality as a metaphor of truth. Z. Toczynski aptly states that: "painting not only approached reality in a greater extent than word, it managed to convince to itself as the carrier of truth. Painting as mimetic structure is in privileged situation. Therefore photography – as the picture – could refer not only to our experience, of people living in a certain place, culture and time but also to the picture as archetype – our internal experience, determined by the value of the picture".¹⁰

⁷ M. Hopfinger, *Hiperrealizm*, [in:] M. Hopfinger (red.), *Nowe Media w komunikacji społecznej w XX wieku. Antologia* (Warszawa 2005), p. 76.

⁸ C.K. Norwid, *Pisma wszystkie* (Warszawa 1977), p. 442.

⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje*, trans. M. Łukasiewicz (Warszawa 1979), p. 135.

¹⁰ Z. Toczynski, *Fotografia*, [in:] *Nowe Media w komunikacji społecznej...*, p. 57.