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Photography and Sociality. Between Banfi and the Selfie

Abstract: The main purpose of this article is to analyse the relationship between photography and sociality. Since its beginnings, the photographic language was in close proximity to society and therefore was able to depict significant aspects of the everyday life through images. In contemporary times, the photographic image developed new variables and nuances that will be analysed in this article. The relationship with social issues changed in the last decades, especially considering the advent of the social media. Because of it, the photographic image went through different transformations and it obtained new socio-psychological nuances. In the first section of the article, the analysis is broader and more philosophical, aiming to capture the nature of photography and its relation to contemporary society but also to solitude. The works of Antonio Banfi are quite relevant here and especially his concept of “sociality” related to aesthetics. Afterwards, in the second section of this article, the author will focus on a narrower analysis, applied to the selfie and to how this type of image constructs the virtual identity of its users. The focus will be placed both on the psychological and sociological aspects.

Keywords: photography, sociality, transdisciplinary, aesthetics, art, selfie, social-media, Antonio Banfi, solitude.

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Fotografie și Socialitate. Între Banfi și Selfie

Abstract: Scopul principal al acestui articol este de a analiza relația dintre fotografie și socialitate. Încă de la începuturile sale, limbajul fotografic s-a aflat în proximitatea societății și astfel a fost capabil să reprezinte cele mai semnificative aspecte ale realității cotidiene prin intermediul imaginilor. În timpurile actuale, imaginea fotografică și-a dezvoltat noi variabile și nuanțe care urmează să fie analizate în cadrul acestui articol. Relația fotografiei cu problemele de natură socială a trecut și ea prin schimbări semnificative în ultimele decenii, cu precădere rețelele de socializare au reprezentat un factor decisiv în

acest sens. Datorită acesteia și imaginea fotografică a suferit anumite transformări și a dobândit valențe socio-psihologice noi. În prima secțiune a articolului, analiza are un caracter mai general, o perspectivă mai largă, mai filosofică, își propune să surprindă esența fotografiei contemporane în prezent și a relației acesteia atât cu societatea cât și cu solitudinea. Ideile și textele lui Antonio Banfi sunt relevante aici, cu precădere conceptul de “socialitate” va fi prezent pe parcursul întregii analize. Mai apoi, în cea de-a doua secțiune, autorul se va concentra pe o analiză mai îngustă și mai aplicată pe fenomenul de selfie și pe maniera în care acesta contribuie la construirea identității virtuale a utilizatorilor. Accentul va fi plasat atât pe aspectele sociale cât și pe cele psihologice.

Keywords: fotografie, socialitate, transdisciplinar, estetică, artă, selfie, social-media, Antonio Banfi, solitudine.

Introduction

In this article, I tried to evaluate photography in accordance to its social character, or its sociality (according to the Cambridge dictionary it represents “the fact of living together in an organized way as a society” or “the activity of meeting and spending time with other people for pleasure”¹). Therefore, I chose to treat photography based on its social character that it bears today and the challenges it faces with the external reality.

“It can be talked about a social history of art, which highlights those moments of *sociality* which determine the structure and evolution of artistic realities; or about a social critique of art that analyzes its reality according to its planes, forms, social syntheses and the reports that derives from them; and, finally, about a philosophical phenomenology of art, according to its social moment, which will recognize its living fabric even in the sphere of artistic realities, based on an universal principle.” (*Banfi, 1984:190*)

Through the present study, I will focus on the last layer developed by Banfi, by connecting it to the contemporary period through a universal context. Beyond the impact of the pandemic on the social, personal and cultural life, I plan to focus on analyzing the condition of the solitude as a catalyst of artistic experiences. Before examining this aspect, I planned on evaluating the photography’s condition in contemporary society and the new perspectives that define it as an art.

The methods chosen to more accurately analyse the ideas developed in this article are mainly qualitative research methods, such as: hermeneutics, most present in both sections in the analysis and interpretation of ideas; image analysis, where different creations or images were interpreted visually (more used in the second section of the article); historical analysis, where the modern and contemporary aesthetical ideas that circulates in our culture were evaluated; a variant of the case study, where the selfie was approached; transdisciplinary approach, by combining sociology, aesthetics and psychology in a structured and cohesive manner.

Sociality, Photography, Solitude

‘Art for the sake of art’, and pursuing freestanding beauty are directions that lose themselves in the context of contemporary culture. They are insufficient. The need to include social and political components in the artistic discourse is felt more strongly and it also should provoke debates centered around complex subjects such as civil rights, democracy, capitalism, ecology. Although it carried after itself this political dimension, rendered especially through freedom of

speech, to offer a viewpoint, to argue and to present itself as an identity construction, art differentiates in a key aspect from politics, through its unpredictable character. This aspect can be essentialized in the following manner: Art has an infinite potential of possibilities, as long as it manifests in accordance to the uniqueness of our perceptions as individuals, and this particularity is most probably the one that transforms art into a “fingerprint of eternity”, as Antonio Banfi profoundly called it.

“But also more relevant is the fact that just as it inserts itself as a secondary reality in the overall picture of the social life, art is altering its dimensions, it creates spaces, reports and new structures. It can be the reason of emphasizing human communion, just because it creates symbolical landmarks; but, furthermore, it can create an oasis of loneliness, centers of meditation and of distance beyond the normal social relationships. It must not be forgotten that accentuating some forms and relations of significant emotional contents, with the help of the work of art, it highlights them, influencing the foundations of the social structures and of their expression. Finally, art, idealizing the significance, confirms and promotes new forms of sociality, a new unity of the groups and functions. We should think of the meaning of the architectural monumentality, at the value of courtly and urbanistic art, at the ambiance created by decorative arts, at the pomp of the ceremonies or of the banquets. Art leaves a mark over all life forms, a trace if not of eternity, certainly of ideal vitality that pervades and invigorates social structures.” (*Banfi, 1984:201*)

Exactly this characteristic of art of being unpredictable gives it the unbridled strength to change the world. It becomes a competitive force that encompasses other forces of different types. Beyond the considerations that art is the source of a universal truth, or rather a lie whose purpose is to shape mentalities, to manipulate the perception over life, art remains an “engine” that engages society in perpetual movement.

“Amongst the new things produced by the social development, firstly is the recurrence, against many obstacles, of the conviction that art also has an important social and ethical function and a close connection with a classicism of style. This belief may attain the distorted forms of intervention of the political sphere into arts – which, as history may show us, is not always negative – and of propagandistic art. But it answers to a more profound call: humankind’s desire to recognize itself in the artistic representation, with all of its values and renewed energies inside the concrete reality.” (*Beigel, 2002:26*)

Either we analyze artists or art viewers, a fundamental quality of art is that of facilitating connections between people who in a different context, beyond the cultural one, would not interact. Art means dialogue, interdisciplinarity and it lives amongst people. The question which comes at this point of our analysis is in what way it is necessary to “expose” the artistic creations in society, in order for everyone to see it, or, on the contrary, to keep it hidden, as a refuge known only by the artist and untouched by the external reality? Or, even more than this, what is the solution to harmonize these two extremes – the compulsivity to manifest an artistic outcome in a social framework, or the isolation, the social detachment and the seclusion of the artistic creation in a state of fear towards exposition. Fear lies at the base of both extremes – to share exaggerated or not share at all, both tendencies being proofs of the need to be accepted in society.

If we move past the analysis of art in general, towards the specificity of photography, seen as a social phenomenon today, these questions remain valid: given the fact that photography, amongst all arts, suffer the most from the massive access of the general public to photographic tools, it can be remarked an oversaturation of images on the social-media channels. On the other side, this visual intoxication places the photographic artists in a vulnerable position. The conflict between amateur photography and professional ones can be defined in many ways. It can even be called a ‘war of the images’, but the greatest threat is that both sides begin to homogenize. People who use photography as a tool, enjoy the increasingly more advanced technical qualities, whilst photographers borrow methods from the mainstream, which will include in their creations. We are witnessing a revolution of the image’s meaning in society, and this aspect can be perceived from at least two perspectives: either as a revolt against the image, or as an opportunity which may encourage photography to become the primary universal language.

Antonio Banfi admits in his book *Filosofia Artei/ The Philosophy of Art* (1984) that “a rupture is created between art and society, through which art believes that it can find its ideal value outside the contrasts of society. From here derives the artist’s withdrawal as a subject creator, his tragic and grotesque isolation from the human reality alive and concrete, just as its deviation of the creative function from any tradition and its reporting to the spontaneity of an arbitrary subjectivism, or in the best case, at a geniality satisfied only by itself. At the same time, the public’s taste is gradually dissolving, it is widowed from the community life of a social organism and the meaning and a reality of the art which will represent, displaced in the plane of an aesthetical problem with a partial character [...] I will add that in the period we are discussing here, the alive art is the crisis art: rich in problems, in unfulfilled experiences, in dramatic calls, in an exasperated sensibility, in disciplinary efforts, of discovering and in indications.” (Banfi, 1984:202-204)

What connects and likens both sides, the producers of amateurish photography and the photographic artists is the need for expression. Photography, amongst all arts, enjoy the richness of the snapshot. Discoveries, wonders, curiosities, pleasures, fears, basically a varied palette of emotional tones can be instantly expressed through photography. More precisely, the reference will be made strictly to digital photography which is dominant in the photographic universe in our times.

“Of course, the classical art has not hesitated to represent portraits, interior scenes, landscapes; and the literature is even abundant in descriptions. *The representation is not a repetition of the real*, it is foremost *a bringing in presence* (“art helps to see”, as the poet Paul Eluard said), a presentation. What the artist receives and express in his creation is without a doubt essential, he reveals a reality that is independent from the susceptible appearances. *Any work of art is “expressionistic”*, in the sense that it liberates from imitation and passive impression. What the expressionism of the 20th century reminds us strongly more than any other, is that a drawing is explosive, a color is discordant, an order ravaged.” (Beigel, 2002:26).

Beyond the need of representing the reality, the photographic images we meet today everywhere, especially in the virtual reality, hide a calling and a desire towards integration – *You see me, therefore you accept me*. This desire towards external affiliation is treated and countered by Brené Brown, which said: “True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging

to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are." (*Brown, 2017:39*)

An intriguing case study for this analysis is the social media. The terminology used on these platforms aims at a diverse range of domains and of "content creators". From art to tourism and life-style, the "content creation" targets the form, ironically, rather than the content. The aim is that of a constant promotion, which reminds us of the compulsivity of the image in the virtual reality, mentioned previously. Also, the accent is placed on the massive attention obtained following the gesture of creating online posts, then on the essence of the content itself.

In this regard, I tried to diagnose a symptom of contemporary society, related to the function of the image which suffers transmutations and to the artist's condition, the effect is the feeling of solitude, theme which will be further analyzed in the next section.

Analysis of the Selfie in contemporary culture and media. Aesthetical, psychological and sociological nuances

In this section of the article, I plan on continuing the analysis between photography and its exploration of the social dimension and how it relates to solitude, started in the previous section by my colleague, Amalia Gaiță, by focusing on a particular aspect of it: the manner in which the selfie influenced how social identity is constructed, the way digital-social interactions have changed because of it and the role solitude plays in this phenomenon.

In general, the selfie does not hold any intellectual or aesthetical value which is why it is not frequently analysed in the academic field of visual arts, maybe is more relevant in sociological and psychological studies but less here. However, my aim in this article is to investigate this contemporary phenomenon and its potential ramifications: aesthetically (the connections with the self-portrait), sociologically (its social impact and value) and psychologically (with a particular focus placed on solitude).

In essence, the selfie is a form of photographic language which aims to communicate something related to the social identity or personality of its creator. Psychologist Elena Stănculescu noticed how the "virtual self" is shaped by the selfie. This "virtual self" would be placed somewhere between "the actual and the ideal self" (*Panisoara et al., 2016:69*). Quite relevant to our discussion is this idea. In essence, the "virtual self" claims both areas of the self (the ideal and the actual ones) but in order to obtain itself a visual form, it needs a selfie. Otherwise, there would be only words or images taken by other people of us. But the selfie can also be seen as a tool which helps us built a virtual identity.

Another relevant idea can be found in Erving Goffman's concept of "social theatrical mask" (*Goffman, 1952:6-8*). The sociologist noticed there are different "masks" that people create in order to better fulfill their social roles. However, it could be relevant to apply this theory to the selfie phenomenon. By using it, the selfie can be seen as contemporary "social mask", purely visual, and that represents an integral part of our digital identities. Adults can separate this mask more easily than teenagers do because their identities are more precisely structured and therefore may not be so easily susceptible to outside influences modelling their personality. This can be seen as a negative aspect of the selfie, especially for teenagers and to their psyche.

Media critic, Brooke Wendt, remarked that the selfie can be seen as an effect of the proliferation of digital medium. An essential difference between film and digital is that the first one cherishes preservation, whilst the latter, accumulation (*Wendt, 2014:16*). And this accumulation, characteristic to all digital mediums, is perhaps most easily noticed in the self-portraits, or selfies, uploaded on Instagram. The quantity prevails.

The abundance of images on Instagram represents an issue on the matter of individuality because it is almost impossible to authentically build “a social mask”. All masks are alike. Instagram, and other social media platforms, flatten the unique characteristics of authentic personalities in favor of the collective persona. Most users adhere to this collective persona in order to be more socially accepted.

An interesting case study titled “Top Girls: Photographic Self-Image of Berlin Hauptschuler”, related to this matter, was written by Stefan Wellgraf (*Wellgraf, 2018:356-359*). There, the author tried analysing how teen-agers of Islamic religion that lived in Germany used the selfies as a tool of deforming their actual social status. They did this by posing next to luxury items or objects, or to other objects that they considered to be luxurious, for instance car brands like Aston Martin, expansive clothes or the latest iPhone. But they did not own these items. They knew persons, maybe considered them their friends, that were actually in possession of these items, but were not their own.

So, psychologically, this can be perceived as an issue. These teen-agers used the selfie as an instrument of ascending socially and economically but only artificially. They used other people’s propriety in order to highlight their potential social status. However, it is an illusion for others and, more severely, for themselves. They force themselves to believe in it, in order to obtain a better image of themselves. It is interesting to notice that only teen-agers that belonged to a working-class environment exhibited this type of behavior quite frequently. Probably, in order to compensate the financial and social shortcomings.

On the other hand, the author noticed a positive aspect in this case study. Most of the subjects do not forget their own culture and religious background. Many selfies represent aspects of them. So, in other ways, the selfie can be seen as a way of promoting one’s own values and cultural identity. In this respect, the selfie has a positive connotation.

Also, the selfie hypersexualizes the stereotypical image of women, basically transforming it into a commodity, an object to be admired, consumed and desired. This type of image was promoted obsessively in Hollywood films. The selfie was quite influenced by this approach. Many teen-agers chose, especially girls, to present themselves in this ‘hypersexualized’ light, devoiding themselves of their own personality and particularities in the process.

If this type of image ends up being a reference point worth following in life and of absolute value to which all young women should relate or tend towards, then it is not surprising that the selfie is seen as probably the best way to realize these overly consumerist and reductive towards women ideals. Many teenagers think of themselves as having a type of value in society if they are physically attractive, if they take selfies with a duck muzzle, if they are posing in something different than what they are. Because if they do not this, they may be ostracized from the social groups they belong to (in their own entourage or at school) or can be found in physical or virtual bullying situations. They choose to comply in order to avoid these uncomfortable situations.

Many other aspects can be analyzed regarding the nature and essence of the selfie in contemporary culture, on multiple levels and from different perspectives, however in this section, my aim was only to analyse the selfie from a particular perspective. Many other approaches can still be nuanced regarding this social phenomenon.

Discussion

In the academic literature, this subject, the relevance of the selfie, was often overlooked, mainly because it does not hold any particular cultural or intellectual value. But if it is perceived from a more sociological and psychological perspective, the selfie does hold more relevance. And if the aesthetical component is not overlooked, the selfie subject should not be forgotten by other media or photography theorists because through it we can begin to understand better how the teen-agers (but not only them) of our times built their identity using it.

Also, from a broader perspective, the relationship between photography, society and solitude, analyzed in the first section, poses many questions. Antonio Banfi, a Marxist culture philosopher, nuanced quite profoundly this relationship from a social, political and cultural perspectives. That being the reason for why I chose to focus on his ideas.

The authors hope that this article could help by fulfilling the spaces in the field of photographic studies, by focusing on the dynamic relationship between contemporary photography, society and psychology in a transdisciplinary manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis developed throughout this article between society, psychology and photography (with an accent on the more particularised form of selfie) should be relevant today. Photography was always the art extremely connected to the everyday realities and to the changing social and political realities, but at the same time this macro angle was permanently mirrored by a micro one, in which the focus on the individual was placed and his feelings of solitude and detachment from society were often explored. This duality was, in a sense, the main idea explored in varied ways throughout this article.

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