Empiricism of the Medium of Photography and the Interflow of Realities of Vision

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Abstract

The study is a scientific essay on the current position of the medium of photography that is perceived as one of the basic communication means of media education and disciplines of art, combining technology and intention. Each chapter addressing a contextual touch of this medium with the central photographic themes and genres. The empirical research of the medium of photography is founded on the creative and pedagogical experience of authors who systematically deal with analysing the ontological nature of photography, its overlap into genres of conceptual art with a specification in the photographic documentary. The interflow of realities of vision in the creative process and the postmodern approach analogically forms itself into an ideal of visual purity, where *the touching* of the photographic layer becomes a bearer of causal relationships within the apprehension of contemporary art as well as the analysis of human existence. These aspects are the bases of our thoughts on current position of the medium of photography within media studies and media culture, its variations forming visuality, aesthetic and cultural predisposition, sociological reflections, and critical thinking in the creative process students of mass-media communication, especially emphasizing the necessity of acquiring visual competences, creative strategies and information literacy.

Keywords: causality, conceptual, media education, medium of photography, postmodernism, creative process.

1. Introduction
Touches of Technology and Intention

If we are debating the current position of the medium of photography, we explicitly need to have a specific image (technical, abstract) as a presumption of a meaningful and deeper process of examining history and the present. "The photographic ideal of visual purity in modernist, straight photography must be understood against the development of the photographic vision formed by the scientific use of photography during the nineteenth century. In his study 'The Techniques of the Observer', Jonathan Crary points out how touch and vision were in the eighteenth century perceived as two co-joint entities that complemented each other in the gathering of knowledge, and how touch was decisive in the concept of vision. The idea of the natural objects (non-figurative objects) touching the photographic plates, present in Talbot´s formulation ('Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or, to the Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil' (1839), linked photography early to the concept of indexicality" (Goysdotter, 2013). Creative process and the moment of touch that ensures the present – the connection between the image and reality, is thus a natural concept of vision as a

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combination of *touching* and *seeing* the notion of the symbol of the inner reality and the processes of materialization and dematerialization, construction and deconstruction of reality. "Representatives of the cognitive school of psychology believe that the basis of the effectiveness of cognitive actions and behavior is the ability of an individual to shape and capture the cognitive schemata (models, scripts) in personality structures – i.e. the universal meta-tools of knowledge, which, when compared with the observed, allow an individual to experience and reflect upon and evaluate not only reality, but also oneself and one's actions" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

To photograph means to open up a dialogue. These are the historical standard-setting elements of *the story of photography* consisting of several interconnected hypotheses related to the identification of mutual relationships between the reality, truth, and vision that have been formed within the Western epistemological tradition ("Western visualism") informed by science and converted into the direct photographic theory. This implies the fact, that "it has become a vital skill for an individual to survive in modern digital environment: 'media literacy education is the key to understanding the modern information society" (Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020).

Contemporary photographic concepts represent a program of communication with *the historical time, people, objects*, while the historical methodology of vision (observation) is not only the basis for materialization of an archive, but also generates abilities (of the medium of photography – the mediator of reality) to enter – as a significant nonverbal means of communication – into intergenre and intermediary relationships, with a capability of *clear vision* with the so-called *naked eye*, in an ever-existent diction of *anthropomorphization* of the photographic apparatus. The character and its features give a clear assumption of international comprehensibility. From the platforms that recycle new forms of vision (coding), these are the forms of subgenres and topics of light painting, urbanism, or portraiture. In the context of international media literacy "analyzing the 'habits of thought' in media presentations can provide insight into cultures in transition from one stage of cultural sensibility to another" (Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020).

2. Materials and methods

The main sources have been expert studies in scientific publications and academic journals, dictionaries of terms from history of art, scientific conferences proceedings, photographic publications, and monographs of photographers. The study uses analysis and synthesis, methods of comparison and generalization. Authors' arguments are based on discourse and content analysis of individual photography genres and specific examples of topics assigned to students. Comparative method defines the differences, individual characteristics, and the essence of these topics, which we have consequently, in a form of synthesis, brought together in homogeneous units based on inner semantic and visual contexts, relationships, and developmental stages in the history of photography, using examples of various author's concepts, with particular emphasis on their application within media education. Within this research, we focused on current position of the medium of photography. Our main goal was to find out how the realities of vision interflow in the creative process of mass-media communication students, but also how their critical thinking contributes to their acquisition of visual competences and formation of creative strategies.

3. Discussion
The Touch with Light

The dominant and main techniques, when a photograph gets outside its matter, constitute the light painting and the projection. *Light painting* "is defined as a subgroup and the most frequently used technique of manipulated photography. Its main specificity is recording reality through a long opening of the shutter that has expanded since the late 1970s; while resulting in magical images based on the transformation of real light source into dynamic light trails recorded directly to the negative or digital chip" (Geržová, 1999).

In Slovakia, authors such as Ján Krížik, Jozef Sedlák, Judita Csáderová, Ľubo Stacho, Vladimír Kordoš, Ľubomír Ďurček, Ľuba Lauffová, Robo Kočan, or several representatives of the Slovak new wave, mainly Kamil Varga, Peter Župník, and Jano Pavlík, in Czechia Jan Pohribný or Jiří Šigut, thematically address this technique in their work. It is not only about the visual touches through the lines of lights, but mostly the contexts of casting doubt, irony, criticism, aesthetics, and intentional anti-aesthetics. Whether it is the multiplication of lines forming 3D associations of drawings in Altamira, minimalistic work with neon tubes and primary colours referring to the light

art of Dan Flavin, narrative and grim shots of loneliness, schizophrenic and "in vitro" compositions of hands and portraits evoking decomposition, intimate multiplied images, outdoor mysterious night scenes in the no man's land, or the EKG graphs and allegories of being. Students in their art works equally intentionally and complexly achieve surprising visual results and contexts that outreach the technological essence of the light painting (Cepková, 2011).

Image projection onto reality stems from the classic method and technology of "camera obscura", where the reality is projected through a small aperture onto a wall in a room or a surface in the interior as either a static image or moving images. Currently, in parallel to classic production of projection technologies, more significant manifestations exist mainly in the conceptual art that uses instruments and visuality of postmodernism. In the 1960s, the method of projecting various structures in a form of classic diapositives on female body was used by Czech photographer and pedagogue Ján Šmok. Classic usage of this principle, the appropriation of light layering through a process of projecting onto reality is used by Finnish author Jutta Strohmaier. These are difficult installations of projecting onto a wall from several slide projectors, the most well-known being her installation of projecting Manhattan onto a gallery ceiling (Sedlák, 2011).

Another example is the work of American artist Jenny Holzer, who projects various aphorisms and slogans in public spaces of cities using giant data projectors. There is also a linguistic level in Holzer's work, as she explicitly explores words as an artistic medium, making the text the image itself. Among the Slovak conceptual artists, projection is used by, for example, Vladimír Kordoš, Ladislav Čarný, Milota Havránková, Robo Kočan or Peter Rónai, who enriches static image by video. The multiplication ability of multiple exposure, exposure time, linear distortion, scale distortion, etc. is not represented solely by the dimension of purity of expression of the medium of photography, but extents the aspects and interpretational methods of projection by the space of experiment. In the students' works, we are able observe gradual loosening of working with human body; however, their works reflect a sense of play, irony, spiritual messages, and figurativeness of light (Sedlák, 2011).

The Touch of the Vision of Space

After the distinctive footprint left by pictorialists, the photography of the 1920s is characterized by pragmatism, everyday commonness, and the poeticism of banal reality. Nowadays, it is the virtual reality that evokes a strong memory of the theory of "communicating vessels" represented by French surrealist André Breton. According to him, there is a strong connection between reality and the ghost of memory of reality, where being awake and dreaming flow from one shoulder to another and vice versa.

Shop windows as a theme represent a clear entrance to the world of magical realism. According to surrealists, the world "outside" (exterior) automatically rewrites the world "inside" (interior) and vice versa. The search for magical reality in reality (of shop windows) was conceptually and systematically developed by Eugène Atget. We can also observe the interflow of realities and worlds of associations in the work of this renowned representative of living photography. In his sequential stories from the streets of Paris, he photographed the world outside through a shop window. In a form of hidden camera, he was capturing subtle reactions of the passers-by and their reactions to the world of things inside the shop windows.

Within the Central European context in the 1980s, Ľubo Stacho started an extensive cycle of photographs of shop windows from Obchodná ulica in Bratislava. Bearing witness to ideological propaganda and control of the former regime of socialist Czechoslovakia is replaced by consumption desire for fast fulfilment of needs in the form of fast-foods, sex shops, or cheap Chinese clothing shops in the post-revolutionary years. In 2015, the author conducted a presentation of the project in the public space of Obchodná ulica and the spectators were able to watch a thirty-year-long record of changes (1984-2014). "On screens directly in the shop windows were running different eras and past times that were confronted with the present of the shop window and this led to an emergence of varying diptychs of two different political systems" (Stacho, 2016). "The frequent absurdly comical contrast between the name of the shop and the poster in its window, a motif of long lines of shoppers or the topic of looking into the window as a symbolic link between the street and the shop interior, a person with a matter of commodity that is presented as an exhibit through the shop window." (Kralovič, 2016).

An important educational presumption of the topic of shop windows is a perception of content contrasts, sources, relationships and meanings, creation of opportunities in the areas of art and communication to perceive the cultural, sociological, and environmental application of the

medium of photography (Sedlák, 2011). *Environmental documentary,* within the visual contexts, systematically addresses housing estate and periphery as a social-spatial organization of human communities. Periphery often finds itself under less social control, resulting in a more frequent occurrence of socio-pathological phenomena, concentration of problematic people, and low standard of housing. Within the context of images and from the aspect of theory of photography, photographing such assignments requires adherence to the principle of content representation. These characteristics of marginalized areas of cities are also transformed into societal understanding and visual depiction of human body, where iconographic shifts of its topography occur. Similarly to a city, a body and identity as social constructs are a result of the economic and media impact of the devastated place for life.

Among the Slovak authors, this topic is addressed by Jana Hojstričová, who records a body in its natural form. "She is drawing its parallel to the so-called territorial body, which is on the periphery of large housing estate agglomerations, and hence on the periphery of general interest in such a kind of housing. The aesthetic dislike for an imperfect body or dehumanised housing estate becomes an ethical issue, which reverses the scale of values in the society" (Koklesová, 2013).

Example of a deeply sociological documentary is a cycle entitled '3x1' (2001) by Danish photographer Nicolai Howalt. The periphery of a city becomes a synonym for the periphery of family relationships, with an impact on existential needs of an adolescent (Cepková, 2009).

Students' works were dominated by a need to portray decay and destruction of social relationships in the receding world of an industrial zone. Details of banalities that are transformed into artefacts characterize the world that exists in reality; the world that, however, paradoxically fulfils its role of inverse beauty and poeticism. "It should be emphasized that T. Dridze justly considers any kind of sociocultural communication (certainly including the education process) as a type of textual activity. Thus, the subjects of interaction not only perceive and store the author's (primary) text in memory structures, but also understand in a certain way, interpret, rethink, analyze, systematize, reproduce, compile and comment the information" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

Industrial architecture. Photography's nature to archive reality has influenced not only the history of architectural photography itself, but has also established the conditions for the emergence of substantial photographic documents capturing the state, development, or termination of city urbanism. Paris of the turn of the 19th and 20th century on the photographs by Eugène Atget is nowadays accepted not only as a record of individual architectural structures of urbanism, but as a visual artwork based on an attempt to grasp "objective" reality. At first, such informative images were not considered a form of artistic expression (Bull, 2010). Technological progress during the interwar years constituted a major turning point for architectural photography (Sedlák, 2011).

In the United States, photographers Andreas Feininger and Berenice Abbott, inspired by *New Objectivity,* have documented urban transformations and decline of Manhattan districts. While Feininger, fascinated by the ferocity and monumentality of the construction of skyscrapers, perceived the city through a metaphor of a dynamic, living and breathing organism, Abbot was more subjectively-stating, leaving behind for other generations a strong documentary testimony of the city's changing face.

In the second half of the 20th century, Bernd and Hilla Becher, also referring to *New Objectivity*, in a spirit of the Düsseldorf School, reduced urban aesthetics to cold and descriptive conceptual forms. Their approach was based on a strict set of formal rules: standardized format of negatives, frontal photographing from the same perspective, identical lighting conditions, absence of people on the photographs, same framing, centre composition, and the effort to reach the highest possible technical level (Lančarič, 2017).

This aesthetic approach, popular among and frequently cited by students, has led artistic photography out of sentimentality, exaggeration, and subjectivity, later covered by the term *deadpan aesthetic* (Cotton, 2014). However, a significant role has been played by post-conceptual artists working with photography, such as Ed Ruscha or photographers Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, and others (see Lančarič, 2017: 107-118).

In connection to the public function of art to control the development of the society, to judge ethically, aesthetically, and morally, the term *"urbicide"*, or genocide of the city, appears in sociological studies of sociologist S. Graham. He describes urbicide as an intentional destruction of heterogeneity in order to impose homogeneity that, similarly to genocide in a form of war,

represents the factor of destroying historical cultural layers (similar to eradication of ethnic groups in genocide), elimination of the memory, i.e. destruction of the spirit of the city and its degradation to a colourless homogeneous unit (Graham, 2004). The concept of photographing industrial buildings represents a program of the positive definition of a relationship between a human and an evidently disturbed space and content that, at the same time, becomes crucial for postmodern visuality in authorial concepts of many students, what is very accurately defined by Aleksandrov and Levitskaya: "This understanding of the question can be expressed through a verbal formula: while creating texts, a person is simultaneously creating him/herself" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

The Touch with Human Identity

Portrait. Within the context of semantics, portrait is connected mainly to the idea of likeness. Portraits are not only about the outer likeness, they are also artworks that address complex notions of identity. From the psychological point of view, personal identity is based on perception of one's selfsameness in time and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others also recognize one's sameness and continuity (Eriksen, 1994). The term identity is being analysed on three levels. On the intra-personal level, identity represents the core of personality. It is self-realization of one's authenticity and stability towards one's internalized values and norms. On the interpersonal level, identity is defined through social roles. By naming the roles, we are able to answer the question of who I am. On the level of social self-definition, identity is derived on the basis of one's identification with specific social groups (Bačová, Kusá, 1997).

These aspects of identity cannot be literally expressed by portraits. It resembles some half-clear contours of the character, personality, uniqueness. The concept saying that a portrait should also show something about psychological state, the so-called *"inner world"* of the portrayed subject, has been evolving gradually. Portraiture has significantly contributed to formation and articulation of modern individualism (West, 2004). With the changing human experience and technological transformation of society, limits of this genre also move forward. According to sociologists Michael Emmison and Philip Smith, the body, unlike the soul or the self, is inherently visual and, therefore, constitutes a rich source of facts (Emmison, Smith, 2012).

The external appearance of the portrayed subject also reveals a portion of their psychological identity. On the basis of the subject's visual features, we are able to at least estimate their social role or the social groups they belong to. Portrait is thus also a representation of time, era, and society. Therefore, many portraits are regarded as historical documents (Jonisová, Lančarič, 2020). In the 1970s, there were significant discussions about a shift of the primary interest from the issue of what a portrait means to what it socially does and brings. It is an outlook on a portrait as not only the primary product of a single (mythicized) creator – individual, but mainly a product of a specific social situation in which it has been made and in which it functions (Sedlák, 2011). "The fact is that in life and career virtually the majority of interactions are carried out in the form of short-term interpersonal contacts. But, despite the narrow time frame, each such contact should be interpreted by its participants 'stereoscopically', that is, through the prism of past, present and future" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

Visual representation of a human being in the 21st century changes alongside the notable transformation of their ontological status. Complex questions related to postmodern identity and their interpretation by the medium of photography leads students to understand the psychological relevance and difficulties of communicating social and ethical messages. The dramaturgy of the image is a parallel of the sentence syntax, from which literacy explicitly follows – a critical reading of the image message. The process and context of the cognitive properties of the medium of photography is not only in the social (sociological) settle of the image at a given time "period eye", but reading the image is a system of image sentence, where work with image components (main theme, secondary story, rhythm, gesture, sign, metaphor) is compared to the structure of a developed compound sentence. If we think of photography as about "media texts, so they can not only represent and model reality, but also concurrently perform anthropomorphic and sociomorphic functions" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

Family circle and generations. Proximity of these two topics predicts the motifs that allow us to observe private moments of a family, to watch physiognomic and psychological similarities and differences (Cepková, 2011). The historically most significant milestone would be the exhibition and publication entitled *The Family of Man,* curated by Edward Steichen. The exhibition was presented to the public in 1955 in the New York City Museum of Modern Art. Max Horkhaimer considers this exhibition a symbol illustrating a common bond between all people. He places

emphasis on the photographs' ability to sustain a mutually supportive dialectic of difference and sameness, not on its erasure (Hurm et al., 2018).

Photography of the second half of the 20th century starts to focus more on everydayness, family and relationships within it. "Families are containers for both loyalty and cruelty, altruism and selfishness: in short, for all our best and worst characteristics" (Howarth, McLaren, 2016).

In authorial works, we see grim themes, consequences of alcohol or drugs on family development, as well as the view of how the economic, political, and cultural circumstances influence the upbringing of children and contribute to the destruction of the basic social unit. In the 1970s and 1980s, family is depicted mostly within the context of a clear and direct photographic documentary (Štreit, Sally Mann more subjective), photography observes relationships within family in a form of time-lapse (Stacho, Saudek, Hoffman, Nixon), conceptual tendencies appear in the depiction of generation on the work of Jiří Hanke and others. Authors increasingly draw on their private lives; reveal painful topics leading to family disintegration (Richard Billingham, Nan Goldin, Jessica Dimmock, Chris Verene, Anna Fox). However, we also encounter ironizing in depiction of banal spectacles, when authors closely monitor the habits of family members that evoke humorous contexts (Martin Kollár, Lucia Nimcová). "Media language and media representation analysis mainly concerns present-day social contradictions and ills (i.e. gender stereotyping, racial discrimination, intolerance, culture or religion conflicts, consumerism, etc.)" (Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020; Gálik, 2019; 2020; Kačinová, 2018; Šupšáková, 2016). In a form of still lifes and emptiness taken to the point of absurdity, the students outline the unbearable tension in a family (Cepková, 2011).

4. Results

The results of the analyses show, that the concept of vision (touch) in media photographic texts has balanced the one-sided line through complementarity of genres and super-quality of hybridization of subgenres. When we think about the current position of the medium of photography, we explicitly need to have a specific image as a presumption of a meaningful and deeper process of interpreting the coding of *what has been* and examining the meta-image of the present. Each segment that appears in the cut-out of reality, whether it is of a figurative or non-figurative character, is a bearer of representative content – a symbol.

On the other hand, time revaluation and bridging between the development of society and aesthetics, where a descriptive document, besides its archiving value, also assumed artistic value, have become important factors.

It is important to note that to photograph means to open up a dialogue, share the seen; communicate unconditionally with *the touch* of causality and the idea. Furthermore, the results of the research pointed to the causality, which is aptly defined by Fedorov and Mikhaleva: "There is an opportunity here, but it should not involve abandoning the traditional critical imperatives of media education – which are about much more than practical skills, or the sentimental appeal to 'creativity'" (Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020).

It is also interesting to note that formal features of the photography can be described as a means of expressing the scientific and systematic methodology. The photographic image operates with similar functionalities as a text message (media text, etc.). It is also a path from the general to the specific, from the objective to the subjective, from the public to the private. But dimension of the photography can be demonstrated in particular from "data of cognitive psychology, which suggests, that textual activity forms the basis of cognitive processes, and its result is the foundation of cognitive schemata used by an individual while perceiving, institutionalizing, understanding and evaluating reality" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

In pedagogical process, it is important to update changes in the perception of the photographic medium and its overlaps into the media sphere with an emphasis on the growing sociological contexts of the present. Transposition of motifs within intermedia overlaps and media studies provides unlimited amount of means of expression; the boundaries of genres and the established methods of expression are being torn down, leading to an aesthetic revaluation of new visuality. Discourse in the area of theory of photography is increasingly directed towards various mutations of an image and deconstruction of the traditional concepts. However, what remains inherent to photography is its need to share and judge. Photography is a means of expression that mainly reflects a state of mind (Cepková, 2011).

5. Conclusion
Photography as a Program of Communication
To photograph means to establish a dialogue, to share what has been seen, to communicate and participate in a process, to be a torch between a pedagogue and a student. Photography reflects values of the society and the era; it teaches us to judge in a sociological, political, ethical and aesthetical way. Students' ability to visually decode and consequently transform and apply their findings in their own work confirms the need for complex analysis of the postmodern approach. Moreover it turns out, that are needed "discussion forms of reflexive and analytical practices about media texts contributing to the interiorization of a dialogue into the intrapersonal space for the expansion of students' social and professional competencies" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

The development of students' cognitive abilities and critical thinking within visual portrayal confirms the empirical basis of such kind of studies, as well as "reflexive analytical practice involving media texts (both in classroom and independent work) provides enrichment of cognitive schemata, the development of students' social and professional competence, especially if a media text's characters find themselves in situations of external or internal conflict, at the crossroads of existential or moral choice" (Aleksandrov, Levitskaya, 2018).

From the dialectic aspect, we can thus presume that authors are aiming to approximate untraditional forms of depiction, which provides a wide platform for postmodern way of thinking and, at the same time, is the reason for the need to constantly acquire visual competences and creative strategies through media education. De facto, the knowledge and skills, acquired through media education, allow students to apply personal reflection and critical thinking in a variety of media products, that "create excellent opportunities for students to discuss, reflect, analyze and evaluate different perspectives and construct their own meanings through the feedback of their peers in the blog. Feedback can even be extended to participants in other schools or learning institution and even on a globalized level" (Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020).

Students in a visual dialogue often pose questions, challenge aesthetical norms and societal attitudes or play with gestures. This moves the educative dimension of photography towards empirical learning about the inner structures of the medium (Cepková, 2011). "Philosopher Etienne Tassin, in his study, 'Images of the Invisible – Photography and Temporality' suggests that the moment of photographing removes time from an event. It brings it to a standstill. It embalms the past to make it present today. In case of documentation, photography is rather a vector pointing outside of itself" (Kralovič, 2016). This results in a significant sociological and philosophical dimension of as human being, as well as in the fact that photography, not only the documentary, liberates from the nothingness of oblivion.

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