VOYAGE TO SELF SEEN THROUGH THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LENS

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Abstract: Reading and projecting emotions in visual artwork, especially in photography, may take the viewer on extraordinary journeys to both outer and inner self-discovery. Yet, while some may claim that photography is antithetical to art arguing that it does nothing but copy nature in an objective, neutral manner, and hence cannot arouse the viewer's emotions the way art is supposed to, others profess that an image captured by a lens is not only the most genuine form of art, but, all the more so, it is able to ideate and unveil the most intimate and unspoiled kinds of emotions. In this paper, however, my aim is not necessarily to contemplate on this unresolved dualism but, rather, to catch a glimpse of this complex process of visual drama staged by photographs where, as Barthes points out, denotation is always interwoven with connotation. Seen from such a perspective, the photograph may be perceived as a semiotic sign that reveals its culturally grounded meaning within the reality it inhabits, a meaning that is intrinsically imbued with the viewer's both rational and emotional inference.

Keywords: cognitive metaphor, semiotic signs, photography, emotions, self-discovery journey

Life is a journey

Life is a journey. This is probably the most effective and powerful cognitive metaphor that is able to provide a multifaceted and nuanced perspective on our understanding of what life really is. When Lakoff and Johnson argue that the human mind uses metaphors to structure our perceptions on abstract concepts of the mind such as life, time, causality, morality, and the self, they offer a blueprint for a new philosophy. Relying considerably on the cognitive science – the empirical study of the mind -, this new philosophy reveals that human thinking cannot be reduced to Platonic philosophy, or Cartesian mind-body duality, and neither to Kantian pure logic. Instead, it reveals that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical. In other words, human thinking depends on metaphors and metaphors are deeply rooted in our embodied experiences. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999) Or, as Haidt puts it, "we understand new and complex things in relation to things we already know. For example, it's hard to think about life in general, but once you apply the metaphor *life is a journey*, the metaphor guides you to some conclusions […]." (Haidt, 2006: 2) In such a reading, metaphors seem indeed to be able to guide our thinking.

Understanding life as a journey also serves the very purpose of this paper. Since journeys are essentially tied to such ventures as learning the terrain, picking a direction, finding some good travelling companions, enjoying the trip, and, eventually, getting to know the traveller himself/ herself, we might very well conceive this journey as a self-discovering pilgrimage. We might as well imagine that this self is who we are, in a continually, free-flowing process of disclosure, an experience which is embedded not only in a body and a culture, but, rather, in an entire universe. All the more so, this becomes true if we acknowledge that all things are delicately interconnected through emotion. It is precisely the concept of emotion that I want to draw upon in this journey to self-discovery through the photographic lens. I believe that outer and inner self-discovery through emotions offers an unparalleled and unique glimpse of the human being's truest nature, of his/ her most

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unembellished and naked self and photography, as a form of art, is able to trigger and surface such emotions.

Photographs – it's not all black and white

There are voices that claim that an image captured by a lens cannot in any way generate or arouse emotions since it represents nothing but an objective display of reality. And such displays, precisely because they exist independently from their receivers, are not altered by the subjective vision of the viewer and implicitly by their emotional, idealized projection. Or, as Virginia Woolf would say, photographs might after all depict nothing but a "world seen without the self". (1959: 287)

Apart from this, by arresting an ephemeral moment and freezing hence both social and individual time, the photograph is essentially evidence to things past. It therefore becomes, as André Bazin would suggest, an attempt to capture an instant and ensure its survival for ever. Yet, by doing so, it discloses mortality and approaches photography to death. Bazin goes that far and postulates that, following the tradition of other forms of art, whose aim is to preserve the body from decay and to make it thus outlive its ephemeral physical existence, photographs, and the photographic portrait in particular, may be conceived as a logical extension of mummification. (Bazin, 1980) Consistent with this idea according to which photography foretells death, an idea that over time has been widely embraced by both philosophers and writers (Barthes, 1981; Proust, 1992/ 1922), Zhang contends that:

Taking seriously the objectivity that has long been attributed to the lens, it will be my contention that such vision turns out to be traumatic not because it reveals to us the future *non*existence of things, but, rather, because it reveals their *continued* existence in our absence. It is not their having been and being no longer that disturbs us, but precisely the contrary: their continuing to be when we are not there – the absolute indifference of the world to our perception of it, on which it does not depend the slightest. […] Photography signals death, then, not only by forecasting the time when we will cease to be, but by exposing the fact that we need not have been at all: not only the necessity of our nonexistence, but the nonnecessity of our existence. Such is the world seen without a self . (2012: 104-105)

While there might be some common sense in the theory that promotes the objectivity of photography, one should however not fall into a trap and assume that the objective lens could entirely obliterate the subjective vision and interpretation. Metaphorically speaking, seeing objectivity in simple opposition to subjectivity would be opaque. Or, as Daston and Galison postulate "[t]o be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgement, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight – seeing without inference, interpretation, or intelligence." (2010: 17)

Hence, reality cannot be so brutally deconstructed as to completely keep subjectivity at bay. Moreover, if photographs were mere substitutes for a glimpse of a reality that is deprived of human presence and implicitly of subjective vision, it would not only annul our very essence as human beings, which is a flawless combination of sense and sensibility, of reason and emotion, but it would also root us to a one-dimensional universe and immobilize us in a fundamental state of isolation. I therefore believe that it is somehow utterly deceptive and illusory to reduce reality to such a crude minimum – an existence outside the self. It is as if reality and emotion were absolutely incompatible, as if they were unfit to inhabit the same space and time. Not to mention that even science, probably the most prestigious force in modern society and which is renowned for its essentially objective, true to nature view on reality, is associated with metaphors of emotion like *the thrill of discovery*, *the passion for truth*, *the pleasure of knowledge*, *the desire to know* etc.

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All things considered, it would probably be more appropriate to conceive the photographic reality as a means of contemplating the world, yet, not just as a dry encounter with reality, but, rather, as an encounter with one's own self and, eventually, with life itself. Quan, for instance, delicately illustrates this curious blend of reality and emotion by suggesting that while photography might act "as a window into the lives of others" it might simultaneously act "as a mirror onto the lives of the viewer". (1979: 8)

Furthermore, something extremely valuable can still be drawn from the theory of objectivity. Aside from the idea that photographs freeze time and are thus able to capture some perishable and profoundly ephemeral splinters of reality, they offer us a unique opportunity to re-experience reality. More precisely, photographs are able to deconstruct reality in layers and reveal hereby details that might have escaped a first encounter with the photographed image. They may therefore provide, as Zhang suggests, a corrective to the eye. (2012: 3) Or, as Valéry remarks, "[i]t must be admitted that we cannot open our eyes without being consciously disposed not to see some of the things before us, and to see others which are not there." (1970: 167)

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. And so does emotion.

Photographs reshape our capacity to see details of reality that otherwise would remain concealed. Yet, to see means to understand, not just to look. And, apart from this, understanding is a very complex phenomenon, one that entails not only our cognitive, but equally our affective awareness in a given time, space and, most importantly, culture. In other words, "we signify ourselves through the signs available to us within our culture; we select and combine them in relation to the codes and conventions established within our culture, in order to limit and determine the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others." (Turner, 2005: 14) Altogether, understanding the meaning of a sign, be it a photograph, a word or any other semiotic sign is a very complex phenomenon that subtly, yet profoundly, interweaves reason, emotion, and culture.

Somehow, it may be inferred that a photograph is like a canvas on which we add layers of colours and nuances, a continuum process of creation and re-creation. As such, this process of meaning creation becomes something very intimate and personal reconfirming the idea that our interpretation of reality is idiosyncratic and beauty does eventually lie in the eye of the beholder.

To prove this very point, I have conducted a small-scale experiment with my first-year philology students, one in which I exposed them to a black and white picture that illustrates a boy. More precisely, I divided my class of 50 students into two groups and then, separately for each group, I projected the photograph below on a big screen in the lecture room.

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Both groups were asked to name just one emotion, the one that first comes to their minds when watching the photograph and is able, according to them, to epitomize their vision or perception. Additionally, while the students in one of the groups were supposed to come up with a narrative without being given any additional information on the photograph, the other group was provided with a context. More precisely, they were purposefully and deceptively informed that the boy illustrated in the photograph had just found out that he would spend his Easter holidays with the family he had been previously separated from and, thanks to some benefactors, they wouldn't feel the burden of their obvious poverty, at least for the time being.

The ultimate purpose of this endeavour has been to see whether context may become relevant in decoding and interpreting a piece of information, in this particular case, a piece of visual information. In meaning research, especially in linguistics, it has been frequently noted that "context behaves like a fertilizer for the word whose meaning is therefore impregnated by the semantic content carried over by its contextual environment." (Duma, 2015: 93) Hence, if one were to legitimately consider a photographic image as being a semiotic sign and compare it thus to a word, then, it becomes conspicuous that context might play an active and essential role in the narrative of perception.

The results of the experiment are illustrated in the table below:

Group 1 (context free)			**Group 2 (context)**					
Negative emotions	**Nr. of respon-dents**		**Negative emotions**	**Nr. of respon-dents**		**Positive emotions**	**Nr. of respon-dents**	
sadness	10	0	sadness	3	2	happiness	6	4
compassion	5	0	compassion	3	2	hope	2	
suffering	4	6	worry	2		euphoria	1	
loneliness	3	2	fear	1		surprise	1	

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pain	1		pity	1		calmness	1	
pity	1		anxiety	1		blessing	1	
empathy	1					amazement	1	
nothing	1					nostalgia	1	
TOTAL	**25**	**00**		**11**	**4**		**14**	**6**

For the interpretation of these results, I have used the most basic dichotomy, the one that stems from Aristotle's passions as "pleasures and pains" and conceives emotions in terms of positive-negative values. (Dow, 2015) The first straightforward conclusion of the experiment is that while the first group has almost exclusively (96%) pinpointed and expressed negative emotions, with the exception of *nothing* which is neither positive nor negative, the students from the second group were much more biased. Not only did they employ more nuanced adjectives to describe their emotions, but these were also fairly polarized. Hence, 56% described the photograph using positive emotions and only 44% negative ones.

Considering the fact that, at a first glance, it might seem quite obvious that the fabricated context is in total visual and narrative contrast with the photograph, it has, nevertheless, massively impacted on the perception of the interpreters. This means, that, to a certain extent at least, people might tend to filter and adjust their perceptions so that to adhere to and, eventually, coincide with their own expectations, their own subjective reality. Most of the times, however, this happens without our even realising it and, as Haidt points out, we might even find reasonable justifications for our temptation to interpret, to idealize and hence to 'objectively delude' ourselves:

[o]ver and over again, studies show that people set out on a cognitive mission to bring back reasons to support their preferred belief or action. And because we are usually successful in this mission, we end up with the illusion of objectivity. We really believe that our position is rationally and objectively justified. (2006: 65)

In such a reading, the results of this somewhat naïve and unpretentious experiment are not completely surprising. Yet, if we decipher it as being part of our journey to self-discovery, it might teach us some consistent lessons. One of these lessons would be that, in spite of what we might think, we cannot be really fairly accurate in the perceptions of the world around us. On the contrary, we see the world through coloured lenses. Moreover, the objects around us become but a collection of mental ideas, implying hereby that when no one is there to perceive them, objects might have no existence at all. We are therefore the co-creators of reality and this reality is imbued with our emotions, it is "concocted from memories and seasoned with affection". (Zhang, 2012: 103)

What makes the journey to self-discovery so fascinating is precisely to know that we have an 'unignorable' voice, a unique insight on reality, moulded by our previous experiences that are deeply rooted in the culture we live in. Everyone's journey is therefore true, simply because it is a personal metamorphosis. Moreover, it only depends on us how we look through the lens. Or, as Proust so delicately remarks "[t]he only true voyage […] would not be to visit new lands but to possess other eyes […]." (1992/ 1922: 291)

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