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How is a Philosophy of Photography Possible?

Abstract *This paper focuses on the following question: how is philosophy of anything possible? Where lies the boundary of specialisation area beyond which the term “philosophy” loses not only its strength, but also its meaning? When we talk about specific genre, for example, graphic art or sculpture we use the term “philosophy” in a broader, metaphorical sense. Why then should philosophy of photography be any different? All of the abovementioned questions are discussed in the present article. Philosophy of photography is, indeed, a legitimate discipline, just as philosophy of language, philosophy of science and technology and philosophy of politics are.*

Keywords: *Photography, visual image, iconic turn, language of media*

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Der Menschen waren nie Herren der Bilder
Dietmar Kamper

I ask myself: how is a ‘philosophy of something’ possible? Where is the boundary of an area of specialisation beyond which the term ‘philosophy’ begins to lose not only its strength, but also its meaning? Indeed, in what other way, save for a lack of meaning, or – what is worse – a lack of taste, can one explain such phrases as ‘the philosophy of agriculture’, the ‘philosophy of a company’, or ‘the philosophy of driving an automobile’? The high frequency with which the word ‘philosophy’ is used, for one, gives us reason to think not only that the boundaries of philosophy are re-defined with each new generation, but also that attraction modern marketing methods to the resources of philosophy. Secondly, in relation to art, regardless of the harsh criticism of Schlegel, who said that ‘one of two things is usually lacking in the so-called Philosophy of Art: either philosophy or art’ (Schlegel 1991: 12), the term ‘philosophy of art’ does not raise objections either from the intellectual or from the artistic communities. Perhaps, indeed, this has something to do with the list of respectable authors who have written books with that very title: Antonio Banfi, Vicente Cardoso, Hyppolite Taine, Broder Christiansen and, of course, the authoritative Schelling, as well as the existence of modules dealing with the subject in the teaching of aesthetics and the history and theory of art.

When the term ‘philosophy of art’ is used in respect to a particular medium, such as graphic art or sculpture, it is used in the same broad – that

is to say, incorrect – sense in which we can speak of the ‘philosophies’ respective to an automobile or a business concern, or even of the ‘philosophy’ of a magazine. Why, then, should the philosophy of photography be treated any differently? Why is it that earlier, when photography was still struggling to be accepted as a genre of visual art, the theoreticians of photography answered questions as to the secrets of photography under the heading of ‘ontology’ of photography, while now, when photography has gained acceptance, the ‘philosophy’ of photography is now in demand? One sign of the contemporary importance of this philosophy of photography is the ever-growing list of publications in which we find this very phrase. Could this all just be a sign of the loss of subtlety in our language that has followed the blurring of boundaries among the philosophical disciplines? Here I shall try to support the claim that the philosophy of photography is beginning to enter the group of such respectable and legitimate terms as the philosophy of language, science, technology, and politics. The greatest expression of this tendency is the term’s active use not only in the rubrics of courses in artistic theory, but also in the self-reflection of artists, critics, and curators.

It is quite possible that we must look for the reason for this tendency in the specific nature of the photographic medium, which has become a current question in the epoch which analysts call either the ‘civilisation of the image’ or the ‘iconic turn’. Let us direct our attention to the latter. The iconic turn is a shift in the socio-cultural situation, a transformation by which the problems of ontology become the analysis of visual images. This turn is in keeping with the ontological and linguistic turns, defining, as it does, the media producers’ abandonment of verbal communication for the visual (or, as Virilio might have said, the shift from the soft to the hard). However, the lordship of the new means of communication changes the *substance* of apprehension, which in the end leads to a change in our very *understanding* of reality. In the present day, the overproduction of visual images has reached such vast proportions that the criterion of our analysis of events has itself been reconstructed: that is, more and more we but our trust not in letters or words, but in visual images. The beginning of this tendency was first discovered in the thirties of the last century by Günter Anders, who saw within this tendency a ‘iconomania’, while the contemporary art theorist Gottfried Boehm would have us call it the ‘iconic turn’, in the manner of the ontological and linguistic turns of the past century.

Could one speak of such an ‘iconic turn’, and if so, in what manner? Is not the turn to the image made by theorists of media and philosophers

in their solving of contemporary problems tantamount to a decision to ignore language, which, according to Jean-François Lyotard had by 1980 already achieved a separate reality? As Lyotard writes,

[Even] scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse. And it is fair to say that for the last forty years the “leading” sciences and technologies have had to do with language: phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages, problems of translation and the search for areas of compatibility among computer languages, problems of information storage and data banks, telematics and the perfection of intelligent terminals, paradoxology. The facts speak for themselves (and this list is not exhaustive). (Lyotard, 1984: 3–4.)

And so, if the linguistic turn brought us to the understanding that all questions of philosophy are properly questions of language, the iconic turn means to show us the unique role that images are to play at the very heart of the formation of contemporary reality, that is, in both the ethico-political and economic parts of life.

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Now, when one can not only *reproduce* an image, but also *manipulate* it (at first this was made possible by photography, but today the new digital methods give us a hundred times more possibilities), the level of manipulation any visual document undergoes has greatly increased. The construction of an *objective*, impartial image or depiction has been deprived of its foundation, and the referent of the image comes under question. The idea of faithful and adequate reproduction has been displaced by the free choice of how to present the same reality: in such a way Heidegger’s *presentation* of reality gains its iconic development. We do not so much *interpret* what we see as we *see* that which we imagine. Reality acts as something like an archive, a warehouse, out of which we can take (or even make a special order for) that which we need for the production of images. ‘Give me an image, and I will turn the word upside down’ – such is the maxim which expresses the substance of the iconic turn in Western civilisation. To the figure of the intellectual controlling the minds of his contemporaries is added the figure of the ‘cultural’, who successfully makes his claim upon the possession – and mastery – of his spectators’ gaze.

Wittgenstein once said that ‘the image is the model of reality’, but today we are coming to see independent reality in the image itself. A multicultural and multi-level style of image production is the order of the day: in this context, the substance of the photographic image is one of the most important themes in new media. This is where the interests of philosophers

and art theorists, anthropologists and media theorists meet. A consensus has been more or less reached: the reality of the visual image, which in traditional societies had never been questioned, has in the modern era become a means of desacralising 'the reflection of reality' (photography was the first to produce this strong sense of illusion). In the postmodern era, the reality of the visual image does the very same, but with reality itself, which had once thought to be all-meaningful.

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In any possible conception of the present moment, visual images always take first place. The image has a history: according to H. M. McLuhan, with every event of historical importance, with every advance in technology there appear new epistemological metaphors that structure and control our ways of thinking, and Aristotle, in the first words of his 'Metaphysics' pointed out the fact that humans are naturally attracted to sense-impressions, taking delight in 'the sense of sight' 'above all others'. The printing revolution, beginning from Gutenberg's invention, not only scattered the political and physical body, having freed voices from the previous necessity of being physically present, but also caused a tense imbalance between the spoken and written word, with the following consolidation

of visual space as the dominant method of enculturation. As a result of this, the epoch of 'optiocentrism' has been born, in which 'presentation' plays a central role, characterising the 'worldview' of today. At the same time, the concepts 'look over' and 'see' come to be synonyms for 'investigate' and 'analyse'; the statement 'I see' becomes equivalent to 'I understand', 'I confirm', 'I agree'; and the word 'speculation', rather than characterising *being-as-opinion*, comes to mean being-as-truth, pointing to vision (as does the well-entrenched turn of phrase 'In this work/research is *reflected...*') and referring us to that knowledge, that form of cognition which can only be "seen" with one's mind, and yet, loving it as we do, can never 'look at' often enough.¹

At the very source of today's dominance of the visual image lies the photograph. While the photograph – artistic, silvery, ever-analogous to something else – sympathetically 'suffers' from the situation which the it itself has created, still, its growth (we shall refrain from calling it 'mutation', as to do so would betray an evaluative tendency) responds to the actual state of affairs (for example, the expansion of new technologies) and, in the end, comes to grow into this very situation, filling the photographic image with digital contents.

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Let us now return to our original question: how is a philosophy of photography possible? For a start, let us attend to the demarcation between the subject areas of the theory and philosophy of art, the latter of which has been mostly associated with aesthetics. Wolfgang Iser, one of the editor-contributors of an anthology of art theory in which are included the various contributions of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roman Ingarden, Nelson Goodman, and others, separated the two spheres of art theory and philosophy of art in the following way: Modern art theory is as different from philosophical aesthetics as aesthetics differed from the Aristotelian rules for poetics that it had replaced. If the poetics of Aristotle had been a sort of rulebook for the production of artworks, philosophical aesthetics aimed to gain knowledge of what is art. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, different forms of art had been compared in order to uncover their specific features, but philosophical aesthetics unites all forms of art into one Art. This Art had ceased to be understood as something that is made, and was dragged by philosophical aesthetics – itself created by the great philosophical systems – into the concept-world of epistemological ultimate foundations (*erkenntnistheoretischer Letztbegründung*). The different manifestations of philosophical aesthetics had a common premise, namely that art, as an appearance of the truth, is both

the representation of an ideal reality and a representation of the Whole. Such a view of art served to give reasons for seeing the philosophical system as a finished product. [...] This identification of art with aesthetics is being erased by modern theories of art. These theories – with the obvious exception of Marxism and metaphysical aesthetics – no longer see themselves as branches of philosophical systems (Iser 1992: 33–34).

Iser goes on to say that the defining characteristic of modern art theories is that they translate the work of art itself into a discourse; as a consequence of this, a work of art is only discussed under a certain aspect that is defined by an approach specific to the work .

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Once more having changed our point of reference, let us make note of the fact that while different theories of art – some of them relying upon phenomenology and hermeneutics, others, upon psychoanalysis and semiotics – *define* the specific characteristics of a particular artistic genre, philosophy rather *interrogates* a particular work of art, asking the question of how it is that through an *individual* (work of art) a *wholeness* comes into being, or how through the *given* (in the artwork) in space-time becomes *universal*: in short, philosophy asks how it is that now, in the present, we can find reasons for making an aesthetico-critical judgement. That is, philosophy enquires as to how, under certain conditions, the thought of the actual, the now, can come to be associated with the twin horizons of the past and the future; how an emerging genre of art solves the problems of art as art (or does not solve them – and so makes its exit from the stage of Art).

In relation to photography as a particular form of art, it would be proper to quote the opinion of one of the first philosophers of photography, Vilém Flusser, author of the book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 'Any philosophy of photography will have to come to terms with the ahistorical, post-historical character of the phenomenon under consideration' (Flusser 2000: 77). Concerning photography's importance, he says that In the eighteenth century, a philosophy of the machine would simultaneously have been a criticism of the whole of anthropology, science, politics, and art, i.e. e. of mechanisation. It is no different in our time for a philosophy of photography: it would be a criticism of functionalism in all its anthropological, scientific, political, and aesthetic aspects. (Flusser 2000: 78)

In the history of photographic thought, art theorists have been more likely to look to philosophy than philosophers to have considered the

theme of photography. A striking example of this is Nietzsche, who is often invoked by theorists of photography in support of their various ideas and concepts (I would note that a mention of the 'philosopher by the hammer' is hardly ever out of place), but at the same time his musings about the nature of photography are nothing special, failing, as they do, to extend beyond the day-to-day uses of the word 'photography' as it was understood in his time.

And so, coming to the heart of the matter at hand – the philosophy of photography, or at the very least the context in which we could speak of such a particular philosophy – let us define a certain boundary, namely between philosophy *about* photography and the philosophy *of* photography. In the twentieth century, philosophers began to turn back the tide of opinion (which had held them as having ceased to understand how it is that art is created) by actively analysing particular works of art: paintings, poems, performances. Oddly enough, none of these endeavours prompted the appearance of philosophies of painting, poetry, and performance art. This is important: indeed, it is just as important as understanding that thought-about-being and the being-of-thought are only seen as the same by the very earliest philosophers – the Pre-Socratics – coming back only to glimmer slightly in the works of Heidegger. In all other cases, whenever we see these two different concepts (that thought-about-being and the being-of-thought) considered as one, we can count it a symptom of a non-reflexive, and thus of a non-philosophical, position.

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More often than not, we find not common sense, but past philosophy (now become prejudice) fighting in a battle with the philosophical position. Likewise, radical art is opposed not to life and its values, but rather to past forms of radicalism, which have been transformed into a sort of icon of the present day. With the entrance of the philosopher onto the scene comes an injection of *concepts* into the sphere of Life broadly defined, that is, into one of the very regions of discourse that, whether by the whim of history or the cunning of the World-Spirit, has come to be one of the most important areas under discussion.

The philosopher's conceptual accent legitimises the interests of the artists, while at the same time making the musings of the philosopher on art more up-to-date (the two may seem exclusive, but they are not). For example, if philosophy is 'forgetting' about science, then this is not due to the failing memory of philosophers, but rather speaks to the fact that the discoveries of science no longer find great resonance with the public.

Indeed, science is becoming more and more the sphere of application for the technical disciplines: science is no longer involved with questions of metaphysics. While the pragmatism of Western society has caused it to turn to the solution of moral problems arising around the problems relating to various scientific advancements, free will finds itself in different areas, and those interests not subsidised by grants are coming to find their philosophical identity in the analysis of visual art. And there is nothing surprising about the fact that after painting philosophers have come to deal with cinematic and photographic images, in a sense coming from the *'thinking-together'* with Anaximander, Parmenides, or Heraclitus (as seen in the work of Heidegger) to the *'thinking-along-with'* the cinema (as seen in Deleuze) or even to thinking-along-with photography. Just as his philosophical predecessor Thales thought along with the speculators on the olive-oil market (just in order to prove the attractiveness of useless pursuits), Deleuze proved that he could think along with the cinema in order that we might ask the following question, appropriate only to extreme youth or old age: 'what is philosophy?'

I shall end this article with something entirely obvious – the philosophy of photography is not only a theoretical discipline, but also a love for the photographic image.

Endnotes

1. *Translator's note:* The final clause of this sentence is something of a play on words, which is difficult to reproduce; the original Russian phrase contains the words *nenaglyadnoe umozrenie*. '*Nenaglyadnoe*' literally means 'that upon which one can never become weary of looking', and '*umozrenie*' could be literally translated as 'mind-seeing', cognition. Both of these words fit in with the use of analogues for 'seeing' in sentences directly preceding the phrase.

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Kako je moguća filozofija fotografije?

Rezime

Članak se koncentriše na sledeće pitanje: kako je filozofija nečega moguća? Gde leže granice specijalizovanih područja iza kojih termin „filozofija“ gubi ne samo svoju snagu, već i svoje značenje? Kada se govori o nekom specifičnom žanru, recimo o grafičkoj umetnosti ili skulpturi, onda se termin „filozofija“ koristi u širem, metafotičkom smislu. Zašto to ne bi bilo primenjivo i na filozofiju fotografije? Ovaj članak razmatra navedene pitanja. Filozofija fotografije je legitimna disciplina, kao što su i filozofija jezika, filozofija nauke i tehnologije ili filozofija politike.

Ključne reči: fotografija, optička slika, slikovani preokret, jezik medija