

Truth and Domination of the Visual Image

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Abstract

This text aims to trace the social meaning of the visual image. On the one hand, how true is the photographic image in particular, and how much we can trust that it is an absolute replica of reality. On the other hand, it is considered the impact and his public use. Practically, every person, holding a phone, owns a weapon. The weapon is the visual image that has the power to ideologize and mythologize. Theoretical pillars are the ideas of Roland Bart – for the ideological significance of photography and cinema, of Suzan Sontag – for the reality of the image and its emotional significance, and of Jean Baudrillard – for the concept simulacrum.

Keywords: visual image, social significance, ideology.

1. Introduction

In the recommended era of hyper-consumption and fiercely shortened times, the end of postmodernity is wonderful. It is talked about "hypermodern" times. The 21st century is a time of commercialization of lifestyles. Spiritual spaces have been replaced by the rhythms of technology and telecommunications. It is built a virtual reality. "Technology has revolutionized culture. Reproducibility, animation, seriality, constitutive of photography, also delete the discourse on the genius of the creator. Art has already been reduced to a medium – not a mediator between here and there, but a medium. Now culture is everywhere among us. Now the culture is no longer in the presentations, but in the objects, brands and technologies of the information society" (Lash, 2004: 181). Completely flattened and restricted, the world is already reduced to a screen. Freed from moral chains, the "technical" person "clicks" on one or the other "drop-down menu" to satisfy his hunger for consumption. Instead of upholding ideals and moral causes, images of virtual space take over him. Hypermodern thinking completely desacralizes the image. It is no longer a sign of something unattainable, it is not a symbol, it does not represent a mythical or beyond world. The visual image confirms the phenomenology of the "here" as indisputably real. Only what is seen is absolutely true. The rapid development of imaging techniques – photographic imaging, cinema and video imaging, holographic imaging, digital imaging, laser design – saturates the image space. The hypermodern individual is in a circle of rapidly changing, constantly circulating images. Everything is already previewed. The "instrumental mind" communicates through images. Iconic signs shift the word. The hypermodern man is armed with "remote" and "mouse"; he perceives foreign signs as his own, appropriates foreign images, combines them and completes them to build his world. Marshall McLuhan defines the modern age, in his book *Laws*

of Media, as the “Age of Image”. Do you visualize yourself integrating into the mind and having a hypermodern person believe that something is seen, is it something like that?

2. The truth and domination of the photographic image: Susan Sontag

When I talk about the visual image in this article, I will primarily look at photography. Its transformation is interesting. At first, it seems like an elitist art which is not for everyone, then it gradually enters into public life – mandatory family portraits, fashion, cinema and the most objective form of journalism. With the development of technology and the incorporation of a camera into a phone, anyone can virtually shoot. Anyone can create images or capture foreign. Citizens, journalists and terrorists all have the same weapons. Even social media users have power over the image, sharing it with a certain emotional and ideological connotation. With applications and filters for the built-in camera, anyone can create an image that is far from reality.

Here comes a basic question: Is the photographic image an absolute replica of reality?

Since Plato, philosophers have been trying to free us from the dependence on images through ideas for the realization of reality without images. The opposite happens – images have the power to determine our requirements for reality, and they themselves become substitutes for immediate experiences. Unlike a picture that no one considers reality, the photo is part of the object and a means of controlling it.

2.1 *Photography controls in many forms*

It creates a consumer attitude. For example, events that are not even part of our life experiences. I wasn't there, but I saw the photos and I know what it was. “Photography becomes one of the main ways to experience something, to demonstrate participation” (Sontag, 2013: 16).

Photographic images have the ability to impart knowledge regardless of the experience of the individual. I.e. photos are appreciated for offering information, making invaluable, “realistic” inventory through which the world is cataloged. Once a photo is taken, it becomes part of an entire information system – the family photo album, astronomy, meteorology, medical diagnostics, microbiology, police and military intelligence. We know things we haven't really seen. “Reality itself is being redefined – as an object of display, a document of careful research, a purpose for observation” (Sontag, 2013: 191). The photo is a testimony and a proof that something has happened or exists. The modern country exercises control – every citizen is shot and can be justified or blamed. A photo may distort it, but the assumption always remains that something at least similar to what it shows us exists or has existed. Each photo has a more natural and therefore streamlined connection to the visible reality than all other imitations. If the primitive understanding of the image is that it has the properties of reality, then now reality looks like an image. When people go through a strong occurrence, they say it was “like a film” so as we know how real it was. Image and reality complement each other. As the idea of reality changes, so does the image, and inverse.

Photographic image has the power to change reality by turning it into an object. In the past, unwanted reality has been longing for another world. “In modern society, dissatisfaction with reality is the most powerful and compelling thing in the longing to reproduce this world. It is as if looking at reality as an object, fixing it through the camera, it is really real, i.e. surreal” (Sontag, 2013: 104). Moreover, photography seems to always stand between truth and beauty. What drives people to take or contemplate photos is that they find something beautiful. It is not enough to simply see reality, it must have something worth looking at. Thus, the photographer not only recreates reality, but adorns it. To the point that photos, rather than the world itself, became the standard of beauty. For example, it is not enough to shoot a naked body, it must have a graceful

form. The seascape at sunset looks far more impressive. In accordance with our aesthetic taste, we set requirements to reality and what we see must meet those requirements. The modern human is considered attractive when he looks good on a photo. People need their idealized image and feel reprimanded when the camera does not respond with the same. In the mid-19th century, a German photographer invented the first technical way to retouch the negative. At the World Exhibition in Paris in 1855, he presented two variations of the same portrait – the one has been retouched, and the other was not. The crowds have been amazed. “The news that the camera cannot completely show the truth makes shooting much more popular” (Sontag, 2013: 109). With the advent of digital technology, Photoshop and numerous smartphone applications, this “not completely showing the truth” becomes an outright lie. The false image invasion captures the modern man, making him a consumer of imitations. A typical example of this is the most powerful incubator of visual images – social networks on the Internet. In them, users scroll through hundreds of pictures a day, voyeur over foreign images – “plastic beauties”, appetizing dishes, exotic trips, cheerful companies. This surreal world seems perfect, as if it excludes pain, sadness, guilt, after all, no one posts a crying picture. The image has forged reality.

2.2 Emotional influence of the visual image

The photographic image is the most memorable and influential media that creates the feeling of a momentary window to a part from reality. “The memory is like an ‘instant shot’, and the main unit it uses is the individual image. In this age of information satiety, photography offers a quick way to learn something - plus a compact form to remember it. Photography is like a quote, maxim or proverb” (Sontag, 2015: 26). But if the visual image has an exceptional direct emotional power because it is perceived most quickly and easily, it too often remains decontextualized, elementary in its understanding of the world, and powerless to tell a story outside its own frame. Although we think of documentary photography as an extremely objective genre, as a machine that impartially reflects reality, it is in fact an example of an extremely limited and subjective view. And that is why it must be treated with extreme care and even distrust. Photography is the most convenient tool for propaganda by creating emotional excitement without a comprehensive understanding of the context. This is where the problem of reporting violence and acute social crises through photos comes from – our information – saturated environment is intensifying, a trend that Sontag points out.

On the one hand, the image influences as the right reality, pleasing and comfortable using what society is looking for. On the other hand, the media must convey a cruel reality that cannot be embellished – disasters, wars, violence, catastrophes. Then the image must be shocking and captivating people’s attention. The shock of the dramatic image is a major impetus for consumer demand. “Today’s wars are also spectacles and sounds from the living room. Information about what’s happening elsewhere, which we call ‘news’, includes conflict and violence. “If it is bleeding, then it is leading!” – reads the tried and tested rule of tabloids (Sontag, 2015: 23). The knowledge of people who have not been confronted with war, terror and death is based on the photographs they have access to, through which they can somehow experience the horror of others, this legitimate voyeurism, the insolent glimpse of the suffering of the other. An unhealthy, somewhat interest in other people’s pain is rooted in us, but photography can be manipulated because the photographer decides how and when to shoot the frame, whether to fake it a little to enhance the desired effect or inverse. Regarding the heart-wrenching pictures showing the physical pain of others, Susan Sontag writes: “What is the point of exposing yourself? To provoke outrage? Make us feel bad; oppressed and sad? Give us joyous thoughts about human nature? And is it worth watching them at all, since their documentary has been done a long time ago and has lost its limitation? Are we getting better at seeing them? And do they really tell us anything? Or are they simply confirming what we know (or will we know)?” (Sontag, 2015: 100). The famous intellectual asks the important question of how we are affected by the suffering of

others and are we used to cruelty. If the purpose of the shocking footage is to make us suffer with the victims and to empathize with their pain, has it been achieved? Provided that the mass culture filled with spectacles, has a high threshold of tolerance for violence. It is featured in movies, comics and computer games. What happens: If an event is depicted, it becomes even more real, shown repeatedly, however, it begins to move away, to become unrealistic. Sontag shares the story of a Sarajevo resident: “In October 1991, I was living peacefully and quietly in my Sarajevo apartment when Serbs invaded Croatia. I remember on TV they were showing the destruction of Vukovar (only two hundred kilometers away from me), and I said, ‘Oh, how awful!’ and I switched channels. So why be angry if someone in France, Italy or Germany sees the killings that are a daily occurrence on TV and says, ‘Oh, how awful!’ and then looks for another program? This is normal. Human ...” (Sontag, 2015: 108). The foreign pain is not mine, it is foreign and devoid of reality, I can even not look at it. The flow of images creates indifference and seems to dampen empathy. The possibilities of photography, as well as of cinema and television, have depleted our understanding of reality. Plato’s attitude to the images is neglectful, to him they are shadows — transient, “powerless seductions of the real things that create them” (Sontag, 2013: 220). On the contrary, in modern societies they have power, traces of what gave birth to them. Images are a powerful tool for turning reality into a shadow. In “Regarding the pain of others”, Sontag writes that photography objects, transforms every event and individual into something that can be possessed, so it is somewhat alchemy, however much we want to accept it as the most reliable reflection of reality.

3. The visual image- myth and ideology: Roland Barthes

In *The Imagination of the Sign*, the famous French philosopher analyzes the mechanism for creating the ideological and cultural meanings of photography and cinema. Roland Barthes turns to an analysis of the “mythology” of modern, consumer society. Bart analyzes the daily myths created by the media. Mythology is viewed from a semiological point of view – as a sign system that resembles a structured natural language. Barthes identifies two levels of message: the main meaning (denotation) and mythical or ideological (connotation) “mythologies” (Barthes, 1991: 142). The connotation is the expression of a certain attitude to reality in photography. Such ideological, value is the product of a particular society. Therefore, reading a photo is always historical and depends entirely on society. Myths are connotative entities whose distinctive feature is that they erase their essence into constructs and go for something completely natural. The meaning is conveyed in messages that are dominantly visual. What lies beneath the ghost, what is the true meaning hidden in the innocent form of an image or linguistic cliché? Barthes's myth is an instrument of ideology; it serves as a conviction, myth is a sign. Myth has a historical boundary; it is a form of communication. And since the universe is infinite and thus infinitely suggestive (connected with suggestion and using one), everything can be a myth. According to Barthes, everything can serve as a bearer of a mythic word – not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reports, sports, advertising, etc.

“The function of myth is to eliminate reality. Things in it literally become bloodless, flowing constantly, without a trace of disappearing reality, feeling like an absence” (Barthes, 1991: 45).

In “Photographic Communication”, Barthes explores the mechanisms for encoding the ideological content of photography: “The paradox of photography is the coexistence of two messages: on the one hand, it is an analogue of reality; on the other hand, this reality is being processed, that is, it has a kind of “rhetoric of photography” (Barthes, 1991: 505). There is no need for a mediating element between the object and its image, that is, a single code. In this way, the special status of the photographic image stands out: it is a message without code, a dogma from which an important conclusion must be drawn immediately: the photographic message is a continuous message (Gaymer, 2011: 101). The photographic image creates the illusion of reality

and neutrality (“yes – it was”), but at the same time it carries an ideological plan – connotative or cultural. The visual impact mechanism was implemented by Roland Barthes, with the article “Rhetoric of Image” published in 1964 (*La rhétorique de l'image*). There, Barthes examines the mythological level in creatives or the level of ideology, analyzing in the first place advertising images: “First, let’s make the task easier (and significantly): we will only consider advertising images. Why? Because the significance of any advertising image is always and undoubtedly deliberate: labeled advertising a priori are the very essence of the properties of the advertised product and these labeled must be passed on to the user with all possible security” (Barthes, 1991: 527-528). According to Barthes, the advertising image always contains certain characters and they are made to be easy to read, that is as expressive as possible.

In the essay “Rhetoric of the Image”, when examining the advertisement of the Italian Panzani paste, Barthes emphasizes three messages:

- Language message – add text. Reading and decoding a language message requires no knowledge other than language knowledge;
- A symbolic message based on a specific code – a “symbolic” image of objects, a series of discrete symbols contained in the image. In order to read an emblematic message, it is necessary to analyze the ideas that they evoke; and
- An iconic message based on a lack of code – a “literal” image of objects that does not contain any characters. To read such a message, you only need the ability to perceive visual images.

Barthes emphasizes that every image is ambiguous, and culture develops methods to enhance meaning in photography, for example by using text. Managing the identification and interpretation of photographic messages is a way of ideologically controlling the image.

Analyzing the French advertising of powders and cosmetic creams, images and associations that awaken in consumers, the philosopher concludes that people's consciousness is still mythological. In the creative, the designation (“whitens whiter than white”) is complemented by a sense of connotation: buying consumer goods is natural and proper; they bring happiness and joy.

Myth penetrates the contemporary mass culture no less than the primitive. Yes, the visual image is the weapon through which ideologies can be propagated in society. But why can it be easier through images than through words? For Sontag, the photo has a very emotional effect, Barthes calls it punctum. “... sometimes a” detail “lures me. I feel that its availability changes my read; I am already looking at another picture, with a higher value for me. This detail is the punctum (that what pierces me)” (Barthes, 2001: 53). Photography “performs an unheard of mixing of reality (‘it was’) and truth (‘it is!’); it brings the image to that insane point where affect (love, compassion, sorrow, impulse, desire) is the guarantor of being. Then she really approaches madness, reaches the ‘mad truth’” (Barthes, 2001: 131). The society has begun to understand this madness, this new form of hallucination. There are two means to this end. One is to make it an art. “The other means of restraining Photography is its universal extension, its transformation into a herd, its banalization, so that no other image, in respect of which it stands out, affirms its specificity, its scandal, its madness. This is what happens in our society, where Photo smears other images with its tyranny... today, images are more alive than humans. Probably one of the hallmarks of our world is this rollover: we live according to some universal imagery” (Barthes, 2001: 134-135). It is characteristic of modern societies that they consume images, they do not believe fanatically, they are more liberal, but also more false. Barthes criticizes the universalization of the image, which seems to create an indifferent world from which only the individual or marginal screams can be heard here.

In the theory of photography from the seventies and eighties photography as a document was subjected to radical criticism and the “effect of the real” (Barthes, 2001) in the images was declared “ideological”. In this interpretation, the viewer is transformed into a passive observer, consuming the images as a voyeur, and photography as a document serves to represent cultural constructs as natural images.

4. Simulacrum and hyperreality: Jean Baudrillard

The main concept that shaped Jean Baudrillard’s popularity is the concept of simulacrum. Simulacrum is not a reflection of reality; simulacrum is a reality, a reflection of nothing. According to Baudrillard, simulacrum is a world without opposition, a hyper-reality that has no reference to reality. It works through a claim to reality, but it is neither real nor unreal. It is a reflection in a mirror that requires neither a mirror nor a source object. The simulacrum masks the traditional notions of truth and false, distorting moral and aesthetic norms. We may wonder how simulacrums appear in our information reality, since they do not reflect anything true. Baudrillard proposes that simulacrum be regarded as the final stage in the evolution of reflections (images) of reality. What can be the phases of the image?

- Image – a reflection of existing reality.
- An image that masks and distorts reality.
- The image that covers up the absence of reality.
- An image that has no connection with any reality at all.

Baudrillard does not believe that critical theory is able to cope with consumer society. According to him, the society is ruled by the simulacrum, the so-called Baudrillard “fourth kind,” in which good, evil, beautiful, ugly, right and wrong are blurred. Simulacrum has no reference in reality – it relies on high technology, media and communications to tear consumer society out of reality. Simulacrums do not just represent facts and events – they produce events and facts.

Baudrillard traces the social dimensions of simulacrum. “He examines literary and cinema products, advertisements and shopping malls, television shows and power gestures, scientific theories and experiments to conclude that all modern life is reproduced on the basis of simulation models of cinema, television, advertising” (Popova, 2016: 118). “In this sense, America is nothing but a great Disneyland” (Baudrillard, 2015: 31).

Baudrillard sees the main model of simulacrum in the media. “Contemporary media transmit information in real time, but their ability is a reason for the temptation to create events.” (Popova, 2016: 121). If there is no event, the media creates it – catastrophes, illnesses, fake celebrities, silicone beauties. Then, in the process of consumption, already consumed, they are replaced by another media product. The subject of “reality” formats is present in French texts. As an example of hyperreality, he looks at one of the first formats of television reality television. An average American family has been watched by television cameras for seven months. Finally, the family divorces, but the question of the place of form in this family crisis is discussed. For Baudrillard, this is hyperreality. In this experiment, neither lies nor truth can be spoken. It could not be traced whether this happened because of the presence of cameras and what would have happened if they had not. There is no clear point of view – the viewer is a television hero and television is both being watched and watch. “There is no longer any subject, no focus point, no center and periphery” (Baudrillard, 2015: 54). Whereas for traditional philosophy, representation implies an identity of sign and reality, hyperreality dissolves the real into the sign, replacing the real with the signifying signs. Modern society has lost its criteria of reality. In her article “The Gulf War Didn’t Take Place”, published in 1991 in the *Liberation* and the *Guardian* during the Gulf

battles, Baudrillard warns that we are already so immersed in the virtual world that we also understand the most dramatic real-life events as visual media present us. Even disasters and wars seem to be episodes of reality television and are intended to be aired on television. For him, the trial of Ceausescu looks like television speculation, and the Gulf War was created by and for CNN. In fact, all modern culture resembles “realities” which maintains “a single passion: the passion for the image and the desire for the images” (Baudrillard, 1996: 126).

5. Conclusion

In modern society, photography is so widespread that it is hardly practiced as an art. It is simply a visual image transformed into a social ritual. The visual image is a means of reaching the other end of the world, of displaying conflicts, a means of proving, blackmailing, diagnosing. Our whole world is imbued with images. At first glance, harmless selfies with built-in beauty filters lead to deviations from moral and aesthetic norms. Not only is reality falsified, the modern man is falsifying himself. Not someone, but the image itself is a model of imitation, the copy without the original. Communication of images in hyperreality. The three authors discussed above seem to have tried to warn us of the danger of this image invasion. They question the reality of visual images. Yes, they are pieces of reality, but they are “read” in a particular society and age. If, by the 1990s, the verbal component had prevailed in the flow of information, the advent of technology opened up new possibilities for influencing the human psyche with the help of visual images. Such an effect is based on the emotional experience of a person who is trusted more than words. In other words, the more emotional the rational impact on a society can be, the easier it will be to manage.

The visual image that dominates our words and our mind is a means of power. On the one hand, Visual images distort reality or directly change it. On the other hand, a person believes in the image, with his eyes he sees that it was so. It is a trap, two aspects of the same presence, a reality but false. In this “hyperreality”, mixed patterns of thinking and behavior can easily be imposed, new ideologies may be invoked.

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