

Analysis and Interpretation of the Photographic Work as Foundations for its Study and Documentation

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«Photographies are ... discursive practices and ... for this reason one cannot use photography as an unproblematic source. Photography does not transmit a pre-existent reality which is already meaningful in itself»

John Tagg¹

«At any stage of photographic production the apparatus of selection and interpretation is liable to render itself invisible ... photographers, archivists, editors and curators can all claim ... to be merely passing along a neutral reflection of an already established state of affairs»

Allan Sekula²

1. Photography naturalised (Green)³

It is obvious that nearly everybody can take photographs today⁴. Many different technologies are made easily available to us so that we can fix, keep and, at some point, share an unprecedented amount of memories. Conversely to the spreading and standardization of technologies, behaviours, styles and outputs, we are facing a tendency to the fading away of wariness and awareness. There seems to be no need to ask ourselves anymore: «how can I keep a visual record of *this*?» (whatever *this* is), while we should rather ask ourselves *why* we would want to keep a static, visual record of just one fraction of an event, framed by social structures and practices, which is taking place through time, involving feelings, sounds and other senses altogether, etc⁵. The *whys* & *wherefores* get overlooked and – while the globalised marketplace feeds us with the thrilling escalation of the *hows* – photography gets more and more naturalised⁶. Allan Sekula, remarked:

«the *naturalisation of the cultural* seen by Roland Barthes as an essential characteristic of the photographic discourse, is repeated and reinforced at virtually every level of the cultural apparatus – unless it is interrupted by criticism»⁷.

Bad news is that such naturalisation has become commonplace also in the critical approach to the photographic issues⁸. Analysis and critical interpretation⁹ – here to be considered as equivalents – are assessed as the very foundations of the researches on photographic works; both in the case of the photograph considered as a proper document, and in that of photography implied as iconic source for a documentary study, deployed in other medias and with other aims than the photograph itself.

¹ Tagg 1988: 119. The historian Paola Carucci expresses the same concerns in writing: «the document is itself an interpretation of reality and, as such, it has not an absolute objective value; even when this value be proven, the reading of documents does not amount to historical knowledge» (*Il documento contemporaneo. Diplomatica e criteri di edizione*. La Nuova Italia Scientifica, Roma 1987) in Mignemi 2003: 179.

² Sekula 1986b: 446.

³ As for the odd titling of the parts of this paper, together with somewhat conventional descriptions, I chose to use “colour” codes, somehow related to the content of the paragraphs, in order to keep the differences, provide some clues, bend some rules, and possibly make sense.

⁴ Assessing the social and geographic distribution of both photography users and publics is beyond the limits of this paper. For a thorough survey see Bourdieu 1965; for one of the many updatings (both in scope and lightness) see Bajac 2010.

⁵ Beyond these questions, there are others, like: «What am I doing, and who am I, taking this photograph? And, whether or not I succeed in putting down to images my experience now-and-here, what shall this photograph be about?». Neither proficient professionals nor consumed artists can manage on a daily base this level of frankness.

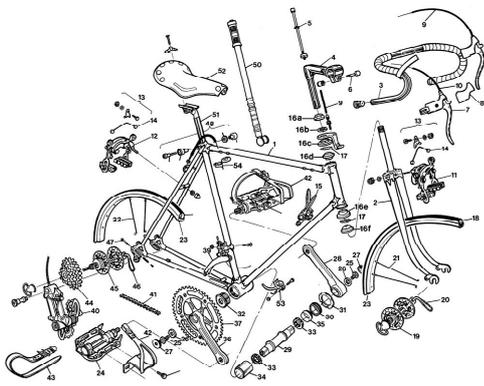
⁶ In 1888 George Eastman notoriously claimed that the users of his newborn Kodak cameras should only care about pressing the button, while the Eastman firm would do the rest. The backlash of creative photographers, such as Alfred Stieglitz and his many fellows and followers, proved so committed and consistent that paradoxically we might owe to Eastman not only popular and vernacular photography, but also modernist high-art photography.

⁷ Sekula 1986b: 447. Roland Barthes' remarks (Barthes 1964: 35) were focussed on commercial photography. The connoted images typical of this photographic genre – Barthes noted – disguise their semantic artifices as objects naturally being-there. We will, of course, insist on the critical disruption of naturality, because it appears of absolute importance to our topic. The French semiologist returned on this topic in Barthes 1980: 34-5.

⁸ Because this paper is provided with bibliographic references, it would be quite useless to replicate in this note the huge amount of contributions from which I draw my colloquial remarks. I will be contented by simply recalling here two pivotal books as Sontag 1977 and Tagg 1988, whose bibliographies, in turn, sum up this whole discourse and much more altogether.

⁹ On the fundamental difference between critical and semantic interpretation see further.

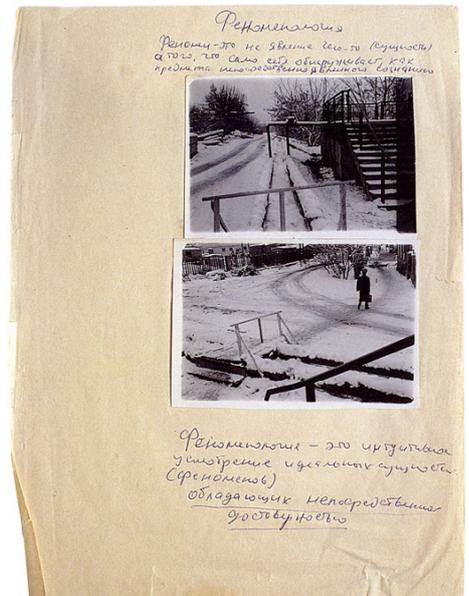
I should also immediately introduce the pivotal notion of *photographic work*. The analysis and interpretation of visual texts – be they voluntary or merely intentional¹⁰ – proves itself way more interesting and fruitful than that of images per se. Studying or working on the self and then shooting, developing, post-producing, printing, editing, sequencing, captioning, titling and presenting are but a few of the many crossroads where photographic meanings¹¹ emerge, overlap, chorus, clash or implode. My work in photographic critical analysis is usually devoted to highlighting these junctions, as if drawing an exploded isometry of – say – a bicycle, that in real life could only be considered in the assembled form, better still if purposely driven somewhere. As a dense network of interactions cannot be explained but in an analytical, sequential form, so exposing my approach will forcefully require the linear form of writing, which is an-isomorphic with the critical activity which – intellectually speaking – is totally synchronic or, at worst, convoluted.



Let us consider for a brief moment “Unfinished Dissertation”, a 1998 series by the artist Boris Mikhailov. Before any further context analysis, it suffice me to say that it is impossible to grasp that work without being, not only aware of the images, their coupling and sequencing, but also of the papers they are glued onto, of the writings – both in matter, style and content – surrounding the images, and many other (narrative, ironic, revelatory, poetic) purposeful elements which the body of work is made of. Mikhailov, in fact, make materic reference to the family albums of sovietic Russia both through the ballpoint writing and in the old yellowish papers, and yet irony is brought back in the philosophical content of the somewhat cursive notes.

This approach is biased by my own personal background as a contemporary art critic and historian, moved, in the early 90s, to focus on photography¹². Time and experience with the most diverse authors taught me something akin to a *flexible discipline*. An «ingenious and permissive»¹³ approach to critical analysis and interpretation suggests that not because a photographic work might be a lot easier to grasp, our approach should be less structured and capable of subtle distinctions.

This paper tackles the dialectic between photography’s apparent naturality and its complex and manyfold role-playing in the social games of our cultural scenarios, the *archive* being one of the least evident and most challenging. References and quotations come from a manifold library drawing from such diverse fields as photographic theory, historical method, visual ethnography, philosophy, social studies, museography or archival theory. The paper shall try and pursue an academic standard and yet photography – although connoted, technical and theory laden¹⁴ – is a very lively and elusive matter, and shall be addressed in its own terms.



¹⁰ An opposition I borrow, and rephrase, from Baxandall 1985: 41-2, hardening a little its binary distinction. Somehow expanding this idea, we see photographs as matters of *intention* (more or less *volitional*), *practice* (more or less *functional*), *technique* (more or less *masterly*), *form* (more or less *stylish*), *creativity* (more or less *artistic*), etc.

¹¹ As far as my beliefs are concerned, I would never endorse a study of photographic meanings: my works is rather in *making sense* of photographic works as such, in the twofold sense of framing them into a coherent interpretation, and keeping such interpretation critical, open and self-aware.

¹² Daniel Girardin (in Fontcuberta 2002: 89-90) remarks: «the art historians might be the most capable ones in analysing photography because they are provided with formal and methodological tools fitting/suitable analysis of images». Girardin, though, overlooks the materiality of photographs.

¹³ Amy Rule writes: «because the creative process is often intangible, spontaneous, complicated, and protracted, our methods for documenting it must be *ingenious and permissive*» (my italics). In Rule and Solomon 2002: 22. Institutions – Ms. Rule follows – tend to «limit the transgressive nature of the artist, and to shape a safe identity that can be described within the bounds of cataloging and inventory systems and justified within a collection policy» (ibidem). Our approach is shaped by the difficulties posited by the artists’ works but applies to any other kind of photographic work.

¹⁴ Goodman 1978: 96-7. Nelson Goodman’s adaptation of the epistemological assumption that all practices are theory-laden, while all theories are fact-laden, suggests the same conclusions concerning photography. See also Kuhn 1962.

2. Controversial issues (*Bleen*)¹⁵

Since photography is functional to nearly all human activities, experts may come from such diverse fields as: art, architecture, anthropology, history, medicine, science, digital imaging, massmedia communication, marketing, journalism, psychotherapy, yoga etc¹⁶. A one single photograph could be in gear with such different social practices or, in other words, play such diverse roles¹⁷ as familiar recollection, scientific evidence, artwork or commercial item, without suffering any substantial change. An instance of this capacity – and of the fact that sorting and classification actually do create new worlds¹⁸ – is a photograph, formerly classified as an image of a horse in motion, then classified as Muybridge's photograph¹⁹, thus shifting from belonging to the scientific heritage (and departments) to being both an early experiment in fast photography, and a forerunner of cinema. This peculiar attitude to social transformism, unknown to any other iconic media, suggests an openness and availability to diverging interpretations and usages, beyond unlimited semiosis, making photographs the perfect match on the tinder of semantic interpretation²⁰, or worse: of semantic drifts²¹. Conversely, because of the physical and technical features of its making, photography is conceived as having an ontological status of transparency and honesty²². Pivoting on its verisimilitude (reality effect), it is practiced and used as a natural representation of the outer world, and sometimes also as a honest equivalent of the inner world²³.

It is possible to think otherwise, though. Photographs could be considered as provided with a *portemanteau* identity²⁴. A portemanteau word is the combination of two (or more) words merging into a new one unifying and blurring both words' meanings. Photography in fact takes advantage of both its *indexical* and *iconic* (and also *symbolic*) functioning, both its *denotation* and *connotation*, both its value as a *document* and as a *visual text*, both its *imagery* and *materiality* etc. (such binary oppositions are not just verbal jugglery with one selfsame distinction). I am reformulating here what has been said many times in many different ways. Among the most influential contributors I would quote Roland Barthes when he first talked about the “wisdom and madness” of photography, that is: its capacity to be either tamed or hallucinatory; capable to transform every image in an entertainment or else capable to «face the unmanageable reality»²⁵. I shall also recall Jean-



¹⁵ This colour doesn't exist. It is a *portemanteau* word coined by the American philosopher Nelson Goodman (Goodman 1954). See further.

¹⁶ As proved in the symposium “La cultura fotografica nell'Università italiana: situazione, problemi e prospettive” at the Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Cinisello Balsamo – Milano, held in 2008, and particularly in the contribution of Cosimo Chiarelli.

¹⁷ VV.AA. 1998.

¹⁸ For the sense of “worldmaking” see Goodman 1978; for a general framing of the topic see Wittgenstein 1953.

¹⁹ Crimp 1981: 7.

²⁰ For a recollection and development on *unlimited semiosis* – derived from Charles Sanders Peirce – and on *critical interpretation vs. semantic interpretation*, see Eco 1990. As for the semantic drift, see Derrida 1967. For an accurate account of the relationship between semiotics and photography, see Signorini 2001 and Friday 2002.

²¹ As instances of dominant semantic interpretations, we could take all the intersections between photography and poetry, music, zen, eros, self-motivation, therapy, time, death etc. Whenever the equivalence of photography and feelings is a means to the end of inner flourishing or expansion, there critical analysis is useless, reduced to that forensic strategy Barthes used to term “studium”. Yet the separation between the domain of analysis and that of pleasure is blurry at least.

²² The knowledge of the *arkè*, as theorized in Schaeffer 1987. Instead of quoting the hundreds of contributions stemming from this awkward assumption, I shall use the American photojournalist Eugene Smith's famous words: «I adjust reality to make it closer to the truth» and «the camera cannot lie but it can be an accessory to untruth» (quoted in Mora 1999).

²³ Carmelo Vega (in Fontcuberta 2002: 218) wrote: «in order to pursue a veritable history of photography it is mandatory to look at photographs *without nostalgia*» (my italics). Photography has to be analysed and interpreted as if it did not channel emotional projections or instinctive (at times compulsive) approaches. It surely does, and it must be taken into account, but analysis and critical interpretation must put themselves out of the frame of what I would define the “primacy of semantic interpretation”. See above, note 20.

²⁴ Like “Spanglish” (Spanish+English) or “Spork” (Spoon+Fork). The main character of the 2008 Pixar-Disney film “Wall-E”, uselessly tries to find the proper section into which putting a Spork away (The wordless sequence of gestures might be translated like this: «Forks? No... Spoons? Nither. Let's plunk it down in between. That's where it belongs!»). The two hybrids: “Bleen” and “Grue” (Blue+Green), devised by Nelson Goodman (see note 15) in order to deconstruct the supposed intrinsic essentialism of colour definition, are *portemanteau* words too.

Marie Schaeffer's book *The Precarious Image*²⁶ where photography is spoken of, instead, as a "wild and intermittent sign" exactly because of its shifting behaviour, both as an index and as an icon²⁷: both as a trace and as a picture.

Too many undisputed contributions have insisted – from the most diverse historical and disciplinary standpoints – on the cultural construction of *facts* and *ideas*, and consequently of photographic images, for us to carry on a starry-eyed notion of the photographic gaze as natural, unbiased, objective and neutral. The photographic gaze does not depend on a biological apparatus and is a constructed way of seeing, totally unisomorphic with physiological vision, which is itself a combination of eye and mind: of ocular perception and its correction – or interpretation – by the mind, according to experience²⁸. Consequently, and *a fortiori*, in order to make sense, every physiological vision, every *looking*, will have to become a *seeing*, which is always a cultural act of *recognition*, before possibly get deepened into a further action of *observing*²⁹.

Nothing – not even a smile – is what "we" think it is, unless we determine who and when and why "we" is. In other words, meaningfulness depends on the contexts – social relationships, rituals of truth etc. – granting the reading, the sense-making of that smile. Smiling might also mean different things in different cultures (friendliness, quandary, even the outset of a fight). It is even more so with the *photograph* of a smile: actually that which photographically *looks like* a smile, often is not. A photograph is the reality it represents no more than a map is the territory³⁰. Such difficulties are apparently overcome, sometimes, by choosing to contemplate the photograph in itself³¹, describing it – at most – in a matter-of-factly way. And, even though scholar and archivist Amy Rule, from the Center for Creative Photography of Tucson, Arizona, openly admonished that «there is no one right way to see and appreciate photographs»³², two approaches to photographic images have proved themselves unfruitful: the *naturalistic* one (photography as an automatic image, a natural document and a naturalised practice) and the *ontological* one (studying photography in itself as a decontextualised phenomenon). The former assumes *neutral* description as a method supposedly drawn from photographic functioning. Now – beyond the fact that no image-making is an unbiased act, simply because of the choice of a subject instead of another³³ – there is no such thing as a neutral description of an image³⁴. In fact, according to Michael Baxandall:

«description and explanation interpenetrate each other ... we do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures»³⁵.

So, once «the given [is] acknowledged as taken»³⁶ we are ready to acknowledge that every remark about pictures is enfolded in frames of reference that «belong less to what is described than to systems of description»³⁷.

²⁵ Barthes 1980: 119 and 112-5.

²⁶ Schaeffer 1987.

²⁷ For a thorough discussion in photographic terms of Charles Sanders Peirce's distinction of signs into *Symbols*, *Icons* and *Indexes*, depending on their relationship to their referents, see Signorini 2001. We will not enter the post-structuralist quarrels on the nature of referents (as facts/as texts) and on *referential fallacy*, in force of Barthes' remarks that, in photography, referents *are* real, for they *must have been* in front of the camera (Barthes 1980: 77-8).

²⁸ One of the most notable recollections on the argument is Gombrich 1959.

²⁹ For this distinction see Faeta 2006: 18-9. For a general framing of the dialectic *vision/visuality* see the dense recollection given in Foster 1988.

³⁰ Alfred Kerzyski's celebrated statement: «the map is not the territory» means that a model of reality is never tantamount to reality; it may well be some *other kind* of reality.

³¹ Zen applied to photographic analysis is, at its worse, the illusion of being "aware" of the picture in itself here-and-now, confusing the plan of imaging with that of context and, most of all, obliterating the agency of social and cultural presets. The application of Zen to life, and to the making of photographs, though, could lead to a liberated practice, stripped of many cultural constrains, such as stylistic or behavioural codes, that suffocate free and creative attitude. But that is another use, another point of entry to photography.

³² Rule and Solomon 2002: 17.

³³ Burke 2001: 27 quotes the words of Farm Security Administration official Roy Stryker, making the same remark. Stryker was the legendary head of the Information Division: patron of the photographic documentary campaigns of such authors as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein or Walker Evans, during the Great Depression; he was the mastermind of rooseveltian *publicity*. Allan Sekula (1986b: 451) epitomizes: «neither the contents, nor the forms, nor the many receptions and interpretations of the archive of human achievements can be assumed to be innocent».

³⁴ Oscar Wilde notoriously wrote that «truth is rarely pure and never simple» (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895). The same disenchantment should apply to photography.

³⁵ Baxandall 1985: 1.

³⁶ Goodman 1978: 7.

³⁷ Goodman 1978: 2-3.

Analytical descriptions are, once again, tantamount to interpretations, and this is why the ontological-immanentistic approach is to be rejected too. In fact it is another way of saying the same thing as before: that we can define or describe photography *per se*. Every reading is, of course, a reframing of the photograph's relations with worlds we might or might not be acquainted with, with times we might or might not have lived, and an approximate account of the technicalities of such relations. How could anyone say anything on a photograph *per se*, which is not for the same reason his/her bundle of remarks biased by his/her implicit knowledge and interpreting agenda, or by those of the institution promoting the observation? We shall return on the latter topic, but first let us try and say something on a typically misplaced assumption when looking at photographs as images of the world.

3. A non-viable backtracking (White)

Rediscussing the nature of photographs is way beyond the scope of this paper, and yet one thing must be said, although it may sound paradoxical and counter-intuitive. It is undisputable that the photographic image is indexical by nature and could not be produced otherwise (this did not prevent many photographic works, metaphorically speaking, to have been issued while not being *literally* photographic images³⁸). Even when filtered, screened and altered in any way, a photographic image is the direct trace of the light coming or rebounding from what will end up leaving a mark on the light-sensitive memory. This said, it is nonetheless undisputable that what results from the aforesaid exposure might encompass a field and mode of “vision” that do not reproduce neither the aims, nor the focus, nor the will (or the “spirit”) operating the apparatus³⁹. An operation that could be purposefully driven so that the image would function either straightforwardly or else in rhetorical, allusive, critical, ironical or oppositional terms. We shall never underestimate that purposefulness –



A

as remote and undetectable as it may be – for, whether that purposefulness extends or not to the entire photographic process, it could still be the rationale, the very backbone of the photographic work the picture is part of.

Photographic imaging of course implies natural phenomena and yet both the merging and readapting of such phenomena, as much as every intentional use of its outputs, must be accounted as cultural and, for this reason, understood by means of a network of cultural considerations and assessments. Let us consider the following figure and, for the sake of reasonment, make two assumptions that in real life couldn't possibly be made without cautions:

- let us assume that A is an unproblematic “thing” in the real world;
- let us assume A' to be an unbiased photographic image of A that a generic onlooker would take as a valid token for the thing-in-the-world⁴⁰.

In order to get A' we *must* assume A: this is Barthes' “noema”, positing (to oversimplify the matter) that what is in the photograph must “have been” in front of the camera. *What is* in the photograph, then? Many things altogether, but the recognition of these things will vary according to diverse standards: time, place, social and cultural belonging of the onlookers, access to A', institutional briefs, cultural habits, coded readings of A', stylistic and technical expertise,

personal experiences, and so on and so forth. Many thinkers, from different standpoints, have found different names for such “implicit” or “transversal” knowledges: Umberto Eco called them “encyclopedia”, Michel Foucault “epistheme”, John Tagg “regimes of truth”, Wittgenstein “language games” etc.

A' will often exceed – or frustrate – the intentions of the photographer. According to Walter Benjamin, and later to Franco Vaccari⁴¹, the photographic apparatus is made so that its capacities to *see* will never be comparable to those of human perceptions (operated by eyes & mind); their theories come to the point of positing some sort of “technical unconscious” revealing itself in the photographs⁴². In any case, since there is not a two-way relationship between A and A', once we have *only* A' – and A is either lost or removed – there is neither a straight way, nor a given one, to get undisputedly back to A in order to know what A *actually* was.

It is possible that neither from A to A' the path be undisputedly straight. In fact the fading-out of the already problematic (dotted) line hints at a homologous dubiousness in the linear transition not only from the thing-in-the-world to a recorded memory (negative, positive, file etc.) but also from the recorded memory to the final

³⁸ Gerhard Richter springs instinctively to my mind, but this category might as well include the manifold instances of what Dominique Baquet describes as *photographie plasticienne*; see Baquet 1989 and 2004.

³⁹ Villem Flusser radically outlined how the outputs of technical apparatuses literally “construct” reality way beyond the user's control, and how this fact is technologically determined and culturally enforced by agencies of economical and social power (Flusser 1983).

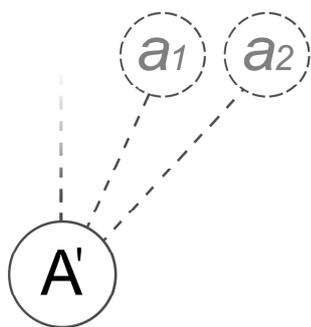
⁴⁰ The scheme is not triangular, for photography is an “uncoded message” (Barthes 1961), therefore we can't posit an *understanding* of the referent logically prior to its signification. And yet this assumption is deeply problematic: communication should be voluntary or, at least, intentional. So are natural languages, while photographic signs are constructed via naturalised artificial gestures, by making several choices at once, or in a row, with a conspicuous incidence of fatality. Communicative intentions are mostly reflected in what and how much is chosen (or materially set up) at every stage of the photographic process. Natural language and photography are radically different inasmuch as natural languages set the *rules* for proper formation, correctness and understandability of the statements, *chance* plays a smaller role, and *private discourse* is set apart from *public utterances* (I would take revising negatives and files as the equivalent to “muttering”). Such remarks exceed the limits of this paper, though.

⁴¹ Benjamin 1936; Vaccari 1979. See also at note 38.

⁴² The inevitable friend looking asleep as s/he was blinking his/her eyes while being photographed, or the unpredictable disaster taking place in the background of a smiling portrait photograph.

photography. Photographic techniques – no matter if photo-chemical or digital, commonplace or sophisticated – can be used to bend this supposed, conceptual, straightforwardness: it has been happening since the very inception of photography and is notoriously quite easy today.

According to the unlimited semiosis, a bundle of potential things-in-the-world (actual or imaginary) can be deduced starting from A': we have called a pair of them: *a1* and *a2* but they are potentially endless. Incidentally, a two-way viability between the photographic image and its referent is no less impossible than a transparent transfer into the photograph of the things intentionally represented⁴³, or of the emotions pervading its author⁴⁴. A reading of such contents could only result from the complex interplay of the implicit vectors of intention lurked beneath *authors, objects, situations, onlookers*.



Once photographed, A continues its life as a thing-in-the-world, having originated A': a photographic object which starts its own life as a photograph, be it as a negative, and/or file(s), and/or print(s), etc. In fact A' is itself a new thing-

in-the-world and, as such, its reader's experience will arise from its features. An author's experience culminates with the image: the onlooker's starts from it. One is in touch with A, while all the others – s/he included – are just in touch with A'. Its composition, its materiality, its contexts and contents will never have anything to do with A except for one thing: that A' could be a valid token for whichever we interpret as being A.

As an instance, I shall take this photograph, not better readable than as a polaroid of two flowers (Araki Nobuyoshi, *untitled*, late 90s). All I will ever get to know about this image *alone* – I mean: out of context, captionless and untitled – is closely related to the image itself, or to the series into which I may find it, or to the situation that brings it to my attention. This pointlessness, although frequent, is obviously not a working model of critical analysis. I might find the same photograph in a context either of gardening or of art (use and meanings would be dramatically diversified) and, in the latter case, either in a gallery or in a museum (stability of economic and cultural values would shift conspicuously). Another effective example are the captionless scientific images gathered by Mike Mandell and Larry Sultan for their book *Evidence*, irresistibly evoked by Spanish artist and curator Joan Fontcuberta in his book *El beso de Judas*⁴⁵, as perfect instances of a meaningless images onto which our drive to read hopelessly keeps operating.



All I will ever know of the things-in-the-world represented in a photograph will start from the fact that some of these things are (and many are not) framed, both literally and metaphorically, within the picture or within the narrative of the photographic series it belongs to. What I will say about what is not in the picture is also fundamental, and at times provokes ethical compulsions to studying what history or chance have confined to the "blind field"⁴⁶ beyond the frame. We must accept such inferential supplements to photography the same way as historians or scientists do with traces: evidences pointing towards something lost that will be forever unattainable (we shall briefly return on this topic, later). It should be clear, by now, that photographs – as far as analysis is concerned – are not "worth a thousand words" but rather require as many; or none. The English inventor of photography William Henry Fox Talbot, in his never enough celebrated book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-6), wrote that photographs are «mute witnesses and it's difficult to translate their testimony into words»⁴⁷. It is true, in fact, that photographs «are fragmentary and

⁴³ Setting intentionally signified memories apart from the unintentional ones is too hard a task for the analysis of a continuous message.

⁴⁴ I often ask myself, and my students, in which moment of the long and quirky photographic process shall we posit *intention*. In the project or in the shooting? In revising and editing or in printing? In framing or in setting up? And if so, shouldn't we consider other actors on the stage of meaning? As a non-believer in the monotheistic religion of the fleeting moment, I understand photographs as being made by the interplay of skills and improvisation both nourished by a sensitivity to meaningfulness (on different levels) constructed in years of practice and mistake/correction processes: usually purposeful but mostly unpurposeful.

⁴⁵ See Fontcuberta 1997: 63.

⁴⁶ Barthes 1980: 56. In Didi-Huberman 2001, four blurred pictures, secretly taken by some Dutch prisoners in the nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, urge the historian to keep investigating way beyond the limits of the nearly unreadable photographic documents. The historian will keep investigating even though his material evidences are problematic, falsified, corrupted or lost. Disturbance, falsification, corruption and destruction are historical objects of enquiry as well. See Ginzburg 2006: 9-13.

⁴⁷ Burke 2001: 14. For an Italian critical edition of Talbot's book, see Signorini 2007.

incomplete utterances. Meaning is always directed by layouts, captions, text and site and mode of presentation»⁴⁸.

Photographs are *-emic* facts⁴⁹: totally contingent⁵⁰, bereft of an *-etic* perspective. They are uncoded⁵¹ and timeless (meaning that dates are not obvious contents of photographs)⁵², therefore they cannot be indexed by virtue of any pertinent trait. The capacity of photographs to abstract is only stylistical or metaphorical. Only consolidated techniques, habits or frames of reference could be considered universal traits of photography, its *-emic* foster parents, in a manner of saying. Photographs are not mere reproductions of facts – which occasionally they may well be – yet primary facts. It is therefore mandatory to study them as such, assessing their reality both as images and as objects. Photographic images will have to be addressed in both their mimetic and non-mimetic properties⁵³, posited in a historical perspective. Both as images and as objects, they shall equally be considered for what they *reveal*, that is: both for what they say and omit⁵⁴ in endorsement or rejection of social, textual and technical habits, revealing emotional, visual, institutional and political agendas. Framing and shooting conversely implies more or less evident actions of staging, faking, compositional cutting, censorship, erasure, wasting, loss etc. Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg insists that the historian should take “sincere” and “falsified” documents alike, for all attitudes are real⁵⁵. For good or bad, «photographs are never *evidence* of history; they are themselves the historical»⁵⁶.

Back to the point: the way from A to A' is somehow granted, although this does not prove its being straightforward or unbiased, nor – more importantly – it defines in any way the purpose of any exposure and of their selection as a photographic work, or parts of it. Still I must insist that what is positively *neither* straightforward, *nor* granted is the path backwards: from the image *back* towards reality, because, in order to do that, we should know what had been photographed in the first place and, most crucially, why. Photographs are things-in-the-world, but are not the world they show⁵⁷: yet they *make-see* both visible and invisible things (as with x-ray or infra-red photographs, long-exposures, candid or stolen pictures, private images made public etc.). This obviously – and currently – drives our attention to focus on the visual contents of images thus making, once again, the photograph invisible.

All of the above obviously clashes with two very strong *frames of reference* for photographic reading: ordinary experience and documentarism. On the one side, in the experience of millions of people taking photographs usually starts with an occasion whatsoever and ends with a memento; the same amount of people would testify that looking at photographs usually starts with a picture and culminates either in a reminiscence (at times fashioned by time and habit so to fit with the picture rather than with the events) or with imaginative projections of the *facts*. On the other side the big issue of photography is its being available as illustration, document, witness, testimony, proof. Both as images of a specific historical subject, and as traces of practices or behaviours, photographs are functional to the documentary practices of – among others – history, science, archiving and more or less engaged photo-journalism. An entirely different set of reflections would follow if

⁴⁸ Sekula 1986b: 445. As for the use of the term “meaning”, see note 11.

⁴⁹ The structuralist distinction between *-emic* (like in “phonemic”) and *-etic* (like in “phonetic”) facts dates back to 1967 when Kenneth Pike sorted the objects of social and behavioural sciences in such two categories taken from Saussure’s division between syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis. The former category is made of contingent actualisations of the systematic elements, which the latter category is made of.

⁵⁰ Barthes 1980: 7, 22 and 35.

⁵¹ Barthes 1961: 7. That would be slightly better said if the construction and the coding of the photographic image be posited *along* a chain of very different actions, affecting not much the depictive, denotative values of the image, as much as its style and material appearance.

⁵² This position – grounded on the acknowledgement of the contextual nature of time-markers – is contrary to the barthesian belief of dates being encapsulated in the photographs (Barthes 1980: 84). A position fatally embraced, instead, in the considerations on photography coming from the art-historical tradition of connoisseurship and from the tradition of dating artworks from the re-contextualisation of their stylistic and iconographic features.

⁵³ Meyer Schapiro, “On Some Problems of the Semiotics of Visual Arts”, 1969, quoted in Burke 2001: 172, and translated in Schapiro 2002.

⁵⁴ «Each photograph is important for all it doesn’t show» writes photo-ethnographer Francesco Faeta (2006: 45). A preliminary account of photography as the site of removals rather than just inclusions, has been roughly sketched in Pieroni 2011. A wider account is under preparation.

⁵⁵ Ginzburg 2006: 9. From the historical standpoint it is clear that «the challenge is how to use the distorted stuff, not how to discover the rare and unusual Pompeiis» (Binford 1981: 205). Film director Jonas Mekas used to say that «faking is also reality».

⁵⁶ Tagg 1988: 65.

⁵⁷ For the map/territory metaphor, see above at note 30.

we were to touch such topics; I shall only recall here some of the most intriguing theoretical contributions⁵⁸ rediscussing the primacy and reliability of the *documentary paradigm* in photography at the turn of the 21st Century. We surely have not been completely healed from its delusions⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ See, among others: Savedoff 2000, Scianna 2001, Garner 2003, Colo, Esteve and Jacob 2005, Lavoie 2010 and also Tagg 1988 and Levi-Strauss 2005.

⁵⁹ Serge Tisseron claims the contrary in “A proposito di Eugene Smith: cos’è un’immagine emblematica?” in Mora 1998: 66.

4. Approaching interpretation as analysis (Grey)

It is understood that – accurate as it may seem – every account of a photographic work isn't but “temporarily steady”, as Georges Perec brilliantly remarked of every possible sorting⁶⁰. We shall take as valid for the study and classification of photographs – and for the archival practices at large – what is valid for restoration, according to Cesare Brandi's theory⁶¹. First tenet is that in the very action of *taking charge* of a work it is implicit its *cultural relevance*. From such choice descend *respect* and *responsibility* in sight of its *preservation* for the future generations. It is up to them, in fact, to keep consulting, interpreting and readjusting the reading of the photographic heritage providing new insights and updating its meaningfulness within future scenarios⁶². Secondly: any management of the heritage should be informed by the *broadest study* and *documentation* available so that every action taken be coherent with the identity and the history of both the object and the institution. Third tenet is that the methods of such management should be *outspoken*, *documented* and *updatable*.

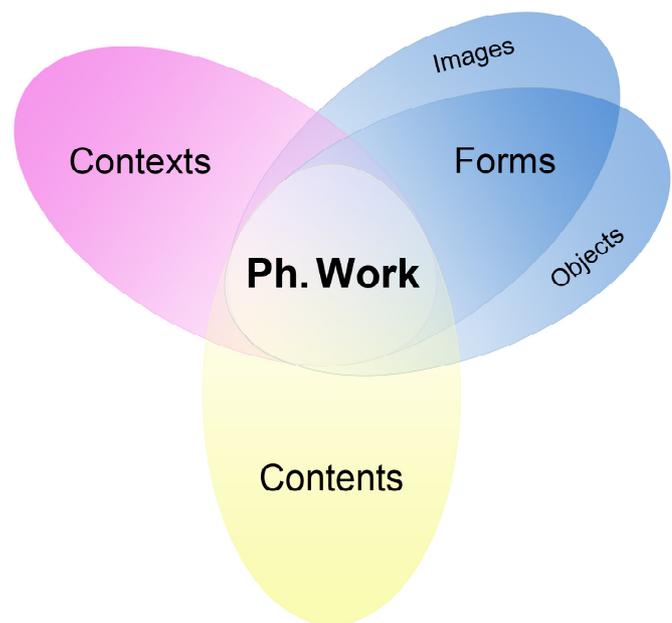
These theoretical assumptions are also perfectly viable in archival studies on photographs, hence the encouragement to the broadening of methodological sensitivity in the study and documentation of the photographic heritage. In this field of expertise the difficulties and weakness of any culturally broadened approach have often been lamented⁶³.

Making sense of photographic works implies an *approach* rather than a *method*, as suggested by the historian Peter Burke⁶⁴. Uncoded messages will prove resistant to analysis if tackled as natural languages, made of the articulation of oppositional values.

Barthes' early failures to do so are the very ground of contemporary photographic theory. A correct approach, therefore, is not made of forms and tick boxes (yes/no, on/off, 0/1), it rather consists of the acquisition of a sensitivity to the manifold variables – both historical and current – in terms of communication, technology, style, etc. And also to the «more than one variety of absence»⁶⁵ implied by the belonging of photographs to social “games” such as private memories, political communication, marketing etc. whose agendas – as said before – for the most different reasons, might require the removal of unwanted statements or the *optimisation*, as it were, of awkward compositions.

Analysis – the critical interpretation of the photographic work – consists of the blending and interaction of observations developed in such different domains as those of: *Contexts*, *Contents* and *Forms*. Only within such merger⁶⁶ will we draw some sense from our object of analysis, provided that – in one sense or another, it be *photographic*⁶⁷.

It is always the case of addressing photography both as an image and as an object-in-the-world. Such concern is especially crucial as far as formal remarks are concerned. Those whose primary object of study is the



⁶⁰ His wording was slightly different; he confronted “ultimately temporary” sortings to “temporarily ultimate” ones. See Perec 1985: 35. We must be clear on this: “temporarily steady” does not mean “unsteady” (see further).

⁶¹ Brandi 1963: 4-6 and 16-18.

⁶² As stated by historian and archivist Paola Carucci: quoted in Mignemi 2003: 181.

⁶³ Mignemi 2003: 217.

⁶⁴ Burke 2001: 169.

⁶⁵ Burke 2001: 175. See above note 53.

⁶⁶ The approach sketched here is an extension of the scheme proposed in Pieroni 2006.

⁶⁷ Many diverse phenomena belong under the wide “umbrella” of the term *photographic*: from daguerrotypes to jpegs, from photograms to montages, from polaroids to platinum prints, from print-outs to clones, and so on almost endlessly. *The Photographic* (as in Krauss 1990) would be a useful term for defining the manifold nature our object of analysis, and yet archives often have to deal with synthetic objects and heterogeneous collections which inevitably exceed even the broadest meaning of *the Photographic* (see further at note 71).

photographic object – e.g.: techniques, papers, montages⁶⁸ etc. – might face on a daily base questions unknown to those who study the compositions, colour balancing or schemes of lighting. And yet if I were to make educated remarks on the depth of field and selective focussing of a photograph, I should posit myself at the crossing of the two concerns because I couldn't understand a compositional value without acquiring data from the apparatuses and procedures. Of course at that point I would want to deepen my knowledge of the *whys*. Why that subject, why that framing and why that visual (and communicational) strategy. Why *then*, and why *now*. Once all of these issues are raised, I will find myself right in the center of our scheme: where a sense (although temporarily steady) is drawn from the photographic work.

⁶⁸ See Wilhelm 2001.

5. Mind map of the analytical approach (RGB)

Back to the scheme: every area is full of crossroads where choices (or the interplaying of intentions and chance) could be detected and assessed in their contribution to the sense we make of a photographic work. Proportions and balance between the three areas of interest are not fixed: like with an air balloon, when one end is squeezed, the other end will dilate. When *forms* prove themselves of small or no relevance, *contexts* and *contents* will get more relevant. The crossroads – or, to recur to another metaphor already introduced: the elements of this “exploded isometry” – are many and each and every one is potentially interacting with every other.

Every photographic work shall be first identified in its *textual unity and identity*: the functionality of an image within a series – although seizable as a singular object of study – makes its sense totally different from what it would be out of context. The original role played by a photographic piece is hard to retrace once removed, or overlooked, the scenario where it used to play. Pictures migrate easily, though; private to public use is the main shift in location, function and meaningfulness a picture could undergo. Studies shall be ready to document the circulation and currency⁶⁹ of images and possibly trace back all the shiftings in both symbolic and material use⁷⁰.

Let us now scan together some of the most relevant crossroads. Every dot (•) implies a certain internal articulation, undisclosed in this paper. Every list is exhaustive and yet virtually open to updatings. In analysing photographs, we would always want to deepen our awareness concerning the following subjects:

CONTEXTS

No threshold will ever set apart **internal** from **external** contexts, yet the former are to be found closer to the phases of making and outputting, the latter amounting to historical and actual remarks on mediation and reception.

- Contact sheets/images taken immediately before and after
- Author’s archive of negatives/glass sheets/files
- Variants
- Published/unpublished works
- Institutional archives where originals/replicas are kept
- Series *Dyptichs*, *tryptichs* etc.

Sequences

Photo essays

Portfolios

Reportages

Photographic books

- Other authors/influences (from the most diverse fields)
- Patrons
- Prestigious stereotypes
- Rejected stereotypes
- Mediation contexts
- Cultural and political policies
- Circulation and currency
- Reception contexts
- Outputs and publics
- Social biography

FORMS-1 (Object-making)

Image-making – in this case: a photographic object – has its phases, dependent on the different techniques; the following phases belong to the analysis, instead: not to the production of the photograph.

5 logical phases

(the photograph may have been obtained by the altered repetition of one or more phases)

- Finding (of subjects)
- Elaboration (modification of appearances)

⁶⁹ Currency and circulation are terms coined by John Tagg (in *Screen Education* n. 28, 1978) and widely used in British social studies, as explained by John A. Walker in Evans 1997: 57-8.

⁷⁰ The «social biography» recalled in Edwards and Hart 2004: 48.

- Acquisition (recording of sensitized memories)
- Process (alterations on/starting from such recorded memories)
- Realisation (turning the recorded memories into images-in-the-world)

Multi-level compositions

(composite prints/collages/photo-montages/mergers/photocompositions/layered files)

Lines

Areas

Images

Materials

Text-making

- Editing (selection of images in sight of the visual text)
- Sequencing (linear, non-linear or spacial arrangements of the visual text)
- Presentation (arrangement of dimensions, tones, matter, space, light, time, site etc.)
- Iconotexts (titles, captions, writings etc.)

FORMS-2 (Imaging)

- Dimensions
- Proportions
- Balance
 - Forms*
 - Lights*
 - Colors/tones*
 - Textures*
 - Patterns*
- Composition
 - Axes*
 - Rule of Thirds*
 - Golden section*
 - Asymmetries*
- Vantage points
- Depth of field
- Focussing
- Focal plans
 - Foreground*
 - Middle ground*
 - Background*
 - Sky*
- Shootings
 - Wide shot*
 - Long shot*
 - Medium-Long shot*
 - Full shot*
 - Medium shot*
 - Close-up*
 - Detail*
 - Controcampo*
 - Rack focus*

CONTENTS

As said before, contents can either be born with the image, or imbued in it through time and space. Meanings exist only when languages are coded, outputs are indexable and *thesauruses* are feasible: which is not the case with photography.

- Visible contents (identifications, denotations)
 - Limits: *Partial usefulness of Iconographic Thesauruses*
- Intentional references (allusions, symbolisations)
 - Limits: *Semantic openness of allusions and symbols*
- Rethoric (variations, connotations)
 - Limits: *Technical variety is unchartable*
- Themes (recurrent issues, obsessions)

Viability of thematic analysis

Thematic analysis

all issues interact with each other; values range from zero either to one polarity or halfway in between

- *Site/Being-there*
- *Acting/Sorting*
- *Form/Procedures*
- *Identity/Relationship*
- *Duration/Moment*
- *Uncanny/Upsetting*
- Implications (“punctum”, unlimited semiosis)
Limits: *Inner worlds are unfathomable*
- Sense-making (the eternal purposeful reading and re-reading of photographs)

Where *all* of these issues merge and influence each other forming a multi-dimensional recollection of the photographic work, resides the grey area where analysis and interpretation alloy.

6. Photographs are images, objects and situations (*Black/White & Things*)

«There is a need to examine the *life* of an image as well as its birth to consider its *circulation*, its *currency*, as it moves through time and space from context to context, as it is used by various individuals and groups for different purposes until eventually it is destroyed or lies forgotten in an archive»

John A. Walker⁷¹

I once found a photograph lost in a train. A young girl must have let it slip from her diary absent-mindedly. On its back I could read “Mom and Dad” written in a girlish calligraphy. That photo is the perfect specimen of the “tricky” object historian and archivist Adolfo Mignemi refers to, when he describes the photographic image as:

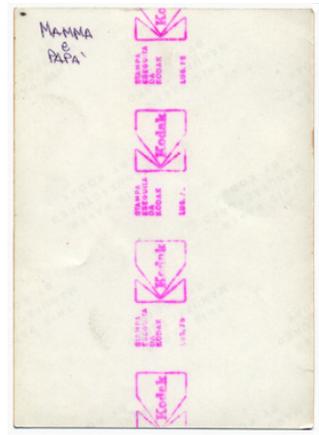
«the most deceitful of documents, because it never loses its own character of verisimilitude, and because of its capacity of narrating in any possible case; which does not happen with any other kind of traditional document»⁷².

Both the front (image) and the back (object) of the photograph are incredibly dense with signs and marks, styles and gestures, symbols and *pointers*. Apart from the site (a very generic Italian countryside), dressing codes, make-up and object design all hint to a dating revealed by the commercial marks on the back of the photographic object. Kodak features are both in the colour codes of the photograph and in both the paper and imprints at the back. Gestures and body languages suggest something of the personal characters of these



people, something of the presence of someone else outside of the frame, and also of the situation they might be caught in: possibly the aftermath of a party (why not? But also: why so? And again: why at all?).

This photograph, so readable and available to infinite usages, proves itself nearly unexplainable, ensnared as it is in private meanings and allusions. I have tried and publish it more than once in the secret hope to find its owner, to bring it back to its private context: as if that small piece of photographic paper were a lost animal, bound to be brought back to its original environment. I have always been aware of the fact that its public role as a specimen of analysis – as a



decontextualised private photograph – never fitted that picture. I can only try once again, here-and-now.

But again: in case I wanted to use this picture, should I use it to find the two adults, or the girl who lost it? I can predict two very different reactions in case I succeeded. And how do I know whether these people are alive or not? Let us suppose I only wanted to sort this image and file it: how could I do it? By *owner*? (I ignore who she is and – by the way – I am now its illegitimate owner). By *place*? (which one: the place of its making? of its loosing? of its keeping?). By *technique*? (what would it be good for?). Or by *subject*? And which one is the “actual” subject?

Furthermore, this photograph is (unduly) in my hands because of its being, not just the photograph of a man and/or a woman, but of a *couple* and, in particular, of the parents of the picture’s owner who lost it exactly because she used to keep that emotionally loaded picture amongst her personal belongings. This fact should never be obliterated. Now, again, which feature is pertinent? And, among them, which feature is preminent?

Allow me to make another example. My mother keeps in a drawer a photograph of her niece when she was one year of age. My mother did not *take* that image, but it has been passed to her; therefore it is hers to keep, hers to watch, hers to use (to lose or to tear apart). It embodies memories she shares with a big part of my family. Memories are often shared, while objects rather seldom are. Because of their being trivial objects – often coming in multiples – photographic images can be the perfect points of recollection of shared memories (many social networks are born for this purpose). Yet, being into the image does not alter the photograph’s ownership – even though it grants some rights on its reproduction. Therefore, in the implausible case my cousin wanted to have a look at *all* the pictures ever taken of her, it is very likely my mother would send her a xerox, or a scan

⁷¹ John A. Walker, “Context as a Determinant of Photographic Meaning” (in *Camera* n. 14, July 1980). Republished in Evans 1997: 57-8.

⁷² Mignemi 2003: 217.

at most. Not the photographic thing, for sure: not the pencil inscriptions on its back, nor the thick yellowed paper with the dented borders. Not the old gilded wooden frame where she keeps that picture bound together with those of her nephew and of her son⁷³.

These rather prosaic instances introduce us to some of the problems of study and documentation of photography in an archival setting. Many are the problems that involve the study of photographs and most importantly all the actions that descend from it: sorting, classification and filing. It is true for photography what Goodman said of the world: «[it] may be unmanageably heterogeneous or unbearably monotonous according to how events are sorted into kinds»⁷⁴. And it is also true that collections are hopelessly made of items both natural and synthetic, the latter being:

«objects upon which sense and order have been imposed in their institutional lifetimes creating something that was not there before, making a new entity both intellectually and physically»⁷⁵.

Collections are made of diverse object in a “topological, typological, taxonomic and semantic sense”⁷⁶.

Of course material images posit mainly topological and typological issues, leaving indexical problems to the phase of study and cultural interpretation; files instead are indexed as such⁷⁷, and would be unretrievable otherwise. Analysis and interpretation prove themselves fundamental for the archival functions, most of all if focussed on the photographic objects: the motivations of their making, but mostly the *whys & wherefores* of their circulation, of their keeping, of their being, as it were, at home in the wrong places. Displacing the photographic object from its historical environment *might itself be* a historically relevant action. Chance might have displaced the picture, it might have been stolen, someone might have given it away, it might also have been bought. These are all pertinent contents of the photographic object, while the image in itself could not be much affected by its displacement (unless carelessness produced some damage to its readability).

Since ownership determines what to do with almost anything, the same rule applies to photography. Owners also determine if they need photographs close at hand in retrievable order and climatized ambience, or if simply disposing of them; now: owners, is understood, are not always the makers of the photographs⁷⁸. Once the photographic object lands in its “temporarily steady” storage: the archive (be it private or public, haphazard or scientific), it is up to the owner of the archive to decide what to do of the pictures and how and why to sort them into kinds according to which analytical grid. Classification is an arbitrary action⁷⁹ and its reliability depends on the intents and scope of the institution promoting it: its intentions in classification, organisation, maintenance, access and dissemination of the collections⁸⁰.

Photographs are in gear with many aspects of living, and – as noted elsewhere – social production of sense is a game of power: the power of seeing-as and defining, that of choosing between concealing and making-see. The archive is one of the main holders of such powers, by virtue of the rights of ownership on the photographic collection. Once again: archives are institutions whose behaviour depend largely on some key elements such as: ownership, nature of the collections, policies of the institution, director, curatorial staff and archivists alike⁸¹. One of the main differences between private and public archives is the same one separating private and public interests: while private interests are usually primarily focussed on the economical revenues (and oftentimes the demise of archival items depends on a disproportion between potential economical value and the cost of their safeguard), public interests, instead, should rather be concerned primarily on preservation, study, interpretation and education⁸².

⁷³ This example is partly fictitious inasmuch as my mother doesn't keep this photographs all framed together: the archival functions have not been upgraded to monumental!

⁷⁴ Goodman 1978: 9.

⁷⁵ Edwards and Hart 2004: 49.

⁷⁶ Quotation and climax as in Edwards and Hart 2004: 59.

⁷⁷ As far as images – and not objects – are concerned, the analysis and indexing of files is submitted to the very same choices of a material photograph. You would not stumble upon an immaterial file, unless browsing for oddly-named files in a folder, or in a sub-archive; files are natively indexed, in force of their many encodings and inscriptions, and would disappear otherwise.

⁷⁸ Sekula 1986b: 444.

⁷⁹ Thus stated Gerhard Wolf at the conference “Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History – Part 2”, Firenze, Warburg Institute; unpublished.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Edwards in “Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History – Part 2”, unpublished.

⁸¹ Graham Carter in Pinna and Suter 2000: 149.

⁸² The Italian State – once acknowledged and “notified” a piece of cultural relevance – automatically exerts its *ius in re aliena* (a right on items belonging to others). For a historical back-tracking of this premise in Italian laws concerning archival and museological practices, see Mignemi 2003: 163.

In private archives, the interplay between life and photographs will largely depend on where they are stored, and the suggestions drawn from such pictures will therefore depend on whether they are dispersed or grouped, and, if so, in which order, if any. Casual grouping may provide unpredictable comparisons and insights, but will make photographs hard, if not impossible, to retrieve. While in private archives the interoperability of the classification and filing systems is not required, in public ones it should be. Many archives, anyway, are structured on a double level (inventory/classification), diversely accurate and accessible, in sight of the perusal and implementation of both the material archive and of the knowledges arising from its active and conscious study.

7. Archival deeds and classification strategies (*Orange*)

Studying, documenting, indexing and filing are all variations of *seeing-as*⁸³. The other polarity – as noted before – might be described as an *ignoring-as*. The archive exerts these parallel rights on the items it owns.

«Power produces reality. It produces domains of objects, institutions of language, rituals of truth»⁸⁴.

Both private and public owners can conceal an archive without studying it or publish its highlights (Getty-Corbis gargantuan archive is a tragical instance)⁸⁵. The archive as owner, in fact, has rights that others do not have. Being physically the holder of the documents, the archive could (or not) investigate them thoroughly on behalf of Humanity; it could (or not) entrust the most skillful human resources in order to study, reconsider and exhibit the collections; it could (or not) benefit from the most effective means of communication in order to disseminate its outputs; it could (or not) benefit from the most focalised and/or experienced publics, capable to grasp the relevance of its communication.

As Tagg and Sekula differently noted, in fact, the archive has the enormous power to create a protocol to put the items in order, but once this order has been proved fruitful it could become a system (regime of sense) ending up with being a paradigm, an epistheme (system of truth). And this perhaps thanks or because of another important aim of museums, archives and of all the institutions responsible for a collection: dissemination⁸⁶.

Digital reproduction and electronic databases have a latent tendency to suppress the experience – and the study – of the original photographic objects, substituting them with their accurate digital reproductions. The institutional call of archives and museums, instead, would be both of preserving and disseminating the cultural values arising from the study and interpretation of their collections. The archive should encourage the publics to proceed beyond reproductions – as accurate as they may be – towards the original object⁸⁷. Archivists and scholars in fact reveal to us how the experience of a “photographic box” might be enlightening for many reasons. Objects have histories, their material gathering might tell another, and so their description, captioning, sorting and understanding.

«A photograph or box of photographs treated as an object in its own right can provide new arguments and a level of support to the intellectual and cultural environment of making and meaning that a mere “photograph as document” approach cannot accomplish»⁸⁸.

It should be mandatory, in fact, to

«reveal the archival ... object not as stereotypically dormant and clouded by the dust of ages, but as an active socially salient entity that exists within contexts that shift and sometimes dramatically change over time»⁸⁹.

Analysis and interpretation can bring dormant archival matters to a cultural state of activity, and be the remedy against one of the lurking problems with archives, according to Allan Sekula:

«in an archive the possibility of meaning is *liberated* from the actual contingencies of use. But liberation is also a loss, an abstraction from the complexity and richness of use, a loss of context»⁹⁰.

Now, *preservation* and *dissemination* – indissolubly entwined – are the main concerns, and the very theoretical base, of archival and museological activity⁹¹: the best agencies to provide photographic archived collections of a new and dynamic context.

⁸³ As recalled at note 19, Douglas Crimp described how the classification of a “Horse in Motion” may have shifted to “Muybridge” recalling us of the shifting classification of Araki’s polaroid either as a floricultural specimen or an artwork.

⁸⁴ Tagg 1988: 87.

⁸⁵ Mignemi 2003: 213-6.

⁸⁶ See, among many, the proceedings of the *International Conference on the Inclusive Museum* – Leiden NL, June 2008. Common Ground Publishing, Champaign – IL.

⁸⁷ Mignemi 2003: 211.

⁸⁸ Edwards and Hart 2004: 59.

⁸⁹ Edwards and Hart 2004: 48.

⁹⁰ Sekula 1986b: 444-5.

⁹¹ See Mignemi 2003: 165.

The Italian laws – the D.L. 490/1999 in particular⁹² – beyond enforcing these two aims, help in understanding what is to be preserved and why. The law acknowledges and protects, as part of Italian cultural heritage, any «material witness bearing values for civilization»⁹³. The same law also puts the study and preservation of cultural heritage in the perspective of dissemination. It must be stressed, in fact, that the most important aim of an institution devoted to the preservation and study of large and heterogeneous collections of cultural heritage, is not the *didactic* output (teaching the collections), but the *educational* one (teaching through the collections). Museum studies expert Graham Carter made the following remarks, which easily apply to photographic archives too:

«educative and interpretative activities represent the vital public face of the museum movement ... museums which fail to provide well-interpreted collections with associated educational programmes are failing in at least a part of their public function ... education and interpretation provide the vital bridge between collections and their audiences»⁹⁴.

As with restoration, though, it is frequent to bend exceedingly on the side of the material objects, overlooking, in turn, their cultural value. Historians and archivists in fact agree that «the biggest problem still is that of a *cultural* approach to the document»⁹⁵. In France, furthermore

«as for the intellectual management of photographic collections, no specific regulation concerning description has ever seen the light»⁹⁶.

As we said before, the Italian D.L. 490/1999 states, at least theoretically, what can be regarded as the subject of public study and preservation. In our case, a photograph is of cultural value for: its *rarity*, its *historical belonging*, the *inscriptions* it holds, its *documental value*. No more. These are the main features, although limited and controversial, making photographic works part of Italian cultural heritage. But which protocols of study are currently followed?

The Italian institution governing the methodologies for the classification of public collections is the “ICCD - Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione”⁹⁷. In recent history, it has promoted the creation of diverse protocols of analysis, according to the type of item: be it a work of art (form OA, OAC if contemporary), a drawing (form D), an engraving (form S), a photograph (form F) etc. Such forms are – as usual – meant to be compiled, and consulted, at two different levels of complexity by different personnel, while criteria are meant to be kept homogeneous and shared.

Here is an oversimplified summary of the F form, once removed the huge amount of sub-fields constituting its analytical accuracy, and once kept only the pivotal taxonomic elements:

Codes and Institutions

Vertical and horizontal references, Administrative placement, Specific placement, Archival placement, Inventory, Other placements, Inventorial datings

Object

Amount

Subject and titles

Description

Classification, Thesaurus

Site, date and occasion of exposure

Generic and specific chronologies, Motivations, Other datings

Author

Historical-photographic setting, Other authors, Cultural setting

Production and distribution

Responsibles, Dates, Roles, Circumstances

⁹² The *Testo Unico delle Disposizioni Legislative in Materia di Beni Culturali e Ambientali* – D.L. 29 Ottobre 1999 n. 490, thoroughly discussed in Mignemi 2003: 160-1.

⁹³ Mignemi 2003: 203.

⁹⁴ Graham Carter, “The Educational Function of Museums” in Pinna and Sutura 2000: 149-150.

⁹⁵ Mignemi 2003: 217.

⁹⁶ Luce Lebart, “Les tribulations du «Fond de Moscou» 1940-2006”, in Berlière and Fournié 2011: 298.

⁹⁷ <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it>

- Edition
- Series
- Conditions of the work
 - Stages, Copies*
- Technical data
 - Colour, Technique, Measurements, Format*
- Digital image and its features
- Conservation and restorations
- Watermarks
- Inscriptions
 - Stamps, Historical and critical remarks on the object*
- Legal conditions
 - Acquisition, Measures of preservation, Changes, Exportations, Copyright*
- Sources
 - Image management, Archival sources, Bibliography, Webography*
- Exhibitions
- Other forms
 - Compilation, Responsibles, Updatings, Inspections*
- Observations and notes⁹⁸

The straining complexity of the forms, at their fullest disclosure, stems from such concerns as Cesare Brandi's ones exposed above: study and documentation should be conducted at the deepest level available and with the greatest care in order to enlighten the action of future scholars and functionaries. The standardization of vocabularies and thesauruses (Iconclass is one of them, others are made available by the ICCD itself) are the ground for an interoperability which is always threatened by operative shortcuts.

Of course the form F, like all the others, simplifies the methodological approach but at the same time it burdens the management⁹⁹, not only digitally, but also materially. And yet the most crucial of troubles is networking. Big troubles come as far as data-crossing and interoperability are concerned. Within digital forms, open fields inevitably get filled with natural language descriptions which are resistant to a standard translation in other languages; furthermore – as Carles Mitjà and Howard Besser¹⁰⁰ will have fully disclosed during this conference – not only it is difficult to integrate the heterogeneous photographic objects, but also operating systems and softwares – and their updatings – are never easily migrated. It is trite saying that inscriptions do not easily migrate¹⁰¹, it is somehow necessary saying that photographs, for their being resistant to indexing, leave classification to the analysis of their features: *intrinsic* features can be copied (xeroxed, digitally acquired etc.), while *extrinsic*, material features can not.

Digital inscriptions, in turn, usually enrich the photographic files with technical data concerning exposure, lens, f-values, histograms and endless particulars which would be extremely important, if shared, crossed and compared. The *cold war* between the major firms in photographic hardware – Canon and Nikon for instance – prevent such interoperability. The data readable on a digital memory of one brand are structured and encoded in a totally different fashion by the other. The marketing logics are, thus, just one of the many difficulties preventing the circulation and exchange of cultural information, also preventing the sharing, confrontation and discussion of interpretations.

The world-wide-web has stimulated new strategies, though. One example is the *wiki* dictionaries growing up on the web, another one is the rationale behind the exhibition “Click! – A crowd-curated exhibition”, presented in 2008 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, on the grounds of James Surowiecki's theories expressed

⁹⁸ At <http://www.iccd.beniculturali.it/index.php?it/253/beni-storici-e-artistici> are gathered all the forms, and the related manuals, for historical and artistic heritage items, including photographs.

⁹⁹ Mignemi 2003: 187. At page 209 Mignemi explains some easier classification tools as those used by the “Istituto Nazionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione in Italia”. Such tools are based on a more operable software (CdS/ISIS freely distributed by UNESCO) and a shorter form, still available on two separated levels of compilation/fruition.

¹⁰⁰ See their contributions to this conference: “Technological infrastructure and procedures for digitising photographic archives” and “Archiving Media from the ‘Occupy’ Movement: Methods for Archives Trying to Manage Large Amounts of User-Generated Media”.

¹⁰¹ Both Kelley Wilder's and Tiziana Serena's unpublished contributions to “Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History – Part 2”, Firenze, Warburg Institute, touched and discussed on this topic.

in his book “The Wisdom of Crowds”¹⁰². The museum handed over the privilege of curatorship to the inhabitants of Brooklyn who, as far as an exhibition on their area was concerned, were – as a group – the absolute experts. A web-based protocol allowed the people to submit, shortlist and choose the photographs portraying the “Changing Faces of Brooklyn”. Time and space forbid to deepen the analysis of the pros and cons of the many instances posited by the exhibition, so we shall end drawing a very odd and concise sort of conclusion.

¹⁰² See Surowiecki 2004. The economist’s theory – supported by investment data – is that when quantifiable decisions are made by a *large, diversified, independent* and *decentred* group of complete non-experts, the percentage of good results are fairly comparable to those of decisions taken by a single expert; the capital difference is that the single expert, like every single person, has a high chance to make mistakes, while the crowd compensates making nearly none.

8 . Conclusions (*Dark-brown*)¹⁰³



¹⁰³ «Il n'y a pas des photos ratées» (There is no such thing as a missed photograph) Ben Vautier 1997. Photographs, once exposed, can never be unmade, and an exposure - whether ending up with a valid image or not - is always a valid photographic act. Analysis and interpretation are also to be exercised on photographic objects whose meaningfulness is apparently vacant, while possibly deflected on inscriptions or contexts. This attitude is confirmed by such trends as Surrealistic found images, New-dadaistic usage of trivial imagery and iconic debris, the Post-modern crush for kitsch massmedia images, and - last but not least - the works on lost and/or torn photographs of such contemporary artists as Joachim Schmid and John Stezaker. The colour of the title is that of - yet undeveloped - photochemical film.

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