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Photography, the art of manipulation

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**Ideas on the photographic medium
as a tool for manipulating reality**

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the subjectivity of photography in a 'political' context, and provide an analysis of different facets of photography with a focus on the manipulative qualities of the medium. The analysis explores the nature of photography by separating the medium into three possible areas: memory, documentation, and art. Subsequently, photography is considered as multifaceted and is described according to its functions as a 'writing machine', replacement of memory, tool of control, tool of propaganda and deceit, and a tool for counter-action. Lastly, the paper attempts to answer the question of what is authenticity in photography and how one could perceive it.

Key words: Photography, manipulation, art, medium as a tool

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca jest próbą zrozumienia subiektywności fotografii w kontekście 'politycznym'. Praca ta zawiera analizę różnych obliczy medium fotografii ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem manipulacyjnych cech rzeczoności medium. Analiza bada naturę medium przez podzielenie go na trzy główne obszary, które medium obejmuje: pamięć, dokumentację i sztukę. Następnie, medium jest uznane za wieloaspektowe i opisane według swoich funkcji – bycia 'maszyną do pisania', zamiennikiem pamięci, byciem zwodniczym medium, narzędziem kontroli, narzędziem propagandy oraz narzędziem do przeciwdziałania. Na koniec, praca próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie co jest prawdą w fotografii i jak można ją postrzegać.

Słowa kluczowe: Fotografia, manipulacja, sztuka, medium jako narzędzie

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Introduction

Photography is a peculiar medium, it can become many things and it can be used for a variety of different functions. It is all thanks to its twofold nature, namely the fact that it's both an artistic and non-artistic medium. It has always faced criticism and brought a lot of discussion because of this uncertain nature. At one point, it was praised as the new magnificent tool - which will replace painting, and later it was disdained for its artificiality and lack of real emotion conveyed through the final artwork. Over time, however, it gained a name of the most true-to-life medium for its capability to reproduce reality flawlessly. But is photography truly the most true-to-life medium? What if the truth and the reality captured by photography was never even remotely close to what's real and the representation it creates was always, to some extent, tampered with? The other important question to ask about photography is how should this peculiar medium be understood, and should it be considered a fine art at all? Is the struggle to recognise photographs as work of art truly caused by the flaws of the medium? Photography is prone to manipulation, it is a 'political' tool, what's more it is often staged or touched-up, but are those the matters the observers should be thinking about when contemplating the artwork?

In this paper, these, and many other, questions considering photography will be asked and answered. Firstly, I will consider photography as a 'writing machine' to find and back-up its similarities to the medium of writing. Then, I will focus on the impact of technological advancement on photography and how it changed the medium. Later, through a series of comparisons, I will focus on the topic of photography being used as diverse tool in order to show the range of uses the medium possesses.

Photography considered as a ‘writing machine’

One could say that there exist two main opposing positions about the function of common pictorial reproduction in humans. One of these viewpoints states that as human abstract thinking developed, humans started to record their observations by drawing and painting symbols and patterns on the walls of the caves they lived in. These symbols referred to the world that surrounded these people, and subsequently the symbols evolved into picture writing, the predecessors of hieroglyphs.¹ This idea is about the very beginning of human culture – the time when humans started to create early cave paintings. This description sounds remarkably similar to what we see every day on the streets. In our phones, in social media, through selfies, and Instastories. One could say that we document our lives in a similar fashion in which the first humans did - we record what we see. Today, it could be something very important for us emotionally, for instance, a family gathering or a birth a child, or it could be something as rudimentary as a cup of coffee with a biscuit next to it. We use photography to ‘take notes’ as we go, we write down our memories by simply pointing the camera at a desired object, scene or event.

However, not all of us stick to this simple form of life documentation, not all of our photos are simply a plain representation of nature. Similarly, so did the cavemen as not all of the early symbols in the caves showed just their surrounding world. Those recreations of the world by the early humans were also accompanied by more abstract designs, shapes and patterns.² Nowadays, we can see a similar phenomenon on e.g. Instagram where the picture of someone’s lunch is accompanied by a series of artistic and abstract images.

This phenomenon considers image-making as a kind of return to image-based communication. It could be said that humans once again seem to favour image-based communication as in the pre-text time of representing the world. We have not become actually illiterate as the prehistoric humans were, but everything we see on the streets, in our phones, on TV, on the posters etc. is image-based, and text-based communication seems to have been marginalised in the mass media. We are so accommodated to image-symbols of all forms and sizes that we don’t even realise how few letters we see on a daily basis. And then, even when the letters are present they start to work as separate signs, icons or illustrations and less than actual glyphs. Letters are

¹ Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (North Atlantic Books; Reprint edition, 2015), p.17.

² Ibid.

used to create interesting typographical shapes and not words as such. The same thing happened to our capability to write in general – instead of writing in full sentences, we write acronyms and sometimes use only emojis, which are not that far from simple examples of image-based communication. If we're not sending emojis, we send each other photos with short descriptions or short videos. One could say that we're back to communicating with images like early civilisations, and technology allows us to exchange the message faster. Maybe it is not entirely our fault, and one could say that it is a response to the overflow of information – if communication, symbols, and writing were as complex as it used to be, it would not be possible to keep up with the pace of the world; such simplification and return to the image-based communication could be considered a necessity. Writing is changing its form, it uses various new machines to be reproduced or displayed, and one of the most common of these 'writing machines' is photography.

A 'writing machine' is a tool, an invention, which allows people to reproduce texts in an easier manner than by simply rewriting them by hand. As Vilem Flusser said, "photographs (...) took over the task formerly served by linear texts, which is transmitting information."³ As photography is a tool created for reproduction it could be considered as the next variation of the said 'writing machine'. If so, would the pictorial reproduction of thought be a natural evolution, a kind of progress, or maybe the trend should be considered and understood as a return to image-based communication?

There is also another way to understand the development towards popularised photography. According to Walter Benjamin, "photography and film opened-up new sensory experiences and different modes of perception for the viewer, neither of which could be judged in terms of past art forms."⁴ Photography, thus, made the entire sensory process immediate, and what's interesting is that this new way of 'writing' enabled one to make an exact copy of the world for the first time in history. There was no need for descriptions anymore, there was no need to imagine how some scenes looked like. What's more, photography made the popularisation of thoughts, images, stories etc. easier because of its high quantity reproduction aspect, and when one compares it to previous techniques of reproduction, it proved far superior. Throughout the years, humans have created dozens of varying ways to visually record language and ideas. These different manners of 'writing' have been recreated and reproduced by a number of other

³ Vilem Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p.5.

⁴ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 102.

inventions, which in turn allowed for a quicker reproduction of ideas when compared to writing words on a page.⁵ So with inventions like ink, papyrus, parchment, bound codices, woodblocks, mechanical printing, presses, billboards, photocopying machines, and electronic computer screens, the medium history of writing is closely linked to technological development.⁶ Photography can easily be added to the spectrum of those inventions as it serves essentially the same function, namely to record and reproduce ideas with ease.

The medium truly constitutes a cultural revolution, yet this revolution is not free of the similarities to the function of writing. In his book, *TechGnosis*, when discussing the revolutionary aspects of the invention of writing, Erik Davis brings up a story from Plato's *Phaedrus* in which a king is offered a gift of writing; however, he refuses the offer because it "... will introduce forgetfulness into the souls of those who learn it..."⁷ In the story, writing is described as a gift, which relieves humans from the burden of having to remember everything and asks the question of the need for memory. If we treat photography as a writing technique, it can be said that it also serves as a replacement of memory for image-makers.

The connection between photography and writing can be observed even further. One only needs to look at numerous publications that employ images and texts to inform a reader. This is yet another example of how writing and photography overlap, how photography shares the same qualities as writing and how they have a similar function for people. In fact, the word photography itself comes from two Greek words: /phos/ and /graphie/. They mean, consequently, 'light' and 'to write'/'to draw'. Therefore photography means literally drawing/writing with light.

⁵ Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (North Atlantic Books; Reprint edition, 2015), p.16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), p.79.

Photography as a tool of control

Photography shares yet another similarity to writing in that it also serves as a means of regulating reality, both as a tool of power and a tool of control. In his book, Davis refers to the power of images by describing a story of a ruler of a city who: “Around the circumference of the city (...) placed engraved images and ordered them in such a manner that by their virtue the inhabitant were made virtuous and with-drawn from all wickedness and harm.”⁸

Davis later said that “the very intelligence of their design and placement instils goodness within his city’s inhabitants, while also protecting them from the dark side of human passions,”⁹ and one could see it as a form of discipline. In this way, the use of images became a way of control, and not unlike writing it can become a tool for regulation and governance.

We know that the medium of writing has served this purpose for as long as it existed. Society shaping texts were, and still are, very common and take on many forms. One only needs to look at the oldest texts known to mankind: hieroglyphics, mythology, the Bible, and other holy books, etc. From the very beginning, such texts were supposed to shape their readers understanding of the world. They didn’t have to contain a strict set of rules like Hammurabi’s Code, or the Decalogue, but focus mainly on ‘the pictures’ they wanted to convey - the stories, the images of good and evil.

These written instructions and controlling ideas weren’t reserved solely for the ‘rule books’. Even ancient Greek theatre, and their written dramas, didn’t serve the purpose of sole entertainment - they were supposed to show us what’s good and what’s bad, how you should act, and what you should do in a given situation. These texts tried to regulate us by teaching and shaping us as human beings, thus engraving set ideas into our mind.

What if we see photography in a similar way to writing. In the context of considering writing as a tool of control, I propose that both writing and photography were and are intended not only as a replacement of memory but more of a ‘memory manipulator’, a tool, which reshapes memories. The purpose of writing was primarily to immortalise the stories, legends and

⁸ Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, (North Atlantic Books; Reprint edition, 2015), p.14.

⁹ Ibid.

histories, which were only passed on by speech. This helped to shape the societies, teaching the young members of the communities, telling them how to act in different situations etc. Writing, thus, became a tool responsible for implementing certain ideas by ‘replacing memory’ and teaching people a given ideology. It was effective because of the ease with which it became accessible. Moreover, written texts were easier to reproduce in larger quantities, and therefore the controlling function of the stories they contained was easier to achieve – now everyone, when in doubt how to act could grab a written text for instructions instead of relying on their memory or what the elder of the society once said. In that way, the written texts somewhat deprived us of our free will, as our moral codes became dependent on ‘what was written down’. Hence, the written texts were, and are, indirectly a form of control for those who are the ‘text’ producers.

One could say that nowadays, this role is also fulfilled by photography. In *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire*, Anne Marsh proposes that photography controls our reality and that this started at the very beginning of the existence of the medium, and “identifying the camera obscura as a mechanism capable of reproducing Renaissance perspectival space constructs an apparatus of seeing that is related to control and power.”¹⁰

So one could say that photography shows what people need to see, what was chosen for them to see. One of the main features of control within the medium is its necessity of framing - simply choosing what will and what won’t be visible in the picture. Writing tried to show us an image of good and evil behaviour by describing it; however, with photography, there is no longer a need for long descriptions of a problem, it’s way more immediate, both in the creation and in the reception of the photograph.

To really understand the impact of photography we need to scrutinise its origins. Photography emerged in the time of the Industrial Revolution – a revolution which forever changed the shape of the world and the psyche of humans. Before everything was quieter, life was slower, towns were not as big, and the advertising industry was not as prominent. During the time of the industrial development everything changed, and people were exposed to ‘industrial’ noise. But the world was going forward, and the ones who had to change were the people and not the

¹⁰ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 28.

reality, and they did – as best they could. Marsh states that “[Photography] was part of a technological revolution, what Susan Buck-Morss has called a technoaesthetics, which produced different realities for the viewer and satisfied and increasing desire for illusionary entertainment. Buck-Morss argues that these techno-phantasies are compensatory illusions which exemplify the alienation of the modern worker, and that they have an anaesthetising effect ‘not through numbing, but through flooding the senses’. She concludes that ‘[s]ensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control’.”¹¹

But photography not only works as a means of social control by ‘feeding’ us the uncountable number of images every day, but also as a proof of someone’s presence somewhere - as the memory of government and services, the memory of power. Very early on, photography served as the ultimate evidence from the crime scene. Now, security cameras are used to determine if someone was at a certain location at a given time, speeding cameras are used to determine if someone was speeding, and so on. Governments base their memory on various sets of images, sometimes more than on people’s confessions and as photography is still believed to be the most true-to-life medium, there is not much discussion with something that was ‘caught on film’. This is one of the main reasons why it is still believed that photography is the most true-to-life medium – because of the fact that it’s used as evidence. It is hard to expect the authorities to change their method as, for now, this is indeed the most reliable tool.

As photography serves as a memory of the government, of the police and other services it can also be used as a tool of citizen control. The presence of photography in the hands of the government works as a panoptic device. In her book, Marsh compared and explained how photography could be a panoptic tool: “The panoptic prison, like the camera obscura, is a theatrical stage. It is not just a physical space that inscribes power relations (...) it is, more importantly, the effect of this knowledge, which may or may not be realised.”¹² The accessibility of photography made the concept of the panopticon come to life. There is no guard as such but each of us could turn into a guard at any point, we just need to reach into our pockets.

¹¹ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

However, at the time when DeepFakes emerge and AI technology advances a very important question must be asked: How do we know if a photo is real? What should we do so that people are not convicted of a crime they didn't commit when a fabricated photo proves them guilty? Is the future of photography endangered? Should the authorities still use photography as evidence of authenticity?

Photography as a tool for counter-action

Photography in the hands of the government can become a tool of control and manipulation; however, the common access of the medium also gives it the advantage of applicability by the broad masses. People can record what they see themselves, they can document police brutality, for example and send the proof to higher instances, or make the footage public. This was a very popular way to fight the oppression of police in the United States recently where the *#blacklivesmatter* movement was created. This action constituted a series of demonstrations and public debates, the purpose of which was to highlight racism and structural disadvantages faced by black people in the United States. Photography became a strong medium for the movement, and taking pictures and recording acts of violence against black people served as a weapon of counter-action, a voice. The ubiquitous presence of photography gave power to the people, allowed them to provide videos and photos as evidence, which would prove that they were a suspect to racist behaviour. The citizens can counter-act, and therefore, similarly to the relation of photography and politics, here photography played a double role – it became both a shield and a sword; it can protect the citizens but also allows them to directly attack the politicians, for example.

Another way of using the power of photography in 'the shield' role, is the way photography is often adopted by journalism. Here, war photography can really become a tool for counter-action, for example, journalism from the times of Vietnam War, where photos that showed the brutality of US Army forces pushed the public to act against the government's actions.

Therefore, in line with Marsh, “the camera as a witness is not always used in the service of a dominant ideology, it can also be used against the prevailing authority.”¹³

However, this tool of counter-action can be used by the citizens not only to defend themselves but also to attack. Showing compromising photographs of politicians is a common practice for most tabloids whose aim is often to destroy a person’s public image, fight with his/her ideology and, as a consequence, make them lose their supporters and political influence. Therefore, the counter-action aspect of the medium isn’t always positive and can, in turn, become the tool of control again. As a consequence, even in the role of counter-action, photography still remains a panoptic tool of control, which instead of observing the citizens, it observes the politician and the figures of power, – photography swung back like a two-edged sword.

How has the nature of photography changed because of technological development?

Photography is more technical than its ‘reproduction tool’ predecessors. Previously, it required a complicated chemical process to develop. And to actually show the image, one would need to have an enormous knowledge for the full realisation of a picture. Nowadays, the process of image-making and realisation is way simpler. Image-making still remains a part of the technical world, and although everyone can create photos, not everyone is considered a photographer. What’s more, photography is the medium designed for mass mechanical reproduction in large quantities, and from very early on it gave rise to the possibility to produce an uncountable number of prints from a single negative. This was previously only possible with writing and the use of the printing press, or with art, using different techniques of printing, which required a matrix i.e. lithography. When lithography emerged the technique of reproduction changed and it was a breakthrough. It allowed for a very direct way of reproducing the image, as instead of recreating the image on a stone or etching. Thanks to the reproduction technique of graphic

¹³ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 37.

art, images could be created in great numbers and on a daily basis, by which it could keep up with the pace of regular printing.¹⁴ However, lithography was never as precise as photography.

Photography was the next technological step, although interestingly at the very beginning of its existence it was thought of as a dishonest and superficial artistic medium, and treated as a technological gimmick rather than a real artistic tool. We know now that photography was a giant leap forward. For the first time, image reproduction became an immediate record of that what we see. As our eyesight records much quicker than our hands ever could, the speed of image-making and reproduction was close to that of speech.¹⁵ This possibility to instantly record the world changed everything. Before that, we would have to stop, prepare everything then sketch and so on. And what we wanted to capture never looked the same as in the moment we first saw it. Here, you can walk down the road, you see something, and it's immediately recorded. It brought a lot of positive changes, yet all of those aspects have another side to them. The possibility to capture everything we see at any given point could lead to a detachment from reality. It gives us an advantage, but don't we start to look at the world through the lens because something could happen and we have to be ready to take a picture of it? Do we actually enjoy our surroundings or has the possibility of immediate recording taken something away from us?

Interestingly, photography was also the first medium to reproduce reality in a somewhat enhanced version. The fact that one can choose the shutter speed, which far exceeds the natural human vision and perception, opened up new possibilities, and the medium was even once considered a 'deceitful' medium by John Ruskin who said that "the photograph lies because: 'in reality time does not stop'".¹⁶ At the same time, the nature of photography gave us the possibility to look at life in a still frame like never before. One could capture an image at thousandth of a second to see the unseeable. In addition, the process of reproduction of the negative can bring out the qualities of the original, which would be impossible to perceive or record with the naked eye, details that are accessible to the photographic camera only. With its lens and other tools, photography is more adjustable and can choose the angle of perception on demand. In this way, photographic reproduction is capable of enlarging the pictures, record

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 30.

slow motion, it can record the world in a way, which escapes the natural vision. What's more, the technical reproduction of the photo, its print, can create opportunities for the photo to be put into situations, which would be impossible for a single image.¹⁷ As Walter Benjamin described: "it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record."¹⁸

All the same, the initial form of photo development, not the modern digital version, left a lot of room for the photographer to further change the captured reality. The fact that one has the negative does not mean that what the public will see is the exact same thing that was caught on the film. One could compare it to Freud's description of the thought process, where every thought or idea starts to exist in our unconscious (like every photograph that starts as a negative), and it can, but doesn't have to be transferred to our conscious state (as a negative can be turned into a positive version of itself). However, just as the original negative, might look completely different than what goes out to the world, as the process of development can bring out certain qualities and omit others – both in thinking processes and in photo development errors become a natural process of this transformation. In the process of developing and making copies, one can over or underexpose the photo to guide the viewer's attention to what they think is important, or they can do it in a more direct way - by zooming-in on a chosen part of the frame, for instance.

Just like in most photographic techniques, where the medium is designed to be reproduced, the same can be said for the application of the medium to art practice. From a photographic negative one can reproduce an uncountable number of 'art' prints and there is no single 'authentic' one.¹⁹ Hence, it becomes close to impossible to speak of artworks as 'authentic', and the functionality of art is being reversed, as instead of focusing on the Benjaminian ritual basis of the artwork it starts to be founded on a different base, which is politics.²⁰ What this means is that because of these changes photography became prone to manipulation, to be changed by other parties, and recontextualized.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Photography as an artistic expression is always supposed to imply certain emotions on the viewer. Even when we ‘just’ take a picture of a landscape it carries some emotional footprint with it – those can be emotions which accompanied us while we were taking the photograph, or emotions we want to convey when we show it to someone. A photo can act as a kind of ‘disposal’ of emotions for us, it can be a shield from the world, as an absorber of the emotions which accompany the event; and it is always supposed to carry that emotion with it and ‘hopefully’ convey it to another person. The fact is that photography created without the target audience in mind almost doesn’t exist. It is always done for someone, even when it’s done subconsciously – the target audience could be the photographer themselves. Because of this fact, and the fact that it was very easy and cheap to reproduce compared to other types of reproductions, photography possessed a new function when compared to other artistic media. Due to this fact, photography was added to the array of art practices, which are mostly done for the ‘other’, purposefully created for others to see, admire and contemplate. This great emphasis on the exhibition aspect of the artwork makes the work of art a new function within a new setting. Benjamin said that “this much is certain: today photography and film are the most serviceable exemplifications of this new function.”²¹ Amongst those functions there emerges the artistic function, which could be recognised as being created by chance, or by accident.²²

However, this new function brought new issues to the medium. Photographs show us the reality we see every day, but those are sometimes images without context. Unlike paintings, the medium praised at the time, photography does not go through the process of manipulation and distortion in the author's mind whilst being created, and because of that, the medium was said to be plain and dehumanised. According to John Ruskin paintings were “[the] good art [which] ‘conveyed not so much the scene’ as the artist’s ‘own originality of mind’.”²³ Photographs are typically solely image-based and sometimes it is impossible to understand the message without knowing anything about the photograph - one can see that it is a portrait for example and understand nothing else. According to Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*, a response to such a photo would be called a ‘studium’, which means that the image is seen through a set

²¹Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 8.

²² Ibid., p. 7

²³ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 30.

code of identifiers.²⁴ Photographs do carry the emotions with them anyway; however, it can be difficult to read them without knowing the context. Because of that, photographs are put into albums, have descriptions, usually are accompanied by a title or a caption, to let us understand that this seemingly ordinary photo is actually something more. Another way to understand a response to a photographic image is Barthes' idea of the 'punctum', which describes a special response to a given photograph, something that captivates the observer, makes him or her an active participant in the image. The caption could usually be a guide for the observers to notice the 'punctum' in a photograph, which seemingly has only 'studium' qualities in it.²⁵ Interestingly, as Walter Benjamin wrote: "For the first time, captions have become obligatory." It became obvious that the nature and character of those captions serve a different purpose than the title of a painting.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill & Wang, 1980), p. 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Photography as a tool of political propaganda

Photography without its title is simply a picture, a copy or representation of the world and open for various interpretations. As such, photography is prone to be used in other ways than intended by the author. One could go as far as to say that it needs explanation, as without the caption it can be misunderstood.



Pic. 1 *German soldiers demounting Polish border barrier, 14.09.1939, © Hans Sonnke*

A photograph stripped of its caption can be used in any way, a story can be added to it, or it can serve as a representation of one idea but in reality represent the exact opposite. A good example is the case in which Polish nationalists used a short film and photographs from the 1940s to celebrate the independence of Poland, emphasising how the country broke from the rules of the III Reich.²⁶ However, what they didn't know was that the 'image' they used showed not Polish soldiers opening the borders after the war, but German soldiers breaking through the border while invading Poland on 1st September 1939.

²⁶ Sourced from an old Facebook post on a Polish Nationalist Page, which has been deleted by Facebook and I couldn't find any traces of it now.

What is interesting about this particular photo taken by Hans Sonnke is that it's not the first time it was used for propaganda purposes. In fact, the photograph wasn't really taken on 1st September 1939 but 14th. What's more, it was not taken on the German-Polish border but instead on the borders of the Free City Gdańsk. This photograph was staged by the German troops and later used as a piece of propaganda in later years as a symbol of power of the German army. It was named by the German propaganda as "German soldiers demounting the Polish border barrier."²⁷ What's even more interesting is that the photographer himself was originally from Gdańsk and was a well-known pre-war photographer; all of the 'German soldiers' in the photo are actually members of the Gdańsk Police Force.²⁸ The entire photograph was staged, it was created for propaganda purposes and it created a situation, which in reality never happened.

So is photography just a representations of reality, of a given situation, which without the caption can be used freely, for any purpose? John Berger in his book *Uses of Photography* proposes that "it's because of the fact that the photographs don't carry their own meaning, they are similar to the pictures in the memory of a complete stranger, you can use them in any way."²⁹ If photography becomes the memory of a stranger, and this applies to everyone who sees them (unless you are the author), this means that they technically belong to no one's memory, and therefore become 'public', more so if they are stripped of their caption, their context. Berger stated that "public photography (...) is deprived of its context and becomes a dead object, which – because it's a dead object – can be arbitrarily used."³⁰

Interestingly, photography is also used within politics as it "cuts both ways - the aestheticisation of politics (Fascism) and the politicisation of aesthetics which is, according to Benjamin, [was] the task of Communism."³¹ The government can use the pictures to show their leaders as heroes of the nation, manipulate their appearance by different perspective tricks for e.g. by making the leader look taller, and use other tricks to show the government's power. And because photography is thought to be the truest medium and people are accommodated

²⁷ Apoloniusz Zawilski, "Battles of Polish September", (Łódź : Wydawn. Łódzkie, 1989-1990)

²⁸ "wPolityce.pl," wSieci Historii, access date: 19/01/2020, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/168107-podreczniki-do-historii-trzeba-drukowac-od-nowa-slynnne-zdjecie-niemcow-lamiacych-graniczny-szlaban-to-propagandowa-ustawka>

²⁹ John Berger, "Uses of Photography", in *About Looking* (NY: Pantheon, 1980), p. 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

with this idea “it was this truthfulness of the new medium, which incentivised to wisely use it as a tool of propaganda.”³²

Another way of using photography for propaganda is through aesthetics in general, namely by influencing what and how people observe the every day. Certain images can be associated with an opposing ideology, in the case of Communism that would be Capitalism, which would be shown in a disgraceful demeanour, making sure people see it as something bad and a threat to the system and vice versa. In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag said that “cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images.”³³ Photography ceases to be solely the tool in the hand of the government, which is used to propagate the ideology – photography, essentially, become the ideology, way more powerful than only the spoken or written words, as it becomes omnipresent in people’s lives, hence, becoming a somewhat omnipotent governing tool and a tool for shaping reality.

³² John Berger, “Uses of Photography”, in *About Looking* (NY: Pantheon, 1980), p. 72.

³³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 178.

How can photography be understood as re-shaping memory and our reality?

Another way to consider photography is to see it as a re-shaper of memory and our reality. Similarly to writing, photography removes the need for memory. The memory replacing qualities of writing were discussed for centuries and Plato even argued that writing will do us more harm than good as he said that “if men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.”³⁴ These qualities translated onto photography to an even greater extent. Memory, even before photography, was mainly image-based, the way we remembered events is usually with a series of images, kinds of short films, etc. Therefore, if now there exists a possibility to actually capture a memory, a feeling of a place, is there still a need for us to physically be there or can we experience it all by looking at the image? Do we truly remember the event, the sight, or do we remember the fact that we took a picture, and we come back solely to the emotions connected with the act of taking the picture? What if that we experience in the present becomes that which we choose to remember as a memory? Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography* that “Proust (...) by considering photographs only so far as he could use them, as an instrument of memory, [he] somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement.”³⁵ One could say that photography is the first medium to truly realise what our memory was for us, how we perceived it in our minds and how we imagined it if it was to be materialised.

Maybe the photograph itself carries some emotions with it, and even without being somewhere physically we can feel those emotions, feel as if we were there. Did photography, becoming such a common part of our life, strip us from our basic emotions, and actually experiencing the world? Some of us feel an inherent need to take a photograph, otherwise - how would anyone believe me that I actually was there?

Understanding and using photography as a replacement of memory was and still is, present since the beginning of its existence as a medium. Nowadays a camera serves as a kind of diary,

³⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), p.79.

³⁵ Susan Sontag, *On photography* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p. 164.

which we take everywhere with us. Whenever we go on holidays there needs to be a documentation of that. We don't trust our memory as it is closely connected to our imagination and to avoid any inconsistencies in the images of our trip, we document every step with the tool that won't fail us – photography. Today, it serves an even more important function. Photography that focused on holiday pictures was very much present; however, now it's more than just that. Nowadays, it could be said that photography is a proof of existence – I shoot, therefore I am; I am because I have a document of the experience. Some people document almost every moment of their life and the form of this documentation is also very interesting. We've come a long way from taking pictures of simple landscapes we've seen, photos that our parents took of us entitled "me standing next to/under <insert a monument here>". Right now we prefer selfies, which for the reason of acting as proof of presence are the best form of image-making. It is now not so important if we post a picture of a landmark, what's important is that our face is visible in the picture, we were there, this photo couldn't be taken by anyone else. Our close link to the everyday use of photography made us change our perception of it, and somewhat could make us forget that what we do is taking pictures. The process has become so natural, and it has been aided by the accessibility of the cameras, which are a standard feature in any electronic communication interface we now own.

However, photographic practice wasn't always that accessible. Back in the day and some people had a chance to have their picture taken only once in their lifetime. A common and even popular form of this single opportunity photograph was "the making-beautiful of the dead [and it] was part of the grand ritual of funerals in the Victorian era."³⁶ This practice meant preparing a deceased loved one, a member of a family, a child, or a partner, sometimes for their first, photographic session. People were arranged in life-like postures, properly dressed, sometimes sustained on some wires to 'stand' still and later be photographed. Bodies could be photographed on their own and then it would portray them as contemplating or sleeping, or they could be a part of a family photo where they would be 'actively' participating in posing for the photograph. The entire idea of the process was to keep the memory of a person as they were alive so that they remain in the family's memory as a happy and primarily living member of a family. It became a new way of commemorating your loved ones and "people sought to

³⁶ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 158.

preserve a memory of the person just after they had died.”³⁷ However, the fact was that it wasn't the memory of the people that kept the person alive, but the photograph. The photograph could show the person in a way they would never actually look in their life, farmers could be dressed in rented suits, they could be portrayed reading a book wherein reality they couldn't read. The memory about the person was augmented, and in this way their augmented memory will forever be alive and perfectly arranged in the way the family wanted, as long as the photograph remains intact. The photograph becomes proof, sometimes the only proof, that someone was alive and a statement of who they were even if it was an 'arranged' statement.



Pic. 2 *Post-mortem photography*, photo. Whitehotpix/Forum

Photography as a deceitful medium

The medium of photography tends to be not as precise and truthful as we think. Trusting in it too much can be deceitful, as we can be fooled by the medium's nature. We use photography to record certain landmarks in our lives, to remember events or sceneries. As stated previously, photography becomes a diary for us, a tool for storing memories. But what if both of this image memory was flawed? What if both the physical photograph and imaginary image were

³⁷ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 158.

somewhat incorrect? According to Marsh, “Benjamin and [Sigmund] Freud imply that all photographs have a psychic origin, that we literally think in photographs, and that these pictures in which we think and remember are quite obviously photographs of ourselves.”³⁸ We remember our lives in sets of images, short films, slow-motion moments and so on. This idea is supported by the fact that it also happens very often to “(...) people [with near-death experiences who] speak about the way in which their whole life flashes before them in a series of cinematic stills (photographs) which may never have been taken with a ‘real’ camera.”³⁹ But, how can we know that what we see before our eyes is the true image, how can we be sure that it truly looked like that when we first observed it? It usually happens that the images we see in our mind are often distorted, tampered with by our imagination to show a ‘version’ of the real event, or an inaccurate representation of reality. It is very interesting how in this way, our inherent imaginary camera is very similar to an actual photographic camera. As Joel Snyder argues: “If photographs are about ‘the real world’ ... then in what sense is a picture that shows us something unseeable still to be thought of as about ‘the visible world’?”⁴⁰ As photography captures reality which otherwise would be impossible to record or be seen with the physical limitations of human perception, for example we simply cannot perceive reality as fast as a camera, one could say that our mind works similarly, but not through rapid recording but by manipulation, augmentation and imagination. This is why “memory, perception and desire intersect in complex ways to create a lifetime of memories and recollections which may have little to do with so-called ‘real’ events.”⁴¹ However, the actions of manipulation, augmentation and imagining are not reserved solely for our mind as memory and photography share those qualities. In her book, Marsh spoke of the connection of our memory and photography: “Likewise, Henri Bergson, to whom Benjamin is indebted, argues that photography and perception are analogous to one another not ‘because perception works like a camera to seize reality but rather because, working like a camera, it fails to seize reality’.”⁴² What this means is that there is, in fact, no good way to capture reality, and even though we might think that

³⁸ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan Art Publishing, 2003), p. 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴² *Ibid.*

photography serves us well in that task, it is inherently flawed and what it captures is always somewhat an interpretation of the real.

Photography, manipulation and art

Manipulation is commonly used as an agent for the creation of art, it is a part of the process of creation. However, manipulation is acceptable for people when it's used in painting for example, because then it becomes a natural part of the medium, part of the process of creating the piece and nobody questions how it was made, with photography the case is often different. When manipulated, photography is said to be lying, deceiving and going against its 'true' nature, which is commonly understood as solely representational. According to Jamie Windsor, when we feel cheated by photography is it because we feel that the photographer tried to trick us, or is it because our expectation of what photographic process is misconstrued?⁴³ In some sense, as said before, all photography can be described as somehow dishonest, as the act of simply framing the photograph, deciding what to leave in and what to leave out is a way of tampering the reality. What the observer sees is not the entire situation that happened, it is what was chosen for them to see.

We know that photography is equipped with many tools, which allow for the manipulation of the initial frame to such an extent that the final result can be hard to recognise, showing a somewhat different version of reality, which for instance could be perceived or captured differently by someone else. But, is that a bad thing? Does manipulation change the truth of the photograph? Or maybe manipulation means simply using tools available to photographers, which they use to overcome the limitations of the medium, and realise the vision of the photograph they saw when they were taking the picture?

⁴³ "Are these photographers CHEATING?" YouTube video, 2:39. "Jamie Windsor," December 15th, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nsFNUqQpJM&t=111s>

According to Windsor, photography will never be, and never was, absolute truth in itself, but rather a communicative tool, by which a representation of truth is conveyed, representation of the truth that the author wanted to show.⁴⁴



Pic. 3 *Elevator* — *Miami Beach*, 1955, © Robert Frank

Even some of the most iconic images like Robert Frank's *Elevator Girl*, from the series *The Americans* have been staged. This series was supposed to show the state of post-war America, how people tried to cope with life and with various ways to earn money. The *Elevator Girl* was the perfect example of how people looked and felt in this time of distress – caught while working, daydreaming, despair visible in her eyes. Whereas, the reality was quite different.

⁴⁴ "Are these photographers CHEATING?" YouTube video, 8:36. "Jamie Windsor," December 15th, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nsFNUqQpJM&t=111s>



Pic. 4 Contact sheet for *Elevator* — *Miami Beach*, 1955, © Robert Frank

In the case of the *Elevator Girl* when one sees the contact sheet of the session it is clearly visible that the girl was arranged in different poses and the photographer spent quite a long time with her, making sure he gets the perfect expression, the perfect composition, and the perfect truth of the situation. One could say however that this process doesn't matter, the photograph still speaks about the culture and social hierarchy of post-war America, and because of that its message is sent, it carries its truth with itself.⁴⁵

The truth in photography, as in all other art is not told through the intent or the process, by which something was created, but by what the end result communicates and how it speaks to the observer.⁴⁶ To truly appreciate that what needs to change is people's approach towards photography.

⁴⁵ "Are these photographers CHEATING?" YouTube video, 8:45. "Jamie Windsor," December 15th, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nsFNUqQpJM&t=111s>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:54.

Conclusion

For some photography was and still is difficult to place in the realm of fine arts. At the same time, it is truly difficult to pigeonhole the medium because of its threefold nature as it drifts between the area of memory, documentation and art. It has done so since the very beginning of its existence when it was said to be a competitor to painting. However, even in those times, it wasn't free of accusations it still faces today, because while paintings were said to show the thought process and emotions of the author, present the artistic capabilities of the author, and document the world, photography was recognised as showing only the captured reality, without any emotional load or artistic qualities whatsoever. This idea had become engraved in the mind of the masses and it seems that it is where photography gets its common analogy from as: *the most true-to-life medium*. However, as shown in this paper, photography went through various stages and was perceived in many various ways. In different periods of time, photography proved itself to be an exact opposite of the analogy it was given. Thus, photography could become a 'writing machine', a replacement of memory, a tool of control, a tool of propaganda, or it can be medium of deceit, as well as a tool of counter-action. What's more, photography possesses a variety of uses, and it utilises a vast spectrum of tools. One could ask: does it matter that photography is a 'manipulative tool', that it is prone to changes and manipulation, that what the observer sees in an exhibition is entirely different to what was initially captured by a camera?

The truth in photography is what the final image communicates to the observer. However, what is this truth nowadays? In the times of emerging AI technology, DeepFakes, computer-generated imagery, which slowly becomes almost impossible to tell apart from the images created by humans, the question that needs to be asked is: what is real in photography?

Photography should always be considered not only as an interpretation of reality but a medium that shapes reality. We see this especially now, with the ubiquitous nature of image-making and the pictures of places and humans that form a new reality of how one perceives themselves as an individual.

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