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## Transience of All Things

### Abstract

Within the horizontal level of perception of the world (the sphere of intellect) and the vertical sphere of the heart, the study is an analytical examination and questioning of the photographic medium essence across various views from areas of philosophy, theology, semiology, and visual culture. At the same time, it is, however, also a view from inside, i.e., the author's note based on personal experience with this medium. The objective of the study is to decode seeing as an autonomous, actively performed, and purposeful activity of body and soul, but also as universally valid principles of looking; but mostly, it is an attempt on defining the essence of this particular action. Thus, what comes to the fore is the mental image that proposes various questions about desire to own the world, which is simultaneously an image of awakening within the being through photography. Within the context of human temporality, it forms an ontological basis illustrated by documentary photography with its devoted duty to see the world in the complexity of being;

and the relationships arising in such way, breaking the reality, are connected to the sphere of the heart animating the work of art. Here, art as an expectation of the truth is being depicted by profane situations of searching for infinity, which talk about an apparent triumph of human spirit over the transience of all things. The study is based on the thoughts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes, and Marián Gavenda. Photography supported by the "fluidity" of modern thinking allows us to better see the signs of lost paradise; brings us from the non-being to being; is Breton's "catalyst of human desire". It is also about a constant - Cézanne's expansion and overflow of objects' boundaries in a picture, where we cannot but state that photographer's relationship to the world is a relationship full of ambiguities but also immense closeness.

### Key words

Documentary. Immanence. Infinity. Latency. Photography. Profanity. Transience.

### Instead of Introduction

*"Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
... out of the Ninth-month midnight,  
over the sterile sands and the fields  
beyond, where the child leaving his  
bed wander'd alone, bareheaded,  
barefoot, down from the shower'd  
halo ... from your memories ...  
from under that yellow half-moon  
late-risen and swollen as if with  
tears, from those beginning notes  
of yearning and love there in the  
mist, from the thousand responses  
of my heart never to cease, from  
the myriad thence-arous'd words,  
from the word stronger and more  
delicious than any, ... borne hither,  
ere all eludes me, hurriedly, ...  
throwing myself on the sand,  
confronting the waves, ... the aria  
sinking, all else continuing, the stars  
shining, ... never more shall I escape,  
never more the reverberations, ...  
never again leave me to be the  
peaceful child I was before, ... the  
sweet hell within, the unknown want,  
the destiny of, me".*

I would like to reverse the irreversible. Photography allows us to keep returning to the memories of our loved ones again and again. These thoughts also bring a reflection on why we feel such a hunter's desire to photograph an object instead of simply look at it. What could be more permanent than our participating look in time, carved in the layers of memory?

Here, however, starts an issue of selectivity in what we are capable of remembering; by which I mean the question of awakening in the being through the medium of photography. We have stopped looking with our hearts, but photography has an ability to revive the heart. If I could only have one wish, it would be a desire to stop time for a while, because of the beauty of the present and because of everything that we so much want to grasp for eternity and, yes, in a way, own emotionally. That is why I am a photographer, because this medium allows this, at least seemingly. Somewhere deep in the nature of a human being lies our affinity for letting ourselves be swayed by ideas, desires, and dreams, sometimes unreal, but more beautiful for it. This atavism is a hidden legacy that we cannot escape from, but thanks to which we are able to keep rediscovering long forgotten messages and feelings that once gave us happy beings. If we long to find the scent of the world outside, we should first get to know the scent of our home. This, in my opinion, is also hidden in the time dimension of photography when, to some extent, it numbs past wounds, softens our doubts, pushes away precious memories that always reappear on the sand on the shore with each new tidal wave.

Roland Barthes very precisely defines the moment when the person in front of the camera becomes a spectre frozen in a loving, but also mortuary stillness; that "micro-experience

of death" that always takes place in each photography between the subtle touches of solitude and Lacan's moment of "encounter". Photography usurps its position in the present time through a protected place that constitutes the basis of the secret of identity of the unreachable being. On photographs, people, cities, countries, and things we long for so much are and remain painfully and persistently pinned like butterflies, unable to escape. This is the most radical metaphor to describe what photography performs in its perfect theatre. It also means that the essence of photography must be anchored in silence, so we could hear its music; so we could hear the absolutely free and subjective language of images; so we could will them from our minds when we close our eyes, so as not to rattle the butterflies. Photographs touch mainly the emotional sphere of our being and they always hurt us anew, and we guard this sadness and desire for the unreachable as a treasure. In a typical Proustian way, we could state that photography is much crueller and more elusive than the actual thought or memory of a loved one, because the resurrection it attempts on is also its vanity. It is a breakage of awe that, however, unconditionally and quite melancholically makes us face an existence without future, as photography stills the dimension of time. The presence of things in a photograph will always be just a "live image of the dead"; it allows us to mourn (in sadness we always want images to be as real as possible),

<sup>1</sup> WHITMAN, W.: *Spojím vás láskou milenců*. Prague : BB art, 2002, pp. 7-16.

but, according to Barthes, mourning is still only a suppression of pain caused by irreplaceable loss that makes our lives unqualifiable; on the other hand, however, it allows us to wait for non-dialectical death. Each photograph, through its look fixed in the past, its reversed prophecy, is a priori a document of the present, a latently new being that we cannot touch, although it ruthlessly forces us to count life and death and note the cessation of generations before us. Paradoxically, all this takes place in the name of resurrection of the past. In the essence of stopping the present, there is an excessive way of a still and stuck time, but also a certain violence in its ability to fill our whole view. Thus, the greatest paradox is the attempt of photography to create death by which it wants to preserve and retrieve life<sup>2</sup>. “*With the Photograph, we enter into flat Death. The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting...*”<sup>3</sup>. Photography is mostly about the mysticism of observing the pre-future time; it is a guaranteed, but mainly transient, testimony of proving “everything that-has-been”. In Barthes’s semiological analysis photography is a bizarre medium, a form of hallucination that is, on the one hand, perceptually untrue, on the other hand, painfully and

madly true in the dimension of time, evoking a fear of future and, ultimately, a fear of death, not only ours. Barthes himself concludes his reflections on photography with the necessity to choose between the submission to the code of perfect illusions and awakening in an intractable reality<sup>4</sup>. “*Reality that each photograph so apparently seems to show is unreachable...*”, with each moment of pressing the camera shutter we are observing past in its whole dimension, our mortality, shiver from catastrophe, when “*...we are dying in the midst of life*”<sup>5</sup>. This study is a brief analysis of the universal principles of looking, but mainly an attempt at defining the essence of seeing in the context of the photographic medium as well as its connection to the key paradigms anchored in areas such as philosophy, theology, semiology, or visual culture.

### 1 On Andromeda or How Photography Stole My Heart

“*People like full moon and don't know why... If only because people don't believe in anything that hasn't happened to them personally*”<sup>6</sup>.

Photography stole my heart and it still does it every time it lets me enter the world of another person, but it is

not the only reason I value it so much. Art is a confession of love for being, for the world; it allows us to fall in love with life over and over again. For me, our desire to at least partially “own” the outside world through an image resembles a dream of Andromeda (perhaps the most famous constellation near Pegasus), “*...which, according to the ancient myth, represents a princess saved from Poseidon's wrath by Perseus. This constellation is our closest big galaxy, but also the most distant space object that can be seen with unaided eye*”<sup>7</sup>. Unimaginable, infinite, and unbounded space stands in contrast to the boundaries of our world, at least the physical one. Edmund Halley thought that the Andromeda galaxy, which is situated in the constellation of the same name and will absorb our galaxy in a few billion years, “*...is the spot where light comes from eternal day, i.e., the light created on the first day according to the Bible*”<sup>8</sup>. Similar charm can be found in pressing the camera shutter; an act that is an umbilical cord (but also a child-like fascination with terror) in a moment when “*...from a real body proceed radiations; the photograph of the missing person will touch me like the delayed rays of a star*”<sup>9</sup>. By choosing a situation of our being in a particular

<sup>7</sup> Astropozorovanie/Atlas oblohy/Androméda. [online]. [2022-01-05]. Available at: <<http://www.astronom.cz/astropo/constellations/andromeda.htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> Nepochopiteľný vesmír/Galaxia Androméda. [online]. [2022-01-05]. Available at: <[https://nepochopitelnyvesmir.estranky.sk/clanky/galaxia\\_andromeda\\_html](https://nepochopitelnyvesmir.estranky.sk/clanky/galaxia_andromeda_html)>.

<sup>9</sup> BARTHES, R.: Světla komora (Poznámka k fotografii). Prague : Agite/Fra, 2005, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> PETŘÍČEK, M.: Citím, tedy vidím (Afterword). In BARTHES, R.: Světla komora (Poznámka k fotografii). Prague : Agite/Fra, 2005, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> AŠKENAZY, L.: Ukradený měsíc. Prague : Československý spisovatel, 1956, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see: BARTHES, R.: Světla komora (Poznámka k fotografii). Prague : Agite/Fra, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 88.

place at a particular time, we enable sunlight that forms the ontological basis of the photographic medium, to penetrate the latent layer (and the memory, within the limits of human temporality). “*On the largest cosmic scales, planet Earth appears to be anything but special. Like most galactic groups and clusters, we're a small part of a larger structure containing over 100 000 galaxies. Ours is named Laniakea*”<sup>10</sup>. Laniakea is thus our home, home of the Milky Way, Solar System, and Earth. Especially fitting is the translation of the originally Hawaiian word that means “immense heaven”. How would we then want to see our world – home under this immeasurable heaven with no boundaries? Photography and art generally definitely provide us with many directions, opportunities, and unlimited possibilities<sup>11</sup>. As beings, we are very fragile and we touch each other through words, sounds, and images created by our senses. This emotional perspective provides us with a whole number of interpretations. I have found the most suitable and distinctive metaphor for this in an immensely human approach of Marián Gavenda; particularly his definition of the fundamental desire of a human being

<sup>10</sup> SIEGEL, E.: BIG THINK/Laniakea, Our Local Supercluster, is Being Destroyed by Dark Energy. [online]. [2022-01-10]. Available at: <[https://bigthink.com/starts-with-a-bang/laniakea-dark-energy/?fbclid=IwAR32lT9J9MaMyDosl0isCGKv5B6P364E\\_XOUYn7m3ayNCPfSBOA4OrqR6M](https://bigthink.com/starts-with-a-bang/laniakea-dark-energy/?fbclid=IwAR32lT9J9MaMyDosl0isCGKv5B6P364E_XOUYn7m3ayNCPfSBOA4OrqR6M)>.

<sup>11</sup> See: ENGLER, M., TRNKA, A.: Fundamental Knowledge Behind Creation Of Concept Art. In European Journal of Media, Art & Photography, 2021, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 106-115.

to “look”, which, however, does not necessarily mean the ability to “see”: “*The most important incentive for sharing is to provide a guide on how to look at things with human sight and see in them and behind them also that which is invisible to eyes. Mystics speak of the 'sight of the heart'. For those who master it, life will become significantly richer and more beautiful. Our times are referred to as an era of visual culture. The flood of visual stimuli causes the fact that we do not have time to even look at them, let alone think about what we are seeing. Those, who learn to see with their hearts will encounter a mysterious overlap between the profane and the sacred. Looking changes into seeing and seeing is a bridge to contemplation. Contemplation leads to inner transformation. An image has a power to penetrate not only the body, but, through imagination, also the soul. The things that happen in photography are the same as those in contemplation. It is interesting that long before the invention of photography, the expression 'to photograph' was used by Philotheos of Sinai, 12th century Byzantine author. He uses the word to express what is happening when the soul contemplates the Christ ...so that simple words and shots become a mirror of the whole heaven*”<sup>12</sup>. I myself have felt such moments when photographing, mainly the documentary photographs, and it

<sup>12</sup> GAVENDA, M.: Pozerat' a vidieť. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2017, p. 6.

always confirms my belief that only that, which is consistently honest and comes from the bottom of our heart's convictions, is demonstrable in time and, thus, also inevitably eternal, because it is only the dimension of time that has the power to confirm the real and permanent values. Time is the fairest judge and if there is something we still need to learn from the outside world of nature, it is patience. Patience is not the only thing I have become acquainted with during long-term photographing in years 2015 – 2017 (with colleagues and students from our University FMK UCM, Trnava) in villages Brehov and Rad in Južný Zemplín. This, not only photographically, magical area of Medzibodrožie has many layers. Although local Catholic priest Roland Bőör metaphorically calls the village Rad “the end of the world”, as it is a blind alley that does not continue anywhere, it actually has no said end. On the contrary, it continues and transcends the borders of an individual, community, in order to cleanse us and make us reborn in the morning light of this quiet lowland. There are a countless number of such blind alleys in each one of us. People that we photographed are simple in their lives and kind in their hearts, they don't distance themselves from each other; on the contrary, they support each other in the hard every-day reality; they are a lasting proof of a vivid love for fellow humans. Documentary photography as a medium is more than necessary at places like this, as it is its role to show not only great and decisive actions and historical acts, but also those that are invisible to eyes and

that can only be found when we start looking into ourselves. *"In the ink darkness that poured over our dwellings behind the walls of Brehov Monastery every night it was easy to identify that we as people are destructive in our independence. Hours and days behind and outside these walls have taught us a lot, for instance the fact that sometimes silence speaks the loudest and that instead of our own needs we should see the needs of others. In Južný Zemplín, surrounded by rivers, we have realized that we are not alone on our journey. They allowed us to learn how to devote ourselves to something greater than ourselves; something that transcends us"*<sup>13</sup>. Here, "looking" is implicitly transformed into the dimension of "seeing", leading to a transformation from the photographer's subjective experience to the aspects of the outside world, which strongly decipher any further course of their visual expression, which then becomes their determinant defining them mainly as a human being. *"To give a little when having a little is sometimes more than to give everything. How much we can learn from others. ...and thus, we experience not quite home, but also not quite hell. Another unforgettable moment for me was a speech of Father Roland to us, photographers, during holy mass in Rad where, with tears in his eyes and in a deeply*

*human way, he described our interest in their lives and the extent of importance of understanding each other. His frankness broke down all barriers between the boundaries of ourselves and his world, as he was crossing the borders of his soul's pride. What remained in my mind were images of beautiful grey hair and years, when the old hands of women touched the best of meals that they honoured us with in a light that would be more suitable for an Impressionist painting. We were engulfed by dead river Tica and also engulfed by our emotions, which, through their peaceful flow and scale, encouraged reflections on the flow and inevitability of time, on the corners of our nature, but also on sadness as great as this river. My heart dropped. Here, I have again realized that we have been made for fellowship and entangled into relationships that are at the core of who we are. We have become each other's mirrors on our mutual journey"*<sup>14</sup>. In the context of documentary photography, we could state that the photographer's main duty is to see the world in the complexity of being, notice and record it, but mainly put their whole self into it on all levels. It is the radically human and live photography, which lasts in the lives of the photographed and matures in time, which confirms the "...creative search for new horizons of questions that form the meaning of photography in relation to reality and

*time - i.e., to people, history, environment, things, and ethical values of human identity. Such unexpected, unforeseen, even symbolical knot of relationships, stories, meetings, messages, and images (breaking the reality) couldn't have been a coincidence and we cannot interpret it as common even in hindsight. It is not a matter oriented solely on logical-visual analysis by a 'oversmart head', but it is also a connection with 'moral organ' of a human being, with the sphere of heart (warmth of the heart) reviving and warming a work of art and the whole human existence (R. Guardini). Legitimate material for documentary photography is such material that finds new meanings (contemporary icons, artefacts, and archetypes). The question is, who regards the process of photographic verification more as an ideal or a threat (the author themselves, the photographed subject, or the spectator). It reminds me of Heidegger's thoughts on art: when the concept of the world (life) is 'historical', it is 'designed' by history and is carried out by 'designing'. Art (documentary photography) is like an event and expectation of the truth. It is its philosophy of 'reversal', which carries the experience of an event into a being, while the person involved is only a middleman and interpreter"*<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> CEPKOVÁ, P.: Dve miesta jednej duše/Brehov. In SEDLÁK, J., LESŇÁK, T. (eds.): *Archeológia času/Brehov/Rad (Život a príbeh ľudí Južného Zemplína)*. Bratislava : Vydavateľstvo Lúč, 2016, p. 275.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> SEDLÁK, J.: Archeológia času. In SEDLÁK, J., LESŇÁK, T. (eds.): *Archeológia času/Brehov/Rad (Život a príbeh ľudí Južného Zemplína)*. Bratislava : Vydavateľstvo Lúč, 2016, pp. 210-211.

## 2 Holistic Principle of the Imaginary

*"Pictures do not lie, but neither do they tell the whole story. They are merely a record of time passing, the outward evidence"*<sup>16</sup>.

Our minds, people, are very often elsewhere, stuck in the past, toying with their own phantoms. We like escaping into our dreams and imaginations where there always is that one day that has been there since the first morning. Photography provides us with something similar; it is our internal scriptorium of unwriting or overwriting reality. A picture contains a myriad of stories that oscillate at its surface and are a grandiose narration of the quivering past. This movement is an imaginary journey of a quest for our roots, a shelling of the kernels of generations before us, while simultaneously forming a predisposition for the road that we make for our children. Looking at photographs, I am often overwhelmed by a fresh wave of guilt for everything that could have been done, everything that could have been said while there still was time. It is a similar feeling to placing our tired bodies on a chair or laying them crinkled on our beds with a hope that the new sunrise that will bring salvation from oblivion. Photography thus becomes a diaspora of our

scattered memories under voluntary compulsion, returning us back home from emigration, while preserving all the important ties. This is what I consider its fundamental trait, its holistic principle, its integral aura and coexistence of particles of light and memories, which, in the spirit of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* joins all its attributes into a single and definite whole, into its maxim.

Here, I must again take up Gavenda's words, when he codes meaning and sense of our looking: *'That girl in front of us must be very pretty! How do you know? Look at the faces of people coming the opposite way! A seemingly profane situation; a short and simple dialogue. And still, it is worth considering. In every moment, the face of each of us projects an image of our soul. ... What is inside is important. ... The Bible states that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks; however, so do the eyes, face, body posture, walk, gestures. ... We emanate what we take in and we project it on those that we encounter. ... Combinations of mutual reactions are being formed. Evil is multiplied by the number of vicious people. Fortunately, not only evil, but also good expands and passes from one person to another. It depends on what you are full of. Before you leave your house, look not only into the mirror, but also check the outfit of your heart. Look into your soul for a while. So that not only people who meet you, but also those who walk behind you could say: That person*

*in front of us must be very good"*<sup>17</sup>. Every day, we receive powerful lessons; we live in the coldness of human relationships, consumer-egoistic culture, so that we realize that we cannot survive if we don't find our way to each other. Beyond the boundary of giving up our comfort triumphs "the noblest of all freedoms" – good is that, which suits me. From the sociology point of view, the key perspective here has been provided by Zygmunt Bauman about a metaphorical "maturation" of both an individual and the whole humankind that, only when shaken and faced with a definitive threat or extinction, only when understanding the moral imperative from the inside, will understand the principles of survival<sup>18</sup>. And this is where something inevitable about the triumph of human spirit over foolishness and temporality of all transient things is encoded. Therefore, we identify with the idea that there are no bad people, only unhappy people. They don't need to be tamed like wolves; let's try to cure their unhappiness with understanding and love and let's try to change their fortunes for the better, because in that place we can all meet. Let's try to live on earth but reside in heaven. Recognition of the purpose of human life, development of spiritual dimension is also a call for metaphysics of how to free oneself from neuroses of

<sup>17</sup> GAVENDA, M.: *Pozerat' a vidiet'*. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2017, pp. 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

our time, how not to be superficial humanists, how not to talk about love for our fellow humans out of tiredness, how not to give up the cross, how not to be in emptiness without real connection, because we have the freedom to either deny or acknowledge ourselves. Falling is human and just as urgent as “I am right here and right now”, just as sharing is a dynamic state of heart, just as great as the desire of every human being not to be alone in the most beautiful and the most difficult moments, because when a human being is alone (not in the silence of solitude), they cease being, they even cease being themselves in the hell of loneliness. Just as there is an absolute death, just as we get weak at the knees when we are overwhelmed by fundamental anguish of our maxim (of moral behaviour), of infinity in ourselves (which, according to Luigi Giussani cannot be suppressed), of beauty that is vain if we are alone with it – we lose the reason to go on when a precious moment of life can also be an experience of abysmal loneliness. We all hold our future in our arms, just like the ever-relevant principles, and as we walk on our journey, we carry our future with us. That is why it is now more than necessary to hold one another in humanity and absorb the urgency of others. Just as we enjoy the smell of ripe grain or the look in the lively eyes of our children, we feel deep wounds in our hearts, so we could discover our future in time and in eternity; and such experience must implicitly contain our comprehension and realization of the fact that

fulfilment and happiness stand or fall on relationships. Here, I will let myself propose one assumption and thought about the fact that, just like faith, photography and art as a whole allow us to find that mysterious and concentrated silence that helps us to reach inside ourselves and find the much-needed escape or emergency exits from our existence, when we are threatened by the metaphorical or real inner burnout. Photography/art has the power to lead us from non-being to being; it helps us to search for our identity and purpose in this world, and it achieves this immanence directly through an image. Our mind is so unique that even when looking at old black-and-white photographs, we are able to see the memory and moment in colour and relive it over and over again with all its scents, to feel the warmth of our loved ones, quiver frozen in time and smell the scent of centuries. However, the first step towards uncovering the mystique of photography is to “look” at the world properly, so that we could really “see” it. In a silent visual dialogue, photography is capable of saying as much as would fit into a long novel; from reading one shot we can easily gain a feeling of having a thousand years of life in our soul. While we are unsuccessfully searching for that deep mystique of an experience, we have already been experiencing it through the act of searching itself. And then, to be able to live in a profane reality of a day we must only decide to “step out” of our daily comfort zones, because only then are we able to find and

create completely new dimensions of relationships and, mainly, not to get lost in the mists of life. Here, we can find a parallel line with the title of Janko Silan’s poetry collection *Kým nebudeme doma (Until We Are Home)*, in which he defines the meaning of human existence from the Christian Humanism point of view. Or else, in a broader context of concepts by Mircea Eliade and his work *Sacrum et profanum/The Sacred and the Profane*, it should be our implicit goal that our lives and homes are places of history of salvation that reveal generally valid parallels of life<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, even Jean-Paul Sartre in his fundamental philosophical work *The Imaginary*, inspired by Edmund Husserl’s idea of “intentionality of consciousness”, searches to unravel and find a crystal-clear solution to the riddle of our existence in the world, as well as the exploration of artistic vision. It is the freedom of imagination that situationally always stands against nothingness, so the world of ideas could rise to the surface through the layers of behaviour patterns, so that freedom could become a theory of human existence. Therefore, iconographically, we could compare photographing as an activity and action to Sartre’s thoughts on intentionality of consciousness, to get back to Barthes’s interpretation of this fundamental human desire, and, from the phenomenological point of view, independent of

19 For more information, see: GAVENDA, M.: *Pozerat’ a vidieť*. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2017, p. 11-60.

whether we are interested in the ideal or the real world. Sartre’s perception of Heidegger’s theory of human finiteness is a paradoxical juxtaposition of two realities – possibility and impossibility (of being), referring mainly to the boundaries of human freedom through an analysis of relationships to others<sup>20</sup>.

Within the context of Susan Sontag’s definition of the mission of a photojournalist, for whom the world has become a territory<sup>21</sup>, we could similarly regard the overall mission of the photographic medium (regardless of genre), because the main thing it provides us is our own footprint in the latent layer of a picture, but also in layers of historical time and place, in which we are anchored in the world. “*And they weren’t afraid of anything they didn’t know*”<sup>22</sup>. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we could identify this state of mind in the context of photography with the analytical dimension of perception itself, especially in the moment when we are forgetting the world and this medium brings us back to the path of discovering the world of perception: “*If modern thought is difficult and runs counter to common sense, this is because it is concerned with truth*”<sup>23</sup>. Merleau-

20 For more information, see: SARTRE, J.-P.: *Bytie a ničota*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2006.

21 SONTAG, S.: *S bolestí druhých před očima*. Prague : Paseka, 2011, p. 36.

22 AŠKENAZY, L.: *Ukradený měsíc*. Prague : Československý spisovatel, 1956, p. 28.

23 MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Svět vnímání*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2008, p. 16.

Ponty describes this transformation complexly using the example of Paul Cézanne’s approach to painting an apple that “ends up swelling and bursting free from its confines”, which faces us with a need to rediscover the world in the exact same way as we do it in a lived experience. It is because through perception, we enter into contact with the world, just as a painter always tames the restless passage of a landscape and stifles its inner tremble. Such perceptive experience becomes crucial for an artist and also vital for a receptive viewer, as they are both, together and each on their own, able to “feel the world” with its present but also span in time. Through all of this, Merleau-Ponty directs us to the ideas of Jean Paulhan and refers us to the space of heart, where this world becomes one with the human being. Our physiological attachment to the earth refers us to a horizontal dimension of world perception (sphere of intellect), while the sphere of heart is purely vertical, but it is thanks to it and our human attributes that we have access to the genuine reality of things<sup>24</sup>. Emotional meaning of human existence thus becomes a cornerstone of imagination that gives our life purpose, frees us from the physical formula of attachment to the world and constitutes a new horizon of consciousness.

24 For more information, see: MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Svět vnímání*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2008, pp. 19-24.

### 3 Immanent Trials of Photography

“*The body was wearing a golden cloak and through the cloak light was flowing and most of the light was in the place where people have their hearts*”<sup>25</sup>.

Through discovering the perceived world and perceivable things, photography allows us to find the immanent being in its different forms that in mutual synthesis uncover and create unity of all things. Merleau-Ponty refers us to Sartre’s analysis of this paradigm as a situation of things perceptible by senses on the principle of honey running between fingers, i.e., the world of tangible and simultaneously elusive things; the world where our roles can turn way too easily. The photographer’s eye looking at the world is, in a sense, caught and drawn into the outer being. The utmost docility of things, a kind of dog loyalty and obedience and quiet possession emerges only through a dialogue of a human being towards the world. Just as honey displays a certain form of behaviour towards us and our bodies, photography in this context also assumes completely new dimensions, transforms its qualities into new shapes, entreties, unity of people, relationships, and things that redefine it. If Cézanne believed that it is possible to paint the scent of trees, then it must be

25 AŠKENAZY, L.: *Ukradený měsíc*. Prague : Československý spisovatel, 1956, p. 31.

possible to photograph the human soul, which, on the physical level of the body, we could boldly identify with a certain consent with finality and death. Thus, the other person on the photograph becomes to us a living body revived for different intentions. In accordance with Cézanne's thoughts on the complexity of things, the whole human being is in the world and the whole world is in them, which means that a photographer can search inside them for archetypes and bring them to light so they could be shaken to their foundations, continually humbled and drop to the ground before the immense truthfulness of life. It is, however, also a certain form of obsession, which, when connected to Gaston Bachelard's reflections on elements, then just like water and its constant restlessness, photography also likes to surrender to its innate gravity. This, I dare say, "fluidity" of the photographic medium represents, in a way, home for a certain kind of people and their dreams necessary for life itself, but mainly is a celebration of all things and Breton's "catalyst of human desire". The relationship of a photographer/artist with the world is a relationship full of uncertainty, but at the same time a relationship full of amazing closeness that necessarily contradicts Descartes's analysis of distance and supremacy of human spirit over things<sup>26</sup>. What is then really the immanence of photography? What is happening while viewing photographs is, in a sense, comparable

to the line of interpersonal dialogue, a certain exchange of arguments, when emotions shift to even the gentlest layers of the physical body. And we are honestly surprised and concerned by what suddenly happens in the inevitable space between us and the image, which extends beyond the boundaries of matter, escapes from us to the outside world and transforms into a feeling, a thought. Such disconcertment, however, proves our vigilance in the world that allows us not only to see, but also know and even find our own selves. This is where lies the hidden meaning, the ability of our own physical being to explicitly express relationships through experience of photography, to uncover inner structure and development of things and events in time, forcing us to enter into new symbolic relationships: "To speak of the world poetically is to remain almost silent"<sup>27</sup>. Thanks to photographs, we are able to view people, things, and events that are long gone, which allows us to get in touch with a perfect illusion of reality (outside the picture) that is more perfect than the reality itself. Autonomy often hidden behind a visually apparent entropic line of photographic medium is breathtaking. It is a photographer's moral right, but also a duty, to search for the ontological dimension and essence of the world. "We give credence to the flimsiest of straws in the wind that are aligned with our values, while dismissing opposing evidence with a

torrent of contempt"<sup>28</sup>. It is largely a certain type of modern humanism of sharing our common fate because we need each other. Our subjective choice (and, to a certain extent, necessity) of excluding this and that from a picture when photographing, makes us active in sharing. "The photographs are a means of making 'real' matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore. ... No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain"<sup>29</sup>. From Sontag's interpretations of Virginia Woolf's thoughts: "Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind..."<sup>30</sup>, we could deduce that in reality we learn the most from one another, we are each other's mirrors that blur the boundaries between me and the others, allow me to see the world from the perspective of others; here, I mean the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. Our sensory experience is a collective phenomenon largely eliminating expressions of individuality, which, no matter how significant, only express themselves in relation to the whole and in reaction to others. Therefore, we could assume that the ability to empathize with each other is naturally innate to us; that we exist in a mutually shared space that helps us to head from the social to the individual, to some Gallese's "theory of mind". Human interaction is an

28 COLLIER, P.: *Exodus/Jak migrace mění náš svět*. Prague : Nakladatelství Libri, 2017, p. 13.

29 SONTAG, S.: *S bolestí druhých před očima*. Prague : Paseka, 2011, p. 12.

30 Ibidem.

immersion into the everydayness of the others that could be defined as a basis of the collective theory of seeing, just as the whole visual culture and imagination is key to our very existence<sup>31</sup>. "The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim, or proverb..."<sup>32</sup>, and photographs are no more an impartial record than a personal testimony, a copy, but also an interpretation of a real moment<sup>33</sup>. Sontag's parallels of determinants such as death and nudity, courage to look at pain and possible feelings of pleasure or shame, are trying to identify us either as spectators or as cowards unable to look. Synthetically, Sontag uses an example of Goya's famous painting *The Disasters of War/Los desastres de la guerra*, in which even the landscape of the scene becomes the darkness, vague and only sketched in an atmosphere that is supposed to pain us. It is no coincidence that Goya, together with Dostoyevsky, have become landmarks of the possible maxim of the depth of moral feeling and sorrow. Here, however, it is impossible to agree with the condition of photography as a medium that should a priori show in the position of an evidence (contrary to, e.g., painting), but not to evoke or judge<sup>34</sup>. "The idea 'life is elsewhere' is potentially debilitating, but it can be

31 MIRZOEFF, N.: *Jak vidět svět*. Prague : ArtMap, 2018, pp. 97-99.

32 SONTAG, S.: *S bolestí druhých před očima*. Prague : Paseka, 2011, p. 24.

33 Ibidem, p. 28.

34 Ibidem, pp. 43-45.

countered. *A triumph of postmodern culture has been to decenter...*"<sup>35</sup>. This is where the Plato's paradigm of sense-perceptible things and holding the ostentatious position towards reality lie. In this context, photography provides us with fundamental ideas and judgment stereotypes; through its slice of reality, it decides what is worth attention and what is not. This, however, doesn't exclude the possibility that it can also find itself in a state of crisis that should result in a completely new forming frame and establishment of a new paradigm. That would, however, be a topic of considering the direction of this significant visual medium in a situation that could be described as an ex-ante state.

### Conclusion

"Seeing is something we do, and we continually learn to do it. ...what we see with the eyes, it turns out, is less like a photograph than it is like a rapidly drawn sketch. Seeing the world is not about how we see but about what we make of what we see. We put together an understanding of the world that makes sense from what we already know or think we know"<sup>36</sup>. The objective of a visual expression is thus mainly to understand perception, which Mirzoeff named "body maps", i.e., it

35 COLLIER, P.: *Exodus/Jak migrace mění náš svět*. Prague : Nakladatelství Libri, 2017, pp. 195-196.

36 MIRZOEFF, N.: *Jak vidět svět*. Prague : ArtMap, 2018, p. 75.

defines us, where and who we are, so the photograph itself could be perceived and simultaneously be the actual action of perception, when we sketch reality in our brains and we always learn to see anew. Seeing is a process of mental analysis, a process of assembling pieces of reality into a whole scene. "Seeing transforms perception. Eighteenth century art theorists once proposed a theory of a 'flickering' or 'blinking' vision. Painters like François Boucher aimed to create this sense of moving surface that would later come to influence the Impressionists"<sup>37</sup>. It is innate to us to touch with our eyes. It is an area of studies of visual culture that confirms the human need to understand the process of seeing, which is, however, dependent on the relationship with traditions. This is proved by a careful vacillation of Chagall's *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was not only love that constituted the basic colour of his paintings, but also emotional resonance, which he achieved mainly by references to his personal history. It is there, in trying to keep balance with one foot on an unstable and inclined surface of various life aspects and situations (just like the title of the article *Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof*), where something deeply existential is encoded: "...you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant,

37 Ibidem, p. 89.

26 For more information, see: MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Svět vnímání*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2008, pp. 25-32.

27 MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Svět vnímání*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2008, p. 65.

simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous? ... 'There are two ways of honoring your traditions. One is to wear your father's hat. The other is to have children.' This quote from Pablo Picasso perfectly captures what I was calling the static vs. the dynamic conceptions of Tradition. There is a problem with the concept of living traditions, too, and this is what is most philosophically interesting to me. Go back to the Picasso quote: ...the better way to honor one's traditions is by having children"<sup>38</sup>. Here arises a marked connection to Gavenda's reflection of the future that we all carry in our arms like a child, because through children, our being transcends its boundaries and the infinity inside it.

American philosopher Arthur C. Danto, in his reflections, provocatively predicts a possible end of art due to its separation from traditional history in the 1960s. Pluralism has brought with it mainly freedom of thought about contemporary art outside the traditional narrative. "I also find Arthur Danto's similar Hegelian-inspired theory of art history helpful. In books such as *After the End of Art*, Danto argues that something can be an artwork at one time

in history even though it would not have been an artwork at an earlier time in history. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (the infamous readymade urinal), could be art in 1917 though it wouldn't have been art in 1719. The explanation for this phenomenon is the narrative shape of history: events gain their identity by how they fit with what came before and what comes after them. In other words, being part of a tradition means accepting limitations and pushing the boundaries only one step at a time. An artist can't jump too far ahead of her place in history or no one will recognize her work as art. She may be appreciated as 'ahead of her time' by later generations, but she will still not really be an integral part of the tradition. In analogy to religion, she'll be like one of those heretics whose theology we come to appreciate centuries after they were burnt at the stake. They might have been right all along, but they were still heretics. But if our goal is to avoid heresy by remaining faithful to our traditions, then we have to push the envelope from within like the artistic avant garde. (Though I want to point out that it is a modernist prejudice to think that only the avant garde is 'real' art. Remaining comfortably within the bounds of current traditions is not a bad thing unless you begin to idolize tradition by denying that the avant garde is art at all.) Of course, these artistic metaphors don't help if what you want is certainty. 'Teveye says, because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.' This

is an understandable goal. But it is an impossible goal. Tradition is not the solution to our shakiness; it is the cause of our shakiness. Being faithful to Tradition is a balancing act, like trying to play the fiddle on the roof"<sup>39</sup>.

The objective of the study was to decode seeing as an autonomous, active, and purposeful activity of body and soul as a taste of the mystery of creative work. At the same time, we could also state that photography, in a certain way, also allows us to see better, but mainly prepares us for life situations, in which we should be able to define and distinguish the signs of lost paradise when we find ourselves in the country of the last things. "Reason does not lie behind us, nor is that where the meeting of minds takes place: rather, both stand before us waiting to be inherited. Yet we are no more able to reach them definitely then we are to give up on them"<sup>40</sup>. And this is what visual transcription and grasping reality through the photographer's body map, i.e., eye, mind, and heart, is based on.

<sup>38</sup> MCATEER, J.: *Without Our Traditions, Our Lives Would be as Shaky as a Fiddler on The Roof*. [online]. [2022-02-15]. Available at: <https://filmphilosopher.wordpress.com/2008/06/25/without-our-traditions-our-lives-would-be-as-shaky-as-a-fiddler-on-the-roof/?fbclid=IwAR3ySlu8UHsENh8bVrxbUxVb9wk\_4tGk51SAyOM4eX80crgUFC4A-3ULxu0>.

<sup>40</sup> MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Svět vnímaní*. Prague : OIKOYMENH, 2008, p. 53.

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Petra Cepková is a fine art photographer. She completed her doctoral studies in 2009 at the AFAD in Bratislava. She is a pedagogue at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava. As a photographer, curator, and pedagogue, she has participated in various publications. She has exhibited her works individually or as a part of collections in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, France, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Mexico, Korea, Italy, and Spain. Her works have been incorporated into collections and funds of renowned public institutions at home and abroad. She regularly attends professional conferences in the field of photography.

<sup>38</sup> MCATEER, J.: *Without Our Traditions, Our Lives Would be as Shaky as a Fiddler on The Roof*. [online]. [2022-02-15]. Available at: <https://filmphilosopher.wordpress.com/2008/06/25/without-our-traditions-our-lives-would-be-as-shaky-as-a-fiddler-on-the-roof/?fbclid=IwAR3ySlu8UHsENh8bVrxbUxVb9wk\_4tGk51SAyOM4eX80crgUFC4A-3ULxu0>.