

IMAGES IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT OR THE REBORN PHOENIX OF THE DOCUMENTAL IMAGE

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ABSTRACT Despite the frequent discussion, either in the academic environment or the media, concerning the documental image, in the context of the so-called crisis in the documental culture as a whole, there is no denial of the proliferation of images and the increasing of a production with this proposal in the universe of communicative relations, be it printed or digital. If, in the realm of art, the hegemonic contemporaneous action consists of the figurative destabilization of the images, on the massive production media side, there is the affirmation of its stability as a basic condition to the action of documenting. Therefore we are not dealing here with defining the meaning of documental, since we base ourselves on the presupposition that this aspect is presented as the result of figurative-enunciative, plastic and tensive strategies, responsible for the multiple sense regimes. From these choices and organizations derive interactive modalities, based on the mediate or immediate nature of the comprehensive process, in a value system limiting the communicative action which makes evident the practical, cognitive, emotional or fiduciary functions (based on supposed systems of belief) of the symbolic mediations. The more general issue which guides this proposal is to investigate how the different media operate with these images and what types of communicative implications they provoke.

Key-Words: Photojournalism; documental photography; information images; interactive relations.

INTRODUCCION

Although the crisis of the documental image's role, in view of the increasingly frequent explanation of the processes which involve its manipulations, as well as its expansion to the market of lay users made up of journalists or potential authors of the large news media, it shows up vigorously in our knowledge area, above all that which is linked to our mass communication media. Printed photographs and videographic images, televised or from the virtual area, are registered as witnesses of the events and have been taken as sources of important opinions for

our world view. They are utilized both in the academic-scientific area as well as in the vast domain of the various media, in which they function as testimonial evidence, critical orientations, stabilized ratifications in order to see what is “real” or provokers of emotional-passionate effects in inter-subjective relations. Even when faced with the multitude of experimental exercises aimed at the figurative destabilization of the image and therefore of its supposed reference value, prevalent in art, its insertion in propositions of an informative nature is still widespread.

In all these usages, the creation of the image marked by a clearly documental purpose, whether it be authorial or massive, as it has been used in the information area, registers however a recurrent tension between being characterized as a representation of something or construction of a subjective point of view. Various relational modalities also result from this choice, based on the mediate or immediate nature of the perceived actions, in a value system limiting the communicative action which makes evident the practical, cognitive, emotional or fiduciary functions (based on supposed systems of belief) of the symbolic mediations (FLOCH, 2002, pages 183-226 and 1986, pages 11-33). The more general issue which guides this proposal, therefore, is to investigate how the different media operate with these images and what types of communicative implications they provoke.

The naturalness with which images destined to represent real events and people are looked upon determines the leveling of their significant potentialities: at first glance, they all seem in conformance with the discursive standards in effect in a culture’s visual documentarism, above all due to their highly figurative appearance and supposed similarity to what they refer to. In the opposite direction of this perspective, we encounter visual discourses in their diverse interacting systems, by the mere fact of conceiving them as significant objects which, as such, form part of a semiotic system of which they are only some of the possible manifestations (GREIMAS, 2004, p. 84). We question, therefore, the much-disseminated assertion that iconic processes, or those with a high figurative concentration, are defined by traces of analogy with the object represented. They constitute, rather, culturally stabilized forms of “representation” of the world and, in most cases, politically hegemonic forms of “showing reality as it is”, according to the esthetic standards considered most appropriate for this purpose.

Guided by these principles, we understand, in short, that the different procedures aiming at creating effects of the meaning (or impressions) of reality shape the visual dynamics, generate distinct expectations and

degrees of complicity among those involved in the communicative action, and consequently end up by determining the methods of apprehension of reality through symbolic mediations.

Meaning effect of referent

Taking as a starting point the discursive semiotics presupposition (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 1979, entries *referente/*, *reference/* referent, pages 377-378; *figurativização/ figurativisation/* figurativization, pages 185-188; *iconicidade/ iconicité/* iconicity, pages 222-223), we consider informative images to be a meaning effect of reality, an impression resulting from discursive procedures, based on a kind of tacit contract established between those involved in the communicative action, for whom verbal and non-verbal text takes on an aspect of a true expression or, at least, of an expression which seeks to “represent” real events. In this line of thought, the referential world is apprehended by reading scrutiny which makes it significant, and also is presented as a text capable of being translated by means of other languages. The relations which are established, therefore, between what is called reality and language constitute an expression of inter-semiotic translation based on cultural principles of representation. According to this theoretical view, a documental image would be that which has as its purpose, explicit or not, the witnessing of the simulated fact or event, constructed based on argumentative or emotional arrangements which evoke effects of similarity and of presence. If we can draw some type of analogy in this case, it involves a similarity between the characteristics of the forms of expression and the characteristics of the content attributed to our socialized reading of the world, and not between language and reality.

In this process of figuration of experiences with reality, visual discourses can take on more stabilized aspects in a given culture when the iconizing procedures convoke traditionally established resources of representation, or on the contrary, cause ruptures capable of being encountered on different levels of achievement¹.

Therefore we are not dealing here with defining the meaning of documental, since we base ourselves on the presupposition that this aspect is presented as the result of figurative-enunciative, tensive and plastic strategies for making believe – either due to the supposed characteristic of indiciality (DUBOIS, 1993, p. 61) postulated, or due to its rupture, mobilizing in this case the “making believe” or the “seeming true” precisely through the questioning of an absolute truth or reality. For this work then, an image will be considered to be documental when it is put

up as such, which includes a very wide part of our experiences with the world by means of figures, considered to be informative, scientific and artistic, and expressed by a wide spectrum of channels and supports. A specific reduction is therefore necessary: from the start, the entire range of images linked to the scientific area, as well as the artistic ones which seek to break, by means of various forms of experimentalism, any type of anchoring with social, political and economic events of societies, are excluded from this discussion. Our reflections include photojournalism images and the so-called documental photographs, present in magazines and newspapers, from the print area; videographic documentaries, above all for dissemination in mass television programs, from the televisual area; and blogs and news sites with a photographic base or illustrated by images with various relations of complementariness between verbal and non-verbal. Based on this universe of expressions, we intend to develop this discussion seeking the constituting and constitutive visual dynamics of our current idea of the role of images, especially photography, as referent of the information disseminated by the media.

Each society establishes not only stabilized forms for visual representation of reality, capable of being positively or negatively axiologized, either due to what they represent or construct (photographs which praise or ridicule certain politicians, for example, such as those projected in the guise of official images or in “flagrants délits”²) or due to their own constitution (photos considered to be well made or in bad taste), but also establish technical-esthetic standards which are acclaimed as hegemonic in a given culture. These arrangements serve to qualify and legitimate the documental value of discourses, officially approved by the “quality standard seal”, such as that awarded to itself by the largest Brazilian television network, the Globo television system, asserting itself as spokesman for a major part of Brazilian society. As a result of these television standards, in the first place, printed newspapers also change. The printed newspaper with the largest circulation – *Folha de São Paulo* – has been systematically renovating its visual aspect having increasing recourse to large images and to fast news strategies (See *Folha Corrida*), and the weekly magazines such as *Veja*, for example, are expanding and multiplying these photographs as esthetic illustration as if to deepen the documentation of the main news items of the week. The online newspapers have not substantially changed this situation, and affirm their specificity more through the agility and ubiquity of the information than through the potentiality of a unique language. A significant difference is observed in some news sites and blogs, above all

those exclusively devoted to photographs, which take up again the now conventional difference between photojournalism, with its hurried aspect and impoverished technical resources, and documental photography, whose outstanding characteristic is the enunciative effect of presence of the subject in the symbolic construction.

Obviously, technical standards are subject to conditions of a financial nature and decide, in turn, many of the possibilities for esthetic choices, as is seen historically with the insertion of color in photographs, the apprehension of unique images (the decisive moment of Cartier-Bresson³), the association of image, sound and movement with reality effects, the quality of resolution and extent of the media, with a variety of offers and a differentiated public, which allows a media (mainly television) to offer more popular and more experimental programs, among others. Nevertheless, once installed as esthetic standards, these arrangements can serve as parameters and at the same time as barriers to other productions' entry into the market, as stated by Bolaño (2000, pages 234-235). Once again, Globo's style of production, with its self-proclaimed "quality standard", is an example of this situation. Entering into competition with its programming means, at the outset, adhering to a discursive-esthetic structure which is unique to it. This fact can be observed in the TV stations' news telecasts or in their documentary programs, and also in the print circuits, between a photojournalistic production emanating from the image agencies and that generated by photographers from an independent agency such as *Magnum*, for example. The same thing seems to occur in the universe of blogs and sites (and all kinds of novelties for the social networks and networks for sharing images which are emerging in their wake such as twitters, flickr, etc.), showing a frequent tension of the information image in a continuous axis of productions which are hegemonic (with the fame of many of them due to technological idioms) and counter-hegemonic.

Discursive patterns and interacting relations

The evocations provided by images, and which act on the receivers as reading instructions for the apprehension of the discursive events, are governed, in a general way, by two forms of relations (FONTANILLE, 2005, pages 142-148): those based on the immediacy or mediacy of the comprehensive processes. From the viewpoint of their natures, immediacy can be *cognitive* (and *practical*), or *emotional*, and mediacy can have a *critical* or *symbolic* dominance (Id., pages 142-145).

Examining televised issuances of tele-reality, Fontanille associates

cognitive and practical immediacy with evocations focused on the programs' content; emotional immediacy with the established system of believing; critical mediation with the emphasis on the concept underlying this or that type of program and symbolic mediation, due to its characteristic of trust with regard to the role of the presenter. We have incorporated partially some of these dimensions into the study in question, since they seem to us to be useful for this discussion. In the first place, the tension (and not simply the opposition) between mediacy and immediacy can be seen as useful, because it implies both a time of production as well as of differentiated apprehension: photojournalistic images, for example, should be made in the "heat of the moment" (when not taken from the files for possible coverage of news stories) and have their reading defined by the caption. Documental photography of an authorial nature presupposes the existence of a project and of its execution, in the same way as a more contemplative and lingering reception, especially because it ends up being integrated into the universe of expositions, books, catalogs, contests for awards, etc.

The "time" factor thus appears as an important differential between the two, including the entire process linked to the photographic action: taking the picture, organizing, editing and evaluating. In photojournalism, the agenda imposes an accelerated rhythm; in authorial photography, its deceleration. Obviously the financial question, and all the advantages and disadvantages resulting from it, places limitations on this premise.

In short, the relational value of mediacy/immediacy overrules the forms of apprehension of visual discourses, which can therefore take on axiologic values echoing the model of communication and consumption values (See FLOCH, with respect to marketing and advertising, as well as photography, respectively 2002 and 1986; FONTANILLE, 2005, p. 145): *practical, ludic, critical and symbolic*. It is pertinent to the analysis of these values the appropriation of the dimensions systematized by Fontanille for the study of the generic sequences of the openings of televised broadcasts (evocation of the content, concept, system of belief and the role of the presenter), which are in turn also defined by the modal values of the 1) *know-how*, in broadcasts designed to guide activities in the practical sphere; 2) *belief*, in those based on the *make feel* in the systems of belief; 3) *meta-knowledge*, in the opening sequences which reveal the concept of a program, of its critical function and 4) *believe and feel* in the evocations of the presenter's role, in which the latter expresses the program's representativeness, its content and ideology, highlighting the *symbolic* values postulated by Floch and sustaining the

inter-subjective relations on emotional-fiduciary links.

Applying these categories to the examination of photographic images, it is possible to postulate that *evocation by contents* makes an image's informative load evident. It consists not only in exercising a *know-how*, relating to competence in being able to show what is talked about in journalism, but also in a *making known*, of a transmitting nature, ratifying the traditional image of the journalist as a subject who knows how to transmit and transmits information, as well as of a linear view of the communicational process. Its most evident example is daily journalism, whether print, televised or virtual. The rhetoric accompanying it is that of certainty, of the remissive present, of the witnessed proof, strengthened by images or delegation of voices, such as interviews, testimony, sources of reference. In this case the image requires from the reader an exercise of mere recognition and possibly, of interpretative connections⁴.

Evocation by concept presupposes a cognitive mediation. It is not a question of generating contents which can be immediately deduced by lexicalizations or recognizable figures, but rather of tracing a profile, a proposition and the role of a language action. According to Fontanille, "the evocation of the concept establishes a technical distance between the spectator and the broadcasting he is watching, and also between the rules of a product which asserts itself as such, without considering the relation with reality, nor even with the symbolic investments which could bear the content of the broadcasting". It can be said that with respect to the image, it is a question of discourses concerned with its own attainment and the effects which the arrangements activated for this purpose cause in the spectator's perception, putting him in a critical position with relation to the enunciative actions at stake. An evaluation system is established which places in question the genre, the points of view, as well as the inter-subjective links convoked. Its examination should necessarily include the approach to the figurative construction processes, based on forms of stabilization and destabilization of the visual shapes. Accordingly, there are several arrangements of a technical-esthetic nature for differentiating photojournalism and authorial photography, which range from the choice of the equipment, methods and forms of circulation, the option for the use or not of film, flash, filters, and even the definition of color or black and white. Let us leave this dimension aside for now. However, it should be emphasized that it would be ingenuous *a priori* to establish conformities among these choices and the images' esthetic nature or not; hegemonies appear, obviously, but each discourse institutes the compositions' singularity. In addition, the technical options ended up by

taking on the characterizations of the genres in which they are included just as hegemonic styles.

To be faithful to the model proposed by Fontanille, there still remain two dimensions to comment upon: the *evocation by the system of belief and by the animator's role*, which interest us especially in this essay. The *animator's role* is the equivalent in journalism, as in the discourses in their totality, of the various types of presence and participation of the enunciator (the presenter being considered to be one of the multiple actorializations of the enunciator) and of the voices delegated by him. The *evocation by the system of believing* involves not only the reader/spectator's degree of trusted adhesion with respect to the visual enunciation presented but also the emotional sharing with the discourse, and by means of it between those involved in the communicative action, which predisposes an immediacy of common feeling. As clarified above, the spaces for evocation of these dimensions cannot be rigorously defined, but dominances can be shown, knowing that the media contaminate each other and the discourses take on various appearances, due to the competition itself, which justifies dissonant television programs, as well as photojournalistic products, in the uniform mass of the large daily productions. Based on not very exhaustive empirical observations and on studies already carried out by other authors, it would be plausible to associate the predominance of *evocation by content* with the photographs of daily journalism and the *evocation by concept* with reporting photography of the authorial kind (and their reproductions in television programs or in the virtual news communication processes), which from the relational viewpoint would imply respectively, cognitive immediacy on one hand and critical mediation on the other. Nevertheless, this assertion should be given consideration with caution, since photography itself as a documental project is subject to decisions of various types, constituting the technical-esthetic standards adopted as a visual formalization of the methods for looking upon the languages: either as mediations, or as experiences integrated into the totality of reality.

Emotional-cognitive tensions and inter-subjective derivations

The tensions which may possibly occur between the immediacy/mediacy and cognitive/emotional axes appear to be appropriate for comprehending another type of tension, normally associated with the wider divergence of press photography and documental photography, and which becomes apparent in the traditional debate over the different

degrees of valuation attributed to the so-called shock-photos and authorial photography of a documental nature. The comments made about the adjacent but in general fluid borders between these two products are usually vague. They say more about the receiver's subjectivity, in the sense that they express expectations or sensations awakened when facing an image, than about their potential for reading. For Barthes (2006, p. 107), for example, the shock-photo's inconvenience lies in the fact that everything is said (or shown) in the discourse; the photographer does not leave any gaps for the imagination of the receiver of the enunciation, who has before him all the indications for reading and for sensations, expressed in the most blatant possible way. Jean Baudrillard, on his part, in an interview granted to the newspaper *Le Monde*, at The International Photojournalism Festival of Perpignan/France – "Visa pour l'Image", the maximum event offering awards for press photographs, criticizes the artificial esthetization of the images, and postulates the need for the greater presence of empty spaces in photos (empty here can be conceived in two ways: physical, involving a re-dimensioning of the use of space in the composition of the visual discourse, and symbolic, involving a greater evocation of its semantic and sensitive virtual aspects, which reiterates to a certain extent the recurring assertion that the meaning should be evocative and not representative).

The impact (when it exists) caused by the shock-photo has an affinity with reactive attitudes, awakened by astonishment, disgust, fear, repulsion, when faced by figurations which the culture, at certain times in its history, prescribed as not representative, and therefore contrary to the standards of ethical and moral convenience of what can be seen or what can happen to be seen⁵. Its emergence and proliferation in the core of the same societies announces a cultural transformation, indicating a weakening of previous values. However, if these images lose the vigor of their effects, they do not totally eliminate the force of their acting on the pathetic states, either by appealing to morbid curiosity, which fuels the production of multiple sensationalist discourses nowadays, or by their rejection in indignant manifestoes when faced with their own explanation. Revealing human cruelty, or the impact of tragedies on our limited condition, shock-photos display mutilated bodies, blood, dead children, all being effective ingredients for stimulating emotional relations.

Nevertheless, attention turns in this case to the terror of the image itself, of what it means for the process of visual "recognition", quickly apprehensible from a slice of reality (even before there is time to close one's eyes in order not to see it). Its action is focused on cognitive

and emotional immediacy. In this sense, it can be considered “invasive”, since it implies a direct action, imposed by the image on the body itself, without the movement of the subject’s emotional availability necessary for the esthetic encounter, from which results its transformation in the world. If we are permitted a critical reflexivity on the event, this occurs afterwards thanks to its linking to supplementary information, to which it adheres as if it were adjacent to the real, therefore producing an illusory effect of a sense of reality and truth. From this it follows that its occurrence in frequent doses, due to the predictability of the shock, attenuates the impact and makes the discursive action banal. The same rapidity with which the phenomenon of apprehension takes place can be observed in the ephemeral nature of the impact’s duration, capable of being reduced to zero by the exhaustive nature of the occurrence.

These limiting cases are significant in order to dimension the difference between an image capable of promoting comprehensible actions (learning together), by actions of a sensitive nature, and that which has the most vulgar, most banal emotion, based on the principle of the immediate recognition of the referent represented, since it is a necessary condition for the precipitation of the impacting effect, the effective arrangement of inter-subjective relations. We can say that in this latter case, the cognitive and emotional immediacy are intimately related to promote links of passion, which are not necessarily established in systems of believing or by the enunciator’s role, but rather by the direct action of mediation of the images.

On the other hand, while also favoring evocations of content and emotional evocations of the images, the virtual informative sphere has attributed an important role to the enunciator, no longer as limited competence of the journalist, above all when consideration is given to the increase of the collaborative forms which journalism has been taking on in this domain. The question involves knowing up to what point this decentralization of a role, in order to assert it positively as a condition of discursive equality, leads to a new critical posture of the images which circulate in the media in general.

In the universe of participative journalism: the enunciator’s role

The systematics of creation, circulation and exchange of information on the network profoundly alter this centralizing position of journalism as a subject with competence for making-known, above all with the institution of the *Independent Media Centers*, free software, open agenda journalism. Although destabilizing in the sense of the interactions

obtained, this new condition does not appear to have significantly changed the production of images which accompany verbal news stories. In other terms, they continue, in their most frequent usage, to serve as anchors for the texts, with strong predominance, due to technological limitations, of the recourse to thumbnails, small photos which are juxtaposed with the catch lines, contrary to what occurs in print and television journalism, in which large impacting images (with high definition and resolution, "as if they were real") predominate. There is obviously the recourse of specific links of images, of photo galleries, which permit extension of the gaze to other images of the same series or of other series. A gaze in an abyss torn between recognizing the evidence of what is being reported and losing itself in an array of images which lead to new figures, which lead in turn to other matters in a labyrinthine structure. This architecture does not always reveal discoveries, nor does it always provide a hermeneutic thought, since repetition of the same thing, above all when events with worldwide repercussion occur, causes the circular character of the information to take effect immediately and causes the senses to become drained.

In the forms of participative journalism, with open agenda, *evocation by content* and the enunciator's role prevail increasingly. It can be said that they determine the systems of belief in the inter-subjective relations, but not as specialized sources or representatives of influential media, as in the traditional patters. On the network, they display *their* participation in the events, show what they say by means of the relationship of presence which they have with the happenings in the heat of the moment. To begin with, the esthetic development of an image with a view toward either functioning as a stopper, in the most advertising-type style possible, or providing a reflexive contemplation, is of little importance. The moment is condensed there, in all its imperfection, and indicating, with this, not only the simultaneity of the take, but also human impotence. Its value of truth derives from this. Even motivating heated arguments over an image's veracity, it is the role of the enunciator, as the subject participating in the event and not reflecting on the event, which is at risk. There lies the paradox of our current situation: the dismantling of the referential value of informative journalism provided by the network is neutralized in its own situation of taking up again, as a reborn Phoenix, the role of the image in the documentation of reality. Being in action, representing in a situation, causing to circulate in real time, revealing itself as witness and participant, these are the essential ingredients of a referent based on the old formula of the teller of tales, just like the

legend of the Indian Timbira who recounts the events in *I-Juca-Pirama* by Gonçalves Dias: "Boys, I saw it!"

| NOTES

- 1 It is appropriate here to recall the recurring assertions that the dominant figurative aspect in western societies is based on Renaissance perspective, that is to say, on the arrangements for transforming three-dimensional structures into two-dimensional surfaces, in which the idea of depth is represented based on certain codified resources, such as meaning effect. With regard to photography, the reflections of Vilém Flusser (2003) on the conceptual character of the arrangement (based on this perspectivist view) in the development of the image have been debated (MACHADO, 1997, pages 220-235; COUCHOT, 1993, pages 37-48), above all when it involves taking into consideration the possible destabilizations caused by the technical devices which followed them, as in the case of movies, TV, video and the computer.
- 2 See. Landowski, E. 2004, pages 31-70.
- 3 See Cartier-Bresson, in: Fontcuberta, J. 2003, pages 221-236.
- 4 On the other hand, in the academic area of the study of images, many theoretical works on semiotic analysis are still devoted to investigating the image in its various nuances of presentation and construction of inter-subjectivities, from this descriptive or interpretative point of view, equally leveling the phenomenon's complexity. Put in other terms, they confuse analysis with a mere exercise of recognition and interpretation of contents, which results precisely from the impression of those who look upon it from a distance, and with reservations. In addition, even in some supposedly more rigorous approaches, there occurs, at least with regard to semiotics of structural origin, the fact, as Landowski says, of "projecting on any object of study precisely the type of reading grid which was the rule more than fifty years ago among the founders of the structural approach" (2008, p.50-51), from which results, in the same way, a type of criticism which questions it generically only in these terms, as if its more up-to-date states were being talked about.
- 5 Consult, about this subject, the excellent study of Vivian Sobchack, published in the *Inscribing ethical space: ten propositions on death*,

- representation, and a documentary. *Quartely Review of film studies*. Vol. 9, nº 4, 1984.
- 6 Gonçalves Dias, Antologia Poética, 5th edition, Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1969. Accessed at <http://www.cce.ufsc.br/~nupill/literatura/i-jucapirama.html>

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