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NOTES ON THE DOCUMENTARITY OF THEATRE ATELIER PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract

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The ability of perception and interpretation of photographs, a fundamental component of visual culture, is today indispensable cultural and scientific competence. This article is intended to define field of analysis and interpretation of the theatre atelier photography, with an emphasis on one of its features – documentarity. It is also an attempt to justify the need for a comprehensive study of the theater the second half of the 19th age and equal treatment of materials documenting the phenomenon.

Theatre atelier photography is the main, apart from drawings published in newspapers, iconographic source material used to study the theatre of the second half of the 19th century. The visual culture, which seems to dominate nowadays, developing visual studies – anthropology, ethnography and visual sociology caused that more theatre historians are reaching for iconographic material giving it different from classical descriptions and 19th century spectacles interpretations meanings. For a long time photography studies, also theatre photography studies, focused on the recording of phenomena and illustrating a text, they did not constitute a separate study material which would be able to contribute new cognitive content to the examined problem¹.

¹ See P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia jako metoda badawcza*, Warszawa 2005, p. 9.

150 years since the popularization of atelier photography have equipped science with a lot of valuable tools putting the discussed problem in a different, completely new light. Erwin Panofsky believes that:

It is the curse and the blessing of the academic study of art that its objects necessarily demand consideration from other than a purely historical point of view. [...] It is a blessing because it keeps the academic study of art in a constant state of tension, consistently challenging methodological consideration [...]. It is a curse because it introduces an uncertainty and fragmentation into scholarship which is hard to tolerate and because the attempt to discover inherent laws has often led to results which either cannot be reconciled with serious scholarship or which appear to offend the notion that the individual work of art has a unique value².

Panofsky's reflections were based on works of art but his remarks seem to be valid also for theatre source materials, especially documents purely visual like photography or drawings. A picture is a combination of signs, and each single of them and they all together create the meanings. Some of them reflect reality directly, for example an actor and his costume, others only relate to it, like often unrealistic scenery. Of course, a complete depiction of reality is not possible because a two-dimensional photograph only refers the three-dimensional space, nevertheless photography not only contains some signs but also a hypothesis which opens ways for many possible interpretations.

Photography has dominated over the visual culture almost since the very beginning of its existence, it made it common and democratic to such an extent that the correctness of its perception became a condition of proper functioning in modern times, and the ability to read pictures – a necessary cultural competence³, and what follows, also scientific. A picture contains within signs and symbols, it is an expression of ideology, convention and meanings which were not given to it now, but which have existed since the origin of a picture.

Among all stimuli man is most sensitive to visual stimuli, has the biggest, as it seems, cult for a picture, which is etched in their memory most easily, starting with photographs in identity cards, through portraits of state leaders, fashion, advertising, commemorative and reportage photographs. [...] Pictures are easy to be taken in every circumstances, to be distributed in millions of copies, to be worn on a heart⁴.

Methodological tools which have been provided for 10 years, since the invention of photography, cannot be used uncritically because the historical perspective devaluates definitions, changes the way of perception, redefines the methods, modifies the interpreted picture. Atelier theatre photography set different goals, different were its sources and functions from modern theatre photography, also the theatre of the second half of the 19th century was a different event than it is now, thus it does not seem

² E. Panofsky quoted after: G. Didi-Huberman, *Przed obrazem. Pytanie o cele historii sztuki*, Gdańsk 2011, p. 5.

³ B. Stiegler, *Obrazy fotografii. Album metafor fotograficznych*, Kraków 2009, pp.13–15.

⁴ U. Czartoryska, *Plastyczne przygody fotografii*, Warszawa 1965, p. 161.

to be possible to adapt easily contemporary research methods to pictures often more than 150 years old.

Atelier photographs, due to the character of the presented actions, can fulfill different functions, however, in the theatre studies they seem to function mainly as a documentary material. So what does it mean that a photograph is a document? Bernard Stiegler states that:

The purpose of photography – what is documented by numerous texts from the beginning of its history – is to archive the world, write it down with incorruptible precision. It transforms objects into pictures and stores them in the form of pictures, which are the proof of their existence even after the objects themselves no longer exist. These pictures are stored in archives, libraries, albums and are used for far and near journeys into your own past. Photography changed the reality into picture, became a new technology of graphical – archival assimilation of the world⁵.

He stresses not only the factography of pictures but also the way they function – by confirming the existence of a specific phenomenon, immortalized on a photograph, the possibility to place it in the cause-effect and space-time line (localizing it in the specific system of other photographs) and to assimilate and understand it because of the symbols and signs conveyed in them and the conventions, in which they were expressed.

Krzysztof Olechnicki defines documentary photography as ‘a visual record of some event, which happened in a specific point in the space-time’⁶. A document would mean then such a photograph which was not arranged, is not a fictional construction but represents a real situation. Bertold Brecht, on the other hand, stresses the feature which puts under question the genuineness of the presented image, because, according to him, photography is a kind of medium which erases the context⁷. A photograph, in this perspective, is only what it presents, and it is not possible to draw any conclusions on its basis about the reality outside the frame. Olivier Lugon as the characteristics of documental style in photography specifies: focus, precision, brightness, clearness⁸; to this list should also be added: impersonality, directness, reality, the ability to move the emotions of the viewer⁹, and at the same time a distance to the presented events¹⁰.

Adam Sobota, considering the notion of a document, stresses that its value, which is most often recalled, is objectivity and he turns our attention to the need to precise this term depending on the specific field of science, the document is to serve. The objectivity is closely connected to the notion of realism, functioning in the specific epoch

⁵ B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

⁶ K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia jako metoda, przedmiot i medium nauk społecznych*, Warszawa 2003, p. 272.

⁷ B. Brecht quoted after: B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

⁸ O. Lugon quoted after: B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

⁹ W. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New York 1973, p. 14.

¹⁰ D. Price, *Surveyors and surveyed: photography out and about* [in:] L. Wells (ed.), *Photography. A critical Introduction*, London–New York 2004, p. 94.

– a convention which let us perceive a picture as realistic¹¹. An objective object is the subject of the emotions of a photographer but also viewers, who add their own feelings, experiences and associations, and place it in a precisely specified world of meanings and emotions, but also intellect, their own knowledge, abilities and possibilities. Each source material, analyzed by a theatre historian, not only photography, but also newspapers, epistolography, prints or theatre playbills should be perceived in the categories of the culture, in which it came into being. Sometimes only time distance and the knowledge of different epochs from different sources allow us to recreate wholly its realism.

The photography of the first half of the century of its history is denied the conscious assigning the function of documenting, as the documentarity was to be its essence¹². A radical change of an attitude to this issue started only in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, when the documentary photography was recognized as a cultural construct presented only by means of natural pictures, and the effect of reality as an ideological effect¹³. A modern photography is a simulacrum, a picture, which does not need an original and does not relate to it in any way, it is itself an enough value to support its existence¹⁴, the documentary function often becomes unimportant. Walter Benjamin confirms the documentarity of photography, its ability to be a witness of the past but only when it is put in the context of other media¹⁵.

The discussed kind of theatre iconography does not fit into such parameters of documentary photography, although its ontology requires both taking an attitude towards these features and creating new, characteristic only for it and distinguishing atelier theatre photography from other studio photography or stage photographs.

Photography treated as a document confirms a fact which took place in a specific time and place in the past. Theatre atelier photography does not confirm, however, as it is usually believed, existing of a stage performance, a specific dramatic scene, an actor's pose or a scenery, but only a meeting of a photographer with an actor or actors in a studio in the specific space of a photography atelier, at the specific time, which is not the time of the spectacle duration.

It seems appropriate to introduce now the considerations over the term of documentary photography and to clearly distinguish its character from 'documenting photography', although it is not an easy task, especially when we take into consideration that, as it is highlighted by Stiegler:

In the 19th century describing photography as a document could be still a pure tautology, because in the contemporary understanding photographs were not only documents but also a pictorial reality 'sui generis'¹⁶.

¹¹ A. Sobota, *Odslony dokumentalności* [in:] M. Kozień-Świcy, M. Miskowicz (eds.), *Rzeczywistość a dokument, Materiały z sesji naukowych zorganizowanych w ramach 5. Krakowskiej Dekady Fotografii*, Kraków 2008, p. 63, 66.

¹² B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

¹⁴ See J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacja*, Warszawa 2005.

¹⁵ W. Benjamin quoted by Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 238.

¹⁶ B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

Slawomir Sikora holds a similar opinion; while presenting the development of the notion of photography he recalls the thought of Abigail Solomon-Gogea, about the identity of the meanings of both terms in the 19th century¹⁷. The distinction is important, because, as it seems, the documentation of a theatre spectacle includes, on specific terms, into the field of its interest documentary photographs, giving it documenting character.

Documentary photography assumes, in contrast to 'documenting photography', conscious shaping of esthetic, ethic and social value of the presented event. The purpose of 'documenting photographs' is to preserve as accurately as possible the image of a particular phenomena, with a detailed attention to the imitation of its shape, color and texture. The difference seems to also lie in the intention, photographic practice whose aim is to register the real condition of objects or events gives a picture documenting character, whereas it gains documentary character when it is supposed to express the opinion of a photographer about the presented object. 'Documenting photography' should be the most objective and complete, a documentary photograph, highlighting one or several aspects of reality, becomes selective and, what comes with that, subjective.

Documentary photography, in contrast to 'documenting photography', constitutes the part of artistic photography, which products provide esthetic pleasure, and it is also subordinated to other aims, purely commercial, which cannot be said about documenting photos, which possess mainly cognitive function. Atelier theatre photography apart from esthetic satisfaction resulting from looking at the image itself, fulfills also other functions. The functionality of photography is closely connected with the way it is read. In different way we read a documentary photograph than artistic or press one; each of them must possess its code, which would allow to decipher the content, and the viewer should use the language, which would allow their reading. Theatre atelier photography combines different functions:

- documentary, as it is contemporary an evidence of not only the presented reality, theatre, actors, props, but also of an atelier, the technical possibilities of the new medium, the abilities of a photographer
- artistic (esthetic) as it is a result of an actor's creation and the artistic actions of a photographer
- promotional, both in the classic form (photography) as in a press print (based on it), reproduced in newspapers, magazines and books.

Depending on the particular picture, the immortalized actor, stage persona, or drama, photography can additionally have informative, heuristic, explanatory, social-propaganda, political, collector's functions, and the methodology which will serve the interpretation of theatre atelier photography should take into consideration each of them and work out a language which would take into consideration all their features. An important aspect is also the fact that the functionality of a photograph

¹⁷ S. Sikora, *Dokument dziś* [in:] M. Koziń-Swica, M. Miskowicz (eds.), *Rzeczywistość a dokument, Materiały z sesji naukowych zorganizowanych w ramach 5. Krakowskiej Dekady Fotografii*, Kraków 2008, p. 54.

changes as the time goes by, promotional aims recede into the background, giving up their place to documental, social- propaganda – informative functions, or the other way round, causing the meanings to multiply and undergo transformations¹⁸.

The foregoing considerations lead towards the questions which should begin the analysis and interpretation of theatre atelier photography: What is in a photograph? How do we know that this is what we think this is? What proofs the authenticity of the presented phenomena? How faithfully the particular scene was transmitted from the stage into photo atelier? The first question allows us to understand the general idea of the image, the following put forward detailed hypotheses and research problems¹⁹.

Theatre atelier photography does not fit into documenting categories, but its documentary functions are obvious. Reporting arguments advocating the documentarity of a photograph – it is an actor's creation, reflecting not only objective reality but also dramatic creation moved from a stage to a studio, so it is a way of perceiving the immortalized scene by an actor, but also a photographer, because it shows how he perceives an actor and a stage persona²⁰. The multiplication of the recorded, artificially created reality (doubly – first: theatre and fictional, second: atelier, being theoretically the repetition of a scene played in a theatre) causes overlapping the methods of looking at and reading the recorded image, constitutes then the subjectivity and selectivity (a photographer, as well as an actor underlines different aspects of recorded image). The education of a photographer, his esthetic taste, his knowledge of dramatic and theatre trends and also personal preferences cannot be without any significance for the final effect of his work, namely: the photo.

What is more, we should also remember that the different analyses and interpretation of visual culture is a natural phenomenon, because there are different cultural competences of the researchers, their point of view, context in which they read the photo, education or sex. None of the photos, as well as none of other manifestation of visual culture, is free from social circumstances, which has to find its reflection in the photography.

The doubling of the presented reality, through transition of the theatre world into the world of atelier, puts under question also faithfulness and minuteness of the recreated scene. The change of one space into another is not possible without the change of the meaning of each element of a spectacle, as the spaces differ in size, lighting, color, even scenery, propos, the way the costume is arranged. What is more, the scene in an atelier is static as opposed to live, dynamic theatre performance.

The mentioned earlier intention of the person taking the photo goes far beyond the pure desire to immortalize earnestly a particular phenomenon. A photographer as well as an actor aimed at satisfactory, if not perfect, image, which would meet personal expectations of both artists but also the expectations of the audience, and which

¹⁸ A. Saj, *Zmienna wartość fotografii dokumentalnej* [e-doc.], p. 205; http://www.asp.wroc.pl/dyskurs/Dyskurs9/Andrzej_Saj.pdf [access: 2.01.2013]

¹⁹ Por. K. Olechnicki, *op.cit.*, p. 223.

²⁰ See A. Kędziora, *Polscy szekspiryści w atelierowej fotografii teatralnej końca XIX i początku XX wieku* [in:] *Szekspir w kulturze polskiej*, Kraków 2012.

would build and promote their image. Photographs were to fulfill some functions in the society, which generated the proper way of taking them, extending way farther than the usual register of events. The photographer's artistic preferences, his knowledge of current artistic trends, especially in painting, purposeful or subconscious imitation or at least inspiration shape the subjectivism of immortalized image, place it in the context of other photographs, and at the same time contradict the objective, faithful reflection of reality. Photography as a cultural sign, and not natural²¹, cannot in a precise and direct way reflect the reality, thus it seems justifiable to propose a term, appropriate for atelier photography, a subjective document, including into analysis and interpretation of the photo the author's will – a subjective 'photographic gesture'²².

Thomas S. Kuhn introduced the term of the context of discovery and the context of justification, which were acknowledged, by the interlocutors of the discussion on the documentarity of photography, to be adequate to its description²³. According to this interpretation the context of discovery would be a complex process including not only the decisive moment (according to the conception of Henri Carter-Bresson), being the choice of the most appropriate moment, which would be immortalized, but also all accompanying procedures, such as: choosing topic, cropping or staging the immortalized fragment of reality, the fact of taking a photograph itself and the developing of a photograph. The context of justification serves the justification of the origin of a photograph: discovering its sources, results and functions – author's intentions, the desire of scientific cognition of immortalized image, expressing yourself, giving it an artistic function (providing esthetic satisfaction) and also utilitarian functions – cognitive, promotional, ludic, magical-ritual, commemorative²⁴.

The context of discovery in theater atelier photography, apart from strictly technical assumptions of a photograph production process, turns our attention to the choice of the decisive moment. Is it a moment dramatically crucial for a play or a spectacle? One, which allows the most esthetic depiction of a portrayed scene? In which an immortalized artist presents himself/herself best? Many of the preserved photographs allow (with the help of dramatic texts and press reviews) to determine the specific scene, recorded by camera, similarly as actors' portraits enable us to recognize the presented character, which inclines to the creation of generalization that the choice of stage character and dramatic scene is identical with the key figure or the crucial stage moment.

Atelier photography is staged photography, what, according to Andrzej Saja²⁵, undermines the existence of the basis of documentary photography – the decisive moment. However, we should remember that, what has been mentioned earlier, theatre photographs are ruled by different laws and the decisive moment for the photo-

²¹ B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

²² A. Saj, *op.cit.*, p. 207.

²³ See *Rzeczywistość a dokument...*, A. Saj, *op.cit.*

²⁴ A. Saj, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

graphed reality does not have to overlap but can be replaced by the crucial moment for a dramatic spectacle.

The history of photography elaborated terms describing particular types of documentary photos, consciously and on purpose including the subjectivity of an author (*New Documents*), combining the staging of an image, understood as resignation from a decisive moment, posing straight in front of a camera, with the role of photographer reduced to minimum (descriptive photography) and the inspiration by currently modern trends in photography, and also applied art, significant interference of the author of a photo in order to work out and not simply capture the decisive moment (para documentary photography)²⁶. Theatre atelier photography seems to be the closest to para documentary photographs, because the staging efforts of a photographer in order to record a scene were often radical, appropriate to current fashion, also in photography, in a natural way obeyed the valid conventions, at the same time as a result of choosing an appropriate scene or a character and the process of positioning and posing a model, retouching, picture framing (vignettes, borders, shapes of pictures) reached the moment of the highest dramatic and esthetic tension.

Within the range of interests of a historian are also portrait photographs, private actors' images, ruled by different laws and conventions, but also important from the comparative point of view, which allows to discover actor's visual tools, such as the mimic or face features.

In the contemporary reflections on the value of photography as a document dominates, existing in the science since the 60's, the conviction about crisis of documentary photography and documenting possibilities of a photograph, which results not from the changes in photographs themselves and the process of taking pictures, but is mainly an effect of the way they are thought of, which situates in the centre of interest not their referentiality but symbolism²⁷. However, a photograph seems to remain a document not only of referred reality but also of a certain way of thinking about taking photographs as a process, a theatre, an actor, stage art. It is also an evidence of the conditions, in which the picture was taken, the technical abilities²⁸. Theatre photography analysis, in order to be complete, should take into consideration all aspects, also the technical ones: the size of a photo, the state of preservation, decoration, company's overprints, signatures, dates. It is extremely easy, because of repeatability and even banality of some elements, simply ignore them, when in fact they are the evidences of the importance of a portrayed artist, popularity of a spectacle, they inform about the date and place of its origin.

Superficiality in photography analysis concerns not only its technical aspects but also the content-related ones. While working on some historical-theatrical problem and browsing through hundreds of atelier photos it is extremely easy to stuck in a rut and adapt visual cliché²⁹ to smilingly similar, but in fact totally different photos. It

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 208–209.

²⁷ See *Rzeczywistość a dokument...*

²⁸ A. Sobota, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

²⁹ A term by K. Olechnicki, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

would seem that a theatre researcher acquires practice in interpreting photos, when in fact, their perception is in danger of stereotyping which may effect in missing a lot of important details.

The notions of document and documentarity have evolved. Adam Sobota notices the difference between documentary photography of the 19th and 20th century in the approach to the modern esthetic trends; between painting and photography of the 19th century there can be found a lot of similarities in the way some topics were depicted, the 20th century, on the other hand, developed documentary photographs negating programmatically esthetic canons in the expression, techniques and interpretation³⁰. In the first period of the photography development dominant influence had Realism and Impressionism, later – in the first quarter of the 20th century – Dadaism and Constructivism³¹. The influence of photography on the society was, however, completely different from the influence of painting. The advantage of photography over works of art is that it can be easily reproduced, it is available for a wide spectrum of viewers in a time and place convenient for them, it makes it easier to exchange composition and thematic solutions, and what follows, it leads to mixing of cultural models³². Photography possesses much stronger connection with reality than painting, a photograph – even if it is later processed (for example retouched) – it always reflects an actual fact, a painter can create an image of situation or a person, which has never existed. Painting refers to an issue which is expressed directly by photography³³.

It might seem that digital photography has shaken the axiom of the authenticity of the reflected by a photograph reality, but in fact the techniques used were also known by traditional photography. The most popular and the earliest include, of course, retouching, relatively quickly photo-montage appeared, but there also existed more subtle ways to falsify (or maybe just beautify) the image, for example colouring the photographs. The decrease of trust, which we can observe in relation to digital photography is not a result of, as it is commonly believed, new technologies, but the attitude towards the studied photos³⁴. Without any doubt it cannot be adapt to all branches of science, because it is not true, for example, for anthropology or cultural sociology, but in case of theatre and stage photography analysis such an approach seems to have a solid foundation.

Styles in painting are closely connected with styles in photography, however, they do not always reflect acting styles, which undermines the credibility (documentarity) of a depicted scene. Acting style presented by the immortalized in a dramatic scene actor confronted with the vision of a photographer results in an image, in which at least two ways of perception meet. In the second half of the 19th century, the first half century in the existence of photography, the stage was the witness of classicist acting, romantic acting, realistic, and at the turn of century – naturalistic, mod-

³⁰ A. Sobota, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³¹ The last two trends had an immense impact on expanding the spectrum of photographic possibilities, and what follows, applying it to new fields. U. Czartoryska, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 50.

³³ S. Sontag, *O fotografii*, Warszawa 1986, p. 141–142.

³⁴ See Z. Olechnicki, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

ernistic. In painting artists reached for realism, impressionism, symbolism, secession, trends from which drew photographers, however, they did not try to choose characteristic means of expression for a character or actor, such as impressionist overexposure and chromatic aberrations or secessionist asymmetries and casual compositions³⁵ reflecting such and not another acting style.

Theatre photography should be studied in a complex way, none of the elements should be left out, especially the objects available in a tangible way: costumes, props, scenery. Only the research material available in different forms and from different sources allows to talk about the performance in a solid and creditable way. The photography itself is only an evidence of a photograph as a photograph, it does not refer in an objective way to the reported reality, it becomes, as stated Bertold Brecht, a medium without context³⁶. Whereas theatre photography can confirm or contradict the information, which is known from different sources to the researcher, but first of all, provide knowledge, which is not available in any other way.

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³⁵ A. Benicewicz-Miazga, E. Klauziński, A. Góra, *O fotografii. Historia, nurty, kierunki, mody, podziały*, p. 11–12, [e-doc.], http://ckfoto.pl/foldery/nurty_artykul.pdf [access: 2.01.2013]

³⁶ B. Brecht quoted after: B. Stiegler, *op.cit.*, p. 55.