

3/ BIOPICTORIALITY – THE FIGHT FOR THE EYE

'A picture should ... be made just as sharp as the eye sees it and no sharper.'¹⁷

Peter Henry Emerson, 1889

'... if people had been aware of ... potentialities [of photography] they would have been able with the aid of the photographic camera to make visible existences which cannot be perceived or taken in by our optical instrument, the eye; i.e., the photographic camera can either complete or supplement our optical instrument, the eye.'¹⁸

László Moholy-Nagy, 1927

The previous chapter emphasised the opposition of 'iconicity' and 'indexicality' of photographs. Now we shall try to identify the specific mechanisms enabling an iconic aesthetic to be applied to photographs. First, let me emphasise that the following sections, describing specific technical features of photography, are not a brief history of photographic inventions. They were written to explain and define several sources of the aesthetic principles of photography, as well as certain features of cognition that we experience when we see the world through photography.

The two contradictory quotations at the beginning of this chapter refer to two completely different understandings of the concept of technical images. One asks photography to mimic human vision while the other calls for the extension of human vision. Photography from that perspective seems to be in a schizophrenic situation. But the situation is even more complicated. Photography is not torn between these two demands, but, as we shall see, among three. In addition to mimicking the eye, it is asked to mimic handmade images.

We can start by looking through the prism of one of the founders of modern media studies: Marshall McLuhan. We will examine two of his basic theses. First, according to McLuhan, each medium contains in itself the characteristic features of other, older media: '... the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print ...'¹⁹ Second, the 'media are extensions of the human

¹⁷ Peter Henry Emerson, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 119

¹⁸ László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 28.

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 10.

body'; photography can thus be seen as an extension of the eye and nervous system.²⁰

An analysis of the influence of biology, technique and art history on photography could begin with the first of McLuhan's theses. If we accept the idea that new media contain the legacy of older media, we need to find out why it should be so. Why should every medium benefit from older media? McLuhan's examples – of handwriting and speech, of printing and the written word – are not, of course, really subject to debate; there was no other option. But what if the situation is less clear? If we discuss painting and photography, does photography contain painting and other handmade images? It definitely does and following pages will discuss it in detail. We can suggest that one of the reasons that the media contain other, older media is that we, the users, simply put them into it. We mould new media according to the shape of older media. This does not mean that some new media are less independent, but we need to integrate the old ones in order to easily and conveniently understand the new ones. This explains a lot of the aesthetics and features of photography. In addition to clarity, however, there is another reason why the heritage of old media lingers on: the legitimacy of the senior media. Older media are legitimate simply by being older. They exist and have existed. In psychology, this is called 'mere-exposure effect': what we know is generally more acceptable and perceived more positively than the unknown. A number of experiments have been carried out to demonstrate this effect using words, photographs of faces, and so on. For example, experimental subjects were asked to guess whether the meanings of words in a language they did not know was positive or negative. The language was fictional and the words had no meaning at all, of which the subjects were not informed. The words that were repeated more often during the experiment were usually estimated as positive. In another experiment, experimental subjects saw photographs of various faces. Those people whose faces were shown several times during the experiment were in the end judged as more sympathetic.²¹ It can be suggested the media might work in this way too. The new media can be fascinating but not necessarily sympathetic. In order to be legitimate, to be sympathetic, each medium must initially refer to older media, taking on some of their properties or even disguise. While referring to older media, the new medium borrows its legitimacy and slowly builds its own. Only in conquering its legitimacy does the new

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Mere-exposure effect or, as it is sometimes called, 'familiarity effect', was systematically analysed by Robert Zajonc, who was also the author of the experiments mentioned. Robert B. Zajonc, *The Selected Works of R.B. Zajonc* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

medium become separate and autonomous, obtaining a spectrum of its own properties. The new medium will win the right to its own nature only by living long enough to get it.

Few people would be surprised to hear that, of ante-photographic media, it is painting, or more generally handmade images, that is most present in photography today. Nevertheless, the presence of painting in common non-art photography is much greater than we are willing to believe. Surprisingly, the specific mechanisms of relations between handmade and technical images are not – and in contradiction with prevailing opinion – as precisely analysed as they deserve to be.²²

If, in parallel to McLuhan's idea, we suggest the working hypothesis that the content of photography is painting, then we need to ask a fundamental question: in what ways do paintings and handmade images enter photography? The answer is twofold: first, photo media are intuitively interpreted or perceived through our experience with ante-photographic visual media; second, those who constructed and construct cameras, lenses, films, and sensors – from the early inventors and engineers to employees of developing departments of large corporations – work according to the set patterns and characteristics of handmade images.

From these two points inevitably another question arises: do we intentionally use ante-photographic visual media in interpreting photography or designing photographic equipment? Certainly not, but the following sections will demonstrate the specific ways that, without our intention, handmade images infiltrate technical images.

However, though we put the properties of the handmade image into photography, we like to compare the photographic camera to the eye. Biological metaphors, for example the camera as a (mechanical) eye, have long been part of the photographic vocabulary. In the first photographic book, *The Pencil of Nature*, Henry Fox Talbot writes about 'eye' of the instrument. The catalogue of the largest exhibition of avant-garde photography in 1929 was called *Foto-Auge* (Photo Eye), an echo of the 1924 Russian cult film *Kino-Glaz* (Cine Eye). In some languages, even the word 'eye' entered the terminology; in my mother tongue, I refer to single- and twin-lens reflex cameras as 'single-eye' and 'twin-eye'. Metaphorically, we say that the camera 'sees' or 'can see'.

²² The relations between photography and painting are well researched as far as pictorialism – historical photographic style – is concerned. Photographers of this movement intentionally integrated many painterly references and techniques in their work. They used painterly themes, stylisations, gestures, and so on. This kind of photography, however, was always marginal and it is not the theme of this book. In this book, I concentrate on those who imported painting into photography unintentionally. Our view on the theme is that of media studies not of art history.

Indeed, we believe that a photograph, whether a private snapshot or *repho* existing in millions of copies, represents the eye, which ‘sees’ into the past or to remote locations. Photography is often praised for its realism, and it is assumed that it is the ‘realism’ of human sight. Its technical view seems to be ‘biological’. Even if photographers and, more importantly, the inventors, designers and developers of photographic equipment do not want the camera to mimic the human eye, they unintentionally mirror paintings. Handmade images are present already in the mathematical and chemical formulas of photographic equipment, thus blending painting, biology and technique. We believe that cameras are instruments for making technical images, which we believe is a substitute for the human eye (a prosthesis for the human eye). This is partly true, but the experience of the human eye was long ago reshaped by the cultural heritage of painting. We believe that we imitate anatomy, but we imitate in reality the history of ante-photographic images. This ambivalent situation shall be termed *biopictoriality* – combining human sight and the pictoriality of handmade images. Biopictoriality is the way our culture transforms our vision, or, more simply, photography is what the culture *thinks* about our eyes.

Although photography as art is of marginal interest to this book, I opened this chapter with quotations by two personalities in the field of art photography – PH Emerson and László Moholy-Nagy. Both were eloquent theorists who formulated their opinions and views with precision. While they are utterly contradictory, they are good examples of the biological and counter-biological views of photography.

Peter Henry Emerson, in *Naturalistic Photography for the Students of Art* (1890), fought for *natural* photography. He argued that photography, if it is supposed to be art, must reject its mechanical nature. For Emerson, the cornerstone was the human eye, more precisely our assumptions about how the human eye sees. Emerson was well read and his sophisticated theory was directly influenced by science, namely, by Hermann von Helmholtz’s ophthalmological studies. Emerson’s photographs, for example, are only sharp in a small area of the photograph, because this is how the eye focuses on the main theme, blurring the rest of the reality on the periphery. He was opposed to traditional photography, which usually strives to achieve uniform sharpness – or uniform unsharpness. He refused to use lenses whose focal length he considered ‘false’, because, according to him, these did not match the vision of the human eye. He also considered ‘false’ lenses that depicted reality more sharply or accurately than could the human eye. Emerson’s ‘naturalism’ was an attempt to impose biological parameters on photography, and thus to give it the autonomy of an independent medium. Emerson’s approach to photography was extreme but at the same time logical. He summed up an unspoken

yet very common tacit persuasion, that photography, from a formal point of view, should show the world as we see it.

If Emerson wanted photography to see the world like we do, then László Moholy-Nagy wanted photography to see the world like we do not. He wanted photography to exceed biology. As a theoretician, he was quite radical. In 1927, 40 years after Emerson, he wrote: 'Although it has spread enormously, nothing essentially new has been discovered in the principle and technique of photography since the process was invented. Every innovation since introduced – with the exception of X-ray photography – has been based on the artistic, reproductive concept prevailing in Daguerre's day: reproduction (copy) of nature in conformity with the rules of perspective. Every period with a distinctive style of painting since then has had an imitative photographic manner derived from the painterly trend of the moment.'²³

Interestingly, both Emerson and Moholy-Nagy were fighting for photography as an independent medium. Both went in an anti-painterly direction. The difference is that Emerson wanted to achieve the independence of photography through biology, Moholy-Nagy by exceeding biology. What they have in common, however, is that their points of view have never had a wider influence.

Photography's painting heritage could seem natural, logical and even – in some sense – justifiable. But it should not be natural – not if we seek 'new' messages from the 'new' media. It could give us new experiences, new ways of communication and even new ways of thinking.²⁴ The potency of the new medium – in the case of photography, however, one almost 200 years old – is much broader than the one with which you normally work. Actually, we can say that the medium of photography has never exploited its potential. Photography has remained biopictorial and therefore – in the Moholy-Nagy sense – far beyond its capabilities. It has refused the technological innovations that would bring not only a new aesthetic but also a different perception of the world. Photography's technological backwardness is discussed in detail in the next chapter. The legitimacy of current photographic technology is undermined only by scientific photographs, some of which have become popular icons. Oddly enough, avant-garde art contributed only marginally to the destruction of painterly aesthetic canons in photography.

²³ Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 27.

²⁴ Marshall McLuhan's famous statement, 'the medium is the message', from 1964, means that the character of the medium thoroughly defines what is being communicated. From this perspective, photography, with its inherited painterly properties, seems to be something that does not fulfil its possibilities. It does not communicate what it could.

Family snapshots, like 'artistic' photography, borrowed from painting the principles of composition, various iconographic canons, the Renaissance convention of perspective, colour canons – before the advent of colour, the metaphorical black and white range – visual narrative strategies, and so on. In order to implement painting into photography, photographic equipment (lenses, films, sensors, software) had to be constructed according to painterly and biologically seeming correctness. However, in order to analyse the painterly aspects of photography, we must examine the conflict between painting and the inborn autonomous properties of photography.

ALLITY

One of the key properties of photography, and perhaps the most significant obstacle to its pictorial heritage, is the indiscriminate presentation of everything in front of the lens at the moment of the exposure. It is this property that makes photography so fascinating and, at the same time, something that stirs resistance among those who would prefer the photographic vision to remain painterly – that means all of us. A photograph shows an abundance of detail that was not put there intentionally, but through which you can wander with your eyes for as long as you wish – the folds of a shirt, cracks in²⁵ the walls, the shape of leaves on a tree in the background, details of dress, floor, random figures in the image, a piece of chipped paint on the railing, rose petal, a hole in a socket, and so on. Although theorists sometimes discuss this property of photography, there is no generally acknowledged term for it. Since we will discuss it thoroughly, it is necessary to coin a term for it. It should not be a long word, because the topic is rather simple. I was searching for a short word to describe the fact that photography shows all – and so I came to the neologism *allity*.

This property, of showing banal or possibly unimportant but in the end fascinating things, is shared by no other media, whether born before photography or after it. Film is relatively accurate as far details are concerned, but it moves and 'superfluous' details are becoming continuously 'non-present'. Photographic *allity* is as fascinating as it is problematic for those who wish to see themselves, rather than the camera, as the author of photographs. A considerable proportion of photography with artistic ambitions, as well as advertising and fashion photography, but also documentary and family photography, attempts to be perfect – in a way, 'painted'. They are fighting hard

²⁵ There were exceptions, however. Miroslav Petříček suggested the use of the term 'over-presence'.

for an iconic aesthetic and therefore do their best to suppress *allity*. Even the holiday-maker taking a family photograph will shift his camera, choosing the correct angle so as to get the garbage bag next to the sidewalk out of the picture. A painter would just not paint the garbage bag if he or she did not want it in the picture. Such an analogy might seem banal, but I believe it illustrates the ubiquitous principle of *allity*. A painter would not compose a picture so that a tree appears to be growing from somebody's head, whereas the camera does. Horning someone's head – an amateur photographers' nightmare – is nothing but the essence of photography. *Allity* – the indiscriminate parade of all the elements of reality in front of the lens – causes randomness in the relationships between fragments of reality in the photograph, because the photographer is not able, when taking the picture, to control them. The exceptions are, of course, completely staged images in studios.

It is obvious that, because of *allity*, one of the main battlefields between painterly iconic and indexical aesthetics has to be composition. Composition of any image has number of functions, among others the narrative one. Narration needs to oust superfluous details because these distract our attention and cause us to miss the point of the visual message. Relationships between the objects in paintings are – at least in the broadest sense of the word – always narrative. They are always a distribution of singular elements, which contribute to tell us dynamic, static, calm or aggressive stories in images. The composition is an acknowledged pictorial syntax. Once you leave the camera to work without your surveillance, the message can easily disappear from the image and leave you standing before an icon or an index, in which you can, technically speaking, decipher the individual elements, but whose internal relations will be at best confusing, at worst utterly incomprehensible. *Allity*, the essential component of photography, tends to be suppressed even by the so-called documentary photographer. Documentary photographs seek not to document because, again, if they did it would considerably reduce the legibility of the images. Untamed *allity* destroys order and generates chaos.

There is probably no better evidence of the pictorial tendency in photography than these systematic attempts to overcome *allity*. It is not surprising. All human efforts to control reality, our rejection of leaving anything to pure chance, are not just a principle on which images are based. It is also how we approach sculpture, music, literature and, in the end, our lives. But photography is a different medium; it is a mechanical medium. Of course we need legible photographs, but would it be unjust to ask whether we control reality too strictly, and whether at least part of the chaos of the world could not be *intentionally* let into some photographs? Why not let the camera do what it is suited for? The fact that photographers want to erase *allity*, that they want their photos controlled, artistic, perfect, clean-cut, might possibly be damag-

ing. Letting a certain randomness into photography could make the medium stronger and cognitively more differentiated.

Yet, under certain conditions, *allity* can be appreciated. Its primitiveness can be seen as authenticity. *Allity* produces an indexical aesthetic, the aesthetic of everyday life. There are people who work deliberately with carefully limited *allity*. Probably the best examples of deliberately staged *allity* are found in advertising photography. There are images made by professional photographers that seem to be slightly uncontrolled, which supports a feeling of authenticity. Advertising strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and working with carefully planned imperfections is already an advertising convention. A slight touch of disorder in the apartment in which a young man/woman casually describes the benefits of some product is often more effective than perfect order, because we are more willing to identify with the person in the advertisement. Such a tamed, calculated form of *allity* appeals to us because it resembles our everyday way of seeing. *Allity* is also fascinating as a component of the work of photographic primitives, savage prodigies whose work is sensationally discovered after years of being left forgotten in attics. In tabloid newspapers, *allity* may be not only accepted but also appreciated because it gives the image a candid look, a touch of thrilling – though false – reality so beloved by readers.

It would be, however, wrong to see *allity* simply as an imperfection. It is rather an uncontrolled part of the depicted reality. As indicated above, *allity* is often – though definitely not only – represented by details. I believe that *allity* is a precondition for what Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, coined the neologism *punctum*.²⁶ According to Barthes, *punctum* is a fragment of reality, a specific element in a photograph, with which a certain viewer (*punctums* are individual) is fascinated – pierced, hurt, moved. It is completely unintentional, it is not a message of the author of the photograph, and it does not carry any crucial cultural meaning. But *punctums* are what, according to Barthes, allows us to be enchanted by photographs. The opposite are photographs without *punctum* – in Barthes's terminology, 'unary photographs'. *Unary* photographs represent the majority of the photographic universe and can offer nothing but a *studium* – another Barthes neologism – meaning culturally conditioned lukewarm interest. Perhaps it is not only *allity* that enables the existence of *punctums* (they can be found even in studio portrait photography), but in many cases it helps to let *punctums* into photographs. As has been said, *punctum* is unintended by the photographer, so the more intentionality – author control – there is in the image, or simply the more polished an image, the less chance of finding an unintended, culturally untamed, magical detail.