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## TRUTH OF IMAGE AND THE VISUAL TURN

Photographs by Igor Eškinja in a context of symbolic systems

Iconic power and symbolic charge have turned two war photographs into a paradigm of photographic truth: *Death of a Loyalist Soldier* by Robert Capa and *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* by Joe Rosenthal. Both photographs occupy the prominent positions as universally known and culturally relevant "moments of truth" which only an aloof camera eye could transform into the objective historical and anthropological value. There are no controversies about whether these two photographs depict events as they really happened – did Federico Borrell García really die on the spot where he was photographed and was the American flag truly hoisted on the Suribachi mountain – and could it be the case that the photographs' factography or iconography has been adjusted to the wishes of news agency, needs of political opportunism or authors' creative interpretation. These are the images of real events and they have become part of imagery of warfare history and visual culture in general. Though these two photographs are not the same, their difference evolve not so much from a fact they present two entirely different events as much as from a manner in which they were shot. A snapshot by Robert Capa is an unrepeatable and unique moment in time when Federico Borrrell suddenly fell down, hit by a nationalist soldier's deadly bullet. On the other hand Rosenthal's photo is primarily a reproduction of an event that followed a certain prearrangement. Namely, on the fifth day of the battle for Iwo Jima the marines have hoisted the first flag on top of the Suribachi mountain. However, it was established the flag isn't sufficiently visible for the troops that have at the very moment been embarking on the shores of the Pacific island and therefore the symbolical effect of streaming national flag isn't strong or motivating enough for the remaining course of war operations. After the decision to raise another, bigger flag Rosenthal, of his own initiative, went to the mountain's top and recorded the events.

The succession of historical facts enables us to draw conclusion that Capa's photograph is a consequence of an unpredictable circumstantial junction, while Rosenthal's tableaux is a result of a political decision to act symbolically by raising another flag. Observed from the viewpoint of historic authenticity, both photographs are the credible documents of the place and time of action. However, from a standpoint of photography as a representation medium

their epistemological effects are divergent and irreconcilable. In that moment, and especially after the accusations that Rosenthal staged the whole thing in order to send rather attractive material to the Associated Press, it became clear that the issue of truth in photography is much more complicated than, for example, in a case of the homogeneous doubt in regard to painting or film. Culturally and anthropologically, photography was always demanded to yield truth, while documentary representative quality of two-dimensional photo depictions in time became what Charles Sanders Peirce refers to as the index or the trace of real events. In this essay I will try to warn of two paradoxes. One concerns dichotomy between the world of life and the world of art that has been most dramatically challenged in the medium of photography, where the separation between art and life was most believed in. The second paradox concerns the faith in the power of image that is actually strengthening in the era of the visual turn, by disappearance of borders between truth and fiction of the photographic image. In this endeavour I shall be equally aided by contemporary image theory, theory of perspective from the first half of the 20th century, as well as by the minimalist conceptual photography by Igor Eškinja, an author whose works thematizes the anti-individualist nature of modern presentation regimes.

We are truly in the time of visual and cultural turn, as aptly testified by the fact that hierarchy of an event's importance is defined after a manner in which it has been visually implemented and not just accordingly to its historiographic, factual or, nowadays most frequently, media relevance. We produce events through visualisation regimes which no more have anything in common with what and how we truly see, but are articulated in the languages of images and cultural construction. Hal Foster defines the difference between vision and visibility as a dialectical field bordered by the capacity of sight and power of interpretation:

Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visibility sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature is to culture: vision is social and historical too, and visibility involves the body and the psyche. Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference between the visual – between the mechanisms of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determination – a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster (editor): *Vision and Visibility*, Bay Press, Seattle 1988; p. 9.

Foster implies we are no longer capable of ascertaining the truth of image by itself, but only of establishing the manners in which image is media-generated from the events that follow it rather than precede it. Therefore, we can support Martin Jay's claim that following the visual turn images cannot be understood as the signs that, due to analogy with natural objects, still possess some universal communication power.<sup>2</sup> On contrary, today the meaning of images is constituted through processes of resemantization or, as Norman Bryson would put it, by ascribing images with "discursive" features and by abandoning their "figural" features.

In his text *We Have Never Been Modern* Bruno Latour somewhat relativizes the possibility to totally reduce figurality to discursivity, images to the texts, and visuality in general to the codes which rule the language. Latour pleads for a new hybrid (haptic, rather than visual) interaction between subject and object, now already pseudo-subject and pseudo-object.<sup>3</sup> In addition to Latour's "relativism" Jay supports and explains it by the basic irreducibility of images to a single specific culture restricted with its own rules and attitudes." In fact, much of the power of images, we might conjecture, comes precisely from their ability to resist being entirely subsumed under the protocols of specific cultures."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if we agree to a twofold structure of the visual which Hal Foster divides to vision and visuality, if we deem sustainable the Bryson's thesis on image sliding from figural towards discursive, and if we accept Latour's and Jay's relativism, we are still missing the answer to a question as to within which specific feature the images do visually and discursively interpenetrate and in which concrete manner culture becomes involved with reading the image and undermines concept of visuality as a primarily natural i.e. cognitive phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

One of the possible answers to these questions can be approached by analyzing the herein presented most recent cycle of photographs by Igor Eškinja or his previous 2006 /2007 cycle

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Jay: "Cultural relativism and the visual turn", published in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1 (3), Sage Publications 2002; pp. 267-78.

<sup>3</sup> According to M. Jay, Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> There are authors who discern image's cognitive potential in its very discursive character:"... all images have a discursive aspect, at least insofar as we attempt to consider them cognitively or (especially) to communicate our cognition to another person. And to consider an image cognitively, to engage in discourse about it (...) is to textualize it." (John T. Kirby: "Classical Greek Origins of Western Aesthetic Theory", published in: B. Allert (editor.): *Languages of visuality*; Kritik, Detroit 1996; pg. 36)

titled *Imagineering*.<sup>6</sup> Both cycles problematize Foster's dichotomy of vision and visibility as a difference between the mechanisms of sight and various historical technics of the latter's transformation into image systems. Eškinja created his photographs to question objective reality of the recorded scene by applying photographic angle that renders the reality of a three-dimensional scene inferior to reality of a two-dimensional image surface. In other words, though what is seen on photographs entirely faithfully represents what was in front of camera lens, an observer is still being manipulated via the perspective, shooting angle, suggesting that the very photograph is an event worth of attention (since s/he is being led to perceive the photo has been subjected to a physical intervention), rather than the scene that was photographed. Any other camera position, its shift to the left, right, up or down, could "bring back" photography onto the scene's objective treatment. Then the scene from the photo would be interpreted same as we would experience it in reality. We are facing a paradoxical thesis that perspective, as a cultural construction par excellence, created in order to aid us in presenting the objective world, is being offered here as the subversion of western image epistemology. Is this not the reason for which Eškinja's photographs belong to the category of images considered by Martin Jay to be strong enough to stand against the protocols of their own culture? To be staged and credible at the same time, though not as in the traditional image strategy of tableaux in *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, but by undermining the very system of vision?

Hubert Damisch, author of imposing *L'Origine de la perspective*<sup>7</sup>, warns how it would be really inconsiderate to reduce central renaissance perspective to a formal disposition i.e. tools for constructing the image, since Panofsky already demonstrated that perspective as a representation system can transcend image representation and become the visual-symbolic order of the entire modern culture of Christianity. Damisch takes interest in perspective as a universal method of creating the meaning: "No doubt our own age is far more 'informed' on perspectival paradigm through photography, film and to this date video, than it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which knew but rare examples of 'correct' construction."<sup>8</sup> As an example of "denying the paradigm for the purpose of rhetoric", he refers to Raphael's painting *The Ecstasy of St Cecilia* dating from 1516. Though on face value this painting uses all the renaissance cannons of transposition of two-dimensional into three-dimensional space, it does so selectively or – in

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<sup>6</sup> I primarily refer to *Made In:side*, a series of lambda prints and a work titled *Postproduction*.

<sup>7</sup> Hubert Damisch: *L'Origine de la perspective*, Édition revue et corrigée; Flammarion, Paris, 1989. Quote from the 1<sup>st</sup> Croatian edition *Porijeklo perspektive*, Institut za povijest umjetnosti, Zagreb, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 46.

other terms – in a manner of polyperspectivity. Namely, a painting's lower part with depiction of musical instruments is observed from an "impossible" accentuated upper angle. A painting's central part and figures' heads are aligned with observer, while an upper registry is in a mild lower angle. Raphael approached the scene in *Saint Cecilia* in a dialectic fashion. Each particular painting's registry is submitted to the canon of representation of *cinquecento*. However, observed as a whole they lead to perception outside of immediate experience, creating a surplus of symbolical value which in the actual case relates to specific Raphael's interpretation of Saint Cecilia. Damisch says on the subject:

Far from the paradigm ceasing to be of value here, its double negation equals the confirmation and substantiates Panofsky's hypothesis according to which the perspective would open an entirely new realm to religious art, the realm of "vision" understood literary in its most exalted manner and which, while finding its place in a soul of a depicted person, is no less accessible to an observer, within a kind of rift inside a prosaic space.<sup>9</sup>

The regimes of visual representation of the real world have always been a fruit of social agreement, irrespective of their description in dichotomies of figural / discursive and vision / visuality or through the conventions of vertical, iconographic or central perspectives. Eškinja's photographic compositions "in which the dynamism of illusion of a continuing transit from a two-dimensional into three-dimensional space and back never ceases to operate"<sup>10</sup> are symbols of the very modern suspicion that, by using our vision system framework i.e. purely Euclidian geometrical model, one can represent the visible world. Raphael "corrected" mathematical coldness of perspective by symbolical construction of the world in which *Saint Cecilia* ignores the visual laws of visible/ invisible to the advantage of religious transcendence. On the other hand Eškinja pragmatically favours a single point of view and conceals "the truth of space", therefore bringing the manipulative image's nature to the fore. Eškinja pointed to the totality of symbolic systems of representation by filling his photographs with irrelevant contents regarding symbolism and story-line – such as colour stains, self-adhesive tape, sugar and household dust – and further by submitting this content

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<sup>9</sup> Here Damisch refers to Panofsky's claim from a latter's book *Die Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form'*, Vorträge des Bibliothek Warburg, Leipzig-Berlin, 1924/25, pg. 126. Croatian edition: H. Damisch, Op. cit., pg 44.

<sup>10</sup> Branko Franceschi: *Imagineering*, catalogue of the exhibition by Igor Eškinja, MMSU, Rijeka, 2007, pg.5.

to perspectival distortion in order to complete the photographic delusion. Paradoxically, though the truth offered by the photography is absolutely credible, the truth of a scene can not be grasped here. A metaphor of fake image of the world offered by technical reproduction has been realized by Eškinja through scenes more realistic than we could know and wish to know.

The turn is all the more dramatic since photography always had special responsibility in representing reality. It was expected to be the faithful reflection of the surrounding world, to liberate other visual media from the obligation to inform and educate – but nothing else. And this is a moment of the ultimate visual turn, because the image became more real than its own referent. What is photographed loses importance in relation to photography itself. The image no more reveals the nature of physical world but is being imposed as the new convention for the new world of images that we yet have to start believing in. Perhaps this turn occurred already with Cézanne. Yet, maybe it happened in a moment when we realized that two temporally and formally close documentary war photographs, described in the beginning of this essay, are separated by an insurmountable epistemological chasm – with story of life and death on one side and rise of media appearance on the other side.

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