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Making Sense(s)
Information and Visuality in Contemporary Ocular Defeatism

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Abstract: This paper investigates the importance of the visual domain in the (new) economy of signs. By analyzing two cases of visualization of events (Croatian War of Independence and the Ukrainian crisis), the paper reiterates the need for visual studies to reconsider the social and cultural impact of the symbolic capital. Furthermore, this paper seeks to acknowledge the manipulation of media in the digital realm, evoking an understanding of the structural complexities of new media and proposing a model which would include an inter-subjective understanding of the media dialectics.

Keywords: New Media, Internet, Photography

Introduction

Theoretical analysis of dominant media systems (whether they are based on visual or narrative systems) are too often viewed solely on techno-optimistic (i.e. through extension of our senses) or techno-pessimistic (i.e. through its presupposed manipulative nature of representing reality) grounds. This kind of determinism paralyses the dialectical potential of media ecology in today's society disabling the proper analysis of media effects that have various cultural aspects in our contemporary culture. In this paper I hope to lay out a more detailed interplay of photographic vision that takes into account political, cultural and ideological spheres of everyday culture, as well as its historical repercussions on the information society of the new media today. In so doing, the underlying question I would like to pose (and hopefully answer) is not whether or not photography (or perhaps even film) represents reality, but what can we see through photographs as subjects of their visual system. Walter Benjamin’s famous and often cited study (2008) although aimed at a critique of such era, only confirmed the status of mechanical reproducibility as unavoidable and permanently actual. Almost a century later, theoreticians such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, to name a few, took photography as a central part of our everyday culture and wrote about it in terms of its relation to reality and subjectivity. Many more attacked it for its presupposed manipulative essence, failing to grasp its historic complexity. Taking into account the formative years of photography, one has to put into context precisely this complex structure of technological innovation in relation to social formations of the time.

Apparitions from the Past

Boulevard du Temple by Louis Daguerre is most likely the first image in history that contains a human being, but also, it is perhaps the first image that displays absence through visual systems. In what way? This daguerreotype of a Parisian boulevard, taken in 1838 is a known masterpiece. Louis Daguerre, battling with the earliest technology, needed high amounts of light to make objects on his image visible. Setting the exposure for what is now thought to be approximately ten minutes, every moving object on the street vanished except for two figures—a shoe shiner and his customer who were steady enough throughout ten minutes for their bodies to become visible, although ghostly in their blurred presence.
It can be said that even the very birth of photography was inscribed with the presence and absence of the world at the same time. For example: if Walter Benjamin believed that the capitalist mode of production destroyed the world, leaving only ruins, could we try to extend his reading even further—all the way to the famous image by Daguerre? Isn’t it, after all the famous image of Paris always already a ruin—missing its constitutive object? Slavoj Žižek in his book The Sublime Object of Ideology (2008) described this constitutive absence through a joke: at an art exhibition in Moscow there is a painting displayed. The painting seems to portray Lenin’s wife in bed with a young Komsomol. Its title is “Lenin in Warsaw.” A visitor of the museum, confused by the image and its title, asks the guide: “But where is exactly Lenin here?” to which the guide responds “Lenin is in Warsaw.” For Žižek, this joke is the basic example of the “exclusion as a positive condition for emergence of what is shown” (Žižek 2008, 178-179). In other words, the absence of Lenin is de facto the basic condition of the possibility of the scene—his wife in bed with another. The title hence functions as a warning to what constitutes the center/object of an image.

This center of the image was of concern to another scholar: Jean-Louis Baudry. In his 1974 essay Ideological Effect of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus (1974-1975) he claims the dominance of the cinematographic apparatus (screen projector) over the content conveyed though it—i.e. the content of a film. His point of reference was Italian Renaissance which used “a centered space,” a space that “coincides with an eye which Jean Pellerin Viator will so justly call the ‘subject’,” as opposed to the discontinuous and heterogeneous perspective of the ancient Greeks. In short, he claimed that the dimension of the cinematographic image, its depth and ratio are taken from the tradition of Western painting, while the pictorial construction of the ancient Greeks “corresponded to the organization of their stage, based on multiplicity of points of view” (Baudry 1974-1975, 41). Hence, in his reading of ideology, it is precisely this center that constitutes the subject though the process of recognition. The cinema screen was that center, and we were called into our subjectivity by the illusion of a world that was not there as a reality, but as a projection. In both examples—the painting of Lenin’s wife and Daguerre’s vision of Paris—there is an absence of a thing that at the same time serves as the center of the image. Rendering of reality in both examples is possible only through a lack of something, almost a lack of a central part of an
image: in the former example it is Lenin himself; in the latter it is people that were occupying the street, but were exiled through technical limitations of an apparatus.

This relation between reality and "spectacle" should not be analyzed in a way that has been present for decades, from Jean Baudrillard to Paul Virilio, but dialectically. For example, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy in their book Globalni ekran clearly state that “once upon a time, ‘I am’ connoted inner search for the authentic self, and today our subjectivity is acquired via ‘personal virtual connections with others’” (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013, 17). They continue on to say that cinema produces silence, homo telespectator, conditioned by the illusionistic practices of the image. This age-old discussion about the ontology of the image and its phenomenological relations to the actual needs to give place to the discussion about its dialectical potential. Therefore, I will present two case-studies bearing in mind precisely this structural complexity of a medium and its relation to the actual.

**Case Study 1: Croatian War of Independence and its Discontents**

Much of the Western academic thought on the image sees the field of the visual as philosophically complex, ontologically unstable and critically (as well as culturally) heterogeneous. But how can we apply this fruitful history of the image to the practical investigation of our everyday culture? Susan Sontag in her book Regarding the Pain of Others stated that photography is at the same time objective inscription and a personal testimony. She continues to say:

> Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real—inconvertible, as no verbal account, however impartial could be—since a machine was doing the recording (Sontag 2003, 22–23).

But even for the genre of documentary photography Sontag wrote about, the above mentioned paradox persists. Although “more real” than verbal accounts, photographs need a caption to describe what is present in them, and to recreate or conjure (context) which may be absent. During the Croatian War of Independence (1991-1995), the media played an important role in the conjuration of such context. For example, Croatian theorist and artist Sandra Vitaljić in her book Rat slikama (2013) investigates a whole corpus of images used in the Yugoslav wars, putting them in context of the current political situation and ideological idiosyncrasies of established political parties and national discourse. One photograph named Prekopakra by Romeo Ibrišević is particularly striking in terms of its “nature.” Taken in 1991, the image shows a Croatian soldier running towards the camera with a burning house behind him. It was displayed three times, according to Vitaljić. First, it was published in Croatian newspaper Vjesnik with a caption “To defend your home.” In the Italian daily newspaper La Repubblica it is shown alongside an interview with a caption which translates as “Attack on the periphery of Osijek continues,” while the third time it appeared in a Serbian paper suggesting that the soldier on the photograph is burning down a Serbian house. Vitaljić therefore concludes that the same picture is used in three different contexts: for Croats, it is a sign of bravery, for Serbs we are witnessing an ethnic cleansing, and Italians mistook Croatian soldier for a Serbian one (Vitaljić 2013, 24). Sontag writes that “all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions” (Sontag 2003, 10). The war in Croatia served that purpose on more than several occasions: for example, the same pictures of corpses were used by both sides to display the monstrosity of the other.
It is not uncommon to witness this kind of manipulation and ideological hegemony in media, nor is it unknown to write and theorize about it. Roland Barthes, in the condensed reading of his semiotics and image theory spoke about denotative and connotative levels of reading. For instance, on a denotative level, photograph is not a real world, “but at least it is its perfect analogon” (Jay 1994, 442). The second order of signification for Barthes was photograph’s connotative power, “the cultural resonances activated by their perception.” Insofar, photographs by themselves can do little in terms of ideological influence and propaganda—they must be encoded properly. The denotative level of photograph thus can record a “visual situation” (although this recording is constrained by the shot, authorial preferences, light etc.), and the connotative level can refer to other symbols, as we’ve seen with the war in Croatia. Vitaljić concludes along similar lines with regards to the war in Croatia that photographs often served as a visual “proof” of what had to be said with the text.

Pierre Bourdieu was aware of this decades ago when he wrote his seminal study On Television (Bourdieu 2012) postulating that only in our contemporary culture, images received their description. One can say Bourdieu is correct: Boulevard du Temple is—from today's point of view—somewhat deserted; image deprived of its subjects, almost empty scene of clues. Meaghan Morris in her essay Banality in cultural studies (1996) speaks of an interesting and somewhat similar anecdote that took place in the capital of Australia’s far north, in an isolated town called Darwin. While watching TV, the regular program was interrupted with the announcement that “something’s happened to Darwin” (Morris 1996, 152). Since it was 1952, and the town was isolated, there was no knowing of what actually happened. Communication with the town simply ceased to exist. There was no description of the event—it was at the same time a pure event and a scene occupied with only “clues.” Today, image has a “legend”—like we’ve seen from examples of the Croatian war—a legend that is often at the same time a political or ideological codification.

Vitaljić points out to one event that is particularly reminiscent of Morris’ work. During the war, Croatian national television reported on the total destruction of the village Dragotinci in central Croatia. Croatian television reported on the story without ever being there in the first place, instead relying on the information obtained on a press conference from the army. The pictures they broadcasted were “of only three destroyed homes, while the other parts of the village remained intact” (Vitaljić 2013, 25). Of course, the televised commentary of the event didn’t mention this detail, instead, they reported on “total destruction,” without even witnessing it first-hand. The other side in the conflict also had their share of informational misconduct.
example, upon Serbian bombing of the city of Dubrovnik, one of Serbian media outlets Politika ekspres published a photograph of a city in smoke, accusing Croats of burning tires in front of international cameras, thereby allegedly victimizing themselves in front of the international audience.

Serbian denial of the bombing, as well as Croatian television’s at times misleading reporting were part of an informational warfare that is not new to the medium of photography. Susan Sontag invokes distant history when making a mention of Roger Fenton, possibly the first war photographer. Curiously enough, he was sent to the Crimean Peninsula by the British government:

Acknowledging the need to counteract the alarming printed accounts of the unanticipated risks and privations endured by the British soldiers dispatched there the previous year, the government had invited a well-known professional photographer to give another, more positive impression of the increasingly unpopular war. (Sontag 2003, 39)

It is clear, as I already postulated in the introductory section, that the photographic practices from the very beginning had in themselves inscribed the notion of narrative or the recreation of the world in front of the camera. Just a few years after Roger Fenton’s antics, American Civil War soldiers had a practice of moving corpses from one place to another so they could be captured in a more adequate setting in order to improve people’s morale. Citing one photographer’s alleged claim that “the camera is the eye of the history,” Sontag proceeds to conclude that “not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subject tampered with” (Sontag 2003, 43). In a way, we can see that Baudry’s ultimate question was in a way already inscribed with an answer. He asked “does the technical nature of optical instruments, directly attached to scientific practice, serve to conceal not only their use in ideological products but also the ideological effects which they may provoke themselves?” (Baudry 1974-1975, 40). This kind of reading of ideological effects of the technology was not limited only to cinematography and to analogue technology. For example, Paul Virilio accuses photographic technique through citing Rodin in his debate The Vision Machine: “It is the art that tells the truth and photography that lies” (Virilio 1994, 2). Nevertheless, for Virilio analogue technology didn’t succumb to what he called paradoxical logic because it was dependent on material techniques (film track, for example). The development of the digital technologies for Virilio meant that reality becomes more suitable for total manipulation, for it has no relation to the material world anymore. This digitalized “industrialization of vision” renders photography completely automatized in its perception of the world. These machines depersonalize the act of looking, and the subject is no longer an “ocular witness.”

But isn’t this first case study precisely the apotheosis of the shortsightedness of Virilio’s argument? For, doesn’t it show the potential of the manipulation via images in an environment of analogue technology also? If that is true, one cannot say that “total manipulation” exists only in today’s new media sphere of digital images. As I have shown through the images of Croatian War of Independence, photographs served not only for the cultural relativization of that what is shown, but for de facto manipulation of the dominant visual sphere. But we’ve seen from various examples how this view on technological manipulation shouldn’t be confined only to digital media. On the contrary, the history of visual media is immersed in spectacular visions, special effects and even propaganda. Insofar, in the recent decades, new media technologies and the internet took the main stage for media theorists around the world as a discursive field of struggle over the notion of their political and cultural potential against the mainstream (often described as hegemonic) media, and rightly so. Centralized production of information (uniformity of content) of mainstream old media gives place to a new mode of production on the internet, still taking into account the traditional viewer, as well as the new media agent. As much as traditional media
dissemination is limited to its interface that enables almost exclusively communication from the sender to the receiver in the media value chain, the internet turns that strategy on its head. Precisely because of the inversion of the producer-receiver relationship, the internet is a place of two extremes: on the one hand it is celebrated as the utopian space without a master, abundant with “democracy,” and on the other, it is characterized as a space of banality, amateurism and false freedom. I argue neither of the accounts is right. My second example will try to make way for a more dialectical notion of new media as a place of dialogue and negotiation with the information.

Case Study 2: The Ukrainian Crisis as the Modern Rashomon

Taking into account what has been said so far, what can be said about the functioning of the specific dominant media systems in the contemporary "digital" culture? Baudry certainly had moments of useful introspection when describing the importance of an apparatus for our perception. It is all too often in our contemporary culture that we subjectivize the very technology that enables our perception. To be more specific: during the first half of the 2014 there was a popular image circulating in the mediasphere: the US President Barrack Obama taking a “selfie” with the British Prime Minister David Cameron and Denmark’s Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt.

The photograph was very popular for at least two reasons. Firstly, it was an inappropriate gesture as the image was taken at the memorial for the recently deceased Nelson Mandela and the media took upon themselves to criticize this hardly empathic gesture. Secondly, the picture was taken in the advent of the so called “selfie trend,” an online craze for taking and disseminating photos of oneself and circulating them through various social networks. But hardly any media companies noticed the paradox in the image. As can be seen, the photograph that appeared in various newspapers was almost unanimously labeled as a selfie, while in reality it was not a selfie, but a professional photograph that was recording a moment of President Obama taking a selfie (which we've never actually seen to this day). Unconsciously, we have identified ourselves with an apparatus, the camera. Isn’t this the confirmation of Baudry’s thesis? Is this thing that is lacking but constituting the image precisely the technology that enables it? When Jacques Derrida wrote Specters of Marx, he spoke of a thing that is invisible between its apparitions, a thing that “meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there” (Derrida 1994, 7). This instance of seeing whilst not being seen he named the visor effect. While
the age of analogue technology was depicted as ideological, today’s contemporary society is often depicted through, for example, the notion of “pictorial turn” (as described by W. J. T. Mitchell). Mitchell detects our society as swarming with images. If Theodor Adorno asked through his writing if there is a point in writing poetry after the Holocaust, today’s question may be posed: can there be said anything by the images in the age of the pictorial turn?

The Ukrainian crisis in the late 2013 and continuing in 2014 manifested that question ostensible. Unlike the Gulf War or the Croatian War for Independence, the Ukrainian crisis was riddled with reports not just from traditional media outlets, but was a big part of the new media sphere. How can one deal with the overload of images in the era of digital media? The Ukrainian crisis is an excellent example of today’s synchronic functioning of the information sphere. On the one hand, divergent dominant media reporting can be conditionally divided into three separate spheres: Ukrainian, Russian and Western. They all had at least three similar characteristics:

- Media reporting on the Ukrainian crisis was often strikingly simplistic. Therefore, information conveyed through the dominant media was regularly condensed into “one minute reports” that touched upon virtually nothing but the perpetuation of the basic informational dimension. For example, in Croatian media environment there was no room for actual political and cultural analysis of the Ukrainian situation. The news were only source of information that was at the same time very basic. The news followed the philosophy Bourdieu already described when he stated that “It must attempt to be inoffensive […] and it must never bring up problems” (Bourdieu 2012, 254). Not only there was no antagonizing of the conflicted sides, but the main ideological stance seemed to be that on not involvement in complex cultural and social geopolitical specificities of the subject in question.

- Censorship that emerged from the dominant media was partly the result of precisely this neoliberal ideological approach to the news. Unlike the examples from textbook totalitarian or ideological censorship that emerged as a reaction to the “inadmissible” reports of individuals, I believe the more dangerous forms of censorship lie within the realm of almost “accidental” self-censorship that finds its roots in the first characteristic described above. The inability to report on the news or events informationally heterogeneous or semantically challenging is not the result of the ideological leanings of the broadcasting companies towards any particular side of the conflict, but is the result of the neoliberal aspiration to “please” the audience with simplistic information, evading the everyday complexities of political struggles, as Bourdieu described in his reading of television.

- Nevertheless, actual censorship cannot be disregarded, as it can be visible on both sides. For example, Russian television channel Russia Today (abbreviated RT) was under heavy criticism for its alleged one-sided reporting on the Ukrainian Crisis. During March of 2014, a RT news anchor Liz Wahl even resigned her position because she couldn’t handle the alleged censorship and one-sidedness, saying she’s “proud to be an American and believe in disseminating the truth.” Of course, her position of conveyor of truth was mythologized to the level of the nation, regardless of various instances of western censorship throughout the decades. USA had (and still has) a plethora of cases when the censorship in that country was not only visible, but was a part of a national agenda.

Although the magnitude of actual censorship has yet to be determined, it seems clear that the analysis of contemporary media cannot restrain itself only to traditional as well as clear-cut media occurrences. On the contrary, it needs to be reiterated once more that the power of ideology lies not only in one-sided reporting, but in the very lack of the information. In a sense, the real danger of censorship is not in its visible effects, as we’ve seen in the third example, but in the very neutrality and ideological autism mainstream media often tries to represent. The lack of information is embedded precisely as the lack of the object (the thing) that is presumably being reported on through constant media communication. Traditional dominant media relies on this lack of a real object, but in the digital realm, its lack can be more visible (and therefore easier to negotiate with).
When I first got involved with the Euromaidan wave of demonstrations, taking place mainly on the Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti square, I was confronted with a 7 hours long direct broadcast from one of the square’s digital cameras. There was no legend in Bourdieuan sense; no real visible symbol that could help me interpret what was going on the screen. I was witnessing a nightmare Paul Virilio was writing about—automatic image from the surveillance cameras. He believed this future (now the actuality) will bring us the complete automatization of perception, rending human interpretation unwanted and unnecessary. If Walter Benjamin said that the analphabet of the future will not be a person who doesn’t read letters, but the one who doesn’t know photography, how can we be literate in an age of swarming images?

It is often said that the traditional media (television, radio or newspapers) are unidirectional agents of communication from producer to receiver, although the field of cultural studies with Stuart Hall and David Morley (to name a few) very provocatively questioned that notion. The Ukrainian crisis crystallized a need for the development of a relation between the producer and the receiver of the information in a digital age. This is a more appropriate paradigm in which information can achieve its full potential through the process of intersubjectivity. The new media perspective and the appropriation of technology (internet) have changed the nature of the dissemination of information. We cannot talk about authenticity or credibility in terms of "telling the truth or lying." On the contrary: today users can verify information by contrasting traditional media, or by autonomous investigation on the internet. In that manner the information is rendered semantically ambiguous. With approach akin to cultural studies, the position of the speakers becomes important (unlike today in mainstream television media where it is hidden behind a program). The new media provides a new perspective in which the user is always the arbiter of informational usefulness. The crisis that is manifested in traditional media by the lack of subjectivity of the reporter changes on the internet. The all-knowing subject vanishes and gives place to an intersubjective exchange which renders hierarchy virtually unnecessary. In that new media present/future, the creation of the media value chain will not be reserved for the ideological mass producers. By becoming media, we are becoming ready for the burden of subjective analysis and multivocality.

Take the anecdote of the Darwin “disaster” again: in that moment of “pure event”—an event that took place ontologically (something is wrong), but not epistemologically (we cannot know what exactly)—one can say the relation of media to audience became the scene of a communicational rupture. The exact moment television became unable to broadcast information to the public became the moment the audience started to contemplate Darwin’s fate. Although the speculation was too great, it revealed an important component of everyday media culture already outlined—the disruption in hegemonic processes of creating and disseminating information top-down resulted in an oppositional reading of the media.

Today we can see maybe most clearly the point of communicational rupture with the Ukrainian crisis, as I already mentioned earlier. Going back to the 7 hour broadcast, we can detect the absence of two major informational (and visual) events:

The reporting of “surveillance cameras” completely reverses the traditional Baudrian notion of ideological apparatus. The central perspective of the ideology is not necessarily present in those kinds of visual coverage as it often lacks a legend that takes upon itself to explain and give meaning to the events. For example, if during the Croatian War ideological warfare could be fought via falsely described images (first case study), digital sphere introduces heterogeneous public that can compare and analyze images in relation to the other on the internet, thereby opening a space for productive and more complex readings of our visual culture.

Therefore, we cannot habitually claim the existence of the visor effect anymore, as explained through Derrida’s reading of the gaze. There is a certain lack present—a lack of a subject that disseminates without being seen.

What can be done with this automatic image that is all too often present online? I claim that new media opens up a possibility of real intersubjectivity, where the public sphere needs not to
be a part of mainstream media. Taking into account examples from the beginning of the paper, the “center” of the image Boulevard du Temple was not the formative core of the image. The thing that lacked was in a way its constitutive absence that enabled the visual potential of the image. Isn’t the public (and private) online sphere the embodiment of this gesture? The intersubjective process exerted in a decentralized cyberspace denaturalizes the position of an all-knowing subject towards a user, who can compare, check, analyze, comment and improve on the information found online. The process of signification on the internet becomes of central value. While editors of daily newspapers or news anchors sometimes hide behind institutions while producing information, online users are almost always subjected to the process of individualization. The crisis that is evident in contemporary media mirrors this sentiment. The process of intersubjectivity cannot always be adopted by mainstream “old” media because it would nullify their authority as creators of objective reality. Isn’t WikiLeaks one of the prime recent examples to this view? Released secret documents not only brought panic and disarray in mainstream media, but they introduced a new kind of requirement. Media agencies such as The Guardian, Der Spiegel or Le Monde didn’t have access to filtered media events. They needed to interpret the scattered information and make sense of it. The dialectic process between different signifying practices that was involved indicated the potentiality of new media practices as intersubjective. The documents that WikiLeaks disclosed were “pure event” (much like the disaster in Darwin)—a pile of information someone had to analyze. In that conundrum of data, through dialectics of intersubjectivity, the large decentralized audience had unprecedented access to the raw information. Therefore, it can be said that the internet cannot be viewed as a place of the democratization of banality, but a space of intersubjectivity and of multiple interpretative practices because of its decentralized structure that enables the gesture of a productive look.

Take, for example, the Ukrainian crisis and the visual systems employed. As we’ve seen, traditional, as well as online media participated in the coverage of Maidan protests and the outage of the President Viktor Yanukovych. Twitter erupted in activity after the civilians swarmed his already abandoned presidential estate. One of the more popular tweets was a photograph of President Yanukovych’s alleged golden bathroom toilette.

Figure 4: Twitter image of alleged Yanukovych’s golden toilet later flagged as false
Source: www.twitter.com/alexblx, used with permission
The legend below the photo was of the same form as legends describing photographs from various instances in dominant media. Almost every news outlet in Croatia (but also internationally) provided the same photograph of the tweeted toilet as a synecdoche for the unfair and corrupted life of the president. A couple of days later, I found out on the internet that the toilet is an old image, dating at least to 2012 of a random luxury apartment. Traditional news broadcasts in Croatia never really confuted their reports. I had to find that out online, amidst the supposed dystopia of the information sphere.

Conclusion

Photography never was objective in the sense discussed in this paper, from its spectacular origins, through its long history of narration and propaganda to today’s digital manipulative potential of the visual systems. It was, most of all, an aesthetic artifact, from Daguerre’s vision of the world to the political symbol in the Croatian war. The Ukrainian crisis, on the other hand, actualized that which became visible a couple of years ago in the Arab Spring, but what was already theoretically discussed decades ago. Nevertheless, it needs to be asserted I am not proposing the internet and new media technology to be a utopian ideal of globalization, democratization and transnational ideology-free system of liberation. Exactly the opposite, the aim of the paper is to remind of the importance of traditional critique of ideology through examples laid out here, and to rethink power-relations and the possibilities of visual images inside the society of institutional ideologues, as well as within digital visual systems. Photography (and film to an extent) lost its legend, title—to an extent, its very addressee. Photographs became harder to describe, harder to trace and to make sense of.

Figure 5: One of many photographs from the Ukrainian protests of 2014

Source: http://www.terry.ubc.ca, used with permission

Take the example of the photographs from the Ukrainian protests that consequently overturned the government in power (image 5). Traditional reading of visual culture would have rejected the photograph as being unclear, without the legend that describes it. But on the contrary, today’s digital sphere enables amateur photographs, as well as those that are unclear in
the subject they depict, to no only complement our contemporary visual ecosystem, but to completely bring into question the validity of traditional image-making system through which the ideological inscription is maintained. Through this paper I tried to show the potential of precisely this kind of emphasis in visual studies. For, if today’s images lost their aesthetic dimension, they have evidently gained a social dimension. Communication that is happening online does not render our visual culture undecipherable in an aesthetic sense, but enables our social potential for dialectics of reading and interpreting visual signs around us. If the image in a way lost its “authority,” its clear subject, isn’t this a cue for the appropriation of such visual system? The need to learn to live in such a world outweighs the need for a technophobic critique of the ecstasy of communication. If the first photograph in history that depicts a human represents an absence, an empty scene—aesthetically present, but socially “in the making,” isn’t this recent photograph of human struggle just the other side of the same coin—a photograph that needs its interpreter—an empty scene that needs its social dimension? Learning to live with the images of our everyday life aspires precisely to that claim, demanding the subjects of our contemporary culture to look, interpret and make our visual culture through dialectization as a part of a social structure of meaning that is not embedded entirely in its dominants systems of thought.

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