

REMEMBERING OR IMAGINING?

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1

Reflection about images is vast and often inconsistent. The visual, the iconographic, and the pictorial cross with the analysis of images (graphic, mental, verbal...) and give rise to symbolic, metaphorical, and conceptual links (among many others) (Mitchell, 1986). The construction of a “civilization of the image”, from the nineteenth century onwards, leads to a general lack of confidence in the value of the image in furthering scientific knowledge. We look at images as something of lesser value, a tracing, a copy, a poor imitation of reality: “the word image is looked upon poorly because we believe a design to be a tracing, a copy, a secondary object, and that the mental image is nothing more than a design of the same mold kept in our private bric-a-brac” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 23). At the same time, images nourish all kinds of imagination and fantasies, creating the illusion of an open field of meanings and interpretations.

Western thinking wanted to be the inheritor of a unique “truth”, denying the plurality of meanings (and readings) of images. It is fundamental to highlight the paradox of a civilization that promotes enormous development in techniques of production, reproduction and communication of images, yet, at the same time, never lets go of an endemic iconoclasm. The image cannot be reduced to a formal “true” or “false” argument, and so is devalued as a tool of furthering understanding (Durand, 1994). Jonathan Crary explains that the reduction of the observer to a supposedly rudimentary state, was a condition for the formation of a “new” observer: “The visual culture of modernity would coincide with such techniques of the observer” (1992, p. 96).

This argument is crucial for the understanding of history and its formation as a nineteenth century discipline. On one hand, historians fulfil the role of observers of past facts, legitimizing their work as an objective exercise that separates the “true” from the “false”. The eye of the historian looks to be neutral and exterior, recording only what is there. To achieve this, it is necessary to ignore its very position as observer, to pretend that the “grand narrative” of which s/he is the bearer is to be constructed under the register of objectivity and universality. The metaphor of the historian as a *photographer of the past* fits well into this concept. But to achieve this it is necessary to reduce the photographic image to a mere cliché and believe in a teleology of history.

The historian of the nineteenth century refused to enter into the game of images, into the game of multiple interpretations and of contested narratives. S/he does not accept the polysemy, the plurality of viewpoints. S/he does not look at images as “producers of meanings”, but only as mere “register of facts” or a “portrait of reality”. Nowadays this attitude is difficult to sustain. Instead of calling for the exorbitation of “the eye”, it is better to encourage the multiplication of a thousand eyes, in what we could designate as a multifaceted dialectics of seeing (Jay, 1994, p. 591). In moving from the singular “eye” to the plural “eyes”, a change is undertaken from the singular vision of panopticism, with its idea of an objective vision of control through visibility, to the stereoscopic vision of more pluralistic techniques of observation that have emerged in the twentieth century.

Games of showing and hiding are not different, but include processes that create illusions and suspicions. We cannot forget that images can always be recycled and reused and

therefore are open to an infinity of meanings and interpretations. There is no harmony in this “world”, but vision and visuality in their rich and contradictory variety “can still provide us mere mortals with insights and perspectives, speculations and observations, enlightenment and illuminations, that even a god might envy” (Jay, 1994, p. 594). New analysis of images needs to be theoretically grounded, and cannot avoid a sophistication of methods and approaches. The will to look and to show is inseparable from the will to know, and it is necessary to establish a cartography of vision if we wish to apprehend the production/reproduction of images in the field of visuality.

2

The meaning of historical writing has to be found at the light of two movements: on the one hand, the remembering-imagining pair that establishes new relations in historical time; on the other hand, the definition of space (although often a virtual space) as an essential reference of historical work. The excess of images gains importance as the excess of memory (and forgetfulness) and the excess of places (and non-places) are revealed. Never before in the history of humankind has there been such a strong sensation that we are the “producers of history”. A history that it is not the devolution of a unitary past, but a reconstruction of the past in order to propose an intelligibility of people's actions and beliefs. It is of little surprise therefore that our society is impregnated with an excess of meanings or, more precisely, an excessive search for meanings.

Looking at “images” allow us to transform memories in an objet of historical inquiry. If History was constituted as a nineteenth-century discipline through a rupture with memory, nowadays memories (individual and collective) are one of the most important “documents” for historical research. Not only as “sources”, but mainly as ways of building new understandings of historical time and new emplacements of people in historical space. It is interesting to look at the pair “remembering-imagining” (or to the processes of “remembrance” and “imagination”) to define the historical writing. One needs to relate the origin of the so-called “*civilization of images*” with the consolidation of a *historical thinking* and an *educational society*. These three realities were born and developed in the same time period. In the nineteenth century, this triad – images, history and education – is the bearer of a linear conception of time that situates the subjects in a permanent logic of remembering-imagining. The chronological perspective of time is used to build the historical science in a past-present-future sequence. Does this perspective remain useful to us in thinking about historical work at the end of twentieth century?

I am convinced that we have to introduce more complex conceptions to historical reflection that allow us to understand the coexistence of distinct dimensions of time. Nowadays, it is not the facts but the historians who dominate the debate. They are tireless producers of coherence and meanings that compose a kind of “fiction” on the basis of “true” elements (Boia, 1998). In *Figural Realism*, Hayden White puts clearly the question of historical emplotments and the problem of “truth”. He asserts that narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story. Recognizing this interconnection between different story-meanings and modes of emplotment, historical research needs also to define what kinds of story can be properly told.

3

The photographs by Paulo Catrica are “clean”, inducing a (false) impression of simplicity, as if no technique was needed. *Just a photo*. There is no underlining, no majuscules. There are no calls, no *clins d’oeil*. The intention is “only” to show. In a certain way, Catrica’s work suggests a return of photography to the “objectivity” of the early stage. Maybe in search of the same innocence, but definitively without the same naiveté – “Don’t underestimate Paulo Catrica for he leaves nothing unconsidered or to chance... even chance itself” (Jeffrey, 2003, p. 4).

Do you remember the essays by Viktor Sklovski at the beginning of 20th century, and their reference to the *ostranenie effect* (estrangement, unfamiliarity, strangeness)? According to him, that was the only way to understand the “known” as “unknown”, overcoming the automatism of perception and enlarging experience. In contrast to the photographers of this generation that looked for this *effect* through various processes of deformation of images, Paulo Catrica achieves this purpose without tricks or montages.

“Image is literally the negative of the presence”: Pierre Bourdieu’s thesis (1965) clearly applies to the work of Paulo Catrica. As noted by Ian Jeffrey (1998), one of the main features of his pictures is “the suppression of human beings.” But, strangely enough, human beings are deeply present in all the photographs: in the great hall of Sommerville, in the classroom of Weoley Castle Nursery School, in the Maths classroom of Queensbridge, in the Laboratory of Saltley... He knows that *absence* is the most powerful *presence*. He re-presents different spaces, inviting us to imagine how they have been occupied. He opens up our imagination, placing the observer in a position of remembering-imagining.

Paulo Catrica creates a game of images, a game between what we see and what we know, between what is pictured and what exists in our memories. On the one side, the images – framed, concrete, touchable. On the other side, the memories – vague, imprecise, often inaccessible. We remember too much. We forget too much. The game of vision is the game of history. As Roland Barthes explained, it is no coincidence that photography and history were invented in the same century.

Paulo Catrica photographs school spaces without teachers, without pupils. But he is not interested in architecture, in the formal building of spaces. His attention is driven towards the appropriation and transformation of space: the signs on the walls, a new lamp for a new activity, a door that is blocked, a laboratory filled with papers... He pays attention to the *plasticity* of spaces, to the different “historical layers” detected in each *frame*. For him, a classroom or a laboratory is a place where people have lived, and that is why we cannot avoid inserting teachers and pupils into the pictures. The tension between the predictable form of spaces and the unpredictable action of human beings is at the core of Catrica’s approach. He produces images that are always inhabited. They are like stage sets... and drama is an art that cannot exist without a plot!

The aesthetic of Paulo Catrica is so simple that it puts us on the alert. Apparently, his only intention is to show the facts. *Only* is certainly not the best word. Paulo Catrica’s photographs are a strong invitation to see what we already know, but adopting a different way of looking at it. He is aware that the familiarity of visual experience is an obstacle to the exercise of seeing. Each one of his photographs is a provocation that compels one to ask *And if...* Hence, he gives us the possibility of telling new stories, and of imagining new histories. This is the main fascination of his artistic work.

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