

## 4. PERFORMATIVITY BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION IN MEDIA PHOTOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** *Performativity and staging in photography are constructive practices performed in front of the camera. The present material aims to analyze a series of situations in which photos considered documentary access technical subterfuges to divert or correct reality and some variants in which staged photos symbolically reproduce reality.*

**Key words:** *performance photography, staging, media, visual communication, fiction*

### 1. Introduction

The transformations that appeared in the methods of approaching photography from the beginning of the 20th century are based on the evolution of humanity, which capitalizes on developments in terms of technology, culture and the perception of the work of art.<sup>202</sup> Thus, the scope of the dissemination of visual information, the innovations at the level of production of photosensitive materials as well as the equipment specific to the environment, the need for the emergence of new positions in relation to classical art and the change in the organizational chart of artistic institutions as a result of the implicit transfiguration of the patron and the status of the artist, led to a series of creative forms, sometimes structurally close, sometimes parallel or opposite.

### 2. Photography in the media space

Although the changes operated in the area of expression were not immediate, the first programmatic artistic coagulation with the objective of detachment from pictorialism took shape through the formation in 1932, in San Francisco, of the Group/f/64, which included Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, John Paul Edwards, Sonya Noskowiak, Henry Swift and Willard Van Dyke. In the manifesto released at the exhibition held in the year of its establishment, the artists admit that they cannot cover the entire spectrum of photography and that it formulates its creative discourse by appealing to a simple and direct presentation, built on purely photographic methods, which benefits from the highest possible clarity and definition of the image.

Pure photography, according to the exponents of the f/64 Group, must develop along the lines established by the actualities and limitations of the photographic medium, must always remain independent of the ideological conventions of art and aesthetics, which recall the period and culture that precedes the appearance of the medium itself and is defined as having no qualities of technique, composition, or idea, derivative of any other art form.<sup>203</sup> Adherents of the use of large-format cameras, the members of the f/64 Group had to restrict the subject matter of the works to representations of natural or urban landscapes, to limited elements of

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<sup>202</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Lighting, Idea design & Print*, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 107

<sup>203</sup> Therese Thau Heyman, *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography*. Oakland Museum, 1992, p. 20–24  
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organic details or to geometric shapes with industrial inspiration, sometimes to the simplified rendering of the human body, but obsessively considering tonal relationships and textures.

This mode of representation with a static predominance refers to a minimalist aesthetic that provokes the viewer, for the most part, only experiences of plastic and attitudinal contemplative perception. Photographic purism decanted the appearance of the image by adding clarity to the image, but technological gains, made through the development of materials with superior photo-sensitivity, high-performance portable equipment with 35 mm film rolls and interchangeable lenses, opened the horizon of photography to the general public and have primarily pushed the forms of documentary expression to a new level, that of speed, expressed through the snapshot.

Photographic reportage acquires a new dimension, adding ethical precepts that seem at first glance to draw their substance from the same purism. The objective nature of documentary, especially war, is called into question in the situation where the photographer is located on one of the areas separated by the conflict line, thus favoring one of the belligerent parties. More and more present, "photojournalism was created within the new publishing and communications industries and developed a new type of picture, utilitarian in its determination by the editorial task and novel in its capture of the snapshot, of the news event as it happened."<sup>204</sup>

Originally converted by draftsmen into woodblock engravings to be printed in newspapers, documentary images could be reproduced mechanically through the invention of the halftone.<sup>205</sup> In the 1890s the first newspapers with halftone photographic reproductions appeared, and then it took another ten years for the process to be fully adopted. This served the needs of the circulation of the image in its informational, entertainment and advertising forms as extensions of an applied photograph. Following the main objective of this material, represented by performative photography, it is natural to identify situations when, within the genres that presuppose the observation of reality, we encounter various types of staging.

### **3. Documentation, performativity and staging**

Image manipulation dates back to the early days of photography. Roger Fenton (1819-1869) documented the Crimean War of 1853-1856 and is widely seen as the first official war photographer. From the documentary series, his most famous work, *The valley of the shadow of death* renders a desolate landscape, crossed by a road filled with artillery shells. The image underwent a re-examination when a second picture was discovered in 1981 with fewer bullets in the frame. Today, it is believed that the second image was the original and that Fenton added the extra cannonballs to make the scene appear more dramatic.<sup>206</sup>

Due to the perception of the environment as a form of direct representation of reality, there has been since the 19th century a compensatory relationship between

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<sup>204</sup> Jeff Wall, "Signs of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art Originally published in Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Art Object*, as part of the 1995-1996 MoCA Los Angeles Exhibition and Catalogue, p. 248

<sup>205</sup> Halftone turns the different tones of a photo into dots of different sizes. The eye has limited resolution power and, at a distance, is tricked into seeing these dots as a continuous tone.

<sup>206</sup> Hendy Van Erp, Susan Bright, authors, *Photography Decoded: Look, Think, Ask*, Ilex Press, 2019, p. 77

the aspiration of the author to be believable and the satisfaction of the viewer who wanted to believe. A number of fashionable subjects in the era are speculated by photographers and reproduced in various media outlets. Taken by Elsie Wright, the 1917 photograph entitled *Alice and the Fairies* was received by the public with a sense of wonder (Fig. 1). To prove that they were playing with the fairies in the nearby woods, cousins Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright, from Cottingley, Yorkshire, captured some images on film. Elsie, who was 16 at the time and already familiar with her father's room, was surprised to reveal a portrait of Frances with the dancing fairies.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the spiritualist Sherlock Holmes books, used the image to illustrate an article about fairies in the Strand Magazine for its Christmas issue in 1920. It was not until 1983 that Elsie admitted that she had drawn and painted the fairies on cardboard, he had cut them out, stuck them with hat pins to look believable in the pictures and that their photos were actually hoaxes.<sup>207</sup> In addition to the iconic figure of the writer, the widespread acceptance of the authenticity of the photographs, also known as the *Cottingley Fairies*, was helped by the fact that they were taken by children, with the considerable technical difficulties existing at the time, by two young middle-class girls, who could not lie to the authority of adults. If we were to extrapolate today these esoteric trends, now present under other guises, we will notice that the desire to see beyond the frame is still intact in photography or any other form of media exposure.<sup>208</sup>

On the eve of the First World War, photojournalism was still far from the form known today. Of the images that have passed the test of time, an important part was made by the great mass of anonymous authors, by the participating soldiers equipped with medium format portable cameras on rollfilm.<sup>209</sup> There are few photographs in the illustrated periodicals depicting the staggering human cost of this war. The central imperatives regarding photographing the conflict were to solicit public support without unduly recording the contradictions of war and to validate the state's insistent call to duty and service while mitigating the ugliness of war.<sup>210</sup>

In the year 1915, in the midst of the world war, the photograph capturing moments unfolding on the front came under the spectrum of censorship for the first time. Far from the theater of violence, in the Sentier district of Paris, Léon Gimpel, a photographer working at the time for the newspaper *l'Illustration*, meets a group of children who lived on rue Grenéta. He proposes that they interpret the war in front of the camera. The parents find the idea excellent because this activity could keep the little ones occupied on Sundays and in addition, the mothers agree to make costumes imitating the uniforms of the French and German soldiers. Gimpel decides to represent the battle images by establishing typologies specific to the Great War through trenches, boy fighters belonging to both armies, little girls as nurses, a cardboard plane, improvised cannons, flags, medals and marking locations, each street corner becoming a the scene of a possible frame.

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<sup>207</sup> Ruth Thomson, *Photos First*, The Watts Publishing Group, 2017, p. 38

<sup>208</sup> Hendy Van Erp, Susan Bright, authors, *Photography Decoded: Look, Think, Ask*, Ilex Press, 2019, p. 83

<sup>209</sup> Jorge Lewinski, *The Camera at War: A History of War Photography from 1848 to the Present Day*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 67-68

<sup>210</sup> Jason Francisco, *War Photography*, Encyclopedia of twentieth-century photography, Lynne Warren, editor. Published in 2006 by Routledge, p. 1637

In all visually recorded actions there are no victims. Gimpel and the Grenéta street army do not mime death, but heroism, courage and victory. (Fig. 2) The artist proposes a variant of the suite of images to the publication *L'Illustration*, which does not find the subject serious enough to include in its pages. Fortunately, the Lumière brothers offer the window of their shop on rue Rivoli to display the works, and Gimpel invites his small army, along with the general public, to admire them. *L'armée de la rue Grenéta* shows a hidden side of war and also a projection of it in a rather curative record.

The photographic experience of The First World War was followed by an extensive practice of the photojournalist developed in the Spanish Civil War, to be taken over more and more consistently by the new media of communication. With the development of the Second World War, there was a need and requirement for the events to be recorded photographically. "Basically," declared US General Dwight D. Eisenhower, "public opinion wins wars."<sup>211</sup> The armed forces of nearly all nations engaged in the conflict trained and equipped thousands of photographers for military service, and the number of formally trained photographers grew throughout the war to accompany nearly every military unit. The emergence and popular success of picture magazines in Europe and later in North America was complemented by the growing importance of motion pictures, radio, advertising, and political propaganda. In this context the use of photographs in the press has become increasingly common and expected. Photojournalism emerged as an established practice, but one related to conventional notions of documentary, news, information, opinion, publicity and propaganda.<sup>212</sup>

Perhaps the most famous war photograph in history, Robert Capa's 1936 image *The Falling Soldier* depicts a soldier of the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) at the moment of his death (Fig. 3). The character is caught falling backwards after being hit by a bullet on the Cordoba front. The frame was placed on June 12, 1937 in *LIFE* magazine alongside an article representing a hair wax advertisement. The paradox of this association was signaled by Susan Sontag in 2003 with the statement: "The public's appetite for images that represent grieving bodies is as great as the desire to see empty ones."<sup>213</sup>

The photo remained in the collective memory of genre lovers due to the drama of the moment, that split second that immortalizes the moment of suspension between life and death. However, the man's identity and location have been called into question repeatedly. Debate over the image's authenticity has accompanied its notoriety, but it may be unfounded if one considers that it is unlikely that soldiers staged their own deaths as an acceptance of their own defeat.<sup>214</sup> A decision to establish the reality of the photograph can mean in many ways more than what it actually depicts. "Does it matter which version is true? It could be a man shot in the middle of battle or it could be staged. This is an unusual position for a documentary photograph and illustrates that reality is perhaps not the most important issue when

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<sup>211</sup> Jason Francisco, *War Photography*, Encyclopedia of twentieth-century photography, Lynne Warren, editor. Published in 2006 by Routledge, p. 1638

<sup>212</sup> Michael Griffin, *The Great War Photographs*, *Picturing the Past: Media, History & Photography*, Editors: Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, University of Illinois Press, 1999, p. 123-124

<sup>213</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*, London, Penguin Books, 2003

<sup>214</sup> Jason Francisco, *War Photography*, Encyclopedia of twentieth-century photography, Lynne Warren, editor. Published in 2006 by Routledge, p. 1639

making a statement about the role of representation in war.”<sup>215</sup>

Photographic staging has in certain cases become a powerful and dangerous tool in the service of propaganda, mystifying reality. Close friend and confidant of Adolf Hitler since 1920, Heinrich Hoffmann recorded two million frames with the Nazi leader as the central subject. In fact, after Hitler took control of the party in 1921, he appointed Hoffmann his official photographer, a position he held for over a quarter of a century. No other photographer, apart from Hoffmann, was allowed to take pictures of Hitler.<sup>216</sup> His work includes a variety of settings depicting Hitler's business visits, intimate images or famous Mephistophelian dramatics against black backgrounds, but the 1934 visual direction of the Bückeberg Nazi rally is one of the most penetrating.(Fig. 4)

The photograph captures the Führer's preferred orchestration, with troops and flags organized in broad straight lines and symmetries that were always inspired by his megalomaniac and self-centered spirit. As the main protagonist of the picture, Hitler is surprised as he ascends to the podium. The lines of force described by the rows of soldiers or the swastika flags converge to the central geometric place represented by his head. The sensation but also the ascension symbolism is amplified by the perspective end placed in the upper area of the photograph, which generates the path and at the same time suggests the enormous distance to the foreground. Such images were aggressively spread in Nazi Germany. Hoffmann's propaganda can be seen as a testimony to the fact that photography in the service of oppressive power has the ability to change the thinking of nations and plunge the world into war.

The photo *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, taken by Joe Rosenthal, on February 22, 1945, probably the most famous photograph from the Second World War, is an iconic example of the fighting spirit, a form of encouragement to identify the feeling of the victor but also an analogy of the triumph of the American people (Fig. 5). The photo shows a group of American soldiers in an effort to raise the United States flag vertically on the highest point of the island of Iwo Jima, facing something more than atmospheric conditions. The compositional dynamics resulting from the opposition of the two intersecting vector diagonals, that of the flag and that determined by the intention of the characters' movement, intensifies the impression left on the audience.

The huge reputation of the famous picture is somewhat affected by the controversies surrounding the making. Apparently the first image was taken the day the Marines took control of the heights of Mount Suribachi. With the bullets still whistling, no one wanted to develop a heroic posture when the symbolic gesture was performed. As a result, Rosenthal remade the photo using a larger flag and careful choreography. The question is not whether the photograph was actually staged, but whether its classical composition and metaphorical allusions, driven by the staging, were largely responsible for its immediate popularity and rapid rise to iconic image status.<sup>217</sup>

A similar role is played by Evgeni Khaldei's iconic image of a Russian soldier

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<sup>215</sup> Hendy Van Erp, Susan Bright, authors, *Photography Decoded: Look, Think, Ask*, Ilex Press, 2019, p. 31

<sup>216</sup> Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. Woodstock, New York: Overkill Press, 2002, p. 255

<sup>217</sup> Michael Griffin, *The Great War Photographs, Picturing the Past: Media, History & Photography*, Editors: Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, University of Illinois Press, 1999, p. 143-144

waving the Soviet flag over the Reichstag. As an official representative, Khaldei was given the task of making a collection of photographs representing the victory of the Red Army soldiers. On April 30, 1945 the author makes the first recording of an image of the roof of the Reichstag building still on fire. It is followed the next day by others starring two soldiers. It was only on May 2 that Khaldei managed to complete his staging with the help of two other soldiers. In the end, 36 shots were fired, the best of which were published, but only one of them remained famous (Fig. 6).

Later edits hide certain aspects that arouse more public attention. In an "aesthetic excess," according to artist and critic Martha Rosler, Khaldei manipulates the space around the main character creating an additional contrast and adds smoke from another image, thus manipulating the viewer's perception of the moment the image was made. Thus it can be believed that the symbolic scene takes place right during the fighting.<sup>218</sup> In addition, Khaldei hides the second watch worn by the soldier at the base of the photo in a kind of "reparation" of his conduct, in order not to leave room for the interpretation that he committed a robbery.

The photojournalistic aesthetics does not always appeal to the palette of plastic formulations because the content of the visual information, meant to delight the public, remains placed in the reporter's center of interest. In the case of Arthur Fellig, known as Weegee, the subject may appear in the nightlife of New York City, in the form of tragedies or murders. He had the ability to always be in the place where the latest news was going to spread. In the work *The Critic* we encounter the contrasting relationship caused by the confrontation between the social categories represented by two ladies of high society who came to the opera and a woman in an accentuated state of intoxication (Fig. 7).

The striking contrast enhanced by the flash of the device juxtaposes the glow of the expensive white furs, jewels and tiaras laden with precious stones, which demonstrate the social belonging of the two, and the modest clothes of the intruder. The drunken woman on the right side of the image has a disheveled head, and her mouth is tense and open as if she is saying something. It was later learned that she was actually recruited by the photographer's assistant for this staging after she was lured with a few glasses of drink. Thus, a photo that became famous thanks to the social message indicates particularities of the way of manipulating the public in a field that requires professional honesty.

#### **4. Reality and Imagination in Advertising**

Photo-based advertising appears quite late in the newspaper and magazine pages although the halftone spread became widely available in the early 20th century. It is only in the second decade that the first attractive visual allegories of life make their place as propositions of product presentations. The increased use of commercial photography in the next decade came as a result of a conceptual change in the philosophy of advertising. Over time, suggestive and evocative images grew in the perception that they might be able to do the same job, and perhaps even better, than enumerating the virtues of a product rendered through texts. In addition, visual

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<sup>218</sup> Jason Francisco, War Photography, Encyclopedia of twentieth-century photography, Lynne Warren, editor. Published in 2006 by Routledge, p. 1639-1640

allusions to modernist geometry or surrealist extravagances enhanced photographers' creative assets and made advertising photography increasingly attractive.<sup>219</sup> In this context, the presentation of subjects as close as possible to realistic situations is paradoxically based on fictional constructions, carefully directed.

*American Girl in Italy* is one of nine photographs taken by Ruth Orkin that appeared in the September 1952 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Fig. 8), in an article entitled *When You Travel Alone*. In the accompanying commentary women are encouraged to travel alone abroad to meet new people, men for example. This should build their self-confidence, and the lack of a companion would encourage invitations to play with other people. The dramatic contrast between the lone woman and the fifteen men gazing appreciatively at her depicts the complexity of an apparently friendly, even adoring, but actually intimidating and hostile atmosphere for a woman on the street in Italy in 1951.<sup>220</sup> Actually the American in the picture, her name was Jinx Allen, she was a painter, she was twenty-three years old, and she wasn't really single.

Twenty-nine-year-old Orkin met Allen in Florence at the American Express office, where American citizens could pick up their mail. She agrees to collaborate for the making of some photographs and thus appears in Orkin's visually transposed scenario. In the image the young woman appears somewhat confused as if she needs to be directed. The photo was taken again, the second attempt removing some of the men's gaze to the camera. It should be noted that in the continuation of the series Allen appears on the motorcycle in the picture, in the passenger seat.

The two women claimed that in the entire atmosphere created there was no reference to the ideas of harassment, patriarchy or feminism. The photograph reproduced since then, frequently in magazines and books, may no longer convey the same spirit to contemporary audiences. The figure of the girl is perceived today as rather frightened, the mouth is half-open, the half-open eyes stare straight ahead while the hands clutch the shawl and the sketchbook to the chest. Most likely the girls did not feel any danger. In the context of male gazes, the image can develop multiple meanings. "And if a photograph becomes 'iconic', as this one has become, it is not because it has universal meaning; rather, it is open to different interpretations", David Campany tells us.<sup>221</sup>

*Case Study House #22*, featuring Julius Shulman as author is one of the most successful real estate promotional images ever made (Fig. 9). The photographer immortalizes all 36 houses of the architect Pierre Koenig, experimental projects that expand the virtues of the modernist author both in terms of theory and in terms of the innovative use of new industrial materials. Shulman outbids in his frames the impression left by the constructions, betting on the illusory phrase of the Californian dream. Thus in *Case Study House #22*, a Hollywood house enclosed in glass is viewed from an angle that allows it to feel suspended above a breathtaking view of Los Angeles. The author stages the image by placing inside it two elegantly dressed young women as in a glamorous photo.

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<sup>219</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *100 Ideas That Changed Photography*, Laurence King Publishing, 2020, p. 127

<sup>220</sup> David Bate, *Photography*, Thames & Hudson Ltd. London, 2021, p. 85

<sup>221</sup> David Campany, *On Photographs*, Thames & Hudson Ltd. London, 2020, p. 38

The architectural association with the feminine element perfects the art of valuing the fictional aspirational feeling, but perfectly explained by Jean Baudrillard through the Logic of Santa Claus: "we don't believe in him, but we believe in the advertising that wants to make us believe in him"<sup>222</sup> Starting with the 20th decade, the world of fashion is revealed to the public as a result of the consistent support of profile publications. Fashion, a mirror of society, has always transposed a hypothetical reality located chronologically in the future.

Published in 1981, in the French Vogue magazine, the diptych of Helmut Newton, titled *They're Coming!* represents an erotic metaphor for the changing image of women (Fig. 10). In the artist's view, photography expresses reality, if one accepts the idea that fantasies also belong to the inventory of reality. In the diptych proposed by Newton, the unusual settings sought under the Mediterranean sun, under the subway lanterns, in luxurious hotel rooms, loaded with harnesses and utensils of erotic domination rituals are missing, all of which are replaced by the sober context of the studio background. In both frames four models appear to move from the background towards the camera in the direction of the optical axis.

In the first photo, from the left, the characters are wearing only shoes, while the second shows them in similar positions, but clothed. For Newton, a woman isn't naked unless she's wearing high heels, and that kind of nakedness gives her power. The contours of the women seem to be sculpted with light, reinforcing the impression of menace. In the field of magazines, the right side is usually considered to be the most important. In the opening of Vogue it is considered that the human being is initially naked and only then clothed. Whether dressed or undressed, the women in Newton's photographs are ready to conquer the world of men. Helmut Newton was undoubtedly a witness to the dramatic change in the role of women in society. And he was their important, if often misunderstood, iconographer.<sup>223</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The series of examples above accesses the segment of artistic practices applied in photography, used to describe aspects of reality, which are made available to the public with the help of media devices. Performativity and staging, as fictive constructive modes of operation, become all the more interesting to follow when we find them in the area of these practices. The commented visual models show us that in certain situations reality should not have been modified, or on the contrary, the truth is equally present whether it is taken directly or represented symbolically through the camera.

### List of illustrations

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<sup>222</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *System of objects*, Echinoc Publishing House, Cluj, 1996, p. 109

<sup>223</sup> Hans-Michael Koetzle, *Photo Icons The Story Behind the Pictures 1827-1991 Special Collection*, Tashen, 2005, p. 87-88

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