

Katarzyna Łata

**Communication in Photography
Between Iconography and Isotype**

Katarzyna Łata's doctoral dissertation titled *Communication in Photography. Between Iconography and Isotype* was supervised by Dr Hab. Piotr Muschalik, Prof. ASP at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice. It consists of a cycle of photographic works complemented with a theoretical dissertation and a set of works as a basis for the research on the meaning of photography in the context of communication and image interpretation.

The author begins the theoretical considerations about the function and meaning of a communication in photography with its technical definition as a method of recording an image by means of light and lenses, which enable recording an image on photosensitive material, and lists its possible purposes: scientific, informative, documentary, advertising and creative. She also emphasises the increasing significance of content that a photographer wants to convey with their work, that is, the communication, both the explicit and the implicit one, which remains open to the recipient's interpretation.

Referring to Rudolf Arnheim's works, the author proves that a photographic visual communication depends on such components as: layout, perspective, light, colour, symbols and signs, and compares photographs to words while considering the medium of photography as more natural than the language, because it facilitates the expression of emotions, mood and context. After Arnheim, the author differentiates between an icon, a symbol and a sign, indicating diverse functions of images. Based on the theory of visual communication, the author continues the considerations about the semiotic layer and presents Susan Sontag's opinion about photography as one of the most important media in the society due to its expanding our knowledge and empathy towards other people and cultures. Following the analysis of photography conducted by Ronald Barthes, the author indicates its documentary function as regards history and cultural heritage, accounting for the development of technology and means of artistic expression. In reference to the diagram proposed by Roman Jakobson, the author names and explains the referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic functions of language, in this case: photography, in the process of communication. The author also presents Stefan Wojnecki's model of space of social communication, which demonstrates the probability of identifying an image with photography.

Next, the theoretical part of dissertation focuses on composition as a carrier of a photographic communication. It describes its role in conveying information and evoking particular emotions in the recipient, indicates the fundamental composition techniques as tools, which make photography a carrier for a photographic communication. Another element the author accounts for is the role of light in the photographic image regarding its colour, reflection, dispersion, direction and intensity, which all affect the style, emotion and message of the photograph.

Further, the dissertation emphasises the role of colour in photography and its symbolic, resulting from particular colours and their associations, emotions and values. The author

emphasises the connection between colour interpretation and human perception, emotions and conduct as well as with our cultural and personal experience, demonstrating its potential effect on the recipient.

Then, the use of perspective and its influence on the interpretation of a two-dimensional image is described. Based on Erwin Panofsky's opinion, perspective is named as one of the most important components of a visual message, because its use affects the way we see and understand the world. The author explains the influence of various types of perspective on how an image is interpreted by the recipient due to implied direction of view and spatial hierarchy.

A large portion of the dissertation is dedicated to discussing a sign and a symbol in the context of a photographic image. Using Villem Flusser's dictionary of fundamental terms, the author differentiates between an image, a symbol and a sign, providing the etymology, types and connection with the represented meaning for each term. A sign and a symbol are demonstrated as notions with the crucial role in the process of visual communication in photography. The considerations about a symbol lead to the explanation in the area of semiotics – the study of signs and their meanings in the context of logics and linguistics, a theory that integrates all aspects of human activity. The author describes its three sections: semantics, syntactics and pragmatics. In the context of visual arts, the cognitive theory facilitates our understanding of how cognitive processes shape our aesthetic experience, and how artists employ various strategies in order to communicate by means of images, as well as how interpretations of art differ between persons and cultures. The author also presents the opinions aired by the opponents and critics of this theory, i.e. Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. To support the thesis that in photography, and in other areas of visual art, symbols play a fundamental role in constructing and conveying the message, the dissertation quotes Adrian Frutiger and Tzvetan Todorov, who also spoke of characteristics shared by symbol and allegory. Among the theorists who claimed that symbols are integral elements of a photographic communication, the author names and quotes Ernst H. Gombrich and Rudolf Wittkower, also recalling the opinion of Władysław Strzemiński, who wrote that a word is a certain type of symbol, usually associated with particular images, ideas and emotions. The author persuades that photography can reflect the reality, but can also constitute a symbolic statement.

The author moves on to discussing the subject of information in photography as a carrier of a visual communication, which conveys a certain message, idea, emotion or suggestion. The dissertation includes the introduction to the theory of visual semiotics, studies signs and symbols in photographic images and the manner in which these elements are organised to convey the message. Next, the author applies the concepts of Herbert Marshall McLuhan's, who introduced the division into the warm media (particular, e.g. books) and cold media (condensed, e.g. social media). He argued that the medium does affect the way we receive the message it conveys. The author concludes that what media are used for conveying information depends on the communication goal and the recipient's expectations. Shortly, the dissertation discusses the phenomenon of eidetic memory, which has not been conclusively proven by scientific research. It would seem that the visual memory is selective and further processed, and memorisation and restoration of images are complex processes, conditional upon many factors.

The final part of theoretical considerations is focussed on a matter of a communication in photography in the context of iconology and isotype. Defining iconology as a research method employed by art historians, the author uses the term coined by Aby Warburg for emphasising the significance of studying the content and symbols in works of art. As quoted in the dissertation, Edwin Panofsky claimed that the analysis of artwork should account for its form as well as for its historical and cultural context and symbols, allegories and history of depictions. The author demonstrates the use of iconology at three stages of artwork interpretation: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconographic interpretation. The dissertation also presents the opinions of iconology critics, including Ernst Gombrich and Umberto Eco, who denounced this method as inclined to stiff classifications and impoverishing the study of artistic form. Moving on to discussing isotype, the author defines it as a visual language, which employs visual tools to convey information. This system, developed by Otto Neurath and his interdisciplinary team, was intended to replace the traditional methods of data representation, as it is characterised by visual consistency due to the use of simplified system of colours and unified Futura typeface. Its purpose was to democratise the access to information and education, and thereby introduce a real change in various areas of life.

Having established the theoretical foundation, the doctoral candidate moves on to discussing the research in the area of visual communication conducted based on the original photographic cycle titled *The Case Study*. The notion of visual communication is defined as a form of two-way communication, on the photographer's and on the recipient's side, in which information is conveyed by means of images, prints, diagrams, charts, signs, symbols etc, and so with visual language, used to convey information, emotion and ideas. The research was based on the set of works in the form of photographic diptychs, presented to the wide public during exhibitions.

The cycle *Communication in Photography* consists of twenty photographs (ten diptychs), each juxtaposing two images as communications in the area of medium of photography. Taken with a digital camera, the images were exposed in the form of digital pigment print on paper maintaining the of Digigraphie Collection quality parameters, on 50×50 cm format. The additional cycle of photographs titled *The Case Study* constituted the material for research conducted on a numerous target group (of recipients). Composed of more than eighty photographic works, the set of hybrid photography is presented in the form of objects – overlaid diptychs. The doctoral candidate used candid and medium-format photo cameras as well as photo films, digital photography and instant photography. Each diptych is 23×23 cm, and framed in white box frames. Each of the works tells the story of an event or a person who had impact on the doctoral candidate's life. It could have been a short acquaintance, an incident, or a long-term relationship with a family member for example. The portraits come together as a case study of the author, personally.

The main type of research was the individual in-depth interview – a method of qualitative research which involves conducting an interview with one respondent in order to obtain particular information about the studied phenomenon. The doctoral candidate employed open-ended, closed-ended and half-open questions, as well as introductory questions. The research was also art-based with an artistic practice as the main source of knowledge – artistic practice serves to study issues connected with art and its social function, and the

results come in the form of artistic products, which can be further evaluated and analysed. Here, the research included photographic practice as a means of studying the issues connected with photographic methods and creative processes, as well as with the manners of interpretation and reception of photography. The resulting artistic products assumed the form of a photographic cycle titled *The Case Study*. There was a complementary research of observation with comments gathering during expositions, openings and guided tours of exhibitions. In the dissertation, the author quotes several of the statements collected in the course of in-depth interviews, which evidence the thesis that in photography symbols are an important element of communication facilitating the expression of meanings, otherwise difficult to present verbally.

The author concludes by discussing the issues of emotional and rational interpretation in the process of image perception. The differentiation between these two terms was proposed by Villem Flusser. Emotional interpretation is defined as a subjective process, in which the recipient decodes or provides an emotional meaning to the visual elements of the image. Rational interpretation, on the other hand, relies upon logical and objective understanding of the image.

Based on the statements made by Nicholas Mirzoeff, the author claims that perception as a skill undergoes constant modifications, also by means of modern technologies, and emotional interpretation is one of the components that affect the way we receive and understand the photographic image.

The doctoral dissertation includes reproductions of the discussed photographs, detailed descriptions of the used devices, printing technologies and framing of works. It provides the explanation for symbols used in photographs and a list of words, photo-interpreted by the doctoral candidate. Moreover, the reasons for which the author resigned from colour for black-and-white photographs are given. The entire dissertation is summed up by explaining the connection between interpreting photography in its connotative and denotative layers, which come as a whole in the process of perception. Finally, the author emphasises the dominant role of images in the society and culture as the result of iconographic revolution.

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