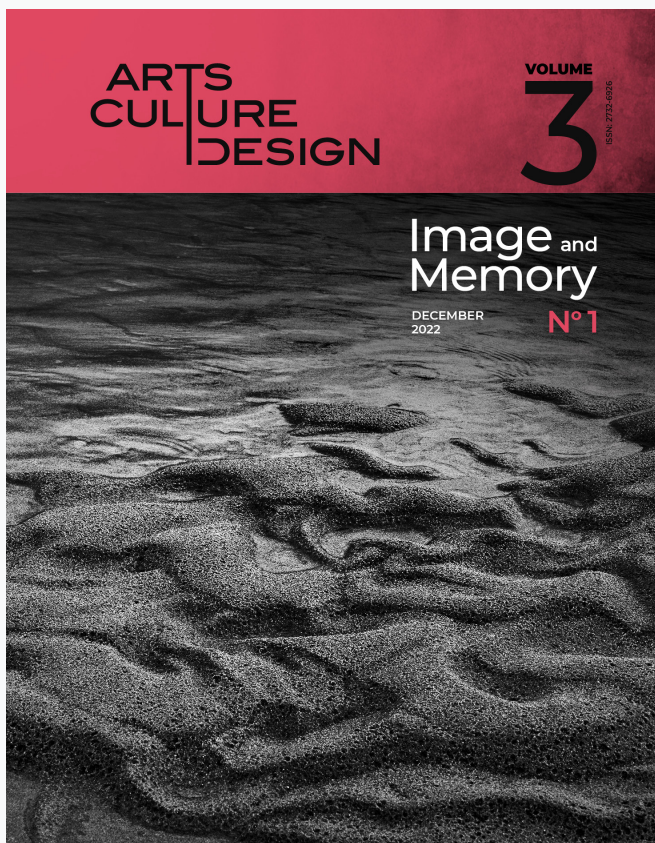


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Image and Memory



PHOTOGRAPHY AS ANTI-MEMORY

Fotis Kangelaris

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ARTICLE

PHOTOGRAPHY AS ANTI-MEMORY

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PHOTOGRAPHY AS ANTI-MEMORY

“The photographic lens reveals unconscious optics, the same way that psychoanalysis reveals unconscious causes.”

(Benjamin, 2013, p. 52)

Abstract

It is widely known that photography is related to memory. The invention of photography was inextricably linked to memory, as a more effective and direct way than painting.

A more effective and direct way to depict the object to be remembered such as the rulers' portraits or the painted depictions of animals and plants that navigators met while discovering the world, always having a painter with them.

However, in the present study, we attempt to show that the innermost reason for the invention and use of photography was never related to memory, and if it was related, the reason was to make us forget what we were aiming to remember.

The inner cause of photography's position in human history and art was:

1) To bring us into contact with the invisible: to that, photography is analysed through philosophy's prism and especially as Romanticism's offspring that attempts to go beyond reality and connect us with alterity and the invisible which dictates the visible.

2) To offer a sense of reality to the structural void on which the human psyche is composed: to that, photography is analysed through the prism of psychoanalysis as a symbolic mirror of the photographer's and viewer's psyche, a process based on the “mirror stage” (Lacan, 1966).

3) To make us forget: to that, photography is analysed through an anthropological regard where, via common mechanisms which are related to Magic, the photographer and the viewer have the potential to surpass reality's flow through amnesia.

Keywords

Romanticism

the invisible

alterity

structure

the void

symbolic mirror

magic

memory

remembrance

photography

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH: A RUPTURE IN THE VISIBLE

Photography is Romanticism's offspring. It is born in the same era as the great movement of Romanticism, the most radical search that human history, art, and life ever met.

Romanticism was the ideal hunter of the absolute, the birthplace of anything and everything, the most ground-breaking and contradictory movement that humanity ever came across. Romanticism is the expression of the impossible and futile absolute, where we should be at the meeting of Don Quixote with Vienna's Actionists who express the rage for the transcendence of life's futility, answering to futile with explosive futility, knowing that the human is a useless passion, as Sartre (2008) would say. Romanticism is the rebellion against the settlement of the Enlightenment and Rationalism, which supported that all the questions are true answers and all the answers can be combined with each other into a whole, otherwise, the world would be chaotic: Newton's theory on gravity could be applied on politics and ethics. The Enlightenment, however, which led the human away from the darkness of the Middle Ages into the light of Rationalism, is a victory of humanity in seeing the world through science, social self-determination, psychological free will and the interpretation of nature based on physics (Kepler, Galileo, Copernicus, Newton) and not based on the Old Testament. Foucault (2003) equals the fight against the Enlightenment to patricide.

Romanticism comes to reject exactly the human's victory of the spirit against darkness, not wanting to bring the human back to the Middle Ages, but to side-line logic into the human to leave space for the other nature of the human to emerge, human's real nature, desire. Desire was exiled from the social forefront as not contributing to social cohesion, not contributing to ethics, science's progress, and human's logical side. Romanticism is also the womb of two completely different movements: Socialism and Fascism, since both pursue the absolute as a social state. The slogan of May '68 itself, "Be realistic, demand the impossible!", is nothing but a later post-romantic slogan.

Romanticism is a search for alterity in its most absolute form, a plea towards 'thereafter' so that it can become part of our life again, after being excluded by Rationalism. It becomes a way to penetrate the collective imagination as a reaction to science's and reality's desert, into the predefined meaning and life. It is, at the same time, what Pinel did when he took off the chains from the mad, the society recognises that the mad people have a human status, and accepts the complete alterity of madness as a constituent of human nature. Romanticism's main slogan was: "I don't want any more truth, I want more magic".

A complete opposition to science, to conventions, to Rationalism and a complete reinforcement of the exotic, of the non-conventional. But, as far as art is concerned, Modernism's main pillar, Surrealism, which paved the way to 20th-century's art, is Romanticism, as Breton (1946) said. Romanticism is concurrently the complete prominence of subjectivity, of individuality, of singularity. It is, therefore, the prominence of desire. The desire, as the main component of the human state, because of the social conventions, cultural censorship, and religious prohibitions, remained the exiled voice, coming from the place of the conscience which acted secretly, creating symptoms whether they were social expressed with the French Revolution of 1789 or the movement of 1848, or psychological with the manifestation of psychosomatic symptoms or organised disorders such as neurosis and psychosis. Freud, a little later, calls for the desire to speak, to express itself and to stop acting in a censored and forbidden way. We would say that the previous centuries were sick of lack of speech and ingestion of desire.

Until the Romanticism era – with a few exceptions such as Goya, Rubens, Manet, and Gericault – in terms of its topics and expression, art was completely subdued to social conventions and religious laws so as to present the human in the image and likeness of God, which made Foucault (Régis, 2001) say that art was the servant of the system. Everything that follows in human and art history has its origin from that era. From Hegel and Fichte to Breton and Tzara, from Gropius and Tschumi to Situationists, Actionists, Abramović and Stockhausen (press-conference, NDR, Hamburg, 2001), who claims that the events of 9/11 were "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos". It is then when the long trips to the East begin and the European Romantics, such as Byron, Chateaubriand, Hugo etc., participate in the Greek Revolution of '21. Myths such as the nation, the admiration for minorities, exoticism, collections, the point that the absolute reaches, the impossible, the futile, and the encounter with alterity emerge.

Orientalism, which emerges at the time, is a prologue of Primitivism and Art Brut, which will bring to the foreground the Modernism and “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)” (Picasso, 1907), so that the 20th century can welcome art and life. In essence, what comes to the foreground is the most absolute form of alterity. And the most absolute forms of alterity are death and madness. But death and madness are the absolute forms of life and desire.

The world is undergoing a change. The world is not content with the church’s doctrine and social puritanism. It asks for liberation from ethics, from society and from prohibition. It asks to see the world in a ‘different’ state. However, this ‘see’ means to see the other side of the things which were diligently hidden within art and social ethics. The world, which everyone knew was also daemonic, had to be presented as angel-made. This is the era that photography was invented. In that breeding ground, photography blossoms, demanding the absolute as a genuine offspring of Romanticism.

Photography aims to be able to express, present, to depict human’s inner nature, the one that the human eye is unable to capture, in contrast to the photographic eye, ‘oculus mentis’, which would be able to depict the image of the hidden. The photography, Romanticism’s blossom, is trying to trap what cannot be trapped, to truly be where it doesn’t exist, though knowing it beforehand. In fact, to be able to illusionary immobilise the perpetual wave of the universe, according to Romanticism, the Whole, into a previously hopeless and for that reason acceptable attempt to cut reality into pieces, as an irony against the fact that we cannot conceive things. A conscious and, at the same time, futile attempt of self-transcendence. We know that the definition through reality does not dwell there, but we insist on a last attempt of definition.

Photography becomes, thus, one of the contemporary myths of the human imaginary. Since all the old myths have died during the Enlightenment, the world has been disenchanting, as Weber (2009), Benjamin (2013) and Adorno (2000) would say. New myths are called by Romanticism for a re-enchantment of the world, a return to the “sacred” (Weber, 2009) and to “aura” (Benjamin, 2013) so as to substitute the lost places, to ‘narrate’ as a reaction to the scientific Newtonian and partly Leibnizian reality. Photography, away from being identified with reality, aims to show us, to drag from the depths of the human nature, those strands that lie into the darkness of prohibition, censorship, guilt, which, however, only in the 20th century could systematically be done, the century of a complete dispute of the social, philosophical, cultural and individual values, having as main representatives in the field of photography, just to name a few, Molinier, Arbus, Mapplethorpe, Sherman and naturally the greatest anatomist of the human soul, Witkin.

The advent of photography offers us the magic machine so that we can see the other side of things. Photography does not come to depict a known reality. What would be the point of that? One atrocious reality is enough, as Danto (2004) would say. It comes to make us see the world in a different way, to reveal to the glance what the glance, because of its training, had learnt to see in a particular way, the way which dictates the glance to see something as correct. If we analyse the history of photography, we will see that photography never depicted reality or if it did, it was in order to show something else. In the movements in photography’s history, the image is not related to reality, although is making use of it. This is best shown as a point of view in the slogan of Situationists, which we could say expresses the whole of the movements through which photography existed: “The Earth will celebrate when art is freed from the value of the result” which slogan, in an unexpected way, meets Kant’s (2013) austere definition about art.

In the question of whether the pursuit of being able to see the other side of things, applies to simple photographs as well; family photos, landscape, travel photos etc. the answer is ‘yes’. In a family photo the pursued is not the people’s images, but to show that they are present, they laugh, and they compose a whole body against decline, loss and death. In other words, what they are not. The family photo is the acceptance of lack with images of wholeness. A sunset is the definition of the border between life and death, two mathematical sets which intersect into a subset, the one that is neither day nor night, but captures in an instant way the hovering moment when the human is light and darkness, the verge between existence and non-existence. It captures Artemis’ image as a deity of borders. Concerning travel photography, it is not so much to take something with me from this place, its images, although Sontag (1993) says that it is proof that the trip, as a strategy of accumulating photos, happened.

It is to leave something from me, my glance which will continue to exist at that place even when I will have left from that place, from the earth, from life. We realise that photography, although an image itself, seeks what is not an image, to see something else through the image. The same applies to art in general. As if the human seeks through art to see 'behind' it. What is there 'behind' the image? Behind the surface of the 'things'? Can the image reveal what there is 'behind' itself? Or is it, that only through the image I can see, even though the image itself conceals what I would be able to see, saying "if you want to see something, see this". As if we are trying to pass through the image, to see what? We would say that, although the relation between photography and reality is given, photography cannot exist without 'something out there'.

However, its intention was, from the beginning, something else: To see what dictates reality, it becomes an image. In essence, to visualise the invisible. Photography comes to cover the human's desire to see 'beyond' what one sees, 'beyond' what one is told that the world is, to see the world in a different way, behind the surfaces even though, and we can see the contradiction here, it is the surfaces that one takes pictures of. Photography, the essence and soul of Romanticism, becomes a philosophical theory and the camera becomes a psychoanalytical mechanism to discover 'thereafter', the invisible, the ineffable, what is not represented, alterity, the 'other side' of ourselves.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH: PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SYMBOLIC MIRROR

Why do we like photos? Why does photography, ever since it was invented, attract so much the human psyche, having as a result of the photographic act, contributed by the affordable cost, to concern the whole of the planet? It may be the most common act in the globe along with driving, navigating the Net and mobile telephony.

We have, at times, already connected photography to death: Photography as a victory over death, since the subject's image remains even after the disappearance of the body's physical dimension. We have connected photography to time: Immobilisation of the moment, intervening in life, and detachment of the phase we desire. We have also connected photography to remembrance: Photography is the imprint of a remembrance of our memory the way we believe we met a person, a moment or a place. We have connected photography with travel: Travelling, nowadays, means photographing and the opposite, photographing means travelling. We have all seen the crowds of tourists photographing and not travelling though being on a trip. We have also connected photography with art: exquisite works of art are the photos of Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, Henri Cartier-Bresson etc. We have connected photography as a synonym of reality: Photography captures reality as an image, even though the camera does not see reality as it is. We have connected reality with truth although it can support lies. And, of course, we have connected photography with advertising, architecture, cinema, the press, politics, science, biology, medicine, astronomy... In general, photography has been connected with the whole of our life, it is the framework within which our life moves. As Sontag (1993) said, what has not been photographed, simply does not exist. Or, as Baudrillard (1991) said, it doesn't matter whether 'The Gulf War' happened or not, what matters are the images which tell us that it happened.

Although photography defines our life – photography makes us exist, not the other way round – we could wonder: Is there a common place, a common denominator which dictates photography to exist within the manifestations we just mentioned? In terms of semiotics, if we consider photography as a Saussurean sign whose signifier is image, is there a common signified in every photographic act, in every photo?

The sense we have for ourselves, who we are or who we think we are, who we would like to be, how the other sees us, if he sees us the way we want to show him we are or that we are afraid whether he sees something we do not want him to see, something concerning our relation to the truth and the lie, the relation to ourselves and the other, the relation to our sex, all these are dictated by an elementary and fundamental composition which happens at the early stages of the human's life, the "mirror stage" which was introduced to psychoanalysis by J. Lacan (1966). The "mirror stage" (Lacan, 1966) is a universal procedure during which the young child discovers the image of their body and, by extension, the image of oneself in front of a mirror or in front of a child similar to them.

They know that this image is his/hers, this body is his/hers, acknowledging their existence as real. However, this sense of oneself's reality is based, formed on the basis of an image, the one that the child sees in the mirror. The image might be the equivalent of reality, but it is not reality. It is the depiction of reality, it is the representation of reality, it is a capture of reality, an interpretation maybe, but not reality itself, even though the image as a fact is real. This means that the sense of reality to the human is formed without reality. We would say that the alienation by the image is the only way for someone to feel that they exist, that they have and are a body on which, later on, the sex is going to be structured and, by extension, social transaction. The fact that the sense of reality, the sense of existence, is formed while reality is absent has consequences concerning human psychology.

We would say that the psyche is structured on the basis of a lack, the lack of reality having as a result for the human to be in a perpetual search for reality so as to fill the void which does not happen in a random way: The human pursues the reality with which he wants to identify, according to the image that he has in his thought for him, that is the image as it was formed in the mirror completed with ideal-'objective' reality. This search is nothing but the procedure of desire. The human desire is nothing but the thirst for reality which comes from the void of reality and at the same time, the procedure itself, the target, sometimes the existential plan to conquer the ideal image of ourselves, the way it has been dictated by the image in the mirror.

For this reason, the search for reality doesn't happen randomly. We will seek for the companion who promises our completeness, the ideal image of ourselves through the mirror our companion becomes, so as to find our image. We will seek for our children to fulfil our desires, so that we can find our own ideal image through our children. God is made in the image and likeness of the human and the opposite. Our friends make us see an image of ourselves which reinforces, sometimes cures what we want to be, what we believe we deserve to be. But, also, what we do in our life in general, to work, to travel, to just desire something, are ways to cover the void, we would say actually to find a meaning of life.

It is obvious from what is said that our desires are the symbolic mirrors through which we search for the ideal image of ourselves, the ideal reality of ourselves, the way that we did not have it when we formed our image in the mirror. The dreams of our life and the dreams of our sleep, sometimes as a nightmare, are close representations of the image of ourselves.

Art is the perfect symbolic mirror in which the artist can mirror, see oneself, be a narcissus of oneself, be, possibly, freed from what one considers bad elements of oneself because the viewer's glance judges and acquits them. The artist can be freed from his internal confrontations, he can create bridges of communication between his loneliness and the other, he can avoid madness or suicide, although these two are not certain at all. But, even in the case of the mad artist (Art Brut), what is asked is for the work of art, as a symbolic mirror, to picture the image that the mad artist seeks for, or wants to express for himself.

Photography, because of its relation to reality, as an equivalent and substitute of reality, as representation and reproduction of reality, therefore of the 'truth', promises, in the most emphatic way, that it is going to be the perfect symbolic mirror, an – as good as reality – mirror, the one which does not lie and the one which, through reality, is going to picture the ideal image of ourselves, exactly as we would like to be, in the most persuasive for us way.

We would say, at this point, that the photographer is always in front of his lens (Kangelaris, 2020). And, as Benjamin (2013) points out, if the soul and photography are mechanisms of producing images, what is produced is not any image, but an image of ourselves. We would also say that every photo, and not just portrait photography, becomes a magic mirror, which pictures the reality we have in our heads for us. In that sense, photography, as a sign, always has a constant signified: the photographer's ego which dictates the variability of the signifier, that is, the different topics he will capture and picture into image. Yet, the reality into an image is never complete. However, many selfies that we take are never enough. We photograph in order to exist. And in that sense, a selfie is an agonising cry for existence.

No image, no photo, no work of art can be complete, because no work of art, no photo can picture the reality of ourselves (since this reality is only inside our head). So much the better. Because, that way, we will continue to take photos, to desire, to live.

Maybe, the perfect work of art is an invitation to death. On the contrary, the agony for the perfect work of art might be the possibility of meaning and the management of time from birth to death.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH: THERE IS NO SOUVENIR PHOTOGRAPHY

If the most widespread aim of photography is to maintain remembrance, a fact which means credit of time, does the cancelation of time cancel, concurrently, the meaning of photography?

If a photo as image is not proof of reality, whose the photo makes use of so as to exist, meaning that if the image is not part of the pre-existent reality, then maybe photography does not exist so as to make us remember – since the image does not picture the alleged reality – but exactly because the image owes its existence to the cancelation of reality, then maybe the aim of photography is not to remember but to forget? And if so, what? And forgetting to which desire of the human could it be related?

Frazer (2009), Mauss and Hubert (2003), Lévi-Strauss (Mauss, 1999) – studying the width of manifestations of magic thought in everyday life, in the feeling, in the reasoning, actually make us contemplate that magic thought is not the exclusive capability of the primitive, as Lévy-Bruhl (2010) claims, or the children's and mentally ill people's capability, as the psychiatry of the '30s claimed. It is not a pre-logic state of the human mind, but it continues to co-exist with the Aristotelian, the dialectical and psychoanalytical logic, if not as a structural element of the contemporary human's psychology, at least as a powerful remnant of the archaic structure of the psyche at the dawn of the thinking human.

Nowadays, magic as thought is ignored. It is ignored, on one hand, at a social level as driven away by religion, whose, according to Frazer (2009) and Mauss and Hubert (2003), magic constitutes a continuation. And, on the other hand, involved with the symbolic order in the human's psyche, it is hidden concerning its procedures: The human is a ritual being, the social structure is a world of symbolic relationships and culture is the whole of the symbolic relationships over which the meanings of magic continue to secretly act.

If we search for common elements between magic and photography, we see, in the first place, that concerning magic, ritual as well as the photographic act, there is no distance between desire and its realisation, in other words the magician's practical, verbal, figurative act: say it and it will happen. As a consequence, the "laws" that according to Mauss and Hubert (2003) rule magic or give magic the possibility to exist, are common to the ones that rule the production of the image since the image owes its existence:

1. To the absence of reality or to an unwanted reality;
2. It tends to substitute reality;
3. It creates reality;
4. The new reality is an equivalent of the replaced one;
5. The new reality occupies the place of the old one, Sontag (1993) would say, at such a level that the way we perceive reality is not the way the world exists, but the way it is imprinted;
6. The new reality of the image acts in the place of the old one:
"The pictures", Avedon (no date) says, "have a reality for me that the people don't", fact which has as a result to completely change the perception and investment of the signifier, object and feeling are related to the image and not to reality;
7. Driving wheel for this mechanism is desire.

In that way, we are not surprised when, looking ourselves in a photo, we say: Here I am, we are not surprised that in the mirror in the morning we see ourselves and not our image, we are not surprised by the interest in television heroes, we should not be surprised by the faith to optical illusions, to the delirium, to humans' visions. Let's not be surprised that the world is no longer the one that derives from the mechanism of vision, but also, and maybe more powerfully, the world which derives from the world of the images. The Otherworld, the invented and at the same time alienating, since it imposes irrevocably its imprint on our psyche.

“Photography”, Winogrand (no date) says, “is not about the thing photographed. It is about how that thing looks photographed”. The image is not a certificate, a proof of reality, a Barthes’ evidence of “existed” (Barthes, 2008), that I was there, but, on the contrary, it is a certificate of death, reality’s death certificate (Kangelaris, 2020). Image is what is absent. The film becomes the philosopher’s stone which achieves the transformation of reality’s metal into the valuable metal of desire. The photographer becomes the contemporary magician who invents a reality which is not questioned as real, the studio or the open space becomes the temple of the ritual, the camera becomes the magic medium, the order and the photographer’s movements become the magic ‘abracadabra’ for the transition to the image’s reality. Having a surplus of meaning, Lévi-Strauss (Mauss, 1999) would say, the definition of the objects’ truth becomes infinitely more powerful through the image than through reality itself. Photography, having forgotten its origin, which is that the offspring of the dead-during-labour mother-reality, becomes the charm, the haunt, the credential and the passport, so that someone can inhabit their world with reality. Through photography, the human achieves what was sought after by alchemy and medicinal magic at the same time. What is that?

If the desire is the creation of a new reality through the motivation of either the supernatural powers, concerning magic, or the natural-technical powers, concerning photography, then the image is not the medium through which we remember, but it is the complete opposite. It is the medium through which we forget ‘what it was’ and we perpetually find ourselves within a ‘what it is’. Through photography, we don’t remember who we were, but we are who we are, through the present moment of looking at it. Photography becomes the negation of remembrance, the deactivation of the then-reality, it becomes the substitute, here and now, of a constant reality perpetually invariable. It becomes the reality itself, where the time component has been completely repealed so that the image of the person who sees, immovable in time, can exist in its place. That is, immortal. Thus, photography becomes the mirror of immortality, where the human captures and is alienated by his image as a fact of the reality that he has invented and circumvents the meaning of time, he constantly dwells in the present.

The love for photography is not a testament to remembrance but to the fact that the human is indebted to death, that he is possessed by unsurpassed mourning for the fact of life which he tries to rescue with images. The photography is the radiography of an existential depression. Photography is not a way to remember, but to forget. To forget not who we were, but who we will be. That is, dead. It is a memory mobilisation so as to trigger its own repeal. It is a way to be ‘magically’ and constantly present through the confusion of the pictured person’s image and the person himself. In that sense, souvenir photography doesn’t exist. Souvenir photography as such, is nothing but the thought’s obedience to the “laws” of magic (Mauss and Hubert, 2003), where the human creates time, with his own means, as an image imprint. So, we photograph not to remember but to forget, and through this to constantly ‘be’. The ‘through the glance’ fact becomes photography’s magic moment where the time’s hand is forever immobilised. Photography becomes a complete ‘magic image’, a ‘magic mirror’, a magic portrait, affirming for the immortality of the moment and, therefore, for ‘eternally’.

However, it is widely believed that photography was invented so as to protect memory, that the role and the meaning of photography is to remember. There is also the conviction that photography operates as memory’s hard disk. Academics on photography and image beyond the English Channel are categorical when they talk about photography as memory’s hard disk, a view over which the philosophical background clearly emerges [James (2006), Dewey (1950)]. View which, though beyond the English Channel, does not include Rorty’s (2001), Quine’s (2008) or Ayer’s (1994) view on what we would call reality as a variable. But what is memory?

Memory is a psychic mechanism to forget what is not useful to remember, no matter whether the outcome of this mechanism is always successful as a complete repression or the opposite: inability of repression, as in the case of post-traumatic syndrome. What we remember is the superficial, the material to form a conscience of being with a time constant. Memory – let’s remember Lacan (2005) and Lituraterre – is the litter of the conscience, the psyche’s litter. In that sense, we would say that we are what we have forgotten, subject of the ‘thing’ and not only subject of the signifier. So, if we want to say that photography is a memory’s hard disk, it is a memory that does not concern us, that is not us, that we were not there, it is photography’s memory.

We are in front of a signifier without the signified [Hjelmslev (1991), Eco (1988)]. And although the world does not exist without photography, the world appears only after its death, Kracauer (2014) said. Photography announces our absence, as Cadava (2014) said, reminding us Barthes (2008) who called photographers agents of death. In the best-case scenario, we would say that photography is an equivalent of translation, thus, continuous presence of the prototype's death, exactly what happens with speaking and writing, what happens with writing and printing (Derrida, 1990). I photograph means I lose.

Photography helps us forget, it is a hard disk of what we have forgotten, helping the repression mechanism of an unbearable or traumatic reality, feeling or imagination. As Carrera (1986) said, photography was not invented because of appeal to the things, nor to retain memories but from the mere human's desire to live without a glance and without thought. Photography nails our memory to what is not our memory, but to what is the photography's memory. We take photos so as to forget. Souvenir photography does not exist, even though we believe that this was the cause of photography's invention.

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