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## MEANING MANAGEMENT – PHOTOGRAPHY AND “PERSONAL” MEDIA EDUCATION

### Introduction

As this reversal – objects possess power over people, images are exceptionally tricky objects, hypnotizing human beings blinded by the drive to imitate or confusing show with reality – may lead to the most iconoclastic accusations. Then, by granting images with power, it is easy to turn them into a scapegoat and provoke others to fight against them, which is often a vain, apparent or only substitute action. This mistake can be avoided in many ways, at least by rejecting the concepts of power or dominion (as Latour wants, for example). But it is also possible, from the prism of power, to look at images as a complex and heterogeneous group, assessing differences in their causative capabilities, as well as various ways of their acting. It may then turn out that the division of power in the iconosphere does not correspond to traditional high-low hierarchies or media divisions

– writes Zaremba in one of the chapters of his doctoral dissertation (Zaremba, 2015, p. 170)<sup>1</sup>. Living in Warsaw the researcher of visuality captures the most significant characteristic of photographs, which are discussed

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<sup>1</sup> While writing the article, I was using the typing copy of the dissertation disclosed by its author. Published in Warsaw in 2018 Ł. Zaremba's work entitled *Obrazy wychodzą na ulice*, which is an expanded version of this typed copy, is already available.

within the following text. I would like to take a closer look at the intriguing (from the perspective of cultural studies research trend concerning the media) phenomenon of building meanings by specified composition of images-photographs, their placement in the macro-structure of a website and the amount of additional details (hashtags, comments, popularity tags expressed in the traditional form or using emoji), which influence or crystallize the so-called **chain of meanings**. The specific character of this phenomenon is primarily affected by place and the stage of one's observation capability: the level of complication in understanding the image is largely dependent not only on the "perceptivity" of the observer (even when understood in a very general way), but also on **the level of their media competencies** (acquired either through conscious education or through experience), as well as **the increasing need for interpretation of the surrounding space filled with images of various origin** – sometimes understood only as a "place for hanging" various images (static, but moving) and a specific social position (situation) of participants in the held exchange. The manner of selection of examples is, of course, perplexing – as starting material I used images breaking the canonical factual pact and constantly gaining in popularity and evolving towards photo-fetish, that are selfies.

### Operation field – towards the networked photo-images

Considering the problems of the network visibility, which appeared in the last few years, one should start by explaining a few (seemingly) well-known and familiar issues concerning the area of the so-called "new media". I will not solve here the problem of "new media" or "newness" – I am just pointing out that I use this term only due to the lack of a better one, bearing in mind the reservations of media aesthetes which oppose such categorization, citing two arguments: troublesome historical classification (media development in the world<sup>2</sup>) and logic ("every media was once new" [Gitelman, 2006, p. 205]). Following Składanek (2011, p. 37–45), the phenomenon which

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<sup>2</sup> I mean a rather common error: often in the case of phenomena related to the digital age (data carriers, dynamics of hardware changes, and finally – the emergence of optical fibers and spreading of telematics), we often adopt the censorship of 1989 as the moment of their availability in Poland. It gives a false picture of events, which may be seen e.g. in statements such as: "a compact disc dominated the nineties" or "the cable TV was most popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries".

now constitutes the basic research problem should be called a **problematic combination of border discourses**. In fact, today it is extremely difficult to answer the question: Where is the media? Mainly because, while thinking about the media, many of us operate in completely different areas in which the media works, cooperates or operates.

Moving away from the aspirational model of culture has created the possibility of discussing the media only with a sense of some theoretical non-fulfilment. The Łódź-based researcher calls this phenomenon: the inflationary character of theories that should organize both typology and media properties. In other words – both a carrier (which seems to be the most basic understanding of this concept), but also material (without properties) are a medium for the contemporary *recipient/user/creator*. It is not a simple binary opposition, but the creation of another possibility: the medium is also technology, and then – the institution. It seems that in such a system of reservations against Levinson’s not too fortunate classification (Levinson, 2010, p. 327) (let me remind you that “the new new media” is, in fact, a category that allows for unlimited typological and genological freedom) is just the beginning of the dispute. If the user treats the media basically as everything or vice versa: everything can be basically combined with the media – we encounter another research dilemma: what would be subject to research analysis, that is what images would be the foundation of the visual media? – only those created with the help of electronic media (e.g. video-painting by Wasilewski, Kuzyszyn or Ogórek [Lubiak, 2006, p. 88]), or perhaps those which mediated by the media (through specific technology – e.g. sampling, mash-up, geolocalization<sup>3</sup>) gained new meanings? There will be another one – the institutional one – what to do with a group, a collection of visual products that in some way (often misty one...) have been included in the so-called canon (or became a “must-have” of the practitioners of visuality)?

Each of the questions asked is solved by audio-visibility researchers basing on various methods – from quantitative to descriptive ones. Most of the analyzes, however, reveal an interesting scheme of the user’s functioning in the discussed area:

In many cases, this complexity and proliferation of the media practices is the result of an exceptionally well thought-out selection of the order of the

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to: the Brian Eno’s project, the Muzak phenomenon, Kutiman’s activity, localization services, push notification with advertising images.

user's actions. The strategy of operation (a form of expression) is always accompanied by reflection on the choice of the tool by means of which the user manifests their media action. Interestingly, this choice is not only determined by the potential attractiveness of the product, but it simultaneously takes into account the reception consequences (will it be noticed, how will it be noticed, or is it worth noticing), because the intensity of interaction depends on the possible "life span" of the image. To illustrate this example: lifestyle bloggers have not chosen the formula of the blog solely because it is an extremely popular model of online communication, or because only such a blog is suitable for the presentation of outfits they found in 'second-hand stores' or 'clothing chain stores'. They have chosen such a type of a blog because, for a particular audience, a fashion blog (no matter what is on it) is **a specific type of images** that have been socially verified and accepted, constituting a certain level of popularity. Differences in the perception of individual female or male bloggers result not only from external factors (one can say unrelated with blogs such as physical attractiveness or better support of social media) but from the very method of constructing a blog (layout selection, search engine optimization, ways of arranging photos and ads). What seems to be the most fascinating about the era of the domination of images (well described by W.J.T. Mitchell [2015, p. 416]) is an attempt to describe the unique "crevices of the sense", the codification of thinking about the total domination of the image (according to the hyperbolizing principle: everything is an image). This opens up new (?) possibilities for the interpretation of the users' activities – reaching a bit beyond the (still popular and necessary) content analysis, level of "aggregation of content" or different ways of image manipulation, brand management and unrestrained shifting between journalistic professionalism and public relations activity.

Against the sketched background, I would see three problems with the perception of an image, especially of a photograph, in the presented communication scheme.

### **The first issue – media self-generativity**

Since I have already mentioned mash-up or broadly understood remixes – I just want to point out that I treat operations performed in photographs not only as changing the contrast, colour saturation or size of the photograph, but also as creating a new functionality. A functionality that requires a slightly

different type of knowledge or media competencies, a kind of new “awareness” of the media and the image. A photograph, which was tailored to a specific Facebook-dedicated self-presentation strategy of the user (I mean check-in or tagging users), ceases to be only a private (with all false “massiness” of FB) record of an event – and becomes part of a wider message generating a different receiving possibility.

Thinking about digital photography in general, we make a specific shift in the interpretation of the medium (camera, album, gallery) towards the space of the program for correcting individual photographic activities. Of course, the degree of action depends on the ability to operate the program (e.g. *Adobe CS*), and not on knowledge of how to take pictures. The combination of both is, of course, possible and occurs in artistic activities very often (to mention even a series of digital photographs by Daniel Lee – *Manimals*<sup>4</sup>). However, to a large extent, the awareness of photography in many cases comes down to the awareness of the desired photo resolution, ways of redistributing it, following the current fashion (e.g. popular filters, using the right application, fitting into a specific alternative trend such as lomography, supporting practices with applications such as *Hipstamatic*, allowing you to get photos stylized to resemble those taken by Holga or SuperSampler cameras<sup>5</sup>). It can be assumed that a significant part of photographic activities has one dominant feature among users today – it is a migration towards readability, the presence of what is absent from the photograph – the concept, the aesthetic assumption, and the inclusion of photographs in a specific narrative model. This is connected with the second discussed problem, namely:

### The apparent domination of the image

The second half of the twentieth century brought us the development of brand new scientific disciplines, such as visual sociology (developed thanks to the groundbreaking theses of Pierre Bourdieu) or visual anthropology, which still did not manage to solve its dilemmas: no matter how important the said disciplines are for photography, they are, to a large extent, the extension of the fields of science for which they were created. The medium serves as an instrument of data acquisition or, for example, a therapeutic

<sup>4</sup> For further information see: Zawojski, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth to mention the interesting (also from a historical perspective) findings of Jakub Dziewit (2014).

method, not an objective. A photograph referred to as a text, a cultural “game of metaphors” or – as literature. This state of things was first observed by researchers who advocated visual culture. (Michałowska, 2012, p. 19)

And although the author of these words – an outstanding expert in photography does not fully accept all the research proposals offered by visual culture studies, she notices and appreciates some of the possibilities offered by the research methods included in it. Currently, the so-called **surplus of images**, which makes the perception extremely difficult (“we see more than we think we see”, which is particularly evident during research in focus studios) becomes more and more visible. It is very easy to observe this phenomenon in the universally recognized **ennoblement of the idea** and **depreciation of the coherence of individual photographs**. It is worth noting that these are not artistically conscious activities, such as for example Mohr’s and Berger’s project *If Each Time* described by the author of *Obraz utajony* (Eng. *The Latent Image*) (also the film character of the combination is an issue here) – it is rather about the inability to recognize the presented image, to read it in the wider context of the whole utterance, e.g. in the area of a well-known information portal or social network. An example of this may be the phenomenon of the recent months – the website (and at the same time a Facebook profile) called “ASZDziennik”<sup>6</sup>.

In this case, specific information is irrelevant (their popularity may be subject to separate texts), instead we will focus on the general principle that guides the creator of the website: Rafał Madajczak. Webwriter illustrates the articles<sup>7</sup> he invented with images from internet resources (e.g. shutterstock) or

<sup>6</sup> I have devoted a separate article to the genesis of “ASZDziennik”. For more details see: Bielak, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Here are some of the examples from the last few days: *Dramat Antysystemowca. Chciał przetłumaczyć “Fuck the System”, wyszło mu “Głosuj z rządem”* (Eng. Anarchist’s Drama. He Wanted to Translate “Fuck the System”, and Got “Vote for the Government” Instead); *Bydgoszcz zlikwidowała komunikację miejską. “Taka sama jest w Toruniu. Nie będziemy jej papugować”* (Eng. Bydgoszcz Authorities Liquidated Public Transport, Saying “It is the same in Toruń. We Won’t Parrot It”); *Dramat Platformy. Już trzy dni stoją na sejmowych schodach, a władza do nich nie wróciła* (Eng. Civic Platform’s Drama. They Have Been Standing on the Parliament Stairs for Three Days, and Still Haven’t Retrieve Power); *Black Friday w Miasteczku Wilanów. Przenicenił kajzerki o 13%. “Kolejki ustawiły się już w nocy”* (Eng. Black Friday in the Town of Wilanów. They Announced 13% Sale on the Kaiser Rolls. “The Lines Formed Already at Night”).

official photographs (used on a citation basis) from such websites as gazeta.pl, rp.pl, newsweek.pl, tvn24.pl. For the user embedded in the multi-context world of roaming Internet photographs, “ASZ” is the next content curator, not much different from the onet.pl website. The readability of the mentioned photographs satisfies the need of an information update. The photographs used to establish a separate factual pact (it does not matter that they are subject to regular technical and symbolic manipulation<sup>8</sup>).

It creates the likelihood of truth (by paraphrasing the findings of Alan Sekula), or perhaps it passes through the “sluice of truth” (Potocka, 2010, p. 43), and finally saves the recipient (viewer-reader) from the ubiquitous info-oppression according to the principle that if the article includes such a professional (true) photo, it is certainly also real. Such realizations gave surprising results: one of the most popular entries, regarding the position of bishops on the prohibition of breastfeeding, caused an avalanche of comments, objections, ostentatious attacks on baby-boom forums. The picture in the article strengthened the sense of the interpretative community (Feuer, 2011, p. 114–115). However, I would not treat it differently than a group of Internet prosumers (I am deliberately very careful with the use of the concept of an internaut, because it is not very clear who he/she is) whose opinions, judgments, assessments **legitimize a specific way of reading** (or wrong reading, reading contrary to). I think that it would be important to emphasize the political nature of such judgments – due to such an arrangement, there occurs also a scheme of “reading” a photograph, that is putting it into a specific trend or a wider cultural context. Activities such as “ASZ” (modelled on the American *The Onion*) allow noticing the dominant role of the picture, gif, and clip over the institution of the text. The logocentric model of culture in its entirety gives way to voluntary omnivision (based on media mediation), which is built on a false and dangerous belief about easier and faster understanding of the intentions of a photograph.

### Third issue: the dominant machine

[...] the camera turns out to be a machine that misrepresents every desire, eliminates any intentionality, except for the reflex of taking pictures. [...]

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<sup>8</sup> For more details see: Piekot, 2006.

even erases the sight, replacing it with a lens, which in turn is the support of an object. (Baudrillard, 2010, p. 253)

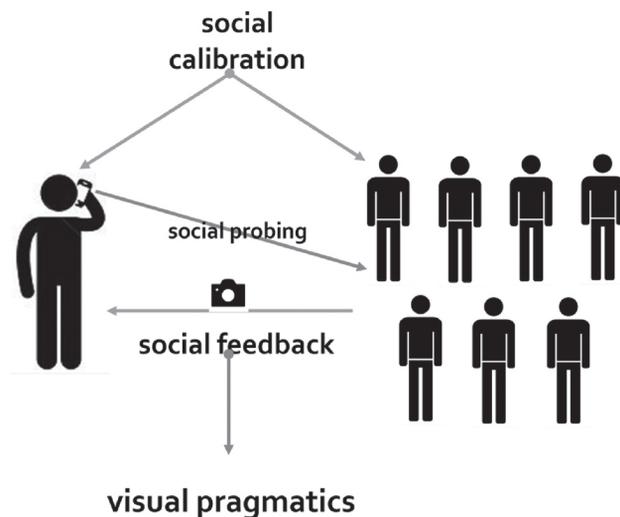
Although the words refer to the polaroid technique, we can treat them like the forecast of the digital selfie era. And just like Polaroid once (apart from the social substitute of intimacy – a photo produced without institutional cooperation, a technique that does not require knowledge of the process of exposing the film) fulfilled the eternal dream of almost simultaneous possession of both object and image, now the selfie-related madness eliminates the need for the object completely. Even if we do not have to worry much about the American Psychological Association's subsequent inclusion of selfie-addiction in the list of compulsive-obsessive diseases<sup>9</sup>, it is difficult to discuss with statistics, for instance, this concerning Instagram, which say that there are published 60 million photos a day, and over 230 million photos are publicly available images marked with a *selfie* hashtag [as of 29 November 2015], and still these numbers can be multiplied up to seven times.

About a selfie as a cultural practice, it has been already written many times, but it seems that we still do not have a fixed mechanism for the creation of this concept. Historical references (first “self-portraits” by Robert Cornelius in 1839, Joseph Byron in 1909) or associated with good photographic practices (self-timer pictures, remotely controlled cameras) cool down the enthusiasm of the phenomenon researchers but do not fully explain the mechanism of producing the specific need.

It seems that the issue of the popularity of selfies can be embedded in a specific construction, not so much as “taking a selfie”, but “thinking selfie”.

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<sup>9</sup> See: *Psychiatrzy uznali selfie za zaburzenie psychiczne*, <http://wolnemedi.net/wiadomosci-ze-swiata/psychiatrzy-uznali-robienie-selfie-za-zaburzenie-psychiczne/> [accessed: 29.11.2015].



*Figure 1.*

Generating a social circulation of a selfie.

Source: Svalander and Wiberg, 2015.

Svalander and Wiberg (2015, p. 34–38) characterize the phenomenon on three levels, starting with the assumption that the combination of technologies and social processes have motivated each other to popularize this practice. It is difficult to consider the phenomenon only in an individual or psychological perspective. In this approach, the decision to make a photo does not stem so much from the narcissistic need for private broadcasting (for a conscious user the EdgeRank algorithm will be a sufficient stopper<sup>10</sup>), but from the hiding behind the ease of taking a selfie conscious decision about catalyzing with the use of a selfie complicated process of calibration and social self-calibration.

Calibration is made as a comparison of the images viewed, the specificity of the context in which they are embedded, the situation, time, and even factors not fitting into the scheme of the scientific study (“selfie” as a therapy for boredom). Observation of photos allows one to develop a mechanism, a habit of registering reality with oneself in the main role. This is not about

<sup>10</sup> For more details see: Halawa, 2013.

interaction with the environment, the virtual audience (followers<sup>11</sup>), but rather about working out a specific rhythm, not only of taking pictures (these can be of an infinite amount) but above all of publishing them. With the help of a selfie, the user measures the need of presence in a specific community, interestingly – the pictures fit into the poetics of “cultural usefulness” – they disappear, cease to be relevant or, quite the opposite, they experience a renaissance of interest, become the basis for creating popular memes, gifs, or comments to current political, social and sport events.

The next stage can be called a private survey (Svelander and Wiberg use the term probing). The author of the photo simulates their own joining the community – just by publishing the photo. The most interesting is, however, the third phase, in which we deal with (seemingly) obvious feedback. Only that this feedback is not about the person posting, publishing their own image, but about the type of picture, a certain number of hashtags, and the conditions in which the photo was taken, and even (which then involves the commercialization of popular practices) with the use of which program and application it was taken, corrected and distributed in the space of popular social networks.

Findings of the researchers from the University of Umeå can be used primarily for activities related to interaction design (improvement of statistics in the space of social networking sites, greater awareness of specific decisions of individual users). The most important, however, seems to be the realization of the fact that in the presented model the process of collecting results, effects, feelings (even in the comment area) may take place in ignorance of the immortalized situation or the person portrayed. This means that the self-poetic approach must contain awareness of the loss of the owner’s dominance over the shared content. The thing is not about copyrights, but about endless interpretations of photos. Perhaps this is one of the markers that will explain the phenomenon of hate on the Web or of the “fighting images” (following the example of “fighting words” by Judith Butler<sup>12</sup>).

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<sup>11</sup> A significant number of publications concern the problems with self-expression, for more on this subject see: D.C. Murray (2015). Notes to Self: the Visual Cultures of Self-Confidence in the Age of Social Media. *Consumption Markets Culture*, 18(6), 490–516; L.E. Buffardi & W.K. Campbell (2008). Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(10), 1303–1314; S.M. Bergman, M.E. Fearrington, S.W. Davenport & J.Z. Bergman (2011). Millennials, Narcissism, and Social networking. What Narcissists Do on Social Networking Sites and Why. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(5), 706–711.

<sup>12</sup> I have already pointed to the problem in: Bielak, 2012.

## Conclusion

In the frame of visual pragmatics (a bit like Richard Rorty’s proposal), there are thrown many issues. It turns out that a photograph, embedded in the interpretive patterns of a social networking site, loses its primacy to the markers of its popularity. The type of information the images contain does not matter here, the only thing that is important for the phenomenon that Isaac Mao calls “sharism” are the dynamic “signs” of the images’ validity (the number of “I like it” tags, shares, comments). The operation on the border of the essence of photography can also explain the phenomenon of the popularity of filters available in popular applications, Jurgenson calls it “nostalgia of the present” – a state in which the use of a filter somehow detaches us from the time and consciousness of passing away (Jurgenson, 2011). Such a photograph has been called faux-vintage and in this perspective, it becomes for us another way to last. Along with broken by creations such as “ASZDziennik” the factual pact it constitutes a new chapter in discussions on the status of post-conventional media.

Now, the research reflection should rather be directed towards additive activities that are the context or support for the individualistic culture, for which the most important solution (and at the same time the most important educational challenge) is to equip its participants at every stage of education with an appropriate catalogue of media competencies. It will refer to the visibility of events or the awareness of operations that are performed from the time of taking a photo and its editing to the choice of the moment and place of its publication.

To a large extent, the photographic education (even if photographic literacy is not fully developed...) is right now introducing us to the next stage of media evolution known as me media...

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## MEANING MANAGEMENT – PHOTOGRAPHY AND “PERSONAL” MEDIA EDUCATION

**Summary:** In the article, I analyse the fascinating (from the perspective of culture-related mainstream media research) phenomenon of building meanings through a specific composition of images – photographs, their placement in the macro-structure of the website, the number of additions (comments, tags, locations) forming the so-called chain of meanings and being one of the pillars of the modern media education. The specifics of the discussed phenomenon are primarily influenced by the observation point: the level of image comprehension largely

depends not only on the observer's perception (understood even in an extremely general way), but also on the level of media competencies (acquired through conscious or unconscious education), the need to interpret the surrounding space filled with images – or more precisely understood as the place for “hanging” various images (static, but moving) and a specific social (situation) position.

**Keywords:** media education, visual pragmatics, networked images, media self-generativity

## ZARZĄDZANIE ZNACZENIEM – FOTOGRAFIA I „PRYWATNA” EDUKACJA MEDIALNA

**Streszczenie:** W artykule analizuję fascynujące (z perspektywy kulturoznawczego nurtu badań nad mediami) zjawisko budowania znaczeń poprzez określoną kompozycję obrazów – fotografii, ich umiejscowienie w makrostrukturze strony, liczbę dopowiedzeń (komentarzy, znaczników, tagów, lokalizacji) tworzących tzw. łańcuch znaczeń i będących jednym z filarów współczesnej edukacji medialnej. Na specyfikę omawianego zjawiska wpływa przede wszystkim pułap obserwacji: poziom komplikacji rozumienia obrazu będzie w dużej mierze zależny nie tylko od „spostrzegawczości” obserwatora (rozumianej nawet w sposób wyjątkowo ogólny), ale również od poziomu kompetencji medialnych (nabytych w drodze świadomej lub nieświadomej edukacji), potrzeby interpretacji otaczającej go przestrzeni wypełnionej obrazami – czy bardziej rozumianej właśnie jako miejsce „zawieszania” różnorodnych obrazów (ruchomych i statycznych) oraz określoną pozycją (sytuacją) społeczną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja medialna, pragmatyka wizualna, obrazy usieciowione, autogeneratywność mediów