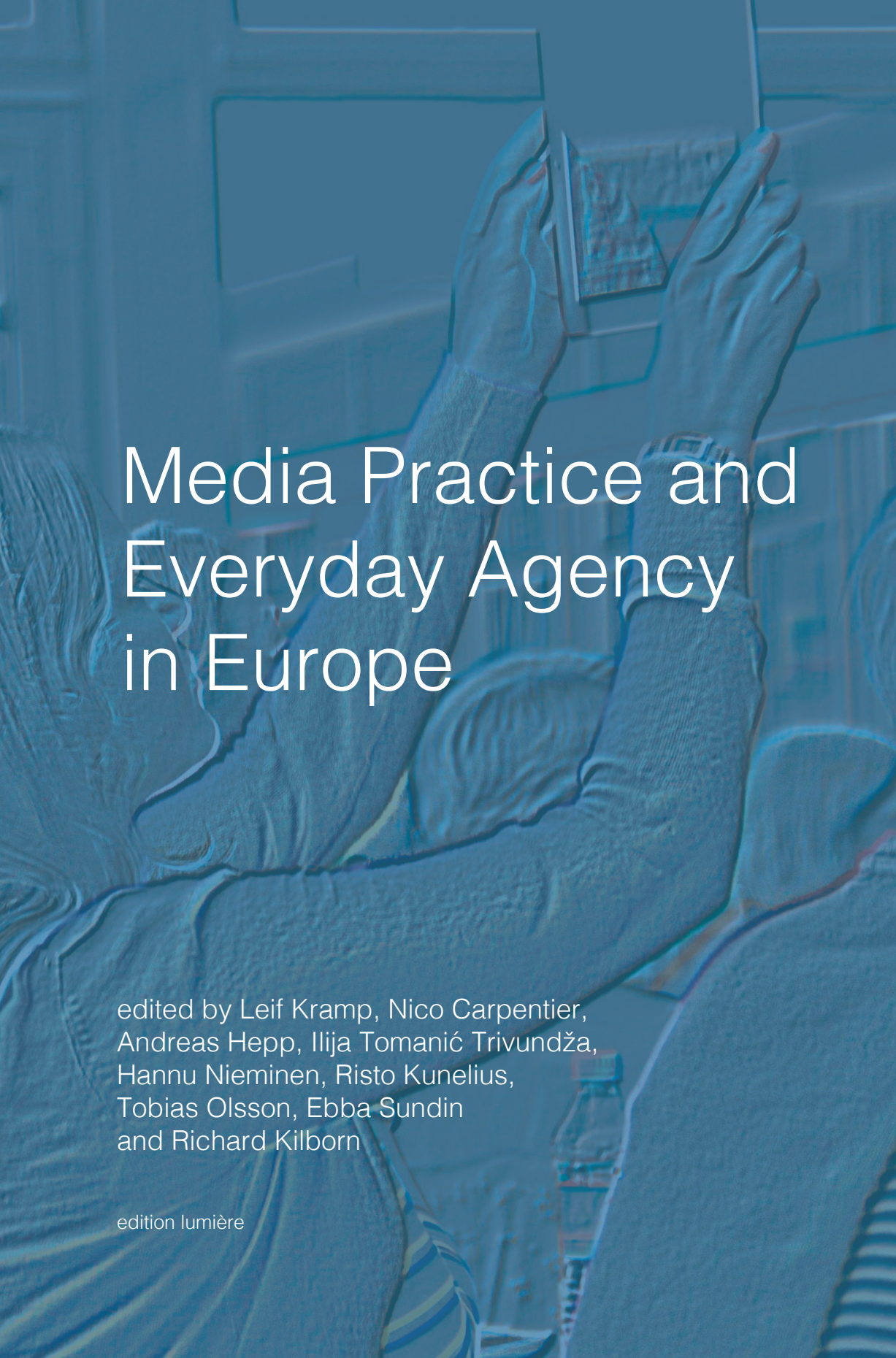

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

edited by Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier, Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius, Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin and Richard Kilborn

edition lumière

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Records of Facts or Records of Mystification? Brief Notes on the "Surplus Value" of the Photographic Image

Ilija Tomanić Trivundža

1. Introduction

When photography was invented in the first half of the 19th century, it was conceived of as an epitome of rational Western thought and scientific methods of appropriating (subjugating) the world. By the beginning of the 20th century, photographs had acquired an unprecedented social status as a means of (visual) record, and as both visual facts and the practice of visualising facts. Photography managed preserve this status at the beginning of the 21st century after weathering attacks concerning the ontological uncertainties raised by digital technology, which turned out to be more about resurrection than about the death of the medium. In this simplified and commonly accepted narrative, photography marches in step with modernity's project of Webrian disenchantment of the world and seems to be one of the showcase examples of its "rationalization and intellectualization" (Weber, 1948: 155). Photography thus comes to be seen as "modern vision in every sense, but above all in its alliance to the modern epistemology of vision through its realism" (Slater, 1995/2002: 223).

This master narrative is a gross oversimplification, however; if anything, photography has participated prominently in several of modernity's central projects of re-enchantment of the world, ranging from "the mundane daydreams of advertizing and consumption" (Jenkins, 2000: 18) to rituals and phantasmagorias of nation-state. Moreover, it seems that the realm of photography might very well prove to be one of Weber's "transcendental realm[s] of mystic life" into which sublime values retreat (Weber, 1948: 155); or rather – where they persist. J.W.T. Mitchell, for example, claims that images today persist as one of the last strongholds of magical thinking:

Tomanić Trivundža, I. (2014) 'Records of Facts or Records of Mystification? Brief Notes on the "Surplus Value" of the Photographic Image', pp. 217-225 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe*. Bremen: edition lumière.

> Modern, urban cultures may not have many cults of saints or holy icons, but they do have an ample supply of magical images - fetishes, idols, and totems of every description, brought to life in mass media and in a variety of subcultures. Supposedly obsolete or archaic superstitions about images, moreover, have a way of breaking out in thoroughly modern places like New York City and London. (2005: 128).

Both popular and theoretical discourses on photography have, since photography's inception, been permeated with ideas of spirituality, mystique and the supernatural. Photographic images have been attributed certain powers beyond their mere ability to depict an object or a scene: they have come to be seen as seductive, dangerous, suggestive or enlightening, insinuating the presence or emanation of mythical, magical or divine forces. Political actors and media professionals frequently speak of the (superior) power of images to influence individual perception and to mobilise or sway group thinking, a process in which typically the ratio is seen to be overpowered by emotio, by the "surplus value" of images themselves. Theoretical writings on photography often highlight the "lack" of language to explain the visual, or give up their quest for meaning, the most notorious case of the latter involving Roland Barthes, whose analytical semiotic apparatus capitulated in front of a family photograph in Camera Lucida (1981).

This investment of photographic images with the "supernatural" and the "non-rational" is not specific to photography, however. Rather, it should be seen as a strand of a general human attitude towards visual representation. As Freedberg put it:

> People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. They do so in societies we call primitive and in modern societies; in East and West, in Africa, America, Asia and Europe. (1989: 1)

The belief in the "surplus value" of photographic images can be expressed either in the "devotional" practices of idolatry or iconophilia, or as "destructive" practices of iconoclasm. Of the two, iconoclasm might be more telling of the contemporary belief in the "surplus value" of images, regardless of how much iconophilic practices permeate the advertising industry, popular culture or political marketing and propaganda. Consider, for example, the intensity and emotional investment that goes into the destruction of photographs and posters of dictators during political upheavals, such as those of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 uprising in Egypt; or the outrage about "immoral" images in the media, such as that of the Polish Catholic Church and its proponents stirred by Agnieszka Radwanska's semi-nude photographs for a special issue of ESPN Magazine in July 2013. Both are indicative of

the "surplus value" of images, which in the first case indicates the tacit belief that images in a way also embody the person depicted, and in the second case explicates the belief in the power of images to morally corrupt the observer or even insult divine forces.[1]

Rather than dismissing such incidents as trivial, it is important to ask why people "behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images have the power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing and leading us astray?" (Mitchell, 2005: 7).

2. Photography and traces of magic

It has been noted above that the "surplus value" of visual representation is not confined to photography. As Freedberg (1989) has convincingly shown, such beliefs apply to visual representations in general, ranging from classical paintings or sculptures to icons and wax figures. However their connection to photography is special because of photography's cultural status as a medium of "visual facts", because "traces of magic" are found in the very "traces of the real". Photography's link to the "surplus value" of images can be traced to three characteristics of photography as a medium – to (1) the photographic image as temporal and spatial discontinuity, to (2) the photographic image as trace of the real, and (3) to photography as an act of objectification. One of the central links between photography and the domain of the mystical is related to the temporal and spatial discontinuity inherent in the photographic image. Every photograph is a dislocation of a particular fragment of time and space, its transformation into an image. However, this image is always also a material object and it is precisely this "objectiveness", the materiality of this seemingly transparent object, that facilitates the dislocation of fragments of time and space. Photography can thus be seen not only as writing with light but essentially as writing of and with time. Not only is it marked by timing (making a photograph in one particular moment and not at some other point in time), but the image itself is produced in/by a fraction of time (commonly referred to as shutter speed) during which film emulsion or the CCD/CMOS sensor surface is exposed to the incoming light. As Siegfried Kracauer noted, each photograph is directly associated with "the moment in time at which it came into existence" (1993/1927: 428) and seems, as John Szarkowski remarked, to describe "only that period of time in which it was made", the present. (1966/2007: 101) However, the present of image-making and the present of image-viewing are not the same. John Berger stressed that photography "removes an appearance from the flow of appearances" (1980: 55) and preserves it unchanged, "isolating it from the supersession of further moments" (Berger, 1982: 89).[2] Since a photograph arrests the flow of time, its depiction (content) is consequently imbued with

another message – the shock of discontinuity (Ibid.: 86). It is precisely this shock of discontinuity that led Barthes (1981) to conclude that photography testifies not so much to the appearance of a given object but to the presence of the depicted object in time. A photograph therefore serves as a link/mediator between past, present and future – it presumes "time itself as a progressive linear movement from past to future. The present, during which we look at the photographic image, is but a starting-point, a hallucinatory hovering that imbricates both past and future" (Batchen, 1999: 93, original emphasis). The temporal dislocation of photography connects the photographic image to death and transcendence. For Barthes (1981), photographs testify to the inevitability of death and serve as a form of resurrection.

But photographs are also traces. As Susan Sontag put it, they are "material vestige[s] of the subject", "something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (1977: 154). Similarly, Barthes writes that "[t]he photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant" (1981: 80). Although the indexical properties of photography[3] are often described as traces, they are seldom perceived as "neutral" traces, such as in Krauss' use of a metaphor of footprints. Just like temporal and spatial dislocation, indexicality is frequently associated with death. For Susan Sontag (1977) and Andre Bazin (1960), photographs are death masks precisely because the image is a trace "that belongs to the subject" (Barthes, 1981: 54). Moreover, these traces are objectified. Every photograph, even a digital one, has its materiality. It exists as an object (and often also as a commodity). As Sontag put it, "photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (Sontag, 1977: 81), which can evoke the tacit, ages-old belief that pictorial representations of bodies "somehow have the status of living bodies" (Freedberg, 1989: 12) and lead into some form of idolatrous attitude and behaviour. By taking a photograph, we literally "take" an image of someone and the material object gains a "life" and "history" of its own. As an object, it can be worshiped, exchanged, reshaped, destroyed.

3. "Surplus value" of photograpy as fetishism, idolatry and totemism

Mitchell (2005) identifies three distinct forms of the "surplus value" of images, three types of attitudes attached to over/underestimation of their power: idolatry, fetishism and totemism. Idolatry has the greatest surplus of overestimation of the power of image, as the representation is taken to be the very object it represents (e.g. treating images of gods as if they are gods themselves). It is related to practices of worship, to the iconic properties of signs in Peircean terminology, and belongs to the Lacanian register of the imaginary. "Fetishism

comes in a close second to idolatry as an image of surplus, associated with greed, acquisitiveness, perverse desire, materialism and a magical attitude toward objects" (Mitchell, 2005: 97-8). The power of a fetish derives from it being a part of the object (often a body part) and, as such, it is consigned to the realm of materiality and private "consumption". A fetish is revered as an obsession (often explicitly sexual), it is related to the indexical properties of signs, and to the Lacanian register of the real. By contrast, a totem is characterised by the regulation of collective behaviour and hence connected to practices of communal festivals or sacrifices; it is linked to Peircean symbols and the Lacanian register of the symbolic (Ibid., 195). However, this tripartite division is not to be understood as a typology of different characteristics or types of images, rather, it describes three different types of relations towards visual representations:

> [O]ne and the same object (a golden calf, for instance) could function as a totem, fetish or idol depending on the social practices and narratives that surround it. Thus, when the calf is seen as a miraculous image of God, it is an idol; when it is seen as a self-consciously produced image of the tribe or nation [...] it is a totem; when its materiality is stressed, and it is seen as a molten conglomerate of private "part-objects," the earrings and gold jewellery that the Israelites brought from Egypt, it becomes a collective fetish." (Mitchell, 2005: 189)

Fetishism appears, first of all, through the conception that photographs are windows to the world which offer unmediated access to knowing the world, based on the subjugation of knowledge of the medium's operation. This attitude permeates a series of institutional uses of photography, primarily those that rely on the notion of images as proof or insight – the police and the judicial system, science, journalism (and also those of advertising and promotion). Fetishism is thus linked to the notion of truth, and Szarkovski (1996/2007) is right to point out that photography found its truth in fragmented nature. It should also be noted that a number of institutional practices and conventions have been developed to preserve the fetishist value of photography. Thus, for example, photojournalists routinely employ a set of conventions regarding framing, lens choices, exclusion of fellow photographers from the photographs etc. (see e.g. Schwartz 1992) to minimise distortions and thus preserve the illusion of press photographs as windows on the world. If the "surplus value" of unmediated access to reality operates mostly on the level of professional practices and defines certain genres and styles of photography, totemistic uses of photography can be traced in some institutional public uses of photography, as well as in the (increasingly less) private sphere of family photography. According to Mitchell, totemistic functions of photography refer to practices in which certain photographic images are used as articulation points for the formation or maintenance of memory and identification of social groups. One such example would be the narration of national identity or national history

through the repetitive use of a limited selection of images. Often, these photographs acquire the status of iconic images that can evoke a complex web of feelings of belonging, and personal or adopted memories that situate the individual in a "community of belonging" that imagines sharing not only its present but also their past and future conditions (Bauer, 1907/1996). In a similar way, totemistic uses of photography manifest themselves in the domain of family photography, where selected images (often collected in albums and passed on from one generation to another) or ritualised image making practices (which not only commemorate a specific event through images but create group activity and cohesion through the very process of image making) are used to integrate individuals into a shared group narrative. According to Bourdieu (1990), family photography exists as a practice in the ritual documenting of the family through a series of predictable events such as various "rites of passage", ceremonies and habits. "Family photography is thus understood as a ritual of the domestic cult in which family is both subject and object," (1990: 19), and which serves the totemistic function of organising the collective life of smaller or larger social units.

Idolatry, on the other hand, is more often related to unstructured social uses of photography although various (state) institutions continuously attempt to capitalise on this commonly felt attitude. The most straight forward expression of idolatry in relation to photography is the idea that the photographic image can in some way capture the essence of a person, their soul. This notion is most present with photographic portraiture, a practice often evaluated (by photographers, curators and art critics as well as audience) based on the "criteria" of how well a certain image captures the spirit, soul or essence of the subject. In its reverse form, the notion of photography's ability to capture person's essence can be transferred into the fear of having one's soul stolen or spirit captured, a belief often attributed to pre-modern cultures.[4] As I have indicated above, such attitudes are not characteristic solely of photography, but have gained new currency through the ease with which surrogate possession of a person can be achieved in the form of the photographic image (e.g. Bryson, 1994; Freedberg, 1989). Moreover, the idea that an image somehow is the person it depicts is grounded in photographic indexicality, in its being a trace of the depicted person. Idolatry is thus the practice of maintaining a surrogate presence, possession or control of the portrayed individual, in a form of a photograph of a loved one kept in a wallet, a portrait of a president, prime minister or royalty in public buildings and offices, or an image of a hated political figure being burnt during political demonstrations. All these diverse practices build on the notion that the image is something more than a mere depiction; it is not seen to be representation as much as emanation, as a presence of the person. Researchers have continuously noted that individuals are reluctant to destroy (tear, cut or burn) photographs of their loved ones (e.g. Mitchell, 2005) or engage

(and indulge) in such activities if individuals hold negative feelings towards the depicted person. As Sontag notes, with photography, "some trace of the magic remains: for example, in our reluctance to tear up or throw away the photograph of a loved one, especially of someone dead or far away" (Sontag, 1977: 161).[5]

Photographs can acquire a status that equals that of a religious icon – they are adorned, worshiped or prayed to, even in cases where the political beliefs of the depicted persons are anti-religious. Goldberg (1993, 152-161) notes how, for example, after Che Guevara's death, his famous portrait became an object of religious worship (his photograph was taken to church to be blessed and was then hung next to a picture of Christ and the Virgin Mary) or how the photograph of Mao Tse-tung became part of wedding ceremony rituals and was reported to perform miracles. What should be noted is that the belief in the "surplus value" of photographic portrait is maintained by idolaters as well as iconoclasts. Images of political opponents or former lovers are destroyed precisely because at some level, people maintain that the act of violence will somehow be transferred from the image to its referent. Although "public demonstration" is an important aspect of iconoclastic acts, the mutilation of images and the emotional intensity with which it is committed indicates the notion of the transfer of pain to the depicted person themself.

Regardless of the specific form of the belief in the "surplus value" of photographic images, the attitudes express the notion that images have some sort of inherent, almost bewitching power over the beholder. This special power is generally interpreted as a power over the rationality of the human mind. Writing on interpretation of the meaning of photographs, Allan Sekula described them as "incomplete utterances", a message that "depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability" (Sekula, 1982: 85). Consequently their power cannot derive solely from their transparent immediacy, riddled with the potential to evoke emotions and desires, but also from their elusiveness in terms of definite meaning: images are powerful and magic because of their silence, because of "their dumb insistence on repeating the same message" (Mitchell, 2005: 27), which transforms them into glossy surfaces for the projection of ideas. As this chapter aimed to illustrate, this projection is not confined to the meaning of those depicted in the photograph, but extends to our understanding of photography as a medium for the preservation of traces, both "real" and "magic".

Notes

1 Contemporary iconoclastic practices of course extend beyond photography and range from attacks on paintings in galleries (see e.g. Freedberg 1989), vandalism of statues or official removal of monuments and buildings associated with former regimes (ranging from Estonia's relocation of the monument of the liberators of Tallinn in 2007 to Germany's removal of DDR's

Palast der Republik in 2006-08), to the destruction of the "idols of wrong religions", such as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001 or the attacks on the World Trade Centre by Al-Qaeda (see Mitchel 2005 for interpretation of 9/11 attacks as an iconoclastic act).

2 Similarly, Christian Metz notes that "in all photographs, we have this same act of cutting off a piece of space and time, of keeping it unchanged while the world around continues to change." (1985: 85).

3 It should be noted that photography does not fall neatly into Pierce's division of signs to symbolic, iconic and indexical. It functions at the same time as an index and as an icon.

4 In a recent blog post, a Reuters photographer explained how, in the language of the Kayapo tribe in the Brazilian Amazon, the phrase "akaron kaba" not only means "to take a photo" but also means "to steal a soul" (Moraes 2011). In a similar way Balzac is reported to have believed that "everybody in its natural state was made up of a series of ghostly images, superimposed in layers to infinity, wrapped in infinitesimal films. Every time a photograph was taken, one of those layers was stripped away. Eventually, after an infinite number of photographs, the thing might cease to be, robbed as it was of its constituent layers of visuality" (Nadar in Sontag 1977, 158).

5 A recent study (Hooda et al. 2010) showed that this attitude can extend also to images of objects of personal importance, such as photographs of childhood toys.

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Biography

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