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Phenomenology and Documentary Photography. Some Reflections on Husserl's Theory of Image

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University of Barcelona

ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to understand the symbolic potential of photography, especially of documentary photography and photojournalism, from the analysis of Edmund Husserl's reflections about the symbolic function of picture in *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness*. For this, first of all, I outline the tripartite scheme of picture consciousness, which explains consciousness in an artistic-aesthetic attitude. This scheme is based on the idea that the representation operates by means of the similarity between the picture and what it represents. Secondly, I present some considerations about act-character of pictoriality. Its study allows us to understand how a picture can function symbolically and how the viewer through memory can divert attention from the picture looking for a more complete representation.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on documentary photography, specifically, on documentary photography and photojournalism, in relation to Edmund Husserl's theory of images. Thinkers like Susan Sontag (2004) and Errol Morris (2011) claim that documentary photography's meaning resides in its symbolic dimension and is determined by our beliefs. One interesting case is the manipulation of war photographs, which can be politicized and depoliticized at the same time (Sontag 2004) and be employed arbitrarily in hegemonic speeches of propaganda.

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We can understand this situation from the perspective of the logic of visual consumption and information crisis, which Paul Virilio (1994) calls, a kind of pathology of immediate perception. As the result of transformation of pictures into units of information, their importance does not lie in their contents, but in their volume and speed of circulation to the point that they turn out to be empty signifiers, filled at every opportunity according to the interests of those who observe them or circulate them (Zylberman 2013). Therefore, the more symbolic a picture becomes, like in the case of documentary photography or photojournalism, the less indicial strength it possesses (Zylberman 2013), ceasing to be reliable proof of an event.

In the current context, influenced by the instability of the visual fields that restricts contemporary photographic visualization (Kennedy 2015), questions arise about the role of the viewer in the reactivation of the symbolic potential of photography. In this respect, Ariella Azoulay says that photography is an event, "product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator " (Azoulay 2010, 11), where the latter ceases to have a passive place upon taking the photo from the stability of the frame and the photographer's field of vision. From this point of view, "civic negotiations about the subject they designate and about their sense" (2008, p. 11) are possible because "the photograph exceeds any presumption of ownership or monopoly and any attempt at being exhaustive" (2008, p. 11). Less optimistically, Errol Morris, points out

that: "Photographs attract false beliefs the way flypaper attracts flies" (Morris 2011, p. 92) inasmuch as our gaze is not a *tabula rasa* that together with the photo would constitute the photographic meaning, because, as Morris observes: "we do not form our beliefs on the basis of what we see rather, what we see is often determined by our beliefs. Believing is seeing not the other way around" (Morris 2011, p. 93).

Understanding photography as the product of the encounter between several actors, or, from a sceptical perspective, which does not allow us to contemplate it critically, puts us before questions related to the constitution of its meaning and the reactivation of its symbolic potential. Faced with these questions, I think that Edmund Husserl's phenomenology has a special place because it requires us to abandon the picture and its medium, to focus on the experience by which it can be evoked and disconnected from its contexts. In fact, we can understand the symbolic and enunciative potential of photographs from his reflections on the symbolic function of picture and his idea that they are a domain of heterogeneous representation, which can mutate sense through the carrying out of associative connections made by the viewer.

This paper is mainly based on the *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness* course of 1904/05.[2] In this period Husserl's reflections still

[2] After the publication of *Logical Investigations* (1900/01), Husserl gave a course in the winter semester of 1904/05 at the University of Göttingen, entitled "Principal Parts of the Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge". The course had four parts dedicated

take place based on the content-apprehension scheme, which had already been exposed in *Logical Investigations* (1900/01), to explain the constitution of intentional acts. Subsequently, the scheme was partially rejected by the author in the context of the analysis of the constitution of temporal consciousness and restricted to the constitution of perception (Bernet 2002). These reflections of Husserl's are important because: firstly, in relation to the criticism of psychologism, they demonstrate that the imagination is an act not derived from consciousness, that is, not mediated by pictures (Jansen 2016); and secondly, they show us the step from a so-called static phenomenology towards the affirmation of the necessity of time consciousness. As Eduard Marbach points out, the study of these reflections "requires a high degree of reconstructive thinking" (Marbach 2019 p 13), as is the case with the 1904/05 course, where we find as a starting point the content-apprehension scheme, and as a point of arrival the need for a time consciousness, in order to be able to study fantasy and picture consciousness (Husserl 1980; Marbach 2019; Bernet 2002).

This paper has two parts, the first of which presents the tripartite scheme of picture consciousness, which Husserl developed in depth in *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness* to explain consciousness in artistic-aesthetic attitude. This scheme explains how the pictorial representation operates through the similarity between the picture and what it represents,

respectively to perception, attention, phantasy and picture consciousness and time (Brough 2005).

giving rise to the idea that the pictorial representation has the act-character of internal or external pictoriality [*Bildlichkeit*]. In the second part, I deal with some considerations about external pictoriality. Its study allows us to understand how a picture can function symbolically, that is, how the viewer through memory or evocation of pictures of experiences already lived, can divert attention from the picture, widening its symbolic potential.

1.

In *Logical Investigations*, Husserl confronts the theory of images and its distinction between immanent object and transcendent object, for example, between a sign or picture existing in consciousness and the designated or represented thing. From the perspective of this theory, the picture is a fiction that is stuck in the mind as a thing is in reality (Husserl 2001). In opposition to the "duality" of the theory of images, Husserl presents a tripartite schema of picture consciousness, which is outlined in the appendix to paragraphs 11 and 20 "Critique of the 'image-theory' and of the doctrine of the 'immanent objects' of acts" by *Logical Investigations* and developed in greater depth in *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness*.

Already in *Logical Investigations* is the idea that in the pictorial representation [*Darstellung*] in picture what is represented is "meant" by way of a picture [*Bildobjekt*], which is "neither an internal character nor a

real predicate" (Husserl 2001, p. 125). With this idea Husserl wants to express that in pictorial representation we "go back over the picture, referring it to a certain object foreign to the conscience, through the similarity [*Änhlichkeit*]" (Husserl 2001, p. 125), which allows us to see-in picture. What a perceived object presents to another through similarity means in geometry that identical shapes, despite having different sizes, can maintain the same proportions. In the same way, Husserl's concept of similarity explains the identity relationship between picture and subject representation, which is never consummated because there is always a space of separation, a margin of difference, insofar as they are calibrated by those who are contemplating, or as Husserl says, by the faculty of a 'representative self' that intuitively keeps one thing in mind and mean another instead of it (Husserl 2001). Likewise, in *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness* Husserl observes "The Madonna by Raphael that I contemplate in a photograph, is obviously not the little picture that appears photographically" (Husserl 1980 p. 17), but, although its measures have increased or decreased in the same proportion, it remains the same Madonna. According to the content-apprehension-schema, the above is explained because in aesthetic contemplation there are two apprehensions: a primordial one that determines the actual present and a second modified perceptual apprehension that gives way to the picture [*Bildobjekt*]. In this second apprehension, the represented [*Bildsujet*] penetrates [*durchdringen*] and integrates into itself [*aufnehmen*]

the available sensory material of the picture, making the picture its carrier [*Träger*] (Husserl 1980, 30; p. 16). In this way, a tripartite characterization of consciousness in artistic-aesthetic attitude takes place, where we find: (i) the physical picture [*physisches Ding*]; (ii) the picture object [*Bildobjekt*] - the picture of the imagination; (iii) and, the subject picture [*Bildsujet*], the object represented (Husserl 1980). If we think of a photograph that documents a news story in a newspaper, we have the picture as a physical thing, which appears as ink printed on dull and rough paper that we hold with our hands. These visual sensations, Husserl observes, can be interpreted as lines on paper or as the appearance of the plastic form, that is, as the appearance of a picture [*Bildobjekt*] that shows what is represented [*Bildsujet*] (Husserl 1980), for example, a car accident, an attack, etc.[3]

As a result of this characterization, the picture object appears as a double objectivity. On the one hand, when sharing the contents of apprehension of the physical picture, it appears in the middle of the perceptual reality, as if claiming to have an objective reality in its midst (Husserl 1980, p. 47). Furthermore, as the bearer of the representation

[3] In *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, Marbarch translates "Bildsujet" as "picture subject". The use of the French term "Sujet" instead of the German "Subjekt" indicates that the "picture subject" is not the conscious subject, that is, the transcendental (or empirical) subject that perceives, remembers, etc. As well, he describes the distinction between "Bildobjekt" and "Bildsujet" as a distinction between "pictorial object" and "represented object", meaning that with the term" Bildsujet" Husserl has in mind what a picture, its object or motive, is about, such as a landscape represented in a painting or a person represented by a sculpture (Bernet, Rudolf; Kern, Iso; and, Marbach, Rudolf (1993), *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, Evanston Northwestern: University Press).

subject, the picture object requires a consciousness of presentification [*Vergegenwärtigung*], that is, the consciousness "of something which does not appear within that which does appear" (Husserl 1980, p. 31; Marbach 2019).[4] From this idea it becomes understandable that in the picture we can intuit what is represented to the extent that the result of perceptual apprehension is not a perception, but the appearance of the subject. According to Marbach, "genuine *picture* consciousness only occurs thanks to the *presentificative* relationship with a figurative thing" (2019, p. 23), which despite being entwined with a presenting consciousness that presents the physical image, has the character of unreality (Husserl 1980).

This means that there is only depiction when there is correspondence between picture-object and picture-subject; that is, when the subject is intuited in the picture, and we feel the presence of the object presentified (Husserl 1980). This is possible because the appearance of the picture arises from series of intuitive moments, called in the case of pictoriality pictorializing moments [*verbildlichenden*], in which we intuit the theme [*Bildsujet*] of presentification (Husserl 1980, p. 50). Also, there are non-pictorializing moments in which we do intuit the media and materials of production, such as the texture of paper or the brightness of a screen that,

[4] I have chosen to translate "Vergegenwärtigung" as presentification and "vergegenwären" as presentificate, and not as representation or re-presentation. As Julia Jansen (2016) points out, the concept of presentification emphasizes the sense of presenting what is not present in itself, as well as the feeling that this necessarily implies a repetition or the memory of a previous experience.

despite being parts of the picture, do not fulfil a depiction function [*Abbildungsfunktion*] (Husserl 1980, p. 34).[5] In fact, Husserl points out that "If the conscious relation to something depicted is not given with the picture, then we certainly do not have a picture" (Husserl 1980, p. 31). Therefore, we could conclude that between picture-object and picture-subject, or following Sartre, between picture and model, there is a bond of emanation by which "The subject has ontological primacy. But he incarnates himself, he descends into the image" (Sartre 2004, p. 24). Because of this convergence, meaning is not only directed towards the picture object, but towards what is represented by it (Husserl 1980, p. 24). In this way, our contact with an artistic-aesthetic object is an experience in which we enter into direct contact with the object of contemplation because "this is not a conceptual knowing either, nor does it imply that I undertake an act of distinguishing and relating, setting the appearing object in relation to an object thought of" (Husserl 1980, p. 31).

In short, both in *Logical Investigations* and *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness*, the idea is present that, in imaginative presentation, which takes place in the contemplation of a photograph or a painting, although the object exists as a factual object, consciousness has only the picture (Husserl

[5] However, at this point Husserl's reflections differ because later in the text he will add that they can also broaden the construction of the picture when "an interest in the form of aesthetic feeling, hangs on to the image object, and hangs on to it even with regard to its non-analogizing moments" (Husserl 1980, p. 52).

2001); and, despite being in connection with its material_media and its referents, picture is autonomous because it is constituted in and by contemplation. About that Husserl says: " If the appearing picture were absolutely identical phenomenally with the object meant, or, better, if the picture appearance showed no difference whatsoever from the perceptual appearance of the object itself, a pictoriality consciousness [*Bildlichkeitsbewusstsein*] could scarcely come about. Surely then, a consciousness of difference must be there, albeit the subject does not appear in the proper sense. The appearing object is not just taken by itself, but as the representative of another object like it or resembling it "(Husserl 1980, p. 20). That is, insofar as the picture belonging to aesthetic-artistic contemplation arises from the lags of its strata, the picture is really nothing because there is no picture thing [*Bildding*] in consciousness. In this respect, Husserl observes that the picture-object: "truly does not exist, which means not only that it has no existence outside my consciousness, but also, that it has no existence inside my consciousness "(Husserl 1980, p. 23). In this sense, the picture, in aesthetic depiction, does not give itself to us as a completely finished object because it is subjected to a permanent adjustment between the apparition of strata, thus disclosing the active aspect that constitutes that which is properly aesthetic and which allows the viewer to remain in a constant constitutive activity (Cordero, 2017).

2.

In accordance with the above, the artistic-aesthetic picture arises from a work of adjustment –between the appearance of the picture [*Bildobjekt*], the physical media and the subject of representation- by means of which we can seeing-in picture, that is, come into contact with what the picture presentifies. This is explained because the apprehension contents of the picture object and of the physical picture are identically the same, and therefore the picture can appear as a physical thing, spatially present, but also, as fiction, as the bearer of the imagination [*Imagination*] (Husserl 1980 p. 44). However, there are certain kinds of picture that allow us to establish associative connections, which make the picture lose its expressive value, that is, its ability to show the subject of representation, to the extent that the viewer can evoke new pictures that are outside of the identity relationship of the strata.

We can understand how this kind of picture works from the explanation in *Phantasy and Picture Consciousness* about the modes of representation by means of similarity. The first - which I have already referred to in the first part of this article - Husserl calls internal pictoriality [innere Bildlichkeit] character. The main feature of this kind of pictoriality is that we can seeing-in picture because the picture object functions as bearer of the representation subject. From the analysis of the internal

pictoriality, Husserl also observes that there are cases in which we can contemplate the picture as a means to evoke or indicate pictures other than what is represented, which corresponds to a second kind of representation by means of the similarity, the external pictoriality [*äusserer Bildlichkeit*], a kind of symbolic consciousness, to whose domain, Husserl says, the photographs and scientific images belong (Husserl 1980 p. 36).

In the external pictoriality a thing or person can be presentified, but it can also remind us in a way similar to that of the designated sign (Husserl 1980, p. 52). That is, a picture can work symbolically when from an internal picture consciousness, it turns to something else in a new appearance (Husserl 1980, p. 36). As Husserl points out: "Whoever makes use of the picture as memory, seeks and occasionally finds another presentification of the object, which may offer him a richer presentification of it" (Husserl 1980, p. 35). In this case, we are facing a symbol consciousness directed outward, while the picture becomes a sign –a symbol, of the original [*Urbildes*] (Husserl 1980, p. 53)-, providing pictorial indexes [*billiche Inhaltsverzeichnisse*], whose objective is not to awaken internal pictoriality nor aesthetic pleasure, but to function as a sign of memory (Husserl 1980, p. 35). With respect to the sign and its indicative function, in the first Logical Investigation, Husserl affirms that: "Every sign is a sign for something, but not every sign has 'meaning', a 'sense', that the sign expresses" (Husserl 2001, p. 183). This is the case of signs that work indicatively, which do not

express anything because they do not have a significant function. According to Husserl, to this category correspond, for example, a brand as the sign of the slave; the flag as the sign of the nation, the fossil vertebrae as signs of the existence of prediluvian animals, etc. (Husserl 2001, p. 183). Its indicator effectiveness depends on the association relationships made by the viewer insofar as there is no visible and objectively necessary connection between the related elements. There is, however, says Husserl, a nexus established by means of convictions and dispositions, whose foundation lies in the sentimental and volitional sphere (Husserl 2001, p. 185).

From this perspective we can understand the symbolic functioning of a picture, for example, of a photo-journalistic image, when, in addition to documenting a specific situation, the use of iconographies, gestures and poses make it possible to make associative connections, to widen and ensure its symbolic effectiveness. In this regard, I would like to mention the series of photographs by Abu Ghraib (2003), which document the different types of torture carried out on Iraqi prisoners, registered and disseminated by US soldiers. One photo of particular interest, "The Hooded Man", appeared in the New York Times with the name "the indelible symbol of torture" (Morris 2011). This photo showed a naked Iraqi prisoner, covered with a hooded blanket, from whose fingers hung electric cables, allowing the emergence of associative connections to the extent that the pose of the Iraqi man evoked the figure of the crucified, icon of the scourge in the History of

the West (*photo 1*). However, as associative connections depend on cultural and social factors, the symbolic effectiveness of photographs can change. As Errol Morris points out, while in the West the icon of the war in Iraq is the picture of the "The Hooded Man"; in the Arab and Muslim world, the iconic picture is actually the photograph of a woman, Sabrina Harman, the soldier who smiles and gives the thumbs up over the body of a dead Iraqi man (*photo 2*) (Morris 2011).

Figure 1: "The Hooded Man", Abu Ghraib prision, (2003).

Figure 2: Photograph taken by Chuck Graner of Sabrina Harman poses over the body of detainee Manadel a-Jamadi, Abu Ghraib prision (2003).

That some pictures, such as photographs, can work as "memory engines" (Husserl 1980, p. 52), means that, in their symbolic functioning, in addition to the presentification of the object, can indicate the object as what should [*sollen*] be meant (Husserl 1980, p. 53). This "should" explains the idea that certain pictures in their symbolic functioning fit to reality through memory, that is, through the evocation of pictures of experiences already lived. This is the case of photography, whose main characteristic is to raise the

possibility of searching beyond what the picture shows, as Husserl says: "in an externally connected symbolic intention, turn toward what is symbolized" (Husserl 1980, p. 53). In this regard, I would like to mention two emblematic cases in documentary photography history: *The Falling Soldier* (1936) by Robert Capa, a photographic montage, which shows the anarchist Federico Borrell García, in the foreground, reclined on the ground next to his rifle, being shot; and, the photograph by Joe Rosenthal that reconstructs the raising of the American flag in Iwo Jima, Japan, in 1945. In both cases, the photographic composition by means of the use of poses and iconic elements of war, seeks to arouse the viewer's attention externally to what is represented. Also, we must not forget that traditionally the documentary photo has been modified by the caption, which operates based on extrinsic meanings to what is represented by the picture. In fact, when we come into contact with a written expression attached to a photographic picture, our understanding dispenses with the picture because when searching externally, that is, in reading the caption, we cannot at the same time seeing-in the picture, that is, seeing in the *image* [*Bild*] the subject [*Sujet*] (Husserl 1980, p. 53). In this sense, our knowledge of a photograph would not be constituted only from seeing in picture, but also, from our previous experiences that are deposited in the pictures and that determine our symbolic references. As a result, we can say that, in opposition to the idea formulated by John Tagg (1993): the meaning of a documentary

photograph is fixed because it is the capture of a representation of a particular place at a specific time, documentary photography is neutral and the inferences we make from them can be true or false (Morris 2011).

Finally, I would like to point out that Husserl's analyses of the symbolic picture function allow us to put photography, specifically, documentary photography and photo-journalistic image, into perspective from the idea that it is a heterogeneous domain that allows us to seeing-in picture or establish associative connections. Thus, we could conclude that the expressive value of the picture, the emanation relationship between picture object and picture subject, disappears to the extent that associations are made, which produce new forms of representation. In this way, the photographic picture has the paradoxical power to show in picture a composition or divert our interest towards an ethical or even corrective dimension through the evocation of new pictures. This is the case of the works of photographer Sebastião Salgado, which, according to Sontag compromise the picture's status as a document (Sontag 2004). If we think about his latest project, *GOLD - The Serra Pelada Mine* (2019), a monumental installation of screens that, hung from the ceiling of the exhibition hall, project pictures of one of the largest open pit mines in the world and the misery and precariousness of its workers. In this project, as Sontag already said, we cannot know the name of the faces of misery because they are omitted. This would make it impossible for the viewer to

leave the photographic immanence, the idea of misery in the abstract, and go to instances where he can disconnect from his aesthetic dimension and connect with suffering in his own flesh.

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