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On Philosophy and Language of Photojournalism: the (Un)Ethical Aestheticization of Violence

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Abstract. All languages have a code. Photography is a language, but it has no code; it is universally seen. The language of photography (its image) is not seen in Chinese, Arabic or English. Press photographs, especially those reporting violence and war, showing dead, dying or suffering people, become trivial in modern visual cultures. They have ethical implications: its excessive iconic violence. Through a visual rhetoric, they are simulacra, provoking sensationalism, making the real seem less stimulating and violent than its image. They are a fetish product whose power is in the ideological and aesthetical ways of seeing and thinking the events.

Tutte i linguaggi hanno un codice. La fotografia è un linguaggio; ma non ha un codice; è universalmente vista. Il linguaggio della fotografia (la sua immagine) non è visto in cinese, arabo o inglese. Le fotografie di stampa, in particolare quelle che denunciano violenza e guerre, che mostrano persone morte, morenti o sofferenti, diventano banali nelle moderne culture visive. Hanno implicazioni etiche: la loro eccessiva violenza iconica. Attraverso una retorica visiva, sono simulacri, provocano sensazionalismo, facendo sembrare il reale meno stimolante e violento della sua immagine. Sono un prodotto feticcio il cui potere è loro nei modi ideologici ed estetici di vedere e pensare gli eventi.

Keywords: *aestheticization, ethics, photojournalism, violence, visual language.*

Parole chiave: *estetizzazione, etica, fotogiornalismo, violenza, linguaggio visivo.*

o) Introduction

«When photography takes itself out of context, severing the connections illustrated by Sander, Blossfeldt, or Germaine Krull, when it frees itself from physiognomic, political, and scientific interest, it becomes creative. The lens now looks for interesting juxtapositions; photography turns into a sort of arty journalism.»
(Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*).

The modern technological development allows greater ease and quality in the aesthetical edition of photographs, making indistinct the radical difference between real and fiction. However, there is a reduction of the object to the image of the object: the passage from the real to the photograph. The image is not the real; it is the aesthetical representation of the real, a moment in time, an unrepeatable moment, points out Barthes (1982, p. 4).

In the press photograph, the public can't know the before and after of the click. The reality is simply revealed or re-presented as being what it is or as the operator sees it. Thus, is the press photograph a representation of reality or an aesthetical transformation of reality? What is the responsibility of photojournalism before the representation of reality? Is it allowed to make a judgment of reality or just show it as it is? According to Barthes (1977, p. 15), «the press photograph is a message»; «the photograph is not simply a product or a channel but also an object endowed with a structural autonomy».

This idea leads to the ontological or existential realism: the very existence of the photograph depends on the real existence of the object photographed; the picture depends on an event in what might be called «real time», i.e. «something must have passed before

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the lens», according to Don Slater (2003, p. 222). Photography has «the cultural ability to bear witness to people and events, to record or conjure up the dead, the past, the ruined» (Slater, 2003, p. 222). Between the photograph and the object, there is a unique and privileged relation between sign and referent. Photography is the same as a natural and correspondent representation of sign to referent; it reduces the world to «objectively described surfaces with no inherent meaning: to facts» (Slater, 2003, p. 223). It is as if nature represents itself.

As per Barthes (1982, p. 5), «the photograph always carries its referent with itself». We never see the photograph, we only see its referent, because «a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see» (Barthes, 1982, p. 6). For Peter Burke (2001, p. 21), «the temptations of realism, more exactly of taking an image for reality, are particularly seductive in the case of photographs and portraits». For this reason, Burke says, newspapers have long been using photographs as evidence of authenticity and, like television images, these photographs make a powerful contribution to what Barthes has called the «reality effect».

As never before, we live under the predominance of images. «Today everything exists», as Sontag underlines (2002, p. 24), «to end in a photograph». This is due to the recent digital revolution of photography from analogue to digital. A revolution based on the transformation of the practice of capturing images in an easy, aesthetical and attractive fashion, a lifestyle guided by the cult of visibility and sharing. The photographic images can thus be captured by anyone, everywhere and at any moment. «We are now producing images in enormous quantity by means of digital media», says Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 29).

The massification of the mechanical reproduction of images is an iconolatry, the expression of a «civilization of the image», in Fulchignoni's (1969) terminology. This perspective about the iconolatry becomes even more pertinent in Deleuze's words, for whom the civilization of the image is above all a «civilization of the cliché», a civilization of the iconic inflation based on redundancy and concealment (of the power of persuasion), distortion or manipulation, «where all the powers have an interest in hiding images from us, not necessarily in hiding the same thing from us, but in hiding something in the image» (Deleuze, 1985, p. 21). Purposely, we never perceive everything that is in the image, affirms Deleuze, because «the cliché hides the image from us».

With the predominance of images and the primacy of concealment, persuasion, distortion or manipulation, this iconic inflation is an invitation to an ethical or aesthetical practice of the image. If the press photograph is a representation of reality or an aesthetical transformation of reality, what about press photographs reporting violence and war? How could they be a referential representation of the event? Photojournalism of war didn't foster the aestheticization of the world and transform reality when it shows us fancy pictures? With what responsibility and objectivity press photographs show us pictures about what happen in reality? Is still informative the ability to bear witness to people and events? Photography didn't turns into a sort of arty journalism, as Benjamin mentions?

Considering images of violence and war in the press, the two aims of this article are interconnected as just one: 1) to discuss the philosophical ontology of the photographic image, namely the «beauty» (aestheticization) of press photographs of violence and war; 2) to understand the influence of an aesthetical language and practice of the image as a visual rhetoric resource, which amplify the *pathos* and transforms photographs into artistic objects of contemplation and aesthetical valorization.

1) Ethics vs. aesthetics of the image

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the concept of aestheticization means «the action or process of making something aesthetic in character or appearance; an

instance of this». Making something aesthetic (from the Greek *aisthētikos*, from *aisthēta*, «perceptible things», and from *aisthēsthai*, «perceive»; the sense «concerned with beauty» or the appreciation of beauty) is making something visually pleasing, particularly in art.

For its part, «violence» (from the Latin word *vis*, «force») is the use and abuse of force exercised over something or someone. It is the result of an excessive human action. According to Arendt (1970, p. 43), «power, strength, force, authority, violence – these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function». Arendt (1970, p. 52) concludes that violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate.

Therefore, the aestheticization of violence in photojournalism is made by using, editing and publishing violent images in the press, which are chosen by the aesthetical and sensational criteria, in order to provoke the *pathos* of public opinion. For this reason, it has ethical implications on truth, moral values, image manipulation, sensationalism effects on the public opinion, image reservation, privacy, etc. Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs are a well-known example of the limits of what constitutes the artistic image.

Due these implications, this article confronts the ethical and the aesthetical practice of the image. The epigraph of Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* underlines the concern about the creative and aesthetical transformation of photography, which may simply occur with the change of its context (Benjamin, 2005, p. 526). As Mitchell points out:

Photography's true nature is found in its automatic realism and naturalism, or in its tendency to aestheticize and idealize by rendering things pictorial. It is praised for its incapacity for abstraction or condemned for its fatal tendency to produce abstractions from human reality. It is declared to be independent of language or riddled with language. (Mitchell, 2005, p. 274)

We easily see and look at press photographs (Barthes, 1982, p. 16). They stylistically represent and manifest visualities without any effort to our understanding. As Sartori (1998, p. 35) says, the images are not seen in Chinese, Arabic or English; they are simply seen. In this perspective, Barthes (1977, p. 17) states that the photographic image is a continuous language; it has no code. There is no need to think, because images dilute the concepts. One only needs to look at the images and sees what they show. Images just demand to be seen, but it is a seeing without understanding, as in Sartori's *homo videns* (1998, p. 11), who is moving from a being of thought and conscience to a being controlled by electronic image. «Photography is a record of what we see or a revelation of what we cannot see, a glimpse of what was previously invisible», according to Mitchell (2005, p. 274). Photographs are objects we look at, they are to be seen, as if it irresistibly appealed to the eye.

However, what the press photographs convey to us is always related to what they contain (the ethical *logos*) and to the way they express (the ethical *ethos* of the photographer). The way images are looked at does not necessarily correspond to the way they are to be looked at, because both ways are dictated by visual rhetoric by which images are captured, edited, shown, and perceived.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag (2003) questions the ability of the photography of war to communicate, signify, or sensitize something substantial. This question is important to understand the role of the press photograph as an ethical and practical activity to fulfil social functions as to inform us about what happen in the world, as Baudrillard asks in the 1990s whether photographs in the news media could really show us the Gulf War. According to Baudrillard, it is the hypervisualization of the war. Baudrillard (1997, p. 28) states that it is «a sort of frisson of the real, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency». Images

of war are not different from war, but «they are not (or not any longer): to the routinized violence of war is added the equally routine violence of the images» (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 77).

Taking press photographs as objects of art, fulfilling an aesthetical function instead of a referential and informative functions is taking its content as simulacra of reality, because the photographs deviate from their main interest (i.e. to report the truth of the facts) and invest in the «creative production» of another reality. Simulacra (from the Latin *simulare*, «to make like, to put on an appearance of») are changed (not factual) representations of reality produced using signs. For example, modified press photographs (an image is a sign) which pretends to report a war situation. Representation presuppose that the sign (representant) and the real (represented) are equivalent, producing and conveying accurate meanings.

For this reason, the medium is no longer identifiable as such; there is a confusion between the medium and the message, which is «the first great formula of this new era», since the medium «is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real» (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 30).

There is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined. (Baudrillard, 1997, 80)

According to Baudrillard, McLuhan's formula «the medium is the message» is the key formula of the era of simulation, because «after all the contents and messages have been volatilized in the medium, it is the medium itself that is volatilized as such» (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 80). Accordingly, photographs of violence and war published on first pages of the newspapers turns these newspapers into messages, which means the end of the message, but also the end of the medium.

Toby Miller (1998, p. 252) remarks the technical and ethical implications using the airbrush for correction and creation. Is this corrective use ethical? Changing an image is not also changing the information it contains? How to establish criteria for defining what is acceptable? Is the ethical implication of the press photographs about the use of tools and software to modify images, even when the photographs have a technical error, or some content is added, subtracted or highlighted?

Photojournalism must be ethical, i.e. focused on respect, responsibility, credibility and freedom of the act of publishing. In journalism, the truth is a deontological criterion and any modification of the facts which are presented to the public, such as the practice of the image to improve or correct its quality, amplifies its effects of derealization of the real, causes false impression, awakens attention to what is not the case, and becomes a spectacular (more aesthetical and visual) sensationalism.

For this reason, according to the code of professional ethics of The National Press Photographers Association, photo editing must maintain the integrity of the content and context of the image, so it cannot be manipulated, misleading the public or misrepresenting the facts. Therefore, ethics of the image must prevail over the aesthetics of the image.

2) The aestheticization of the image

Massively diffused through the media and circulating freely in an increasingly globalized world, the image is estheticized to produce spectacle and visuality. The relevance of this object of study is the need to understand the contemporaneity, which is increasingly represented in a more visual, superficial, tautological and global way. A contemporaneity

that is characterized by iconolatry, by the accumulation of images and by the massification of the forms and patterns of a visual culture.

Given the mechanical reproduction of images regarding outstanding events, such as extreme violence and war, which have *per se* newsworthy (i.e. correspond to some news-value or editorial criteria to turn an event into news) and justify a priority and careful treatment of images (and not rhetorical, ideological or aesthetic preferences), what is the place or the role of an ethics in the aestheticization of the image?

As in Deleuze's «civilization of the cliché», there is a paradoxical iconic inflation: the profusion, redundancy, and concealment of images do not correspond to an easier access to the truth or to a more polished use of freedom of expression. On the contrary, it corresponds to a greater doubt about what the truth is, about what the image represents, and about the place of distortion and manipulation that Deleuze refers to.

The inflation of the truth in the image is a fundamental problem of image ethics. Dealing with the truth requires an unconditional care, which cannot be abdicated either in favor of aestheticization (the process of aestheticize, i.e. showing something at its best, most beautiful or artistic) or in favor of the spectacle of the image. In photojournalism, as a documentary resource of what is true, the inflation of truth is doubly an ethical problem: first, when the truth is distorted or manipulated, considering that all practices of distortion or manipulation are against the fundamental principle of ethics, that of truthfulness; second, because it is a case of using freedom, supposedly a freedom of expression and freedom of creation, which can always follow another course of action, since there is awareness and the option to cover the event in a different way.

Ethics has always to do with responsibility, critical judgment, freedom of action and what one does with freedom. Therefore, ethics is justified in all human domains, particularly in the field of war photojournalism, because this specific practice: a) deals with an impressive and tragic subject; b) make known the violence, that is, it disseminates the human tragedy of the war to vast audiences all over the world; c) uses the image as a strategic communication resource, following visual rhetoric to impress or persuade public opinion, often without scrutiny or objectivity.

Ethics is the analysis of human action and behavior based on moral constructs and social values desired in a given social or professional context. Ethics is the guidance of personal, social or professional relationships. With ethical conduct, it is expected that human coexistence occurs in harmony, responsibility and respect. Therefore, acting against ethics or with a lack of ethics implies an inadequate course of action, which may produce negative effects and social discredit to those who act outside acceptable parameters.

The aestheticization of the world using photographs is a creative way to represent reality and produce meaning. It is like to have an idea, as Deleuze questions in a conference talk on 1987 titled *What is the creative act?* What it means to have an idea, in cinema, in philosophy, or in any discipline? Deleuze states that to have an idea is a rare event and that we do not have ideas in general, but always in a specific field. An idea is an image that forces us to think; it is a thoughtful image, it is thought in the making. To have an idea means to be creative, to produce something and to convey its meaning. In art, in general, to have an idea is to be aesthetical. If photography is an art, the press photographs contribute to the esthetization of the world, even if it is reported to violence and war.

3) Visual rhetoric and aestheticization

Some war photographs are historical documents and collective memory. They are photographs-documents. The photographic technique is, according to Jünger (1993, p. 25), a way of fixing things and, therefore, has the status of optical document. For Jünger, the I World War was the first major event where photography, as a sensitive and invulnerable

«artificial eye» served to this documentary purpose. However, one cannot expect more from photography than what it can show, says Jünger.

According to Jünger, in his article *War and photography* (1993, p. 24), photographs are instruments of technological consciousness and perpetuate the misery of war; a misery that life itself tends to forget. In this perspective, photography is a useful aid to the imagination of those who did not participate or could not participate in the war. The forgetfulness and memory of suffering caused by war imply the moral essence of the human being. «Appealing only to our revulsion to suffering would be a betrayal of our moral essence, as would a beautification of such a serious matter as that which was embodied by this war» (Jünger, 1993, p. 25). Both the forgetting and the memory (guaranteed by photography) of a severe problem (that of suffering caused by war) have to do with the moral dimension.

In Jünger's theory, photography is a technological weapon to dominate the world and seeing is an act of aggression (Gil, 2012, p. 154). Photography expounds an objectification of the world, because «the invulnerability of the mechanism is enhanced by its coldness, i.e. its lack of emotion, which allows the takeover of reality without making any difference between human and object» (Gil, 2012, p. 154).

If we attribute to the image the function of organ of social memory, according to Agamben (1998, p. 26), press photographs reporting events of violence and war become iconic cultural objects, as historic as the events themselves. They can awaken collective consciousness and memory, increasing the repudiation for war like Huynh Cong Ut's Vietnam war photography. Another example is the photograph of Eddie Adams (from 1968) showing the execution of a presumably Vietcong. More recently, the photograph of the body of a Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, who hit the coast of a Turkish beach in September 2015; or the recent (published on June 26th, 2019) harrowing image of a Salvadoran dad and his 23-month-old daughter drowned while trying to swim across the Rio Grande into Texas).

In these cases, there are arguments to not publish photographs that report human tragedy, protecting the public from the striking impact of the image, which is violent and therefore avoidable in a more judicious and less sensational editorial line. There are more subtle ways of showing reality, avoiding sensationalism without highlighting or trivializing extreme violence.

The understanding of the photographic image as a visual rhetoric resource has to do with the capacity of the picture to amplify the *pathos* of the public. For example, Robert Capa's fascination for pointedly conveying the feelings and suffering of people in war in a single picture is a quality that transpires throughout his work, which is a manifesto against war. His picture named D-Day, from 1944, is as memorable as a statement about the II World War.

Press photographs influence public opinion. The influence is made using appropriate means for good and necessary results (stressing a truth that must be seen and denounced as such) or using inappropriate means for illicit and immoral results (distorting or manipulating the truth, the facts). Both cases depend on the subtleties of the visual rhetoric. The rhetoric of the image follows categorized ways of saying/showing and it transforms the visible (which is made visible by photography) in a more apodictic message. This is the case of the aesthetical repositioning of the body of a soldier killed in the American Civil War, in Alexander Gardner's photograph entitled *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*.

In 1863, when Alexander Gardner and his assistant arrived at the site of the Battle of Gettysburg (ended two days earlier), bodies were still unburied on the battlefield and they photograph the carnage. To get more dramatic photographs, they moved one corpse and the caption of the image become the most famous and documental of the Civil War.

Using appropriate or inappropriate means for good and necessary or for illicit and immoral results are like Plato's two possibilities of rhetoric: a «good rhetoric» (as a psychagogy) guiding people for desirable ends of life, in Plato's *Phaedrus* (1997, 261a); and a «bad rhetoric» (the sophist rhetoric) that seduces and deceives, which is independent of the truth, in Plato's *Gorgias* (2004, 452e). The criterion followed is that of pleasure and spectacle. As an art, rhetoric (from the Greek *retoriké*, the art of discourse) is traditionally understood as the ability to persuade or motivate the receivers of the messages. Rhetoric is a capacity that ensures persuasion, the *Pheitó*, the control over the receivers.

The ethical problem of persuasion is that it is generally a form of distorted communication, influencing people toward the adoption of one's views without the consciousness of the public. «Persuasions still operate with some Orwellian techniques», because «the goal is the invasion of one's mind by readymade phrases to alter our attitudes» (Klikauer, 2008, p. 124). Persuasion is a form of deceptive communication where deception strategies are used: distortion or equivocation, omissions or concealment, falsification and information manipulation (Klikauer, 2008, p. 134). The more principles of ideal speech (principles of ethical conduct, such as respect, responsibility, openness, truthfulness, sincerity, or rightness) are established in communication, the higher the ethical stage (Klikauer, 2008, p. 171). The ethical problem is that «ideal speech acts and communicative action cannot be instrumentally guided towards strategic goals» (Klikauer, 2008, p. 178).

In Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* (2004, 1355b), the ultimate end and virtuous use of rhetoric (the careful and conscientious use for good purposes) is «the ability to discover what is appropriate in each case in order to persuade». In the daily practice of press photography, there are many cases of good and bad use of the visual rhetoric. That is why Barthes (1993, p. 19) argues that «the world is incredibly full of ancient rhetoric».

When photography takes the status of an aesthetic resource, it possesses a peculiar aesthetics, as Soulages (2001) states, that is, a medium to produce beautiful pictures. As such, the photographic image is essentially interested in being an art object, i.e. an object of contemplation and aesthetic valorization, respecting standards and criteria of taste and beauty. Even in journalism, where photographs are mainly used to inform, the photographic practice is guided by aesthetic criteria.

The practice of the image as an aesthetic activity is guided by an aesthetic concern. There is the prevalence of the photograph as an art object. In *On Photography*, Sontag (2002, p. 108) underlines the aestheticizing tendency of photography, which is also seen to neutralize the distress that photographs of suffering can effect in the public. The aestheticization of photographs of dead, dying or suffering people becomes a «means of deflecting its impact and sheltering the public from scenes considered too gruesome» (Brothers, 1997, p. 172).

In the establishment of an ontological antinomy, the distinction between the art of the photographers and the photograph of the artists is relevant (Rouillé, 2005). This distinction determines the separation of two distinct products: photography as art and art as photography. If the pictures are idealized, how can one recognize the beautiful side of a photograph that portrays violence, war, destruction and catastrophe?

4) The language of photojournalism, spectacle and violence

The option for aesthetic photographs in journalism regarding acts or events of violence and war is what Zizek (2008, p. 1) classifies as «symbolic violence» or violence of language and its forms. It is a violence based on the imposition of a given universe of meaning (Zizek, 2008, p. 2). It is a violence hidden in the language. This form of violence is in the simple act of symbolizing things, leading to their mortification (Zizek, 2008, p. 61). In the case of media language (both verbal and visual) about acts or events of violence and war

(e.g. Syria war and refugee's crisis), the language is too reductive and simplistic, tautological and destructive of the unity of the event reported. According to Žižek, symbolic violence is exercised when language treats the parts of things as if they were autonomous and isolated from the whole, inserting the object reported in a field of signification that is external to it.

For this reason, language may be used also as a form of violence. It is not only reality, acts or events of violence and war in the world that are violent; to show them through a press photograph might also be violent. Therefore, language is violent due to its content or its form, the way it shows this content exaggeratedly explicit or realistic. Press photographs may be a hypotyposis of reality, a vivid and realistic description of a situation. As Žižek (2008, p. 67) points out, «reality in itself, in its stupid existence, is never intolerable: it is language, its symbolization, which makes it such».

Consequently, the presumption of truth confers ethical authority and interest to the press photography, but the work of the photographer is not an exception to the equivocal relations between art and truth.

The press photograph must be a «mandate of truth», a denunciation of violence, a pedagogical tool. Thus, it is relevant to understand how photographs influence the structure of representation and have an impact on the public for a better understanding of the event reported. The public use of journalistic photography must be the result of an image ethics. This use is an expression of a peculiar way of seeing and thinking the event. That is why Benjamin (1978, p. 277) points out that we only come to an effective reason or critique for violence when this violence is inscribed within a context of law and justice. «For a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues», and the «sphere of these issues is defined by the concepts of law and justice», says Benjamin (1978, p. 277).

The main language's function of the press photography is, by definition, the informative / referential of the visual message. If the function is to inform through the image, the function of press photography is also ephemeral, because it depends on the actuality of the information it reports (Joly, 2008, p. 167). However, there are press photographs that report important events and, therefore, have become legendary and have surpassed its original, singular and momentary dimension, i.e. they become enduring and part of the collective memory, separated from the actuality that provoked them. Photograph, in this sense, is a mythography (Joly, 2008, p. 167), a production of mythological meaning and speech, i.e. a meta-language, a rhetorical resource, a mythopoietic and logopoietic device, a reproductive mechanism of polysemy through language. As a mythography, the photograph passes from a precise moment in time to a trans-historical dimension, from the singular to the general, from the real and factual to the symbolic and legendary (or mythical). By the rule, press photographs are ephemeral and become eternal (they represent the permanence of the immanent), but they are also unique, rare captures of image that, due to the repetition of its exhibition, become banal (they represent the repetition of what is unique). The transformation of photography into aesthetic and valuable object (of contemplation and preservation of the collective memory) contributes to these two situations. According to Joly, contemplation is what is essential, what makes press photographs attractive, prompting the reader to look at them, even when they are unpleasant about violence and war, because they impress more the *pathos*.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains how the concept and signification of the photograph is cultural, producing meaning and effects (the *studium*, the cultural base of the photograph, and the *punctum*, the disruptive element of the photograph) in certain contexts. «What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training», says Barthes (1982, p. 26). For Barthes, «the interaction and relationship between the spectator and the photographic image is a cultural one» (Fuery & Fuery, 2003, p. 104). The literacy of the spectator to interpret/read the image comes from

his socio-cultural context. The choice of the best photograph among several makes the perfect photograph of the event. But the choice of the best framework is an aesthetic criterion. This is because the photography is rhetorical, express a discourse and produce meanings and become a myth or legend; it argues more than it just informs. This is what Barthes (1977, p. 32) calls the rhetoric of the image. The problem is that the visual pleasure provided by the aesthetics of the image can go against ethics and become irresponsibly abject.

Press and documentary photographs are not limited to informative and historic functions. They are also an ontological antinomy to conceive photography as an art or a functional journalistic practice. The result of the artistic action and journalistic practice is the same: the production of an image.

On the subject, John Deigh (2010, p. 164) asks: «When a photojournalist takes photographs of people involved in events that are making news, war refugees, say, or protesters at a public demonstration, is he using his subjects simply as a means to reporting the news?». If so, the photojournalist is acting against the Kantian deontological principle. Individuals might do not wish to be photographed. Much less they want their photographs relating personal suffering and drama to be published on the first pages of newspapers all over the world.

Photography is a language, it is instrumental, but it is also an act of consciousness, according to Sartre (2004, p. 7). What is perceived and how it is perceived are important to understand the role of the press photograph. Perception is a process of transferring physical stimulation into psychological information; it is a mental process by which sensory stimuli are brought to consciousness.

Violence is concretely in an excess or abuse of force, in a violent act or event. But violence is also, at least indirectly, in the signs and modes that represent violence, because signs re-present (in the sense of making present again) the act or event of violence, which are the referents of the picture. Violence is in what the signs mean and in how they mean. The ways of saying/showing can always be adequate to what is said/shown.

A sign is a *representamen* of something, remarks Peirce (1978, 2.228). Consequently, an image of violence represents violence, but it is not the violence itself. This is what Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* explains with the sentence «Ceci n'est pas une pipe» (Foucault, 1983, p. 19).

We deposit credibility, responsibility and impartial/critical judgement in the press photography. Although human beings are credulous in general, one believes in the truth of what is shown/represented in the press photograph. The violence shown by press photographs is much more impressive than the images in the cinema, because we know that violence has happened in fact.

In his essay *The Photographic Message*, Barthes (1977, p. 16) asks: «What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit?». If what is transmitted is «the scene itself, the literal reality», as Barthes (1977, p. 17) answers, it is not possible to be moral or aesthetic, it is what it is.

The well-known and already mentioned photograph of the Vietnam War, by Huynh Cong Ut, became the iconic symbol of this event. Huynh Cong Ut's photograph is not just a picture reproducing a dramatic war event. In addition, it symbolically evokes the historical event or the collective idea about this war, becoming the collective consciousness and the social memory about what happened. «The Vietnam War gave rise to numerous images of bodily violence, many of which were credited with changing public perceptions of the fighting and, eventually, undermining public support for American involvement.» (Campbell, 2004, p. 59). Huynh Cong Ut's photograph ensures a presence and a continuous action of the Vietnam War, even for those who were not yet born at the time of this event.

Certain ways of language (of saying/showing) emphasize violence or exacerbate the *pathos* of the public (exposing too much the victims, particularly focusing the destruction or exhibiting the human tragedy in a sensational perspective) and are not necessary to fulfil the purpose of informing about the occurrence of a newsworthy fact about something that really happened.

In addition to the violence itself, i.e. the violence of the acts and events of war reported by the photographs, there is a violence of the spectacle of violence, that is, violence as a media product. The violence of acts and events of war is exacerbated by another type of violence, the one that results from the excessive and impressive news reference to violence and war.

A sensationalist emphasis highlights certain aspects and shows facts mixed with subjective approaches, like pain sensations. If it is on purpose, it is a deliberate strategy to produce or impress the public opinion. The logic of such press photographs lies in the immediacy and superficiality of seeing and in the sensitive impact of impressing. The excess of visuality and realism depends on the editorial style, the way of saying/showing, the visual rhetoric of showing.

In the press photographs, the spectacle is in certain aspects to which attention is drawn when pictures are seen, as if these pictures of violence, war, destruction and human tragedy were worthy of contemplation. The spectacle is in the theatrical representation of the war.

War events amplify the abusive use of force, which is violence. The publication of photographs in the press is the visibility of this force. The photojournalistic treatment of sensitive aspects, such as human suffering, put in question the use of pictures that enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what can be observed. But they also shape our ways of seeing, thinking, acting and feeling.

Images are significant surfaces, according to Flusser (2006, p. 6). The meaning of the images always remains on its surface and can be scaled at a glance. However, the meaning will also be superficial in this case. As Flusser (2006, p. 35) says, «photographs are mute surfaces waiting patiently for distribution through reproduction». «The photograph of the war scene in Lebanon is an image on a surface which the eye scans in order to establish magical relationships between its various elements; they are not, however, historical relationships» (Flusser, 2006, p. 43). We do not recognize Lebanon's historical processes of causes and effects; we recognize only the interrelationships within the photograph.

If photography is surface, it is also a surface of thought that shapes ways of seeing, thinking, acting, and feeling. The ethical values and principles contribute to the correct, adequate and necessary influence of all these ways of photography on public opinion. For Flusser, «each single photograph is a surface, an image, which serves as a model for the behavior of its receiver» (2006, p. 50). Because it is surface, the photograph is incompatible with the depth and completeness of the truth of what has happened and departs from the ethical rigor in presenting the facts as an *analogon* of reality. So, are not the press photographs, although documentary, an interpretation and an aestheticization of the world?

Conclusions

This article argues that ethics must govern our collective reason and aesthetics, so that both reason and aesthetics would not despise ethics and follows a path condemned to the eventual banality of violence, indifference, irresponsibility and ethical insolvency. In the contemporary iconolatry, violence and war are reported abundantly in the newspapers. Photographs, violence and war become trivial; they familiarize us with the atrocity, suffering and horror. That's the fragile ethical content of photographs (Sontag, 2002, p. 21). When the photojournalist captures a dramatic or catastrophic reality, for example,

victims of violence and war, the picture becomes a symbolic appropriation of the event and people shown in the photographs become represented objects. Photographs turn an event or a person into something.

Agreeing with Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 59), «today, images no longer trigger shock» and «even repulsive images are supposed to entertain». «Even disgusting images have been made consumable, and the totalization of consumption is eliminating every form of immunological recoil» (Han, 2017, p. 59).

Publishing images of war in a sensationalist way trivialize violence and produce spectacle of what is simply visible; it is the splendor of the image, that brings with it the accumulation of spectacles as an inversion of life, «the autonomous movement of non-life» which is represented as false (Debord, 1995, p. 12). The function of the spectacle is the «manufacture of alienation», according to Debord (1995, p. 23). With the predominance and the spectacle of the image, there is the inability to distinguish between real and fictitious, truth and distorted or manipulated representation of the truth.

Following Debord's critique of the spectacular perversion of modernity, the spectacle is an unnecessary product; it's a fetish. The spectacle is in the representation of the image and the «representation constitutes the essence of photography» (Han, 2017, p. 63). That is why Baudrillard (2005, p. 67) says the real has succumbed to the hegemony of the sign, of images and of the simulacrum, i.e. «reality has succumbed to artifice» in a society of the spectacle.

Today, misery, violence, war and death reported by photographs are becoming a leitmotif of media, are, in a sense, «a spectacle of death» (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 92). Realistic images do not capture what is, but what should not be (death and misery); «it captures that which, from a moral, humanitarian standpoint, ought not to exist (while making a perfectly immoral aesthetic and commercial use of that misery)» (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 93). Most images and photographs reflect the misery and the violence of human condition, but this affects us less and less, according to Baudrillard, because it is over signified.

Most photographs (including media images «and all that makes up the visual») are not true images: «they are merely reportage, realist cliché or aesthetic performance, enslaved to all the ideological systems» (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 93). There is always some interest (aesthetic or commercial) about an event that is not a pure and informative interest.

For Baudrillard (2005, p. 77), in the sphere of the virtual (of the digital and the computer) nothing is representable; even war is no longer representable, because of the hypervisualization of the event. The war in Iraq and the Gulf War are examples of this. «For there to be critical perception and genuine information, the images would have to be different from the war. But they are not (or not any longer)» (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 77). Violence of war and violence of the images are both routinized; added to the digital virtuality of the images, they produce the technical virtuality of the war. For Baudrillard, this circumstance leads inevitably to the death of photography as original medium. When press photographs report violence and war and become public in the media, they provide certain insights or perceptions about what happened. For example, Matthew Brady's pictures of the American Civil War illustrate the importance of photography in publicly reporting the facts. In this case, the war photographs allow a unique and necessary understanding of the event, to the point of appearing as historical documents. However, when it is limited to speculation and sensationalism, it becomes a mere reproduction of violence and war.

A photograph is a resource, either in the literal sense of means to achieve an end, or in the sense of serving as a support for different purposes: a) reference to truth; b) historical-documentary testimony; c) visual rhetorical form to constitute a media product; and d) art object. These four different purposes are defined by the philosophy and language of photography, i.e. its ontology.

If ontology is the study of the nature of being and existence and if photography is the process of producing images of reality on photosensitive surfaces, the ontology of the journalistic photographic image is the study and discussion of the status of photography in journalism as a multifaceted resource.

Following the main purpose of André Bazin's discussion about what kind of thing a photograph is, the ontology of the journalistic photographic image defines what kind of resource the photograph is to journalism of war. In his article *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, Bazin (1960, p. 7) affirms the photography is «a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part» and «all the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence».

Agreeing with Bazin (1960, p. 8), «we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us» in time and space, and «photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction». In photography, an aspect of the being of the objects is transferred to the image. Moreover, the question arises about the appearance and reality in photography, which justifies the use of the term «ontology of photography».

It is ancestral, accurate and increasingly actual the distinction between appearance and reality. In *Platon et le Simulacre*, an excerpt from *Logique du Sens* by Deleuze, this distinction is clearly developed as an important attention to the perception of images. Deleuze (1969, p. 295) argues the Platonic distinctions between the thing itself and its images, the original and the copy, the model and the simulacrum. The relation between the Platonic concepts of essence and of identity may help us to understand today what is represented by the photographic images, which is essentially a representation, and to distinguish the real from the appearance. Both the real and the appearance may be precepted and confused seeing an image, including a press photograph. A photograph may bring together the sense of reality and the sense of appearance, confusing us.

To conclude, the image is part of the world, it «is caught up in the same becoming, in the metamorphosis of appearances», as Baudrillard (2005, p. 99) states. The role of photography is not to illustrate the event, but to constitute an event.

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