

COGNITIVE ASPECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Due to our acquired understanding of the <sup>outside</sup> visible world, we are able to <sup>gather</sup> ~~obtain~~ various amounts of <sup>visual data</sup> ~~information~~ about a referent/event perceived in a photograph. The human cognitive as well as perceptual capacities are spontaneously activated while one observes the <sup>PHOTOGRAPHIC</sup> surface in an effort to extract sufficient <sup>information</sup> ~~data~~ that will not only make the recorded subject representationally cogent, but also place it within a larger context than the one delimited by the <sup>PICTURE'S</sup> frame. In this process, we are generally unaware of our extra-photographic knowledge, <sup>which is</sup> ~~which is~~ indispensable for an associative reading of the photographic image.

Hence, ~~A~~ photograph contains no information but that which is read into it: without prior knowledge, <sup>the data</sup> ~~any information~~ obtained from a photograph <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ purely formal (i.e., tonal/chromatic and/or graphic composition), which is the basis of abstract/nonrepresentational photography (to be discussed later in this text). It is of utmost importance to realize, however, that such an instinctive perception of formal photographic elements <sup>S</sup> plays a significant <sup>KEY</sup> part throughout a thematic reading of a representational image. <sup>A photograph is a different</sup> ~~This~~ awareness lies at the core of <sup>or see pp...</sup> ~~utilizing~~ the medium as a means of artistic expression: the greater the degree and function of the formal devices, the more powerful the aesthetic rendition--and meaning--of the photographed subject. ~~of course, as we have already stated,~~ <sup>of course,</sup> there is a limit above which any accumulation of ~~the~~ formal devices threatens to destroy <sup>BOTH</sup> the ontological authenticity and ~~the~~ representational validity of the referent(s). Therefore, as long as the photographic image preserves sufficient analogous ties with the external world, its reading involves

associative consideration of the recorded referent(s) through a synthesis of the perceived visual data <sup>AND knowledge already present to</sup> as well as previously acquired knowledge ~~on the part of the observers.~~ Of course, <sup>an</sup> element of such consideration is involved even in the perception of the most abstract photographic image: it is in the nature of human mind to search for some kind of rational meaning in any visual structure, ~~at least to establish~~ certain kind of representational likeness in the forms that do not have even one of no pretense of signifying something. <sup>As has been proven by statistics</sup> ~~any pretension to "signify" anything.~~ Instinctively, <sup>visual perception, we experience</sup> the spectator finds pleasure in "discovering" a human figure on the surface of a <sup>see</sup> deteriorated old wall, ~~which does not in any respect increase~~ the observer with information not about the anthropomorphic "referent" but rather ontological authenticity of the "discovered" figure; ~~the picture's~~ the accidental configuration of grain textures, highlights and shadows captured ~~"this has been" still depends on the photographic rendition of the~~ from a particular camera angle. Perhaps abstract photography can serve as the best ~~wall's surface.~~ example for proving that it is the observer who must bring extra photographic knowledge

In her book On Photography, Susan Sontag differentiates between our visual perception of the referent per se and understanding of it <sup>that</sup> depending on ~~our~~ <sup>S THEIR</sup> intellectual capacity as well as <sup>prevailing</sup> emotional condition during the actual viewing of and subsequent contemplation about the picture.

<sup>B</sup> <sup>SINCE</sup> Besides this, the photographer's personal <sup>KNOWLEDGE ABOUT</sup> attitude toward the ~~subject~~ <sup>REFERENT DOES NOT</sup> also affects the <sup>observer's</sup> interpretation of the recorded referent(s); <sup>IF IT IS NOT INDICATED BY MEANS OF A CAPTION...</sup> consequently, Sontag concludes that "photographs...can not themselves [italics mine] ~~but to~~ trigger our associations, which implies that ~~the~~ photographs are "inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and <sup>f</sup>fantasy" (p. 23). Later in this text, we shall <sup>own</sup> examine Sontag's "inexhaustible speculation" as part of her analysis of an old photograph showing victims <sup>IN THE - I'd say it</sup> of Nazi ~~concentration camps.~~

In her book On Photography, Susan Sontag draws <sup>THE</sup> a distinction between information (which she terms ~~the~~ "inventory") and understanding (which she equates with the "message") <sup>of a</sup>

R of p.3

replace...  
this one

photograph, on the basis of which she...  
Sontag asserts that <sup>the medium</sup> photography, by its nature, is non-narrative because

the development of a story must always "take place in time and must be explained in time." (p. 23). In contrast, <sup>A</sup> the photograph <sup>IS INCAPABLE OF</sup> does not generate <sup>ING narrative</sup> meaning through a linear <sup>FOR</sup> temporality and sequential flow, of event(s); ~~in order~~ to compensate, ~~this~~ photographers often divide

the frame into segments, each representing another and/or advanced phase <sup>THE DEVELOPMENT OF:</sup> in the same event/action, <sup>THUS treating</sup> ~~by presenting~~ several frames as one

photographic unit. <sup>(A) (B)</sup> The narrative connotation of a photograph can be <sup>ALSO</sup> expanded through multiple exposure, <sup>BY</sup> collage, and by a dramatic arrangement of objects/characters/events within the frame--all of which

<sup>manifests</sup> represents different attempts to intensify the ~~cognitive~~ <sup>an</sup> meaning of the image. <sup>(4)</sup> the most blatant way of incorporating <sup>CONCRETE information</sup> knowledge in a

photograph <sup>is through</sup> relies on captions (written information) placed within and/or outside the frame. In ~~most~~ of such cases, however, ~~the~~ cognitive

signification is <sup>MECHANICALLY</sup> attached to the photograph. <sup>(A) go to next 4</sup> ~~achieved through~~ <sup>(A) put above</sup> extra-photographic means. triggered by the linear or segmental

arrangement of <sup>REPRESENTATIONS = REFERENTS</sup> visual elements within the frame, <sup>OBSERVERS,</sup> ~~the~~ spectators are <sup>challenged "BUILD"</sup> expected to a "story" in their minds, <sup>determined by their own associative capacities</sup> on the basis of each knowledge.

Captions are routinely employed in journalistic photography, mostly with the intention <sup>an</sup> to convey ideological message and/or to expand the viewer's knowledge ~~that~~ <sup>(he/she already possessed)</sup> in regard to the ~~photographed subject~~. Captions within the photographic frame--in

addition to their informative function--are sometimes treated as part of the ~~the~~ picture's graphic design (through the choice of lettering styles, their size and placement), <sup>for example, was</sup> as <sup>BY</sup> was the practice of the Soviet Constructivist photographers of the 1920s. At times, they would execute the captions in their own hand (often with ~~X~~ great calligraphic talent).

opening subject...

thus increasing not only the cognitive aspect but also the pictorial/graphic impact of the image. Later in this text we shall discuss a photographic project which intentionally overuses captions in a parodic manner (Wayne Lazerik's Ersatz Leopard).

~~Theoretically, the photograph is capable only of triggering the~~  
How an observer "makes sense" of the visual data within a photograph ~~already existing knowledge in the spectator's mind, which, in turn,~~ is determined not only by one's extra-photographic knowledge, but also one's ~~should be also on the mind of the photographer, does he/she want to reach~~ emotional condition during perception and subsequent contemplation ~~any particular spectator or to express his personal vision.~~ The former ~~attitude is best exemplified in journalistic photography, the latter in~~

~~personal photography which, at its best, represents the use of the medium as a means of artistic expression.~~ Barthes and Sontag confirm this with their analysis/interpretation of ~~the snapshots~~ <sup>particular photographs</sup> that moved them tremendously on both emotional and cognitive level. ~~By comparing the~~

daguerrotype of his mother as a five year-old girl, Barthes ~~arrives at~~ <sup>ECABORATE</sup> ~~rational conclusions that are based upon his extra-photographic knowledge about his mother and their family.~~ <sup>of her "imperfect parents who he loved her so badly" (p.69) of</sup> ~~knowledge (see a detailed reference to this on page 69).~~ <sup>of his "imperfect parents who he loved her so badly" (p.69) of</sup> kindness & gentility, in sp

Sontag responds in a similar manner to <sup>WAY</sup> ~~the snapshots~~ <sup>she</sup> came across ~~by chance~~ in a bookstore near Santa Monica documenting tragic victims in the Nazi concentration camp<sup>s</sup> of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. Like Barthes, she does <sup>NOT</sup> ~~the reproduction of~~ <sup>IN HER BOOK</sup> these photographs, even though she

admits that they "cut [her] sharply, deeply, instantaneously," helping her to "understand fully what they are about" (p.20). Obviously, ~~the~~ initial emotional response ~~lead to the formation of the cognitive fields~~

<sup>influenced</sup> ~~on the basis of which Sontag formulated her~~ <sup>photos</sup> ~~reading of the image.~~ As she states, the ~~snapshots~~ depicted an event she "had scarcely head of," AND while looking at them, "something broke...some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but

As she <sup>limits,</sup> it wasn't until years later

part of my feelings started to tighten" (p. 20). ~~The next stage of~~  
that ~~her~~ <sup>purely</sup> emotional response to these photographs was intensified and  
~~perception involved~~, Sontag's contemplation related to the historical  
<sup>augmented</sup> by her intellectual understanding of the socio-historical circumstances.  
facts known to her before she discovered the snapshots. Even though she  
~~related to the references~~  
does not elaborate how her emotions helped her understand the given  
historical implication of the Nazi atrocities, she points to the fact  
that the degree of one's cognitive associations depend upon the  
intensity of <sup>THE</sup> personal response to the photographed subject.

My personal experience provides an additional illustration  
- In addition to the personal emotional response, the cognitive  
of the <sup>relationship</sup> between cognitive and emotional aspects of photographing  
grasp of the photograph depends to a large extent on the circumstances  
~~in which it is perceived. My personal experience may confirm this. As a~~  
<sup>REVEALS A RELEVANT ILLUSTRATION</sup>

As <sup>a</sup> small boy living in an occupied Balkan country during the Second World  
War, I <sup>WAS</sup> continuously exposed to the <sup>many</sup> snapshots of prisoners in the  
Fascist concentration camps, taken by the Wehrmacht photographers and  
often printed in the famous propagandistic German photo-journal Signal.  
Pictorially enhanced, these images <sup>depict</sup> obviously were meant to ~~mis~~ represent  
the actual <sup>of CAMPS</sup> environment as neat "educational" working <sup>ENVIRONMENTS</sup> communities. For <sup>From</sup>  
the perspective of a youth living in an <sup>COUNTRY</sup> environment ravaged by war,  
these photographs signified a world of <sup>"ORDER"</sup> satisfaction and fulfillment, in  
spite of my parents' caveat that <sup>it</sup> was not so. The power of photographic  
authentication prevailed, producing ~~at the same time a sense of~~ paradox <sup>between</sup>

~~what I saw~~ <sup>IN THE JOURNALS</sup> and what I was told by my parents. <sup>This facet of</sup> ~~From time to time,~~  
~~however,~~ there appear in Signal a snapshot in which ~~a subtle~~ <sup>subtle</sup> and  
~~coincidental~~ expression on the children's faces unveiled their suppressed  
<sup>AND HORROR</sup> suffering, which disturbed me greatly, even though I, not quite aware of  
~~its true meaning.~~ <sup>(THIS TIME)</sup> The medium's power to capture authentic details, ~~in~~  
<sup>PREVAILED, despite</sup> ~~spite of~~ the photographer's intention to erase ~~it~~ <sup>THEM</sup> by technical ~~sophisticated~~  
<sup>TECHNICAL MEANS</sup> intervention.



Today,

Looking back at these <sup>photographs</sup> snapshots in ~~the old issues of~~ Signal, I have a two-fold experience: a strange, ~~essentially~~ visceral and nostalgic feeling ~~that~~ <sup>combats</sup> a subsequent critical understanding of (and hence a repulsion for) what these images <sup>believe</sup> document. It is this posterior, extra-photographic knowledge that has allowed me to fully understand the socio-historical signification of these photographs, ~~some~~ of them ~~executed in a highly polished compositional and textural manner which permits yet another ideological perspective to the contemporary spectator.~~ <sup>THAT OPENS</sup> A <sup>further</sup> critical examination of the old Signal ~~snapshots~~ <sup>photos</sup> confirms that, while most of them represent ~~ideal~~ examples of pictorial slickness, there ~~(exist also)~~ <sup>(exist)</sup> those whose ~~photographic~~ features <sup>ARE</sup> ~~is~~ outstanding, which ~~creates~~ <sup>FROM</sup> a cognitive-perceptual conflict--~~a~~ <sup>EMERGES</sup> ideal ground for ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> structural examination of the interaction between the observer's ~~personal~~ <sup>OWN</sup> aesthetic sensitivity and the feeling stimulated by a ~~socio-historical~~ <sup>SOCIO-HISTORICAL</sup> understanding of the photographed subject.

Barthes' reading of a <sup>photograph</sup> snapshot depicting the horrors of war in Nicaragua (1979) by Koen Wessing ~~clearly proves this phenomenon.~~ <sup>proves that the observer's cognitive understanding of a photograph can be enhanced</sup> Wessing's snapshot captures ~~an extraordinary moment in life; the not only by one's emotional response to the thematic content, but peculiar relationship between the recorded referents produces an also those feelings triggered by the aesthetic qualities of the image.~~ <sup>Wessing's</sup> ~~apparent symbolic implication.~~ <sup>It is</sup> a journalistic photograph taken in Nicaragua during the civil war showing <sup>S</sup> three soldiers on patrol, <sup>TOGETHER WITH</sup> ~~as~~ two nuns <sup>ING</sup> walk behind them among the rubble scattered over the destroyed village seen in the background. Obviously, any reading of ~~as well as~~ <sup>AND</sup> emotional response to this image depends by and large on the political stand of the beholder. While some may see the soldiers as immoral destroyers of the Christian ideals represented by the Catholic nuns, other may well consider the same soldiers as heroic fighters against ~~an~~ <sup>THE</sup>

"evil" <sup>FORCE THAT</sup> people who suppress <sup>es</sup> religion. Without ~~a knowledgeable~~ identification ~~as Barthes calls it~~ <sup>of the uniforms</sup> ~~of war~~ <sup>symbols of war</sup>, the observer is incapable of being emotionally and ideologically involved in the photograph. (The two nuns can also be associated with either the old --reactionary and dictatorial-- regime, or with the revolutionary movement in which the Catholic church participated <sup>THROUGHOUT THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION</sup> as well.)

Barthes, <sup>As</sup> one would expect, is interested exclusively in the thematic contradiction of the <sup>SE</sup> two disparate symbols, one standing for religion, the other for war, and <sup>THIS</sup> in such an accidental <sup>COLLISION</sup> presence (he calls it "photograph's adventure") of ~~the~~ two heterogeneous elements (rebel soldiers and <sup>HE LINKS THE PHOTOGRAPH'S FUNCTION</sup> soldiers of Christ) <sup>ING</sup> he concludes that, in spite of the

"banality" of the image, he "understood at once its existence <sup>IT IS HE CALLS IT</sup> ~~its~~ <sup>70F</sup> ~~adventure~~" derived from <sup>THE</sup> co-presence of two discontinuous elements, . . .

<sup>DO</sup> heterogeneous in that they ~~did~~ not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast): the soldiers and the nuns." (p.23).

<sup>OBVIOUSLY</sup> <sup>prior understanding of</sup> But without ~~a previous knowledge~~ concerning these "two worlds", <sup>BARTHES</sup> ~~he~~ would not be aware of the <sup>"PHOTOGRAPH'S ADVENTURE."</sup> contrast. <sup>REJECTS TO</sup> As in all other cases, Barthes ~~does not~~ <sup>choose to neglect</sup> pay any attention to the formal structure of the photograph, which

contains several <sup>EXPRESSIVE</sup> photographic devices that enhance the emotional impact of the image. One of its most evident features is <sup>the</sup> different tonal rendition of the background (war destruction), the two nuns in the

middleground (one of them acknowledging the camera), and the three soldiers in the foreground, their faces obfuscated by <sup>shadows that also</sup> darkness, which prevails ~~and~~ over their uniforms. <sup>IN ADDITION, THE TEXTURE</sup> Also, the different photographic grain

underlying the three zones <sup>EXPERIENCED</sup> can be read as a perceptual intensification <sup>es</sup> of the ~~the~~ depicted subjects: the roughness of ~~the~~ demolished wall and rubble on the street, and the <sup>impersonal figures</sup> ~~indistinctive texture~~ of the soldiers.

~~figures~~, the pictorial sharpness and brightness of the <sup>NUNS!</sup> faces, and the ~~slightly~~ <sup>slightly</sup> ~~yet distinguishable~~ depth of field <sup>ALL OF WHICH</sup> contribute to the photograph's emotional impact and its ideological reading #

Acquiring knowledge <sup>IN GENERAL</sup> implies establishing a rational relationship between the ~~given facts~~ <sup>PERCEIVED</sup>, which a photograph cannot provide because such an act requires a process that takes place within the work. Even anthropological photography--which is supposed to be absolutely deprived of any "outside" intervention--serves only as visual illustration ~~meant~~ <sup>OF</sup> to support a particular ~~information such as~~ <sup>FACT AS FOR EXAMPLE,</sup> how the aborigines dress,

eat, perform their rituals or warfare. If such a photograph "shows" that the Papua warriors wear special covers over their penes, this fact <sup>FULL</sup> becomes knowledge only through an anthropological research that explains the exact function of the ~~cover~~ <sup>penis</sup>. Similarly, portraits of ~~the~~ people dressed in period costumes are mere display of visual data that ~~can be~~

<sup>RESULT INTO</sup> ~~part of~~ a cognitive statement after the observer establishes their ~~concept~~ <sup>CONCEPT</sup> historical signification: a daguerrotype of the Napoleonic general

highlights the ~~ornaments and~~ decorations whose signification must be deciphered in order to understand the <sup>PARTICULAR</sup> military rank. When Sidney Sherman appears (in her self-portraits) dressed as a medieval princess, <sup>THE OBSERVER IS EXPECTED</sup> one should be aware that by doing so, the photographer is making a <sup>PERSONAL</sup> statement and

~~try to figure out what does she intend to "say."~~ <sup>HENCE, THE</sup> As a result, the interpretation of Sherman's photographs draws from the <sup>OBSERVER'S</sup> understanding, <sup>OF</sup> the paradox <sup>CREATED BY,</sup> of the maker's behavior in front of the camera. Without research

"studium", <sup>ONE IS</sup> we ~~are~~ unable to "learn" that such self-portraits <sup>ARE NOT</sup> ~~are not~~ <sup>USE THE ACTUAL</sup> made at the time demarked by the costume. <sup>AND THE MOMENT WE ARE PROVIDED</sup> ~~And the moment we are provided~~ with such an information the image's "This-Has-Been" is abolished. Only on the basis of such <sup>KNOWLEDGE</sup> ~~an~~ information (the observer) can avoid



misconclusion (~~incorrect knowledge~~)<sup>UNDERSTANDING</sup> about the given facts, which however ~~is the very point Sherman wants to communicate.~~

The Emotional impact of <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ photograph depends to a large extent on its ontological authenticity: the notion that the referent actually existed in front of the camera, instantly stimulates the observer's emotional centers, which is the reason why ~~are they~~<sup>WE</sup> more disturbed while ~~watching~~ amateur snapshots of the Spanish citizens executed by the Fascists than by Goya's--artistically ~~most~~<sup>more</sup> powerful--depiction of these executions in his famous series Killings (1....). Needless to say, ~~that~~ the aesthetic aspect of Goya's ~~paintings~~<sup>CANVASES</sup> generate ~~a~~ different kind of emotions, ~~but~~<sup>THROUGH</sup> the inclusion of ~~the~~ visual devices that ~~are meant to~~ stimulate such feelings, ~~automatically decreased~~<sup>WAS AT THE SAME TIME</sup> the ontological authenticity of the photograph, ~~and replaces~~<sup>is decreased, substituting leading to suppression</sup> the observer's ~~search for~~<sup>PROCESS</sup> knowledge with a pure visual experience in which the cognitive aspect is overpowered by the aesthetic one.

<sup>A</sup> ~~The~~ (appropriate) balance between these two aspects of the photographic ~~structure~~<sup>IMAGE</sup> ~~is~~<sup>HAS BEEN</sup> the ultimate goal of all great photographers who have tried to accomplish it within the single frame, ~~without~~<sup>REDUCE TO THE MINIMAL THE DISTURBANCE OF</sup> disturbing the authentication of the referent(s), ~~and including~~<sup>AND BY EXCLUDING FROM</sup> in the picture elements ~~that are alien to the nature of the medium.~~ ~~Suzan~~ ~~Langhauer~~<sup>Langhauer</sup>, for example, achieved such a ~~photo-aesthetic~~<sup>(THE AESTHETIC)</sup> balance in her best works, above all in The Migrant Mother (19..), which represents a perfect merger of the ontological authenticity of the referents and the image's visual organization: the sense of "This-Has-Been" in this portrait of ~~the~~<sup>A</sup> working woman and her ~~daughter~~<sup>CHILDREN</sup> is so intensive that ~~everybody~~--until the recent discovery--everyone undubitably believed that they ~~were~~<sup>REFERENTS</sup> captured while spontaneously relating to each other in

~~such a~~ <sup>AN</sup> emotional way, ~~while at the same time generating a symbolic~~ <sup>THAT JUSTIFIES THE ANTI-PROFANE</sup> ~~message.~~ <sup>INTERPRETATION OF THE IMAGE.</sup> The two aspects of Langer's photograph complement each other:

the thematic implication of the referents' physical interaction stimulates emotions that enhance sociological implications of the image, while its formal execution triggers aesthetic feelings that <sup>CAUSE AN</sup> ~~function on~~ <sup>INTENSIVE</sup> the level of artistic empathy. Paradoxically, the most evidential knowledge related to The Migrant Mother is <sup>(EXTRA-PHOTOGRAPHIC, NAMELY</sup> the recent discovery that ~~the~~ <sup>HERSELF -- A FACT THAT SUBSEQUENT</sup> ~~photograph was significantly "doctored"~~ <sup>REGARDING</sup> by Langer, which reduces its authenticity but without any consequence ~~of~~ its artistic value.

(\*)



"Langer did not arrive at this final composition by accident, but by patient experimentation with various poses" (\*)

(\*) James Curtis, Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p.49.