Some Aspects of Aesthetic Creativity in Journalistic Photography

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Abstract: Journalistic communication through photography is a fundamental way of transmitting both visual and verbal messages, and its aesthetic expressiveness plays an essential role not only in capturing and maintaining the attention of the audience but also in terms of emotional impact and to support the credibility of the message. Regardless of its classical or digital form, the type of publications and media in which it appears, journalistic photography is a pertinent mean of communication, primarily through its creative aesthetic aspect. On the basis of these considerations, the present study intends to underline the importance of the aesthetic dimension of journalistic photography in online journalistic publications in Romania. The study will debut with the illustration of the aesthetic and stylistic peculiarities of journalistic photography, both at the level of its form and of its contents. The second part of the study underlines the characteristics of artistic journalistic photography in graphic, compositional and chromatic aspect, also revealing its functions in online journal publishing. The applied part of the study consists in the qualitative analysis of the aesthetic creativity of some journalistic photographs from the Romanian online press, and finally we shall draw some conclusions.

Keywords: *Journalistic photography; visual communication; online journalism; aesthetic creativity;*

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1. Introduction

This paper is a theoretical and applied study on the importance of the aesthetic dimension, namely the artistic creativity of journalistic photographs, especially those of the Romanian online press. From our point of view, the aesthetic creativity of journalistic photography, its visual and compositional concept play an essential role not only in the distinction between qualitative, original and questionable quality journalistic products, but also in its communication capacity. Thus, the credibility of journalistic photography often transcends the textual one, keeping in mind that the emotional impact on the audience is considerable. The scientific relevance of the subject is supported by the need to set up a theoretical framework, at least in a preliminary way, with an introductory character, since the subject is still marginally articulated in Romanian in-depth specialty studies, although it has become an indisputable mark in international literature for anyone interested in such a dynamic field of journalism, especially online.

The analysis of the power of suggestion of photography in nowadays online media must take into account the post-modern context of contemporary society (Hershberger, 2015). This is particularly evident in the preference of photo reporters to select significant elements in the informational field, but also in the proliferation of photographs in which special, picturesque, funny, contradictory, ironic or sarcastic details are captured. Focusing on these points indicates the mutation generated by the post-modern culture from the sober and immobile state of classical photography to the alive, artistic, more natural elements of life. Such snapshots are sought after and appreciated, being appropriated by the online users and distributed, placed in new contexts, both because of their aesthetic qualities, and for amusement or debate, which are sometimes very intense (Sandbye, 2012).

Our research will be based on a theoretical and methodological interdisciplinary background, with analytical tools specific to aesthetics, visual communication and journalistic communication, involving content analysis, comparison, data collection, observation and interpretation. Thus, the emphasis of some theoretical references on the aesthetic dimension of journalistic photography will be followed by the theoretical argumentation of importance and its functions as a form of visual communication. The analysis of the aesthetic qualities and the impact on the audience of some Romanian online journalistic photographs will be a practical argument in support of this study's account.

2. Aesthetic particularities of journalistic photography

In the context of the digital age and the "hypermedia language" (Joannes, 2009), the efficiency of journalistic photography as a form of visual communication results, on the one hand, from the technical precision, from the stylistic coherence of the form (the image), and on the other hand from the artistic vision, i.e. the aesthetic effects of the transmitted content, which makes the audience perceive and understand the message. Journalistic photography, in the most general sense, is a direct visual representation of a subject or event. Regardless of the type of journalistic photography (documentary, focused on social, political, religious, cultural, economic, commercial subjects) and message (informative, educational, ideological etc.), it tries to respond to the real expectations of the audience using, in this sense, both the imperative of the objective journalistic approach and a universal means of communication, namely the artistic one. In this sense, A. Feininger considered that "unlike the spoken and written word, a photograph can be understood anywhere in the world. It can build a little over the abyss created by differences in language and alphabet. It is a universal means of communication. And there has never been more need for a universal language" (Feininger, 2015, p.15).

The aesthetics of journalistic photography, as in the case of any photographic image, can be analyzed from the perspective of the two components: shape (its visual appearance) and content (message transmitted). The aesthetic creativity of journalistic photography involves, on the one hand, stylized graphics of the image and, on the other hand, the artistic rendering of its content. In order to have a visual impact, image graphics require coherent styling and good digital editing, while content must be accurately characterized, well-structured and fully conveyed, whether or not it accompanies a journalistic text. There are elements considered by professionals before taking the photographs, their success depending on how they use the camera, classical or digital. The latest state-of-the-art digital cameras have plenty of apps and software to instantly edit the photos (Hjorth & Pink, 2014).

Of course, the way it has been aesthetically designed, journalistic photography, both in print and online, depends to a large extent on the talent and technical skills of the photo journalist, but besides this, a number of aesthetic principles must be observed to ensure its graphic quality. Generally speaking, a creative team, made up of a number of specialists, namely the photographer, the publisher, the editor and the layout designer or the web-designer (Feininger, 2015, p.217), contribute to and develop the

final editing of journalistic photographs. The current trend in the media is that many operations (even all of them, sometimes) are performed by one person, the photographer being the one who takes, edits and posts the snapshot on media platforms, his role being a universal journalist, often also the author of the text. When doing so, there are material advantages because of the reduction of costs (Szabo, 2017, p. 104). However, quality drawbacks may arise because the photographer does not always have the knowledge and experience of other colleagues. This is also one of the explanations of the avalanche of aesthetic deficient photographs in the Romanian and world press alike.

Responsible for the aesthetic quality of journalistic photographs are, first and foremost, the photographer (the journalist who performs and processes the photos digitally) and the layout artist, who visually organizes the photographic imagery. In the final drafting and editing of journalistic photographs, regardless of the content (script), it is necessary to take into consideration certain graphic and compositional elements, such as: the overall plan, the foreground, the size, the perspective, the background, the organization, the continuity, page insertion, arrangement, and space ratio to the titles and journalistic texts (Kobre, 2016). At the same time, the creative team assures the choice of the most expressive photos to be placed at the beginning and end of a photographic-article (whether it is a pure photographic-article, not accompanied by text or legends, illustrated text, composite report, incidental, anticipated, or planned reporting) to keep attention and interest of the audience. For consistency and continuity, photographic reports must follow certain steps: repeated identity, progression in time, progression in space, likeness and layout (Feininger, 2015, pp.217-218).

In order to make a journalistic photo stand out in an online publication, it must be a much larger size than the rest of the photos posted on that website, while journalistic photographs that are posted in the same size are of the same value and importance. Some journalistic photographs, because of the compositional layout, are placed only to the right, while others are to be positioned only on the left side of the page. For example, a left-handed portrait photo (with an inward orientation to the left) should be placed on the right side of the page, similar to the journalistic prints of a magazine that are oriented towards the core of the layout (Kobre, 2016).

Digital journalism photography is different from classical photography in terms of image capture and storage, its quality being given by the number of pixels, the most common formats being JPEG, RAW, TIFF. Thus, the size and quality of digital journalistic photography can be

assured using two criteria (Freeman, 2011): the pixel size and the total number of pixels in its composition. Among the benefits of editing digital photography given by the operating speed, we mention: immediate verification with the help of the display LCD screen of a digital camera, adjustment and restoration, exposure checking, post-processing with photo editing software, making, storing and archiving a large number of images at relatively limited costs (Kobre, 2016).

The aesthetic creativity of journalistic photography implies, of course, a good knowledge and application of language and techniques of visual arts, of design principles, if not, there is the risk of taking unfulfilling photographs of doubtful quality and, moreover, run the risk of alienating the audience instead of raising its interest. However, if a journalist photograph graphically represents the design and the expressiveness of the content, containing some original elements, it becomes an *artistic image*, and this quality can be perceived by the audience, regardless of the degree of aesthetic education. From an aesthetic point of view, as an iconic image, journalistic photography is composed of elements of stylistic, graphic, chromatic, geometric shapes, surfaces, spatiality (with size, right-to-left, up-down or depth ratios), textures, as well as from the topographic layout of all these elements through different plastic processes: symmetry, balance and contrast of colours and tones (light-dark), of the shapes (focused-diffuse), of the content (continuous-intermittent) (Micu, 2013). In this way, the photographic image can express four kinds of interfaces, namely "referential (who/where/when/what); topical (archetypal, socio-cultural); axiological (by valorisation of the transmitted message); enthymematic (due to the realization of the image)" (Micu, 2013, p.34). An expressive journalistic photography must not necessarily be symmetrical and balanced in graphic form, its artistic dimension being also accentuated by dynamic asymmetries and balances, for example, by capturing some unusual frames or details, which can increase the audience's reactivity in a shorter time period. To form the aesthetic quality of digital journalism photography, as in any photo, contributors are *luminosity, exposure and framing*. It is known that one of the most significant aesthetic qualities is the *luminosity* that results from the "photochemical action of light energy on the emulsion layer of film or photographic paper" (Freeman, 2011 p.34), its volume and intensity depending on certain factors: the direction of shooting, the structure and the colour of the surface or objects on which it is reflected, the angle formed between the surface and the direction of light. The main characteristics of light that contribute to the overall atmosphere of photography are intensity, colour, direction, contrast, its photographic surge being extremely varied:

direct, diffuse, reflected, filtered, natural, artificial, continuous, discontinuous, radiant (Feininger, 2015, p.170). Professional photographers can use light and its symbolic capacity, so that the brightness of a face can express positive emotions (joy, pleasure, satisfaction, delight), while a diffused light or complete lack thereof can express negative emotions and feelings (suffering, drama, catastrophe). *Exposure* is the total amount of light entering through the lens during shooting, recorded by the digital sensor and controlled by the diaphragm, shutter and sensor sensitivity (ISO). A correct exposure has the role of emphasizing light, shapes, rendering colours and tones correctly, and highlighting details. An overexposed photo is unfocused, with blurred tones, blurry and vague, while an underexposed one will be predominantly dark. *Framing*, an important design element, is the ambience in which the photographic image is placed, the subject in the frame being the most important element to be depicted accurately. The frame can also be modified after shooting, resulting in another imaging perspective. Without going into technical details, we mention that, most often, a balanced photographic image implies either a 3:2 horizontal frame or a 4:3 frame (broader for the visual horizon) and adherence to placement rules in the frame. Also, in the rendering of the subject in the photographic plane, the foreground, middle plane and background can be distinguished. Often, the ambience or the background in which the subject is placed or captured may increase its importance when it is aesthetically capitalized.

From a chromatic point of view, journalistic photos can be both colour (vast majority) and black and white. It should not be forgotten that the colours have different meanings, different from one cultural area to another, so without developing, we mention that their symbolism must be used according to the cultural, social, religious context of the audience. It is widely accepted that black and white photography has a special place in visual arts (Freeman, 2017; Davis, 2010), its minimalism being extremely expressive and spectacular. If in the coloured journalistic photograph, aesthetic effects are achieved by juxtaposing shades, tones, saturations and contrasts in the black and white photograph, the aesthetic expressiveness is given by the forms and contrasts captured (which can contribute to enhancing the physical or moral qualities of the characters or details in the image) as well as the content of the transmitted message, since not every subject is likely to be rendered visually in black and white. In general, the dramatic, tragic, catastrophic, negative aspects of human reality, as well as those that are addressed, given its content to a narrower audience (mostly targeted at the aesthetically educated and the artistic sense), are depicted in black and white journalistic photographs.

The aesthetic categories that can be identified in a journalistic photo are extremely varied, depending on the subject and the captured characters, for example, the beautiful, the interesting, the graceful, the sublime, the picturesque, the heroic, the comic (with many circumstances such as the ironic, the sarcastic, caricature, parody, ridicule, comedy, etc.), the tragic, the dramatic, the pathetic and the absurd. Of course, at the level of a journalistic photography we can find negative aesthetic categories, the most common being: the ugly, grotesque, monstrous, vulgar, obscene, terrible, such photographs often have a considerable impact on the audience, especially due to their shocking, spectacular, out of the ordinary expressiveness. At the level of journalistic photography, a central role is represented by the character or characters depicted, their frontal rendering having a connotative function and a convergence effect on the viewer. On the other hand, depicting a character as a profile or semi-profile, accentuates the role of the other participants, while capturing various facial expressions, including comic or caricature effects, can convey different moral connotations. Also, the organizing of the image in the layout must necessarily accentuate the subject and not insignificant details in terms of the communication aspect.

3. Functions of the artistic journalistic photography

The importance of the journalistic image as a form of visual communication is already a common place in specialized literature, co-operating with the journalistic text to attract and maintain the audience's interest: "Excessive attention to the text can be embarrassing. The presentation of a magazine material must necessarily take into account the distribution of images and text. An equal quantitative distribution of image and text leads to a boring presentation. Therefore, it is recommended to use a ratio of 2/3 images and 1/3 text or vice versa. Articles containing uploaded images must alternate with spaces loaded with text. Too many articles displayed in the same fashion create the impression of a lack of clarity. Conveying content in a clear and attractive form makes it worthy of remembrance." (Abrudan, 2008, p.32)

To the extent that a journalistic photograph has creative and original aesthetic elements, it can become, as mentioned before, an artistic image with a clear and certain aesthetic value (Freeman, 2017; Leddy, 2014). In the online journalism, besides the main function of information or message transmission, generally speaking the main function of photography, the artistic journalistic photography may perform other functions, which are

significant especially regarding the efficiency with which the audience receives the visually communicated messages.

First, the artistic journalistic photography, through the stylistic expressiveness of its appearance and content, can have a *rhetorical function*, serving both to disseminate the transmitted message and to accentuate its persuasive effect.

Then, artistic journalism photography can also have a *socializing function*, to the extent that its content has symbolic connotations, linking social groups, identities and attachments, cultural, political, religious, scientific communities etc. It is important to note that in order to fulfil this function, the symbols (political, religious, cultural or other) present in the journalistic photograph must be relatively easily recognizable by the target audience, in this case a segmentation of the target audience, otherwise it is mandatory for it to be accompanied by a textual explanation, called photo legend, which complements the communication product and enhances its coherence (Szabo, 2011, pp. 167-169). Thus, a message transmitted through journalistic photography can be understood much better by the audience than the textually transmitted one, since its' symbolic-suggestive dimension offers a much more detailed perspective of the communication act. Moreover, if the documentary journalistic photograph is merely descriptive, the artistic one, due to its symbolic dimension, is also interpretative, managing to convey not only a certain emotion to the audience but also a surplus of significance.

Thirdly, artistic journalism photography has a *purely aesthetic function*, in the sense that its graphic and stylistic expressiveness, including in the online environment, can generate an aesthetic attitude in the audience, of gratified receiving and contemplating the artistic elements in its composition. Also, the aesthetic expressiveness of journalistic photography, its creative presentation, can be decisive not only in drawing in the attention of the audience, but also for maintaining its interest, being easily memorable due to the original artistic elements, unlike the banal journalistic photographs where the lack of aesthetic creativity can generate a dull, uninteresting picture for the audience.

4. Aesthetic creativity in Romanian online media journalistic photography

In this context, it is a duty for the media professional to capture photographic elements of reality that stand out, that are relevant for that context. Thus, some photos stand out directly through their artistic quality

and content capable of transmitting an aesthetic emotion, such as snapshots of landscapes, aspects of natural or human beauty. Others have obvious informative content, such as images capturing dramatic moments, for example accidents, armed incidence, extreme weather phenomena, when the excitement generated by danger is enhanced not only by the context of events but also by the aesthetic aspects of that photograph. These are the most chased after photographs by photo-reporters (and not only them!).

Another category, which is more common in practice, is represented by people of some notoriety (artists, politicians, athletes) caught in delicate situations. It goes from the field of photography that informs about an event into the entertainment, if the happenings are funny, or in the social critique, if the gestures captured have deviations from the ethical or behavioral rules, in this case the aesthetic qualities being placed the secondary plane. In order to illustrate these instances, we shall refer to some photos taken at the *Tulip Symphony*, the latest edition being run from the 20th to the 22nd of April 2018. Printed publications, especially online ones, have published many pictures of the first category, some without human presence, that is, only flowers, expressive by themselves or in various arrangements. Where children, adults or elderly people were captured, the focus of the photographers was set on the admiration of the beauty of tulips and floral arrangements. In a snapshot, from the 2013 edition, two people appear between separate pots of yellow or red flowers. One shoots with a regular camera and the other one with a mobile phone. It is a snapshot that shows the author's attention on the photographer himself (<https://www.casadex.ro/wp-content/uploads/simfonia-lalelelor-2013.jpg>).

There was no tragedy at the Tulips Symphony, so the attention of the photographers turned quickly towards the contrast elements that pigmented the official part of the event. A government delegation headed by the country's prime minister was present at the opening. For a politician, any occasion to mingle with the crowd is a carefully pursued objective, the stake being to register an increase in popularity. The photos taken on this occasion show a carefully prepared performance, the representatives of the local administration in Pitesti being interested in presenting themselves in the most flattering way in front of the government dignitaries. But one of the photos that came to the forefront in internet searches was a three-year-old girl dressed in a gym suit with her head to the ground and her bottom in the air, a snapshot captured when the little girl was doing a demonstration of her sporting abilities in front of those present. (<https://recorder.ro/romania-pierzandu-si-mintile/>). On-line, the photo in question has provoked contradictory reactions, many people believing that this child was directed in

a unnecessary degrading situation in an attempt to increase the premier's popularity and create a positive image for the same character. It is noteworthy that this photo does not appear on the official site of the event.

Another photo shows the Premier congratulating the girl for her performance. The prime minister seems uncomfortable with the mobile phone in his hand, which shows that he has taken care that the equipment is permanent on him. (<http://www.universulargesean.ro/mii-de-oameni-au-participat-la-deschiderea-editiei-41-a-simfoniei-lalelelor-cele-mai-frumoase-imagini-din-eveniment/>). It is a detail that created speculation that the prime minister did not tell the truth, about not having her phone when she was called, around that time, by the president of Romania. Also with the occasion of this event, another snapshot was taken, showing two men kissing the hands of the prime minister and the interior minister (<https://republica.ro/motivul-grimasei-acestui-spectator-al-zsimfoniei-lalelelor-zam-simti-o-revolta-muta-si-brusc-am-avut-senzatia>). The kissing of the hand has a long tradition among Romanians, being the gesture by which the subjects showed their positions to the masters. Subsequently, it has become a form of greeting with a diminished symbolism, especially when men want to show courtesy to ladies. What is highlighted in this picture is the rictus displayed by a man in the second-plane of the photograph, who obviously disapproves of the servile behaviour of the two men in front of him, making the sarcastic, ironic character of the image evident.

5. Conclusions

Online journalism is in continuous expansion, both because of the large number of web sites and the large number of users in the virtual environment and the interactive benefits. In online journalism, the relationship between the textual message and the visual message, more specifically, between the journalistic photography and the journalistic text, has been overturned. If in traditional journalism the text contained the essence of the message, the journalistic photograph being important but secondary in relation to it, in the virtual environment we can appreciate that the report changes, the representation and the impact of the photograph as a visual message being extremely important, its aesthetic composition can guide the visual focus of the audience to the centre of interest. The aesthetic expressiveness of journalistic photography can have a considerable impact on the audience, triggering emotional reactions and shaping opinions. The aesthetic elements specific to the journalistic photography do not only supply graphic expressiveness, but, due to their implied symbolic

appearance, become the means of transmitting multiple and novel meanings, effectively enhancing the value of the communicational act.

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