

PHOTOJOURNALISM AS A SOCIAL FIELD. PROPOSAL TO STUDY JOURNALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

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— *Abstract* —

Journalistic photography is a message that is constructed, like any communicative act, to provoke something and, through its articulation with other elements, it can structure a complex discourse that far exceeds the simple enunciation of a particular fact.

In addition to the photography itself, its study must consider the production pole, whose interests and objectives determine its themes, treatment, and disposition to the public. Understanding photojournalism as a social field allows us to study the relationship -in two senses- between the objective structures and the structures incorporated in the agents of the field and their incidence in the configuration of the message.

Keywords:

Photojournalism; journalistic photography; journalism.

One of the most important elements of today's journalism, printed or digital, is photography. Today, despite the development of digital technologies and the supposed general crisis of journalism, it is mainly used as a reliable proof of facts or situations and is associated, due to its degree of precision and detail, with concepts such as *truth* and *objectivity*.

However, journalistic photography is a message that is constructed, like any communicative act, to provoke something that, through its articulation with other elements, can structure a complex discourse that far exceeds the simple enunciation of a particular fact.

Since its origin, as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, photography was attributed the task of documenting, and witnessing -without interfering- the most important events of family life, first, and once the technical adjustments¹ were achieved, of public life. Hence, the relationship between photography and journalism derives from the positivist tradition and is based on the idea that events or situations of public interest can be "encapsulated in time" to be shown through the press.

In photography, the subject becomes the object and the unrepeatable can be reproduced infinitely: "to take a photograph is to participate in the mortality, vulnerability, mutability of another person or thing. Precisely because they section a moment and freeze it, all photographs bear witness to the merciless dissolution of time" (Sontag, 2006, p.32). The past is nothing more than an exclusive reconstruction of memory.

JOURNALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY, AN INTELLECTUAL CREATION

In the first quarter of the 20th century, photography appeared regularly in newspapers, gradually replacing the engravings and illustrations used until then². Due to its characteristics, this new "window" to the world, revolutionized the way of doing journalism. According to Susan Sontag (2003, p.33):

Photographs had the virtue of uniting two contradictory attributes. Their claim to objectivity was inherent. And yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were the record of the real - uncontroversial, as no verbal account could ever be despite its impartiality - since a machine was recording it. And they testified to the real since a person had been there to make them.

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- 1 "To take the first portraits (around 1840) it was necessary to subject the individual to several poses under a glass case in full sunlight; [...] a device called headrest was then invented, a sort of prosthesis invisible to the lens that supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility..." (Barthes, 1990, p.34).
 - 2 Because of the time-consuming process, the photographs began to be published regularly in weekly newspapers such as *Le Monde Illustré* in France, the *Illustrierte Zeitung* in Germany, and the *Illustrated London News* in Great Britain.

Both attributes pointed out by Sontag continue to operate in journalistic photography. In the beginning, this *objectivity* occupied almost all the expectations of the photographer, the medium, and the public itself; it was this "probative force of the images" that came to confer on them a status of *truth*. Hence the interest of governments in distributing their photographs.

Today we know that when we talk about photojournalism we need less totalizing concepts (*objectivity/truth*) because although photographs are indeed a record of something that happened, it is necessary to clarify that:

All photography is fiction that is presented as true. Against what we have been taught, against what we usually think, photography always lies, it lies by instinct, it lies because its nature does not allow it to do otherwise. But the important thing is not this inevitable lie. What is important is how the photographer uses it, what intention it serves. What is important, in short, is the control exercised by the photographer to impose an ethical direction to his lie. The good photographer is the one who *lies the truth well* (Fontcuberta, 2016, p.17).

That is, the photojournalist makes a series of decisions to take the photo, decisions that require, at the very least, training, skill, and intentionality. In the end, the photograph is the combination of the photographer's vision, the use of a series of technical and compositional elements, and the expectations of the medium that makes them public. Journalistic photography is anything but objective.

In 1924, Ernst Friedich published *Krieg dem Kriege!* (War against war!), a photographic album about the horrors of World War I, sequences of close-ups and panoramic shots that openly contravened the pro-war discourse of the time.

Despite its wide acceptance in intellectual circles, especially on the left, the German government censored both the book and the exhibition of the photographs. The mutilated soldiers, the rotting bodies, the faces with almost indescribable wounds, were accompanied by feet in four languages; together they designed a kind of cry to raise public awareness and refute war propaganda.

In the United States, Friedrich's works, like those of Lewis W. Hine and Jacob Riis³ "used the camera as a tool to move public opinion" (Colorado, 2016, p.5). While it is true that these works are not considered properly photojournalistic, they demonstrated the capacity of the photographic image to deal with specific social phenomena.

3 Hine made photographs of the conditions under which children worked and Riis made photographs of the immigrants' conditions. The former is credited with a major influence on the Keating-Owen Act which regulated child labor and the latter on Roosevelt's social policy.

Thus, to speak of photography is to speak of intentionality. Even in the private sphere, there is an intention that guides the *making of*⁴ photographs: to share a moment, to remember an event or situation, to show oneself in a certain way to others, etc.; each situation demands adjustments and decisions by the Photographer according to his or her objectives, even in a selfie.

In the public sphere, journalistic photography materializes a synecdochic gaze constructed from a (political) position. Objectivity is a look that is neither naïve nor innocuous, of defined but camouflaged intentions, which in its materiality overflows the classic pretension of informative journalism.

According to Enrique Villaseñor, there are four types of photography in photojournalism: informative, testimonial, photo essay, and photo-illustration. Informative photography dispenses -at least so it is believed- with the photographer's subjectivity and seeks above all the truth; on the other hand, testimonial photography⁵ focuses on structural phenomena and, in this case, "is based on the photographer's opinion (...) a graphic journalism of opinion that goes beyond immediate information" (2011, p.33).

On the other hand, the photo-essay is an iconographic narrative on some topic and, as its name indicates, is eminently subjective, while the photo illustration has no commitment to reality and is more related to commercial interests⁶.

Therefore, all journalistic photography is fundamentally committed to *reality* and is conceived to reach the general public. That is its condition to exist in the field of journalism and at the same time it is the greatest of its limitations; the *noema of photography* according to Barthes (1990, p.91): "It has been [¬...] it has been there, and yet it has been immediately separated; it has been absolute, irrecusably present, and yet already deferred".

Recognizing, then, that beyond our pretensions, photography ¬-as such- is not reality itself or its analog and, consequently, neither is journalistic photography, also implies rethinking the role of the photographer. That is to say, journalistic photography is no longer the mechanical work of reproducing reality, but an intellectual creation -of a subject- that has as its

4 *Making* rather than *taking* photographs. *Making* implicitly recognizes the photographer's action; *taking*, on the other hand, reserves a marginal place for it. In the former, it is recognized that photography is construction; in the latter, only reproduction.

5 Traditionally called "documentary."

6 Villaseñor includes this type of photography by resorting to Pepe Baeza's classification in *Por una función crítica de la fotografía de prensa* (2007). However, photo-illustration does not fit in this essay since it does not necessarily deal with events of public interest, nor is it closely related to the news or information field. A distinction should be made between press photography, i.e., that which appears regularly in the press, and journalistic photography, which, as mentioned, is necessarily linked to events of public interest.

raw material facts of public interest, which is constituted as a media and message⁷ to be distributed through different media and modalities.

According to Gamarnik (2010, p.17) "photography shows great ductility and the possibility of being used in multiple instances" and its meaning -changing and historical- depends on social uses; therefore, by overcoming the myth of objectivity that has been used almost indiscriminately since its invention, the study of photography, including journalistic photography, must focus on production; that is, on the creative pole, whose interests and objectives determine the configuration of the message.

In his dystopia *1984*, George Orwell (1948) posits the interest of the government, the Ministry of Truth, in controlling the past through its documents and records to justify its actions in the present. If journalistic photography contributes to record events or situations of public interest that time turns into documents, then how does it intervene in the construction of history?

Nazi Germany, for example, had in the photographs of Hugo Jaeger, Hitler's personal photographer, the perfect device to record the entire propaganda system of the Third Reich. It was not only the swastika, or the predominant use of red, white, and black, but also the impeccable formations of the soldiers, the precise placement of the flags, and in general, the arrangement of the distinctive elements of any official Nazi rally. According to Ben Cosgrove (2014), all these elements -recorded by Jaeger- contributed to the construction of the myth of Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler, and Goering, and above all, to perceive Nazism, at least for some years, as unstoppable.

In Argentina, during the first Peronist government, the Undersecretariat of Information of the Presidency of the Nation was created, which was in charge of producing and distributing government propaganda and, in turn, a photographic division dedicated almost exclusively to building the image of Perón and -subsequently- of Eva Perón. In that area "the most repeated and widespread photograph of Peronist iconography" -Perón on horseback-, and that of Evita "chosen by Peronist youth during the 1970s as their own symbol" (Gamarnik, 2010, p.5) would be created.

In contrast, in 1981 a group of photographers held the first exhibition of Argentine Graphic Journalism "intending to exhibit the photos they had taken during those years [during Perón's governments] and that had not been published or had been directly censored by the mainstream media" (p.13).

In Mexico, the student movement of 1968 and its terrible outcome -more than 50 years ago- meant a schism in the depths of the Mexican political system, including, of course, the journalistic sphere. The messages from

7 In the same document, Villaseñor explains that journalistic photography is both media and message because it functions as a vehicle to transmit other messages through different means (2011, p.30).

the government were accompanied by censorship of dissenting voices; an information control system was set up that equally restricted the journalistic exercise of the media, reporters, and photojournalists⁸.

Fortunately, many photographic archives were preserved and over time have seen the light of day. This is the case of the portfolios of Armando Lenin and Manuel Gutiérrez "*El Marichito*" -photographer of the Ministry of the Interior-, which *Cuartoscuro* magazine presented in 2008; two views of the same movement, one built from the journalistic field and the other from the power.

APPROACHES TO JOURNALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Even today, journalistic photography does not occupy a prominent place in journalism studies. In Mexico, for example, research works focus mainly on written texts, conferring an accessory position to this type of photography. Many local and national media indeed privilege the use of photography, as an illustration, that is, completely detached from the journalistic piece; however, the mere increase in recent years in the number of photographic images published in newspapers, both print and digital, justifies the need to address it through rigorous studies that conceive it as a protagonist in the field.

However, there are several ways to study photography. Following Laswell's scheme, Javier Marzal explains that each instance entails a way of approaching the object of study. There are biographical and historical works; there are also tech works and those based on iconological or semiotic orientations; of course, each of them has implications and limitations. However, this is a developing field.

Javier Marzal (2011, p.12) himself explains that studies on the photographic image have usually "developed within the framework of the world of collecting and photographic criticism in specialized and popularization magazines." That is to say, despite its massification in the second half of the 20th century, photography has been studied, above all, from intellectual and artistic circles.

Walter Benjamin (1973), for example, one of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, studied photography as a subversion of the concept of art. Due to its capacity for reproduction, photography disrupts the limits of authenticity and originality of art to the point of turning it into a commodity.

For her part, the photographer and sociologist Gisèle Freund (1974), through the historical opposition painting/photography, introduces the idea

8 Confiscating rolls of film at rallies was a recurrent task of the Interior, military, and paramilitary agents of the time.

that changes in the social structure influence both the themes and modalities of artistic expression. That is to say, from her perspective, there is an undeniable incidence of the structure on what is considered art.

Now, Joan Fontcuberta (2016), Jacob Bañuelos (2014), Pepe Baeza (2001), among others, have developed works on the limits, implications, and transformations of photography in its use as a journalistic tool; this, of course, according to the structures of the journalistic field, without denying the inherent attributes of photography itself.

As Roland Barthes (1986, p.15) maintains, beyond its conception as an analogous document of facts and situations, "press photography is an object worked, chosen, composed, elaborated, treated according to professional, aesthetic and ideological norms that constitute as many factors of connotation."

For example, in Chiapas, in the 1994 conflict between the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and the federal government, which was initially armed and derived in an informational strategy⁹, press photography was determinant. According to Flor Gómez (2015, p.245), the guerrillas configured a space of representation that included *disguise*, symbolic locations, and an epic style that was distributed through press photography.

The photographs published in the press about the events in Chiapas offer ideological information, serving the propaganda of the guerrilla Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. We are led to this affirmation by the detection of certain elements in the images that, related, fix ideas, concepts, symbols, in short, propaganda.

For Gómez Cortecero the graphic material published in Spain about the armed conflict in Chiapas, on the one hand, proves that "press photography is, indeed, a medium capable of establishing strategies of persuasion and creating opinion", and on the other that, at least, in this case, it served to provide ideological information following the propagandistic interests of the EZLN (2015, p.242). This research work, then, found underlying intentionality that conditioned the way of doing photojournalism about the guerrilla. A *sui generis* situation that evidences the need to understand journalistic photography as a message within a structure that, materializes through the exercise of the photographer.

If this requirement is met, then, it can be observed that photojournalism is part of a larger informational structure, with commercial interests, but,

9 Manuel Castells (2009) considers the EZLN as the world's first informational guerrilla.

above all, political; that uses the nature of photography, how it is perceived in everyday life, to build a discourse of great semantic weight.

This position opens the door to study not only the photography of governments or different political entities but also journalistic photography itself as an instrument of political propaganda. Journalistic photography is no longer reality, nor the reproduction of the referent, but a message that is deliberately constructed.

From Cultural Studies, Osiris Aquino (2018) argues that there is a gender bias in the work of male photojournalists, as a result of the normalized heteropatriarchal structure that shapes their way of seeing. From this point of view, the gaze is constructed through culture and inevitably reproduces its stereotypical forms.

In such a way that, without being aware of it, through their work, photojournalists not only make certain social groups (women and LGBTQ members¹⁰) invisible, but also construct their messages from a negative charge in line with the discourse dictated by male hegemony.

That is to say, for this work the structural mandates are internalized through culture and then reproduced through journalistic photography, as an extension of the gaze of the subjects. The political component then becomes more complex through a new element: culture.

It is worth asking, then, how can journalistic photography be studied without falling into reductionist visions, that is, recognizing it as a structured message in which both the photographer's intentionality and the structural elements of the journalistic sphere are materialized?

POLITICS AND CULTURE, A SPACE FOR THE PRODUCTION OF JOURNALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Journalistic photography is of interest as a document that crystallizes, explicitly or implicitly, on the one hand, the objectives and interests of the information market, and in turn, the subjectivities of the photographer. In such a way that, to understand it, the one is inseparable from the other.

Cultural Studies, in its Latin American aspect, which emerged in the middle of the last century, focuses mainly on "the spaces of resistance between popular and mass culture" (Szurmuk and Mkee, 2009, p.9). This interdisciplinary field "inherits from the German-Jewish intellectual diaspora exiled from Nazism, the concern for the power of the culture industry and

10 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transvestite, transsexual, intersex, queer.

the interest in analyzing new modes of cultural production, often with a changed sign" (Szurmuk and Mkee, 2009, p.12).

That is, Cultural Studies, among other things, reformulate the concerns of the Frankfurt School, which posited a mass society without individual freedom, to give way, mainly as a result of poststructuralism, to a society with the capacity to produce meaning (Szurmuk and Mkee, 2009, p.13).

In this context, the theories of mediations¹¹, especially the one developed by Jesús Martín Barbero in *De los medios a las media a las mediaciones: comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (1991) have resulted in a whole school of reflection on mass media and globalization in Latin America.

In this work, Martín Barbero argues that communication is more a matter of culture than of media, that the idea of transmitters-dominant and receivers-dominated was insufficient to explain what was happening in a scenario of "memories and imaginaries that mix the indigenous with the rural, the rural with the urban, folklore with the popular and the popular with mass media" (Barbero, 1991, p.10).

Martín Barbero proposes a kind of conversion; to formulate the questions not from the commonplaces of the academic tradition, but its opposite; this means "to re-see the whole process of communication from its other side, that of reception, that of the resistances that have their place there, that of appropriation from the uses" (1991, p.10).

However, as a consequence of the theoretical displacement that placed culture at the center of interest, studies on Latin American communication, especially those derived from the theories of mediations, have shown a "marked process of de-politicization":

The segmented, decontextualized, and micro-scale study of the reception process; the indifference towards the links of the media with ideology, dependence, and power; as well as the adoption of research agendas designed from the business market, are some of the manifestations of this loss of the critical and utopian sense of research (Gámez, 2007, p.207).

That is to say, although it is true that the works on mediations evidenced the insufficiency of analytical categories to account for the process of mass communication, they focused mainly on the relationship of the subject-cultural practice, leaving aside the political categories of power or, to put it another way, the categories that refer to the great structures (Gámez, 2007, p.208).

Journalistic photography, as mentioned above, deals with matters of public interest, newsworthy or not. Its area of action is broad and complex

11 In 1977, Manuel Martín Serrano published *La mediación social*.

because it is related to social dynamics; consequently, it fits perfectly into the logic of mass media whose primary interest is the dissemination of contents on a large scale.

Although there are examples of journalistic photography with the status of art¹², it does not pretend, in the first instance, to be enclosed in a kind of intellectual solipsism; on the contrary, its main objective is its massive distribution, to reach the general public. If an analogy were to be made with painting -one more- journalistic photography would be a mural as opposed to easel painting.

According to García Canclini (2000, p.72) the recomposition of the public sphere within countries and the questioning of the classical forms of representation have problematized the different conceptions of the public sphere:

the public is developed in newspapers and broadcasting as well as in entertainment, not only in the media under state control or conceived as a public service, but also in talk shows, video games, contests in which personal successes and skills are rewarded as if they were public performances (García, 2000, p.75).

In this sense, to the extent that it is distributed, journalistic photography participates in that deliberative scene that overflows the classic mechanisms of representativeness, in that symbolic space complexed by the communication and information industries, where public affairs are discussed, where politics is made.

Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the immanent political component in every communicative act that takes place in the media, without ignoring the cultural context of which it is a part; both, politics and culture, are the frameworks of interpretation of media contents; both are also the space of production of journalistic photography.

It is imperative then, in addition to analyzing journalistic photography itself as a complex and structured message, to account for the motivations and intentions of the producer pole; that is, the photographer: a subject who creates but at the same time reproduces, who is indebted to society but depends on an industry, who sees but above all, looks.

12 Mexican Enrique Metinides, a sensationalist photographer, has exhibited his work in museums such as the Recontre d'Arles Photographie in France, the Aperture Gallery in New York, and the Fair Royal College in England.

FROM JOURNALISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY TO PHOTOJOURNALISM AND VICE-VERSA

Understanding journalistic photography as a text in context, which is also deliberately structured, demands reflecting on the role played by the photojournalist as a political entity; that is, as part of the web of relations not only of the journalistic industry, but also of the economic and social sphere; and, to top it off, as a subject -which is not determined by the structure- with the capacity of the agency.

This implies understanding that journalistic photography is built within a *social field*¹³, in the meaning of Pierre Bourdieu (1997), in a web of relationships and structures that determine what is understood as legitimate and what is not, and that inevitably affect its daily practice. This field is photojournalism.

Thinking of photojournalism as a field urges us to study the relationship -in two senses- between objective structures and incorporated structure¹⁴, that is, between other social fields and *habitus*; the former as exogenous structures and the latter as internalized practices.

In other words, with photojournalism we speak of agents and institutions and their practices and relationships in a specific context; that is, photographers, editors, and journalistic companies (of printed or digital products), mainly, and their incidence in the configuration of journalistic photography.

The demand here is to understand that journalistic photography cannot be studied without paying attention to the production pole (including the photographer himself), whose logics determine its themes, its treatment, and its disposition to the public; that is to say, the margins in which it develops.

Studying journalistic photography on its own, or as a reproduction of reality, reveals a serious problem in the relationship between the researcher and the object of study because it excludes, in a simplistic equation, the political component, which is essentially what motivates photojournalism.

13 In *Practical Reason. On the theory of action* (1997, p.49), concerning social space, the author explains that a field is "a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on the agents who have entered it, and as a field of struggles within which the agents confront each other, with means and ends differentiated according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to preserve or transform its structure".

14 In the 1960s, Pierre Bourdieu conducted a study on the social function of photography in France. The work focused on the meaning of photographic practice, specifically of the popular classes. The paper shows that photography, more than a spontaneous activity, starts from the reality in which it exists and materializes, in addition to the intentions of the subject, the systems of thought of an entire group.

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