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FATHOMING SNAPSHOTS AND POETRY

Abstract

This paper sets out to examine “Hitler’s First Photograph”, (1986) by the Nobel Prize winning Polish poet Wisława Szymborska as a site of conflict between writing and image. In relying on one captivating photograph, the poem reveals a sense of ambivalence about writing and history, and above all about deceptive surfaces of affirming snapshots. Drawing on Jean Luc Nancy’s insights, the author argues that the visual image makes perceptible what is often identified as impossible to be perceived. In “Hitler’s First Photograph” the poetic regarding of an artless but incontrovertible photograph creates an uneasy multiple portrait that gathers its object and its viewers in a surprising illumination.

Key words: writing/image, photograph, writing/history, multiple portrait, surprising illumination

In post-industrial society, “this colossal and labyrinthine phototeque”¹ everybody possesses a camera and everybody takes snaps everything. We continue to assume that the photographs taken with ever-faster, smaller and more precise cameras are clear and objective reflections of the world, its meaning and its shape. But very few observers, Vilém Flusser acknowledges, can and feel the need and have the ability to decode photographs, to question our understanding of them, and to examine deceptive photographic ways of representing the world. Flusser also warns that in a “global image scenario” humans do not use images to orientate themselves in the world, but to live “lives which become a function of their own images (Flusser 2000:10)”.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy’s phrase (2005:106) is used, however, to analyze the dialectics of the photographed body.

Flusser's diagnosis is a pessimistic vision of society fascinated by immobile and silent surfaces without value, a vision inattentive to spaces and to subjects which consciously and provocatively pay attention to the photographic image and its always unexpected functions. I find that some recent poetic treatments of the relationship between the text and image also offer a sophisticated elucidation of the workings of technical images which so powerfully and decisively dominate our consciousness and practice.

In contemporary thought, the visual image, as a model image, is regarded as an obvious and unique way of mediating between the world and us. The image, we understand, is significant (Flusser) and inexhaustibly distinct, separate, and palpable, but at the same time moving and absorbing (Jean Luc-Nancy). The image sets apart while it paradoxically affirms and condenses the world. Its complexity is dependent on the careful observer, but their intention and their attention to it is no longer of the order provoking a change of relation with the world. The image has the potential power to reveal its magical or even sacred world (Nancy), provided it is actively decoded, or "scanned." In addition, Flusser says, its relationships are structurally, "different from...the linear world of history in which nothing is repeated and in which everything has causes and will have consequences (Flusser 2000: 9)". The image is always extreme in its "immutability and impassability," says Nancy, in its "distension", though it makes itself seductively available (Nancy 2005: 10).

Yet the magic attached to the image, the magic of which Flusser speaks in terms of fascination, is a new, post-historic kind of enchantment. "It is magic of the second order: conjuring tricks with abstractions (Flusser 2000: 17)". Always looking for new layers of the relationship between the image and the word, Flusser assumes the primacy of the word, giving his explanation of why "technical images were invented: in order to make texts comprehensible again, to put them under a magic spell – to overcome the crisis of history (Flusser 2000: 13)". In the post-industrial world, in his philosophy of history, he laments the fact that images have become cheap playthings. Thus he sees the force of the image – what Nancy identifies as the intimacy of the image – as inescapably compromised and threatened by the constraining developments in the jungle of Western culture. Nancy, on the other hand, chooses to deposit the image's dangerous and often destructive distinction – its separate "dense", "condensed", "tight" and immobile potential – in art, art seen as necessary observance.

In this paper I propose to examine one picture used in a poem by Wisława Szymborska under the revealing title “Hitler’s First Photograph.” In the poem we are looking at an image and experience it poetically in its missing materiality. It baffles. Upon consideration, questions about its material and conceptual identity, questions about our own and history’s identity paradoxically unfold, enticing reflection. As a captivating visual image, this photo also functions as a shield against the accuracy of our claims and against determinacy based on visual experience, as a message in defense of poetic experience. The poet, like a careful observer, reads the image for us, in the words of Flusser, to “bestow significance on it”, to engage both conceptual and imaginative thought in order to reinforce them (Flusser 2000: 12). Additionally, this poem, like many others taking up photographs as points of reference, testifies to always present conflicts in mediation between writing and images. In its reliance on one photograph, the poem reveals a sense of ambivalence about writing and history while it also surprises. Although the poet calls this visual image a photograph, I will propose to read it as a snapshot for reasons to be presented in the later part of the paper.

Since the inception of photography poets have handled its relationships, its unstudied rhythm. By employing metaphoric cameras, poets become verbal photographers, their words capturing fragmentary moments as archivists of mental photographic images. By reflecting on them as viewers and readers, poets like the Nobel Prize-winning Szymborska have yielded to the strangely seductive power of photographic images as if words did not carry the comparable force of the image. Inserting metaphoric photographs into their poems, photographs, which are always only a fragment, as Sontag often says, the poets play with an additional kind of moral and emotional weight. Poetic subjects recall² and read these brief images and adjust them to their experiences; photographs thus become agents of contact with the real and with themselves. Not surprisingly, poetic readings of such images open up questions beyond immediate personal concerns. Thus looking at, considering (with its etymological implication of examining the stars to see how they come together), the photographic image is often an act of

² T.S. Eliot, for example, speaks in a disappointed tone when he acknowledges the fragmentary, accidental and unsatisfactory nature of ‘photographs.’ He says “when we try to recall visually some period in the past, we find in our memory just the few meagre arbitrarily chosen set of snapshots that we find there, the faded poor souvenirs of passionate moments [emphasis mine](1958: 95)”.

composition and de-composition. We expect poetry to “girder” that visual plenitude.³

The modern poet’s preference often is for a concrete type of imagery that is imagery “in communion” with ordinary, concrete people, participants in life. The image, responding to the disorganization and disconnectedness of experience and reality, realizes the first-hand experience always intermingled with the accidental and banal. Louis MacNeice, for example, in the poem “*Nature morte*” invites a response to that stabilizing calm, that Barthesian “strange stasis” of a visual surface. The everyday experiences we receive by the senses offer, MacNeice says, “things misfelt and misheard.” The word, akin to the camera, “by photographing our ghosts”, freezes “the light on the sun-fondled” trees, though “pretentious” it “claims to put us at our ease.” An ordinary snapshot, like the printed word in a journal, possesses that protective, shielding quality but the ease is not from arrest, not from recognition of the “multiplication” of our lives in the photographs. Critically, we begin to see that despite its quality of solidity and staidness, “even a still life is alive”, as MacNeice says. What the careful observer recognizes is that “stillness” “exudes” that “appalling unrest of the soul.” MacNeice, the poet of light writing, of “photo” and “graphie”, acknowledges the attraction and even pathos not of presentation, but of an enticing kind of casting forth, a projection of contact even in a simple picture.

In a collusion of the mediating practices of the image and word, the problem of sense,⁴ or the multiplicity of senses and the significance of a single photograph has triggered intense debates. Barthes, for example, defending photography as art related to literature, affirms that “Photography, like the word constitutes a form which desires to express something. It makes me discover meaning, or at least a given sense.” For Barthes, the form appears

³ The ethos of photography and poetry is close: “As painting has become more and more conceptual”, argues Susan Sontag, “poetry (since Apollinaire, Eliot, Pound, and William Carlos Williams) has more and more defined itself as concerned with the visual. Poetry’s commitment to the concreteness and to the autonomy of the poem’s language parallels photography’s commitment to pure seeing. Both imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their context, bringing things together elliptically, according to imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity” (1977: 95-96). ‘In *Aesthetics of Photography*, Francois Soulages shows the unavoidable tensions between Baudelaire’s criticism of photography as the enemy of poetry and dreams, as mere *techné*, and Lamartine’s enthusiastic acceptance of photography as art.

⁴ Berger proposes an interesting perspective arguing that the assumption that photography creates sense, is a way of securing it both for the past and the future (in Soulages 2007: 308).

only to disappear, making room for the assumed reality of the represented thing (Soulages 2007: 309). John Berger, on the other hand, denies any clear sense in a photo, strongly arguing that by photographing the event beyond time, it “necessarily excludes its sense” (Soulages 2007: 307). Already in 1893 Bertillon recognized that we can see again in thought only that which lent itself to description (Soulages 2007: 308). Without language, a photograph is believed to remain elusive.

The term “snapshot” calls for some explanation. Interestingly, its first uses take us to poetic practices. Surrealism, Ian Walker argues, began with an interest taken in the “realms of the instantaneous, the world of snapshot.” Aragon’s famous “*royaumes de l’instantané*” or “the realms of the instantaneous” was the realm of snapshots, the realm of immediacy and unmediation, so attractive to the Surrealists who eschewed skill and conscious design in their art. The snapshot, the *instantané*, represented that form of photography practically synonymous with Kodak (Walker 2002:12). We should recall also the fascination with snapping embraced by the twenties artists like Rodchenko postulating “Against a Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot”. Snapshots are pictures taken very quickly, instantaneously, often carelessly and because of that they are received as uncontrived, as more indexical, more magically charged. Taking snapshots is a practice of amateurs and therefore received as more authentic; after all, the users of cameras are not expected to know how to create the images. The amateur, according to Barthes, is one who “engages without the spirit of mastery or competition,” and who despite a lack of skill “will be the counter-bourgeois artist” (Barthes 1977: 52). Like a fine art-photographer, he can produce visually very beautiful and accomplished photographs, but unlike a professional photographer, the amateur in possession of “new” cameras on the market (46), snaps a picture of anything and everything. He produces more and more images, and consequently, he becomes an “extension to the button of the camera,” whose “actions are automatic camera functions” (Flusser 2000: 58). Amateurs are key figures responsible for what Flusser describes as a terrifying and continual “flow of unconsciously created images (Flusser 2000: 58) in modern culture.

As a spontaneous, banal, off-hand, and only seemingly unstudied image, the snapshot offers insight into random, sometimes unconventional subjects⁵. Moreover, as the photography of the everyday, the highly

⁵ Critical for any discussion of snapshot poetics is the recognition of a growing interest in and, despite Flusser’s philosophical denigration, a critical valuation of the possibilities of

personal, and often synonymous with the old, the accidentally found and sometimes the unidentified, the snapshot responds to our frequent need for visibility and perpetuation. We believe we can obtain visibility in a snapshot in the form of “flies in amber”, as Metz aptly puts it (Metz 1985: 84). Thus snapshots are used as reference markers for identities, containing and controlling the shocking as well as the boring.

For the careful viewer willing to pause and reflect on them, snapshots can disclose “a simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible version of the plain fact (Metz 1985: 85)”. Paradoxically, the snapshot affirms the world outside of us and our view of it while not signaling knowable reality. It can be said to unsettle the process of knowing while aggressively “filling the sight by force (Barthes 1993: 91)”. Put more assertively, a snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the subject out of the world into another world, into another kind of time, into another kind of world. Metz concludes that it is a “journey with no return (1985: 84)”. As a “death apparatus” the snapshot deadens perception, but attracts with its flat availability and obviousness.

Metz explains that a photograph is a “cut inside the referent – a snapshot cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part of the object (Metz 1985: 84)”. Frozen and immobile, the snapshot is a discrete parcel or slice of time, a quoting out of context or, as MacNeice says, a caged minute; it gives us an atomized structure. It is for this reason that in a consideration of the structure of the image, Flusser wants us to consider it as “doubt made up of points of hesitation and points of decision-making” where reality is “information” and not the “significance of this information (Flusser 2000: 39)”.

Some argue that the snapshot penetrates our consciousness, it works like consciousness. Taking a picture of some event strips the experience of its dynamic power and merely registers it as reductions of real things. Jervis sees taking pictures as a way of “insulating against the experience of shock while recording it”, eclipsing “important sources and forms of experience, ”preventing them from being “really absorbed as such, never really ‘lived’ (1998: 316)”. Rendering experience in an image is grounded

the poetics of the snapshot. Recent displays given to snapshots testify to this attention. In 1998, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art showed, for example, “Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life 1888 to the Present”; in 2000 John Paul Getty mounted an exhibition entitled, “Close to Home: An American Album.” Both enjoyed tremendous popularity.

in exclusions: “to possess the world in the form of images”, Sontag says, is to “re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real”, it is to “miniaturize experience” and “transform history into spectacle” (Sontag 1977: 110).

The economy of interruption and fragmentation in the snapshot conceals not only sources and forms of experience (subjective yet subjectless), but also individual desires. As a “material artifact of the imagination,” a snapshot shares many properties of the fetish in its ordinary association, “combining a double and contradictory function: “on the side of metaphor, an inciting and encouraging one”, and “on the side of metonymy, an apotropaic one, that is averting of danger”, both “loss” and “protection against loss” (Metz 1985: 84).

The Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past (“this-has-been”), the photograph suggests that it is already dead (Barthes 1993: 79).

It is not so if a photograph, or a casual snapshot, is embedded in poetry. In Szyborska’s provocative poem the seemingly casual and penetrating observer asks: “And who’s this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?” A casual question about the identity and distinction of the subject, in what we know is its first photograph, indicates the observer’s separation from the subject and at the same time it allows the subject, *this* little fellow, to assume diminutive presence, concealed in plain clothes. In this photograph, the observer distinguishes a subject and, without hesitation, posits its identity with an exclamation: “That’s tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers’ little boy!” The answer gives a name to the immobile and silent subject, a formal name, a kind of extrinsic identification which calls for no other introduction. And yet as soon as the name is established, revealed by the speaker, it is suspended. The observer in “Hitler’s First Photograph” does not fall back on shared associations with Hitler’s name, but literally falls for the magic of the image. Thus she responds in the fashion Flusser expects of an acute reader of a visual image. “The magical nature of images must be taken into account when decoding them”, he says. “Thus it is wrong to look for ‘frozen events’ in images. Rather they replace events by states of things and translate them into scenes.” He alerts us to both the “superficial

nature” of the scene and the “contradiction peculiar to images (Flusser 2000: 9)”.

The magic of the first photo of baby Adolf emanates from the appeal to the intensity and intimacy of the presentation of the “tiny baby Adolf.” It gathers force through sensory references to “mommy’s sunshine,” (sight) and “Adolf’s heartchen knocking”, (hearing), as well as the play of diminutives like “little”, “itty-bitty”, “kitten”, “tot” “sugar”, before going to catalogue symbolic accessories of childhood. It puts in motion – it agitates – the enchanting tactile, olfactory, kinesthetic and musical faculties of the baby and the viewer. Assembled, these qualities create a condensed site that Jean Luc Nancy, who reads visual images as scenes with ontological content, identifies as “sur-face, exposition, ex-expression.” Isolating anything ugly from the scene, fitting in the fore of the image not with the “fate’s footsteps” or the “howling dogs” but the “smell of yeast dough”, the poet composes an image, a surface, in Nancy’s words that is a “traction and an attraction (Nancy 2005: 9)”. The photograph unmistakably engages a sense of magic of the baby’s first photo. But it is not the magic in the sense of ancient ritualization of myths, but rather as what Flusser calls “current magic,” or programmed magic which ignores historical consciousness (Flusser 2000: 17). “Hitler’s First Photograph” gives us an image that is post-historic. In Braunau, Hitler’s “small, but worthy town”, the observer says “A history teacher loosens his collar/and yawns over homework.”

Like Walter Benjamin’s active future developer of images, the speaker in the poem brings out the plate and marks its significance. The observer considers an image of the perishable bits and pieces, in the artless and swift moment captured in the photograph in the year 1889. It is significant that in the scene created in the poem, little Adolf “looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket, / like the tots in every other family album.” The intimacy and ordinariness of this “honey bun” - Adolf Hitler - not even the words “fate’s footsteps” intimate the “Bosch-like hell” which we hear of in another poem by Szyborska under the title “Family Album.” The viewer recognizes the plenitude of this scene. Little Adolf looks but does not see us and his is a look of “phantom’s calm” because it is paradoxically looking without seeing: “The Photograph separates attention from perception”; the calm is a result of that “aberrant thing” in photography “*noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought”, and because the look *retains* attention (Szyborska 1993: 113) without disclosing anything in return. That removed fullness as emptiness is possible only as a photographic image.

We are told “tiny baby Adolf” looks just like “the tots in every other family album.” He is captured by a camera, looked at without acknowledging anybody’s look: “The camera will click from under that black hood.” Its mechanical and sophisticated click produces the image-symbol. After 1900 the cameras became “foolproof”, a realization not of a unique and single perspective or the photographer’s vision, but of an expected result, a way of thinking which, as Flusser notes, every camera is programmed to produce. The camera is an apparatus used for recording images, but also for playing with them. Flusser says that a camera’s function is to play with symbols and combine them (Flusser 2000: 28). But by isolating this moment of conscious and determined recording – “the camera will click” – the poet distinguishes something else. Hidden under “that black hood”, the camera is an obscure but potent object situated in the third stanza of the poem.

In the midst of the familiar – “A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib” – the click of the camera is summoned to announce the unfamiliar, the altered moment, an altered subject, but also to create an expected record, a new convergence of identities. “This click, and this *hic and nunc* eternalizes here and now (Nancy 2005:105)”. The speaker, confirming the result of this instantaneous abduction and alterity, carefully directs us to “The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau” where it was most likely developed. The place of birth of this snapshot with the birthplace of Hitler, the birth of the image and the birth of a person, come upon each other in the poem, overseen by the speaker as two subjects. The Atelier is where the image was captured testifying to the difficult “I am” of this first portrait.

We are transported beyond the view from beneath the black hood, from inside the scene of signs of the delivery of a “long-awaited guest” to outside, past the windows with “geraniums” into a parallel site of decorum and well-being in the “worthy town” of Braunau. The poet captures here the gravity of the common incidence of the snapshot’s split between the luminous (*photo*), (in stanza two there is natural light to see as well, and its trace (*graphie*) in the first photograph. In the following lines, though, the peacefulness of Braunau, the “smell of yeast dough” as well as of “gray soap”, portending perhaps the bodies in the ovens of Auschwitz, or the human fat rendered into soap in the camps, for now only marks the innocence and the clarity of this moment of coincidence of light and the eye. And what we are invited to consider in this curious shift in location (most likely printed on the picture and therefore centrally located in the poem) is perhaps the gesture to include in the first snapshot of Hitler also the takers of the photograph and us, “we

who were grasped in the grasping” in what Nancy calls “the strangeness of our illuminated capture (Nancy 2005:105)”.

The poet’s regard of the photograph brings together the poet and Hitler and two times, the time of the photograph and the time of viewing. However, despite the silence and the comforting smells, despite the play of permutations of options concerning Hitler’s future, we see that the poet’s reading of the photograph, to draw again on Nancy’s powerful insights, arrives not at a view or a vision but at a “stigma of surprise” (2005: 104) and so do we. The initial question “And who’s this little fellow in his itty bitty robe?” is an invitation to that surprise, that coincidence Nancy so aptly describes as the “common incidence” of “being taken by each other” and by “coming upon each other... as the same image (Nancy 2005: 104)”. So as soon as “The photo *captures* the familiar,” we should not be surprised that “immediately, instantaneously, it *strays* into strangeness. By capturing its own straying, it leads what it captures astray. The photograph *estranges*, it estranges us (Nancy 2005:106)”. It makes perceptible what is often identifies as imperceptible or impossible to be perceived. Suggesting and playing with grasped illuminations of the image, which in its inactuality and attention clings to the poet. The photograph in the poem, and the poem about the photograph engage a disturbing “coming upon” of one another, a kind of acting out of being grasped in the act of grasping and portrait building. Hitler and us, “others together” taken in what is a poetic “illuminated capture” (Nancy 2005: 106).

Inadequate as the poet’s *regarding* of this artless but incontrovertible photograph is, we nevertheless sense it discloses a lot in one thing, the *exorbitant* thing.⁶ Certainly, the putting of the poetic and photographic vision together creates a sort of uneasy multiple portrait that surprises and gathers us despite the obscurity implied in our brief determination.

⁶ I am following Barthes here who says that in the photograph there is : “no odor, no music, nothing but the *exorbitant* thing (1993: 91)”.

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РАЗМИШЉАЊЕ О ФОТОГРАФИЈИ И ПОЕЗИЈИ

Сажетак

Предмет овог есеја јесте песма пољске песникиње и добитнице Нобелове награде Виславе Шимборске (*Wisława Szymborska*) “**Hitler’s First Photograph**,” (“Прва Хитлерова фотографија”, 1986), која је у есеју претстављена као простор међусобног сагледавања језика и слике. Надахнута једном упечатљивом фотографијом, песма изражава осећање амбивалентности између песничког стварања и фактографије, а изнад свега открива варљивост која је у природи слике. На темељу идеја Жана Лука Нансија (*Jean Luc Nancy*), ауторка овог есеја заснива уверење да слика омогућава схватање онога што се обично сматра несхватљивим. Неуметничка, али снажна слика пружа основу за поетско промишљање у песми “**Hitler’s First Photograph**” стварајући, кроз поетску визију, групни портрет у коме се објекат и посматрачи састају у неочекиваној епифанији.

Кључне речи: писање-слика, фотографија, писање, фактографијавишеструки портрет, ненадана фактографија