Photography

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Some readers glancing at the table of contents of the new issue of *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* may think that they are in the wrong corner of the library. Given the diversity of topics studied and methodologies used, is this really an issue of a semiotic journal, or is it an issue of an interdisciplinary journal devoted to culture? And the readers who really scrutinize the articles will find both a confirmation and a denial of their first impressions. For if all contributions to this issue belong to the field of photography studies, the meaning of the word 'photography' is not always the same, nor is the approach that of photography 'studies'.

Photography as it is understood by the contributors to this issue does not have a single, but a double referent. On the one hand, photography refers to an *object*, which is the result of a photographic *act*. On the other hand, photography refers also to the act itself, be it the act of production or the act of reception. Yet most contributors demonstrate very convincingly that this distinction between object and act is artificial, and in some cases even deceitful and dangerous. The argument goes as follows: first it is argued that it is not possible to conceptualize a photographic object without taking into account the conditions and circumstances of its making, and *vice versa*; second, that it is no longer possible to subscribe to a monolithic or homogeneous definition of what an 'object' and an 'act' actually are in the field of photography. A photographic image, even if one dissociates it from the act of its making, is never just a single image. Even if one disregards the debates on

photography in the age of reproducibility (and, by the way, the essays gathered in this volume clearly suggest that this topic is not as hot today as fifteen years ago, when digitization was the hype), each single image becomes a multiple image from the very moment it is being circulated, for this circulation — this social life, if one prefers — of the image tends to create numerous new meanings. Corollary, the contributors to this issue all promote and document the idea that a photographic act is not just a single act, but a broad set of mechanisms and operations (from the very decision to shoot a picture to the effort involved in getting it circulated in this or that way), *i.e.* a network whose complexities cannot be reduced to one single act, one single operator, one single temporality.

Nevertheless, we have to raise the question to what extent the diversity of the contributions to this issue reflects, or instead refutes, the contemporary tendencies in the visual semiotics of photography. For many years, indeed, visual semiotics has been characterized by its highly restrictive or, if one prefers, specialized character. First of all, visual semiotics — as well as semiotics in general — suffered from the mutual ignorance of its two major schools (the continental tradition of Saussure-Hjelmslev-Greimas and the American tradition of Peirce). This resulted in a regrettable lack of dialogue and debate, and the subsequent over-specialization of each of the traditions. Secondly, and more importantly, because both the continental and the American approach have had a propensity to focus exclusively on a limited number of questions: the question of the indexical or iconic status of the image (in American semiotics) or the question of its formal characteristics (in European semiology). Of course, there have always been a number of go-betweens, and the small subfield of photography studies within visual semiotics has proven incredibly fertile in this regard, for instance through the work of Umberto Eco (1976), which has led to a complete renewal of the reading of the visual, through the work of Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1987), which has played a key role in acclimatizing many Peircean ideas to continental thinking, and through that of the Groupe μ (1983), whose *Traité du signe visuel* remains unchallenged as the authoritative synthesis of the field. And not just the study of photography, but photography itself has offered a solid ground for the development of a totally new semiotics, whose inspiration is more sociological (some critics would say: more ideological) but whose role in the encounter between semiotics and cultural studies has been of paramount importance. The work by Roland Barthes, first in his *Mythologies* (1971), then in his *Camera Lucida* (1981), has proven decisive in this regard, as is easily demonstrated by the number of scholars in cultural studies who have relied on this new semiotics, where the image is read in social terms as well as linked to a new reflection on the body and soul of the subject (Hall 1997). The growing exchanges between the various branches of semiotics, which have been successfully fostered by photography studies, and the gradual broadening of semiotics itself, which has become a semiotics of the

social field, have made room for diversity. Good examples of this 'better practice' can be found in recent overviews like the collection edited by Frizot (1998) and the evolution of a journal like *Études photographiques* (whose initial focus on a rather traditional semiological point of view has been progressively replaced by a stronger emphasis on history and phenomenology). From this point of view, the diversity of this issue is not only, as we all like to say, a sign of richness and broad-mindedness, but also a sign of its actually being representative of what is happening in the field.

The opening article by Jan Baetens attempts to give a survey of the 'larger picture' of these evolutions, while making a double plea for the convergence of semiotics and semiology on the one hand and the cultural interpretation of semiotic facts on the other. This appeal for a broadening of the field, however, does not imply that more traditional approaches are not present in this issue. In this regard, the contribution by Maurizio Gagliano, who transfers to the field of photography the key ideas of Umberto Eco on translation (following the example of what had been done by Nicola Dusi in his work on cinema), is a good example of "traditional" or "classic" semiotics, even if the starting point of Gagliano is more Peircean than Greimassian. In line with some of the other contributions, Gagliano's article also deals with the question of digital photography, yet not in the strictly 'ontological' perspective that has been imposed for many years by the mainstream reflections on the digital revolution.

Several articles approach photography in a spirit of intermediality. This is the case, for instance, in the contribution by Maria Giulia Dondero, who analyzes the pictures taken by Roger Pic during the famous tour of the Berliner Ensemble in Paris in 1957 (and whose influence on the evolution of drama studies in France has been vital). Dondero compares the specific aspects of this type of photography with the images that are offered to the audience in the theatre, and this comparison enables her to reframe the photographic practice from the perspective of a global media theory. The article by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, who looks at the mutual influences of mechanical (photographic) and manual (pictural) images and ways of representing, points to the same questions, while emphasizing the relationships between the representational techniques on the one hand and the history and social construction of the images on the other. In a similar vein, Hilde Van Gelder's article scrutinizes the frequent hesitation between the models of art and documentary in many contemporary artists (her examples are Wall and Sekula), suggests that all serious study of photography today should start with a meditation on the place of this medium in the broader media ecology. The essay by Isabella Pezzini discusses intermediality in a way that is even more direct, since she close-reads a photographically illustrated book by G.W. Sebald. Sebald was not the first one to include photographic documents in his creative prose writing, yet he was probably the first, at least in

recent literature, to successfully challenge the taboo on photographic illustrations in fiction books. The essay by Danièle Méaux is devoted to a very particular type of photography (travel photography in book form), which is studied here as a literary genre and, obviously, although in less explicit terms, as a form of intermediality. Finally, this second group of articles also comprises Ruggero Eugeni's essay, who proposes a stimulating rethinking of the basics of photography (like the distinction between 'operator' and 'spectator', established since *Camera Lucida*) with the help of a close-reading of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, one of the most profound reflections ever made on both the image and its making.

A third group of articles combines semiotics (intermedial semiotics, more precisely) and reader-response theory. In this section, essays are gathered that exceed the frontiers between photography as an object and photography as an act. In certain cases, the contributions adopt a more historical perspective, although their ultimate scope is always much broader. In her analysis of the aerial photography of the death camps in Auschwitz, Nathalie Roelens examines the ethical stakes of these images and especially of their reception, which has been tragically (and following Roelens, purposively) 'missed' or unsuccessful. The possible result of the reading of these images (which might have prompted the Allied Forces to bomb the camps) has not been their real result (which was to ignore them, in order to avoid any interference with the other war operations). In a different mode, more hilarious at first sight (but only at first sight, as the author shows very convincingly), Bernard Darras scrutinizes the digital make-up applied to the photographs of celebrities. Starting from a very particular example, he rapidly hints at the social construction of social and racial types and the political underpinnings of what is being done in digital photo websites. Darras tackles the importance of digital techniques in cultural terms, not only from a technical viewpoint, and this stance is shared by two other contributions. Giovanni Fiorentino, first of all, analyzes the notion of photographic 'scandal' while linking it to an interpretation of recent war photography. Secondly, Dario Mangano proposes a sociology (or is it an anthropology?) of our new ways of digital picture making or, more precisely, picture taking. The distinction between subject and camera, between photographer and act, between image and image taking, blurs to the point of non-existence here. Anne Beyaert's article, which examines a corpus of press photographs, is a wonderful summary of the various approaches that accompany and complement each other in this issue. Beyaert is mainly interested in decoding the function of memory in the construction of 'spontaneous' photography, and she stresses the problematic analogy between supposedly analogous notions such as reality, truth, and spontaneity. Beyaert's article is also exemplary in that it unites all the aspects that come together in this issue: first its use of 'tensive semiotics', which helps her to surpass the distinction

between semiotics and semiology, secondly its study of photography as a practice of intermediality (the corpus is not just photographic, but entails the publication context of these images), and finally its linking of pragmatics and ethics. This article is therefore an excellent way of wrapping up the collection, as it offers a perfect synthesis of the research hypotheses underpinning our project.

Most of the texts that are brought together in this issue were originally presented at a conference on the semiotics of photography hosted by the University of Urbino in 2006. We would like to express our most sincere thanks to the Director of the Center for Semiotics, Pino Paioni, for his hospitality as well as his generosity, and extend these thanks to the authors and (anonymous) reviewers of *RS·SI*, the latter for the quality and relevance of their remarks, the former for having taken them on board enthusiastically.

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