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*The Memory Within
Photography:
How to Observe
Photographic Images
in the “Post” Context*

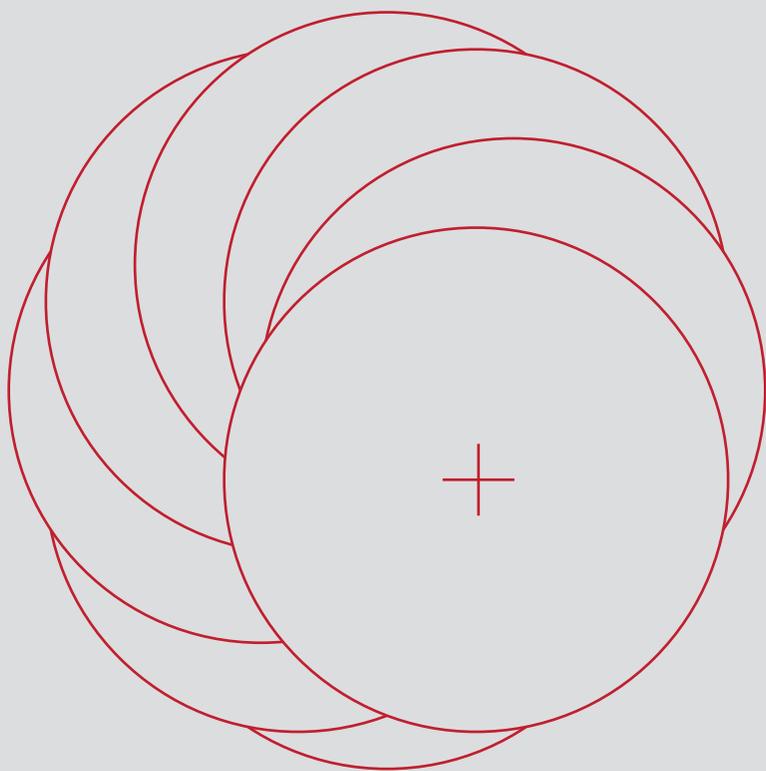
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ABSTRACT

The photographic making has become, in recent decades, a tangle of practices, techniques, and modes of circulation, which makes it a challenge to define what is a photograph today, after all. In this text, we propose a reflection on how to observe contemporary photographic images in networked environments through the concepts of Interface Photography and the Web of Imaginariness. We suggest an approach that emphasizes not only the surfaces of the images but also considers the surroundings that integrate with them, helping to unearth other memory images that are part of their constitution. Furthermore, it's also reflected on the role of the medium – the Instagram image sharing platform – as a device that conditions and promotes the agency of memorial and aesthetic relationships between circulating networked photographic images.

KEYWORDS: photography, memory, interface photography, web of imaginari-ness, Instagram.



INTRODUCTION

Each era inaugurates, through its technical processes, new aesthetical sensibilities and new forms of communication. Today, we are confronted, daily, by a vast profusion of photographic images that reach us through different means and communication channels, taking on varied forms and serving different purposes, making us question the role assumed by photography in our contemporary technoculture.

For authors like Philippe Dubois, who are dedicated to reflecting on the statute of images, photography making has become a tangle of practices, techniques, and modes of circulation, making it imprecise and impossible to define what is, after all, a photograph. In this paper, we take the Instagram social image sharing platform as a privileged locus of observation for the production of thought about the current stage of photographic images. Such a platform has been presenting itself not only as a growing repository of images produced by its users, but also as a substantial collection of contemporary visual technoculture, which allows us to reflect on how images are produced and accessed over a network.

To this end, we will seek to develop a line of thought around the photographic images circulating on Instagram through two articulating concepts: the Interface Photography and the Web of Imaginariness.

The first one refers to a certain modality assumed by the images present in environments such as Instagram. To think of an image as an “interface photograph” is to conceive it from the concatenation of the referent within the photographic frame and the environment that surrounds it. That is, consider the information contained in the platform’s interface, such as comments and likes, among other interaction records that establish the place and function of the image in the context of network communication.

Such elements convene what we call here as “webs of imaginarieness” — which are possible relationships to be established whenever users register their comments on the published images. They are virtual arrangements that consist of interface photography as the central element of the memorial ecosystem whose imagery fragments inhabit its interior update different temporalities.

The text is structured in three parts: the first one describes the methodological procedures used to analyse the images that make up the *corpus* of the work. The following section establishes the conceptual framework that supports reflections and problematizations on how photographic images circulating mostly in environments such as Instagram should be observed. Finally, the section that precedes the conclusive considerations reflects on Instagram as a conditioning device for the way of observing and making photographic images, highlighting some of its main attributes which produce models of a dialectical understanding — sometimes sacralising, sometimes profaning — the imagery produced in it.

INTERFACE PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN OBSERVATION APPROACH TO NETWORKED PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES

(...) The decisive factor in deciphering images is that they are plans. The meaning of the image is found on the surface and can be captured at a glance. However, such a method of deciphering will produce only the superficial meaning of the image. Whoever wants to “deepen” the meaning and restore the abstracted dimensions, should allow their sight to wander the surface of the image. Such wandering the surface is called “scanning” (Flusser 1995, 7).

The scanning procedure, proposed by Flusser, expresses a way of sticking to the images, that is, of imprisoning them with the gaze, making it able to then traverse their surface to gradually extract their meanings. It is from the concept of scanning that we seek inspiration to formulate our proposal for interface photographs.

*Deserted*¹ is an image published on Instagram by the English plastic artist and photographer known as Slinkachu (Image 1). It constitutes the corpus in which we will articulate our discussion on the contemporary photographic image.

Image 1• Deserted.



Source: Slinkachu’s Instagram profile (2019).

Conceived as an interface photograph, in this image, the interactions of the platform users (represented, above all, through comments) should also be considered as constitutive instances of the photographic image, which prove to

¹ Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByLLBXwpcIG/>. Accessed in September 19th 2019.

be a key for its analysis and understanding. The users' comments on the platform act as catalysts of cross-referencing processes referring to other memory images that inhabit each user's private memorial collection, which is triggered when the image surface comes in contact with the memory of these individuals. Such cross-references, expressed through user comments, are the "far ends" of the relationships that link these photographic works on Instagram to other types of images, from different temporalities. In this way, from the perspective of interface photography, Instagram establishes an environment that emulates constructs of places where the individuals who circulate it share, each, their vision of the works they observe.

Image 2- The Interface Photograph.



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Slinkachu's Instagram profile (2019).

When observing *Deserted's* photographic frame (represented by the green frame in Image 2), we can see a small man walking towards what would be a commercial establishment – a motel. It is also observed that this place is formed by a metal can, which, in the context of the composition, is turned into a motel by the photographer. From the perspective of the character's body in the foreground, the viewer sees him as a miniature doll.

This first reading is necessary to move on to the frame which makes up the interface that integrates the photograph. When looking at the interface, we come across the users' comments (highlighted by the smaller red frames), where each

one expresses a type of reference that he or she makes when observing the subject within the photo frame. We come, then, to the point where the interface photograph branches out to start forming a web of imagery references that lead up to other images within the memory of Slinkachu's work. We call such virtual arrangement as a web of imaginariness. These maps encourage us to think that a photographic image is not limited to what the frame shows, stimulating us to exercise a deconstructive look, which seeks to reach other orders of memory images that inhabit the photographic frame.

THE PAST AS ETERNAL RETURN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WEBS OF IMAGINARINESS

When rehearsing on the issue of post-photography, Dubois (2019) considers three dimensions of the functioning of these relationships: the historical, the media, and the theoretical. In this section, we will work with a focus on the historical instance of post-photography, as it is from there that we will constitute our observation axes based on the concepts of interface photography and webs of imaginariness.

For Dubois (2019), post-photography escapes evolutionary chronology and is not conceived as progression, as it questions technological progress, turning it against itself and putting it in crisis. In this sense, post-photography is based on anachronistic time. Characterized by a fluid movement and not subordinated to the paradigms of linear chronology, post-photography is that of a "wounded history, which is sometimes seen, observed and recycled, a history in zigzag and of advances and retreats, a history where the future can rediscover, cross or unite with the past." (Dubois, 2019, loc. 273).

Such perspective of cyclical, non-linear time, formulated by Dubois to think about the time of post-photography, finds resonance in the idea of the past as a living time by French philosopher Henri Bergson. For Bergson,

The past preserves itself, automatically. Undoubtedly whole, it follows us all the time: what we feel, think, what we wanted since our early childhood is there, leaning over the present that will join it, forcing the door of consciousness that would like to leave it out (Bergson, 2006, 47–48).

The French author's perspective on time as an eternal return helps to understand how images update the different instances of the past through cross-referencing processes. These operations are triggered by users who come into contact with these photographic works and are expressed through the comments registered on Instagram's interface.

Returning to Image 2, we observe how the interactions of the platform's users (through the comments), when pointing to a set of cross-referenced images that connect to Slinkachu's work, press and modify the interpretation of what is inside the photographic frame.

"*Fallout Shelter*", says the user's *@do.boi*, first comment. This comment refers to one of many other possibilities to which the meaning of the photographic work can refer. *Fallout Shelter*² is part of the *Fallout* digital game franchise where, in a post-apocalyptic context, the player needs to build and defend their own nuclear shelter, managing resources, people, and their defences. The comment alludes, therefore, to the idea of an underground shelter that resides, simultaneously, both in the promotional materials of the referred game (Image 3) and in the image of *Deserted*.

Still analysing Image 2, it is possible to notice that the second and fifth comments made, respectively, by users *@paulorafaelbici* and *@shalom_zollinger*, quote the series *Bates Motel*³, a television production developed by Carlton Cuse, Kerry Ehrin and Anthony Cipriano from the cinematographic work *Psycho*, by Alfred Hitchcock⁴. This comment lives up to the connection that exists between the photograph and the facade of the motel where the series is featured, in which one can read, in a bright sign, "*Bates Motel, Vacancy*".⁵

Image 2 also includes the comment from user *@_saulocruz* which says: "Joshua Three !!" (sic) (Joshua Tree). The plant on the background of Image 2 is a Joshua Tree, a species commonly found in arid environments. Along the same lines, also with the name of this species, there is a potential reference to the cover of the album *Joshua Tree*⁶ by the Irish band U2.

² *Fallout Shelter* is a free-to-play electronic simulation game for portable devices developed by Bethesda Game Studios, together with Behavior Interactive, and published by Bethesda Softworks. The game forces the player to build and manage their Vault, a nuclear shelter.

³ *Bates Motel* is an American television series of drama, psychological horror and suspense, developed by Carlton Cuse, Kerry Ehrin and Anthony Cipriano, produced by Universal Television and shown by A&E. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2188671/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1>. Accessed on September 19th 2019.

⁴ Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was born in Leytonstone, Essex, England. His first job outside of the family business was in 1915 as an estimator for the Henley Telegraph and Cable Company. His interest in movies began at around this time, frequently visiting the cinema and reading US trade journals. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000033/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm>. Accessed in September 19th 2019.

⁵ Available at: http://www.gsfdcy.com/bates-motel-wallpapers.html#photo_2. Accessed on September 19th 2019.

⁶ Available at: <http://spillmagazine.com/spill-album-review-u2-joshua-tree-30th-anniversary-edition/>. Accessed in September 19th 2019.

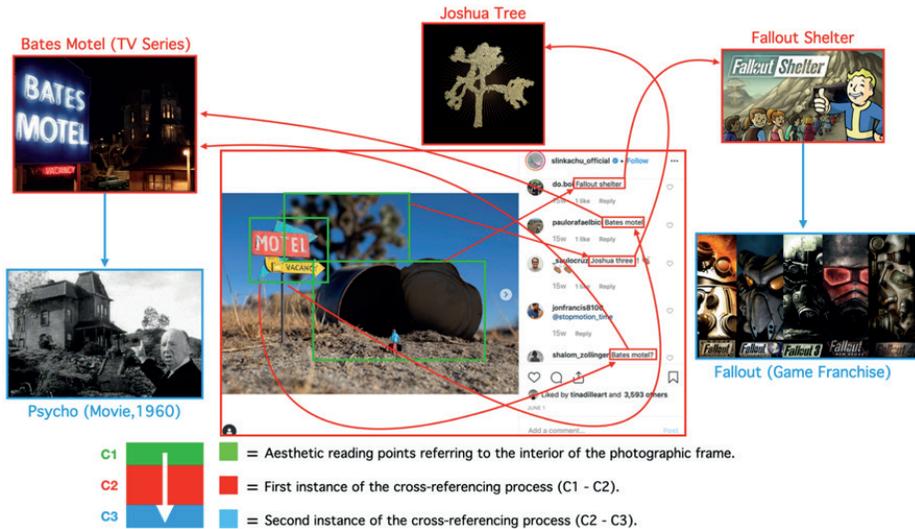
Image 3· Image references in *Deserted*.



Source: “Bethesda.net” (2015), gsfdcy.com and Spill Magazine (2019)

Image 4 seeks to organize and graphically represent the different image references made from *Deserted* in which comments by Instagram users act as memory triggers to evoke different orders of images from the past. This process is reciprocal, and also acts in a reverse manner: these memory images, in turn, invoke the collective memory when coming into contact with the subjectivity of each user.

Image 4· *Deserted*’s web of imaginariness.



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The starting point of this scheme starts at layer C1 (the most superficial layer indicated in green colour), which represents the instance referring to the interior of the photographic frame and the elements that compose it. As indicated, the green frames that highlight the tree, the sign and the individual entering the tin can do

not have connecting arrows of the same colour, as the one outside the photographic frame, since this layer represents only the relationships established between these objects within the photographic subject (inside the photographic frame).

The second layer, C2 (represented in red colour), is the densest layer of those identified so far. This is the level at which an interface photograph moves to the web of imaginarieness arrangement. Here, the observation look turns to a broader scope, which focuses not only on the interior of the photographic frame, but thinks of it as part of Instagram's interface, which is where the cross-referencing processes begin to branch out. With the spatial limits of the photographic image expanded, it is possible to notice a series of relationships being built through each user interaction with the image (through the comments). These relationships are responsible for evoking other images from different temporalities, authenticating these same images as part of a web of imaginarieness, gradually building up around the central image.

The last layer, offered by the photographic work in question, does not strictly concern all memory images brought by users in their comments. Therefore, the two memory lines that connect the viewer to the C3 layer (represented by the blue colour) occur through the works of *Bates Motel* and the game *Fallout Shelter* (which were not directly referenced by users through comments).

The first relationship established at C3 connects directly with *Bates Motel* and is indirectly linked to Slinkachu's photographic work, precisely because the series originated from Hitchcock's film *Psycho*. Similarly, *Fallout Shelter* is a spin-off game from the *Fallout* game franchise. In other words, there is the same type of relationship established, but with different technocultural objects. However, this layer is no less important because it only relates objects of more distant temporalities. On the contrary, it reveals crucial points about the relationship of Slinkachu's work with technocultural elements from other periods, thus contributing to the enrichment of the memorial arrangement of this image.

Considering this process of producing layers that the webs of imaginarieness establish, it becomes productive to think about this process from the media archaeology perspective.

This approach makes it possible to explore temporal coalescences, expanding the web of imaginarieness that is formed around the analysed images. It proves to be pertinent for the study of these images that place themselves partly in the present, and partly in an anachronistic sphere of time. Summing up Huhtamo's (2011) thinking, Fischer (2012) reports that archaeology would have two main uses:

The first would be linked to the study of cyclical and recurrent elements and motives that underlie and guide the development of media culture. A second point would be what he calls the "excavation" of

ways in which these discursive formulations and traditions were marked on specific media machines, in different historical contexts. This type of approach, according to Huhtamo, would emphasize a cyclical rather than a chronological development and would also reinforce the idea of recurrence instead of “unique innovation” (Fischer, 2012, 9).

The cyclical elements referenced in this quote constitute a way of thinking about time outside the moulds that treat it as progressive and exclusively linear chronology. Thus, according to Telles (2017), media archaeology

“Unwrites” traditional historiography by looking for fissure points within the conventional narrative [...], rewrites the history of the media and the (techno)cultural environments in which they find themselves, inserting noise into them, so that they remain critical, open and unstable (Telles, 2017, 3).

Through the arrangement elaborated from Image 4, it is possible to observe Slinkachu’s work as a central image in a certain set of other images, to which it refers, either through the intervention of users, who explain their references through comments, or by the aesthetic points identified by *scanning* the image surface. These other images that constitute and expand the webs of imaginari-ness do not necessarily have a relationship between them and, therefore, tend to represent different temporalities that inhabit Slinkachu’s photographic work. There is an analogous idea of these contemporary photographs as a puzzle: from the perspective of the one who aims to think of these imagery productions as images belonging to both past and present, these photographic productions were constituted through a constant boomerang effect, which recurrently turned to different layers of the past and collected in them their different parts that are composed in the present.

The second point of the archaeological approach to the media in Fischer’s (2012) mention concerns the exercise of archaeological excavation. This movement classifies the type of intervention that was performed on the image, that constitutes the corpus of this work, for the production of the webs of imaginari-ness. Thus, temporal layers were produced transcending the scope that the *scanning* deals with.

It is a critical practice that excavates media-cultural evidence for clues about neglected, misrepresented, and/or suppressed aspects of both media’s past(s) and their present and tries to bring these

into a conversation with each other. It purports to unearth traces of lost media-cultural phenomena and agendas and to illuminate ideological mechanisms behind them. It also emphasizes the multiplicity of historical narratives and highlights their constructed and ideologically determined nature (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011, 28).

That is, from the critical exercise emphasized by the media's archaeological approach, it is possible to work on the range of minority and implicit narratives in each photographic image. Thus, the image is deconstructed and removed from its previously determined ideological involucre to later be reconstructed as an image of even more multifaceted narratives, belonging to different times and products of communicational consumption.

Telles (2017), in articulation to the thought of Huhtamo & Parikka (2011), reports that media archaeology

Cuts across the layers of time and makes a connection between the “here and now” of the present with the “here and now” of the past. This transit between past and present makes the media itself in its concreteness a “media of time” linked not only with what it was but also with cultural and technological memory (Telles, 2017, 7).

In this sense, it is possible to think that a wide range of contemporary photographic images can be thought of as media that flow seamlessly between the present and the past. This dialectical movement also places these images as points that rescue not only other products of media consumption, but also the technocultural notions engendered in each of these products.

PROFANATION AND SACRALIZATION OF NETWORKED PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES

Returning to the layers of the web of imaginarieness regarding Image 4, we ask: how does the relationship between the film (C3), the TV series (C2), and the photograph (C1) takes place? And how is the relationship between the game franchise (C3), the spin-off game (C2), and the photography (C1) established in this same dynamic? It is understood that the conception of each of these works was possible through technology and that the photographic subject of Slinkachu's production has visual elements that enhance memory images referring to both the *Bates Motel* series and the game *Fallout Shelter* (relation C1, C2). In the same way, the American series was based on the concept of the cult film *Psycho*, and *Fallout Shelter* evolved from the game *Fallout* (relation C2,

C3). With these relationships established, it is inferred that Slinkachu's photograph is an indirect reproduction of *Bates Motel* and *Fallout Shelter* (a fact that does not depend on the intentionality of the final work's producer, in this case, Slinkachu). These two objects within the C2 layer, in turn, are reproductions based on the film (C3) and the digital game (C3).

Bringing our discussion closer to Benjamin's (1986) reflection about the process of massive replication of art products and their implications on the value (of exposure and cult) of such works, we observe that the relationships established between the different layers – C1, C2, and C3 – reinforce the character of symbolic contamination among distinct media products. This is true as the processes of replication and dissemination of images are accelerated in networked image sharing platforms, such as Instagram. Under certain conditions provided by Instagram's communicational ecosystem, *Deserted* shares imaginaries and memories in common with both a well-known game franchise (*Fallout*), and with the cult film by Hitchcock (*Psycho*).

Another consequence that emerges from technological reproducibility – and that can also be identified through the previous examples – is the exposure value at the expense of the cult value. Benjamin (1986) deals with this process from the allegory of the destruction of the aura. Thus, the aura, among so many definitions, is responsible for assigning a cult value to imagery objects. Concerning the previous example, it is understood that even at different levels (as there is no comparison between *Psycho* and *Fallout*, but rather a comparison of each of these products with their respective updated forms), the C3 layer imagery objects have an elevated aura and low exposure value, whereas the imagery objects manifested in layer C1 have only traces of the aura and elevated exposure value (also enhanced by the medium in which they are integrated – Instagram). Therefore, technological reproducibility always tends to trivialize, desecrate, and break with the aural involucre present in the works. However, something interesting about this process is that, even with almost non-existent cult value, the vestiges of aura make it possible to refer to other memory images rescued through the imagery repertoires of each communicating individual.

In the wake of the effects of massive image replication that characterizes networked communication environments such as Instagram, the concept of the device, developed by Giorgio Agamben (2005), allows us to deepen our reflection on the impacts of technological reproducibility on the value of photographic images.

For Agamben, a device is “anything that can somehow capture, guide, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure gestures, behaviours, opinions, and discourses of living beings” (Agamben, 2005, 13). Following the perspective proposed by the Italian author, we understand that Instagram is this device that

manages and conditions the modes of exposure, and consumption of images. In this sense, we can question how the referred platform, through its algorithms that give greater or lesser visibility to the elements that circulate in its ecosystem, engenders processes of “profanation” and “sacralization” of certain images.

Agamben (2005) states that the term “consecrate” designates the departure of things from the sphere of human law, while “profaning” means, on the contrary, restoring something to the free use of men. The device that performs and regulates this separation would be the sacrifice that, through a series of rituals, removes objects from the common access domain to place them in a position surrounded by an aural sphere. However, the author reveals that ritually separated entities can be returned, through the rite, to the profane sphere. Therefore, “profanation is the counter device that restores to common use what the sacrifice had separated and divided” (Agamben, 2005, 14).

Summing up the discussions on Image 4, we can infer that the references to the cult/sacred film *Psycho* touch a semiological process that trivializes this cinematographic work. This occurs by placing it, albeit indirectly, within the scope of restitution to common access, that is, fast and superficial consumption operated by users of networked communication platforms.

In summary, Instagram, as a device, enhances the profanation process of the work of art in two ways: the first occurs through the relationships that the platform reveals (the references brought by users through comments, highlighting the previous works to which the photographs published on the network refer to); while the second takes place when Instagram itself acts as a device in favour of technological reproducibility, conveying imagery works on its network (considering Slinkachu’s photographic work as an updated form of Hitchcock’s work that has a lower cult value).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Observing the dialectic becoming that emerges from the relationships between Instagram platform users, the concept of the web of imaginarieness appears as an articulator between the different expressive spheres that frame and, therefore, shape the images published on that network. With the interface photographs and their relations with the exterior of the photographic frame as a central point, the webs of imaginarieness allow us to think towards the opening of a new memorial strata, which update other orders of images that inhabit them.

It is paramount to highlight, however, that every image has the potential to make webs of imaginarieness emerge (such as the one we have begun to plot, throughout this text, from a particular photographic image). However, the number of layers that a web of imaginarieness arrangement can produce on its

surroundings depends on the imagery repertoire of those who observe them, and also the manner in which they visualize them.

The Bergsonian perspective, assumed as the central epistemological axis of this text, in conjunction with an archaeological approach oriented to the “excavation” of images, shape our proposal to find dialectical relationships in images circulating in a network. Thus, we consider that this process helps us to reflect about post-photography, in the terms of Dubois (2019), as a fragmented and reconstituted image from anachronistic fragments.

Finally, it is understood that the different perspectives of observation and problematization on the photographic image, as well as the concepts, developed and operationalized through some analyses, open paths for us to continue developing methods of thinking about the photographic image of the “post era” and its new configurations.

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