The objective subjectivity of an image

DANCE HALL
1932
Brassaï

AT THE CAFÉ', CHEZ FRAYSSE
Rue de Seine, Paris
1985
R. Doisneau

These two photographs are both extracted from the book edited by John Szarkowski, *'Looking at Photographs: 100 pictures from the Collection of The Museum of the Modern Art'* (1973), an extraordinary collection of best pieces from 1845 up to 1968. The author personally chose these pictures, as curator of the Moma's Photography department, in order to give them an eternal lasting value into the Photography history.

All the series in the book shares a common visual aspect: the colour, which is always characterized by a black and white scale, even if it is not always exactly the same.

In fact, as we can easily see in the two examples above, the intensity of the lights is quite different as the first one has much more dark shadows and high contrast in comparison with the one in the right side that has clearly softer and warmer tones.
Nevertheless both of the photographs have been shot in two nightclubs in Paris, and equally in the frames are portrayed two comparable scenes: four characters in pairs, two gentlemen and two ladies seated closely, drinking wine.

If we look at these two pictures above, we can think at first they belong to the same artist, as the style seems very similar. Despite this, they have fifty-three years in between instead and the older one (on the left) was taken in 1932 by the Hungarian photographer Brassaï, who took his name from the small town in which he was born, whereas the one on the right comes from the camera of the well-known French photographer Robert Doisneau.

We do not know anything about these strangers, about their stories or about the overall situation in that place in that specific moment. Especially, we cannot know why the two photographers chose exactly these characters; perhaps, pushed by that desire of knowing and understanding, which connote our species, we deliberately decide to linger on them.
As usually happens in art, even though we are able to read and find information about authors and artists, often we cannot get down into his\her works' meaning.
We can only be certain about the general content, the obvious, about what we can perceive through sight. This is what the theorist, philosopher and critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980) would call *studium*. 'Is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful (...) but it always refers to a classical body of information (...)' he wrote in the first part of his book '*Camera Lucida*' (Barthes, 1981, p. 25, 26).
Basically, he wanted to understand and define why we, as individual subjectivities, are interested in that particular image, as real objective fact.
So, he recognised two main aspects, which together allow the artist to summarize the reality in his personal piece and the viewer to understand what he is looking at and then to develop his personal vision of it.

'He says, in fact, that a picture which is all studium is just a passive object: inert, immobile, lying there. But when there is that second element, the element that breaks up the *studium* (...). Something happens: the

second element goes off from the scene like an arrow and comes and pierces the viewer. This is a reversal: something in the photographs is aggressive and penetrates the viewer' (Gallop, 1985, p.49).

This is the perspective that Barthes would name '*punctum*', from the Latin literal meaning of 'detail', 'instant', 'sting': 'A photographs *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (Barthes, 1981, p.27)

Indeed, choosing these physical verbs, he underlines the concrete and emotional connection between the viewer and the photograph, which now is not anymore a static passive object. Here, 'observing' shifts from a rational act to an intentional participation led by each individual personal experience. In according to the *empiricism,* as a philosophical movement grown during the second half of the 17th century in opposition to the rationalism, in fact, the human knowledge derives exclusively from the *sense* and the *experience*, which was considered as the only and unique possible science.
Later on, after a *few* years, precisely three centuries, this concept seems to be evoked by Barthes implicitly. The *punctum*, in itself, is linked with different ideas and it depends on the viewer's experience, and it means it could not be the same one for everyone, but it will be proportional to the number of people who are looking at that image, or canvas.

'There is no natural connection between particular sounds and particular ideas (if there were, there would be only one human language); but people arbitrarily *chose* to use such and such a word as the mark of such and such an idea. So that is what words are used for, to be perceptible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification' (Locke, 1690, p. 146)

In this passage of his essay about the '*Signification of words'*, the empiric English philosopher introduces and reveals in some way the fundamental principles of the *semiotics,* which Barthes reclaims, applied to Photography, in his 1970 essay *'The Third Meaning',* which 'concerns what he finds beyond the first and second order of meaning, the informational (the purely denotative level of the shot) and the symbolic. Where symbolic meaning is intentional and "obvious," the third meaning is 'obtuse.' If first and second meanings are those of communication and signification, the third meaning is that which exceeds signification: Barthes calls this *signifiance.'* (Mueller, 2005), which takes shape from a theoretical individuality.

Looking back at both images, what we can feel is just a strict and cold spirit that lingers and dominates the atmospheres, as the actors were unsatisfied by something happened that we, as audience, can just wonder and never really know. That is actually what makes this kind of images, which are covered by a mysterious veil, so unique and interesting.

'I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at.' (Barthes, 1981, pp. 53)

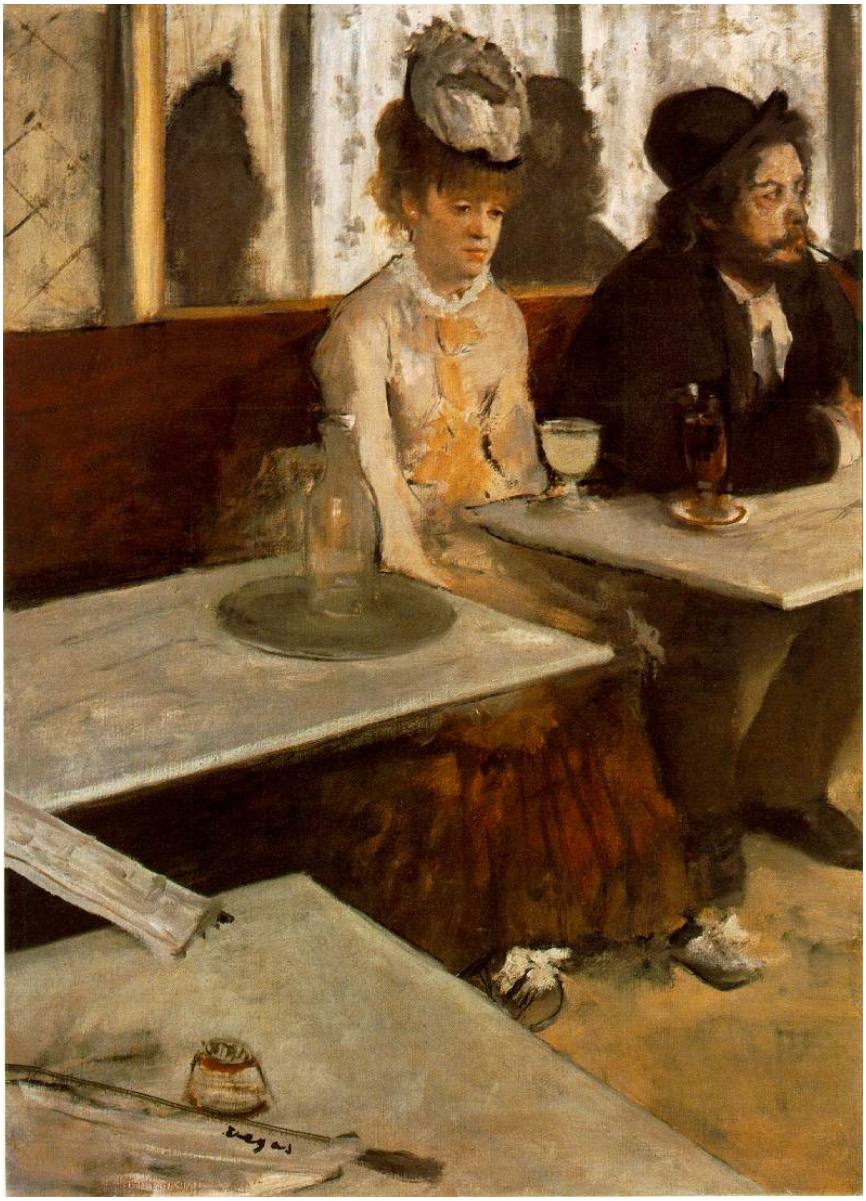
As a viewer, the details, which stick in my mind the most, are the glasses.

I imagine (this is all I can do, since I am not a photographer) that the people in the right frame are drinking red wine, but what surprise me is to find on the table four glasses per two individuals, three of which are full: only the one in front of the man is empty. *She* is still having the first red. That is my *punctum*, that lets me develop my story about them.

He is older than the lady to whom he keeps offering too many drinks, which *she* does not even want to drink. As suggested by her down gaze, *she* seems subdued and resigned to his oppressive dominant presence, even if, at the same time *she* firmly refuses to give to him what *he* pretends from her.

In the opposite frame instead, both of the glasses, one per each, are finished. It means they are playing as equals in whatever kind of relationship they are in. Nobody of them seems to overcome the scene or each other neither, both looking to different directions.

These examples of Photography, automatically, bring me back to Paris of the second half of the 19th century, where the *Impressionism* was influencing the world of the modern art, while the French painter Degas was painting '*The Absinthe Drinker*' (1873) as a critique of the social isolation of the misunderstood modern artists, which were used to meet each other at The Cafè de la Nouvelle Athènes, Paris.



THE ABSINTHE DRINKER
At the Cafè de la Nouvelle Athènes,
Paris
1873
Edgar Degas

The classic night-charm that dresses Paris and its people seems to be the inspiration of the art in general since the dawn of time, evolving his style moving over from the impressionist brushstrokes on canvas, up to the modern version of them translated by the camera into the latest creation of a realistic portrait.

After all, the result is a dimension where relationships work reciprocally. While the public expects something from the artist and vice-versa, an unique common intellect that pushes the artistic mind to create and the

viewer to observe, governs overall: the *art*, the only religion that does not have any rules at all, where there is no right or wrong. That is probably the main reason why art actually will be never considered as a religion. At the same time, it seems like the fact of not having any kind of rules is the bravest faith that a person can ever choose to follow. Sometimes *freedom* in itself, the one we have always been looking for, implies too much freedom to handle, risking to get lost.

In conclusion, there are many ways as many sorts of art to represent situations, to tell stories, or just to let your thoughts speak louder, as we have learnt throughout the history. However, there is the same amount of probabilities to understand the right interpretation of these authentic mute pieces.

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