

FROM MIMESIS TO IMAGING
The representation of art as a critical visual-resource
Considerations and emblematic cases

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Abstract

The purpose of this contribution consists in looking at that particular photography sector which is related to the photographic representation of art.

It intends to investigate the characteristics of this kind of photography and to search out that probable expressive originality which springs from the tension between the imitative ability and the creative will. Starting from the etymology of the word “mimesis” considered in its double meaning of “imitation” and of “image”.

I tried to outline the activity related to the photographic representation of art, in the attempt to catch out, through the historical evolution, its aesthetic value.

Keywords

Mimesis, image, copy, reproduction, translation, Plato, Aristotle, Bernard Berenson, Man Ray, Ugo Mulas, Auguste Rodin, Medardo Rosso.

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Resumo

O propósito deste contributo consiste em olhar um setor particular da fotografia que se relaciona com a representação fotográfica da arte.

Pretende investigar as características deste tipo de fotografia e pesquisar a provável originalidade expressiva que brota da tensão entre a capacidade imitativa e a vontade criativa. Partindo da etimologia da palavra “mimesis”, considerada no seu duplo significado de “imitação” e de “imagem”. Procurei delinear a atividade dependente da representação fotográfica de arte, numa tentativa de captar, através da evolução histórica, o seu valor estético.

Palavras-chave

Mimesis, imagem, cópia, reprodução, tradução, Platão, Aristóteles, Bernard Berenson, Man Ray, Ugo Mulas, Auguste Rodin, Medardo Rosso.





Nothing could seem easier than talking about imagination or about image. However, nothing is harder than connecting the “phantom”, the *simulacrum*, that appears clearly to our mind’s eye, to the root of the lexical Greek word: *mimos*, *mimeomai* (imitation, to imitate). The etymology of the word “image”, as well as that of the word “idea”, from the Greek *eidōs*, *feid*, *feideo* (view, to see) brings us back to the representation of something already existing. The image, the idea, even the invention, from *inventus* (to find), all carry an historical-philological atavistic bond with the “reality” that preceded and from which they have been originated.

The concept of *mimesis* originates from the thought of Plato, who speaks in the *Republic* of copies of reality. Even Aristotle in the *Poetics*, later speaks about *mimesis*, but no longer in terms of “copy”, but of “representation”. Inherent in the ideology and in the artistic-literary expressiveness of the Latin world, the re-presentation – understood as something presented again, as a *reproduction* and *transduction* of reality or of an existing model – turns out to be a task of paramount importance for the transmission of knowledge and understanding, whether performed by a copyist, an engraver, a photographer, a translator or an interpreter. In the activity of visual rendering, it often happens that the terms “representation” and “translation” are used interchangeably. The “translation” is a skill that is learned through an educational activity, which is experienced on an existing model; apparently it is a repetitive activity, but actually it requires talent and, in certain cases, even “inspiration”.

After all, translating — before being a literary, scientific, technical and artistic craft — is an incessant, often unconscious daily activity. We translate in our mind (good, bad, faithfully or arbitrarily) what people tell us, their words, but also their looks, gestures, attitudes, trying to grasp their true meaning (Magris, 2006).

Therefore, what is originality? Well, “original”, to stay on the etymological level, means giving rise to other things. Considering that between reality and its representation, figurative, abstract or conceptual that is, there is a virtuous relationship, within the borders of which the artistic creativity performs.

It is possible to define as original any activity whose relationship with the original is declared, otherwise, if you are operating in bad faith, in art as in literature, you end up incurring in falsification and betrayal (Montani, 2001: interview February 21).

“Betrayal” is derived from *trans-ere*, that is “to deliver” (the traitor was the one who, during the anti-Christian persecution, delivered the holy books to authorities), not to be confused with *trans-ducere*, hence the term “translation”, which means to conduct, to accompany.

However, what distinguishes a copy from a translation? We try to explain it with the words that the artist and engraver Giuseppe Longhi uttered back in 1830 and that are still very topical.

I say that a “copy” is a thing which is performed by the same means that gave birth to the original, whereas a “translation” is that work of art reproduced by the means of a totally different art. Equal is their aim, as well as the obligation to maintain inviolate the invention, the composition, the expression, the proportion, chiaroscuro and perspective of the original. In a word, the copy is closely linked to the original both in substance and in the way, the translation is constrained to the substance, free in the way (Ferretti, 1975: 124).

At that time, the art itself was increasingly “museumfied” and was the subject of interest from collectors to dealers, while engraving and lithographic techniques played a very important role in the field of art reproduction and dissemination. By the end of “the century of copper”, as Luigi Lanzi has described the eighteenth century, with reference to the prints from engravings that it had produced, the next “century of stone” – paraphrasing Lanzi and with reference to the invention of lithography by Senefelder – would last about 40 years. It came to an end because of the opening of a process not yet passed, although technically considerably evolved, i.e. the photographic reproduction/translation.

Photography, drawing and engraving techniques are intended as equally suitable to perform the same task, that is reproduction (Miraglia, 1977: 55).

So pronounced the Standing Committee of the Royal Calcografia, in 1886, concerning the institutional function of inventory and documentation of artistic property in Italy and in the colonies. In its “reproductive” role, the photography as heir of engraving and drawing, intended as works of art reproduction has always involved artists as well as art historians and critics.

Daguerreotype plates were relatively cumbersome, yet in this regard the judgment of John Ruskin leaves no doubt: «It is certainly the most extraordinary invention of the century» (Costantini & Zannier, 1986: 32).

Among the pioneers, one of the most sensitive to the problem related to the work of art dissemination and the most aware of the role that photography was more and more playing, was certainly Bernard Berenson:

The task of photographing a painting is almost unbeatable when it comes to preserve the values, relationships and color transitions. (...) It is a fact, of which only long experience can make us fully persuaded, that photography highlights not only the details, but also aspects that escape our observation. (...) I'm not ashamed to confess that I happened to run into errors more often when I have personally seen a work of art than when I have known it only from reproductions. So today I hesitate to come to a conclusion about a work of art without first submitting it to the dispassionate examination of the photographs (Berenson, 1986: 147).

His antagonist Roberto Longhi transformed the photograph of artworks as a tool for documentation into a critical tool itself as exemplified in the volume of Piero della Francesca's Arezzo fresco cycle, where the photographs are not accessories but the supporting frame of the text and Longhi's thought in its making and then in its manifestation (Zambrano, 2009: 22).

And while Marcel Raymond, in presenting his books on Florentine sculpture, began saying that the name Alinari should have been placed beside his own, remarked:

In an art book is even more important to show the works than to talk about it. The progress of photography and photogravure has completely transformed the conditions of art criticism and the way to edit books. Today all the photogravures that illustrate the art books allow the reader to better follow the thinking of the writer and allow the writer to suppress all the long, unnecessary descriptions in order to directly pursue the train of his thought (Ferretti, 1975: 136).

In 1870, Hermann Grimm (professor at the University of Berlin) was among the first to use the slides as educational support. He believed that images bolster and that speech was not necessary to justify images. It seems that Heinrich Wölfflin should have in mind not so much the works of Rodin, but pictures of his works when he says that the contemporary sculptures are totally alien to the principle of frontal view:

It is difficult to decide from where they should be looked at, given that by no side they appear in a comprehensive manner, so that the observer comes to a complete reading clarity only through the sequence of all the single points of view (Messina, 2001: 34).

Auguste Rodin himself was fully aware of the interpretation gradient of photography, this is proven by the fact that he signed the plates executed by the photographer Eugène Druet. Images in which works of art dialogue in a space where disorder and lights create real screenplays. It was precisely the indications delivered by Rodin to his photographers — and disseminated through the great fortune encountered by the sculptor in contemporary art magazines – that unthrew one of the canons laid down by decades of stereotypical professional photographic practice: frontal view distance and uniform daylight.

Medardo Rosso had a different approach with photography. As well as a necessary tool in the survey of the creative process, the photographs of Medardo Rosso's works of art were very often subject of reckless cuts by the sculptor himself .

They are themselves works of art and works as fluid and unstable as the overall artistic creation of Medardo Rosso is (Mora, 2009: 32).

According to Constantin Brancusi, the language of photography and sculpture clash and interpenetrate each other to the point that it is often difficult to separate the sculpture from its image, so much so that often they end up to become one single work in our mind. We recall as Brancusi, dissatisfied with photographic reproduction of his works of art asked his friend Man Ray to teach him to take pictures. We know how Brancusi even bother to develop them by himself. Let us remember it with the words of Man Ray.

I helped him to take the first photo and showed him the steps to perform in the darkroom. Starting from then he worked alone, without consulting me. Later he showed me his pictures: they were all blurred, overexposed or underexposed, scratched and stained. He said that his works had to be reproduced that way, maybe he was right. He had photographed one of his golden birds while invested by the rays of the sun, so that the sculpture seemed to radiate a kind of aurora, giving it an explosive character (Man Ray, 1981: 94).

Halfway between reportage and documentation, the photographic work of Ugo Mulas is a plain and intelligible page in the history of art criticism, where environment, construction, material, artist's thought and considerations of the photographer, take shape and substantiate in a simple, meaningful, wonderful click.

I enjoyed very much to see him working, to see these things, so light, colorful, invented (...). Movement was really the number one problem of his work, because nothing is less photogenic than a thing that moves. I quickly realized that Calder did not like much those photographs where the movement took away clarity from the object. Actually "mobiles" are not made to move like airplane propellers as I have seen in some movies on Calder. The "mobile" is an indolent object, an object that feels the slightest air currents in the house, and moves lazily taking wind directions and sailing in that gust of air, for this reason it is a nonsense to reproduce a "mobile" whirling like an airplane propeller. However there is a point of movement that is the minimum movement of only one side of the mobile that can help you understand the game. I managed to get this only a few times because I also wanted very much to do something that was as close as possible to the spirit of Calder, for this reason I was not looking for a beautiful picture, but a picture illustrating Calder's works of art (Mulas, 1973: 80).

Instead of pictures that look like paintings, Aaron Siskind's photographs seem rather reproductions of paintings on paper that is to say, the place where people mainly admire the paintings they see. His photographs are therefore reproductions, but reproductions without the original (Bergstein, 1995, vol.11, N. 2).

Considering that our visual memory has a more persistent idea of the "replica" or "photographic documentation" than of its original, today, this Harold Rosenberg thought raises some doubts around the value of art photographic documentation, considered not so much as a "surrogate" or "second-hand" picture but a complex representation that can convey different cultural values.

Returning to the concept of "copy" and "translation", if we assume that the photography belongs to the universe of signs and it can be expressed in many different languages, the activity of linguistic translation is comparable to the activity of photographic reproduction. Both express themselves within the very narrow limits fixed from the original work. Within these limits, they are expressed, sometimes with more freedom of personal choice, sometimes, however, closely following the customer's instructions. The exercise of this activity arouses a dialectic function that oscillates between two contradictory variants: "fidelity" and "treason".

In my opinion, in photography, the better artist is not the one who most “betrays” the original. This last personal consideration contravenes Italian legal provisions from which descends a different degree of copyright protection that discriminates between art photography and documentary photography:

The Italian legal system, and in particular the rules on intellectual property, regulates three different types of photographic images: creative photographs, protected as intellectual property by copyright; simple pictures or no creative images obtained with the photographic process or similar process protected under Articles 87 and following of the law n. 633/41, in the context of related rights. Finally, the photographs of writings, documents, business papers, material objects, technical drawings and similar products which are also excluded from the protection afforded to the simple photographs (Parente, 2005, Conference May 27).

This happens because of a sad result of poor interpretation of Benedetto Croce’s cultural heritage.

Even the photography, if it has anything of artistic, that is because it transmits, at least in part, the intuition of the photographer, his point of view, the attitude and the situation that he has strived to grasp (...) (Croce, 1909: 234).

Whether photography, as it is known, has helped painting and engraving get rid of the more traditional place they have had in the image history, i.e., to reproduce reality – where for reality, in the cases examined, is meant the original art — it has also directed its attention towards new significant experiences exempt from any naive referentiality. Photography succeeded in winning the autonomy of expression and language already universally recognized in the field of art, but it is still struggling to gain momentum in its “critical role”. I hope that these reflections will encourage a more extensive investigation around the role played by the “photography” considered not only as a support, a functional corollary, or even a work of art, but also as an autonomous critical language.

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