

Subject and demiurgy in the photographic gesture

Ana Taís Martins Portanova Barros

Abstract

Based on statements that give clues concerning creativity and subjectivity in Brazilian theoretical studies of photography, this paper discusses the notion of the subject that is presented there, comparing it with that which is derived from contemporary theories underpinning the splintering of identity. The conclusion that subjectivism negates creativity because of its binary nature leads us to seek, along with Heidegger and Wunenburger, concepts that equate the idea of an unstable subject with that of creation. An anthropological - not epistemological - obstacle is presented by the constant which results either in “schizomorphic” or “gliscomorphic” thought, simultaneously embodied in the assertion of arrogant sovereignty over and integration divorced from technique (image). These results emphasize the need for a two-fold solution through *coincidentia oppositorum* that makes a third element the basis and justification for what was initially binary, restoring the possibility of demiurgy to the multipliable subject.

Key words:

Photography. Subject. Creativity.

1 Introduction

“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,” (Genesis 1:26). The Creator gives His creations gifts likened to His own, so the creature is also creative. Despite this reassuring information from Genesis, the creative possibilities of humanity are a recurring question. When it comes to actions mediated by strong technical devices, such as photography, uncertainty as to the human mark on the final product grows and calls for reflection on who, after all, is the subject of this predicate.

The notion of the subject seems to pair immediately with the object (*objectum*), the former referring to what is put inside (*sub*) and the latter to what is set before (*ob*) humankind. When conducting a new survey of notions of the subject, Hall (1999, pp. 35-45) distinguishes three main options: the Enlightenment, Sociology and Post-Modernity. He points out the characteristics of each one, being that in the first two the subject has a relatively stable core, something like an inner essence, and in the third the core falls apart, and identity is changeable, multiplied and

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multipliable. In the transition from the modern subject to the postmodern subject, according to Hall (1999), five periods can be underscored that signal the complete decentralization of the subject: Marx's rejection of man as the essence of his theoretical basis; the Freudian theory that man is defined by unconscious processes; Saussure's theory that man is not the author of what he says, because the language he uses to express it is preexisting; Foucault's theory that the individual is monitored by collective power; and feminism, which is believed to have brought the family and household things into the heart of social protest.

Will the subject lose his active voice when losing his core identity? If it is impossible to assign him a distinguishing mark that can differentiate him forever and amid any number of other marks, can this subject still have the demiurgic gift granted at the time of his creation? Who is this man who is no longer sure of his place in the world? What can he do?

The shocks to man's self-image seem to be recurrent in Western civilization. By removing man from the center of the universe, the Copernican Revolution made him realize his relative position in the world; Freud informed us that man does not even know what was going on inside his own head, and almost at the same time, physics showed that certainties about the material world are extremely

uncertain. Can a man who does not know himself still believe in his own creative autonomy?

Based on this point, this paper will reflect on the basis of the partial results of a study I am conducting with the general aim of reviewing the relations between science, imagination and common sense present in Brazilian scholarly production about photography.

2 A question

This article is specifically built up on the basis of a question about creativity in photography that the protocol of analysis asks of the texts that make up the body of empirical research: does it exist? If so, where does it come from? The answers found allow us to conclude that photography, despite being a form of expression shot through with all kinds of contradictions, is still viewed as being carried out by a modern subject with a stable identity. Here we will consider some theoretical consequences of these ideas, making them engage in dialogue between the literature of the body of empirical research and authors external to it.

I have mapped the intellectual output on photography produced in Brazil during the ten-year period between 1999 and 2009 (the date this study began). Based on the CAPES directory of theses and dissertations and the directory of CNPq research groups, I have sought papers that looked at photography as an *episteme*, providing clues to what would become a theory of Brazilian photography. Using photography as the word

search expression, I found 111 research groups in the CNPq directory. It should be observed that, out of the intellectual production of these 111 groups, it was necessary to discard 101 of them because they only used photography marginally, seeking visual information. I then went on to map the intellectual production of the 10 other research groups, published during the 10-year period covered by this study, and arrived at 29 papers that effectively focused on what might be called a theory or philosophy of photography.

In the CAPES directory, the total found was 65 theses and dissertations that matched the search with the word photography. After analyzing their abstracts, I arrived at 16 papers that were suited to the criteria for forming the empirical body of this research.

During the current stage of this study, I am reviewing the heuristics explicit or implicit in the texts. The issue of creativity, which is strategic in the discussion of the epistemological foundations of the technical image, is especially examined. Having analyzed 45% of the empirical body observed that 36% of the studies do not touch on the question of creativity in photography, focusing instead on what they term the photographic sign.¹ The remaining 64% of the studies view creativity in photography as being supported by the subjectivity of the photographer,

conceived as an individual, with a personal outlook, as in the following excerpt:

Every photographer looks at things in the world as a cognitive method, a unique way of thinking, in which technique is at the service of interpretation. He individualizes the reading to supplement it with his own meaning, removes things from the world, encrypts them internally in accordance with everything that makes them unique, and returns them to the place from where he took them, multiplying their meanings in themselves (GATTO, 2004, p. 102).

Here we observe the respective positions of the photographer on one side and the world on the other; the photographer is in the position of the subject and the world in the position of the object to be known. Here, photography plays the role of an instrument of cognition and the photographer is a subject who has an essence, “everything that makes him unique.” The core identity remains stable in the process of learning about the world, and the world runs the risk of remaining stable in the end, because the things that are removed from it are returned to the place from which they were taken by the photographer. There is a nod to the multiplication of meanings, but one can ask whether this multiplication is not the same as that effected by the unfolding of the Same in pairs, since the two poles of the relationship remain in place.

So while the idea of splintering the subject seems to have already achieved a considerable level of diffusion, it is betrayed *en petit*, when its possible

¹ These works are strongly affiliated with semiotics, especially Peirce, which may explain the de-historicization of photography and consequent disregard for the subject.

consequences are put under magnifying glass, showing that we have not abandoned so hastily the habits of thought cultivated for millennia and only occasionally placed in question.

Photography as the reproduction of the real, that is, as objectivity, as direct access to the world, seems to be sufficiently assumed as a given, as the work often assigns responsibility for photographic production to a subject that looks at things in a particular way. However, even when rejecting the idea of photography as a window on the world, there is a tendency to think of it as a window on someone's (the photographer's) world, as in the following quote:

That which, for us, is a "natural" portrayal is actually a way of apprehending "reality" (according to a codification of Renaissance perspective), or, in other words, it could be said that photography *means* what someone with *authorization* saw before us, and that same someone, the photographer, gives us his way of seeing (CHAMARELLI FILHO, 2002, p. 204, author's emphasis).

The notion of the subject is based, from the logical standpoint, on the early systemization of rational thought when Socrates challenged the polysemic, ambiguous and contradictory quality characteristic of mythical thought with the rational demonstration of the existence of only two ways of thinking: right and wrong. Plato refined the ideas of his teacher with his famous allegory of the cave, which, as Heidegger points out (1989 in MARCONDES, 1997, p. 267), introduces the idea that the subject has to adjust his eyes to the

object: the man who leaves the cave (the darkness of ignorance) must adjust his eyes so he is not blinded by the light (true sight). According to Heidegger, this marked the birth of the concept of knowledge based on the subject-object relationship, which views identity as a trait of being. However, the philosopher is convinced that the truth is otherwise:

Man is manifestly an entity. As such, he is part of the totality of being, like the stone, the tree and the eagle. Here, belonging also means to be inserted into being. But the distinguishing feature of man lies in the fact that he, as a thinking being, open to being, is confronted with it, is still related to the being and therefore corresponds to it. Man is precisely this relationship of correspondence, and only that. "Only" is not necessarily a limitation, but a plenitude (HEIDEGGER, 2006, p. 44).

The correspondence to which the author refers, and which constitutes man, is not assimilated into the subject-object relationship. The correspondence of the being with an entity is a third element, a point of support – and not a mere intermediary – between the two different elements. We will return to this later.

The subject, which is within (*sub-jectum*), differs from what is outside (*ob-jectum*). Subjectivism (as much as objectivism) expels the third element, which is consistent with the principle of identity (A is A), of non-contradiction (it is impossible to be both A and not A) and the excluded third element (A or not-A). Creativity in photography as a result of the photographer's individual world view is at once an attribution of the subject-object

duality, determinism and distrust of appearances. The photographer who looks at the world is the subject separated from the object, which is, in itself, just waiting to be discovered beneath the deceptive appearances that prevent the distracted eye from seeing it. In a subject-object relationship there is no creation, but rather two disjoint and stable hubs, so that crediting subjectivity with creative expression in photography means depriving man of that creative faculty.

The technical apparatus of photography carries in its genesis the marks of binarity, reflecting and reinforcing its *arché* positivist ideas. Photography arrived at a time when, although the developments of science indicated great difficulty in predicting the behavior of nature, it seemed that man could dominate the world. The fact that photography is done through a machine, a necessary interposition between the photographer and the photographed world, is certainly the engine, in every photographic act, of the separation of the subject-object. A separation all the more tragic for creativity, the more it is enhanced by technical intermediation where the photographer is not the subject of the passive thing being photographed, but the device itself, allowing Flusser (2002, p. 54) to conclude that man only photographs what can be photographed: "Anyone who contemplates the album of an amateur photographer will be seeing the memory of a device, not a man."

One possible reaction is to surrender to photography as "...an instrument par excellence

for the apprehension and transmission of knowledge, because it objectifies the world in the process" (MARTINI, 1999, p. 40), as one of the texts examined in this study states. But if "the photographer's skill lies in responding impeccably to programming, and even surpassing it with care, through the quality of his photos and the acuity of his eye," wouldn't that photographer still be subjected to the device, because he always has to prove he is superior to it? (MARTINI, 1999, p. 43) Once again, creativity based on individuality beckons with the promise of the leap over the abyss, even challenging the consistency of the referent:

Through this creative outlook, which produces a work in the photographic sign, the documentation often takes on a poetic aspect despite the dominance of the referent. And this highly aestheticized semantic information gives an artistic character to photography that leads it to become an authorial work, removing it from the unique condition of a [visual] record (MORAES, 1999, p. 116).

Referent, Other, world: there it lurks, severing ties with the subject, threatening him, humiliating him. It is no use claiming that "interaction with the outside world makes it possible to create, interpret, and signify the experience indefinitely" (GATTO, 2004, p. 107) if, after all, that outside world is given. In subjectivism, parallel with objectivism, there is no creation, but rather reproduction. The subject-object separation is inconsistent with the demiurgic epiphany of the act of taking photographs.

3 The relationship

Attributing creativity in photography to subjectivity seems to be a desperate act in defense of the freedom of man from the machine which, though lifeless, is lively with threats against its creator, as this analyzed excerpt points out:

Despite being the inventor of the device, something escapes him. Man builds the machine, which, manipulated by him, produces the image, and, nevertheless, that image, when produced, is not a uniquely human creation, which undergoes a partnership with the device (MARTINI, 1999, p. 40).

The struggle takes shape; another section of the analysis leads to the solution by seeking:

... a precarious balance between the two components of the subject: one regarding the automatism that never ceases to gain autonomy in relation to those who programmed it or those who will use it; the other, through the attempt to resist that technological dependence by redefining their own identity in the face of technicist changes (COSTA, 2008, p. 16).

The oscillation between these two extremes is verifiable in two contemporary trends: the extravagant use of techniques, producing photographs that are a veritable showcase of the features of image editing programs, and a return to early photographic processes, which do not require flashy digital marvels. Opposite in their phenotyping, both behaviors are united in their archetypal roots: the anguish of the chaos generated by the loss of supremacy.

In the creator versus creature conflict, the subverted order results in the domination of the one who was at the origin by that which was originated. The subject is overwhelmed by the object because it does not waive what it considers its essence, namely, the ability to stay the same in the midst of turbulence. With his head stubbornly held high, he wants to give proof of being able to enter the black box, exhaust its resources and reprogram it, but all he does is insert possibilities that are offshoots of earlier developments. The opposite strategy does not yield better results when the subject, who believes himself to be the Same, disdains the technology that he developed and indulges in nostalgia for the innocence of the early days when a metal plate coated with bitumen of Judea was enough to produce a photograph. The tragedy of this lies in man who, instead of luring the monster to the terrain where it could be easily vanquished, enters enemy territory, only to be taken hostage.

To conceal this defeat, it can be argued that some properties mediate the photographic gesture, serving as a bridge between the Same and the Other, as in this excerpt from an analyzed text: "...the photographer acts as a cultural mediator by translating his experience of the subjective social world into technical images" (MAUAD, 2008, p. 37). Or again: "The photographic operation establishes relationships between subject and time, between subject and space, between subjects and between the subject

and a given situation” (MARTINS-COSTA, 2006, p. 82). This plethora of relationships, however, does not reach the state of complexity when it merely the sum of one plus one, forming pairs that always return to the Same.

One can also turn to the release of meaning in view of the ubiquitous polysemy found in that which, although a mere representation, is usually called an image: “Photography is a convention of the eye and a language of representation and expression of a view of the world. In this sense, images are ambiguous... and susceptible to multiple interpretations...” (MONTEIRO, 2008, p. 174). But the proactivity of the mediator and plurality of readings still presuppose that the subject is struggling with an adverse externality.

Something with a different quality is outlined in the following excerpt, in which the photograph, after use, is neglected, abandoned, ruthlessly discarded, without the squeamishness of a subject that cannot bear to see the work he deems to be his being cast aside. The photographic gesture must transcend the photographic in order to be a creative gesture, to produce a symbolic image that, having the theme of its birth in a subject, if we so desire, does not rest on it, nor or is it justified by it. If it once was the utmost expression of individuality, this picture

reverses the vector of the process and returns the individual to the collective:

This combination characterizes photography as an allegory in which the author’s signature is juxtaposed with a symbolization, from which the survival of the image against blindness is ultimately determined; that is, the possibility of the occurrence of the affect that closes the circuit between the subject and the image as a phenomenon. Based on this link between signature and symbolic convention, the latter mode of appearance of photography is defined, which, in its automatism, permits the appearance of the photo as dross or a hallucinatory image, that is, the production of meaning that despises the trait and an imbalance occurs in the articulation in which, in spite of what is represented or not, meaning is inferred (BARTHOLOMEU, 2008, p. 17).

Although the photographic trait is finally unvalued, let us assume that it is due to a defect of origin, the “automatism” that makes it “dross or a hallucinatory image.” The indication of the hallucinatory and represented seduces thought to seek truth, which would be somewhere else, opening the way to reinstating duality.

4 The process

Contemporary (not to mention postmodern) theories of the subject refer to the splintering of that subject because, instead of an affirmation of identity, that which prevails is “...a culture that denies the uniformity of an individual or process throughout all its stages and circumstances... and navigates the waters of a fluid, protean and

2 Não discutiremos aqui a noção de imagem, mas é sempre produtivo lembrar que ela vai muito além do ícone e da figuração. Para aprofundar o tema, ver Durand (2000).

problematic I” (COELHO, 2005, p. 154). It is therefore necessary to think about a new subject – which certainly will no longer be entitled to that name – a subject which, as Flusser (2008, p. 104) notes, will no longer create “in the solitude of the glacier, in the highest peaks (Nietzsche)”:

Currently, the mass of information available has taken on astronomical dimensions: it no longer fits into individual memories, no matter how brilliant they may be.... Human memory is too slow to process such a vast amount of data. The internal and solitary dialogue has become inoperative. Groups of individual memories assisted by artificial memories (laboratories, committees, research and work groups) are required.

And Flusser (2008, p. 107), who views photography as a paradigm of the automatism in our technological society, concludes: “The future game will produce the abstraction ‘I’ in the form of ‘we the others.’”

However, the idea of the subject with a quietly splintered identity, which recognizes itself as an amalgam of many others, seems to face an obstacle that is not epistemological, but anthropological: what Durand (1997) calls the “schizomorphic” imaginary universe. In it, idealization and autistic retreat are the isotopes of the heroic weapon-links pair of substantive archetypes.³ If we are to think of a subject that is no longer modern, no longer bound to internal

consistency, no longer struggling with the object, we will have to face this anthropological constant that continually leads us, in response to the request for links, to raise the sword that threatens and bites.

Renouncing distinction is not a quick fix leading to an indistinct blur, because it is still a gesture of identity thinking. As mentioned above, the pair always returns to the one; “identity thinking tries to reduce differentiation to an alternative between the confusion and separation of two determinations that share the field of the given” (WUNENBURGER, 1990, p. 47).

Heidegger proposed another possible solution (2006, p. 44), to which we now return: open to being, confronted with it, man corresponds with it, and “is precisely this relationship of correspondence.” The various decenterings and splintering of the subject become understandable and bearable if the definition of man does not include the stability induced by the “logic of the predicament of the homogeneous and heterogeneous, conjunction and disjunction” (WUNENBURGER, 1990, p. 48), but rather the flexibility of correspondence, which, made up of connections, also houses the interstices

³ Gilbert Durand, in his *General Theory of the Imaginary*, maps out three imaginary worlds: the heroic or schizomorphic, the mystical and the dramatic. Each of these universes is made up of symbolic groups that come together through isomorphism, corresponding to different responses that the human being, as a collective (which can never be overstated), gives to the problem of finitude. While the trend in the mystical universe is fusion, the opposite happens in the schizomorphic universe; the dramatic universe would be a harmonizing solution (not an appeasement) of the other two trends.

that provide space, opportunity, a hook for new correspondences. Therefore, man is no longer the subject purified of the object, no longer an accident of being, he is the third term, far from simply being the middle way. He becomes more complex, opening up to a multitude of links; a third way that is not stabilized in a mediator, because it is not based here and there. It is primarily the base of support for the Same and the Other.

Therefore distinction does not disappear in favor of a gliscomorphy; instead of going from identity dualism to monism, it boldly enters the realm of *coincidentia oppositorum*, where the multiple is not binary but ternary, as Wunenburger explains (1990, pp. 68-69):

Only in the triad can links and repulsions co-exist at the same time, evolving according to alternative balances and imbalances.... Only a triad, which makes possible a relationship and a range of components, which contains a variety of measures, truly inaugurates the multiple.

This triad, not to be confused with a trichotomy that isolates the third party in relation to the first two, allows creativity to explode within the repetition characteristic of the machine, not because of a subjectivity judged to be superior, more refined, more sensitive than crude technique, but through the interplay between the world, the technique that addresses that world and the product of the approach – the photography that multiplies

being. Man can either be objectified by the technique or objectify it, and this interplay, which is not alternating, but simultaneous, defines the being as human. It is true that “the photographer cannot photograph processes” (FLUSSER, 2002, p. 31), but the processes can be set in motion through the photographic gesture, which will produce a different photograph every time. It no longer matters whether the possible shot is the only one previously inscribed in the device or is the result of a subjectivity superimposed on the world; it is no longer necessary to confront the technical image, asserting the superiority of the subject over the object. This subject recovers its autonomy when it is dangerously confronted with the object, recognizing himself in it, even allowing himself to be objectified by it, for he is aware that there are no guarantees of integrity, that his “self” is still an “I,” even in the passive voice, because it was his active voice that permitted the delivery.

Therein lies the creative action. That is where man, no longer the subject sterilized in his introjection, no longer keeping a distance from Being, can once again conjugate the verb, and if he likes, make the word flesh: demiurgy is reinstated. It is no longer the demiurgy of the solitary subject in his laboratory of genius, redeeming a humanity trapped by the automation of technique, but still a demiurgy.

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Sujeito e demiurgia no gesto fotográfico

Resumo:

A partir de enunciados que dão pistas a propósito da criatividade e da subjetividade na produção teórica brasileira sobre fotografia, discute-se a noção de sujeito que aí se apresenta, confrontando-a com aquela derivada das teorias contemporâneas que sustentam o estilçamento da identidade. A conclusão de que o subjetivismo nega a criatividade por causa de seu binarismo leva-nos a buscar, junto a Heidegger e a Wunenburger, conceitos que possam viabilizar o equacionamento da ideia de um sujeito instável com a da criação. Reconhece-se um obstáculo antropológico – e não epistemológico – oferecido pela constante que redonda ora no pensamento esquizomorfo ora no pensamento gliscomórfico, consubstanciado simultaneamente na afirmação da soberania arrogante sobre e na integração alienada à (imagem) técnica. Conclui-se pela necessidade de uma saída bifurcada através da *coincidentia oppositorum* que faz de um terceiro elemento o ponto de sustentação e justificação do que inicialmente foi um binarismo, restituindo a demiurgia possível ao sujeito multiplicável.

Palavras-chave:

Fotografia. Sujeito. Criatividade.

Sujeto y demiurgia en el gesto fotográfico

Resumen:

A partir de enunciados que dan pistas sobre la creatividad y la subjetividad en la producción teórica brasileña sobre fotografía, se discute la noción de sujeto que ahí se presenta, confrontándola con aquella derivada de las teorías contemporâneas que sustentan el despedazamiento de la identidad. La conclusión de que el subjetivismo niega la creatividad debido a su binarismo lleva a buscarse, junto a Heidegger y a Wunenburger, conceptos que puedan viabilizar el ecuacionamiento de la idea de un sujeto inestable con la de la creación. Se reconoce un obstáculo antropológico -y no epistemológico- ofrecido por la constante que redonda en el pensamiento esquizomorfo o en el pensamiento gliscomórfico, consubstanciado simultâneamente en la afirmación de la soberanía arrogante sobre y en la integración alienada a la (imagen) técnica. Se concluye por la necesidad de una salida bifurcada a través de la *coincidentia oppositorum* que hace de un tercer elemento el punto de sustentación y justificación de lo que inicialmente fue un binarismo, restituyendo la demiurgia posible al sujeto multiplicable.

Palabras clave:

Fotografía. Sujeto. Creatividad.

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