**Perspective**

# The Aenesthecizing and Mimetic Power of Photographs: Representation of Reality in Photo-Stories

**Jan Sitvast\***

*Department of Health Care, Advanced Nursing Practitioners, Netherlands*

**\*Corresponding author**

Jan Sitvast, Department of Health Care, Advanced Nursing Practitioners, Faculteit Gezondheidszorg, Bolognalaan 101, 3584CJ, Utrecht, Netherlands, Tel: 0031 (0) 614328220; Email: jan.sitvast@hu.nl

Humans use metaphors in thinking. Most metaphors are visual [1]. In processing information stimuli the mind depends partly on visual codes. Information is processed and stored through two channels: one for non-verbal information and another for verbal information [2]. The two different areas in the brain of information are interconnected. An image calls forth the concurrent verbal coded information and vice versa. The information is stored in patterns that form an inner representation of how the individual perceives his reality: the so-called imagens (for images) and logogens (verbal). Memories and anticipations of the future are part of this representation. Representations are dynamic and can be manipulated, for instance when influenced by strong emotions. One aspect of the representation is how man looks upon himself. What image does he have of his 'self'? How does he position himself in a life story? People build their life story on remembered experience that is often interpreted in such a way that it points forward to an anticipated and hoped-for future. From research we know that remembered images have a greater evocative and convincing power than verbal memories. The active processing of new information, remembering and the self-image are no isolated phenomena. They are related and influence each other, sometimes leading to biased interpretation or even reconstruction of contents in each of these areas. Imagination, expectations and memories are the more active manifestations of these processes. Keeping the self-image up-to-date in order to face challenges in life, happens in a continuous process of fine-tuning, adaptations and testing of how one relates to relevant variables in one's milieu.

In this process mimesis plays an important role. Mimesis is the imitation of reality in play, in story-telling or in creating images of how things should look like in future. Through mimesis people can anticipate on roles in social life or appropriate experiences from someone else and relate them to one's own life story [3]. In the processing of information mimesis contributes to protecting a person from too many perceptional stimuli. It protects a person's psyche against a perceptional shock. We can illustrate how this works with photography. Making a photograph the pictured information is limited to a pinpointed moment in time. The spatial involvement is cropped into the encadrement of a photograph. This selectiveness of visual information in a photograph invites viewers to interpret the image as standing for hidden meanings and connect these with their own inner representations of reality. This is what Barthes (1981) has called the punctum function that photographs can have [4].

So we can distinguish on the one hand the function of protective buffer against perceptual shocks caused by the never stopping stream of information in modern society [5] and on the other hand the facilitation of meaning making from what otherwise would remain mere superficial experiences and sensations. In the first case the protective buffer prevents information to overload someone's system. Information does not get assimilated into an experience that touches on deeper layers of self-consciousness. In the other case the information is related to the self through processes of association and becomes 'Erfahrung'. The philosopher Gadamer reserved this term for a process in which someone not only associates subjective experiences with personal anticipations and memories, but also assimilates meanings from the collective cultural repertory into the constructed meaning. An experience ('Erfahrung') can be traced in memory, but that will not be the case with mere sensations or feelings.

Walter Benjamin demonstrates the use of the protective working of mimesis by referring to the flâneur, the modern city dweller that first occurred in the novels and poetry of Baudelaire. The flâneur strolls along the boulevards but keeps himself aloof from the city bustle. Observing it from a café terrace and city pavement he finds it amusing but never becomes really involved. A deeper experience will be shielded off. Today we recognize in this image the tourist who often 'does' a city, working himself through the 'must-see's that are mentioned in the travel-guide which are then recorded on photographs proving that we have seen it all. Here the camera plays a role in a protective adaptation but at the cost of richer and more involving experiences. The same goes for other visual media. Television for example is a medium that bombards us with fragmentary impressions at such a

fast rate that the viewer sees a lot but cannot assimilate them properly. The possibility of zapping between channels creates overstimulation and exhausts the capacity of a more adequate response and in the end may result in blunting our senses. Our eyes can see but seem to have lost the capacity of really taking in what we see. The senses become anaesthecized. The real experience is no longer within reach as the synaesthetic system must shield off an overload of stimuli to protect the psyche from a trauma caused by a perceptual shock. Reality becomes devaluated virtual reality. From a synaesthetic organisation of the senses perception deteriorates into anaesthecia. However, Walter Benjamin saw in photography also the potential of becoming aware of meanings and thus appropriate experience into the life story. He calls this 'innervation', a processing of information stimuli that does not anaesthecize but uses the power of imagination and active response. The function of absorbing stimuli remains intact because we depart from the encadring and delimitation of the experience in the frame of the photographic image. A photograph fixes time and space in one point. An incident is lifted from the stream of time and transformed in a moment that is made conscious. By making a photograph the photographer detach himself for just a moment from the lived world. Choosing a subject for photographing and then recounting what the photograph shows us, the photographer projects his orientation in photographs. Photographs are multi-interpretable and in themselves seem banal [6]. Photographs elicit stories when viewed by the photographers or the public and only then they receive meaning [7]. Photographs depict reality but are also always an interpretation. Through their mimetic character photographs mirror not only the physical world but also the representations in the photographer's or viewer's mind. The image in the photograph will be connected with the imagens from the autobiographical memory and will in this way call forth meanings that first lay hidden. Photographs elicit meanings that the photographer or someone else who views the photograph were not aware of or were not able to express before. Photographs can become the vehicle of motivated interest for telling a new story. This is the 'punctum' character of certain photographs. Photographs lower the threshold for expressing what one feels and thinks and at the same time connect us with deeper layers of consciousness [6,8,9]. The inner representation of the self image reveals itself in photo stories. In the same way someone's perceptual orientations on the life world become transparent in photo stories [6]. This richness in data makes photo stories relevant for identity research. Dollinger and Dollinger for instance used photo stories to develop the concept of 'autophotographic individuality', measuring the degree in which photo-essays show a creative and abstract (more symbolic) process of meaning making or remain limited to a more concrete level of picturing. We may note here that the expression of individuality is a cultural skill that is determined by social class, education and professional training. On a subconscious level it will also be coloured by ideological traditions. While some persons will use the available cultural repertory and idiom of images in a flexible and self-conscious way, others will imitate the standard pattern and not divert from safe and well-trodden paths [10].

The action of making photographs can be part of social interaction if photographs and photo stories are exchanged and shown to others, for instance by organising an exhibition. The photo story then becomes a 'relational narrative' that is shared with others. The exhibition lends it the characteristics of an 'enactment', a staging of the identity that a participant chooses to represent himself with.

This makes photo stories interesting for use in a therapeutic sense, for instance in mental health care, where photo storytelling can be deployed in the context of recovery and rehabilitation [11-13]. Here the moral and ethical dimension of storytelling will fulfill an urgent and acute need of patients to restore credibility in their own eyes and those of others. The active participation of the patient-photographer makes for a strengthening of agency because it deconstructs the passive role of patients. The texts resulting from photo storytelling are grounded in dialogue, but in the first place they are firmly based on experiential expertise of the patient-photographer. It produces a de-centring of the agenda of treatment and support. The central topics become emotions and subjective experiences. The (mimetic) anticipation on the future rehabilitates a patient as a moral agent and an individual with a responsibility for his own life, for which he shows himself accountable in the exhibited photo story.

Such a therapeutic effect rests on the triad 'reflection---expression---self-representation', but only where the triad becomes integrated in a social interaction and a dialogue. The three elements can strengthen each other when properly directed by the care professional. There is a demand in health care for interventions that realize this integration and that aim at meaning making and life story review. The photo-instrument Sitvast (2013) developed for mental health care answers this demand [11].

## References

1. Lakoff G and Johnson M. Metaphors we live by Chicag: The University of Chicago Press. 1980.

2. Pavio A. Imaginary and verbal processes. New York: Rhinehalt en Winston. 1972.

3. Ricoeur P. Time and Narrative. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press. 1984; 1.

4. Barthes R. Camera Lucida. Reflections on photography (original title: La Chmabre Claire, translated from French by Richard Howard-Editions du Seuil, 1980). New York: Hill & Wang. 1981.

5. Benjamin W. Illuminations. Schocken Books, translated by H.Zohn, edited by H Arendt : New York. 1969.

6. Ziller RC. Photographing the Self. Methods for Observing Personal Orientations, Sage Publications: Newbury Park, London, New Delhi. 1990.

7. Sontag S. On Photography. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. 1979.

8. Harper D. Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. Visual Studies. 2002; 1: 17.

9. Collier J & Collier MC. Visual Anthropology. Photography as a Research Method. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico. 1986.

10. Ellis R. 'Picture imperfect ? The cultural politics, interpretation and anxieties of self-directed photography picturing the home space'. Chimera Working Paper 2003-01. Colchester: University of Essex. 2003.

11. Sitvast J. Self-management and Representation of Reality in Photo-Stories. Advances in Nursing Science (ANS) 2013; 36: 1-15.

12. Sitvast J. Hermeneutic Photography. An innovative intervention in psychiatric rehabilitation founded on concepts from Ricoeur. Journal of Psychiatric Nursing. 2014; 5: 17-24.

13. Sitvast J. Recovery in Mental Health Care with the Aid of Photo-stories: An Action Research Based on the Principles of Hermeneutic Photography. Nursing and Health. 2015; 3: 139-146.

14. Benjamin W. Doctrine of the similar (1933). New German Critique. 1979; 17: 65-69.

15. Buck-Morss S. Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay reconsidered. 62: 3-41.

16. Einstein A."A Testimonial From Professor Einstein". In: J. Hadamard, editors. The Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field . Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1945.

17. Ellis RD. Curious Emotions. Roots of consciousness and personality in motivated action. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. 2005.

18. Ellis RD and Newton N. Consciousness & Emotion. Agency, conscious choice and selective perception. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing. 2005.

19. Fiske S T and Taylor S E. Social cognition. 2nd edn. New York: McGraw Hill. 1991.

20. Gergen KJ. The Saturated Self: Dilemnas of identity in contemporary life. New York: Basic Books. 1991.

21. Gadamer HG. Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einern Philosophischen Hermeneutik. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck). 1960/1990.

22. Goffman E. Interaction ritual. Hammondsworth: Penguin. 1967.

23. McAdams DP. The stories we live by. Personal Myths and the Making of the Self, New York: The Guilford press. 1993.

24. Morton J. Interactions of information in word recognition. Psychological Review. 1969; 76: 165-178.

25. Mouwen A. Betekenisgeving is van levensbelang. De ervaring van zin als schakel tussen natuurwetenschap, geesteswetenschap en levensbeschouwing. Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek. 2004; 19: 73-81.

26. Rubin DC and Greenberg DL. The role of Narrative in recollection: a View from Cognitive Psychology and neuropsychology. G Fireman, T McVay and O Flanagan editors. In: Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain. New York: Oxford University Press. 2003.

27. Strauss JS and Carpenter WT. Schizophrenia. Critical issues in psychiatry. New York: Plenum Publishing Corporation. 1981.

28. John-Steiner. Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations in Thinking. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997.

**Citation:** Sitvast J. The Aenesthecizing and Mimetic Power of Photographs: Representation of Reality in Photo-Stories. SM J Nurs. 2017; 3(2): 1015.

**Page 3/3**