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From photogenic to photocreative¹

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Photography reached its maturity as a system of language through the discussions that shaped the so-called modern vanguards, i.e., the artistic debate of early 20th century. Among various positions presented in its historical moment, the distinction between photogenic and photocreative characters developed by László Moholy-Nagy² still has some issues to be considered relevant and contribute to the look of contemporaneous production in photography. These issues will be addressed here.

Moholy-Nagy took the concept of photogenic to characterize the posture of photographers that sought the qualities that might seem good for a photographic image in the object to be photographed. The plastic problems would be solved in the perspective of object, leaving the photographer only the register of such an event. The event itself would guarantee the plastic qualities so that the image was considered pleasant. As the focus was on the event and not on the image production process, according to Moholy-Nagy any other media may be adopted to build the desired image. In fact, the intention of this note was the characterization of behavior change toward a creative attitude, i.e., an attitude actually productive in modern human formation process.

'There are indications that with a changing of intellectual attitude the photographer of today is no longer exclusively interested in photogenic (the traditional illusionism plus glamor) renderings, but more in synthetically composed situations. His attention is shifting to the control of photographic effects rather than on the event itself. He tries to acquire not only a photogenic but a photocreative mind' (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, p.209).

¹ This text is part of the Ph.D. tesis named "Criações Óticas: propostas de reciprocidade entre os meios de expressão fotográfica e os meios de expressão espacial na obra de László Moholy-Nagy", defended by author in 2007, at Post-Graduation Program in multimedia, at ia.unicamp.

² He was born in 1895, in Bácsborsöd (so-called Borsod), in southern Hungary, and he died in 1946, in Chicago, USA.

At first, such differentiation between *photogenic* and *photocreative* would be directly related to the 19th century tradition, not only of pictures themselves, but also of scientific photographs production, the photographic realism legacy characteristic of 19th century that reveals a full of *wonderful structures* world never seen before. However, this encyclopedic knowledge of world would not be enough to modern human formation. The look would be conditioned only to the extended range of vision. The objects would still maintain their static condition that interrupts a continuous space. Through creative photography, Moholy-Nagy pursued to catch a new condition of the objects. Through the enhancement of visual relations due to light effects on the object, he did not seek a two-dimensional plastic result, but he did seek to build a new look that understands reality as a dynamic system of relationships. The *creative photography* didn't have its foundations in the detachment from real, but in the redefinition of the quality of the look about it, that enables man to flagging its own light trail in its daily life.

'[...] changing light intensities and light tempos, variations in spatial motion engendered by light, the extinguishing and flashing forth of the whole organism of motion, the triggering of latent functional charges in us, in our brain. Chiaroscuro. Light-palpability, light-movement. Light-distance and light-proximity. Penetrating and cumulative light rays. – The strongest visual experiences that can be guaranteed to man.' (Moholy-Nagy, 1927a, p.85).

Therefore, image production through photographic medium would happen in the competency of control of this light action result as reconfiguration of the perceived. Unlike painting, it no longer depends on vision physiologic apparatus intermediation and on its conditioning to a cultural repertoire, but on the optics systems of objective lens and on the chemical properties of emulsions applied during the awareness of supports to be spelled.

The Moholy-Nagy's defense also reflected on the debate about photography in general, in the post-World War I, in which he participated actively. In response to the need of suppression of romantic motivations from *Photographic Art*, pictorialism, photographers invested in research about photographic medium autonomy through the use of specific elements inherent in this medium. It is conventional to call this production, specially the one located in European Eastern, *New Photography*.

Among the variety of positions, two debate axes stood out. On one hand, the concept of *New Vision* (*Neue Vision*) defended by Moholy-Nagy, and on the other, Albert Renger-Patzsch with his research about *New Objectivity* (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Both hands use the same photographic language resources recurrent in this period, however with distinct motivation and deepening. Frizot (1994) pointed out the technical quality of the produced images as one of the differences between them. Considering in fact Renger-Patzsch as a real photographer, his technical perfection legitimated the artistic quality of his objective representations of an objective world, technical and, because of it, beautiful. Unlike, Moholy-Nagy was considered as an artist who worked with painting and at a moment resolved to use the camera, an amateur

with plastic intentions that bordered the abstraction by the abstraction. One may perceive that the elements used by Frizot, and by Renger-Patzsch in his texts, align themselves with photogenic character criticized by Moholy-Nagy. The focus of *New Objectivity* exalts the industry prowess with such intensity that images rapidly ceased of being inserted in the experimental area of language and began to be taken as pure discourse about technique benefits. On the other hand, *New Vision* marks the seeking for technique for structural understanding of new reality that the same technique configured.

'Technology is the obvious pioneer in this process. The illiteracy of the future will be ignorance of photography. All the desires of today's photographic epicures will then be an unremarkable if not automatic accomplishment.' (Moholy-Nagy, 1927b, p.134).

According to Moholy-Nagy, in this historic moment, the function of photography would be given through the performance of this medium in human's formation, acting directly in the constitution of a modern look. "We may say that we see the world with entirely different eyes" (Moholy-Nagy, 1925, p.29).

In this moment, reality would not be given exclusively by physical environment, city or nature, but by images profusion in this environment. In this moment, new relationships essential for life were understood in a media environment. "The quantitative growth of 1920s reinforces the social significance of photographic media" (Frizot, 1994, p.458, our translation)³. Social function of images was to stimulate experiences which enabled man to code not only new visual relationships but, above all, any visual relationship that stimulated it on its daily life. Along his theoretical trajectory, Moholy-Nagy found the enthusiasm about photographic image, leading him to the excessive use of this medium in diverse forms of impress communication. It was necessary during the approach of medium specificity awareness as creative form in terms of this trivialization of visual proposals, where the discoveries of new relations would be rapidly incorporated into *style manuals*, losing their initial motivation. It was necessary, above all, *visually alphabetize man*.

Moholy-Nagy, when distances himself from the *photogenic* conditions, put technical competency on the central axis of the process of constitution of *creative photography* as artistic form. An action of formation of man and of its understanding of new space where it habits, that many times just become possible in this photographic condition which defines it, be the printed, or be the perceived ones.

³ From original in French: "C'est l'accroissement quantitatif des années 20 qui renforce la signification sociale des médias photographiques".

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