NOTES ON THE DOCUMENTARITY OF THEATRE ATELIER PHOTOGRAPHY

Abstract

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The ability of perception and interpretation of photographs, a fundamental component of visual culture, is today indispensable cultural and scientific competence. This article is intended to define field of analysis and interpretation of the theatre atelier photography, with an emphasis on one of its features – documentarity. It is also an attempt to justify the need for a comprehensive study of the theater the second half of the 19th age and equal treatment of materials documenting the phenomenon.

Theatre atelier photography is the main, apart from drawings published in newspapers, iconographic source material used to study the theatre of the second half of the 19th century. The visual culture, which seems to dominate nowadays, developing visual studies – anthropology, ethnography and visual sociology caused that more theatre historians are reaching for iconographic material giving it different from classical descriptions and 19th century spectacles interpretations meanings. For a long time photography studies, also theatre photography studies, focused on the recording of phenomena and illustrating a text, they did not constitute a separate study material which would be able to contribute new cognitive content to the examined problem.

150 years since the popularization of atelier photography have equipped science with a lot of valuable tools putting the discussed problem in a different, completely new light. Erwin Panofsky believes that:

It is the curse and the blessing of the academic study of art that its objects necessarily demand consideration from other than a purely historical point of view. […] It is a blessing because it keeps the academic study of art in a constant state of tension, consistently challenging methodological consideration […]. It is a curse because it introduces an uncertainty and fragmentation into scholarship which is hard to tolerate and because the attempt to discover inherent laws has often led to results which either cannot be reconciled with serious scholarship or which appear to offend the notion that the individual work of art has a unique value2.

Panofsky’s reflections were based on works of art but his remarks seem to be valid also for theatre source materials, especially documents purely visual like photography or drawings. A picture is a combination of signs, and each single of them and they all together create the meanings. Some of them reflect reality directly, for example an actor and his costume, others only relate to it, like often unrealistic scenery. Of course, a complete depiction of reality is not possible because a two-dimensional photograph only refers the three-dimensional space, nevertheless photography not only contains some signs but also a hypothesis which opens ways for many possible interpretations.

Photography has dominated over the visual culture almost since the very beginning of its existence, it made it common and democratic to such an extent that the correctness of its perception became a condition of proper functioning in modern times, and the ability to read pictures – a necessary cultural competence3, and what follows, also scientific. A picture contains within signs and symbols, it is an expression of ideology, convention and meanings which were not given to it now, but which have existed since the origin of a picture.

Among all stimuli man is most sensitive to visual stimuli, has the biggest, as it seems, cult for a picture, which is etched in their memory most easily, starting with photographs in identity cards, through portraits of state leaders, fashion, advertising, commemorative and reportage photographs. […] Pictures are easy to be taken in every circumstances, to be distributed in millions of copies, to be worn on a heart4.

Methodological tools which have been provided for 10 years, since the invention of photography, cannot be used uncritically because the historical perspective devalues definitions, changes the way of perception, redefines the methods, modifies the interpreted picture. Atelier theatre photography set different goals, different were its sources and functions from modern theatre photography, also the theatre of the second half of the 19th century was a different event than it is now, thus it does not seem

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to be possible to adapt easily contemporary research methods to pictures often more than 150 years old.

Atelier photographs, due to the character of the presented actions, can fulfill different functions, however, in the theatre studies they seem to function mainly as a documentary material. So what does it mean that a photograph is a document? Bernard Stiegler states that:

The purpose of photography – what is documented by numerous texts from the beginning of its history – is to archive the world, write it down with incorruptible precision. It transforms objects into pictures and stores them in the form of pictures, which are the proof of their existence even after the objects themselves no longer exist. These pictures are stored in archives, libraries, albums and are used for far and near journeys into your own past. Photography changed the reality into picture, became a new technology of graphical – archival assimilation of the world5.

He stresses not only the factography of pictures but also the way they function – by confirming the existence of a specific phenomenon, immortalized on a photograph, the possibility to place it in the cause-effect and space-time line (localizing it in the specific system of other photographs) and to assimilate and understand it because of the symbols and signs conveyed in them and the conventions, in which they were expressed.

Krzysztof Olechnicki defines documentary photography as ‘a visual record of some event, which happened in a specific point in the space-time’6. A document would mean then such a photograph which was not arranged, is not a fictional construction but represents a real situation. Bertold Brecht, on the other hand, stresses the feature which puts under question the genuineness of the presented image, because, according to him, photography is a kind of medium which erases the context7. A photograph, in this perspective, is only what it presents, and it is not possible to draw any conclusions on its basis about the reality outside the frame. Olivier Lugon as the characteristics of documental style in photography specifies: focus, precision, brightness, clearness8; to this list should also be added: impersonality, directness, reality, the ability to move the emotions of the viewer9, and at the same time a distance to the presented events10.

Adam Sobota, considering the notion of a document, stresses that its value, which is most often recalled, is objectivity and he turns our attention to the need to precise this term depending on the specific field of science, the document is to serve. The objectivity is closely connected to the notion of realism, functioning in the specific epoch

5 B. Stiegler, op.cit., p. 22.
8 O. Lugon quoted after: B. Stiegler, op.cit., p. 56.