

Reversing Plato - or the critical power of phantasmagoria

1. Ever since the invention of photography has its indexical nature been holding a compelling place in the way one perceives images. The fact that light reflects the outside world on a surface and then withholds it, returning it as an image not necessarily of what we see, but of what we could have seen, has molded the realistic array of photography. Authors such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer reflected extensively on this issue and the concept of *optical unconscious*, introduced by Benjamin to designate the deferral between human visual perception and mechanical perception, clarified this ambiguous and spectral relationship that we have established with the truth of photographic representation¹. This is because what we in fact see, although it looks like the thing itself, is no the real thing longer in fact. It is in this friction between being and non-being, between the indexical molding of the world and its abstraction that lies the Gordian knot of photography's ontology.

The pictures in the *Passages* series by Virgílio Ferreira are placed in a ground that, beginning with the traditional photography device, develop not in the sense of that realistic ideal but of another kind of analog representation which, starting from the external reality, are more concerned with the Subject as seer than with the object that is seen.

What is being represented (people and places) comes with a ghostly appearance. These ghost-images refer to a tradition that in recent years has been repeatedly cited and re-worked: the Spirit Photography, Auras and Fluid photography, which between the 1860s and 1930s came out in the United States and spread intensively, either in the form of business or as the foundation of philosophical and theosophical theories in the late nineteenth century. Because these were images that supposedly represented extrasensory objects, which are not visible to the human eye, they still claimed for the indexical and true nature of the photograph to assert themselves as *documents*.

In 1863 Bostonian engraver William Mumler, using the already used negative plaques, through over-exposure process, included portraits of death people up the ones of the living ones and pursued to establish these as 'proof' of life after death and their ability to communicate with the living, which was the core idea of Spiritualism. This practice spread to Europe especially the UK and France. So far, there are no signs of pictures of this kind in Portugal.

2. Photography's metaphysical possibilities have already been addressed by several authors as being intrinsically linked to the nature of the pictures produced by the medium. Tom Gunning (1995 and 2003), Alison Ferris (2003), Clement Chéroux and Andreas Fischer (2005) have, in recent years, reflected on the cultural and historical context that presided over spirit photographs or auras and particularly Tom Gunning links the ghostly possibilities of photography to its simultaneous character of spectral double, once a picture is always the signal of the absence of the represented object, and, at the same time, of the undeniable, positive and apodictic truth.

¹ "For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.(...) It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." Walter Benjamin, "Little history of Photography". *Selected Writings*, volume 2 1927-1934, Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cam./Mass., and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 511-12).

The interesting idea of these images was their claim of non-aesthetic pursuit. They were the definite proof of an extra-sensory reality, whose vague and imprecise nature was pointed out, precisely, as the effect of the presence of what was immaterial in the photographic plate. They were merely documentary and non-artistic, at a time when the tradition of picturesque photography was developing every effort to be established as Art. The appearance of images in *flou* and blur, which were sometimes mere tracks or traces of light, was properly interpreted as indexical, a sign of an extra-sensory communication or as a manifestation of presence, among the living, of the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the dead. These no longer just used an acoustic pathway to reveal themselves, as had happened with initial rapping, but now also occupied a visual space. In order to do that, they used the most impersonal mechanical means, photography, around which, since its inception, had been formed a speech that Jacques Derrida would call 'white mythology', i.e., the belief in the innocuous power of photographic representation, considered merely a *transfer* of the object to its image².

3. At the end of the twentieth century, photography could no longer operate in this area of belief, nowadays circulating in an hyper-rationalized environment, dominated by scientific, positive and technological imagery.

Yet these forms of photographic image make their come-back, not linked to spiritualist beliefs, or Theosophy, but by means of Art. The case of the *Passages* series is part of this paradigm, the recovery of a way of producing images which contradicts the limpid appearance of the world and which simultaneously summons the critical eye of the spectator in relation to their significance as indexical signs.

This is also derived from the way they are made. In the manufacturing process of these photographs, there is a type of inversion of the normal photography process; pictures, mostly portraits, are done by overexposure, taking advantage of everyday situations, without any staging or performative programme, to which characters would lend themselves. After a first light capture, the image is subjected to a second exposure. This physical process does not result in a second image (as occurred, for example, in the Surrealist images of Fernando Lemos), but in an erasure of the first image. The light that enters the second time comes forth to delete and subtract parts of what was there. The light takes away instead of adding. Thus, the result is an image that presents the figure, the object, in a fading portrayal (of the background and of the figure), as if dissolved of all its solidity and materiality, referring these figures or spaces to a ghostly, spectral, and immaterial appearance.

If the similarity between these images and the known pictures of the supernatural and 'invisible' is quite clear, the process is, nevertheless, reversed. If in the Spirit's photography it is about an inscription (of the 'extras', the 'auras', the 'fluids'), the ontological strategy of this series seems to work on the reverse. Erosion is the process that presides over the manufacture of these images. It is not a figural hyper-production, as those old images often were, when the person which was represented appeared 'accompanied' by another one represented in a more ethereal form.

4. One should now ask: Why is there an interest in dissolving the figure, in erasing it? What do these almost hallucinatory, ethereal and apparently immaterial images give back? Why is this series designated, above all, as *Passages*, suggesting the idea of a presence, even if elusive?

"Passage" was the term used to designate the covered shopping areas in big cities that were studied by Walter Benjamin, and that interested him as symbols of a modern culture placed in the *showcase*, in the merchandise, in voyeurism. 'Passage' is a place through which one passes, and that can also be used to mean a place in-between: a passage between two main streets, for example. But 'passage' is also a transfer to another realm of existence (from life to death), where the body loses all its importance, as well as its limits. In Virgílio Ferreira's images, where sometimes, beyond human figures, a white wall or a translucent door is insinuated prompting a narrative, all these meanings seem to blend; the images are formed in this place of 'in-between', mirroring the restlessness that settles between the capture of matter and its passage into nothing. But these images are mostly a mirror of a particular sensitivity of the way in which, in the contemporary world, the perception of the world tends to lose solidity and materiality, often producing the feeling of strangeness and volatility of human experience, of sensory confusion between what is lived and what is only visualized, between true memory and hallucinating memory. The style and technique which is used is, in fact, common to other works of Virgílio Ferreira, as 'Uncanny Places', or 'Daily Pilgrims' where a city is associated to a fluid presence, or where the entire image appears dismembered, with a wrecked appearance.

The *Passages* series testifies the effect of perceptual dissolution, that is to say that it invokes a dysfunctional relationship between subject and object. It refers back to the problem of how we relate ourselves to our memories and perceptions.

For Plato, the empirical images, the *eikones*, were nothing but shadows that always constituted a misunderstanding of reality. Representation was always attached to *phaenomena* and therefore to the empirical surface of things that reflected through *simulacra*. Virgílio Ferreira does not share this Platonic distrust of the simulacra. He relies on *mimesis* as a function of aesthetic knowledge. Images can indeed allow us to think. If these images contradict the common logical processes of photography, this is precisely because they represent a way of being and relating to the world which has been greatly affected by feelings of contingency and fragility, of crumbling of perception and memory. These images' liquidity and rarefaction are, in themselves, their critical and aesthetic content.

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