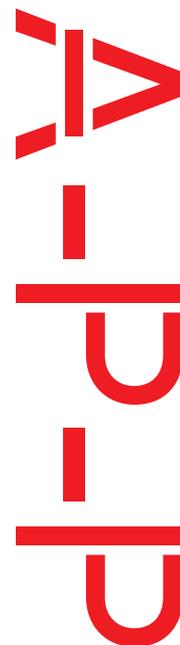


# Paweł Starzec / Non objective eye



Photographing protests is a social activity. Not only because there is a crowd of people with banners in front of the photographers' lenses; it is also because photographers themselves do not experience this process from the perspective of lab technicians observing the course of the experiment on a microscale. Documentary photography, as a form of a long-term project intended to constitute a form of narrative combining the image and textual description of an event, phenomenon, group or place, is a form of self-observation, because the person holding the camera is a member of a specific social group. The problem of the possibility of objective participation in the social world has been questioned in the field of social sciences for over a hundred years. At the same time, however, the knowledge gathered on this subject doesn't seem to resolve the controversial issues regarding the objectivity of photographers documenting important social events, on at least two separate levels.

First of all, the myth of photography as an objective eye, which considers the photographic image beyond the entanglement of people holding a camera, because the very process of seeing and documenting is transferred to the mechanical device, is beautiful, but it is not true. The hand of the creator decides when to press the trigger, their eye – to place a fragment of the world within the frame in a certain way. Secondly, the criterion of objectivity is also discussed in terms of the combination of aesthetics and purity of intentions, which is specific to press photography. In this perspective, objectivity relates not so much to the mechanical (as an opposite to a non-objective human eye) nature of the tool itself, but rather to a certain desired state of objectivity in the performed action, achieved by the creators themselves. More broadly, their eye and hand are actually being obliged to break away from the individual intentions of a given person, embedded in social contexts and grounded in a network of relations of dependence that can be named – employment, political views, previous experiences, prejudices and sympathies, aesthetic views. According to the knowledge gathered by social sciences, such a state seems to be an impossible requirement. Why, then, the recurring need to deal with the myth of the objectivity of photography, and why is it not reprehensible to deny it altogether?

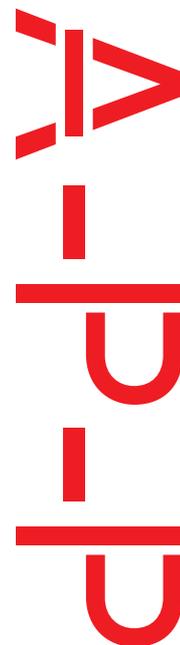
In the perspective of A. Giddens' late modernity, the definition of today's times is breaking the formerly inviolable connection between the identity and the commonality of place and time. What questions does documentary photography answer in such a world? Resentment about the role of photography in learning about the world stems directly from the times when recipients had to rely on the photographers' eyes. The conflict somewhere far from home was reported by individual people – reporters assigned for this role. They transferred their subjective assessment to paper or film, producing widely distributed stories in the form of press reports. The social contract about believing in them was based on the assumption that they were performed with every effort to confirm the truthfulness of every detail. However, the recipient could not say „check”; because most often he or she did not have the tools to do so. This order changed only with the spread of the Web 2.0 standard at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, in which the Internet became a mass good that allowed for multi-directional communication. Twenty years later, there is no obligation to send these individual people to the conflict zone, and news networks are filling up with images and reports done by the participants and observers themselves, without appointed media workers' participation.

The place of the chosen few was taken by the next generation, where the change of nature of work forced adaptation to precarious conditions. A large part of the content published in the press is the result of the work of freelancers who decided to document an event, group, or place – with a belief that someone would be interested in publishing such material, but also possibly out of a sense of the importance of the topic at hand. The world has come a long way from the moment when few dedicated reporters talked about its complexities. Today, it tells us about itself, on a multi-channel basis, through documentations made by people at the scene.

How does this change affect the order described by Walter Lippman a hundred years ago – the agenda setting theory, in which public opinion was influenced not so much by real events experienced empirically as by media facts, interpreting these events through the lens of the press? Omni-directional, non-hierarchical communication will mean, on the one hand, the possibility of access, and, on the other hand, susceptibility to disturbance of the connection between a real event and its documentation published by the media. In the media landscape of quick, automatic reaction, there is no need to wait for the stories of the chosen few. The change in the nature of communication in the media has forced a change in the media landscape in general. The order of media facts is determined by what generates the readers engagement – whatever this statement would be a truism, it means a real consequence in shaping contemporary media in the fusion called infotainment. Belief in journalistic objectivity – understood as a state, not a general goal or an ideal type of sorts – also requires negating this phenomenon. The media are not, and never have been, objective entities in their essence – they are not transparent transmitters and they shape their agenda in relation to the chosen ideological, political, social and commercial profile of their recipients.

Let us assume, following Weber, that objectivity in the social world does not exist. In the case of the media, it is now partially treated as a disciplinary instrument against actions that are in contradiction or simply outside the frame of generally accepted discourse. Often, the criterion that goes hand in hand with the requirement of objectivity is the requirement to balance the information provided, to listen to all parties to the conflict in an equal way and to balance between their points of view. But what factor determines the framework of this necessity?

Assuming the simplest capital interpretation, in which media pluralism is limited by the structure of their ownership – different groups possess different outlets of mass communication – the press objectivity discourse treated as a tool of discipline would be designated as the resultant of the interests of these groups. In practice, it would mean that within the limits of the common sense, in the pages of the conventionally understood press, there may be something that does not contradict the averaged interest of political and economic actors of influence. In this landscape, the voice of marginalized and unprivileged groups is outside of the frame, as by definition such groups cannot have means of communication that would balance them with actors such as state power or politically affiliated interest groups. Of course, one can argue with this – currently, the democratic revolution in the mass media equaled access to the channels of widely available communication, at the same time building walls between the media sectors – newspapers and TV channels showing their political sympathies in a more or less veiled way were joined by channels based on social media, with the use of which requires a certain level of resources and technical competence. Depending on the adopted perspective, protesters in a given case may only be a group of radicals who violate the status quo by their actions.

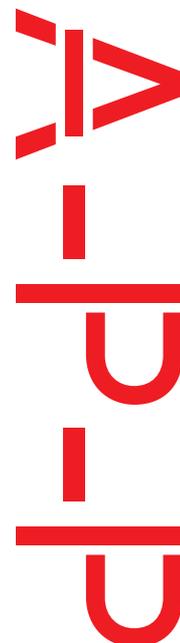


While analyzing the discussion under one of the – widely distributed – photos of protests taking place in Warsaw in recent years, I came across the accusation that focusing on the face of a person forcibly detained by the police is biased; it evokes emotions in the viewer and distorts the course of the event. This opinion can be looked into in several possible ways. Would this mean that an objective reporter can only show randomly selected moments of a given protest, cutting off instances of abnormal moments such as this? Is it in the spirit of objective documenting of such phenomena the mere photographing of such a scene, or does it become biased at the time of publication, when it's published without a balancing portrait of a policeman or policewoman?

Considered somewhat of an antonym in relation to objective reporting, there is the figure of activism and citizen media. So where is the line between activism and journalism? In the perspective of the evaluator. Just as subjectively assessed objectivism is a measure of craftsmanship, activism is a stigma of the involvement of a journalist on one of the sides. This concept, deeply detached from the reality of what happens after a journalist's work in the process of producing information, is not only internally illogical, but also ungrounded in the actual history of the media.

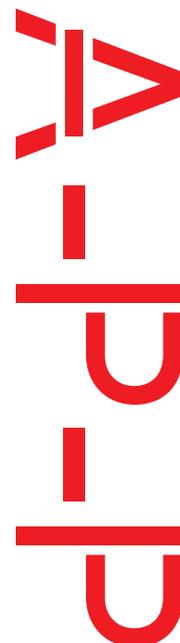
In the name of professional solidarity, the actions of activists are treated in a reluctant manner, but this touches upon a number of problems in modern media in general. What else is this reluctance – the strength of which is reflected in the vitality of the division into objective and non-objective journalism – than it is an expression of alienation, in which the anger of the media working class is directed not at those guilty of deteriorating working conditions, but against other members of the same class who compete and get in the way of work? But I see something else in it; aversion to media activists also has the dimension of longing for another, symbolic figure of a journalist. Would a stereotypical reporter living on the pages of a suspenseful script, fueled by coffee in the struggle to find answers to uncomfortable questions, pass a harsh evaluation of the ethos of his work? After all, his actions are motivated by a strong, individual need grounded in a subjective perspective. Considering in a simplification that activism means actions for a specific purpose with the potential to influence the course of events, the figure of a journalist – obsessed with a goal of reaching the truth, uncompromising, risking to publicize a given topic – fits in quite well. These journalists are later spoken of with pride and pointed out as role models. So if we assume that the role of a journalist, reporter, documentalist could be not so much to collect the statements of those whose voice is already present in the public discourse due to having resources and means of communication, but to reach out to those who are not present in the discussion? In the same line in which this mythical figure of a journalist strives for the truth at all costs, there may also be a desire to listen to those who are pushed outside the frame of any debate.

Let's summarize. Objective photography does not exist, because there cannot be any human activity in the social world that is not conditioned by person's subjective assessment of the world, an individual way of understanding the phenomena around them. In addition, the means of mass communication as they existed until recently are not egalitarian, and their shape largely results from their embedding in the capital context. The culturally accepted figure of a journalist assumes both the requirement of objectivity and – being a directly manifested matter of subjective evaluation – persistence in the pursuit of knowing the truth about the world and passing it on. The media landscape is changing with the rise of Web 2.0, the collapse of the press market, the separation of identity from a common understanding of the here-and-now. No classic medium can keep up with



this; therefore I see their function in creating in-depth stories about a given phenomenon, going beyond the documentation of current events. The image acquired a narrative potential, or rather it was allowed to use the newly acquired subjectivity of images to tell about the world in a more insightful and nuanced way.

The Archive of Public Protests is not a news agency, nor is it an objective press entity. At the same time, it is a project referring to this interpretation of the reporter's duty, which involves an attempt to reach for as complete as possible picture of a phenomenon, and to tell about it through images. The operation of the Archive is an attempt to produce an in-depth study of the protests taking place in Poland after the current ruling political party took power. This does not clearly result from our anti- or pro-government political orientation, but rather from the intensification of the protests themselves and the growing scale of social discontent. Photography is a proof of phenomena, a witness or a description, but the choices behind its making and publication are subjective. Behind the Archive there is a team of associates – documentary photographers, sometimes also press reporters. Our work and further activities resulting from it are the result of our commitment.



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