

<https://doi.org/10.52326/ic-ecco.2021/KS.05>



# The Nonhuman Character Of Technology And Nature Revealed Through Photography

Perciun Andrei

Technical University of Moldova, Faculty of Computers, Informatics and Microelectronics, Department of Social Human Sciences, Republic of Moldova, Chisinau, 9/7 Students Street, [andrei.perciun@ssu.utm.md](mailto:andrei.perciun@ssu.utm.md),  
<https://fcim.utm.md/>

**Abstract** — Tools, like photography, are helping the man fighting nature. However, inside the essential structures of photography there is no signification function. Therefore, the objects represented in the photograph appear as they are in nature, meaningless and without human presence. The photograph, like other technical devices, does not retain the meaning of things. And so, photography is equivalent to nature, which equivocally has nothing to do with human meanings and values.

Only in the field of subjectivity and human intersubjectivity the meanings given to world objects are able to survive. In addition, free of sense objects from photography or film, under the guidance of consciousness can combine in unexpected ways and, as a result, produce alternative meanings. Hereafter, the photograph circumscribes an element that corresponds to the basic function of art in general, namely the opportunity to readjust the daily life in which we live in by giving possible meanings and opening up alternative perspectives. In this context, the man is no longer formalized by abstract rationality, but returns to the rethinking of the living environment in which he cohabitates with others.

**Keywords** — *technique, nature, history, photography, capitalism, mass, meaning, signifying function, everydayness, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, ratiom, abstraction, dehumanization.*

The nature seen by Kracauer, is deprived of human meaning sediment from which are built the value priorities of reality. The pure nature is unwrapping from the system of cultural meanings, meaning human meanings, leaving behind just a sequence of things separated from the meanings which were given by a dominating and emancipated conscience. The one thing that brings closer the photography to nature is the common way of how the things appear to be. In both cases a kind of indifferent touch is sensed, plane and homogeneous, that places itself outside the human meanings. In other words, in the bare nature any object with a conferred meaning is suspended.

On the other hand, the non-involvement of the man in the same way purifies the nature from meaning. Here, in the picture we can see the bareness of nature, because

even if this was a product of the human technical development and on a daily basis it is taken by someone specific, the access to nature's essence is restricted, which is why on the ontological level the man is no longer capable to make any changes. We find ourselves standing before a raw relationship, where a lot of things are exposed in front of us like an old-fashioned clothing, to which we don't know how to refer because of incapacity of finding a meaning that would allow us to connect to the origin of the époque's content. The object from old pictures are meaningless, therefore deprived of any effective human presence.

Given this, the stuff from an old photography are presenting themselves from a natural perspective the way they are, wiped off any meaning of human history. Through the effective human absence, we can root for missing the direct contact with those very objects which once were given so much sense, which was a result of someone's direct experience with the object.

So what should we understand out of all this? Surely, it doesn't mean that once we don't have the direct access to objects from the past we can't talk about them or we can't know them. Actually, we are very much capable to do so but only through the indirect experiences, which supposes the mediation idea. The great absence, suggested by Kracauer, refers to the actual, mundane presence, which is the most concrete and in which every one of us is in this singular moment that we intertwine with objects we encounter, building meanings where not only objects become known but also the people in a specific story. One thing that gets a photography closer to nature is the univocal way of how all objects are treated. Being displayed in a photo, there is nothing extra is attributed to them, only the ways they are seen remain. In both cases, a particular approach is exhibited, as mentioned before, an indifferent one, plane and homogeneous placed beyond the human-meanings zone. The bare nature, as we've seen, lacks the cultural component. The fact that the photography, original from opposite side of the nature, the technical side, which in its turn has evolved in a human

<https://doi.org/10.52326/ic-ecco.2021/KS.05>



meaning framework, is approaching the closest to the nature's essence and is fortifying along its qualification a general inventory of nature according to its irreducible elements.

Therefore, for Kracauer the photography is a environment where a succession of objects in space is shown. The photo places the elements in a line, ignoring their meaning. Even if it apparently looks like a monogram, it isn't. In a monogram one can see something invisible, like a name and surname of a person. Neither one nor the other are installed at the line's surface that tangle in irregular ways. Only behind this decoration we can explicitly capture the person. If we would leave aside the monogram that is caught by a phenomena of a specific human experience, we could discover „ a general inventory of nature” made out of raw elements whose essential propriety is the spatial appearance.

The unquestionable value from Kracauer's actuality that photography celebrates is confirmed by the abundant presence of the illustrated magazines. Here, the world is being shown in the way that it is accessible to the camera. Kracauer suggests that not a single other époque has known more about itself than ours, if we understand first of all that: the fact of having an image of things that look like themselves that's done via a photo [6, p. 95].

In most of the cases, the object of the photo is given and it is accessible in its original form. The way a photograph exists is one of reproducing, whose purpose is to connect us to its object. This blending function of photography reflects its sign structure that refers to something more specific. That is, being able to recognize a friend from a Facebook picture whom I met in flesh a day before. Regardless of all this, we just can't deny admitting the fact that there are people, objects and phenomena that we've only seen in pictures, and this should lead us to the idea of inversion where a person's recognition is being done based on his presence on the photo.

Even if in a photo there are all the necessary conditions for a sign to be connected to the original, the photography cannot possibly be a pillar for remembrance. Therefore, another way of approaching the photography through which it's proven that it does not aim to reproduce an original through pictures, is recognized in the background of selective mode of memory manifestation. According to Kracauer, selectioning is a memory property. The overwhelming presence of photos in the world triggers a suppression of memories. The photographs display the object with all his spatial details captured in one moment, while memories focus on some properties and relevant manifestations of and from a person, a specific person's life.

We remember an object due to some particular situations and concrete perspectives of where we've met and how have we been positively or negatively marked by it. The *great fight* is held between the way one remembers

that the object is and the way it appears on a photo. The avalanche of photography, according to Kracauer, must provoke some doubts referring to the memory's validity and in this way to deprive of vigor the cornerstones on which a memory is built. So, we have a separate vision on decisive traits of an object, which however risk to be erased by the multitude of photographs that reproduce it.

The masterpieces lose from their original value exactly because of this reproducing reason. Instead of being distinguished from its replicated background, the original is simply fading. In order to illustrate this uniformity, Kracauer refer to an old German saying *mi(t)gefangen, mitgehungen* (caught together, hanged together). Another example from the same series would be the parable of how Charlie Chaplin who has participated at the impersonation competition of himself got the second place.

In the illustrated magazines appears a world which the public see it but can't perceive. In the illustrated magazines the public sees a worlds that the illustrated magazines is blocking to be perceive [6, p. 95]. Deleting the barriers between catching the object in a spatial continuum in a photography and its spatial emergence in its highly similar level determines its „history” evaporation. This idea brings Kracauer to an affirmation that related to other époques, ours knows the least about itself. The illustrated magazines represent a declared stake to cognition. In these circumstances the photography kills the recollection. The illustrated magazines interpret the world as a totality of photos. The world itself has a photographic look.

Being available to be photographed starts off this look, trough which the world is reduced to a spatial continuum. A celebrity keeps the cameras focused on her, worthy of being photographed and reaching the front-pages of the illustrated magazines. In this greedy overload of illustrated papers with photos, Kraucauer sees a fear of death where the world is getting stuck. The death recollecting is implicitly composed in any other memory, and photographs can remove it. Photographing the world means and supposes its perpetuation or immortality.

Hereafter, there are two acceptances of photography in the modern world that knock out each other. The first one resonates with what a photo must do as a sign that it is. So that photo's *must-do* coincides with bringing an object as close as possible to that very moment when it is missed the most, which means that a photo sends us back to the original object that it's represented on it.

The second acceptance aims the rapport between the conscience and the world, which in fact it mediates. Through photos, the world gets closer and in the same time farther. The photographs obstructs the world, being a kind of indirect presence of it. The fact of reducing the world to the sum of all the pictures it appears on, takes on a development on Kracauer's comparison between memory and photography.

<https://doi.org/10.52326/ic-ecco.2021/KS.05>



In this very acceptance the photo destroys the memory. A rather unexpected conclusion appeared from the faith background that the pictures help us memorizing, help us to remember. Taking all this into consideration, photographs function in another way than memories, but even so, it's like photo's recollecting help shouldn't be cancelled.

Kracauer's position justifies starting from the memory's correlation with history, where history is performed through a given meaning, a given idea and it's found in a personalized vision of he who builds a vision around what happened with him. Given the fact, depending on the valuing intensity, of wishes and believes, the conscience operates selectively the happenings that occur.

Normally, we wouldn't remember something that for us had no important value and vice versa, we would rather remember the things that affected us in a very specific way, positively or negatively. The photos cut out from a spatial continuum a scene where things appear in all its' details [1]. A reason which the spatial appearance of an object is covered by spatial continuum given from a camera's perspective.

In another of Kracauer's analysis aspect, he refers to the historical evolution of representations trough image, which starts with the *symbol*, where its roots emerge from natural type of society. The photography is a modern manifestation of this evolution. The reference to this natural society, Kracauer is overtaking from the XIX century Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen, who was noticed through his studies about the primitive family and matriarchy. In Bachofen's conception, the society's evolution has known at its beginnings the unity between conscience and nature, the reason for which in the symbol's content the physical world was represented in the first place. This direct reflection of the nature doesn't margin to symbols only, alike words which were referring to a sensorial-material reality only, eventually ran deeper and revealing concepts more and more abstract.

The whole register of evolution from *palpable* references to nebulae concepts, religion comes to its positioning. The rapture debut from nature's den takes place when the conscience becomes self-referential, what will have as an effect the loss of the identity between the nature and human. An idea that is infused in the entire XIX century way of thinking, starting with representatives of the classic German philosophy which reaches its climax in the in the Marx's conception about society.

However, the representations via picture didn't detach from their symbolistic structure. These natural reports satisfy the man's need of symbols in which the *visible bodily intentions of the conscience* are conditioned [2]. Even if the conscience separates from nature, it continues to think in concepts, that are still used with a mythological function. Anyway, the symbolic function is gradually removed from the images, so that the symbolical

representation becomes an allegory. Repositioned this way, the image makes a general idea that differs from it-intelligible .

Let's focus a bit on this change of accent of the way a picture functions. So, in a human society conditions, marked by a unity of conscience and nature, the pictures were just symbols that were sending us to a sensitive where nature was encountered directly. Than later, throughout the history the conscience development of oneself tears this unity, a reason why the conscience starts operating with general concepts, though the way it happens remains of a symbolistic structure [4].

As a consequence, the symbolic representations are taken as tools for an idea's meaning as it happens with the allegories, and the symbols themselves become a sensitive embodiment of this idea. Thus, if from the start through the symbols the man was getting closer to nature, than in the conscience's evolution on oneself, the man by the means of symbols narrows down his general ideas to his conscience. The difference between approaching an idea from an allegory and from a symbol, is followed by Kracauer from the German philologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer, who supports that the object of thinking is comprised in the symbol, while in an allegory „the thinking is preserving the image only” [6, p. 97].

Once photography enters the daily life of social life, there is a division of reality into human reality, we can also call it cultural, technical and natural reality.

The existence of these three components of division should not lead us to the idea of a triad. Consequently, it is a matter of contrasting the reality of human meanings with the realities of nature and technology. The fusion made between technique and nature is valid because of the same way of treating things, which implies a indifference to the meanings attributed by man. Which is why Kracauer identifies photography by resemblance to an inventory of things illustrated from a natural perspective. The established partnership between photography and nature is strengthened by the eradication of man from their content. But it is not so much man who is removed, but especially the sum of the meanings that come from being in the world. Meanings prove to be an ideational envelope that sits over things as they are displayed in nature and that are given in a subjective experience.

Human life cannot be imagined in the absence of these degrees of significance. It would be wrong to interpret man as a mark of photography. No, photography still serves human purposes and manifests itself in a community of people, in fact, in this place is the meaning of photography which consists in showing something that is absent. Consequently, the photography is produced by man and is intended for man. Using a metaphor, with the hope that her choice will make things clearer, we could say that the photo won the trophy in a competition to recover the past according to the most meticulous level possible. Certainly cases of photo editing must be

<https://doi.org/10.52326/ic-ecco.2021/KS.05>



excluded. Their purpose is to distort reality. Traveling through photography to an object from the past, captured in a fragment of time, we discover the object exactly as it was the moment the shutter was operated. This accuracy belongs to the photographic image, because these images represent the object beyond preferences and meanings, which would result from a cultural selection. The photographic image homogenizes all the elements that appear in the content of the represented object.

It is natural for a cultural individual to select a favorite element from a photographic surface, because it is affected by his own social context. In photography, however, everything is flat and equal from a natural perspective. This natural homogeneity is uneven and tangled in the flow of perceptions of a concrete person. That's why photography is not a monogram. It has nothing to hide, everything it has to show appears in an indifferent spatial succession where all the elements are equal. There is no meaning behind it. The way something is shown in a photo is similar to a grid in which a grouping of things recorded by their property to appear in space is inserted. In parallel with photography, historicism assumes the inventory of all phenomena that show up over time. But just as we cannot find any meaning from the spatial alignment of the elements in a photograph, so also from the temporal sequence of events, which defines historicism, we will not find any meaning of them.

Normally, according to Kracauer, consciousness penetrates the chain of temporal successions and discovers a meaningful history that it preserves. From the simple successive order of events we can extract only a simple order of them. The review of the time sequence of events as such does not bring to light any transparent meaning. From its technical position, photography detaches the natural element from the world of human meanings. The data strings from the photo are dried up by any human manifestation. Man is expelled from the all-encompassing narrative of the photographic image, and the possible intrusions of meaning are struck by an invincible negligence of the natural perspective through which an

object is represented in the photography. The expulsion of man from the natural and photographic circuit reveals death in this context. The dimension of death is characterized by the total absence of man, and technique and nature are also independent of man.

It turns out that in photography and in nature there is a world of death - a world cleared by man.

Man in his history, in his life, in his feelings is able to hold together a lot of scattered elements, because all these represent a value and a meaning for him.

In nature we will not find any meaning, but in a person's life we will find it. The elements stored in a photograph do not have a cohesion from which a meaning would be produced, they are as they are from a natural perspective and independent of man. The effects of technological progress lead to a categorical demarcation between human and natural. From this delimitation the objects abandon their human values and through the technique expose their natural foundation.

Thus, photography facilitates the opposition between consciousness and nature. In the photo, things are shown in their pure, manless way [2], [3]. In essence, nature is not human and is beyond any meaning. The technique produced as a result of the evolution of enlightened reason is in the same closed position towards man as nature. In both cases, man is the one who humanizes nature and technique.

Predominant in this tendency to dehumanize the technique is not the self-management capacity of an AI, but the structure in which no human presence is involved.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] R. Barthes, *Bright room*, Cluj: Idea Design&Print, 2010. 110 pp. (in Romanian)
- [2] E. Coccia, *Sensible life*, Cluj: Tact, 2012. 114 pp. (in Romanian)
- [3] V. Flusser, *Gestures*. Cluj: Idea Design&Print, 2015. 240 pp. (in Romanian)
- [4] M. Heidegger, *Being and time*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012. 676 pp. (in Romanian)  
S. Kracauer, *The ornament of the masses*, Cluj: Tact, 2016. 427 pp. (in Romanian)