The Aesthetics of the Negative or; The Negative Dialectics of Photography

Ana Peraica

Makarska 1, 21 000 Split

aperaica@ffri.hr

Abstract
This essay gives technical details on two photographic experiments, Positiveland (2009) and Negativeland (2009), intended to indicate physical constraints of photographic aesthetics, in terms of material, style and today's condition. Namely, what is commonly seen as the aesthetics of the vintage photograph may be a non-original, romanticised condition of the very photograph splitting apart. With different techniques, in recording and digital post-processing elementary slices of images can be analysed and compared, thus allowing entering deeply into the author's signature and original choices. This solution may be important in conservation and preservation of historic image, but as well in interpretation of photographs.

1. Introduction

Photographic theory and criticism of the early XX century may appear vague if the original set of reference, being the technology of the era [1], is not taken into account. This appears the case when referring to the concept of "automatic camera," as seen by early photography theorists. Namely, Stieglitz [2] and others, in criticising the fashion of snapshot photography as installing the "era of Button-pressers," were referring to a Brownie camera [2]. These cameras were not, as did compact ones in the eighties, having an inbuilt automatic light-meter nor did they have the auto-focus option that would simplify the use. Still, one thing they share in common with contemporary versions is - both used a rolled film, which simplified the production of photographs [1]. Kodak's invention reduced all previously demanded special knowledge for the preparation of negatives. This specific automatism changed furthermore with digital imaging development. The automatic camera of the eighties, seen from the contemporary digital age, seems more complicated, in terms of film handling, no matter how easier was to develop the roll of a film. With "digital shift" the negative or the photographic prototype, disappeared. Or, the world of images has lost own prototypes [3].

Similarly to the notion of automatic camera, interpretation may find problems with definition of photographic negatives and positives, for there is a variety of materials and chemical processes used during the last hundred and fifty years since the invention of photography. The world of negatives still, was rarely depicted theoretically. Only few authors have referred to the negatives [4] out of their technical necessity inside the production of the photographic image, all until recently. In some latter discussions, precisely condensing around the invention of the autofocus compact camera, the split induced by the division of labour on "button pressers" and "laboratory workers" was obvious. Walton [5] has seen the dark chamber as a place of conspiracy, similar to the one of Searle's Chinese room [6]. Needless to say the dark chamber, seen as the very realisation of the Plato's cave, was taken as the paradigm of ideology. Both [7] and Marx have suggested the relationship [8], one analysing conscience, while the other ideology. Still in terms of developing the theory of the negative unavoidable theorists are, aside Hegel, Adorno [9] Zizek [10] and Nancy [11].

In the upcoming elaborate I would focus on the material level of the negative – positive dialectics, the one present in photography. I will focus on comparison of original negatives and vintage prints, their conservation and digitalisation, by using digital technologies, thus framing the field of theoretical discussion and giving advices for practical handling of negatives and positives.

My meta-discourse would be photography itself, or the digital equipment available in restoration and conservation of photographs. With paper positives, or photographs, digitalisation seems simple, in terms of having a set of simple instructions suggested by professionals in conservation, but results of scanning positives are hardly near results of the research into original negatives. Namely, what can appear as the style of the romanticised vintage photograph may as well be the signal of its decay, while the original image is inaccessible.

To be able to show this thesis I've recorded various conditions of paper positive as well as negative behaviour in photographing. These two sets I've named Positiveland and Negativeland.

1.1. Rephotographing

Both the Positiveland and the Negativeland, are produced by rephotographing. The concept of rephotographing itself was in Postmodern referred to two different processes; rephotographing the scene represented by the photograph and rephotographing the paper representation or - the photograph itself. Rephotographing of the first kind is often used in archival and documentation purposes where the landscape photographs are repeated in order to record the very change of the landscape after the urbanisation processes.§ The other type of rephotographing, one of the paper-positive, was quite Postmodern in the specific repetition with a change and a question of authors rights. There were orientated to the re-emerging theory of photography with a subsequent theory of the author, as appearing, after Benjamin, in theories of authors [12], as written by Barthes [13], Foucault [14] and Derrida [15].

The difference of the two is clear, paradoxically enough, in terms of violation of rights; one violates the very author's idea or right on the scene, while the other – the copyright of the work. In both types of photographing the authorship may lead to paradoxes. ** Crimp [16] retells: "Levine has said that, when she showed her photographs to a friend, he remarked that they only made him want to see the originals. "Of course," she replied, "and the originals make you want to see that little boy, but when you see the boy, the art is gone". Still, as also Levine's work has shown; interpretations can happen even in the accurate 1:1 re-photographing on the level of conceptual choice of the second photographer as author decision. Krauss cited Barthes in referring to Levine's work "To depict is to ... refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy .. Through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy."[17]††

Positiveland and Negativeland are made in the second term of rephotographing, the one having own interpretation of the material. The main task of both cycles was to answer a set of questions deriving from the difference of scanning and re-recording photographs, as, the depth of the image, the photographic material itself, original interventions into it etc...

2. Re-Recording

The difference between scanning photographs and re-photographing is vast, I will show by a couple of re-photographing tests. Strong light of scanning lenses can pass through the old paper positive and record traces of the background on the foreground within the same image. An emitting pink replaces the natural pale brown colour of the old photo paper. Paper image rather reflects emitting pink as if the paper was overexposed to the light. Intuitively, seeing pinkish surround, one cannot but conclude the photograph is damaged by the very process of scanning with the strength of light and its temperature. It literally looks as if it is burned.

The neglecting of the original material in interpretation may lead to many mistakes, especially when these techniques are important to the very aesthetics of the image, as for example differences of gelatine silver, albumen, collodium process, or other. These final medium of the image is especially important in early aesthetics of photography [18].

Furthermore, with digital correcting of scanned images what is brought in front is only the image whose original condition can hardly be depicted, but relies more on the aesthetic presumption of the re-photographer. The difference between the paper and the original photographer's will comes more

visible when comparing positives and negatives. The original image, as recorded on the negative is smooth, while the very destroyed paper positive shows up a large interest in geometric shapes of deep shadows, high contrasts and a contrasting retouch in small details. This Modernist aesthetics can hardly be programmed in the automatic digital processing correction, as with auto-contrast, as the image itself is reworked within the process of developing but also in additional work.

2.1. Rephotographing

By rephotographing the damage of the old print is avoided. The contact is not direct. Still some damage may appear with handling and lighting.

2.1.1. Lenses. Chosen lenses of camera are giving more details than any process of scanning can. In Positiveland, when focusing on material, I have used manual telephoto lenses to be able to concentrate on different details of the paper image, such as material, depth of the image, but also different conditions they are found in, as being damaged by scars, holes, paper disintegration etc... In Negativeland, to the contrary, I have used wide view lens which can give more of general sharpness in the near field or the first plan. Both lenses used were fixed. The full connection of background and foreground can be recorded using stronger photographic lenses.

2.1.2. Light. Positiveland in recorded in a horizontal lightening, as in ordinary view, allowing layers or slices of photographic image to be visible at different point. This was possible only with narrowing the depth of the field, using shutter speed larger than 2000 and large exposure, optionally. Negativeland is recorded against the direct sunlight, in counter-light, as only then they are visible. Furthermore they are over-exposed, using the method of long exposure to gain the light into the dark glass, so the surround appears bleached, but once inverted – the surround will become black.

2.1.3. Post-Processing. While Positiveland is not post-processed, Negativeland is tied to additional processing. In Negativeland large-size negatives are rephotographed and inverted back into positives, but with its near surround, drawing the world into the negative. As images in the Negativeland and Positiveland would appear very similar, I have further used differences in lighting, which have made Negativeland appearing in definitions of cold colours, while Positiveland, recorded in the smooth daylight appearing, in warmer scale of colours. This colour specificity is reached by the paradox inbuilt in the medium.

2.1.3.1. Post-Processing Errors. Aside inversion of the negative, all colour corrections in Negativeland are put down so the black which is control colour can define the image on the negative, making at the same time all the surrounds hysteric in colours. Also all the contrasts are put down to get more of nuances of fragile black and white image. So, either a glass negative or the surrounding world is recognisable and visible. The negotiation between the two was impossible.

As time since the original negative has changed, as well as colour codes of each medium, the system error of transcription occurs on most of them. Rerecording negatives was indeed used in some processes to stabilise the medium, but usually making the same copy.‡‡ Rarely it is for manipulating contrast or exposure between black and white and dia-films, where again the colour function is narrowed back to the black and white.§§ The difference of film technologies and digital ones is also in the colour definition which prevents such an easy transfer, except for the black and white. Namely, CMYK technology recognised black as key colour, while not recognising accurately all other colours of the RGB spectrum. This was the reason of the difference of the monochrome films once with methods for the film-colour processing. So, recording glass negatives, which are monochrome, in CMYK produces a distortion of the real-world changing its colours in the key colours of its spectrum, while the real world and colour films appear in the negative which never existed in the real world as CMYK was not used in the negative process, so the negatives appear visually more similar to the ultra-violet photography positive than the ordinary film negative.

3. Photographic Tests

3.1. *Positiveland*

People hold photographs in their wallets... They also draw on them or write. But they also kiss them or tear them apart. Anyhow, they make relationships - to them and no matter how a photograph is treated, it would age as people do. It is the world of time. Still, while in painting the patina is giving an additional value, in photographs it is treated as decay. Some of positives in the archive seemed much older than their original negatives. Some were splitting apart or having different sorts of mechanical damage as scars, scratches, holes, but also interventions. These conditions were recorded in order to compare positives and negatives.

A special focus has been given to the print. Under smooth daylight in counter-view, the silver layer that reflects into a scanner when these images are scanned, is emitting the oxidation, turning images black and showing precisely paper condition.

In most of cases the reason was a thinner paper used in atelier's hyper-production, all until the image is chosen to be printed on in large format. But then the glue on the back of them, attaching them to the album or the background in frame has done even worst. Different behaviour of paper and textile has conditioned the different depth of the image. Although paper and textile positives are having an un-transparent texture, not allowing the projection the negatives do, they still possess a certain transparency visible once orientated against the sun. In direct backlight it is possible to choose the layer to record; the image, the surface with the scar...

And the light again makes the inner image to the image, as with shadows of the negative which are images as well, but these are made, as the paper is not forgetting – only once. In small frames that staid in our window-shop for a decade I've found shadows of images of two children in separate frame. A boy and a girl imprinted on the red background by the solarisation process. They were the only "the positive of the positive." While the original images bleached the background carried the image for itself as the ghostly reminder of once a photograph and then again, as in Levine's story; asking for the original image. But, contrary to Levine's work, the original image here has, as well as probably boys and girls; disappeared. But, if I was asked I would ask for the negative rather than the original boy. But whatever asked the situation cannot be strange as with finding a negative without own picture, or finding an image that was never integrated into reality.

3.2. *Negativeland*

Negativeland appears as the world bringing up distant past in vivid lightening, which as the turn effect obscures the present layout in front of the camera. The hallucinating effect is stronger as negatives are transparent, so the light passes through them making shadows which are again images – the original photographs themselves at the first place. The transparency allows to see the image from both sides Making a number of projections they come multi-dimensional, as the same image in negative is visible from both sides, which makes two images in projection. So, effects may resemble combination printing, although they are not ones.[***]

4. Conclusion; Towards the Metaphysics of the Negative

The number of positives in the real world is bigger than the one of negatives kept. Most of them, even those whose subjects are forgotten are integrated into reality. But, negatives appear as the fallout of processes. Negatives, as "memories of memories" or long-term memories to the positives which have split apart of disappeared, were for a long time seen as just as they were black-holes. Still, some serious theoretical insight may be interesting for this conference, is found within the physics.

In the philosophical argument of time travel, which can be infinitively connected, an interesting debate on photographic negatives has been initiated decades ago. It has played a significant role in time-travel philosophy based on Wheeler and Feynman assumptions of continuous space.[19] In Maudlin's revision of the modal argument, a standard black and white film is shooting results arriving from the time machine. [20] The first arrival is a developed film, which is shot and developed again

and then is sent back to the time machine. The positive of the positive is set to come out at the very precise moment when the shot of developed negative was done. Author claims; the result is the negative which is on positive.

This argument is extremely interesting for those who have the laboratory practice. The input in positive, which was turned to a positive showing negative is actually a common dia-positive with complicated process. Whatever the result is, the author claims – positive of negative is still dependant on the original in a physical way, i.e. it is continuous. The film preserves a certain amount of gray which is never "translated" into own opposition.††† And this was proven even more radical in the conversion of colours. But, for claiming "Photography can not be used to create time travel paradoxes either!" Maudin might not be correct in physical sense. One can find other metaphorical visual meanings into it [19]

Namely, experimenting with negatives of negatives even today resembles a concept of the "looped time." On the serial Negativeland suddenly the distant past was re-appearing from negatives alive as if it happens in present time.

And there the notion of hidden appears back again with famous Freud's recognition. In a certain sense Negativeland seems to be the world of photographic meta-physics. So the technical problem arrives if; the negative which is surpassed technology, draws implications on our physics, in terms of meta-physics. He has noticed the obvious split between the conscious and subconscious hunting the photography, saying: „In order to form a picture of this vicissitude, let us assume that every mental process... exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and that it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase, just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being formed into a positive. Not every negative, however, necessarily becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one. This may be advantageously expressed by saying that an individual process belongs to begin with to the system of the unconscious and can then, in certain circumstances, pass over into the system of the conscious.[21, 22]

Taking in mind this subconscious and conscious relationship, I would conclude; the research into negatives, especially as enforced by digital imaging possibilities, in terms of post-processing is important way of finding hidden and oppressed within the history of photography itself. Only by comparing negatives and positives some important facts on the material, its condition, but also re-working may be found out. This would appear the most important in cases of revisionism in photography [23]. By recovering data all post-photographic interventions, being they the ones made by author or the editor, can be précised.

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[§] Such were Rauchenberg's Re-photographing Atget project, Andrzej Maciejewski's, After Notman (2003), or various artists in the book by Jean Provencher Que´bec, les images te´moignent (2001), rephotographing the work of Jocelyn Paquet on Quebec, as well as Mark Klett's Rephotographic Survey Project (1977 and 1979). All of them were rerecording with the same lens format, angle and viewpoint the same locations of Paris, Montreal or Quebec to be able to compare.

[**] Such visual discussions of the former were for example serials of Sherry Levine on Walker Evans (1981), Christian Boltanski's serials Ten Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski,1946–1964, Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964, or finally his serial Monuments. Foster called these type of works "subversive" for the very reason of hacking the original author's rights, which subsequently, at the end belonged to the original author, See also: Foster, H. (1985). Subversive Signs. Recordings Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics. H. Foster. New York, The New Press**:** 99-121.Fascinating case of Levine's work which ended up as the very work of Walker Evans.

[††] The topic was Postmodern in the very sense Jameson formulated in regard to pastiche and parody. See: Jameson, F. (1999). Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham, Duke University Press.

[‡‡] Copy of the negative is used in situations where the negatives have started disappearing. So for example Gertrude Ksebier's, The Road to Rome (I903) has prints made from the copy negative of rephotographed gelatin silver print. See: Bunnell, P. C. (1992). "Pictorial Photography." Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University 51 (2 - The Art of Pictorial Photography 1890-1925): 2+10-15.

[§§] But results of recording via dia-positives would be different as they are used when the negatives which are too dense might have been overexposed, overdeveloped or slightly fogged they can be duplicated on the color slide, which would give more contrast.

[***] Encyclopedia of XX century photography defines the combination print as "a photograph created through the combining of two or more individual images to form a whole and generally rephotographed to create a seamless final image, as distinguished from montage," contrary to montage which is "An assemblage of photographic images; generally distinguished from collage in both the restriction to photographic images (as opposed to drawn or three-dimensional elements) as well as the presentation of the final image as a unified whole, often by rephotographing. Hannavy, J. (2008). Encyclopedia of nineteenth-century photography. New York ; London, Routledge.

[†††] In 1990, when this argument was written, digital equipment colours auto adjustment, relying on a very stabile fact of the average "greyness" being 19 percent was still undiscovered. At the time, still the colour definition was largely dependant on RGB rather than b&w definition. Processing of black and white photos on the colour processor was also not fully functional, but was rather giving bluish and greenish results in defining black and gray, while white area was also polluted with the middle value.