

## Interview with Margarida Medeiros

By Sara Magno e Sophie Pinto

PhD researchers - CECC (Research Centre for Communication and Culture)

School of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal

Translation: Ana Flora Machado and Vera Herold

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### Introduction

The present interview to Margarida Medeiros is devoted to photography and how it lends itself towards the notions of suspicion and truth. Professor Margarida Medeiros is a lecturer at FCSH, Nova University of Lisbon, and a researcher in the areas of Theory of Photography, Visual Culture, History of Image, and Photography and Cinema. Medeiros has written several publications and books, amongst which, *Fotografia e Narcisismo – O Auto-Retrato Contemporâneo* (2000), *Fotografia e Verdade – Uma História de Fantasmas* (2010), and *A Última Imagem – Fotografia de uma Ficção* (2012)[i]. Likewise, the researcher is involved in several curatorship projects, and works with the newspaper *Público* as a photography critic.

Within the scope of this interview, Margarida Medeiros explains the ambiguity inherent to the photographic device, between *mise-en-scène* and being indexical of reality, since its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tracing the history of photography,

Margarida Medeiros argues that, although it fluctuates between falsehood and truth, photography is ultimately known as a knowledge-seeking tool with documentary value. It is for this reason that photography becomes a response to the need for objectivity of the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century subject, whose vision is becoming increasingly fallible and embodied, and whose feeling of impermanence is becoming more acute, as the rhythms of the industrialization era and of the big metropolises accelerate. Finally, Margarida Medeiros explores the relation between photography and the notion of post-truth in today's world.

S.P. You have taken an interest on the flip side of the history of photography. For instance, in the introduction to *Fotogramas: Ensaaios sobre Fotografia*[ii], you write: "With the emancipation from the canons on image organization, the characteristics of belief systems and knowledge, of true and false, and of seriousness and play have emerged. Ever since its early beginnings, photography – with its ability to register, spread, and document, as well as its playfulness and fun nature, which serves as a pretext to the most dashing and complex performances – has demonstrated these characteristics." (Medeiros 2016: 8-9) Indeed, your book focuses on phantasies that blend scientific knowledge with imagination and delirium. What motivates you to explore this obscure territory of photography?

M.M. I believe that what motivated me was my perception that the history of photography was pursued under a formal model of History of Art, which is based on the notion of the evolution of forms, chronologies, of ancestors and successors. Photography is a medium which cannot properly fit these criteria: first, because photography is not necessarily art, in other words, most photographs are not artistic; secondly, because it is this non-artistic photography which becomes relevant and impacts History of Art. Every so often one needs these 'drawers' or chronologies, as

for example an organization according to decades, milestones historians create in order to piece things together under a unifying perception. Nonetheless, these 'drawers' are entirely artificial; they are not real.

Photography has suffered substantially with the 19<sup>th</sup> century's will to turn it into art. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that one has come to separate its artistic utilisation from mass utilisation – particularly with the rise of vernacular photography, like Kodak's *snapshot*, but also with its function as a tool for the exact sciences and the humanities, such as anthropology, sociology, geography, etc. Thus, I have taken an interest in two things: on the one hand, the need to make other stories and to show how the history of photography is a plural territory – there is a book which left an impression on me, a book devoted only to anecdotic episodes of photography, *Cyanide & Spirits: An Inside-Out View of Early Photography* by Bill Jay. The author devotes himself to the errors, nonsenses, discussions on photography; for instance, whether it should be allowed for one to smoke in a photography laboratory or not, etc. On the other hand, I am quite interested in facing the paradoxical side of photography. Barthes' 1961 work, for instance, is a statement about the contradictory side of photography, the author referring to it as being simultaneously nature and culture, performance and document. This tension, this unresolved contradiction, is fundamental for the visual arts and it is that which is of a greatest interest in photography. Therefore, it is required to explore both sides: the conviction that truth in photography allows also for all sorts of delirium, as well as for it to be highly staged; and the need to make a history of non-artistic photography.

S.M. Setting out from Paul Ricoeur's notion of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as a fundamentally modern way of interpreting texts and cultures, so often associated to the famous 'masters of suspicion' Marx, Freud and Nietzsche and, taking into

account the contemporaneity of these authors with the invention of the fixation of photographic images (c. 1833), what relation can one establish between the notion of suspicion and photographic practice?

M.M. It is a very complex relationship. For instance, if we pay close attention to Jonathan Crary's texts, he disregards the connection between photography and illusion. In other words, the photographic device is much more related to the need for truth, to the act of recording, to its epistemic side, rather than, for instance, to the mechanisms of visual entertainment such as the kaleidoscope or the thaumatrope. He believes there are several optical 'toys' which are related to the desire for illusion, but photography is to do with the desire for truth. What can be said about the matter of suspicion is that, from its beginning, photography has suffered from a great ambiguity. For instance, one of the first portraits ever developed in the history of photography is a staged portrait, the self-portrait by Hippolyte Bayard. The latter is, according to Geoffrey Batchen, inspired in a painting by Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*. Bayard's photograph is, like the painting by David, accompanied by a text, which reads: "Here lies Hippolyte Bayard..." The author is at the same time dead and alive. There are several questions regarding the falsehood of photography and its ability to deceive that we find in even more vernacular settings, such as the practice of taking photographs of the dead as if they were still alive, because there was no opportunity to do so in their lifetime. The advertisements of the time read "take a photograph of your beloved, before it is too late, or even after," using to that purpose a *mise-en-scène* as if people were alive. Therefore, this device for deception has been present since the beginnings of photography.

With regard to suspicion, I believe photography is not inasmuch a device related to what Foucault discussed and to the notions that derive from Marx, Freud and

Nietzsche: the idea that the subject is often wrong and does not think properly, in other words, he is not reflexive and has too many illusions on himself. Freud argued that, unlike our beliefs, we have much more desire for illusion than for truth. And yet, photography emerges as a documentary record, 19<sup>th</sup> century's discourse being essentially related to the issue of *mimesis*, that is, mimicry. In fact, both the documental and falsehood have been connected in photography from the start. As a device for discourse however, photography is associated to the idea of truth rather than to that of suspicion. The idea of suspicion in texts on photography is more connected to the *camera obscura* as inversion.

S.M. Marx, Freud and Nietzsche shared this same idea that culture hides, or that it creates a certain opacity for behaviours and ways of thinking, or of being in the social, and that through suspicion one could lift the veil and discover other truths about the subject. Can photography, in this sense, be a tool for suspicion that can provide us with visibility towards things which we otherwise cannot see?

M.M. Yes. In fact, Oliver Wendell Holmes' text ["The Stereoscope and the Stereograph", 1859] is precisely about the idea that in the future there will be libraries dedicated to stereoscopic photography which provide us with the illusion of depth (3D), and we will not, therefore, need to go anywhere to actually know the world. Nonetheless, what I am trying to say is that photography is not aligned with the discourse on suspicion. It is considered a tool for knowledge, apodictic, and it is under these premises that it can likewise be falsified...

S.M. And for revealing something?

M.M. Yes, revealing as well, though of course later this notion that there is a cut, a framing, that there is a fragmentation of the real became more prevalent. But, by then, the discourse found in several texts is that of euphoria about the image's ability to show that which has not been seen. It is, therefore, less associated to the suspicion of the subject. Deep down, these authors bring to the fore the notion that the subject might be tricked, but that photography in itself is not a tool for deception.

The topic of suspicion is particularly present in *A Última Imagem*, where both sight and the eyes are understood as *loci* for delusion and deception. This is connected to the notion of subjectivity that emerged by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "there onwards understood not as a site for reason but for conflict and suspicion," as you contested in *Fotogramas: Ensaaios sobre Fotografia* (Medeiros 2016:13, see endnote 1). How do these perspectives on vision and on the subject relate? What consequences can be highlighted from this focus on the "mechanisms of deception"?

I approach this idea mainly in the first part of the book, relating it with questions brought up by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, which Crary later takes into his book *Techniques of the Observer*. In other words, theories on sight, and on the subject pertaining to the 19<sup>th</sup> century point towards the embodiment of sight, thus constructing a fragile subject. For instance, Hermann von Helmholtz, invented the ophthalmoscope, which showed that the retina is, after all, not opaque, along with other findings which were then unknown. Various findings highlight how sight is not merely an optic matter, but also a physicochemical one. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many experiments were conducted towards a science of sight beyond the scope of physics and mathematics, beyond the question of vector direction and light

refraction, that also includes, visual photochemistry – a science which had just begun to develop. For example, Helmholtz, when offered a job in Heidelberg, said he would only take it under the conditions of having a physics laboratory, since in the time physics and chemistry started becoming increasingly experimental; this experimental aspect of these sciences is precisely linked to sight's materiality, the “flesh”, the body. Chemistry and biology join 19<sup>th</sup> century's physics and optics, impacting the way the “after-image”, retinal persistence is viewed. It is from this point onwards, from the secularization of the subject onwards, symbolized in the French revolution and in the decentralization of the political realm, that attention is brought to the flaws of sight and, therefore its lack of objectivity. Thus, it is a matter much related to corporality.

S.P. In *A Última Imagem* (see endnote 1), we can distinguish between two perspectives on photography: photography as an exponent of objectivity, that is, as empirical observation, but also as a window to the inner drive, as if vision itself would extend continuously outwards and inwards. To what extent are these two perspectives compatible?

M.M. Deep down, what I study in that book is the myth that it is possible to obtain a ‘last image’ – the last image seen by the dead – which is directly related to the notion of photography serving as metaphor, namely for vision itself. The myth suggests an inversion of functions: it is no longer the photographic camera which replicates the optic mechanism, but it is the eye which works like the camera. It is the body itself which is capable of, in a more direct way, absorbing the truth from the outer world.

The success of photography in 1840's discourses has mainly to do with the idea of automatism, as if photography appeared as a non-mediated form. As John Berger

states, in photography there is no composition, since when I take a photograph everything is already there. Considering photography as an automatic mechanism, we establish a parallel between the subject himself and his vision, or the desire that the subject's vision too might be automatic. That is what I explore in this book: the phantasy of automation in a time where psychologic automation was explored, as can be read in the works of Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Freud, etc. These authors studied the idea that the human being acts without thinking, in other words, that he himself is an automaton. In this context, the phantasy of the eye's ability to photograph automatically, and independently of a given person's will, appears. It is basically the idea that photography lends itself as a metaphor to discuss the possibilities of the body as a machine and, therefore, of vision itself becoming objective.

It is obviously a perspective which comes to contradict all the experience of illusion, the experience of non-objectivity. But it is likewise an ideal which exists precisely because, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the subject constructed in the big urban centres is the *flanêur*, the dispersed subject who feels the world fleeing and his life being established around commodities, objects, things that are permanently flowing. Photography is a response to the desire to objectively fix and grasp, even if it isn't entirely capable of doing so. The desire in photography is to grasp a fleeting reality – that, which Simmel argued in “Metropolis and Mental Life”: that the individual is a *quantité négligeable*; that this feeling of fluctuation makes him want to grasp the world through a technology that apparently produces objective records, as is the case with photography. He knows that, when he looks into the stereoscope or the thaumatrope, he is being tricked, he knows it is an optic illusion, that it is imperfect. However, the phantasy of the automatism works the same way as photography's ability of obtaining some kind of objectivity that works against what is in fact



happening in the realm of subjectivity. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is the realm of subjectivity. As Richard Sennett posited, psychoanalysis is the fruit of the Victorian cult of nostalgia, because it pertains to the realm of subjectivity, of the past, of memory, of inner memories, etc...

S.M. The notion of truth suffered, or is suffering, a wide reconfiguration since photography appeared. To a certain extent, your book *Fotografia e Verdade* follows this reconfiguration focusing on the production of 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritist photography. In the first chapter you argue that, "The main concern of this book is, therefore, to research the way how the automatic and indexical nature of photography has lent itself to the construction of a system of truth, of evidence, of apodicticity" (p. 61). However, what makes this book unique is its focus on photographic images which depict a different dimension of life, supposedly invisible. For this reason, we can look at several archive images which illustrate ghosts, fluids and auras. These are the images that trigger a "strange connection between the photographic image, the story of which begins with a technical capture of the visible, and the extended possibility of also becoming evidence to the invisible" (p. 62). What is the core of this tripartite relation between photography, truth and the "invisible world"? What concept of truth can be derived from these notions for the photographic image?

M.M. The main focus of this book is precisely that. In other words, the documental status photography has. By document it is meant something which seeks to teach, to inform. That is where the idea of the documental stems from, something we can believe to be true. Since its early beginnings, photography has always had this duplicity of being true and potentially false (as we have previously spoken when mentioning Hippolyte Bayard's Self Portrait as a Drowned Man; he is, in fact there, but he is not drowned, which means it is staged). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more

insights in the exact sciences, allow for the theorization of new phenomena so far unknown, such as electricity, magnetism, ultimately other matters that withdraw physics from the realm of the observable. It is up to scientists to introduce society to things which cannot be seen by the naked eye, such as retina studies. Language becomes gradually specialized, and it is no coincidence that Helmholtz and David Brewster are the first to conduct what they call “popular lectures on science”, that is, texts explaining certain aspects of science to common people. This happens because science was becoming more specialized, discussing things which cannot be directly observed, namely phenomena such as electricity, magnetism, radiations, cathode rays, etc. Therefore, there is a whole dimension of the real which, although being factual, is not observable, and when photography appears, it does so as a language that mimics the observable creating the expectation that it is a document. In other words, that the photograph speaks truth. The axiom is: “everything that is in a photograph exists.” This means that neither photography, nor the existence of the photograph’s referent are contestable. This will allow for a series of different behaviours related to photography. That is, the stories of photographic studios, those of artists, and of people who in fact use that truthful aspect of photography because they wish to document or represent reality and because they want to use it as a document, for instance, in expeditions.

Considering photography as an apodictic tool – we are certain that whatever it shows exists – allows for the invention of images subject to interpretation, in other words, which point towards intangible realities, but that supposedly exist. The fact that the ontology of photography has this documental side to it, which is uncontested, allows precisely for it to be used as an assertion of the existence of things not-true, not proven, as is the case for spirit photography. But, more interestingly even, is how some authors and scientists – such as Hippolyte Baraduc, Jules Bernard Luys,

William Crookes – begin taking much more abstract pictures, closely related to the “white canvas”. Since photography is completely abstract, we need only to enfold it with a theory of presence, not of factual images, but of auras, fluids, etc. Thus, these authors, in a way, continue to take advantage of this apodictic side of photography to affirm their theories of fluids, of the continuity between the body and the spirit, etc., theories which are completely speculative and use photography as ‘evidence.’

As much as we may argue photography to be deceiving, nothing in it is of interest except its truthful aspect, as we already have falsehood in 15<sup>th</sup> century painting – false mimicry, perspective drawing. Therefore, photography comes to add an appearance of truth, of automatic image, of “poor” image (an adjective which I fondly use for photography since it is one of its most important aspects). That is why Andy Warhol starts using newspaper photographs, “poor” photographs as source material, mostly from the printed media, to draw into art this more vernacular aspect, this basic or documental side. Thus, the relation between the visible and the invisible has much to do with photography’s ability to affirm itself as a tool for representing the intangible world – due to its status of truth. It had so far reproduced the visible, but then came the idea that it can also show the invisible.

S.M. Nietzsche’s famous quote “there are no facts, only interpretations” became key to this notion of post-truth which “haunts” today’s world. How would you describe the current relationship between photography and truth; and in which way does spirit photography, as presented in your book, contribute to clarify the current confounding of fact and fiction?

M.M. I believe that photography is still used in our everyday lives the way it always had, that is, as documental. What happens today is that we have increasing amounts

of tools to manipulate photographs with. We have always had manipulation tools for the camera obscura, with masks, photomontages, etc., but today we have Photoshop, and several devices which immediately transform a photograph into something else, such as Instagram with its glazes of the 60's and the 20's... However, this only works, as Tom Gunning argues, because, after all, falsehood is only relevant because there is relation to truth – which is an idea I find compelling. For instance, morphing is only interesting because we know it is a morphing. Morphing is the transformation of two faces into one, as some programmes allow for today. They put together the face of a mother and a child, resulting in a sort of a hybrid face. It is a fake image, since it does not belong to anyone, but its only interest is the knowledge that it is a mix of something real, because there is an alteration of truth. Therefore, the fakeness which we today discuss only works because, despite everything, we establish a relation with some truth that is not apparent. We can learn that a certain photograph was not taken in Egypt, but rather inside of a house next to a palm tree, and although we are aware it can be deconstructed any time, it still acts as truth. Therefore, what we have available today are many more tools of modification, but we are also much more open to the possibility of being unmasked.

S.P. Do you think we are becoming suspicious? Are we increasingly suspicious of images?

M.M. I couldn't say. I think we continue to believe; otherwise social networks would not work as they do. Otherwise, how would Instagram or Facebook work, if these tools are essentially identitarian and narcissist tools? They work because we believe "the other" will see the image as a part of ourselves, or as a part of what we want to say about ourselves. Thus, this side of truth still works. I am not certain whether we

are more sceptical, I believe we are more gullible, we use photography more often and there are barely any informative documents which dispense with a photograph – although it sometimes suits no purpose other than serving as a vehicle to grasp our attention to the device of truth itself. I believe we are more sceptical than we were in 1839, because that was not the concern at that time, the agenda being: “let us take a better photograph, ever more perfect.” While with painting, for instance, artists began producing blurred images from the 1850’s onwards, photography sought to become sharper, truer, more perfect. Today we no longer have that agenda, but culturally the question pertaining to the desire for photography is still closely related to the quest for truth. We may have developed a greater critical stance – that I believe because we are already acquainted with a history of falsehood. Nonetheless, I am not certain if, irrationally, we are more sceptic considering the immediate device. We have to regard the difference between us as intellectuals and us as the average person, who walks the streets and looks at the photographs in the Metro – that is when the unconscious works, and not rationality, as first response to a first impact. Advertising knows this well, that we are not thinking when we look at an advertisement in the Metro, but rather consuming; we are spectators manipulated by the image’s force of conviction.

S.M. And how can we look into the question of post-truth in your book? Because, when you refer to photography and truth, you are contextualizing truth within a given timeframe. How can we relate photography and post-truth today?

M.M. Post-truth is when truth is no longer of any importance and we live under a premise in which truths overlap each other, that is, we live in a world of illusions. It is true that we live in a world of illusion, because every so often we are completely deceived by TV newscasts, only to learn the following day that the entire news report

was a montage. For example, recently at a conference of The Left, a communication on Robert Capa's campaign for the Israeli state was presented. In it, one could follow the construction of the state as contributing to its ideology, and to a state being built in a *no man's land*, while some of its territories were concurrently stolen from Palestinian territories. Today we know things, much due to the investigations conducted outside the more formalist territories, we learn that we were highly deceived by photography.

S.M. But the Internet also allows much of that...

M.M. The Internet allows that. Therefore, it is a good example of post-truth and of the role photography has played in the regime we live in. I believe photography contributes to this, but so does the audio-visual. Audio-visuals have a greater impact in terms of news reports online, but it is always a photographic matrix, a matrix of realism, a matrix of contact. As Michael Taussig argues, what matters is contact, the idea that the image was in contact with what exists, and which also puts us in contact with that specific reality.

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[i] *Photography and Narcisism – The Contemporary Self-Portrait; Photography and Truth – A History of Ghosts; The Last Image – Photograph of a Fiction* (these books by Margarida Medeiros have not been translated into English). All titles and quotes translated by Ana Flora Machado and Vera Herold.

[ii] *Photograms: Essays on Photography* (this book by Margarida Medeiros has not been translated into English). All translations by Ana Flora Machado and Vera Herold.