

Ludwig Wittgenstein and photography as analytical practice

*“Wie gesagt: Denk nicht, sondern schau!”
Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophischen Untersushungen¹*

In a recent paper of mine, dedicated to the figure and work of Aby Warburg, I noted how the visual culture with which anthropologists and ethnologists have imagined the Other depends on a multiform complex of representations, within which great importance is given to what has been transmitted by pre-scientific literary sources, what is related to common sense and to popular and folk representations, what emanates from the photographic and cinematographic culture of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century (previous images, sedimented and stratified also in the context of literature and scientific thought, and reworked there). Even when we had, and have, as social scientists, the illusion of thinking about others in sophisticated ways that emanate from a specific and specialized mode of perception and knowledge, we have in fact inherited a wide range of highly disparate images.

On a critical level, then, our own way of looking and seeing, despite the claim of self-sufficiency, springs from the reflection of external intellectual fields. These reflections and representations have also arrived within the perimeter of the social sciences in an autonomous way and, certainly with a completely different level of elaboration, they too have sedimented and stratified; we have, in short, learned to know our gaze and representations through the lessons, sometimes assimilated without explicit critical awareness, of scholars very distant from our intellectual context.

In this last perspective, I recalled that, in order to have a non-blurry and, from a historiographical point of view, approximate picture of contemporary visual representations related to our scholarly field, it is necessary to consider authors and ideas that are tangential or entirely external; authors and ideas that have had, whether scholars know it or not, a considerable influence in determining the modes of their gaze and the forms of their imagery. Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Aby Warburg, Ludwig Wittgenstein, along with many others, have intensely shaped the ethnographic gaze with their theories of vision and representation, with their concrete experiences of reflection and research. Benjamin's theory of the optical (and technological) unconscious; Merleau-Ponty's theory of the phenomenal field; Warburg's hypotheses on the origin of symbolic forms; color theory, family resemblance theory or Wittgenstein's "paradigmatic" idea of image, to name but a few, have nourished the culture of contemporary ethnographers and anthropologists, contributing to determine the ways in which the universes they study have been perceived and represented. It would be necessary, therefore, an in-depth work, in search of the roots of the visual paradigms elaborated, directly or through intermediaries, by anthropologists and, today, often trivialized by a plethora of social research practitioners.

Some of these terrains of *archaeological* survey are offered to us on a silver platter, so to speak: Warburg worked, for some time, on the Hopi and

¹ “As said: do not think, but look!”.

photographed them; it is quite clear that we need to understand what he did, from the critical perspective of ascertaining whether, as social science scholars, we owe anything to a great iconologist and art historian. But in other cases, the influxes, the ideas, the contributions coming from outside are more difficult to identify and decipher. This is the case of Wittgenstein.

Some attention to his thought, in the international anthropological context, of course, there has been (I'm not talking about the *Bemerkungen über Frazers "The Golden Bough" - Remarks on Frazer's "The Golden Bough"*, a work that, for its immediately anthropological content, has on the contrary often been taken into consideration). As for Italy, this attention has mainly been paid to the borderland between anthropology, epistemology and philosophy of science, and has essentially been translated into a theoretical analysis; i.e., in the context of ethnolinguistic studies, due to the suggestions coming from the linguistic turn. As far as I am concerned, in my sporadic references to Wittgenstein, I have stopped at the link between linguistic acts and the theory of vision, without bringing due attention to a central core of interest, which is that offered by the philosopher's visual practices and their wider theoretical implications. Fallout that, as we will see synthetically, has a considerable importance in the restricted perspective that I mentioned before, as well as, at a more general level, in configuring a modern critique of visuality in the context of the contemporary West.

A major exhibition held in Vienna, at the Leopold Museum, from November 2021 to March 2022, accompanied by an accurate and informed catalog (*Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fotografie als analytische Praxis/Photography as Analytical Practice* [eds. V. Gamper, H-P. Wipplinger], Köln, Walther und Franz König, 2021), now offers us a significant contribution to verification and reflection.

I will not dwell at length on the interesting and stimulating exhibition, which relates Wittgensteinian photography to a brilliant series of re-elaborations by a wide range of international artists, directly or indirectly interested in (and influenced by) the philosopher's poetics; it is an enjoyable and extremely stimulating exhibition in which, among many others (I will certainly wrong many who I will not mention), there are works by Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Christian Boltanski, Nam Goldin, Peter Handke, Sherrie Levine, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, Otto Zitko. I will dwell instead on Wittgenstein's exegesis of photography, which is, on the other hand, quite unknown even to experts in the history and criticism of the medium, as it emerges, with a wealth of details, many of which completely unpublished, from the numerous essays in the catalog.

Wittgenstein, therefore, was also, albeit in a limited and very particular way, a photographer, as well as a friend of photographers, among whom stands out the personality and the collaborative contribution of Moriz Nähr, close to the "Viennese Secession" and author of many of his well-known portraits. His activity stemmed from a long family tradition about photography, practiced for generations, in relation to the celebratory events of the group, to the architectural achievements related to it, to the dynamics of wealth and family. The family albums constituted for the philosopher an intellectual habit, with which he had to deal since his youth.

I wrote earlier that he was a photographer in a very special way. In addition to taking photographs himself, with a very elementary camera (and making of this elementary nature, and of the absolute simplicity of execution, of the choice of bare and naked backdrops, with a precocious intuition, an element of radical reflection in the field of images and their language), he constructed self-portraits of peculiar identity significance. A well-known series of these were made in a photo-box, one of the first existing ones, perhaps between 1928 and 1930 (in the catalog mentioned above, see, in this regard, the images made by the already mentioned Handke, the Austrian writer, among the works that best interpret, in my opinion, Wittgensteinian tension and experimentation). Other portraits (or self-portraits) were commissioned to

photographers, but following his precise, peremptory indications, so that the intervention of others seems to be reduced, to a large extent, to a merely technical fact. He, then, dedicated himself with care to the compilation of a particular album in which he collected significant images of his family, friendship and social life (on which I will return later); moreover, he was a careful collector of photographs and postcards that marked important stages of his reflection, punctuated by frequent references to the medium. Finally, Wittgenstein promoted a problematic use of composite photography, following the indications, experimented a few decades earlier, by Sir Francis Galton, British polymath, singular and multifaceted character, cousin of Charles Darwin, whose scientific story is relatively well known in the international anthropological context. This photograph was produced through the superimposition of many different faces, centered on the eyes, in order to build, on the plate, a single figure; through a careful dosage of exposure time, it was possible to obtain the impression of the dominant features of each physiognomy, so as to compose an average type of the particular cross-section of humanity that one wanted to represent: “the portrait of a type and not of an individual”, as Galton stated. The average type of the African native, the criminal or the insane person with a particular form of disorder, for example (in concrete terms, the first experimentation, which took place in 1877-78, considered, with the declared intention of being useful to medical diagnosis and criminology, two classes of “problematic” subjects, vegetarians and criminals).

It is easy to understand what particular aspects the composite photography could assume, if tested, as it was, on the members of the Wittgenstein family, in particular on the context of his siblings. It was, most likely, above all his friend and companion Nähr, in the early thirties, who was responsible for composite portraits of the family entourage. The remarkable similarities between the relatives resulted in photographs with a particularly sharp center and margins, along the perimeter of the face, of more or less marked blurring. The philosopher’s attention was placed on the parts in focus and, above all, on those out of focus. Starting from Galton’s photographs, he sketched out the theory of family resemblances, based on that fluctuating series of identities and dissimilarities, which led him to theorize the concept of resemblance itself, basing also on the analysis of language games. The first mention of Galton, as far as I know, and of the specific usefulness of his work, is in a lecture of 1929-’30, entitled *Lecture on Ethics* (written in its original wording in English) and after collected in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. And in this regard, it is useful to remember that the problematic approach to photography takes place right around those years, when Wittgenstein undertakes the mighty work of critical revision of his first philosophical formulations as they were condensed in the *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)*, a revision that is largely based on his many attempts (think of the *Remarks on Colour*) to compute a grammar of vision.

I recalled the existence of the album, kept at the Wittgenstein Archive in Cambridge, composed, probably on several occasions, starting from the early thirties. Unlike the sophisticated and elegant albums belonging to his family tradition, it is a simple note-book of 152 lined pages on which are glued 102 images, taken by professional photographers, by members of the philosopher’s family, by himself, covering a period of about four decades, placed on the right side (*recto*), with the exception of three of them. The opposite side has no caption or written text and appears, except in two cases where photographs are pasted, completely empty. This emptiness demands to be understood and possibly filled in (as does the disorder with which the images are juxtaposed, with obvious jumps in subject, topic, space and time, and author). The void, as Michael Nedo reminds us in the book, “in a way is an inversion of his *Philosophical Investigations*: in the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, in which there are no pictures, Wittgenstein refers to it as an ‘album’ of sketches of landscape, that is, a combination of text and images that requires simultaneous viewing

and reading. And just as the readers of the *Philosophical Investigations* are requested to image those pictures, those sketches of landscape, so are the viewers of the photo album, which contains no text, requested to imagine the narrative to the photos into the empty verso pages”².

² M. Nedo, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: His Life, Work, and Practice*, in *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fotografie als analytische Praxis/Photography as Analytical Practice*, cit., pp. 14-23, p. 19.

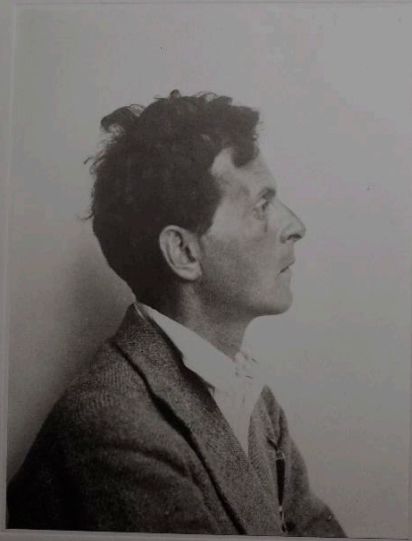
³ Cfr. V. Gamper, *The Album*, Ivi, pp. 114-140.

Verena Gamper largely agrees with Nedo about the conceptual link that unites the album to the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*³. And in fact, upon careful observation, the logical procedure that the note-book suggests, even through its discontinuity of sequence, is the one by which Wittgenstein’s philosophical reasoning proceeds, through discards and connections (not expected, not taken for granted, under everyone’s eyes and yet not perceived) that allow us to eliminate the superfluous, to create new hermeneutical paths, to open the way to systems of conceptual relationships that, at first glance, are not experienced. And this function, as it is known, in Wittgenstein’s work, is associated with simplicity, I would say with Franciscan nudity, of observation and reasoning.

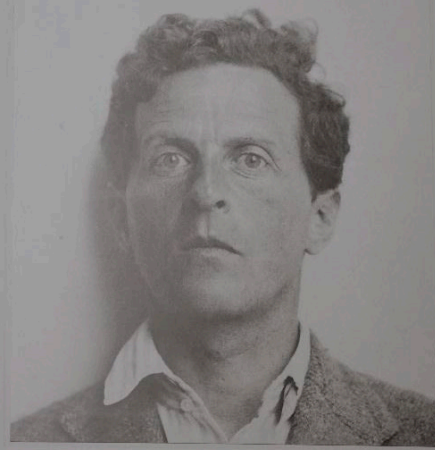
Photography serves Wittgenstein, therefore, in this case as in the other occasions of his practice, as an element of reflection, by means of the organization of vision and representation, around the logical structures that preside over the formation and conceptual use of language. The Viennese philosopher, with all clarity, made photography an instrument of analytical, logical and cognitive practice, placing it behind some of his most interesting theoretical formulations. For this reason, I think it is useful that those who deal with photography, and those who deal with photography in relation to the social sciences, dwell carefully on his work. On the one hand, this work gives us back an instrument of radical questioning of the elementary structures of observation and perception, it provides us with the means to analyze in depth the logic of the gaze and the ways in which this gaze forms language, and through it, current ideas about society and culture; on the other hand, above all through the nakedness of its formulations, it contributes to decolonizing our imagination from every kind of easy prejudice and from every mortgage of common sense.

Ludwig
Wittgenstein

Fotografie als



Analytical



analytische
Praxis

Photography
as

Practice

From Wittgenstein Archive Cambridge

