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**Concise Semiotics of ‘Amateur’ Images.**

**(On Genres and Experiences of Images)**

**Introduction: Identifying Versus Experiencing Images**

“Amateur images of migration” – as the title of the present volume reads – are not ‘professional images of migration’, nor do they have a duty to document migration. The goal of this article is to discuss this difference, and thus to attempt firstly to define ‘amateur’ images, i.e. images free of ‘institutional’ constraints, and subsequently to examine “amateur images of migration”.

More generally, above and beyond a debate on the subject of this book, my analysis seeks to support the need to use such distinctions when studying images. Although it is very difficult to represent this in a satisfactory way, it is essential to understand and attempt to explain that the meaning of an image changes according to the manner in which we approach it. More precisely, whether an image is an ‘amateur’ image, a ‘press’ image, an ‘archived’ image, an ‘art’ image – or even a ‘religious’, ‘political’, or ‘educational’ image, etc. – what matters is that these categories are all different semiotic appraisals, attached to different cultural practices and mediations, which permeate the image and which finally give it a different meaning. This distinction, albeit crucial, still lacks a thourough discussion in the scientific literature, despite a recent display of interest in the question.[[1]](#footnote-1)

From this general perspective, and in a bid to render an account of the semiotic functioning of amateur images and images of migration, I will develop the following epistemological distinction: on the one hand, images can be classified, on the other hand, they can be experienced. On the one hand, it is a matter of finding the correct label, the right box, the final say, which would allow us to take *over the images*. On the other hand, it is a matter of spending time with them and becoming familiar with them, of being affected *by the images*, of experiencing them as a learning ground or a reservoir of emotions to go through. Even the different scientific lines of discourse on images seem to adhere to either one of these two poles: some endeavour to pinpoint the genre or style that encases them, or even to identify the situation that created them (their historical and ‘cultural’ origin or their psychological roots) or the purpose that inspired them (their social or psychological destination), whereas others try to explain them by means of their structure and/or their effect.

I am of course in the process of uniting, in a dual opposition, a largely disparate group of different approaches. Nevertheless, in order to comprehend the degree to which, fundamentally, we are dealing with two major groups of opposing attitudes, we can contemplate two ways of playing with images, each with its own different aim. The first, the game of classification, ultimately consists in applying knowledge to the images, in precisely a scholarly approach. The aim of the game is to endeavour to identify the images. But identifying means identifying the image *with* something, or *based on* something, something that is thus set beyond the image. This can be a familiar style, the idea one has of a certain culture, a technique considered essential, etc. – and therefore the images ‘are’ the expression of a style, the symptom of a certain culture, the product of a technique, etc. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is the game of experiencing images. This consists less of applying external knowledge *to the images* than in ensuring that the images themselves mean something *to us*, that they have an effect *on us*. The aim of this game is for the images to affect us and educate us (in the etymological sense of ‘e-ducation’, i.e. ‘leading out’, leading someone towards change…). The images are not identified, but explained (again in the literal sense of ‘ex-plain’, i.e. ‘un-fold’, expose, develop…). This approach is no longer scholarly, but experimental: the competency that follows the encounter with the images counts for more than that which precedes it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

An apparent and symbolic example of the first game, the game of the scholarly approach that aims to identify, is the archiving of images. An example of the second game, the game of the experimental approach, where we allow ourselves to be guided by the images, is the identification with the characters or the situations that these images depict. A good archiving is a classification system perfected to accommodate all images: its aim is not to change; whereas a good experience of an image affects us: it changes us.

These two approaches are conceptually opposed, but of course they do not reciprocally exclude one another: they can be brought together – and this is what happens most often as a matter of fact. A certain experience of the image can be obtained by means of its previous classification. Contextual information on its production, information on the genre it adheres to, etc. all lead to an image being experienced differently. A good example of this is the ‘aesthetic’ experience, since there strictly speaking is no ‘art’ if the image has not had a range of pertinent categories applied to it. But it must be added that it is the encounter with the image itself that tells us if our categorisations are pertinent or need to be reformulated – and ‘art’ consists precisely in systematically changing our predefined categories.[[3]](#footnote-3) This suggests that the bringing together of the two types of approaches of the image can also follow the reverse order: an image can be attributed to a category in an attempt to capture the experience that it has managed to produce. For instance, one can regroup and identify ‘the canvasses that created Cubism’,or ‘the images that triggered important responses in the history of western culture’,[[4]](#footnote-4) or simply ‘the films that made me love the American deserts’…

Furthermore, the two approaches, the scholarly and the experimental, the identifying and the explanatory, can not only be brought together in one sense or another; they can also, and above all, enter into dialogue with one another. They can make up the two poles of a practice, which takes place in the middle and is thus complicated and tense. An example of this is when we are faced with an image in a museum, which causes us literally to oscillate between, on the one hand, the information provided by its caption and the interpretative framework imposed by the exhibition in general and, on the other hand, the fact of coming face to face with the image itself, the patient exploration thereof, the immersion or, even, the reverie.

The aim of this discussion is precisely to argue that it is interesting to pinpoint – if possible – when one process finishes and cedes its place to the other, or when one takes over from the other; in particular, how *the meaning of the image changes*. Our more specific challenge, following this epistemological introduction, is the following: is the “amateur image of migration” defined as such only as a result of the attribution of a label, for the externalknowledge that is applied to it, or also for a particular experience that it triggers, for the knowledge and effects, in a way, evoked by the image itself? For if an image were “amateur” and “of migration” simply as a result of external labelling, *independently of the image itself and with no effect whatsoever on its meaning*, the act of questioning this type of image would lose a lot of its appeal, and all that would be left would be to draw up an empirical inventory, citing existing “amateur images of migration”.

**Definition of the “Amateur” Image**

The question thus arises whether an image is said to be “amateur” and “of migration” because an external source, accompanying the image, informs us that this image was produced in a non-professional context and in (or for) a situation of migration; or whether such an image also possesses a particular effectiveness, if the “amateurism” and “migration” elements are also, to a certain degree, *within* the image and, if so, in what manner. I will focus on the question of “amateur” images and will come back to the “migration” issue only in the final part, since by then it will be obvious that this second question is entirely determined by the first.

After Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s fundamental essay on photography, it appears difficult to negate the importance of the “knowledge of the *arché*”, i.e. of the information one has when faced with the photographic object that concerns its production and, at the same time, radically changes its meaning.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, it can easily be agreed that an image is ‘amateur’ and not ‘professional’, not because of what it shows or the manner in which it shows it, but because of what we know about its production. It would be rather naïve to think that an image is ‘amateur’ because its subjects are depicted in a certain manner, or because it employs (or does not employ) certain technical procedures. On the one hand, these same ‘amateur’ procedures are widely reproduced by ‘professionals’, for various reasons; on the other hand, in particular, a ‘dilettante’ can also produce a photo in a ‘professional’ manner. In summary, it is clear that an ‘amateur’ image is not by visual definition of a lower quality than a ‘professional’ image; the real difference lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that what a ‘professional’ does by definition is to produce *ensembles of images*, while ‘dilettantes’ can limit themselves to a single image. It follows that an image produced in a ‘professional’ way is an image that has been reframed in relation to the ensemble of the project, in relation to the other creations of this project and in relation to the technique that has been developed in the meantime or as a result of previous projects, etc. In other words, questions of technique, project, alternatives, etc. become just many new pertinent categories for the ‘professional’ image.[[6]](#footnote-6) The ‘amateur’ image, on the other hand, is an image that is free of any institutional framework; which means that it is not part of a series of images and therefore exempt from more general classification, discussion and assessment practices.

In summary, an image considered an ‘amateur’ image passes through the only categorisation that pits it against the ‘professional’, and as a result frees itself from all other ensuing additional categorisations. Questions of technique, project, alternatives, etc. are not pertinent in this case. With the ‘amateur’ image, first the game of scholarly identification is played, in order subsequently to play directly, and *more freely*, the game of affective or cognitive effectiveness.

**Institutionalisation versus Personalisation of the Image**

What happens, more precisely, once the image is classified as ‘amateur’? The image, as we have just seen, is available for a direct encounter, for a personal experience, or even a personalising one. If the ‘professional’ image functions through institutionalisation, the ‘amateur’ image functions *ad personam*, through personalisation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To explain this dynamic, it no doubt helps to recall the fact that the genre *par excellence* of the amateur image, the most prevalent and banal, is the souvenir photograph. A brief discussion on the souvenir photograph will allow us to understand more clearly the personalisation that characterises amateur images in general.

Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that, while they may produce the same experience of personalisation, the ‘amateur image’ and the ‘souvenir photograph’ are not necessarily one and the same. An amateur image requires prior categorisation (that states that the image does not belong to an institution, and thus is not part of a project, etc.), whereas a souvenir photograph could be almost any image, amateur or professional, involving a process of personalisation. I can therefore take on, as my own souvenir photograph, a professional photo taken by an artist who used my sweetheart as a model, or a photo from a journalist’s article (and therefore professional), which happens to feature my cat. In summary, any image can *become* a souvenir photograph, whereas an image *is*, *straightaway*, either professional or amateur.

A souvenir photograph can talk of any subject (including ‘migration’); and, just like an ‘amateur’ image, it can be produced in any manner. Certainly, it has recurring themes, like important people and/or moments of our lives. It also bears witness to recurring formal procedures, true stereotypes of composition, like a certain frontal positioning, even the use of the camera look, or, in the case of tourist trips, the framing of subjects by a monument[[8]](#footnote-8). Nevertheless, nothing stops a photograph with an overstated subject or an unexpected technique from becoming a souvenir photograph.

In fact, what counts in a souvenir photograph is not the content of the image or its means of expression, but a personal and personalising experience with regard to the image: *an engaging of the photographic representation with our memory, our ideas, our affections*. More specifically, playing the souvenir game with the image is akin to trying to go through a re-cognition of what the image is meant to represent. The game of the souvenir photograph consists in trying to re-find, re-cognise something or someone personal *in the image*. So much that, in this game, two types of behaviour appear typical. On the one hand, there is the behaviour of the souvenir protagonists, the “people”; on the other hand, there is the behaviour of those who are strangers to the souvenir, the “non-people”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Typically, the first, the “people”, those who were captured in the photograph or those close to them, have trouble finding themselves in the photo: they have to make significant concessions (“*shame I am pulling such a face*”, “*you are much prettier in real life”*, etc.), or even refuse to play the game (“*I hate having my picture taken*”, “*I have no photo of my friend*”, etc.); more rarely, they might express wonder (“*yes, that’s definitely it!*”). The second group, the “non-people”, display a totally different behaviour in this game: they find the photo insignificant, because they have literally nothing to do with it.[[10]](#footnote-10) In one case as in the other, one can clearly see that the pertinent question appears to be a process, possible or not, of personalisation.

This issue is understood even better when contemplating what is possibly the furthest removed from the personalisation of the souvenir photograph: the institutionalisation of the (scientific) documentation photograph. The latter consists precisely in submitting the photograph to a series of depersonalisations and classifications. In effect, one can say that there is scientific documentation of the image whenever the latter is:

1. associated with a precise time space,
2. an aid for a collective and anonymous audience,
3. available for verifications or processes of reasoning by (II).

The souvenir photograph, for instance of our lover, contrasts with this in each point. It functions:

1. without us necessarily knowing at what exact time our lover was photographed;
2. by virtue of the fact that the person featured, the lover, is important to us, thus triggering personal reactions,
3. without any discussion having to take place, beyond the experience (ii) itself.

That being said, nothing could stop the police from seizing the photo of our lover, if for instance the latter is a criminal on the run; and the police then endeavouring to make the photo function in precisely the institutionalist manner of scientific documentation (points I-III). Meaning that, subsequently, *other things are going to be seen in this same image*. For instance, every element able to identify the situation in which the photograph was taken (cf. I) will be scrutinised, but not whether this photograph agrees with the personal state of mind of the viewer (cf. ii)…

In general, the personal photograph can be institutionalised, but it has to be taken into account that its meaning then changes. The ‘amateur’ photograph can be archived by an institution, and then it can be used, for instance, to study how ‘amateur’ photos are taken, and in doing so it becomes the object of a further and more precise sub-classification (cf. III). Meaning that the amateur photograph, once it becomes an archived photograph, would take on a *reflective* expression that was previously absent: the photograph serves to *exemplify* a type of photo. This reflexivity, which makes us see new things in the photograph, can also increase if the photo is featured in an exhibition or a newspaper article: in these cases, it becomes even more exemplary, for the institution exhibiting it, or for the social issue of the newspaper supported by it. In summary, in this case, the photo, whether originally amateur or professional, is ultimately viewed according to a collective and shareable issue.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Conclusion: What the Image Speaks of**

The conclusions of the preceding discussions seem fairly clear: what the image speaks of, what it makes us experience, changes according to the games it yields to. These ‘games’ are the genres and practices, institutional or not.

Thus, the theme of “migration” – to finally come back to the key subject of this book – will be experienced and identified differently, according to whether it makes up the content of a ‘professional’ or an ‘amateur’ image. In the first case, migration must be able to be *documented*. This with the specific methods of the institution in question (documentation as analysis, exposure, suggestion… i.e.: documentation involving more science, more coverage, more propaganda, etc.). On the other hand, if migration were to be the theme of an ‘amateur’ image, namely an image free from subsequent frameworks, migration need only be *experienced*. Which means that, quite simply, the “amateur image of migration” is an image that functions *for someone* as being linked to migration. It is not obliged to document migration, or even show it, but just to have it experienced. It functions, for instance, much like a souvenir photograph that would have us relive the experience of our trip to Italy even if no monument or landscape of Italy were visible on it – ‘visible’ to the view of the collective and anonymous audience of the documentation…

In these few pages, I have suggested that how an image functions may be likened to a game. The image testifies to a reality or an experience exactly like pawns and a chessboard testify to a game of chess.

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1. See: Tore, “Médiations”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On this discussion and opposition, see also: Didi-Huberman, *Devant l’image*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here reference needs to be made to all so-called ‘analytical aesthetics’. For the question on categorisation, see: Walton, “Categories of Art” and Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See: Freedberg, *The Power of Images*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schaeffer, *L’image précaire*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be noted that ‘artists’ are also professionals and that the entire framework mentioned also applies to them: technique, practice, series (which also means ‘style’ or ‘genre’, or even the creation of an ‘author’s work’)... Hence the semiotic interest and paradox of the ‘naïve’ artists, a sort of contradiction in terms, which consists in creating an art that would be free of the framework of ‘art’, i.e.: an amateur art. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The art image, insofar as it is ‘professional’, is also submitted to the various games of institutionalisation. Hence, any potential ‘personal’ experience must take into account these games, thus adopting tactics such as an assumed ignorance and the concessions (“I know that…, but for me…”) or rethinking the institutional classifications (“oh yes, *that image employs a revolutionary technique*”, “*this artist is the most representative of his generation*”, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It would be worth carrying out a large-scale structural analysis of a vast body of souvenir photographs, even just of amateur photographs of migration, in order to mark their visual *topoi*. See, in this volume, the contributions by Christina Natlacen, Peter Burleigh/Sophie Jung and Susan Aasman. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here I refer to the classical theory by Emile Benveniste on subjectivity *within* the language, i.e. the manner in which language differentiates and reproduces the “person versus non-person” difference (*I/you* versus *he*) and then the “subject versus non-subject” difference (*I* versus *you*). The souvenir photograph is personalising, even subjectifying, in the game of dialogue it elicits (an *I-you* game). On the other hand, scientific photography, for instance, functions in the third person (a game of *he*, or of *one*), which in reality is a non-person and which, in fact, is objectifying. See: Benviste, “Structure des relations de personne dans le verbe” and Benviste “De la subjectivité dans le langage”. With this semiolinguistic approach, some formal *topoi* and some rules governing various types of photographs can be explained. For instance, personalising photographs, such as the souvenir photograph and even more the identity photograph, require a frontal pose. By contrast, non-personalising, but possibly more “realistic” photographs, such as “portraits”, do not require this. Schapiro has discussed these issues in paintwork, see: Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*,37 s. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This brings to mind the most renowned account of the souvenir photograph: that of Roland Barthes on the photograph of his mother. Indeed, while common opinion has taken this account as a general theory of the photograph, Barthes is in fact about finding just the “good” image of his own mother (which incidentally Barthes is careful not to show the reader – a stranger to whom the photograph would no doubt have appeared insignificant). See: Barthes, *La chambre claire*. Contrary to what one often thinks, Barthes does not say “that-has-been” for every photograph, but only for photographs he can take possession of both affectively and cognitively – an approach that Barthes applies independently of the genre of the photograph. Barthes incidentally provides a good illustration that every photograph, given successful personalisation, can become a souvenir photograph. For a more elaborate study on the souvenir photograph, see Tore, “La pratica semiotica della foto ricordo”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Beyaert-Geslin, *L’image préoccupée*. The ‘press’ photograph can thus be defined as a more focused ‘documentation’ photograph: featuring a precision and intensification of the institutional mediation on the one hand, and of the social exemplary aspect on the other hand. The ‘art’ photograph, for its part, seems to make sense at the intersection of an institutional view, anonymous and collective, and an individual and personal one. 'Art’ images work as a curious combination of 'science' images, which typically are subjected to rationalisations and discussions, reviewed and re-evaluated several times, and souvenir photographs, which typically are matters of affection and of acceptance/rejection in relation to their being experienced. For discussions and analyses of different semiotic statuses of the photograph, see: Edwards and Hart, eds., *Photographs, Objects, Histories*; Basso and Dondero, *Sémiotique de la photographie*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)