THE SUBVERSION OF THE IMAGE

the doubleness and the unsharpness in Zbigniew Libera's 'La Vue'

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[EN]

Abstract

The subject matter of the article is the series 'La Vue' by Zbigniew Libera, in which photograph itself and landscape view become the objects of the play with language and image conventions. The reference for this play is composed from the writings of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), and his conceptualized strategy of doubleness. Libera refers directly to Roussel's creation assumption that language writes itself and is independent from reality, and also to the strategy of doubleness. Taking under consideration the process of perception, Libera represents the illusion of desired object and in the same time the illusion of photographic picture. The author of the article presents this play as a highly sophisticated and grounded in the history of photographic conventions where unsharpened image is unreadable and often called a mistake. The further argument is that we can describe this perception using Carl Jung category of active imagination, which let explain how 'La Vue' provoke our imagination and in effect how one brings abstract desires to our attention. In consequence, the aim of Libera seems to be the awakening of the viewer and making him aware of his responsibility for a perceiving.

Keywords

Zbigniew Libera, Raymond Roussel, (un)sharpness, doubleness, active imagination.

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Resumo

O tema do artigo é a série *La Vue* de Zbigniew Libera, na qual a fotografia e a visão paisagística se tornam objetos de um jogo com as convenções da linguagem e da imagem. A referência para este jogo é constituída pelos escritos de Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), e pela sua estratégia conceptualizada de duplicação. Libera refere-se diretamente à suposição da criação de Roussel, segundo a qual a *linguagem se escreve* e é independente da realidade e refere-se também à estratégia de duplicação. Levando em consideração o processo de perceção, Libera representa a ilusão do objeto desejado e ao mesmo tempo a ilusão da imagem fotográfica. O autor do artigo apresenta este jogo como sendo altamente sofisticado e fundamentado na história das convenções fotográficas, onde a imagem desfocada é ilegível e muitas vezes considerada como erro. O argumento adicional é que podemos descrever essa perceção usando a categoria da *imaginação ativa* de Carl Jung, a qual permite explicar como *La Vue* estimula a nossa imaginação e como, de facto, mobilizamos a nossa atenção para o desejo abstrato . Em consequência, o objetivo de Libera parece ser o despertar do espectador e a tomada de consciência da sua responsabilidade pela perceção.

Palavras-chave

Zbigniew Libera, Raymond Roussel, (des)focagem, duplicação, imaginação ativa.

Between 2004–2006 Zbigniew Libera made the *La Vue* series composed of large-sized colour photographs depicting unidentifiable *pseudo-landscapes*. The images bring to mind abstract compositions, not least of all through the dominant blur and indistinctness of the image, responsible for perception discomfort and cognitive dissonance. The eye wandering across the image is aided by the horizon lines, which connote an iconography of landscapes and potentially facilitate recognition. In fact, they depict fissures and cracks, stiches of two foldups of glossy magazines and albums, photographed by Libera with a macro camera. The project is fittingly interpreted through the prism of Baudrillard's diagnosis, according to which «signs are the source of signs and in a Platonic precession, they drive us away from reality» (Zaremba, 2013). They are moreover seen as exemplifying the Leibniz question, as they «bring about a merger of what one sees with what one knows, i.e. the mistaking of result for cause (we see an object, *ergo* a cause, while we see only an image on the retina of the eye, *ergo* a result)» (Leśniakowska, 2013: 6). The subversion of the image in Libera's project is, however, far more complex and sophisticated.

The title of the series, *La Vue*, is a direct reference to the Raymond Roussel work by the same title. The French writer's method of doubleness and image depictions, which gain the status of literary reproductions, correspond to Libera's strategy, subversive towards the image. Of key importance for both authors is the recognition of the power of language and the rejection of discursively declared realism. Still, the most interesting here is the effect of illegibility, a result of the use of the above tools in Roussel's works, achieved by Libera through the blurring of the image's visibility. The unsharp visuality becomes a polemical tool, introduces an image into a *critical state* and must be considered in the context of its own photographic history. My interpretation of *La Vue* that ensues makes references to the discursive status of photographic unsharpness (which I see as a category that

Figure 1— Zbigniew Libera. *La Vue*, 2003-2006. Courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw.

brings together the many and varied reasons for the rejection of the sharpness of image – optical indistinctness, inadvertent move, etc.). At the same time, I address the problem of the viewer's implied perception, doomed to cognitive helplessness yet conducive to significant self-consciousness. I describe this work of perception through the Jungian category of active imagination. As a result, what matters is the shift of attention from the act of making the pictures under discussion to the effect itself, and then to the activity of the recipient and their role in the interpretation of photographic images.

In his *La Vue*, Roussel includes a meticulous description of a photograph placed on a pen cap, showing a seashore landscape. Both in this case and in the case of other "graphic reproductions", i.e. depictions of images, statues, prints, or paintings, the description does not refer to reality but to its mediated representation (Robbe-Grillet, 2007: 202). In other words, the text refers exclusively to other texts or other media used to depict the world. As Bogdan Banasiak, a scholar studying the works by the French writer, maintains: «Roussel does not depict reality but an

already depicted and described world; he describes a description» (2007: 87). In his other texts the writer strengthens the power of language through the method known as doubleness. The underlying assumptions of the method can be found in the author's posthumously published essay *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (Roussel, 2007). The starting point was a selection of two nearly identically sounding words (metagrams) with differing meaning, used to compose two identical sentences that are the beginning and the end of the text. The space in between the framework so established was filled with a construction based on a similar technique, transformed and developed, enriched by ever new procedures such as anagrams, synonyms, homonyms, puns on words, etc. (Banasiak, 2007: 98). Essentially, the procedure attempts to discover the "method" of language itself, its creative patterns. Both practices correspond with Libera's work. The Polish artist accomplishes Roussel-like descriptions and a focus on action within language through the gesture of a double photograph of his pictures, which means creation enclosed within a mesh of images. Key in both cases is the moment of rejecting "the realist drive" and of subjecting work to the power of language (Banasiak, 2007: 101; Foucault, 2001: 100-101).

The above similarity of both authors' strategies hinges, therefore, on fundamental epistemological kinship, whose importance must be duly appreciated. Banasiak sees in Roussel's practice an intention which comes close to Libera's *La Vue*, analogous also to the Derridian rejection of the "transcendental signifier":

> «an external truth, of the subject of meaning-cause established by the intention of the speaker, who would govern it and guarantee its stability and identity, the identity of significance (…), for which the text (the material tissue of a record) would be solely an extraneous, fortuitous and insignificant tool of conveying the message» (Banasiak, 2007: 111-113).

The revealed language mechanisms show that «the same words can signify different things and the same sentence, when repeated, gains another meaning» (Banasiak, 2007: 112). This applies also to Libera, as his photographed images break free from the signified, the primary cause of taking pictures published in magazines, and acquires a new meaning; the cracks between the pages become horizon lines in the *pseudo-landscapes*.

The above epistemological turn, present in the practice of both Roussel and Libera, is naturally well-known in contemporary humanities, literature and art criticism. What is exceptional, however, is the effect of illegibility obtained in both cases. Both reproduction and the doubleness method should be seen as tools which lead to an illegibility of subversive power in both artist's works. The illegibility in Roussel's works is due to the distinct domination of the very textual structure, subject to a particular method determining contents. The consistent use of the writer's signature method in works such as *Impressions d'Afrique* and *Locus Solus, l'Étoile au Front* results in the primacy of language over content, in the domination of the linguistic structure underpinned by a composition principle (Banasiak, 2007: 94-95, 112-113). This leads to a unique illegibility of content which provides an opportunity for asking questions about language itself. The reader follows a word game that reveals the ambiguity of words, while meaning is born through the domination of the language structure. The illegibility seems the most intriguing interpretative tool for Libera's photographs. In the photographs of the *La Vue* series the illegibility and semantic instability are due to blurred visibility, which has claimed authority of the images. The "unsharpness" cannot be seen solely as an effect of over-photographing magazines, but as a means revealing the significance of this strategy. The gesture of doubleness, of taking a photograph of another photograph, is not an appropriation gesture analogous to the one we know so well from the canonical works by Richard Prince (e.g. *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 1980-89) and Sherrie Levine (e.g. *After Walker Evans*, 1981). The "unsharpness" seems to enhance the act of double photography and limits the possibility of direct references to other images, artefacts of visual culture; the movement towards other images and depictions remains uncertain. The "unsharpness" is responsible for the *critical state of an image* which helps undermine the authority of photographic language with its universal ambitions, rooted in the very beginnings of the medium's history, in both the potential of actual reference and unequivocal iconic sharpness.

The subversive aspect of unsharp visuality stems from its discursive negation in the history of photography. In early photographic discourse, the "unsharpness" of an image was criticised and was tantamount to its potential

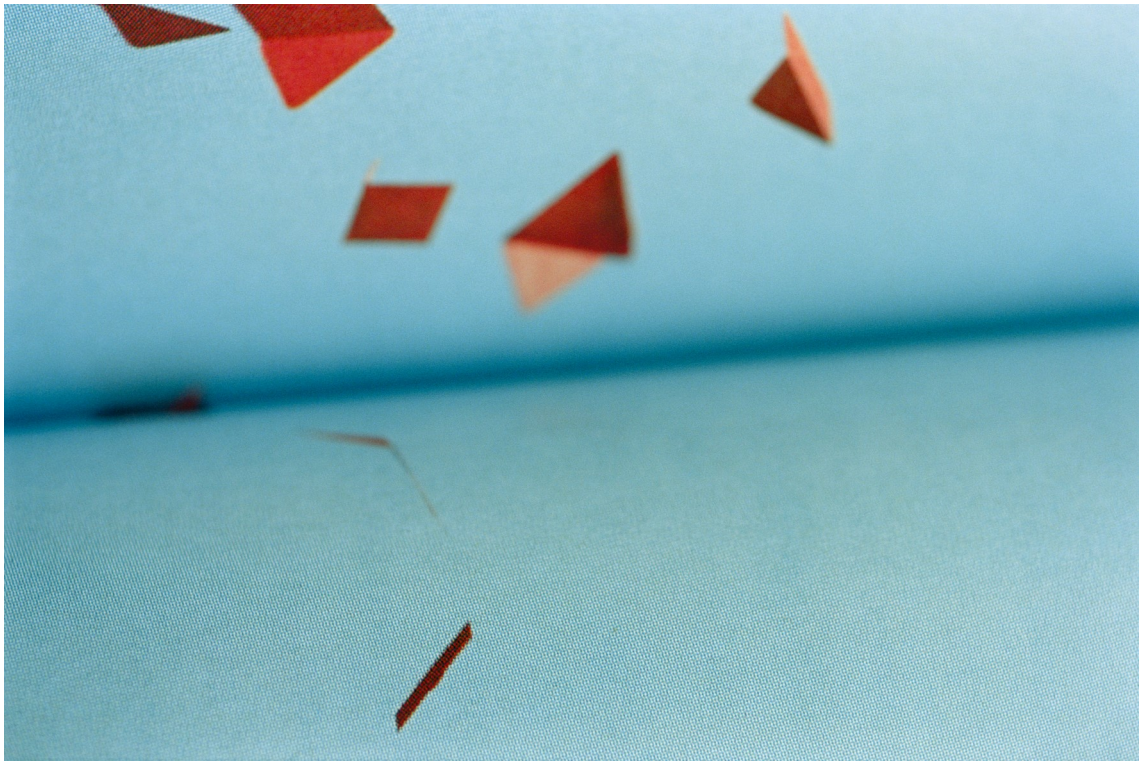

Figure 2— Zbigniew Libera. *La Vue*, 2003-2006. Courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw.

illegibility; it is an obstacle, a blind spot on a transparent picture. The obsessive craving for sharpness can be seen both in the direction of photographic practice and in the statements by discoverers and early explorers. Louis Jacques Daguerre described the difference between the effects obtained by him and by Joseph Niécephore Niépce, stressing the perfection of detail, gradual tonalities and sharp daguerreotypes (Daguerre, 1839). Sharpness as the fundamental category, determining the correctness and aesthetic quality of a photographic image, is addressed on numerous occasions in William Henry Fox Talbot's and John Herschel's letters (Talbot, 1841; Herschel, 1839). A sharp and detailed photographic representation assured the optimum legibility to representation and was to find its fuller application in science. Importantly, the rejection of unsharpness linked with illegibility clearly indicates how the paradigm of objectivism and declared transparency of photography is in fact established through the negotiation of the desired visuality of the image, which propels the technological progress of the medium in the first decades of its history.

The above implied negotiations, the establishment of the criteria of legibility of photographic representation, appear also when specific image-taking principles and photographic conventions are defined, which takes place from the very onset of the medium. To highlight one of the many examples, one can refer to reproductions of works of art, or museum artefacts, especially sculptures, pottery, porcelain, and other objects (Snyder, 1998). Equally significant is the codification of documentary photography, as if in response to the alternative models of photographic epistemology of the pictorialists, for which the dissolution of verity was idiomatic. The definition of documentary photography as adopted in 1910 during the 5th International Photography Congress in Brussels prioritised the sharpness and wealth of detail over the "beauty" of an image (Rouillé, 2005, p. 63). In other words, the sharpness and primacy of information over other image values were considered the fundamental properties of visuality, helping sustain the authority of a transparent and credible image. The depreciation of unsharpness, its rejection from the discursive establishment of the power of the photographic image, can also be found in historical studies. A case in point is Helmut Gernsheim's description of Julia Margaret Cameron's practice; according to this account the unsharpness of the photographer's pictures was an effect of chance and technical errors (Gernsheim, 1948). This conviction was revised only a few years ago by Mirjam Brusius, who on the strength of written indicated sources that Cameron consciously rejected photographic distinction in the name of a pursuit of the Truth (Brusius, 2010).

The above examples show the desire for eliminating unsharpness from photographic practice. Unsharpness that takes up the entire image frame or its major part, irrespective of its cause (program/artistic strategy, error, the optics of the camera) suspends movement towards actual reference and points to the independence of the photographic image from external reality. In his analysis of the shift from reportage and aesthetics towards photo-documentary and photo-journalism in the practice of 20th-century artists, Jeff Wall evoked Daguerre's famous street views, indicating that along with the blurred sections of the photograph, reportage transforms into picture (Wall, 2003, p. 33). Unsharpness, then, becomes a kind of wedge, a tool that undermines the apparent transparency

and declarative universal legibility of the image, even if it appeared against the photographer's intention. Unsharpness that introduced the photographic image into a *critical state*, which in the history of the medium was rejected, hidden and overlooked / silenced, has transformed into a critical strategy of contemporary art.

In 2011, the Kunsthalle Hamburg hosted an exhibition *Unscharf nach Gerhard Richter* which gathered works by contemporary artists using the medium of photography, video and painting. Displayed on the show were objects using unsharpness as a category subverting the unequivocal image and its stability, embodying instead metaphoric ephemerality or doubt. Gerhard Richter's *oeuvre*, and more precisely his paintings based on photographs, with their unique blur, constituting a different other existence of the object (Gassner, 2011: 6). Wolfgang Ullrich (as cited in Gassner, 2011: 7) sees the unsharpness introduced after Richter by artists active in the 1980s as a symbol of postmodernism, a critical strategy undermining the western concept of image as information. Unsharpness, then, becomes a "tool of image policy", touching on the ethics of an ambiguous image (Hüppauf, 2011: 42–45). As Bernd Huppauf observes, in Richter's oeuvre and in the works by the other artists shown in Hamburg, due to the unsharpness the image reveals itself as a phantasy that is simulation and construction.

The unsharpness of Libera's photographs from the *La Vue* series is part of a broader visual strategy aiming at introducing the image into the critical state, at achieving a state of quivering and instability tantamount to cognitive uncertainty. This state of an image has a subversive power as it is located directly opposite the sanctioned paradigms and attendant sharp visuality. The polar relation of sharpness and unsharpness can be also seen, however, as the polarisation of mechanical prosthetic vision of the camera, independent of and different from human vision and the vision with the eye, limited and imperfect, first of all however with the blurred peripheral vision of our eye. Perhaps, then, *La Vue* not so much, or not only, refers to alternative human vision, solely in the realm of images and mediated by images, but points to the activity of the recipient, its subjective aspect and limitations.

Figure 3— Zbigniew Libera. *La Vue*, 2003-2006. Courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw

The unsharpness of the photographs in the *La Vue* series cannot be missed; it irritates the viewer and prevents the reading of the image, and as a consequence prevents cognitive satisfaction. The process of perception of these images is contingent on the circulation of associations, memory images which prompt the reading of the *pseudo-landscapes*, discernible despite being blurred. They cannot be identified more precisely, though, since as I have already indicated, they immediately present themselves as abstract compositions to our gaze. Still, their visual attractiveness and enigmatic quality make them desirable. They trigger our craving to be "there", far away, in a place with positive associations, despite, or possibly due to its being undefinable, a kind of phantasmagoria. The very images and their aesthetic values are also desirable, though; their apparent isolation from reality allows immersion in pure visuality. This mechanism allows paying attention to the active perceiving subject. Perception is based here on irreducible conflict and impossibility of conventional cognitive satisfaction. What we discern in the images results from our imagination, imaginativeness, memory and the whole (visual) legacy, which make up our identity and inherently determine the reception of

images. Such perception experience can be compared by analogy to the technique of active imagination applied by Carl Gustav Jung who, like Roussel, was an object of interest to the Surrealists. The Jungian method of active imagination consists in the assimilation of unconscious content, phantasies provoked by a form of self--expression and by the imagined, fantasy image, including arising from a focus on a specific mood. The first stage of active imagination involves observation of images, which latter transforms into conscious participation in them, taking the form of action aiming at their comprehension (Sharp, 1991; McNiff, 1998). Jung describes the transformation as follows:

> «Although, to a certain extent, he looks on from outside, impartially, he is also an acting and suffering figure in the drama of the psyche. This recognition is absolutely necessary and marks an important advance. So long as he simply looks at the pictures he is like the foolish Parsifal, who forgot to ask the vital question because he was not aware of his own participation in the action. But if you recognize your own involvement you yourself must enter into the process with your personal reactions, just as if you were one of the fantasy figures, or rather, as if the drama being enacted before your eyes were real» (Jung, 1977: par. 753).

Active imagination is, therefore, the experience of an inward-oriented subject. The subject follows the projection of "dreaming", of images, i.e. allows contradictions and oppositions, or compensatory content, to enter consciousness (Ku micki, 2008: 320-321). This helps reveal content of which one was previously unaware. If we posit that photography may embody a phantasm which provokes the experience of active imagination, it will appear with attendant associations, memories, etc. In the case of *La Vue*, however, the process does not finish with the question: "What do we see?" We need to recognise the very role of the recipient, his or her activity, the power of co-creating what they see.

La Vue is not a project that refers only to the image seen as an independent and autonomous entity, having authority over a passive subject. The critical state of an image concerns both the image entity and the viewer, his or her inevitable reaction. The sensation of discomfort arising in the course of perception, arises from the suspension of the possibility of unequivocal cognition, of reading the image, but also appears along with the very identification of the role played by the recipient.

After all, what we see (recognise and get to know) is in fact a vision which merges "the image content" and the viewer's perception. To sum up: Rousell-like doubleness and unsharpness as well as the game with repressed visuality allows Libera to introduce an image, and consequently the viewer, into a state of quivering; the viewer becomes the pivot of an inner conflict. In the broader context of Libera's *oeuvre*, the processing of the perception mechanisms and the introduction of an image into a state of uncertainty in *La Vue* seems to address the question of responsibility on the part of the viewer. The responsibility resounds in a particular historical, social or moral context, for example in works such as *Intimate Rites* (1984) and *Positives/Negatives* (2002–2003), where the artist shakes the audience out of their comfortable inertia and shows what is rejected by social identity, violates their habits and unsettles the collective consciousness.

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