doi:10.5477/cis/reis.148.135

Social Tensions in the Photographic Representation of the1870-1930 Period

Tensiones sociales en la representación fotográfica del periodo 1870-1930

José Romero Tenorio

Key words

Visual anthropology
• Social Determination of Meaning
• Photography
• Family Research
• Rural to Urban Migration
• Social Tensions

Abstract

Before the rural exodus of the 1950s in Italy, a symbolic and reverse exodus took place. The symbolic capital of modern culture penetrated into the farming world. Society has particular mechanisms in place to relieve pressures, thereby also announcing and preparing for social changes. This paper analyses one of these mechanisms, namely family photography between the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Through some singular portraits, we see the "dispatcher" role that photography played in the interstices of society between psychological, social, and material realities: a junction of emotions, a mediator between the rural and urban worlds, a rite of passage that channels drives, and a yardstick of what society considers to be correct or not.

Palabras clave

Antropología visual
• Determinación del significado social
• Fotografía
• Investigación sobre la familia
• Migración campo-ciudad
• Tensiones sociales

Resumen

En Italia, antes del éxodo rural de los años 50, hubo un éxodo simbólico en sentido contrario. El capital simbólico de la cultura moderna penetró en el mundo rural. La sociedad tiene sus válvulas que dosifican la presión, anunciando y preparando los cambios sociales. Este artículo analiza una de esas válvulas, la fotografía de familia de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX. A través de singulares retratos, veremos ese papel de *dispatcher* entre la realidad psíquica, la realidad social y la realidad material que jugaba la fotografía en los intersticios de la sociedad: empalme de emociones, aparejador entre el mundo rural y el mundo urbano, ritual de pasaje que canaliza las pulsiones, medida de lo que se considera lícito o no en la sociedad.

Citation

Romero Tenorio, José (2014). "Social Tensions in the Photographic Representation of the 1870-1930 Period". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas,* 148: 135-156. (http://dx.doi.org/10.5477/cis/reis.148.135)

José Romero Tenorio: Researcher at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS-Paris), Institut Acte-Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne y Profesor Asociado Universidad Católica de Pereira (Colombia) I joserotenorio@yahoo.es I www.manueltenorio.com

Method and sample

This paper presents the conclusions from a social and ethnographic study on family photography from the 1870-1930 period carried out in the Toscana de Lunigiana region, Italy, as part of a thesis directed by Piermarco Aroldi. Yannick Geffroy and Patrick Accolla were the intellectual parents of this study, as our passion for family photography originally came from them. The fieldwork was performed over eight months between 2004 and 2005: two months in the summer of 2004, and five consecutive months from January to May 2005, and finally, a number of short, usually weekly, periods. The centre of operations for the study was located in the village of Merizzo.

The fieldwork approach demanded an ethnographic methodology that basically consisted in becoming integrated into village life. We learned the local dialect, shared coffees and meals with the locals, participated in village festivals, talked to people. Little by little, an emotional bond was created that allowed us to get access to the tin boxes which guarded the old photographs. Four hundred and seventeen family photographs were collected.

The process of transcribing the ethnographic experience onto the pages of this paper involved making a difficult decision, one which every ethnographer is faced with: whether to shape these experiences within empirical scientific discourse, or to use a way of writing which is marred by the very folly and lack of continuity that characterises the ethnographic subject matter being tackled.

There is no greater folly than for heroes to escape by tying themselves to the bellies of sheep. Like Polyphemus, we felt the rough backs of the photographs. That is, we limited our scope to the analysis of the photographs, without intending to offer a coherent discourse that can be understood without the benefit of a tenacious reading. Whether this is the case or not is totally dependent on the success of the ethnographic subject matter itself, and not on the scientific narrative. Authors such as Stéphane Beaud and Florence Weber (2010) talk specifically about the production of ethnographic data. We do not produce anything, but rather are limited to being awkward witnesses. Much in the manner of a mosaic, fragments were collected and overlaid, as if they were to form a frontispiece by Juan de Madariaga. From our point of view, an ethnographer must accumulate various elements rather than stringing them together within a discourse.

We cannot be oblivious to the current tendency to narration in ethnographic accounts. Contemporary ethnographic works, such as that by Corine Sombrun (2012), relate the life of people, in this case of a Mongolian shaman, who faces all kinds of vicissitudes, as if it were an adventure novel. An excess of narration shades the unrepeatable nature of the ethnographic experience. Paradoxically, the inertia of using narration appears in certain registers that intend to gather or explain the data without contaminating it, from news programmes (Casetti and Di Chio, 1998: 232) to documentaries. Thus "anthropomorphised" animals are paraded on the television screen (Sorice, 2002: 158), complete with will, emotions and intentions.

The intention here is not to achieve ethnographic purity, nor do we think that writing deflowers facts; we simply let the experience be, with all of its inconsistencies and challenges, improvised turns and unforeseen dialectics. Finally, the aim is to restore some dignity to ethnographic data, which have today become mere qualitative underpinnings (Banks, 2010) for other disciplines, from journalism to sociology. Therefore it can be agreed upon that ethnography does not consist in becoming immersed into a gypsy neighbourhood for a couple of days to seek a distinctive or appealing fact for a specific public. For this reason, we prefer the sometimes jumbled ethnographic discipline from the 1970s, despite all of its excessive use of

psychoanalytic analysis (Mead, 1976), and its long exposures to the lens with sometimes nothing happening, to *fast ethnography*.

The method of analysis from the perspective of visual anthropology proposed by Claudine de France is fully current, and is to this day disseminated amongst the students of the masters and doctorate courses in *Cinéma anthropologique et documentaire* at the *Université de Nanterre,* France. According to Claudine de France, the continuous flow through which ethnographic data pass has three counterpoints: "bodily, material and ritual" (France, 1979:148).

The bodily aspect is shown in a continuum of socially-codified gestures and postures. Photography was clearly a bourgeois representation with codes that reflected the appearance needs of this particular social class. These codes were imposed on the farmers by the photographer, thus causing the subjects to adopt forced gestures and rigid poses. This tension in the representation revealed interesting sociological aspects, such as the problematic incursion of the urban world into the rural world. The material environment means that photography "initially appears as a saturated space" (France, 1979: 153). This saturation of the photographic space by staging elements means that a manifestation that is presented realistically ends up looking unreal, as will be shown later. The ritual dimension of photography is of fundamental importance. It consists of "a show of gestures, objects and manipulations that men offer to God or that they offer to each other" (ibíd. 1979:156). This gesture show is orchestrated by the photographer, the real master of ceremonies who prepares the liturgy. The photographer furnishes the scene with all of the necessary props, respecting the missal of bodily practices that conform to the different permitted ways of presenting the characters.

The ethnographic method differs from the social psychological method in that it does not operate by surveying samples—which are (mis)labelled as being representative. Real groups are being taken into account here. We have used what Pierre Bourdieu called functional sociology (Bourdieu, 1979). Whilst recognising the utility of social psychology when it comes to collecting data, essentially by way of interviews, we later insert this material into the social structures from which it emerged.

In the context of this contrast between formal and qualitative methods, Banks reflected on the scope of visual methods in sociological research. For Banks these methods bring "a seemingly paradoxical mixing of the singular and the multiple" (Banks, 2010). Evidently, as argued further by this author, certain abstract macro-sociological categories cannot be immediately transferred to images, but this does not mean that visual research should exclude these categories. Faced with the impossibility of fixing abstract realities in the representation, the researcher should reconsider "taken-for-granted analytical categories", and adopt "multiple forms of analysis" (ibíd.).

By understanding functional sociology in a Wittgensteinian sense, our scope is not limited to mapping the network of social interactions that leads the members of a group to adopt a certain behaviour in accordance with the group's codes. We are first faced with "immediate experience, which is shown in the opinions that conceal objective meaning at the same time as revealing it" (Bourdieu *et al.,* 1965:20). Focusing on the immediate experience, which according to Bourdieu is the first level of the three inseparable stages of research, we promote "exploration, serendipity and social collaboration in social research" (Banks, 2010). Secondly, "we analyse the objective meanings and the social conditions that make these meanings possible" in order to finally "reconstruct the relationships between the agents and the objective meaning of their behaviour" (Bourdieu et al.,1965:20).

This method of analysis is particularly effective in coming closer to "photographic practice" (Bourdieu et al.,1965:11), since it appears as a reconstruction of the pathways by which individuals or groups have been forced to adopt a series of socially-coded behaviours. In this sense it is interesting to analyse how photography at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, is the representation of a specific social class, the bourgeoisie, which penetrated different social strata, and produced a friction that this study is intended to address.

In order to reconstruct these pathways, various tools from different social disciplines are used. Bourdieu's social theory serves as a beacon for the first two sections, which are concerned with the social uses of photography. Photography is presented as a socially-codified representation, the photographer being the guarantor of respect for these codes.

We have no qualms in using certain psychoanalytic concepts when the arguments provided by the image are exhausted, although we are aware that this discipline is rejected in many areas. As a result of a complex about resorting to psychoanalysis, a recent, extraordinary piece of work by Virginia de la Cruz (2013) on *post-mortem* photography fails to look far enough, from our point of view. It put to one side the universe of drives and desires, and attributed the reason for this strange type of photography to a mnemonic help in remembering the deceased (Cruz, 2013:41). De la Cruz also argues that this portrait has an important notarial value as "proof and justification of the expenses incurred in the funeral" (ibíd.: 41) when it came to settling accounts with the family members who had emigrated. De la Cruz constructs brilliant arguments: "the horizontality, imposed by the figure of the deceased, is a counterpoint to the verticality of the living … [which] corresponds, as in every stage of the funeral rite, to a clear visual confrontation between life and death (standing/lying)" (ibíd.: 111); but a turn of the psychoanalyst screw seems necessary when dealing with the link between death and the image with greater rigour.

This link is the subject of the third section of the study. Family photographs were compiled that capture the departure of the father to the First World War. From the point of view argued in this paper, this type of portrait responds to a rite of passage which deals with death sometimes even ironically, as will be seen. Digesting such a tragic event as the departure of a loved one to a cruel war unleashes unexpected psychological mechanisms that are captured by the sensitivity of the lens. The social psychology theory of René Kaës underpins the considerations used in this paper.

Sometimes, when looking at a portrait, we felt incapable of going beyond a mere aesthetic analysis; it is for this reason that a semiotic study of the reception of the photograph has been undertaken. This is the case in the fourth section, which contains a zigzag search for an explanation of a photograph which depicts transvestites. Using Lotman and Jakobson's semiotics, a reflection is undertaken on the social mechanisms used to re-insert this transgression into the rules of this rural society at the beginning of the 20th century.

The last section is an account of the story of Matilde, a woman who used a portrait as a ruse to symbolically reconstruct her emotional bond to her husband, who crossed the ocean looking for a better life for his family.

The photographer as the director of the bourgeoisie scene

Photography rapidly became a medium for the transmission of the values of the nascent bourgeoisie thanks to its technical and aesthetic characteristics, which made it stand out from other forms of representation, such as court painting. The photographer

was not an art patron but a technician. Photography did not depend, unlike painting, on artistic ability, but rather on the photographer's technical capacity to fine-tune the optical instruments and prepare the negatives. The lens was to be an incorruptible witness of the present, whilst the fabric was intended to have a certain timeless image of the power of the monarch transcend history. The "noema" that made the photograph, its *ça a été* (Barthes, 1980:176), was no more than a simple cog in the workings of the larger machinery that continued to operate.

FIGURE 1. *1882. Like a King, Alberico Caimi, posing with his family.*

However, photography, despite its realistic claims, ended up being not too dissimilar from court painting. Chicharro and Rueda analysed the photography of this period as being "an individual representation capable of being interpreted in terms of symbolic capital, in the same way a pictorial naturalist image was before the liberal revolution" (Chicharro and Rueda, 2005: 110). So Figure 1 is not a mere testimony to having been in front of the lens, and the history of this family; rather, it is a representation of the power of that particular factory owner. As already noted by Combessie, photography is objective because it conforms "not to things, but to the social use of things… it subordinates the image, its production and its use to social uses" (1967:641-642).

The portrait is totally theatricalised: the people pose in a certain way, acting out in front of the lens. We see Albercio's wife, on the right as you look at it, holding a prayer card. Alberico himself has his legs crossed. The position of the right arm of the young lady who sits on the family head's left is very striking. All of the paraphernalia in the *mise en scène* leads us to think that the photograph is governed by strict codes of representa-

FIGURE 2. *1914.*

tion that conveniently place the people in front of the camera.

The overcrowded scenes gave an air of unreality to a representation that was sold as being realistic. The accumulation of elements

FIGURE 3. *From around 1921.*

produces a strange effect: walls, tables, columns and balustrades organise the scene. But not just these. There were also decorative elements, used as supports for the subject being photographed, who had to stay still so that the light could imprint its image on the photographic plate.

The photographer is responsible for the preparation of the liturgy. Like a good amanuensis for the bourgeoisie, he compiled a script of the appearance requirements of his clients. He placed the different characters in their respective places, making sure that their clothes and pose were suitable. He also ensured that the image reflected in the negative was the image that the bourgeoisie wanted to convey. The photographer's struggle with the client's "corporal hexis" allows the discerning of certain mechanisms imposed by the dominant culture concerning the "body bearing and attitude" (Bourdieu, 1980: 117) of the dominated classes. Nevertheless as noted by Berger, this social stratum exercises a certain degree of subtle resistance and negotiation in the field of gestures and body performance and expression (Berger, 1987:41). In our opinion, this is related to the configuring effect of "habitus", a set of complex ramifications of "dispositions structured by the social conditions that influence the actions and perceptions of individuals" (Bourdieu, 1972:67, rather than connected to a certain political resistance.

The struggle with the rural world

At the end of the 19th Century photographers were obliged to seek new clientele in the rural world due to a set of circumstances, notably, the changing habits of the bourgeoisie clientele and the proliferation of photographic studios. It was standard practice for families to go to the studio at the weekend to be photographed. In the 1870s, a wide range of leisure activities started to become a part of the life of the urban classes. At the weekend people used to meet in casinos to play cards and talk business. Open air activities were the norm. Cafes and cake shops proliferated throughout the city and had a large number of customers. The photographers' workload therefore dropped considerably. This was why they decided to take their camera, photographic plates and costumes and, above all, their script, to the villages and hamlets. In the rural environment photographers were

faced with an unexpected challenge: imposing the codes of bourgeois representation on farmers.

We are not the only ones who think that this was a penetration of bourgeois codes into the rural environment by the use of the Trojan horse of photography. John Berger's analysis of a photograph by Sander that shows three suited farmers already focused on the representation of the "class hegemony" and the appropriation of the models and values of the bourgeoisie by part of the underclass (Berger, 1987:35-439).

As mentioned earlier, farmers did not put up any resistance other than the "incorporated history" (Bourdieu, 1980:117) which their social practices inscribed on their bodies, their poses, their body language. In many photographs there is evidence of a tension and, above all, an absence of their rural environment. It is undoubtedly harder to seem to be a member of the bourgeoisie than to be one.

The relaxed body hexis of Figure 4, which shows an industrial bourgeois family from Carrara, contrasts with the rigidity in Figure 5, with forced poses due the hierarchisation of the scene imposed by the photographer on this farming family from Lunigiana. However, the symbolic orthopaedics that the photographer applies to the bodies of the farmers and the scene, in order to straightjacket them into the bourgeois representation model was gradual. The people who were the subjects of the first photographs made in the rural world posed informally, showing their cattle, their lands and their tools.

There is a clear intention of excluding all signs of work and ruralism from the portrait, which in these first photographs depended more on the ability of the farmers to identify themselves with the city, than on the coercive action of the photographer on the scene.

These photographs do not represent farmers at work, but people who are posing. Images of work are part of the hidden memories of these rural communities, together with images of illness, pain, or death (Ortiz García, 2005:198). Figure 7 shows a curious scene and the very relaxed atmosphere that surrounds it. It is a photograph where the virili-

FIGURE 4. *1919.*

FIGURE 5. *1912.*

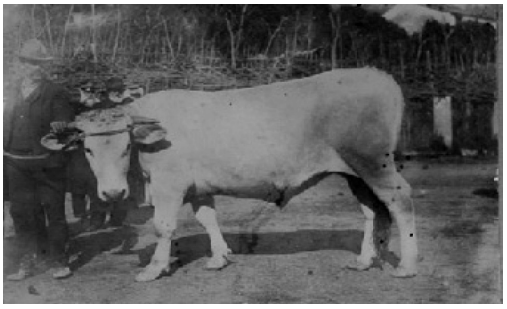


FIGURE 6. *1871.*

FIGURE 7. *Around 1907.*

ty that certain contemporary photographs wish to show from the world of work, such as those of fishermen in Cantabria, is absent. The effort of muscles working on the land is not shown. Staging elements, such as Sunday suits and floral compositions, rather suggest the opposite.

Poses become tenser in the photographs below, where the scene is structured more stiffly.

We cannot be absolutely certain that the element that covers the background was deliberately used to exclude the rural elements from the scene; however, the photographer's interest in imposing the model of appearing to be bourgeois on people, who wanted to seem to be bourgeois, is made apparent through various means: costumes, pose, staging elements. This leads us to believe that this backdrop placed with little aesthetic taste, which was only used in a specific period (1910-1915), reveals the problematic relationship with a nature that was incompatible with the standards of the bourgeoisie. This was also noted by Geffroy (1990). We do not

FIGURES 8, 9, 10: *1914, 1911, and around 1913.*

think that the backdrop was intended to adapt the scene to the technical device used. In the first photographs, taken in the field with more rudimentary equipment, the photographer did not use a backdrop in order to technically improve the photograph.

Don't shoot the pianist!

The saturation of staging elements, the artificiality of the poses, the stiffness of the people, and ultimately, the excessively theatrical nature of the photograph, paradoxically allow us to approach a certain aspect of social relations.

The photograph reflects the existing relationships within this family. The character that appears seated in the paternal grandmother, who is carrying a child in her arms. The child's sister is standing very close to this woman. This is not a random arrangement, but rather one that corresponds to some representational codes, as has already been noted in another study (Accolla and Geffroy 1981). With a few exceptions, as in all codes, the seated character is the person who bears the weight of the economic activity, economy here being understood in its etymological sense *οίκονομία*, that is, home management. It can be inferred that the woman is the man's mother due to their proximity to each other: the man is leaning on the chair, whilst his wife is relatively distant from the mother-in-law/husband/children "monolithic block".

FIGURE 11. *Around 1914.*

The scene has a delicious symmetry to it. The extremes are occupied by two staging elements with floral motifs: a flower-patterned curtain and an *art nouveau* table. Digging into the history of this photograph, we found that this family emigrated to Chambery, a French city where this artistic movement was relatively popular in the early 20th century. This leads us to highlight the penetration of this decorative and architectural style into the studio photography of the period. The *art nouveau* movement was born in the emerging European cities (Nancy, Barcelona and Milan), thanks to the industrial bourgeoisie, as a counterpoint to the immobility of the old European capitals (Paris, Madrid and Rome). In contrast with the restrained order based on the lineage and status of the aristocracy, *art nouveau* corresponded to a series of symbols whose common denominator was dynamism: the impertinence of growth, the enthusiasm for progress, and the uncertainty of the unknown were threaded into the spirals used by the vegetable motifs which constructed an organic and lively space.

Looking beyond the rigid poses of the people, which reveal the photographer's intervention in the representation, what is piercing about this photograph, the "punctum" (Barthes, 1980:49), is that the grandmother's pose and that of the daughters corresponds to a three-quarter perspective, whilst the couple holds a rigorously frontal position with respect to the lens. The code related to the position of the people within the scene can be interpreted as indicated below on the basis of the corpus of photographs referred to in this study.

Due to technical limitations, photography at that time required a ritual staging. The current ease of snapping pictures does not even require the ritual of going to collect copies from the photography studio. Going to

the studio at that time was not a banal act, but was imbued with all the paraphernalia of a ritual: gathering the family together, dressing up in the best finery, going to the studio, selecting the props and even the costumes in the studio, taking a position in the stage setting, etc. Families usually went to the studio at the weekend. It was a true social and festive occasion.

Let us now look at the photograph again, and at how the husband and wife are acting in front of the lens. The wife is supporting herself on the *art nouveau* table, on which there is a vase of questionable discretion. He is carrying a prop, a cigarette, which has certain symbolic connotations: it gives the scene a social status, a certain maturity, and perhaps, a certain virility. The fact that a cigarette is a phallic symbol is not just a conjecture based on psychoanalytical principles. An analysis of tobacco advertising shows that, particularly in the 1980s, it did not pass unnoticed that cigarettes were used as phallic symbols (Joly, 2000). It is interesting to note that in photographs of young people departing for military service, the cigarette was often used as a prop. It is known that in the first decades of the 20th century military service was a rite of passage into the adult class, sexual initiation being part of this ritual.

The grandmother has not allowed herself to be daunted by this festive act. Her responsibility to the children cannot be forgotten even on a public holiday. This is made apparent by three clearly perceivable elements in the photograph. The first and most significant one is that the grandmother's glance is not captured by the lens, she strongly refuses to allow herself to look. The second one is illustrated by the fact that the girl is aligned with the grandmother's pose, both in three-quarters. The child is looking at the camera, exactly as her parents do. For her it is also a festive act, but the image is intended to convey to us that she is under the protection of her grandmother. Finally, the grandmother is displaying the new-born to the camera with a timid gesture. They might have woken the baby up for the occasion, but for the grandmother, respecting sleeping time is more important.

At this point, we may wonder whether it is possible to bridge the social codes that restrict the representation and will of each individual character; the tension that underlies many of these portraits. Taking the analysis one step further, we could say that there is a "group psychological apparatus" (Käes, 2010). Whilst psychoanalysis is reviled by many academics, in this study, we cannot help tracking and appropriating some concepts such as that coined by René Kaës.

A family is a group structured not only by "interpersonal and social arrangements" (Käes, 2010:14), but also by a "psychological connection apparatus', referred to by the French author as an "intersubjective set" (ibid.: 9). Within this set are "the drives and mobilising object of the representation', which is fundamental to "the construction of relationships between the psychological, social and material realities" (ibid.: 14).

In light of these considerations, how can the savage melancholy, the strangeness, the decadent atmosphere of the following photograph be explained only from the sociological and ethnographic point of view?

This portrait from 1916 (figure 12) was taken, as many photographs were, on the day before the departure of the husband to the First World War. He is portrayed in a rigid, determined pose, which transmits to his family a sense of security and bravery in the face of an unpredictable future. The wife is sitting following the standard rule: it is her who bears the weight of the family, even more so since the enrolment of her husband in the army. She is in a three-quarter position, avoiding looking at the lens, which shows her commitment to, and responsibility for, caring for the home, to the extent that she never allows her duty to cease, not even during a festive time such as having a family photograph taken.

FIGURE 12. *1916.*

It would not be far-fetched to consider that this photograph plays the role of a rite of passage. The proliferation of this type of images during First World War cannot be explained in any other way. Society has a system of channelling emotions, of venting and draining them. In addition, it has been amply demonstrated that images are linked to many festive death rituals (Thomas, 1988; Ariès, 1977), especially photographic images (Cruz, 2013). In Ancient Rome there was a rite of passage that consisted of the family of the deceased contracting an actor who could pass for the deceased. The family gave the actor all sorts of details: the words ordinarily used by the deceased, the facial expressions, gestures and significant facts in the life of the deceased. The actor eventually invited everyone to a feast and played the role of the deceased. Everyone participated in this collective madness, giving free rein to their instincts and drives.

This ritual, as in the photograph being analysed here, was a festival of passage that conjured up death, just as Mrs Giovannacci, who does not only avoid looking at the lens, but also at her husband, on whom she turned her back in a posture that might seemed to be disrespectful: it is as if her husband were already dead. It could be argued that the position of the wife turning her back on her husband is circumstantial. This could be the case, but it cannot be ignored that the atmosphere of the picture is strange, or curious, to say the least. And particularly what should not be ignored is that the extreme codification that the photograph was subject to, turns the photograph into a ritual object, with a powerful emotional load. From our point of view, this is not a question of credulity or scepticism, but rather one of facts. How can it be explained that in the first photographs no living children appeared, according to the body of photographs collected in this study? Circumstances or fear of the image? Judge for yourself.

The staging elements used to present the man's daughter and her strange pose may also be considered to be merely circumstantial at the time when the photograph was taken. But as the researchers that we are, we are obliged to use the tools that the different disciplines offer us to carry out this research project. Describing is not the same as analysing. It is obvious that not everything is circumstantial, but that there is a dynamic of the "inter-subjective set" that the photograph reveals in its stillness. The girl character seems disturbing because she projects all her ghosts and fears, but also her desires and expectations. For Kaës, "projection is the operation by which the subject expels out of itself and locates in people or things certain qualities, feelings, desires or fears that are unknown or denied as belonging to itself. That which the subject expels outwards it reencounters again later in the world" (2010:27).

This psychological and social process is evident in this photograph. The daughter takes the hand of her mother in a gesture of mutual support. They are already alone, the father has died, at least symbolically, as shown in many rituals that give rise to a change of status. Consider the bachelor party ritual and how young men's groups are disguised to satirise such a serious event as the marital bond. At times sometimes the bride-to-be is disguised with various white rags that end up being stained with *calimocho*[1]. This disguise is like the marks found on the body of sacrificial victims. It is her, dressed in white, whom women gather around (note how this person is positioned in the group, always surrounded, protected), she who is going to die (of course, it is the death of her life as a single woman).

Returning to the photograph in question, it can be easily seen that the child is carrying a lady's bag in her right hand. The props therefore fulfilled the role of building a credible and believable world (Goffman, 1976:92), projecting on the paper the desires of the characters and, above all, those of the parents, who made their children feature in the photograph with a racquet, for example:

The parents of this little one wanted their child to be in a comfortable enough position to have free time to play tennis. Leisure time was a bourgeois value at the time. The bag is a prop that fuels, therefore, the imagination of the girl's parents. They wanted, or would have wanted, her to be an urban, cosmopolitan lady. But that is not the only prop. On her head she is wearing a soldier's cap, like her father's, and her hair is decorated with a small flower. A child's play, circumstance, chance, whim. Say what you will, but this antithesis or enantiomorphic trend (Lotman, 1996:36) confers a strong "mythopoetic force" (Jakobson, 1979:252) to the image. Evidence has been provided to suggest that this type of photography corresponds to a rite of passage, together with the anthropological certainty that the image is linked to death in certain rituals (Debray, 1992), as taken from René Kaës (who despite being a psychoanalyst, is respected for his sociology work). Consequently, we suspect that the child both conjures and metabolises death by using a terrible irony: a child who inscribes her future on her own body, that is, she becomes a lady (flower and bag) as well as an orphan (military cap).

FIGURE 13. *1912.*

The photograph allows her to leave the body and look at herself from outside, in order to be able to see those drives and fears that we do not recognise in ourselves, but that we do when looking at ourselves from another place, from the panoramic screen of the ritual.

Photography, body, identity

Photography cuts all communication with our body by interposing signs such as uni-

[1] Translator's note: *Calimocho* is a drink consisting of a mixture of red wine and cola drink.

forms, sticks, hats. The body, just as in the different ages of life, is never represented in its naïve immediacy, but taking a totally self-referential symbolic universe as a resource. It could be thought that this liberation of the body from the plane of existence to be then attached to a semiotic universe allows us to experiment with our bodily experience with greater plurality. The body, as a sign, is constituted as an unstable reality. Signs, by connecting with other signs, blow up the hegemonic implant of power, changing the concepts of rule and normality in the sexual and identity plane.

Still, before deconstructive views existed, a certainly very curious photograph was taken:

We will never know the reason that led a photographer at the beginning of the 20th century to dress two women as men. At that time carnival was not celebrated, and obviously transvestism was not a common practice in this small village. As different hypotheses are being rejected here, I do not think that these girls wished to cast doubt on the hegemonic sexual categories, thus championing the concept of gender. The photograph could have been taken at the ritual festival of the *Calendimaggio*, also called *Cantar Maggio* or *Canto del Maggio,* which still takes place in Lunigiana these days. This festival marks the start of the good weather. A group of people would sing popular tunes going from house to house, anticipating the good weather ahead. They were offered gifts in exchange, in the form of food (eggs, meat, sweets) and drink (normally wine). Flowers were very much present, above all violets and roses, as seen in the photograph.

We have images of transgression dating from this period, but this photograph breaks the mould. The *Calendimaggio* is a solemn, serious festival, as is the formality of its representation. In effect, apart from the transvestism and thanks to it, what stands out is the balance in the representation. The transgression highlights the norm. Photographers,

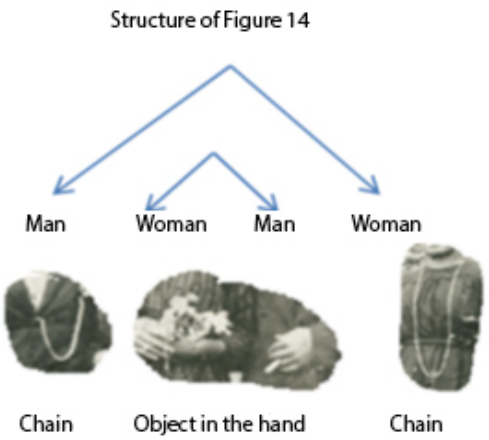
FIGURE 14. *Around 1920.*

as the demanding stage directors that they were, always sought to balance the compositions of their photographs. This particular one structured the scene by using an obvious man/woman symmetry that was achieved by the location of the figures and the props. The outline of the scene was: man/woman pairing at each end, man/woman pairing in the centre, in the following order:

The props organise the scene, and their layout can be explained as follows: the two central characters are carrying objects in their hands that transmit the sexual status represented and so reinforce it, namely a bunch of flowers and a cigarette. The characters at the two ends of the photograph are flaunting chains: the one dressed as a woman is wearing a necklace, and the woman who is dressed as a man is wearing a watch.

All of these objects characterise the sexual status of each person and creates internal relationships: the people on the flanks are related to each other by the "chain" element, and those in the centre by the "object-in-hand" element.

The detail on the man's shoes worn by the girl on the left must also be noted according to the position of the voyeur, as an



example of the scrupulous work of the photographer in creating the scene. The other figures may also be wearing shoes in line with the acted-out sex, but the grass hides the feet of the other people. The representation is structured with an overwhelming internal coherence.

The virile pose of the masculinised figures is fascinating: there is a clear staging here, with the director almost taking the role of a second actor. Looking at the two women with their legs crossed, the one holding a cigarette is imitating the style of Gary Cooper, looking sideways, out of the corner of her eye, as if settling accounts with someone. Except for the girl on the right hand side, who seems to outline a timid smile, the other people hold serious poses, as they had no intention of joking.

Assembling diversity in the photograph as a whole

Photography reveals, captures, pierces, the fragile limit of an instant. The click is not as immediate as it is now, let alone being free. The more limited number of photographs meant that each photograph had an important place in the memory of the individual and of society as a whole. In the village where this photograph was taken, there were priests, old ladies hiding behind their lace curtains, and still, this truly strange mummification took place. The photograph was taken for a reason unknown to us. We can only infer that the staging was at equidistance from the individuals and society, between what was meant to be represented and what was finally represented. This equidistance finally matched what the photographer intended to express and what escaped from his script.

This changing threshold that brings the strange closer and makes that which is in the borderline area part of the cultural fact, is developed, according to by Roman Jakobson, by the mythopoetic function of representation. It is truly difficult to define the concept of the mythopoetic function, more so from a formalist point of view, as this function cannot be isolated as a specific element limited by the depiction. Jakobson restricted it to a form of "suggestive magic", twinkling here and there in the capricious "vibration of the profound union between sound and meaning" (Jakobson, 1978:42). Then "a play occurs of the mythopoetic transformations which help to energise the autonomous semantic potential of the distinctive features and the environment of the representation" (Jakobson and Waugh, 1979:252).

This transformation game turns obvious and intuitive, on the one hand, the dense exchange of relationships established amongst the texts of a culture in continuous dynamic translation; and on the other hand, the network of links that promote textuality, and at

the same time its contextual exclusion from the environment of meaning. This expansion of textuality does not break the integrity and the unity of the representation itself, as the basis of all communicative processes lies in the invariant principle that ensures the cohesion of the semiotic space (Lotman, 1996:35). The invariant principle is, according to Lotman, enantiomorphic symmetry, which is built upon a combination of symmetry/asymmetry "with the periodic ebb and flow of all vital processes in any of their forms" (1996:36).This photograph is structured by a principle of mirror symmetry. The transgressions of transvestism acquire a formal coherence by using the resources mentioned above (pose, props, placement in the scene). When the dissonant elements are brought together, a series of symmetries/asymmetries appear that produce tension in the representation, producing new horizons of meaning. This enantiomorphic relationship creates "the kind of correlative difference that distinguishes both identity—rendering dialogue useless—and non-correlative difference—rendering it impossible" (Lotman, 1996:36-37).

Therefore, the photographer ensured that the transgression would be placed in a semiotic network that established internal relationships which allowed the photograph to engage in dialogue with the society within which it existed. The tension of the representation, due to its symmetrical mirror-structure, creates "the necessary relations between structural diversity and structural similarity" (Lotman, 1996:37). In this way the photograph becomes an open text with which it is possible to enter into dialogue.

Many current texts and representations are careful not to leave a chink through which to penetrate. Advertising texts, for example, in general do not have counterpoint or irony, and create interfaces impermeable to the action of the consumer of the messages. Digression is thoughtfully studied, it does not appear before its formal correction, but it is part of the form, at the same level as any other element of discourse (light effects, music, staging). The system is completely identical, unitary, symmetrical.

A self-referential system that can be semiotically analysed as text is the shopping centre. It is a closed eco-system where there is no external interference. The atmosphere is controlled, as well as the light, the music, the smell, there are even lanes in place so that people move only in one direction. All of this is intended to eliminate any friction which may hinder consumption. Paradigmatic of this type of eco-semio-system is the *Ikea* store. It is like a film studio, with a backdrop where the characters pass a series of tests to reach the tills. The blue plating prevents any *Deus ex machina* from saving us at the last minute. In fact, the format governs everything, so that our freedom is reduced to following, just like Dorothy, a tiled path that marks the way forward. The novice hero endures the whole route; whereas the more experienced shoppers know shortcuts that take them directly to the sofa or kitchen section. The freedom to break the continuity of the dominant discourse therefore depends on the degree of irradiation to which the consumer is subjected.

This does not mean to say that consumers do not appropriate these closed texts. I have known groups of women, housewives with grown-up children who first gather information and then go straight to the shopping centres that give away a free breakfast. They arrive, like guerrilla fighters, they strike, and they leave. They enjoy the free test of the new mascara by *Maybelline*. They invent their quotidian routine every day (Certeau, 1990). However, communication, management and marketing professionals try to ensure that all the tactical implants that are added to the system, lubricate it rather than short-circuit it. We find beggars at the doors of some supermarkets or bread shops, but it is impossible for them to be found in a shopping centre. At best we will encounter food bank trolleys, flanked by people in their iden-

tification bibs who invite us to deposit part of our shopping. Everything should flow, be aseptic, nothing should perturb our path through the discourse. Poverty is disguised and solidarity is yet another merchandise.

Contrary to the above descriptions, we hold with two fingers a representational device full of short-circuits and semiotic counter-weights; a photograph with a tottering balance. This is what mirror symmetry is, the enantiomorphism of the mythopoetic function of photography, which places us in a game of differences and, at the same time, similarities, which makes dialogue possible: "On the one hand, the systems are not identical and give out diverse texts, and on the other, they are easily converted, ensuring mutual translatability." (Lotman, 1996:37). This game of symmetries and asymmetries creates a dynamic space where texts can be reciprocally transformed, nourishing from the criss-crossing of their own evolution.

The photograph is interspersed by a system of boundaries that run through as if they were endless veins. These boundaries are the limits that delineate the difference networks, lines around which identities are confronted with each other. In this dynamic production infinite microspheres, short-circuits of meaning are generated, which multiply in the semiotic determinations and the variable horizons marked by history, precisely in between these determinations.

A good trend analyst is capable of modelling the strategies and mapping the complex processes that stimulate the market. In this photograph there is something that escapes this. It cannot be mapped only by superimposing the different parts, as these participate in a complex network of relationships that are intrinsically dialogical.

The cunning of Penelope

The photography from the period under discussion in this paper is, in its anthropological sense, a ritual. Like all rituals, it is bound by space, the studio, which seems at times like a Hindu temple, with all its colours and embroidery. The photographer, depending on circumstance, takes his trappings to the client's house, which is then suitably arranged for the liturgy. The photographic ritual also reached the temporal dimension. The technical limitations demanded a time for exposure to the light, which would sit on the photographic plate like the residue of a good coffee. What if photography from the beginning of the 20th century acquired a global dimension? And if photography was not enslaved by a space and time rigorously limited by technical demands?

Let us go back to the beginning. The need to draw certain sociological conclusions has undoubtedly mitigated the ethnographic core of this study, which is to tell stories through photographs. Even for the octogenarians interviewed, whose families were the protagonists of these photographs, the stories told in the stillness of the negatives are distant. Reconstructing stories, making a kind of fictional collage of memories, forgotten events and paper may not seem rigorous enough when doing work that is supposedly scientific. But fiction also forms part of the science of ethnography, as Geertz used to say. For him, it is only possible to give coherence to the complex assembly of culture through fiction (Geertz, 1989:18).

I am holding a photograph in my hand that will be discussed below. According to witnesses, it dates back to around 1910. Our carbon 14, if not an inscription on the back of the photograph, is the word of the descendants.

Photograph in hand, it did not particularly grab our attention. It can be inferred from the rigidity of the pose that it is a portrait of a humble farming family, who are not used to all the paraphernalia involved in having a photograph taken, and its strict codes of bourgeoisie representation. The children and

mother look concernedly at the lens, as if they were in front of a firing squad. The children hold each other's hands for security. The mother, leaning on the table, seems to be terrified. However, the man looks different, he is calm, which makes us think that this photograph was taken at two different times.

Digitalisation revealed the entire DNA sequence of this photograph, which goes unnoticed at first glance, since this portrait, like so many of the period, is small and lacking in brightness. It was found that these are two photographs taken in two different places, mounted one above the other, with the express intention that the photo montage would go unnoticed. The winding cut allows the two photographs to be mounted more naturally than if it had been straight: the sleeve of the father's jacket is overlapping onto the girl's arm, then between the man's leg and the body of the child, there is a small edge where the cut is, hiding it perfectly. An inevitable error is the different tiles in the two parts of the photograph. It was possible to make the background uniform with pigment, but retouching the floor in order to make it more uniform would have been counterproductive to hide the ruse. So it was left as it was, with the conviction that no one would discover the splice.

FIGURE 15. *Around 1910.*

The photograph hides a unique and at the same time, universal story. Roberto Fenocchi, from Grondola (a village in Pontremoli, Tuscany, Italy), emigrated to America in around 1908 looking for a better life for his family, leaving his wife and two children in Italy. A letter from Argentina sent at the end of 1909 was found that allowed this date to be set.

While the archaeology of memory is built through archetypes lacking a skeleton, as the "writing of life" (Young, 1990:4) does not allow itself to be shaped into a structured discourse, we can imagine, however vaguely, what this fact means to the daily lives of these particular people. This was 1908 in the small village of Lunigiana, where life ran between the hard work in the field, Sunday in church, and laundry work for the women. The natural cycle marked the rhythm of the local people's lives. A century later I went to Merizzo and met a farming couple pulling out roots to prepare the ground for cultivation, something done every year at the same time.

Although Matilde's life improved in economic terms, as Roberto sent her money, her emotional life must have been hard. There were postcards that arrived every now and then, and the date of the reunion was not marked on the calendar. However, the cyclopean walls of a traditional society could not curtail the will of Matilda, as she waited. Like Penelope, Matilde devised a ploy to make the absence bearable and kindle her love. Penelope wove a cloak during the day and unravelled it during the night, showing society the symbol of a love that she did not want to die. Tricking the Achaeans, she extended

the wait thread by thread. They managed to usurp power, but not her marriage bed. Matilde, for her part, hatched this photograph in secret to symbolically recompose the nuclear family. According to the tale told by Anna, the daughter of little Roberto (the child in the photograph) this went on for ten years.

Anna kept this photograph amongst many others, and she had never noticed the retouching by the archaic *Photoshop* system. It was a normal photograph that had been part the historical patrimony of the Fenocchi family. We are left to wonder what role this photograph played in the family, in society, and ultimately, in Matilde's inner life. In order to approach the subjective dimension that organised the everyday life of the period, obviously we cannot speculate on the feelings that drove social relations, although the pain of being away from a loved one is such a universal feeling that it runs through history, from Penelope to Matilde.

This photograph, like the cloak, is the symbol of a distance relationship, of waiting, of affirming convictions. But not just an affirmation for her, but also for society: just as the cloak was for Penelope, this photograph for Matilde was a public symbol.

The nature of this photograph leads us to conclude that it would have been placed in the living room of the house, and not in a bedroom or the entrance hall. As we have already analysed in another study (Romero, 2005), photographs in entrance halls were more likely to be of individuals, or certainly no more than a couple, and they always showed an action or circumstance to do with rites of passage: first communion, baptism, military service. The photographs in the bedroom had a worshipping character; they were placed next to, and mixed with, the portraits of saints to whom they prayed. Matilde's portrait is collective in nature, it shows a group. This type of photograph was normally located in the living room, the place where the relationships between family members were affirmed. The living room is the space where the act of living together, the heart of the home, took place.

The degree of emotional closeness to a guest was shown by the place in the home where they were welcomed. A guest with hardly any emotional ties to the family did not get much further than the first filter, the hall. If the guest were honoured with the gift of friendship, they would share a fragment of family life in the living room, with was the terrain of family relationships. Photographs placed there showed precisely this bond. The sober staging of photographs shown in the living room makes us focus on family ties: the aseptic and homogeneous background, the scarcity of props and decorations do not divert attention from what is really important to convey. The props are subordinate to the construction of the representation: the two tables are used to keep the pose for as long as necessary.

According to Anna, this portrait is the first in which the full Fenocchi family appeared. No group photograph has been found that was taken before 1910. The part in which the wife and the two children was taken has been dated to around 1910, as we saw a photograph of the girl's first communion taken in 1914 where she looks visibly older. We are certain that the photograph was not framed before 1908, the year when Roberto emigrated. The photograph's characteristics place it at around 1910. The arguments for selecting this date will be provided below, drawing from another study previously undertaken on the matter (Romero, 2005).

Roberto is in no way nervous in front of the camera: he poses calmly and gives the impression that he is comfortable, that he feels closer to the lens than to his family. The photograph shows a scene of well-being, different from the first photographs that emigrants sent to their families, which were photographs showing location. The latter had the social function of transmitting to the family

the image of emigrants in their new environment, in this way redefining the range of family relationships.

This wonderful photograph served to submerge the family who had remained in Italy in a portrait constructed around the cultural stereotypes of the welcoming culture. Think about the strong effect this image would have had on those family members who lived in a village in the heart of Lunigiana at the beginning of the 20th century, where photographs were scarce and people had not been irradiated by images. They had not been numbed of the ability for surprise and astonishment.

I am now in Villafranca, in Anna's house, with steam from the coffee fogging the lenses in my glasses. I ask her if she remembers the presence of a photograph in the living room of her father's house, little Roberto in the photograph. She says yes straight away, but unfortunately she does not have it. Anna describes a group photograph: her grandfather on the left leaning on a table. Her aunt was at his side, holding her father's hand. Behind the boy, grandmother Matilde with her right hand leaning on a table on which there was a bouquet of flowers.

Incredibly, the photograph described by Anna, surely taken in the 1920s, upon the happy arrival of Roberto, has a number of surprising similarities with the photograph from 1910. Further, it is the variationes that have a surprising coherence. In the photograph from 1910, the bouquet was on the man's table, whilst in the later one it was on Matilde's table. The photographer composed his iconic discourse, on this occasion in the same space-time. It was more normal for the women's table to be decorated with more feminine elements, whereas the table on which the man leant normally had no decorative elements, least of all flowers. In the current design of perfume bottles the same logic prevails. Men's perfume bottles have, in general, a larger base (to transmit virility, protection, strength), their shapes are geometric and austere, lacking decorative elements; whilst female perfume bottles have forms that appeal to femininity, the base is not a place of support, but a dynamic space from which forms emerge. The image is intertwined by shared representations, by stereotypes and, ultimately, by the social structure.

FIGURE 16. *1923.*

Looking at the corpus of photographs, we can see that it is really difficult to find a photograph in which two tables appear as props. The artistic sense of the photographer would lead to repetitive elements being avoided, and this is why they normally alternate: a table and a fence, a table and a column, etc. This led us to think that it was at Matilde's express wish that the photograph from the 1920s should be similar to the earlier one. In this way, Matilde would never be discovered by the terrible Achaeans, or if you prefer, by her neighbours in Grondola.

Matilde did not make the same error as Penelope, who unravelled her weaving in a palace full of eyes. Matilde, instead of violently unravelling her little ruse, constructed a similar photograph, put it in its place, and thus prolonged her tactic eternally. Once the montage had served its purpose, namely to

affirm the bond of her husband to her family, her society and her heart, the construction was set aside, left in the silence of the drawer.

Anna died in 2008, and I never told her Matilde's secret. She wanted it to remain within the sepia-coloured veins that cut through the strata in the depths of oblivion. Let her secret stay between us!

Conclusion

A privileged laboratory of society at the start of the 20th century, photography was a unique adventure of shock and contradiction. In the smooth and testimonial paper of the photograph, symbolic furrows, short-circuits and mismatches proliferated. Much as the photographer attempted to seal with hemp the joints between the rural world and bourgeois universe, the leakage of the symbolic was as inevitable as it was necessary. Inevitable, because it is impossible to superimpose these two worlds without them collapsing; necessary, for the stability of the frame, which paradoxically depends on the overflow which it tries to contain.

The carefully planned order in the staging of the characters causes strangeness in the beholder. The click does not interrupt the breath, but holds it and stiffens the scene, stirs it, shakes it, solidifies the symbolic fluid of society, so that the unexpected and the ordinary become impregnated with it (as the foam of the African frog *Chiromantis xerampelina* does by all the males who decide to join in the orgy).

Bibliography

Accolla, Patrick and Geffroy, Yannick (1981). *L'empreinte des jours*. Nice: Serre

Ariès, Philippe (1977). *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident: Du Moyen Âge à nos jours*. Paris: Seuil.

Banks, Marcus (2010). *Los datos visuales en investigación cualitativa*. Madrid: Morata.

Barthes, Roland (1980). *La Chambre Claire. Note sur la photographie*. Paris: Seuil.

Beaud, Stéphane and Weber, Florence (2010). *Guide de l'enquête de terrain: Produire et analyser des données ethnographiques.* Paris: Éditions La Découverte.

Berger, John (1987). *Mirar*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1972). *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Genève: Droz.

— (1979). *La distinction.* Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

— (1980). *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

—; Bolstanki, Luc; Castel, Robert and Chamboredon, Jean-Claude (1965). *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie.* Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Casetti, Francesco and Di Chio, Federico (1998). *Analisi della televisione*. Milano: Bompiani.

Certeau, Michel de (1990). *L'invention du quotidien. Tome 1: Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.

Chicharro Merayo, Mar and Rueda Laffond, José Carlos (2005). *Imágenes y palabras. Medios de comunicación y públicos contemporáneos*. Madrid: CIS.

Combessie, Jean Claude (1967). "Les clases sociales et la culture. Les cas de la photographie". *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales,* 3: 641-644.

Cruz Licher, Virginia de la (2013). *El retrato y la muerte*. Madrid: Temporae.

Debray, Régis (1992). *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire du regard en Occident*. Paris: Gallimard.

France, Claudine de (1979). "Corps, matière et rite dans le film ethnographique". In: France, C. de (ed). *Pour une anthropologie visuelle*. Paris: Mouton Editeur.

Geertz, Clifford (1989). *El antropólogo como autor*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Geffroy, Yannick (1990). "Family Fotographs: A Visual Heritage". *Visual Anthropology,* 3: 367-410.

Goffman, Erving (1976). "Gender Advertisements". *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication,* 3: 69-l54.

Jakobson, Roman (1978). *La linguistica e le scienze dell'uomo. Sei lezioni sul suono e sul senso*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Jakobson, Roman and Waugh, Linda R. (1979). *La forma fonica della lingua*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Joly, Martine (2000). *Introduction à l'analyse de l'image*. Paris: Nathan.

Kaës, René (2010). *L'appareil psychique groupal*. Paris: Dunod.

Lotman, Iuri (1996). *Semiosfera I. Semiótica de la cultura y del texto*. Valencia: Fronesis Cátedra.

Mead, Margaret (1976). *Macho y Hembra*. Buenos Aires: Alfa.

Ortiz García, Carmen (2005). "Fotos de familia. Los álbumes y las fotografías domésticas como forma de arte popular". In: Ortiz García, C., Sánchez Carretero, C. and Cea Gutiérrez, A. (coords.). *Maneras de Mirar. Lecturas antropológicas de la fotografía*, vol.1. Madrid: CSIC.

Romero Tenorio, José (2005). "La fotografia di famiglia come strumento di analisi socio-antropologico". Tesi di Laurea. Milano: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

Sombrun, Corinne (2012). *Les esprits de la steppe. Avec les derniers chamanes de la Mongolie*. Paris: Albin Michel.

Sorice, Michele (2002). *Lo specchio mágico*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

Thomas, Louis-Vincent (1988). *Anthropologie de la mort*. Paris: Payot.

Young, James Edward (1990). *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

RECEPTION: May 15, 2013
REVIEW: September 18, 2013
ACCEPTANCE: December 3, 2013