Joan Fontcuberta

ÇA-A-ÉTÉ?
AGAINST BARTHES

For Roland Barthes all of photography indicates "that-has-been" [Ça-a-été], and this principle is what gives coverage to its value as document. Yet when we seek to verify it, we realise that photographs are nothing but the product of various operations of theatricality. The camera, therefore, can only speak to us of scenery and of costumes.

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Walter Benjamin aside, the most cited essay on photography in history is without a doubt *Camera Lucida*. It is Roland Barthes' final book, and was published shortly before his death. With his poetic gaze and theoretical reflections, Barthes develops key concepts in the book, such as *punctum* and *studium*, which have since been incorporated into the heritage of photographic criticism. In one of the most significant passages, we find another central idea: "In Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality, and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography. What I intentionalize in a photograph is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography. Photography's noeme will therefore be: 'That-has-been'" [Ça-a-été].

This *ça-a-été* constitutes the ontological bulwark of photography's documentary value: without the certainty of "that-has-been", all visual testimony ends up delegitimated. This is why it could be beneficial to analyse photo-journalistic snapshots in light of this criteria. For example, as a case study, we could take the photographic archive of the now-closed Mexican journal *Alerta*, a tabloid dedicated to blood and guts news stories, which in Latin America is referred to as "nota roja" [red note]. If we do an analysis, we are surprised to see how frequently the iconological pattern of the gesture of pointing appears: a figure in the image (a victim, a witness, an "expert", whoever) points with a finger at someone or something in the composition to draw attention to it. These are theatrical, artificial situations where it is clear that the model is following the reporter's instructions, while nevertheless making doubly clear the pretension of applying he principle of *ça-a-été*, in a way that is as naïve as it is rudimentary. We are witness to an effect of superimposed indexicalities: one passed down through photography and the other of the finger (the index) pointing. Both the camera lens and the finger focalise our perception towards

something that has gone by. Yet the staging is so naïve, rudimentary and artificial that instead of emphasising, what it does is problematise the validating value of the camera, especially in genres like forensic and news photography, which should be characterised precisely by an aseptic, derhetorized treatment of information.

Barthes, perhaps, fascinated by the theatricality he had also dedicated enthusiastic studies to, sought to pass over this drift: "What is theatricality?", he asked in 1971. "It is not decorating representation, it is unlimiting language." Very well, then, but if so, *ça-a-été* is no longer a guarantee of objectivity, inasmuch as it explores staging. A triple staging, in fact, as all photography implies the staging of the object, the gaze and of the photographic device itself. It is from the conciliation of these stagings that language emerges. We can decide to not limit it, we can grant it all freedom available to it, but at the cost of breaking the contract of verisimilitude.

Unmasked by the overplayed gesticulation of accusing or pointing fingers, we discover that the noeme heralded by Barthes is more a theatrical operation than one of reference. "That has been", indeed, but what, in fact, has really been? It is imperative to ask this when there is no spontaneity, but rather construction. Yet worst of all is that photography, in and of itself, tells us very little about "that". Very little beyond scenery and costumes.

KILLING ME SOFTLY
Valentín Roma

One of the common standpoints from which to read Joan Fontcuberta's work is the one that points to irony as an intrinsic feature of his work. And at the same time, in line with this argument, one of the purposes attributed to the humour, faking and twisting of facts used by the photographer from Barcelona is that of disrupting and even dynamiting the certainties of representation.

Fontcuberta himself has devoted works, essays and even performances to these things, turning the fake into the "decisive instant" in an unmasking process that sometimes looks like an epiphany and at other times like collateral damage.

But the method of discovery through trickery works within a dialectic between lies and truth. This, carried over to the terrain of images, adds another antagonism: the document considered as a homage and residue of a faithfulness as opposed to the document seen as a manifesto for any form of inventiveness.

However, if we extract Fontcuberta's works from this yin yang, if we place them in a less moralist—and also less heroic—framework, we find new possibilities for analysis and two crucial aspects emerge: one is the pedagogical dimension underlying his whole career, while the other is the proposal for use of images that his pieces point to.

From Zeno of Elea to Parmenides, from Heraclitus to Anaximander, much pre-Socratic philosophy used parables and aphorisms as tools for a radicalised way of teaching. It is not surprising that it is one of the first authors of "printed work", Plato, to whom we owe the basic concept of the illusory nature of images and their consequent existentialist reading, who was to abandon the path of sarcasm, ushering in the enduring period in which, to be a teacher, one must first rid oneself of all temptation to indulge in satire, brandish truth in one hand and always wear priestly robes.

We could well attach the epithet of "master of suspicion" to Fontcuberta, as before tilting at the windmills of power—the

invisible pillars of the system, as Kafka called them—while far from being a mere collector of conspiracies, in all his projects there is a certain lesson in distrust, a policy of venturing among images, a *poiesis* or creation of meaning to govern his fascinations and his rejections.

Thus, the didactic nature of Fontcuberta's work lies not so much in deconstructing facts, but in constructing a margin of possibility for the outrageous; it is not so much a question of revealing the fallacies of photography in its happy encounter with the objective, but of establishing a casuistry of dysfunctionalities, a survey of the cracks in a discourse.

Fontcuberta's work stands out from many other iconographic appeals for insubordination for structural reasons: without a certain dose of self-parody, any diagnosis runs the risk of entropy or messianism; in an utterly futile way, all histories are turned into a prologue to History, bureaucratic systems arise to standardise images; conditions, requirements and states of exception are established, an optical aristocracy and a visual lumpen proletariat appear.

The border between the post-modern and the essential is not as thin as it might appear. Moreover, between populism and hypochondria there are a range of combinations, even notable intersections. Looking at Fontcuberta's series of photographs, one cannot but remember the diatribes by Agustín García Calvo in which the philosopher, poet and dramatist attacked common sense, gave "sermons and psalms"—as he called them—the aim of which was to *look away*. Also, both authors share the same "enmity" with affectation and false transcendence, and all the ecumenical solemnities and the superiority that derives from them.

In this respect, one recalls the "Post-Photographic Decalogue" launched by Fontcuberta ten years ago, which did not just work as agitprop and as a critical diagnosis of—photographic—reality in the process of exhausting itself, but was also in the nature of a breviary of indisciplines; in a way it was the last instruction manual for an anti-pedagogy of image.
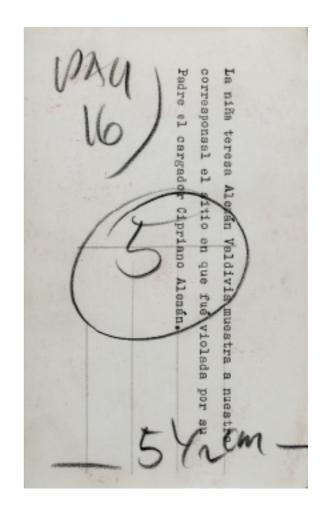
We said at the start that Fontcuberta's photographic output invites one to reconsider what the value is of using

and circulating images. And once again a certain semantic twist is needed, because while the artist's work questions the epic authorial figure, it is hard to fit into the literary bracket known as "death of the author"; it is worth pointing out that it is rather a warning that any reading is always a cultural practice.

Fontcuberta has created a real photographic counter-epistemology, so freeing himself from a range of egotistic or authoritarian interpretations. The aims of this effort to reassess the exegesis of images were not always properly understood, though if we abandon corporatism and over-protection we can understand it from a different viewpoint.

In my opinion, what the photographer points out is that we do not read the image in an exemplarising limbo all of our own, but in general reading is the product of the conditions in which we were made into readers. Or to put it more directly, in the face of the consecration of the figure of the author and the investiture of a court of privileged interpreters thereof, Font-cuberta says that the only way to free ourselves of everything history imposes on us is to become aware—and even parody—of the history of our links to photographic interpretation.

Thus far this does not depart from other previous criticisms coming from sociology; nothing that does not sound like, for example, Pierre Bourdieu or Roger Chartier. However, Fontcuberta incorporates a distinctive feature that is highly relevant, that of his own "participation" in this iconoclastic process, the place of self-portraits in his work.

It is curious how little the lack of distancing and the theatrical nature of Fontcuberta's photographs has been analysed: the Brechtian sense of many of his images. Thus, seeing him "disguised" as Bin Laden or an orthodox priest, as a cosmonaut or as an ape giving lectures, apart from raising a smile and ruffling some feathers, makes us wonder about the mechanisms and rituals that place the artist in the realm of the shaman—or why he never strays into that of the clown.

Amusement seems to me in this case to be secondary, or "collateral damage", as Fontcuberta's overexposure of himself should not be understood as first-person parody, but as

a breaking of the codes that dictate where we should bow to images and where we are allowed to be in them, even if the latter implies throwing caution to the wind.

In this frame of mind, while it might seem sacrilege, one might spot great similarities between Fontcuberta and someone like Alexander Kluge, especially with regard to the German film-maker's work for television.

Kluge had a fundamental influence on the creation of the theoretical grammars that shaped New German Cinema, as well as in writing the famous Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962—another furious proclamation against the anachronistic use of images. He went on to found the first film school in West Germany in Ulm and, in the mid-80s, took a drastic change of course in his career, giving up the role of creator of the *film d'auteur* notion to produce notorious work in the field of television arts programmes for mainstream channels.

In this journey from theoretical essay to taking a role in the creation of a specific local scene, from the university campus to critical work in the mass media, it is not difficult to see a parallel path taken by both figures. However, it is in the use they both make of historical fiction that the greatest parallels can be seen. For example, in Kluge's recreations of events like the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl, the conquest of space during the Cold War or the attack on the Twin Towers, which the film-maker "reads" by including caustic fictitious characters, who give a clearly inconvenient interpretation or a point of view that mixes humour with what at the time went unnoticed. They are generally comic actors—nearly always the same ones but dressed up according to the period—who give this kind of outrageous testimony, a kind of eccentric erudition that strongly recalls Fontcuberta himself, travelling in character through the narrative of history, at the same time symbolising its most suspect nooks and crannies, everything conventional Truth has hidden or tried to cancel out.

This same "real truth" is what seems to be pointed to by the individuals in the photographs from the Mexican magazine *Alerta* that Fontcuberta uses for *Ça-a-éte? Against Barthes*. These are citizens who testify to or certify, before

the camera lens, misdeeds and crimes they have witnessed or might be investigating. The finger pointing at a bullet wound, at the place from which a prisoner escaped or at a wrongdoer, the finger with which—how can we forget?—God dispenses justice and gives life, though it is also the finger that presses the shutter release on the camera or pulls the trigger of the murder weapon, appears here as a traffic sign for the eyes, as it points to the scene of the crime, the body or even the guilty party.

Of course, in the gesture of pointing that Fontcuberta has examined in this photo-reporting archive, there is an element of incriminatory blame, but also a significant element concerning where the essential principles of visual documentation lie. Because—pardon the truism—for something to be documented it must first have happened, it must be there for someone to photograph it. However, in this "personification", this "objectivisation"—the way the event is shown—a range of testimonial devices are also at work, prisms of interpretation are altered, a space of experience is identified, or a place from which to watch and take part is proposed.

A simple pointing finger creates an incredible play of beliefs, conjectures and information. One might suggest that these fingers turn wrongs sideways could be the prompters in the photographic theatre, as they stop the viewer losing the thread of the visual arguments, by recommending or imposing one or another moral posture.

Among his various terminological finds, Barthes is famous for taking up—and considering—the end of authorship, the death of the author. However, what these anonymous fingers point to here is real deaths, something that does not cease to be a further smart play on words of the kind Fontcuberta so often creates. In this respect, taking a position "against Barthes" would be a way of taking the French thinker's dictates to their logical, absurd conclusion. The great disparity among so many against-whatever manifestos is that the apparent exercise of refuting Barthes actually represents a device to de-consecrate photography; "profaning" Barthes carries Barthes from a certain inaccessible limbo towards

worldly things, as Giorgio Agamben describes the mechanism for destroying icons.

Just as "killing the father" means, in psychoanalytical jargon, emancipation from him and in some way taking up his symbolic pulpit, theoretically killing the person who "murdered" the notion of authorship may mean that there will be no more burials or funerals, that there will be no authors or that we will all be authors, that we will finally stop feeling like the creators of images or that, fortunately, those pointing fingers will tell us who is guilty and who is not in each and every photograph.

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