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GLOBAL AGE OF MAN WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The study is a reflection on photographic image within contemporary visuality and aesthetics of metamodernism, when, in the concepts of last decade, the human and the natural permeates each other in subjective interpretations of socially significant contents. The authors' objective is to search for complex contexts within the topic in question across various areas of social life with specification on the medium of photography and history of art, taking into account the inevitable changes in conventional ways of looking at the photographic image.

Keywords: *Anthropocene, global age, narrative, pandemic, photography, posthumanism, trauma, visual communication.*

Art is always about a subjective interpretation and communication of the socially significant content. However, it is also the methodology and inner structure of the medium of photography itself that is constantly re-formed by the contexts of the theory of photography, aesthetics of the periods of modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism, as well as current trends of differentiation of languages used in author-conceived programs.

Discursive analysis within the research of visual communications can include many social science areas that are, to a certain extent, preconditioned and determined by the anthropological principle and approach to the world in itself; a world that we can interpret through the medium of photography. Within this context, more and more authors are currently addressing visual topography in various artistic genres. *"Photography provides a record of a concrete landscape of urban area and its poetic testimony from the aspect of the author – passer-by, who wanders the land, maps it, and records it. Historically, one of the first landscape photographers was Englishman Francis Bedford (1816 – 1894), who had been commissioned by Queen Victoria to travel the country and photograph territories under the Monarchy. Bedford also recorded landscape parts in a form of double compositions, which were probably made as outputs from a camera with twin lenses. Back then, these were known as stereographs, forming a 3D image effect for a viewer looking through special tools and devices. They were a sort of predecessors of current 3D photography and virtual reality. Similar composition approach of double compositions is also used by Slovak photographer*

Lukačovičová, when she photographs a certain place with a time delay and places together two photographs of a similar and yet slightly altered environment. Her photographs can also be perceived as visual diary entries, either formally recorded or modified by the author through a slight intervention in a form of land art and performance, demonstrating our cultural-social climate. In her photographs, she captures longer processes, but also a physical moment, here and now – for instance in a form of simple gesture of throwing stones into the water. Through some works, Lukačovičová also reflects on the state of our surroundings during the year of living with coronavirus … they present records of new vegetation grown during "the lockdown" on a football field and at the edge of a city park, as well as situation/shot from area-wide testing taking place by the Salesian church in Trnávka, Bratislava. Michal Huba does not examine the defined country solely from its direct topicality and visibility point of view, but also through invisible contexts related to its historical, archaeological, genetical, geographical, biological, and mythological layers. However, he apprehends these layers through a metaphorical expression in photography, and he considers the depicted country also within the context of philosophy. For his artistic examination, which can even evoke principles of an archaeological or historical exploration, he deliberately chooses an area with certain characteristic features. For the country between Záhorie and Malé Karpaty, these are: borderland, roads and barriers, nomadism, woods, an intersection of mountains and lowlands, steppe, sand, wetlands, tectonics and fault lines, wind, and rocks. His cycle of photographs takes a form of a massive set that works with space-time characteristics of a place and its genius loci. Although a human being is not physically present here, he still is present, because he has left/imprinted a significant mark on the landscape. He has been forming the country since prehistoric times, leaving such footprints that are becoming more and more ambiguous" (Prechádzanie krajinou v Záhorskej galérii 2021: https://kultura.pravda.sk/galeria/clanok/581314-prechadzanie-krajinou-v-zahorskej-galerii/).

Without dreams, our world would be quite a grim place; and even more without visualizing our ideas in art. Time and space that belong to the sphere of the most secret imaginations and wishes are inherent to every living creature. What would it, then, be like to dream about a better world here and now, in the real life? The answer is hidden in the reflections on a desire that does not oppose Kant's categorical imperative, but quite the opposite. If you asked yourself that definite question, what would you want your last dream

to be? Life of each of us, here and now, lasts (figuratively) only a few short moments. Every artist and every conscious being, as they grow older, contemplates the meaning of existence, its purpose, and, especially, its consequences. Our thoughts predetermine the impact of our actions on a society-wide level. Here and now, we have never been alone. Our every act or thought should be perceived as a dependant consequence of a well-known butterfly effect (an idea that goes back more than 40 years), when even a minimal initial change or our decision can cause a major change and variations in the development of the whole system. Can our ability to foresee lead to decisions that would be considerate of others?

These thoughts are inevitably followed by reflections on the era in which we live in and which we also are the creators of. At the end of the 20th century, this geochronological period has been named *Anthropocene* (from Greek., anthropos - human, kainos - new) and corresponds to a period characterized by intensive human activity and its influence on the present world, although, it is still disputed whether Anthropocene should replace the last phase of Holocene (Working Group on the 'Anthropocene' | Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy 2019: http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/). This informal term is ascribed to ecologist and botanist E. F. Stoermer, but it gained popularity thanks to Dutch atmospheric chemist P. J. Crutzen after 2000, when our age has been declared a global age of man (Crutzen 2002: 23, https://www.nature.com/articles/415023a). Its origins, sometimes also called the atomic age or the Great Acceleration (1950) (The Anthropocene | Great Acceleration 2015: https://www.anthropocene.info/great-acceleration.php) have been linked to the industrial revolution, new inventions powered by coal and oil, the emergence of first railways and cars, through which humans had been able to connect all parts of the world within a few years, and new discoveries in medicine that have saved a great number of people who would not have otherwise survived. And maybe it dates back to the cave paintings of our ancestors, and maybe it has all started with the first seed planted or with animal domestication, with rice growing or the tests in the atmosphere. This all has led to an increase of human standards of living and interconnection, as well as to the population growth and pollution. Modern history of humankind is writing its infamous story mainly due to the production of plastics that has grown from 1 million tonnes to 300 million tonnes per year (McNeill, Engelke 2014: https://www.worldcat.org/title/great-acceleration-an-environmental-history-of-the-anthropocene-since-1945/oclc/926050454) and there is a

constant growth of population, industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. For some it is a crisis and catastrophe, for others a new opportunity, on the one hand a space for scientific and technical hypotheses, on the other hand, a rich artistic topic. It is our reality, but also a socially, culturally, and politically determined construct. It is one of the biggest concepts of today that mostly requires a deeper thought. However, we can state with certainty that Anthropocene is a disturbing concept. In 2018, Canadian landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky published a book of photographs entitled *Anthropocene*, in which he captures a wide range of natural sceneries affected by human activity. In the same year, Burtynsky also participated on Canadian documentary film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, which provocatively debates the topic of our unprecedented influence on our planet in a moment when we, the humans, are more powerful than natural forces or, at least, we often tell ourselves that (Burtynsky 2018: https://www.worldcat.org/title/anthropocene/oclc/1050861419). It can lead to extinction of our species and although many scientists had already warned us in past, it is still not too late. We are probably not going to witness it, but we can at least imagine what it could be like here. If only we could go back in time and be a little bit smarter. National Geographic in cooperation with screenwriter Ann Druyan and producer Seth MacFarlane has produced a monumental film documentary series entitled *Cosmos – Possible Worlds*, which is based on stunning and iconic ideas of American astronomer, astrophysicist, astrobiologist, and science popularizer Carl Sagan that have been scientifically, but also accessibly and humanly, narrated by contemporary significant astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. Thanks to their appeal for a better civilization, we can embark on a scientific journey of discovery of our feelings and coordinates in the space and time, so that we ultimately, in astonishment, get to understand the meaning of being but also how tiny we are; so that we could and had to ask ourselves a fundamental question – What will come after us and what kind of world will it be for our children? And whether, maybe, the maturing of Anthropocene could not also lead to our own maturing. We also see a significant parallel to this topic within the context of famous philosophical film opera *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Stanley Kubrick, screenplay of which was cowritten by Arthur C. Clarke. Here, the meaning of evolution and human existence is confronted with a sinister and silent symbol of alien life in a form of a black monolith. In this timeless story about a journey beyond the boundaries of space and time, contexts referring to Kazimir Malevich's suprematism are visually encoded.

Within the photographic concepts of the last decade, the human and the natural are intertwined. Many authors map and record a concrete landscape or urban area in combination with a poetic expression; they point out our social climate through invisible contexts related to the cultural, geographical, and biological layers, as well as to the time-space characteristics of a place and its genius loci. Within the contemporary "everchanging" and "unstable" visuality, photographic narratives turn more and more in the direction of the analysis of inner psychological feelings that consequently, to a certain extent, become generally valid, as, through them, the authors address a pursuit of thoughts from the past and suppression of reality when a being becomes just a fragmented body wishing to escape. Strong association and appropriation of this essential desire within staged photography can refer us, for example, to Frida Kahlo's paintings and surrealism of dreams in the context of a body, and not only the female body. Artificial beings, depicted in contemporary art, acquire contexts of our fears of an intelligence form that could substitute or even completely replace human species in future. Science-fiction theme in art is also articulated in the background of subcultural fashion that often suggests new beings with robotic elements, or even replicants from the famous Ridley Scott movie *Blade Runner*. Suddenly, we have a feeling that future with the new beings is not that distant and a motive of digital data flow is within reach in the near future. Another trend worth mentioning is using fashion photography within the context of swap fashion, the philosophy of which is acquiring an increasing societal and recycling aspect that respects considerate and responsible behaviour of the population. An increasing visual accent is also placed on a depiction of the impact of anthropocentric aspect on urban environment within a possible coexistence of two realities that may or may not reflect in the objects made by our hands. Such ambivalence provides space for contemplation about a possible existence of the world without people, when the current pandemic has emptied the spaces which have become quiet still-lifes in the landscape, withdrawn and inertially resisting the passage of time in silence. Authors often implement the tension from such kind of detachment (both physical and psychological) into their visual concepts also through a staged metaphor of partnership, starting a family or expectation of a child. Here, we can find a semantic parallel in a desire for material security, the current state of which, in its anti-aesthetics, rather refers to self-destruction that is so often a part the sphere of human relationships. For example, wall structures become unstable structures of our touches that we build our lives on; they are a synonym for spiritual,

psychological, and internal decay, which strongly resembles the inspiration with an aesthetics and work with a body in Francesca Woodman's artwork, when the fleeting nature of spaces is parallelly intertwined with both the physical and psychological vanishing. This inner and outer imprisonment by cold walls becomes a process of wandering through being, forgetting and remembering again. Deformation of reality and hybrid neologisms transform in art into convincing statements about the existence of possible worlds in almost manneristic compositions of post-industrial environment of urban nooks, decoding our footprints that constitute a key memento of the environmental situation and an imprint in time. Such still-lifes of various graffiti scenes and object wall structures internalize a story about us; they are full of symbols and attributes defining the human species with its desires and extroverted attempts to rule the world. They are a sad and grave visual grotesque, our factual footprint, and a reflection in the mirror of these modern sites. Other times, authors use a form of a suggestive and metaphysical game referring to Magritte's surrealism to articulate elements of urban and peripheral housing estate parts which, despite their artificial attributes, carry a dreamy atmosphere. Such images are not only strict records of reality, but also vague formulas referring our reading to Rhotko's abstract paintings of colourful geometric surfaces or Mondrian's neoplasticism. Diverse associations to, e.g., film compositions of David Lynch or photographs of Leslie Krims in evidently postmodern satirical fictions full of black humour can be found in the works of artists who urgently comment on the superiority of humans over animals, and who often play with the meaning of individual attributes that are vital mainly for reading this type of image scenes, set in banal contexts of day-to-day lives and activities of human species. The most critical view can be seen in conceptual-documentary photographs that capture the remains of mass-consumption at, e.g., landfill sites, when these piles of trash become metaphorical, but mainly sad, portraits of us rather than just another landscape picture. It is similar in the landscape sceneries of constructions, industrial zones or impressions of water surfaces which are also, in other layers of their reading, references to the sphere of consumerism marking us as the main actors in polluting the planet. These minimalistic and discovered still-lifes constitute a tiny, but explicit, accentuation of the recycling of our actions characterizing interventions of people and their desire to appropriate and subdue the world at all costs. The opposite of this, let's say, a more general genre interpretation of landscape is the subjective staged photography that is dominated by grim landscape sceneries so typical for, for example, Pavel Pecha from *The Slovak*

New Wave or Pasolini's controversial filmography. In the dramatic and dark lighting, we are able to decode topics of condemnation, pain, death and resurrection, where theatrical expressions from subconsciousness become a cathartic, but also bleak, journey between the earthly world and the absurd wating for the next one. Provoking semiotics of the individual attributes takes a shape of a dreadful postapocalyptic country, as if coming straight from biblical revelations, while defining human species as an architect of all endings, but, at the same time, refers to temporality, to our helpless defiance and insignificance in the cycle of boundless time that always takes its toll.

We have been intrigued by a text entitled "Art in the Anthropocene" from a book *The Posthuman Glossary* published by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2018, the editors of the volume mapping the basic terms and theoretical contexts reflecting the current era of Anthropocene being Rosi Braidotti and Mária Hlavajová. The theory, based on the pillars of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism, is even more urgent today – it does not belong just to the academic world, but can be more and more often encountered in the areas of art, culture, and media. Anthropocene has the power to remind us of our restricted and contingent time on this earth. In the text, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin state that "*...so far as we are to accept the term Anthropocene and its mobilizing potential, it is an aesthetic event. I mean this in three ways. First, aesthetics can be understood from its etymological source in aesthesis, meaning sense perception. Taken in this light, the Anthropocene marks a period of defamiliarization and derangement of sense perception. This is primarily what is unfolding around us: the complete transformation of the sensations and qualities of the world. In other words, the world that we are born into is receding in front of our eyes, causing a rearrangement of the sensory apparatus of our organism. Climate change, under these terms, can be understood as a complete rearrangement of our sensory and perceptive experience of being in the world, where the threat itself becomes hard to identify based on the sensory limitations of our bodies. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014) argues, the problem with these changes is that they are often written into the canon in a way that signifies beauty. He uses the example of Claude Monet's Impression: Sun Rising (1873). This painting, one of the most circulated images in art history, marks not just a particular aesthetic shift associated with Impressionism, but portrays the intense smog produced by early industrialization. The fact that air pollution has been anaesthetized into a kind of beauty marks one of the central problems of the Anthropocene era. This fetishizing of environmental destruction which troublingly straddles*

the realms of beauty and awe can also be seen in the work of photographers such as Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky … Second, the Anthropocene has been framed through modes of the visual: data, visualization, satellite imagery, climate modelling and other legacies of the 'whole earth'… Third, art is a polyarchic site of experimentation for living in a damaged world, offering a range of discursive, visual and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism or psychological depression. Art can provide a space for dealing with the affective and emotional trauma of climate change, dams and environmental pollution as it can hold together contradictions. We need modes of expression for the collective loss we are suffering through and venues to express the emotional toll of living in a diminished world. This sense of multiplicity that is contained within art provides a way to sift through the numerous contradictions of our everyday lives, to deal with divergent and discontinuous scales of time, place and action. Art practice can also provide a space of propositions and future imaginaries … As David Garneau says 'What art does do – and what is difficult to measure – is that it changes our individual and collective imaginaries by particles, and these new pictures of the world can influence our behaviour'. The arts are part of the emergence of the narratives about the ways, in which we live in the world, narratives that can be damaging or visionary, which can connect or dislocate us from the earth. The fact that so much of Anthropocene discourse has been taken up in the arts merits more attention" (Braidotti, Hlavajová ed. 2018: https://34.sk/umenie-v-antropocene/).

If we consider photographic image within the intentions of current visuality, we must accept the notion of a photographic image as a constantly changing flow of information, data, and stories, which are being transformed in time, space, and contexts of the era. It is a consequence of the volatility of the term "reality", when not only art but also our physical bodies and all our being transforms into a sphere of virtual possibilities. Aesthetics of metamodernism carries within itself neologisms in thinking, to which we must also adjust our perception of the established interpretations of photographic image. Hybridization in the era of post-humanity and in the contemporary visual photographic language does not only influence morphology, but it also increasingly affects the medium itself and its philosophy, not excluding transformations of the content, structure, i.e., those that address the contexts of body, portraiture, and even conceptual documentary. "*The message of Foucault's book "The Order of Things" subtitled "An Archaeology of the Human Sciences", was this. The main*

question of modern philosophy since the times of Kant is: I, i.e., my consciousness must be both an empirical object of representation and a transcendental originator of representations. How can it be possible? In Foucault's opinion, history has showed us that it cannot – and this impossibility means a collapse of modern episteme. He concluded the book by comparing the eventual end of man to erasing a face drawn in sand at a shore … People acquainted with Kittler as a coldblooded theoretician, a hot typhoon that has washed away all the marks left by a familiar face at a shore and has melt it down into silicone chips, are often surprised by the poetic power of his texts. Make no mistake, for Foucault and Kittler it was not about an elimination of the humankind itself. They mostly addressed epistemological questions within the context of human sciences traditions which have, during the last two centuries, built and glorified the "oh, human"—human supremacy over the events and life on the planet and the whole universe; supremacy stemming from the privilege of being able to think (and speak). Human sciences and artists have only recently started to draw consequences from the withdrawal from anthropocentric positions and that is also the reason that ecological themes and Anthropocene are such resonating topics. And it seems that natural sciences are going to need us… Anthropocene has become one of the main narratives of our time quite fast" (Barok 2015: https://monoskop.org/Talks/Antropoc%C3%A9n).

Just as a river tide carries the silt of memories, our own memory and experiences, it also transforms ourselves. This interflow and constant changes in time can be implicitly found in contemporary photographic language in a form of an interflow of realities. Within the postmodern shift in the portrayal of self-portrait photography and its biographic features, it is mainly the fundamental author's identity, interpreted mostly through their relationships with their close ones, that is coming to the fore. Contemporary authors more and more often address the time-space reconstructions of real and key life events, while the narrative of the photographs is based on a thorough direction of individual characters, their facial expressions, gestures, and attributes, while simultaneously remaining in a position of fiction about possible reality that is taking place in the area of personal memory. Within the theory of photography, art, and philosophy, such disruption of time continuum by a parallel reality, which a spectator has no way to verify, raises many fundamental questions about the stability or uncertainty of the truthfulness of the medium of photography itself. The effort of photographic concepts of all genres and intermedia overlaps of the last decade could be defined as a need to find the human being in their

imperfect wholeness; finding one's place in the journey that secretly speaks of who we are, where we are heading, and who we are becoming; on a journey that frankly reveals socially sensitive topics and shows us that "look, this is us, people, nothing more and nothing less". In contemporary photography, genres such as landscape, still-life, portraiture, and body are becoming the bearers of social trauma, our emblem and imprint, so that we could learn to accept difference one small step after another. "*Darwin has defined the main, destined peculiarity of a human being: their saliency and oneness, thus, a certain loneliness in it ... Man has lost a sense of limits, boundaries, and order; has spilled themselves all around the planet as a biblical flood ... is unique both up and down ... has overflown their banks and that inevitably leads to chaos in them that they cannot handle ... man is a God to man (Spinoza) ... is not a master in their own house, as Freud had pointed out ... a human being is unwillingly against themselves*" (Műnz 2020: 91-94). Therefore, if, within our reflections, we have such a preview before our eyes, there is a lingering key question - in what way, if at all, can art, in connection with the critical theory, give answers to the diverse challenges related to both the current and future ideological, political, and economic factors.

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The whole text of the study comprises several extracts and paraphrases from Petra Cepková's curatorial text to exhibition entitled *Posledný sen o budúcnosti (The Last Dream of the Future)*, GĽH/Galéria Ľudovíta Hlaváča, FMK UCM, Trnava, 2021.

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