Representing the Bektashis
Exploring Epistemologies in Visual Anthropology

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Abstract　As a professional photojournalist collaborating with anthropologists, I have often confronted perspectives from academic scholars with little (if none) *practical* knowledge of, attention to, and understanding of the visual medium. In such a context, current theoretical approaches to how visual cultures are thought and signified, might offer a valuable and clarifying occasion to address the profound misconceptions visual media, and photography particularly, suffer. Based on my 2008 fieldwork on the Bektashi community in Albania, I aim to foster *montage* as a practical tool for visual signification of anthropological research. By applying the professional photographer's hands-on expertise to the academic field of anthropology, and of visual anthropology specifically, I will eventually advocate for a more articulated and aesthetic-led understanding of visual communication.

Keywords　Bekthasism. Albania. Photojournalism. Montage. Visual anthropology.

> Montage doesn't produce an analytics, but a work of representation. (Marcus 2009)

The issue of representing within visual cultures, as much as its parallel one for verbal media, is still crucially debated, with no resolution of sort. This is due both to ontological and epistemological concerns. Visual cultures appear to be still a very contrasted and rather indefinite academic field because of what defines the visual itself (Mitchell 2005), and how notions of 'visual literacy' (Elkins 2008) might be convincingly applied to current media changes.

For the present contribution, I will appreciate 'visual cultures' as the research field defined by two qualities: its being visual-led while focusing on contemporary and modern media: hence photography belongs to visual cultures, modern painting remains questionable, as it might fall under both 'visual cultures' and 'art history'.

In my years as a professional photojournalist, I have been confronted several times, both epistemologically and ontologically, with anthropological perspectives from academic scholars with little (if none) *practical* knowledge of, attention to, and understanding of the visual medium. As Robert Gardner once pointed out «too many aspiring ethnographic filmmakers

train on the job, having read the instruction manual for the camera they just bought on the flight taking them to the field» (Jakobs 1979, p. 432).

As such, current approaches to how visual cultures are thought and signified might offer a valuable and clarifying way to address the profound misconceptions visual media, and photography particularly, suffer. This is the reason why this paper will address the issue arguing through a 'reverse' perspective, that of the professional photographer who applies his skills to the academic field of anthropology, and of visual anthropology specifically. Thus, by reflecting on my own production practices, I will use my work on the Albanian community of the Bektashis to clarify a few pressing issues on visual cultures epistemologies.

This analysis derives from a 2008 side project I carried out once completed my contribution to a comprehensive UNESCO intervention in the South of Albania managed by Professor Macchiarella. Given the sad rationale for the present collection, I could not think of a better way to remember a most beloved friend, to whom this short contribution is *in memoriam*.

The 1986 revolutionary appearance of George Marcus' edited *Writing Culture* stemmed a fierce debate on the ontology of anthropology and the epistemological dimension of anthropological research. Since my first encounter with the discipline, and following up my professional work as a photojournalist, I have been progressively joining in the field of those researchers appreciating the Cultural Studies stance on anthropology as a discipline, questioning the semantic quality of its visual communicative possibilities (among many: Hobart 2000). In my research, I have eventually come to favour the thesis that any document is an anthropological text *per se*, so any text could be, and should be approached, as a field of semantic analysis. And, hence, as a possible vector of storytelling possibilities (Fusari 2012, 2013, and forthcoming).

Within the terms of such a framework, and in spite of all current media developments, or, possibly, because of them, the key elements in communication theory (what to represent, how to, to whom, with which result) have remained pivotal. In light of this, I have come to appreciate the extent to which any visual document carries a multitude of interpretations stemming out of the many coeval representations the visual is the vector of.

As Nietzsche pointed out that «there are no facts, only interpretations» (Nietzsche in Kaufmann 1954, p. 458), indeed, the above is NOT a totally new topic by any means. Magritte implicitly confronted the issue through his *The Treachery of Images*' 1928 series, when he painted below a pipe «This is not a pipe», meaning that the painting subject was not a pipe, but instead the image of a pipe. As he commented «it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe', I'd have been lying!» (Magritte 2012). To which, Roland Barthes indirectly replied that in photography, «a pipe is always a pipe» (Barthes 2010, p. 47).

Contrary to Barthes, I share Magritte's perspective that in photography

a pipe is never a pipe, and, in the same way, that a photograph doesn't relate to Truth («It is this», i.e. a representation), but, instead, conveys an interpretation of Reality («This is what I witnessed»). Moreover, in a Photoshop-led word, the photograph might be better appreciated as «what might have happened in one form or another, at a specific time and from a very personal perspective, due to the very contingent light then appearing».

Considering the above, I will introduce Roman Jakobson's definition of the lyrical quality, as he argues that

> lyricism exists when words, with their meanings, composition and form acquire value in themselves rather than simply referring Reality. In other words: they are not the same with the object. This produces a juxtaposition, in which the word is both the object and not the object. The juxtaposition is needed for the mobility of signs and ideas, without which their relation is automatic and univocal. If this relation turned univocal, the symbolic activity would cease and the conscience of reality would die with it. (Jakobson 1981, p. 744).

Building on Jakobson's note, I will approach anthropology as the field where forms of meanings negotiations occur (I use occur here as an intransitive verb on purpose). With such a definition I build on a practice-led approach towards the limits of interpretation (see also Eco 1990) to reinforce how, regardless the discipline or the field of application, the relation between a signifier and the quantity and quality of its signified/s is what constitutes the production of information in any text.

Hence, the more the relation 'word as an object' and 'word as not an object' is vivid and un-expected, the more its information production is reverberating. As Umberto Eco would put it, a stop sign at a crossroad leaves no space for signifying processes (Eco 1989, pp. 66-68). And it'd better not do so. Or, in other words, the less an information is just what it represents, the more there is space for ambiguity. And *viceversa*, the more an information is what it represents, the more space for un-ambiguity there is.

However, a fully ambiguous work of art is un-thinkable, as the resulting confusion would be un-manageable, nor signifying in any way (Eco 1989). The conscious creation of new connotative associations, as well as empty spaces for ambiguity, i.e. for un-refined, un-defined and un-univocal experiences to be *lived through* phenomenologically must be confronted, and, possibly, 'tamed'. The 'taming whip' I here consider and suggest for visual media signification is *montage*.
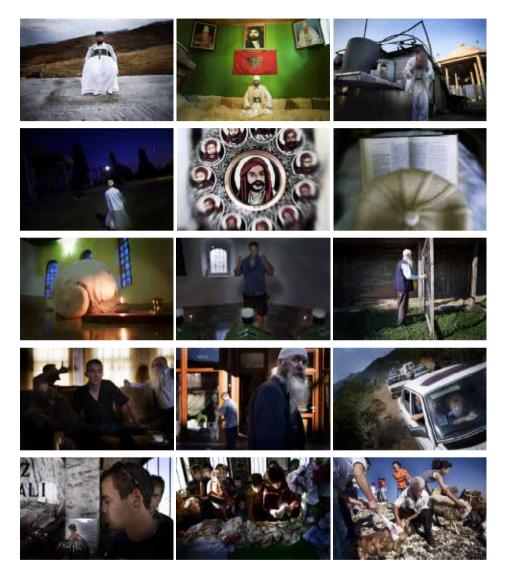
As for *montage*, it is common to refer to Sergei Eisenstein's research, even if finalised for a cinematic form, as it is still widely and consistently applied in photography. I would even dare to say that it still represents the most important theoretical and practical contribution to the subject of montage and visual editing.

Not coincidently, Eisenstein would constantly refer to a *general* theory of montage, and draw his examples from all art forms. In one of his crucial argumentations, Eisenstein introduces a sequence of 4 images: a whitehead old man, a whitehead old woman, a white horse and a roof covered with snow. Looking for a unifying element, as it is common when confronted with a sequence, audiences do not *yet* know whether the sequence will continue in the direction of 'oldness' or 'whiteness,' as both are present and conveyed at the very same time (Eisenstein 1977, p. 65).

To cope with the polysemic nature of the image, and manage third meanings (Barthes 1977, pp. 52-68), Eisenstein introduces his notion of the 'Revealing Index' as a tool to favour *a* signification for the whole sequence (Eisenstein 2010, p. 402). In an orthodox construction, such 'Revealing Index' would appear at the beginning of the sequence to shape the following signifying processes (see the below presented case studies). Alternatively, in more heterodox editing practises, such signifying vector could be arranged anywhere in the sequence, and work as a crucial contributor for more articulated *Oberton* narrative processes (Eisenstein 2010, pp. 402-410). In conclusion, the 'Revealing Index', is here recommended as the privileged tool to cope with the polysemic nature of the medium 'image'.

Eisenstein approaches the image as a polysemic hieroglyph, because the same hieroglyph goes through different signifying processes depending on its position within its enunciation, be it visual or verbal. It has therefore to be read and signified in direct relation with the other hieroglyphs in the sequence and, particularly so, with those immediately before and after it (Eisenstein 1977, pp. 29-30). As such, had the 'Revealing Index' not made explicit, we would enter into a too vast interpretative field, which would loose audiences into too many contemporary and alternative signifying processes, with what Umberto Eco identified with the notion of noise, as «every text, however 'open' it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as a field of *oriented* possibilities» (Eco 1990, p. 142, emphasis added). With noise, I follow Eco's approach to open significations as those balancing the lowest degree of order with the highest degree of ambiguous dis-order. When such a delicate relation breaks in favour of too much openness, the risk of noise creation, i.e. losing even the smallest understandable element, appears concrete.

I will use the below examples to clarify the extent to which montage might be effectively used as the tool as what leads towards an intended direction the complex and rarely foreseeable process of visual signification. Hence, how does that happen?

What follows is a section of the photographic essays I post-produced out of my 2008 one-month research on the Bektashis. The Bektashis is a dervish order (*tariqat*) of Islam named after the thirteenth century Haji Bektash Veli. Nowadays, the Bektashis are mainly found throughout the Balkans, from Turkey to Albania, where I conducted my fieldwork.

First, I here introduce the 15 images which constitute the online published essay in a random way.

The resulting communicative act is a mere sequence of un-ordered (and hence semantically dis-ordered) images, without any stated communicative policy. In order to achieve the forementioned communicative policy, I would have to 'post-produce' the sequence of photographs. By post-production, I refer to all interventions following the recording (i.e. produc-

tion) of the photographs; these interventions include, among many other possibilities, the following variables as the most relevant factors to be used for the grammar of *montage*:

a.   The number of pictures to be used;
b.   the medium of representation (i.e. web gallery / magazine / exhibition, just to mention a few);
c.   the relation between the photographs and the backgrounds format, including specific issues of multimedia communication such as the presence of accompanying audio and/or the usage of a fixed transition pace as opposed to an audience-paced advancement;
d.   the relation between the visual and the written (i.e. are there captions or a general statement, or both? Does the visual precede the verbal or the opposite?);
e.   the review of the finalised version with a specific attention to the possible contributions dismissed photographs might bring, as other images would now better fit the first (temporary) finalised *montage*.

On purpose I do not address the preceding production process, and more aesthetically informed elements such as, for instance, whether the photographs are in colour or B&W. In fact, it is not within the realms of this paper to address the crucial part aesthetics has in any visual form (Bennett 2012). Though, it is just astonishing to note the extent to which, within the social sciences, aesthetic is still understood in very kantian terms as something optional, if not thoroughly futile (Kant 2000, section 44).

Considering how «montage allows fragments and features to connect without having to supply a narrative of causality [while allowing] micro-descriptions» (Highmore 2009, p. 81), let us now explore in a very practical manner how diverse *montages* might lead to alternative interpretations, either implicitly or explicitly intended through the representation.

The first example is very straight forwarding, as for the sequence of portraits below:

Such a sequence might work very well on several levels of interpretation, which include, among many:

a. the *photographic* composition, as in each picture there is a main subject against a background (from left to right the Bektashi and the 2 oval portraits, the Bektashi and the 3 square portraits, the Bektashi and the street-sweeper);
b. the *internal* composition, as in the central picture the three hanged portraits within the photograph mirror and echo the three picture-based essay series;
c. the *external* composition (i.e. the essay composition), as the two old Bektashis 'embrace' the younger one in the central picture. In fact, I chose to place the main character on the left of the picture on the left of the sequence as much as I used a photograph with the main character on the right for the right picture in the sequence.

However, even those similarities are broken by the compositional and aesthetic differences each single photograph presents. For instance, within the interpreting key of the main character against minor ones in the background, the total number of elements in the frame is – respectively from left to right – three, four (five if considering the flag) and two. Hence, following up on Jakobson's notes, it could be argued that the object appears to be both 'the object' (as for the three above mentioned common interpretative keys), and 'not the object,' because of how similarities are consistently broken.

Let us now explore the topic in more detail through a second example.

This second sequence too offers a wide variety of possible and contemporary interpretations, as the sequence from left to right might hint at, among many, the following keys:
a. temporal, from dawn to dusk;
b. spatial, as the three photographs are in the *tekke*, in a private space and outside;
c. of activities, as the main character prays, reads and walks;
d. compositional, as we have a medium shot, a wide angle and a wider shot.

Once more, the object photograph is approached by being both 'the object'

and 'not the object,' as it concurrently signifies as a singular element, and as part of a sequence. Furthermore, I have here merely addressed different *informational* elements part of a very short sequence of three pictures, without referring to the *communicational* qualities that the author might have intended or the audience understood. These interpretations are just a few possible among the many contemporary fluid identities might actually think of and feel (Fusari forthcoming). Moreover, such an indefinable multiplicity of interpretations, based on a singular representation, should be approached as growing logarithmically with each and every added picture: this happens because of the previously discussed hieroglyphical- ontological quality of the image, as in fact each image is signified singularly, and as part of a sequence.

The following case should help to better finalise such a theoretical perspective. What happens when from a sequence, one image is swapped with another one in the same position and with the same intended semantic code, that of the religious devotion?

Furthermore, even if the two initial images further share the same temporal, spatial and – arguably – compositional qualities, the distinct role the hat acquires within each sequence, comprehensively alters the resulting storytelling, eventually leading to different signifying practices.

Finally, if I wanted to increase the pictures number in the sequence, I would have to use the hat element differently for the two sequences, thus choosing to progress the storytelling through diverse images, and resulting 'Revealing Indexes'.

In fact, I could alternatively re-use the original picture for the sequence below, leading to a diverse 'Revealing Index', and resulting storytelling:

I might also consider re-editing the sequence as below, to explore the possibility of producing a better compositional rhythm, and avoid two consecutive tilted Bektashis:

Or – finally – why not re-arranging the hat-sequence in another way?

Eventually, it appears clear that had I preferred a 'Revealing Index' working on activities, I could have equally suggested the latter sequence together with the image here on the right:

Then, which sequence should I focus on? With which aim in mind? With, eventually, which reception by audiences? Grosswater states that «a meaning or a message [not exactly the same, but this is not the place to contextualise it] is to be found in every camera angle or in the juxtaposition between the shots…but I would not want to give it away in one sentence» (Grosswater in Binter 2010, p. 10).

In conclusion, I am inclined to evince the extent to which anthropology is fighting to preserve its own specificities against the progressive take-over of its cultural qualities by concurrent academic disciplines, and primarily by cultural studies and visual cultures. Moreover, the scientific need to positivistically explain all and everything (even lyricism!) obscures Henri Cartier-Bresson's recommendation that «narrative forms are ever-changing…so let leave its uniqueness aside and not talk about it anymore» (Cartier-Bresson 1999, p. 29). As such, either everything goes explained, and we lose lyricism, or things are left un-explicit, and audiences allowed to explore the crucial signifying tool of aesthetics: to the best of my knowledge, the first option is still dominant across all visual cultures academic fields, and particularly within anthropology, while the latter keeps on being relevant for the arts.

Considering the semantic and media changes the current digital media developments are bringing about, it might be high time to reconsider some self-imposed boundaries, and open up the field to more syncretic and multi-sensorial approaches: the aim is unquestionably to keep on challenging, in the best tradition of anthropology, both its epistemological and ontological dimensions.

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