

Jelena Mišeljić

The University of Montenegro, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Cetinje, Montenegro

Stillness and Movement: Photographic Essays and the Moving Images in Contemporary Digital Culture

Abstract: In the age of digital re-materialization and the circulation of visual content, the discussion on the nature of the photographic image has its implications on the medium itself. In the context of new and interconnected media, it is somewhat relevant to reconsider the definitions of traditional visual forms. This article will examine the relations between photographic images in different media contexts. If it is considered that the photographic books and essays are the assemblages of still photographs structured in a particular order, the first question that arises is how to, in the first place, define the structural norms in the context of contemporary circulationism. Thematically and formally, the relations between photography and cinema, duration and time, movement and stillness have been questioned historically. In the contemporary context, we can find similar examples present in the form of cinema also as an expression in everyday communication on different platforms, which Lev Manovich describes as a specific language. This article will examine the nature of that language, the correlation between *still* and *moving* mediums of photography. Finally, the aim is to recontextualize the definition of cinematic photo-essay in its articulation in social media platforms, as the main generators in circulationsim of images in contemporary digital culture.

Keywords: cinema; photography; time; movement; film-photo essay; Instagram.

She said she got confused when she stepped onto an escalator that was not functioning. [...] She stepped onto an up escalator that wasn't moving, and she couldn't adjust to this, she had to self-consciously climb the steps and it was difficult because she kept expecting the steps to move and she'd sort of half walk but not seem to be going anywhere because the steps weren't moving.

Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*

Introduction: Photography and Film in the Context of the New Media

Our memories are just one small part of events that once happened, a particular perspective on the excerpts of a past that has unfolded. Like our cognitive and spiritual automatisms, photography and film record the reality that occurred in a specific moment by imprinting the actual event in the material carrier. They create the illusion of a standstill in time.

Our era, characterized by a continuous circulation of audiovisual records of our surroundings, could be seen as a kind of memory interchange era: we are flawless in taking and sharing snapshots of our everyday lives. Furthermore, as Hito Steyerl suggests, this *circulationism* “is not about the art of making an image, but of post-producing, launching, and accelerating it.”¹ Contemporary digital culture, saturated with images, demands the revisions of the existing paradigms about photographic images within the context of the social media platforms. Instant photography became intertwined with our networked existence. Equipped with hardware and software for constant visual communication, we are invited to tell stories with images in form of photographic diaries. We carefully curate this content, arranging it like an album of memories by which we depict our impression of the past events. Furthermore, our smart devices can also recognize and meticulously arrange our memories in personal albums on their own.

Different photo and video-sharing platforms require different approaches to content. However, the foremost common characteristic for each is that every user is equally invited to share snapshots with friends and followers. Therefore, the first step is to recognize these platforms as places for social engagement. Their purpose is deeply rooted in the understanding of photography and film as documented memory and within the broader context of social networks – photography and video are there to tell a story; they are a *language* of social media. Furthermore, besides the context, we need to examine the formal characteristics of this kind of visual communication between photographic stillness and cinematic movement. What are the main features of photographic images in the circumstances of digital culture? Are the virtual worlds of audiovisual content – like endless scrolls and swipes through photographic albums, Instagram stories, TikTok videos, and Snapchat images – similar to flipping through paper, *material* photo albums? We need to start questioning the old media to understand the new better, and one way could be to recall the idea behind them, the concept of recording the world or memories of it, in terms of movement and time.

Thus, the moment in which we live is determined by the need to redefine the framework of the media, their production, and their theoretical foundation. This paper attempts to gain insight into some of the tendencies that once and now explored the boundaries and relationships between photography and film.

¹ Hito Steyerl, “Is the Internet Dead?” in *Duty-Free Art* (London, New York: Verso, 2017), 258–75.

Moving Images and the Language of Film-Photo-Essays

To describe as simply as possible the relationship between photography and film, *stillness* on the one hand and *movement* on the other, we can use an example from cinema prehistory. In 1872, the former governor of California, Leland Stanford, a businessman, and racehorse owner, hired Eadweard Muybridge to make a portfolio for his racehorse. Stanford asked for an image of his horse at full speed and was frustrated because the existing descriptions seemed incorrect. The human eye might not completely break down the activity at the quick gaits of the trot and gallop, and he needed technical assistance. For this purpose (recording each animal's position in motion), Muybridge developed a specific set of cameras that could photograph each part individually. The goal of the series of photographs was to prove a physical event that our eye is not equipped to register correctly. Our mind needed to stop time in order to comprehend the movement, and the still-photography was the solution.

In the photo diary *Bark*, Georges Didi-Huberman describes his tourist tour of Auschwitz with photographs and text. In this visual-textual *collage*, Didi-Huberman also looks at existing visual works, various types of pictorial photographic and film pieces that deal with the presentation of the apparition of the larger. It is inevitable, as he notes, to take into consideration the notable films which deal with the Holocaust. Didi-Huberman especially emphasizes specific film procedures in the films *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann and “Night and Fog” (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1956) by Alain Resnais. Specifically, Didi-Huberman discusses the so-called travelling *shots* or *ghost rides*, in which the camera travels together with trains carrying human cargo.

On the other hand, in contrast to the camera movement used in ghost rides, Didi-Huberman compares his photograph of the barracks entrance door with a *stop-frame* (*le plan d'arrêt*) where the camera *stops*, and the shot is resting in the form of a simple still photograph. This stillness, as a pause, has an ominous undertone, as Didi-Huberman writes: “A human stable, of which I photograph only the door – which is like the unmoving shot, the ‘Halt! Who goes there?’ of all perspectives; was this barracks, on the whole, anything other than one more gigantic cattle wagon? The last wagon, the wagon comes to a stop, the space of an infernal life while awaiting worse to come?”²

Stop-framing or *le plan d'arrêt* is connected with the concept of *pensive spectatorship*, as Reymond Bellour wrote in his 1984 essay “The Pensive Spectator”. He discusses the differences between film and photography in terms of spectatorship, which could also be considered from the perspective of the impact of pauses and stops in cinema sequences. “Before a photograph”, Bellour explains, “you always close your eyes, more or less: the time it takes to produce ‘the supplement’ necessary for the spectator to enter the image.”³ Some radical film practices, such as the French New

² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bark* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2017), 44.

³ Reymond Bellour, “The Pensive Spectator,” in *Cinematic*, ed. by David Company (London, Whitechapel, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 119–23.

Wave directors, have pointed to this relationship between movement and stillness. The cine-essayistic work of the Left Bank auteurs⁴ could be described as examples, and as Andrew Taylor discusses:

It (cine-essayistic works) offers an opportunity for expression often missing in film and photography. It is as if photography alone is too silent to speak. It is mute. And cinema is usually so busy moving that it is unable to stop and hear – it is deaf or suffers from partial deafness – whereas ‘still/moving films’ are in-between; they can ‘speak’ more than still images do standing alone, but they allow for a more reflective, pensive space than their ‘pure’ moving image relatives.⁵

The cine-essayistic works, this way, could serve as a platform for the further theoretization of both structural and cultural contextualization of the contemporary digital image, its production and circulation, that could be described as a *hybrid* of the still and the moving media. In this direction, we could analyze one of the most famous Left Bank films.

Thematically and formally, Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1964), a type of film essay entitled *ciné-roman* or *cinema-novel*, can serve as an ideal example. The dystopian context of the film is set in the period after the Third World War. While scientists are developing the time travel project, the survivors are trapped in underground areas. The protagonist of the film is a man who manages to travel to the past, to the moment of his pre-war childhood in which he saw a woman’s face and, at the same time, saw a man die. He visits the past and begins a connection with the woman, and then he travels to the future, where he is given a power unit to regenerate the present time. When the people of the end learn that his jailers are planning to kill him, they agree to support him and send him back to his childhood, where he will meet the woman. However, he is shot, and it is then that he realizes that the man he watched getting killed was himself.

La Jetée was also published as a photo book. The aspect of time could also be seen within photo panels. Reading and looking at the book is profoundly different from watching the film. As Patrick Friel explains: “Despite its unconventional construction from still images and Marker’s deeper concerns with time and memory than is usual for the genre, the film is unavoidably defined by science fiction, mystery, and time-travel. The desire for narrative is difficult to call in to check.”⁶ The still panels

⁴ The filmmakers of the Left Bank group of French New Wave movement were the auteurs who weren’t connected to the *Cahiers du Cinema* magazine. The main characteristic of their work is that it was strongly rooted in left-wing political views, documentarism and experimental filmmaking. The most famous protagonists of the group were Agnes Varda, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais.

⁵ Andrew Taylor, “Writing with images: The Film-Photo-Essay, the left Bank Group and the pensive moment,” *Journal of Screenwriting* 5, 1 (2014): 81.

⁶ Patrick Friel, “Chris Marker and the Archival Imperative: ‘La Jetée: ciné-roman’ and ‘Staring Back’ by Chris Marker and ‘Chris Marker’ by Sarah Cooper,” *Senses of Cinema* 52 (2009), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/book-reviews/chris-marker-and-the-archival-imperative-la-jetee-cine-roman-and-staring-back-by-chris-marker-and-chris-marker-by-sarah-cooper/>, acc. on March 24, 2022.

printed on paper could also be related to time. Although the panel images are presented to us all at once, there is a specific itinerary that we need to take to make sense of them. This is one of the fundamental reasons why Marker uses both mediums (the photo-film and the photo book) to deconstruct the idea of a frozen time in the form of an image that hunts our mind and memory to the point of their (traumatic) narrative apprehension. In that regard, the main difference between the film and the book, in this case, is the exact idea of the spectator as a ‘traveler in time’, a browser of memories imprinted in a form of an image.

In relation to *La Jetée*, we can recall the theories that have preoccupied philosophers in terms of connections between cinematic stillness and movement, and our cognitive mechanisms. Henri Bergson⁷ wrote that the present is a continuous reinterpretation of the past and the future. He calls *actual* or current the aspect of our living world, which is *now*, at this moment, before us. The object in front of us, for example, is much more realistic than the memory of that object or the representation of that object. For Gilles Deleuze,⁸ as for Bergson, each of these moments and objects are *images* – the object in front of us is an *actual image*, and the object that we remember, that we imagine, is a *virtual image*. Image is, thus, the term by which Deleuze, following Bergson, names one part of the world. Among these cut-outs of the world, or images, some are more actual, some more virtual, and their interpenetration forms the basis for understanding time. In that sense, Deleuze’s preoccupation with film has as its starting point a fascination with film media, cinema, because it authentically collects the processes of retreating virtual images according to a certain automatic determinism, which is, according to him, a basic process of perception and understanding of the world. The concepts of time and movement are inseparable from the ontological nature of the photographic and cinematic medium. If we define *cinema*, the art of motion-picture photography, primarily as a set of *ideas* about moving images, those ideas, in Andre Bazin’s words, are not yet fully embodied. Moreover, cinema is not only about motion pictures, but also about motion, i.e., movement and duration as essential qualities of our living world. Only in these terms we can comprehensively approach Marker’s concept of a *cine roman*. Cinema, the moving image, is not necessarily the imprint of movement, per se, and Marker directly addresses this preoccupation. In this sense, *La Jetée* is a true example of “cinema by other means”, as Pavle Levi⁹ explains cinematic practices beyond the art of moving images. The pause in time, imprint of memory, of a past moment, is not only a thematic preoccupation of *La Jetée* but also refers to the idea of the cinematic medium as documenting the memory. In this sense, the illusion of movement through time is achieved not through the *movement image*, but the structural schemes: the shot arrangements and the cut. As Levi has written: “There is something inherently equivocal about the cinematic

⁷ Henri Bergson “The Idea of Duration,” and “Matter and Memory,” in *Henri Bergson, Key Writings*, ed. by John Mularkey, Keith Ansell Pearson (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2002), 59–94, 95–167.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989)

⁹ Pavle Levi, *Cinema by Other Means* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.)

cut. It brings two shots together while setting them apart. It plays an important role in the constitution of the film's meaning but can also function as its limit – as a trace of the failure of discursive and perceptual totalization”¹⁰.

In the age of other perspectives of time perception, in-between circular production and distribution of (moving) images, how could we recontextualize the mediums of photography and cinema? With the constant *interaction* with images, such as swiping on Instagram, are we more of the *spectator* or the *reader*? Could we understand *swipe* as flipping through a book or watching the still-photographic images? Those ideas of moving images as cut-outs of time can also be understood as a framework for some possible directions and perspectives in analyzing the current models of digital platforms for photo and video sharing. Therefore, we need to question some of the tendencies that became part of our everyday interaction with physical and virtual surroundings because we are not only consumers of the content. In a networked world, we also respond to and manage the content. Spectators and readers are also users and producers at the same time.

Snapshot, Share, Swipe: The Context and Language of Instant Photography

To set the reference basis for understanding Instagram as a platform for the production and distribution of photographic images and the interaction with the visual content we further communicate with, we must first consider the broader context of this application as a place for virtual social media engagement.

In the essay *Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling*, Jean Burgess describes the current state of social interaction mediated by online platforms by presenting the concept of the *vernacular culture*. Burgess explains that the democratization of technologies discourse converges with emerging neoliberal business and economic models “under which consumers (or ‘users’), particularly of technology, are considered to possess and exercise more creativity and agency, combined with a surge in both the participation in and power of voluntary work and ‘productive’ leisure”¹¹. Consequently, cultural production is now an inseparable part both of the reasoning and the logistics of everyday life. Likewise – there is no visible line that separates the producers and the consumers of the content. This shift in the value chain is also reflected in how we consume new media, such as blogging or photo sharing. In this context, the aspect of participatory capacity is related to the need for cultural participation. In this regard, Burgess uses the term *vernacular creativity* to describe contemporary creative practices that emerge from “highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions”¹². Based on

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹ Jean Burgess, “Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 20, 2 (2006): 202, acc. on March 30, 2022.

¹² *Ibid.*, 206.

that, Burgess uses the term *digital storytelling* to address modes of production, technological apparatus, and textual characteristics of cultural practices. Digital storytelling, Burgess explains, is “a dynamic site of relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use that takes place in specific contexts”¹³. The best way to understand Instagram not only as a platform but as a set of different content lies precisely in this Burgess concept.

The next step is to go towards the content, the *text*, that is, to understand the language of the media. Instagram is first and foremost a social networking application, which focuses on all those moments in our daily lives worth sharing, and where communication is based on the light motive of ‘living in the moment’. If we follow Burgess’ concept, in this way Instagram develops a vernacular visual culture, which is characterized by a specific language that is, according to Lev Manovich, a “system of conventions and techniques that define the subjects, narratives, editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing, and other image characteristics”¹⁴. In that direction, we will take one step backward – to analog media, in order to use certain abovementioned formal practices that we can now observe in a new context.

Similar to experiments with film-photo-essays, we need to approach new social media platforms from the position of analyzing the specific language they use, in addition to understanding the social context we have mentioned. What interests me the most is examining the possibilities of photographic or cinematic essays on Instagram. Since the option to upload multiple photos in one post appeared, the idea of linearity emanating from the act of ‘swipe’ inevitably reminds us of comic books, photographic essays, rather than randomly stacked albums of specific places and moments. For a filmmaker, the logic of multiple posts is *narrative*. The narrative is not necessarily linear but could also be associative and random. Regardless, the multiple-part posts underlie the logic of telling a story. Instagram seems to make it possible to transfer the idea of the photobook but also photographic or cinematic essays in the place of vernacular culture mediated by new media infrastructure.

Also, besides the posts, there is the Instagram story, a quick post. Instagram stories are content that could be described as a 24-hour-lasting photographic (or cinematic) essay. Let me underline that, neither in the case of posting nor in the case of stories, I am not addressing the informative and randomly shared content (although we should not shy away from the fact that this can be an interesting theoretical challenge). The Instagram story is not an album. It is not about the image, but the image in *time*. Since the Instagram story has a *duration*, could we perhaps envision this content as a new form of filmmaking practice? In the book *Expanded Cinema*,¹⁵ published in 1975, Gene Youngblood defines the context in which historically relevant experimental filmmakers have communicated with the idea of new screen media and the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁴ Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017), 18, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>. acc., on March 30, 2022.

¹⁵ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co, 1970.)

problem of limiting cinema to a single screen. Watching Instagram story content for 24 hours, which is enabled by using just one channel (an app), can be equated with the performative quality of the cinema. Youngblood defined it as an explosion of the screen towards an immersive, interactive, and interconnected understanding of culture. Thus, the performativity of the Instagram story as a film photo essay is exclusively related to the smartphone screen and is available for a limited time. The challenge in that direction would be to perform a film (photo) essay in real-time, during the twenty-four-hour availability of story content.

On the other end are our technologies and gadgets. Smartphones are equipped with software that allows them to independently create personalized content for our eyes and pleasure only, without the primary purpose of placing visual material to a more significant number of recipients. Automated content generation technologies have not yet (at least, legally) reached our phone cameras, but archiving apps have started to work on their own. They edit our photo albums and visual diaries. Thus, they surprise us with the reminders they sort in a sophisticated manner. They can produce a photo album, for example, titled *Food in December*, but also with the way they combine audiovisual content, adding the context and atmosphere with carefully selected music, rhythm, and tempo – the photo album *Food in December* might take a form of the film-photo-essay, for example, *Melancholy for the December Feasts*. The intelligent software offers us personalised content, made by silent algorithmic operations that continuously work in the background.

Andrew Taylor, in the article *Writing with Images: The Film-Photo-Essay, the Left Bank Group and the Pensive Moment*, writes about his ‘writing-with-image’ experiments, building on the concepts of Bellour and the New Wave authors. As mentioned earlier, Taylor connects the theory of pensive spectatorship with the formal-stylistic approach of film photo essays. However, it is necessary to discuss digital platforms as the places where the limiting paradigms of film and photography media are best questioned. Taylor concludes: “I would now contend that the film-photo-essay form – even the variation of images and music alone – allows more space for audience interaction and emotional response than conventional narrative cinema. In a world saturated with information and cluttered with images, there is an important place for new pensive hybrid art forms – forms between word and image; essay and story; stillness and movement; photography and cinema”¹⁶.

Digital tools and strategies require changing how we think about old media. Moreover, from everything we have written about, they seem to erase the distinctions between photography and film, converging them into new creative practices.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Writing with Images: The Film-Photo-Essay, the Left Bank Group and the Pensive Moment,” 82.

Conclusion

What are the moving images today? This paper aims to open some new possible perspectives in questioning the media of photography and film in the context of new media technologies of image production and distribution, and the techniques on which our perception is based. The paper has analyzed the main structural and contextual characteristics of production and circulation of digital images, by connecting them with historically relevant practices of cinematic essays. In researching some historically relevant practices that have questioned aspects of perception and reproduction of moving images, we can conclude that new media platforms could be considered in constant questioning of the ontology of the moving image.

Hybrid forms that move in the space between movement and rest, on platforms for participatory creativity, can be a space for a potential critical reaction to the current saturation of images. Suppose we understand this space as a place for the response, not only to mass production but also to total automation in content production. In that case, the lesson we need to learn is understanding the context of new media to reflect the reality around us, both physical and virtual.

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