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THEATER PHOTOGRAPHS AS A SOURCE OF RESEARCH ON THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF 2ND HALF OF THE 19. CENTURY

KEY WORDS: theatre, actor, photography, atelier, interpretation

SŁOWA KLUCZE: teatr, aktor, fotografia, atelier, interpretacja

Abstract

Theatre atelier photography is one of the few visual sources relating to the theatre of the second half of the nineteenth century; it is the most direct testimony, which, however, requires considerable caution in its interpretation. Science has developed a lot of methods for the study of visual sources, so an attempt – however schematic and being just a reconnaissance in that research field – to implement them to interpret theater atelier photography seems to be justified. The author refers to methods which are the most interesting and the most relevant for the history of theater, and considers their usefulness in the analysis and interpretation of the photographic testimonies of dramatic performances.

„What we see never resides in what we say”¹.

Michel Foucault

Photography in the first decades of its existence was perceived as an impartial medium, as the most accurate picture of reality of all possible, which resulted from the trust in the mechanical way of recording the image, as well as the trends in art – realistic and naturalistic. It was not until the twentieth century that a question mark was placed over the credibility of the presented images and the usage of specific techniques of image interpretation was demanded. Peter Burke points out the fact that some of the historical issues are more explainable by the visual testimony than the verbal one, the image becomes then the fuller testimony and the basis for interpre-

¹ M. Foucault, *Słowa i rzeczy. Archeologia nauk humanistycznych*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 22.

tation than verbal transmission². Theater iconography without doubt provides information not available elsewhere, it is probably wrong to claim that it is a better channel for analysis and interpretation than other source materials, but surely its omission or misinterpreting causes incorrect reading of the studied phenomenon.

A theater historian reaching for theater atelier photography treats it as a historical phenomenon, showing the manner in which it was created, its reception and perception, but also as evidence of a dual process – a real situation taking place in a studio and fictional reality created by an actor on stage. The multiplication of the presented world calls into question the purposefulness of the dominant methods of the analysis and interpretation of documentary photographs, which are programmatically direct and objective registration of reality.

The information provided by atelier photographs is not always given straight, so treating them as a faithful depiction of the portrayed image is incorrect, and the testimony of historical truth takes place on different levels. The interpretation should take place on at least three levels: individuating – taking into account the subjective point of view of the photographer, cultural – including the conventions and contexts of the communities in which the image is created, cognitive – allowing for reading of the presented reality and the laws ruling it³. The attempt to connect subjectivity and objectivity makes photography a „border form”, located on the boundary between the real reproduction of existing objects and a subjective act of creation⁴.

Until now various research methods have been developed that enable reading of images, placing them in certain cultures and interpreting their symbolic content, but none of them has been used in the analysis and interpretation of the second half of the nineteenth-century theatre atelier photography. The most popular, supported by centuries-old tradition, method of interpretation, which is very often used intuitively, is borrowed from the history of art and disseminated by Erwin Panofsky – pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological description. Iconography is part of art history, which deals with the description and interpretation of substantive and symbolic content of the image. Iconology is a science, which additionally places the picture in a specific political, social, economic, artistic, cultural and ideological space; it provides the context for the work⁵. Originally, this method was mainly used in the interpretation of paintings but because of its versatility it was quickly adopted to other visual testimonies of culture: film, photography, sculpture.

Each of the descriptions refers to other meanings hidden in the analyzed image. Pre-iconographic description refers to primary meanings: factual and expressional, which are used to identify the presented forms, shapes and colors as well-known objects of everyday experience, and to discover natural senses, expressing evident

² P. Burke, *Wprowadzenie do wydania polskiego* [in:] *idem, Naoczność. Materiały wizualne jako świadectwa historyczne*, Kraków 2012, p. 19.

³ M. Sztandara, *Fotografia etnograficzna i „etnograficzność” fotografii. Studium z historii myśli etnologicznej i fotografii II poł. XIX i I poł. XX wieku*, Opole 2006, p. 8.

⁴ Z. Toczyński, *Fotografia – sztuka graniczna*, „Fotografia” 2001, vol. 6, p. 28–29.

⁵ E. Panofsky, *Ikonoğrafia i ikonologia* [in:] J. Białostocki (ed.), *Studia z historii sztuki*, Warszawa 1971.

relationships in a specific culture. This is the simplest and most obvious knowledge understood intuitively by recipients. The photograph of Ellen Terry in the title role of Olivia, from a play by W.G. Willis, (Ill. 1) read in this way would portray an object – a young woman in a long dress with sleeves reaching her arms, fingerless gloves and a bonnet. The blazer, put on the dress and tightly fastened around the waist, is finished with many flounces. A woman is standing with her face turned delicately to the right with her mouth slightly open, she is not looking directly into the lens, but also to the right. All the information is the realm of the primary meaning, on the basis of which can be identified the elementary (after Panofsky: expressional) senses, regarding the attitude of the portrayed woman, her emotions. In the photograph above, the woman is lifting up her left hand with her fingers bent, all except the index one; the features of her face, raised, wrinkled brows, slightly parted lips, questioning eyes relate to the information which the observers possess from their own experience and identify them by comparison. The primary (natural) meanings comprise the world of motifs. To make their correct interpretation possible, it is necessary to possess the knowledge of the history of styles, the knowledge about how objects and events were expressed by forms in certain historical and cultural periods⁶.



Ill. 1. Ellen Terry as Olivia (*Olivia* W.G. Willis) by Window & Grove of Baker Street, London, England, circa 1878

A researcher interpreting the photograph of Ellen Terry does not refer only to his own empirical experience, but also to a group of customs and cultural traditions belonging to a specific space and period in history. This ability shapes the next level of Panofsky's analysis – the iconographic description, presenting secondary (conventional) meanings of the image, understood intellectually, not intuitively, requiring from the recipient the conscious use of knowledge. These meanings are comprehended when the artistic motifs or their combinations are combined with themes and concepts, for example, when a young girl in a sweeping robe with flowers in her hair, shown in the photograph, is recognized as Ophelia or a man with long white hair and a beard, sandals, a long robe, belted at the waist with a band and a garland of grass as King Lear. Of course, the motifs do not have to refer to specific characters or do not

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

have to be read as such, they can also depict some allegories or symbols: innocence, transgression and sin, which seems to be very useful for the identification and analysis of the images of little-known actors in secondary roles. The correct iconographic description should be based on the information derived from the pre-iconographic description and it requires the knowledge of the history of types which enable the proper reading of the secondary content which comprises the realm of images, stories and allegories. The history of types informs how the themes and concepts are visualized by means of objects and events.

The last phase of Panofsky's image interpretation is iconological description, which allows to locate the image under particular social, economic, political, religious and philosophical conditions. This type of information can be found both in the process of composing the image, as well as in the topics and concepts, forms and themes, it refers inner meaning (content) of the image. The presentation of Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet*, W. Shakespeare) evolved since the creation of the drama. The life of photography is much shorter than the existence of the drama, but in the iconological description of the photo of a Shakespearean heroine different visual images, drawings or paintings will be helpful. The first characteristic, very distinct in the images of Julia, is the approach to women and femininity. Initial images abound in the elements showing women's submissiveness to men, indicating their dependence, not only social and financial but also emotional. They also present, to a much greater extent than the later images, the role that religion played in their lives. Julia of the nineteenth century (Mary Anderson, Maude Adams, Julia Neilson, Julia Marlowe, Ellen Terry, Helena Modjeska, Patrick Campbell) is not as ethereal and dependent nature as she was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The character of Hamlet (*Hamlet*, W. Shakespeare), through a series of portraits (Charles Kean, John Philippe Kempe, Edward Hugh Southern, Edwin Booth, Forbes Robertson, Wilson, Barrett, Laurence Olivier, Sarah Bernhardt), conveys – in addition to the information locating the character within a specified time and space – the knowledge about the political system and the system of power. In order to be able to analyse it correctly, it is necessary to possess the knowledge of the history of cultural signs, i.e. the information about how the important tendencies of the human mind are expressed through themes and concepts, and to possess or cultivate certain specific skills whose summa, can be called, after Piotr Sztompka, visual imagination⁷.

In pictures are captured various forms of behaviour, such as sex demonstration, highlighting the social, economic or intellectual differences, often unconscious as acquired through socialization, however, manifested in the natural for the era and the area of cultural conventions. This is not the result of the natural expression of the presented person, but socially shaped habits and behaviors. It seems that the iconological and iconographic description in case of the atelier photography presents much less challenges than other products of visual culture. This is certainly true for the identification of themes and motifs. During the discussed time dramatic theatre performances were photographed, which means that the performances were based

⁷ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia jako metoda badawcza*, Warszawa 2005, p. 22.

on a dramatic text. As a result, each image must find its confirmation in a drama. Of course, we should constantly remember about the specificity of the subject – a dramatic situation or a character on stage, which multiplies each of these behaviours and represents not only the cultural image of the presented drama/performance, but also – on equal rights – the image of the era in which the photograph was taken.

Iconography transplanted to the field of photography analysis may be used to its classification, defining the area in which specific topics were presented by means of particular themes, it helps to determine the date and origin of a picture, its authenticity, it gives grounds for its interpretation, but does not interpret on its own – this does the iconology. Generally speaking iconography is used to describe photography, iconology – to interpret it.

Panofsky's method was and is exposed to criticism, mainly due to the omission of emotions provoked in the recipient, as well as the belief that the images serve to illustrate certain ideas, and that content is more important than form⁸. Moreover, it seems important that it was designed for the analysis and interpretation of works of art – paintings, sculptures, and to be able to apply it to the study of theater photography it is necessary to modify it. The total and uncritical adaptation of iconographic and iconological description is wrong because it does not only face a number of difficulties that are not faced by art historians, but also can lead to the simplification, and sometimes even to the falsification of the interpretation of photography.

For the analysis of theater photography is necessary the knowledge of the history of styles, types and cultural symptoms on several levels of history: photography, theater, historical era in which the action of the play is set. How to draw this type of information? Analyzing the works of the masters of the Renaissance, Panofsky used the materials originating in antiquity, but also medieval encyclopedic works, commentaries on classical and late ancient texts, treaties about mythology. However, he looked for the sources with direct meaning to analyze the image, he tried to show the tradition of presenting an image or a character that was not distorted by different points of view. Looking at the work of Piero della Francesca *Resurrection* an art historian performing the iconographic and iconological description remains at the level of the artist and his work. Obviously, the topic is broad and in accordance with the elements of consecutive descriptions, it takes into account many aspects: perception of the resurrection theme by Piero della Francesca, the representation tradition of earlier and later artists, biblical and apocryphal messages, the writings of Church Fathers, the subsequent scientific commentaries and essays, including contemporary, the contexts from which the painter took by the handful – literary, musical, finally other master's images and his and the others theoretical texts. This is just an exemplary and very selective choice of sources, which may be useful in the analysis and interpretation of the image using Panofsky's method. These materials can be multiplied, which probably would be for the interpretation itself greatly beneficial, but here they were mentioned only to make it clear that despite the multiplicity of sources, which art

⁸ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images as historical evidence*, London 2001, p. 42–44.

historians may refer to, they still remain on the same level of interpretation: Piero della Francesca – *Resurrection*.

Analyzing a theatrical photograph, it should be remembered that the meaning overlap each other, because the image reports different realities. The level: photographer – photography is not enough here, but probably would be, if it was not the subject of the analysis was not a theatrical image. Theatrical as well as stage photography always represents two spaces: real and theatrical (photographic studio or theater stage) and the space of a performance.

Piotr Sztompka considering ways of interpreting photographs, draws attention to the three layers, which should be taken into account:

- the subject, which is what the picture shows,
- the subjectivity of the photographer and his or her cultural orientation,
- subjective and cultural reactions of the portrayed people⁹.

The photographer's subjectivity means their attitude to the immortalized image, and the cultural orientation determines their belonging to a certain group of people with specific behaviour. An artist-photographer shooting a scene from *Hamlet* can approach this problem as an attempt to immortalize an actor's artistic creation different from the one on stage, because in a studio it is possible to idealize it and capture in time, or as a faithful transfer of the image from the theater stage to the studio or as their own vision of this particular Shakespeare drama. The cultural orientation creates, in an obvious way, the photographer's subjectivity, because it sets the framework for her or his behaviour as an artist, a photographer, a documentarist.

Photography is part of the society, because it is the effect of people's activity, it presents them and is perceived by them. Interpreting an image one should be aware of its multidimensionality: the sender, the subject and the recipient. Introducing photography as a research method Sztompka distinguishes four types of approaches to photography: hermeneutical analysis, semiological interpretation, structuralist and discursive interpretation¹⁰. The first of these types focuses on the author of a photography, her or his subjectivity and objectivity, and is associated with an attempt to answer the questions about the identity of the author of images, the intention with which the image was made, its purpose and its recipient, the author's skills, possessed and used knowledge of what is being immortalized (in the case of analyzing theater photography it is the knowledge of a play, an actor, the theater) about whether the personal preferences, social and economic situation of the photographer had an impact on the image, or were the age, sex, education or origin of the photographer important, whether and what her or his emotions were captured in the picture, what technical skills he or she possessed. Helpful in photographic image hermeneutics is empathy, an attempt to place yourself in the situation (emotional, social, professional) of the photographer¹¹.

⁹ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia...*, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 75–76.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 77–78.

Krzysztof Olechnicki discussing the hermeneutical method draws attention to the duality of the image mirrored reality, which manifests itself by overt and covert messages that may be complementary or contradictory¹². Some of the information is not given directly, but getting to them requires special endeavours. Interpreting the image you can often exploit the signatures, both professional, of the photographer, as well as those of the portrayed person, in the form of a dedication or an autograph. Hermeneutics also includes the person who is in the picture to the analysis, as a person in the relationship with the author. In the case of theater atelier photography one can speak of the use of images, not only to promote the artist, but especially to create consciously the image¹³, to use mutually the situation which is created by portraying famous personalities and popularization of their photographs.

Enjoying an enduring popularity among theater audiences and the press Lilly Langtry has also gained favour of the most famous American theater photographer – Napoleon Sarony for whom the desire to immortalize the actress in a photo in his studio was so strong that he decided to pay her five thousand dollars for posing, which was over three times more than he offered a much more prominent dramatic artist – Sarah Bernhardt¹⁴. This situation, as well as many years of Sarony's experience, crystallized and determined actress' tastes, education of both of them, social contacts, especially of Langtry, who moved in the highest aristocratic circles, could not remain without influence on the way the picture was taken.

Sztompka introduced semiological and structuralist interpretation with a situation in his mind where in the center of research is placed the image as a visual fact. Hermeneutic analysis refers to psychology, semiological analysis to culture and assumes that a photograph is composed of signs and symbols behind which are hidden cultural meanings. The author of *Visual Sociology* considers both of the analysis together, because the semiological analysis is used to discover the method, according to which meanings are constructed, and the structuralist analysis explores the social and cultural content hidden on many levels of the image¹⁵.

Charles Peirce introduced a triple division of signs, according to which there are icons, with a similarity between a sign and its designation (each theater photograph considered in this way is an icon), indexes that indicate correlation and symbols, whose meaning is constructed by social agreement. Each of the signs is a tool of cognition, and all together they constitute a code that communicate complex meanings¹⁶. Theatre atelier photography would be in this sense both the index – as a result of the process of recording a negative image on the plate, then its reflection on the paper, the icon – by reflecting the immortalized image and the symbol – because of the social agreement, concerning the using of conventional signs, whose importance is not

¹² K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia jako metoda, przedmiot i medium nauk społecznych*, Warszawa 2003, p. 136.

¹³ See: P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 72–76.

¹⁴ B.L. Bassham, *The Theatrical Photographs of Napoleon Sarony*, Kent 1978, p. 4–5.

¹⁵ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia...*, p. 81.

¹⁶ Ch. Peirce, *Wybór pism semiotycznych*, Warszawa 1997.



Ill. 2. Kyrle Bellew as Mark Antony (*Antony and Cleopatra* W. Shakespeare) by Napoleon Sarony, New York, USA, circa 1890

directly derived from their sensually perceived form¹⁷.

The photograph of Kyrle Bellew as Mark Antony (*Antony and Cleopatra* W. Shakespeare) taken by Napoleon Sarony (Ill. 2) is an index, as mentioned above, a trace of chemical reactions, resulting from the action of light on the emulsion. It is also an icon, because, on the basis of similarity, it reflects the specific situation in the studio, and a symbol – presented props and pose of an actor have a symbolic meaning. Tiger skin, on which Bellew stands, symbolizes power, and the stick he holds in his left hand, topped with a statue of an eagle, refers directly to the battle sign, unifying the Roman army, acting at the same time as one of the imperial insignia – a symbol of power.

Semiological analysis is also supported by the concepts, introduced by Roland Barthes, of denotation and connotation, forming collectively *studium*.

Denotation means the totality of designates, which the concrete concept contains, everything that is shown in the photograph, they are direct and objective first-order meanings. Connotation, which comprises second-order meanings, is a set of associations evoked by the image, the senses arising out of context, social tradition and discourse¹⁸. In this approach the impact on the photography recipient manifests itself in two ways: substantially in the form of *studium* and emotionally as *punctum*. Both parts are mutually shaped. What, in some way, shocked an observer determines how the merits of the image will be read, but also the merits shape the emotional approach to photography.

Punctum carries content that can be the result of an individual, subjective approach of the recipient. It may be associated with the presented drama scene, a stage character, a gesture, an actor. Patrick Campbell, immortalized in the photograph by Alfred Ellis in 1895 in a scene from William Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, a beautiful woman in a costume of the era, an actress in the role of Juliet, plays a specific stage situation transferred from the stage of the Lyceum Theater to the photo atelier (Ill. 3). The identity and appearance of the actress and the stage char-

¹⁷ See: K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia...*, p. 218–219.

¹⁸ R. Barthes, *Retoryka obrazu*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1985, vol. 3; R. Barthes, *Światło obrazu. Uwagi o fotografii*, Warszawa 1995.

acter, place and time of the performance, the circumstances of taking the photo – all these constitute the *studium* of the photograph, *punctum* would be the realization that beautiful young Julia is going to die, the concern in her eyes is a premonition of approaching death. The connotations could also be of very different nature, could be associated with the similarity to a woman known to recipient from the closest environment, nurture a sense of danger, fear, anxiety, grow to a symbol. Each of them, though strictly subjective, is equal *punctum* of the photograph.

Barthes points out connotation procedures that allow to read photographs such as: trick effects, poses of presented stage characters, objects-indicators (causing relevant associations, specifying depicted topic), photogenia, aestheticism, syntax and text procedures. The connotation is realized at three levels: perceptual, which allows to identify the elements of photographs, cognitive, enabling the reading of cultural signs and ideological, speaking about the norms and values. Consequently, the researcher interpreting the photograph is in contact with three types of message: connoted (iconic, symbolic cultural transmission), denoted (iconic and direct transmission) and language message¹⁹.

Retouching and the process of hand-colouring would be the trick effects used in the atelier photography, a good example being the photo taken by Jose Maria Mora, showing Helena Modjeska as Adrianna (Ill. 4). The pose of an actress and the prop, held in the hand book, highlight her mental state, Adrianna is not looking at the pages of the volume, but with a turned head, deep in thought, she is looking into the distance, beyond the cadre of the photographs. An additional element, that would allow for the improving of the photogenic image, would be using a white background by the photographer, which made it possible to show more expressively the character, without distracting elements behind. The second half of the nineteenth century did not know yet the color photography, so the process, mentioned above, of coloring pictures is obviously the trick effect, transforming a realistic image, but it is also an aesthetic procedure, in consequence bringing photography closer to painting. It became natural to compare photographers to painters, for a long time simi-



Ill. 3. Patrick Campbell as Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet* W. Shakespeare) by Alfred Ellis, London, England, 1895

¹⁹ K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia...*, p. 231; R. Barthes, *The Photographic Message* [in:] *idem, Image – Music – Text*, New York 1977, p. 19–23.



Ill. 4. Helena Modjeska as Adrianna (*Adrianna Lecouvreur*, A. Scribe and E. Legouvé) by Jose Maria Mora, New York, USA, circa 1878

larity to painting, conscious referring to the conventions of painting, determined the importance of the photographer as an artist. Napoleon Sarony, the most respected and popular New York photographer, deliberately strived to imitate the conventions of painting and solutions in the field of art, he stylized the poses of photographed characters according to the images known from painting or sculpture masterpieces, he used special albumin paper and shades, tones and colors resembling the paintings of Old Masters²⁰.

Into Barthes' connotation procedures should also be included the signature – Modjeska below the photograph of Helena Modjeska as Adrianna, suggesting the place where the photograph was taken – United States or England, it could not be Poland, country of the actress' birth, since there was not used the American form of her surname. Unlike the majority of actors' cabinet photographs, the discussed photo has neither on the vignette nor on the reverse

the name of the photographer or the address of the manufacturer. In this case, the text procedure is significant through its denial. This type of operations may not always take the lapidary form of a signature or an inscription, often can be even an extended commentary; defined by Burke as iconotext they can be read literally or metaphorically²¹. A signature, the name of a photographic atelier, an autograph, a quotation coming from the drama, in which the actor, shown in the photo, played his or her part, give a context to the image, set it in specific reality. The photograph is no longer explicitly ambiguous, iconotext limits the possibilities of its interpretation, and the two elements are mutually dependent.

To semiological analysis Barthes also introduced syntagmatic and paradigmatic categories of relationship between the signs, which can be applied to a photograph, but also extended to a series of images of the same role, which is especially valuable, as it allows to capture these aspects that are not available at the time, when only one photograph is analysed. The remained series of the same scene, taken by a photographer during a photo session including a dozen or even dozens of photos, perhaps

²⁰ B.L. Bassham, *The Theatrical Photographs...*, p. 22.

²¹ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 41.

are not frequent but they allow to consider the stage movement, which is not possible with single images.

Semiological interpretation is an introduction to structuralist interpretation, which aims to reach out to the deep content, the social structures hidden in photography. Social structures build the system, which consists of human actions, social norms and rules, ideas (beliefs and opinions), possibilities. The image is an external representation of these constructions, photography is a signifier, structure – a signified, denotation and connotation of registered situations²². Theatrical photography has, in this case, double meaning, because it describes the rules governing not only the real time in which it was made, but also the theatrical time, or rather – dramatic, in which the action of the drama takes place.

Discourse interpretation is an interpretation which takes into consideration the audience and the situation in which the image is perceived. The circumstances under which the theatre atelier photograph is perceived may be different, especially since most are a hundred-, hundred and fifty, and even older photos for which perceptual situation has changed many times. The information which the researcher wishes to obtain, is often associated with one, up to a few situations in which theater photography is observed. During this period – the second half of the nineteenth century – the pictures of actors constituted a family prestige, its interests, were collected and stored in specially prepared albums, displayed in a conspicuous place. Collecting photographs of famous people, including kings, writers and musicians was fashionable, it was the entertainment of the middle class, the bourgeois and higher, noble and aristocratic. But a photograph was also a subject to the market process, the conscious use of it by the photographers and actors to promote their own company, service or talent, which naturally generated other ways of perception – a photo hung in a shop or the theater was addressed to a less elite receiver, passer-by, who was often not wealthy enough to afford to buy a picture, but they could buy a cheaper ticket to the theatre. The quality of execution and the fact that the photographer's studio is visited by famous people could also encourage through simple association, to take photos in that particular studio. Photography became a part of social life:

During the 1850s, a completely new place where fashionable people congregated seemed to appear out of nowhere. This was the photographer's studio. It combined the attractions of a stroll along the boulevard with a visit to the theater. At the same time, the price, quality, and standard of a personal portrait were changing constantly. This meant that the narcissistic pleasures of possessing an image could be enjoyed by an ever wider public, just at a time when kings and princes were busy making sure everyone had pictures of them in an attempt to convey a sense of both authority and social stability²³.

Another specific type of photography is a stereoscopic image, giving the impression of a natural, three-dimensional view, which required a special optical instru-

²² P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia...*, p. 86.

²³ J. Sagne, *All Kinds of Portraits. The Photographers Studio* [in:] M. Friozt (ed.), *A New History of Photography*, Köln 1998, p. 103.



Ill. 5. Helena Modjeska as Adrianna (*Adrianna Lecouvreur*, A. Scribe and E. Legouvé) by Jose Maria Mora, New York, USA, circa 1878

ment allowing perception (stereoscope), and also evoked a new and different type of reception (Ill. 5). It is not possible to present all potential situations of perception, but it seems reasonable to draw attention to some typical circumstances, such as those listed above.

Photography brings a lot of possible meanings that change into real at the moment of reading it by a recipient. Whether these senses will be selected by the recipient depends on her or his individual characteristics and the visual competence, shaped by the culture in which he or she functions, the knowledge of the conventions of perception variables and presenting reality. Elapsing time and changing space causes that the same image is perceived and understood quite differently. The receiver in case of theater photography is understood in many ways, as a person who ordered the photo, a person who bought or received a photo, a researcher, who on the basis of it after a dozen or dozens years tries to obtain the truth about a theater performance. A visual dis-

course must therefore also lead to the discovery who is or was the recipient of a photograph and how he or she can co-create the meaning of it. The more so as the framing technique, the way a person is posed and presented – en face, in profile, half-profile, full figure or just a bust, exposing one person at the expense of others, the selection of props, lighting, colors, everything is a conscious impact of the photographer and the presented actor on the audience.

Reception theory, especially the cultural history of images, is closely associated with the discursive interpretation, however, it includes to a larger extent its historical development, including into the field of the research interests not only verbal messages but also visual. One of the examples, providing a lot of information about the process of shooting in the studio is a photograph from the late nineteenth century, depicting a photographer taking a photo of an actress holding in her hands a wreath made of flowers, which in the picture will become fringe surrounding her bust. These photos are certainly unique, because on the one hand there are few photographs so directly showing the process of taking the photos, on the other hand it confirms a unique technique of decorating them (Ill. 6). The reception theories include also other unusual reactions, which are the result of any demonstrations whose exemplifications are visual materials.

„As in the case of written documents, two images are better than one”²⁴ – a comparative photography study allows to extract the characteristics of the image and specify the characteristics common for a group, such as photos of the times, a particular photographer, or an actor or a performance. Interimagery (intervisuality) according to Burke²⁵ are conscious (visual quotation) or unconscious (plagiarism) for the recipient references to already existing images, as well as the use of themes, permanent motifs for a particular cultural group, what in the case of discussed issue would locate it very closely to the conventions of theater, photography and painting. The researcher also notes the need to interpret images not only with regard to the earlier images, but also the later ones, what allows to stress their functions, to consider the contexts in which the image was created and functioning (social, cultural and political) and to take into account the relationship between the world immortalized in the picture and the real world²⁶.



III. 6. Effie Shannon with photographer & early tintype camera by Celebrities Studios, New York, USA, circa 1890

Theater atelier photography is not a simple, impartial reflection of the reality on stage, in addition to the obvious fragmentation – having contact only with a fragment of a larger whole, and stillness – reducing an image to the motionless image, these pictures combine different points of view. They focus the photographer’s perspective on the dramatic role, the stage character, the actor, but also the actors’ views on themselves and the drama, space, change of space, which is a result of transferring the situation from the theater stage to the studio. The similarities between atelier photographs of the same artist or drawings of one illustrator (and / or an engraver) make us think about the role of convention in the visual depiction of stage characters, the need to express types more than individuals. The intention of the photographer is also essential, who in addition to the desire to capture their own vision of the situation presented on stage, is also pursuing, consciously, using photographic conventions, the idealization and even alle-

²⁴ P. Burke, *Wprowadzenie...*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 21.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22–25.



Ill. 7. Fanny Davenport as Lady Teazie (*School of Scandalous Moliere*) by Napoleon Sarony, New York, USA, circa 1880



Ill. 8. Helena Modjeska as Adrianna (*Adrianna Lecouvreur*, A. Scribe and E. Legouvé) by Napoleon Sarony, New York, USA, circa 1878

gorization of the reality²⁷. Each picture is a representation embodying the larger whole, it does not only show itself, it is not autotelic, but referential.

Both actors and photographers moved within certain conventions which defined their point of view on the image created with the usage of a camera. The convention clearly limited creativity of an actor and a photographer, determined the choice of a model's pose, their facial expression, costume arrangement, background, props, by introducing visual topoi it regulated the expression of artists and audience perception. A few pictures taken of artists at different times and in various roles by Sarony, who is known from his large impact on the model's pose, raises the question of the faithfulness of the stage poses transferred to the studio, the impact force of the convention and the rules of representation, using by a photographer the patterns of several presentations (Ill. 7 and 8).

The photography of the second half of the nineteenth century corresponded with realistic and naturalistic conventions (later with neoromantic, prerafaellic, symbolic, impressionistic), manifesting itself also in other presentations: paintings, sculpture, literature, theater. Visual patterns used in photographic representations can easily be found in novels, plays, theater performances. The use of iconographic tem-

²⁷ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 96.

plates in photography evoked in recipients a feeling of familiarity, of moving within well known and commonly accepted standards, rules and axioms²⁸. The similarity of different ideas of the same image, a scene or a character, was a result of the standard representations resulting from the group of conventions, soon taken over by photographers and introduced to this field of activity by posing, arranging, directing²⁹ theater photography, in a much more distinctive way than other pictures, emphasizes the directing of the being immortalized image, it presents, by directing the situation in front of a camera or posing a person, the knowledge of the world of all people involved in the process of taking and perceiving the picture.

Manifestations of visual culture have always been formed in a particular convention, typical for the area and the era, the perception of an observer is also determined by visual patterns they use every day. There is no way to look at the theater photograph without taking



III. 9. Adelaide Neilson as Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet* William Shakespeare) by Napoleon Sarony, New York, USA, circa 1868–1870

into account the modern point of view, without the knowledge that is now available to historians, the phenomena that followed the researched phenomenon, modern research methodologies, broader perspective. Indeed, this would lead to the loss of some meanings of the interpreted images. Even more dangerous, however, is the omission of the perspective of the era in which the photograph was created, because it may lead to false interpretation by misreading its individual components (III. 9).

Analyzing the photo of Adelaide Neilson as Juliet (*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, Napoleon Sarony's photo, New York, 1868–1870), it can be noted that the actress' diadem consists of repeated ornamenting theme – the stars situated in a crescent, now commonly known as a symbol of Islam. Careful examination of the text of the play validates the claim that there are not any Muslim themes in it, the analysis of theatrical reviews also confirms that such elements were not used in the spectacle. Unquestionably, it could just be a coincidence, the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a period when the Europeans and the Americans were largely fascinated by the oriental culture, taking over and using in various fields of art,

²⁸ M. Sztandara, *Fotografia etnograficzna i "etnograficzność" fotografii...*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 47, 50.

also in utility, Islamic motifs. The jewelry used in the spectacle confirms contemporary trends in fashion and is an expression of Neilson's fascination with these themes, it does not give the character or the performance religious dimension as it could be read today. On the other hand, despite many objections to the treatment of atelier photographs as source material, the benefits of the analysis and interpretation of the details placed in the presented segment of reality seem indisputable, they express various aspects of the theater material culture – costumes, props, gestures and facial expressions. Peter Burke defines such procedure as contextualization, involving the reading of objects and gestures in their original context – the social environment³⁰.

A photograph is not only a registration of a phenomenon, but also a description of it, on the one hand it is a record of reality, on the other hand it is a record of its representation, of how it is received; the vision, in this sense, is not only a sensual activity, but mainly intellectual – an interpretation³¹. Considering the theatrical atelier photography as the testimony of the way of seeing and perceiving should be considered the distinction between generalization and individualization, typicality and individuality of the presented image, moreover, context and conventions. Certainly, theater atelier photography is a testimony of the formation of common notions about reality, especially about the theater, actors, and the models of their perception and understanding. Taking into consideration the way of functioning of this type of images in the society of the second half of the nineteenth century, the period when they were created, so they reflected best current requirement for them, they confirmed mainly the need to satisfy the tastes of the widest part of the public. Available in a mass, they underline the national socio-cultural standards, they reduce to types the elements of visual reality, create the images of actors, artists, playwrights. Photography was testifying not only facts, but was also using commonly known symbols.

Multifarious ways of interpreting theater photography transplanted from other disciplines – art history, sociology, anthropology, media studies, raise the questions: which of them is adequate for reading theater photography? Panofsky's approach does not include unconscious symbols and associations, for which could be used, for example, psychoanalytic method. In the structuralist strategy is emphasized internal systematization of individual image elements to each other, in poststructuralistic all readings of the image are equal, in the feminist approach the image is seen through the aspect of sexuality, reception theory focuses on the interaction between the image and the audience (actual or potential), and recipients on the image³², impressionistic method is based on direct impressions derived from the perception of the image, first impressions, feelings and associations³³. Piotr Sztompka points out that only including all, distinguished by him, types of interpretation: hermeneutics, semiological, structural and discursive, reveals the full meaning³⁴.

³⁰ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 104.

³¹ M. Sztandara, *Fotografia etnograficzna i "etnograficzność" fotografii...*, p. 9–10.

³² P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 169–180.

³³ K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia...*, p. 225.

³⁴ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia...*, p. 92.

Sceptics argue that images, including photographs, provide only the knowledge of the representational conventions of the culture, that they are a value in themselves, they do not refer the captured reality. There is also an indirect way, of the researchers rejecting the simple opposition of credibility – unreliability of photography considered as historical evidence in favour of the way of credibility and searching for the meanings which are between the proposition of the autonomy of visual image, the system of conventions and signs and a photo – a reflection of reality³⁵. Peter Burke does not make from any of the proposals for analyzing and interpreting photographs a method, but makes them not excluding research strategies, whose consideration expands the field of view, providing new information and readings³⁶.

None of the above-mentioned methods of the interpretation of photographs has not found so far a satisfactory application in the study of atelier photography, although it seems that their use may allow to discover all the meanings which particular representation has to offer, and the use of these tools of interpretation in an interchangeable and complementary way will allow to obtain the overall image showed in the photo. Obviously, they cannot be – as it has been repeatedly signaled – adapted uncritically, they require taking into consideration a number of specific features of the theatre and atelier photography, adjusting the methodological strategy to the nature of a photograph, and, in particular, considering the multiplication of the presented reality. However, they may be an important foundation for the existence of iconographic material in the studies of the history of the theater.

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³⁵ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images...*, p. 183–184.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p.169.

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