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INTRODUCTION

The history of the relationship between “America” and photography is one of mutual reference and construction. The way “America” is perceived and defined has been substantially informed by the photographic technology as well as by specific photo images – from Whitman’s use of the daguerreotype to Walker Evans’ engagement with Americanness in the aftermath of the Depression Era, to recent photowork that re-reads the American landscape and the histories of various communities in it. In his book *American Photography*, art historian Miles Orvell observes that Americans were intensely fascinated with the photographic process from the very beginning, because it

harmonized with a growing enthusiasm for technology, part of a national mentality that emphasized change as a fact of life. [...] [P]hotography would revolutionize the idea of modern life. [...] Secondly, the camera has been the prime instrument for self-representation, capable of fashioning an image for public consumption in a democratic republic where personal identity and national identity were always to be invented and reinvented. (Orvell 2003, 13)

Photography as a technology and means of expression, in other words, has always well suited the needs of American self-definition and quest for identity. In the preface to his 1989 seminal study *Reading American Photographs*, Alan Trachtenberg suggests, elaborating on Siegfried Kracauer’s ideas, that the work of the photographer resembles the work of the historian, as both attempt to make sense of fragments and achieve a kind of unity. Both the historian and the photographer attempt not to lose sight of or downplay details, while going for the bigger picture. Last but not least, both attempt to dig out, or preserve, a “usable past” in order to move ahead and into the future. In Trachtenberg’s words:

The value of photographs as history lies not just in what they show or how they look but in how they construct their meanings. [...] American photographs are not simple depictions but constructions, [...] [and] the history they show is inseparable from the history they enact: a history of photographers employing their medium to make sense of their society. It is also a history of photographers seeking to define themselves, to create a role for photography as an American art. (Trachtenberg 1989, xvi)

Trachtenberg reads a number of selected photo-series, or photo-ensembles, examining how they interact with specific phases of American history; mostly, these phases correspond to moments of crisis, conflict, and change – from slavery to the Civil War, from Western explorations to the Great Depression, from industrialization to imperialistic expansion. Photographic images, read in isolation but also and especially in relation to each other, in dialogue with words, and in “external dialogue with their times” (1989, xv), contribute to a many-layered understanding of American history and American cultural identity as a terrain of social transformation and political struggle.

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Besides remarking the historical importance of photography for American representation and self-representation, we would also like to suggest that the idea of “America” is often informed and defined by what one perceives – despite all inevitable technological and creative innovations – as intrinsically or quintessentially photographic. The obverse of this statement is also valid: the history of photography is informed by “America,” to the extent that conceptual items and material practices often associated with “America” – such as, for instance, the idea of a democratic vision and encompassing representativeness; broad visions and landscapes or, conversely, an obsession for the detail – have also influenced the way we conceive of photography. Perhaps not surprisingly, photography contributes to reveal some of the contradictions intrinsic to a “democratic” approach to representation, in epistemological as well as political terms. Susan Sontag convincingly highlights this in her reconstruction of how American photography has changed from the times of Whitman to those of Diane Arbus. Whitman’s enthusiasm for reality in all its forms, the “inclusiveness and vitality of actual American experience” (Sontag 1990, 27) celebrated in *Leaves of Grass*, becomes something different in the American photography of the second half of the twentieth century:

Whitman thought he was not abolishing beauty but generalizing it. So, for generations, did the most gifted American photographers, in their polemical pursuit of the trivial and the vulgar. But among American photographers who have matured since World War II, the Whitmanesque mandate to record in its entirety the extravagant candors of actual American experience has gone sour. In photographing dwarfs, you don’t get majesty & beauty. You get dwarfs. (Sontag 1990, 29)

The pitfalls in the quest for “democratic” representation can be rendered through a number of interrogations. In formal/stylistic terms: what is the purpose of representation? What is aesthetically worth being represented? Is something recognizably “ugly” still worth of representation? How about something totally commonplace (like programmatically pursued in the – by now canonical – work of Stephen Shore)? Is the quaint and bizarre (like in the case of the work of Diane Arbus) an antidote to the banal and commonplace? Are there any ethical limits to the scope of representation – an issue raised, for instance, by the controversy sparked by the public funding of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic exhibit *The Perfect Moment* (see Bright 1998)? In “thematic,” representational terms: what individuals/communities/social classes are worth representing? Who detains the power to represent what/whom? How does political power express itself through photography? The essays in the present issue of *Iperstoria* address, directly or indirectly, many of these questions.

In the American literary domain, the writers’ keen interest for the new medium, as early as the age of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, is well known and well documented. Hawthorne’s approach to photography especially combines stylistic preoccupations with social and political ones. Discussing the role of the daguerreotype in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Trachtenberg argues that, in Hawthorne’s text, the “literary distinction between two kinds of mimesis,” one “strictly adherent to an imitation of the probable and the ordinary,” and another “less constrained and freer to deploy atmospheric effects – corresponds to a distinction already well formulated in theories of photography at the time, between merely mechanical and self-consciously artistic uses of the new medium” (1997, 461). Trachtenberg suggests that this nuanced presence of photography in Hawthorne contributes to blurring any clear-cut separation between “romance” and “novel” – “not by a rejection of mimesis but by the positing of another kind of mimesis, atmospheric, shadowed, faithful to that which flits away” (1997, 461). The complexity inherent in Hawthorne’s literary use of photography reflects, in Trachtenberg’s reading, the social and political ambivalence of *The House of the Seven Gables* – a text that blends a very modern valorization of change with a final salvaging of tradition and repetition of history as unchanging continuity.

Stuart Burrows has argued that the contribution of photography to the development of American literature, starting with Poe and Hawthorne and especially later in the modernist period, consists to a great extent not in an upholding of perfect mimesis but instead, to the contrary, in offering proof of the fundamental redundancy of any realist representational project; discussing Poe’s essay “The Daguerreotype,” Burrows suggests that “photography, in Poe’s account, is imagined as having made referent and representation undistinguishable.



This is [...] the actual photographic effect: the abolition of the gap between copy and original” (Burrows 2008, 16). Among else, Burrows discusses (2008, 71-114) Henry James’s photography-informed speculations on the flattening, almost indistinct quality of the (democratic) American scene when contrasted with the European one. Expanding Burrow’s argument – which is, in turn, grounded in a rich critical tradition that sees photography as related to death, ghosts, and emptiness – it may be suggested that photography alters and “weakens” reality while reproducing it: it makes it uncanny, phantasmic (also see Concilio 2009), as well as socially and racially problematic.

The interest for photography has evidently not waned in our times, despite the fact that many of the rituals revolving around it have changed. In the digital age, photography as a medium still maintains its own specificity, albeit increasingly and conspicuously reworked and remediated in new forms and contexts (see Bolter and Grusin 2000, Ritchin 2009, and Bruno 2014).

The essays collected in this monographic section are grounded in – and in some cases combine – different academic disciplines: art history, aesthetics, visual studies, literary studies, history, cultural studies, healthcare ethics, business, and American studies. Photography displays its relevance for a number of themes and issues that are as diverse as they are (inter)connected *through photography as a practice and an idea*. Specularly, these essays engage with *America as a real entity and/or as a semiotic/imagistic construct*. Among recurrent themes and issues are: the preservation of the environment through an ecological/ecocritical stance; the photographic construction (and deconstruction) of the American landscape, especially in U.S. southern and western states; the coming-into-being of American regional identities; the power of representation and, conversely, the endless reproduction and reproducibility of reality-as-construct; material culture and the materiality of the surface; gender, racial/ethnic, and national identities; technology and American imperialism; the configuration of urban spaces; and the fluid, unstoppable flow of time as the ever-present “other side” of any photographic still. The essays published here rework all these concerns within the more specific frameworks of their individual authors’ scholarly interests.

Angelo Capasso’s essay re-frames several “earthworks” by well-known land artists of the 1960s and 1970s such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, Jan Gibbets, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim. Capasso remarks how, for all their richly diverse individual approaches, these artists share a twofold – or perhaps even multifold – relationship with photography, which is crucial for their creative work. To these artists, the photographic technology is a necessary tool for documenting a type of art that is the opposite of the “monumental” works normally housed in museums and galleries; at the same time, though, photography is revealed as an insufficient, unsatisfactory means for bearing witness to the fluid, changing nature of reality, which the artworks attempt to render in its impermanence. For the creators of the earthworks, photography is also a repository of meaning and metaphor – like in the case of Heizer’s *Double Negative*, clearly evoking, albeit paradoxically, the representational powers of the medium. Capasso’s essay highlights a specific, very “American” instance of the tension existing between the power of photography to bear witness to specific moments and the artistic will to account for the inevitable transient, even illusory quality of time.

By deploying recent critical tools such as W.J.T. Mitchell’s visual theories and Giuliana Bruno’s concept of the “surface,” Emanuele Crescimanno discusses two of the most celebrated photographers of the second half of the twentieth century: Robert Frank and Stephen Shore. Crescimanno suggests that both artists have, in their own respective times – the 1950s and 1970s – confronted the prevalent representations and icons of Americanness, and that they have appropriated such cultural baggage of images in order to move past and beyond them. Crescimanno remarks that, in this respect, Shore is an ideal heir to – and simultaneously an innovator of – Frank’s “outsider” perspective on the U.S. In their perception, investigation, and diffusion of an American imagery that runs counter to the much-diffused (self-)representation of the U.S. as a land of success and the exporter of an ideal(ized) “way of life,” Frank and Shore have contributed to the construction of a much more complex, rich, and nuanced image of America and American culture. The latter, especially in Shore’s work, paradoxically blurs the distinction between reality and representation, subverting a consolidated repertoire of positive images through a focus on daily life in its less attractive and drabber, commonplace forms.

Sonya de Laat and Stefano Tijerina’s “Constructing Modernity and Progress: The Imperializing Lens of an American Engineer in the Early Twentieth Century” is the first in-depth study of the photographic component



of Maxwell Waide Smith's historical archive. An engineer employed in the construction of the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway (between 1907 and 1908) and the Panama Canal (between 1913 and 1914), hence a participant in what de Laat and Tijerina's describe as the "thousands of engineering projects across the Americas that together composed the American imperialist project of the early twentieth century," Smith was also a non-professional photographer who, in his pictures, documented daily life, human interaction, labor dynamics, and technological development at both sites he worked at. While speculating on Smith's position within the "bigger machine" of America's internationally expanding capitalism, de Laat and Tijerina maintain that his photos testify to a fundamental shift in his perspective over time: interested in registering "human interaction" while in Mexico, in the Panama Canal his images increasingly display a lack of human empathy and a new exclusive focus on technology and construction. From an active and engaged participant in a problematic joint venture, the engineer – and photographer – Smith changes, de Laat and Tijerina observe, into someone "not human but instead [...] almost literally part of the machine."

Nausikaä El-Mecky focuses on the work of renowned contemporary American photographer and artist Spencer Tunick, telling the story of the repeated arrests and legal issues he experienced while working in New York City during the 1990s. Documenting Tunick's struggle for freedom of expression, El-Mecky's essay comments on the potentially disruptive physical presence of naked bodies in public (urban) spaces, a presence that is indispensable in the case of Tunick's photographic work; significantly, such disruptive potential is not lessened in a case such as Tunick's, when nakedness in public is germane to the pursuit of an artistic outcome. El-Mecky further historicizes Tunick's tug-of-war with the NYC authorities by placing it in the context of Rudy Giuliani's administration and its "broken window" policy: Tunick's photoshoots, assembling naked people in the streets, belonged to those "minor" disruptions of order deemed worth being targeted and repressed in Giuliani's NYC. Hence, El-Mecky ironically observes, "as the streets of New York got safer, they also became a lot more hazardous for Spencer Tunick."

In the essay that follows, Audrey Goodman discusses four selected photobooks/photoprojects by women photographers (in two cases, in collaboration with male colleagues): Anne Brigman's *Song of a Pagan* (1949), Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones's "Death of a Valley" (1960), Alma Lavenson's "Mother Lode" project (1930s-1970s), and Joan Myers and William de Buys's *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* (1999). Goodman demonstrates that these works deploy a number of visual and textual strategies that problematize the widespread "settler" image of California as a place where one can "start over," freed from the constraints characterizing the more traditionally-minded lifestyle of the rest of the nation. Such "settler" mentality, Goodman suggests, often results into completely erasing the histories of the native Californian populations, and the memory of the heavy human costs they sustained due to the whites' massive new settlements. By contrast, the women photographers analyzed by Goodman carry on, in the author's own terms, "an ongoing process of critiquing the colonial assumptions that underlie popular conceptions of California as an exceptional western region," offering more nuanced perspectives: their works combine words and images, documentary impulse and affective potential, beauty and defilement, nature and human intervention, a gaze towards the past and a projection into the future, often displaying an environmental consciousness that takes into account the complexities and transformations of existing ecosystems.

Thomas Mantzaris's essay analyzes a recent specimen of American multimodal literature, exploring the role of photography in the novel *S.* (2013), conceptualized and co-authored by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. *S.* is a multifaceted artifact, consisting of a differently titled book within a cover; this book "poses" as a library copy of a novel titled *Ship of Theseus*, by fictitious author V. M. Straka and translated into English by the equally fictitious translator F.X. Caldeira. The material, tactile quality of *S.* is also manifested in its inclusion of photographs between its pages. These photos are distinct material objects that can be taken out and experienced separately; some appear new, while others bear artfully obtained traces of the passing of time. For Mantzaris, the photos in *S.* contribute to "augment" the multisensorial, multimodal experience of the novel, besides constituting a paradigmatic case of remediation in our times: i.e. the "return" of an (albeit modified) "analog" dimension in our digitally informed age.

Nicola Paladin's essay transports us back to a previous period in U.S. history, analyzing two distinct ways of representing death on the battlefield, produced by different media. On the one hand, the rendering of death in John Trumbull's famous painting of the American Revolution *The Death of Joseph Warren at the Battle of*



Bunker Hill obeys the conventions of pictorial representation, as well as the broader intention to represent death as an individualized, heroic feat. On the other hand, the availability of the photographic technique during the Civil War resulted, by contrast, into a dramatic proliferation and increase in circulation of images of dead soldiers, thus having the American public (vicariously) experience death as “universal.” The comparison enables Paladin to highlight the historical importance of the invention and diffusion of photography for the conceptualization of death as a shared human experience: “miserable, banal, unheroic,” Paladin writes. Photography also turns death into a paradoxical source of post-Civil War national reunification: again in Paladin’s words, “individual characteristics are blurred in the process of democratization of death,” and “[d]ying in the Civil War posits the inevitability of death as the only reunifying threshold that characterizes American society, without design nor honor, and beyond any form of rhetoric of sacrifice.”

Offering another perspective on the role of photography in shaping a relationship with a territory, Chiara Salari’s contribution discusses some “re-photographic” practices dealing with the American West and its landscapes. Salari uses the concept of re-photography both in a specific/restricted sense – i.e. referring to photographic captures that reproduce previously adopted frames and perspectives, especially emphasizing a “before and after” comparison – and a broader one, i.e. re-photography as an act of re-interpretation of a previously held view. Salari’s essay tackles a number of projects that openly play with the viewers’ expectations in order to de-familiarize, and urge them to re-think, their visual (as well as material) relationships to specific parts of the Western American territory. These projects are: the collective surveys *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (1984) and *Third Views, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West* (2004), and the more recent exhibits *Reconstructing the View: The Grand Canyon Photographs of Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe* (2011) and *Oblique Views: Aerial Photography and Southwest Archaeology* (2015). These works often combine a cultural/artistic approach with a scientific one. Salari’s work complicates a very “American” tendency to visualize and frame broad landscapes by placing such tendency in several discursive contests – among which the recent flourishing of studies on the American West, a field that has contributed to problematize the idea of “wilderness” often associated with this U.S. region.

In the concluding essay, Giuliano Santangeli Valenzani provides an in-depth visual reading, and historical analysis, of selected photographs that participated in some among the photo contests sponsored by the Eastman Kodak Company that regularly took place in various U.S. newspapers in the early 1960s. Santangeli Valenzani focuses on a limited selection of “vernacular” photographs – the term referring, in this case, to photos taken by strictly non-professionals, albeit sometimes with a creative, “artistic” intent in mind – that were sent to, and published in, two American southern newspapers: the *Clarion Ledger* in Mississippi and *The Tennessean* in Tennessee. Based on the premise that “vernacular” photography tends to show, in Santangeli Valenzani’s terms, “the world as one [the photographer] imagines it should be,” the essay highlights the differences between the images published in the Mississippi-based newspaper and those appearing in the Tennessee-based one – differences that, in the author’s reading, mirror (albeit in a similar middle-class context) the different social, environmental, and racial milieus existing in the two States.

By way of conclusion, we wish to remark that the present monographic issue lends itself to the hypothesis that photography – highbrow and lowbrow, professional and amateur; in/by itself and/or (re)mediated by other codes and media such as literary writing, popular press, cinema, websites, digital applications, art exhibits, scientific projects, and more – has, since its invention, emergence, and rapid diffusion, accompanied and created various ways of dealing with and conceiving of both the diversifying and the unifying aspects of “America.” These aspects include the complex fabric of democratic American society and its inescapable social disparities; cultural and racial diversity; gender differences; and America as a geographic and imaginary entity predicated on the negotiation of the fine line between nature and culture, a negotiation with environmental consequences and implications. How we regard the specificities and prerogatives of photography as an expressive code is (paraphrasing Bourdieu 1965) often validated by categories historically grounded in American culture. Specularly, American identity has been, since the invention of photography, constructed as well as deconstructed by photographic practices. Within this framework, “America” oscillates between a real entity – which can be approached through a camera – and a floating signifier, orienting the mechanical yet inevitably subjective camera in its relationship to its referents.



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