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The World Seen Through a Vagina. The Photography of Private Space in Dani Lessnau's Experiment

Abstract. This paper aims to renegotiate the place of the photography of private space, as the recent experiments in this area show that it is imperative that the moral censorship with which it has been surrounded by the sovereign power be undone. In the first section of the paper I will analyse Hannah Arendt's political philosophy in relation to Ariella Azoulay's political-ontological theory of photography, arguing that Azoulay succeeds in finding a solution for the crisis announced by Arendt. Furthermore, using Azoulay's method and Arendt's theory, I will investigate the state of the photography of private space, demonstrating its legitimacy to transgress from the private to the public. In the last section I will present Dani Lessnau's photographic experiment, showing the manner in which it is able to question the concept of photography itself.

Keywords: private and public realm, Hannah Arendt, the civil contract of photography, Ariella Azoulay, Dani Lessnau.

1. The civil contract of photography and its power to re-create Hannah Arendt's public realm

According to Hannah Arendt, modernity makes itself culpable of blurring the limits between the private and public realm, a form of organising the space which survived from the Greek antiquity onward. The private realm, which corresponds to the sphere of the household, and the public one, corresponding to the sphere of political practice. The private realm, sustained by inequality and primal necessities, and the public one, based on equality and freedom of action. As Shiraz Dossa states, "the first is immanent and private; the second is transcendent and public." It is the world that belongs separately to every one of

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DOI:10.24193/ekphrasis.19.8 Published First Online: 2018/06/20 us and the world that is common to all of us.⁴ It is important to note that Arendt does not perceive the two spheres of human life as opposing each other, but rather as two complementary aspects of existence, as the individual must fulfil her primal needs and then transgress into the public space, where she will achieve freedom. The modern age altered this state of things by creating a third dimension, that of society, in its political form of the nation-state, which overruled both the private and the public by transforming the world into a giant household, that is to say by projecting the private realm into the public one.⁵

The cost of society infiltrating into the modern *modus vivendi* consists of the loss of the possibility of action and freedom, as, in Arendt's theory, they are conditioned by the transgression into the public realm that ceased to exist. Moreover, society discourages plurality that is vital for the existence of the public space, and instead imposes numerous codes of behaving among its members, ending up in uniformity.⁶ Modernism promoted a style of life pointed inward, towards the psychological self, by closing every channel of communication with the public.⁷ This is the reason why Dossa argues that "the problem with modern man is not self-alienation but world-alienation."⁸ And Arendt's real quest "is to re-open the gap between the individual and society, to separate the private and the public self, to re-discover the world as the space between men."⁹

Ariella Azoulay challenges the canonical views on photography and writes towards the foundation of a new form of photography theory, ontological and political, by filtering it through the eyes of critical theory, as it exposes the ideology behind the war between Israel and Palestine, thus placing her theory in a concrete space and referring to real Palestinian people that have been oppressed by the Israeli. Moreover, Azoulay offers a solution to this social and political crisis stating that it may be overcome through photography, which does not only uncover the Israeli ideology but it also has the power to carve into the real and calls for the spectators' gaze to grant the oppressed the power to achieve citizenship. It is no wonder that Azoulay extends critical theory into the field of the visual arts, as in the early 20th century Walter Benjamin demonstrates their compatibility by asserting that the then new technology of the photography and after that as well that of the cinematography succeeded in making people equal because they made possible the access to the image: not only the access to look at images, but also that of turning oneself into an image.¹⁰

It may be stated that Azoulay tries to demonstrate that photography can act as a catalyser in the process of re-creating the public space that Arendt argues that the humankind has lost. In Azoulay's view, the photographic act does not bear the marks of only one agent, that of the photographer, but should be understood as an encounter between every participant: the photographer, the camera, the photographed one, and the spectators. This is the crucial moment when the civil contract of photography, as Azoulay defines it, comes into existence and suspends the sovereign power over

the individuals, giving them the space to claim citizenship in the community of photography. 12 "In other words, photography is one of the distinctive practices by means of which individuals can establish a distance between themselves and power in order to observe its actions and to do so not as its subjects,"13 states Azoulay referring to the manner in which photography is able to make every participant in its act aware that she is governed, allowing her at the same time a state of non-governing, which precisely because it is under no sovereignty, possesses no apparatus of exclusion.¹⁴ In this manner, photography offers an alternative to the space in which they have been abandoned by the sovereign power that has promised to watch over them.¹⁵ Furthermore, photography is able to modify the immediate reality and its physical space (while the community of photography is rooted not only in the physical space, it is at the same time a virtual political realm), by means of reshaping the borders, the communities within and even the space itself.16 This reshape takes place by means of replacing the physical place weakened due to exclusion with a common one, as Azoulay states that "I would like to challenge the transformation of the photograph into an object of private property."17

In order for the community of photography to be in a perpetual re-enacting, it is strictly necessary to abolish the classic practices of photography that are based on inside/outside relations, claiming the photograph to be a closed image, external to the subject and vertical. Is Instead, the photograph should stop being perceived as a product of the photographer's stable point of view, and its plurality of centres and their destabilising forces should be rendered to sight, as "the photograph is always more and less than what one of the parties to the encounter managed to frame at the moment of photography." It is always an excess of, but at the same time a lack of. And in this new space that photography (re-)creates, Azoulay emphasises the responsibility on the shoulders of the spectator who until recently have been a passive agent in the production of photographs. Barthes' view on photography stating that it acts as a witness that something "was there" should be overcome and it should be replaced with two new dimensions of the photograph, that of time and movement, which gives voice to the idea that somebody has actually never stopped being there, claiming her citizenship.²⁰

One can observe the manner in which Azoulay's theory on photography may shape around Arendt's political philosophy on space, resemblance even more striking as Azoulay uses Arendt's concept of *vita activa* in order to describe how photography is able to produce action, the key-element in the theory of the public realm seen as a political space. Firstly, the sovereign power in Azoulay's discourse bears traces of the society that has infiltrated into the private and public realm to the bone, meaning that it has carved even in the biological aspects of life (society representing thus biopolitics as Agamben defines it²¹). Moreover, the community of photography, resulted from the actions of all the participants in the photographic act, that Azoulay imagines, resembles Hannah Arendt's concept of public space, as it supposes both

freedom that is political and plurality of voices. Dossa notices that to Arendt freedom accepts no sovereignty²² and so it is in the case of the civil contract of photography, as it envisions a space where the sovereign law is suspended and the participants regain their freedom of action and of speech, which is itself a political freedom, since it enriches the individuals with the quality of citizenship. Furthermore, according to Arendt's point of view, the subjects are not equal in society, but they become equal in the realm of politics and just for as long as they move into the space of public realm.²³ Following the same logic, the community of photography is an open space that renders all of its members equal, as a response to the sovereignty, which bases its laws on inequality.²⁴

Dossa remarks that the public realm expands far beyond the physical space into "a living space which arises between men,"²⁵ under the condition that they are driven by political interests and show respect to each other's freedom and actions. As Arendt's public realm, the space created by photography which Azoulay theorises is rather a virtual one in a continual process of shaping and reshaping by the community it produces. And one of the political action of the people in this community is to simply press the button of the camera, which is the equivalent of taking a position.

Thus, Azoulay may have successfully brought forward Arendt's theory by finding a solution to the crisis she announces. Arendt asserts that, beginning with modernity, society has contaminated the public space transforming it into a lost paradise. But Ariella Azoulay argues that photography is capable of recreating a realm of equality, freedom, and action outside the boundaries of the sovereignty between the members of the community, in this manner succeeding in recreating the public space whose extinction Hannah Arendt laments. And photography has become such a common practice in contemporaneity that this public political place is being in a continual actualisation and re-actualisation in a time when even the potential event of a photograph inscribes in the area of photographic acts.²⁶

2. The photography of the private space and its transgression into the public realm

Azoulay uses exclusively war photographs as her case studies, leaving the area of the photography of private space unexplored. But the photography of the private is as challenging to put to test through this ontological-political theory as that of war or even more as it has two obstacles to cross in order for it to sign the civil contract of photography: that of the immanence and necessity of the private space and that of the norms and stereotypes imposed by the society, as it has already been proved that sovereignty expands its roots even into the private realm of the individual. To Hannah Arendt, the basic nature of the private space is a restrictive one, as the subjects trapped in the private realm are restricted from interacting with other subjects and, at the same time, from making their own presence felt.²⁷ The aspects of private life show themselves in a vague and spectral manner, their existence being

always questionable, as they are not exposed to the world, which can testify for their existence. Only in the public space will they gain consistency and their existence will become undeniable,²⁸ photography being thus a means through which things become irrefutable.

Moreover, a life lived in the sheltered area of the private is a life lived for itself, that does not leave anything for the posterity.²⁹ But as soon as a photograph is taken, the private space is overcome and the photograph becomes available for the public for a period of time that outgrows a lifetime, becoming an object of posterity. The community of photography in Azoulay's meaning and the public space in Arendt's theorising of the term may be formed only in the presence of other subjects and together with them, and that is why photography understood as the encounter between multiple agents is capable of such a transgression. And the public realm is composed of individuals gathered around the same object,³⁰ in the case of the community of photography the object being that of the photograph. Moreover, if, for Arendt, at the base of the public space lay action and speech, for Azoulay it is the image, which is both action and speech.

It is important as well to note that Hannah Arendt states that the modern age has replaced the private with intimacy, which is closer to the apparatus of sovereignty than it is to the archaic sense of the private³¹, and, as a consequence, the first step that photography takes is to clear the private of the society's traces and only then to help it transgress into the public, into the community of photography. In his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault argues that the family functions as every institution, with its disciplinary system, teaching the child the forms of behaviour that the society allows.³² Thus, in the photography of the private space the same social pattern as in that of the public (in the conventional sense that Azoulay uses the concept, meaning the space that may be visible to all the subjects) realm can be noticed. As an example, in the family portraits, as a mark of the patriarchal nature of society, the father in his quality of the head of the family will always be positioned at the centre. But photography does not only spot these kinds of abuse from society's part, it overcomes them at the same times, through the actions of all the participants in the photographic act, helping in this manner the photograph to transgress both the private space and the society into the recovery of the lost public realm where the subjects regain their citizenship and freedom. This act of transgression may be made from a certain framing of the photograph, or through a peculiar body position or mimicry of one of the characters in the photograph that has the result of destabilising the centre and of creating lines of flight in the visual.

The photography of private space is received with a certain degree of scepticism and resistance, precisely because, as Arendt notices, corporality and all its derivatives (from sexuality to labour) have always been pushed away into the private space.³³ In other words, the photography of the private space is unsettling both to the model and to the spectator, because it represents taboos. And taboos may be defined as

social constructs created by the sovereign power in order to sustain ideology. The role of photography is of great importance especially as one of its attributes is that of exposing ideology, mission that must be accomplished through the deconstruction of these taboos. But the question that arises immediately is that of how much or which aspects of the private life can be unveiled. At this point a contradiction between Arendt's theory and that of Azoulay emerges. Hannah Arendt claims that while the public realm is superior to that of the private, there are certain things that must remain closed into the sphere of the private, while it is imperative to place others into the public space.³⁴ Still, Arendt gives no further information concerning which of the private affairs should be kept under the protection of the private realm. On the other hand, Azoulay states that "for as long as the photographer's eye is pressed to the viewfinder, everything may be photographed."35 Even if at the beginning of her argumentation, Azoulay asserts that the public space imposes no control on what the camera records or chooses not to record (exceptions being places like military zones, where the photographs are produced by the sovereign power)³⁶, this "everything" from "everything may be photographed" seems to encapsulate both the public and the private.

This conflict may be solved through an anecdote Azoulay mentions in her book, in order to give an example of "an agreement to be photographed - but not to be seen - by a photographer."37 Mrs. Abu-Zohir, a Palestinian woman, demands to have a picture of her legs taken, as a testimony of the Israeli soldiers' violence, as they shot her legs with rubber bullets. Mrs. Abu-Zohir makes an agreement with the photographer Miki Kratzman who is about to take her photograph, but at the same time, due to her religion, she does not want the male photographer in the room as the process unfolds, explaining: "A photo's a photo. I don't care if the photo is seen, but you're not going to be in the room when I expose my legs."38 Thus, the photographed person may not insist on hiding herself behind the taboo, of keeping her existence into the sphere of the private, because she decides to be solidary to the apparatus of the state which protects these kinds of moral prohibitions, nor because she is afraid about the consequences of an intimate photograph flowing freely in the public space, but because it is the judging or unreliable gaze of the photographer that inhibits the photographed one. A most authentic photograph of/ in the private space is one taken by a photographer who is familiar to the individual and whom the individual trust. Concerning the resistance of the spectator towards photography that depicts taboos it can be stressed that a certain discomfort is necessary for the ideology behind the taboo to become visible, as rupture from ideology supposes violence, in the case of photography meaning visual violence that may incite the spectator to action, to becoming an active part in the photographic act. It is the same violence that makes possible the passage from the private space to the public, political realm.

3. Dani Lessnau's experiment. Four agents deconstructing the sexual taboo

In January 2018, Dani Lessnau, an American photographer based in Brooklyn, launched her experiment extimité using Lacan's coined concept referring to a space which between the inside and the outside. 39 The artist placed a pinhole camera inside her vagina and took photographs of her partners prior to the sexual act. Since the photographs were taken by using long exposure (the subjects had to sit still from one to two minutes while the photographs were being imprinted on film), the products are some blurred images that render to male body peculiar. Lessnau's idea originated in another similar experiment, that of Ann Hamilton, Face to Face, in which the artist put her cameras inside her mouth in order to photograph the subjects she encountered. 40 This kind of experiments challenge the classic photography of private space and even the concept of photography itself, transforming it into something active, into a net of encounters between the photographic elements, being thus close to Azoulay's idea of photography. Even without having read Azoulay's theory, Dani Lessnau seems to share the same view on photography, as in an interview with Bust Magazine she expresses her intuition that there is a common space between people and that this space may be reconstructed through photography: "I'm fascinated by the unknowable space between people and how to feel, see, and translate a fraction of that. (...) There's a shared space of something being created between two people in a vulnerable space."41 Thus, it would be legitimate to explore Lessnau's experiment by underlying the points of encounter of each participant in her photographs, in the process of re-creation of the public political space of non-sovereignty and of freedom.

Firstly, it is important to note that, as the community of photography states a very close relationship within its members, it is almost impossible to manage with each of them separately and this is why they often become visible at the nodes of their intersection. This is the case of the photographer's gaze and that of the camera's. I have previously argued that the photographer's look might become intrusive to the photographed subject as it possesses authority, but Lessnau gives here an example of a gaze that equalizes the relation between the two participants, through the appearance of vulnerability. To Dani Lessnau, the subject that inserts a camera in her vagina and allows it take control over her body is as vulnerable as the subjects who stand in front of that camera, explaining almost in Azoulay's words that it recreates "this space where both of us could be autonomous and vulnerable." Moreover, Lessnau mentions that her reading of Luce Irigaray on silence has made her aware that in photography it (as the two partners lied in silence until the photographed were taken) may ease a reconnection not only with her own body, but also with her lovers, in a place of equality. As the two partners are connection not only with her own body, but also with her lovers, in a place of equality.

By inserting the camera in her vagina, Lessnau states that she has transformed her entire body into a camera,⁴⁴ thus mechanizing it, turning it into a posthuman body. According to Judith Halberstarn and Ira Livingston, posthuman bodies are that bodies

that escape any form of classification, that cannot be encapsulated into discourse nor into ideology as they always "emerge at nodes," 45 and they are always on the move. Moreover, these bodies are not in totality unfamiliar to the human eye as they represent an overlapping of old and new elements. 46 In the case of Dani Lessnau, the body, that is old, and the camera, that is new. And this body borrows the attributes of the camera as Azoulay perceives it, an object that is both threatening due to its gaze that stares directly, but it is also seducing.⁴⁷ Thus, by this use of the camera, Lessnau has verified Azoulay's idea that the camera may bring considerable changes in the modes in which the individuals allow themselves be governed and, at the same time, participate in the governing process.⁴⁸ It seems that with this experiment, Lessnau has brought another participant in the community of photography, the body, which gives an accentuated organic dimension of the gaze, as Lessnau testifies that "I feel we gaze with our entire bodies, not just our eyes."49 The mechanization of the body does not make the photographer feel less, but much more. And at the intersection of the photographer's gaze with the gaze of the camera in the body the female gaze is given birth, which is fluid, disruptive, it is not coherent, it creates a space for the body in the image, bearing resemblance to Cixous' écriture feminine. In Lessnau's words: "The female gaze renders bodies familiar and alien, tender and erotic, strong and vulnerable, specific and abstract."50

The American artist emphasises the manner in which photography exposes the marks of the sovereign power on all its layers. Concerning the photographed subject, Lessnau's photographs seem peculiar as they depict male nudes with which the patriarchal culture is not accustomed. It is the female nude that is usually exhibited for the spectators to see, because men cannot be conceived to be that vulnerable. Thus, by this inversion of roles, Lessnau opens another breach in the totalizing dimension of the ideology in private space. Even though Lessnau claims that the photographer bears the same vulnerability as the photographed one, Azoulay states that in his case a degree of violence intervenes, as he is used as an instrument in the production of the photograph, only to be abandoned afterwards, having his image taken away.⁵¹ On the other hand, he never really leaves the photograph:

"The person in the photograph comes to life, out of the picture, makes demands, activates, tries to pull strings, hovers in the air, commands, seduces, repels, troubles, and irritates. But she always also remains opaque, dumb, distant, locked in a space separate from the surroundings of the spectator." ⁵²

There is the same contradiction in Lessnau's photographs: her lovers seem extremely real, as the texture of the photographs is almost organic. The artist explains that, once she inserted the camera into her vagina, breath was the solely element that could control the production of the photographs.⁵³ And, as a consequence, they seem to continue breathing, as the traces of breath are visible on film. On the other hand, due to their blurred aspect, the men portrayed there look peculiar, as they live in a distant

past. That is because of the arbitrariness of the photographs, of the photographer's decision to allow the medium work upon them: "There is a surrender to not being in control of the image to a certain degree." According to Azoulay, the manner in which the photographer manipulates the visible is essential in the photographic act. And the most important condition is not to restrain it, to allow it to manifest naturally: "the gaze doesn't seek to control the visible, but neither can it bear another's control over the visible." ⁵⁵

Azoulay perceives the spectator as an ethical individual playing a part that is as active as that of the photographer in the process of photography making. Inquiring the role of the spectator in theatre, Rancière criticises the views that she can be emancipated only at the moment when her body it put into motion. ⁵⁶ As actions does not necessarily means motion. And viewing is not opposed to acting. ⁵⁷ Emancipation begins when to spectator watches instead of looking and by watching she becomes aware. The gaze of the spectator is sufficient to turn photography into "a social, cultural, and political instrument of immense power." ⁵⁸ The authority of the spectator rests in the fact that she can report on what has seen in the photograph, and at times she can even anticipate the future, ⁵⁹ the only condition being that she is free of any prejudices, only then being she able to perceive clearly. ⁶⁰

But there is a kind of uneasiness that the spectator experience when put in front of the photographs of private space as those of Lessnau's. Azoulay argues that this uneasiness that is also accompanied by a feeling of fascination occurs because the spectator can sense the proximity of the photographed subjects, by adopting someone else's gaze. Suddenly the spectator may envision herself in front of the nude men, being herself put in a vulnerable position. Moreover, Lessnau's addressee is asked to watch what Azoulay names "photography on the verge of catastrophe," meaning photographs that announce that a catastrophic event is about to happen, photographs that bear the marks of a direct form of violence that is to come. In Lessnau's example, no catastrophe will be happening, but the unveiling of another taboo. To the spectator it becomes clear that these photographs announce the sexual act between the lovers and she feels that she witnesses it as well even if it is not imprinted on the film of the photographs. This certainty is violent to the spectator as sexuality is one of the main taboos that the society preserves, being one of the affairs that should under no circumstance leave the private sphere of existence.

4. Conclusions

Photography possesses the power to overcome the crisis of the modern times as Hannah Arendt theorises it, by re-creating that public political space of freedom and action that the humanity has lost. This is the reason why the shift from perceiving photography as external to the subject to acknowledging it as an object put in motion by all the participants in the photographic act is significant for the photography theorists, as it opens the ways for studying this field's possibility of world creation.

A matter of the same importance is a new focus on the photography of private space, exposing the ideology behind its moral censorship by the sovereign powers, as Dani Lessnau does in her experiment, understanding that taboos actually depict natural gestures of human existence and their transgression into the public space is legitimate from an ethical point of view.

Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 28.
- 2 *Ibidem*, pp. 30-32.
- 3 Shiraz Dossa. *The Public Realm and the Public Self. The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt*. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989, p. 96.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, op. cit., p. 52.
- 5 Ibidem, p. 28.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 40.
- 7 Shiraz Dossa, op. cit., p. 99.
- 8 *Ibidem*, p. 98.
- 9 *Ibidem*, p. 100.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 34-35.
- 11 Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2008, p. 21.
- 12 Ibidem.
- 13 *Ibidem*, p. 100.
- 14 Ibidem, p. 120.
- 15 *Ibidem*, p. 18.
- 16 Ibidem, p. 120.
- 17 Ibidem, p. 94.
- 18 Ariella Azoulay. "What is a photograph? What is photography?" *Philosophy of Photography*. Vol 1, No 1, 2010, pp. 10-11.
- 19 *Ibidem*, p. 12.
- 20 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, ed. cit., pp. 14-17.
- 21 Giorgio Agamben. Homo Sacer: *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 119.
- 22 Shiraz Dossa, op. cit., p. 83.
- 23 *Ibidem*, p. 81.
- 24 Hannah Arendt, The Civic Contract of Photography, ed. cit., p. 23.
- 25 Shiraz Dossa, op. cit., p. 87.
- 26 Ariella Azoulay. "What is a photograph? What is photography?" art. cit., pp. 12-13.
- 27 Hannah Arendt, op. cit., p. 56.
- 28 *Ibidem*, p. 50.
- 29 Ibidem, p. 56.
- 30 Ibidem.
- 31 *Ibidem*, p. 38.
- 32 Michel Foucault. *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège De France*, 1973-74. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 79-80.

- 33 Ibidem, p. 67.
- 34 Ibidem, p. 68.
- 35 Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, ed. cit., p. 345.
- 36 Ibidem, p. 137.
- 37 Ibidem, p. 139.
- 38 Ibidem.
- 39 Stephanie Eckardt. Exploring the Intimacy of Sex, Through the Literal Lens of a Vagina. W Magazine, 3 Febr. 2018, https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/danielle-lessnau-sexual-partner-pho tographs. Accessed 15 May 2018.
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- 42 Dani Lessnau. Interview by Miss Rossen. Dazed Digital. art. cit.
- 43 Ibidem.
- 44 Ibidem.
- 45 Judith Halberstarn, Ira Livingston. *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, p. 2.
- 46 Ibidem, p. 3.
- 47 Ariella Azoulay, The Civic Contract of Photography, ed. cit., p. 333.
- 48 Ibidem, p. 85.
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- 51 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, ed. cit., p. 102.
- 52 Ibidem, p. 327.
- 53 Dani Lessnau. Interview by Miss Rossen. Dazed Digital. art. cit.
- 54 Ibidem.
- 55 Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, ed. cit., p. 93.
- 56 Jacques Rancière. The Emancipated Spectator. London: Verso, 2009, p. 2.
- 57 Ibidem, p. 13.
- 58 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, ed. cit., p. 121.
- 59 Ibidem.
- 60 Ibidem, p. 159.
- 61 Ibidem, p. 278.
- 62 Ibidem, p. 268.

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