

Original Research Article

Photo Hermeneutics: Strategies and Approaches

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Abstract

Problem statement: To observe social conditions and situations in everyday life, photography has been actively and efficiently substituted by inactive visualization, as it has made it possible to consciously observe the daily events and analyze them through photographs. The interpretation and analysis of photographs related to human daily life requires methods that can lead to a better understanding of people's beliefs and daily interactions. Such methods should be informed by the context and socio-historical structure of population issues. Hermeneutics is the knowledge of interpretation and hereupon, a hermeneutic analysis of photography facilitates studying target photographs with social themes and interpreting their implicit meanings based on the characteristics of linguistics, population interventions, intents and intentions, and also those social rules governing the creation of the photographs. The hermeneutics of photography means the interpretation and explanation of photographs within their socio-cultural context by an interpreter who has gained prior knowledge of the context by applying the effective factors of hermeneutic interpretation.

Research objective: Basically, in hermeneutics, the way of understanding is under question, and so in addressing the photographic categories, hermeneutics deals with "the way of analytically understanding photo". Therefore, the purpose of the hermeneutic analysis is to 1) identify the factors influencing the process of perceiving photography, 2) to explain the background conditions for this comprehension, 3) to determine the characteristics of the analytical context for the correct interpretation of photographs, 4) to define the interpreter of the hermeneutics of photography, and finally to determine who/what has a more reliable position in the photography?

Research method: In this study, the hermeneutic analysis of photography is based on the philosophical hermeneutical views of 'Hans-Georg Gadamer', and is constituted based on a careful examination of its hermeneutic elements, in creating the correct interpretation of the photo. In other words, the position of each of the elements of Gadamerian hermeneutic in analyzing the context (the concept of tradition, prejudgment, effective historical awareness, conversational logic, semantic horizon, author intent, and hermeneutics critique) is considered in the interpretation process of photography, and its position is raised based on a visual context.

Conclusion: The hermeneutic analysis of photography can include all types of analysis, interpretation, and criticism of target photographs if the influential hermeneutic tools and elements in the analysis are applied accurately. Addressing the interpretive position of the hermeneutic elements will lead the hermeneutics of photography towards a more comprehensive and accurate analysis.

Keywords: *Interpretation, Hermeneutics of Photography, Hermeneutic Elements in the analysis of Photographs, Hans-Georg Gadamer.*

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Introduction

Today, photographs have a significant role in defining the way we explore the world and the life around us. Photographs swiftly immobilize and freeze the intricate and varying social situations, and so allow us to analyze them in more detail. Photograph “enhances sociological descriptions or diagnoses, but it also helps explanation by uncovering trends, regularities or even perhaps ‘social laws’ (Sztompka, 2008, 27).

Photographs are supposed to act as guiding maps, but they have turned into a display scene; today human beings observe and define their life and the world through the pile of photos, and so photographs are represented in the form of the images of the various scenes, situations, and states that photos display. As it can be said human beings have become an influencer of their photographs. The art of photography plays a significant role in mediating social relationships, building an interpersonal discourse, and making interactions with others. It offers us the limitations of contractual relationships to create new social communities. Photography is an exploratory tool to study the environment, the natural world, and a means for understanding our place in relation to each of them in our daily life (Barson, 2017, 47). That is why many studies in the fields of humanities have either evolved since the advent of photography or have undergone structural changes for acquiring and expanding their knowledge under its influence. According to ethnographers, anthropologists, historians, art historians, sociologists, and also today’s social historians of everyday life, the art of photography has a great and influential place in advancing knowledge. So, to comprehend photography in various fields of humanities, which is highly dependent on the interpretation of analyzing and understanding texts, the hermeneutics of photography is one of the areas that can be mentioned here:

Hermeneutics of photography deals with the “methods” of obtaining and understanding the desired photos and comprises all kinds of analysis

that can be applied to describe, explain and interpret these photos. In form-based analysis, which follows aesthetic principles and refers to the form of a photograph, those critics who emphasize the visual aspect of art might refer to the complications of interpreting artistic intentions to preserve the purity of ‘Art for art’s sake’, which is detached from the historical context of its creation and its social meaning (Hall & Neitz, 2012, 323).

However, in content analysis, the concept of context is clearly highlighted in 1. the quality aspect of interpretation and 2. in receiving the content of an artwork; as a viewer from one hand might look for the photographer’s voice in the context of the photograph and follow its creator’s intent, and on the other hand, concentrate on what the viewer might receive from the content of the photo. All various kinds of theoretical critic analyses that are acquired through various sociological, cultural, semiotic, historical, and other related theories (rely on the form or content-based critics) can be addressed in a hermeneutic analysis. Hermeneutics reveals the context of the comprehension process through a variety of theories, critiques, and interpretations, and confirms the accuracy and authenticity of various kinds of receiving an artwork text. The hermeneutic analysis refers to uncovering the actuality of an art criticism, which is based on discovering, analyzing, and presenting the process of receiving and analyzing the comprehension basis of an artwork.

The hermeneutic analysis of photography, as the foundation of an analytical process of the photograph in this study, is not necessarily addressing the aesthetic aspect and its originality, nor limited to what the photographer might intend to convey through special connotation in the context of the photograph, or even to simply pay attention to what the audience receives from the target photo. In photo hermeneutic analysis, the place of hermeneutic elements in the photographic context is studied and the way they are applied in this analysis process is outlined. Finally, it can be mentioned that photo hermeneutics deals with “the way of processing

photo analytical comprehension”; in other words, it deals with the following concepts:

- What factors are involved in the process of photo comprehension?
- Which of the contextual conditions verifies the understanding of photography and for what reason it happens?
- What are the features and characteristics of a photo context?
- Who is a hermeneutic interpreter, and who can specifically have more authentic conditions in this photo hermeneutics? and finally,
- What is the place of “experience”, “living context” and “theory” in understanding photography?

Obviously, the photo hermeneutics address the issue of the “comprehension/perceiving process” of the photograph, and in this process benefits from interpretation, elucidation, analysis, and any explanation and description provided an effective presence in identifying this cycle of comprehension. However, the hermeneutics of photography does not remain merely in the stage of explanation, critique, or interpretation, and has a more important task to verify as follows:

How can a photo impress someone? This is the basic question of the photo hermeneutics, in which to acquire possible answers, hermeneutic thinkers have come up with various methods, of them the hermeneutic method of social history, is considered as one of the significant approaches.

A glance at some earlier works

Lloyd in his article entitled “ The Methodologies of Social History: A Critical Survey and Defense of Structuralism” lists three major currents of the historic hermeneutic analysis. Since photographs are considered as one of the significant resources in the science of history, this classification has been adopted in the current research:

A) Traditional historical interpretivism, which is quite different from present-oriented psychological and sociological theories, as it relies on the interpretation of “common sense” from a set

of events and eras. B) The Sociological and Anthropological Interpretivism: it considers the historical explanation based on theory (for example, sociological theory) and has a hermeneutical approach in analyzing the content of history. The interpreters in this approach, who are influenced by theory, look for recalling the significant position of the people’s constituting social power, and also the influencing power of cultural structures on actions. C) The movements of people’s history, and oral history: This approach claim that interpersonal relations have a political orientation, and sometimes to represent it through hermeneutic analysis, they use the investigation on historical roots of local power structures to overcome repression, in current life (Lloyd, 2015, 212-215). Fairburn (2015), in his famous book entitled, “Social History, Problems, Strategies, and Methods”, categorizes the analysis of the historical text into three general states: ‘causal explanation’, ‘intentional explanation’, and ‘hermeneutics’ and explains the hermeneutic state in detail. In the hermeneutic state, the historical interpreter is focused on the understanding of unfamiliar ways people in the past used to identify themselves and their world based on them. The hermeneutics expert must comprehend the past society according to its native’s opinion (Fairburn, 2015, 37-39). So the photo hermeneutics here in this study has been reviewed as a method of confronting the photographs as a historical context.

Research Method

In modern hermeneutics, the process of understanding the philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer has been improved to an ontological position, and the quiddity of the manner is perceived in relation to the text has always been proposed. According to Heidegger, hermeneutics should also say farewell to its past and move toward the position of philosophy from the level of epistemology and methodology (Palmer, 2008, 134). Even in early modern hermeneutics, according to two philosophers, Schleiermacher and Dilthey paying

attention to comprehension process, in which meaning is generated from the context is noticeable; In this study, the kind of analysis would be considered as photo hermeneutic analysis, which explores the conditions for understanding social photographs relying on their communal context; and in this process, the study is more focusing on the philosophical hermeneutical views of 'Hans-Georg Gadamer'. Therefore, in the prologue, "photo hermeneutics" was founded based on "the way a photograph is perceived"¹, and then the method of hermeneutic analysis was built based on social history.

Analysis of Text and Hermeneutic Elements

Any kind of hermeneutic analysis unavoidably put the 'interpreter-textual encounter' in the direction that all elements of philosophical hermeneutics would be presented together with what provides conditions for hermeneutic understanding. The hermeneutic elements comprise the understanding an accurate measure of the validity and accuracy of an interpretation and reveal any misunderstanding or invalid interpretation. The validity of hermeneutic analysis which is based on some of the most significant opinions of philosophical hermeneutics is resulting from the following conditions: A) The traditional context in which the text and the viewers are existed and belonged to; B) The attention to the position and manner of constituting prejudgments and prejudices which an interpreter encounters with them in advance while facing with the text; C) The standpoint of the accurate consciousness of the viewer/ interpreter and the historical current that founded this awareness in understanding process of the text; so in analyzing process, it is preferred and required to be considered to identify the correct interpretation out of those with less accuracy and validity; D) The position of the "dialogue" and the "dialectical" process of the interpreter and the text in the process of building comprehension, which fundamentally shapes any kind of perception and analysis; E) The combination of semantic horizons of what the interpreter intends of meaning, and also the meaning that the text has substantially constituted, based on the hermeneutic

elements (The outcome of such fusion of semantic horizons, which is the outcome of a dialogue between the meanings an audience might expect and the meaning is presented in the text, will be resulted in the achievement of a deep understanding of the text and the formation of an authentic interpretation arising from it; F) The hermeneutic cycle of comprehension that promises the meaning of a text ahead of the audience; as the addressee only refers to a particular phenomenon, subject, work or text only if the whole entity conveys meaning to him/her. On the other hand, this integrated meaningful entity can only be perceived through the analysis of its components, and thereupon, the comprehension act would be constructed through the analysis and interpretation of both the components and the whole - in a dialectical relation to each other. G) The standpoint of the author's intention, and attention to the fact that neither the prejudgments and preconceptions of the interpreter, nor the intention of the author in the hermeneutic analysis means adapting the formation of a meaning to the prejudgments of an interpreter or the intention of the author; rather, prejudgment in the process of analysis depends on certain conditions, and on the other hand, the intention of the author is only as one of the promises of meaning. The author's intent, as an initial interpreter, should provide condition to be integrated with the meaning horizon of the addressee and form a dialogue between them; H) The moment of textual critics in hermeneutics can be initiated by considering the function of its elements in hermeneutic analysis; it is because any precise understanding of a text, event or phenomenon, refers to its critical understanding at the same time, provided its effective and constructive elements all can be considered and taking the position that protects their legitimacy in an accurate critical analysis be possible.

Hermeneutic elements in the analysis of social photographs

Social photography is the place of manifestation of everyday human life, and in this regard, vernacular and private photographs are considered as a great document in history (social type). Therefore, when

encountering these historical documents, the hermeneutic-historical analysis can be used to interpret and critique photographs; here upon, the prevalent elements in philosophical hermeneutics, not only interfere in the process of encountering photographs and the initial manner to deal with but, it leads to a better orientation and determination of the analytical process and evaluation of the accuracy and authenticity of the historical interpretation in the desired text. One of the desired research methods in the hermeneutic-historical field is presented by historians who have had the historical presence in the living and geographical context of their research, so, the first and most significant predisposition for the manner one can understand hermeneutics is 1). To be present in the context and custom the audience and the text both belong to, 2). To provide methodologically the possibility of examining the other promises of hermeneutic elements in the context of interpretation. In the hermeneutic analysis, research subjects do not represent an objective existence and therefore are not capable of objectively analyzing the related structures; thereof, only a hermeneutic understanding can capture them as a complete Gestalt creature... These historians insist on intuitive insight and understanding the concepts of actions, beliefs, and eras, which is arising from complete immersion in the ideas governing a space, and trying to reconsider them (Lloyd, 2015, 212). In the first stage, the hermeneutic analysis of social photographs manifests a “historical document of human society who are belonging to a particular population”, which represents the possibilities of analysis, and the custom associated with it. This means, if social photography is considered to be the text for art’s “aesthetics tradition” (and not necessarily the context of social history and its necessities), then the main context of artworks analysis should be based on the explanations and approaches that the art world describes and clarifies. The theories have improved the aesthetic tradition from ancient times to the present and have analyzed every aspect of art objectivity in the philosophy of art. For example,

Noël Carroll in the introduction of the book entitled, *Theories of Arts Today* itemizes the traditions of twentieth-century art philosophy as follows:

In the first half of this century, various formalism and expressionist theories (or definitions) flourished, believably the most important of which were the theories of Arthur Clive Heward Bell (1881-1964), and Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943). In the middle of the twentieth century, and often under the influence of Wittgenstein’s² theories, a series of debates arose that sought to make it impossible to propose the definition of art (in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions). The influential essay of Arthur Coleman Danto (1924-2013), entitled ‘The Artworld’³, argued that any artwork must have a compulsory characteristic, which means, it must be in accordance with the art theories. Afterward, George Dickie introduced the concept of the art world with a different emphasis. Accordingly, various forms of his ‘Institutional Theories’⁴ of art were constituted, which led to his theory of the “art cycle” ... From the early 1990s onwards, or even earlier, the attraction of this query that “What is art?” decreased to some extent” (Carroll, 2014, 9-11).

It is clear that by considering the aesthetic tradition, proposing the issue of hermeneutic analysis of social photographs is based on the views and history of aesthetics (for example, the twentieth-century aesthetic ideas and those opinions that Carroll referred to), and so any hermeneutic elements of the analysis must be based on its aesthetic content. Hereupon, in hermeneutic methodology, the photographs which are based on social life, social history, and other related theories, constitute the “main tradition” in forming the basis of the present research, and though, the hermeneutic elements are incorporated in the area of text interpretation based on the same foundation; These elements related to photography and social photography are as follow:

A) The concept of tradition: This concept has a fundamental place in philosophical hermeneutics. According to the experts in hermeneutics, human as a creature finds his loneliness in this actuality that human

being before anything, and from the beginning of creation is standing in the midst of traditions, as, abruptly in this position finds himself (Couzens Hoy, 2006, 40). In philosophical hermeneutics, both subjective - the viewer, the audience, the interpreters - and the text or what is being analyzed all are the product of tradition and always engaged in and involved with it. It is obvious that social photographs are arising from social traditions, customs, beliefs, desires, and behaviors that certify them as a document; A photograph interpreter has arisen from the historical tradition that is passed on to him/her through various institutions and social states. According to Gadamer, "Tradition influences a social actor's attitudes and behavior through authority, and such authority is transmitted through time and history via cultural mechanisms" (Butler, 1998, 288).

The "authority" of tradition creates issues in analytical hermeneutics that are manifested as "preunderstanding/ fore-perception", "presupposition" and finally "prejudice" and biases of the audience/ interpreter of the photograph. This means that the observer of the photographs interprets and understands the photograph as the text, with a mind raised and influenced by the traditional living context: The interpreter approaches the text with certain expectations and a pre-given understanding of the historic-cultural tradition to which the text in question belongs. The name that Gadamer gives to such preunderstanding of the whole is, "prejudice" (in a relatively neutral sense of the term), and he points out that it is our prejudices that constitute the historical reality of our being (Prasad, 2002, 18).

Therefore, in the hermeneutics of photography, being aware of the presence of a 'socio-historical tradition' both in the context of the photograph and in the interpreter's view, which manifests itself through a rather biased opinion and preliminary judgments, is kind of a hermeneutic act which directs analysis to the right track. In a variety of private photographs, attention to the reason behind the photos in different social contexts represents the strong structure of tradition in their presentation. For instance, the socio-

historical tradition, which presents itself through the conventional culture, beliefs, and actions of the people who are living in a certain geography, population, or group, can be analyzed through a variety of "social interactive rituals", "everyday life patterns", "patterns of social cognition through the five human senses" and "types of lifestyles". Being aware of the presence of socio-historical tradition in the process of photo hermeneutic analysis is situated in the first step of the interpretive classification of artworks, and so any hermeneutic interpretation must initially pay attention to the traditional context to which it belongs and then historically analyze its content.

B) Prejudice/Prejudgment: certainly, the existence of any mindset and prejudgment in the process of interpreting and analyzing photos can be accompanied by some prejudices and intentions. "For Gadamer, a prejudice is a provisional legal verdict before the final verdict is reached. A prejudice may be true or false, accurate or inaccurate hence, we might say that there exists legitimate and illegitimate, visible and invisible prejudice. But, 'critical reasoning' is required to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate prejudice" (Butler, 1998, 288). Gadamer believes all our hermeneutic activities belong to and are derived from tradition, and argues that the moment of its emergence is related to the formation of prejudices arising from the tradition:

"the meaning of "belonging" - i.e., the element of tradition in our historical - hermeneutical activity - is fulfilled in the commonality of fundamental, enabling prejudice" (Gadamer, 2006, 295). Prejudices, in the absence of right direction and accurate information of the interpreter- to be suspended according to Gadamer in the process of interpretation- are invalid and, of course, they will turn into prejudices that mix the path of textual interpretation with the interpreter's egoism and biases, which will not ultimately provide the correct analysis. To limit any prejudice, prediction, and bias to analytical methods while interpreting photos, and

be able to rely on them, we are required to acquire what Gadamer calls “ahistorical consciousness”. “A ‘historical consciousness’ is vital if misunderstood prejudices are to be understood for what they are. Prejudices need to be isolated; that is, their validity needs to be suspended. This is... to be accomplished through the structure of a question: ‘The essence of the question is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities’” (Butler, 1998, 289). The criterion for the accuracy, precision, and rightness of prejudice is the historical consciousness that is required for the interpreter and analyst to benefit from it. The historical consciousness of the interpreter in the hermeneutics of social photographs refers to the awareness of the contexts that lead to the formation of interactions, encounters, and social traditions, through the experience of social actor’s everyday life; Gadamer addresses this concept as “effective historical consciousness.”

C) Effective historical consciousness: Basically, such consciousness is the confirmation of the fact that: “The effect of historical events through ‘lived experience’ influences our interpretation, and hence understanding, of phenomena. The experience of effective-historical understanding is achieved in questioning phenomena that are ‘present-at-hand’” (ibid.). The structure of the query can associate the life experience in tradition with questions that can be responded to “through theories and knowledge.” In other words, an effective historical consciousness is able to distinguish the accurate and right judgment, from misinterpreted blind biases, in a hermeneutic circle of understanding, and thereupon allow the formation of a “more correct understanding” of the desired text. Relying on the historical consciousness, and according to Gadamer, the effective kind of this historical consciousness that exists in the query structure of photographs has been formed in the heart of theory and knowledge that the photographs’ interpreter benefits from them while encountering photographs to reading and questioning their social content. When it comes to social photographs, the knowledge of the social history on the issue of population, where photographs

are created, forms rather an effective historical awareness within the interpreter of photographs (Fig. 1), to provide a clear intuition for avoiding the prejudices, that lead to misunderstandings or textual misinterpretations. Another part of this historical consciousness is the presence of the social photographs’ interpreter who is living in the heart of everyday life, among those actors whose social documents (photographs) are interpreted and analyzed by this interpreter. This presence in daily life ends with judgments and raises questions about photographs, which have more originality and accuracy due to their daily encounters with the culture, desires, and beliefs of the people.

The logic of conversation against photographs: In philosophical hermeneutics, any action toward the understanding/perceiving is a hermeneutic act and has a conversational matter. Gadamer believes that the conception of any type of text is founded on a conversation between the interpreter and the text, in which the structure of this conversation represents ‘query and response’:

The hermeneutic conversation between the interpreter and the text is a dialogue in which the interpreter raises queries by addressing the text, and the text in return responds against the interpreter. These inquiries challenge the actuality of the interpreter’s judgments, and the purpose of interpretation is to find the queries that the text offers responses to them; so according to Gadamer the text represents their meaning, so not to leave any nonsense concept [in the text] (Prasad, 2002, 19-20).

Expecting for meaning contains very significant hermeneutic points. Conversation with the text occurs when it has meaning for the interpreter or there is an expectation that the text has meaning. In other words, in the condition that the interpreter can initiate the query and response process with the proposed content, the social photos would have meaning as an interpretive text for the interpreter. This query and response are formed based on the interpreter’s hermeneutic consciousness, with a theoretical origin based on the available theories, and also due to his presence in the

heart of everyday life. The structure of 'query and response' which is constituted between the photograph and the interpreter is achieved by proposing issues in the context of social photographs that have already formed a strong hermeneutic connection between these two items- the interpreter and the photograph. Tradition stands as an integrative factor that allows the interpreter to raise queries about the photographs with responses for them in the textual photograph, and, in response, the photographs confront the interpreter with queries that responsesto them by this interpreter will categorize his/her prejudgments against the photographs and evaluate them by testing: "The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer, 2006, 293).

In this way, the expectations` horizon in the mind of the photographs` addressee—who is the interpreter - is merged with the semantic horizon of the photographs in a common tradition, and thereupon the interpretation of the photograph is formed according to its meaning. The fusion of horizons always certifies the text is meaningful in the dialogue between the text and its audience.

Fusion of Horizons: The horizon of expectations and meanings in the mind of the audience is a unique entity, which merely is formed based on the specific mind setwhich is resulted in his/her viewpoint of the world in their personal life. Of course, the horizon of expectations and meanings in the mind of the audience is quite different from the semantic horizon of the text. A common understanding in a dialogue-here between the audience and the text- is merely formed when their semantic horizons are adjacent to each other, overlying and merged. Obviously, this common understanding occurs through

language, and within it (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, 343). Meanwhile, the role of the interpreter's initial prejudgments in suspension is essential for merging horizons and forming a common understanding of the text:

By suspending the prejudgments that affect the interpreter's understanding of the text, a more accurate understanding around it would be acquired, which in turn leads to the fusion of horizons. The interpreter expands his/her horizons by distancing himself from prejudgments and prejudices to integrate himself with the horizon of the text. This merging of horizons requires knowledge of the effective history which provides the interpreter withc hains of historical awareness to which he/she bonds (Prasad, 2002, 20).

According to Gadamer, a horizon is simply a 'field of vision that comprises everything that can be seen from a particular standpoint' (Butler, 1998, 289). Tradition, as the past horizon, is constantly moving by the passing of time. "In process of 'prejudgment', 'interpreting' and 'struggling to understand', some horizons of social phenomena are merged, and this integration of horizons is considered as the highest point of understanding occurs between the interpreter and the text, and between the researcher and research as well' (ibid.).

Therefore, the fusion of the meaning horizon of the interpreter with those of the photograph occurs through a deep understanding of the social traditions and cultural practices in which the photographs partially manifest it (which is perceivable in an effective historical consciousness for the viewer of the photographs), and this fusion of semantic horizons upraises the interpreter's perception on the photographs. This fusion represents the significant position of another essential element of philosophical hermeneutics: any perception of the text is possible in a circular cyclefrom the whole to the part and vice versa. To understand social photographs (as components) a kind of 'whole'is required. This wholeness can be considered the traditional context in which photographs are hermeneutically analyzed.

On the other hand, to recognize this entirety (the whole of social and cultural traditions in the photo context), it is required to study and understand its components (social photographs as historical documents), and therefore, perceiving would be possible in a hermeneutic cycle.

F) Hermeneutic Cycle in Perceiving Photograph: Gadamer believes that there are two main features in the formation of understanding text which are perceived in a hermeneutic circle. From one hand, an addressee refers to a text of his/her knowledge-as a meaningless or worthless text is a clear reason to keep the audience away from it - and hence, a “wholeness” is considered for a text which conveys meaning; On the other hand, to make this wholeness understandable to the audience, it is required to keep a historical distance with him/her to let this entirety comprehend by the addressee. “The circle of understanding is not a “methodological” circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding... It states that only what really constitutes a unity of meaning is intelligible. So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken _i.e., the text is not intelligible_ do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied.” (Gadamer, 2006, 294).

The inner content which is represented by things can be understood only when the ephemeral circumstance within which the thing happened is over, and the event has been detached from it. The positive conditions for historical understanding involve the relative termination of that historical event so that we can perceive it as a whole and distance ourselves from today’s view on its content. This mental presumption in the historical method makes it clear that the solid and enduring concept of something can only be objectively perceived if it is “dead” enough to be considered as a precious historical object. Only after this, the observer’s intervention will be detached. So, ‘time distance’ could be a constructive and positive condition in perceiving the process, and only when the relations of phenomena with the present are

faded, their factual essence would appear, and there after a valid universal perception would be realized (ibid., 297).

Relying on what is presented in the hermeneutic circle of understanding, a researcher can understand a phenomenon or subject as a “whole” that like a historical issue has now been fulfilled, which is defined by its entire components. At the same time, the researcher can identify different parts of these components to clarify the phenomenon by examining and defining them before the whole investigation (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, 345).

Prediction and expecting a meaning are considered as one of the features of the hermeneutic cycle. This expectation is considered as one of the prerequisites for the “whole”, as the existence of a single meaning is expected. Prediction and expecting a meaning is another approach to describe the confrontation of ‘part and the whole’ in the hermeneutic circle (Lawn & Keane, 2011, 10-11).

In the hermeneutic analysis of social photographs, while considering photographs as a historical document, that is arising from the social and cultural context (tradition/whole), relying on a suitable distance from them, and having consciousness about the social history of photo contexts, the precision and manifestation of the whole integrity of them would be possible; at the same time, it is promising to consider social photographs as components by which the whole can be defined and understood, and by integrating the content of the components (whatever the photographs constitute as a social document), a whole image of social and cultural tradition would be visualized to us. Similarly, the purpose of hermeneutic research is to merge the past, present, and future horizons by using the hermeneutic cycle that is formed while a dialogue between the text and the audience is occurring (Paterson & Higgs, 2005, 246). A hermeneutic interpreter analyzes the photo’s constituting phenomena from his or her point of view in terms of “language”, “existing actions”, “intentions of the actors”, and “general rules

governing the image”, that all convey a meaning in the hermeneutic circle:

Language is the basis of the existence of three other phenomena, which define the numerous actions of society, and thus give them semantic appearance.

Actions, which are controlled by people as actions and, do not definitely consist of the uncontrolled behaviors that happen to us or within our minds and bodies (such as blinking).

The intention of the actors, according to the hermeneutic model, every action is accompanied by intention, which implies the conscious reasons of the actors. Intentions are those considerate thoughts that lead to action and arise from a combination of desires (which calls people for their needs and requests), beliefs (which calls people for the way the world works), and the power of human intellect (which creates an effective link between people’s beliefs and desires).

Social rules consist of the structure of customs, norms, orders, principles, rules of behavior, and the dos and don’ts of society. The social rules are manifested in proverbs, common cultures, myths, rituals, and ceremonies, and are often found in a concept known as the “common sense” (Fairburn, 2015, 288-292).

The hermeneutic understanding and the position of author’s intention: The photo hermeneutics, which seeks to understand the meanings of the photographs, encounters fundamental challenges if only merged with the author’s intentions:

There is an issue here that generally the works’ creators are not fully aware of the intentions behind the process of creating the work, and even these unclear intentions may change over time. Another very disturbing concern is that whatever the intentions of the creators of the works, how can others understand what those intentions were? Sometimes all that is required to be performed is the quiddity of the art object. Even if we have a discourse with the author, there is no guarantee that he remembers his intentions correctly or whether

he would represent them at all (Hall & Neitz, 2012, 322).

Therefore, according to Gadamer’s thinking manner, a hermeneutic interpreter is neither dealing with the author’s intention nor the centrality of its position, opposite to what is a convention in many other types of textual interpretation (similar to what the Romantics believed to it, as they considered the text to be derived from the genius of the author, and therefore perceiving the intentions behind it is necessary to comprehend both this genius and the text. The suspension of non-constructive prejudgments in the process of understanding a text- which is formed by the audience/interpreter as the first step in confronting the text arising from an “authentically-historical consciousness”- help the fusion of the audience and the text horizons happen, and the audience perceives the meaning in his existing semantic horizon without necessarily pursuing the intention of the author of the text:

The interpretation of a text is rooted in the interpreter’s condition and can occur on the horizon of his/her present textual prejudgments. Therefore, although interpretation does not refer to adaptation of meaning to the interpreter’s prejudgment, it is not trying to take the author’s place and receive what he or she intends. The text meaning always goes beyond its authors, and it is constantly a representative of territory beyond its author. As a result, the interpreter must perceive concepts more than what the author does, and thereby, interpretation not only reconstructs an activity but also creates everything (Prasad, 2002, 21).

Reading the author’s intention is also in conflict with the basis of the hermeneutic understanding cycle and distorts its original meaning. For instance, if in photo analysis, the recognizing and understanding the intentions of their creators is considered as the basis of the process, then it would be required to place ourselves in their time and horizon to understand the whole entity (refers to the context of making photographs, including tradition, culture, intellectual factors, and other related issues); however, still more

time interval is required to keep from the author position, and therefore we cannot have a proper understanding of its comprehensiveness (similar to the author's condition when he/she creates the text). In the photograph hermeneutic analysis, we understand the constitutive factors of the works - which relies on the lifestyle of ordinary people in society - we comprehend these people and their living conditions according to their time horizon, we struggle to understand their behaviors and the way they understand society and perceive it, only when definite and desirable distance are considered from their living time, to be able to realize them in an integrated and traditional context as a whole, that has built up the desired social rituals and customs. A photo hermeneutic interpreter can only represent an accurate interpretation when he/she be able to properly align his/her effective historical consciousness, based on the theory, by merging his horizons with those of photographs concepts, when interpreting and analyzing the desired photographs. The social history as a way of encountering in the current study (Fig. 1) can be adapted to the whole integrated entity of past time that social photographs used to represent, and therefore provide the conditions for the understanding process of its addressee.

H) The criticism moment in photo hermeneutics: Basically, any hermeneutic analysis is associated and coordinated with structural critique. In a way that, from the moment the audience /interpreter encounters the text, he /she actively communicates with it, and this "active state" of the interpreter would be possible through any hermeneutic situation that represents his/her reasoning, critique, and analysis of the desired text: determining the effective time interval with the text, accurate application of theory in the analyzing process, suspending the initial prejudgments and leaving any personal prejudices and mindset, which all are considered the outcome of their critical study based on the interpreter's hermeneutic consciousness of the text, confirm this active state. The criticism of

traditional context by passing through theory in the hermeneutic analysis process, and generally the whole entity that the interpreter /audience applies in perceiving the hermeneutics of a text to form the comprehensiveness of his/her interpretation, will bring out a critical quality; thereby it constantly relies on the critique of positions, theories, preconceptions, and principles that an interpreter exploits in confronting with the text. Relying on this opinion, Paul Ricoeur considers all aspects of human life and his action as a text that a hermeneutic action prevails. According to him and many post-Gadamer hermeneutic theologians, a critical hermeneutic researcher is supposed to constantly be aware of one or more theoretical opinions and apply them while expanding the interpretation of the desired text (*ibid.*, 24 & 26); it is because, through critical hermeneutics, it would be possible to determine the context (whole) and the components (behaviors/ actions/ constructed elements); similarly, Jürgen Habermas believes that this whole entity of hermeneutic analysis is founded on the critical type of hermeneutics, and think discriminating any right prejudgment from the wrong one, that forms the interpreter's encounter with the text in advance, is merely possible based on that mentioned critical thinking, and hence, any hermeneutic analysis of the text will be a kind of critique (*ibid.*, 22).

The moment of criticism in the social type of photographs, from hermeneutic analysis view, is the moment that the photograph concept and its hermeneutic interpretation are perceived at the same time. These two concepts are constituted, simultaneously in accordance with each other, addressing the photograph or any type of artwork, as perception cannot be excluded from interpretation and analysis at all. Interpretation without perception is inconceivable, and it should be mentioned that any aesthetic experience involves perception and interpretation at the same time (Uribe, 2013, 514). The hermeneutics position in any artwork is a means that provides the prerequisites for the ultimate perception and analysis, and consequently for the

“judgment” and “evaluation” of artworks. According to Barrett, a critic, and researcher in the fields of art and photography, in various types of photo criticism, any conclusion about the influencing of photo on its audience is provided in the context of photo hermeneutic analysis, which verifies the accuracy and authenticity of the evaluation and the ultimate judgment of the photos (Barrett, 2006).

Hermeneutic Analysis of Photo Critique (Critique of Critique)

As previously stated, hermeneutic analysis is a kind of verifying the art criticism, which is founded relying on hermeneutic elements in the process of interpretation through discovering, analyzing, and presenting the way a photo is perceived; and therefore it can put the critical texts under query from a critical view. Here in this study, as a research sample, a media photo is presented, which has received a lot of feedback from viewers, various reviews, and critiques following its broadcasting (Fig. 1). To perform a theory-based hermeneutic analysis, ‘social history’ has been applied as a method of hermeneutic confrontation. In other words, to deal with the “critique of critique” of the present photograph, the hermeneutic elements are applied based on its historical content, which has been proposed in the implicit essence of the photograph. For the target photo, a critical text broadcasted on the virtual space, at the time of its publication (Spring, 2019) received more attention compared to the other relevant photographs.

It was a critique by “Moein Dehaz”, a contemporary writer and poet, who published it on his Telegram channel which was repeatedly visited on the other Telegram channels, Instagram pages, and even blogs. It can be said that his interpretation is a kind of a fragile and problematic critique, from the historical hermeneutic point of view; moreover, in the standpoint of “critique of critique”, his text might be argued as an ambiguous one. It is because, in this hermeneutic analysis, it is required that all the photo hermeneutic elements be reconsidered and

interpreted to confirm the authenticity of his text. Here, we first present the image caption to critique it based on the desired photo hermeneutic:

Photo Caption: The critique presented by Dehaz: “This photo is a masterwork. It looks like it has a director. Four people are presented in front of it, four men from different backgrounds, four government officials who are in the water up to their knees, and are laughing. What are they laughing at? It cannot be understood. Everything is amusing for these four people. It seems they are in a ball pool. It is a water park. Looking back at the image, four people are standing. Four young and definitely old men and women. They are families. They are the People. Their appearance is not clear and this helps us to see them beyond simply four specific persons. They can be generalized to all the people of Iran. According to the way they stand, it can be realized that they are sad and disappointed. Looking at their hands shows that they are very disappointed. They seem to be staring at the amusement park behind the glass, but they can’t afford to buy a ticket and have fun. Out of the water, they are watching like a child. The camera focuses on the four official persons, while those families are fading away. In the science of photography, it is addressed as “fade”. Wow, that’s an amazing word. Those [far] family members, on a smaller scale, are standing a few steps back from the “focus” area, and are gradually dying away. They



Fig. 1. Parviz Fattah, head of the ‘Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation’ visiting the flooded areas of Golestan Province. Unknown Photographer; Spring, 2019. The image was criticized by “MoeinDehaz”. Source: www.soraya.news

are fading.” (Adapted from the telegram channel of the critique author).

To perform the “critique of critique” of a specific photograph, based on the historical hermeneutic method, it is required to refer to the hermeneutic elements of the photo to be able to deal with the possible mistakes in Dehaz critique. Based on what has been dealt with in this research, the hermeneutic elements of the present photo can be evaluated based on the content of Dehaz’s critique according to the following order:

The concept of tradition: and its authority, which leads to the formation of immediate and initial prejudgments and preconceptions, that makes a biased view. Applying the terms like “masterpiece” or “directed” indicates beforehand the dominance of traditional thinking on the author’s opinion. A kind of tradition - which is clearly derived from the radical left-wing (economic or political) tendencies. The authority of tradition in the author’s critique is challenging where his biased opinion and prejudgment have no significant connection with the historical analysis of the experienced geography of the flooded people of Golestan Province, and the political geography of the rulers. Such a photograph carries messages of altruism and philanthropy of the rulers in its political context (by considering the historical background of this kind of media photos); although many of these photos take on a purely decorative quality, based on the tradition of the photos of official media press; and in the context of the everyday life of its population category (flooded inhabitants), according to the prejudgment of the Dehaz critique in which- by presuming the government standpoint as a special class, who pays no attention to the difficulties of the flood-it seems we are facing with a kind of preconception. Many government agencies such as the ‘Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation’, the ‘Housing Foundation of Islamic Revolution, banks, and other similar foundations have provided proper facilities for returning the affected people to daily life, which by referring to the published news on the flooded areas its accuracy would be confirmed.

B) The effective historical prejudgment and awareness: Actually, the prejudgment of photo by the critic author about the content of the photograph is completely biased and generalized to Iranian people without paying attention to the geographical conditions of the flooded area, the social environment and the role of non-governmental or governmental institutions in improving the condition; while it is required to be addressed through a correct analytical process (relying on the historical consciousness that restricts the misleading, biased prejudgments, and here awareness of the public experienced contexts of social actors, beliefs, interactions, and traditions. Having historical knowledge of the context of a socio-historical theory must be constituted based on the population historical study in order to limit the intentions and prejudgments of the interpreter. For example, if the critic author was aware of the social history of the flooded people in Golestan Province, which has scientific characteristics (such as the local relations of people in the process of improving the conditions of flooded areas, rural and urban geographical context), and had knowledge about the way of government and private agencies interactions to provide facilities to define criteria and analyze the specific phenomena, would not attribute the presence of four persons at the background of the photo to all the people of Iran. Because the first criteria in sociological theories and history are to consider the limitation of population geography!

C) The logic of conversation against photo and merging the horizons: Basically, this particular photo has a meaning for the critic, who criticizes it enthusiastically, which in turn reveals the conversation logic against the photo. The dialogue that takes place between the interpreter and the text must isolate his prejudgments and merge the conceptual horizon of photo with those of the interpreter. However, since the photo was taken at the same time the text was written by the critic author, the interpreter is not situated at a relative historical distance from it to acquire a historical hermeneutic consciousness of the traditional context in which

photo was used to be analyzed. An effective historical consciousness will lead to an accurate relation of 'query and response' between the text and the audience, only when an effective historical distance from the photographic text has been established, to be able to provide a theoretical analysis of the traditional context in which the photograph was created. Immediate analysis and a rapid critique of a phenomenon does not represent a methodological accuracy, according to a hermeneutic-historical view, and requires founding an appropriate historical distance from that specific phenomenon. The inconsideration of historical distance with the target photo has put the critic author in condition that, instead of having an effective sociological or historical dialogue with the photographic text, which perhaps the general formation of its context is likely to be better understood in the future, has limited him to the superficial expressions such as "being out of the amusement park because they cannot afford to enter the game and so they are sadly disappointed."

D) The hermeneutic cycle of understanding: the relationship between taking this photo of the officials, and the presence of ordinary people in the photo background, has a 'cause-and-effect' relationship with the general conditions and factors of constituting the "government-people" social relations in Iran, and specifically with exploiting the photographic propaganda in public persuasion (these kind of photos are created to influence people, and on the other hand, they are the outcome of the context of the particular Iranian society).

Any disregarding this meaning cycle leads to the formation of a misinterpretation due to the biased presumptions: the critic author considers the distance between government agents and those ordinary people in the background so peculiar that it seems as if they come from another world and are not the outcome of their own social context and tradition. However, in hermeneutic analysis, based on the hermeneutic cycle of understanding it is possible to consider more accurately some other elements in the photo, which are the cause and

effect of recording this specific propaganda photo. The presence of 'Parviz Fattah', who was the head of the 'Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation' at the time, has a semantic relation with the living context of the people (who were inhabitant of Aqqala, county which is formed based on farming and agriculture activities). In other words, it is possible - and recommended - to study a causal relationship founded between the rural (but urbanized) flooded areas and inadequate urban infrastructure and also the effectiveness of foundations such as the 'Crisis Management Organization', the Relief Foundation and 'the Islamic Revolution Housing Foundation', by considering the background of hermeneutic-historical analysis of the target photo.

E) Critic of Photo Criticism: If the critic author paid enough attention to the reason for the obvious prejudgments and biases that appeared in his critique and put them under query by considering the hermeneutic elements of the photograph, then he could have presented an authentic critique. A reliable critic or interpretation does not value an artwork at all, rather ends the process with the evaluation. Moreover, the correct interpretation of an artistic text is not a place for releasing emotional feelings and personal interpretation. Similarly, a photo critic requires to become more familiar with the technical and content of media due to the complex relationship of the photography with the types of new realities that prevail it through the context of media and newfound technologies. The target photo, which is a masterpiece according to its critic author, unlikely, is neither a masterpiece nor so remarkable! It is just among those propaganda media photos which broadcasted within the hard days in the beginning of 1998 in the flooded areas in Iran. Its critical text highly refers to a personal interpretation and could be the outcome of particular emotions or other intents, and therefore, the author's personal interpretation would not necessarily be related to the photograph content. In the process of content analysis, the expressions such as "laughing because of being in the amusement park", "the hands gestures and

sad appearance”, “Standing behind the glass”, and generalizing those four persons at the background to all Iranian people, not only is kind of a cliché, but also is irrelevant and lacks a reliable critic! What is the relation between laughing and amusement park? How hand gestures represent sadness, and does body language in photography justify it?

What does standing behind the glass refer to? It is possible that those four official people were in flood difficulties earlier in their past lives even more than these background people, as according to the side information of photo, probably the presence of people at the background is mainly due to this reason; and finally, what is referring to gradual dying in the background of the photo! specifically, by addressing the fading? However, the row of the wall bricks at the background is completely along with the line of sight (so even in verifying a simple frame, the author has made a technical mistake! The fading or blurring of the background, which is linked to various technical features in photography, has no significance in the target photo; relying on the angle shot, the lens is wide, so it can clearly record the front and background scene, and in the target photo, the people in the background are rather clear!); the critic author, has represented an irrelevant and unreliable text in relation with the photo, within it, the personal interpretation and emotional feelings is obvious from the title to the content.

Conclusion

In the hermeneutic analysis of photography-opposing to what is sometimes considered as a merely audience-based issue arising from the opinions, beliefs, and viewpoints of the audience of the photograph, and thereupon considering any opinion or interpretation as a correct one- only when the analysis and interpretation are targeting the hermeneutic elements of the photograph, and so an accurate photograph interpretation would be expected. In this regard, initially, the foundations of prejudgments, presuppositions, and the responsible mindsets, are verified based on the hermeneutic

knowledge of scientific theories to reveal its correctness or intent; in the next place, considering the tradition on which a photo interpreter deals with the text leads to a series of accurate interpretations that can alter the related process; finally, similar to the hermeneutic cycle of understanding in which there is a mutual and complementary relationship between the components and the whole, photo hermeneutics allows the interpreter to establish an active relationship between 1. the components that constitute the social texture within a photograph, 2. the intentions and beliefs of the author, 3. the constructive tradition of interpretation that explores the text of the photo and 4. To portray a correct analytical interpretation model; So as not to analyze a photograph merely based on the ‘inclination and disinclination’ of social actors or even the ego that an interpreter might have, and not to overlook the theories that improve an interpretation in the hermeneutic analysis process. From this viewpoint, the photo hermeneutic analysis method might comprise all types of interpretation, and critique to provide an effective hermeneutic method in this interpretation process.

Endnotes

1. To prevent any verbal confusion, a couple of hermeneutical terms are explained. The word “interpret” (Tafsir kardan in Persian), exegesis” (especially in the critical interpretation of holy texts), and “construe” (interpretation of a term or a specific gesture) are interchangeably used in English texts. The term “interpretation” means explanation and even translation. In modern hermeneutics, the term hermeneutics involves” interpretation “, which is translated ‘Tavil’ by Persian translators (explanation in detail)”. In this study, the term “tafsir”, or “mofaser (in Persian interpreter)” refers to its hermeneutic meaning and is closer to “Tavil” “.
2. Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (1889-1951).
3. Danto published the article entitled “The ArtWorld” in issue 61 of ‘The Journal of Philosophy’ in 1964. According to him, ‘the expansion of art history terminated around 1964, with the advent of Andy Warhol’ Brillo Boxes (soap Pads), and so we can hardly make a perceptual distinction between an artwork and a daily object. Thus, what distinguishes an artwork from an ordinary object is the existence of an artistic theory; As in any historical era, consciously or unconsciously, there has been a theory to distinguish Art from Non-Art”; however, today, this issue has taken on a new appearance” (see Sharifzadeh & BaniArdalan, 2013).
4. Dickie in explaining the social institution of art, writes: «The formation of the social institution of art several people are required to present, however, to work in the world of art or to act as a representative of this world, and to be qualified for receiving the art dignity, only one person would be enough ... The dignity of perceiving may be acquired through the perception of an individual – a representative for the perception of the artistic reality - of course, nothing prevents a group of people to give such honors, however, it is usually being presented by an individual, the

artist, who is the creator of the artistic reality” (see Dickie, 2007). These two conditions presented by Dickie in ‘Institutional Theory’ are mandatory necessary for the formation of an artwork: The first prerequisite of this definition in different theories, as a constant need, states that an artwork is required to be an artifact object. Dickie considers such artifacts as an inherent feature of art, and in addition to representing the traditional meaning of artifacts that are associated with art, construction and ‘material alteration’, introduces a different meaning of artifacts to be more compatible with the Contemporary concept of Art. In the original sense, he explains it through the concept of giving artificial dignity by a person on behalf of the art world, and as the late and current concept, he explains it through a medium for a specific purpose and in the context of the art world (see Mosayebi, 2015).

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