

The oneiric world of women in the Grete Stern' s photomontages

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Abstract

Grete Stern was a german fotoghaph ad designer. Due to her jewish origins, during Nazism she had to migrate to Argentina. In the 1948 she started a collaboration with the magazine for women *Idillio*, on Buenos Aires. Her task was to represent on a photomontage the dreams of the female readers reported on the letters addressed to the Italian-argentine psychanalist Gino Germani. She looked for and created new immages that allow to part with real world and point out an idea of interior world. In her work she represents dreams through a special critical analysis that, at the same time, record argentine women's concerns of that time: she represented with humour, irony and interest, the discrimination and the conventionalism. Her sharp critical sense of society and morality, represented in most of her photos, often plays with the crisis and the contrast between female submission and recent wind of protest and change. These photomontages are a kind of revelation of obvious, exceptional psychological portraits in which are represented the typical symbolism inherent in the idea of a collective unconscious language. Within psychoanalysis, the significant role of the image in psychic functioning has been recognized from the beginning. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1892-95) Freud says that images are very important to understand hysterical symptoms during the treatment, based on content retrieval of visual hallucinations traumatizing. However, as Contardi (2005) highlights, it's on the book *The interpretation of dreams* (1899) that image becomes the privileged object of psychoanalysis; in this work Freud says that the unconscious finds expression in the dream images and that unconscious contents can be known and may become the subject of a story, starting from the images and their association (Zurlo, 2008).

This work would like to stress not only the relevance of picture as real "technological prosthesis" of the psychic apparatus, that man can use to satisfy their need for assimilation and introjection of experience (Tisseron, 1995), but also the social aspects of complaint carried out by a woman who turns to other women, using the power of image.

Keyword: image, dreams, collective unconscious, women, conflict

Grete Stern was a German photograph ad designer. Due to her Jewish origins, during Nazism she had to migrate to Argentina. In 1948 she started a collaboration with the magazine for women *Idillio*, in Buenos Aires. Her task was to represent on a photomontage the dreams of the female readers, reported on the letters addressed to the Italian-Argentine psychoanalyst Gino Germani. The photomontage—somehow connected to the *decoupage*—art of decorating objects and furnishings with cropped paper, born in Venice in the 1600s—is a derivation of the *collage*, born in 1912 when Picasso and Braque started to put on their picture pieces of wallpaper, playing cards and newspapers (Arestizabal, 2004).

Grete Stern worked under these influences, processing meticulous compositions of objects and lights, often using movie shots. In her photomontages, the mix of different kinds of photos increases composition possibilities, allowing to blend unlikely elements, to create distorted perspectives that give to her work an atmosphere almost surreal (*ibidem*).

She looked for and created new images that allow to part with the real world and point out an idea of an interior world. In her work she represents dreams through a special critical analysis that, at the same time, records Argentine women's concerns of that time: she represented with *humour*, irony and interest, the discrimination and the conventionalism. Her sharp critical sense of society and morality, represented in most of her photos, often plays with the crisis and the contrast between female submission and the recent wind of protest and change (*ibidem*). *Suenos* photomontages worked as illustrations of Prof. Richard Rest's advices, published in the magazine *Idillio* by Gino Germani and Enrique Butelman, two important academics who developed Argentina's Sociology and Psychology. These photomontages are a revelation of obvious, legitimated by an own righted composition, extraordinary psychological portraits in which were represented typical symbols of the collective unconscious (*ibidem*). *Idillio* magazine inserted two important innovations on female editing: the *fotoromanzo* and the column *psychoanalysis will help you*, a kind of *vademecum* for that helped readers to construe themselves their dreams. Stern, with her photomontages, had the task of illustrating this section and the comment of the Italian-Argentine psychoanalyst Gino Germani, who in those days used the pseudonym of Richard Reist (*ibidem*). The photomontage's work was planned. Initially Germani reported to Stern content of the dreams, faithful copy in most of the cases, of one of the many letters sent to the magazine to be interpreted. Sometimes, before working, Stern used to ask Germani information about interpretation. First, photomontages, which represented faithfully the story of the readers told to *Idillio*, had in the center of the artistic composition, images of women, as appears on most of the works. Prevailing issues depended on Germani's interest about analysis and, in this sense, the most useful were dreams which represented conflict situations (*ibidem*). These general determinations—the woman as central character of a conflict situation—coincided with personal Grete's interests, so it made a lucky coincidence for the

hired photographer: a project in which production requirement and personal interests could coincide. In the other side, Germani allowed Grete to work with the freedom to choose images and their combination: relevant topics, anecdotes of the dreams related to the issues. Guidelines with specific issues open and free about artistic performance (*ibidem*). Grete worked convinced that the photomontage could represented what the woman dreamed. After it was printed, picture was useful to Germani to generalize topic represented on the illustration- isolation, sadness, disorientation- and comment it. Certainly, Germani's use of the photomontage conditioned Grete's point of view. This for many reasons.

First of all, there's a prejudice about guidelines of an artistic work. It seems that guidelines have a kind of pre-eminence on the work, when the work is critically examined, as if the idea had already image set in itself. This is not the true, obviously. Photomontage's impression and effect on our sensitivity, suggested associations, originate from his specific and always visual shape. So, Grete's photomontages evoke a personal interpretation, who, outside their nature of illustration about dream's tale, refers to a specific visual shape, made by specific elements mixed in a particular way (Arestizàbal, 2004).

Then, Germani's interpretation was, usually, unambiguous and mandatory. For him, signs have an exact and detailed symbolic representation. Interpretation always ended with the assignment to the dream of a specific e definitive message, emerged from the unconscious. Unconscious was described as a busy agent, working inside mind to reveal symbolically psyche's mysteries (*ibidem*).

When the key becomes clear, dreams becomes diaphanous while image's allusions, direct or indirect, remains obstructed and stifled. Grete made *Idilio*'s work thinking that dream's protagonist, woman dreamer, had to be represented on the picture, in explicit or implicit way. Often, woman play dream's action, like a snapshot of the dream. Other times, camera work as woman's eye, producing subjective sight and introducing a suggestive variant formal. This second kind of picture illustrates feeling's consequences translated on visual product. In this way, photomontage are detached from the story and offer to the user active participation, allow looking with dreamer's eyes and projecting personal feelings on the picture. In the photomontage "*dream of jealousy*", for example, the shot places the viewer inside intimacy between the protagonist and the man. So, viewer participates to adultery's evidence, reflected on man's glasses and had to indentify on his presumptuous mustaches, on arrogant cigarette leaning to his mouth and in his cynical smile, the empty petulance of the professional seducer. So, use of the glasses represent brilliant *escamotage*, which consented Grete to apply on it women's portraits with perfect shot, adding to the man represented on the picture a simulation tone that makes him even more unpleasant (*ibidem*).

Those subjectives photomontages circumvent problems of likelihood, present when dreamer represents dramatically on the picture his experience. Fear, happiness,

discouragement, are ever corresponding to experience; however, feeling's fiction, represented with emphatic gesture on a cold snapshot of the dramatic episode, harms image's likelihood (*ibidem*). "*Fotonovelas*"'s editors well knew it. "*Fotonovelas*" were edited on *Idilio* Magazine at the same time of *Sogni* by Grete Stern. In those editions, actors didn't play feeling on the acme of intensity, but used to take neutral attitudes, contained expressions. So reader could projecting on their faces supposed feelings. Photographic picture it's too likely to allow additional fiction: it ends for seems false. Generally it happens also in Grete's photomontages, where more efficacy originates by neutral character expression. So, result don't originate by empathy but by contrast between discordant elements composing picture (Arestizàbal, 2004).

The central issue developed by Grete Stern on her photomontages

Woman in situation of conflict is the central issue developed by Grete Stern on her photomontages.

What kind of woman? Sure, *Idilio*'s readers. For Richard Rest, this kind of woman belonged to wide social class, from workers or domestics to middle class women, living in big cities, eager to social ascent, successfully alimanted by Peron's government.

The picture *Reliance Dreams* (n°89) has heavy, almost tragic mood: woman, lying on her own anthropophagous's teeth and tongue, like a damned small animal, well dressed and clean, look at the outside world with melancholy stoicism waiting to be chewed. This wonderful work, with his round signs, shock our sensibility as a punch. On the other hand, the image of the female character as a manipulable and manipulated object, is one of the most evocative picture of the series. There, woman is represented not only like victim, but also like actor of her own situation, ever with double role of decorative and functional object.

In the picture *Dreams of chess* (n°109) woman, as pawn, is the Queen of the chessboard. Her long dress and her gloves tell us that she's a lady. However, she's a lady with fixed movement, fixed functions in a fixed space and, above all, she's one of the many pawn that entertain player. Player's male hand isn't visible, but it's possible to imagine his movement while fingers grab Queen by the head and move her across the table to defend or conquer new positions (*ibidem*).

The dream called by Grete *Electric things for the house* processes the same issue; title represents with explicit biting the sense of composition and illustrates the transformation of the female dominant values: becoming a beautiful object of the house. In this picture, it seems evident the utilitarian and interchangeable nature of the cute porcelain figurine, modeling her enchantments for the Lord who dominate her.

The harshest prohomontage who represent woman-object issue, is the number 101, *brush dream*. In this picture female head used as the edge of the brush bend over

brush stroke. It ironizes about hair, one of the most classic and attractive characteristic of women *charme*. Woman's happiness alludes to loving ecstasy...

Grete liked very much this work, so she modified and improved it in a second time. In the new version, background changed, as head's position, and lightly, hand's and brush's perspective. Apparently, change originated by plastics reasons, but other kind of motivations are not to be excluded. In the first composition, brush and hand seem to small on the white tableau. In the second composition, fold of the sheet under girl's head solve this problem and introduce an element of intimacy more than loving ecstasy. *Electric things for the house's* issues are also found in this picture: woman as object for the male, used especially in bed (Arestizàbal, 2004).

Woman accepting humiliation is one very strong element of the picture. It purpose a meditation about women's submission without victim-headsman stereotype. This deep look to women's submission derived by a broader perspective on traditional family's suffocating nature about women's freedom. Grete good knew that. She had to free herself by conventional future that family had planned for her. Grete's family wasn't too tyrannical, so leaving marriage's idea to searching a job wasn't a traumatic event. But sure, women's situation in a world leaded by patriarchal ideals, was an important and oppressive issue for her.

Also on advertising work by Ringl+Pit studio, as established by Maud Lavin, conventional femininity was represented with caustic wit and reprobation. So, critic to female alienation visible in Stern's Works continues and deepens creation line yet present in her life and at the base of her maturation (*ibidem*).

Domination Dreams is another important photomontage. In this work, Grete symbolized woman as a middle-class house's Cerberus. It seems that for several landladies dominate means keep people under control, prisoners inside home like alive decoration. Treated like plants everyone stay on his own vase, showy and well watered, source of prestige for the home. Grete's plants are human severed heads, a kind of trophies that transform bourgeois house in a museum of dissected bodies. Like Lord shows hunting trophies in the lounge for his own pleasure, so the Lady grow her plants. Decorative mutilation, like bourgeois value, expresses disturbing idea, also about political issues.

Idillio's photomontages by Grete Stern are the first and the most important argentine artistic work about woman submission and his alienating consequences (*ibidem*). Publishing this kind of work on one of the most popular female magazine of that time, adds ironic tinge to Grete's biting *Houmor*.

Grete Stern was an edge woman and artist. Dreams series well represents this. She lived her life with the same radical independent spirit exposed on her photomontages. Among others, *Dreams* represents the work in which issues are present with great sharpness already in the image's construction. Opinions are explained by means of plastic and visual conviction, typical of photographic making. Without this work

would be reduced to a simple illustration. Her association between several elements ever offers a moral reflection about subject matter (Priamo, 2004).

Gombrich says that images lie between verbal statements- designated to bring with them a meaning- and nature elements, to which observers attribute meaning. Stern used photography like instrument of denunciation, connection between the inside world and the collectivity.

Illustration like connection between the inside world and the collectivity

In an interesting essay entitled *Images Philosophy* (1997) Jean Jaques Wunenburger, expert of literature scholar of functions of images, symbols and myths, highlights multiplicity, variety and heterogeneity of this kind of representation. This plurality born and takes shapes on the ways covered by images during their creation (Zurlo, 2008).

Image word, in ancient greek language, originate by *eikon* (icon). This concept is available to mental representation as much to material representation of psychical reality. Similarly, the term idol (originated by *eidōs*, that means shape, appearance) presents some contiguity with the concept of unreality and is associated with notion of lie, guise and so the notion of idea (*ibidem*).

In ancient latin language, term whence image word originate are different from ancient greek terms, but express similar semantic plots: the word *imago* contains all the meanings of image word, and approaches to terms like *species* and *simulacrum*, that mean *eidolon* (*ibidem*).

So Wunerburger says that at the semantic level, image seems visible form- *eikon* in greek, *imago* in latin language, *bild* and *gestalt* in german, *picture*, *figure*, *pattern*, *frame* in english- and also dummy content, unreal thing, product of the imaginative. At an intermediate level lies a conception of the image that represents an half way between those two level and conceives image like a mental representation that preserves the perceptual information (*ibidem*).

Among the different uses of the term image emerges, according to Wunerburger, an orientation that connects the semantic 'image to a mixed representation, intermediate, which allows to unite and oppose two plans against: the objective reality, presented by sense experience, and, on the other side, the level of 'abstract information, concepts and ideas by which we equip ourselves with the content of thought. In any case it is necessary to keep in mind, and connect multiple meanings of the word image to capture the value of the 'use of' *eikon* in photography and understand the status of the concept of image in psychoanalysis.

Within psychoanalysis, the significant role of the image in psychic functioning has been recognized from the beginning. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1892-95) Freud says that images are very important to understand hysterical symptoms during the treatment, based on content retrieval of visual hallucinations traumatizing. However, as Contardi(2005) highlights, it's on the book *The interpretation of dreams*(1899) that

image becomes the privileged object of psychoanalysis; in this work Freud says that the unconscious finds expression in the dream images and that unconscious contents can be known and may become the subject of a story, starting from the images and their association (Zurlo, 2008).

With *The interpretation of dreams* psychoanalysis was finally bound to the work on images and so to work on representational world and on processing and representation occurring in the 'psychic apparatus. These processes lead to hysterical and also to oneiric staging, that is figurative expression, on body stage like and on dream (Cotardi, 2005).

The interpretation of dreams introduces the equally important concept of 'image as an intermediate step in the processing work that in analytic therapy leads to 'verbal expression of unconscious content: it is in fact primarily a transposition of images into words. As Cotardi says, *The interpretation of dreams* establishes "the psychic apparatus as a representative system with multiple levels of registration and processing, in which image plays a fundamental role in transition from representations of objects to representations of words", giving centrality "to the study of the representation and the work based on words " (*ibidem*).

According to Freud- like highlights Duparc (1995)- thinking in pictures represents an archaic form of thought, closer to the primary processes of 'unconscious. For this reason, image has the power to connect thought to body, affection and drive.

In the essay entitled *Séduction de l' image, image del la séduction*, Paul Denis (1994) talk about "image's power", power to arouse thoughts and feelings, and encouraging words, writings and actions. The range of image- highlights Denis- extends from elementary visual sensations to the intellectual meanings and runs simultaneously through fantasy register. Seen and analyzed from the point of view of the observer, image's power resides mainly in two aspects. The first aspect, called by Denis the "phantasmatic charge" of image, is the ability of the 'image of awakening ghosts. The second aspect, connected to the first, concerns the functional value of 'image in' psychic economy, that is, the role that image plays in the formation and regulation of affective charges related to the representation, and so, in the organization of relations between psychic reality and external reality (*ibidem*).

As regards the first aspect, the evocative power of a picture depends by the power of an image of activate affective and emotional experiences. Phantasmatic contents activated by images can be the original ghosts described by Freud: the ghosts of the primal scene, the fantasies of seduction, castration ghosts, the ghosts of the family romance, and the ghosts of return to the womb. As Denis points out picture can have this kind of power because uses the gap between the removal mechanisms operating in 'artist- that communicates unconsciously a ghost through his work- and removal mechanisms operating in the observer.

However processes of evocation activated by images are peculiar. Work based on stimulation of the visual channel, in fact, differ from those based on the narrative

channel, because they communicate in a synchronic way while narration made this in a diachronic way. In visual art, so, work is offered as a set simultaneous. Denis say that simultaneous reception isn't associated to an ephemeral experience. On the contrary, picture and photographs make image limited, manipulated, offer to the phantasmatic content a support that ensures it permanence and allow the return to a mode of thought different by the thought system used in the dream. Picture uses primary processes of condensation, displacement, synchronic association of contradictory elements (Denis, 1994).

According to Denis, the use of 'image is isomorphic to the representative processes of the human psyche, because processes that work in image are the same that work to representation. If it is true that for the artist a latent content stay behind the manifest content of the image, for the observer the organization of latent content develops starting from the image in a personal way, inevitably different from the artist as well as from any other observer of the same picture. The vision of image provokes in the viewer a psychic process that 's work is relived as its own creation, which reflects itself and comes from his inner world (*ibidem*).

As Denis points out, image not only active affects and representations, she also had power to organize experience. Image, created by artist ad so by observer, can organize the representative system of the subject. For this reason both production and fruition of works of figurative art may contribute to the development of processes of organization and elaboration of thought (Zurlo, 2008).

This kind of power of images can be usefully applied to face disorganizing effects of trauma on psychic life. If trauma derived from an over stimulation which disorganize representation system, fruition of images can help to overcome the trauma promoting the reconstitution of an investment system organized by a set of representations linked together (*ibidem*). Denis points out that the power of image of activate these processes computing organizers, result, as Freud said, from the absence of the object that stimulates the presentification hallucinatory and both from memory traces reactivated by the experience of satisfaction originally experienced.

According to Denis, the function of the image is to organize the relationship between inner psychic reality and external reality. This function result by the power of image of belong simultaneously to the outside world and the inner world, being meeting point between them (Denis, 1994).

Tisseron (1996) says that the use of 'photographic image can help to stimulate and promote the work of thought processing, assimilation and metabolism of perceptual and emotional experiences, and points out that photographic experience can do that thanks to the link, at the same time metaphorical and metonymic, that it has with the psychic apparatus.

Tisseron says that any photograph testifies to the existence of two complementary mental processes. The first is the psychic assimilation of the components of the experience, a work that starts with sensory-motor processing of perceived reality and

continues with the production of the image. The second is the "freezing" of the experience and its characteristics, largely independent of their establishment and possible assimilation. So, according to Tisseron, camera "Lays down a 'world picture' more or less similar" as well as the psyche fixed representations, effects and body states tied to a situation. " In photographic experience, he says, the experience of image retention shows that the process of introjection of the 'experience has already been started. At the same time, there is a desire that the elements of the 'experience can be taken for further processing and related functions. So, according to Tisseron, photography can be a container, an enclosure that houses the different elements of the perceived real 'object in the scene, returning it to the processes of activation and creation of containers on a psychic level.

Conclusions

This work would like to stress not only the relevance of picture as real "technological prosthesis" of the 'psychic apparatus, that man can use to satisfy their need for assimilation and introjection of experience (Tisseron, 1995), but also the social aspects of complaint carried out by a woman who turns to other women, using the power of 'image. In '40s Buenos Aires, art became social dialogue thanks to the Peronist party. Isn't a coincidence that one of the battles fought and won by Evita Perón was the one that led to the recognition of the equality of civil and political rights between men and women, with Law 13010 filed on 23 September 1947. Her commitment to the dignity of women was constant and took her on July 26, 1949 to the founding of the Female Peronist Party (PPF).

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