

SEEING OTHERS THROUGH PHOTOBOOKS: MONSANTO®, PHOTOGRAPHY AND EVIDENCE

VER A OTROS A TRAVÉS DE FOTOLIBROS: MONSANTO®, FOTOGRAFÍA Y EVIDENCIA

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the photobook *Monsanto*®: *A Photographic Investigation* by documentary photographer Mathieu Asselin. First, photobooks are addressed from a semiotic perspective, specifically using Roman Jakobson's functions of language. Then, in this case, the difference between photobooks and photojournalism is understood partly as a matter of time, as photobooks usually report on events that are not current. Next, *Monsanto*® is considered in relation to the tradition of photobooks on warfare, especially *Agent Orange: "Collateral Damage" in Viet Nam* by Philip Jones Griffiths and *War against War!* by Ernst Friedrich. Asselin relates victims of war to victims of corporate capitalism, overcoming the colonial difference between Western soldiers and Eastern victims, and delving deeply into the causes of warlike capitalism. *Monsanto*® also reflects decisions on the limits of photography to show the world and, therefore, on visibility. Unlike Friedrich, Asselin assumes that photography does not have to visually feature everything mentioned in the book. What is more, the captions provide essential information and some photographs are only meant to show what Asselin witnessed. Finally, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's considerations about evidence are used to understand how photography is meant to be evidence of facts, which could lead pictures to precede and create the event they report.

KEYWORDS: Monsanto®, Mathieu Asselin, photobook, photography, photojournalism

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza el fotolibro *Monsanto*®: *a Photographic Investigation* del fotógrafo documental Mathieu Asselin. En primer lugar, se abordan los fotolibros desde una perspectiva semiótica, especialmente empleando las funciones de Roman Jakobson, y después, en este caso, se entiende parcialmente la diferencia entre fotolibros y fotoperiodismo como una cuestión de tiempo, ya que los fotolibros suelen informar sobre hechos que no están de actualidad. Después, se considera *Monsanto*® en relación con la tradición de los fotolibros bélicos, especialmente *Agent Orange: «Collateral Damage» in Viet Nam*, de Philip Jones Griffiths, y *War against War!*, de Ernst Friedrich. Asselin relaciona a las víctimas de la guerra con las víctimas de las corporaciones capitalistas, superando la diferencia colonial entre los soldados occidentales y las víctimas orientales, y profundizando en las causas del capitalismo bélico. *Monsanto*® también toma decisiones sobre los límites de la fotografía para presentar el mundo y, por ende, sobre la visibilidad. A diferencia de Friedrich, Asselin asume que la fotografía no tiene que representar visualmente todo lo que se cuenta en el libro, además, los pies de foto brindan información esencial y algunas fotografías solo pretenden mostrar lo que Asselin presenció. Finalmente, se utilizan las consideraciones de Nassim Nicholas Taleb sobre evidencias para comprender cómo la fotografía se destina a ser evidencia de hechos, lo que podría llevar a que las imágenes precedan y creen el evento relatado por ellas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Monsanto®, Mathieu Asselin, fotolibro, fotografía, fotoperiodismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

«E come a li orbi non approda il sole
 così a l'ombre quivi ond' io parlo ora
 luce del ciel di sé largir non vole:
 ché a tutti un fil di ferro i cigli fóra
 e cusce, sì come a sparvier selvaggio
 si fa però che queto non dimora.
 A me pareva, andando, fare oltraggio
 veggendo altrui, non essendo veduto:
 per ch'io mi volsi al mio consiglio saggio»¹ (Alighieri, Canto XIII vv. 67-75; 2003, pp. 206-208).

In Dante Alighieri's journey through the Purgatory, he comes across these souls who sinned with envy, and feels embarrassment because they are not able to see him as well. Dante assumes responsibility for his look in front of people who however cannot look, and transmits this conscience to his readers. Looking is an interference – as photography is – because this constitutes the mean through readers will know what he witnesses.

As a Dantestic travel, the photobook *Monsanto*®: *a Photographic Investigation* by Mathieu Asselin (2019) consists of pictures and written texts integrated in book support, and revolves around the more than one hundred years of American corporation Monsanto®'s harmful practices. Monsanto® environmental impact in America and Vietnam is addressed in depth – harmful to nature, cities and people – as well as the abusive conditions imposed to farmers, and its financial, lucrative activities.

That is not a current, new issue. According to Asselin², *Monsanto*®'s success is a matter of «timing», when the fight against the multinational was at its peak in Europe and *Monsanto*® Papers³ saw the light. Monsanto®'s activities have been addressed in press by authors like Soren Seelow (2012), and more in depth by Marie-Monique Robin (2008 and 2014), who moreover influences and collaborates in *Monsanto*®. Then, some important questions are: what is striking on *Monsanto*®? Why is it worth studying? What does it bring to the subject as a photobook that is different? This key issue will be discussed throughout the three sections of this article.

Photobooks have been widely addressed by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger (2004, 2009 and 2014) in a three-volume study, but in this article Roman Jakobson's communication scheme will serve to study *Monsanto*®, which will also be analysed in relation to photojournalism and documentary, whose link with reality is non-fictional, too. As a documentary photographer independent from journalism, Asselin chooses photobooks as a privileged way to create and to communicate⁴.

Photography has widely denounced warfare atrocities, and the official dialectical speech that promotes and keeps conflicts, as well (Griffin, 1999). Warfare photobooks tradition will serve to examine *Monsanto*®,

1 «And as the sun does not reach the blind, so to the shades there of whom I speak now the light of heaven does not grant itself: for each had his eyelids pierced and sewn by an iron wire, as we do to a wild sparrowhawk because it will not be still. It seemed to me as I walked that I was transgressing in seeing others, not being seen: so I turned to my wise counsellor» (Alighieri, 2003, pp. 207-209).

2 Cannock, Alejandro León (2019). Entrevista a Mathieu Asselin: «Tanto en un fotolibro como en una exposición, cada gesto tiene que estar justificado». *LUR*. Available in: <https://e-lur.net/dialogos/mathieu-asselin/> [cited May 6th 2021].

3 In March 2017 in the United States, a class action lawsuit against Monsanto® allowed internal documents of the multinational to be released. These showed that Monsanto® manipulated scientific reports and bribed the press, among other activities. Consequently, the judge ordered the declassification of a big deal of the documentation of plaintiffs and the corporation. These are the so-called *Monsanto Papers*.

4 According to Asselin, «para mí la idea de hacer un fotolibro fue clave para comenzar a pensar el proyecto, incluso antes de hacer fotos» («for me the idea of making a photobook was key to start thinking about the project, even before taking pictures» [my translation]) (Cannock, 2019).

mainly due to Asselin’s attention to the biological arm Agent Orange used by the American army in Vietnam War. Monsanto® devised this containing-dioxin herbicide, which was used to spray and destroy forests in Vietnam.

Finally, *Monsanto*® will be analysed at the crossroads of what is apparent and representable, in other words, what *can* be seen and what *must* be exhibited. Asselin uses photography aiming to bear witness of reality, but his pictures overcome the obligation of making visible the reported event, by being aware that photography is not obliged to feature everything.

This article will argue indeed that when photography has no obligation to prove a fact but only to exhibit an investigation result through their means, pictures are likely to avoid the need to resort to fakes or previously prepared images, and on the other hand, they are also likely to display aesthetic strategies in order to be more pragmatically effective.

2. WHY A PHOTOBOOK TO INVESTIGATE?

As messages to be interpreted, photobooks are in the middle of Jakobson’s (1987) communication scheme, first applied to verbal text. According to Jakobson (1987, p. 66), the factors in the communication schema determine the functions of language, which are not exclusive to any kind of text but predominant. The following schema (Figure 1) addresses photobooks in the crossroads of four functions: referential, poetic, emotive, and metalingual, depending on the factor focussed – context, message, addresser, and code.

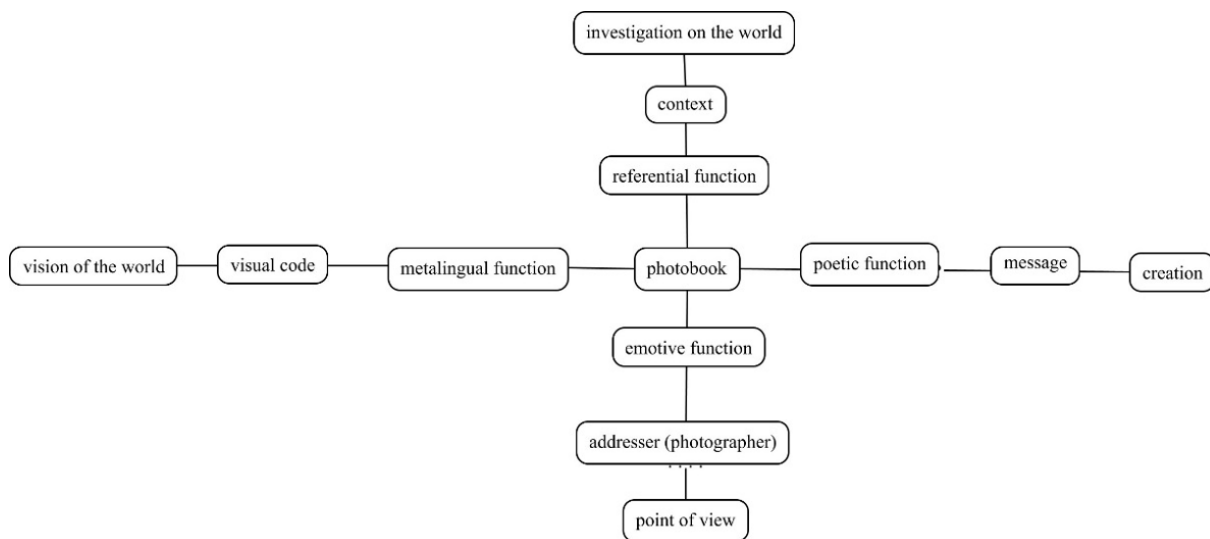


Figure 1. Photobook at the crossroad of Jakobson’s functions. Prepared by the author on Jakobson (1987).

The referential function focuses on the context, therefore this function would be predominant in *Monsanto*®, defined as an investigation into the world. According to Asselin, investigating does not mean going to the effects of things but to the causes, as a result of dealing with new ways of representing extensively covered issues (Cannock, 2019: § 42). Going to the causes is also a semiotic attitude of interpreting signs. In fact, Umberto Eco (1984, p. 37) explains the difference between diagnostic sign and prognostic sign: the first one «goes back from the effect to the cause», while the second one «goes from the cause to its possible effects». *Asselin’s diagnostic* attitude seeks a prognostic aim: how the future looks like from Monsanto®’s path. However, as Eco (1984, p. 38) also explains, «the necessity of scientific evidence has little in common with the necessity of semiotic evidence». This way of understanding causes will go on to be addressed in the following section.

On the other hand, investigation is a key word in journalism, a non-fictional discourse, too. Asselin refers to the differences between documental and journalistic photography as follows:

«The differences are many and they have already been discussed extensively; in my case, the most important difference is in the freedom of artistic representation, subjectivity, aesthetics, etc., which, contrary to photojournalism, allows us not only to document but also to interpret the subject we photograph, thanks to the fact that we are not tied to the temporality of the facts or to the norms of photojournalism – which seem important to me»⁵.

He refers a different timing between photojournalism and photobooks: urgency vs. waiting. This could be the result of photograph as a technology tied to time: time of exposition and to be on time for any event. As in any technology, the first drawback can be mitigated (Greenwood, 2019), but not the second one.

Monsanto[®] is the result of conducting a five-year investigation into the «100-year history» of Monsanto[®] (Asselin, 2019), which is not even finished. Although there are exceptions, photobooks do not usually harbour current news, conversely to traditional magazines and new places on the internet – the so-called «Twitter revolution» made by mobile phone's citizens (Gynnild, 2019). In comparison, books are objects to be designed and to be planned parallel to their subjects, unrushedly, so what is not apparent immediately could be noted later, such as Agent Orange's malformations in new born children. This leads photobooks to exhibit their time of investigation, as will be seen.

In Asselin's previous quotation (Cannock, 2019), he went on to suggest another difference between photojournalism and photobooks: the freedom to develop an aesthetic dimension and a proper interpretation in his work. An equivalent of Jakobson's poetic function, which focusses on the message, can be found in photobooks. Extrapolated from linguistics to art, this function results in more attention to the aesthetic dimension, and can derive from the difference of time explained above, but not only⁶. It is not just about transmitting world information but *how* this information is transmitted: this is the reason why non-novel subjects are thought as major creative challenges by Asselin.

The chapter where the aesthetic dimension is more exploited is «The Stock Market», about Monsanto[®]'s share price and its merger with German multinational Bayer, by making numeral information visually striking. There is a graph on the depreciation of Bayer and some pages designed with columns of numbers about its market value. Although these result empty after the revealing of the rest of the book, these neat stacks of information present a harmony composition for lookers at stock-market, another encrypted and encoded way of visually interpreting the world.

The following picture in this chapter is a montage, outside of orthodox documentary practices: this is a pseudo-event⁷ press picture⁸ about the agreement between Monsanto[®] and Bayer, in a silhouette effect⁹ more suitable for publicity or art, next to a sentence taken from Monsanto Papers: «We can't afford to lose one dollar of business» (Asselin, 2019, pp. 156-157). There is no contradiction to the documentary purpose of the photobook, but a variety of ways of representing that individualize each one and therefore the multiple ways in which reality takes shape. Moreover, the private sentence and the public picture – both denatured by the same black style – suggest that Monsanto[®]'s affairs are a matter of visibility policy, which

5 «Las diferencias son muchas y ya se ha hablado de ellas extensamente; en mi caso, la diferencia más importante está en la libertad de representación artística, la subjetividad, la estética, etc., que, contrariamente al fotoperiodismo, permite no solamente documentar, sino también interpretar el tema que fotografiamos, gracias a que no estamos atados a la temporalidad de los hechos ni a las normas —que me parecen importantes— del fotoperiodismo» (my traslation) (Cannock, 2019).

6 Although the point of this article focuses on the essential role of time, this is not always determining. Some current, journalistic pictures show aesthetic dimensions, such as Samuel Aranda's 2011 winning picture of World Press Photo about revolts in Yemen, of Baroque reminiscences.

7 Pseudo-events are defined as «non-spontaneous events, as happenings planned primarily for the purpose of generating news coverage (...) for example, interviews, press releases, press conferences, and photo opportunities» (Ferrucci, 2019, p. 1290).

8 14th September 2016. Bayer acquires Monsanto for \$66B cash. *Processing Magazine*. Available in: <https://www.processingmagazine.com/news-notes/article/15586732/bayer-acquires-monsanto-for-66b-cash> [cited May 7th 2021].

9 The silhouette effect is a kind of optical transformation of iconic signs similar to the negative effect (Groupe Mu, 1992).

is key in dealing with the world: what is apparent, what must be exhibited, and what is not allowed to be seen, too.

The metalingual function, which stresses the code, is a complex dimension in an intermedial object made of different sign systems that relate to each other. In addition to the linguistic code, there is an essential visual code in photobooks that can also be analysed by semiotics, both in pictures and in book designs. Asselin usually refers to the importance of Ricardo Báez's designs for *Monsanto*¹⁰, determinant in «The Stock Market», for example.

At this point, two key assertions with regard to photobooks should be indicated. Firstly, the visual code is not exclusive to pictures, drawings or photographs, but every representation, because visibility is certainly not synonymous with iconism. Eco (1976, p. 207) suggests that the variety of phenomena considered iconic signs might possess «conventionalized properties», which were exclusively thought for symbolic signs, such as words. Indeed, a clear border between totally iconic signs and symbolic conventionalized ones can doubtfully be delimited. Conversely, Barthes (1977a, p. 36) finds it possible for photography to have a «non-coded iconic message», which means a non-conventionalized message and therefore non-ideologized. This idea implies both: that a qualitative difference between photographs and other kinds of iconic pictures such as drawings indeed exists, and that some photographs are not actually encoded. As will be explained, these differences are not such.

Secondly, visual code should not be confused with visual media. From a communicative point of view, media are defined as channels, and painting, film, television, and photography are among those that give prominence to visibility. Dealing with either any pure medium or any mere material conception of medium outside of cultural practices is problematic (Mitchell, 2005). Photography cannot be understood unless it is defined as a historical and cultural phenomenon.

Conversely to photojournalism, photobooks may use several visual codes more consciously. This is the case of *Monsanto*[®]. Two publicity, propaganda sections open and close the photobook exposing advertising slogans, firstly with their original images, and finally without them, a choice that brings into play several visual codes. Barthes (1977b, p. 20) analysed such kind of publicity images and their «connotation procedures», which can also be noted in documentary. Indeed, Asselin's documentary pictures *visually* analyse their visual code, for example, including photographs within the pictures. This will be exemplified in the following section.

Finally, the emotive function focuses on the addresser, who is a photographer in *Monsanto*[®]'s case. Asselin only uses his words for a brief introduction, without any first person pronoun but only the noun-phrase «this project» (Asselin, 2019, p. 5). Nevertheless, the photobook does not result in an impersonal object, because the lack of a voice is replaced by the presence of a look whose author is not portrayed: Asselin prefers to use photography to show his own investigation conducting. In the middle of some pages of newspaper clippings, two pictures exhibit the «microfilm machine and cartridge», including one of the clippings previously reproduced (Asselin, 2019, pp. 110-111). Asselin is behind the camera but plastic gloves and a pencil remains him, as well as a wall clock freezes the time of researching. The investigation subject is Asselin, while the object is the act of examining the world or rather of examining world representations. This suggests that this picture is a mirror image of the reader, who is invited to go on to consider Asselin's world representation with a critical gaze, too.

After tempting to analyse *Monsanto*[®] through the roll of four Jakobson's functions of language, a provisional definition may be established. Photobooks are intermedial, unitary texts in book support, which allow words and images to share space in different proportion – the book as «a specific “event”» (Parr and Badger, 2004, p. 7). In cases like *Monsanto*[®]'s, the no-current time of events leads them to be documentary rather than photojournalism, and therefore they do not focus exclusively on the context (referential function) but are able to give more importance to the message (poetic function), the code (metalingual function), and the

10 Asselin, Mathieu. «Monsanto: una investigación fotográfica», de Mathieu Asselin. *LUR*. Available in: <https://e-lur.net/mathieu-asselin-comenta-su-fotolibro-monsanto-una-investigacion-fotografica/> [cited May 6th 2021].

addresser (emotive function). This results in a non-fictional message without any predominant function, but each one puts each resource at the service of the message to be understood better.

Having said that, the question of why to choose a photobook to investigate, and specifically, why *this* photobook, still remains. *Monsanto*® is not the most exhaustive investigation compared to the several hundred pages written by Robin (2014). Despite of following closely Robin's timeline, Asselin does not addresses some issues about Monsanto®, such as the bovine growth hormone, a transgenic hormone developed to increase milk production of cows. *Monsanto*® is rather a personal supplement that takes advantage of its visual media, which transpires from how Asselin and Robin quote the sentence from a Monsanto®'s internal letter «We can't afford to lose one dollar of business». In *Monsanto*®, firstly the original document is reproduced, and secondly this is part of the montage in «The Stock Market» addressed above (Asselin, 2019, pp. 32-33, pp. 156-157). Asselin exploits both, original records' documentary value as visual objects, and the suggestive meaning of sentences to create an aesthetic imagetext relationship.

Monsanto® particularly confronts readers with pictures. Being photographer, Asselin finds photobooks a suitable genre to exhibit his pictures. As Sontag (2003, p. 119) points out, «space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in a modern society», yet this space could be books for both words and pictures. Not by chance does Sontag's essay revolve around images of pain, such as warfare ones. In the following section, the relationship between *Monsanto*® and the previous tradition of warfare photobooks will be addressed.

3. WARFARE PICTURES: FROM PHOTOJOURNALISM TO PHOTOBOOK

Monsanto® focusses on this corporation's activities from a diagnostic and a prognostic point of view – looking to the past and fearing the future¹¹ – or rather, capitalism destructive consequences from large corporations (see Achbar and Abbott, 2003; Harari, 2014). Yet it is especially tackled in the final chapter «The Stock Market», the attention to capitalism activities goes through the whole book, among which war is one more, something evident in how *Monsanto*® easily join warfare photobooks tradition.

The relationship between war and capitalism is complex: although the correlation does not seem totally clear (Coulomb and Fontanel, 2012), evidences suggests that modern warfare dimensions take advantage of capitalism activities – in other words, warfare became a fruitful military industry. According to Yuval Noah Harari (2014, p. 417), world enjoys a global unprecedented peace because of market pre-eminence: «while war became less profitable, peace became more lucrative than ever». However, military industry continues to develop, therefore capitalism may not need warfare to go on to create warfare casualties. This means that warfare consequences do not disappear as a result of corporation economic activity, neither do victims with health problems by chemical warfare¹².

Contrary to the official division between soldiers and civilians, and between two different sides in warfare, Asselin evidences that health problems are not only produced by official warfare actions – like American army spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam. Any civilian exposed to harming-health products can certainly be affected; even worse, Monsanto's pressure to farmers and GMO-seeds threaten health globally:

«The new generation of GMOs comes with dramatic environmental and social consequences for all the regions of the world where they are cultivated, principally the United States, Brazil, Argentina, India and Canada. The dependence of GMO crops on pesticides is undeniable; since their emergence, crop yields are no higher, and world hunger continues to rise» (Asselin, 2019, p. 118).

That is part of the world peace imposed on current «World Empire» (Harari, 2014, p. 419).

11 «Looking at the company's past and present, this project aims to picture what *Monsanto*®'s near future will look like» (Asselin, 2019, p. 3).

12 Some examples are the cases of Minamata disease by mercury poisoning, and victims of uranium. According to Smith and Smith (1972), in Minamata, Japan, Chisso corporation dropped wastewater between 1932 and 1968 where people fished. Some symptoms are similar to Agent Orange ones (Griffiths, 2003, p. 96). On the other hand, it is a fact that the uranium used in war is a surplus of industry in USA: «The Department of Defense is delighted to off-load some of that waste onto arms manufacturers, gratis, in the form of depleted uranium» (Nixon, 2011, p. 212).

Rob Nixon rightly expanded the range of warfare victims by this concept of «slow violence», which covers victims whose wounds do not manifest immediately: «What about those casualties that don't fit the photographic stereotypes, casualties that occur long after major combat has been concluded, casualties whose belatedness and dispersal make them resistant to dramatic packaging?» (Nixon, 2011, p. 200). «Slow» is a matter of time required to note war consequences, and a matter of visibility, as damage has to be perceived. Nixon focuses on biological arms used during Gulf War and Afghanistan War, linked with a wide range of health problems suffered by civilians and soldiers.

The label «chemical industry victims» is inaccurate because it is unable to point who are actually their victims, but it could be understood better from the «forward-backward problem» explained by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010). Imaging an ice cube melting and consequently resulting in a puddle (the forward process) is easier than considering a puddle of water and from it guessing the ice cube (backward process), because «the puddle may not have necessarily originated from an ice cube» (Taleb, 2010, p. 196). By extrapolating this idea, Agent Orange and uranium can be considered by their composition as the *cause* of diseases such as cancers with a high degree of certainty. Conversely, guessing the influence of such chemical products on cancer proliferation is certainly more difficult, because cancer has multiple causes and the direct exposition to the product needs to be demonstrated.

Monsanto[®] tells the story of several slow violence, corporation, chemical industry victims, analysed below in light of warfare photobooks and photojournalism. Warfare is explicitly addressed in one chapter, in which the following question is posed: «Can we, in all decency, deny that Viet Nam is a victim of chemical warfare?» (Asselin, 2019, p. 57). Nevertheless, the whole book does explore a wider range of capitalism chemical industry victims.

«2, 4, 5—T Agent Orange» focuses on this herbicide's uses and casualties in America and Vietnam War. This is divided in two parts preceded by two bodies of written texts: the first one explains the production of this chemical product, while the second one goes on to explain the spraying of the product over Vietnam. Archival material is used, especially pictures, either from people or taken by Asselin, which portrays American and Vietnamese victims: not only people directly exposed to Agent Orange but also second and third generation casualties. Sometimes health problems are not apparent, but other times diseases and malformations in their bodies can be easily seen.

The Agent Orange was further addressed in a previous photobook: *Agent Orange. «Collateral Damage» in Viet Nam*, by Philip Jones Griffiths, a photographer who also reported in depth Vietnam War in his previous photobook *Vietnam Inc.* In *Agent Orange*, Griffiths focusses on the ecological destruction of forests – the ecocide that was the first objective – and on alive and dead slow violence victims. Yet two differences stand out in *Monsanto*[®]: the attention to American side victims, and the portraying of diseases and casualties that are not so visually striking. These two key choices will determine the rest of this article: the first one will be addressed below, while the next section will focus on the second one.

The first point – the inclusion of American victims – is essential in a photobook devoted to Monsanto[®]'s victims in America, but this is not an obvious choice. Griffiths portraits landscapes and people only from Vietnam and Cambodia, and despite not being oblivious to soldier victims, he only exhibits their offspring because there are no pictures from other authors than him. The following caption is revealing of his standpoint:

«Ton Nhu Cam Nhung, 10, has spina bifida, is deaf and suffers from epilepsy when the weather changes. Her father, who fought with the Americans during the war, says: "America has a responsibility to help our sick children"» (Griffiths, 2003, p. 136).

An erroneous delimitation between *them* and *us*, more typical of the colonialist vision of some sectors of photojournalists, which results from Griffiths regarding Vietnamese casualties as the real victims.

Warfare photojournalism has a long and discussed tradition, developed at the same time that camera technology, from static scenes to dynamic ones (Griffin, 1999 and 2010), therefore dead and injured bodies were



Figure 2. Ton Nhu Cam Nhung photographed by Griffiths (2003, p. 136). This is the image referred to in the above quote, a close-up of the child in the same black-and-white style as the rest of the photobook. © Magnum Photos.

more liable to be photographed in warfare, as well as destroyed cities and devastated landscapes. Such indescribable events could nevertheless be watched in photographs: cameras were promptly attracted by war because «a primary mission of photojournalism is to create the images that offer proof. The presence of the photojournalist allows creation of visual confirmation that something occurred» (Greenwood, 2019, p. 1187).

However, photojournalism usually stands up for governments' official propaganda to create a favourable climate for war. According to Griffin,

«Every war necessarily involves competing propaganda and no image remains insulated from such machinations. Therefore, a full consideration of any image of war must include an analysis of the conditions under which the image is produced and the institutional practices by which the image is distributed, selected for display or publication, and reproduced across media formats» (Griffin, 2010, p. 8).

For example, Griffin (1999, p. 151) points out that during the Gulf War, pictures of American victims were not exhibited until a few months later, in order to give the image of a high-tech commercial victory.

Although photobooks may avoid some photojournalism disadvantages, however they do not lack of its very contradictions, such as Griffiths' colonialist choice of victims in *Agent Orange*. War was used to maintain the imperialist policy of Western countries (Coulomb and Fontanel, 2012) so was photography. As raw materials and human resources, images are indeed a commodity for Western eyes. Sontag (2003, p. 72) explains the colonialist treatment of victims, taking advantage from their «injured bodies»: «This journalist custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – that is, colonized – human beings».

Griffiths's discourse is a double-edged sword because this accuses American government of having caused such hideous victims among Vietnamese people, but at the same time this gives a false security, because this would only happen *there*, far from the voyeuristic looking *here*. This is indeed an aesthetic choice: an alienating black-and-white style that portrays the *Other*. Conversely, Asselin avoids differences between *there* and *here*, *them* and *us*, without giving colonialist food for western eyes; therefore, from a photographic point of view, there is no difference to feature American and Vietnamese people.

As it was said, Griffiths does not exhibit pictures of soldiers but only offspring. Conversely, the use of archival and personal material made by Asselin leads to cultivate an aesthetic of contrasts. In «2, 4, 5—T Agent Orange», there is the picture of Heather Bowser, daughter of a Vietnam soldier, «born with several fingers and part of her right leg missing» (Asselin, 2019, p. 63). This is a studio picture and she is posing against a black background, as some of the other victims of Agent Orange. When turning the page, there is another picture in colour with the caption «Heather Bowser holds a photograph of her father» (Asselin, 2019, p. 63): in a black background her mutilated hand holds a black-and-white picture of a man that stands out.

Two different planes are juxtaposed: past vs. present – black-and-white vs. colour – father vs. daughter. Not only is his hand holding the picture, but there is also a visible metonymy of her disease. The contrast between both planes produces a narrative effect of cause and effect: dramatically, her father’s time results an unconscious bubble of what surrounded him, the Orange Agent and his daughter’s hand. In a new contrast, a picture of Heather when she was an infant is featured in the next page, on a black background, leaving open the question of what is to come, whether the next hand – generation – would be mutilated.

Such montages have no room in Griffiths’s photobook. However, Asselin’s narrative between pictures seeks for a more effective communication of the message by focusing on the visual code. When a photograph is the subject of photography, the metalingual function is predominant, leading to significant connotations, which could be thought as a wake-up call on the importance of time with regard to chemical problems: even though some side effects are not immediately appreciated, they may appear later.

Like in other wars, in Vietnam babies and children – even foetuses – were also victims, and pictures made them visible, too. In *Monsanto*[®] and in *Agent Orange*, the pictures that probably disturb more are those of deformed foetuses at Tû Dû Obstetrics Hospital in Vietnam, saved for science. Both Asselin and Griffiths take individual, face-up pictures: Asselin individualizes them by black background, while Griffiths unifies them by black-and-white images. Well singled out, they can be watched in detail.



Figure 3. Griffiths (2003). Deformed foetuses at Tû Dû Obstetrics Hospital in Vietnam photographed by Griffiths. Although the photographic style is different, these are the same foetuses that Asselin photographs for her work, also with several close-ups. © Magnum Photos.

... en de invaliede proletariër bij zijn dagelijksche „sport“.

... und der kriegsverletzte Proletarier bei seinem täglichen „Sport“.



... and the war-wounded proletarian at his daily “sport”.

... et le prolétaire mutilé dans la guerre, exécutant son « sport » quotidien.

Figure 4. Page 203 of *War against War!*, where the photograph of a mutilated man appears with the legend written in four languages. © 1924 Ernst Friedrich published with permission The Real Comet Press from their 1987 first U.S. Edition.

Children victims' pictures are not stranger to warfare photo-journalism, like those about the My Lai massacre in Vietnam taken by Ron Haerberle. These exhibit a group of women and children shortly after being killed by the American army in 1968, but the pictures came to light one year after in the journal *Life* (Wingo, 1969). Becoming a photojournalistic icon of Vietnam War thought such a shocking scenery¹³, one of Haerberle's pictures was later used by three members of the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) Poster Committee (Fraser Dougherty, John Hendricks and Irving Petlin) as a poster with the caption «W. And Babies? A: And Babies» (Schlegel, 1995, p. 56).

These pictures are example of the possible difference between photojournalism and photobook in some cases as a matter of time. Journalists need to reduce time between the event and its report, which should be transmitted in the most faithful way – its climax is the picture taken. This is key in «the eyewitness function of photographers» (Gynnild, 2019, p. 1631), which does not exhibit events as having been happened but as being happening. Conversely, neither the victims nor photographers have to witness any battle live in the chemical warfare addressed by these photobooks.

As slow victims, babies in formaldehyde glass jars are not a current new, and their pictures do not need to be urgently taken. They did not live the war directly but are an eternal remind of its destruction. Indeed, they seems to challenge the need to report the news as soon as possible as they remain ignored in their room.

In warfare photobooks tradition, there is a milestone that *Monsanto*[®] may echo: *War against War!* by Ernst Friedrich. First edited in 1924, this work is composed by more than two hundred of photographs and drawings juxtaposed to written text, in order to exhibit the hideous reality of warfare – people, cities and landscapes victims of First World War. Friedrich also tries to denounce the ideological discourse on war heroism by combining pictures and words in a revealing and striking way.

Michele Martini (2017) divides *War against War!* in three clusters of pictures: «pictures of dead soldiers», «violence against non-combatants» and «photographs of mutilated veterans»; the last one is also divided in «mutilations» and «the Visage of the War». In the last cluster, Friedrich uses especially harsh pictures of victims severely affected for ever, suffering from limb loses and mutilated faces. These soldiers are not dead but they actually cannot recover from wounds, as slow victims of *Monsanto*[®]: in both cases «they bring *with* them and have *on* them the mark of war» (Martini, 2017). Yet these pictures were not thought to be seen: these are medical record made by and for a scientific purpose (Van Bergen, de Mare and Meijman, 2010; Martini, 2017). Decontextualizing medical pictures certainly serves to attract attention, as foetuses saved for science do. According to Martini (2017), this is a matter of visibility on what can and cannot be seen.

Pictures and words in *War against War!* are aesthetically used to result more eloquent, like in Asselin's work. However, Freidrich's faith in photography's truth and its capacity to change the world is closer to Griffiths's. According to Friedrich (1987, p. 22), pictures in his book «show records obtained by the inexorable, incorruptible photographic lens, of the trenches and the mass graves, of “military lies”, of the “field of honour”, and of other “idylls” of the “Great Epoch”». Having everything into consideration, an assessment on portraying diseases and casualties that are not visually shocking – on visibility – will be following made.

4. THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIUM: WHAT IS NOT VISIBLE NOR REPRESENTABLE?

What is on the base of Griffiths and Friedrich's documentary works is the myth of «visual credibility», as well as in photojournalism (Gynnild, 2019, p. 1631). Yet this poses two issues on photography, need of verisimilitude and obligation of representing, which lead to the important problem in documentary of faked pictures. After defining photobooks and focusing on warfare tradition, the argument of this article will finally be addressed: without photography's documentary obligation of providing proofs, pictures can avoid fakes and display other aesthetic strategies. The analysis of *Monsanto*[®] suggests some ways that this change in visibility might be possible from documentary.

Not only does photography truth in photojournalism have to be truthful, but it essentially has to seem verisimilar: «credible and truthful» (Gynnild, 2019, p. 1631). In fact, this is the engaging effect of photography, which «convey a direct and authentic sense of real events» (Griffin, 2010, p. 9). However, the promise of reality con-

13 The only difference is the fact that it is not clear why Haerberle took that picture (Schlegel, 1995).

„De edelste deugden van den mensch ontwikkelen zich in den oorlog!“ (Graaf Moltke.) In den oorlog der Spanjaarden tegen de, om hunne onafhankelijkheid strijdende Marokkanen, hebben Spaansche soldaten den gevangenen het hoofd afgeslagen en opgespieetst.

„Die edelsten Tugenden der Menschen entfalten sich im Krieg!“ (Graf Moltke.) Im Krieg der Spanier gegen die ihre Unabhängigkeit verteidigenden Marokkaner haben spanische Soldaten den Gefangenen die Köpfe abgeschlagen und aufgespießt.



“The noblest virtues of men are developed in war!” (Count Moltke.) In the war of the Spaniards against the Moroccans fighting for their independence, the Spanish soldiers cut off the heads of their prisoners and stuck them on poles.

« Les vertues d'hommes les plus nobles florissent dans la guerre. » (comte Moltke.) Pendant la guerre des Espagnoles contre les Marocains défendant leur indépendance, des soldats espagnols ont coupé et enfermé les têtes aux prisonniers.

Figure 5. Presumably, this image would be a fake (Friedrich, 1987, p. 243). © 1924 Ernst Friedrich published with permission The Real Comet Press from their 1987 first U.S. Edition.

fronts readers with the threat of fake. Presumably, *War against War!* contains one faked picture, which does not override the veracity of the others but can create doubts. As «Friedrich intended this photograph to prove the dehumanizing effect of war» (Van Bergen, de Mare and Meijman, 2010, p. 130), he may depend too much on pictures and therefore be limited by photographic representations to prove his point.

This leads to the second problem: compulsory of representing. If photographs are the only truthful fact proofs, they become obliged – even morally obliged – to be so. Yet dependence on visibility promotes so-called pseudo-events, in order to make events accessible to general eyes. Conversely, Asselin assumes that, firstly, everything cannot be apparent in photographs, and in turn, everything does not have to be featured. A photography is unable to exhibit anything because it cannot make everything visible. When photography is the used tool, accepting its technological limitations and visibility conventions to recognize what is seen becomes essential.

Asselin deals with visibility offering pictures that are not actually necessary proofs, which is not an obvious choice by any means, contrary to Friedrich's use of pictures. As well as the case of Heather Bowser, limbless daughter of an American soldier, Asselin goes on to feature the case of Kelly L. Derricks,

«the daughter of deceased Viet Nam veteran Harry C. Mackel Jr. [whose] illnesses, presumed to be associated with the intergenerational effects of Agent Orange, include chronic kidney disease, Crohn's disease, Addison's disease, congenital adrenal hyperplasia, interstitial cystitis and degenerative disk disease» (Asselin, 2019, p. 66).

Although her portrait does not lie, her illnesses are neither visible at first sight nor shocking.

On balance, this is the problem: as her illnesses are not easily visible, people do not see them, then they have no visibility at all. Yet she has the same right to appear in the book and to be known, because otherwise, visibility may alarmingly be the only measure of reality. What is more, Asselin addresses the relationship between visibility and causality. «Kelly's daily medication» (Asselin, 2019, p. 67) is the caption of a picture featuring about thirty kinds of pills that Kelly has to take daily. Her medication is exhibited as evidence of her disease state, because Agent Orange diseases have no cure. This is a redress offered by the same power that caused the damage, as in the case of Friedrich's mutilated veterans, who are portrayed with prostheses provided by the government that had induced them to go to the war.

What cannot be seen has to be exhibited somehow. At the beginning of «2, 4, 5—T Agent Orange», some landscapes in America are not polluted at first sight, but after seeing them in detail and knowing their history, pollution becomes apparent. By turning the page, two American relatives of Agent Orange's victims are portrayed in their houses. The first one is

«Lee Roy Muck at his home in the Poca Basin, close to one of the Monsanto®'s illegal dump sites. Like an alarming number of residents in the area, his wife suffered a cancer-related death» (Asselin, 2019, p. 48).

She is also featured in some familiar pictures, which are only meant to allow readers to see and to know what stories were witnessed by Asselin.

As can be noted, what is exhibited in photographs is complemented with captions, and consequently, pictures are freed from the obligation to demonstrate the information provided by captions. Although *Monsanto*® is a *photographic* investigation, everything addressed does not have to be apparent nor visually proved. Asselin's act of featuring provides documentary with «the truth of the magic in photography», in Allan Sekula's words (1982, p. 10), whose pictures fulfil an anthropologic purpose, such as remembering dead loved ones: «Amber Beller holds a photograph of the mother, Shriley Beller, who died of ovarian cancer in 2006» (Asselin, 2019, p. 53). This mourning aim is not far from the custom of portraying dead people with their relatives, as ritual and convention. Without its caption, readers would ignore that her mother was a Monsanto®'s victim, but they could deduct that the woman whose portrait she holds is dead, because dead is also recognized by conventions. Asselin's honest use of photography leads him to feature morally necessary pictures yet *expendable* from a judicial point of view.

Once photography does not need to demonstrate everything, the fact that everything does not have to be exhibited because everything is not apparent can be assumed. In fact, this is a major problem that concern the way knowledge and science works. Science has taken advantage from photography because this technology complied science aim of objectivity – for example, one of the pioneers using photographs to illustrate his investigations

„De dank des vaderlands is u verzekerd“ –

„Des Vaterlandes Dank ist euch gewiß“ –



“You are assured of the gratitude of the Fatherland” –

« La gratitude de la patrie vous est sûre » –

Figure 6. (Friedrich, 1987, p. 209). © 1924 Ernst Friedrich published with permission The Real Comet Press from their 1987 first U.S. Edition.

was Charles Darwin (Prodger, 2009). After assuming that mankind did not know everything and was wrong about some things, photography was seen as a new breakthrough that improved human senses to fill knowledge gaps. Burdened of an aura of objectivity, photography became a piece of evidence in science methodology.

However, Taleb (2012, p. 93) points out how science is based on evidences, but «mistaking absence of evidence (of harm) for evidence of absence». For example, taking the case of a new medicine, there is not any evidence that the medicine is harmful, but under no circumstance is this absence of harm a proof or evidence of harm absence. That is also the case of Agent Orange, whose effects are subsequently manifested.

Taleb's argument is key with regard to how much science relies on photography. The excessive confidence in photographs as pieces of evidence leads to the fact that every proof has to be a photograph. Therefore, without photography there is no evidence, and the next step is easy: this is an evidence of the non-existence of the event. To some extent, this is the ironic argument of Jean Baudrillard (1995, p. 48) on the Gulf War: «what we live in real time is not the event, but rather in larger than life (in other words, in the virtual size of the image) the spectacle of the degradation of the event and its spectral evocation (...) in the commentary, gloss, and verbose *mise en scène* taking heads which only underlines the impossibility of the image and the correlative unreality of the war». Baudrillard, who speaks of the war, is actually dealing with the visual representations that prove it.

Asselin avoids the fallacy pointed out by Taleb, first of all, by creating a photobook, which allows him to deal with not current news. *Monsanto*[®] is not a proof of something never said before, but a new contribution to spread a well-known message. Even more essential is the juxtaposition of visual and written material from several sources. Pictures and events that Asselin can bear witness are given a relative value as pieces of evidence, because they are not the only ones featured, therefore the absence of Asselin's pictures would never be a proof of the absence of such event.

5. CONCLUSION

As Dante's embarrassed look has consequences for the whole humankind, the use of photography in *Monsanto*[®] redefines photobooks and also photography, whose reading of the world invites his readers to act according to Sontag:

«Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?» (Sontag, 2003, p. 117).

Understanding this use has been the attempt of this article, thus Asselin's work has been addressed in depth. From a semiotic perspective, photobooks and photojournalism essentially focus on the context (referential function) but, conversely to photojournalism, poetic, emotive and metalingual functions – among others – play an important role at the service of photobooks' message.

Although this is not always the case, *Monsanto*[®]'s time is a factor to consider. Asselin chooses a format that allows him to focus on not current events, and the extra time he can spend working in his projects is also extra time for the development of the event. This is the reason why Asselin portraits slow violence victims of warfare and also of corporation warfare economy, consequently inscribed in warfare photobooks tradition.

This comparative study was meant to understand that the choices taken by Asselin are not obvious. Unlike Griffiths, Asselin includes in *Monsanto*[®] documentary material and some montages with an aesthetic purpose. On the other hand, Griffiths writes the text himself and takes every picture, therefore he creates a unitary message. It can be concluded that, inconveniently, Griffiths ballasts the colonial difference usually made by photojournalists between *them* and *us*, while Asselin features victims of slow violence in America and Vietnam, both soldiers and civilians. It is revealing that Griffiths, informative though the value of his written texts is, does not mention the word *Monsanto* not even once.

On the other hand, Asselin overcomes the previous warfare photobooks tradition with regard to the value of photography as evidence, yet being able to relativize it. While *War against War!* trusts its effectiveness in the

sensationalist, shocking scenes – sometimes weirdness – that pictures exhibit, even including a fake, Asselin works with the more cautious premise that everything is not apparent, and therefore, do not have to be featured in them. This is a key step once realized that photography in documentary and science became a verisimilar proof of what was featured.

Considering Taleb's assertion on evidences in science, it seems that Asselin faces the problem in two ways: 1) he does not always use his photographs as evidences; 2) he often takes photographs to feature events, not to evidence them. Both are achieved by mourning pictures in which relatives of Monsanto®'s victims are portrayed with the images of their dead love ones. Pictures of ill people even serve to verify that every illness is not visible at first sight, so he can free photographs from being proofs.

To some extent, Asselin makes sense of the argument of this article, that photography could feature reality without resorting to fakes and thought effective aesthetic strategies, if the obligation to prove facts is avoided. Photography as evidence has been widely accepted with Barthes' claim, however responded by John Tagg (1993, p. 4), who has argued that the consideration of photographs as evidences «rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process», which results from «a complex historical outcome».

This reasoning also suggests that this is a feedback process. The scientific and documentary attempt to know better the world has led to trust on photographs as the most accurate and reliable representations, even making representations precede events. Photography is faced with the obligation of being the evidence of everything that happens, otherwise the absence of an image that proves it is understood as evidence that this event did never took place. In conclusion, the supposed superior iconism of photography can be better understood as a burden, as an obligation that is taken for granted by convention and affect photographs as objects.

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