

El retrato más profundo. El trabajo moderno de Silva Nogueira en las décadas de 1920 y 1930

The deepest portrait. The modern work of Silva Nogueira in the 1920's and early 1930's

Paulo Ribeiro Baptista

Doctor en Historia del Arte, Lisboa

RESUMEN

Uno de los aspectos técnicos y estéticos más innovadores de la práctica fotográfica de mediados de la década de 1920 y 1930 fue la tridimensionalidad, o la sugestión de volumen en la superficie bidimensional de la impresión fotográfica. En Portugal, este cambio apareció en la década de 1920, y uno de los primeros estudios en explorar fue el estudio de Brasil, dirigido por Joaquim da Silva Nogueira.

Esta práctica prefiguraba una situación de gran modernidad, estrechamente relacionada con la renovación del teatro portugués, ya que la mayoría de los retratos realizados por Silva Nogueira tenían actores y bailarines como modelos.

De esta forma, podemos ver esta renovación estética del retrato fotográfico como uno de los aspectos que contribuyó a un cambio de paradigma en la representación de la figura humana y su rostro, uno de los aspectos estrechamente relacionados con la renovación de las etapas, debido a la influencia del cine. Este fue precisamente el caso de Silva Nogueira, quien también fue fotógrafo de cine y, en Portugal, introdujo por primera vez un sistema de iluminación cinematográfica en su estudio.

El trabajo de Silva Nogueira tuvo un gran impacto a través del uso creativo de la tridimensionalidad, y su estilo se convirtió en una referencia para los fotógrafos portugueses durante los años 1930 y 1940.

Palabras clave: Silva Nogueira, retrato, Brasil, cinematógrafo, tres dimensiones.

ABSTRACT

One of the most innovative technical and aesthetic aspects of the photographic practice from the mid-1920s and 1930s was three-dimensionality, or the suggestion of volume on the two-dimensional surface of the photographic print. In Portugal, this change appeared in the 1920s, and one of the first studios to explore it was Brazil studio, managed by Joaquim da Silva Nogueira.

This practice prefigured a situation of great modernity, closely connected with the renovation of the Portuguese theatre since most of the portraits taken by Silva Nogueira had actors and dancers as models.

In this way, we can look at this aesthetic renewal of the photographic portrait as one of the aspects that contributed to a paradigm shift in the representation of the human figure and his face, one of the aspects closely related to the renovation of the stages, due to the influence of the cinema. This was precisely the case of Silva Nogueira, who was also a film photographer and, in Portugal, first introduced a cinematographic lighting system in his studio.

Silva Nogueira's work had a great impact through the creative use of three-dimensionality, and his style became a reference for Portuguese photographers during the 1930s and 1940s.

Key words: Silva Nogueira, portrait, Brazil, cinematograph, three dimensionality.

Three-dimensionality is not a feature that occur to us when we look at a photographic print or a photograph in a book. The perception of three-dimensionality is intrinsic to most photographs we look at, either in a landscape, the interior of a building or even a volume such as a human torso. Even though the surface of photographic prints are generally flat, the images formed in them may suggest three-dimensionality. Three-dimensionality and other features of the photographic image are conventions. When we look at a photograph, the need to interpret its visual code is innate and merges with a number of other social life's references and conventions. Its disclosure is more and more widespread as a universal conventional system. Only limit situations such as optical illusions jeopardize our ability to read and understand photographs.

One of the most notorious case of image misreading was experienced by the Russian painter Vassily Kandinsky. At a Moscow's impressionist exhibition when he was facing a series of paintings by Monet representing fields with haystacks, he could not decode those forms. The form of Russian haystacks is totally different from French one's or, in other words, the code for «haystack» is different in Russian and French visual cultures. Ultimately art historians considered Kandinsky's episode as a crucial step in the awareness of abstraction.

The system of photographic representation system also demands a special need to learn its code, although innately. This question has been the key of several philosophical and aesthetical debates since it was first formulated by Roland Barthes. We would like to endorse it under another scope called «the question of representation». If we analyze the systems of representation, in figurative painting we understand the transformation and equivalence of objects and figures as a construction of the artist's imagination and creativity while in photography we feel immediately the *barthesian* attraction of the reference. That attraction is not in the grey areas formed by the clusters of blackened silver dots but in the tangible, in the recognizable forms that adhere, through our eyes, to those areas of the photographic image. This question emerges if, following the proposals of Barbara Savedoff on sculpture photography, we consider that: As with the photographs of pictures the disturbing effect of these statue photographs seems to arise from the creation of an equivalence of status between sculpture and person, but the reason for this change in the way we see the sculptures is not so obvious. Whereas the flatness of pictures is «overcome» by photography in that the whole world is made two dimensional, the three dimensionality of sculpture matches the three dimensionality of people. Why should an equivalence of sculpture and person be more pronounced in the photograph, where both are made flat? The answer to this question will not only help us to understand the animation of sculptures, it will also serve to give us a more complete understanding of the animation of pictures. For both pictures and sculpture, equivalence, and hence, animation are encouraged not only by the two dimensionality of the image, but also by its motionlessness, its lack of color, and by our tendency to anthropomorphize objects selected for our attention by the photograph. [particularly if we remark its traces of expressiveness] (Savedoff 1992: 95).

Therefore, Savedoff suggests that photography, particularly black and white photography, has an intrinsic ability to flatten the space and hence to create representations that help the identification of certain traces. It eases the reading of certain photographic traces as human forms, particularly in black and white photographs of sculptures. In another essay (Savedoff 2000),

Savedoff deepens her reading on the reproduction of art. She considers it is marked by a «gestural ambiguity», particularly the pictorial representation of sculpture since renaissance. But she also finds situations of extreme ambiguity in other art forms. One striking example of such an ambiguity is 1930's René Magritte painting «La condition humaine I». There is an illusion between the representations of a window and a painting placed in front and covering it. So we are led to believe that the image of the painting is the view of the window. Hence there is a problem of distinction between real and representation in a level that Savedoff suggests IT is «beyond ambiguity» (Savedoff 2000: 34-35). But she finds photography to raise to another baseline regarding painting, as she clearly states:

Perceptual ambiguity in photographs results partly from the nature of the medium itself. The stillness, the flatness, and, in black-and-white photography photographs, the limitation to monochromatic values, all contribute to masking the differences between people and representations (Savedoff 2000: 43).

Since the beginning of photography, the ambiguities and equivalences it can easily generate have been explored by many photographers (Savedoff 2000: 44-45). Photography differs also from other art forms because of its intrinsic reproducibility, giving a different character to that ambiguity. One eloquent example, also mentioned by Savedoff (Savedoff 2000: 61) is a photograph, Seville 1930, by Henry Cartier Bresson. In that Bresson's photograph the space is ambiguous. There is a double game challenging real and representation. The various planes in the image interact and fragment creating a central vortex surrounded by the dented frame of the neutral wall (Savedoff 2000: 60-61). Photography referential system is put into question, revealing the ambiguities of perception. Fine arts explored similar features, particularly op art.

Frederick Evans was one of the first to consciously explore the perception of depth in plain photography. His work can be more accurately defined as space photography rather than plain architectural photography. Most of his pictures display English and French cathedrals and other old buildings interiors. He captured those monumental interiors with a flawless photographic technique. Beaumont Newhall suggested that the way he photographed light, volume, substance, intends to guide the viewer throughout the spaces (Savedoff 2000). We have precisely that perception looking at one of his most famous masterpieces, 1903's A Sea of Steps, Wells Cathedral: Stairs to Chapter House and Bridge to Vicar's Close. We are subtly driven up the stairs to the Wells Cathedral Chapter house's door. Evan's technical virtuosity achieved in A Sea of Steps resulted from a combination of circumstances that Evans knew to manipulate in favor of his aesthetical practice.

One of the most important aspects of Evans work was the use of the platinotype printing technique, ensuring to his prints the richest tonal range, therefore his photographs could overcome some of the limitations felt by other photographers. Therefore, he could print his photographs with outstanding detail in all tonal ranges.

Evans defined his photographic research as:

[T]ry for a record of an emotion rather than a piece of topography. Wait till the building makes you feel intensely.... Try and try again, until you find that your print shall give not only yourself, but others who have not known your intimate knowledge of the original, some measure of the feeling it originally inspired in you.... This will be 'cathedral picturemaking,' something beyond mere photography... (Lyden 2009: 17).

Three-dimensionality was also perceived and experimented as an underlying trace of photographic practice and aesthetics in other areas of photography. During the first decade of the 20th century a breakthrough in sculpture photography also took place. The first sign of that

transformation emerged from the artistic collaboration between August Rodin and Edward Steichen. Throughout his career, Rodin called upon photography as a tool to document his work but also as visual recording of the making of his sculptures (Becker 1999: 91-92). Rodin never tried to photograph himself his sculptures, he called for the work of photographers such as Stephen Hawies and Henry Coles that used the gum-bichromate photographic printing process. They worked with Rodin during 1903 and 1904 publishing images of several Rodin's sculptures such as *Crouching woman* (c. 1880-1882), *Meditation* (1885) and *Venus toilette* (c. 1886). The «sfumato effect» of gum prints particularly suited to Rodin's works and he surrendered to the creative and aesthetical capabilities of photography to render his creations in two-dimensional media.

In 1901, Rodin was presented to Edward Steichen by Fritz Thaulow. Steichen had already a noticeable photographic career. His art studies lead him to embrace a symbolist painting that some critics called «whithlerian». After school, he worked as a lithographer, quickly evolving to draw, engrave and, at the same time, started to photograph with a small Kodak camera. Steichen deeply admired Rodin's work he had followed through American magazines, particularly Rodin's *Balzac* he praised more than any other work, so he decided to travel to Paris and look at it on site (Becker 1999: 115). In Paris, he pursued his artistic studies, attending classes at the famous Académie Julia and was hired to photograph George Frederick Watts, the first of a series of portraits that included Alphonse Mucha and Maurice Maeterlink.

Since he met Steichen, Rodin was impressed by his photographs. Steichen photographs in a slightly unfocused pictorialist style, tried to recreate Corot's painting style in photography. Their first collaboration took place in 1902 with the portrait of Rodin entitled *Rodin: Le penseur*. To do it, Steichen used different photographic plates he combined in the darkroom, in a difficult composition that took him almost two years to accomplish. He captured Rodin in profile with its expressive facial features against the white marble of Vitor Hugo's sculpture. The thin light beam falling in Rodin's nape helps volume perception. The statue of Zola in the background is zenithally lightened to increase drama. Steichen's *Rodin: Le penseur* is as «tenebrist» photograph. Steichen had already explored such tenebrism in a series of other works, particularly urban landscapes. Working with a reputed drama lover such as Rodin gave Steichen the opportunity to use tenebrism in his portraiture. The image is organized in different plans and is perceived as a scenographic depth. It creates a situation in which the sculptures are brought «to life», a pigmalionic effect. Rodin became fascinated with Steichen's work and he used to tell a joke about being pictured between the devil (Victor Hugo) and god (*Le penseur*) (Marcoci 2010: 88). Rodin's portrait *Rodin: Le penseur* was an experimental work and a real breakthrough. It introduced tenebrism in portraiture, was an innovative aesthetical leap highlighting the question of three-dimensionality in photography.

The creative collaboration between Rodin and Steichen also extended to other important series of sculpture photographs, particularly the visions of *Balzac*. In 1908 Rodin transferred the plaster mold of the *Balzac* sculpture to a platform in his Meudon garden (Marcoci 2010: 88.). Steichen was invited to photograph it. Facing the difficulty of obtaining decent results in the photographs of white plaster in broad daylight, he accepted the proposal of the sculptor to do it in a night session, under moonlight. He worked hardly all night through and captured a significant number of photographs that really pleased Rodin so much he rewarded Steichen with three of his works and a large sum (Marcoci 2010: 88). The series of *Balzac* photographs are strikingly modern. They have a unique character since sculpture's ghostly dramatic forms are transfigured by the moonlight enhanced by the projection of the trees' silhouettes. The photographs printed in gum-bichromate acquire a supernatural aura.

The impact of Rodin's Balzac photographs surpassed all expectations, particularly during the special exhibition in Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery. The publication of three images in April-July 1911's *Camera Work* magazine edition also helped. They brought Steichen the fame that would turn him into one of the most influential photographers of the first half of the 20th century. Furthermore, Steichen's new pigmalionic approach to anthropomorphism in photography also had huge impact. The new aesthetic framework of photographic portraiture he introduced turned it into one of the more innovative fields in modernist photography. After his experience with Rodin, Steichen started facing portraiture as a volume. This was a disruption with the dominant conservative aesthetic tradition. His new approach was ideal for the new visual media that were expanding in the eve of the 20th century. It had a huge impact in the photographic press and the movies.

Surrealism was the first artistic movement in which photography gained a major role, technically and aesthetically. It owed a lot to the contributions of photographers such as Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz as well as the pictorialist movement itself that struggled to claim for the role of photography among the arts. It was surrealism the first movement to welcome photography as an artistic practice. The surrealist aesthetic research brought huge contributions to broaden the field of photography as well as Dadaism, Futurism Constructivism and Bauhaus. In all those vanguard movements, photography gained the autonomy that helped to shape its new limits. Surrealist artists were more concerned to achieve the «highest level of representational clarity that photography could offer» particularly in their «object trouvé» concept (Marcoci 2010: 31). The Dada movement also used photography, particularly to deny painting. In Constructivism and Bauhaus' reflection and practice of photography, an artist emerged, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy deeply reflecting on the use of photography, both in his art works and in his writings. Moholy-Nagy enriched the sculptural sensibility of photography, in a process of identifying sculptural formations in the world of objects he defined creating a new term, «Photoplastik» or photosculpture (Marcoci 2010: 31).

But Man Ray was probably the surrealist artist that took further his photographic research, shaped by a diversity of techniques, materials, forms he could explore based on the work of his photographic portraiture studio. Surprisingly most of his studio's work is conventional. But it is in Man Ray's experimental photographic portraiture we find a profound change, exploring games of light, shadows, patterns and transparencies. One of the most striking series in his experimental portraiture is the 1930's Lee Miller nude series near a window, known as «shadow patterns on Lee Miller's torso». He plays deliberately with the effects of the incident light from a window filtered by curtains. The light draw patterns in the model's sculptural nude torso. That light game challenges the viewer to perceive forms and volumes. Man Ray hardly use this techniques in his commercial portraiture practice, for instance in 1929's portrait of Yves Tanguy. Probably popular taste wasn't yet prepared for such a change.

We must not forget technical changes in photography. In cameras off course but particularly with use of film replacing glass plates, bringing significant gains in productivity, eliminating the constraints of glass fragility, cutting costs, promoting the standardization of the photographic activity and allowing the possibility to take several exposures of the same subject. Thus, photographers had a greater freedom to explore new situations of lighting, exposure, framing and focus with evident results in the creative process. Furthermore, the flexible supports were easier to manipulate with masks, frames, internegatives.

During 1920's Portuguese photography underwent a major transformation towards modernity. It followed the renewal of the illustrated press. The first Portuguese photographer to embrace that change in portraiture was Joaquim da Silva Nogueira owner of the Lisbon's Brasil studio.

He started to explore a direct style and creative lighting. His modern style pleased stage artists, actors and dancers. In the new illustrated magazine's era, the theatre became more demanding with photography. The innovative photographic work of Silva Nogueira was appreciated and he soon became the most requested portraitist of Portuguese stage artists. Two factors contributed to accelerate the change, the internationalization of some Portuguese actors and dancers and the occasional presence of foreign artists in Portuguese stages. In both cases Silva Nogueira was challenged to innovate. Photography related to several other artistic fields such as music-hall, theatre, movies and became an important marketing tool. Success on stage depended more and more of high-impact images.

Silva Nogueira pursued an aesthetic research with models such as Francis Graça, Ruben Lorena, Ruth Walden, Julieta Valença, Georgina Cordeiro, Maria Cristina, Maria Sampaio, Constança Navarro, Brunilde Júdice, Mariamélia, Maria Paula, Maria Helena Andrade, Maria Helena Matos e Luísa Satanela exploring set, lighting, pose. Silva Nogueira even explores nudity with Lucy Snow, Mafalda Evanduns, Lea Niako, Maria Benard, Beatriz Costa, Francis and other foreign artists that performed in Portuguese stages and also in Spanish stages in most cases. It's worth mentioning that some theatre critiques, such as António Ferro (Ferro, 1925, 4), were defending nudity on stage as an artistic resource.

In 1926, Silva Nogueira renovated his studio, increased the height of the main room, installed a modern lighting system and replaced the old backgrounds and scenarios for a neutral wall as well as the old props and furniture for high plinths in forms of cylinders and other neutral geometric shapes. He was able to create a distinct art-deco ambiance for the photographic sessions. Silva Nogueira's studio became the most modern in Lisbon.

The new technical features of the Silva Nogueira's studio broadened the creative possibilities for more flexibility of positions, angles and approaches to work the pose with his models. Besides the close-up portraits of the artists, mandatory in the promotion of modern theatre, music-hall and movies, Silva Nogueira was ready to engage in large photographic productions, such as complex scenes or long costumes. We can witness the renewal of his studio in some of his photographs. One of those photographs is a portrait of Maria Paula, an actress that started her career straight at the movies near the new light sources of Silva Nogueira's studio. He photographed her for Leitão de Barros film *As Pupilas do Senhor Reitor* protagonist's photographic sessions. The connection to the movies industry brought him the demand but also the knowledge for the renovation of his studio. He explored the dimension of the pose in a sensitive and extremely creative way, plasticizing it or, using Moholy-Nagy's term, *photosculpting* his models. He carefully selected the technical resources, lighting, framing, focus and set props in an entirely innovative way. One of the best examples of Silva Nogueira's creativity is the 1928's portrait of the actress Constança Navarro with the use of contrast to enhance the elegant lines of the actress' expressive gesture. Besides Silva Nogueira's photographic virtuosity, his ability to direct the young actress, fresh out of the acting school and debuting the National Theatre company, is outstanding.

Silva Nogueira used the creative resources of his studio extensively to model faces and bodies, accentuating certain features, attenuating others, using light to give dynamics to the image. The traces of movement Silva Nogueira captured in his photographs reflected the urge of the modern society, the quick acceleration of time felt by his contemporaries and the possibility to show those images, to publish them in the new high impact media, such as illustrated magazines. In a small selection of images, we can find a significant number of lighting and pose situations, a kind of portfolio of the photographer's creative possibilities.

The work of Silva Nogueira matches most international photographic studios and his photographic palette opened deeply. The international references are obvious in his work. We do not know the technical and aesthetical references Silva Nogueira used in his work. The documents of his studio were lost but in one photograph, it is possible to identify an edition of «L'Art Vivant», a high-end art and modern photography magazine. Undoubtedly, he followed a photographic genre inspired by the fashionable style of magazines such as Vogue or Harper's Bazaar with the regular presence of Edward Steichen and editing work of Alexei Brodovitch, who photographed Ballets Russes for a couple of years.

The research that is at the basis of this article included the comparative study of around ten thousand photographs from Silva Nogueira's archive. The current set illustrating this paper focuses on images that have notorious three-dimensionality. The option for a group of Mafalda Evanduns's portraits was obvious.

Maria Bárbara Reiner, a young dancer that adopted the artistic name of Mafalda Evanduns, arrived at Lisbon in 1929, as member of an artist's trio, the Evanduns trio that also included her sister, Inês Evanduns and brother Piero Evanduns. Piero, who would soon change the name to Piero Bernardon, had a long career on stage as a dancer, choreographer, director and vaudeville entrepreneur. Later Mafalda and Inês danced in duo but it was Mafalda alone who stood up in Portuguese vaudeville theatre, from 1929 to 1931. She became one of the stars of a local theatrical genre, the «revista à portuguesa».

The analysis of a first series of Mafalda Evanduns' images reveals deep formal analogies with contemporary international photographs. Creative lighting, transparent clothing and props were part of the visual game enhancing the perception of volume and depth as we have seen in Man Ray's example. The column is a prop deliberately placed to deepen the sense of depth e to give a suggestion of classicism, combining with the dress itself. Another interesting aspect is the discreet erotic suggestion of a breast revealed under the transparency of the dress. In another photograph, a Mafalda Evanduns' profile, a transgressive framework is clearly suggested. To address it, Silva Nogueira benefited from the contact with several foreign artists, open spirits, uninhabited. Some performed temporarily in Lisbon venues from other stages from Spain, other moved permanently to the city. This was the case of, Lea Niako (German), Eva Stachino (Mexican), Luísa Satanela, Adria Rodi and Mafalda Evanduns (Italians), whose daring has shaken Lisbon's stages. From the experience of working with those artists emerged undeniable contributions to his photographic practice, particularly in boldness. Later, he develops similar sensual photographic approaches with Portuguese artists such as Maria Benard, Beatriz Belmar or Beatriz Costa.

The extent and diversity of Mafalda Evanduns's photographic series by Silva Nogueira reveal the experimental nature of their research, pursued in deep complicity between photographer and model. This is particularly clear in a profile portrait in which she wears a small strip of cloth and revealing thighs. She stands in a challenging attitude branding a whip with a sense of power. Silva Nogueira increases the drama of the scene backlighting the figure and projecting a pattern in the background. In the composition of this image there are all the resources of a *soi disant* cinematographic lighting technique. The effect is the expansion of the studio or, as there is a recreation of the dancer's work. Silva Nogueira will apply the same technique to several other situations.

One of the longest Mafalda Evanduns's series recreates the indoor scene of an intimate and elegant interior. The dancer is pictured with a big dog, a Grand Danois. The scenography, although minimalist, suggests an art deco interior, only with a column, a framework division

and a chair lined with a modern pattern fabric. The intimacy of the scene is thwarted by a raw dramatic lighting in a sort of game that remind us some Man Ray images. The lighting creates drama in the scene to look like a movie set. Throughout this game, the props, the dancer and the dog, the lighting, Silva Nogueira suggests a change in the perception of the room's depth, revealing an outstanding ability to control the suggestion of three-dimensionality.

Several series of Mafalda Evanduns suggests eroticism and transgression, explored in Silva Nogueira's photographs. One of the most explicit photographic nudes pictures the dancer laid down over a flight of stairs. Her position reveals, in the foreground, the face and breast of the dancer. The scene is lightened with a raw strong facing floodlight softened with an ambient light to attenuate the contrast and to highlight the nude body lines. In two other different series Mafalda Evanduns is wearing short two-pieces costumes. On one of the photographs she is wearing a very short oriental costume, barely covering her nudity. On the other, the costume has a futuristic look, made of shining metallic fabric, remarkably modern. Another portrait features Mafalda Evanduns wearing a transparent tunic with a violin under her arm. Her breast is revealed under the fabric. The photographic setup enhances the sensuality of the scene.

We can perceive some transgression of a different nature, on gender ambiguity, in another photograph where Mafalda Evanduns is pictured in a complex dual costume, half man, half woman, probably for a stage performance called transformist. The male half of the dancer's body wears a soldier's outfit and it is embracing the female part of the body, dressed in a maid's costume. The gesture simulates the embrace of the lovers but, in this case, there is also a suggestion for a social dimension often caricaturised in theatre shows, the military and maid couple. The ambiguity of the scene is enhanced by the illusion of depth Silva Nogueira's set-up creates.

Finally, there is a very unusual image, a composition of Mafalda Evanduns seated in lotus position and pictured with two pairs of arms, supposedly representing an oriental divinity. The image was obtained from the digitization of the negative plate. Therefore it wasn't just a print manipulation. The consistency of the negative's exposure also excludes the possibility of an internegative process. Probably it is an extremely skilled double exposure technique or a composition with two models with a dark cloth concealing the body of a second pair of hands. In any case this experimental image has an exquisit light control, proving again Silva Nogueira's photographic virtuosity. In another context, artistically more consistent, this composition could be regarded as a surrealist photograph.

Undoubtedly, Silva Nogueira mastered technically and aesthetically the depth of his photographic compositions. He did it finding different solutions and different challenges. He demonstrated a remarkable consistency and virtuosity. The sensation of depth he achieved in his photographs was rare in the work of his rivals, particularly during the 1920's and for that reason, he saw a great number of his photographs published in Portuguese magazines, particularly in *Notícias Ilustrado*, the first Portuguese high-quality print illustrated magazine. The work of Silva Nogueira become the technical and aesthetical reference for Portuguese photographic portraiture, followed by many other of his colleagues in the 1930's and 1940's.