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EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE MIRROR OF PHOTOBLOGS. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF THE CONSUMER CULTURE

Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality

John Berger

1. Introduction

The problem I am going to discuss is concerned with **the relation between the consumer culture and photography**. Does the omnipresent consumer culture of the globalized world change the photography and its social functions? Certainly, the present ubiquity of photographs in the Western society is not a new phenomenon, but my thesis is that in the age of the consumer culture some functions of photography are being modified and new ones are being introduced. The best example of these changes are to be found in photoblogs, in their desire to discover extraordinariness of everyday life.

When asked why they take pictures, people give a variety of answers. The authors of photoblogs are also motivated by a choice of reasons, but in their case the most authentic seems to be the answer used by one of the icons of American photography, Garry Winogrand, who asked why he takes pictures answered that, "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed"¹. This quotation may look like a joke or an expression of impatience of an annoying

¹ B. Diamonstein, *An Interview with Garry Winogrand from Visions and Images: American Pho-*

journalist but it is not – it shows that photography is a complex process with its own rationale. Photography is not a purely mechanical/electronic record of reality. **Photography is the result of synthesis: it includes a photographer (his/her craft but also his/her attitude, emotions and thoughts at the moment of picture-taking), the subject of photography and the act of photographing.** This is why each and every photograph is not only a record, a document or an interpretation of the subject but also a record, a document and an interpretation of its creator and an attempt to construct a total view of reality.

In his classic work *Camera Lucida* (1984) Roland Barthes expressed some remarks on the ways photography is socially and culturally constrained. My article shows that, on the one hand, Barthes's conclusion is still valid: photography evades us, absorbs the world, seems to be more real than people and reality and even shapes our life in accordance with the generalized beliefs (frequently represented by the photographs themselves). On the other hand, however, the introduction of digital photography – which reinforced the position of photography among other means of mass reproduction – also implies setting it free from a strict social control and any censorship, because the production of images may be entirely home-made by everybody and it does not require any special skills. In the age of analogue (film-based) photography the things which were photographed and the ways of photographing were for most people conventionalized, socially restricted and under control². Now the personal uses of photography are open to new and unexpected inventions, which is also encouraged by the fall of traditional aesthetic values.

The essential conditions for these changes were formed by the introduction and diffusion of the whole new cultural complex of the Internet, mobile phones and – most of all – digital photography. In the course of the last 10 years digital cameras have dominated the market of mass photography. The majority of manufacturers have stopped the production of film cameras and completely change over to digital photography. This applies both to the market of popular digicams and the market of advanced amateurs and professionals. Actually, we can stop thinking about film cameras – digital cameras are undisputed winners.

Let us look at some basic current data. According to the Lyra's Digital Photography Advisory Service report from 2006, the worldwide digital camera shipments grew to more than 63 million units in 2004 and digital camera shipments were

tographers on Photography, Interviews with Photographers, New York 1982, <http://www.jnevens.com/garywinograndreading.htm> [access: 05.02.2011].

² My article refers to the vernacular photography only (amateur photography, family photography, tourists photography etc.) but certainly not to more artistic ventures, which by definition seek transgression.

expected to exceed 100 million units in 2008³. The forecast was accurate. According to the *Worldwide 2008–2012 Digital Camera Forecast* by International Data Corporation (IDC) digital camera unit shipment was 146 million in 2008 and will grow to over 160 million in 2012⁴. Japanese trade body Camera and Imaging Products Association (CIPA) informed that the total shipments of digital cameras from Japan in 2009 (the cumulative total of shipments from January to December) reached 105.9 million units, exceeding the performance in 2007 for the third consecutive year⁵. CIPA's forecast says that the camera market will grow 7.8% to 131 million units from 2010 to 2011⁶.

While the technology is an important factor in this process of changes, the transformation of value system of an average consumer and camera user is even more essential. This transformation is tightly connected with the unquestionable triumph of the consumer ideology in the Western societies. The logic of consumerism has a determining impact on a social and cultural role of photography. I would like to emphasize here that **three major characteristics of the consumer culture are:**

1. An individual's need to act as a free subject – in this context freedom is formulated in terms of individualism. The need to act as a free subject is stimulated by the social surrounding of individuals and it is satisfied by choices made by them – the choices which deal with various goods and services offered by a non-discriminating global free market. Simultaneously, individuals, construct and express their identities, uniqueness and distinction by the power of these free choices and consumption.
2. The freedom of choice is tied with the openness to a cultural variety and frequent alternations of cultural identities. The society which consist of culturally differentiated individuals works only because their cultural identity is mainly shaped by the participation in the mass consumption, i.e. by buying the specified goods and services.
3. A development and expansion of the hedonistic culture based on entertainment and leisure. In the consumer culture the ideal model of life is packed with pleasures, joy, positive experiences. Searching pleasures is the fundamental value and it justifies acts which traditionally would be recognized as immoral, sinful or plainly stupid and irresponsible. The values of the con-

³ <http://www.lyra.com> [access: 05.05.2006].

⁴ <http://www.idc.com/home.jhtml;jsessionid=FHJW3CY4UVWFCCQJAFICFFAKBEAUMIWD> [access: 10.12.2010].

⁵ <http://www.dpreview.com/news/1001/10012606cipa2009.asp> [access: 26.01.2010].

⁶ http://news.cnet.com/8301-30685_3-20031237-264.html [access: 16.03.2011].

sumer culture has easily devastated other values systems because its great attractiveness results from the fact it accomplishes its promises now and here – no long waiting for the deferred gratification is required.

Gary Cross in his history of modern American consumer society *An All-Consuming Century. Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* noticed that the success of consumerism was possible because of its support for the idea of freedom and democracy. Freedom here is understood in terms of liberation from the old, traditional and a slightly to tight communities and joining the mass society of individualists⁷. Consumer goods, including visual media and photography have become the basis for the construction of new – freely chosen – identity. As a result, **the role of the photography in the consumer culture is rather increasing than decreasing** because it plays an important role is shaping the fundamentals of our social identity.

2. Changes in social functions of photography

Let us come back to photography and consider its present condition. Before I analyse the very special face of photography and photoblogs in detail, let me comment on the relation between sociology and photography and also on the recent and profound changes in photography.

Already in the 1960s, even before the rise of visual sociology, Pierre Bourdieu wrote that sociological interest in a social practice of photography and in the meaning of the photographic image is important and justified. Firstly, because photography is not a matter of chance; secondly, because analysing the socio-cultural factors which define photography can be useful for sociological aims. Bourdieu observes that “from among the theoretically infinite number of photographs which are technically possible, each group chooses a finite and well-defined range of subjects, genres and compositions”⁸. In other words, photography is not only a matter of individual and unique imagination but rather a matter of an internalized norm and values of a group. “The most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group”⁹. Bourdieu thinks

⁷ G. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century. Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, New York 2000, p. 2.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, Cambridge 1990, p. 6.

⁹ Ibidem.

that the range of subjects, genres and composition should be seen against the class background, although not only because they also vary with age or sex. The practice of photography and attitude towards photography represented by different groups are one of the aspects of their position in social and cultural structure. Therefore, contrary to popular belief that photography is ruled by anarchy and improvisation, we can safely note that “there is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice and amateur photographs”¹⁰.

Bourdieu’s conviction that photography is conventionalized is still valid but today we should notice that a class context has a weaker impact. The most important is the context of the consumer culture, which means a specific tyranny of dominant values, but at the same time it gives us some significant margin of freedom. It leads me to an assumption that this duality refers to photography, as well. Photography is affected by the dominant values and represents dominant images but it also represents defiant and alternative images by which society generate its resistance against the dominant iconosphere and seeks the way to liberate from its influence¹¹. In the present day the environment of vernacular photography (amateur photography) is shaped by the cultural frame of the consumer society. In this context photography show us the complex Janus-like nature of facing opposite directions: one head looks for subordination to the dominant values of the consumer society and the other head looks for resistance and contestation. I looked for the latter and I have found it in some photoblogs – in their ability to pay attention to the ‘extraordinary obviousness’ of everyday life.

Now we are going to consider major changes in social functions of photography in the age of the consumer culture.

2.1. The total voyeurism as a cultural norm

The proliferation of digital and computer technologies makes it very trouble-free to take pictures of unsuspecting people in the public sphere but also – which is more important – it gives the possibility of showing these files on the Internet, which makes them accessible for everyone. It is so straightforward: one can go to a party or a local swimming pool, the beach etc., take hundreds of “glamorous” photos and publish them on the Internet on the very same day. So without even knowing it everyone can become an object of a fetishistic cult of any kind. So far

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 7.

¹¹ See: R. Drozdowski, *Obraza na obrazy. Strategie społecznego oporu wobec obrazów dominujących* [Offended at Images. Strategies of Social Opposition to Dominant Images], Poznań 2006.

we have been discussing the public sphere which is quite open but the trophy hunters enter more constrained spheres, too. It is not surprising concerning the fact that spy-like character of new cameras is often emphasized in the advertisements. While surveillance has become the permanent element of our life (we are under the camera's eye on the street, in a bank, a superstore – everywhere) but its motives are different. An invasion into our everyday private life can be, to some extent, justified by security measures but the voyeuristic pictures published on the Internet are a feature of exploitation. The bodies (or their fragments) of anonymous men and women are treated in a purely instrumental way, as commodity. They are virtualized, which means that the “models” do not have any control over their own representation. Consequently, this may undermine the trust necessary for the normal social relations.

2.2. From voyeurism to exhibitionism

One can easily observe that a surprisingly large part of these voyeuristic pictures show the authors – photographers themselves. The voyeurism of some people is combined with narcissism and exhibitionism of others but in this case they are often the same people. A very good example is an interaction between photography and consumption which affects the representation of sexuality in contemporary digital photography. Thanks to this new equipment consumers can become the producers of erotica or even pornography by themselves: for their pleasure or commercial use. Their production can be easily presented and distributed on the Internet – no technological disadvantages of film cameras, no censorship, no fear, no shame! Advertisements of digicams emphasize qualities of a total control and a total manipulation in the hands of the anonymous consumers. Such ads which are quite popular now would not be possible outside the context of the serious change in the consumers' value system: the glorification of the pleasure, a pleasure quest and permissiveness combined with the myth of individual freedom¹².

Many people make a use out of this promise of a “total control” and “no censorship”. For example, a short survey on the Internet photoblogs and galleries with mobile photo photography shows that people love their own “naughty” photos:

¹² See: J.E. Schroeder, P. McDonagh, *The Logic of Pornography in Digital Camera Promotion* [in:] *Sex in Consumer Culture. The Erotic Content of Media and Marketing*, T. Reichert, J. Lambiase (eds.), Mahwah-New York 2005, <http://www.dit.ie/DIT/business/marketing/staff/mcdonagh/docs/30-digital.pdf> [access: 02.09.2005].

putting them on their mobile phones panels is quite trendy and fashionable. Teenagers take many nude and semi-nude photographs of themselves and send them away to their boyfriends/girlfriends. The large scale of such visual production makes it a cultural norm or, at least, makes it impossible to recognize it as a simple deviance. A great deal of new users of digicams or camcorders firstly point them at themselves and their partners to take a photo or shoot a film. Moreover, they often do not hesitate to share these images on the Internet. How to explain this phenomenon? I think that artificial shaping of personality and identity through buying goods or services, which is an essential feature of the consumer culture, should be mentioned here. I would like to suggest that the abundance of auto-photography (including pornographic ones) is somehow connected with the problem of identity construction. We can read in every handbook of sociology that a social identity of an individual cannot be constructed just like that and on one's own. This is a relatively long process which requires cooperation of other people who acknowledge and recognize one's social identity. I think that distributing one's own images on the Internet can be analyzed as a form of communication. In a proper context this communicational medium activates the mechanism of community and it enables constructing one's identity even without any physical contact with other people – they can do it exclusively in the virtual reality.

2.3. From the family albums to web albums

It seems that the content and functions of family photography (including family albums) have not undergone any serious changes caused by the digital revolution. Still, we can watch modifications in their form, in the habits associated with looking at photos, with sharing and storing. The family pictures function as an effective and highly emotional way of maintaining and preserving the important social relations. Digital photography only reinforces these functions: thanks to email communication we can share the photos faster and more frequently. One important change I have noticed is the fact that a digital medium is favourable for greater openness. The photos once providently hidden from the eyes of strangers now can be found on the Internet forums, weblogs or WWW home pages. The routines associated with watching photos are different, too. At present, people, especially the younger generation, watch the photos almost exclusively on computer screens and they have a very rare contact with material prints (and even these prints are usually home-made). Photos no longer are stored in family albums or shoe-boxes – now we use hard drives, memory cards, optical discs, and, most of all, an online sharing and storing services, web albums etc.

2.4. New photographers

A significant change in the family photography (and photography at all) was introduced by the emergence of new photographers. Because of the introduction of digital cameras and because of the ideology of consumerism cameras are now more frequently bought and used by women. Technology and machinery were traditionally perceived as men's domain and even if film cameras were not very complicated, in most cases men were responsible for picture-taking. However, the digital cameras have liberated women's activity: taking pictures is for free, poor photos can be deleted and many more taken, so let's the women play with it. The group of new photographers also consist of children and teenagers who are generally equipped with cameras or at least cameras build in their mobile phones. It is to early to evaluate the consequences of this proliferation but they will be unquestionably very fascinating.

2.5. The trivialization of photography

What is the difference between a present-day photos and the photographs which were taken 20–30 years ago concerning the subject of photography? Have the rules of photography regarding the choice of an object and the way it is represented changed? I think the changes are quite serious and deep – they have affected the whole socio-cultural aspect of photography. The changes were triggered off by the proliferation of fully automatic compact cameras (in the beginning loaded with film but now digital ones). One of the most important qualities of images in the contemporary culture is their large or even mass scale, which at first glance seem to be indifferent to any criteria of beauty and aesthetics. The capability of taking pictures was liberated from acquiring skills required by a manual camera, consequently the number of photos radically increased and their quality significantly dropped.

The peculiarity of contemporary photography is that nowadays we can watch the trivialization and devaluation of a subject of photography. People take picture of everything that can be photographed and everything they can see. First, because of the economic factor – digital pictures are almost for free: buying a digicam is a one-time financial effort – taking thousands of pictures afterwards does not require any further investments. Second, because of the crisis of a artistic tradition and the lack of aesthetic authorities which is characteristic of the consumer society. Moreover, the proliferation of the Internet has made it possible to use it as a particular type of a gallery – its specificity relies on the fact that now every photo can appear in public and for free.

Pierre Bourdieu noticed that the very act of photographing confers a special meaning and value on a situation, object or person being photographed. However, this function of photography is possible only when not everything is photographed. “Photographs of major ceremonies are possible because – and only because – they capture behaviour that is socially approved and socially regulated, that is, behaviour that has already been solemnized. Nothing may be photographed apart from that which must be photographed”¹³.

The most typical exemplification of this function is wedding photography which gives the indispensable social sanction and meaning to the rite of passage and integrates its participants¹⁴. Today, this function is no longer valid but the trivialization of the subject of photography should not be automatically assessed as negative because in the works and photo-practices of some new photographers this trivialization transforms into a total photography. Examples of such a shift can be found in photoblogs. By analyzing them we can observe the change in general function of photography which once was uniqueness but now it is mundaneness.

3. Photoblogs – history and basic facts

Photoblogging has increasingly become a very popular mainstream online activity for both amateur and pro photographers. Professionals and amateur photographers use the Internet for creating social networks as well as showing photos to very large audiences.

Photoblogs (or online photo-diaries) have emerged as a part of blogosphere and a subgenre of Internet blogs. Blogs are diaries, chronologically organized web site with text messages that are successively added to the diary. Photoblogs use blog technology to publish pictures instead of words (“photo” + “web” + “log”) – even if they use words, pictures are the main focus (photographs are substituted for a text message or a part of a text message but most photoblogs have some verbal content as well as pictures). It makes no sense to define how many photos it takes

¹³ P. Bourdieu, *op.cit.*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁴ One can observe that this trivialization of the subject matter of photography is not always accompanied by the trivialization of photographing *per se*, which is still perceived as an important part of many ceremonies. See: J. Lubos-Kozieł, *Ona stoi, on siedzi oraz całe mnóstwo innych możliwości. O studyjnej fotografii ślubnej i przyczynach jej popularności* [She is Standing, He is Sitting, and a Whole Lot of Other Possibilities. On Studio Wedding Photography and Reasons for Its Popularity], “Ikonosfera. Studia z Socjologii i Antropologii Obrazu” [“Iconosphere. Studies in Visual Sociology and Anthropology”] 2006, Vol. 1, <http://www.ikonosfera.umk.pl/index.php?id=45> [access: 23.09.2009].

to change a blog into a photoblog – usually it is obvious if we deal with a blog or a photoblog, but the most important and crucial factor is the definition of situation accepted by the author. When we cannot find such a self-definition the decisive question is about autonomy of images: do photographs in a photoblog function as independent and self-sufficient message or maybe their function is purely illustrative/decorative? The site www.photoblogs.org, one of the photoblog service websites, defines photoblogs in this way: “A photoblog is a type of blog that is regularly updated with photos. Some photoblogs focus only on photography, while others have photos in addition to other content. All photoblogs, however, consider photos to be an important part of their chronological blogging structure”¹⁵.

When did first photoblogs appear? The first web pages which served this function (although they were not called photoblogs) emerged in the middle of 1990s together with development of WWW home pages and proliferation of the Internet. Photoblogs in the proper sense appeared as soon as there were technical possibilities of displaying images to audiences (WWW browsers, user-friendly software and fast transmission). The proper photoblogger’s movement (photoblogging) started at the beginning of the third millennium together with first specialized photoblog services and providers, as well as software for editing, uploading and updating the photoblogs. They do not require any special computer or software skills. The first Polish photoblogs emerged in 2002. The good example is <http://www.bartpogoda.net> which evolved from a text weblog. Photoblog catalogues such as <http://www.photoblogs.org> have started in 2002 – they catalogue and classify photoblogs according to various criteria¹⁶. Photoblogs are so abundant that it is more and more difficult to find projects that are unique, creative, imaginative so such catalogues play a very important role.

How many photoblogs are there? Without doubt there are a lot of them but it is very difficult to estimate their number. According to <http://www.photoblogs.org> in April 2011 there were more than 40,000 registered photoblogs all over the world (a few hundred in Poland) but these are only selected photoblogs which fit criteria of the catalogue – there are much more unregistered ones. When we look at statistics of the biggest photoblogging service <http://www.fotolog.com> (April 2011), we can see very impressive statistics: **32 291 931** registered photoblogging accounts in more than 200 countries, **929 541 005** uploaded photographs, **37 537** photographs uploaded during one single per day (April 14, 2011).

¹⁵ <http://www.photoblogs.org/faq/> [access: 10.01.2009].

¹⁶ See: http://wiki.photoblogs.org/wiki/Photoblogging_History [access: 27.08.2006].

It is very not possible to accurately estimate the total number of photoblogs and the same thing applies to Polish ones. As I research Polish photoblogs I think that the statistics from <http://www.photoblogs.org> presented above is somehow incomplete and underestimated. Polish site <http://www.fotolog.pl> informs about 21048 photoblogs registered in Poland (April 2011). The other Polish blog-provider <http://www.photoblog.pl> assesses there are a 100 thousand photoblogs which seems to be overtly overestimated, because photoblog service providers prefer such a triumphant way of guesstimate (higher numbers increase the attractiveness of the site for advertisers). Besides, one should remember that every day there are many new photoblogs added to the blogosphere and, at the very same time, many established ones are not updated anymore, so there are many “dead” photoblogs out there as well.

At the beginning of their history the development of photoblogs was limited by slow Internet connection and expensive digicams. The heyday of photoblogs correlate with a cheap broadband Internet and affordable digital cameras. Such a relation and the impact of technological advances is not new in the history of photography. When George Eastman introduced the hand-held Kodak camera in the 1880s he made photography accessible. Cameras such as famous “Box Brownie” were manufactured in millions and sold for about quarter of an average week’s wage. The facts that photography has become much cheaper and much easier (“you press the button, we do the rest”) affected the way people use photography, i.e. people interested in recording life moments, which would otherwise require a professional photographer, were offered a new tool¹⁷.

The relocation of cameras from photo studios, where they were usually used for serious fine art projects, portrait or still life photography, meant that they have become available for average people who take photographing into their hands and use it to preserve important and less-important moments in their life: family celebrations, picnics, holidays. It would be impossible with pre-Kodak heavy and bulky cameras loaded with fragile glass plates: easy to load rolls of film changed everything and started a new era in the history of photography.

Undoubtedly the proliferation of cheap digicams caused a similarly dramatic change in the practice of photography. The real simplification of taking pictures, decrease in costs and new possibilities of sharing pictures made all photographers look for new objects of photo-interest. They aim their lenses at these aspects of

¹⁷ G. Freund, *Photography & Society*, London 1980, p. 201; P. Holland, *Sweet It is to Scan. Personal Photographs and Popular Photography* [in:] *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, L. Wells (ed.), London–New York 1997, pp. 127–132.

their life and their reality which in the pre-digital photography, as a rule, were not photographed (or they were very rarely photographed). So we have moved from the studio photography, through occasional photography, to the era of total photography. The total photography is interested in everything – in everyday life and trivial activities, in all facets of life which are not always exciting and unique altogether, because mostly they are mundane, routine and dull procedures (what one has for dinner, a book one is reading, people in the subway, passing cars). However, at the same time, these trivial and mundane elements of everyday life create a fundamental dimension of human life – they all are integral parts of life as such. Photoblogs endeavour to give us a direct, unmediated, emotionally based experience of life as it is in all its manifestations. **The power of a photoblog does not rely on the uniqueness of individual photographs, but rather on the totality of experience it delivers.** It seems that photoblogs work this way even if some photobloggers declare a high level of selectivity. It is so because their criteria are not the exceptionality and rarity of the image but authenticity of a personal signature.

4. Photoblogging as exploring the everyday life

During my research on photoblogs many times I have run into a very specific thought which is to be found in the statements of photobloggers.

My photoblog is a report about reality I observe. Photography means for my new experiences and photoblog gives an account of it. The most important thing for me is to create a visible report and build a particular atmosphere in my frames, unique and characteristic only for my worldview. A frame is an image in which I can paint a photograph with the light.

For me my photoblog is 100% me, not some unreal “who is this?” – just me, my joy and sorrow, my laughs and tears, emotions and lack of emotions...

In the beginning the photoblog was an idea how to spend some time, but now this is a part of my soul.

Let there be life, everyday life, and you in the photoblog.

Photoblog is my own small world :)

My photoblog is my life!¹⁸

¹⁸ The statements and comments of Polish photobloggers, which I quote in this article, were obtained during my research on photoblogs. They were expressed in my email contacts with the authors, in a questionnaire I sent them and in online discussions in the following online posts: *Fotoblog. Fotografia. Sztuka* [Photoblog. Photography. Art], <http://ffb.pl/forum/viewtopic.php?t=42&sta>

These comments show that photoblogs can be seen as a personal chronicle of the present time, a form of communication, an individual diary, but at the same time they can be seen as a social artifact, a product of author's social environment. Taking photos is a social process, a part of a life-world, which accompanies us on almost every occasion – both everyday and unusual activities. By recording the images of the world, which surround us, photobloggers create a very special diary which allows them to preserve the passing reality of the world and things that seem to be trivial or mundane. The diary is at the same time both individual and collective. Moreover, the majority of people do like recollecting memories because our memory defines us in a more meaningful way than present or future activities which importance are unknown. What is also very significant this record of memory is always directed towards other people: "I want to pass on the image, the moment which has just gone through the lens of my camera. My city, my streets, friends and strangers who I meet, the aura of a small town, which is very boring sometimes, and a very beautiful place I am living my life".

Sharing photos and reviewing them alone is not enough to satisfy the definition of a photoblog – such goals could be achieved by using popular photo-sharing sites such as Flickr, Picasa, SmugMug, ImageShack and web albums. The quality that distinguishes a photoblog is the blog formula, a function of a diary and a documentary. Photobloggers often put emphasis on the fact that in dealing with elusiveness of everyday life their photoblogs try to overcome the fading memory, save ephemeral moments, be a testimony to the truth of growing-up, changes around them and within them, changes in their view on reality. When we watch their sites we can discover private worlds of people who are either very similar to us or completely different, but nevertheless, getting in touch with them gives us pleasure and satisfaction, even when their photoblogs show unexciting face of everyday life.

Photobloggers want their photographs to be interesting, diverse and technically correct but these are not the most important criteria of success. What is more vital is a personal message and catching the right moment: "when I am in a spe-

rt=15&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=&sid=8d7f421ba8db8 d89a429b67253d1e7e1 [access: 6.01.2006]; *Mój fotoblog* [My Photoblog] <http://ffb.pl/forum/viewtopic.php?t=57> [access: 10.01.2006]; *Czym jest dla Ciebie PHOTOBLOG?* [What Is Photoblog for You?] <http://www.photoblog.pl/forum/index.php?forumID=2&ID=48448&start=0> [access: 16.01.2006]. In my study I analyzed the following photoblogs (the life of photoblogs is ephemeral and some of them already do not exist): <http://awakening.fotolog.pl>; <http://barteq.fotolog.pl>; <http://blindmelon.blog.pl>; <http://blog.art.pl/gruzja>; <http://cristobal.fotolog.pl>; <http://daily.com.pl>; <http://dope.rst.com.pl>; <http://evareppel.com>; <http://foto.chudkiewicz.com>; <http://foto.piotrciezkowski.com>; <http://grzeda.blog.pl>; <http://individual.ownlog.com>; <http://insmac.fotolog.pl>; <http://natalia-natalie.blog.pl>; <http://pad.go.pl>; <http://senq.ownlog.com>; <http://spoon.unspl.com>; <http://straupisz.blog.pl>; <http://streetphoto.blog.pl>; <http://trzaskprask.blog.pl>; <http://www.bartpogoda.net>; <http://www.coffeerepublic.fotolog.pl>; <http://www.terriblelie.ownlog.com>.

cific mood – good or bad – I may want to share it. I look for a proper image by which I am able to express my emotion. When I find it I record it, save as jpg and upload on my photoblog”; “I do not choose particular images for my photoblog but I do know my photoblog pictures are very different from the ones I am taking in my job assignments. Photoblog’s pictures are usually simpler – they do not have to be perfect but they have to be the record of time”. Let me use a metaphor from the art world. A photoblog is unlike a big oil painting, it is rather a modest sketch-book that helps to share simple joys and details. This sketch-like quality of a photoblog is compensated by the engagement, enthusiasm and authenticity. Photoblogs help us to “tame the world” or snuggle up to the world. One of the photobloggers noticed that it is important to differentiate between “everyday photos” and “photos taken every day”: the idea of a photoblog is to publish mundane photos – not necessarily upload photos on a regular basis.

The photobloggers’ inclination to record moments of time and various details around us can be seen as a kind of return to the historical roots of photography and cinema when moments of everyday life were saved and preserved: a view from a studio, a passer-by, a working gardener. Photoblogs and digicams are wonderful tools for anybody in a pursue of new forms, experiments, but also in giving attention to things that are usually unnoticed.

5. Total photography

The photographs of what photobloggers appraise so much and call “the everyday”, the “trivial” and the “mundane” should not be confused with conventional family, holiday or wedding snapshots. Photobloggers are not interested in this kind of the everyday and mundane moments. They want to show “the real life” and how they experience it. This outlook on photography was also discovered in Chris Cohen’s research on photobloggers, “Real life, photobloggers say, traditionally happens *outside* of photographs, and this is precisely what they want *in* their photos”¹⁹. So photoblogs should be interested in “the real life” which is not shown in “traditional” photography. Therefore, when they take pictures of themselves, their friends and strangers they usually do not use flash, they avoid posing (unless it’s a self-reflective or ironic pose). In order to achieve this goal they employ different techniques: they use “undercover” photography, work by surprise, shoot from un-

¹⁹ K.R. Cohen, *What Does the Photoblog Want?*, “Media Culture & Society” 2005, Vol. 27(6), p. 887.

sual angles (LCD screens of digicams make it very easy), use reflections – all these to show the truth about people and the world.

Chris Cohen also notices a very intrigue and unexpected (even paradoxical) relation between pursuing the real life and digital photography²⁰. According to photobloggers it is the digital photography that makes it possible to discover and explore “the real life”! “The fact that digital photographs are free (once the camera and accessories have been purchased) allows photobloggers to take more photos, to experiment and play in a way they rarely did when paying for film processing. What they tend to do under these expanded conditions – and I think this is an interesting and non-obvious choice – is take more photos of what they call “real life”: life as it happens, the small stuff, an intriguing signpost, the stages of construction of a new building, the Thames at low tide, a strange effect of lighting. This behaviour appears to invert a strong claim often made about the digital and its supposed virtuality: namely the claim that the digital introduces a disconcerting fissure of virtuality and indeterminacy into the Real and into our realities. If a photograph is digital, the story goes, how can we tell if it's been altered, if irrealities have tainted the photograph's realities? With photoblogging practices, conversely, the digital prepares the field for the introduction of the Real, for the introduction of ‘real life’ into photography”²¹.

What is the characteristics and profile of Polish photoblogs? Polish photoblogs, exactly like all photoblogs, present the worlds of particular photobloggers which they want to share with viewers. How does these worlds, creations of photographs, look like? How photobloggers perceive the reality? Most of the pictures are street life photography that captures life on the spot. Photobloggers are especially interested in their immediate surroundings – the reality of gray and ugly block of flats, untidy gloomy backyards, poor and neglected neighborhoods. Poland represented in their photographs is quite different from Poland usually seen on TV – this is not a country of colourful malls and smiling, successful free-market winners. It is different and more real because there are real people living their lives not some virtual models made of pixel and plastic. I suppose that this gloomy grayness is so popular because it functions as a reaction to sugary images in mass media. In

²⁰ This remark is very important because of the heated discussion among the theorists on whether digital means “death” to the truth of photography and how the real is allegedly undermined by digital photography (more on this topic, see e.g. K. Olechnicki, *Fotografia cyfrowa = śmierć fotografii?* [Digital Photography = Death of Photography?], “Camer@obscura. Historia, Teoria i Estetyka Fotografii” [“Camer@obscura. History, Theory and Aesthetics of Photography”] 2007, No. 3–4; K. Robins, *Into the Image. Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*, London–New York 1996, pp. 149–153).

²¹ K.R. Cohen, *op.cit.*, p. 888.

the panorama of human types photobloggers are sympathetic with people from the margins of our society, with those who are unwanted and excluded from a happy capitalism of the consumer culture. The most imposing impression from watching these pictures is the sense of visual roughness and harshness of Polish reality, which is very directly experienced by photobloggers.

These photoblogs do not represent the impartial look of an anthropologist, neither the curiosity of a collector. This is a voice (or rather a vision) of a “native” who has to survive within this hostile social ecosystem. Young people²², who are the most active authors of photoblogs, send us a clear message and a critical view. The visual reality they document annoys them so they show their negative attitude towards it, but at the very same time they try to cope with it. The most popular way of managing the reality is dividing it into two parts: one is a hostile sphere of the city, street, neighbourhood; the other one is a cosy haven of one’s home, family, closest friends, favourite pets. The public sphere is confronted with the private sphere but thanks to a photoblog this is not a complete closure in the shell of home, because this privacy and even intimacy is very often publicly exposed and shared. The photographs which show the authors’ life, emotions, intimacy – may be seen as ambivalent. Sharing such representations can be dangerous, too, because it may cause some hostile feedback from the environment. However, as one photoblogger has said, showing ones life gives a chance for a meeting with another person, so it is worth trying because a photoblog is “a diary with a function of communication”²³.

6. Conclusion: photoblogs and profits for sociology

The proliferation of photography in its newest form (digital photography) has many consequences but it definitely means that people are taking more photos, in fact, without any limits concerning the subject. This can be and should be used by sociology, particularly by visual sociology and sociology of everyday life. The prevalent practices of sharing the photos on WWW home pages, galleries, photo-sharing sites and photoblogs give sociologists a fantastic opportunity – an access to private worlds of people, worlds closed for a conventional investigation. Photographs are as important personal documents as letters, diaries, journals – they can

²² The average Polish photoblogger is a young person, usually 15–35 years old, who lives in a city with 50 000 thousand inhabitants or more, with at least high school education (very often, 50%, have higher degree). Men photoblog more often than women but the difference is very small (this characteristic differentiates photoblogs from weblogs, which are usually more often written by women).

²³ <http://danieluk.net/fotoblog/ja.htm> [access: 08.01.2006].

be used as empirical data and evidence. In such a case visual sociology cooperates with a biographical method. According to Rafał Drozdowski this cooperation relies on using visual documents in many ways²⁴. Photoblogging can be treated as a contemporary version of Mass-Observation Project²⁵, which is even more useful for sociologists since people with digicams are everywhere and anytime.

Photography is a universal language which is very often used instrumentally, even abused, but can also become a tool used to learn about the world, a tool of creation, a tool of human integration and a tool of resistance against dominant cultural aims. Even if the majority of pictures uploaded on the Internet demonstrate the popularity of a voyeuristic and exhibitionistic attitude built on consumerism, there are still some photoblogs which use personal messages and personal images for self-development and communication with others, rather than narcissist self-advertisement. As we can see the “dark side” of the contemporary photography, which is dominated by the consumer culture, is accompanied by the ‘bright side’ of photography, which in this cultural environment can use the margin of freedom guaranteed by the very same consumer culture.

Howard Becker has drawn a parallel, popular among the visual sociologists, between sociology and photography. He says that they both were born almost the same time: 1837 – the 4th volume of Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* was published; 1839 – the daguerreotype was invented, and they also shared a very important common denominator: the will to explore society in a total way and conviction that is absolutely possible²⁶. As we know from the history of sociology a very deep discord soon happened for the reason that sociology was aspiring to become a “real” science and photography was defining its goals within the context of fine arts. Now, sociology and photography are very close once again: they have realized that the most uncommon thing is common life.

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²⁴ R. Drozdowski, *Fotografia jako dokument osobisty* [Photography as Personal Documentary] [in:] *Co widać?* [What Can You See?], J. Kaczmarek, M. Krajewski (eds.), Poznań 2006.

²⁵ Ch. Madge, T. Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, London 1937.

²⁶ H.S. Becker, *Photography and Sociology*, “Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication” 1974, No. 1, Vol. 1.

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SUMMARY

The article aims to analyse the relation between the consumer culture and photography. The analysis begins with presenting a wide context of changes of social functions of photography (both technological and ideological). The changes include voyeuristic and exhi-

bitionistic trends among the photographers, transformation of family photography, emerging of new photographers and last but not least the trivialization of photography. All these changes are discussed with a reference to a new photographic phenomenon – photoblogging. The paper presents its history and basic facts and then assumes that some photoblogs implement the project of a total photography which is achieved by exploring the everyday life. Finally, the article offers a perspective on profits which sociology can gain by surveying the world of online images.

Key words:

Photography, sociology of everyday life, visual sociology, photoblog, consumer culture