

SILENT ABSOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

The study is a theoretical-visual essay that addresses the contexts of interconnection of documentary photography in wider societal relationships – cultural, social, religious, philosophical, and pedagogical. The sources of the study are the opinions of key philosophers related to the sphere of human being and the participation of a person in human society, service to others, egoism, altruism, existence, borderline situations, and problematisation of happiness. The core of the study comprises an analysis and interpretation of approaches (within the photographic project entitled *Damnatio memoriae – Condemnation of Memory*) and is divided into several parts: *The Stories in Images, Images of Awakening and Self-Discovery, The Inner Memory and Cultural Information, Almost Home* and *Podolínec or About Loneliness within Ourselves*. Institutionally, instrumentally, and biblically, the study is a reflection on an image of stories of the religious congregation of Redemptorists, childhood dreams, historical and cultural continuity, difficult messages on the meaning of suffering, political persecution, and finding new identities and spiritual perspectives. It is a story of human wandering that implies a journey from the individual to the whole, a journey of breaking boundaries and stereotypes, a journey from the profane to the sacral. Through the medium of photography and their theoretical attitudes, the authors build a narrative of personal experience that has become a story of rises and falls, but also a dramatic turnaround, where a human being becomes a different person.

KEY WORDS:

altruism, documentary photography, faith, humanism, iconography, mystagogy, narrative, orphanage, postmodernism, solitude, stereotype, transcendence, visuality

1 Introduction

“People or stars regard me sadly, I disappoint them.” (Sylvia Plath)¹

Can photography as a medium be interpreted and perceived as a form of confession? Such a context comes to mind as we consider the social impact intentions of documentary photography. In a way, the concept of “absolution” can sublime an image that is constituted in our consciousness when we consider the necessity to participate in human society emotionally and rationally; a certain selfless idea of forgiving ourselves, others,

¹ PLATH, S.: *Ariel*. Prague : Argo, 2017, p. 11.

and the outside world. It seems, however that such “absolution” is impossible to achieve, for various reasons that define us as a rather autocratic and boundless kind. Both Ch. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and the Neo-Darwinist term “selfish gene” established by evolutionary biologist R. Dawkins negate the existence of pure altruism as, according to him, there is egoism behind our every action; and, at the same time, this gene tells us a lot about our atomised society.² Contrasting with his ideas is A. Smith’s belief that, by pursuing their own goals and needs, an individual also serves others, and thus does not regard selfishness as a trait but rather a relationship that cannot be attributed to individuals. They consider terms “pure egoism” and “pure altruism” to be artificial constructs lacking deeper meaning, because an individual can never precisely separate their own benefit from the benefit of other people.³

Although we ‘inhabit’ this world, it has never belonged to us. In many senses, this situation can resemble an inner desire for ‘petrichor’,⁴ i.e., the smell of rain falling on dry ground, which all living creatures long for. This archetypal principle introduces us to the context of our origins, the Earth that is common to all species. This highlights the key concept of boundary situations of K. Jaspers’s philosophy of existence, which is absolutely intertwined in all areas of our being and living in the world; it encompasses theology, psychology, art and palliative care. We are only able to avoid boundary situations in life by closing our eyes to them, but, eventually, we must give in to them and that is why we react to them in a meaningful way, i.e., “(...) becoming the possible existence that exists in us. We become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations (...) Experiencing the boundary situations and existence are the same thing. In the hopelessness of living, a possibility to rise the being in myself opens”.⁵ Jaspers further states: “Only in the boundary situation can suffering be inevitable. Everybody must bear and fulfil his burden. No one else can relieve him of it.”⁶ And thus, ‘sheer happiness’ feels as something strange, not quite normal; something that must inevitably fail in our lives, i.e., “must be jeopardized and restored to become true happiness”. Is this revelation of being the basis of what we should love in another human being?⁷ However, our own contact and clash with our own boundaries is a clash with the boundaries of immanent being that does not exceed us as beings and stays hidden inside; thus, it is something that cannot be compared to the Christian interpretation of the transcendent God, although, according to G. Deleuze, “immanence means a dismissal of any transcendence”.⁸ A person never withdraws into themselves for no reason but as a result of helplessness. Good and evil exist as a consequence of selection that must be continually revived and constituted.⁹

“People do more evil than good; humankind thus appears to be structurally defective and its future is dark. (...) That is why good is often not seen; it is taken for granted, although, fundamentally, it is all that matters. (...) There is nothing last, final in the activity of such a dynamic creature as the human being. (...) And in the contempt, even hostility, toward pain, we do not accept that it could be not only a means of self-loss but also of self-discovery. (...) As Nietzsche pointed out, we would not make it in the world without evil. (...) Therefore, the world itself is neither good nor bad, it is what we make it and how we see it. Leibniz stated that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He deduced it from his faith in the best, omniscient, and omnipotent God. Simply because we were born in it, have adapted to it, and are able to live only in it. (...) To be born in it does not necessarily mean that we are completely satisfied with it... We see possibilities to improve it and that is what we must do.”¹⁰

Therefore, it is our innate duty to examine the world and try to understand it, to find order of everything within infinity, to be present in being. One of the oldest quotes in the history of Western thinking, “Anaximander’s quote”, interprets our perception of the difference between being and existence; it moves us closer to the being itself and helps us to cope with the inner turmoil that we have created: “All things must

2 See: DAWKINS, R.: *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2018.

3 For more information, see: SMITH, A.: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

4 See: BBC NEWS: *Petrichor: Why Does Rain Smell So Good?* Released on 27th July 2018. [online]. [2021-09-27]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-44904298>>.

5 JASPERS, K.: *Mezní situace*. Prague : Oikoyemnh, 2016, p. 11.

6 JASPERS, K.: *Mezní situace*. Prague : Oikoyemnh, 2016, p. 62-63.

7 JASPERS, K.: *Mezní situace*. Prague : Oikoyemnh, 2016, p. 62-63.

8 For more information, see: DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI, F.: *What Is Philosophy?* London, New York : Verso, 1994.

9 See also: DELEUZE, G., GUATTARI, F.: *Tisíc plosín*. Prague : Herrmann & Synové, 2020, p. 16.

10 MÚNZ, T.: *Odhádzame? Esej o človeku a prírode*. Bratislava : Petrus, 2020, p. 43-48.

in equity again decline into that whence they have their origin for they must give satisfaction and atonement for injustice each in the order of time.”¹¹ Heidegger regards existence as something that is simply there, and he defines the human being as the only existence that realises their own being, in contrast to the Christian or to Plato’s interpretation and the analysis of the sacred and the profane, in which existence is something true, an idea of God, something we can really comprehend; it is thus the being itself. Heidegger calls being a “presence” and, according to him, anxiety is the fundamental human experience, as it represents the human themselves, because this possibility of being also implies the possibility of non-being. Within this inseparable interconnection in the state of anxiety lies the actual principle of man facing their own death.¹² And, therefore, it is the anxiety that makes us human; it is necessary to experience it, as thanks to it we meet ourselves inside ourselves and we face the most personal challenges throughout our journey.

The documentary photographs which are a part of this study, were created as part of creative workshops that took place in Podolíneč in 2017 and 2018, and which we organised for the students within the Studio of Communication in the Medium of Photography at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. Our studio has long been implementing creative workshops of documentary photography with the aim of recording the cultural, social and religious layers of the urban and rural environment. Our goal is to develop students’ photographic skills, but also a very important factor is the broader social dimension of this type of photography, because students learn to form deep interpersonal relationships with the displayed people, by personal interviews they learn how to properly create an atmosphere suitable for photography, to find a suitable environment for creating photographs, which should be technically and compositionally progressive and, especially, strong in content and able to tell the stories depicted in a broader context. “Visual representation of a human being in the 21st century changes alongside the notable transformation of their ontological status. Complex questions related to postmodern identity and their interpretation by the medium of photography leads students to understand the psychological relevance and difficulties of communicating social and ethical messages. (...) Students in a visual dialogue often pose questions, challenge aesthetical norms and societal attitudes or play with gestures. This moves the educative dimension of photography towards empirical learning about the inner structures of the medium. (...) This results in a significant sociological and philosophical dimension of as human being, as well as in the fact that photography, not only the documentary, liberates from the nothingness of oblivion.”¹³

In 2017, we went for the first time to the small town of Podolíneč in Slovakia, but still had no idea what topics and human destinies awaited us there. We were 16 photographers together (2 teachers, 1 priest and 13 students from our university). This study, which tells a story of a visual and human journey, could be divided into several parts or chapters.

2 The Stories in Images

It is impossible to walk through the town Podolíneč without looking back into the past – history. Whenever we and our students travelled to see a priest – our friend Ľuboš Hajdučík in Nižné Ružbachy, our schedule was always very simple. Fulfilling it, however, was much harder. Because, without some luck, it was impossible to agree on a meeting and the topic of a workshop, set up the time, place, and situations that would automatically lead to many idea-rich photographs.

The project about the Monastery in Podolíneč is unique because we did not regard it as a simple topic or a general term. It also did not become a post-humanist portrait of a community of children behind a mirror or indrawn monks who we observed and judged within the context of presented stereotypes. On the contrary, it became unique because of the saturation of all the possible reflections on how to grasp the hidden picture of the big and small stories of the religious congregation of the Redemptorists, childhood dreams, historical and

11 HEIDEGGER, M.: *Anaximandrov výrok*. Prague : Oikoyemnh, 2012, p. 5.

12 For more information, see: HEIDEGGER, M.: *Bytí a čas*. Prague : Oikoyemnh, 2008.

13 ČEPKOVÁ, P., LANČARIČ, P., SEDLÁK, J.: Empiricism of the Medium of Photography and the Interflow of Realities of Vision. In *Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)*, 2021, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 41-43.

cultural continuity, gloomy messages of the meaning of suffering, political persecution, resumption of the monastery activities, and finding a new identity and spiritual perspective.

The Special Primary School of St. Clement Hofbauer, the Orphanage of St. Clement Hofbauer, and the Monastery of Redemptorists constitute a concentrated 'Commune of God'. Institutionally and instrumentally, the teachers and caregivers are social workers – employees. 'Biblically', together with the monks, they are also brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. This personification, both figuratively and architectonically, represents the monumentality of the former monastery transformed into social institutions for abandoned children that is, however, also a true expression of a community that apprehends the principles of *Rerum Novarum* and *Humanae Vitae*.¹⁴

In the labyrinths of corridors with baroque arches, to us tangled, archaic areas of the monastery, we encountered the spontaneous and wild identity of Roma children. To be in the monastery in Podolíneč felt like a rise from the dust of our stereotypes, in which we were at times pursuers of the children wanting to examine, grasp and move the boundaries of their personal worlds (imagination); at other times, we were pursued by the children who were not scared of this exposure. On the contrary, they demanded the different – unknown physical and mental contact with the world we represent. At times, wild gestures of the 'children of the monastery' appeared in these contexts not only as different forms and contents of the good, but they also assumed an ability to separate, to discover the new and overcome the old. Together the author and the object of their interest undergo a radical change on this social level. Our personal experience was not just linear (flat). It became a story of change, detours, rises and falls. Despite these dramatic turns, through which one becomes a different person, the stories captured by the photographs allowed us to explore an inner mark between that which is central for the personality of a child (human being) – or the identity of a community, and that which is arbitrary. In this case, the image reflection gives a meaning to the plurality of experience and side stories, the social, cultural, and spiritual history of being (being of the monastery) as variations of a single topic – an authentic mystical experience (finding faith, hope, and love).

3 Images of Awakening and Self-Discovery

"I got a deeper insight into my own heart and also into that of others. Gradually I began to love my fellow men again, myself included, and more and more my heart and soul revived. And the more I turned to reality, and mingled with people, the more I felt new life reviving in me." (Vincent van Gogh)¹⁵

Our photographing has become a name for the content of that which internally transforms from the world outside into the world inside – into the spiritual layer of reality – a deconstruction, but also a reconstruction of an idea of fragile happiness given to all without conditions, including the real sociocultural future of the prematurely (mentally) 'grown-up children'. Neither of our photographs in the book is a clear and definite answer to the question of subsidiarity in relation to the disadvantaged groups or to the general orientation of the church in relation to social topics of family. It is a feeling, thought, image symbol, moral action, maybe a work of art – a product of unprepared people afraid of the fear of being exposed. These are fears that we can bravely interpret in many topics and worlds but cannot stand when they touch our world.

Project *Damnatio memoriae – Condemnation of Memory* refers to an ideal of authenticity of the medium of photography (truthfulness and uniqueness of capturing the causal and intentional level of a topic). It is an image of awakening and self-discovery of the author, but also of the interpreted reality, its history in time and stories, which enhances the self-formation of both the individual and the community. Such an image is dialogic; it is realised through a visual conversation between the author and the photographed subject. Photography as a semiotic kind of record forms a structure of social horizon, social recognition, and a background of the process of individualisation – a spiritual and physical originality. Within image chaining of events, it forms a certain

14 See: SEDLÁK, J. (ed.): *Damnatio memoriae/Stratenie pamiatky*. Bratislava : Neumahr, 2019.

15 HULSKER, J.: *Vincent van Gogh – Deník v dopisech*. Prague : Labyrint, 2012, p. 16.

order – coding. An author should see the approach to reality interpretation as a necessary structure of moral life. Complexity of a human being is an imperative of learning (to have certain reference points – a constant of God that we head towards) and interlinking the experienced – thought, and, vice versa, of attempting to find connections.

4 The Inner Memory and Cultural Information

Photographing socially disadvantaged groups is constant verification of personal experience with social legislation of public authorities, psychology, philosophy, religion, as well as public opinion, the mainstream media, and the tabloidization of cultural and moral role models of the society. Contemporary genres of social documentary assume the requirements of interdisciplinary discussion. The project *Damnatio memoriae – Condemnation of Memory* – was supposed to create a spacetime in which the necessary question of meaning could be asked and then discussed and solved. Photographs of the mostly Roma children taken by the state, children without parents and children abandoned at birth, are an important testimony of historical events and the story of Slovak society that are not always pretty; on the contrary, they cause outrage, provoke, and are a catalyst for an authentic present. In the end, the aforementioned question of meaning cannot represent just a reliance on one's own strength or being stuck in a cycle of egoistic notion – if I am not faithful to myself, I lose the meaning of my own life, I lose that which makes me a human being. In the previous regime, the Monastery of the Redemptorists in Podolíneč was meant to be the story of a deliberate attempt to erase the history of Christian identity – the inner memory of the nation. Today, it represents a stage of self-discovery of new social relationships and spiritual experience, a story of ascent, self-sacrifice in the projects of human missions for others. Within the context of the project *Damnatio memoriae – Condemnation of Memory*, biblical redemption, forgiveness and demise of the old sublimates into finding the new. It is the sharing and recognising of that which was not meant to exist – which should have been foreign to us. (It is not possible to make something fully our own, if it is foreign to us in its nature. To appropriate something means to make it similar, although it was not similar or even known to us before).

It is certain that in the postmodern perception of reality, the moral, ethical, and aesthetic boundaries of visualisation go through a process of falsifying changes and revolutions, ergo the process of utilitarianism – an attitude and value based on the rate of usefulness and calculation. What really fills life with meaning, what is self-forming, is to appropriate such a character of image which, although unknown before, is able to express the transcendent truth of reality. Such an approach is inevitably a theological-anthropological approach to art. The monastery in Podolíneč is a story of the world that exceeds the politics of human will, because it is not only cultural information, but also God's story, a monastery built on a 'rock', not a (referential system of rearrangement of sand). Each shot created in this environment has become a living image – a materialised word oriented at the creation of the future. With each live contact with the monastery, something new was formed – new experience – new spiritual world. In the explicit words of A. Belyj: *"The aim of a contact is to activate within a touch of two worlds a third world."*¹⁶

5 Almost Home

Documentary photographs from the workshops in Podolíneč have a single goal – to reflect on lives of human beings that have been denied love. *"The photographs thus lead us to the specific environment of the monastery in Podolíneč, which has been writing its history in the area of education and selfless help for those in need since the 17th century. The monastery had also gone through adverse times since the 1950s, when it served as a camp that housed monks for the purpose of their re-education – denial of their faith. Nowadays, the monastery's gates are open for those who need it the most – orphans of living parents. And thus, children*

16 BELYJ, A.: *Estetika. Teoria simbolizma. Tom I*. Moscow : Izdatel'stvo Estetičeskoje, 1994, p. 228.

from adverse social environments live next to the Redemptorist monks, pedagogues, carers, and the necessary personnel, who are trying to substitute what they have been unjustly denied – family and home, in a Special Primary School and Orphanage of St. Clement Hofbauer that started its activities in 2006. We cannot just pass the photographs presented here by; they are powerful by their fate and perspective. Let us look into their eyes that do not accuse, only grieve for love from those unknown close ones. To empathise with their life, we must be willing to reach inward and ask ourselves a question: Who is a human being and who am I in this world? And to answer truthfully: We live in a time that is spewing information that overloads us and directs us far from what is important in life – to understand each other and express genuine love not only to our closest ones, but also to those who need it. It is not difficult; a nice word is enough. Photographs of children abandoned not through their own fault interpret the reality of life. They have become a story of those that are unwanted, rejected, important only for statistical data. They are a heartfelt dialogue between the photographers and the object of photographing – a human being that is a gift of life.¹⁷

6 Podolíneč or about Loneliness within Ourselves

Everything is silent like when it snows. In the Orphanage of St. Clement Hofbauer in Podolíneč, it is sometimes quiet. It is quiet like when an act of faith and altruism in the moment means everything but still hurts. To find oneself in an orphanage, where the walls of children's rooms are metaphorically colder than a January morning, is like waking up and realising that we are alone. To find out that home and family, that feeling of belonging somewhere, to someone who alleviates all pains of childhood, is just too much. In that silence, and still now, it is hard to describe the anxiety and despair, when all you have left is to believe in something.



Pictures 1,2
Source: Jozef Sedláčik

However, what is the title in the analogy of the term loneliness supposed to mean? We could find symbiosis within the terms such as meaning, suffering, love, ideal, and passion in S. Freud, F. Nietzsche or S. Kierkegaard. It is S. Kierkegaard who has laid the foundations of existentialism, but also the relationship between our lives and the faith in God. Not only Kierkegaard's 19th century saw a departure from humanness, from the great significance of subjectivity and human individuality, it is still notable today. Reason can often carry us away from important views on life, making us lose 'enthusiasm' in our essentially rational present. Therefore, it is necessary to reach inwards and get to know ourselves (with our fears and hopes), because only then we are able to get to know and understand the world around us. Being is not something predestined, finished, but it has a character of 'dynamis'; it is a mightiness, power, and to understand the world is the task, purpose, and meaning of life for each of us. A human being should form the most intimate relationship in

17 KUBÍKOVÁ, K.: Takmer domov. In SEDLÁK, J. (ed.): *Damnatio memoriae / Stratenie pamiatky*. Bratislava : Neumahr, 2019, p. 5.

accordance to the question 'Who am I?' (to believe and to live in the spirit of this belief), because how else could we bear to look at the sadness in the eyes of abandoned children? It is like reaching for eternity, it is a journey on which we are trying not to lose ourselves. In this sense, Kierkegaard's 'most radical' and most subjective work *Fear and Trembling*, which mainly defines the concept of faith, implies the inner drama of a human being transformed by the inevitable experience of anxiety and doubts, without which it is not possible to reach transcendence.¹⁸ However, he has complexly developed this key idea in his book *The Sickness unto Death*, where despair becomes a part of the existence of each of us, despite our internal refusal and conscious suppression of it. In our vulnerability, we are destroyed by our superficiality, fear, and defiance. But, on many levels, despair teaches us self-reflection, self-acceptance, and concentration, which allows us to awaken in deeper layers of our personal self and, consequently, to reflect needs stemming from others' despair. Despair is thus able to save us as people in many aspects as the possible last hope.¹⁹ Kierkegaard's book *The Concept of Anxiety* defines a human being as a mature and mainly whole creature that one becomes thanks to the courage to experience anxiety, which is ultimately set between the beginning and the end, the inevitable and the possible, between eternity and time.²⁰



Pictures 3,4
Source: Petra Cepková

The town of Podolíneč and the area of the monastery that we have visited with our cameras are unique especially because of the concentration of religious and social messages of human society. A single area constitutes a common place for the spiritual life of the monks and a home for abandoned children. And thus, we photographed the lives of children during their everyday activities and their mutual relationships that literally pervade the walls of the monastery rooms. Currently, especially young people need to be reminded of the spiritual dimension of communication, responsibility for the world around them and solidarity with abandoned people that are disadvantaged in any way. Bleak stories of anonymous people are aimed to humanise society through a spiritual dimension, which the medium of photography also attempts to do in a form of social documentary that, in its layers, operates with the meaning of mutual dialogues, 'listening', and sharing of personal stories.

18 For more information, see: KIERKEGAARD, S.: *Bázeň a chvenie*. Bratislava : Kalligram, 2005.

19 Compare to: KIERKEGAARD, S.: *Choroba na smrt'*. Bratislava : Premedia, 2018.

20 See also: KIERKEGAARD, S.: *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1980.



Pictures 5,6

Source: Jozef Sedlák

To walk among the walls of such ‘almost homes’ is like walking on very thin ice, as we could experience a fall into our own depths of despair. We live our lives and only retrospectively understand the feelings, events, and situations that we go through; it is us who form our lives and we always have an option to choose between the true and the untrue. And this is also what the medium of photography is like, as it allows us to uncover ‘the invisible (and often painful) moments’.²¹



Pictures 7,8

Source: Petra Cepková

A partnership of two subjects (institutions, individuals), their cooperation, communication, and mutual acceptance has its story – narrative. An open documentary project, where the students were able to visually and abstractly adjust the area of the premises to their authors’ concepts, could only have been created thanks to the openness of the managers of the institutions, directors, many teachers, vocational teachers, caregivers, and other employees. The project is, in a way, an intermediate stop, punctuation in the spacetime that reveals signs of the past and the present recorded and interpreted through the eyes of today’s young people. The premises of the Special Primary Boarding School, Orphanage of St. Clement Hofbauer, and the Monastery of Redemptorists became the students’ creative studio, unforgettable because of the *sjet* (plot) of flow of events in its different parts (schoolrooms, classrooms, workshops, boarding rooms, temporary houses, common areas, kitchen, monastery garden). This scheme and the tension between perception and reality – noise outside and silence inside – was determined by the function of memory. Images of the children’s social status do not represent a tendency to tie perceptions and imagination solely to recorded reality. This ‘turn to an image’ of the photography students is a ‘turn to an audience’ with a potential for strong impulses that represent a certain

21 CEPKOVÁ, P.: Podolínce alebo o samote v nás. In SEDLÁK, J. (ed.): *Dannatio memoriae / Stratenie pamiatky*. Bratislava : Neumahr, 2019, p. 6.

parable – an ability to link individual stories of children under the supervision of pedagogues and caregivers with personal projection, in other words, the projection of the author’s thought process in situations that are ethically difficult to discern.



Pictures 9,10

Source: Jozef Sedlák

The young generation of students – photographers, adopts a modern visual language as a social concept detached from the general iconography anchored in history. Although it recycles several things, methodologically it shifts the poetics of reality perception (of relationships, human identity, work, objects) not only into the context of indictment and falsification (of the so-called post-humanist document), but also an emotional, subjective construct of a tense aestheticising situation bordering on kitsch. Within this conception (coding), there is also a sensitivity towards understanding one’s own evolution, an existential, spiritual, and self-reflective attitude of the author, questioning (maybe intuitively) the normative values, meaning of a purpose, and the role of art.



Pictures 11,12

Source: Petra Cepková

From the position of a pedagogue, it is a question of an approach to an interpretation of an art work and the meaning of a message (of an exercise, subject). Interpretation needs to interpret more than just things and must always make sense. The language of interpretation is an essential form verifying institutional and art-studies norms, as well as the associative power of an individual’s perception. How and what to interpret is always a story about a meeting, interaction, relationship, dialectics. In a pedagogical process, it is an assumption that ‘something’ has already existed in an objective state, in the author’s identity, before we started to interpret it.

The historical story of photography brought with it also a belief in its absolute trustworthiness, authenticity, and truthfulness. This phenomenon seems unshakeable, although we are daily confronted

with the exact opposite. Contemporary documentary contests the rules of reliability and, from a privileged position, creates many original subgenres and hardly decipherable meanings. In the students' photographs, it is sometimes a difficult, exposing path of personal symbolic reference to the meaning of being, which codes and hides in it the Jungian 'fate of the world'. It is the community of experts' competence to assess their authenticity. In relation to the process of visualisation, the medium of photography is said to have independent cognitive abilities and perceptual attributes that allow it to explore historical, spiritual, and mental conditions of a given culture (region, events, people), which together constitute an ability to perceive cultural and ethical contexts and which, in social photography, are called "the period eye".²² This topic also poses many philosophical questions, mainly about who needs who, about relativisation and catharsis, dignity and self-respect and about possibilities of human existence. To be or to give up?

For the students, such photographing was a real philosophical stance – of searching and looking beyond the horizon of reachable reality. The photographs of documenting character often bring an illusion of transparency (clarity). They give an impression that, through them, we could understand, learn and sort everything. The social status of an abandoned, forsaken, and disadvantaged human being is, however, a mystagogy and allows us only partially to enter their secret, story, intimacy or spiritual world without violating them. We tried to communicate with them very intensively on various levels to express to them something that cannot be expressed by words, but only by images.²³

7 Conclusion

Through their narrative, photographs of abandoned children speak mainly about ourselves, our immature and unprepared society, and re-question the imperative of life situation of the 'throwaway creatures'. For each of us, it is difficult to take a step that would summarise our whole existence: to give ourselves completely, to go to the periphery of existence, to learn to get out of ourselves so we could go out to others, especially those that are the most distant, forgotten; those who need understanding, consolation, and help.²⁴ Situations in which we become the means of contact with the strange outside world for others explicitly uncover for us identification with our own selves; they teach us to distinguish the important from the insignificant, to have our eyes open for photography and art, to open our hearts and minds, so we could awaken. Through photography, the theological-anthropological approach has allowed us to experience this mystical discovery of ourselves in others, thanks to their willingness to let us into their worlds unconditionally. These fragile, but also prematurely 'mentally grown-up' children are in many ways stronger than some of us, because they never had the option to experience certainties so common and familiar to us, and have thus been exposed to the 'brutal' face of life directly, ruthlessly, and unscrupulously, to identify themselves with the future.

Interpretation of reality should meet moral values and humanise society, and we have tried to do this in ethically ambiguous situations, hoping that it could save us as human beings. The medium of photography, with its ability to absorb the 'truthful' world, should live up to this absolute idea and try to answer the question of us needing one another, especially if it is a social documentary. As we have already mentioned in the text, our photographs, although having an ambition to answer the fundamental questions, are mainly personal visual reflections on fears hidden deep inside us.

We (subjectively) never feel more alone than in peripheries of existence such as these, which are not at all pretty, but it is here we truly begin to comprehend the true magnitude of being; we see possible dimensions of our desire for the unreachable; we shatter into a million small pieces, in order to eventually find ourselves on this journey in new relationships created from our anxieties and hopes, so that we could leave our shadows behind. It seems impossible to heal the world, but it is worth it to at least try.

²² Remark by authors: The term "the period eye" is a concept that was devised by Michael Baxandall; he used it to describe the cultural conditions under which art in the Italian Renaissance was created, viewed, and understood. See: BAXANDALL, M.: *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

²³ SEDLÁK, J.: *Deti Patrónky (2009 – 2019)*. Bratislava: Devin Printing House, 2019, p. 94-97.

²⁴ VATICAN NEWS: *Bohatstvo 17 cyklov katechéz Svätého Otca Františka: Božia logika*. Released on 4th September 2021. [online]. [2021-09-04]. Available at: <<https://www.vaticannews.va/sk/papez/news/2021-09/bohatstvo-17-cyklov-katechez-svateho-otca-frantiska-bozia-logika.html?fbclid=IwAR3ioqdyxbwY25xZlqRTOPsmgbcQw3K8De1U9NpgEgSN50LQQ-gEb1VNOqU/>>.

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