THE ARCHITECTURE OF A PHOTOGRAPH: DECONSTRUCTING LA CASTIGLIONE'S *SCHERZO DI FOLLIA*

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Abstract "Reading" a photograph, compared to just looking at one, implies a complex perceptual experience layering compositional aspects, background information, and even preconceptions. Nevertheless, this process of deconstructing the image might really become fascinating, if the object of the study is a human portrait. Thus, the paper proposes an insight into the life of one of the most mysterious women in history, Virginia Oldoïni Vérasis, Countess de Castiglione. The analysis will focus especially on her portrait, Scherzo di follia.

Keywords portrait-photograph, icon, gazing eyes, Countess de Castiglione (1837-1899), Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913)

Context

Man is essentially a social being, prone to dialogue. The direct interaction with a person often provides impressions, opinions, and beliefs regarding their personality. However, this relationship changes completely when the interlocutor's mimic, gestures, expressions and observations are replaced by a single, static gaze. What happens when we look at a photograph representing the portrait of a human being? Our mind registers facts which are later constructed into a perception. Thus, the first assessment is whether that person is known to us – are they a direct acquaintance, based on personal relationship, or do we know them through a third party (i.e. through popular media such as the internet, television, newspapers, magazines)?

Usually, a photograph of a known person (a close relative, a friend, a mere acquaintance or some memorable figure – like an actor or a politician), arouses feelings,

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emotions, impressions associated with that individual's character or, sometimes, with our conception of that person's character, reputation, fame, way of life, etc.

Nonetheless, there are portrait photographs, depicting unknown persons, be they famous figures or common people, which might exert a special attraction, which could trigger positive or negative emotions, or even fascination – simply due to the "pose", the force generated by the composition, due to the narrative, the image evoked or the alleged subliminal messages. These photographs interact directly with their viewer, conveying a powerful message through the expressivity of the face, through the staged attitude or because of other contextual factors, such as décor (including the possible artistic setting) or articles of clothing. Some portraits exude moral force, while others, instead, create an evil atmosphere around them, or they might even envelope the whole composition in enigmatic shrouds.

Due to nowadays' high interest in human portraits, we may tackle this issue through photograph semiotics, focusing on "a game of madness" [in Italian, *Scherzo di follia*] – one of the world's most famous photographic frameworks. When analysing the personality / identity that lies beyond the "immortalised" image, the composition of connotations beyond the denotative plane, the degree of participation of the photographed person in the overall composition, and the impact of the text (the title) that accompanies the photograph, the portrait is given a cognitive value. Beyond the image, there is a story and the photograph is based on that particular story, so that the image, in its whole, becomes evocative.

Unlike the narrative image – which involves movement or action, as elements of the composition –, the conceptual image (scenery, portrait) – usually a static image – generates an evocative language through the symbols and meanings of the text, which reach beyond the image itself. The text (namely the title of a photograph) is often the starting point for unfolding a narrative. On the one hand, in the very special case of the portrait, the title is the one which makes the direct connection with reality, bringing the denotations to the foreground. On the other hand, the symbols, compositional elements and the artistic effects develop all the connotations accompanying the photograph, thus enabling its profound meanings.

All these will be revealed when discussing the case study, which focuses on the life, rise, glory, and decadence of one of the most famous women in history – the Countess de Castiglione.

Reading the Message

In his "Rethoric of the Image" Roland Barthes develops a theoretical construct which subjects the photograph to "a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain"[1]. Although he further exemplifies his theory concentrating on advertisement images, his methodology of relating meanings to images is still extremely relevant to the present study. Consequently, the author states that meaning can occur on three levels, which, pieced together, form a coherent system. The first one is the "linguistic message", which operates directly in the denotative plane and

[1] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, Inc., 1980), 269–85, 270.

indirectly, through meaning, in the connotative plane. The second level, the "coded iconic message", includes all the connotative meanings and symbols of the photograph, while the "non-coded iconic message", the last level, tackles literal meanings, namely what the photograph represents, what we see when we look at the image.[2]

We believe that the unravelling of a photograph should start with its title, namely the linguistic message. Titles are not merely "calligraphic translations of the image,"[3] since they can have multiple roles: they can reveal more information, synthesise, provide cues or starting points for the interpretation, or they can seal the meaning. They can sometimes be distanced from the content of the image, in which case the meaning drifts somewhere in-between the image and the title. However, as Clive Scott remarks, the "image and title are the two terms of a metaphor."[4] This translates the process of reading a photograph into a quest for an implied comparison, for certain analogies that shift the image from one meaning to another, enriching it with new significations.

Further on, Barthes states that the linguistic message has a dual function over the iconic message: "anchorage and relay,"[5] which are often combined. Through anchorage, "the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image [...], it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance", while through relay the "text [...] and image stand in a complementary relationship; [...] and the unity of the message is realised at a higher level, that of the story […]."[6] Thus, Barthes concludes that the denotative message is intended to "naturalise" the connotative one: "the denoted image naturalises the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation."[7]

At the same time, in "The Photographic Message", Barthes, referring to the denotative level of a photograph, argues that photography is analogue to reality ("a mechanical analogue of reality").[8] Therefore, a photograph transmits or transposes "the scene itself, the literal reality", thus becoming a "perfect analogon" of the represented object.[9] Hence, the portrait will be seen as analogue to the individual who poses, and is defined by the title of the photograph. In this context, the visual-textual relation needs to be underlined and explained. Consequently, on an informational level, the photograph consists of two "heterogeneous" structures which work together: the text (i.e. the title) and the image itself, made of "lines,

[2] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 272 and passim 270–79.
[3] Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), 57.
[4] Scott, *The Spoken Image*, 47.
[5] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 274.
[6] Ibid., 275–76.
[7] Ibid., 279.
[8] Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 194–210, 197.
[9] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 196.

surfaces, shades".[10] Nevertheless, a photograph transmits a connoted message, as well – "which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it."[11] Thus, the paradox of photography would be the "co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art', or the treatment, or the 'writing', or the rhetoric, of the photograph)".[12]

Furthermore, focusing on the connotative message, Barthes introduces six "connotation procedures" for a photograph: the tricks, the pose (the character's position), the objects and their composition / arrangement (the props, the décor), the photogenia (in this instance, the connotation regards the image itself, enhanced by the effects of light and exposure), the aestheticism (the relationship with "art"), and the syntax (creating narratives, when there is a series of sequential images). The first three are iconographic procedures; they induce meanings through associations of ideas. Therefore, these procedures surpass the merely denoted messages, offered by the conventional senses, and establish the starting point for new meanings, reaching new and original forms and significances according to certain values, based on "the reading of the signifieds of connotation." The last three are technical procedures; they generate connotations by modifying the reality, allowing the direct use of effects – be they personal, spiritual, artistic, dynamic, etc. Thus, the reading is profoundly sophisticated, rather than simply discursive.[13]

The implications of these connotations often reach profound historical, social, religious or moral sensibilities, specific to the historical period in which the photograph was taken or, on the contrary, when it was "interpreted". Social conventions, behavioural codes, expectations – all of these greatly influence our interpretation when looking at a photograph.

Consequently, as Barthes remarks, all of these observations lead to several types of connotations: perceptual (related to the way in which we "read" or "perceive" the reality of a photograph – based on assumptions), cognitive (different signs and symbols enrich the "image", which thus becomes easier to understand, depending on the level of knowledge of its viewer), and ideological (or even ethical, introducing motivations and values; assuming more elaborate meanings or extensive cultural connections – "conjunction of people", "development of attitudes", composition of objects, sometimes with socio-political implications).[14]

Finally, focusing the discussion on human portraiture, one can note the importance that is given to a specific connotative procedure, namely the act of "posing". It is a conventional arrangement of the body – a smile, a studied position, emphasising certain aspects, while minimising or hiding others (i.e. feelings or emotions). Scott points out that, in photography,

[10] Ibid., 195.
[11] Ibid., 197.
[12] Ibid., 198.
[13] Ibid., 199–204.
[14] Ibid., 207–209.

"posing" involves "a peculiar psychological apprehension" – regardless of its "physical configuration" – which is generated by the anticipation of the snapshot. This moment consists of a general contraction or a twitching of the body, largely due to the impatience or anxiety that anticipates the actual moment of taking the photograph. Although it is considered to be critical in the field of photography, it is clearly "not evident in the painted portrait," due to the time-consuming and elaborate technique of painting. Consequently, Scott shows that, in photography, the smile is "a conventional arrangement of the face, without emotional implications."[15] Hence, it is important to study the position, which translates into a kind of physical and psychological introversion of one's personality, staged through a kind of "stiffness" of their body, in a certain suggestive, apparently "frozen" position, often with symbolic implications related to what that person really wants to convey. It is these connotations that will create the multiple possibilities of interpretation, analysing each element for what it means and not for what it is.[16] Moreover, by adding text to the visual elements, their symbolism is complemented and increasingly amplified – enriching the meanings and implications of each element and of their role as a whole.

Finally, determining, analysing, and interpreting these symbols represents the transition of a photograph from "index" to "icon".[17] Seen as an index, the portrait photograph refers to the real photographed person; as an icon, it presents possible similarities associated with the represented person, but, this time, without referring to their identity; and, as a symbol, it reflects, in the viewer's mind, certain meanings and significations that will be the subject of interpretations, which, in turn, generate the image-symbol.

[15] Scott, *The Spoken Image*, 39–40.

[16] Ibid., 40.

[17] Consider, here, Peirce's triad of index – icon – symbol: Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: the Theory of Signs", in *The Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955 [1940]), 98–119, see, explicitly, 102–03, 113–15.

The index indicates, points out, shows, draws attention, and establishes references.

The icon implies a similarity with the object; it resembles what it represents. The resemblance is not always straight; it can be inferred also through intermediate formulae, but without requiring interpretation / decoding. It presents similar characteristics of the represented object, but without having any connections with it.

The symbol, often based on conventions, requires interpretations. It is a general term that has meaning only to those who, beforehand, know it. Based on some concepts, and starting from the icon, the symbols develop, grow, and form new symbols.

For the contemplating eye, the image is decisive. "Rhetorical images are ubiquitous, powerful, and important." From a psychological perspective, it has been shown that the image provokes an emotional impact, an intensity of feelings and beliefs, which are more powerful than the abstract text.[18]

Deconstructing *Scherzo di follia*

There are historical figures of whom irrefutable facts are known; however, at the same time, when looking at their lives as a whole, one realises that only bits and pieces are truly familiar. Thus, when "reading" their portrait photograph, following different cues, it becomes possible to make connections between the historical reality and various interpretations, which are often a matter of subjectivity. Therefore, the well-known photograph entitled *Scherzo di follia* was not randomly chosen for the present case study*Scherzo di follia*. The analysis focuses on the manner in which photography, as an artistic manifestation, can complement the complex personality of the photographed individual. The photograph is a psychological metaphor, with ample cultural implications and biographical connotations.

Scherzo di follia [meaning "Game (viz. joke) of madness"] is, apparently, nothing more than a photograph from the renowned series of portraits that depict the Countess de Castiglione (see Figure 1). The photograph was taken by the French Court photographer, Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822-1913), sometime between 1861 and 1867. It is considered to be one of the most famous portraits in the world, yet, not much has been said about the photograph itself, when compared to the written work dedicated to its subject or its photographer. Thus, besides being regarded as an artistic manifesto of its decadent era, the photograph might be regarded as a premeditated act of defiance against a certain person, against society and its precepts; an act of will, fatefully symbolising the entire destiny of a woman – her political and carnal power, her beliefs, her despair, and even her psychological decay.

The analysis of the title unravels the linguistic message. Thus, the exploration begins by studying the two words: "game", which implies something of a ludic nature, that causes laughter, and "madness", which suggests an abnormal instance, a moment of psychological imbalance, an act which is out of the ordinary, a whim. And, indeed, all approximately 700 photographs, summing up over four decades during which Pierson immortalised dozens of the Countess de Castiglione's intriguing guises or imagined identities, were nothing more than a whim – the extravagant mise-en-scène of various, capricious or sometimes even freak ideas of an extraordinary, intelligent and mysterious aristocrat woman. However, the question remains: who was, after all, la Contessa di Castiglione?

[18] Charles A. Hill, "The Psychology of Rhetorical Images," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 25–40, 32–33, 38.

Born in Florence, on 22 March 1837, the daughter of a Tuscan nobleman, Marquis Filippo Oldoïni, Virginia was a precocious child, acknowledged from early childhood as a rare beauty – a feature that, early in her youth, had already become legendary throughout her country. Aged seventeen, in January 1854, she married Count Francesco Vérasis di Castiglione (1826–1867) and, quickly after their wedding, the couple settled in Turin, where she became a prominent presence at the Royal Court of King Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia and Piedmont (the future king of Italy). On 9 March 1855, she gave birth to the couple's only child, a boy named Giorgio (or Georges, 1855–1879). Sharp minded, and due to her extraordinary, angelic beauty, charm and charisma, and just as much due to her influence in the Turin society , she soon became known as "la divina contessa" ["the divine countess"]. Observing her great abilities, her cousin, Count Camillo di Cavour, sent her, in 1856, to the Court of the Emperor Napoleon III, in Paris, so that she could support the cause of the Italian independence. In this instance, she became something of a fascinating secret agent or messenger, rather than a simple political emissary or a diplomat – she was, in fact, as Nicole Albert remarks, a Mata Hari avant la lettre, in a context shrouded in a conspiring atmosphere.[19] Shortly after her arrival in Paris, in July 1856, she commissioned portraits, for the first time, at the famous studio Mayer & Pierson. Ever since, Pierre-Louis Pierson was the one to "immortalise" all her "whims", for almost half of a century, until her death, in 1899.

Thus, Cavour's political scenarios began to be put in practice in no time at all. Falling victim to her social circumstances and to her own ambitions, the Countess de Castiglione won the Emperor's heart and became his mistress. Moreover, she made each of her entrances at the Court and in the Parisian society seem like a greatspectacle, making excessive use of luxurious costumes, spectacular coiffures, and various fashionable cosmetic tricks. Each time she was even more extravagant, having a different look.

The royal love affair, which was a matter of state secret, lasted from the first months of 1856 until the spring of 1857, when, after an incident which took place during the night between 5and 6 April 1857 – an assassination attempt on the Emperor –, the Countess officially left France. As a parting gift she received an emerald worth one million francs.[20] Nevertheless, she returned a few months later, contributing decisively to the secret agreement between Napoleon III and Cavour, known as the Treaty of Plombières, which was signed in Plombières-les-Bains, on 21 July 1858. The Treaty between the two countries stipulated that France would provide military support to the Kingdom of Sardinia and Piedmont against the Austrian Empire, and, in exchange, France would receive the territories of Nice and Savoy. The treaty played an essential role in uniting Italy. Afterwards, the Countess returned to Italy, but not for long. Between 1859 and 1868, she had sequential appearances in Paris, apparently for

[19] Nicole G. Albert, *La Castiglione: Vies et métamorphoses* (Paris: Perrin, 2011), 14 and passim 5–17.

[20] David Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza* (Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 236.

unclear reasons. However, by then, she had lost much of her influence. In 1868, she officially and definitively returned to France. Her last political involvement was during the Franco-Prussian War, between 1870 and 1871, when it is said that after the united German forces defeated France, she personally tried to persuade Bismarck not to occupy Paris. Bismarck's triumph – the formation of the German Empire, in 1871, when King William I of Prussia was proclaimed German Emperor at Versailles – also meant the end of the French Empire and the proclamation of the French Third Republic. It was the end of an era and also the end of the glorious life of La Castiglione. After the fall of the Second French Empire, in 1870, the countess would reclusively live in the dark solitude and tenebrous ambience of her apartment in Place Vendôme No 26, in the shadow of her spectacular and forever lost youth. Her eccentric existence would become more sorrowful after the death of her son, accentuating the pathological side of her passion and search for her perfect looks, immortalised in dozens of photographs. This passion became a morbid obsession with her ageing body, with the loss of her carnal beauty, denoting a certain mental instability. During her final years, she rarely left her apartment, usually at night and only covered in veils. She died alone, on 28 November 1899, in her Parisian apartment, on Rue Cambon No 14, at the age of sixty-two. Her modest tomb, left almost anonymous for one hundred years, and restored in 1999, is located in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery.[21]

Robert de Montesquiou, fascinated with her personality, collected over 400 photographs, along with other personal items that had belonged to her. He also wrote her biography entitled La Divine Comtesse, which was published in 1913.[22] In 1999, one hundred years after her death, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris organised a memorial exhibition entitled "La Comtesse de Castiglione par elle-même" ("The Countess de Castiglione by herself").[23] Later, at the end of 2000, the exhibition was also presented at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, thus her unique contribution to the history of photography was acknowledged. "Orchestrated"

[21] Association des Amis et Passionnés du Père-Lachaise, "Inspiratrice de l'unité italienne: CASTIGLIONE Virginia, comtesse Vérasis de (1837–1899): 'Carmelite de la beaute'," Association des Amis et Passionnés du Père-Lachaise, September 9, 2005, accessed on 10 March 2017, http://www.appl-lachaise.net/appl/article.php3?id_article=111. For more biographical details, see Albert, *La Castiglione*.

[22] Robert de Montesquiou, *La Divine Comtesse: Étude d'après Madame de Castiglione* (Paris: Goupil & Co., 1913). The photographs are now part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) collection.

[23] Musée d'Orsay, "La Comtesse de Castiglione par elle-même", Musée d'Orsay, 1999, http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/evenements/expositions/archives/presentation-detaillee/browse/19/article/la-comtesse-de-castiglione-par-elle-meme-3995.html?tx_ttnews[backPid]=252&cHash=b770fe6ac3 (accessed 10 March 2017).

by herself, the series of portrait photographs represent, as Pierre Apraxine, the curator of the exhibition, notes, "the first historical encounter of photography and narcissism."[24]

Resuming the analysis of the title, in a more contextualised manner, a parallel can be drawn with the famous Verdi aria, "È scherzo od è follia..."[25], from the opera Un ballo in maschera. Was La Castiglione a real visionary or is it pure irony? In the opera, Gustavo (Riccardo)[26], who just finds out that he will be killed by a close friend, is written to interpret an aria of a bleak hilarity, despite its tragic spirit. Although, at that moment, the character regards his fate as a joke (viz. game), the regicide is the result of "madness" (the epilogue of a tragic love story) and takes place during a masquerade ball. In the photograph, the "mask" and the slightly ironic smile of the character become evident. Even more so considering the success of the opera at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples, in 1858 – despite its obvious censorship during those times – with the two attempted assassinations of the Emperor Napoleon III.[27] One of them took place in 1857, just as he was leaving the house of his mistress – in fact, even their love affair can be seen as a short "madness" –, while the other was initiated by a group of Italians, in 1858.[28] Therefore, the image presented in the photograph may not appear random at all, being in fact rather a psychological game. La divine comtesse played this game, on the stage of her own life, until her death: *Scherzo di follia* represents only the "beginning" (i.e. of her madness, of her pathological obsession with her own self). Thus, allusive references may be related to her relationship with Napoleon III, her access and ascension in the Parisian Court, and especially to the "madness" and extravagances that characterised her eccentric way of life. Hence, she symbolically "starred" in all the stances and guises that she imagined and which were, of course, immortalised, by Pierson, thus anticipating the entire series of "poses" that were to follow, and which were marked by a great mental and physical instability. Was life for La Castiglione indeed a masquerade ball? Perhaps one could argue that she always wore her own mask. She lived for and through photography; the "mask" in *Scherzo di follia* is, after all, nothing more than a photograph frame. And through this frame one can observe only the suspiciously detached eye of the Countess, gazing far away, not betraying her feelings at all.

[24] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "'La Divine Comtesse' Photographs of the Countess de Castiglione," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 8, 2000, http://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2000/la-divine-comtesse-photographs-of-the-countess-de-castiglione (accessed 10 March 2017).

[25] "È scherzo od è follia / Siffatta profezia, / Ma come fa da ridere / La lor credulità!" ("Your prophecy is either a joke or it is / madness! / It makes my laugh to see gullible they are in / believing it!"); text by Antonio Somma; see Burton D. Fisher, ed., Opera Journeys: Libretto Series: Giuseppe Verdi: A Masked Ball: Complete Libretto: with Music Highlight Examples (Boca Raton, FL: Opera Journeys Publishing, Inc., 2004), 22.

[26] Gustav III, King of Sweden or, due to censorship, Riccardo, Count of Warwick.

[27] Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime*, 236.

[28] Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A short history of opera* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004, 4th edition), 404.

Photogenia and beauty become irrelevant when analysing this image – the woman on the other side of the frame identifies herself with the eternal image of La divine, behind which she posed and hid throughout her entire life.

Therefore, the title and the image presented in the photograph are bound in a bi-univocal relationship. Through "anchorage", the text undoubtedly completes the image, hinting towards the games and madness which characterise La Castiglione's life of turmoil. At the same time, through "relay", the title refers to the complex and sophisticated image of one of the most fascinating women in history, contextualising the image on a broader scale – namely a historical and social context. The linguistic message, from a denotative point of view, reveals the "enigma" of the masked portrait, and, at the same time, through its "power" and "symbolical content", it opens the way to certain strong connotative meanings. Further on, following Barthes's theoretical construct, the denotative message, abundant in extensive biographical data, favours the natural intertwinement of connotations into an ever evolving cultural network which raises, time and again, new questions.

Seen as index, bearing the non-coded iconic message, the photograph represents a certain moment in a day, somewhere between the years 1861 (possibly 1863) and 1867 (possibly 1866), when the photographer, Pierre-Louis Pierson, immortalised, in his studio, a "pose" of Virginia Oldoïni Vérasis, countess de Castiglione. Due to the lack of an explicit setting and the neutrality of the background, the attention focuses on the subject. One might consider the photograph just a simple portrait, however the theatrical character of the image clearly leaves one in awe. It is not as much because of the dress, but the whole "costume" astonishes, including the coiffure and, especially, the presence of a photograph frame, (strangely) used as a mask.

As an icon, the photograph presents the image of a beautiful (and, apparently, young) woman, with a richly decorated dress, full of embroideries, ribbons and trimmings, with a wide neckline, which highlights her uncovered (right) shoulder, in the foreground. Her left shoulder and arm are covered with a cloak, tied over the right arm, in a manner such that her forearm can be seen, revealing a small dimple on the elbow. The jewellery is abundant and quite striking: several strings of pearls around her neck, a double bracelet with glittering beads on her right arm and at least one bracelet on her left arm; and then, an enormous gemstone and a diamond ring, on the fourth finger of her right hand. The coiffure appeals to a fashion almost one hundred years prior, reminding of the rococo style and the image of Marie Antoinette. All of these details are meant to emphasise her femininity, fuelling her eccentricity, on top of which the "mask", partially covering her face, is added. Thus, the photograph is not a mere mystery, but a true challenge. Resuming the analysis of the title, *Scherzo di follia*, and linking it with the action of the opera Un ballo in maschera, one could associate the portrait with the image of a courtesan, suggesting adultery and love affairs. Of course, the historical context of the photograph should not be neglected either. The Countess's presence at the Parisian Court

and her relation with Emperor Napoleon III are also relevant to this topic. Analysing the composition, one notices that the whole body falls into the background, therefor emphasising two features: the naked arm – suggesting a premeditated frivolity – and the (defiant) eye – which consequently becomes the focal point. A great tension is induced by her detached and challenging gaze, as though she would follow "something" or "someone", thus, only that specific person, to whom the photograph was (specifically) addressed, could understand it. It is not an entirely indiscreet and intrusive gaze, but a confident one – one that stings, especially when associated with the low, pale and slightly ironic smile.

Concluding with these perceptive connotations, the analysis reaches a symbolical level. The cognitive and ideological connotations try to "elucidate" the true meaning, a "meaning which the photograph cannot express but language can, because it has access to translation, interpretation and abstraction."[29] The coded iconic message, which encompasses all possible symbols, requires a process of interpretation, which is not entirely based on conventions, but rather on unravelling cultural codes and establishing connections between solitary meanings. However, symbols have a special status: they belong neither to the image, nor to reality or to the photographed person; their status has to do with the language and the semantics of the image, hovering somewhere in-between the real and the abstract. As such, three of the six connotation procedures mentioned by Barthes become obvious: the "pose", the photograph frame as an object, and (partially) the photogenia of the character. The key of the photograph – linking all three procedures – is the eye. It possesses three instances: the one who sees, the one who is seen, and the one through which one can see – the lens that separates the real world from the imagined one, and the ephemeral from the "immortal".[30]

Therefore, the photograph contains two overlapping images: one is La Castiglione and the other is her eye – a photograph within the photograph. Thus, it becomes the expression of an extravagant personality, often defiant; features that she was obviously aware of and which, sometimes, she even abused. It is said that La divinna had a stupendous beauty, being without equal in those times. Accordingly, the writer, journalist, and playwright Gaston Jollivet (1842-1927) wrote hyperbolically: "There has never been another woman, […] at least not in my lifetime, in whom immortal Venus, as deified by the brushstrokes and chisels of the great masters, was more perfectly incarnate."[31] Abigail Solomon-Godeau mentions that "even Princess Pauline de Metternich, who thoroughly disliked the countess, admitted, 'I have never in my life seen such beauty and I do not expect to see its like again.'"[32]

[29] Scott, *The Spoken Image*, 41.

[30] The term is deliberately used as such, being a reference to the act of "immortalising" through photography – which is, in the end, the ultimate goal pursued by La Castiglione.

[31] Alain Decaux, *La Castiglione: dame de coeur de l'Europe* (Paris: Le Livre Contemporain, 1959), 151, cited in Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," October 39 (1986): 65–108, 69.

[32] Montesquiou, *La Divine Comtesse*, 26, cited in Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," 69.

The Countess's image represents "indiscretion", both for the one who looks at it, and for the one who is seen (probably, at the time when the photograph was taken, there was at least one person who ought to have understood the meaning of her gaze). The photograph might be associated with the Countess's period of glory, given that, after 1870, her (total) social decline, seconded by the loss of her political influence, followed. Although, it is very likely that the photograph is only a "game", truly a "joke", the result of a spontaneous "madness", and everything depicted in it is only a cliché, we highly support the suggestion that the "pose" was taken knowingly and intentionally, by a very clever and whimsical mind. Thus, in the Countess's real life, photography, surpassing obsession, became a true "madness". The guises and stances which she wanted to immortalise were petty and nasty little "games", exaggerated whims of a narcissistic woman, driven by the desire to "expose" and even to "exhibit" herself. Consequently, Pierson took over 700 photographs, many of them having symbolic titles, thus generating over 700 analogies to reality. Most of them exhibit a predisposition towards theatricality, as well as the personal creations of La Castiglione, denoting her constant desire to reinvent herself, to change her personality, and also her need to "multiply" herself – "an archive of multiple identities of her 'singular' self."[33] Hence, La divinna stage-managed her own life as a succession of images – photography being a miracle of modernity, the latest fashion. She was her own scriptwriter, scenographer, and costume designer; starring fake identities, as the result of her mad narcissist obsession. Accordingly, Pierson was a mere instrument.

The eye could be interpreted as one's own viewpoint, the creative eye, the demiurge of all other "reinventions" of the self, the eye that decants, that judges society, only to defy it afterwards, the eye of revelations, of perceptions, of analysis, and, finally, the eye of introspection, the one which sees itself, subjugating its own personality. When perceived as a direct expression of one's soul, as a way of communicating feelings, thoughts or beliefs, the eye cannot help but betray suffering or pleasure. Thus, the artificially created image could hide underneath a being who is subjugated to an exuberant self, who acknowledges its own inability to break free or, on the contrary, who expresses an obscure desire to wear a social mask throughout their entire life, willingly duplicating their personality. Consequently, in the case of Virginia Oldoïni Vérasis, it seems more reasonable to lean towards the second option. Thus, Scherzo di follia could be interpreted as her own way of proudly and consciously acknowledging her situation, as a detached being, living behind all the unconscious mask-instances, fully assuming her status as "La divinna" or "La Castiglione" – as she was tendentiously honoured by her contemporaries.

The analysis of her deviant and compulsive behaviour, which proliferated over the years (especially after 1870), proves a great mental instability, with almost pathological manifestations, as Solomon-Godeau remarks:

[33] Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, N.J., Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1999), 97.

> the countess's obsessive self-representations are less an index of narcissism – although they are that too – than a demonstration of a radical alienation that collapses the distinction between subjecthood and objecthood. […] the countess can only reproduce herself as a work of elaborately coded femininity, a femininity which, as always, derives from elsewhere.[34]

Solomon-Godeau also notes that, when the Countess was sixty years old, praising the beauty she once had, she even referred to herself using the third-person singular, considering herself a "marvellous work" (in Italian "maravigliosa opera"): "The Eternal Father did not realise what He had created the day he brought her into the world; He formed her so superbly that when it was done He lost His head at the contemplation of this marvellous work."[35]

Thus, the Countess became a dichotomous being. Firstly, she was the woman who lived a secluded life, in a tomb-like home, decorated in funeral black, lacking mirrors, a home she preferred to leave mostly during night-time and only shrouded in veils – refusing to accept her own ageing. Secondly, she was the narcissistic woman, overly obsessed with the exhibitionism of her own body – thus, she pursued, with a perseverance carried out to the extreme, as far as the last year of life, the "project" of "immortalising" her beauty in many stances and guises, "posing" in extravagant costumes. This during a time when fashion photography did not yet exist. She even had her naked legs photographed, when she was about fifty years old, and she also commissioned plaster casts of them. Despite all of these, and the forty-year collaboration with the photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson, she died in 1899, aged sixty-two, unable to fulfil her dream of mounting an exhibition of her photographic oeuvre at the Exposition Universelle de 1900, in Paris. Unfortunately, her wish came true only 100 years later, celebrating her great personality, legacy, and the centenary of her death.

The analysis of the photographic image resumes with Barthes's "perfect analogon" of the person who poses, who literally presents the scene. Thus, we can observe a woman wearing an unusual mask: the Countess de Castiglione, around the age of thirty. Recognised as one of the most beautiful women of her time, we could ask ourselves what the real reason was for covering her face. Both the title of the photograph and the association with the opera Un ballo in maschera, make reference to a game (viz. joke), but also to costumes. However, noticing the serious, "frozen" posture, which does not assume any "conventional arrangement" (v.s. Scott), there is a hint of a contradiction. Therefore, if, at a first glance, the perception of the viewer leans towards the comic and farce (viz. game, joke), than, at a closer look, the placidity of the "character" and her amazing, almost serene, detachment transmit the thrill of an instigative inner force. Thus, through its tormenting power, this force transcends the photograph, dramatically drilling into the psychological sphere. This tension, corroborated with the subject of Verdi's tragic opera (i.e. the regicide), derails the reading of the photograph

[34] Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," 76.

[35] Frédéric Loliée, *Les femmes du second empire* (Paris: Talladier, 1954), 48, cited in Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," 69.

towards revenge. Moreover, the suggestion of frivolity only emphasises the masked or disguised character of this revenge. However, the character in question is a distinguished aristocrat woman, perfectly aware of her power, charms and "madness" which characterise her every action, frequently breaking the social norms and usages du monde of those times. Therefore, the image is an irrefutable proof of a calculated, premeditated and wilful mind, but which, at the same time, struggles on the verge of madness. In the end, her revenge, concealed as irony, turned out to be a moral one.

Towards an "end"

By employing such an attitude towards life, combined with the permanent desire to "play" her own self ("the only thing she ever impersonates is her idea of herself"), "using the self-portrait as a vehicle for an imaginary self," destiny proved to be a mentally destructive one for the Countess. Hence, when she was about thirty-five years old, La Castiglione isolated herself from the Parisian society, deciding to belong only to herself. She deliberately restricted her relation to the public, communicating only through hundreds of impressive images representing faces of the same "self", hidden under façades "of impassive beauty". Unfortunately, behind those artificially created artistic fragments of beauty, there was, in fact, nothing more than "turmoil, panic, despair" caused by the inevitable and abominable process of ageing. In her mind, this process was symbolically associated to the implacable physical disfigurement of her body.[36]

The spying eye of the Countess gazes suspiciously, inquisitively through the oval aperture of the photograph frame. It will remain as such, forever anchored in the mystery of her own personality: "The eye, reduced to its voyeuristic role, becomes a symbol. The sitter's identity is hidden behind the improvised mask, and the image acquires a striking timelessness."[37] Although we now know that the model posing was the Countess herself, it is this bare fact that emphasises the enigma of La Castiglione – a woman of divine beauty…

[36] Carol Squiers, "Noble Cast: The Countess de Castiglione," *Artforum* 38 (1) (1999): 184, cited in Charles A. Riley, *Aristocracy and the Modern Imagination* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001), 224.

[37] Pierre Apraxine, Xavier Demange, Françoise Heilbrun and Michele Falzone del Barbarò, *La Divine Comtesse: Photographs of the Countess de Castiglione* (New York: Yale University Press in assoc. with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum Art Series, 2000), 183.

Fig. 1. *Scherzo di follia* – the portrait of the Countess de Castiglione. Studio Mayer & Pierson, Paris. Gelatine silver print from glass negative dated 1861–67 (printed in the 1940s, 18.7 x 12.5 cm).

[Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: ARTstor Collection – Images for Academic Publishing. Gift of George Davis, 1948. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org]