



## Bohdan Schumylovych Historical recurrence

In my home collection there is an old photo – someone from my mother's father's family created a specific kind of collage using photography. In the picture, I can see a woman sitting at the table and a child on a footstool on the other side of the table, both figures as if clinging to the table around the focal point of the whole composition. In the centre, there is a picture placed on the table. It shows a man in a military uniform. Everything seems to be clear and understandable: the family members are waiting for the father/husband to return home, and the photo sent by him constitutes his temporary replacement. Among the photos of my grandfather, I found the original photograph of the man in uniform, which the woman and the child placed between themselves in another image.

Therefore, the original piece – the photograph of the man in a military uniform – and its derivative, i.e. a collage in which this photo was placed in another photo, both got into the same space and time. I put both pictures on one surface and got the result called *mise en abyme*. In his novel *The Counterfeiters* (1925), modernist André Gide used this old French concept (*mise en abyme*) to show one of the basic principles of modernism – the disappearing reality, the replacement of reality by a counterfeit, artist's metaposition in relation to his work. Gide came up with a character who, as an author, wants to write a novel, and in whose mouth Gide puts his own ideas. Thus, Gide's novel concerned literature and art, the act of writing and the author, representation, reality and fiction. He placed the novel inside the novel and allowed it to "speak" the language of art. Gide was awarded the Nobel Prize for this work. He considered it a masterpiece, and my friends agree with this opinion.

To make things clear, the concept of *mise en abyme* does not derive from literature, but from visual arts, in particular from the medieval heraldry. We often encounter this technique in advertising, when an image is placed inside another image and the repetition becomes infinite, or in visual arts, e.g. in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (Jan Van Eyck) or in *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez), where the artists place a mirror in the image, which results in a switch of the roles of the observers and the observed.

*Mise en abyme* is the point of view and attitude of the one that looks and the attitudes of those looked at. Roland Barthes called it "study" and "punctum", when the photographer's and viewer's intentions provide a certain way of understanding the style and form and the ability to read them. Culture plays an important role in this photographic stimulus (punctum), because it is through culture that communication takes place here. Jean Baudrillard described this situation, showing how reality (image) has evolved into hyper-reality, where truth, thanks to its "truthfulness", masks a situation in which truth no longer exists.

Is it possible to create a situation of *mise en abyme* in life? Imagine a city which used to be inhabited. People disappeared, but the city remained... If other people came to this city, can we look at it as an act of *mise en abyme*, just like my distant relative did with a photo of her absent husband? She placed the representation of an allegedly true man in a virtual world constructed by her, while her own world is quite real. In this way, she made an act of harmonization of reality and brought the absent husband back to her family. She could only do this with a photo, because it is not only an image, it is a capsule in which you can even hide a soul.

Is it possible to inscribe in the scenery of the present-day Lviv some real, but completely absent people – artists from the past – in such a way that the scenery turns into a *mise en abyme*? In such a way that the imagined reality and the real past become a part of the real, but also virtual present!

Are we able to harmonize our reality, at least in our imagination, to put together the absent and present people in the scenery of an old city? If there is exists such a possibility, it must also be photographic. It can be an exhibition in which the combination of the past and the present should be transformed into a collage and intertwine each other. Such a collage will have the power to create a new reality!

I said! Biba Schulz, autumn 2018