

FOTOGRAFIA EUROPEA 2020

FANTASIES. STORIES, RULES, INVENTIONS

"Three things will make me remember that week as one of the best of my life. The first is that the billboard posted for the occasion by the municipality announced in capitals Encounters with Fantastica [*], allowing me to read on the stupefied walls of the town that same word that had been keeping me company for thirty-four years". While it is up to the readers to imagine what were the other two facts that made **Gianni Rodari** so happy in June 1972, it is a pleasure to point out that almost fifty years later the word "Fantasy" becomes the guiding thread of the fifteenth edition of Fotografia Europea, thus returning to invade the streets and the squares of Reggio Emilia. The book that originated from that experience was titled *Grammatica della fantasia* ("The Grammar of Fantasy"), and interestingly enough, a few years later, another Italian creative genius, **Bruno Munari**, dedicated a no less interesting book to the same theme, albeit focusing more on visual aspects, as it opened with the following statements: "*Fantasy is the freest of the faculties; in fact, it doesn't even have to concern itself with what it has thought up. It's free to think anything, even the most absurd, incredible, or impossible things. Invention uses the same technique as fantasy - that is the relation between the things one knows, but it aims it towards a practical use*". These were years of utopias and extraordinary social changes, and it was by no coincidence that fantasy - in its vast terminology field - enjoyed a great fortune (let us think of one of the most famous slogans of 1968: "*L'imagination au pouvoir*"). And yet even today, in a very different context, it makes sense to reason about the extent and possibilities of fantasy as a creative power, including what emerges from photography, which has often been instinctively connected to faithful and realistic reproduction of reality, while it is actually capable of the most unbridled fantasies, as it is shown by its history generally, and its recent one especially.

Besides, photography emerged in the middle of the positivistic age, but was constantly accompanied by an aura of magic (the appearance of an image from darkness in the camera obscura was often perceived as an alchemical operation). At the same time photography was also the child of the same romantic culture which gave life to the paintings and visionary thoughts of the so-called "painters of the imaginary". As **Caspar David Friedrich** wrote, "*close your physical eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring what you saw in the dark to the light, so that it may have an effect on others, shining inwards from outside*". It was at the time that the idea of the fantastic as center of the creative process is affirmed, as shown by the success of a genre of literature which, in addition to giving birth to absolute world masterpieces - such as the tales of E.T.A. Hoffman, Theophile Gautier, E.A. Poe,

among many others, served "to question the relationships that exist, in every historical era, between the paradigm of reality, language and our strategies of representation", as **Remo Ceserani** wrote. A *remise en question* that is among the primary characteristics of photography and that subsequently reached its extreme manifestation with surrealism (to its origins contributed the disturbing and transgressive fantasy of Lautreamont, capable of imagining "the accidental encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella"), a movement in which photography takes on a central role precisely because of its ability to create a dialogue between different levels, let them be cognitive and interpretative, of reality and dream.

Fantasy, therefore, as the ability to create relations through its techniques, its grammar, and therefore its rules (and the transgression thereof): in this case what is a central necessity is "the severity of imagination", which manages to balance the freedom of fantasy with the necessity of norm and order because, as **Fausto Melotti** put it, "*when kept on a leash it turns and bites you; when left free it goes and gets lost in the woods, in the clouds, and you cannot find it again. Once tamed, however, imagination elegantly takes you out for a walk*". It is through such rules that the fantastic process is communicated, allowing for its transformation into speech and, finally, into storytelling. As **Michael Bader** wrote in his fundamental volume on sexual fantasies, "ordinarily, when we think of a fantasy, we tend to think of a story": it is starting from that story, or from those stories rather, that individuals and societies create new worlds, and therefore new surprising images that were unimagined until then.

[*] He refers to a founding phrase by romantic poet Novalis: "Hätten wir auch eine Phantastik wie eine Logik, so wäre die Erfindungskunst erfunden" ["If there were a theory of the fantastic as there is for logic, then we would be able to discover the art of invention"].