

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

FOREWORD

Photography, as with all of the visual mass media preceding it, from painting to stained glass, is a singular means to construct and perceive the world, or to trigger off different ones. It also transforms the image of man. In any case, as with all other media, photography gave rise to new possibilities while blocking others. Photography's playing field was demarcated in *The Philosophy of Photography*.

However, its virtualities and barriers did not become known all at once. A history was called for. As such, this history was the result of often chance encounters between equipment, external events, and particular brains. This history is thus a sinuous track, especially as this medium is so independent from the human purpose, so technologically autonomous, that a bulk of important photographs were produced in the margins of main trends.

However, exemplary photographers – the “great” photographers – remain of interest. Indeed, they are the ones who brought out the virtualities of photography with resolve, force and wonder, while others were employing them somewhat haphazardly. Accordingly, we will define their *photographic subject* as the principal virtuality that each of these photographers privileged or sorted out, independently from the *themes* or *motifs* that this subject was applied to or induced. Thus, the photographer's photographic subject parallels the linguistic subject of a writer, the pictorial subject of a painter, the sculptural subject of a sculptor, the architectural subject of an architect, the musical subject of a musician, the cinematographic subject of a director, and the choreographic subject of a dancer.

In no case does this imply that this subject was aimed at explicitly by its author, nor even that it was perceived retrospectively. In almost every case, this work subject (sujet d'oeuvre) came about mainly subconsciously, and necessarily so; overtly self-declared programs beget mannerism, and when writers, painters, or musicians talk about their own production, they mostly do so through invoking the prevailing ideas surrounding them, without pertinence to their work. The same holds for photographers. Apart from some witticisms that are all the more revealing the less premeditated they are, the explanations offered by photographers are often only of sociological interest, and inform us more about the milieu than the actual practice of the photographer. Keeping this in mind, it is not the statements but the things made that matter here.

Since we are dealing with a history, we will signal for every photographic subject certain consonant phenomena related to the subject's date of sudden emergence. This does not imply a

strict causality from one discipline to another, but solely the participation of diverse disciplines in the same topology, the same cybernetics, the same logics and semiotics, which precisely gave rise to a *historical moment*, making possible or plausible the appearance of specific *photographic subjects*.

There is some usurpation in our title. Indeed, when John Szarkowski demonstrates how photographs and the intentions of photographers intimately depend on the sequence of discoveries of the technical aspects of the medium, he already makes a certain photographic history of photography. However, the occasion was too good to remark how the present study is coherently inscribed among others by the same author: the Linguistic History of French Literature broadcast on France-Culture; the series of the Logic of Ten European Languages published by “Le Français dans le Monde; and a plastic history of the visual arts. Parts of the latter were scattered around between several publications, starting with 1959’s The Arts of Space [Les Arts de l’Espace], up to contributions in the Encyclopaedia Universalis. Furthermore, it endows technology – here, photographic - with an outspoken existential role like that developed in 1962’s work The New Age [Le Nouvel Age].

We hope that our illustrations, as well as those from the *Philosophy of Photography* – hereafter abbreviated as PHPH – will suffice to elucidate the text. Nevertheless, since our brains cannot determine anything except through comparison, extremely accurate documentation is called for in order to grasp the photographic subject of a photographer rather than simply his or her themes, thus allowing the subtle determining of perceptual-motive or logico-semiotic field effects, while enabling us to contrast these with those of other photographs. In the work of Paul Strand for instance, where the positivity of the shade is foregrounded, the slightest increase of black tones so frequent in prints leads to actual misinterpretations. Conversely, the phototonic imprints of Robert Frank vanish in prints that are too bright. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to expand the reader’s references as much as possible. Accordingly, even for those photographs reproduced in this book, the reader will always be able to turn to works containing excellent documents, or at least different ones from those used here.

Primarily, these sources are the four catalogues published in 1989 in New York, Chicago, Houston-Canberra-London, on the hundred and fiftieth birthday of the announcement of the discoveries of Daguerre and Talbot in 1839. The illustrations in these masterful books are abundant, well chosen, of perfect finish, and they have the advantage of being accompanied by the technical specifications of the negative and of the print. In addition to monographs and irreplaceable catalogues such as the *Aperture Monographs*, it was deemed useful to add certain selections containing less luxurious material, or containing less technical indications. However, these publications are still satisfactory and easy to find.

In order to avoid groupings that might seem too dogmatic, the thirty chapters are arranged according to the birthdate of the first photographer under discussion, except in the case of color photographers, whose works are put together in the same final folio because of technical printing restrictions. One will be able to see that such superficial historicity often reveals a profound historicity. The amount of chapters, thirty, as well as the number of photographers, about fifty, seemed representative, since this book does not claim exhaustiveness; this book invites the reader to take a voyage. When a photographer is not mentioned, this does not mean he is excluded. For instance, one will not find a chapter devoted to Winogrand. This should suffice as reassurance.

Jean-Claude Lemagny and Giles Mora were kind enough to reread this text and prevent me from making blunders. The traces of deep understanding of the plastic arts and logical rigor of Micheline Lo can be found on every page. Countless others should be thanked, i.e. one faction for its approving chatter, and the other faction for its troubled silence. The road to historical understanding is riddled with imponderables.

List of abbreviations of common references :

PN: *Photography until Now*, Museum of Modern Art.

NV: *The New Vision*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Abrams.

AP: *The Art of Photography*, Yale University Press.

FS: *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow*, Art Institute of Chicago.

BN: Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: Essays and Images*, Museum of Modern Art.

LP: Szarkowski, *Looking at Photographs*, Museum of Modern Art.

PF: Kozloff, *Photography and Fascination*, Addison.

CI: *Caméra International*, Paris.

PP: *Photo Poche*, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris.

CP: Special issue of "Cahiers de Photographie" dedicated to the relevant photographer.

PHPH: *Philosophy of Photography*.

The acronyms (*), (**), (***) refer to the first, second, and third illustration of the chapters, respectively. Thus, the reference (***) AP, 417) must be interpreted as: "This refers to the third illustration of the chapter, and you will find a better reproduction, or a different one, with the necessary technical specifications, in *The Art of Photography* listed under number 417".

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A Photographic History of Photography

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