

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

### A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

# 1. HILL (U.K., 1802-1870) ADAMSON (U.K., 1821-1848)

## From the form to functioning elements

The portrait of the future Elisabeth Eastlake standing besides her seated mother is prophetic. It is a calotype – or talbotype -, meaning that it is made according to the first principle of the negative-positive process made public by Talbot in 1839, and which he perfected the following year when he noted that the negative could be developed and its exposure time - hence, its developing time - could be reduced. This photograph required a painter, Hill, and a young engineer, Adamson, thereby pointing out the preponderant role played by the equipment in the new discipline. Above all, the mother, the daughter, the drape, the flowers, the leprous wall and their setup declare the rupture – in the forties – with the construction of space and of the time imposed in the western world for the past two and a half millenniums.

Let us briefly remember the background. In around 500 BC, the Greek rational crafts had setup a capture and construction of the environment through “forms”, or “wholes” made up of “integral parts”, or elements that each *directly* referred to the whole they integrate, and standing out on a background. The result is a “cosmos” (cosmetic organization) as a vision of the universe. One that is so effortless that it can be summed up in geometrical and anatomical microcosms, like a triumphant human body. It is convenient to call this system - that reigned until the European romanticism - WORLD 2. For, in what we call WORLD 1 – since the origins – humankind had always understood and built its environment through “vital elements”, meaning that it referred pulsatorily and agregatively to neighbouring elements before *indirectly* referring to fluid wholes confounding themselves with the background, which was thereby not a real “background”. Alternatively, we should just like to note that such practices were developed halfway between WORLD 1 and WORLD 2, in Sumer in Egypt, in India, China, Japan, in pre-Columbian America, and in the middle Ages in Europe.



Hill and Adamson, *Portrait*, BN, 82

Our photo dated 1844 breaks with this, illustrating a new capture-construction that we can refer to as WORLD 3. We no longer have a direct reference of “integral parts” to “wholes” as we did in WORLD 2. The seated mother and standing daughter create a sort of triangle, yet nothing refers to it directly. The trespass of the curtain on the wall, like the receding matter of the wall and curtain – escape a classical geometry and anatomy, even creating a sort of un-form. These are not “vital” elements referring one to the other pulsatorily as in WORLD 1 either: the hood and the dress do not engender consecutive pulsations, nor do the flowers with the flowery curtain, or any other elements of the wall and layered curtain. We are dealing with a mainly heterogeneous whole of pieces and events, and the one thing that we can say is that they *work well* together, that they trigger each other mutually from near of far, just like the *functioning elements* of the machines and processes of the new industry. We are therefore not surprised at the announcement or the reflection of the first painters of the WORLD 3: Delacroix (he of the “tartes aux pommes mal cuites” [apple tart] of later days), Courbet (the matterist whose *L’homme à la pipe* dates from the same year), Manet (who places his blacks independently from his contours) before Degas’ conversion. A new outlook is born.

Not enough is being said. Because the WORLD 3 triggered by Hill and Adamson is a world of photographers, not painters. Their calotypes result from the light going through the texture of the negative paper, and their definition is so low that the image consists to end up in a packet of dense shadows and blotches of dense lights, which contrast even more massively that the developing time still requires between ten to twenty seconds, causing a certain blur. On the other hand, these brutally contrasted packets encroach on the hedges, which they fragment as a reference system. The good old frame-index of western painting has become a limit-frame, one that we can also refer to as frame-indices as it simply signals that the sensitive surface of the plate ends there.

Hill and Adamson made a *photographic subject* of these characteristics of photography of their era. They used this jumble of blocks of shadows and blocks of light to trigger a positive/negative equivalence, to generate a veritable positive/negative flutter that will remain one of the great resources of photography, and from which they will draw their own personal stained glass effect (AP, 35-43; FS, 23-27). They accomplished this in an opened rhythmic sequence due to the jostling of the index-frame (of painting) by the limit-frame or frame-indices (of photo), boosting the capture-construction through functioning elements rather than through “forms”.

This photographic subject led to themes. The strongly contrasted guns and uniforms of the *Cordon Highlanders at Edinburgh Castle* (\*\*AF,38) were predestined. Or still, among other places haunted by Walter Scott – Scottish like them – the St Andrews cemetery where – by predestination – large light tombs were opposed to large dark tombs at the same time as a high, solid tower and a large, hollow curve (PN, 41).



Hill and Adamson, *Gordon Highlanders à Edinburgh*, AF, 38

Hill and Adamson's visual options were probably comforted by the English portrait tradition *à la* Reynolds, and by former English romantic landscapes, in particular Constable who already cultivated the hazy frame. On the other hand, Hill attended the Free Church of Scotland, whose Puritanism ratified in advance the photonic imprints of photography, which were virtually direct works of Nature (one of Talbot's books is titled *The Pencil of Nature*), hence of God in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, more than the intentional signs that are borne from a painter's hand. Particularly since these photonicity obtained indices showed the light shining from the shadows (*On the art of fixing a shadow* is the subtitle of Talbot's 1839 discovery statement), and were sufficiently frustrating to evoke a divine transcendence. Hill clearly states in 1848: "The rough and unequal texture throughout the paper is the main cause of the Calotype failing in details (...) and this is the very life of it". From which he draws an allegation of transcendence: "They look like the imperfect work of man and not the very much diminished work of God". We will often come across this note of stupor and marvel that accompanies the party that is a photographic subject.

The fact that Elisabeth Eastlake – who was then still Elisabeth Rigby -, the wife of the Director of the National Gallery presiding the Photographic Society of London (future Royal Photographic Society), completes the historical strength of the portrait. Stimulated by the extraordinary theoretical turmoil of her circle, she writes a remarkable text in 1857: *Photography*. The latter goes to the sociological essence of the new medium: "for a mere shilling, the last servant can now get his image in the farthest village in the countryside, just like Rothschild's fiancée (abridged text)", and its cosmological essence: "Now, a great primitive agent (light) has entered our service, we can foresee how extensively it will contribute to unraveling the threads of other secrets of nature's science".

Here – like so many other instances later on – the portrayed exists on both sides of the camera. Elsewhere, we will see that Hill and Adamson asked many other women to dress in lace and flowered dresses that exalted their photographic subject (AP, 39, 40). However, future theoretician Elisabeth must have understood well the reason behind this request. We imagine her choosing theoretically – not only coquettishly – her triple cascade dress, her askew pose sending the flux of fabric towards an eccentric destination thwarting the index-frame to the profit of the indice-frame), the shaky tapestry and the leper on the walls (every photo is texture before being structure), the mother's cape and bonnet pursuing the positive/negative flutter and the stained glass effect.

Seeing the Cultural Revolution implied by photography in the 1840's, we could ask ourselves if it did not trigger the entire WORLD 3. However, let us not forget that, at the same period, electricity replaces the progressive actions of the ancient techniques by the brisk triggering of its commutators. That the machines of information – also triggering – begin to complete energy machines. That mathematicians envisage non-Euclidian geometries, or through a point taken out of a straight line one is able to lead an infinity of parallels to this straight line (Loatchevski), or, to the contrary, none (Riemann). That Richard Wagner dissolves the classical tonality in the chromatic that was the resonant absolutism of the "form". That, at the great fear of Karl Marx - romantic aesthete - human activity changes nature by the passage of factory manufacture. Instead of remaining "concrete" - hence establishing a pulsatory ("agregatory") correspondence in WORLD 1 naïve crafts, then globalizing ("formal") in the rational craft of WORLD 2 - the "work" had become "abstract", accounting fragments of

matter with fragments of gesture in the non contiguous functioning of WORLD 3. We evoked the parallel revolution of painters higher.

Photography was hence the privileged operator and witness of a radical mutation of topography, cybernetic, logic and semiotic, among other operators of an entire historical moment in consonance with it, just as Nadar will confirm.

**Henri Van Lier**

**A photographic history of photography**

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*List of abbreviations of common references :*

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

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

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

*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".*