

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

17. IRVING PENN (U.S.A, 1917), BERT STERN (U.S.A,1930)

Flat dilatation

Jumping from Ueda to Suda to better feel the originality of the Japanese space-time, we have just gone from – without realizing – photographers that set their vision before the Second World War to others who established it afterwards. In order to understand Irving Penn – who is so representative of the new period – we must now consider this change from up close, and somehow embrace the period 1950-1975. After years of scientific discretion (from 1930 to 1950), we will again speak of sparkling scientific revolutions like the one between 1900 and 1930, but that were very different because they were so much more intelligible for a wider audience.

Indeed, the cybernetic and the 1948 theory of information were tangibly incarnated in automation. Establishing the sequences of now-crystallized proteins (Sanger-Edman), then giving their three-dimensional representations that even showed the angles and length of their bonds (Pauling-Corey) required much astuteness, but made things tangible. The 1953 double helix of heredity was not unimaginable and the genetic ‘code’ had immediate medical consequences. Still in 1953, the obtaining of amino acids – the basis of proteins – from elementary constituent elements (hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen) under the effect of a simple supply of energy, made plausible the chemical origin of life by demonstrating that the information of a system could sometimes rise up without the contribution of exterior information. The notion of big bang gained ground since the discovery of cosmological radiation in 1964. In 1969, man’s landing on the moon was no longer abstract. Even the mathematical catastrophe theory of the sixties soon resulted in some suggestive figures, which made it known to the general public via magazines. The notion of axiomatic, which traumatised minds in 1900, became easier to comprehend through the teaching of so-called new mathematics.

The conviction that henceforth everything was possible with a good dose of goodwill proved limitless. Some saw men dominate even climates; others felt the Earth was easily going to feed a hundred billion dwellers. All this occurred among the devaluation of monolithic reason, the re-evaluation of the woman, the child, the mad, and the foreigner as such. The notion

of creativity ceased to have the anti-naturalist orientation it had had in 1920's surrealism. Nature and artifice were henceforth destined to be woven in a 'median reality', from which Simondon released the concept in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* in 1957, and that supported a philosophy of contemporary culture in the author's *Nouvel Age*, dated 1962.

17A. Contrasted dilatation: Irving Penn

On this canvas, Irving Penn's cover for 'Vogue', dated 15 November 1949 (*Vogue covers 1900-1970) has the effect of a kick-off. Millenniums of relations between the body and its image were turned upside down.



Irving Penn, *Couverture de Vogue*

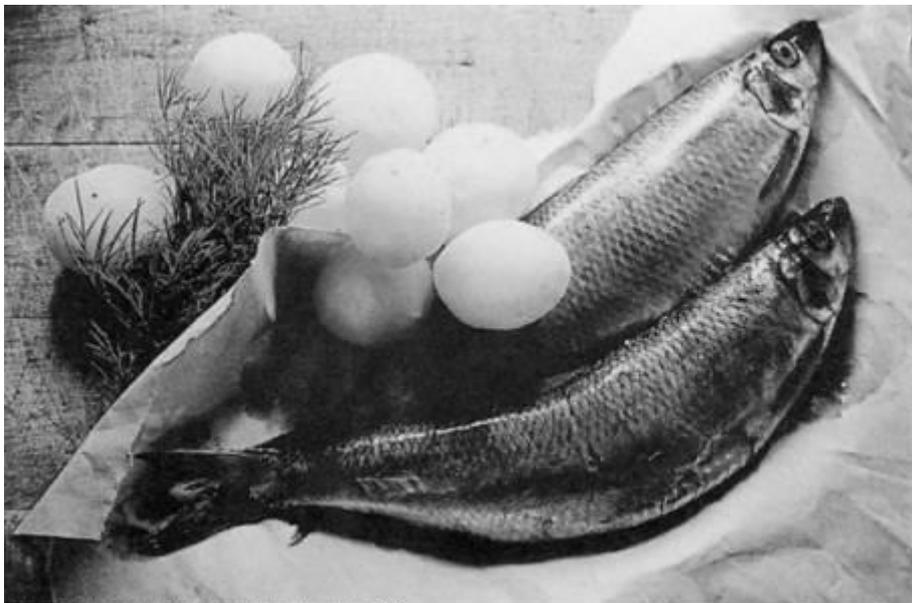
Among the women shown on the cover of 'Vogue' since the magazine was founded in 1900, there was every sort of style, from Modern Style to Styling. However, the imagery and reality were always distinct. And here, in Penn's cover, we find a real volume like the one found in reality, and in the same time, a flat surface like those we find in pure imagery. The flesh was available for every porosity, but it was weightless. A surface had the virtues of a volume without ceasing to be a surface. The outside was equivalent to the inside, and the opposite – like in a Moebius ribbon where we may be outside or inside, always circulating on the same face. This ribbon was not only suggested on the Christmas packages it loosely tied, but it also structured the body of the entire woman, continuing her topological turnings in the sleeves, the cleavage, the spatial capsule formed by the hat, the package figuring under the bust, a belly of rich volume and void weight. The veil ceased to be the exaltation of darkness as it had always been, and was in turn a declaration of weight without weight, and particularly of the within-without, of the imagery-reality.

Penn's body image – or image-body – was, way before its time, the 'median reality' that Simondon saw in the technical object and process. The woman ceased to be a subject or an object, and became a moment of a process. The word 'process' was becoming as current as – since the middle ages – 'substance' and 'accident', 'objectum' and 'subjectum'. The notion of object, unknown by the Latin – who had known 'objicere' (throwing across a road) but not 'objectum' (something thrown in front and across) –, this notion that, since the twelfth century, had invaded Europe under the form of *objectum* (medieval Latin), *objet* (French), *object* (English), *Gegenstand* (German), *voorwerp* (Dutch), *predmjet* (Russian). The result was that the great bourgeois philosophical couple object/subject, was gone for good. 'Objects' were merely the local and transitory products of the 'processes', sole responsible of the systems. Like one car in the Automobile process. A woman in the Woman process.

Obviously, according to the median reality of the imagery-reality, photographs no longer needed to conform to women, but women needed to conform to photographs, to the Woman-Photo process. Worldwide, make-up would lighten, remove hair, deodorize, pastelise, to obtain the feminine photographicity in vivo. In 1952 *Cybernetic and Society*, Norbert Wiener asks: Can we telegraph a body? (Let us understand: not telegraph the image of the body, but the body itself). Hence, WORLD 3, or grasp-construction through pure functioning, entered into its age of maturity. The woman-image-process was no longer a microcosm, distinct substance and essence of the images that we could have, but an image and a life, all at once. The relay of a universe that was itself grasped as an ensemble of processes, from which every being is only a complex crossing.

This demanded the flat dilatation that photography could provide. Irving Penn made this his photographic subject as a contrasted flat dilatation, or perhaps more as a paradox of the dilatating contrast, to which no painting or sculpture could have pretended. There had to be the thinness of the photo, but also its aptitude to the subtle modelling, for it to inflate like a flesh, and the contrasted black and white to stay in the shot without ever stopping to inflate. Hence, the imponderable volume, joined to the deploying arabesques (not the 'intervalling' Japanese arabesque or the 'concluding' Ingres arabesque) would multiply the ambiguities between inside and outside.

Never has white been so ample. Because of course, black is the colour that contrasts as white dilates. It culminates in the nightdress of the famous nocturnal little girl sitting full face or in the daylight photograph of an ageing Collette, in the austere figures of the Cuzco women (FS, 339) and the women of Goulimine (AF, 442), there, in Peru, in the blowing of the cheeks, or still here, in Morocco, in the monumental altar of the knees for the Penn's anthropology of the clothing. Sometimes, the white and black napes inter-model themselves at a distance, like in the vertical white sleeve and the horizontal black hat of 1951 *Large Sleeve*, which was remarkably chosen by Szarkowski to resume this space-time (PN, 193). The same contrasted dilatation, the same dilating contrast smoothly inflates the *Three Herrings* and their white potatoes, green sprigs of dill, pleats of the wrapping paper (Moebius is still here) for a Swedish tourism advertisement (**Life, *Les grands photographes*, p. 233). We have reproduced this colour photograph in black and white for technical reasons. But it is in no way a loss, because it allows us to see more clearly how the body of a fish and the body of a woman are, through the same photographic subject, of the same structure and texture.



Irving Penn, *Herrings*, Life, *Les grands photographes*, p 233

The flowers of the colour *Flowers*, published in 'Vogue' from 1967 to 1973 for the Christmas issue, and compiled by Harmony Books, are somehow to Irving Penn what the clouds of the *Equivalents* were to Stieglitz. There is nothing like a flower to lay bare a photographic subject. The *Phalaenopsis* of Palm Beach, in an echo to the 1949 'Vogue' cover, tells us of the formidable capacity of attention and respect required to see the 'world in a nutshell'. But the three red and white petals of the *Tulip* of the cover precise why young Titian – who erased the articulations of the *Flora's* breast to give it the inflation and dilatation of a sole breast; he who had so well erased the articulations of the pelvis and the knees of the two naked bodies of the *Pastoral Concert* (which had formerly been attributed to Giorgione) that he made continuous goatskins bottles – would have stopped to look fraternally at Irving Penn's nudes.

17B. Galactic dilatation: Bert Stern

In 1962, Penn's imagetive revolution had been well digested, and Bert Stern gave a galactic, and no longer contrasted, version of the flat dilatation.

In his supreme success, this supposed Marilyn Monroe, meaning a skin that was grainy yet transparent and that would give off a velvety and juicy light; a hairstyle and a face in horizontal expansion (a landscape face); a body reflecting the marine and aerial undulations of this face according to the cosmological undulation that Andy Warhol sought then in his silk-screening inks, before Antonioni should go back to it in the cinematographic swipes of 1970's *Zabriskie Point*. It also supposed that a photographer should recognize this skin, this wave, this immenseness, felt their accord with the films while sincerely believing that he had met the light, the divinity and the moon. 'She was the light and the goddess and the moon'. Finally, like in Nadar and Sander, the portrayed had to invent herself, but this time, as an immaterial film, a photonic imprint where every substance is resorbed in intersidereal make-up.



Bert Stern, *The Last Sitting*, 1974

This is where the galactic perceptive-motor fields of colour photography came from, followed by black and white of *The Last Sitting* (LS). This was the last sitting during which Marilyn Monroe made her own apotheosis assisted by Bert Stern; her tragedy death, before her dramatic death a few days later. We kept one of the black and white shots (**LS, 174), which was published by 'Vogue' in cenotaph. To fully understand these photos, taken while the NASA was busy conquering terrestrial gravitation, it is good to have seen – like Californian Bert Stern undoubtedly did – a few shots of galaxies.

Henri Van Lier

A photographic history of photography
in *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, 1992

List of abbreviations of common references :

PN: Photography until Now, Museum of Modern Art.

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".*