

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 2 – PHOTOGRAPHIC INITIATIVES

Chapter 11 - THE INITIATIVE OF THE SPECTACLE: PHOTOGENIUS

Je est un autre.

RIMBAUD

Up to the invention of photography, the spectacles of nature and culture were limited in number and perceived in an anthropocentric manner. What struck 19th century photographers and their clients was that nature and culture offered spectacles unlimited in number and strangeness. Spectacles are numerous, and include, amongst many others, those of cosmic grandeur (Herschel the astronomer), of medium magnitude (*Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region*), of miniscule size (Talbot's botanical and zoological specimens or those of the Bisson brothers), of very brief phenomena (Muybridge and Marey) or underwater (Thompson and later Boutant), of disappearing cultures (Curtis's "*The North American Indian*"), of unacknowledged social classes (Riis and Hine), of innocent appearances ("Alice" by Lewis Carroll), and also concerning scenes of daily life, as in Rejlander's "*Did She*" for example.

In all of this, the specific characteristics of every photograph, to which we will return at leisure, and particularly the superficiality of field and the frame-border, ensure that normally unrelated objects, persons and events voluntary or involuntarily spark off true denotative, connotative, structural, and textural *collisions*, especially the curvatures and inflections of perceptual field effects, where the gigantic and the miniscule enter into an alliance (air photography and microscopic photography).

Furthermore, the initiative of the photographic spectacle does not limit itself to simply being present. At any time, men, women, and children, isolated or in group, become *aware* that they are the *theme* of a photograph, and one person will signal his active participation more than the other. The satisfaction is considerable, as being chosen is rare against the backdrop of indifferent city life. It is the pleasure of momentarily being an actor with a minimal public. It is the belief in the magical form of the image within societies that are hardly industrialized. It is

the hope of being chosen a star within highly industrialized populations. In any event, the photographed human is not an object. Almost always, even when he is sick or disgraced, he will collaborate with his photograph, as attested by those strange creatures photographed by Diana Arbus. Marilyn Monroe, who was born on film (her mother was an editor), is the perfect example of photography's power of creation, which occurs simultaneously by itself and thanks to the photographic process, and not just thanks to the photographer, even if his name is Bert Stern.

There is more. Even in a conventional photograph, often something will appear that neither the photographer nor the photographed actively looked for or even sensed in advanced. An particular area of a face, a statement in someone's shoulder or ankle, creases in clothes preceding any possible intention, not to be recovered by any notion of intentionality. If someone who has just been photographed is often so anxious to see what *it*, or *that* looks like, it is because the photographed "I" is always other, unknown and indifferent, always prior to the person photographed. It is the revelation of a truth other than a truth understood as sincerity or authenticity, a truth as old as our existence or even further away in time and space. If this *it* of the photographic spectacle evokes the Freudian *id*, as the codes of analogical and digital signs prior to individuation, it also recalls that of Georg Groddeck, as the pre-signification of the body prior to and below sign systems, revealed through strange correlations that cross cultural evolutions and those of tissues and species. For the photograph, there is no solution of continuity between the spectacle of landscapes, animal, plant, and mineral life, and the stratifications of signs, indices and human bodies. It is the exemplary photographic facet that Richard Avedon explored of this stratigraphy of bodies and minds, right up to that of his dying father.

This etymologically defines photogenius as the manner in which one is generated by light. (It is the word Talbot chose before Herschel proposed "photography"). Firstly, there is the *immediate photogenius* of what one easily recognizes in a photograph, without significant deviation from what these things are in everyday life. Secondly, there is the mediate photogenius of what appears in the photograph as the unpredictable zones of the psychological and biological "that" outside of the shot. Finally, there is a kind of *transcendental photogenius* of those whose appearance boosts the photographic process itself, as with film actors such as Chaplin, whose motility stimulates the cinematographic process as such. It goes without saying that in the latter case, denotative and connotative traits matter less than (perceptual, motive, semiotic, indicial) field effects with their curvatures and inflections.

This introduces three types of *poses*. Firstly, there is the rapid freeze of someone who realizes that he has only to be himself or imagine himself in order to "pass". Secondly, there is the insistent freeze of someone ceasing to picture himself and allowing his organism to let "it" pass. This can be seen in the freezing of action with Diana Arbus, the social role with Sander, and the anthropological sampling of Avedon. Finally, there is the pose à la Monroe, evincing a kind of absolute availability toward the photographic film, photographic paper and the film screen. Here, the only life and even the only "that" possible are those of the photograph as such. This type of photogenius is perhaps the most philosophical as it shows that there are images that are a world *apart from the world*, in every sense of the phrase. To fully appreciate the derealizing implications of this experience one must take the following expression (which also holds for cinema, but differently) literally: "*it works well on film*"



*Martin Holger: Visages
d'amour, 1982*

So everything can be the theme of a photograph, not because a human being is generally interested in everything, which is not true, but because the world creates, for our lenses and film, almost point by point spectacles everywhere, at any time, and on any scale. Thus, the desire grew to experience everything, strictly everything, to see everything from the beautiful to the ugly and the horrible, the face of Einstein as well as that of the idiot, from Julia Margaret Cameron's Kiss of Peace to Michel Laurent's photo of the execution of Pakistanis. One has attempted to see in the manic and ceaseless triggering of shots a form of repetition compulsion, which Freud addressed. This may be the case. However, the infinite object of the photographic can suffice to explain this unquenchable thirst. Walker Evans had to put an abrupt and arbitrary end to his photographic series of the New York subway because he felt his reason sink into the bottomless pit of inventory. Seemingly, the approximately ten thousand negatives alone that Weston had archived at the University of Arizona caused dread because of their vast and at the same time inadequate number.

At the beginning, closely allied to painting, photographers persevered in the composition of their spectacles, either through the use of decors, or by cleverly arranging their characters. In publicity and pornography, one still composes meticulously. Photo novels are series of figures, and artistic "staged photography" displayed its vitality in a recent exposition in Rotterdam. However, these are all cosmological, physiological, semiological and indiciological initiatives of spontaneous spectacles that, up to now, have been the source of the most disconcerting originality. The photograph illustrates Borges's point raised in his *Handbook of Fantastic Zoology*: all the efforts of the human imagination have only with difficulty invented a few hundred species, while nature has created millions, and often stranger ones. In this respect as well, the photograph dismisses reality and drives us to the real.

Henri Van Lier