

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 2 – PHOTOGRAPHIC INITIATIVES

Chapter 12 - The initiative of the photographer: trap and switch. Mediumnity

My best photographs have always been photographs that found themselves. I have made enough pictures so that now I see like a lens focused on a piece of film, act like a negative projected on a piece of sensitized paper, talk like a picture on a wall. I know fairly well how to eliminate accidents from my photographing, and, paradoxically, in so doing I have also learned that the happy accident can be cultivated!

MINOR WHITE, *Found Photographs, Memorable Fancies*, 1957.

Contrary to the painter's initiative, which from the outset resembles that of God, the initiative of the photographer comes afterwards. It comes after the initiative of the spectacle, which follows that of nature, which, in its turn, comes after that of the world-wide photographic process. Of these initiatives, that of the photographer is also the only facultative one. Photographs, even of psychological or social situations, are obtained through the automatic application of objectives, films, developers, and fixatives; they frequently offer interesting or even important results, while texts or aleatory paintings hardly ever do. Still, there are those effects that can only be obtained through the intervention of a human agent, the *photographer*. Both optional and last, and yet miraculous, the photographer undoubtedly has a status even more difficult to define than that of the photographs he makes, or, to be more precise, he *helps to make*.

First of all, this status is not unequivocal because there are photographers of the shot, of developing, of the positive print, printed matter and lay-out. Generally speaking, they do not coincide. Moreover, it is impossible not to take into account this particular "photographer" who is also an artistic director foreseeing existent or possible desires of the buyers of his magazine, and who not only decides which contact print will be kept, but also the lucky one who will become, in this or that shot, the *Berlin child among the ruins* or the *pied-noir returning to France*.

However, when one uses the word "photographer" without further nuance, one mostly thinks of someone taking shots. Like the sexual act, the photographic activity has its stage of arousal, a stagnant phase, a phase of quasi vegetative triggering, followed by the various stages of pregnancy in the darkroom with its techniques of burning and dodging, cutouts and re-centerings, and various lay-outs before reaching a resolution in simple or multiple deliveries. In this metaphor, the moment of the shot is the orgasmic instant. The photograph has its manuals of obstetrics, and its philosophy in the bedroom. The latter thrived the most, confirming the superiority of he who takes the shots. Accordingly, we will now turn our focus on the photographer.

For a particular photograph of an Italian peasant pointing out the retreat of the German enemy to even exist, there had to be Robert Capa. The war reporter, while walking towards the hill on the background, intuited that the peasant and the American soldier squatting next to him were to form a triangle inscribing itself within the triangle of the landscape. In addition, Capa sensed that the peasant would raise his staff until it would cover a fold of the slope. Thus, in this instant, one cannot decide whether we are merely looking at an individual making a denunciatory gesture or an entire country spewing out the intruder.

The extremely tense concentration required for this type of shot taken in a fraction of a second and at close angle, is known to reporters, but also to those professionals who meet in a scene of Antonioni's *Blow up*, where a photographer is shown who had just snapped away at his model before collapsing on a sofa in a sort of orgasmic exhaustion. This demand culminates with photographers who do not touch up the image and who retain the integrity of the negative, like with Weston's and Cartier-Bresson's focus on the instantaneous, and Cameron's privileging of the pose. This requires *pre-visualization*, that is to say, the capacity to anticipate, in the slightest detail, what the result will be. Cartier-Bresson speaks of his tiptoeing in order to find the most intense angle and what he himself dubbed "the decisive moment". He compares the release of the shutter to a fencer making a lunge. The calling of those who snap away, pick and choose, crop and touch up afterwards and do not wager everything on one single click, is no less passionate, although for other reasons. Sometimes several years afterwards, the latter's old contact sheets will yield new selections according to new codes.

Curiously, a certain modesty prevails in all this hot and cold passion. What is essential to the role of almost every photographer is *vision - photographic vision*. This is a question of registering and not of constructing. One must register not only the collapsing soldier, no matter how emotional this may be, but, more fundamentally, the *encounter* of the elements of the *reality* of the shot soldier with the elements of the real of the reflected and subsequently impregnating photons through the anticipation that this photographic imprint will be, after developing and printing, an extraordinary trigger of *mental schemas*, which one can already feel teeming at the very instant the shutter is released. Many photographers state that they have had this vision directly and continuously since childhood. This is telling for two reasons. On the one hand, this does not fully apply to painters, who predominantly paint what they have constructed. If need be, this could confirm the extent to which photographers do not *compose* in the strict sense of the term. On the other hand, the commonness of the photographer's

photographic view would justify its everyday nature through the viewer's brief scanning of magazines, while paintings are hung in museums or family shrines.

One has therefore concluded too rashly that the photographer as shot-taker is a 'hunter of images.' The word conjures up *loading, to aim, fire*, and capture; to *take, shoot* and *snap*. However, the camera is certainly not a revolver, despite the sound of the shutter and the phallic protuberance exploited in publicity. Neither is it, to keep with this sexual imagery, a suction pump. The camera is rather *a trap* that must lead its prey into getting caught. The photographer as shot-taker resembles the *hunter-trapper*. The trapper is as passive as he is active. For the animal to enter man's scheme, man must take in beforehand the animal's behavior. The word trapper is used by North American Indians and indicates precisely the complicity between the hunter and his prey as the uttermost brotherhood. The classic trope of the proximity between photography and sexuality is evocative only if one keeps in mind the idea of a reciprocal rhythmic coaptation.

In addition, the metaphor of the trap also indicates that the photographer remains on the outside. The trapper is satisfied with connecting the trap with the prey. The photographer as shot-taker connects the spectacle with the camera obscura. He never sees exactly as the film "sees." If the viewfinder is distinct from the lens, the eye sees simultaneously with the camera, but from another point of view. If we are dealing with a reflex camera, the eye sees from the same place as the camera, but at another moment, i.e. prior to it.

All comparisons end here. Ordinarily, the trapper does not adjust the trap to his prey every single minute. But above all, he eats his prey. The photographer as shot-taker is a signalman as well as a trapper. His most essential tasks consist of the measuring of shot angles, incoming curvatures, the amount of aperture, rabatment time, and the intensity of darkness of the shot. And he does not devour his prey. Often, he is a pure predator, *capturing* for the sake of it, knowing that he will only catch shadows - he steals the shadows of others, as Shuji Terayama phrases it. Alternatively, the photographer might *recycle* "mental things" in unlimited and multiform industrial printings. Or he might *accumulate* his traces in photographic collections of Babylonian proportions, *awaiting* endless recyclings. What strange type of hunter-trapper is this who does not even catch his prey but merely its traces? And what to think of 'game' consisting of wild rabbits, the curves of a lover's smile and Orion's nebula?



*Capa's eye
(Ruth Orkin).*

*Mapplethorpe's
eye (P.-F.
Daled).*

© Robert
Capa-Magnum
: *Italie, 1943*

This elucidates diverse characteristics of widely-known shots. The *bustle* of the family or tourist photographer, whose use of the viewfinder and diaphragm makes us see what could not have been seen without the apparatus, while he can exempt himself of the responsibility of direct perceptual contact with an environment. Then there is the repetition *compulsion* of the voyeur. Or the *professionalism* of those who, fascinated by the initiative of the worldwide

Photographic process, feel redeemed by obeying it piously and to the letter, like priests or sextons. Or the *availability* of those one could call photographers *tout court*, reporters like Cartier-Bresson or Capa, fashion photographers like Hiro or Avedon, the landscape photographers of *Time-Life*, as well as the "mediums" that, brilliant or not, supply the world's major newspapers and magazines with images and share a respect for the proper textural and structural photographic characteristics, i.e. the overlap of indices, the subordination of the frame-indices to the frame-indices, uninhibited digitality, field effects preceding denotation and connotation, the aptitude for lateral browsing, the photograph's otherworldliness and anti-anthropomorphism, a reality devoured by the real, even if the most frequent photographic theme remains Man, or *The Family of Man*, as Steichen put it. Finally, one cannot forget the *willingness* of beginners in school gleaning from these attitudes, often supplementing them with the museal and nostalgic aspirations of the traditional arts.

When addressing photographers as such, we can use the word "medium." This is not a misuse of language. Photographers themselves have often repeated that they are not artists in the common sense of the word. Moreover, they are not craftsmen or laborers. So, where are we to situate them? For the OED, a medium is a person claiming to have communication with the spirits of the dead and reveal its results to others. For Webster, it concerns a person or thing acting as intermediary, but not between persons and spirits, but between the *world* of men and the *world* of spirits, which is not without link to what we have called 'universe.' If it is true that even a highly indexed and indicial photograph contains fragments of reality against the frame of the real, then every photograph is mediumnic. Innocently or not, both the photographer as developer, printer, and the one responsible for the layout, and especially the photographer as the taker of shots are mediums - *mediums between reality and the real*.

Here, the English language can help us, as *medium* applies at the same time to the object as to the subject, to the photograph and the photographer at the moment of capture, so that both are not quite separable. Furthermore, in its meaning of intermediate, the word medium brings out that, for the photo as well as for the photographer, we are not dealing with mediation or dialectic, which are unifications proper to signs, but only with *go-betweens*, as the interventions of stockbrokers - suited to overlapping centripetal and centrifugal indices - for the most substantial activation of mental schemas.

Henri Van Lier