

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 3 – PHOTOGRAPHIC BEHAVIORS

Chapter 14 – Artistic behaviors

In almost all of our languages, the word art indicates two almost opposite notions which we will consider separately.

14A. Everyday Art: *Elucidation and Confirmation of Codes*

Instead of favoring photography as art, the cultural policy of FNAC took into account its various incarnations as a mass phenomenon.

CAROLE NAGGAR, *The FNAC Collection*.

Man as the signed animal is truly constituted by images and sounds, some of which are natural although many are conventional and therefore function as signs. Thus, at all times and everywhere, man is inclined to produce images and texts whose codes are exceptionally *visible and consistent* so that he can configure himself and the group to which he belongs. These image-signs and discourses, whose codes are obvious and well-coordinated, are used eloquently by man, just as the objects and bodies he finds. He feels pleasure whenever he encounters them. This might be called everyday art. A nice drawing, a melodious song, a nicely written or spoken text, as well as clothes, utensils, a successful home, a committed or conventional political image - these can all be sources of joy.

The photograph evidently has an output rich enough to fulfill these criteria. The indicial character is carried over onto the imprint, and these indices are strongly indexed. These indexed indices refer to signs or object-signs, sometimes to stimuli-signs, and very often to figures in the classical sense of the term. And this indexation answers to visible and relatively coherent codes. Denotations, connotations, and perceptual field effects are immediately decipherable and

contain almost no false cues. Up until the nineteen fifties, this type of photography undoubtedly organized its field effects more formally, or rather, more forms and depths were distinguished according to the ideal of western perspective and production. By contrast, nowadays the overlaps of forms and depths are sometimes welcomed, as evinced by David Hamilton's popularity. But this still concerns mostly directly *recognizable* codes to members of a broad group at a given moment.



Boubat: Madras,
1971

It is possible that the photograph, owing to its isomorphism and synchrony, as well as its temporal, spatial and physical superficiality, is particularly apt at fulfilling this social function. The postcard and the poster have become typical examples of everyday art in almost every field. Today they relay what once were, in the era of painting, the *images of Epinal*. In his booklet *The Photograph*, French photographer Edward Boubat presents a clever and delightful collection of rules governing good photographs of this type. The cover of the book shows the democratic tenets they often carry.



"Toi et moi",
Lancio, 1983.

The photo novel is an extreme case. It not only applies immediately recognizable and very strict codes to the images, but also to the words and to the sequencing of events, thus effecting a generalized rigidity and clarity. By virtue of the photograph as imprint, it can pretend to create more real situations than those evoked by a simple text. However, it simultaneously disconnects these situations from the complexities and the unpredictability of real life. This is attained through the absolute legibility of indexes, through the grouping of successive moments on the same page (thus demonstrating the code governing their sequencing), and through the ostensible disconnection of the characters whose words, gestures and facial expressions are not in sync (in particular, their mouths remain immobile). One could even say that the photo novel tries to create *non-situational situations*, where the reader feels close to everyday life while moving within a prudently demarcated fantasy, enabling a projection without the risks inherent to passionate identification or empathy. The legibility of codes is so strong that the photo novel is no longer an object for sociology - it is almost ready-made sociology in itself.

14B. Extreme Art

Brodovitch told us things like: If, looking in your viewfinder, you get the impression that you have seen this somewhere before, well, don't shoot it then.

HIRO

The act we will dub extreme art is not the perfecting of everyday art as a way of exceeding it. To a large extent, extreme art follows a strictly inverse path.

14B1. Radicality

Instead of providing correct forms and harmonious compositions, that is to say, instead of clarifying and accounting for societal codes, extreme art radically questions things. At the same time as signs, and also on their level, extreme art envisages how they structure and de-structure themselves, keeping in mind that, without exception, they can only locally and temporarily capture the chaos, pre-structures, and quasi-relations - signs can never fully seize the latter. Thus, not only is extreme art animated by the drives of life and death, it also explores the entropy and negentropy of all systems, as well as sense and the absurd, thereby unveiling the gap and the anti-scene (beside-the-scenes, before-the-scenes and the after-the-scenes) of every language, figure and construction. This is what Rabelais, Beethoven, and the Dogon and Olmec sculptors put to practice. This surely also applies to the intransigence one can find in sexuality, fundamental science, philosophy, sports records and mysticism. Extreme art is the version where man presents himself with both a mental capture of what is at the "heart" of things, as in fundamental science and philosophy, as well as a sensorial capture, as in sexuality, mysticism and sports.

The photograph responds remarkably well to this. One need only recall what we have discovered about its texture and structure. As all imprints, its zones are steeped in the anti-scene of pre-semiotic quasi-relations. Its indices, which are never defined as regards to their border, number, and exact range, reinforce the capture of fluctuations that shake systematics. Its spatial isomorphism and the synchrony of its registration immediately instill a terrible impartiality which goes before, after, and outside of all duration and any familiar timeframe. While dissolving reality, its absence stands in for the real, and therefore, in a certain sense at least, it is present in the upheaval of being and non-being that makes every ontology tremble. It frees itself from structural links with the infinitely large and the infinitesimal, hurling us back to the origin. It forcefully inscribes the universe as a succession of irreversible states - the *never-again-nowhere* of any event. It brings out little of the situational of any situation. And the

human body appears continuously at the bottom of auctorial intentions, giving away an unconscious, a "that," which is no longer merely psychical but also cosmo-physical.

The photograph therefore has all it takes to satisfy those who wish to pursue the radicalizing impetus of extreme art. This does not entail miming the effects obtained in other age-old practices, such as painting for instance, whose effects are normally those of everyday art. Extreme art is produced when photography is faithful to its own texture and structure.

14B2. The Photographic "Subject"

However, extreme art does not employ the world as its setting in an undifferentiated manner. Its products are always marked by a society and, within this society, by biological and semiotic individualities. It might stem from what the group or the individual wants to express deliberately, as was the case with romanticism and expressionism. But originality persists even when it is not pursued for its own sake. The radicality of the products of extreme art is always seized from a certain angle, through a singular revelation or construction, causing Mozart, Beethoven, a Dogon or a Polynesian to produce equally radical results that make each of them directly recognizable. Few are marked by their denotations or connotations, which are broadly shared anyhow; they are mostly marked by their perceptual field effects. These are so specific that that one could designate them by the term pictorial subject for painters, the architectural *subject* for sculptors, the architectural *subject* for architects, and the textual *subject* for writers. These *subjects* designate the specific *rates* of aperture-closure, density-porosity, continuity-discontinuity, concentration-diffusion, and so on, which bring forth sounds and rhythms in music; traits, touches, colors, volumes, and materials in architecture, painting and sculpture; sounds, rhythms, and curvatures between logical and fantasmatic series when dealing with literature.



Akiyama, Tokyo,
1969

Once again, the photograph can here join the other arts. Let us name a few particularly insightful cases. Robert Capa is identifiable through delicately wrapped lighting, no matter whether it concerns a mountain, trousers, or bloodstains on the ground. We recognize Cartier-Bresson through salient volumes, which he captured in the photographs of prostitutes of Mexico City and North African children in a courtyard. We recognize William Eugene Smith through tapered angulations that invigorate the "coloration" of black and white contrasts, which culminated in *The Spinner*, and which he found in rural scenes, the posture of a doctor or of family members at a wake in a Spanish village. We can recognize Edward Weston through a texturology in which an impartial focus intersects with things and light, arrangements and degeneracies conveying a certain eternity. Dorothea Lange produces an articulation she desired to be audible, phonetic, in the back of a shirt or the branch of a tree. Walker Evans gives us frontality, planarity and magnified quadrangularity. William Klein: the panic of the turbulence of urban events. Avedon: the physiology and geology of epidemics. Irving Penn recognizes himself in the tension between luminous pomposity and mortal cut-ups. Andrzej Kertész: blinding structures. Robert Mapplethorpe: edge to edge filled with large areas of imponderable dimension, where all forms, left behind rather than immobile, well up, in a slow instantaneity, to forge a connection between the void and the fragment.

However, it has to be stressed that *photographic subjects* do not possess the same resolve as textual, musical, pictorial, and architectural subjects. Vivaldi is almost immediately recognizable from his first to his last work, practically measure by measure. Painters, architects, writers and musicians evince great constancy, even if it is that of inconstancy, as with Picasso for instance. Their musical, textual, pictorial, and architectural "subjects" vary little whatever the denotations and connotations they revert back to. Furthermore, it is the artist who chooses the denotative and connotative themes that might, according to his intuition, harbor perceptual field effects. The photograph is different.

It is the aforementioned Avedon who made fashion photos for *Vogue* of celebrities he invited to pose to exhaustion, photos bespeaking the death throes of his father: the three series complement one another, and they even partake of the same physiological and semiological interest for the life of death. But undoubtedly this link is more apparent when we associate Mozart's operas with his chamber music. When looking at a painting, we involuntarily exclaim, due to the determinacy of the pictorial subject: here we have a Rubens, this is a Hockney. Before a photograph, one can hardly say: This is a Capa, an Avedon, a Cartier-Bresson, or a Walker Evans.

One could regret this situation, and see it as a weakness. Alternatively, one could sense something original here, and be attentive to it. If human intervention is less imperious to photography than the other arts, it is because the universe-world barges in more than anywhere else. In addition, the transmutability of the photograph instantly allows it to evade its author, which cannot be said of most other productions.

We have yet to discuss photographic *style* in addition to its subject. We have not addressed style because it originally referred to the quill, and because the quill, whether with respect to text or drawings, refers to the graph, and therefore to the field of signs, which does

not pertain to photography. The word 'subject' in *photographic subject*, far from being ideal, does not have this disadvantage, at least if one marks it off clearly from the *theme* or the *scenic subject* of a photograph. Besides, "subject" has the virtue of clearly indicating that photographic field effects are not simple forms (embellishments of a contents, in the classical sense), but constitute a perspective, a vision, an overall capture, a fundamental phantasm and a different kind of denotation, which, partly existential, is often the true "contents" of extreme art but also of publicity. Moreover, the term "subject" does not sever the photograph's field effects from the photographer's, or, in other words, it respects the link between the photograph's texture and structure and that of the decision-maker's brain. Even if a photograph by Cartier-Bresson is not really a Cartier-Bresson (as one could say of his paintings), it still goes out *from* Cartier-Bresson. What we have before our eyes are not only imprints and indices steeped in their field effects, but also mental schemas forged by the same field effects. The activity of looking at a photograph struck us because of its extremely apposite activation of the indices-mental schemas couple (in the plural and in overlap). The act of photographing astonishes because of the same characteristics. With the same effacement of long-standing *subjectivity*, as the centre of reality and the Cosmos-Mundus, to the benefit of a *subjectality* transfixed by the real, as a universal state amongst many other universal states.

14B3. Only Slightly Reflexive Indicialogy and the Impossible Self-Portrait

Finally, it is rather unlikely that someone pursuing extreme art will not end up, at a certain moment, engaging in a particular form of radicality and singularity, i.e. the interrogation of the nature of the medium itself. A reflexive attitude asserted itself in all the arts from 1950 onwards, giving rise to paintings about paintings, sculptures on sculpture, literature about literature, music on music, and cinema on cinema.

Is there such a thing as *photography on photography* as well? One can find examples pointing in this direction. Dibbets brought out the importance of skylines in the shot. Moholy-Nagy thematized the meshing and weaves of the photo's shades, as Zielke itemized the transparencies and leafage of light. Ernst Haas practically made a systematics of the ordinary pairing information-noise in the fusions of color photographs. Friedlander carried out the most thorough exploration of the implication of the photographer in what is photographed. One could say that the series of captioned photographs by Duane Michals and Nakagawa are not only narratives-figures, like photo novels, but reflections on the figural (not figurative) aptitude of the photograph, by virtue of the gap between the captions and the ambiguity of the shots. Finally, Douglas Crimp shows that as early as 1895, Degas, conspiring with Mallarmé, had produced a veritable semiotics or an actual indicialogy of photography.

Even so, one could maintain that the photograph is less driven to this type of self-referentiality than other artistic endeavors. Paradoxically, the photographs of uttermost reflexive significance have often attained this only by accident. Everyone knows Robert Capa's famous series of the landing in Normandy. The film was ruined in the London studios. In the end, eight negatives survived the accident, which only serves to intensify one of their fundamental aspects: photos are problematic imprints. The result of this mishap activates a staggering semiotic and indiciological complex concerning the nature of present or absent

appearance, manifestation, and events. But the fascination, so well-suited to the nature of photography, arises not from premeditated intentions but from an exterior accident.

The self-portrait is a good test for the highly irregular reflexive possibilities of signs and indices. The classical painter, working with semiotic traits, excels in this genre and confirms his *ÊMe'*, his microcosm. Here, the photographer, trapper of contingently indexed indicial imprints, fails. *ÊMe'* is a matter of the mirror, as Narcissus believed. The photograph is not a mirror. In a photograph, the "I" is captured from the back and in delayed-action (Denis Roche), in its black shadow (Tress), as an anticipated corpse (Schwarzkogler), as a reflection among reflections (Friedlander). However, in the latter case the *ÊI'* discovers its positive status: to be a state of the universe among other states.



Henri Van Lier