

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 1 - THE TEXTURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Chapter 4 - The non-scene: on the obscene in stimuli-signs and figures

Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic

SUSAN SONTAG, *On Photography*, 1973.

Before anything, the photograph unsettles the *scene*. Firstly, the scene is a specific and marked place that is at a good distance from our eye and body, neither too near nor too far so that we can embrace with our sight what is taking place there. Next, it are the objects, characters and actions that will manifest themselves in this place with the desired clarity. The scene cannot be found in every civilization, it is lacking in that of Africa for instance. However, the scene was so forcefully introduced over here by the Greeks, and then penetrated the entire western history so intensely that it attained a fortunate immortality within a beatific vision, so that, in the eyes of many, photography is seen as undoubtedly invented to stage things and present dramatic or touching scenes even better than in painting.

However, owing to its characteristics as luminous imprint, a figurative photograph offers a kind of *non-scene*. Its depth (superficiality) of field entails that a large part of the evoked spectacle is visibly too close or faraway to be embraced, and that, in addition, it is spatialized in comparison with an abstract plane (the plane of highest definition) rather than occupying a veritable place. Similarly, the frame-limit and frame-index create intervening borders without organic relation to the ensemble or at least to part of the structure of the objects in view. The isomorphism of objectives contributes to the flattening and therefore also the canceling of place. Ostensibly, synchrony crushes duration. The pulsation of the negative of the negative upsets the expected stability of the scene, while digitality presents every trait as present and absent, and while the blend of surcharge and subcharge of information overturns the habitual connections to the surroundings. As soon as we try to actually embrace them as scenes, even the most glorious of photographs - Weston's cypress roots for instance - provoke a feeling of absurdity that gave rise to Sartre's off-scene view of the roots of the *Jardin des Plantes* in his

Nausea. It is not even very shocking to maintain that every photo contains something obscene through an etymology that, unfortunately, is quite forced, since *ob-scaenus* undoubtedly does not derive from *ob-scaena* (beside the stage), but from *ob-scaevus*, (awkward, of a false prophet).

Simultaneously however, and this still in keeping with the same characteristics of the luminous imprint, the advertising, pornographic, industrial or family photograph presents its objects of spectacle with such an extreme blatancy that we are compelled to introduce the neologism *stimuli-signs*. The *stimuli-signals* of the animal world are well-known. These are signals which, affecting the brain of the receiving organism, set off complex behaviors of nurture, nidification, escape, coupling and so on. These are triggers (*releasers*). Thanks to their superficiality of field, framing, isomorphism, synchrony, pulsation, surcharge and subcharge, certain imperiously indexed photographs succeed in presenting a stature, gesture, organ or action in such a captivating and intense fashion that the spectator is literally triggered. In this case, one is thus also tempted to speak of stimuli-signals. However, since this effect is only acquired through very forceful indexation, and since indexes belong to the conventional, intentional and more or less systematic field of signs, we will speak of *stimuli-signs*. This would constitute the scene. And yet, in a single blow, that which is presented to us is so immediate, so non-mediated, that within the shock itself there is a loss of mastery, and therefore also a contrary non-scene.

Finally, photo novels might lead us to wonder whether or not the photograph forcefully revives the notion of the *figure*, in the sense of the word prevalent in the 17th century. In this vein, a face is neither an object, nor an action, nor a form. It is a particular way of occupying space, of being alone or with others, of being immobile but being so in a significant way: "to figure" means *to make an appearance*, to appear; and "to figure in" means *to come upon the scene*, according to the OED. The Bible is populated with figures, and Pascal employs in this respect the term "figuratives." The Jewish filmmaker Chantal Akerman created a cinema of figures through a frontal and immobile camera. The same holds for the photo novel, as its characters are not individualities; they do not perform true actions or even movements. They are inexpressive and dead. However, they do occupy space, and this enables signification: standing in a hallway, turned towards an angle of a room, positioned between two animals, waiting in front of a door, sitting down with a distant look, towering over someone else's head, standing on a stage: a true multitude of figures. The textural and structural qualities, which, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, allow the photograph to carry stimuli-signs, ensure that the photograph will also contain the immobility of figures. In the photograph, these forces of death become sacrosanct. Such is the case with the photo novel, certain publicity photographs, in sequential photography with artistic intention as in the work of Duane Michals, and also in more than one family portrait.

We therefore return to what had surprised us at the beginning of the game, namely that the photograph harbors two contrary effects, which complicates all discourse on the subject. In some respects, the photograph is what is most vague and, in others, what is most clear. However, in both cases the photograph is a non-scene, because sometimes it remains within the obviousness of the scene, while at other times it blinds the latter, through an inverse abstraction.



*Weston: Cypress
in Point Lobos,
1929*

Henri Van Lier