

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

# PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

## Part 1 - THE TEXTURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

### Chapter 5 - Reproduction and transmutability: process and relay

*Rather than reproduce the real, photography recycles it - this is one of the key processes of modern societies. In the form of these images, events and things assume new functions and are assigned new significations, thus exceeding habitual distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, right and wrong, useful and useless, good and bad taste.*

SUSAN SONTAG, *On Photography*, 1976.

With regard to sonatas, statues, paintings and texts, one cannot cut or re-cut, brighten or darken, analogize or digitize with impunity. By contrast, the photograph invites and lends itself to all these metamorphoses.

This is due to the photograph's unmistakably digital character, so that, after passing from the state of positive to that of a newspaper print, there is no change of character. This does not hold for paintings, as the latter are analogical from the outset and for which a digitalization of form entails a modification of regime. From its first imprint, the photograph is an impression. Thus, the reframing of a photograph is not inevitably more illegitimate than its framing, regardless of whether it concerns either the frame-limit or frame-index, as both are largely aleatory compared with the painter's picture frame. The photo's subcharge and surcharge of information are such that ablations and additions are often innocent. A non-scene couples easily with another non-scene, which is certainly not the case of a scene in relation to another scene. In addition, infinite indices - in overlap and perpetual emergence from a background in which they submerge - in their turn do not hesitate much to lose or incorporate a number of new companions. On the other hand, might not an object that holds so many successive and discontinuous states (latent images, negatives, positive contact imprints, enlarged positives, printed versions, and miscellaneous layouts) be bifurcated in each of its stages? Put bluntly, one cannot even state that a photograph changes, since it is largely undesignatable. Apart perhaps from its latent image (but who can access it regularly?), is the photograph's identity to be situated on the level of its negatives or its prints? According to Stieglitz, what counts most in photography is the printed page. But which one? The print made by the photographer? Many

of them do not make their prints themselves. And, even if they did, why restrict it to photographers? While the title of a painting is linked to the here and now of that painting, the title of a photograph only refers to a *process*, which can only materialize across multiple states, and this indefinitely so.

So we return to the idea of triggering, to the click and the release. The click of the guillotine that is the shutter. The click signaling the emergence of the latent image that turns into a negative. The click of the *blowup* by means of enlargers. The click of the scissor's cuts framing and reframing. The click of clashing layouts in the make-up of a magazine. The click of instant multiplication in every turn of the rotary press. The click of the eye while leafing through a magazine. The click between the eye and brain when, across memory and perceptual mechanisms, scraps of imprints are interjected amongst other patches of imprints that are equally unclassifiable, thus giving rise to a perpetual recycling. This is thus the most absolute of *disseminations*.

As such, the photograph clarifies certain aspects of information theory. To begin with, it reminds us that one must be careful when speaking of the *degradation* of information through reproduction. Of course, after repeated copying, the number of black-and-white bits contained in a first photographic print cannot but diminish. But information theory also holds that there can only be information in comparison with receptive and selective systems that decide whether things have information value. However, due to the photographic texture and structure, the loss of bits often results in the appearance of overlaps or new indices for the code of the reader. Thus one has to keep in mind that such an exorbitant multiplication of the Same - no matter how reduced - augments the chances of engendering prolific coincidences with other indicial imprints from all parts of the world.

These repetitive triggers and bifurcations, these entanglements and disentanglements, as well as the reciprocal implications of *reproduction* and *transmutability* resemble the fundamental workings of Life. There as well, whether through the recombination of DNA or cerebral memories, processes are repeated and are simultaneously and continuously transmuted billions of times. Over the past thirty years or so, it has become increasingly evident that the one cannot do without the other, which in this case means that recordable transmutations cannot occur without vast amounts of repetition. This entails a simultaneous upstream and downstream movement from the flow of data; the former to allow the unexpected to occur, while the latter ensures that the unexpected is not immediately washed out. As soon as the photograph appeared, its transmutability was felt and implemented in popular media. The *pell-mell* dissolved and merged in every direction into the photograph. While scanning a magazine (the warehouse where one can find everything), photographs slip and grow into one another, page after page.

**Henri Van Lier**