

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 1 - THE TEXTURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Chapter 6 - Reality and the Real, the Cosmos-mundus and the Universe, the Possible and the Black box

A different nature speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye; most different in that in the place of a space penetrated by a person with consciousness is formed a space penetrated by the unconscious. Photographic aids: time-lapse, enlargements, unlock this for him. He discovers the optical-unconscious first of all through it, just as the drive-unconscious is discovered through psychoanalysis.

WALTER BENJAMIN, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, 1931.

After having scrutinized all of its characteristics, it might be said that photography is best understood in light of the opposition often made today between the real and reality. *Reality* designates the real in so far as it is already seized and organized in sign systems, thus assuming the form of intentionally, conventionally and systematically defined signs accordingly distributed in objects and actions, which are the designates that denominate or represent the signs in question. By contrast, the *real* is that which escapes this conception of reality. It is all that is before, after and underneath reality, it is all that is not yet domesticated by our technical, scientific, and social relations, and which Sartre, for instance, dubbed the *quasi-relations of the in-itself*.

*Robert Capa**Claude Nori*

Indices hover between the real and reality. They are the chaotic, unnamable and unrepresentable quasi-relations - mostly suddenly - constituting relations: schemas, words, drawings, or digits. From there, they enter into reality, but often only hypothetically, partially and fragily, in overlap with other possible relations, and consumed by other quasi-relations. In their emergence, indices are not only aided by the internal decision of their more or less analogical or nameable texture and structure, but also by the index which, by designating indices, increases the latter's likelihood to be viewed in a particular context, and thus to be seen as either this or that. Therefore, to start with, *indices belong to the real*, and only *appertain to reality in the final stage*, which is furthermore rarely decisive. Moreover, photographic imprints are indices of indices with respect to possible spectacles. They are (very direct) indices of the imbuing photons, and, through their multiple abstractive mediation, they are (very indirect) indices of external objects and actions. As such, a photograph is not merely a blend of reality and the real. It is a phenomenon where what is represented of *reality* comes to us across the frame of the *real*. Moreover, this is a double frame involving the chemistry of the film and the physicality of the lens. However, the term *across* is still inexact. One has to use the term *within*, since the photograph is infinitely slender and lacks a before or after, back or front. In a figurative sense, photographs are therefore *fragments of reality within the (double) frame of the real*.

It is true that, in the case of advertising, pornographic, industrial, and family photographs, extremely imperious indexes and remarkable analogies may ensure that we forget this frame and can only perceive stimuli-signs. However, even in this case, the *quasi-relations of the real* do not border on the *relations of reality*; the former can be seen as the mould in which these relations are in continuous and precarious germination. This confirms the priority of perceptual, motive, semiotic, and indicial field effects. Indeed, why is it that between the quasi-relations of this matrix and the created fleeting relations there is no solidification at any time, as their place of reciprocal conversions, field effects, curvatures and fluctuations? In a figurative sense, a photograph is *reality emerging from the real*. Conversely, it is *reality gnawed at by the real*.

One can rephrase this by introducing a different set of categories. The Greeks opposed Chaos - non-information and noise - to Cosmos - (cosmetic) order, which was translated almost literally in Latin as Mundus, the cleanly (the non-filthy). In this frame, Chaos pertains to the real, while the Cosmos-Mundus belongs to the realm of reality, of which man could indeed be the ruler and the semiotic epitome, the Microcosm. According to Cicero, Latin had the virtue of introducing a more comprehensive notion, namely that of Universe, the turn-towards-one, capable of embracing Cosmos and Chaos, order and disorder, information and noise, negentropy and entropy, improbability and probability, refinement and obscenity, scene and non-scene. One can now clearly see the place of photography. Through its indexes and certain more or less indexed indices, the photograph offers fragments of the Cosmos-Mundus. However, the chemistry of its latent image and the abstractive configuration of its lenses belong to the Universe World of which they are states. The tips of the Cosmos-Mundus therefore appear as states of the Universe.

There is a third way of formulating this. In ancient times, what mattered most was the *event*, to the extent that, since the times of the pharaohs and Romans, many lived for their tomb or posthumous glory, that is to say, for the final consecration of the event that they had been. The *possible*, uncertain event was distrusted. For the most part, the photograph belongs to the latter. The contingency of the photographic shot and its development. The eventuality of indicial imprints, and the possibility of indexed indices. The contingency of re-cuts and ulterior layouts. An event implies a certain emphasis, or else value judgment, and willy-nilly seems to refer to some banality. The possible, as situated between imprint and the indicial, between indices and indexes, between reality and the real, between Cosmos and Mundus, is more readily accessible, and, as is the case with a process, is situated in a *course* (things have to run their course, as Beckett would put it) that does not necessarily have an end or goal. Moreover, the latter are even discouraged. Reality is comprised of events and objects while the real is characterized by process and relay.

Therefore, the photograph is in every sense a matter of *black*. What is most important for photography - as with interstellar space - is the night. In film rolls and blank paper, the camera, darkrooms and printing laboratories, it is the night, the darkness and non-light out of which luminous eventualities manifest themselves punctually and incidentally, emerging out of the dark only to return to it. The photographic photon traverses the night of the device only to take hold again of shadows, in the form of negatives and latent images. And this darkness is contained in a room with its secret and genital workings. Here, one solely speaks of spools, paper impregnators, baths, and developing. The photograph is more uterine than phallic. The

architect, the dancer, the painter, the sculptor, the artisan, and the writer all work in a lighted room; even their nights are filled with light. By contrast, the photographer inhabits the *camera obscura*, and he ultimately and always draws in the future viewers with him.

The photograph is even the most vivacious experience of what physicists call the *black box*, where one can clearly perceive the entrance (*input*) and the exit (*output*), without ever knowing quite well what takes place between the two. The function of reality and the cosmos is to dissimulate black boxes, to make us believe that everything can be reduced to signs, referents, objects and events, and therefore to links that clarify and reveal causality. The apprehension of the real and the universe is to dare to confront black boxes everywhere they might be, which is to say, almost everywhere when keeping in mind that there are fewer clear-cut cases of causality than what Heisenberg called *series of probabilities*. These series of probabilities are statistically calculable and predictable; however, this does not entail that they are uninterruptedly describable. No matter where it is taken, a photograph renders place and duration, which are peculiar to reality, in the form of space-time, non-duration and non-space, which are characteristic of the real. Invented and used by earthlings, the photograph is the stuff of extraterrestrials.



*Bioautobiografía de
Jorge Luis Borges,
Siglo XXI, Buenos
Aires, 1970.*

Henri Van Lier