

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

7. WESTON (U.S.A., 1886-1958) DOROTHEA LANGE (U.S.A., 1895-1965)

The anatomy of the world and of bodies

The 1922 meeting between Stieglitz and Weston, back from Mexico, marks a turning point. The protagonists show each other photographs, amongst which those they have just taken of their companions, the former of Georgia O’Keeffe (PHPH, p. 133) and the latter of Tina Modotti (FS, 206).

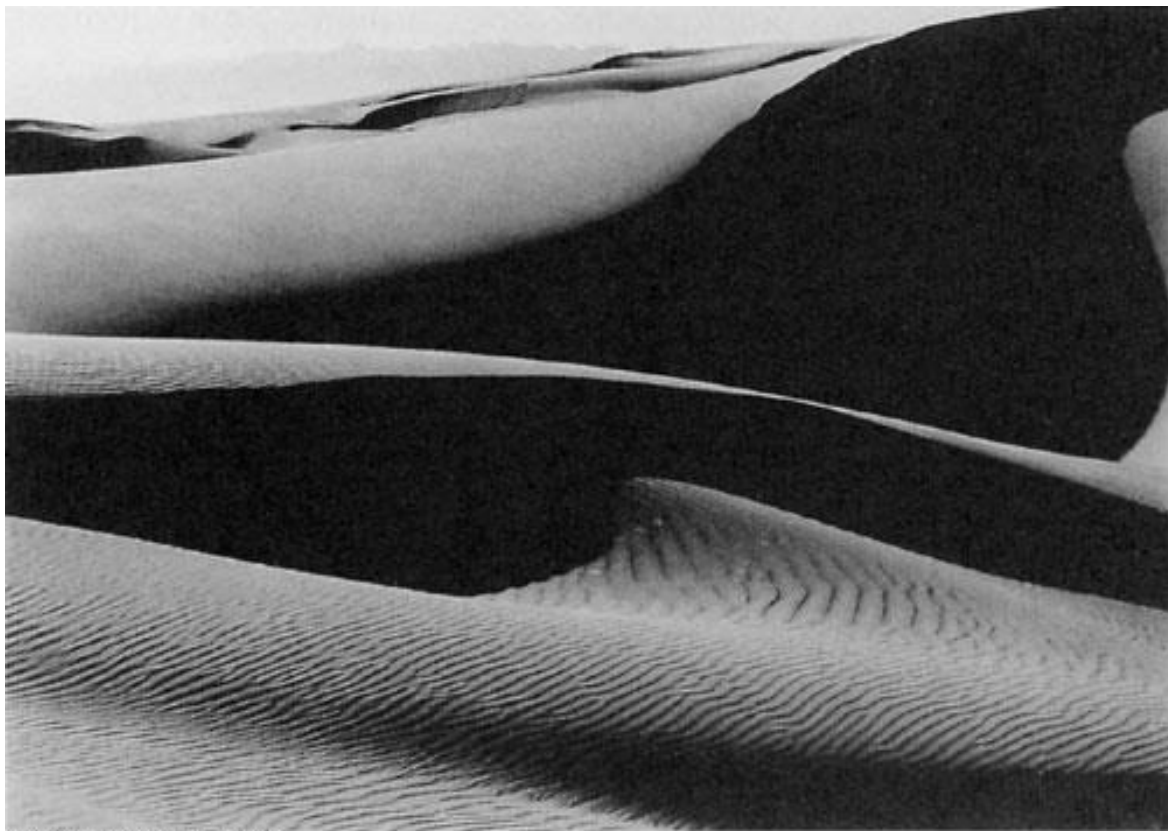
All is agreed. Pictorialism and the work of « Camera Work » from 1903 to 1917, which insisted on a certain blur – hence on the incontrollable subjectivity, then on a sort of formalism – has worn out its possibilities. The word ‘straight photography’, which appeared in 1900 to fill the absence of manipulation in the print or the negative, joined in 1913 by the ‘sharp focus’ before to comprehend the integrity of the negative in 1930, will tie itself, in the 1920’s, to the ideal of a rather ‘straight’ photonic recording, allowing the ‘pencil of nature’ to establish itself in exact resonance (in a physical and spiritual consonance) with Nature’s radical movements and engenderment. Not rendering the nature of something but on the occasion of something, nature as it stands in its tireless fecundity.

7A. The competition of fluxes: Weston

While Strand practices the « straight » approach by going towards extremely elaborated phenomenon: human beings and their technical objects, - its irradiating shadows will not only reveal chairs and palisades, but cinema cameras (NV, 13) and trains dating to the era before automobiles (AF, 187), - Weston goes to the core of fundamental ‘technicity’, that of the geology of the anatomy. Hence, Spinoza’s ‘naturing’ rather than ‘natured’ nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1803-1882) transcendentalism, Walt Whitman’s (1819-1893) symbolism, the semiotic intuitionism of the world as Peirce’s (1839-1914) divine indices (*indicia*) and indices (*indices*), remains, along with all that fed the American pictorialism. Yet, it is cleansed, more

verifiable as it is at least partially possible to handle according to isolable and modifiable factors. In other words, according to the experimental method.

Moving to this new period in the twenties, Weston does not shift direction. Like Stieglitz, Steichen, or Strand, when we think that he changes, he radicalizes a constant photographic subject. Wonderment was great before the capacity of photonic imprints to record fluxes. This virtuality had already made an appearance in the floating pleats of Elisabeth Eastlake's dress as photographed by Hill and Adamson, then in the shiny ridges of Isidore Taylor's clothing in Nadar's photograph, in Atget's small erosions, in Stieglitz's luminous rolls, in Marlène Dietrich's ragtime on Steichen's non-scene. Yet, this time, the photonically recorded and enhanced fluxes are distributed in layers, by reciprocal compressions and competitions like in any other mineral, vegetal, or animal formation.



Weston, AP, 221 ; NV, 117

Weston's life was spent photographically pursuing these cosmologic competitions and compressions under the most diverse forms: in the sand dunes under the effect of the wind (AP*, 221; NV, 117); in the Point Lobos cypress roots (PHPH, 37); in the bulbs of a pepper (AP, 220); in the tender flesh of his young son's torso (AP, 217; LP, 84); in a female body combining its folds with the sand (PN 236, 237); in the sharp plans of an attic ceiling (AP, 213); in the crow's foot around the eyes of a marksman, the *Sharpshooter* (BN, 246); and in the corners of *Tina Modotti's* mouth and eyelids (**AP, 216).

In any event, we shall never mix up the competitive and compressive taperings that he hunted down with a banal purity of lines. Nor with the 'memorable fancies' of nature that Minor White, following Weston's trail - would catch on his trail a generation later. Even in his latest shoots in Point Lobos (AP, 222, 223), where his work closely resembles White's, Weston remains a contemporary of *On Growth and Form* by anatomist D'Arcy Thompson. The editions of the latter - which were repeated since 1917 - served as a prelude to René Thom's Theory of Elementary Catastrophe, meaning the differential topology of the fold, the pleat, the swallow tail, the butterfly wing, the hyperbolic (crest), elliptic (needle), parabolic (spurt) curvatures.

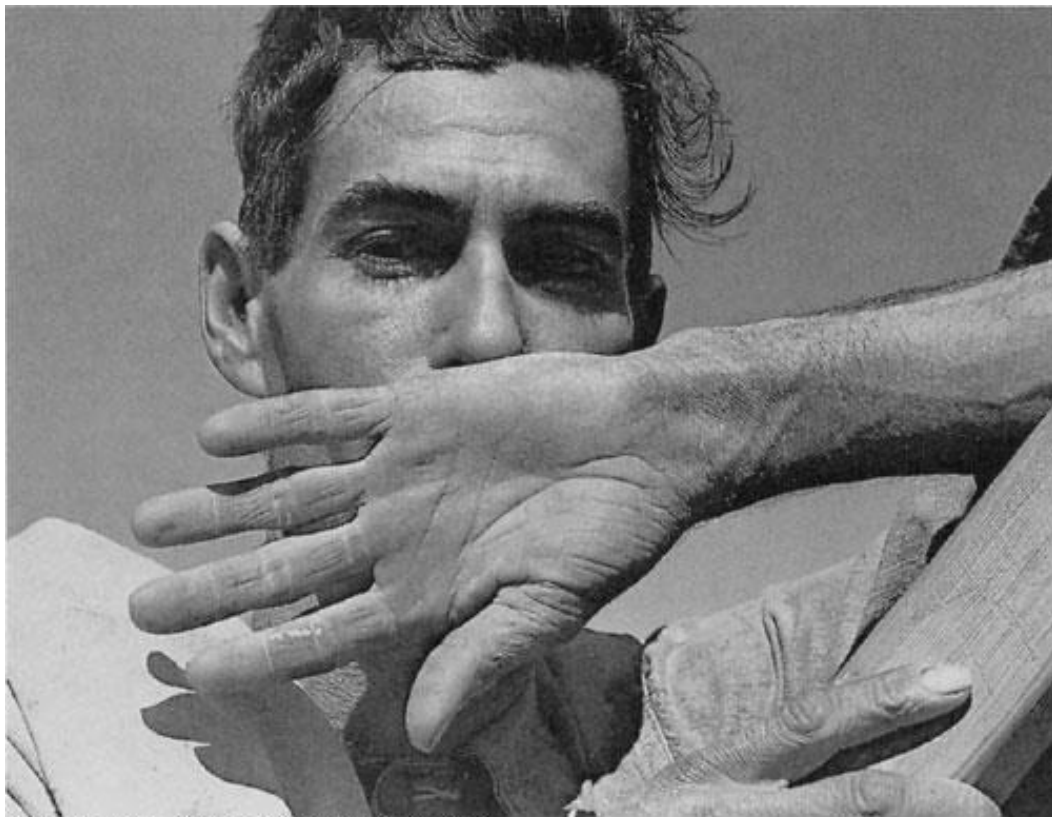


Weston, *Tina Modotti*, AP, 216

7B. The bony angularity: Dorothea Lange

From Weston we come closer to Dorothea Lange, who was nine years younger than he was. He was the one to suggest her exhibition at Van Dyke. Was the reason an open-mindedness of a timeless naturalist for a colleague who would, in the 1930's, condemn the misery of the great depression and manage to provoke concrete actions to help them in the tradition of Riis and Hine? Perhaps. Yet, the reason probably lies in the fraternity of two consanguine – yet non-identical - photographic subjects.

Indeed, the poster of the *Migrant Mother's* bust holding her three children tight around her (BN, 165) would probably not have gone around the world if Dorothea Lange's photographic brain had not captured – everywhere and before – a central bulge she shares with others, and also an acute angle, here of the forearm and the arm, the collar, the heads around her, a sort of clavicular bony articulation right to the folds in a shirt (LP, 131) which is not without reminding Weston. Here again we are close to the *On Growth and Form* problematic. In 1940's *Migratory Cotton Picker* (PN, ***217) – one of the most banal of human circumstances – an interposed raised arm gives us to see one of the greatest cosmologic structures, the fin, the mammalian paw, the human arm reaching the flat hand, filled with geometry and technique. Naturalism still crosses the path of magnification in the stride of American transcendentalism.



Dorothea Lange, *Migratory Cotton Picker*, PN, 217

For those who would encounter difficulties in abstracting this structure to which the texture is subordinated, it was clearly declared in the isolated hand of 1958 *The Indonesian Dancer* figuring on the back cover of the MOMA 1996 Dorothea Lange retrospective catalogue, as a key. For the RATE of angularity shown by the thumb, the palm and the wrist, is found on every page as a photographic subject, between the straight lines of the human legs (DL, 101), animal legs (DL, 81), tree branches (DL, 69), but also in the curves of a basket (DL, 101), of a hat (DL, 98), a porch (DL, 99), and a furrow (DL, 24).

It is also blatantly obvious that Weston and Lange are the remarkable manifestations of a much vaster - the consonance of *On Growth and Form* with comics since McCay is also blatant - historical moment, confirmed by Tina Modotti's work. Indeed, Weston's companion developed a consonant universe as a theoretician and photographer (PN, 324; NV, 114).

American transcendentalism gave the perceptive field effects a peculiar intensity. In this case, they not only work on visual centres, but also on the schemes of mathematical and physician integration of our brains. They trigger the perception of an engendering, not just any swaying. In the work of Lange and Weston, everything is cosmology, even the psychological and sociologic, when it is there (DL, 72, 74, 75).

Henri Van Lier

A photographic history of photography

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List of abbreviations of common references :

PN: *Photography until Now, Museum of Modern Art.*

AP: *The Art of Photography, Yale University Press.*

BN: *Beaumont Newhall, Photography: Essays and Images, Museum of Modern Art.*

LP: *Szarkowski, Looking at Photographs, Museum of Modern Art.*

NV: *The New Vision, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Abrams.*

FS: *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow, Art Institute of Chicago.*

PHPH: *Philosophy of Photography.*

The acronyms (), (**), (***) refer to the first, second, and third illustration of the chapters, respectively. Thus, the reference (***) AP, 417) must be interpreted as: "This refers to the third illustration of the chapter, and you will find a better reproduction, or a different one, with the necessary technical specifications, in The Art of Photography listed under number 417".*