

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

10. BRASSAI (Hungary - France, 1899 - 1984)

The chiasms of the place

We enter here in the thirties, a decade anticipated by Dorothea Lange, where we are going to encounter more familiar photographic subjects, closer to everyday life, less systematic and tense than Man Ray's, Kertész', Weston's, and even Sander's or Paul Strand's. This was probably the result of the great depression. In the same while, the seism of classic representation, which started around 1900, no longer bore its essential fruits with Heisenberg's Relations of incertitude in 1927. In everyday life, Bauhaus made place for Raymond Loewy's Styling, meaning that instead of spreading out their organs, technical objects (typewriters or automobiles) dissimulated a great part of their information – that had probably become plethoric – under a hood. Brassaï introduces this innovative proximity and daily life particularly well, and this simplified, coachbuilding vision that will bloom in halftone engraving.

His photographic subject was the capturing of the place. The place is a portion of the space where elements refer to one another in the shot, but also in the depth. From back to front, and from front to back; and in exchanged glances. In a word, in intro-reverberation. After all, photography is not spontaneously talented in this regard, due to the fact that its Cyclops eye opens to its watcher – who has also become cyclopean – a depth without to's and fro's from the background. Yet, a range of conditions can remediate to that state.

Hence, what first strikes in Brassaï's work, and what we constantly find throughout his career, is that his outlook infallibly notices balls (PP, 48). Very often, it is the Euclidian ball, i.e. a virtually perfect ball such as with this photograph of children in the *Parc Montsouris* in 1936 (PP, 4), where almost-spherical balloons are agglutinated into an almost spherical ball besides a child with a spherical head who himself holds a balloon. Similarly, there are at least five regular-seize balls – among which the lamp – in 1935 *Tois Femmes masquées* (*PN, 221). However, in Brassaï's work, we must generalize this preference right to the topological ball, which can look like a cube or a roll: an isolated vertical roll (PP, 1, 8), standing rolls shrinking into the depth (PP, 10), horizontal rolls spreading out frontally, stackable rolls (PP, 9), etc. The balls-rolls can then be as much a posting pavilion (PP, 8) as a 'Bijou' at the Bar de la Lune (PP, 16), or still, *Claudiel et sa femme* in 1949 (PP, 60)



Brassaï, *Trois femmes masquées*, PN, 221

The ball invades space like every other volume – and in the same while, concludes in itself – is perceptively a salient that has enough vividness to start triggering the intro-reverberation of the place. We could even be led to believe that someone who would notice it needed to be usually gifted for massive, direct, frank, objectal, on the level, salient. With things, with people. From the whore to the cult minister (PP, 50) and nuns (PP, 47). From Sartre (PP, 20) and Henry Miller (PP, 62) to Matisse (PP, 57) and Claudel. The Creator having done things well, even Brassai's eyes were incredibly globular (PHPH, 130). This ensured an immediate contact with everyone and his longevity as a photographer. There are no concealed captures here.

However, when general histories of photography want to represent Brassai, they inevitably choose photographs taken between 1931 and 1935, as though something extraordinary had happened in that era. Indeed, we see that at that moment our ubiquitous photographer, not content with obtaining the intro-reverberation of the place through the capturing of balls, situates the latter in an atmosphere that is itself self-reverberating through combinatory and permutational means. Was it the Hungarian influence of Kertész, whom he had rubbed shoulders with and who had encouraged him?

Firstly, because during these years more so than usually, Brassaï displays great attention to the chiasm, meaning the AB/BA structure, gently declared in 1932's *Un costume pour deux* (AP, 286), where a character has the jacket, the other the trousers according to the mechanism: clothing/nudity//nudity/clothing. The *Danseuses*, published in 'Vogue' magazine (PHPH, 53) in 1935 are placed in the shape of the St Andrew's cross. Like the little boy and little girl flirting in 1939 (PP, 43). Among the graffiti that Brassaï will photograph throughout his life, many are chiasms (**PP, 29).



Brassaï, Graffiti, PP, 29

The mirrors, where faraway B and nearby A are reflected in nearby A' and faraway B' obviously multiply the embraced dispositions. The architects of the era used them in places of passage, hotels, bars, bordellos, to give an illusion of the intro-reverberation of a real place. 1932's *At Suzy's* (**AP, 287) proposes two body-rolls in a large mirror that is sufficiently shot from the side to favour the conclusion rather than the abyss, whilst the *Rue de Lappe*, dated the same year (AP, 284) shows a chiasm through the two mirrors at a right angle that form a corner of the bar.



Brassaï, *At Suzy's*, AP, n°287

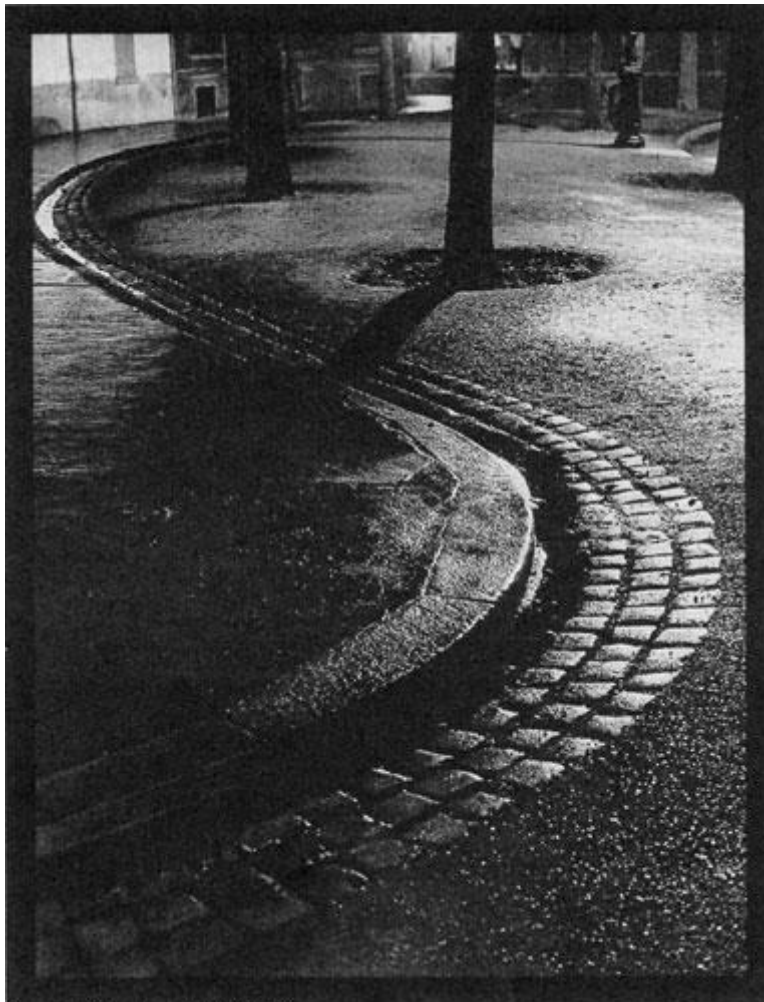
Finally, still between 1931 and 1935, Brassai seeks as much as possible the overlapping in-depth (PP, 36), another auto-reverberation. In our *Trois femmes masquées*, dated 1935 (*PN, 221), the photographer – hence the future watcher of the photograph (let us call them C) – grasp, along with the actors of the scene (let us call them A), the spectators of the front stage (let us call them B). Therefore C, above B, looks at A, that in turn looks at B while looking at C above B. Simultaneously, C is mentally situated between A and B, even between B and A, and is even looked at by B while it is looked at by A. Yet, A is masked, which means that it is twice a watcher and twice watched, and the interactions double. Note that we neglect the fact that B is masked for C, and that therefore... We must compare this device with Diane Arbus', which does not require intermediary spectators (PN, 260) to measure the difference of topologies, cybernetics, logics, and hence existential parties, and in our case photographic subjects between one and the other.



Brassaï, *Une prostituée jouant au billard russe*, AP, n°282

Therefore, *Une prostituée jouant au billard russe*, dated 1932, is almost a declaration of principle (****AP, 282). The balls, the queue and the hole along the frame evoke the Ancelot quatrain noted by Hugo: « J'ai joué, je ne sais plus où,/ Sur un billard d'étrange sorte./ Les billes restent à la porte/ Et la queue entre dans le trou». The prostitute stands off from a cleverly oval mirror. She leans on her hands over the lying body of the billiard, which is continued by her skirt, confounding the two in the same function and demonstration. The solid spheres and curves dominate. However, the sense is more general. Brassai's photography as such is Parisian prostitution. The billiard where the inverted returns are multiplied as well as the cushions, canons, the chiasms of the glances and the mirrors, the reflections and echoes of every type, to trigger the place, or, more precisely, its simulacra.

We need to take one last step. In 1933, still in those fatidic years, Brassai publishes *Paris de Nuit*. These 64 photographs are printed in photogravure (intaglio printing) and reprinted by Flammarion (FLAM), using the same process. Twenty contain allusive human beings. Twenty others contain recognizable places. Otherwise, there is only a blend of obscurity and glow. No longer places, but the place: pure intro-reverberation virtually devoid of beacons, where everything is total presence or total absence (Lavelle's *La Présence totale* is dated 1934). In a word, not nights, according to the counter-sense of Paul Morand's accompanying text, but night. Night as the ball of balls. As the body of obscurity. Non-isolated photographs, each being only an obscure shot in the obscurity of its frame, among the obscurity of the page, in continuity with the obscurity of the other pages. These photos were rarely reproduced precisely because they are not isolable. *Paris de nuit* is not photographs, but a photography book. Probably the only one.



Brassaï, *Paris de nuit*, FLAM, 14

photos © Gilberte Brassai

The commentator will be tempted to add that in that night too there are particular balls, such as the bedside of Notre-Dame (FLAM, 7) and explicit rolls, such as a printing workshop (FLAM, 41). In particular, he will not resist the temptation of noting the cobbles, the great, fat cobbles of the Paris of these days, these dense balls grouped in dense balls, and sometimes in 'S' shaped chiasms, whose bellies are Brassaï on their own (***** , FLAM 14). But we shall especially ask the commentator not to trouble the silence too much.

And we will leave in the Henry Miller's ecstasy: 'Brassaï has the rare gift which so many artists despise — normal vision (...) For Brassaï is an eye, (...) the still, ail-inclusive eye of the Buddha which never closes. The insatiable eye. »

Henri Van Lier

A photographic history of photography

in Les Cahiers de la Photographie, 1992

List of abbreviations of common references :

PN: Photography until Now, Museum of Modern Art.

AP: The Art of Photography, Yale University Press.

PP: Photo Poche, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris.

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".*