

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

11. ANSEL ADAMS (U.S.A., 1902-1984)

The serialisation of light

Despite their kinship, there is a wide difference between Stieglitz and Weston on the one hand, and Ansel Adams on the other. And once again we reach the border between before and after 1930, which we encountered with Brassai. Adams has something natural, familiar and close to current perception, where his predecessors – contemporaries of the great perceptive mutations of the previous three decades – had always sustained something extreme, tense, specialized. Like Brassai, Ansel Adams privileges the place as an intro-reverberation of space. With the difference that his place does not consist of Parisian brothels or the lights of Paris at night, it is nature in its most embracing manifestations: Yosemite National Park and the mountain chain surrounding it, the Californian Sierra Nevada, The Range of Light.

Yosemite Valley is undoubtedly, on our planet, the place where the serialization of light is the widest and the most subtle. Hence, the place where we can best test the visual perception of a primate adapted to electromagnetic waves comprised between 400 and 700 nanometres, the most energetic for a Sun of 5800°K in surface, as ours. There, day and night have the Californian frankness, and the geology is such that the slopes, being more lit above than below, the light falls in high, wide, and detailed cascades, like a sort of Niagara of photons. China, of a different genius, presents the same light-falls, the same multiplicity, but not with this decision throughout the multiple. In *Yosemite and The Range of Light*, the title of the sumptuous book published by Thames and Hudson in 1979, 'Range' has its two English acceptations: the mountain range, which was Ansel Adam's theme or motive, and the light serial disposition, his photographic subject.

The latter demanded a calculation allowing, in the presence of a distribution of light, for opening the range to the maximum, or at least according to wish. This calculation was incarnated in the 'zone-system' that Ansel Adams developed at the end of the 1930's with Fred Archer, stimulated like him by relations between exposition and density of the films studied by Davenport: 'The Zone System correlates essential information, including effective film speed, subjects luminance, meter, lens, and shutter calibrations, and film processing, along with own concepts and recognition of image qualities in a subject'. In turn, the zone-system applied to such a wide motif as Yosemite National Park led to a new regime of the frame. Hill and

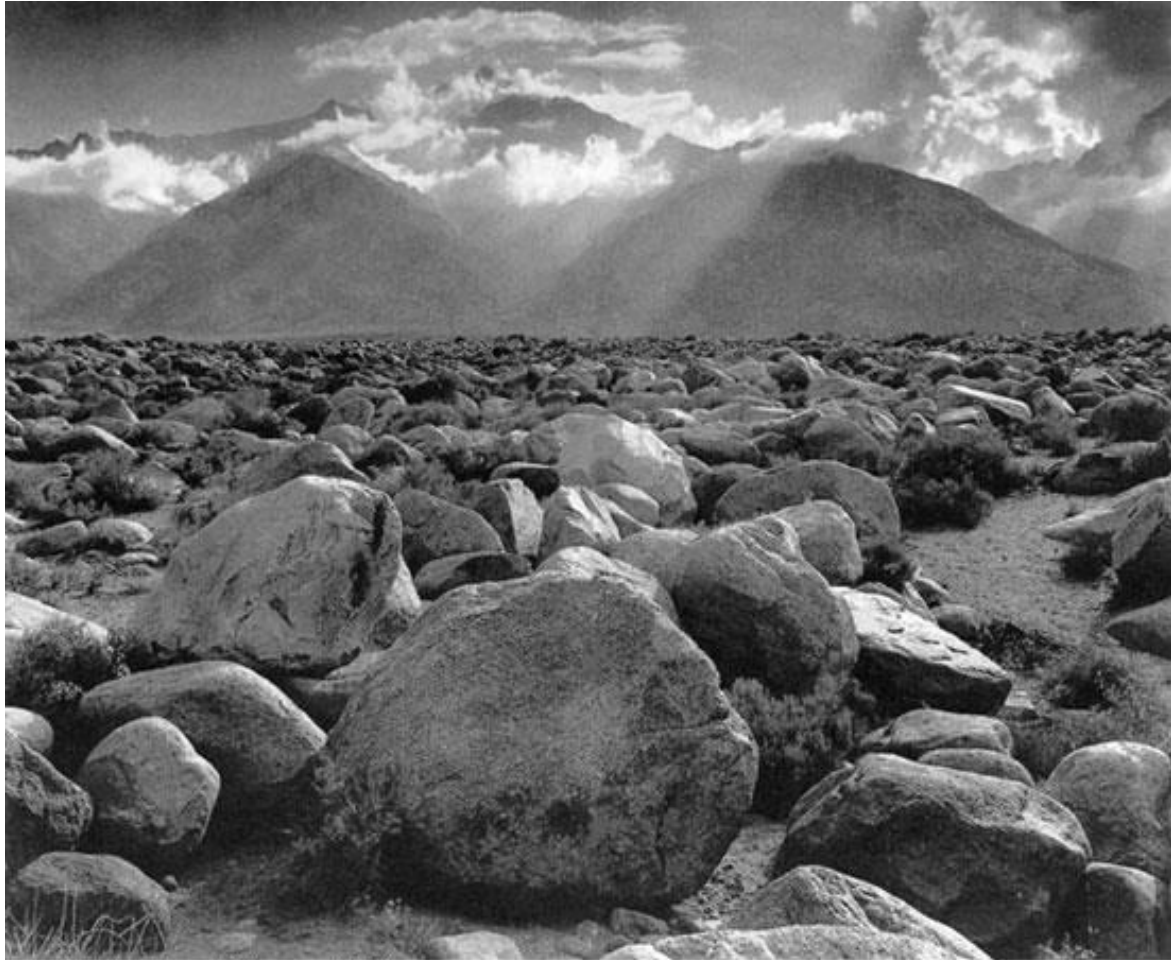
Adamson had already led us to distinguish from the *index*-frame – typical of traditional painting – the limit-frame, or *indicium*-frame, typical of photography. However, in Ansel Adams's work, the conjunction of the scope of show and its luminous differentiation did not only produce almost fatally a limit-frame, hence the opening of the edges, but also a sort of boiling of partial, mobile, erratic, overlapping shows derailing every reference, every axe of coordinates, that we can call internal multi-frame.

The photographic action takes place according to a protocol that has been commented at length by Adams: we circulate as a traveller in a landscape of beginnings of the world. We feel a blend of intense perception and emotion, not only *before* a show, but *among* multiple shows. These shows are not only visual, but are tactile and proprioceptive engendering. If one is a photographer, one 'pre-visualizes' what could be a photograph that, once printed, will give an 'equivalent' of this engendering-perception-emotion (we have seen the notion of equivalence introduced by Zayas about Picasso spread out throughout Stieglitz). We are going to attempt to make this photo, and this supposes the Zone System and this drives the internal multi-frame.

We will have understood it: 'it', in any case, is not Yosemite as a physical (inaccessible) reality, nor is it Yosemite as an object of direct visual and tactile perception (inaccessible) but a perception-emotion that has been produced in such a brain at such a second among a place in Yosemite, and that will later trigger, in the same brain or in others, an 'equivalent' through a photograph. Nothing of realism or romanticism, but a grasp-construction opening wide the Reality beyond, or rather, within Reality. Or rather, if one prefers, between a brain and a piece of impressed paper, a glimpse of naturing nature. No natural manifestations, but something of their principle according to the ever-present doctrine of American transcendentalism.

Then, the photographer wins every time. Because he is too happy, almost mystically happy, if he obtains 'that'. If it fails, he is happy too. Because he will have learned something new on one of the steps of the photographic process (film, aperture, exposure time, preservation method) that he will communicate to Land, the eminent physicist and inventor of the Polaroid, with whom he enjoys frequent contacts. In other words, the photographic reasoning is both perceptive-motor and almost scientific. This type of ambition also animated the group F/64 founded in San Francisco in 1932 by Weston. Ansel Adams joined the group two years later: '64' designates the smallest aperture of the lenses, blending the high definition and the depth of the depth of the field. If 1930's photography showed a proximity and a daily life previously unknown, we need to add scientific humility with the control of variables as corollary. The French-speaking reader will easily measure this attitude when he circulates in the two hundred pages of the *Le Zone-Système* published by 'Les Cahiers de la Photographie'.

To illustrate Ansel Adam's poetic geology, we chose *Mount Williamson* that takes up a double page in 'The Family of Man' (*FM, 69). This photograph demonstrates the strength of the system both in the distance and in the proximity. On the other hand, it has been chosen by Adams and Steichen – who designed the exhibition – and so enlightens both simultaneously. To measure just how we went to grasp-construction of WORLD 3 – hence by independent elements linked by their only functioning – we shall compare this shooting to Witkins' in 1866 in the 'Garden Paradise' at Yosemite, which had only recently been discovered, and that, isolated (AP, 1 13-120) or juxtaposed in 'mammoth plate' (AP, 112), still widely belonged to the unitarian and even formal grasp-construction of WORLD 2.



Ansel Adams, *Mount Williamson, FM*, 69

If extraterrestrials visiting our planet intended to take just one photograph back home, we could give them an Ansel Adams. To honour our planet, its light, its virtualities, scientific humility, but also the grasps that a terrestrial outlook (eye and brain) managed to elaborate, and also forbade himself from elaborating, about them. The last choice would trigger problems. In the work of Adams, what is most geological and cosmological? His landscapes. Or the portrait he made of Brassai in 1974 at Yosemite (PHPH, 130)? If we were certain that our visitors had an eye, we could give them the portrait, which virtually contains landscapes. But let's play it safe and hand them a landscape.

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A photographic history of photography

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List of abbreviations of common references:

AP: The Art of Photography, Yale University Press.

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".*