

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

16. UEDA (Japan, 1913), SUDA (Japan, 1940)

The interval

Thirties Japan – despite the extreme militarism of Hiro Hito’s reign and the war against China – opens up to all the American and European currents that we have just evoked. We come across trends referring to Stieglitz, Weston, Ansel Adams, Robert Capa – made known through *Life* magazine –, even Cartier-Bresson when Jimura captures a hat maker and his hats in a lively Tokyo street.

16A. The white interval: Ueda

However, at the same time, something completely novel occurs in the Tottori prefecture on the Japan Sea, near the latitude of Tokyo, a place where the changes of climate already fed the vision of Shiotani the pictorialist. There, a photographer called Ueda ceases to give a Japanese version of western space-time. He shows the ancestral Japanese space-time, which builds the world from the interval. Lartigue and Kertész had warned us that emptiness – and even the interval – was a particular virtuality of photography. Ueda confirms this, although his interval, the Japanese ‘ma’, is something completely different.

The etymology is instructive. In the western world, the interval (intervallum) is a gulf between two ramparts. It is a certain place and a certain length through which a first state-moment causally moves into another by the means of mediations, physical or dialectic causalities allowing understanding, to take together the successive or synchronic state-moments. At the opposite, in Japan, since 600 of our era, -therefore since the famous still-Korean statue of the Miroku, - and even from the prehistoric era, the so-called ‘ma’ interval is not taken in a causal system, it is not mediating. It is a true non-place-non-moment, elusive, non-measurable, through which what borders it (spatially, temporally) provokes a perceptive re-grasping, a re-freshness, a re-astonishment that are informally illustrated by martial arts when the fighter takes a position then another without an apprehensible passage between the two.

Hence, there is no progressive blossoming from a hearth here as we find in the western substance. There is no reciprocal conversion of poles like we find in the Chinese Tao, no tireless articulation from near to near like we find in India, but a non-linked succession of particles of space and particles of time, among which the Japanese arabesque – which is very different to Pisanello's or Ingres' – is the artistic realization. In the painted illustrations during the twelfth century of the *Genji monogatari* – this triggered a perspective that was neither Western (converging) nor Indian (diverging), where the parallelism – at times strict and at times slightly diverging or converging – of the vanishing points caused the watcher to be unable to situate himself in front, behind, or on the surface; in a sort of nowhere and everywhere, where every element of the show would completely strike him down. In the words of Walt Whitman, American photographers have repeatedly told and shown us that each drop of dew contains the world. This time, the drop of dew, through its presence, absence, through each of its statuses, re-creates a new world at each perceptive act. This is why the Genji observes so attentively the dew on a petal when he visits a woman or a minister, or when he leaves them.

We have chosen a 1952 photograph, *Sand Dunes* (*CI, I), to illustrate Ueda, because the system is particularly clear for westerners. The place is the beach at the north of Tottori, where Shiotani had already shot his classic *Swing* modulated by the tatami. However, Ueda's sand does not link the sea to the earth. It is so united that it creates a sort of non-place, of nowhere and everywhere, where three characters co-exist without progressive reciprocal causality, without any relation between them other than combinatory and permutational.



Ueda, *Sand Dunes*, CI, I

Let us mention a few of these combinations and permutations. A) Three-quarters back towards the right / three-quarter front towards the left / three-quarters back towards the left. B) Holding the tip of a point (a finger) / holding the end (of a balloon) that holds a point / holding the semi-opening (of an umbrella). C) Hair covered in white / bare black hair / rustled hair at a distance from an umbrella. C) Not holding anything at the end of the arm / holding a balloon by the end of the arm and above the arm a woman / a woman holding an umbrella by the end of her arm. D) And new permutational combinatory in the clothing and accessories.

The photograph we look at consists of series. It is itself part of a series, where it becomes an element of a wider permutation. This series – large in turn – is merely a series amongst others, until the series of series: the entire Universe. As to the watcher, the more he looks, the least he is in front, or behind, or on the surface. However, like in the illustrations of the *Genji monogatari*, in the interval itself. In the West, at the same era, Borges would have been the only one not to feel too much astonishment.

Ueda enjoys confiding that he would have liked to be a painter. However, he had to content himself with photography. The sort of emptiness and interval he practices, although ancestrally Japanese, could only be a photographic subject, not a pictorial subject.

16B. The black interval: Suda

Suda, thirty years younger than Ueda, found his own interval in the cancellation by the black. Assuredly not the mediating black conveyed in the West by the dense, thin shade, obscurity, the colour black. A non-mediating black suitable to the 'ma', for which it is hardened, sterilised, made artificial by the contrast of the flash. In this black – as in Ueda's white – the shapes isolate themselves in figures. However, this time the combinatory gives in to analogy. Not the substantialist Western analogy, not the Chinese analogy of the reciprocal conversion of two principles, nor the Indian analogy of infinitesimal articulation; but then, which?

Let us see the analogy proliferating in our *Three Little Girls* (** *Japanese Photography*, 128). A) They are flowers, and the heliotrope behind them is a flower. B) The heliotrope has a round heart and petals, their faces are round hearts, their hats are petals. C) Heliotropes have natural stems, they are natural stems, and the lit pole on the left hand side (our left) is a natural stem made artificial. C) They smile through energy, the heliotrope bends for lack of light. E) They are as sharp as the shiny, square pole; inextricably nature and culture, like it, and like everything in Japan, etc.



Suda, *Trois petites filles*, in *Japanese Photography*, 128

Yet it is not so much the contents – relatively trivial – that will enlighten us. What counts is the topology according to which they refer one to another, and which is relevant of the Japanese arabesque, which – chiefly reinforced by the flashed contrast of black and white – denies every compenetration, mediatisation, or resonance. Not linking anything, but declaring, fulgurating, renewing the perceptive-motor instant from gap to gap. Here again, at the opposite of Ingres' arabesque and a long way away from the formal or semiotic references linking opposite shots in someone like Cartier-Bresson. The entire distance between the Europe of sentiment and the Japan of emotion or that, insurmountable, of the mediate and the immediate.

We voluntarily chose a candid theme – three little girls florally dressed before flowers – so that we might see that the shiver of the Real – which in Suda's work shakes the Reality from every aspect – does not stem from his motives and his themes, but to his photographic subject. In his work, a simple street (JP, 123) and a simple, long, narrow flag falling before a curtain of trees (JP, 123) show – underlying – the same black of flash and timeless dazzling that crosses the rain effect reproduced in *Philosophie de la photographie* (PHPH, 57). We can only fully comprehend Suda's black if we forget that it belongs to the only culture that, since the

twelfth century, is attached to rendering imagetically the orgasm as such – not solely through sexual organs and positions – and succeeds in doing so.

In summary, Japan, every time it is itself, never practiced the ‘formalising’ frame-*index* (vs frame-*indicium*) of WORLD 2, and has always activated a space of punctual intensities to the point that it entered almost naturally in the grasp-construction of WORLD 3. In that way, it has always been photographic. The recycling of debris in Akiyama’s work (PHPH, 122), the non-form of a plastic bottle twisted by the Hiroshima bomb in the work of Shomei Tomatsu (PF, 174) testify this. Like Hiro will soon confirm it, right to the colour.

* © Shoji Ueda.

** © Issei Suda.

Henri Van Lier

A photographic history of photography

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List of abbreviations of common references:

PF: Kozloff, Photography and Fascination, Addison.

CI: Caméra International, 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”.*