

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 3 – PHOTOGRAPHIC BEHAVIORS

Chapter 15 – Scientific, documentary and testimonial behaviors

Brassai had normal sight. But he had a cosmological eye.

HENRY MILLER

It is said that the intention of the first photographers was pictorial. It is also claimed that the intent was scientific. Both affirmations overlap. For two thousand five hundred years, western painting and science have been reflecting one another in their search for reality, a reality assumed to be composed of substances, which in their turn would harbor an essence, that is to say, a type, a nature, as well as an individuality. Science was more abstract, painting more sensory. In both cases however, it was a question of capturing reality. In its early stages, photography set out complete this aim. In 1839, Daguerre captured the spirit of the Tuileries. A photograph of the Moon is dated 1853. In 1855, Albert Sands Southworth attempted to totalize all the angles of a female face in an oval medallion by depicting a frontal shot surrounded by eight profiles. Nadar tries to penetrate into the radiant characters of Daumier, Delacroix and Baudelaire. Around 1880, Eadweard Muybridge, through shutters working at 720th of a second, records short phases that, once put together, would explain the complex behavior of nerve-attacks or the gallop of a horse, at least to the photographer's associating eyes. Georges Demy does the same for speech. America tried to get an overview, as the term "survey" indicates so well, of its landscapes and population. The rest is history.

In truth, the photographic practice precisely demonstrated that there was no substance, no essence, no type, no stable character, no radiant individuality, and no atoms of behavior. It even demonstrated that there is no such thing as a true situation, understood as a collection of events reducible to an interconnected overall meaning. Photographs of criminals were put side by side with those of law-abiding people, and on asking to distinguish the one from the other, interviewees would confuse them. For the photograph there are neither born criminals nor saints, neither lunatics, nor sages. More generally speaking, there is no true being, no authenticity. There is only the dissemination of actions, signs and indices. No other medium than photography better illustrates the thesis that there are no grand systems, whose remainder would only constitute subsystems. By contrast, the photo reveals that, for all orders, it are

always the small local and transitional open systems that somehow make themselves compatible and only remain so for a while in function of these compatibilities. In biological terms, the photograph is populationist. It is not essentialist, not generic, not specific, not biographical, and certainly not hagiographic. Furthermore, the photo clearly reveals how all views actually encapsulate several 'shots,' immediately involving scaling, angle, perspective, sensitometrics, exposure time, and superficiality of field. In other words, it indicates the reciprocal involvement of what is photographed and the object doing the photographing, thus disclaiming pure objectivization, even as a vague or ideal concept.

The photograph imposes the idea of a *science* that is not a *knowledge*. It is precisely a practice of non-knowledge, simultaneously precarious, problematic, and rigorous, and continuously colliding - from angle to angle - not with a single and reassuring reality, but with the disparate and uncomfortable real. Whether capturing coiling nebulae, a fallen war soldier, a cancer devouring a face, the smile of a child, or a handshake, the photograph does not show a Cosmos-Mundus, but the world as a jumble of quasi-relations in search of new relations, which in their turn are producers of new noise, and new relations.

This explains why, even when tackling themes that are strongly articulated by reality such as war, famine, love, or holidays - in brief, life - one often uncovers, underneath all these behaviors, a specific attitude that is less realistic than real, and which could be called *testimonial behavior*. A witness is neither a propagandist nor an informer. It is somebody who says, following Jean de l'Epître: this is what I saw, this is what I touched. I pass it on to you with the greatest care for the real, and with the least care for reality. After that, it is up to you to see. As an imprint, albeit abstracted, the photograph possesses this impartiality, and when it is indexed, the photograph can be a given-to-view (*le voici*). We stressed the fact that the photograph is already in itself a given-to-view, and that it can profoundly affect us as pure automatic recording, without index, without given-to-view, and therefore without any human behavior, or at most very oblique interference (putting down a camera somewhere automatically taking shots). The simple given-to-view of the photo as eyewitness account is then the minimal index, and therefore the minimal degree of the intentional photograph. It can be said that this is the behavior that respects the photographic nature of the photograph the most.

This testimonial side is practiced in the reportage, which is perhaps why many people spontaneously identify reporters as the photographers par excellence: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Capa, Plossu, and so on. Is it because their work is so raw, or because it is so richly psychological, sociological, political, or religious? Or precisely because they contain a given-to-view we ultimately cannot say anything about, and which puts us directly below or beyond psychology, sociology, and politics, in a penetration of reality by the real that can only be described by Miller's adjective: *cosmological*. As such, the frame-index is generally very discreet; it has the spontaneity of a simple frame-border. The testimonial photograph differs greatly from the photograph that takes a stand, the committed photograph.



*Ansel Adams: Brassai à
Yosemite, 1974, in B.
Newhall,*

*Photography, Essays and
Images.*

The difference solely concerns the reporter. In photographing a cypress root or a dune, and bodies or houses as cypresses or dunes, Weston comments on the *impartiality* of the camera eye, in that it does not transmit any message. The nude photo of O'Keeffe by Stieglitz is of the same order. Here we see, from over the breasts to above the knees, luminous imprints of the vegetative part of the human body, the place of organic exchange, without any of its active parts (the region reserved for the right hand, paralleling the absence of the rest, is passive). Here we see the three sites and the three periods of generic exchange: the past of the navel, the future of the breasts, and the present of sex. We view tips, hollows, bushiness. Days, shadows, night. The view as touch. Though subtracted from reality, it contains a high degree of the real. Thus, nothing is constructed, there is no thinking, no discerning, no imagined, but there is a physique, a chemistry, a truly exterior physiology, i.e. that of weight and the development of breasts on a torso, that of the torso on the columns of the thighs, that of pubic vegetation. Surely, Stieglitz internalized the Venus de Milo and the techniques of chiaroscuro. However, no painter, not even Titian, could attain this derivation of a body; not a body according to our eyes, but a body

attuned to itself. The moment the Young Fate utters the words "*I saw myself watching myself, with every look gilding my deepest forests,*" (cf. Valéry, "The Young Fate"), all is captured in a thought. In a photograph, there is the silence and the fascination for the pure and cosmological given-to-view. Here are, given to view, at least the effects of photons having touched this or that.



*Alfred Stieglitz : Torso,
1919.*

*Metropolitan Museum of
Art. N.Y.*

Overall, we perhaps formulated the issue inadequately. We asked ourselves which behaviors could benefit from photography. Our answers focused on the pragmatic behaviors of pornography, publicity, fashion, and sentimentalism; on artistic, everyday or extreme behaviors; and on scientific or testimonial behaviors. However, our attempt was to embed the photograph into the worlds anterior to it, into behaviors already defined prior to photography. As such, the photo introduces a truly novel behavior, i.e. *photographic behavior*, which simultaneously challenges - or thoroughly redefines - art, pragmatism, science, and testimony in their traditional sense. In all these long-standing behaviors, surely its testimonial silence is most common. But what noise human silence still makes compared to an intersidereal phototonic silence!

As photography is closer to the universe than the Cosmos-Mundus, its pedagogy had to be especially *negative*. No, no, it is still too much of this or that, as Brodovitch would repeatedly say without ever accommodating himself to a yes, to an affirmative. There is something Zen-like, or something resembling old negative theology here, because we can agree that the universe is precisely that which is never either this or that in the world, or even either this world or that world. Any photograph that makes us think about its nature is undoubtedly strictly indefinable, as well as the behaviors producing and receiving it.

Henri Van Lier