

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

# PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

## Part 1 - THE TEXTURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

### Chapter 7 - The triggering of mental schemata

*The weight of words, the shock of photographs.*

#### PARIS-MATCH

It is necessary to gauge, one last time, to what extent photography has continuously upset human conduct and behavior. In every civilization, people have always been immersed in environments where mysteries were perceived and were part of everyday life. To *perceive* means, as phenomenology has long since described it, to be in a place for a duration of time amongst objects and events disconnected from a background, according to systems of orientation polarized by *two* eyes, two ears, two nostrils (on both sides of the nasal bone, as Bower insists), two arms, two legs, a very mobile head on an occipital spinal column, to which are added different successive layers organized according to the degree of cerebral development (perceptual, logical, semantic schemata), in addition to vast analogical and digital sign systems that are culturally instituted. Perception as elective and globalizing: *per-capere*. What then distinguishes oeuvres that are considered important, those works that are called masterpieces in the arts and crafts? The answer is straightforward: it is due to an intensification, a surcharge of perceptual conditions. From the cave paintings to Cezanne, from the Andean flutist to the Wagnerian orchestra, one can discern intensified and surcharged perceptions that secondarily trigger conceptualizations. Through the curvatures of the trait and the mark, through sonic torsions, through the gathering in the (pictorial, sculptural, architectural, oratorical, choreographic) frame-trap, through the coherence of (perceptual, motive, semiotic, and sometimes indicial) field effects in particular, place is condensed into ubiquity or multipresence, while duration is condensed into eternity or *Aevum*. Microcosms of the macrocosm. Accordingly, man and his oeuvre were concrete; they had grown together (*con-crescere*). The Greek stage, where thousands of citizens converged in semicircle while focusing on three actors and about fifteen members of the chorus - all of them embraced by the gaze and hearing - was one of the most exigent accomplishments of this perceptual pretension. *Theatre*, a word derived

from the Greek *theasthai*, means to embrace by the eye (and the ear) from a fair and equitable distance.

One could say without much exaggeration that the photograph frustrates nearly every property of perception. Of course, on a photographic positive one can clearly perceive bright and obscure zones on white paper. In this respect, the real and reality converge. In the encounter of photons and halides, the real engenders the black spots while reality intimates that these are indeed marks or zones. But this is not really what one thinks about when speaking of photographs and how they are used. The reality that is envisioned appertains more closely to the possible spectacle that these marks and areas bring into view. As we have already noted, this spectacle-reality-there, intensely consumed by the real (by virtue of carrier photons diversely abstracted and filtered), sidetracks the perceptible and creates a kind of non-scene through its superficiality of field, its matter-of-fact framing, its relentless isomorphism and synchronism, its negative-positive alternations, its ostensible digitality, its informational subcharge and surcharge, and its monocular and cyclopean capture (while paintings, although bidimensional, are binocular, which is surely the case with Cézanne, but also even with Mondrian).

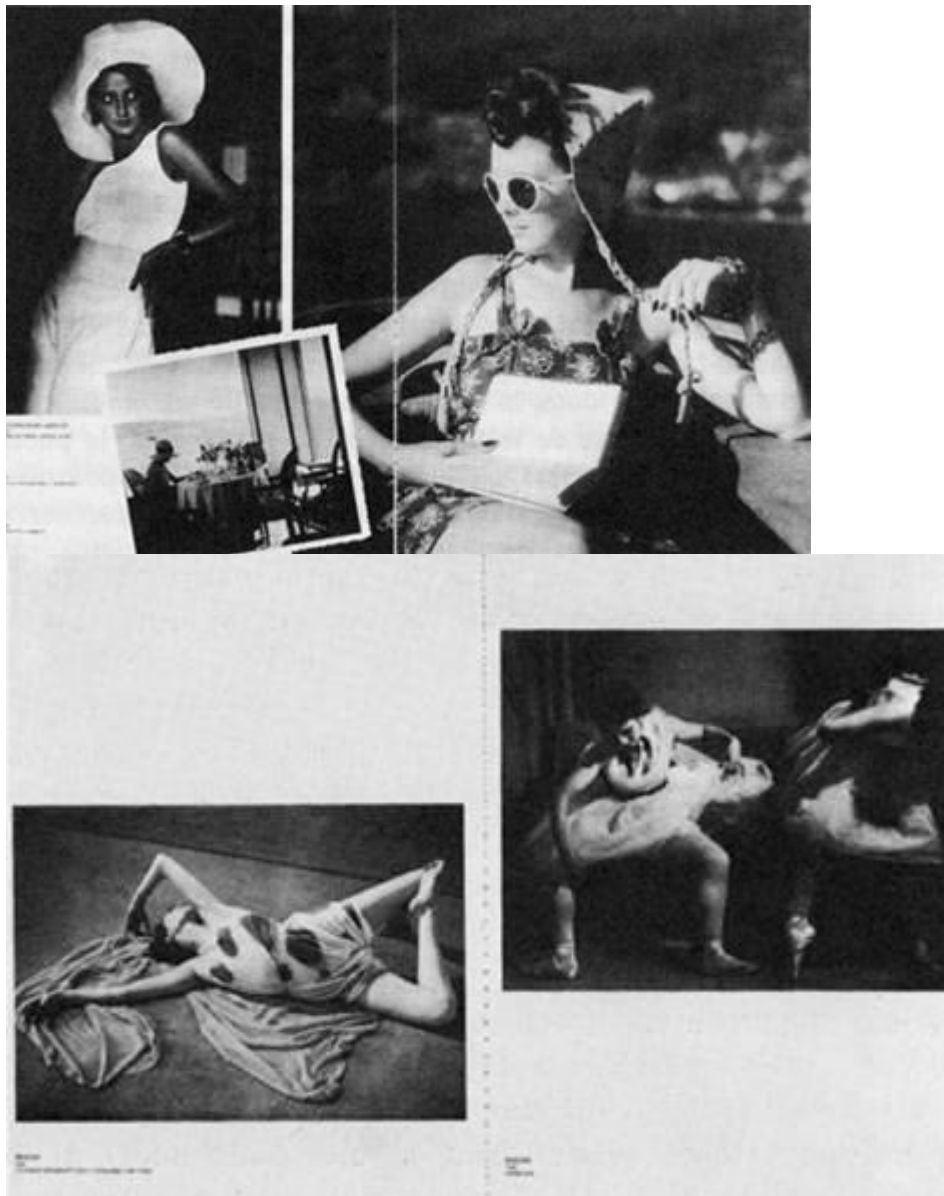
Thus, the most innocent gaze on a photograph creates a decidedly uncanny situation. On the one hand, there is the viewer who sometimes walks around in a gallery but who most often is seated and leafs through a magazine, thus being in a situation of concrete perception. On the other one hand, there is a sheet of darkened paper that is actually perceived, and which signals a spectacle that defies almost all perceptual conditions while displaying space, but by no means a place. Temporally speaking, things are even stranger. The viewer is well and truly enveloped in a duration, and even in an actual *present*, with a consistency characteristic of any present. And the viewer is confronted with an object whose possible spectacle, for its part, lacks all consistence of duration. It is even a provocative instance of pure *simultaneity* as defined in physics: concomitance, at the speed of light, between the emission of photons by the spectacle and their impregnation on the film, the latter datable to a billionth of a second after the passage of the last photon. In other words, all that concerns the viewer takes place in the present, in the Bergsonian concrete simultaneity, while all that concerns the photographic spectacle takes place in four-dimensional space-time, in Einsteinian abstract simultaneity. And the historical debate between these two illustrious men shows to what extent the dialogue was really a dialogue of the deaf.

Consequently, this process cannot really occur between photographic imprints and the body, nor does it occur between signs and imprints. So, where exactly do things happen? Simply put, everything takes place between the print's bright and dark areas and our *mental schemata*.

To clarify this point, and also for historical reasons, it is absolutely necessary to abandon the technical definition of the sign proffered by Saussure, and to revisit the term in its common and traditional meaning which holds that a sign is a complex of signals designating the designated, an event or an object. Accordingly, one can distinguish six terms that describe this operation of *signification*. Signification takes places between the poles of the sign or designated; an object or event; interpretants, and other signs contrastive with the initial sign, an addresser (sender) and an addressee, and finally - and this is the point that interests us here - between the designant (*désignant*) and the designated (*désigné*), a mental scheme. In the world of ancient

artisanship, which was dominated by signs and organized in a relatively stable reality, the salient points of this operation were, apart from the sender and addressee, the sign and its designated. We can clearly see that there was a certain mental schematism at work that was so well wedged between and aligned with the designated and the designant (*désignant*) that it allowed one to speak in the singular using terms such as idea, concept, notion, or representation. Thus, everything remained within the boundaries of a cosmos, of a *mundus*.

Even the smallest of photographs upsets this security. The photograph does not contain veritable designants (*désignants*) or signs, nor does it contain a real designated or referent, and it therefore cannot have interpretants (the photograph contains very little reality; it is hardly a universe or microcosm). However, the photographic imprint is often a carrier of indices, and possibly also indexed indices, and is therefore an extraordinary trigger of a *mental scheme*. Or rather, one should say mental schemata. Because precisely what these indices reveal is that, in their incessant germination and overlap there are, at every instance, dozens, even hundreds of mental schemata and not just one single scheme. In other words, this means that ideas or concepts are semiotic illusions; they are acts of violence imposed by the desire of reality to capture the ever elusive real. In effect, even in sign systems, the unity of concepts or ideas cannot be but illusory. When I say "sugar," whatever may be circulating between the sign and object is by no means a simple thought but a crossroads where a host of notions may be activated: substance, matter, sweet, powdery, in pieces, crystalline, fondant, sickening, pleasant, bad for diabetes, carbon, sugar bread. In common discourse, speakers incessantly tinker with thousands of mental schemata that spiral and come to fruition, where metaphors and metonymies are not mere stylistic figures. Instead, they must be seen as the fundamental functioning. That is precisely what *artificial intelligence* has made apparent. To be able to use the words "arc" or "to walk," artificial intelligence demands that we define them and that we provide their concepts or ideas. Thus we get underway, believing that a few well-chosen semantic traits would suffice. But three pages of semantic traits will still not allow any A.I. to understand or to imagine what we mean with the phrase "The triumphal arch tilts without threatening to topple," or, more decisively in "Mark walks with difficulty," or simply "Mark is walking." The designants (*désignants*) "arch" and "walk" attain their designated only through multitudes of mental schemata, and this works analogically rather than digitally (which is the only way of managing this worrying plural). What artificial intelligence forces us to acknowledge in the domain of signs, the photograph shows us more naively with respect to indices. The photograph attests to the illusory nature of stability and meaning. During those bygone eras that favored reality, the designant (*désignant*), the designated (referent), indices, and the indicated emerged. In our present scientific information society, as transfixed by the real, mental schemata emerge in signs and indices. These schemata intervene in signs and indices, as we grapple with both reality and the real. However, their activity is more obvious with indices and the real than with signs and reality. And this explains why linguists and semiologists have missed the cue as they failed to spot the swarming plurality of these schemata.



*Lartigue,  
Musée  
Jacquemart-  
André*

Surely it is this prodigious triggering of mental schemata one has in mind when referring, rather joyfully, to the *fantastic* in photography. As is repeatedly pointed out in this respect, photography only marginally satisfies the *imaginary* as it deceives perception and designation: one imagines *within* or *in front of* a painting, architecture or a text. By contrast, the photograph does not have a within, nor does it even have a threshold. The fantastic added a new and different experience to the imaginary of the past. With Hoffmann, it will explore the "supernatural," which is not simply the intensification of our duration and place as was customary in ancient narratives. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stories will take great pleasure in exploring the more inhuman aspects of science. The encounter of photography with the real,

and therefore also with science and science fiction, is linked to the fantastic, and as such it is also connected to surrealism in so far as it is associated with our understanding of the fantastic. Being such an imposing activator of ever-spiraling mental schemata, the photograph is closer to the *dream* than to the imaginary. And that is why similitudes and contiguities - the stuff dreams are made of - draw together the mechanisms Freud spotted in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, namely *condensations* (*Verdichtung*) and *slippages* (*Verschiebung*). These are more indicial and semiotic than metaphors and metonymies.

All this allows us to focus on common reactions to photography. One usually chatters around a photograph, when passing the family album around for instance, in order to simultaneously dispel the panic of the real lurking underneath and in order to animate a feeble reality. The reading of photographic captions in magazines ensures that with less exertion the same informative, animating and apotropaic functions will be fulfilled. But the most common attitude is *leafing through*. For every captioned or commented photograph, there are dozens that are leafed through. Presently, the overwhelming majority of socially cycled and recycled photographs corresponds to the criterion not of frontal but of *lateral* perception, no matter whether the photographs are on the wall or on the page. It is during their perusal that photographs (the plural has its importance) trigger off in the most straightforward and most extensive manner all mental schemata in all directions through the immediate activation of the eye-brain nexus, thereby bracketing the other parts of the body. The *layout* is the staging of this texture and structure. Nonetheless, sometimes photographs are viewed attentively without any ulterior motive, and not because one might uncover clues, as detectives would do, or to discover facial or bodily expressions, as a lover might do. What do photographs provoke? *Interpretations*? As appears from the previous paragraphs, the photograph usually escapes interpretation and decoding, at least if these are understood as the progressive lifting of the veil and as semiotic enclosure. In this respect, Freud is as ill-suited to the task as is Hegel. Viewed as such, the photograph *fascinates* us, a bit like a serpent might. The fascinating serpent transfixes us through its movement from back to front (the intervals of the negative of the negative), and left to right (the lateral overlap of indices). The serpent is not actually perceived by the one who is fascinated and stunned by it. The serpent thus establishes a non-space and non-duration, outside of the imaginary. But the simile, as with all the others that may apply to photography, once again breaks down for the same reason. The snake reveals a depth; it is profundity - its mouth, its gaping stomach: the serpent is depths itself. And must we yet again repeat that the photograph is infinite superficiality, that which cannot snatch us up?

Therefore the photograph is both dangerous and reassuring at the same time. It is the most mentally fascinating thing there is. Leonardo da Vinci held that paintings were a mental thing, *una cosa mentale*. But in fact, it is precisely the photograph that is *the mental thing*. However, this does contradict da Vinci. All his paintings, and his fascinating *xn* particular, share the most photographic of characteristics, except superficiality ("*Leonardo da Vinci, deep and dark mirror*", as Baudelaire put it). In any case, the "fascinating" adjective has become all the rage today, and the multiplication of objects and photographic shots is surely no coincidence.

The photograph, while blurring the pertinent terms of signification, and activating mental schemata, the latter concerning indices rather than signs, renders the position of the addressee equally floating, a position more emphatically referred to in ancient oeuvres, texts or drawings, even if they only had posthumous aspirations or just spoke to the *happy few*.

Undoubtedly there are fans of Marilyn or Elvis who think that the poster of their idol was personally intended for them. However, generally speaking, the viewer of a photograph does not really feel interpellated, but all the more impersonally connected to a process that exceeds him. What affects him is not his entire body or the singularity of sign systems, but precisely his mental schemata, that is to say, that which is more general, more intangible and the least individual. We have already spoken at length of the viewer's indifference to photographs, and his straightforward interest ("*how interesting*" is heard even more frequently than "*how fascinating*"). We attributed this *a-pathy* (non-affection in the stoic sense) to habit, which is true. However, the photograph, like volcano eruptions, tidal waves, or major droughts creates a more philosophical and radical indifference because of its very texture and structure, which are closer to the impassive real than to impassioned reality, provided of course one can agree that understood in this sense, the real is both impassive and overwhelming.



*Suda, c.*  
*1967,*  
*Printletter.*

In *Vendredi, ou, Les limbes du Pacifique*, Michel Tournier imagines the situation of a man living alone for years on a deserted island, and who, instead of maintaining a sense of reality through the use of signs and social rituals, as Robinson did before him, begins to perceive the trees, hills, and caverns for what they are in themselves, without much recourse to referentiality. In order to designate this symbiosis of man and his environment, the author uses the term phantasm. The word eloquently recalls the co-incidence (the falling-within-together between subject and object), the a-mediation (non-mediation, non-dialectic), the fascination and the imperative coercion (performative) of the *phantasm* as defined by psychoanalysis. It also hints at how reality might wither in the face of the real, or the event in the face of eventuality, or causality in the face of the black box, or the concept-idea in the face of mental schemata. It cannot be denied that, even only viewed socially and sociologically, that is to say in the least photographic way possible, the most familiar or sophisticated photographs never stop producing, in our eye-brain nexus, something like a phantasmization. It is not in Plato's idealistic cavern that one will understand photography. We need to reach Friday's Pacific island.

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