

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Part 1 - THE TEXTURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Chapter 8 - Types differing from black and white

*A Polaroid hammers into whipped cream
A Polaroid chisels into transparency*

STEFAN DE JAEGER

Up to this point we have been privileging black and white photographs for reasons of historical and methodic precedence. It is now time to ask ourselves whether other types of photographs share certain characteristics or whether they modify them or develop new ones.

8A. The color photograph: symbiosis.

The color photograph shares several traits with the black and white photograph. It is still the alteration of silver halides that provides for contrasts of dark and light, and the colored pigments are articulated following this basic distinction. The color photograph is also a superficial imprint, within a frame-border. It is equally isomorphic, synchronous, a negative of the negative (complementary of the complementary), digital, surcharged and subcharged (about thirty tints instead of thousands), possibly indicial and indexed.

However, certain of these characters are reinforced. In some respects, the colored imprint is more indicial than black and white imprints, since the saturation and luminosity of hues bear indications concerning the seasons and the hours of the day, affective atmospheres, and the chemical states of soil and cultivation in geological or agronomical prints. With respect to stimuli-signs, color improves the speed of recognition and the emotional charge. Furthermore, it even more clearly refuses subtle interpretations specific to sign systems as

indexes, which are the only unequivocally semiotic elements of a photograph, are buried under a general warming of colors.

By contrast, color diminishes digitality and reinforces analogy through this warming. It attenuates the effect of the negative-positive interval. The entire motionless side, outside of place and duration, is tempered, because the contrast between advancing warm hues and retreating cold colors creates convections, or even tactile relations. To sum up, the color photograph does not so much evacuate perception, common imagination, or the basic forms of interpretation. The color photograph encourages cruder connotations, and therefore lends itself less to tensions which might engender (perceptual, semiotic, indicial) field effects.

This can be considered an aide, particularly to stimuli-signs in publicity (the case is not so straightforward with pornography). Or, to the contrary, it can also be seen as an impurity with regards to the austerity of the photographic non-stage, and especially as indolence in the search for field effects, the latter being so pronounced in black and white photography. Indeed, for a long time, the most demanding of photographers worked in black and white. But one has come to realize that there are ways to deprive color of its characteristics. This can be done through outlining contrasts, as Bourdin and Hiro have done. Alternatively, one can make the colors warmer as in Ernst Haas's jerky movements, panoramic shots, and ob-scene proximities. Or like Helmut Newton, the master of the black overtone in his litho work, who now provides his *contre-jour* shots with color overtones, or by making a virtue out of flatulency - yet another obscenity - as in the work of Irving Penn. And India would never have conveyed its field effects and sweltering heat without Eliot Elisofon's use of color.

Both the familiar and the terrifying are latent in every photograph. Depending on whether black-and-white or color is used, one can come closer to the one or the other. However, this does not determine the results in an exhaustive manner.

8B. The Diapositive: Transfiguration

The slide is so often used as a simple document that one might forget that it has a very original photographic status, and that audiovisual editing procedures that make use of it are not a poor man's cinema, as the South American saying goes.

Unlike the photograph, the slide is not a flat imprint. Rather, it conveys a luminous *flux*. The diapositive dissolves the frame-border and the frame-index, as the surrounding blackness is an ambient and atmospheric shade, belonging to the room where it is projected. This way it does not break contact with whoever is watching and embraces him or her almost architecturally, to the point where he or she becomes a spectator again, and not simply a viewer in an encounter. One does not stumble onto a diapositive like one does with a photograph, one is bathed in it.

In addition, the slide is *rich*. Here, light does not suffer from fading which usually affects its reflection on the various layers of an ordinary photograph. Filtered through the reversal of the diapositive, the light keeps all its clarity, contrast, and saturation, and hence it retains its general strength of information, while the black tones will be particularly vibrant. In this fervor, digitality disappears to the advantage of analogy, and several aspects of perception are retained or even intensified while guarding synchrony, isomorphism, and the terrible immobility of the photograph. The diapositive *transfigures*.

This paradoxical status, in which perception is stimulated and contradicted, is heightened through audiovisual montage whose slow discontinuity of successive and even momentarily merging views contrasts with the continuity and empathies of the soundtrack. Meyerowitz showed New York City in this way in the Museum of Modern Art. Jespers and Roquiny put together phantomatic sequences of Louvain-la-Neuve by night in the style of Altdorfer, which no other medium - neither cinema, which is too alive, nor photography, which is too spectral (radiographic) - could ever have achieved. And audiovisual montage is equally peculiar to the grasping of structures that are simultaneously fixed and active, as with the *phantasms* of a civilization or a writer.

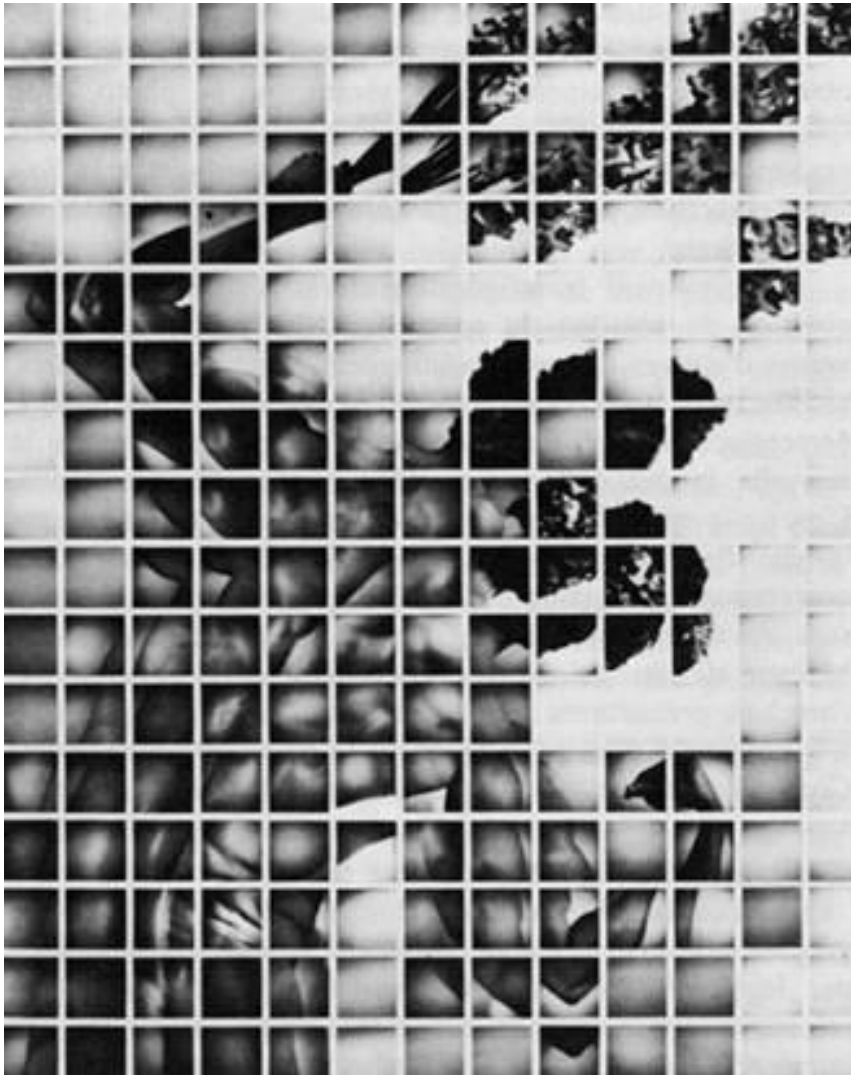
The slide's power to transfigure poses the question of interpretation or misinterpretation of luminous projections of traditional artworks. Paintings, sculptures, and old architecture already have the character of intensified perception, to which the slide adds the new perceptual intensification of its luminous flux. Thus, the work takes on such an intense air that viewing the original in a museum often disappoints a contemporary audience. Is this a betrayal? Undoubtedly, a diapositive betrays the murality of Gauguin or the depressions of the Maestro dei Aranci. But it suits Rembrandt, who precisely looked for luminous and transfigured materiality. There is a case to be made that with *Conspiracy of Julius Civilis*, Rembrandt had painted a diapositive.

8C. The SX 70 Polaroid: the Return of the Body

However, the most significant difference with primitive photography was introduced, some years ago, with the Polaroid. Let us get straight to the point by stressing that nothing is more foreign to the body than the photograph, since the former is depth itself, while the latter is superficiality itself. However, through its various characteristics, the Polaroid rediscovers certain aspects of the body's depth, albeit through a "photographic" distance that agrees well with those contemporary sensibilities that are conditioned by the interconnected specificities of our industrial environment.

To begin with, an SX 70 or a 600 Polaroid camera is a scaled-down chemical plant. Its 7.8 cm by 8 cm picture we have in our hands might be fixed, but it was the place of a development that, slowly and progressively, took place right under our noses, gradually and sometimes unexpectedly drawing out new traces (the subtle lines of the flux and reflux of

additives). This chemical, genetic, and aleatory depth materializes in the thickness of the paper and the square format of the picture. The seething and genesis suggests an initial consonance with the body's depth and its anticipations and duration. The Polaroid is anti-instantaneous, and an anti-snapshot.



Stefan de Jaeger:

Le plus fort 1981

This is reinforced by the disturbances of the depth of field, or rather the superficiality of field, which is very sensitive in traditional photographs because of their high definition. The low definition of the Polaroid ensures that the imprints of objects and events will effect a vagueness between the distant and the near - the tridimensional - resulting in a hazy continuity that is tactile as much as it is visual. And all this occurs from a living touch that measures less than it caresses and palpates.

On the other hand, the Polaroid's color saturates and even gets blocked by its borders, in such a way that the latter bulge or drop down - they bleed, as the ceramist or the tiler would

say. When one measures to what extent the frame-border of the traditional photograph is cut off and therefore becomes alien to the human body's animal and semiotic anticipation, the Polaroid yet again stands out. By virtue of its squashed borders, it is the entire image - which is already flaky because of its low definition - that tends to camber or cave in. A picture of a neutral environment taken by an SX 70 or a 600 Polaroid is transformed into a phial of light or shade. Its impact will be convex or concave.

These properties define a distinct type of transparency. While the glaze of a photograph endows it with a brightness that volatilizes it, that of the Polaroid creates a cloudy, aquatic, woolly or muffled, stagnant, semi-coagulated depth, whose dominant green renders everything glaucous. This effect may foreground the viscous, at other times it may foreground bronze resonances.

In addition, a Polaroid is woven together like human tissue. In a traditional photograph, the grain of the positive is enlarged and dilated, thus adding a veil to an already slimmed down body. By not introducing such a lateral distension, the grain of a Polaroid reinforces its in-depth homogeneous resonance.

Finally, every Polaroid is non-reproducible and unique. The negative of a photograph is a basic starting point allowing for reprints and infinite re-cuts that in no way alter the initial matrix. While in a manner of speaking a photograph has an 'open' life, that of a Polaroid is closed off and caught in a tireless evolution over which we have no command - we cannot even accelerate the process. The Polaroid thus confronts us with the constant of time, it is an internal world all of its own. This also gives it a thickness, a density and a physiological and sculptural autarky.

All in all, a simple and isolated image of 7.8 cm by 8 cm can of course never capture the movement, anticipations, and the depth of an entire sculptured body. However, it invites us to pay attention to organs, or those part of the organs (and tractus), that Freud had in mind when he spoke of the pleasures of organs, which are self-sufficient, simultaneously sensing and being sensed, moving and being moved, flesh and sign, and thus an impulse in the rhythmic circulation of pleasure. At that moment, the entire body is but an archipelago of perceptual, motive and semiotic islets separated by gaps without reference points, by black and whites. However, each single one of these islets is a small world.

Thus, what remains is to put Polaroids side by side along a regular pattern, so as to wipe out the white connecting spaces so the curves and inflections of the (perceptual, motive, semiotic, indicial) field effects are intensified, and so that the multiple anticipations and centers - which are equally perceptual, motive, semiotic, indicial - endow an entire body with life. Accordingly, one could rediscover in this veritable *Polaroid frieze* the sculpture of the body, which faded progressively in the course of the 20th century (in part undoubtedly due to the influence of photography), and which Moore and Giacometti were the last to show, the one through emaciation, the other through a dilation fusing sculpture and environment.

From 1979 till 1981, Stefan De Jaeger's compositions were not just idle exercises but Polaroid friezes fully exploring the sculptural. By 1982 he was joined in this domain by David Hockney and numerous others. It is telling that the first work greeting the visitors of the 1982 Paris Biennial is a juxtaposition of Polaroids by the Finnish artist Lyytik[^]inen, and that its theme

was a pregnancy on the verge of delivery. The proximity of Sophie Ristelhueber's twelve black and white surgical photographs eloquently illustrates the contrast between the two media: the immobile superficiality of the latter is opposed to the genetic density of the former.

However, both share the same evanescence of old content. The Polaroid forced us to rediscover something of our bodies, its anticipations, decenterings and resonances. It also draws us into the photographic non-stage, and does not spare us from the slipping away of the securities of the cosmos-mundus in the face of the strangeness of the universe. No matter whether they are black and white, color, diapositives or Polaroids, and even considering different accents, all photographs are *fragments of reality taken through the frame of the real*, with all the paradoxes this entails.

Henri Van Lier