

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

# PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

## Part 2 – PHOTOGRAPHIC INITIATIVES

*What perhaps matters least to a photograph is he who takes it.*

GILES MORA, *Les Cahiers de la Photographie*, n° 2.

Up until photography's arrival on the scene, human beings had a sense of mastery and creation in almost every domain. Both artisans and artists were responsible for their project just as much as for the means used in drawing, sculpting, and writing. If the brain had composed a bad model or had chosen ill-fitting traits or words about to be produced, the artist only had himself to blame, and the same can be said of a trembling hand using the brush, chisel or quill. Conversely, successes were entirely one's own. The processing of information taking place in the artist's cerebral cells was proudly called 'spirit'. And an oeuvre's fortunate coincidences "one indeed realized they were there" carried the prestigious name of 'inspiration'.

This system of relations can be summed up by taking a look at easel painting. Sitting or standing, a man held under his domineering view a rather distant model with the canvas in reach. The trajectory from the model to the image was entirely defined by him. Thus, he would remake the world if he was a Romantic, or he would unlock its essence, if he happened to be classicist. In any case, the artist played God, and this explains why he so readily believed in a God, a demiurge just like himself. If the painter's canvas or the sculptor's stone were replaced by the writer's paper, nothing substantially changed in the triangle of model, creator and work. As for technology, it was a simple tool, a means in the service of human intentions, the latter alone being really respectable and originary. Instrumentality did not figure amongst the four major causes. It was only mentioned rather shamefully.

The photograph radically changed this situation, that is to say, it changed the entire system of traditional culture. This is mainly due to the fact that the initiative of the photographer only takes places *after* other initiatives, namely after those of the technician, of natural light, and of the spectacle with its structures and actors. One is obliged to follow this order of dependency to realize the characteristics of the new system of relations. Man as creator of images, formerly so important and fundamental, has been subordinated and is now often only facultative. With a camera in hand, it is difficult to imagine man as the microcosm, or to exclaim, with Descartes, that 'I think therefore I am' or that 'I am I' to quote Fichte. Indeed, we have left behind anthropocentrism and humanism in favor of a more biological, universal, technical, semiotic and indicial perspective. In addition, our attempt at understanding all these

incessant mutations has created a techno-logical, cosmo-logical, physio-logical, semio-logical, and indicio-logical mindset.

## Chapter 9 - The initiative of industrial technology

*The question is, assuming that the technical proficiency of 35mm camera work were as great thirty-five years ago as it is today, would I still do 8 x 10 work. Is that the question? Well, the answer is, gosh, I don't know. Yes, I think I would. There's such a fascination in, for example, seeing your image although it may be upside down and in reverse on a ground glass. It's an entirely different kind of action. You don't do that with a 35mm now. It isn't big enough to excite you the way it does even on a 4 x 5, certainly on an 8 x 10. It's quite an exciting thing to see. So, I would do all those things. I would underline that they are quite different photographic activities, 35mm and 8 x 10.*

WALKER EVANS, University of Michigan, 1971.

Technology has always taken an important initiative with respect to its user. Not only did the introduction of the grand piano allow Beethoven to compose the last of his musical pieces, but the device evoked them to him, it literally put them under his fingers, the same way a Stradivarius or a Bergonzi might drive a violinist or a cellist.

From this point of view, photographers are in a situation similar to that of ancient artisans. Walker Evans is the photographer of the 8x10 inch view camera with its stabilizing and integrating capture. Edward Weston is the photographer of high definition film. Henri Cartier-Bresson: the photographer of "the decisive moment," facilitated by the 35 mm, especially the combination of a Contax f/1.5 lens mounted on a Leica body. W. Eugene Smith: the photographer of the explosive angulosities of the flash bulb, even when working in natural light. William Klein: the master of the wide-angle lens and Ernst Haas, the photographer of Kodachrome 1, who, after some time, made the difficult change to Kodachrome 2, which has a different rendering. These initiatives of technology can lead to remarkable results. At the turn of the century, Alvin Langdon Coburn put into practice the "blemishes" that Bernard Shaw had so eloquently summed up in his portrayal of G. K. Chesterton: "*You could say, if you beg my pardon, that something is amiss with the framing of the head, that something is amiss with the focus, that something is amiss with the exposure time; but that nothing is amiss with Chesterton himself.*" Indeed, nothing was amiss. Coburn explored the possibilities of a black and white in movement, from its dynamist to its futurist effects, until Haas would assemble panoramic landscapes suggested by color. If one were to multiply these examples, it would become even clearer that the different technical combinations inflecting the photographic processes of each epoch are divided amongst the classical masters of the history of photography, each one of them pushing the technical possibilities available at that time to their extremes, just like ancient artists

used to do. A photographer's "photographic subject," that is to say his systematic exploitation of particular perceptual field effects, is intricately bound to this choice, much in the same way a painter's "pictorial subject" was bound to the props, pigments and media he had at his disposal.

However, a photographer does not depend on his apparatuses and his lenses in the same manner that Beethoven depended on his piano makers, who were few and lived close by. Someone using photography depends on a photographic technician who sees to thousands of individuals all over the world, who in their turn depend on a gigantic *planetary processing*, i.e. Photography.



*Marianne Lambert*

In fact, for every shot or zoom lens, for every film, developer, or fixative to be possible at a given moment in time, it is necessary that at least three conditions are met. Marketing engineers must be aware of the conscious and unconscious desires of a truly international market. Throughout the world, these desires, which often form technically incompatible combinations, must be supplied in compatible combinations whose elements are to be given form by either physical engineers for the lenses, or either chemists, for the film. The moment

these combinations are known, their means of production must enter the harsh manufacturing and distributional competition governing the global market. Of course, singular developments might occur, as with Edwin H. Land, who was simultaneously the designer, producer and marketer of the Polaroid. However, even in this case presupposes a strong connection between the industrial and the scientific. Land was anything but an artisan. Photography places its users within a multidimensional and planetary technical network, putting the species to work so to speak.

This international process defines a kind of *homo photographicus*. The latter undoubtedly began as a realist. What mattered most was that photographic representations rendered things not as they physically behave, but as they appear to us after perceptual correction. In shade, objects appear bluish, in the morning they are aglow and in the evening they are strongly affected by the colors of neighboring objects. The same column is large or small depending on our distance, and it is straight or curved depending on whether it is located in front or to the sides. Our perception regulates and rationalizes, by painting things in so-called 'local colors' (independent of their environment) and according to an orthogonal perspective with "corrected" measuring standards. No doubt, physical engineers and chemists will continue spreading a wealth of ingenuity in order to conform to this non-real and merely perceptual realism by fighting those "distortions" in a spool or barrel lens, and by making use of filters to "improve" colors. Especially in the west, man as technician, as well as technology are thus subordinated to man as user-consumer.

However, the position of a planetary *homo photographicus* also produced an inverse subordination, in which technology, changed by its own logic, modifies the perceptual and mental habits of human beings. An example of this concerns recent cartography, where one can see a photograph coupled to a computer offering geographical and historical positions in curved space that are neither subjected to orthogonal arrangements, nor to realistic colors, nor to recognizable measuring standards. However, we are not disturbed; instead we concentrate and treat it as obvious. Crossing cultural barriers, the photograph, together with other planetary processes such as the computer, sound, the car and the plane, has therefore given birth to a *more topological than geometric* appropriation and understanding that activates mental schemas in an operative rather than conceptual or ideal fashion, where data processing is pivotal and where the real has precedence over reality and realism.

This is even more marked when considering the violent reaction to *Thirteen Portraits of Susan*, put together quite some time ago for the Swedish magazine X by Dieter Lÿbeck, who had collaborated with a dozen research laboratories and about thirty photographers for this project. What we have under eyes here is definitely the result of the physical encounter of a living young woman with various techniques, including radiography, Agfacontour, thermal duplicators, stereophotogrammetry in the treatment of relief, holograms and electronic microscopy for textures, ultrasonoscopy, barograms and thermograms, "owl's eye" multipliers of luminous intensity, and many more. Faced with these structures that by no means intervene in our perceptual world, we are instantly aware that what the devices captured they have indeed seen, and that we will never see it this way, and that even though the devices transmitted them to us, we will never be able to actually perceive these things. We may indeed perceive the imprints, but not the actual spectacle. Perhaps we perceive the spectacle in an "other scene," a non-scene, an anti-scene.

Alternatively, one needs to stress that this limit case only pushes the provocations of ordinary photographs to extremes. We do not even notice the barrel distortions in photojournalism anymore. It is undoubtedly partly due to the fact that our eye-brain nexus makes the desired optical "corrections." But it is surely also the case that the photograph has accustomed us to curved space, where the viewer mentally, through *data processing*, constructs without actually perceiving. The photograph has so incisively changed our epistemologies and aesthetics that Bill Brandt's extreme wide angles, whose photographic shots go well beyond the perceptual powers of the eye-brain couple, have become popular classics. There, the "other scene" runs alongside the everyday scene, interacting in a reciprocal domestication.

The initiative of technology is such that, for almost a century, historians conceived of photography's history as a series of discoveries and technical innovation, until Beaumont Newhall opened new avenues. Even today popular magazines announce alternations to lenses and films not only for commercial reasons, but also in a kind of monthly ritual celebration. Anyone present at a convention of photographers, as if at an ancient Church Synod, could see members of this semi-fraternal and semi-aggressive movement passing around equipment from hand to hand, with everyone touching, weighing and handling it, not so much so as to discover what one already knows, but to participate in a ritual, in a cult. The camera is not an object. It is a *relay* in a process or network, just like his acoustic brother, the tape recorder. And the network, as Gilbert Simondon pointed out, has become one of the places for the contemporary *sacred*. As we have just seen, this is but one space amongst many others where the prophetesses speak. We may hear them, but we do not understand.

In the ancient Cosmos-Mundus, of which man was the Microcosm, material and instrumental initiatives were secondary to the extent that they were not considered pertinent to representational systems. In the information-noise and signs-indices of the Universe to which we are exposed, the unrestrained excess of man's technical devices, or more precisely his technical *environment*, which is not merely a means, is more often than not the most pertinent to the system. Besides, what does one mean with *pertinence* when studying luminous, possibly indicial and possibly indexed imprints?

Thus, the photograph is one of three or four spaces "together with sound, lighting, the computer, car, and plane "that manifests the true initiatory character of technology in our contemporary world. In this sense, photography is not only technical, but also technological.



**Henri Van Lier**