

Photography, Or The Writing Of Light¹

Jean Baudrillard

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http://free.art.pl/fotografie/ baudrillard/photography_writing_of_light/

The miracle of photography, of its so-called objective image, is that it reveals a radically non-objective world. It is a paradox that the lack of objectivity of the world is disclosed by the photographic lens (*objectif*).² Analysis and reproduction (*ressemblance*) are of no help in solving this problem. The technique of photography takes us beyond the replica into the domain of the *trompe l'oeil*. Through its unrealistic play of visual techniques, its slicing of reality, its immobility, its silence, and its phenomenological reduction of movements, photography affirms itself as both the purest and the most artificial exposition of the image.

At the same time, photography transforms the very notion of technique. Technique becomes an opportunity for a double play: it amplifies the concept of illusion and the visual forms. A complicity between the technical device and the world is established. The power of objects and of "objective" techniques converge. The photographic act consists of entering this space of intimate complicity, not to master it, but to play along with it and to demonstrate that nothing has been decided yet (*rendre evidente l'idee que les jeux ne sont pas faits*). "What cannot be said must be kept silent." But what cannot be said can also be kept silent through a display of images.

The idea is to resist noise, speech, rumors by mobilizing photography's silence; to resist movements, flows, and speed by using its immobility; to resist the explosion of communication and information by brandishing its secrecy; and to resist the moral imperative of meaning by deploying its absence of signification. What above all must be challenged is the automatic overflow of images, their endless succession, which obliterates not only the mark of photography (*le trait*), the poignant detail of the object (its *punctum*), but also the very moment of the photo, immediately passed, irreversible, hence always nostalgic. The instantaneity of photography is not to be confused with the simultaneity of real time. The flow of pictures produced and erased in real time is indifferent to the third dimension of the photographic moment. Visual flows only know change. The image is no longer given the time to become an image. To be an image, there has to be a moment of becoming which can only happen when the rowdy proceedings of the world are suspended and dismissed for good. The idea, then, is to replace the triumphant *epiphany* of meaning with a silent *apophany* of objects and their appearances.

Against meaning and its aesthetic, the subversive function of the image is to discover literality in the object (the photographic image, itself an expression of literality, becomes the magical operator of reality's disappearance). In a sense, the photographic image materially translates the absence of reality which "is so obvious and so easily accepted because we already have the feeling that nothing is real" (Borges). Such a phenomenology of reality's absence is usually impossible to achieve. Classically, the subject outshines the object. The subject is an excessively blinding source of light. Thus, the literal function of the image has to be ignored to the benefit of ideology, aesthetics, politics, and of the need to make connections with other images. Most images speak, tell stories; their noise cannot be turned down. They obliterate the silent signification of their objects. We must get rid of everything that interferes with and covers up the manifestation of silent evidence. Photography helps us filter the impact of the subject. It facilitates the deployment of the objects's own magic (black or otherwise).

Photography also enables a technical perfection of the gaze (through the lens) which can protect

the object from aesthetic transfiguration. The photographic gaze has a sort of nonchalance which nonintrusively captures the apparition of objects. It does not seek to probe or analyze reality. Instead, the photographic gaze is "literally" applied on the surface of things to illustrate their apparition as fragments. It is a very brief revelation, immediately followed by the disappearance of the objects.

But no matter which photographic technique is used, there is always one thing, and one thing only, that remains: the light. Photo-graphy: The writing of light. The light of photography remains proper to the image. Photographic light is not "realistic" or "natural." It is not artificial either. Rather, this light is the very imagination of the image, its own thought. It does not emanate from one single source, but from two different, dual ones: the object and the gaze. "The image stands at the junction of a light which comes from the object and another which comes from the gaze" (Plato).

This is exactly the kind of light we find in Edward Hopper's work. His light is raw, white, ocean-like, reminiscent of sea shores. Yet, at the same time, it is unreal, emptied out, without atmosphere, as if it came from another shore (venue d'un autre littoral). It is an irradiating light which preserves the power of black and white contrasts, even when colors are used. The characters, their faces, the landscapes are projected into a light that is not theirs. They are violently illuminated from outside, like strange objects, and by a light which announces the imminence of an unexpected event. They are isolated in an aura which is both extremely fluid and distinctly cruel. It is an absolute light, literally photographic, which demands that one does not look at it but, instead, that one closes one's eyes on the internal night it contains. There is in Hopper's work a luminous intuition similar to that found in Vermeer's painting. But the secret of Vermeer's light is its intimacy whereas, in Hopper, the light reveals a ruthless exteriority, a brilliant materiality of objects and of their immediate fulfillment, a revelation through emptiness.

This raw phenomenology of the photographic image is a bit like negative theology. It is "apophatic," as we used to call the practice of proving God's existence by focusing on what he wasn't rather than on what he was. The same thing happens with our knowledge of the world and its objects. The idea is to reveal such a knowledge in its emptiness, by default (en creux) rather than in an open confrontation (in any case impossible). In photography, it is the writing of light which serves as the medium for this elision of meaning and this quasi-experimental revelation (in theoretical works, it is language which functions as the thought's symbolic filter).

In addition to such an apophatic approach to things (through their emptiness), photography is also a drama, a dramatic move to action (passage a l'acte), which is a way of seizing the world by "acting it out."³ Photography exorcizes the world through the instantaneous fiction of its representation (not by its representation directly; representation is always a play with reality). The photographic image is not a representation; it is a fiction. Through photography, it is perhaps the world itself that starts to act (qui passe a l'acte) and imposes its fiction. Photography brings the world into action (acts out the world, is the world's act) and the world steps into the photographic act (acts out photography, is photography's act).⁴ This creates a material complicity between us and the world since the world is never anything more than a continuous move to action (a continuous acting out).

In photography, we see nothing. Only the lens "sees" things. But the lens is hidden. It is not the Other ⁵ which catches the photographer's eye, but rather what's left of the Other when the photographer is absent (quand lui n'est pas la). We are never in the real presence of the object. Between reality and its image, there is an impossible exchange. At best, one finds a figurative correlation between reality and the image. "Pure" reality -- if there can be such a thing -- is a question without an answer. Photography also questions "pure reality." It asks questions to the Other. But it does not expect an answer. Thus, in his short-story "The Adventure of a Photographer,"⁶ Italo Calvino writes: "To catch Bice in the street when she didn't not know he was

watching her, to keep her in the range of hidden lenses, to photograph her not only without letting himself be seen but without seeing her, to surprise her as if she was in the absence of his gaze, of any gaze...It was an invisible Bice that he wanted to possess, a Bice absolutely alone, a Bice whose presence presupposed the absence of him and everyone else."⁷ Later, Calvino's photographer only takes pictures of the studio walls by which she once stood. But Bice has completely disappeared. And the photographer too has disappeared. We always speak in terms of the disappearance of the object in photography. It once was; it no longer is. There is indeed a symbolic murder that is part of the photographic act. But it is not simply the murder of the object. On the other side of the lens, the subject too is made to disappear. Each snapshot simultaneously ends the real presence of the object and the presence of the subject. In this act of reciprocal disappearance, we also find a transfusion between object and subject. It is not always a successful transfusion. To succeed, one condition must be met. The Other -- the object -- must survive this disappearance to create a "poetic situation of transfer" or a "transfer of poetic situation." In such a fatal reciprocity, one perhaps finds the beginning of a solution to the problem of society's so-called "lack of communicability." We may find an answer to the fact that people and things tend to no longer mean anything to each other. This is an anxious situation that we generally try to conjure away by forcing more signification.

But there are only a few images that can escape this desire of forced signification. There are only a few images that are not forced to provide meaning, or have to go through the filter of a specific idea, whatever that idea might be (but, in particular, the ideas of information and testimony are salient). A moral anthropology has already intervened. The idea of man has already interfered. This is why contemporary photography (and not only photo-journalism) is used to take pictures of "real victims," "real dead people," and "real destitutes" who are thus abandoned to documentary evidence and imaginary compassion.⁸ Most contemporary photos only reflect the "objective" misery of the human condition. One can no longer find a primitive tribe without the necessary presence of some anthropologist. Similarly, one can no longer find a homeless individual surrounded by garbage without the necessary presence of some photographer who will have to "immortalize" this scene on film. In fact, misery and violence affect us far less when they are readily signified and openly made visible. This is the principle of imaginary experience (*la loi de l'imaginaire*). The image must touch us directly, impose on us its peculiar illusion, speak to us with its original language in order for us to be affected by its content. To operate a transfer of affect into reality, there has to be a definite (*resolu*) counter-transfer of the image.

We deplore the disappearance of the real under the weight of too many images. But let's not forget that the image disappears too because of reality. In fact, the real is far less often sacrificed than the image. The image is robbed of its originality and given away to shameful acts of complicity. Instead of lamenting the relinquishing of the real to superficial images, one would do well to challenge the surrender of the image to the real. The power of the image can only be restored by liberating the image from reality. By giving back to the image its specificity (its "stupidity" according to Rosset),⁹ the real itself can rediscover its true image.

So-called "realist" photography does not capture the "what is." Instead, it is preoccupied with what should not be, like the reality of suffering for example. It prefers to take pictures not of *what is* but of *what should not be* from a moral or humanitarian perspective. Meanwhile, it still makes good aesthetic, commercial and clearly immoral use of everyday misery. These photos are not the witness of reality. They are the witness of the total denial of the image from now on designed to represent what refuses to be seen. The image is turned into the accomplice of those who choose to rape the real (*viol du reel*). The desperate search for *the* image often gives rise to an unfortunate result. Instead of freeing the real from its reality principle, it locks up the real inside this principle. What we are left with is a constant infusion of "realist" images to which only "retro-images" respond. Every time we are being photographed, we spontaneously take a mental position on the

photographer's lens just as his lens takes a position on us. Even the most savage of tribesmen has learned how to spontaneously strike a pose. Everybody knows how to strike a pose within a vast field of imaginary reconciliation.

But the photographic event resides in the confrontation between the object and the lens (l'objectif), and in the violence that this confrontation provokes. The photographic act is a duel. It is a dare launched at the object and a dare of the object in return. Everything that ignores this confrontation is left to find refuge in the creation of new photographic techniques or in photography's aesthetics. These are easier solutions.

One may dream of a heroic age of photography when it still was a black box (a camera obscura) and not the transparent and interactive space that it has become. Remember those 1940s farmers from Arkansas whom Mike Disfarmer shot. They were all humble, conscientiously and ceremonially standing in front of the camera. The camera did not try to understand them or even catch them by surprise. There was no desire to capture what's "natural" about them or "what they look like as photographed."¹⁰ They are what they are. They do not smile. They do not complain. The image does not complain. They are, so to speak, caught in their simplest attire (dans leur plus simple appareil), for a fleeting moment, that of photography. They are absent from their lives and their miseries. They are elevated from their miseries to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their destiny. The image is revealed for what it is: it exalts what it sees as pure evidence, without interference, consensus, and adornment. It reveals what is neither moral nor "objective," but instead remains unintelligible about us. It exposes what is not up to reality but is, rather, reality's evil share (malin genie) (whether it is a fortunate one or not). It displays what is inhuman in us and does not signify.

In any case, the object is never anything more than an imaginary line. The world is an object that is both imminent and ungraspable. How far is the world? How does one obtain a clearer focus point? Is photography a mirror which briefly captures this imaginary line of the world? Or is it man who, blinded by the enlarged reflection of his own consciousness, falsifies visual perspectives and blurs the accuracy of the world? Is it like the rearview mirrors of American cars which distort visual perspectives but give you a nice warning - -"objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear"? ¹¹ But, in fact, aren't these objects farther than they appear? Does the photographic image bring us closer to a so-called "real world" which is in fact infinitely distant? Or does this image keep the world at a distance by creating an artificial depth perception which protects us from the imminent presence of the objects and from their virtual danger?

What is at stake (at play, en jeu) is the place of reality, the question of its degree. It is perhaps not a surprise that photography developed as a technological medium in the industrial age, when reality started to disappear. It is even perhaps the disappearance of reality that triggered this technical form. Reality found a way to mutate into an image. This puts into question our simplistic explanations about the birth of technology and the advent of the modern world. It is perhaps not technologies and media which have caused our now famous disappearance of reality. On the contrary, it is probable that all our technologies (fatal offsprings that they are) arise from the gradual extinction of reality.

Notes

- [1.](#) A Translation of Jean Baudrillard, "La Photographie ou l'écriture de la Lumière: Litteralité de l'Image," in *L'Echange Impossible* (The Impossible Exchange). Paris: Galilee, 1999: pp. 175-184.
- [2.](#) There is here a play on the French word "objectif." "Objectif" means objective (adj.) and visual lens (subs.) at the same time.
- [3.](#) This term is in English in the original French version.

- [4.](#) An unsatisfactory translation of "la photo 'passe a l'acte du monde' et le monde 'passe a l'acte photographique'."
 - [5.](#) Capitalized by Baudrillard in the French text.
 - [6.](#) "L'Aventure d'un photographe," in Italo Calvino, *Aventures* [Adventures]. Paris: Le Seuil, 1990. Calvino's *Aventures* (I Racconti in Italian) have been published in several different books in English. For example, "The Adventure of a Photographer" was published as part of Calvino's novel *Difficult Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), pp. 220-235.
 - [7.](#) Translation borrowed from Italo Calvino, *Difficult Loves*, trans. W. Weaver, p. 233.
 - [8.](#) I use the term "real" (in quotation marks) in front of victims, dead people and destitute to render Baudrillard's term "en tant que tels" (which literally means "as such").
 - [9.](#) Possibly Clement Rosset, author of *La Realite et Son Double* (Reality and Its Double), Paris: Gallimard, 1996; and of *Joyful Cruelty: Toward a Philosophy of the Real*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
 - [10.](#) In English in the French text.
 - [11.](#) In English in the French text.
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