

## THE FASCINATING IMAGE

"The camera... is much more than a recording apparatus, it is a means whereby messages from another world come to us, a world not ours, leading us to the heart of the great secret." (Orson Welles).

By its very structure, the objective image tends to establish a new rapport between man and the world. One can hardly, if at all, speak of "image" in connection with photography. Originally the word signified: imitation, copy. The image which imitates the world remains distinct from it. In a drawing, faithful though it might be, there is always a distance, an interval between the object represented and its plastic transcription. This distance disappears entirely in photography. There, the image coincides so much with the given data that it is somehow destroyed as an image. It is this very data, magically *repeated*, covering the surface of the paper or of the screen with its presence, its double, so to speak. The photographic image is no longer a copy, but a statement of the world itself expressed in it, a simple opening into the world.

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

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In the plastic image, either painting or drawing, the world was denied. I mean denied not in its forms or colors, but in its very essence, denied insofar as it was the *world*. It was a world trans-posed, trans-figured, abstracted from that exteriority in which it is displayed as the world. A world in which man made his mark by interpreting it in plastic terms. Van Gogh's *Orchard* is a *picture* before being the representation of an orchard. Man can gaze upon it as on a beautiful creation in itself, added to the world, and if subsequently he is referred to a real orchard, the spectator will discover it with Van Gogh's eyes, through the transfiguring vision of the painter. The image traced by man's hand acts as a transmutation: it appropriates the substance of the world in order to integrate it into the human domain. In a second phase, it shapes the world to our visual taste.<sup>1</sup> The revolution accomplished by photography, on the contrary, depends on what the world henceforth predicates—in its autonomy and difference—in the very image which man forms of it. Where once there was an exercise of power, now there is nothing but submission. Photography is the total effacement before the real with which it coincides. It is the world as it is, in its immediate verity which it reproduces on paper or on the screen. It confers upon it, as it were, a second presence, effacing itself insofar as it is an image in order to be no more than a field open to this presence, repeated each time. To the denied world of plastic representation, there consequently succeeds the world affirmed as pure in itself, established in its difference before the observer. The objective image makes possible the paradox that the world unveils itself as it is in itself, pro-nounces itself, if I may say so, prior to all human language. Up to then, it was manifested as a world only via the mediation of the observer. It was the "given" matter of an observation: that of the man who simply was orienting himself or contemplating, or the creative gaze of the artist. In the photographic image, the world somehow precedes this observation: it

<sup>1</sup> Does a scene *in itself* exist in nature? Is not a landscape most often experienced in terms of, if not an esthetic, at least an implicit sensibility which one pictorial tradition or another has contributed toward creating? Could a man of past centuries have *seen* a landscape as we see it today, after Cézanne and the modern masters?

determines its content, imposing a vision. The traditional schema is reversed: from pure matter to a discourse, the world becomes itself a language and "accosts" man in this language. The relationship between man and the world, summed up in classic vision, becomes, via the interpretation of the twin-image, a sort of relationship of the world to man.

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The structure of the objective image expresses this new rapport. I have said that photography coincides with the world to the point of negating itself as an image. The world which it renders present, however, is only imaginary. Photography "is" and "is not" the world. It is the world, to the degree that it rigorously is identified with it. It is not the world insofar as it is only an imaginary form deprived of that concrete density of the real world which we have captured. But, in itself, it confers a new force upon the world which it unveils, precisely to the degree that that world, although magically present, slips out of our grasp insofar as it is imaginary. It is the world, if I may say so, in its pure state, in the pure projection of its essence, beyond all prehension. The world such as it would be, if it could be set up as a "world," outside of any dialectical rapport with the human. Such as it would be if it could, in such a solipsistic predication, exclude us from its own domain...

Hence the fascination exercised by this kind of image. There is much more here than a simple repetition of things. If it were only a question of things in their tangible reality, mere looking would suffice. But the real, proposed in such a way, is already reflected in itself and consequently withdrawn as such from *vision*. The mind is no longer facing the sensible world which leaves it free to choose. It is no longer facing an image in the usual sense, since photography coincides strictly with the given data. It can only be opened passively to what is offered to it, imposed upon it as a fascinating complex of the imaginary and the real.

What is the result of this situation? One cannot help but say that the "witnessing" mind is lost in the image. There is no exchange between the objective image and the mind. Posed in its difference, the world is simply uttered. To the fascinated conscious-

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ness, nothing else but this pure immobile feeling. Such is truly the meaning of the word "fascinated:" a total paralysis of power. Filled to the brim, but at the same time inert. Inert to the same degree that it is filled to the brim, without any reaction in the face of this *enthralling* world, uttered in itself and for itself, indifferently, a pure affirmation of self.

All this leads towards silence where the only word pronounced would be that of the world, mute, unprecedented, inaudible...

Inaudible because what is said here does not go beyond the narrow limits of the world. As Ponge put it, the tree expresses itself only with treelike means. The street recounts the street, but no one knows exactly *what* it says or *how* it says it. This "hitherness" does not yield itself precisely because it irreducibly remains a "hitherness" for us. The plastic image made the world an open domain to the degree that it released this unformulated language, giving it *form*. Establishing the world in its difference, photography renders it in its self. The real bespeaks no more than itself. "For us," no word is spoken.

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This pure and, I would say, pre-logical affirmation of the world is the ultimate basis of the alienation which menaces the spectator. Henceforth, the representation of an object may be made without mediation. As there is no negation, there is man's alienation in the face of this immediacy represented, that is to say, fixed as such, and presented in its autonomy. The spirit as *logos* is rejected. But there is more to it than that: this "worldly" structure of the image makes possible a new *logos* in which the immediate real (that is to say, non-mediated) becomes the very expression of the imaginary, is substituted for it. When the film maker imagines a house and wants to express his vision cinematographically, he can do so only by reproducing a real house even if he must have it built in order that it should correspond to his vision. In his language, the world *as it is* will always supercede the imaginary world.<sup>2</sup> And the same holds true for any story recounted in terms

<sup>2</sup> Cinematographic special effects might be offered here in rebuttal, as an instance of transcending the data given. But cinema is not theatre. Its logic is

of "images:" man's dreams have no other means of expression than this repetition of the world, this simple re-production of *what is*. Man no longer expresses himself except via this detour in the very language of the world itself. The imaginary which is the pure expression of *logos*, the domain reserved for man, becomes that of the *alogos*.

The danger lies in this infringement of the world as a statement. In the last analysis, that alone accounts for the fascinating power of the photographic image. In its essence, the latter is *cosmophonie*. It is the pre-face of the world, of a world which up to now has been humiliated as an object and which seems, by means of photography, to be regaining its lost position. Reassuming its ancestral ascendancy, multiplying its presence around us, and in us as a sort of second manifestation, indefinitely repeated....

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In an objective representation, the world is itself made *logos*. This fraction of reality which photography offers to view, is significant *in itself* by the mere fact of its imaginary projection. The borders of the paper or the screen suffice to confer a *meaning* which it would not have in the sensory world in which, however, it fits. It would appear as suddenly endowed with cohesion, clearly expressed before one's eyes. It is the world in its literal verity and at the same time it is much more than the world. The world as such is *deprived* of sense. It must be, at the very least, recognized, identified, and if the eye isolates a sector of reality identical with that set forth in the photograph, it forms it, in the last analysis, only by interpreting it, that is to say, denying it as the world. A "picture" is the plastic result of this interpretation. And how many observations are possible in the face of the same data, object or landscape, which can be expressed in so many works! But the "works" which their maker will sign are actually there. The real world never has only one virtual sense. In photography,

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that everything thus fabricated should have the appearance, the verisimilitude of the real. Special effects (photographic or cinematographic) can be nothing but a substitute for reality: it implies the same effacement before the object, simply substituting man's ingenuity to give an illusion of this object. But reconstructed, or in itself, it is always reality speaking its own language.

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on the other hand, it is defined as the world, expressing its multiple visage at one blow. Certainly, there are numerous angles from which to capture it. But from the same angle, only a single negative is imaginable. Reality, gathering its virtualities together there, uniting and thereby *denying* possible interpretations, expresses itself in its entirety. Photography is the real-become-statement. Something like the world's word. In it the world, insofar as it is the world, is named, even prior to all abstraction or choice, in its undifferentiated being. It is pure unveiling.

There is a word: photogenic, the self-expression of the world in the image. Being photogenic applies above all to the moving image, and the word was created in connection with cinema. But it is valid for the replica-image insofar as it is such. That object is "photogenic" which reveals a new aspect unperceived up to then. A surprising aspect which *forces* us to see, and makes us interpret almost literally what is being expressed. Being photogenic is not in the seeing, it is in the object. It is the object which, in the true sense, *attracts* our attention, makes it memorable. Being photogenic is that appeal coming to us from the object via the interpretation of its imaginary replica whereby it designates itself as an object. It expresses this power of disclosing the world registered in the photographic image; it designates this mute discourse of things which henceforth speak to us. It has been well pointed out that being photogenic cannot help but be confused with the picturesque, for it can be applied as easily to objects as to the most banal scenery. Indeed, it manifests itself even more in such cases. Picturesqueness is a quality which we attribute to things, a certain language which we lend them. It rests on human observation, and the word, expressing a pictorial intention, puts it very well. Picturesqueness is the intimate and reassuring sense which *we* give things, whereas being photogenic—this world "language" which so unexpectedly strikes us—is the sense which things give *themselves*. The objects or scenery of the world thus repeated are photogenic because they are self-significant in the objective image. Being photogenic expresses the cosmophonic character of the revealing image.

This quality of being photogenic, however, achieves its perfect form only in the moving image. Sadoul has described the emotion of the spectators at the first cinematographic representation of

real movements, especially those evoking natural rhythms: smoke rising into the sky, waves breaking, leaves trembling in the wind. Up to that time one *said*: the smoke is rising into the blue, the leaves are trembling; or, the painting suggests such movements. In the cinema, however, the smoke itself is rising, the leaf really trembles: it declares itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. It is a leaf like that which one encounters in nature and at the same time it is much more, from the moment when, in addition to being that real leaf, it is also, indeed primarily, a *represented* reality. If it were only a real leaf, it would wait for my observation in order to achieve significance. Because it is represented, divided in two in the image, it is already signified, offered in itself as a leaf trembling in the wind. What fascinated the spectators who saw the Lumière projections was, much more than the exact repetition of a natural rhythm, this self-expression of the moving image. As a result of this self-language, the projected leaf, trembling in the breeze, was more "real" and charged with *meaning* than the signifiable leaf on the tree. What was fascinating was less the spectacle of the replica than the photogenic power of the statement by virtue of the replica. A thing was being said here which did not have, could not have its equivalent in nature. On my part, I can attempt to rediscover the slow rising of smoke into the sky, the trembling of birch or aspen leaves in the breeze, as revealed on the screen: I will always add myself to it, *the* immanent significance of this movement will remain closed to me. At the cinema it is this immanent sense which reveals and conceals itself at the same time. The trembling of the leaf is enunciated insofar as it is a trembling, in its nudity.

But the disclosure is not limited to that. This new expression has its laws and, if I may say so, its own syntax, which is itself cosmophonic. With the mobile image a new dimension is introduced in objective representation, that of *time*; the world which it evokes is rhythm and continuous growth. At the cinema, I see the curling smoke *rising* and I see the spray *breaking*. Even more than a moving white form, I "see" this rhythm and this ascension. Henceforth the tempo of things is objectified. Like space in still photography, it is shown on the screen with its essence undisclosed. "Speeding up" reveals ultra-slow rhythms, imperceptible until now, such as the rhythms of germination. "Slow motion," on the

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other hand, stretches out those fugitive moments which the eye cannot capture. In the "fondu-enchainé," reality shown circulating in a somehow reversible time-dimension, produces, as it were, a mingling of periods wherein the past is smoothly incorporated with the present. Now, perhaps, only measurable duration might be said to be irreversible, not time itself whose dimension remains hidden. The graph of movement reveals time in its essence, as pure element.

To the same degree, it augments the self-expressive power of *space*, which, in a strict sense, *unfolds* its multiple dimensions on the screen. Space is *spread out* on the "panoramic screen" where the camera not so much sweeps a given field, as it gives that field the power of slowly defining *itself*<sup>3</sup> by virtue of the divided lens. It rises vertically in a "dive." In the case of "dollying," the notion of distance, inevitably associated with human traveling, becomes a definition of space itself, as the camera progresses toward the object or, on the other hand, ebbs far from it, delimiting its surroundings. Here, space allows *itself* to be looked at from all sides. A lyric space, a space, as it were, freed of the world of objects, a space which bounds, recoils, stands erect, expands, is compressed. A space in which, as has just been said for filmic time, all places throng and merge. The camera is everywhere at once, exploring by various shots a concrete space which little by little defines itself in its entirety, according to its own pulsation.

I have said *little by little*, which reintroduces time. In this new graphology, space and time are revealed one by means of the other. Space is expressed according to a temporal rhythm by means of the wide-angle screen, dollying, the camera angle. Time assumes special form in "Slow Motion" where things are seen describing curves in space which are the decomposition of temporal acts, or else in "Fast Motion" which implies the reverse movement and accelerates time: a reality invisible to the naked eye, like the slow growth of flowers, here takes on an appearance

<sup>3</sup> Set in the same position as the camera, the human eye adapts itself to the space thus discovered. In the final analysis, the eye *names* it. On the screen, the turning movement of the lens—insofar as it might be compared with looking—disappears in its result. There only remains the spread-out space which *is named* in itself.



revealing the unsuspected life of the vegetable world ("Accelerated, the life of flowers is Shakespearean," said Cendrars) and, at the same time, giving body to time's mysterious and hidden reality.

In fact, such sequences restore to us the unperceived unity of phenomena. Space and time here melt into a new "syntax" which discloses the world in its entire being. As if freed from its natural fixity, and, by means of the moving play of the image, restored to a kind of unveiling autonomy, the universe expresses itself in its unconceptual *hitherness*. It joins with itself, becomes moving, reveals itself in its truly synthetic reality, beyond our fragmentary views of it, always reassuring. There is infinitely more here than the simple self-expression of the object in being photogenic. It is the world itself which is being named insofar as it is *world* and totality, borrowing only elements of this "logos" for itself. On the screen, time articulates with space, strengthening the infinite swiftness as well as the infinite slowness of its manifestation. By means of enlarging, the infinite becomes perceptible. It is no longer the human eye which is seeing and ordering, but the world itself which, beginning with its elements, gives meaning to itself and allows itself to be seen.

Such a world is de-fined without us. It is the world "without us." A world uninhabitable for us, whose coordinates are no longer ours. Where time is no longer concrete duration, where space ceases to be that in which we live. Where the growth of flowers becomes the expression, beyond all reference to seeing, of a kind of vegetal verity. Where things are proposed to us in their selfness as things, as if we were given the opportunity to apprehend them as they are in themselves. But that is precisely the illusion. One does not really pass *on the other side* of things. The "beyond" thus propounded remains imaginary, and as such eludes our grasp. It yields itself only as much as it escapes us. If the cinema gives body to this "set purpose of things," which haunts Ponge (the mimosa without me). It is in an imaginary projection which in no way modifies our sensory apprehension of the world. Such a projection excludes, by its very essence, any dialogue; it is the negation of any sort of dialectical rapport. Ponge tries to make an incursion into the beyond of things by means of words. Regardless of his attempted self-effacement, his

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“set purpose,” his attempt is tantamount to forcing entrance into it by a verbal instrument. Identifying himself in some way with things, Ponge is trying very hard to illuminate their opacity and name them insofar as they are things. At the cinema, it is this opacity which is projected by itself, reaching us without our being able to exercise any real grasp upon it, without the possibility of any dialectical relationship between it and us. The screen gives us only an exteriority represented, and then sealed. I have said “cosmophonic” and this must be understood in its meaning of self-manifestation, where what is manifested, protecting the initiative of its disclosure, at the same time keeps itself aloof and conceals itself. Orson Welles has correctly stressed the self-revealing character of the cinematographic image. “The camera...” he writes, “is much more than a recording apparatus, it is a means whereby messages from another world come to us, *a world not ours*, leading us to the heart of the great secret.” But how can one subscribe to this last affirmation? The camera by itself would not know how to introduce us “to the heart of the great secret.” In order that we should be led to that, it would still be necessary that we play a part in the expression. Now, this world ignores us, in the name of its self-definition. This “great secret” remains closed to us. It is as a *secret* that it expresses itself in the shadow of darkrooms. It needs the shadow and may be comprehended only in this imaginary unfolding which deprives us of any grasp upon it. It might indeed, be the secret offered by the world if, enriched by what has been disclosed to us, we could return to the real world in order to perceive it again in another light. But the real world has no continuity with the world thus projected, precisely to the degree that the latter is nothing but the real world become imaginary, the real-imaginary world, and as such not mediatable, or more exactly, self-mediatable. Henceforth, cosmological expression has to do with the world alone.