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# CAMERA

translated by Emmelene Landon

In an interview on Swiss television, Jean-Luc Godard defines the image as the relationship between two distant things being brought together, or two close things being separated. “As thin as a hair, as wide as the dawn,” such is the image. The space between our mental representation of dawn and that of a wisp of hair offers our imagination and our thoughts a chasm to fill, a gigantic space into which images can settle. How then does memory make its selections, with its inventories and erasures?

In a magnificent tribute to Andrei Tarkovsky, *A Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, Chris Marker subtly reminds us of what we often forget: in cinema—more precisely in American and Russian Cinema—there are those who film from the earth and those who film from the sky. Cowboys look up to a limitless sky, a sky they know they owe everything to. Icons, they float above men. They gaze down at the earth and see tiny figures in perpetual agitation, striving to leave their worthless traces.

The image is blurry, a capture from a short film, photographed on a television screen. On the right, a black stain could be a bumblebee whose long, still wing stretches out to the left. From the black stain—an aircraft—thick, white smoke pours out, beyond the frame. The image is immersed in diffuse vapor. Floating in the air just behind, the plane filming the dislocation shows us the wounded bomber. Nothing of its fall, just the curious glow of a target struck the moment the shutter is released. This plane suspended between the intensity of combat and a shattered flight is the match of Pierre Bergougnieux's incandescent *B-17 G*.

Two mesmerizing photographs, of such calm and violence that one is immediately staggered into silence, rendering all commentary useless, are reproduced on pages 280 and 281 of the catalogue for the exhibition *Vues d'en Haut* at the Centre Pompidou-Metz. Their framing is identical. On the left, a city seen from above; on the right, the same city photographed after Enola Gay had dropped the atomic bomb.

How much time had passed between these twin images, images that take our breath away when we realize the extent of the blast? Gone. No traces of anything, absolutely no traces at all, only an immensity of ashes. Clear annihilation photographed from a sovereign height. One of the questions that has kept turning in my mind ever since I saw these two images is whether the pilot took these photos to prove to his superiors that he had accomplished his mission, or in order to convince himself that he hadn't fallen prey to pure hallucination.

How many images—and which—remain, pressed onto our memories after covering miles and miles by plane, car, tram, or foot in the sun, in the rain, blown by the wind, through the dust and sand, the salt, right in the middle of arid, infinite plains, or in the smell of tobacco and alcohol that grabs the throat when entering a casino on a Saturday evening in a small town in Nevada?

At the conference *Looking for the First Spectator* on June 3, 2011 at the Cinémathèque Française, the filmmaker and writer Jean-Louis Comolli showed a fifty-second “Vue Lumière,” shot in 1895. A crowd of men and women with boxes and tripods flocks to the wharf from a ship’s gangway. Some ignore the camera, others wave and tip their hats. *The Photographical Congress Arrives in Neuville-sur-Saône* is a short film that shows the arrival of photographers on their way to a congress at the French Society of Photography, the same year cinema was born. Seventeen meters of film unroll an image of cinema filming photography on the move, an extraordinary osmosis of fluidity and of fixity.

Several years ago, I decided to write about an anonymous photograph at MoMA, surprised by its inclusion in the collection. Some time passed and I still hadn't started to write about this photograph taken at Coronado Beach in 1930. At first glance, one sees only two of the three people in it: a man, face hidden by a stole, lifts a woman up by holding her under her breasts. She smiles at the photographer whose shadow, an integral element of the scene, is the obvious proof of his presence. This photograph could mean nothing more than what it shows, nothing of the thousand and one possible existences of these three characters at Coronado Beach, suspended on the sand one day in 1930, in autumn, winter, spring, summer, how could we know? The seasons follow on, one after the other, and nothing ever really changes on the California coast.

Nevertheless, there are two men and a woman. One man is carrying her, the other photographing. The woman isn't smiling at the man carrying her, but at the man photographing her. It is impossible not to be reminded of *Jules and Jim*, the drama of a woman torn between two men, incapable of choosing. These three are protagonists whose own story has disappeared into thin air, and the MoMA caption, "Coronado Beach, California, circa 1930, silver-salt print, 10.7x6 cm, from the Lois and Bruce Zenkel Collection, number 200.1991," doesn't tell us much, not if they are a couple nor who designed the pattern of the dress, where the earrings came from or how many pieces made up the suit, not the brand of the brilliantine nor where they had walked from or who owned the car parked on the dune. And even if they couldn't know a war was going to break out in Europe nine years later, they had already lived through a Black Thursday, a Black Monday, and a Black Tuesday; though maybe, on that day in 1930, this beach sparkling with mica might well have let them forget.

Another photograph, quite similar in size to the one in the MoMA collection, has intrigued me ever since I found it in a family album, without knowing who took it, or where or when. Perched on a sand dune, a woman stands alone in the middle of the frame, her face tilted over a 6x6 camera. I do not know who this woman photographer being photographed is. Could she be photographing another photographer, perceived in the tarnished reflection of her camera, captured at the moment he or she is photographing her in return? Or was she photographed in a moment that was hers alone, solitude swallowed by the lens, framing precisely that which escaped the one photographing her?