

Photography and Liquid Intelligence

In *Milk*, as in some of my other pictures, an important part is played by complicated natural forms. The explosion of the milk from its container takes a shape which is not really describable or characterizable, but which provokes many associations. A natural form, with its unpredictable contours, is an expression of infinitesimal metamorphoses of quality. Photography seems perfectly adapted for representing this kind of movement or form. I think this is because the mechanical character of the action of opening and closing the shutter—the substratum of instantaneity which persists in all photography—is the concrete opposite kind of movement from, for example, the flow of a liquid. Rodney Graham has expressed this perfectly in his *Two Generators*, which shows a river flowing at night under artificial illumination. There is a logical relation, a relation of necessity, between the phenomenon of the movement of a liquid, and the means of representation. And this could be said to be the case with natural forms in general: they are compelling when seen in a photograph because the relation between them and the whole construct, the whole apparatus and institution of photography is of course emblematic of the technological and ecological dilemma in relation to nature. I think of this sometimes as a confrontation of what you might call the “liquid intelligence” of nature with the glassed-in and relatively “dry” character of the institution of photography. Water plays an essential part in the making of photographs, but it has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined. You certainly don’t want any water in your camera for example! So, for me, water—symbolically—represents an archaism in photography, one that is admitted into the process, but also excluded, contained, or channelled by its hydraulics. This archaism of water, of liquid chemicals, connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an “archaism” here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production-processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving, and so on, which are connected to the origin of techné—like the separation of ores in primitive mining, for example. In this sense, the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory. I think that this “prehistorical” image of photography—a speculative image in which the apparatus itself can be thought of as not yet having emerged from the mineral and vegetable worlds—can help us understand the “dry” part of photography differently. This dry part I identify with optics and mechanics—with the lens and the shutter, either of the camera or of the projector or enlarger. This part of the photographic

Written in January 1989. First published in French and English as “Photographie et intelligence liquide”/“Photography and Liquid Intelligence,” in Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Une Autre Objectivité/Another Objectivity*, exh. cat. (Milan: Idea Books for Centre Nationale des Arts Plastiques, Paris, and Prato: Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, 1989), pp. 231–32.

system is more usually identified with the specific technological intelligence of image-making, with the projectile or ballistic nature of vision when it is augmented and intensified by glass (lenses) and machinery (calibrators and shutters). This kind of modern vision has been separated to a great extent from the sense of immersion in the incalculable which I associate with "liquid intelligence." The incalculable is important for science because it appears with a vengeance in the remote consequences of even the most controlled releases of energy; the ecological crisis is the form in which these remote consequences appear to us most strikingly today.

Now it is becoming apparent that electronic and digital information systems emanating from video and computers will replace photographic film across a broad range of image-making processes. To me, this is neither good nor bad necessarily, but if this happens there will be a new displacement of water in photography. It will disappear from the immediate production-process, vanishing to the more distant horizon of the generation of electricity, and in that movement, the historical consciousness of the medium is altered. This expansion of the dry part of photography I see metaphorically as a kind of hubris of the orthodox technological intelligence which, secured behind a barrier of perfectly engineered glass, surveys natural form in its famously cool manner. I'm not attempting to condemn this view, but rather am wondering about the character of its self-consciousness. The symbolic meaning of natural forms, made visible in things like turbulence patterns or compound curvatures, is, to me, one of the primary means by which the dry intelligence of optics and mechanics achieves a historical self-reflection, a memory of the path it has traversed to its present and future separation from the fragile phenomena it reproduces so generously. In Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris*, some scientists are studying an oceanic planet. Their techniques are typically scientific. But the ocean is itself an intelligence which is studying them in turn. It experiments on the experimenters by returning their own memories to them in the form of hallucinations, perfect in every detail, in which people from their pasts appear in the present and must be related to once again, maybe in a new way. I think this was a very precise metaphor for, among many other things, the interrelation between liquid intelligence and optical intelligence in photography, or in technology as a whole. In photography, the liquids study us, even from a great distance.