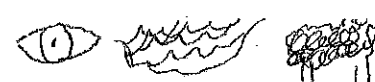[Image]

The Photographic
Message

The press photograph is a message. This message as a whole is constituted by a source of emission, a channel of transmission, and a medium of reception. The source of emission is the news-paper staff, the group of technicians of whom some take the photograph, others select it, crop and compose it, treat it, and then others title it with a caption and a commentary. The medium of reception is the public which reads the newspaper. And the channel of transmission is the newspaper itself, or, more precisely, a complex of concurrent messages of which the photograph is the center but whose environs are constituted by the text, the caption, the headline, the layout, and, more abstractly but no less "informatively," the name of the paper itself (for this name constitutes a knowledge which can powerfully inflect the reading of the message proper: the same photograph can change its meaning by shifting from the [conservative] *Aurore* to the [communist] *Humanité*). Such observations are not a matter of indifference, for they allow us to realize that the three traditional parts of the message do not call for the same

method of exploration; both the emission and the reception of the message pertain to a sociology: a matter of studying human groups, defining motives, attitudes, and trying to link the behavior of these groups to the total society to which they belong. But, for the message itself, the method has to be a different one: whatever the origin and the destination of the message, the photograph is not only a product or a channel, it is also an object, endowed with a structural autonomy: without in any way claiming to sever this object from its use, we must provide here a specific method prior to sociological analysis—this method can only be the immanent analysis of that original structure which the photograph constitutes.

Of course, even from the viewpoint of an immanent analysis, the photograph's structure is not an isolated one; it communicates with at least one other structure, which is the text (headline, caption, or article) by which every press photograph is accompanied. The totality of information is thus supported by two different structures (of which one is linguistic); these two structures are concurrent, but since their units are heterogeneous, they cannot mingle; here (in the text) the message's substance is constituted by words; there (in the photograph) by lines, surfaces, shadings. Further, the two structures of the message occupy separate if contiguous spaces which are not "homogenized," as they are, for instance, in a rebus, which dissolves words and images into a single line of reading. Therefore, though a press photograph is never without written commentary, analysis must first of all deal with each separate structure; it is only once we have exhausted the study of each structure that we will be able to understand the way in which they complement each other. One of these structures is already known—that of language (but not, it is true, that of the "literature" constituted by the newspaper's particular language: a great deal of work still remains to be done in this connection); the other structure, that of the photograph proper, is virtually unknown. We shall limit ourselves here to defining the initial difficulties of a structural analysis of the photographic message.

The Photographic Paradox

What is the content of the photographic message? What is it that the photograph transmits? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image, there is of course a reduction: in proportion, in perspective, in color. But this reduction is at no point a *transformation* (in the mathematical sense of the term); to shift from reality to its photograph, it is not at all necessary to break down this reality into units and to constitute these units into signs substantially different from the object they represent; between this object and its image, it is not at all necessary to arrange a relay, i.e., a code; of course, the image is not the reality, but at least it is its perfect *analogon*, and it is just this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Here appears the particular status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*; a proposition from which we must immediately extract an important corollary: the photographic message is a continuous message.

Are there other messages without a code? At first glance, yes: specifically, all analogical reproductions of reality; drawings, paintings, movies, theater performances. But, as a matter of fact, each of these messages develops in an immediate and evident fashion, beyond the analogical content itself (scene, object, landscape), a supplementary message which is what we commonly call the *style* of the reproduction; here we are concerned with a second meaning, whose signifier is a certain "treatment" of the image as a result of the creator's action, and

whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain "culture" of the society receiving the message. In short, all these imitative "arts" comprise two messages: a *denoted* message, which is the *analogon* itself, and a *connoted* message, which is the way in which the society represents, to a certain extent, what it thinks of the *analogon*. This duality of messages is obvious in all reproductions which are not photographic: there is no drawing, however "exact," whose very exactitude is not turned into a style (the style of hyper-realism); there is no filmed scene whose objectivity is not finally read as the very sign of objectivity. Here again, the study of these connoted messages is still to be made (in particular we must decide if what is called the work of art can be reduced to a system of significations); we can only predict that for all these imitative arts, when they are common ones, the code of the connoted system is most likely constituted by either a universal symbolic or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes (schemas, colors, graphisms, gestures, expressions, arrangements of elements).

Now, in principle, with regard to the photograph, we find nothing of the kind, in any case with regard to the press photograph, which is never "artistic." Since the photograph offers itself as a mechanical analogue of reality, its first message completely "fills" its substance and leaves no room for the development of a second message. In short, of all the structures of information,* the photograph is the only one to be exclusively constituted and occupied by a "denoted" message, which completely exhausts its being; in front of a photograph, the feeling of "denotation,"

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* This is a matter of "cultural" or culturalized structures, of course, and not of operational structures: mathematics, for example, constitutes a denoted structure without any connotation; but if mass society takes it up, using an algebraic formula—for instance, in an article devoted to Einstein —this message, originally purely mathematical, assumes a very heavy connotation, since it *signifies* science.

or if you prefer, of analogical plenitude, is so powerful that the description of a photograph is literally impossible; for to *describe* consists precisely in joining to the denoted message a second message or relay, drawn from a code which is language and which inevitably constitutes, whatever care is taken to be exact, a connotation in relation to the photographic analogue: to describe, then, is not only to be inexact or incomplete, it is to change structures, it is to signify something other than what is shown.*

Now, this purely "denotative" status of the photograph, the perfection and the plenitude of its analogy, in short its "objectivity"—all this risks being mythical (these are the characteristics which common sense attributes to the photograph); for, as a matter of fact, there is a strong probability (and this will be a working hypothesis here) that the photographic message (at least the press message) is also connoted. The connotation is not necessarily immediately apprehensible on the level of the message itself (it is, one might say, both invisible and active, clear and implicit), but we can already infer it from certain phenomena occurring on the level of the message's production and reception: on the one hand, a press photograph is an object worked up, selected, composed, constructed, treated according to various professional, aesthetic, or ideological norms which are so many connotation-factors; and, on the other hand, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*, attached—more or less consciously by the public which consumes it—to a traditional stock of signs; now, every sign supposes a code, and it is this code (of connotation) which we must try to establish. The photographic paradox would then be the co-existence of two messages, one without a code (this would be

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* To describe a drawing is easier, since it ultimately involves describing an already connoted structure, one worked up with a view to a *coded* signification. It may be for this reason that psychological tests use a great many drawings and very few photographs.

the photographic analogue) and the other with a code (this would be the "art," or the treatment, or the "writing," or the rhetoric of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is not of course the collusion of a denoted message and a connoted message: this is the probably inevitable status of all mass communication; the paradox is that the connoted (or coded) message develops here from a message *without a code*. This structural paradox coincides with an ethical one: when we want to be "neutral, objective," we seek to copy reality meticulously, as if the analogical were a resistance factor against the encroachment of values (at least this is the definition of aesthetic "realism"): how then can the photograph be at once "objective" and "encroached upon," natural and cultural? It is by apprehending the mode of imbrication of the denoted message and the connoted message that we may ultimately be able to answer this question. But, to undertake this task, we must remember that in the photograph, since the denoted message is absolutely analogical—i.e., deprived of any recourse to a code, i.e., *continuous*—there is no need to look for the signifying units of the first message; on the contrary, the connoted message does comprise a level of expression and a level of content, of signifiers and of signifieds: hence it requires a veritable deciphering. This deciphering would be premature at present, for in order to isolate the signifying units and the themes (or values) signified, we should have to undertake (perhaps by tests) certain directed readings, making certain elements of the photograph vary artificially, in order to observe whether these variations of forms involve variations of meaning. But at least for the moment we can anticipate the main levels of analysis of photographic connotation.

Connotation Procedures

Connotation, i.e., the imposition of a second meaning upon the photographic message proper, is elaborated at different levels of photographic production (selection, technical treatment, cropping, layout): in short, it is a coding of the photographic analogue; hence it is possible to separate out certain connotation procedures; but we must remember that such procedures have nothing to do with units of signification, as a subsequent analysis of a semantic kind may one day define them: they do not strictly belong to the photographic structure. These procedures are well known; we shall limit ourselves to translating them into structural terms. Strictly speaking, we should clearly separate the first three (trick effects, pose, objects) from the last three (photogeny, aestheticism, syntax), since, in these first three procedures, connotation is produced by a modification of reality itself, i.e., of the denoted message (such methods are of course not peculiar to the photograph); if we include them nonetheless in the photographic connotation-procedures, it is because they, too, benefit from the prestige of denotation: the photograph permits the photographer to *evade* the preparation to which he subjects the scene he will take; the fact nonetheless remains that, from the point of view of a subsequent structural analysis, it is not certain that we can take into account the material they afford.

1. Trick effects

In 1951 a photograph widely circulated in the American press is said to have cost Senator Millard Tydings his seat; this photo-

graph represented the senator in conversation with the communist leader Earl Browder. The photograph happened to have been faked, constituted by the artificial juxtaposition of the two faces. The methodological interest of trick effects is that they intervene without warning on the level of denotation itself, they utilize the special credibility of the photograph, which is merely, as we have seen, its exceptional power of denotation, in order to present as simply denoted a message which is in fact strongly connoted; in no other treatment does connotation assume so completely the "objective" mask of denotation. Of course, signification is possible only to the degree that there is a stock of signs, the rudiments of a code; here the signifier is the conversational attitude of the two figures; it will be noted that this attitude becomes a sign only for a certain society, i.e., with regard only to certain values; it is the hypersensitive anti-communism of the American electorate which makes the interlocutors' gesture the sign of a reprehensible familiarity—which is to say that the code of connotation is neither artificial (as in a true language) nor natural: it is historical.

2. Pose

Consider a press photograph widely circulated during the 1960 American elections: a profile bust shot of President Kennedy, eyes looking upward, hands clasped. Here it is the actual pose of the subject which prepares the reading of the signifieds of connotation: youth, spirituality, purity; the photograph signifies, obviously, only because there exists a stock of stereotyped attitudes which constitute ready-made elements of signification (eyes raised, hands clasped); a "historical grammar" of iconographic connotation would therefore have to seek out its materials in painting, in theater, in associations of ideas, in popular metaphors, etc., i.e., in *culture*. As we have said, the pose is not

a specifically photographic procedure, but it is difficult not to mention it, insofar as it derives its effect from the analogical principle which establishes the photograph: the message here is not "the pose" but "Kennedy praying": the reader receives as a simple denotation what in fact is a double structure—denoted-connoted.

3. Objects

Here we must grant a particular importance to what we might call the pose of objects, since the connoted meaning derives from the objects photographed (either because they have been artificially arranged in front of the lens if the photographer has had the opportunity, or because the layout man has chosen one among several photographs for this particular shot of a certain object). The interest lies in the fact that these objects are acknowledged inductors of associations of ideas (bookcase = intellectual) or, more obscurely, of actual symbols (the gas-chamber door for Chessman's execution refers to the funereal gateway of the ancient mythologies). Such objects constitute excellent elements of signification: on the one hand, they are discontinuous and complete in themselves, which is, for a sign, a physical quality; and, on the other hand, they refer to clear, known signifieds; hence they are the elements of a true lexicon, stable to the point where we can readily constitute them into a syntax. Here, for example, is a "composition" of objects: a window open on tile roofs, a landscape of vineyards; in front of the window, a photograph album, a magnifying glass, a vase of flowers; we are, in other words, in the country, south of the Loire (tiles and vines), in a bourgeois dwelling (flowers on the table), whose aged resident (the magnifying glass) is reliving his memories (photograph album): this is François Mauriac in Malagar (in *Paris-Match*); the connotation "emerges" from all these signifying units, "taken," however, as though the scene

involved were immediate and spontaneous, i.e., without signification; we find this made explicit in the text, which develops the theme of Mauriac's links to the land. The object may not possess a *power* any longer, but it certainly possesses a meaning.

4. *Photogeny*

The theory of photogeny has already been sketched by Edgar Morin in *Le Cinéma ou l'Homme imaginaire,* but this is not the place to discuss the general signification of this procedure. It will suffice to define photogeny in terms of informational structure: in photogeny, the connoted message is within the image itself, "embellished" (i.e., in most cases, sublimated) by techniques of lighting, exposure, and printing. These techniques need be inventoried only if there corresponds to each of them a signified of sufficiently constant connotation to be incorporated into a cultural lexicon of technical "effects" (for instance, the "blur of movement" proposed by Dr. Steinert's team to signify space-time). This inventory, moreover, would afford an excellent occasion for distinguishing aesthetic effects from signifying effects—subject to recognizing perhaps that in photography, contrary to the intentions of exhibition photographers, there is never *art* but always *meaning*—which would at last furnish an exact criterion for the opposition between good painting, however strongly figurative, and photography.

5. *Aestheticism*

For if we can speak of aestheticism in photography, it appears that we do so ambiguously: when the photograph becomes a painting, i.e., a composition or visual substance deliberately

treated in its own texture, either in order to signify itself as "art" (this is the case of the "pictorialism" of the beginning of the century) or in order to impose a usually more subtle and more complex signified than other connotation procedures would allow; thus, Cartier-Bresson constructed Cardinal Pacelli's reception by the faithful of Lisieux like a scene from an Old Master; yet this photograph is not a painting at all; on the one hand, its paraded aestheticism refers (mockingly) to the very idea of such a scene (which is contrary to any real painting), and, on the other hand, the composition here signifies in an explicit way a certain ecstatic spirituality, translated precisely in terms of an objective spectacle. Moreover, we see here the difference between photograph and painting: in the scene by some Primitive, "spirituality" is not a signified at all but, one might say, the very being of the image; of course, there can be, in certain paintings, code elements, rhetorical figures, period symbols; but no signifying unit refers to spirituality, which is a mode of being, not the object of a structured message.

6. *Syntax*

We have already mentioned a discursive reading of object-signs within one and the same photograph; naturally, several photographs can be formed into a sequence (as is commonly done in illustrated periodicals); the connotation-signifier is then no longer found on the level of any of the fragments of the sequence, but on that—the supra-segmental level, as we should say in linguistics—of the concatenation. Consider, for example, four shots of a presidential hunt at Rambouillet; in each, the illustrious huntsman (Vincent Auriol) is aiming his rifle in an unlikely direction, greatly endangering the keepers, who run away or drop to the ground: the sequence (and the sequence alone) represents a comic effect which derives, accord-

ing to a familiar procedure, from the repetition and the variation of attitudes. It will be noted in this regard that the single photograph is very rarely (i.e., with great difficulty) comical, contrary to the drawing; the comic requires movement, i.e., repetition (which is readily obtained in the cinema), or typification (which is possible in drawing), these two "connotations" being denied to the photograph.

Text and Image

Such are the chief connotation procedures of the photographic image (once again, we are concerned here with techniques, not with units). To them may be joined the text which accompanies the press photograph. Three remarks should be made at this point.

First: The text constitutes a parasitical message intended to connote the image, i.e., to "enliven" it with one or more secondary signifieds. In other words, and this is an important historical reversal, the image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is the words which, structurally, are parasitical on the image; this reversal has its price: in the traditional modes of "illustration," the image used to function as an episodic return to denotation, starting from a principal message (the text), which was perceived as connoted, precisely because it needed an illustration; in the present relation, the image does not come to illuminate or "realize" the words; it is the words which come to sublimate, patheticize, or rationalize the image; but since this operation is performed accessorily, the new informational set seems chiefly based on an objective (denoted) message, of which words are only a sort of secondary, almost inconsequential vibration; in the past, the image used to illustrate the text (made it clearer); today the text burdens the image, loads it

with a culture, a morality, an imagination; there used to be a reduction from text to image; today there is an amplification from the one to the other: connotation is now experienced only as the natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogy; hence we confront a characteristic process of the naturalization of the cultural.

Second: The connotation-effect probably differs according to the mode of presenting the words; the closer the words are to the image, the less they seem to connote it; caught up by the iconographic message, so to speak, the verbal message seems to participate in its objectivity, the connotation of language is made "innocent" through the denotation of the photograph; it is true that there is never a real incorporation, since the substances of the two structures (here graphic, there iconic) are irreducible; but there are probably degrees of amalgamation; the caption probably has a less obvious effect of connotation than the headline or the article; headline and article are noticeably separate from the image, the headline by its emphasis, the article by its distance, the former because it breaks with, the latter because it distances, the content of the image; the caption, on the contrary, by its very placing, by its average dose of reading matter, seems to duplicate the image, i.e., to participate in its denotation.

Yet it is impossible (and this will be a third remark apropos of the text) for the words to "duplicate" the image; for in the shift from one structure to the other, secondary signifieds are inevitably elaborated. What is the relation of these connotation-signifieds to the image? What is involved here is apparently an explicitation, i.e., to a certain degree, a stress; in effect, in most cases the text merely amplifies a set of connotations already included within the photograph; but sometimes, too, the text produces (invents) an entirely new signified, one which is somehow projected retroactively onto the image, so that it seems denoted there: *"They have had a brush with death, as*

their faces show," says the headline of a photograph in which we see Elizabeth and Philip getting out of an airplane; yet at the moment of the photograph these two persons still knew nothing about the possibility of the accident they had just escaped. Sometimes, too, the words can even contradict the image so as to produce a compensatory connotation; one of Gerbner's analyses in *The Social Anatomy of the Romance Confession Cover Girl* shows that in certain romance magazines the verbal message of the headlines on the cover (of a gloomy and disturbing content) always accompanied the image of a radiant cover girl; the two messages here form a compromise; the connotation has a regulating function, it preserves the irrational movement of projection-identification.

Photographic Non-signification

We have seen that the code of connotation was apparently neither "natural" nor "artificial" but historical, or perhaps one should say "cultural"; its signs are gestures, attitudes, expressions, colors, or effects endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practices of a certain society: the link between signifier and signified—i.e., strictly speaking, the signification—remains, if not unmotivated, at least entirely historical. Hence we cannot say that modern man projects into his reading of the photograph certain characterial or "eternal" feelings and values, i.e., infra- or trans-historical feelings and values, unless we make it clear that signification is always elaborated by a specific history and society; signification is, in short, the dialectical movement which resolves the contradiction between cultural man and natural man.

Thanks to its code of connotation, the reading of the photograph is therefore always historical; it depends on the reader's

"knowledge," just as if this were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned its signs. All things considered, the photographic "language" does in fact suggest certain ideographic languages in which analogical units and signaletic units are mixed, with the difference that the ideogram is experienced as a sign while the photographic "copy" passes for the pure and simple denotation of reality. To recognize this code of connotation would therefore be to isolate, to inventory, and to structure all the "historical" elements of the photograph, all the parts of the photographic surface which derive their very discontinuity from a certain knowledge on the reader's part, or, one might say, from his cultural situation.

Now this is a task which may take us very far indeed. No one knows if there are "neutral" parts of a photograph, or at least it may be that utter non-signification in photographs is altogether exceptional; in order to solve this problem, we should first have to elucidate completely the mechanisms of reading (in the physical, and no longer semantic, meaning of the term), or, one might say, of perceiving the photograph; now, on this point, we do not know much: How do we read a photograph? What do we perceive? In what order, according to what itinerary? What is it, in fact, to "perceive"? If, according to certain hypotheses of Bruner and Piaget, there is no perception without immediate categorization, the photograph is verbalized at the very moment it is perceived; or better still: it is perceived only when verbalized (or, if verbalization is delayed, there is a disorder of perception, interrogation, anxiety of the subject, traumatism, according to the Cohen-Séat hypothesis apropos of filmic perception). In this perspective, the image, immediately apprehended by an interior metalanguage, which is language itself, actually has no denoted state; it exists socially only when immersed in at least a primary connotation, that of the categories of language; and we know that all language accommodates itself to things—that it connotes reality,

even if only by articulating it; the connotations of the photograph would therefore coincide, *grosso modo*, with the major connotation levels of language.

Hence, beyond "perceptual" connotation, hypothetical but possible, we would then encounter more particular modes of connotation. First of all, a "cognitive" connotation, whose signifiers would be selected, localized in certain parts of the *analogon*: looking at this city view, I *know* that I am in a North African country, because I see on the left a road sign in Arabic script, in the center a man in a gandurah, etc.; here the reading closely depends on my culture, on my knowledge of the world; and it is likely that a good press photograph (and they are all good, since they are selected) readily relies on the supposed knowledge of its readers, choosing those prints which involve the greatest possible quantity of information of this kind, so as to "euphorize" the reading; if we photograph the destruction of Agadir, we had better scatter around a few signs of "Arabicity," although "Arabicity" has nothing to do with the disaster itself; for the connotation resulting from knowledge is always a reassuring power: man loves signs, and he loves them to be clear.

Perceptual connotation, cognitive connotation: there remains the problem of ideological (in the broadest sense of the term) or ethical connotation, the connotation which introduces reasons or values into the reading of the image. This is a strong connotation; it requires a greatly elaborated signifier, of a readily syntactical order: an encounter of personages (as we have seen apropos of *trick effects*), a development of attitudes, a constellation of objects; a son has just been born to the Shah of Iran; here in the photograph we have: royalty (cradle worshipped by a host of servants surrounding it), hygiene (white surgical gowns, Plexiglas lid of the cradle), the nonetheless human condition of kings (the baby is crying); i.e., all the contradictory elements of the princely myth as we consume it

nowadays. Here we are concerned with apolitical values, and their lexicon is rich and clear; it is possible (but this is merely a hypothesis) that, on the contrary, a political connotation is generally entrusted to the text, insofar as political choices are always, so to speak, in bad faith: of a particular photograph I can give a rightist or leftist reading (see in this regard an IFOP survey published by *Les Temps Modernes* in 1955); denotation, or its appearance, is impotent to modify political options: no photograph has ever convinced or refuted anyone (but it can "confirm"), insofar as political consciousness is perhaps nonexistent outside of the *logos*: politics is what permits *all* languages.

Such remarks sketch a kind of differential table of photographic connotations; we see in any case that connotation reaches very far. Is this to say that a pure denotation is impossible? If it exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the non-signifying, the neutral, the objective, but quite the contrary at the level of strictly traumatic images; trauma is just what suspends language and blocks signification. Of course, certain normally traumatic situations can be apprehended in a photographic process of signification; but this is precisely because they are indicated through a rhetorical code which distances them, sublimates them, pacifies them. Strictly traumatic photographs are rare, the trauma is entirely dependent on the certainty that the scene has really occurred: *the photographer had to be there* (this is the mythical definition of denotation); but this granted (which, to tell the truth, is already a connotation), the traumatic photograph (fires, shipwrecks, catastrophes, violent deaths) is the one about which there is nothing to say: the shock photo is by structure non-signifying: no value, no knowledge, at the limit no verbal categorization can have any hold over the process instituting its signification. We might imagine a kind of law: the more direct the trauma, the more difficult the connotation; or even: the "mythological"