

3_ PHOTOGRAPHY AS DIAGNOSIS OF CONTEMPORANEITY

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As far as the political sphere is concerned, photographic images have always played a decisive role within battles for representational hegemony, thereby leaving their trace on each historical moment of contemporary society. Evidently, we are not dealing with the staging of opposing 'truths' but of textualities whose ultimate stakes are the antithetic effects of truth itself. However, this does not entail a merging of reality into discursivity, as there will always remain an effective 'inherence' amongst practices, lived experiences and the world into which each subject is thrust. The problem is that this inherence is not deployed as a configuration of meaning but through a discursivity comprising various perspectives, engagements, and inflections. Keeping this in mind, photography will function as a resource for the diagnosis of contemporary tensions, and this in the hands of social actors endowed with differing roles. The photograph enables a "thorough examination" (i.e. "a diagnosis") and the formulation of a judgment. In short, we are rather far removed from the idea that a photograph "shows" reality. By contrast, the photograph takes on a "symptomatic" mode of being, assuming "known" correlations with various degrees of intensity. But the semantic potential of this diagnosis and the illocutive force of the inscribed judgments function as a kind of "argumentation through images" and depend on the entries in the body of work, the types of "affference", and the status ascribed to photography (Rastier, 2001: 228).

It is within this theoretical framework that one can gauge the effectiveness of the immense photographic series entitled *Fish Story* (Sekula, 2002), a textual composite staking out a

position against prototypical notions of globalization. At this very moment, the concept of globalization is undoubtedly at the heart of representational battles while informing the crisis of contemporaneous identity. This series, created by photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, has an artistic status, implying that the spectator is invited to saturate his or her semantization with figurative and plastic traits. Following Nelson Goodman, it can be said that this status guarantees that Sekula's photographs—as far as their textuality is concerned—will be endowed with a heightened semantic and syntactic density (Goodman, 1969). However, in itself, this does not suffice. In addition to its obligation to produce an immeasurable vista for the tensive connections between the enunciated (*énoncé*) and the enunciation (*énonciation*), one cannot fail to note that semantic and syntactic saturation is fundamental to a veritable “reasoning through figures” (Fabri, 1998). In other words, it forms the basis for a diagnosis of humanity's contemporary ‘globalized’ political and existential identity. This allows us to do away with an ambiguity: in no way does artistic status compromise the testimonial efficacy of the photograph, nor does it force us to relegate the photograph's emotional dimension to a secondary position in relation to its cognitive dimension.

Theoretical Preliminaries

First and foremost, we must point out that our analysis diverges from both the aprioristic and sociological ‘ready-made’ knowledge concerning the phenomenon of globalization. Rather, it attempts to describe semiotically—prompted by the figurative level of photographic texts—how the political and existential identity of the immigrant laborer is called into question by *Fish Story*. Exclusively taking actual symptoms as its starting point, this photographic series presents perspectives on contemporary labor, and offers itself as a diagnostic deposit probing into the emergence of phenomena of globalization. Accordingly, our corpus will not exemplify the preconceived notion of a globalization commonly understood in terms of the infiltration, insinuation and hegemonic imposition of one (Western, liberal, etc) culture on a planetary scale. However, despite the fact that our focus is indeed concentrated largely on symptomatic forms of contemporaneity as signaled within a pertinent diagnostic framework (i.e. the corpus we are examining), this does not mean that we will only deal with what the photographs ‘show’ us. We will speak about the photos’ figurative character, but this is not at all reducible to what the photograph supposedly ‘illustrates’. Indeed, first and foremost, the figurative plane must be understood as an “inter-actantial” horizon (Basso, 2003) dependent on the polysensoriality of the values at play. Secondly, as Jacques Fontanille (2004) emphasized, the figurative is endowed with memory and tensive vectoriality (prefiguration). Lastly, the figurative character can take on different shapes in order to present irreconcilable inner tensions that require a semantic resolution through a *figural* key (in other words, it may warrant a rhetoric of the photographic image).

We know how figurality arises as a necessary but still tentative discursive profile that prefigures any argumentation, as is the case with scientific metaphors (Fabri, 2000). In addition, figurality may infringe upon the institutional rules of communication, as when enunciation must rely on tropes so as to bypass the suppression affecting direct speech. Moreover, the figural is also anticipated in function of the subjectivity of the enunciation, which concerns the enunciator as well as the addressee, while taking into account the competence required for producing a frame for narrative transformations. Furthermore, the figural should not be considered as merely one figurative “area” distinguishable by virtue of its high density of features that may well become pertinent as objects of the natural world. Instead, the figural must be seen as the “construction of perspectives for discursive material emphasizing internal relations, especially in terms of the tension between plastic and figurative elements” (Basso, 2003: 29).

With respect to Sekula's work, one can safely say that, on the one hand, the photographer faces opposite social and political forces traversing the lives of immigrants in addition to the strong tensions regarding identity. On the other hand, Sekula is faced with a stratification of enunciations—especially concerning the representation of scenes and landscapes of labor—which precede and stigmatize *Fish Story* with notions such as alienation, deterritorialization, exploitation, and so forth (cf. Sekula (2002), especially the chapters “Red Passenger” and “From the Panorama to the Detail”). *Fish Story*'s internal figurality presents and elaborates a diagnostic space for a moving ‘social body’ showing contradictory symptoms, while its figurality also departs from commonplaces informing the battle for representational hegemony.

The majority of the images taken by the American photographer are set in some of the most important seaports of the world. As such, the series presents itself in the form of a contemporary cartography of harbor life. As the Indian theorist Homi Bhabha affirms, in these images “the harbor and the stockmarket become the *pyrage moralisé* of a containerized, computerized world of global trade” (Bhabha, 1994: 8). The title, *Fish Story*, is decidedly emblematic, precisely because depictions of fishing boats, fishermen, fish or the sea are so rare. The only photos of harbor landscapes without containers are of deserted places, vestiges of the past, remnants of a forgotten world where it was possible, unlike today, to devote one's life to fishing. By contrast, the series contains representations of harbors, complete with naval machinery, cranes, trucks, and port workers. It is precisely from the semantic tension between the title of the series and the textual corpus that our analysis starts. The title's fish as well as the sea are conspicuously absent from the images. Assuming that the disjunction between the title and the photos is significant, we must examine how this semantic tension can ultimately attain some kind of resolution.

The Epic of the Container

While not exclusively political in its contestation, *Fish Story* offers a problematization of a state of identity through its focus on various contemporary harbors. *Fish Story* is a photographic work (and an essay) composed of seven image 'chapters' and two texts by Sekula that retrace the histories and theorizations of the representation of industrial and post-industrial labor, as well as the iconographic tradition of marine landscapes. In a certain sense, the objective of the two essays is to show how *Fish Story*, in its own eccentric manner, inserts itself within the Western iconographic tradition of labor and the harbor. A number of the series' images are representational configurations that correspond to the great romantic landscapes so prominent in 18th-Century Germany. However, contrary to the sublime landscape where man perceives his own grandeur by appreciating the grandeur of natural elements, *Fish Story* posits an epic of the machine and the container.

The seven photographic chapters of the series collect images taken between 1989 and 1994. The first introductory sequence of photographs is entitled *Fish Story* (1989-1993), and is comprised of images of the Los Angeles dock. *Loaves and Fishes* on the other hand is mainly concerned with the port of Rotterdam, but also features Gdansk and Barcelona. *Middle Passage* again focuses on Rotterdam, but presents images of the open sea, in this case the Atlantic, as well. *Seventy in Seven* is set in South Korea, as it focuses on Seoul and Ulsan while exploring the lives of the workers employed at the large naval company Hyundai. The fifth chapter, *Message in a Bottle*, shows photographs of Portuguese and Spanish harbors such as Puerto Pesquero, while *True Cross* contains images of Mexican ports such as San Juan de Ulua in Vera Cruz, as well as the Cuban port of Malecon. The final chapter, *Dictatorship of the Seven Seas*, resumes with the Los Angeles seaport and that of Hong Kong. All seven chapters show images of containers, cargo liners preparing or ready for loading, as well as anonymous dockworkers whose faces we can almost never see, and who are only identified by captions representing them as employees of large enterprises or naval companies, such as Hyundai, Mitsui, Evergreen, American President, and so forth. These loci are so striking because, instead of using their potential to signal identifying traits that might have exposed their provenance, they become so similar and indistinguishable that the suspicion arises that these photographs address the cultural processes responsible for the leveling of labor landscapes and for the neutralization of differences amongst dockworkers coming from every part of the world. From Rotterdam to Seoul, laborers of all seaports share the same existential condition: they perform a "relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha, 1994: 9). Indeed, in the global ports as photographed by Allan Sekula, everything has changed

compared to the time when it was still possible to discern nationality through a boat, cargo, or through a naval company. Or, as Sekula writes:

"Things are more confused now. A scratchy recording of the Norwegian national anthem blares out from a loudspeaker at the Sailors' Church on the bluff above the channel. The container ship being greeted flies a Bahamian flag of convenience. It was built by Koreans laboring long hours in the giant shipyards of Ulsan. The crew, underpaid and overworked, could be Honduran or Filipino. Only the captain hears a familiar melody." (Sekula, 2002: 12)

The gap with an irremediably lost time is marked by those images that feature boats of a distant past: sailing ships. However, these sailboats are only offered to the viewer in the form of small-scale models in naval museum displays, or the shop window of a jeweler. Even rowing boats are exhibited in the Prins Hendrik naval museum of Rotterdam, and passenger ships also featured there have become collector's items. Instead of sailing ships and passenger boats it is really the container vessel that is the protagonist of *Fish Story*—it is no coincidence that some critics proposed "Container Story" as a more fitting title. Besides, even living spaces can be confused with containers, as suggested by titles such as "Waterfront vendors living in containers" or "Mike and Mary, an unemployed couple who survive by scavenging and who, from time to time, seek shelter in empty containers". The container is a space signaling work. However, it can often also become a habitation, while anonymous living spaces can come to resemble containers, such as those built for the dockworkers of Hyundai in Ulsan. In all of these cases the existential landscape of man merges entirely with that of labor, as can be seen in the exhaustive assimilation symbolized by the figure of the container box that simultaneously stands for both the receptacle carrying and circulating commodities across the oceans (a box just as itinerant as the commodities it holds), and for the cubicle man is forced to live in. Just like goods, the migrant worker is held, restrained, packaged, parceled and prepared inside a container.

Be that as it may, it is essential that we don't stop by noting that the images almost exclusively show containers rather than fish. Thus, one needs to go further than art criticism and those sociological theories of globalization that merely point out that the title of the series refers to what the images contain *in absentia*, namely the natural element that has been substituted in our post-industrial society by the artificial element par excellence, i.e. the commodity. One needs to uncover a more profound motivation for the tension between the title and the text, without limiting oneself to an analysis of figurative representation. Instead, one must emphasize the figural dimension of the image, as the latter, as Pierluigi Basso stresses, "will not be reduced by

us to prototypes of the imaginary nor to symbolic meanings" (Basso, 2003: 30), nor to broad generalizations that may pose the risk of losing sight of the rhetoric of the photographs we are examining. It is not so much a question of connecting opposites such as container and fish, the artificial and the natural, as art critics have done, but of turning one's attention to the simple fact that, before anything else, the container is something that envelops and encloses, within which contemporary humankind is rigidly bound to. Indeed, a fish is also 'contained', but unlike the container box, the water of the sea is a reservoir organically connected to its 'content'. A fish in the sea is thus 'contained' in a completely different manner compared to commodities (and people) inside a container. A fish is 'contents' as it is closely and biologically attached to its container, thereby forming an inseparable part of it.

A Fish Out of Water

From the semantic fracture between the title and the corpus emerges the tension between two types of receptacles, namely the container and the aquatic environment. Because Sekula's series confronts us with houses and containers instead of the fishing space of the sea, this means that its theme is linked to the *subtraction of natural environment*. If on the one hand the rigid container is considered hostile to man, while on the other hand the aquatic reservoir is presented as soft and as the guarantor of life to fish, we may propose that it is precisely the subtraction of the natural that enables us to compare the condition of the immigrant worker to that of a 'fish out of water': both risk death by suffocation. In contrast to 'man contained in a container', the organic and healthy relation of fish in the sea calls to mind the concept of *sacred* as defined by Gregory Bateson in his *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (Bateson, 1973). In the words of Bateson, the *sacred* is a "healthy ecology". For the 'fish out of the water' and for the migrant worker, the subtraction of the natural world presents itself as a violation of an ecological, salutary and sacred system. In *Fish Story*, the negation of the sacred relation, or the "disease" as Bateson calls it, sets in precisely because the necessary unity of a container with its contents has been lost. Through the subtraction of the natural, the relation between the receptacle and its contents has been damaged and profaned. If we can agree with Bataille when he states that "what concrete totality is to objects considered in isolation, the *sacred* is perhaps to the *profane*" (Bataille, 1998), one may realize that the disease, the profane, is describable in terms of separation and missing relations. In this sense, *Fish Story* is to be understood as a diagnosis through images.

"To solve the "rebus" posed by Sekula's photographic series, it is necessary to take an anamorphic view, which plastically deflagrates the figurative landscape so as to be recomposed as the expression of a new (indeed figural) content, which although unstable, will appear in the form of a text's privileged isotopic connectors, since these

result from the perception of a structure made of more profound semantic relations." (Basso, 2003: 30)

"The Relocation of the Home and the World"

Fish Story contains only one representation of a fish out of the water. It is a photograph of an elusive eel trying to reach the small stream of water on the floor of a fish market in Pusan, South Korea. The eel's futile escape attempt is really an emblem of the human condition 'presentified' in *Fish Story*. In this image, the eel is a fish out of the water just like all the laborers of Sekula's series. The fish out of the water, or the "unhomely" laborer Bhabha alludes to, is extracted from his habitat and prepared as a commodity: at the market he is put on display, cooked, processed into a dish or packaged. The isotopy of 'man for sale' is corroborated by other images, in the photograph entitled *Engine-room worker's ear protection* (Sekula, 2002: 56) for example, where the text composed in the first person, i.e. "I can not be fired. Slaves are sold", reminds us that, for the laborer, death will not come from the barrel of a gun, but from the imposition of economic laws governing the world market. Therefore, the contemporary "unhomely" worker is the locus of an identity riddled with powerful tensions between dispersive forces and rigid regulations. Rather than just a pamphlet on contemporary labor conditions and spaces, *Fish Story* is a reflection on the political tensions between conflicting forces of identity, a reflection on the relation between the non-organic and the profane, between a receptacle and its contents, between open dispersion and rigid containment, between cosmopolitan scattering and existential contrition. In short, *Fish Story* explores the tension between global dispersion and passionate homing.

Works Quoted

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