Photography and imagination

Henrique Loff Silva

Abstract:
The article is structured from the point of view of a photographer. Through this evocative first-person lens, the author — grounded in what is interpreted as the ontological essence of photography — articulates three primary modes of imagination that various types of photographs may elicit: sensorial, fictional, and material. In a compelling final development, the author introduces an enigmatic form of photography that, rather than stimulating the imagination, serves to block it.

Keywords*: photography, imagination, "That-has-been", fiction, nothingness.*

Resumo:
Este artigo é escrito a partir da perspectiva de um fotógrafo. O autor, numa óptica pessoal e evocativa, com base no que se entende ser a essência ontológica da fotografia, distingue três modos principais de imaginação que diferentes tipos de fotografias podem suscitar — a imaginação sensorial, ficcional e material. Por fim, num movimento contrário particularmente marcante, o autor explora um tipo enigmático de fotografias que, em vez de estimularem a imaginação, a bloqueiam.

Palavras-chave: *fotografia, imaginação, "Isto foi", ficção, nada.*

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Introductory Note

This article arises from the perspective of a photographer. It is grounded in a sustained practice. I do not intend to present an exhaustive account of the relations between photography and imagination, nor do I wish to uphold a specific thesis. Taking concrete photographs as a point of departure, I seek to explain certain imaginative processes that occur in me when I contemplate them, when I look at them with an enchanted gaze. I have chosen images that clearly interest me, in an effort to find in them what can awaken imagination. From these exercises arise certain questions and perplexities that a photographer should note when taking his craft a little more seriously. Perhaps the most demanding — and, at the same time, the most fascinating — task of a photographer consists less in taking photographs than in knowing how to look at them. Which is to say: in knowing how to imagine them.

The Noema of Photography

As a photographer, as a practitioner and collector of photographs, I can hardly avoid the theme of the ontological identity of photography — its fundamental nature, its distinctive particularities. I do not believe I can ignore this theme, especially if I wish to relate it to imagination. André Bazin and Roland Barthes place particular emphasis on this aspect. When I find myself facing a photograph, I am compelled to believe in the existence of the thing represented; I cannot deny that «the thing has been there». «The name of Photography's noema will therefore be: "That-has-been", or again: the Intractable», writes Barthes in the famous passage from his final work, devoted precisely to photography.[1] Indeed, how can one refute that this is the founding order, the metaphysical status of photography? How can one underestimate the importance of this premise? A painting may be more faithful and precise than a photograph, yet it will never have the credibility of photographic proof — the image comes into being differently in each case. A painter may imitate reality without having seen it; a photographer is someone who has necessarily seen the photographed thing (the person, the object, the landscape). I am not, with this, taking a given photograph as an inevitably exact copy of reality, but as a disturbing reverberation of a past fragment that still, mysteriously, glimmers, an «emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art», as Barthes puts it.[2] I must grant photography a power of authentication that surpasses its power of representation. What photography offers me, irrefutably, is not a presence but the proof of a "presence" of something positioned in space and time, a thing or an event that the photographer witnessed and recorded, even though

[1] «Le nom du noème de la Photographie sera donc: "Ça-a-été", encore: l'Intraitable» (Barthes, R., 1980, *La chambre claire – Note sur la photographie*, p. 120). Naturally, I cannot consider here images created digitally — whether or not through the recent models of "Artificial Intelligence" — nor photographs so extensively manipulated that they lose that necessary and singular connection with their referent.

[2] «émanation du *réel passé*: une *magie*, non un art» (*Ibid*. p. 138).

photography itself cannot guarantee any resemblance to, or veracity about, that photographed thing or event.

In fact, if we go back to the origins of photography — to the five decades preceding the official date of its invention in 1839 — we find, within the scientific and cultural milieu of the Western world, countless testimonies that confirm a very precise desire: the proto-photographers of that time wished to produce images that would inscribe themselves spontaneously on a photosensitive surface.[3] This aspiration is understandable if we consider that, since the Renaissance, the projected image produced by the *camera obscura* (the optical device that was the precursor of the photographic camera) had been known. In this desire — which lies at the root of the initial conception of photography, in the notion that an image could be fixed "spontaneously", without the intervention of the human hand, onto a given surface — there already seems to be implied, we must admit, the very specificity of photography, that which distinguishes it from painting: the fact that, with photography, it is the projected image of the very presence of something that becomes inexorably inscribed ("That-has-been") upon a given physical support.

What remains of photography's essence today, in an age when we are flooded with images every passing minute? What importance does the "That-has-been" still hold? The specificity of that disquiet towards what has been seems to have been replaced by a kind of fascination with the "This-is-now". For my part, I remain held to what has always struck me in photography (perhaps that is why I remain faithful to obsolete photographic processes, never resorting to digital tools).

Whenever the camera clicks, it inevitably captures something. From the object that once stood before the camera radiated rays of light that now reach me — I, who am here, before the image, at another point in space and time. An image in which an unrepeatable event, now irretrievably gone, continues to reverberate. As Barthes says, photography is «literally an emanation of the referent».[4] In some way, the photographed object comes to touch me with its very own rays! The certainty we have in the "That-has-been" is only possible by virtue of the optical and chemical phenomena inherent to the act of photographing (focusing, developing, etc.).

The unique materiality of the photographic image may produce a particular impression. In a certain photograph I see, for instance, a dark forest where at the heart of the lush vegetation there is a blaze of light — a large stone struck by a powerful stream of sunlight. I immediately notice its effects: I feel the stone grow warm, I sense the spread of a mineral warmth running through it. It is almost as if I am allowed to access the interior of matter, as Bachelard would say. I can even experience tactile (the texture of the rock), olfactory (the scent of the forest), and

[3] On this subject, see: Batchen, G., 1997, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, p. 180.

[4] «littéralement une émanation du référent» (Barthes, R., 1980, La chambre claire – Note sur la photographie, p. 126).

auditory (the sound of the wind) sensations. And as the rays of light seem to touch me, I cannot resist the temptation to run the pulp of my fingers over the surface of the photographic paper, to feel the slight burn of that white stain.[5] What first astonishes me in one of Edward Weston's celebrated peppers (link in note[6]) is the miracle of the referent's attachment to the photograph (only on a second reading — a "cultural" reading — do I become interested in its sculptural quality). Thanks to this wonder, I have the feeling of drawing closer, through the image, to the very nature of things, as if stepping outside myself in order to sense them inwardly — to, in this case, "taste" what a pepper is.

After all, what kind of experience is this? In my view, it stems from the specificity of photography. But could it take place solely in the sensory domain? Is it not rather an experience that already unfolds in the domain of the imagination? What is at stake here is the difficult realm of phenomenology — which I will not explore.[7] I do recognise, however, that this experience of photography cannot result from the simple reception of images; it is instead the outcome of an active, productive process, capable of generating the new and the unexpected. What I mean is that the "sensations" (tactile, olfactory, auditory) I have just described, this "drawing closer to the nature of things", already result from the very activity of the imagination. They are imaginative acts, something not present in the photograph itself but which, as we have seen, its metaphysical density elicits, or rather, makes possible. The imagination is thus the operator of this passage from the possible to the unreal. It is what allows the real to be subverted, even denied. It is what allows the absent, the non-existent, the absurd, to be experienced.

A matter still to be settled: can imagination liberate us from the constraints of the senses and the dictates of reason?

Through the Image

If I contemplate the photograph of a given mountain landscape, I may so strongly believe in the existence of the thing photographed — such is the reliability with which its radiance convinces me of the reality of that landscape — that I end up being drawn to the extent of space represented in the photograph. I wish to visit, or even inhabit, that domain. I may feel myself transported there, and into the

[5] Would the same happen with painting? When faced with Cézanne's fruit or van Gogh's flowers, what kind of experience unfolds? Painting seems to demand a decoding, a set of intellectual operations; it justifies abstractions, ideas, rather than what we at first take to be sensations.

[6] Ver: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/58496

[7] Sartre presents his theory of imagination in *L'imaginaire* (Sartre, J.-P., 1940, *L'imaginaire – Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*). In this work, we become aware of the difficulties involved in a phenomenological description of the mental image: the difficulty, for example, of describing the subjective evocation of an absent object (the most difficult image to describe); the difficulty of determining, ultimately, what an image is and what kind of consciousness apprehends it; and the difficulty of determining the very structure of the consciousness in which imagination may take place.

surrounding space that is not visible. I may wish to cross into what lies beyond the limits of the frame. I then experience a perfectly acceptable imaginative reverie: I walk along the stony path of that mountain, making my way toward the unknown slope. One might say that, in doing so, I set in motion a specific kind of movement: a movement toward what the frozen image prevents me from seeing — the movement, I am tempted to say, of cinema.

I now turn to a concrete case (I will risk showing a series of my own photographs) (Figure 1). Three photographs depict the same setting: a room in which three slides are projected onto a projection screen. Each projected image corresponds to a photograph.

Figure 1. Henrique Loff Silva, *Three Seas* series, 2007, triptych, pigment ink on paper (79.9 x 60 cm each).

A patient observer will begin by lingering in front of the first photograph (Figure 1, left). In a manner similar to what I have just described, there should arise within him — or so I hope — the desire to visit this space. In this case, however, the observer might feel tempted to "jump" into the image, as Alice did to the other side of the mirror. He will thus enter a first dimension — the room where the slide is projected, where the projector and the screen are located (and he will be in the company of the photographer responsible for that installation). Another leap, and this time he will plunge into the projected image: he enters the next dimension. He is now on the beach (summer holidays), beside a second photographer looking through the viewfinder of his camera, while three children bathe in the sea. He guesses the thoughts of the older girl ("I'm cold, I can see myself cold and shivering in the photograph — quick, take the picture!") and of the girl with the swimming cap ("Look, I can swim!"), and he hears the little boy shouting. Placing himself beside these children, he looks in the direction of the second photographer, as the two girls do, and then another marvel occurs: he leaps to the other side of the lens of his camera and, once again, finds himself in that living-room. If the observer plunges into the lens of the first photographer, he will end up back in the initial position, before the photograph,

in what we all assume to be the real world. Without restraining his imagination, he even admits that the beings who rightfully inhabit that image possess, like many others, the very same power to leap between dimensions. And so the three bathers, chilled to the bone, jump out of the screen, leaving salty wet footprints on the living-room floor, on their way to dry towels.

In the second photograph (Figure 1, centre), the observer may likewise be drawn into it, into the dimensions of space and time that unfold there. He knows that those people are watching the sea. On this side, on the viewer's side of the image, he is unsettled by what he cannot see. As the sea entangles itself in the thoughts of those beings, he swiftly merges with them, as if by metempsychosis. He enters that dimension, infiltrates himself into the being of each member of that group (something catches the attention of the child standing on tiptoe), and he looks at the beach bathed in the orange-violet light of sunset. Finally, in the third photograph (Figure 1, right), the observer may assume that this same group of people has crossed the white wall of the promenade, heading towards the water's edge.

Far too intricate, no doubt, is the kind of imaginative delirium in which this observer might indulge. It is almost a mirror play, potentially infinite. Could it have been triggered by a painting? I do not think so. In my view, all this must stem from the specific nature of photography. Yet it is upon these photographs that the imagination works. Here, once again, imagination must be a productive faculty — irrepressible, undisciplined, almost subversive, and certainly deceptive. These three photographs, I am bound to admit, seem to call for a particular kind of imaginative delirium, a demanding imagination: one that depends on prior training and entails a certain knowledge and a certain set of references — from cinema, from literature...

A Hallucinatory Pathos

Some photographs, all too rare, are not merely interesting: they reveal something that unsettles me, stirring an emotion I can scarcely explain. When I devote myself to looking at them with due attention, the marvellous flows of imagination are set in motion within me.

I revisit one of them (published recently, accompanied not by a critical commentary, but by a fictional text).[8] It is the most beautiful photograph in the world — an anonymous photograph (Figure 2). Six girls, dressed in white, are seated around a table outdoors, apparently celebrating a birthday. At the far end of the table, a smiling boy (from a different social stratum — I can tell by his work clothes — than his angelic friends) holds a large mirror in which is reflected the image of the photographer who captured that moment. A woman photographer, in fact, also dressed in white, leaning over her camera. Thanks to this play of reflections, she was able to include herself in the very image she intended to record.

[8] Loff Silva, H., 2024, "Fala, memória!", in *Osso*, 38, pp. 14-15 (https://www.revistaosso.pt/fala-memoria/).

Why does this image move me so deeply? First, at a glance, I read its historical framework; I place it in a likely period (the first or second quarter of the twentieth century). Then, with closer attention, I try to decipher its signs. Everything awakens my curiosity: why those white dresses with those lace collars? Where was the mirror brought from? From the dining room? Where were those apples and pomegranates picked from? Is there an orchard? Are those decorative ferns arranged around that plate of watermelon slices? Is that an unwrapped birthday cake resting on the pedestal at the centre of the table? And the house? Where might the house be located? Behind a garden? Provence, Italy, southern Spain? I also imagine the lavender scent of all that immaculate whiteness, the mad song of the cicadas, the rosy hue at the end of that day, and its melodic, trembling shadows. I am struck by a hallucinated pathos. I paradoxically, disturbingly, almost painfully associate the certainty of a past that has irretrievably vanished, never to return, with the evidence that this past, through photography, becomes a permanent now, with the conviction that this past still reverberates, is still alive. I recognise that the absolute stillness of the instant (the suspension of time here is almost excessive) coexists with my suspicion that something still seems to be in motion. To the "That-has-been" I add "This-will-unfold-in-time". I know too well that everything in that photograph is dead, and at the same time I sense that everything is going to die, as if photography could crush time. Life and death are thus combined, presence and absence, eternity and transience — of all things and of all those beautiful beings.

The markedly ambivalent nature of the photographic image — something that, in my view, stems from its very essence — lends this photograph an extraordinary power. I am not struck by a single «punctum»; it is not just one detail that draws or wounds me.[9] Perhaps it is the presence of the boy that intrigues and moves me the most. I notice his slightly withdrawn posture (he is holding the mirror), his short hair, the tightly fastened collar, the work overalls, and a smile that is utterly indefinable. And that sunburnt hand of his, resting on the noble frame of the mirror, while all six girls keep theirs hidden in their laps, in that girlish attitude of obedience and good manners... What does that hand say? What can it reveal? Could it be what brings forth the truth of that being, the story of his passage through the world?

The details that touch us are, to a large extent, inexplicable. Yet they often lead us to imagine what lies beyond the photograph — all that it does not show, an entire realm that deserves to be imagined. When a photograph is anonymous, as in this case, it seduces us all the more and invites us to drift into a long reverie. And then there are the details that call up and intertwine with the images stored in memory, with what is most cherished there, with our own obsessions, with the symbols and allegories we have shaped ourselves.

[9] I use here the celebrated concept introduced by Barthes in *La chambre claire* (Barthes, R., 1980, *La chambre claire – Note sur la photographie*, p. 49).

Figure 2. Anonymous photograph (date, printing process, and dimensions unknown).

In the imagination triggered by this photograph, I think we might be able to distinguish a different property. It is a type of imagination less unrestrained, less capable of generating the absurd or the irrational. Everything in this photograph seems to encourage the creation of a coherent world; everything in it seems to establish a logical sequence between things, everything seems to propose a meaning; it seems, after all, to offer the ingredients that could entice a narrator. Consequently, the imagination of such a narrator will have to operate with a certain consistency, while still turning to his own memories, beliefs, and anxieties, as well as resorting to images drawn from cinema, literature, painting, and photography itself. The fictional, epistolary text published alongside this photograph (see note[8]) clearly reflects this — Proustian in tone and richly saturated with literary imagery. As if imagination had shifted into fiction, holding itself back and submitting to a method, a model, a plot. In other words, imagination can help us better understand a photograph: by creating and rehearsing scenarios, by testing our intuitions, and by revealing new fields of meaning.

Will imagination be able to rescue all those wonderful beings from the irreversible nothingness in which they now find themselves?

The Uncertain Photograph

Other photographs give rise to reveries that are far less distressing. Yet because they are staged — at times meticulously so, something perceptible even to the least trained observer — they end up losing a significant part of their pathos. The photographic image ends up losing the virtues that we usually associate with it: its contingent nature and its supposed innocence. This does not prevent us, however, from continuing to believe in the material existence of the thing represented; the "That-has-been" remains inseparable from the image. But now, the referent is permeated by a marked artificiality; it is no longer natural, but consists instead of a *téchne* of staging.

I recall, for instance, the work of Gregory Crewdson (link in note[10]) and of Philip-Lorca diCorcia (link in note[11]). Crewdson orchestrates, down to the smallest detail, genuine cinematic tableaux. Indeed, it is cinema that seems to lend him his imagery, his stagings, his symbols — or, if we will, his codes. He creates enigmatic, uncertain images, avoiding elements that would clearly identify a time or a place. DiCorcia's stagings, on the other hand, recall the poses, masks, and atmosphere of the theatre. Rougher, less elaborate, they present unusual, seemingly casual situations, even though they are carefully planned images. It is well known that this work explores the tension between the factual and the fictional that photography can produce.

In both cases, I am faced with photographs that intrigue me but do not move me. There is in them something unresolved that unsettles me. The polysemic nature of many images, Barthes tells us, is linked «to an uncertainty (to an anxiety) as to the meaning of objects or attitudes. Hence, [...] a certain number of techniques are developed in order to fix the floating chain of signifieds, to combat the terror of uncertain signs».[12] Yes, to some extent I may be inclined to try to fix the meaning of Crewdson's and diCorcia's photographs, to seek a synthesis of their possible meanings. But is that even possible? In fact, no deliberate, too explicit meaning emerges in these images: there seems to be a drift of meaning. Perhaps for this very reason, I fall into a strange complicity with the characters within them, with their gestures devoid of content, without any apparent significance.

I have the feeling that I have been given a still frame (Crewdson), a distant moment from a movie, or a theatre poster (diCorcia), a brief excerpt from a drama. In fact, these fragments are more quotations than mere samples of a whole. Faced with these quotations, I am driven to carry them forward, to devise the "text", to discern, within what is still diffuse, a kind of diegetic outline. But my reading remains sus-

[10] See: https://gagosian.com/artists/gregory-crewdson/

[11] See: https://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/philip-lorca-dicorcia

[12] «à une incertitude (à une inquiétude) sur le sens des objets ou des attitudes. Aussi se développent [...] des techniques diverses destinées à *fixer* la chaîne flottante des signifiés, de façon à combattre la terreur des signes incertains» (Barthes, R., 1982 (1964), "Rhétorique de l'image", in *L'obvie et l'obtus, Essais critiques III*, p. 31).

pended; it never fully comes into focus, allowing me only to engage in a play of correspondences. The sense of uncertainty never fades; everything seems to undermine any diegetic logic. Only counter-narratives unfold — unconnected, discontinuous, incongruous elements — as if all that mattered to me were to "follow" a minor and absurd detail, an apparently superfluous theme, without variations or progressions.

When faced with photographs of this kind, I must then acknowledge that imagination — tempted to create its own images — merges with the process of fiction, unsettling its methods and undermining its attempts to establish a fixed plan. Here, imagination is unresolved, undecided. In most cases, indeed, even in the presence of highly diverse photographs, the images I end up bringing forth are marked by an instability which is inherent to them. They are nebulous, mutable, shifting images; those that gain coherence quickly change or dissipate. And the fictional process, if it occurs at all, is more a chaotic movement than an organised process guided by a structuring axis. It is often an unruliness — something non-hierarchical, always dismantlable, reversible — where a multiplicity of images intersect and ramify.[13]

Would it be possible, in any of these unusual photographs, to uncover — and bring to life — the germ cell of a fiction?

The Dreamed Earth

Other photographs seem to capture a time far too distant. They hold something pure and inaugural, as if an image could exist without relating to prior representations. These are photographs with no apparent past, primitive images whose meaning has been lost within the chain of meanings. In such photographs, metaphors are absent.

One of Francis Frith's extraordinary photographs[14] belongs to this genre of images (Figure 3). A landscape of a primordial territory appears before me, the image of an immensity. «Isn't imagination alone able to enlarge indefinitely the images of immensity?», writes Bachelard.[15] In images of immensity, imagination desires to expand. Immensity seems to be a category of imagination — imagination naturally leans toward greatness, toward an unlimited world. Indeed, imagination amplifies Frith's image. I sense the vastness of the world, the extension of its physical components, the density of its matter. But what strikes me immediately is the powerful presence of the earthy element. And the images that follow from it seem to arise from what is solid, from what is aggregated, from the stability of things and of the creatures it sustains. The enchantment of images of the earth is bound to repose, to inertia, to the pacification of substances. Imagination here is not animated by air or

[13] George Steiner repeatedly emphasizes this point. On this matter, see: Steiner, G., 2005, "Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought", in *Salmagundi Quarterly of the Humanities*, No. 146-147, pp. 3-32.

[14] See: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/260957

[15] «L'imagination, à elle seule, ne peut-elle pas grandir sans limite les images de l'immensité?» (Bachelard, G., 1998 (1957), *La poétique de l'espace*, p. 168).

by fire, by the uncertainty or fervor of aerial or igneous images, nor even by the aqueous element. I dream of the perpetuity, not of the impermanence of things; I dream simultaneously of the distant and the eternal, not of the void or of nothingness. Imagination, however, expands in both directions (there is something ambivalent about it): in the vastness of the earth I dream of visions of what lies within its bodies — the womb of a mountain, the core of a rock, the heart of a tree — and, once inside them, I dream of the immensity of what is intimate to them, of the unlimited resources of their depths.

Figure 3. Francis Frith, *The Written Valley, Sinai*, *ca*. 1857, albumen print (14.9 x 20 cm).

The figure I end up identifying — the man seated beside that large stone with which he seems to merge — appears also to contemplate that landscape. He dreams of the images of the earth, of the vastness of the world, and of the depths of matter; he lets himself be enchanted by their ambiguity, and at once his presence reminds me that, of all faculties, imagination is perhaps the most specifically human.

The imagination awakened in me by Francis Frith's photograph is then the Bachelardian imagination — the material imagination, that is, the imagination that gives life to its material cause, to its elemental sign, the imagination marked by

one of the four elements.[16] Few photographs can give rise to it. Remote places and vast landscapes inspire imagination according to an old law of Romanticism. Yet the inaugural photograph — the one that seems to arise from an archetype — is as rare as a poem that frees itself «from perishable forms, from vain images, from the perpetual change of surfaces».[17] Moreover, just as with every truly powerful verse, the inaugural photograph will produce within us images all the more enchanting and disconcerting the more imagination allows itself to be carried away by a certain ambivalence, by that state in which opposing values ceaselessly compose themselves. In the images of the dreamed earth we shall then recognize the double participation of what is immense and intimate, at rest and in motion, permanent and transitory.

The Terrible Nothingness

I must finally mention certain peculiar photographs that seem to deny the very status of photography. The "That-has-been" is emptied out, ceases to matter, insofar as the photograph was capable only of attesting to the presence of what is inaccessible to us, of an unbearable distance. They are negative images, images whose meanings collapse, images that block imagination. And it is precisely these images that, perhaps, disturb us the most.

Not long ago I came across one of these photographs. When I first saw it — without any caption, without a title (without words seeking to impose meaning upon it), without a date (without the indelible mark of the past), without knowing its author (without the intrusion of rhetoric or morality) — it appeared, in its total inapprehensibility, as the strange apparition of an impenetrable realm: cold, distant, and unattainable. Today, even though I possess all the information that was then lacking, the distance at which it still holds itself has not diminished, nor has its defining indeterminacy faded (see link in note[18]). It resists. It closes its doors to me. It is, by nature, inaccessible, uninhabitable. In this photograph there is no reference (of place or of time) on which I might rely. The objects contained within it — for there is, after all, something enclosed there — belong to the domain of the illusory, to a kind of inconceivable future. I struggle to discern what they are. I know, however, that they

[16] See Bachelard's introductory chapter in *L'eau et les rêves* (Bachelard, G., 1964 (1942), "Imagination et matière", in *L'eau et les rêves – essai sur l'imagination de la Matière*, pp. 1-27). With regard to the dreams of "material intimacy", see the first chapter in *La terre et les rêveries du repos* (Bachelard, G., 1965 (1948), "Les rêveries de l'intimité matérielle", in *La terre et les rêveries du repos – essai sur les images de l'Intimité*, pp. 7-57).

[17] «les formes périssables, les vaines images, le devenir des surfaces» (Bachelard, G., 1964 (1942), *L'eau et les rêves – essai sur l'imagination de la Matière*, p. 2).

[18] See: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50466. It will not be possible for the reader to engage with the image as I have just described: here one will be faced with the authorship, the title, and the date of the photograph. Although this is the second example I present from Edward Weston, it should be noted that I have no particular interest in the work of this photographer.

are not remains or fragments of our world. They are objects, according to Blanchot's formula, «present in their absence, graspable by being ungraspable», objects that «appear as having disappeared».[19] I must then acknowledge that they are mortal remains — corpses. Yet a corpse escapes common categories.

At this point, let us follow Blanchot's thought. The presence of a corpse, in its strange solitude, is the presence of something that has withdrawn. We are therefore in the presence of the unknown. And, at the moment the corpse appears to us, it resembles only itself. "Itself" points to that impersonal being, distant and inaccessible, which no longer maintains any link with our world. The corpse is then an obscure possibility, a shadow that ultimately appropriates what once existed and transforms it into something inaccessible. The objects that this photograph offers me are therefore corpse-objects: they are the unreachable from which I cannot distance myself; they are what I cannot imagine and therefore what I cannot forget.

On the other hand, the place where a corpse is found is not just any place.

> «What is there [the corpse], with the absolute calm of something that has found its place, does not, however, succeed in being convincingly here. [...] To be precise, this basis lacks, the place is missing, the corpse is not in its place. Where is it? It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But then nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere. [...] The corpse is here, but here in its turn becomes a corpse: it becomes "here below" in absolute terms, for there is not yet any "above" to be exalted.»[20]

The place where the corpse-objects of this photograph are found is that undifferentiable "nowhere" which, nevertheless, must be situated somewhere. And this is the place of death: a space marked by the most absolute irresolution, a space unreachable, paradoxical, and, for that very reason, imaginable only in its unimaginability. Hence the place these corpse-objects occupy is dragged down, sunk by them, and this dissolution seems to compromise the very possibility of there being a habitable place where I myself might remain.

Edward Weston's photograph, without his ever having realized it, is thus an image that establishes nothing, that shows a terrible nothingness. The indeterminacy of this nothingness clings to my skin, takes up a place within me, precisely because

[19] «la présente dans son absence, la saisissable parce qu'insaisissable, apparaissant en tant que disparue» (Blanchot, M., 1955, "Les deux versions de l'imaginaire", in *L'espace littéraire*, p. 268).

[20] «Ce qui est là, dans le calme absolu de ce qui a trouvé son lieu, ne réalise pourtant pas la vérité d'être pleinement ici. […] Justement, cette base manque, le lieu est en défaut, le cadavre n'est pas à sa place. Où est-il ? Il n'est pas ici et pourtant il n'est pas ailleurs; nulle part? mais c'est qu'alors nulle part est ici. La présence cadavérique établit un rapport entre ici et nulle part. […] Ici est le cadavre, mais ici à son tour devient cadavre: "ici-bas", absolument parlant, sans qu'aucun "là-haut" ne s'exalte encore.» (*Ibid*. pp. 268-269).

it is situated nowhere. But how can this nothingness be imagined? I cannot avoid the oxymoron: how can one imagine the unimaginable?

When I turn away from Weston's image — or rather, when it allows me to do so — I am tempted to paraphrase one of Cioran's merciless aphorisms[21]: «Only a madman, indeed, could have thought of inverting the Nothingness, of having degraded it into a universe».

[21] «Le grand forfait de la douleur est d'avoir *organisé* le Chaos, de l'avoir dégradé en univers» (Cioran, E., 1980 (1952), *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, p. 103).

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