Chapter 12
Photography, Image Agency, and Visual Ecocriticism
Henri Cartier-Bresson's Lucania

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Abstract

During the post-war years, within the reflection on the Southern question, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945) crystallized Lucania into a form of eternal damnation, permeated by misery and disease, as the symbolic negative pole of a rigidly divided Italy where the north was instead idealized as the healthy, strong, and productive part of the country. Against this backdrop, Cartier-Bresson's photography reveals a more open and receptive perspective, free from ideological and symbolic constraints. The authenticity and intense vitality of the French photographer's work still resonates today, making it capable of signifying and acting in contemporaneity. This chapter takes its cue from the Cartier-Bresson collection held at the Rocco Scotellaro Documentation Center in Tricarico (Matera), which houses the photographs taken by the French photographer during his two reportages in Lucania, in 1951-1952 and in 1972-1973 respectively. Analyzing Cartier-Bresson's work and those of other photographers who centered their works on Basilicata during those years (such as David Seymour, Arturo Zavattini, and Franco Pinna), the chapter focuses on the question of image agency (Mitchell 2005; Bredekamp 2010) in relation to the environmental issue and visual ecocriticism.

Keywords

image act; seeing-as; Carlo Levi; southern question; Basilicata.

> A photograph is not taken or seized by force. It offers itself; it is the photograph that takes you.
>
> Cartier-Bresson (1964)

Carlo Levi's Lucania

Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* is a complex work, not only for the relevance of the issues it addresses but also because of its multifaceted form. Actually, it is simultaneously a novel, a political essay, a poetic narrative, and even a book of memoirs, a diary. Many scholars have focused their attention on the context in which the book was written (Sarfatti 2000; Coccia 2018), as Levi penned it between December 1943 and July 1944 in occupied Florence, hiding under false identity in Anna Maria Ichino's house[1]. The condition of clandestinity evoked in Levi the memory of a preceding period, that of his confinement in Lucania he had lived ten years prior. In the opening lines of the book, Levi wrote:

> Buffeted here and there at random I have not been able to return to my peasants as I promised when I left them, and I do not know when, if ever, I can keep my promise. But closed in one room, in a world apart, I am glad to travel in my memory to that other world. (Levi 1947: 1)

Some stark contrasts are already expressed in these opening lines. Levi juxtaposes his world against the "other world", that of Lucania, and two distinct forms of time emerge: on the one hand, the time of the Lucanian peasants, rooted in a state of permanent stagnation; on the other hand, the time of progress and history. The confinement in Aliano, which spanned from August 1935 to May 1936, thus brought Levi into contact with a world vastly different from his own. As an intellectual from the north hailing from an urban and industrial context, Levi found himself confined in a world dominated by rural culture and poverty, suspended between magic and superstition. He found himself there by coercion, but ultimately became intimately attached to that world — my land, he will write — and found himself sharing his days with those he will later call my peasants. However, the context of clandestinity in which Levi composed

1 Regarding the relationship between Levi and Ichino, as documented by Filippo Benfante in an essay dedicated to the subject, in October 1945, when a portion of the book's initial print run had already been bound, the publisher inserted a final comment at Levi's request, as a note of gratitude to Ichino: «This book was written in 1944, during the German occupation of Florence. Anna Maria Ichino's courageous, humane solidarity made it possible for me to work, despite the difficulties of that clandestine period». As noted by Benfante, Ichino did not appreciate the praise and, a few months later, sent a lapidary message to Levi: «You had no right to commit that final affront to me. You should have sought my permission to cite me in that manner. You knew I did not approve» (Benfante 2023: 10; translation mine).

the book gives a strongly ideological imprint to his narrative, with the opposition of places and civilizations. From such a perspective, despite his sincere, emotional participation, Levi's point of view remains external to the Lucanian world. Lucania is idealized as a symbolic space, bounded by emblematic rather than geographical borders. Indeed, Christ stopped at Eboli: right from the title, Levi's geography is symbolic and Eboli identifies the border that separates the archaic Lucanian world from the world of progress and history. Levi's narrative is infused with symbolism from the first pages: «Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history» (2). His writing is characterized by strong opposites and explicit dichotomies: the rural and archaic Lucanian civilization, on the one hand, and the urban and industrial civilization of the north, on the other hand; the pre-Christian naturalistic world versus the Christian civilized world; superstition versus rationality, immobility versus progress, and ultimately, the well-known opposition between nature, on the one hand, and culture and science, on the other hand. This dialectic of oppositions offered a representation of Lucania that, isolated from the rest of Italy, was forced into a symbolic-ideological structure and defined by subtraction compared to the more developed areas of the country.

In the aftermath of publication, for the resonance the book received, both Communist Party Secretary Palmiro Togliatti and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi visited Lucania. These official visits ultimately led to the government's issuance of a plan for the evacuation of the Sassi of Matera, a true «national shame» as Togliatti had described it[2]. However, especially in left-wing circles, Levi's book was partially criticized for providing a representation of the southern question largely based on personal, emotional elements rather than a purely political perspective. Levi's work allowed literary suggestions and a

2 At the rally he held in Matera on April 1, 1948, condemning the deplorable sanitary conditions of the Sassi as a national shame and urging the government to take action, Togliatti declared: «From this city arises a terrible indictment against the ruling classes of our country, social groups, capitalists, landowners, and privileged individuals, who are responsible for the fact that in Italy there is still a city where thousands of men and women live in such conditions» (Mirizzi 2005: 223; translation mine). Two years later, the Prime Minister De Gasperi visited Basilicata, and on July 23, 1950, after witnessing the Sassi, he declared: «There are no words to comment on what I have seen. The poor people of the Sassi cannot continue to live like beasts. If no one has taken an interest in these people until now, it is time to do something in their favor to free them from a most pitiful condition» (Selvaggi 2011; translation mine). In the subsequent weeks, De Gasperi appointed a commission, presided over by Emilio Colombo, to study a bill aimed at restoring the Sassi. On May 17, 1952, the special law no. 619 (Law for the restoration of the Sassi), was definitively and unanimously approved. The law essentially provided for the forced transfer of most residents from the Sassi to new quarters in La Martella, Serra Venerdì, Lanera, and Venusio. De Gasperi returned to Matera on May 17, 1953 to inaugurate and hand over the first homes to the inhabitants of Villaggio La Martella.

certain primitivist taste to emerge, which were subject to discussion and criticism. The criticism was particularly harsh from communist intellectual and deputy Mario Alicata, who argued that the liberation of southern peasants could only be achieved through an alliance with the working class, to which the leadership role belonged. A 1954 article by Alicata was aptly titled *Il meridionalismo non si può fermare a Eboli* (The southernism cannot be stopped at Eboli)[3], echoing the title of Michele Gandin's 1952 documentary *Cristo non si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ did not stop at Eboli), works that exemplify how Levi's book was regarded in the discussion of the southern question during that period.

Levi's narrative portrayed Lucania as a paradigmatic representation of an archaic, agrarian culture, a world diametrically opposed to northern Italy as sphere of progress and development. However, this primitiveness also awakened an interest in relation to its character of authenticity and anti-hegemonic resistance. Gramsci's notion of popular culture, correlated with the concept of folklore, was defined not as a useless repository of picturesque ancient reminiscences, but rather as the genuine expression of elements deemed useful and positive in their opposition to prevailing conceptions. Popular culture revealed itself as an irreducible, authentic alterity against the hegemonic forces. With regard to its authenticity, Gramsci and De Martino began to speak of «progressive folklore» from the years of the Resistance onwards. De Martino, describing the aims of his expeditions in Lucania in a 1951 article, identified progressive folklore as «a conscious proposal by the people against their subaltern social condition, or that which comments on, expresses in cultural terms, struggles to emancipate themselves» (1951: 3; translation mine)[4]. As the perspective shifted, it was no longer moving between the dialectic of archaism and modernity, between poverty and progress, to that on the authenticity of popular culture and its irreducibility to dominant forces. Such a perspective was so pervasive that it drew numerous foreign intellectuals and artists to southern Italy in those years, as if they were magnetically attracted by its vibrant essence

3 In the article, Alicata argued: «In truth, even disregarding the programmatic theses that are openly enunciated, as has been seen, in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, and considering the representation it provides of the southern Italian countryside solely as a "poetic" one, it cannot be denied that, artistically speaking, such a representation is ambiguous and lends itself to misinterpretation, precisely because it is not realistic, precisely because it arbitrarily severs the connections between southern Italy and the rest of the world in terms of both time and space, and arbitrarily erases the deep-seated contradictions and intimate developmental processes that have occurred and continue to occur within southern Italian society» (Alicata 1954: 595; translation mine).

4 In the same article, to conclude his analysis on the relevance of progressive folklore, De Martino wrote: «for broad popular strata, and above all for southern rural society, it represents a highly effective means of cultural education. Where the "popular book" is unable to exert any practical influence due to illiteracy or semi-illiteracy, and where party ideological education is necessarily limited to narrow parameters, progressive folklore constitutes a genuine cultural advancement for the popular masses, the actual birth of a progressively oriented popular culture» (*ibidem*).

Photographers in Lucania

The pardon granted to political prisoners to celebrate the "success" of the fascist colonial campaign in Ethiopia allowed Levi to leave Lucania and travel to France, where, from 1936 to 1942, he frequented Parisian cultural circles and came into contact with David "Chim" Seymour and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The two photographers, founders of the Magnum Photos agency along with Robert Capa and George Rodger, fit into the tradition of modernist photography initiated by Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, and Edward Weston, who had definitively legitimized photography as an autonomous art form and imbued it with a strong realist style. Seymour and Cartier-Bresson, drawn by an intellectual, visual fascination with southern Italy, which was certainly also inspired by Levi's book, arrived in Italy between the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948, in Puglia and Basilicata, Seymour collected a series of photographs that represented that ancient, semi-unknown world through the gaze of children. The collection of Seymour's photographs, which was eloquently titled *A Troglodyte Village*[5], basically recalled the same dialectical symbolism of Levi's work. While Seymour's journey to Southern Italy was also sparked by his acquaintance with Levi in Paris, Cartier-Bresson traveled to Lucania at the request of UNRRA-Casas[6] and on the invitation of another Piedmontese, entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti, who presided over the National Institute of Urban Planning and had established the commission for the study of Matera. The commission prepared an analysis of the Lucanian city in anticipation of urban planning interventions to be implemented for the evacuation of the Sassi. Cartier-Bresson provided with his photos a visual documentation of life in the Sassi, which was annexed to the report drafted by the commission. With this assignment, between the end of 1951 and the beginning of 1952, Cartier-Bresson photographed not only Matera, but also several towns in the region, including Aliano, where Levi had been confined, Craco, Ferrandina, Pisticci, Rionero, Metaponto, Scanzano, and Stigliano, producing a photographic corpus now preserved at the Tricarico documentation center[7]. For this first photographic reportage in Lucania, later included in the 1955 volume *Les Européans*, Cartier-Bresson gathered a series of

5 As stated in the Magnum Photos website, in his journey through Basilicata, Seymour photographed «the troglodyte village of Matera shooting pictures of families that lived together with their animals in dark limestone cave dwellings» (Magnum Photos, n.d.). Among those shots, there is the renowned photograph depicting a young laughing girl who leads her family's horse back home from the fields (Seymour 1948).

6 The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the Comitato amministrativo soccorsi ai senzatetto (Committee for the assistance to the homeless), an institute for post-war reconstruction that was established in 1946 in Italy under the ministry of public works, was responsible for the building of a large number of villages in many areas of the country.

7 The Rocco Scotellaro documentation center in Tricarico (Matera) is located in the former convent of Saint Francis of Assisi. It includes an archive of documents related to the figure of Scotellaro, the Italian writer, poet, and politician who served as the mayor of Tricarico from 1946 to 1950, and an important photographic archive with images not only by Henri

shots that captured the essence of those places and people on the cusp of an imminent, profound transformation that would forever alter their way of life. In these Cartier-Bresson's photographs, the natural element often prevails, highlighting forms and daily practices of a rural culture characterized by coexistence and sharing between humans and non-humans (Cartier-Bresson 1951a). In the photographs of the Sassi, the anthropic component appears to arrange and align itself in a coherent continuum with the natural element (Cartier-Bresson 1951b). These images reveal an intimate, original connection between human and nature, where simple, everyday gestures ascend to symbolic elements of a culture of environmental respect and care.

These aspects can also be discerned in the shots taken by some Italian photographers in Basilicata during the same years. One of them, Arturo Zavattini, son of the director and screenwriter Cesare, participated in De Martino's first expedition to Lucania, in Tricarico, in 1952. Zavattini provided photographic coverage for this first Demartinian inquiry, which was later disseminated through the biweekly magazine of the Italian Communist Party *Vie Nuove*. The experience in Tricarico marked the beginning of a methodological approach that continued over the years and became the hallmark of Demartino's scientific research. Zavattini's shots inaugurated the era of ethnographic photography in Italy, with images firmly rooted in neorealistic style. In the subsequent Demartinian expeditions, from 1952 to 1959, Franco Pinna took over from Zavattini (except for a single occasion, in 1957, when Ando Gilardi replaced him). As a prominent representative of what is known as the "Roman school" of photography, Pinna followed in the footsteps of Italian neorealism. The rich photographic material collected by Pinna was extensively utilized by De Martino in his works, both in books — such as *Morte e pianto rituale* (Death and ritual mourning; 1958), in which is included the *Atlante figurato del pianto* (Figurative atlas of mourning), and *Sud e magia* (*Magic: A Theory from the South*; 1959) — and in articles published for a popular audience in magazines, such as *Radiocorriere TV*[8] and *L'Espresso Mese*[9]. The aforementioned atlas contains among others the

Cartier-Bresson, but also by Arturo Zavattini, Mario Carbone, Mario Cresci, and Antonio Pagnotta.

8 In 1954, in conjunction with the launch (on the third program of Rai) of a radio series directed by De Martino and dedicated to twenty-six ethnographic and folkloric landscapes, on the magazine *Radiocorriere TV* he wrote: «The series aims to satisfy as far as possible a strictly cognitive need, by acquainting the non-specialized public with the most striking and accessible aspects of primitive and popular cultural life [...] the series could not be reduced to a simple ethno-phonic panorama, lacking adequate ideological and more specifically ethnographic and cultural commentary [...] it was felt that it would be necessary not to neglect national folklore, on which there certainly exists a vast literature, but which the broad non-specialized public continues to ignore or evaluate through the distortions of the picturesque, the romantic, or even the touristy» (De Martino 1954: 16; translation mine).

9 In May 1960, De Martino's essay *La taranta. Si liberano dal cattivo passato* (The tarantula. They free themselves from the bad past), accompanied by Pinna's photographs, inaugurated the

famous Pinna's photograph *La lamentatrice di Pisticci* (The mourner of Pisticci) that, with its high chromatic contrast and through its realistic matrix and deliberate sense of movement, rekindles the intensity and strong symbolism of the ritual (Pinna 1952).

The third name that deserves to be mentioned in this context is that of Mario Carbone. As another prominent figure of Italian neorealist photography, Carbone was a close friend of Levi, whom he accompanied to Basilicata in the early 1960s to capture with his lens the landscapes and people of the region, which were used as the basis for Levi's creation of a large-scale tapestry (18 m by 3 m) intended to adorn one of the pavilions at the Torino exhibition *Italia '61*. Adopting a purely documentary style, Carbone took over 400 photographs in which Levi is often included appearing as a very different character compared to Lucanian people, marking, even visually, the symbolic contrast already expressed in his book. A stylistic continuity between Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Lucania and those by Zavattini, Pinna, and Carbone is discernible, yet certain differences also emerge, particularly for the ironic, playful character that is consistently present in Cartier-Bresson's work but absent in the Italian photographers. After the 1951-1952 journey to Basilicata, Cartier-Bresson returned to the region twenty years later, in 1972-1973, finding himself amidst a deeply transformed social and economic reality. Cartier-Bresson photographed the new industrial settlements, viaducts, dams, and bridges — as exemplified by the iconic photograph of the Musmeci bridge, the viaduct over the Basento river in Potenza (Cartier-Bresson 1973a). In this second reportage, which is primarily focused on the conflict between old and new, Cartier-Bresson's black-and-white photographs highlight the contrast between ancient customs and modern symbols, juxtaposing memories of the past with new icons, ancient tools with new machinery, donkeys and plows with tractors and cars (Cartier-Bresson 1973b).

With a passion for painting and a training honed in the André Lhote's atelier, Cartier-Bresson has consistently demonstrated, from a stylistic perspective, particular attention to composition and form. In a 1964 television documentary, Cartier-Bresson said of himself: «I am the heir to a certain photographic and painterly tradition, especially painterly. I have a genuine passion for painting» (Cartier-Bresson 1964; translation mine), and acknowledged his debt to famous painters, such as Cézanne, Degas, and Manet. Notably, his famous photograph

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ethno-anthropologist's collaboration with the magazine *L'Espresso Mese* (De Martino 1960a). The purpose of the collaboration, as specified in the editorial, was: «the discovery of an ancient Italy, coexisting with the modern Italy and so well-documented by newspapers and books, an Italy where myths operate, a hint of a past that refuses to disappear» (5; translation mine). Later that year, between July and November, other contributions by De Martino were published in the same magazine, including *Il gioco della falce. Ogni estate in Lucania la passione del grano* (The game of the scythe. Each summer in Lucania, the passion of grain), dedicated to an ancient Lucanian rite connected to the harvest (De Martino 1960b: 57-65).

Dimanche sur le bords de Marne (Sunday on the banks of the Marne; 1938) exemplifies this influence through its artistic composition and precise volumetric balance. Yet, as is well-known, Cartier-Bresson is also the photographer of the decisive moment, of capturing images *à la sauvette* (on the run)[10]. The decisive moment is for Cartier-Bresson «the instant when chance meets necessity» (Cartier-Bresson 1964). In 1963, in another television interview, reflecting on his profession as a photographer, Cartier-Bresson observed:

> the photographer's task is to be a witness to his own time, without pretension or expressing judgments. Our work is not didactic. We freeze an immediate sensation that has struck us, with an instantaneous contact that few other means of expression could establish. (Cartier-Bresson 1963; translation mine)

Cartier-Bresson and the Image Agency

About a decade ago, at the 2015 Milanesiana festival, in occasion of the inauguration of an exhibition dedicated to Cartier-Bresson's Lucania, art critic Vittorio Sgarbi highlighted how the French photographer succeeded in conveying the essential truth of the Italian region, capturing it in its purity and dignified integrity. According to Sgarbi, Cartier-Bresson, unlike Levi, was able to adopt an open, receptive perspective, free from ideological and political frameworks. Sgarbi observed:

> The internationally renowned photographer, who arrived there with little knowledge of Basilicata and its culture, was nonetheless able to gaze upon that world with an open and liberated eye. While Levi, who lived and breathed there, had interpreted that poverty as an endless damnation, in Cartier-Bresson's work, there was instead the idea of human integrity, the poetry of small things. (Sgarbi 2015; translation mine)

The image of a poor, indolent south, superstitious and backward, always lacking and irreconcilably deficient compared to the north, an image that has also been partly suggested by Levi's narrative, appears forced and stereotypical, in contrast to the more authentic reality that the photographic images by Cartier-Bresson reveal. His shots show an authenticity and existential integrity that still strikes the contemporary observer's eye, and which makes them capable of signifying and acting, suggesting to ecocritical analysis a reflection on the relationship between image and reality, between human and non-human, between nature, culture, and progress. However, there is the evident risk of falling into a contradiction. Namely, in criticizing from one side an ideological

10 In this regard, particularly illustrative is the famous photograph taken by Cartier-Bresson behind the St. Lazare station in Paris (Cartier-Bresson 1932b).

approach marked by a strong opposition, only to fall back into another equally forced and schematic idealization that contrasts an unsustainable, destructive modernity with the pure, genuine integrity of ancient rural culture. To resolve the ambiguity, it may be helpful to recall some observations made by Cartier-Bresson himself in the already cited 1964 documentary. «There are», Cartier-Bresson argued, «two types of photography: documentary photography, which doesn't interest me at all [...] and photography that evokes». «A photograph», Cartier-Bresson concluded, «is not taken or seized by force. It offers itself. It is the photograph that takes you» (Cartier-Bresson 1964; translation mine).

These observations help us to open a brief reflection on the notion of image agency. With regard to a complex theoretical discussion that has developed over the years and has produced numerous works in the field of visual studies, and within the scope of this chapter, I confine myself to examining only a few issues that seem relevant to me in relation to a methodology and practice of visual ecocriticism. The temporal dimension is pivotal in the concept of image agency. Agency refers in fact to the ability of an image to act as a dynamic source that produces effects over time. In his 2010 book *Theorie des Bildakts*, Horst Bredekamp argues that images possess a unique visual agency that goes beyond mere representation and enables them to act autonomously and independently of their creator's intentions. In other words, images produce effects and meanings that burst forth and transcend their original context of production. The image's power, identified by Bredekamp as "image act", «finds its starting point in the latent capacity of the image to move the viewer» (Bredekamp 2018: 33) and to leap from a state of latency to efficacy within the realm of perception, thought, and behavior. The image act arises from both the power of the image itself and the reaction of the viewer who gazes upon it.

In the face of this exorbitance of the image, which is compounded by an excess of images, W.J. Thomas Mitchell, another widely discussed author in visual studies, used the concept of "pictorial turn" to identify the characteristic visual orientation of contemporary culture. Confronted with this turn, Mitchell believes it necessary to shift the debate from the issue of image power to that of what images want. From this perspective, Mitchell remarks, we should «scale down the rhetoric of the "power of images"». He argues:

> Images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think. The problem is to refine and complicate our estimate of their power and the way it works. That is why I shift the question from what pictures do to what they *want,* from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak. If the power of images is like the power of the weak, that may be why their desire is correspondingly strong, to make up for their actual impotence. We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them. (Mitchell 1996: 74)

What Mitchell proposes is a shift in focus away from the interpretation of the image, which is suggested by a double recognition. On the one hand, the identification of images as «"animated" beings, quasi-agents, mock-persons» (81); and on the other hand, the identification of images «not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits, but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference and who function both as "go-betweens" and scapegoats in the social field of human visuality» (*ibidem*). Above all, Mitchell observed, what images seem to want is a kind of effect on those who observe them. The spectatorship is a relevant part of Mitchell's theoretical framework, and it is, in relation to the image, as important as the interpretation of the image itself. The study of spectatorship concerns what Mitchell identifies as «showing seeing», that is, showing one's gaze, which is considered a crucial aspect of visual culture and its connotations.

Cartier-Bresson and the Showing Seeing

The issue of the showing seeing highlighted by Mitchell interestingly intersects with Cartier-Bresson's photographic work. In 1973, during his second journey to Basilicata, Cartier-Bresson was asked to select from his extensive photographic corpus the shots he deemed most representative (ultimately, 385 photographs), in order to outline a synthesis of his artistic experience. This selection resulted in a *master collection* now preserved at six cultural institutions, including the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris. In 2020, the collection was exhibited at Palazzo Grassi, in Venezia, under the title *Le Grand Jeu*. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a catalog, edited by Marsilio, which consisted of the reinterpretation of the master collection by five contemporary cultural figures, including the film director Wim Wenders. The editorial project entailed each of them selecting fifty images from the Cartier-Bresson's collection to look at it through the eyes of "others", thereby focusing not on the French photographer but on those who observe his photographs. Wenders' approach highlighted the "showing of seeing" as a fundamental aspect of Cartier-Bresson's work. Commenting on the famous shot taken by the photographer in Brussels (Cartier-Bresson 1932a), Wenders observes: «What is this image if not a complete and utterly complex revelation of photography itself, of men sharing the act of seeing, among themselves first and then with a photographer behind them, and then with you and me…» (Wenders 2020: 153). And further on, Wenders notes: «Cartier-Bresson shows "viewers" and the act of seeing […] we are made to identify with their longing […] Our act of seeing becomes one with theirs» (154).

The act of seeing is a practice that requires to be interpreted alongside the image, having central importance in our relationship with the visual. In this regard, it may be useful to reconsider the well-known duck-rabbit figure proposed

by psychologist Joseph Jastrow at the end of the 19th century (Jastrow 1899: 312), which clearly reveals the presence of aspects of use in the selection and interpretation of the visual (fig. 12.1). In his *Philosophical Investigations*, reflecting on this image, Ludwig Wittgenstein invites us to distinguish seeing from "seeing-as" (*Sehen als*), drawing attention to the perceptual phenomenon of flashing of aspects.

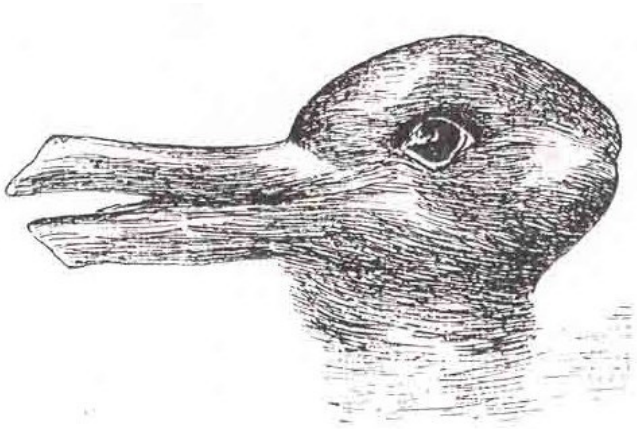

Fig. 12.1 – Duck-rabbit illusion, Jastrow (1899) «Popular Science Monthly" (volume 54, January 1899), public domain

Wittgenstein writes: «The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged» (Wittgenstein 1958: 196). In the aspect change, seeing-as reveals itself as a practice linked to some form of perceptual habit. Wittgenstein considers the meaning of the image as if it were connected to a certain habit of use based on relations that link an image to its interpretation. The seeing-as is connected to a representation that, based on a relation, is projected onto the image and the perceptual situation. According to Wittgenstein, the perception of an image can be explained, on the one hand, as the sum of sensory properties that strike the organ of sight, and on the other hand, as alluding to some relation of similarity that connects what we see to a possible paradigmatic interpretation. Seeing-as is not simply seeing, but seeing according to relations; it is seeing according to thought. An interpretation does not merely superimpose itself upon the perceptual material, but is rather the echo of thought within the perception itself, which animates and determines its resonance. Wittgenstein wrote: «the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought» (197). The flashing of aspects is a seeing that echoes thought. If it is possible to see the

duck-rabbit image as it is occasionally suggested, it is because it makes sense to ask that one attempt to see the image in light of a certain relation. Seeing-as is therefore in part subordinate to the will. We can try to see-as we are suggested, because we can assume and understand things according to the relation that is indicated to us.

From these considerations, it might seem that some form of relativism would emerge, since under the light of a relation and a usage rule we could interpret an image in any manner whatsoever. However, for Wittgenstein, «what the picture tells me is itself» (142), and the possibility of grasping it under a certain relation always depends on what the image is, that is, its form and features. Only starting from the image itself is it possible to see it under a certain interpretive paradigm. Therefore, every interpretation ultimately rests on the sensible determination of what is being interpreted. Interpretation can only take hold of perception by identifying in what is perceptively given a different relevance. We cannot therefore see-as we wish, even if it is possible to reorder what is perceptually given in a different perspective.

Our attention should therefore be directed towards the character of familiarity that defines our world, as perception presents it to us. Reflecting on the phenomenon of seeing-as and the flashing of aspects, we are prompted to recall that our interpretations are woven into the fabric of perception as well as the history of our previous perceptual experiences. We have learned to assign significance to certain traits of the image that enable us to grasp a particular relevance, dictated by a shared paradigm. It is from these considerations that Wittgenstein poses a strange condition, imagining a "blindness to aspects". Wittgenstein wrote:

> Could there be human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something*—and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have?— Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness or to not having absolute pitch?— We will call it "aspect-blindness". (213)

If we were blind to aspects, according to Wittgenstein, we would not know what we might even intend to see. Wittgenstein concluded, «The "aspect-blind" will have an altogether different relationship to pictures from ours» (214). Thus, if we can see as we do, it is because we have a certain disposition towards images and we are inclined to grant them a prominent place in our world. In images, we seek something, and it is precisely because of this inquiry towards them that a response becomes possible.

What does the seeing-as and the flashing of aspects mean in relation to Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Lucania? Do those photos taken by the French photographer perhaps flash the aspects of a natural world that, in the name of progress and economic growth, appears irreparably lost today? Can

those images of poverty and misery, lived with simplicity and dignity, be seen as an expression of an authentic and genuine existential essentiality? Can we grasp the recurring co-presence in those photos of human and non-human and view it as a manifestation of a practical ethics of coexistence and sharing? As Georges Didi-Huberman posited a few years ago in an essay titled *La condition des images*, «Confronted with an image, we should not only ask which history it documents and to which history it is contemporary, but also of which memory it is the return» (Didi-Huberman 2011: 95, as quoted in Saliot 2015: 49).

The paradox of images lies in the fact that they are, at the same time, alive and dead, powerful and weak, significant and insignificant. In the face of this paradox, Mitchell's first step is to cease considering media as mere structures or systems, but rather to reevaluate them as environments in which images thrive and we ourselves are a part. Mitchell presents a total interpenetration between world and images, in a perpetual, reversible crossing of horizons and perspectives, between perceptions and manifestations, where seeing and seeing-as, thinking and interpreting are centered on the inseparable chiasmus of human being and image. According to Bredekamp,

> Images do not derive from reality. They are, rather, a form of its condition. Images, through their own potency, empower those enlightened observers who fully recognise this quality. Images are not passive. They are begetters of every sort of experience and action related to perception. (Bredekamp 2018: 283)

An ecocriticism of the visual should therefore begin with the identification of images as quasi-agents, as suggested by Mitchell. And if a visual ecocriticism is tasked with explaining how one should see a particular image, that is, the seeing-as, in relation to the environmental question, our entire effort as scholars will consist in drawing attention to certain particulars, in order to orient what is perceptually given towards a specific direction and facilitate the flashing of aspects. As previously stated, Wittgenstein's purpose is not at all to support the relativity of perception, but rather to bring to light the conditions upon which agreement within an interpretive paradigm can be based. The task of a visual ecocriticism is therefore that of facilitating agreement on a paradigmatic interpretation useful for the environmental cause.

Since the medium is a complex environment that envelops us and includes within it customs and practices, habits and techniques, the methodology to follow for a visual ecocriticism is the one proposed by Mitchell himself – that is, a kind of defamiliarization with the visual, questioning some of the assumptions and customs connected to the discipline of study. According to Mitchell, we must position ourselves in a state of "in-discipline", in order to foster a moment of rupture and crisis. According to Mitchell,

> If a discipline is a way of ensuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, etc.), "indiscipline" is a moment of breakage or rupture when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question. (Mitchell 1995: 541)

Visual ecocriticism should "indisciplinedly" facilitate the affirmation of interpretive practices within which the image can activate itself as a real agent of change.

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