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Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2017, 295 pages**

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## Danièle MÉAUX, *Photographic Travel Books*, e-book, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2017, 295 pages

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Paul Léon

The work of Danièle Méaux, *Photographic Travel Books*, published in 2009, has just been translated into English. A genre which started with the Americans in the 1950's ; Robert Franck, despite some precursors, being the initiator if not the inspirer. The foundation of the genre would be a hitherto unseen conjunction in photography of "roaming or wandering", with the taking of shots, as part of one and the same approach. For Robert Franck it was both a portrait of America at the time and the evocation of his experience as an itinerant operator. The inaugural book led to a succession of "Travels" across the great wide open spaces of America, with titles such as *California Trip* by Dennis Stock (1970) or *Travelog* by Charles Harbutt (1973), demonstrating the extent to which these imitators were able to adopt and promote the mystical notion of being on the "road". What photographers' books share is the dream element. The notion of roaming or wandering is used by the author to designate a certain manner of travelling, an oxymoronic portmanteau which drifts ambiguously between the idea of a planned itinerary and the random destinies of a rover.

The nine chapters of the work develop therefore all the themes and notions related to this novel object ; the "*Photographic Travel Book*".

The first subject dealt with is the essential question of the "book", which the photographer Martin Parr considers as "the natural abode of the photographer". For the projected book is often the *raison d'être* of the journey, and its photographic record will vouch for its authenticity. Chateaubriand said that he brought back "pieces of marble from the Parthenon". The photograph is this piece of marble which guarantees the identity of the traveller-photographer-author. The book also functions as a kind of equivalence or similarity, between the progress of the practitioner and that of the reader. Combined with varied forms of text, the linear nature of the book contributes to the vectorisation of the reading trajectory. Ultimately, the *Photographic Travel Books* refer both to the great ancestor which was the painter's travel diary, and to the personal journal.

Another question covered from the outset by the author is that of space, and of spaces, encountered during the journey. If it is legitimate to speak of *Photographic Travel Books*, it is because the genre has already produced its own motifs ; to the forefront the emblematic notion of these "journey spaces" which are the roads and various routes, stations and airports, motels and petrol stations, transit zones. In the words of Claude Roy, "the instruments of travel are already the trip itself". The image of the road has become photo-genetic, thanks as much to travelling photographers as to film-makers. Based on published books, the author outlines a very acute typology of transportation links, that poetical science that John B. Jackson chooses to call "Hodology" : Pierre Zachmann's motorway, where speed tends to disconnect landscapes from reality (*Autoroutes, France, 1980, 1997*), the National highways of Christian Louis, crossing agglomerations, giving a

perception of the country's territorial diversity (*Route nationale 7*, 1988), or the winding Departmental roads of Thierry Girard, defying modern means of travel. (*D'une mer l'autre*, 2002).

The itinerary includes even footpaths, that of Didier Sorbé, for example, its slow pace contributing to a real appropriation of the landscape (*Mont-Perdu*, 2003). Another predictable space is the photographic open-air mine of subject-matter which is the street : for example, *Prague* by Magdi Senadji, 2000. Also covered are those "non-places" which haunt on occasions the travelling photographer, contrasting with relational sites : shopping centres or transit camps, "non-places" saturated with neon lighting, advertising hoardings and signposts, as found in abundance in the book by Stephen Shore, *American Surfaces*, 1972.

As for train journeys, which have been extensively studied, another series of images is developed ; window frames, narrow corridors, stations and platforms, the railroads and tracks, without counting the actual speed of the train, repeatedly recalling the technical ploy of the blur (Gianni Berengo Gardin, *In treno attraverso l'Italia*, 1991 or Bernard Plossu, *Paris-Londres-Paris*, 1988). These are the mandatory steps in the "vagabond experience", once the photographer becomes involved. Chapter three has the wonderful title, "Passing landscapes". While the tourist seeks permanent sites, the itinerant photographer is fond of transitory spots, preferring in his temporary passing the "staging" of his moving relationship with space : blurring effects, the sensation of "flying by", reflections, the oblique framing, relating both the perception of being carried away by the flows of life and the lability of lived through moments. The journey is now perceived as a vital experience involving, in many cases, the notion of being in the grip of that malediction which Alain Bergala believes can be linked "almost ontologically" to photography : "the lack, the absence, the missing of reality". Danièle Méaux underlines the fact that the Latin verbs "*iterare*" and "*errare*" have both produced the same verb "to err", as if "error" and "errant" were fundamentally related. Here we approach an imaginary Romanesque world which renders every travelling photographer a "character" who is only ever temporarily absent from his images : *topoi* of compartments or a wind-screen which indicate his presence, the hand on the steering wheel, a part of the body included in the field of vision, demonstrating both spatial limitations and proximity. *Topoi* of mirrors, window panes and shadow, found in *Going East* by Max Pam (1992), who stated : "Art interests me less than the desire to photograph my own life". This leads us on to the founding text, published in 1982 by Giles Mora and Claude Nori, the "Photo-biographical Manifesto", in which photography is declared to be a "biographical witness par excellence" and an "amplifier of existence". The protagonist of the *Photographic Travel Books*, concludes Danièle Méaux, is a "lyrical subject".

Words are omnipresent in the *Photographic Travel Books*. At a minimum level, captions of localisation and dates, in almost all cases in compliance with publishing practice, a presentation text, a back cover. Often more, sometimes better. The cohabitation of words and images is however always a challenge, supposing, as Maurice Blanchot points out, that "seeing is often to forget to speak". The best form of collaboration, observes Danièle Méaux, is that which leads to "productivity" as in terms of film editing. Who does the writing ? Often the photographer. But he can choose to associate a writer : Michel Butor, fictionalising the *Paris-Londres-Paris* of Bernard Plossu (1979), Jean-Claude Guillebaud, putting into a historical perspective *La Colline des Anges* (Hill of Angels) by Raymond Depardon (1993). "Will I be able to find the right words ? Will Raymond know how to find the images ?". That is the question.

A key chapter in our view is that entitled "An exercise of attention to reality", and its three sections, respectively "Imbibing the world", "Celebrating the ephemeral" and "Scrutinizing the visible". These poetic phrases relate undoubtedly to the essential aim of the author : to establish the specificity of the person in the world of the travelling photographer, and beyond this, that of the *Photographic Travel Books*. Words reappear, closely linked to the adventure which is the journey, despite the diversity of experiences and works from which they stem : asceticism, solitude, contemplation. "We travel not to procure for ourselves exoticism and anecdotes, like a Christmas tree" said Nicolas Bouvier, but to be fleeced, to be rinsed out and spin-dried by the road. "Taking photographs is to attempt to seize the stubborn presence of things in a movement which brings them to perception". The question to be posed therefore is that of the investigation project.

The response from a number of photographers today is to prefer itineraries of proximity, territories close by, "grey territories". "What we don't know how to discover just next door", said Georges Picard, "we will not find any better in the Antipodes" and we have known for a long time that the most informative of journeys we can make is that around our own bedroom. Without taking into consideration the fact that ethnology, amongst the first disciplines to call on the services of photography, has been developing over the last few years an approach of proximity : endotic curiosity rather than exoticism. "Grey territories", therefore ; consciously visited with the aim of "reconsideration", such as the Cross Channel photographic mission launched in 1987, aiming at the reconstitution of an identity for the regions of Northern France, but also regions randomly chosen sometimes on the basis of almost Oulipien "constraints" : here Danièle Méaux unveils unexpected travel practices and behaviour, for example the "trip" of Carol Dunlop and Julio Cortàzar, stemming from nights spent hopping from one motorway service station to another (*Les Autonautes de la Cosmoroute*, 1983) !

On the other hand there are journeys which are perfectly motivated, related to going back in time, that of collective history, that of our own history. The photographer sets out in the steps of those who preceded him, visioning what others have seen or even photographed ; sites that are heavy with voices from the past : Gérard Rondeau in the steps of Delacroix, Philippe Sellier in those of Pasolini, Françoise Huguier and Michel Cressole crossing the "*Afrique fantôme*" of Michel Leiris, etc. They treat their journey as a pilgrimage, a celebration.

The final chapter of Danièle Méaux's book seeks finally to outline the role of fiction which plays a part in most of photographers' books. For the myths exist, those of yesterday and those of today : recurring themes of the absence of a home port, an unhappy exile, the ineptitude of reality, heirs of romanticism ; themes of urban wandering, day time or night time drifting, inherited from surrealism and situationism ; themes related to the call of the road and of freedom, a lightening of the load of existence through travel, a break away from scorned values, handed down from the *Beat Generation and the Hippy movement*.

The reader emerges from Danièle Méaux's book impressed by the reality and richness of a finally identified icon-textual object, the "Photographic Travel Book", that no-one beforehand had sat down to describe or define. Now the work is available to English speaking read

