

## Photography and Liquid Intelligence

In *Milk*, as in some of my other pictures, an important part is played by complicated natural forms. The explosion of the milk from its container takes a shape which is not really describable or characterizable, but which provokes many associations. A natural form, with its unpredictable contours, is an expression of infinitesimal metamorphoses of quality. Photography seems perfectly adapted for representing this kind of movement or form. I think this is because the mechanical character of the action of opening and closing the shutter—the substratum of instantaneity which persists in all photography—is the concrete opposite kind of movement from, for example, the flow of a liquid. Rodney Graham has expressed this perfectly in his *Two Generators*, which shows a river flowing at night under artificial illumination. There is a logical relation, a relation of necessity, between the phenomenon of the movement of a liquid, and the means of representation. And this could be said to be the case with natural forms in general: they are compelling when seen in a photograph because the relation between them and the whole construct, the whole apparatus and institution of photography is of course emblematic of the technological and ecological dilemma in relation to nature. I think of this sometimes as a confrontation of what you might call the “liquid intelligence” of nature with the glassed-in and relatively “dry” character of the institution of photography. Water plays an essential part in the making of photographs, but it has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined. You certainly don’t want any water in your camera for example! So, for me, water—symbolically—represents an archaism in photography, one that is admitted into the process, but also excluded, contained, or channelled by its hydraulics. This archaism of water, of liquid chemicals, connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an “archaism” here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production-processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving, and so on, which are connected to the origin of techné—like the separation of ores in primitive mining, for example. In this sense, the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory. I think that this “prehistorical” image of photography—a speculative image in which the apparatus itself can be thought of as not yet having emerged from the mineral and vegetable worlds—can help us understand the “dry” part of photography differently. This dry part I identify with optics and mechanics—with the lens and the shutter, either of the camera or of the projector or enlarger. This part of the photographic

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