Article

HIEROPHANIES AND APPARITIONS: SOME IDEAS TOWARD AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC

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Photography and the photographic are children of modernity. They belong to the historical moment of industrial capitalism and exist hand in hand with it. Conventional prehistories of the photographic locate its embryonic development in the conceptual and technical leaps in picture making and the theorisation of vision in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. Sometimes, they even trace back theories of vision that employ a parallel between the eye and the camera obscura to the medieval period, and even to classical Greece, suggesting that the photographic gestated throughout the history of Western thought, before it could be born in modernity. There have, of course, been attempts to recontextualise the development of photography in the nineteenth century, and disconnect it from the history of the Western Picture and the camera obscura. The most successful of these is probably set out in Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of The Observer* (1990).

There are, then, broadly speaking two approaches to the prehistory of photography: a modernist, materialist approach and a postmodern, contextual approach.

Here, though, I would like to attempt to outline a different approach to the prehistory of the photographic, using a more Foucault-inspired methodology. That is, if we concentrate on an 'archaeological approach,' on the continuities and discontinuities between 'epistemes' – that is, the 'unconscious' structures underlying the production of knowledge in a particular time and place – then we might open a way to think about the photographic somewhat differently. Rather than trying to extend the roots of the genealogical tree ever further back in the past and insisting on their connection to the present or, alternatively, suggesting that the child belongs to its time and can only exist and be understood in that time, we would, instead, concentrate on some continuities and discontinuities, on some instances, impulses and intersections that we might, looking back from the present, consider to be somewhat 'photographic' in their nature.

In doing so, we may learn something about the photographic indirectly. We might also learn something about the contemporary photographic situation without having to insist that these ideas and phenomena are somehow precursors of the photographic, or that we can bridge the gaps of time and culture in a historicist sleight-of-hand – but also without attempting to disprove the obvious truth that the photographic is a uniquely modern phenomenon.

What then do I mean by "the photographic"? Strictly, the photographic is a process of '*inscribing*' still and moving images with light, in which such images present themselves "as a result of an objective process."[1] Nonetheless, it may be useful not to pursue this well-worn path too far here, as such definitions belong to the moment before the photographic was redefined and necessarily re-thought following digitisation – and this path leads to a dead end. In my view, it is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the photographic is a process of '*inscribing*,' therefore the photographic is defined by the inscription of an image in an emulsion, and so on. Rather, I would say that the photographic has to do with manipulating light for the purposes of fixing a place in time and space; photographic processes and practices are repetitive and reproductive rituals.

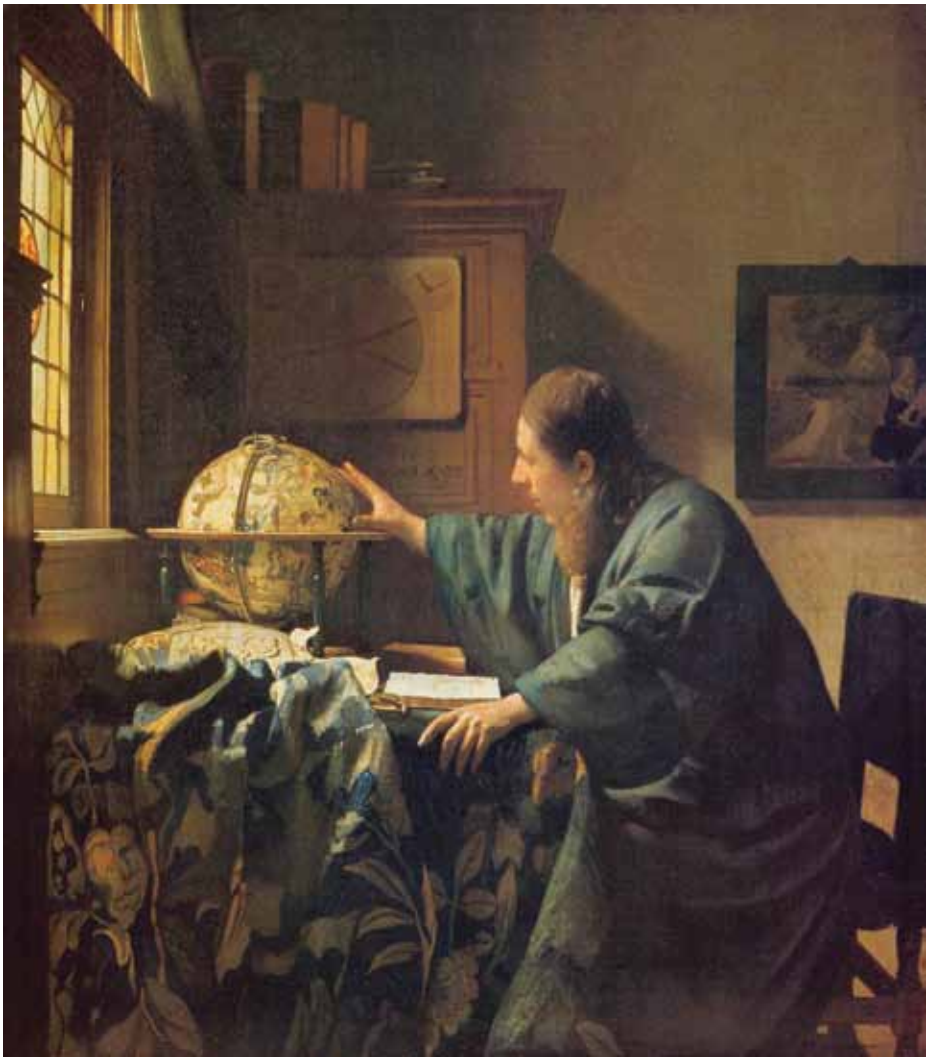

Figure 1. Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, c.1668, oil on canvas, 51 cm x 45 cm.

Defined like this, something like, or perhaps something alternative to, 'photographic' impulses, ideas and mechanisms can be recognised in other cultures and times, beyond the modern and beyond the history of Western thought and, perhaps, written history. Again, this is not to suggest that these phenomena are like photography or film, as such, but merely that they have something in common with them or that they share certain impulses. They also have a great deal of distance and difference from them. I would say the same about the camera obscura, for example. What I am suggesting is that the differences are as interesting and useful as the similarities, and that any similarities are speculative at best. Nonetheless, these speculations are useful, I believe, in considering the present photographic situation.

Let us begin with an example from the Enlightenment to illustrate the point, before we attempt to tackle some practices from other eras, which are more difficult as they belong to very different periods of thought from our own.

Vermeer, painting in his camera, is not a photographer. His paintings are not photographs. Unlike most photographs, they are not designed to be reproduced, but are unique and laboriously constructed. He picks and chooses the optical effects he is interested in and adds fictional embellishments as he sees fit; the images are not formed 'automatically' or 'instantaneously.' On the other hand, he lays down the paint according to patterns of light and shade produced by the camera's lens without drawing or line; he heightens the colours and contrasts, as the optics do; he paints the perspective of the room according to the optical projection, and he even paints out-of-focus-ness and other optical phenomena.

Vermeer also gave his paintings something of the omniscient detail that only the camera can provide, particularly in his renderings of maps, globes, musical instruments, etc. Ironically he did this selectively: he painted flesh without lines, marks or detail, for example. In other words, Vermeer picks and chooses what he wants from the camera in a way that the photographer could not, at least until the digitisation of photography. Vermeer's paintings are not like chemical photographs, but they *are* like digital photographs and they can teach us a lot about what photography is or isn't or was or wasn't. And they remind us that, since digitisation, we can no longer think of the photographic as being ontologically wedded to 'inscription' processes.

Let us now try to repeat this experiment with an example from prehistory. The sarsen monument at Stonehenge from the European Neolithic era (the phase we are concerned with here may be around 2500 BC) seems to have been constructed and used to frame and 'momentarily freeze' both the winter solstice sunset and lunar standstill moments in an attempt to 'stop time' in a repeatable way that feels to me, highly 'photographic.' This interpretation of the monument is eloquently advanced by Lionel Sims in his 2006 essay "The 'Solarization' of the Moon: Manipulated Knowledge at Stonehenge,"[2] in which he contextualises these ideas in recent thinking about the transition from hunter-gathering to pastoralism to agriculture in Europe and the place of monuments such as Stonehenge within that transition. Sims quotes Alasdair Whittle's book *Europe in the Neolithic: the Creation of New Worlds* to emphasise the importance of this context to interpreting the monument:

> The Neolithic phenomenon was not so much the creation of new worlds as the prolongation of old ones. But there were fundamental differences between different conceptual orders … Many early foragers may have seen themselves as part of an undivided, timeless world, shared by people and the animals which inhabited it … In … the Neolithic way of life … there was categorisation and separation … a new emphasis on … relationships with an otherworld. Speculatively, this shift may have been reinforced by guilt to do with the breaking of earlier bonds with nature.[3]

Connecting Whittle's ideas to Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments, Sims suggest that we can then see these monuments as "devices to prolong, recapture or manufacture a sense of unity and respect for more ancient beliefs." He goes on to elaborate:

> Circular monuments celebrated the disc-like shape of the cosmos, designed to mimic the topography of local horizons and the movement of the sun and the moon upon them. […] By aligning these monuments on the local encircling landscape and the rise and set positions of the sun and the moon, the builders locked their monuments to their local place. Each regional group, focused around their monuments, commanded their own 'centre of the universe.' Instead of a generalized communion with the entire natural world as sacred, [as] in the Mesolithic, Neolithic concepts emphasized local space as a cosmological centre, reversing earlier beliefs.[4]

Neolithic monument-building, then, was about 'social relationships,' not scientific observations of cosmological phenomena. Rather, these phenomena were utilised and incorporated into devices (monuments) in order to commemorate a "past lived communalism through *imagined* collectives of ancestors."[5] Sims suggests that this was achieved through rituals that both "respected and transcended an ancient cosmology that was focused on the moon" whilst introducing "solar symbolism."

The astronomy of prehistoric monuments, then, is ritualistic and religious. The Stonehenge ritual was specifically connected to the winter solstice sunset and the moonset at its southern standstill, and this seems to be the case for a vast array of similar monuments. The centerpiece of this ritual is predicated on the fact that the sarsen stones were arranged in such a way that the circles of pillars would have appeared solid when approached uphill from the north east, with only "a 'window' framed between the grand trilithon uprights aligned on winter solstice sunset. Within the darkening mass of stone at winter solstice sunset, a observer [standing at the Heel Stone outside the circle] would have seen a burst of light as the sun seemed to set into the Altar stone at the apparent centre of the monument." Furthermore, "when approaching the monument from the Heel Stone, walking at a sedate pace at winter solstice sunset, the artifice is created of holding the setting sun still, the upward movement of the walker's eye exactly counter-balancing the sinking motion of the Sun."[6] Adding to this effect, at certain times the dark moon would have set in a window above that framing the sunset on the solstice.

It is worth quoting Sims at length on this subject:

> We can conclude that the builders selected this alignment on the moon as the main alignment […] since it allowed them to place the moon above the sun. […] The onset of ritual power with the period of dark moon which, arguably, Palaeolithic and Mesolithic hunting cultures had conferred on the moon is preserved and manipulated by combining the southern minor standstill moonsets with the setting winter solstice sunset. Not only does this generate the longest darkest night possible but, by bracketing this dark moon with the setting winter sun, each mimics the other in their properties of signalling the onset of darkness. […] Further, by creating the illusion from the Heel Stone that both moon and sun descended from the world above to the world below through the centre of the sarsen monument, the monument is constructed as an 'axial centre of the cosmos.' Earlier hunter-gatherer conceptions of a generalized sacred landscape were reversed by such artifice. The artifice is extended when processing uphill in the final Avenue approach towards a descending winter sun: the two movements cancel each other and give the appearance of a momentarily frozen sunset. Ritual leaders, through prolonging winter sunset, demonstrated the power to 'stop time.' [7]

To me, the parallels with the photographic are obvious: the power achieved by apparently stopping time; the desire to locate ourselves and our culture at the centre of the universe; the power that comes from manipulating natural phenomena for these ends, etc., etc. The light in the dark with a corralled audience facing the window, in which the light appears – from "the centre of the cosmos" – reminds me of the experience of the cinema. In another example from Neolithic Europe, the passage tomb at Cairn T, Loughcrew, Ireland, from around 3000 BC, has "[c]ircular solar pictographic engravings on the backstone [which] demarcate the diagonal movement of the [image of the sun] across the stone [on spring equinox]."[8] This particular example seems uncannily close to the photographic, with the passage tomb actually acting as a camera. In both of these examples, there is a complex relationship between place and time, the sun and darkness, the living and the dead, etc., which seems similar to the characteristics of the photographic.

Similarly, the descent of the shadow of Kukulkan, the plumed serpent, at spring equinox each year down the edge of the staircase at the Castillo pyramid at Chichen Itza, in the Yucatan peninsula of modern Mexico, seems to me to be a remarkably photographic apparition.

The Castillo, built by the Mayans around a thousand years ago, had to be carefully aligned to achieve this effect, but also had to be *designed* to achieve it. The building is a stepped pyramid with four sides, each with staircases of 91 stairs, plus a platform on top, counting the days of the year, and is orientated so that its shadow indicates the zenith passages. In order to create the moving image of Kukulkan, the corners of the stepped terraces are rounded and there are large snakeheads carved at the bottom of each staircase. Furthermore, "the dimensions of the [stepped terraces] and of the outline of the edges were precisely modelled in such a way that, roughly half an hour before sunset on the days near the equinox, the shadow is projected along the stairs."[9]

Everything about the construction, orientation, angle, the shape of the stepped terraces, etc, was designed to produce the image of Kukulkan sliding down the side on the equinoxes. Clearly, this elaborate moving image far exceeds the role of the building as a calendar, being nothing less than an apparition of the return to earth of the deity Kukulkan. This hierophany seems similar to that of Stonehenge in its 'photographic' qualities, but differs in that the production of an *image* created by light and shadow, rather than the venerated body itself, is at its centre. After all, it is the apparently magical reappearance of the absent that gives the photographic its power.

The same era as the sarsen monument at Stonehenge (c.2500 BC) offers up another famous and controversial example of monumental ritual architecture that seems to have been organised around cosmic phenomena.

The 'star shafts' in the Great Pyramid at Giza (Khufu's pyramid) seem to have been designed to connect the dead pharaoh to the place where he will reside in the afterlife. The rebirth rituals took place in the so-called 'Queen's Chamber' and 'King's Chamber'. In the King's Chamber, the southern shaft was aligned with the star Al Nitak -Zita Orionis in Orion's belt, Orion being the Egyptian Osiris, Lord of the Afterlife and first legendary king of Egypt, whilst the northern shaft was aligned, at the time, with the pole star of the era –Alpha Draconis.[10] Similarly, the shafts in the Queen's Chamber were aligned with Sirius (Isis, wife of Osiris) in the south and Kochab near the celestial North Pole.[11] In other words, these shafts were, in the words of Gulio Magli, "*stellar conduits* orientated towards the two regions of rebirth mentioned in the Pyramid Texts."[12] It seems likely that the rituals enacted in these chambers, at the death of the king, were a re-enactment of the story of Osiris.

Figure 2. The Descent of Kukulkan, Chichen Itza. Photographed 21 March 2009.
Public Domain photo, source: wikimedia commons ATSZ56.

What is particularly intriguing here is that the shafts have a horizontal section at their start, so it "would be impossible to frame the celestial bodies in them; these alignments, then, had a purely symbolic significance."[13] Magli goes on to define the purpose of Khufu's pyramid succinctly: "[It] was conceived as an astronomically anchored mechanism […] The aim of this mechanism was to reconcile the sun cult with the star cult, in order to ensure the king's rebirth, and simultaneously to assert the king's power in the face of death itself."[14]

Robert Bauval has suggested "that all seven fourth-dynasty pyramids were arranged on the ground in exactly the same pattern as seven key stars in the Orion/Osiris constellation and its neighbouring group, the Hyades […]. Incredibly, the Great Pyramid (with its shaft pointing at Zita Orionis) correlated on the ground almost exactly to the position of that star in the heavens."[15] We are faced with the possibility that the Giza plateau is a sort of 'celestial mirror,' a recreation of the heavens on earth, with the pyramids as stars and the Nile as the Milky Way. In fact, Khufu's pyramid was known as "The Horizon of Khufu," in other words, the meeting place of earth and sky. There are numerous suggestions that the idea of the 'celestial mirror' is a global phenomenon, with many examples where monuments on the ground mirror significant constellations, etc. in the sky – but we must leave these other instances aside for now if we are to concentrate on this specific confluence of mirroring and ritual reincarnation.[16]

What might this confluence tell us about the photographic? Photography in the nineteenth century and twentieth century embodied the modern mechanisation and capitalisation of the Enlightenment project of acquiring, ordering and cataloguing knowledge, attaching them to the desire to conquer space and time in doing so. The photographic then, is a kind of 'terrestrial mirror,' reflecting and collecting everything, transcending space and time to do so. Subsequently, in the twenty-first century, this project has both reached absurd Borges-like levels, where the map covers the territory,[17] and has been superseded by a new photography that replaces the cataloguing of the world with the so-called 'front-facing' camera that actually turns inwards at the endless number of photographers, endlessly cataloguing themselves.

In modernity, the other world of the stars that was the counterpoint for previous cultures was replaced by a doubling of the world itself. If the photographic is or was a 'terrestrial mirror,' then the recent turn inward could be seen as our own rebirth ritual: a mechanism to ensure our rebirth, and simultaneously to assert our power in the face of death itself.

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1 H Damisch, "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. A Trachtenberg (New Haven, CN: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 287-90.

2 L Sims, "The 'Solarization' of the Moon: Manipulated Knowledge at Stonehenge," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 16:2 (2006), 191-207.

3 A Whittle, *Europe in the Neolithic: The Creation of New Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), as quoted in Sims, "The 'Solarization' of the Moon."

4 Sims, "The 'Solarization' of the Moon."

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Matt Gatton, http://paleo-camera.com/neolithic/.

9 G Magli, *Mysteries and Discoveries of Archaeoastronomy* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2009), 193-4.

10 See A Badawy, "The Stellar Destiny of Pharaoh and the So-called Air-shafts in Cheops's Pyramid," and V Trimble, "Astonomical Investigation Concerning the So-called Air-shafts of Cheops's Pyramid," both pub. *MIOAWB*, 10 (1964), 189-206 and183-187, respectively.

11 See R Bauval and A Gilbert, *The Orion Mystery* (London: Heinemann, 1994).

12 Magli, *Mysteries and Discoveries of Archaeoastronomy*, 349.

13 Ibid., 350.

14 Ibid., 359.

15 David Keys, "EGYPTOLOGY / Trying to Build Heaven on Earth: Controversial New Research Suggests That the Pyramids were a Map of the Stars," *The Independent*, 1 February 1994, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/egyptology-trying-to-build-heaven-on-earth-controversial-new-research-suggests-that-the-pyramids-1391311.html.

16 *In The Order of Things, Foucault* makes explicit the large part played by resemblance in later Western culture: "Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars." M Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1966]), 19.

17 In *Simulations*, Baudrillard refers to a story by JL Borges: "The finest allegory of simulation [is] the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory…." J Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 1.