Eternal Wandering

Timeless Photography and Alternative Interpassivity

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Timeless photography—an apparent contradiction in terms—remains the volatile secret of masters, much like what Lucien Hervé left unspoken and which I had to discover myself. One example: the secret use of the golden ratio in pursuing subjective expressiveness in photography.[1]

I imagine that the concept of **alternative interpassivity** might reconcile my reveries scattered with images preceding my vision, hoping to transcend the antagonisms of technocratic modernities in crisis, which leave today's consumer lost between fundamental human needs for piety and virtue.[2]
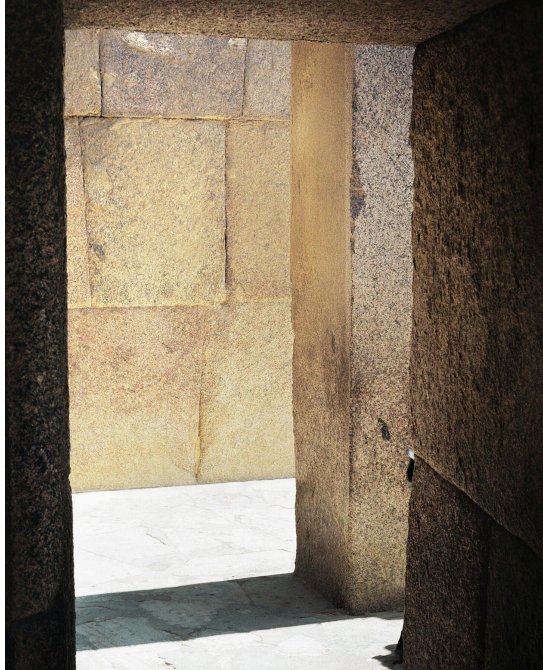
Photo: Jérôme Bertrand © 2001). Valley Temple, Pyramid of Khephren, Cairo Egypt. Color version.

Will this alternative help me detect the immanent absence in my photographic expressions of built existence? As Le Corbusier said and Hervé applied in his work, or as French agnosticisst poet, essayist, and editor Charles Péguy noted: *The most difficult thing is not to say what one sees, but to accept seeing what one sees.*[1]

I defend my non-anecdotal subjective intention[3] as a critical procedure in my architectural photography. The existing object will merge with the present subject in the very subjective convergence that distinguishes them in the obtained image.[4]

Three Stages of Representational Truth

I examine three distinct processes of reading mediated images—not to corroborate a global self-reference in medialities (McLuhan, Baudrillard) but to better envisage certain values of truth, subjective rather than objective.

Comparative Analysis: Valley Temple of Khephren, Giza, Egypt

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[1] "Dare to see what one sees"—a reference made by Le Corbusier to his friend and photographer Lucien Hervé, who conveyed this to me during our numerous documentary video recording sessions (1993-1999). Visit the official website of Lucien Hervé: http://lucienherve.com. "Chandigarh vu par Lucien Hervé" (Vimeo, video 22 min, kinokast Berlin 2013): *Reflexions on modern architecture in independent India. This film portrait gives us a first hand recollection of Lucien Hervé's collaboration with modern architect Le Corbusier in India and beyond.*

From left to right, photo: 1, 2, 3.

Photo 1/3: Lantern Slide Collection

Documentary representation: Interactive mode
The activity is induced between documentary objects, forming a visible duality in the image. Object and subject merge without knowing each other. Question: Should I walk faster on the object (the path)?
Source: Egypt. Gizeh View 13: Egyptian - Old Kingdom. Granite Temple near Pyramid of Khephren. Joseph Hawkes (1900). Brooklyn Museum Archives (S10|08 Gizeh, image 9621).

Photo 2/3: Temple of the Sphinx

Reportage representation: Interpassive mode
The activity is reported onto the object in its entirety, inferring a passive and objective reading of the subject. Should I stop in passive contemplation? Is this a total and pleasurable loss of control over the object?
Source: Exploring the Environs of Cairo. Future15epic (© 2009)

Photo 3/3: Errance Perpétuelle - Eternal Wandering

Immersive/subjective representation: Alternative interpassive mode
The subject's passivity is reported onto the object in a dialectical cycle. Can this form of interpassivity reactivate my subjective reading of the image? Must I exit the subjective image to liberate myself from it?
Source personal: Eternal Wandering - Egyptian man was always on his way. Jérôme Bertrand © 2001, Valley Temple, Pyramid of Khephren

I question this photo, which after years of doubt about its significance, I rightfully opt to document by the name of 'ETERNAL WANDERING'.
This stems, on a plastic viewpoint, from a subjective process of internalising *objective* reality—a place crowded with tourists: the Valley Temple of the second pyramid of Khephren, built during the Old Kingdom for Pharaoh Khephren, son of Cheops (Giza, Cairo, Egypt).[5]

The Moment of Capture

The moment of capturing this photo is an epic of sorts for me. It plunges me in an alternating back-and-forth process between my *activity* and *passivity* at the very moment of the snapshot click—magical because it makes the gaze seem to exit the borders of the image.
This unity between object and subject imposes a liberation of the image by the image, which I produce rather in a kind of **alternative** fashion to the seemingly straight-forward psychological process described under **Interpassivity** by Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1949).

The photograph "Eternal Wandering" emerged after waiting for the propitious instant (seemingly eternal, but actually ten seconds of framing maximum). I desired to construct a composition with millennial pink granite (the object), expressing a unique or timeless moment of calm within tourist chaos (the subject).

When suddenly forty tourists before, beside, and behind me simultaneously escaped my sought framing, I felt the photograph fabricate itself before my eyes. I had to wait without panic for a few more seconds to see the last human trace (fabric, right side) disappear. In a final moment of profound doubt—divine perhaps?—lasting a quarter second maximum: should I take the photograph before or after the complete disappearance of the human corporeal symbol from the scene? The visible instant obtained by precise shutter release would be decided within a tenth of a second.
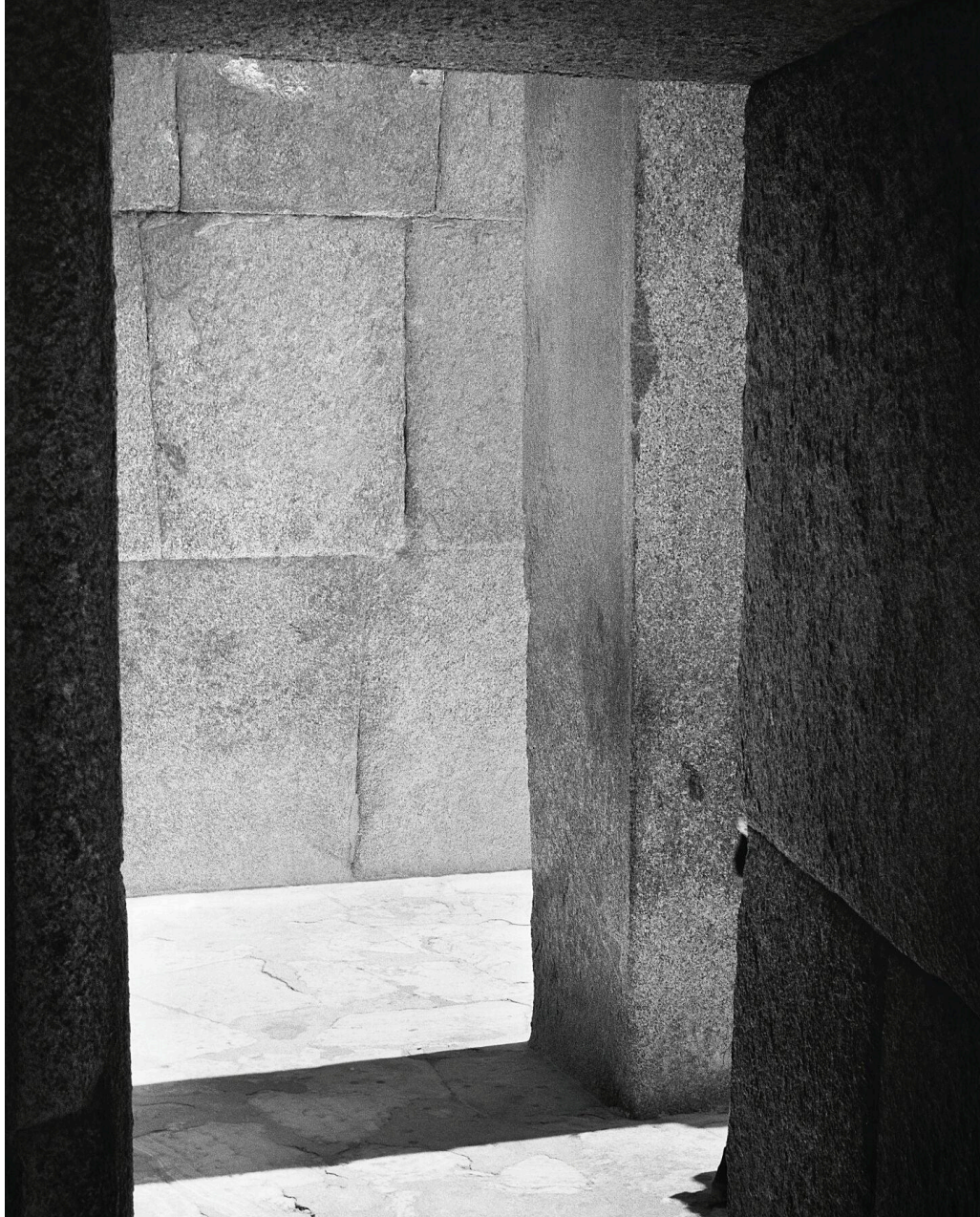
Photo: Jérôme Bertrand © 2001). Valley Temple, Pyramid of Khephren, Cairo Egypt. Black and white version.

I chose to preserve a furtive piece of fabric—a symbolic flight whose significance I later found in Norberg-Schulz's texts on the Egyptian's perpetual wandering in architecture. I subsequently estimate seeing in this photograph the volatilisation of the stage curtain, a wandering of romantic text, or perhaps an explanation I seek in the history of scenography and cinematic montage, expressed through Kahn's premonitory verse: "A man with a book goes toward the light."

But *which* book?

Architectural Reading

The Valley Temple of Khephren (4th Dynasty, 2723-2563 BC) features T-shaped passageways leading to hypostyle halls. Comparison of three photographs of the same scene demonstrates how visual treatment differs and brings about different meanings to the depicted scene. From left to right, meaning transforms from principles of objectivity (documentary object) towards subjectivity (free subject).

A. Documentation (Technical Rendering, document)

Photographical documentation follows principles of interactivity between subject and photographer. The Lantern Slide displays the subject matter completely; the camera's vantage point brings depth and direction to the passageway. This composition refers to the building's existence before the photograph was taken—one feels able to walk down the passageway (the central expression being how fast one should walk on the stones). Reality becomes tangible through the interactive character of the setting including architecture, camera/viewer, and the picture itself functioning as artifact or interface.

B. Reportage (Picturesque Rendering, reportage)

Mediated photography follows principles of interpassivity where "one sits and waits in pleasurable oblivion." This vernacular view exemplifies geometric and volumetric aspects but remains obscure in captions, applicable to potentially numerous other picture sources. The use of optical subterfuges (wide angle, shadows, scaling) creates an exaggerated view rendering the human figure gazing at architecture in passivity—presenting a small actor within an overwhelming décor. The dramatic scaling effect becomes a sensation in itself, distinguished by technical advancement rather than subject matter.

C. Free (Artistic Essay on an alternative interpassivity)

Subjective architectural photography follows cycles and principles of alternative interpassivity. "Eternal Wandering" immerses the viewer in the passageway, placing them at the centre of experiencing the scene at the hypostyle hall. The photograph brings one's presence into the context of the photographer's experience—into the action of moving along the passageway. Subjective meaning becomes an abstraction of wandering through Egyptian architecture, though optical effect forces stronger visual confrontation with granite blocks. One must escape the image to comprehend its full signification.

This photograph exemplifies **alternative interpassivity**, referencing Norberg-Schulz's analysis of Egyptian architectural movement: "Egyptian man was always on his way. His space became the stage for an 'Eternal Wandering.'"

Appendix: Norberg-Schulz Citations

From *Meaning in Western Architecture* (ISBN 0 289 70635 1, revised 1980, reprinted 1986):

"In the Chephren temple this court is preceded by a T-shaped hall, and between the court and the pyramid are five parallel sanctuaries. The complexes at Giza are characterized by an unsurpassed wish for pure and simple form. [...] This is still evident in the well-preserved valley temple of Chephren, where a T-shaped hypostyle hall is constructed of monolithic pillars, lintels and slabs. This is the first mature orthogonal space-structure of Egyptian architecture." (p.18)

"It is often maintained that Egyptian architecture shuns space, and that its formal language is primarily based on plastic relationships. [...] The basic wish for enclosure stems from the experience of a need for 'Being somewhere,' that is, the need for an inside, but the Egyptians did not 'dwell' in the space thereby created. Instead, the way they handled interior structure expresses the idea that Egyptian man was always on his way. His space became the stage for an 'Eternal Wandering.'" (p.19)

"This is not only symbolized by the longitudinal axis, but also by the intermediary spaces between the plastic members, for instance, between the columns of the hypostyle halls. These intermediary spaces are often smaller than the volume of the masses, whereby they become fragmented and do not invite calm. [...] Series of pylons or gates give emphasis to the staccato movement of the Egyptian wandering."

Footnotes

[1] A video recording session between black and white, timeless photography (2011) shows a physical cutting session of photography with students, following the transfer Lucien Hervé made to me; the practical framing work session elucidates this plastic question of expression and free application of the Golden Section or golden ratio.

[2] In their modern and postmodern evolution, the two divergent notions of Piety and Virtue could present a dichotomy that the conception of alternative interpassivity might unify: piety will attach to the reality of existence (humanism of societies) whilst virtue will lead to the virtuality of presence (autocracy of media).

[3] Modern subjectivism.

[4] As Jean Zin notes so well: "Believing in the independent, objective existence of the subject facing an equally independent object defines the naive, natural attitude of perception which is also the positivist, scientistic vision because it is simply theoretical (separated, object of work) ignoring the process of knowledge constitution. One is then caught in the antinomies of mind and matter, freedom and causality, means and ends, devil and good god."

[5] The funerary complex of Khephren, built over 4,500 years ago under the 4th Dynasty, is in much better condition than that of Cheops and notably includes a magnificent temple in pink granite from Aswan. This is not the funerary temple proper, of which only foundations have been found, but the one at the end of the funerary causeway leading to the monument. Called the "valley temple," like all those situated near the Nile, it served to receive the deceased's sarcophagus after crossing the river.