

The Wordless Doctoral Dissertation: Photography as Scholarship

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Communication

In 1979, a unique and revolutionary event occurred in France. Photographer Lucien Clergue was granted a Ph.D. (*cum laude*) solely on the basis of his collection of photographs entitled *Langage des Sables* (Language of the Sands). Directed by premier French philosopher and author Roland Barthes—one of the founders of semiology—the dissertation is an example of the scholarly value of creative photographic work. This paper discusses the dissertation’s intrinsic worth from the semiological, mythological-poetic, and photographic perspectives. Selected images from the dissertation accompany the article.

On August 19, 1839, the French Academy of Sciences formally recognized the invention of photography—“writing with light.” On December 5, 1979, French academicians from the prestigious University of Provence awarded a Ph.D. degree (*cum laude*) to Lucien Clergue, a noted French photographer for a doctoral dissertation written entirely with light—a collection of photographs entitled *Langage des Sables* (Language of the Sands). This unique, revolutionary, and singular phenomenon, which I had the privilege to witness, could only have happened in France, whose people, according to sociologist Andre Siegfried, are capable of both the most daring inventiveness and the most narrow-minded routine. Or, as iconoclastic poet Jean Cocteau paradoxically expressed it, France represents a tradition in anarchy. For the granting of this Ph.D. degree was as radical and *avant-garde* an action as the public recognition of the phenomenon of photography itself in 1839.

Examined more closely, what makes this event most striking is the fact that in order to receive his degree, Lucien Clergue was granted two major exemptions: first, he was excused for not having the basic University degrees and coursework normally required for the granting of the Ph.D. degree; second, he was allowed to do a doctoral dissertation consisting entirely of photographs. As far as he knows, this unique event has never been repeated in France. And it never will be until we are able to appreciate the scholarly value and intrinsic worth of such creative efforts.

French writer and philosopher, Roland Barthes, one of the recognized founders of semiology—the science of signs—was the Director of Clergue’s dissertation and the dominant force behind the recognition of the scholarly value of creative photographic works. In his analysis of Clergue’s work, Barthes notes that the collection of photos:

appears as a discourse, since these images were subjected by their author to a classification, ...and that, moreover, since they reproduce a referent, they bring into play a reproduction code and lend themselves to a secondary level analysis. (Clergue, 1980, p. 1)

After pointing out how Clergue’s photographs alter the level of perception of a beach, “a sprig of grass becomes a tree, a scatter of grains, a mountain range,” he goes on to state that Clergue’s work affects us because it says something:

In the photographic “suite” (and I use the term in an almost musical sense), there is also meaning, and it is a vaguely cosmic one. Through the ordering of his images of the sands, Clergue follows the parcourse of a progressive birth emerging from primordial chaos: from form to form, he thus moves from streaming water to man-made object, on to debris of some plastic. The series works here, therefore, like an Allegory (in the broad meaning of the word). As a substance endowed with plasticity, sand is allegorical of a process of “becoming.” (Clergue, 1980, p. 2)

Caroline Spurgeon, in her book Shakespeare's Imagery, addressed the question of the nature and power of metaphor:

For I incline to believe that analogy—likeness between dissimilar things—which is the fact underlying the possibility and reality of metaphor, holds within itself the very secret of the universe. The bare fact that germinating seeds or falling leaves are actually another expression of the processes we see at work in human life and death, thrills me, as it must others, with a sense of being here in presence of a great mystery, which, could we only understand it, would explain life and death itself.

For as the poet well knows, as does also the seer and prophet, it is only by means of these hidden analogies that the greatest truths, otherwise inexpressible, can be given a form or shape capable of being grasped by the human mind. (1958, pp. 6-7)

Barthes expounds further on this subject when he discusses the question of how to evaluate a modern image or text:

The presence of a recognizable allegorical process is, for me, an indication of value. Little does it matter, I repeat, what a work of art means. What matters is that it bear in itself, meaning, that it be devoted to meaning: one must feel the call of meaning. Adapting Keats' line, I'll say that: "Photography by a worthwhile photographer is a continuous allegory." (Clergue, 1980, pp. 2-3)

Barthes finds two poetic elements in Clergue's "suite": theme and trace. The theme of this collection of photographs is the sand. In my interview with Lucien Clergue, he made it very clear that the theme of sand—the sand of the river, the sand of the beach—was at the center of all of his life, of all of his work. The second poetic element present is trace:

Trace is an intermediary, unachieved or else overachieved, a transitory clue to some unknown. The photographer is here comparable to a trapper or an archeologist who follows his quarry's spoor. Through this culture of Trace, Clergue touches upon two distinct levels of photography: the first is painting... the second is magic, which is essentially an inspired reading of Traces, since for pagan man, nature is nothing but that surface of the Earth that has been marked (just as Clergue's sands), by the track of the Gods. Thus, Clergue's suite almost becomes a geomancy treatise. (Clergue, 1980, p. 3)

If Clergue's work almost becomes a geomancy treatise, if it is an inspired reading of the footprints of the gods, a reinvention of the history of man and his universe, and if the primeval sands are as he says "mirrors of the great cosmogonies", then *Langage des Sables* is part of the world of mythology. Joseph Campbell, in his book The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion, observed that:

The life of a mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors delivering, not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence, infinity, and abundance...Indeed, the first and most essential service of a mythology is this one, of opening the mind and heart to the utter wonder of all being. And the second service, then, is cosmological: of representing the universe and whole spectacle of nature, both as known to the mind and as beheld by the eye, as an epiphany of such kind that when lightning

flashes, or a setting sun ignites the sky, or a deer is seen standing alerted, the exclamation "Ah!" may be uttered as a recognition of divinity. (1988, p. 18)

The "Ah!" of Campbell and of Clergue was the same as that uttered by Albert Schweitzer while making his way through a herd of hippopotamuses at sunset : "there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase 'Reverence for Life' "(Schiller, 1994, p. 202).

Viewed from another perspective, that of the photographer, Lucien Clergue's work may be thought of as a photo essay (a collection of pictures on a single theme) or reportage on a cosmic theme. As Clergue himself expressed it: "these images endeavor to tell a story, the story of man, and to discover, amidst the sands, the progression of life upon our planet " (Clergue, 1980, Preface). The images that form this photo essay consist of sexually symbolic rock formations, patterns upon the primeval sands made by the sea, insects, plants, seaweed, and man, reflections of galaxies on wet sand and in tidal ponds, the fossil-evoking tracks of automobile tires upon the sands, as well as of the plastic refuse and litter of twentieth-century man. Clergue sees the primeval sands as "vast schoolbook pages inscribing the march of time or delivering messages from the shores of some Elsewhere" (Clergue, 1980, Preface). And he and his camera are there to see, to bear witness, to be awed, to tell a story, to define a theme, to document, probe, question, intuit, to hold the grains of silver halide crystals up to the grains of primeval sand to record the transitory signatures and signs of the sand, the scrawl of seaweed, the traces and tracks of the time.

Lucien Clergue is a poet with a camera. A creative artist who broke the Ph.D. barrier fifteen years ago. A product of the small southern town of Arles, France, whose life has been greatly influenced by sun, sea, sand, and death. A sensitive photographer who understands the interrelatedness, interdependence, and unity of man, nature, and the cosmos. A documentary photographer concerned about the future of humanity, who, like Chief Seattle, knows that " what befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth" (Campbell-Moyers, 1988, p. 34). A *photo-reporter* who used his camera to answer the questions raised in the Buddhist Scriptures of the Visuddhimagga:

Am I ?
Am I not?
What am I?
How am I?
Whence came this existing being?
Whither is it to go?

References

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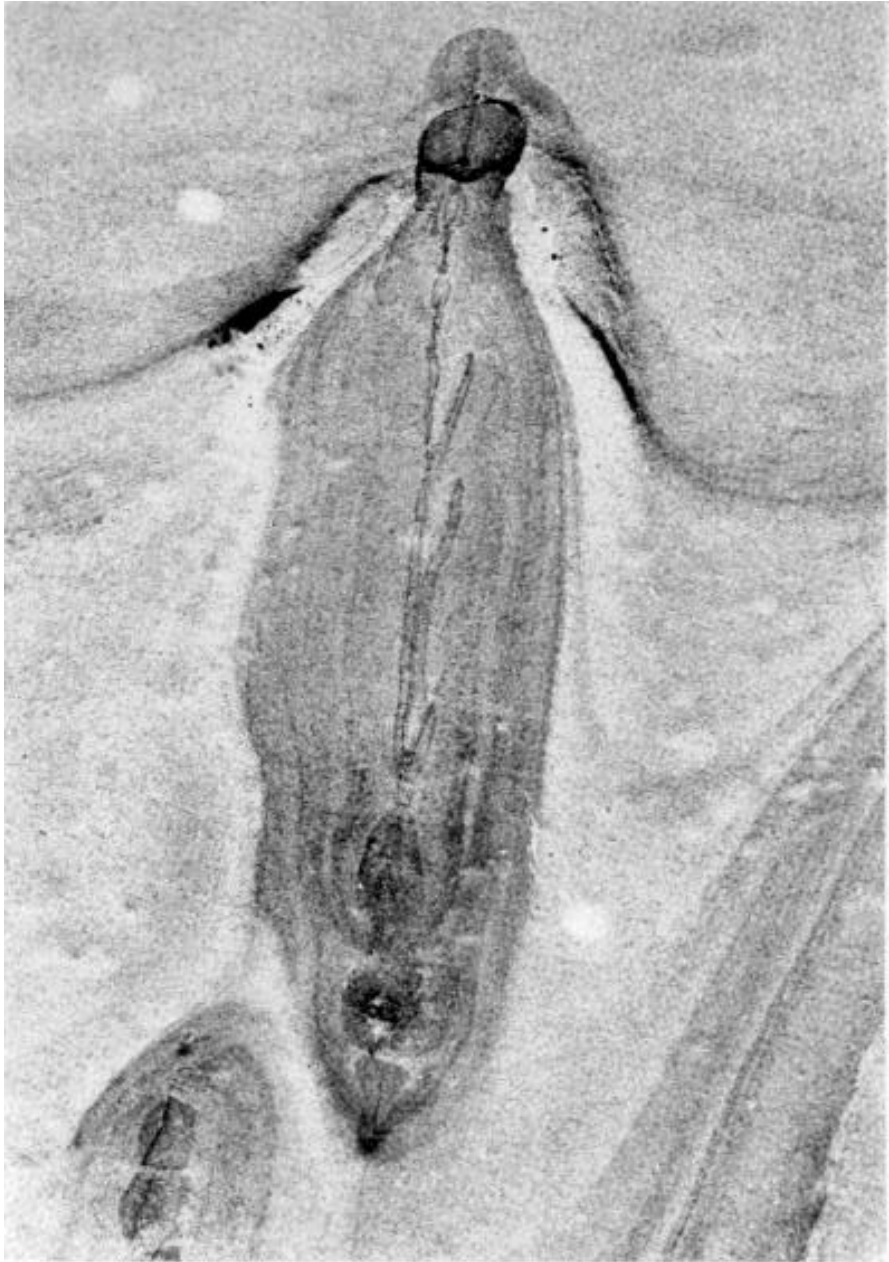
Personal Interview

Clergue, L. (cassette recording, July 25,1994). Arles, France.

The collection of photographs which follow are taken from Lucien Clergue's *Langage des Sables*. The photographs of the rock formations were taken at Point Lobos, near Carmel, California. The rest of the collection was taken over a fifteen year period on the beaches of the Camargue in France and in Spain.

Rocks of the Pacific having kept pages from some god's sketchbook: Man is present everywhere, and Woman, through their birth symbols, their sex and their dreams. (p. 6)





Primeval sands, mirrors of the great cosmogonies, unless we witness here the invention of forests or monoliths, sprung here from some other planet. (p. 8)



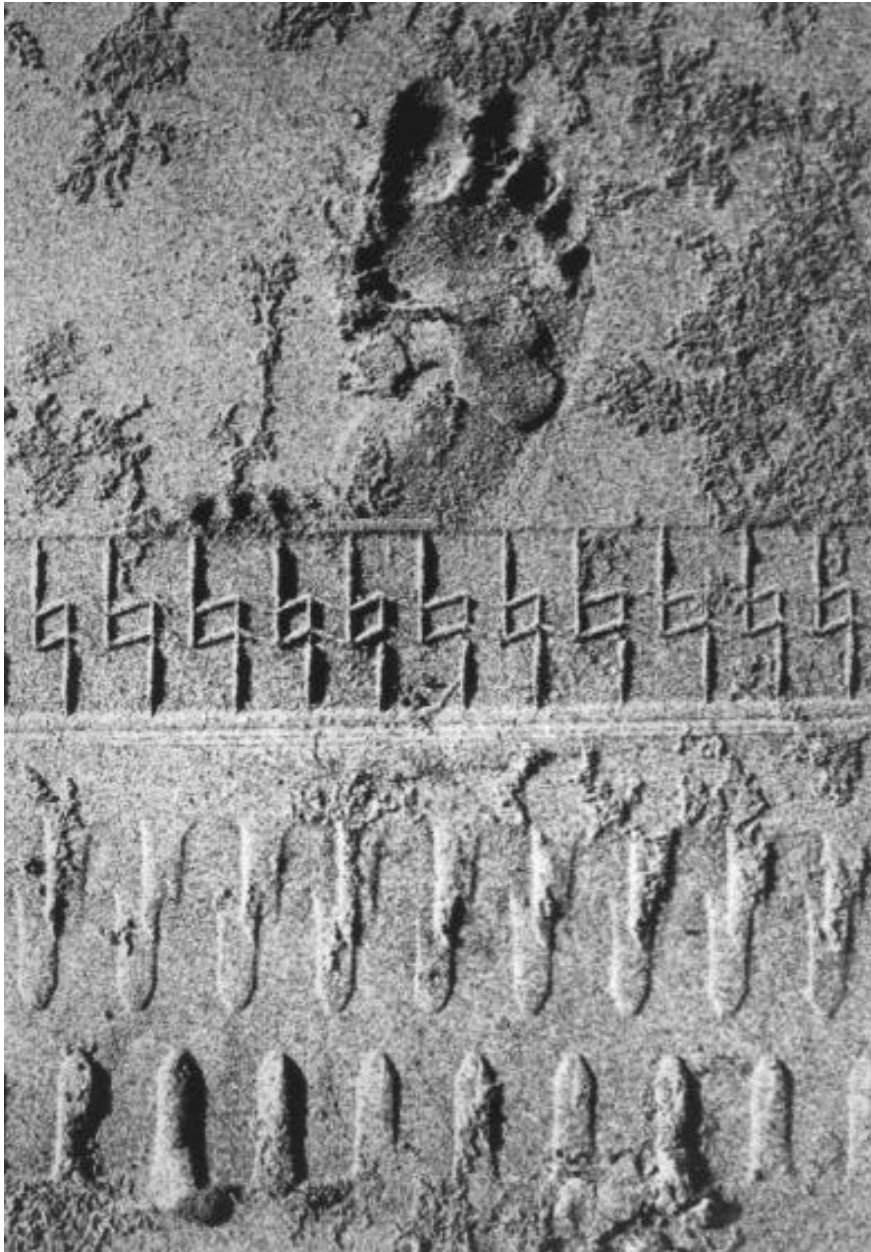
Vast schoolbook pages inscribing the march of time, or delivering messages from the shores of some Elsewhere. And since the beach dreams itself forest, insects dream themselves men. (p. 10)



It is all moving very fast now: Man is here at last, and galaxies drown into the pond his heels have dug, as night carries him off upon its Pegasus. (p. 13)



Upon these nowhere roads, man recreates fossil tracks, vestiges of some graphics, with his tires: Assyrian bas-relief, Indian textiles, musical staff. (p. 14).



Man's refuse invades the beach, to shock the heart and illusions of archeologists of time to come. Plastic litters all. Out of its substance the white flag of surrender is cut out, unless it be Death's wedding dress. (p. 15)

