

GOD IS NONSENSE by Trmasan Bruialesi

Neville tapped the photo with his index finger.
«Take a look at the hand!» he growled impatiently.

Phil picked up the picture again. He examined it carefully. If Neville had noticed something, then he should see it too. He went through all the details one by one. Hillery had his right leg slightly bent and the bottom of his foot leaning casually against the wall of the house. He seemed to be ready for anything, just not for something threatening.

Phil's eyes scanned the two figures. Then he, too, stopped short. He closed his eyes and, in his mind, considered the scene depicted in the photo. No, there was no doubt about it, the man in the picture was left-handed. The murderer fired with his left hand!
(from: G-man Jerry Cotton, No. 174, «Trouble on Broadway», 1962)

I like the cheap Jerry Cotton paperbacks from the 60s. That's when people really knew how to smoke and drink whiskey – and that's when photos were looked at closely. A situation that I desperately miss, especially with the curators I'm familiar with. During a recent telephone conversation, a curator informed me that ever since the digitalization of photography, the question I had posed was superfluous; I had merely asked her, if one were to place a negative in the holder of an enlarger reversed, how much the resulting positive image (exposed in that way) would correspond to the reality depicted on it? Such a positive image – that would have been my answer – would of course be identical to the reversed image on the screen of a camera and – since world coordinates are already translated into camera coordinates – would correspond more to the photographer's view of an image of the world than to the world itself. Indeed, I wanted to explain further, our view of our mirror image is likewise a first abstraction of reality; we in fact need to view ourselves reflected through two mirrors to be able to see ourselves as the world sees us. But I didn't get to that point, because, according to the curator, both the question and its answer had been made superfluous by digitalization. All the same, it seems to me that mirror imaging (or left or right handedness) is still one of the most substantive questions in photography. Not only for the left-handed murderer in Jerry Cotton, who would have escaped the electric chair as a photographically proven right-hander if a clumsy police lab technician had inserted the film incorrectly and if a resourceful G-man had not discovered a license plate number in the lower right corner and a shop window lettering in the background that were both unreadable because they were reversed, i.e., horizontally flipped. In spite of this, the image was still true to reality, undistorted, and bound to the depicted subject like a print (likewise laterally reversed) to the printing block. Yet: unreadable. Because letter characters, and with them all characters, are flipped horizontally into something DIFFERENT (with the exception of the symmetrical ones, such as 8, the capital letters H, W, I or a stylized eagle on a coat of arms) which, of course, is what constitutes the familiar difference between image and symbol.

The little word PIPIFAX may be used to illustrate this: Originally, Jews used the name of God YHWH (Yahweh) in Greek translations of the Bible. It was determined that the Hebrew way of spelling the so-called Tetragrammaton should be exactly maintained, with the script reading from right to left. The Greek script, however, went from left to right; YHWH was thus read by the Greeks as HWHY. The four Hebrew characters resembled the Greek and read as PIPI for the Greeks. During a reading of the Bible facsimile, the

Greeks asked what PIPI was supposed to mean in the fax (for facsimile). It was incomprehensible to the reader: because of this, readers of the facsimiles spoke of a PIPI fax.

In today's slang, PIPIFAX means nonsense, triviality, rubbish. In mirror image, then, the name of God also means nonsense, triviality, rubbish. In short, the symbol obviously no longer agrees with that which is depicted. But back to photography: If we would flip the photographic image of a house horizontally, everything would remain the same and then again, not the same. What was on top, remains on top, the roof would be in place, the doors too, the windows, the chimney in the right location; and yet everything would be reversed, laterally reversed. An observer would have to assume, insofar as he would not know and recognize the location and the house from having seen it himself, that everything was in order. But now, in our minds, we hang a sign on the house with an inscription, let's say: JERRY COTTON. The reflected image would now read NOTTOC YRREJ, which would not signify anything, but for every observer capable of reading and writing, it would be evidence enough that something was not right, that the image was mirrored. With these thoughts in mind, in a Berlin bookstore recently, I came upon a thin catalogue with the title PIPIFAX FOR TIRANA.

The authors of the work, a Swiss artist couple that works under the moniker HAUS AM GERN, realized this project in 2011 in Tirana, the capital of Albania. Because I don't know Tirana, I couldn't sort out the city landscapes in the photos. On one of the 13 horizontally formatted photos is an expansive urban square, at the time the photograph was taken, a large construction site. In the middle of the picture, on a tall pedestal built of raw stone blocks, is a bronze equestrian statue (it shows Skanderbeg, according to the caption, Albania's national hero), next to it, waving from a mast is a large Albanian flag with a black eagle on red ground. In the background, a heavily trafficked street, pedestrians, a bell tower with clock, beside it a mosque with a minaret, to the right the corner of a massive neo-classical building, probably a theater or an opera house, to the left an imposing palace-like building, behind it a tall skyscraper, still under construction, in front of blue mountains under a sky overcast with heavy clouds. The photo would have been fine in a travel guide, but what was it doing in an art catalogue? Following the example of Phil, the G-man, I picked the picture up once more and examined it carefully. If it's already been reproduced in an art catalogue, I should be able to see the so-called art co-efficient too. I went through all the details one by one. Skanderbeg sat motionless on his steed, the flag blew in the wind and the clocktower behind it indicated exactly 1:17 pm – but just then I noticed the woman and the man who were also on the pedestal. My eyes scanned the two figures. Then I too stopped short. I closed my eyes and, in my mind, considered the scene depicted in the photo. No, there was no doubt, the two of them held a pole in their hands, with a clock face fastened to the upper end which they had moved in front of the face of the clocktower. I quickly flipped through the pages and in all of the photos, discovered the same clear evidence: all signs, all letters, license plate numbers, graffiti, t-shirts, logos – everything was manipulated, had to have been photographed first, then flipped horizontally, printed, and pasted onto cardboard and, during the photo shoot, either moved over the already existing characters one-on-one or, in the case of the more inaccessible neon signs on the roofs of houses, with the help of accomplices, extended in front of the original characters on sticks and rods, perfectly matching their size and perspective. That's the point at which the photograph was taken and itself flipped horizontally, so that the characters were readable once more and reclaimed their meaning. I'd be a bad G-man if I hadn't noticed something else: An Albanian national flag was smuggled into each photo. The heraldic animal is the two-headed eagle, one head looks to the right, the other to the left – or is one looking south and the other north? In any event, the flag is perfectly

axisymmetrical. In the mirror image of the photo, it is photographed on top of itself, ergo, it remains the only thing unchanged, while everything else is different. A political statement from the artists? Quite possibly, for, twenty years after the collapse of the Stalinist regime, the politics of Albania is determined by two parties, the Socialists and the Democrats, which battle against each other and continue to impede the difficult process of reform.

Trmasan Bruialesi

**1956 in Tiblissi, Georgia. Slavic Studies with focus on the ancient Slavonic texts of early Christianity. Since 1989 active in Berlin as translator, author and musician.*