

## **“To ‘Represent’ and not to lie”: Christian Courrèges’s Portraits of the Swenkas**

In the second of his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes tackles the powerful myth of the “Harcourt actor.” The author means by this the sublimated portraits of film and stage stars for which the Paris photography studio Harcourt has been famous since the 1930s. Barthes denounces the artifice of these images, which are supposed to show the actor “in town,” and not on stage – “naturally”, so to speak<sup>1</sup>. He counters this deceptive iconography with the photographs of Thérèse Le Prat and Agnès Varda, which portray the actors in their costume and stage make-up. According to him, these photographs « always bequeath the actor his fleshly face and enclose it frankly, with an exemplary humility, in its social function, which is to ‘represent’ and not to lie. »<sup>2</sup>

Representation versus lying, honesty and humility, these notions could just as easily define Christian Courrèges’s portraits of the Swenkas. Of course, the position of these men is practically the antithesis of that of the actors Barthes writes about. The shiny clothes and stylized poses they display for the photographer are not the tools of their trade, but belong to moments stolen from their social condition and an often difficult daily existence. Nevertheless, as in Barthes’ analysis of Le Prat and Varda’s photographs, these images offer a reversal of the poles between lies and truth, artifice and reality. By showing his models in a situation of representation, Courrèges most likely tells us far more about their true nature than if he had chosen to document their everyday lives. As with the portraits praised by Barthes, “humility” is a term which accounts well for the impact of these photographs whose composition, while taking inspiration from the world of theatre, is marked by a great sobriety. Humble rather than neutral is how I would qualify the photographer’s approach and its delicate balance between closeness and distance.

Posed portraits of individuals or groups have become a common-place of contemporary photography. These frontal, monolithic images are surrounded by an aura of objectivity by virtue of the author’s apparent self-effacement in favour of the subjects’ self-representation. In his essay “What’s in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography”, Julian Stallabrass perfectly analyzed this movement, aptly pointing out its disturbing proximity with the old ethnographic photography of colonized peoples. Focusing especially on Rineke Dijkstra’s work, the art historian very convincingly defines the pernicious character of this “quasi-ethnographic strand”<sup>3</sup>. By deliberately choosing to remain on the surface and conflating the subjects depicted with the image they wish to project, this photography acts as an accomplice of the “spectacle” governing our neoliberal society and the crisis in democracy that comes with it. Worse, this apparent neutrality serves to mask both the photographer’s and the spectator’s fundamentally elitist attitude vis-à-vis the subjects portrayed. In this manner, such images reinforce a general “ethnographic” gaze on the population, thereby serving the interests of the ruling classes.<sup>4</sup>

It would be pointless to look for a social or political message in Courrèges’s photographs of the Swenkas. More simply, Courrèges portrays the humanity of these men who, while striving to create an image, do not disappear behind it. Although they worship appearances and are clearly aware of our planetary media-based culture, they in no way come off as passive consumers. I lack the historical and sociological knowledge that might allow me to decide whether the Swenka pageants are a means for these members of the Zulu people to reappropriate the codes of their white oppressors, and thereby affirm their dignity, or the new incarnation of a traditional rite – or, yet again, mere entertainment. What I do know is that there is no pretence to a clinical gaze, and even less condescension in Courrèges’s images, whose relatively modest size also contrasts with the monumentality prevalent in the “quasi-ethnographic” genre of photographs.

Nor do I detect an attempt at idealization in the Swenka portraits despite the careful lighting, which brings out the shine in the finery worn by these men decked out like peacocks. Regarding the tight framing of the Harcourt portraits, and the way in which this composition contributes to the sublimation of the subjects, Barthes also remarked: « What we need here is a historical psychoanalysis of truncated iconographies. Walking is perhaps—mythologically—the most trivial, hence the most human gesture. Every dream, every ideal image, every social preferment initially suppresses the legs, either by portrait or by automobile. »<sup>5</sup> The Swenkas do not walk either like ordinary mortals: they pose, following an elaborate code. At the same time, their full-length portraits strongly differ from yet another type of truncated iconography, that of the kind of bust portraits whose model Thomas Ruff provided in the late 1980’s. As Éric de Chassey points out, these images, whose look is reminiscent of ID photos, manifest their author’s conviction that the photographic medium is meant to remain on the surface of things and of people<sup>6</sup>. Ruff scrupulously reproduces each and every accident on these surfaces (pores, pimples, etc.). In this sense, his portraits are the polar opposite of the smooth and flawless icons of the Studio Harcourt. Nevertheless, both kinds of images share in a certain levelling of differences between subjects, that is, in a certain form of abstraction.

More than other examples of photography, the Swenkas series makes me think of paintings. In support of this pictorial comparison, one might say that the lighting in these images is somewhat reminiscent of tenebrism. Courrèges closely looked at Ingres's portraits in his formative years. He especially admired the twist Ingres often imparts to his models in order to bring his composition to life. There is perhaps a faint echo of this in the attitudes of the Swenkas. For my part, I am reminded in looking at these photographs of a succession of full-length portraits of seventeenth-century kings and aristocrats. Strangely perhaps, I find myself thinking of one of Van Dyck's masterpiece: the portrait of Charles 1st of England that hangs in the collections of the Louvre. The king can be seen making a stop during a hunt. While a page holds his horse, Charles stands, leaning on a cane, one hand on his hip, looking directly at the painter. His appearance is supremely elegant, a mix of nonchalance and haughtiness. In the absence of any official insignia, royal power is shown here to be founded on natural superiority. Kings for an evening, the Swenkas, on the contrary, seem to prove the power of clothing through their traditions. In the refinement of their attire there is, as it were, something evocative of the pomp and sophistication exhibited by the clothes of aristocratic men before the leaden weight of nineteenth-century bourgeois puritanism came crashing down. Yet, after the initial surprise and admiration elicited by the Swenkas' dress, what truly holds one's attention is the nobility that breathes life into these men's clothes—a nobility that exists below the surface and which has found its interpreter in the photographer's deep and penetrating gaze.

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1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 15.

2 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 18.

3 Julian Stallabrass, "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography," *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 73.

4 Stallabrass, "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography": 87-90.

5 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 16.

6 Éric de Chasse, *Platitudes: Une histoire de la photographie plate* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006), 180-81.