

# The Art of Transcribing a Sunset

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*I refuse to be the dupe of a kind of magic which brandishes before an eager public albums of colored photographs instead of the now vanished native masks. Perhaps the public imagines that the charms of the savages can be appropriated through the medium of these photographs. – Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>1</sup>*

Claude Lévi-Strauss forcefully registers his skepticism about the capacity of color photographs to transmit an anthropological journey in the opening pages of *Tristes Tropiques* (its first sentence: “I hate traveling and explorers.”). He wants to keep magic for himself, on the interior of an ethnographic escapade, guarded by the boundaries of his professional expertise and sensitivity; naïve are those who believe native secrets can be imprinted on photographic paper, who fall for identification between color and the real. As he says, “Nowadays, being an explorer is a trade, which consists not, as one might think, in discovering hitherto unknown facts after years of study, but in covering a great many miles and assembling lantern-slides or motion pictures, preferably in color, so as to fill a hall with an audience for several days in succession” (*Tristes* 17-8). The proof-boasting quality of photographic forms, both still and moving, is so obvious that it exposes its own sham. And in his vision of the impressionable who are attracted to such charades and “fill halls,” Lévi-Strauss imagines a continuous flow of bodies and misguided curiosities to match the mesmerizing flow of motion pictures: a foil to his solitary excursions and the erratic rhythms of their physical and mental labors. Though he doesn’t say so, these colored pictures are clearly a foil to language as well.

But in his “Sunset” chapter—the transcription of a setting sun seen from aboard a Brazil-bound ship, shortly after departing from Marseilles in 1934—Lévi-Strauss rides on color, and produces an optical trip with language. In so doing, he provides my favorite example of the power of color to shock a philosophical investigation into quiet submission, transmission occurring not via the reality-imprint of a photograph but along the surface of a colored picture that’s composed of words. Perhaps because he hasn’t arrived at his destination yet, some rough, broken-down form of ethnography can only be conducted by documenting a morphology of color; Lévi-Strauss’s refusal of the association between the pictorial and the ethnographic quiets down as he gives in to a journey that’s narrated by the sky.<sup>2</sup> I read it as a lyric ode to magic without mention of magic by name—not magic-as-ritual, delicately uncovered and recorded in the heat of an

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*. Trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin, 1992) 41.

<sup>2</sup> The sunset-inspired, voyage-out narratives of anthropologists deserve our attention: shipboard preludes to fieldwork tell us much about the stimulation and imagination of an anthropological mind before the purported objects of study have been reached.

inaccessible jungle, but magic in its most modest, culturally neutral state: as a picture of change.

The vision of a complete performance with so many rapidly dissolving acts, the surprise of finding the gaudy, neon and jewel-toned in the daily, and the drive to narrate the spectacle in detail combine to momentarily topple Lévi-Strauss's professional sense of identification. He no longer needs anthropology; or, anthropology for a moment is contained in the joint beholding and transcription of a sunset: "If I could find a language in which to perpetuate those appearances, at once so unstable and so resistant to description, if it were granted to me to be able to communicate to others the phases and sequences of a unique event which would never recur in the same terms, then...I should in one go have discovered the deepest secrets of my profession" (*Tristes* 62). His language in this chapter jumps out of the skin of its usual container; he stretches for the words to mark his vision of the sky and rushes to include it all in eight pages of sunset-hypnosis. He sees "bloated but ethereal ramparts, all glistening, like mother of pearl, with pink, mauve and silvered gleams," then a "laminated [mass] like a sheet of metal illuminated from behind, first by a golden, then a vermillion, then a cherry glow"; there are "bulging pyramids and frothy bubblings" and "streaks of dappled blondness decomposing into nonchalant twists" and a "spun glass network of colors...shrimp, salmon, flax, straw" that, with the final setting, becomes "purple, then coal black, and then...no more than an irregular charcoal mark on grainy paper" as night finally arrives (*Tristes* 62-9). And then he returns to being an anthropologist, making his way through South America without the accompaniment of a painted sky. He returns to being a structuralist, a writer, and to black and white.

As evidenced by Lévi-Strauss's professional un-doing in its midst, the sunset is a zone of reversal. The day trades places with the night, and announces the turn-over with paint and time; it's a rare site of ocular access to x becoming y in a temporal register that's both fast and slow (fast enough for the entire morphology to unfold in one sitting, slow enough to note and record each transition). When water is part of the tableau, the identities of sea and sky break down too—the shapes of clouds and spills of pink and purple pass back and forth. And as the stream of his documentation unfolds, Levi Strauss's use of figurative language collects around another kind of reversal: the turning of the sky is linked to forms of art, and the comparative leap that characterizes metaphor finds in the sky the artifacts of culture. "Daybreak is a prelude, the close of day an overture which occurs at the end instead of the beginning, as in old operas" (*Tristes* 62). In a double back and forth, he notates clouds "immobilized in the form of mouldings representing clouds, but which real clouds resemble when they have the polished surface and bulbous relief of carved and gilded wood" (*Tristes* 64). And in the end, the scene is a "photographic plate of night" (*Tristes* 68).

Although Lévi-Strauss does not invoke "magic" in his sunset reverie, its presence hovers. For magic in its essence runs on the surprise and gratification of encounters with condensed, sped-up forms of change, foils to the durations by which changes of state—in material form and psychic interiority—take place in non-magical life. Magic offers a display of its own effectivity, turning abstract ideas into objects. In *A General Theory of Magic*, Marcel Mauss tells of a Murring

sorcerer, for instance, who produces chunks of quartz from his mouth as proof of a nocturnal encounter with the spirit world.<sup>3</sup> But as Mauss crisscrosses content, geography and time, reviewing demonology, rites and role-acquisition in Australia, Madagascar, and Malaysia at ancient, medieval and contemporary moments, he is most interested in language; he remains a spectator who gets to use logical language and watch its illogical applications at once—the ideal position, perhaps, of the anthropologist. Mauss boils magic down to its core: “The magician knows that his magic is always the same—he is always conscious of the fact that magic is the art of changing” (*General* 75). And again: “Between a wish and its fulfillment there is, in magic, no gap.... [M]agic’s central aim is to produce results” (*General* 78-9). In response to criticism leveled against Mauss for drawing generalizations from such diverse examples, Lévi-Strauss re-framed Mauss’s move as the seed of a radical semiotic observation: magic is a turning of the mismatches of language into useful material; it takes the peripheral excess (outside logic, but hovering, waiting for attention) and allows it to motor and fuel the activities of change.<sup>4</sup> As David Pocock explains in his “Foreward” to Mauss’s *General Theory*: “Rituals *do* what words cannot *say*: in *act* black and white can be mixed; the young man is made an adult; spirit and man can be combined or separated at will” (5).

The idea that a photo could not only stand in for a mask, but also carry the mask’s contexts, auras and the anthropologist’s hard-earned understanding of it, is for Lévi-Strauss an unbearable shortcut. Photography is a variety of magic that he “refuse[s] to be the dupe of.” In contrast, in his beholding and written tracking of the sunset, Lévi-Strauss finds a way to stay with the stream of his consciousness without break—the sunset holds his perception and reverie, contains and is coextensive with it: the sunset functions doubly, as any satisfying magical event does, as object and stream.

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An overwhelming number of videos made by the French-born American artist Michel Auder (b. 1944) feature sunsets: *Brooding Angels* (1988), *Personal Narrative of Travels to Bolivia* (1995), *Polaroid Cocaine* (1993), *Rooftops and Other Scenes* (1996), *TV America* (1988), *Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines* (1993), and others. A sunset and a videotape are somehow meant to commune: the furriness of the tableau of a dropping sun; the temporariness; the bleeding colors, pale and florescent at once, tending toward gradation and chiaroscuro; and the strange impossibility of their location in the sky—all find ideal recognition among televisual tubes and scan lines and their chromatic tendencies. Video is prone to disappointment in a variety of directions. It degrades with ease, can produce unsolicited clarity, stubbornly refusing mystery, and it fails to behave and gratify like film. But when it finds its proper objects and gestures under the auspices of the right light, a poem is made. Auder once told me that making videos feels like working with language: like writing.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*. Trans. Robert Brain (New York: Routledge, 2001) 50-51.

<sup>4</sup> David Pocock, “Foreward,” *A General Theory of Magic* 4-8.

In *Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines*, Auder holds dissociated and urgent time side-by-side for 55 minutes. He has gathered, selected and ordered fragments of intercepted phone conversations (he obsessively scanned mobile calls between 1987 and 1989) for his audio track and placed them on top of slowly alternating, gazed-out-at images from a quiet beach retreat. Many images frame some combination of sea, sky and horizon line—often fringed by the silhouettes of tree tips and leaf edges—at alternating moments of daytime and sunset, noontime azure expanses and evening tableaux of the sinking sun existing side by side. The shots are devoid of human figures, and there's a suggestion that the pictures were generated out of solitude, perhaps spurred on by notes of engaged malaise. Rain falls on bricks; seagulls fly across the water; beads of water rest on pine-needle tips; a daytime moon hangs in the sky. Auder is not lost in the wilderness, however: in the second half of the video we encounter a beach house interior with a fireplace, car racing on TV, and windows through which to continue to watch the sky.

The pairs of voices from the phone calls are common and raw—the content is not always alarming but the sameness that binds them is: these conversations are marked by intimate and incisive stabs at the truth, and many of them by urgent concerns about sexuality and sanity. Lovers anticipate sex and taunt each other with guesses about who loves the other more; parents fret over their teenage daughter's tendency toward unprotected sex with an unsavory boy and fantasize about forms of violent punishment; two female friends make distinctions among kinds of sex with types of men; two men wonder how to re-engage an emotionally withdrawing girlfriend; a woman describes feeling acutely rejected by a boyfriend who's not keen on sex; two friends criticize a third for cutting off all contact with her mother and calling it bravery. There are questions about masturbation and molestation and therapy and the ethics of skipping a birthday party, and about how to best praise God and gain membership to his kingdom.

It's not enough, though, to call Michel Auder a "voyeur"—the term most often used to explain what's undeniably and uncannily fascinating about his work. The tag of "voyeur" stems logically from the artist's tendency to capture images from angles of silent, secret or furtive observation, as well as from the fact that his biography and body of work are full of well-inscribed proper names—Viva, Cindy Sherman, Alice Neel, to name a few—and hence many of his videos offer the viewer a kind of ethnographic access to some of the many art-worlds in which Auder has worked and lived. But this tag is of little use in the effort to fully encounter and articulate the poetics and rhetorical acrobatics of Auder's work, which spans four decades and many hundreds of tapes.

Yes, Auder is certainly listening in in *Voyage*—but his voyeurism goes way beyond the perversely motivated acts of observation that we associate with the term. I see Auder-as-voyeur collecting in order to confirm a suspicion, intervening in the streams of talk that contain everything we might ever want to know. It requires great labor to collect the scripts of one's own thought, and even more to collect those of strangers and reformulate them into an object of some kind—a video.

I can't watch *Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines* without thinking of William James's "Stream of Thought" essay from his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*: a proposal that thought is not made of starts and stops and discrete ideas but is instead continuous, interruption-free, and ever-changing ("we never descend twice into the same stream"). The sole place James does assert a gap—"the greatest breach in nature"—is between individual minds:

The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's. Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law.<sup>5</sup>

The implicit charge is that this breach is so profound that we misperceive it in every place but the one where it actually exists—we treat it as occurring between and among thoughts and days and objects, and we value associated gestures of articulation, enunciation and concision. James doesn't ask us to banish the recognition of separate objects and moments of thought, but simply to view them in the context both of the "greatest breach" between minds and of the ceaseless stream within a single one. In *Voyage*, like so many of Auder's videos, there is both bleeding—between day and night, water and sky, and among the private pains of strangers—and the satisfying static of switching channels as we leave the stream of one conversation and enter the current of another.

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Shots of sunsets in *Voyage* punctuate the video with a kind of focus and straightforward shock that mimic the urgency of these lovers and relatives and friends. Each finds the setting sun in a pose of distinct gesture and coloration (it is unclear if the images come from a single night or were collected from many). The water is black; a neon pink halo surrounds the sun; the sky is striped by yellow and green strokes; the setting sun shrinks in a turquoise sky over navy water; lavender, fuchsia and peach gradations float above a dark purple sea. Each shot is startling for its difference from the others, and for the spectrum of coloration that's so unlike the pared-down palettes of the day-time shots. The night tells secrets. The speakers tell secrets too—not so much to each other as to us—because they are neither meant for us nor for assembly alongside those of the other callers.

The secret is both that we're all having versions of the same conversations and that culture provides few ways for us to know and encounter this fact. The secret is that we need transcripts from the stream of thought and from the flow of talk for our own experiences of health and communion. Sexuality is urgent and confused. Women speak of the workings of desire with certainty among themselves—and invoke knowing these things less surely with a male lover. We've heard of these dilemmas before, but we don't know them in this form, all at once and from the mouths of strangers.

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<sup>5</sup> William James, "Stream of Thought," *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) 221.

Woman: People who are not God's children are going to be blinded.

Man: But it's also up to us to bring as many into the flock as we can. We have to listen to people. I pray that he gives me time to do that...

Woman: God is good—he answers prayers, but we have to really keep in touch with him; it's a two-way street.

Man: I read the Bible everyday. I speak the Word every single day when I do have time. That's kinda hard sometimes.

Woman: God doesn't expect more than what you can do—he knows, but you can lift your thoughts up to him. Just your thoughts.

Man: I try to be still before the Lord and I try to tune into what he has to say...



Woman 1: I don't want it to be like we're gonna get together and go to bed...

Woman 2: You know what happens, when you have so little time together, that's what ends up happening.

Woman 1: And I don't like that. I want there to be some substance...quite frankly to me, that's kind of boring...

Woman 2: When I was going out with Russell, I felt like I was fucking dessert at the end of every night...

Woman 1: I'm trying to learn you shouldn't be insulted by that, but it's like, I don't want to be this object that gets fucked.... It's like, hello? I'd rather just cuddle up with a guy...

Woman 2: Oh, I love to cuddle. For me that's even better.

Woman 1: Oh yeah, I love that...

Woman 2: I just like guys that make me melt. Oh, God.

Woman 1: [X] made me very responsive to him because he was very caressing, and he wasn't rough. It was like he cared about your body.



Daughter: Mama wants to know if it's convenient for you to talk to him?

Father: Talk to *her*?

Daughter: Yeah. Alright 'cause there's something she's gotta tell you...

Father: Is it about you?

Daughter: Yeah.

Father: What is it now?

Daughter: You're gonna be disappointed but it's something.

Father: Don't tell me you saw Billy again.

[...]

Father: I think there's something radically wrong with her.

Mother: You don't know the worst of it. She's been sleeping with him. She slept with him last night.

Father: What do you mean she slept with him last night?

Mother: She's not been using protection and mind you he's been sleeping with every Tom, Dick and Harry.

[...]

Mother: I think you need to keep a tighter rein on her, Jack...

Father: I'm gonna beat the shit out of her if she lied to me. I'm just forewarning you. I don't give a fuck how old she is. She's gonna feel the back of my hand.

Mother: Don't hit her on the face.



Woman: Think about this—my father supposedly according to Uncle Morgan was sexually abused more than anyone else.

Man: That's what I understand as well.

Woman: What if my father did it to Garth and we don't know?

Man: That somehow would not surprise me.

Woman: How do we find out?

[...]

Woman: How about masturbation?

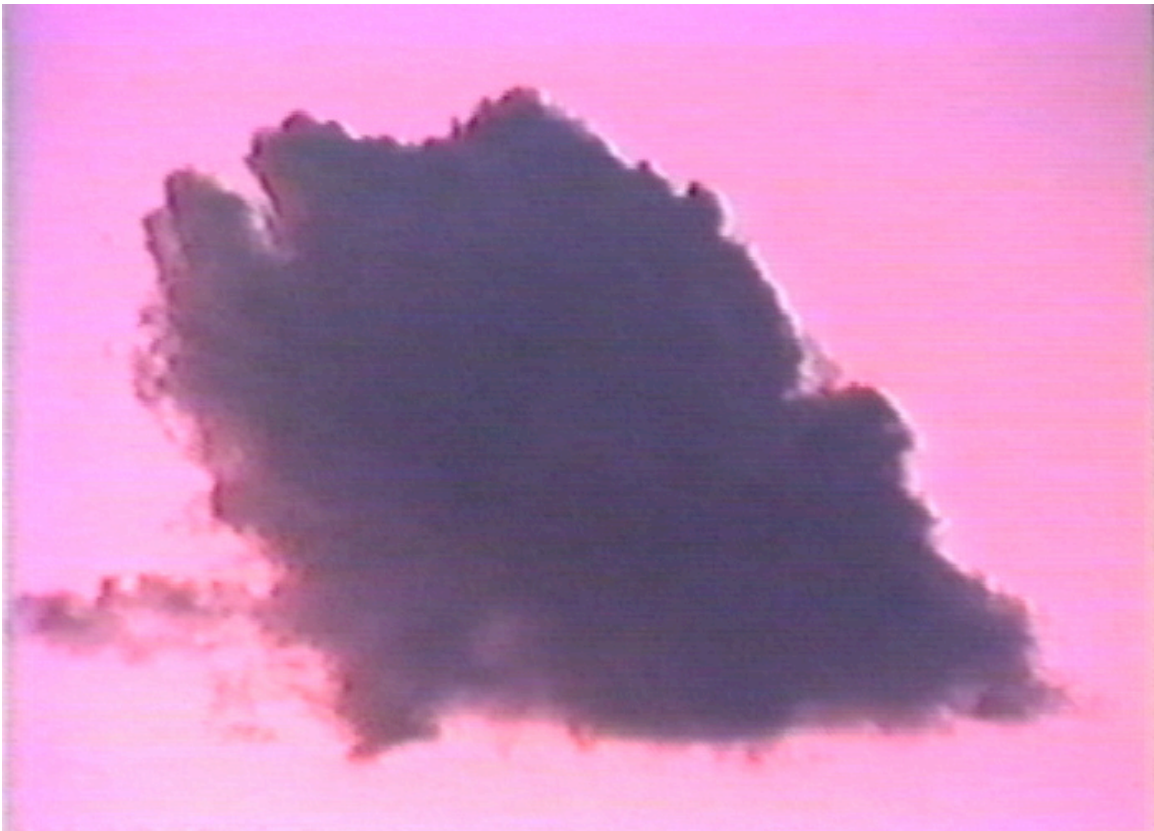
Man: Masturbation is a big question. Lots of kids masturbate.

Woman: I know that, Philip, but they don't do it in the TV room on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in front of Pat and my mother at 3 years old...

Man: Something is very, very, very wrong.

In *Voyage*, Auder offers us rare samples from the chaos of spoken language. The video seems like a direct response to the question Wallace Stevens poses in the first stanza of "A Fading of the Sun":

Who can think of the sun costuming clouds  
When all people are shaken  
Or of night endazzled, proud,  
When people awaken  
And cry and cry for help?<sup>6</sup>



*All images come from Michel Auder's Voyage to the Center of the Phone Lines*

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<sup>6</sup> Wallace Stevens, "A Fading of the Sun," *Wallace Stevens Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 1997) 112-113.