

MIRACULOUS RECOVERY OF ILUSIÓN: SYMBOLIC THICKNESS IN LENA HERZOG'S *LOST SOULS*

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Introduction

Lena Herzog's *Lost Souls* is a photographic book published in 2010 after visiting St. Petersburg *Kunstkamera* and several other Curiosity Cabinets (*Wunderkammern*, literally 'cabinets of wonder') around the world. These cabinets could be seen as proto-medical museums that collect, displace, and reorganize oddities and monstrosities.² With this article, I will specifically focus on the portion of the book devoted to some bottled fetuses preserved in formaldehyde. The fetuses photographed by Herzog constitute a fundamental part of the collection of human and animal anomalies that Tzar Peter the Great bought off from Dutch anatomist Frederich Ruysch in the late 17th century.

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² Patrick Mauriès describes cabinets of wonders as follows: "The founding secret that lay at the heart of cabinets of curiosities was thus dual in nature: their intention was not merely to define, discover and possess the rare and the unique, but also, and at the same time, to inscribe them within a special setting which would instill in them layers of meaning. Display panels, cabinets, cases and drawers were a response not only to a desire to preserve, or to conceal from view, but also to a parallel impulse to slot each item into its place in a vast network of meanings and correspondences. If the object possessed something of the unique, the rare or the unassimilable, plucked from the infinity of atoms that made up reality, the cabinet would become a place of inspection: a place in which objects were viewed according to a scale, a perspective or a hierarchy that endowed them with meaning— if only on the scale of how fiercely they were desired." Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2002), 25.

This collection later became the core of Russia's first museum in St. Petersburg, the aforementioned *Kunstkamera*. As the introduction to the book reads, «the Orthodox Church, upon seeing an array of Cyclopes, Siamese twins, and creatures that looked like lions or leprechauns, could not justify nature's unsuccessful attempt at human life and deemed their soul "lost:" they could not go to heaven, hell or limbo – they were dead on arrival and had nowhere to go».³ In this way, the Orthodox Church sentenced these fetuses to a destiny of eschatological meaninglessness and indecipherable earthly permanence.

I will firstly describe how the bottled fetuses immortalized by Herzog's photographs are defined by a transition from the semantic dimension of the sign to the dimension of the symbol: the portraited fetuses recede into a symbolical dimension and unveil the presence of a silent abyss that constitutes their existence, one that exceeds their mere facticity. The 'regression' into the symbolic dominion thickens the surface of the fetuses' factual reality: this latter reveals itself as unexpectedly deep, the source of a wondrous or miraculous (θαυμαστός) experience whose content coincides with a *je-ne-se-quoi*, a *locus* of inexhaustible interrogation.

Secondly, I will explain how the revelation of a concealed depths that turns the fetuses into symbols is generative of an existential protension or disposition that Julián Marías identifies with *ilusión*. Following Marías' *Breve tratado de la ilusión*,⁴ I argue that the fetuses in Herzog's photographs become the condensation of that 'something' that is really relevant, the hyper-concentrated location where a futural vectorial protension (Marías' *carácter futurizo*), a latency of meaning (*latencia*), the anticipation (*anticipación*) for the manifestation of an imminent fulfillment, and the dramatic interplay between cheerfulness (*alegría*) and melancholia, coalesce in order to reawaken a possibly lost *ilusión*. In this sense, one may re-define Herzog's *Lost Souls* as a photographic brewing place for the emergence of *ilusión*.

³ Lena Herzog, *Lost Souls* (New York: de.Mo Design Limited, 2010), 3.

⁴ Julián Marías, *Breve tratado de la ilusión* (Madrid: Alianza, 1985). I will not translate Marías' term "ilusión" for two main reasons: the first one, as Marías explains in the treatise, has to do with the fact that there are not really equivalent expressions in other languages, or expressions with the same semantic complexity that refer to the referent of the Spanish *ilusión*. The second reason – which also applies to other words I decided not to translate – lies in the fact that the noun "ilusión" belong to Marías' specific philosophical terminology: it is a technical term and, hence, is rich to a whole series of layers that connect it to the entirety of Marías work as a Spanish philosopher working with and in the Spanish language. A translation, then, would simply impoverish this implicit richness.

1. The Lost Fetuses as Phenomenological Symbols

Upon sight, the viewer realizes how Herzog, rather than being concerned with documentary ambitions, aims at capturing a phenomenological dynamic that lies deep beneath the factual monstrous appearance that characterizes the 'unredeemable' fetuses of *Lost Souls*. Indeed, I argue that these lost fetuses show themselves to be a repository of the fundamental human condition that Julián Marías describes as *ilusión*: this is specific aspect that Herzog's photographs are able to seize. The phenomenological dynamic encapsulated by Herzog's collection of photographs articulates itself as a thickening of the aesthetic experience: *Lost Souls*, in this sense, frames the transition from the semantic dimension of the sign to the dimension of the symbol that, almost invisibly, permeates the bottled fetuses found in the Russian *Wunderkammern*. When addressing Jung's contribution in his *Metafore del simbolo*, Mario Trevi maintains that the validity of a symbol finds its roots in being constantly projected or thrust forward toward the not-yet-given, toward an ultimately undisclosed and inexpressible future meaning. Once the meaning is disclosed or reached, the symbol dies and metamorphizes into a mere sign.⁵ In this sense, the fetuses photographed by Herzog encapsulate the withdrawal into the symbolic domain precisely because they show to be characterized by that perennial «anticipación» and «proyección»⁶ that Marías ascribes to the futurizing dimension of *ilusión*. By receding into a symbolical dimension, the photographed fetuses unveil the presence of a silent abyss that constitutes their existence, a latent dimension that exceeds their mere facticity. By withdrawing from the semantic sign order, the fetuses start speaking a more foundational language and disclose an inexpressible excess of carnal existence, one that inhabits the imminent time of 'aboutness' (the Jungian not-yet-given). With Wittgenstein, one might say that they speak «perhaps what is inexpressible... [that is,] the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning».⁷ It is the allusive and elusive symbolic status into which these fetuses draw back that points toward without revealing, that evokes without explaining what Wittgenstein identifies with the ineffable. It is the katabasis, the sinking into the symbolic, the sensorial unification and simplification that open the chasm for the

⁵ See Mario Trevi, *Metafore del simbolo. Ricerche sulla funzione simbolica nella psicologia complessa* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 1996), 40.

⁶ Marías, *Breve tratado*, 38.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16e.

emergence of *ilusión* understood as the true mode of human existence⁸ of these fetuses or, better, as the dimension that pertains to them as the «*mismidad* de la vida humana»,⁹ as Mariás remarks.

How does the “regression” into the symbolic happen? In a 2013 interview, Herzog maintains that the first time she saw the bottled fetuses, «they seemed to be revealing something profound. But I didn’t quite know what it was. Some form of a riddle [...]. I don’t know what they necessarily all meant. [...] You had thoughts and emotions that you normally take a lifetime to accumulate [...]. And all of these thoughts occur to you upon sight, upon one sight. And it’s a sudden insight».¹⁰ As part of a *Wunderkammer*, a space that means to defy and reconstruct humanly comprehensible categories, the fetuses inhabit a liminal space under many respects: they are born and unborn, alive and not alive, normal and monstrous. One might say that they do not abide in a region of existence where traditional ontological categories are suspended, but rather where they have not yet formed: these fetuses are still attached to the unseparated symbolical dimension of the womb and, hence, have not made any final entry into the linguistically codified world of the father, the mediated world of the sign. As the presence of still attached umbilical cords testifies, these creatures remain literally anchored to the hidden, pre-cultural, immediate, simultaneously dual yet unitary, silent and symbolic fetal condition. They do not partake in the separateness of the world, i.e., in the multifaceted difference that characterizes the linguistic relationship between sign and meaning.

In a sense, these stillborn are still unfathered as they are perennially bound to their motherly origin. In *Generato e non creato*, Simone Tropea maintains that the word ‘mother’ shares the same Sanskrit root *M-* with verbs such as ‘to measure,’ ‘to form,’ and ‘to prepare.’¹¹ One might argue, then, that the mother represents the immediate that precedes and prepares for any form of mediated measurement or categorization. As Tropea notes, the «experience of the maternal womb does not easily lend itself to be interpreted through logical

⁸ See Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 64

⁹ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 61.

¹⁰ Robert Harrison, “‘It stuns me every time’: Lena Herzog on the Uncanny Powers of Photography,” April 16, 2013, in *Entitled Opinions*, podcast, MP3 audio, 1:05:35, <https://entitled-opinions.com/2013/04/16/it-stuns-me-every-time-lena-herzog-on-the-uncanny-powers-of-photography/>.

¹¹ See Simone Tropea, *Generato e non creato. Mistica e filosofia della nascita: la maternità surrogata e il futuro dell’umanità* (Rome: Aracne, 2021), 70.

or cultural structures, [for] it is a dimension that precedes»¹² these hermeneutics. It is in this sense that the stillborn embody the realm of the symbol: here, an overabundance of uncodified existence emerges from their prelogical and prelinguistic condition. And this profusion of existence, I argue, coincides with the fetuses' unitary and bodily immediateness with the womb, their intimate participation in the origin (certainly a paradoxical participation for they are stuck in jars), the primordial and pre-cultural relationship that is silently articulated and that, therefore, resists any post-birth codified separation. For a symbol to maintain its status, the suspensive presence of an inexpressible 'something' is fundamental: in order to thicken experience and unveil the depths that lie underneath the surface of factual reality, the symbol needs to be filled with a veiled *je-ne-se-quoi*. As Trevi argues, the symbol keeps alive only when it's pregnant with an unspeakable, yet perceivably hidden and silent substratum; when explained, brought to the light, the symbol ceases to exist.¹³ In this light, one might say that these dead fetuses come back to life by virtue of rejecting the explicit world of language and culture, that is to say, the domain of the sign. By dropping instead into the symbolic, they remain dramatically anchored to the immediacy of the motherly womb (a womb always physically recalled by their fetal condition) and keep alive, albeit symbolically. It is their unclassified unity with the womb, the womb-like state they are in, that makes them pregnant *loci*, i.e., generative symbols that are prepared for the yet-not-given that is to come, symbols filled with the anticipation whence *ilusión* finds its roots, symbols fraught with that intentional desire that Mariás spells out as «deseo con argumento».¹⁴

2. Anticipation and Latency in *Lost Soul*

As Mariás remarks, anticipation for the yet-not-given represents a key aspect of *ilusión*. In this regard, one sees how the stillborn embody a radical form of anticipation, the anticipation for a birth that has been forever denied to them. It is the tension between the anticipatory preparedness and the constant negation of that occurrence that would satisfy such anticipation that sets up the biographical drama of the stillborn. Due to their symbolical status,

¹² Tropea, *Generato*, 49. My translation.

¹³ See Trevi, *Metafore del simbolo*, 65.

¹⁴ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 59-62.

Herzog's fetuses hint at a latent depth – the depth of birth – that is always and constantly about to reveal itself, about to show itself in its wholeness: these fetuses are installed on the threshold of their always present and always absent coming into the light, of their parturition. One might observe that these symbolical fetuses embody – in the sense that live through their flesh – the imminence of meaning, that is to say, they hold written on their bodies the suspended denouement of their preparedness. In this regard, their body is rescued from the meaninglessness of commodified death and become the dramatic effigy of a meaningful imminence, of a pregnant revelation. As Mariás underlines, «la ilusión, lejos de ser un fenómeno psíquico, un mero estado de ánimo, es un acontecimiento dramático de la vida humana».¹⁵ The stillborn of *Lost Soul*, in fact, are not defined by any particular psychological or emotional state: they are *de facto* dead. The kind of *ilusión* as *deseo con argumento* ascribed to them is a more primordial and foundational one: here, *ilusión*, with its anticipatory protension, is defined by a biographical (βιογραφικός) character,¹⁶ for it is carved into their bodies, encrypted into their biological constituents. At some point in time, these fetuses were waiting with anticipation (and perhaps with expectation) to be born. This intentional anticipation was a deeply biological one: every fiber of their bodily being was protruding, projecting itself toward, preparing itself for the project of their birth. A specific historical event occurred and froze in time what it was a personal life just about to begin, turning such a punctual and biographical existence into the Janusian unity of «alegría» and «melancolía»¹⁷ that Mariás tracks down within the experience of *ilusión* conceived as a drama. However, the condition of being sealed to time contemporaneously takes the stillborn out of time and transforms their bare flesh into a symbolical flesh, a carnal effigy perennially teetering on the edge of latent ‘aboutness.’

One might even venture one step further. With relation to the phenomenon of anticipation, Mariás writes that «en la medida en que la ilusión envuelve una anticipación, [...], en que tiene un carácter futurizo, le pertenece intrínsecamente una referencia a lo que está ausente; por lo menos, *todavía* ausente [...]. En ese sentido, siempre hay en la ilusión un elemento de *latencia* [...]. No sería excesivo ni inoportuno traer a este contexto el sentido griego

¹⁵ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 50.

¹⁶ Mariás too associates *ilusión* with the biographical character of human existence. See Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 59.

¹⁷ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 50.

de la verdad como *alétheia*, descubrimiento, desvelamiento, manifestación o patencia».¹⁸ While Mariás aptly associates latency with the futurizing protension of *ilusón* and, therefore, with truth (understood as the not yet unveiled revelation that promises its own disclosure), it might also be useful to emphasize a kind of latency that vectorially moves backward, a protension toward a latent dimension that occurs through retention, a holding-onto that is mnemonic, that has to do with a punctual biography, a kind of memory that, in the case of the fetuses, is densely written (γραφτός) onto their flesh. In this regard, truth as ἀλήθεια would not only coincide with the disclosure or revealing that patently awaits in the future, but also with ἄ-λήθεια, that is to say with the absence of forgetfulness, the negation of unmindfulness, a mindful dwelling into memory that engenders authentic consciousness. In the case of these fetuses, however, the conscious refusal to step into the River Lethe, the disavow of forgetfulness, the dwelling within realm of memory does not happen as a psychic, mental, emotional, linguistic, or rational process: Herzog's stillborn inhabit memory in a physical manner, they are carnally mnemonic and, in this way, give flesh to the truth Mariás refers to. But what kind of truth do these fetuses embody? With their doubly vectorial orientation and by relating to truth as both disclosure and memory, these stillborn represent the mnemonic effigy of the human condition according to Mariás' interpretation of it: they literally embody what Mariás identifies with the human *instalación*, «la estructura biográfica del estar».¹⁹ In this regard, it is interesting to observe that biological language echoes Mariás' terminology when referring to the process of insemination and conception: sperm is ejected and *projected* into the reproductive tract, it *inseminates* the egg and the fertilized egg – the conceived human being – *implants* in the lining of the mother's uterus. One might even say, then, that, upon conception, the first bodily act of a human being is one of implantation, of installation. In the specific case of *Lost Souls*, the fetuses' installed posture stands at the reveling threshold between two imminences, between two latencies: their conception (being implanted, installed in the uterus) and their (anticipated yet negated) birth; the being given to themselves and being given to the world (the physical project of their birth). In this regard, these fetuses become the solid memento of the human condition, the doubly vectorial tension between givenness and projection that the human gaze cannot escape: they are *memento creatum et*

¹⁸ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 115. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Mariás, *Breve tratado*, 63.

memento creāre, carnal symbols of human creatureliness and human creativity. They embody human truth and harbor human consciousness in their flesh; they guard the ἀ-λήθεια about the human being because they force the viewers to remember by preventing them from stepping into the river of forgetfulness and unconsciousness. One again, ἀ-λήθεια here is not verbally or logically articulated: it is a kind of truth that is inscribed onto the flesh of the fetuses, a truth that solidly becomes presence by expressing itself silently, by refusing to announce itself linguistically and, therefore, abstractly. Perhaps, this is the reason why Marías recalls San Juan de la Cruz's lines when talking about *ilusión* engendered by a desired presence: «mira que la dolencia / de amor, que no se cura / sino con la presencia y la figura».²⁰ What miraculously heals is ἀ-λήθεια incarnated, a truth whose alphabet is the flesh and whose articulation is silence.

3. Herzog's Redemptive Gaze

It would be imprecise, however, to reduce the fetuses photographed by Herzog to generalized symbols. It is worth noting that the truth of the human condition as creatureliness and creativity, announced by the symbolic character of the fetuses, surfaces from punctual flesh and is engraved in specific bodies. The ἀλήθεια of the human as a being installed into a carnal intentional desire cannot dispense of the concrete individuality of these fetuses. In other words, the stillborn cannot be merely identified with disinterested harbingers that simply convey an informational message. Indeed, they too are subject to and subjects of the doubly vectorial ἀλήθεια: they too live this kind of ἀλήθεια as the common and individual destiny that Herzog's photographs capture. In describing David Octavius Hill's photographic work, Walter Benjamin explains how photography «introduces something new and strange: in every fishwife from Newhaven who gazes at the ground with such nonchalant, beguiling modesty there remains something that, as testimony to the artistry of the photographer Hill, is not completely absorbed, something that cannot be silenced, obstreperously demanding the name of she who has lived».²¹ The individuality of Herzog's fetuses, then, bursts out from the photographs as a call for a name: in a way, they too have a name, or, at least, they too deserve a name. Giorgio Agamben describes this

²⁰ Marías, *Breve tratado*, 119.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 66.

prerogative begged for by the fetuses as an «esigenza: il soggetto ripreso nella foto esige da noi qualcosa... Anche se la persona fotografata fosse oggi completamente dimenticata, anche se il suo nome fosse cancellato per sempre dalla memoria degli uomini, ebbene malgrado questo – anzi, precisamente per questo – quella persona, quel volto esigono il loro nome, esigono di non essere dimenticate».²² The exigency that Agamben refers to «non ha nulla di estetico. È, piuttosto, un'esigenza di redenzione».²³ In this sense, I would argue that the fetuses of *Lost Souls* beg for that redemption with which the Orthodox Church was unable to provide them. In contrast to the Church's eschatological sentence, Herzog's photographs function as a redeeming practice that rescues these creatures from their lost condition.

But what kind of name does Herzog return to these fetuses? Certainly, one should not think about their linguistic proper name in this case: as much as these stillborn are factually dead, they never had a proper name for no one took the time to properly christen them, not even Herzog. One should only look at the captions that identify the pictures and read such general nouns as "Thinking Soul," "Scream," "Embrace," "Conversation," "Ghost," "Siamese," etc. Furthermore, a proper name might not even represent a truly suitable tool for the determination of the stillborn and their singular individuality as symbols. In a way, the attribution of a linguistic proper name would flatten the symbolic status of the fetuses and force them to relapse into the domain of the sign, which had been eschatologically sentenced as lost. In *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?*, Michel Serres maintains that a proper name should not be understood as a precise linguistic device that allows to deictically identify a human being: a proper name is but a rental and the human being inhabits it as a «tenant».²⁴ As Serres writes, «my real personal name... and my authentic identity codify and contribute in real life to construction of my organism, and that is physical, heavy, and *hard*».²⁵ In this regard, the redeeming name that Herzog's photographs return to these fetuses should be seen as coinciding with their concrete, carnal, proper identity: here, photography does not linguistically dematerialize these fetuses but calls them by their very flesh, the only unsubstitutable repository that

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2005), 28. I do not translate Agamben's quotes because the Italian language has a technical function in his philosophy.

²³ Agamben, *Profanazioni*, 29.

²⁴ Michel Serres, *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 88.

²⁵ Serres, *Malfeasance*, 88. Emphasis in the original.

guards their individuality, their personally irreplaceable biography that is condensed in their very unique and bodily unmitigated gestures. In this sense, even the fetuses of Siamese twins are preserved in their both shared and individual flesh: despite their common torso, the bifurcating separation that recalls cellular mitosis makes each of them already into an «hapax»,²⁶ to borrow from Vladimir Jankélévitch's reflections on death. Therefore, the doubly vectorial sense of ἀλήθεια engraved onto the fetuses' flesh and captured by Herzog's photography reveals each one of the fetuses both as a symbol and as existential hapax. *Lost Souls*, then, redeems these fetuses by preserving the only name that can be properly given them, which is their very own and particular flesh.

At this point, a series of questions arise. When is a proper name resolutely not forgotten or aptly redeemed? When is a proper name decidedly summoned? When does a proper name coincides with the truth of a person? When is truth understood both as revelation and memory? When is truth as ἀλήθεια and ἀλήθεια called to reckon with its proclamations? I would argue that the answer to these questions is one: the Day of Reckoning, the Day of Judgment. Here, however, one should not think about such final moment in apocalyptic terms; or, better, one should precisely think about the etymological sense of the apocalyptic dimension of the final reckoning as the moment of revelation, the apogee of disclosure, the summoning of truth as both ἀλήθεια and ἀ-λήθεια, the moment in which the body is glorified. In *Profanazioni*, Agamben emphasizes the eschatological nature of photography and maintains that photographs represent «il luogo del Giudizio Universale»,²⁷ for every irrelevant gesture is laden with the weight of an entire existence through the photographic process. By framing a specific moment in time, photography points at a fleeting instant as an index finger (perhaps, the selective index finger of God the Judge) and «quest'indice rimanda ora a un altro tempo, il piú attuale e piú urgente di qualsiasi tempo cronologico». ²⁸ The apocalyptic instant at which photography points amounts to the more current and urgent time because it coincides with the moment in which the proper name is summoned to account for its existence, it is the time that constitutes the most intimate intentional object of human desire. It is in this sense that Agamben identifies photography

²⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), 29. Jankélévitch, however, uses this term to identify the irreplaceable singularity and uniqueness of a person throughout his entire book.

²⁷ Agamben, *Profanazioni*, 25.

²⁸ Agamben, *Profanazioni*, 28.

with «una profezia del corpo glorioso»;²⁹ according to him, a photographic image is always more than just a faithful representation of a factual object: a photograph coincides with the chasm between the sensible and intelligible, the *locus* whence an excessive meaning burst forth. Considering that the Orthodox Church had already cast its own judgment onto these lost fetuses, one might say that Herzog's photographs function as a redeeming reckoning. *Lost Souls*, then, could be seen as rescuing final judgment: the photographs contained in it absolve the lost fetuses from their namelessness and return to these creatures their humanity by restoring both the futurizing protension that represents «un rasgo esencial de la vida humana»³⁰ (which had been excised by the Church's eschatological assessment) and the carnal identity that defines them as existential *hapax*.

4. The Photographic Practice of Lena Herzog

Lost Souls, however, is also and primarily a photographic book. But what's the role played by photography here? Being a symbolic and not a sign-based form of representation, photography seems to be able to aptly capture the concrete symbol that the bottled fetuses embody. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, photography seizes «what *can* be shown, [and] *cannot* be said».³¹ Photography is not an ekphrastic process: it does not put into words or describe the fetuses by translating them into a sign-meaning structured order. Nor does it reproduce the *actual* reality of the fetuses. Photography, phenomenologically speaking, captures the allusive dynamism, the evoking gesture, and the silent exceeding reality that impregnates the symbol as it touches the photographer's senses. In a way, photography *does* freeze a selected portion of reality; but it does so by *taking* this selected portion or, as Marias would say, by *capturing* «la “condensación” de lo relevante».³² These verbs speak about an act of possession, a kind of apprehension that coincides with a technical extraction. What is extracted, however, is not mere facticity, but the constitutive dynamism that defines the object, its 'symbolicity,' its latent meaning as it makes itself available: in other words, photography captures precisely that *relevante* which can only be shown but not said.

²⁹ Agamben, *Profanazioni*, 29.

³⁰ Julián Marias, *La felicidad humana* (Madrid: Alianza, 1988), 375.

³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 31 (4.1212).

³² Marias, *Breve tratado*, 120.

Herzog's use of long lenses and shallow focus, for example, does not aim at faithful rendering of a seen reality, but rather at capturing the liminal status of this reality's symbolicity, its relevance. As Herzog notes, «when something is over-familiarized it loses the mystery»,³³ it flattens. In the case of the fetuses, then, Herzog uses her photography to defamiliarize these creatures, to recover the mystery they lose when looked at from a normative point of view, to give a raising body to what might be levelled to a plain surface. With her photography, Herzog wants to extract the unknown that guarantees true understanding, in this way performing a new approximation or a newly discovered attunement to a truth, which is not, however, explanation.

The process described here occurs in a very practical and technical way. Perhaps, the most relevant technique that allows Herzog to capture the symbolic status of the fetuses is her use of pyrogallol as a developer. Without lingering on the chemical structure of this compound, I will note that, in an aesthetically suggestive parallel, the high degree of volatility and fair toxicity of pyrogallol seems to echo and repeat the allusive dynamism and evoking symbolic gesture of the fetuses. The very same developing process, in fact, yields to the unpredictability of the unexpected, the sudden emergence of an incalculable physical excess. It is, then, the very concreteness of the photographic practice, the developing process, and the volatile bio-chemical reactions of pyrogallol that capture and give a body to the allusive posture of the symbol as well as to its silent excessiveness. The meaningful excess here is – quite literally – a physical one: what Mariás defines as the *relevante* is expressed through a relief on photographic paper in the work of Herzog. It is not by chance that she describes her developing process as follows: «the negatives come out of the developer slightly heavier [...] because the chemicals build a stain. [...]. It forces the grain to cling to the outlines of the objects. [...] Under the microscope, when I look at it, I am stunned every time: [...] how very much like an engraving it looks. And how my negatives [...] look as gravure plates, as objects».³⁴ One might say, then, that Herzog uses objects not to represent but to *show*, to point at objects as an index finger: the material excess on the negatives produced by pyrogallol occasions the transformation of a two-dimensional image (which reproduces but a slice of reality) into a three-dimensional object.

³³ Robert Harrison, “‘It stuns me every time’.”

³⁴ Robert Harrison, “‘It stuns me every time’.”

In a way, Herzog's photographic practice physically and chemically enacts Roland Barthes' conception of the *punctum*. Barthes identifies two fundamental elements in photography: the first one, the *studium*, is associated to the «field of information that we *register* when looking at a photograph»;³⁵ the second element, the *punctum*, «rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me».³⁶ Byung-Chul Han expands on Barthes' observations by noting that the *punctum* «is a place of the highest intensity and concentration. *Something indefinable* inheres in it, something beyond all representation... and allows *presence* to burst in».³⁷ In Herzog's negatives, pyrogallol crystals thicken the density of the negatives, in this way letting the excessive *je-ne-se-quoi* that exudes from the symbol literally to shoot out from a flat surface. In this sense, the *revelatory* – not ex-planatory – and *mnemonic* effort of photography manages to preserve the silent and abundant meaning that unexpectedly lies in wait within the bottled creatures, fixing the *ilusión* that is harbored in the flesh of these creatures. What is relevant, i.e. the *ilusión* as the fetuses' *instalación*, is punctuated, emphasized, made into a relief, miraculously relieved from unconsciousness, concretely made protrude from the flat surface of annihilating space, inasmuch as Herzog's images protrude from the surface of the negatives. In Herzog's *Lost Souls*, then, what is usually veiled and forgotten is unveiled and remembered: the miraculous recuperation of what is normally taken for granted occurs and *ilusión* as the authentic mode of human existence becomes possible again in the flesh as well as in the photographs that turn into objects.

Conclusion: *Ilusión*, *θαῦμα*, and Philosophical Thinking

In *Small History of Photography*, Benjamin attributes an almost magical quality to the photographic practice: to him, the camera is endowed with the ability to decipher a different nature that is only unconsciously perceived by the eye and draw it out from the factual reality where it lies hidden:

the most precise technology can lend a magical value to its productions... It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera than that which speaks to the eye; different above all in the sense that a space saturated by a person

³⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *Non-things. Upheaval in the Lifeworld* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 59.

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 26.

³⁷ Han, *Non-things*, 58-59. Emphasis in the original.

who is conscious is superseded by one saturated unconsciously. While it may now be quite usual that, for example, someone might account for a person's gait, even if only roughly, that person would certainly know nothing of the posture in the fraction of a second when the person 'takes a stride'. Photography, with its technical aids – freeze-framing, image enlargement – make this accessible. One learns of this optical unconscious only through photography... Photography discloses in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which inhabit the smallest things, interpretable and latent enough to have found a bolthole in daydreams. But now, as they have become enlarged and articulable, they make manifest how the difference between technology and magic is a thoroughly historical variable.³⁸

In this sense, the disclosure of the optical unconscious turns generally imperceptible fragments of existence into objects of consciousness that are liable to be thought about. However, one should not interpret the kind of thinking afforded by photography simply as another form of abstracting procedure, almost as if it were a visual translation of that Cartesian *cogito* that provides a sign-based explanation of reality. With *Lost Souls*, Herzog engraves symbols (the fetuses) into photographic objects that show instead of telling, in this way granting consciousness a physical entryway into the domain of the unconscious. To borrow from James J. Gibson's terminology, the photographs of *Lost Soul* use light to turn what the Orthodox Church had reduced to a meaningless objective surface into an affordance:³⁹ in doing so, Herzog's photographs bring to the surface and into the light the meaningful status of the fetuses as symbolic *hapax*, that is to say as objects laden with, a latent yet present, sense. But what is made conscious through the object-like photographs of Herzog? Once again, the *deseo con argumento* as it imbues the symbolic *hapax* that the fetuses coincide with: in a way, these fetuses are redeemed because they are returned that «estructura de la vida humana»⁴⁰ that they had been deprived of, that it to say, that *ilusión* harbored in their flesh that had being made inaccessible (and, perhaps, timidly made into an unspeakable taboo) by the eschatological sanctions of the Orthodox Church. In this sense, Herzog's ability to show symbols with objects opens up the chasm for the emergence of thinking, for, as Ricoeur suggests, «the symbol gives rise to thought».⁴¹ The

³⁸ Benjamín, *On Photography*, 68.

³⁹ See "The Theory of Affordance" in James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 1986), 127-143.

⁴⁰ Marías, *La felicidad*, 376.

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 352.

relevance made into a relief, which rises from the negatives via pyrogallol, precisely coincides with a kind of second degree of thought: thinking here is not an abstracting or extracting process; rather, it is an insemination, a fertilization, an implantation, that is to say, an *instalación*.

Interestingly enough, the *Wunderkammern* that host the fetuses were principally, and onomastically, places of wonder, of θαῦμα. As both Plato and Aristotle argue,⁴² θαῦμα always comes first; θαῦμα is the primordial sensory experience that originates philosophical thinking, is the womb that births thinking, i.e., the symbolic unitary origin from which philosophy is midwived. One might say, then, that thinking is birthed by the constitutive θαῦμα that represents both the content and aim of these cabinets. By remaining anchored to the pre-cultural and pre-linguistic world, the stillborn creatures turn into a physical symbol generating wonder, embodying the necessary ineffable origin, the wondrous beginning, the inarticulate place of birth of philosophical thinking. In his interview with Herzog, Harrison suggests a parallel between the stillborn creatures and the fixing capacity of photography: he argues that, being preserved in a state of eternal stillness, the fetuses could be understood not only as stillborn but also as still-lives. Likewise, he adds, a photograph fixes in a stable image something that, otherwise, would be caught up in the flux of time. But what is this 'something' that gets fixed? As mentioned earlier, it is the symbolicity, the silent and bodily relevance of the fetuses; but one could also add that Herzog's pictures safeguard the pre-linguistic θαυμαστός (*thaumastos*) experience, the openness to the unutterable silent excess of existence that, harbored within these creatures, births thinking. It is in this sense that *Lost Souls* captures the bottled fetuses: they are concretely made protrude from and, therefore, relieved of both meaningless space and the flow of annihilating and unthinking time.

Emanuele Severino speaks about the protrusion from the nothingness everything is reduced to by the passing of time as the manifestation of θαῦμα, i.e. the salvific epiphany that takes on the form of an opening to thinking in

⁴² See Plato in *Theaetetus* 155d: «My friend... This wondering of yours is very much the mark of a philosopher – philosophy starts nowhere else but with wondering, and the man who made Iris the offspring of Thaumatas wasn't far off with his genealogy». Plato, *Theaetetus and Sophist*, ed. Christopher Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19. See also Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 982: «For it was because of wonder that men both now and originally began to philosophize. To begin with, they wondered at those puzzles that were to hand, such as about the affections of the moon and events connected with the sun and the stars and about the origins of the universe». Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 9.

the face of an unthought nothingness.⁴³ Thinking occurs as a protrusion from the unthinking; it contrasts the passing of time that reduces everything to nothingness by flexing backward, by remembering, that is to say, by living truth as ἀ-λήθεια. And yet, thinking is also generated by the unthinkable, by the θαυμαστός (*thaumastos*) sensory experience that impregnates the objective symbol and lies at the origin of its primeval excess of meaning. In this sense, one might look at Herzog's photography as a second-degree form of thinking: by fixing the symbolicity of the fetuses, it turns them into protruding manifestations of θαῦμα, *loci* of rest from the forwardly projected dynamism of time, *loci* of backward flexion – of memory –, *loci* of symbolic withdrawal. Again, one should not be mistaken in believing that *Lost Souls* represents a further abstraction of philosophical thought; the second-degree, here, is not an elevation but a deepening into the biographical dimension, a thickening of life in its biological constituents. The aesthetic experience occasioned by *Lost Souls* does not shoot upward, but it rather represents a more radical form of philosophical thinking, a kind of living thought; and it is, perhaps, not by chance that Mariás maintains that «primariamente se piensa con la vida».⁴⁴ It is a more radical kind of thinking in the sense that it thickens at the living foundations, it moves katabatically, it deepens its roots into the original θαυμά. One might say, indeed, that the form of thinking that originates in the aesthetic experience granted by *Lost Souls* is a sensorial regress into the symbolic, a coming back to the biographical origins of our silent womb.

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⁴³ See Emanuele Severino, *Il gioco. Alle origini della ragione: Eschilo* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989), 347-355. In his work, however, Severino identifies the θαυμαστός with “the horrid thing.” While the happiness to which the exercise of philosophy leads coincides with the marvelous, philosophy finds its place of birth in the horrid experience of angst that is engendered by the constantly changing flux of time.

⁴⁴ Mariás, *La felicidad*, 383. Emphasis in the original.

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