

NANDA LANFRANCO

MISE EN ABYME



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REFLECTIONS OF THE ARCANES

ANTONELLA RUSSO

THE ARCANES ARE TAROT CARDS which the photographer Nanda Lanfranco produced from images chosen from her work between 1987 to 1995. They call to mind the experiment Italo Calvino tried out in his novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*¹. In his preface, Calvino explains how contemplation of the tarot card imagery led him from one episode to another of his story and notices how: "I looked at the tarot cards very hard and carefully, as if I had never seen such things before, drawing ideas and associations from them and interpreting them according to an imaginary iconology"².

Calvino also describes how he used two different series of tarot cards for the two stories entitled *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *Inn of Crossed Destinies* which make up the novel. He based the first story on the courtly figures and emblems of the sixteenth-century tarot cards finely illuminated by Bonifacio Bembo for the Dukes of Milan; for the second, he used the more popular and well-known imagery of eighteenth-century Marseilles tarot cards which have enjoyed great popularity with contemporary writers, from the time of the Surrealists on.

Nanda Lanfranco's Arcanes recall the procedure outlined by Calvino, where the tarot cards are seen as a "narrative machine".

This does not mean that she deliberately followed Calvino's technique but rather that her photographic tarot cards stem from a compositional strategy just like the experimental narrative used by Calvino. She presents us not with single photographs but with a system of interlinked images.

Just as with the tarot cards in Calvino's story-telling machine, in Lanfranco's photographic tarots, "the meaning of each card depends upon its place in the series of cards which precede and follow it"³. Since 1987, Nanda Lanfranco has been taking photographs

1. Italo Calvino,
Preface,
in *The Castle of Crossed
Destinies*,
San Diego: Harves Brace],
1979.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

without any pre-conceived idea of where they would lead her. She only knew that she wanted to produce "a family of images" and create figures and symbols closely related to one another. The set of rules which govern the organization of tarot cards in general are also true for these Arcanes. Firstly, they constitute a true semiotic system and are to be considered as complex images. Their meaning, as I already mentioned, can only be traced by reading the whole set of linked cards and referring not just to one but to all the others in the pack. Furthermore, this meaning changes depending on the order in which the cards are laid down and their different combinations.

Tarot cards provide a structure of meaning comparable in complexity of devices and sets of rules to a linguistic system. It is no chance that many semiotic and linguistic studies based on cartomancy have been made from the late sixties on⁴.

Lukomceva and Uspenskij, for instance, pointed out how the structure of divination cards involves at least two conditions which can be linked to linguistics.

The first has to do with the way the cards are laid out, according to a pre-established pattern, while the second corresponds to a system of decoding. According to the Russian linguists, cartomancy involves the following conditions: "a. A laying of the cards on a table, that is to say the mechanism of sentence production; b. A dictionary which provides a key to the meaning of each card. In some instances, a new card can form a different meaning (which cannot be derived from the previous meaning)"⁵. As with the linguistic system, tarot cards are conceived as a set, a structure which comprizes its own de-codification. This can be "played", or re-invented and its conventions can even be challenged by putting the validity of its codes to the test. This structure has enabled the Genoese photographer to substitute the conventional iconology of tarot cards with completely new imagery, removing the old symbols and putting flowers and foliage, portraits or fantastic landscapes in their place. The value of each card remains constant.

Yet the formal structure of the tarot cards allows for and includes changes, ensuring that new images will be deciphered and become intelligible. The tarot card of the PRIESTESS for instance, instead of picturing a hieratic, austere female figure isolated in the

4. See for instance the text also known to Calvino, by M. I. Lukomceva and B. A. Uspenskij, *La cartomanzia come sistema semiotico* and F. Egorov, *I sistemi semiotici più semplici e la tipologia degli iniziati*, in Ramo Faciani and Umberto Eco ed., *I sistemi del segno e la Strutturalismo sardeles*, Bompiani, Milan 1964. I wish to thank professor Giuseppe Panini of the Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica in Urbino for providing me with those two texts.

5. M. I. Lukomceva and B. A. Uspenskij, *La cartomanzia cit.*, p. 223.

foreground, has been replaced by the photograph of an old peasant woman comforting a sorrowful old man, like an earthly Madonna. Lanfranco explains that "this image recalls two other female figures, the EMPRESS and DEATH. These three images are conceptually linked and all together represent three aspects (or phases) of language: the first is a language which has not been mastered and which has to do with a sort of "natural" female language, the body of knowledge that is transmitted orally from mother to daughter. The second has to do with the figure of the EMPRESS, which represents a language that has been mastered, a cultural language as opposed to a natural one, a language of power; the third is connected with the notion of time and its cyclic nature is also a narrative language. I see this as a series of steps, to be connected with the tarot card of DEATH, which I represented as a goat's skull with jutting horns. As for many of the other tarot cards, this image was made by cutting and doubling the negative so that the resulting image somehow suggests the outline of a butterfly. The bones represent the idea of the permanence and stability of being; a butterfly can be associated with metamorphosis and death as transformation"⁶.

The TOWER is one of Lanfranco's most forceful symbols, a composite image consisting of half a swordfish's head and above it, its fin, like the wing of a bird. The photograph has been cut vertically and doubled so that the head seems to be whole, not halved. Lanfranco feels that "the evolving shape of the swordfish stands for ascension, expansion and emancipation from bodily weight, a tendency to spirituality. This tarot card also contains a linguistic reference, to the reconstruction of a mythical original language to be found in Brahman tradition, which tells us that because the language of origin was wrongly used, it was divided by the Gods into four parts. One part (apparently, the most sacred) was given to birds, one to humans, one to animals, the last to insects.

The association fin-wing is a reference to this myth, suggesting the bringing together of the lost parts of an original language". Nanda Lanfranco's tarot cards combine these semiotic and linguistic structures with a series of modes of composition specific to the language of photography. The cards are clearly designed and conceived photographically,

⁶ Nanda Lanfranco
in a conversation
with Antonella Russo,
June 14, 2025.

using fleeting passages of light to set up a subtle play of visibility-invisibility. The black background which takes up the greater part of each card is not a mere backdrop to provide the image with a sharp outline; it represents an absence or eclipse of form which continuously threatens every image. And this may be the reason why none of the figures and signs in the Arcanes can be immediately identified, for they emerge little by little from this darkness as though taking shape, thin and intangible, before our eyes. They look as though they had been breathed onto the surface from which they emerge, only to dissolve into air again, like rings of smoke.

The Arcanes never disclose themselves fully to the observer. Their images appear and disappear, tantalizing, within the dim light they inhabit.

The structural link with every other card in the pack enhances this impression of flickering back and forth between images that come before and after, as happens in language.

Nonetheless, the cards also respect the photographic criteria of seriality. Each tarot belongs to a sequence, a series of other images all of which can be reproduced. Lanfranco used photography as the most suitable medium for her tarot card imagery precisely because it lends itself to the serial form, its nature lying in multiplication and concatenation, intensifying and magnifying meaning by repetition.

Actually what we have here goes beyond the concept of the series, producing a quality of reflection in which the work can be seen "to turn upon itself."

The idea of a work which reflects itself is known as *mise en abyme* and many studies have been made on this subject.

Lucien Dällenbach wrote an exhaustive essay on it, pointing out that André Gide, among others, analyzed the formal aspects of *mise en abyme* in his *Journals* in 1891⁷.

Gide defines *mise en abyme* as a technique in which "each fragment reveals a likeness to the work of which it forms a part"⁸. It is interesting to notice that one of the conditions of a *mise en abyme* is its cyclical structure, its periodical reiteration, and also its capacity to reveal through doubling of the very image which, like a play of mirrors,

7. Lucien Dällenbach, *Il racconto speculare. Saggio sulla mise en abyme*, Pratiche Publishing House, Parma 1994.
Nanda Lanfranco first called this essay to my attention.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

reflects a point of view which would otherwise remain invisible. Hence a *mise en abyme* appears as a sort of representation within the representation, that condition of image-splitting whereby a figure or visual fragment is reproduced and reduplicated until it becomes a mirror of itself. Dällenbach points out how the *mise en abyme* of a work is "every internal mirror which reflects the entire story through duplication, which can be of a simple, reiterated or specious nature"⁹.



THE EMPRESS, FOUND TAROT CARD, 18TH CENTURY IMAGERY

Nanda Lanfranco produces the *mise en abyme* condition in Arcanes mainly by cutting the image into two halves, sometimes diagonally, and then doubling it either upside down or obliquely so that the image multiplies itself in the space of the same photograph as though reflected in a mirror. In this way she turns her tarot cards into fine miniatures and broadens their visual impact by multiplying and redoubling their imagery.

The *mise en abyme* produced by the Arcanes is not a mere creative intuition but a way of understanding and seeing photographically, a mode of production which belongs to the theory of vision. The *mise en abyme* is also central to the theory of Surrealist photography as it was first put forward by André Breton in his text entitled *La Beauté sera convulsive*, published in the literary magazine *Minotaure* in 1934. "La Beauté sera convulsive" is the last sentence of Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928) which reappears in the first chapter of *L'Amour Fou* (1937), but it may even be considered as a title announcing the manifesto of the thought and vision of Breton's Surrealist movement. Interestingly, the

French poet mostly used photographs to illustrate this new way of understanding vision. Some were found; Brassai, Man Ray and other photographers were commissioned to take others. The images were reproduced together with the text in *L'Amour Fou*¹⁰.

One of these images is a photograph he asked Brassai to take of a hand-crafted wooden spoon which the poet saw one day when walking with Alberto Giacometti in the flea-market in Paris. This *trouvaille* struck Breton, who recalls how for months he would wake

9. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

up in the morning, turning over the words *cedrier-Cendrillon* (ashtray/Cinderella) in his mind, unable to find a meaning for this bizarre play on words.

Finally he realized that coming across this spoon-ashtray-slipper object constituted an example of "Objective chance" and the retrieval of meaning. In his view, this episode typified a moment in which reality suddenly seems to turn into representation. The spoon, in this case, seemed like a visual parallel of the automatic verbal fragment, which until that moment had remained mysterious.

This verbal fragment, just two associated words, had brought back an image and a meaning but, more importantly, it had indicated a way, a means of seeing. Breton asked Man Ray to photograph a close-up of the spoon and his text guides us to a perception of the *mise en abyme* of this image. The spoon photographed in profile looks like a mysterious slipper, while another little shoe at the end of the handle repeats the very image of which it forms part. Breton lived this experience intensely, as a representation of his desire (for Nadja, for love) which drove him irresistibly to that object, revealed and fixed it in an image.

Nanda Lanfranco's Arcanes also exemplify certain fundamental conditions of the production of vision an element of chance, in fact no more than apparent, an almost imperceptible dividing line between the visible and the invisible, together with a meditation on its cyclic nature. Added to which, they give us a very special experience of what it means to *offrir à ta vie un miroir*¹¹.

10. For an exhaustive analysis of the Surrealist theory of vision see the fundamental text by Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Photographic Condition of Surrealism*, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths*, Cambridge-London: The M.I.T. Press, 1936, pp. 87-98.

11. André Gide, *Pleide*, in Dillebach, *Il racconta speculari* cit., p. 179.