

Fontcuberta's photographed plants.

"Information" has become a crucial concept in various and quite distinct disciplines, and one may observe how those distinct disciplines tend to converge in that concept. For instance: both biology and photography are basically concerned with information. Basically, biology may be considered the study of the successive changes in genetic information, ever since life appeared on Earth and up to the present. And this study is now beginning to result in a technology, in what is called "Gentech", which may in the future permit us to manipulate genetic information and thus produce new species of animals and plants, (including, quite possibly, a new species "Homo"). As for photography, it may be considered to be a technique which aims at producing information from the chemical changes provoked by light rays on a sensitive surface. Now of course: biology and photography being quite distinct and unrelated disciplines, one may well ask whether the term "Information" means the same concept in both of them, or whether we use it metaphorically when applying it to two realms as different the one from the other. Which is, I believe, a very important question in the present context.

Fontcuberta's photographs of plants seem to provide an answer. What we see in them are new species of plants, which however have not come about by a mutation of genetic information, but by a manipulation of photographic information. It may thus look as if, within those photographs, "information" in the biological and in the photographic sense of the term had coincided. Fontcuberta seems to be capable of manipulating biological information with photographic procedures. Of course: we know that this is not "really" true: the plants we see in Fontcuberta's pictures are not "real" plants, and they are not "real" in two senses of that term. They are not "real", because they only have the two dimensions of the photo surface. And they are not "real", because, if we look closer at them, we see that they show something which has been manipulated by Fontcuberta with the express purpose to deceive us into accepting them as being "real". Still: although Fontcuberta's plants are only symbols of plants, and although those symbols mean an artifice, a stratagem, a ruse, (although Fontcuberta's plants are what is called "art"), there is something about them which suggests that they are relevant to the problem of "information" within the botanical discourse.

Let me put the problem this way: in "nature", (whatever we may mean by that dubious term), new genetic information comes about by error. By some defect in the transmission of information from one support to another. The enormous majority of new information thus produced is meaningless nonsense. An infinite minority of such mutations gives rise to new species, and it is this infinite minority which is responsible for biological evolution. In other terms: "nature", (whatever this may mean), is exceedingly silly, and what we admire when looking at plants is this blind silliness of "nature". Once we have discovered this stupid game of chance, however, we may deliberately interfere in it, and provoke desirable mutations. We may substitute deliberate selection to natural selection. This has been done empirically ever since man invented agriculture, and it is now beginning to be done scientifically by plant geneticists.

Consider what comes about when this is done: consider those new species of wheat, of cherries, of yeast, (not to mention the new species of bacteria and fungi). They are not "natural", which means that they are artificial. Just as are the plants photographed by Fontcuberta. Of course; there are two aspects which distinguish those new species from Fontcuberta's photos. One is that the new species grow and multiply, they behave as if they were "real". The other aspect is that the "art" which has produced them is a technique which is based on what may be called the "laws of nature". Whereas Fontcuberta's plants are merely symbols, and his "art" is independent on the laws of biological evolution. But this distinction is not as radical as it appears to be at first sight.

In order to produce a new species of wheat, one must know what sort of species one desires. For instance: one that be pest-resisting. One must have a model of the species desired. Then one may take that model and try and force nature into obeying it. Now how does such a model look like? Of course: very like Fontcuberta's photos. With that difference however: that a genetician's model will tend to be "operative", (capable of being enforced upon nature), and to be "useful", (capable of resulting in species which will have some advantage for industry and agriculture). And Fontcuberta's models are perfectly inoperative and perfectly useless. Which makes them so very funny.

Now this is the reason why I consider Fontcuberta's pictures to be relevant to the problem of "information" in the biological discourse. They show, in a funny way, that what distinguishes scientific from strictly artistic models is the fact that the scientific models are operative and useful. Now both "operative" and "useful" are ethical terms. They imply values. They are pragmatic. They are not scientific terms, in the sense that science is a "value-free" discourse. Fontcuberta's pictures are not less scientific than are scientific models, only less pragmatic. And this is very funny. Because, being less pragmatic, they may be considered to be "purer". Which poses an epistemological problem: is there any sense in holding that the models of biological information are more "true" than are Fontcuberta's pictures? Or is not botany a kind of reasonable, (i.e. bourgeois), Fontcuberta?

"Nature" is silly. It will produce any kind of plant if given sufficient time to recombine information by the method of blind error. Given sufficient time, it will even produce such plants as photographed by Fontcuberta. So that those photos show not only how problematic is scientific knowledge, but also how stupid is nature which is the subject of scientific knowledge. This is why those photos are funny: they make fun of science, of technology, and of nature. But, now that we come to think of it: is that funny? Or are those pictures not a funny way of showing our present tragical disappointment with science and with nature?