

To discover the meaning in photographs one must find what photographers have hidden rather than what they show. To reconstitute an invisible image behind the visible image, we carry out an inquest:

1/ We identify the suspect

Rita Barros is simultaneously the author and the subject of the photograph. The image was staged in her apartment with the help of a remote control device.

2/ We question the suspect

We get in contact with Rita Barros and she answers our questions. Rita (very relaxed) : "I wanted to illustrate the action of putting a stop to an addiction. Holding 'the last cigarette', lighting it, smoking it with pleasure and killing it". A book by Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, inspired the photographer. In this psychological novel, the hero incessantly reiterates his decision to quit smoking.

3/ We observe the scene

The red colour gives unity to the image. The photograph is structured in 4 planes: we distinguish a red table in the first plane, the foreground; red lipstick in the second plane; a red door in the third; and a monochromatic painting in the background.

4/ We isolate a detail

The succession of red planes in the composition highlights the most fundamental element: the made-up lips.

5/ We discover a clue

Looking carefully at the lips, we are surprised by the movement of the smoke. No wisp escapes from the open mouth. The photographer got a perfect white halo of smoke. This way, she managed to create an aesthetic "à la Lynch", through an erotic-surrealist effect.

6/ We interpret a clue

The O-shaped mouth, the white smoke, the lipstick... A white circle with a red outline... It reminds us of something, but what? A universal symbol...

.... The mouth represents a Stop sign!

And here is how Rita illustrates the goal to stop smoking: the mouth is open, but it evokes a signal that prevents access to the cigarette.

7/ We are suspicious of the discourse

In Italo Svevo's novel, the hero, Zeno, is convinced that speech was given to man to hide thought. Maybe Rita Barros has also appropriated this idea: words lie. The title of the photo, *The last Cigarette*, acquires an ironic sense. Who can guarantee this cigarette will truly be her last?

8/ We thwart Rita's plan

The cigarette is omnipresent:

- it is evoked in the title
- Rita Barros holds a cigarette
- a pack of Malboro Lights sits on the table.

The photographer seems to wish to draw our attention to this object. But she insists too much to be honest. Like a slight-of-hand, her true intent is maybe to distract our attention. What if the cigarette was a trick? What if the subject of the photograph could be found elsewhere?

9/ We elaborate on a hypothesis

Let us imagine that this Stop sign does not prevent the entry of the cigarette, rather the exit of... Of what? What breaks the barrier of the lips?

The voice, the spoken word.

Maybe Rita Barros is expressing a fear characteristic of artists: the inability to express themselves, to communicate. The colour white works as a counterpoint to the colour red. We are talking about the anguish of an author confronted with a white page on which he cannot write. In French "une voix blanche" (a white voice) means that we are under emotional stress: in this case white is used to express the absence of words.

10/ We finish the inquest

In Italo Svevo's novel, Zeno is going through psychoanalysis. Well, words are at the centre of the analytical device, since the patient, to get rid of his ailment, must be able to name it. The latent eroticism of the photograph reveals a frustration. We witness a photographic refutation of Munch's cry. Rita Barros has transformed it into a mute cry.

Francesca Serra
"The Last Cigarette"
Grazia.fr.

(Translated from the French)