

Vilém Flusserl

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY
OF PHOTOGRAPHY

photo

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Why a Philosophy of Photography Is Necessary

In the course of the foregoing attempt to sum up the essential quality of photography, a few basic concepts came to light: *image* – *apparatus* – *program* – *information*. These must be the cornerstones of any philosophy of photography, and they make possible the following definition of a photograph: It is an image created and distributed by photographic apparatus according to a program, an image whose ostensible function is to inform. Each one of the basic concepts thus contains within it further concepts. *Image* contains within it magic; *apparatus* contains within it automation and play; *program* contains within it chance and necessity; *information* contains within it the symbolic and the improbable. This results in a broader definition of a photograph: It is an image created and distributed automatically by programmed apparatuses in the course of a game necessarily based on chance, an image of a magic state of things whose symbols inform its receivers how to act in an improbable fashion.

This definition has the peculiar advantage for philosophy of not being acceptable. One is challenged to prove it wrong since it rules out the human being as a free agent. It provokes one into a contradiction, and contradiction – dialectics – is one of the spurs to philosophy. To this extent, the proposed definition is a welcome starting point for a philosophy of photography.

If one considers the basic concepts *image*, *apparatus*, *program* and *information*, one discovers an internal connection between them: They are all based on the 'eternal

recurrence of the same'. Images are surfaces above which the eye circles only to return again and again to the starting point. Apparatuses are playthings that repeat the same movements over and over again. Programs are games that combine the same elements over and over again. Pieces of information are improbable states that break away again and again from the tendency to become probable only to sink back into it again and again. In short: With these four basic concepts, we no longer find ourselves in the historical context of the linear, in which nothing is repeated and everything has a cause yielding consequences. The area in which we find ourselves is no longer ascertainable by means of causal but only by means of functional explanations. Along with Cassirer, we shall have to leave causality behind: 'Rest, rest, dear spirit.' Any philosophy of photography will have to come to terms with the ahistorical, post-historical character of the phenomenon under consideration.

Besides, we have already started to think spontaneously in a post-historical fashion in a whole range of areas. Cosmology is an example of this. We see in the cosmos a system tending towards states that are becoming more and more improbable. It is true that by chance more and more improbable states are coming into being; however – of necessity – these sink back into the tendency to become probable. In other words: We see in the cosmos an apparatus that contains an original piece of information in its output (the 'big bang') and that is programmed to realize and exhaust this information necessarily through chance ('heat death').

The four basic concepts *image*, *apparatus*, *program* and *information*, support our cosmological thinking quite spontaneously, and in so doing, quite spontaneously

prompt us to reach out for functional explanations. The same applies to other areas such as psychology, biology, linguistics, cybernetics and information technology (to mention only a few). We think, quite spontaneously, across the board in an imaginary, functionally programmatic and information-technological fashion. The hypothesis proposed here thus argues that we think like this because we think in photographic categories: because the photographic universe has programmed us to think in a post-historical fashion.

This hypothesis is not as bold as it first seems. It is a hypothesis that has been around for a long time: Human beings create tools and in so doing take themselves as the model for this creation – until the situation is reversed and human beings take their tools as the model of themselves, of the world and of society. Hence the well-known process of alienation from one's own tools. In the eighteenth century, human beings invented machines, and their own bodies served as a model for this invention – until the relationship was reversed and the machines started to serve as models of human beings, of the world and of society. In the eighteenth century, a philosophy of the machine would simultaneously have been a criticism of the whole of anthropology, science, politics and art, i.e. of mechanization. It is no different in our time for a philosophy of photography: It would be a criticism of functionalism in all its anthropological, scientific, political and aesthetic aspects.

The matter is not all that simple, however. For a photograph is not a tool like a machine; it is a plaything like a playing card or chess-piece. If the photograph is becoming a model, then it is no longer a matter of replacing a tool with another tool as a model, but of replacing a type of

model with a completely new type of model. The hypothesis proposed above, according to which we are starting to think in photographic categories, argues that the basic structures of our existence are being transformed. We are not dealing with the classical problem of alienation, but with an existential revolution of which there is no example available to us. To put it bluntly: It is a question of freedom in a new context. This is what any philosophy of photography has to concern itself with.

It goes without saying that this is not a new question: All philosophy has always been concerned with it. But in being so concerned, it was located within the historical context of linearity. In a nutshell, it formulated the question like this: If everything is to have causes and consequences, if everything is 'conditioned', where is there space for human freedom? And all answers, likewise in a nutshell, can be reduced to the following common denominator: The causes are so complex and the consequences so unpredictable that human beings, these limited beings, can act as though they were 'unconditioned'. In the new context, however, the question of freedom is formulated differently: If everything is based on chance and necessarily results in nothing, then where is there space for human freedom? In this absurd climate, the philosophy of photography has to address the question of freedom.

We observe, all around us, apparatuses of every sort in the process of programming our life through rigid automation; human labour is being replaced by automatic machines and most of society is starting to be employed in the 'tertiary sector', i.e. playing with empty symbols; the existential interests of the material world are being replaced by symbolic universes and the values of things

are being replaced by information. Our thoughts, feelings, desires and actions are being robotized; 'life' is coming to mean feeding apparatuses and being fed by them. In short: Everything is becoming absurd. So where is there room for human freedom?

Then we discover people who can perhaps answer this question: photographers – in the sense of the word intended in this study. They are already, in miniature, people of the apparatus future. Their acts are programmed by the camera; they play with symbols; they are active in the 'tertiary sector', interested in information; they create things without value. In spite of this they consider their activity to be anything but absurd and think that they are acting freely. The task of the philosophy of photography is to question photographers about freedom, to probe their practice in the pursuit of freedom.

This was the intention of the foregoing study, and in the course of it a few answers have come to light. First, one can outwit the camera's rigidity. Second, one can smuggle human intentions into its program that are not predicted by it. Third, one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative. Fourth, one can show contempt for the camera and its creations and turn one's interest away from the thing in general in order to concentrate on information. In short: Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera.

However, photographers only provide such answers when called to account by philosophical analysis. When speaking spontaneously they say something different. They claim to be making traditional images – even if by non-traditional means. They claim to be creating works of

art or contributing to knowledge – or being politically committed. If one reads statements by photographers, for instance in the usual works on the history of photography, one is faced with the prevailing opinion that with the invention of photography nothing really far-reaching took place and that everything is basically proceeding just as it did before; only, as it were, that alongside the other histories there is now a history of photography as well. Even though, in practice, photographers have been living for a long time in a post-historical fashion, the post-industrial revolution, as it appears for the first time in the shape of the camera, has escaped their consciousness.

With one exception: so-called experimental photographers – those photographers in the sense of the word intended here. They are conscious that *image*, *apparatus*, *program* and *information* are the basic problems that they have to come to terms with. They are in fact consciously attempting to create unpredictable information, i.e. to release themselves from the camera, and to place within the image something that is not in its program. They know they are playing against the camera. Yet even they are not conscious of the consequence of their practice: They are not aware that they are attempting to address the question of freedom in the context of apparatus in general.

A philosophy of photography is necessary for raising photographic practice to the level of consciousness, and this is again because this practice gives rise to a model of freedom in the post-industrial context in general. A philosophy of photography must reveal the fact that there is no place for human freedom within the area of automated, programmed and programming apparatuses, in order finally to show a way in which it is nevertheless possible to

open up a space for freedom. The task of a philosophy of photography is to reflect upon this possibility of freedom – and thus its significance – in a world dominated by apparatuses; to reflect upon the way in which, despite everything, it is possible for human beings to give significance to their lives in face of the chance necessity of death. Such a philosophy is necessary because it is the only form of revolution left open to us.

Lexicon of Basic Concepts

Apparatus (pl. -es): a plaything or game that simulates thought [*trans.* An overarching term for a non-human agency, e.g. the camera, the computer and the 'apparatus' of the State or of the market]; organization or system that enables something to function.

Automatic machine: an apparatus that has to obey an arbitrary program.

Code: a sign system arranged in a regular pattern.

Concept: a constitutive element of a text.

Conceptualization: a specific ability to create texts and to decode them.

Cultural object: an informed object.

Decode: demonstrate the significance of a symbol.

Entropy: the tendency towards more and more probable states.

Functionary: a person who plays with apparatus and acts as a function of apparatus.

Game: an activity that is an end in itself.

History: the linear progression of translation from ideas into concepts.

Idea: a constitutive element of an image.

Idolatry: the inability to read off ideas from the elements of the image, despite the ability to read these elements themselves; hence: worship of images.

Image: a significant surface on which the elements of the image act in a magic fashion towards one another.

Imagination: the specific ability to produce and to decode images.

Industrial society: a society in which the majority of people work at machines.

Inform: 1. create improbable combinations of elements;
2. imprint them upon objects.

Information: an improbable combination of elements.

Machine: a tool that simulates an organ of the body on the basis of scientific theories.

Magic: a form of existence corresponding to the eternal recurrence of the same.

Memory: information store.

Object: a thing standing in our way.

Photograph: a flyer-like image created and distributed by apparatus.

Photographer: a person who attempts to place, within the image, information that is not predicted within the program of the camera.

Plaything: an object in the service of a game.

Post-history: the translation of concepts back into ideas.

Post-industrial society: a society in which the majority of people are occupied in the tertiary sector.

Primary and secondary sector: the areas of activity in which objects are produced and informed.

Production: the transfer of a thing from nature into culture.

Program: a combination game with clear and distinct elements [*trans.* A term whose associations include computer programs, hence the *us* spelling].

Reality: what we run up against on our journey towards death; hence: what we are interested in.

Redundancy: repetition of information; hence: the probable.

Rites: actions corresponding to the magic form of existence.

Sign: a phenomenon that signifies another.

Significance: the aim of signs.

State of things: a scenario in which what is significant are the relationships between things and not things themselves.

Symbol: a sign consciously or unconsciously agreed upon.

Symptom: a sign brought about by its significance.

Technical image: a technological or mechanical image created by apparatus.

Tertiary sector: the area of activity in which information is created.

Text: series of written signs.

Textolatry: the inability to read off concepts from the written signs of a text, despite the ability to read these written signs; hence: worship of the text.

Tool: a simulation of an organ of the body in the service of work.

Translation: switching over from one code to another; hence: jumping from one universe into another.

Universe: 1. the totality of combinations of a code; 2. the totality of significations of a code.

Valuable: something that is as it is supposed to be [*trans.* able to be filled with value].

Work: the activity that produces and informs objects.

ISBN 978-1-86189-076-4



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Photography

In this book, media critic and philosopher Vilém Flusser proposes a revolutionary new way of thinking about photography: an analysis in which the aesthetic, scientific and political aspects of the medium act as a key to the diagnosis of the current cultural crisis and the new form of existence and society taking shape within it. Flusser shows that the change from a text-based to an image-based culture (from the linearity of history to the two-dimensionality of magic) and the change from an industrial to a post-industrial society (from work to play) go hand in hand, and how this mutation can be seen with particular clarity in the case of photography.

Vilém Flusser was born in Prague in 1920. After emigrating to Brazil twenty years later, and then to France, he embarked on an influential career as a lecturer and writer on language, design and communication. He died in 1991. He was the author of numerous journal articles, essays and books, including *Language and Reality* (1963).

The Shape of Things, a selection of Flusser's essays on the philosophy of design, is also available from Reaktion Books.

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