

Photo criticism.

(For EUROPEAN PHOTOGRAPHY)

Criticism is closely related to explanation. It is an effort to render explicit those aspects of a given phenomenon that are implied within it. It differs from explanation in that it evaluates while explaining. Now the difference between natural and cultural phenomena is precisely that the cultural ones contain values. They are more or less like they "ought to be", like they were intended to be by their producers. Criticism is thus an effort to compare the phenomenon with the intention which is implied within it. A given phenomenon is the "better", the closer it comes to the intention which has produced it. The horizon of evaluation is "perfection", total realisation of the intention. This horizon can never be achieved, because the phenomenon resists the intention by its inertia, (the perfidy of matter). The resistance of the object changes, "de-forms", the intention. One of the tasks of criticism is to show the deformations of the intention. Another task is to compare the phenomenon with other similar ones, "put it in its context", in order to elicit the historical, geographical, social, cultural background of the intention. It will have to show how the phenomenon criticized fits or does not fit within its context. Which means to show to what extent the intention implied within the phenomenon was to be expected. A given phenomenon is the more "informative", ("original"), the less it was expected. There may be other criteria, aside from "perfection" and "information", but those two are sufficient. The first one results in "internal criticism", the second one in "external criticism", and both should go together.

A photograph is a phenomenon which has resulted from a number of sometimes converging, sometimes conflicting intentions. All of those intentions are implied in the photo. There is the photographer's intention. There is the intention which has programmed the camera which took the photo. There is the intention of the media which distributed the photo. And there are "hidden" intentions which sustain the camera and the media intentions, (for instance the intention of the photo industry which has produced and programmed the camera, and the intention of the political and publicity apparatus which sustains the media). All those intentions, and their complex co-implications, must be taken into account by photo criticism, before it can compare them with the phenomenon it is criticizing, and before it can put the phenomenon in context. A photo is the result of a dramatic conflict between heterogenous intentions, which renders photo criticism so exciting.

Unfortunately, one does not get the impression that the photo critics are up to their task, if one reads what they are writing. Most of them would have us believe that what is implied in the photo is the photographer's intention only. As if a photo were just any kind of image, and not a "technical" image. As if its production and distribution did not involve apparatus inspired by intentions. And as if therefore there were no decisive difference between the criticism of any kind of image and photo criticism. Now at first sight such a mistaken critical attitude seems to "glorify the artist". It is pleasing for the photographer

to be taken to be the only one responsible for his photo. But at closer inspection it will be seen that such an attitude amounts to a contempt for the photographer's commitment. The photographer is one whose intention is directed against his camera, (he intends it to take photos which are not prescribed in its program), and against his medium, (he intends it to distribute photos which are not in its program). Most of the photo critics silence this struggle of human against programmed intentions. They miss the whole thing.

This mistaken critical attitude pleases the receivers of photos, the public at large, because it has it believe that it is easy to decipher photos. All one has to do is to find out the photographer's intention, meaning the point of view from which he took the photo. As for the rest, a photo is an "objective image", one that reproduces faithfully a given situation out there. Most of the critics put the critical faculty of the public at rest, by silencing the codifying intentions programmed within the camera and the media of distribution. In fact, this attitude of the photo critics despises the critical intelligence of the public.

But, most of all, this mistaken critical attitude pleases the programming apparatus. They disappear from view, and may thus escape critical inspection. If the codifying role of the photo camera and of the medium is silenced, if a photo is shown to mean what the photographer means it to mean, and not also what the camera programm and the medium program means it to mean, if those two programmed meanings are left implied within the photo, the photo can work according to those implied intentions: it can program the experiences, the values, and the behavior of the public. In fact, this attitude of the photo critics re-inforces the intentions programmed within the various apparatus.

The critical attitude, according to which all one has to do to criticize a photo is to elicit the photographer's intention, pleases everybody. Last, but not least, it pleases the critic. No need for him to go into the complex and almost impenetrable co-implications between photographer and program, between man and apparatus. No need for him to elaborate new criteria, (such as "automation" or "multiplicability"), in his effort to criticize a photo. No need for him to submit the traditional criteria, (like "good" and "beautiful"), to re-examination. Under this critical attitude, there is nothing very new, very revolutionary, about photos, if compared with other kinds of image. The danger implied within photos, (and within all the technical images), namely their intention to program automatically the behavior of society, goes unnoticed.

A "correct" critical attitude toward photos, one that would take into account all the intentions implied in a photo, would, on the contrary, be universally unpleasant. It would show the photographer to be a functionary of various apparatus, although one who struggles to emancipate himself from his function. It would show society to behave ever more uncritically in function of photos which are becoming omnipresent in newspapers, magazines, posters, on walls, in shop windows, on cans, on shirts, and which function as models. It would show the camera and media apparatus to be only the tip of an iceberg of gigantic programming apparatus about to establish an automatic totalitarianism. And it would show the

usual photo criticism to be a non-negligible contribution to the establishment of such a totalitarianism. But although such a "new criticism" as here recommended would be highly unpleasant for everybody, including for the "new critic" himself, (it would demand of him to re-think all criteria, and to elaborate new ones), it would provide an avenue of access to the evaluation of what is so revolutionary new about photos.

The task of a "correct" photo criticism, as opposed to the task of the criticism of pre-apparatus cultural phenomena, is to render explicit that photos are the result of a complex co-implication between man and apparatus. Unless, of course, the photo to be criticized were the result of "full automation". In that case, like in satellite pictures, the critic may restrict himself to the elicitation of the programmed intention implied in the image. In all other cases, this is the sort of questions the critic will have to ask of himself, before he can apply the criteria "perfection" and "information": (1) Which sort of camera has produced this photo? (2) In what part of the world, with what sort of techniques, and against which cultural, political and historical background was this camera produced, and in what way does it differ from other cameras available on the market? (3) What was the photographer's intention in choosing this camera? (4) What was his intention in making this photo? (5) In what degree did the photographer succeed to submit the camera to his intention? (6) In what degree did the camera program deviate the photographer's intention? (7) What kind of medium distributed this photo? (8) In which cultural, political and ideological background does this medium function? (9) In which aspect does this medium differ from other media available to the photographer? (10) What was the photographer's intention in choosing this medium? (11) In what degree did the photographer succeed to submit the medium program to his intention? (12) In what degree did the medium succeed to recuperate the photographer's intention and thereby enrich its program? Now this list of questions is far from exhaustive. But if satisfactory answers may be found, it is sufficient for the critic to evaluate the photo.

He may now apply the criterium "perfection" to the photo. A photo will be the more perfect, the "better", the more the photographer's intention prevails in it over the programmed intentions of the various apparatus involved in it. The more human intention prevails in it over automation. And the critic may now apply the criterium "information" to the photo. A photo will carry the more information, it will be the more surprising and "original", the more it shows something not to be expected from the camera and the medium program. The more it differs from the photos we expect to see coming out of this camera and this specific medium.

Two points will become clear, if one compares this critical attitude with the usual one: (1) Its criteria are different, and (2) its impact is different:

(1) The usual criticism operates with criteria like "artistic" photo, "politically committed photo", "publicity" photo, "scientific" photo, "documentary" photo, "experimental" photo and so forth. Those criteria are meaningless

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for the "new photo criticism" here recommended. It is medium, (the gallery, the newspaper, the poster, the magazine,) and not the photo by itself which codifies this kind of "meanings". Whether a photo is "artistic" is a question to be asked of the medium, non of the photo itself. Instead, the "new criticism" will have to operate with criteria like "automation" and "camera manipulation".

(2) This change of criteria implies that the "new photo criticism" will have an impact quite different from the one the usual criticism is having. Since it will no longer be interested in the distinction between the esthetic, the ethical and the epistemological parametres of photos, (between artistic, political and scientific photos), since for it all those parametres are implied in each and every photo, it will amount to a criticism of culture in general, to a "Kulturkritik" in a new sense of that term. To criticize each and every photo becomes an effort to criticize the apparatus culture in general, and man's position in it.

This is as it should be. If it is understood that each and every photo is the result of a struggle between human intention, (freedom), and apparatus program, that the photographer's intention is not directed against some inanimate object, (for instance a paper surface), but against the inert perfidy of the apparatus, then it becomes obvious that to criticize a photo is synonymous with the effort to render explicit what is implied in apparatus culture.

Criticism is a Janus-like creature. It faces the producer of the phenomenon criticized, (its "emitter"), in order to explain to him what he was doing. And it faces the receivers of the phenomenon criticized, (its "public"), in order to explain to them what it is they are receiving. The task of photo criticism, (as here recommended), is to explain to the photographer his true commitment: to master the apparatus which tries to program him, to assert his freedom. And to explain to the public the danger lurking in the photos: that they are phenomena which intend to manipulate it. This is why photo criticism may be such an exciting thing to do: it may contribute to the emanipation of society from apparatus totalitarianism.