

Photography and the end of Politics?

Second East-West Conference, Wrocław (Borblau)

For the purpose of this lecture, and for that purpose only, let me define a photo as a picture made by an apparatus which observes the world. The definition is problematic, because it involves the problem of apparatus observation, and thus one of the foundations modern science stands on. One of the basic assumptions of science is that unprejudiced 'objective' observation of phenomena is possible, and that therefore two different observations of the same phenomenon will provide the same information. This assumption has been put into question for various reasons. One is that observation changes the phenomenon observed, and that therefore it depends on the observer. No two observations of the same phenomenon can thus supply exactly the same information. Another reason for doubt is that close observation cannot be made without apparatus, that any apparatus is the result of previous theories, and that therefore no observation with apparatus can be unprejudiced and objective. Every observation will somehow mirror previous theories, and thus depend on the apparatus. There is a third and even more disturbing objection: apparatus may be very expensive, and thus observation may involve economic considerations. It cannot be said that science has found valid answers to those objections so far.

The impact of this on the photo definition proposed is that we have to admit that the photo camera cannot observe the world without interfering in it. There can be no such thing as an objective unprejudiced photo. It is not necessarily the photographer who holds the camera, it is the camera itself which affects observation. But this is not all there is to it. If we admit that the camera influences the world we must also admit that it is itself influenced by the world. If observation changes the thing observed, it certainly also changes the observer. Observation must be understood to be a reversible channel through which both the observed thing and the observer are changing each other. It is this constant feed-back between the photo camera with its photographer on the one side, and the world on the other side, which is the nucleus of the proposed definition of the photo.

When photography was invented during the first half of the nineteenth century, those doubts about observation were not yet fully conscious, and science was still solid. The idea was that a camera should stand somewhere outside the events and observe them. This in itself was a very complex idea. The camera was supposed not only to be an impartial witness to events, but also to be a memory wherein the events leave their traces. The complexity is not only technical, but conceptual. Events flow in time, they have a linear structure. The camera memory are images, it has a two-dimensional structure. Thus if events leave traces in the camera memory they must be transcoded from linearity into two dimensions. This involves a very important manipulation: events are changed into scenes, they are frozen. It is therefore evident that the camera changes the events it observes; it freezes them to become pictures. Thus it should have been obvious, even at the origin of photography, that there can be no such thing as an objective photo.

This is an important point, and I must exemplify it. Suppose you make a photo of a battle of the American civil war, and suppose that you are neutral.

You will attempt to make unprejudiced objective pictures of the battle, not war propaganda for one side of the other. But the result will be the picture of a battle scene, not of an event during the battle. Now scenes are contexts where elements relate to each other in a specific reversible manner. The soldiers, the horses, the guns, even the trees and the houses within the photo of the battle scene will be so related to each other. Now what I just described is a magical context. By making your photo of the battle, you will have translated a political event into a magical rite, and we can feel that magic even now when we look at those early civil war photos. You will have depoliticized the civil war, not because you intended to do so, but because this is the very structure of photographic observation.

Now you may say, of course, that this is not very important for the outcome of the civil war, and that the north did not win because or in spite of photos. This is true as long as the photo magic depoliticizes only its consumer, the one who looks at the photo, but not the observed thing, the fighting soldiers and the generals and politicians who command them. You may say that the political consciousness of the actors of events was not influenced by photos. However, this cannot last forever, and very soon the observed actor must become aware of the fact that he is being observed by an apparatus. Like you become aware of the fact that there is a mirror in your bathroom. At that point your behavior changes. You may observe it when couples step out of the church after having been married, and stand there for a camera to take their picture. You might say that their behavior acquires a ritual, magical parameter. When soldiers become aware of the camera, and when generals become aware that the soldiers are thus aware, depoliticisation creeps in and it will influence the battle.

The next step during this process of depoliticisation is when the generals and politicians become aware of the depoliticizing power of the photo image. They may then organize political events for the express purpose of them being photographed and then use those photographs to provoke unpolitical, magical behavior in the photo observers. This is the method of fascism in the first half of this century, and it shows the explosive power imbedded in the photo magic. Nazism cannot be even imagined without photos and films, those ribbons of photos. You may say that with this development the magic of the photo has been put to the service of a specific political action, and that there is a general magical depoliticisation in the service of specific political decisions.

The next step was made after the second war, and it is more difficult to analyse than the fascist use of photos. It is when political actors take the image to be the purpose of their action, and no longer a method of action. Hitler organized party meetings to be photographed, so that he might transform the people into a magically motivated mass and use that mass to wage war on other people. But the terrorists of the fifties and sixties kidnapped people and exhibited them to photographers and other cameramen, for the express purpose of the picture. The political event became a method for picture making. Of course, those pictures of kidnapped airplanes were still at the service of some political purpose, but still: the magic of the picture has become an aim for political commitment. This may be seen even

more clearly with events like the Landing on the Moon: they were organized to be seen in pictures, and in the same picture the American President would be shown, and thus the event had the picture for its purpose. Of course: the American president was shown for political purposes, but still: the magic of the picture was a strong depoliticizing factor.

What happened then is fundamental for the present situation: the people who handle the apparatus, all those photographers, camera men and media people, became aware of their influence on political decisions and actions. For them, political events are the raw material pictures are made of, and they began to manipulate the events to produce better pictures. A possibly fictional, but still very revealing example: a cameraman is present at the execution of a group of Vietcong, as they stand there against a black wall. He asks the executioner to please have the Vietcong stand against a white wall instead, because that would result in a better picture. The cameraman becomes a kind of scenarist of the Vietnam war, and the war is fought for the purpose to make pictures. Political action becomes a pretext for magic. Now this is a very complex process. First it is the apparatus people who are aware of it, and the political actors ignore it. A comedy of errors: the apparatus people believe that they manipulate the politicians and vice versa. But very soon that error is clarified, as the politicians become aware of the power of the camera people, and try to take advantage of it. They try to use their photo and TV image for the political purposes, while knowing fully that the apparatus people use those images for their own purpose. But even thus feedback between politics and magic can not last long, as it becomes ever more obvious that it is the apparatus, and not politics, which makes the last decisions. At this point political consciousness may be said to be subservient to pictures.

But this is not yet the end of this process of depoliticisation. The apparatus people may become aware of the fact that they can do more than use political events for the manufacture of pictures. They can do it the other way round and use their pictures to make political events out of them. This is what has happened in Rumania: pictures were made to make a revolution, and the revolution was just as real or unreal as are pictures: it was an emanation of pictures. In such a situation there is no political consciousness at all involved, but only magical manipulation. This is the end of politics, and the victory of the photo and similar technical images over historical action.

Now consider what has just been said from a structural point of view, or, to put it more elegantly, as a topological problem: The camera was invented for it to stand above the event and to be their witness. That it delved into the flux of events and became involved within them. Next it emerged from the events opposed itself to them, and became their purpose. And in the end the camera emancipated itself altogether, stood there by itself, and began to spout events like a fountain. It is the two last situations which merit attention.

Twenty years ago critics of culture were led to introduce the term 'post'-history, and what they meant was more or less that all events tend to flow into images and that to turn around there in an eternal return. The 'new imagination

with its new categories and new values was held to be a kind of whirlpool into which historical, political consciousness was being sucked in. But now, in the light of the Rumanian and similar happenings, we must review this. We must admit that what we are witnessing is not the end of historical events, but absolute depolitisation. History will go on, probably even more violently than ever before, but now it will be programmed by apparatus. It was believed, twenty years ago, that what we are witnessing is the end of ideology, because political commitment had become an absurd commitment. What we are witnessing now, with the victory of image over event, of apparatus over politics, is ideology without commitment. The events of Eastern Europe, which show the rebirth of ideologies long thought dead, like nationalism, antisemitism and religious bigotry, are a proof of death of political consciousness and political commitment, and of the victory of apparatus. A most terrifying perspective.

I said in the beginning that the definition of the photo I am proposing is meant for the sole purpose of this lecture. It should have become obvious by now why I had said so. This is my first invitation to speak in what used to be Eastern Europe. I take it to be a challenge to face the problems those societies pose for the understanding of our future. I therefore want to thank those who invited me for the opportunity they gave me to reflect on this question. And I hope that you will find some of my reflections useful.