

How not to be devoured by the box.

14th International photo encounters, Arles, July 9, 35.

Cameras are boxes which are being bought by people who have been programmed to do so by publicity. A box thus acquired will tend to be of the last model: cheaper, more automatic, more efficient and smaller than were previous models. Cameras improve progressively, because photo industries learn automatically from the behavior of snap shooters all over the world, and because a specialized press feeds the industries with a steady stream of test results concerning that behavior. This has become the essence of post-industrial progress: society functions as a feed-back to the established apparatus. See public opinion research, marketing, elections.

The camera is based on complex scientific and technological principles, but it is progressively easy to handle. It is a structurally complex, but functionally simple toy. Quite unlike chess, which is structurally simple and functionally complex. With chess, it is easy to understand its rules, but difficult to play it well. With cameras one can easily shoot good pictures, but it is difficult to see through its structure. It is a "black box". The snapper has no idea what complex processes he is releasing when pressing the releaser.

The snap shooter loves to progressively simplify his game through ever more perfect automation. The opacity of the black box, its impenetrable complexity, inebriates him. Photo amateur clubs are places of apparatus inebriation, places for technological trips, post-industrial opium dens.

The camera demands of its owner, (of the one possessed by it), to shoot pictures at every conceivable occasion. This photo mania, this eternal repetition of identical or very similar pictures, this urge for redundancy, leads to a point where the snap shooter no longer can see anything without his camera: drug addiction. The snap shooter can look at the world through the camera only. And he sees it through the categories of perception that are programmed within the camera. This is mass culture: everybody everywhere has the same programmed world vision. The snap shooter no longer "transcends" the camera, (like the artisan used to transcend his tools), but he has been devoured by the box. He functions in function of the box, and his gestures are automatic functions. He has become an extended self-releaser. This sort of behavior is characteristic of the future society of apparatus and apparatchiks.

A steady flow of snap shots is the result, and those snap shots constitute an apparatus memory. He who inspects an album of a photo amateur, does not look at preserved human experiences, values, or knowledge, but at automatically produced apparatus virtualities. He is seeing the places where the camera stood, and how it made the snap shooter behave in those places. The photo album attests to a specific realisation of a specific camera program.

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A photographer is the opposite of a snap shooter. His aim is not to be devoured by the box, but to cheat its program. Cameras are programmed to produce pictures which are apparently ever new ones, but which in reality are always the same pictures. They are always the same, because they show everything in the same way. They are like they

were expected to be. They do not surprise. They are probable pictures. This is to say that they do not inform. "Information" is the unexpected, the improbable, the un-programmed: it is adventure. The aim of the photographer is to cheat his camera into producing unexpected pictures, to trick it to produce information.

History of photography shows this growing understanding of information on the part of the photographers. At the beginning they aimed at showing ever new scenes of the world. They wanted to document the world. But as automation and the sciences of information advanced, they became aware of the fact that documentation can be automated. That fully automated cameras, (like in satellites), can document the world better without human intervention. The photographers came to understand what photography is about: information, surprise, the unexpected. For instance: to show surprising aspects in things covered by habit, or to see things in an unusual way, or to establish unusual situations. They came to understand that to photograph is to try and show that which has never been seen before. The problem is this: how can this be done with a camera which is programmed for redundant pictures? Can one do with a camera a thing which is not inscribed in its program?

The camera program is rich, and it contains an amount of virtual pictures which can never be exhausted by any photographer. The "camera competence" is larger than the competence of any single photographer, and of all the photographers in the world. Nonetheless, the photographer can dominate the camera. He knows how to feed it and how to make it spit pictures. He dominates the input and the output of the box, though he ignores what goes on in its belly. This goes for every apparatus functioning: apparatchiks dominate a game for which they are not competent. Kafka.

But it is precisely the blackness of the box which challenges the photographer. He turns the box around, looks into it, and through this opaque complexity out into the world. He does so in an effort to create information. To discover an unsuspected virtuality within the camera program and the world out there. The program within the box, and the world out there, are not yet real for him, but they are fields of virtualities to be realized in a picture. It is he who will make those virtualities real by creating information. Thus the photographer transcends the traditional distinction between realism and idealism. It is not the knowable, nor the knower, who are real, but real is the known, the picture. What is real is the image, the symbol, information. This transfer of reality into the symbol is the mark of post-industrial society in general, a society which will inhabit a universe of symbols, and which will live in function of information.

Each true photography is thus the result of a struggle between a photographer and a camera program. It is an intricate struggle. The photographer tries to do with the camera what he intends to do, but he can only do with it what the camera can do. Anything he does is inscribed in the camera program. But it may be inscribed in a hidden corner of that program, unknown even to those who have programmed it. Each true photography is the result of an effort to discover such hidden corners. To trick not only the camera, but those who have programmed it. The photo industry, the industrial park, and all those gigantic apparatus which hide behind the camera program.

But there is even more to this struggle. A photograph is a surface which is not only produced by an apparatus, but which is also distributed by apparatus. The camera spits pictures which are distributed by media like newspapers, posters and picture galleries. Those media are boxes which are just as black as are cameras. They are not passive channels, but they codify the meaning of pictures. And they are programmed to do so. A newspaper programs the pictures it distributes to mean some event, (to "indicate" it). A poster programs the pictures it distributes to mean some behavior, (it is "imperative"). A picture gallery programs the pictures it distributes to mean some experience, (it is "aesthetic"). The picture itself is semantically neutral, and it acquires its meaning within the medium. Thus a photograph of the Moon landing will have a "indicative" meaning in a newspaper, an "imperative", (political) one in a poster that hangs on an Embassy wall, and it will have an "aesthetic", (artistic), meaning in an art gallery.

Now the photographer depends on the media for his living. He functions for them. He photographs for a newspaper, a publicity agency, an art gallery, and he must adapt his pictures to their respective programs, if he is to survive. But if he is a true photographer, he will try to cheat those programs. He will try to smuggle some information in his pictures which are not inscribed in those programs. The media, on the other hand, may very well discover that trickery and still accept the picture, in order to enrich their programs, to "recuperate the information". Thus each true photography is the result of this struggle between the media and the photographer, which explains why photographs are <sup>such</sup> ~~so~~ dramatic pictures.

The task of photo criticism is to decipher this intricate struggle in every single picture. The critic must ask: "How far did the photographer here succeed in tricking his camera program, how far did human intention succeed in cheating the apparatus?". And also: "How far did the photographer here succeed in tricking his media, how far did human intention succeed in cheating the apparatus?". But those are not the questions usually asked by critics. They usually ask questions of the type: "Is photography an art, and is there politically committed photography, and how about the relation between photography and science?". As if those questioned were not answered automatically by the media who distribute the pictures. As long as we do not dispose of a true photo criticism, we shall continue to be uncritical victims to the photographic messages which program our experiences, desires and actions.

The box, be it the camera or the media, tend automatically to devour us. The photographers try to trick the boxes into producing information. It is the struggle between human freedom and his own apparatus. Each single photography testifies to that struggle.