

How should photographs be deciphered?

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In contrast to natural phenomena cultural ones, (human products), have meanings. They were deliberately produced, and that deliberation is where they point to. The purpose which characterizes all human products is however not necessarily obvious for the "sender" nor for the "receiver" of the meaning inherent in the product. Often it must be deciphered. This is the critic's task. And this is also the basic difference between sciences of nature and those of culture. The natural scientist explains phenomena, the cultural scientist deciphers them.

Modern criticism, under the influence of classical philosophy, distinguishes three basic purposes which motivate people to produce. The first purpose is to understand the world. The second purpose is to change the world. The third purpose is to experience the world. The ideal of the first purpose is truth, of the second purpose it is the good, and of the third purpose it is beauty. Examples of a product of the first purpose is a telescope, of the second purpose is a hammer, of the third purpose is a song. The consequence of such a distinction is the typically modern divorce of science, politics and the arts. It results in "pure science", the purpose of which is to know the world free from prejudice and value. Another result is political and technical "commitment", the purpose of which is to change the world in accordance to specific models. And a further result are the "fine arts", the purpose of which is to elaborate models for the experience of the world.

Such a division of culture into three realms did not exist prior to Modern age. Classical and medieval criticism accepted the evidence that every human product is motivated simultaneously by the search for truth, for the good, and for beauty. An arrow is "good" for hunting if it is built "right", and this is why it is "beautiful". To ask whether the arrow is a work of science, of politics and techniques, or of art, is, prior to the Modern age, a meaningless question. Pre-modern criticism attempted to decipher in every human product the whole of human existence in its search to give life in the world a meaning.

The modern distinction between science, politics, (including technology), and art is both unfeasable and pernicious. It is unfeasable because it cannot be denied that each and every product comes under all three of those headings. Each scientific proposition has political and esthetic aspects, each technical tool, (including each ideology), has epistemological and esthetic aspects, each work of art has epistemological and ethical aspects. A Renaissance map is "true", since it expresses the geographical knowledge of its period. But it is also "good", since it serves the interests of the up and

coming bourgeoisie, for instance it serves navigation. And it is also "beautiful", since it articulates a Renaissance experience, and it may therefor adorn the walls of present-day bourgeois appartments. And the modern distinction is pernicious, because it distorts the purpose which informs production. It gives rise to the irresponsible scientist, the prototype of which is Frankenstein, to the fanatical and irresponsible technocrat, the prototypes of which are Stalin and Michmann, and to the alienated esthete, the prototype of which is Nero as he plays the violin while Rome burns.

But though the modern distinction between science, politics and the arts is both unfeasable and pernicious, it maintained itself for centuries. It is part of the bourgeois ideology; and the concept of "art" more especially, (for which there is no true equivalent in Antiquity and the Middle ages), serves the bourgeoisie ever since the Renaissance to mythify production: "creation" instead of "manufacture". But it seems as if this ideological distinction is finally about to be abandoned. All three concepts, -science, art and politics-, begin to merge. Science questions its lack of prejudice and of values and begins to accept that it is motivated, like every human endeavor, by desires and experiences: that it is politically and esthetically motivated. Political commitment takes itself to be, in part, "scientific", (for instance marxist and technocratic commitment), and, in part, esthetic criteria, (for instance the socalled quality of life), begin to influence political commitment. But it is most of all the concept of "art" which tends to become undefinable, and therefore inoperative.

This long overdue decadence of the concept of "art" is due, to a great extend, to the invention of photography. For two not necessarily connected reasons. One reason is that photos are produced with apparatus which are technical tools and thus belong to the political realm, and which are based on scientific theories, (for instance optics and chemistry). As socalled progress goes on, those apparatus tend to become ever cheaper, smaller and more efficient, thus enabling almost anybody to produce "beautiful" pictures. Now the concept "art" implies an "inspired artist": it is élitaire, and cannot survive democratisation by cameras. The other reason for the decadence of the art concept due to photography is the fact that the distinction between scientific, political and artistic photographs is evidently not being made by the "sender", (the photographer), not by the "receiver", (the public), but by the channel of communication which transmits them. A photograph of a moonscape is "scientific", if it is published in Scientific American, it is "political", if it is exposed in the hall of an American Consulate, and it is "artistic", if it is exhibited in a museum of art. It is therefore becoming obvious that the criterium "artistic photography"

implies the uncritical acceptance of the categories through which the communicational apparatus programs us.

This is why the concept of "art" should be abandoned in the field of photography even earlier than in other fields of culture. But if we are to let go of the traditional distinction between art, science and politics, if we no longer can classify photographs according to such criteria, (for instance: if we no longer can distinguish unproblematically between the purposes of X-rays, election photos and photographs in art exhibitions), then the question is: how are we to decipher photographs? An important question, because photographs are, together with the other techno-images, (like movies, TV-screens etc.), tools by which the apparatus of technological civilisation programs us. If we cannot decipher them, if we cannot uncover the purpose which is hidden within them, we shall become passive victims to such a programming. To decipher photographs is one method open to us to yet escape from technological totalitarianism.

The answer is obvious: we must try and elaborate new criteria for photo-criticism which are beyond the distinction between scientific, political and artistic photos. Until recently it looked as if we had such a fundamental criterium: it was possible to distinguish between amateur and professional photos, and then to try and classify those two categories further. But in view of the progress of cameras both in technical and in cost aspects such a criterium is no longer reliable. Cameras render progressively human interference in the act of photographing less and less indispensable, and as they take over human functions the distinction between amateur and professional becomes less interesting. The decadence of the professional portraitist is an example: the profession is dying out, because almost everybody can make a "good" portrait.

But there is a criterium for deciphering photographs, for classifying photographs into various categories, which cannot be made redundant, because it has to do with what is essential to photographs. One that has to do with the curiously opaque relationship that links photographs to what they represent. This essay will propose to study the possibility of a classification of photographs according to their relationship with what they represent. Such is an ontological criterium which abandons the traditional distinction between artistic and other photographs as a meaningless one, and which supercedes the distinction between amateur and professional photographs. Such a criterium would make it possible, at last, to decipher the meaning of photographs in a disciplined fashion, because it would grasp the roots of the purpose of photographs, which is to deform the pretense of "reality" which they represent. This writer believes that such a criterium would signal the birth of disciplined photo-criticism.

The relation between photograph and what it represents is curiously opaque because the photograph is a "techno-image". Techno-images are different from traditional, "hand-made" ones in that it looks as if what they represent is representing itself somehow. It looks as if they were "objective". Rays are being reflected by what is being represented, they are captured by a camera, they provoke chemical reactions there, and they leave traces on sensitive surfaces. Those traces are the techno-image. It looks as if the relation between the photograph and what it represents is like the relation between finger print and finger. Such a relation is called "symptomatic". The fingerprint, (and allegedly the photograph), is a symptom, because there is an uninterrupted causal chain between image and what it represents. Image and what it represents are of the same ontological level: what is represented is the cause, the image is the effect. Such is the objectivity of symptoms

Traditional images, on the other hand, are connected to what they represent through a person, (for instance a painter). However one might interpret such a human interference in the relationship "image-represented", it is obvious that the causal chain, the objectivity, is interrupted. Traditional images are not symptomatic of what they represent. Neither are they subjective, "private" utterances of their producer, because if they were so no observer of the image would decipher what it represents. They are intersubjective, representations, and their intersubjectivity can be measured by the number of those who decipher them. Such intersubjective signs are called "symbols". Traditional images are symbolic and must be deciphered as symbols, be they realistic or surrealist paintings, blueprints or statistical curves.

In truth techno-images are no symptoms, (like fingerprints, red spots on the skin or ski traces are), but they are symbols just like the traditional images are. An interrupting factor introduces itself within the causal chain between photograph and what it represents just as it does with traditional images. But with photographs that factor is not simply a person, but a complex of humans and apparatus. It is difficult to pierce that complex. Apparatus are tools which follow specific rules, and those who use such tools must take those rules into account. It is just as true to say that men function in function of the apparatus as it is to say that the apparatus functions in function of men. In any case: those rules of the apparatus, (their "programs"), interfere in the causal chain between the photograph and what it represents. For instance: they accept specific rays, refuse others, and they accentuate one type of rays over others. And this implies that the photograph is just as intersubjective as is the traditional image, and that it must be deciphered in its quality of a symbol. But it pretends to be objective, and to be decipherable as if it were a symptom. That is the opacity and the danger inherent in photographs, (and in all techno-images): that they mislead

by pretending objectivity. And this is an important aspect of "techno-image culture" which programs us.

The first criterium of the new photo-criticism here proposed would thus be to classify photographs according to the technique which produces them. The critic would have to analyse first the structure of the apparatus and find out how the apparatus categories modify what is represented. Thus Kodak images would have to be distinguished from Agfa images, and the Kodachromisation of our world vision would have to be gone into. Such a critique should not limit itself to technical aspects only, but would have to consider economic, political, social, psychological, esthetic aspects as well.

The second criterium would be to classify photographs according to the manipulation to which is subject what is to be represented. Thus one would have to analyse how biological specimens are colored before being photographed, how molecules are illuminated under the electronic microscope, what liquids a stomach absorbs before being X-rayed, what positions politicians assume before being photographed. This sort of critique would have to consider not only the obvious epistemological aspects here involved, but also esthetic, political etc. aspects.

The third criterium would be to classify photographs according to the processing which they suffer after production. To analyse how photographs are ~~are~~ prepared for posters, how photo-assemblies are made, how photographs are covered with "foreign" elements like texts and abstract or figurative forms, how they are "retouched". Such a critique would transcend the strict domain of photography and overlap into the realms of politics, science, and of traditional image making, but this overlap is indispensable in view of the tendency of photographs to merge with "foreign" codes of communication.

If one searches for the criterium for the deciphering of the meaning of photographs within the relationship that links them to what they represent, further criteria for photo criticism will emerge spontaneously. Thus a new vision of the photographic "universe" will take shape. The manifold illusions, (which are partly conscious and partly not), which lurk in the purpose of making photographs would then become apparent. Of course: such a critical enterprise would have to overcome difficult hurdles. There are vested interests which sustain the traditional criteria "art", "politics", and "science", for instance galleries for "artistic photography", illustrated magazines and universities. The apparatus defends itself from being deciphered. And so do the consumers it programs: they do not want to know the true meaning of the snap shots they are producing.

Still: the enterprise is worth the trouble. Since if we cannot decipher the purpose of photographs, we become their victims.