Vilem Flusser.

How to decipher photos.

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Photographic criticism has suffered from the prejudice, according to which photographs are pictures of the same kind like paintings. That they have the same kind of meaning, and that this meaning may be deciphered by the same method, namely through aesthetic criteria. In other words: photographic criticism has suffered from the prejudice, according to which photographs are an art form of the traditional kind. I shall suggest that this is not so, and that new criteria are required if we are to decipher photographs.

Obviously photographs must be deciphered. They are "products", which means that they were made with a purpose. To decipher photos is to show their purpose, their meaning. This is what distinguishes products, (culture), from natural objects: that products, (culture), have a meaning. Therefore natural science explains its objects, while the humanities have to decipher their objects.

To what purpose do we produce things? Traditional philosophy, ("Kulturkritik"), has distinguished between three kinds of purposes: we either produce things to know the world better, (example: telescopes), or to change the world, (example: hammers), or to make the world more agreeable, (example: songs). The first purpose seeks "truth", the second one "goodness", the third one "beauty". The first purpose is responsible for science, the second one for technology and politics, the third one for art. Thus photography is an "art form": its purpose is the search of "beauty".

But this distinction is both unfeasable and undesirable. Every human product aims at all three of the above-mentioned "ideals". An arrow is "true", (i.e. correctly constructed), if it is "good", (i.e. serves to kill), and if it is "true" and "good", it is also "beautiful", (i.e. it gives pleasure). A Renaissance map of America is "true", (it reflects the geographical knowledge of its period), it is "good", (it serves navigation of the rising bourgeoisie), and it is "beautiful", (it may hang on a wall like a painting and gives pleasure). Every scientific proposition is also "good" and "beautiful", every machine is also "true" and "beautiful", every work of art is also "true" and "good". If a scientist forgets the political and aesthetic aspects of science, he becomes a Frankenstein, if a technician and politician forgets the scientific and aesthetic aspects of his manipulations he becomes an Eichmann, and if an artist forgets the scientific and ethical aspects of art he becomes a Nero who fiddles while Rome burns.

We must accept the fact that there is no "pure science", no "pure politics and technology", and no "pure art", but that all three cultural activities are intimately interwoven. That we must re-define our concepts of science, politics, (including technology), and art. This becomes obvious in the case of the photograph. It is a scientific product, (the result of a specific knowledge), a political and technical product, (the result of a camera which serves political interests), and an artistic product, (the result of a search for beauty). All these three parametres of its meaning must be deciphered by criticism.

What makes it clear in a photograph that it is not "pure art", and what distinguishes it from a painting, (where the fact that it is not "pure art" is less clear), is the camera. The camera, the photo apparatus, is a product of scientific and technical progress. It gets ever "truer", "better", and therefore more "beautiful". It gets ever cheaper, smaller, and more easy to handle. Everybody can now make "beautiful pictures". Less and less do we need "professional photographers": almost everybody can make his own "beautiful portrait". Now this does not fit into the bourgeois concept of "art", which is a noble and elitiste endeavor. The traditional consept of art cannot survive this democratisation by the camera. It must be re-considered. But there is more to this problem:

If a photograph of a moonscape is published in the "Scientific American" it becomes a scientific product, if it hangs in an American consulate, it becomes a political product, and if it is exhibited in an art show, it becomes a work of art, but it is always the same photo. It thus becomes obvious that he who "defines the photo as an object of art is neither the photographer himself, nor the "receiver of its message", but that it is the channel of communication. To say that photography is an art form is thus shown to be an uncritical submission to the manipulation by the media. We must elaborate new criteria for photo criticism, if we are to escape from this manipulation which programs us.

Let me re-state the problem: what do photographs mean? The answer to this question is hidden in the camera. It is an apparatus so designed that it preserves the traces of sun rays reflected from objects on a sensitive surface. Those traces mean those objects, are "pictures thereof". Now this looks very much as if the objects were the cause of the picture, and the photo the effect of the objects. As if the relationship between photo and the object it represents were the same as between fingerprint and finger. Such a relationship is called "objective": a causal chain links the fingerprint to the finger, and he who knows that causal chain has understood what the fingerprint means. No need for him to decipher its meaning. Cameras were designed to create precisely this impression of "objectivity". They were designed to make us believe that photos are objective pictures. But this is a deliberate mystification.

Consider how we decipher paintings. We know that it was a man, (a painter), who put the traces on the picture surface, in order to represent something, (an object, a feeling, a form). To decipher the painting is to decipher the painter's intention. We would not dream to believe that the painting is "objective". We know that the painter interferes in the relationship between the painting and what it represents, that the causal chain is interrupted by the painter's action. But we also know that the painting is not "merely subjective". If it were so, we could not decipher it. On the contrary, we know the painting to be "inter-subjective": the painter wants us to decipher his meaning. He addresses us.

Now, in reality, the photograph is in the same "ontological" relationship with what it represents, as is the painting. There is, like in painting, a factor which interferes in the causal chain, but this factor is no longer a man, (like in painting), but a photo apparatus as handled by a man. To decipher a pho-

tograph is to decipher the intention of this complex "apparatus-photographer". Which is no easy task, considering the complexity of this kind of interference. The photographer handles his camera, but in so doing, he must submit to the rules of the camera, to its "program". The camera is his tool, but, unlike a painter's brush, it imposes its complex structure upon the photographer's action. It is true that the photographer "owns" his camera, but it is equally true that the camera imposes itself upon the photographer. The difficulty involved in deciphering photos has to do with this complex and dubious relationship between camera and photographer. Thus not only is it untrue that photographs need not be deciphered because they are "objective pictures", but it is even more difficult to decipher the meaning of photographs than it is to decipher the meaning of painting.

To master the task of deciphering photos we must concentrate our attention upon the intentions, according to which the camera has been built, much more than upon the photographer's intentions. Because the photographer's intentions can only become effective within the framework of the intentions built into his camera. A really effective photo-criticism must concentrate upon the camera structure, if it is to unmask the intentions hidden within photographs, to unmask their hidden meaning, and thus emancipate us from the manipulation to which photographic messages subject us.

We must ask questions like these: what kind of rays does the camera swallow, and what kind of rays does it reject? How does it filter the rays? What processes does it use to imitate colors? What points of view with regard to what it represents does it permit, and what points of view does it exclude? What distance with regard to what it represents does it permit, and what distance does it exclude? How long and how short is the instant for which it "looks" at what it represents? What sort of manipulations of what it represents, (flashlights, curtains, etc.), does it expect to be done, and what sort of manipulations does it prohibit? What sort of manipulations of the picture itself, (montage, retouchement etc.), does it permit, and what sort does it prohibit? How far can the camera work automatically, (like in satellite pictures), and how far does it expect collaboration on the part of what it represents, (like in pictures of politicians)? How are photos enlarged and condensed? What about collages? How does the camera affect the coloring of biological specimens, the scanning of the sky by telescopes, the illumination of archeological sites etc?

Such questions must be supplemented by others, like: what distinguishes the various brands of cameras? What is the difference between Kodachrome and Agfacolor? Is there a structural difference between Japanese, German and American cameras? Why is the life-expectancy of photos becoming shorter? What cameras are destined to provide photos for illustrated magazines, what for the daily press, what for posters? What is the intention of the firms that build cameras? and of those who work for them? And of those who finance them? What is the intention of the inventors of nes devises? And of the governments who finance those investors? What is the intention of those who publish the photos: magazines, newspapers, publicity agencies, galeries, government offices? In sum:

we must ask questions concerning not only the structure of the photo camera itself, but concerning the whole economic, political, social and cultural apparatus within which, for which, and in the interest of which the cameras are programmed. Because it is within this gigantic apparatus that the true meaning of photographs is hidden. And it is within this gigantic framework, (and sometimes against it), that the intentions of the individual photographer act.

Such sort of questioning would constitute a truly effective photo criticism. But there are obstacles to such a critical endevor. One obstacle is obvious: there are enormous vested interests who would go to almost any length to prevent us from unmasking their intentions. Those interests want us either to accept photographs as "objective pictures", or else to glorify them as "beautiful pictures". But there is another obstacle, which is far less obvious: people at large, the "receptors of the photographic message", do not want us to decipher the true meaning of photographs for them. They want to be deceived, and it is this refusal to know the true meaning of the messages which constitutes "mass culture". A truly effective photo criticism would hurt itself both against the vested interests of the "establishment", and against the general consensus.

But it must be undertaken nonetheless. Because we are surrounded by photographs from every side: not only do they hide in our family albums and our west pockets, but they are displayed on walls, in shop widows, on vegetable tins, in newspapers and magazines, along the roads, in offices and workshops. They constitute one of the most powerful "media" by which our daily life, (production, consumption and leasure), is being programmed. If we do not decipher their meaning, we shall become defenseless victims to their manipulation.