Towards a Philosophy of Photography

Vilém Flusser

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Introductory Note

This book is based on the hypothesis that two fundamental turning points can be observed in human culture since its inception. The first, around the middle of the second millennium BC, can be summed up under the heading 'the invention of linear writing'; the second, the one we are currently experiencing, could be called 'the invention of technical images'. Similar turning points may have occurred previously but are beyond the scope of this analysis.

This hypothesis contains the suspicion that the structure of culture – and therefore existence itself – is undergoing a fundamental change. This book attempts to strengthen this suspicion and, in order to maintain its hypothetical quality, avoids quotations from earlier works on similar themes. For the same reason, there is no bibliography. However, there is a short glossary of the terms employed and implied in the course of the discussion; these definitions are not intended to have general validity but are offered as working hypotheses for those who wish to follow up the concepts arising from the thoughts and analyses presented here.

Thus the intention of this book is not to defend a thesis but to make a contribution – informed by philosophy – to the debate on the subject of 'photography'.

The Apparatus

Technical images are produced by apparatuses. In saying this, one presumes that the typical characteristics of apparatuses as such – in a simplified, embryonic form – are also contained within the camera and can be derived from it. To this extent, the camera, as a prototype of the apparatuses that have become so decisive for the present and the immediate future, provides an appropriate starting point for a general analysis of apparatus – those apparatuses that, on the one hand, assume gigantic size, threatening to disappear from our field of vision (like the apparatus of management) and, on the other, shrivel up, becoming microscopic in size so as to totally escape our grasp (like the chips in electronic apparatuses). However, one must first attempt a more exact definition of the term 'apparatus', since various conceptions of it exist in current usage.

The Latin word *apparatus* is derived from the verb *apparare* meaning 'to prepare'. Alongside this there exists in Latin the verb *praeparare*, likewise meaning 'to prepare'. To illustrate in English the difference between the prefixes 'ad' and 'prae', one could perhaps translate *apparare* with 'pro-pare', using 'pro' in the sense of 'for'. Accordingly, an 'apparatus' would be a thing that lies in wait or in readiness for something, and a 'preparatus' would be a thing that waits patiently for something. The photographic apparatus lies in wait for photography; it sharpens its teeth in readiness. This readiness to spring into action on the part of apparatuses, their similarity to wild animals, is

something to grasp hold of in the attempt to define the term etymologically.

But etymology on its own is not sufficient to define a term. One has to enquire into the ontological status of apparatuses, their level of existence. They are indubitably things that are produced, i.e. things that are pro-duced (brought forward) out of the available natural world. The totality of such things can be referred to as *culture*. Apparatuses are part of a culture, consequently this culture is recognizable in them. It is true that the word *apparatus* is also occasionally applied to natural phenomena, e.g. when speaking of the hearing apparatus of animals. Such usage is, however, metaphorical: We call these organs hearing apparatus because they 'lie in wait for sounds' – thus applying a cultural term to the natural world; if there were no apparatuses in our culture, we should not refer to such organs in that way.

Roughly speaking, two kinds of cultural objects can be distinguished: the ones that are good for consumption (consumer goods) and the ones that are good for producing consumer goods (tools). The two have in common that they are 'good' for something: They are 'valuable', they are as they should be, i.e. they have been produced intentionally. This is the difference between the natural and the cultural sciences: The cultural sciences pursue the intentions hiding behind things. They enquire not only 'Why?' but also 'What for?', and consequently they also pursue the intention behind the camera. Judged by this criterion, the camera is a tool whose intention is to produce photographs. As soon as one defines apparatuses as tools, however, doubts arise. Is a photograph a consumer item like a shoe or an apple? And hence, is a camera a tool like a needle or a pair of scissors?

Tools in the usual sense tear objects from the natural world in order to bring them to the place (produce them) where the human being is. In this process they change the form of these objects: They imprint a new, intentional form onto them. They 'inform' them: The object acquires an unnatural, improbable form; it becomes cultural. This production and information of natural objects is called 'work' and its result is called 'a work'. Many works, such as apples, are admittedly produced, but have hardly been informed; others, such as shoes, are strongly informed, they have a form that is developed from animal skins (leather). Apple-producing (-picking) scissors are tools that inform very little; shoe-producing needles are tools that inform a lot. Is the camera then a kind of needle since photographs carry information?

Tools in the usual sense are extensions of human organs: extended teeth, fingers, hands, arms, legs. As they extend they reach further into the natural world and tear objects from it more powerfully and more quickly than the body could do on its own. They simulate the organ they are extended from: An arrow simulates the fingers, a hammer the fist, a pick the toe. They are 'empirical'. With the Industrial Revolution, however, tools were no longer limited to empirical simulations; they grasped hold of scientific theories: They became 'technical'. As a result they became stronger, bigger and more expensive, their works became cheaper and more numerous, and from then on they were called 'machines' . Is the camera then a machine because it appears to simulate the eye and in the process reaches back to a theory of optics? A 'seeing machine'?

When tools in the usual sense became machines, their relationship to human beings was reversed. Prior to the Industrial Revolution the human being was surrounded

by tools, afterwards the machine was surrounded by human beings. Previously the tool was the variable and the human being the constant, subsequently the human being became the variable and the machine the constant. Previously the tool functioned as a function of the human being, subsequently the human being as a function of the machine. Is the same true for the camera as for the machine?

The size and high price of machines meant that only capitalists were able to own them. Most human beings worked as a function of machines: the proletariat. Humanity was divided into two classes, that of the machine owners for whose benefit the machines worked, and that of the class of proletarians who worked as a function of the use of machines. Is that true now for the camera? Is the photographer a proletarian, and are there photocapitalists?

All these questions, even though they are 'good questions', do not appear to grasp the basic function of apparatuses. Of course: Apparatuses simulate technical organs. Of course: Human beings function as a function of apparatuses. Of course: There are intentions and interests concealed behind apparatuses. But this is not the decisive thing about them. All these questions lose sight of the basic function of apparatuses because they arise out of the industrial context. Apparatuses, though the result of industry, point beyond the industrial context towards post-industrial society. Therefore a formulation of things based on industry (like that of the Marxists, for example) is no longer competent to deal with apparatuses and misses what they are about. We have to reach out for new categories in order to be able to tackle apparatuses and define what they are.

The basic category of industrial society is work: Tools and machines work by tearing objects from the natural world and informing them, i.e. changing the world. But apparatuses do not work in that sense. Their intention is not to change the world but to change the meaning of the world. Their intention is symbolic. Photographers do not work in the industrial sense, and there is no point in trying to call them workers or proletarians. As most human beings currently work on and in apparatuses, talk of the proletariat is beside the point. The categories of cultural criticism must be rethought.

Photographers, it is true, do not work but they do do something: They create, process and store symbols. There have always been people who have done such things: writers, painters, composers, book-keepers, managers. In the process these people have produced objects: books, paintings, scores, balance-sheets, plans – objects that have not been consumed but that have served as carriers of information. They were read, looked at, played, taken into account, used as the basis for decisions. They were not an end but a means. Currently this sort of activity is being taken over by apparatuses. As a result, the objects of information created in this way are becoming more and more efficient and more and more extensive, and they are able to program and control all the work in the old sense. Therefore, most human beings are currently employed on and in work-programming and work-controlling apparatuses. Prior to the invention of apparatus, this kind of activity was seen as being the 'service sector', as 'tertiary', as 'brain work', in short as peripheral. Nowadays it is at the centre of things. Therefore in cultural analysis the category 'work' must be replaced by the category 'information'.

If one considers the camera (and apparatuses in general) in this sense, one sees that the camera produces symbols: symbolic surfaces that have in a certain way been prescribed for it. The camera is programmed to produce photographs, and every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite: It is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by a camera. It is true that one can, in theory, take a photograph over and over again in the same or a very similar way, but this is not important for the process of taking photographs. Such images are 'redundant': They carry no new information and are superfluous. In the following, no account will be taken of redundant photographs since the phrase 'taking photographs' will be limited to the production of informative images. As a result, it is true, the taking of snapshots will largely fall outside the scope of this analysis.

With every (informative) photograph, the photographic program becomes poorer by one possibility while the photographic universe becomes richer by one realization. Photographers endeavour to exhaust the photographic program by realizing all their possibilities. But this program is rich and there is no way of getting an overview of it. Thus photographers attempt to find the possibilities not yet discovered within it: They handle the camera, turn it this way and that, look into it and through it. If they look through the camera out into the world, this is not because the world interests them but because they are pursuing new possibilities of producing information and evaluating the photographic program. Their interest is concentrated on the camera; for them, the world is purely a pretext for the realization of camera possibilities.

In short: They are not working, they do not want to change the world, but they are in search of information.

Such activity can be compared to playing chess. Chess-players too pursue new possibilities in the program of chess, new moves. Just as they play with chess-pieces, photographers play with the camera. The camera is not a tool but a plaything, and a photographer is not a worker but a player: not *Homo faber* but *Homo ludens*. Yet photographers do not play with their plaything but against it. They creep into the camera in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within. Unlike manual workers surrounded by their tools and industrial workers standing at their machines, photographers are inside their apparatus and bound up with it. This is a new kind of function in which human beings are neither the constant nor the variable but in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity. It is therefore appropriate to call photographers functionaries.

The program of the camera has to be rich, otherwise the game would soon be over. The possibilities contained within it have to transcend the ability of the functionary to exhaust them, i.e. the competence of the camera has to be greater than that of its functionaries. No photographer, not even the totality of all photographers, can entirely get to the bottom of what a correctly programmed camera is up to. It is a black box.

It is precisely the obscurity of the box which motivates photographers to take photographs. They lose themselves, it is true, inside the camera in search of possibilities, but they can nevertheless control the box. For they know how to feed the camera (they know the input of the box), and likewise they know how to get it to spit out photographs (they know the output of the box). Therefore the camera

does what the photographer wants it to do, even though the photographer does not know what is going on inside the camera. This is precisely what is characteristic of the functioning of apparatuses: The functionary controls the apparatus thanks to the control of its exterior (the input and output) and is controlled by it thanks to the impenetrability of its interior. To put it another way: Functionaries control a game over which they have no competence. The world of Kafka, in fact.

As will be shown later, the programs of apparatuses consist of symbols. Functioning therefore means playing with symbols and combining them. An anachronistic example may serve as an illustration: Writers can be considered functionaries of the apparatus 'language' that plays with the symbols contained within the language program – with words – by combining them. Their intention is to exhaust the language program and to enrich literature, the universe of language. The example is anachronistic because language is not an apparatus; it was not created as a simulation of a body organ and it is not based, in its creation, on any scientific theories at all. Nevertheless, language can nowadays be 'apparatusized': 'Word processors' can replace writers. In their games with words, writers inform pages – they imprint letters on them – something a word processor can also do and, even though this is 'automatic', i.e. happens by chance, it can, in the long run, create the same information as a writer.

But there are apparatuses that are capable of playing quite different games. While writers and word processors inform statically (the symbols that they imprint on pages signify conventional sounds), there are also apparatuses that inform dynamically: The symbols that they imprint on objects signify specific movements (e.g. work move-

ments) and the objects informed in this way decode these symbols and move according to the program. These 'smart tools' replace human work and liberate human beings from the obligation to work: From then on they are free to play.

The camera illustrates this robotization of work and this liberation of human beings for play. It is a smart tool because it creates images automatically. Photographers no longer need, like painters, to concentrate on a brush but can devote themselves entirely to playing with the camera. The work to be carried out, imprinting the image onto the surface, happens automatically: The tool side of the camera is 'done with', the human being is now only engaged with the play side of the camera.

There are therefore two interweaving programs in the camera. One of them motivates the camera into taking pictures; the other one permits the photographer to play. Beyond these are further programs – that of the photographic industry that programmed the camera; that of the industrial complex that programmed the photographic industry; that of the socio-economic system that programmed the industrial complex; and so on. Of course, there can be no 'final' program of a 'final' apparatus since every program requires a metaprogram by which it is programmed. The hierarchy of programs is open at the top.

Every program functions as a function of a metaprogram and the programmers of a program are functionaries of this metaprogram. Consequently, no-one can own apparatuses in the sense that human beings program apparatuses for their own private purposes. Because apparatuses are not machines. The camera functions on behalf of the photographic industry, which functions on behalf of the industrial complex, which functions on behalf of the

socio-economic apparatus, and so on. The question of ownership of the apparatus is therefore irrelevant; the real issue here is who develops its program. The following explanation shows that there is little point in wanting to own an apparatus, as if it were just any other object.

It is true that many apparatuses are hard objects. A camera is constructed out of metal, glass, plastic, etc. But it is not this hardness that makes it capable of being played with, nor is it the wood of the chessboard and the chess-pieces that make the game possible, but the rules of the game, the chess program. What one pays for when buying a camera is not so much the metal or the plastic but the program that makes the camera capable of creating images in the first place– just as generally the hard side of apparatuses, the *hardware*, is getting cheaper all the time, the soft side of them, the *software*, is getting more expensive all the time. One can see from the softest of the apparatus, e.g. political apparatus, what is characteristic of the whole of post-industrial society: It is not those who own the hard object who have something of value at their disposal but those who control its soft program. The soft symbol, not the hard object, is valuable: a revaluation of all values.

Power has moved from the owner of objects to the programmer and the operator. The game of using symbols has become a power game – a hierarchical power game. Photographers have power over those who look at their photographs, they program their actions; and the camera has power over the photographers, it programs their acts. This shift of power from the material to the symbolic is what characterizes what we call the 'information society' and 'post-industrial imperialism'. Look at Japan: It owns neither raw materials nor energy – its power lies in programming, 'data processing', information, symbols.

These reflections make it possible to attempt the following definition of the term 'apparatus': It is a complex plaything, so complex that those playing with it are not able to get to the bottom of it; its game consists of combinations of the symbols contained within its program; at the same time this program was installed by a metaprogram and the game results in further programs; whereas fully automated apparatuses can do without human intervention, many apparatuses require the human being as a player and a functionary.

Apparatuses were invented to simulate specific thought processes. Only now (following the invention of the computer), and as it were with hindsight, is it becoming clear what kind of thought processes we are dealing with in the case of all apparatuses. That is: thinking expressed in numbers. All apparatuses (not just computers) are calculating machines and in this sense 'artificial intelligences', the camera included, even if their inventors were not able to account for this. In all apparatuses (including the camera), thinking in numbers overrides linear, historical thinking. This tendency to subordinate thinking in letters to thinking in numbers has been the norm in scientific discourse since Descartes; it has been a question of bringing thought into line with 'extended matter' constructed out of punctuated elements. Only numbers are suited to a process of 'bringing thinking matter into line with extended matter'. Since Descartes at least (perhaps since Nicholas of Cusa) scientific discourse has tended towards the re-encoding of thought into numbers, but only since the camera has this tendency become materially possible: The camera (like all apparatuses that followed it) is computational thinking flowing into hardware. Hence the quantum (computational) structure of all the movements

and functions of the apparatus.

In short: Apparatuses are black boxes that simulate thinking in the sense of a combinatory game using number-like symbols; at the same time, they mechanize this thinking in such a way that, in future, human beings will become less and less competent to deal with it and have to rely more and more on apparatuses. Apparatuses are scientific black boxes that carry out this type of thinking better than human beings because they are better at playing (more quickly and with fewer errors) with number-like symbols. Even apparatuses that are not fully automated (those that need human beings as players and functionaries) play and function better than the human beings that operate them. This has to be the starting point for any consideration of the act of photography.

Lexicon of Basic Concepts

Apparatus (pl. *-es*): a plaything or game that simulates thought [*trans.* An overarching term for a non-human agency, e.g. the camera, the computer and the 'apparatus' of the State or of the market]; organization or system that enables something to function.

Automatic machine: an apparatus that has to obey an arbitrary program.

Code: a sign system arranged in a regular pattern.

Concept: a constitutive element of a text.

Conceptualization: a specific ability to create texts and to decode them.

Cultural object: an informed object.

Decode: demonstrate the significance of a symbol.

Entropy: the tendency towards more and more probable states.

Functionary: a person who plays with apparatus and acts as a function of apparatus.

Game: an activity that is an end in itself.

History: the linear progression of translation from ideas into concepts.

Idea: a constitutive element of an image.

Idolatry: the inability to read off ideas from the elements of the image, despite the ability to read these elements themselves; hence: worship of images.

Image: a significant surface on which the elements of the image act in a magic fashion towards one another.

Imagination: the specific ability to produce and to decode images.

Industrial society: a society in which the majority of people work at machines.

Inform: 1. create improbable combinations of elements; 2. imprint them upon objects.

Information: an improbable combination of elements.

Machine: a tool that simulates an organ of the body on the basis of scientific theories.

Magic: a form of existence corresponding to the eternal recurrence of the same.

Memory: information store.

Object: a thing standing in our way.

Photograph: a flyer-like image created and distributed by apparatus.

Photographer: a person who attempts to place, within the image, information that is not predicted within the program of the camera.

Plaything: an object in the service of a game.

Post-history: the translation of concepts back into ideas.

Post-industrial society: a society in which the majority of people are occupied in the tertiary sector.

Primary and secondary sector: the areas of activity in which objects are produced and informed.

Production: the transfer of a thing from nature into culture.

Program: a combination game with clear and distinct elements [*trans.* A term whose associations include computer programs, hence the US spelling].

Reality: what we run up against on our journey towards death; hence: what we are interested in.

Redundancy: repetition of information; hence: the probable.

Rites: actions corresponding to the magic form of existence.

Sign: a phenomenon that signifies another.

Significance: the aim of signs.
State of things: a scenario in which what is significant are the relationships between things and not things themselves.
Symbol: a sign consciously or unconsciously agreed upon.
Symptom: a sign brought about by its significance.
Technical image: a technological or mechanical image created by apparatus.
Tertiary sector: the area of activity in which information is created.
Text: series of written signs.
Textolatry: the inability to read off concepts from the written signs of a text, despite the ability to read these written signs; hence: worship of the text.
Tool: a simulation of an organ of the body in the service of work.
Translation: switching over from one code to another; hence: jumping from one universe into another.
Universe: 1. the totality of combinations of a code; 2. the totality of significations of a code.
Valuable: something that is as it is supposed to be [*trans.* able to be filled with value].
Work: the activity that produces and informs objects.