

Toward a Philosophy of Photography.

For: Art Journal. To: Max Kozloff.

Photography is not only a subject to be discussed: even more so it is a pre-text to discuss other subjects. This will be the case here. The reasons why photography fascinates those who are not primarily interested in individual photographers and their photos, but are interested in the cultural scene in general, have to do with the omnipresence of photos. I have written several essays on this, and you will find them listed at the end of this paper. But here I shall try to concentrate on the grainy structure of photos. No doubt: it will not be possible to avoid discussing other photo aspects as well. Still: I suggest that it is the fact that photos are composed of grains which points to the imminent future of our culture

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The photo camera is an apparatus equipped with a lens through which rays are admitted after having somehow been chosen. Each ray incides on a molecule of a compound and provokes a reaction. The surface of that compound is then understood to be a negative reflection of the objects from which the rays were irradiated. This may be put differently: The photo camera is an apparatus which takes in information which has somehow been previously filtered. Each bit of information incides upon a memory which has been structured appropriately for information storage. The information thus memorized may be recuperated in the form of pictures.

In the first formulation photo production is being described as an optical, chemical and mechanical process. In the second one, as an informational process. The first formulation explains the camera as a result of previous scientific and technical evolutions. The second one explains it as a primitive computer. The first formulation implies linear, causal thinking. The second one implies unlinear concepts like "emergence" and "mutation". (It implies the thought that cameras have emerged from previous levels, and that, if one wants to understand them, one must look at them from the new level.) This paper will not contest the validity of the first formulation, but it will be interested in the second formulation. To explain why, let me recall very rapidly two "visions" which stand somewhere close to the origin of Occidental tradition:

The one, (ascribed to Heraklitos), sees rivers everywhere, streams of events which flow from the past toward the future. The other one, (ascribed to Demokritos), sees drops of rain everywhere, a steady beat of grain-like bits which may accidentally collide to form the objects around us. Under the first "vision" everything is in the state of becoming, under the second one everything is the result of coincidences. Those "visions" are not theories in the strict sense, they are semi-mythical insights. And they do not contradict each other. The Heraklitian river may be seen as a compact Demokritian rain, and the Demokritian rain as a rarified Heraklitian river. Still: each vision is bathed in its own existential climate. The river in the dramatic climate of irrevocable instances, of a life where every opportunity lost is lost forever. And the rain in the absurd climate of fortuitous accidents, of a life where anything may happen. The first formulation of the photo production goes on in the Heraklitian, the second one in the Demokritian climate.

The point I want to drive in this paper is the following one: Western civilisation is dominated by the Heraklitian "vision". This is why explanations like the one implied in my first formulation of the photo process have a familiar ring to them. But this will change in the immanent future. The Demokritian "vision" with its absurd, rainy, grainy climate is beginning to assert itself in the sciences, in politics, in art, and elsewhere. We are not yet very familiar with it in our daily life, and this is why explanations like the one implied in my second formulation of the photo process strike us ^{as} far-fetched. The Demokritian "vision" will assert itself, in part because we are getting accustomed to looking at photos, and photos have a grainy, Demokritian structure.

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Why was photography invented? This is the first question to ask, because photography is a phenomenon of culture. (In cultural, as opposed to natural, phenomena one must ask after their motive, which is the difference between natural sciences and the humanities.) If the camera is taken to be a primitive computer, this is not a question to ask of the camera inventors, but of the computer programmers. There the motivation becomes more apparent. The answer will be: cameras were invented in order to emancipate imagination from all its mechanical aspects, (from the necessity to make pictures), and render it free for the creation of information. Which poses the question of "imagination". We must address it.

Pictures were produced at least twentyfive thousand years ago on cave walls. How and why did people do this? Possibly the only feasible way to answer this is to put oneself in the place of those picture producers. How did they do it? They stepped back from an object, (for instance a poney), looked at it from a distance, then they fixed their fleeing vision on a wall, and while doing so they codified it. They memorized their vision and they rendered it inter-subjective. This memorizing and codifying poses complex problems, but they may be bracketed out in this paper. It is the stepping back from the object which is of interest here, because it is this step back which is "imagination". And why did those people do it? In order to use their vision as a model for a future manipulation of the object seen, (for instance for the hunting of poneys). This sort of answer may be contested. Are they cave paintings really nothing but models for hunting? (And: pictures like those made by Maljević, are they really models for manipulating objects?) Still: this sort of answer is good for the purpose of this paper, (even if it should turn out to simplify the question).

"Imagination" is the specifically human capacity to step back from the objective world, and then to use what one sees there as a model for future manipulations of the objective world. Where does one step back to? The answer would sound fantastic, were it not for the fact that all of us experience it concretely. One steps back into oneself. That non-place, here called "oneself", has acquired such elegant names like "subjectivity" and "existence". Thus: imagination is our capacity to become subjects of an objective world. Or: to no longer insist within the objective world, but to now ek-sist facing it. (This is of course no explanation of imagination, it is in the best of cases a description of it.)

Let us consider imagination more closely. It puts one into an uncomfortable position. He who stands outside the objective world can no longer reach it. His arms are not long enough to bridge the abyss of alienation which separates him from the objective world. The objects are no longer "manifest", they can no longer be handled. Instead, they have become mere appearances, phenomena. But this uncomfortable position of doubt with regard to the objectivity of the phenomenal world has its advantage. It permits us to see objects in their context, to see the relations which hold objects together. Instead of constantly stumbling against individual trees, (like we do when we move within the objective world), we may now see the forest. This becomes useful, if we jump back from imagination into the objective world. Imagination provides us with tables of orientation: we may now seize and handle objects better. To imagine is to "reculer pour mieux sauter": it permits a better hunting of poneys.

But the pictures provided by imagination are not very reliable tables of orientation. The picture codes are connotative ones: they permit conflicting interpretations. Manipulations based on imagination may become, (indeed: must become), confused and picture-oriented: they will become "magical" manipulations. This is why, some three and a half thousand years ago, the code of linear writing was invented. To describe, explain, clarify imagination, and thus permit a more disciplined manipulation of the objective world. Writing submits imagination to the critique of linear, conceptual thinking. But although the code of writing letters and numbers is more denotative than are the picture codes, it poses a new problem. It orders its symbols according to the rules of the line, and those rules have been lately shown not to be always adequate for the manipulation of the objective world. Such rules, (like Aristotelian logic or causal explanations), do not work properly in all situations. This is why, a few hundred years ago, calculus was invented. It breaks up the lines of writing, (and of conceptual thinking articulated in writing), into points and intervals, and thus submits it to the critique of clear and distinct analysis and calculation. This should permit a highly accurate manipulation of the objective world. (What has just been said may be taken as a description of the history of Western civilisation.)

Let us now restate our question. Why was photography invented? Cameras are calculating apparatus. They calculate rays into molecules, and compute them into pictures. They calculate bits of information and compute them into new information. They were invented in order to permit the emergence of a new type of imagination: one that unfolds after having gone through the critique of conceptual thinking and of calculations. This answer does not contradict the first one: they were invented in order to free imagination for the creation of information. It complements it. But it is a far from obvious answer. This is why, in my opinion, every philosophy of photography should take it as its point of departure. To clarify that answer.



Consider: when we step back from the objective world into imagination, we perform a motion of abstraction. We abstract ourselves out of the objective world. This is why the pictures we make are abstractions: two-dimensional surfaces abstracted from four-dimensional space-time. But when we project calculations into images, (like we do when we photograph), we perform a motion of concretion. Those images are two-dimensional surfaces which have been projected from zero-dimensional points and intervals, and this shows through their grainy structure. Now this implies that those are two different sorts of imagination, that their two vectors point at opposite directions. And that the pictures produced by those two imaginations have different, opposite "meanings". A picture made as an abstraction from the objective world points to, ("means"), that world, and a picture made as a concretion of a calculation points to, ("means"), that calculation. Thus photos, being concretions of points, cannot have the same meaning as have hand-made pictures, they must have an opposite meaning. They are the products of a new type of imagination.

The sad fact is that we cannot perceive this from photos at first glance, (and not even at second glance). There are two fundamental reasons for our critical blindness as far as photos are concerned. The first reason has to do with camera construction. It is a very primitive computer. It takes in rays coming in from the objective world, and it processes those rays to become absorbed, and thus negative reflections of an objective situation. Thus the pictures it produces are indeed "pictures of objects", and in this sense they "mean" them. That this is so may have been the intention of the camera inventors, but it is opposed to the very principle cameras stand on. What that principle is becomes evident if we consider pictures synthesized by computers. There the rays which come in have nothing whatever to do with the meaning of the pictures. The principle the camera stands on is to be an apparatus which processes rays into pictures of computations, not of objective situations. But there are few photographers, (and even fewer critics), who see this.

Which brings me to the second reason for our critical blindness. It is the fact that most photos are not made by fully automated apparatus. With most of them the releaser has been pressed by some human agent. Of course: photographers are technically redundant, (they can be substituted by automatic releasers), and they go against the very spirit of photographing, which is to eliminate human intervention from the process of picture production. Still: photographers exist, (be they professional ones or amateurs), and they handle the camera as if it were a brush or a pencil. They handle it at the service of the old imagination which "means" the objective world. This old imagination of theirs appears in the photos and it covers up the new imagination, (the one camera programmers possess), in the picture. It is only if we look at fully automated pictures, (like those made by satellites or by electronic microscopes), that we can perceive what is so revolutionary new about photos: that a new imagination articulates itself through them, and that what the programmers of those photos mean is not an objective situation as perceived by our senses, but a calculated, fully criticized situation.

What has just been said amounts to saying that in photos, (and in films and videos), the new imagination must fight the old one, and that it becomes really functional only in computers. That photos, films, and videos are phenomena of transition from one imagination to another. Which is precisely what makes them so fascinating. But what has just been said has far-reaching consequences, (esthetic, political and epistemological ones), which must be considered. It matters relatively little that what has just been said contradicts most statements made by photographers and photo critics. If what has been said is correct, those people cannot know what they are really doing. It matters much more that if what was said is correct, we have to expect a radically new form of existence, born from the new imagination.



Let me give you a few examples to illustrate the emerging new imagination, this new "photographic", grainy vision of the world around us, this "neo-Demokritian" world vision: I shall first suggest a series of epistemological, and then a series of ethico-esthetic examples. We no longer imagine the objects around us to be solid bodies which stand in our way, but rather to be swarms of particles which float in the void, and which are held together by specific relations. The traditional distinction between "matter" and "energy", (terms which are now seen to be metaphysical), no longer holds any meaning, but instead we imagine an undulating space-time, where the valleys represent "matter" and the waves "energy". We no longer imagine life on Earth to be composed of individual organisms, but we rather imagine an undulating broth, (the "biomass"), composed of tiny drops which contain genetic information, we imagine that information to be in constant accidental transformation, and the individual organisms to be epiphenomena, (phenotypes), which emerge from the broth and sink back into it. We no longer imagine mental processes like perception, desire, sensation, thought or decision making to be entities, but rather to be computations of point-like electronic and chemical jumps and fluxes which go on in the intervals of nerve synapses. We no longer imagine our "selves", (our identity, our psyche), to be something solid, but rather to be a knot which emerges from a collective, sub-individual, (and possibly sub-human), psychic substratum, and which accidentally acquires bits of information from the outside world. We no longer imagine the cultures, (past and present), which shape our lives to be distinct and separate structures, but rather to be computations of a set of culturemes common to our species. All those examples, (which may be readily multiplied), are not only pictures, (photos), of a calculated situation, but they are also models for manipulations: they permit us to compute "artificial" matter, "artificial" organisms, "artificial" intelligences, "artificial" identities, "artificial" cultures. And we are in this only at the beginning.

We no longer imagine society to be a set of individual men, (the traditional problem whether society should serve man or man society has no longer any meaning), but we now imagine a net of social, intersubjective relations, a net which is in the process of constant accidental knotting and un-knotting, the knots of which may be occupied by men or artificial intelligences, but may equally well be empty. Political commitment does therefore no longer aim at changing society *and*

man, but rather at programming and de-programming social relations, (see technocracy and terrorism). We no longer imagine freedom to be a rather forlorn attempt to emerge from out of the river of causal chains, "freedom as opposed to pre-destination or condition", but we now imagine freedom to be the attempt to put some order into chaos, "freedom as opposed to accident, to the absurd". We no longer imagine that "value" is how things ought to be, but rather how they may be. This is the most radical of mutations, and it merits a short reflection. What this "re-evaluation of values" implies is that we no longer believe in a "work ethics", that what matters is to change the objective world, because this will change us. We now tend to believe that what matters is to realize some of the possibilities within us and around us, in a "creational ethics". And here we have to distinguish between two types of "creation": the variational one, which computes available information bits into new information, and the "transcendent" one, which injects new elements, (noise), into available information. Which is to say that the term "art" will acquire a new meaning, (with all its connotations like "artificiality", "artefact" and "artifice" fully explicated), and that we should expect "work ethics" to be substituted by some "art ethics".

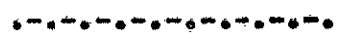
Those few examples to illustrate the emerging "photographic vision" were chosen to underline the incipient mutation of our existential climate. It is not decisive that we now prefer probability calculus to causal explanations, or that we now prefer scenarios to descriptions, (although such mutations are very suggestive). The decisive point is that we no longer feel to be living within a context of chains which bind us, but rather within an absurd context to which we somehow must give a meaning. Let me exemplify such a climate:

People sit facing a computer key board, (a situation which tends to become normal). They press one key after the other, and with each pressing they dive into a meaningless broth of point-like possibilities, take one of them, and transfer it on a screen to compute a picture. For instance the picture of an airplane. This is not the picture of an existing object, but of a calculation of a possible airplane, and it may be used as a model for robots to make airplanes. What those people are doing is to exercise their imagination, in order to give a meaning, (any meaning), to the meaningless broth of possibilities which they are facing. This is a very pedestrian example, but precisely for this reason it may illustrate the emerging existential climate.

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What I am trying to suggest is not that the invention of photography is responsible for the scientific, political, esthetic and existential revolution we are witnessing at present. The matter is more complex. Photography is itself one of the first results of that revolution, which was long in preparing. What I am trying to suggest is that were it not for photos with their grainy structure, the acquisition of the new, "neo-Demokritian" world vision would not have been possible, and that therefore photos must be considered important elements for the understanding of our cultural situation.

I have argued, in this paper, that photos are ambiguous, transitional phenomena which partly belong to Western history with its traditional imagination, and partly stand on a new level of calculating imagination. This argument is central to everything I was saying. It implies that those who are interested in photography for its own sake, (photographers and photo critics), do not have the distance necessary for seeing photography in its context. And that it is the business of photo philosophy to acquire that distance. It is true: if you look from a distance, you will miss many details. But this is a danger you must be willing to run, if your aim is overall vision. This paper is therefore exposed to criticism with regard to the details. This criticism is wellcome: it will correct or complete the picture. However, that is not the kind of criticism which I believe to be adequate to what I was saying. My hope is to provoke criticisms which question my interpretation of the present cultural situation. It is with this hope that I wrote this paper.



On this topic I wrote the following essays:

- "Towards a Philosophy of Photography", European Photography, Goettingen 1983
- "Ins Universum der Technischen Bilder", European Photography, Goettingen 1985
- "Die Schrift", Immatrix, Goettingen, 1987.