

REVIEW

THE FIGURE OF “THE PHOTOGRAPHER”
in Flusser’s Philosophy of Photography

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First published in German in 1983, Vilém Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* has now become an inimitable cornerstone of analytical rumination about photography. Besides being an effective case of “outside the box” thinking, it is a luminous exemplar of envisaging the entire cosmos from within a box. This conceptual and speculative box is called: the medium of photography. Succeeding the “digital revolution” by a few years, therein Flusser single-handedly conceived a “photographic universe” in which the photographer acts as a knight who is constantly on the verge of vanquish, not by the world, but by the camera. While theorizing many photographic concepts, such as “the camera”, “the image”, and “the apparatus”, it is the figure of “the photographer” which plays the central figure of the book; only if s(he) “plays” with the camera and is not played by it.

Being confronted with the fathomless functionalities of the camera, the photographer, in Flusser’s word, is «a person who attempts to place, within the image, information that is not predicated within the program of the camera» (p.84). Like a scavenger who traverses the land in search of usable resources, photographers are in a constant search of information in the world, since for them the entire universe «is purely a pretext for the realization of camera possibilities» (p.26). While crystallizing the dormant features of the camera, photographers shift the course of history; they transform the world with their cameras. However, a photographer does not intend to change the world by altering the material fabrics thereof, but by changing the meaning of the world through “play”; for the photographer is not a “homo faber”, who creates things, but a “homo ludens” (p.27): a player in the process of signification. In this game, the photographer has an invincible adversary, which if not defeated, will immediately become the conqueror of the game. That unruly, indomitable, and indeed “automatized” enemy is the camera: the “black

box”. To lead this ludic venture, photographers need to both take control of the camera’s exterior (i.e., the hardware features working as interfaces between the human and the camera) and the camera’s interior (i.e., the internal software embedded within the camera). Regardless of their attempt to dominate the camera, alas, photographers are mere “functionaries” who are playing in «a game over which they have no control» (p.28). It is because the camera is not just a “tool”, which modifies the shape of the material world (e.g., a knife), or a “machine”, which intervenes in the world through empirical advancements (e.g., a car), but an “apparatus”. It is precisely this insight that makes Flusser’s book not only pertinent to but also urgent for our times; because, living in the epoch of “after post photography”, our dependence on and acceptance of undisclosed algorithms of apparatuses are more than ever exposed.

For Flusser, the photographer needs to master the “apparatus”, which «simulates thinking in the sense of a combinatory game using number-like symbols» (p.32). Otherwise, the intentionality of the camera, manifested by its internal, arbitrary, and encoded operations, takes over the agency of the photographer. The intentionality of the camera, or what Bazin once referred to as its “agency”, drives from its ever-changing binary model that keeps evolving into more intricate algorithms every day (that is why even professional photographers of our time need to constantly update their technical savvy, if they do not want to be rendered obsolete by the instantaneous updates of their camera). Following this line of argument, Flusser advocates that the best photographs are those in which the intentionality of the photographer wins out against the camera’s intention (p. 47). Although he does not have any type of photographer in mind, since scientific, documentary, and artistic photographers are all susceptible to become mere “functionaries” (p. 53), his figure of the photographer has a close affinity with whom he calls an “envisioner” in *Into The Universe of Technical Images* (1985): the person who defeats the automaticity of the apparatus by fleshing out the serendipitous potentials laden in the world. But the photographer, or the “envisioner”, does not achieve this aim by imposing human intentionality on the apparatus, but rather by disclosing the sheer unintentionality of the apparatus. This is, according to Flusser, the only apt “humanistic criticism” of photography: «uncovering the terrible fact of this unintentional, rigid, and uncontrollable functionality of apparatuses, in order to get a hold over them» (p.74).

Towards a Philosophy of Photography does not perceive or conceive any figure as “the photographer”. Instead, it creates a photographic constellation in which anyone, even the most skilled photographers, can fall prey to the automaticity of apparatuses; unless they become “envisioner” cavaliers who agree to take on the never-ending battle posed by the camera. As Nancy has put forward: «photography is a monster with two subjects, with a double body (human) and a single, cavernous head whose one eye blinks on and off» (p.104, 2005). For Flusser, too, it is this stupefying and inscrutable second body that determines when one qualifies as the photographer. It is this condition that makes Flusser’s philosophical trajectory germane to all of us today, since his photographic macrocosm has already been materialized, attested by all the cameras that lie in wait in our near vicinities. The choice, therefore, is on all of us, whether to become an “envisioner” in Flusser’s photographic universe or a “functionary” in the abyss of the camera’s possibilities.

SOURCES:

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