Mark Amerika, Applied Flusser

markamerika@gmail.com

Flusser, in *Toward A Philosophy of Photography* writes: "The task of the philosophy of photography is to question photographers about freedom, to probe their practice in pursuit of freedom." Here, the photographer is not just someone who uses a camera to take pictures, but is a kind of hybrid who is part science fiction philosopher and part data gleaner. In my own work, I apply a kind of Flusser "theory filter" to transform the photographer into what I term a *digital thoughtographer*, one who is using emerging media apparatuses to expand the concept of writing. In this way, the gesture of writing is reconceived as a live, networked performance where the artist morphs into a *remixologist* who creatively postproduces images that are magically conjured up by playing with their fingers on a computer keyboard. Of course, the questions Flusser asks us to consider are, "How is the envisioning gesture being directed?" and "Where are the fingers pointing?"

While directing my recent feature-length "foreign film," *Immobilité*, which was shot entirely on a mobile phone, I was reminded how my tactical use of new media technologies relates to Flusser's ideas that "one can outwit the camera's rigidity," "one can smuggle human intentions into its program," "one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative," and "one can show contempt for the camera" by turning away from it as a thing and focusing instead, on information. In other words, freedom for a new media remixologist such as myself involves "the strategy of playing *against* the camera" *as* photographic device. But how?

In *Immobilité*, I investigate the present state or status of writing in a world rapidly being overrun with networked and mobile images. Instead of allowing these images to take over the world, take over *my* world, without me having any say in it as a writer, I instead accept the challenge of intervening in the automated process of making and distributing images that the apparatus channels *for* me. This is the struggle new media artists must accept as their own as they probe their practice in pursuit of freedom.[1]

---

[1] Mark Amerika's Immobilité has been exhibited internationally. For more information, you can visit the website at immobilite.com

Sean Cubitt, What is a photograph?

scubitt@unimelb.edu.au

> It is an image created and distributed automatically by programmed apparatuses in the course of a game necessarily based on chance, an image of a magic state of things whose symbols inform its receivers how to act in an improbable fashion (Flusser 2000: 76).

Vilém Flusser's definition is comprehensive, if densely packed. From the standpoint of the camera, the heart of the photographic apparatus, human users are mere functionaries. The real work is done by the camera: users only play with it, but their play extends the capacities of the apparatus. From the perspective of the photographic apparatus, society is only a feedback mechanism for improving its functions. Automation is intrinsic to the apparatus. Once designed, the camera operates according to the program written into its structure. This automation not only abstracts values from the world, but reconstructs the world as information. (Flusser 2000: 39) Following Shannon and Weaver's (1949) mathematical definition of information as a ratio between probabilities, Flusser sees the camera seizing not the world but an abstract 'state of things': data. Information depends on the balance between repetition and novelty. The human user and the world the camera observes only add improbability, chance, to the mix, increasing the amount of data which it can convert into photographs. The 'magic' of the definition describes the way photographs, in their abstraction, produce images, not of the world but of concepts (such as 'states of things'), concepts which then program society 'with absolute necessity but in each individual case by chance'. (Flusser 2000: 70) Photographers are functionaries of an apparatus which, if analysis is extended back far enough, reaches into capital, corporations, politics and economics, a nested series of black boxes each governed by an elite of functionaries who nonetheless are prisoners of their own apparatus. Designed to work without human intervention, cameras program both photographers and viewers in a determinist vision which comes close to Jean Baudrillard's (1975) apocalyptic vision of society as self-replicating code.

For Flusser, codes embedded in any apparatus feed on human use to produce new combinations to assimilate into the apparatus itself. This more general application of the word apparatus includes not only the mechanical device but the ensemble formed by manufacture, clubs, publications, galleries, newspapers and magazines, people and their institutions. Flusser's 'apparatus' is an

institution: an ordering of social interactions which produces its own type of language (discourse), its own mode of knowledge, its own idea of truth. Unhampered by moral judgements external to its own operation, its goal is maximal efficiency. The apparatus operates in and as a regime of power, in much the same way as the clinics, asylums and prisons investigated in Michel Foucault's early writings.

According to Flusser, before photography, all thought was verbal. Photography, he argues, is a visualization of language. Digital photography, by extension, extends the verbalisation of perception by mathematising it. We know from Saussure (1974) that language is based on difference: that difference is negation: X is X because it is not Y. Language's intrinsic capacity for negation extends to negating what is empirically or perceptually given. Thus language asserts human independence from what is given to it by way of environment. Numbers are an outgrowth of language. From counting, number has developed to be abstract, counterfactual, independent, and negating – the same qualities as language itself. The calculus, mathematical logic and the mathematics of algorithms stem from the negation of the semantic content of sentences. Number and algorithm, as formalised in computer languages, are also institutions. Even though they do not obey exclusively the same rules (for instance, of generative transformational grammars) as natural languages, they share language's fundamental capacity for negation.

From this an important point emerges: algorithms have the power to institutionalise perception. They bring perception within the ambit of (a form of) language. The empirically and perceptually given of the non-human environment, that excess of signifiers which is a danger to humans as much as a resource for them: that world is systematically negated, pixel by pixel, in the process of enumeration. Such might be the case too with drawing and analogue photography: that they neither name nor describe, but substitute for the reality they observe: the various schools of drawing and printmaking applied such 'grammars' (Ivins 1953) between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But what distinguishes digital imaging from both drawing and traditional photography – especially as defined by the practice of Ansel Adams as exemplary technician – is a semiotic, but not a semantic, change. It is the nature of the process of automation.

However, 'the process of automation' is not a stable, definable entity, confined to digital code (what literally distinguishes digital imaging from drawing and photography is not automation, but the absolute precision, predictability, and finite limits, of its numerical grid). The broader history of photographic manufacturing has been about exploiting automation in the quest for the stability and certainty that automation provides, and the profit that derives from it. The process begins several

decades before Adams with Eastman Kodak's Box camera in 1888 – with its philosophy of 'you press the button, we do the rest' – and perhaps even earlier in the transition from wet-plate to dry-plate photography. Such incremental steps, via the Instamatic cassette cameras of the 1960s, and the progressive introduction of electronics into cameras in the 1970s, arrive at their destination in the 2003, when digital cameras began to overtake sales of analogue.[2] At this juncture, the grammar of objects and the previsualised composition are superseded by the enumerated and averaged accumulation of photographic data.

References

Baudrillard, Jean (1975), The Mirror of Production, trans Mark Poster, Telos Press, St Louis, Mo.

Flusser, Vilém (2000), Towards a Philosophy of Photography, trans Anthony Matthews, intro Hubertus Von Amelunxen, Reaktion Books, London.

Ivins, William M Jnr (1953), Prints and Visual Communicatioon, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1974), Course in General Linguistics, rev.ed., trans Wade Baskin, Fontana, London.

Shannon, Claude E. and Warren Weaver (1949), The Mathematical Theory of Communication, University of Indiana Press, Urbana.

---

[2] The Photo Marketing Association International statistics show 2003 as the year that total US digital camera sales overtook US analogue camera sales, and that this was the first country for this to happen in.

Siegfried Zielinski, Interview

zig7@digital.udk-berlin.de

What is the current theoretical and practical relevance of Flusser's Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, written more than 25 years ago and translated into many languages?*

The fact that the book is still read a lot by students and scholars demonstrates its character: Flusser's Photo-Philosophy - as it is often referred to - has become a classic. Besides Roland Barthes' CAMERA LUCIDA and Susan Sonntag's basic texts it has become one of the most important reference for the theory of photography and therefore media theory for the last decades. In style it is one of Flusser's most elegantly written books and a real monograph. That makes it very special within the many texts he has written.

What was the impact of Flusser´s theory of photography and the image on your own artistic work and / or theoretical research?

Most important for me are his remarks on the possibility to use the apparatus against or in tension with its function. This idea reaches far beyond the special medium of photography. If machines are able to do our work, if they can do, in principal, without us, we have to re-think the artist's role within the art process. To just fulfill the function is not enough. Artistic creativity has to reach beyond the functionality of technology.

What was the impact of Flusser's conception of photography on the artistic practice of photography and image-creation internationally?

I think its greatest value is to support artists' and philosophers' braveness. After having read the book one is more willing and able to take a risk.

What is the status of photography and images within the present context of digital cameras and 3-D film?

It has not changed ontologically. We do not perceive the digital code, but finally an analogue image.

Ever since analog photography was invented, the notion of representation had already become very doubtful. Nobody believes seriously anymore that a technical image represents a reality outside of the picture. The dramatical changes I see mainly in the realms of production and distribution of images. They have become extremely accelerated. And what interests me a lot is an effect, which Flusser thematized when he discussed Video: the instantaneity of accessibility of the images. The production of a digital photography is completed without perceptible delay. This creates something that we call INSTANT ARCHAEOLOGY. One of my students, Annika Kuhlmann, is just writing a final thesis on that. Claudia Becker, who is now responsible for the Flusser-archive in Berlin, is writing her dissertation on the epistemological quality of the digital image. We have to develop Flusser's ideas further. This is our responsibility for the future.