

Ecole Nationale de la Photographie, Arles.

Second lecture on March 15, 84: Photo distribution.

Let me recall two ideas which I have submitted to you in the precedent lecture: (1) A photograph is an image produced and distributed by apparatus. And (2) The distribution of information is synonymous with history. Thus I shall be concerned today, where photo distribution is our subject, with the revolutionary changes in the historical process which are a result of apparatus distribution of photos.

Let me consider a paradox first: Photos, as we know them today, (i.e. not yet electro-magnetized ones), are images which have a material, paper-like support, they are leaflets. Therefore they can be distributed like leaflets. They do not seem to require any sophisticated apparatus for their distribution. In fact, however, enormous apparatus of cosmic dimensions have come about, apparatus which suck some of the photos, as they come out from the cameras, multiply them, and distribute them, for them to become models of the experience, the knowledge, the values and the behavior of society all over the world. This paradox requires some reflexion.

Photos having a material support, (not like other technical images which appear on "immaterial" screens), may be considered to be "cultural objects". Now a cultural object is a piece of nature which has been plucked at from nature and impressed with a new and improbable form. For instance: a shoe is a cultural object in the sense that it is a cow hide which has been plucked from nature and impressed with a form which is improbable for cow hides. The human act which plucks pieces from nature and impresses them with improbable forms is called "to work". The result is called "a work". And the improbable form thus impressed into the object is called "information". Thus a shoe is a work which carries "shoe information". In order to "receive" that information, one must own the shoe, and in order to own it, one must pay for it, (or steal it, or conquer it, or have it given as a present). If one has acquired the shoe, one may use it, until the information it carries is worn out, which may take a long time, since the information is deeply impressed into the object. Once the shoe information is consumed by use, the dis-informed shoe may be thrown away, it becomes garbage. Until the Second Principal of Thermodynamics has it fully decomposed into nature. Now what I just said is a description of history of culture. What goes for the shoe, goes for "civilisation". To show this more clearly, I shall add one more consideration:

The information impressed into a cultural object may be called its "value". Because a cultural object is as it "ought to be", (Sein-sollen, devoir-etre). A shoe is as a cow hide ought to be. This is why a shoe must be paid for. Thus work creates value, and consumption destroys value. Now this implies an entire ethics. The ethics of work, of property, of "just distribution of values". "Government", (from "kybernein"=to steer a ship), comes to mean: guide the distribution of the values, the informations contained within cultural objects. "Immortality" comes to mean: impress information, value, into unconsumable objects. The idea of the Republic is based on such an ethics of work and consumption of values. I shall develop that idea as follows:



A "work" has an author, namely a man who has elaborated the information to be impressed upon an object, and a man who has impressed that information, (ideally it is the same man). The term "author" stems from "augere"=to found. The Republic is a "work", it has an author, a founder: the Roman republic has Romulus for its author, the United States have the Founding Fathers as their author. Now what matters in a Republic is that the information it carries, the values it contains, be unconsumable, "eternal". There are two methods to achieve this: (1) the information must be kept pure from accidents which deform it, and (2) it must be constantly redistributed. Those methods are called "authorities". Authority (1) maintains "fidelity" to the author, it is "religious", (from "religare"=to link back). Authority (2) administers the distribution of the authors' information, it is "traditional", (from "tradire"=to hand along). The author of the Republic is usually mythical, (for the Church it is Christ, for the French republic it is common consensus, for the Socialist republics it is the working people), but the authorities are real. Thus history as a process of creation and preservation of values can be seen to be an authoritarian process.

Now back to the photo. It is a curious cultural object. The information it carries has not been deeply impressed upon its support, but it sits on the surface, and may be easily transferred from one support to another. And this transfer prevents the information from being "consumed". Moreover, the transfer can be made by automatic apparatus. Therefore, whatever the "value" of the photo, it does not sit in the object. As an object, it has next to no value. Therefore also, it cannot be called a "work" in the sense just suggested. To photograph is not to work, and a photographer is not a worker. To want to own, or steal, or conquer a specific photo is next to absurd. Now what I have just said goes for all printed matter, at least ever since the invention of printing. But there is more to the photo. It has been produced through a complex interaction between a photographer and an apparatus. It has no "author" in the strict sense, since the information it carries has been in part elaborated within a camera program, and has been impressed upon the support by an apparatus. And there is no authority involved in its distribution. Every copy is automatically "true" to the information, and true to every other copy, (authority (1)), and the distribution apparatus administers automatically the distribution, (authority (2)). A new ethics is called for.

The revolutionary change in the historical process which I have just hinted at may be formulated thus: (1) Ownership of objects is less interesting than reception of multipliable information. (2) The production of objects is less interesting than the production of information. (3) The Republic is an instrument for the automatic distribution of multipliable information, it is "cybernetics". (4) "Religion" and "tradition" are automated, and every kind of authority is redundant. (5) "Immortality" is synonymous with eternal information multiplication. (6) "Value" is not an information which changes nature, but one which gives nature a meaning, (not an impressed, but a transfereable information). Now all this amounts to saying that the photo distribution apparatus are about to change the historical process into what is commonly called "information civilisation".



Each of the six points of change merits, of course, to be closely considered. However, I shall today concentrate your attention to one point only, namely to the change in our concept of "value", (point 6). What I mean to suggest is that the photographer's praxis shows concretely that his ethics is no longer to try and change the world, so that it become as it should be, but that the photographer aims at changing the attitude of society toward the world. He is not a worker, but a producer of meaning. In this the photographer is a precursor of a general trend, which points to a situation where change of the form of the world, work, will be performed by automatic robots which were programmed to do so, and where mankind will be free to program that work, which means to give it a meaning. Usually this trend is called one away from the primary and secondary sectors of production, and toward an ever growing occupation of society in the tertiary sector. The photographer is an early example of what is meant by commitment to the tertiary sector. I shall try to consider this commitment from the point of view of photo distribution.

I said in the previous lecture that the photographer, while making his pictures, is trying to oblige the camera to make pictures which are very improbable according to the camera program. He does so, in order to produce unexpected, unfuturable pictures, i.e. information. And the information thus produced he intends to submit to other people, so that they may use it as a model for their behavior, which means in the last analysis, for their changing the world according to the photographer's model. Now if he were to distribute his pictures among people, like leaflets, there would be no further problem. He would hand his pictures to those people, and hope that they act accordingly. However, this method of distribution is not adequate to photographs, which are images that may be endlessly multiplied to reach a very great amount of people. Therefore distribution apparatus is required. And this apparatus does not merely distribute the images handed to it by photographers: it submits them to previous critical scrutiny, to censorship, it sorts them out, suppresses most of them, and it distributes those that have passed scrutiny in very specific channels which give the photos their ultimate meaning. And the apparatus do all of this according to very specific programs. Which means that the photographer, after having made his picture, must face another apparatus, very similar in structure to his camera, and must try to oblige that apparatus to distribute the pictures he intends to reach other people. He must try to prevent his pictures to be suppressed, and then, to prevent that the information be changed in accordance with the apparatus program.

But there is more to it. The photographer does not make his pictures for the sake of receivers of information directly, but he makes them for the sake of specific distribution apparatus. For instance: for a newspaper, a publicity agency, a political organisation, a scientific publication, an art gallery and so forth. Thus he knows, while taking his picture, what sort of pictures the apparatus will suppress, and what sort of pictures it will swallow. Now if he is a true photographer, committed to unexpected information, he must try, even while producing his picture, to somehow go around the program of the distribution apparatus, and have it distribute pictures which are not in its program. On the other hand, the appar-



atus itself may perfectly be aware of this attempt of the photographer's to cheat the program, and still accept the picture, because it might enrich the program. Thus the photographer's intention will be recuperated and transformed by the apparatus program. In other words: the photographer fights the distribution apparatus just as much and at the same instant as he fights the camera program. Which is a description of every creative activity within the emerging apparatus culture.

It is therefore important to understand the criteria, the "values" which program the distribution apparatus in their choice of pictures to be distributed. A preparatory remark is in order: according to classical analysis, there are three types of value: models of knowledge, (truth), models of behavior, (goodness), and models of experience, (beauty). This is however a purely theoretical distinction. In real fact, every cultural object is valuable only if it contains all three types of value, since they co-imply each other. For instance: a shoe is valuable, if it is "true", (in the sense of having resulted from a knowledge of cow hides), "good", (in the sense of useful for a walking behavior), and "beautiful", (in the sense of being agreeable to wear), and it is true, because it is good and beautiful, and vice versa. The distinction between physics, science and art is pure abstraction. But the photo distribution apparatus is programmed with this abstract, theoretical classification. Thus scientific publications and newspapers are said to distribute "true" pictures, publicity agencies and political apparatus "good" pictures, (meaning good for a specific behavior pattern), and art galleries and magazines "beautiful" pictures. And it is the apparatus censorship which decides which picture is going to be "true", "good" or "beautiful", scientific, politically committed or art, and not the photographer himself. The question whether photography is an art form is thus answered automatically by distribution apparatus: it is "art", if an apparatus has decided to be it.

The photographer is primarily not concerned with this sort of theoretical questions. His aim is to produce information, and if a picture carries information, it is true, good and beautiful, since one implies the other. The photographer stands beyond the classical distinction between science, art and politics: he is committed to information. But nonetheless, he must be secondarily concerned with this silly distinction, because he is concerned with apparatus program. Because he knows that the public will receive his pictures as "art" through an art magazine, as "politics" through a propaganda poster, and as "science" through a magazine like the Scientific American. This might mislead him into making biased pictures, which are, by definition, neither true, nor good, nor beautiful, since they are "expected", no information.

I shall reserve the discussion of "true", "good" and "beautiful" in the photographic, ("phenomenological") context for a future lecture, but shall here briefly consider the mutual permeability of the various distribution apparatus. Let me give an example: A photo of the Moon landing may be distributed through American Consulates, and thus be received as a "good" picture, (useful for American propaganda). It may then glide from there into the Scientific American, and thus be received as a "true" picture, (a model of understanding the Moon surface). And it may glide from there into an art magazine, and thus be received as a "beautiful" picture, (providing an experience new to the beholder). It may thus be seen that the "value" of a photo



is a function of the photo distribution apparatus, unless the photographer succeed in cheating the distribution program. It may therefore be held that "creativity" on the part of the photographer is his ability to have us proclaim "how beautiful" while looking on a picture in a newspaper article about Mr. Mitterand, or on a picture in a poster which sells tooth paste. Or to proclaim "how true", while looking at the tooth paste poster or at an art magazine.

Let me resume what I tried to say in this lecture: Photos are cultural objects which require apparatus distribution. They no longer carry information deeply impressed upon them, and they are therefore beyond distribution through ownership or possession. Beyond the work and propriety morals. And yet, they are not "immaterial" images like the electro-magnetic ones, which can be received only through apparatus. Thus photos are a passage from industrial to post-industrial culture. The distribution apparatus occupy the whole space between the photographer and the receiver. They are "media". Therefore there is no "private space" for the photographer, (he is at the input of the apparatus), nor "private space" for the receiver, (he is at the output of the apparatus), nor is there any "public space" which would separate photographer from receiver. Thus it cannot be said that the photographer publishes what was his private "idea", nor that the receiver privatizes what was a public "idea". If "politics" is privatisation of what was public, and publicizing of what was private, there is no space for politics in the photographic context. There is, instead, automatic censorship and criticism. And it is this automatic censorship which the photographer is called to facing. This automatic censorship is based on the classical distinction of values into science, ethics and aesthetics. Those values, which are typically "modern", (bourgeois), have no longer any meaning where photography is concerned. Photography is neither science, nor ethics, nor art, and it is all the three together, because it aims at creating information. Thus, in the last analysis, the photographer is called to defy the classical values of photo distribution, and to proclaim new values. Namely the values which have to do with giving the world, and life in the world, an epistemological, ethical and aesthetic meaning. Which he is in fact doing, if he is a photographer in the strict sense of the word. Thus the dialectics between photographer and photo distribution apparatus is even more dramatic than is the dialectics between photographer and camera apparatus.