

Thomas Stubblefield

**The Black Box and the Techno-Imagination of the Sublime:  
Flusser, Kant, and Iñarritu's *11'09''01*.**

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser positions the photographic operation at the intersection of the agency of the operator and the “program” of the apparatus. In several passages, the text opens to the possibility of “meta-programming,” a kind of forced malfunction or *détournement* in which what is typically the mere “functionary” of the camera comes to operate more like its author. However, it is clear that the normative relationship the operator maintains to the apparatus in Flusser’s theory is one in which the latter not only conditions the processes of image making and viewing, but perpetuates the larger cultural framework of the technical image. Acting as a materialization of a larger discursive regime, the camera oversees and manages micro- and macro- distributions of the program of which it is a part. Thus, for Flusser, the camera and its everyday functions fuel a larger convergence which expands far beyond “the scene of photography.”

It is not coincidental, in this respect, that Flusser describes the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in precisely the same terms that structure his theory of photography. Whereas the concepts of nature, reason and progress defined previous eras, the organizing principle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Flusser, is the “program.” Using the holocaust as an example, he describes the way in which programs gives birth to and are enforced by specific apparatuses which in turn bring into being actualizations of the larger program of which they are a part. For this reason, he resists describing the Final Solution as a crime against humanity, insisting that the event instead be understood as a realization of a latent possibility within the larger program of “Western project.” As Flusser puts it, “The SS were functionaries in an extermination apparatus.” Housing a given set of “programs,” the “black box” of the camera reiterates the progression of history by presenting a delimited sphere of action, an image repertoire, which yields only a modest, at times even illusory space of “play” for the user. As the apparatus circumscribes a virtual field from which images, concepts and events are actualized, this play does not typically expand beyond or challenge the finite parameters of the larger program.

As a result of Flusser’s expanded view of the apparatus, the binary that began this discussion unfolds into a dynamic triad or what Cubitt (2010) calls “a nested series of black boxes” (p. 3) through

which both the experience of operator and action of the apparatus come to overlap with the social. The camera “programs” its social environment not so much in terms of content or ideological message of specific images, but rather through the automated production of concepts. These concepts are standardized largely by market forces, which in expounding the necessity of the new and the obsolescence of the old initiate a kind of feedback loop for the apparatus’ continual re-definition. Photographic practice in turn both realizes these innovations and re-imagines future iterations of the medium of photography. Despite the varying shapes this dynamic exchange may take, the process serves to reaffirm the operation of photography which, unlike Barthes’ approach the medium which focuses on semiotics, is at its core a transformation of the real into information for Flusser.

I would like to draw out the larger implications of this model by engaging with the disaster photography, specifically, the seeming ubiquitous impulse to take pictures in the context of 9/11. Here, not only do the relations of exchange described seem to momentarily break down, but, more importantly, photography and much of visual culture in general visualized this reconfiguration in reflexive fashion. Rather than the ineffable of the sublime or unassimilable of trauma studies, Flusser’s idea allow us to start with a more materialistic framework to approach this scenario, one that accommodates those events that appear to exceed the program or larger frame of reference through which we interpret them. As such, Flusser’s theory suggests that unique camera consciousness of disaster functions as a specific category within the program rather than its compromise or negation.

As the first year that digital cameras outsold their analog counterparts, 2001 marked a tipping point in the digital turn, one that would forge a new relation between the medium and the spectacle of disaster (Melnick, 2009, p. 66). With its dematerialization into code and capacity for instant transmission, the digital format allowed photography, perhaps for the first time in its history, to satiate the desire for “live” images. As a result of this sudden acceleration of the still image, the cultural position and function of film photography would endure an equally profound redefinition. In an attempt to retain legitimacy in the face of what John Roberts (2009) calls the “intrusion” of digital technologies and a “defeated documentary culture” (pp. 289-290), film photography in the 21<sup>st</sup> century appeared to relinquish its hold on the now in favor of more reflective and distanced role. As David Company (2007) explains, in ceding “the representation of events in progress...to other media,” the post-digital identity of the medium became bound to the role of the “undertaker,” that shadowy figure who “turns up late, wanders through the places where things have happened” in order to document “the aftermath of the event” rather than the event itself.

However, the experience of photographers “on the ground” on 9/11 suggests that this familiar narrative of digitization was momentarily compromised by the disaster. Within minutes of the colli-

sion, gift shops that surrounded the World Trade Center reported selling out of disposable film cameras. The manager of a Duane Read drugstore in the vicinity of the towers even claimed to have sold between 60 and 100 film cameras in the first hour of the attacks (Heller, 2005, p. 8). These accounts, along with the numerous exhibitions of amateur photography from that day confirm that the most photographed disaster in history was just as often captured in celluloid as binary code. While one is tempted to diagnosis this phenomenon as a nostalgic return to a more familiar mode of seeing in the face of uncertainty, framing the issue in these oppositional terms tends to overlook the unique circumstances of this resurgence. As the rivalry between these formats was momentarily subsumed by a larger desire for visibility, photography in the context of the disaster was no longer simply in a transitional state as of 9/11, but rather a hybrid medium.

Alejandro González Iñárritu's contribution to the *11'09''01* compilation (2002) integrates this unique mode of vision into its mode of address and in so doing illustrates the formative relationship that the camera maintains to the sublime experience in the context of this event. The work begins with a slowly building soundtrack of panicked voices and ambient sound which plays against an entirely black screen. After almost a full two minutes of darkness, an image flashes and then disappears. As similar images begin to appear more rapidly and eventually remain on screen long enough to be deciphered, they come to reveal bodies falling from the World Trade center at almost incomprehensible speeds. Immersed in darkness for the majority of the film, the viewer struggles to situate themselves within this filmic space as desperate voices and occasional screams seem to come from all directions. With the viewer's eyes adjusted to the darkness, the flash of images is intrusive, literally difficult to watch. Its afterimage lingers in the absent spaces from it emerges, merging the work's claims to visibility with its outright refusal to do so. While the film's scenes of falling bodies are composed of video footage, their momentarily flash mimics the photographic act and as such asks the viewer to extrapolate the logic of the film to the experience of the camera. Indeed, the spectator position of the film is in many ways that of the disaster photographer whose precarious oscillation between survival and image, seeing and non-seeing appears written into its very form.

It is telling that the film conjures such an intense affective charge by mimicking the experience of the camera, integrating its structure of delay and return, opening its intervals to interminable durations before finally delivering the tortured image. Clearly, in a world where disaster is signified by a swarm of cameras, the photographer's experience appears as both psychic code and visual shorthand for the experience of trauma. However, in merging the camera's transformation of vision with the psychic experience of disaster, the film suggests a larger interpenetration, one which is at the center of Flusser's theory of the photographer and the arrival of a "techno-imagination."

As a post-industrial form of labor which displaces work unto the apparatus, the “photographic gesture” in its normative instance is one of play, an incessant recombination of possibilities within a given “program.” The givenness of these space-time manipulations is central to what Flusser (1983) describes as the Kantian base of the photographic operation: “...one time and space for extreme close-up; one for close-up, another for middle distance, another for long distance; one spatial area for a bird's-eye view, another for a frog's-eye view; another for a toddler's perspective; another for a direct gaze with eyes wide open as in olden days; another for a sidelong glance. Or: one area of time (shutter speed) for a lightning-fast view, another for a quick glance, another for a leisurely gaze, another for a meditative inspection... The result is a mass culture of cameras adjusted to the norm; in the West, in Japan, in underdeveloped countries - all over the world, everything is photographed through the same categories. Kant and his categories become impossible to avoid” (p. 90).

The apparatus' articulation of these universal categories not only provides the condition of possibility for translating experience into a codified and legible image, but also de-centers the processes of cognition through a dynamic exchange between camera and operator. In applying these categories to their subjects, photographers (“functionaries”) manifest the apparatus' pre-programmed possibilities at the same time they subject this process to their own desires (“the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do”) (ibid., p. 35). While imagination (“the specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and project them back into space”) serves as “the precondition for the production and coding of images,” the camera itself supplies what Kant refers to as the “ontological predicate” of perception, those categories through which thought takes place and in turn the world comes into being.

This externalization of Kant's representationalist philosophy is in many ways prefigured by Adorno and Horkheimer (1998) who understand the selective function of the culture industry as a displacement of once internal processes of cognition. They explain: “Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him. Kant said that there was a secret mechanism in the soul which prepared direct intuitions in such a way that they could be fitted into the system of pure reason. But today that secret has been deciphered” (p. 124).

For Adorno, the self-realizing demographics of marketing combined with the predictability of genre and the sheer ubiquity of mass culture allow the culture industry to effectively supplant the individual so as to reproduce the material conditions of exploitation. Flusser's revisions to Kant, on the other hand, suggest a less deterministic relation which proceeds according to reciprocity rather

than repression. For Flusser, photographing operates as a means of “post-ideological manipulation” in that it relies upon the seeming autonomy of choice at the same time it delimits and contains the possibilities in which this “freedom” can take place. This departure from the top-down deployment of power complicates the relation of the camera to vision as the enigmatic “black box” is in this exchange neither a prosthetic extension of its operator nor an autonomous agent, which covertly reprograms the sensorium. Rather, echoing Foucault’s abandonment of the “repressive hypothesis,” Flusser’s camera oversees a reciprocity or “unity” in which the subject’s seeming autonomous operation of the device serves to reproduce (at the level of form rather than content) the authority of those underlying parameters of experience which the apparatus articulates. This circle establishes a “symmetry between the function of the photographer and that of the camera, [so that the] apparatus functions as a function of the photographer’s intention [and] this intention itself functions as a function of the camera’s program” (p. 35).

For Flusser, the static quality of these givens (“photographers can only photograph what they can photograph”) is at the root of the medium’s connection to totalitarianism as it provides the universal language through which large scale processes of repressive homogenization can take place. In the context of 9/11, the same immutability of these analog “camera-categories” prompts a confrontation between the camera’s mode of seeing and the accelerated urgency of disaster in the face of the digital turn. As these latter forces resist the film camera’s attempts to process the scene, they come to fuel an overwhelming of these mechanized categories, thereby prompting this “techno-imagination” to reproduce the Kantian experience of formlessness. Paul Crowther (1989) explains the latter in the following terms: “If we view a mountain in the distance it has a characteristic shape which enables us to describe it as a ‘mountain.’ But suppose that we are standing at its base with, perhaps, its higher reaches shrouded in mist. Under these conditions...the mountain seems...to be a limitless phenomenal mass or aggregate, without any defining shape or form” (p. 79).

While on the one hand the negativity and formlessness of the sublime event testifies to a violence performed upon the imagination, on the other, it is precisely this inability to “see” or at least to see fully, that grants us access to a beyond representation for Kant. As Derrida (1987) points out: “In this violent renunciation...the imagination gains by what it loses...it gains in extension and in power...the potency is greater than what is sacrificed” (pp. 130-131).

The unfathomability that the analog camera produces is in this relation clearly not the transcendental outside to representation nor does it offer the thinly veiled intimations of an absolute which has historically accompanied the concept of the sublime. As the camera furnishes the categories through which sensation can be translated into experience, what were once *a priori* categories of the

soul materialize in Flusser's theory as mechanical conventions. As such, these "camera-categories" not only form the ground from which the photographic act emerges, but also the conditions for their own overwhelming.

## References

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