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## **A New Philosophy of Photography?**

Critical Notice of:

### **Philosophy of Photography**

Henri Van Lier. Leuven University Press, Leuven 2007.

Published in *History of Photography*, 32:4, pp. 380-383.

Henri Van Lier's *Philosophy of Photography* originally appeared in French in the *Cahiers de la Photographie* in 1983 before being published as a book in 1993. The monograph has been influential ever since, particularly in Belgium, as it quickly became required reading in many photography courses. Its reputation never spread to the Anglophone world, however. This translation, complete with a new set of illustrations, is meant to change this reception.

*Philosophy of Photography* consists of three parts. In Part One Van Lier presents a detailed analysis of the texture and structure of the photograph. The photographic imprint, as he sees it, is inevitably characterised by weightlessness, superficiality of field, an 'impassible' margin and a hesitation between darkness and light. It is also synchronous, in the sense that it 'expels concrete duration', and isomorphic since it is 'always a non-place'. Moreover, the photographic imprint is at the same time analogical and digital, surcharged and subcharged. Van Lier explains this in the following way. Photographs are analogical because in the 'dark and light stains of a figurative photograph one can recognize forms that share proportions (analogies) with those of an outside spectacle'. Yet, they are also digital because the dark and light stains are obtained 'through the conversion of each single silver haloid grain governed by the choice between darkened / non-darkened, that is to say, a choice between yes or no, 0/1'. Photographic imprints are inevitably subcharged or under-informed since there is always

a loss of information if we compare the imprint with the depicted spectacle (dozens of colours instead of thousands, etc.). Simultaneously, however, photographic imprints are surcharged. For instance, a photograph of a busy street brings everything to a standstill and thus allows us to discover and notice things that we wouldn't be able to see in real life.

After this first, sketchy characterization of what he calls the 'abstractive imprint', Van Lier introduces what is arguably the most fundamental distinction in his exposé, namely the distinction between 'signs', 'indexes', and 'indices'. Signs, says Van Lier, are intentional, conventional, and systematic signals. Indices are not signs, but rather the effects of a cause they physically signal either through 'monstration' – as when the imprint of a boar's paw shows this same paw – or 'demonstration', as when a disarrangement of furniture might reveal a thief's path through the house. Indices are non-intentional, non-conventional signs. Indexes indicate objects in the same way as the index finger might point to an object. Indexes are what Van Lier calls 'minimal signs': they are intentional and conventional but designate nothing by themselves. When applying this threefold distinction to photography, Van Lier stresses the fact that photographs are not signs. Photographs are indices that signal their cause. But photographs do contain indexes which indicate certain privileged parts of imprints. Examples of such indexes are the darkening or brightening of certain parts of imprints during development or the enclosing of a motive through a certain depth of field. Photographs, to use Van Lier's catchphrase, are possibly indexed indices.

To avoid all confusion with C.S. Peirce's famous distinction between icons, indexes, and symbols, Van Lier added an appendix at the end of the book outlining the differences between his own and Peirce's account. His main objection is that the Peircean notion of 'index' is far too broad as it encompasses not only 'indices' but also linguistic indexes (such as possessive, relative, and demonstrative pronouns), propositions, and the uttered names of existing or imaginary things. According to Van Lier, it is difficult to see why such a muddled notion became so influential, except that 'for reasons of academic conviviality, a vague idea and a white lie are more lucrative than a clear and distinct idea'. He later directs a similar sneer at Roland Barthes and his notion of 'punctum'.

The fact that Van Lier's own ideas are not always so clear and distinct, however, becomes evident in the last few paragraphs of Part One. After defining 'the scene' as 'a specific and marked place that is at a good distance from our eye and body ... so that we can embrace with our sight what is taking place there' he goes on to claim that scenes cannot be found in Africa, as if this is self-evident – which, needless to say, it is not. He also, quite confusingly, writes that the photograph 'sometimes ... remains within the obviousness of the scene' while repeatedly stressing that '[b]efore all else, the photograph unsettles the scene'. Additionally, Van Lier proposes (rather gratuitously) that every photograph has something obscene even though he acknowledges himself that, etymologically speaking, 'obscene' does not derive from 'ob-scaena' and is thus unrelated to the word 'scene'.

'Reality' for Van Lier is 'the real in so far as it is already seized and organized in sign systems', whereas 'the real' is that 'which escapes this conception of reality'. This distinction raises a few questions. To begin with, is it not circular to define one concept in terms of the other and vice versa? Also, does it make sense to talk about the real in so far as it is already organized in sign systems? Does the real not stop being the real once it is organized in such a way? Moreover, when Van Lier describes photographs as 'fragments of reality within the (double) frame of the real', one might wonder how this is possible. How can there be a frame of the real if the real is that which escapes all framing? At the very least this seems an ill-chosen metaphor. Van Lier even talks about the double frame of the real, thereby referring to the chemistry of the film and the physicality of the lens. This makes it even more incomprehensible. The real, for Van Lier, is that which is 'not yet domesticated by our technical, scientific, and social relations', but are photographic film and lenses not precisely the products of technology and science?

More is said about technology and science in Part Two which offers an investigation of what Van Lier calls 'photographic initiatives'. He distinguishes four consecutive initiatives. First there is the initiative of industrial technology, then there is the initiative of nature, after which follows the initiative of the spectacle. The initiative of the photographer comes last and is utterly dependent on the three previous initiatives. Hence, Van Lier's conclusion that in the photographic process we have finally left behind anthropocentrism and humanism. But, one might wonder, how can Van Lier claim that,

say, the initiative of industrial technology marks the end of anthropocentrism, when in Part One technology is described as something by which we anthropocentrically domesticate ‘the real’? Also, while it is one thing to say that Cartier-Bresson’s or Weston’s photographic practice was partly determined by the available or preferred equipment, it is quite another thing to claim that the equipment itself took the initiative. Surely, in defending such a claim one is anthropomorphising technology too much? In any case, it seems inaccurate or an exaggeration at best to posit that in photography ‘[m]an as creator of images ... is often only facultative’. And Van Lier is simply wrong (there is no other word for it) when he writes that ‘[c]locks activate the laws of mechanics, and ink activates those of chemistry’.

In Part Three Van Lier describes different photographic behaviours. He starts with so-called ‘pragmatic behaviours,’ i.e. those occasions where photographs serve certain practical aims (pornography, advertising, fashion). Next are artistic behaviours with a subsection devoted to ‘everyday art’ (postcards, posters) and one to ‘extreme art’ which, in Van Lier’s own words, ‘explores the entropy and negentropy of all systems, as well as sense and the absurd, thereby unveiling the gap and the anti-scene ... of every language, figure and construction’. The section also contains some brief and hasty remarks on his idiosyncratic notion of the photographic subject. Thirdly and lastly, Van Lier discusses scientific, documentary, and testimonial behaviours. In a postscript, entitled ‘New Theoretical Perspectives’, he also tries to further illuminate his philosophy of photography by situating it within a broader, scientific framework. For this reader, however, these closing thoughts are everything but illuminating. Except for some vague references to well-known scientific theories, the postscript mainly consists of pseudoscientific or downright unscientific speculation (‘Intelligible Ontology,’ ‘Semiophysics,’ ‘Anthropogénie,’ etc) – truly *gefundenes Fressen* for debunkers like Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont.

Van Lier is at his best when he steers away from big words and theories to draw our attention to certain peculiarities or interesting characteristics of photographs. For instance, when he states that photographic imprints are indicial just like the imprint of a boar’s paw or the Turin shroud, he also notices an important difference in that the boar’s imprint shows a concave for a convex and the imprint on the shroud is reversed left to

right, whereas a photograph makes us see the effects of a cause according to a direction and plane by which we ordinarily perceive such causes. And when Van Lier suggests an explanation for the weightlessness of the marks on a photograph compared to those on a painting by referring to the weightlessness of photons he cleverly adds that tanning is not a form of make-up. Worth mentioning is also his observation that the lateral perception of photographs (when leafing through magazines) is perhaps more common now than frontal perception or that Rimbaud's dictum 'Je est un autre' ('I am someone else') is nicely illustrated in the fact that someone who has just been photographed is often very anxious to see what the picture looks like.

Van Lier's powers of observation are perhaps most obvious in his astute descriptions of the work and style of individual photographers. Nevertheless, even when he writes about some particular photographer's oeuvre he sometimes loses himself in phrases that are too vague and abstract. For instance, Mapplethorpe's pictures are characterised as from 'edge to edge filled with large areas of imponderable dimension, where all forms, left behind rather than immobile, well up, in a slow instantaneity, to forge a connection between the void and the fragment'. This is not the only hollow phrase in the book. Describing photographs as 'the stuff of extraterrestrials' or 'more uterine than phallic' does not really advance our understanding of the medium, either.

This brings me to the two main shortcomings of the book. First, Van Lier's exposé is at times inconsistent to the point of being self-contradictory. I have already given a few examples of this, but let me mention a few more. It is not clear to me how Van Lier can claim at the same time that '[i]ndices are not signs' and that '[i]ndices are non-intentional signs'. Also, if indexes are signs and photographs include many indexes, how can photographs be completely excluded from the realm of signs? Or consider the role of technology again. Before the invention of photography, Van Lier writes, technology was 'a simple tool, a means in the service of human intentions'. On the next page, however, he argues that 'Technology has always taken an important initiative with respect to its user' (emphasis added). The most striking inconsistency, perhaps, is one that relates to formal and stylistic matters. On the very first page of the book Van Lier points out that we lack the appropriate language to describe a photograph adequately since our languages were originally forged to speak about painting, architecture and

literature. Then he goes on to say that ‘specialized terminology would be ... fallacious, as only common language has the power – through its bricolage – to re-encode itself so as to touch on new objects. That is why one should forget all jargon here’. A strange admonition, to be sure, as the book is literally filled with specialized technical terminology. This, in combination with the fact that the translation was not done by a native English speaker, makes it anything but easy reading.

Second, *Philosophy of Photography* contains more than its fair share of over-dramatic statements if not gross exaggerations. One sometimes gets the impression that the invention of photography was the single most important event in human history. Here are a few examples: ‘Up until photography’s arrival on the scene, human beings had a sense of mastery and creation in almost every domain’; ‘Prior to the invention of photography, the spectacles of nature and culture were limited in number and perceived in an anthropocentric manner’; ‘The photograph ... changed the entire system of traditional culture’; ‘the photographic practice precisely demonstrated that there was no substance, no essence, no type, no stable character, no radiant individuality, and no atoms of behaviour.’

In addition, Van Lier has a remarkable knack for dramatising the experience of looking at a photograph. For instance, according to Van Lier, ‘the most innocent gaze on a photograph creates a decidedly uncanny situation’. And ‘[o]ne usually chatters around a photograph, when passing the family album around for instance, in order to simultaneously dispel the panic of the real lurking underneath and in order to animate a feeble reality’. Photography, Van Lier thinks, ‘has continuously upset human conduct and behaviour.’ I do not wish to deny that photographs can sometimes be puzzling or that thinking about photographs can lead to all kinds of interesting paradoxes. But to claim that the family photo album typically creates a panic or an uncanny situation is just absurd. Ordinary photographs are not, pace Van Lier, the stuff of extraterrestrials.

Let me conclude by saying that, in my opinion, the editors of the book also overstate their case when they introduce the book as ‘one of the major reflections on photography that has ever been written’ and as ‘comparable, in its scope as well as in its achievements, to the work of ... Walter Benjamin, André Bazin, André Malraux, John Berger, Susan Sontag, or Roland Barthes’.

