

# 1986: LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF LEO- NARDO

By Vilém Flusser (†)

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***“[...] the apparatus does what man wants it to do, and men can only want to do what the apparatus can do. In fact: apparatus and man form a single functional unit.”***

*In this paragraph, Vilém Flusser articulates his theory of apparatus, as opposed to the classical machine, in a remarkably condensed manner. It is taken from a letter to Leonardo journal from January 1986, Flusser's reaction to a Leonardo article (in vol. 19, no. 1) on the artist Gottfried Jäger. Flusser – the philosopher of the technical image – was very much interested in Jäger's experimental generative photography. Taking the camera as particular apparatus as a starting point, Flusser formulated his general concept of apparatus in this letter. Here, the human operator is reduced to a “functionary” (Flusser) of the given programme operating hidden inside the black box which is the apparatus. According to Flusser, this techno-determinism can be countered by critical artistic practice, intervening in the programme of the apparatus – as a way to go beyond its interface surface into the darkness of the black box, in order to produce new, surprising results.*

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*Daniel Irrgang*

Sir:

The article by Gottfried Jaeger on “Generative Photography”, appearing in your Vol. 19, No. 1, is dense, and it contains several fundamental ideas, to two of which I should like to comment.

(a) Reproduction versus production:

This ancient distinction between “mimesis” and “poiesis” is, as Jaeger's work shows, no longer valid. When photography was invented, people believed that it would permit an even more faithful reproduction of the objective world than the most “realistic” of paintings. Because apparently the objects impress themselves upon the sensitive surface of the film, like they do in fingerprints or footprints. Thus photos seem to be not “symbols” of objects, (conventional signs which mean them), but “symptoms” of objects, (signs caused by the objects themselves). As one began to consider photography more closely, however, it became obvious that a very complex codifying process goes on between object and photo: the rays reflected by objects are submitted to complex processes before they become an image. The non-objective, symbolical character of the photos became ever more conscious. Thus it became obvious that in photos, even more evidently than in painting, a codifying, “sense-giving”, intention intervenes between image and object. Thus there is no such thing as a purely reproducing, mimetic image, and that there is a producing, poetic quality to every image. Jaeger takes advantage of this theoretical insight, and he attempts to accentuate the poetic parametre of image-making.

(b) Apparatus versus man:

Apparatus seem to be complex machines, which again seem to be complex tools, so that there seems to be no essential difference between using a brush and using a computer. Both are tools at the service of those who use them. This is not so. The relation between man and tool is different from the one between man and machine, and the one between man and apparatus. With tools, man is the constant, and the tool is the variable: man is surrounded by tools and he may exchange one tool for

another. With machines, the machine is the constant and man is the variable: the machine is surrounded by men which may be substituted one for another. With apparatus there is an intricate co-relation of functions: the apparatus does what man wants it to do, and men can only want to do what the apparatus can do. In fact: apparatus and man form a single functional unit. Jaeger is one of those who understand this. He concentrates his attention at least as much on apparatus function as on his own intention. He knows that the problem is not so much of man "governing" apparatus, or apparatus "governing" man, but of a creative man-apparatus interaction. In this he contributes to the avoidance of the danger that automatic apparatus take over, and relegate men to mere apparatus functions.

Jaeger's work (and his theoretical considerations), are important steps on the way towards the emerging culture of images generated by apparatus.

Sincerely,

*January 31, 86.*

*Liz Crumley,  
Associate Editor,  
LEONARDO,  
2112 Berkeley Way, Berkeley CA 94704*

*Dear Liz Crumley,*

*thank you for your kind letter of January 13. I wrote to Lisa R. Bornstein on January 26 that I could write the letter on Gottfried Jaeger's article in March only. I now found the time to do it immediately. Please find it enclosed.*

*I hope that [??] it is what you expected from me. I know Jaeger well, (I gave lectures at his Bielefeld school), and I think I know the driving intention behind his work and his teaching. Therefore I hope that my letter will help your leaders to appreciate what he is doing.*

*Thanking you again for having invited me to write this comment,*

*I am sincerely yours,*