Almost everyone today has a camera and takes snaps. Just as almost everyone has learned to write and produce texts. Anyone who is able to write can also read. But anyone who can take snaps does not necessarily have to be able to decode photographs. For us to see why the amateur photographer can be a photographic illiterate, the democratization of the taking of photographs has to be considered – and at the same time, a number of aspects of democracy in general have to be addressed.

Cameras are purchased by people who were programmed into this purchase by the apparatus of advertising. The camera purchased will be the ‘latest model’: cheaper, more automatic and more efficient than earlier models. As has already been established, this progressive improvement of camera models is based on the feedback mechanism by which those taking snaps feed the photographic industry: The photographic industry learns automatically from the actions of those taking snaps (and from the professional press that constantly supplies it with test results). This is the essence of post-industrial progress.

Apparatuses improve by means of social feedback.

Despite the fact that the camera is based on complex scientific and technical principles, it is a very simple matter to make it function. The camera is a structurally complex, but functionally simple, plaything. In this respect, it is the opposite of chess which is a structurally simple, and functionally complex, game: Its rules are easy, but it is difficult to play chess well. Anyone who holds a
camera in their hands can create excellent photographs without having any idea what complex processes they are setting off when they push the button.

People taking snaps are distinguishable from photographers by the pleasure they take in the structural complexity of their plaything. Unlike photographers and chess-players they do not look for 'new moves', for information, for the improbable, but wish to make their functioning simpler and simpler by means of more and more perfect automation. Though impenetrable to them, the automaticity of the camera intoxicates them. Amateur photographers' clubs are places where one gets high on the structural complexities of cameras, where one goes on a photograph-trip - post-industrial opium dens.

Cameras demand that their owners (the ones who are hooked on them) keep on taking snaps, that they produce more and more redundant images. This photo-mania involving the eternal recurrence of the same (or of something very similar) leads eventually to the point where people taking snaps feel they have gone blind: Drug dependency takes over. People taking snaps can now only see the world through the camera and in photographic categories. They are not 'in charge of' taking photographs, they are consumed by the greed of their camera, they have become an extension to the button of their camera. Their actions are automatic camera functions.

A permanent flow of unconsciously created images is the result. They form a camera memory, a databank of automatic functions. Anyone who leafs through the album of a person who takes snaps does not recognize, as it were, the captured experiences, knowledge or values of a human being, but the automatically realized camera possibilities. A journey to Italy documented like this stores the times and places at which the person taking snaps was induced to press the button, and shows which places the camera has been to and what it did there. This goes for all documentary photography. The documentary photographer, just like the person taking snaps, is interested in continually shooting new scenes from the same old perspective. The photographer in the sense intended here is, on the other hand, interested (like the chess-player) in seeing in continually new ways, i.e. producing new, informative states of things. The evolution of photography, from its origins right up to the present, is a process of increasing awareness of the concept of information: from an appetite for the continually new using the same old method to an interest in continually evolving new methods. Both those taking snaps and documentary photographers, however, have not understood 'information'. What they produce are camera memories, not information, and the better they do it, the more they prove the victory of the camera over the human being.

Anyone who writes has to master the rules of spelling and grammar. Anyone who takes snaps has to adhere to the instructions for use - becoming simpler and simpler - that are programmed to control the output end of the camera. This is democracy in post-industrial society. Therefore people taking snaps are unable to decode photographs: They think photographs are an automatic reflection of the world. This leads to the paradoxical result that the more people take snaps, the more difficult it becomes to decode photographs: Everyone thinks there is no need to decode photographs, since they know how photographs are made and what they mean.

That is not all. The photographs that we are deluged by are seen as contemptible flyers which are cut out of the
newspaper, torn up or used for packing paper; in short: We can do what we like with them. An example: If one sees a scene from the war in Lebanon on television or at the cinema, one knows one has no alternative but to look at it. If one sees it in a newspaper, on the other hand, one can cut it out and keep it, send it to friends with comments or screw it up in rage. One thinks one is thereby able to react in an active way to the scene in Lebanon. The last vestiges of materiality adhering to the photograph give rise to the impression that we are able to act in a historical way towards it. In fact, the actions described are nothing but ritual acts.

The photograph of the scene in Lebanon is an image which, as one’s gaze wanders over the surface, produces magical – not historical – relationships between the elements of the image and the reader. In the photograph, rather than seeing historical events with their causes and consequences, we see magical connections. It is true that the photograph illustrates a newspaper article whose structure is linear and which is made up of concepts with meaningful causes and consequences. But we read this article through the photograph: It is not the article that explains the photograph, but the photograph that illustrates the article. This reversal of the text–photo relationship is typically post-industrial and renders any historical action impossible.

Throughout history, texts have explained images; now photographs illustrate articles. Illuminated capital letters used to illustrate Bible texts; now newspaper articles illustrate photographs. The Bible broke the magic spell of capital letters, the photograph is recasting the magic spell of the article. Throughout history, texts dominated, today images dominate. And where technical images dominate, illiteracy takes on a new role. The illiterate are no longer excluded, as they used to be, from a culture encoded in texts, but participate almost totally in a culture encoded in images. If the complete subordination of texts to images comes about in future, then we shall be faced with a general state of illiteracy, and only a few specialists will learn to read any more. There are signs of this already: ‘Johnny can’t spell’ in the USA, and even the so-called developing countries are in the process of giving up the struggle against illiteracy and providing schools with education in the form of images.

We do not react in a historical way to photographic documentation of the war in Lebanon, but with ritual magic. Cut out the photograph, send it on, screw it up – all these are ritual acts, reactions to the message of the image. This message has a particular background: One element of the image addresses itself to another element, gives significance to another and in return gets its own significance from it. Every element can follow on from that which has followed it. Charged with this background, the surface of the image is ‘deified’: Everything in it is either good or evil – tanks are evil, children good, Beirut in flames is hell, doctors in white coats are angels. Mysterious powers are circling overhead above the surface of the image, some of which carry names pregnant with value judgement: ‘imperialism’, ‘Zionism’, ‘terrorism’. Meanwhile, most of them are without names, and they are the ones that give the photograph an indefinable atmosphere, lending it a certain fascination and programming us to act in a ritual fashion.

It goes without saying that we don’t just look at the photograph, we also read the article illustrated by it – or at least the headline. As the function of the text is subordi-
nate to the image, the text directs our understanding of the image towards the program of the newspaper. It thereby does not explain the image, it confirms it. Besides, we are by now sick and tired of explanations and prefer to stick to the photograph that releases us from the necessity for conceptual, explanatory thought and absolves us from the bother of going into the causes and consequences of the war in Lebanon: In the image we see with our own eyes what the war looks like. The text simply consists of instructions as to how we are to see.

The reality of the war in Lebanon, as all reality in general, is in the image. The vector of significance has been reversed; reality has slipped into being a symbol, has entered the magic universe of the symbolism of images. The question of the significance of symbols is beside the point — a ‘metaphysical’ question in the worst sense of the word — and symbols that have become undecodable in this way suppress our historical consciousness, our critical awareness: This is the function that they have been programmed for.

Thus the photograph becomes the model for its receivers’ actions. They react in a ritual fashion to its message in order to placate the powers of fate circling overhead above the surface of the image. Here’s another example: The photographic poster of a toothbrush summons up the secret power of ‘tooth-decay’, and from then on it lies in wait for us. We buy a toothbrush in order to carry out the ritual of brushing our teeth and to escape the power of ‘tooth-decay’ lying in wait for us. We make a sacrifice to the god. It is true that we can look up ‘tooth-decay’ in a dictionary, but the dictionary has become a pretext for the photographic poster: It will not explain the photographic poster, but confirm it. We will buy the toothbrush whatever the dictionary says, because we are programmed to carry out this purchase. The lexi-context has become a caption for the photograph: Even with the support of historical information we are acting as if we are under a magic spell.

Our magical-ritual acts are nevertheless not those of Native Americans, but those of functionaries in a post-industrial society. Both Native Americans and functionaries believe in the reality of images, but functionaries do this out of bad faith. After all, they have learned to write at school and consequently should know better. Functionaries have a historical consciousness and critical awareness but they suppress these. They know that the war in Lebanon is not a clash between good and evil but that specific causes have specific consequences there. They know that the toothbrush is not a sacred object but a product of Western history. But they have to suppress their superior knowledge of this. How else would they buy toothbrushes, have opinions about the war in Lebanon, file reports, fill in forms, go on holiday, take retirement — in short, how would they function? The photograph here serves the suspension of critical faculties, it serves the process of functionality.

Of course, critical awareness can still be awakened so as to make the photograph transparent. Then the photograph of Lebanon becomes transparent as regards its newspaper program and the program behind it belonging to the political party programming the newspaper. Then the photograph of the toothbrush becomes transparent as regards the program of the advertising agency and the program behind it belonging to the toothbrush industry. And the powers of ‘imperialism’, ‘Zionism’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘tooth-decay’ are revealed as concepts contained within
these programs. But this critical exercise does not necessarily lead to a disenchantedment of the images. That is, it can itself have been put under a magic spell, thereby becoming ‘functional’. The cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School is an example of such a second-order paganism: Behind the images it uncovers secret, superhuman powers at work (e.g. capitalism) that have maliciously created all these programs instead of taking it for granted that the programming proceeds in a mindless automatic fashion. A thoroughly disconcerting process in which, behind the ghosts that have been exorcised, more and more new ones are summoned up.

To summarize: Photographs are received as objects without value that everyone can produce and that everyone can do what they like with. In fact, however, we are manipulated by photographs and programmed to act in a ritual fashion in the service of a feedback mechanism for the benefit of cameras. Photographs suppress our critical awareness in order to make us forget the mindless absurdity of the process of functionality, and it is only thanks to this suppression that functionality is possible at all. Thus photographs form a magic circle around us in the shape of the photographic universe. What we need is to break this circle.

The Photographic Universe

As inhabitants of the photographic universe we have become accustomed to photographs: They have grown familiar to us. We no longer take any notice of most photographs, concealed as they are by habit; in the same way, we ignore everything familiar in our environment and only notice what has changed. Change is informative, the familiar redundant. What we are surrounded by above all are redundant photographs – and this is the case despite the fact that every day new illustrated newspapers appear on our breakfast tables, every week new posters appear on city walls and new advertising photographs appear in shop displays. It is precisely this permanently changing situation that we have become accustomed to: One redundant photograph displaces another redundant photograph. As such, the changing situation is familiar, redundant; ‘progress’ has become uninformative, run-of-the-mill. What would be informative, exceptional, exciting for us would be a standstill situation: to find the same newspapers on our breakfast tables every day or to see the same posters on city walls for months on end. That would surprise and shock us. Photographs permanently displacing one another according to a program are redundant precisely because they are always ‘new’, precisely because they automatically exhaust the possibilities of the photographic program. This is therefore also the challenge for the photographer: to oppose the flood of redundancy with informative images.

It is not only the permanently changing situation of the
photographic universe but also its gaudiness that has become commonplace. We are hardly aware how astonishing the colours of our environment would be to our grandfathers. In the nineteenth century the world was grey: walls, newspapers, books, shirts, tools, all these varied between black and white merging together into grey – as in the case of printed texts. Now everything cries out in all imaginable colours, but it cries out to deaf ears. We have become accustomed to visual pollution; it passes through our eyes and our consciousnesses without being noticed. It penetrates subliminal regions, where it functions and programs our actions.

If one compares the colour of our own world with that of the Middle Ages or of non-European cultures, one is faced with the difference that the colours of the Middle Ages and those of ‘exotic’ cultures are magic symbols signifying mythical elements, whereas for us they are mythical symbols at work on a theoretical level, elements of programs. For example, ‘red’ in the Middle Ages signified the danger of being swallowed up by Hell. Similarly, for us ‘red’ at traffic lights still signifies ‘danger’, but programmed in such a way that we automatically put our foot on the brake without at the same time engaging our consciousness. All that emerges from the subliminal programming of the colours of the photographic universe are merely ritual, automatic actions.

However, this chameleon-like nature of the photographic universe, the changing gaudiness of it, is only one of its main characteristics, a superficial feature. In accordance with its deeper structure, the photographic universe is grainy; it changes its appearance and colour as a mosaic might change in which the individual little pieces are continually being replaced. The photographic universe is made up of such little pieces, made up of quanta, and is calculable (calculus = little piece or ‘particle’) – an atomized, democratic universe, a jigsaw puzzle.

The quantum-like structure of the photographic universe is not surprising, since it has arisen out of the act of photography, whose quantum-like character has already been discussed. Yet an examination of the photographic universe allows us to see the deeper reason for the grainy character of all aspects of photography. It reveals, for example, that the atomized, punctuated structure is characteristic of all things relating to apparatus, and that even those camera functions that appear to slide (e.g. film and television pictures) are actually based on punctuated structures. In the world of apparatus, all ‘waves’ are made up of grains, and all ‘processes’ are made up of punctuated situations.

This is because apparatuses are simulations of thought, playthings that play at ‘thinking’, and they simulate human thought processes, not for example in the way one understands thought corresponding to introspection or the insights of psychology and physiology, but in the way one understands thought as described in the Cartesian model. According to Descartes, thought consists of clear and distinct elements (concepts) that are combined in the thought process like beads on an abacus, in which every concept signifies a point in the extended world out there. If every point could be assigned a concept, then thought would be omniscient and at the same time omnipotent. For thought processes would then symbolically direct processes out there. Unfortunately this omniscience and omnipotence are impossible, because the structure of thought is not adequate to deal with the structure of extended matter. If, for example, the points in the
extended ('concrete') world grow together, leaving no gaps, then distinct concepts in thought are interrupted by intervals through which most of the points escape. Descartes hoped to overcome this inadequacy of the network of thought with the help of God and analytic geometry, but he did not succeed.

Apparatuses, meanwhile, these simulations of Cartesian thought, have succeeded. They are omniscient and omnipotent in their universes. For in these universes, a concept, an element of the program of the apparatus, is actually assigned to every point, every element of the universe. This can be seen most clearly in the case of computers and their universes. But it can also be seen in the case of the photographic universe. To every photograph there corresponds a clear and distinct element in the camera program. Every photograph thereby corresponds to a specific combination of elements in programs. Thanks to this bi-univocal relationship between universe and program, in which a photograph corresponds to every point in the program and a point in the program to every photograph, cameras are omniscient and omnipotent in the photographic universe. But they also have to pay a high price for their omniscience and omnipotence, this price being the reversal of the vectors of significance. That is: Concepts no longer signify the world out there (as in the Cartesian model); instead, the universe signifies the program within cameras. The program does not signify the photograph, the photograph signifies the elements of the program (concepts). In the case of cameras, we are therefore dealing with an absurd omniscience and an absurd omnipotence: Cameras know everything and are able to do everything in a universe that was programmed in advance for this knowledge and ability.

This is the place to define the term 'program'. To this end, all human involvement in the program – that struggle between the function of the program and human intention that was the subject of the previous essay - should be bracketed out. The program to be defined is a completely automatic one: a combination game based on chance. As a particularly simple example of a program, one can cite the throw of dice combining the elements '1' to '6'. Every throw is random, cannot be predicted: but over time every sixth throw is necessarily a '1'. Put another way, all possible combinations are realized by chance, but over time all possible combinations are necessarily realized. If, for example, an atomic war is entered into the program of any apparatus as a possibility, then it will happen by chance, but necessarily someday. In this subhumanly mindless sense, apparatuses 'think' by means of chance combinations. In this sense they are omniscient and omnipotent in their universes.

The photographic universe, like the one by which we are currently surrounded, is a chance realization of a number of possibilities contained within camera programs which corresponds point for point to a specific situation in a combination game. As other programmed possibilities will be realized by chance in future, the photographic universe is in a permanent state of flux and within it one photograph permanently displaces another. Every given situation in the photographic universe corresponds to a 'throw' in the combination game, i.e. point for point, photograph for photograph. But these are totally redundant photos. The informative photographs of photographers consciously playing against the program signify breakthroughs in the photographic universe – and are not predicted within the program.

From which one can draw the following conclusions:
First, the photographic universe is created in the course of a combination game, it is programmed, and it signifies the program. Second, the game proceeds automatically and obeys no intentional strategy. Third, the photographic universe is made up of clear and distinct photographs that each signify one point in the program. Fourth, every single photo is — as the surface of an image — a magical model for the actions of an observer. To summarize: The photographic universe is a means of programming society — with absolute necessity but in each individual case by chance (i.e. automatically) — to act as a magic feedback mechanism for the benefit of a combination game, and of the automatic reprogramming of society into dice, into pieces in the game, into functionaries.

This view of the photographic universe challenges one to look in two directions: towards a society surrounded by the photographic universe and towards the cameras programming the photographic universe. It challenges one to engage, on the one hand, in criticism of the post-industrial society that is coming into being, and, on the other, in criticism of cameras and their programs; in other words: to critically transcend post-industrial society.

To be in the photographic universe means to experience, to know and to evaluate the world as a function of photographs. Every single experience, every single bit of knowledge, every single value can be reduced to individually known and evaluated photographs. And every single action can be analyzed through the individual photos taken as models. This type of existence, then, in which everything experienced, known and evaluated can be reduced to punctuated elements (into 'bits'), is already familiar: It is the world of robots. The photographic universe and all apparatus-based universes robotize the human being and society.

New, robot-like actions are observable everywhere: at bank counters, in offices, in factories, in supermarkets, in sport, dancing. When one looks a bit more closely, the same staccato structure is also perceptible, for example in scientific texts, in poetry, in musical composition, in architecture and in political programs. Correspondingly it is the task of current cultural criticism to analyze this restructuring of experience, knowledge, evaluation and action into a mosaic of clear and distinct elements in every single cultural phenomenon. Within such cultural criticism, the invention of photography will prove to be the point at which all cultural phenomena started to replace the linear structure of sliding with the staccato structure of programmed combinations; not, therefore, to adopt a mechanical structure such as that in the Industrial Revolution, but to adopt a cybernetic structure such as that programmed into apparatuses. Within such cultural criticism, the camera will prove to be the ancestor of all those apparatuses that are in the process of robotizing all aspects of our lives, from one’s most public acts to one’s innermost thoughts, feelings and desires.

If one now attempts a criticism of apparatuses, one first sees the photographic universe as the product of cameras and distribution apparatuses. Behind these, one recognizes industrial apparatuses, advertising apparatuses, political, economic management apparatuses, etc. Each of these apparatuses is becoming increasingly automated and is being linked up by cybernetics to other apparatuses. The program of each apparatus is fed in via its input by another apparatus, and in its turn feeds other apparatuses via its output. The whole complex of apparatuses is therefore a super-black-box made up of black boxes. And it is a human creation: As a product of the nineteenth and twen-
tieth centuries, human beings are permanently engaged in developing and perfecting it. The time is therefore not far off when one will have to concentrate one’s criticism of apparatuses on the human intention that willed and created them.

Such a critical approach is enticing for two reasons. First, it absolves the critics of the necessity of delving into the interior of the black boxes: They can concentrate on their output, human intention. And second, it absolves critics of the necessity of developing new categories of criticism: Human intention can be criticized using traditional criteria. The result of such a criticism of apparatuses would therefore be something like the following:

The intention behind apparatuses is to liberate the human being from work; apparatuses take over human labour – for example, the camera liberates the human being from the necessity of using a paintbrush. Instead of having to work, the human being is able to play. But apparatuses have come under the control of a number of individual human beings (e.g. capitalists), who have reversed this original intention. Now apparatuses serve the interests of these people; consequently what needs to be done is to unmask the interests behind the apparatuses. According to such an analysis, apparatuses are nothing but peculiar machines, the invention of which has nothing revolutionary about it; there is no point therefore in talking of a ‘second Industrial Revolution’.

Thus photographs also have to be decoded as an expression of the concealed interests of those in power: the interests of Kodak shareholders, of the proprietors of advertising agencies, those pulling the strings behind the us industrial complex, the interests of the entire us ideological, military and industrial complex. If one exposed these interests, every single photograph and the whole photographic universe could be considered as having been decoded.

Unfortunately this traditional kind of criticism with its background in the industrial context is not adequate to deal with the phenomenon. It misses the essential thing about apparatuses, i.e. their automaticity. And this is precisely what needs to be criticized. Apparatuses were invented in order to function automatically, in other words independently of future human involvement. This is the intention with which they were created: that the human being would be ruled out. And this intention has been successful without a doubt. While the human being is being more and more sidelined, the programs of apparatuses, these rigid combination games, are increasingly rich in elements: they make combinations more and more quickly and are going beyond the ability of the human being to see what they are up to and to control them. Anyone who is involved with apparatuses is involved with black boxes where one is unable to see what they are up to.

To this extent, one can’t talk of an owner of apparatuses either. As apparatuses function automatically and do not obey any human decision, they cannot be owned by anybody. All human decisions are made on the basis of the decisions of apparatuses; they have degenerated into purely ‘functional’ decisions, i.e. human intention has evaporated. If apparatuses were originally produced and programmed to follow human intention, then today, in the ‘second and third generation’ of apparatuses, this intention has disappeared over the horizon of functionality. Apparatuses now function as an end in themselves, ‘automatically’ as it were, with the single aim of maintain-
ing and improving themselves. This rigid, unintentional, functional automaticity is what needs to be made the object of criticism.

The 'humanistic' criticism of apparatuses referred to above is in opposition to this portrayal of apparatuses being transformed into superhuman, anthropomorphic Titans and of thus contributing to the obscuring of the human interests behind apparatuses. But this objection is erroneous. Apparatuses are actually Titans, since they were created with this sole intention. This portrayal attempts to show precisely that they are not superhuman but subhuman – bloodless and simplistic simulations of human thought processes which, precisely because they are so rigid, render human decisions superfluous and non-functional. Whereas the 'humanistic' criticism of apparatuses, by calling upon the last vestiges of human intention behind apparatuses, obscures the danger lying in wait within them, the criticism of apparatuses proposed here sees its task precisely in uncovering the terrible fact of this unintentional, rigid and uncontrollable functionality of apparatuses, in order to get a hold over them.

Returning to the photographic universe: It reflects a combination game, a changing, gaudy jigsaw puzzle of clear and distinct surfaces that each signify an element of the program of the apparatus. It programs the observer to act magically and functionally, and thus automatically, i.e. without obeying any human intention in the process.

A number of human beings are struggling against this automatic programming: photographers who attempt to produce informative images, i.e. photographs that are not part of the program of apparatus; critics who attempt to see what is going on in the automatic game of programming; and in general, all those who are attempting to create a space for human intention in a world dominated by apparatuses. However, the apparatuses themselves automatically assimilate these attempts at liberation and enrich their programs with them. It is consequently the task of a philosophy of photography to expose this struggle between human being and apparatuses in the field of photography and to reflect on a possible solution to the conflict.

The hypothesis proposed here is that, if such a philosophy should succeed in fulfilling its task, this would be of significance, not only in the field of photography, but for post-industrial society in general. Admittedly, the photographic universe is only one of a whole number of universes, and there are surely much more dangerous ones amongst them. But the next essay will illustrate that the photographic universe can serve as a model for post-industrial society as a whole and that a philosophy of photography can be the starting point for any philosophy engaging with the current and future existence of human beings.