

# OLD VISION, NEW SEEING

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At the outset of this essay I would like to linger on several prevalent terms and ask: What is seeing? What's between seeing and photography? Are the conditions which enable seeing also those that sustain photography? Take, for example, an open window, a white wall, and a lens: If we place the lens between the window and the wall, an image of the window or of the view seen through the window will be projected on the wall. Photography, as we are well aware, is primarily a technology for the creation of such images, and more important – for fixing them. Every camera is also a camera obscura, a dark chamber, hence photography is an intense verification or the materialization of a primeval aspiration dating back to the Renaissance: the yearning for a perfect, permanent imitation of reality. If we observe such a fixed image (a photograph), we may see, time and again, the imaginary window that had been there – opposite the wall, opposite a chemical surface or a photosensitive, digital surface. Moreover, we may also see the view seen through that window. Just as we have learned to see by means of spectacles, telescopes, and mirrors, so we are capable of seeing through, or by means of, photographs. Photography is thus a potent instrument which enables us to see what our eyes would have seen had they been equipped with the ability to see that which is too small, distant, or fast to be seen. Photography has endowed the human eye with superhuman capacities, or so we have been told.

The analogy between seeing and photography is rife with tortuous connections and arbitrary assumptions such as those exemplified above. These assumptions, I believe, not only fail to explain anything about photography, but they also deny the human eye many abilities which it indeed possesses and ascribe qualities to it which it lacks. We do not experience the world with our head fixed in place, one eye closed and the other observing the world through a narrow cone, which allows for a fixed field of vision typified by uniform sensitivity, uniform contrast, and conspicuous perspectival distortions, registering color like Kodak Ektachrome film or Adobe 1998 color profile. Therefore, why discuss photography as an analogue (or an extension) of human seeing? Instead of saying that the camera shows us what we would have seen had we been in a given place at a given time, perhaps we should propose a different structure altogether, one which does account for the interrelations between seeing and photography.

László Moholy-Nagy seems to propose an alternative structure such as this, when he places a mechanical eye in a human hand.<sup>[fig. 1]</sup> What are we



[fig. 1] László Moholy-Nagy, *Foto-Qualität*, IX.1.2, 1931, magazine cover print

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László Moholy-Nagy, "Photography is Manipulation of Light" (*fotografie ist lichtgestaltung*), *Bauhaus*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1928, pp. 2ff.

2

Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana and Harper Collins, 1977).

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László Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," *Telehor*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1933, pp. 32–36; reprinted in Nathan Lyons (ed.), *Photographers on Photography: A Critical Anthology* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 80. A similar version of this phrase is found in Moholy-Nagy's essay "Photography is Manipulation of Light," pp. 48–49.

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Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," in *Photographers on Photography*, p. 76.

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Henry Fox Talbot called the camera the "pencil of nature," whereby "I made ... a great number of representations of my house ... And this building, I believe to be the first that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture." William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968).

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In this context one should mention Rosalind Krauss's essay which touched upon the crux of the matter: Rosalind Krauss, "When Words Fail," *October*, vol. 22 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 91–103.

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Moholy-Nagy, "From Pigment to Light," in *Photographers on Photography*, pp. 78–79.

to make of that little giant eye? What do Moholy-Nagy's upward or downward gazes, acute angles, and distorted perspectives see for us? What radical message do the photogram, photomontage, and photo-plastic bear?<sup>1</sup> The camera obscura was known to us long before Alberti formulated his laws of perspective. Centuries later it was fitted with photosensitive surfaces on which Niépce and Daguerre, Talbot and Herschel toiled. Moholy-Nagy, as an artist and a writer, delivers these surfaces from the dark chamber, as if to tell us: If the camera doesn't see like the eye, perhaps the eye may see like the camera. When I observe Moholy-Nagy's mechanical eye observing me, when I scrutinize those hands and the spiraling of light over and over again, I am inclined to say: if ever human sight will be as primitive as photography, than it will also be rich and sophisticated.

The false analogy described above gives rise to many ideas which apply to different fields and notions – from nature, through truth, to memory; for instance, the perception of photography as a trace imprinted in matter or as an index for real objects and events. In Moholy-Nagy's works these ideas dissolve and disappear entirely. In his view, photography is not a message without a code,<sup>2</sup> but rather a code with a message. This is what Moholy-Nagy implied in his famous words, which ought to be quoted repeatedly: "The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike."<sup>3</sup> More than eighty years have passed since these words were written, but they still resonate forcefully. While today we already know how to use the camera, we are still ignorant about photography.

In his essay "From Pigment to Light," Moholy-Nagy maintains that manual skill, the personal touch, has long been redundified.<sup>4</sup> Utmost precision and well-formulated rules, he believes, will replace the manual work, since the significance attributed to it was essentially erroneous. To paraphrase the poetical descriptions of another thinker-artist, we may say: only with the pencil of nature can the house draw itself.<sup>5</sup> Or, to put it in my own words: The hand no longer distinguishes between labor and fact, the light beam replaces the index finger, and from now on all it takes is to illuminate something in order to show it.

What is, then, the code that must be deciphered? Old modes of expression will not generate new forms. The eye in the hand does not want to see, but rather to write; to write words in light.<sup>6</sup> While many acts failed to produce new forms, says Moholy-Nagy, scientific experiments undertaken without such pretense have taught us about ourselves and the world.

Moholy-Nagy listed eight varieties of photographic vision: abstract seeing by means of drawing in light (photogram) in both color and b/w; exact seeing by means of "normal" fixation of forms of appearance (reportage); rapid seeing by means of an especially quick fixation of movements (snapshots); slow seeing; intensified seeing by means of macro lenses and various filters; penetrative seeing (e.g. X-rays); simultaneous seeing by means of superimposition of transparent and translucence materials (semi-automatic photomontage); and distorted seeing by means of prisms and chemical manipulation.<sup>7</sup>

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According to Roland Barthes, the major quality of photography lies in testifying to the represented reality, attesting that "the thing has been there." See: Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image" see also: Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans: Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 32.

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The building designed by Walter Gropius for the Bauhaus school in Dessau, Germany (the school's second home) appears in one of Moholy-Nagy's best-known works, Bauhaus Balconies (1926). After leaving Europe, Moholy-Nagy settled in Chicago in 1937, where he set up the New Bauhaus school two years later.

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The "Beast of Kandahar" is the nickname given to a remotely controlled stealth plane operated by the American Air Force in Afghanistan and elsewhere for surveillance and scouting. While the aircraft hovers over its destination, its operator is usually based in the United States, and the photographs it takes are broadcast to a control base in Germany.

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Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 24.

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Some of these varieties were already known in the 19th century, when photographers constructed their pictures from patches (the true origin of "cut-and-paste"). Other photographers taught us about the horse's gallop and about the flow of water. Wilhelm Roentgen and Henri Becquerel taught us about the qualities of materials and about various wavelengths. Although only a few of the eight types of seeing enumerated by Moholy-Nagy were new (while others were old-new), how is it possible that today, more than 80 years later, we have been left with a single variety of seeing, a single type of photography only – seeing which can tell us only: "having-been-there."<sup>8</sup>

Despite Moholy-Nagy's mythological status as an artist, a thinker, and a teacher, and despite the central place reserved for Dessau and Chicago in the development of the discourse of modern photography,<sup>9</sup> one should note: mythology has become prose, and the center has transformed into margins. Many of the possibilities predicated by Moholy-Nagy remained potential, and many of the varieties of seeing he listed are no longer seen. There is still no "new vision," and it is doubtful whether there will ever be. Seeing was new but the vision is already old.

Photography, like many other technologies, was invented long before the need for which it was intended was discovered. Like any other technology, photography also grants us certain abilities while denying us others. The ability to fix, signify, and record the impressions of seeing, still denies us the ability to see. Of the eight varieties of photographic vision introduced by Moholy-Nagy, we have been left only with exact seeing. We are still deprived of any ability to see through, from, or regardless of.

Photography was invented in the 19th century, and many of its principles were formulated in the 20th century. Contemplating the possibilities that remained orphaned and the growing gap between seeing and vision, it is hard not to ponder over what the 21st century will bring (or has already brought). Moholy-Nagy was a visionary, but he never lived to see the "Beast of Kandahar".<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the old vision of new seeing has been realized in this flying panopticon? The eye in the hand navigates an eye on a wing, which, in turn, shows, from a bird's-eye view, a world in which the eye cannot be seen and in which the eye is all-seeing. Man still does not see as a machine does, and the machine no longer needs man.

Let me conclude with the words of American philosopher Stanley Cavell, which are congruent with our time, an era in which we think we see everything, yet we still know nothing. Perhaps with these words we may find a new path to an old vision: "The camera has been praised for extending the senses; it may, as the world goes, deserve more praise for confining them, leaving room for thought."<sup>11</sup>