

Releaser.

(For: PhotoVision, Madrid).

The photo camera comes equipped with a catch, a push button. If one presses it, the camera takes pictures. This does not seem to surprise anybody. But it surprises me that nobody is surprised by it. Of course; I know why one takes such buttons for granted. Everybody is accustomed to them. I press such a kind of button, and my room is lighted. I press another such button, and my TV starts showing pictures. I press a series of such buttons, and this text is impressed upon a sheet of paper. A terrorist presses such a button, and an airplane explodes. The America president will one day press such a button, (a red one), and civilized life on Earth will be over. So, if this sort of button is omnipresent, why should it surprise us? Still: if you come to consider such buttons a bit more closely, you will agree that there is something uncanny about them. If pressed, they release an automatic process, over which you have no control, although it is you who have decided to press them. Here an example taken from Camus: you decide that life is not worth the effort. You put a revolver against your head and you press upon the releaser. A very complex mechanical and chemical process is released, it is an automatic one, and you cannot control it. In what sense may it be said that you have decided "freely" upon suicide? I do not wish to suggest that taking pictures is quite like committing suicide. It is less final. Still: is not there something suicidal about it?

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The first thing that strikes us, when we come to consider such buttons, is their extraordinary quickness. They work like lightnings. They do not hesitate: they strike. Which is to say that they are extraordinarily stupid. Even a rattle snake may hesitate while striking, and snakes are not famous for their superior brain structures. But if I say that the photo camera is an extremely stupid rattle snake, I underestimate it. It does not need to be intelligent: it is programmed. And when I press upon its button, I do not release its own intelligence, but the intelligences of those who have programmed it. It is therefore incorrect to call automatic apparatus "ultra-rapid idiots": they are ultra-rapid canned intelligences.

No wonder they are ultra-rapid: the push buttons they come equipped with move within the realm of particles whose velocity is close to that of the lightning. They move within the realm of the infinitely small and very rapid. Still: they produce effects in the realm of human dimensions: they take pictures, light rooms, permit people to commit suicide. And they even produce effects in the realm of astronomic dimensions: they release missiles which travel through space-time. Thus the releasers mix up the three layers of the famous universal sandwich: the layer of the infinitely small, the layer of human dimensions, and the layer of the enormous. When pressing a camera releaser, we get the feeling that we are introducing into human dimensions something that is foreign to it. While photographing, man is no longer "metron panton", and he knows it.

The extreme velocity of push buttons abolishes our experience with mediations.

Their result is "immediate". When we use a tool, (for instance a lever), we know that it mediates between ourselves and the world. It takes time before the action we have decided upon comes into effect. Decision and action form a sequence: I decide, and the tool acts after my decision. It is my mediation. Not so, where releasers are concerned. Decision and act coincide: they form a single instant. Instant photography is therefore no mediation between photographer and world. The extraordinary quickness of push buttons no longer permits the ancient distinction between decision and act, and therefore between subject and object. Angels are said to differ from men in that with them decision is action, "free will". To photograph is an angelical gesture. Let me therefore call photographers "hell's angels".

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The second thing that strikes us, when we come to consider push buttons, is that some of them come in groups, and others come single. The groups push buttons come in are usually called "key boards". For instance: there are seven buttons to my TV set, and about fifty to the typewriter I am now using. Those buttons are somehow married to each other. The button on my photo camera is a bachelor, and so is the switch on my table lamp. Which poses the problem of choice in a way revealing of what we mean when we say "freedom":

The key board permits me to choose between buttons. It does so in various manners. On my TV set the choice is simple: to each button corresponds a channel, and the board permits me a choice of channels. On my typewriter the choice is more complex: to each button corresponds a sign, but the signs obey to rules which order them into text lines. The typewriter key board permits me a choice of texts, if I submit to the rules of the game of writing. It thus looks as if my choice on the TV set were "more free" than my typewriter choice, but this is of course an error. I am more free with my typewriter, precisely because there are rules which limit my choice. As for single push buttons, (like in photo cameras), I have apparently only the choice to push them or not to push them. This "all or nothing" choice, this "to be or not to be" dilemma, has, as I said before, something suicidal to it. To photograph, (and to light a room), looks like a miniature suicide. Still: when pressing the releaser on my camera, I have the clear feeling of a free decision. Which may be taken as a miniature proof of the statement that the ever present possibility to commit suicide is the essence of freedom.

It may be held that my example of the typewriter key board is not a good one. Those buttons are tips of levers which transport mechanically a sign on to a sheet surface. They do not move like lightning. I can see through their motion. The typewriter is a "white box". Whereas with the TV set I can do no such thing: it is a "black box". This is undoubtedly true: the typewriter is not (yet) an apparatus. Still: there are word processors. And the example of the typewriter permits me, precisely because it is a white box, to see what we mean when we talk about choice and freedom where black boxes like TV sets and photo cameras are concerned. We mean the decision to press a button. Which is not quite what people meant when making the American or French revolutions.

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The third thing that strikes us when considering push buttons is that they come in two kinds. The first kind "emits" something, (for instance photo pictures). The other kind "receives" something, (for instance a TV program). Now, at first sight this is as it should be. Man is a being which either "emits" into the world, ("publishes what was private"), or "receives" from the world, (privatizes what was "public") This is precisely what Hegel called "unhappy consciousness": If I go out into the world, I lose myself, and if I try to find myself I lose the world. But if one considers the buttons more closely, they show that Hegel does not work any longer:

I switch my light on: I privatize what was public, namely an electricity current. But in what sense was it public? Of course: the generator which emits the current may be a "public utility", but it may also be a privately owned one. And the electro-magnetic field through which the current has travelled is not a "republic" in any meaningful sense of that term. I push upon a camera releaser: I publish what was private, namely a picture. But in what sense was it private? Because it was "in my head", or because it was in "my" camera, or because it impressed itself into my head or my camera from outside? Consider a TV-set button. I push it and I privatize a public image. In what sense was it public? Because it went through a public channel? Because it was elaborated and manipulated in a public place called "TV emmitter"? And in what sense has it now become private? Because it appears in my kitchen? Because it was I who have chosen it from among other pictures? All those are inconvenient questions. The terms "private" and "public" no longer mean quite what they meant before the invention of buttons. They blend one into the other. The generator, the electro-magnetic field, the TV channel and the camera are both public and private. Even my kitchen has become public, since the President of the Republic may step into it, uninvited.

Which plays havoc with all our political ideas and values. To be committed politically is to publish. (For instance: this paper is my political commitment). But is a photo the photographer's political commitment? To be sure: he pressed a releaser, and the releaser released a picture. But wherefrom did it release it, and whereto? There is no good answer to this question, if we are honest about it. But I suggest a different sort of answer: The two kinds of buttons, the "emitting" and the "receiving" one, are not as they should be. Those are mistaken kinds of buttons. All the buttons should be of one kind only: they should, all of them, permit both "emission" and "reception". Like the telephone key board. Once all the buttons are built that way, there will no longer be any problem of distinguishing what is private and what is public. There will no longer be any problem of private property and of political commitment. Everything will become "dialogical", beyond the public and the private. This transformation of all the buttons into "dialogical" ones is called "telematics". It is in the making.

The photo camera, as it is now, does not permit this solution of the photographer's political dilemma. It can do nothing but emit pictures. But once the camera is electro-magnetized, (which is soon), the situation changes. It will then become possible for the receiver to change the picture and send it back to the emit-

tor. This sort of ping-pong will result in ever new "synthetized" pictures. There will be two, (or various), apparatus involved, which come equipped with buttens permitting picture emission, picture manipulation, picture transmission, and picture reception. To photograph will no longer be a private or a public affair, but a form of dialogical, and informative, communication. The photographer will no longer have any political dilemma. He will be part of a dialogue which aims at producing ever new information. Thus the two kinds of buttons, the "emitting" and the "receiving" one, (the "productive" and the "reproductive" one), can be seen as a first and yet imperfect stage in the tendency toward "universally dialogical" buttons, toward a true society of information.

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But what strikes us most when we consider push buttons is the fact that it is our finger tips which "command" them. This is not what finger tips were used to do, before buttons were invented. This was the pre-button situation: We used to have hands which manipulated objects in order to change their form. This used to be called "working", and hands were considered tools for changing the objective world. Those hands used to have fingers which seized and investigated the objects before they were manipulated. This used to be called "conceiving", and the fingers were considered tools for investigation, ("heuristics"). And those fingers used to have tips which pointed at the objects to be seized, investigated and manipulated. This used to be called "pointing out", and the finger tips were considered tools for "sense giving", (semantics). With the invention of buttons all this has changed out of all recognition. Our finger tips press upon a button, and the apparatus does what the hands used to do, (robots), and what the fingers used to do, (artificial intelligences). We are far from understanding the impact of this revolution.

Take what happens if I press upon the releaser of my photo camera as an example. I do not work: the camera does it for me. I do not investigate: the camera does it for me. I point out to the camera what sort of work and what sort of investigation I intend it to do in my place. I am reduced to my finger tip, and all the rest is now within the black box, which I "control" without knowing what goes on within it. Now of course: this amputation of my hands and fingers, perpetrated by the camera releaser, must have profound consequences on me, but those are outside the scope of this paper. What I want to stress here is the fact that the releaser has reduced my being to pointing out, to commanding, but that it has also released me for pointing out and for commanding. I need do nothing else but pointing out and commanding: my finger tips are my being-in-the-world.

To point out, to point at, to command, is an imperative gesture. It "imposes". It is "intentional". Husserl has shown what it intends, what it imposes: it imposes meaning, ("Sinngabung"). The camera releaser releases me of the necessity to work and to investigate, and it releases me for the possibility to impose a meaning. A photographer is not one who works or who investigates, (those are archaic terms when applied to buttons), but one who gives a meaning to the world and to life within the world. Photographs are not "works of art", nor are they "documents which investigate", but they are imperatives, "models" for behavior, experience and knowledge.

Now that push buttons are eliminating work and investigation, (hands and fingers), and are concentrating attention on sense-giving, (finger tips), we may, for the first time ever since man has become man, begin to live a "full life". We need no longer bother to change the world, (apparatus will do it for us), nor to explain the world, (artificial intelligences will do it for us). We may now concentrate on giving our lives a meaning. And to do this, we shall push buttons. This is in fact what is implied in the so-called "third industrial revolution". That people are no longer active in the "primary and secondary sectors", but that they now act in the "tertiary sector", in "services", in programming, in giving a meaning. The photo camera releaser is one of the first manifestations of this revolution. And the photographer, as he presses his button, is executing a gesture characteristic of a new and emerging society: he is a "new man".

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Summary: Releasers are revolutionary gadgets. They are meant to permit control over apparatus, but, if pressed, they release an automatic process over which those who press them can have no control, (example: thermo-nuclear apparatus). They move with a velocity comparable to that of light, and therefore permit no hesitation: each pressure on a releaser is a definite decision, (example: suicide with a revolver). By their velocity they introduce a dimension into the human world which is not a human dimension, (example: switching on light). Their effect being "immediate", they can not be considered to be mediations, (they are not tool-like). They grind decisions into point-like decision quanta, (each one must be pressed with a single decision), and they thus pose the problem of freedom as a problem of a discontinuous series of "all-or-nothing" choices, (example: typewriting, TV-set). They confound the distinction between what is private and what is public by opening up all private spaces to public invasion, and by thus privatizing all public spaces, (examples: TV, electric current). They thus impose a new sort of political action, (example: telematics). Finally, they render unnecessary all work and all investigation, (examples: robots, artificial intelligences), and they release man to concentrate upon giving a meaning to all work and all investigation, (example: programming). Releasers are revolutionary gadgets, because they quite literally change man's being-in-the-world.

All this may be observed if one considers the releaser on a photo camera more closely. All the examples cited above are recognizable within the photo camera releaser. To photograph, (to press a releaser), is a gesture which articulates the change which is at present occurring in man's being-in-the-world. A philosophy of photo camera releasers is in order.