

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 10

Photography

by

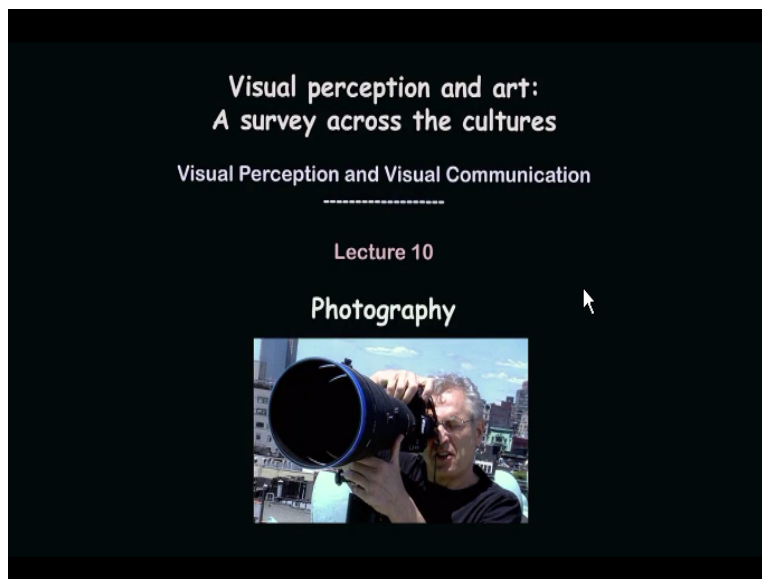
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Visva – Bharati

Welcome viewers, welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures.

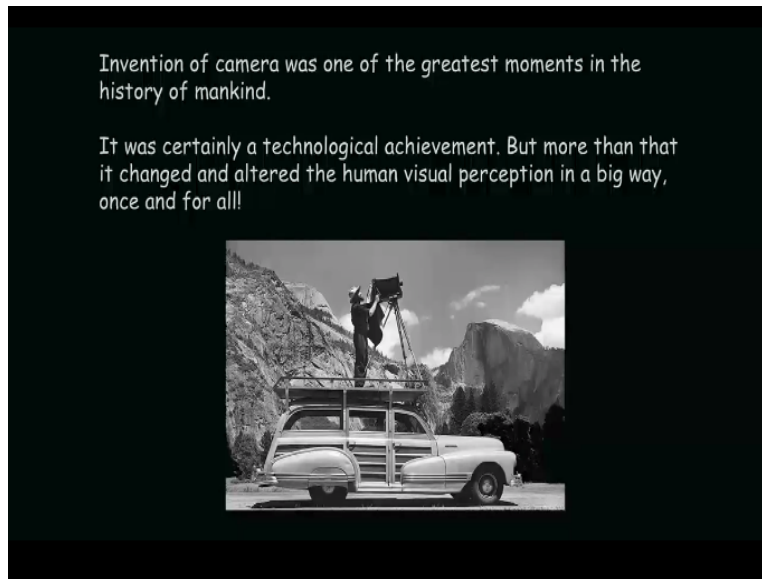
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This is the tenth lecture today and in this lecture we will be discussing photography and its role in changing and altering our visual perception. It is undeniably true that after the invention of camera and after the emergence of photography as a major visual tool in our daily life, and in also, in various sectors like advertisements, journalism, even in our personal memories, and all photography has played a very significant role to the extent that it has not only changed the way we look at the world, but it also changed the way we look at painting.

Because photography now demonstrated that it was able to do certain things able to depict the life and objects in a very, very realistic manner, making painting or the job of the very realistic academic painters almost useless. So in a sense photography overtook that position, but looking at photography from a different angle photography also opened up new spaces, new ways of capturing incidents, events, sights, locations so on and so forth.

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Invention of camera was one of the greatest moments in the history of mankind, no doubt about that. It was certainly a technological achievement, but more than that it changed and altered the human visual perception in a big way once and for all. And it is not at all difficult for you to come up with ideas and guesswork we do not even need to guess, you know that how and why photography changed and altered our visual perception.

The very fact that photography or camera as a tool was almost replacing or behaving like a parallel eye for us itself was a very, very strong kind of experience for mankind until the invention of camera, we had this pair of eyes, the only pair of eyes through which we could make sense of the world we are inhabiting. Now we have another eye which is called lens, lens of the camera which not only functioned parallelly like an eye, but it began to behave in peculiar ways, it began to expand its function, expand its abilities and power and capabilities to the extent that even our eyes biological natural light could never match.

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When you look at few very early examples of photography like this 1911 photograph of the city of New York, or the hand of man that is what it is called because it is one of the earliest kind of photographs of a railway engine, approaching you the viewer. But even in this early photography you can see certain things, certain elements happening which only a camera could do, I mean capture a particular moment, captured a particular situation which when captured gets so still, and stagnant, and permanent.

Then you are bound to look at it from a different kind of perspective, I mean something like the wave the smoke belches out of the railway engine we all have seen that, but we have never seen that captured in one particular fraction of a second unless and until the camera captured it.

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So camera started capturing moments and situations for us enabling us to see them to look at them in a way we have never looked at it before. Then we have not just moment, but a light situation we are all very, very familiar with the changing like situation around us. I am not saying that it is only after the emergence of photography, after the appearance of camera that we learned how to look at light.

We all have been looking at light and in the traditional culture the painters, and sculptors they were everybody was very much familiar with the quality of life the character that light keeps changing all the time and all these factors, but then the moment a particular situation of light, a combination of light and shape gets trapped within the frame of a photograph. Then we begin to see light in a different sense, we begin to experience and enjoy that light situation in a different way.

And we, I think we begin to take care of these elements something that we had always considered very common, very banal that we never bothered to look at them carefully. Now camera or photography makes us aware of this phenomenon, aware of the situations very vibrant situations around us all the time.

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Harry Callahan



Weeds Against the Sky, Detroit. 1948



Eleanor, 1951

A photography like this one taken in 1948 in Detroit by a photographer called Harry Callahan called weeds against the sky is a photograph that comes very close to a pen drawing. Note that this photographer is trying to emulate or imitate a pen drawing, but a photographer can actually play with the contrast, can play with light and shade that is tonality, and can create an image which comes very close to the sensibility of a drawing.

In fact a photographer if he or she wants can make a particular photograph look almost like a painting.

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The concept of 'visual reality' became the most crucial idea to encounter now.

On the one hand, photography appeared to be too real to avoid; on the other hand photography was identified as a tool to 'reconstruct the real'.



Once again these photographers nobody is actually imitating photography or emulating photography, nobody is trying to have an replace painting everybody is trying to create a new language of photography, everybody is trying to create a new language of photography, but many of them are also having the language of painting in their mind. So new kind of visual perception now emerging.

The concept of visual reality also became the most crucial idea to encounter now apart from the light situation, apart from this element of moment in photography what is visual reality becomes a very, very important question not only for the photographers, but also for the viewers who are looking at the photograph, because of the one hand photography appear to be too real to avoid. And on the other hand photography was identified as a tool to reconstruct the real.

So the question that we arrive at finally is whether photography is completely and totally reliable thing that is if photography, is it able to replace the visual reality or photography is actually not a visual reality the way we expect photography to almost replace the visual reality, or copy the visual reality, or kind of make a very, very faithful copy of the reality, no, often it seems that photography is a visual reconstruction.

So what it is finally, is photography a visual reality itself or it is a visual reconstruction, because in many cases the photography looks like as if you are looking at it, as if you were there behind the camera, as if this view could have been viewed without the camera that is the case with the

left hand photograph, but when you look at the photographer the right hand, there of course you find something else is happening.

Probably you might have also noticed and observed some strange juxtaposition of architectural corners or buildings in light and shade and black and white things like that, but when a particular photograph is clicked and framed by a particular photographer, then this particular vision this very specific vision is reconstructed for you, if that photographer was not there, probably it was not possible for us to see the same thing in this particular light, in this particular composition.

So broadly speaking there are two kinds of visual realities that a photographer deals with, one which is also called a candid photography, where you do not intervene much and the other where you do intervene and reconstruct the reality in order to make an independent visual statement. And mind it both these kinds of photography influence and change our visual perception to a great extent.

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What is real? Do the photographic artists have the same right to invent reality that a painter or sculptor does or should photography always be bound by what can be put in front of the cameras?

Both representation of the *real* and reconstruction of the *real* became problematic.

So the question is what is real? Does the photographic artist have the same right to invent reality that a painter or sculptor does, or should photography always be bound by what can be put in front of the camera, both representation of the real and the reconstruction of the real became problematic. So the very fact that the photography as the camera has a tremendous freedom of capturing anything that it wants, is often contradicted or challenged by the other notion that no, it is also limited, it is also constrained by certain limitations.

Because camera however mechanical it might be as a device has to be handled by a brain or an eye with a brain behind it, because every snap that you are taking, every frame that you are trying to capture is an active and conscious choice. And it is the choice that makes everything very subjective, hence this is also another very important aspect with regard to the understanding of photography and visual perception that photography though it may apparently look very neutral, it is not a neutral video.

It exercises a choice, it exercises certain kind of position that is a cultural position, social position, even a physical position. It exercises also the freedom to alter the frame, or transform the frame mechanically during the process.

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So when you look at a photography like this which is apparently the image of a very common place thing in an urban life. But a photographer makes you see a very common thing in a very extraordinary way, the way you have not looked at it before. Hence by this process it is also influencing your visual perception, camera or no camera, photography or not, next time when you go out and take a walk down the street you, there are chances that you would also begin to look at things from a different angle.

And with a slightly different intention also to enjoy the composition of black and white to enjoy a wonderful juxtaposition of light and shade to enjoy a certain kind of peculiar perspective which you might have otherwise avoided or you might have left it unnoticed. Then photography in the context of visual reality also plays the function of capturing some very, very important extremely stunning moments of visual reality, social reality, political reality, for the rest of us to see.

Because there are locations in places like a war zone, for example, where common people cannot reach, only soldiers can reach and photographers can reach.

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So photographers from the war front send us photographs of battle scenes, of violent images which otherwise we would never have a chance to witness unless and until we go to the front and witness the war. So it is in this sense certain visual reality is exceptional in photography it can be done only through camera it can be done only by photographers and hence the visual reality it is trying to capture also becomes very exceptional.

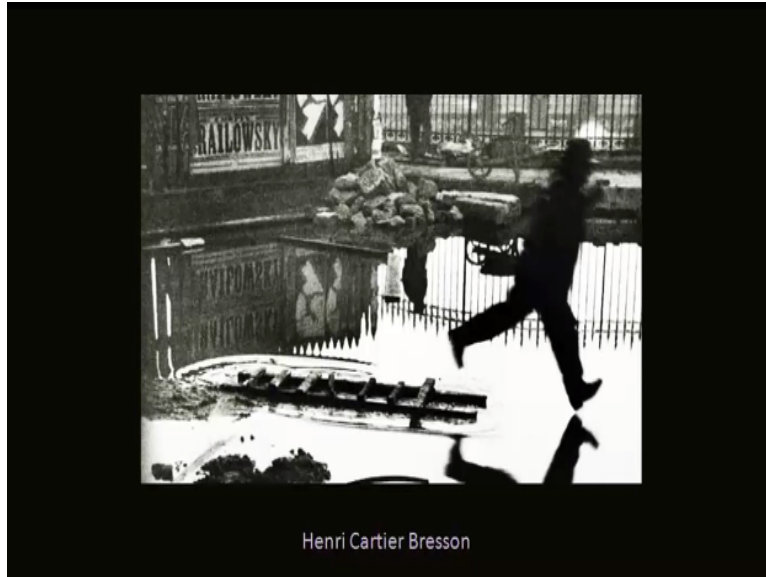
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Then certain enhancements are often made like this photography, by this particular photograph by Man Ray or wonderful and a very talented surrealist artist once experimented a lot with photography in this particular photograph simply enhance the teardrops, and water drops which look like teardrops on the face of this woman, and thereby creating a strange surreal sensation, because this is not exactly the way tears roll down our cheeks.

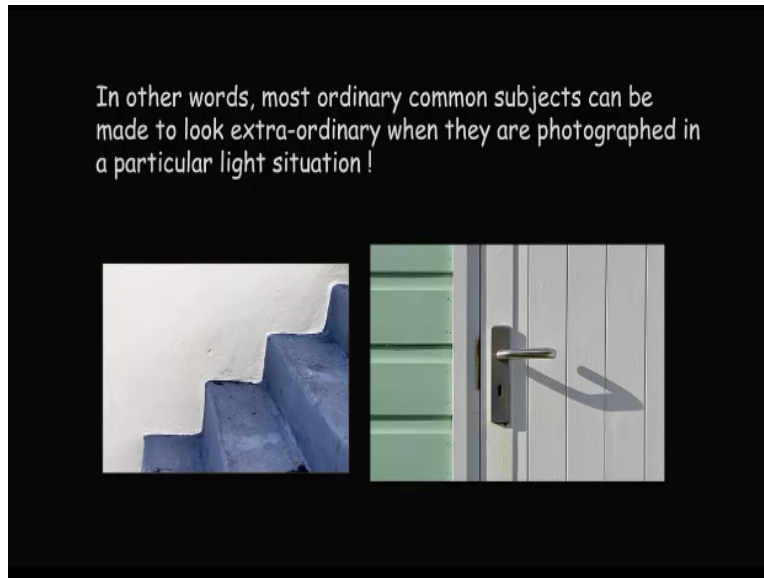
So he is creating some water droplets and he is leading them right on the face itself thereby creating a strange expression. So like Man Ray we have many photographers even today in contemporary times who use photography not only to change and influence our visual perception, but also to change the notion of art itself. So we have art photography today where the medium of photography is used to create some stunning artworks, and art objects, where you do not expect to see the visual reality, but we expect to see a new conceptual reality in those photographs.

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Henri Cartier Bresson as you might already know was one of the greatest photographers who really excelled in trapping the exact moment of emerging out a very banal, very ordinary situation like this one.

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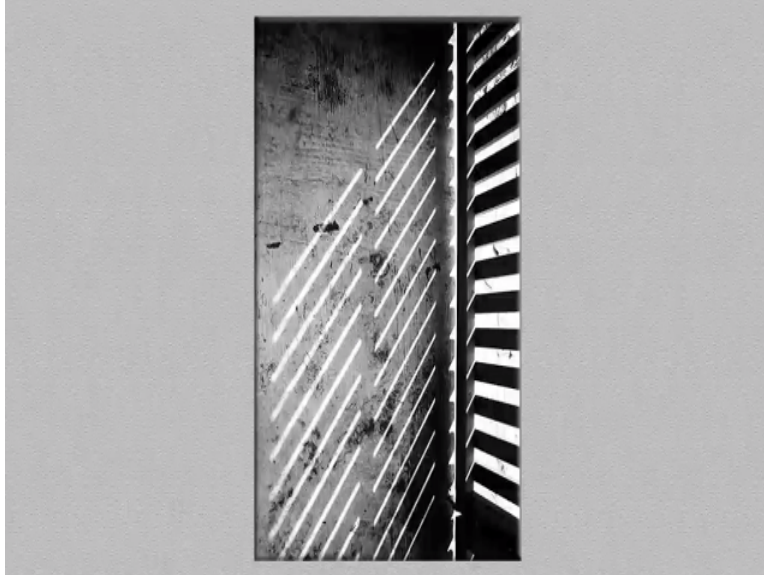


So in other words most ordinary common subjects can be made to look extraordinary when they are photographed in a particular life situation, or from a particular angle, or in a particular moment. So it is this transformation that I was talking about which affects our visual perception in a big way, making a very common place thing, making a very ordinary thing or situation or object look different.

You can always argue that can also be done in painting, in a painting you can also if you want paint a situation, or an object, or a thing, or a figure in a way that it might appear exceptionally different and beautiful to our eyes, I totally agree that it is possible, but it is never possible the way of photographer does it, because the photographer always has this position to claim that I am not painting it or drawing it, I am simply passing on the visual reality to you.

This is very interesting because the photographer never paints on a blank surface, never draws on a blank surface, he captures a movement or a situation from the real life, and it is this direct contact with the real life that empowers the photographer with a different kind of claim.

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Like this one it is supposed to be a very, very ordinary situation. All of us might have encountered something like this light passing through, coming into the room, through a venetian blind and thereby creating some pattern. But the moment you take a photograph and get this particular visual experience framed within a rectangular space it becomes a different experience, you can keep staring at this photograph for a long time, for many minutes.

But in the real life situation you might have simply looked at it and turned your face away from it. Why it happens that in a photograph a very ordinary object can draw our attention in a way which fails to draw attention in real life think about it. And later let us know what do you think could be the possible reasons that world behind this extraordinary power of photography which is able to make the most ordinary things look extraordinary or something like this.

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A very, very simple photograph but when captured from a particular angle in a particular moment it looks different.

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So, and particularly when it is about the human expression a photographer waits always for the right moment. And what appears to be the right moment for one photographer can be different from another photographer, it varies from photographer to photographer.

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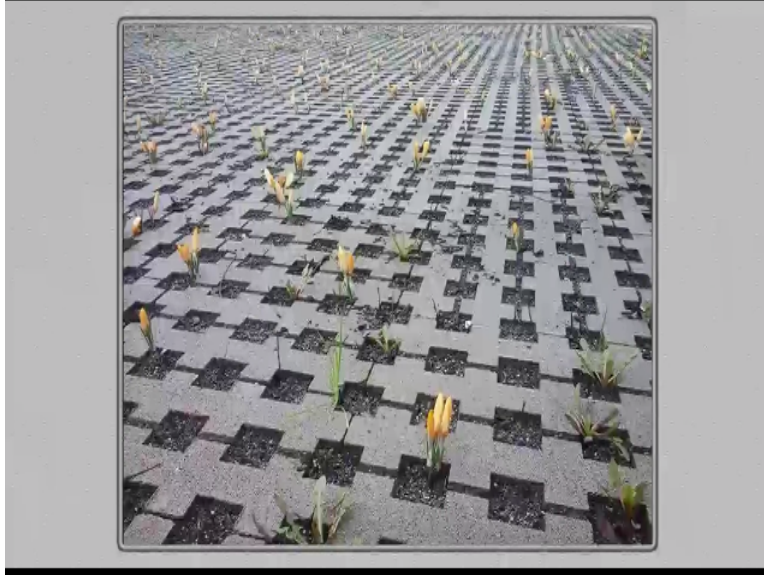
Because photographic visual perception gives us this freedom this liberty to be extremely subjective in terms of choosing what we call the right moment. So there is nothing called a right moment, a perfect, classical right moment in photography, there can be hundreds of right moments it all depends on the photographer to choose the right moment which suits her or him.

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So very banal images like this look very interesting maybe as a pattern, maybe as a color combination, maybe as a geometric juxtaposition when they are photographed.

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And it evokes different sensations, different memories, it evokes even different emotions. So the angle of camera can create some peculiar patterns and combination of patterns which in our naked eye might fail to see or notice like this one.

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Or a landscape like this one.

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And also this human touch this very emotional touch that is often captured by many photographers like this one.

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In fact when a photographer himself is photographed by another photographer this also gives us a scope to study. So this is not really the moment or we do not have the scope to study this in great depth, but I suggest that if you are interested you can actually study how the street photographers create and operate within a different kind of visual ambience, different kind of visual world creating an artificial backdrop with painted architecture or palace or Taj Mahal, asking the customers to stand or sit, right in front of it and creating another virtual goal for them.

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Not just light, but also camera angle and the right moment.

This is called the most decisive moment!



So it is not just light, but also camera angle and the right moment and this is called the most decisive moment for any photographer.

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Photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot.



So photographs are not as is often assumed a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that site from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snap shots.

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So capturing the moment is often the most challenging task of any photographer like this one and that definitely alters our visual perception, because we do not chase a capturing movement it happens in front of us, but for a photographer one has to if he or she is a photographer, he or she will have to change the right moment, change that wait for that moment, and get all his senses so alert that the moment it happens his or her hand or fingers automatically presses the shutter button.

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So you can go through this photographs and make your own analysis that why this particular photograph is different from the other, and in what sense each of these photographs can have an influence or an impact on our visual perception.

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Camera --

be it still-camera or movie-camera,
emerges as the new 'Eye' of human civilization.



In the film 'Man with a Movie Camera' by Dziga Vertov made in 1929, this concept of a 'new eye' and thereby a new visual perception has been explored very significantly.

It has been said that camera be it still camera or a movie camera, it emerges as the new eye of human civilization which I have already mentioned. There is a film called Man with a Movie Camera by Dziga Vertov made in 1929, he is the Soviet Russian filmmaker. And this concept of a new eye and thereby a new visual perception has been explored very significantly in this particular film.

So he is using film to explore the possibilities and the life and the life changing experiences of a camera though it is in this case is talking about a movie camera, but we can actually replace many of his findings also onto our still camera, and it is almost like having an experience if your still camera or movie camera whatever its style or it if it starts to replace your eyes what happens to our world particularly our visual world.

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I am an eye, a mechanical eye.

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I the machine show you a world the way only I can see it.

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I free myself for today and forever from human immobility.

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I am in constant movement.

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I approach and pull away from objects, I creep under them.

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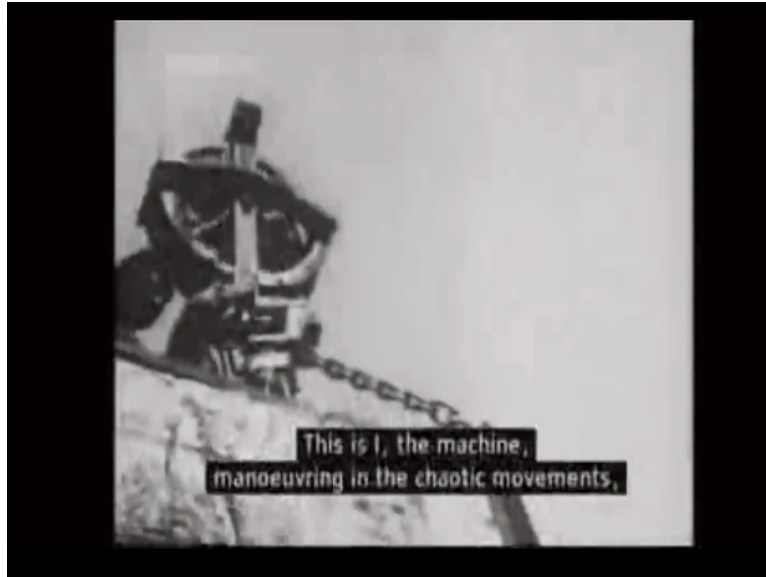
I move alongside a running horse's mouth.

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I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies.

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This is I, the machine, maneuvering in the chaotic movements.

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Recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations.

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Freed from the boundaries of time and space.

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I coordinate any and all points of the universe wherever I want them to be.

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My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world.

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Thus I explain in a new way, the world unknown to you.

So you might have followed what he was trying to say, but at the end of this lecture let me repeat that text.

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*"I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility.
I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations.*

Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you."

This quotation is from an article written in 1923 by Dziga Vertov, the revolutionary Soviet film director.

As if the camera is writing its own biography, the camera says I am an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I am in constant movement. I approach and pull away from the objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies.

This is I, the machine, maneuvering in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world.

Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you. So this is the text that you just heard and also read in the subtitle of the film clip which we saw. It explains in the briefs, but in a very, very significant way in a very meaningful way, the existence of camera is not about just the emergence of a mechanical device, it is the emergence of a new kind of visual perception, thank you.

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