

The story of the frogs and the Titanic.



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by Pedro Meyer

I have often been surprised how many things change around us that we do not notice on a day-to-day basis.

There is this famous experiment with frogs where if you take a frog and place it in a pan with water sitting on a stove, and then heat the water slowly until it boils, the frogs will eventually die in the boiling water having never jumped out of the pan. However if you take a frog and place it in that same pan containing already very hot water, the frog will jump out immediately and save itself from being fried to death.

How does that apply to us with regard to digital photography, you will ask. I'll tell you. Most people do not quite realize that the technological changes that are taking place around us on a daily basis are a bit like the boiling water. I do not suggest that we will die as a result of all these changes, but certainly they can introduce substantial changes in our livelihood to make the going rough, that is unless we sit up and take notice of what is going on, and plan accordingly.

The first thing we should be aware of is that digital photography is only a very very small part of the overall technological revolution going on in the world. The significance of this notion has to do with how we envisage the depth of the technological transformations surrounding us. Some photographers entertain the misguided notion that what is changing

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for photography is like some option that you can choose to ignore. Like choosing between types of film, papers, or cameras, for instance.

Well of course you can always choose to ignore anything, some people in fact have done just that, in the midst of a war they choose to ignore the reality surrounding them, usually with quite perilous consequences. Some members in my own family ended up being exterminated in concentration camps during WWII because they could not bring themselves to believe that what was going on had much relevance to their personal lives and therefore acted accordingly.

So let us review a few ideas that can shed some light on this story. If digital technology is already prevalent in all our telecommunications, and will soon become part of how television is broadcast; cinema is to be presented; and if video, and photography are now all going digital; nothing to say of all the gadgets in cars, kitchens, toys. It is affecting how we shop; how we entertain ourselves; how we learn and educate others and ourselves; conduct business; deal with sports; how medicine is being practiced and last but not least, how war is being carried out with digital technology being an integral part of modern warfare. If all this is taking place, then I believe that it is a safe bet to state that we can only view digital technology as it is applied to photography as a very small companion to this massive technological transformation of all our societies.

To somehow consider that photography could or would remain an isolated island not subjected to all these transformations is nothing short of delusional.

Obviously, you can dismiss all the evidence that is out there and suggest that it will not come to pass in quite such a dramatic way as I suggest. The problem with that approach is that it does not recognize the speed of change (remember the frog?). I must admit it is a difficult call, to know how fast things will actually change (heat up); but change they will, about that there is, I believe, total certainty. So if things are to change sooner or later, my personal inclination is to take the bull by the horns as early as possible, not leave it for later. The advantages are obvious. Those who change first, have an important competitive advantage over those who become involved at a later stage.

Changes are always difficult to adapt to, so if something is to begin with, already complicated, why not make it easier on oneself by assuming the needed changes on your own terms, rather than waiting till they are imposed on you by external conditions?

I have already seen instances of photographers who refused to implement digital technologies into their production, loose significant portions of their business to other photographers who could produce at a far smaller cost, equally compelling work.

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I have seen business after business dealing with the printed image, in one form or another, fall on the way side just because the onslaught of technological changes introduced changes so great that they could not cope with them, in due time.

For those just starting off in life and pondering where to go and learn about photography, my advice is to choose those places that offer the most advanced information as to what is going on now. To go today and learn all about darkroom work is like training in steam engine technology. Interesting? Probably. However, to earn a living, probably not.

In a recent discussion with a friend of mine who runs a teaching institution, he was telling me that today the number of students seeking work shops and wanting to learn traditional technologies (both in film and photography) was considerably higher, than those asking for digital equivalents. I was not surprised at all, with that piece of information. After all, the momentum is just starting in the direction of digital technologies. But think about it, if it takes you four years, let us say, to cover all the learning you have to do, then would it not make sense to learn for what is going to be needed four years from now?

When you emerge from your four year training period, you would probably want to have acquired those skills that are needed at that time, not have to start all over because what you learned is no longer applicable in the market place. For instance, you learned how to work wonderful prints in the dark room only to find out that the local newspaper that can hire you, is all digital and not interested at all in your dark room skills (they don't even have a dark room anymore). Or you go to the local museum archive, and discover they are now working only with digital technologies. You turn up at a corporation to work in their internal publications department, as a photographer, and discover they now work all digital; you set up your studio to do school pictures, and discover that your competitors do all their work using digital formats, underselling you by a wide margin. We can go on, in every possible direction and the story will always be more or less the same.

Some of the worst offenders in this transition period are the very people who should be leading the learning curve, the teachers. Too many are simply holding back others for fear of making their lack of knowledge the issue. They argue and defend the "old regime" simply to maintain their privileges and cover up their ignorance. Many times even their superiors lend support to such attitudes for lack of real knowledge of their own. All of this will simply have to work itself out in a Darwinian evolution of the species, with the survival of the fittest. With the statistics showing us that in the United States, 48 million youngsters between 5 and 17 use computers, that is 90% of that population, we see that in a couple of generations the change over will have been completed in spite of the teachers who are holding others back.

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Many of the kids are actually teaching each other rather than waiting for an adult to come up with solutions. Games are one example, some of these are quite complicated to understand and deal with, yet six and seven year olds, are managing quite well to teach each other in a network of information that should make adults take notice. I have yet to see the equivalent network of my seven year old and his friends, with that of my photographer colleagues and their willingness to participate in such structures. Their spontaneous idea of sharing knowledge within their network is a world apart from that of adults who would benefit mightily from such an approach.

The Titanic as it appears, did not have to crash into the icebergs the night that it sunk, the disaster could have been averted by merely paying attention to the elements surrounding them and acting accordingly. Captain Smith ignored seven iceberg warnings from his crew and other ships. If he had called for the ship to slow down then maybe the Titanic disaster would not have happened. Arrogance also seems to have also been an important part in the mistakes made that night. The belief that the ship was unsinkable.

We should be able to take our cues from the frogs and it should be possible to see that the disaster aboard the Titanic did not need to happen. In much the same way, the photographers' learning curve to acquire the working knowledge to be proficient in the digital age which is not an easy or quick one, should be dealt with in a timely manner. I have said it in many forums; the most difficult part of it all is to have the time needed to learn and practice. As any surfer will tell you, you want to ride the crest of the wave, not have it come crashing down on you, we therefore need to think ahead and look around to understand what has to be done and we need to network.

In that spirit, let us have a discussion on this topic, the benefit of the Internet is that it is a two way street, and you can express your opinions in our forums. Give us examples of why you agree or not with your own personal experiences and what your plans are to deal with the undergoing changes.

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