The Renaissance of Photography

Written by Pedro Meyer

A Keynote Address by

Pedro Meyer

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It's with the greatest of pleasures that I take this opportunity to share with you a few thoughts and ideas regarding the technological sea changes brought about on photography, which I believe will affect all of us here tonight.

If you can believe this, at one time I was also ten years old. Between my tenth and thirteenth year, my life changed completely: I had discovered the existence of photography.

I can well remember those moments when I would hold my breath as my eyes visited those little white sheets of paper immersed under a liquid, watching as the magic of the image would appear before my very eyes. I must tell you that I thought that those precious moments of shear amazement would never come back to me, ever again.

But lo-and-behold they have, almost forty years later, with the appearance of personal computers. Only this time the initial excitement has never ceased; every week there is yet a new development which makes last week's surprise look tame in comparison. Twelve years later, the magic continues for me on a daily basis, it never ends, because I'm always starting.

What had captured my imagination as a child were some very modest sheets of paper, exposed by contact and developed in tiny 5x7 trays precariously placed over the toilet seat. What has captured my imagination more recently has been the Internet, a medium which offers something just as unassuming but exhilarating as those initial small images. Only this time they appear on the screen instead of the developer. Here I am, fifty years later, being able to tell you with great excitement that my days of childhood are starting all over again.

Nice as this sounds, I also know that what I find so exciting and pleasurable is not every person's cup of tea. I am well aware that for many of you the simple idea of "new technologies" causes ripples to go down your spine.

Already Nicoló Machiavelli identified in his most famous work, The Prince (1532), "Nothing more difficult than to invent a new system, nothing more dangerous, since the possibilities for success are few. Whoever wants to build a new system makes enemies of all those who benefited and had privileges in the old system, and will receive little support from those that will derive the most benefit from the new order. Their reservation is due on the one hand to their fear of those that oppose them, the defenders of the old regime, and on the other, their skepticism; they don't

believe in the new as long as its superiority has not been proven"

Let us listen to the words published on the Internet by a modern day skeptic: "In a culture where new and alluring technology tends to easily seduce us by its wonder into a kind of sleepy stupidity, we need personal defenses for protection from our own dangerously naive enthusiasm. In this world of blinding techno-hype, our survival demands that we learn to shield ourselves from the seductions of technological eloquence"

He goes on to state: "Culture always pays a price for technology. For every advantage a new technology offers, there's always a corresponding disadvantage. All technological change is a Faustian bargain".

With this sort of simplistic rhetoric one doesn't get very far, given that one could easily apply the same logic to anything in nature. For example, wolves have recently been restored to the Yellowstone National Park, after discovering that they represent a very welcome and needed element in the ecosystem of the park and after having been hunted into near extinction. This return of the wolves has been accomplished over the strong protestations of those that perceive such wolves as a threat or at best a nuisance. Tobacco brings harm to millions of smokers, yet it also represents a means for survival to tens of thousands of farmers. Yesterday's floods bring along the promise of new yields in the crops of the following season. As you can observe, the

threat of catastrophe, or a "Faustian bargain" can be found wherever one chooses to look. It goes without saying that for every advantage there will always be a disadvantage. Otherwise, how to explain that people do drugs, expose themselves to AIDS or defend the right to own a gun.

I have yet to find evidence for many of the theoretical fears presented by those who declare themselves as guardians of the good order. It goes without saying that technologies can be abused, but so can antibiotics, and this hasn't stopped them from being used properly. I guess that anyone can take issue with something that is exaggerated in its application. As Nicolas Negroponte recently pointed out, even reading for five hours every day is probably not in the best interest of a child, as good and important as reading might be, one has to introduce diversity in a child's upbringing.

How about all those arguments against technologies because they alienate us, or dehumanize our relationships, or what have you; they seem to be more often than not just a provocation. People in pursuit of their ambitions have wrecked more havoc on mankind through their greed, than any examples of technology I can think of.

I don't believe that the present day tribal wars in Africa, with hundreds of thousands killed, have much to do with computers, but with the problems left behind by the departing colonial powers, or for that matter, the dead-end in the lives of literally millions of human beings brought on by the bureaucracies out of control in the socialist nations of the recent past, they had nothing to do with computers either. If anything it was their absence on which so much of their power was based. Lack of controls and information have a wonderful way of ofuscating the goings-on behind the scene. The destruction brought about by massive bombing missions in Vietnam and Cambodia, as the ex-secretary of defense MacNamara recently pointed out, was the folly of politicians and their personal ambitions, not of the tools they had available for inflicting destruction on to others. Those same tools could have been used in a legitimate way for

defense purposes as the title of the office he held is named.

When we blame technologies for many of our present day ills, we tend to forget where we come from. The history of mankind throughout the ages and civilizations hasn't been precisely an ideal model which one could say has worked so brilliantly, were it not for technologies. Far from it, if anything, I would venture to say that the overall quality of life has improved to some degree by their use, even though this has been accomplished unevenly between rich and poor, and north and south. One can still see improvements even among those groups which some reactionary anthropologists would like to keep protected from what they say are the "evils" of modern day life. Where "hand made huaraches", which are very hard on the feet, are exalted, these same critics have no compunction in wearing themselves the comfortable sneakers they so decry for having displaced the huaraches.

I find the practice of child abuse or sexual harassment to be a lot more pervasive and responsible for social ills, than any of the much maligned new technologies. I don't believe that one can embrace anything without a critical eye, but having said that, it's also in our best interest to delve beyond the facile commentary based on other simplistic interpretations, to the point where in some intellectual and artistic circles it's almost considered as a badge of honor to be ignorant of what technologies have to offer, let alone actually use them.

I know we have strayed a bit from our course, but then I hear quite often many of these arguments against technologies which makes me consider that these issues are better addressed at the outset, rather than have them linger on in the background without being discussed. Should you agree with some of my premises this leaves a bit more room to immerse ourselves in the issues pertaining to the world of photography without being distracted or dismissed for "our sleepy stupidity or our dangerously naive enthusiasm", as that critic on the Internet would have it. Even though his observations where not addressed to anyone in particular, I consider that at the very least they deserve to be rebutted.

Given that the topic I suggested I would speak about is the "renaissance of photography", we can't overlook the fact that we find ourselves amidst a total revolution the likes of which have not been seen since the onset of the industrial revolution. Photography is but a tiny part of this recent technological sea change, and the transformations are not only in the tools we might decide to use, but in how we as people will eventually respond to some of the issues brought about by such changes. One of the fundamental topics deals with our perceptions of the world as seen through the looking glass of photography.

Let us concentrate for a moment on one of the hottest issues around, and which keeps so many minds in fierce debate and at odds with each other. I'm talking about the "representation of reality", issues such as THE TRUTH in photography (whatever that means for each one of you). It has puzzled me time and time again, why this item of "veracity" should be such a hot topic, when in fact the issue of reality and its representation is such an old one, which precedes photography by literally, centuries.

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I am reminded by Maurice Tuchman (Senior Curator Emeritus at the LA County Museum of Art) that crucial chapters of the story of art history have suggested that art's highest achievement is, in literal effect, duplicity: the counterfeit of the appearance of the natural world. According to legend there was this competition between two rival Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasisus; Zeuxis painted such realistic grapes that the birds flocked to peck at them. Confident he had demonstrated his superior artistic skill, Zeuxis demanded that Parrhasisus unveil his painting, so that the comparison could be made.

Triumphantly, Parrhasisus revealed that the curtain covering his painting was in fact the painting itself -Zeuxis himself had been deceived.

I think it's time for us to revisit our collective notion of what a photograph actually deals with. It's my impression we have been pecking at photographic images for the last one hundred and fifty years, much like the birds did with the grapes in Zeuxis painting, trusting we were dealing with reality itself. Only now with a heightened awareness brought on by the notions of what digital photography can accomplish, are we beginning to discover what photography was all along: the very act of deception. Parrhasisus has won once again. The black and white "Moon rise over Hernández" by Ansel Adams, was just that, the photograph itself, and not the landscape.

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Mark Haworth-Booth, curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, guides us with patience and great care through the intricacies of what Camille Silvy had accomplished in his 1858 image named "River Scene, France" by creating an image composite from various negatives.

In his revealing study, Haworth-Booth narrates how Silvy's "River Scene, France" may appear to have been taken with a wide-angle lens, and goes on telling us "but this effect results in part from the optical effect of the oval format. A rectangular mask placed over the photograph establishes a quite different general impression. The clouds, as they do in the photolithographic version of Aguado's 'Ile des Ravageurs', greatly accentuate the perspectival depth". The difference clouds make to a landscape was well described by a contemporary critic: "A sky should convey the effect of space, not surface, the eye should gaze into, not upon it, and

instead of coming forward and throwing back every other object it should retire and bring the landscape into prominence. Landscapes without skies, with only a uniform white tone above the ground, were found wanting by critics. They lacked atmosphere. But the blue sensitive negatives of the time made landscapes with skies an almost impossible challenge."

Figure 11. COUNT AGUADO. *Ile des Ravageurs, Sèvres*, circa 1855. Photolithograph after a photograph by Aguado, 27.3 × 39.5 cm (10¾ × 15⅞ in.). Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

Silvy apparently solved the problem by photographing a landscape and the sky separately, on separate negatives, and probably on different occasions and in different places. He joined landscape and sky at the printing stage. This process had already been publicized widely by Hippolyte Bayard in 1852. This method became a widely accepted practice at the time.

With great foresight, Mark Haworth-Booth consulted in 1982 with Ansel Adams, as to his interpretation of "River Scene, France" and these were the words in the letter of response: " You will note that there is a dark value in the trees above the bottom cloud line. This indicates that the masking was not done adequate in this area (it is not apparent in the trees to the right)". He also detected "something 'phoney' about the light-edged clouds along the horizon; they look to me as they were retouched in." Adams also thought that "the little shed on the left looks dodged or 'bleached'". He pointed out that "there is no reflection of the clouds, the water foreground has been burned-in and the roof of the little shed is in the area of the main burn-in, and

consequently darker than expected.... The right hand side of the picture is in a different light from the left hand side. There is a definite 'dodging' area above the roofs on the far left." Adams concluded, we are told by Haworth-Booth : "It is pretty good optically. The 'old boys' did some remarkable 'cut and paste' jobs; I am surprised that the green foliage comes through so well....Apparently it was quiet water and very little wind (if any)".

After reading these remarks I recently asked Sarah Adams, if she thought that her grandfather would have taken to digital photography, to which she responded:

"Yes, we believe Ansel would have been immersed in digital technology. Several possible reasons:
a. More environmentally sound
b. Archivability / restoration of older negs
c. Greater access to color realm
d. The newness of new tools; recently learned that at the 1915 Pan-American exposition in SF at the age of 13 he taught himself quickly the art of typing and taught others at a booth!!?!:)
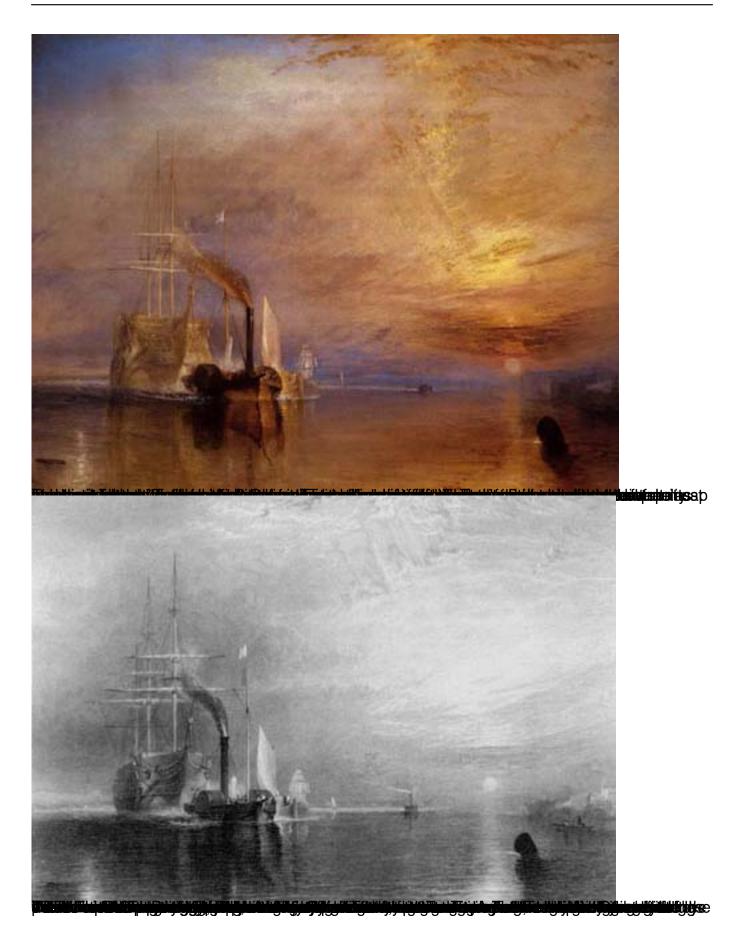e. Access to photographic manipulating tools: dodging and burning, etc."

I was intrigued by her response, in particular to the last sentence, where she refers to the tools of manipulation, with the dodging and burning, leaving, as I see it, the most important opportunities of digital transformations in the realm of the etceteras. In an oblique manner however, she does acknowledge all that can be accomplished with such tools, as she leaves the door open with that very useful expression that fits so well when we need to be imprecise, etcetera.
I don't say this in a critical manner, because there is no room for that; my observations relate to the anecdotal value of how someone chooses to describe what promises to be the biggest transformation of photography since it was first discovered. She is certainly in plenty of good company when it comes to describing the tools that promise to unlock the future of photography as etceteras.

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During a recent trip that I made to London, I came across a wonderful painting by Turner at the National Gallery: "The Fighting Temeraire". This particular painting created a furor at the time, because the painter had taken the liberty, for aesthetic reasons, to alter the right order in which the tug's masts and smoke stack ought to go. We are told that the most telling detail in the picture of the ship is a vacant space. A jack-staff would formerly have been fixed to the top of the bowsprit cap; it is now missing. When in harbour, and she had been in harbour for 26 years, the "Temeraire" would have flown the red, white and blue union flag from her jack-staff. From the moment that she was sold out of the Navy, the "Temeraire" could no longer fly the flag. Where the union flag once flew, the tug's smoke now ascends. The full poignancy of the lines Turner adapted from Campbell can now be understood:

The flag which braved the battle and the breeze, No longer owns her.

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This Pulitzer Prize winning photo by John Filo shows Mary Ann Vecchio screaming as she kneels over the body of student Jeffrey Miller at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. National Guardsmen had fired in to a crowd of demonstrators, killing four and wounding nine.
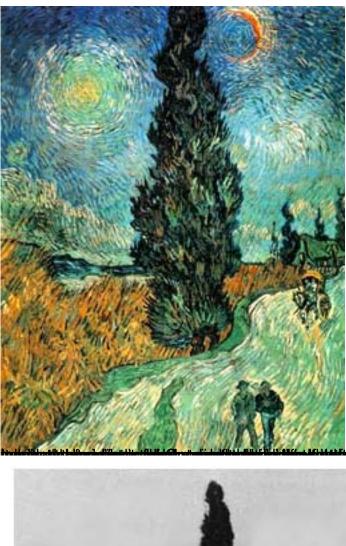
(left) - Copyright 1970 Valley Daily News   (right) - As appears in Life Magazine, May 1995

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Here are some comments taken from NPPA-L, the National Press Photographers Association email listserver, and from messages posted to the above address:

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