

The Heart of Zeros and Ones

Written by Chip Simone

Bless me Father for I have sinned.

It has been thirty-five years since my last confession and this is my sin,

I bought a digital camera, a five megapixel digital camera.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

This is a meditation on the state of photography in the digital age.

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The advent of digital imaging has given rise to heated discussion and rabid debate. Photographers who are invested in the traditions and ways of the past feel threatened. And well they should. Digital technology has changed everything.

For most of the 20th century the entire notion of what a photographic image is was never in question. It was seen as a straightforward process that followed cardinal rules toward a fixed conclusion. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the photograph has been reincarnated. A digital capture is not a singular thing. It is a starting point, a point of departure that can go off in many directions at the same time. The photograph as artifact has been transformed into an electric chameleon with a throbbing heart of zeros and ones.

More than thirty years ago futurist Alvin Toffler rightly predicted that it will not be the inevitability of change that will challenge our culture but the ever increasing and telescoping rate at which change is occurring. Those that, for whatever the reason, can't or won't keep pace are destined to find themselves on the side of the road grumbling at the train whizzing past.

But there is a point that needs to be made about photo-technology and the rate of technological advancement, especially digital technology. The rate at which change is occurring today must be seen in its own light and not presumed to be happening at the Jurassic pace that silver-based materials evolved. All indicators suggest that silver materials have de-evolved. The number of silver-rich films and papers that were once readily available has shrunk to a handful. There were once 120 kinds of printing paper. In my career I have seen the demise of Opal, Medallist, Brovira 111 and Portriga Rapid, to name a few. The quality of the remaining products are generally sub-par compared to earlier products, though we have come to view them as acceptable in the absence of comparatively richer materials. Fine papers will soon be made by boutiques and costs will soar. Film choices will eventually exclude black and white. Black and white images will be extracted from color film via digital process. It is an economic inevitability.

On the other hand, it would take a blind photographer not to see that research and development in the digital sector is advancing at a dizzying rate. It is a computer based technology and, as such, it moves in the sweep of the atmosphere in which it was born. Change is essential nutrient of technology.

It is clear that the digital arena is sensitive to the needs of both the marketplace and traditional photographic values. Tonality, fidelity, longevity are areas where digital technology has made profound advances in a remarkably brief period of time in response to market place concerns. Who will argue that in the very near future ways will be found to equal, mimic, or surpass, the virtues and perceived qualities of any desirable photographic method. Technology is not static and neither is the market place.

I worked with an 8"x10" field camera for a decade. Today I find it easier to justify the use of digital technology than I do the provincial and quaint 19th century practice of setting a cumbersome camera on a stand in order to photograph stationary objects. Perhaps more importantly, I resent the amount of time that it steals from my life. Dilettantes like to busy their hands but artists look for the most appropriate and expedient method of expressing the creative impulse.

I am not impressed by the argument that because digital output isn't made of silver that it is therefore an inferior form. That is simply bigotry. Digital is what it is and it has immense expressive capability. The realization of its inherent potential is all that matters. A remarkable

number of dedicated, accomplished and masterful photographers, spanning several generations and representing the full spectrum of styles and methodologies, have embraced the digital realm and continue to proclaim its creative potential. Many extol its ability to exceed the limitations of traditional methods and find liberating the digital tools that, while seemingly simple at first blush, clearly demand as much finesse and artistry as any other expressive discipline. The passion, excitement and reinvigoration of the profession in light of this unfolding technology is, to me, the strongest evidence of the significance of digital photography.

The camera has been my lover for forty-three years. It has brought me pleasures and sensations beyond the physical realm. It has been my teacher and my mistress, a teller of stories, a third eye, and a spinner of truths. It sees an amazing world and shows it only to me. Without it I am just another blind man.

In all these years my love for the camera have never wavered, but the camera itself has undergone remarkable transformations. It has become more refined, more intelligent, more sophisticated. What even the most sophisticated camera doesn't do, however, is something that cameras have never done. The camera doesn't define what photography is. Neither does the lens, the film size, pixel count, or the type of final output. Photography isn't a noun. Photography is a verb. Photography is what I do. It is a deliberate and willful act. It can be an expression of hope, an act of faith, or fear, or lust. It can be joyous or excruciating. But photography is not a camera.

Which brings up the last point, the lamentation of change, the fact that many people see the rapid rate of change as a bad thing, a marketing scheme designed to keep us panting breathlessly for the next toy. True, with the speed of advancement and change many products will have much shorter lives. But where should we tell them to stop? Where should we cap the inventive mind? Should imagination have boundaries? Where would we be if Medicine figured that it had gone far enough with sterile surgical tools, or x-rays, or bleedings, or leeches?

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No, bring it all on I say and let artists not yet born determine what beauty next becomes.

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/heart01/heart01.html>