

HA512 – The Photograph: Culture, History, Aesthetics
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2nd Essay:

“Does digital photography and its associated technologies signal the end of photographic realism?”

“A work of Art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament”

Émile Zola

Birth and advancement of digital photography has tied various loose ends in terms of the philosophy of painting and photography. Either interpreted as a U turn or a main step forward, depending on the point of views, it is a fact that digital photography and its associated technologies enabled artists to boil down several movements and concepts in the same pot. While tying the 'loose ends', inevitably it gave birth to rise of some other arguments too. Analyzing the identity of art, painting, photography and the hybrid elements, this essay focuses its argument on the main complexion of the mediums of photography and painting. The question of whether digital photography and its associated technologies signal the end of photographic realism, holds a main part in this argument. Yet, it wouldn't be coherent to search for an answer to this question without taking a wider perspective.

Since the dawn of time, art has been a way of representation – more than communication – and a way of depiction of images, characters, places, events and ideas. And since the dawn of time, until Renaissance, the representation of ideas was definitely not independent from representation of tangible objects and images. Today art has reached a level where its cardinal aim is to express ideas and concepts of all kinds – free and virtually indefinable. Following the path of Romanticism and Realism this change at the cardinal aim (change of the identity of art) begins with Leonarda Da Vinci's 'camera obscura'. "It was Alberti (Leone) who first suggested the idea of considering a painting as a window through which we look at the visible world. It was Leonardo Da Vinci who gave substance to this idea by suggesting that perspective is nothing else than seeing a place behind a pane of glass, quite transparent, on the surface of which the objects behind the glass are to be drawn."¹ As the concept of 'perspective' was discovered and art was pursuing to be more realistic than symbolic, paradoxically, art's identity was becoming more and more abstract. So how come art became abstract, free and indefinable as more and more realistic artworks appeared? Moreover, considering the theory that 'art has always been free', one might even ask why were/are there conventions, manners and movements anyway? This ironic and intriguing question leads back to Andre Bazin's mummy complex and art's slavery to religion which furthermore leads to the identity-substitute function of art.

Following Andre Bazin's footsteps, one can say that at the origin of painting, sculpture and photography, lays the mummy complex – surviving against death, depending on a tangible body or object. "It is no question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny"². This can also be interpreted as "art's ancient function as the identity-substitute"³. This function of art has been ever so powerful that in Islam, painting was prohibited and considered a sin. Where Islam was born and outstretched as a rebellion against paganism. One can postulate that this prohibition was due to prevent any attempts to substitute the identity of God; to banish the concept of idols of Paganism. On the other hand, in western culture, art had become the substitute for propaganda. Moreover, unlike Islam, in Christianity art had become an idol of God (identity substitute / identity of God) with the very 'Cross'.

"When Rome began to subjugate Greece, art went into slavery. The early Christians employed it as a means to propagate their doctrines. The oriental idea of teaching by parables spread in their community, and we find the art of the catacombs enslaved to the new mysticism which arose on the Pagan ruins. The gorgeous monstrosities of

¹ Gombrich, E.H., *Art And Illustration*, Phaidon Press, London (1960) p.253

² Bazin, Andre., *The Ontology of The Photographic Image*

³ Friday, Jonathan., *Andre Bazin's Ontology of Photographic and Film Imagery*

Byzantium were also made a serf to religion. At last, in the twelfth century, we find the Art of Italy developed into a national art, but still a slave to the church. Beautiful things were done, but alas, the great men of that period had to paint to order, to paint what are called the works of imagination, in other words untruths; and what was the consequence? A surfeit of madonnas, annunciations, presentations, massacres and other subjects, which are diametrically opposed to true art.”⁴

While art’s identity and its ‘identity-substitute function’ are presented and taken to account, under its light the question of ‘if photographic realism has come to an end’ is to be examined. In contrast to Romanticism, Realism delivered a non-ideal and realistic approach to subjects of the artworks. “The medieval artist, like the child, relies on the minimum schema needed to make a house, a tree, a boat that can function in the narrative.”⁵ Birth of photography was the ultimate alternative to ‘minimum schema narrative’. “One of the motives contributing to the development of photography was the desire for a technology that would allow a person, even one with little talent for drawing, to capture on paper what he or she saw.”⁶

After the industrialization and with the arrival of the age of mechanical reproduction, photography was Realism itself. The element of Realism associated to photograph was beyond its identity as an art medium; that it took half a century for photography to be commonly accepted as art. Alfred Stieglitz refers to photography in his essay in 1899 as a ‘bastard of science and art’. It “...was not the result of a single inspired moment of genius. Economic, political and social circumstances counted just as much as scientific criteria, lucky observations and the intuition of a few clever men. During a period of two critical years (1839-1840) photography took a decisive path, whose success and survival – which were not achieved straight off – determined its technical future and its fields of application. At the end of 1840, the general principles of photography, which would be based on the concept negative, had scarcely been sketched out.”⁷ Its mechanical character and rapidity and ease of production had caused a solid prejudice against the artistic attributes of the medium. Yet, the realism of the photograph even expanded the aesthetic concerns.

“Photography extended the conventions of art by exploring new pictorial approaches, especially with regard to composition... since the Renaissance if not earlier, we have come to expect in Western art a carefully balanced picture, one often build around a central point of importance. Photography, with its instantaneous capturing of a world in flux and the relatively causal usage permitted by the small handheld camera, accustomed us to a sometimes asymmetric, sometimes cropped image whose edges might be of more visual importance than its centre.”⁸

It was the way photographs were produced which evoked the artistic character of the medium. The very primitive and basic techniques like gum bichromate, bromoil

⁴ Bazin, Andre., *The Ontology of The Photographic Image*

⁵ Gombrich, E.H., *Art And Illustration*, Phaidon Press, London (1960) p.248

⁶ Savedoff, Barbara., *Transforming Media: Painting, Photography and Digital Imagery*, The Photography Complicates The Picture

⁷ Frizot, Michael., *A New History Of Photography*, Konemann Press, Koln (1998)

⁸ Savedoff, Barbara., *Transforming Media: Painting, Photography and Digital Imagery*, The Photography Complicates The Picture

and carbon pigment process had involved a certain initiative of the photographer over the products of this mechanical process.

The amount of interference by the photographer, during the print making process in the earliest years of the medium, can be considered as the starting point which leads to the acceptance of photography as an art form. This recognition of photograph as an art form was inevitably not free of the rise of new arguments; “By 1900 the advocates of photography as a fine art had already divided into camps – the purists and the Pictorialists. Both groups rejected the accumulation of the fact through optical precision in favour of individual expression, but the purists thought it sufficient to obtain the perfect negative, where as the Pictorialists sought the beautiful and picturesque through various manipulative printmaking process... Many of these processes such as gum bichromate, bromoil and carbon pigment processes were certainly hybrids, combining photographic reproduction with varying degrees of hand control over colour, tone and detail.”⁹

The purist and Pictorialist manners/views were the proof that photography was now recognised as an art form by considerable audiences. The control over the colour, tone and detail shares the same philosophy with the digital photography.

Then came the use of soft focus, improvement of lenses, special filters, albumen paper and heavy manipulation in the darkroom. But the renaissance of photographic manipulation and digital photography initiated with ‘Kodak Digital Camera System’ and ‘Adobe Photoshop’. The ‘ultimate representation in art’ was now the subject matter under the moulding of systematic and complex tools.

“1991... was the year that the Kodak Center for Creative Imaging opened in Camden, Maine. The Center provided a unique educational setting where photographers and graphic artists could explore the creative use of the latest technologies. It was an extraordinary environment where, in just a single visit, photographers’ perceptions of photography were fundamentally changed upon the realization of an entirely new set of imaging tools and creative options... The new tools included the Apple Macintosh computer, Adobe Photoshop 1.5, the Kodak DCS 100, and the Kodak XLS 7700 Thermal Dye Sublimation Printer. Reactions to demonstration with these tools were consistently the same – eyes opened wide and jaws dropped in amazement. Many photographers became instant believers, eagerly embracing the new technology. It’s safe to say that with these tools, the Center became the place where people started referring to ‘photography’ as ‘imaging’, and photographers began calling themselves ‘imaging artists’ and ‘digital photographers.’”¹⁰

Once photography had been recognised as an art form, still it was considered by some to be dependent on being an ‘imitation of painting’. Straight Photography was the opposite of this, trying to bring photography to its full independence. “Just as sculptors at the beginning of this century debated the merits of carving against those of modelling, so camera artists debated those of straight against manipulated photography.”¹¹ Straight Photography’s aim was to depicting an image as realistically

⁹ Taylor, John., *Pictorial Photography in Britain 1900-1920*, Shenvall Press, London (1978) p.7

¹⁰ Kasai, Akira and Sparkman, Russel., *Essentials of Digital Photography*, New Riders Publishing, Indianapolis, USA (1997) p.23

¹¹ Weaver, Mike., *The Art of Photography 1839-1989*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London (1989) p.7

and objectively as permitted by the medium. A notable Straight Photography group titled 'Group f/64', created in 1932, states in its manifesto as follows:

"...The production of the 'Pictorialist', on the other hand, indicates a devotion to principles of art which are directly related to painting and the graphic arts... The members of Group f/64 believe that photography, as an art form, must develop along lines defined by the actualities and limitations of the photographic medium, and must always remain independent of ideological conventions of art and aesthetics that are reminiscent of a period and culture antedating the growth of the medium itself."¹²

So, after 1991, the rise of the digital photography was tended to be seen as a fatal blow to Straight Photography. "We are at an exceptional time for photography, as the art world embraces the photograph as never before."¹³ However it should not be evaluated as the end of Straight Photography or Photographic Realism. Straight Photography or Photographic Realism or Painting, one can not deny the artistic value of the works of Man Ray, Richard Hamilton, David LaChapelle or Dimitri Daniloff. Furthermore it is not a matter of 'denying' but 'claiming one manner is superior or more true than the other' seems pointless among this plethora of manners and styles. In a comparison between a portrait work of Diane Arbus and a portrait work of David LaChapelle, one cannot/shouldnot state that one of them has more art value than the other. Their accomplishments in their works go beyond the difference in their manners. Paradoxically this is because the manners are so different. But through completely opposing manners, both artists apply their interpretation and narration successfully. One can even say it is like comparing Caravaggio with Picasso. With more hybrid artworks like collages, photographic manipulations and possibly infinite manners one can't help but think of valuating all images and pictures under the same embodiment.

"In our study of the language of art we have come increasingly to stress one fact – the power of interpretation"¹⁴

In conclusion, digital photography and its associated technologies should not be seen as a replacement for the photographic realism, nor should it signal the ends of photographic realism. If there's one thing for certain, digital photography does bring photography closer to painting by the extensive increase in the interference to production. One can say digital photography worked mostly on the psychological level, in relation to the identity of the medium itself. Thus, concerns of the Pictorialist and concerns of the Straight Photography, even Surrealism and Realism fall under the same embodiment. Embodiment of the two mediums; painting and photography. What digital photography and its associated technologies did was delivering a better and unconstrained understanding of the identity of this 'one' embodiment. This unconstrained understanding stresses on the vision of virtually limitless opportunity of tools and manners.

Digital Photography is the cyborg/mecha of painting. Just like the mankind is destined to co-exist or even merge with the technology and artificial intelligence he creates, painting and photography are destined to merge under one embodiment. Everything is not art, but everything can be art. It is the way an artwork is presented and interpreted that matters. Highlighting the aesthetic interest, it is the idea/feeling/'punktum' of the work that deserves the attention more than the tools and

¹² Wikipedia, *Group f/64*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_f/64

¹³ Cotton, Charlotte., *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Thames&Hudson Ltd, London (2004) p.7

¹⁴ Gombrich, E.H., *Art And Illustration*, Phaidon Press, London (1960)

the manner. Displacing the focus on a work of art's dedication and relation to its subject matter, aspiring independency from the medium, digital photography is on its way to merge painting and photography, if it has not already actualized it.

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