



SIZE matters

(and some other related matters)

by *Diego Goldberg*

This is, more or less, what we know:

A slow (?) but inevitable exodus towards electronic media is taking place. Even though the paper made of wood is being transformed into electronic-ink paper, and is still called paper, the fact is that this is one of the new forms that will be adopted by computer screens. We are talking about e-ink, iPhone, pad, computer, TV, flat screen or projector, we better get used to the idea that these will be the means through which information will be disseminated, and these will be the places where photography will continue to expand.

The exponential growth of the number of photos taken by people in every kind of way since the advent of the Digital Revolution –digital cameras, cell phones, etc- has caused photography to invade every corner of the planet, and has helped the ongoing evolution of the capacity to see, create, judge and reevaluate the use and importance of still photography.



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In spite of the emergence of new visual expression media, such as TV, cinema and the Internet, photography has maintained its validity and despite the constant complaints about the “death of photojournalism” there are more and more photographs being published.

The Holy Grail of the use of photography in a journalistic or documentary context has been the "Photo Essay". In other words, the intention of using more than one image to build a story. W. Eugene Smith continues to be the main referent, and even though it is not necessary to copy the structure of his stories, there are some concepts that remain valid, and that explain why the photographers are still trying to get them published.

This is too obvious and needs no further explanation; a single image is not enough to explain a complex subject. Not all the pictures have the same "value", due to their form, or their contents. As the title says, "size matters", and it matters a great deal. Each image needs an ideal size to express itself. Gursky's "99 cents" needs to be seen in the wall of a museum, an image by Nachtwey is perfectly fine in a magazine, an ID photography looks good in a passport.



"99 Cent II, Diptych" Andreas Gursky.

A story, whatever the media –text, cinema, TV, music- has a dramatic structure. It has a beginning and an end, emphasis, relevant and not-so-relevant elements; central subject matters and peripheral subject matters, characters, climates, etc. All of them are tools used by the storyteller to convey what he or she is trying to say, in a better and more effective manner.

In addition, in visual media, the layout and design, play a chief role: a double homepage, different sized photos, more than one picture per page and the relation between captions, downloads, epigraphs, main text and the images. All of these elements, when used properly, help to realize the full potential of each one of them.

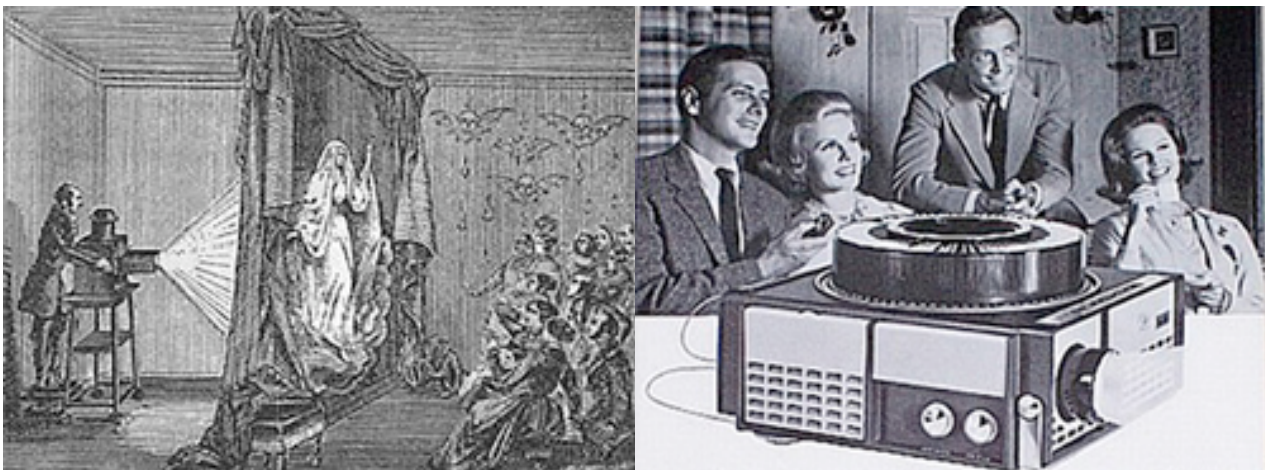
In the current paper-based platform, either in magazines or in newspapers, the struggle for space is vital. There is not a lot of it, it is expensive and has to be shared both with the text to be completed, and with advertising, and frequently they are in opposition.

This was the state of affairs before the Internet. Suddenly, an unexpected space opened up, a virtual place that no one had foreseen, a new platform to show our images, and full of possibilities.

Photos look very good on screen. The other alternatives, such as e-ink, are still on an early stage, but without question, we will get to a point in which images will be reproduced with the highest quality. On the other hand, the cost of uploading one or several pictures is exactly the same.

Images don't have to compete with advertising; they dwell on their own space. The only limit (apart from connection speed, another thing that continues to increase) is creativity.

Nevertheless...



So far, the experience is almost discouraging. There is more quantity, but this doesn't mean more quality. The aesthetics of slide projection remains unsurpassed. We still have to endure a slideshow similar to the vacation pictures of a relative; every picture has the same size, the same value and the same time on screen.

Looking at a photo is a "willful" action, and the time one decides to spend in each picture is decisive. One stops, enters into it, tries to read it, to understand it, to make discoveries. Information has to be deciphered. This triggers ideas and feelings, and carves them into our memory. The power of the still image is summed up here. In an attempt to enhance storytelling, audio and video have been added in the Internet. Sometimes it works, but sometimes is like a reinvention of television. And the linear, automated structure of the narration, most of the time prevents us from stopping to contemplate an image that appeals to us more than others. Of course, this can be done, but it

interrupts the development of the story, and this surely does not happen with a reader.

And when speaking about the reinvention of TV, I can't understand the idea of photographers becoming TV cameramen to narrate their stories in a new medium: the interactive newspaper. It's not that exploring new media of expression is wrong, what is not comprehensible is that there are people advising photographers to abandon photography, which is twice as strange when these people are photographers themselves.

To conclude, the use of images is no longer done in relation to a text but to audio and video, which can be interesting, but definitely more ephemeral. In reality, the enriching experience of the interaction between text and image has been set aside: the understanding of certain subject matters requires text, and if the text interacts with interesting, powerful and clarifying images, the stories that need to be told can reach their full potential.

This is the task of programmers, designers, editors, photographers and writers. We have to re-think the use of photography in the new media. We must find other ways to tell our stories, to go beyond a sequence of images. We have to work in the editing, to know where to accentuate, to construct a narration, to make the reader participate.

Photography is going through a moment of extraordinary expansion, but if we do not put it in its rightful place, its use in the media will be reduced to mere ornaments of web pages or emasculated versions of TV shows.

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