

Traditional Photography **vs.** Digital Photography



©Pedro Meyer 2001- 2001

It appears that a boxing match is taking place; in one corner we have “traditional” photography, and in the other, a new contender: “digital” photography.

However, there is one major problem with this alleged “fight”, these two cannot be opponents, as they are both on the same side. What is called “traditional” photography can be produced either in an analog way using a chemical process or in a digital format, electronically. If you have a particular “style” of photography, which could be done, using either technique, there need be no confrontation at all, and the metaphor of antagonism becomes redundant. The only reason why people perceive the changes in photography in this way, is because there is a lot of misunderstanding as to what digital photography is actually all about.

Let us explore this further. A portrait photograph using film and old dark room techniques created in the most “traditional” fashion can today be created just the same with a digital camera and with the aid of a computer printed with ink jet printers or posted on the web. In either case, the look of the image, or style, has nothing to do with the underlying technology of how it was produced.

There is enormous confusion, whereby digital images are mainly associated with manipulation, with the implication that something has been “changed” in a clandestine manner, people then think that a “traditional” picture (unaltered of course) has to be the converse, and therefore confined to the opposite corner of the ring.

The debate then becomes even more convoluted, as there are many positions surrounding the issues associated to the term, “manipulation”. As an aside, I, personally have never liked that term: manipulation, to describe a very legitimate process -that of alteration-, it arrives already loaded with very negative connotations that invoke all creative intentions on the part of the digital photographer as inevitably suspect. By all means question the medium -the photographs- but don’t invalidate them solely because they are digital.

So allow me to replace the term manipulation with the word “alteration.” Yes, we alter images just the same in the analog world (chemicals) as we do in a digital (electronic) environment. Photographers have always done so. The only consideration today is that we do it in different ways, and at different stages within the process. Historically it has been primarily before the shutter clicks, where as today - in the digital arena- it can also occur after the click.

In either case, you will observe that digital photography is not about a specific style of image making. Bringing clarity to this issue then, allows many photographers who so far have felt that altering images (after the fact) was not their cup of tea, can now proceed to get involved with digital technology for what it can offer those photographers. In general it can be a faster (?), easier (?), cheaper (?) way of working, even if all that you are doing could be described as traditional images.

You will surely have noticed the caveats introduced above by the question marks following the adjectives regarding the benefits of digital technologies. The reason for this is that in most cases, it's almost true, but this is not always the case. For instance, it is a lot faster to take a picture and look at it on the computer screen, once you have downloaded it from you camera, as compared to developing and making contact sheets. It is a lot faster to print an image on your printer, regardless of which one you use, than standing in the darkroom in front of your trays with chemicals and all the circus which takes place around the enlarger.

However, to master all this, you need to know your digital equipment and software very well, and that process does not happen over night. It takes a lot of time to acquire such knowledge, and then one has to constantly keep up to date. And if that would not suffice, let me tell you that I spend at least 35% of my time, just working out problems of a technical nature, of things that refuse to work they way they ought to. So if you add and subtract time of what you gain and what you loose, I think with the way technology stands today you end up with a net gain of zero.

In addition to this, a new phenomenon has emerged from the digital age. Today you can accomplish so much more with an image -from a creative point of view- that you also end up playing around a lot more with those same images and experimenting and exploring many more “what if” scenarios than ever before. The thinking that goes on all the time is: what if, I just changed this, that or the other?

Your clients, you will discover, if you are involved in studio work, will love to play with an array of endless options and ask of you (at their expense, one would hope) for all kinds of changes –alterations- which before they would not have dreamt of asking for. “Could you please change the color of the shirt in this image?” or “ Can you please move that person forward?” “Oh! Yes, the chair has to go.”... “The Palm tree is to green, or too yellow, or too pink .” etc.... What ever the case may be, we are all exploring the possibilities that until yesterday had no where else to go other than to stay silent and with very few options beyond their initial imprimatur.

You must also take into account, that we are at an early stage, as that of an infant. We spend much of our time playing as a means of gaining knowledge and finding out how the world actually works. As the photographic community matures around these new technologies, it is very probable that the “playing” around part will be more focused and less time is going to be spent in just aimless explorations. Having said that, I already feel sad at the notion that my “playing time” might somehow be narrowed down. I rebel.

We obviously have here two opposites pulling at each other. Yes, this time the opponents are real, on the one hand the search for efficiency and productive output, on the other, the artistic creation, which requires the outmost exploration and “inefficiency”. This time the artists have many more paths to explore and avenues where we might loose our way.

The beauty of the whole digital age is that for some it is a matter of becoming more efficient, as the options are narrowed down to some very basic essentials, and thus standardized around speed and results. For others, it is a matter of taking a swim in a sea of endless possibilities without an immediate concern to reach the other shore; the creative process will be the only one that will define such limits. In essence this dichotomy existed always, what is different this time around is the scope and depth of these two polar experiences. The productivity will be far superior to anything in the past, and so will any creative explorations or what some view as a total “waste” of time. By both being more intense and different than before, our choices of which best suits our needs, will have to be defined early on in the process of working digitally, or we really end up in trouble.



About the picture of the man with the “black eye”

He is actually a colleague and a good friend of mine, Marco Antonio Cruz. If you click on the image, you will discover the original picture without alteration. The importance of this particular photograph has to do with the misconceptions around “alteration” that a number of art critics have sustained all along. They have used some terms derived from other art forms, to describe digital alterations, and called these “photomontage” or “collage”. They had in mind the work done by artists such as George Grosz, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, Josep Renau, and one of the more established artists in this context, John Heartfield. The problem with using the term of photomontage, which originates in a process of “cut and paste”, is that it did not consider the technological transformations inherent in the production of today’s images.



© Pedro Meyer 2001

To the picture of Marco Antonio, I did not add anything. Moving around and pushing the same pixels that existed there already, altered the eyes. No pixels were added from other images. The skin tone was controlled down to the level of every pixel to achieve the tonality desired: that of a bruised eye.

I believe this image allows me to make another point which goes back to my earlier statements about a traditional and an altered image both possibly being digital. Here we have an example, the first image I did of Marco Antonio, is unaltered, "traditional" and digital; the second one is altered and also digital. As you see, the fact that something is digital has nothing to do with an inherent style.

One last point I would like to make. The image of the man with the disfigured face looks credible enough so that everyone who knows Marco Antonio has been asking me, "Oh My God! What happened to him?" Well, where do we take such a picture from here, you will ask. I say it is increasingly a matter of context. Where and for what purpose an image is displayed or published, and how do we offer it to an audience. Secondly, we should view photographs solely for what they are: interpretations, nothing more. If we understand context and the inherent nature of the photograph, I think we can go a long way in placing digital photography in the right direction. Don't forget, the context is almost always provided by the publication in which the image appears, not the photographers.

Pedro Meyer
March 1, 2001
Mexico City.