

When is a photograph a photograph?

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While this question is posed nowadays in the context of the film/digital conflict, it is worth bearing in mind that the earliest cameras used neither lenses nor film. The *camera obscura* has been in use since ancient times, to form images through a pinhole on the walls of a darkened room. Due to the non-permanent nature of the image, I doubt that we would call these photographs today. Lenses became prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries. Silver entered the picture (again no pun intended) in 1727, when Prof. Schulze created the first photosensitive compound by mixing chalk, nitric acid and silver in a flask and noticed darkening on the side of the flask exposed to sunlight. In 1816 Nicéphore Niépce combined the *camera obscura* with photosensitive paper and in 1822 he made a contact print (of a portrait of Pope Pius VII) on a glass plate. In 1825 Niépce etched his images on copper, then on tin in 1826. In 1834 Henry Fox Talbot created permanent (negative) images using paper soaked in silver chloride and fixed with a salt solution. In 1837 Louis Daguerre created images on silver-plated copper, coated with silver iodide and developed in warm mercury and patented the *daguerrotype* process. Talbot patented his process under the name *calotype* in 1841. Glass plates, gum bichromate and paper negatives continue in use to this day, but are now definitely considered “alternative process.” George Eastman set up the Eastman Dry Plate Company in Rochester in 1880 and it was only in 1889 that improved Kodak cameras came out with roll film instead of paper. Film is thus a relatively recent development (no pun intended) on the photographic scene, but it was this critical technical innovation that enabled photography to move out beyond the realm of artists and photographers and to capture the mass consumer market. Just such a technical advance has taken place with the digital revolution and, while I doubt that silver gelatin film will ever truly disappear in our lifetimes, it is very likely that it will soon become “alternative process.” Every other day some other old-time photographer discovers these market realities and declares with great pomp and finality that “*film is dead!*”

Most photographers, publishers and camera clubs have now, sometimes grudgingly, conceded the point that digital prints and digitally-captured images are legitimate photographs. But there is still considerable resistance to digitally-manipulated images. So when is a digitally-manipulated image a photograph? It is possible to create photograph-like images entirely in the computer using programs like Bryce® with sometimes very realistic-looking (and at other times very surreal) landscapes; obviously these cannot be considered photographs. At the other end are images that obviously started out as photographs, but have been tweaked digitally in much the same way that a photographer would in the darkroom: namely, by burning and dodging, cropping, using contrast filters or adjusting color balance and spotting out specks and scratches. Do these negate the photographic content of the image? Before you answer, consider that if you are using an auto-anything film camera, there is a silicon chip in there that automatically performs some manipulations before the photons even strike the film surface. Furthermore, if you hand your film over to a drugstore or mail it in to Kodak, the concentrations and

temperature of the chemicals and processing times are computer-controlled. You can even opt to forego chemical prints altogether and to have your film scanned onto CD. Then you can send those files (with or without digital manipulations) to a lab to be printed *chemically* on real photographic paper. Where does that leave us? Talk about complicating the issue!

Many digital shooters are content to stay with kinds of digital manipulations we just discussed. Others choose to use the digital process to exercise their creativity. But just as photography is not the exclusive domain of the film shooter, neither is creative manipulation the exclusive domain of the digital artist. The images of Jerry Uelsmann, Freeman Patterson and André Gallant, to name just a few, are instances in point. In one case the composites or montages are created in the darkroom, in the other case, they are done in the camera. Since I want to learn to *take* (not just *make*) better pictures, I personally try to resist the temptation to use Photoshop® to simply correct flaws in my photos. But then should all digital manipulations of photographs be acceptable as photographs? I feel that this needs to be answered on a case-by-case basis. The *intent* of the image is, to me, a prime consideration. Most newspapers and news agencies have policies that strictly forbid all but the most innocuous manipulation of journalistic photographs. And remember, people have been “doctoring” photos long before the computer. The PSA Nature Division has a similar policy forbidding manipulation of images for nature competitions. For a creative competition, this stricture obviously does not apply. The operative principle in either case seems to be one of honesty: of not altering the content of the image with intent to deceive.

Then there is the question of fairness for the purpose of competition. Do digital manipulations make things easier for the digital artist? You bet they do! At least for many kinds of manipulation, if you know what you are doing and how to go about it. But then an experienced printer will find many things easier in the wet darkroom. It still takes me less test prints to get a good monochrome chemical print in the darkroom than to calibrate my monitor, software, printer, paper and inks and get a decent inkjet print. And does getting your film processed and/or printed at a custom lab not give you an advantage over the photographers who process and print their own images? Perhaps so, for “straight shooters”, but probably not for creative printers. Ultimately photography is all about what you want your images to say and choosing the right tools for the task, be that a fish-eye lens or a Photoshop® filter. And for every purist who sees the film/digital divide in terms of “real photography” versus digital, there are ten new converts every day who see the same issue as one of photography versus “alternative process” (yes, read: film!)

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