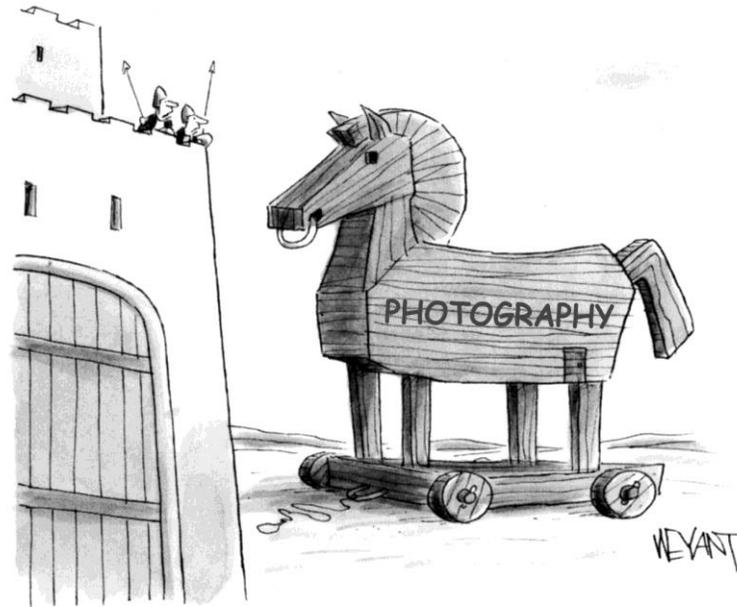


## EQUAL BUT SEPARATE, A PLEA FOR LINGUISTIC CLARITY

***“Photography, as we have known it, is both ending and enlarging, with an evolving medium hidden inside it as in a Trojan horse, camouflaged, for the moment, as if [emphasis mine] it were nearly identical: its doppelganger, only better.”***

-Fred Ritchin, Former Professor of Photography and Imaging, New York University, and current Dean of the ICP School



*“How do we know it's not full of pixels?”*

The **word** “photography” has been co-opted, inadvertently, by digital imaging. The term “digital photography” is, in fact, an oxymoron. This essay is about word use and definitions, not about the relative merits of digital imaging as opposed to photography. If anyone is still dwelling on that issue, it’s time to move on.

The invention of photography itself provoked whines that painting was dead. Then, from the advent of dry plates and the first hand-held cameras, practitioners have, with every new innovation, complained that *real* photography is ruined. They decried the proliferation of know-nothings and ever smaller cameras. These complaints, all eerily similar, have accompanied every innovation from the 1800s to the present. (1)

1 It is true that the release of the first Kodak box camera by George Eastman in 1888 was accompanied by advertising campaigns for the first time in photography’s short history; all subsequent developments have been, and still are, market-driven. But that is a subject for another essay!

*...Most of them [amateurs], instead of elevating our profession, have degraded it...The*

*class I am bitterly opposed to, and which is increasing rapidly, and must ere long force the profession to retire in disgust, will be found at watering-places and pleasure resorts in the summer time. You see them...firing away at anything they may fancy...They cannot develop their plates, or print from negatives....This is the class that is robbing our customers.*

Sound familiar? This was written by one Robert E. Trammell in 1884!

So, rather than addressing the individual merits of each medium (not relevant to my point), what I am articulating in this essay is that digital imaging is a new, and fundamentally different medium than photography, and therefore shouldn't be called "photography" at all. Digital practice is the imaging medium of the future, while photography is entering into an awkward retirement. Digital imaging started out seeming very similar to photography (see quote at the top of this essay). Digital imaging devices looked just like photographic cameras, and whereas some still do, many imaging devices today are multi-functioning, and don't look like cameras. ("Camera" is Latin for "room" or "box").

But at the present time, most people are (understandably) confusing the two media. A good example was the May, 2011 exhibition of elegant scannographs **(2)** called "Illumitones" at the Center for Photographic Art (CPA) in Carmel, by Kim Kauffman. The catalog accompanying the exhibit states that Kauffman's "abstractions are created exclusively through the use of digital tools and materials..." and yet celebrates "the art and craft of photography in its most fundamental and traditionally significant way," a statement that is not only confusing but misleading. This digitally generated and printed imagery should not be called "photography."

Another recent confusing situation: RayKo Photo Center in San Francisco had a juried show of "Camera-less Photography" in June, 2011. In the entry rules, they suggested that entries could include many photographic processes, such as photograms, chemigrams, lumens, etc. They also included something called "laptopograms." Then, they insisted that "all work must be original." Assuming that "laptopograms" would be similar to the scannographs referred to at the beginning of this essay, I would suggest that, with digital imagery, there are no originals, only infinite numbers of clones. I saw the show, and, as wonderful as it was, it was mostly mixed media (photographic originals digitally scanned and printed) or all digital (scannographs), which pieces I would not call photographs, certainly not "originals" at all. *The minority of the pieces were photographic originals: i.e., one-of-a-kind photograms, lumens, chemigrams,*

**2** Images made by placing objects onto a scanner and altering the images in Photoshop. "Scannography" is itself a new word, and as yet there isn't agreement on how to spell it—with one or two "n"s.

*cyanotypes, etc.*] I asked the director about this, and she threw up her hands, saying that she and the advisory board had not been able to agree.

This is not to suggest that CPA, Rayko, and other institutions exhibit only photography. Not at all. A more realistic suggestion would be for CPA to consider changing its name, to something like the Center for Photographic and Imaging Art (CPIA). All such organizations should consider the same sort of name change, if they continue to exhibit both digital imagery and photography (including mixed media and video), a change New York University has already made; note Fred Ritchin's title at the top of this essay: Professor of Photography and Imaging.

Photography West Gallery in Carmel, CA made a resolution to avoid exhibiting digital imaging over a decade ago. The owner became convinced that digital imaging "will become the art medium of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is clearly an entirely separate and distinctive medium from that of photography.... It is a very revolutionary detour from photography on several levels."

PhotoWarehouse, a mail order supply business, divides its catalog into supplies for Digital Imaging and for Photography.

Right now, when a person says she's a "photographer," I don't know what that means, because there is no consensus on what terminology to use. When someone asks me what I do, and I answer "photography," he probably doesn't know what I mean. All we can safely assume nowadays is that if someone makes a living from image-making with a camera, or an imaging device, it is most likely digital, not photographic. And most likely, a "snap-shooter" will also be using a digital device.

Language is in a constant state of flux, and nowadays cultural evolution happens faster than language can change. People rarely (voluntarily) make themselves think about the language they use. But as digital imaging evolves and morphs, becoming less similar to photography, it will make more sense to call it something other than photography. It (digital imaging) has its own features, its own *vocabulary*, and an entirely new trajectory.

### **What are the differences between photography and digital imaging?**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were many terms for the medium we now call photography, among them *photogenic drawing*, *heliography* ("sun-writing"), *sciagraphy* ("shadow-writing"). Hercules Florence used the word *photographie* ("*light-writing*") as early as 1832, to describe his experiments. Later, while Sir John Herschel was working with Wm Henry Fox Talbot, he also coined the term *photography*. You will notice that these terms all refer to writing—something materially etched onto something else. This is the primary characteristic of photography, the main difference between it and digital imaging.

Professor Achim Heine wrote, in *From Polaroid to Impossible* (2011), that digital imaging "may be identical to analog photography in its gestures... but there is a world of difference between their results... True, the digital image can be stored, played back and viewed in a matter of seconds. But does it actually exist as a picture? Not

really...The digital photograph sits somewhere on a storage medium as an algorithmic cloud of zeroes and ones...” With analog photography, he continues, “the light rays are permanently etched, permanently manifest...”

On a purely material level, photography, and even the earlier 17<sup>th</sup> century proto-photography, had/has several features not shared with digital imaging: *substrate* plus *light-sensitive emulsion*, and *chemistry*. (Note: no camera necessary.) Actinic rays cause **photochemical** change, visible or latent, to a light-sensitized surface, which is then chemically processed. The light rays are etched, manifested as image. The final product is an artifact, an actual thing one can hold or touch or store in a box. Digital imaging does not include these chemical processes, and may not exist as an artifact at all. Then there are the bigger, cultural differences-- not only the way images are made, but the way they are distributed and experienced. These differences are becoming more and more pronounced, moving the digital realm further and further away from the photographic.

Right now, Ritchin’s Trojan Horse analogy is wonderfully apt. Digital imaging and photography are, for now, quite similar. I like to compare photography to Neanderthals and digital imaging to Homo Sapiens. They both walk upright, swing their arms, but are *different species*. (Neanderthals had hairy backs.) Luckily for my analogy, it has recently been discovered that Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens interbred (some Homo Sapiens have hairy backs), which would be analogous to the hybrid practices by many artists today, combining digital technology with historical photographic processes. But Neanderthals themselves no longer exist.

Ritchin’s book After Photography (2009) is the best elucidation of the profound differences between photography and digital imaging I have read, but if I were asked to review the book, my only negative criticism would be that he is linguistically inconsistent, interchanging many terms such as “digital imagery,” “the new photograph,” “the pixelated photograph,” and “digital photography.” Possibly he was simply striving for linguistic variety. Curious, I wrote him asking about this issue. He answered:

“A major premise of the book *After Photography*, as you pointed out, is that digital photography does NOT equal photography, and in fact springs from very different origins. I did look for linguistic variety in describing this evolving medium in *After Photography*; some twenty years ago, in my previous book on the subject, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (1990), I was quite clear about not referring to digitally manipulated photographs as being photographs, but as images—I credited them as such. The hostility that you've encountered is not at all infrequent; there is much anger concerning profound change of all kinds, from the economy to one's medium of choice. I have often felt it at lectures I give, although not as much in recent years.

Best, Fred Ritchin

Speaking about the differences in After Photography, Ritchin writes:

*The new photograph will be read and understood differently as people comprehend that it does not descend from the same representational logic either of analog photography or of painting that preceded it.....The pixelated photograph's ephemerality on the screen and its easy linkage, as well as the impression that it is just one communication strategy among many, reduce the individualized impact of the photograph as it appears on a piece of film or paper. Rather than as "photographers" for the most part these kinds of image-makers will be thought of simply as "communicators."*

Geoffrey Batchen (Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico) who, unlike Ritchin, *does* make the careful linguistic distinction between photography and digital imaging, also speaks about the deeper differences: (The following quote refers to photography using a camera.) In Burning with Desire, The Conception of Photography (1997), Batchen writes:

*The main difference is that whereas photography still claims some sort of objectivity, digital imaging remains an overtly fictional process.... For what makes photographs distinctive is that they depend on this original presence, a referent in the material world that at some time really did exist to imprint itself on a sheet of light sensitive paper... As a footprint is to a foot, so is a photograph to its referent....Where photography is inscribed by the things it represents, digital images may have no origin other than their own computer programs. These images may still be indices of a sort, but their referents are differential circuits and abstracted data banks of information (information that includes, in most cases, the look of the photograph....Given the advent of new imaging processes, photography may indeed be on the verge of losing its privileged place within modern culture.*

Batchen, referring to "some sort of objectivity," is not here referring to veracity. He means simply that in photography there is a There there, whereas in digital imaging there may not be. [That book was written in 1997. I do not know how Batchen's ideas on this issue have evolved.]

Another artist, writer, historian and educator who uses language carefully is Robert Hirsch. He uses the terms "digital imaging," digital technology," and "digitization," but not "digital photography:" In Seizing the Light, A Social History of Photography (2009), he writes:

*Digital imaging breaks the customary prescription by giving imagemakers the ability to not only determine place and time, but to control space and time. This is possible because images are formed into a binary numerical code that is electronically stored and available for future retrieval....In a Darwinian twist of Natural Selection, digital imaging has placed the traditional photograph in the same position that the invention of photography put painting.... The great disparities among the working procedures of handmade, digital, and theoretical images has led to the suggestion that they should be regarded as separate ways of working, even if the final results are similar. (Emphasis mine.)*

Though Hirsch is careful about the terms he uses, distinguishing digital imaging from photography, he goes no further than the above comments; he does not want to take sides, or be drawn into argument about this issue, which is peripheral to the content of Seizing the Light.

Christopher James, author of The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes (3rd<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2014) said in an e-mail to me recently: “There is photography, and this means you’re actually going to have a role in making it. And then there’s digital imaging, which means a gust of wind can activate the device to record the impression.” Later, he more seriously clarified that he has always felt that : “Digital imaging is one thing, and photography quite another.”

## CONCLUSION

I’ll return to Fred Ritchin, who, in spite of his linguistic inconsistency, makes the best case for separating the two media, and warns people about conflating photography and digital imagery (emphasis mine):

*“For those who see the digital as comprising a markedly different environment than the analog, what we are currently observing is no less than a revolution.... **We should be suspicious of the easy melding of photography into digital photography, focusing on initial similarities.**”*

Now that digital imagery has taken over all of the practical, scientific, commercial, and “snapshot” applications of photography, all that photography has left, for the first time in its short life, is ART. This could be considered good news for photographers, as the tired old argument about whether photography is an art or not has finally been rendered lifeless. Interest in photography, especially in its early processes, has been experiencing a revival in response to the rise of digital technology. Moreover digital technology has introduced many exciting new mixed media (combining digital and photographic) possibilities, devices, and entirely new art directions, many of them not yet explored or imagined. It is indeed an exciting time when one can choose between a daguerreotype (photographic) workshop with Jerry Spagnoli, or a cell-phone (digital imaging) workshop with Dan Burkholder!

So, to conclude this essay, I’ll reiterate: I am not speaking about the relative merits of the two media, but I am making a plea for linguistic clarity by terming, defining, and describing photography and digital imaging differently. Why should we now have to add a qualifier to the word “photography” to differentiate it from digital technology? (Such qualifiers include “analog,” “conventional,” or “traditional.”) Or, why should we have to re-define photography itself? Let photography keep its own name and curl up and enjoy its retirement. Digital imaging, as a new and different medium, also deserves its own name.

The term *digital imaging* itself may become obsolete before we know it. Not long ago I heard a Lytro representative declare that digital imaging was on its way out and light

field imaging was next. Now, he was a salesman, so I'm not going to speculate on that...

Someday we might have implants that enable us to capture an image or moving picture that we can send to a cloud or another person by rolling our eyes or tugging an ear lobe. Will we be calling that "photography"? I hardly think so. "Photography" is a 19<sup>th</sup> century word/concept. But, for the future, using the word "imaging" might be the way to go, using modifiers: photographic imaging, digital imaging, light field imaging, implant imaging, etc. But stay tuned! The cards have been thrown in the air, and I think they're never going to land!

### **P.S.: WHAT SHOULD WE CALL IT?**

Here is one more linguistically murky issue relating to contemporary imaging: if a digital print is made, what do you call it? How is it differentiated these days from a conventionally printed photograph? If you go to any group show, you'll find each print labelled according to what the artist put on the back of the piece, or on the entry or submission form. In other words, there is no consensus on what to call/how to describe a print. This makes it very difficult for the average viewer to understand what they're looking at. Some artists use generic terms, and some use brand names (of papers, printers, or mounting process).

Even published works have the same problem. Let me list for you just some of the different labels used for images in Talk About Contemporary Photography, by Elisabeth Couturier (2012), and you'll see what I mean.

C-print under Diasec

Digital print, colored pigment on 100% cotton rag paper

Digital print, pigment dyes on 100% cotton rag paper

Silver Gelatin Print

Black and White Photograph

Color Print

Ilfochrome under Diasec

C-print of Forex

Color digital print

Analogue color photo, digital pigment print

Silver Print

Cibachrome

Color print on aluminum

Digital chromogenic print

Digital print on photo paper under Diasec

Chromogenic Dye on paper

And here's another list, from [Art Photography Now](#), by Susan Bright (2005)

C-print

Digital C-print

Colour print

Chromogenic print

Lambda print mounted on aluminum

Black-and-white print

Fuji Crystal Archive print mounted to Plexiglas

Light Jet Endura C-print

Unique Colour photograph

Light Jet print

Cibachrome/Diasec

Ilfochrome on aluminum

Digital Photograph

Epson print

Pigment print on Somerset Velvet paper

R-type print

Fuji Crystal chromogenic archive c-type print

Digital colour print on Fujiflex

And then you have your silver dye bleach print, inkjet print, Giclee print, Piezo print, Hahnemuhle paper, archival pigment print, etc., etc.

Many of these terms—but not all-- mean exactly the same thing, and could be termed “digital pigment print” and left at that. Many use brand names (e.g., Piezo, Epson, Lambda, Hannemuhle). This would be the same as, in the old days, labelling a silver gelatin print thusly: SGP on Agfa Portriga Rapid paper; or, Beseler SGP on Ilford, (Beseler being the brand name of the enlarger). Doesn't this sound a bit silly? Do we really need to know what kind of paper is used? What kind of digital printer? Do we have to be told that a print is archival these days? In a book, does a picture have to be labelled how it is mounted or framed? Why can't curators and editors come to some kind of consensus, and streamline and simplify these labels so the viewer/reader has at least some idea what they are talking about?

If this isn't a plea for linguistic clarity, I don't know what is!

Martha Casanave, 2011, 2015