

# *The Trivialization of Photography*



*Silhouette House, Coleville, CA, 2015 (c)*

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# The Trivialization of Photography

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*As in the iconic scene from "The Wizard of Oz," the curtain obscuring the secrets of photography has been pulled back. The wizard, the alchemist, the powerful conjurer of images, the artist of light and shadow is shown to be just a man. His old tricks no longer amaze anyone. —Pablo Corral Vega*



Have you ever run so fast that your feet ran right out from under you? I presumed (rather haughtily) that this had actually happened to me one time when I was a child. (I was a pretty fast runner.) Of course, soon after planting my face in the ground I realized that I had simply lost focus, thereby tripping over an errant tree stump that, somehow, managed to wander into my path. Could it be that the medium of photography is currently experiencing a similar comeuppance?

According to *buzzfeed.com*, the social news and entertainment company with a self-proclaimed global audience of over 200 million: "Humans have taken a lot of pictures." (That's a direct quote, by the way.) Under most circumstances I would dismiss this kind of revelation as being suspiciously self-evident. On the other hand, one of the statistics cited on the *buzzfeed* web site (in a piece titled: *How Many Pictures Have Been Taken Ever?*) surely caught my attention.

Since the invention of the photographic medium (roughly 189 years ago) it is estimated that a grand total of more than **3.8 trillion** pictures have been taken, worldwide. That's 3,800,000,000,000! Though it does seem an impressive number, it can be somewhat difficult to comprehend (let alone fully appreciate) *any* number possessing so many zeros!

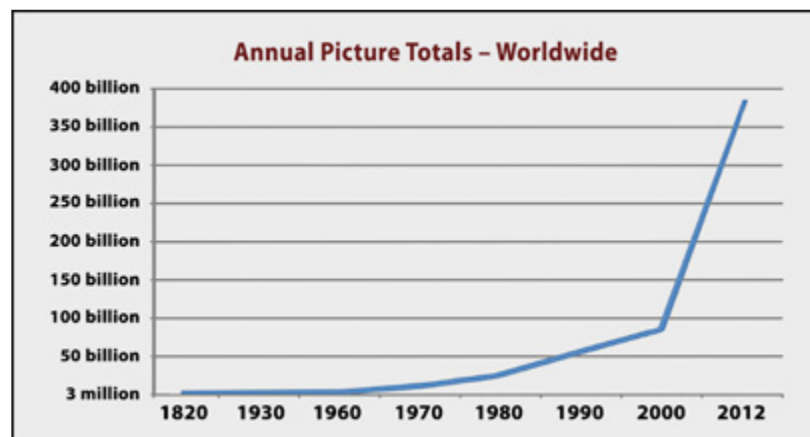
There must to be a better way to visualize 3.8 trillion pictures. Let's try this: A stack of 1,000 un-mounted (single-weight) photographic prints measures approximately 10 inches in height. As such, the height of a stack of 1 trillion prints would then measure roughly 157,828 miles! Now,

multiply that number by 3.8 and you arrive at an overall distance just shy of 600,000 miles. You'd have to travel more than *twice* the distance to the Moon just to be able to see the top print in the stack! (Imagine the poor workshop instructor charged with reviewing *that* portfolio!)

Much like our national debt, the numbers will only tend to increase in logarithmic proportion with the passage of time. Hopefully, the accompanying graph will help to illustrate the medium's more recent ascent.

I'm left to wonder... At what point will the number of pictures being taken become so overwhelming that the medium, itself, will be summarily dismissed as having become so overtly trivialized as to have rendered itself all but completely meaningless?

Of course, the trivialization of photography is *already* upon us. Look closely at the graph and you'll note the medium's precipitous rise in popularity began to skyrocket immediately after the year 2000. Wasn't



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that right around the time that the digital approach first entered the mainstream? Photography has been running so fast that it now appears to have run right out from under itself in much the same way I thought I had as a child. And to stick with the analogy, here, the tree stump over which the medium has inadvertently stumbled looks remarkably similar to an iPhone! (Surely, that *must* be the “smoking gun”.)

Edward Weston keenly observed that photography is the most democratic of art forms. I wonder if he could *ever* have imagined just how democratic the medium would eventually become? Has the magic now disappeared from photography, altogether? If one buys into an abundance of current ruminations, the medium, itself, is now collapsing under the sheer weight of its own pervasiveness.

Could it be that the act of taking pictures has evolved to become a hard-wired part of our DNA? Has the act of taking a picture become an instinctual one, much like our basic instincts to walk and talk? Or, has photography now become such a routine and trivial pursuit that identifying oneself as a “professional” photographer amounts to nothing more than a non sequitur? Suffice it to say, if you are a working photographer, the trivialization of your chosen profession might well be a matter of some concern to you.

I have to ask myself: Why in the world would I continue to expend so much time and energy performing an act of such triviality? Haven't I got more important things to do with my time? I tend to think that I do not – despite the possibility that my thinking might now be considered archaic.

For me, photography has always been more about the day-to-day process of living my life as a photographer – more so than it has been



*Storm Clouds, Eastern Sierra, CA, 2015*

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about the results and realities of actually *being* a photographer. As such, it's about the *exercise* of the process, rather than being about the *results* of the process.

For the better part of my life, photography has allowed me to continually learn more and more about myself, and more about the world in which I live. Certainly, it has taught me more of life's lessons than any other pursuit I've engaged. Ironically, given my decidedly myopic eyesight, photography has also allowed me to better utilize acts of visualization, thereby allowing me to more keenly observe, reflect upon – and ultimately connect with – the essence of that which goes on around me. In short, my life has become more personally satisfying, meaningful, instructive, and fulfilling as a result of having spent so much time observing the world through the eye of a camera. Why would I ever want to give up such a trivial pursuit?

A commitment to pursue the path of an artist can indeed provide the ride of a lifetime. Yet, regardless of one's chosen medium – and despite any technological breakthroughs specific to the mechanics of

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photography – the true path to artistic accomplishment remains one that can only be negotiated through a lifetime of commitment. It doesn't really matter *how* far you'd have to travel in order to see that top print in the stack, artistic pursuits are *not* about the destination. They are about the journey. By focusing on the day-to-day exercise of what remains a life-long pursuit, and paying less attention to the results of that pursuit, one is able to rest assured that whatever transformations their chosen medium might ultimately experience – those changes can do nothing to alter the basic tenants of an ongoing quest that has little (if anything) to do with the mechanics of the pursuit, itself.

You might ask: What about all those photographs? Well, I've always considered the *results* of my own photographic explorations (the actual photographs produced along the way) to be the equivalent of a writer's journal. With each successive photograph I'm able to figuratively add a new entry in my journal. And I can always refer back to those carefully recorded visual notes in order to remind myself of what it is that I've learned (or perhaps even forgotten) along the way. And of course, if I'm *really* lucky, I'm occasionally afforded opportunities to share my journal with others.

When I think about it, my own relationship to photography is not all that different than it is for most of the rest of humanity. Could it be that photography has now become the hard-wired instinct that provides those vital visual clues we *all* need in order to make better sense of our lives? If such were to be the case, *that* would be anything but trivial.



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