

AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHY

by Clarence A. Crawford

One could truly say—it probably has been said—that we live in the Age of the Image. That has been true since the invention of television, and has intensified as television images have become larger and clearer—and as people have come to spend thirty percent of their lives looking at them.

I have read that our culture's obsession with electronic doodads has not reduced our time spent in front of television screens. I believe it. We spend more and more time looking at little images, and creating little images, without reducing the time spent in front of the bigger screen, presumably because we think we can “multitask,” that is, live in a fragmented mental world.

One subset of the world of the image is the image of the natural world. My subjective judgment is that such images comprise a very large proportion of all images we see every day. One large group of such images is in advertising, and the two largest such groups in my experience are on television and in magazines. The prototype of such ads is the automobile ad, set in the dramatic Southwest or the verdant East.

The same type of ad occurs in the magazines, but in addition to cars we see a great variety of products, concepts, and brands, as well as recreation and tourism. Natural scenes, or what passes for natural scenes, are used to sell anything, or at least create warm feelings about anything (forest products, oil companies, insurers, financial services, drug companies).

The third type of image is that of the natural world reproduced on the page as an illustration or offered as “art.”

Before I make a case “against photography” I must tell the reader that I have never been without a camera since the age of eleven; that I currently own and use two excellent cameras; that my favorite electronic device is a photo-show screen saver; and that every room in my house contains numerous photographic images. In fact, when we remodeled our house I installed strips for hanging photos on every wall. I love my photos.

I take and display photos because I like pretty pictures and the memories they evoke. I make no claim to a technical knowledge of photography, nor do I claim artistic knowledge.

My first suspicions of the integrity of commercial photography, and of photography claiming to be art, began in the days of film; specifically, color reproduction.

The Arctic in northeastern Alaska is my favorite landscape, and I am familiar with it from early June to mid-September. During that time the vegetation changes from spring browns to summer greens to autumn reds and golds, with of course many subtle contrasts and nuances at all times.

The summer greens are very muted. The new green often overlays the browns of last year's sedges, the tundra is typically thin, the plants may flourish for a time but are not lush.

The sky likewise is not an intense blue. The light varies of course and the color changes are numerous and subtle, but generally the light is low and muted.

But what did I see in the film photography of the time as displayed in magazines? Emerald tundra and deep azure skies.

I preferred to use Kodak Ektachrome for slides and Kodak Kodacolor for prints and I thought the reproduction was close to true. But, according to what I read, a commercial photographer must at that time shoot Fujichrome if he expected to sell his work, because the magazines wanted the bright greens and blues produced by Fujichrome regardless of the reality of the landscape. The magazine editors took it upon themselves to create "reality," and I take it as given that the consumers accepted their version of "reality" and allowed it to shape their thinking.

This visual distortion foreshadowed the digital age. We were being introduced, all unaware, to the shaping of reality for commercial purposes. I contend that this was and is an important epistemological problem. The way we physically see the world is fundamental to human life. Our perceptions—our brains—are being formed by the people who shape these images and present them to us, usually in a commercial setting. The development of digital reproduction has made this manipulation easy, which means it is pervasive and insidious.

One could argue that it has always been so. For example, I read that Ansel Adams spent weeks in the darkroom manipulating his images until they conformed satisfactorily to his view of reality. I honor the idea, presented by people who know more about art than I do, that his efforts produced, not just pretty pictures, but works of genuine art. Nevertheless, one must make an assertion that is basic to this technology: unlike traditional forms of representation, such as drawing and painting, the great advantage of photography is its *accuracy*. The technology of photography, and its principle strength, is its ability to, at least potentially, closely approximate the visual reality of its subject. Other technologies involved with visual presentations, whether it be a simple pencil or sophisticated oils, do not aim primarily at literal reproduction; that they do not is what makes them potentially

art. Attempting to make art with this photographic technology violates its primary value.

(A corollary observation: I become aggravated when someone buys photographic technology and thinks that they are suddenly transformed into artists; even if they did manage to pass Photography 101.)

One must ask the provocative question, Are the image-makers deciding how we are to think and feel, or do they simply reflect the perceptions of the natural world that people already possess? Both, I think.

The fundamental question is, How do our ordinary daily perceptions come to embody an ideal? Or, do we possess an ideal form and seek to impose that form on the world?

I remember my first trip to the West. My perceptions had been formed in the hills of western Pennsylvania and by the age of twenty-three I had ventured as far west as the eastern border of Ohio. Nevertheless I had definite preconceptions of what the West *should* be. And, sure enough, that is what I saw. My wife and I would obediently pull the car into the overlook with the Scenic View sign—we were already following someone else’s lead—and I would say, ready with a keen insight, “That’s a nice shot.” What did I mean by “shot”? That I could fit some portion of the world into a rectangular or square frame and preserve a piece of reality in that way. I was selecting something for *inclusion*, which means that I was unconsciously selecting something for *exclusion*, and I know that my selection process led me toward visual cliché. I was, on the one hand, thrilled by the magnificence I had before me; on the other hand, there was much that I did not see. In any case, I allowed myself to be governed by two unworthy impulses. First, I wanted to shape the world to my frame; i.e., the camera’s frame. Second, once I had done that, my job was finished, time to go, get back into the car.

In recent years my wife and I have learned to love Florida’s north-central and north Gulf Coast. We go there when Alaska is most difficult for me, November and April (our transitions into and out of winter). I think the landscapes and seascapes there are stimulating and interesting. Strong horizontal lines are dominated by sky, on the one hand, and a horizon of sea, or rich green vegetation, on the other hand.

Almost all the Alaskans I know are amused or bemused by my assertions that Florida’s scenery is arresting, and always for the same reason: there can be no interesting landscape without mountains. An interesting view must have a mountain, or at least some topography, in it somewhere. When Alaskans travel for pleasure, it is usually to the Southwest or Hawaii, where scenery is what it’s

supposed to be. This conviction that only mountain scenery qualifies as *real* scenery runs deep.

I think there are two reasons behind this conviction. One is a direct result of our American myth of the Frontier: the West has big mountains, which symbolize its wildness and grandeur; the East is small, uninteresting, and tame. Westerners know that The West is Best, and mountains are the literal and figurative backbone of that conviction.

The second reason has to do with mental conditioning (and these two reasons overlap).

Why did I pull off the road to get my “shot”? First, because mountains really are intrinsically interesting and beautiful. Second, because my response was thoughtless and conditioned. I have come to know why I was thoughtless; but by what was I conditioned?

Some years ago I read a summary of research results that probed this question. A researcher travelled the globe to find out what landscapes are preferred by people who inhabit all or most habitats, and the results generally were that people liked river mouths or lake shores, and mountains or some relief in the distance; a suggestion of open space or an open horizon but also fringes of green. The people who designed the L. L. Bean logo must have read this study.

I do intuitively accept the idea that humans prefer certain landscapes. We evolved in conjunction with certain landscapes, and it certainly makes sense that we would have a preference for what we have connected to for millions of years. In my case, I must be a descendant of the open grassland or steppe: I feel happier, more expansive, on the open tundra than anywhere else. Judging by the extraordinary commitment people make to maintaining large lawns and golf courses, I think I have lots of company. (On the other hand, we are subject to cultural conditioning. Humans are highly mutable and adaptable, happily living in dense forests or jungle; coastal swamp dwellers are happy in the mangroves; the vast majority of humans now live in densely packed cities. Yet they nevertheless may harbor ancient emotional preferences. And though I am a natural tundra dweller, I also appreciate the forest canopy. We are a most flexible species.)

Some portion of our preferences must come from our daily habits—the preferences we learn from the numerous images we absorb daily, reinforced by the preferences and prejudices of those we associate with. And here is where the power of the image becomes pernicious.

I take it as a given that a primary obligation of the human mind is to perceive what *is*: the basis of truth lies in *the fact*. However, *the fact* can be extraordinarily elusive, and the difficulty we have with verifying reality is complicated by human subjectivity. Our big brains are enormously powerful, our senses keen, our emotions turbulent and sometimes unreliable, and we often project ourselves onto

the reality of the material world. That patch of blue I spy in the clouds is “hopeful,” the dense fog “oppressive,” the rain “gloomy,” the bright sunshine “cheerful.” The reality evades us, or we invent the reality we want.

Knowing it is one thing; feeling it is something else; both are necessary and complimentary. And so we view the landscape selectively, and we are apt to interpret it in terms of metaphor, which is almost always cliché. Why “interpret” it at all? Why not be content with the unmediated experience or the intuitively understood fact?

I accept as a fact that humans have connected to the world in this subjective manner for as long as we have been human. I accept the fact that indeed these types of perceptions may enliven and deepen our connections to the natural world rather than impede them. But the advent of the promiscuously used electronic image has taken us beyond metaphor and beyond unmediated experience, and I wonder if our ability to reproduce, store, and manipulate these images haven’t become barriers to connections rather than bridges; and worse, if much of this image-making isn’t a way of forming the interiors of our brains for commercial purposes.

Florida; South Fort Meyers Beach; sunset. My wife and I have taken our wine to the beach to indulge in one of our favorite Florida rituals.

A young woman leaves her hotel room, followed a few minutes later by several companions. Tourists, Germans I think. She walks to a spot, holds up an object, takes the photo; her companions do likewise. They talk briefly. They look at the palms of their hands intently. They turn from the west and return to their rooms.

The world continues to spin, the colors in the western sky change, evolve, intensify, fade; the rolling ocean continues to find the beach, its colors likewise changing subtly as the light changes; stars emerge, the sky beyond the reach of the city’s ambient light darkens; the great world spins on. I have no images, but I do have an ongoing experience; they have images but no experience. What are they doing in that room, where the light flickers? Staring at the little images? Or is it TV time now?

One thing they almost certainly did was send the images to someone, perhaps to dozens or hundreds of people. This raises another troubling problem. They did not actually experience the turning of the earth as they stood briefly on the beach, but they likely wanted their recipients to think they did. “Here I am, in fabulous Florida, where the sunsets are grand, and I am having an enviable experience.” This is now part of their resume; a trophy; look at me me me; I didn’t see them take “selfies,” though that would have been the norm. The word “selfie” is utterly appropriate and revealing, suggesting, first, the egotism of the act, and then the latent dishonesty, letting the image stand in for or suggest an experience that never

really happened. It lets the image suggest a fictional reality, and lets us use the world as a “prop,” in both senses of the word, as a theatrical property, and as something to prop up an impoverished life. And I assert that the life is impoverished because the experience never happened, for I saw them quickly turn their backs on it and walk away.

Much of my little narrative here is supposition. However, we have all observed this behavior countless times.

The corporate management of the images in TV and magazine advertising has been expanded to encompass the personal image, for what is a widely broadcast “selfie” but an advertisement for oneself? The reality of the world is submerged; we create the “reality” we inhabit and that “reality” is inevitably impoverished, and so must be the minds that inhabit it. A self-created reality is solipsistic, and the human mind is thereby severely reduced.

Auto makers and their marketers know full well that selling and buying a car is an emotional experience. The car, truck, or SUV does indeed provide transportation and some utility, but it also *represents* something. Cars generally represent one kind of freedom or another, trucks I suppose represent manliness (however stereotyped and sterile), the SUV represents adventure and the outdoors. As with so many purchases, what we buy is an emotional ideal, and buying an SUV allows us to imagine that we are buying the adventure that we associate with the natural world. What we get in exchange for our money is a substitute for reality. For the very adventurous, buy an extension for the front of the vehicle to cut the brush, and the driver is transported to the African veldt!

Apparently the marketers (and some buyers) imagine that driving to the edge of the lake to pitch the tent is the *destination*. Your journey stops where you park your SUV. Or you blast your vehicle through mud and snow, and you’re *there!* The journey is now concluded. Imagination stops here. The pleasant image doesn’t show the littered camp site, the cigarette butts where the tent is pitched, the aluminum foil discarded in the fire pit. Time to drink your beer and be happy, in a completely sanitized world, the world of the sanitized image.

I have no idea how much manipulation and distortion goes into the magazine and television images, but in the “digital age” it must be considerable. This goes to the heart of the epistemological question. If, forty years ago, Fujichrome was used to create a false reality, then one must assume that the current manipulation of images must be much more widespread, nearly total. Indeed, we may be on the point of redefining the word “totalitarian.” The traditional definition of the word is that a small elite, or a dictator, determined the total life of a nation from the top

down: the military, the economy, the classroom; the household, the bedroom, the thoughts in one's head. Stalin would be the model. But modern totalitarianism in the West is far more subtle, more insidious; more total, because the individual becomes complicit in shaping the falsehoods we live by.

Long ago I concluded that the basic fallacy of *1984* had to do with television. The brutal totalitarianism of the book was indeed a logical extension of what Orwell and his world knew, Hitler and Stalin foremost. But the continual surveillance of the population was one-way—the camera could not be avoided, Big Brother could not be seen. Surveillance in today's West is more subtle, more widespread, and more effective. Instead of just being watched—and we certainly are—it is much more efficient and more total if we desire to be the watcher ourselves. So, as well as being subject to surveillance, we voluntarily place ourselves before the TV monitor. Winston knows that Big Brother is watching him, and for us too Somebody knows what a large percentage of Americans are doing at any given time, but we apparently don't know or don't care. Somebody knows what 30% of Americans are doing, hour by hour, on Superbowl Sunday; Somebody knows what a large percentage of Americans are doing when every television show is broadcast. It is easier, and more gentle, and far more profitable, to induce people to watch Big Brother than to be watched by him. In this way the watcher is complicit, and everything seems painless, even enjoyable. Huxley's *Brave New World*, and its Soma, is further from the political reality that Orwell and Europe knew, but it is closer to our modern comfortable, passive existence.

We are horrified that the Federal government was (and is) sweeping up billions of telephone records. But where do they get these records? Those records already exist in the computers of for-profit businesses! For some reason that does not horrify us. Everyone who uses the Internet knows that their transactions are being tracked in considerable detail by many businesses. Why does that form of surveillance not concern us? The new totalitarianism requires that we be complicit, and we are; we are so comfortably ensconced within the apparently benign capitalistic system that we are indifferent to its totalitarian scope. The new totalitarianism is perpetrated by the oligarchs of business at least as much as it is by government.

(I asked above why Internet tracking does not concern us. I think that is because we have as a culture accepted the idea that all of life is business life. Big business has taken over much of our lives, including and especially Congress and the Supreme Court, and it aims to take over much more. The largest privatization prize of all is public education, and business is moving government steadily in that direction under the camouflage of educational "reform" and, in some states, charters. We have already accepted the concept of total work and are apparently passive about seeing our retirement prospects destroyed, after seeing our unions

decimated. Americans have apparently, passively, accepted the idea that the business of America is business.)

The good news is that this form of totalitarianism does not rely on brute force. If the individual finds the will to reject it, it can be fended off to some extent. However, this new totalitarianism is deeply corrupting, because it requires our complicity; our tacit approval; we are guilty too.

While we have comfortably been voting in response to television advertisements, and in response to quasi-news like Fox, or in response to the lies propagated by Hate Radio, our democracy has, since 1980, been transformed into an oligarchy, at least at the national level, and increasingly at the state level. The Supreme Court's *Citizen United* decision has gone a long way to extending oligarchic rule, but the oligarchy was already entrenched after the *Gore v Bush* decision, and was increasingly strong before then. Money talks, as they say, but money talks loudest when citizens avoid their own duty to vote as informed citizens. If television advertising controls elections, that means that most citizens aren't voting as citizens but as consumers, and democracy has already died.

In *The Republic* Plato described the four forms of government he recognized (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny), and he traced how they were transformed when they deteriorated. As an oligarchy broke down, it deteriorated into a democracy; as democracy broke down, it deteriorated into tyranny. Plato disliked democracy because he judged that the democratic man was an undisciplined, childlike, anarchic man of disproportioned desires. Plato assumed correctly something that Americans refuse to recognize: that the individual takes on the characteristics of the larger society, that the individual is a microcosm of the macrocosm. As the democratic society is undisciplined and unrestrained, so is the democratic individual. And that lack of proportion eventually contributes to tyrannical behavior. (This microcosm/macrocosm connection applies in all forms of government. For example, Communism in Eastern Europe and Russia developed a type of person who fits that form of government, and who was lost and abandoned when Communism collapsed.)

Modern democracies do not look at all like what Plato knew. Indeed, our democracy has deteriorated into an oligarchy rather than the reverse. Nevertheless there are two important linkages here. One is that the individual does indeed take on the coloration of the larger polity, whether they recognize that or not. The second is that there are linkages between oligarchy, democracy, and tyrannical behavior. Our democracy, on the one hand, has always had a bit of an oligarchical cast, which has now become dominant; and an undisciplined tyranny can also be found in our behavior. This undisciplined tyranny is also called "personal freedom," and often takes the form of the tyranny of the undisciplined child, as when our neighbor at a Florida rental, a man who was chronologically well into

legal adulthood, threw a tantrum when my wife asked him to turn his very loud music down. Many millions of Americans are chronologically adults and emotional children, as we all have observed and experienced.

This is not as far from my discussion of photography—the image—as it may seem to be. The use and misuse of images is a fundamental part of epistemology: how we know the world, how we see the world: how we determine what *is*. We must consider with dismay what we lose when we fail to consider the reality that stands before us—the true, undistorted beauty of The Creation. If we accept the false, or the distorted, as real, we accept the subsequent distortion that occurs in our minds and emotions, from the narcissism of the “selfie,” to the falseness of electronic images, to the reliance on the narrow materialism of consumerism, to our subjection to total work. Does it seem fundamentally unjust that the six Walmart heirs control more assets than 42% of all Americans at the economic “bottom”? This economic imbalance is not the result of chance. Somebody wants it that way, and it could not happen without the complicity of most of us. There are reasons why many Americans believe that President Obama is not a citizen of the United States, or that the Affordable Care Act requires “death panels,” or that global warming is a fiction; there are reasons why economic and social justice are becoming increasingly remote. And those reasons are based on our collective inability—or refusal—to distinguish the false from the real: the truth.

One final example, homely and common but telling.

My wife and I travel a bit, and we often encounter this response when people we meet learn that we are from Alaska: First they say, “From Alaska! You’re a long way from home! Took a cruise there a few years ago; loved it.” And then, “How are things in Alaska?” I long to say that Alaska is roughly 600,000 square miles in area, spans fifty-eight degrees of longitude (nearly the width of the continental United States) and seventeen degrees of latitude (about the distance from Key West to New York City). I long to say that there is more difference between Ketchikan and Barrow than between Miami and Duluth. But I never get into any detail, because my interlocutor invariably begins to tell *me* what Alaska is all about, because they saw television shows about it. They are inches away from an Alaska resident of forty-eight years, a wilderness guide, someone who has spent more time on extended trips in the wilderness than anyone they have ever met, someone with remote property far from the road system. But the *reality* of Di’s and my experience is of no interest whatsoever; however, they must narrate the television show in detail, because it is *real*. This experience occurs to us frequently, even predictably, and is utterly dismaying, not because I am eager to talk to strangers about these things, but because their insularity from reality is so

total, so narcissistic. They know! And they know all they need to know! And what is even more dismaying, this attitude is uniform from person to person; it apparently permeates the culture. Television usually trumps reality.

In response to the question “How are things in Alaska?” I frequently express dismay about Alaska’s warming; I hate losing our winters. And I am told that my worries are nonsense, because climate change doesn’t exist or changes are natural. In other words, they get all their “information” from the same place, and most of it is misleading at best, or completely false; nevertheless, they know more about Alaska than I do. And, it is worth repeating, this attitude spans the culture; few people are exempt.

There is only one answer: turn it off. Which won’t happen, because most people prefer their self-imposed slavery.