

So what is causing this renewed interest in such an old and difficult process? Well, I firmly believe that with technology advancing at such a rate, people are beginning to rebel against the tide and have the desire to take back some control before these advances remove the craft from so many facets of our daily lives. Photographers around the world are tired of enabling an electronic device to take complete control of an art form which should remain the domain of the photographer.

Applying this purely to wet-plate photography, there is nothing quite like seeing an image appear when the developer is poured upon a plate which you yourself have prepared from a handful of chemicals and a piece of glass. There is an indescribable sense of accomplishment as you gaze upon a totally self-made image which not only is hand-crafted, but has a beauty all of its own.

It never ceases to fascinate me how this form of photography has such an effect on people. It is almost addictive in its grasp on newly initiated, rather bewildered practitioners. Fingers blackened from silver nitrate and eyes glazed over from the effects of the strong alcohol, ether and collodion fumes are regarded as a badge of honour by those who have fallen under the spell.

When George Eastman introduced the Kodak camera in 1888, photography came within reach of millions of people, where before it had been practiced exclusively by professionals and the wealthy. The camera was sold loaded with 100 shots and was returned to the factory for processing and reloading. The advertising slogan, 'You press the button, we do the rest,' got the message through as to the simplicity of the new apparatus. This was the beginning of popular photography and hardly any home could be found without a film camera by the mid-twentieth century. Of all the photographic processes and supports for holding emulsion, roll-film has enjoyed the longest and most successful career – that is, until now.

Kodak introduced the first true digital camera in 1986, little knowing that this would have such a dramatic impact on their future business and recently take them to the verge of bankruptcy. Since then, digital imaging has had such a profound effect on photography that film itself is now considered almost archaic.

I must confess that I do own several digital cameras and that the majority of images I shoot are digital. The ease with which perfectly focussed and exposed photographs can be produced is mind-blowing. We now have cameras and telephones which can be held above the photographer's (a loose term) head, which will not only focus and correctly expose the image, but will even compose the photograph and only trip the shutter once everyone in a group is smiling!

This is not to say that digital photography is not an artform in its own right. Modern digital cameras and particularly DSLRs are capable of truly awesome results, many times in situations where film would struggle. In many cases, digital images are superior to those captured on film. These cameras are truly the tools for future image-making and will continue to evolve and improve. However, there are still those among us who appreciate the organic, handmade quality that traditional processes bring with them.

Until recently I was Head of Laboratory at Peter Jackson's film facility in Wellington. I have been involved in motion picture laboratory work since 1976 when I started work at the National Film Unit. Now the laboratory has gone – a casualty of changing times and a victim of technological change. Film is now considered obsolete and only the die-hards are left to keep this medium alive. For all the arguments extolling the virtues of digital capture, there are still those among us who love the 'organic' look of film.

Digital images have a very pixelated structure, unlike film and wet-plate images which have random or very little grain structure. Sure digital images are clean, crisp and blemish-free, but I feel the way we view the world around us is becoming too structured, too defined, almost too clean. Film and alternative processes help keep us focused on what can be achieved outside of the technological storm that is engulfing us.

Many of us are now relying too heavily on digital cameras without knowing even the basics of how these instruments capture an image. This is not to say that we all need to be techno-wizards, but we do need to understand the tool to be able to maximise its full potential. The instruments that we use for wet-plate photography are really no more than a hollow box with a lens attached. They have no shutter and very often little or no aperture control. Yet with these basic cameras we can create images that are both visually stunning and totally unique.

I feel that returning to the grassroots level of image-making gives the photographer a sense of power and control which is lacking in both film and digital capture. You feel that you are the master of your photographic destiny, the alchemist, the maker of images, a 'keeper of light.' The satisfaction that this gives is what drives us to persevere with these early processes.

Looking at motion picture capture, there are valid arguments against film. Film-stock and processing costs, combined with distribution overheads all conspire to make film uneconomical – but there is still that random grain, organic look that makes film unique. With laboratory services now being taken over by Archives New Zealand, we at least can still look forward to continuing negative processing in Australasia. Film is not dead and will continue to appeal to those who wish to pursue that natural, photochemical look that has appealed to filmmakers for decades.

There is also the question of longevity. I have wet-plate and daguerreotype images in my collection that are over 150 years old, but appear as good as the day they were made. Archives New Zealand and The New Zealand Film Archive have in their collections nitrate movie films which are over 100 years old and although most are not in perfect condition, they are still viewable. Contrast this to digital files, CDs and DVDs which, if not backed up and migrated every few years, run the very real risk of data being lost completely. Currently, there is no digital format that matches film and some of the 'archaic' processes for archival permanence.

This piece is being penned by the now Head of Picture at Park Road Post Production, managing the digital team working on the second *Hobbit* film. Yes, I have gone to the dark side but still maintain the view that capture on film will make a comeback in the next few years or as long as film stock is available. We are constantly receiving enquiries from individuals, film schools and production companies requiring film processing. These are people who recognise that shooting on film is an expensive proposition compared with digital, but who also cherish the organic look of film and who will go on shooting it, teaching and gathering converts as long as the negative is available. Much like the revival of vinyl in the music industry, in some cases newer isn't necessarily better to everyone.

I do believe that alternative processes like wet plate will continue to thrive and attract those who value the art of making an image by hand far above the technological marvels that are poised to engulf our craft.

Perspective

PRODUCTION PROGRAMMES: CAROLINE MCQUARRIE'S "ARTIFACT"

Mark Bolland

In the 1830s, the introduction of machines using Jacquard cards into the lace-making industry enabled the mechanical production of lace, and this programme for production became a key ingredient in Charles Babbage's development of the Analytical Engine, the forerunner of modern computers. Contemporaneously, William Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the first positive/negative photographic process, was making 'photogenic drawings' of

pieces of lace by placing them directly onto paper that had been coated with a light-sensitive emulsion. Also at this time, Samuel Morse was creating the first instruments for electric telegraphy. These more or less simultaneous developments represent the first emergence of all the ideas, desires and technologies for the production and dissemination of digital photographic images. They also represent a moment when 'technical images' and machine-produced artefacts imitated and then superseded their handmade predecessors. These new kinds of objects, images and communications quickly became accessible to many, as they are programmatic and the programme is a model that can be shared.¹

The lace photographed by Talbot and reproduced in his book *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) was machine-made and it was presented with a text that elucidated his new, also mechanical, 'drawing' process and explained the difference between a direct contact print – a negative image – and its positive copy. In an essay on the past and future of both photography and computing, Geoffrey Batchen has suggested that Talbot's reproductive technique, the contact print or photogram, "rendered the world in binary terms, as a patterned order of the absence and presence of light."² Batchen has also highlighted the 'pixelated' structure of the material revealed by Talbot in a picture of lace magnified one hundred times.

A famous story of early responses to Talbot's images of lace is equally revealing: Talbot's friends thought that he was playing a trick on them, and were sure that he was showing them the lace itself, not a reproduction. This is photography's equivalent of Pliny's story of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, wherein Parrhasius produced a painting so realistic that it fooled the expert eye of Zeuxis. Both stories mark a moment of progress in the Western quest for ever more realistic representations, but it is photography's ability to reproduce that sets it apart. Talbot's negative process provided a detailed lifelike image that could be reproduced infinitely, and this enabled images to become mass-produced commodities. These were the first truly technical images, produced by a programme. These programme-produced commodities had the power to convince us that the thing reproduced was real, because the image is, in some senses, caused by the object – a trace of the real world.

This 'trace' of reality is evident in the accidents of early photography whereby a necessarily long exposure often led to a small movement of the subject, causing a blur to be registered instead of the sharp definition that was the desired result. Such moments are extremely revealing, pointing to the mechanism by which the image was created rather than the subject. It is these instances, when the transparency of the photographic image is denied, that allow us to reflect on the processes that are now so commonplace and ubiquitous as to be almost invisible.

The contemporary equivalent of Talbot's contact printing process is the digital scan, and the digital 'artifact' that disrupts the scanned image by revealing its coloured pixels is akin to the accidental blur. These 'artifacts' are produced in the same way as a blur, by movement during a long exposure, as in a camera image. But the scanner image, like the contact print, is devoid of perspective and, as with the contact print, it makes explicit the 'directness' of the photographic image. This directness has historically suggested that the photograph's meaning is the same as its cause, and that no decoding is required. The presence of the 'artifact' suggests otherwise, unveiling the process of encoding and decoding that takes place during the creation and reception of photographic images, revealing their presumed naturalness as illusory.

Caroline McQuarrie's work "Artifact" takes mass-produced objects that mimic the handmade and reproduces them on the scanner, drawing a parallel between the objects and the process. The pictures suggest that we look again at the aphorisms reproduced on the scanned objects and find a tension between their mass-produced, clichéd, messages and the handmade, homely style they imitate.

1 The phrase 'technical images' and the accompanying information are derived from Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 14.

2 Geoffrey Batchen, "Obedient Numbers, Soft Delight," in Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press 2001), 164-75 at 167.

Artist's Statement

THE GOLDEN YEARS

Ted Whitaker

This is a look, a style, a pattern that didn't previously exist in the real world. It's something that's come out of digital. It's come out of a digital way of seeing, that represents things in this form. The real world doesn't, or at least didn't, have a grain that looks like this.'

James Bridle

Noise, grain, altered colours and square frames are fundamental visual traits of amateur filmmaking from a time before I was born. Instamatic and motion picture film cameras have never been used conventionally in my lifetime, nor have they been easily accessible. I am familiar with digital image-making, still and moving: a process that is second nature for my generation and culture. Instagram, the popular smart-phone application, arrived with golden hues to the mobile phone 'app' market in 2010 and has increased dramatically in popularity ever since. Instagram is well established as a leader in forming a contemporary aesthetic for vernacular photography, with strong nostalgic ties. As an Instagram user, I participate in this image forum, sharing immediate visual experiences with minimal post-production manipulation. With a limited range of slap-on filters and vignettes, Instagram is directing a visual continuity, contrasting with the infinity of digital photographic manipulation available through other programmes.

Classic surfing films of the 1960s and 1970s such as Albert Falzon's *Morning of the Earth* (1970) and Gary McAlpine's *Children of the Sun* (1968) have contributed to the aesthetic adopted by Instagram filters. These vibrant and playful depictions of surf culture create an odd sense of faux nostalgia, nostalgia for something never experienced. Captured in vivid colours on Super8, 16mm and 35mm celluloid, these 'authentic' films illustrate the style of an era. Photo-apps like Instagram recapitulate the preceding aesthetic to 'enhance' a seemingly banal digital image.

My short surfing film *A Neo-Modern Aesthetic* (2013) adapts the visual, performative and user functionality elements of an Instagram aesthetic to a surfing culture context.² The dialogue in the film is taken from text responses attached to images on Instagram. Streaming this fragmented language of one-liners, accompanied by verbal 'hashtags', highlights the mutterings and new language born from mobile-device communication. The audio track recreates exchanges between two users, perhaps oceans away from each other, or living in the same neighbourhood.

A process common to 'appographers' is the post-production edit, widely regarded as integral to creating a successful image: the instant slap-on filter is considered a beautifying element. *A Neo-Modern Aesthetic* simulates an Instagram colour grade, replicating the exact filters of Instagram.

While paying tribute to the 'look' of 1970s surfing films, *A Neo-Modern Aesthetic* is a reaction to the nostalgic concept of the 'golden years' through a re-contextualisation of the earlier films' visual properties. The opening credits establish more than those responsible for making the film. Interfaces from iOS and Photoshop, embedded in the title sequences, establish a specific period of technological development. The operating system interface featured here has already been superseded, thus locating the film in a specific period in time.

Instagram can no longer be regarded as a derivative of analogue photographic techniques, but now stands alone, describing a new visual and textual culture. The aesthetic that shapes a visual culture is derived from its machines. From the hand-held digital device to sophisticated post-production tools, design determines the image that results.

1 James Bridle, "Waving at the Machines," Web Directions South, Sydney, 11-14 October 2011, <http://lanyrd.com/2011/web-directions-south/shyrk>.

2 *A Neo-Modern Aesthetic* was selected for the 2013 inaugural Aotearoa International Film Festival, one of two films representing Aotearoa.