

Why I Don't Use a Better Camera, at Least Not Yet

Mostly by way of connecting, not mere vanity I hope (social media that I don't even use makes me question my motives), I show photographs to many people. Some of these images have been published by third parties, which makes me unduly proud. Today someone who had seen my latest and most ambitious effort, [Moonlight: a photo essay](#), suggested, again and bluntly, that I should use a "real" camera, instead of the camera on my phone, to make the images I so wantonly scatter. The phone was expensive in large part because it has a good camera, for a phone, so cost is not really an excuse, any more than laziness. A serious camera would of course be wonderful, but there are psychological and artistic reasons I've resisted doing the obvious and upgrading my equipment.

To sneak up on the psychological reasons, let me tell a story. A colleague is a very good pianist, could probably have made a modest living at it, but went into law instead. Locked down during the coronavirus pandemic, I expected him to be playing a lot. Not so, he said. To play well he had to be relaxed, and he was too edgy to play at a level he found "personally satisfying," and consequently wasn't playing all that much. Getting good at something imposes its own burdens. For years I ran but found it depressing, because I wasn't as fast as I had been when younger and racing. Swimming has remained easier, more fun, because I've always been strong but never that good, and only raced a couple of times, in triathlons. I was never "a swimmer." Now that I'm much older and heavier and don't expect to go fast, maybe running would be good again. By the same token, I have long tried not to take photography seriously, lest I ruin it, which seems likely.

On seeing "Moonlight," the same colleague said how nice it was to have a hobby. I honestly had never thought of photography as my "hobby." I just take pictures of things that look beautiful, merit remembrance or seem worth communicating, mostly to family, sometimes more widely. Sharing images has become a way of talking. I live amidst beauty, and at least until recently travelled a lot, so there has been much to report. As a result, I guess, photography indeed has become a hobby. Several friends of mine are serious hobbyists, or even professionals, so photography becomes something to share, which is good. (They all wonder why I don't have a better camera, and this little essay is in part for them.) But, as they demonstrate to various degrees, photography can easily become an obsession, and I don't need any more obsessions. I need to be able to mess around. (The absence of basketball this spring has been kind of hard on me, not because I care about basketball, but because I don't care about basketball, and can not care about it in the company of friends and family.) So, I've quasi consciously resisted getting serious about photography.

Whatever my intentions, however, I've gradually moved from memorializing family life and travel (and until phones had cameras, little of that), to putting images on my webpage, to buying lenses for the phone, to getting published. One of my images is on the cover of one of my books, some of my wildlife photography has been in the local paper . . . Nonetheless, my webpage still insists that I don't really consider myself a photographer. Yet in this springtime of discontent, I am very interested in combining images with words, as in "Moonlight" – there may be real

possibilities there, and don't we need possibilities? Things begin to get serious. Knausgaard said of Kiefer that everything he touched turned to art, as in the unhappy story of Midas. Everything I touch threatens to turn into work.

I also have substantive reasons not to give up my phone camera for something more serious. A cousin is a professional painter. We spend a fair amount of time talking about painting and to lesser extent photography. One thing that he unsurprisingly really got is that "Moonlight" is a reflection on painting, and the painterly character of the images is caused by the camera's relative weakness in low light. The process of composition is important here. I awoke on a stunningly moonlit night, a bit above zero, cold anyway, grabbed my phone, ran outside much less than dressed, and started taking pictures. The phone was to hand; this was not a photoshoot. In looking at the resulting images, I thought of painting, and more specifically, Kiefer and Richter, about whom I was thinking about writing an essay that grapples with the resurgence of representation, especially in Germany, as a way of lending *gravitas* to painting, long declared dead, at several points killed by photography, unless not, but seemingly trivial by our day. (Koons? Really?) Subsequent nights provided more opportunities, both for badly executed and somehow therefore, to me at least, moving photography, and for more thinking about the resulting images. That is, I didn't try to do this, it happened to me, being in high mountains alone with a mediocre camera, an incredible full moon, big dogs, vodka, and anxieties about the nature of history and the career of art, among other things. The image is not so much an expression as an occasion.

One might object that this defense of inadequate gear is rather specific to "Moonlight." I have a bunch of other things I want to show/say, spring green in the Flint Hills, for example, or fall in Manhattan as it was not so long ago, or suburban flowers – and for such projects, it is easy to make the case that I should use, or should have used, a better camera. "That might have been usable, if we had the image in super high rez," is the sort of thing that's said of some of my images. A good friend takes exquisite close-ups, often of flowers. I could do that, too, and blow the images up to wall size, as he does. It would be fun, in a way, and I'd probably [force myself to] get good at it. And I may do that, still, but not without reservations.

Each new phone (and camera) is sold in terms of "creative control." So is editing software. That is, photography becomes about mastery, and I'm not at all sure that's what I want, especially not from photography. If I were a painter, maybe, and as a writer, I certainly dream of absolute control, though it is not possible for writing, language does not work that way. In middle age – late middle age, honestly, don't think I can ask for much more than 90 years – I have been thinking about the lack of control, of the moment, of being right here, right now, like it or not. And, of course, lack of agency is rather characteristic of a pandemic. Being right here, right now, for all of its oddity, is much of what my latest (and imho best) book *Smith Lake* is about, and it is also the great strength of photography, very traditionally conceived as a snapshot: a mechanical representation of an instant in a place (Sontag).

Digital photography changed the temporality and so the meaning of photography. In principle if perhaps not always in practice, every pixel can be fixed, later. The image of reality can be reprogrammed. Mastery of the image, however, vitiates the photograph's power as an artifact, the mechanical consequence of some instant in a place, right here, right now. For digital

photography, a subject in a time and place are merely raw material, the beginning of the process of image production. The edited digital image reflects this process, then, rather than represents, however imperfectly, a mechanical view of some particular something, seen in this place at a specific time, and not something else, seen somewhere else sometime else. Given that we all have time to make things perfect, pretty “pictures” unsurprisingly abound, too pretty to be in fact, clearly advertisements for something, often the self.

This is all overstated, though I’m not sure by how much. Using a serious camera would not force me to adopt an aesthetic of meretricious perfection, posters on the jetway, endless selfies in some visual caricature of Hegel. But, in photography, at least so far, I’m trying to catch here and now, not make something new. And, like most folks, I have my phone with me, almost always – isn’t that enough for *this*, to create an image, flawed as all images are, but a trace nonetheless, maybe worth communicating? I do try to frame shots well, and crop them, to draw the viewer’s eye, encourage them to see what I do, to connect visually. To speak. With rare exception, my images are unedited, and I have neither the software nor the knowledge to do anything sophisticated. Connecting to someone is hard enough, without the additional, and often distancing, demands of mastery. Let me close with a delightful problem in terrible times: even though made with a phone’s camera, the images taken in South Park on “February 11,” a single unusually lucky day, seem worth putting together, perhaps with a few words. The difficulty is that the images look like they belong in a coffee table book. Not the end of the world, but . . .