

Fetish in Amateur Photography Practices

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Abstract

People, including amateur photographers, have been experiencing development on digital technology. Amateur photographers are those who practicing photography as a hobby and join a photography club. Although at first people doubted the quality and performance of the digital technology, until now it has been growing to become a fetish. In the practice domain, it is cherished as a god-powered machine able to do incredible tasks. This research aimed at studying the psychological and sociological conditions of amateur photographers at the shift of technology from analog to digital photography and close to the the post-digital era. Technology transformation has brought about significant impacts on photographers' perspective about creating, displaying, and publishing photographs. The qualitative data were collected from literature study and interviews with senior photographers famous for their achievements among the amateurs, especially those who joined the Salonfoto Indonesia. The result of this study shows that fetishism on digital technology in amateur photographers' practices does not automatically become the only method employed in exploring their creativity sources. Based on the aesthetical experiences of the amateurs, it can be concluded that digital technology functions only as a computing system to perfect the creative works. Technigue is important but not the most important one.

Keywords: fetishism, analog, digital, photography

Fetis dalam Praktik Fotografi Amatir

Abstrak

Perkembangan digital sangat dirasakan oleh semua orang termasuk fotografer amatir. Mereka termotivasi untuk pengembangan diri, bersosialisasi dan berpartisipasi dalam kontes fotografi. Walaupun pada awalnya diragukan dalam performa kualitasnya. Dalam praktiknya, teknologi digital seperti mesin yang menjadi dewa, ia menjadi fetis, seolah-olah memiliki kekuatan yang luar biasa untuk menghasilkan foto yang bagus. Penelitian ini mengkaji kondisi-kondisi psikologis dan sosiologis amatir sebagai akibat dari peralihan teknologi analog ke digital dan menjelang pasca digital. Dampak transformasi teknologi sangat memengaruhi perspektif dalam mencipta, menyajikan, dan mempublikasikan foto mereka. Metode pengumpulan data menggunakan kualitatif yang bersumber pada studi kepustakaan dan mewawancarai beberapa fotografer senior yang sudah sangat dikenal prestasinya di kalangan amatir, khususnya Salonfoto Indonesia. Hasil awal dari penelitian ini menunjukkan tranformasi teknologi digital mengubah paradigma amatir senior, yang semula menganggap digitalisasi merupakan mesin rumit dan membingungkan, sehingga mereka berusaha mempertahankan nilai-nilai 'tradisional' fotografi analog yang mengutamakan proses manual. Kesimpulan yang dapat dirangkum bahwa fetisisme teknologi digital dalam praktik fotografer amatir, tidak serta-merta menjadi satu-satunya metode yang dapat mendukung eksplorasi sumber daya ciptanya. Berdasarkan pengalaman estetika amatir, teknologi digital hanya sebagai suatu sistem komputasi untuk menyempurnakan olah kreatif. Teknis penting, tapi bukan yang terpenting!

Kata kunci: fetisisme, analog, digital, fotografi

INTRODUCTION

Technology and photography have always been related and become an unseperable unity like head and tail sides of a coin. The development of the two complete one another. Since the daguerreotype was first introduced in 1839, photography technology has been significantly developed and is marked by many innovations. A very contrastive development was the transformation from the analog to digital technology. Some aspects of the digital photography replace the operating system, devices, and also the production and reproduction process used in the analog.

Every new technology comes with its strengths and weaknesses. How people respond to it depends on each individual. Analog phothography uses manual and mechanical operating system so that high precision is required. On the contrary, the digital one applies computerized and automatic operating system that ensures precision and accurateness. It replaces the celluloid film with sensor-based recording media as to dismiss the celluloid films. The use of sensors provides people with freedom to take picture as many as they want without worrying about running out of films.

These days, the tendency of people's dependency on digital technology is getting unavoidable. This technology is at the top position in processing fragments of a photograph. Viewed from the artistic aspect, digital photography is the only medium that can visualize recorded shots into a piece of a photograph. The data gathered from the qualitative interviews with eleven amateur photographers living in Java and Bali islands show that the transformation from analog to digital photography posed them in a new technological habit. It also put them in a problem where they had to make a decision when they took, processed, saved, and displayed their photographic works. Their orientation to manual aspects had to be shifted because they had to deal with a set of computers.

Photographic Transformation from Analog to Digital

Before discussing the sophistication of digital photography, we need to appreciate some former photographers in terms of how they produced phenomenal works using modest devices. When the process carried out to produce a photograph was still very simple, they were able to combine some visuals from some incredible fragments of a photograph. When creating 'The Two Ways of Life', Oscar G. Rejlander needed more than 32 negatives. He combined them in one photo print talking about 'vice and virtue'. Henry Peach Robinson conjoined five negative glass plates to narrate the sorrow felt by a family for the daughter who was dying in 'Fading Away'. John Heartfield made a photo montage delivering an anti Nazi and anti facism message. Another great photographer, Jerry Uelsmann created a

mesmerizing surrealistic photograph. It is unimaginable how careful and precise they were when working on those pieces.



Figure 1. Oscar G. Rejlander needed more than 32 negatives for creating ‘The Two Ways of Life.’
Oscar G. Rejlander, *Two Ways of Life* (Hope in Repentance), 1857.
Albumen silver print, 21.8 x 40.8 cm, Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Source: <https://artblart.com/tag/two-ways-of-life/>



Figure 2. Henry Peach Robinson conjoined five negative glass plates for creating ‘Fading Away.’
Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858. Albumen silver print from glass negatives, 23.8 x 37.2 cm.
The Royal Photographic Society at the National Media Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom
Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/302289>

Digital photography changed photographers' habit in producing and displaying their photos. Today, photographers do not only take pictures, but they can independently edit their photo fragments by means of graphical computer. Software supports such as Photoshop that adopts various tools from the dark room provide photographers with an opportunity to legitimate their photos as truly sourced from their own creativity without any assistance from the dark room operator who used to be worked with photographers in the analog era.

Basically, digital photography was formed in a hybrid way by adopting the basic principles applied in analog photography. Its main beneficial feature is that it offers a limitless chance of production and reproduction. Rubinstein (2013: 13) claims that digitally produced pictures never stay still; they never freeze; they constantly move from one space to another and force the users to go along with them. Fragments of digital photos are very different from analog films in the form of celluloid ribbons. When an exposed film is processed, it will become a permanent image and stop there. Different thing happens to digital photos. They are data that can always be changed in accordance with the need but still perform similar quality. Benjamin (2008: 224) in his thesis '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*' states that from a negative film, someone can produce some print outs and those prints are all 'original'.

Before the digital replaced the analog, artistic effects were created through many techniques such as multi-printing, solarization, bast relief, film sandwich, and other manipulation darkroom techniques. The skill in printing manually in the dark room was prestigious in the past. However, these days this special skill has been taken over by Photoshop software that can be operated by anybody only in one click.

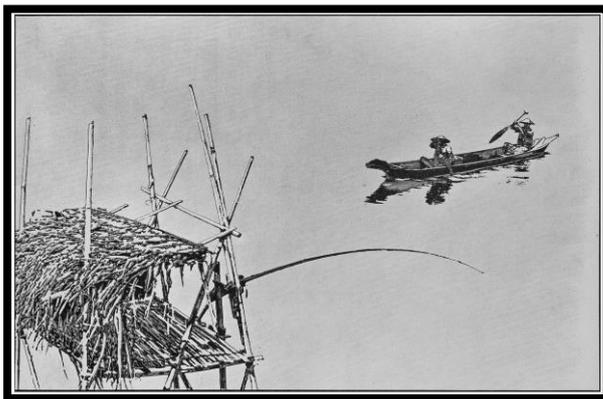


Figure 3. Dharma Suryanto, *Fishermen*, Gombong.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1974



Figure 4. Santoso Alimin, *A Happy Family*, Surabaya.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1977



Figure 5. Heru Laksmna, *Potret*, Jakarta.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1975

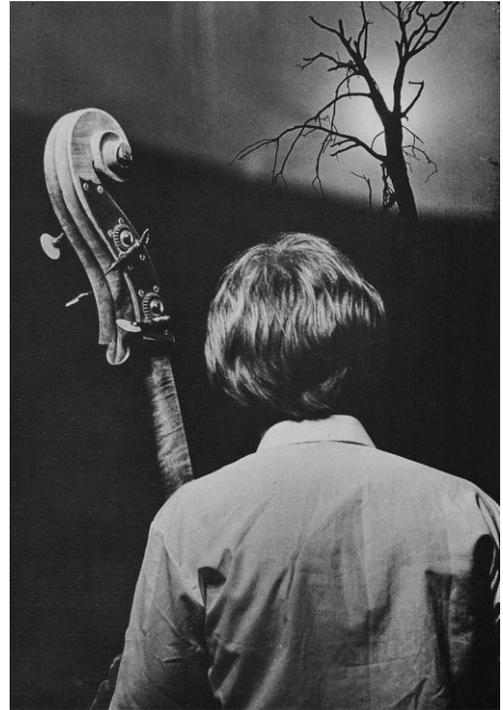


Figure 6. Fendi Siregar, *Musik Kering*, Bandung.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1978

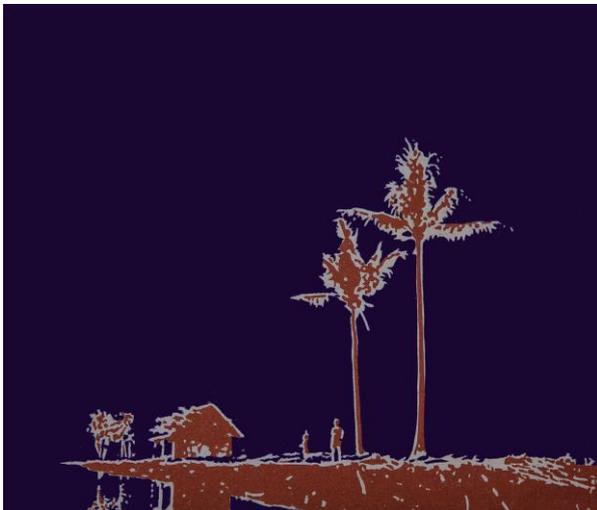


Figure 7. Toky. Y., *The Way Home*, Jakarta.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1973



Figure 8. Tjan Hwa Tjoe, *Senyum Remaja*, Surabaya.
Manipulation darkroom technique.
Source: Salonfoto Indonesia Catalogue 1978

Digital technology triggered the creation of visual artworks resulted from image combinations. Budi Yuwono, a digital imaging artist, says that by combining some images using digital imaging means producing 'new realities.' He further asserts that the new realities are the visualized objects or events that did not exist

before. The objects visualized in a photo by means of digital processing are not necessarily posed in front of the camera. The photo might be created by processing digital data of a montage of some pictures.

Technology fetishism in Amateurs' Practice

One of the major discrepancies between the former cultural activities that trigger fetishism strategy and the later is how people exploit the technology more and more to support the human's biological inadequacy (Kaplan, 2006: 175). These days, digital technology has taken over the troublesome manual skills by offering many conveniences and effectiveness. The superior digital technology gives people, including amateur photographers, as much space as possible to improve their creativity. It leads amateurs to become a fetishist. They adore technology as a superior machine capable of realizing their desires.

Digital technology of photography is a fetish in a way that it is seen as a substitution that can realize human's desires. Photograph manipulators can change the meaning and potential of pictures utilization as a proof by adding, deleting, or replacing the elements of identification (Michell, 1998: 204). By means of *Photoshop* software, photographers manipulate photo fragments to obtain visual pleasures (*voyeuristic*) toward a photograph. Burgin (1982: 190) asserted that those who find them selves enchanted to a picture are called fetisists. The ease in processing photo fragments digitally make the amateurs amazed by the superiority of digital technology. As John Hillman (2017: 17) says that photography is not only able to record, witness, and show something to people but also able to shape responses, interactions, and affective intensity from people as parts of the digital culture. Within this context, digital technology is a part of human's daily life and culture. People do not have power to reject it. People are conditioned to adore it and need it to achieve their desire of pleasures.

The Amateurs' Responses to Digital Transformation

The transformation of phothography from analog to digital influenced the habits of amateur photographers in producing photos. It is in accordance with Dong-Hoo Lee's (2010: 266) statement that digital technology changes the users' modes in accessing, processing, manipulating, saving, and distributing various data. This study was conducted to locate those impacts. The respondents were selected through a purposive sampling, i.e., a non-random sampling that is organized by priorly determined the desired criteria that are supportive for the attainment of the research' objectives (Ratna, 2016: 215). For this reason, the informants of this research were taken from senior amateur phoyhographers experiencing both the analog and digital technology.

There were eleven informants, namely: (1) Agatha Anne Bunanta, (2) Agus Leonardus, (3) Aris Liem, (4) Budi Darmawan, (5) Edwin Djuanda, (6) Harto Solichin Margo, (7) IMade Arya Dwita Dedok, (8) Johnny Hendarta, (9) Stephanus Setiawan, (10) Sungkono, and (11) Tan Sioe Lay. They are famous as Salonfoto Indonesia members. All of them are very competent so that they were assigned as juries in the salon. They were called amateur because they are active in photography world driven by their interests on the activities. Those seniors consider photography as a hobby. They are motivated to develop their capacity in photography and to socialize by joining an amateur photographer clubs in their own city. They are also actively participated in exhibitions and competitions of salon photos at the national and international levels.

They experienced technological shift from analog to semi-digital, then digital, and are facing the post digital era today. Technological shift always demands adaptation and also shift in thinking framework toward the new operating system, devices, materials, and platforms. They were not only conditioned by transformation on technology but also experienced numerous events that influenced their methods in creating photos. According to Hirsch (2008: 4-5), the production of a photography work is influenced by four attached tendencies. First is the tendency on the production system: devices, materials, and softwares used in producing pictures. The second one is the tendency coming from the photographers' habit and preferences when operating a system. Third is the photographers' personal experiences that are delivered to the spectators. The last is the influence originated in the external cultural power, social trends, economy, and politics at a particular time.

The following is the result of the interview with the chosen amateur photographers who informed their background and attitude toward the transformation on photography technology (analog to digital):

Agatha Anne Bunanta (54 years old - Jakarta) was a photographer who has been actively involved in national and international salon photo competition. The history recorded her as the first female jury of the 2007 Salonfoto Indonesia. She loves photography due to her traveling hobby. To her, technology is merely an aid in strengthening and smoothing the delivery of the photo messages. A photo is resulted by the photographer's concept and ideas. Like a painter who starts his work from an empty canvas, a photographer does a similar process too.

Agus Leonardus, (67 years old - Yogyakarta). In 1976 he started to learn photography in a self-taught way from books and magazines. In his mind, technology always develops and certainly will be replaced by the more sophisticated ones. However, it is just a machine that supports the doer in terms of technical process. Techniques are important but not the most important ones. It is easy to learn them. The more crucial factor is who handles the camera.

Aris Liem (55 years old - Solo, Central Java). He learnt photography when he was a student in Yogyakarta in 1985. He enjoys producing landscapes for he wants to create natural photos without artificial settings or arrangements. To him digital photography has big impacts and some strengths. In the past when photographers only took pictures, the quality of the end products would greatly depend on the dark room operator. On the contrary, the digital era allows photographers to be involved in the printing process to get the end products fit to their expectations. The photos are really the photographers' works because it is the photographers themselves who handle the digital processing.

Budi Darmawan (74 years old - Surabaya, East Java) began his photography activities when he was a student in 1971. When he visualizes his works, pictorialism plays a huge role. He enriched himself with artistic knowledge he gained from catalogues published by international salon photo competition organizers, especially from Hongkong and other Asian countries. The transformation from analog to digital was not a big deal for him due to his intensive involvement in printing business that was close to digital process. Digital technology is a huge aid in realizing his inspirations. However, he thinks that glorifying technology without strong basis will result in banal works.

Edwin Djuanda (68 years old - Jakarta) began to do photography when he was 15 in 1969. In his opinion, today, utilizing digital technology in taking pictures is a lot easier and sophisticated. However, to make an outstanding photo greatly depends on the photographer's imagination. Photoshop is just a technical support. Taste and feeling are much more crucial for the end products.

Harto Solichin Margo (70 years old - Bandung, West Java) has been falling in love with photography since 1965. He studied in Germany so that it was easy for him to get access to aesthetical knowledge from famous magazines and photographers in Europe. He states that digital photography provide him with a direct access to photograph quality and visualization. Screens on digital cameras enable photographers taking the desired pictures without waiting for the negatives to be processed to become prints. Digital cameras shorten the long process so that photographers can directly see the quality of the taken pictures.

I Made Arya Dwita Dedok (51 years old - Magelang, Central Java) knew photography when he was little from his father who loved photography. When studying at SMSR Bali (1987-1991), he continued his interest to this field because photography was a school subject. He was taught about dark room, printing, and chemical bathing of the black and white photos. Digital technology eliminates the needs to buy the negatives and to print them because the pictures can be seen already on the computer screen and can be produced when we need it.

Johnny Hendarta, (69 tahun - Yogyakarta), has been enjoying his hobby in photography since 1979. To him, photography is a visual language as well as a

document where he can store his memories about space and time of various objects or events. Photography is a trace that can be used as a guidance by the next generation. He has a huge interest in taking pictures of humans and their activities. In the past, he used to take shots on his object artificially. It was because in the analog era, there were only limited choices for film's ISO. When the targetted object was in a limited lighting condition, the process would be hindered by the availability of ISO sensitive to the available light. Nowadays, we can determine the value of the ISO without changing the films. In his opinion, the technique used is still the major thing to have a high-quality photo.

Stephanus Setiawan, (70 tahun - Yogyakarta) learnt photo in a self-taught manner when he was a sixth-grade elementary school student in 1964. He started his passion toward photography since he got a school task to document school activities. Digital technology development gives him flexible ISO choices. Digital photography frees him to push the shutter without thinking about running out of films. According to him, analog and digital technologies are merely facilities. Once you master the technology, you will master the basic of the coming new technology. That is why when the digital appeared, he did not need long time to adapt himself to it for it shared the basic principles with the analog.

Sungkono, (66 tahun - Magelang, Central Java) knew photography in 1975 when he worked at a photo studio as a dark room operator. His experience in printing photos encouraged him to work on black and white photography that back then was still something many people did not understand. The shift from analog to digital, especially processing the fragments to become a quality print, was not an obstacle for him. At the early time of digital era, most amateurs could not afford it. Using a digital camera without possessing a computer was 'having the head but not the body'.

Tan Sioe Lay (73 years old - Singaraja, Bali) has been engrossing himself in printing black and white as well as color pictures since 1970. He states that digital technology, mainly the Photoshop software support, is very efficient compared to the manual printing. For example, the process of combining some images in layers using Photoshop is much more practical and easier. Digitalization brings freedom in taking pictures. However, although we do not need to worry about running out of films, we still must be careful in shutting the shutter.

The data gathered shows that the eleven amateur photographers at the beginning of the transformation from the analogue photography to the digital one encountered some obstacles in comprehending the facilities and infrastructure of the system used in digital operation. However, because they developed their knowledge on this matter they were finally benefited from this technological shift because it provides them with vast opportunities to improve their creative process.

CONCLUSION

The advantage of digital technique is how its softwares can be operated easily. Almost all people can edit pictures using computer softwares. For amateur photographers who put importance on techniques, digital technology shapes them to become a pragmatic and instant individual.

A number of special printing techniques that used to be the pride of the dark room experts, now are replaced by Photoshop features. However, making a photo to become a work of art with high-quality visuals and novel idea and concept is not easy at all. In the past, an amateur could produce fine photos using only modest cameras. Through trials and errors, they built a strong foundation for their selves. The foundation was their capital to cope with a coming technological transformation so that it would not hinder them in creating photos. Those whose foundation is strong consider technology as just a support. As Agus Leonardus said that technology was significant, but it was not the most significant.

The post-digital era influenced by the digital revolution triggers a dematerialization, i.e., the absorption of physical materials towards digital dimension. It can be clearly exemplified by the change in producing images from chemically printed from films to digitally printed using inkjet pigments. Ink as a color pigment has replaced the chemical printing process. The printing media also become various, ranged from papers, canvases, textiles, etc. Technology transformation in photography is inevitable since technology and photography is a unity.

The statement that camera can freeze time and space can be rebutted by the fact that digital technology enables photographers to create a visual in a photo frame by joining a number of objects recorded from different times and spaces. Digital photography creates new realities. It becomes a new characteristic of the visual style close to the post digital era.

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Informan

Budi Yuwono, aka Budi "ccline" is a digital imaging artist, living in Sleman, Yogyakarta. <https://www.instagram.com/budi.ccline/>.