



Old-School Photography

OF COURSE YOU CAN TAKE GREAT PHOTOS WITH A SMARTPHONE,
BUT JOURNALIST CAROLINE BUIJS FINDS THAT TAKING PICTURES BECOMES
EVEN MORE FUN WHEN YOU USE A 'REAL' CAMERA.

A few years ago, I thought the best thing about my smartphone was its built-in camera. It made it so easy to document everything I found beautiful about everyday life. In a split-second, I could capture what I found important: a meal that was carefully prepared by my husband, the hollyhocks that were blooming all around my neighborhood, the decorated window of my favorite paper shop or the floral Victorian cups from which I drank my tea. 'Nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs. But many, through photographs, have discovered beauty,' writes American author Susan Sontag, with good reason, in her book *On Photography*. 'Nobody exclaims, "Isn't that ugly! I must take a photograph of it." Even if someone did say that, all it would mean is: "I find that ugly thing... beautiful."'

ALL IN THE PHOTO

In 1841, British scientist, inventor and photography pioneer, William Fox Talbot patented his photographic process as the calotype, after the Greek word *kalos*, (beautiful) and *tupos* (impression). In the 19th century 'photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary,' writes Sontag. As nice and true as this all may be, smartphones made photography almost too

much of a knee-jerk activity—something we can do easily without being terribly discerning or thoughtful. The same smartphone also makes it easy to be online everywhere and all the time—and this is exactly what has been irritating me since last year. I don't want to be checking my email, looking at Instagram or texting on WhatsApp everywhere and all the time. It might seem like I'm contradicting myself, but because I always had a phone with a camera in my bag, I would take pictures of everything I liked. Funny that the French writer Émile Zola said (after taking amateur photographs for fifteen years), "You cannot claim to have seen something until you have photographed it". But that was in 1901. Back then, photography was a complicated procedure and Zola had to think things through several times before clicking the button, which forced him—I would think—to first really take the time to look at what he was about to photograph.

REALLY SEEING

The photos I take with my phone are always snapshots. There is nothing wrong with taking a snapshot, of course; it's just that they are always fast and easy so I don't really 'see' in the sense that I think Zola meant—probably because of the display and because of all the notifications I receive. >





‘You get really absorbed in the picture, so
you choose the composition more carefully’

If you read about photography or speak with photographers, you’ll notice they emphasize that it is always about really seeing. Dutch photographer Vincent Mentzel talks about it in his book *Vincent Mentzel: Portrait Photography*. ‘Looking, you are continuously forced to look and that is the best part,’ he writes. ‘There is a feeling that takes over your whole body when you look at a beautiful painting, a beautiful photo, a beautiful woman or a beautiful man.’ Anki Wijnen, author of *Shoot!: Fotograferen met je hart* (Shoot! Photographing with your heart), a practical guide to photography, believes that when you photograph with a ‘real’ camera you are more aware of the pictures you take, because you have a camera with you purely to take pictures, not to text. ‘You are more focused,’ Wijnen writes. ‘Instead of a snapshot, you are suddenly capturing a real image. A camera has a viewfinder (that small window that you look through) and you look through it instead of looking at a screen,

so your view is not hindered by unnecessary light and you are able to see your composition better: You get really absorbed in the picture, so you choose the composition more carefully.’

IN AT THE DEEP END

In an attempt to be offline more, I started leaving my phone at home—when I’d go for a walk in search of some nature, for example. The only thing was, it was at those exact moments that I would see beautiful things that I wanted to photograph, like the blossoming trees full of flowers, and then I’d regret my decision. Sontag also writes about this aspect in her book: ‘It is common for those who have glimpsed something beautiful to express regret at not having been able to photograph it. So successful has been the camera’s role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful.’

My solution was to start using my ‘real’ camera again—it had been sitting in the hallway closet, unused, since the arrival of my smartphone—except, I couldn’t actually remember how it worked. I was so intimidated by all of the different dials, screens and settings that I just kept it on auto mode, which meant the quality of my images wasn’t much different from those that were taken with my phone. But I decided to throw myself in at the deep end and started to learn all about my camera again.

BEFRIENDING THE CAMERA

Dutch photographer and blogger Daan Rot also has to overcome a few issues first before she can start working with a ‘real’ camera. “I sometimes find this type of camera scary and it can take a year for me to figure out a new one,” she says. “It’s an adventure from the very beginning, and every now and then I still



SHEDDING LIGHT ON PHOTOGRAPHY

LIGHT: Light is the most important aspect of photography, so it's good to know a little bit about how to regulate the light that comes into your camera. There are three ways to control light exposure on a camera: through the shutter speed, the aperture setting and the ISO speed. It is best learned by doing. Take pictures at different shutter speeds, aperture settings and ISO speeds, and see what happens. Also try it in different settings: on sunny days and on cloudy days.

SHUTTER SPEED: This refers to the length of time light is allowed into the camera lens and is shown on your camera in seconds. When you take a picture with a shutter speed of 125, then the shutter stays open for 1/125 of a second—the length of time light will enter the camera. Things to remember: the higher the shutter speed (so a higher number), the less light will enter the camera, and vice versa.

APERTURE: This controls how much light enters your camera. The aperture sits inside your camera lens, so the bigger the opening, the more light passes through. This also means the bigger the opening, the smaller the range of sharpness (depth of field). Things to remember: the lower the number, the bigger the opening in your lens and the shallower the depth of field, and vice versa.

ISO SPEED: ISO speed determines how sensitive your camera is to light. Things to remember: the higher the ISO speed, the more sensitive the camera and the lighter the photo.

get frustrated and put it back in the closet, because it isn’t doing what I want it to do. At the moment I have three cameras and I’m better friends with one than with the others. I was advised to just start trying out all of each camera’s options one by one. I still don’t quite understand everything on them, but that’s okay. Really looking is the most important thing. Just going ahead and taking a lot of pictures. You learn from mistakes and sometimes they lead to surprising results. Just go out and have fun. Don’t fret too much about rules or techniques. Figure out what works for you and stick to it. And remember that you are the boss of your camera, not the other way around. Your camera is nothing more than an instrument. It’s your eyes that do the real work: they ‘see’ the picture. The camera is just an aid. Take a course if you don’t feel confident, but don’t let it throw you off track. Anyone can learn photography.”

THE FUN IN EXPERIMENTING

In the end, it didn’t work out between my old camera and me. One day, I walked past a small, one-man camera shop in my neighborhood where the owner tries out cameras before he sells them. And there it was in the window: It was almost the same model as the camera my father used to have, but digital. Buying a camera is like buying a tool, Mentzel tells me: it needs to fit your hand. My father added that you have to fall in love with it a little bit—and it’s true. I traded in my >

BASED ON FEELING

Perfect photos are boring. You don't need high-tech gear or gadgets to take beautiful pictures. Czech photographer Maria Austria, Vincent Mentzel's mentor, based everything on feeling: she would simply look at the sun, adjust her aperture setting and get to work. Mentzel also photographs based on intuition: high-tech gear doesn't interest him. His favorite pictures are those that have small imperfections.



‘Your mind makes the most beautiful pictures in the world’

camera, which I was never in love with, and now I’m trying again: proudly walking around with a ‘real’ camera. I don’t set it on automatic anymore; I just try to take the pictures I want to take. I decide for myself whether I want the background sharp or blurry—something I never do when using my smartphone or dared do with my old camera. For me, photography is again a means for relaxation, authenticity, joy, the fun of learning and for experimenting and figuring out that mistakes have to be made before you can actually figure out how your camera works. I still take photos with my smartphone, but I’ve stopped clicking away excessively. Sometimes when my camera doesn’t work and it doesn’t do what I want it to do, I think about the words of Mentzel: “Your mind makes the most beautiful pictures in the world.” ●

WANT TO KNOW AND SEE MORE?

- * ‘On Photography’, by Susan Sontag
- * ‘Vincent Mentzel: Portrait Photography’, by Vincent Mentzel
- * Instagram: @vincentmentzel
- * Andreacorroneajenkins.com, @hulaseventy
- * Lightstalkings.com
- * Photographytalk.com



GOING ANALOG

Once you are familiar with the way cameras work, borrow an analog camera (a camera that uses rolls of film). The American photographer Andrea Corrora Jenkins still regularly photographs with an analog camera. “Because the amount of pictures I can take with one film roll is limited, it helps me really think about what I want to photograph and how, where and why,” she says. “This calm way of working with the camera helps feed my creativity, something I don’t always experience with digital photography.” Vincent Mentzel agrees: “Seeing and photographing with a digital camera is fidgety: you push a button and then look down at your screen. When you take pictures with an analog camera, you look, click on a button and your gaze remains on your subject. They feel more comfortable and less like they’re just an object. Analog photography keeps you focused and can be surprising.”