

My Lens

by R.B. Ganon

Photography and cinematography are two of my few passions in life. The ability to freeze a moment in time, which can be appreciated for years to come, is something that would have been considered magic only 200 years ago. According to Walker Percy in his essay “The Loss of Creature,” however, photography is a definite way of completely missing out on an organic experience. Percy argues that when shooting either photos or videos of a particular object or event, the person doesn’t directly confront the subject. The photograph or video is a mere symbol of the event that occurred, a representation of what was that could never be experienced in present time.

As a photographer I have captured many scenes and moments from my life ranging from scenic hikes along the cliffs of my favorite beach to gatherings with friends and family. Percy’s argument about ironically missing the experience one is trying to capture through photography is certainly valid in some situations. With the goal of getting the “perfect” shot, it is all too easy to get caught up in the technicalities of shooting a photo, such as the lighting, aperture, depth of field, and shutter speed. The danger here is that their focus lies in the action of taking the photo more than the subject of the photo. As soon as the photographer has made this mistake, they fall victim to Percy’s theory; they are no longer experiencing the moment to be captured, rather, they are experiencing capturing the moment. This mistake is made by simply not having one’s priorities in order when taking a photo. As a photographer myself, I have come to terms with the fact that I can never completely re-live the experience I have captured. Therefore, my thoughts when taking the photo lie more with the subject itself. I adapt to the ever-changing environment surrounding the subject while simultaneously engaging it. This leads to a much more personal photograph that I have found naturally meets or exceeds the standards of traditional photography. I credit my fresh perspective on photography to having taught myself the art. I learned through trial and error and by researching only the most basic of techniques on how to manipulate the camera’s settings to have a photo come out in focus and not over or under exposed. Without the influence of a teacher, my outlook on photography itself is organic and strictly within the boundaries of my own mind. When I look through the lens of my camera, my goal is never to catch the subject in the most aesthetically pleasing moment, but rather to catch it in the original moment. I accept the impurities of a shot as a more accurate representation of what has occurred because nothing in nature is perfect; the imperfections are what make nature, natural. Take for example this photo of a friend of mine surfing:



If I were a photographer was trying to capture Dominic's surfing style, and this wave in particular, this photo is a disaster. The bird draws attention away from the surfer and thus away from what the artist was trying so desperately to grasp. Yet, that is not what the photograph should be about. The reason why this photograph is one of my favorites is because the bird flying into the shot has added an exponential amount of information about the environment than what would have been conveyed otherwise. A person looking at this photograph obviously knows it was taken at the beach, and that a surfer is riding the wave. With the appearance of the bird, the viewer not only gains a new understanding of the wildlife that inhabits the shoreline but also an appreciation of how the bird naturally interacts with its environment. Notice how close the bird is to the water, how its wings nearly brush the surface as it glides effortlessly through the air. The elegance of the bird's interaction with the ocean offers a beautiful parallel to Dominic's interaction with the wave, all in the same shot. This is nature. This is the unpredictability of the ocean and the stunning sight of two animals engaging it in their respective ways, all caught in a single frame.

Percy argues that for a photographer there is no present, only the past, which has been seen, and the future, which has yet to be seen. I, on the other hand, believe the exact opposite. Photography grants me the opportunity to live in the moment. As I take the photograph, I am not hindering my experience of the subject by limiting myself to the view through the lens; I'm engaging the subject and exploring its potential through my own artistic metaphorical lens. As renowned photographer Ansel Adams once said, "You don't make a photograph just with a camera. You

bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved.”

How does the mere act of recording an event rob the experience of the event itself? Writing is just a record of the spoken word, and although it may not convey the spontaneity of a conversation, it does have the potential to convey the essence of a conversation, does it not? My relationship with the photos I take runs much deeper than just the information the photo communicates. I experience the emotions I felt at the time of the shot and the rare experience of observing my own experience from different points of view every time I re-engage the photo. Granted, Percy’s argument about only getting a fraction of the emotion felt at the time of the event is certainly valid; I’m given only a taste of what I was feeling at the moment I clicked the shutter release, but to me, that taste is exquisite.

Every time I see that photo of Dom, I return to the rock where I shot this on that sunny day in August with the sun warming my body and the ocean breeze rustling my hair. I remember the moments before, when the eerie silence of a session in-between sets is broken by Larmo yelling “On the outside!” as a set begins to roll in from the south. Dominic saw his wave and adjusted his body accordingly, waiting until the last minute to paddle furiously and pop-up effortlessly onto his board. As he rode the wave, aside from my finger clicking the shutter release, my mind was not with the camera but with Dom and the ocean. I was not trying to predict where and when the best shot would take place; I was just adapting to what I saw through my telephoto lens and capturing every possible frame I could. The lens showed his facial features so clearly, I was able to ride the wave vicariously through him, cruising along the face of the wave until the section opened up and allowed him a buttery-smooth bottom turn before ferociously throwing his legs out for a snap at the peak of the perfect four foot high, right-handed wave. Dom usually isn’t one to show much emotion, but after that wave, I distinctly remember the grin on his face and how in that moment, Dom seemed to be the happiest I have ever seen him. Now I realize that not all of my readers can follow my surf jargon, but the point I’m making is that with one picture, one frozen moment in time, I am given a small but magical piece of an experience I never want to forget. This relationship to my work is perfectly summed up by Karl Lagerfeld, who explains that “what I like about photographs is that they capture a moment that’s gone forever, impossible to reproduce.” The moment is gone. It will never happen again, and yet, the visual aesthetic can be enjoyed until the photo ceases to exist.

Here are some more photographs I have taken. I encourage you to spend time with them and engage the entire setting along with the intended subject. Enjoy!







