

## A Note on Photography in a Zen Key

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**Abstract:** In an era when mainstream photographic artists automatically resort to high resolution and heavy-handed Photoshopping to enhance their artwork, this article presents “photography in a Zen key” as a minor, divergent species of photography that has the viewer’s satori as its *raison d’être* and catalyzes such satori through its “coolness.” The article draws on Zen-spirited painting, poetry, and philosophy to further the discussion, and refers to a few pictures captured/composed by Wei-Shyuan (Stone) Peng to illustrate the point. [China Media Research. 2013; 9(3): 20-27]

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When photography came to the scene, painting had to diverge, because photography seems to be better at re-presenting the world. This understanding can be traced back to André Bazin (1967), who points out: “Simultaneously a liberation and a fulfillment, [photography] has freed Western painting, once and for all, from its obsession with realism and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy” (p. 16). Paul Virilio (1999) seems to be echoing Bazin when he says: “Impressionism was a critique of photography” (p. 33).

Insightful as the above understanding is, it nevertheless captures only one side of the story. The truth is: there has been a complex interplay between the two mediums. The typical painting by Gérard Fromanger, for example, can be understood as a painterly (i.e., not slavish) transcription of the photographic image. Which is to say, instead of seeing photography as a mere threat that renders painting obsolete, Fromanger treats of photography as a friendly, appropriable, and enabling medium. On the other hand, photography as an art form also has much to gain from painting, especially Zen-inspired painting, which is characterized by suggestiveness, the synecdochic implying of the macrocosmic by the microcosmic, the indispensability of empty space, the sense of haecceity (i.e., the singular mystical aura that belongs with each specific moment), and the feel of *wu-hsin* (无心, i.e., no-mind), etc.

While it is absolutely necessary to master the medium, the Zen-minded photographic artist wouldn’t allow technical excellence to dominate the artistic process. Nor would he depend on top-rate apparatus for artistic effect. Between the magnitude of power and the magnitude of poverty, he is predisposed toward the latter, to borrow Virilio’s phraseology (Virilio, 2009, p. 64). As such, while others may make a big fuss about their darkrooms and personal studios, he is all too ready to have his photos printed at the most ordinary supermarket. What makes his photos stand out, then? The secret has to be in his Zen sensibility.

Zen-inspired photography is “cool,” which is a root metaphor in Marshall McLuhan’s corpus. In a written dialogue with me entitled “Poetics Is Not a Subject but a Function,” Eric McLuhan points out:

“Hot” and “cool” describe the extent of the user’s sensory engagement in whatever. They are not properties of the technology but rather of the user’s responses. That is, they are part of the closure for the experience: they do not describe the technology or artifact.

I believe it’s useful to take “hot” and “cool” beyond the sensorium so the two metaphors could be applied legitimately to the aesthetic, ethical, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of the viewer’s experience as well. A cool art piece involves the viewer, without whose contribution the art piece is incomplete. That is to say, the viewer is included as an indispensable element of its Gestalt (i.e., formal integrity). It positions the viewer as a coauthor, so that when the viewer gets “it,” she can no longer draw a line between the art piece and herself. Nor can she separate the art piece from the infinite totality of which it is a synecdoche. As such, the Zen-spirited art piece is not supposed to be a self-contained thing of consummated beauty for the viewer to recognize and admire, but an invitation for a true encounter that may lead to satori (顿悟), i.e., instantaneous, total enlightenment, a sure mark of which is ego-loss (无我). There is a difference in kind between the merely beautiful and the Zen-spirited artwork. The one pleases; the other awakens.

The “coolness” of Zen-spirited photography manifests itself in multiple ways. Black and white is cool. As the photographic artist matures or becomes increasingly Zen-minded, he naturally switches from color to black and white. Where he does use color, he uses it sparingly, for a strategic reason, as in the use of green as a sign of spring emerging out of a “ground” of winter (see Picture 1).

Suggestiveness is cool. Imagine a picture of a few aquatic plants whose stems cast zigzag-shaped shadows on water. It takes a moment of wonder for the viewer to figure out there's a ripple that is barely perceptible (see Picture 2). Now envision a picture of a horse stopping on a snow-covered farmland against the background of two or three trees. Such a picture profoundly involves the viewer because each farm implies its owner, and each horse its rider, in the same way each picture implies its viewer. It being a snowy scene only enhances the viewer's sense of existence, snow being such a potent reminder of the often forgotten forces of nature and our oneness with the all-encompassing whole. The picture is cool also because it vaguely calls to mind Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (see Picture 3). The mood of the picture is captured by a haiku:

Sleet falling;  
Fathomless, infinite  
Loneliness. (Watts, 1957, p. 186)

Such a scene involves the viewer existentially and emotionally.

Simplicity is cool. As Bruce Lee (1975), the Zen-minded martial artist, points out: "The height of cultivation runs to simplicity. Half-way cultivation runs to ornamentation" (p. 24). Paraphrasing a line from Tao Te Ching ("为道日损"), he further points out: "It's not daily increase but daily decrease – hack away the [inessentials]!" (Lee, 1975, p. 42). Indeed, less is more. Simplicity of composition in photography is the equivalent of parsimony in painting or writing, as captured by the expression, "(So and so is being) frugal with ink as if it were gold" ("惜墨如金"). Imagine a picture of a gray-colored, cracked brick wall against the bottom of which stands a tiny, tiny seedling that has turned red (see Picture 4). What an economical, fresh way to indicate the advent of fall! Such a picture invokes the Chinese expression, "A single (fallen) leaf betokens the coming of fall" ("一叶知秋").

Now imagine a black and white picture of a heron standing on ice covered with a thin layer of water, accompanied by nothing but its shadow (形影相吊). The discontinuity of the shadow – which is a stroke of genius as much as it is an act of God – contrasts with the solidity of the heron image. The interrupted shape of the shadow implies in the subtlest way imaginable that there is a breeze blowing on the thin layer of water. This is arguably the coolest way to render visible a natural force that in itself is invisible. The juxtaposition of the solid image of the heron and its discontinuous shadow creates vital energy (气), and makes an otherwise static picture dynamic, full of vitality (see Picture 5). The

picture embodies the Zen principle of wu-hsin, and calls to mind a Zenrin (禅林) poem cited by Alan Watts (1957):

The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection;  
The water has no mind to receive their image. (p. 181)

Indeed, the heron does not intend to cast its shadow, and the water has no mind to receive it.

As an image of solitude, the heron picture immediately calls to mind a Zen-spirited poem by Su Shi (苏轼):

人生到处知何似？  
恰似飞鸿踏雪泥。  
泥上偶然留指爪，  
鸿飞哪复计东西。

Here's a translation offered by Curtis Smith, a Su Shi scholar:

Where one is in life, what can compare?  
It is just as a wild goose in flight, alighting on slushy snow.  
On the snow, occasionally is left a track of a claw;  
The goose flies off, but who knows whether to the east or the west.

The poem coaches a Zen attitude toward life. So does the picture, which is a skillful means (善巧方便) the photographer comes up with to induce satori in the viewer. The simplicity of Zen-spirited pictures lies in the indefinite article "a": a seedling, a heron. Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元) has a poem that exemplifies this principle perfectly well:

千山鸟飞绝，  
万径人踪灭。  
孤舟蓑笠翁，  
独钓寒江雪。

A plain rendition will be adequate for our purposes:

Not a single bird in all the mountains,  
Nor a single person on all the paths.  
Only an old man in a straw mantle and a straw hat  
on a solitary boat,  
Fishing alone in a cold river in the snow.

A Zen-minded photographer will be able to capture such a scene. It's all about haecceity: a specific time of the year, a specific hour of the day, a specific slice of the world. Speaking of haecceity, Monet's haystacks

paintings are all about haecceities, or once-occurring Zen moments.

Liu Zongyuan's poem situates a tiny "figure" in a vast "ground." It implies another principle: empty space is cool. Thinking takes space. That's why there's a lot of "air" in McLuhan's tetrads. That's why the typical CEO's office has a lot of unused, seemingly useless space. That's why there are such things as the Sabbath and the sabbatical. If music gets people to muse, that's because "music is the space between the notes," as Claude Debussy, the French composer inspired by symbolism, points out. Symbolism, by the way, is characterized by the pulling out of visual connections, i.e., by the creation of gaps. Empty space (留白) is a matter of useful uselessness (无用之用). It is one of the chief characteristics of Zen-spirited painting. As Watts (1957) points out:

One of the most striking features of the Sung landscape, as of sumi-e as a whole, is the relative emptiness of the picture – an emptiness which appears, however, to be part of the painting and not just unpainted background. By filling in just one corner, the artist makes the whole area of the picture alive.... The secret lies in knowing how to balance form with emptiness and, above all, in knowing when one has "said" enough. For Zen spoils neither the aesthetic shock nor the satori shock by filling in.... Furthermore, the figure so integrally related to its empty space gives the feeling of the "marvelous Void" from which the event suddenly appears. (p. 179)

Watts (1957) further suggests that empty space plays a crucial role in poetry as well – at least in East Asian poetry. As he puts it:

In poetry the empty space is the surrounding silence which a two-line poem requires – a silence of the mind in which one does not "think about" the poem but actually feels the sensation which it evokes – all the more strongly for having said so little. (p. 183)

Empty space is Zen-spirited painting's most precious gift for photography. To put it in a paradox, empty space allows photography to encompass the unlimited through the limited, or to gesture toward the cosmic through the human-scaled or the anthropomorphic. A few Zen-spirited lines from John Dewey's *Art as Experience* are in order here:

We suppose the experience has the same definite limits as the things with which it is concerned. But any experience the most ordinary, has an indefinite total setting. Things, objects, are only focal points of a here and now in a whole that stretches out

indefinitely... any experience becomes mystical in the degree in which the sense, the feeling, of the unlimited envelope becomes intense.... This sense of the including whole implicit in ordinary experiences is rendered intense within the frame of a painting or poem.... A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live.... Where egotism is not made the measure of reality and value, we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves, and any intense realization of its presence with and in us brings a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves. (Dewey, 1934, pp. 193-195)

Dewey's point about paintings or poems applies to Zen-spirited photos. Empty space is veritably the chief means by which the Zen-minded artist could invoke the larger, all-inclusive whole and display a cosmic consciousness.

The significance of unfilled space is not only aesthetic but also existential. Dewey (1934) further points out:

Space is room, Raum, and room is roominess, a chance to be, live and move. The very word "breathing space" suggests the choking, the oppression that results when things are constricted.... Lack of room is denial of life, and openness of space is affirmation of its potentiality. Overcrowding, even when it does not impede life, is irritating.... Works of art express space as opportunity for movement and action.... Emphasis upon spaciousness is a characteristic of Chinese paintings. (p. 209)

Dewey's sentiment is shared by Virilio (2008), who echoes: "... the very place of freedom... is expanse... freedom needs a field" (p. 83). In a different context, Virilio (1997) points out: "Oriental wisdom has it that time is useful when it is not used. Surely we can say the same of space, the unused life-size of the expanse of a world unknown and often ignored" (p. 60). In the inexhaustibility of nature lies humanity's freedom from claustrophobia.

With its simple composition and empty space, the typical Zen-spirited picture offers an antidote against busyness, and enforces a fasting of the mind (心斋) in the viewer. It constitutes a spiritual discipline (修炼) or askesis for artist and viewer alike.

Zen-spirited pictures not only show empty space, but also imply empty time. Snow, water, mist, and sky are recurrent motifs in Zen-spirited pictures. Oftentimes, there is no clear line between snow and sky, water and mist, the better to imply a profound sense of oneness among all elements. On the other hand, Zen-spirited

pictures both result from and create empty time – time for ludus, for wondering, for marveling at and getting carried away by the immemorial, renewed-moment-by-moment, eternally returning processes of nature.

Zen-spirited photography almost invariably shows a loving attitude toward nature, which is profoundly mystical. Absent infiltration by the stubborn, inexplicable forces of nature, the cityscape would be utterly sterile and alienating. The indescribable, shifting-by-the-moment patterns made by countless birds where the two highways meet in the downtown Grand Rapids area always keep me awe-stricken. The birds fly, and fly, for no reason, for no purpose. They do it purely in a *wu-hsin* (i.e., no-mind) mode. The ineffable ease and elegance with which they make and remake formations at once perplex and curiously excite me. I can't stand having the radio on when driving past, when encountering this miracle of nature. By the same token, a black and white picture featuring the irregular, vital, out-stretching branches of a leafless winter tree against a backdrop of sharp-edged high-rises in Chicago would be tremendously powerful (see Picture 6). The irregularity forcefully disrupts the suffocating uniformity of the scene, and generates a cooling effect. Gilles Deleuze (2004) has it right when he says: "when the medium is hot, nothing circulates or communicates except through the cool, which controls every active interaction..." (p. 250). The interfacing between the hot and the cool generates vital energy. In the Chicago scene, coolness is synonymous with livability. The naked, dark-colored tree is the equivalent of a breath of fresh air, and a precious cooling force in a "hot" scene.

Zen-spirited pictures are the artistic equivalent of the imagistic haiku (俳句). A haiku is essentially a one-image poem. Take this one:

Leaves falling,  
Lie on one another;  
The rain beats on the rain. (Watts, 1957, p. 187)

Ezra Pound got the inspiration for his imagist poems precisely from haiku. Here's a most famous poem by him:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough. (McLuhan & Parker, p. 1968, p. 36)

Watts (1957) points out:

"... a good haiku is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory. It invites the listener to participate instead of leaving him dumb with admiration while the poet shows off." (pp. 183-184)

This is Watts's way of saying that the haiku is "cool."

He further points out:

The artificial haiku always feels like a piece of life which has been deliberately broken off or wrenched away from the universe, whereas the genuine haiku has dropped off all by itself, and has the whole universe inside it. (Watts, 1957, p. 196)

Watts's points about the haiku apply equally well to Zen-spirited pictures.

The *raison d'être* of Zen-spirited photography is *satori*, or psychic minorization taken to the nth power. The photographic image is the equivalent of what McLuhan calls a probe, what Deleuze (1995) calls a mediator (pp. 121-134), what Huxley (1954) knows as mescaline, what Leary (1968) knows as LSD, or what the Zen practitioner knows as the strike of the master's staff on the head (当头棒喝). The point of the image is to awaken the viewer from petty-minded attachments. The image is supposed to embody and coach a Zen ethos. It takes the right kind of receptivity for the viewer to "contract" this ethos. The petty viewer is easily attracted to the prettiness of, say, the heron image, which is to miss the point altogether. The clever viewer may intuit a psychic or social posture out of the heron's bodily stance. The wise viewer is simply shocked by a sudden realization of the profound oneness of all beings (i.e., the realization that being is really inter-being) and can no longer be bothered by the hustle and bustle of mundane life. This realization is an inner trip of no return. The superior viewer, who sees the mystical in the mundane all the time, would smile an understanding smile and go about her daily routine like normal.

A passage from Thich Nhat Hanh's book, *Zen Keys*, is in order here:

"All of the Buddha's teachings are a finger pointing to the moon." To see the moon, we use the finger, but we must not mix up the finger and the moon... "Skillful means"... are methods created to guide people toward awakening. But if these methods are taken as a description of awakening or as awakening itself, they become a kind of prison. As soon as we think that the finger is the moon, we will no longer look in the direction the finger is pointing. (Hanh, 1995, p. 51)

The Zen-spirited picture is to *satori* as the finger is to the moon. It is meant as a catalyst for *satori*. To treat it as another fetish object to get attached to is to miss the point entirely.

When photographic artists are overly distracted by high resolution (which does reverse into "noise") and high saturation, when the proliferation of picture taking threatens to blunt our perception and blind us to the

mystical nature of the world, we might as well entertain the opposite strategy (反其道而行之), and explore photography in a minor mode, in a Zen key, as something that holds the promise to retune our sensibility. To couch it in Deleuzian terms, it's impossible for the new race of photographic artists, already preparing their work and their styles, not to be born.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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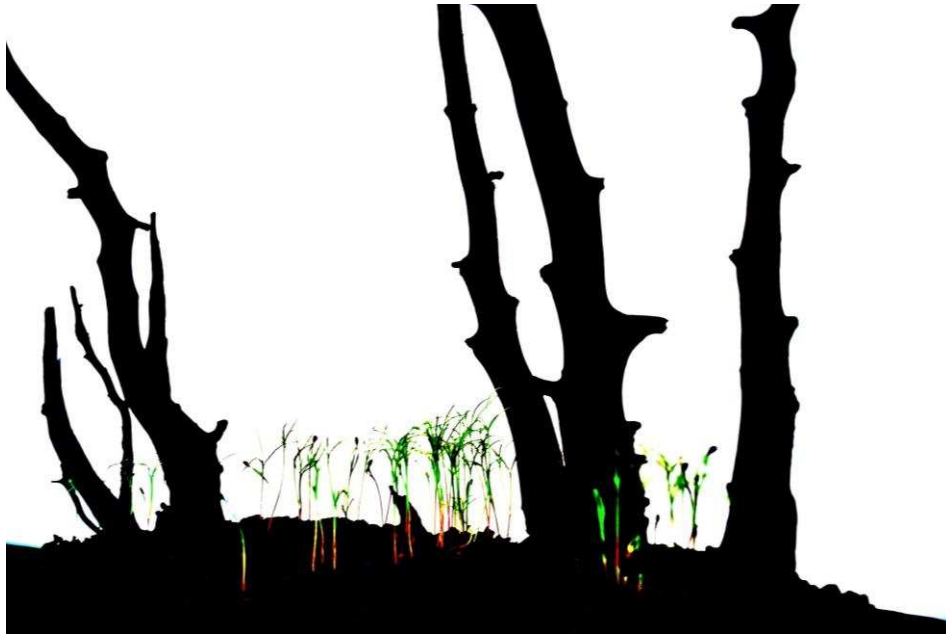
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**Appendix: Pictures Mentioned in the Article**

Picture 1: Spring



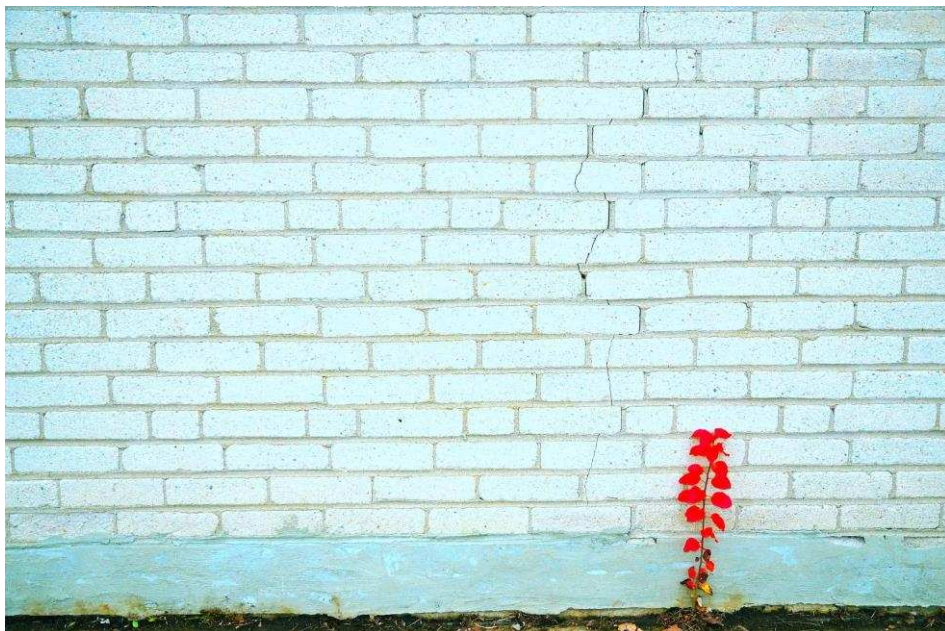
Picture 2: Summer



Picture 3: Winter



Picture 4: Fall



Picture 5: Heron Alone



Picture 6: Chicago





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