

Smoking in the Darkroom

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One photographer I visited recently had a darkroom more luxurious than anything I had ever seen before: deep fitted carpets, stainless steel plumbing, swivel stools at the bench, deluxe stereo unit, even a television recessed into an alcove covered with a safelight, all operations connected to a master control panel, framed prints on panelled walls, bookshelves and a couch for thinking and naps during long printing sessions. "Why not?" he said. "I spend more time in the darkroom than I do in my living-room so it might as well be as comfortable an experience as possible."

This darkroom might not be worth mentioning except for a chance remark and its subsequent ramifications down a byway of photographic history. I had noticed on his workbench an antique cigarette case and table lighter. "So you smoke in the darkroom," I accused, not expecting any serious response. "Yes," he said "and it is the only place where I smoke." The reason was more intriguing than the fact.

This photographer claimed that smoking increased his concentration, not because of any physiological results of nicotine, but because "it kept the robot occupied." I knew what he meant. By coincidence (or synchronicity) I had been rereading Stephen Spender's beautiful little essay, called "The Making of a Poem."¹ The problem of creative writing (and presumably of creative anything) is essentially one of concentration. Spender asserts that the supposed eccentricities of poets are wholly due to mechanical habits or rituals developed in order to concentrate. He gives a few fascinating examples: Schiller liked to have a smell of rotten apples wafting from a drawer in his desk; Auden drank endless cups of tea; Spender himself smoked a great deal, "which I hardly ever do except when I am writing." Walter de la Mare claimed that smoking, when creating, provided a channel along which distractions from the outside environment could flow without interrupting his mind. While the robot, or subconscious watchdog, was busy with the cigarette it was not constantly making the mind aware of other stimuli, such as the crying of children or the barking of a dog.

This connection between the photographer and smoking as an aid to concentration reminded me that I had read many articles in the 19th century photographic press concerning smoking in the darkroom. For the Victorians this was a continuing source of debate and experiment, as well as amusement. Then, as now, the very idea of smoking was anathema to some. When a correspondent wrote to a magazine editor "for complete instructions in photography," he received a long letter which is a fascinating peephole into the life of a 19th century photographer. The letter begins:

If you can shave and wash yourself before breakfast, and neither smoke nor chew; if you can make a charcoal fire, and sweep out the laboratory before six o'clock in the morning; if you do not hesitate to carry a pail of water through the street, or drag a photographic hand-cart up a precipitous declivity: if you can run with a wet plate for half a mile in five minutes, through brakes and brambles, without shuddering at the idea of rattlesnakes or black serpents; if you do not seem to ascend or descend crags overhanging death-like abysses, without the slightest concept of your soul being severed from your body; if you can feed on crackers, cheese, and spring-water for a whole day, without any craving for city delicacies; if you can bear to see a whole tour's labour shattered to atoms in the cars, without swearing; in fine, if you are determined to make photography your hobby, I will condescend to allow you to enter my sanctum, and to partake of my instructions. 2

An even more spirited condemnation of smoking was published in *The British Journal of Photography* in 1872, although the remarks were made for an American audience:

Photographers who chew tobacco or smoke in the presence of their customers, or allow any one else to smoke in their rooms or spit on their floors and carpets; or an operator that has the odour of beer or whiskey about his person; his clothing and linen dirty; his manners and language not polite and respectful to all and every one of his patrons; his gallery, stairways, chairs, and showcases dirty, dusty, and everything out of order; the specimens on the wall old and out of date; the frames dusty and ornamental with spiderwebs – must not be surprised that he has nothing to do. Such a photographer is distasteful to either ladies or gentlemen, and the sooner he gets “burned out” the better it will be for himself and his patrons. 3

Apart from the fact that a photographer who smokes “is distasteful to either ladies and gentlemen,” he was also risking fogged plates, according to several 19th century investigators.

In 1862 Monsieur Davanne tested the action of smoke on wet-plate development in the darkroom of a friend. His conclusion was that smoking caused fogging.⁴ This finding was confirmed during a lecture by a Professor Duby at a meeting of the Photographic Society of Berlin, in 1879.⁵ Duby was reading a paper on “Positives, their Different Methods of Preparation.” After the reading he undertook to demonstrate the technique in practice. Unfortunately, the photographic paper, instead of producing clear and beautiful prints, now gave only foggy, indistinct images. Someone suggested that the cause of the problem was the tobacco smoke which had filled the room during the lecture. “This conclusion was agreed to by all present, and the general opinion was that it would be quite impossible, under the circumstances, to obtain good prints.”

In spite of this general agreement of the meeting, other photographers disagreed about the harmful nature of smoking. As one remarked: “An easy, leisurely mode of proceeding is indispensable to the enjoyment of a hobby; and the devotee of the

Nicotian weed will proceed about many photographic operations with increased enjoyment when it is accompanied by a choice ... cigar or well-blackened pipe.” 6

The advocates of smoking in the darkroom had some heroes to cite. Hugh Diamond, one of the earliest and best photographers, often smoked a cigar while developing his plates. R. Manners Gordon, “the prince of neat manipulators as well as of artistic photographers,” was never seen in his darkroom without a cigar in his mouth, “a circumstance which probably conduced to the deliberation of development to which he attributed a good deal of success.” This “deliberation” sounds very close to Spender’s concentration. And there were other, more practical, advantages of smoking in the darkroom according to one writer. In 1874 7 he noted that the smoking of tobacco released fumes containing ammonia as well as nicotine, both volatile alkaloids. During alkaline development the photographer could give the plate a few puffs of smoke for increasing the density of the image. In theory the idea seemed quite plausible; there is no record that many photographers actually employed it in practice.

On balance the problems of smoking in the darkroom out weighed such minor advantages. Few darkrooms in the 19th century had adequate ventilation and the atmosphere was stuffy enough with chemical fumes and oil or gas illumination without adding clouds of smoke. In addition a meeting of the Photographic Society of France 8 reported in 1874 that tobacco ash in minute quantities would settle on the print and combine with chemicals to form little yellow spots incapable of being removed. But these were trivial risks in comparison with the dangers of being blown up. The collodion used in the wet-plate process was a mixture of guncotton and ether. The former was extremely explosive; the latter, highly flammable. The risk of a lighted cigar in the proximity of these chemicals can be imagined. The editor of *The Photographic News* described his own narrow escape from accident:

A gentleman wishing to show us some pyroxylin in a tin cylinder which he was employing for collodion, seized the tin with one hand, and with the other, between the fingers of which was a lighted cigar, he proceeded to twist round and remove the cover. Fortunately it was a good cigar he was smoking, and the long ash remained firmly attached to the fragrant weed during the operation of forcing the case open; but we have often thought the result might have been different had our friend been enjoying himself with a cheap Pickwick. 9

This risk was eliminated with the introduction of dry-plates. In 1909 a magazine ran a full-page text piece on “Developing by Cigar-Light: a useful emergency expedient.” 10 The photographer-author, A. Lockett, recommended development by inspection using the glowing end of a cigar for red illumination. (The plates were not panchromatic at this date.) He even recommended the brand of cigar - “Marcella” or “Blackfriar.” A picture illustrating the piece shows Lockett rocking a plate in a tray with a cigar dangling over the dish. Another photographer was equally inventive. He had the misfortune, when photographing the countryside, of sticking the leg of his tripod in a

wasp's nest. He completed his exposure "with more than his usual sang-froid, repelling the onslaught of the wasps by vigorous puffing from his briar."¹¹

A short survey of smoking and photography among early photographers would not be complete without mention of Magic Cigar Holders introduced in 1866. As the smoker puffed at the cigar, a photographic portrait slowly developed on the tube.¹² These ingenious cigar holders were marketed by Messrs. Harvey, Reynolds and Co., of Leeds. One year later Magic Cigar Holders were introduced by a Mr Grune of Berlin, who was described as the inventor "of these amusing novelties."¹³ French photographers claimed they were introduced in Paris. After a brief flurry of interest, the idea seems to have died, only to be reborn 25 years later.

In 1892 the Scientific American revived the novelty by describing commercially available cigarette or cigar holders which were supplied with a packet of plain white photographic papers about the size of a postage stamp. One of these papers was inserted in the holder, behind a window. Smoke from the tobacco was drawn across this paper which gradually revealed a portrait or other subject. The "secret" was revealed in several photographic magazines¹⁴ and in the extremely popular book Photographic Amusements by Walter E. Woodbury. In brief, a small image was printed onto silver chloride paper. This was then dipped into a solution of "bichloride of mercury" which bleached the image. The photograph could be made to reappear with ammonia fumes, contained in tobacco smoke. I offer the idea to cigarette manufacturers suffering from flagging sales. A prize could be offered for the most appropriate image on the little prints.

The truly vain Victorian smoker could order a pipe in the shape of a self-portrait "More than one London tobacconist," said a writer in 1885, "now undertakes, on being furnished with a photograph, to provide you with an absolutely correct portrait in meerschaum."¹⁵

The history of photography is littered with these trivial quirks, eccentricities and abortive experiments. They are the tinting on the cheek of any portrait of history.

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