**The Camera Does the Rest**

*The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography*  

At my fiftieth high school reunion I met a classmate whom I will not name. He has always been a close friend and he felt comfortable relating a painful story.

In the 1970s he was a Professor of Psychology who also did student counseling at a public university. With a Ph.D. in counseling, he was well qualified for his job. Knowing what a kind person he is, and that he is a sympathetic and careful listener, I am sure he was good at his work. He told me that he once had a secret life — he would travel to a large nearby city and patronize prostitutes. During his activities he would photograph himself and the women with a 35-mm camera. The film got sent off to a laboratory he had seen advertising in a men’s magazine. The lab guaranteed complete secrecy.

One day my friend was confronted at his office by his chairman and a state policeman. The lab had been raided, and his film had been found. His boss forced him to quietly resign his position. A protest would have resulted in unwelcome publicity — an embarrassment to my friend and his family. And so he left a job at which he excelled and never returned to his profession.

Suspending my judgement about the exchange of money for sex, I find this a sad story. It was like hearing from someone who had caught polio after the vaccine had become available. For, like the disease, this situation had a readily available technological fix. This was the Polaroid Land Camera, which had been first introduced to the public in 1948. Once you tripped the shutter you would have, a few minutes later, a sepia photograph, 3.25” by 4.25.” Because the photo processing lab had been bypassed this became known as “instant photography.” By the 1970s Land cameras had been greatly improved, were less expensive, and featured automatic focusing with sonar, a self-timer, and unlike its 1940s ancestor, could now produce color pictures.

There is a whole spectrum of books on Polaroid. One is the biography of its American-born founder Edwin Land (1909-1991). Land was a distinguished inventor even before he produced his famous camera — the first of the “instant” cameras. He was well known for inventing polarizing filters that form the basis of polarized sunglasses. The Polaroid Corporation existed before the camera. Not only a great inventor, with over 500 patents in his lifetime, he was a wonderful showman who had a flair for introducing his latest cameras at shareholders’ meetings; he famously influenced his young friend Steve Jobs. One can read a history of the company: *Instant: The Story of Polaroid* by Christopher Bonanos (2012) is a recent example. Polaroid engaged in a brutal war over patents with the larger and older Eastman Kodak. This moved through the courts for a decade, starting in the mid-1970s, and was settled with Kodak having to remove itself from the instant photography business and pay nearly a billion dollars in damages to Polaroid for having infringed on its instant camera patents. This too is the subject of a book: *A Triumph of Genius: Edwin Land, Polaroid, and the Kodak Patent War* by Ronald Fierstein (2015).

Peter Buse, in his *The Camera Does the Rest*, stakes out different territory. His focus is on the social meaning of the Polaroid camera: how did it change photography? How were the cameras used? And how did Land intend them to be used — a concept that often differed from their actual use.

The first Polaroid camera, Model 95, was expensive and big and clunky, weighing over 4 lbs. It cost $95 and was a luxury item that initially was sold not in camera shops but in classy department stores. This was at a time when the average weekly wage was $60. A packet of film cost $1.75 and would allow for 8 shots. Despite its price, the camera did well among the affluent. By the time it was retired in 1953, 900 000 had been sold. Throughout the 1950s smaller, less expensive cameras were introduced and it was then that the company started to take off. Much of its profit lay in its patented special film, which contained a chemical pod. Pulling the film through the camera after the exposure resulted in the rupturing of
the pod, by means of rollers, and the spreading of a chemical between the negative and the paper that was to receive the image. After a wait of perhaps a minute the user would peel the negative away from the positive and a print would result. The bottom of the print had an oversize white border space which became a signifier of a Polaroid photograph for the life of the company. As Buse points out, the placing of the print on its paper became so recognizable that a Polaroid was not just an image but also a “thing,” a physical artifact whose appearance was copied by the advertising industry and is still evoked in some advertisements. Sales of the camera and its film boomed in the 1960s and 1970s — sales were $500 million in 1970.

Of course the serious amateur looked down on the camera. The first ones had a slow shutter (capable of only 1/60th of a second) and for focusing you had to estimate the distance to your subject. And the system produced no negative; each image was unique and couldn’t be copied by putting a negative into an enlarger.

Initially writing off the sophisticated consumer of photo equipment, Polaroid’s advertising focused on the social value of the camera: bring it to a party, wedding, etc., take pictures of everyone, and send them home with their snapshots. And the company promoted the camera as a prothetic device for the socially inept: an awkward young man could bring his camera to a social gathering, take a picture of an attractive girl, and within a minute hand it over to her. The ice was broken. Buse sees the camera of this period as a kind of seductive toy. He contrasts this with the early days of the Kodak roll film cameras, which dated from the late 19th century. They were sold as a tool for preserving memories — you photographed your loved ones because they would one day die. There is a subtext of sadness in early photography. Later, Kodaks too were marketed as toys — a device bringing joy and excitement.

Besides its function as a toy, Polaroid had serious professional and industrial applications: insurance adjusters would photograph your damaged car while estimating its damage, dentists processed xrays with Polaroid chemistry, and law enforcement agencies used the camera at crime scenes. The American public learned in the 1970s of an ugly use for the technology: the South African government used Polaroid to make photographs of its citizens to be placed in passbooks which served as an aide to control and intimidate its black population. The embarrassed company was forced to pull out of the South African market in 1977.

Most communications media somewhere have a sexual fellow traveler (think: “blue movies,” French postcards, “phone sex”). In 1965 Polaroid introduced a cheap camera, The Swinger. It weighed only 21 ounces and cost $20. The device took its name, apparently, from the instruction that it be allowed to swing from the user’s wrist via an attached strap. But either by accident or calculation the Polaroid “swinger” had other connotations. Many of us recall The Swinging 60’s. And “swingers” of that era (and well into the 1970s) were known for being sexually adventurous if not downright illicit. With the Swinger (or any other Polaroid camera) you could make your own pornography — the photo lab didn’t intervene. John Updike observes this in his novel Rabbit is Rich. A later Polaroid camera, the SX-70, has him musing about the S and X being signifiers. Buse finds the sexual connection with Polaroids not only in Updike but also for a number of other writers including Joyce Carol Oates and James Ellroy. It’s a pity my high school friend wasn’t reading them. Or that he wasn’t one of the 7 million people who bought the Swinger.

As Buse remarks, the use of the Polaroid camera as a record of sexual experience or as a maker of pornography anticipates the use of digital photography for the same purposes. But he makes the important point that the most transgressive and shocking use of digital photography isn’t sexual but the picturing of abuse, torture, and violence.

Edwin Land was famously known as a “Renaissance man.” He had aspirations for his camera that extended well beyond its use as a toy, a memory aide, a party ice breaker, or a do it yourself porno device. Land took fine art seriously, and he had a long close friendship with Clarence Kennedy who taught art history at Smith College. Kennedy sent a number of his former students to work for Land and advised him in matters of aesthetics. And Land constructed a photography gallery at Polaroid, in Cambridge, MA, to honor his friend and mentor.

Also important to his aspirations to make the Polaroid camera a tool of high culture was the long relationship that Land enjoyed with one of the most important “serious” photographers of the 20th century. This was Ansel Adams, who served as a consultant to Polaroid from 1949 until his death in 1984. Adams was famous for his dramatic black and white landscapes of the American West. He was also the author of a complex and much cited theory of photography called The Zone System, which enabled the serious photographer to determine how much exposure and development to give to a sheet of film being used in picture taking. I say “sheet of film” since Adams’s teachings were designed for people using view cameras on tripods where one sheet of film was exposed at a time. Such equipment is very far removed from the typical Polaroid experience.

Land provided Adams with liberal amounts of cameras and film and sent him off to use them. He took hundreds
of pictures, which became part of the Polaroid Collection in Cambridge, MA. Adams produced an entire book in 1963, dedicated to Land, and titled Polaroid Land Photography Manual. Containing not just technical advice, it is filled with high quality Polaroid work not only by Adams but by other informal consultants to Polaroid, people like the famed teacher and photographer Minor White as well as Paul Caponigro and Marie Cosindas. Polaroid had a deal with them: we’ll keep you supplied with our film if you’ll give us your work. Not mentioned by Buse — and it should have been — is that these photographers were often not using Polaroid cameras but conventional view cameras equipped with a special adapter that would take 4 by 5 inch Polaroid sheet film. White particularly favored these devices as a teaching tool to give rapid feedback to his students on their work. I was one of his students.

Buse remarks how major figures of photography besides Adams took to Polaroid, e.g., Walker Evans and Andre Kertesz. Both these men were elderly and Buse might have observed that the Polaroid camera had an appeal to the old but venerable photographer. The physical effort in using a Polaroid was certainly less than that required in dragging around a view camera on a tripod (as Evans had once done) and the immediate gratification in receiving an image, without requiring the wait for processing, must have been attractive to someone who felt his picture taking days were soon over.

Also not described by Buse is a feature of serious photography for which Polaroid cameras were ill suited, the kind associated with “the decisive moment.” This work is best exemplified by Henri Cartier-Bresson, who produced a book with this very title. It involves a photographer who will make him or herself as inconspicuous as possible, who uses a small camera (usually 35 mm), and who is capable of taking photographs in rapid succession when the decisive moment arises. Polaroid cameras — big and clumsy and usually equipped with slow lenses and shutters — were not designed for this mode of working. As Buse explains, a reduction in the size of the camera — to render it inconspicuous — results in the production of a smaller picture. Land and his engineers couldn’t keep shrinking the size of the Polaroid camera and hope to get a decent sized picture. And decisive moment photography grew in importance and popularity in the postwar years.

Through his connection with distinguished photographers, Land significantly ameliorated the image of Polaroid in the community of amateur photographers. In its prosperous days, the Polaroid company also published a highbrow magazine called Closeup which lasted from 1970 to 1985. Filled with Polaroid photography by such distinguished photographers as Mary Ellen Mark and Lee Friedlander it also had first rate writers like John Irving, Donald Barthelme, and Phillip Levine.

Any book about Polaroid must inevitably deal with its decline and fall. This is not the focus of Buse’s work but it is not unrelated. The conventional wisdom is that Polaroid was undone by the advent of the digital camera in the mid 1990s for which it was unprepared, partly because it had clung to the notion that consumers were committed to wanting a camera that would produce “hard copy.” Although there is much truth in this, the company was in trouble over a decade earlier. In the four years from 1978 to 1982 the company started to lose its share of the camera market. There are a number of reasons. The inexpensive Japanese 35 mm cameras, once disdained in the postwar decades, as were Japanese cars, were getting better and better. Brands like Olympus and Canon had good lenses while the popular Polaroid One Step had a plastic lens and a limited focusing range. Such an invidious difference couldn’t be undone by the association between Polaroid and such giants as Ansel Adams.

Also, and perhaps more important: Kodak changed the chemistry of its color film. This meant that a drugstore could maintain a lab that would develop your Kodak film and give you prints or slides in an hour — hence the “one hour photo lab.” You could bring film over from a morning wedding and hand the prints out to your guests in the afternoon, and (unlike shooting Polaroid) give out multiple copies.

After control of the company left Land, it was largely mismanaged, going through two bankruptcies. You can buy instant cameras today that say Polaroid on them, but the Polaroid Company in Massachusetts created by Land isn’t the manufacturer. Various firms buy licenses to employ the name. Fujifilm, a Japanese firm, makes an instant camera that competes with them.

One feature notably lacking from Buse’s book is any mention that there has emerged today a hybrid camera, which like the Polaroid produces a paper-based image right after exposure but also produces a digital file that can be downloaded to a computer or placed on the Internet. The images are small — around 2.5 by 2 inches. Google the words “instant digital cameras” and you see what I mean. Some of these cameras carry the Polaroid name. This is probably still just a niche market but it may grow. Perhaps it arises from our need for immediate gratification or for a desire to grasp a physical object to reward one’s labors.

Reviewer Information

A. David Wunsch is Book Review Editor of this magazine. He is an Emeritus Professor in the ECE Dept. at U. Mass Lowell. His email address is ADWunsch@gmail.com.