Double Density

Martin Volman

Introduction

Double Density sounds like a Berlin garage punk band, but it's Mavica's magnetic contract: 1.44 MB, 19 grams of iron oxide. The Sony Mavica FD-7, a camera that stores images on 3.5-inch magnetic diskettes, wasn't chosen out of nostalgia or retro affectation. It happened by chance while I was kind of playing around with odd categories on MercadoLibre.[1] I still have the purchase emails, my questions. I paid around 300 Argentine pesos in 2015 — about 25 USD.

This book is not a history of the Mavica, nor an essay. I wouldn't know how to classify it, and I don't want to bias you, reader, although I inevitably will. I'd call it a kind of practice-based investigation: from the artistic practice itself, reflected through theory.

If pinhole photography is usually thought of as the zero degree of photography — the image reduced to hole, light and time— then the Mavica could be thought of as the zero degree of digital photography. Not because it's rudimentary, or because it lacks technique, but because it reduces the digital to something still legible: limited resolution, finite file, physical support, visible procedure. Not too much magic in the medium. Just that. Basically, a pretty brutal honesty.

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[1] Something like the Ebay in Latin America

It is precisely this visibility that raises the central question: by making their technology visible, these images also reveal their materiality — and with it, inevitably, the issues of weight, support and the physical condition of the digital image.
The low resolution — 640×480 —, the visible pixel grid, obvious compression, and flattened tones don't work simply as technical limitations. They are the specific "eyes" of the apparatus: a historical way of seeing. In these photos the pixel doesn't hide.On the contrary — it announces itself, flat and proud.


ASCADOS

1. The name

The first thing that struck me about the name was MAgnetic VIdeo CAmera. Not "digital camera" —neutral— nor a mere "camera." But magnetic video camera — a name that sounds like a hybrid rejected by technological evolution.

Perhaps it's telling us something else: digital photography was never stable or pure, but an in-between medium in permanent tension —between the optical and the magnetic, between what is art and what is not, among other tensions.

The Mavica FD-7 is, literally and paradoxically, a video camera that doesn't make video. A name that lies about its function, or that tells the truth about its genealogy. Kittler, in Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, argued that the names of technical media reveal the conditions of their emergence more than those of their actual use. That is: the name of the apparatus freezes a moment in technical history and drags it forward, like a linguistic fossil embedded in the present. Magnetism is the first thing named because it was the first thing that existed: this camera used a video sensor, not a photographic one. But this doesn't only belong to the support (diskettes) — it seems to speak about the images themselves: they attract, repel, and come back together through the strange forces of magnetic fields. As if they had their own special logic. The Mavica is a

historical apparatus before it is an optical one. Here, photography doesn't fail: it reveals itself as technology.

Weights and Resolutions

The weight of the apparatus matters more than it seems: awkward, forcing the body into specific positions and gestures. And let's not forget — fixed lens, optical zoom that was limited, which meant you had to move. The body imposes itself. Something almost performative, which I'll come back to later.
That's the Mavica's standard resolution — what Hito Steyerl would call a poor image. But here the technical data reveals something political: VGA comes from screens, not cameras. The rupture is right there: the Mavica captures data for screens, not photos for paper. These images were never meant to be printed — no negative, no object you can hold separately from the machine.
It lives in the light, in the glow of the CRT. It "prints," yes, but in phosphorescent light.
In a 1997 world that still thought in terms of paper, the Mavica occupies a revealing liminality: not analog, given its magnetic support — but not the fluid post-photography of today either. A transitional technology that forces you to see the screen not as a mirror, but as the only habitat where these images breathe.

Brutal honesty

The restricted chromatic range feels strangely beautiful. Flat greens, blocked blues, no gradients—closer to Teletext than to photography. Paradoxically, it’s more authentic than a 108-megapixel image processed by artificial intelligence, precisely because it lacks the technical resources to disguise its computational nature. It shows itself as it is.

The same applies to the zoom. A fixed 10x optical lens—when that’s not enough, the software interpolates. The result turns unreal, almost painterly. Today I’d say it “lies badly,” but that’s exactly what makes it fascinating: the pixel hides itself today; the Mavica strips it bare.

2. Digital before digital

The Mavica can be understood as digital before the digital learned to disguise itself. I'm not interested in the post-photography debate or the death of the medium — those debates exist and will keep existing without my help. What interests me is something more concrete: these images show an early stage in which the electronics had not yet learned to hide themselves. What we already see in these images is not a technical flaw but a historical condition.

In these photos the pixel says I'm here, I'm visible, I exist. Today pixels are ashamed of themselves — compressed, smoothed, processed until they disappear. The Mavica didn't have that option. Or that shame.

The problem arises in that involuntary act of transparency. An image that reveals its technology also reveals its materiality, raising the uncomfortable question: where does this image exist? What object does it live in? What is it made of?

Enter the diskette. That object you touch, drop, jam, break with an ease no manual mentioned. With its apparently protected but intimately sensitive surface, its metal mechanism that works one day and the next decides not to, without explanation, without warning, without any grieving process.

The diskette was to the 1997 digital photographer what the roll was to the analog photographer: something you carry, that fills up, that you swap, that you label with a marker and keep in a pocket hoping not to crush it. The economy was almost identical — 20 photos per diskette, 36 per roll. The same old question: do I shoot now or wait to see if something more interesting comes along? The digital arrived promising infinite abundance and in 1997 it still behaved as if it hadn't gotten the memo.

The digital image was born fragile. The magnetic field that constitutes the picture on the diskette is not stable — it degrades, alters, disappears. A magnet nearby: bye, photos. Extreme temperature: bye. Enough time in inadequate conditions: also bye but slower, sadder, without notice. The analog negative at least gave you the dignity of deteriorating visibly. The diskette simply stops being readable. One day it works, the next it doesn't. No explanation. No intermediate state. Technology.

3. 19 grams

The pixel as a fictitious unit of mass? As a unit of measure?

I remember when Ruth, my mother, taught me in primary school how to compare cheeses by looking at the price per kilo. Don't let the packaging fool you. Years later I understood the trick worked for almost everything: time, money, attention. Why not pixels too? Is there such a thing as "pixels per gram"? Or the other way around — grams of information per pixel?
The question might sound absurd. But it's productive. And it leads to a more uncomfortable question: How much does a digital image actually weigh? Not in KB — we already know that. In the literal sense, what mass is required for that image to exist in the world? Where does it occupy space?
Because we're so used to measuring images in KB or MB — size as a technical detail, an engineering default — that it became the only way to think about the weight of an image. An abstract, invisible heaviness the body never feels. But that unit hides a decision: measuring in KB means conceiving the image as pure data, bodiless, without a place in the physical world.
There was a brief, uncomfortable moment when the digital still needed a bag. When the image had mass, support, logistics. When you had to decide how many diskettes to take before

leaving the house. The Mavica arrived exactly at that moment. Too early to learn to be data. Still an object.

So where does the pixel actually live, if not in the object?. Tato Bores[2] spent decades asking Argentina why it kept chasing something nobody could hold in their hand. The implicit question in all his monologues was always the same: has anyone actually seen a dollar?

I wonder the same about the pixel. Has anyone seen one? The pixel itself has no shape, no edge, no colour of its own. It's a convention. A coordinate.

And yet, on the Mavica's diskette, the pixel has something Tato's dollar never had: measurable weight. Two millionths of a gram of iron. Small, absurd, real. And like Tato's dollar: present everywhere, but visible nowhere.

Grams per pixel: the weight of a point

Let's start with the most visible, or rather, the most tangible thing: the camera in your hand.

Grams per pixel = mass of device ÷ number of pixels

590g ÷ 307,200 pixels = 1.92 milligrams per pixel

[2] Tato Bores (1925–1996) was an Argentine comedian. I recommend watching some of his videos on YouTube.

Weighing 590 grams, it produces 307,200 points. There is a calculable ratio between what you hold and what you produce — a physical correspondence between body and image that was never quantified by analog photography and has been completely erased by contemporary photography. An iPhone produces 48 million points with a weight of 230 grams: 0.004 mg/pixel. Nothing. About 500 times less. I hope no physicists are reading this!

When that ratio tends to zero, the body disappears from the equation. The image detaches from touch, circulates without perceptible support. What does it mean for photography when the body vanishes from the math? The 1.92 mg pixel can't answer that yet. It still needs someone to carry it.

But the camera is only half the story. The other weight is the support where the image lives.
And at the molecular level, the most absurd formula comes now:

Grams per pixel: what holds the image
= weight of support ÷ (images × pixels per image)
19g ÷ (30 × 307,200) = 0.0000021 g/pixel = 2.1 micrograms/pixel

Two millionths of a gram of iron per point of color. Not metaphor — physical iron, ferromagnetic particles aligned north-south to hold that color. The pixel is massless by definition: convention, coordinate. But on the Mavica diskette, it weighs 2.1 μg.
And because it's iron — physical, oriented, fragile — it can be lost geologically. Not corrupted like a bad bit, but terrain destroyed: particles scattered, magnetic landscape flattened. I have a diskette labeled "2009-047" that no drive reads. Nineteen grams that technically contain something — residual patterns, partial orientations — but that something is gone. Was it ever an image? Is it still?

Together, these formulas scale from the physical — the apparatus you hold — to the molecular — the iron that guides each point. They contrast the tangible Mavica, with its honest weight and visible logic, with today's digital image. Somewhere in that chain, the image exists. The question is just where.

4. The performative. Choreography of a shot

Changing diskettes was all part of the process. You'd leave with a bag loaded with at least twenty disks, a pair of tweezers in case they got stuck, and the near-certainty that, at some point, you'd forget to check the write-protection tab. Because it always happened. Always. Three seconds of waiting while the camera wrote the image. Three seconds during which you couldn't do anything. You couldn't rush, undo or take another photo. You just had to wait.

And waiting changes everything.

The slowness, the noises, the rituals. In an era where images are auto-generated, these interruptions force a different kind of photographic relationship: one that stops you in your tracks and reveals what today's photography hides — your choices.

Diskettes had what SD cards lack: you could label them. Name, date, place. The illusion of order. But another trap — that label promised you'd save it for later, and you rarely did. Every diskette got reused. Every label became a small, lying monument.

600+ grams in hand, motor vibration, waiting. The Mavica doesn't vanish into the gesture — it insists, weighs, occupies

space. Not a camera you forget. A camera that reminds you it's there.

That presence never goes unnoticed. People stop me. Airports, streets, museums. Someone always says: is that a floppy disk? — the way you'd say: is that a mammoth?

The Mavica doesn't just catch eyes. It catches ears.

Whirrrrr. Best case scenario.

Or the *clack-clack-clack* of a jam? Pray.

There are no discreet shots. The Mavica announces itself with an unavoidable mechanical whir that cannot be silenced or deactivated. Especially in museums, not because photography is banned, but because the noise violates the unspoken agreement that cameras shouldn't be seen or heard. It shouldn't disturb. The Mavica breaks that contract with every shot. Loudly. Mechanically.

Conclusion

Roy Batty in Blade Runner: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe."

And what about Mavica? I've photographed things I can't believe came out. Images screaming their birth certificate: 90s. The present emerges looking retro. Not failure — Mavica's job. Born obsolete, it ages everything it touches.

Digital photography promised timeless, weightless images. Clean slates. The Mavica? Refused it.

What looks like "defect" is photography's oldest truth, shouted loud: every image fingerprints its making. Apparatus, resolution, compression, support — scars everywhere. Digital tried erasing them. Mavica wears them proudly.

Too digital to be analog. Too analog to be digital.

Too contemporary for history. Too historical for now.

Born 1998, photographing 2026, looking 1998 forever. Digital promised escape from time. The Mavica proves it: no image escapes its birth. It shouts it — whether it wants to or not — with every pixel.

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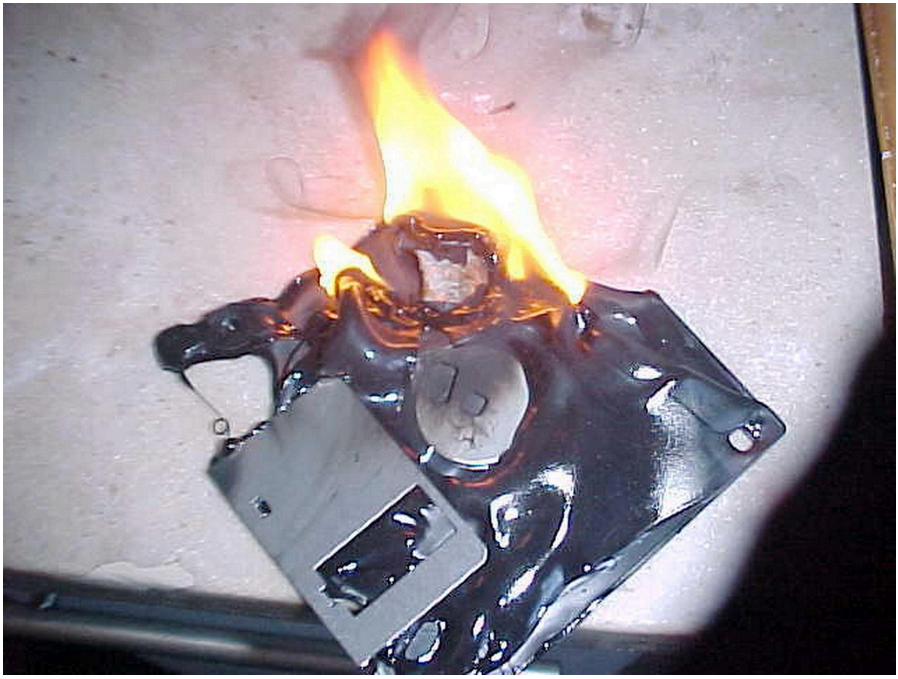

Too digital to be analog

Too analog to be digital

Too contemporary to be historical

Too historical to be contemporary