

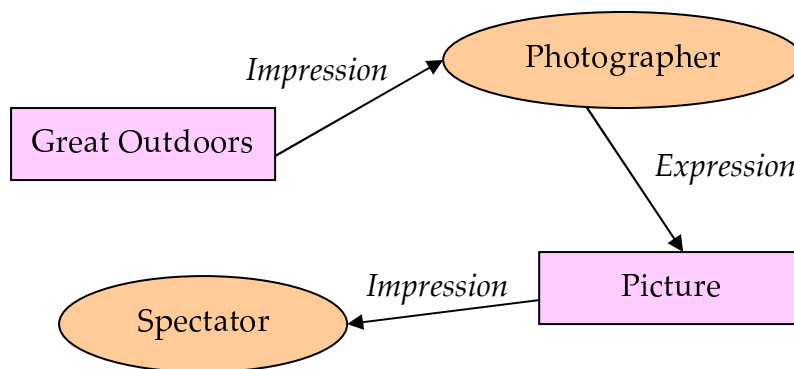
Landscape photography: expression/impression

The following discourse is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Where I analyse my approach and proffer opinions, the reader should react to them, rather than accept them at face value.

In photography, there are *two* viewers :

- (i) the one who witnesses the scene and takes the photograph – ie the photographer;
- (ii) the one who looks at and interprets the final picture – hereafter termed the spectator.

By dint of time, these two roles may be played by the same person. However, the two mental processes are separate, such that one may distinguish those events leading *to* the picture and those arising *from* the picture. The first is an expression, the second an impression.



The above schematic diagram shows that there is the further impression of the Great Outdoors upon the photographer, so that there are in fact three processes:

- (i) The photographer perceives the scene;
- (ii) He makes a picture;
- (iii) A Spectator sees the picture.

What the spectator sees is a part of the Great Outdoors, filtered through the mind of the photographer (question of his personal vision) and revealed to the best of the latter's abilities (question of skill and technology). In terms of mental processes, the picture is the expression of the concept formulated by the photographer upon witnessing a particular scene. In physical terms, the picture stems from the image of the three-dimensional Great Outdoors projected on to a two-dimensional photo-sensitive surface by a lens (or set thereof). Only the record of the image formed on the photo-sensitive surface may be described as writing with light, ie a photograph. This photograph is subsequently

transformed to give the picture. This second process is a transformation of one two-dimensional surface into another.

As an artist, the photographer is compelled to alter the world around him, to model it according to his thoughts: this is the basis of expression in all of its forms (speech, writing, sculpture, etc). I do not consider that it is the photograph itself (transparency, negative, RAW file...) but rather the print made therefrom (if that is the chosen mode of communication) which impresses the spectator. The objects which the photographer can transform, are thus the image and its record – the photograph.

Transformation during the actual creation of the photograph (eg placing the image elements on the viewing screen) is the art of photography *stricto sensu*. However the second process (creating the picture from the photograph, eg by printing) might best be described as “pictography”, ie writing with pictorial elements. These elements are derived from the photograph and include those that are:

- (i) graphic: line and area, variously coloured and/or toned;
- (ii) descriptive: a tree, a rock, etc., without further meaning;
- (iii) symbolic: giving a further meaning to either of the above by reference to a cultural or personal value.

Many different transformations can lead to a valuable work of graphic art. The range of expressive tools is ever-growing; it is up to the photographer to decide which he wishes to use. The choice of method must however be justified since it influences the impression made by the work of art.

This stance permits far more expressive techniques to be used by the photographer. In recording an image, the photographer controls among other things the choice and position of the image elements, the aperture, the focal length, the exposure time, the choice of film, the colour cast. In creating a picture, he can add further means of control. In traditional darkroom printing, the tones or colours of a print can be altered relative to the photograph. Simply cropping introduces a different arrangement of the pictorial elements. Nowadays digital routines have been added and should not be spurned simply because they are novel. One should not either discount the possibility of taking pictorial elements from different photographs to create a picture, in which only the parts (and not the whole) show the Great Outdoors.

The application of these methods are learnt from technical manuals and journals; it is not within the scope of this essay to describe them, or even list them exhaustively. They are however part of the photographer’s expressive arsenal and as such merit mention here. Of greater importance to us is a discussion of how a photographer can control his expression by his choice of pictorial elements and how he chooses to organise them, ie the mental processes rather than the technical ones.

As landscape photographers, we are impressed by the spectacle of the Great Outdoors and moved into creating a work of art. Our expression is directly and necessarily informed by

this impression. However, it is also influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the impression we hope to make on the spectator. This is an on-going process: our previous creations will have been commented; these comments inform us on how successfully we have transmitted our ideas, our vision of the world, ie whether we have expressed ourselves clearly. Does the impression our picture is making accurately inform the spectator as to the concept we have formulated upon witnessing the original scene? This iterative approach hones our powers of expression.

Although two people may share one culture (a set of knowledge and beliefs defined by a time and place), the two will not share the same personal history and outlook. *Quot homines, tot sententiae*. For this reason, the ways of interpreting a picture will be many. What spectators see in a picture is therefore a variable, which the photographer would be presumptuous to admit knowledge of. Being ignorant of the spectator's take on the world, he cannot completely control the latter's perception of his picture. From the stand-point of the spectator, it is equally difficult to comprehend the photographer's motivations. The march of time worsens this effect; the picture however is permanent and will always be there to be judged. The impression is passed on to posterity in its entirety: the photographer must encase as much of his expression as possible in this impression. In order to create a picture that will make an impression as close as possible to that intended, the photographer depends on an understanding of the spectator's culture for his choice of picture elements or their arrangement. This is obviously only practical for cultures present and past.

Composition is an objective description of the arrangement of pictorial elements. Composition therefore requires that the pictorial elements be

- (i) more than one. If there is just one, arrangement is impossible by definition. As the frame acts as one element in itself, this condition is usually fulfilled.
- (ii) identifiable. An element must be distinguishable from its surroundings for it to count as such. Any means of distinction may be employed; different spectators may distinguish elements differently.

Composition describes the works of all previous photographers and indeed all artists whose end product is a picture. It provides a point of cultural reference, for instance as a style (art movement) or as a conventional representation of particular sentiments.

There are many different styles and approaches in the world of painters which await the attentions of photographers – especially now after the efforts of the 20th century. Although landscape photographers are perforce limited to the bounty of Nature, there are many ways of representing it. Neoplasticism has much to say about how we organise colour within the frame. Purism and delineation, Futurism and motion blur, AbEx and freedom from objectivity: all are relevant and may be quoted on the assumption that the spectator knows about them, and can use them to understand what our picture is saying.

Another means of ensuring that one makes the right impression is to simplify one's picture to the point that the number of possible interpretations is much reduced. Simplification leads to clarification, whether one simplifies the picture elements themselves or their

arrangement within the picture. The picture elements are distinguished by a subjective analytical process, which will benefit from a simplified composition. Perversely, however, the photographer may unintentionally limit the number of possible interpretations to just two: that intended and total incomprehension. If the spectator does not perceive the former, he will have no choice but to admit to the latter. The spectator could even be left with an understanding of the picture entirely unintended. The photographer who follows this approach should be aware that the spectator might be given so few clues as to the original intentions, that they are obscure to him.

The photographer must be careful not to lose sight of his initial intentions, while trying to make the right impression. Sycophancy only benefits the spectator. There is little gain (other than possibly in money or glory) in impressing the spectator with work which is not a reflection of one's self. The photographer must therefore strike a balance between being true to his self and being clear to others. Honesty to one's self must prime. This is all the truer as it is far easier to control one's own expression than the impression one intends; for this reason, a photographer should spend his time and energy improving his expressive skills in order that he (as a spectator of his own pictures) be satisfied with the results.

As the picture results from the photographer's expression, the picture's composition provides an objective reflection of this process. By analysing his pictures for their composition and classifying the compositions, the photographer can systematise his expression. In this form, he may use composition to improve both the quality and quantity of his pictures.

- (i) Composition once classified can be analysed objectively, then criticised so that expression can be altered over time. It is thus a very potent tool in one's quest for a better structured photograph. Composition can be used to impart a structure on the picture either for its own graphical sake or to bring forward those picture elements which have greater meaning.
- (ii) There is a further advantage in knowing more compositions. The photographer will always have an impression made upon him by Nature, but the number of ways of reacting to it will increase. He will thus be able to give the impression new meanings, evolve new concepts and therefrom new expression processes will emerge.

The architecture of the picture must be well balanced, while not forgetting the main purpose of the picture must be to express oneself. Any person seeking success and satisfaction with his landscape photography will seek to convey a message that tells the spectator about the scene and himself; he will strive for a composition relevant to the scene and to himself. Composition is as much a reflection of the self as it is a reflection of the human object. This duality provides a bridge between photographer and spectator. It will help the latter understand the intentions of the former; it will help the former get closer to a picture that conveys the desired impression.