

(This is a copy of an article in the March/April 1999 Issue of Photo Techniques Magazine)

Some Photographic MYTHS

By David Hum and Bill Jay

March/April 1999

In this article we want to touch on a several issues that seem confusing to many photographers with whom we've talked over the years. All of these myths deserve even more detailed treatment than we've given them, but we hope our joint comments will serve to open discussions and debates between you and your friends and colleagues.

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Myth No. 1:

Photographers are the best editors of their own work

No. The myth is that the best photographers are the only ones who have the insight and ability to select the best images of their own work for publication or exhibition. In the same way that writers are enhanced by a close relationship with a good editor, so a photographer can benefit from the insights of a good picture-editor.

This myth arose because the photographer is often too close to the subject matter, invests the content with emotion which might not be present in the picture, and believes that in order to be "true to myself" he or she has a special insight into the work. But the best editors or selectors of images are those who are capable of divorcing themselves from emotion when judging their own (or others') work and assessing picture merit dispassionately and with cold logic.

Some photographers of the highest rank are capable of this detachment; most are not. Indeed, many of the best picture editors are not photographers at all.

An instructive example of this myth is the career of W. Eugene Smith, who became a legend by resigning from LIFE magazine because he was not allowed full control over picture selection. Photographers applauded Smith's action as a case of artistic integrity in the face of corporate Philistinism. Unfortunately, the facts are that all of Smith's greatest and best-known work was edited by LIFE staffers. When he was given the opportunity to edit his own work, the results were disastrous, as epitomized by his Pittsburgh essay. He shot over 11,000 negatives in one year (1955), printed 7,000 proofs, and selected 2,000 images. The only publication willing to use the result was Popular Photography Annual, 1958. It used 88 images over 34 pages. The images were accompanied by Smith's own labored, tortured prose. Even on Smith's terms, the whole project was a failure.

W. Eugene Smith had complained so often about his lack of artistic control that we thought it would be interesting to give him 16 pages plus front cover in our magazine Album. He was told his choice of images and their layout would be followed without the slightest deviation. The result was so bad that we felt obliged to print a disclaimer, telling the reader that the images and the layout were made solely by Smith. There is no disputing the fact that Smith was a superb photographer, but he was a poor editor.

Some art photographers are actually better printers than they are photographers.

Our advice to photographers is: find an editor you can trust, one who is working at the highest possible level of professionalism. This does not imply you must blindly accept and follow this person's recommendations; it does imply that this editor might offer you a clarity of insight into your own work which you would not achieve on your own. The very best photographers are usually very humble about seeking advice from colleagues they trust.

Myth No 2:

Photographers are their own best writers/designers

The same principles apply. It is extremely rare for a good photographer to be an equally good writer or designer. Both fields have an abundance of individuals who have spent years of hard work mastering the nuances of their crafts. It is the height of arrogance to presume that photographers can do just as well without the equivalent amount of invested time and effort. Does the skill of the writer or designer suddenly become irrelevant once a photographer enters the scene? Hardly. Just reverse the situation in order to understand its absurdity. We are offended when fine writers or successful designers pick up a camera and instantly declare themselves to be great photographers!

David: *If I have a choice between writing my own text or collaborating with someone like Graham Greene, the insistence that I do it myself would be ludicrous.*

Bill: *Many photographers write very well when explaining their methods and intents (see *Photographers on Photography*, edited by Nathan Lyons) but that is not the equivalent of excellence in writing to accompany a photographic essay. Philip Jones Griffiths wrote well in his classic book, *Vietnam Inc.*, but most photographers' images are enhanced by collaboration with brilliant writers. Examples of such effective collaborations would include: Fay Godwin and John Fowles; Rosamund Purcell and Stephen Jay Gould; Paul Strand and Basil Davidson; Chris Killip and John Berger; and Bill Brandt and Lawrence Durrell, among others.*

Our advice to photographers who are preparing a magazine essay, book, or exhibition, is to collaborate with the best writer and the best designer you can find.

Myth No. 3:

Photographers are good printers

Not always. We have all seen many exhibitions even by well-known photographers in which the enlargements fall short of the highest standards of craftsmanship. The usual justification is a variation of "but it's all my own work," which sounds more like an apology.

The fact remains that printing is a highly skilled profession that demands a great deal of time (and enthusiasm) to master. Some photographers have the interest in fine printing, and have invested the effort to become extremely proficient in it. Most have not. In reality, a professional printer, working in collaboration with the photographer and sensitive to his or her needs, is likely to produce a far superior result. It is preposterous to think that a photographer can make enlargements to the same standards as a professional printer who does nothing else all day, every day.

If it is any consolation, most top photographers use renowned printers for their final prints. Picto, a lab in Paris, prints the negatives of Robert Frank, André Kertész, Josef Koudelka, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, among others. Not a bad group of photographers! What those photographers understand is that the merit of the image is only as good as the weakest link in the chain. There is hardly any point in mastering all the other links of fine photography only to falter at the final one.

Most photographers, especially those who hope to sell their original prints in the burgeoning art market, would do much better by accepting the idea that a professional printer is going to produce a better result than a half-hearted, part-time printer—such as the photographer. Printmakers have long understood this point. Most etchers, en-gravers, lithographers, and those whose medium is aquatint, photogravure, collotype, or any other print-making technique, employ masterprinters, under the supervision of the artist, to produce the final editions.

To be fair, there is a notion among some art-photographers that a particular sort of magic, spiritual resonance, or special personality transfer takes place when the artist handles the paper in the developer. And some art photographers are actually better printers than they are photographers. In some cases, the photographers assert that a certain essence or aura can be transmitted to some prints as opposed to others from the same negative, with the result that the former are priced thousands of dollars more. In our effort to be non-judgmental towards these artists we will merely note that such mysticism is bull.

Myth No. 4:

Commerce is corrupt; art is pure

There is a peculiar notion prevalent among art photographers which equates certain kinds of money with a lack of merit. This fallacious assumption leads to some odd ironies and strange consequences.

For example, if the institution which pays the photographer is, say a magazine, then he or she will do the job less well or less sincerely; if the institution which pays the photographer is an arts agency, then he or she will do the job with merit and integrity. There are several problems with this scenario.

The idea that professionals are commercial hacks but that artists are free and independent imagemakers wipes out practically the whole history of photography. Almost without exception, the great photographers of the past, whose images are revered by contemporary artists, were professional photographers whose main goal was to earn a living from the sale of their prints.

Sincerity is not the prerogative of the artist. Richard Avedon is a great photographer largely because he cares about fashion to the point of obsession about every tiny detail. Artists could learn a lot from this attention to detail. The fact that Avedon makes a lot of money is irrelevant.

On first encounter the idea that seemingly impartial arts agencies will provide grants and fellowships to photographers might imply that this route to making money is less corrupt than the commercial method. It has been both our experiences that the art world is far more corrupt—in its subjectivity, nepotism, reliance on shared favors, dependence on who you know—than the professional arena is.

There is a rank hypocrisy in the idea that art is free of compromise. Here's a simple proof. If an art agency were offering a major grant to photograph businesses and homes being built directly on top of the San Andreas fault in California, it would be amazing how many photographers would suddenly discover a passion for that subject, having previously never considered it!

The bottom line is that, unless you have a private income, it is necessary to make money with your photography. There is no merit in starving to death or in not having enough money to buy film to shoot more pictures.

Bill: *When I worked as a picture editor there was not a single time that the magazines published an essay by a "name" photographer if an unknown produced an essay which was better for the publication (in that it was of greater interest to our readers). I fail to see how this is a more corrupt system than art grants which tend to go to those who have the right buddy contacts. Since I have been in the arts of academia I have rarely observed an honest, professional appraisal of merit being the sole criterion of selection for any grant or award.*

David: *The great majority of jobs in photography are done by freelance photographers. It has certainly been my experience that if you produce quality work, it will ultimately be published. However, I do believe that part of the process of producing quality work is to understand that you must be communicating information to your general public that is not boring to them. A test I often suggest to photographers is to ask themselves: "If I were a picture editor or a curator, would I publish or exhibit these pictures?" It is amazing, if one is honest, how rarely you can come up with the answer "Yes." The trick is to find projects on which you wish to work which also have a chance of fitting into the editorial policy of various magazines or of producing a visually arresting exhibition. What I often do myself is not think in terms of one thing I wish to do but of half a dozen. Having begun to research them I then begin to make a decision as to which one I will do best on many criteria, one of which might be "Does it have any sale possibility—i.e., is the public interested?"*

Our recommendation is to select your projects with care, using the analysis discussed here, and to realize that, if several essays are of equal interest to you, then it is no compromise to work on the one which will be appealing to others. This applies to all styles of photographing, at both ends of the art-professional spectrum. We all know photographers who cannot photograph because they did not receive an assignment or an expected grant. This usually means they were insufficiently enthusiastic about the project to begin with. The answer is to get on with the project, determine that, yes, it can sustain your interest, and then find any method to support the continuing photography.

Myth No. 5:

Photography is all about talent and instinct

Both of these words, "talent" and "instinct," are comforting to second-raters. They imply that some people are born with a special gift for making photographs (!) and that no planning or thought is necessary because such photographers mysteriously sense a picture and, therefore, everything that they produce is of merit. This attitude is particularly prevalent in the hot-house, rarefied air of academic art.

Time for a reality check. No one is a born photographer. The idea is absurd. Certain people may be born with genetic traits which are useful to becoming a photographer at a later date, among which physical fitness, visual acuity and, above all, a lively curiosity about the world, would rank highly on a list of desirable characteristics. There are many ways a person may choose to transmit the object of his or her curiosity to others. Photography is one of them. That's when the hard work begins.

Examine the lives of people who have truly excelled in any of the arts—music, theater, dance, sculpture—and they all have one characteristic in common: the capacity to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their chosen disciplines. They practice it every day. No excuses. A dancer, for example, cannot compete at even the lowest level without years of daily exercising; a pianist cannot perform at a concert after having taken a one-month break; actors are not given roles in a Shakespeare play because they feel they should be. So why should photographers expect to receive one-person exhibitions or publications without similar dedication? Are the standards in photography so low that success can be achieved with so little effort? Of course not.

The fact is that photographers at the highest level have committed themselves to continuous and dedicated practice. Fierce single-mindedness and self-motivation are essential. It is very, very rare to find a part-time photographer in the front ranks. This leads to an uncomfortable conclusion.

The two routes by which a photographer can earn a living in the medium are as a teacher or as a professional. The artists of the medium, unless they're independently wealthy, nearly always end up in academia. Very few survive as photographers at the highest level. Sensibly, they have created an internal system of shared exhibition venues and publications where they are competing only with each other, rather than with the best photographers throughout the medium. That is why documentary photography is at such a low level in so-called art venues patronized by academia. Some artists do indeed thrive with college or university patronage. But they are the exceptions, not the rule.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the very best photographers of the past and present, whether reportage photographers or art photographers, have been, or are, professionals. The case of Walker Evans is instructive because he has been called one of the great artists of 20th century America. Look closely and what you will find is that nearly all his major images were taken on assignment for *Fortune* and *Survey* magazines or for the Farm Security Administration. Other renowned artists in photography who have earned their living as professionals included Weegee, Joel Meyerowitz, Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand, Duane Michals, Eugene Richards, Burk Uzzle, Elliott Erwitt, Jeff Jacobson and Diane Arbus.

Our advice to photographers is best expressed by Calvin Trillin: "The immature artist imitates; the mature artist steals."

This is not a coincidence. Through professional photography they practice their craft on a continuous basis. And in so doing, they become better at it.

Myth No. 6:

The it-has-been-done-before syndrome

One of the most pernicious and destructive remarks that can be made to a photographer is that "it has been done before," the clear implication being that any attempt to rephotograph the same subject will be a waste of time, or even unethical.

Of course "it" has been done before. I doubt if a photographer can think of a subject which someone, somewhere, at some time has not explored. Should photography, therefore, come to a screeching halt? In fact, the opposite is true. Photographers should actively look for ideas, attitudes, images, influences from the very best photographers of all ages. You cannot learn in a vacuum. The whole history of photography is a free and open treasure-trove of inspiration. It would be masochistic to deny its riches and usefulness.

David: *For example, I am thinking of expanding my sculpture essay to include war memorials. I feel sure I was very much influenced by Lee Friedlander's book on monuments. Friedlander, in turn, has said that he was influenced by a story in Fortune by Walker Evans—who may have seen Emil Hoppe's book on monuments, who could have seen Eugene Atget's images in old Paris, who probably knew of the French Historic Monuments Commission, which assigned early paper-negative photographers of the 1840s such as Charles Marville, Henry Le Secq, Charles Negre and others to photograph monuments. This tree of influence with many branches extends from today back to the dawn of photography.*

Our advice to photographers is best expressed by Calvin Trillin: "The immature artist imitates; the mature artist steals."

So steal from the best. Surround yourself with people who are better than you—not only better photographers but also individuals who are better in their respective fields, no matter what they might be, than you are in yours. Learn to climb and use other people's ideas and attitudes as your ladder. Read good books, even if they are not literary. Our definition of a good book is one that includes as many ideas as possible that are worth stealing! Pay attention during movies—for ideas from camera angles, pacing, interesting images. Note them. Use them. As the poet T. S. Eliot remarked, "Each venture is a new beginning, what there is to conquer has already been discovered, once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope to emulate, but there is no competition, there is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again."

Remember that the photographer or artist's worst nightmare would be to reach the top of the ladder with nowhere else to go. The end.

Myth No. 7:

Critics and theorists are useful to photographers

Most colleges and universities do not hire the best in this field because the best individuals in the field of photography are full-time photographers. Teachers are in the classroom or at meetings most of the time, so what they do best is talk about photography. So it is not surprising that there has arisen in academia a peculiar type of critical theory which young photographers are expected to apply to their own work, and reference when discussing the work of others.

We have two attitudes to critical theory:

Our advice to photographers is: do your homework, examine your motives, and be clear about the purpose of your pictures.

One: when critical theory is taught prior to, or simultaneously with, the making of images. In this case, critical theory is not only useless, it is also positively dangerous. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the production of fine photographs. The irony here is that most of the top photographers, often cited by the critics, have never read these theories, would not understand them even if they encountered them, and have no idea that such an influential group of thinkers exists in the medium! The dangerous aspect of theory for young photographers is that attempting to apply its precepts often leads to total paralysis. We have both encountered many photographers who have completely dried up as image-makers because of their efforts to take pictures which conform to critical theories. Those who do not stop completely make very bad images which are then discussed and justified in blinding, mind-numbing

jargon. There is a distinct correlation at work here: the greater the intrusion of critical theory before the act of photographing, the worse the images will be.

Two: when critical theory is taught after the images have been made or about other photographers' works. In this case, critical theory can be an enjoyable way of stretching the mind, if the critic is capable of thinking clearly and expressing him- or herself with concise, vivid prose. Photography is a field with an infinite number of profound issues spanning sociology, history, psychology, biography, science, anthropology, and all the arts; each image can be a pebble dropped in the pond of consciousness where the ripples eventually lap the very edges of human existence. Talking about these broader, deeper issues in the medium can be full of stimulation, inspiration, and the sheer pleasure of working out in a mental gymnasium.

We say "can be"...usually, critical theory is none of the above, but is rather an experience akin to wading in thick mud through a dense fog. It is no fun. The reason is that the language used by academic theorists in photography is so dense, obscure, jargon-filled and so damned dull that it is usually impossible to decipher the points being made.

Perhaps the issues are so profound that they cannot be expressed in clear, intelligible, vivid prose? Not likely. When scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould, Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies, Lewis Thomas, and Arthur Koestler can write about theories of life's origins, the nature of time, quantum physics, the limits of the universe, the paradoxes of evolution, and similarly complex topics, and produce books of such dazzling appeal that they are best-sellers, can it really be said that photography is so much more profound that its issues cannot be explained in clear language? We think not.

Many critical theorists in photography cannot think clearly or write well. They have many excuses, surely, but the bottom line is that their essays are useless because they are unintelligible. But that is not a condemnation of the critical faculties applied to photographs. We hope a time will come when a Gould or a Hawking or a Davies will turn their attention to photography. Meanwhile, we pass...

Myth No. 8:

You should not photograph in foreign cultures

A rising tide of political correctness threatens to drown the aspirations of photographers who wish to

shoot pictures in cultures not their own, either at home or abroad. The rationale for this notion is that you cannot fully understand another culture, or race, or ethnic group, unless you were born in it. The photographs you take, therefore, will be exploitive and not truthful.

There are several problems with this seemingly liberal idea, and the most important is that people are far more alike than they are different. The idea that photographers should not photograph people of different cultures presumes that the “differentness” is the major issue. This notion is not only false but also divisive, and it verges on racism. Human beings share more in common with each other than the myth allows, and photographers are in a unique position to explore and celebrate the one-ness of our existence.

If the truth is so elusive when photographing other cultures, then it must be equally exploitive, for the same reasons, to photograph people in different economic brackets (higher as well as lower), people of the other gender, people of different ages, and people who look different than you. Taking the argument to its logical conclusion, you shouldn't photograph anyone. And there does seem to exist an attitude in some quarters that all photographs of other human beings, especially those taken unawares, are indeed not only unethical but should be illegal. The idea is that everyone owns their image, even if that constitutes merely the light reflected off a solid surface.

If respected, this awkward notion would have wiped out the vast majority of fine photographs taken since the 1880s. And it would wipe out all the social benefits which have accrued from humanistic photography, from Lewis Hine's work with the Child Labor Committee, to W. Eugene Smith's exposé of toxic waste dumping in the Bay of Minimata, to Sebastião Salgado's images which brought to world attention the slave conditions in Brazilian mines. Include also the images that were instrumental in turning the tide of public opinion against the Vietnam war. The list would be endless.

But even if all these social benefits of reportage photography did not exist, or could be explained away, there remains a fundamental flaw in the myth: photographers never claim to tell the truth. Period. The best photographers have an intense interest in and enthusiasm for their subjects which precludes exploitation, and they have researched and read and talked until they are mini-experts in the area. All they claim is: “This is what I saw. This is what I felt about what I saw at the time I was taking the pictures. This is my point of view. This is my individual truth, to the best of my ability to tell it.” It will never be everyone else's truth.

David: *I was the one who discovered my mother after her death. She had died of natural causes and had a smile on her face. I wanted to remember that smile, so I took a picture—just one. The picture has no relevance to anyone but me, and consequently would not be shown to others outside the immediate family. However, for me, it is the most important picture I've ever taken. Over the years I had amassed a large number of photographs of this remarkable woman and decided to print up a coherent set, which I showed to the rest of the family. I was amazed to find that each in turn would remark, as they looked at different images, that this one or that one really captured her, was “just like her.” But the choices of the family members were never the same—each viewer had a personal preconceived notion of what was the truth. At this point I clearly realized that there is no universal answer, or agreed truth, even with a subject on which all the viewers were extremely knowledgeable. Each viewer brought to the photograph his or her own truth.*

Our advice to photographers is: do your homework, examine your motives, be clear about the purpose of your pictures, make no exaggerated claims towards omniscience— and ignore this myth.

Myth No. 9:

Documentary photography is not art

Don't panic—this will not be a treatise on the various definitions of art in an effort to force photographs into an odd-shaped pigeonhole. Instead, we want to offer a few words of consolation to photographers, perhaps struggling in an art-academic environment, who are feeling a sense of inadequacy in their straight photography when surrounded by the transformations of the medium practiced by artists. It is our

contention that much of the confusion surrounding art and photography would dissipate by bearing in mind two simple statements:

Art is not the medium or style but the agreed merit of a body of work created over a life-time of achievement by a dedicated individual.

This body of work is likely to center around the unique characteristics of the chosen medium.

Both statements could be expanded, amended, reconfigured and analyzed *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, but they do serve to clarify certain problems and dispel the myth under discussion.

Today, especially in art environments, the photographer is urged and expected to emphasize individuality. Can reportage photography reveal such personal idiosyncrasies? The clear answer is that it is impossible to keep them out of the images. You select a subject for which you have interest and enthusiasm; you choose how best this subject is revealed by camera viewpoint; you decide on the precise moment when it is most significant—all very subjective, personal decisions.

Indeed, it's our contention that the self is more emphatically expressed by ignoring it and concentrating on the thing itself. Personal knowledge is best gained by objectification, looking outward, not inward. Life itself is the mirror in which the personal image is reflected.

Is there any evidence for these assertions? Look at large bodies of work by the finest reportage photographers and you quickly discover that it is easy to distinguish individual styles and concerns. That should come as something of a shock if you suppose report-age photography to be only an impersonal, objective reflection of reality.

Another experiment (hypothetical, this time): suppose you could ask 100 of the best critics, curators, historians, museum directors, and photographers to each select the 50 greatest images in the history of the medium. Our guess is that the vast majority of these 5,000 images would fall under the general category of straight, documentary or reportage photography.

These remarks are not intended to disparage the work or ideas of the painters, sculptors and print-makers who utilize photographic images. That's a legitimate and sometimes fascinating process for producing visually stimulating works of mixed-media. But it isn't photography.

We believe that photographers of all personality types, using the whole panoply of camera formats, would become better photographers at a faster rate by employing the common denominators gleaned from the images, ideas and lives of the best photographers throughout the medium's history. These basic principles are:

1. *Photographers are not primarily interested in photography. They have a focused energy and enthusiasm which is directed at an outside, physically present, other. They bring to this subject an exaggerated sense of curiosity, backed up by knowledge gleaned from reading, writing, talking, and note-taking.*
2. *The photographer transmits this passion in 'the thing itself' by making pictures, therefore the subject must lend itself to a visual medium, as opposed to, say, writing about it.*
3. *The photographer must assiduously practice his or her craft so that there is no technical impediment between realizing the idea and transmitting it through the final print.*

4. *The photographer must have the ability to analyze the components of the subject-idea so that a set of images not only reflects the basic categories but also displays visual variety. Intense, clear thinking is a prerequisite to fine photography.*
5. *The photographer is aware that, like all difficult endeavors, to be good at photography requires an unusual capacity for continuous hard work and...*

Good Luck.

*This article was taken from the book *On being A Photographer*, by David Hurn in conversation with Bill Jay, available from Lenswork Publishing (www.lenswork.com, or toll-free 1-800-659-2130.)*

Magnum photographer David Hurn is a leading British photojournalist who has covered major topical events, such as the Hungarian Revolution, for LIFE, The Observer, and many other major magazines and newspapers throughout the world. He has also worked as a fashion photographer for Harpers, The Telegraph, and Jardin des Modes.

The feature essay was his first love. He has worked on many assignments concerning what is now known as "alternative lifestyles," often with brilliant writers such as Nell Dunne and Irwin Shaw.

In 1970, David Hurn founded The School of Documentary Photography in Newport, Wales. Since 1990, he has returned to full-time photography, producing self-assigned major essays for both publication and exhibition. In 1999, the National Museum of Wales will give him their Millennium exhibition, where he will show a major body of work documenting his native Wales.

Bill Jay began his career in England, where he was the first Director of Photography at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the first editor/director of Creative Camera and Album magazines. During this time, he earned a living as Picture Editor of a large circulation news and feature magazine, and as the European Manager of an international picture agency.

After studying with Beaumont Newhall and Van Deren Coke at the University of New Mexico, he founded the program of Photographic Studies at Arizona State University, where he has taught history and criticism classes for the past 20 years.

*Bill Jay has published over 400 articles and is the author of more than 15 books on the history and criticism of photography. Some of his recent titles include *Cyanide and Spirits: an Inside-Out View of Early Photography*; *Occam's Razor: An Outside-In View of Contemporary Photography*; *USA Photography Guide*; *Bernard Shaw: On Photography*; and *Negative/Positive: a Philosophy of Photography*.*

Bill Jay is a frequent guest lecturer at colleges and universities in Britain, Europe, and throughout the USA. His own photographs of photographers—his lifelong project—will be featured in the Special 20th Anniversary Issue of PHOTO Techniques, coming in September/October 1999.