

“Pssst . . . help for frustrated photographer’s spouses!”

5 Tips To *Whisper* To Your Favourite Camera Bore

By **Stephen Bray**, Author Photography and Psychoanalysis : The Development of Emotional Persuasion in Image Making.

Tip 1. Stop using filters instead of talent

The problem with photography today isn't one of technology, or equipment, but that there is an overall lack of awareness, and therefore creativity. It's all a question of quality. If you explore Flickr you will find thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of images that contain some sort of spark, but only a small proportion are inspired.



Le Marche 2010, Michael Eldridge

It's the same with Instagram. There an array of filters can help you convert an average image into something weird, or sentimental. Weirdness, however, is for aging hippies and irritating poets, whilst sentimentality is the worst kind of historical knowledge. It slides down the gullet like crème-de-menthe.

In many ways Instagram is a perfect example of what the philosopher Alan Kirby refers to in his paper, published in 2006, titled: 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', as our 'Pseudomodern age'.

Pseudomodernism looks backwards for inspiration, but relies on technology to eliminate effort. It is digital, on-line, connected, frequently sentimental, easily manipulated by Big Brother and those who own her. Pseudomodernism has the potential to erode original knowing and creativity. It may even kill you by shrink wrapping your spirit.

Much as Pseudomodernism exhorts connectivity, it also subtly demands conformity, and limits expression.

Whilst this is bad for the world, it is good for artistic photographers, for having identified the problem we can begin to use our cameras as an aid to finding liberation.

Tip 2. Treat photography as an adventure

When you do so photography becomes an adventure and, at the conclusion to your life you may look back upon your discoveries like a warrior prince, or princess, who from the chaos of conflict has learned something enduring. Who knows, you may even attain that realization long before you reach your death-bed?

The history of photography abounds with examples of original photographers such as: Julia Margaret Cameron, Henri Lartique, Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Margaret Bourke White, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helmut Newton, Saul Leiter, Lisette Model, William Eggleston, Elliott Erwitt, Vivian Maier, Guy Bourdin, and more recently, Jeff Mermelstein. The styles of such photographers differ greatly, but by and large, each photograph made offers something distinctive of the particular photographer in her, or his context.



Ellen Terry 1864, Julia Margaret Cameron

*When a boy
real photographs
now remembered!*



Farm implement Gokova 2015, Stephen Bray



Ensign twin lens reflex camera

Tip 3. Accept your uniqueness

You can copy any particular technique, of course, but when you do so all you have is a forgery. Jurgen Teller, who is a talented photographer, tells a story of going out on the street with William Eggleston:

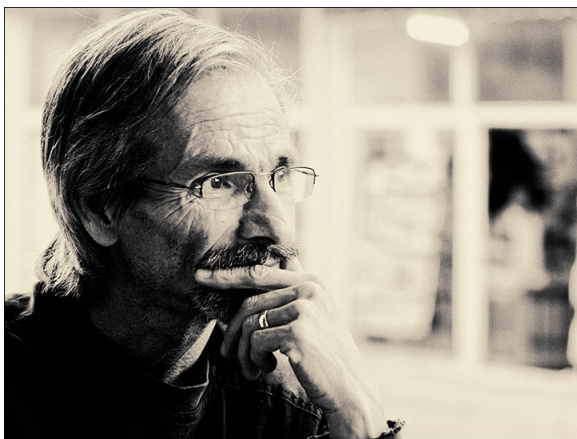
"We're sitting on this park bench, and over there, there is this rubbish bin. Right at that moment he is sort of looking over and standing up - and taking a photograph 'click', like he does very elegantly! I thought 'Oh my God, I'm going to get my own William Eggleston photograph, EXCELLENT, I get up, 'click, make sure I'm going to get it, 'click! click! click! click!', as I do because I'm me and he's him. Two years later this picture was there. I thought 'Oh fuck man this looks fantastic, what a great photograph', and I knew mine just didn't work. That's something quite bizarre and quite magical, that one person isn't the same as the other, and you can't just do the same thing."



Jürgen Teller 2013, Pascal Ferro

Tip 4. Develop an eye for quality

Upon the wall of the dining room in my home hangs an image of a man sleeping by an old car after washing it. It's a copy of an image from a greeting card sent to me by my sister-in-law. When the painting arrived from China, where it had been copied from the card, I was aware at once that there was a problem with it. The car's headlights were of different sizes. I was faced with a choice, either I must send the canvas back to China for correction, which would require me to obtain an expensive document from the curator of a registered museum certifying that it was not a valuable work of art, or I could have a talented local artist fix it.



Coşkum 2009, Stephen Bray



Dancing in a cave house 2010, Stephen Bray

Coşkum was local. He had spent most of his life avoiding compulsory Turkish military service, and as a result had lived on deserted islands and in caves. He could not stop himself from painting, even when stoned or under the influence of absinthe. Upon being introduced, he agreed at once to my request, took the painting - returning it the following day suitably corrected.



Full moon in Cappadocia 2009, Stephen Bray

In so far as anyone really knows Coşkum, we became friends; he introduced me to gatherings in central Anatolia where we danced to the sound of drums in cave houses, and on special days under a full moon around a fire in the abandoned cave monasteries.

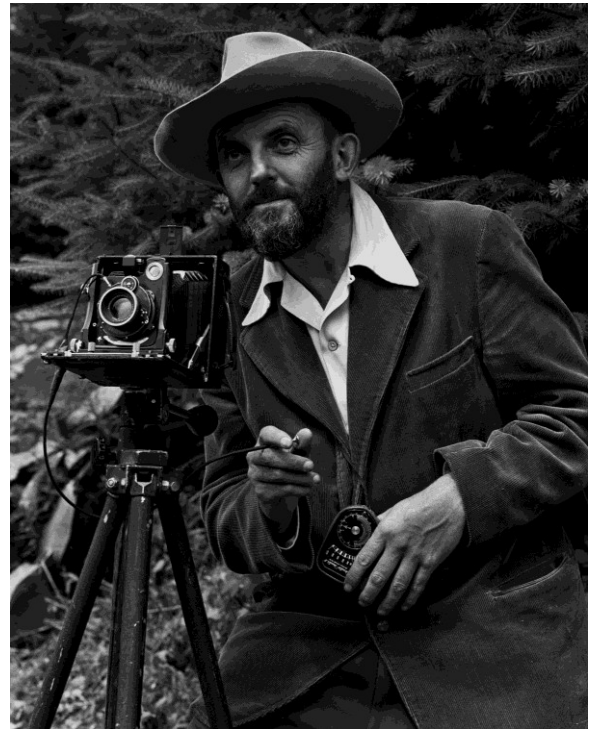
Over the years, as my eye for art has improved the impact of that oil painting has weakened. It's clever, but its charm is sentimental. Only the old car's headlights, in that painting, have any profound quality.

Tip 5. Exceed your technical limitations

You may become a great technician through practice, combined with reading books, or articles, such as the one you're reading now.

That's all to the good. But real mastery occurs for some when the frame of your mind's eye explodes and the world ceases as an entity 'out there' waiting to be photographed. You can practice, go to workshops with the very best instructors, buy new equipment, but whatever you do you must accept that you have no control over when the shutter will click and the frame, which you think of as your personal self, with all its history and foibles, gets overexposed, and sublimely, overdeveloped. Make that 'mistake' just once, and you'll never look out at the world the same way again.

Ansel Adams was a great technician. He was committed too. He spoke about photography in the context of music, in which a photograph was the performance and a negative, the score. He confessed to Saul Leiter that during the 1940s he became 'hot' and he had been repeating the same thing ever since. You don't want to be like that.



Ansel Adams 1947, J. Malcolm Greany

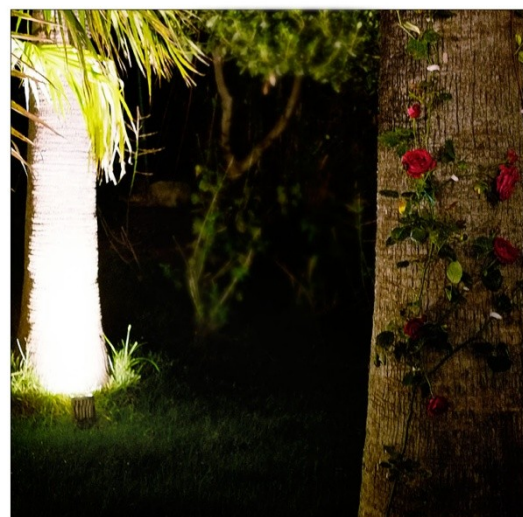
Did you know that many of the world's most regarded photographers rarely printed their best works?

The poetry of photography

For me photography shares many of the qualities to a Japanese form of poetry called 'Haiku'. Japanese poets traditionally used haiku to capture and distil a fleeting natural image, such as a frog jumping into a pond, rain falling onto leaves, or a flower bending in the wind. Contemporary haiku sometimes strays from nature as a subject, because urban environments, emotions, relationships and even humorous topics are all valid experiences.

The trick with Haiku isn't the meter, but to unify subject and object in one moment. I think the same way about photography.

*Finding the camera
darkness suggests
a moment*



Outside the Hotel Del Mar 2015, Stephen Bray

In Haiku there is nothing that can be dissected. There is experience flowing with the environment giving rise to something that instantly drops away, yet through words or with an image that experience may be shared.

Many do not find communion when they look at images, or read Haiku. Cultural conditioning very powerfully overwhelms the senses, frequently substituting the desire for products for the ability to fully engage and experience. A good photograph does not sell some arbitrary ideal on a poster or within the covers of a magazine, but acts as an invitation to the viewer to drop pretence and see the world as both miraculous and ordinary.

The art of photography

Edward Weston said

“Art is considered as a ‘self-expression’. I am no longer trying to express myself, to impose my own personality on nature, but without prejudice, without falsification, to become identified with nature, to see or ‘know’ things as they are, their very essence, so that what I record is not an interpretation – my idea of what nature should be – but a revelation, a piercing of the smoke screen artificially cast over life by neurosis, into an absolute, impersonal recognition”

Much as I agree with Edward Weston’s words, it’s a mistake to believe that your images can ever be devoid of personality. Your character is not an enemy and indeed, within the dream of separation, it can be a powerful asset. A paradox arises for those attempting to impose themselves upon their work, because the ego is built out of conditioning and so whatever the ego thinks it makes can only be a reflection of an apparent past. Those who willingly surrender everything to the moment, on the other hand, frequently find both their true nature and their personality embracing within images.



Tina Modotti 1921, Edward Weston

Perhaps this is why the lovely photographs of all great photographers sparkle with originality.

What is creative photography?

Whilst I believe that the technical aspects of photography may be learned from books, I doubt if creativity may be discovered in the same way. Edward de Bono attempted to do something like teaching creativity in books, but I found them tedious – rather like studying a foreign language without bothering to live in the country to hear how it is spoken.

Creativity also is not something that can be modelled. Robert Dilts, and various other exponents of Neuro-linguistic Programming wrote of this decades ago. It’s useful to read his three volume text on the subject, but ultimately when creativity occurs you can claim no ownership for it. Neurologists, using instruments, discovered that your body/mind organism registers change nearly half a second before you know it. The same applies for thought, and any other automatic behaviour such as deciding when to release the shutter on a camera. It’s all done for you; all you have to do is to bear witness. Isn’t that wonderful?

What you regard as your inspiration, or creativity, or energy, doesn't really belong to you at all in the same way that you might own a Nikon. They are more like what Christian mystics refer to as 'graces', gifts from an unspeakable, ineffable, place that silently witnesses our struggles without emotion.

*The Way that may be photographed
is not an empirical way.*

*The way that can be described
offers little to seekers.*

*Techniques and images abound;
so much for photography.*

With apologies to Lao Tzu

I will be part of a photography workshop in Bristol from July 3rd – 5th 2015, together with Colin Tracy and Michael Eldridge. We each have our own ideas about photography, liberation and creativity. These sometimes meet but often are so divergent as to cause others to excel after spending time with us.

I hope to see you there.

The fee for the workshop is £160, with a reduction for early booking. Contact Colin Tracy 01305 889476 or, mobile 07874 910877 for full details.



Bee Keeper's Store, Gökova 2015, Stephen Bray



Untitled 2010, Colin Tracy