



PERSONALITY AND PHOTOGRAPHY - OR THE COURAGE TO BE OURSELVES

By John Eaddy

Introduction

Very often good photography images conform to principles or guidelines, yet given the same subject matter photographers will produce a wide range of different images, with seldom two being the same. Why is this?

From my interest in human temperament and personality, it is suggested there are some key reasons.

The Courage to be Ourselves Peter Peryer - Photographer, reminds us that photography is more than being objective about what we see, for in the main, in his words, if two individuals look at the same view they will see different things. The filtering of what we see takes place very quickly, with the brain governing what the eye perceives.

The way we modify objective reality, that is what we see, will be related to our personality, not to that of someone else. In fact art has been defined as the world perceived through a personality. Making interesting images will depend on how much our own personality shines through. The ability, and the courage, to be true to oneself will lead to greater originality.

But what is personality? Perhaps a model will help.

Character and Temperament

The Oxford Dictionary describes personality as the distinctive character or qualities of a person: often as distinct from others. Temperament goes a little further being a persons distinct nature and character especially as determined by physical constitution and permanently affecting behaviour.

In the last century this notion seemed to wane, there being a belief that people were fundamentally alike. Perhaps this arose out of the growth of democracy. If we are equals then we must be alike. Carl Jung the great Swiss Psychiatrist and analytical psychologist disagreed. He said that people are different in fundamental ways even if they have the same multitude of instincts that drive them from within, in that we have built in preferences that determine how we function or behave. Further that these are just as inborn as our physical features.

There are several models that describe behaviour but it is proposed to use, in brief, the Meyers-Briggs model which is based on Jungian typology and appears to fit the introductory comments from the work of Peter Peryer.

Behaviour

Goldsmith and Wharton, writing on the model, indicate that our behaviour is the result of how we receive information about the world and how we reach decisions based on that information. As Peryer comments this takes place very quickly, with, in the photographic sense, the brain governing what the eye perceives. This process is continuous and may be hard to separate, but to begin to understand, this is necessary.

The first step - what we "see", - that is how we receive information - is where, in the Jungian model, we first start to use our built in preferences. There are two preferences.

1. Sensing - the taking on of information through our five senses - seeing, hearing, taste, touch and smell, or
2. Intuition - the use of our sixth sense, or hunches. The use of imagination or possibilities.

While we can do both, we have an instinctive preference for one or the other, and find the other requires greater concentration, or is more difficult. By way of a physical model, we have a preference for being right handed or left handed. We can do both, but one is usually a struggle.

Each of us then has a bias, so perhaps I should declare mine. I am sensate - that is use the five senses, and am in awe of what the intuitive photographer can achieve, for example by placing a leaf in a cobweb to achieve an exciting image.

The next step is how we make our decisions based on the information we have received. In other words make a judgement.

Again there are two preferences.

1. Thinking. Here the decisions are based on analysis and principles with a premium based on fairness.
2. Feeling. Here the decisions are based upon our likes and dislikes, our personal values, and with thoughts for pleasing others.

Again we can do both but we have an inborn preference for one.

The third step is where we go to get our personal energy, that is to be with others to gain stimulation, or to be by ourselves and be stimulated by the depth of our own inner world. The model describes these as extroversion or introversion.

Finally Keirse and Bates indicate that, within the model there is an added factor overall to the decision making process - that is receiving information and making decisions and is in a sense, a lifestyle issue. Do "I" like to make decisions immediately and have that matter settled, or do "I" prefer to keep options open and fluid. The words "judging" and "perceiving" are used in the model to describe this but to some extent it causes confusion.

However, to give an example the "judging" person seeks out to decide as quickly as possible and then feels satisfied, whereas the "perceiving" person tends to collect more information only then to feel uneasy that a decision made is still premature.

Neither is right or wrong - again they are inborn preferences.

Application to Photography

Probably the major way in which the analysis of behaviour can help, is the impact of our individual personality, on the subject of visual design. Clearly the process of taking on information, through our senses or imagination and then deciding where to put this information within the image, will be very different, photographer to photographer. This will be so, unless we feel obliged to comply with a set of rules imposed by a school of thought, club, employer or colleague.

But first some basic issues. Within photography, for me, there are four of these to understand.

1. The place of colour or hues, ie the different colours and the way boundaries are created at the edges of each colour.
2. The place of tones or the degree of brightness or darkness from black to white, and the fact that these too, create boundaries or edges, often within a specific colour, eg dark green and light green.
3. The raw material - light - for without it neither colours/hues or tones can be seen or imagined, for our images are the reflection of light from our subject matter; and
4. The technical use of the lens to create further boundaries or edges by contrasting areas sharply in focus, with blurred sections often completely out of focus - where this is necessary (limited depth of field).

The Building Blocks of Visual Design

These are the bits of information that we seek out or imagine, before we can make a decision. Here I will use the material of Freeman Patterson, though there will be many photography books on this topic.

The first is Shape. These are made visible by the contrast of tones and colours, or both, though in some photography this is aided by the use of limited depth of field. The primary shapes are circles, squares and either equilateral or isosceles triangles. These shapes suggest order.

The secondary shapes are ovals, rectangles, different triangles and highly complex shapes such as maple leaves being composite blends of the different shapes.

A prime object of photography - the human face - is an oval.

Shapes may be formed within the frame by the shape itself, or by using the edge of the frame to create one or two boundaries. In the case of a circle or oval it need not be complete but may cut the frame at its edge or boundary.

The second is Line. There are two types of lines - straight and curved. Straight lines are unambiguous, and impart a sense of purpose. Curved lines impart a sense of digression - they slow down or relax the viewer.

Straight lines can be vertical, horizontal and oblique (often diagonal). Vertical lines convey stiffness and formality. Horizontal lines create a sense of solidarity and oblique lines convey movement.

The third element in the two dimensional description of what we see or imagine is:

Texture

Examples are the texture of a particular surface - ripples on water, dots of colour - flowers in a field, and how smooth (glass) or rough (sandpaper) the texture is. Texture is often found within shapes and tends to be neglected by photographers.

The fourth element adds the third dimension and is Perspective. It is how artists or photographers convey the sense of depth or distance on a flat surface, by the arrangement of shapes, lines and texture.

Depth is created by distorting and deforming lines and shapes in the first instance. An easy example is the front and side view of a building, coupled. The right angled corners, and some shapes, but not the vertical lines (unless "parallaxing" cannot be avoided in say a skyscraper) will be distorted. Secondly changes in texture, hues and tones will add to the effect.

Distance is created by disproportion. This is done by reducing the size of the background motif eg mountain and increasing the size of the foreground. For example a relatively large flowering plant against a mountain backdrop. Clearly the viewer knows the mountain is much larger than the daisy so it must be at a distance.

While this completes the receipt of information section some key words to describe Sensing and Intuition may be helpful.

Sensing - Details, Facts, Repetition, See "what is"

Intuition -Patterns, Ideas, variety, See "what could be"

Putting the Building Blocks Together

This is how we put the information together. This is the decision making step in which our preferences will either be "thinking or "feeling". This is how you decide to arrange the shapes, lines, textures and perspective together to make an image.

Generally the more simple and orderly a composition is, the more quickly and effectively it delivers your message.

The first matter to consider is *Dominance*. The dominant part of the photo is the centre of interest or primary motif. Please do not confuse this with size though in many cases size is a factor. Dominance may be provided by size, colour, location in the frame, symbolic value and so on. The question is - is dominance a factor to be considered before I press the shutter.

The second element is *Balance*. Does it look right, even if you are not sure why. Here the "intuitive" is at an advantage and the sensate could do well to develop some "gut" feeling. Does the frame attract our attention, is there sufficient competition among the elements to create healthy tension. An asymmetrical design ie with the major motif offset using say the mathematical concept of the golden section is useful but not always so, for where there is equal balance on both sides symmetrical images with the principal motif in the centre work well - eg a cathedral, entrance way etc.

Like pairs often create too much tension beyond harmony and it may be preferable to look for "threes" instead.

The balance of a small object against a larger one is also effective.

The third element is *Proportion*. This is about the relative size of the objects in the picture

to the available space. Often it is the size of a major object to a smaller one. A common failing is that the principal objects are far too small and are lost, but to the contrary the correct, and very small use of say a camel team in a desert scene can create a sense of vastness.

The final element in decision making is Rhythm. Patterson describe this as a harmonious pattern characterised by the regular recurrence of strong and weak elements, usually lines and shapes. They are both orderly and dynamic providing thus both structure and movement.

Returning to the behavioural model some key words for the decision making preferences are:-

1. Thinking - Head, Objective, Precise, Principles and when their photos are being evaluated - need to be treated fairly.

2. Feeling - Heart, Subjective, Harmony, Values and when their photos are being evaluated - need occasional praise.

The Final Behavioural Elements

While we are concerned mainly with developing an individual voice most members belong to "Camera" clubs and interact with other members who clearly have different personalities. Thus it is worth considering briefly the other two sets of elements.

1. Introversion/Extroversion. Many photographers use their equipment as a hobby, a means of relaxation. The extrovert will be happy in a group, sharing skills and subjects and using comparisons as a means of energizing his or her batteries.

The introvert may prefer to be in smaller groups or alone, and when in groups often works apart from others. While they will share they also need space.

2. Judging/Perceiving The judging photographer will want to size it all up and press the shutter as quickly as possible. While they may catch the decisive moment before it has even occurred to the perceiving photographer that a moment existed, they may in the words of John Shaw need to slow down, stay a little longer, just wait and watch.

The perceiving photographer may need to waste a little film, push the shutter a little more often even if vaguely dissatisfied, and compare the results, otherwise the "moment" may have, forever, gone.

Conclusion

We are all different and respond to what we see and imagine in different ways. As we endeavour to help and encourage each other we could remember that the person with whom we engage is bound to be different.

So; If I believe other than you, at least pause before you correct my view or If I act, or fail to act in the manner of your design for your action, let me be.

For if you will allow me any of my own wants, beliefs, emotions or actions, then you open yourself, to see that my ways might not seem so wrong, and finally might appear right - for me.

Thus to put up with me is the first step to understanding me, and then to value me for what I might offer in this instance, to the common goal of photography as an art.

References:

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