

Introduction

Since its invention by Nicéphore Niépce in 1826, photography has provided us with widely different views of the world. Medical and scientific photography give us a window onto a previously invisible world; news and documentary photographs show us the world as others experience it; advertising photographs tempt us with the sugar-plumb world of the sponsor's idealised product; family snapshots record the world as we will subsequently remember it and, in art galleries, photographs of moments-of-the-world-as-art provoke or enchant us with scenes and events made special by the photographer's attention.

With the introduction of the automatic or 'instamatic' camera, popular photography has given all of us the means to record images from the world around us. In addition to our snapshots of friends and family, holidays and special events, many of us also make pictures just because we liked the way something looked – often without knowing *why* we were attracted to a particular scene. We might photograph two children playing in a park, an old house, or a bicycle lying in the grass – but we don't know those children, or the people who live in that house, and that's not our bicycle.

This book will offer another way of looking at – and finding meaning in – many of these casual snapshots. Like a flashbulb that briefly illuminates a dark street and which reveals the goings-on in the shadows only when we get the film back from the lab, many of the photographs we make have the power to bring to light the places within us we seldom see.

Just as a whiff of perfume can suddenly stir a long-forgotten memory, certain scenes and images can evoke a powerful emotional response. Studies in neurology have shown that everything within our visual field is transmitted to the brain, but only a small fraction of what we see penetrates our conscious awareness. The countless details we do not notice are instead registered within our unconscious where, like the figures in myths or dreams, they become symbols for something else. When our attention is drawn to a scene or an event 'out there' with which we have no conscious or logical connection, this is may be an indication of what I call a 'meaningful resonance'.

Poems in time and chance composed in the symbolic language of the unconscious dreaming mind, many of the photographs we are prompted to make are ideographic descriptions of our interior emotional terrain. In the pattern of the visual elements of the scene, we may have intuitively recognised an allegory for something below the horizon of our conscious awareness and to which, with a subliminal tap on the shoulder, our unconscious is trying to bring to our attention. In the image of children playing happily together, we may find a metaphor for the acceptance by others that we so desperately seek; a dark and empty house may represent the painful memory of having been hurt, ignored or unloved at home, and the image of an abandoned bicycle may remind us of a father who was never there. Much more than an accurate rendering of the *Things in Front of the Lens*, our snapshots are picture postcards of the emotional landscape we inhabit 'in here' – and sometimes an allegorical self-portrait of the one we have become in our efforts to find our way through it.

While all forms of intuitive expression (painting, sculpture, dance, prayer and meditation) offer us the means to establish a dialogue with our creative unconscious, the camera is uniquely suited to reveal the secrets behind the door of our conscious, rational mind. In the same way that our unconscious uses the elements of our daily life to construct the narratives within our dreams, the camera gives the unconscious the ability to respond at

the touch of a button and to record those scenes in which it recognises a relevant and significant metaphor without the need for – or the interference of – conscious decisions.

Preserved like an artefact for subsequent examination, the mantic patterns and parables we have unconsciously ‘chosen’ to record describe not just what is in front of our eyes but what is in front of our soul: the truth which lies just around the corner – that which we *know* but which the conscious mind cannot or will not see. By learning to recognise and decode the narratives intuitively incorporated in our photographs, we can discover the beliefs and assumptions through which we define our Selves, plot our course and live our lives. Accordingly, the ‘truthfulness’ of our photographs to be explored in this text is not a measure of the precision with which they have recorded the *Things in Front of our Lens* – but the accuracy with which they reflect our private myths about who we are ‘in here’.

In the features of a pleasant landscape, we may recognise an allegory for the life we once dreamt of when our happiness didn’t depend on possessions and power. Our photograph of a busy city street may show us the path we chose instead – and include a clue to what we have left behind. And in the image of a figure surrounded by dark and foreboding shapes, we find a clue to the fears that, ever since, have controlled our lives. The photograph of a mannequin in a shop window may describe the circumstances in which we now feel trapped, in another, the mask we have adopted in the hope of being accepted by others (and which we may even have come to believe *is* the person we are underneath).

In its simplest form, a myth is an allegorical or symbolic description of our attempt to reconcile the conflict between the world ‘out there’ – and the Truth we ‘know’ inside. To find happiness and fulfilment in our lives, we must find the courage to look behind our mask(s) and rediscover the life we dreamed of Once Upon A Time. In the scenes it recognises and records in our photographs, our unconscious shows us the obstacles we must overcome – the lessons we must learn and the monsters we must defeat – to reach our goal.

The approach taken in this text towards both the structure of the unconscious and to the manner in which it expresses itself are both drawn from the work of C.G. Jung. Unlike the characterisation offered by Freud (for whom it was a repository of repressed fantasies and infantile sexual desires), Jung described the unconscious as a rich source of wisdom and self-knowledge whose guidance is ours for the asking. Referring to these expressions of the unconscious and their value in our search for self-knowledge, healing and personal fulfilment, Jung wrote (1964):

[D]reams provide the most interesting information for those who take the trouble to understand their symbols. The results, it is true, have little to do with such worldly concerns as buying and selling. But the meaning of life is not exhaustively explained by one’s business life, nor is the deep desire of the human heart answered by a bank account.

Jungian concepts used in this text include: *the Persona* (the mask we have adopted and through which we relate to the external world), *the Shadow* (elements within ourselves that we are unable to acknowledge and which have accordingly been repressed from our conscious awareness), *the Anima/Animus* (the usually-unacknowledged feminine aspect of a man/masculine aspects of a woman that mediates our relations with our inner realm), *the Collective Unconscious* (an archaic source of knowledge below the level of the personal unconscious) and *Archetypal Images* (symbols arising out of the Collective Unconscious and whose meaning is ‘hard-wired’ into the psyche of all members of the human race).

One of the archetypal images Jung identified is *The Alchemist*: the magician who searches for the Philosopher’s Stone – through which he can turn base metals into gold and possess

the secret of eternal life. This is a particularly apt metaphor for the use of photography put forward here: a process through which we can transform metallic silver (the base of the photographic process) into the gold of Self-awareness and acceptance.

Since 1992, I have conducted more than a dozen workshops to test this hypothesis. In these workshops, participants were asked to photograph scenes and events to which they felt an intuitive response and to allow their intuition to determine the arrangements of the elements within the frame. At the end of ten weeks, participants were asked to examine six of their photographs, to identify the symbols they believed they had recognised within each, and to explain the basis and significance of the ‘resonance’ (if any) they discovered within them.

I feel no fear in this place. The statue at the back is me: the person I was and the one I have to be again. When I look at this picture, I'm no longer pessimistic. On the contrary, now that things appear to be much clearer, I feel hopeful. It gives me strength to face my problems and even get rid of them. I can't really explain the way I feel right now. I feel so happy and it is as if they were taking me in their arms. I can't hide that I've got tears in my eyes right now. I think that is the magic of photography. Now I'm sure it works.

This project has been very interesting to do. I must admit that at the beginning I was sceptical; I wasn't convinced that we could analyse our own pictures. Now I know it's possible. It has helped me to realise where my problems are. It has set things in my mind and I've understood a lot of things. Now I'm convinced that our pictures reflect our souls, and that must be the conclusion of the course. A.V.

Based on the response from over two hundred workshop participants as well as my own journey of Self-discovery, I am convinced that the camera offers us a way to establish an open and honest dialogue with the unconscious mind: an invaluable source of wisdom and guidance in our search for meaning and personal fulfilment.

Before attempting to decode the insights offered through our photographs however, it is necessary to consider the relationship between visual symbols and their (largely unconscious) influence over our narrative metaphors – the ‘mental pictures’ through which we find meaning in scenes and events. Drawing on recent studies in anthropology, biology, communication theory, history, linguistics, mythology, psychology, and semantics, the first three sections examine the way in which our mind finds meaning in visual symbols, as well as how these in turn shape our perceptions, attitudes and beliefs.

There are four reasons why I believe that it is important to be able to recognise and decode the meanings we associate with visual symbols:

- i. Our mind ‘thinks in pictures’. Operating below the level of conscious awareness, visual symbols operate as a form of ‘mental shorthand’ to organise our perceptions and to find meaning in the world around us. By becoming more aware of the relationship between *what we know* and *how we know it*, we can learn to recognise some of the assumptions that shape our beliefs – both about the world around us and the person we are ‘in here’.
- ii. With the dominance of corporate controlled images providing our ‘picture’ of the world, the producers and sponsors of the commercial media have an enormous influence over the matrix through which we ‘see’ it. A greater understanding of how we find meaning in visual symbols can help us to recognise – and to develop defences against – the efforts of corporate and political advertisers to shape our perceptions about the Product the Politician, and the Right Priorities.
- iii. As the creators and compilers of our own photographic histories, we make pictures in order to share our impression of a scene with an audience – as a way of saying, “It

looked like this... and it made me feel this way”. The ability to record and describe our experiences (and our reactions to them) through the images we create permits us to create an emotionally accurate record of the events and experiences that shape our lives.

- iv. In our search for meaning in our lives, we are in need of honest and compassionate answers from a voice we can trust. Our ability to recognise and understand the significance of the symbols and allegories we have intuitively incorporated into our photographs gives us a way to unearth – and to confront – the forces that have shaped the person we have become.

At first, I was mortified to see my greatest fears and deepest secrets plainly exposed for all to see. But after spending some time with these pictures and reflecting on the person they described, I began to see that they offered more than just accusations of my faults and weaknesses. They also held out messages of hope and encouragement from one who knows me well – and who seems to like me anyway. In the years since I began to see myself reflected in the things I ‘choose’ to notice, the lessons I have learned from them have given me the courage to follow my dreams and to build a life I would never have dreamt possible.

In writing this book, it is my hope to provide anyone with access to a camera – even a simple instamatic – with the means to open a dialogue with the unconscious dreaming mind: your trustworthy and compassionate companion on the journey to discover – and to become – who you really are. By encouraging you to be more attentive to the images that affect you and to explore your reactions to the scenes and events that move you to photograph them, it is my hope that you may begin to *listen*, to *understand*, and eventually to *trust* what it has to say.

It works like magic for me.

© Rutherford 2009