

The Shadow of the Photographer: Using Photographic Snapshots in Our Search for Meaning and Fulfilment

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ABSTRACT: The automatic or 'instamatic' camera gives us the means to record the scenes and events that attract our attention, including those with which we have no personal connection. Our desire to photograph something 'out there' is often the result of an intuitively recognised 'resonance' between the visual patterns in the scene and their symbolic or allegorical description of something we have repressed from conscious awareness. Like a flashbulb that suddenly illuminates a dark street and which reveals the goings-on in the shadows only when we get our pictures back from the lab, our snapshots have the power to bring to light the places within us we seldom see. This essay describes how even a simple camera can help us to discover the secrets we keep, even from ourselves, and to establish a dialogue with the unconscious dreaming mind: an invaluable source of wisdom and guidance in our search for meaning and self-acceptance.

Introduction

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

With the introduction of the automatic or 'instamatic' camera, popular photography has given us the means to record the scenes and events that attract our attention. In addition to our pictures of special events and familiar places, many of us make photographs of things just because we like the way something looks, often without knowing the reason *why* we are attracted to a particular scene. We might photograph two children playing in a park, an old house, or a bicycle leaning against a wall, but... we don't know those children, or the people who live in that house, and that's not our bicycle. Prompted by a feeling that, "This is interesting... I want to photograph it", our photographs allow us to share

our impression with an audience, to say "It looked like this, and it made me feel this way".

Just as a whiff of perfume can suddenly stir a long-forgotten memory, the sight of certain images can evoke a powerful emotional response. In this text, I will suggest that, like a flashbulb that suddenly illuminates a dark street and which reveals the goings-on in the shadows only when we get the film back from the lab, our snapshots have the power to bring to light the places within us we seldom see.

Poems in time and chance, composed in the symbolic language of the unconscious dreaming mind, our photographs can expose the secrets we keep, even from ourselves. Preserved like an artefact for subsequent careful examination, the resulting photograph is something much more than an objectively accurate rendering of the scene or event, it is an allegorical portrait of the Self we seldom get to see. I will suggest that, when we are moved by something we see, when we feel the urge to make a photograph of something 'out there' with which we have no personal or conscious connection, it is because we have unconsciously recognised a 'resonance' between the visual pattern within the scene, and its symbolic or allegorical description of some aspect of ourselves of which we are currently consciously unaware.

Further, by learning to recognise the meaning we find in, or project onto, these patterns we will find the reflection of many of the beliefs and assumptions through which we define our goals, plot our course and live our lives. In the image of two children playing, we may recognise an allegory for the acceptance by others we so desperately seek. The sight of an abandoned house may recall the painful memory of being 'torn away' that left us wary of emotional attachments, a broken bicycle may remind us a father who we felt was never there. In a photograph of a figure surrounded by malevolent-looking trees, we may find the reflection of what we fear within ourselves or the circumstances in which we now feel trapped. In the features of a pleasant landscape, we may recognise the life we dreamed of Once Upon A Time.

In our intuitive selection and arrangement of the visual elements in the scene (what I call 'the Things in front of the Lens'), the unconscious dreaming mind uses the camera to describe, not 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. Through the myths and metaphors we have intuitively recognised and recorded in our photographs, our unconscious dreaming mind reflects the way we see the world and contains timely and vital clues about the nature and origin of some of our attitudes and behaviours. Accordingly, the 'truthfulness' of our photographs is not a reference to the precision with which the camera has recorded the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens, but to the accuracy with which they describe the 'Who' we believe we are.

While all forms of subjective personal expression (prayer, meditation, painting, sculpture and dance) offer the opportunity to establish a dialogue with our unconscious, I believe the camera is uniquely suited to help us explore the features of our interior emotional terrain. Like the unconscious, the camera records a scene almost instantly and in much greater detail than we can ever register consciously. At the touch of a button, and therefore without the possibly of the subtle interference of conscious decisions, the camera gives us the means to compress the visible details of the three-

dimensional world into a pattern of graphic and symbolic relationships drawn from the scenes and elements to which we have intuitively responded.

Since 1992, I have conducted more than a dozen workshops on this theme. Participants were asked to carry a small camera with them wherever they went and to photograph any scene or event that seemed meaningful or that attracted their attention, particularly those to which they had no logical, conscious or personal connection. Participants were asked not to *think* about how to compose the photograph, but to rely instead on their intuition to know when it *felt* right to release the shutter.

All my photographs are always closed. I've noticed words that always come back in my descriptions, words like 'wall', 'farther', and 'can't'. If the thing that can't come out is my sensitivity or my sadness, maybe the wall that traps them inside was constructed by me after the sad things that I've had to confront when I was young that pushed me to stock up all this sadness inside to live my life more easily. These photographs taught me a way to find clues about myself and maybe these clues can help me to open the walls. (H.A., 2001)

The trees are clearing the way for me and they pay attention to me. The trees are trying to show me the way. When I look at this picture, I am no longer pessimistic. On the contrary, I feel hopeful. It gives me strength to face my problems. I have forgotten that I am not alone and that there are people who care about me. I feel so happy and it is as if they were taking me in their arms. I can't hide that I have tears in my eyes right now. I think that is the magic of photography. Now I am sure it works.

I must admit that at the beginning I was sceptical; I was not convinced that we could analyse our own pictures. Now I know it is possible. It has helped me to realise where my problems are and I have understood a lot of things. Now I am

convinced that our pictures reflect our souls, and that must be the conclusion of the course. (A.V., 2001)

The nature of the unconscious used in this text is based on the work of Carl Gustav Jung¹. Unlike the *subconscious* described by Freud (for whom it was a repository of repressed fantasies and sexual desires), Jung described the unconscious as a rich source of wisdom and self-knowledge whose guidance is ours for the asking. Accordingly, the approach to visual symbols in this text is drawn from the major principles of Jungian thought, including the Collective Unconscious (an archaic repository of symbolic expression below the level of the personal unconscious), Archetypes (typical modes of expression arising out of the Collective Unconscious and whose meaning is 'hard-wired' into the psyche of all members of the human race), and the Shadow (aspects of our nature that we are unable or unwilling to acknowledge and which have been repressed from conscious awareness).

One of the archetypes that Jung identified is The Alchemist: the magician who searches for the Philosopher's Stone through which one 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.

Based on the feedback from over 200 workshop participants as well as my own journey of Self-discovery, I am convinced that anyone with access to even a simple camera can use their photographs to establish an open and honest dialogue with the unconscious mind: an invaluable source of wisdom and guidance in our search for personal meaning and fulfilment.

It works like magic for me.

Visual Symbols and the Preverbal Mind

Ancient traditions, when tested by the severe process of modern investigation, commonly enough fade away into mere dreams: but it is singular how often the dream turns out to have been a half-waking one, presaging a reality. (T.H. Huxley, 1863)

The Oxford Dictionary (1995) defines the verb "perceive" as "apprehend, especially through the sight". Processing the visual input from our environment on an intuitive and often unconscious level, we are moved by natural beauty, motivated by great art, and manipulated by clever advertising and package design.

Since our ancestors first rose up on two legs to look out over the savannah more than a million years ago, the human mind has found the meaning of events primarily through their appearance. The art and artefacts left by pre-linguistic peoples show that, since the dawn of human consciousness, we have recognised and revered the magical power of images. The intertwined histories of art, religion, ritual and culture are a record of humankind's use of images as a way to draw upon the sacred interior domain: the vital living link between the realm of dreams and the everyday world in which we live.

Predating the emergence of spoken language, the manipulation of visual symbols into narrative metaphors is the most ancient form of human cognition and understanding, and thus our most basic way to impose order on the events in our environment (Ricoeur, 1970). Acting as a kind of 'pictorial shorthand', these narrative metaphors are our most ancient organs of perception, and it is through these that our mind interprets our perceptions, organises our reality and assigns meaning to the information we receive from our senses. The world we inhabit is literally the way we imag(in)e it. Van Gogh (1883) wrote, "...one sees nature through one's own temperament."²

In his study of visual symbols and their use in advertising, Key (1972) described the role of these mental pictures in shaping our attitudes and beliefs:

The system that processes subliminal stimuli appears to deal mostly with very basic emotional information content and is thought to be the oldest part of the human brain developed during evolution. Further, many theorists maintain that the conscious mind merely adapts itself to the basic program established in the unconscious; no significant belief held by any individual is apparently made on the basis of consciously perceived data.

Explaining the connection between visual symbols and our perception of their meaning, Jung (1968) wrote:

And even what we retain in our conscious mind... has acquired an unconscious undertone that will colour the idea each time it is recalled. Our conscious impressions, in fact, quickly assume an element of unconscious meaning that is physically significant for us, though we are not consciously aware of the existence of this subliminal meaning or of the way in which it both extends and confuses the conventional meaning. (p.27)

Every concept in our conscious mind, in short, has its own psychic associations. While such associations may vary in intensity (according to the relative importance of the concept to our whole personality, or according to the other ideas... to which it is associated in our unconscious), they are capable of changing the 'normal' character of that concept. It may even become something quite different as it drifts below the level of consciousness. (p.29)

Mental images are our mind's way of organizing out thoughts and memories. When we

think of "Fire", "Home", or "Father", we unconsciously and spontaneously summon up a visual metaphor: one that not only *represents* the memory or experience, but which also symbolically *describes* our emotional, subjective and unconscious judgement or feelings about the concept. Picture 'a terrorist', and consider how the visual attributes of the accompanying mental picture convey the negative character of this concept.

This ancient and primitive way of thinking continues to exert an enormous influence over many of our supposedly rational and objective decisions. Fused together and buried deep within our unconscious, it is extraordinarily difficult to acknowledge, or even to recognise, the emotional judgements hidden behind the mental symbols through which we 'know' and experience the world around us. As a result, the assumptions hidden behind and represented by the cognitive mental images we carry for "Female", "Homosexual", "Old", "Fat", "Poor", "Capitalist", "Communist", "Black", "American", "Arab" or "Jew" have long since coalesced into unquestionable, and to the conscious mind, largely inaccessible, value judgements that determine our reactions to the real-life situations in which these images are evoked. These mental images or metaphors function like 'mental bookmarks' behind which the mind hides or disguises a veritable Trojan Horse of biases, objectionable feelings or experiences, until an encounter with the symbol triggers all the anger, fear or resentment we have repressed from conscious awareness.

In addition to their influence over our response to the world around us, the metaphors buried deep within our unconscious also guide the way in which we search for personal fulfilment and self-esteem. Is our life a journey to be enjoyed, a ladder to be climbed, a path to be explored, or a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won? Adopted unconsciously as a response to our early experiences in our effort to make sense of our environment, our metaphors determine what we see when we look at the world, instruct us in the way it works and impose the rules by which we must live

in order to succeed. We do not create these images, rather, they create *us*.

In our search for validation, our ability to maintain a positive self-image depends on the achievement of those qualities that we consider its proof: the attainment or accumulation of wealth, status, security, power over others, physical beauty, spiritual fulfilment, or the belief that we are loved. The way we 'picture' success thus shapes the decisions we make about how we spend our time and energies, and it is these decisions which, in turn, shape the life we create for ourselves. By looking carefully at the photographs we have made of things that move us, we can begin to recognise the unconsciously held beliefs that are the root causes of our vague but ever-present feelings of distress.

Through the images and dramas we have captured on film, we can discover some of the filters through which we continue to define and relate to the world. Many of these are the legacy of the beliefs we developed in childhood in order to protect ourselves from pain and rejection. Often too painful to recall, these defences and the memories of the experiences that made them necessary are now buried and forgotten, but not inactive, deep within us, they continue to insulate us from direct and meaningful contact with Life and from the Self who must live it.

Recognising the Subject of Our Photographs: Naming the Monsters Under the Bed

Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
From the straight road and woke to find
myself

Alone in a dark wood. How shall I say

What wood that was! I never saw so drear,

So rank, so arduous a wilderness!

Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

Death could scarce be more bitter than that
place!

But since it came to good, I will recount

All that I found revealed there by God's
grace. (Dante, *The Inferno*, Canto I,
translated by Ciardi)

Many of us carry within us buried deep down in our unconscious the suspicion that there is something wrong with us, that we are not as good as others, that we are 'bad', unworthy, or unlovable. This belief is especially common among those who were abused or emotionally neglected as children, and by those who lost a parent through death, suicide or divorce. While as adults we may be able to rationalise and 'understand' the reasons for our suffering, as children we interpreted these experiences as rejection and abandonment: as proof that "Daddy (or Mummy) doesn't love me anymore". The belief that, as the one who knew us most intimately, Daddy (or Mummy) found us unacceptable is often too painful to live with and must be banished from our conscious awareness.

Whatever its origins, our belief that we are 'no good' is driven deep down into the unconscious where, safely hidden from view, it takes root and grows into our unconscious conviction that we are fundamentally flawed and unlovable. Vaguely aware of a deep, dark and frightening secret somewhere within us, many of us fly from partner to partner and from bed to bed looking for momentary relief in the act of intimacy, but never staying long enough in any one relationship to risk the discovery of our secret. Some of us overeat, abuse drugs or alcohol, or spend money we cannot afford, all in a never-ending effort to fill the void we feel inside.

Unable to construct a healthy self-image based on an awareness and acceptance of who and how we really are, we base our self-esteem on the accumulation of wealth, professional status or in our membership in a socially privileged group of whites, males, or heterosexuals. Projecting a convincing façade modelled on what others envy or admire, our reflection in their eyes assures us that

we are 'okay', as long as they never see the desperate machinations going on backstage.

The maintenance of our mask(s) requires our constant effort and attention. (I'm dancing as fast as I can.) But all around us, the presence of 'Losers' (foreigners, gays, the poor and inconsequential) is a constant and frightening reminder of just how tenuous is our membership in the group of 'Us', and how easily, but for the grace of God or an accident of birth, we might have been one of 'Them'.

By punishing the Other onto whom we have unconsciously projected what we are unable to acknowledge in ourselves, we momentarily soothe the raging monster that threatens to devour us from within. By battering women, bashing gays, belittling our children, lynching Blacks, killing Jews, waging war on Arabs or, (the favoured past time of neo-liberals: punishing the poor), we delude ourselves into thinking that we have successfully excised the dreaded quality from ourselves and thereby reaffirm that we are among life's winners and let the Devil take the hindmost. This isn't politics, it's exorcism, and it has been known to kill.

The fear against which we lash out is but a distortion of our own reflection, projected onto the face, and into the heart, of our loved ones and our social or political opponents. But no matter how hard we try or how many surrogates we punish, we can never drown out the sound of our forgotten prisoner, desperately tapping out messages against the wall of his cell. Lost in a hall of mirrors, we never seem able to find the emotional validation we desperately seek, because we have hidden from ourselves the real object of our longing: the assurance that we are acceptable to one who knows us intimately. Instead, we are trapped in a vicious paradox: the strategies and defences we developed to protect ourselves from the forbidden knowledge have now become the very obstacles that prevent us from achieving the goal we seek. The walls we built to keep the pain out have become a prison or a maze from which we can find no escape.

If we are unwilling to confront what we fear may lurk inside and the emotions such a confrontation would unleash, these aspects become part of our Shadow: the dark and omnipresent shape that looms up menacingly behind. Driven deep underground into the dark, these unacknowledged fears about our worthiness are distorted into the monsters hiding under our bed: powerful and terrifying projections of fears from which we have spent our life hiding. To conquer these fears and to create for ourselves the life we need to be happy, we must find the courage to unlock the door and welcome this voice back into the light. Our dreams can do this, and so can our photographs.

Finding Monsters in Our Snapshots

Who are you really? What are your truths and how do you know them?

When engaged in conversation, we attempt to select the words and phrases that best describe our mental image of the idea we are trying to express. However, because we are often unaware of many of the assumptions and beliefs which lie beneath the surface of consciousness, the image we are aware of trying to convey to our listener is seldom the whole truth. Sometimes, as we grope for a way to describe a feeling or an important emotional experience, and particularly one that we have never before put into words, a 'slip of the lip' will inadvertently reveal something significant and of which we had previously been unaware. Arising spontaneously and unexpectedly from somewhere in our unconscious, these sudden revelations can surprise us with the power and clarity of their challenges to a belief that had, just a moment before, been beyond question. In these rare moments, we catch a brief glimpse of the hidden assumptions behind what had previously been certain, safe and true. Like everyone who has ever had this experience, I have often found in these sudden and unexpected insights a stark and unsettling contradiction about the Who I believe I am.

If language can occasionally yield up such insights, photography can go one better. Exploiting

its native literacy in the language of symbol and metaphor, the camera offers the unconscious a direct and unmediated mode of expression and, unlike verbal language, one not so easily kept under conscious control. I have found that a careful look through our favourite pictures will often reveal as much about us as a thorough search inside our closets and secret hiding places.

Much more than the rational application of method to medium or of aesthetics to form, our photographs are the souvenirs we make of our encounters with the things we find moving or significant in the world around us. In the things we choose to photograph, we describe our vision of the world we inhabit. Our photographs say, "It looked like this, and it made me feel this way". Emotional or psychological Self-portraits composed in the ancient picture-language of the unconscious dreaming mind, our photographs describe allegorically the way in which we see the world and Who we have become in response to what we have experienced. By offering us an allegorical reflection of our attitudes towards what we see 'out there' in the world around us, the record of the things we find worth photographing can help us to piece together a picture of the Who that feels thus.

We all have at least one photograph to which, since getting our prints back from the lab, we find ourselves drawn to look at it again and again. We may even have got up from doing something else, just to go and look at it one more time.

To be clear, I am not referring to those photographs made because of a conscious decision to record family, friends or important events. While I do not dismiss the value of these photographs or the insights into our attitudes which they may reveal, I am referring instead to those photographs we made simply because we liked the way something looked, those that 'struck a chord', or made us feel something we couldn't explain: those photographs we made because something about the scene touched us in some way, and because we thought it would make a good picture.

Since 1984, I have taught photography classes to hundreds of amateurs. When asked to explain the genesis of some of their most outstanding photographs, many students confessed that they hadn't understood what it was that had attracted their attention to the scene and were unable to explain why they had decided to make a particular photograph, except by saying "I found the scene interesting" or "The moment was right". Moreover, the particular element within the composition that made the photograph rise above the ordinary was often something the photographer had not consciously noticed at the time.

Some of the greatest masters of photography have acknowledged the role of their unconscious or intuitive response to The Thing(s) in Front of the Lens:

For me, the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity...

Henri Cartier-Bresson

I cannot, at the time, say why I record a thing in a certain way, nor why I record it at all. Feeling and recording are simultaneous.

Edward Weston

It was unimportant where I chose to photograph...you can only see what mirrors your mind at that particular time.

George Tice

People often ask, "How did you do this photograph?" I do not know; the moment came.

Andre Kertesz

The camera is a fluid way of encountering that other reality.

Jerry Uelsmann

It's all a question of recognitions.

Richard Avedon

It is what I've never seen before that I recognise.

Diane Arbus

Such indications of the inexplicable source of our inspiration suggest that the significance of an element or the relationship between elements is recognised *intuitively*. This reaffirms my belief in the enormity of the extent to which our unconscious contributes to the selection and composition of many of our most potent photographs. Accordingly, by excluding or minimising the creative input from our unconscious, the 'Rules of Good Photographic Composition' proposed by many well-intentioned authors of photography books more often than not *reduce* the chance of creating powerful and moving images.

Our photographs sometimes reflect our most intimate feelings about what we saw 'out there', not only in *what* we have chosen to photograph, but also in the *way* we have unconsciously arranged these elements within the frame. The spatial or graphic relationships created between the elements within the scene are an indication of the relationship between the things represented by the symbols we have recorded. But, while the raw material of our photographs is taken from the scenes and events of the exterior world, their *real* subject, what our photographs are actually 'about', is more often a description of (and a commentary on) our interior landscape of needs, hopes, longings and fears.

In the photographs we make, we will find both insights into the origins of our distress as well as loving and benevolent guidance in how to overcome them. The messages we will find here will encourage us in the discovery of Who we Are and Who we might Become.

Of course, whether we are prepared to listen to what it has to say is another matter.

The Messages in Photographs That Can Help Us to Heal

Like the fleeting figure of a ghost in a dark room, the memories of things we have never seen often leave a trace across the surface of our photographs. In the thoughts, impressions and especially the *emotions* prompted by the picture we have made, we are looking for an insight into our hopes, fears or aspirations. If we are willing to identify our emotional response to a particular visual image, to explore its associations and the buried memories to which it is connected, we may learn a great deal about the often unconscious feelings, attitudes and beliefs which prevent us from being able to find our way.

In the photographs we make, we can sometimes find a portrait of the One we once dreamed of being and were always meant to be. Like the long-forgotten souvenirs of our childhood, these photographs confront us with important truths about our Self: secrets that got lost or forgotten behind the façade of our ego and which we now dismiss, if we remember them at all, as signs of weakness that we must overcome if we are to 'get ahead'. Unconcerned with the desires of the ego, our photographs-as-allegories describe the hopes and dreams of long ago and the fears which banished them as well as the hidden obstacles we must acknowledge and against which we must struggle in our effort to create for ourselves the Life we need in order to be truly happy. By reminding us of the image of ourselves we once held so dear, the voice that speaks to us in our photographs gives us the courage to believe in our dreams and to reach for them again. Well aware of the obstacles that have now accumulated in our way, in other photographs, our compassionate guide offers us clues into the source of some of our present difficulties and shows us the way out.

Our photographs describe how we feel about who we are and offer us a glimpse of the Who we might become. In the visual symbols and themes that recur in our photographs, we can often find the key to the prison into which we have banished our most trustworthy friend and guide.

Brought obliquely to our conscious attention through parables told in symbol and metaphor, the messages in our photograph are often a direct challenge to the picture of the Self that is held so tenaciously by our ego. As Bettelheim (1976) wrote, "A voice used to tell lies leads us only to perdition... But a voice used to repent, to admit our failures and state the truth, redeems us."

Like notes pinned to trees and left for me to find, in the cryptic messages within the composition of my photographs I have found words of comfort and advice from one who knows me well and seems to like me anyway. The chilling accuracy with which he has described me finally obliged even my suspicious rational mind to acknowledge his role in the creation of my photographs. Most importantly, it is the wisdom of his advice and the compassion with which he offers it that has led me to acknowledge his mantic power and to treasure what he has to say.

But learning to listen is a lifelong lesson, and I am a slow learner.

Photographing with the Left Eye

If you jot down every silly thought that pops into your mind, you will soon find out everything you most seriously believe. (American journalist, 1915-)

Like most people who own a camera, you probably have a number of photographs that, for reasons you may not understand, evoke a powerful emotional reaction. Before making new photographs, look again at those you have made previously and which still seem to affect you strongly. Leafing casually ('absent mindedly') through your favourite photographs, try to identify those at which you regularly and instinctively pause. I believe that we intuitively and unconsciously respond to, and be tempted to record, those scenes and events that allegorically reflect important emotional issues.

Whenever possible, carry a small camera with you wherever you go and be prepared to record any scene or event that catches your attention. For those not already familiar with the workings of a 35mm reflex camera, I would recommend using a fully automatic camera: one which will allow you to simply 'point and shoot', without having to take light meter readings or adjust the camera's exposure controls. Try not to *think* about how to compose the photograph to make it look 'good' or 'pretty', but rely instead on your intuition to know when it *feels* right to press the button. If you find it difficult to 'turn off' your rational, critical filter, try making your photographs without bringing the camera to your eye: hold the camera at arm's length, point the camera and push the button.

The human brain is divided into two hemispheres, each of which controls the opposite side of the body. While the Left hemisphere is the source of language and mathematics, the Right hemisphere processes information from our senses through analogy and spatial relationships through which we recognise and interpret the meaning of gestures and symbols. Drawing on its non-linear and 'illogical' way of knowing, the Right hemisphere is also the source of our creative imagination, our intuition and our dreams. To exploit the connection between the left side of the body and the spatial and intuitive understanding of the Right hemisphere, put the camera to your left eye and allow your intuition to arrange the elements within the frame.

We usually attempt to compose our photographs according to certain rules for the arrangement of lines and shapes within the frame, the rules that we are told will produce a 'good' picture. But if you are prepared to put aside your notions of 'right' and 'wrong' techniques of composition to give up your conscious control over what and when you photograph, you may find that you have produced something altogether more valuable. While we may fear that the scene or event to which we respond may not hold still long enough to have its picture taken, I have found that it will in fact do so more often than one might expect. If we are able to avoid imposing such rules on our

photographs, we create the conditions necessary for our unconscious to influence the arrangements of elements within the frame and choose the moment in which the elements reflect something within our psyche.

Make photographs of the things that catch your attention, the things that reminded you of 'you-don't-know-what', the things that reach up and tug on your sleeve. Make photographs of the things that look the way you expected them to, as well as the things that you feel should look some other way. Make photographs of the things that frighten you, and of the things that make you feel better. Photograph the things you hope for, and the things that disappoint you. Try not to think rationally about the 'best' way to photograph the scene or event, just point the camera at what moves you and then let your intuition compose the picture and choose the 'right' moment.

In particular, look for:

- * scenes that strike you as a description of yourself: an 'environmental self-portrait' made from objects, landscapes, gestures and/or the relationships between them
- * scenes that remind you of what your Life is like
- * scenes or images that describe something that you feel is missing from your Life
- * scenes that describe the Life you would like to have
- * scenes that describe the Life you have always tried to avoid
- * scenes that frighten you
- * scenes that seem to describe some choice that is necessary
- * scenes that seem to describe 'the way ahead'
- * scenes that remind you of your relationship within your family
- * scenes that make you feel happy when you look at them

- * scenes that make you feel angry or resentful
- * scenes that make you feel sad or lonely
- * or any other scene or event to which you respond

Don't look for scenes or events that simply *illustrate* a feeling according to a logical reading or interpretation of the scene or event, look for scenes to which your response is *intuitive* and for those that provoke an emotional reaction even if, or especially if, the feeling it evokes is one that you cannot clearly identify.

I have found that photographs made in black & white are often easier to interpret. This may be because, whereas colour photographs so closely resemble the 'real' world in which we live, black & white photographs are more easily seen as subjective *interpretations* of the scene or event.

Interpreting the Results

It is important to emphasise that one will more often discover the 'true' interpretation of the photograph after considering carefully the *context* of the picture, rather than by looking for an atomistic 'translation' of its separate elements. While the interpretation of the parables in our photographs is by definition an emotionally charged subjective process, we must be wary of the tendency to 'see what we want or expect to see' and that the insights available to us are lost if we are not prepared to recognise what we have previously hidden from ourselves.

To uncover the meaning or significance of the messages in our photographs, we must approach the image we have recorded in the same way we would a dream fragment and to look for clues to its meaning and relevance in our intuitive reading of both the individual symbols within it, as well as to the story it seems to tell.

Look again at that photograph; does something about this picture seem to remind you of anything? What is it about this particular

photograph that makes you feel so strongly? It may be a photograph of an old man and a young boy walking down the street together hand in hand, a barren tree in front of an empty house, or an abandoned bicycle leaning against a wall... But you do not know those people, you have never seen that house before, and it is not even your bicycle.

When examining the photographs you have made, try to identify the most important elements within the frame. Which elements seem to be main characters in the drama? Look for the place within each image where your eye comes naturally to rest, for it is here that we will often find the most significant element(s) of the picture as well as a clue to the emotional issue to which our attention is being drawn. These elements can be either *concrete* or *implied*; they can be physical *objects* such as a tree, a shadow or even a gesture, or they can be relationships created *between* the different objects in the scene. These relationships might be found in the spatial pattern created by a stand of trees in a field, the fact that everyone is walking or looking in the same direction, or by the similarity of the shapes, sizes, or colours of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens.

In trying to identify the most significant element(s) within the photograph, be careful not to confuse the Things in Front of the Lens (the elements in the scene) with The Subject of the Photograph (the idea, memory or emotion that the voice within your unconscious has tried to express in the picture). For example, a photograph of a woman sitting alone on a park bench may be trying to tell you about some aspect of yourself that you have unknowingly left behind and abandoned. In a photograph of figures surrounded by barren and malevolent-looking trees, you may recognise your fear of primordial, natural forces (the emotions you cannot acknowledge or control), or in a photograph of an urban scene covered in snow (cold, virgin and sterile), you might see the superficial source of your highly prized self-esteem.

One of the most common obstacles to the accurate or 'truthful' interpretation of the symbols and metaphors incorporated within our photographs

is our tendency to over-analyse or to intellectualise their meaning. Just as in our dreams, the 'meaning' or significance of any particular element within our photographs can often be deduced from an explanation of its obvious purpose or function. In other words, things 'mean' what they 'are': a child is an innocent and trusting character, a building is a construction of the mind and the hand of Man, a wall or fence is a barrier or boundary, a road is the route to another place, and a bridge is a way of getting across a chasm.

In my work with students, I have found that there are three categories of symbols we may discover within our photographs: *Universal*, *Cultural* and *Individual* or *Personal*. Some of the images we will find in our photographs may resemble what Jung called "archetypes"; some will refer to meanings shared by all members of our Western culture, while still others have a significance unique to us and draw their meaning from our personal associations and experiences.

Universal Symbols and the Collective Unconscious

Jung maintained that there are a large number of universally recognised patterns or metaphors buried deep within the psyche. In his work with patients and their dreams, Jung noted the recurrence of symbols and patterns that often had little or no personal significance for the dreamer, but which nevertheless carried a powerful emotional charge. Jung became convinced that the source of these patterns was a level of awareness below the personal unconscious within all members of our species and in which lay the legacy of the experiences and inherited memories of our ancestors. Jung called this level of awareness shared by all humankind "the Collective Unconscious".

Examples of such universal patterns include: the Circle or Mandala (which represents the universe and its recurring patterns and cycles of life, day and night, the changing seasons etc., as well as the search for completeness and Self-unity); Mother (the source of Life, compassion and refuge as reflected in the Holy Mother Church and Mother

Nature); The Sun (often associated with the Father and the Phallus) as the source of power and vitality; and The Wise Old Man, seen throughout time in such various guises as the Wizard or Sage with power over nature, and the wise and kindly grandfather.

Finding that many of these images also appeared regularly in the myths, stories and religious rituals of peoples all over the world, Jung believed these to be typical modes of expression arising out of the Collective Unconscious, the meaning of which are 'hard-wired' into the psyche of all members of the human race. Many of these archetypes survive into the modern world in folk and fairytales. Passed down from generation to generation in the bedtime stories we tell our children, these symbolic narratives describe the mythic adventures and perils faced by the hero or heroine and the tasks s/he must perform to overcome them in order to achieve the object of his/her quest. Dragons and treasures, princes and woodsmen, towers and caves, swords and shields, these are the features we will encounter on our Life's journey.

In his study of the role of fairytales in the emotional development of children, Bettelheim (1976) explained that, by presenting figures and situations drawn from within the Collective Unconscious, these myths and fairytales provide our children with a safe way to confront and to resolve important emotional issues about powerful familiar figures. Although Pollak (1998) has revealed that significant portions of Bettelheim's work were plagiarised from Heuscher, these insights nevertheless provide us with a valuable clue into how the images and archetypes carried within the Collective Unconscious continue to affect our thinking and imagination.

Cultural and Personal Symbols

Cultural symbols are those based on events and experiences shared by all (or by most) members of the culture. Examples of Western cultural symbols include office towers (symbol of autocratic

power and control); money (symbol of material wealth and social status); roads and highways (symbols of 'the way forward'); aeroplanes (associated with the power of flight and the symbol of professional success and status); peaked roofs (symbol of 'home' and protection); stately stone pillars (symbols of tradition and security), as well as many others which can be seen in modern advertising. As a result of the Western tradition of writing from Left to Right, motion to the Left ('backwards') is often a symbolic reference to the past, while motion to the Right means 'forward' to the future.

The third category of symbols that may attract our attention are those drawn from our personal unconscious and which are the result of emotionally significant experiences. It is important to point out that the meanings we associate with certain universal or cultural symbols can be modified or supplemented by our own personal experiences. It is possible, for example, that because of an early experience involving an aeroplane, we may associate aeroplanes with loss or betrayal.

After spending time reflecting on the elements found in your own photographs, you will be able to begin to learn the visual vocabulary through which your unconscious dreaming mind expresses itself and be able to compile a personalised list of symbols. It must be emphasised however, that while these symbols may take the shape of something from the 'real' world, in our intuitively made photographs, they are the representations of our *inner* reality and describe our unconscious *feelings* and *attitudes*.

Photographic Syntax and the Relationships Between Elements

The photograph uses what I call 'photographic syntax' to *describe* each element within the scene. Our response to the photograph is influenced by the visual appearance of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens: their colour(s), tonal range, contrast, and the angle and quality of illumination.

Like the actors in a drama, the meaning of the metaphor we have recorded in our photographs is often to be found in way that the characters or elements behave within the space around them and how each element appears to affect the others. In our intuitive choice of camera angle and depth of field³, the camera compresses the space in front of the lens into a tableau, creating relationships between the various elements through juxtapositions we may not have noticed consciously at the time. For example, when we make a photograph of someone standing in front of a telephone pole, the compression of planes may make it appear that the pole is growing out of their head. Two figures that were metres apart in the original scene may now appear to be going somewhere *together*. Or imagine a photograph of a man and a woman and notice how their relationship in the photograph changes depending whether they are facing towards or away from one another.

To help recognise consciously what the story is 'about', I have found it helpful to begin by trying to write down, in as much detail as possible, the thoughts and impressions that occur to me as I reflect on this allegory: What is this 'story' about? What is going on in this photograph? Does this photograph make me feel happy or sad? Does it make me feel anxious or do I find it comforting? Logical, specific answers are not the point because the right hemisphere does not work that way; rather, try only to get a 'feel' for the meaning of the picture and for the elements through which the photograph tells its story. Forget that these are photographs of things 'out there' and look at them instead as the clues to a cryptic puzzle: important not for what they are *of* but for what they *mean*.

This is the starting place for learning the basics of our visual language: the grammar and the vocabulary of the unconscious dreaming mind. The more accurately and honestly we can identify these symbols and the attitudes with which they are associated and the more clearly we can identify the metaphors of which they are the elements, the more clearly we can recognise the truth about ourselves.

'Who' Photographs and 'Where' Photographs

I have found it helpful to begin by asking myself whether each photograph is a 'Who' photograph (one that seems to describe or refer to a person), or a 'Where' photograph (one that seems to describe a situation).

'Who' photographs are those in which the story appears to be 'about' an individual. It is important to point out however, that not all 'Who' photographs have *people* as the central characters; sometimes the central character is 'played by' an object, such as trees, boats, buildings or bicycles. The 'Who' in our photograph is usually *us*, or some aspect of ourselves that we have been unable or unwilling to acknowledge. For example, in my photographs, my rational mind is often 'played by' buildings. To identify the aspect of ourselves depicted in the photograph, ask yourself what is the character doing? What is its function or objective? Next, try to identify what the character (the 'someone' or 'something') appears to be *feeling*.

Just as in our dreams, the people who appear in our photographs, including those we recognise from our daily life, are often representations of some aspect of our own character that we have not acknowledged or wholly integrated. When people appear in our photographs, it is often because, in either the way they look or the action they are performing, we have unconsciously recognised a symbolic reflection of some aspect of ourselves that the Life Force within us wishes to bring to our conscious attention.

In those we identify as 'Where' photographs, the metaphor is describing a *situation*. Is the scene happy and reassuring, or sad and melancholy? Does it make you angry, or does it seem to hint at something ominous? Does it remind you in some way of your current situation, or one in which you are afraid to find yourself?

Identifying the common themes in your photographs

Often, the 'meaning' of your photographs can be more readily recognised by looking at them collectively. While it is often easy to misinterpret a single image, by examining all of the photographs to which you respond *as a group*, you may find clues in their similarities. Are there any elements, themes or patterns that appear regularly in many of the photographs to which you respond? Do your photographs often include roads, windows, clocks or large areas of empty space? What do these things mean to you? What are your associations with these elements? What do they make you think of? Conversely, are there any elements that are conspicuous by their absence? Do your photographs seldom include the sky, horizon lines, people or faces (people are always shown from behind)? Are your heads always cut off? What are your associations with these elements, and what do you think this means that you are refusing to confront?

The significance of an element is suggested by both its size and its position within the frame. When the Thing in Front of the Lens the element is large, or is positioned in the centre of the frame, it appears to be strong and dominant. Small elements appear to be weak, lonely or insignificant.

Consider too, the position of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens within the frame (in the centre, at the top of the frame, or off to the right). By positioning an element in the centre of the frame, we suggest that it is of 'central' importance and represents the thing to which all others must submit. Placing elements close to the edge of the frame, or partly out of the frame, implies that they are in motion or are trying to 'get away from' other elements within the frame. Elements near the top seem to be lighter or weightless and give the impression of 'floating' out of the frame. Conversely, those near the bottom of the frame are seen to be heavier. Compositions that include more ground than sky appear to be 'weighted down' or 'earth-bound'; those that include more sky than ground seem to put our 'head in the clouds'.

Another aspect of the scene that should be considered is its place in a chronological continuum. Looking at the situation described in the photograph, what do you feel had taken place just a moment before? And what do you suspect is going to happen next? Where are the people in the photograph coming from? What have they just done there? Where are they going? What are they going to do when they arrive there?

Our photographs and the voice that speaks to us through them cannot, by themselves, bring us a healthier attitude and self-image. This work we must do through patient and constant effort, but it helps to know that the one who knows our deepest darkest secrets is here to guide us. It gives us hope to know that we have a friend and constant companion who will help us to find a way out.

By encouraging you to be more attentive to the images and their meanings that affect you, by showing you *why* you are *what* you are, the metaphors within your photographs will introduce you to the vocabulary used by the compassionate companion within the unconscious dreaming mind. When it speaks to you, it is my hope that you may begin to listen and to make the effort to understand. If you do, I believe that you will soon come to trust what it has to say.

And be prepared for some surprises.

The Shadow of the Photographer

One of the most frequent and disturbing influences on the ego... the Shadow... can in large measure be inferred from the contents of the personal unconscious... To become conscious of it involves recognising the darker aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.⁴

While working as a commercial photographer, between professional assignments I continued to make photographs for my own enjoyment. I made photographs of scenes and events in which I liked the way something looked: unusual juxtapositions, intersecting lines, figures seen from behind, and shadows on walls. Perhaps as a reaction against the fastidious degree of control over my compositions demanded by art directors, when making photographs for myself, I relied on my intuition to select the scene, to frame the image and to choose The Moment.



Figure E

Like many of the photographs I made that year, the photograph *Building and Tree* (Fig. E) juxtaposes two apparently antagonistic elements: in this case, a large, barren tree moves menacingly from left to right across the frame towards a building that seems to recoil in fear and trepidation.

This image haunted me for days and weeks afterwards, irresistibly drawing me back to look at it again and again. I found myself getting up from doing something else, just to go and look at it. I could not understand why this one image should captivate my attention so much more powerfully than any other, ostensibly similar photographs made at the time and was troubled by my growing

obsession with this image. I was unable to explain its tenacious hold on my imagination until it occurred to me that, like a poem or a dream, my attraction to the image might be due to its *symbolic* significance than its artistic merit.

Reading the photograph symbolically, it described a large organic and malevolent force advancing menacingly towards a logical and rational structure: Nature threatening the artifice of Man.

Despite my professional success, for many years I had secretly believed myself to be worthless and unlovable. Afraid of being overwhelmed by hostile emotions I could not control, I had learned to repress my emotions and found safety only in abstract ideas, logical propositions and rational arguments. Knowing only fear, shame and anger, I desperately avoided any contact with my own feelings and the loathsome self-image I was certain to find there. Instead, I had succeeded in cobbling together a fragile illusion of self-esteem, regularly reinforced by a 'detached' intellect that laid siege to anything which threatened my 'rational objectivity'. Firmly convinced that no situation was impervious to the power of my rational mind, I believed I could safely navigate through life by the light of my intellect, and without the emotional reflection I so desperately feared.

Estranged from my emotional compass and hiding my insecurity and fear of exposure behind a polished façade of culture and learning, I was able to rationalise my occasional emotional meltdown with well developed powers of rhetoric and manipulation and to deftly shifted the blame onto a bewildered 'other' where (please God) it had to belong. Carefully disguising my fears (even from myself) behind a pontifical and apparently benevolent detachment, I attempted to convince anyone who dared to challenge me that the problem was, in fact, *theirs*: "Oh my dear, you *do* have a serious emotional problem. Now then, let me advise you..."

I probably would have made a terrific salesman.

An emotional illiterate driven by anxieties I neither recognised nor understood, I felt safe in only the most superficial and mercenary relationships. All the while however, I was unable to avoid the suspicion that, deep down, something was seriously wrong.

It was through this photograph that I began to find a way out.

Looking again at these two elements and reflecting on my intuitive associations with them, I recognised in this photograph an allegorical description of the tension between my rational and 'right thinking' mind represented by the clean, organised and logical form of the building and its apparent fear of my 'sinister' unconscious represented by the tree: a powerful, natural force, one that I had made all the more potentially malevolent because of the powerful secrets I had long ago hidden there. My fear of what had been pushed below the surface of conscious awareness had grown until, in my imagination, it had taken on monstrous proportions.

The discovery that an intelligence so clearly intimate with my deepest fears and anxieties should not only possess the ability to make itself heard, but that it should address itself to subjects I had effectively banished from the court of conscious awareness, shook me like a blow. It was as if others could hear the private voices of reproach and self-doubt that rang incessantly in my ears.



Figure F

In an almost identical composition made only a few days later, *la Femme Reculée* (Fig. F) describes a female figure trapped in an enclosed space, recoiling (*reculée*) from the advance of a dark and ambiguous form from the upper left of the frame. Approaching this image in the same way I had *Building and Tree*, it seemed to suggest that the female figure represented an aspect of my Self under siege from dark and malevolent forces beyond the reach of my highly prized conscious control. In the female figure, I recognised the symbol for my Anima⁵: my unacknowledged 'feminine' side.

For several months before I first began to re-examine my photographs, dark and malevolent trees had been a common motif in many of the photographs I made. Although I had paid no attention to the significance of this recurring theme at the time, in retrospect it had been an early clue about the fearful and troubled self-image I soon began to recognise and find reflected in my photographs.



Figure G

During a previous trip to New York City, I made a series of photographs in which the composition was entirely devoid of any conscious control. (I had made the photographs by pointing the camera at the scene without putting the camera to my eye.) In my subsequent re-examination of the photograph *trees in Central Park*, (Fig. G) I recognised the same elements as in *Building and Tree*, and was reminded of the tale Sleeping Beauty and the dark and malevolent forces surrounding the castle where she lies unconscious.

Made shortly after my return from New York, *The Shadow of the Photographer* (Fig. H) depicts an



Figure H

anonymous photographer and three sets of converging lines. The first, (formed by the silver legs of the tripod), leads the eye upwards to where the head of the photographer (the seat of logical, rational thought) is clearly 'out of the picture'. Two others (the arrowhead created by the shadow of the tripod, and the rifle-scope cross-hairs created by the gaps between the paving stones which have the shadow 'in their sights') are 'targeting' (and drawing my attention to) the point at which operator and machine are fused together as one. These converging lines are an example of the way in which, through 'photographic syntax', the camera creates relationships in the photograph. These relationships did not exist in the original scene, only in the photograph 'made' of it. It was in this composition that I found an allegory for what these photographs were 'about': the mysterious rapport between the camera and my Shadow.

Simultaneously fascinated and frightened by the accuracy of these unintentional emotional self-portraits, I began to look more closely at other photographs I had made and found several whose insights I had overlooked. While sorting through dozens more of these 'personal' photographs, I was surprised to discover just how many contained allegorical descriptions of some of my deepest fears and anxieties. But this voice is not only honest: he is also compassionate. After looking again at these photographs, I began to see that they offered something more than just accusations of my shortcomings: I also found messages of hope and encouragement. In the years since, his advice has led me identify and confront, and then eventually to overcome, many of the fears and insecurities that controlled me.

Now, when making photographs, my objective is not to try to record faithfully what is 'out there'. I try, through a kind of left eye/right brain Geiger counter, to find the arrangement of the visual elements that provokes the strongest emotional response and to bring home a picture postcard souvenir. These mythic Self-portraits describe a particular moment in the always precarious relationship between my ego and my unconscious a snapshot record of the 'who I am at this moment' and a clue about the direction in

which this 'Who' desires to lead me. Neither condescending nor unnecessarily cruel, his lessons never placate me, but in the stories he tells, he encourages me in the discovery of who I am and of who I might become.

Conclusion

No matter how slow the film, Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen.⁶

The tales my photographs tell and the lessons I have learned from them have helped me to build a life that, even ten years ago, I would never have dared believe I deserve.

Encoded in dozens of disturbingly accurate 'snapshots', I have found the symbolic reflection of what I had chosen to forget. By looking past The Thing(s) in Front of the Lens and into the associations I find there, I have discovered that *I am* what my photographs are about: that I am The Subject of the Photograph.

Treating the insights I have gained from my photographs with the same significance and respect with which I have come to regard the guidance of my dreams, my photographs have helped me to establish a closer and more trusting relationship with the guide and companion within my unconscious dreaming mind. Through the secrets he has found necessary to share with me, I have occasionally come face to face with that One that I am also. Through the insights I have gained from a careful examination of the symbols and allegories intuitively incorporated into my photographs, I have come to believe that my happiness, fulfilment and peace of mind depend on expanding my concept of what is 'real' and what is 'true'. By learning to read his language, and to trust the advice he offers me, I have learned to be less afraid of what I have not yet acknowledged and found a better balance between the demands of my rational mind and those of the irrational but no less legitimate voice of That which I am also.

This growing familiarity with my own private symbolic language has helped me, sometimes consciously, but more often intuitively, to recognise and understand the myths I have created about myself and to uncover the private truths I find there. These lessons are now reflected in a growing body of work documenting the emergence of a more fully integrated Self: one who now sees, and sees himself, through very different eyes. More recently, my ability to recognise and to interpret the meaning I find in, or project onto, the scenes and events around me has occasionally allowed me to detect the voice of my guide in the present tense without having to wait for the photograph.

Products of an extraordinary dialogue, my photographs reflect private, rather than public realities, the mythic rather than the momentary and mundane. Received with trust, gratitude and a large measure of humility, these photographs have left me with mementoes of a life I have learned to live in a state of grace with chance.

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Endnotes:

1 Bruce C.S. Barnes, a member of the Ontario Association of Jungian Analysts, has reviewed the relevant sections of the text to ensure conformity to Jungian principles.

2 Quoted by Stone (1937) (p. 288)

3 Depth of Field refers to the linear distance in front of and behind the plane of focus (the point on which the camera is focussed) which is also in focus. It is controlled by the aperture setting (the *f*-stop) of the lens.

4 Campbell, J. (Ed.). (1976). The Portable Jung. New York: Penguin. (p.145)

5 Like Yin and Yang, the two opposites that, together, make a whole, the Anima is the (usually unacknowledged) feminine side of a man; the masculine side of a woman is called the Animus.

6 Quoted by Cameron (1992) (p. 51)

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This article is excerpted from *The Shadow of the Photographer*. Publishers interested in reviewing the complete text are invited to contact the author.

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