

## Critical Analysis, what is it all about?

By  
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Critical analysis of anything is very subjective. Film critiques analyze and criticize film based on years of watching the movies. Their analysis is nothing more than their opinion of the film with an emphasis on making an interesting discussion around the critique. Part of their interest in the critique is self-serving, in that they need their audience to continue to read and listen to their articles and/or television show. Their opinion may or may not be for the purpose of helping the filmmaker do it differently the next time.

Analysis for the sole purpose of helping the maker be more successful is a different thing. The American film industry is largely in it for the money, so their reason to do it correctly has to do with pleasing the masses. The masses enjoy certain things and if the film industry provides this they will be successful. This does not mean the success is something everyone enjoys; it just means they made money. Making money is their reason to exist, their purpose. Lately, some would say, they are short of meeting their purpose.

Still photography is much like this. There must be a reason for the image to exist. If the photographer creates only for self-gratification, then the maker should do the analysis. For a second party to dare and comment on this type image would be a mistake. If the image is made for esoteric purposes and only for viewing by the so called “art photography” crowd, the person doing the analysis must know this and tailor the comments to help make the image pleasing to that group. It is when the image is created for exhibition or commercially that critical analysis becomes a most valuable tool for the maker. If the photographer wishes to be successful in dealing with the public or salon judges, there are certain rules that apply. Someone once said that before photographers can break the rules, they must understand them.

Rules and regulations have been passed down through the centuries in art. They are a part of the public awareness to the point of being transparent. Show three landscape photographs to random persons on the street. More times than not they will pick the one, as the best, that meets the most rules. They do not know why and when asked why will not usually be able to articulate it. They have been bombarded their entire lives by images that meet certain criteria and this pleases them.

It is this phenomenon that causes the analysis to be a valuable tool. The photographer must be aware of the rules that cause the public and judges to react favorably to images, if she or he is to be successful in exhibiting or in commercial endeavors with the public. Sure, one can just muddle along and see what sells or hangs, then make more just like that. This is a very slow process and one that can stifle the creative juices as well as being very costly. Knowing the rules leaves the photographer open to all types of experimentation. Rules can be applied and broken in a myriad of ways. The photographer that knows the rule and breaks it will know why the images was or was not successful.

The role of the analyst, as I have stated must follow the reason for the image. This cannot be emphasized too strongly. The person doing the analysis must only have the interest of the maker in mind. If the maker cannot articulate the reason for the image, any comments about it will be superfluous. Personal analysis of images with no purpose is a waste of everyone’s time. If you ask me my personal opinion of an image with no stated reason for it to exist, then it must have been created for me as a gift and for no other reason. In this case I can comment and give a very personal analysis. Then you can go back into the

darkroom or into the field and make the image again to my specifications and I will be very happy. This seldom happens outside of the classroom and in my 30+ years as an analyst of photography I can say it has only happened to me, maybe once. Usually the maker wants to know how to make the image more successful in some broader context.

The role of analyst will become more important to the photographer if certain criteria are met. The person who is doing the analysis should not have vested interest in the image. As I stated, if you are not making it for me then my comments must serve another purpose. If no one except the maker is to hear the analysis, then there can only be one reason for the analysis - to make the image more successful based on the makers purpose.

Photographers must be emotionally prepared for critical analysis of their images. Analysis can be one of the most painful aspects of a photographer's life. Most images are not finished to the point of showing them unless the maker feels something about them. Seldom have I heard, "I just hate this image, can you tell me why?" In almost every case the photographer is looking for reinforcement of his/her reason for making the image. Some times the maker is looking for additional reasons for the image to exist. Seldom is anyone prepared for reasons the image could have been made better, and worst of all, reasons it should not have been made at all. This is part of the reason the image must have a purpose. The purpose opens up the discussion to specifics regarding how the image does or does not fit that purpose. It allows photographers to distance themselves from the emotional attachment to the image and focus on the way to make it successful based on this purpose. The analyst's role at this point is a simple matter of discussion regarding what rules have been broken, or not applied, and make a recommendation based on facts, not emotion.

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