

The Pain and Pleasure of Critical Analysis

One of the most difficult moments in the life of any photographer is hearing an analysis of his/her work. The few minutes leading up to the analysis may seem like an eternity. The event itself may feel like watching your first-born perform in her first Christmas pageant. This feeling is difficult to shake and may be around for years for those who continue to exhibit. I call this Analysis-Paralysis, AP for those of you who love acronyms.

One of the most critical elements in reducing this anxiety is the proper analysis by whoever is doing it. Properly done, the analysis can reduce the stress of the moment, and go a long way toward making future events much easier for the maker.

New members of camera clubs, PSA, or any group, whose aim is viewing graphic art, may be especially vulnerable to AP. If part of the group's goal is to keep new members and make them old members, AP may need to be addressed at every level.

Analysis is much more complicated than just saying something nice about a photograph and then explaining how it could have been made better. This has been the popular belief in clubs for years. Persons who are successful in exhibiting are many times ill prepared to conduct analysis. Knowing how an image can be made better through experience is only part of the skill needed in proper analysis. Saying something nice about the image may do more harm than good.

Kind words regarding a photograph may seem condescending if they have no substance. Simply saying that the subject is pretty, is saying something about the photograph over which the photographer may have little control, and is probably obvious to everyone. Comments pro or con must have substance. Most makers will recognize superficial comments and Analysis-Paralysis may set-in. . "I really like this photograph" may make you feel good; however it does not help the maker unless you can articulate why.

Many times the person doing the analysis leaves out the most obvious. After all is said and done regarding rules and regulations about composition, lighting, and impact, how does the photograph make you feel? Sometimes the photograph will evoke a certain feeling and step beyond the rules. This gives the analyst another positive tool to set up the help the maker needs.

Often, when confronted with a photograph that has a myriad of obvious flaws, the knowledgeable photographer as analyst may be so anxious to help he or she may not even be able to see the positive aspects of the image. A type of tunnel vision sets in and the positive comments are rushed and many times shallow. It takes patience and understanding to ignore what needs to be done and comment intelligently on what was done properly.

Many times it is not what is said that is painful, but the way it is said. Positive comments regarding a photograph have no business in the same paragraph or breath with assistance in what can be done better. An example might be: "The foreground is well handled, however is slightly out of focus." The maker may only hear the out of focus part, and worse than that hasn't a clue as to how the foreground was well handled. A better approach is to discuss the foreground in a substantive manner. "To me, the foreground is well handled. Notice how the dark band of the foreground steps your eye into the lighter middle ground and then to the darker background. This layering of hues, in my opinion, adds dimension and impact to the image."

Notice also the use of the personal terms TO ME, IN MY OPINION. These terms anchor the analysis to the analyst's personal opinion, which, after all, is what it is.

Never use the connecting words, 'however' or 'but' or any word that ostensible "drops the other shoe." This technique doesn't work; the receiver may only retain the negative comment.

After finishing with what was done properly, a short pause may allow the maker to relax and even reflect on the fact that this process is not so bad after all. When writing the analysis always separate the good from the help area by placing them in separate paragraphs. The tendency may be to re-address previous positive comments, to emphasize the help part. Do not do this. The positive reinforcement has been done and can only be degraded by further comment. Make the help comments as succinct as possible and above all make them pertinent

In the previous example one might say, “The foreground appears to be slightly out of focus to me. I think a sharper foreground may have given this photograph a bit more impact.” Then stop, and go on to any other help that can be rendered. Never belabor an obvious flaw, saying it two different ways is redundant at best and only adds to the makers AP.

One of the most difficult things in analysis is the need, many times, to completely alter the way one speaks or writes. The use of definite terms such as ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘must’, ‘should’, are usually not the best words to use to analyze photography. Substituting softer terms such as “may”, “might” or ‘consider’, may go a long way toward making AP easier to handle, and leave the analyst room to be wrong.

Analysis is not designed to find something wrong. It is designed to see something right, and then see things that may be improved upon. Analysis is not designed to correct what is wrong, but to suggest what may be done to improve in the future. The maker must always be left with the impression that the improvement is their choice.

New members of PSA are taking advantage of an analysis service designed just for them. Along with many additional services for new members this analysis service is provided on the PSA new member web page, <http://www.psa-newmember.org/>

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