

# The Language of Light



"Waterfall, PA, 1978"

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article by **Huntington Witherill**

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*"Great Sand Dunes National Monument, CO, 1975*

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**P**hotography is in most every sense of the word, a language. It is a language of light and a language of visual expression. In spite of its somewhat abstract nature, the photographic language may in many instances be the most adept form of efficient and precise communication yet devised by man.

The photographic process itself was invented over a century and a half ago. Yet after more than 150 years of use the masses remain, for the most part, unable to interpret the photographic

language when it is used as a means of artistic expression. This lack of fluency contributes to widespread misunderstanding of the art and thus reluctance on the part of many to view photography as a legitimate art form. Could it be that the inherent limitations of translating a visual language into a spoken or written language contribute to this problem? Undoubtedly so. However, I believe a contributing factor may be the undue emphasis which has traditionally been placed upon the mechanical techniques of the medium.

The fact that photography enjoys widespread accessibility serves as both a blessing and a curse. Unlike painting or drawing, in which the mechanics of technique must be developed over extended periods of time before any sense of craft is established, the workings of a modern camera will allow most anyone to make a reasonable photographic record with no prior experience. Therein lies a curse. The mechanics of photographic materials (that being of camera, film, paper and chemistry) while easily mastered, are too often mistakenly assumed to encompass the entirety of photographic technique. And, to further complicate this problem some photographers and teachers may tend to place great emphasis on the mechanical techniques, thereby encouraging the misconception that they represent a major prerequisite of accomplished photography.

If we can begin to think of fine art photography in terms relating to the process of visual communication through the use of a language, I believe that we might find ourselves

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better equipped to use and translate the language into terms that will be more easily and thoroughly understood by the masses. This might inevitably lead to greater understanding and acceptance of photography as a fine art. The old saying; “*a photograph is worth a thousand words*” rings true in spite of its triteness. Ironically, it also seems that no amount of the spoken or written language is ever adequate to describe or explain a photograph. The fact is, one can not begin to understand or appreciate any photograph (regardless of like or dislike) until one has studied the image first hand. The photographic language is uniquely suited to its own purpose and does not easily translate to other languages.

And, if we are to speak of photography in terms of a language, then photographic technique should be viewed as being analogous to vocabulary. With the mastering of each new technical skill, the photographer gains the ability to introduce another “word” into his/her vocabulary. The vocabulary may then be interwoven into the language in order to communicate a specific group of thoughts or ideas. At the same time, it is important to understand that possession of vast vocabulary does not assure the ability to communicate effectively with any language. One need only reflect upon the monotonous diatribes asserted by many political leaders to appreciate this concept. There seems to be a great amount of vocabulary being used, but hardly any real communication. A relatively recent phenomenon, characterized as being that of *all form and no substance*, seems to be on the increase in all aspects of our lives. Artistic endeavors



“Juniper & The Grand Canyon, AZ, 1975”

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are no exception. Mastering the mechanics of camera, film, paper and chemistry represent only the form (the *vocabulary*, if you will) of photography. The substance (being that of aesthetic concern) is where the real communication takes place.

Although it is absolutely essential for the photographer to master the mechanics of his/her tools, it is important to remember that it makes little difference if one possesses great technical skill with the language, if one has nothing to say. Further,

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it is worth noting that the study of those technical skills are often limited by misconceptions of what actually constitutes a well-rounded technical proficiency. Often, when photographers evaluate technical concerns they apply the wrong precepts. Too often “good” photographic technique is related only in terms of sharpness, lack of grain, tonal separation and a host of other mechanical details. These mechanical details are what I refer to as “cosmetic” technique. I use this term because cosmetic technique is so frequently used to mask or cover up



“Reflections, Badwater, Death Valley, CA, 1980”

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a basic flaw, most often in visualization. Far too often, we equate cosmetic technique as being the major prerequisite of accomplished photography. If cosmetic technique were actually *the* prerequisite, we would then have to dismiss the work of many photographers who offer a most eloquent use of the photographic language. As examples of this I cite the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bill Brandt, Alfred Stieglitz, Mario Giacomelli and Ernst Haas. The list is by no means complete. These photographers have made unusually clear and concise photographic statements in spite of the fact that their photographs do not necessarily exhibit sharpness, lack of grain, or tonal separation. They do exhibit what I refer to as “clear” technique.

Ansel Adams once observed that photographic technique need only be good enough to carry out a photographic idea. If we are to believe in this observation (and I do) then we must begin to evaluate technical concerns within the context of an overall visual statement. Clear technique provides that the most direct and cohesive visual statement be made regardless of mechanics. Often times, presenting a direct and cohesive visual statement requires that the photographic image be sharp. However, in some instances sharpness can actually inhibit clear technique and consequently, dilute the overall visual statement. Alfred Stieglitz’s image entitled: *The Hand of Man*, (1902) serves as a fine example of this point. I remain convinced that the tonally depressed, grainy and fuzzy image of a steam locomotive and railroad yard would suffer severely were it not fuzzy, grainy and depressed. In my opinion, the strength of this particular image

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lies not within its mechanical perfection, but within its ethereal quality and the fact that Stieglitz has used the photographic language to make a clear and concise statement about the material at hand. Whether or not we find the photograph pleasing to view, we cannot deny what Stieglitz has visualized and more importantly, we cannot escape or dismiss what he felt emotionally about what he had visualized. The photograph exhibits unusually clear technique.

To me, the most compelling attribute of any artistic endeavor is the fact that no rules may apply. Unlike scientific exploration, in which absolutes are declared and the audience invited to disprove a particular axiom, artistic exploration assumes no absolutes and invites the audience to simply consider the possibilities. Within the photographic language there can be no absolutes. There does not exist the “right” or “correct” way to communicate a visual statement. There does exist however, the capacity for using the language to its best advantage so as to most clearly communicate a visual idea. Although the argument can be made that each photograph is capable of eliciting a variety of responses from its audience, it remains the task of the photographer to continually explore the language of photography so as to accommodate the most direct and clear communication of his/her own unique vision. This exploration goes to the very core of artistic purpose. Only through unbiased examination of all conceivable possibilities, will the artist be equipped to make a clear statement. Photography is a relatively recent form of visual and artistic expression. Many people simply do not yet

understand its subtleties or appreciate its directness. They tend to be enamored with the mechanical processes while remaining oblivious to the real power of the language. Published statements such as “*You push the button, we do the rest*” may help to sell cameras and film, but they do little to encourage the medium’s enormous capacity for effective artistic communication. Photography’s ability to relate a visual and emotional experience in the most intimate way, is as appropriate for this type of communication as painting or drawing.



“Bandon Beach, OR, 2000”

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Those of us who are involved in the field of photographic art must endeavor to teach the concepts of the language to our audience. Having said that, it is also important to understand that attempts by the photographer to explain the content or intent of his/her individual photographs will most often fail. This is because the opposite effect is desired. The purpose of the photograph is to communicate the content or intent of the photographer and of itself. If the photograph fails to do this on its own, it *too* has failed. In other words, we should be teaching the audience to interpret the language for themselves, rather than translating it for them.

There remains little doubt that great attention must be paid to technical concerns in photography. However, this attention must be focused within the overall concept of visual expression and not limited to the workings of the camera, film, paper and chemistry. I believe that this is precisely what Ansel Adams had in mind when he so eloquently pointed out that... *“there is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept!”*

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Huntington Witherill is a fine art photographer who lives in Monterey, CA  
He can be contacted through his web site at: [www.HuntingtonWitherill.com](http://www.HuntingtonWitherill.com)

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