

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 overcome, and for those who continue to exhibit, the feeling, referred to as Analysis-Paralysis (AP), may be around for years.

One of the critical elements in reducing this anxiety is the proper analysis by whoever is doing it. Properly done, the critical 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, the Photographic Society of America (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 help them become longtime members, AP may need to be addressed at every level.

Critical 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 may be saying something about the photograph over which the photographer has 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.

Many times the person doing the analysis leaves out the most obvious. After all is said and done regarding rules and guidelines 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 and wants.

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.

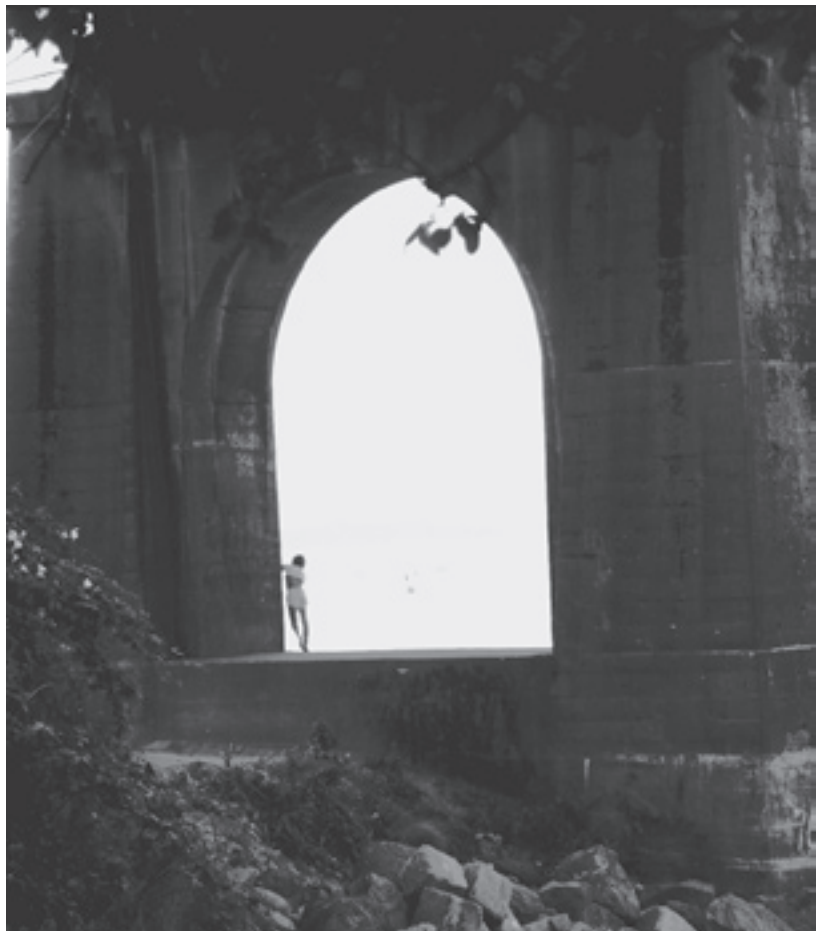
Many times it is not what is said that is painful, but the way it is said. Positive comments regarding a photograph have no business in the same breath or paragraph with assistance in what can be done better.

An example might be as in *Figure 1*: "This photograph evokes a relaxing feeling, however the out of focus leaves, as well as the slight tilt to the left and light trap is a distraction."

A better approach is to try and discuss how it makes you feel relaxed, the positive part of the analysis. Something like: "The arch and the figure are reminiscent of a church window, one wishes to be the figure in the photograph viewing whatever is outside. The figure is placed very nicely in the frame, and the overpowering arch add impact."

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Figure 1



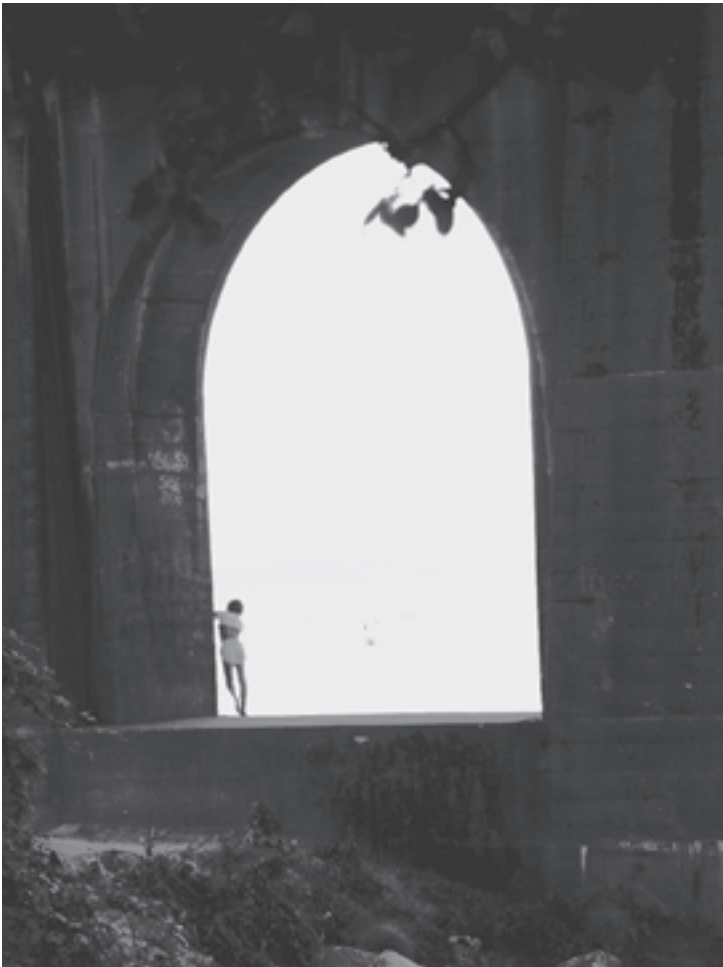


Figure 2

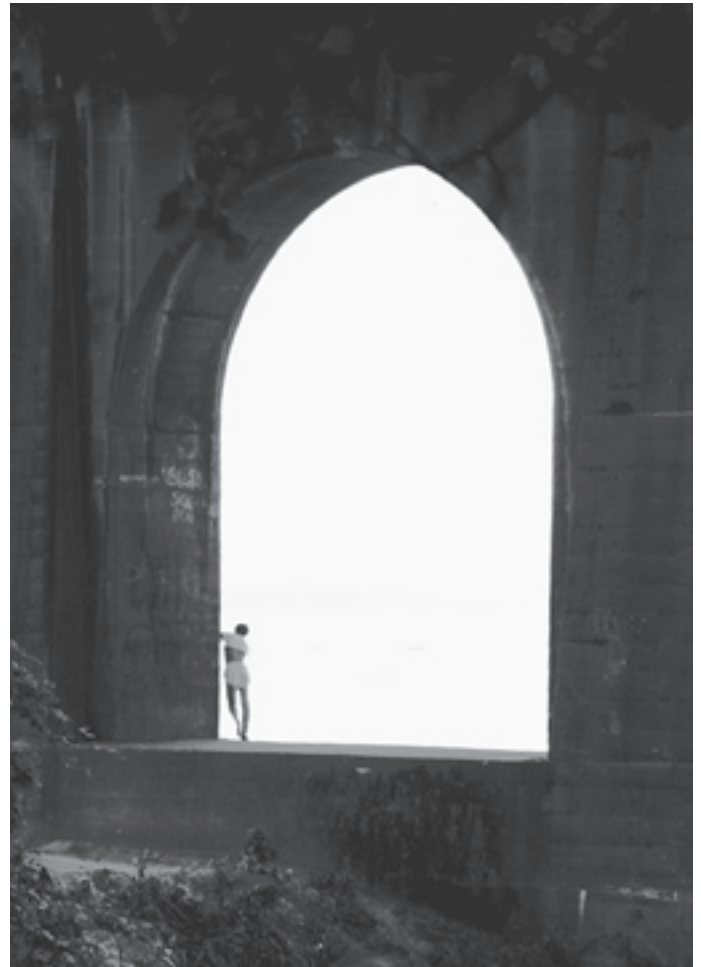
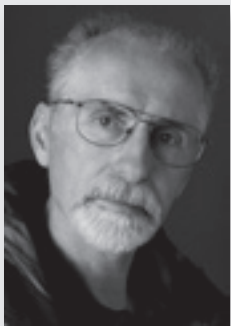


Figure 3

Photos © Jon Fishback



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Never use the connecting words, ‘however’ or ‘but’ or any word that ostensible “drops the other shoe.” “The composition is very nice, BUT, the foreground is out of focus.” 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 emphasis the help part. Such as: “As I said previously, the arch and figure are placed well, but...” Do not do this. The positive reinforcement has been done and can only be degraded by further comments. Make the help comments as succinct as possible and above all make them pertinent. Never belabor an obvious flaw, saying it two different ways is redundant and only adds to the makers AP.

In the previous example, after a short pause or in a new paragraph, one might say, “The upper left corner contains a light trap which may draw the eye and keep the viewer unnecessarily occupied. See *Figure 2* with that cropped out.

The unfortunate limb and out of focus leaves,

break the line of the arch and may further distract the viewer. This can be removed with a graphics arts computer program, however this may be frowned upon in some competitions. *Figure 3* is simply a look at the cropping without the leaves and with the vertical lines straightened a bit. See what a beautiful photograph you have created.”

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 definitive terms such as ‘always,’ ‘never,’ ‘must,’ ‘should,’ are usually not the best words to use in analyzing photography. Substituting softer terms such as *may, might* or *consider*, can go a long way toward making AP easier to handle.

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 future improvements. If possible the maker should always be left with the desire to project the help into the next project.

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