The Appeal of Imagery:

THE LEFT-BRAIN / RIGHT-BRAIN CONVERGENCE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Shutter Release, October 2005

At this juncture in time, science can only hypothesize the nature of consciousness, never mind explain how we think. All the more reason we are driven to query and explore the human psyche. In the field of photography, substantial speculation has been offered on the workings of the mind in the creation and appreciation of images.

A dichotomy of supposed left-brain and right-brain functions has been a popular approach in explaining mental processes affecting photography and other arts. "Left-brain thinking" is analytical, logical and forward-looking—so-called linear thinking. "Right-brain thinking" is intuitive and tends to the emotional and spontaneous. People are said to be inclined to either the left- or right-brain approaches. Whether such cerebral processes actually occur on opposite sides of the brain is arguable, but research reportedly indicates that analytical and emotive thinking appear concentrated in different areas.

Association of Right-Brain Thinking with Art

Photography in its early years was considered a reproductive rather than an artistic endeavor. Producing an image required extensive preparation and carefully planned, utterly still composition. As such, the nature of photography was initially seen as mechanical and analytical at best. In contrast, painting on canvass was considered intrinsically creative. A major objection to the acceptance of photography as art was that photography was supposedly a left-brain (analytical) rather than a right-brain (intuitive) function. (Sounds extreme, but note that it was widely accepted in that era that the shape of the skull could gauge criminal tendencies.) To expressly counter the view that photography was not art, many photographers adapted soft-focus techniques to produce the look of impressionist paintings.

Photography was accepted as an art form by the late 1920s. Art students were encouraged to develop their "right-brain thinking," emphasizing freewheeling composition, unconventional perspective and metaphorical imagery. Debate about left- and right-brain thinking quieted to concerns such as the inter-relationship of the approaches and the extent to which presumed right-brain functions should be encouraged.

The Convergence of Left and Right-Brain Approaches

Two articles in 2002 characterized contemporary thinking about the dichotomy of analytical and intuitive approaches to photography.

"Does Your Left Brain Know What Your Right Brain is Doing?" by Michael Fulks appeared in Apogee magazine in August 2002. Fulks begins by relating the evolution of the camera as a factor in a long-term shift from left-brain predominance (previsualization and highly technical setup) to right-brain emphasis (impressionistic and even spiritual). Photographers have been given an extraordinary degree of latitude as a result of the simplification and progressive automation of 35mm photography, and more recently, digital photography.

Fulks does not suggest the pendulum may have swung too far to right-brain, intuitive picture taking. Rather he first distinguishes between perceived feminine and masculine tendencies in photography, and posits that male photographers have traditionally tended toward left-brain, analytical approaches, and that this remains a problem; whereas women are supposedly more balanced in their approach. This was not, however, his main point.

Fulks emphasizes that analytical and intuitive approaches to picture taking should be complementary and vary, depending on the situation. Basic common sense this, but a major proportion of photographers are not prepared—mentally or technically—to apply either analytical or intuitive approaches to photographic situations. The photographer who is not willing or able to do spontaneous "right-brain" shooting will probably loose numerous one-time opportunities. The photographer who thrives with utterly spontaneous creativity would nevertheless also miss some fine images because of a reluctance to stand back, consciously survey a scene and methodically plan for a particular perspective or technique.

Left- and Right-Brain Effects in the Eye of the Beholder: An Explanation of Compelling Photography

A second piece treats the cognitive and sensual aspects of photography from the perspective of the audience or clientele of the photograph. "Beyond the Basics: Strategies for Creating Award-Winning Photographs" by Glenn Hohnstreiter was published in View Camera magazine, November-December 2002. The central theme of his discourse is that both analytical and emotional content—left- and right-brain contributions—are necessary for an image to be compelling.

Hohnstreiter argues that an awe-provoking photograph must combine visual beauty with cognitive stimulation. Not heavy stimulation but a stirring of our thinking, or wonderment, however momentary. In Hohnstreiter's words:

“Left-brain/right-brain balance is an often overlooked concept in advanced photography. . .left-brain images are typical “record pictures”—the viewer sees little artistic content because there is little creative or imaginative stimulation. Right-brain-only photographs are visually beautiful but provide limited analytical stimulation. In such images, the left brain evaluates and classifies the subject quickly, then loses interest. When balance is achieved in an image, the left brain reacts to the inherent meaning while the right brain appreciates the artistic expression."

The message: A photograph moves us when it combines beauty or other spectacle with a story.

“The Tetons and the Snake River,
Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942”

Let me confide to you that the above photograph by Ansel Adams is my all-time favorite. Surely you have seen it: the Teton mountains majestically thrust into a sky of sun-lit storm clouds, a gorgeous panorama. . .as the Snake River meanders around two bends in the foreground before sweeping into the mountains, causing the mind to wonder and follow its course for an enchanting moment. The rugged beauty of the mountains meeting the gently meandering river, softened by a subtle mist, do indeed appear to create the special emotion I sense when gazing upon on that image.

The construct illustrated by Hohnstreiter methodically explains some typical reactions to imagery. Why do photographs of sunsets or national monuments so often fail to inspire or place in competitions? Because our left-brain thinking tells us we’ve been there and done that—nothing new so let’s move on please. Nevertheless, if a photograph of a sunset or other frequent subject includes a novel perspective or array of color or form that leads us to wonder, then the image may impress after all.