

So Much for Individuality

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If there is one aspect of their work which photographers (and photographic writers) cherish above all others it is individuality. The photograph/article may not be a perfect expression of purpose, may not be instantly and urgently needed by others, may not be recognized for its historical significance and may not be cherished by anyone, ever. But, at least, we believe, it is singularly and uniquely our own.

It is a humbling thought that even this meager justification for our efforts is based on a false premise. Originality is not only overvalued but also, in most cases, of dubious provenance.

I point the finger of accusation at myself. A couple of years ago, I wrote a short piece called "Bill Brandt: a True but Fictional First Encounter" which was published in an issue of *Shots* magazine. When another magazine requested permission to reprint it I read it again in order to see if it needed any revision. I say to you, immodestly, that it sounded just right. I hoped it would entertain/inform other photographers interested in Brandt's work but, if nothing else, I thought it had the ring of authenticity. It was mine.

Pride goeth before a fall alright. While congratulating myself on a piece well done, a student asked to see my Brandt file. Browsing through its contents I stumbled across a photocopy of an article which described a visit to Brandt made by the author of the piece. With a palpable shock I recognized a distinct similarity of tone and even the use of identical phrases between this article and my own. Unfortunately the photocopy chopped off the source of the article but, by typeface and layout, it looks like it may have come from a small circulation journal in London, called *Camerawork* (not the San Francisco periodical of the same name). The point is that I have no memory of having previously seen this article but there it was in my file where it had languished for, I guess, ten years or so. What I had thought of as "mine" owed a great deal to someone else. I had obviously read this article when it first appeared, recognized not only the similarities of experience but also the aptness of the language, and then appropriated what I wanted to retain while expunging the remainder from memory.

I tell you this experience not in order to absolve myself from a charge of plagiarism (the chances of anyone being familiar with the article are small and, more important, of

anyone but myself seeing the connection is almost nonexistent) but to illustrate the point that this process is happening to all of us - relentlessly, continuously and subconsciously. Our cherished individuality is largely an amalgam of a myriad of forces and influences which, only occasionally, can be sorted, seen and acknowledged.

But even when the connection between present act or attitude and past experience remains hidden the directness of the link is the crudest form of influence. Far, far more powerful and mysterious are the forces which seem to bypass the word, image or event and which shape our minds merely through the act of being human. The most potent influences result from breathing the same air, existing at the same time in history, sharing in the phenomenon of telepathic group-think. The Germans have a word for it: *zeitgeist*. Like a flock of birds instantly and simultaneously changing directions on command from an unseen choreographer, issuing orders at the deepest levels of non-awareness, we whirl in synchronous patterns. And these patterns are manifested in our medium as styles, even subject matter.

There was a time when these patterns were broad, sustained sweeps and lazy curves, when photographers acknowledged shared ideals. In recent decades the patterns have become increasingly jagged and frenetic with photographers more anxious to escape the group-mind. (Perhaps the group-mind *is* seeming chaos). I cannot imagine how these forces operate, only acknowledge their results.

Think of all the short-lived "movements" in the medium in recent years when dozens of photographers simultaneously made almost identical images. The examples are legion. The scratching/mutilation of the negative prior to printing; industrial buildings on construction sites; flash combined with daylight - "pop and jiggle" pix; constructions in the studio; interior corners of abandoned buildings and garages; Diana plastic camera snaps; and so on, and so on.

Each "movement" can be dated by their ascendancy. For example, I once sat on a faculty search committee for a photo-instructor when no less than a dozen of the 50 or so applicants presented a portfolio comprising color pictures of bushes at night lit by a strobe. That subject matter pins down the date of the search to the Spring of 1979! This Spring, of 1989, will be marked by dead animals. . .

What is the process by which the zeitgeist becomes transmuted into such specific photographic techniques and subjects? Why are these manifestations happening with such frequency that they appear to be/are occurring simultaneously? I do not know the answers although I am intrigued by the questions.

During a conversation about these issues one of my colleagues saw nothing mysterious about the process. According to him, the phenomenon can be explained by more rapid communication between photographers through a plethora of journals, exhibitions, lectures etc. Ideas are now quickly disseminated, used up and discarded.

A less charitable colleague explains it as the bandwagon syndrome. Someone else is getting attention from a particular idea so jump aboard before being left behind by the latest trend.

Yet another colleague suggests that pluralism, by definition, is differentness for differentness' sake. When so many photographers are striving for uniqueness certain solutions to photographic problems will be shared. These individuals will be "grouped" by critics and galleries as if they were members of a movement, thereby creating artificial styles.

I feel sure that all these, and other, explanations are appropriate in some cases. Nevertheless I am also convinced that another, more mysterious, force is operating, providing similar images to various photographers simultaneously, without any overt, direct connect between individuals.

Personally I find the idea a comforting one.

Although it seems to diminish our much-beloved contemporary notions of individuality, it also suggests a cosmic-scale connectedness which includes human behavior - right down to the microcosm of shared interest by photographers in specific subject matter, beyond the realm of mere coincidence.

Or, to be more accurate, "within the realm of natural coincidences. " Around the turn of the century a brilliant Viennese experimental biologist, with the delightfully photographic name of Paul Kammerer, spent 20 years studying coincidences. His results turned on its head the usual meaning of the word. He concluded that " The recurrence of identical or similar data in contiguous areas of space or time is a simple empirical fact which has to be accepted and which cannot be explained by coincidence - or rather, which makes coincidence rule to such an extent that the concept of coincidence is negated. " He believed that a mysterious force acts on everything (and everyone) to bring like and like together, which he poetically compared to a cosmic Kaleidoscope, creating patterns "in spite of constant shufflings and rearrangements. " Changing the analogy, "it is," he said, "the umbilical cord that connects thought, feeling, science and art with the womb of the universe that gave birth to them. "

Incidentally, a recent Nova television program dealt with the new Chaos Theory and, as far as I could understand, revealed that even unpredictable actions and events always produced distinct patterns, which seemed uncannily similar to Kammerer's Kaleidoscope idea.

The point is that photographs, like everything else, can be expected to fall into specific, synchronous "patterns" at any given moment. But because these patterns are unpredictable and out of the individual's control they are not useful in any practical sense.

Much more controllable, and therefore useful, is willful influence. As we are constantly influenced by the ideas and images of others anyway, perhaps we should make greater effort to make these influences more overt and direct. Lionel Trilling said: "The immature artist imitates. Mature artists steal. "

The pretense of individuality is a sham so let each photographer/ writer directly, openly, unabashedly acknowledge the extent of the plagiarism. As Thornton Wilder admitted: "I do borrow from other writers, *shamelessly!*" (His emphasis). He continued: "I can only say in my defense, like the woman brought before the judge on a charge of kleptomania, 'I do steal; but, your Honor, only from the very best stores. ' "

One day I will discover who wrote the article in my files on Bill Brandt and then I can unashamedly write to him or her and say: "I stole your words because I needed them. Thank you. "