

## Titles and Trends

How a photograph is titled offers clues to how it should be viewed

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The vast majority of photographs in the medium's history have been titled - with specific information concerning person, place and date. These titles, however, have served more as identifications than as evocations of ideas. They are bland, factual notations of the subject's place, name and date; they are undeniably useful as verbal documentation accompanying the visual, but they have a neutral effect on the viewer's interpretation or emotional response to the image. Rightly so. A regal portrait titled "Queen Victoria", whom the viewer had already identified, is not adding anything, emotionally or intellectually, to the picture/viewer interaction. Whatever the viewer's response to the subject prior to seeing the image has not been swayed one way or another by the title.

Such neutrality or objectivity of title tends to locate the image, and the intent of the photographer, in the band of the photographic spectrum usually called "documentation." ( I have placed this word in quotation marks because it is prone to assumptions and misunderstandings, but in this context, I feel sure the reader will understand my implications.)

Documentary/topographical/portrait and practically all other fields of professional photography use titles as specific identifications, shorn of any attempt at *persuasion*.

A few random examples would be: "Sand Dunes near Sand Springs, Nevada, 1867" (Timothy O'Sullivan); "Father and son walking in the face of a dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936" (Arthur Rothstein); "Lillian Gish as Ophelia, 1936" (Edward Steichen). These and all other similar titles serve to locate or identify the subject matter. They are not, and not intended to be, poetic.

But titles have also served throughout the medium's history to clarify an idea embodied in the image. "The Geography Lesson" (Antoine Claudet); "Fading Away" (H.P. Robinson); "A Good Joke" (Alfred Stieglitz); "Sea of Steps" (Frederick Evans); "The Octopus" (Alvin Langdon Coburn); and many, many

other examples of a similar nature, make no attempt at specificity but rather help the viewer to read the story or grasp the allusion.

In "Sea of Steps", for example, the curve of the steps in Wells Cathedral "is for all the world like the surge of a great wave that will presently break and subside into smaller ones," said Evans. If he had called the print "Wells Cathedral Interior" Evan's metaphor would have been lost and the image would have slipped sideways into a document, no matter how artistic in execution. The title therefore is important, especially for those with artistic intent. The photographer, through judicious selection of title, attempts to clarify the *idea* behind the picture. He has switched on the lights of the runway, providing the viewer with a safe place to land. He has been helpful.

Other artists have been less than helpful, even deliberately obstructive. Clarity of meaning is willfully abandoned in a single-minded effort to confuse the viewer. Indeed, often these titles are as interesting and provocative as the images themselves. The Dadaists of the 1920s, and Max Ernst in particular, were masters at such obfuscations. Ernst perversely aimed to inhibit the viewer from discovering a rational explanation in his impossible imagery. He often gave his photomontages deliberately incoherent, yet evocative, titles:

*The cormorants send up again their hot paper eggs/the twins are nailed to the corners of the admiral sea/ as we are very close to the antarctic magnet the archangels refuse a tip. Or, it is already the twenty-second time that (for the first time) Lohengrin has left his fiancée/it is there that the earth has spread its crust on four violins/we will never see each other again/we will never fight against the angels/the Swan is very peaceful/he rows hard to catch Leda.*

With the resurgence of art photography in the 1960s, titles again became more poetic or evocative than descriptive. Probably the most famous, and influential, art photographer of this period was Jerry Uelsmann whose exquisitely crafted blends were also distinctive for their enigmatic titles, such as "Quest of Continual Becoming" (1965); "Apocalypse II" (1967); "Riddle of Innocence #1" (1951); "Simultaneous Implications" (1973); "Symbolic Mutations" (1961), and so on. These and other similar titles by various photographers were very symptomatic of the new art photographers of the 1960s who, like all of us, were sucking in the *zeitgeist* of symbolic/psychological/ mystical "flower-power."

But Uelsmann's titles were also reflecting the beginnings of another trend which gained momentum during the 1970s. Many of his images were untitled. I do not

mean that he neglected to title them but gave them the specific title: Untitled. The landing lights are now switched off - every viewer is free to impart meaning to the image without assistance.

Photographers throughout the next decade were abandoning attempts at bold description, directions towards visual/verbal allusions and even deliberately mystifying ambiguities. They increasingly identified their work as Untitled, as if they, too, had no idea of the meaning or motive of the work and left all attempts at interpretation to the viewer - with all conclusions having equal validity. At exhibitions throughout the country "Untitled" was the most commonly seen title on the wall label. The Friends of Photography even titled its journal Untitled.

All that is changing again. The pendulum has swung to the opposite end of its arc. The early 1980s has witnessed a resurgence of flamboyant verbosity in titling, reminiscent of Max Ernst, if without his poetic power.

A recent photographic exhibition, by Manual (a collaboration by Suzanne Bloom and Ed Hill) not only titled each individual photograph but also the series from which the image was extracted. So the wall label for a typical photograph read: "Art In Context - Homage to Walter Benjamin series. Franco-Japanese Television//A modest proposal for a cultural merger simultaneous with its commodified form."

The proposal might be "modest" but the title is not.

I will confess that I have little patience for such post modernist pretensions specifically and for efforts to obfuscate in general, whether visually or verbally. But I do think descriptive titles are often stylish, conducive to contemplation and sometimes evocative, hence my ambivalence to this trend.

I also believe that the history of photography, and the tradition of titles, should be useful and I have a suggestion to artists looking for photographic titles. They should discard their dictionaries of pseudo-intellectual jargon and find a copy of a most interesting and useful book which appeared on the market in 1904, called Picture Titles for Painters and Photographers, published "at the Offices of *The Studio*, London.

The book was timed just right to be of maximum relevance to the budding Pictorialist, a movement aiming to promote the art claims of the medium in opposition to its professional utility, so encouraging the photographer's use of

poetic titles.

Before describing how this book might help the Neo-Postmodernist-Pictorialist, a few words about the author and contents are in order. The book was compiled ("written" would be the wrong word) by Alfred Lys Baldry (1858 - ?) who was both a painter and an art photographer, active in the two decades around the turn of the century, and with a predisposition towards ethereal nudes (several of them are in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection).

The book contains 3,000 potential titles for photographs, gleaned from lines penned by lesser known poets (Baldry excluded lines from "much-read poets" as he was convinced the photographer would know all these by heart!).

The lines are then indexed under 6 major sections and 25 subsections as an aid in finding the most appropriate title.

It works like this... Let us give Jerry Uelsmann some assistance because he has the historical perspective to appreciate it. (Many of his titles have references to 19 century photographs). Jerry looks at his freshly made print. It contains a nude. But he cannot call it "Twinka" because that's not the girl's name and, anyway, the title has already been appropriated by Judy Dater. Also, even if her name was Twinka, she is coiled in a fetal position under the roots of a tree floating in the sky, and is unidentifiable as a particular woman. It is an imaginative picture - and that is helpful. So Jerry looks up Mr. Baldry's useful book, turns to the section "Figure" and to the subsection "Imaginative." Turning to the relevant pages he now has a choice of 145 titles, even more because many of the possibilities are so lengthy each would suffice for several pictures. The choice is difficult; so many seem relevant. How about:

*for oh! big gall drops, shook from folly's wing,  
have blackened the fair promise of my spring.*  
Monody on the Death of Chatterton, Coleridge

This is evocative all right, but I'm not too sure of the "big gall drops." Let us try another. Perhaps . . .

*How weary is wisdom, how weary!  
When one sits by a smiling young dearie.*  
Song, T. Campbell

On second thoughts it is too raucous, better suited to a fraternity party than the hushed reverence of an art gallery.

Try again:

*Queen of a day, by flatterers caressed,  
And flaunting, fluttering up and down,  
Looks at herself and cannot rest.*

The Blind Girl of Castel Cuille by Longfellow

Well it *is* appropriate but somehow lacking in the right spirit. What is required is a bit of Art, not narcissism. I would choose this one, Jerry, if you do not mind the suggestion:

*The statue seemed to breathe  
And soften into flesh, beneath the touch  
of forming Art, imagination flush'd.*

Autumn, James Thomson

You are right, it is a bit cutesy, but it sure beats "Quest of Continual Becoming."

Back to Baldry's book. This single example of how to choose a picture title will give you an idea of its usefulness to contemporary photographic artists but they should note a warning delivered in a 1904 review of the book: "there is ... but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, and a badly chosen title may provide just this stepping stone." The review (in The Amateur Photographer, 28 January 1904) continued with an example:

*"Some years ago some ambitious photographer dressed up some figures in armour and photographed them in various mock heroic attitudes. The photographs alone merely drew a smile from those who saw them, but a reference to the catalogue, where a verse of poetry was tacked on to each print, brought forth long and hilarious laughter from all but those whose sense of humour was asleep."*

And perhaps that is the troubling aspect of so many art, especially postmodernist, photographers - their sense of humor is asleep. Perhaps they are "O'erwrought with ornaments of barbarous pride" (Temple of Fame, Pope. See under Architecture) and have spent too much time in academia "Where all are talkers, and where none can teach" (The Parish Register, Crabbe. See under figure: Imaginative).

With the rapid growth of Fine Art photography in galleries and museums, there is a corresponding need for picture titles of imagination, wit and wisdom. Unfortunately few photographers today are widely read, especially in modern poetry; they are, let's face it, visual folk, not literary ones. They need help. I would propose that a considerate poet compile a similar guide to Baldry's but updated for contemporary usage.

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