

The whole story

Photography is a wonderful medium for communicating ideas, yet images that have a strong narrative are often overlooked in favour of those that are deemed more aesthetically pleasing. Niall Benvie explains why it's important to differentiate the two approaches



There are a lot of different stories in this image taken on a foggy day at Vestrahorn in Iceland, including wider ones about nature as a commodity.

Not long ago, a photo tour company my wife and I do work for ran a training week for its guides, old and new, in Iceland. This was not only good fun but it also gave the opportunity for an exchange of experience, knowledge and ideas. I was particularly interested to learn about learning, since it's knowledge that informs how successful you can be as a teacher. I'd assumed that my detailed, analytical explanations of a range of ideas and techniques in photography, using simple language and analogies, was the best way because, as a learner, that method works best for me. I'm what the educational psychologists class as a theorist but it turns out that there are also pragmatists (let's work our way systematically through this); reflectors (I'll just watch and think about it first); and activists (let's give it a go and see what happens). Each benefits from a different approach to teaching. In truth, we're all to a greater or lesser extent a bit of a mixture of these things, depending on what we're learning. That aside, my own experience suggests that the time we are most receptive as learners is when we have a question we need answered so we can move on. When you're new to photography, I think it's a mistake to go and take a workshop straight away. Without questions you need answers to, you'll not learn as deeply; knowledge becomes embedded by application. You just need to go and do it and find out what you don't know.

I had a similar experience when I started to learn Adobe InDesign a few years ago; my mentor encouraged me to use it and to come back to him only with specific questions when I got stuck. By doing it this way I remembered every one of those lessons.

In my opinion, though, each subject has something fundamental about it that we need to grasp before we can start to understand it. With InDesign, the breakthrough came when I got the concept of objects. Now that I am learning about field audio recording, with all its parallels to photography, I am getting to grips with the unparalleled idea of an auditory corridor extending behind the subject of the recording. So, what is photography's core idea? I propose this: that pictures are 'of something' or they are 'about something'; pictures that have an expressive intention as opposed to a narrative one. Some pictures are primarily about the appearance of things, others tell a story. It's not that one is right and the other's wrong, one better or worse; simply that these are fundamentally different types of photographs that demand different approaches by the photographer and can't be judged by the same parameters.

A concrete example: I'm standing at the edge of a large colony of lady's slipper orchids in a damp spruce forest in central Estonia. My first instinct is to reach for my longest lens, focus in closely on a backlit slipper and, with aperture wide open, render a largely blurry but rather beautiful impression of lady's slipper. It's a personal statement about what I feel about the subject and how I view it. My principal intention is expressive. But if I'd been commissioned to photograph a story about the orchid, I would want to show the whole plant so readers could see the shape of the leaves and the proportions of the flowers. I'd shoot it with a wideangle lens so that they could see the extent of the colony and the sort of place it grows. I'd certainly want even lighting so that no clues were hidden by shadows, and I might even bring a trowel along to illustrate why the plant has become rare in much of its range. Here, my main intention is a narrative one: to tell the viewer things about the plant that they can't glean from the more personal, expressive approach. Neither is better than the other any more than a knife is better than a fork; they each have their distinctive functions.

You may argue that you've seen plenty of narrative images that are also beautiful, as have I. But that is as a result of serendipity rather than deliberate intent on the part of the photographer since, as we've seen in the example of the orchid, the active choices made to support a particular intention in respect of lens choice, lighting and perspective, profoundly alter the appearance of the final image.

This brings me then to the problem with photography competitions. I've helped to judge a number of national and international ones over the years and I can't recall, except where there was a dedicated story category, being expected to differentiate narrative from expressive images and to judge them separately. But of course you must! If it's ever niggled you that some of the wildlife images in *National Geographic* look a little ropery alongside those in glossy wildlife magazines, it's because their primary intention is to tell a story, not just to look pretty (although they are sometimes both – search online for Steve Winter's photograph of a puma beneath the Hollywood sign).

In truth, narrative images may have dirt under their fingernails and smell a little funny, but it's because they have been doing work and I fear that too often they are overlooked in favour of the visible virtues of the expressive image.