Virtuous Technique

By Chris

Hi Mike, I've read the recent review that Mike has recently put on the Nikon D850 photographer. He could be going to write about Nikon photography.

Well, he is entitled, his column pays out of a conversation over a decade ago between Mike's dinner guest and my, and I'll be planning of doing that it should run this week. Perhaps a case of Nikon's Law of Unintended Consequences, or perhaps just a coincidence.

I have written in the past about photographers trying to find a photographic style that is perfect, expressing some feeling, or mood, or idea, or even just a mood, or just a feeling, or just a mood, or, most regrettably, even with other files. Although you do hear people talking about the "look" of Nikon files, or Canon files, or photographs in PDF files from RAW files. This suggests that there is something distinctly more virtuous about taking what the camera gives you than there is about using software to make the image look closer to what it looked like in the darkroom (or on the computer).

Of course, there is no such thing. Even those impossibly honest Nikon photographers. You might wave your Nikon from morning to night, you're right by your side. There's time to realize the error of your ways, and you'll be back in Canon by lunchtime.

I should be holding out for Sony Because their sensor capture more light.

Or Fuji, because they are hard to mistreat, and sympathetic. Or Leica, because they are hard to afford.

They cannot, however, lay claim to the title of being the most virtuous. Because they do not allow for choice. Virtuousness is a choice. Virtuousness is the right of a man choosing to act virtuously, and not the right of a man who is programmed to be virtuous. Virtuousness is the right of a man who is programmed to be virtuous, but who is given the option of being not virtuous, and who, after a long, and difficult, and painful struggle, chooses to be virtuous. Virtuousness is the right of a man who is programmed to be virtuous, but who is given the option of being not virtuous, and who, after a long, and difficult, and painful struggle, chooses to be virtuous, but who, if he wishes, may choose to be not virtuous. Virtuousness is the right of a man who is programmed to be virtuous, but who is given the option of being not virtuous, and who, after a long, and difficult, and painful struggle, chooses to be virtuous, but who, if he wishes, may choose to be not virtuous, and who, if he does so choose, may choose to be not virtuous, but who, if he does not choose to be not virtuous, may choose to be not virtuous.

Chris

Comments

Entertaining theory!

This can easily take something I have been thinking about recently, while traveling through (as I seem compulsorily) what the photo-world is now, and the increasingly-ubiquitous digital manipulation, "outside".

There's a lot of talk about getting into a shot by **manipulation** - Photoshop, Photomerge, Photomatix, Photoshop Elements, Photoshop Lightroom, Photoshop Lightroom Classic, Photoshop Lightroom CC, Photoshop Express, Photoshop Fix, Photoshop Mix, Photoshop Sketch, Photoshop Touch, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus, Photoshop Lightroom Mobile Preset Creator Pro Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus Plus

Posted by: Oskar Ojala | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 10:29 AM

The day that someone shows me how to make a negative looks like velvia 50 (for instance) is the day I'll stop using slide film. As it is slide film has a unique look (unlike jpg) that can't be emulated in post processing (either digital or converting a negative).

If you like that look then you've made a choice - if you can't see the difference then it's not a problem for you.

I will say that choice before capture seems more virtuous than choice after capture, but that is a different argument.

Posted by: Tim Parkin | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 10:01 AM

Crein,
Thanks, I hadn't thought about their pricing model that way. Interesting!
Will

Posted by: Will Frantzolf | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 06:47 AM

"I shoot slides for myself because...the image is my own and not a print that a processor or developer fiddled with."

I think this path is how a lot of people came to slides. When I started, B&W was the norm for most things, and doing your own darkroom work was the norm for any serious hobbyist. Slides were the preferred form of color because it was cheaper, and because nobody one messed with the image. Also, projected slides look spectacular in a well-darkened room. And, commercial printers were used to dealing with slides, so it's also what commercial color work was done on (only wedding and portrait photographers and snapshooters used color negative film), so we felt like we were using the "professional" material.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that post-processing has always been an important part of the photographic process. Not just Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, but everybody who employed a master printer to make their final prints. Also, of course, the people working for most of those commercial clients, who did the post-processing after the work left the photographers' hands.

The "slide period" was an anomaly, which took the post-processing out of the hands of the original artist. Conditions no longer require that, and failing to consider artistic options now again available to us doesn't correspond to any kind of "virtue" I recognize.

Posted by: David (Ivor Bonner) | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 08:40 AM

Mystified Mike,

Some people actually use (gasp!) COLOR film in their Leicas.

And let's face it, Leica committed heroy in making their digital Ms. They should've made 'em shoot ONLY in black and white (as some people have actually demanded...)

Posted by: Paul Lowther | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 12:02 AM

Dear toh, as a photographer I don't relate to a hi-fi nut, but to the musician.

Listening to music is more akin to watching movies. It's a passive, non creative process that can involve lots of consumer electronics.

But like playing and writing music, photography is creative. If I am a musician, do I care about the performance? Yes. Do I care about recording quality? Yes.

To use your music analogy, a jpeg shooter would be a musician who goes to a recording studio which had four presets for classical, jazz, rock and blues and picks one. A film shooter who uses a drug store lab puts everything on "auto levels". A slide shooter always uses the same lab with the controls set the same way and can't play too quietly or loud in case of noise or distortion, but the result is predictable.

There is a reason why recording studios have lots of buttons and sliders. It's the same reason Photoshop has lots of buttons and sliders. There is no "best setting" for every photograph.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 11:21 AM

"And let's face it, Leica committed heroy in making their digital Ms. They should've made 'em shoot ONLY in black and white"

Paul,
That's what I thought.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Thursday, 26 May 2011 at 06:55 PM

dear crein,

i have visited this neck of the woods three years and more, and still i don't seem to know you better. mea culpa. i think when the technical details get think, i get scarce. i must say though that i thoroughly enjoyed your piece on how you ended up converting that image of the mansion by the lake into a b&w photo.

dear steve jacob,

first off, i don't think watching a movie is a "passive, non-creative" experience despite the movies seeming to dumb-down all the time. the movie does not manipulate me, and it certainly does not come without cultural baggage and ideologies. also, i think you missed my point.

i'm not arguing one way or another for one format or another. rather, i'm making a case for the primacy of the picture. like art, photos are to be attended -- to borrow from nabokov -- at the level of the guts. you wait for it to hit you in the solar plexus. sometimes it creeps up on your unawares much later on. i think a good photo is a good photo despite any number of flaws, whether it has blown highlights or is blurry. conversely, a technically polished image is not necessarily a good picture.

toh

Posted by: Toh | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 10:55 AM

"I will say that choice before capture seems more virtuous than choice after capture, but that is a different argument."

Perhaps a different argument, but probably an interesting one.

Choice before capture matches the "pre-visualization" model -- you figure out what image you want, and then plan the exposure and pre-plan the post-processing to get you there. The major decisions are all made before exposure (even if there is extensive post-processing; if the decisions on what will be done are made in advance of the exposure, then it fits this category).

I will say it fits my own personal ideas well. I want art to be a deliberate intellectual process, arising in the mind and proceeding outwards from there.

But some artists are all about surprises and discovering things, and talk about newness and spontaneity and discovery a lot. I can't off-hand name one from this school whose work I consistently like -- but that's more likely to be my ignorance than the real absence of any such artist and work.

Despite being largely of the pre-visualization school, I sometimes find surprises in my take from a session that I like very much. I suspect that the most extreme adherents of both schools, if they were completely and totally honest, would have to admit that they have, in their careers, produced work they like using significant bits from the other school; pre-planning to make accidents you like happen, say, or finding a lucky thing that made the photo that you hadn't anticipated.

I can imagine people getting frustrated at things they did that were "almost right", and gradually training themselves to think ahead more -- moving themselves into the pre-visualization school. And I can see people finding they're stifling their own art by over-intellectualizing (while I yield to few in my respect for intellectual effort, it CAN become a straight-jacket and set of blinkers if you let it, too), and looking to ways to get back more spontaneity. In other words, some of the people with strong commitments to one or the other camps may have reached there because that camp helps them avoid their own personal problems.

I suspect, but certainly cannot demonstrate, that the camps are much more important as tools for individual artists to overcome their own problems than as real guides to producing good art. If so, then I would say that no moral imperative attaches to either one.

Posted by: David (Ivor Bonner) | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 09:51 AM

Dear toh,

OK, you've been here almost as long as I have.

Please recall that one theme I consistently and regularly hit is skewering the absolutists. Every time. My position against the "one true way" folks is pretty well, ummm, absolute.

(No that's not a contradiction, just wordplay. Same way I like to characterize myself as being firmly bigoted against bigots.)

So, he asks rhetorically, why would you assume that I suddenly feel differently in this column?

Nope, there's no overt irony, no satire alert, nothing to tell the reader how absurd I'm being by using the absolutists own logic to prove a contrary position. I'm simply writing on their level.

There's no way to determine, merely from the words, that I'm not dead serious. Yet, almost every commenter figures that out, through critical reading and thinking. So I gotta call this column a success.

Will there be one or two who do not grasp the import of a particular column? Surely. But there always will be, and I do not sweat it.

pax / Chrin

Posted by: crein | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 12:40 AM

"*Choice before capture* matches the 'pre-visualization' model - *you figure out what image you want, and then plan the exposure and pre-plan the post-processing to get you there....But some artists are all about surprises and discovering things, and talk about newness and spontaneity and discovery a lot.*"

Pre-visualization is great for landscape and architectural photographers. But "choice before capture" often involves photographs of evolving scenes that cannot be pre-visualized, and it is often far from a slow or deliberate process; important decisions about the photograph (framing, direction, timing) are made instantaneously. The "choice before capture" camp includes great street-shooters (HCB, Elliott Erwitt, Robert Frank) and others who specialize in clicking the shutter as they are "discovering" "surprising things," continually reacting to split-second rearrangements of constantly changing scenes. In other words, almost every photojournalist, war, and sports photographer falls into the "choice before capture" camp, and they are hardly a ponderous bunch.

The "choice before capture" is often made in a tiny fraction of a second. To elect to make *before* clicking the shutter the decisions that most affect the final image (rather than making those decisions *after* capture, in post-processing) certainly need not mean one is slow; on the contrary, spontaneity, discovery, and quick reaction times are often crucial to those who opt for "choice before capture."

Posted by: MW | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 12:05 PM

Just a thought - can you change the content, the subject matter, the subject of a photograph after it has been taken? Without discarding your virtue, of course....

Posted by: cyborgd | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 03:44 PM

'a technically polished image is not necessarily a good picture.'

"*Although at the end of the day only the pictures count (and technically poor execution doesn't make the image more artistic)*
;-)

Both true. Interesting.

Posted by: Paris | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 04:54 PM

"I only shoot RAW."
"I only use manual mode."
"I never crop."
I. do. not. care.

Show me the picture.

Posted by: Paris | Friday, 27 May 2011 at 05:04 PM

Dear toh,

"I think a good photo is a good photo despite any number of flaws, whether it has blown highlights or is blurry. conversely, a technically polished image is not necessarily a good picture."

I don't disagree. I never mentioned sharpness or blown highlights. I know many musicians who rave about the musicality of old recordings played on worn out LPs and even cassettes.

But why should I entrust the soul of my image to the camera defaults? Capture is just the sheet music, post processing is the performance. It's where I make it personal, even if it's noisy and blurred and displayed on the web.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Saturday, 28 May 2011 at 12:11 AM

This column is very amusing.

For me, the chief merit of slide film is not that it's a superior medium per se, but that shooting slides was always a good way to improve your photographic skills (and for many still is)and to determine who is truly and consistently a good photographer- because, "what you see is what you get." When you entered a slide competition, for all intents and purposes, it is the finished product and how it is later reproduced in a magazine or print is secondary. It cannot be denied that in the digital age too many people rely on post processing to not only "improve" their images but to alter them well beyond what one could do with film. One could say, this is not photography as we know it but a hybrid that should not be compared to film photography.

My humble observation is that the chief beneficiaries of digital photography, apart from the mass market for cheap and easy images for exchange, is the photo-artist, one who combines art with digital images to create something new.

Posted by: ZEB | Sunday, 29 May 2011 at 07:08 AM

I am the virtuous film photographer. After having eschewed a 5D Mk II to lug a 6 kilo medium format kit around London, I have surely now ascended to the level of Deity. Fellow tourists gawk at my camera as they prostrate themselves at the altar of 'Rolleiflex'. They are awed by my bad mood when my Pan F supply runs out, and they are humbled by my piety as I kneel and face east for a roll-film change every 20 minutes.

Temptations in the desert? Ha! I have Schneider locust Kool-Aid. What have you got? 20 megapixels? Pfebe.

Frankly, Chrin needs to be washed clean in the Holy Water Bath.

Posted by: Tri(m)numnum | Sunday, 29 May 2011 at 07:48 PM

Dear TM,

Truly, I am in the presence of a master. I bask in your glory.

Pax / humbled Crein

Posted by: Crein | Monday, 30 May 2011 at 02:08 AM

The comments to this entry are closed.