



I am not a photographer! (How you can become one too)

By Mark Renz

You heard right. I am not a photographer. And proud of it! Is this some silly talk? No. I'm serious. Thanks to digital, everybody is a photographer. Or at least they claim to be. It's such a broad title that those who don't know anything about photography speak as if they're a staffer for *National Geographic*. Well, I'm not and I cringe when others toss about the title like a circus juggler.

I don't want to be called a photographer for two reasons: 1) I have too much respect for the true artists of photography to suggest my images are in their league, and 2) I hear far too many camera-snappers boast that they're photographers when they - like me - are little more than amateur point-and-shooters.

I occasionally make money from my photos. Doesn't that make me a photographer? Not from my perspective. Even if I made my living selling the stuff, it doesn't mean I would think of myself as a photographer, unless I thought my work was first class. Salable is not the same as first class. It's not a matter of self-deprecation. I just like to call it as I see it. I shoot pictures that occasionally get oohs and ahhs from viewers. Shouldn't that make me a photographer then? Again, no. Perhaps when I consistently get great stuff, I can feel comfortable being called a photographer. But until then, I am pointing a technologically-advanced image box at 4-1/2 billion years of evolution and pressing a damned button. I don't know about you, but that doesn't inspire boasting rights.

So what is a photographer and who really cares? Depends whether you ask Webster, yourself, Your spouse (who either agrees with everything you say or disagrees...usually the latter) your sweet aunt, or a highly-paid professional photographer. However, I have never been comfortable with titles given me by people who may only know a fraction of my true talent or lack of it. It's not that titles are unimportant. It's just that too often they're inaccurate portraits of who we really are. We are, each of us, better and worse than what others see in us.

While we're on the subject of over-used titles, how many times have you been accused of not being a "purist", or charged someone else with the same offense? I'll gladly concede if there really is a purist photographer out there. But I am unaware of anyone who clicks a shutter without some kind of special lens, filter, sensor, or post-program for enhancing their images. Because frankly, you may start with a photo, but by the time you have run your image through a zoom, wide-angle or macro lens, then on through a host of add-on computer filters, what you end up with is a variation of reality.

I once responded thusly to a self-proclaimed image connoisseur who suggested that a pure photo with no alterations of any sort is the only true photo:

"I admit it, I'm a fraud. To be honest, I am a photo tweak-ographer. I believe that the only great photo is the one tweaked, saturated, cropped, sharpened, masked, high-lighted, layered, filtered, blurred, mirrored or totally recomposed. And I admit why I do all these dastardly things. Because reality isn't everything. Life is full of dreamers and those who see the world slightly out of kilter. Don't get me wrong, reality has it's place. But it's only one place. There are many, many others. And that's where you'll find tweak-geeks like me."

Speaking of images...I'm that gray-haired geezer you see somewhere near the front - or better still, the hind end of this wordy viewpoint. I was going to try to hide the fact and filter myself back into my early 20s, but then someone might card me the next time I try to buy a couple of ice cold Corona's. There's actually a very practical reason for including my mug shot. Not only should it serve as a dire warning about how dorky you could look when you get my age, but it might also suggest I've lived a little and actually have something to say.

How old am I? I turned 40 seventeen years ago, back when there was no such thing as digital photography. In those days, your last name had to be Rockefeller to afford the cost of film and processing. I recall something like four bucks for a roll of 24 color exposures, then another 7 or 8 dollars for processing. If you had already invested a thousand or more dollars in camera equipment, you couldn't afford to experiment and learn what works and doesn't work - without a huge inheritance to pay for it all.

So a lot of folks like me, dreamed of becoming a wildlife or landscape photographer, but never got much further than the dream stage. When someone called themselves a "photographer", you knew they weren't exaggerating. Nobody dumped big money into photography unless it was their profession. People who took occasional nature or landscape photos called themselves amateurs if anything.

But be not fooled. Serious photogs of my youth may have been professionals but they weren't purists either. Not by a long shot. They witnessed and photographed retreating ice and the extinction of mammoths with long or wide lenses capped with colored filters. Or they altered their ancient world from color to black & white just by switching films. Later, in the darkroom, came further tweaking as they dodged and burned their images to get a desired contrast or tone.

Many old-time professionals and amateurs such as myself purchased and tested our first digital camera cautiously, as if we were purchasing a sexual-enhancement drug. We were told it would improve our performance and it did, but it left us feeling like inadequate cheats. Those who weren't afraid of change got over it quickly and couldn't imagine ever going back to a non-digital world.

Younger people whose eyes glaze over when you mention such archaic words as "film", have no trouble using any electronic tool available to get that perfectly colored, textured or cropped photo. Many of them are exceptional professional photographers. I would embrace the rest as fellow vocational clickers were it not for their annoying over-confidence in declaring themselves "photographers". I have yet to meet a stranger who - within one minute - of my broaching the subject of pursuing nature with a camera - proudly brag that their wife or nephew or cousin - or wife's nephew's cousin - is a world-class photographer.

"I mean it!", they exclaim with exuberance. "He has a real eye for this stuff...I keep telling him he ought to be working for *National Geographic*."

Yet when I am directed to the photo prodigy's web site, I discover that while they have mastered the mechanics of their foreign photo box, they have no "feel" for what they're shooting. Their images are technically correct, i.e., great composition and lighting. But the finished product appears calculated and lacks a sense of warmth. There are moods to every photo. Critters have names and interactions that go far beyond a single image. There are on-going stories in every life form. When you arrive onto the scene, what story is playing out in front of you? Do you know if your bird migrates, what it eats, where it likes to nest, what it sounds like? Do you know if it's a male or female and whether its in a breeding cycle or a juvenile just getting started? This is all knowledge that helps you "feel" your subject and better reflect it in its natural setting. The better you understand the story, the more warmth you'll bring to your photo.

There is another challenge for all of us who like to preserve moments with a camera. I call it the copy-cat syndrome. We see the shots from other camera slingers and mimic them. (Yes, I am guilty too!) When we recognize an angle we've seen in a magazine, taken by a professional, we quickly shoot it and think of ourselves as belonging to the same professional club. There is nothing wrong with this approach if you enjoy it and are happy being defined as a

predictable copy-cat. And it is inevitable that as more shooters join our ranks, it create less opportunities to be original. At the same time, it's a greater challenge for us to raise the bar even higher in terms of presenting our photography in a different or more unique light. Once you know what a copy-cat shot is, then you can work at moving beyond that level.

Oscar Wilde described the sameness of anything this way: "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

What Poet Saxon Dane said about writing could also be applied to photography: "To hell with the great mass of the people! Write to please yourself, as if not a single reader existed. The moment a man begins to be conscious of an audience he is artistically damned." (I would have said "man" or "woman", but it's not my quote.)

So how do we get around being just like every other clicker? My short answer is not to suggest we be different, but to be ourselves. After all, who else is better qualified? If I am myself behind the lens, the results are also going to be uniquely me.