

WHEN THE MOON HITS YOUR EYE LIKE A BIG PIZZA PIE, THAT'S AMORE!

A year or two ago, I wrote a comment on one of the pictures in one of the boxes expressing the wish that people wouldn't immediately start looking for faults in a picture. The emphasis was meant to be on the 'immediately', though I'd not underlined it or done anything to indicate that that was where I wanted the emphasis to be and consequently was rightly taken to task for appearing to suggest that critical comments weren't wanted. Of course they are – it's largely what Phoenix is about and I'm grateful to members who point out something I'd missed or overlooked in one of my own pictures.

Constructive criticism is what it's all about but it must go beyond the 'I don't like 47s so this is rubbish' or even 'I don't like this.' Plain and simple (with perhaps the emphasis on the 'simple'. I don't like garlic. So what?

I'm afraid I have to say that I find a very small proportion of comments made on other people's pictures in Phoenix actually cringe making. This led me to recommend to members an extremely cheap booklet, 'Looking at Photographs' by Ken Holland who sub-titled it, 'A Personal View of Appraising and Judging Photographs'. Whilst he suggests some of the things to look for in a good photograph, he is at great pains to point out that there are no hard and fast rules.

Judging by the Box I've just finished, few if any members have read it and the impression I get strongly, is that anything which takes them beyond their comfort zone or threatens their perceived 'rules' of photography, is to be discouraged at all costs. Thank the Lord we've decided to recruit a 15 year old!

I have to say that my dismay regarding the quality of comments in Phoenix is seldom in relation to those on my own offerings. As things on the family child-minding front had eased off recently, I decided to read a couple of books on photography generally, in the hope of finding something that might enrich the standard of my own comments. I started off with 'Understanding a Photograph' by John Berger (Edited and Introduced by Geoff Dyer). Dyer's introduction tells us he 'became interested in photography not by taking or looking at photographs but by reading about them.' Well, I suppose we could redesign the crit sheets to accommodate a 1,000 word essay on the picture in question. It might make us think about what the picture is about – but hasn't the picture failed if that's not obvious? (I'm talking about railway pictures here.) I'm afraid I didn't get beyond Berger's section on landscape photography in which he considered the political relevance of landscape photographs. I hadn't realized how seriously (and how boringly) some people take their photography so I went down the road to take a few pictures which people wouldn't need to be told how to understand.

So what is it we're looking for in a good Phoenix picture? Personally, it's always my first impression of a picture which counts above all else. And I'm willing to forgive quite a good deal if it's original in any way at all – which perhaps takes us back to the beginning – don't pick holes at the outset. What do I like about it? Why?

'There's too much sky in this picture.' Ok, but why? How much should there be? 'The train's too close to the edge' Alright, but how far away should it be? And, as always, why?

Ian Cowley 2016