

## Chance Encounters: ecology and haiku-inspired photography

by Arran Stibbe

### Introduction

One of the root causes of ecological destruction is the ideology that animals, plants, forests and rivers are nothing more than property, rendering them resources to be exploited, used up and destroyed by their owners at will in the interests of profit (Devall and Sessions 1985).

Environmentalists, observing the destruction caused by decisions made for short term profit, call for a more responsible use of resources, for their sustainable exploitation. But, as Devall and Sessions (1985:70) point out, environmentalism, essential as it is, often entrenches the ideology that plants and animals are resources rather than challenging it.

The profound and fundamental cultural changes necessary to restore ecological balance, Devall and Sessions argue, require the widespread recognition by people in all walks of life of the intrinsic value of plants, animals, and of all nature. When and where life becomes valued for its own sake, a virtuous circle of ecological benefits ensues. People concerned about the killing of insects and birds by pesticides, for example, may buy organically produced food. People may waste less food when they value the plants and animals who died for their meals, or use cars less when they recognise the damage that cars and roads do to many lifeforms. In turn, the farming methods and treatment of the land encouraged by these actions create a better environment for everyone.

There is, however, a gap between the philosophical claim that plants and animals possess 'intrinsic' value, and the reality of encouraging people to actively value the nature around them. Valuing the lives of others requires empathy, the ability to identify with others. Humans have difficulty empathizing with each other at times, let alone empathising with individual trees, plants, or animals. And yet, every-so-often, people catch in chanced encounters a fleeting glimpse of 'the identity of life on different planes' (Cherry 1960), and are moved to record these moments in verse:

Hatsu shigure / Saru mo komino wo / Hoshige nari

First winter rain / The monkey also seems to wish / For a little straw cloak (Bashō, in Suzuki 1970:232)

In just such a moment, Bashō recognizes in the wet monkey the feeling of coldness they share, and in the form of haiku offers to share the moment with his readers. If it was the invention of writing which started the cultural shift from engagement in the natural world towards our engrossment in socially-constructed worlds (Abram 1997), then at first it seems ironic that the written word may encourage empathy with natural phenomena. But Bashō's haiku is one of countless thousands written by ordinary people over the years, each speaking of a single moment of identification with some commonplace inhabitant of the natural world, with birds, insects, and plants which readers

will undoubtedly themselves encounter in their daily lives. And if haiku succeed in recreating, between their readers and nature, the relationship their authors originally enjoyed, then they have the power to counter the ideology of relentless profit-orientated discourses.

It has, in fact, been argued that people are so absorbed by the worlds of the written and spoken word that only such media are capable of re-directing their attention to the natural world. According to Bate (2000:283) 'poetry is the place where we save the earth'. But, replies Rigby (2004):

I too would like to believe that poets can in some measure help us to 'save the Earth.'  
However, they will only be able to do so if we are prepared to look up and listen when they urge us to lift our eyes from the page.

How many, of those who read or hear poetry, will lift their eyes? And how many spend time reading or listening to poetry in the first place? In oral cultures, where a balanced way of living with nature has evolved, poetry is central; however, in money-oriented literate cultures, poetry tends to be squeezed out in favour of artificial entertainments such as television and video games. Raising ecological awareness, therefore, may require the involvement of other media in addition to poetry.

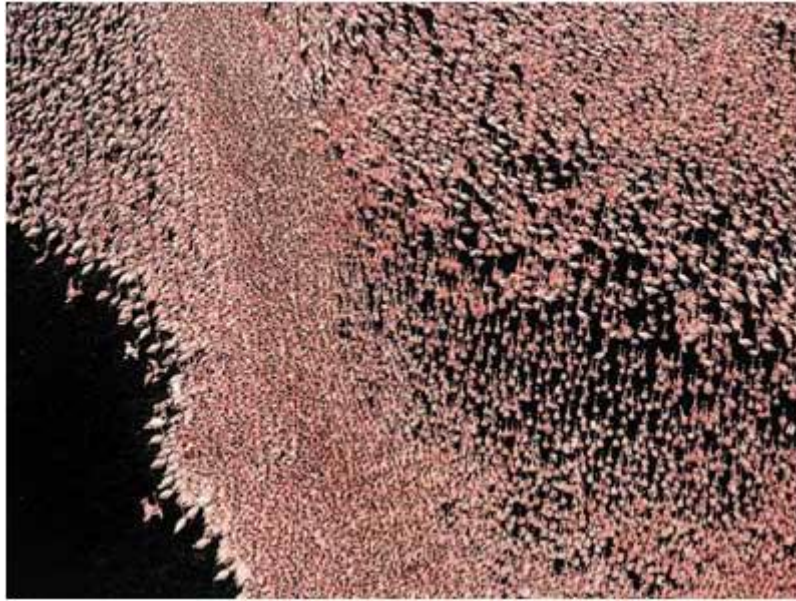
In their thought-provoking book *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) describe how images have a grammar that can be described in terms similar to those of linguistic grammar. If the linguistic conventions of haiku have the power to resist the ideology of profit-orientated discourses, then there may be ways to carry at least some of these conventions across to other media to invoke similar powers of resistance.

Photography is one medium that has been linked to ecology (Loori 2000). The best known ecological photography is the work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand, presented in the spectacular book *Earth from above* (2002). This book contains a wealth of environmental facts and figures accompanied by stunning photographs from around the world. An example of the written discourse used in the book is:

The Okavango delta...has a rich and diverse fauna, including tens of thousands of elephants...the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), the world's largest land mammal, recently came close to extinction (Arthus-Bertrand 2002:25)

But this quotation typifies the opposite of haiku, in the sense that it constructs plants and animals as part of an overall, all-encompassing 'environment' rather than as individuals existing of and for themselves. In the quotation, animals are identified by the generalised term 'fauna', scientifically classified, enumerated, and not characterised beyond the obvious physical attributes of size. And when we look at the photographs, the same kind relationships are evoked.

Arthus-Bertrand's photographs are taken from above, at a long distance from the subjects, focusing on their shape - often the general shape made by thousands of individuals. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:149) point out, top-down photography represents theoretical, objective knowledge and a god-like point of view. And the spectacular photographs tend to be of rare and unusual scenes in far-off lands. These encourage appreciation for nature, but when we lift our eyes from the photographs, do the manifestations of nature we see about us seem more enchanting or more mundane?



Pink flamingos on Lake Nakuru by Arthus-Bertrand  
(from <http://www.earthfromtheair.com>)

A visual grammar of photography informed by the conventions of haiku, would be very different from that represented by Earth from above. Haiku reveal the beauty of the ordinary, by capturing unexpected moments of identification with its subjects. The examination, then, of the linguistic discourse of haiku, might disclose a way to complement the visual discourses of environmentalism with a visual grammar which, like haiku, encourages feelings of equality and respect for individuals.



haiku-inspired photograph - an ant on a leaf from Stibbe (2012)

### **From linguistic grammar...**

The variety of haiku is immense (in fact, variety and creatively bending the rules is part of the genre of haiku), but the following examples represent haiku in its quintessential form:

kago no tori / cho wo urayamu / metsuki kana  
the caged bird / envies the butterfly- / just look at its eyes (Issa in Addiss et al 1992, p. 56)

Crouching / Peering up at the clouds - / a frog  
tsukubaute / kumo wo ukagau / kawazu kana (Chiyo in Addiss et al 1992:92)

Although haiku are written in three lines, they can be thought of as divided into two parts - the *theme* and *rheme* (adopting a modified version of Halliday's functional grammar notation). The theme is what the haiku is about and is the point of departure, which given the brevity of the lines is usually the whole first line. In the first example above, the whole first line is 'the caged bird', making the bird the theme. Many haiku present the animal or plant as the theme by placing it first, with the remainder of the haiku, the rheme, then presenting the theme in a particular light. Alternatively, as in the second example above, plants animals are given end-focus by being placed in the last line. There are also what are known as *kireiji*, cutting words, which are commonly placed immediately after the animal or plant and give them extra emphasis. By placing animals in the first or last position in the haiku and using cutting words, the animals are made to stand out as the most salient and important part of the poem.

It is a convention in haiku to ground the poem in a particular season, through the use of a season name or a plant/animal associated with the season. The frog haiku is late spring, a time when frogs make their presence known. Fundamental to haiku is the fact that the plants and animals do what they normally do, without performing in strange ways or being controlled in any way. The frog is crouching, which is what frogs do. And there is only one frog, an individual, rather than 'fauna' or ten thousand frogs. Another convention is that the poet is physically present - this is a real frog before the eyes of the poet, not an imaginary one, or a frog being seen by someone else.

The tense of the verb *ukagau* is straight present, and haiku are nearly always present tense or tenseless because they capture moments. A prototypical haiku captures a moment of identification between the poet and an animal or plant. In the second haiku above, in order to know what the frog was looking at, the poet must herself have peered up at the clouds, perhaps forming a moment of recognition of identity.

Examination of a large number of nature haiku reveals that the most common themes are plants, animals, physical aspects of nature (mountains, the wind), and times (morning, autumn), in that order, followed by an assortment of less frequent themes. By placing natural phenomena in the position of theme, haiku ascribe importance (significance) to them. The magnificence of, say, bees, may be generally neglected, but not by the haiku poet, who not only writes a poem about them, but places them in the key (theme) position, often with a cutting word for emphasis: *oya hachi ya*, 'Oh parent bee!' (Issa).

Finally, haiku always treat the animal or plant as itself, and never as a symbol of something else. Ueda captures this spirit with the following comment on a haiku by Bashō:

*A butterfly flits / All alone - and on the field / A shadow in the sunlight.* This is susceptible of various allegorical and didactic interpretations, but the simplest is that Bashō saw a butterfly flitting about over a field in bright sunlight, and transformed his immediate sensations into a poem before they began to move in any intellectual or moral direction. The reader is intended to experience only that pre-intellectual and pre-moral sensation. (Ueda 1982: 50)

Haiku then, make ordinary plants or animals salient through their placement at the start and end of the haiku and the use of cutting words, represent a moment of direct observation by the poet, convey a season, and represent nature as it is rather than as a metaphor for something else.

### **...to visual grammar**

What photography shares with haiku is the capturing of a moment. A frog, peering up at the clouds, could equally be the subject of a photograph as a haiku. In this way, one photograph corresponds to one haiku poem. But for the photograph to 'work', it will need to be, like any single haiku, an example of an entire genre with associated conventions. While some of these conventions will be explicit in any single instance of the genre (a photograph), the image is interpreted with knowledge of other conventions which are not present. For example, on viewing the image of the frog, a viewer familiar with the genre will know that it is a common frog, not a rare species, that the meeting between photographer and frog was by chance and not design, and that the photographer was moved by the intrinsic beauty of the frog and the sense of fellow-feeling which accompanied its recognition. These conventions become obvious through viewing many instances of the genre, reading texts which accompany photographs, and reading critical works about the genre.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) reveal some of the ways in which the structure of the photograph itself provides hints about the relationship between photographers and their pictures. In the haiku-inspired photograph, there are two participants: the theme (a plant or animal) and the appreciator. The appreciator is the photographer in the first instance, and then the viewer, who sees the scene from the same perspective as the photographer. The mere act of taking a photograph and putting it on display says something about the theme and the photographer, at the very least that the photographer found the theme important in some way. Importance is emphasised when the theme is salient against the background by being the only element in sharp focus, having a distinctive colour, and/or being in the foreground. The remainder of the picture (which corresponds to the rheme of a haiku) establishes the locative and temporal circumstances (the place/season/time of day) as well as vectors suggesting the actions of the theme (if any).



Caterpillar: salient by virtue of being in the foreground, in sharp focus, with distinctive colour.  
(from Stibbe 2012)

In some forms of photography, even when participants are represented in the foreground, they still do not appear as individuals in their own right because of symbolism. A dove, for example, photographed against the background of a war torn country, may be interpreted as a symbol of peace, rather than an animal with value in her own right. Symbolic representation is usually signalled by making the symbolic element seem out of place in some way (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:110), or flagging the metaphor in the surrounding text. By contrast, the theme in haiku-inspired photography is shown as it would look from the perspective, angle and distance of someone who has encountered them naturally.

Distance is revealed through frame size, and is particularly important in establishing the relationship between the viewer and theme. In portrait photography, an extreme close up of the human face affords the viewer intimacy with the subject, head and shoulders suggest personal space, and a full body shot symbolises public distance (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:130). Although frame size depends on the type of animal/plant involved, haiku-inspired photograph positions the theme at the equivalent of personal distance, hinting at engagement without interference. By respecting the personal space of both the theme and the viewer, the photographer emphasises the individuality of both at the moment of viewing. In terms of perspective, the vanishing point being within the picture suggests involvement in the scene (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 142), rather than detachment.

Perhaps the most important technical feature of photography which reflects spatial relationships is camera angle (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:146). A high angle suggests the viewer has power over the represented participant. Animal rights photographs, for example, are often shot looking down at a bedraggled and miserable animal, portraying the animal as a victim.





battery hen, high camera angle symbolising that it is a victim  
<http://www.enzyme.org.nz/aucklandanimalaction>

By contrast, the appreciation and respect for the theme expressed by haiku translates visually into a low or level camera angle from which no inequalities of power are implied. For example, in the photograph overleaf from Stibbe (2012), a mantis fills almost the whole frame, at a camera angle for which the photographer would have to be bending down. From this angle, the mantis's gaze forms a vector directly to the eyes of the viewer. In Kress and van Leeuwen's terms, this 'demands' a relationship, and eyes meeting eyes across the gap of species and phylum has the power to provoke the sense of two individual identities sharing a singular moment of their lives in a common plane.

Photographs taken in a natural setting are grounded though locative circumstances and elements in the background which tie the participants to place (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:71). In haiku-inspired photography these are the natural settings where the plants/animals were encountered - the place where they are at home and leading their lives. This is essential to the construction of a sense of identity because it shows others getting on with their lives without interference, according to their own circumstances and agendas, in the same way that humans do. If the circumstances speak of interference, or are strange or unlikely (a frog in cage or a desert) then viewers will look beyond the picture for symbolic interpretations.



Mantis, level camera angle implying equality of relationship  
(from Stibbe 2012)

In addition to locative circumstances, the season is always manifest in the photograph, either through the seasonal nature of the theme, or through temporal circumstances, such as autumn leaves in the background. The importance of the season to the photograph is that it overcomes the limitations of its square border, by connecting with the wider context of the feelings the viewer familiarly associates with the season.

Finally, an important feature of haiku is the contrast of theme and rheme. Just placing 'ordinary' animals and plants as theme provides one form of contrast, but further contrast highlights essential parts of their nature. For example, in the following haiku, the immaculate beauty of the plum blossoms is contrasted with the dirt from the feet of a warbler.

uguisu ya / doroashi nuguu / ume no hana

The warbler / wipes its muddy feet / on the plum blossoms (Issa in Adiss et al 55)

In photographs too, it is often the contrast of theme and rheme that triggers the recognition of the beauty of the ordinary, for the photographer in the first place, and potentially for the viewer too. An example is a photograph of a single fallen leaf against a background of utterly dead foliage (Stibbe 2004). In contrast with the background, the little of life the leaf still possesses appears beautiful, the more so because it will soon be as dead as its surroundings. This is not symbolic of death, it is a real leaf passing through a stage of life as all living things do.





Leaf from Stibbe (2012)

## **Conclusion**

This article has described how some of the conventions of haiku poetry could be applied to the medium of photography to form the genre of haiku-inspired photography. The essence of this genre is that the photographer records moments of appreciation and respect for individual plants and animals with which he or she feels a sense of identification. Publishing the photographs allows viewers to see the scene from the same perspective, and, because of the conventions governing the construction of the photograph, to experience something approximating the relationships to nature felt by the photographer, as expressed through foregrounding, perspective, vectors, locative circumstances, frame size, angle, and other technical aspects.

It is perhaps worth re-iterating that no single haiku-inspired photograph can exemplify all of the conventions of the genre, and by the same token, the technical aspects of its production cannot be dictated by rules. The conventions and techniques are adapted in interesting ways to suit the unique circumstances of particular chance encounters. Understanding the conventions, therefore, requires viewing a large number of examples to build up a knowledge of prototypical features, something which can be done to a large extent without access to language.

Ultimately, the success of haiku-inspired photography depends on whether viewers start to look at the plants and animals they come across in new ways. The influence of haiku-inspired photography

will therefore be strongest where it reflects the nature of the bioregion inhabited by the viewers, their attention directed towards the real beauty and value of the ordinary nature around them, which lies not in the photographs but in the plants and animals themselves.

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