

ROUGH GUIDE TO NOWHERE

GUCCI

by
David Smith

2nd Edition



ROUGH GUIDE

TO NOWHERE

David Smith

Let the story wreck itself on the spreading rails of the *Non Sequitur* Limited, if it will; first you must take your seat in the observation car “Raison d’etre” for one moment. It is for no longer than to consider a brief essay on the subject — let us call it: “What’s Around the Corner.”

— “The Venturers” by O. Henry





**Visual and literal communication are two
separate species that cross paths
with bad intent.**













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Walking bare-legged through brambles and poison ivy, or rather mental equivalents thereof, scratches open and inflames the mind. Seeking out the frisson of the dangerous, damaged, and unsightly has been a favourite pastime of mine since an early age. Conventional beauty can be soporific, the pabulum of the cognoscenti. Stuff that isn't challenges, and may scare the shit out of you.

No, we're not there yet.

Nowhere

Travelling to places you've never been provides a kind of stimulation and escape. What if you went nowhere instead? Here is a technique for glimpsing what is familiar to us as a stranger might, a stranger within. The key is *glimpsing*.

The camera and the photograph

It turns out the camera is an excellent tool for achieving the desired state, and (sometimes) result. Something of the nowhere condition can be recorded! I don't mean as a subject—we already know that can be recorded. The difficult thing is to make nowhere look like somewhere.

The analogue photography process is equivalent in some ways to opening a ceramics kiln after a firing: one never knows what you'll get, and if you do already know, it will likely be derivative work. This is not to throw shade on new imaging technologies, but the instant gratification they pander to demands different strategies, probably.

I always want to be surprised by photographs. Really good photographs subtly disturb our world view, revealing their insights on repeated viewing and study. This calls for unconventional framing, leaving stuff in the frame that most photographers, by instinct and training, want to leave out, and vice-versa. Take it weird, you can pretty it up later if you must.

I find almost all photographs, especially those taken by naifs, can have amazing qualities. And I'm always surprised some photographers and critics either fail to recognize this, or it frightens them. I think it means that the camera, and anybody who picks one up, has the potential to produce what feels to us like magic—talent and expertise are just add-ons (Susan Sontag nailed this point for all time). We want to harness this magic and bend it to our vision. That's the trick of this one-trick pony.

Glimpsing v. filtering

Unless we're dead or watching tv, our eyes are constantly moving. Our minds build all the things we glimpse into a coherent visual map of our environment, mainly by *filtering out* almost everything we see. Visual information we *think* we want or can use, and perceived threats are top of the heap. Everything else we habitually ignore.

Our stranger is incapable of exercising the sustained level of prejudice required for this to work effectively in a new environment, and that's exactly what we want. By turning off the filter, we may suspend *received* visual hierarchies.

A stranger looks about wildly, seeking anything remotely recognizable to rebuild a kernel of meaning from. This is how the stranger is able to perceive new meanings in ossified systems, often by sheer accident—the collision between alien and new environments.

Knowing this, we can subvert rather than reify conventional expectations.

What about (...)

If conventional filters stifle creativity, are there other filters that may yet be useful? Indeed there are, but *we have to make them for ourselves*.

We humans have been making visual stuff for millennia, sometimes as 'art', sometimes for more prosaic or outlandish applications. The thing about art is, better minds have been working out just these questions for a very, very long time. We can develop new filters to fit our own, evolving vision, by absorbing as much as we can of this inexhaustible library. It can take many years for new filters to coalesce.

If you're a visual person, the effort is supremely enjoyable, and there's a real risk of falling down some rabbit hole and losing the plot for extended periods. That's OK, it comes with the territory, and one never knows which rabbit hole(s) will yield pay dirt. Also, it takes time to learn what the plot even is, bearing in mind it is meant to be different from everybody else's, and there's no map.

Some of the effort may involve formal study as a starting point. Mostly it's best left to osmosis; looking, looking, and still more looking, *mutely* acquiring the knowledge that will form the basis of one's expanding creative vocabulary.

The how

The literal mind and its acolytes will constantly try on rationalizations about the un/suitability of subjects and their treatments. They are irrelevant.

Our *unconventional* new filters provide a solid framework for both glimpsing, and *what comes after* in the photographic context. Glimpses are pre-composed before a picture is taken, by referencing our individual visual knowledge, the knowledge we want to reconfigure and expand.

How the raw material of glimpses/snapshots is organized, so suspected new meanings may be identified, developed, and presented, is equally important. Ultimately we want to convey our own, fully realized visual ideas, not half-baked glimpses that could mean anything, or nothing—we are chasing new visual ideas *and their proofs*.

New visual ideas are communicated solely by clear and convincing visual evidence (the pictures), and can't be verbally or literally described.

An earlier draft of this text was published on [Photothunk](#).











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To Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson.





