

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

April 16, 2007

The Ballad of Good and Bad Titles

Filed under: [books](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:14 pm

Men might think about sex every seven seconds, but I think about project titles. There is no greater pleasure than lying on the couch, closing my eyes, and daydreaming about the perfect title.

I guess this isn't much different from teenagers dreaming up names for their rock bands. While I suppose this sounds silly, I think it is actually worthwhile. Titles are important. When I review student work, one of the first questions I ask is "what is the title?" More often than not I'm met with no answer. This is remarkable. I'd have a hard time getting started on anything without having some sort of working title.

This need to wrap an idea in a few, well-chosen words isn't limited to creative projects. I'm currently working with [a non-profit organization](#) that is putting together a large event centered on creative responses to life-threatening illness and death. It is going to be a great night with some legendary dancers and storytellers. But we've struggled to find the right name for the event. For awhile the working title was "Dance with Death." But it started to leave a bad taste in the mouth. For some it was too corny, for others too bleak. And we weren't sure if it was good marketing. The producer of "*Death of a Salesman*" once said the play would have had a much longer run on Broadway if 'Death' wasn't in the title.

Titles are important. They affect the way people read the work. Take Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. The title is so urgent and unexpected. Imagine if the book was just called 'Downtown.' I doubt we'd think of the book in the same way.

It is a shame when a great book gets a bad name. One of my favorites of the last few years was Jem Southam's *Landscape Stories*. The title is generic and lifeless – just the opposite of his sensual and complicated pictures. (I much prefer the title of Southam's latest book, *The Painter's Pool*).

Sometimes photographers get corny. David Heath's *Dialogue With Solitude* is an example. But I'd rather have a corny title than a boring one. I'm a sucker for DeCarava's *Sweet Flypaper of Life*.

William Eggleston is the title champion. He has the trifecta with *Eggleston's Guide*, *The Democratic Forest* and *Los Alamos*. I love them all in different ways. *Eggleston's Guide* is funny and playful take on the generic author title (*Diane Arbus* by Diane Arbus). *The Democratic Forest* is good example of a title that suggests the photographic process (much better than Helen Levitt's *Ways of Seeing* and Cartier-Bresson's *Decisive Moment*). Finally, *Los Alamos* is sly and subtle. The pictures were taken all over America, not

just Los Alamos. But rather than using the generic adjective 'American,' Eggleston chose the name of the town where the atomic bomb was developed.

American Photographs by Walker Evans and *The Americans* by Robert Frank are so iconic that it is hard for contemporary photographers to avoid using 'American.' As great as these books are, I don't love the titles or the legacy they've created. With the exception of Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects* (a great title), most of these names are a bore:

American Surfaces, Stephen Shore

In the American West, Richard Avedon

American Monument, Lynn Davis

The American Monument, Lee Friedlander

American Musicians, Lee Friedlander

American Music, Annie Leibovitz

Model American, Katy Grannan

American Cockroach, Catherine Chalmers

American Pitbull, Mark Joseph

American Color, Constantine Manos

American Bachelor, Michael Rababy

I'm not saying we should ban 'American,' but I'm encouraged when photographers come up with something different. One of my favorite recent books is Tim Davis's *My Life in Politics*. What a great title – and what a relief he didn't call it *American Politics*.

Ray's A Laugh by Richard Billingham, *Why Mister, Why* by Geert van Kesteren, *Yesterday's Sandwich* by Boris Mikhailov – these are titles that match the originality and excitement of the pictures inside. Great marketing? Perhaps not in the short term. But like *Death of a Salesman*, these titles burn into the brain over the course of time. Does anyone remember Eugene Richard's book *Americans We*? What was it about? It might as well have been called *Untitled* (wait, that is another Arbus book). But then consider Richard's recent monograph, *The Fat Baby*. If you are like me, you can instantly recall the whole thing – the weight of the book, the images and stories, the feeling.

I'm not suggesting that a title needs to be wordy and poetic. One of the most memorable titles is Winogrand's *Women are Beautiful*. It's so dumb that it is smart. It sticks. This brings to mind Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. He offers up some good advice for those of us daydreaming about titles:

The hard part of communication is often figuring out how to make sure a message doesn't go in one ear and out the other. Stickiness means that a message makes an impact. You can't get it out of your head. It sticks in your memory. When Winston filter-tip cigarettes were introduced in the spring of 1954, for example, the company came up with the slogan "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." At the time, the ungrammatical and somehow provocative use of "like" instead of "as" created a minor sensation. It was the kind of phrase that people talked about, like the famous Wendy's tag line from 1984 "Where's the beef?" ... To this day, if you say to most Americans "Winston tastes good," they can finish the phrase, "like a cigarette should." That's a classically sticky advertising line, and stickiness is a critical component in tipping. Unless you remember what I tell you, why would you ever change your behavior or buy my product or go to see my movie?

38 Comments

1. Hey Alec, I enjoyed this post but I disagree with you on the "American" issue. I don't really think any of those titles are so bad. "American" is an adjective that's just so powerful and expansive it's hard for people to resist its use. Anytime someone puts that word in a title, questions pop up: How do we define American? What does it mean to be American? What does American mean to this artist? All these questions have been answered in different, clever ways. Mitch Epstein's "American Power" is a good example of this. And even though the word has been reused a number of times, that doesn't mean it's tired or trite. Think of all the great work beyond photography with "American" in the title. From Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* to movies like *American Beauty* or *American Movie*. We could make an endless list, and I think many of the titles have impact.

Comment by [Bryan S](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [12:42 am](#)

2. Hi Alec,
I'm really pleased to read your opinion about importance of title for a project.

There is a interesting book from Umberto Eco called "Apostille au Nom de la rose" where he explains how he found his title "the Name of the Rose".
/ in English it should be : "Postscript to the Name of the Rose" ? /

Comment by [corinne](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [1:24 am](#)

3. hey alec, i agree with you that it is pretty difficult to find a title that feels and sounds just right...you have to consider so many things on the one hand but on the other hand a title shouldn't be something you (have to) force. best is it comes just naturally...but that's hard... in the end my titles end up just to be a play on words or almost a sentence...but i think the title shouldn't be too strong otherwise...can you exercise this title-thing? someone should give courses (;

i also have to say that bryan s. is right and whenever we hear "american" we have to think about the context and the definition because it's so powerful.

that's it for now with my thoughts on it.

best,

chrischa

Comment by [CHRISCHA](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [3:47 am](#)

4. Winogrand's *Women are Beautiful* was originally called *Confessions of a Male Chauvinist*, which is a great title, but I think that cooler-marketing-heads prevailed.

Comment by [Ross](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [4:23 am](#)

5. Excellent post! I found the statement "*Titles are important. They affect the way people read the work.*" very interesting. It is true no doubt, there's an opportunity to influence how people read the work, but doesn't it also imply that a title is restrictive and curtails freedom of interpretation? I think it's quite hard to find a balance here when choosing a title and that's probably the reason why much work ends up as *Untitled*. And often this might even be justified.

I have been thinking lately about the translation of titles into another language. As I am living in Austria, I am often confronted with foreign language titles translated into German. For example, there's a German version of Billingham's book *Ray's a Laugh* and it's titled *Ray is'n Witz*, which I guess is one possible translation (it means Ray's a joke) but as so often when colloquial English is translated into German it sounds terribly cheesy and simply not right (in my humble opinion).

In other cases, the original title is not translated at all but replaced by another one. The other day I watched the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (wonderful title) and the German title is *Vergiss mein nicht!* (Forget me not!) which in comparison to the original is rather shallow. I'm sure these respective titles affect people's expectations before having seen the movie, but I'm wondering to what extent it changes what they think after having watched it?

I think when entitling photography, there's a discrepancy between the "universal" language of the content (cultural and personal background aside) and the language of the title, that isn't there (or not as strong) in e.g. literature or film.

Comment by [Arthur](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [6:11 am](#)

6. So Alex, how do your two book titles work for you — or are you too close to them to consider that questions?

I think *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is just about perfect — "Mississippi" being the literal setting but "Sleeping" only suggesting, evoking. The combination sends my mind to Twain and Faulkner.

Niagara, on the other hand, feels more literal and less evocative — and less successful as a title?

(Unrelated — how about a discussion at some point about photo books that go out of print? I'd love to own *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, but used copies are almost \$300...)

Comment by [Joe Holmes](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [6:54 am](#)

7. Bill Eggleston's book "William Eggleston's Guide" was shortened by John Szarkowski, from Bill's original title. "William Eggleston's Guide to Correct Color Photography".

Comment by [John Gossage](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [7:10 am](#)

8. I have to disagree with Joe about the title *Niagara* – it works because the place itself has so much history attached to it and is so deeply ingrained in American mythology.

I too am a title daydreamer and love the challenge of coming up with a good name. I wrote about [namin and other obsessions of mine](#) over on Personism a couple of weeks ago.

I usually come up with my titles in the shower or as I'm waking up or falling asleep, but I'm also constantly looking at combinations of words and thinking "That'd be a great title for something." Because I'm a word nerd.

My nomination for the charity event: *Dancing in the Dark*.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [8:08 am](#)

9. Damn typo! *namin* and other obsessions is what I meant to say.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [8:10 am](#)

10. First, I want to thank John Gossage for commenting. There is probably nobody out there with a better grasp on this subject of photography book titles. I don't know how many fine books you've made, Mr. Gossage, but a lot of them have damn good names. From the obscure (*The Things That Animals Care About, And.*) to the simple (*The Pond*) – they are all well considered. A few of my favorites: *The Romance Industry*, *Empire*, *Hey F**kface*,

I'm fascinated to learn that both *Eggleston's Guide* and *Women are Beautiful* started with different names. For the record, so did *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. I'm not going to share the original title here...it is downright embarrassing. When I showed the book to one of my essay writers, Patricia

HAMPL, she told me that I needed a new title. It probably isn't a coincidence that I came up with 'Sleeping' while napping on the couch.

NIAGARA originally had a different title too. First it was *Love & Niagara* – but it felt too corny. For a long time after it was *O'Niagara*. At the last minute, I took off the 'O'. NIAGARA seemed like a strong enough word, reminiscent of Viagra. The word almost comes with its own exclamation point. To help this along, I tried to always have the title printed in caps. Nevertheless, I regret dropping the 'O'. 'O' makes me think of lyrical passion, 'Oh!', and orgasms – all the stuff I wanted to evoke. Oh Well! Live and learn.

To Bryan: You are right that 'American' has a lot of meaning. That is why I hate to see it overused. I think *American Power* is actually a good title for Epstein's project. And I forgot to mention *American Night* by Paul Graham (which I like) and *American Night* by Axel Criegler (which I don't like). It all depends on the book. My point is that it is overused. But maybe I'm just too aware of this issue. I know that when I'm on the couch, the word keeps invading my daydreams. It is a struggle to push it away.

For the record, I think 'American' is overused in movies too. I didn't like *American Beauty* – the title or the movie.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [9:37 am](#)

11. Great post, Alec. Yeah, Eggleston is good with titles. *Morals of Vision*, *Troubled Waters* and *Election Eve* is other favorites of mine.

One thing many people don't know: Eggleston's project ideas and titles often come years after the photographs are made. This was the case with *The Democratic Forest*. It was a way of editing and then packaging all of the work he had shot during that time period.

And I happened to be working with him when he came up with the odd name *Dust Bells* for one of his more recent portfolios. It was the name of one of the sounds on his portable synthesizer.

Comment by [Christian](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [9:44 am](#)

12. If you are ever tempted to put "America/n" in a project or book title, just try replacing it with Canadian for a moment – it will make it pretty clear how it just doesn't work....

Comment by [tim atherton](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [10:28 am](#)

13. I like *American Bacon*

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [10:38 am](#)

14. Reminds me of my disappointment in the title of Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski's doc film, "Born into Brothels," because it's sure to turn some people away from what is actually a very hopeful and inspiring work. Of course, the Academy Award couldn't have hurt, but still...

Comment by [ND](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [11:48 am](#)

15. I think this is related to the conversation you brought up last week about work that deals with varying subject and formal ideas. Perhaps the title works like glue. Like Tilman's IF ONE THING MATTERS EVERYTHING MATTERS, still one of my all-time favorites. Along with the title, the cover image may be just as important. This makes Tilman's book title/cover/project epic and dynamic. And the same goes for Eggleston's Guide. I think it'd be worth posting these cover images to juxtapose with the title words.

While you have a title to work with, I often carry a polaroid or small print in my back pocket to use as a place of departure. Could not imagine how I could avoid using it as a cover image.

Also, love that you ask your students their working titles– makes it feel like a Hollywood pitch meeting.

Comment by [Jesse Chehak](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [1:19 pm](#)

16. dear alec: hello after many moons! i love your blog! thank you. i appreciate that it makes me reflect on this world of photography in all its complexity and that it creates community. yes, titles. i always have trouble with titles for individual images not so much for projects. my last work is vedute di venezia, 18 prints and an artist's book reminiscent of the postcard books of the fifties. the title actually referenes paintings of venice by 18th century painters. i agree titles are difficult choices. as someone said to me once, a title should add to the image, complete it in some way and not state the obvious. a presto, ewa.

Comment by [ewa zebrowski](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [1:38 pm](#)

17. Eggleston is also lucky to have such a wonderful and memorable name. Would his ground-breaking book have sounded so appealing if it had been "Smith's Guide" or "Johnson's Guide?"

Comment by [Joe Holmes](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [3:29 pm](#)

18. [...] Alec Soth's recent post on titles made me think about my recent titler's block when it comes to damn near everything I'm working on. Here are a couple remedies, or at the very least, entertaining time-killers, for when that perfect title is escaping you. [...]

Pingback by [AMP » Blog Archive » Titler's Block](#) — April 17, 2007 @ [5:31 pm](#)

19. [...] Following Kurt Vonnegut's death and my recent post on titles, I'm reminded that Slaughterhouse-Five is actually an abbreviation of the full title: Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade – A Duty-Dance with Death By Kurt Vonnegut [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » More on titles](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [12:03 am](#)

20. I'm pretty sure I despise the title of William Klein's "Life is Good and Good For You in New York: Trance Witness Revels".

Comment by [aizan](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [2:39 am](#)

21. You mention The Great Gatsby in your [follow on post](#). The running title of the draft Gatsby was "Among the Ash-Heaps and Millionaires", according to [an article](#) I remembered from a year or two ago. For me, that title just sneaks under the poetic limbo bar. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts – anyones thoughts – on the content of that article as it pertains to photography.

Why Mister, Why? is a great title, but I've always wondered if van Kesteren knew of [Why, Mother, Why?](#)

Comment by [rob](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [10:43 am](#)

22. Though he's a musician and not a photographer, [Dave Fischhoff](#) is my favorite titler:

World Gets Smaller When You Dream
Landscape Skin
Rain, Rain, Gasoline
In a Lightless Carriage
In This Air
Small Drifts
Matrimony Vine
Suburbs of Eden

Ghost of an Afternoon
Flip Books
Last Room
A Nap At Truthtime, Some Magic Slips Away
Blemish And A Bowl Of Oranges
How Things Move In The Wind
We Break Up And Watch The Angels Swim
Propaganda For A Comic Strip
The Doctor Yawns For Columbus Day
Geranium
The Science Of Raindrops

Comment by Ben — April 18, 2007 @ [11:11 am](#)

23. Also, to Joe Holmes, I recently (about a month ago) found a copy of "Sleeping by the Mississippi" new at a Border's for their original discounted price. I was very happy to find it. They're out there, mostly in the suburbs...

Comment by Ben — April 18, 2007 @ [11:16 am](#)

24. "End Time City" by Michael Ackerman is the classic title for me.

I also had a Fishbone album a long time ago that was titled:

"Give a Monkey a Brain and He'll Swear He's the Centre of the Universe"

Comment by [ross](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [7:08 pm](#)

25. [...] More title talk. More examples of original titles: [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Original Titles](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [9:30 pm](#)

26. Since I also adore the amazing work of Jem Southam, how about Southam's book/project, "The Raft of Carrots"?

Now that title is a stroke of brilliance!

Comment by [Leslie Brown](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [10:56 pm](#)

27. Not many people know that the original title for "War and Peace" was "War What's It Good For."

Comment by [chuong doan](#) — April 18, 2007 @ [11:01 pm](#)

28. My favorite: "He Do The Police In Different Voices"

T.S. Eliot's working title for "The Waste Land".

Comment by [Eric Z.](#) — April 19, 2007 @ [12:16 pm](#)

29. another one for the america/n list: 'my fellow americans' by jeff jacobson.

Comment by [aizan](#) — April 19, 2007 @ [2:32 pm](#)

30. Another great one is "Riviera Cocktail" by the great photographer Edward Quinn. <http://www.edwardquinn.com>

Comment by [T Korol](#) — April 19, 2007 @ [4:34 pm](#)

31. One more – I Am Not This Body: Photographs by Barbara Ess.

Comment by [m](#) — April 20, 2007 @ [11:13 am](#)

32. Another, not a photographer, and once we go into Not Photography we'll be here till christmas I am aware. But my favourite titles come from Italo Calvino, who began his career with *The Path to the Spiders Nest*, and ended with *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (in which there are only five). And on the way came up with *The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees*, *Cosmicomics*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*...among others.
I'm a big fan of titles in translation, too: Wong Kar Wai named *Days of Being Wild* after the Chinese title for *Rebel Without a Cause*. Stagecoach became *Red Shadow* in Italian and *Home Alone 2* in French was 'Mum I missed the plane again and this time I am lost in New York'. Which, incidentally, was exactly what happened to me last week...

Comment by [Amy de Wit](#) — April 20, 2007 @ [1:26 pm](#)

33. I have a copy of a book from the Smithsonian "Photographers at Work" series, from 1994 called "Horses and Dogs – Photographs by William Eggleston". I couldn't tell you why it works, but it works to for me. I haven't yet come up with a good title for any of my series of pictures but feel there is a need to come up with something. For the moment, I am using simple categories like "Seascapes" and "Trees" – maybe that is enough ?

There is a quote from Ernest Hemingway something like "there is no symbolism, the sea is the sea and the old man is an old man" and I really like that. TS Eliot was once asked what his image of leopards under a juniper tree meant. He replied that there was a juniper tree, and that there were leopards underneath it. I hate titles to photographs that are along the lines of "The terrible pursuit of loneliness" when you just think "it's a cat, it's just a picture of a bloody cat". I admire Eggleston for this, titling his photographs simply "Memphis, 1978" or similar. If I wanted to write some kind of poem I would write some kind of poem. As it is, the pictures I show are what I am trying to show, though a nice title for a "body of work" would be most welcome. For now, "Seascapes and Trees" suits me, until inspiration comes. As you said, Alec, the need to avoid corny titles is paramount. I think for the Southam book, "Landscapes" would have been better than "Landscape Stories" as the "stories" seems to be there from some kind of forced effort to add something that was never needed.

"Sleeping by the Mississippi" I like a lot. "NIAGARA" as well works for me.

Music works entirely differently I think. Especially for tunes with no lyrics. A photograph has visual references. If we see a beautiful photo of a cat then we need no title suggesting some philosophical departure I don't believe for we have the cat and we can see, or infer, what is happening. In music it is nice to have a title – even just to be able to refer to the piece.

Lastly, at the risk of continuing this thread as a list of titles, a couple of personal music favorites of mine are "Orange was the Color of the Dress She Wore" by Charles Mingus and "Now Please Don't You Cry, Beautiful Edith" by Roland Kirk.

Apologies for the long post.

Robert

Comment by [robert](#) — April 21, 2007 @ [7:09 am](#)

34. Robert, don't apologize. I like long comments, especially when they are so well considered. I don't know squat about music titles. But I think you make a good point about Horses and Dogs. I like titles that are simple but simultaneous lyrical. This is why I think *The Painters Pool* is a great title (I don't think 'Landscapes' is enough).

One of my favorite titles of the last few years is a good example of simple lyricism: [Dog's Chasing my Car in the Desert](#) by John Divola

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — April 21, 2007 @ [9:06 am](#)

35. Yesterday a good friend of mine asked me what I thought of the title "Second Nature". Assuming he was struggling with titling his current body of work involving night shots of trees, I told him that "Untitled" is due to make a comeback.

I am most taken with titles that describe exactly what the series is about (Hank Wessel's "Night Walk", Martin Parr's "Bored Couples"). I don't want to learn anything new, or have the series title bend me towards looking at the work in an alternate way. I tend to dislike titles that imply something beyond the photographs. As much as I love Tina Barney, I hate the title "Theater of Manners". Still, just recalling that title, I can picture everything about that book, including exactly which shelf it sits on at the SFAI library. I can't say the same for Wessel's "Night Walk".

The titles of the photographs themselves, however, is a different story. I sometimes feel more comfortable looking at a photograph knowing that its title is grounding me with a location, an exact time, a person's name... this is where I gladly welcome new information with open arms, even if it is entirely false.

I thought Robert's comment regarding music titles in comparison to photographic series titles to be very thought-provoking and entirely accurate. Although slightly out of context, it made me consider a new appreciation for Nan Goldin's "I'll be your Mirror".

The last thing I'll say is that I disagree with you about the Winogrand title... I still think the title "Women are Beautiful" is dumb and just dumb, but because he's Winogrand he can get away with it (and get away with "I don't know if all the women in the photographs are beautiful, but I do know that the women are beautiful in the photographs."... barf.)

Comment by [Becca](#) — April 28, 2007 @ [8:21 pm](#)

36. [...] Alec Soth – Blog post about project titles [...]

Pingback by [Jeff Curto's Camera Position » Blog Archive » Camera Position 49 : Know Thy Subject](#) — May 7, 2007 @ [2:37 am](#)

37. hm yeah titles are important though I have to say I understand the student who can't give an answer because all my titles I just "found" during a project. Usually I start out with long term projects quite experimental and basic and I don't know yet where it will take me myself. I do have a working title usually, which often is quite corny or boring or misleading or all of that, but I like to keep it to myself, because I find people will jump to the title and talk more about it than giving me their reactions to the pictures which is really much more important for me at the beginning state where I'm not sure myself what this is all about.

Comment by [Werner](#) — May 9, 2007 @ [11:53 am](#)

38. Re. 'American' in titles.

There seems so much to explore of American life – the word seems blank, and yet can be a signal of a re-examination of the culture, whose subtleties seem to be documented with increasing frequency. Like a film stock alive to the fine grades of shadow, we're finding out more about America than ever. Which is why the word's overuse is a bit of a tragedy.

How many great American novels mention America in the title? Not many.

Comment by [Rob Haynes](#) — November 19, 2007 @ [6:02 am](#)

