Photography as Storytelling

Like everyone who owns a camera, you probably have a box or file of photographs you don't show to anyone: photographs that hadn't turned out the way you wanted or that had failed to capture the 'feeling' of the scene – the Story – at which you had pointed your camera. These pictures may be very pretty – but they are not the photographs you wanted to make.

Photographs usually begin with our emotional or intuitive response to a scene or event. We make pictures in order to share our impression of a scene with an audience. We want to be able to say, 'It looked like this... and it made me feel this way'. Moved by something you had seen, an event, a landscape, a face, or some small detail, you had followed all the rules for correct exposure and good composition before you released the shutter; you did everything right… but somehow your photograph failed to capture the scene with the same emotional force with which you had experienced it; whatever it was that you had seen 'out there' and wanted to record – that special *je ne sais quoi* – is missing from the photograph.

If we want our photograph to evoke the same response in the viewer, we must first learn to recognise the 'Story' we see in front of us – and then identify the combination of visual elements required to 'tell' it. When we learn how to do this, we will be able to bring home a more accurate description of what we saw, to describe our experiences of the details of our life – and so be able to share with others our own unique vision of the world in which we live.

In this brief essay, I will offer some practical suggestions about how to make photographs that record more accurately your response to the original scene. I will suggest that *how you think about the photograph* is as important as *how you make it* – because it is only when we understand what our intended picture is *about* that we can accurately identify those elements or relationships within the scene and then use the 'language' of (what I will call) 'photographic syntax' to tell our stories.

Before we release the shutter, we must be able to recognise:

- What the photograph is intended to be 'about' (the 'Story' we saw in the scene). I will call this *The Subject of the Photograph.*
- The specific visual elements in the scene that are necessary to tell this 'Story'. I will call these *The Thing(s) In Front of the Lens.*
- The most appropriate way to position and arrange these elements within the frame. I will call this *The Composition of the Photograph.*
- The most appropriate way to describe, record or represent these visual elements in the photograph. I will call this *Photographic Syntax.*

The brain is divided into two hemispheres: Left and Right, each of which controls the opposite side of the body. The Right hemisphere is the source of our creative imagination, intuition and dreams and is the source of our ability to recognise and understand visual and/or allegorical symbols. In order to exploit the 'visual literacy' of the Right hemisphere, my first suggestion is that photographers should put the viewfinder to their left eye when making photographs.

The Subject of the Photograph

The most important – and often the most difficult – first step in trying to communicate our impressions in a photograph is learning to recognise the 'Story' we see in the scene.

Photography is a language of metaphor. When we are successful, our photographs *describe* rather than *explain* our impression through the arrangement of emotionally resonant symbols and allegories. When something 'out there' catches your attention – and before you reach for the camera – you need to identify as clearly as possible what it is that you 'see' in the scene in front of you. What is it that you are trying to express or convey (what do you think or feel about what you see)? What is the story you have intuitively (and perhaps even unconsciously) recognised in the scene or event in front of you? What is the *It* that caught your attention?

It is important not to confuse *the Subject of the Photograph* – what the photograph is actually 'about' – with the physical objects in the scene: what I have called *the Thing(s) In Front of the Lens*. You might photograph two old women, but your photograph is about friendship; you might make a photograph of a young man sitting on a park bench, but your photograph is about loneliness. Perhaps we responded to what that tree must have been feeling because the children were all walking away, or how that house seemed to feel about being empty and abandoned.

Before you release the shutter and make the photograph, try to answer the following questions:

- What is going on in this scene? What is the story? What has just happened (or is about to happen)?
- What do I feel when I look at this scene? Is it a happy scene? Is it sad? Is it hopeful? Is it frightening?
- Am I reacting to *What* is happening, *Who it is happening to*, or about *Where it is happening*?
- If the elements could talk, what would they say?
- Does it remind me of something? If so, what?

And

- What are the specific visual elements within the scene (including the spatial relationships between elements) that create this impression or tell this story?

The Subject of the Photograph is the story we are trying tell, or the impression we want to convey: it is why we want to make this photograph. To do this, we must learn how to control the appearance of the elements in the scene and how they interact and affect one another. It is only when we are able to recognise the Story we want to tell that we can make the appropriate decisions (about framing, exposure, depth of field, lighting, and which elements of the scene we must include) to create a symbolic description of the Story we 'saw' in the scene or event.

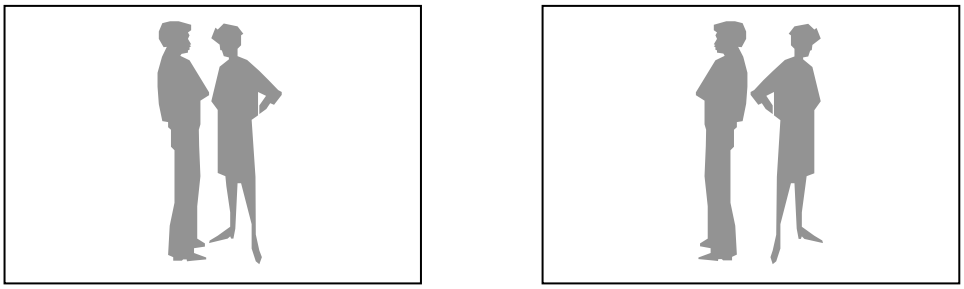
Accordingly, the 'truth' of our photographs is not a reference to the precision with which the camera has recorded the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens, but refers to the accuracy with which we are able to describe *the Subject of the Photograph*. The more accurately we can answer the questions above – the more clearly we can tell this story (or express this 'truth') in our photograph.

The Thing(s) In Front of the Lens

The meaning we 'see' in the scene is based on our intuitive (and often unconscious) response to the symbolic meaning we see in (or project onto) the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens – and in the way in which they appear to relate to one another. To use the photographic medium as a way to describe our impression of a scene, we need to be able to express our ideas clearly in the symbolic language of images. This is what I have called 'visual literacy': our ability to recognise the meaning or associations the viewer will make with the visual elements within the scene. It is our ability to use and manipulate these symbolic elements that determines our ability to convey our impression to the viewer.

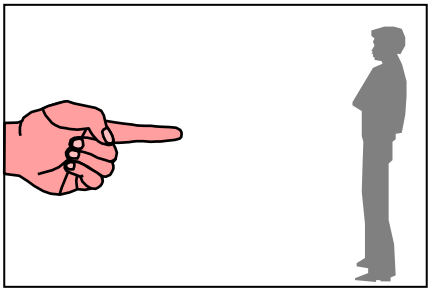
To share our impression with the viewer, we must learn a new way of communicating: one that operates, not according to a code of signs about whose meaning we are all more or less mutually agreed (like words), but by *describing*. Once we have recognised *what* it is that we want to record, we must identify the Story's basic building blocks: the visual elements that, like the words in a sentence, work together to describe what is going on in the scene – or that suggest what will happen next.

From *Gestalt*, there are three different 'kinds' of 'Thing(s) in Front of the Lens': *Positive space* (the physical elements such as that tree or that gesture), *Negative space* (the background or 'set' against which the action takes place) and those that are *implied* (such as the relationships created *between* the objects in the scene: the way in which the different elements appear to relate to one another). For example, in a photograph of a man and a woman, the story will change depending whether they are facing towards – or away from – one another.



Implied elements include the relationships suggested *between* the objects in the scene. In a photograph of a man and a woman, the story will change depending whether they are facing towards – or away from – one another.

One of the most powerful implied elements within our photographs (and one that often goes unnoticed at the time the photograph was made) are the *lines* that create a connection or relationship between the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens. Although there may not be a *physical* line connecting two or more elements within the frame, the way we arrange or juxtapose certain objects nevertheless suggests a connection between them. As a result, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' element in a photograph. *Everything* we include in our photograph is either helping to suggest our butterfly meaning – or is detracting the viewer's attention from it[1].



While there may be no *physical* line connecting elements within the frame, the way we juxtapose certain objects can make a connection between them.

[1] If you were confused by the word 'butterfly' in this sentence and tried to understand how it relates to the meaning of the sentence, I have made my point.

By including an element in our photograph, we create or suggest a relationship between it and the other elements in our composition *whether we intend to do so or not*. The viewer will 'see' every clearly visible element in the frame as part of the story we want to tell – and will try to figure out what this element 'means'. If we include an extraneous element in our frame, the viewer will usually succeed in finding a connection – but if we have accidentally included something extraneous in the frame, this connection will not be one we wanted to create. This is why a telephone pole growing out of someone's head is so disorienting: because it creates a relationship between elements we did not intend. Accordingly, anything you do not want your viewer to notice and to associate with other elements should be rendered out of focus or excluded from the frame.

The Composition of the Photograph

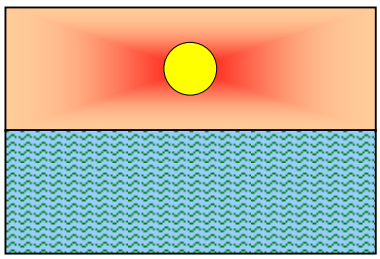
Just as important as the way in which the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens relate to each other is the way in which they relate to the space around them is. How we compose our photograph (the way in which we use the space within the frame, and how we distribute the various elements within it) has a profound influence over the way our viewer will interpret our photograph.

When we use verbal language to describe our impressions, we try to choose words and syntax that (we hope) will evoke our intended meaning and convey our impression to our audience. Likewise, when we use the visual and symbolic language of photography, our ability to convey our impression of the scene in our photograph depends on the accuracy with which we are able to select and arrange the visual and symbolic elements within the frame in a way that recreates this impression for the viewer.

In addition to our selection of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens, we must also consider their position relative to one another and within the surrounding space:

- *where we position* the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens within the surrounding negative space (in the centre, at the top of the frame, or off to the right) and,
- the *size* of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens relative to the surrounding space

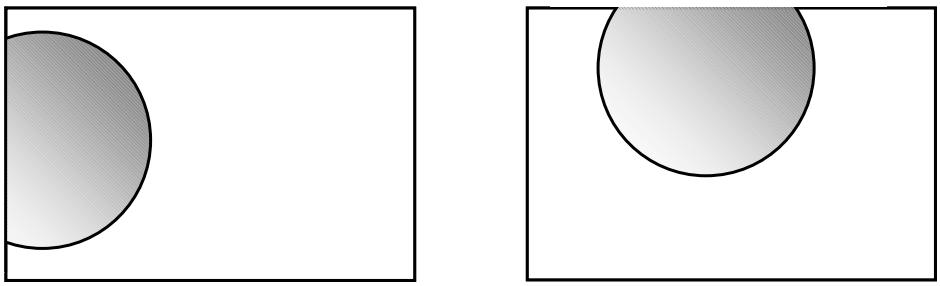
Horizon lines in the centre of the frame are an obvious example of how the position of an element affects our composition. When we bisect the frame (either vertically or horizontally) with either a physical or an implied line, the photograph is divided into two equal parts. Bisecting the frame this way creates competition, conflict and tension between the two halves – locking the two parts of the image in a perpetual struggle for our attention. Of course, sometimes we *want* to create the kind of tension this creates in our compositions. Sometimes the Story we want to tell depends on having the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens compete with each other for dominance by making them appear to be of equal importance – such as when the competition between two elements is the Subject of our photograph, or when we make a portrait of a couple).



When we bisect the frame (either vertically or horizontally), we create competition, conflict and tension between two equal parts

The Rule of Thirds (also called the Golden Section) divides the frame into two unequal parts: one-third and two-thirds

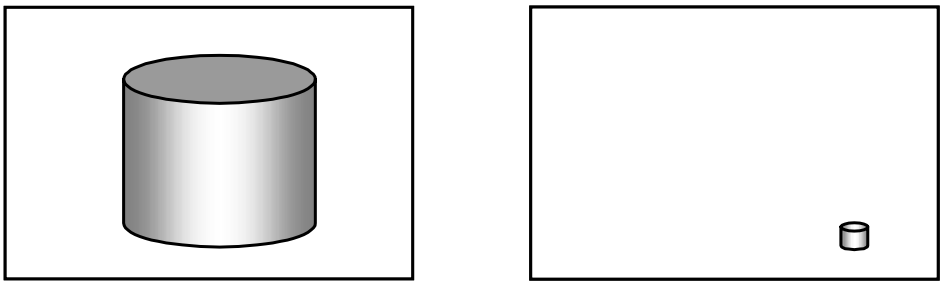
Usually however, we try to create a less static composition (to integrate all the elements within the photograph into a coherent whole) by making one element (or group) larger than the other. One of the simplest and most effective ways to do this is by using the Rule of Thirds (also called *the Golden Section*) which means dividing the frame into two parts of one-third and two-thirds.



Elements close to the edge of the frame appear to be moving out of the frame. Those near the top seem to be weightless or 'floating' into the sky.

Placing elements close to the edge (or partly out) of the frame gives the impression that they are in motion or that they are moving out of the frame. Elements near the top seem to be lighter and 'floating' out of the frame. Conversely, those near the bottom of the frame are seen to be heavier. This is why compositions that include more ground than sky appear to be 'weighted down' or 'earth-bound'; those that include more sky than ground seem to put our 'head in the clouds'.

The strength and importance of an element is suggested by both its size and its position within the frame. When placed in the centre of the frame and large relative to the surrounding 'negative' space, the Thing in Front of the Lens, it appears to be strong and dominant; when the surrounding space is larger than the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens, objects appear to be weak, lonely or insignificant.



The importance of an element is suggested by both its *size* and its *position* within the frame. Elements that are large and in the centre of the frame appear to be strong and dominant; small elements appear to be weak, lonely and insignificant

Photographic Syntax

In addition to the selection and arrangement of the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens, we must also learn to use what I have called 'photographic syntax' to aid the viewer in interpreting the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens – and the relationship(s) between them – and so to 'see' the Subject of the Photograph. Photography gives us a number of ways to present and describe these elements and to influence the 'atmosphere' of the picture. These include:

Camera Angle and Position

- A high camera angle ('looking down on' the scene or event) makes the viewer feel powerful, and makes the Thing(s) in Front of the Lens appear weak or insignificant
- A low camera angle ('looking up to' the scene) puts the viewer in the position of being dominated and intimidated by the all-powerful Thing(s) in Front of the Lens
- Photographing from close-up (filling the frame with the object) implies intimacy
- Photographing objects from a distance implies objectivity and judgement

Colours

- Bright, strong colours are like speaking in a loud voice
- Soft, muted or pale colours are like speaking quietly
- Warm colours (red, orange, yellow) are energetic, vital and passionate
- Cool colours (green, turquoise, blue) are calm, analytical or even hostile

Contrast

The eye of the viewer will be drawn to any area within the frame where differences are juxtaposed (*again, whether you want it to be or not)*. This includes not only contrast of tone (dark areas against light), but also contrast of colour (yellow areas against blue), size (small things against large), shape (square shapes against circles), direction of line (diagonal lines against horizontal) or differences of motion (sharp against blurred).

Depth of Field[2]

Like areas of contrast, the eye of the viewer will be attracted to anything (and everything) that is in focus. Anything you do not want the viewer to notice should be eliminated from the frame or rendered out of focus through the selective control of depth of field.

- 'Shallow' depth of field increases the feeling of depth as well as emphases the object(s) on the plane of focus by reducing the importance of everything else. (This is why portraits are usually made with shallow depth of field.)
- Greater depth of field 'flattens' everything in the photograph onto one plane, thereby creating relationships between objects on different planes

[2] Depth of Field refers to the distance in front of – and behind – the plane of focus (the plane on which the camera is focussed) that is also in focus. It is controlled by the aperture of the lens.

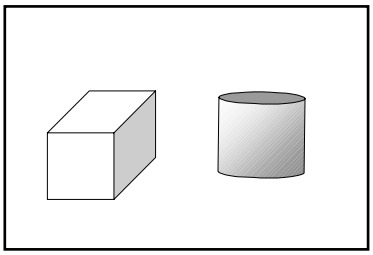
Lines

Lines (real or implied) will direct the eye of the viewer *whether you want them to or not*. We must learn to recognise all of the lines within the scene and use to them to direct the eye of the viewer where we want it to go.

Quality and Angle of Illumination

One of the most important elements of photographic syntax, the angle of illumination (usually determined by time of day) determines the character and position of shadows.

In addition, the way in which light tones change into dark tones is what determines the viewer's impression of the object's shape – an abrupt change suggests an edge or a corner, while a more gradual change from light to dark shows the object to be round.



An abrupt change suggests an edge or a corner, while a more gradual change from light to dark shows the object to be round

Other aspects of the Quality and Angle of Illumination include:

- Direct lighting will create strong, dark shadows (and the more oblique the angle, the longer the shadows) and an ominous feeling of impending danger
- Soft lighting (diffused through a translucent material, or reflected from a large nearby surface such as a wall) or flat lighting (from close to the camera position) reduces shadows
- Warm (tungsten or incandescent) lighting produces a yellow-orange glow and is reminiscent of firelight and Home: safe and warm
- Cold (blue-green) lighting appears objective, sterile and dispassionate

Tones

The tone of an object will affect its size, weight and strength. An object rendered in light tones will appear to be small, delicate and/or farther away; dark objects appear larger, heavier and/or closer to the viewer. Tones can be determined by:

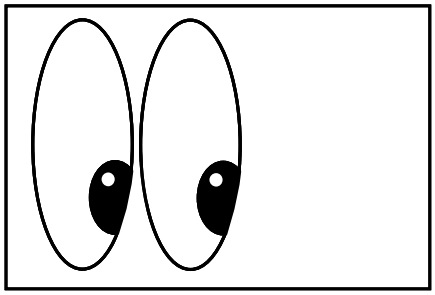
Exposure

In most cases, we follow the recommendations of the light meter in determining the exposure of our photographs. Occasionally however, we will decide to 'over' or 'under' expose the film in order to achieve the desired result. I have proposed the term 'normal' exposure to describe the meter's recommendation (producing an average tone of 18% grey) and 'correct' exposure to refer to that which produces the desired result.

- Overexposure renders the scene in more delicate, pastel tones and colours
- Underexposure gives the scene a darker, more ominous appearance

Eyes

Not an aspect of photographic syntax *per se*, eyes nevertheless deserve special mention. The viewer's attention will always be drawn to eyes (including non-human eyes and even shapes that *resemble* eyes) and will always follow the direction implied by their gaze.



The viewer's attention will always be drawn to eyes (and shapes that *resemble* eyes) and will always follow the direction implied by their gaze

* * *

Photographers are storytellers: poets in time and chance. It is only when we understand what our picture is *about* that we can identify those elements within the scene and employ the 'language' of symbols to tell our stories. When we learn to do this, we will be able to bring home a more accurate description of what we saw, to describe both the details and the experiences of our life, and share with others our own unique vision of the world in which we live.

A commercial photographer in Toronto, Canada, from 1982 to 1993, Rutherford made illustrative photographs for advertising & public relations campaigns and for government agencies as well as editorial photographs for consumer magazines, trade and industry publications. Since withdrawing from commercial practice, Rutherford's photographs have been exhibited in Canada, the USA, France, New Zealand and Japan. His essays on photography, visual communication and advertising have featured in several North American newspapers, magazines and academic journals. An academic since 1999, Rutherford is currently Programme Leader of MA Advertising at Bournemouth University.

Rutherford is the author of The Shadow of the Photographer which explains how the visual elements intuitively incorporated into our photographs can help us to identify and resolve emotional issues.