

EDITOR'S COMMENTS



Beyond Geometry

I suppose it's self-evident that we all want to improve our photographs. This is one of the chief characteristics that define us as photographers. Unlike casual snapshooters, fine art photographers start by taking manual control of the process. That is to say, we let go of those first cameras we used that were fully automatic — probably belonging to our parents. We learned f-stops and shutter speeds, ISO-ratings and assorted technicalities. After we have the rudiments of the technology well in hand, we start thinking about other things that might improve our photographs, naturally turning next to “composition.” There are lots and lots of discussions about composition in photography forums and how-to books, workshops and photography education. All well and good.

However, the “composition” that I find usually discussed in such places has to do with the *placement of objects inside the rectangular frame*. In particular, I find lots of discussion about how the judicious placement of objects can lead to certain visual lines and eye movement. Typically, the art of composition is a discussion of how we can simplify those lines and control that eye movement. I called this part of the discussion *the geometry of composition*. But this is only a small part of the story.

As Edward Weston so famously said, “Composition is the strongest way of seeing.” Notice that Weston did *not* say that composition is the creation of the

most pleasing geometry. Yes, geometry is an important aspect of composition, but it's only the first step.

And here is where I find discussion of composition often go off the rails. After the rule of thirds *et al*, then what's next? Well, after adding geometry to their skill set, many photographers assume the next step is to jump directly to finding a spectacular subject or exotic location to improve their photography. Everyone seems to want to go someplace, thinking that the next step beyond composition is to improve *what* it is that we photograph.

Most recently, this fascination with destination shows up in herd of photographers who are racing off to Iceland. Before that it was Cuba. Not long ago it was Antarctica, Nepal, and Namibia (for example, that broken tree and the red sand dune that everybody in the world has photographed).

I would propose that exotic locations, beautiful models, or rare moments are not the only (nor even the *best*) way of improving our photographs. Instead, maybe it's time to start thinking of the next phase of composition — beyond geometry — to what I call the *language of composition*.

We all know that if we want to speak a foreign language, we have to study its grammar, its vocabulary, its syntax. I think exactly the same thing could be said of the language and vocabulary of composition. There are certain ideas that become the bedrock of using photographic *graphics* to communicate. Think of them as the fundamental vocabulary of photography. Here are just a few of them, just to get the discussion started.

Direction of the Light

One of the most important bits of vocabulary in composition is to be able to *visually see* the direction of the light. I'm not referring here to such simplistic ideas as Kodak's advice about where to place the sun in relationship to us and the subject. Instead, I propose something more subtle yet more powerful: We are biologically confused when we can't determine the source/direction of the light. After all, we have 4 billion years of evolution that has taught us to understand light — that light normally comes from above, for example. When we see light from below — when the light comes from underneath

the subject's chin, for example — we feel that sort of “Boris Karloff lighting” which isn't natural. It's scary.

Seeing evidence of the direction of the light is an incredibly important part of a photograph. Test this: Go back and look at all the images you have made on a day with very heavy clouds that create a directionless light. For some photographs that might work; for most photographs where we cannot see the direction of light, we become biologically confused. It's disorienting. If, on the other hand, you can see that the light comes from the left of the photograph (perhaps outside the frame) and exits the right, we feel oriented, grounded, even safe. Another example where we can see the light itself might be a sunbeam that's coming down from the clouds and illuminating the landscape. Strong shadows also show the direction of the light. If we want to improve our photographs we'll pay more attention to the direct evidence of the direction of light. It's one of the fundamental vocabularies of composition. This may not rise to the level of “rule of composition,” but it is a powerful bit of visual vocabulary that often helps make a stronger photograph.

Another example is the supposed magic of the “Golden Hour.” It's not the “golden” that is magic: we can control that simply enough by changing the white balance in our photographs. The magic in the Golden Hour is the *angle* of light scraping across the landscape and illuminating everything from the side. That strong, side-lit direction of the light is emotive.

Texture

The next thing I look for is *texture that feels physical*. We only see photographs with our eyes; but, our body's largest organ is our *skin*. We are biologically highly attuned to touch, so the more we can include texture in our compositional language, the more powerful the photograph is likely to be.

By the way, don't confuse *texture* with *detail*. Detail is one thing, but *texture that feels physical* is something else. Detail has to do with how small something can be and still be resolved by the human eye; texture has to do with physicality — or even more powerfully, think of *sensuality*.

Sensuality can come from a rough texture or smooth texture, but texture that feels physical is one of the most important components of the vocabulary of a composition.

Mood

The third aspect in the vocabulary of composition I want to highlight is *mood*. The mood of a photograph has to do with this overall general feeling — how it makes the viewer feel.

A mood is a human emotion — and, of course, cameras are not human; they don't emote. Most *subjects* don't emote. Sometimes people might, if they're in the picture. Animals sometimes do, but not often. If you are making a landscape, the landscape doesn't emote at all; it has no feelings. I would propose that by default, most compositions don't have a mood.

So, *mood* is something that we (human) photographers impose on the photograph, typically by camera placement, composition, lighting, post-processing and all the other tools of the craft that we use.

Compositional *geometry* is simplifying and organizing, usually by eliminating the superfluous. The same kind of thought process can be said about the mood of a photograph. To intensify a mood I find this often means pushing an image either in post-processing or camera placement so that one mood becomes *dominant* — then the pictures tend to get more interesting.

This may be a good time for me to share a story I've told before. I heard this in an Alan Watts lecture years ago. He was talking about the wonderful Japanese calligrapher and painter from the first half of the 20th Century name Saburo Hasegawa. Hasegawa was teaching a group of American university students about haiku and the vocabulary of Japanese aesthetics. He started by saying in his heavy Japanese accent, "The first thing you must understand is the importance of the Japanese term *yugen*. *Yugen* is a term that means when the geese are flying and you can hear them overhead, but the cloud and the fog obscures them and they fly off into the distance and suddenly there's silence behind." Hasegawa continued, "The next term you need to understand is *furyu*, and *furyu* is like when a person in a boat is calling out to another person who's on the shore, having a conversation, but they can't see

each other. That's *furyu*." He went on like this for some time. Eventually one of the students who was frustrated with such nebulous definitions said, "Mr. Hasegawa, can you tell us *exactly* what these mean by giving us a definition for these terms?" Suddenly, Hasegawa slammed the desk and stood up saying, "What's the matter with you Americans? Can't you *feel*!?" I love that story.

It's the nature of artists to feel. It's the nature of artists to *communicate* feelings — and the mood of a photograph is one of the most fundamental things we need to learn to communicate. When you compare the importance of learning the skill to shape the *mood* of a photograph to the skill of selecting the best f-stops and shutter speeds, ISO or even compositional geometry, learning how to *express feeling* is way more important. Compared to the never-ending chatter about cameras and lenses, I rarely hear photographers talk about how to create a mood in a photograph, but the mood of your images are of far greater importance than the camera you used.

One of the most fascinating exercises we can do is to look at a group of photographs that are incredibly successful and try to figure out what the mood is and how the photographer captured and communicated that mood. Seriously, try it.

Drama

Last but not least is *drama*. Drama is one of the most powerful forms of vocabulary in the language of composition because drama introduces the element of time.

Again, photographs are still things. They capture a moment. Drama is something that takes place *in time*. To the extent that we can include drama in our photographs, it introduces that element of time and makes the photograph more powerful, more alive, more connected to the world as it happens before our eyes.

For me, there's a relatively simple rule on how to include more drama in a photograph: Capture the moment of anticipation — not the moment of peak action, nor the moment long before the peak action. Capture that moment of anticipation, just *before* the peak action.

Think of two Hollywood actors in a romance movie about to kiss. What's more powerful, those seconds when they actually are kissing, or that moment just before their lips meet when they pause and we don't know if they're going to kiss or not? That's the element of anticipation — the anticipation of will they or won't they? We hold our breath in anxious anticipation and are captured by the moment.

The same kind of drama exists in landscape photography, in street photography, etc. The idea here is to anticipate the moment just before it happens. This is where Cartier-Bresson and his decisive moment comes to mind. He didn't capture that man jumping over the puddle as he landed, nor as he launched. He perfectly timed the photograph to the instant just before he landed. That was the moment of anticipation, where drama exists.

So, what's the next step in improving our photographs? I'm suggesting that rather than chasing off to some exotic location — nothing wrong with that if you want to have fun, but even if you're *in* an exotic location — the next step in photographic growth beyond technical competency and compositional geometry is to think about the *vocabulary of composition* — and a good place to start is with showing the direction of light, enhancing the sensual texture that feels physical, isolating to a dominant mood, and to zero-in on the dramatic moments.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.