

Analysing (and enjoying) Images

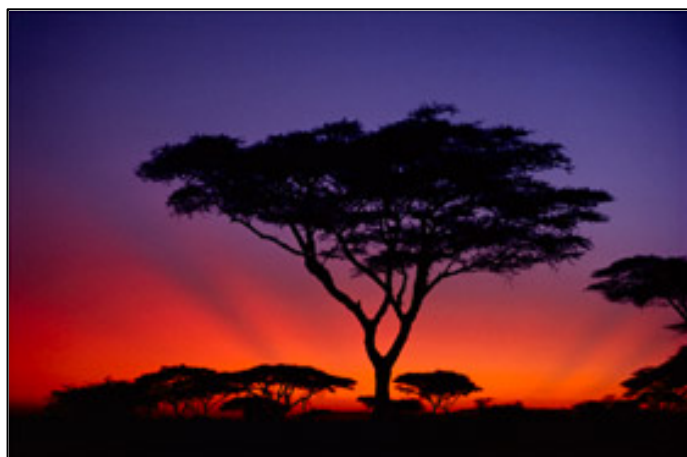
Part 1



FOCAL POINT

The focal point of an image is often the main subject and is what your eye is most drawn to. It is usually what the camera is literally 'focussed on' and usually the key to understanding what the image is 'about' (its meaning).

Write a definition of focal point in your own words in your sketchbook.



Galen Rowell



Brian Duffy



Juergen Teller

What is the focal point in these images? Cut them out and label the focal point in your sketchbook.

Note: Some images have one obvious focal point, whilst others seem to have several areas that your eye is drawn to, or even no focal point at all!

Analysing Images

When we look at a photograph we often give it a quick glance, noticing only that it is an image of a man, a car, a landscape or whatever it happens to be. Looking in this quick and *cursory* manner is unlikely to give us much pleasure or help develop our analytical skills.

To appreciate a photographic artwork we need to look **carefully** and **think** about the image. At first this might sound like hard work, but imagine eating a piece of scrummy cake; you could just put it all in your mouth and swallow, or you could eat it more slowly, savouring the flavours, texture and aroma. Which of these ways of eating is likely to give you more pleasure?

In the same way, looking carefully at an image whilst savouring the context, composition, use of light, its meaning and so on can also be a very pleasurable experience.

When you look at an image, a good starting point is to ask yourself the following questions:

- Who or what is the picture of?
- Is there a focal point of the photograph?
- What is happening in the picture?
- Where was the photograph made – what is the setting?
- When was the photograph made – guess a decade?
- Does the photograph capture a particular or special moment in time?
- What do you notice about the photograph's composition (the use and placement of the visual elements line, colour, tone, shape, light etc)?

Copy this list of questions above and stick them into your sketchbook.

These questions are **merely a starting point**.

At first this might seem a bit daunting, but is actually easier than you might think. Let us start by analysing a specific example image.

Alfred Eisenstaedt



Cut out this image from the pages at the end of this workbook and stick in your sketchbook.

Look carefully at the image by Eisenstaedt. Start analysing the image by asking yourself *'what is the picture of?'*

Next, make a list of as many things as you can that you notice or observe about this photograph and **try to answer each of the 7 questions.**

You may have noticed some of the following:

- A man is kissing a woman (or perhaps he is a vampire and killing her?)
- The scene (the **setting**) appears to be a street in a city
- There are lots of other people in the street
- It is a black and white photograph
- The man seems to be wearing an unusual hat and clothing – a uniform?
- The woman (or is it another man?) is wearing white clothes.
- The photograph does not look recent – maybe it is quite old, say 1930?
- The man and woman are placed in the middle of the photograph
- The image is taken using natural daylight

If your list is similar to the one above then well done! – you are well on the way to appreciating art. **Did you notice anything else?**

Sometimes the observations will not specifically be about the **subject** (what the image is **of**) and that is fine. When we look carefully at an image we often start to notice lots of things, for example, not just what the image is **of**, but also what it **about** or what it might **mean**.

Now write a paragraph summarising what you think the Eisenstaedt image is about. Don't worry about being 'right' – just make educated guesses about what might be happening, when, where and why.

Example:

The Eisenstandt photograph probably records a Vampire convention in Transylvania. There has been a fancy dress party and the vampires have dressed up as soldiers and sailors. One vampire grabs a woman and sucks her blood from her neck. The photo was probably taken around 1930 and is taken at night time (the vampires would die if it was photographed during the day).

Hmmm ... perhaps you can do better than this!

When you have finished writing what you think the image is about check the actual story at the end of this work booklet. You might be surprised at just how close your analysis to the actual meaning/explanation of this image!

Now Repeat the process for this photograph:



1. Cut out and stick the image in your sketchbook (use the copy at the end of this workbook).
2. Write a list of all the things that you observe/notice.
3. Check the list of questions on page 1 and see which of these you have answered. Try to answer any of the questions that you have missed.
4. Finally, write a paragraph describing in more detail what might be happening – the where, what, and why – in effect what the image **means**.

Now Repeat the process for this photograph:

This image is a photograph by **Nick Knight**.

Images like the portrait by Nick Knight can be intriguing and confusing, but by carefully analysing the image we can often work out a possible meaning for the image.

Analyse this image. Do not worry if you cannot easily answer every question, just make educated guesses!



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Sometimes to understand an image more fully we need more information than the image alone can give us; we often need to know about the image's **context**. Context simply means the **'surrounding circumstances'**, in this case the purpose of the image – why, and for what purpose it was made.

Nick Clarke is a fashion photographer and the previous photograph was made in 1997 to record a design by British fashion designer and couturier Alexander McQueen.



**Clothing designs by
Alexander McQueen, 2007**

You might now be inspired to research the designs of Alexander McQueen, or perhaps you simply feel more comfortable about just enjoying the beauty of the photograph and its interesting content. Either way, both responses are good because you are starting to enjoy looking at images and working out what they might be about.

Now Repeat the process for this photograph of a PAINTING:



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas

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Let us finally look at another photograph:



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4. Finally, write a paragraph describing in more detail what might be happening – the where, what, and why – in effect what the image **means**.

Check how close your reading of an image was to the actual story.

Eisenstaedt's photo:

The photograph was taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt on August 14th 1945 in Times Square, New York, USA just after the 'VJ' parades & celebrations.

August 14th is known in the U.S. as VJ day. This is a day to celebrate victory by America over Japan in the Second World War and for Americans marks the end of the war.

In the scene, the parades have recently finished and an unknown sailor grabs hold of a nurse in her distinctive white uniform and they kiss passionately. The kiss is not just a kiss, it signifies the joy and relief of a whole nation at the ending of a devastating war.

How close did you get to working out what this image is about?



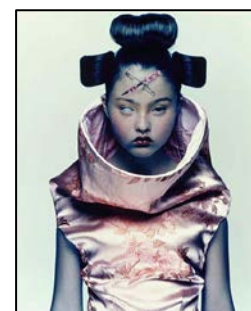
About Bill Brandt's Photograph

Brandt made many photographic images during the Second World War (1939 to 1945). In this black and white photograph we see people sleeping in the London Underground, which acted as an air-shelter during bombing raids. Brandt's wartime photos were published during the war to boost morale – they showed the plucky Brit overcoming adversity to help defeat the enemy!



About Nick Knight's Photograph

The image is a 'fashion photograph', documenting a particular clothing design by Alexander McQueen. On the surface at least then, there is no more to the photograph than this; no deeper meaning other than to document a particular design and promote its designer.



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937: The Context

Guernica was a small and undefended town in Spain, which in 1937 was bombed by the Germans during the Spanish Civil War. It shows the desperate suffering during war, particularly by civilians.



Your first reaction was probably something like “Crikey – what’s going on?” Let’s be honest, it looks like a pile of rubbish – strange shaped bodies and limbs, a horse, a bull, a huge eye-like shape, geometric shapes and the whole thing painted in various tones of colourless grey. It is a crowded and jumbled composition – like something from a nightmare. This is another example of an artwork that means very little unless you know something about its **context**.

Do you notice how many of the civilians look upwards, perhaps at the planes overhead? Notice the mother who holds her lifeless child and screams upwards at her dreadful loss. Notice the bodies and dismembered limbs, the flames, the geometric shapes that represent buildings as they crash down, the severed arm, which holds a broken sword.

Postscript

During World War 2, Picasso remained in German occupied France. Whilst working in his studio a German officer who had heard of this famous Spanish artist paid Picasso a visit. The officer gazed long and hard at the painting ‘Guernica’ and then asked “who did this?” Picasso immediately answered, “you did!”

So to understand the Picasso painting we need to know **more than the image alone can tell us**: we need to know about the **context** of the artwork.



Tulsa By Larry Clark

The Context

The book Tulsa is a collection of black-and-white photographs by Larry Clark documenting the life of young people in Tulsa, Oklahoma (a State in the middle of the United States of America).

In many of the photographs teenagers are depicted injecting drugs, participating in casual sex and playing with lethal firearms. The photographs were taken between 1963 and 1971.

Its publication in 1971 caused a sensation within both the photographic and wider community. Before the publication of Tulsa many white people had believed that the 'drug problem' had primarily been associated with black people, poverty and a few hippy communes. Here, now, were depicted white 'middle class' teenagers in the very heart of America, indulging in those self-destructive activities which had previously been thought the preserve of blacks (who knew no better) and minority groups on the fringes of society.

The characters in the Tulsa story are melancholic teenagers who become violent and sad addicts, with several deaths along the way. Shot in natural light using a Leica camera with a silent shutter release that records continuously, Clark's intimate perspective reveals the shadowy dramas of his subjects: drug injections, young thugs playing with loaded guns, teenage sex. His unflinching view of a previously undocumented drug culture in middle America reveals the uncertainty, innocence, and savagery of adolescence.

Quoted from the Presentation House Gallery Exhibition, Vancouver Canada, September 2011.

Summary

Looking, Seeing, Understanding & Enjoying!

We have seen that when we study an artwork such as a photographic image, it is important to look **carefully and slowly, thinking** about everything in the image, making written or mental notes. Sometimes we are then able to discern the image's message or meaning. At other times to discover any deeper meaning, we may need more information (such as the context).

When we do not know the context of a particular artwork, it may seem incomprehensible (just as Picasso's Guernica probably seemed when you and I first looked at it). In such a case, it is wrong to criticise the artwork immediately as being no good or 'rubbish'. We need to find out more about the artwork - to discover the context, who made it, why, when, what else was happening at the time, was the image made for a specific purpose and so on to discover what (if anything) it or the artist might be trying to tell us.

It is this search, this quest to **understand** that makes much contemporary art and photography so exciting and enjoyable.

So when you next look at a photograph, give it your undivided attention, think deeply about it and most importantly, enjoy it!

Context

Remember, context just means '**the surrounding circumstances**'. For example this could include:

- when the image was made
- what was happening in the world when the image was made
- who made it
- why they made it - was the image made for a specific reason or commission.
- How the image 'fits in' with other work by the same artist



Cut out these images to stick with your notes in your sketchbook.



