

Analysing (and enjoying) Images

Part 2



Learning To Critique An Image

A critique is a comprehensive analysis that seeks to describe, analyse and interpret an image or other artwork.

A critique will also sometimes comment on the 'success' of the image – whether or not we believe that it is a 'good' or 'successful' image. This is not the same as saying whether you 'like' an image (which is a subjective judgement). A critique should be objective – identifying both strengths and weaknesses in the artwork.

In part 1 we learned that to analyse and interpret an image we start by asking 7 simple 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)?

We also learnt that in order to interpret an image it is often helpful to know about the image's context (the surrounding circumstances).

One of the areas that you probably found most difficult was in thinking and writing about the **composition**. The word composition simply means combining or 'putting together' parts to form a whole and can apply to many works of human endeavor including music and writing – in fact anything that is arranged or 'put together' using conscious thought.

To understand more about composition we need first to think about what it is an image **of**.

Clearly, if it is an image of a bus in a street then surely the composition just consists of a bus and a street?



Unfortunately it is not quite that simple. You see, the image is **NOT** an actual

bus, it is merely a **representation** of a bus, using paint, ink or light sensitive chemicals etc.

The actual bus is made of materials such as metal and plastic, whereas the **image** is made of lines, shapes and colours etc, appearing on the surface of a two dimensional surface such as paper, or perhaps projected onto a screen or computer monitor.

Representation is a process:

When an artist represents a scene they can **manipulate** it. For example, a painter could change the colour of the bus, change the number on the front or even make it look longer than it actually is. Similarly, a photographer could make changes to the apparent bus length (through choice of lens focal length). Photographers can use all sorts of camera and post-production editing techniques to alter the representation of the bus.

When we analyse an image's composition we are not analysing the actual 'thing' that is represented, we are analysing how, in the **image** the artist/photographer has composed or put that image together.

To help us do this we consider an image as simply being a collection of lines, tones, colours, shapes, textures, space and form. These are called the '**Visual Elements**' which make up any picture.

Visual Elements

Here are the visual elements that you could comment on in your composition analysis:

Space

How is space used in the image – is it filled or is there empty 'negative' space?

Line

How is line used in the image? Are there lines which are straight, jagged, curved, thick, or thin? Do actual or implied lines lead your eye around the image?

Tone (also called Value or Tonal Value)

Is there a range of tones from light to dark? If you squint your eyes, where are the darkest and lightest tones?

Form

Does the image look three-dimensional or flat? Where are the main 'things' in the image (foreground, mid-ground, background) and how does this affect the form (how three-dimensional the image appears)?

Shape

Do you see geometric straight lined or organic curved shapes? Are there positive shapes, such as objects, or empty voids (negative space)?

Colour: What colours do you see (if any)? Which colour(s) are dominant? Are the colours saturated or muted? Is there a colour scheme (e.g. complimentary colours or analogous colours)? Does the use of colour improve the image in any way?

Texture

Do you see visual textures within the photograph? Does the surface of the image have an actual texture (for example brush marks)?

As Photographers we should also consider the following visual elements:

Light, Shadow & Contrast

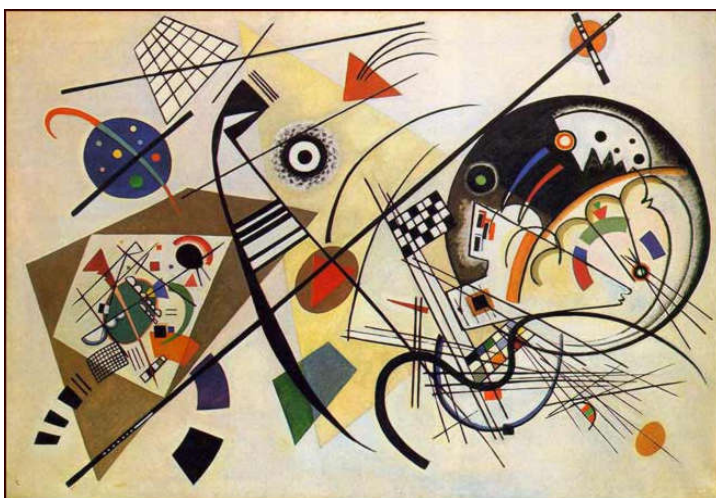
Is the light natural or artificial? Are the shadows subtle or do they create strong contrasts? Is the lighting Hard or soft? What direction is the light coming from?

Focus

How is focus used in the image - which parts of the image are sharply in focus? Which parts are out of focus (if any)? The range between the nearest and farthest things that appear in focus indicates the depth of field (shallow or large depth of field). How does the use of focus help draw your eye to a focal point or focal points in the image?

DON'T PANIC !

When we analyse the composition of an image we don't have to talk about all the visual elements, just the ones that seem to be the most important or relevant for that particular image.



Kandinsky, *Unbroken Line*, 1923

This painting by the Russian artist Kandinsky is essentially composed of **lines**, **colours** and **shapes**.

Kandinsky mixes both straight and curved lines with simple geometrical shapes. These shapes contain a variety of solid colours and some appear to recede into the distance, giving this abstract painting a distinctly three-dimensional feel.



What do you think are the most important visual elements to comment on in these images?

For example, which visual element is used in Sandy Skoglund's image to *lead* the eye?



Guy Bourdin

What could you write about the composition in terms of the visual elements for these images?



Anna Atkins



Wolfgang Tillmans

And Even That's Not All ...

When thinking about the composition we can also consider the following, but remember, **not all these will be relevant for every picture** – the trick is to decide which (if any) are most important for the image being critiqued.

Dominance: When you look at the image, what is the first thing that you notice? Why is your attention drawn there? Are there other areas of interest – if so, how do these other areas affect how your eye traverses the image?

Viewpoint

From what vantage point (or 'viewpoint') was the photograph taken? Imagine the photograph taken from a higher or lower position. How does the viewpoint or camera angle affect the photograph?

Framing: The crop of a photographic image determines what is included within the frame and just as importantly, what is *excluded*. What has been included in the picture? What might have been visible *beyond* the edges of the picture?

Contrast: Are there strong visual contrasts such as light and dark areas, different textures, complimentary colours, solids and empty voids, straight and curved lines etc?

Repetition & Pattern: Repetition of visual elements can create a sense of 'unity' - a sense of order or wholeness that holds the work together. What elements are repeated (if any) and do they contribute to a sense of unity? Is there any pattern evident?

Variety: Variety often creates interest. Can you see a variety of visual elements such as values, shapes, textures, etc.?

And most Importantly

Balance: When the visual elements appear balanced, the image tends to have a greater sense of unity – it just looks 'right'. Visual balance is a bit like balancing an old-fashioned weighing scale – too much 'visual weight' on one side of the image and it just looks 'wrong'. Is the visual weight on one side of the photograph similar to that on the other side? What about top to bottom and diagonally?

Note: An image does NOT have to be visually balanced, but if it is not then there is probably a very good reason why the photographer made the image in that way!

Examples

Which aspect from the list do you think are the most important for these images?

Cut out the images mount into your sketchbook and write a sentence about one aspect of the image from the list (*use the images at end of this workbook*).



Dominance

Viewpoint

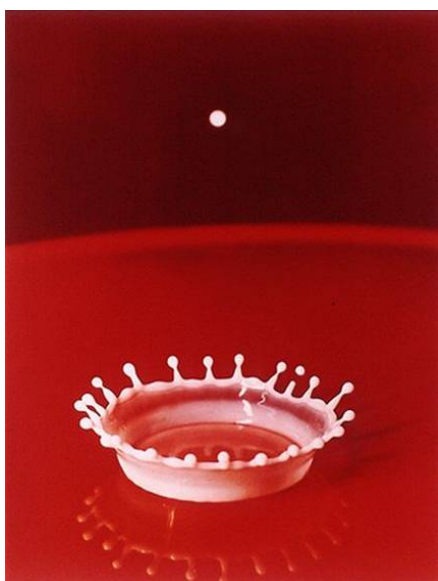
Framing

Contrast

Repetition & Pattern

Variety

Balance



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And Finally

You may also want to comment on the following:

- **Equipment:** How was the photograph made – what equipment was used (digital, analogue, colour, black & white, 35mm, medium format , pin-hole camera etc)?
- **Technique:** What technique(s) did the photographer use (slow shutter speed, flash lighting, tripod, fast shutter speed, wide aperture, high ISO etc)?
- **Feelings/Mood:** How does the image make you **feel** (sad, happy, excited, bored etc)?
- **Rules of Composition:** Does the image follow or break any ‘rules’ of composition (such as the ‘rule of thirds’)?



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

