

Exploring Meaning In Photography

**Livio Fent
Metro Continuing Education**

Introduction

Course outline

- First session:
 - Introduction: Information, Structure, Message
 - Analysis of examples
 - Closer investigation of Information, Structure, Message
 - From symbols and visual grammar to meaning and storyline
 - Objective and Subjective meaning and message
 - Summary and assignment
- Second session
 - Assignment review
 - Wrap-up

Introduction

Goals

- Understand the nature of meaning in a visual art like photography by concentrating on:
 - Information and its role in objectifying meaning
 - Structure and its role in relating object meaning
 - Message, as a function of information and structure, visual grammar, and symbolic value.
- Apply the concepts to our own photography by:
 - Developing a visual awareness of image content, form, relationships and storyline.
 - Assessing and critiquing our imagery to improve our skill for interpreting visual semantics

Introduction

Goals – conceptual view

Objective Meaning ----- Subjective Meaning



Eye dynamics ---- Relationships ----- Visual grammar



Information --- Structure/Order ----- Message

Information-Structure-Message

Information

- Photographic information is essentially light reflected off objects; the *number* of these objects will often define the complexity of the image
- Most natural images are complex and have too many objects in the visual field.
- Our challenge as photographers is often to reduce the number of objects in a natural scene (unlike studio photography where we add objects).
- **A general rule of thumb is to have between 2-3 key objects in a frame.**

Object Information



Information-Structure-Message

Structure (order)

- Photographic structure is a function of how objects (Information) are arranged within the photographic frame; A more orderly arrangement simplifies the interpretation of the information and leads to more clarity in the message.
- Structure in the photographic field has been typified by techniques such as the 'Rule of Thirds'; other compositional dynamics are also important in structuring and ordering an image, they include:
 - Balance
 - Tension
 - Repetition
 - Contrast

Object Structure/Order



Information-Structure-Message

Message:

- Message is the outcome of the common understanding of the object information and the relationships implied through its ordered arrangement.
- Message clarity is achieved by:
 - Minimizing complexity (less information is simpler to interpret)
 - Maximizing order (clear object relationships drive the visual narrative)
 - Reducing 'noise'. Noise is information that is not relevant to the message.

Message Clarity:

'Noise' reduction



The image crop clarifies the message by reducing information and ordering the objects such that the object relationship is strictly between the girl and the horse.

Message Clarity

Object Placement



Is the basic information content similar for the two photos?

Is the object arrangement more conducive in conveying the message in one or the other?

What is the message?



Message Dynamics



How are the information and structure of the two images changing the message?

Is one more clearer than the other? Is one more complex?

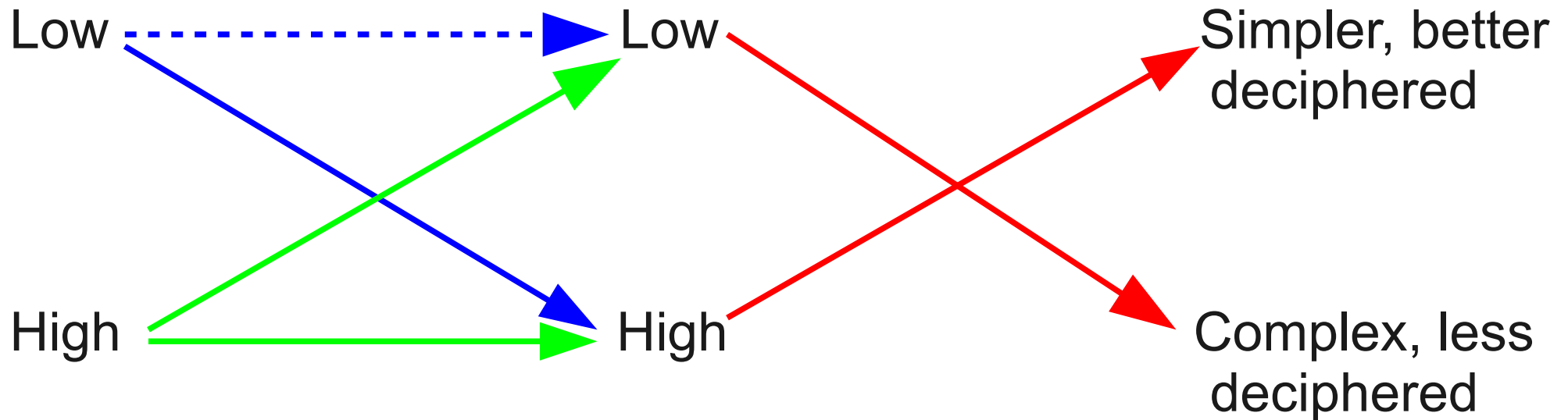


Information-Order-Message Relationship

Information

Order

Message



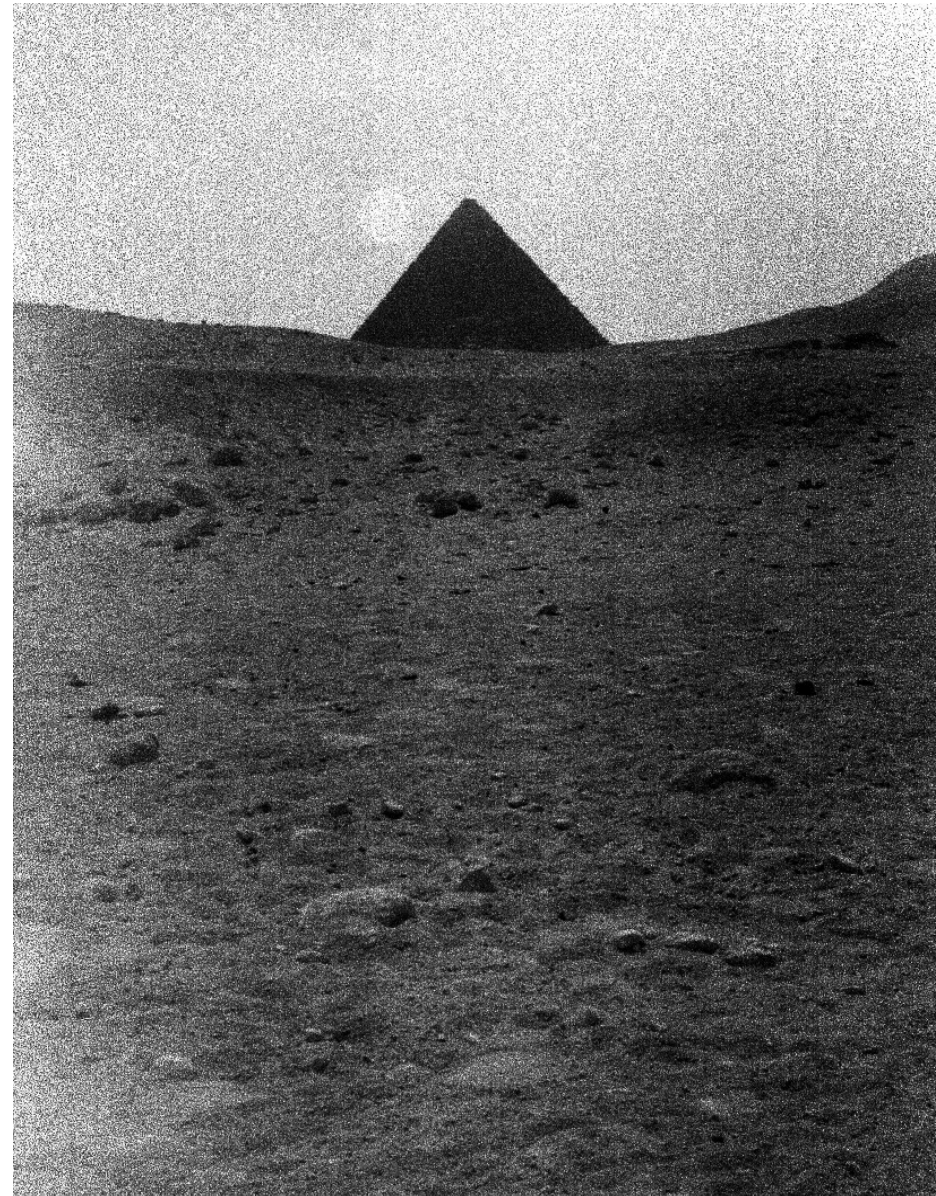
If the goal of communication is to make a message easily (efficiently) understood then we would aim to simplify the message as much as possible.

Which combinations simplify a message?

Examples

- View the sequence of photographs, note the change that is occurring as we move from one photograph to another, consider our basic variables:
 - Information: How many objects are at play?
 - Structure: what are the object relationships in the image space; are they clearly defined?
 - Message: Is the message clear, is it ambiguous, is it confusing?
- We'll try to evaluate our opinions on the S_S

Slide 1 - 2



Slides 2 - 3



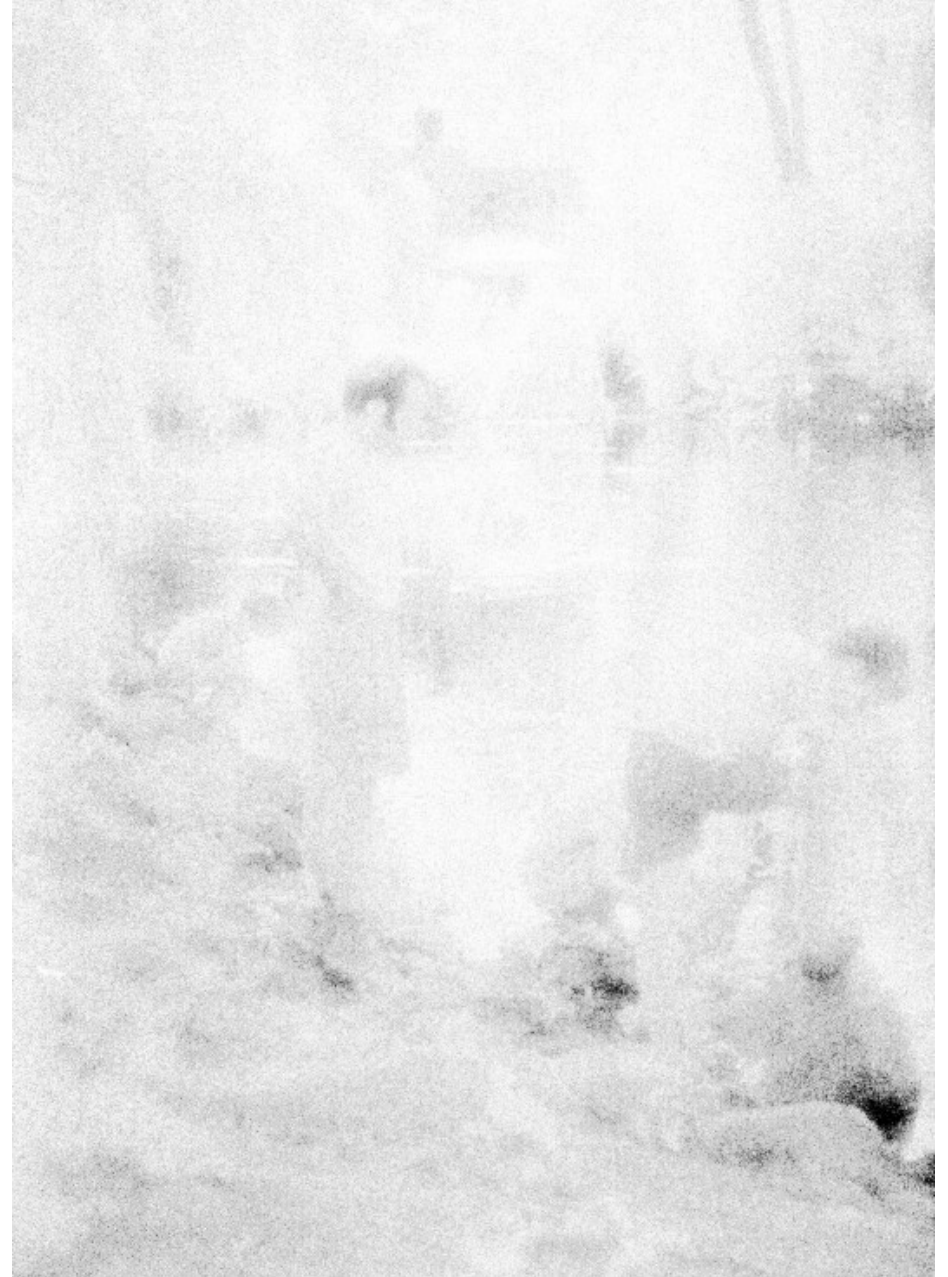
Slides 4 - 5



Slides 6 - 7



Slides 8 - 9



Slides 10 - 11



A closer look at 'Information'

- Consider information as a *quantity*
- That quantity, in itself, has no value, no meaning.
- When information is structured or ordered, and, coded or symbolized, then information is transformed from random 'data' to a message
- As photographers we assemble random visual information into coherent statements and present these statements to our audience.
- The process is the basis of communication
- How well we communicate depends on the information presented, its structure and the common understanding of the coded information, or symbolic value of the objects

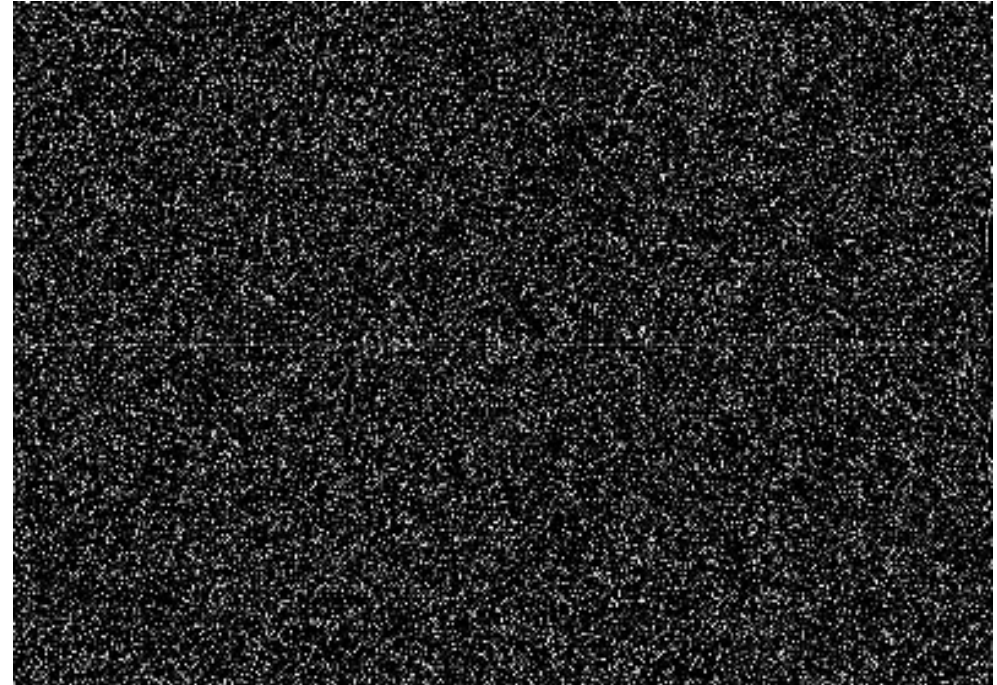
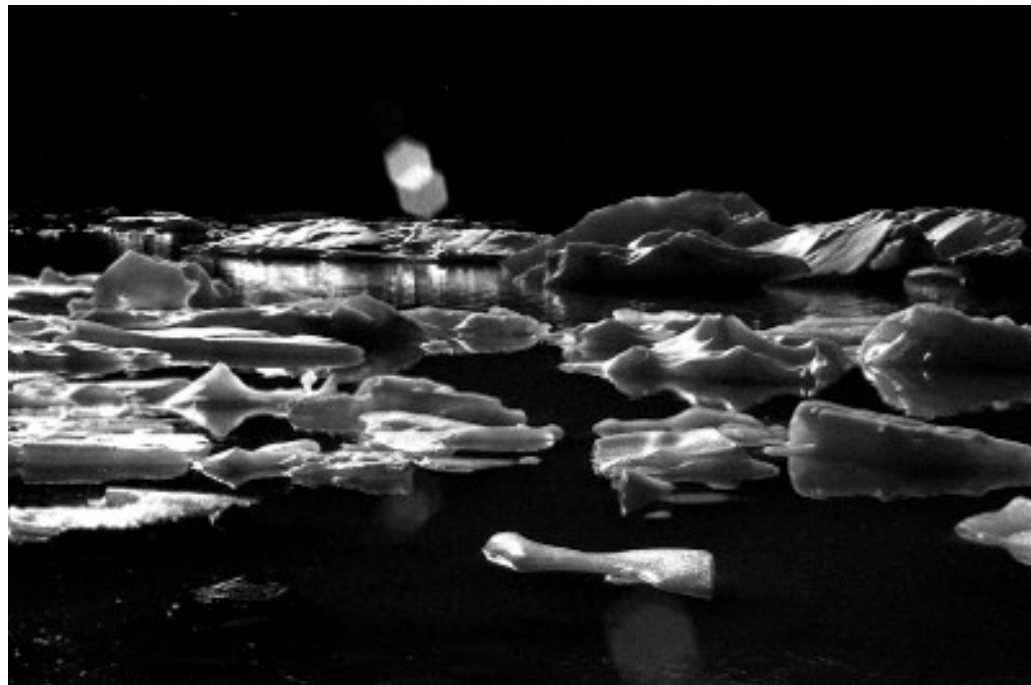
A Theory of Information

- The basic communication principles were first formalized by C.E. Shannon in 1949.
- Shannon's measure of information is the number of bits to represent the amount of uncertainty (randomness) in a data source.
- The more information we have about a system, a state, photograph, the less uncertainty we have about it.
- Highly ordered and structured systems have less randomness, are less uncertain, contain more information.

Image order

- The degree of randomness or noise in a communication system can be described and is known as **entropy**.
- It is also a fundamental theory in physics known as the second law of thermodynamics.
- Entropy describes the degree of order in a system: low entropy – more ordered, high entropy – more random.
- When we photograph we generally strive for greater order, or less entropy in our photos, lower entropy images enhance message transmission (as per Shannon's communication theory)

An extreme image example: Information and Entropy



Pixel statistics:

Rows 550, Columns 820 = 451000 pixels

Of 256 levels of grey, the mean = 37, std. = 61, median = 6

- Consider the image statistics, is the data quantity the same between the two photos? What about the information quantity
- What is the *difference* between the two photos?

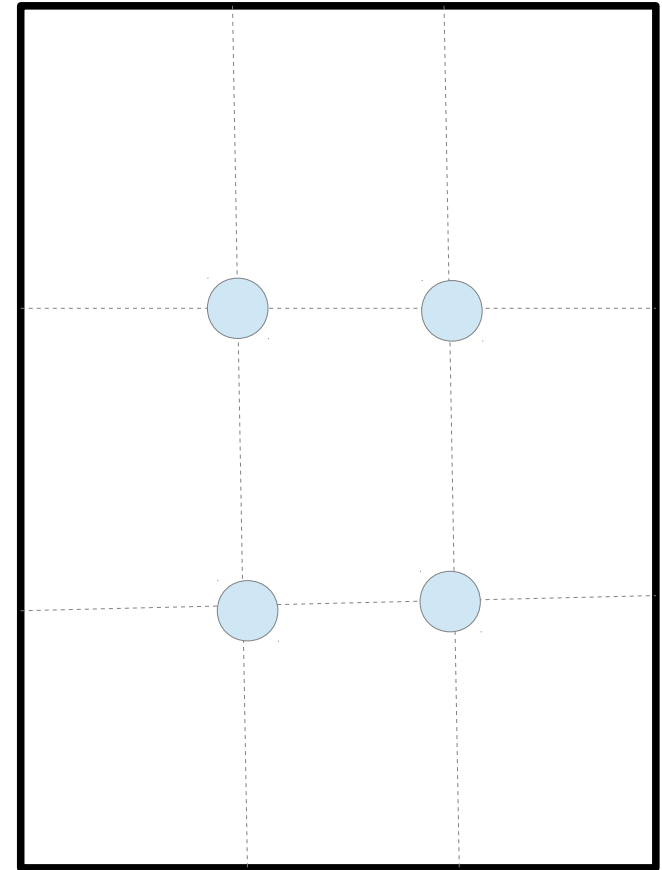
Entropy and 'orderliness' in photography



- Which of the two images have a higher degree of entropy or 'disorder'?
- Which is 'more comfortable' to view? Why?

The basic technique for producing 'orderly' images: Rule of 1/3s

- The most widely used technique is the 'rule of thirds' where the image frame is divided into three equal horizontal and vertical sections
- Horizontal linear objects are placed along the horizontal lines while vertical objects are placed along the vertical lines.
- Non-linear features are placed at the intersections of the lines.



Rule of thirds examples



Vertical object placement emphasized

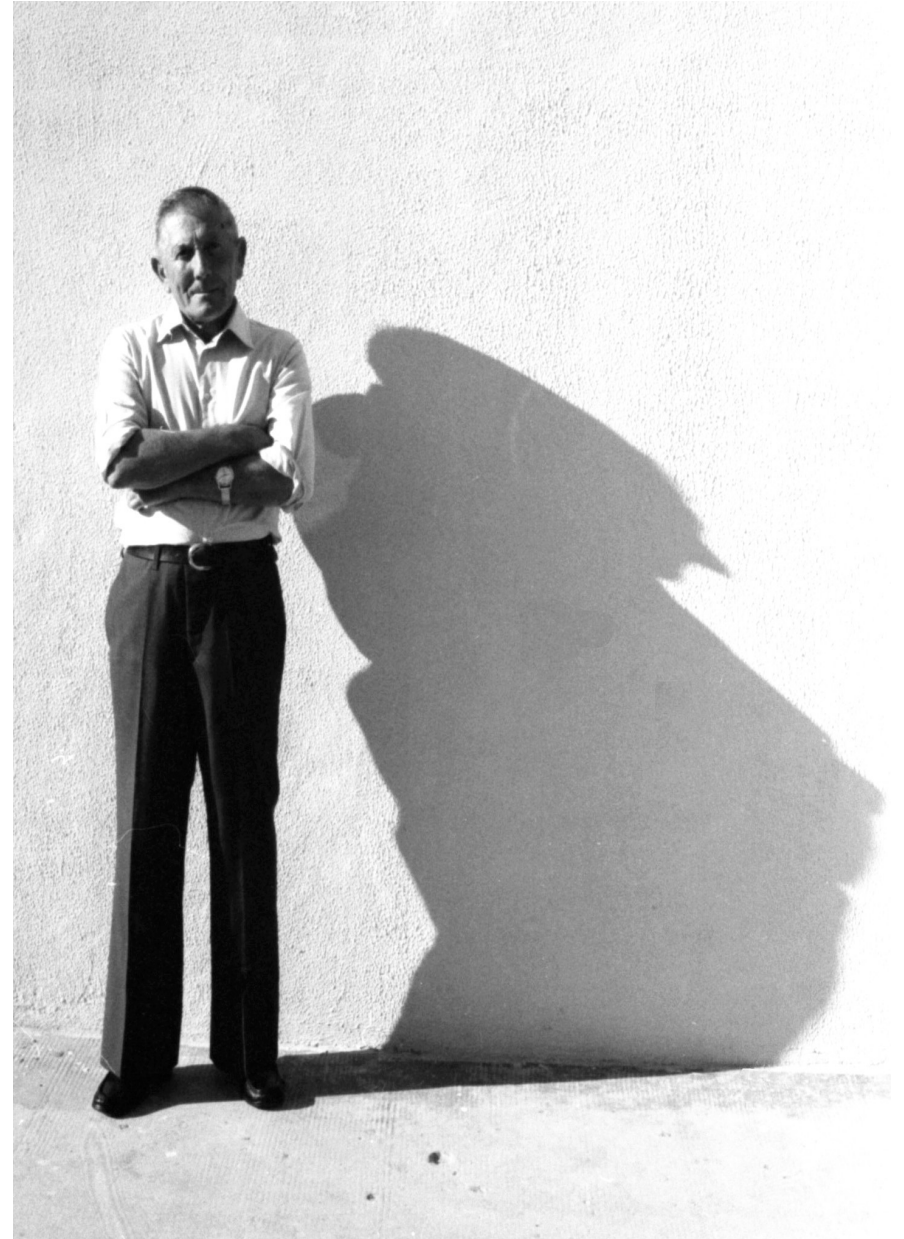


Horizontal object placement emphasized

Our goal with this technique is an 'ordered' image, such an image conveys the message more clearly. Again, the message and meaning have not yet been addressed.

Other 'order' design principles

Balance and Tension



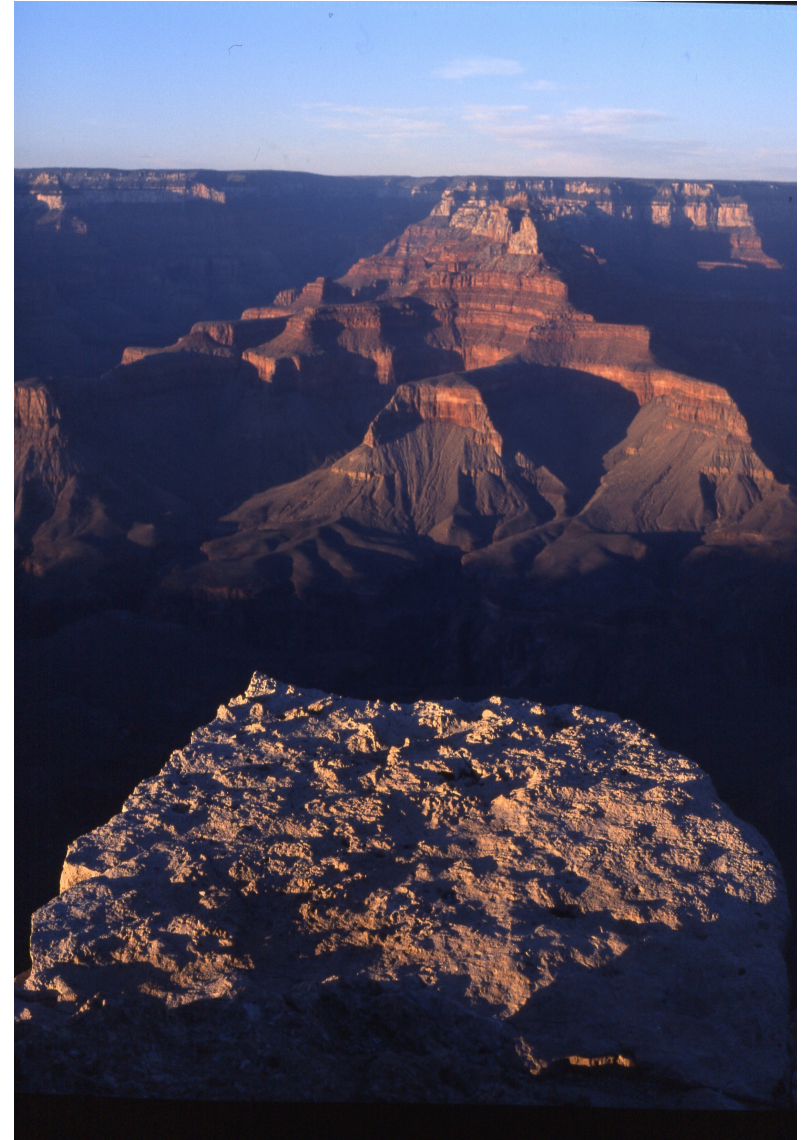
More 'order' design principles

Contrast and Repetition

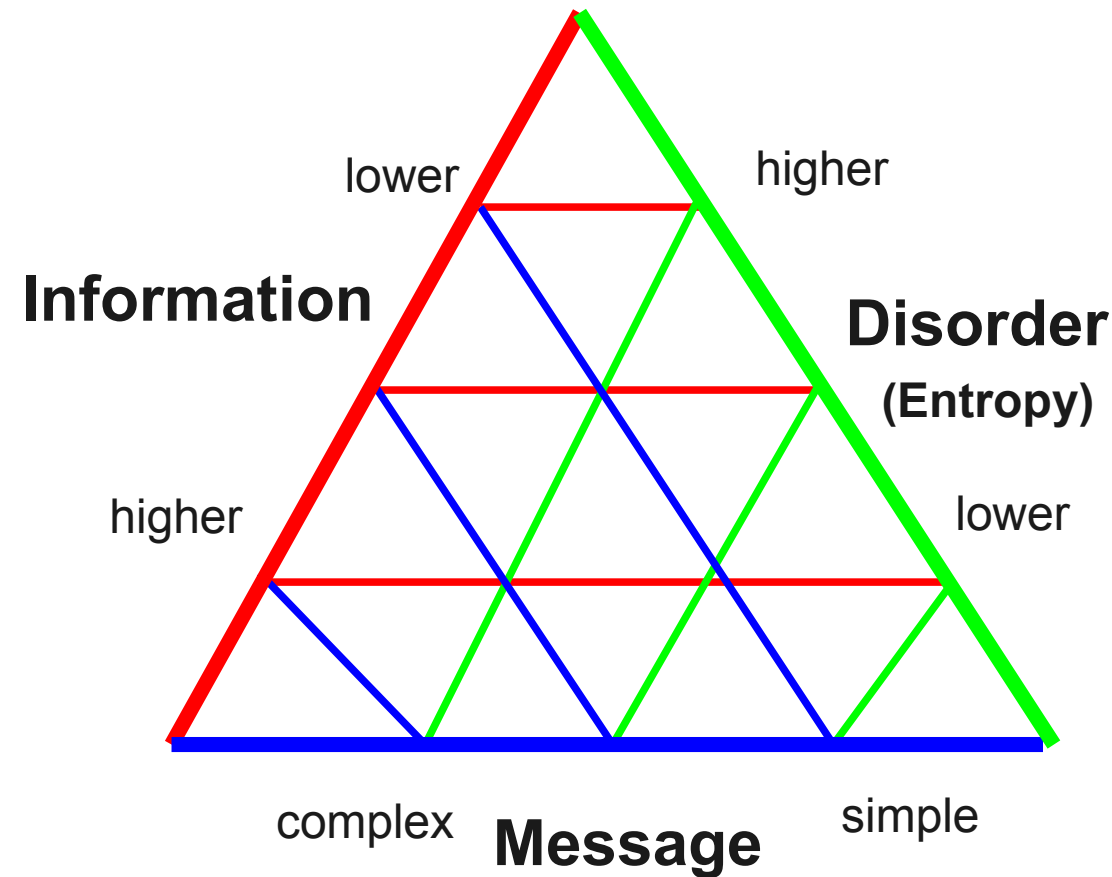


And more 'order' design principles

Depth and Perspective



From Information and Order to Message and 'Meaning'



A quick review of our 3 variables in triangle graph:

Accepting the premise that simple messages communicate their 'meaning' more readily than complex ones, then

If the information quantity decreases or disorder decreases then the message becomes less complex and easier to decipher and 'meaning' is more clear.

First Define 'Meaning'..

From Wiktionary:

- The *symbolic* value of something.
- The *significance* of a thing.
- (semantics) The objects or concept that a word or phrase denotes, or *that which a sentence says*.

From the definition a couple of fundamental building blocks can be established:

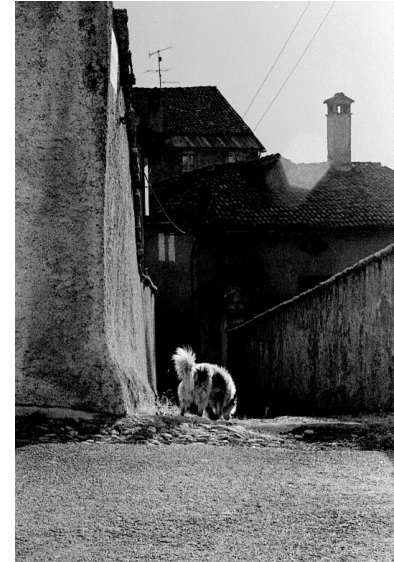
1. A common understanding of object significance, symbolic value, and,
2. Sentence development, a message conveyed.

Object significance

- From the common..



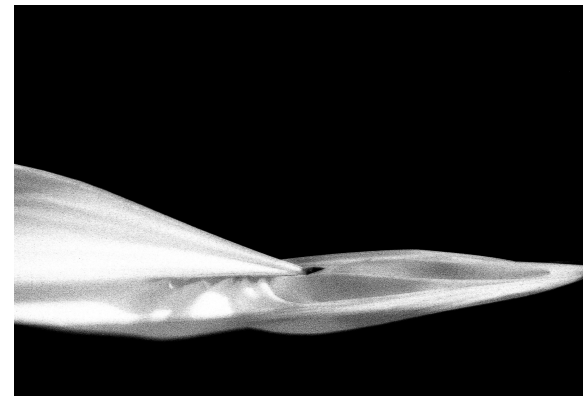
- To the culturally defined..



- To the personal..



- To the abstract..



Object Symbolic Value ..whose value?



The West:
Nazism, antisemitism, hate



The East:
Auspiciousness
Good heart
Compassion, Love,

And on to the Image Sentence..

- As the basic sentence is composed of nouns, verbs and adjectives, so is the image..
- We can transpose this basic structure to develop a *visual grammar*.
- We have image objects as nouns and are associated with some level of *meaning* as we have just seen.
- We have image action as verbs, these are the eye dynamics and relationships (visual design elements) between the objects.
- To a lesser extent we have image 'mood' as adjectives which tends to set the descriptive setting.

Developing a visual grammar example..

- To recap, key elements of a visual grammar are:



- Subjects/objects (information)
- Relationships (structure)
- Elements to create action among the subjects/objects (lines, edges, contrast, balance etc..)
- The image on the left has the lines of the fence, wall, ground, actioning the eye to the subject.
- A secondary subject could be the door and a secondary action could be the relationship between the youth and the door.

From visual grammar to message

- In developing the message we begin by interrelating the image objects:
 - The youth in the image is the central object.
 - The door is behind him and secondary but the eye action or relationships are driven between these two objects.
- The *mood* or descriptive setting of the image (B&W, grainy) is a somber one.
- The dynamics of the image focus on a young person sitting on steps in front of a closed screen door. The message could end here. But..



From message to image story



- Adding object meaning to the message:
 - Youth: downcast, lonely?
 - Door: Access, entry
 - Door closed: entry denied
 - B&W grainy setting: Coldness stark, depressing.
- The image story focuses on the youth's dejection/depression, of being shut out or excluded from some other environment or opportunity. The overall *meaning* of the image is one of alienation. Are there other stories supported by the grammar and objects?

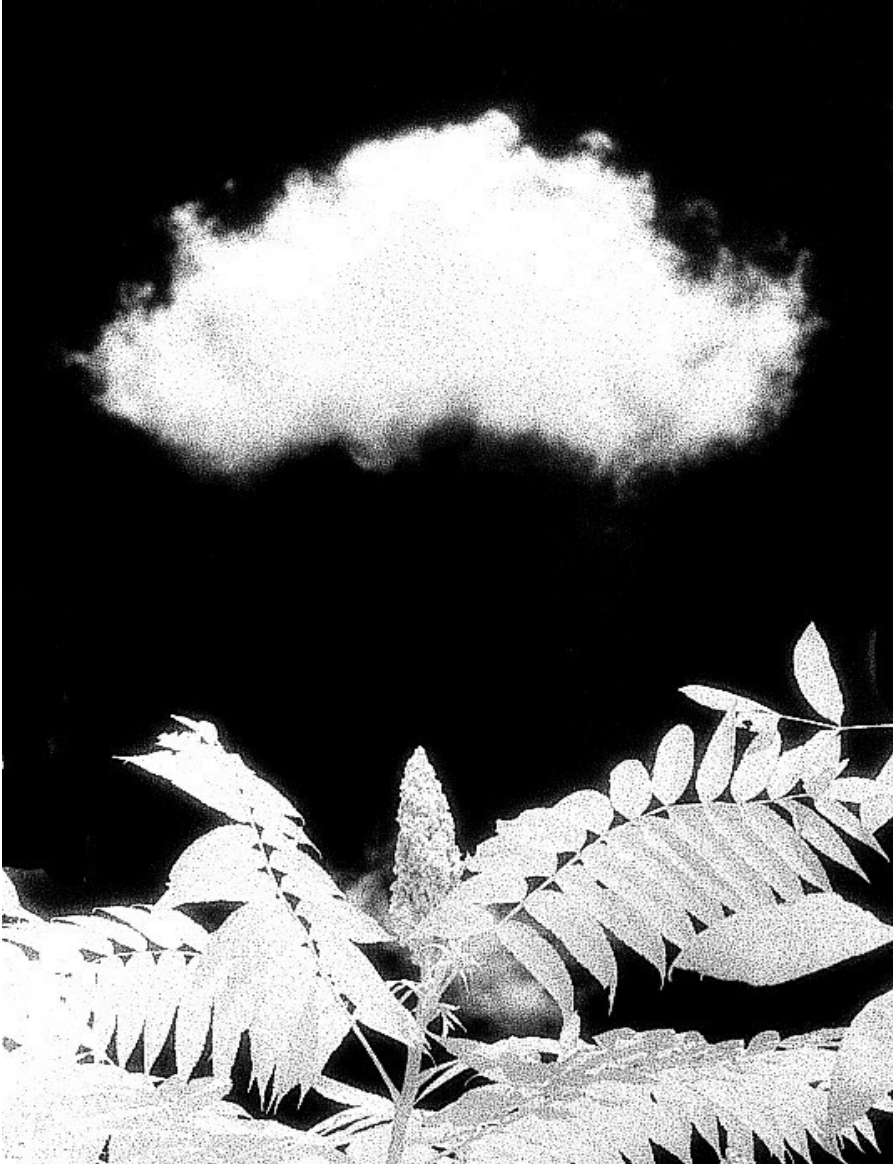
A progressive basis for image 'meaning'

In the previous example the meaning was developed from three image components, image information, image structure and visual grammar driving meaning to the message.

1. Information is selective and focused, most of the objects contribute to the storyline. The rule of thumb: less is better (more information requires more order)
2. Image structure and eye action is promoted by strong lines directing attention to the main subject. Visual design principles (order) drive the viewing process
3. Visual Grammar. A relationship is being implied between the primary (youth) and secondary (door) subjects. The meaning of that relationship is driven by an interpreted meaning of the youth, the door, and the mood of the image (grainy, B&W)

Analyzing meaning:

example 1



- What's the information content? high/low/medium
- What is the image structure? What's the 'action', what are the eyes doing?
- What are the main subjects? What are their significance?
- Does the image tone convey a mood?
- What is (are) the object relationship(s)
- What's the story?

Analyzing meaning:

example 2

- Is this image ordered? What compositional principle(s) are working (or not)
- What are the main subjects?
- What's the 'action', what are the eyes doing? What are the connections?
- What tone does the image convey?
- What's the story?



Message through composition

- We've seen structured images following compositional rules, what about breaking the 'rules'?
- Moving away from compositional norms lends meaning to the composition itself.
- The image to the left is unconventional in its composition but it does have an ordered simplicity.



Weak message: too much information

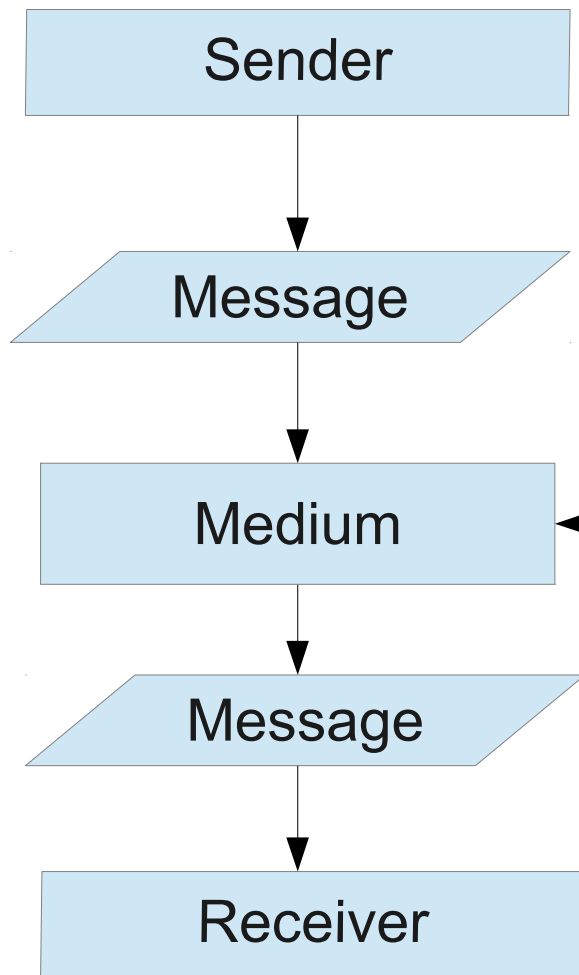


Ask the questions:

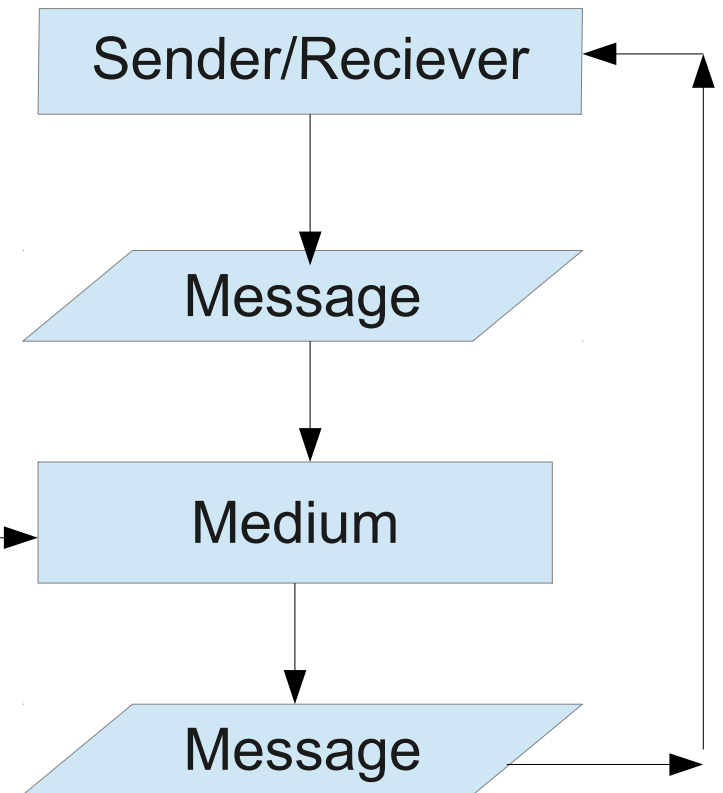
- Is there a compositional form
- What is are the objects
- What are the eye dynamics
- What's the story, what's the meaning?

Objective and Subjective Meaning

**Objective communication:
The Shannon model**



**Subjective communication:
introspective photography**



The subjective meaning and message

- Firstly, the principles already discussed for efficient communication are all at play; information and structure are key elements.
- Object meaning is assigned based on the photographer's life experience, for example a large dog may be symbolized as a threat and associated with fear because of being bitten in the past, or, it is a symbol of companionship, loyalty.
- The process of symbolizing objects in an image in this way transforms the message to a very personal mosaic. *Personal* insight is gained by relating the symbolized objects to each other.

Symbolizing the image: introspective meaning and Self-analysis



The objects, the information

- Dog
- Building wall (left) and wall (right)
- Downward road to buildings
- Chimney
- Lens ghost, front/side sunlight

The symbols, the meaning:

Dog: companionship, playfulness
Walls: restriction, boundary, blockage
Road: the way forward, future
Buildings: Shelter, protection
Chimney: air foulness, waste
Light/Ghost: life, energy, maybe spirit

The story, the message:

The search for companionship is blocked by the greater need for security and that security is producing undesired results especially at the mental level. There is a sense that it will be overcome

Symbolic Levels of Meaning



Let's look at the mountain in this image from various symbolic perspectives.

Level 0 – The literal interpretation
A mountain is a mountain is a mountain, Period.

Level 1 – Generalized connotations
Achievement, effort, goal attainment

Level 2 – Philosophical meanings
Elevated thought, ideas (height and air)
Higher knowledge, a spiritual level

Level 3 – Esoteric meaning (in this Image)
The breast of the the earth goddess (Gaia) giving and abundance of life.

Summarizing

- The basics of communication are:
 - Information
 - Structure
 - Message (and meaning)
- Less information (2-3 key objects) leads to more efficient communication of the message.
- More order and structure (lower entropy) enhances communication.
- Object relationships through structure (say, using the rule of thirds and compositional dynamics) communicate a visual story.

Summarizing cont'd

- The visual story is driven by image grammar, the lines, edges, contrast, that drive the eye in creating the relationships.
- Symbolic meaning of the objects can be at the 'objective' level (everybody agrees with the meaning of an object).

And/Or

- Symbolic meaning can be at the 'subjective' level where the meaning is typically very personal.
- The objective message and storyline is one of common understanding, mass communication.
- The subjective message is personal understanding, introspection and Self knowledge.

Further Reading

- Entropy and Art
 - http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/emergingorder/seminar/Week_7_Entropy_and_Art_Arnheim.pdf
- Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche
 - http://truecenterpublishing.com/photopsy/article_index.htm
- On the construction of photographic meaning
 - http://www.academia.edu/229731/On_the_construction_of_photographic_meaning
- How to convey meaning in your photos
 - http://www.photographyblog.com/articles/how_to_convey_meaning_in_your_photos/

Assignment

1. Take two natural images (not studio), one with two key objects and one with four or more.
2. Take two natural images, an ordered one using the concepts discussed, and one with the most disorder you can create
3. Use one of the images to discuss the relationships of the objects and the message it conveys, consider the dynamics of eye movement and visual grammar
4. Use the image to investigate the symbols associated with the objects in the photograph, how does the message change with the symbolic association.