



How to Analyze a Photograph



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We tend to look at images and decipher their meanings right away. Often times without giving much thought towards how we are drawing conclusions about the image. Through this step-by-step instructable we will learn to answer the question of how we come to understand an image.

Supplies:

1. An image to analyze.



Step 1: Find an Image to Analyze

Find any high quality commercial image (stock photos, advertisement images, documentary stock, etc.). I have chosen an image (above) that I found on a website called Unsplash. Keep in mind the key search term that you typed in to find your image as it can be useful in analyzing the image in further steps.

For the exercises in this instructable you can follow along with the image that I have chosen, and/or if you so choose conduct your own analysis after!



Step 2: Observe Your Image

Now that you have your image, you can dive right in!

First, write out the key words that come to mind when viewing the photograph. What do you think the image hopes to depict? Here you can also pull out the key search term or tags that you used/ or would use to find your image.

For the photograph that I have chosen, the search term that I used was "mindfulness".

Other terms that come to mind:

- Serenity/ Tranquility/ Peace
- Self Love, Self Reflection, Self Connection
- Individualism, Aloneness
- Independence
- Adventurer

-Escape

-Spirituality

-Thoughts

-Nature connection

The above exercise will provide you with the answer to the question: What reaction the image elicits from you? This is one of the best ways to gauge the purpose(s) of the image. Did you make connections to potential contexts of the image? Yes! You did make connections, think about how you came to the conclusions about selecting key words. Remember we are looking for the "HOW?" How are we reading the messages that we are receiving from the image? We are going to use this exercise in order to get a hold on what this image hopes to achieve. This will essentially allow us to understand the individual elements that compose this overall meaning.



Step 3: Analyzing People

The individual aspects of the image can give insight into where the key ideas in the previous step are derived. These factors can include analyzing the setting, people, activities, perspectives, and objects depicted.

Q: Who is depicted in the image?

Notice the gender, posture, and clothing of the person. Is he facing towards the camera or away? The non-verbal behaviour of the subject is connoted with social ideals leading the viewer to believe that they possess specific traits. This process of encoding and decoding allows for multiple meanings of the image to be produced.

In this photograph:

- A man,
- Appears to be 20-30 years old because of physique

and

- Casual clothing (hoodie, jeans, baseball cap worn backwards) items often worn by boys and young men.
- Clothing and physique essentially allude to youthfulness.
- Slouching back posture = sign of relaxation or unwinding. Crossed legged seating position = meditation, contemplation, relaxation.
- Man is facing away from the camera, he does not engage with the viewer and isolates himself = solitude, disengagement, independence.
- Man is more deeply set into the foreground creating distance between the viewer and subject. = self contemplation, dissimilarity, alienation.



Step 4: Analyzing Setting

Where activities are taking place are relevant in determining the connotations that can be drawn from the image. Spaces are linked to expected affordances built by social and cultural constructions on what can be done in them. Therefore, settings can be extremely valuable in guiding the photograph decoding process.

The man in this case is situated within nature. The composition frames him in such a way that he is surrounded by nature in all directions. This gives the man the connotation that he is distant, even extracted from everyday life. It also reinforces the pre-conditioned meaning of 'connecting with nature'. The horizon defined by the outline of mountains and the direction he faces can connote looking towards a positive future. At the same time, the sunset has the potential to connote the ending of old cycles. The still water that surrounds the individual activates a sort of human sensory resonance with the space. It brings to mind the terms 'tranquility' and 'peace'. The rocks scattered in the still waters act as metaphors both within the physical landscape and as a potential

reflection of the individual's mental space. Overall, the setting influences the mood of the image and frames the context of the outside reflection of desired meanings.

Questions to ask:

- 1) Is the subject placed in nature/outdoors or indoors?
- 2) Is there an environment in which the individual is placed that aligns or disengages with the nonverbal behaviour of the individual?
- 3) Are there any metaphors between symbols in the setting and subject?
- 4) How deeply into the frame is the individual placed? How immersed is the subject to the setting?
- 5) How does the setting contribute to enhancing the potential connotations of the image?



Step 5: Looking at Generics Vs. Specifics

Facial expressions are important indicators of emotion, people often prioritize the face when reading body language. Facial expressions are removed from viewer's access, the individual distances himself from the viewer. Since the man's face is not visible, the mood in the image can range from bliss to sadness, depending on how the image is read and/or manipulated in use. The race of the man is not as clearly decipherable from what is visible of his skin in the image. This indicates a further generalization of the subject portrayed in the image. The man becomes just a figurative representation of a

person and/or concept rather than the focus of specific discourse.

Questions to ask:

1. What is visible? What is invisible?
2. What elements are open to interpretation?
3. What elements are closed off from interpretation or are clearly defined?

Step 6: Looking at Colour

Colours are useful in creating links between various elements that may otherwise be different. They have the ability to influence the mood and therefore the connections and meanings made from it.

To truly understand the way that colour has such a great impact on the connotations that can be derived from the image, you can alter, for example, the hues of various pieces of the image (the sky, the water, the person, etc.). By doing this you will be able to see how connotations perceived from the unaltered image may lean in particular directions than others.

The dimensions of colour that can be analyzed:

- a) Hue
- b) Brightness
- c) Saturation
- d) Purity
- e) Modulation
- f) Luminosity

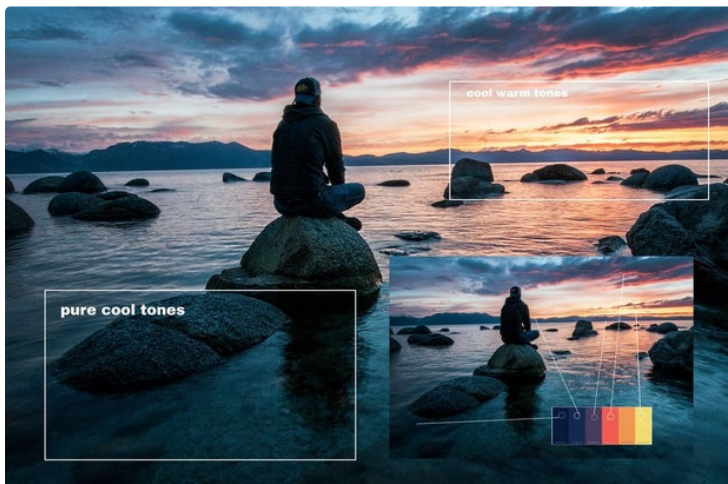
In this image...

The subject is seated and is coloured in such a way that he blends in with the rocks, furthering the assumption of 'connecting with nature'. This is reinforced by the large rock positioned to the right of the image which balances out the visual weight of

man on the rock towards the centre. The image heavily maintains a natural palate of hues, playing with earth tones of moderate to high saturation. The naturally occurring complementary colours of blue and orange, as well as the tonal variations of the primary colours harmonizes the objective elements as it casts reflections of their colour values onto the objects. This is specifically visible in the way that the luminosity of the yellows and oranges in the sunset reflect onto the water and the darker shadows cast as a result encompass the rest of the image, making the rocks and figure appear of similar colour value. These darker areas appear to be reduced in modulation, depth being highlighted by distribution of objects and their size.

Questions to ask:

1. Are warm colours used in the image or cool colours? Which are the most dominant?
2. Do dark tones or light tones have more prominence?
3. How saturated are the colours used (exuberance of colour vs. subtlety)? What about purity?
4. Are there different shades of colours that overlap? Is depth of the image enhanced by the colours? Or is depth reduced by colours?
5. Are there any points of abundant light?



Step 7: Looking at Viewer's Positioning

The way that the viewer can interact with the image can also be guided by the way that they are positioned in relation to the subject of the image. There are two aspects to positioning analysis: 1. the angle (vertical, horizontal, oblique) and 2. Proximity (of the viewer to the subject).

Here, the viewer is distanced from the man, separated by a body of water. The rocks behind him however, compositionally directs the viewer's gaze towards what becomes the focal point. Metaphorically, the rocks positioned behind the man can be interpreted as being a pathway towards his 'state of being'. The subject is seated. The viewer is distant but can choose to interact with the subject as there appears to remain a level of human resonance.

In the photograph, the viewer is positioned to look at the subject from almost eye-level. The angle has the potential to create a narrative of the image. It is as if the viewer is sitting a short distance behind the man, accompanying him both in his thoughts but also in the setting. He is only very slightly raised, as the shot

is taken from slightly below. This addition contributes to the subject's sense of independence, as the viewer observes him at a place of strength (positioned higher than onlooker).

Questions to ask:

1. How far or close is the viewer from the subject in the image?
2. Is the subject being viewed from a high angle (bird's eye view), eye-level, low angle (worm's eye view)?
3. Is the subject being viewed from a vertical angle (indicates: superiority/inferiority, strength/vulnerability, engagement, creativity, etc.), horizontal angle (indicates: detachment, disengagement, aggregation of space, etc.), or oblique angles (indicative of informality, spontaneity, dynamism, etc.)?

