

A Structure for Appreciating Photographs

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Introduction

This paper presents my attempt at devising a system with which students can approach photographs intelligently and appreciatively. It offers a structure for criticizing images with an emphasis on interpretation rather than on evaluation. It can also be applied by those primarily interested in making images.

The first three sections deal with what I think are some common and unique characteristics of photographs: selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility. The fourth section presents overlapping categories to consider differences among photographs. In it, viewers are asked to consider a given photograph as if it functioned analogously as one or more types of language statements and are invited to argue for one interpretation over other plausible interpretations. I believe my categories are superior to such traditional divisions as landscape, still life, nude, portrait, and so forth, in that they recognize significant differences among photographs sharing similar subject matters and do not allow the viewer the false comfort of naming "landscape" or "nude" without considering aspects of its meaning. The categories are more complex than such bipartite classifications as "straight and manipulated" or "mirrors and windows" and resist oversimplification by giving the viewer the advantage of more options. The fifth section discusses various contexts that can be constructed around a photograph for expansion of information that ought to aid understanding and appreciation.

Commonalities:	Differences:	Contexts:
Selectivity	Descriptions	Original
Instantaneity	Explanations	Internal
Credibility	Interpretations	External
	Ethical evaluations	
	Aesthetic evaluations	
	Theoretical photographs	

I. Selectivity

The major problem facing the photographer is choice. Given sufficient light, the universe becomes available: outer space, underwater, the wilderness, the city, the backyard, the body and the face. Adapting the camera to a microscope or telescope, the world closed to the natural unaided eye also becomes visible. Subject matter is everywhere.

If everything is possible, what should be chosen? And what should be expressed about what is chosen? Minor White chose to present the ordinary as extraordinary, while Diane Arbus advanced the extraordinary as commonplace. Some photographers are interested only in documentation while others are only content with transformation. For several a primary motivation has been their ability to present the otherwise inaccessible, to bring people to places they had not reached by other means: Bruce Davidson brought Harlem to White coffee tables, the press brought us to Viet Nam, and the astronauts took us to the moon and the stars; Giles Larrain showed us drag, and Diane Arbus took us to nudist camps, insane asylums, theater backstages, and other places we would not otherwise be allowed.

If photographers are not recognizing significance existing in the world, they are inventing it through imagination. Duane Michals, Lee Krims, and Arthur Tress have not been content to search the outer world but have forcefully turned to imagined experience, selecting and directing as many variables of time and space as possible in the creation of their compelling fictions.

No matter what their predilections toward presenting their views of art and life in photographs, photographers are constantly involved in choices. The contact sheet is a visual metaphor for these choices. Having already made a major choice regarding the world-view they are to inscribe on film, photographers are then confronted with further selection and distillation from the

