8.1 THE PROCESS OF ANALYSING PHOTOGRAPHS

By looking at and studying the different ways artists approach photography, you can learn a lot that will aid you in your own photographic work. It is important that you develop the ability to know what to look for and evaluate what you see. By studying and analysing photographs you can develop an understanding of how different photographers work, what their concerns are, the techniques they use and their influences, as well as gaining an awareness of what makes a successful photograph.

Every day we are confronted with hundreds of photographic images in newspapers, magazines, books, on television, or on billboards. We accept photographs as part of our daily lives and often flick past these images without even noticing them. However, if we want to develop a better understanding of the artistic approach to photography we must learn to look more closely at photographs. We need to establish a procedure that will help us to evaluate the photographic images we see. Following is a good procedure to use when analysing a photograph.

PROCEDURE FOR ANALYSING A PHOTOGRAPH

Describe the photograph

Your description should include the title, artist’s name, date of the work and a detailed description of what is in the photograph, including the main subject matter and what is in the background and foreground. Describe the picture so that someone who has never seen the photograph can visualise what is in it by reading your description.

Analyse the techniques used

Discuss how the artwork was made, including the techniques, equipment and materials used. Has the image been manipulated? Was it photographed in a studio or outside? How has the photograph been lit? What type of film has been used? What kind of process was used to print the image?

Analyse the design features

Discuss how the photographer has used the six elements of design. How has the composition of the picture been structured? What are the most relevant design elements and principles in the photograph?

The meaning and/or intention of the artwork

What was the photographer trying to achieve by producing this photograph? Was the artist trying to tell a story, or make a comment or judgement? Was the artist primarily concerned with capturing images in nature, or concerned with creating their own image?

Look for clues when analysing photographs. Everything from the title of the work to the subject matter, date and the way it has been photographed will give you some idea of what the artist was trying to achieve.

Evaluate the artwork

What are the qualities of the photograph? What are the successful and unsuccessful elements in the photograph? Has the artist been influenced by photographic traditions? If so, how? Do you like the photograph? Is it considered an important photograph? Why/why not?
In your studies of Photographic and Digital Media work, you will need to be able to analyse photographs you have studied. More specifically, you will need to be able to both speak and write about photographic and digital images. The following pages contain a series of questions or guidelines you may use when analysing a photograph through the process of Description, Analysis, Interpretation and Evaluation.

### 1. CATALOGUE INFORMATION
This information is basic to all photographs and very important when first contextualising the image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Artist / Photographer</th>
<th>Date Produced</th>
<th>Dimensions (where possible)</th>
<th>Print Media / Processes (where possible)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### 2. DESCRIPTION
The first step in visual analysis is *Description*. Descriptions should remain objective, discussing what can be seen without drawing conclusions. When describing a photograph, we can talk about:

**a) SUBJECT MATTER**

What is the major subject of the work?
- Portrait
- Landscape / Cityscape / Seascape
- Still life
- Figurative / Nude
- Fantasy
- Interior Spaces
- Design

**b) THEMES**

What themes are evident in the work?
(Below are some examples)
- The environment
- Social Comment
- Movement
- Pastimes/sport/leisure
- Love / Relationships
- Heroism
- Non objective (no reference to anything real thing)
- Religion
- Beauty
- Conflict
- Events / Happenings (real or ‘constructed’)
- Emotional states (Joy, Fear, Anxiety)

**c) PLACEMENT**

Describe what is happening in the photo and where the subjects/elements in the work are situated?
- Foreground
- Background
- Centre
- Top Right/Left
- Middleground
- Right-hand side
- Left-hand side
- Bottom Right/Left

**d) STYLE and REPRESENTATION**

Consider how the subject is represented.
- Naturalistic / Straight Photography
- Semi-Abstract
- Abstract
- Non Representational
- Does the photographer work within the conventions of any style or movement?
- Contemporary – Postmodern – Pop –Surrealist

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3. ANALYSIS
An Analysis of a photograph could be based on:
a) The Techniques, Equipment and Processes
b) The Design Elements and Compositional Devices.

a) Techniques, Equipment and Processes

i) How was the photograph made?
   What Processes were used?
   - Collotype
   - Dauerreotype
   - Black and White Gelatin Silver Photograph
   - Polaroid
   - Digital Print on Paper / Canvas etc.

ii) Has the image been manipulated?
   What Techniques were used?
   - Hand Colouring
   - Sepia Toning
   - Super Imposing
   - Negative Image
   - Digitally (through the use Colour Adjustments, Filters and Layers)

iii) What Equipment was used
     How has the image been lit?
     - 35mm Camera
     - Medium Format Camera
     - Digital SLR
     - Natural Light
     - Artificial Light
     - Studio Lights
     - Flash etc.

iv) Focus and Depth of Field? Has the artists photographed his work to achieve any of the following:
   - A clear, sharp image
   - A soft focus image
   - Large Depth of Field
   - Short Depth of Field
   - Frozen Motion
   - Blurred Motion
b) Design Elements

i) Line – What kind of Lines are used?

A line can be straight, curved, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, or zigzag. Lines imply motion and suggest direction or orientation. A line can also be implied, that is filled in by the mind when several points are positioned geometrically within a frame. Horizontal lines imply tranquility and rest, whereas vertical lines imply power and strength. Oblique lines imply movement, action and change. Curved lines or S shaped lines imply quiet, calm and sensual feelings. Lines that converge imply depth, scale and distance – a fence or roadway converges into the distance provides the illusion that a flat two-dimensional image has three-dimensional depth.

ii) Texture – What texture is evident?

Texture refers to the surface quality or “feel” of an object – smooth, rough, soft, sharp, prickly, grainy, furry, etc. Textures may be actual (felt with touch – tactile) or implied (suggested by the way an artist has created the work of art – visual). Texture is often emphasized in oblique lighting as it strikes the objects from one side.

iii) Colour – How has Colour been used?

Analysing colour in Photographs can be complex. Here are some things to look for and discuss in relation to Colour when analysing a photograph.

Photographs can be black and white or monochromatic in color. Monochromatic refers the use of one color where only the value of the color changes, that is, it gets brighter or darker.

Value refers to the brightness and darkness of the color. Colours can be intense or subdued.

Colors are called warm or cool because of our association with various elements in our surroundings. Red, yellow and orange are considered warm colors whereas blue, green and violet are considered cool colors. Photographers can position different colors in an image to maximize contrast between them and also to provide perspective. Perceptually, cool colors tend to recede into the distance whereas warm colors appear to advance.

iv) Shapes – What kind of shapes are used?

Shapes are the result of closed lines. However shapes can be visible without lines when an artist establishes a color area or an arrangement of objects within the camera’s viewfinder. Some primary shapes include circles, squares, triangles and hexagons all of which appear in nature in some form or another. Shapes can also be organic or geometric.

v) Space – What kind of space does the photograph contain?

- Deep Space (looks like you can see a long way)
- Shallow Space (looks like you cannot see very far)
- Flat Space (looks like there is no/very little depth)

Space is defined and determined by shapes and forms. Positive space is where shapes and forms exist; negative space is the empty space around shapes and forms. For images to have a sense of balance positive and negative space can be used to counter balance each other.
vi) Tone – How has the tone been used?
- Highly Contrasted (mainly black and white)
- Variety of Tones (black, white and a number of grey tones)
- Limited Tonal Use (appears to be mainly one tone)
- High Key (mainly pale tones)

c) Composition

Composition in photography refers to the organizing of various elements within the frame of the viewfinder. Here are some points on composition you may discuss when analysing a photograph.

i) Vantage Point – The vantage point can generally be discussed when a photograph has been taken from an unusual or exaggerated angle.

ii) Dominance and Subordination (Emphasis)
- What is the Focal Point?
- What parts of the picture are dominant? (stand out more than others)
- What parts of the picture are subordinate? (are of less interest)
- How is this achieved? (size, colour, location etc)

iii) Is the image visually Balanced?
Balance implies that the visual elements within the frame have a sense of weight. Large objects generally weigh more than small objects and dark objects weigh more than light colored objects. The position of the elements is also critical.

Positive space is where shapes and forms exist.
Negative space is the empty space around shapes and forms. Areas of a picture that contain “nothing” are important visual elements that provide balance in an image.

- How is balance achieved?
- Is the Balance symmetrical / asymmetrical

iv) Rhythm
- What elements are repeated in the work?
In photography the repetition of similar shapes sets up a rhythm that makes seeing easier and more enjoyable. Rhythm is soothing and our eyes beg to follow rhythmic patterns.

v) Framing – This is what the photographer places within the boundaries of the photograph.

- Describe the edges of the image.
- What is included?
- What does the framing draw your attention to in the photograph?

vi) Contrast

Contrast refers to strong visual differences between light and dark, varying textures, sizes, etc.

- Do you see any contrasting elements in the photograph?
When considering the Function and Intention of a Photograph, one can ask: ‘Is the Photograph...’

- recording/documenting an event?
- capturing images in nature?
- reflecting an artistic idea?
- photographing something beautiful?
- attempting to get a reaction from the viewer?
- commenting on an issue?
- expressing a feeling?
- exploring the elements/principles of design?
- creating something beautiful?
- a narrative (telling a story)?

Considering the Meaning of a Photograph is often complex. Personal reactions/responses are often a valid way of interpreting meaning in photographic works. However, meaning can also be derived from an intimate knowledge of the artist/photographer (and their work) gained through research and an understanding of the photographic in both historical and contemporary contexts.

All photographs and artworks have many layers of meaning. Meaning is never fixed. It can shift and change for different people in different times and places. Subjective, structural, cultural and postmodern interpretative frameworks help us understand the many layers of meaning in a photograph.

When interpreting a photograph in a subjective context or through the subjective frame, we consider the feelings and imaginings associated with the image. We can interpret a photograph subjectively even without any knowledge of the artist or artwork and we can ask the following questions:

- How has the Artist/Photographer used his or her imagination?
- What feelings do I think the Artist/Photographer is trying to communicate?
- How does it make me feel?

When interpreting a photograph in a structural context or through the structural frame, we are concerned with how the photographer has combined the elements and principles of design in their photographic work. More specifically, we are concerned with how these elements are often used by artists as symbols that express ideas they wish to communicate. We can ask:

- Why has the Artist/Photographer drawn our attention to certain elements of design; such as colour, line, tone or pattern?
- Has the Artist used any symbols in the work? If so, what are they and what might they mean?

When interpreting a photograph in a cultural context or through the cultural frame, we are concerned with how the photographer has been influenced by when and where the image was made. Artists/photographers are often influenced by the events that happen around them. When trying to understand an artwork through the cultural frame, we can ask the following questions:

- When was the artwork made?
- What was happening in the world around the Artist when he/she made the artwork?
- What important events and or issues does the artwork refer to?
- How does the artwork suggest the time it was made?

When interpreting a photograph in a postmodern context or through the postmodern frame, we are concerned with how the work borrows or appropriates previously existing images either throughout history or contemporary culture.

- How/why has the Artist borrowed from or referred to another artwork/image in time?
- What has the Artist changed? How has the Artist changed it?

5. EVALUATION
Evaluating a photograph implies making a value judgment about the work. Judgment can be based on personal opinion, but more informed judgments will take into consideration:

- Technical Proficiency,
- Utilisation/Manipulation of the Elements and Principles of Design,
- Communication of Message / Meaning,
- Intention of the Artist / Photographer

When evaluating a photographic work you may ask:

- What do you like / dislike about the photograph? Why / Why not?
- Is there a strong sense of composition?
- Have the Elements and Principles of Design been used successfully? How?
- Is the work successful / unsuccessful in communicating the artist's intentions/meanings?
  - How is this done; subtly? overtly?
- Is the meaning clear and obvious/subtle or sustained?
- How well has the artist used Materials, Equipment and Processes (analogue/digital)?
- Do you like the work? Why/Why not

‘Cathedral’ by David Lachapelle, 2007