

What Makes a Great Image?

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Part 1 - Introduction

Making Great Images

“There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.”

Ansel Adams

What are the characteristics of a good image?

1. The image catches the eye of the viewer
2. The image keeps viewer attention after capturing the attention
3. Is timeless as the viewer keeps coming back to look at it

Evaluating an Image*

1. Technical

- Technical choices
- Technical execution

2. Organizational

- How the elements of the image are arranged

3. Emotional

- Impact on the viewer

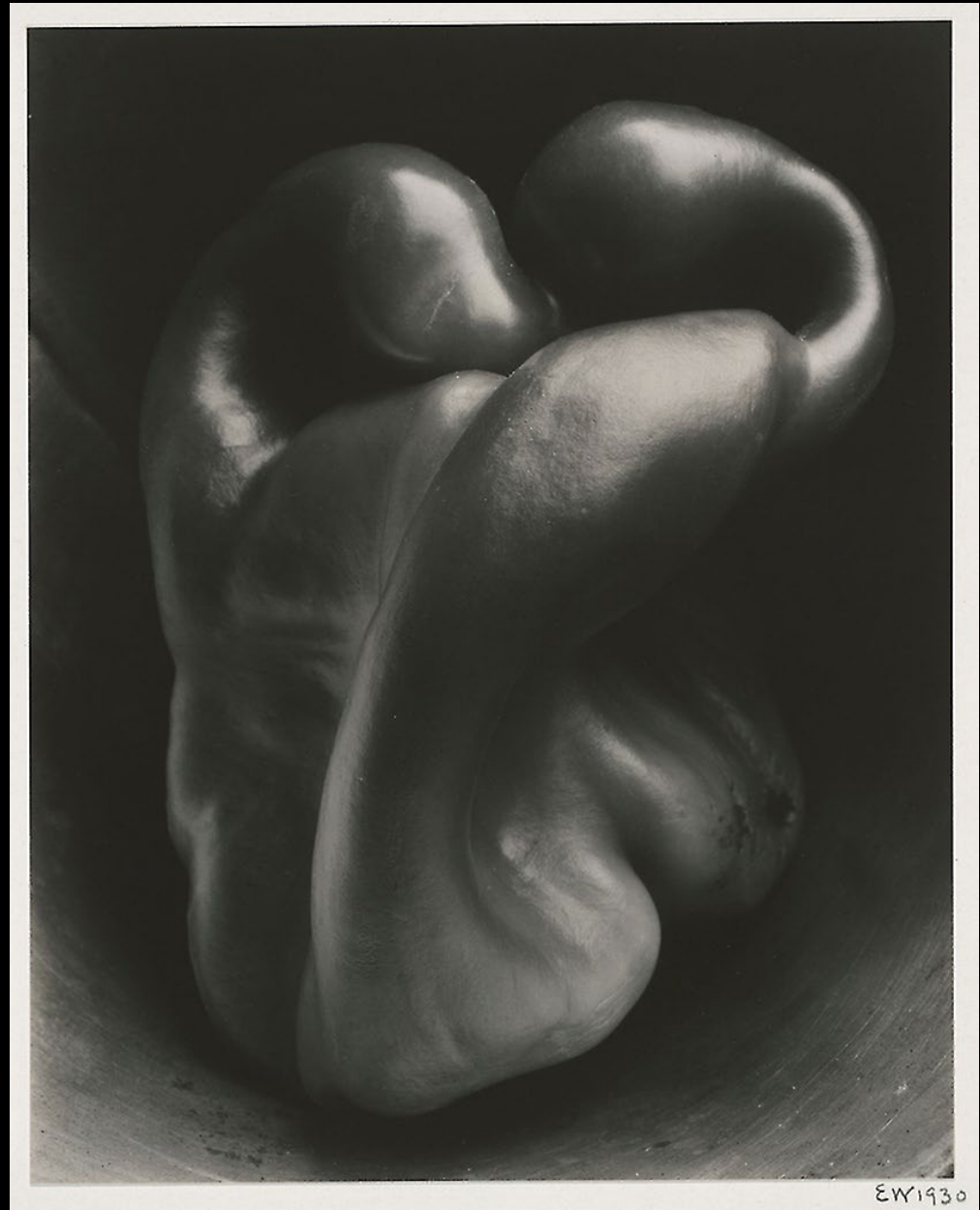
* Note – these evaluation criteria are based on the CAPA Judging Manual

Great images that have influenced me

- This is a very tiny subset of images that have influenced my own work
 - In some cases I try to incorporate the ideas into my own work
 - Others show examples that are not to my taste and something that I avoid
- All are by highly recognized and influential photographers both past and present.
- Not everyone will be impressed by any or all of these images.

Edward Weston

"Pepper #30" - 1930



Henri Cartier-Bresson

“A Man rides his bicycle through the Var Department, France” 1932



Yousef Karsh

“The Roaring Lion” - 1941



Ansel Adams

"The Tetons and the Snake River" - 1942



Robert Capa

Omaha Beach - 1944



Andreas Gursky

“Rhein II” - 1999



Edward Burtynsky

“Iberia Quarries #8 Cochicho Co., Pardais, Portugal, 2006”



Evaluation Criteria

1. Technical

Easiest to master

2. Organizational

More difficult to master

3. Emotional

Most challenging to master

Questions?

Part 2 - Straight Out of Camera (SOOC)

Can you get a great image straight out of camera?

Final Version – Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico



Straight out of Camera – Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico



SOOC Images

The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance.

Ansel Adams

Questions?

Example Images

- All images used in the rest of this presentation come from my personal images.

Part 3 - Technical

- This is the first aspect of photography that people will master

Technical Criteria

- When we look at the technical considerations that the photographer made, we look at these decisions in two different ways:
 1. Was the technical aspect appropriate for the image we are evaluating?; and
 2. Was the technique executed appropriately?
- We look at this from both”
 - The image capture; and
 - The post-processing.

Technical

- Colour
- Light
- Exposure
- Sharpness
- Technique

Technical - Colour

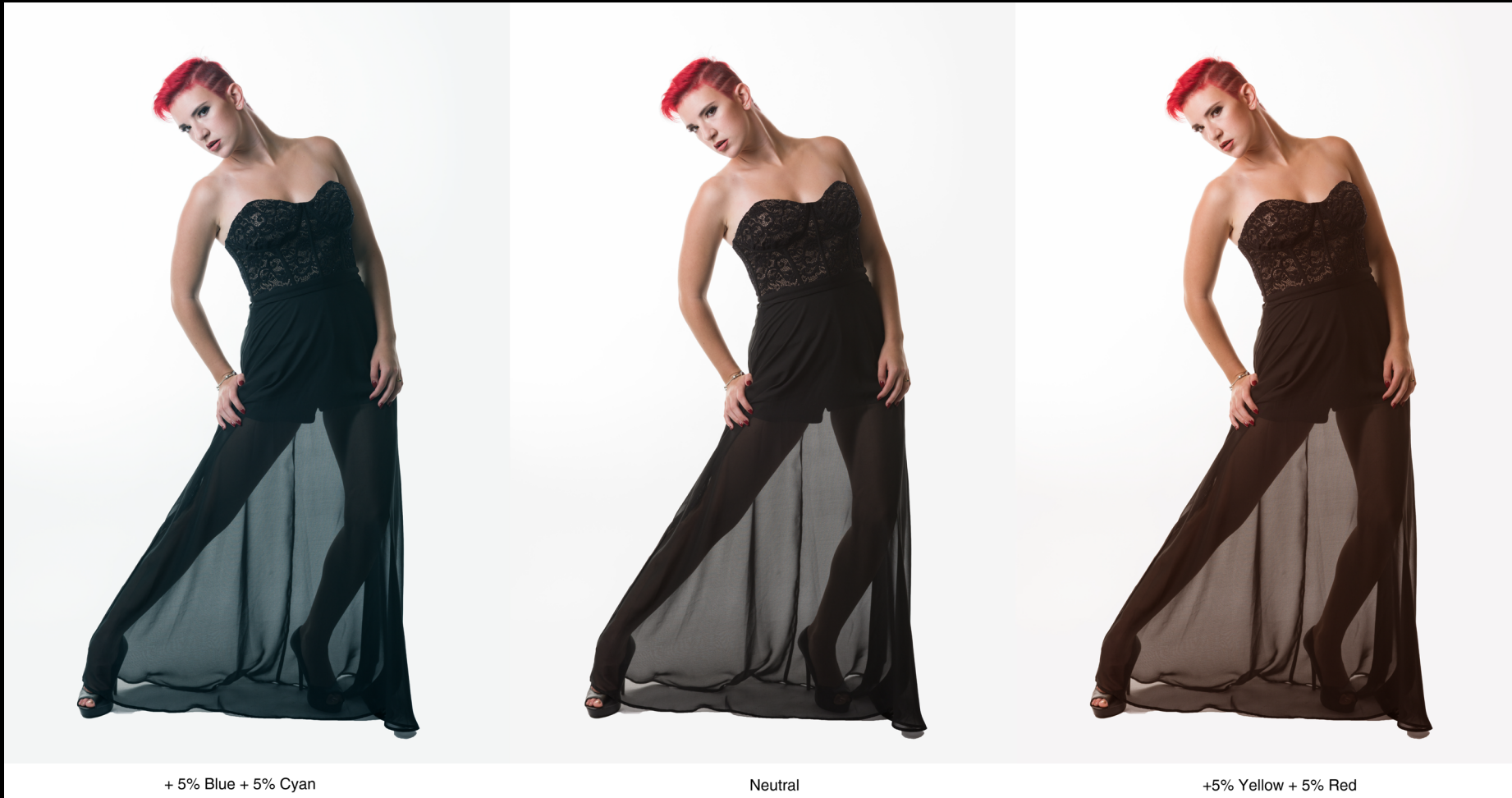
“Colour is an opinion”

Michael Tardioli

Technical - Colour

- White Balance / Colour Temperature
 - Has this been handled appropriately (Colour Cast)
- Psychological Aspects of Colour
 - Warm / Neutral / Cool
- Monochrome (B&W) versus Colour
- Colour Harmonies / Colour Grading – will not be discussed

Colour Cast



Colour vs Monochrome



Colour vs Monochrome



Technical - Light

- When we discuss light in photography, we generally look at three key aspects:
 1. Quality of light
 2. Direction of light
 3. Quantity of light

Soft Light – Golden hour





Soft light – Photo Studio

Soft Light – overcast day



Hard light – Natural Light



Hard light – Studio Light



Technical - exposure



Exposure – Dodging & Burning

Dodging and **burning** are steps to take care of mistakes God made in establishing tonal relationships.

Ansel Adams

Dodging & Burning - Original



Dodging & Burning - Final



Dodging & Burning - Original



Dodging & Burning - Final



Sharpness

- What is sharpness?
 - It is the level of detail achieved in an image.
- What defines sharpness?
 - The equipment used – lenses, tripods.
 - Focus
 - Depth of field
 - Shutter speed
 - Aperture
 - Post-processing techniques
 - Focus stacking
 - Sharpening – does not increase sharpness but increases microcontrast.

Does an image have to be sharp?

- It depends
 - All of it can be sharp
 - Some of it can be sharp
 - None of it has to be sharp.

Sharpness – foreground to background



Sharpness – partial

(Shallow depth of field)



Sharpness – no sharpness

(Intentional camera movement)



Sharpness – Long Exposure / Motion Blur



Foggy / misty scenes are not sharp



Sharpness – foreground must be sharp



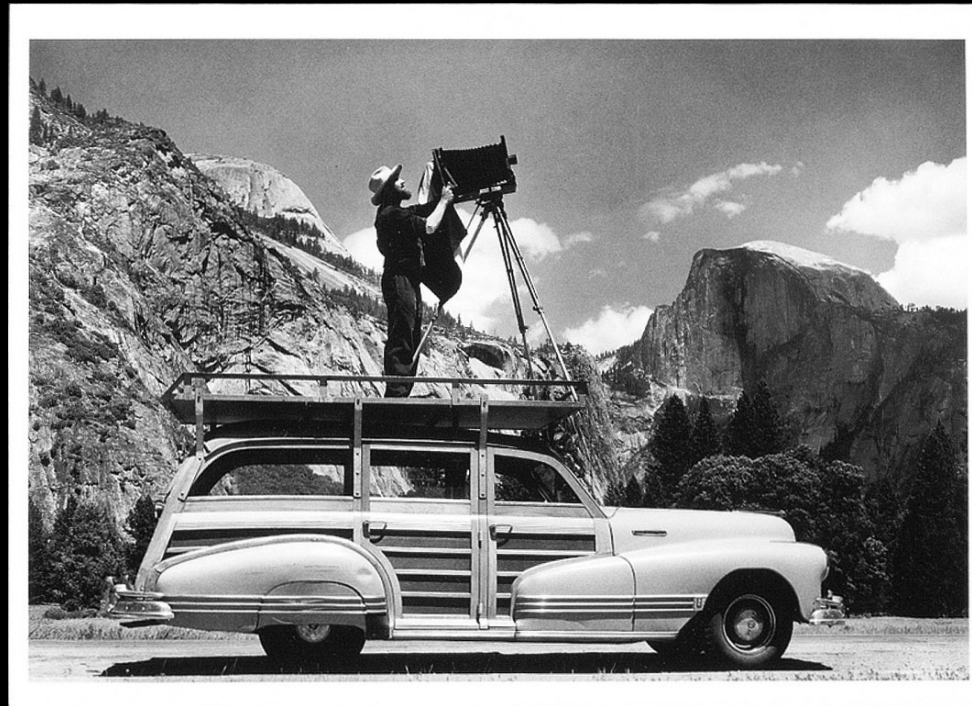
Eyes must be sharp

The eye closest to the camera must be sharp



Technique

- Most pictures are taken with the camera at eye level



Shoot up!



Shoot down!



Long Exposure / Night



Panning / Motion Blur



Dutch Tilt



Questions?

Part 4 - Organization

- Once people have started to master the technical aspects of photography, they tend to start working on how the elements in their work is organized
- Many people view this as “composition”, but it is more than just composition

Organization

- **Distractions**

- Contrast
- Edge of frame

- **Space**

- Appropriate amount of “negative space”
- Appropriate amount of space / position around the edges of the frame
- Positioning the subject in the frame.

- **Composition**

- Does not mean following “Rules of Composition”
- Guiding the viewer through the image

Distractions

- The human visual system is keyed to notice:
 - Bright areas
 - Areas of high contrast
- Distracting elements tend to be:
 - Bright areas
 - Areas of high contrast
 - Especially when they lead to the edge of the frame or cross the edge of the frame

Distractions

- Eliminate distractions while framing the image
- Eliminate distractions while post-processing by cropping appropriately
- Remove distracting elements by:
 - Cloning them out
 - Dodging and / or burning to reduce their impact
- “Calm” areas of high contrast through:
 - Dodging and / or burning

Distractions - Before



Distractions - Markup



Distractions - After



The sky is often a distracting element



No sky – no distraction



Space

- Space is all about what surrounds the subject or centre of interest of the image

Negative Space





Original Image



Hard Crop on Right



Negative
Space on
Right



Closeup

Get in close!

If your image isn't good enough, you're not close enough.

Robert Capa

Get in Close!



Composition – Progression of a Photographer

- Novice

- My images are not as good as I would hope. I'm going to have to learn the "Rules of Composition" and apply them in my work

- Intermediate level

- My images are getting better, but are still not great.
 - I know the "Rules of Composition" but they don't always work

- Advanced

- Following the "Rules of Composition" does not give me the strong images I know I can make. I ignore the so called "rules" and go with experience.

Composition – Advanced Photographers

Consulting the rules of composition before taking a photograph, is like consulting the laws of gravity before going for a walk.

Edward Weston

Experienced photographers recognize strong a composition without the need to consult a list of “rules”

Composition

- Composition is how the image elements are arranged in the picture.
- Many of the “rules of composition” are little more than using the basic principles of using other underlying principles of photography
- There are many books and videos on the topic.
 - Buyer beware! Some have misleading advice...
 - Composition does not follow a “cookbook” or formula approach

Rule of thirds

The Rule of Thirds has been frustrating fine artists since 1797 when a mediocre landscape artist named John Thomas Smith misinterpreted a reference by Sir Joshua Reynolds that in a work with areas of light and dark it is best that one dominate.

The rule of thirds has become myth and a crutch since.

Harry Turner

Questions?

Part 5 - Emotional

- In my view, this is the most challenging aspect of photography to master and many photographers never get there.
- This is what differentiates a good image from a great image.

Emotional

- Mood
 - What mood is conveyed in the image
- Impact
 - Connection of the viewer with the image
- Subject
 - Choice of subject can have a positive or negative impact on the viewer
- Imagination
 - Unusual approach, technique or subject

Mood

- Lighting and colours impact the mood
- Warm tones tend to be inviting
 - Yellow, orange and red
- Cool tones tend to be less inviting
 - Blues and cyans
- High key and low key images also impact mood
- Light quality, quantity and direction affect mood

Warm Tones



Cool Tones - Blue hour



Exposure – High Key



Exposure – Low Key



Impact

- Connection between the viewer and the image
 - Is very personal
- People, pets and wildlife often have strong impact
- Dangerous situations and creatures have strong impact
- Stunning scenery has an impact

- Something familiar or common place will often have low impact

Composite Image

- Woman with gasmask on her head
- Entrance tunnel of Diefenbunker



Looking down from a bridge at a large caiman in the water near the Iguazu Falls, Argentina



Hill on the Salar de Chaguna salt flats, Bolivia



Subject

- Personal connections with a specific topic can bring out strong emotional reaction
 - Wedding or baby photographers sell their work primarily because the subject is important to us
 - Impact may be limited to people who know the subject!
- Something that is familiar will often have limited impact
 - No one in Ottawa gets excited by a picture of a squirrel
 - Or the Parliament Buildings...

One year old on a bench



Chateau Laurier Hotel
taken with a shift-tilt
lens and long exposure
of an OC Transpo
double-decker bus going
by



Three yellow hat (Gelug school) Buddhist monks at a winter festival in Northern India



Imagination

- Unusual approach, technique or subject

Do these images demonstrate imagination?









Final Words

Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

Questions?