Part III

Beyond Language Pedagogy
Language Awareness and Multimodality
A Social Semiotic Approach to Visual Composition

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Introduction
In this paper, I extend the idea of ‘language awareness’ to the practice of everyday photography and the meanings of the photographic image, with specific reference to visual composition.

In our book Reading Images (2006), Kress and I developed an explicit grammar to describe how images, photographic or otherwise, use composition to make meaning. In every composition, we argued, three systems are simultaneously deployed. The first, ‘information value’, is expressed through the placement of the depicted people and things in the composition. If there is some kind of contrast between two depicted elements and one of them is placed on the left, the other on the right, then the left element is Given, deemed to be already familiar to the viewer, while the right element is New, providing new information and therefore constituting the crux of the message to which the viewer should pay special attention. Similarly, if, of two contrasting elements, one is placed in the upper and one in the lower half of the image, then the top element is positioned as the Ideal, the generalized or abstract essence of the message, the bottom half as the Real, complementing the Ideal with more detailed or factual or practical information. Compositions can also be centred, in which case the Centred element represents the core of the message and the marginal elements are in some sense dependent on it, or complementary to it. These three sub-systems – Given-New, Ideal-Real and Centre-Margin – can then be combined in different ways.

The second compositional system we identified is salience, the degree to which different elements are made eye-catching, and therefore the degree to which they are made important for the message the image is trying to get across. This can be expressed in a number of ways, for instance through size, through being placed in the foreground, through being in sharper focus, or through tones or colours that stand out from the immediate environment of a salient element.
The third compositional element is framing, the degree to which different elements are connected to each other, or disconnected from each other, and thereby either positioned as ‘separate’ elements or as in some way ‘belonging together’. This can be expressed by dividing lines or frames formed by depicted objects – a lamp post between two people who are perhaps looking in different directions, a window forming a frame within the frame, and so on, or through strong contrasts in the tone or colour of the background behind depicted elements. Connection, ‘belonging together’, can be created by the absence of frame lines or frames within the frame, or by visual rhymes – repetitions of shapes or colours.

These compositional systems are necessarily used in every photograph. But most everyday photographers will not be able to explicitly formulate why they decide to compose their pictures the way they do. Almost everybody is a photographer now, but few have received even the most rudimentary formal training. In the early days of amateur photography, in the late 19th century, Kodak told people “You press the button, we do the rest” and the little technical knowledge needed to use today’s mobile phone cameras is meant to be ‘intuitive’ rather than explicit. Yet, in watching everyday photographers take their family photos, their selfies and their holiday pictures, we can observe a confident compositional know-how – that moment of intense concentration as they position themselves in relation to what they are about to photograph and look through the viewfinder or at the screen of their mobile phone to decide whether what they see there is ‘right’ for the occasion.

In exploring the ‘composition awareness’ that lies behind such decisions, I will combine two theoretical approaches. The first is Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977), in which he makes a categorical distinction between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’, arguing that the relation between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’ depends on context, and, especially, on social class, as people from different social classes have differential access to explicit knowledge, and different appreciations of the explicit knowledges they may be aware of.

The second approach is a theory of normative discourses (van Leeuwen, 2005). While the observable regularity of everyday compositional practices derives in part from conformity, from the imitation of images made by their friends and relatives or seen in the media, most everyday photographers are also exposed to normative discourses, and these may be of different kinds – hard and fast rules, expert advice, best practice models, coffee-table books about famous photographers, courses, online tutorials, mobile phone advertisements suggesting what photos to take with it and how, and so on. I will also argue that there are, at the origin of every practice, explicit normative discourses and legitimations, and that, in the case of everyday photography, these have been in particular created by advertising campaigns for cameras and film in the days that easy-to-use cameras began to be mass-marketed. It is only later that ‘genesis amnesia’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 79) occurs, as practices become accepted traditions and no longer need explicit formulation.

Practical Knowledge

In Outline of a theory of practice (1977), Bourdieu made a categorical distinction between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’. The know-how applied in everyday practices, he argued, is not based on rules that, if made explicit, could predict what people will do, but on ‘habitus’, on broad, flexible principles that allow creative adaptation to unforeseen
and ever-changing situations, “schemes of thought and expression” that form “the basis for the intentionless invention of regulated improvisation” (p. 79). People are aware of these principles without necessarily being able to formulate them explicitly. Practical know-how, as Bourdieu put it, is a _docta ignorantia_, a ‘learned ignorance’. At most it will be expressed in sayings and proverbs, and in the “spontaneous ‘theories’ which accompany even the most automatic practices” (p. 20). Thus practices can be regular without needing to be regulated (or ‘managed’, as we say today). They are “collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (p. 72).

Outsider knowledge, on the other hand, ‘knowing that’, seeks to formulate explicit rules. When people are asked to make their practices explicit, they will therefore try to produce a ‘semi-learned’ discourse, “drawing on the vocabularies of rules”, which “conceals, even from their own eyes, that their practice in fact obeys quite different principles” (p. 19). Something similar occurs when practices are formally taught, when “the master must bring to the state of explicitness, for purposes of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice”, often focusing only on the most highly valued features of practices, or the most crucial ‘do’s and don’ts’ and leaving many other things unsaid, to be learnt through experience and exposure to examples.

Bourdieu derived these ideas from his anthropological work in the Atlas mountains of Algeria. But they apply to many other practices, for instance the practices of media professionals. In a study of (studio-based) television news interviews (1994), Bell and I found that our description of interviews as structured by a common pattern (‘greeting’, ‘soliciting opinion’, ‘fact checking’, ‘challenging’, ‘entrapment’ and ‘release’, all expressed by specific kinds of questions and statements) was flatly rejected by media interviewers. In the words of the late ABC presenter Paul Lyneham:

> Your analysis is an outsider’s analysis that seeks to codify and make neat theorems about something that is a great deal more random, spontaneous and haphazard in the reality of doing it (...) When you draw out your charts of sequential ideas, and so forth, the implication, I think, can be drawn that the whole thing is a great deal more consciously planned than it really is. I am listening intently and trying to develop the idea, to flush them out from the things they are saying.

_Bell and van Leeuwen, 1994: 173–174_

And Boyd-Barrett (1974: 181), in a study of journalism recruitment and training, found that “there is no system of abstract propositions to which new recruits are exposed and without which they cannot practice”. But what media professionals such as Lyneham _are_ aware of and _do_ explicitly formulate, however, are the principles and values that constitute their professional habitus as interviewers: ‘informing the viewer’, ‘listening intently’, ‘challenging’ interviewees through ‘hard’, ‘robust’ questioning, and so on.

According to Bourdieu, habitus is, to a large degree, formed by imitating other people’s actions, in an immediate transfer from practice to practice, without verbal instruction or explanation. Embodiment plays a particularly important role in this process, close attention to dress, gestures, postures – “a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech” (p. 87). The fundamental principles of the habitus therefore form a kind of knowledge that fuses feeling and thinking. This again applies also to professional practices such as those of media presenters – and to the practice of everyday photography. As Arnheim has shown (1982: 92), visual composition is intricately
related to our sense of balance, our intuitive ability to judge the ‘visual weight’ of the elements of a composition and to move them around (or to move the camera) until they ‘balance’ around a ‘balancing centre’, an ‘invisible pivot’ (Arnheim, 1982), in the same way the parts of a mobile balance around the point from which they are suspended. From this derives our sense that everything is in the ‘right’ place in a composition. Literal balance can then become figurative balance – ‘equilibrium’, ‘stability’, and so on, and lack of balance can signify the opposite. As Arnheim has said (p. 153), visual order, the sense that everything is in the ‘right place’, “serves no purpose unless the constellation thus balanced represents a ‘theme’”.

Composition also relates to everyday nonverbal interaction – the distance we keep from people we relate to, the way we angle our bodies in relation to those of others, and so on. Bourdieu writes about the importance of frontality in wedding photos from rural areas in France (1990: 81–83). These photographs, he says:

…show people face on, in the centre of the picture, standing up, at a respectful distance, motionless and in a dignified attitude (and this) spontaneous desire for frontality is linked to the most deep-rooted cultural values. Honour demands that one poses for the photograph as one would stand before a man whom one respects and from whom one expects respect.

*Bourdieu, 1990*

The composition of group photographs (and today also of the identity-oriented individual photograph, the ‘selfie’) thus fulfils important social functions. Group photographs represent social cohesion, the way the social roles and functions within families, groups of friends, schools and workplaces are integrated (“mother or father or fiancé, the photograph must show them as such”, Bourdieu, 1990: 82). They create equality or hierarchy, centre on what is considered central and marginalize what is considered marginal, and so on – all this on the basis of a sense of the social order that is never explicitly formulated. And everyday photography also marks special events such as weddings, and breaks from the everyday environment, through holiday photos that document “the encounter between a person and a consecrated place, between an exceptional moment in one’s life and a place that is exceptional by virtue of its high symbolic yield” (p. 36), again without this symbolism ever being verbalized – the values they express belong to people’s ‘natural’, taken for granted world.

**Genesis Amnesia**

Although Bourdieu’s theory convincingly explains the ontogenesis of habitus in people’s lives, it does not explain its phylogenesis. On the basis of historical studies of media practices (e.g. Bell and van Leeuwen, 1994; Boeriis and van Leeuwen, 2016; van Leeuwen, 2016), I have come to believe that, in their initial stages, practices are in fact always explicitly formulated and legitimated, whether in the course of prolonged trial and error processes or in detailed plans for the strategic introduction of new practices, for instance through advertising campaigns such as those of Eastman Kodak in the early days of amateur photograph (and those of Apple, Sony and others today). It is only later, once the practices have become well established, that they become traditions that are experienced as ‘natural’, self-evident, ‘always having been there’, and not in need of explicit formulation.
Professional media practices such as radio and television announcing, reporting and interviewing are, again, a case in point. The media historian David Cardiff (1980) has described how late 1920s BBC radio programmers and presenters became aware that the new medium of radio should adapt public speech to its reception in the listeners’ living rooms, and began to experiment with scripts that contained deliberate hesitations, with fully scripted vox pops which, for a small remuneration, were read in the studio by London taxi drivers with a ‘cockney’ accent, and with forerunners of the interview such as the interlarding of long speeches with scripted questions and comments from an ‘interlocutor’. Leitner (1980), similarly, described how, during the same period, Goebbels told German radio announcers to use local dialects and “sound like the listener’s best friend” – all in the name of developing a ‘conversational style’, and Barnouw (1966) has described similar experiments in the United States, including Roosevelt’s famous ‘fireside chats’.

To develop such new practices, explicit proposals and explicit legitimations are needed. But as they become more entrenched, and as new generations enter the profession, scripts are no longer needed and media practices begin to be learnt ‘on the job’, by osmosis, their origins forgotten in what Bourdieu has called ‘genesis amnesia’: “the ‘unconscious’ is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of habitus” (1977: 79). Often a new origin, further back in time, is invented, for instance by tracing media interviews (and research interviews) back to Socrates. In 2015, politicians everywhere celebrated the Magna Carta, which dates from 1215, as the origin of practices such as habeas corpus jury trial, equality before the law, the independence of the judiciary, and so on – all of which did not in fact emerge until much later (Krygier, 2015).

A similar process lies behind everyday habits of dress, eating, and so on in families. Many of the habits that were inculcated in me as a child go back to the cultural revolution that took place in the Netherlands in the 17th century and were, at the time, explicitly formulated by Jacob Cats, a poet and politician who produced rhyming aphorisms such as ‘De vijgh eyst water, persick wijn / soo moet dat ooft gegeten zijn’ (the fig requires water, the peach, wine / this is how that fruit should be eaten), or ‘zuivel op zuivel, dat is de duivel’ (dairy on dairy, that is the devil). His verses helped consolidate what would become the Dutch ‘habitus’ of down-to-earth practical-mindedness that is still in evidence today, for instance ‘die sich laet eere doen meer als het hem betaemt, is weert geweldigh trots, of geck te syn genaemt’ (who allows himself to receive more praise than he deserves, should either be called arrogant or mad).

But over the past half-century, many practices that used to be learnt without formal instruction have come to be taught formally, or semi-formally. This transforms them, creating general rules where previously none existed, so that only experience and the study of examples could lead to mastery. Practices of media production, for instance, began to be taught in many universities, and textbooks such as those by Herbert (1976) and Evans (1977) laid the groundwork for what today is even more widely accessible through online courses such as Wikihow (www.wikihow.com/Read-and-Speak-Like-a-TV-News-Reporter), Howcast (www.howcast.com/videos/42641-how-to-talk-like-a-newscaster) and LiveScience (www.livescience.com/33532-tv-announcers-voice.html), which purport to teach “how to read and speak like a news reporter” (WikiHow). In many ways, these textbooks and online courses still foreground principles and values rather than detailed techniques – ‘confidence’,

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conviction’, ‘authority’, as well as ‘friendliness’ and a ‘conversational style’ (“Use a conversational but authoritative voice”), for instance – and much of the detail of the actual habitual speech patterns, modes of questioning and so on, is left implicit, to be ‘picked up’ by studying examples.

However, when practices are automatized, as is increasingly the case today, rules must take the form of algorithms that cover every detail. This is already happening with short news items and public announcements, for instance with the Mac OS X operating system which “flawlessly converts text to clear, easy to understand speech” (acapela, www.acapela-group.com). Like all digital technologies, such technologies are on the one hand global, homogenizing the delivery of information in many languages, yet also allow customization, as explained on the website of Acapela, “Use your own exclusive voice, perform your voice chapter, enhance your brand identity and differentiate your services with your own exclusive voice”. But although highly explicit rules now exist, they use a modern Latin, a language available only to the high priests of information technology. For others, there is now, once again, less need for explicit knowledge, because the tools they use have the rules built in and the interfaces seek to be intuitive rather than explicit. The practices of many ‘users’ therefore follow these built-in rules more or less obediently, while a minority of other, more digitally literate users are able to transform the rules into a habitus that allows more creative and flexible practices.

Normative Discourses

Both in the early stages of newly developing practices and when practices begin to be formally taught, normative discourses will accompany and shape practices. Even where practices rely mostly on ‘knowing-how’ rather than ‘knowing-that’, rudimentary normative discourses will exist – in the form of parental admonitions (‘sit straight’, ‘hands above the table’, etc.), or of sayings and proverbs such as those of Jacob Cats – or, today, advertisements and online ‘tips’, which also work with brief, memorable ‘sayings’, such as “You push the button, we do the rest”, “Share moments, share life”, “A good photograph is knowing where to stand”.

Perhaps Bourdieu has somewhat overstated the importance of conformity, of learning by imitation. Conformity is a kind of last resort for those who have no access to the rules – young children, ‘illiterates’, newcomers such as recent immigrants from other cultures, and so on. But the people whose practices they seek to conform to, do have the relevant know-how. They will be quick to spot deviations from the ‘right’ way of doing things, and make the newcomers or illiterates aware of their shortcomings, even if perhaps only by communicating what they should not do. Awareness is always related to discourses of some kind, even when it remains unspoken.

In what follows, I will outline a typology of normative discourses (cf. van Leeuwen, 2005). These types of discourse can not only combine in different ways, but also have specific distributions in different stages of the development of practices, in different types of practices, and among the social classes whose practices they seek to regulate.

Personal Authority

The rule of personal authority is exercised by people who are in a position of power with respect to the practices they seek to regulate. The rulings they provide are rarely
justified and always ad hoc. Even if they are founded on coherent principles, those whose practices they regulate can have no way of knowing so. An example of personal authority is the dictate of fashion. As Barthes (1983) has shown, it never comes with justifications, nor is it grounded on expertise. Fashion designers simply announce what will be in fashion this season, as in this quote from the website of the online fashion retailer Zalando: “Pretty oriental styled tunics are the ideal thing this summer and pair perfectly with cropped white shorts”.

**Impersonal Authority**

There are two forms of impersonal authority, the authority of tradition and the authority of the written word. As already discussed, in the case of tradition, or ‘customary law’, nothing is written down. If the question “Why do we do this in this way?” were to be asked, people would say “Because that’s how we have always done it”, but the question is rarely asked, because the rules are enforced by everyone: “Each agent has the means of acting as a judge of others and of himself” (Bourdieu, 1977: 17). There is often considerable freedom for difference and individuality as each situation asks for its own solution, but diverging from the tradition is nevertheless instantly noticed, and will have consequences, as it amounts to a negation of what people hold sacred. Family photographs, for instance, must be happy, uphold the idyllic nature of family life – sulking children will spoil them.

The other kind of impersonal authority is the authority of the word, of explicitly formulated rules such as the holy scriptures of a religion, the laws of a nation state, employment contracts, or the written house style guides of publishers or publications. But explicit rules can range from broad, flexible principles that can be applied in different ways to rules that attempt to foresee every possible situation, every ‘loophole’. And it is then exactly in those loopholes that either freedom can be found or personal authority asserted. Written rules can of course not be implemented without help from human agents – priests, the police, the judiciary, employers, etc. – and it may be that it is only they who have access to the rules in their written form, as in the case of priestly languages – or of computer codes, which have become a new form of impersonal authority. Where, for instance, the rules of correct spelling and grammar used to be accessible through authorized grammars and dictionaries, and drummed into students in the educational system, they now no longer need to be internalized as they are built into our word processors. And online resources for everyday practices such as applying for jobs, making inquiries with local councils, shopping, etc. often provide more detailed, inflexible and non-negotiable rules than any practices humans have ever known.

**Role Models**

Under the ‘rule of the role model’, social control is exercised, not through explicit rules, but through the exemplary behaviour of high-status role models, whether they are peer group leaders or role models admired from afar and known through culturally salient narratives – saints, heroes, celebrities and so on. Such role models provide clues as to how to dress, how to talk, how to think about current issues, and much more. Not taking up clues of this kind may have repercussions, making us seem out of touch and unable to join in the conversations that lubricate social relationships.
Some writers on popular culture (e.g. Fiske, 1989) have denied that popular culture takes part in social control. They see it as raw material, as a resource with which people, individually or in groups, and self-reflexively, or even subversively, can construct their identities and lifestyles, in other words, on the basis of free will rather than habitus. This may, subjectively, appear to be the case, yet, as a result of the role models the media provide us with, large numbers of people across the globe act in very similar ways and use very similar or identical consumer goods to signify their identity. There is regularity. The ‘rule of the role model’ is a new kind of ‘know-how’, a new kind of ‘learned ignorance’, informing practices that feel like individual choices, yet lead to observable regularity in many everyday practices, including especially embodied practices such as dress, nonverbal behaviour and ways of talking – and everyday photography. As Holland has documented (2000: 150), in creating photographs for camera advertisements, professional photographers deliberately produce pictures which are “as close as possible to those that people would have liked to take themselves”, and it is this which makes it possible for family photos to be “as varied as the individual subjects photographed”, yet also display “remarkable similarities from one person’s family album to the next” (Zuromski, 2013: 34)

**Expertise**

Over the last two centuries professional expertise, increasingly mediated by the mass media and the publishing industry, has replaced religious law and tradition in many fields, including parenting, education, health, food preservation and preparation and much more. As pointed out by Bunton and Burrows (1995: 208), people are constantly expected “to take note of and act upon the recommendations of a whole range of ‘experts’ and ‘advisers’ located in a range of diffuse institutional and cultural sites”.

The ‘rule of the expert’ does not generally use the vocabulary of rules, preferring to take the form of advice, suggestions, recommendations, guidelines, and so on, in other words, of rules that are not binding. But the message is clear. They are experts, and expertise comes with a certain amount of authority. Yet expertise, in the media, is often mixed with the ‘rule of the role model’ and popular expert discourse typically mixes narrative case studies with the authoritative pronouncement of general rules.

In recent times, the rule of the expert has perhaps lost some of its authority. The internet, with its relative lack of gatekeeping, has made many people realize that not all experts agree. As a result, expert advice can come to be seen as a kind of consumer good, to be selected on the basis of subjective values and lifestyles, rather than on the basis of expert authority. In many magazines, the traditional expert column, in which readers ask questions that are authoritatively answered by experts, has increasingly been replaced by ‘hot tips’ and advertorials with just a sprinkling of expert terminology (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2008).

In the next section, I will analyse some normative discourses about visual composition and try to assess to which degree, and how, they make this practice explicit, and to which degree, and why, they still leave it implicit, in the hope that this will provide some insight into the way everyday photographic practices are regulated and the way discourses, including visually realized discourses, provide different kinds of ‘composition awareness’.
Discourses of Composition

In the early days of everyday amateur photography, advertisements quite explicitly stressed the key social functions of photography – “keeping precious memories”, “photographing family and friends at home and good times”, “doubling the value of every holiday”, “sharing with others”. Such advertisements never referred to technical or aesthetic techniques, focusing on ease of use, and, especially, on what should be photographed, and why. “Do you think baby will be quiet enough to take her picture, Mama?” asked an 1889 Kodak advertisement. And a 1920 advertisement told its audience: “Make Kodak pictures of every happy scene. The little pictures will keep your holiday alive – they will carry you back again and again to sunshine and freedom”.

A few other early 20th-century examples, showing, incidentally, that the ‘sharing’ of images did not begin with today’s social media:

You’ll see many chances to keep precious memories. If you have your camera along and two or three extra rolls of Kodak film on hand. And you can share those memories with others by getting extra prints

This film gives you and millions of others – not camera wizards, just average everyday folks – the power to make wonderful snapshots of family and friends and home and good times

Today, the social functions of everyday photography no longer need explicit verbalization, but they are still clearly exemplified in the advertising photos that model the crucial genres which, from the 1920s onwards, have increasingly moved away from the formal studio portrait to the apparently informal, yet carefully composed intimate snapshot. The resulting photographs may be experienced as recording unique, individual moments (and they do), but they also recreate conventional images, “fabricating an ideal scenario for the camera to document by posing, composing and encouraging subjects to look at the camera and say “cheese” (Zuromski, 2013: 31). The way in which these photos represent the social roles and relations in nuclear families and groups of friends therefore remains implicit, to be understood from exposure to iconic images.

In Figure 22.1, the mother and the baby are sitting down, smiling happily, while the father and son make the photo and are shown somewhat more in the foreground and separated from the mother and baby by the open space in between (however, camera ads have also targeted women and children, from the late 19th century onwards). In Figure 22.2 a man photographs himself and his partner as a selfie, with their heads close together.

Magazines, and now, increasingly, the internet, may provide ‘semi-learned’ discourses. On one such site, ‘44 Tips to Improve Your Photography’ (petapixel.com/2015/05/19/44-tips-to-improve-your-photography/), four ‘tips’ deal with composition:

14 Compose meticulously. There is a nature/nurture argument about composition. However, study the ‘rules’ and observe composition in other images to help you ‘feel’ what works best. Then, try to use that knowledge to your advantage. Be deliberate about your composition, if time allows.

15 Symmetry. Along the same lines, if you are going for symmetry, make sure you nail it. A few inches in one direction can upset the image’s symmetry, and your audience (and you) will know you were going for symmetry and missed.
Figure 22.1. Image from a Kodak advertisement (ca. 1950).
Source: © Sally Edelstein. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 22.2. Composing a selfie.
Source: © Shutterstock.
16 Pay attention to the frame edges. The image is more than the subject. Scrutinize the corners and the sides and top and bottom of your frame. Is everything working together well, or is something completely out of place? Can you adjust to remove the ‘noise’ of a busy scene? Look at the whole so the whole does not detract from your subject.

17 Pay attention to the background. Evaluate your scene, especially in portraiture. Is that a tree growing out of the subject’s head, or just a funky new hat? Isolate your subjects from the background by adjusting depth of field, moving the camera, or moving the subject unless the subject is the background.

Although they put the word ‘rules’ between inverted commas, these tips contain many authoritative imperatives (“pay attention”, “evaluate”, “be deliberate”), but they are often vague in technical and especially in aesthetic detail. What precisely is it that must be “scrutinized”? What does it mean for “everything to work together well”? Only a few selected hints are given—“isolate your subjects from the background” and create “symmetry”. Such tips withhold as much as they give, and are perhaps more likely to induce anxiety about the aesthetics of composition than to instill confidence. As Bourdieu has commented:

The basic principles of popular technique, communicated by salesmen and other amateurs, particularly consist of prohibitions. (...) But is it not abundantly clear that these prohibitions encompass an aesthetic which must be recognized and admitted so that transgression of its imperatives appears as a failure?

Bourdieu, 1990: 79 and 190

Ultimately visual composition is mystified here. It cannot be formalized. It must be a ‘feeling’. Formal awareness would destroy the possibility of achieving excellence. Composition can only be learnt by experience: “Study the rules and observe composition in other images to help you ‘feel’ what works best”.

A somewhat more explicit online photography course provides a range of composition tutorials, written by named ‘staff’ writer/photographers, and given titles such as ‘Simplicity’, ‘Give the eye a rest’, ‘Avoid clutter’. They combine a general introduction with the analysis (rendered in italics below) of specific examples (we did not receive permission to reproduce these examples in this chapter but they can be seen on freephotocourse.com/photo-composition-tutorial-1-html/). The excerpt below comes from the ‘Avoid clutter’ tutorial:

It’s said that great photographers have strong powers of observation that generally only police detectives, judges and psychologists possess. This is something that comes with time and practice. But as a photographer at any level, you really have to push yourself to be observant to all of the details both in and out of your frame. Sometimes it’s as easy as removing that pesky pop can someone left on the ground or moving your camera a bit so that the garbage can that’s trying to sneak into your picture stays out of it!

In the example below, see how our photographer improved on his first picture by leaving things out and putting other things in his second shot.

*The picture above features a charming fishing village along the gently curving waterfront. It seems to have all the elements that make for a beautiful image: a sloping...*
treeline providing perspective and depth, several triangular shapes that appeal to the eye, old buildings with character, a breakwall, fishing boats and an outcropping of rocks near the center bottom of the frame. However, upon closer examination, the frame also contains a monument that does not seem relevant to the mood of the picture, a large “OPEN” sign, a modern light post, a fitness club sign, a car and motorcycles in a parking lot. The two people sitting on a bench seem appropriate to the scene but the photographer needs to ask if they add or detract from the intended feel of the photo.

The second photo, seen below, removes these distracting elements and clutter and the result is a far better and more artistic picture. It is achieved by a tiny pan toward the right.

This text has many elements in common with the previous text – the focus on prohibitions and neatness (‘remove that pesky pop can’, ensure that ‘garbage can stays out of your picture’), the injunction to be observant, the sprinkling of selective explicit technical and aesthetic terms (‘perspective’, ‘triangular shape’, ‘panning’), and the idea that only ‘time and practice’ can lead to ‘greatness’. But it also explicitly aspires to an ‘artistic’ result and explicitly exemplifies what should be observed and why (‘avoid clutter’). Another ‘why’ is not made explicit, however. The ‘charm’ and ‘beauty’ of the second, improved composition is that of an idyllic, unspoilt tourist destination, without ‘characterless’ details such as fitness clubs, motorcycles, modern art and local people. The artistry is the artistry of the stereotypical touristic postcard.

Coffee table books, whether they are collections such as Time Life’s *The Great Photographers* (1974), or books of photographs by individual photographers such as Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (2008), do not contain explicit imperatives. These are the great photographers that amateurs are encouraged to study. They provide on the one hand explicit, if still selective, technical and aesthetic detail, but on the other hand relate it only to specific photographers, specific subjects, specific themes, avoiding anything that might suggest general rules, yet also express the unique style of the great photographer in ways that could be imitated. The Time Life book starts by establishing Robert Frank’s credentials as a great photographer who has introduced a unique ‘haphazard’, ‘unplanned’ style and a specific ‘forlorn’, ‘ironic’ personal touch. It then discusses specific photographs (see Figure 22.3), describing what they represent and formulating the themes they express: America as “a land of isolated individuals, often uneasy with one another and their surroundings, [and] lost in their private worlds”.

We have not received permission to include the whole stretch of original text here, but the compositional details of the photograph that are singled out are very selective. For example, they point to the way in which the men “have their backs to the camera”, and that the little boy is looking “into the distance”. There is a great deal more to observe, and a systematic approach to composition analysis such as the one described in the introduction above (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) could have brought this out: there is for instance a contrast between left and right, with, on the left, a group of men in black, close huddled together, hardly distinguishable from each other, and blocking the view, and, on the right and in the foreground, a man and a boy, in lighter clothes, somewhat separate and disconnected from the men on the left, with more space around them, and, in the distance, the other side of the river. All this, too, contributes to the theme that is expressed here: in the new, spacious land, people, and especially the younger generation, may disassociate themselves from the ‘darker’ and ‘closer’ social
relations of the past, and become more individual, even though that step is still to be
taken and that river still to be crossed. Although some ‘tricks of the trade’ may be for-

tally explained in discourses of this kind (the angle, and the gaze of the boy), ‘great’
composition must to some degree remain ineffable, a matter of informed perception
and of feeling.

The only text in *The Americans*, the book from which this photograph was taken
(Frank, 2008 [1958]), is an introduction by Jack Kerouac, who draws parallels between
Frank’s journey through America and the journey in his celebrated novel *On the Road*. Books of this kind do not discuss individual photographs. Their captions are limited to a
title and the place where they were taken (“View from hotel window – Butte, Montana”,
“Bar – Detroit”). Here are two excerpts from Kerouac’s introduction:

That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes
out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral, that’s what Robert Frank has captured
in tremendous photographs taken as he travelled on the road around practically
forty-eight states in an old used car (on Guggenheim Fellowship) and with the agili-
ty, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow photographed scenes
that have never before been seen on film. For this he will definitely be hailed as a
great artist in his field.

Robert Frank, inobtrusive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps
with one hand he sucks a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank
among the tragic poets of the world.
This does little else than establishing Frank as a great artist – and establishing the readers of the book as capable of understanding the photos without any further explanation, unlike the readers of collections like the Time Life book, who still need some help in understanding why Frank is a ‘great photographer’.

As Bourdieu (1977, 1979, 1990) has shown, the differences between these discourses reflect differences in ‘cultural capital’ and its distribution among different social classes. In the most highly valued forms of creating and appreciating photography, photography is to be dissociated from its social functions and from the ‘popular aesthetic’ in which “a beautiful photo is a photo of a beautiful thing” (Bourdieu, 1990: 78). Instead, it is to be judged by the criteria of a ‘scholarly aesthetic’, an explicit knowledge of the way the formal characteristics of images express abstract themes, which must nevertheless retain the ineffable greatness of high art, something that can only occur if explicit knowledge of the scholarly aesthetic is turned into a habitus that can be flexibly and quasi intuitively applied to specific works.

**Conclusion**

Everyday photography is still for the most part produced and appreciated on the basis of ‘learned ignorance’, of an awareness of the proper subjects and the proper way of positioning them that needs no explanation, and is subjectively experienced as a spontaneous response to unique situations and events while still leading to observably regular practices. But visual composition is now also increasingly taught in schools, in a way that seeks to inculcate a ‘scholarly aesthetics’ and is informed by explicit accounts of composition, such as those of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Caple (2013). Here is an example of an American ‘lesson plan’ produced by the National Endowment for the Humanities, focusing, not on what is depicted, but on how it is depicted, and introducing formal aesthetic terms such as ‘compositional space’, ‘focal point’ and ‘triangular structure’, while still focusing on great art, but without discussing what the paintings are about or what themes they express.

**Activity 1. Compose a Visual Symphony: Pulling towards the Center**

The composition of paintings is often designed to highlight or draw the viewer’s attention to a particular part of the image. This might be a specific figure – such as the main figure in the narrative that is being depicted or a particular action that is taking place within the scene. In this activity, students will investigate the ways in which artists design their compositions using methods that will draw the audience’s eyes to the parts of their paintings they feel are most important.

One way in which artists sometimes choose to highlight the most important figures or actions of their works is by placing those elements at the center of the composition. As in the previous activity, divide the class into two groups. Have students from one group view the following image which is available from The National Gallery of Art:

Cima da Conegliano’s *Madonna and Child with Saint Jerome and Saint John the Baptist*

Students in the second group should view the following image, which is also available from The National Gallery of Art:

Sandro Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Magi*
Working within their groups, ask students to identify the main focus of these images, as well as the compositional shapes that appear in the paintings. In the first painting, they should identify the Madonna and Child as being the focal point. How could they tell that the Madonna and Child were the focal points of this painting? One important clue can be found in the interaction of the four figures in the painting: the two saints direct their attention towards the child in Mary’s arms. Perhaps the most important clue is the placement of the Madonna and Child within the picture frame. The two figures are placed at the center of the image while the saints are placed on either edge of the canvas. Where are the Madonna and Child placed within the compositional space of the image? Students should be able to identify the placement of the Madonna and Child at the apex of the triangular structure. Have students assess the line drawing and diagrams of this image through the Student Launchpad to aid in discussing the painting.


In his book about photography (1990), and also in his La distinction (1979), Bourdieu prefers the ‘popular aesthetic’ over the ‘scholarly aesthetic’, both for a positive reason, for the way the popular aesthetic focuses on what is depicted rather than on formal aesthetic values, and takes an ethical stance towards it, and for a negative reason, that the scholarly aesthetic dispossesses those who have no access to it. To start with the former, here Bourdieu uses language as a case in point, but his account applies equally to visual composition. Legitimate, scholarly knowledge about language, embodied in grammars and dictionaries and inculcated by the educational system, functions, according to Bourdieu, as “a semi-learned norm which is internalized to become the principle of the production and comprehension of practices and discourses”:

Awareness of visual composition, similarly, ranges from the internalized and unspoken habitus of the everyday photographer, through to the amateur artistic photographer who is “condemned to execute”, thus producing stereotypical choices of subject using stereotypical expressive techniques, and to the great photographers and expert connoisseurs who can create or appreciate on the basis of a scholarly aesthetic that has become internalized and no longer needs explicit justification.

On the positive side, ‘popular aesthetics’ judges a picture like Figure 22.4 for what it shows, and on the basis of an ethical judgement, as in this quote from Bourdieu’s fieldwork:

The wonderful hands of a good farmer; hands like that have won agricultural prizes hundreds of times. That woman has worked in the fields as much as in the kitchen. She’s certainly tended the vines, looked after the animals. Very nice.

Bourdieu, 1990: 93

Bourdieu, 1977: 201
The scholarly aesthetic, on the other hand, will judge the same photo on artistic grounds, rather than on the basis of life’s experiences:

I find this a very beautiful photograph. It is the symbol of toil. It puts me in mind of Flaubert’s old servant-woman

_Bourdieu, 1979: 45_

This, says Bourdieu (p. 47) “implies a sort of moral agnosticism, the perfect antithesis to the ethical disposition which subordinates art to the values of the art of living”.

But perhaps we need an approach that values reflection on what is depicted as well as on how it is depicted – so long as it is also an informed critical approach that can distinguish between the beauty of a life well lived and the enticing, but ultimately unfulfilling dream of an idyllic past that has never existed and never will.

To conclude, ‘composition awareness’, like language awareness, takes different forms in different social contexts, based on different principles and values. It is at its most explicit in pedagogic discourses of various kinds, but its culturally most highly valued form is, still, the habitus of the great photographer and the expert connoisseur, with its emphasis on the unique and the exceptional.

A social semiotic approach recognizes the social determination of these forms of awareness, but it also recognizes that an explicit awareness of the _resources_ of...
composition (rather its ‘rules’) can make us see more, even than the expert editors of *Time Life* books, and is in no way inimical to creativity and to recognizing the unique qualities of specific photographs, be they everyday snapshots or works of art. Because of its emphasis on communicative functions, social semiotics can also recognize, appreciate, and critically accompany, the life-affirming potential of everyday social photography. And because of its emphasis on resources rather than rules, it can pay attention to what photographs express and to the way they share this with viewers, as well as to the way composition enables both these communicative functions. It is in this spirit, rather than only with a focus on the ‘scholarly aesthetic’, that composition, in my view, can and should be taught – explicitly and creatively.

**Related Topics**

Habitus; normative discourse; multimodality; visual composition

**References**


