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Tips /

1 - What's a Good Photograph?

The Exercise

Jot down everything you can about a photograph in five minutes.

Critical Thinking

Direct your critical thinking toward the photograph—not toward your critical thinking—or yourself.

Write down anything.

Brainstorm.

Don't judge.

The Goal of the Exercise

Most people see only the *subject* in the photograph.

Some see more, the *gist* of the photograph.

A few see and feel a lot more—the entire *gestalt* produced by the photograph.

By doing the exercise below, you can be a level-3 photographer.

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| 1 | Subject |
| 2 | Gist |
| 3 | Gestalt |

Orientation

Make two passes through the exercise.

First Pass

Check off the categories below that apply to the photograph.

Define the categories as you see fit.

The categories may overlap with each other.

When a single term is listed, consider any opposite terms, as well.

For example, *depth* includes *lack of depth*.

There may be shades of gray between the opposites, too.

There are also boxes for adding additional categories.

Second Pass

Jot down comments in the boxes for the pertinent categories.

Privacy

The checkboxes that you click, and the text you enter below, go no further than your own computer.

If you move to another page, or close this page, what you've entered is NOT saved.

Printing

Page breaks have been inserted in the text.

Use portrait orientation with the scale set to *Shrink to Fit*, not 100%.

Here's a [PDF version](#) of this first section.

Solar System Metaphor

You'll surprise yourself.

The notebook and time limit are like a telescope.

You'll see a solar system.

We'll use our solar system as a metaphor for a photograph.

Here's a summary of the metaphor.

The Metaphor The Photograph

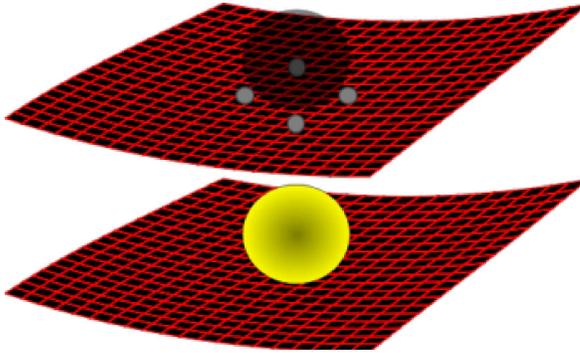
Type of Solar System Genre

Sun Purpose

Sunlight Reward

Gravity Tension, Causality, Narrative

Planets Ingredients



Planets Orbiting Dark Matter

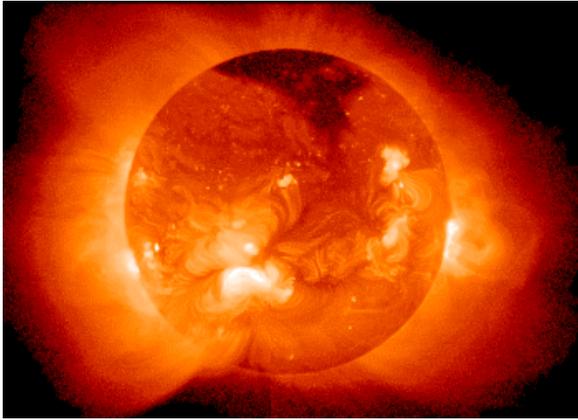
What Type of Solar System?

What's the genre of the photograph?

- Portrait
- Street photography
- Landscape
- Still life
- Art
- Photojournalism
- Snapshot
- Found
- Made

Another category?

Write about the photograph's genre.



Sun as Viewed by the Soft X-Ray Telescope (SXT)

Sun ~ Purpose

Using our solar-system metaphor, the *sun* is the *purpose* of the photograph.

Purpose includes many overlapping ideas.

- Aura
- Beauty
- Communication
- Imitation of a reality
- Insight
- Truth
- Remembrance, for the photographer, for something related in the viewer's life
- Uniqueness

Another category?

Write about the photograph's purpose.



Lykaestria

Light from the Sun ~ Reward

Above, the sun in our metaphor is the purpose of the photograph.

The *light from the sun* is the *something* that lights up the reward areas of the viewer's brain.

What's the reward for the viewer?

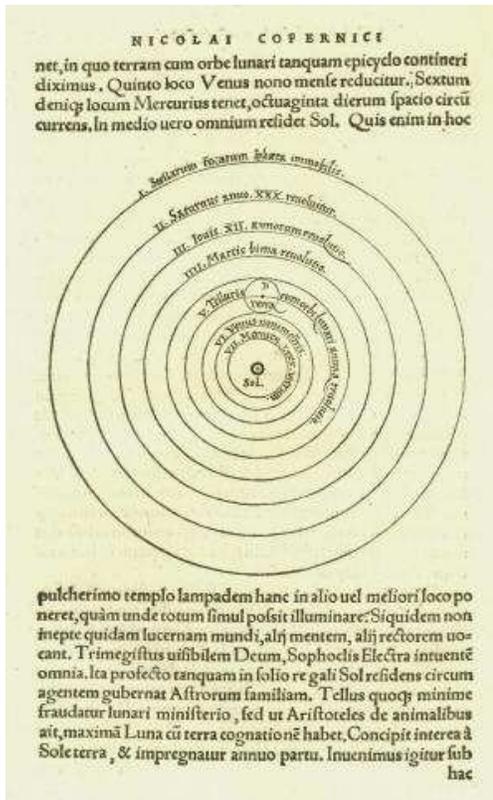
If you're using one of your photographs, this reward may be different for you the photographer, than it is for other viewers.

The photograph creates one or more of the following.

- Emotion, such as pleasure
- Harmony, such as that from a pleasing arrangement of lines, shapes, tones, colors, i.e., visual gymnastics
- Thought, such as insight
- Transformation
- Transcendation

Another category?

Write about the photograph's reward.



From *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* by Nicolaus Copernicus

It's a Solar **System**

The planets, discussed below, are the many ingredients that went into the photograph.

These ingredients, like the planets, are part of a *system*.

Everything within the frame, and a few things outside the frame, are working together in a good photograph.



Michael Maggs

Gravity

What's the gravity that holds the photographic ingredients together?

Tension

Tension is the photograph's gravity.

A good photograph has visual tension.

Paradoxically, when the tension is done well, like gravity, the tension:

- Is often invisible.

The photograph is transmitted without interference.

- Transmits a strong effect.

Causality & Narrative

Causality and narrative may also be the photograph's gravity.

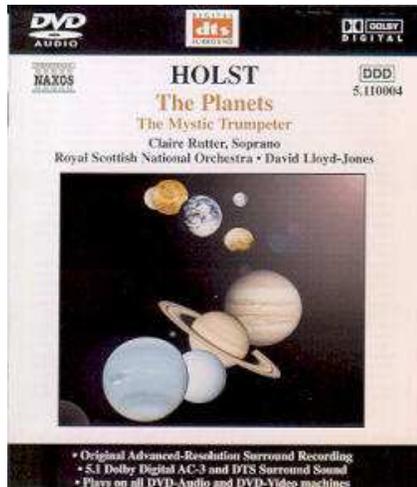
Our brains seek relationships and stories as we go about our days.

We're looking for cause and effect, which often is only a correlation, not causality.

We're attracted to stories and we're story makers.

When we look at a photograph, we're sensitive to the photographer's intentional, and our imagined, causalities and narrative.

Write about the photograph's tension.



Gustav Holst, *The Planets*

Planets

Write about the photograph's ingredients.

As mentioned, the planets are the many ingredients that went into the photograph.

There can be just a few, or many.

The Pluto-sized planets of the photograph's solar system are minor players.

The Jupiter-sized ingredients play bigger roles, such as light.

Light

There's a section [below](#) about light, the Jupiter of our photographic solar system.

Color and tone

Journalistic approach:

Who

What

When

Where

Why

Depth, which may be expressed with composition, tone, focal length

History, time

Past

Now

Future

Technical (See Camera Buttons [below](#))

Point-of-view of the photographer

Is the photographer absent, explicitly present, or implicitly just off stage?

Planets Continued

- Complex or simple
- Clarity or obfuscation
- Balance or dissonance
- Novelty, surprise
- Purity, such as manipulation, camera brand and type, color v. B&W
- Sincerity, authenticity
- Morality and ethics
- Privacy
- Politics
- Advocacy
- Culture
- Ethnicity
- Sex and gender
- Psychology
- Opportunity for commentary, criticism
- Presentation
- Location
- Subject
- Value, including monetary

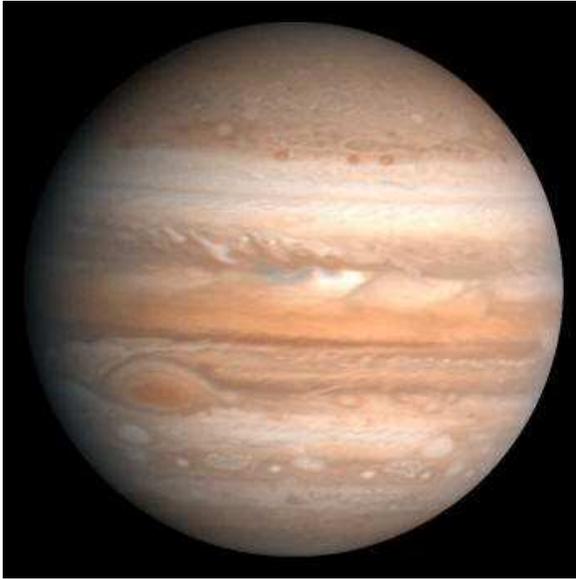
Another category?

Another category?

Another category?

We leave the solar-system metaphor here.

Write more about the photograph's ingredients.



Jupiter

Light

As mentioned, light is the most important planet in your photograph's solar system.

There are four ways to describe light.

1) Direction

Texture & Volume

2) Size, which changes the contrast of the lighting

3) Color and tone

Time of day

4) Distance from the subject

There's a discussion of light in *Beecher's Handouts*.

Go to [Light / 5.1 - Introduction](#).

Write about the light in the photograph.

Camera Buttons

- Focus
- Use of depth-of-field
- Use of shutter speed
- Exposure
- Color balance
- Focal length

Another category?

Write about the focus, depth-of-field, etc.

Composition

- Frame
 - What's on or near the edges and corners of the frame.
 - What's outside the frame, if anything?
- Does everything in the frame contribute to the photograph?
- Vantage point
- Where was the camera placed in the scene?
- Planes
 - Foreground
 - Middle ground
 - Background
- Relationships between shapes, colors, tones
- Rule of Thirds
- Contrast, expressed with lighting, texture, color, and tone
- Repetition
- Focal point
- Secondary focal point

Another category?

Write about the photograph's composition.

Draw It

Sketch the photograph, crudely or with panache.
Drawing can improve observation.

Draw it.



Comet Kohoutek

Gesture

Gesture is the obvious, human gesture.
It is also an added 5% sprinkle of something that takes a photograph up to 100%.
Gesture is like a comet.

Write about the gesture in the photograph.



Viewer's Participation

- First impression
- Lasting impression
- Emotion
- Narrative
- Open to interpretation
- Opportunity for fantasy, imagination
- Admiration for:

Technique

Perseverance, such as Cartier-Bresson's *Decisive Moment*

Risk taking, such as Robert Capa's "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

Another category?

Write about the viewer's participation.

The next section has a more philosophical approach to the topic of what is a good picture.

1 Next