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Street Photography Composition Lesson #4: Leading Lines

October 16, 2013 By [Eric Kim](#) — [47](#)
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© Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos. FRANCE. 1932. Marseille. The Allée du Prado.

All photos in this article are copyrighted by their respective photographers.

For today's street photography composition lesson– I would like to discuss leading lines.

Leading lines are one of the most

basic photography compositional techniques– I am sure you have all heard of it before. But it is a technique that we often don't listen to or follow. For example, it is easy to have a leading line in the background (for example, a background) that leads your eyes away from the main subject, rather to the main subject.

Whenever I look at a photograph, the first question I ask myself is: **who is the subject?**

If I cannot easily identify who the main subject is– it causes me to get stressed out and disoriented. I frantically look around the frame trying to find the central subject.

Therefore you can utilize leading lines to point out your main subject to the viewer. Imagine leading lines to be like a road sign saying: “hey guys, look over here!”

I will bring up some examples to further illustrate the importance of

leading lines:

Josef Koudelka : CZECHOSLOVAKIA. 1963. Slovakia. Jarabina.



© Josef Koudelka / Magnum Photos :
CZECHOSLOVAKIA. 1963. Slovakia.
Jarabina.

In this compelling photo by Koudelka for his “Gypsies” book — you see a man dead in the center of the frame, hands in handcuffs— and onlookers in the background. The story behind the photo (to my understanding) is that the man in the center is being tried for murder— and is on his way to get hanged.

The feeling of the photograph is

tense. The man has a look of fear and death on his face— and his hands slouched by his sides (with handcuffs holding them together) makes him seem even more dead. He doesn't look like he is struggling against this fate (of him being put to death). And in the background you can see people looking over and following— observing the whole event. You can also see some police officers taking care of things.

There is one small subtle leading line in the photograph. Can you see it?

OGRAPHY BLOG



Figure 1: Leading line pointing straight towards the man

If you look at the jagged line in the ground, it points straight to the man about to be convicted.

In “Looking at Photographs” by MOMA photography curator John Szarkowski – he likened the line on the ground almost looking like a rusty hook, about to pull the man to his imminent death. I have made another illustration perhaps showing the feeling of a hook dragging the man to the right:



Figure 2: Imagine a hook dragging the man towards the right.

So you can see the photograph works on an emotional level (the expression of defeat his face, the handcuffs, people watching him go to his death) and on a compositional level (the leading line).

The leading line in Figure 1 points you straight to the man in the center

(your main subject) — while in Figure 2 drags the man towards the right of the frame to his imminent death.

Henri Cartier-Bresson FRANCE. 1932. Marseille. The Allée du Prado.



© Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum

Photos. FRANCE. 1932. Marseille. The Allée du Prado.

This is a classic street photograph by HCB in Marseille. You can see the photograph itself is intriguing. The man has a great bowler cap on, an ominous black cape, a umbrella by his side— and what appears to be a cigarette sticking out of his mouth. He is facing toward HCB — but looking off to the side. It was almost as if HCB caught this man by surprise— and he turned around to see what was going on.

In the background you have the alley of dead trees— going all the way straight down. The whole photo feels a bit dark, mysterious— and slightly sinister.

In terms of the composition— you can see the leading lines perfectly pointing straight towards the man's head (the main subject):



Figure 1: Note the leading lines going straight to his head.

The way HCB shot this was crucial. He stood straight up enough that the man's head was perfectly framed in the center. If he crouched down a little too low — he would have messed up the shot. A photoshopped example of what it may have looked like if he crouched low when shooting this photo:



Figure 2: If HCB crouched a bit lower for the shot. Note how not all the arrows perfectly point toward his head.

So if HCB were to crouch a bit lower, you see it would make the man move up. And then the leading lines (while still pointing to him) wouldn't point exactly toward his head. Therefore the effect of the leading lines wouldn't be as powerful as it was in the original image.

Therefore when you are trying to shoot photos like this with leading lines— realize that you need the angle

and perspective just right. If the perspective isn't right— you might need to tip toe a bit, you might need to stand upright (normal), or even crouch down. So as a takeaway point, realize that often bending your knees makes a huge difference (for the better or the worse).

Josef Koudelka / CZECHOSLOVAKIA. Slovakia. Kendice. 1966. Gypsies.



© Josef Koudelka / Magnum Photos.
CZECHOSLOVAKIA. Slovakia.
Kendice. 1966. Gypsies.

Sometimes leading lines aren't so obvious. In this photograph by Koudelka (also from his “[Gypsies](#)” book) — you see three subjects in the

frame. There are two men who are grown adults— and the one kid on the bottom right.

But when we look at the photo— they all pop out and grab our attention. Why is that?

Well it is due to the leading line. Do you see the leading line here? It is a little less obvious. I illustrated it below:

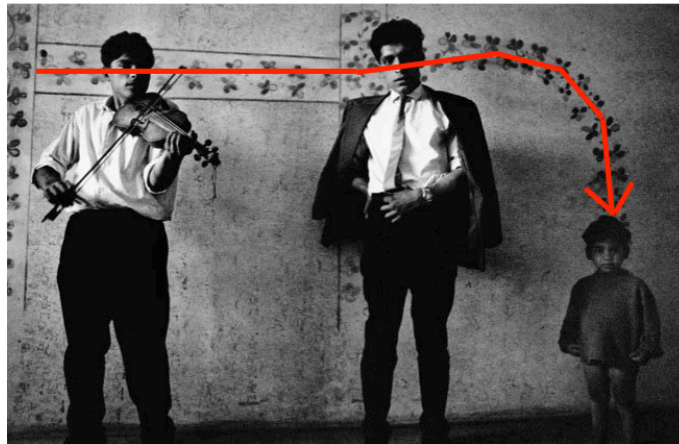


Figure 1: See the leading line pointing down to the kid.

When I first saw this— I was absolutely blown away. Koudelka is a freaking genius. To make a composition like this blows my mind.

Now did he get all of the people to stand this way? I am not 100% sure. He might have seen them all like this and took the photo. But in all realism, he probably was going to take a photo of the two men— and then saw that leading line in the background — and wanted to fill the shot at the bottom right. He might have saw a lone kid wandering around— and asked him to stand there. The shot is completed because of the kid. Imagine the shot without the kid:



Figure 2: Imagine if there were no kid there. (Gotta love content aware in Photoshop CS6)

So due to the help of the epic “content aware” tool in Photoshop CS6— I photoshopped the kid out.

Now doesn't the shot feel so empty?
The kid competes the shot– and it is
because of the leading lines. If there
were no leading line in the
background – it wouldn't be as
distracting:



Figure 3: Note how without a leading in
the background– the shot isn't quite as
distracting.

So you see in Figure 3 I have totally
took out that leading in the
background. Now the shot is a bit
plain– but not as distracting.

The leading lines takes our eyes
through the frame. If we utilize the
leading line well– we will make a
strong composition. But if a leading
line takes your eyes in the wrong
way– it will distract.

Constantine Manos. USA. 1988. Florida. Daytona Beach. “American Color”



© Constantine Manos / Magnum
Photos. USA. 1988. Florida. Daytona
Beach. “American Color”

Leading lines can also be utilized when it comes to signs and the direction in which people look at.

In this photograph by Constantine Manos from his “[American Color](#)” book ([American Color 2](#) is also great)– you see two arrows in the shot. One of the arrows that says “New York Style Pizza” points -> to the man on the far right. But the

interesting movement is the man in the far right is looking over his shoulder towards the left— where there is a man in the shade. There is also a “one way” sign that points left.

So if you illustrate it — the only reason we can see the man in the dark silhouette in the far right is because the “one way” sign is pointing left, and the man on the far right of the frame (who is lit well) looking over to the left:



Figure 1: Note the majority of the arrows pointing left.

So you can see although there is one small arrow (on the New York Style Pizza sign) pointing right— the majority of the arrows are pointing left. If you look at the other lines—

they are also pointing toward that direction:

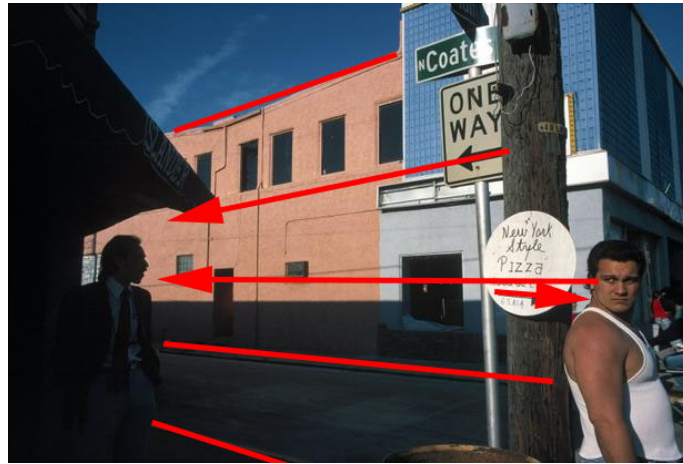


Figure 2: See all of the other lines pointing left.

So you can see the architecture of the building in the background (and the streets in the back) also point left.

Finally what gives the photo tension is that the man on the far left is facing right— and presumably walking that way too. Therefore you see a collision of the man on the far left and the gaze of the man on the far right. This creates a sense of drama:



Figure 3: Both arrows colliding

So I am sure you are reading this analysis and you might be thinking to yourself: “Did Constantine Manos intentionally do all of this while he took the photo?”

I doubt it. But it doesn't matter.

After he took the photo and if we sit down and really analyze it— there is this sense of movement and tension in the shot. And I think this is what makes it partly a great photo compositionally speaking.

So you can see in the prior examples the leading lines were mostly going on direction. But in this example by Manos— the arrows are all colliding in different directions:

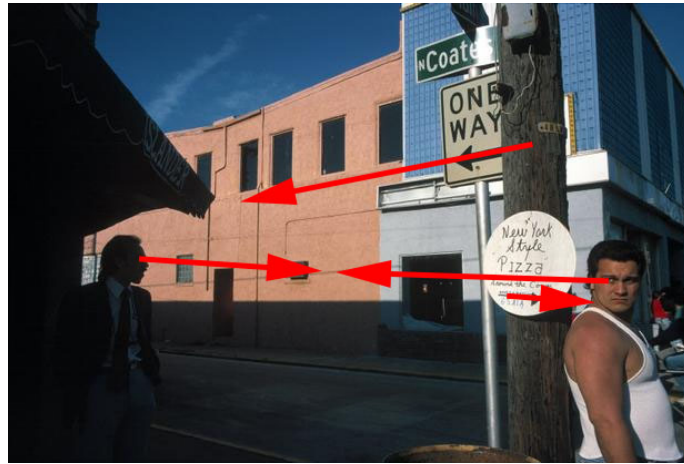


Figure 4: All of the arrows going left and right.

**Henri Cartier-
Bresson / USA.
1947. New York
City. Manhattan.
Downtown.**



© Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum
Photos. USA. 1947. New York City.
Manhattan. Downtown.

Let us go back to HCB. In this photograph he shot in NYC — he took a photo of a lone man, hunched over — hands on his knees, looking at perhaps his only friend in the world— a small cat (or dog). The small outline of their bodies and the overwhelming presence of the alleyways and city makes them feel so small. But it is a beautiful moment he

captured between man and animal.

In terms of leading lines- it is pretty straight-forward. You see all of the alleyways and building point straight toward the subjects in the center of the frame:



Figure 1: See all of the leading lines pointing to the two subjects in the center of the frame.

The reason I wanted to show this

photo is because it is a great example of a street photograph we have all seen opportunities for. It is also a street photograph that any of us can easily shoot in terms of incorporating leading lines.

Conclusion

Leading lines are a great way for any street photographer (starting off or advanced) to create more tension, focus, and direction in their street photography. Some practical tips:

1. Look for leading lines, then add your subjects

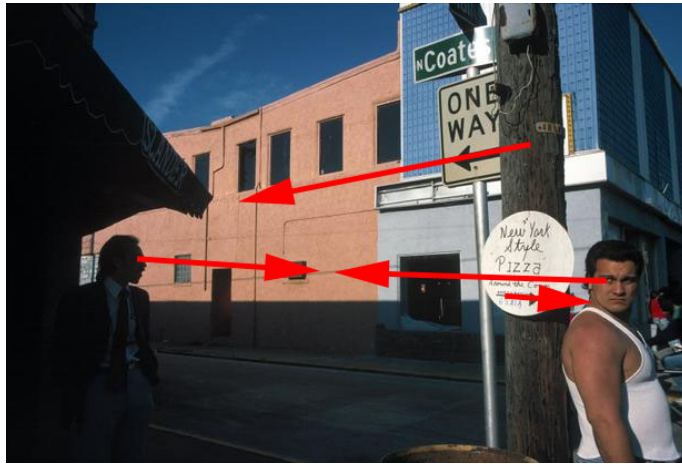


© Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos. USA. 1947. New York City. Manhattan. Downtown.

Often there are certain structures or backgrounds that work well for leading lines. This includes alleyways (think the photo by HCB), signs in the street, or vanishing points. Try to put your subject at the intersection where the leading lines take them.

2. Look for the

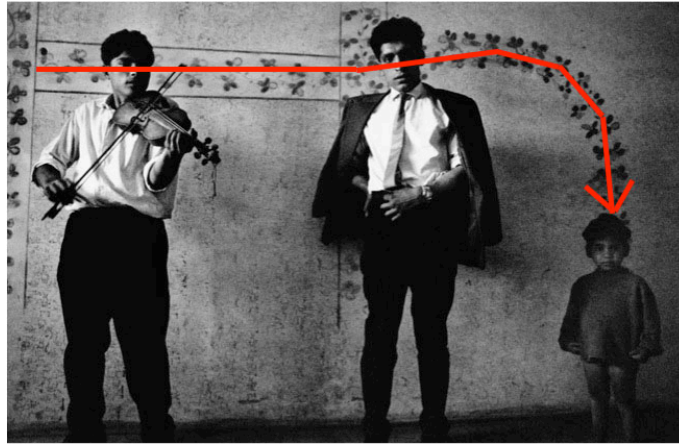
direction people are looking



© Constantine Manos / Magnum Photos. USA. 1988. Florida. Daytona Beach. "American Color"

Some examples of "less obvious" leading lines are the direction in which people point or look. Our eyes often track the gaze of the subjects in our frame. So for example, in the Constantine Manos photo where the man on the far right looks left—which adds direction to bring your eyes that way.

3. Ask your subjects to move



© Josef Koudelka / Magnum Photos.
CZECHOSLOVAKIA. Slovakia.
Kendice. 1966. Gypsies.

If you see a great leading line in the background — simply ask your subject to move his/her feet a bit to the left or the right. It can make all the difference in completing a leading line (as seen in the example above by Koudelka).



g+1

75

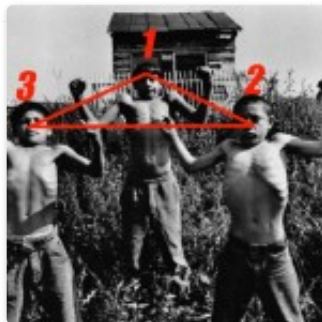
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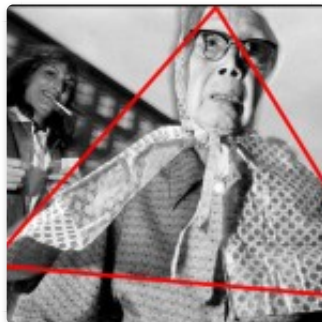
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 Arpan • 10 months ago
I do some street photography of my

own and one thing I have realised that all the rules are good to have practices but not always necessary to follow. These rules have been formulated after years of understanding how the human psyche works subconsciously and armed with that knowledge, the photographer can create compelling images. But then, to break new ground, these rules don't need to be always adhered.

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



SEQLAR → Arpan
• 10 months ago

The thing is that these photographs where people claim to have not followed any rules when actually dissected do follow those rules. Photographers might be doing this unconsciously.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



OGR • 10 months ago

Honestly, i don't need leading lines to understand who or what the subject is in any of these photographs and i consider myself lucky for that.

I don't know if you view photographs the way you explained here but if you do so, i feel sorry for you. You are deprived of the enjoyment of viewing photographs.

THE WHOLE IS ALWAYS BIGGER THAN THE SUM OF IT'S PARTS. To understand what it means, the approach to viewing photographs should be totally different.

Let's take for example, the man and cat photograph of HCB. If i need leading lines to understand what that photograph is about....well, i should quit photography.

7 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Eric Kim Mod → OGR
• 10 months ago

Hi OGR I agree with you. I didn't make it as clear in the article-- but I always feel that content is more important than form in street photography. The soul and meaning of a photograph is much more interesting to me than the composition.

To be quite honest-- I am not that interested in composition in street photography (I am more interested in content). However I have received lots of requests to talk about composition in street photography and have written these articles to help the community.

Definitely at the end of the day, enjoying photos is the most important- we don't always have to get so nerdy ;)

5 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



OGR → Eric Kim
• 10 months ago

What you say makes complete sense. What i don't understand is, if you think that way then why you chose the

why you chose the photographs that you chose :) You could have done with your own photographs. You even went on to say - " look for leading lines then add your subjects" while showing that iconic photograph of HCB.

Anyway, since you are dealing with a lot of nerds, better be more cautious in future.

^ [v] • Reply • Share >



Justin → OGR
• 10 months ago

I think you are missing the point. Good images work for a reason. Understanding why can only help you both appreciate the image and use the techniques in your own work.

5 ^ [v] • Reply • Share >



OGR → Justin
• 10 months ago

What do you mean by a "good image" ?

^ [v] • Reply • Share >



jack →
OGR
• 10 months ago

a well
composed,
visually
appealing

picture.

1 ^ | v •

Reply

• Share ›



OGR



jack

• 10 months ago

Just that
? What if
a well
composec
appealing
picture
does not
convey
meaning?
Also, i
don't
think the
phrase
"well
composec
has any
standard
definition

see more

1 ^ | v •

• Reply •

Share ›



Luke Jones



OGR

• 10 months ago

This
article
isn't
saying

leading lines in a photograph will create a well-composed photograph. It is saying that using leading lines in a photograph can add

[see more](#)

7  

• Reply • Share ›



OGR



Luke Jones

• 10 months ago

There is a reason why Photograph Composition books use landscape to explain leading lines, curves, rule of thirds etc. Read my opening post once

again, I

see more

3 ^ | v

• Reply •
Share ›



Diarmuid McDonald



OGR
• 10
months
ago

Hi, are
you
willing to
provide
some
examples
of your
own
work?

3 ^ | v

• Reply •
Share ›



OGR



Diarmuid
McDonald
• 10
months
ago

Hi, why
are you
asking for
that ? It
will help
you in
judging
the value
of my
comments
I am not a
photograp
i am a

viewer. I think you will agree viewers have the

see more

1 ^ | v

• Reply • Share ›



Tasos



OGR

• 10 months ago

OGR with all due respect, I think you are more bent on trying to take Eric down a notch rather that appreciate the point of his article.

You state

see more

9 ^ | v

• Reply • Share ›



SEQLAR



Tasos

• 10 months ago

OGR is
an
arrogant
amature
who
thinks he
has all
the
wisdom.
These
people
are
everywher
You know
those
who grab
a camera
and think

see more

1 ^ ▾

• Reply •
Share ›



OGR



SEQLAR

• 10
months
ago

SEQLAR,
if you
understan
"People
like that
are
clueless
about art
all
together"
then why
are you
bothered
so much

so much
about my
comments
You
should

see more

^ | v •
Reply •
Share ›



OGR



Tasos
• 10
months
ago

"One
thing is
for
certain,
you're a
bully."

One thing
is for
certain,
you are a
nerd.

^ | v •
Reply •
Share ›



Tasos



OGR
• 10
months
ago

So sayeth
the
"viewer of
photograp
The
queen of
all nerds.

^ | v •

Reply •
Share ›



OGR
→
Tasos
• 10
months
ago

Pray to
God to
give you
some
artistic
sense in
your new
birth. I
will pray
for you.

^ | v | •
Reply •
Share ›



Ken
→
OGR
• 10
months
ago

God
certainly
has not
given you
a humble
dispositior
Work on
that.

6 ^ | v | •
• Reply •
Share ›



OGR
→
Ken
• 10
months
ago

The

problem
communic
online is
you
cannot
see the
gestures.
I don't
have any
such
intention.
The
reason i
am
anonymou
is to
prove i
have no
personal
interest in
what i am
doing.

^ | v •
Reply •
Share >



**Diarmuid
McDonald**



OGR
• 10
months
ago

I have
just read
(and I
think I
hear John
Free say
this too)
that you
should
never
really

really
trust a
criticism
of work
untill you
have
seen their
own

see more

1 ^ ▾

• Reply •

Share ›



Ken



OGR

• 10
months
ago

Hey OGR,
you're
really
smart and
artsy.
Thank
you for
stopping
by and
sharing
you're
wisdom.
Please
teach us
more...

1 ^ ▾

• Reply •

Share ›



OGR



Ken

• 10
months
ago

Gladly.....
follow the

Follow the
comment
section of
this blog.



Reply •
Share ›



Justin



OGR
• 10
months
ago

First,
there is
thousands
of years
of visual
history
and
technique:
re:
compositi
so there
is some
objectivity
in
whether
something
is well
composec

see more



1 • Reply •
Share ›



OGR



Justin
• 10
months
ago

"so there
is some
objectivity

...
in
whether
something
is well
composec
(it doesn't
mean the
image is
good or
art, just
well
composec
"

That's

see more



Reply •

Share ›



hyungsup
Kim



OGR

• 9

months
ago

eat
something
badly
cooked
by a 3
year old
and then
something
cooked
by that
guy who
does hells
kitchen.
Do you
need the
exact list

...
of
ingredient:

see more

^ | v •
Reply •
Share >



SEQLAR → OGR
• 10 months ago

"I don't know if you view photographs the way you explained here but if you do so, i feel sorry for you."

Dude, get off your high horse. Have you ever read anything about composition? I highly doubt since you missed the entire message of the article. If you have no clue what you are talking about then please don't come here and start offending the writer of the article about how sorry you feel that he is dissecting photos and talking about composition.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



OGR → SEQLAR
• 10 months ago

"If you have no clue what you are talking about"

I know very well what i am talking about.

".....you missed the entire message of the article."

What's the message?

.....

Using an iconic photograph of HCB and telling people - "look for leading lines and then add your subjects" ?

"....don't come here and start offending the writer...."

I don't think i have offended him, i have told what i feel is right.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



SEQLAR →
OGR
• 10 months ago


"I know very well what i am talking about."

Keep telling that to yourself, you keep coming off even more arrogant.

"What's the message? Using an iconic photograph of HCB and telling people - "look for leading lines and then add

... "O"
[see more](#)


1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

 **OGR**
→
SEQLAR
• 10 months ago

"This is exactly how I know that you are missing the entire point of this article. You keep asking what's the point of talking about composition and that"


[see more](#)

^ [v] •
Reply •
Share ›

 **SEQLAR**
→
OGR
• 10 months ago

trolling much?

1 ^ [v]
• Reply •
Share ›

 **OGR**
→
SEQLAR
• 10 months ago

If you can help Eric rectify his mistakes, do so but don't be the devil's advocate.

1 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



Matthew McCord → OGR
• 10 months ago

Leading lines are only one way to dissect an image and find the main subject, not the only way.

^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



Caroline Eckersley
• 10 months ago

I don't need leading lines when I take photos, if I like the subject then that's fine for me.

1 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



Diarmuid McDonald
• 10 months ago

Interesting and useful article, I always enjoy looking for the composition patterns in these and then scrolling down to check. Also I think it's funny looking at the photoshops edits you do of these iconic photos, some you manage well like removing the boy, others make the pictures look hilariously bad.

Thanks for posting :)

1 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



hvunasub Kim • 9 months ago



The term leading lines is interesting because the name it self says "leading" which makes me think that it would lead my eyes towards interesting parts of the photo.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Wyn Ron Cheong • 9 months ago

Anyone willing to criticize or critique on the author's (Eric Kim, in this case) words, do so with dignity and just like an essay, when you have an argument, back it up with distinct examples. If you're not a photographer but a viewer who has "the eye to know good photographs", then please enlight us of your technique. I'm all ears and like to find out.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Octavian Todirut • 9 months ago

You should go out and photograph rather than have this small fight. You are missing the essential here with this argue. My humble opinion is that it is important to know why some images work and why they don't but also to show this through famous photographs. These are the photographers that shaped this controversial form of art, photography is today what it is, in part, because of them as much as painting is what it is today because of Lascaux and Altamira cave paintings. Probably, every great photographer, for sure painters, get good at it also because they dig deeper into the matter and so, of course, they reach the masters.

[see more](#)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Johan Chan • 10 months ago

Thanks for sharing... very informative and right up to the point

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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