

The Nature of Photographs

Stephen Shore

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- An American photographer known for his deadpan images of banal scenes and objects in the United States.
- Pioneered the use of color in photography.
- Second living photographer to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.
- 1982 book “Uncommon Places” was very influential in proving that a color photograph could be considered a work of art.



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Determining the Nature of Photographs

- A photograph is a result of a mechanical process. All photographs have this in common.
- These qualities form a visual grammar that makes clearer the meaning of the photograph.
- Shore set out to define the qualities that make a photograph a photograph

Look at a photograph. Question how different the photograph might be from the actual scene.



Levels to View a Photograph

Shore states that a photograph can be viewed on three levels:

- The Physical Level
- The Depictive Level
- The Mental Level

The Physical Level

- In general, a photographic print is on paper
 - Light sensitive emulsion, ink, or dyes
 - Has hard edges & does not move
- The materials used determine the texture, tonal range, hue, saturation
 - Film or digital settings at capture
 - Chemicals used to process / digital processing
 - Type of paper photo is printed on



2007 © Philippe Sainte-Laudy

2007 © Philippe Sainte-Laudy



Physical Level

- Flatness of the paper is the plane
- The edges of the paper are the “boundedness”
- The base is the texture of the print

Chemical Level

- The type of emulsion or paper/inks determine the tonal range, hue and saturation of the photograph
- Printing a monochrome image on cool vs. warm-toned fiber based papers
- Printing a digital image on watercolor paper vs. high gloss

Photograph as a Physical Object

“The photograph is an independent object in the world; it can be stored and displayed in a range of ways, bought or sold. The context the viewer sees the photograph will affect ‘...the meanings a viewer draws from it.’”

The Depictive Level

- When the world is captured by the process of photography, it is changed in four ways:
 - Flatness
 - Frame
 - Time
 - Focus

The Depictive Level

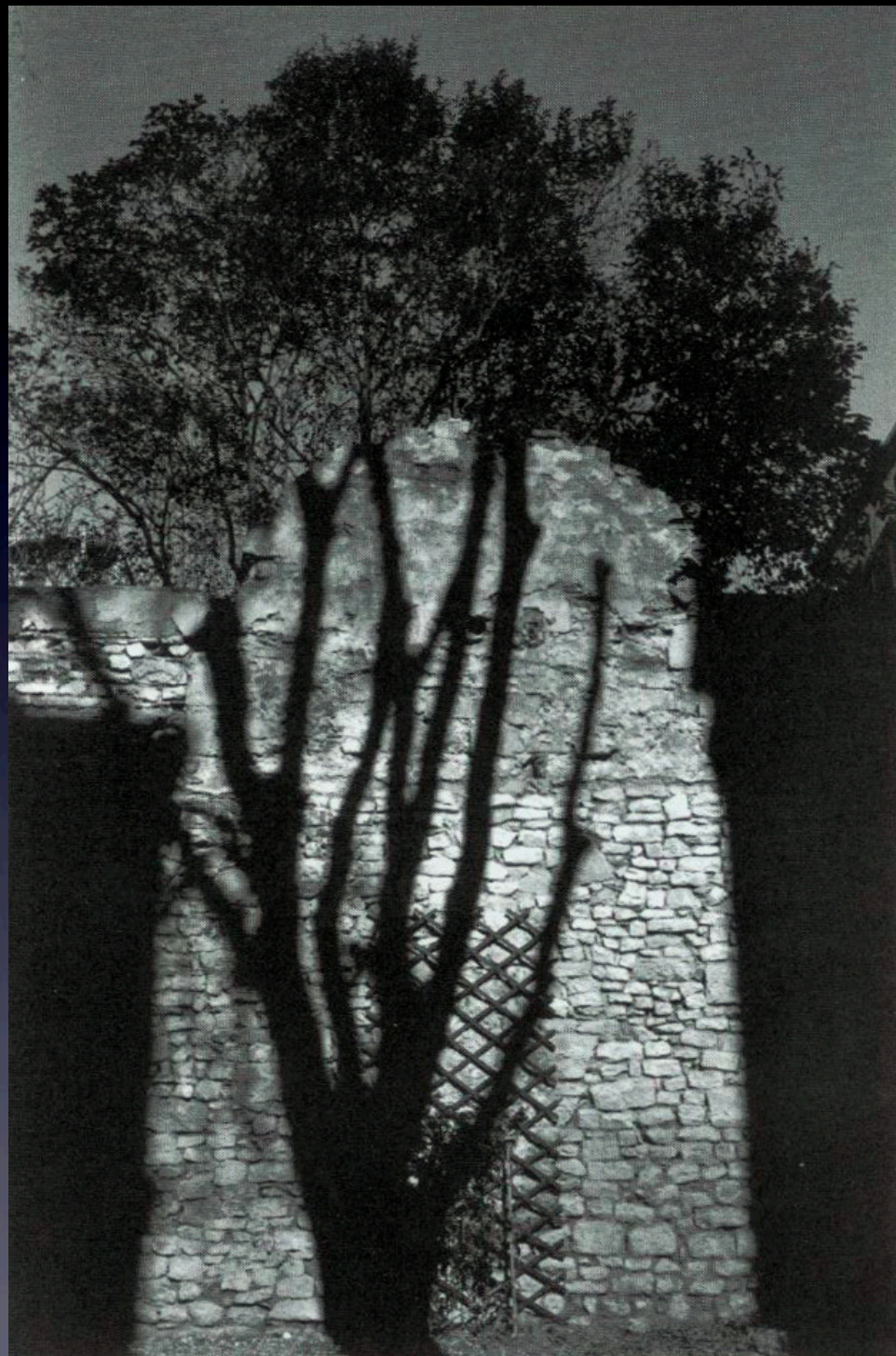
- Flatness, Frame, Time and Focus define the photograph's depictive content and structure
- A photographer can use this to express their perceptions and meanings

Depictive Level: Flatness

- The world is 3-dimensional, a photograph is 2-dimensional
- Photographs create the illusion of a 3-D space with a monocular view
- By flattening the space that is photographed, a photographer creates relationships between subjects that did not exist previously

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“The artist starts with a blank page and must fill it. The photographer starts with the clutter of the world and must simplify it.”



Depictive Level: Frame

- Unlike the world, a photograph has flat edges
- The photographer's framing of an image (choosing what is included, and what is not) is a decision
- This creates relationships between what is included, whether real or imagined



Depictive Level: Frame

A Passive Frame

- The photograph starts within the frame and works outward, implying a world extending beyond the edges of the frame

An Active Frame

- The structure starts with the frame and extends inward, implying that the photograph is a self-contained world





Bruno Barbey, 1966



Ashley la Grange, 1994





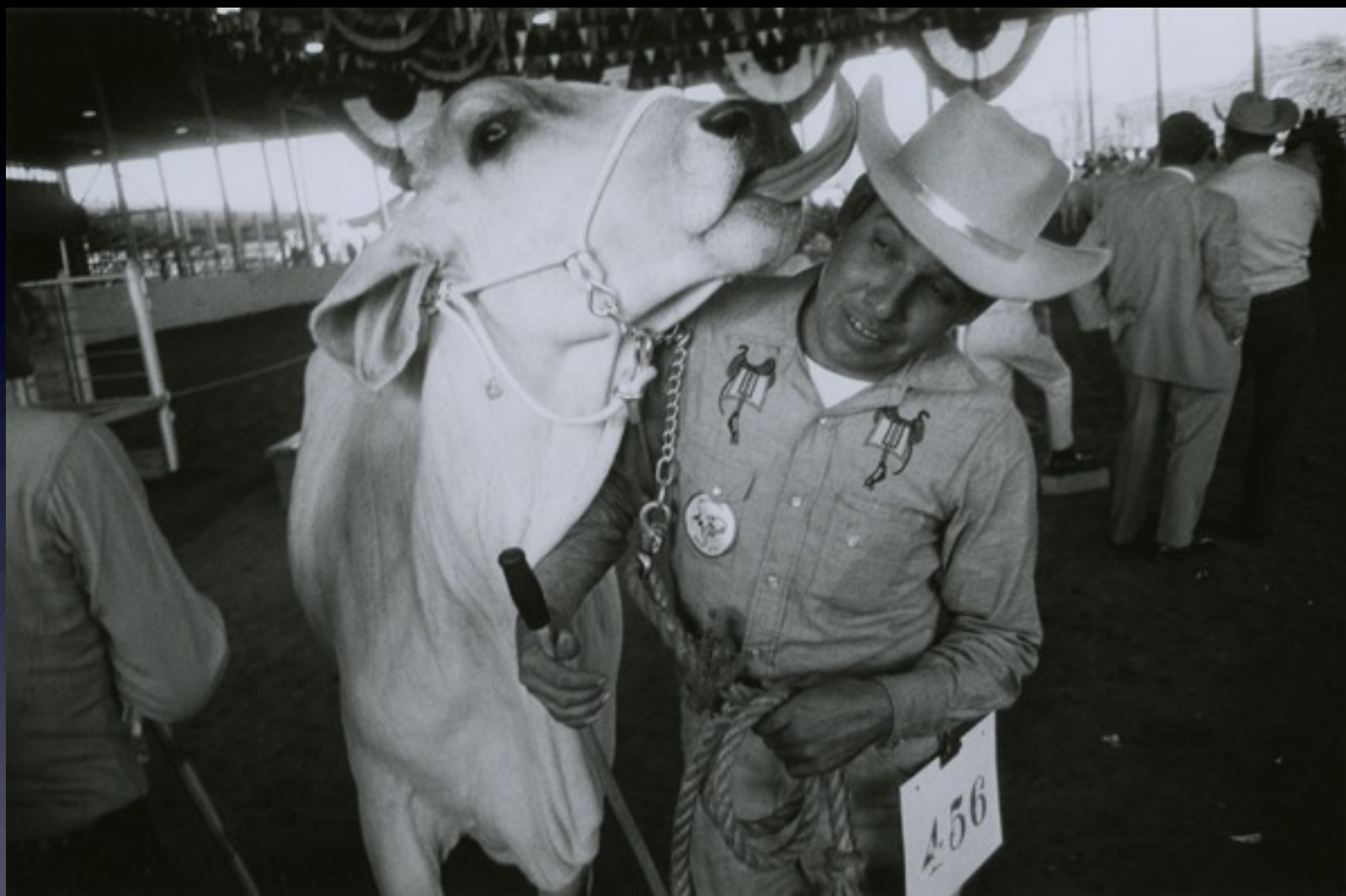
Henri Cartier-Bresson



Dali Atomicus by Phillippe Halsman

Depictive Level: Time

- Photographs are static, unlike life
 - Photographs can capture a moment in time that exists for a fraction of a second, thus creating a new interpretation of that movement
- Longer exposures reveal movement (unlike how we actually see) freezing it as a motion blur, or accumulation of movement
- Long exposures may also reveal “still time,” not revealing motion although it is an extended length of time



Garry Winogrand, Texas State Fair, Dallas 1964



Depictive Level: Focus

- The focus creates an order of importance within a photograph
 - This separates the subject from other content
- The only way to eliminate the impact of focus is to photograph the subject on a plane parallel to the film/imaging sensor



P.H. Emerson, During the Reed Harvest



Outdoor Theater and Cheyenne Mountain, Robert Adams



Jan Groover



Jan Groover







Brassai, Graffiti

The Mental Level

- We construct mental images from the light that enters our brain
- When we view a photograph, we refocus our eyes on a mental level, not optical
- The Mental Level is essentially the process of the viewer's interpretation of an image
- This is dependent on the Depictive elements and how they are utilized in the photograph



Walker Evans, Gas Station Reedsville, West Virginia



Rene Burri, Men on a Rooftop, Sao Paolo (1960)





Mental Modeling

- Photographers base their photographs on mental models they have in their mind
 - Ex. a photographer that only recognizes sunsets as being worthy of photographing
- Mental models can also be changing

Mental Modeling

“Earlier I suggested that you become aware of the space between you and the page in this book. That caused an alteration of your mental model. You can add to this awareness by being mindful, right now, of yourself sitting in your chair, its back pressing against your spine. To this you can add an awareness of the sounds in your room. And all the while, as your awareness is shifting and your mental model is metamorphosing, you are reading this book, seeing these words - these words, which are only ink on paper, the ink depicting a series of funny little symbols whose meaning is conveyed on the mental level. And all the while, as your framework of understanding shifts, you continue to read and to contemplate the nature of photographs.”

Mental Modeling

- When you are photographing, your perceptions are fed into your own particular mental model
- Your mental model's interpretation of these perceptions inform your photographic decisions
- These interpretations then alter your original perceptions
 - This is an ongoing, self-modifying process

Summary

Shore states that a photograph can be viewed on three levels:

- The Physical Level - the boundary of the print
- The Depictive Level - flatness, frame, time, focus
- The Mental Level - your mental modeling