

Creating impact

The fundamentals of storytelling
in street photography



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Foreword

I spent almost two years studying composition in street photography, with the purpose of understanding how to create more emotional and impactful images. I was interested, in particular, in the concepts of harmony vs. tension, camera subjectivity, and light transformation – all recurring patterns in my work.

From this analysis came to life a series of blog posts, and eventually, a conference talk on storytelling in street photography, during the Out of Chicago conference. This is my honor and pleasure today to share with you the result of this analysis; and I hope that this book will take you further in your photographic journey, just as it did for me.

Marie Laigneau

Chapters

1. Seeing possibilities
2. Embracing the moment
3. Developing subjectivity
4. Transforming with light
5. Disrupting the harmony

CHAPTER I

Seeing possibilities



Seeing possibilities

Street photography is a journey which
starts with the willingness to see
the world **differently**

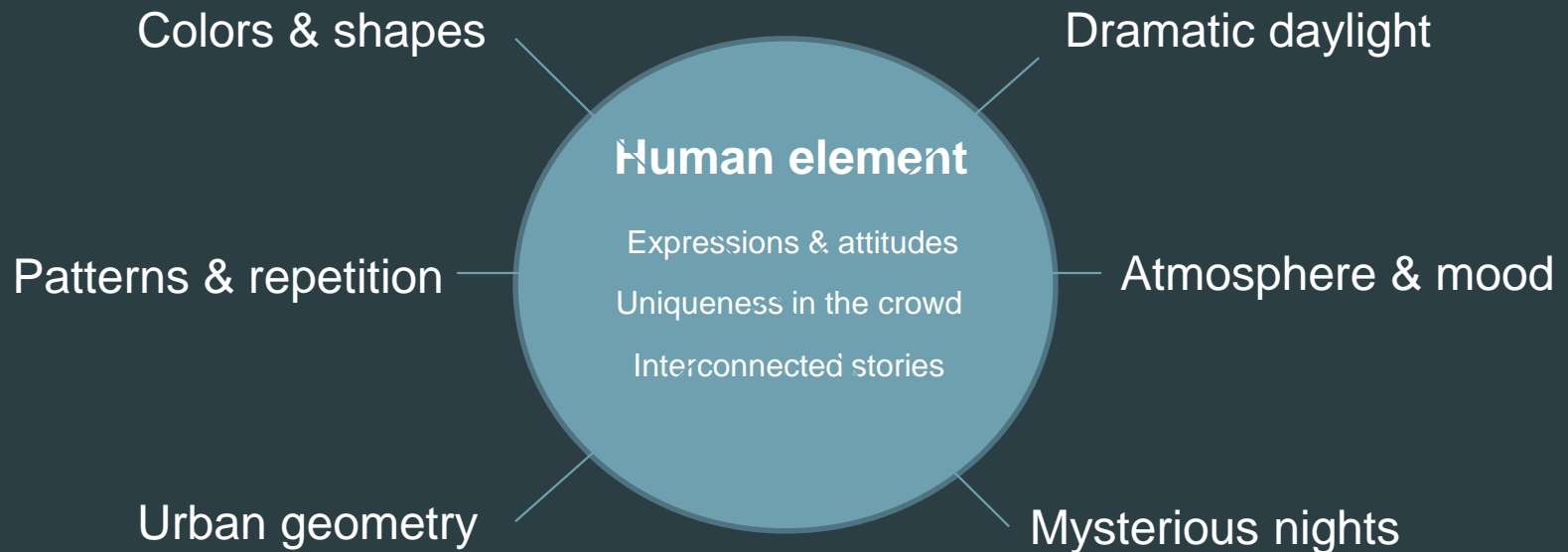
Introduction

Street photography is not about capturing the reality as it is: it is about, as we say, turning the mundane into the extraordinary. I am not talking about post-processing, but about vision: what you see and feel is what you will want to express. And unless you commit to see the world differently, you won't create any meaningful street images.

Seeing the world differently means paying attention to what others will not see by themselves, should it be the simple reflection of a woman in a bus window. It means looking at that city that we know so well, and yet discovering it for the first time, each time you'll go out on your own. It means being able to see some form of beauty in the most common things, in the most common smiles, in the most common eyes. And it means not only seeing, but feeling – feeling deep inside us that a story is born, right in front of us.

So how do we know when this happens? What should we be looking for exactly? The decision to shoot – and all subsequent decisions around framing, speed, depth of field etc. – is a very intuitive process. Yet, we can train our mind to recognize opportunities, and, in doing so, allowing us to become better photographers. This first chapter provides an overview of what I consider myself to be opportunities in street photography.

Overview: Opportunity landscape



1. Unique expressions of life

At the very heart of street photography, the keen observation of human expressions is a talent that can well pay off in a striking picture. Candid expressions that will create a strong impact on viewers are those that tell a story and convey a specific emotion: either through direct eye contact with the camera, or through the capture of well identified facial and body expressions. Many expressions and emotions can be captured on everyday people; one just needs to look carefully...

1. Unique expressions of life



In this image, I particularly like the intensity of the eye contact between those two girls and the camera. The beauty of her candid smile almost brightens up the sadness of the rain falling on the city. This expression really turns a conceptual umbrella scene into a human story.

2. Striking faces and attitudes

Some people, by their attitude and their physical presence, tend to eclipse everybody else in my eyes. And crossing their path brings about deeper feelings, at the intersection of their stories and of my own. I do not see them for who they are, but I see them for who they could be, within the realms of my own fantasy world. Whatever you feel about this person during those random encounters, it is this feeling that you will need to remember, process and express through your photography. And this is this very feeling that will make your capture unique, timeless, memorable.

2. Striking faces and attitudes



I saw this woman by the window of a shop, one Saturday afternoon. I instantly felt transported into another world, a world of iridescent beauty and timeless mystery. This is this very feeling that I have tried to express here, in this image.

3. Uniqueness in the crowd

Shooting crowds is very difficult, and is an art all and by itself. But finding a unique subject within the crowd can also be very rewarding. The context and story that provides a crowd is worth many words: the most important thing being to find and isolate this unique subject appropriately. There are several techniques that one can use to make this happen. You can change the settings of your camera: either choose a large aperture to produce a shallow depth of field, or identify a non-moving subject and decrease the speed to get the crowd in motion. You can also isolate a subject through colors or differentiated tones, if they happen to be distinctive enough.

3. Uniqueness in the crowd



In this example, the closeness to the subject and the effect of stillness vs. motion of the crowd clearly identify the woman as the primary subject. The umbrella as well, as an all-encompassing element, brings up clear focus on the woman vs. the busy surroundings – at the same time separating the subject from the background while bringing all elements together, in a cohesive manner.

4. Interconnected stories

Last, but not least, the human element in your images can be dramatically improved with multiple, interconnected stories. The most sophisticated street images will play not across a single layer, but across multiple layers. In those images, photographers not only isolate a clear and distinct subject, but also create connections across multiple human elements in the frame. When those stories are, apparently, disconnected, composition elements can work very well to establish that connection and tell an interconnected story.

4. Interconnected stories



In this example, the two stories are connected by the overall line created by the stairs in the background. The shadow adds additional dynamic and acts as a strong point of entry into the picture: first leading the eye to the woman with the child, then taking us to the other woman through the intermediary of the stairs.

5. Urban geometry and architectural lines

The contrast between harsh architectural lines and soft human lines provide the basis for interesting story telling. Lonely figures passing in front of immense architectural buildings tell stories of loneliness in the city, while highly graphic elements emphasize the modernity of our urban surroundings. When using urban lines and shapes to create dramatic geometry, it is important to give space for the human story to happen. Stagnant compositions where people could be erased without hurting much the story are not human stories, they are architectural stories.

5. Urban geometry and architectural lines



In this image, the repetition of shapes between the bridge and the body of the person creates a strong connection between the two; it is as if the man was bent in synchronicity with the bridge, forming a symbolic whole. The subject absolutely belongs to the image, seemingly fighting with the bridge against the winter wind.

6. Complementarity of colors and shapes

Colors that complement each others are appealing to the eye and to the mind. They tell a story of their own, a story of harmonious contrasts, of duality and complementarity all at the same time. While neither colors nor shapes create stories on their own in street photography, they add that extra dimension that can help tell greater, more impactful stories.

6. Complementarity of colors and shapes



In this picture, the color version is very strong because of those complementary colors: the cyan talks to the pink in an invisible dialogue, along with the shapes that seem to contradict each other – the roundness of the umbrella against the very polynomial shapes printed on the background wall.

7. Dramatic light and clair-obscur

Photography is all about light. In fact, photography literally means “writing with light”, and the amount of light going into the lens is what, in definitive, will determine your exposure and the resulting image. But light, as a composition element, is also incredibly fascinating; added substance or tension can be born out of great use of light and darkness. Light can take many forms, and play many roles, as we will see in the next chapters. In definitive however, understanding how to take advantage of the light is critical – and following the light is an important first step.

7. Dramatic light and clair-obscures



This image was taken in a fairly usual street in Chicago, full of parked cars, with little interest per itself. But those figures crossing the street in front of the overpowering light is all that was needed to transform the ordinary into a picture seemingly out of time and space.

8. Patterns and repetitive elements

Repetition of human elements or objects can become a story in itself, especially when that repetition is unusual or unexpected. But when thinking about patterns and repetitive elements, it can also be interesting to integrate elements that “break” the patterns: such as a tiny human figure set against a highly symmetric architectural setting. Or the façade of a large building only interrupted by the sight of a man looking through one of the windows.

8. Patterns and repetitive elements



In this image, the repetitive forms created by the human bodies are as ironic as the subjects themselves: cut from their heads, looking alike but for the colors of their clothes. More complex than what the eye is accustomed to, this image creates interest beyond the repetition itself, and the irony is not lost on the viewer.

9. Atmospheric settings and weather

What creates atmosphere is hard to describe, and could possibly become a whole chapter in itself. There are, however, easily recognizable elements that you can leverage: architecture backgrounds telling stories of the past, interesting artificial lights that leave part of the picture in the dark, as well as rainy and / or foggy weathers bringing a mist over the world. Whatever this is, pay attention to the world around you and look for opportunity to add mood to a potential human story.

9. Atmospheric settings and weather



In this picture, taken fairly recently, the soft contrasts created by the light of a rainy day, and the particular architecture of the large and old building all contribute to taking the viewer into another time, another age, far away from today's busy city life. This atmospheric charge really makes the shot – telling a widely different story from the real and the mundane.

10. Mysterious nights

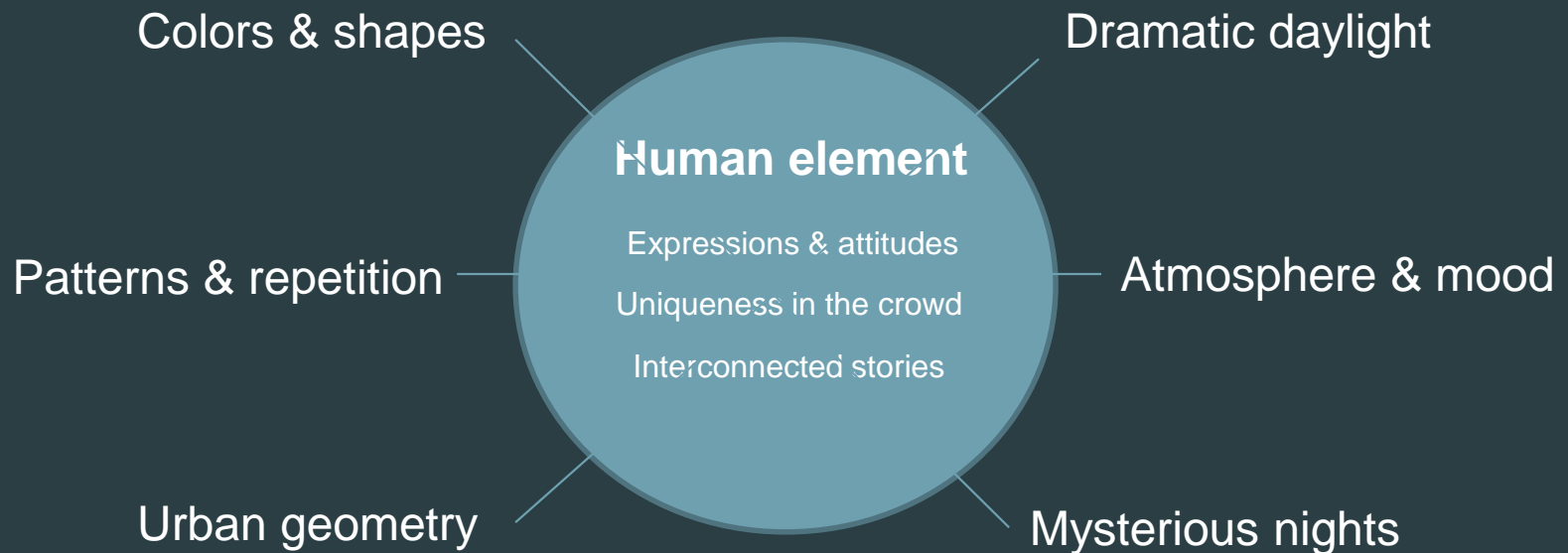
Nights are as mysterious as you want they want to be. Artificial lights and areas of darkness can tell stories of another time, filled with this incredible atmosphere that only the night can bring. The most mundane scene turns into a film noir or a fairytale, depending on your mood and imagination. Fantasy, strangeness, drama: you can borrow so much to those magnificent lights falling on the city half asleep, all of sudden as foreign as a faraway country. The way the world gets transformed at night makes it an incredibly powerful time to shoot and tell unique stories.

10. Mysterious nights



In this image, the lights of the bridge, along with the atmospheric snow and half-darkness falling on the subjects' face create a deep sense of mystery. And mystery is good: mystery forces the mind to cope with ambiguity, with a story only suggested, never totally revealed. It opens up the door to the personal imagination of the viewer – forcing the mind to fill out the void created by the open-ended story.

Summary: Seeing possibilities



CHAPTER 2

Embracing the moment

A black and white photograph capturing a moment of connection between a passenger and a bus driver. A woman with blonde hair, seen from the side, is looking out of a bus window. Inside the window, a driver is visible, looking towards the passenger. The bus is dark-colored with a light-colored stripe. The website address 'transitchicago.com' is printed on the upper part of the bus. The number '4326' is visible on the side of the bus, above the rear wheel. The overall mood is contemplative and human.

transitchicago.com

4326

Embracing the moment

Introduction

Capturing the moment is a matter of seconds, even less. There are so many parameters and variables to take into consideration that it can sometimes feel impossible to achieve; and when we finally get that perfect shot, we may tend to believe that we've been lucky. Well, believing so is a mistake. Luck is important of course, but ultimately, it is your attitude to openness and possibilities that will determine your success. In other words, let's give "chance" a chance to come upon us by choosing the right state of mind.

In this short chapter, I wanted to bring to your attention 5 rules that I believe will enhance your journey into street photography. By following those rules, you will start to see so much more than what you've seen so far: not relying only on luck, but on yourself, on your inner capability to seize opportunities, and to capture this ultimate story. So trust yourself, first and foremost. Be fearless, be focused, be ready. The world is made of so many opportunities – we just need to look around and be brave enough to seize them.

Overview: Key rules

1. Become fearless
2. Never lose focus
3. Forget the technique
4. Fail often, try again
5. Embrace mindfulness

Rule #1: Become fearless

Easier said than done, granted. It took me two years to learn to be fearless – fearless of people, of the rain, of the night. It's natural to fear, but it won't take you anywhere. Eventually, it only deters you from enjoying the experience, and will fill you with never-ending regrets.

The key is to understand that nothing bad can really happen to you: slowly, by getting a little more fearless every day, you'll discover treasures of bravery in you. And little by little, you won't fear anymore – but it takes time and determination! In practice, you will meet a range of emotions from the people that you shoot without prior authorization. Don't let yourself be deterred by that – just smile, and move on. From experience, they won't run after you.

Rule #1: Become fearless



This shot for me represents a turning point. I was shooting at a distance for quite a while, until I got bored with my own fear. I positioned myself very close to that woman, drenched by the rain and half hidden by the night, and I got one of my favorite shots ever. The woman looked at me, surprised at first, annoyed next. What I did? I moved on. I just smiled, and moved on. And I left my old fears behind, forever.

Rule #2: Never lose focus

Opportunities can arise everywhere, at the most unexpected moments – there's so much you can do to anticipate that particular instant when all elements will come together, perfectly, and meaningfully. Therefore, talented photographers remain focused all the time when they're out shooting: they let go of distractions that may take them away from that perfect story.

When I am out shooting, I sometimes feel that nothing else exists but me and my camera. My eyes keep scanning the environment looking for opportunities, while my mind is immersed in a fantasy world of my own: a world where new stories come to life.

Rule #2: Never lose focus



Yes, I have learned to remain focused, at all time. When I saw the opportunity to shoot that little girl in the bus in San Francisco, I pre-focused my camera on her, and waited for her to turn her head. When the flow of light came by the window, I shot instantly. I had no idea that the bus would turn at the next crossroad, allowing light to flow in freely. But I was ready, and I was focused.

Rule #3: Forget the technique

Street photography is a matter of half seconds – rarely more than that. During that period of time, you need to focus, compose, and trigger the shot. This is why shooting in manual is almost impossible for most street photographers: you just do not have the time to adjust that many settings. Think of it this way: you may be quick enough to adjust one variable – whether this is speed, ISO, aperture, focal lengths or focus distance is your choice. The second variable is your own body: getting closer, getting lower, changing your viewpoint...

All this also takes time. Therefore, I would highly recommend to minimize the technique when doing street photography. Focus on seeing the picture, rather than achieving technical perfection – and as importantly, let go of your old manual habits or you will systematically miss the moment.

Rule #3: Forget the technique



Like many of the shots that I have taken with my Canon 60D, this image was shot using a large aperture (f2.8), and automatic speed and ISO. My only decision was to come closer or not, which I decided against to keep the meaningful context of the crowd of customers. The waitress disappeared 2 seconds after, which was just enough time to get that image.

Rule #4: Fail often, try again

Waiting for the perfect shot before shooting the trigger will only get you that far. So many good shots have come from less than perfect circumstances, from an intuition of good shots – but definitely not certainty of it. Because there are so many variables that we can't possibly anticipate, we are bound to fail often. However, if you don't give it a try, what are the odds of success?

I truly believe that this is through trying and practicing that we can get better results. Consistency in the effort is at least as important as talent in street photography: so go out and try. Don't be afraid to fail, it's ok. We fail often, and we try again.

Rule #4: Fail often, try again



I personally shoot a lot – taking maybe 300 shots per 1.5 hour session. A really small proportion of those will ever see the light of the day, of course, but I am often surprised to see how some of the less “wow” shots can turn out to be on my computer. In fact, I rarely know what will make a great shot vs. an average one before actually taking the shot, and sometimes after analyzing the entire scene at home.

Rule #5: Embrace mindfulness

Mindfulness means being in the present – not looking in the past, not thinking of the future, but being, physically and psychologically, in the present and the present only. What this means for a street photographer is simple: stay open to the unexpected, the unpredictable. Never expect anything, just watch and see; this is by doing so that we can let miracles happen.

If you go out with a clear and preconceived idea of the perfect scene, what are the odds that you will find it? Not only will you wait for something that will never happen, but you will fail to see other opportunities arising all around you. If you know so badly what you want, why don't you stage it? There is no value in trying to force destiny: things happen, or they don't. Instead, anchor yourself in the present moment, and let the world surprise you.

Rule #5: Embrace mindfulness



This is by practicing mindfulness that I was able to take this shot – not consciously realizing its potential, but intuitively feeling that a story was born. I had never attempted to take this type of shot before, but the idea came to me right when the bus was passing in front of this woman. I took one single shot, it was the right one.

CHAPTER III

Developing subjectivity

A black and white photograph capturing a low-angle view of a man in a dark beanie and jacket, looking upwards with a contemplative expression. He is positioned in the foreground, slightly to the right. Behind him, a dense urban landscape unfolds, featuring a mix of old brick buildings and a prominent, modern glass skyscraper that reaches towards the sky. Scaffolding or construction poles are visible in the mid-ground, adding to the sense of a city in development. The lighting is bright, creating strong contrasts and highlighting the textures of the buildings and the man's clothing.

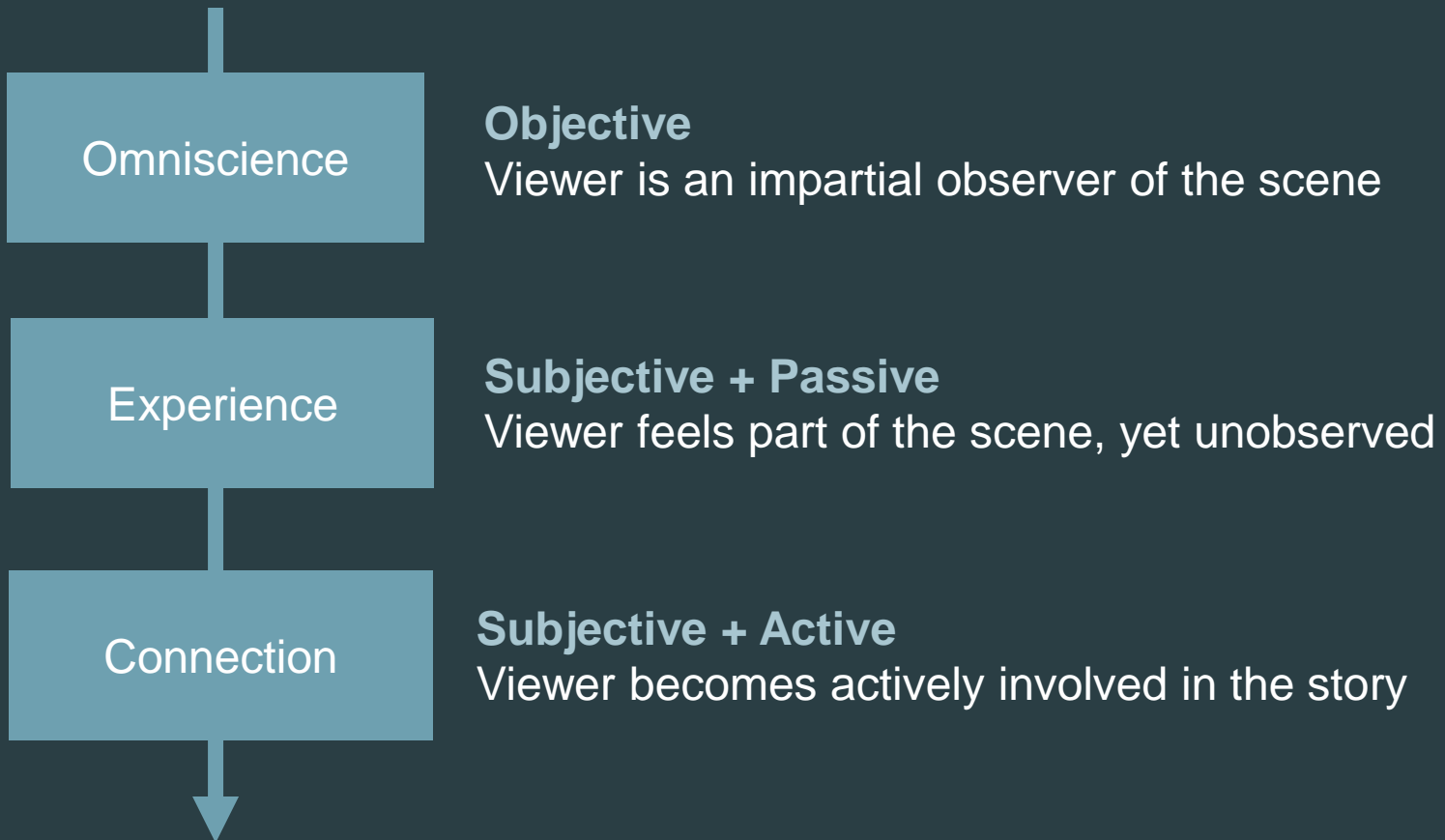
Developing subjectivity

Introduction

Cinema, as an art, has long been using camera angles to create either objectivity (the act of distancing oneself from the scene/subject) or subjectivity (the act of associating oneself with the scene/subject). And indeed, the choice of camera angle will have a deep impact on how the viewer will eventually experience the scene and the story. Will they observe at a distance or will they feel part of the action? Will they identify themselves with the subject or will they react to this confrontation?

Understanding when and how to develop subjectivity is key to creating impactful street images. In this chapter, I analyze and explain the difference between objective and subjective viewpoints: how we can achieve them, and what effect they will have on the viewer. Ultimately, my goal is to help you decide what angles and viewpoints will work best to support and amplify your potential story – thus generating greater emotions and impact with your images.

Overview: Objectivity vs. subjectivity



The Omniscience effect

Behind the idea of omniscience lies the principle of showing the big picture. The viewer is given the opportunity to see the scene in its entirety. Long-range and medium-range shots are best fitted to create that effect. Shots that are at eye level (not higher, not lower) will provide the most objective point of view, while lower / higher shots will create interesting subtleties in the way viewers perceive the overall scene. The key to omniscience is to integrate all meaningful elements into one shot: the subject of course, but also all the surrounding context that will extend the story from that of a man alone, to a man within its environment.

Omniscience: Creating distance between subject and viewer



Omniscience primarily results from large range shots, taken at the most natural angle possible (straight, eye level etc.)

In the above image, viewers are shown the entire winter scene, emphasizing the loneliness of the subject. Without the context of the bridge and fog, that feeling of loneliness would be less strong. It is by distancing oneself from the details that we can see the big picture. The lonely figure exists because of the lonely city – both elements resonate and respond to one another to create a more cohesive story.

The Experience effect

In films, many scenes are meant to make the viewer feel at the center of the action. As the camera follows the actors, we are often given the impression that we are moving along with the camera... following their every step. When two characters discuss together, we feel in the middle of their conversation – yet the characters never actually look directly at the camera. Most of these tactics will, at least, enable viewers to experience a scene from the inside, not from the outside. And this is where the magic happens in cinema: from being a mere observer, we become an invisible actor: we are forced into the story whether we like or not.

Experience: Getting close & personal



When you do get closer, your images will often become more experiential. Close-ups and mid-range images tend to bring the viewer in the story, more so than images taken at a distance.

In this example, the man in the foreground anchors the viewer in the story: the viewer feels as if he was looking through the eyes of this man, and observing the winter scene from his POV. Without the man, this image would be less personal, less subjective. It would portray an urban winter scene from which the viewer is a mere observer (i.e., omniscience effect).

Experience: Shifting the point of view



Tilted orientations, compared with straight orientations, generally add strong subjectivity to your images. When done so meaningfully, the POV becomes highly subjective, as if the viewer was really part of the scene: observing and taking part in the action, yet unobserved – invisible.

In this image, the addition of a low-level angle (the camera is looking up at the man) creates additional emphasis on the subject – making it look more important and imposing than he really is. It also clearly reinforces the subjectivity being created here.

Experience: Learning from cinema as an art



The closer you get from people, the more “voyeuristic” the experience will be, and the more strongly your viewers will experience the scene from the inside – as if they were there, invisible actors of a story that they do not control.

This shot shows a very intimate scene between two lovers, a scene that we can appreciate from very close, not unlike tactics used in cinema to allow viewers to enter the story and identify themselves with the subjects.

The Connection effect

The connection effect relies primarily on establishing direct eye contact. By doing so, the photographer establishes a strong relationship between subject and viewer – as if the viewer could read the mind of the subject, and as if the subject could see beyond the frame – perhaps even into the mind of the viewer. That connection is so strong in fact that it can be disturbing to the viewer at times. When there is a connection effect, camera angles can strongly influence the feelings associated with the subject and the scene. Taking a shot at eye-level puts the viewer and the subject at the same level – and consequently, establishes a peer to peer relationship. Lower or higher angles will change the equation, resulting in different types of feelings.

Connection: Looking eye to eye



When subjects are looking straight into the camera, a strong relationship gets established. The level of the camera will then determine the nature of this relationship. If the image is shot at eye-level, a sense of equality gets created. Viewer and subjects are on one equal foot – looking eye to eye, peacefully or intensely, depending on the expression of the subject.

Connection: Creating emphasis with low-level angles



Taking your subject from below (what we call a low-level camera angle) will in fact dramatically emphasize your subject. Not equal anymore, the person will appear bigger than real, provoking a shift in perceptions and emotions.

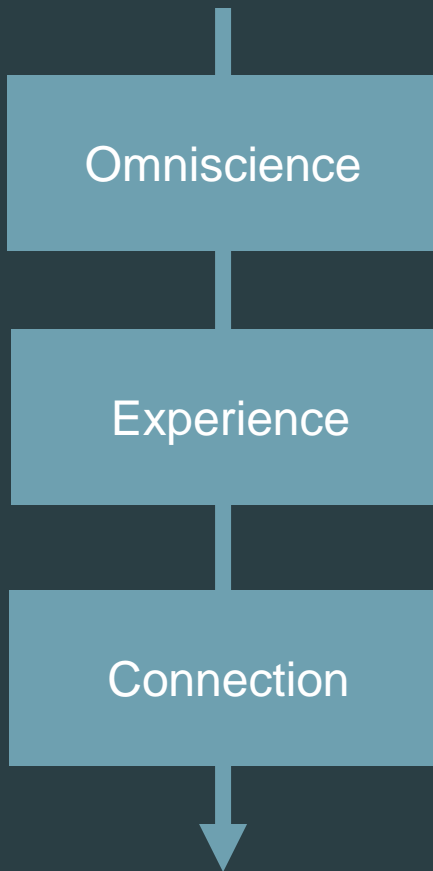
Oftentimes, the viewer will feel overpowered or overshadowed by the subject – associated with a sense of superiority, strength, charisma.

Connection: Minimizing the subject with high-level angles



The opposite is also true, as cinema has shown many times. Shooting a subject from above will result in minimizing the subject, giving it less importance, less strength. These types of angles can generate a sense of vulnerability, of a need for protection. It gives a sense of inferiority to the subject who appears to be lost within the scene.

Summary: the 3 effects of camera angles



Objective

Viewer is an impartial observer of the scene

Experience

Subjective + Passive

Viewer feels part of the scene, yet unobserved

Connection

Subjective + Active

Viewer becomes actively involved in the story

CHAPTER IV

Transforming with light



Transforming with light

Introduction

Light – and the absence of light – is inherent in all photography. Photography literally means: “Writing with light”. The amount of light coming in your sensor will ultimately determine what your image will look like from an exposure perspective. But light is far from being neutral – it shapes your image, it emphasizes your story, and can ultimately transform the reality to create new worlds as mysterious and powerful as those found in our dreams. Knowing when and how to use light is key to creating greater impact with your photography.

In this chapter, I explain and analyze 4 different effects that light can have on your image and your story, looking at it as a continuum: from very basic tonal differentiation to radical light transformation. The transformative power of light has no limit - it is a world of possibilities that I encourage you to explore. Now.

Overview: The transformative power of light

1. Separation

Give shape to your story with basic tonality differentiation

2. Emphasis

Lead the eyes to what really matters: with lines, shapes and negative space

3. Substance

Provide additional depth to the story, reinforcing primary subject

4. Tension

Generate opposition and tension between elements of the story

1. Creating separation

At the very basic level, light acts as a separator between your subject and the background. Back to the core of our perceptions, the human mind can only distinguish elements in visual art if, and only if, they have different colors or shades of a similar color. In B&W photography, when colors are de facto absent from your composition, the only way to define your subject vs. the background is to create tonal differentiation. In other words, you need to capture elements with different values of light if you want them to be distinct from one another.

Separation: Light subject vs. darker background



In this image, the lady walking is clearly distinguishable against the background. In fact, I waited for that very moment to take the shot, as I wanted her head and face to contrast against the background. Since I was range-focusing (i.e., using a small f-stop to ensure that a maximum number of possible subjects would be in focus, regardless of their distance from me). Although useful, this technique also brings far too many distractions: foreground and background tend to be a long continuation from another, making it hard to separate the subject from its environment.

Separation: Dark subject vs. lighter background



Tonal differentiation also works the other way, with a darker subject positioned in a lighter background, as in the photograph here. In both cases, the distinction between figures and ground is clear and indisputable, which is the basic essence of traditional composition. The separation in this image is further created by the shallow depth of field, a useful tool to bring up subjects at close range.

2. Generating emphasis

A more advanced use of light in your composition can allow you to emphasize your main subject. In other words, light can help create better stories if used smartly and appropriately. Think about how light, and its opposite – darkness - can contribute to your composition: leading lines, blockers, frames, negative space. All those elements will support your story by leading the eyes to what really matters – and get rid of what doesn't.

Emphasis: The effect of selective lighting



In this image, the use of light is more sophisticated: it shapes the story and the image. By applying light and darkness selectively – in areas within the arcades, I not only clearly separate my subject but also isolate her, thus creating that feeling of silence and strange quietness that seems to fall on her. The eyes are unmistakably attracted to her, while the exploration of the darker zones on her right and left leaves us wondering what can be hiding behind.

Emphasis: Leveraging negative space



Another purposeful use of light is negative space. Dark negative space brings up feeling of loneliness and silence, while light negative space will generally convey more positive feelings. In this shot, the negative space not only highlights the two subjects, but also brings them in contrast to the wide and empty city behind. The eyes move from the couple to the massive city sleeping behind them, structured and shaped by light and dark. The sense of perspective is amplified by the tonal variations at the center vs. extremity of the city, providing an interesting counterpoint to the couple.

Emphasis: Leading the eyes to what matters



Light can also act a blocker, like that shiny ray of light on the steel of the bridge in the picture below. The line created separates the photograph into two distinct areas: the dark part of the left, where our eyes do not want to stay or linger too long, and the brighter part on the right where the subject stands. As a result, more emphasis is given to the subject, as the eyes are forced to shift on the right and rest on the illuminated face of the woman.

3. Adding substance

Furthermore, light can create elements of its own – secondary actors that will help you tell a more subtle and powerful story: silhouettes, shadows, reflections. Those elements often convey more mystery and depth to your stories, helping to emphasize underlying emotions in your images. Those elements will create substance if they reinforce your existing story – which means, if they do not contradict the story in place.

Substance: Creating meaningful atmosphere



Light can add tremendous substance and depth to the story when it generates additional atmosphere. The light in this image is making the shot: this is because the atmosphere is misty and mysterious that our eyes wonder a little longer. The scene itself and the protagonists do very little to capture our attention, but placed within this explosion of light, they become timeless and memorable, just as the story.

Substance: Capturing stolen reflections



The sun has this wonderful aptitude to create new elements in photographs. Reflections are one of those elements that only light can create, and, if used properly, will add significant substance to your story. In the photograph below, the little girl looking beyond the window is facing her own reflection. Elements respond to one another – as if her reflection was an extension of herself, and extension of her journey into her mind.

Substance: Shadows as extension



Shadows – that other artifact created by light – have a strong symbolic value. They tend to show that we are dual in our humanity, that there are two of us – the dark and the light, the reality and the dream. In the picture below, the shadow of that little girl is enhancing the story, not creating conflict as we could suppose so. That little girl alone imitates the world of adults as she proudly wears her feminine hat, yet behaves like a child in her attitude and posture. Her shadow and negative space around only enhance that story by offering a representation of that world of hers, of that imaginary place where she stands – bridging the seemingly separate worlds of childhood and adulthood.

4. Creating tension

The most powerful impact of light that can be found in photography is to create meaning. When new elements created by light – or absence of light – detract and contradict the story in place, you are in fact creating new meaning. This is probably the most interesting and inspiring use of light for street photographers. New meaning will be created if, at the end of the day, elements with contradictory meaning come together to form a greater whole. This is the power of opposites – stirring emotions in multiple directions to create, ultimately, meaningful tension.

Tension: The opposition of light and dark



Tension is born out of the confrontation of opposites. Light and dark are in constant opposition with one another, and are associated with opposite feelings as well, as we already discussed in this article. In the photograph below, elements created by light do not act as an extension of the characters, but appear in total contradiction. The beautiful woman rests in the dark, while the strange-looking woman with naked legs is in the light. This inherent contradiction creates a feeling of mystery: the beautiful woman is not who she seems to be. From that dark corner, she seems to hide a secret that she will never share.

Tension: What lies beyond the frame



Tension can be created by what is suggested to the viewer. Light in this picture contributes to create an atmosphere of film noir, in opposition with the relatively simple scene in front of us. The fact that the light seems to originate from outside the frame adds an extra dimension to the picture: the mind cannot help but imagine the source of the light, the proximity to the subject, the speed at which it may be coming. So much can be said about not saying too much – like in this picture!

Tension: What's hidden in the dark



Light can also transform and personify ordinary objects. In this photograph, light is not only acting as negative space. In fact, it brings together two key elements in the story: on one side, the group of people happily walking. On the other side, hidden in the dark, the shadow of a car coming at them. There is a strange and powerful contradiction between those two elements, and the car can easily be perceived as another character of its own – with motives of its own. As a result, the image conveys a threatening feeling, a sense of cinematographic drama that gives a totally new meaning to the image.

Summary: The transformative power of light

1. Separation

Give shape to your story with basic tonality differentiation

2. Emphasis

Lead the eyes to what really matters: with lines, shapes and negative space

3. Substance

Provide additional depth to the story, reinforcing primary subject

4. Tension

Generate opposition and tension between elements of the story

CHAPTER V

Disrupting the harmony



Disrupting the harmony

Introduction

Tension exists when the mind cannot see what it expects to see to fully understand the story. The idea of “tension” is anchored into the Gestalt theory – a theory explaining how the mind perceives and interprets relationships between elements in a spatial configuration.

So what happens when you deprive the mind from seeing what's expected? You force the mind to imagine the untold, the unseen. You request viewers to go beyond the frame in order to get closure. You leave open too many questions that viewers will desperately seek to answer. In short, you create tension - and that, by itself, is a terrific fate, but one that is hard to achieve. The more tension you will add in your pictures, the greater the effort required from the mind: and the more interest will be generated as a result.

Why is that so important in street photography? Because harmony is what we see. Harmony is the ordinary, the mundane, the boring. Tension on the other hand is your storytelling ingredient: it opens the door to the imagination, the possible, the dream. It defies the predictable and the expected. It is your key to the extraordinary.

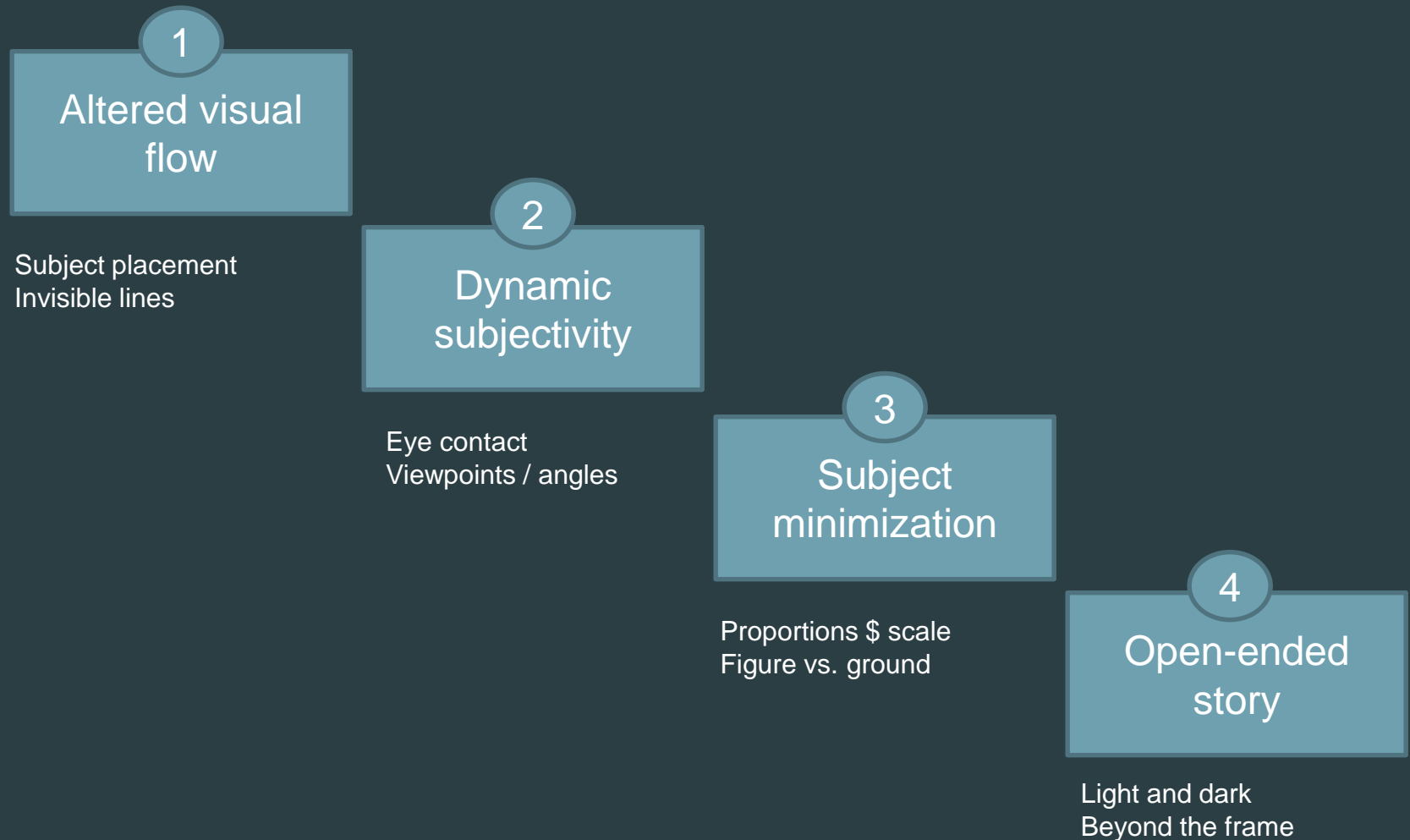
One simple rule to remember

Deny the mind closure



Create more impact

Overview: How to create tension



1. Altered visual flow

The usual visual flow of an image goes from the left (top or bottom), and extends to the other side of the image, to the right edge of the frame. Harmonious compositions make every effort to follow this natural flow, allowing our minds to travel through the picture with as few obstacles as possible. Subjects will traditionally be entering the frame, “owning” the story ahead, and offering the eyes a path to explore the remainder of the image. However, that level of simplicity is rarely satisfying in street photography, as by far, too expected, too ordinary. On the contrary, the most dynamic compositions will break this flow – resulting in increased effort for the viewer to comprehend individual elements, as well as connection between those elements.

Altered visual flow: Placing the subject on the edge or exiting



The placement of the subject in this photograph is quite unusual – nearly at the edge of the stairs, and of the frame, the woman appears to stand in a fragile equilibrium. The stairs in comparison stands out by their high graphical impact that the soft lines of the woman hardly break. The result is a feeling of tension – as our eyes repeatedly move up and down, left and right, in search for the lost harmony.

Altered visual flow: Using invisible lines



Invisible lines created by human stares are very powerful – more so than static elements. Invisible lines make this image complex at several levels. First, the power of the subjects' stares is strong because unobstructed. The woman clearly looks on the left, to something located beyond the frame. This not only adds tension to the image, but also contradicts the natural visual flow. Secondly, the boy is staring in our direction, whether at us directly or at the woman. This creates a triangular configuration which is very dynamic, and largely contributes to the overall effect of tension here.

2. Dynamic subjectivity

Angles and points of view, as I have mentioned previously in this book, can make a scene appear very subjective to the viewer – drawing the him or her into the action, right at the forefront of the scene. Tilted orientations, close ups, low or high-level angles, as well as direct eye contact can all contribute to powerful subjectivity, creating deliberate tension. This can have a strangely disturbing effect on the viewer, who, from invisible observer, is suddenly propelled in the story as an active player. Dynamic images often use those artifacts, supplementing composition within the frame with unusual, deeply subjective viewpoints. The result is altered perception of the reality, a sense of belonging to the scene, and personal association with the story taking place.

Dynamic subjectivity: Connecting with eye contact



Direct eye contact can establish a strong relationship between subject and viewer. The traditional separation between art work and people viewing the artwork becomes blurred. The mind automatically connects with the eyes of the subject, as if an invisible line was being created between the two. This image is disturbing at several levels. First, the woman's stare is definitely disapproving of the photographer – and of the viewer, by extension. This creates tension in and of itself. Secondly, the blurred reality created by the reflection of the man on top of her seems to play with our senses – disrupting the harmony of a traditional portrait, while requiring more effort to be understood.

Dynamic subjectivity: Creating experiential moments



Subjectivity is a key element of dynamism in this image: choosing the right angles and viewpoints will get you a long way in creating unique pictures. The low-level angle at close range, coupled with a tilted orientation, puts the viewer at the forefront of the action. Additionally, tension is created by the large mass of blackness that seems to follow her. Finally, the fact that the little girl is exiting the frame – not entering – suggests almost an escape, a frenetic attempt to run away.

3. Subject minimization

Traditionally, good composition is meant to direct the eye to the subject. Everything we do is aimed at separating the subject from the foreground AND background in clear, indisputable terms. Let's think about what it means to break that rule: what if my subject cannot be easily distinguished from the environment in the photograph? What if your subject appear lost within their massive surroundings? Then discomfort comes in as the mind cannot properly process what's going on. The original distinction between subject and environment doesn't really exist – one and the other are interchangeable, part of a bigger scheme. It will demand more effort to understand your picture. And in many instances, more effort equals deeper interest.

Subject minimization: Giving a sense of exaggerated proportions



The image is all about exaggerating the proportions of the city in comparison with the subject. As you can see, the size of the lamp post as well as the massive triangle of pure black position the subject at the very bottom of an extravagant urban structure. The man appears lost in this urban jungle, faced with a never-ending wall of blackness, and surrounded by large pieces of steel. Even the tree seems frail and vulnerable compared with the tall lamp post. This resulting sense of scale adds tension to the image, suggesting that the subject is, in a sense, at the mercy of the overpowering city.

Subject minimization: Blurring the line between figure & ground



In *The Stairs*, the man is quite visible at the bottom of the picture. But as the eyes travel up to the top of the stairs, the difference between ornamental objects and human figures become increasingly blurred. Are these men looking down at us or are these vestiges of the past? Blurring the lines between figure and ground forces viewers to re-evaluate the image a second time – and perhaps, get lost in the labyrinth of possibilities.

4. Open-ended stories

The human mind needs closure. There is a need for a beginning and an end to everything. In fact, the human mind cannot easily tolerate gaps, nor can it be sustained with allusive answers. This is why playing on that weakness can be surprisingly successful in photography and art in general. The resulting ambiguity is intolerable, and in order to make sense of the whole, the mind is forced to fill in the gaps, making its own interpretation of the scene and the story. As we can expect, this requires effort, and effort means increased interest. And this is perhaps the most important insight to remember: suggesting stories can be far more impactful than simply telling them; it allows the viewer to make it their own, and their own only.

Open-end stories: Keeping key elements in the dark



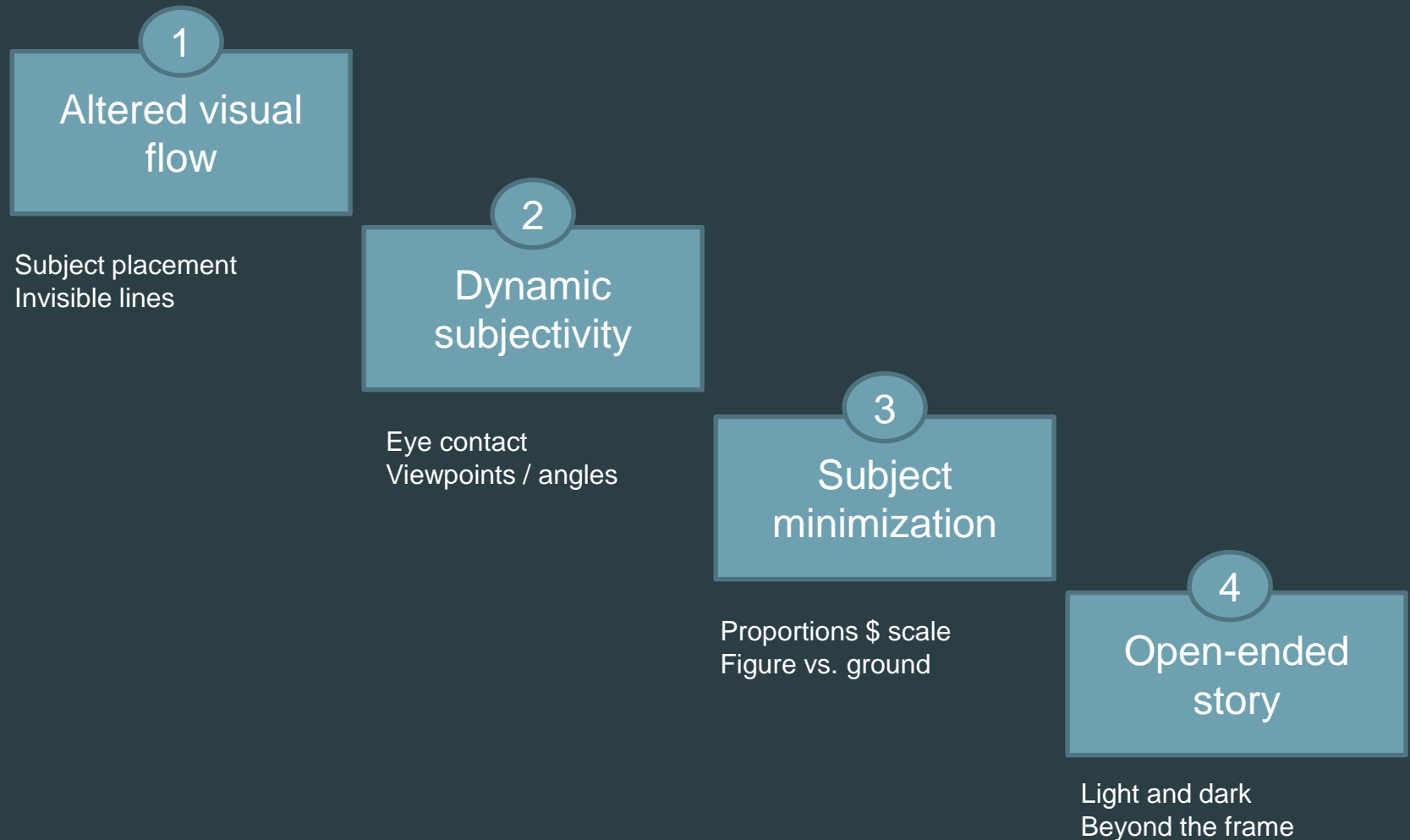
By hiding key elements of the scene, or key features of the subjects, we are in fact inserting gaps in the story – something that the mind cannot accept. This image has been interpreted in so many different ways, since I shared it publicly. The reason is simple: it only tells half of the truth. The subjects are mere silhouettes, whose expressions is hidden and can only be imagined. While the little boy appears to be jumping around, the gloomy light sitting across the dark alley conveys a feeling of ambiguity to the story – revealing too little to establish a clear and common storyline.

Open-ended stories: Not providing all the answers



This image doesn't tell a story, it only suggests one. The subjects are looking up at something located beyond the frame, and for this very reason, the story remains a mystery. This results in a more engaging image, left to the imagination of the viewer. What can they be looking at?

Summary: How to create tension



The end 😊

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