

Contemporary Media Forum

Illustrating Ideas with Digital Images: Insights from Contemporary Conceptual Photography

We live in an age where images proliferate as a tool to express concepts. Pictures are used extensively in movies, videos, magazines, websites, and books to get an idea across to the viewer. Conceptual photographs often appear in instructional presentations and textbooks on any subject matter you can imagine. Almost everyone has a digital camera of some kind and is taking shots to portray something they find important.

However, while our educational system emphasizes the refinement of conceptual thinking via language and semantics, it pays relatively little attention to the development of visual literacy – i.e. how we create and analyze images as expressions of an idea. Viewed from the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory, our culture focuses more on refining the verbal skills of secondary process thinking rather than exploring the visual language of primary process thinking, as we do in dream interpretation.

As a psychoanalytic psychologist, conceptual photographer, and professor who often makes use of pictures in my presentations, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the powerful conscious and unconscious aspects of ideas expressed via images. These insights from conceptual photography can be of service to all types of educators who intend to use pictures to convey an idea. They will also be useful to clinicians who wish to use their own photographic images for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN, AND TO WHOM?

The conceptual photographer strives to bring a message to the viewer. It might be a political statement, a social commentary, or, in the case of the work I often do, the portrayal of a psychological idea about people, relationships, and emotions. The viewers' task is to figure out what the message is. The photographer encourages people to ask themselves, "What does this photo mean?"

Some conceptual photographers work hard at making the answer to that question as specific as possible. They want the photograph to convey one particular idea, regardless of who is looking at it and what that person's background might be. They might even claim that the meaning of the image is exactly what they intended and only what they intended. If you see a photograph of a sickly looking man, grasping his chest, coughing up smoke, with a lit cigarette in his hand, the message is clear: smoking is bad for your health.

Rather than simply presenting a conceptual "fact," some conceptual photographers persuade people to think a certain way about an issue, and may even encourage them to change their feelings and beliefs about it.

Other conceptual photographers design the image in such a way that viewers might interpret the meaning more subjectively, according to their own expectations, feelings, and backgrounds. The photographer steers viewers into a conceptual ballpark, then encourages them to decide for themselves what in particular the photograph might mean. If we see in a photograph a pack of cigarettes on a table, next to a line of cocaine and a pair of dice, with someone's folded hands in the background, the concept seems to be "addiction," but the exact meaning is open to interpretation. The purpose of these kinds of conceptual photographs is to get people to think about a particular idea, usually by drawing on their own feelings, expectations, and memories.

The intention is not unlike that of the Thematic Apperception Test. One card seems to be about a father-son relationship. Another shows a man standing above and seemingly "hypnotizing" someone lying down. People are asked to make up a story based on what they see in the cards. But the pictures are ambiguous. The father and son do not look especially happy, so their relationship must be problematic, but how so? The hypnotist is controlling the person lying down, but for what purpose? Due to the ambiguity of these conceptual images, subjects tend to project meanings into the story they tell based on their own, often unconscious, emotions and life experiences.

This process of projection is similar to what happens when people view the more ambiguous types of conceptual photographs. The photograph presents the container of a general concept or idea, but then people fill that container with their own personal meanings. Some artists would also say that this is what their work is all about – to open a door to an idea, allowing people to enter and explore on their own.

And so the question is more than simply "What does it mean?" It is more like "What does it mean to whom?" The photographer either has a specific or more open-ended concept to convey via the image, but how well do viewers detect that specific concept, and what ideas, if any, do they project into the more ambiguous image? If the image is more than just the photographer's straightforward depiction of the "facts" concerning a particular concept, if it is an attempt to persuade the viewer to think a certain way about that concept, does it succeed? These are the essential questions of conceptual photography.

CONCEPT DIFFICULTY

Some concepts are easier to portray in a photograph than others. “Car” will not give you much trouble, but how about “unconscious anxiety?”

The more you can associate a concept with a concrete thing or situation in the real world, the easier you can represent it in a photograph. “Car” is simple because it is an abstract term for a category of real things. Existential anxiety, however, does not immediately conjure up a thought of something familiar in the physical world. That is going to be a tougher concept to portray.

“Car” also is not terribly interesting as a conceptual photograph, unless you want to convey some message about cars. Messages involve a collection of integrated ideas, which makes them more challenging to represent in a photograph. For example, are cars harmful to the environment? A car oozing oil into a beautiful lake conveys that idea rather nicely. Because both “cars” and “harmed environment” are concepts with ready-made referents in the real world, we can convey that message without too much effort. Now try “repression leads to unconscious anxiety.” No doubt you are scratching your head trying to imagine that photograph.

States of mind and subjective human experiences tend to be more challenging to represent as the concept of a visual image. They are often subtle, elusive, and intangible. That is why many concepts in psychoanalysis pose a problem. Exceptions include those internal experiences that correspond to observable behaviors. For example, we can quickly identify the facial expressions associated with basic emotions like anger and sadness, so if you want to convey the message that anger is burdensome, create an image of luggage with an angry face. Whenever you plan to create a conceptual photograph about an internal human experience, start with the question, “What behaviors reveal it?”

Three tools will come in handy when dealing with challenging concepts: a dictionary, a thesaurus, and an online image search engine. A dictionary definition of a conceptual term will give you insights into exactly what that term means, while a thesaurus will point you towards similar and opposing ideas. The meanings and the words you see might trigger some visualization that will help you depict the concept. If you plug the conceptual term, or similar conceptual terms suggested by the dictionary and thesaurus, into an online image search engine, you will discover how other people tried to visually capture that concept. The most challenging concepts will be those with complex and varied definitions as indicated by the dictionary, with numerous synonyms and antonyms as revealed in the thesaurus, and with search engine hits that show lots and all kinds of images.

CREATING TITLES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Creating titles and descriptive captions for images help guarantee that viewers will understand that a particular concept is being illustrated, particularly when

the concept is elusive or complex. A title by itself might be enough to launch people into the correct interpretation, but adding a description seals the deal by explaining the details of why and how the photograph depicts the concept.

You might use titles and descriptions to supplement the ideas in the image, perhaps explaining aspects of the concept that the image did not depict directly. You might simply allude to the concept in the title, thereby enticing and even teasing viewers to figure out the rest. For the ultimate in conceptual photography puzzlers, you could create titles and descriptions that do not seem related to the ideas in the picture at all, or that blatantly contradict them. But be prepared for the possibility that people might simply be confused. Also prepare yourself for the fact that some viewers will not see the image the way you intended, even when you do explain the concept in the title and description. Accepting the fact that everyone perceives an image differently is accepting the fact that everyone is unique.

SYMBOLISM, METAPHORS, AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Symbols, metaphors, and similes are very useful when designing conceptual photographs. Although these terms have slightly different meanings, they all boil down to the same basic idea. How does this stand for that? How is this thing like some other thing? How does one thing represent or resemble something else? In a sense, these are the most basic questions of all conceptual photography because we start with an abstract concept, then try to determine what visual things might stand for, resemble, and represent that concept. “Unconscious” reminds us of darkness and hidden, enclosed spaces. Having said that, we are already off to a good start in creating that conceptual photograph of “unconscious anxiety.” Perhaps dark images involving caves or basements. But what is “anxiety” like?

Symbols can be archetypal, cultural, or personal. The archetypal symbols hold a universal meaning for all people, regardless of their personalities or background. In many if not all cultures, water suggests birth and cleansing, circles indicate unity, and bridges signify transition. Cultural symbols also have widespread meaning, but a meaning that might be specific to particular societies. The color white might symbolize purity in one civilization, death in another. When deciding on a graphical symbol for a photograph, think about whether you want to pick an archetypal one that maximizes the likelihood viewers will grab the specific meaning you intended, or a more ambiguous or complex symbol that allows viewers to interpret the concept in different ways. Also pay careful attention to symbols and metaphors that might have a particular personal meaning to you, but not necessarily other people. For you “white” is like the childhood joy of eating vanilla ice cream. Others might not see it that way.

When brainstorming about possible symbols to use in a conceptual photograph, try checking out websites that describe the wide variety of symbols appearing in literature, the visual arts, and dreams. Different colors can repre-

sent different emotions. A particular type of house, tree, or animal can symbolize a particular type of person. A person in a photograph whose identity is hidden might stand for all people. Through the process of anthropomorphism, in which we inject human characteristics into non-human things, almost any object or scene can stand for a human, a human quality, or a human activity.

We can use any type of photography for conceptual work, whether it is portraits, landscapes, animals, nature, street photography, still life, macros, architectural, or abstracts. Symbolism, metaphors, and anthropomorphism encourage us to adapt insights from a very wide range of visual experiences in order to express a concept about people.

IMAGE DESIGN TECHNIQUES

Those conceptual photographers who believe in the minimalist tradition might create an image that focuses on a single subject to illustrate a single idea. They might use a clean white background, with no visual distractions, so the viewer's attention is focused exclusively on the one subject and the one idea it represents. Think of Warhol's can of soup. But even under these seemingly simple conditions, the person needs to make some decisions about enhancing the particular idea being expressed. Should the soup can be centered in the frame, to emphasize that it is rather stable but boring, or placed in a more dynamic off-center position? Is it a dreamy, ethereal, soft-focused can of soup, as if delivered from heaven, or is it a hard contrast and boldly colored product that wants to get in your face?

Other photographers like to load up their photograph with objects, people, and symbols in order to create a broad conceptual landscape that expresses a variety of meanings surrounding a particular concept. Such images are usually more difficult to create than the more minimalist type, with the challenge often being an artistic one. Anyone who knows anything about composition will tell you that you cannot just throw a bunch of stuff into a photograph, no matter how conceptually powerful it all is, and expect that people will want to look at the shot or be able to figure it out if they do. Good composition requires an intriguing visual balance and unity of elements that keeps a person looking and thinking, which is what you want for complex conceptual photographs. It means controlling how a person's eye moves through the photograph, so you can guide them first to the main concept, then to auxiliary ideas that elaborate on that concept.

There are countless books and websites that offer suggestions on basic photography, composition, and "post-processing techniques" – i.e. using image-editing programs like Photoshop to alter a picture. Even simple techniques that any layman can learn will serve to enhance the concept being illustrated, whether it involves changes in brightness, contrast, color, saturation, or focus. The control over these variables offered by digital photography makes it especially powerful for conceptual pictures. If there is a "hard" quality to the concept, add contrast and sharp focus. If there is a "soft" quality, smooth out contrasts and apply blur.

Shooting from a distance or down onto a scene encourages an objective sense of understanding the concept, while up close and immersive viewpoints draw the viewer into a more subjective identification with it. Even though most conceptual photographs are more about stimulating thinking than aesthetically emotive reactions like, “Oh it’s so beautiful,” feelings do play an important role in conceptual images, especially when they portray ideas about us humans and most assuredly when they specifically illustrate ideas about emotions. In this type of work, the manipulation of colors, tones, and textures will help create the necessarily emotional atmosphere.

THE PRETTY AND UGLY FACTORS

“Pretty” tends to be a pejorative term among conceptual as well as artistic photographers. The hardcore minimalist photographer might believe that aesthetic attractiveness plays no role in conceptual work and might even detract from the concept, whereas artists in general become annoyed when viewers simply see a photograph as pretty while overlooking the meanings embedded in the work. Nevertheless, the fact remains that people like to look at pretty things, so concepts wrapped in beautiful visuals might be more effective at holding the viewers’ attention and encouraging them to appreciate the concept. Attractiveness and beauty will probably be required for photographs in which the concept itself pertains to attractiveness and beauty.

What about ugly images? For some concepts – especially those that involve distressing ideas, as is often the case in psychoanalytic work – ugly images could very well be the perfect choice. As horror movies and gapers on the highway show us, people often have a hard time looking away from awful scenes. Revolting images can paradoxically capture the imagination as much as beautiful images. For some people, ugly can in fact be beautiful. Writers will tell you that stories about boredom do not have to be boring; they can be interesting. So too, ugly images portraying distressing ideas can be beautiful because they perfectly capture the concept, because they effectively employ the aesthetic techniques of composition and post-processing, or simply because they reveal the poignant beauty of human suffering.

FORWARD AND REVERSE ENGINEERING

Almost any idea can serve as the starting point for a conceptual photograph. If you find yourself stuck, simply think about issues and ideas that inspire you. Look to the news, books, television, or discussions you hear everyday for concepts about politics, religion, social issues, relationships, and human psychology. If you think about it, hardly a day goes by without your mind confronting some interesting, problematic, or even overwhelming idea – especially if you are a psychoanalytic clinician or scholar. The things that linger in your mind at the end of the day probably point to some idea that challenges you. And then there are

those concepts that have been lingering in your mind for weeks, months, years, or even a lifetime. Why not turn any of these ideas into a photograph?

The next step is to brainstorm about possible images that capture the idea. Pose some fill-in-the-blank questions to yourself. For example, if you are trying to design an image about transference, say to yourself:

“Transference reminds me of ...”

“Transference is like ...”

“Transference is as if ...”

“If Transference could talk, it would say ...”

“If Transference was a thing, or an animal, or a place, it might be ...”

It helps to close your eyes and visually imagine the possibilities. Doing so draws on unconscious thinking, which is where creative ideas often develop. The first thing that pops into your mind might turn out to be a very useful image, but do not necessarily stop there. Continue to visually free associate to the concept. If you let go of deliberately controlling the process, you will find that the spontaneous flow of images will lead you to some very useful material. Let it come to you on its own. Do not try to force your visual associations. The best insights will often pop into your mind spontaneously, sometimes later when you are no longer even thinking about the concept or photography. Such a momentary “regression in service of the ego,” as Ernst Kris called them, create the moment of inspiration.

The next step is to take that visual inspiration and actually turn it into a good photograph portraying the concept. This is the more time-consuming and often difficult part of the creative process that Kris called the “elaboration” stage. You will have to ask yourself if it is possible to shoot such an image. It might be beyond your resources or skill level. If so, it is back to the drawing board of free association in order to find another more workable insight. If you are eager to take on the challenge of creating a photograph from that intriguing image that popped into your mind, remember what Thomas Edison said: “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.”

When you are contemplating a picture you want to create, you might find yourself entertaining a variety of questions. Do you want to make the photograph straightforward or complex, subtle or in-your-face? Do you want to convey a widely accepted “fact” about the concept, or do you intend to persuade viewers to adopt a particular point of view? Is it YOUR personal point of view, or someone else’s?

As you grapple with these questions, as well as with the shooting and post-processing techniques that express your answers, you might find that your insights into the concept will change. You might find yourself appreciating the concept at a deeper level. You might even discover that you do not understand the concept as well as you would like, which can inspire you to further explore it. Although the traditional approach to conceptual photography states that the creation of the image follows almost mechanically from the chosen concept, the

process is often more complex than this. Creating the image for a concept gives you a greater understanding of it. Designing the photograph can help you work out your own ideas about that concept. In fact, it is very possible that you chose a particular concept BECAUSE you have not yet resolved your feelings and opinions about it. Attempting to create a conceptual photograph might be motivated by your unconscious wish to master what it means to you and your life.

Contrary to what some photographers claim, we might not start with a concept and then take a photograph to represent it. We might do just the opposite. We start with a photograph already taken and then apply an idea to it. In this type of reverse engineering of a conceptual photograph, you might use free association as you would in the forward engineering approach. What ideas does this particular photograph remind me of? What are the possible messages this photograph is trying to convey? As you look at the picture, notice what you see, feel, and think. Put words into the mouths of the people or things in the photograph. Project yourself into it and see what it is like to live inside that image.

Sometimes the fit between the reverse engineered concept and the photograph is perfect. You do not have to do much or anything to the shot. Sometimes the photograph has to be massaged to better express the concept. That is where skill in post-processing comes in to play. You might have to crop in order to focus on the parts of the shot that pertain to the concept, while eliminating those that do not. You might need to change the colors, tones, contrasts, and sharpness to better address the idea. You might even need to add something into the image that was not there from the start, or create a composite of different images. Sometimes, when you are post-processing a shot without even thinking about it being a conceptual image, a concept comes to you – which reminds us that the concept is not necessarily in the image itself, but in how our mind engages and works with the image.

IMAGES IN EDUCATION

Professors like myself, as well as instructors of all types, often use text and images in their presentations. Sometimes we think of the image almost as an afterthought to the “real stuff” being taught via the text – something to simply pretty up the slide.

The conclusion from this article on conceptual photography, as you no doubt will guess, is that such an attitude is a mistake. Although bullet-points in a slide presentation show promise, a handy, efficient means of conveying information, they can also numb the brain by fooling the viewer into thinking that knowledge is always linear, compartmentalized, and preformatted. This is a very left-brain-only approach to learning. More complete learning uses the whole brain, including the right hemisphere that appreciates a more holistic, integrated, and even intuitive understanding of information. Good conceptual images will activate

that type of comprehension, and will be especially powerful for people who are visual rather than verbal learners.

Instructors might find images online to use in their presentations, but given the guidelines offered in this article, they will hopefully feel empowered to create their own. In either case, choosing the best possible picture rests on the basic questions that we already explored. Do you want to nail a specific concept, offering a simple visual depiction of a straightforward idea, or do you want to encourage the audience to explore different interpretations of a more elusive concept? If you say to yourself, "This idea reminds me of ..." and "This idea is as if ..." does it call to mind an image that might be useful for your presentation? How does the composition, processing, and pretty versus ugly qualities of the photograph add to or detract from its effectiveness as an illustration?

For the best possible slide presentations, really think about how the text and images on a slide interact with and enrich each other. Where do they converge and diverge? During the presentation, talk about the images as well as the bullet-point items of text. For a more unconventional approach when creating slides, think about a concept, select an image FIRST, and then develop the bullet-points of text to elucidate the picture. Finally, after you finish your presentation, ask the people in your audience what stands out in their mind. I am willing to bet it will be the images.

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