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The Four Things, redux

JULY 28, 2016 BY [MING THEIN](#)

One image that appears to break the rules, but really doesn't: relatively flat light prevents texture from being too harsh, but it's directional enough to create the curved shadow between the mown and unmown grass, with the line leading to the yellow flowers – that stand out from the rest of the meadow. Order in chaos, guided nature.

In the past, I've written about ['The Four Things'](#) – what I consider to be the cornerstone elements of a good image. I've also written about [subject isolation](#) and finding that [extra unpredictable magic element](#) that lifts an image to the realm of the memorable. I've not written about 'the idea' yet, but that's in the works. What I'd like to do today is revisit the core structure of an image with the benefit of hindsight and simplify those four things as much as possible, with the background context of understanding how our brains work. It might seem like [photography and psychology](#) all over again; but remember that [photography is really a conversation](#) between photographer and audience – and like all forms of communication, the rules are both cultural and somewhat more deep-seated at an anthropological level.

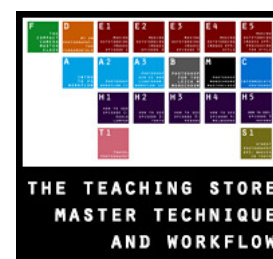
Firstly, it's important to remember that The Four Things are independent of subject and despite what many think, *have nothing to do with the technical qualities* of an image, either. In looking at tens, hundreds of thousands of my own images, those of others and those that are critically acclaimed – I've not found an exception to these rules. Some of those images may require flexible interpretation in conjunction with an idea in order for them to satisfy all criteria, but if you do *not* do this, then the idea falls apart and the image doesn't work anyway. I've done my best to find images that 'work' but break this rule, but have not succeeded – I welcome the audience to try, because if we do find an exception, it helps us to refine the framework.

I suspect the reason there are no or almost no exceptions to these 'rules' – I am hesitant to use this term because it implies creativity is limited and rigid, which of course it is not – is because our interpretation of a scene (as photographer) and an image (as audience) is very much dictated by the limitations of human psychology. *It has almost nothing to do with 'seeing'*: what we notice, observe and the byproducts thereof (i.e. images, or crystallised observations) are driven by the way our brains are wired. If you live in a city, then another high-rise building is not going to attract much attention or distract you – but if you live in a rural village and have never visited a city, it will probably do so – in the same way a large herd of cows might be unusual for an urban resident.

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The good news is that there are some fundamental things that apply to everybody: our brains all interpret certain things in certain ways, which are undoubtedly a byproduct of a pre-societal age. The sky is always lighter during the day, clouds imply rain or worry, we notice high contrast areas, color and pattern recognise human forms first, etc. Water is calming and blue skies are never a bad thing. Smiles are the same across all cultures, and nobody can resist a killer sunset. Barring cultural context, there is actually already a very strong underlying framework for us to work with that's a consequence of evolution and the way our brains have been wired. The more abstract stuff and the implied causal relationships between subjects are a little more complex and require some ability to identify elements and their functions, but once again, there's enough *modern* commonality (e.g. we all recognise cars, houses, buildings, telephones, books etc.) for us to have a very rich vocabulary to work with.

Here are the four things again, in order of criticality:

1. Light
2. Subject
3. Composition
4. The Idea

Light specifically refers to having the right quality of light for the subject: note that if your subject is meant to be camouflaged, you probably don't want strong contrast between subject and background, but if it isn't, then you do. It also means having light that supports your idea: if you want a warm sunset, then you'd better not have no shadows and an overall cool cast. Hard light is not flattering for most portraits, but it might work for some if you want to depict your subject as having a strong or aggressive personality, for instance. What this really boils down to is our taking subtle cues from the shadows: what we can't see can't hurt us, but certainly leaves less revealed and implies uncertainty and ambiguity. And remember that exposure and composition are not independent: changing exposure changes what's visible – or not – in the scene.

Subject is the essence or prime motive of the image: what is the photograph about? Firstly, you as photographer must be able to identify it: if not, then there's no way you can make it stand out to a third party observer. Next, think about camouflage: you want the subject to be the least camouflaged element in the scene; everything else that isn't important should be increasingly camouflaged with the background until it isn't noticeable at all. Subject isolation is really all about pattern recognition: if something breaks pattern, we notice it. The more it breaks pattern, the more it stands out. Ultimately, it boils down to contrast: both luminance and color; this is why light comes first: if you don't have contrast, you can't isolate your subject – period. The more different those two things are from the area immediately behind and around it (remember to think in terms of the two-dimensional projection of a photograph) – the more the subject will stand out. In implementation terms, we're back down to luminance contrast, color and texture/frequency – that's depth of field, spatial frequency and motion blur. Less important elements – contextual secondary subjects – should also stand out, but not as strongly as the main subject. Lastly, remember if you go too close: your subject may also become the background. This transition point is somewhere around the 30% mark: if it covers more than that, it's the background.

Composition is the ability to present the subject matter in a way that's both aesthetically pleasing – or at least arresting – and that a) assists with subject isolation; b) supports the story, and c) keeps the audience's attention within the frame. The last item is what I've always thought of as balance: if an image is balanced, then your attention goes instantly to the intended area of the frame, i.e. the subject. If it doesn't, then you need to shift the edges of the frame in such a way that this is resolved – usually by panning the camera directly in the opposite direction from the unintended focus. There are of course other considerations such as perspective and physical camera position, too; each has various 'better' choices depending on the intended story – and of course the underpinning psychology. For instance, looking through foreground gives the feeling of being an observer; having no foreground between you and subject makes you feel like an immediate participant. Reinforcing the subject by using a frame – much as you would frame a photograph on a wall to make it stand out from the rest of the wall – is another method of ensuring attention doesn't wander. Composition is the third item in the hierarchy because you must know what your subject is before you can construct a frame around it...

The Idea has to be both the foundation and the objective of an image. This is of course somewhat confusing because you need to have some notion of what you want your final story or message to be before you can start assembling the visual elements required to convey it, but at the same time, you can't convey an idea if you aren't fluent in the visual language to begin with. It's of course analogous to conversation: there's no way to explain what you want to say without being able to speak. I've been trying to find a way to explain this in more detail, but have not been happy with any of the essays I've written thus far – it's perhaps both the first and only time I've rewritten an article half a dozen times. The best I can come up with is the concept of telling a story: the idea is the implicit chain of causality and relationship created by spatial relationships and visual prominence of the various elements in the frame. It's as much about exclusion as it is inclusion – you leave out everything that isn't relevant, but include everything that is. It has to be ambiguous enough that a wide variety of audiences can be satisfied, but definite enough that there's no room for misinterpretation.

After several years, I'm still working to this framework – I haven't found a better one, yet. It's good for both composition and curation; if you don't have all four elements, then chances are the image probably isn't going to be memorable. Running through the mental checklist before you hit the button can result in a higher keeper rate; eventually this becomes instinctive. Doing it 100% of the time is tough, though: it can be difficult for us to break habit and not shoot things we've done before because they appeal to us personally, but perhaps carry no weight for others. The only way to go is keep shooting...MT

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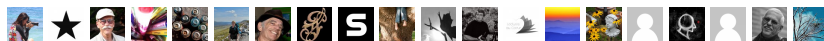
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Comments

Larry Kincaid says:

[August 5, 2016 at 3:26 AM](#)

I always liked the four elements, partly because there are only four. You can find much longer lists out there. They may always apply simply because of their high level of abstraction, which as you pointed out, is what language can do for our thinking and then our actions. However, for a great or better than usual image, I would always add your: It is the surprise that makes the difference between craftsmanship and art; or entertainment and boredom" as a 5th element to be considered. Surprise value is consistent with mathematical information theory, in which rare events are not only surprising but also carry more information as well. The classic example is "the sun rises in the east." A constant carries no new information by definition. For the same reason, one more photo of a sunrise is nice but boring if you (the photographer) or the occurrence itself does not have something else to distinguish that sunrise from all the rest. Painters just add them creatively at will. Photographers may have to get lucky, as you said, or find a different fore/background that adds to the simple image of a sun rising. Expressions on people's faces in portraits in another good example. All kids soon learn to pose one or two ways (if they stand still at all). Capturing the same person spontaneously in a wide range of expressions and emotions can create a surprising and outstanding image, as with the one of Churchill and the cigar when he's visibly showing his emotions. That's the one you select and the one the audience remembers. But if he learned to take that pose on purpose every time, it would soon be boring. [I had to demonstrate to a granddaughter that she exhibits a wide range of beautiful facial expressions if caught spontaneously rather than posed. She didn't believe me until she saw them; didn't even know she was making them.] I suppose you only need the first four all the time, but the fifth "surprise" value (aha! wow value) is a goal to be pursued as well, and hopefully recognized when it is given to you by chance.

Ming Thein says:

[August 5, 2016 at 5:21 AM](#)

Actually, [there have always been five](#) – but I've refrained about talking about the last one til people got familiar with the first four, because it's by far the most difficult to define. In short, the fifth is always the bit *we couldn't have imagined, but were observant enough to notice and use...*

Dirk De Paep says:

[July 31, 2016 at 3:24 PM](#)

Although I agree with almost everything, I believe one could debate about a few things. For instance the priority order. I believe that photographers with different style would alter that, probably giving first priority to subject or idea. I believe your order of priority

will more easily result in a somewhat sterile work. Not necessarily, but more easily. Also, the way to compose can vary for the same reason – style that is. In the course of the centuries, composition rules evolved in all arts. Still in all periods, masterpieces were produced. Yet the importance and need for consistency remains.

Ming Thein says:

July 31, 2016 at 5:45 PM

I agree. Subject/idea is first and last – at least from a conceptual point, you can't structure the rest of the image without knowing what the image is about. But at the same time, the image can't have an obvious subject if you're missing the mechanics to isolate it, either...

Dirk De Paepe says:

August 1, 2016 at 2:51 PM

True. But think about great epic works. More than having only one subject, it's a series of events that makes the work. It's as if it's exactly the extra ordinary collection of appearances that make the subject. In pictorial works, that's maybe less obvious than in literature, film or music, but still there are many examples. We can already think about the great early Flemish masters like Breughel and Van Eyck or Jeronimus Bosch. It's hard to isolate the subject, because the subject is the whole of "events". Composition will order and link them and make for a strong work, rather than "isolating the subject", which is impossible by definition. I believe in epic works, one can not put a limit to the number of subjects as a rule. Sometimes there are only a few, sometimes an abundance.

Also in photography, epic works can be found – even from time to time in the work of a certain Ming Thein. 😊 I believe a picture can, for example, show the many things that (can) happen at a certain location – the "feel" of that spot being the subject of the picture. To me that's typically an epic way of picturing. Not popular these days amongst many photographers, but personally, I find many beautiful and interesting pictures amongst them. Is it my age?...

Ming Thein says:

August 1, 2016 at 4:26 PM

Not your age, it's because conveying that sense of immersiveness requires far too much effort for most people. You firstly need to observe, feel and understand what it is about that spot that makes it distinctive and convey a certain mood; then you need to have the technical skills to capture and translate it for somebody else – and understand how the audience will see/interpret the image so that the experience is in a way, controlled. Most people simply do not even get past the first step.

Dirk De Paepe says:

August 2, 2016 at 3:12 AM

I thought the suspension points would have made clear that I didn't really wonder about my age. 😊 Still, fact is indeed that most people don't want to bother about much and only want to go for instant and easy results.

Regarding how the audience interprets, I guess different people interpret differently – and that's often a good thing IMO. I guess any work can allow for the spectator to take some time for observation. If the spectator doesn't take that time, well, that's his mistake in the first place. Of course the creator can make efforts to make things more obvious, more approachable, but I wouldn't call it a flaw when a work is more difficult to access.

Ming Thein says:

August 2, 2016 at 10:16 AM

I was thinking of the kind of brilliant simplicity that's the result of a lot of thought and distillation, but results in something that's at least 100% self-consistent and whose clarity only becomes visible on further contemplation...

Dirk De Paepe says:

August 3, 2016 at 3:47 PM

To paraphrase Stevie Wonder: "All is fair in art".

That being said, me too, I love this "magnificent simplicity", being the result of a masterly process. Yet those works are extremely rare and humble me to the utmost.

Ming Thein says:

August 3, 2016 at 4:12 PM

Agreed – so much thought has to go into knowing what isn't essential and leaving enough for at least some of us to understand fully...

Dirk De Paepe says:

August 3, 2016 at 10:12 PM

Apparently, we agree fot 100% here, Ming!

jeffreybotah says:

July 30, 2016 at 12:36 AM

I had no idea that so much goes into photography, that's really amazing.

Ming Thein says:

July 30, 2016 at 12:06 PM

I don't think every photograph has quite that much deliberate planning behind it. There are images that do, images that don't and work by virtue of coincidentally having those elements, and images that have no thinking behind them whatsoever...

Tim Halloran says:

July 29, 2016 at 11:51 PM

I think that you are right on with "The Four Things". I also agree that it is a conversation with the photographer and the viewer. When one element of the "four" is very strong and conveys the "idea" it seems that the other elements can play a lesser role. A very strong visual story such as seen in some journalistic photos may have some compositional elements that interfere or aren't needed but hold up because of their visual impact.

Ming Thein says:

July 30, 2016 at 12:05 PM

Perhaps not needed, but better with them...

Per Kylberg says:

July 29, 2016 at 10:01 PM

Highly interesting and thoughtful! Things really essential for any visual art. Your example image really speaks to me for two reasons:

1. 70's rock lyric (Robin Trower):

In this wide and open place

full of empty space

Often comes to my mind when I do photo – and when I look at your example image above. A photo of whats between the camera and the "materia" captured by the camera = air, light.

2. My disabled (cerebral paresis) brother . He bought a big Nikon F and rebuilt it to suit his abilities and shot a lot. Died at 56 and afterwards looking through all his bw negatives his theme was obvious: A little landscape in the bottom, small humans often in a corner and a large sky. All his images were about his isolation and he being perceived so different, yet the same as any of us.

After all we make images, not text. We are not writers. The idea, or theme, is often about what cannot/need not be expressed in words....

Ming Thein says:

July 30, 2016 at 12:05 PM

That's also true: there's often no terminology/description/translation for ideas that aren't written; however, language is our only way to discuss and understand them...

Per Kylberg says:

July 30, 2016 at 4:19 PM

Being for several years working with graphic design I have to disagree with you Ming. Visualization and music are means of communication for instance. Take body language: Much easier to understand each other face to face than over blog chat....

Ming Thein says:

July 31, 2016 at 8:31 AM

Also true. Clarification: one means of communication does not fully translate to another, but we can make up the difference with combinations thereof...

Michael says:

July 29, 2016 at 12:41 PM

I have great difficulty seeing the “idea” as not being implicit in the subject and the way you choose to frame it. Perhaps it’s difficult to write about because it’s actually an intuitive, gestalt recognition when encountered as a found opportunity. If the photo is planned, rather than found, then the idea precedes even the light. The job becomes one of pushing the other factors into the proper relationship, even if you have to bring some of them along with you.

Ming Thein says:

July 30, 2016 at 12:04 PM

Yes it does; the idea is both first and last. It depends if we’re creating the subject or responding to it.

Rennie says:

July 29, 2016 at 7:53 AM

Ming — Thanks for revisiting this. I have thought quite a bit about this framework since you first wrote about it, and have tried to integrate it into my photography. Allow me a couple of brief comments, in general agreement but with some minor additions.

Light. To my thinking, photography is painting with light. The interplay of highlight, shadow, and color is the palate with which we work. I find it helpful to think first about the available palate before trying to create an image.

Subject. I think of this as the reason the photograph is being created. The subject can be a person, a scene, an action, even a pattern. Regardless, it is the “why” of the photograph, and needs to be implicitly clear to the viewer.

Composition. I find writings about composition generally overwrought and unhelpful. I try to think of composition in terms of balance and movement. Composition is the two- (or three-) dimensional forces within an image that compel stillness or movement in the eye of the viewer.

Idea. In my thinking, I have replaced the word “idea” with “story” or “narrative.” The best photographs communicate a story in a temporal dimension independent of the other “things,” that binds those others into unified image.

In short, my variation on your theme is this: light (palate), subject (why), composition (balance), and idea (story).

Thanks again for all your guidance and inspiration. Cheers.

Mark and Emily Fagan says:

July 28, 2016 at 11:31 PM

Ming, the link: the right quality of light for the subject: is broken. Goes to a 404 error.

Ming Thein says:

July 29, 2016 at 8:21 AM

That article seems to have disappeared completely. I’ll look into fixing it later today when I get some time to trawl the ether...

Ryan says:

July 28, 2016 at 11:02 PM

While watching a man get his brains blown out I doubt Eddie Adams was running a checklist through his own however I do personally believe that these can apply to street photography and documentary by way of practice. If these important elements are ingrained into the photographer then you won’t need to run down a checklist when something amazing is happening right in front of you it will just be reflex. I do also believe that an image can be memorable based entirely on subject alone when it is along the lines of Adams photo mentioned, the napalm girl, Eugene Smiths photo of American soldiers handing up the dirt covered baby out of a seized cave. While most of those images would be memorable if they weren’t framed properly, weren’t tack sharp or were a bit over or under exposed the skill level and experience of those photographers aided in the memorability of those images.

Ming Thein says:

July 29, 2016 at 8:20 AM

That’s my point: practice enough and it becomes intuitive, and yes, it does make a difference. But given the extremely low threshold for ‘good enough’ in any way these days, I wonder why I bother at all.

Bumpy says:

August 8, 2016 at 8:03 AM

Please, never give in to mediocrity. It has always been present, is magnified today by sheer volume of both creators and observers who possess it in abundance. Easy to feel no one cares, but those who know see the difference. Think of the olympians who toil in poverty and obscurity in hopes of achieving, even if for a moment, the pinnacle of human achievement in their sport. Unlike the hoards of weekend warriors, history recognizes those who pursue and approach the summit. No matter the volume of mediocre images, only those who pursue the ultra have a real chance at being remembered by history or recognized by those who know (generally peers who have at least seen the summit or been close to those who sought the summit and recognize the enormity of the challenge). Your four (five) principles are a great description of timeless qualities that set a minimum bar. Greatness is clearing that bar by a wider margin than ever before in idea and/or execution. That striving to clear the bar by ever greater margin is what I read in your blog and see in your work. To stop bothering is to concede pursuit of the summit and join the mediocre.

Ming Thein says:

August 8, 2016 at 8:57 AM

Oh, I don't plan to 😊 I don't think I could, at any rate. My own psyche won't permit it; I wouldn't be happy. But I might say less about it...

Jonathan Hodder says:

July 28, 2016 at 4:46 PM

Interesting and thought provoking article. It might, however, be difficult to apply the ranking system to all genres of photography. While I can see how it would provide an invaluable framework for landscape and portrait photography, I don't think this is necessarily the case with street or documentary photography, where the idea and subject arguably takes precedence over light and composition. Some examples include Eddie Adams' Viet Cong execution and Warren Richardson's Syrian refugee escape. While these photos maybe technically imperfect and have considerably bad lighting, they are nevertheless memorable, conveying an idea so strong that they have swayed "hearts and minds."

Ming Thein says:

July 28, 2016 at 4:49 PM

Surely if there's no light on the subject – you're not going to see it. It might not be conventionally 'good' light – direction, diffusion etc – but it is the *right* light at the right time that supports mood and story.

Amaury Métails says:

July 28, 2016 at 4:23 PM

Very interesting post Ming Thein; Thank you for sharing your knowledge! I particularly liked your observation about exposure and composition: "they are not independent". It seems obvious when you say it but I personally don't remember having heard it or read it that clear anywhere else before! Now I have to have a close look to your original "The Four Things" post. And thank you too for making me improve my English vocabulary step by step with some new words in each of your interesting posts!

Ming Thein says:

July 28, 2016 at 4:50 PM

Thanks!

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Photography, philosophy and psychology – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

May 2, 2020 at 12:01 PM

[...] There is some crossfeed and overlap between the philosophical and psychological parts. The weighting/impact of the raw sensory data we experience (what we notice) is tied into our biases and preferences and experiences; this is as much psychological as physiological. But what we actively continue to think about (and thus, noticing) is reinforced by the frequency and intensity with which we experience it. It's entirely possible to see the same things all the time and ignore them or not really notice them – this happens all the time in our home environments – but at the same time, it's possible to be captivated by all of the tiny details of a new environment precisely because they are different. Photography is where we take these inputs and make a conscious choice about which ones we want to present, and how we want to present them. We isolate – curate, really – from the environment what we think is interesting and hopefully arrange them in a way that makes them noticeable in the right order of prominence relative to their importance in the idea we want to convey. The overall process of making an image is something we discussed at length previously in the Four Things. [...]

Back to basics: Turning an idea into an image – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

September 14, 2019 at 12:01 PM

[...] a way that's aesthetically pleasing (and/or different), uses the fundamentals of vision and The Four Things to create the clearest distillation possible, and preferably with a little something extra. If [...]

Back to basics: subject isolation – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

August 21, 2019 at 12:00 PM

[...] readers will know that I've distilled down four common traits of a strong image: quality of light, clarity of subject, balance of composition and 'the idea'. The first [...]

Faster isn't always better – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

October 31, 2018 at 12:01 PM

[...] perpendicular planar subjects at distance; convergent wide 'cones'. In every case, the four things still apply: light is still paramount; subjects don't isolate from similar backgrounds; [...]

Discussion points: photographic rules – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

December 29, 2017 at 12:00 PM

[...] personal guidelines have long ago been distilled down into The Four Things: note that these are not hard and fast rules, but flexible guidelines that take into account human [...]

To photography competition entrants – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

November 27, 2017 at 12:00 PM

[...] absolute standard: winning images must tick all of those boxes compositionally and technically, and at least be a 4, if not a 5. It's also possible that you may land up with multiple contenders that score 5+, [...]

Turning an idea into an image – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

February 14, 2017 at 12:00 PM

[...] a way that's aesthetically pleasing (and/or different), uses the fundamentals of vision and The Four Things to create the clearest distillation possible, and preferably with a little something extra. If [...]

Personal favourite images from 2016: or, a year in curation, part I – Ming Thein | Photographer says:

December 28, 2016 at 12:00 PM

[...] image must rate a '5', at least to my eyes. This means that beyond the normal Four Things, there has to be something unique, temporal, serendipitous or unexpected about [...]

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