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Essay 1: My Photo Essay
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Date



Yellow School Bus (2017)



Lit at Night (2017)

Simple yet Complex

According to the National Eye Institute (2022), “When light hits the retina ... special cells called photoreceptors turn the light into electrical signals. These electrical signals travel from the retina through the optic nerve to the brain. Then the brain turns the signals into the images you see.” Cameras work in a similar way and produces a photograph, a captured moment in time. Light comes through the lens and hits a special surface (a light sensitive material). Sensors convert the way the light hits the material into data which is processed from data into an image. Photographs capture the simplistic yet complex visual interest that can occur in real life whereas in paintings, according to Berger (2013), reality is manipulated and interpreted (20). The two photos “Yellow School Bus” and “Lit at Night” capture portions of my everyday world in a

way that reflects a little bit of my reality. While they are at first glance quite different, I am able to use Berger's ideas help me to figure out how the two photos are comparable in terms of light, color, composition, and movement. The story here is not so much about me or my neighborhood, but about how I see photos and make them relate. This is a story of ideas.

At first glance, one similarity that the two photos share is a focal point in color and light. In "Yellow School Bus," a typical yellow American-style school bus, is approaching an intersection in the black two-way street containing snow piled up along the sides of the street. Instantly, the yellow pops against a washed-out background of white. The setting naturally has a washed-out effect for there are snow covering majority of surfaces including the streets, cars parked on the side, tree branches, and on top of roofs. Even the sky is light, almost whitish-blue, which indicates that the picture was taken in the daytime. These winter colors of the setting present a grayscale which makes the yellow stand out. In addition, the light reflecting off the white snow also assists the reflection of light in the yellow school bus. In "Yellow School Bus," there is a variation of light source from the natural light from the sun as well as artificial light from the head lights of the school bus.

While "Yellow School Bus" has a variation of light source, "Lit at Night" only has artificial light. The outside of a restaurant is captured in the photo. The restaurant has a red neon sign of Chinese characters with the description "char house." Tables and light fixtures inside the restaurant are also visible through the ceiling to floor glass walls. The hood of a black car is visible as the red sign has reflected on to the shiny hood. To the left of the restaurant building, another small sign is cut off containing triangles of blue, orange, green, and red. The surrounding such as the street and building is dark, indicating nighttime. However, from the artificial light of store signs and also yellow light fixtures inside, there are subtle glimpses and hints of different

colors and textures of its surrounding such as the sidewalk, the brick building, windows, and cement walls. Similarly with the picture “Yellow School Bus,” there is a main focal point in the picture of red from the neon sign. The photo is underexposed, which makes it dark. And the nighttime accentuates the extremely dark background. This creates an extreme contrast from the red standing out from a black background. Light is therefore important in both photos, but in different ways.

Berger (2013) explains that “every handbook on photography talks about composition.” This may be that composition plays an important role in gravitating our eye and creating visual interest. In photography, the rule of thirds is common; it guides photographers in aligning important elements to different points in the photograph. The rule of thirds uses horizontal and vertical lines creating squares of nine, thereby making a grid with four intersecting lines. Placing a central element in one of the four intersections, rather than dead center, helps bring visual importance. Interestingly enough though, both of my photographs conflict with the rule of thirds which brings obvious but effective attention and guide movement throughout the whole picture. Both the focal points in the two photos, yellow school bus and red sign, sit close to the middle of the photograph. The focal element in the center is purposeful because it is so obvious that it draws the eye to a starting point. Then, the composition creates movement and flow with elements drawing the eye all around the photograph. For instance, in “Yellow School Bus,” the attention is brought to the center where the school bus is, and the attention moves to the hidden yellow road sign in the left, up spreading through the branches of the trees overlapped by branches connecting to the trees in the right side. In the photograph “Lit at Night,” the focal point is in the center, then the eye moves to the light reflecting on top of the hood of the car in the bottom right corner, then to the neon triangle sign in the upper left, moving horizontally

across the upper portion through the outlines of the windowsill of the building. These movements with the frame of the photographs create not only interest but also harmony within the composition.

Ultimately, there are many elements to a photograph that can make it attractive. I think that photographs cannot be measured merely by its contents. As Berger states: “The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time” (19). And his idea of the simple message of any photo is appealing to me: a photo means “I have decided that seeing this is worth recording” (18). In combining these ideas, I can arrive at what I might call my own photography philosophy. To me, a photograph is difficult and easy, special and everyday. John Berger says that “every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality” (21). The variability of my interpretation of a photo and the everyday simplicity of a captured moment is what makes a photograph both complex and beautiful, like reality can be.

(1113 words)

References

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