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Essay No. 2

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When A Line Bends, A Shape Begins

Geometric shapes make up the world, and thus can be discerned in every photograph taken. Rectangles and squares often help to frame an object, while triangles create a natural depth that gives us a sense of distance and scale. Lines help direct our attention toward a subject, and also help to establish background elements. Shapes are the basic building blocks of the world around us. It’s why we are taught to identify them at a very young age. Often before we can even read. They are ever present, contributing to the aesthetics of a chosen scene and helping us to identify its key features. In his essay “Understanding a Photograph,” John Berger states that “A photograph is a result of the photographer’s decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen.” (292). If this is true, then shapes are the language in which these recordings are written. Through examination of the studium of two photographs, and the rule of thirds, it will become clear just how important geometry is in photography.

The first photo, “Balanced Cylinders,” is of a sculpture by Paul Sisko, located in front of the Starbucks at 6 Metrotech on Jay Street. The main feature of the photo is a sculpture of four cylinders, varying in size, perched precariously on top of one another. They are balanced on their edges, creating a sense of perpetual falling, like a child’s blocks that have been knocked over. The sculpture is painted in a bright, glossy red that reflects the sunlight at odd angles. “Public Plaza Fountain,” the second photo, was filtered using a black and white “noir” filter. It is of a fountain located on the corner of Avenue of the Americas and 55th Street. The water flows down from individual streams that create lines accentuating the sides of the upper part of the fountain, down to a larger rectangular pool. The main feature of the fountain is the sculpture that sits atop it. It’s of a golden sphere with lines emanating from it in every direction. It’s evocative of a shining sun, or perhaps other stars at night.

Teju Cole’s “Perfect and Unrehearsed” shares many instances of the intrinsic geometry found in the studium (the observable elements) of some of the most popular photographs of their time. He notes the interlocking limbs of the boys in a Munkacsi photo creating abstract shapes. He also talks about the elongated rectangles and implied polygons found in a picture by Alex Webb. While “Balanced Cylinders” and “Public Plaza Fountain” are, themselves, photos of geometric sculptures, there are also intrinsic geometric elements present that help to highlight them. In “Balanced Cylinders,” all of the squares and rectangles that make up 6 Metrotech, and their relative symmetry, help emphasize the sculpture’s non-uniformity and it’s seeming unwillingness to bow to the laws of physics, features of the sculpture that make it noteworthy. One may argue that the color of the statue does this more than the geometry does, but “Public Plaza Fountain” shows that this isn’t necessarily the case. Even though the photo is in black and white, the sculpture still “pops” when presented amidst the repetitive lines and squares that make up the building behind it. Providing, through its own lines, a direct contradiction to the uniformity present all around it.

These observations still hold true even after considering the position of the main subjects in the photograph. While the sculpture is front and center in “Balanced Cylinders,” it is offset to the right in “Public Plaza Fountain.” This is in observation of the Rule of Thirds, which proposes that a photo should be divided, both horizontally and vertically, by two equally spaced lines, and that its important elements should be placed along these lines. We can see its advantages, as “Public Plaza Fountain” presents more contextual details with which to form an opinion. It also provides a more nuanced feel to the photo, whereas the sculpture in “Balanced Cylinders” unabashedly demands attention. Although this contrast serves to make the photos seem diametrically opposed, this is far from the truth. There may be many differences between them, but the geometric elements serve to reconcile those differences and unify the photographs under one dominant impression. They both stand out in a unique way, but convey a similar sense of boldness and creativity.

Despite the fact that they help us describe almost everything, shapes don’t really get a lot of love outside of mathematicians and kindergarteners. This despite the fact that they are an integral part of both the human and photographic experience. There has always been a certain unidentifiable, yet undeniable, fascination with how they interact and fit together to construct different things. In describing Henri Cartier-Bresson’s work, Cole states that “The feeling of harmony in many photographs by Cartier-Bresson, this one included, comes in part from this ability to see and capture a scene’s native repetitions of shape or gesture.” This harmony comes from our long-standing familiarity with these shapes. Whether they be abstract works of art, or natural occurrences, there is no thinking about a visible thing without considering its shape. Based on its Latin roots, the term photograph can be roughly translated as “written light.” Just as a photograph literally cannot exist without light, it is almost impossible to properly comprehend what’s happening in a photograph without first understanding its geometry.

Works Cited

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