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David Smith

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Zone

System

David Smith

PREFACE

This book is about property, and entropy. To aficionados of traditional black and white film photography, 'Zone System' means a particular thing. For the purposes of this book, it means *other* things, namely:

1. how our world is systematically subdivided into private and 'public' (government-owned) properties; 2. signage, physical barriers and visual markers enforcing the uses said properties may be put to; and 3. *pictorial composition based on two- and three-dimensional, visual zones.*

Since I am primarily interested in photography as a tool for pictorial composition, as opposed to documentation, reportage, story-telling, performative technical prowess, etc., I will further elucidate some ideas regarding how this, admittedly idiosyncratic visual 'zone system' might work, and how I have come to apply it in photography.

A composition may be analysed as a series of zones: e.g., top and bottom, left and right, near and far – and/or arbitrary shapes formed from constituent elements. Perspective, scale, pattern, texture, tone, and colour can be orchestrated to provide a visual hierarchy to these elements, following well-established conventions developed by artists, artisans and designers over many millennia.

A proximate starting point being the famous cave paintings of bison and other prehistoric animals prized and feared by our forebears. These paintings demonstrate the earliest application of compositional tropes to introduce drama and animation to what would otherwise be straightforward, static depictions. Unbounded by the 2d framing favoured by ensuing generations for various practical reasons, they undulate in and out of shadows cast by torches on cave formations, closely mimicking the frightening and fantastical appearance of dangerous animals looming out of the darkness.

The nascent and instinctive transference of visual perspective, from memory to cave walls, reached its apotheosis in the Renaissance, with better tools and a reinvigorated commitment to spatial realism. It is no accident that an aid and driver of these developments was the refinement of the *camera obscura!*

The modern photograph is bounded by rectangular framing, and quite accurately and effortlessly records the perspective of a scene, along with many other details. This is at once an affordance, and defining limitation of what photography is. And what it affords is to establish the primacy of the point of view at the moment of picture taking.

It is true that photography has been also used as an intermediary artistic tool for any number of novelty visual expressions; these add little if anything to the vocabulary of what we have to come to understand as photography, and aren't my concern.

A clear and convincing visual hierarchy is essential to capture and hold the interest of a prospective audience for a given photograph (and every other visual expression, regardless of medium). To a considerable extent, a strong hierarchy may even eclipse any intrinsic importance (or lack thereof) of the *subject* to this audience.

The idea is to intrigue the viewer through unconventional manipulations – misdirection, if you will – of compositional elements. This is not in reference to studio photographs of e.g. portraits, still lifes, etc., or to physically re-arranging the scene! A scene may contain multiple, 'uninteresting' elements, the meta-subject is that the visual relationships of these elements *in situ* propose a more interesting meaning or mystery for the viewer. You may say that the photographer's job is to notice such relationships, and bring them to our attention.

I'm not interested in pictorial composition for its own sake; I'm interested in it as a means of expressing ideas, and not just visual ones. I leave it to the viewer to draw your own conclusions...

When a social system is in a state of *anomie*, common values and meanings are no longer accepted, and new ones haven't emerged.

Under the condition of anomie, the individual “*aspires to everything and is satisfied with nothing.*”

In commercial sectors, where far-reaching economic goals are continually sought and “*greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold,*” the lack of regulation over material desires becomes a constant state of anomie.*

*Sources: Encyclopedia Britannica, Wikipedia.
Quotes are from Durkheim, Émile. *Suicide*. New York: Free Press, 1951.





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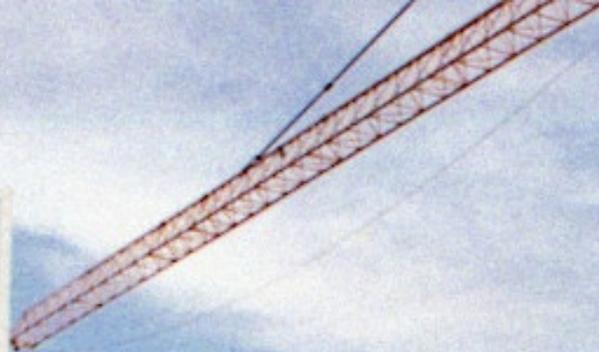
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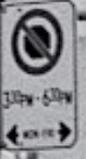




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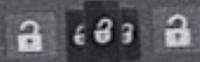
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