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CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY

From the online book *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche* by John Suler

We live in an age of concepts and images. Consider images in magazines that attempt to sell us a "concept car," or celebrities and politicians who worry about how visuals in the media convey a concept of who they are, what people often refer to as their "image." The words *concept* and *image* sometimes seem almost interchangeable. This is because the visual image provides a powerful pathway for the expression of a concept.

Photographs are particularly effective. A picture is worth a thousand words, which means a variety of ideas can be condensed into a single photo. Photographs also offer a seemingly more real, tangible depiction of concepts that otherwise seem abstract or elusive. For all of these reasons, pictures are used extensively in advertisements, movies, videos, magazines, and books to convey an idea. Conceptual photographs often appear in instructional presentations and textbooks on any subject matter you can imagine. However, our educational system emphasizes the refinement of conceptual thinking via language and semantics, while paying relatively little attention to the development of visual literacy, that is, how we create and analyze images as expressions of an idea.

That's the purpose of this article. But first, before I talk about the practical nuts and bolts of doing conceptual photography, let's take a very brief detour into the concepts underlying conceptual photography.

Is Conceptual Photography Art?

Beginning in the early twentieth century, a few rather defiant artists protested the emphasis the art world placed on the aesthetics and materials used to create art. They railed against the over-commercialization of art objects in the money-conscious world of galleries and museums, where the value of any given work rested primarily on the fact that a very skilled person created it using idealized aesthetic methods. The protests reached a peak in the 1950s when the sculptor Edward Kienholz coined the term "conceptual art" which inspired a new movement, often related to

minimalism. Rather than focusing on the masterful execution of aesthetic decisions, this new movement emphasized the *concept* that gives rise to a work of art. It wasn't so much the visual beauty of the piece that was important, or the materials and techniques used, but rather the idea it expressed. In the often cited quote from 1967, Sol LeWitt offered his explanation of the process:

> *In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.*

On one level, this point of view works well for artists because they are free to use an idea as the guide in creating a work, rather than being restrained by aesthetic standards about how things are supposed to done. On the other hand, it creates a problem too. If the conceptual artist's primary concern is getting the idea across, and skillful craftsmanship doesn't matter as much because the execution can be perfunctory, do you end up with a work that accurately portrays the concept but appears rather mediocre, so much so that people don't appreciate or even recognize it as art? Think about how some people react to minimalist and abstract pieces with the comment, "My five year old could do that!" Conceptual art, for some people, isn't art at all.

I mention these issues because they pose a particular dilemma for photography. Early in its history and even to this day, critics claim that a photograph is simply a visual capture of something out there in the world. They use that criticism as one strike against photography as art. Add to that the notion suggested by some authors that conceptual photography is relatively easy, even for amateurs, because you don't have to worry about artistic or even technical matters such as f-stops and shutter speed: just get the concept right… Strike two against photography as conceptual art.

Fortunately, there is no strike three and you're out. In fact, I'd like to step into the game here and call a foul. OK, my baseball analogy isn't spot on, but I suspect you know where I'm going with this. Good conceptual artists, photographers or otherwise, will tell you that highly developed skills in technique and artistic composition help a great deal in hitting that home run of creating an excellent conceptual work. You could take a blurry, over-exposed, discolored, terribly framed shot of old people dancing hip-hop with smiles on their faces, claim that it portrays the idea of being forever young, and you'd be right. But if you nailed the depth of field, exposure, color, and composition so that the joy of their age leaped right out of the photo, your photographic bat succeeded in connecting to the conceptual ball with a resounding crack.

I'd also like to add that the execution of the concept isn't necessarily perfunctory and mechanical, as LeWitt and others have suggested. The process might be very challenging and creative, especially when dealing with complex or elusive concepts. I'll even go so far as to say that turning ideas into photos *should* be challenging,

creative, and artistic when developing truly interesting conceptual photographs, and that the decisions might be made before, during, and even after the shot. More about that later in this article.

The "Concept" in Conceptual Photography

What is a concept anyway? The dictionary will tell you that it's a generalized idea of a thing or a class of things. It's an abstract thought in the human mind rather than a concrete, tangible entity in the physical world. The thing you're sitting on is the particular thing that you're sitting on. "Chair" is the concept that we apply to it and all things with a similar appearance and function (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8 REVEAL by John Suler

In his work "One and Three Chairs," the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth presented a typed-out definition of the word "chair," a photograph of a chair, and the actual physical chair. The real chair is the thing itself. The typed definition is the concept of chair semantically constructed with words and language, which is how the mind often forms concepts.

But what about the photograph? Is that image also a concept? Psychology does talk about visual as well as verbal concept formation. Conceptual thinking can

operate through visualizations. Even though a photograph is a representation of a particular thing rather than a generalized idea about things, it isn't that particular physical thing itself. You can't sit in a photograph of a chair. We could therefore argue that a shot of a chair, or of anything, is a very simple form of conceptual photography because it's not the actual thing, but a representation of that thing, a representation that has been taken away from or "abstracted" from the real world.

Of course a shot of a chair to express the idea of "chair" isn't terribly interesting as conceptual photography—not nearly as interesting as creating a photograph to capture the idea of "freedom," "motherhood," or "psychosis." We also could easily get bogged down in theoretical debates about whether an image of a chair really is a concept.

That's not necessary for our purposes. Instead, what I'd like to emphasize here is much more practical and down-to-earth. Kosuth's work shows us that words, images, and the real things they represent are all intertwined in conceptual photography. As we'll see later in this article, learning how to work with the images, words, and real things that we associate with a particular concept improves our skill in this photographic genre.

The image in particular plays a pivotal mediating role in the intersection of language and physical reality. In conceptual photography, we take a generalized idea based on the meaning of words and transform it into an image that is more specific and tangible. Conceptual photography turns an abstract idea into a specific visual form with substance. It propels the concept it represents towards the concrete physical world.

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 them 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 photo 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 photo 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 take a different approach. In the photo they offer up a general concept, but they 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 photo might mean. If we see in a photo 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.

In psychology the Thematic Apperception Test consists of cards containing pictures that pull for ideas about people. For example, one picture seems to be about a father/son relationship. Another shows a man standing above and apparently hypnotizing someone lying down with eyes closed. Subjects are asked to make up a story based on what they see in the cards. But the pictures are ambiguous. The father and son don't 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 emotions and life experiences.

This process of "projection" is similar to what happens when people view the more ambiguous types of conceptual photographs. The photo presents the container of a general concept or idea, but then people fill that container with their own personal meanings. Some artists would 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's 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.

The Sender, Channel, and Receiver

Social psychology has some useful ideas about communication to offer the conceptual photographer. It talks about the sender of a message, the receiver of the message, and the channel through which the message passes. The photographer is the sender, the photo is the channel, and the viewer is the receiver. Each of the three elements plays an important role in the impact of the conceptual message.

First of all, the photographer as sender should have a clear understanding of the concept. If your knowledge of it is fuzzy, then your visual communication of it will be fuzzy too. Make an effort to gain some mastery of the concept you want to portray. Otherwise, create a more open-ended image that gives viewers leeway in interpreting the possible ideas behind the image. The viewers' feedback might in turn help the photographer better understand the concept.

"Sender credibility" makes a difference in whether viewers are willing to accept the ideas being portrayed in an image. Social psychological research shows that a highly credible sender is someone who is perceived as trustworthy, reliable as a source of information, motivated to be truthful, dynamic, warm, friendly, and possessing an expertise on the subject. Any given conceptual photographer probably does not possess all these qualities, but this research does help explain why viewers quickly endorse some conceptual photos while ignoring or devaluing other images of equal quality.

Social psychology would suggest that a photo is a more effective channel for the concept when it is free from as much "noise" as possible. Although too much film grain or noise might indeed make a photo difficult to view and therefore foil an understanding of the intended concept, this isn't what social psychology means by noise. Instead, noise is anything that obscures the communication of the message. If you intend to depict a specific idea, make the image complete, clear, and explicit in how it visually portrays it. Ambiguous or contradictory elements in the photo create noise. Redundancy—using two or more visual strategies to convey the concept—helps eliminate noise. The conceptual photo also minimizes noise when it's appropriate to the viewer's frame of reference. You wouldn't design the same photo for both adults and children, or experts and novices, or for all viewers regardless of their gender, interest patterns, and cultural background. When creating a conceptual photograph, it's a very good idea to consider what audience will most likely perceive the image as intended.

Various psychological processes determine how accurately the viewer perceives the ideas portrayed in the image. As I just mentioned, "assimilation" occurs when viewers interpret the message according their own personality, frame of reference, and belief system. They may not notice elements of a photo that are unfamiliar to them, or they might misperceive those elements according to what they know from past experience. If a photo is visually complex, people might resort to "leveling" in which they reduce what they see to only a few elements. This leveling might narrow their understanding of a complex conceptual photograph or even derail the photographer's attempt to convey a particular idea. In "sharpening" the viewer's focus on one element of the photo, take it out of the larger context and then build their reactions around that selective perception. For all these reasons, some photographers like to keep their conceptual images as straightforward and simple as possible in order to insure that people focus on the intended message.

To evaluate the sender, channel, and receiver variables, it's a good idea to do a test run. Show your conceptual image to people, then inquire about what they saw in the photo, how their personality and background influenced their interpretation of the concept, and how their perceptions of you, the photographer, affected their reactions. Posting your images in an online photo-sharing community provides an excellent opportunity to understand the wide variety of ways people might react to your conceptual work.

Concept Difficulty

Some concepts are easier to portray in a photograph than others. "Car" won't give you much trouble, but how about "existential 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 photo. "Car" is simple because it's an abstract term for a category of real things. Existential anxiety, on the other hand, doesn't immediately conjure up a thought of something familiar in the physical world. That's going to be a tougher concept to portray.

"Car" also isn't 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 photo. 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 "Existential anxiety comes from meaninglessness." No doubt you're scratching your head trying to imagine that photo.

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's why existential anxiety and meaningless 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 photo about an internal human experience, start with the question, "What behaviors reveal it?"

Some messages in conceptual photography are evaluative: something is "good" or "bad." These kinds of photos tend to be easier to create than those that do not propose an evaluation, simply because "good" and "bad" are ideas that we can usually capture without too much trouble. We can think of all sorts of visual things that are good and bad. A photo of happy and vigorous looking people who are exercising clearly conveys the message "Exercise is good for your health." By contrast, "Exercise requires dedication" will be a more tricky conceptual photograph.

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 toward 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'll 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 helps 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 photo depicts the concept. You might explain the ideas behind the image as well as the shooting, post-processing, and composition techniques you chose to illustrate them. Because online photo-sharing communities often provide tools for creating image titles and descriptions, they are ideal places for presenting conceptual photographs.

Of course you don't have to clearly explain the photo in the title and description. You might use them to supplement the ideas in the image, perhaps explaining aspects of the concept that the image did not depict. 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 don't seem related to the ideas in the picture, 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.

Symbolism, Metaphors, Similes, 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. "Meaninglessness" is like chaos, emptiness, having no direction, or going in circles. Having said that, we're already off to a good start in creating that conceptual photo of "existential anxiety." How about using total blackness, a visual mess, or someone or something going in circles?

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

In fact, anthropomorphism comes in very handy when designing photographs for concepts that aren't necessarily about people. By attributing human qualities and activities to the concept, people will more quickly grasp its meaning. Whatever the concept might be, fill in the blank for the sentence, "This is the same as if people…"

We can use any type of photography for conceptual work, whether it's portraits, landscapes, animals, nature, street photography, still life, macros, architectural, or abstracts. In part that's because there are all sorts of concepts to express about humans, animals, nature, and architecture. It's also due to the fact that symbolism, metaphors, and anthropomorphism encourage us to adapt insights from a very wide range of visual experiences in order to express a concept. It won't be possible to master the technical aspects of all these different types of photography, but anyone dedicated to creating conceptual images would benefit greatly from developing the basic skills in composing these various types of shots. Experimenting with different types of photography also expands one's technical and artistic capabilities.

Composition and Post-Processing Techniques

Although some might claim that artistic or technical skill doesn't necessarily play a significant role in conceptual photography, I personally can't imagine how such skills can be ignored in creating good conceptual photographs.

Those people who belong to 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. For example, think of Warhol's can of soup. But even under these seemingly simple conditions, the photographer needs to make some artistic and post-processing decisions to enhance the particular idea being expressed. Should the soup can be centered in the frame, to emphasize that it's rather stable but boring, or placed in a more dynamic rule-of-thirds 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 conceptual photographers like to load up their photo 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 can't just

throw a bunch of stuff into a photo, no matter 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 photo, so you can guide them first to the main concept, then to auxiliary ideas that elaborate on that concept. Considerable artistic and post-processing skills come into play for such photos.

What composition and post-processing techniques work best for conceptual photography? Of course, there's no simple answer to this question. On the other hand, the answer is quite simple: *any* technique that works to support or elaborate the concept being illustrated, whether it involves changes in brightness, contrast, color, saturation, or focus. For this reason, the control over these variables offered by digital photography makes it especially powerful for conceptual work. If there's a "hard" quality to the concept, add contrast and sharp focus. If there's a "soft" quality, smooth out contrasts and apply blur. On the most basic perceptual level, something as simple as vignetting will help focus the viewer's attention on the subject that depicts the idea. 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 often 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 photo 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 viewer's attention and encouraging them to appreciate the concept. Attractiveness and beauty will probably be required for photos in which the concept itself pertains to attractiveness and beauty.

What about ugly images? For some concepts—especially those that involve distressing ideas—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 don't 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 haunting beauty of the distressing idea itself.

When it comes to the pretty or ugly qualities of a photo, never assume. Don't dismiss a beautiful photo as simply pretty. You might be missing the concept. If you feel tempted to look away from an ugly photo, consider the possibility that you're overlooking a beautiful representation of an idea. And when you find yourself skipping past an image that seems, at first glance, to be boringly plain, like a can of soup… maybe it isn't.

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, TV, 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. 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 photo?

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're trying to design an image about Hope, say to yourself:

"Hope reminds me of…" ?

"Hope is like…" ?

"Hope is as if…" ?

"If Hope could talk, it would say…" ?

"If Hope 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 subconscious levels of 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 don't 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. Don't try to force your visual associations. The best insights will often pop into your mind spontaneously, sometimes later when you're no longer even thinking about the concept or photography—what psychologists call "subconscious incubation" leading to the moment of "inspiration."

The next step is to take that visual inspiration and actually turn it into a good photo portraying the concept. This is the more time-consuming and often difficult part of the creative process called "elaboration." You will have to ask yourself if it's possible to shoot and post-process such an image. It might be beyond your resources or skill level. If so, it's back to the drawing board of free association to find another more workable insight. If you're eager to take on the challenge of creating a photo 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're setting up the shot and later post-processing it, you might find yourself entertaining a variety of questions. Do you want to make the photo 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 don't understand the concept as well as you would like, which can inspire you to do some research into it. Although the traditional approach to conceptual photography states that the creation of the image follows mechanically from the chosen concept, the process is often more complex than this perfunctory approach. Creating the image for a concept gives you a greater understanding of it. Designing the conceptual photograph can help you work out your own ideas about that idea. In fact, it's very possible that you chose a particular concept *because* you haven't yet resolved your opinions about it. Attempting to create a conceptual photo 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 photo to represent it. We might do just the opposite. We start with a photo 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 photo remind me of? What are the possible messages this photo 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 photo. Project yourself into it and see what it's like to live inside that image.

Sometimes the fit between the reverse engineered concept and the photo is perfect. You don't have to do much or anything to the shot. Sometimes the photo has to be massaged to better express the concept. That's where skill in post-processing comes to play. You might have to crop 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 wasn't there from the start, or create a composite of different images. Sometimes, when you're post-processing

a shot without even thinking about it being a conceptual image, a concept comes to you—which reminds us that the concept isn't necessarily in the image itself, but in how our mind engages and works with the image.

Educational Applications

Professors like myself, as well as instructors of all types, often use text and images in their slide 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 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 do the composition, processing, and pretty versus ugly qualities of the photo 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 audience what stands out in their mind. I'm willing to bet it will be the images.