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NEGATIVE SPACE

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

I find negative space to be one of the most fascinating aspects of composition, which is probably due to my interest in Eastern philosophy, which has always emphasized the dynamic relationship between objects and emptiness, form and formlessness. In these philosophies the “void” acquires a mystically powerful role in the process of creation. For example, Japanese Zen Buddhism considers *ma*—which can be roughly translated as “empty,” “gap,” or “space”—to be the critical compositional element of all art forms. The Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu also stressed the importance of the emptiness that gives purpose to things, as he illustrates in this passage from his *Tao Te Ching*:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub; It is the center hole that makes it useful;
Shape clay into a pot; It is the space within that makes it useful; Build walls for a room; It is the space within that makes it useful.

From a purely psychological point of view, we might define negative space as any area of the photograph that the mind perceives as space around, between, or behind the subject, no matter what might be in that space. Because some photographers think of negative space as a place for the eye to rest while viewing

the photo (think of the silent moments in music), any area that the mind perceives as a respite from the subject may be considered negative space. We might even argue that the subject or positive space is that part of the image that arouses the greatest emotional reaction for the viewer, while the background or negative space serves to support that reaction rather than generating an emotional response by itself.

The fascinating thing about negative and positive space, figure and ground, subject and background—whatever terms you might use—is that they depend on each other. In Taoist fashion, they create each other. Space is defined when you place an object into it, and the object is defined by the space around it.

Noticing Negative Space

Because negative space is the area that the eye doesn't focus on, it's easy to overlook it when creating and analyzing a photo. You have to train your eye to see it. You have to focus on the space around the subject rather than the subject itself.

As an exercise in sensitizing themselves to negative space, artists concentrate on painting or drawing the shape of the space around a subject rather than the subject itself. Imagine about how you might do that for the photo of the leaves in Figure 1.18. For those of us who aren't particularly good at drawing or painting, try to think like a stencil—how the paper, plastic, or metal of the stencil makes up the negative space that in turn gives us the shape of the whole that is the positive space, the subject.



Figure 1.18 “Leaves” by John Suler.

Negative space has its most effective visual impact when it forms an interesting or artistically meaningful shape. In visual design, they say the space is “activated” or “on,” as opposed to uninteresting space that is “off.” In some photos, activated negative space actually may be the subject of the image. And yet, you may not consciously notice it, or at least not right away. (See Exercises 4 and 9 at the end of this chapter.)

One thing you can do to appreciate negative space is turn a photo sideways or upside down to look at it. By doing so, you bypass the part of your brain that wants

to categorize and label things. Instead you give your eye a chance to just notice the shapes of the subject and space, and how they interact with each other. You'll see that negative space can appear anywhere in an image: usually along the edges if the subject is near the center, but sometimes in the middle, as in a shot through a tunnel or in the image of the rattan table in Figure 1.19. The space is said to be “trapped” when the positive space encloses it.



Figure 1.19 “Rattan Table” by John Suler.

Sensitizing yourself to the relationship between negative space and the subject will help you notice when they interact with each other in clumsy or unsightly ways. For example, consider a shot of a woman alongside a country road. The woman is the subject and the background road with surrounding fields and trees become the space. At first the mind thinks of them as separate—subject and background space—but then on closer inspection you notice a tree extending out of the woman’s head. Rather than being part of the negative space, the tree now becomes, perceptually speaking, part of the positive space and a grotesque appendage to the woman’s head!

The Role of the Frame

The frame plays an important role in shaping negative space, whether that frame consists of the edges of a print, a digital image, or the camera’s viewfinder. The frame bounds the negative space on the outside, while the positive space (the subject) bounds it on the inside. However, it’s easy to overlook this function of the frame because the mind tends to perceive it as something extraneous to the image, as a kind of container or handle for the image rather than part of the image. We probably develop this perceptual blind spot as adults because children tend to notice the effect of the frame on composition more quickly. Adults often have to train themselves to see it.

Consider this example. You’re shooting up toward the top of several tall buildings that surround you. As you move the viewfinder around, the shape of the

sky, which is the negative space, changes as it becomes bounded between the edges of the frame and the sides of the buildings. Is the shape of the sky square, rectangular, triangular, long, squat, thin, horizontal, vertical, diagonal? What happens to the shape of the negative space when different corners of the buildings touch the frame, thereby enclosing different sections of the negative space—or when you align certain edges of the building with the frame? How do the sizes and shapes of the sky compare to those of the buildings? Imagine how you might apply those same questions to the photo of the leaves in Figure 1.18.

Negative space is not constant. It is always being shaped by the edges of the frame. It keeps changing in size and shape as you move the viewfinder to find different ways to bound the space. The proportions and balance of negative and positive space shift, sometimes in a more aesthetically pleasing way, sometimes not. If the subject fills most of the frame, the negative space is smaller than if the subject fills only a portion of the frame. The ratio of negative to positive space can make or break the composition.

It's a good idea to train yourself to see negative space as you are looking through the viewfinder to take a shot, but you can also modify its size and shape by cropping the image. Sometimes it's quite amazing to see how an ordinary image suddenly pops when cropping alters the negative space in an interesting way or creates an intriguing balance of negative and positive space. Unlike the camera viewfinder, which forces specific dimensions to the shot, cropping has the advantage of letting you choose different widths and heights of the frame, which gives you more freedom in adjusting the size and position of the negative space relative to the subject.

Strategies for Using Negative Space

Thanks to the creative talents of artists, photographers, and graphic designers, there are many useful ideas about how to work with negative space. In fact, “working space” is a term that refers to negative space that serves the composition. Don't simply fill empty space, use it effectively! Here are some of those ideas:

- *Distribution of Space*: Centering a subject tends to neutralize space by pushing it to the perimeter of the image and making it evenly symmetrical. Space on all sides creates a static, calm, formal feeling. It may not be very interesting to the eye. Placing a subject off center can activate the space and make it come alive. Unevenly distributed space tends to do a better job of connecting the elements of an image because they will seem to be grouped. Evenly distributed space tends to make elements float independently of each other.
- *Shape of the Space*: Consider the shape of the space in an image. Is it interesting? How might you make it complement, echo, or contrast with the shape of the subject? Space with a very interesting shape can compete with the subject. It can become the subject. Or it might establish a figure-ground “reversal” in which the space and the subject alternate as the focus of the eye, resulting in a sensation of movement, competition, and tension between figure and ground, or even the

feeling that the eye is being tricked. When the elements of an image create “closure” they may activate the shape of negative space; for example, a curved line of chairs that suggest a circle. In Figure 1.19 the table is the subject or figure, and yet the trapped space of the blurry background trees is so geometrically shaped and precisely framed by the table that it competes for attention as the figure. The mind switches back and forth between seeing the space as figure and ground.

- *Amount of Space:* Some people like to create equal amounts of negative and positive space in a composition to produce a harmonious balance. Having too much or too little of one or the other might ruin a photograph by making the composition seem awkward, overwhelming, or unstable. Too much space can make the subject look insignificant, insubstantial, or lost. Too little space makes the subject appear cramped and the image too crowded; there’s no sense of “absorbability.”

However, a perfect balance often is not necessary or even desirable. Playing with the proportions of negative to positive space can yield interesting results. A generous amount of space can make the subject stand out. As the subject gets bigger, it begins to activate and balance the space, eventually reaching a point where the figure dominates the ground, especially when the space is evenly distributed and uninteresting in shape. When the subject is small and the shape of the space is interesting, the ground dominates the figure. In some compositions, you might deliberately tilt the balance of negative and positive space in order to create a feeling of the subject being awkward, unstable, insignificant, cramped, or lost, as in the photo of the man on the rocky hillside (Figure 1.20).



Figure 1.20 “Volcano” by John Suler.

- *Space Providing Direction:* Space can generate a sense of direction and movement that can complement or contrast with the direction and movement of the subject. Space on the bottom creates a vertical “up” feeling. Space on the top emphasizes “down.” Space on the left pushes elements to the right while space on the right pushes elements to the left, as in the photo of the vase. Space can draw the eye into an image and also lead the eye out of the image.
- *Distracting Space:* Try to avoid using space as a ploy that draws too much attention to itself. Sometimes the viewer might be too conscious of it. It can be distracting and might detract from the message of the image.
- *Emotional Reactions to Space:* Different presentations of space can conjure up different emotional reactions. Space, especially lots of it, might suggest quality, solitude, absence, cleanliness, purity, heaven, sky, abundance, openness, barrenness, vastness, silence, calmness, rarity, quality, luxury, style, wealth, generosity, simplicity, wastefulness, arrogance, or elitism. Think about space as a basic human need for emotional health. Think also about the psychological concept of “personal space”—how people have a zone around their bodies that they consider private. We all need our space!

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