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Heal Our World one Photo at a Time

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## What Is Subject Matter In Photography?

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Subject matter in this photograph includes a ship in a colorful landscape.

What is subject matter in photography and how can you use composition to better define the subject in your photos? Many years of practical photography, and lots of research along the way, enables me to describe and illustrate this fundamental, yet quite profound image making consideration.

**The term subject matter in photography relates to the primary focal point (i.e., point of interest) onto which the photographer's lens is focused. Popular examples of subject matter in photography includes people; structures (e.g., buildings, cars); flora; and fauna.**

A more artistic approach to photography may involve the distinction between object, as a visual element within the frame, and the message, story or compositional element or elements that the image explores, which become the subject of the photograph.

Technique, composition and the relationship between the subject and background need to be considered to convey the feeling or mood the photographer wants to explore in the final image.

Techniques you can employ to clearly define the primary subject matter in your photos include the following:

- Lighting
- [White Balance](#)
- Sharpness
- Movement
- [Depth Of Field](#)

## Subject In Photography

To help us better understand the importance of subject in photography let's deconstruct the above photo.

I photographed this old ship, now no more than a rusting hulk, in the Beagle Channel near the city of Ushuaia in the far south of Argentina.

The orange color of the ship is illuminated by the gentle sunlight and presents a striking contrast against the predominantly bluish light from gathering storm clouds.

As we'll discover this photo explores notions of both subject and object in photography and shows how important composition is to making great photos.

## Highlighting Subject In Photography

The term **complimentary** can be used to describe the notion of opposites in photography.

For example, there's the relationship between primary colors and the complimentary colors that sit directly opposite them on the color wheel.

We can describe that particular relationship as follows:

### Primary and Complimentary Colors

- Red and Cyan
- Green and Magenta
- Blue and Yellow

Just as opposites (e.g., male and female) attract and can form harmonious relationships, so too can seemingly disparate elements within the frame.

In the case of the photo at the very top of this post you can see the warm (i.e., orange) and cool (i.e., blue) colors within the scene and how well those colors compliment each other.

The cool colors seem to make the warm colors even warmer.

You might even say that complimentary colors seem to vibrate against each other producing, as a result, a more dramatic image.

We can describe this relationship between warm and cool colors in this particular photo as being high in color contrast.

Color is so important in this image that I think it's just as much the subject matter as the ship, mountains, sky and water.

From a story telling or **narrative** point of view there's also a range of other contrasts within this image that are worth exploring.

It's these kinds of **dualities** (i.e., opposites) that give our images an added dimension and create a sense of visual tension. For example:

- The man made ship within the natural landscape
- The smoothness of the water and sky against the highly textured rock
- The hardness of stone and ship compared to the smoother areas of water and sky

## Subject Matter And Meaning

A large part of the creative journey involves self discovery. By understanding what your photos are about you'll be more able to understand your own, unique worldview.

While the photo of the old ship contains both natural and man made subject matter, I'd argue that it's the characteristics (e.g., warm and cool, hard and soft) inherent within those elements that become the most important subjects within the picture.

The primary object depicted is the old, rusty ship. The story being told involves the fact that the ship is now in an otherwise pristine, natural landscape.

To enhance that narrative I've employed color, shape and surface textures to visually engage the viewer and bring them into the story.

The theme that follows concerns damage to our environment and, arguably, explores how all man made objects (eventually) return to nature.



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## Examples Of Photography Subjects

You can photograph all manner of interesting subject matter across all genres of photography. Here's just a few examples to fire your imagination.

- Landscape photo showcasing icebergs in Greenland.
- Wildlife photo that features a waddle of [King penguins on South Georgia Island](#).
- Architectural details from the sublime [Temple Of Heaven in Beijing, China](#).
- [People photos](#) including formal portraits, candid moments, and sports and action photography.

The subject of a photograph might be chosen by the photographer or, in the case of most commercial assignments, by the client to achieve a particular look.

Of course, in the world of wedding and portrait photography, the primary subject matter is the customers themselves. They commission the photographer based largely upon trust, budget and the photographer's ability to produce a pleasing likeness of the couple on their wedding day.

In the case of street and travel photography the choice of subject is usually



Beautiful, luminous flower in the Calcutta Botanical Garden in Howrah, India.

### Subject Versus Object In A Photo

A critical question which needs to be addressed is the difference between subject and object in photography.

An object is a visual element within a photo, while the subject of that photo is what the image is actually about.

Examples of objects that might inhabit part or all of the photographic frame might include the following:

- Face
- Bicept
- Tree
- Sky
- Textile
- Food
- Eyes
- Moon

Objects that appear to visually dominate within the scene could also be considered to be focal points (i.e., points of interest) in the photograph.

As a consequence they deserve attention in the overall composition.

It might be helpful to recognize that, while the notion of object (e.g., flower) is usually indisputable, what the photo is actually about is often somewhat subjective.

Take a look at this image of a flower in the Calcutta Botanical Garden in Howrah, just over the majestic [Hooghly River](#) from Kolkata.

The flower is an object which, if you care to, you might further define by its species.

However, at a deeper level, the image may suggest notions associated with nature, growth and visual aesthetics such as color, shape and repetition.

Ultimately, these are examples of the ideas and concepts that attract our attention and, as a consequence, become the subject of our photographs.

### What Is Subject Matter In A Photograph?

The term subject matter deserves consideration. But what is subject matter

- How would you define subject matter?
- What is the actual subject of a particular photograph?
- What does a photograph explore and, ultimately, what is it about?

If you're wanting to move beyond the snapshot and embrace your creativity through the art of photography it's a very useful exercise to spend a few moments to define the notion of the subject within a photograph.

The way to do this is by closely analyzing the composition of a specific photo as a way of distinguishing and separating notions of subject and object within the image.

Naturally you'd want to do so with some of your own photos. However, to learn a process, it's often helpful to do so by first looking at photos that you don't have a personal attachment to.



Col Pearson in La Boca, Buenos Aires is this photo's primary subject.

### What's The Subject In A Portrait Photo?

Most folks would consider the subject in a portrait to be the person being photographed.

On one level that's certainly the case. You could take this portrait of my friend, Col Pearson, in the La Boca neighborhood of Buenos Aires in Argentina as a case in point.

However, I'd argue that the composition has somewhat challenged the notion of what's actually the primary subject matter in this photo.

If the composition makes you stop and explore the image, more closely than you otherwise would, then I'd say that's a good thing.

Notice how the photo has been divided, roughly, in half. How does this help the composition?

- The blue wall on the left of the frame is acting a little like negative space, both contrasting and connecting with elements on the right side of the picture.
- There's a similarity between the color of the wall and the color of Col's camera bag strap and shirt.
- Notice also how the yellow part of the wall acts to both divide and connect both sides of the photo.

So, while the picture is a portrait, I think that elements of composition like color, space and pattern are so pronounced in this image that they've become subject matter in their own right.

The photo has moved beyond mere documentation and become a much richer visual experience. I love it when that happens

But it's still a portrait and Col is still the most important visual element within the frame.

That's appropriate because, as it's a rather straight portrait, I think it's important that the composition hasn't taken over from the primary purpose of the photo, which was to create a pleasing likeness of my friend, Col, exploring the streets of Buenos Aires.

### Subject Matter In Landscape Photography

What about a landscape comprising of, for example, a relatively even mixture of rocks, water, hills and sky? Could they all be considered subject matter in the photograph?

Absolutely!

In this context the word landscape is a very broad term that would normally be considered to be a genre in photography.

It follows then that the rocks, water, hills and sky define the subject matter within the picture.

However, depending on the composition, one element might be more of a **focal point**, or point of interest, than other visual elements within the image.

That would make that particular focal point the primary subject within the photograph.

In the case of a portrait photo you'd most commonly see this as a sharply defined face portrayed against an out of focus background.

In a nature photo the same technique could be used to portray a flower against an out of focus mountain.

However, as a way of retaining as much detail as possible, most landscape photos are recorded as sharp as possible, via a large depth of field, from foreground to background.

In such cases a primary focal point might be separated from it's surroundings in a range of ways, including the following:

- Subject photographed against a much darker background
- Subject photographed against a distant background
- Subject isolated from the background through the use of a telephoto lens
- Subject separated from the background through scale
- Subject color contrasts against that of the background



## About To Travel?

Here's What You Need

### Subject Matter And Composition In Photography

From an artist's point of view rocks, water, sky and people can all be considered to be objects within the frame.

However, it's the elements of composition (e.g., shape, texture and color) inherent to those objects that can actually become the primary focal points or subject matter in the photograph.

This was my approach when making the photo of the abandoned hulk at the very top of this post.

I photographed the old ship in the Beagle Channel after the conclusion of a photography tour I co-ran to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia Island and Antarctica.

Several members of the tour group decided to hire a couple of helicopters for a scenic flight over the mountains near the city of **Ushuaia** at the bottom of Argentina.

It was a brilliant flight, though I missed my opportunity for a turn in the front seat where photography opportunities were superior.

Towards the end of the flight the pilot landed on a remote beach for the celebratory champagne and nibbles part of the tour.

I gave that a wide birth, having more important things on my mind, and headed off to make pictures.

After all, I can drink cheap booze from a plastic cup anytime.

### Subject Of A Photograph And The Color Of Light

Let's take another look at the image of the rusted hulk in the Beagle Channel at the very top of this post.

It was quite a somber day, which is evident in the predominantly **blue light** from the rain filled clouds above.

The color of the water is a less intense blue. That's because it's reflecting light from a brighter and more aqua colored sky directly above.

I noticed the old ship, partly submerged, and wanted to photograph it.

However, as the ship was a considerable distance off shore, it was going to be tricky to define the subject of the photograph as the dominant element within the frame without losing a sense of its grandness within the surrounding environment.

I decided to incorporate the ship as a complimentary element within the broader landscape by exploring both harmony and contrast within the scene.



*Subject matter explores duality in spectacular clouds illuminated by a glorious sunset.*

### Subject Matter And Duality In Photography

After about a 20-minute stopover, during which time I made a range of photos of that rusted hulk in the Beagle Channel, we climbed back into our helicopter for the flight back to Ushuaia.

We were treated to an amazing sunset and an incredible afterglow that brought a fitting end to a wonderful adventure.

As you can see the photo, made from within the helicopter, depicts spectacular clouds illuminated by a glorious sunset.

But I'd say that the purpose of the subject matter in this image is to explore the quality of light and the relationship between earth and sky.

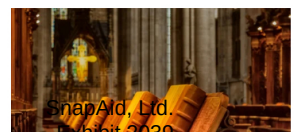
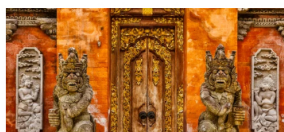
Going forward I'd ask you to carefully consider the power of duality and composition when exploring interesting subject matter in your own photos.

I hope you've found this post worthwhile and that you can see the value of making visually interesting images that challenge how you define the notion of subject in the photos you make.

Getting past technique and thinking about how your photos allow you to connect, at a deeper level, with the world around you is at the heart of an artistic practice.

Did you enjoy this post? [How to Photograph Unconventional Subject Matter](#) is the next post in the series, which I think you'll find particularly interesting.

[Glenn Guy, Travel Photography Guru](#)



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