

5 BASIC RULES OF GREAT VISUAL STORYTELLING



DASHA PEARS
Photography

WHY TELL STORIES?

It's not a coincidence that in today's contemporary art world, which includes photography, galleries, curators, brands are searching for photographers, who are able to tell great visual stories.



WHY TELL STORIES?

Story is the first thing that speaks to the viewer of the image. We are interested in what's going on in the frame. We can then guess what happened before, and what will happen after what is shown in the picture. The story intrigues the viewer and draws them to the image.

Storytelling is what connects us to our humanity. It is what links us to our past, and provides a glimpse into our future. Since humans first walked the earth, they have told stories, and visual stories came way before the written and spoken ones. In the digital age, we are more connected than ever before, yet so many of us feel disconnected. Why are we on social media every day? What are we searching for on Google? A human connection and more experiences told through stories.

We forget names and faces. We forget what we learned in high school algebra because it was high school algebra. But a good story? We don't forget it.

Let's face it: photography without storytelling is just a commodity. Any photographer who is technically good, but takes photos of just facts (think of web store pics, passport photos, crime scene photos) can be easily replaced by someone else, who does the work faster, cheaper, or better.

Then, along come stories. They're more impactful than plain facts in your photos. They get our attention and can impact our emotions. They can illustrate facts and help us understand some phenomena better. They can have an ability to change our beliefs, attitudes and opinions. They can easily transform our behavior, and facts alone cannot.

Stories are usually full of details and they make us relate to other people. Stories are remembered much better than facts and therefore are easier reproduced and passed on further. But perhaps the best thing about stories is relatively simple: stories about other people help us to better understand ourselves.

Why does this all happen? Because stories trigger emotions and feelings. Stories create feelings, and feelings drive actions and determine how we lead our life, treat ourselves, and others and where we put our energy.

You can tell stories with any type of photography, not just surreal fine art. It can be street, travel, portrait, fashion or even food photography.

WHY TELL STORIES?

Let me give you an example: both of these photos include red tape. Yet, the photo on the left does have a story. We can interpret what's going on in the image in multiple ways, we can think of what happened before the image was taken and what will happen in the future. We definitely sense a strong emotion that's coming from the image. At the same time, when we see the picture on the left, we don't feel any emotions. Only facts are represented here. Now let me ask you this: which one of them you'll remember better?



We can interpret what's going on in the image in multiple ways, we can think of what happened before the image was taken and what will happen in the future. We definitely sense a strong emotion that's coming from the image. At the same time, when we see the picture on the left, we don't feel any emotions. Only facts are represented here. Now let me ask you this: which one of them you'll remember better?

I think the answer is clear. I hope now you can tell the difference between factual images and images that communicate a story and make a deeper impact on the viewer.

You can tell stories with any type of photography, not just surreal fine art. It can be street, travel, portrait, fashion or even food photography.

5 RULES FOR TELLING GREAT STORIES WITH PHOTOS

There is a number of rules for storytelling in writing and there are also rules for visual storytelling. I've tried to come up with a combination of those that you can apply to making the stories in your images more prominent and compelling. So what are the 5 basic rules of creating great visual stories?



RULE #1: GREAT STORIES APPEAL TO OUR DEEPEST EMOTIONS

I'm sure you have experienced a variety of emotions yourself, when looking at a particular image. So let's dig deeper into this.

Psychologists generally agree that there are six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. The best photographs are those that can evoke your deepest emotions. They can make us excited, laugh, cry or feel empathy for someone else.

Here's where we first arrive at the notion of self-awareness. Being able to understand yourself is crucial for impactful storytelling. The more you understand how or when your own emotional strings are pulled, the more you'll appreciate how that works in other people (and the more you'll be able to use those emotions in your stories).

Pixar director Pete Docter puts it like this: "What you're trying to do, when you tell a story, is to write about an event in your life that made you feel some particular way. And what you're trying to do, when you tell a story, is to get the audience to have that same feeling."

You need to consciously be able to recognize these various emotions in yourself — and think about the "why":

Why are you feeling a certain way?

How might you be able to take the "why" behind your emotions and tell a story?

Continuously question yourself in order to understand your own emotional reactions to stories. When you do that, you learn to tell more authentic stories that actually move people.



The interesting part about photography is that it can be emotional without actually showing emotional expressions of peoples' faces. In a creative conceptual photo the emotion is often communicated through the environment: location, color palette, props, depth of field, etc.

Take a look at these two images. On both of them you see houses in the countryside. Yet, emotions that you get, from looking at them are totally different.



The image on the left is more likely to evoke happiness and joy. At the same time the image on the right seems to be gloomy and sad.

What makes these images so different? The use of light, colors, season, location and maybe you can think of something else too. So the image on the left is shot on a sunny summer day, the house is surrounded by beautiful greenery.

The house itself looks very pretty and neat. The colors are very saturated and bright. On the contrary the image on the right uses a faded color palette. It was taken on a cloudy and gloomy autumn day, there are no leaves on the trees, no life in the forest surrounding it. The house is obviously abandoned. And it makes you think of loneliness and even death perhaps.

Another example is from food photography. These are two images of doughnuts. However, the feelings that we get from them are different.



The image on the left seems to bring the feelings of joy, hope and cheer. It probably can remind you of a morning on a spring day. It's very light and bright.

The image on the right brings positive emotions too, but of a different kind. It's moody. It probably makes you think of dark winter nights, a cup of hot chocolate and a pair of woolen socks. How is the difference in the emotions conveyed? Again through the **color palette, though props, lighting and location** (or **background** in this case).

Now let's take a look at these two photos. What kind of emotions do they evoke in you?



The image on the right has all the bright saturated colors and therefore looks cheerful, just as the one on the left. Yet, there's a slightly different shade of an emotion here. And the emotion can change, as we look at the photograph for a longer time and try to understand the details. Yes there's a couple of very ordinary doughnuts there, but there's also one disturbing detail - a chain between them. It might remind you of handcuffs used by police and this association can bring yet another wave of emotions.

To me the image on the left is a reflection of pop culture with all its pros and cons. Also, this chain element can make you think of addictions people have, food addiction being one of them. Do you agree? Both of these are food photos. But the one on the right is also conceptual.

So, to summarize in visual stories emotions can be conveyed through:

- *Lighting*
- *Color palette*
- *Locations/backgrounds*
- *Props*

Is that it? Of course not! Now, let's take a look at these two portraits. In both of them we can see the beautiful face of the famous fashion model Natalia Vodianova. Yet, the feeling that we get from each of these images are profoundly different.



Take a minute and compare the two photos. You'll notice that the strong emotions in the portrait shot by Paolo Roversi which we see on the right are shown through:

- *Light*
- *Location/setting*
- *Clothes (or its absence)*
- *Makeup and hairstyle*
- *Pose of the model*
- *Expression on her face*
- *The direction of her look*
- *The angle from which the shot was taken*

So now you know by which means you can add a certain emotion to a portrait and what details you need to keep in mind, when you try to communicate your emotions to your viewer.

RULE #2: GREAT STORIES HAVE A CLEAR STRUCTURE

They have:

- **subject:** a character - the main question here is: *who?*
- **setting** (the situation the character is in): the questions you ask are: *when? where?*
- **narrative**, plot, what is going on with the character? Ideally it's some kind of transformation. The questions you ask here are: *what? why?*

Your subject is a character your viewers can identify with and place themselves in your subject's shoes. It should at least be someone who the viewer will be emotionally invested in. Your subject, your hero and leading character should be noticeable and significant within the entire scene (or frame). There are a number of ways to do that, either by focus, depth of field, by composition (leading lines, sub-framing) or by cropping your image.

Your setting is the location where you take the photo. It's up to you how much of it you want to show in the image, but the more you show the location, the more information you provide about the character and the situation he or she is in. Maybe that's why I rarely take close ups, allowing the location I'm shooting in be a part of the story.

The narrative, the action of your story can be shown in the form of movement, pose, clothes, props, makeup and hairstyle and other details that are present in your image. All of them will give your viewer more information about the characters and what is going on with them.

Your subject, setting and narrative will basically be your shoot's idea - **how the story is told**. Reading this information the viewer understands (or comes up with his/her idea) for two major things:

- **What is the story about?** - what you can actually see happening in the image
- **What is the story really about?** - the concept, the idea behind the shot, the thought a photographer is trying to communicate through the image.

Let me give you an example from my photos:



The character of this story is a girl, woman, she is sitting alone on the sea shore.

The setting: open sea, calm and peaceful, basically perfect weather for a sea trip. The atmosphere is sort of moody and gloomy, due to the cold tones of the photo.

The narrative: she's sitting at the embankment, holding a cage with a paper ship inside, looking at the calm sea.

Let's try to answer the big questions:

What is this story about? Very plainly it's about a girl that has a paper boat in a cage.

What is it really about? Here comes the interesting part! The interpretation! Why is it interesting? Because in conceptual storytelling photography the story can be interpreted in several different ways. Often conceptual photography uses symbols, which can also have different meanings in different situations. Here's my interpretation of this story: it's a story about holding yourself back, about not letting your dreams come true, about staying safe in the cage. So the paper boat represents a dream, and the girl doesn't want to let it float in the waters of the sea, even though they are calm. However, this story can be interpreted in a different way. What would be your answer to the question: what is this story really about?

RULE #3: GREAT STORIES HAVE A CLEAR PURPOSE

The main questions you need to answer here are:

Why must you tell THIS particular story?

What's the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of? What greater purpose does this serve? What does it teach?

When you have a real purpose for telling your story, your story will have bigger impact on the world. In other words, self knowledge and awareness are at the root of all great visual storytelling.

Again, it takes a lot of understanding of what really matters to you in this life. Which topics you are mostly concerned about and why?

Does it mean you can't tell stories unconsciously? No, it doesn't. In fact, some visual artists, including me, start this way. They get a burning desire to create a story, but they don't consciously think about the emotions their viewers will have, when looking at their images. They just pour their emotions into their artwork. That can work for sometime. However, those emotional images, without a clear purpose behind them, will be just that: images, and they will not be able to actually transform their viewers.



RULE #4: GREAT STORIES ARE SIMPLE AND FOCUSED

Don't get lost in the details. Do you notice when people tell stories that seem to ramble forever and never lead to anything, boring the hell out of whoever's listening?

A visual story is the same (if not worse). Too many details, and you lose your viewer's attention. People are busy and exposed to way too much information today. Tell them where to focus, right and clear. ***The structure of your picture, your composition, is key for this.***

As good photographers know, the way you arrange things in your frame can speak volumes by itself. I'll give you a couple of quick examples here. For instance, eliminating unnecessary details and adding negative space to your image will help the viewer focus more on your subject and less on everything else, including other images.

Let's compare these two images.



Which one of them are you likely to remember? I bet it's the image on the left, work of Rodney Smith, one of my favorite photographers.

And why do I think you'll remember it better? Because it's focused and lacks zillions of unnecessary details. At the same time the image on the right overflows with information: too many colors, too many accessories, you get the idea.

RULE #5: GREAT STORIES ARE ARE SURPRISING AND UNEXPECTED

With an incredible amount of visual information pouring on your viewers from the real world, the biggest challenge is to grab their attention. ***What makes visual stories compelling is when our perceptions of reality are challenged or changed in some way.***

That's why surreal images usually attract more viewers: they have an element of surprise, something that catches a viewer's eye, makes him stop immediately and focus the attention on the image. Many great photography masters starting with Henri Cartier-Bresson were influenced by surrealism, though their work does not contain any levitating objects or surreal scenes.

Now let's see a couple of examples. Both of these photos have groups of beautiful girls in them. But one of the photos will be more memorable than the other. Why?



The photo on the right is the work of Michal Pudelka, a fashion photographer from former Checkoslovakia. How does it grab our attention? It's the unusual composition, lack of unnecessary details and the truly unusual pose of the models. It makes us wonder: why are they standing this way? What's going to happen now?

Now, understanding the characteristics of great storytelling is important, but it doesn't mean that you have to start creating meaningful images from the very beginning. It takes a lot of time and practice. And a lot of thinking too. If at the moment, you've been creating photos just for the sake of their aesthetics, there's nothing wrong with it. In fact, I've been doing that for at least 5 years, before I felt the need to dig deeper. However, if you want to fully express yourself and impact your audience, ***a good story is crucial.***