



THE VISION COLLECTIVE: WEEK THIRTEEN.

Repeated Elements & Echo

As you begin to think a little more in terms of visual design, I hope you're open to looking at photography a little differently than through the usual lens. When we begin, we learn the buttons and the dials and a few visual effects—like depth of field and slow shutter speed induced blur—and that's important. But if we never move on, if we never consider the actual language of visual communication, we miss a powerful opportunity. One of those language tools is contrast (discussed in Week Twelve), and it's a powerful tool, or family of tools, for drawing the eye. This week's discussion focuses on the use of repetition and echo, which, when used well, can also create rhythm.

After my own reasons (expression, curiosity, etc.) in making photographs, my ultimate concern is the experience of the person who reads my images. I don't think it's unlike music, where you want to say something, but more than that, you want people to drum their fingers, get transported to a

memory or a feeling, and you want them to play the song again to extend that experience. I want that with my photographs. And it's not usually the subject alone that will do that. You can make a truly bad photograph of a truly beautiful subject. It's how you wield the tools of line, light, contrast, and rhythm that will make the image pleasing; something more than just a record of what you've seen. We are no different than painters, musicians, or any other artist (or we have the potential not to be), for we have tools of craft that can be employed in a way that creates a visual experience that transcends mere information. Together with storytelling and use of colour, it's these tools that help make a photograph *about* something not simply *of* something. Forgive me for the sermon, but more than anything else, I want you to come out of this course converted to this point of view.

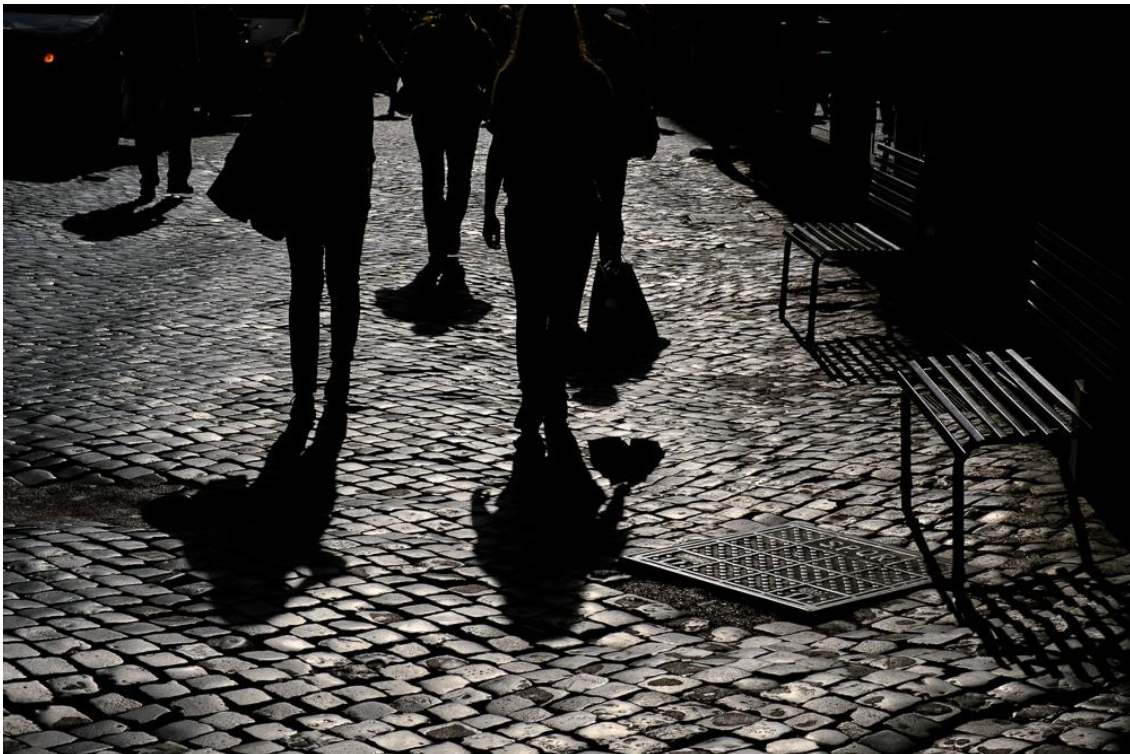
So the question is this: how does the use of repeated elements (discussed below) change our experience? It probably does several things, but the two I'm focusing on are echo and rhythm. Echo points the reader to something by repeating it and reinforcing its importance. Rhythm leads them through the photograph in a pleasing way; alternatively, if you break it once it's established, rhythm can lead to a way that may disturb or raise questions: all are equally valid experiences if that's what the photographer wants to accomplish.

Show a person something once and they might not notice it, depending on how you show it to them. You could make it really large (and unmistakable) in the frame, but that's not particularly subtle. You could also repeat it. In this sense, repetition or echo is the opposite of contrast but can be used for the same effect. Echo says "pay attention to me" by focusing on repeated similarity; contrast says "pay attention to me" by focusing on the differences. Examples of repeatable elements are almost too many to list, but in the broadest categories you could repeat a colour, a shape, or a line to great affect. That colour might be a red element that occurs throughout the frame. The shape might be cat or a human gesture. The line might be a strong diagonal that repeats itself into the frame. Or it might be combination of these things. All of these are examples of an element echoed to pull our attention more intentionally.



Rhythm is similar to echo, but while the repetition of elements that forms an echo can be somewhat random within the frame and calling for our greater attention, rhythm is much more patterned.

Rhythm brings movement and pulls the eye through the frame in a specific way. Both accomplish a draw on the eye and on our attention, but as the name implies, rhythm is more musical, introducing beats on which our eyes land. Those beats can be close together or further apart, they can be very ordered and tight, or they can be more organic, but this pull on our eyes is almost unavoidable, drawing us through the frame. It can also be used to point things out, because as much as we like a rhythm or pattern, we pay even more attention when that rhythm is broken.





There are other ways to introduce flow into our images and other ways to draw the eye, but when repeated elements are present, they can be used beautifully. Like anything, they aren't a formula, and can quickly become a gimmick, free of power of grace, if overused. One of the questions I often ask is, "Why?" and in photography, there are often two answers: one is pragmatic, like the idea that repeated elements can direct our attention or reinforce an idea, and the other is often more experiential (i.e., for whatever reason we find these things beautiful). We like a graceful line, we enjoy the visual experience of seeing someone's laughter well represented in the image, and something about a visual echo or rhythm is particularly satisfying to us. If people enjoy the experience of our photographs, I think we've accomplished something.



Creative Exercise

Take a look at the following images. How does the use of repeated elements create either an echo or a rhythm (or both)? What does that accomplish in the photograph? Does it make your eye follow a particular path? Does it reinforce an idea? Would the absence of that repetition make the photograph a different experience?







Study the Masters

Fred Herzog (1930 -) is a Vancouver-based photographer, an early colourist, and one of my favourite photographers. **Look through his work** and pay particular attention to his use of colour, especially when it is used as the repeated element. There are some lovely parallels between his work and the work of Saul Leiter, whom I introduced in Week Five. His work strikes me as an honest fascination with normal life, albeit the grittier side. There's nothing romantic about his work, but it's beautiful.

Further Study

- If you want to see more from Herzog, see if you can **dig up a copy of Fred Herzog: Photographs** or get your hands on this newest book, **Fred Herzog: Modern Colour**. This one is my next book purchase.
- If you want to study a little more about visual design, here are my two favourite books on the subject, most of which can be applied to photography: **Picture This: How Pictures**

Work, Molly Bang, and **The Non-Designer's Design Book, by Robin Williams,** which is excellent and for those who run a business, has the side benefit of helping you hone skills that will spill over into other efforts , like your website or marketing.

Final Comments

As always, if you're looking for me, you can find me on **my blog**, on **Facebook**, and on **Instagram**. There's a library of articles on my blog, and you can follow my adventures on Facebook or Instagram.

If you're looking for a missed lesson from the Vision Collective **they can all be found in the archive here.**

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin