## Meaning and symbolism

### Description and aim of module

In expressive photography, we rely on visual symbols to represent abstract ideas. A symbol stands for something with a larger meaning. Conceptual Photography, unlike other types of shooting, requires more mental processing, more imagination and out of the box thinking. This type of photography has to do with symbols, metaphors and hidden meaning, and we will implore this further in the module.

### Assessment criteria

1. Understand symbolism and what universal and individual symbols are.
2. Identify expressive photography, and apply it practically.
3. Identify conceptual photography, and apply it practically.
4. 
5. 

### Methods and tasks

- Discuss symbolism and give examples of universal and individual symbols.
- Discuss expressive photography, and take photos to illustrate the concept.
- Discuss conceptual photography and take a photo to illustrate the concept.

### Tasks resources

1. SDC Study Guide
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
Symbols, metaphors and hidden meaning, can be used in photography for creative effect. This is a very expressive and conceptual form of photography and the aim is to convey a message without capturing the reality of it.

- Symbolism: What does it mean?
- Universal symbols
- Individual symbols
- Meanings of symbols
- Expressive Photography
- Conceptual Photography
- From Unity to Subjectivity
- Inside and Outside
- Digital world

Image sources & bibliography

1. Douglas, Phil. 2010. Using symbols and metaphors to express meaning.
3. Foljambe, Alan. 2009. In photography, truth and meaning are not the same.
Symbolism: What does it mean?
Simply defined, a symbol is something that represents, stands for, or points to something else. Not all images are necessarily symbolic. We can appreciate them as beautiful without any particular interpretation offered or required. Nevertheless, symbolism certainly makes them interesting, especially to us humans who love to find meaning in things.

We’re familiar with the idea of dreams containing symbols. We’re familiar with the idea of “interpreting” dreams. Actually, dreams are a type of image. Any image may be symbolic and is open to interpretation. We might even think of some images as dreams.

Universal symbols
Some symbols are universal. Many people from various cultures across history would find similar meanings in a particular image. Water suggests birth, purification, and rejuvenation. The house represents the self. A circle indicates unity and eternity. Carl Jung, the famous psychological theorist, called these images “archetypes.” They represent universal patterns of human thought that reside in our collective unconscious. Instinctively, we react to these images, even though we may not always be conscious of that reaction or the underlying meaning. Some of these symbols date back to pagan beliefs about nature. Others may have evolved from the most basic elements of human psychology, culture, and spirituality.

When you incorporate some of these basic symbols into your photography, there’s a good chance that many people will respond to that universal meaning. Intuitively, they’ll be able to relate to that image and each other’s reaction to it. Happy people splashing in water are being replenished. An untended, dilapidated house is a person in a state of decay. People in a tight circle are strongly joined together.

Individual symbols
Interpretations of symbols also can be unique. People from different cultures and backgrounds may find different meanings. For example, colors, which can be highly symbolic, vary in meaning from one culture to another. People can also have their own highly personal symbols based on their unique personality and history. If you saw a baby bird die next to a rose bush, you might associate roses with death.

That’s how symbols work – by that very basic type of thought process known as “association.” We associate this with that. This reminds me of that. The lines of association generated by a symbol may radiate in many directions.

Meanings of symbols
One way to discover the possible meanings of a symbol is to free associate. When you see a particular element of a photograph or image, what does it remind you of? What different things do you associate with it? There may be many possibilities, some of them leading to more interesting memories, ideas, and feelings than others.
Things get a lot more complex, and a lot more interesting, when an image contains a variety of possible symbols. Then you have symbols interacting with symbols, meanings interacting with meanings. And it’s not just the elements of the image interacting with each other, but also the tones, colors, and composition that add to the symbolism and meaning.

How does it all fit together? Again, there may be a whole variety of ways to answer that question, and they will vary from person to person. That’s why we’re fascinated with great works of art. They are replete with all sorts of meanings.
When looking at an image, ask what are the different things it could symbolize? There’s no right or wrong answer. Play with the possibilities. Free association as a way to unravel the possible meanings of a symbol works best that way – when we use it to play with an image.
Expressive Photography
In expressive photography, we rely on visual symbols to represent abstract ideas. A symbol stands for something with a larger meaning. We may also call them metaphors. Some of the most famous photographs endure because of their symbolism. Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” is an instantly recognized symbol of the great depression of the 1930s and the migrant experience. Joe Rosenthal’s photograph of the American flag being raised during the battle of Iwo Jima is the definitive symbol of World War II. Symbolic photographs can trigger multiple meanings, depending upon who may be looking at it, because symbols can often mean different things to different people. For example, people who might have little interest or knowledge of the Great Depression or World War II might see entirely different meanings in those two images. This is not a weakness of expressive photography. It is a strength. Images that offer multiple meanings will often challenge the imagination of viewers in unexpected and provocative ways. Any image that encourages thought, moves the emotions, or stimulates the imagination can be a valuable experience. It all depends on how the photographer has used symbolization and how the viewer understands those symbols.
Symbolism plays a critical role in all three of the key principles of expressive photography. Abstractions are almost always rich in symbolic and metaphorical meaning. Incongruities often involve symbols in contrast or juxtaposition. Human Values are at the very core of expressive photography, and rely heavily on symbolization as well. A symbol represents the use of an object in order to express an idea, or, the use of that object in a different way than for what it was initially developed (a fork next to an apple is considered a tool for eating that apple; photographing a fork stabbing an apple gives that fork the meaning of a weapon). In other words, the symbolism is the deeper meaning of things. In Photography, we take for example (the classic example) a single tree on an empty field: it stands for loneliness.

Conceptual Photography
Conceptual Photography, unlike other types of shooting, requires more mental processing, more imagination and out of the box thinking. You see something and you think differently about what’s behind the usual and only then you shoot. The persons next to you will probably not notice the same think as you in the view until you tell them at least the name of your photo.
It’s about associating words with image (first in your mind before shooting): title with photography (then in the process of organizing your images).
The primary difference between “truth” and “meaning”, in photography, as in any other field, is that the former is considered to be an objective fact, while the latter is subject to individual interpretation. Rudolf Arnheim addresses this dichotomy within the realm of photography in his essay “The Two Authenticities of the Photographic Media”. Arnheim states that figurative arts can be authentic in terms of “reality”, or in terms of expression of “human experience”. These categories are roughly analogous to those of “truth” and “meaning”.

From Unity to Subjectivity
The historical shift from a belief in absolute truth to a search for personal meaning has paralleled a societal shift from community defined reality to personally defined reality. As we live in an age of situational ethics, it isn’t surprising that a view of reality defined by a belief in universal truth, characterized by such institutions as the Catholic church or the nation state, appears to be giving way to a more context-specific interpretation of our lives. One can see how much attitudes in this area have changed by reading works such as The Camera and the Pencil, published in 1864 by M.A. Root, in which he writes about the “absolute truth in the portrait” (page 424). Postmodernists cringe at the thought of it.
John Berger emphasizes the shift from community towards personality when he writes, “Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.” The consensus agreement on what constitutes “truth” is deconstructed from a monolithic whole into a tapestry of interlocking perspectives on reality. Alan Sekula addresses the same issue but refers to it as “binary folklore”: “there is a ‘symbolist’ folk-myth and a ‘realist’ folk-myth”. We can roughly equate the ‘realist’ folk-myth with the evening news, and the ‘symbolist’ folk-myth with the idiosyncratic vision of the artist.
Inside and Outside
It seems that the only way for these approaches to the nature of the photograph to be reconciled would be through the creation of a magical realism: the reconciliation of instinctive, myth-based realities with objective “truth”. This is a central theme in the consideration of photography. As long as the subjective reality experienced by individuals within their minds is at odds with that which is “outside”, there will be a continued disconnection, not only within the realm of photography, but also in life in general. This attempt to bridge the gap between the interior and exterior worlds is the same issue which was being addressed by the Surrealists eighty years ago. Artists attempt to re-enchant the world by uniting it with their internal visions, while more fascistic types try to resolve the internal/external split by forcing the internal into conformity with the external. In the sense of a uniting of opposites the two poles have some similarity, but the world views of the artist and the fascist clearly result in very different realities.

Digital world
Digital methods of photography simultaneously allow greater artistic freedom and a greater risk of dishonesty and exploitation in public media. The photograph, which was traditionally seen as a bastion of truth and objectivity (or even disparaged as “not art” due to its objective nature) has over the past few decades been transformed by both critics and art historians into a very subjective proposition. It is argued that the traditional film photographer, through the choice of context, inclusion, exclusion, lighting, and mood, engages as much as any other artist in a process of decision making which can only be described as highly subjective. However, with the exception of fairly primitive, often very discernible darkroom manipulations, the fact remains that in the vast majority of film photography what we see in the photograph was, in fact, actually there when the photograph was taken. Whatever the issues surrounding choice, inclusion, and exclusion, it was generally accepted that what was seen was, at least in some sense, real. With the advent of digital imaging and its concomitant powers of enhancement, deletion, addition, and combination, this last leg on which the viewer was shakily standing has been knocked away. While it is possible to use digital photography in such a way that its end result is identical to conventional photography, it is also possible, through digital manipulation, to achieve effects and alterations ranging from subtle removal of blemishes to outrageous and surreal distortions. Thus digital techniques are not so much a replacement of the abilities of film photography as an expansion of them.

As an exercise, attempt to link the images on the pages following with the symbolic value as stated below:
Abandonment
Trapped
World of order vs world of chaos
Death
Dysfunctional modern world
Infinity
Patriotism
Sorrow, frustration
Divinity? or Telephony?

Now closed - done and finished?

Infinity?

Weight battles? Body Image?

Puppet on a string?