A Critique of the Monochrome Image "Viewpoint"

by John Butterworth

Introduction

While the word "criticism" seems to have negative connotations for many, we should recall that a "critique" is a critical review or commentary, usually on a work of art, which is expository and not necessarily negative. When done with careful reflection, by someone with experience in the field, a critique can bring out aspects of the work which we may have overlooked, causing us to under-value the work. Such a review may or may not make suggestions on how the reviewer thinks the image could have been improved, depending on the purpose of the critique. In this didactic article, I present my critique of one of my own photographic images, with the hope that it will serve as a useful example of the process of critical review.

Title: *Viewpoint*

The title of the image gives us our first clue as to the author's intended meaning for the image. Without this information, the interpretation of the meaning of the image will vary considerably among the different viewers. In the art world, this phenomenon is the subject of *Reception Theory* which posits that meaning does not lie in the work of art itself, rather that meaning is part of a process of interaction between the viewers and the artwork.

In *Viewpoint*, we see a young couple who have climbed to the top of a mountain and are sitting in front of an extensive panorama in which the influence of humanity is not evident. While the young man seems to be engaged in the view, the young woman seems to have a different "viewpoint" and to be more engaged in her relationship with the young man.

Impact and Creativity

These are the two principal factors used in evaluating images. They determine when photography is art rather than simply documentary. Impact is generally accepted to mean the degree of success of the image in evoking emotion in the viewer, be it compassion, horror, a response to beauty, humour or any other of innumerable feelings. Impact is bound immutably to creativity. Images which are all too familiar – such as sunsets, family pictures or flower images (which we all love so much) often suffer from "image maturity." We see these images and similar ones so frequently that their lack of a creative difference results in them being perceived as banal clichés.

Questions we can ask are:

- Impact: does the image grab attention? Is its message understood immediately?
- Creativity: does this image show creative intent? Is it innovative and unusual in some way?

There are ways in which a creative approach can be taken to recording any image. How does *Viewpoint* fare in this regard? It relies mainly on contrast for its impact. The human couple is rendered in near-black in the foreground, against a middle ground and background which are of increasingly lighter grey and lower in contrast, giving a sense of depth to the image. In addition, there is the contrast between the human figures and the natural background in which no human influence is evident. The image is not one of a common type and shows creative intent.

Technical Factors

Here we address issues such as lighting, sharpness, focus, cropping, composition, "hot spots," over-saturation, over-use of HDR, horizon not level and other matters. One of the most important is composition.

Questions to ask:

- Has the photographer framed and composed the image so that the photographer's intention is evident to competent viewers?
- In the case of a monochrome image, has the photographer applied the best colour-to-monochrome conversion to produce an image with good contrast and definition? Why was the image rendered in monochrome?

In *Viewpoint*, the couple is placed on the intersection of the one-third points in the frame. For hundreds of years, artists have found that this provides for a satisfying composition. We also need to pay attention to the concept of *balance*, so that an off-centre object is balanced by a compensating object in opposition to it. In *Viewpoint*, the balancing is achieved by darkening an area on the left side of the middle ground.

Colour images are formed of visual objects which have the properties of hue, saturation and value (darkness/lightness). When we convert an image to monochrome, we are

discarding the hue information and leaving only value (or contrast). This makes the conversion process from colour to monochrome critical to achieving an image with appropriate contrasts to delineate the important visual elements. The conversion can be done in Photoshop CS5 by using Layer>Adjustment Layer>Black and White. This results in six colour sliders which can change the rendition of the resulting monochrome image considerably. Has the choice of rendition in *Viewpoint* resulted in an image with good discrimination between foreground, middle ground and background?

The reason for the monochrome rendering is that this image, as mentioned earlier, is a play on contrasts, which are emphasized in monochrome. These contrasts provide an enhanced sense of depth to the image and enable the couple to stand out against the view. The following annotated image summarizes some of the technical factors mentioned:

Summary of the Critique

The title of the image *Viewpoint* can be taken literally or metaphorically. The young couple who form the principal foreground object seem divided in their attention. The young man seems to be engaged in the panorama before him while the girl's "viewpoint" may be more focussed on her relationship with the man.

The couple is rendered in near-black in the foreground, against a middle ground and background which are of increasingly lighter grey and lower in contrast, giving a sense of depth to the image. In addition, there is the contrast between the human figures and the natural background in which no human influence is evident. The image is not one of a common type and shows creative intent.

The couple is placed on the intersection of the one-third points in the frame. This off-centre placing is counter-balanced by an intentionally-darkened area on the left side of the middle ground.

The monochrome rendering of the image emphasizes the play on contrasts. These contrasts provide an enhanced sense of depth to the image and enable the couple to stand out against the view. The conversion from colour to monochrome has been well-adjusted to provide a good separation between the planes of foreground, middle ground and background.