

A comparison of lighting styles in two commercial photographs



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A picture is worth a thousand words; in the advertising world, it can be worth a thousand dollars as well. Photography has been a very lucrative and effective tool in selling almost every product imaginable. Why? Let's face it; the average person would rather look at a very visual full-spread advertisement than at an all-text article.

As Brian Ratty explains in his introductory course outline on Advertising Photography, "The Major Purpose of Advertising [sic] is to arouse the consumers desire to own any given product. Advertising photography is used to stimulate these desires to an act and purchase."

Simply put, the average Joe would be more convinced to buy a car if he saw a glimmering photograph of the car rather than seeing just a full-page, comprehensive write-up of the same car.

But not all photographs evoke the same command and convincing power as some striking advertising photographs do. What sets the difference? One major factor that affects a photograph's impact is lighting. According to Jeff Wignall in his Focus on Photography series, "the direction from which light strikes a scene, relative to the camera position, has a significant effect on color, form, texture, and depth in the resulting photo."

Clemens used one-sided lighting in this particular photograph, although it wasn't mentioned if he used just natural light or if any fill-in flash was used. Of course it will not be implicitly stated if the image was digitally enhanced; but were such technologies already available way back in 1986? It is fairly difficult to capture such a sharply outlined shadow in natural settings. One

might conclude that Clemens actually used natural light and used additional fill-ins.

Clemens' purpose for the entire collection from which this photo was taken from was to showcase Sergio Bustamante's exquisite creations while highlighting the Mexican way of life. By using one-sided lighting in this particular photo, a sunrise/sunset illusion was achieved, giving the viewer a rustic feel of rural Mexico.

Wignall further explains that since one-sided lighting shines light across the object, it reveals the object's surface in such a way that every detail, scratch and blemish is caught; even its three-dimensionality is given emphasis, as is what was done to the cockerel in Clemens' cover photo. The cockerel, facing the light source, had its etched feather-like marks emphasized by the play of shadow & light.

Had the cockerel been facing the opposite direction, then its face and other features would not be so visible. Also, the one-sided lighting gives the impression that the light source in this situation is actually the sun, which adds to the rustic and natural feel of the scene.

Another example of how lighting affects a photograph's over-all impact is Annie Leibovitz's glamorous portrait of Nicole Kidman, as displayed in her retrospective exhibit and book, *Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer's Life, 1990 - 2005*. Leibovitz used bright theater lights to do the backlighting in this shot.

This image was obviously enhanced digitally (one can see that from the unnaturally straight & defined light beams), which all the more helps convey

the glamour of the personality behind this portrait's subject. According to Wignall, backlighting is the way to go when one aims for a dramatic effect, especially when you want to focus the viewer's eyes to the subject.

There could be no more appropriate lighting style one can use in this shot than backlighting. The glaring lights behind Nicole Kidman emphasized her statuesque figure and her extravagantly glamorous dress, giving off a feel of sophistication and allure. The theatrical theme would be lost and ineffective if side lighting or diffused lighting had been used here.

Comparing Clemens' approach with that of Leibovitz, one can surmise that lighting style does a lot in setting the mood and theme for a photograph. Change the lighting in one of these photographs, and the results would be drastically different, to say the least. The photographer's desired effect would be lost! What would happen if one tries switching the lighting treatment in Clemens' snapshot of the Mexican life with that of Leibovitz' iconic portrayal of a cultural idol?

To reiterate, what Clemens was selling here Sergio Bustamante's artwork. In order to sell or showcase his product, Clemens had to produce photographs that celebrate the products' details and Bustamante's fine handiwork.

Since this particular photograph was part of a collection about Mexico, Clemens had to make the viewer feel as if he were actually in Mexico. And as if the man in the sombrero holding the cockerel didn't seem Mexican enough, Clemens decided to make it more believable and homey by adding the sunrise/sunset effect.

If harsh, glaring lights were used in this scene, the details would be not as obvious and prominent; and the whole rustic feel would not be achieved. As with Leibovitz' case, any milder or less dramatic lighting treatment would simply not do the job. Leibovitz' selling point here was Nicole Kidman, and this was during the afterglow of her monumental stint in the critically-acclaimed musical *Moulin Rouge*.

Kidman had to be captured as a star, a diva; this was a portrait immortalizing Kidman as a woman of the theater, and putting glaring spotlights behind her was necessary to portray her as the glamorous star of the stage that she is.

All attention had to be drawn to her, and to her alone. If softer, even one-sided lighting had been used in Kidman's portrait, the glamour effect would not be possibly effective.

Works Cited

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