

Fast, Faster, Fastest: Relative Speed for Controlled Effect

A photography colloquium by Gregory O'Toole, M.A.

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Last fall a student of mine was excited, interested, and, mainly, in a good way, confused about the technique used to create the photograph shown here. It is an image created by myself and a good friend of mine, musician Ben Suchy (www.bensuchy.com). We were camping in South Dakota some time in the summer of 2005, the year I completed my work in the Digital Media Studies graduate program at the University of Denver. We were near the old town of Deadwood, look-



“Flashlight Circumference.” A digital photograph by Ben Suchy (www.bensuchy.com) and author Gregory O'Toole (www.otoole.info).

ing to buy some land outside of town. That is where we decided to camp. Some time near midnight, as the campfire shrank, the digital hand-held (a.k.a. “point and shoot”) came out and we continued with these light string capture experiments which we had been doing at that time.

There were several interesting images that came as a result of these experiments, but this one seemed to most closely retain the combination of characteristics we were hoping to end up with, which were: 1. A sharp facial subject; 2. A sharp hand holding the flashlight; and, 3. An interesting and precise shape caused by the flashlight.

Last fall I showed the image in one of my

digital imaging classes. At first the students thought it was a mashup of more than one image. When I explained that it was one image derived from one exposure, one student’s comment was: “One shot huh? That is incredible! I still do not understand though....I do not understand how you moved the light without the camera exposing your arm moving. I am really interested in how (you) did this. Can you tell us more, or is it kinda a trade secret?” And the answer goes like this: some things in photography are fast, some are faster, and others still are fastest. Understanding this relationship is often times the key to creating interesting visual effects. This knowledge can be the difference between having an idea and manifesting it for the world to share. In this case the “Fast” is subject and physical motion (i.e. the person in the photo); “Faster” is the shutter and aperture, the capture settings, of the camera; and “Fastest” is the light emitted from the flashlight. It goes that if the camera’s capture is faster (with enough ambient or strobe lighting) than the subject’s motion the image will be at least relatively in focus. This is the case with this photograph. However, on the other side of the exposure speed is the flashlight. It appears at first as if the flashlight ring is sharp and in focus, which it is. This would lead one to think that the camera is faster, such as in the case of the camera being faster than person-subject. However, on further contemplation we know that the string of light is not the flashlight’s light but a blurred motion of one single instance of the flashlight’s light. In other words, if the camera was faster than the flashlight-subject, we would see one instance of the flashlight light, or a luminescent circular area at the end of the flashlight. But here we see many of those trailed together which appears as a string. Here what we are looking at is the camera being faster than person-subject and capturing person-subject in focus. At the same time we are looking at camera being slower than flashlight-subject which allows for the photograph to contain the “trailer” effect that is the light as a continuous string.

Watch out for the new Sprint commercials, they’re doing all kinds of exactly the same thing.

Gregory O'Toole is a doctoral student of Media Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Saas-fee, Switzerland. He currently teaches digital imaging and internet theory in the Department of Information Systems at Baker College. His web site is www.otoole.info. He can be reached at gregory.otoole@baker.edu.