

Using motion blur

to creative effect

Blur is avoided in many aspects of photography as people are often chasing a sharp image; used effectively though the results can be very impressive.

Artists and photographers have been using blur in their works for a long time. There are multiple ways to add blur to a photograph and generally it is by use of a slower shutter speed.

Blurring the subject

Motion blur occurs when the subject is moving and the shutter speed is slow enough to record this movement. Your choice of shutter speed will depend on what you are shooting and more specifically how fast it is moving. A person walking across the frame at a steady pace could be blurred at or around the 1/15th of a second mark but as the shutter speed gets faster they will be kept relatively sharp. The faster moving the subject, the faster the shutter speed that will be required to freeze that action. The slower the shutter speed that you use, the more blur that will be apparent. There is a point where the shutter speed is so slow that certain moving subjects will barely register in the image at all; blurring into obscurity.



Photograph

Right: Long exposure with motion blur

Selective blur usually reads well in an image. If part of the image is sharp and in focus then the blur or movement in the frame is seen as a more deliberate addition to the shot. There are a few ways to achieve a motion blur effect with a part of the frame remaining sharp. You need to either steady the camera on a tripod or an object like a table, rock or similar and then allow for a shutter speed that will display the movement.

Slow synchro

Alternatively you can hand-hold the camera with a slower shutter speed and use a burst of light from a flash to freeze part of the frame. This effect is referred to as slow synchro or night mode and produces a lovely blend of light. In lit areas the



neutral light of the flash will meld with the artificial light to provide a nice separation.

Neutral density filters can be utilised to cut down the amount of light that is coming into the lens. This will allow for a slower shutter speed during the day or other bright situations where your shutter would normally need to be a lot higher.

Light painting

Light painting is an effect that is used in conjunction with a slower shutter speed. A long exposure is set and the shutter fired then parts of the scene are 'painted in' with light. You can use a torch, flash or LED light. A smartphone or tablet can be a great source of light to illuminate the scene too. Whatever is illuminated will be burned into the frame and any light that the camera catches will also appear. Light painting can create some unusual and unnatural light as you illuminate an object from multiple places. Used subtly, light painting can fill in some areas of a scene that would otherwise be completely dark.

Camera movement

A bold way to get movement into your image is by moving the camera. Movement in camera will generally blur the whole image, so it helps to have a specific idea in mind. Like any good



image making, you need to think about what you are trying to achieve. Handholding for sharpness in lowlight is tough once your shutter gets to a certain speed, depending on what lens you are using. As a general rule of thumb one over the lens focal length will be the slowest you can safely handhold. For example a 30mm lens can be safely handheld at 1/30th of a second. Practice of course will allow for some leeway as does image stabilisation in cameras and lenses which do a great job at steadying the shot during slower exposures.

One common technique is panning with a subject. Track the subject by keeping them in the same position in the frame as you move. Panning takes a lot of practice to get just right. A shutter speed

Photographs

Photos 1, 2 and 3: Painting with Light using a torch

Photography

of 1/30th of a second is a good starting point for experimenting with panning.

Setting the camera on a tripod and then moving the camera or zooming the lens brings about an interesting effect. To set up a shot like this you put the camera on a tripod and shoot the majority of the exposure in a static position and then move the camera or zoom the lens at the end. For example if it is a 30 second exposure, you can leave the camera static for 25 seconds and just move or zoom for that final five seconds. This ensures that the main image is captured and the moving light trails are an added effect.

Practical use

To use these effects on your camera you can either use full manual mode, shutter priority, slow synchro, flash off or night mode. Which approach you use will depend on a few factors such as whether your camera shoots manual, how quickly you need to set the shot (quick moving subjects etc.) and what picture options are available on your camera.

I find the quickest way is to use a shutter priority mode. This is where you select the shutter speed and the camera automatically selects an appropriate aperture. You can also have the camera choose an ISO or equivalent film speed for you, which is easier again. Shutter priority is usually shown on the camera dial or in the setting menu as 'Tv' (time variation) or 'S' (shutter speed). With manual settings you need

to select aperture and shutter speed yourself and an appropriate ISO. You need to look at the light meter for correct exposure.

For really long exposures a 'Bulb' mode can be used. This will enable the shutter to be open and exposing the image for as long as the button is engaged. With most cameras the metering will stop past 30 or 60 seconds so a little guess work is often involved. Some cameras, such as a select range of the Olympus micro four-thirds cameras, will show you a live update as the image exposes but for the most part you need to experiment with various shutter speeds to get it right.

Post-production

Post-production on the image can help to clean it up and get the desired results. Adding some contrast to an image can often help as blur can look soft. For night photography that may have shot at a high ISO there will often be noise in the image. Some good noise reduction software or a noise reduction effect will reduce that.

When mixing light sources or shooting for long exposures, the colour balance will sometime be a little off. Colour correction and white balance options will help to achieve the desired look. With artificial light sources you often don't always need to neutralise the colour but rather just adjust to suit the aesthetic that you are after.

Altering the image to black and white can be good. Concentrating on the tones in the image rather than the colours will have a totally different outcome as some colours will blend when in black and white.

Challenge

Using some of the techniques discussed here create a series of images of a subject and utilise blur. Think about the subject and the foreground to background relationship. Do you want all of the image to be blurred or just a part of it? As always make sure you experiment with a range of different techniques. Try various shutter speeds and see what effect it has on the image.

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Photograph

Below: Using zoom with a long exposure

