Tutorial Four

Backgrounds & Foregrounds

By

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While most photographers rightly focus on their subjects, it is equally important to consider what is happening before and behind the subject, as these can lessen or enhance your picture's impact.
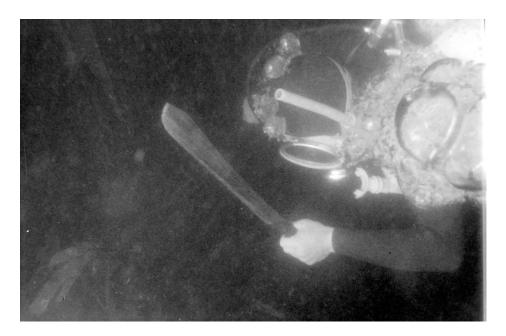
In this tutorial, I will discuss how the backgrounds and foregrounds of your pictures can enhance rather than diminish them. A video of this tutorial is available on this website.

The critical feature which separates the subject and background is conspicuity.

That is the extent to which your main focus of interest stands out from what is happening directly behind, before and around it.

For example, in my picture of a seaweed farmer harvesting his kelp crop while wearing a black neoprene wetsuit in the dark waters of the English Channel.
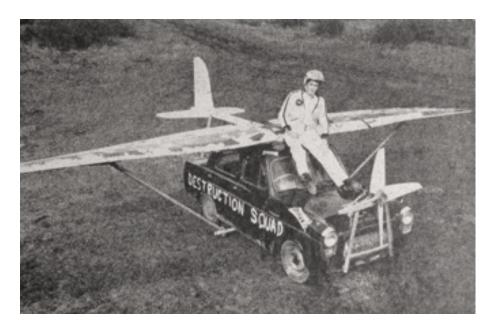

The subject's unavoidably low visibility makes it difficult for the viewer to see exactly what's happening.

The essential rule with backgrounds and foregrounds is to lose or use them. Let me give an example.

When photographing Dave, a daring young stunt man who proposed to 'fly' an old motorcar fitted with wings, a tailplane and a propeller attached to the engine, over a cliff into an old slate quarry, his black the painted vehicle needed to stand out clearly from the quarry's surrounding rocks.

The stunt was to take place on a grey and overcast day in late November, which was far from ideal since I would have to shoot with a fast shutter speed at a wide f-stop.

What worried me even more was whether or not the car would stand out against the background of dark rocks. Conditions deteriorated so significantly that by early afternoon, despite objections from many in the team, I was forced to abandon the shoot for that day.

The following morning was slightly brighter, and despite my continued reservations, I had no choice but to give the go-ahead.

After travelling through the air for a few yards, the car fell from the sky, hitting the water with a gigantic splash and immediately disappeared beneath the surface.

Stunt driver Dave remained trapped, breathing air from a cylinder bolted alongside the passenger seat until the rescue divers pulled him, unhurt if cold and soaked, to safety.

The sequence appeared in over thirty magazines worldwide, including a full page in LIFE.

In some cases, such as this picture of a lion cub stealing a baby's bottle of milk, the background may need to be adjusted. Here, I covered a floral sofa with a sheet of black cloth.

In this picture, a dark giant frog was helped to stand out from a black background by being cupped in the keeper's hands.

You can also use backlight to help a dark subject, like this wet suit-clad diver, stand out from the dark sea.

Or these children, members of a teacher's private police force, stand out from a somewhat messy background.
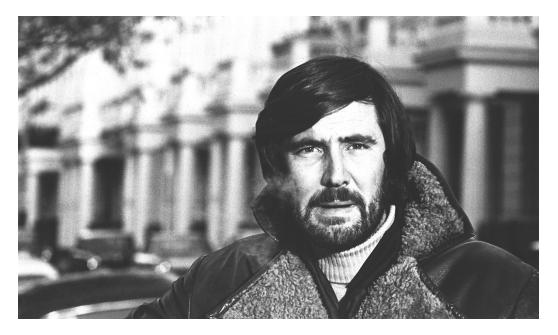
Shooting against the sky can also provide a neutral background, as in this photograph of an autogyro, which pilot Ken Wallis used to navigate traffic jams and fly in a Bond movie.

My book *People I Shot* tells the complete and somewhat surprising story of how I obtained these pictures.

A widely used method for minimising an intrusive background is to use a longer-than-normal focal length lens, anything above 50mm when shooting on 35mm, and combing a reasonably wide aperture to reduce the depth of field after carefully focusing on your subject, as in this picture of actor George Lazenby, who appeared in only one Bond Film.

Finally, let's look at the role of foregrounds in creating an impactful image.

This was taken during a story I shot on a training course for downed airmen forced to survive behind enemy lines. Here, I used the outline of a hole he had dug and where he would spend the night to frame him as he crawled out of sight.

Arches, too, can lead the viewers' eye into the scene....as can gates or, as in this story I shot about Trinity College Cambridge, an ancient and ornate lamppost.

Be creative when finding an interesting foreground frame. When covering the story of a boy cricketer who started playing on his village green, using a plank of wood instead of stumps, and became a county champion.

In my key shot, I framed him using the arms of his bowler father.

What gave the story particular poignancy and international magazine appeal was the fact the lad had lost both legs below the knees due to a childhood accident.

In the next tutorial, I'll consider the technical challenges of covering assignments involving action and situations in which timing becomes crucial.

For details about my various assignments, how they were conducted, and what they reveal regarding the fundamentals of photojournalism, read *People I Shot*. It is available on Amazon or from www. photojournalism.uk in an edition autographed by the author and with FREE UK postage at the same price.