

The phony subject

Today's topic is the Phony Subject: making pictures more interesting by adding an eye-catcher which might not be interesting in itself. This trick works especially well for street scenes and "tourist" photography.

The Phony Subject falls under the more general concept of the "Center of Interest." Being a historian by training, I like to go from the specific to the general, though, so you can consider this lesson to be about the Center of Interest, although approached from a slightly eccentric point of view.

Consider the classic tourist picture. It's got an impressive building, usually in the center of the frame (those of you who read through Lesson 1 know better by now!). The lucky or enterprising tourists will rush to the sight at the crack of dawn, to catch it before the crowd.

While such pictures can be used to show the folks back home what, say, the Notre Dame of Paris looked like, they're usually pretty uninteresting photographically. They're pictures of impressive things, not impressive pictures of things. The viewer is likely to say, "Wow, that's an impressive church!" but not so likely to say "Wow, what a nice picture!"

Remember that list of eye-catchers from the Simplification lesson? Some of the things near the top of the list were:

- eyes
- faces
- people
- animals

The idea behind the Phony Subject is that you put an eye-catcher into the picture and compose the picture *as if* you're taking a picture of the eye-catcher, while *actually* your intention is to make a picture about the surroundings -- the background, the framing element, and so on.

The eye-catcher doesn't necessarily have to be something intrinsically interesting. However, composing the picture around it can cause the rest of the picture to fall into place.

Here's a picture of an impressive structure with the phony subject edited out, and next to it, as it was actually shot:



(Of course, if you happen to know the people in question, the picture has additional interest, but even if you don't, the picture works better with them in it. I think.)

This is a bit like what J.R.R. Tolkien does literarily. The real point of the Lord of the Rings is Middle-Earth. Frodo is actually a pretty bland character, but focusing in on him puts the whole rest of the world into perspective. If there had been no Frodo, there would have been no point to the book... and if Frodo had been a spectacular, super-human, heroic character, he might've drawn the reader's interest away from what the book was *actually* about.

In other words, when taking pictures of interesting things, my advice is: *don't* try to exclude people, animals, or such. Instead, try to make use of them. Compose the pictures around them. Much of the time, the pictures will be a lot better: you'll have injected humor, life, scale, movement, or context, or a combination thereof.

The Phony Subject and street photography

This, in my opinion, is the crux of many very good street scenes. The people in the scene can be very ordinary, doing ordinary things. The main point is the setting. The picture *is* the background, and the "subject" is incidental... but without it, the picture just wouldn't work.

Here's a street scene without the "phony subject":



And here as it was actually taken:



Of course, it doesn't hurt that in this case the phony subject happened to be very photogenic. (Incidentally, the shot was serendipitous: she just happened to come out of the bakery as I was taking the picture. And no, my wife wasn't thrilled at being cropped out, but she forgave me.)

Some things to consider when using the Phony Subject trick:

1. Any attention-catcher can work as a phony subject, but people, animals, and flowers work especially well.
2. If your phony subject is in itself photogenic, so much the better... as long as it doesn't grab *all* the attention. What was that "Three K's" rule again, Chuck?
3. However, a picture of someone mugging for the camera rarely works well. It usually makes the Phony Subject seem tacked-on, artificial, and not part of the scene and it steals too much attention.

In other words, ideally the Phony Subject picture looks like a candid: the subject doesn't seem aware of the camera.

We've already seen some Phony Subject pictures in these Lessons. Ruan's Amphitheater picture is, IMO, a splendid example. Shoo off the dog and wait for the guide to leave, and you have a forgettable if competently captured picture of a monument. With them, you have life, motion, tension, and humor -- a good candidate for a competition-winner.

Here's another one... without the subject:



And with it:



Assignment

1. Do the reverse of what I just did: take an uninteresting picture of an interesting scene, and make the picture interesting by pasting in an eye-catcher, sampled from another picture. Don't worry about technical quality -- this sort of thing is actually quite hard to pull off. Instead, consider it an exercise, teaching you to watch for such elements the next time you're "at the scene".
2. Get out of your house and onto the street, and shoot some street scenes using the Phony Subject Principle. Present and discuss.

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