

Telephoto Is For Cowards

If your photographs aren't good enough, you aren't close enough. -- Robert Capa

*I have a few pet peeves on DPReview and other on-line camera fora. One of them is the question "Which is the best telephoto lens for candid?" It gets asked a lot, and answered a lot. Usually the answers are something like "The 135/2L" or "The 70-200/2.8 IS L" or even (God forbid) "The 100-400 IS L." To make it worse, lenses on all-in-one cameras are getting longer and longer, not even to mention the 33x zooms on camcorders. Now, I'm generally of the opinion that in photography anything goes -- do whatever rocks your boat. However, there are limits, and this is one of them. The fact is, **real photographers don't shoot candid with telephoto lenses.***



Farmhand in Camargue. He took us to watch the steers being fed. I'd been taking pictures of everything that moved. He wasn't paying attention to me when I took this one. (EOS-10D with Tokina 17/3.5.)

Photographers are going through all kinds of harassment nowadays. Taking a photo of a bridge is considered tantamount to planning to blow it up. One major reason for this is *image*. One pervasive image of the photographer is the celebrity-stalking paparazzi, the sleazy PI on Cheaters, and the creepy old guy in the trenchcoat in the woods by the playground, all of whom wield big black cameras and three-foot-long lenses. This is the image of the photographer as stalker: someone who sees us from a long way off without us seeing him; who steals our picture without our knowledge, for some sinister purpose or other. This image is only reinforced by incompetent "professionals" shooting "candid" at weddings with similar gear, and making it a point of pride to get people on film or on chip when they didn't realize that they were being photographed.

The Right to Privacy

The fact is that surveillance cameras and Big Brother notwithstanding, people should have the right to privacy: the right not to be photographed if they don't want to. This is something that transcends what

law says about photography in public places ("knock yourself out"). It's simply rude and morally questionable to photograph people who don't want to be photographed.

The photographer as stalker is not a pretty image. If this is what people get in their heads when thinking of photographers, how enthusiastic do you think they will be in defending photographers' rights to take pictures freely? If we, as photographers, don't respect everybody else's rights *not* to be photographed, why should everyone else respect our rights to take photographs?

So, as usual, politics is the reason I get angry about people shooting candid with tele lenses: this type of "candid photographer" pollutes the waters for all of us. But that's actually pretty much beside the point. The fact is, candid photography with telephoto lenses *doesn't even work!*

What Telephoto is Good For

Of course, there are a quite a few applications for which telephoto is indispensable. Birds. War journalism. Sports. (Although I have to admit that I find sports photography uniformly boring, but I figure I'm in the minority for that.) And, yes, portraits. The narrow depth of field and perspective compression that telephoto affords makes for very pleasant "classical" portraits. However, since you'll need to reposition yourself to bring the background and light into alignment, the long focal length means lots of running around. This takes time. A telephoto is also very revealing: the smallest skin imperfections and quirks of expression will be mercilessly captured. Therefore, getting the light and the background right for a telephoto picture takes much more time than for a shorter focal-length photo. This means that it's best used in quiet situations where the model and the photographer interact -- staged shoots, in other words. The diametrical opposite of candid photography.



Telephoto does work for tight "head shots." However, because of the work involved in getting the light and the background right, and the inherently "revealing" nature of tight shots like this, this approach only works well in staged shoots, where the model interacts with the photographer even if the photographer has backed up a good bit. (Yep, this was a staged shot. Model: Aura Lehti, photographed with EOS-10D with 200/2.8L)

So, there definitely is a place for telephoto lenses. I would not suggest that the guy who owned [\[http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,968952,00.html\]](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,968952,00.html) the 300/2.8 IS L [\[http://www.e9e9.com/img/khxd-01a.jpg\]](http://www.e9e9.com/img/khxd-01a.jpg) that ended up in a pool of blood in the Palestine Hotel in the press photo was a coward, quite the contrary -- personally, I wouldn't go anywhere near that place until things calm down.

Why Telephoto Candid's are Bad Photography

When you're doing candid photography, you'll often be in a crowd. This means that unless you're seven feet tall, there will be people all around you. If you're shooting with a tele lens across the room, garden, football field, or whatever, people will get in the way! You'll miss the right moments to grab the shots because someone will wander in front of the lens or you'll be busy ducking and weaving around them to get a clear line of sight, you'll be restricted to head shots because the body will be hidden by Auntie Agatha's ample bosom, you won't be able to pick your background because for that you'd need to move a quite a long way and the situation you wanted to photograph would be long gone by then. In other words, the best you'll get is head shots with more or less silly expressions: no context, no interaction between people, no situations. Such head shots aren't even characteristic or interesting; they're just dumb! If you want head shots, take your time, pick your spot, choose your light, create a nice, relaxed atmosphere, and shoot them posed. Candid head shots are boring and stupid.



Photography in a crowd. The last thing you want to do is try to get a line on someone with a long lens. This was shot with a 10D and a 50/1.4 -- the longest lens I'd use for this kind of mission.

The whole point of candid's or "situationals" as they should be properly called, is context. Situationals capture or depict a situation. A single head shot with a background nicely blurred by narrow depth of field isn't a situational: it's just a poorly executed head shot. To get a situation, you absolutely need context -- people interacting with each other or the environment, even if part or most of the environment is implied

rather than depicted. To include that context, you need a wider angle of view and more depth of field than that afforded by telephoto.

So, candid worthy of the name are impossible to shoot with telephoto, both for practical reasons (people will get in the way) and optical ones (the field of view is too narrow and depth of field too shallow to include context.)

"That'll only work if your subject's asleep!"

So, in order to get decent situationals, you need to get an unobstructed view of the situation and the optical characteristics that'll allow you to capture enough context to at least suggest the story that's unfolding when you're photographing it: in other words, use a shorter focal length -- wide angle to, at most, "portrait length." But that means that your subjects will notice you, wont it? And that'll mean they're not candid anymore, right? They'll freeze up and start mugging for the camera!

Wrong.



At the souk in Tyre. (EOS-10D with EF 35/2.0)

Pick up a book with work by the Magnum photographers [<http://www.magnumphotos.com/c/>]. Or Cartier-Bresson [<http://www.henricartierbresson.org/>], if you can't find anyone else. Page through it. Do you see people mugging for the camera, looking frozen? Hell no! Every picture is a little story all by itself, with the people sunken in thought, kissing, in the middle of a conversation, at work, arguing, fighting, in conversation with the photographer... living. It's as if the photographer blinked and froze a moment of time in black-and-white just as he experienced it. Did they do this with telephoto lenses? Not on your life. I'm guessing here, but I think you'll find that the most common focal length is 50 mm, with a fair bit of 35 and some 28 thrown in -- with at most an occasional 85 here and there. Normal, medium wide, and at most short tele. Were they master ninjas, able to make themselves invisible at will? Did they have stealth cameras they could carry in their shirt pocket and set off with a remote switch hidden in their watches? No way: they used the same Leicas and Nikons and what not that were and are the basic tools of every photographer shooting for money or for pleasure. So how do they do it?



Ja'afar (Tyre, Lebanon). We had been chatting with him for a while. I had been snapping photos all along. After a few frames, he had started completely ignoring me. (EOS-10D with Canon EF 35/2.0)

The Invisible Photographer

Act exactly as you would without a camera, but take a lot of pictures. Walk in. Be casual. Talk to the people. Engage in the scene or situation. And take pictures. At first, they will notice you. Someone might ask you what you're about. If you're friendly, up-front, and have an explanation for what you're about, nobody will be upset. Those who don't want to be photographed will let you know they don't want to be photographed, and it should be a point of honor for you to respect their wishes. The rest will chat with you or ignore you. Most will in fact ignore you, if only because only a limited number of people can chat with you at one time. By the time you're on your third roll of film (or the digital equivalent thereof), your photographic activities will be totally ignored. You will have become the "invisible photographer" -- with the added reassurance of having given camera-shy people the chance of letting you know they don't want to be photographed.

Don't Be A Coward!

As much as the Magnum photographers would have you believe otherwise, photography is not about a passive, cool observer capturing the world "invisibly." Like in quantum mechanics, observation affects reality. "The Invisible Photographer" is something of a conjuring trick. Like any conjuring trick, it takes a certain amount of practice and, more importantly, a certain amount of confidence to pull off. You have to be comfortable with what you're doing and confident with your technique (or, failing that, zen about the pictures turning out successful or not). If you need to fiddle with your gear, you need to be able to do it casually. However, the rewards are well worth the pain of learning this confidence -- while few of us are Magnum caliber (pun entirely intentional), all of us can shoot candids that look light-years better than the phony "candids" by the creepy people in trenchcoats wielding long lenses.

Moreover, photographers often have a vague, subconscious guilt about what they're doing. We, too, are victims of the image of the photographer-as-stalker. However, and this cannot be stated too often, *there is nothing wrong with taking photographs*. Remember that, especially when you're actually doing the shooting.

Don't add to burden of guilt the collective subconscious tries to lay on us. Don't be a coward. Keep that telephoto for the subjects that really need it. Stick on the 35, walk up to them, smile, and start shooting. Your photography will benefit, and you'll be doing all of us a favor.



Isa at Christmas dinner. I'd been snapping all evening, and by this time nobody noticed. (Canon FD 50/1.4 on Ektachrome)

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