



Viewpoint Mike Smith

As photographers, we can record a single place over a period of time – even the most seemingly banal locations have a story

Photographs play with time and space. Time is simple to understand, as we set a shutter speed and record the incident photons on a sensor over a set period of time. Given that we are usually interested in (the lack of) change over human timescales, something around 1/250sec meets most of our requirements. It's only when we want to extend beyond this that the restriction becomes apparent. Long exposures are commonly used for creative effect, while short exposures extending to thousandths of a second are best exemplified by Harold Edgerton's 1964 photo of a bullet piercing an apple. The former is easy to achieve, while the latter is constrained by the equipment used.

With space, incident photons hit the sensor and reduce the dimensionality (or depth) of the scene to a 2D plane. Space becomes but a *Flat Stanley*-esque world, as if viewing a tableau with one eye. We know that our images show the third dimension – visual cues like converging lines, relative size, occlusion and blur all provide key information. We can also calculate depth, using techniques such as a plenoptic camera (that measures light intensity and direction), photogrammetry (trigonometry from multiple photos) and Canon's dual-pixel technology (which allows small amounts of refocusing).

But reverse the notion of the vista as composed in front of the camera, to the actual world that the photographer is part of – inhabiting, moving through. It is the time and space of the scene itself where the camera provides a visual testament. Now the variability of space is limitless and, when combined with the latitude of the photographer, presents us with the vast body of work that is photography today. For me it is more interesting to consider the *specific* space itself. To flip that around, I'm interested in *time*.

The extraordinary is everywhere

The recent poisonings by a nerve agent in Salisbury reminded me of the story of the Bulgarian journalist and defector Georgi Markov, who was assassinated in 1978



The north-bound bus stop on Waterloo Bridge – the site of a 1978 assassination

'The most banal and ordinary of locations can bear testimony to the extraordinary'

with a ricin-tipped umbrella spike. The attack occurred at the mundane north-bound bus stop on Waterloo Bridge, a place I cycle past regularly. It highlights that capturing time is selective and tough.

In a world that is increasingly saturated with imagery and covered by CCTV's ever-watchful eye, it may come as a surprise as to what a location has witnessed and how we may never know all the events that have happened. This is no better exemplified than by missing airman Corrie McKeague, whose movements were recorded through Bury St Edmunds until he entered the horseshoe area, never to be seen again.

What can this tell us about photography? That no place is ever mundane – things happen everywhere. The most banal and ordinary of locations can bear testimony to the extraordinary. That leaves us with two avenues to pursue. First we find it significant to visit the sites of past events (where someone died), so we photograph them to bear witness to their importance. Second, always carry a camera because the extraordinary is everywhere. Or, as Weegee espoused, f/8 and be there!

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk.

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