

[HOME](#) [PORTFOLIO](#) [ABOUT/CONTACT](#) [FACEBOOK](#) [EVENTS](#) [CAMERAPEDIA](#) [PRINTS/PRINTING](#) [\\*TEACHING STORE\\*](#)
[PHILOSOPHY](#) [TECHNIQUE](#) [HARDWARE](#) [FILM DIARIES](#) [ART PROJECTS](#) [ON ASSIGNMENT](#) [PHOTOESSAYS](#) [ROBIN WONG](#)

# Back to basics: Cut points and edges

AUGUST 27, 2019 BY [MING THEIN](#)

[Symmetry and clean termination points – lowered contrast at the edges helps, too.](#)

Judging from the correspondence and comments flying around recently, it's about time we did a refresher course here on the fundamentals of composition and image-making. As usual, there's far too much obsession over hardware and not enough thought about what it's actually being used for. This will be the first of several posts from the archives in this theme. That said, those people are unlikely to read these posts anyway...

In the past, I've written about the importance of [conscious exclusion](#) in the process of composition: you don't want to confuse your audience by including elements that are irrelevant or worse, distracting and [visually stronger than the main subject](#). As we know, the very act of composition itself is one of both cropping and curation: we are choosing what *not* to show as much as what to show, based on our own preferences and biases. How we structure the rest of the composition around that is very much up to us, and of course the intended story or message of the image. But where do we end things – and in what situations is a little [trimming](#) necessary? How can we achieve a clean frame and a clean idea?

Photography is a nonverbal form of communication between the photographer and the audience – somewhere between a [speech and a conversation](#). As with all ideas, it's much easier to get across something simpler than more complex; however, an

## MY RECOMMENDED GEAR LIST IS HERE

Or, support the site via [B&H](#) or [Amazon](#). You can also find a handy list of a equipment [here at B&H](#).

[Cut your editing time: custom SOF JPEG Picture Controls and ACR prepack for the Nikon Z7 and D850 available here](#)



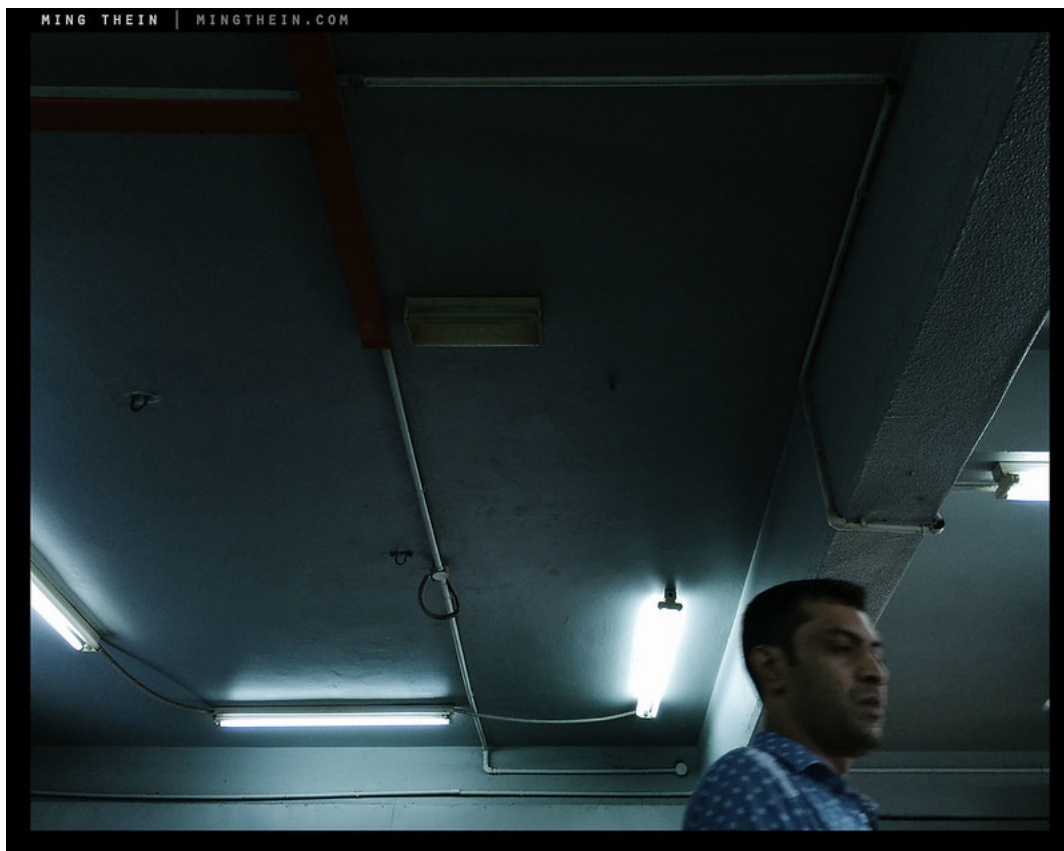
## Behind the scenes videos



[Instagram](#) or [@mingthein](#)

3 million words and 6,500+ image 1,700+ posts. A further 10m words 95,000+ comments below the line you're looking for something – mi suggest a search?

idea that's too simple – not to be confused with clear or profound – is probably not going to hold audience attention for long. For example, a commercial catalog image of a product is just that – a literal representation of the object and perhaps its aesthetics or features, but nothing more than that and certainly nothing of deep philosophical importance. On the other hand, an idea with higher philosophical value is of course going to be harder to parse into a visual medium. It is therefore imperative that we minimise miscommunication to the greatest degree possible by eliminating a) distractions; b) unintended ambiguity; c) clutter.



*Near miss. Can you see why?*

Category a) and b) are easy to explain. If there are elements that isolate themselves and stand out but are not the intention of the photographer, then something must be done to reduce the perceived visual contrast to return focus to the intended subject of the image. If there are elements that are intended but fail to make logical sense – i.e. there is no string of causality the viewer can infer – then one of them probably needs to go, or you need a further one to clarify things by eliminating possibilities. Clutter is a little more complicated: when is an element subject, context, or background? The only real difference between the three is [isolation](#) from the other elements in the frame. We often make the mistake of thinking about single physical elements as being separate to everything else in the frame, and the background being a homogenous sort of backdrop that doesn't contain any lumps of its own.

This is of course seldom true: backgrounds do contain visual lumps, and those lumps can sometimes get stuck going down. I prefer to think in terms of spatial frequency and texture: so long as the spatial frequency/ texture of an area in the frame is consistent, it will read as being continuous and part of the same element. This also means that if your subject doesn't break pattern, it'll be camouflaged – and once again, read as being part of the same element. These uniform bits of texture can then serve as natural frames around the important subject elements – both isolating them from each other, serving as a visual connector between them, and in some cases, subtle context – a hint of brick wall behind everything might be uniform but tell you that you're not outdoors, for instance.

In practice, what all of this means is that you've got to watch out for a) things that stand out but aren't your subject, and b) things that intersect the edges of the frame in a way that isn't balanced off on the diagonally opposite side of the image. If you don't, those elements can be the visual equivalent of a dent or burr on a smooth surface: run your eyes over and the 'catch'. If there are enough of them, then we interpret it as being deliberate. If not, then you have the proverbial stone in your shoe. The worst situation is when you have something that cuts the edge of the frame not just asymmetrically but also non-orthogonally – this inevitably forms a wedge, which is really a pair of converging lines between that element and the edge of the frame – and this draws your attention out of the centre of the image, which is of course precisely what you *don't* want – because it means your audience isn't looking anymore.

If you enjoyed the content, please consider [Donate](#) -ing or [subscribe](#) - thanks for your support!

Join 39,308 other followers

Enter your email address

Sign up to receive new posts by email

#### POPULAR RECENT POSTS

- [The recommended gear list](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Quick review: the 2019 Fuji XF1](#)
- [Technique](#)
- [Film diaries: A quick introduction to Hasselblad V-series cameras](#)
- [Review: the Sigma 16mm f1.4 DC](#)
- [Review: The Olympus E-M1 Mark II](#)
- [Leica M mount lenses on the X](#)
- [Lens review: The Olympus 12-40mm f2.8](#)
- [M.Zuiko PRO](#)
- [Robin Wong](#)

- [RSS - Posts](#)
- [RSS - Comments](#)



*One of the reasons why chiaroscuro-type images are so striking is because they have clean edges by nature – the low contrast and low luminosity really helps keep your attention in the centre of the frame; in effect, a frame within the inevitable outer frame.*

The only solutions I've got for this problem are either to make sure that any elements intersecting the frame edge do so orthogonally, or are otherwise excluded. If you have absolutely no choice, you can always add a counterbalancing element on the diagonally opposite side of the frame; that's probably the next best thing. But add enough of these diagonally counterbalancing elements and you land up with a uniform bezel – and a reversion to the original idea of background texture.

One has to be careful though not to be too afraid of the edges: I've seen some photographers who are unable to keep a clean border no matter what they do\*, sometimes resulting in a very distracting frame, or one that feels as though it's very much a slice out of reality, with life continuing beyond the borders. The latter can be a good thing for some types of photography. On the other hand, there are photographers who are so afraid of the edges that a good 10% of the frame on each edge is wasted; other than in situations where we really don't want to show anything else (think catalog photography again, or some extremely minimalist compositions) – I feel as though we're wasting an opportunity to add some texture or more information or even image quality. If you're going to have a very small subject in a large sea of emptiness, *unless* the sea of emptiness is part of the intention of the image – surely it would make sense just to step closer? That said, I write from the perspective of somebody who really likes to pack their frames completely full.

*\*I strongly suspect it's due to the lack of a 100% finder, which in turn means that there's no way to see exactly what's being included or excluded. In this case, [trimming](#) is highly recommended – no fundamental perspective change, but a very important tightening of the edges instead.*





*Clean edges, but using all of the frame – note that if the bottom light edge wasn't parallel to the bottom of the frame, it would land up forming a distracting wedge.*

And this is the main reason I'm so against hunting for a frame post-capture by means of cropping: there's simply no easy way to visualise where the edges fall, and if there was, then you're basically composing to what's inside the guide lines anyway – which is of course no longer cropping in the randomly hopeful sense. The chances of making an interesting frame that doesn't have odd edge intersections is nearly impossible, which means you know the whole thing is compromised from the get-go. Personally, I find this rather troubling in the pursuit of better images.

There's one last thing: moving subjects can make edges tricky to manage. I find the best approach to be one of staging: find the empty spot first, then wait for your subject to eclipse it. You take care of the edges before the subject arrives, worrying only about critical timing. Things are far more complex with panning – it's already hard enough to counter our impulse to put the subject in the centre; harder still to time the release/position to background the subject perfectly over the ideal portion of background (more applicable the faster your shutter speed gets). And we haven't thought about edges yet – the one redeeming property of motion is averaging: at least you'll land up with reasonably uniform edges since the motion blur is assisting with the averaging.

I can't say it often enough: less can be more, and the difference between success and a near miss is often in the details. Check your edges – and the more complex/busy the frame, the more critical this becomes 😊 MT

Visit the [Teaching Store](#) to up your photographic game – including workshop and Photoshop Workflow videos and the customized Email School of Photography. You can also support the site by purchasing from [B&H](#) and [Amazon](#) – thanks!

We are also on [Facebook](#) and there is a curated [reader Flickr pool](#).

Images and content copyright Ming Thein | [mingthein.com](#) 2012 onwards. All rights reserved

Knowledge is for sharing:

Share 24



Email

Like



41 bloggers like this.

Related

- Cut points and edges

August 15, 2016

In "Articles"
- Some experiments in 2.4:1 widescreen

January 9, 2013

In "Articles"
- Conscious exclusion

July 19, 2014

In "Articles"

FILED UNDER: [ARTICLES](#), [ON PHOTOGRAPHY](#)

TAGGED WITH: [ARTICLE](#), [CUT POINTS](#), [EDGES](#), [ESSAY](#), [MING](#), [MING THEIN](#), [MINGTHEIN.COM](#), [OPINION](#), [TECHNIQUE](#), [THEIN](#)

« [Photoessay: At the food trucks, under the power lines](#)

[On-Assignment photoessay: Welders](#) »

Comments

Mihai Apostol says:

August 30, 2019 at 6:09 AM

Hi Ming, I am interested in your writing, I usually read and most of the time enjoy your blog, but this time...really...main picture is not up to your usual standards. Clean frame, clean idea, not to be too afraid of the edges, spatial frequency and texture... C'mon, I know you can do more than this!

Ming Thein says:

August 30, 2019 at 12:30 PM

I'd say it demonstrates the points I was trying to make perfectly well, which was the objective of the image (and which you've clearly also seen).

*"main picture is not up to your usual standards."*

Why?

Andre Y says:

August 28, 2019 at 7:29 AM

Another great topic to review! As you know, one of my shooting locations (a dance studio) has a pretty cluttered background. It's tricky to find the right cut points especially as I'm trying to follow the action, and sometimes I just have to let it go (the moment and/or my standards), but over time, I've kind of learned where the good angles are, and mostly stick to those. Cropping can help reduce the edge distractions too, as can a long lens to try to fill the frame with as much of the subject as possible. Sometimes, you can use other people and things in between to frame the subject and hide some of the background clutter. It's an ongoing learning experience!

Ming Thein says:

August 28, 2019 at 11:55 AM

Longer lenses actually help because you are including relatively less of the background, plus at short enough distances you have some shallow DOF to smooth over these hard edges. Finding the right cut points is much harder with wides...

Monica says:

August 27, 2019 at 9:05 PM

You mention things that intersect the edges of the frame in a way that isn't balanced off on the diagonally opposite side of the image. Can you explain further? Also, about adding a counter balance on the opposite side. I want to make sure I understand you.

Ming Thein says:

August 27, 2019 at 9:19 PM

There's a whole post on this: [Visual weight](#)