



Introduction

“The photographer edits the meanings and the patterns of the world through an imaginary frame. The frame is the beginning of his picture’s geometry. It is to the photograph as the cushion is to the billiard table.”

John Szarkowski,
The Photographers’ Eye

What we discover when looking at many pictures taken by amateurs and professional photographers alike is a disregard, or better yet, an indifference for the edge of a photograph. The outside boundaries of the images are treated as spaces delegated for leftovers from the main event in the center of the picture. The frame is viewed simply as

where the exposable film area runs out. It is a place of little consequence. One basic way to enliven an image and make it more engaging is to deal with how that image meets the edge of the frame.

– Dennis Carlyle Darling

Disturbances

A majority of all photographs made are center-weighted. How this frame-to-subject indifference became so ingrained in our way of seeing is a matter of speculation. A simple explanation is that the human species seems to love symmetry. It is safe, predictable, and easy to comprehend. Unfortunately, it can be extremely dull as well. However, this inherent love of symmetry can’t be the only factor to explain the plethora of pictures in which the frame and subject act as opposite poles of a magnet, each pushing the other as far away as possible.

I have another theory for this centering phenomena. It dates from photography’s inception when photographers took their cue from fine art painting as sources of artistic inspiration. The majority of the paintings familiar to the general public before the 1850’s were center-weighted. The subject took the middle ground and the narrative material radiated out from the center of interest until the artist ran out of canvas. Think of the Mona Lisa.



Rumania

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Ways of seeing changed. Yet center-weighted photos still continue to be the predominate category in photography. There must be another explanation.

While looking through a box of old snapshots I have collected, I was struck by the number of images whose appeal is due to unconventional cropping and eccentric framing. (This cropping was nearly always done in the camera. The vast majority of film was sent off to be processed and was returned printed full frame.) I am quite sure that the farmers, mechanics, and housewives who took the snapshots that make up my collection couldn’t tell a Rembrandt from a Warhol. Yet their idiosyncratic framing of average subjects elevated their photos from thousand of others I have looked at but failed to buy. There is a visual sophistication contained within their serrated edges that makes the work special. These photos possess a sense of vibrancy and intimacy which the multitude lack. Their subjects overwhelm the space and burst beyond the frames’ confines. Where was the source of these common people’s inspiration when they made these photographs? Why had others not followed them down this virtually untrodden artistic path?

I am sad to say that I now believe that it was because these anonymous shutterbugs were mechanical klutzes. What I admired as advanced art was really nothing more than captivating mistakes. The unconventional framed images were



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saved by the inept not because of the composition, but in spite of it. These men and woman photo makers had not based their compositions on a Japanese scroll painting or the French painter Degas’ masterful sense of composition as I had hoped. They had simply failed to follow directions and stand far enough away from their intended subjects to allow for parallax problems inherent in the early cameras.

There is little question that photographers once aped fine art painting, but camera technology (or lack of it) probably has more to do with the abundance of center-weighted photographs than any Old Master. Because of parallax, photographers soon learned to overcompensate and move the subject well into the center of the frame to reduce the tragedy of a



Cairo - I

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“decapitated” loved one. Well into this century, many camera manufacturers cautioned users that if they wanted a successful photograph, they should keep the subject in the center of the frame. It is still a habit few photographers seem willing to challenge.

Pick whichever theory you wish or formulate your own. The fact remains that it is hard to diminish the visual impact achieved when the frame is brought into serious play with the primary subject of a photograph. Images made with attention to this relationship can often give the photograph a stronger voice that it might otherwise have with conventional framing.

Graham King, in his book Say Cheese: Looking at Snapshots in a New Way, ventures a theory on why unconventional cropped photographs affect us the way they do. King writes, “This inadvertent cropping of the subject can have a curious effect; it frustrates our expectations and forces us to imagine what might be taking place outside the frame. It’s the photographic parallel of a fleeting glimpse when you ‘catch something out of the corner of your eye’. If we’re unable to take the second look we must use the image

we retained to help complete the picture by conjecture.”

King is suggesting that a photograph made with unconventional cropping involves the viewer more fully with the image by actually making him complete the picture where the photographer has chosen not to do so.

One of the most elegant practitioners of eccentric framing is Irving Penn. This master photographer regularly breaks the accepted rules of composition to achieve visual tension and to grab the viewer’s attention. His cropping at times cuts off vital parts of the subject and crowds the center of interest hard against the picture’s border. To describe this kind of provocative framing, Penn has coined the word “disturbances.” Working with the edges, rather than the center of the frame, Penn disturbs the frontier between subject and edge. “They (disturbances) are a powerful means for breaking through to people who are stupefied by a continual bombardment of images day and night. Anything that breaks through the commonplace can be valuable.”

John Szarkowski, in The Photographer’s Eye emphasizes the importance of the crop. He observes that a photographer’s picture is not conceived but is selected by the image maker. “The central act of photography, the act of choosing and eliminating, forces a concentration on the picture edge – the line that separates in from out – and on the shapes that are created by it,” he writes.

Tight and eccentric framing can simplify the photograph by eliminating unimportant items that don’t contribute to the meaning of the photograph. It can create



Mardi Gras, LA

© Dennis Darling

a tension in the picture that would not exist if center framing were used. It can extend the photograph beyond the physical frame using the viewer’s mind’s eye. Using the edge can create ambiguity. Unconventional framing can act as an anchor to fix elements firmly within the picture’s boundaries. It can create new relationships between and among elements. It can alter the shape of the space that surrounds the subject and make it graphically stronger. Unconventional cropping will change the way your photographs look and the way they are viewed more than any new lens or piece of expensive equipment.

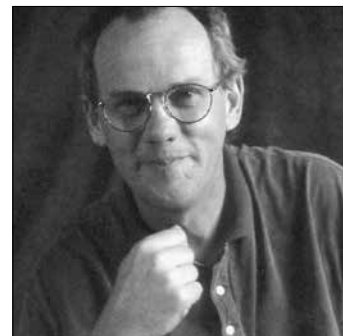
Explores the possibilities that unconventional framing might bring to your images. Edit and simplify, in camera, by having a heightened awareness of the photograph’s edges. Liberate yourself from the dead center. The following is a short list of books that have excellent examples of the use of unconventional framing.

- Penn, Irving. Passages.
- Avedon, Richard. In The American West.
- Richards, Eugene. Surprises: The Arkansas Delta and Few Comforts.
- Frank, Robert. The Americans.
- Meiselas, Susan. Carnival Strippers.

About the Author: Dennis Darling

Dennis Carlyle Darling’s books and photographs have won numerous photography and design awards and have been featured in such publications as *American Photographer*, *CA Magazine*, *Camera*, *Creative Camera*, *Photographis* and *Popular Photography Annual*. Four of his images were recently included in a book and traveling exhibition of the best photographs of *Texas Monthly*.

Darling is currently a professor and the director of the visual communication area of studies in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. He is also one of the founding members of the Texas Photographic Society and is currently an Advisory Director.



The Texas Photographic Society is a nonprofit organization of amateur and professional photographers whose purpose “is to support contemporary photography as a means for creative expression and cultural insight.” With over 650 active members from 24 states, TPS focuses on the education and artistic development of its members and the community

by providing exhibitions, publications, education, and outreach programs.

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