

Composition Case Study #02

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

Breaking the Rules

Take a moment and study this image.

If you consider everything discussed in the Advanced Composition premium guide, this photograph breaks just about every rule that I talked about.

- It has a convoluted subject.
- The use of space isn't very well thought-out
- There is a frame break.
- There are several eye snags.

Still, given all of that, this photograph has some visual appeal.

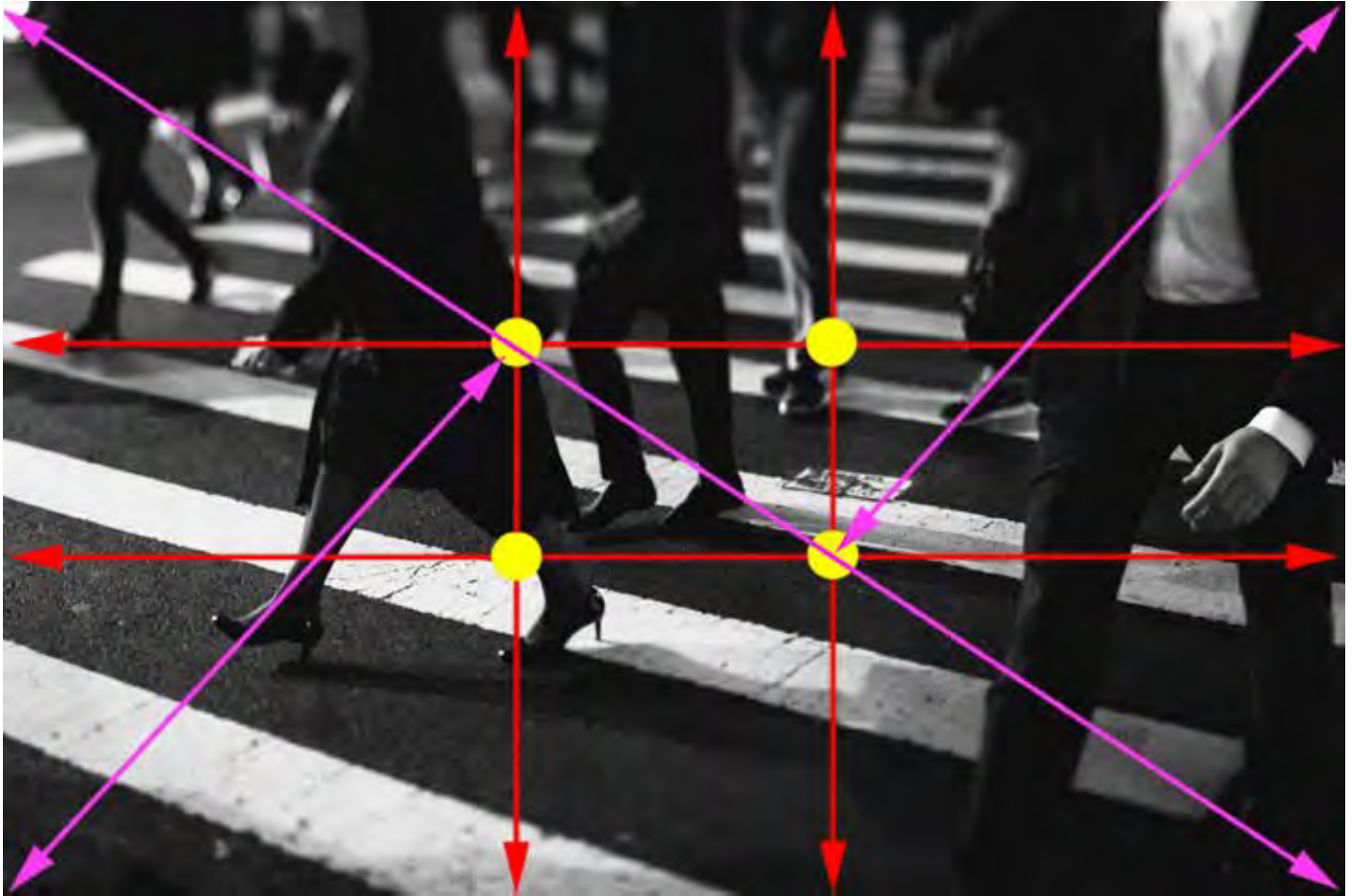
- It uses repetition.
- It uses contrast.
- It has an interesting mood.

The photographer had a good idea, and I think the idea represents a good story.

The composition is where the problem lies.

Let's dissect the image as it is and then discuss how it might be improved.





I inserted the Golden Ratio/Golden Triangle overlay file (from the Bonus Folder) onto this image (as described in the Bonus Video).

I flipped and rotated the overlay around in an attempt to find some organization to this composition. I really wasn't able to find anything cohesive.

Nothing of interest falls into the sweet spot, no matter the orientation.

The closest object to the sweet spot was the piece of paper on the ground, which really doesn't have enough visual oomph to be the subject (in my opinion).



I then performed the same exercise with the Golden Spiral, and I got the same results.

The second exercise, however, did help me to identify several potential circular patterns within the framework of the photographer's composition.

However, the placement of the circular pattern isn't great within the overall use of space.

The analysis so far brings up a good question. What is the subject here?



There are three primary elements within this photograph: the woman's legs, the paper on the ground, and the man's hand to the right. At this point, this is positive space and everything else is negative space.

Looking at the photograph in terms of the use of the space, I would conclude that the photographer thought the woman's legs, or potentially the paper, was the subject.

The hand on the right is quite secondary to those two elements due to its placement within the frame. It is more of an eye snag (as it is currently displayed within the space).

Critical focus is placed on the woman's foot (the red circle), so my conclusion is that that's where the viewer experience should come to an end.
That's the subject.

However, even more important than the subject (in this particular case) is the story.

I believe that the story was meant to be a statement on busy city life, and it actually captures that idea in a pretty interesting way. I especially like the gritty black and white format, out-of-focus negative space, and the high contrast repeating lines of the road.

However, you still must have a subject for a successful photograph. There has to be an end for a successful story!

The problem here is that the paper on the ground and the man's hand draw way too much visual weight away from the subject, which is the woman.

Step one is to try and correct the use of space to better position the woman as the subject.



1

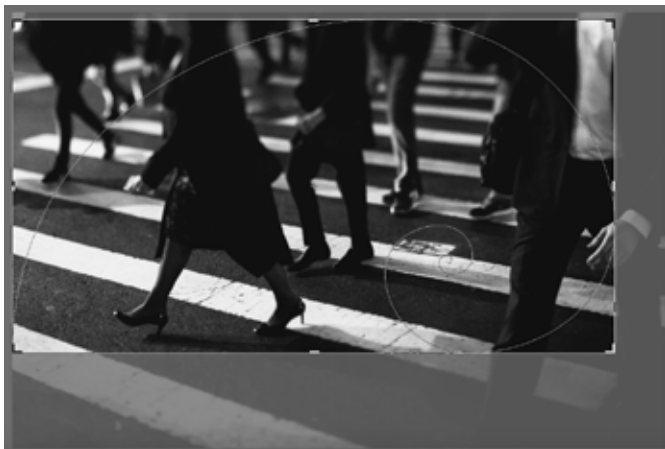
I tried several different cropping solutions while using the 'overlay' option in the Photoshop Crop Tool settings.

In this version (above) I created a more panoramic format. This helped to get the woman's foot closer to the sweet spot.



2

Next, I experimented with a version that removed the man on the right altogether.



3

I also tried rotating the overlay around with no great results.



4

I finally tried an even stronger panoramic format. In the end, I chose something that wasn't quite like any of these!



It occurred to me that even with a crop and a rearrangement of objects within the space, the paper on the ground and the hand were still significant eye snags.

I couldn't come up with a good reason to keep the paper in the shot. It hurt the composition, and it really added nothing to the story.

(This is the type of analysis that is important in your quest for advanced composition.)

I removed the paper (image above) and immediately the composition became significantly stronger.

Compare the original image to the image above. With the paper gone, the woman's strength as the subject has gained significant visual weight.



I also looked at removing the hand through cropping, but, truthfully, the image loses something without the hand. (Try covering the hand with a piece of paper.)

The hand provides some necessary depth perception and scale to the photograph. It also helps to balance out all of the space and activity that is occurring on the left side of the frame. Plus, because of the way it's angled toward the left, it helps add to the horizontal, leftward moving flow and direction of the image.

I did crop this image into a 'slightly' more panoramic format than the original first image. I took a little bit off of the bottom to help position the woman (the subject) a little closer to the sweet spot for the Golden Spiral.

I also cloned out the bright spot, on the edge of frame in the upper left, as it was an eye snag.

The man's hand still seems a bit of a problem. I need to shift some visual weight from the hand over toward the woman.



The first step in that process was to darken the man's hand using the adjustment brush in the Adobe ACR window.



The second step in that process was to *slightly* lighten the woman's forward leg and dress. I also lightened the ground right in front of her. I made a minor exposure adjustment to the white stripe, right at her forward foot. That is now the brightest spot within the entire picture.

(Remember, use contrast to move a viewer's eyes through a photograph.)

My final step was to place a slight dark vignette in each corner of the frame.

All of these steps were followed in order to accomplish one purpose: drive the viewer's eyes toward the woman as the subject and, in particular, her forward foot.



You can now see the use of space and natural flow that I've created through these various post-production steps.



Here is the final version. Compare it to the first image and you will see just how much stronger this composition has become through these few simple steps.

What's important to note here is that the concept, mood, and story of this shot hasn't changed at all! The image has merely been fine-tuned to provide a better composition map for a viewer.