

Composition Case Study #07

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

This image is an exquisitely composed shot, and I think you will truly recognize this as we get into the case study.

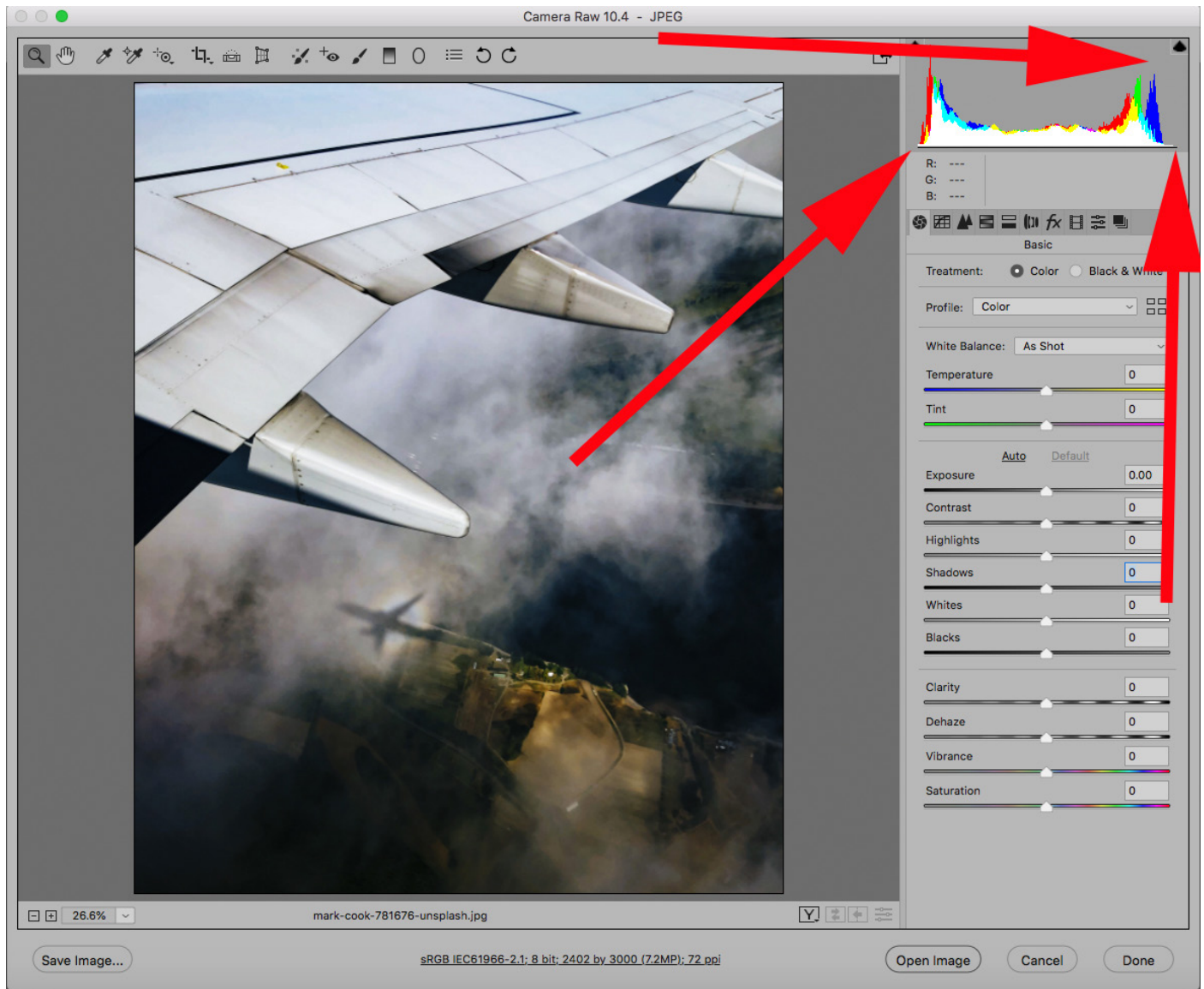
This picture is an example of skill and luck coming together for a perfect capture.

What an extraordinary scene to witness, right?

Still, for a photographer who wasn't skilled at composition, it would have been very easy to blow this shot, especially when you consider that the moment probably lasted only a few seconds.

Let's start this case study by once again looking at the histogram.





As you can see in this image, we have a nice range of tone with no clipping.

However, there is another attribute of this shot that the histogram is revealing. Do you see it?

On the highlight end of the scale, the blue, green, and red peaks have "separated" from the white scale. What does this tell us?

It tells us that in the highlight end of the photograph, we have some very distinct color casts.

The highlight area on the ground is clearly producing the red peak. The blue and green peaks are mostly visible on the wing of the airplane.

Let's think about this for a moment. A colorcast is something that we typically try to eliminate. However, sometimes a colorcast adds mood and direction, and that is what is happening here.

As we study this composition, I think you'll see how the colorcasts are actually improving both the composition and the story of this extraordinary image.



When doing case studies on your own, I recommend starting with an analysis of the histogram along with the preview image. Make corrections at that point if necessary.

The second thing that I recommend doing is to identify the true subject of the photograph. This sounds like it should be easy. Oftentimes, it's not.

A subject that is difficult to identify can be an indication that the image suffers from a poor composition.

In this image, I have identified two elements of the photograph. Can you name them?

The oval is the subject and the rectangle is the focal point.

How did I come to that conclusion?

Everything in the photograph (the composition) points toward the shadow of the airplane on the ground.

Focal points are usually a strong shape and/or color that attract immediate attention toward the subject.

The ground doesn't particularly have a strong shape. While it is a color contrast to the rest of the frame, it isn't particularly bright, colorful, or saturated.

Why does it work as an effective focal point?

This is where the color cast comes into play for this composition.

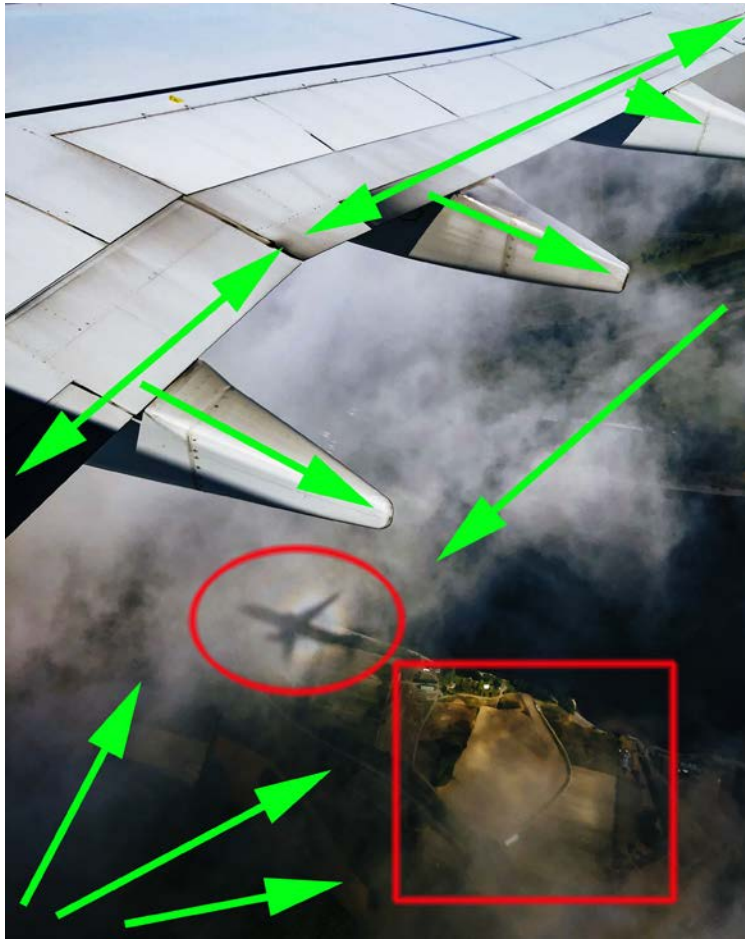
The vast majority of the frame has a colorcast in the blue/green spectrum. The land mass next to the airplane shadow is in the warm color spectrum.

What we learned in our study of composition is that warm colors advance and cool colors recede.

This is why, at first glance, a viewer's eyes will tend to lock onto the land mass first (a warm advancing color – a focal point), but then will immediately shift to the airplane shadow.

Why does the shadow overpower the landmass? Shape truly is the most powerful tool in a photographer's toolbox. It will almost always overpower everything else, depending on the entire composition.

Let's look at the entire composition.

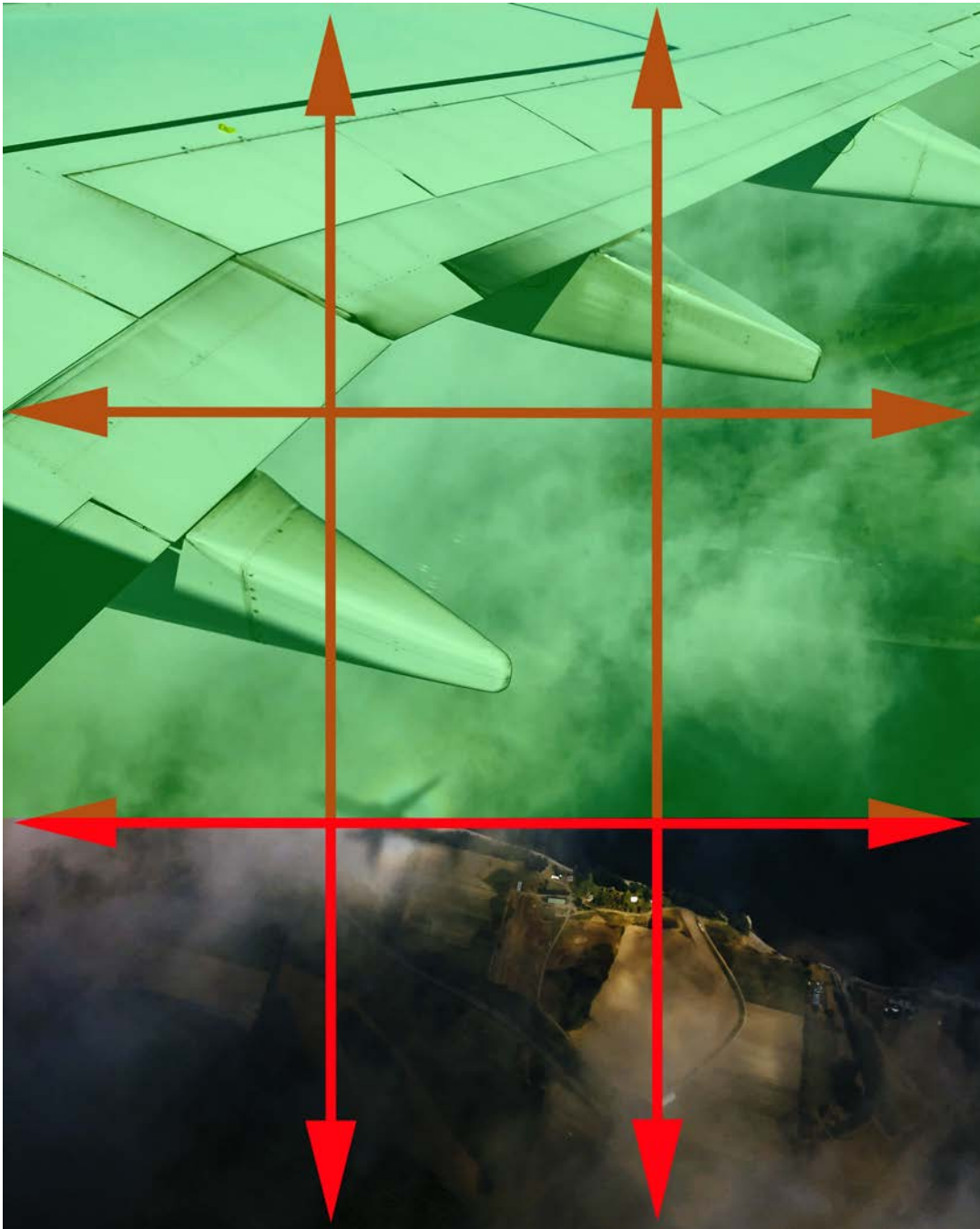


The green arrows indicate how the rest of the frame (the negative space) is pushing the eyes toward the subject.

Let's discuss them one by one.

- The airplane wing forms a frame. This is a visual barrier. There isn't a lot of visual interest up there, so it stops the eyes from drifting upward.
- The engines are all 'pointing' to the right and downward. They are a strong shape. How come they don't overpower the subject? There are two reasons. First of all, they are a cool color (remember the color cast), which causes them to recede, and that adds weight to the focal point (the landmass). Second of all, they do not have as strong a contrast against the background as the subject. This diminishes their visual weight and relegates them to the role of being leading lines. They are leading the eyes down and to the right.

- Look at the green arrow pointing down and to the left. This is a line of contrast. Lines of contrast can be used to guide a viewer's eyes toward something within the frame. In this case, it is leading the eyes directly toward the subject. The important lesson here is to be aware of lines of contrast in any image that you're composing. They can work for you. However, they can also work against you if they are not 'leading' in the right direction.
- Finally, we have the dark area in the lower left. The landmass areas outside of the red rectangle were likely 'darkened' in post-production to enhance the contrast between those areas and the subject. Why? A viewer's eyes will tend to gravitate toward an area that represents the highest contrast and the strongest shape, which in this case is our subject, the shadow of the airplane!



There is one last element that works in favor of the airplane shadow becoming the subject, and that is the division of space.

In this image, you can see the Rule of Thirds grid. The shadow has been placed on the 'sweet spot' for the Rule of Thirds.

In addition, the green overlay indicates a division of the frame using the 1/3–2/3 concept.



On the left is the photograph as we have been examining it. On the right is the same image after going through the Fundamental Editing List.

Essentially, this means color correction was applied.

I wouldn't necessarily say that the corrected version is 'bad.'

However, to my eye the subject and the focal point lose a lot of visual strength and mood as a result of the color correction.

With the color correction, I believe that an abundance of visual weight is being shifted upward toward the airplane wing.