

TAKING LESSONS FROM FILMMAKERS – THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF YOUR CHOSEN CAMERA ANGLE

By Kent DuFault



Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFaults

This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and edited with Snapseed, Instaflash Pro, and TouchRetouch.

I have always been fascinated by the movie industry. In fact, before I chose photography as a career, I wanted to work in the movie industry. I even made a movie back in 2003 titled *Earlene Scores*. It was a 40-minute comedy short that took about four months to create.

Making that movie was a fascinating process. Even today, I still enjoy studying movie-making techniques and using them in my smartphone photography as often as possible.

This creativity prompt isn't about making movies with our smartphones. It's about learning from the movie industry's well-established techniques for creating drama and passing along a subliminal message to an audience through the choice of the camera angle.

One of my favorite movie directors is Stanley Kubrick. He is explicitly known for his use of camera angles to create drama.

My photograph, Image 001, was inspired by his fantastic movie, *The Shining*.

The chosen camera angle is what is known as a medium-low angle. This camera angle can create uneasy feelings in a viewer, which is just what I was going for (as was Stanley Kubrick with his shots of the ghostly Grady sisters in the movie).

I can't cover all the possibilities and information about filmmaking and camera angles within this creativity prompt, so I'll select a few often-used ones, and you can build upon that with more research.

The Level Angle – Camera Orientation Can Play a Factor



Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

To capture this level angle portrait of the model reading on a tablet, I laid down next to her. This picture is the type of scenario that would have been easy to 'shoot down on her,' but that destroys the emotional impact. This image was taken on an iPhone 3Gs and processed in Snapseed.

Filmmakers view the level angle as very subjective. The emotional context can change with the camera orientation from vertical to horizontal.

When photographing humans and other living beings, the level angle is defined as placing the camera lens at the subject's eye level.

It creates the feeling of 'seeing eye to eye' with the subject.

The level angle encourages the viewer to identify with the subject because it eliminates outside reference.



Image 003 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

This level angle street shot gives the viewer an eye-to-eye view of what it's like to be a tour guide in busy Beijing, China. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed.

When photographing non-living subjects, the level angle brings a sense of personal experience to a moment we wouldn't likely be privy to.

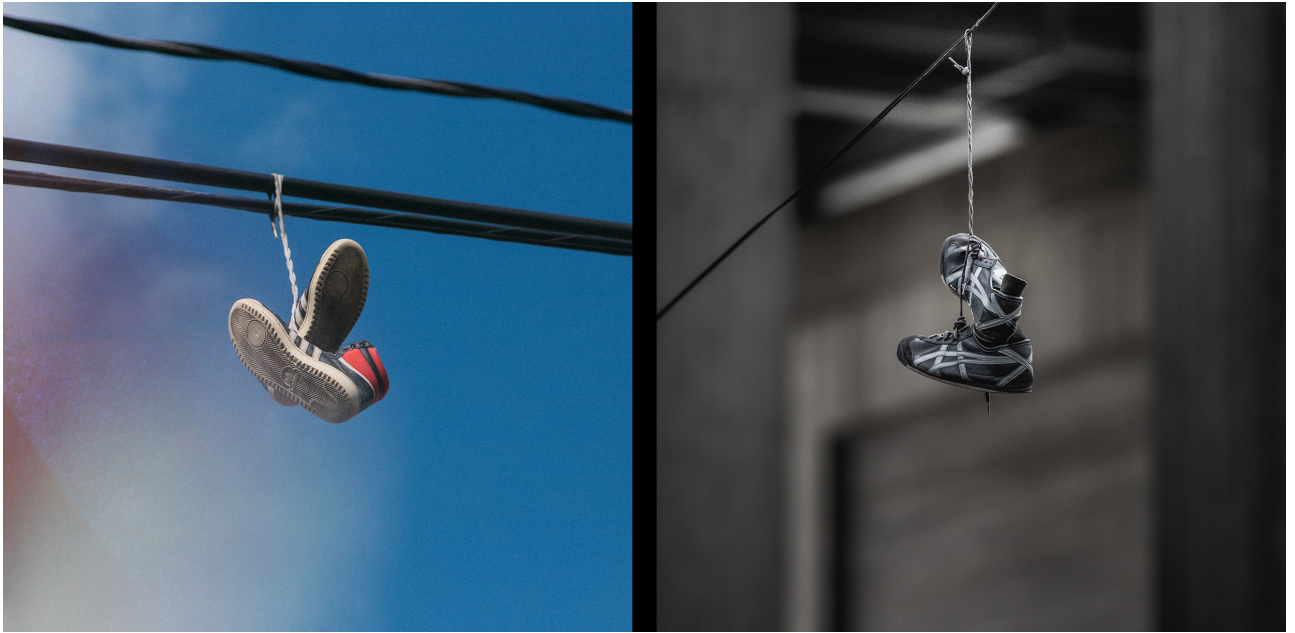


Image 004 – Photograph (l) by Jakob Owens and photograph (r) by Marten Bjork

<https://unsplash.com/photos/F-Pa3S3QTSM>

https://unsplash.com/photos/vpu5kDnU_Aw

Here we have two very similar subjects. The difference between them is a low camera angle versus a level camera angle. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed.

Critical Thought: A level camera angle with living subjects creates a sense of connection or seeing eye-to-eye. A level camera angle with inanimate objects helps a viewer to identify with a moment rather than feeling like an outside observer.



Assignment:

Go out and create photographs of living and inanimate subjects. Concentrate on the level angle first. Then also capture a few shots from a lower angle and a higher angle. Back at home, sort through your results. See if you, and others around you, can identify a different emotional context from the level angle shots versus the others.

The Low Angle



Image 005 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

This portrait was created with an iPhone 3Gs and was processed in Hipstamatic.

A lower camera angle is often described as creating the following emotional triggers. The subject appears big, dominant, authoritative, and imposing.

It can make a viewer feel overwhelmed, powerless, or weak.

It can also give the subject an appearance of superiority and an uplifting persona.



Image 006 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

I wanted to create the impression that these people were ascending toward heaven. Using a low camera angle helped to facilitate that message. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed.

Low camera angles tend to remove the background. Be aware that this can disorient a viewer or give the feeling that the particular location wasn't relevant.



Image 007 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

I took this cityscape of the NYC World Trade Center reconstruction with an iPhone 6 Plus and processed it in Snapseed.

Critical Thought: When choosing a low camera angle and a wide-angle lens, the resulting images often take on a theatrical magnitude – bigger than life, so to speak.



Assignment:

Create a body of work using your smartphone and the low camera angle. If your smartphone has more than one lens, make use of that. Try to pre-establish the message that you would like your photo to create and use the low camera angle to help establish that message. Messages that you should try may include dominance, power, magnitude, big, authoritative, empowerment, importance, and distinction. Remember, if you're eliminating the background, you may also be removing location context.



Image 008 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*I took this medium angle shot while running through the Seattle airport at Christmas time in 2019.
This image was taken on an iPhone 11 Pro and processed in Snapseed and Instagram.*

In a medium angle shot, you position the camera closer than you would with a telephoto lens and further than you might with a wide-angle lens.

You are setting up the scene for the viewers of your photograph to be objective. They are observing the action closely, but yet not a part of what is happening.



Image 009 – Photographs (l) and (r) by Kent DuFault

The medium angle involves the viewer but at a distance. It is more of an external peek than an involved stare.

In the medium shot, we guide our viewer's eyes through lighting, color contrast, tonal contrast, body language, or motion.



Assignment:

Go out and fill your portfolio with medium shots. Try to instill that feeling of looking in versus being a part of the moment.



Image 010 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Shooting from behind is often viewed as somewhat voyeuristic. A viewer assumes that the subject was unaware, and therefore we are taking a sneak peek into their world. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed, Instaflash Pro, and Instagram.



Image 011 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Due to the potential for a detached feeling to a rear angle photograph, it's imperative to instill interest in other ways of composition and subject matter. This photo uses 'spot color' to combat detachment. Image 010 used a frame around the subjects for the same purpose. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed.

Critical Thought: The rear angle can distance us as viewers from the subject. However, when properly composed, it can provide a more intimate and subjective viewpoint of the subject's life experience at that moment in time.

I believe that Image 011 is a perfect example of a rear angle shot that pulls the viewer into the subject's life experience at that very moment.



Assignment:

Practice your rear angle shots. It's so important to organize this type of photo with a message. Otherwise, it seems like the photographer simply snapped a picture of someone's back. How many times have we all witnessed those pictures on social media and online platforms? Too many times, I think. This backdoor snap shooting is a particular problem with budding street photographers. Give your rear angle shots a story element; that's a must!

Let's stop for a moment and discuss the four elements of the camera angle.

- 1 Vertical orientation – All scenes have a natural flow. It's typically a vertical or horizontal flow. When the camera is positioned appropriately for the natural flow, this creates a feeling of harmony. When the camera is positioned opposite the natural flow, it creates tension and uneasy feelings in viewers.
- 2 Horizontal orientation – Before every shot you take, you should consider the scene's natural flow, the message you want to send, and then orient your camera accordingly.
- 3 Tilted orientation – The movie industry has long used the tilted camera orientation for special effects or to disorient viewers. We experience real-life practically in a grid of lines, shapes, and spaces. We then use our brains to find equilibrium. The tilted orientation messes with that plan of nature. When you want to garner some attention, consider the tilted orientation.
- 4 Field of view – This FOV is a function of how much information and emotional context you're going to give a viewer. For example:



Image 012 – Photograph (l) by Mads Severinsen, (m) by Yana Yuzvenko, and (r) by Sebastian Laube

<https://unsplash.com/photos/g3Auz-nRbjM>

https://unsplash.com/photos/B-rnDwqZ_g8

<https://unsplash.com/photos/OkKzqnNX90>

On the left is a tight shot that would be considered a close-up. This photo is a **level angle of view**. Notice the position of the camera lens to the camel's eyes.

In the middle, we have a full-length shot of the camel. Notice that it is still a **level angle of view**. The camera is still located at the position of the camel's eyes.

On the right, we have a wide-angle shot of two camels. It is still a **level angle of view** as the camera lens is still positioned at the height of the camels' eyes.

These are three very different pictures. What changed? The field of view changed!

Critical Thought: The camera angle, field of view, and camera orientation all have a psychological impact on a viewer of your smartphone pictures. Each of these critical elements should be considered in your image-taking efforts.

This brings us to an important point!

Is my camera angle objective or subjective, and what does that mean?

Cinematographers often refer to the classic training book, *The Five C's of Cinematography* by Joseph Mascelli when trying to answer this question.

A subjective camera angle creates deeper emotions and feelings about a scene or the subject. The viewer becomes a part of the experience.

With an objective camera angle, the viewer tends to be distant and removed from the moment to become more of an observer than a participant.



Assignment:

Take numerous pictures of various subjects while changing the field of view and the camera angle. Using your smartphone camera and limited lensing, see how many psychological effects you can create by simply changing the field of view or the camera angle.

Let's review a couple of the more obscure camera angles used by filmmakers.

The Side Jump Angle



Image 013 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

The side jump angle is typically created with a scene that displays a natural horizontal flow. For this angle, the camera is oriented horizontally, with the subject placed slightly off-center. Finally, the subject is typically not looking at the camera. This image was taken on an iPhone 6 Plus and processed in Snapseed.

When a subject is placed off-center but still looking at the camera, the resulting psychological effect is pretty much the same as a simple front camera angle shot.

But if the subject is placed off-center and looking at something else – either within the frame or off of the frame – this is known as the

‘side jump angle.’ It creates a lateral jumping movement of the viewer’s eyes.

It is characterized by composition to push a viewer’s eyes directly toward the subject and create internal drama as we consider what the subject is looking at and why.



Image 014 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

I captured this man in San Francisco with my iPhone 3Gs and processed the image in Snapseed and Instagram.

The side jump angle is often characterized as being controlling or voyeuristic. Subjects in this situation usually do not realize that their photo is being taken. A good rule of thumb is: the closer you are to the subject, the less this controlling effect comes across. Instead, it feels as if the photographer is a part of the moment.



Assignment:

Use your smartphone and create some side jump angle shots that appear voyeuristic and controlled, but also free-spirited and putting you right in the middle of the action. Try not to generate frame breaks, which are generally negative in composition.

Frame Break: A frame break occurs when a subject is positioned to one side of the photo, and the line of sight leads off of the frame on that same side. Image 013 does not have a frame break. The boy (the subject) is positioned on the right side of the picture, and his line of sight leads off to the left side of the picture. Image 014 **does** have a frame break as the man is on the left side of the picture, and he is also looking off of the picture to the left. However, the frame break is reduced in visual strength by the woman's visual power in the window. She tends to balance the man back to the image center.



Image 015 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

This is my bearded dragon Whiskers. I photographed him with my iPhone 6 Plus under the available lighting in his vivarium.

Does Image 015 create a frame break? Is it an example of the side jump angle? Or is it just a standard front angle shot since the subject is looking at the camera?

These are all fascinating questions for this picture.

I would say it is not a standard front angle shot.

It's more of a blend of several different types of shot angles. The point being, don't be afraid to mix and match the suggestions

within this creativity prompt. That's what these prompts are all about: experimentation and exploration!

All photographs in this creativity prompt (created by Kent DuFault) were shot with either an iPhone 3Gs, an iPhone 6 Plus, an iPhone 8 Plus, or an iPhone 11 Pro.

Kent DuFault's post-processing toolbox includes Snapseed, Instaflash Pro, TouchRetouch, Polarr, Focos, Light Distortions, Instagram, Hipstamatic, and LensLight.