

The decisive moment by John Siskin

I've been thinking lately about the decisive moment. You know that business that Eisenstaedt & Cartier-Bresson were so good at: finding the one moment when the image was perfect. I liked Eisenstaedt's use of the moment best. Remember the image of the sailor & the nurse? It was back in the papers just a couple of years ago, on the fiftieth anniversary of VE day. Eisenstaedt died that same week, the week one of his best remembered images was in the press again. Now that's timing!

But that's not the sort of moment I'm thinking about. I'm thinking about how commercial decisions get made. I suppose that some editor made a decision about Eisenstaedt's image, but it might have been a no-brainer. What I keep examining, are the processes of making decisions in my commercial photography business. Let's examine a photo of a toothbrush. First a series of decisions have been made about creating the toothbrush, decisions I had nothing to do with. Eventually I get the toothbrush; and I get a shot list. You know: in the package, out of the package, all the colors lined up, standing, sitting, kneeling, for the love of God. Then there are the shots with the kids.

Regardless of the shot, some of the first decisions I get to make will be about light and camera position. The client has probably dictated capture media already. Wow, we're into this and I finally have creative input. Of course that decision is subject to change: the Polaroid, or first digital capture, will modify the decision. These first decisions will effect every thing we do afterward, though. When was the last time you pulled all the lighting out of a set and started over? I'm going to think about how even the light needs to be, how harsh the light will be, how much contrast there is in the product, will there be cast shadows and do I want this lighting to work for the next shot. Another very important concern: do I need to use a lot of stuff to impress the client? So maybe this is where the decisive moment is hiding?

But, maybe not. Remember what I said about Polaroid, or the first capture above? The real world is going to interact



© John Siskin

with my lovely plans, and sometimes all my plans are for naught. The toothbrush is flat and dead, or blown-out, or covered with reflections. So the Polaroid or whatever is examined, and a new plan is implemented. Some days, I may start over more than once (those are not good days). So, is the decisive moment when the photographer and the client agree on a Polaroid (or a digital capture)?

What about the moment that I engage the shutter? Clearly this is a decisive moment, unless of course I'm using a prosumer digital camera or an auto everything camera, which won't trigger the shutter until the camera is damn good and ready. I could be using my Leaf DCB II; that back takes 3 separate exposures. Which one is decisive? But if I'm bracketing the exposure, on film, which moment is it? Or if I'm shooting the kid with the toothbrush, is this a real exposure, or is it a snip roll, or am I shooting to get the kid comfortable with the strobe? Certainty, if I'm shooting people, the moment of exposure is critical, but if I shoot 100 exposures, is each one a decisive moment?

What about the snip test? Isn't the final processing information important? I know that I go to great lengths to arrange for exposure tests: shooting run 1 hold 1 with 4X5, or snip tests with 120 and 35mm, or bracketing in any format. And this is after I try to achieve critical exposure information about exposure from Polaroid. Now if this had been a digital exposure, with my Leaf back, instead of messing around with processing, I'd be trying to chose a curve, or modify a curve to match the product, another decision.

Now what about the choices after exposure, on the light table or whatever? Aren't those the final decisive choices? Which exposure is the best? Which expression really says "Happy Toothbrushing." Is this just a no-brainer or is our last decision the most important? I don't know, but thinking about it makes me tired.

I think what happened to our moments is they sort of smeared over time, like an electron in quantum physics. Our moments are not moments: they are the sum of a history of decisions guided by a craftsperson/artist. I begun to think that every image I've made is tied into each image I've made. I wonder if each image I've interacted with (whether through crating or intense viewing) has some effect on all subsequent images? Is each moment involved in making an image a decisive moment?

John Siskin is a commercial photographer with a studio in Reseda. He has an article in the August issue of ViewCamera on lens construction. He teaches private workshops and at the Learning Tree University in Chatsworth. His work can be viewed at siskinphoto.com. He can be reached at 818-343-5688.