Flare Is Not A Dirty Word

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Granted that flare can often unexpectedly spoil an otherwise carefully planned shot. But, handled with relative confidence and an open mind, flare serves to enhance many a photograph.

While lens makers try to minimize flare with interior baffles, flat black paint on the barrels, multi-coating and lens hoods, many creative photographers wander the world deliberately using “ghosts” and other manifestations of stray light to enhance their photographic creations. These picture-creators think of flare not as a defect, but as creative tool and even a virtue.

A virtue, you might ask? Well, surely you've seen shots of lithe long-legged models emerging from the sea with the late afternoon sun at their backs and the light spilling forward and suffusing the entire photograph with a romantic mood. Is that the way it appeared in reality? Probably not, although it may indeed have been the way the photographer felt it. It could have been a lucky accident with the lens, and possibly even the camera body, causing the flare. Or it could have been that the photographer actually wanted flare and thus employed one of several techniques to create it.

To understand flare and use it creatively, however, we should understand what it is and what it looks like. Basically, there are three flare categories that affect photography: subject flare, lens and camera flare, and induced flare.

Subject flare happens in the real world, which means that there's not much you can do about it except take its picture. Some examples are: the sun's rays streaming down through a cloud, or the bright ring that surrounds a street lamp on a foggy evening. Subject flare usually looks quite beautiful, but it's not something the photographer creates.

In the “old days” you might get some color slides or prints back from the processor and find, to your horror, that your model, who was standing on the beach with the sun going down behind her, is obscured by bright blotches of light. (Nowadays you know immediately by looking at your camera’s LCD screen or subsequently on your computer monitor.) Either way you've just been had by lens flare, and possibly by some from the camera body's internals as well. All sorts of disasters can occur in the space between the front lens element and the film plane: floating hexagons called ghosts; a multi-pointed star instead of a nice, round sun; the loss of recognizable edges on the subject.

If the lens, and only the lens, is to blame, you could have predicted the effects of flare by stopping down the shooting aperture and looking carefully at the viewfinder screen. Often, however, the camera body accentuates, rearranges or even creates its own flare effects, so there's no way you can foresee the final result with 100 percent accuracy. This is why this kind of flare technically is considered a defect. Also for this reason, we can sympathize with the lens makers in their emphasis on multi-coating, because the name of the game is control.

This brings us to our final category, induced flare, which, unlike the first two, is created by the photographer and remains within his/her control. It usually involves fogging, blurring, greasing and otherwise altering the front of the lens to create the kind of flare effect you desire. The means are relatively simple and inexpensive such as breathing on the lens. This is the simplest and cheapest. But you can sacrifice a skylight or UV filter by scratching it, coating it with petroleum jelly, or just letting the dust accumulate. However, there are also inexpensive special filters that can provide a variety of interesting effects.

The results are varied: you can mimic the kinds of flare the lens itself could produce, or create as-yet unseen permutations - and, by using a stopped down to working aperture, what you see is what you get. Best advice - do all your dirty work on filters since lenses are far too expensive to toy with.

The essential point is that flare isn't the dirty five-letter word it's reputed to be. There are times when it looks fantastic, just as there are times when it's totally inappropriate.

Use lens flare with a little thought and preparation and luck to produce a dramatic picture. But don't depend on what you see in the viewfinder because some flare can be created in the camera body. For a starting point I suggest an aperture of f8. Full frame metering can be used for an initial shot followed by spot metering at several portions of the scene. The results will be quite varied ranging from significant under and over exposure to radial scattering of flare that causes diffraction and ghosts.

I have assembled some examples of flare below, but I will leave it to you to try to exhaust the myriad of possibilities.

Subject, Lens and Camera Flare

1. Just catching the sun at the edge of the tree produced both star burst and diagonal ghosts.

2. Shooting directly toward the sun behind dramatic clouds produced backlighted crepuscular rays also referred as “God rays.”

3. A walk in the woods, usually in the early morning, can produce God rays due to such things as dust, moisture, and pollen.

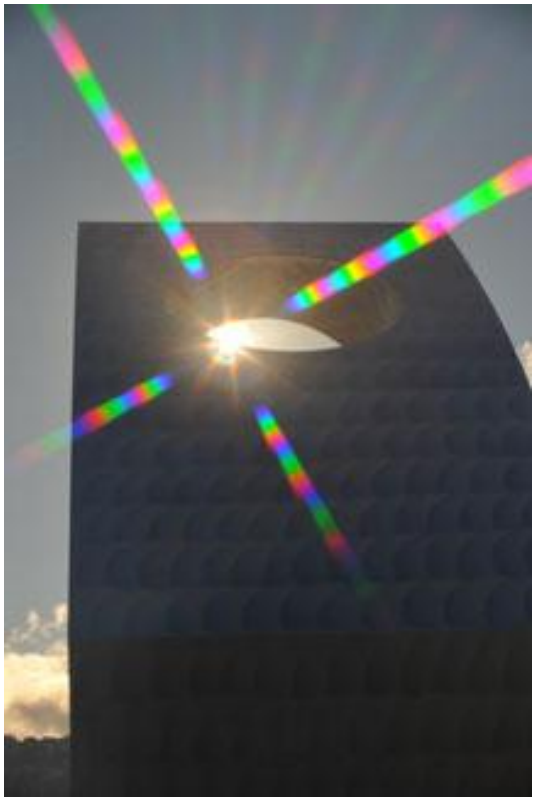
4. An early morning trip to Ruby Beach resulted in a striking image due to ocean spray and mist.

5. A gathering of water stars can easily be captured when ripples are present.

Filter Flare

6. With patience and care a simple star burst can be captured without secondary filters.

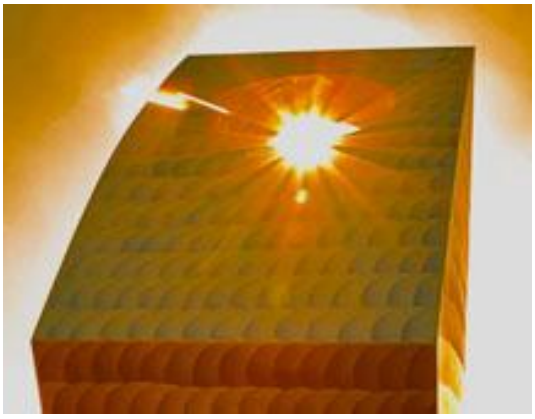
7. Employing a crystal cross star filter changes the dramatics of the image.



8. Using a color cross star filter with the sculpture at the Sequim water reclamation area adds a focal point and interest.

9. A cross star filter enabled a double flare to be dramatically captured at the Carrie Blake pond.

10. Focusing at the very edge of the sculpture and using a rayburst halo filter helps fill frame with colored accent.



11. Finally, using halo software and color modification “Flare Blast” was created.