

The Orton Effect

The Orton Effect is named after Michael Orton, a Canadian photographer from BC who may have been one of the first used the technique of making a 'sandwich' of two images, one in focus the other out of focus. Freeman Patterson and Andre Gallant have both used the technique successfully in their work as well.

It's worth considering the presentation of the final image before even taking the picture. The Orton image is best seen either on-screen as a slide or as a large print - a lot of the effect is lost in small prints and I'd suggest 10"x8" as about the minimum print size. Ortons have traditionally been made by using slide film with the first, sharp, image overexposed by two stops and the second, out of focus image, over exposed by one stop. It is important to use a tripod for this type of work to ensure your photographic elements remain in register on the film. The shots were then sandwiched together in a single slide mount to produce a beautiful, impressionistic image. Proficient darkroom users could make the effect with negatives sandwiched together under the enlarger. Digital photographers have it easy! We can now replicate the same effect in multiple ways.

There are a few digital cameras that can give you multiple images in one 'frame' with the camera deciding on the exposure value. The technique would be similar to film - one exposure blurred and one sharp. No need to worry about the exposures values but you need to open up the lens to reduce the depth of field for the blurred image, so Aperture Priority is the best choice. Of course, manual exposure would work but adds complication in that the camera needs even more touching between the two shots, risking camera movement.

For purists, you can use the same technique as with film, two images, overexposed the same way, and in your image editing program place your blurred image on top of your sharp image as a layer and choose multiply as your blending mode. Of course this means always taking at least two images of your scene and always using a tripod.

Another method, now probably the most common and certainly the simplest and quickest, is to use a single image to create a layer - you could therefore try the effect with any image you have in your collection. A poor picture will probably not be saved by this effect, but a 'not quite' picture can benefit.

Using Photoshop Elements, (any other program that uses layers is fine), open your image. Check Levels, Contrast and Hue/Saturation. Make sure it's sharp and about as good as you can get it, including any cropping/straightening etc you need to do. At this stage you may like to save the image as an improved version of the original.

In the Layers palette, duplicate the **Background** layer (Right click on the background layer and choose duplicate, or click and drag the layer to the 'Create a new layer' icon or just use Ctrl+J) and name that layer **Blur**.

Create another duplicate of the **Background** layer and name that **Sharp**. You should now have three layers - stacked top to bottom as **Blur**, **Sharp** and **Background**.

Change the Blending mode of the **Sharp** layer to **Screen**

Select the **Blur** layer. On the Filter Menu, choose Blur - Gaussian Blur.

Depending on the resolution of the image you are using, the amount of blur needed will vary. Use enough that the shapes are still visible, but detail is not. As a rough guide, 12% is good for a 6Mp image, going up to about 25% for 12Mp. (probably doesn't seem logical, but that's how it is)

Change the blending mode of the **Blur** layer to **Multiply**.

You will now have an Orton, but it will probably be a little dark. Try different settings with the Opacity slider for the Blur layer (maybe down to 60-70%), try changing the blending mode of the Sharp layer to 'Normal' and also add an adjustment layer on top for Levels and try some variations there.

When you're happy, Flatten Image (squash all the layers together) and Save - with another name, of course.

As long as you have your original, you can try it all again until you're either happy or thoroughly fed-up. Like many other techniques, it's not something that should be overdone.

If you try the Orton Effect and have any problems, drop me a line - gchalcraft@cogeco.ca

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