

# The New York Times

TECHNOLOGY | THE PHOTOJOURNALIST

## Which Camera Does This Pro Use? It Depends on the Shot

By SETH SCHIESEL JUNE 8, 2005

DAVID BURNETT spent the dog days of 1963 prowling the drag strips of Salt Lake City with his Yashica-Mat while he waited for his senior year at Olympus High School. He has been taking pictures for money ever since.

So with four decades of war, sports and politics at hand, it was easy for Mr. Burnett, one of his generation's top photojournalists, to engage the dozens of photo experts who packed the back room of a Manhattan restaurant last month for one of his guided slideshows.

Yet through the first 20 minutes of Mr. Burnett's presentation, the cognoscenti seemed less deeply moved by his work and more entertained by his banter ("These are some of the farmers," he said drolly about a picture of Secret Service agents in a pasture during the 1988 campaign).

With one transition on the screen, that changed. In an instant, the chatter stopped, replaced by gasps and a collective groan of appreciation.

Mr. Burnett was explaining why in this age of ever more plentiful megapixels, at this moment when the concept of "film" seems as old-fashioned as a rotary telephone, he has spent most of the last two years lugging around a 55-year-old 4-by-5-inch Graflex Speed Graphic camera, complete with tripod.

On the screen was a wide overhead picture of a John Kerry rally last fall in Madison, Wis., which Mr. Burnett shot with a Canon 20D digital camera, the same camera used by thousands of other professionals around the world. Not surprisingly, the picture looks like thousands of others that were shipped around the globe during the campaign.

The colors are bright. Every part of the image is crisp, so crisp that just picking the minuscule figure of Mr. Kerry out of the huge crowd takes a "Where's Waldo?" moment.

And then Mr. Burnett flipped to a photograph taken seconds later with the ancient Speed Graphic. Suddenly, the image took on a luminescent depth. The center of the image, with Mr. Kerry, was clear. Yet soon the crowd along the edges began to float into softer focus on translucent planes of color.

The effect is to direct the viewer's eye to Mr. Kerry while also conveying the scale and intensity of the crowd. In accomplishing both at the same time, the old-fashioned photograph communicates a rich sense of meaning that the digital file does not.

The digital picture pretends to display raw reality. The analog picture is a visualization of human memory.

"Most people follow the crowd in terms of approach and equipment," Francisco P. Bernasconi, director of photography at Getty Images, said over the hubbub after Mr. Burnett's presentation last month. "David feels comfortable exploring other types of photography that are out there."

That may be why a black-and-white portfolio of Mr. Burnett's Speed Graphic work from the Athens Olympics for ESPN magazine won the top prize for sports stories at the World Press Photo Contest in Amsterdam this spring. A tableau of field-hockey players looks like miniature dolls individually placed on a felt playmat. Beach volleyball players seem suspended by invisible string on a puppeteer's stage.

"It got to the point a few years ago that everyone in the press was using essentially the same tools," Mr. Burnett, 58, said the morning after his talk, drinking coffee around the corner from the Manhattan headquarters of Contact Press Images, the photo agency that Mr. Burnett helped found in 1976. (The agency's roster now includes Annie Leibovitz and Sebastião Salgado.)

"Everyone is using the same couple of Canon and Nikon digital cameras and the same three or four lenses," Mr. Burnett said. "And it isn't that everyone is using them in exactly the same way, but I started to notice a sameness in the look of most things I was seeing. Don't get me wrong: I think digital is incredible in a lot of ways. For me, digital has pretty much totally replaced shooting 35-millimeter slides. But as a photojournalist, you're just trying to get someone turning the pages of the magazine to stop for that extra second before they go on to the jeans ad or whatever. So I started thinking about different looks."

Naturally, Mr. Burnett found his new look in the closet. He hasn't gotten rid of a camera since 1978 (when he traded in all his Nikons for Canon gear) and he has around 50 cameras and 50 lenses at his home near Washington. So by the time he hit the campaign trail last year for Time magazine, he was packing not

only the Speed Graphic and the digital Canon, but also a 2 1/4-by-2 1/4-inch Mamiya or Rolleiflex and a \$15 plastic camera called a Holga. In fact, a photo of Al Gore on the stump that Mr. Burnett took with a Holga won a top prize at the 2001 White House News Photographers' Association's Eyes of History contest.

Michele Stephenson, now the director of photography at Time, first met Mr. Burnett when he arrived at the magazine as an intern in 1967. (Mr. Burnett is currently one of the magazine's contract photographers.) "David has always been a curious person and has always tried new and fresh approaches," she said. "I worry about his back, carrying all of this stuff, but never about his eye. He is always looking for something new, even if that means going back to something old."

Mr. Burnett is certainly no Luddite; he has been using Macintosh computers for his photo work since the 1980's. And he said that digital photography remained his medium of choice when he must file pictures quickly to an editor or when he wants to shoot dozens or hundreds of photos at once. He added that the instant feedback offered by a digital camera was a major help in fast-moving situations.

"Digital is fantastic in its flexibility, not only in being able to get the image and then transmit it around the world in minutes, but in difficult situations where something like the Speed Graphic is just impractical," he said. "Like if you're in the jungle and you know the tiger is going to come along this one spot and you don't want to have to change film, a big memory card really helps."

"And also, with film you had to wait hours or days to see what you had come up with," he added. "With digital you can see instantly what you've missed, so it can really help you fine-tune your composition. That's a big benefit."

Nonetheless, when listening to Mr. Burnett talk about the evolution of photo technology, you hear a bit of the priest whose temple has been invaded by heathens.

"The change really started with autofocus," he said. "That opened up much of what used to be a more craft-based part of the business to almost anybody. I mean, if you can hold it steady and aim it and push that button, you can get an in-focus sharp picture a great degree of the time. And digital, I mean, now anyone with a camera can shoot one, see how bad they screwed up, try and fix it, shoot another one."

Average consumers, of course, often have enough trouble even with that. Pressed for a tip for the birthday-party photographer, Mr. Burnett said: "The thing that bugs me the most when I see people taking pictures of their family or the

Grand Canyon or whatever, is that they spend so much time fumbling with the controls that whatever real moment there might have been is inevitably lost."

"Ultimately, the technology is just a tool," he said. "It's a tool that lets your eye become the picture. It's easy to get caught up with all of the gadgets and all of the technology, but the most important thing is just to get comfortable with the tools you have."

---

© 2015 The New York Times Company