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Theory and Other Dangerous Things

- **Translation strategies in praxis with text examples from Japanese** 7
Jeroen Bode
- **Developing Intercultural Competence in Beginning Japanese Courses: The Case of One Japanese as a Foreign Language Environment** 12
Kiyomi Fujii

Teaching Tips & Techniques

- **Tidbits from the Corpus** 24
John P. Racine
- **Pointing to the Moon: Teaching Religious Studies as a Second Language Course** 27
Simon Kenny

Around the World

- **Come Sail Away** 35
Shinichi Nagata

Creative Writing

- **A Cornucopia of Colour: Rainbow Fuji and HDR Imagery** 38
Gideon Davidson
- **Mt. Fuji** 41
Rika Kuwabara
- **The Doomstead** 42
Anonymous
- **A Fallen Thing** 45
Shinji Nagashiro
- **Take Back Your Name (とりもどせ!)** 49
Adam J. Lebowitz
- **Sea of Walls** 50
Laura Acosta
- **The Lens-less Spectacles** 52
John Methuselah
- **Another World on My Bookcase** 54
Nao Shimizu
- **Mistakes and Blessings** 55
Wendy MacLean

A Cornucopia of Colour: Rainbow Fuji and HDR Imagery

Gideon Davidson

Editors' note: The *OTB Forum* is delighted to feature three photographs by Gideon Davidson. Mr. Davidson is an amateur photographer, and we invite you to behold the photos featured in this issue as well as on Flickr at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pefectfutures>

I took Rainbow Fuji (p. 41) from the shores of Kawaguchiko, one of the 'five lakes' around the mountain. It is easy to get to from the 'K's House' guest house nearby, which is a friendly place to stay at. To get such subtle colours I went in February, when the air is clearest as well as coldest, getting there for the crack of dawn, though this was taken at 6:40, when the light is more developed. You get about 15 minutes of dawn colours, then about an hour of stillness, then the dawn is over- so it is worth getting up to see and trying to photograph. To stay warm, I bundle up with clothes, bring a hot drink and use *kairos*, which are the best thing of all as they generate heat. I'm not sure it's even safe to do things that require taking off gloves, like adjusting a tripod, without them. I also use a carbon fibre tripod- it's lighter, stable, and also doesn't get as cold as metal does.

If I can, I stay in a place for about three days. This is not only to travel around—in the case of Mt Fuji, some may be cloudy, or there may be too much wind, disturbing the waters and robbing me of what I wanted—a symmetrical reflection (or as near to that as possible). Still, I use equipment to help get a more interesting image. I use an ND (neutral density) filter to reduce the light coming into the lens without altering the colours at all (which is why it's called 'neutral'). This lets me use shutter speeds seconds long—this one was 6

seconds—which makes the water appear smoother.

Yet with digital camera abilities, I am usually not satisfied with the out-of-camera image of things like this. The range of light and colour that it can capture, known as 'dynamic range', is much limited compared to film. This is especially so with the Jpeg image that you finally use for printing or putting on the Internet. Yet many digital cameras also allow you to capture in the form of 'Raw files', with a lot more data in them. Many



Mr. Davidson's comments on "Sacred Fire Tree": I went out with only my Fuji compact camera, to see if the autumn leaves were ready in my local temple – the little known and small Tōzenji, in Kita Kogane (which is better known for Hondōji). When I walked in, it was like the trees were lit up, glowing in the gradually setting sun. The *kōyō* [colored leaves] on this tree literally seemed to have the colours of fire, spreading from golden yellow to orange, to a scarlet red. I could hardly believe I was seeing it. As people said these were the best *kōyō* in living memory, I can only think that this is how they are 'supposed' to be, not random splashes of colour, but a smooth transition from gold to red.

people refrain from this, as the file sizes are bigger and since you have to make a Jpeg anyway, they end up being more trouble. Yet this Raw file contains a lot more usable data if you are going to post-process the image, altering it on a computer.

If you ‘bracket’ the capture of these Raw files—by taking various shots quickly on the tripod, getting them at lower and higher levels of exposure as well as the ‘correct’ version—you capture even more usable data. Many DSLR cameras actually have automatic settings for this and I often take hundreds of shots in total this was, with not all that many subjects (my record is 9 shots to blend, which gives me the smoothest results. With enough data, you end up with as much, or even more, than the human eye can see. So what to do with it all?

Hollywood had a need for ‘High Dynamic Range’ imagery, to alter when producing special effects. I suppose one reason was so that the same digital creation could be manipulated to fade in and out, or to show it at different times of day, without constructing it from scratch. This technique soon made its way into digital photography, using methods like mine to capture the initial images, then blending them on a computer. This creates a ‘HDR’ image, or tremendous dynamic range—at 32bit (possessing billions of colours and light levels). It can be kept as an EXR image, a format developed by Industrial Light and Magic (Lucasfilm). But it cannot be displayed as is on today’s monitors, which are only 8-bit, let alone seen on the Internet or printed. So we reduce the dynamic range, though keeping the ‘localised contrast’—the benefits of having all that information being represented in a form with less extreme contrasts. The

range is compressed, if you will. It is a bit like the way music is digitised onto CDs or, more recently, into MP3’s. We can sense the richness of it, without in fact having the full range of sounds involved, which would take too much space and be impossible to play back anyway. So you feel like you are seeing a tremendous range of light and colour, whereas actually it is being seen on just the usual, limited monitor or paper ‘ordinary’ images are seen on.

I use what is probably the most popular software for this—Photomatix Pro. I’ve been using it for years and it is currently on version 4.0. It gives very pleasant results and is easily adjusted with a range of sliders. I am very careful how I use it, as it is easy to create results that appear overblown, lacking contrast and being very garish. In fact, a common problem with HDRs is just that, as people try and show a great range in the form of the image, leading to wild and extreme colours that look nothing like the real world.

I believe in going a little beyond what our eyes can see naturally, but not too far into the realm of fantasy, as at that point the image is unbelievable. A photo should stun and move people, but to do so it needs to be believed. It doesn’t, in my view, have to be anything like what you actually saw at the time, as the atmospheric conditions and weather could well hamper your appreciation of a scene. Yet if it is wonderful, yet believable, people will enjoy seeing it. Other HDR/tonemapping creators actually like the psychedelic effect of extreme colours and so on. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer, it comes down to taste and for me, the ‘true-tone’ HDR images look best.

To see more: As for links, you can always see my photos at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pefectfutures/>

I’m always putting new photos up there, as it is a vibrant community. There are links on the side to galleries of my favourite shots, various themes and so on. To see more of my naturalistic HDR photos, including ones of Mt Fuji, you can see this gallery:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pefectfutures/sets/72157600013406974/>

I also keep up a blog, which mainly talks about my travels and photography, amongst other things that capture my imagination. It’s now at Wordpress:

<http://towardsperfectfutures.wordpress.com/>



Mr. Davidson's comments on "Autumn Stroll": This is a lone photographer in a garden, but with the warm colours of the nature, you don't sense any loneliness about it. The colours are just as vivid as the Sacred Fuji Tree and I think it helped that Fuji, the camera maker, had such experience with colour in their film designs, but the figure makes this a favourite with many, as you can feel part of the occasion vicariously.

It also works the way the figures do in Chinese brush paintings, showing both the immensity of the natural world and its seemingly compassionate ability to provide everything needed by beings such as ourselves.

About the author: I am a British born expat living in Japan for around 15 years now, as both a teacher and photographer. I am taken with the beauty of the nature here, whether in the wilderness or gardens, loving the vibrant changes of the seasons, with their dramatic appearances of blossoms, autumn leaves and snow, along with all the viewing festivals that come with them. Each of them passes in a moment, like the years of childhood, so you really need to get out and see them, or never know what you missed.