



Fundamental Photoshop

Little things make a big difference when working in Photoshop

■ BY BEN WILLMORE

Fixing Mismatched Highlights

As I write this, I'm cruising high above the Pacific Ocean and watching an in-flight movie. So, why does my mind wander to Photoshop? Well, the movie has a classic problem that plagues all too many Photoshop images... mismatched highlights.

bet you can easily find a movie with the same problem. Just think back and see if you can remember seeing an all-too-obvious special effect, where two images were combined into one. What usually gives it away is that the darkest part of one image is much lighter than the other image, or the overall color of the two images doesn't match. When the two images are combined, you can easily see the difference between them, so they don't look natural together. Well, the same problem is very common in Photoshop, but easily avoidable.

Let's say you start out with a photo of a beautiful sunset and then you decide to add a seaplane flying across the golden sky. So, you go to your bookshelf and search through your stock photo collection until you find the perfect shot of a seaplane flying across the noonday sky...white puffy clouds and all. Well, if you combine those two photos, then you're going to run into the problem of mismatched highlights.

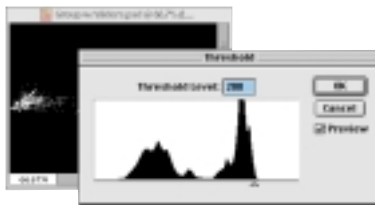
Just think about it for a moment. Your sunset image will be dominated by yellow and orange colors. There won't be a single true white area to be found...the sunset makes everything a golden yellow. Your seaplane shot won't have the same quality of light as it was taken at noon when the sky is blue mixed with white clouds, so there most likely won't be any yellow. If you combine those two images, then it will look fake unless you match the highlights and shadows of both images. Let's look at how it's done.

The first thing you need to do is figure out which photo you want to favor. In this case, the sunset would add all the atmosphere to the image, so that's the one we want to use as our master file.

Next, you'll need to adjust the second photo (the seaplane in our example), so it will look appropriate when it's added to the master file.

Before you start adjusting your image, you'll need to find the brightest and darkest areas of the file you want to match (also known as the highlight and shadow points). To find them, choose Image>Adjust>Threshold, move the slider all the way to the right and then move it toward the center until you see a small white blob appear on your image—that's the highlight. Move your cursor over that spot and Shift-click on that area, which should add a crosshair to that area. Now, to find the shadow point, move the Threshold slider all the way to the left side, start to pull it toward the middle until you see a black blob, and then Shift-click it to add another crosshair. Now that you have those two areas marked, you can click the Cancel button to get out of the Threshold dialog box.

Next, choose Image>Adjust>Levels and double-click on the white Eyedropper that appears in the lower right of



the dialog box. Now move your cursor over to your master image and click on the crosshair that's on the brightest part of the image. Repeat that process for the shadow area by double-clicking on the black Eyedropper and then clicking on the appropriate area of the master image. Click OK to leave Levels. Now Photoshop is aware of what the master image looks like, and it's ready

to adjust the second file.

With the second file active, choose Image>Adjust>Threshold and go through the same process you did on the first image, adding a crosshair to the highlight and shadow points. Next, choose Image>Adjust>Levels, click on the white Eyedropper, and then click on the crosshair that's on the highlight of that image. Next, do the same thing with the black Eyedropper and the shadow point of the image. Now the two images should look good together because the color will be similar and the shadows will be the same brightness.

This technique will work for most images, but you'll occasionally run across that unusual image that contains unique colorcasts—in that case, you'll have to do a lot of manual tweaking. Next time you're out to a movie and you see those obvious special effects, wait 'til the end of the movie before you start squawking about it, otherwise I might throw some popcorn your way. ■



Ben Willmore is the founder of Digital Mastery, a Colorado-based training and consulting company. He's also the author of Photoshop 6 Studio Techniques. Ben provides hundreds of free Photoshop tips and tutorials at his Web site, www.digitalmastery.com.