

## Adding a Filmic Glow

by Chris & Trish Meyer, CyberMotion

### Some simple techniques to unify clips from different sources.

One of the biggest shocks we received in our budding motion graphics career came when we cut together what we thought was a gorgeous 3D render with a reference shot from a commercial which the client provided. The 3D scene looked flat and lifeless next to the commercial, which was professionally shot on film and no doubt was “breathed upon” by a colorist as it was telecined to video. The same shock has no doubt occurred to others who have tried to cut their own footage against professionally-shot clips. The secret is that what we normally associate with a rich, sexy, filmic image has little to do with reality! Instead, the reality was enhanced through a combination of how the film was exposed, and how the film was then treated during transfer and in post production.

Therefore, we often use a technique (which we refer to as “instant sex”) to enhance our own renders and footage as well as those supplied by clients. As a result, our clients make comments such as “you make my film look better than film!” This technique comes in particularly handy when you wish to increase the impact of shots that have flat lighting or boring subject matter.

*Figure 1: This technique takes any shot - including ones that are already well-lit, such as clip LM216 from the Artbeats Lifestyles -Mixed Cuts 2 collection (a) - and makes it look that much more magical (b).*

figure 1a



### Modes and Blur

There are two parts to this trick:

- Using blending or composite modes to combine a copy of the image back on top of itself, resulting in enhanced saturation or boosted luminance.
- Blurring those copies so that the highlights and/or shadows appear to bloom or spread, yielding the romantic association many of us have with film (namely, overexposed film, or film shot through a lens that has been sprayed with ProMist or some other light-scattering agent).

The easy way to execute the first step is to duplicate your clip in your sequence or timeline, and set the mode for the copy on top. This is done in After Effects by opening the Modes column in the Timeline panel (the shortcut is F4) and clicking on the popup for the layer underneath the Mode header (it defaults to Normal). (These are known as Composite Modes in Final Cut Pro, and Blend Modes in Motion. Use the Elastic Gasket plug-in from Profound Effects to add modes to an Avid system.)

Overlay mode is a good starting point, as it increases the overall

figure 1b



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figure 2a



contrast and apparent saturation of the clip; Soft Light is a less drastic version of Overlay. Add and Screen are modes that increase the brightness of the composite - especially in the highlights.

To execute the second step, add a blur effect to the layer copy that has the blending mode applied. Increase the blurriness amount and note how the highlights and other features of the clip “puff” out. If you applied a blur to the unaltered clip, it would merely get blurry; by applying it to the copy with the mode, you’re just adding an additional aura on top of the original clip. Alter the Opacity of the blurred and moded clip on top to alter its intensity. Quite often, we will duplicate a clip twice (yielding three clips total), setting one copy to Add or Screen to enhance the highlights and the second to Overlay to reintroduce the shadows and darker areas. Blend the two copies to taste.

figure 2b



*Figure 2: Start with any clip, such as BE110 from the Artbeats Business Executives collection (a). Duplicate it, and set the copy on top to use a mode such as Overlay to increase its saturation (b). Add blur to this layer to take away some of its literal realism without blurring the underlying image (c). Optionally add another copy on top in Screen or Add mode with blur to brighten the scene, and make the highlights glow (d). See page 3 for figures 2c and 2d.*

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figure 2c



It can quickly become tedious to have two or three copies of every clip. If your program of choice has some way of applying effects and modes to a group of clips, you can treat them as a group. For example, in After Effects you can set up a composition with an edit of all your clips. Then add a Layer > New > Adjustment Layer on top. Add the blur effect to the Adjustment Layer, set its blending mode, and tweak its Opacity to taste.

You do not need to feel restricted to using a normal blur - you can try other effects as well. For example, a Minimax effect yields a crystalline look, while CC Vector Blur gives an underwater effect.

### Zooming Out

Increasing contrast and saturation and adding a glow are not the only steps required if you are trying to duplicate the “look” of film.

figure 2d



Here are a few additional characteristics of film to be aware of - some you can replicate with digital cameras, others are a bit harder:

- Film has a naturally wider “dynamic range” than video, meaning it can capture darker darks and brighter brights. Make sure you are getting the full luminance range out of your shots by studying a histogram (map of luminance levels) of them, and if necessary tweaking the input black and white points as well as the overall gamma curve.

- Film has a shallow depth of field based on its large “sensor” area - namely, a frame of film, which is larger than the sensors you’re going to find in most cameras. To counter this, some use systems such as the Redrock M2 where 35mm film camera lenses are used to project an image on a glass plane the size of a film frame, and the digital camera then focuses on that.

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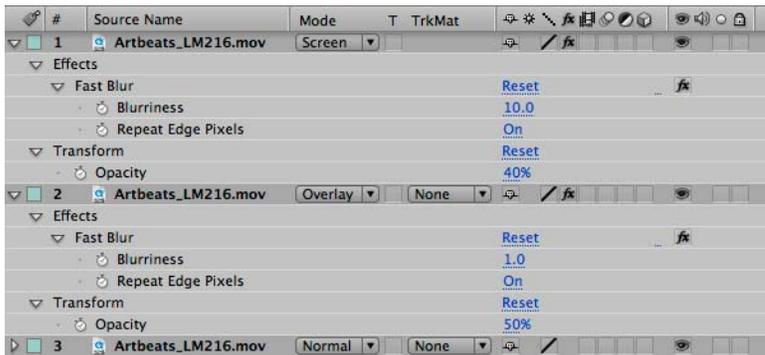
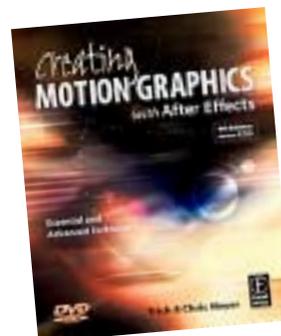


Figure 3: This is the final timeline in After Effects to build the composite you saw at the start of this article. Note we used two copies, and added more blur to the copy in Screen mode to puff out the highlights.

- Most film cameras expose a frame of film for one half of the frame's duration, working out to 1/48th of a second at 24 fps. Keep this in mind when trying to emulate film with a digital camera - don't leave it set to automatic, which may result in faster shutter speeds (and therefore, shorter motion blur trails) in brighter situations.
- Frame rate is crucial to how we perceive motion. A 25 or 29.97 fps video camera that is capturing interlaced footage has a field rate of 50 or 59.94 fps, respectively. This is fast enough to cross the perceptual threshold where our brains think the image is "real" rather than "dreamlike." Shooting in progressive scan mode halves the effective capture rate, placing it below that perceptual threshold and therefore getting a lot closer to filmic motion. To go all the way, use a camera that can shoot in a 24 fps progressive mode. (Note that the vast majority of the Artbeats library is captured either progressive or at 24 fps.) Note that lower frame rates can cause more strobing with fast-moving items; chill out on the whip-pans and other extreme camera movements...

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Chris and Trish Meyer are the founders and owners of CyberMotion ([www.cybmotion.com](http://www.cybmotion.com)), an award-winning motion graphics studio in Los Angeles that has created a wide variety of work for film, broadcast, corporate events, and special venues. They were one of the original development sites for After Effects, wrote the highly-acclaimed books *Creating Motion Graphics* and *After Effects Apprentice* (2007), and are long-time Artbeats users.



For even more tips and tricks, Chris and Trish Meyer have just released the fourth edition of their book *Creating Motion Graphics with After Effects*. Most of the examples use Artbeats footage at full D1 size. To learn more, visit: <http://www.books.cybmotion.com>.