

## Vignettes

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(formerly known as CyberMotion)

### Techniques for artfully focusing a viewer's attention.

A popular technique is to create a vignette. Often associated with very old footage where the brightness falls off as you near the corners of the frame, vignettes can also be used creatively to draw a viewer's focus to a particular area of the screen. In this article, we'll discuss several different approaches to creating vignettes in a program such as Adobe After Effects.

#### Vignettes Using Masks

The most common way to create a vignette in a number of different programs is to create a full-frame black solid, and create an oval or rectangular shaped mask either in the middle of the frame, or around where the point of interest will be in the underlying footage. Invert the mask so that the area inside the oval is transparent, and increase the feather amount on the mask to create a nice fall-off from the transparent center to the black edges. If necessary, adjust the size of the mask to compensate for how the feathering eats away at the transparent center; in After Effects, there is a parameter called Mask Expansion that allows you to control this effect without editing the mask shape itself.

Then, adjust the transparency (opacity) of this layer to control how dark the edges are in the final composite. Note that you can also create more than one mask



Figure 1b

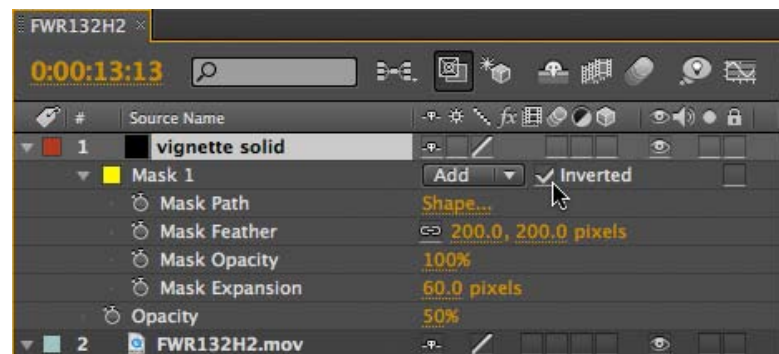


Figure 1c



Figure 1d

Figure 1: In the original footage (a), the sequined shawls in the background compete with the actor for attention. We created a black solid, added an oval mask around the actor (b), inverted and feathered the mask, and dialed back the black solid's opacity (c) to reduce the emphasis on the background and draw attention to the actor (d). Note that in a widescreen format, framing your point of interest to one side leaves space on the other side to add text overlays; adding a vignette will make the text more readable. Clip FWR132H from the Artbeats collection Faces of the World HD.



Figure 1a

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shape on the same layer to create more complex vignette shapes, or use the Pen tool to create irregular shapes masks.

If you have difficulty “masking blind” (masking a solid layer, rather than drawing the mask shape on top the actual footage), you can always mask your source footage for reference, then cut and paste the mask over to a separate solid layer later. Just don’t forget to invert the mask when you paste it to the solid!

## Vignettes Using Shapes

If you are using After Effects CS3 or later, an alternative approach is to use a Shape Layer rather than a solid.

Select the Rectangle Tool in the toolbar, press F2 or Command+Shift+A (Control+Shift+A on Windows) to deselect all layers, and double-click the Rectangle Tool to create a full-frame shape layer. The settings default to the last shape created. Click on the word Stroke along the Toolbar and set the Stroke Option to None (the red slash) and click OK; then click on the word Fill and set the Fill Option to a Radial Gradient and click OK.

Next, click on the color swatch between the words Fill and Stroke to open the Gradient Editor. Click on the color stops below the gradient bar and set their color to black (this fills the entire shape with black). Then click on the left-hand opacity stop above the gradient bar, and set its Opacity to 0%. Click OK.

You should now see the background movie where the gradient creates transparency in the black fill color. You should also see two dots (one surrounded by a circle) appear in the Comp panel, connected by a line. Drag the one with the circle over where you want the center of your vignette to be, and the other dot to the desired end of your fall-off to the darkest area of the frame.

Now you can start tweaking. Click the Fill color swatch again, and play with moving the left-hand stop to the right; this creates a “hotspot” where the gradient is fully transparent and the background layer is not being darkened at all. You can also change the fall-off ramp by moving the Opacity midpoint (the diamond-shaped centerpoint stop along the top of gradient bar that appears when an Opacity Start or Stop point is selected). To set the darkest area of the vignette, you can edit either the layer’s overall Opacity parameter, or the Opacity value for the rightmost Opacity Stop in the Gradient Editor.



Figure 2a

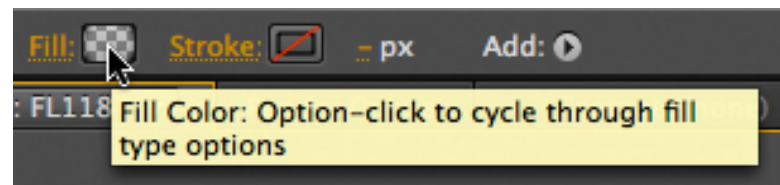


Figure 2b



Figure 2c

Figure 2: The original outdoor shot has very even lighting (a). To put more focus on the family, create a full-frame rectangular Shape Layer in After Effects, then set the Fill to a radial gradient (with a start Opacity of 0%) and Stroke to none (b). With the Shape Layer’s shape group selected, drag the user interface dots in the Comp panel to set the center and outer edge of the gradient (c). Then open the Gradient Editor, and use the opacity stops along the top of the gradient bar to tweak your transparency ramp (d). Adjust the Shape Layer’s opacity (or the outermost gradient opacity stop) to set the depth of vignette effect (e). Clip FL118 from the Artbeats collection Family Life.

Using a Shape Layer plus the Gradient Editor allows you much finer control over deciding how your vignette falls off compared with the normal Mask Feather parameter; you can even click between Opacity Stops to create new stops. The downside of using a Shape Layer is that a gradient must be a perfect circle; with the classic mask approach, you can draw any shape you like. You can work around this by scaling the Shape Layer, but it's admittedly clumsy.

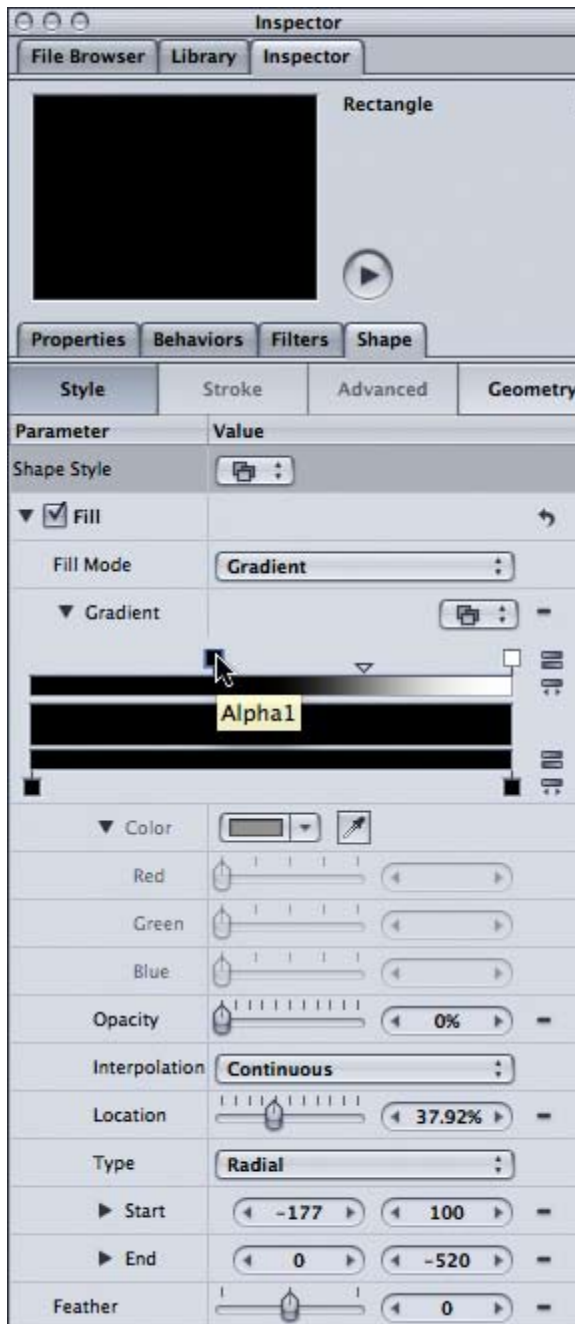


Figure 3

## Vignettes Using Paint

Sometimes you will have more complicated source footage where the point of interest cannot be defined with a simple feathered oval or circular shape. Although you could always draw a complex mask shape with the Pen tool in After Effects, let's look at how you might use the paint tools inside of a program like After Effects (or Motion) to create a vignette with a more complex shape.

If you thought masking blind in the Classic Vignette technique was difficult, it's even harder to paint blind. So rather than starting with a black solid, instead double-click on your layer in an After Effects composition to open its Layer panel (painting may only take place in the Layer panel – not the Comp panel). Select the Eraser (not Paint!) tool; the Paint and Brushes panels will automatically open. In the Paint panel, make sure Channels is set to RGBA, Duration to Constant, and Erase to Layer Source & Paint. Next, in the Brushes panel, set the Diameter (brush size) and Roundness (feather) to taste. (If you're not happy with a stroke, you can always Undo, or even better: edit your settings per stroke after the fact in the Timeline panel.) Then start drawing your strokes in the Layer panel, blotting out the areas of the original image that you want to be unaffected by the vignette.

Once you're finished, re-select the layer you painted on and press E to reveal the Paint "effect." Select and Cut it. Then create a full-frame black solid, and paste the Paint effect onto this solid. It will now behave like a classic vignette with a complex mask; as before, reduce the solid layer's Opacity to alter the strength of the vignette.

Figure 3: Apple's Motion also has simple shape layers: Look for the Create section of its toolbar. You can edit the gradient under Inspector > Shape > Fill tab.

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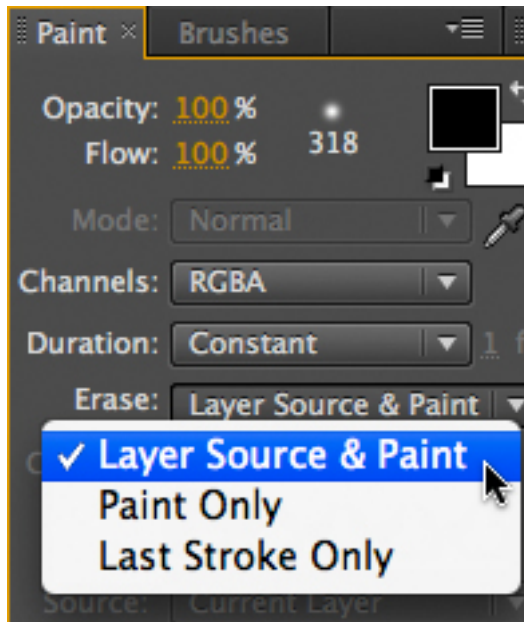


Figure 4a



Figure 4d

Figure 4: Select the Eraser tool in After Effects, and set up the Paint options as seen here (a). Choose a large, soft brush, and start erasing the area of interest of the source footage in the Layer panel (b). Once done, cut the Paint effect from the source footage layer, and paste it onto a full-frame black solid or shape layer, setting the layer's Opacity to taste (c). Note that we painted "hold outs" for both the monk and the statue in the source footage (d). Clip FWR110H from the Artbeats collection Faces of the World HD.

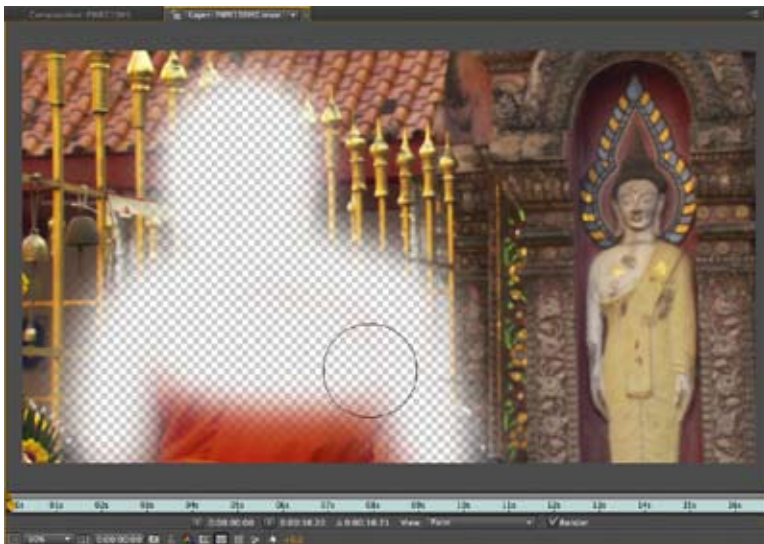


Figure 4b

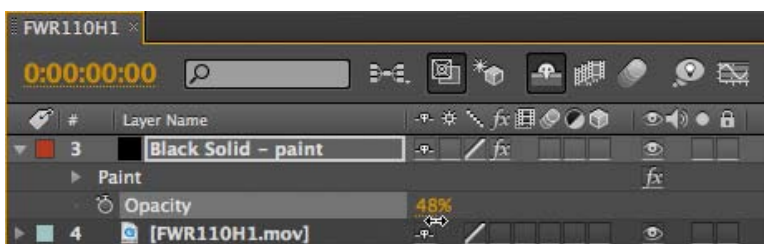


Figure 4c

## Vignettes Using Effects

All of the above vignette techniques require two layers. That's often not a problem, but occasionally you will find yourself in a situation where your source footage is being moved, scaled, and the such – and you need your vignette to move with it. You could parent the two together, or you can use the following nifty little trick employing the Circle effect, creating the vignette directly on the source video layer:

Select your source footage and apply Generate > Circle. Make sure the Effect Controls panel is visible (the shortcut is F3), enable the Invert Circle option, change the Color to black, and set the Blending Mode to Normal (rather than the default of None). Edit the Center coordinates to pick the center of your point of interest, and increase the Radius to set the size of your point of interest. Then twirl down the Feather section and increase the Feather Outer Edge value to set the softness of the transition. Finally, scrub Circle's own Opacity value to control the depth of the vignette effect without altering the opacity of the overall layer.

Now that you've created a vignette effect, save this as an Animation Preset so you can reuse it in the future with only minor tweaks required.

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Figure 5a

Figure 5: Say that we want to focus our storytelling on the girl in the foreground (a) – and we want to do it without extra layers complicating our composition. In After Effects, you can apply the Circle effect, and edit its parameters (b) to create a vignette overlay on the footage itself (c). Clip FL131 from the Artbeats collection Family Life.

## Vignettes Through Lighting

There's one more trick for creating vignettes, which we outlined in a previous article: Using 3D lights. If you aim a spot or point light at a piece of footage, the area where it is aimed or centered over will be the brightest, and areas further away will fall off into darkness. This is a great way to "re-light" footage after the fact. Rather than repeat the detailed steps here, take an extra moment and read [Relighting Footage](http://www.artbeats.com/assets/articles/pdf/relighting_footage.pdf):

[http://www.artbeats.com/assets/articles/pdf/relighting\\_footage.pdf](http://www.artbeats.com/assets/articles/pdf/relighting_footage.pdf)

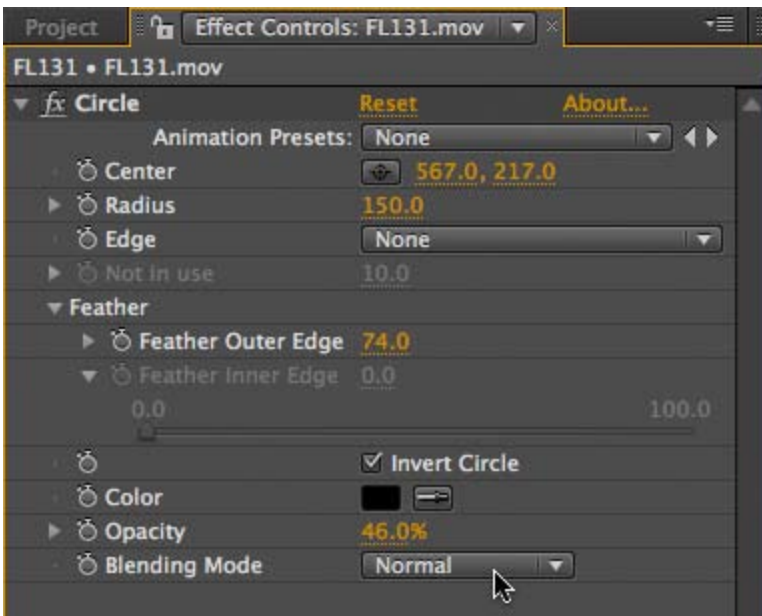


Figure 5b



Figure 6a



Figure 5c



Figure 6b

### **Zooming Out**

In this article, we shared a variety of techniques for creating basic vignettes. If you're thinking to yourself "okay, fine – but I'll only use that occasionally" then make sure you check out the following article, which shows how to extend these basic techniques to selectively add effects, as well as blend together different pieces of footage.

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*Chris and Trish Meyer are the founders and owners of Crish Design, an award-winning motion graphics studio that has created a wide variety of work for film, broadcast, corporate events, and special venues. They are one of the original development sites for After Effects, and have two books currently in print: *Creating Motion Graphics* and *After Effects Apprentice*.*