

All in a Name:

NAMING CONVENTIONS FOR CAMERAS

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In the movie “Road to Perdition” set in the 1930s, a crazed news photographer and his *Speed Graphic* appear prominently in some gruesome scenes. Why did this camera figure in the plot? In the America of the Depression era, the instrument was the popularized camera of news reporters. Hand-held and at the time fashionably cumbersome, this large-format camera enabled journalists to do what its succinct name suggested: take high-quality photographs quickly, notwithstanding the film holders that had to be inserted and pulled out of the camera. Such was the image of a reporter cinching the perfect shot and yanking the negative out of the inimitable *Speed Graphic*, that endured through the advent of television in the 1950s.

Camera names are usually chosen to indicate the nature or leading characteristics of the design in one or two words, catchy if possible. A review of some of the more notable names of cameras and lenses highlights the class, character and occasional quirks of the photographic medium.

Sea, Land and Air

Jacques Cousteau was honored in song by John Denver in his lyrical “Calypso,” understood as the spirited explorer’s remarkable vessel (“Aye Calypso, the places you’ve been to, the stories you tell. . .”) I submit an alternate theory. The song could well have been about Cousteau’s camera, also called the *Calypso*.

The Calypso, an ingenious design by Cousteau himself, was the first camera purpose-built for underwater use. As such it did not need bulky housing. Nikon was highly impressed with the instrument, and purchased the design and production rights, renaming it the *Nikonos*. Three newer cameras designed for underwater photography are the *Aquatica*, the Sea & Sea (sic) *Motormarine Endeavor* (featuring motorized film drive), and a new digital model, the *Sealife Reefmaster*.

Moving ashore, the original Polaroid *Land Camera* comes to mind. No doubt this camera was in its element on *terra firma*, but actually was named after Dr. Edwin Land, inventor of the Polaroid process, rather than to signify terrain. As to cameras adapted for aerial photography, most simply have the prefix Aero- attached to the name of the root camera, such as the Linhof *Aero-Technika* produced in Germany.

For Explorers

My favorite camera name is the Wisner *Expedition*. This handsome cherrywood field camera with brass couplings is manufactured in Massachusetts by Ron Wisner, a mountain climber who tests his company's new models in the field. Taking this camera outdoors, it is a short stretch to imagine you are on an expedition similar to climbers and trekkers a century ago with their hulking wooden view cameras. Another large-format model built for excursions is the Arca-Swiss *Discovery*. And if your hike is in the Alps, what better instrument to lug than the Sinar *Alpina* view camera, also made in Switzerland. Tele-converting to the tropics of Africa and imagining yourself on a photo-safari, an ideal 500mm telephoto lens would be the *Tele-Congo*, from the long line of Congo large-format lenses produced by the Yamasaki Optical Company of Tokyo.

Does the Photographer Qualify?

Certain names appear to challenge the photographer, who may wonder if they are up to the standards of the Sinar *Expert* or Cambo *Legend*. Arguably the finest metal field camera in the world is the Linhof *Master Technika* produced since 1972.

Other names suggest character traits to which photographers might aspire, such as the Canon EOS *Rebel* and Polaroid *Swinger* (I admit to having owned the latter in my otherwise conventional youth.) Fortunately, naming conventions have for the most part reverted to more refined practices since the 1980s.

Functionality in Name

Kodak made history in 1959 with the introduction of a single-lens reflex camera coupled with a built-in light meter. What better name for this early autoexposure camera than the Kodak *Retina Reflex*, the *reflex* referring both to the instant-return mirror and the automatic response to light as through a retina.

Overshadowing such crucial innovations in the late 1950s were new lines of mass-market cameras that offered utter simplicity and ease of use, at a cost of excluding most of the creative features desired by serious photographers. In the U.S., the Kodak *Instamatic* emphasized quick loading and picture taking with flashcubes, a marvelous improvement over flashbulbs. Similar but typically more stylish European and Japanese models were the Agfa *Click* and *Clack*, the Boots *Lady Carefree* (British), the *Droog* ("Friend," Soviet Union), the Olympus *Pen*, the *Pronta* (Spain), the *Robot Junior* (Germany), the *Savoy* (France) and Yashica *EZ-matic*. A number of basic European models were called *Blitz*.

Merely a footnote on the evolutionary path, the *Deceptive Angle Graphic* camera was nonetheless an innovation in its own right, and could have been commended for truth in labeling. A Graflex catalogue called it, ". . . in every sense of the word a detective camera, being thoroughly disguised to resemble a stereo camera and so arranged as to photograph subjects at right angles to its apparent field of vision."

Odd Ducks

The *Nikkoblاد*, a 300mm Nikon lens adapted for use on Hasselblads, was an awkward convention. Long-time readers of this column are familiar with an early Soviet camera, modeled after the Leica IID, called the *FED* (after Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky). A Soviet camera that came to close to cult status was the *Ionkor*, an abbreviation colloquially translated as “Cub Reporter.” Produced in the early 1960s, the camera was a simple medium-format 6x6cm rangefinder built of rugged bakelite. Colored jet black or deep red-orange with a catchy art-deco logo fronting the lens, the camera quickly became a collectible.

Names of panoramic cameras often end with the “rama” suffix. When Linhof introduced a panoramic camera branching off its Technika line, it combined the two descriptives into the Linhof *Technorama*. The Hulcher family of Hampton, Va. named the ultra-wide camera it produces the *Hulcherama*, which takes a 360-degree view, competing with the purposefully named Swiss *Roundshot*. A Soviet panoramic was aptly called the *Horizon*. All three cameras descended from the Lumiere *Periphote* cylindrical 360-degree panoramic camera introduced in France in 1901.

If you are into small, the Canon *Elph* may appeal, or the Soviet *Lilliput* 8mm camera. The petite, elegant *Narciss* did not have a self-timer, its name notwithstanding. On the large side, the Arca-Swiss *Monolith* is a view camera weighing 15 lbs. that takes 8x10 inch negatives. Yet the Walker *Titan* is but a regular 4x5 camera.

Many Japanese manufacturers and Swedish Hasselblad have been reluctant to name their cameras. Among the few Hasselblad products with at least a semblance of a name is its wide-angle camera with premium non-distorting lens, called simply the Hasselblad *SWC* for *Super-Wide with Crank*.

Euro for Lenses

The quality lensmakers Schneider and Zeiss named many of their medium and large-format lenses with suggestive derivations of Euro-language roots that would subtly appeal to speakers in much of the Continent and the U.S. The Schneider series of superwide lenses is called *Super-Angulon*. An artistic telephoto lens is the *Tele-Arton*. The Zeiss moderate-wide and normal lenses are the *Distagon* and *Planar*, while its moderate telephoto lens is the *Sonnar* (the *Vario-Sonnar* being the zoom version). The collaborative Hasselblad/Zeiss lunar lens of quartz fluorite glass features virtually perfect color rendition, and has since been commercially available as the *Super-Achromat* telephoto lens. A custom-designed wide-angle lens produced for the Alpa 12 camera made in Switzerland is aptly named the *Apo-Helvetar*.

I would not consider buying the dated Bausch & Lomb *Anastigmat* because it reminds me of my astigmatism despite the *an-* prefix indicating it is not astigmatic. Another bygone lens, which suggestively captured more than light, was the Gundlach *Radar Wide Angle*.

The Digital Age

Pixel power and clarity count heavily in marketing digital cameras, and have been brought to bear in naming the new models. The Canon *PowerShot*, the Fuji *FinePix*, the Minolta *DiMAGE*, the Nikon *Coolpix* and the Sony *CyberShot* speak to this need. Leave it to Leica to produce the *Digilux*. More intriguing naming conventions come into play as digital capacity and price increase to the professional level where youthful hip counts for less. The CS *Leaf Contare* and *Leaf Volare* were digital camera backs designed for large-format studio cameras, at a price of \$20,000-25,000.

Lest you dismiss the importance of names in photography, the following case is illustrative. A local wag named his photography practice *IconicPhoto*. Ultimately he received an unsolicited offer to purchase rights to the name for substantially more than he will probably ever earn from photography. He never considered selling out, for as they say, it's all in a name.

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