

A2 Peculiarities & Bugs, or How to improve your A2 experience

I followed my own advice in this article. Then I went out and shot 40 totally mindless Point & Shoot shots. I tried to find difficult subjects; forest and sky, lake, opposite forest horizon and sky; clouds, forest and sky – murderous contrasts. I checked the histograms in Photoshop afterwards. Out of these 40 shots two were slightly overexposed, one was inexplicably underexposed. The rest were perfectly balanced, with a wall-to-wall histogram and no highlights problem! I have seldom seen so well chosen exposures. The two overexposed shots were easily salvaged using a method described below, as there were very little blown-out highlights, only washed-out ones.

Update July 2004: It is getting better all the time. After 2000 shots the A2 now out-performs my previous camera, judging along the axis of technically successful shots. ☺

Disclaimer

I have no affiliation to any camera manufacturer. The conclusions, opinions and views in this article are entirely my own. However, everything in here is material I have learnt from a great number of members in the DP Review Minolta Talk Forum and the (German) D7 Forum, plus articles at The Luminous Landscape.

Vegard Brenna, June 08, 2004

Background

Out of the 250 shots over the first weekend with my new A2, I discarded no less than 70 for pure technical reasons; unsharp or overexposed. In sharp contrast to this, on a trip to Lisbon in early 2004 I also shot 250 pictures with my Olympus C-2100 over a weekend and discarded only 10 for the above reasons.

I was puzzled. Why was the A2 so much “worse” than my Uzi? After all, Michael Reichmann bought one! There had to be a reason. Never happy with unsolved technical mysteries, I decided to find out. After reading and collating literally several hundred forum messages I think I am beginning to see some answers.

This article is written for myself, and for those of you who like me are not satisfied with your A2 pictures, and believe the cause lies with the camera. Like me, you should also believe it is possible to learn how to live happily with the A2, once you find out how. Those who think the A2 is the best camera ever constructed, are perfectly happy with it and always shoot in M mode using the histogram will find no useful information here. This was a wasted download, sorry.

Did they leave? No M shooters around? Ok, good. Now we can peacefully go about our business. So read on.

On 2:02:54 AM, Tuesday, June 01, 2004 (GMT)

Largeman wrote

I am lucky enough to have the money to indulge myself and so I own an A1, an A2, a Nikon 5700, a Sony 828 and a Cannon D10. I also own several point and shoot cameras. My favorite by far is the D10, unfortunately it is like carrying a cannonball around your neck, hence all of the other cameras. I have been searching for 1 camera to carry around which will allow me to be creative and not have to take weight training courses. I still haven't found it. I thought it was going to be the A2 but it isn't. The main reason is that in full auto it takes lousy pictures. While I want to be able to do creative photography there are times when I want to just point and shoot. To have to carry another camera around just to do that defeats my intended purpose. For those of you that are really enjoying your A1's and A2's, I'm happy for you, but for me the search continues. By the way if any of you think I have not given the camera a fair chance I have been using the A2 for 5 weeks and have taken over 5000 pictures with it. My reject rate with this camera is over twice what it was with any of the others.

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=9001721>

This is the best summary of the “problematic state” of the A2 that I have seen so far, written by a photographer with far more experience than I have or ever will have. Yet it reflects my own experience, and if you are reading this, probably yours too.

The gripes that occur most frequently in the forums are

- Blurred pictures
- Overexposure
- Really Weird Behaviour

Out of these I myself have experienced only the first two.

I see the A2's problems as belonging to five different categories

- The user does not understand the camera
- The camera does not behave as might be expected
- Unfathomable design decisions
- Hardware and software bugs
- Konica Minolta QC

Again, out of these I myself have without doubt encountered the first three. (The alert reader will notice that I do not think my camera is faulty.) I will take a look at each gripe as I have come to understand it and try to assign it to a category. If possible I will try to give an explanation, hopefully a solution, or at least a workaround.

One important cause of failed shots is the A2's complexity. There are very many ways of achieving a result, and it is not always clear from the manual what the full consequences of many menu settings really are. In a few cases the manual is even incomplete.

General settings

The following settings are given in German, but as there are recognizable words there (LCD, EVF), and the order of the settings are the same, I think an interested user should be able to read it.

March 14 2004 winsoft Grundeinstellungen der A2
<http://www.d7userforum.de/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=6010>

I disagree with the heightened Color and Contrast settings, but that is my taste.

Blurred pictures

Blurred pictures can usually have one or more of the three following causes

- Optical faults, including smears on lenses.
- The subject was out of focus (OOF).
- The shutter-speed was too slow, either revealing camera shake or subject movement.

We will disregard the first one. The A2 has an excellent lens; I belong to that group convinced that the DxO analysis of the A2 shows it to be among the best. And fingerprints or smears are not specific to the A2. But the next two items lead a life of their own in the A2.

Focus not found – Read the manual

The manual states that there may be circumstances where the AF system may not be able to focus. This should be taken seriously. In particular, bright light in the frame will confuse the AF system. Traffic lights have been used to demonstrate this effect. [Update: Most reports seem to indicate that the bright light problem has been fixed in firmware version 1.12!]

Solution:

Please read the manual Page 35 on AF and learn its limitations.

Out Of Focus (OOF) – User error

This one is perhaps too banal, but every camera (unless continuous AF is on) needs time to focus.

Solution:

Press the shutter-release button halfway down. Wait for focus confirmation – red rectangle and white spot. Press the button all the way down. Page 33. It may be beneficial to have focus confirmation audio signal on. Page 130, 141.

Out Of Focus (OOF) – Direct Manual Focus (DMF)

DMF allows you to adjust focus manually after the AF has found its preferred focus. If DMF is inadvertently on, just holding the camera in the standard way while supporting the lens with your left hand, will easily disturb focus.

Solution:

Verify that DMF is not on. Pages 106-107

Out Of Focus (OOF) – User confusion

When the A2 focuses, it shows the area where focus was found. This is indicated briefly with a red rectangle in the EVF. If you do not notice this rectangle you may experience OOF shots. But the reality is that the shot was in focus, but not focused on the subject that you thought.

Solution:

Please read this article <http://home.tiscali.be/johan.branders/A1/A1-focus.htm> to better understand focus on the A2.

Out Of Focus (OOF) – Bug 1

The A2 has several bugs in its AF system. One bug is that it simply indicates that focus was found (red rectangle, white focus light) when this is simply not true. It has happened to me and several other members of MTF. The first camera that DC Resource had for review apparently had this problem, and so did perhaps also the one tested by DP Review.

Solution:

If this is a great concern, send the camera in for repair. Users have reported getting their camera back with note “Focus motor replaced”, and the camera is good.

Out Of Focus (OOF) – Bug 2 and Really Weird Behaviour

It seems that the A2 sometimes enters a mode where it believes the lens is in the Macro position when it is not, or vice versa. Focus then becomes impossible. You will hear whirring and clicking sounds. The LCD will go black, the camera may reboot itself, sometimes several times.

Solution:

First try to shut down the camera. If this does not help, remove the battery, after which the camera will most probably return to normal operation. If this does not help, send it in for repair. [Update: Several reports seem to indicate that also this problem may have been fixed in firmware version 1.12!]

Blurred pictures – P mode insane design

In P mode the A2 stubbornly sticks to $f=7.1$. On all other cameras, the P mode is what you use for Point & Shoot, and will almost always give you “good pictures”. Not so with the A2. It will stick to $f=7.1$ until the shutter-speed creeps down to $1/50$ at full telephoto position, after which it reluctantly starts to compromise. One user received a written statement from Minolta Customer Support that this was how the camera was supposed to work. This unfathomable design decision of course leads to blur caused by subject movement, and may also cause camera shake blur, in spite of AS. If for some reason AS is off, camera shake is very likely to occur. Minolta Customer Support also claimed that it was impossible to fix this in firmware. This is nonsense of course.

Solution 1:

Assign a User Setting with Aperture priority set at $f=4$ (or $f=5.6$). Use it instead of P. This will function very similar to P, but with better results.

Solution 2:

Users have observed that as long as you *do not touch the shutter-release button*, the preliminary exposure suggestion will be a “sensible” one. It is only at the moment you press the shutter-release button halfway down that $f=7.1$ is selected and gets stuck. You may therefore lock exposure before pressing the button and get a correct exposure.

Overexposure

Several remarks all the way since the days of the D7 have hinted at the [insert your Dimage model here] having a tendency to overexpose. This was also one of my first reactions with my A2. Why does it overexpose so often? But then some threads started to explore similar problems, and I think we may have a few answers.

Dimage Series general overexposure

Most experienced users recommend that exposure compensation is set permanently to a value somewhere between -0.3 and -0.7EV. This has apparently been so since the days of the D7, though as always, some users disagree. The reason for the overexposure may be that like several other cameras the A1 and A2 have “pessimistic” ISO ratings. This is often remarked upon in side-by-side test shots in reviews. Perhaps this varies between units.

Solution

Set exposure compensation permanently to -0.3EV or -0.7EV, depending on your preferences and your camera.

Metering on the A2 – Part 1

The A2 apparently has three metering modes, or at least so it seems. The modes are explained on Page 69 – Multi-segment, Centre Weighted and Spot.

At first these three modes seem simple to understand.

From the bottom up, Spot meters within a small circle in the centre of the picture.

Centre Weighted measures within a much larger circle, also taking some notice of the rest of the frame.

And about Multi-segment the manual states that it evaluates all of the frame using 300 segments and “will give accurate worry-free exposures in almost all situations”.

So far, so good. However, shooting in Multi-segment mode results in quite a few inexplicably overexposed and washed-out pictures. My Uzi has better metering, period. And so have many other cameras at a fraction of the A2’s price and complexity. How can this be?

Metering on the A2 – Part 2

I quote myself, “The A2 apparently has three metering modes, or at least so it seems.” Yes, so it seems. In fact there are more – many more. If we read “the small print” on Page 69 we see that the Spot mode can be coupled with the Flex Focus Point. In other words, we can have spot metering wherever we want in the frame, not only the centre. In a Macro shot for instance, we can move the FFP around, find our preferred metering point and lock exposure. Great!

But wait, there’s more! If we read “the small print” of the Multi-segment mode, we discover “... This data is combined with distance information...”. What this implies in practice is that some variation of Centre Weighted metering is applied here too. So instead of metering the whole frame with equal weight, priority is given to the focus point. Now this focus point can be the Flex Focus Point – or it can be the focus point found by the AF. This last thing (the AF point) is not stated by the manual, but it can easily be tested for a fact.

If the focus point is in the centre of the frame, then this seems to be the same as Centre Weighted. Now this is not so. As far as I know, these three metering modes all appear to be variations of Centre Weighted, where the centre weight in Spot mode is 100%, in Centre Weighted mode less than 100% and in Multi-segment mode even less. Careful experiments would be able to reveal the precise graphs used.

The Metering Flaw (in my opinion)

The flaw in the metering system stems from two sources. One of them is more a trap of the ingenious flexibility of the metering system. The other, actual flaw, is Minolta’s understanding of exposure to which I simply disagree. It is wrong. As proof I use my Uzi, which rarely overexposes, and my A2, which often does. A system that often overexposes when comparable (or simpler and cheaper) systems seldom do is not the best system. But let us continue.

Now see where this takes us in real life situations. We select Multi-segment, the “worry-free” version of metering. It happily meters the whole frame, but what is this? Our focus point lies in half-shadow. Oops. The focus point is important. Boost the exposure! And away went the sky, totally overexposed.

Which is exactly what I have experienced.

Minolta’s fancy algorithm statistically gives more overexposed shots, which makes it “wrong”.

A better algorithm in my opinion would perhaps be

- Try for the best
- If we cannot accommodate the entire dynamic range of the scene, do not accept more than [user selectable] segments overexposed. Blown highlights are worse than dark shadows.

Looking at my Uzi shots it seems that the Olympus algorithm may actually be exactly the one I suggest here. If the dynamic range is too wide to capture the Uzi accepts just a little bit of over-exposure, that you will have to look twice to discover.

Metering solutions – Part 1

The A2 has two locking options. There is Focus lock and there is Exposure lock. Focus lock is achieved by pressing the shutter-release button halfway down, Page 34.

Exposure lock is effected with the AEL button, Page 50. The function of the AEL button is user selectable, Page 94.

Solution 1

Always use Centre Weighted. It ignores the Focus point.

Solution 2

First compose image for metering and lock exposure. Then compose for focus and lock focus. If necessary, compose for shooting and shoot. This is really not too difficult.

Solution 3

Use Flex Focus Point and Multi-segment, but NB! Leave the FFP in the centre of the frame. Don't use the cursor keys to move it. This will ensure Multi-segment metering with a known focus point. This is probably the metering method that comes closest to what we expect. It is also very easy to point the centre of the frame at what we want, much easier and faster than using cursor keys. (Cursor keys are great for tripod work however.)

Metering solutions – Part 2

Now this is a solution that is slightly outside my intended scope with this article, but the article would definitely be incomplete without it.

The histogram.

Real Men Always Use The Histogram (and shoot in M mode). But that does not prevent the rest of us from using it as well. The reason I see the histogram as slightly outside the scope is it represents a manual override of the camera's decisions. My main focus (no pun intended) here is to help the camera make better decisions for us. With the histogram on, you can make it a habit to look for that tell-tale spike at the right: overexposure.

Solution 4

Always have the histogram on. Page 45. Assign AE compensation to the rear control dial. Page 144.

Correcting A2 highlights

The theme of this chapter has not been mentioned in any forum threads that I have seen, so this is entirely my own opinion, and it may be utterly wrong. But listen to my story first.

My impression is that the A2 "does something" with highlights. And with highlights I mean for instance the 220-250 range in the histogram in Photoshop. This is the range before total extinction. On the A2 it looks washed out to me. Perhaps it does in every other camera too, but I started noticing it as soon as I got the A2. Perhaps because I expected "perfect" pictures? I don't know. Anyhow, there is a method to reclaim detail in this range. It is a simplified variation of The Luminous Landscape's Hybrid RAW Conversion

<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/tutorials/hybrid-conversion.shtml>

Now the pros out there will say that this only works with RAW, not JPEG. I shall not object, since I hardly understand the original method, but I do get results with JPEG anyhow. Here is my simplified version for Photoshop (I assume PSP has the same functionality):

- Duplicate the original Background.
- Desaturate the new layer. It becomes B&W. Or create a better B&W using the Channel Mixer if you know how.
- Apply a Curve to the B&W layer and manipulate the top fourth of it. Assign "locking points" at 50% and 75% and pull the curve down slightly between 75% and 100%, perhaps even higher up.

- Set the Blend mode of the B&W layer to Luminosity.

Now the point is, if you apply the same curve to the original layer, you do NOT get the same result!

Noise reduction software

Noise is of course not an issue specific to the A2, but it is there, and there is no point in pretending it is not. Just look at any test shots from any of the major review sites, and you will see it. On the A2 and all its competitors. There is no way an A2 or any other 2/3" sensor camera can approach the silky sky reproduced by the several times larger sensor a Canon DSLR. But with noise reduction software it is possible! The price is trivial (particularly the free alternatives! ☺), compared to what you paid for your A2. Recommended.

Since I am on a Mac, I will mention Noise Ninja first. This is the first major player that is available for us Mac folks. At the time of writing it is still in beta, but very stable.

Noise Ninja <http://www.picturecode.com/>

The rest are Windows only.

The "industry standard", Neat Image <http://www.neatimage.com/>

A free alternative, Helicon <http://helicon.com.ua/pages/index.php?noisefilter>

Another free alternative, NoiseWare <http://www.imagenomic.com/>

And probably quite a few others.

There are several Photoshop actions out there, but they cannot compete with those tools based on noise profiles.

Here is one I like. <http://www.canonians.com/noise.htm>

This article, that was last updated in Nov 2003, compares many noise reduction tools.

<http://www.michaelalmond.com/Articles/noise.htm>

Konica Minolta Quality Control

Michael Reichmann of <http://www.luminous-landscape.com/> when reviewing the A2 did not get a good specimen until his third one. Jeff Keller of <http://www.dcresource.com/> needed two cameras to complete his review. And Phil Askey's unit was probably not in 100% working order. He had some focus issues. Reviewers sometimes receive faulty cameras. But this time there were two or three of them at the same time, and one of them received two faulty units. At the same time the forums were ripe with similar reports. There is apparently no explaining away of Konica Minolta's Quality Control problems. The percentage of lemons is way too high. This creates an unhealthy atmosphere in the forums. A user's first post should NOT be "My new A2 arrived. How to test?"

Perhaps the problem is that Konica Minolta indeed has Quality Control, like most European (and American?) companies. But most Japanese companies practice Quality Assurance, which is a completely different approach.

Summary

I hope we have seen above that not every failed shot is caused by a defective camera. And if you combine the tips here in a User Setting, you can have it fixed once and for all and go out shooting. Page 72, 73 and 106.

Here is a summary of all the tips.

Solutions for Blurred pictures

- Read the manual and learn AF limitations
- Wait for the camera to focus
- Notice focus point
- Disable DMF

Solutions for General overexposure

- Set exposure compensation permanently to $-0.3EV$ or $-0.7EV$
- Always use Centre weighted – or – Set FFP to centre, do not move
- Lock exposure, then focus
- Keep an eye on that histogram!
- Try the simplified Hybrid RAW Conversion

Solutions for Shooting in P mode

- Lock exposure before pressing shutter-release button

Solutions for Shooting in User setting mode

- Create an A mode setting with f=4.0 or f=5.6 plus the General tips

References

These links represent a small sample of the places I have visited to learn. There are many many more, but I do not intend this to be a link list.

Forums

DP Review Minolta Talk Forum

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024>

D7 Userforum

<http://www.d7userforum.de/phpBB2/index.php>

Dimage-A1-A2.com

<http://www.dimage-a1.com/Forum/index.php>

Other resources

The Luminous Landscape

<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/>

Hybrid RAW Conversion

<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/tutorials/hybrid-conversion.shtml>

Threads

Here is just a sample of the threads I have read for this article. These threads cover most or all of the problem areas.

March 14 2004 winsoft Grundeinstellungen der A2

<http://www.d7userforum.de/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=6010>

May 21 2004 Kent Clifford Exposure problems with the A2

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=8880245>

May 29 2004 Rob29 A2 another OOF post

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=8969502>

May 29 2004 tebi Neue Erkenntnis zur Belichtung A2 wirft neue Frage auf

<http://www.d7userforum.de/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=8641>

May 30 2004 Barrie Davis Just too many bugs in the A2

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=8981984>

May 30 2004 Alan Sh Continuing the OOF issue on the A2

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=8982123>

June 01 2004 PDM A2 OOF, it happened to me

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=9013215>

June 01 2004 fotog A2 P exposure bug, a hypothesis

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=9014028>

June 05 2004 urban75 A2: dodgy focusing issues. Aaargh!!

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=9071029>

June 06 2004 lcmacedo A1/A2 wrong ISO rating

<http://forums.dpreview.com/forums/read.asp?forum=1024&message=9076738>

About this document

This document is hosted on my own homepage, but the main entry to it is via the link from the Minolta Fax.

This document is located at http://www.geocities.com/barevegard/files/How_to_enjoy_your_A2.pdf

My homepage can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/barevegard/>

You can contact me at vegardb@online.no

I am posting at DP Review as Vegard.

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