

Introduction:

## writing with motion

The term cinematography is from the Greek roots meaning “writing with motion.” At the heart of it, filmmaking is shooting — but cinematography is more than the mere act of photography. It is the process of taking ideas, actions, emotional subtext, tone and all other forms of non-verbal communication and *rendering them in visual terms*. As is discussed in the first chapter, cinematic technique is the entire range of methods and techniques that we use to add layers of meaning and subtext to the “content” of the film — the dialog and action.

The tools of cinematic technique are used by both the director and DP, either working together or in doing their individual jobs. As mentioned, cinematography is far more than just “photographing” what is in front of the camera — the tools, the techniques and the variations are wide ranging in scope; this is at the heart of the symbiosis of the DP and the director.

### THE DP AND THE DIRECTOR

To a great extent the knowledge base of the cinematographer overlaps with the knowledge base of the director. The cinematographer must have a solid familiarity with the terms and concepts of directing, and the more a director knows about cinematography the more he or she will be able to utilize these tools and especially be better equipped to fully utilize the knowledge and talent of a good DP. Any successful director will tell you that one of the real secrets of directing is being able to recognize and maximize what every member of the team can contribute.

The DP has some duties that are entirely technical, and the director has responsibilities with the script and the actors, but in between those two extremes they are both involved with the same basic task: *storytelling with the camera* — this is what makes the creative collaboration between them so important. In that regard, one of the main purposes of this book is to discuss “what directors need to know about using the camera” and “what cinematographers need to know about the process of directing,” with the goal of improving communication between them and fostering a more common language for their combined efforts.

The primary purpose of this book is to introduce cinematography/filmmaking as we practice it on a professional level, whether it be on film, video, digital, High Def or any other imaging format. Storytelling is storytelling and shooting is shooting, no matter what medium you work in. Except for two specific sections which relate to motion picture emulsions and the laboratory, the information here is universal to any form of shooting — film, video or digital.

The first chapter, *FilmSpace*, is a basic introduction to the essential concepts of visual storytelling. It is absolutely essential to understand that a cinematographer or videographer can not be just a “technician” who sets up “good shots.” Directors vary in how much input they want from a DP in selecting and setting up shots; but the DP must understand the methods of visual storytelling in either case.

A good deal of the information in the chapters on *FilmSpace* and *Cinematic Continuity* relates directly to narrative filmmaking, but most of it is still of use in all types of shooting: commercials, music videos, industrials, documentaries, even animation.

Cinema is a language and within it are the specific vocabularies and sub-languages of the lens, composition, visual design, lighting, image control, continuity, movement and point-of-view. Learning

these languages and vocabularies is a never-ending and a fascinating life-long study. As with any language, you can use it to compose clear and informative prose or to create visual poetry.

While wielding these tools to fully utilize the language of cinema, there are, of course, continuous and unyielding technical requirements; it is up to the DP to ensure that these requirements are met and that nothing gets "screwed up." Those requirements are covered here as well, as not only are they an integral part of the job, but many seemingly mechanical requirements can also be used as forms of visual expression as well. This is why it is important for the director to have at least a passing knowledge of these technical issues. Another reason is that many less experienced directors will get themselves into trouble by asking for something that, for purely practical reasons, is not a good idea in terms of time, budget, equipment or crew resources.

This is not to suggest that a director should ever demand less than the best or settle for less than their vision — the point is that by knowing more about what is involved on the technical side, the director can make better choices and can work with their DP to think of solutions that are better suited to the situation and often are even more visually expressive than the technique originally conceived.

#### I DON'T NEED NO STINKING RULES

It is an old and well-worn saying that you should "know the rules before you break them." This is never more true than in filmmaking. Nearly every working film professional can tell stories of first-time directors who declared that, "I know that's the way it's usually done, but I'm going to do something different." Sometimes (rarely) the results are brilliant, even visionary. More often, they are disastrous. The problem is that, unlike nearly every other art form, in film, "doing it over" is extremely expensive and sometimes impossible.

All of the basic rules of filmmaking exist for good reasons: they are the result of 100 years of practical experience and experimentation. Can you break the rules: absolutely! Great filmmakers do it all the time. Once you not only know the rules but *understand why they exist*, it is possible to use a violation of them as a powerful tool.

#### THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

What does the cinematographer need to know about filmmaking in order to do the job properly? Almost everything.

The knowledge base encompasses lenses, exposure, composition, continuity, editorial needs, lighting, grip, color, the language of the camera, even the basic elements of story structure. The job is storytelling with the camera, and the more you know about the elements of that art the better you will be able to assist the director in accomplishing those goals. The DP need not command all these techniques at the level of detail of the editor, the writer or the key grip, but there must be a firm understanding of the basics and more importantly the *possibilities* — the tools and their potential to serve the storytelling and the vision of the director.

This is especially true as the task of directing is more and more accessible to writers, actors and others who may not have as broad a background in physical production and the visual side of storytelling. In this situation, being a DP who has a thorough command of the entire scope of filmmaking but is able and willing to work as a collaborator without trying to impose their own vision in place of the director's is a strong asset. By the same token, to have a reputation as a director who can utilize the talents of their creative team and get the best from everybody is also a goal to aim for.

I started out 5 years ago just to write a simple book containing the basic factual information required to be a working cinematographer. Nothing fancy, not even getting into issues of style and aesthetics. This is the third book in that effort now; it just won't fit into a single volume. The first book covered the theory and practice of lighting, one of the DP's most important jobs. There is a great deal to know even if you are shooting entirely with available light in a cinema verité style. The second book, *Filmmaker's Pocket Reference*, includes the technical facts and figures essential to the job.

Now, in this volume, we cover the storytelling issues, continuity, and providing what the editor needs as well optics, special effects, exposure, composition, filters, color control and all the other aspects of cinematography that go into the job — all of them approached from the point of view of their value as storytelling tools. The craft of lighting is included here, but for a much more in-depth and thorough discussion of lighting, see the first book, *Motion Picture and Video Lighting*. It is also important to note that if you are dedicated to the idea of using the medium of cinema to its fullest extent and employing every tool of the art form to serve your story, then lighting for video or High Def is not essentially different from lighting for film.

#### WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PROFESSIONAL

To be a true professional you need to know all this “stuff.” Even if you specialize in one particular type of shooting, or subscribe to a minimalist aesthetic, you ignore other types of information at your own peril. At any rate, the term “director of photography” refers to someone who can pretty much handle any type of job that comes their way. Someone who applies this term to themselves should never show up on a set not knowing how to handle the job and never just “pretending” to know.

Also, there are certain courtesies, ethics and standards of behavior inherent in the job, and these seem to be fairly universal from country to country; however, like standards of behavior everywhere they always seem to decline as time marches on. Professionalism encompasses these standards as well. For example, occasionally you will see first-time directors who are reluctant to hire a DP who has a great deal more experience than them — they are afraid that the more experienced DP might ridicule their use of terminology, intimidate or embarrass them in front of the crew or even try to impose their own vision on the project. Sadly, this does occasionally happen. Most often these rare unfortunate incidents are the result of the arrogance of people who suffer from the classic “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” syndrome. Someone who truly aspires to being thought of as a professional must take time to learn and understand the standards of etiquette, ethics and behavior in addition to learning the practical aspects of the craft.

Being a professional cinematographer is not a job to be taken lightly: a great deal of money, time, effort and personal vision are at stake even on the smallest low-budget projects. If you know your stuff and have the attitude and personality to be a real team player, it can be one of the best jobs in the world. When things are really cooking on a set and all the hundreds of diverse elements are coming together to get it right, the joy of creation is at a level that is hardly matched in any other profession.

#### TERMINOLOGY: VIDEO AND FILM

As mentioned above, the word cinematography means “writing with motion.” No reference is made to what you are writing on — be it film, videotape, digital media or whatever. However, since the

term cinematographer is still associated in many people's minds with silver-based emulsion, I also use the term videographer where appropriate or the more general term "director of photography." Nor do I engage in the endless argument over which format is "better" — film, video, High Def 24P and digital video are different tools for different jobs. Whenever there is more to the decision than just money, the director of photography should be involved in the choice of format and has the responsibility to be a reliable consultant to the director and the producer concerning which one is most appropriate for a particular project.

Also, despite its long and venerable history, the term "cameraman" is no longer appropriate. I use director of photography, cameraperson or alternate gender references instead. The same applies to other positions as well, as the jobs of director, editor, gaffer, electrician and even grip have become increasingly open to women and people from all cultures and backgrounds.

#### A NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Many of the illustrations here are from the films of great directors such as Stanley Kubrick, Orson Welles and Akira Kurosawa. This may seem to be an endorsement of a formalist and highly stylized type of filmmaking or one in which every shot needs to be a precious little gem — perfectly lit and exquisitely well composed. While I do admire these great filmmakers, the primary reason so many of the illustrations are drawn from their films is more instructional: not only do they serve as excellent examples of framing, composition, use of lens, blocking and color, but more importantly you know that nothing in the frame is an accident — it is easier to follow the choices that they made in order to serve their story.

Making every frame a Rembrandt can be a very satisfying artistic challenge, but there are a nearly infinite number of possible visual styles; each one is valid for its own reasons — the opportunity to explore many different styles and filmmaking aesthetics is one of the main things that makes this job so interesting.



Film is a dream — but whose?

Bruce Kavin

filmspace