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September 2006

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**Cinematographer Adam Biddle**  
**Insights into Shooting HD Feature *Crank***

**Emmy Award Winner Tim Kolb**

**Top Editing Tips**

**Digital Video: A Cool Medium** ▶

**Award-Winning Film,**  
***Fragments of Daniela***

**3 Key Audio Special Effects for Your Film**



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Come and meet contributing writer Jon Firestone and myself at our booth at the 2nd Annual Rocky Mountain VidExpo 2006 in Denver, Colorado, October 11 and 12. Admission is free, but you have to pre-register online at [www.vidxpo.com](http://www.vidxpo.com). Visit our website for more information on all the events we will be attending, and be sure to sign up for the #1 educational film and video magazine in the world.

In this issue our interview with Cinematographer Adam Biddle provides insights into the production of the movie, "Crank." Adam's unique, edgy style of cinematography on this feature was shot in HD with the new Sony 950 and Sony 900. He also used a Canon XL2 and Sony HDVZ1Us. Adam speaks about the benefits of shooting in HD, the special lighting techniques needed, and how HD has a unique look all its own. In another article, "Digital Video: A Cool Medium," Dana Dorrity discusses some of the unique qualities of the use of video in storytelling. I am sure these and all the other articles will inspire, and educate you no matter what level you are at in your career.

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Co-director Mark Nevelidine (left) with Jason Statham on the set of CRANK. Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf, courtesy of Lions Gate Entertainment.



Chev Chelios (Jason Statham) and Eve (Amy Smart) in *CRANK*.  
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf

## Interview with Adam Biddle, Cinematographer for *Crank* Insights into HD Feature Making

by Jody Michelle Solis

The film, *Crank*, is a non-stop roller coaster ride where hit man Chev Chelios (Jason Statham) wakes up to find he had been poisoned in his sleep after letting his target slip away the night before in an effort to quit professional killing and start a new life with his girlfriend Eve (Amy Smart). With only an hour to live, Chev must keep his adrenaline pumping to stay alive, find an antidote, protect Eve from danger and stay steps ahead of his nemeses. The raw, fast-paced action-crime-thriller is written and directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor; and the cast includes Efen Ramirez, Jose Pablo Cantillo, Dwight Yoakam, and Carlos Sanz.

Cinematographer Adam Biddle, who has worked on films such as *V for Vendetta* (2005), *An American Haunting* (2005), and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), details his work on the movie, *Crank*.

### What cameras did you use?

We used the new 950 Sony system that has to be tethered to a deck to record. We carried 2 of these. We also carried 2 Sony 900's that were made up 'ready' to grab at anytime. On top of that we had a Canon XL2 and 2 Sony HDVZ1Us. These DV cameras were used for surveillance style footage or as 'crash' cameras on big stunt scenes.

### Did you use any in-camera color adjustments?

When shooting HD, I'm constantly monitoring color adjustment on a 'color temperature' basis, tungsten or daylight or somewhere between the two. In that respect I treat it like film. Above that, I try to limit getting 'bogged' down by color adjustment within the matrix, preferring to leave that

until post production unless a very specific look is being sought.

I'm not one to play with the matrix on set. But the real bonus was getting to use the new Sony 950 system which has amazing color rendition, the best I've seen.

### Did you use a vector scope?

I personally don't use a vector scope. I've become so comfortable shooting HD, I can now feel the right exposure, but I do have my 'zebra' settings in the eyepiece ALWAYS



Jason Statham (center) behind the scenes on the set of *CRANK*. Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf

on to confirm this.

On *Crank*, I had the luxury of having a Digital Imaging Tech [Nic Theodorakis]. He is the best I have yet to work with and invaluable member of the team. I would trust him to monitor stuff like the vector scope and bring up any problems he thought we might have.

### Tell us about some specific scenes.

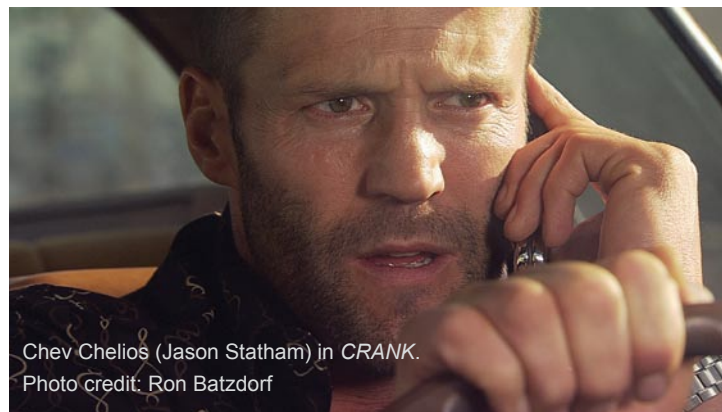
The scene that takes place in at the back of the 'Prince', when Chev cuts Alex's hand – we started that scene in full daylight, and the last half was true night by the time we got to it. That was difficult to pull off.

Also, running a high shutter, say 1/250th,

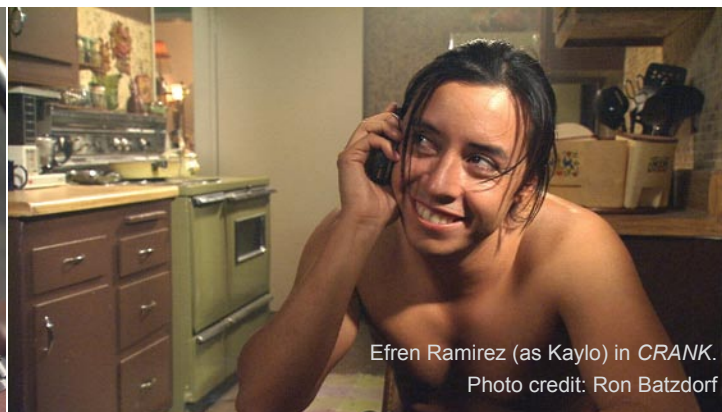
eats up two and a half stops of light. When you're running full speed down hospital corridors [the gurney scene], that covers a heck of a set to light. We must of put at least 200 new fluorescent tubes in that hospital set.

Normal shooting with film takes place at 24 frames per second. The shutter is spinning and each frame of film, or video chip, is exposed for 1/48th of a second creating a 'normal' amount of motion blur to the eye if something is moving in the

frame. If you increase the shutter speed, any motion blur becomes less and the image sharper. The trade off is each frame of film is exposed for less time and so receiving less light. Therefore, you need more light the faster you want to go. No problem day exterior in California, but try it at night or in a low key interior. Every time you double the shutter speed from 1/48th, normal 24fps shooting, you lose one stop of light. This may not sound that much, but to put it in perspective, to gain one stop of light you have to double your light. So instead of using a 5k, I might need to use a 10k and so on. Sometimes there comes a point when you can just get it so bright, and that is your cut off point. For instance, in some



Chev Chelios (Jason Statham) in *CRANK*.  
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf



Efen Ramirez (as Kaylo) in *CRANK*.  
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf

of the interior shoot out scenes at Don Kim's warehouse, we were limited to a 250th shutter because I just didn't have any more light to pump in.

**Did you light differently for different characters?**

Scenes with Eve, I tried to light a little softer. Also, we turned down some [not all] of the video detail when the camera was on her.

**What was the most difficult scene to light?**

The most difficult scene to light was the Mall interior. Driving a real car – and that Rivera Chev drives is huge – through a mall at night is really big to light. I knew the directors were going to want to run as high a shutter as possible, so I really did have to pump in some light there.

**Tell us more about the lighting.**

I find lighting for HD totally different than lighting for film. When shooting in exterior hard sun, I've learned never to be afraid of using big, big units of light – often direct, no diffusion, for fill. I would NEVER do this with film, but HD can be so high contrast, it can take it. When we shot the two rooftop scenes, the light change was extreme due to the movement of the winter sun. Downtown

the shadows from other taller sky scrapers gave me a real hard time balancing the scene.

Another perception of HD is that you need a lot less light. This is true in that if you have complete control of your set, i.e., in a studio, your actual sources can be a lot smaller. I might do something with a 2k that I would need a 10k to do the same on film. But the bottom line is, I will still need as many lamps, flags, stands, etc. The real turnaround is when you are interior and trying to balance to an exterior looking window. Then you need much more light than film to balance the scene properly. That really became true on one particular scene which didn't make the final cut. It was in a hardware store which had a large double entrance door that exposed full daylight outside. I had to try and bring the light right up in the store without it looking too lit. Not easy when the camera is seeing about 300 degrees of the store.

**Could you tell us a little bit about your inspiration and approach for achieving the look and feel of this film?**

*Crank* was always going to be shot on HD on a limited budget and very tight schedule. Consequently, I made the decision to embrace these factors from the get go, and look at the positives. HD cinematography is only just beginning, and it's a strange beast. It isn't film, and it sure ain't video. Handled right, it really does have a

Chev Chelios (Jason Statham) and Eve (Amy Smart) in *CRANK*.  
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf



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Co-director Mark Neveldine (left) with Jason Statham on the set of CRANK.  
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf

quality and look all of its own, and that was my goal to achieve.

**What benefits did you see in shooting HD and shooting digital versus film?**

Film is still king overall, but digital does have its advantages. For one, it's obviously a lot cheaper. Shooting *Crank* in HD enabled more money to be channeled elsewhere in the movie, and in doing so added production value. Also, the ready availability of cheap digital video cameras and software has really blown the industry wide open. Now anyone can shoot their own 'movie' and hone their skills.

**What techniques did you use to make the viewer feel like they're in the shoes of Chev?**

In the opening scene when Chev wakes up, we used a 'body' mount, a lightweight tubular rig and vest which are worn. This was also the first day of filming. We don't see any part of Chev's body except his hands, so we could have had an operator wear the mount but we didn't. By having Chev 'operate' the scene, I think we began as we meant to continue. That got us on to the 'ride'; we just had to hang on!

**What other techniques did you use to help the story and scenes?**

A lot of the time we ran a lot of 'detail' and 'crispening' in

camera. These are video settings that add basically artificial sharpness. Coupled with a high shutter angle, 1/250th or even 1/500th, this gave an almost desperate feel to the image.

The camera settings are virtually unheard of! The usual when shooting 'video' is to have the sharpness turned way low and a 1/48th shutter angle, completely the opposite of what we were doing.

One definitely new technique we used was 'roller-cam'. One of the directors was a fantastic roller blader, and we made a backpack rig that he could wear so he could freewheel around without the worry of a cable being snagged. At first, I was a little skeptical of the results we might achieve, but after seeing one shot with it, I fell in love. Indeed, we had budgeted for 8 days of steadicam. Once we saw what we could get with roller-cam, we cut that down to 1.

**Was everything storyboarded?**

All the big action scenes were storyboarded – rooftop shootout and helicopter fight, Don Kim's shirt factory shootout, driving thru the mall.

**What is your favorite scene in the movie?**

My favorite scene is the flashback when Chev gives Don Kim a break. We had virtually no set to shoot so I stylized the lighting to

help get away with it.

**Were there any challenges that came up working on "Crank"?**

The biggest challenge was always just 'making the day'. On this size movie if you fall behind you really can lose the confidence of the producers. One of our biggest assets was our 1st Assistant Director Bill Clark who really did keep things moving.

**Could you describe your working relationship with directors?**

We really got on the same page from the beginning. They were pretty clear about how 'raw' they wanted this to look, and we wouldn't have time to 'Hollywood' style light – diffusing sun light, etc. I said I was not afraid of shooting in hard sun and trying new things so really we went on from there, in unison.

**What was your most favorite part about working on the movie?**

This movie had a great crew, and everyone got along. It really did have a 'family' feel to it, which is special when that happens. It doesn't always, believe me!

**What was the most difficult problem that you had to solve?**

Getting the 'studio' to buy into the look we were going for. We shot some tests, the directors cut them together, we did a 'film out' and screened a print. They then saw what we were going for and fully supported us. Lions Gate are a decent bunch.

**How would you describe your personal style as a cinematographer?**

My personal style as a cinematographer is to keep things as simple as I can. I don't like to over complicate things, be it a lighting schematic or camera 'method'. I like to move the camera as much as anyone, but feel a move is enhanced when the subject matter dictates it. Moving the camera purely for the sake of it can often detract from a scene or an actor's performance.

**How similar or different is your style compared with the style of "Crank"?**

The feedback I have had from *Crank* kind of back's my style up. It's quite a raw movie, told in a straight forward down to earth way.

**What advice would you give to cinematographers just starting out in their careers?**

Get out shooting, that's the way you learn. I myself worked my way up through the ranks. I started as a 'runner' as it was called then, became a loader, 2nd AC and then 1st AC. I didn't operate, by that time I had seen how the industry was changing. I needed to get out shooting my own stuff ASAP. I think that is the advice I would give now. Additionally, the important thing is to respect technicians that work for you. That way they will respect you.

Photos courtesy of Lions Gate Entertainment.

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Tim with dry ice in strainer with vapors of the evaporating dry ice falling directly down on the shake to keep it cold since there were about 10,000 watts of light collectively focused on it.

## Interview with Emmy Award Winning Director Tim Kolb Includes Top 3 Editing Tips

Tim Kolb is an Emmy, Hugo, and Telly award-winning director and editor with twenty years experience in the video and television production field. He is the founder of Kolb Productions and author of the book, "The Easy Guide to Adobe Premiere Pro," and has written numerous industry articles over the years. Tim has judged Emmys, Tellys, and student films, and serves as an advisor to Adobe Systems and CineForm.

**Your work has received Emmys, Emmy nominations, and other awards. Could you talk a little bit about those projects?**

My partner at the time [Mike Syverson] and I – each have three nominations and an Emmy, and in our time working together we had only done two productions that would even qualify for Emmy competition. So between those two productions, we received six nominations and two statues. Those were for a children's hospital in Wisconsin, and some of the work I'm still proudest of – fundraising type production for some obviously important work the institution is doing. It was an opportunity to spend some time with a lot of children with cancer and other severe health problems. There were dramatic situations. It was a little difficult to do all that, but we did it, and we came up with some good results. A woman called me

shortly after the project was done. She had seen it at a fundraising event and was a mother of a patient at the children's hospital. She was emotional when she thanked me and breaking up when she said, 'Nobody's ever told our story like that, nobody's ever really understood it before.' The statues are great, but I can't replace that phone call with awards.

**How did you get into being an Emmy judge, what goes into it, and what do you look for as an Emmy judge?**

I got into it because I'm active in the Chicago chapter. Once you've accumulated some credibility, they like to know you've been in the field for a while before you lead a panel; then they want you to accumulate a panel of people. They have instructions for you to follow with the evaluation criteria mapped out for you to keep the judging standardized. It's a good way to do it and a solid way to judge, so we all use the same scoring sheet and the same system. And then we do the proverbial, 'fold them up and seal them back in the envelope,' and send them off to the stripe suit guys at the law firm who then open them with the white gloves and figure out who won. It takes a weekend or day of your time or evening, and it takes preparation time. Then you mail all the stuff and you package all the tapes. It's a service project. It's not one of those things where someone comes with a scepter and bestows upon you the title of Emmy judge. It's trying to be of service to the industry, trying to help to keep establishing what standard of performance is for people in the industry, and giving people something to aspire to. It's trying

to make the field better, trying to spend a little extra time to bring some others up as well as yourself. Hopefully, in the end, the field is better in some tiny way because you try to spend a little extra time in trying to help.

**You're an editor and a director. What came first in your career?**

I guess if you're going to be technical, I'm a director, I'm a lighting cameraman, I do motion graphics, and I'm an editor. In 1990, after spending some time with that community college, then spending some time at a television station and the television market in Green Bay, I went out on my own. At the time, I was 23 years old, and quite frankly, didn't have a clue about anything. But in a market that size, you have to be able to do most of it because, until we get to the Milwaukee market, there isn't really a solid crop of freelancers around because there's not enough work to keep them busy. So if you're going to play in this market, at least back when I started, you had to have a variety of skills. Lucky for me, I was interested in all of it. That's probably three quarters the battle right there. If you can keep yourself interested in what you are learning, finding things out, and picking up techniques – if you can just keep yourself engaged, it's amazing what kind of expertise you can pick up.

There are a lot of these roles that can be combined, and I think you become better in any one of them if you've worked in a variety of positions. Great directors already have an eye for shooting because a lot of them have shot before. Great editors can take a look at footage and bring something to it because they've directed before.

**Could you talk about an instance where being able to combine roles as an editor and director helped you to solve a problem that came up on a project?**

I was recently involved in a TV pilot. It's a car reality show. A nearby shop converts Rolls Royces to convertibles and does a lot of high end car work, and a couple of networks are looking at the potential of doing a show around it.

So what they had done was they brought in

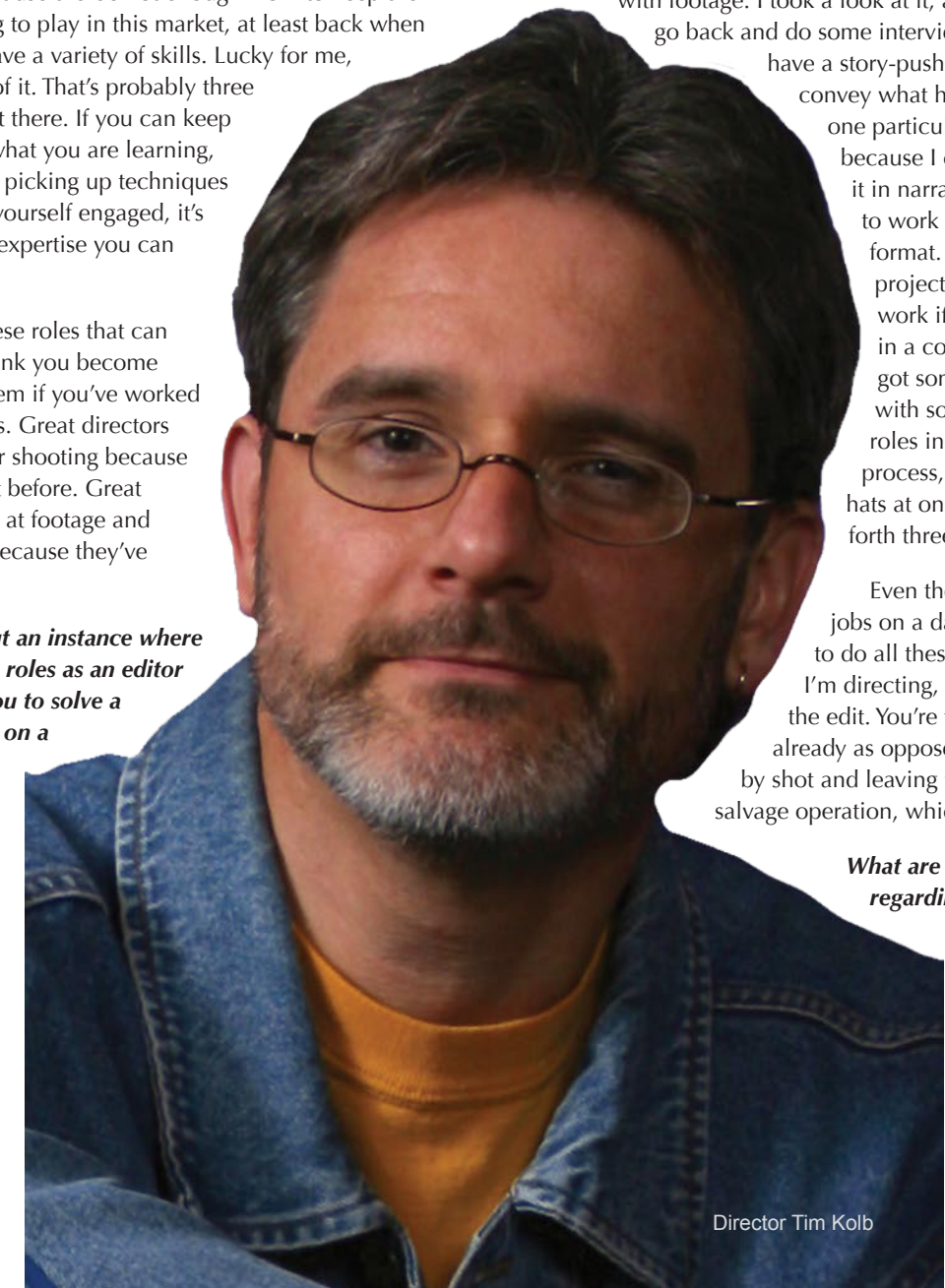
a professional videographer who shoots very nice footage, but they never sat down with a director to figure out what the show should be like. So the videographer had no direction. He wasn't sure whether it should be handheld or on tripod, or shoot a lot of close-ups. Should there be interviews? Should there be audio? Is it going to be narrated later, or is there going to be a host? So he came up with a lot of great footage, and no great story. It's not the videographer's fault, there was no director.

So the next thing that I need to do as an editor is to sit down and "direct" it backwards. I need to take a look at the footage and "direct" a story out of it without a script or even a written story treatment. Someone needed to sort out the elements of the main storyline and the sub-plots, as well as verify that the major points in this conversion are technically covered... and also illustrated with footage. I took a look at it, and we did need to go back and do some interviews so that I could have a story-pushing device to try and convey what had happened with this one particular conversion project because I couldn't just write all of it in narration – that wasn't going to work with this "spontaneous" format. So you could take a project like that and make it work if you have experience in a couple of areas. If you've got some diverse experiences with some of these various roles in the production process, you could wear both hats at once or flip back and forth three times during the day.

Even though I don't do all the jobs on a daily basis, being able to do all these tasks helps. When I'm directing, I'm already thinking in the edit. You're thinking in sequences already as opposed to directing it shot by shot and leaving the editor to run a salvage operation, which is what I do as well.

**What are your thoughts regarding how all the bells and whistles in technology and new technologies can get people away from the essence of telling a good story?**

Other than I agree? The issue when I was in school was that the film students and the television/video



Director Tim Kolb



Breanne Mueller keeps a strainer full of dry ice over the frozen shake until camera is ready to roll.

students were often separated. It wasn't thought of as one composite set of expertise. The TV students learn where the buttons are, and the film students learn how to tell a story. Film students are taught how to light, and video students are taught where auto iris is. At least that was the stereotype at that time.

I think a good thing is some of this has become much more integrated because the film industry itself is moving electronic, but now the problem is we have several things all changing at once. We have the film industry moving into digital cinema. We have video industry moving into hi-def. We have those two things crossing over, as there are people using hi-def for electronic cinema. There are people mixing standard def and hi-def. There are people shooting hi-def for standard def. There are people shooting electronic cinema for the web... Acquisition file formats that aren't cross-compatible and editing systems that need procedures in place to handle these disparate and non-compatible image formats... all these different technologies are changing and mixing together.

I think the biggest issue in many schools is a lot of the faculty are being given the responsibility to keep up with this technology, and the problem is, it's changing the allocation of time they can spend on what is the traditional content – here is what a well-exposed image looks like, here's what a well-blocked scene looks like, here are the techniques you use within the realm of your toolbox to tell a story. I think that part of the issue here is that we need to hang on to the instructors who teach technique, and we need to

maybe delineate the role of teaching technology because I think, unfortunately, it can be very easy for a student who's coming into the field to get the relative "weight" of the two confused because we all spend so much time talking about technology. The technology is important, but it needs to be taught as being as transient as it is... it is temporary. It's like learning who the President of Germany is when you are in school... to know the answer forever, you have to read a newspaper every now and then.

I don't know what the answer is, but again, our focus on technology is taking away from our focus on technique, and if we don't take a moment to re-prioritize, eventually we're going to be an industry of people who know everything about the software and hardware and nothing about how to make a compelling piece of visual communication.

### *What are three of your top editing tips?*

One is – if it works as the cut, stop. You're done. Move on.

Secondly, find the apex of a shot. Every shot has an apex. Every shot has the thing you need to tell the tale. If you're cutting shots together of a motion, or of a person picking an object up, there is a point where that person is doing the most important part of that shot. Whether it's grabbing the item, whether it's the arm coming up – whatever it is – for your own purposes somewhere in that shot there is an apex. Identify the apex, and then start stretching out from

A promotional advertisement for Full Sail University's School of Film. The background is a close-up, low-angle shot of a complex camera rig with a young man looking up at it. The text is overlaid in a clean, modern font. At the top, it says "GET A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN UNDER 2 YEARS". Below that, in large, bold, orange-outlined letters, is "SHOOT. DIRECT. EDIT. BRING YOUR DREAM TO THE SCREEN". At the bottom, there is a call to action "GET STARTED" with a left-pointing arrow, the website "fullsail.com", and the phone number "800.226.7625". The Full Sail logo and "Real World Education" tagline are on the right, along with "School of Film". A vertical navigation menu on the far right lists various programs: "SCHOOL OF: COMPUTER ANIMATION &gt; DIGITAL ARTS &amp; DESIGN &gt; ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS &gt; FILM &gt; GAME DEVELOPMENT &gt; RECORDING ARTS &gt; SHOW PRODUCTION &amp; TOURING". At the very bottom, small text provides the address "3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL 32792" and mentions financial aid, career development assistance, and accreditation by ACCSCT.





Tim shoots an on-camera segment with actor Mike Pace.

there as far as keeping the shot running, cut the apexes together, and then start adding extra trim if needed for continuity, but only what is necessary for continuity.

I find that particularly young editors will fall in love with a shot. And it will be up on screen far too long. Whatever the factor is that you're emotionally attached to in that shot, you've got to get over it and get on with it because none of the rest of us know the history behind getting that shot, nor do we care. It's got to be about the storyline.

Thirdly, you need to learn about color correction, and it's not a brightness/contrast, hue saturation kind of a thing. You're going to start with levels and understanding gamma and move on from there. More editors are becoming responsible for at least some amount of color correction. That's probably the most important skill an editor can add to his or her skill set. Learn as much as you can and keep learning about it because it's a nearly endless topic that is much deeper than most people would ever guess.

**How did you get started in your career? Did you go to school to study editing and filmmaking before working in this field?**

I almost didn't go into this field. In high school, I was one of those perennial does-not-live-up-to-potential guys. I wasn't on track for college career but more on track for something more "blue collar". I had a guidance counselor in high school, and she took

the fifteen minutes allowed to her to plan the rest of my life for me, and somehow she had some kind of insight into my character enough to pull out one brochure for one major at one college, and that was Radio/TV/Film at nearby University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh campus. It was an interesting moment for me because I'd never given any thought to going to college, much less the fact you could actually go into this kind of a field and do audio visual production and get paid for it. I had done it as a hobby in high school. That was how I got into it. I jumped right into my major earning television workshop credits by my freshman year, second semester, and got into a lot of the "hands-on" – maybe a lot more than others might have at that age if they had followed the conventional path.

I ended up with a full-time internship at a vocational community college running their studio, met a woman, as is the downfall of most men, and never got back to college. My full-time internship developed into a job, and from there I started working to feed myself in the industry, and that's what I've been doing ever since.

**Is there anything you would have done differently earlier in your career?**

As a young person my one regret was that I don't think I paid enough attention to what other people were doing soon enough in my career. It's easy when you're a young person to think you've got all the answers. Or you get a little hook, you get a little bit of a skill set together, and maybe you see a couple people who are

doing work that you think is inferior to yours... you think that you kind of have this thing handled. You no longer need to learn anything, or at the very least, you feel you're three steps ahead of the next guy – of course at the end of the day, you can learn every day. I've learned most every day for twenty years in this business. I've learned more on days when I've been more open to it than others. No matter who you're working with, they know something you don't know, no matter what that is.

I suppose those days when I worked with someone that I thought was less skilled than myself, I passed up the opportunity to try to see the benefits to the way they worked... that would be the prime regret I have regarding my career.

I've found over the years the people I enjoy working with the most are those who spend their time asking questions and learning about what the people around them are doing. Even if you're working



Tim (second from left) stops for a quick pic at an outdoor live event in a baseball stadium. The tent behind (positioned at first base) houses audio and video gear.

with a professional who you know from reputation has an extensive career and a lot of expertise, you'll realize, the truly good ones never once stop to tell you about their expertise. However, they may have asked you how you do things four or five times in a day. And you realize that's the key to the deal...

Take every opportunity you can to work

with somebody you've never worked with before and to learn. That's the way you accumulate some expertise in all these different areas. Furthermore, in the end, you have to be a storyteller. And you have to have some kind of a vision as to what you want to do. Editing, directing, shooting – the roles are only delineated by the equipment that you use at points in the process in some circumstances.

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Tim shoots on the plains of Nebraska for a corporate project.

**What advice would you give to new editors and new directors?**

You cannot walk away from any sort of formal or conventional school situation, and then, take what you've learned and make a living for the rest of your life in this industry or any other industry. You may not be able to make a living for five years in this industry with the knowledge you walk away with from a school situation.

Core technique is still king, but you're still going to have to keep learning about the tools, about the workflow, and about what the best ways to tackle various problems are. You have to come to the conclusion that you're never going to stop learning.

Once I got that through my head, it was amazing – once you just open yourself to it and look at every single person as owning some piece of knowledge that you don't know. Look at every experience as a chance to expand your own abilities. Try and pick up what you can from everybody, and try and share what you can with anyone

who you think is looking for that.

You're going to be learning forever, so you might as well just get on with it, and read, write, do whatever it takes to keep your mind active and stay engaged in this industry. Go to a college and help out once you're out of college. Do those pro bono projects that the community needs done that are important for other reasons than the check you're going to get. Go to trade shows and seminars. Whatever you can do to both learn and teach in this industry is going to further your career. And we're all students.

For twenty years, I've always learned more in the current year than I've learned the previous year. If you look at twenty years in the business, you've got to keep your mind pretty sharp – that means you're going to be learning more when you're fifty-five than you ever had to when you were twenty. Keep learning. This career is a journey and school is just a starting point, and your degree only signifies that you've completed orientation...

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# How to Build a 2.5K Soft Light Box for Under \$250

Step by Step Instructions  
by Saro Varjabedian

Passing light through diffusion material or bouncing the light off a reflective surface are the basic methods for creating soft light. When a cinematographer wants to utilize soft light in a project s/he will usually add a Chimera to a focused or an open-faced light, or shine HMIs through a large Griffolyn. The cost of purchasing one 2K Fresnel light with a Chimera can run around a thousand dollars. Renting the same kit can cost close to fifty dollars a day. These are certainly more time efficient methods for the cinematographer who is not confined by budgetary requirements. But for those who have some free time, are handy with a tool and would like to create a 2.5K soft light box for under \$250, here is an alternative.

The first step is to gather all the required materials. Most of the materials can be purchased at any large home improvement store such as Home Depot. The diffusion material is the only item that will need to be purchased at a specialty shop.

Materials Needed:

- a) 1 – ½" plywood 3' x 4'
- b) 2 – ¼" wood panels 2' x 4'
- c) 2 – ¼" wood panels 2' x 3'
- d) 10 – light bulb sockets
- e) 5 – plugs
- f) 2 – 10' aluminum corner strips
- g) 2 – 17' rolls of 14 gauge stripped wiring
- h) 1 – box of large wire nuts
- i) 1 – box of 1 ¼" wood screws
- j) 2 – 1" x 2" x 4' wooden beams
- k) 2 – 1" x 2" x 33" wooden beams
- l) 4 – 1" x 2" x 22" wooden beams
- m) 5 – nuts/washer kit for lamps
- n) 2 – box of 10 assorted 1/8 IP nipples
- o) 1 – all purpose glue
- p) 1 – aluminum foil
- q) 1 – 6 socket power strip
- r) 4 – door handles
- s) 4 – 20" x 24" sheets of 216 Diffusion

## Step 1 →

The ½ inch plywood board will serve as the base or backing for the light box. Begin by gluing the two 4' beams and the two 33" beams around the edge of the box. Glue two 22" wooden beams at both ends of the 2' x 4', ¼" panels. Use clamps to hold the beams in place while the glues dry.



## Step 2 ←

After the glue dries, drill 10 holes into the backing. The holes should be arranged into two columns of five about a foot apart from each other and aligned evenly. The holes will need to be able to house the 1/8 IP nipples. Find a drill bit the same width as the nipple. After drilling the holes, paste sheets of foil to the side of the backing and the wooden panels with the glued beams. Make sure to glue the dull side of the foil to the wood so that the shiny side faces out.

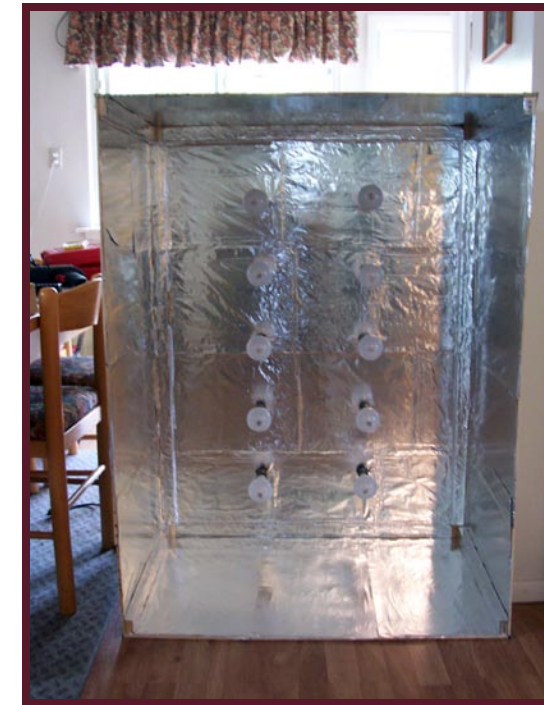
### Step 3 →

Next, screw in the 1/8 IP nipples into the holes on the backing. Before screwing on the light bulb sockets to the IP nipples, attach electric line to each socket. Put on the washer and nuts onto the IP nipples. Run the electric lines attached to the sockets through the IP nipple, and then, screw on the sockets.



### Step 4 ←

Take the plugs and attach electric line to each one. Next, tie together the electric line from every two sockets with the line from the plug so that every two sockets are hooked up to one plug. Make sure to connect one line from one socket with one line from the other socket to the line from the plug. Use the wire nuts to connect the lines, and then, tape the lines up with electrical tape. Attach the 6-outlet power strip to the middle of the backing.



### Step 5 ↑

Attach the panels to the base. Use a few screws to temporarily hold them in place. Then take the aluminum cornering and place it on the corners of the box. Next, drill in more screws through the aluminum into the backing and panels. Attach the door handles towards the four corners of the backing of the light box.

### Step 6 →

At this point the light box is constructed. Screw in 250-watt photoflood bulbs that have a color temperature of 3200. Attach 216 Diffusion to the open face of the box with some gaffer's tape. The box will have an output of 2500-watts of soft, diffused light.



The total cost of the materials for this light box run under \$250. A smaller soft light box can be constructed for even less money and would be easier to store. But keep in mind that the size of the light source is a factor in how soft the light will look. The light source is the area of the diffusion material that light passes through. It is important to note that a stand for the light box should be purchased so that the box can be hung and angled appropriately for the shoot. There is a kit that comes with two light stands and a truss by On-Stage that retails for \$170.

often produces favorable results on the subject. Some of the results of soft light are shadows that are less defined with a gradation of tone producing a beautiful and natural look, hiding blemishes around the face by filling them in, creating a picture that has a full tonal range from light to dark with a lower overall contrast, and highlighting reflective surfaces with interesting reflections serving as a nice eye-light.

*Saro Varjabedian has worked on over twenty films, music videos and corporate videos as a cinematographer. He is currently working on "Erza," which is still in its production phase, "Story 353," which is in pre-production and writing a script exploring the avenues toward finding life fulfillment, "In Hand Behind the Head String."*

# Digital Video: A Cool Medium

## The Unique Qualities of Video Storytelling

by Dana Dorrity



In 1999, when I was in my first year of the AFI Conservatory Screenwriting program, I saw a screening of *The Celebration (Festen)*, the first Dogme Collective film by Thomas Vinterberg, at the Laemmle Sunset Theatre.

I had been a video producer in New York, shooting infomercials and video news releases, but I was insecure about my lack of knowledge of film. As I watched the pixilated image, which looked like a moving impressionist painting, I knew that video, digital video, could be used to tell meaningful, and beautiful, big screen stories. But it would only be successful if filmmakers chose the right kinds of stories for this new cooler medium.

*The Celebration* was the story of a family reunion in an opulent country inn. The father's birthday dinner party eventually becomes a battlefield, when his son launches an attack accusing his father of causing his twin sister's suicide. The intensity of the story, which was shot by Anthony Dod Mantle, is enhanced by the use of video which looks like a home movie. Video is inevitably associated with truth, because until now most video images – the news, home movies, security cameras – capture events that are actually happening. The viewer, watching this film, feels like they are a witness to this devastating family battle.

In the book, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan asserts that video is a cooler medium than film. *The Celebration*, which was shot on a European standard PAL DV camera with 750 lines of definition, is significantly lower resolution than film which is "well-filled with data." A single frame of 35 millimeter film can be converted to a digital file of up to ten million pixels. Film is a hot, high definition

medium which transports the viewer into the story through the sense of sight.

Digital Video yields less visual information. Our minds are forced to fill in the gaps between the pixels. Like a kid who wakes up from a nightmare and has to walk down a dark hallway, digital video creates a sense of danger even in the most familiar or mundane setting. The absence of visual information triggers a sense of the ominous. The DV movie viewer is wary of what could emerge from the shadows or what's outside the video frame.

This cooler medium was used effectively in *The Blair Witch Project*, written and directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. It was the first DV film to be released nationally, and it was tremendously successful because many young viewers couldn't help but believe that the story was true. Initially, this was interpreted as a marketing ploy, but even as an educated viewer, I couldn't help but look up Blair, Maryland on the map and surf the internet trying to learn more about the witch.

*The Blair Witch Project* also used the medium by not revealing the Witch. Since the strength of digital video comes from what's not there, the most terrifying images are absent from this story. If film paints a world that we enter through our eyes, digital video brings us in through a feeling of paranoia, like the characters on screen, we wonder, "What's behind me?"

These digital filmmaking techniques worked for director Miguel Arteta in *Chuck & Buck*. In this DV film, written by Mike White, an LA record producer is stalked by his lollipop-licking childhood friend. Buck is the most benign character, but the graininess of the DV medium increases the viewer's sense of danger, and we sympathize with Chuck, who is now called Charlie, and who wonders why Buck has re-entered his life.

Each of these storylines circles around something unseen by the viewer. *Both The Celebration* and *Chuck & Buck* tell stories about the past, something that is gone forever and often inaccurately recalled by memory. Similarly *Tape*, Richard Linklater's first digital film is about two friends who meet up after ten years. One accuses the other of a past offense and blackmails him with a tape. Throughout the film, it is never clear to either of the characters or the viewer what happened in the past, and the tape is never played. In *The Celebration*, the ghost of the twin sister who has committed suicide is established throughout the film in point-of-view shots, but she is never fully revealed. In the climax sequence when the characters are on a drunken, dancing rampage through the house, the main character senses her presence, and we see an image of a girl, but this could just be his memory of her. *The Blair Witch* accurately depicts on video the thing which scares us most, the unknown. Through the use of flashbacks, movies often make the past seem recoverable. DV reflects reality and lets the past seep into the dark, digitized absence of this cool medium.

Dana Dorrity is an assistant professor of Communications and Media Arts at Dutchess Community College. She has an MFA in screenwriting from the American Film Institute and teaches media writing, screenwriting and video production classes.

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# Smile:

## A Look at the Animated Short Film



Student Animator Gets Online Distribution Deal with iTunes  
by Karelisa Falkner

This year media mogul iTunes decided to add animated short videos to its music store. For those like myself who spend endless hours perusing unknown music and video content from sites like iTunes, YouTube, and AtomFilms, this latest feature is simply one step closer to complete internet sensory overload. But for student animators, it is a welcome addition. With the possibility of exposure on internet portals like iTunes, animators are no longer bound to limited technology and paltry student budgets. To put things into perspective, iTunes alone received about 25 million video downloads just between December and June. Student animator Chris Maise proves that the industry is becoming more accessible. His recent iTunes release, *Smile*, an 8-minute, animated short about a toy that battles his playroom nemesis over a smiley-faced balloon, has put him on the map.

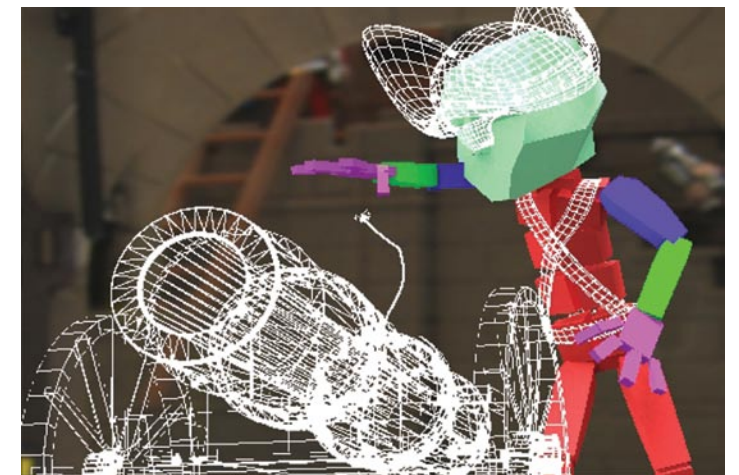
At its best, animation like *Smile* makes us nostalgic for the wanderings of our childhood imagination. Absorbed in the colorful

imagery of a surreal toy world, *Smile* is a seamless short. What makes animated film so difficult is that to achieve the timeless feel Maise gets with *Smile* in only eight minutes requires days of actual filming and a meticulous editing process. Maise used Motion Capture Imaging to achieve the dreamlike effect of *Smile* – the same technology used by Pixar (*Toy Story* comes to mind), and of course Disney animations like *Fantasia*. Motion capture imaging, as Maise points out, is not only more efficient and time saving than line-drawing animation (which would take years to complete, even for a short like *Smile*), but also turns the editing process into a series of puzzle pieces with endless ways to rearrange.

Maise, like most undergraduate filmmakers, realized that *Smile* could not realistically get off the ground without outside help, and his school didn't have a motion capture stage. And who could blame them? Motion capture production for *Smile* amounted to a whopping \$100 per second. Not exactly in line with Maise's

\$1,000 budget. Maise's strategy – hound feature studios through a relentless flow of written letters for financial and production support – a tactic which impressed the visual department at Sony Imageworks and landed him production space for motion capture imaging.

Maise and his team began production by creating a series of background plates using 16 mm film, including shots of a miniature child's playroom. Maise recommends taking as many photographs as possible of the set. This gives the animator a template to create new computer generated background plates that hadn't been factored during conception with relative simplicity. These plates give the motion capture actor a visual of the imaginary set he is moving within. "Working on the motion capture stage is no different than working a live-action film set," says Maise. "There is an actor, director, and camera operator. The only difference is that the performance is captured from every conceivable camera angle, versus the single view of a live action camera." Enlisting a good motion capture actor is key to production – the wider the range of movements and emotions, the more possibilities you have for editing. Joel Moffett acted the movements of both animated hero and villain, making the movements stylistically cohesive. Maise continues, "It was a liberating experience, because we didn't have to worry about lighting, sound, or camera angle." At \$100 per



second, Maise kept the filming short – only six days of live action filming and just four hours in the motion capture studio.

The best feature of *Smile* in my opinion is Maise's decision to accompany the animation with an orchestral score by composer Cody Westheimer. Even on a budget, Maise managed to have the piece recorded at Capital Records by a 45-piece ensemble, a process which took just three hours. Building *Smile* up from a senior student project to a professionally executed production was





easier than might be imagined. Maise secured many of his industry connections simply by showing his sketches and raw edits of *Smile* to as many people as possible. Maximizing exposure to your work, even before you start production, can land unlikely sponsors from people who are not necessarily professionals in the feature film industry. Using an original composition with an animated short film is also a sure way to avoid potential problems in voiceover and expensive music rights. *Smile's* score not only has a classic good versus evil motif which children can readily respond to, but it also keeps the focus of Maise's animation on storytelling.

But Maise admits that while motion capture imaging has been around for decades (Disney used it in the 1930's), it is

not always preferred. Not every artist values digital technologies which dramatically lessen production time, and in animation, some stand firm in their conviction that motion capture is another technology which cheapens the artistic experience. The question of digital technology minimizing artistic vision and perhaps talent will be particularly interesting to watch in the future of animated film, where online marketing and distribution is ultimately key to exposure. The creative vision of an independent animator like Maise is really put to the test in the exhaustive post-production and editing process which streamlines sound and animation together. Maise says, "The editing of *Smile* was quite different than live-action. I had all of these separate elements I needed to combine to create a shot, before I could edit it into the

film. I would composite a rough skeleton performing a segment from the motion capture onto a background plate. I would then have a rough shot that I could cut into the film using Adobe Premiere. If the shot worked in the film, I would then do it over, this time with a properly lit *Smile* character. It was a very tedious process to do it this way, but it offered me unlimited options." To do all of the animation and compositioning, Maise used 3D Studio Max, a program he delved into to prepare himself for the editing in *Smile*, in addition to Adobe After Effects and Adobe Premiere – all of which are "off the shelf software you can find at any computer store".

*Smile* has cleaned up a host of awards in the animated short film category including SIGGRAPH (2005), Cecil Awards (2006),

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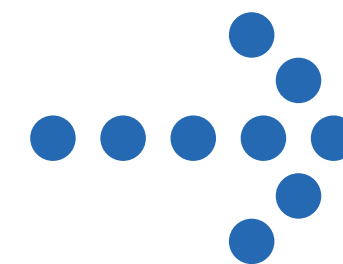
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and MySpace User's Choice Competition (April 2006). After a lucky pair up with a distributing representative following the Palm Springs International Festival of Shorts where it took home the Audience Favorite Award, *Smile* was released to iTunes as part of the portal's April animation launch. Maise and his team are jumping on a selective bandwagon for animated short films on major online portals like iTunes but believe that there is little competition among animators like himself because the spread of quality animated film and new techniques and technology benefits everyone. Although submitting *Smile* to festivals has the benefit of letting Maise hear personal feedback from children and adult audiences, it is *Smile's* distribution on iTunes which suggests the truly changing nature of student animation and film. Like Maise, students and amateurs can now find willing investors for their projects more easily due to the potential for profitable distribution and exposure iTunes offers. The profit Maise adds, is also finding its way back to himself and his team, a sign that the industry is more accessible than you might think. And for animation film artists, the future looks bright indeed – while animation often has difficulty getting recognition at festivals, Maise believes animated shorts found a niche with internet users lacking in attention span and just looking for an easy laugh.

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## Award-Winning Sex-Trafficking Film, *Fragments of Daniela*

### An interview with Writer/Director Sasha Knezev

by Paige Cram

Sasha Knezev's award-winning sex-trafficking film, *Fragments of Daniela*, screens at the LA edition of the New York International Independent Film & Video Festival (NYIIFVF) on September 16. The 80-minute feature film, which won Best Dramatic Feature at NYIIFVF's east coast event, tells a love story that exposes the criminal underworld of sex-trafficked, underage Eastern-European girls. The film stars newcomer Ramona Popa and features Cazzy Golomb (*Cult, That 70's Show*).

Knezev, who graduated from the University of Southern California, is currently finishing his masters work at USC.

*How do you come up with the ideas for your films?*

I tend to incorporate a lot of my own background into my writing. My parents are Eastern European. I'm Serbian by decent. I'm a first-generation American. I tend to stick to issues of cultural amalgamation, cultural specificity, cultural identity, and the Americanization or Westernization of various cultures that are specific to Los Angeles. My newest film comes from my experiences in Eastern Europe. I have family there, so I visit quite frequently, and I have an apartment in Northern Yugoslavia, Serbia. I travel extensively when I go down there, and that's where I get my writing...

*What inspired you to write "Fragments of Daniela," and why did you choose to do this film as a narrative instead of a documentary?*

The reasons I wanted to make this film – I came back from Europe and in Europe this is a well-known issue. Everybody has an opinion on it. Then you come back to the States, you bring it up, and people are just so unaware. It's shameful really.

It's something that's so horrific that I felt I needed to express



it in some way, through the craft of writing and directing. I've seen endless documentaries on the subject of human trafficking, but there's never been a narrative... I always stick to narrative because if you do it right you can bring the element of pathos, the human touch, something more evocative. I'm just such a fan of the collaborative process of filmmaking. We're using all those various components: the music, the acting, the composition, the score, the framing, the writing... If you're human you're going to be touched by this [film]. Human trafficking, in and of itself, is repulsive; it's shocking. With a documentary... you get that window on reality, but through a narrative you have the ability to convey a story that is able to touch the audience on several different levels.

*The film screened in New York and won Best Dramatic Feature in NYIIFVF. How will the LA screening be different?*

It's going to be good in LA. The cast is from LA. My family is from LA. In New York, there were only a couple of us. It was really well received, but this is more important to me because my family will be there, my entire crew, everyone involved in the production – so

it'll be the first time we all watch it together. It's going to be exciting to share that experience with all the people who worked so hard.

*This is your second feature film. What do you feel you learned from your first feature, "Welcome to San Pedro," that helped make "Fragments of Daniela" more successful?*

My first film was really personal, and because it was personal I think it took a lot out of me. I focused more as a writer on the writing, the authenticity of the characters and of the situations, and I was just concentrating on protecting the story. You worry so much about telling the story that you forget about all the other forms of the medium that are so important in its reinforcement. You forget about the score, lighting, etc. On *Fragments of Daniela*, I was really able to use various forms of the medium very well. We have a fantastic score in this film; the cinematography is much better... We knew our locations and pre-visualized the shots, whereas with the other one, we just kind of went as we went along. Also, we were a lot more liberal with the editing style; I didn't feel it had to be as linear as the first one. Financing came a lot easier this time



because I already made my first film. Then you have that backbone to support your new project.

**How was *Fragments of Daniela* shot? How long did it take to shoot?**

We shot on the Digital Canon XP2 24 P. One year to write, shoot, and edit.

**Did any problems coming up filming?**

Not having permits always creates problems, but for the most part, it was smooth.

**How was the score in the film developed?**

Eric Froeberg of USC has composed all my films and continues to do so. This is his third composition. He composed it on stage live with a five man set. I wanted a Balkan melody, so he studied its style as such.

**What was the biggest challenge of this film, and how did you overcome it?**

The biggest challenge, from a director's standpoint, was not to exploit the exploited. I'm making a film about the exploitation of women and girls, these sexually abused human beings, and the trick is to be really subtle. You have to convey that to all your actors, your crew. You have to be very careful. I think that's why people do documentaries on things like this because it's safe. When you start getting to the narrative part of it, it's tricky. We don't want to objectify these girls, but then again, these are beautiful girls, and you do have to show that these girls are dolled up, but there's a delicate balance. We tried to avoid being explicit in showing sexual acts. Also giving a thorough, three-dimensional background to the characters was the most important part.

**You've said that *Daniela* is based on a real girl. Tell us a little about how you met her, and what it was like.**

In Europe, it's so open that it's ridiculous. When I was in Greece,

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I was walking in the street at two in the morning, and people stop you and say, "Hey we've got girls. Right here. From here, from anywhere. Come here." And it's weird because most of us have heard these stories, but unfortunately, we're so consumed by every day life that we never stop to ponder the significance. Then I started to ask questions, and people are very open. It's not a hush-hush thing. And at one of these bars, these strip bars, I sat down and spoke to this girl. The girls drink a lot, and that's in the film because they choose to remain in this fog. So we're sitting, having drinks, and I questioned this girl for about 20 or 30 minutes. Everything that Daniela says in the second scene in Sam's hotel room comes directly from this girl. For example, Daniela says, "I have a mother and a brother." This girl told me she had a mother and a brother.

So the things that Daniela says and her background come directly from that girl.

**What are some of the differences between your real life experience and what you put into your script?**

In my film, she's sent to the hotel room of the reporter, but normally the girls are not allowed to leave the room. The girl that I talked to was from the Ukraine. I switched her background [in the film] to be Romanian because my actress was Romanian.

**What led you to start your own production company?**

I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker, and I knew I was going to do it on my own. I wanted to go outside the studio system

because I want to make the films that I want to make. No one's going to edit or tell me what I can or cannot make. I made the film, *Welcome to San Pedro* about the Serbian and Croatian community in Los Angeles, and who's going to finance that? But at the same time, that's my story, my life, and I'm going to make it.

**What does it take to start a company to produce your own films?**

You have to be self-sufficient. You have to be very ambitious, and you have to prepare yourself for failure because you're going to fail along the way. Do what you gotta do. Cut corners, pay when you gotta pay, but don't go the other route.

**Can you talk a little about your experience at USC?**

It was a fantastic experience. I have some professors that left a profound influence on me. My focus was in critical studies. That's where I learned the most, really learning intensely about my favorite filmmakers, [the ones] who came from a time when the filmmakers were also film theorists. Unfortunately, we don't have too much of that these days, but to me that's the greatest education you can have: where you're not only watching someone's film but reading his theories, reading his essays, his works. Studying the work, writing about the work, theorizing and really dissecting the medium. That's really what I learned from USC, and that's really what helped me become the writer and director that I am.

**Who were these filmmaker/theorists that you studied?**

Todd Boyd, Priya Jaikumar, and David James. Those three have had an amazing influence on me. I can't even begin to put words to it.

**Would you say that film school helped you get where you are today?**

That's difficult. I would say it's two-fold. It has in my education and learning the specifics of the medium. So from an educational stand point, yes, but as far as being a writer goes, that's something I really learned on my own.

**What advice would you give to aspiring filmmakers who hope to achieve your kind of success?**

Prepare to get your hands and feet dirty and never give up. If you have a story to tell, tell it. And keep going. Tell another one, and another one and another one. Because you're going to put a lot of energy into that first film, and it'll open doors for you, but it's not going to set you financially. If you're doing it for the money, be a stockbroker. But if you love cinema, eventually your passion will transcend into something. The energy that you create will carry you places.

*Paige Cram is a recent graduate of the University of Massachusetts where she studied journalism and creative writing. Among other honors, she was awarded The Robert Crowley Memorial Prize for Excellence in Column Writing for her published articles in The Massachusetts Daily Collegian. She hopes to attain her MFA in creative writing beginning next fall.*



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# 3 Key Audio Special Effects for Your Film

Phoneizing Effect, Reversing Audio, and Reverb

by Bryant Falk



Walter Horton (Chris Federhofer) struggles through the longest night of his life in the independent film, *Blur*.

When painting a picture you normally take stock of all the tools at your disposal. Brushes, palette knives, and canvas, etc. As with painting, there are many audio sound effects tools available for use in your film. Like a painter, be careful not to use too much of one effect or another, or your project can become unbalanced.

The first trick of the trade is called *phoneizing*. This is a process of taking perfectly good audio and making it small and crunchy like it's coming from the phone. This effect is placed in a subcategory of EQ, (short for equalizing). When working on the audio for the film *Blur*, I have an extensive phone scene which is key to the picture. I create a back and forth effect of characters' voices sounding like they are "on the phone" one moment, then you hear clean audio the next moment. This effect can be used in your film when a character is talking on the phone or on a transistor radio.

There are also other applications where phoneizing comes in handy. Let's dive into a fictional detective movie where our character has just uncovered a clue to a missing person's case. He kneels down to pick up a hairclip when he hears this small "phoneized" girl screaming for help. He turns his head and spots a drain pipe. Now we change channels to a comedy where our leading character loses his "mojo, moxie, tough guy persona". Maybe to represent this loss we phoneize his dialogue till he gets it back!

There are many different ways to create a phoneized sound, and the effect can be subtly altered into many different permutations. The girl screaming for help through drain may also have a slight reverb mixed in to create distance. Usually some kind of equalizer is used to create the correct tonal quality for the scene you are working on.

Another effect is the *reverse*. Simply put, reverse the playback of the audio in a scene. This effect can be used, for example, in a horror film or used to create a demonic sound. This is also a way to create or show confusion in a character's mind. While working on the *Blur* movie I experiment extensively with the drunk character by having his internal dialogue backwards and far away.

The reverse when sped up is a way to show time turning backwards in a story or scene. People associate this high pitched reverse with time travel from the earliest TV shows and films. The pitch or speed of the reverse and the way it is EQ'd decides whether it is humorous or not.

Let's jump into another scene. A car crashes on an empty urban street, two cars are burning, and one man stumbles out of the wreck. We push into his eye and start rewinding the accident. To maintain the seriousness of the moment we can roll off the high end, (EQ out all the high frequencies) and push up the bass

frequencies. This tends to bring out a heart beat energy, serious and deep. Push the rewind back even further in the same scene to where our survivor is back in his office cracking jokes with co-workers at the water cooler. On this second rewind as we are heading into a lighter moment we can return that high frequency and start pulling down some of the bass.

Keep in mind when creating a reverse effect, location sound may not be the perfect audio to start with. Some audio sounds the same backwards and forwards like noise from a fan or an A/C unit. It might be better to record your actors in the studio talking for an "office sound" and work with that in reverse. Add a few backwards phone rings, some coffee sip sounds, and typing against a computer keyboard. This is another effective reverse sound that can either be creepy or humorous depending on your necessity.

A third effect and one of the most powerful is *reverb*. Reverb simply put is the echo of a sound repeating so close in time to the source that you can't hear it definitively. Just like yelling, "Hello!" in the Grand Canyon is the classic example of echo or delay, and singing in a large old church is a classic example of reverb.

On the *Blur* project, reverb was used extensively to recreate the alleyway sound for the actors. During shooting, the police officer's audio was overloaded on mic and had to be re-recorded through ADR. He was about as far from an alley as you can be when he was re-recorded so we had to create that alley sound with

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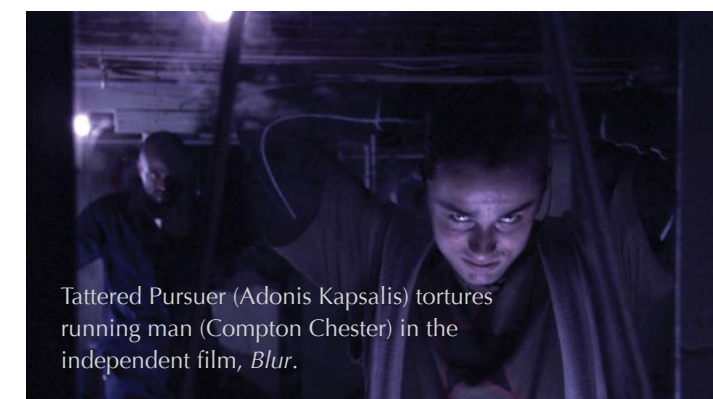
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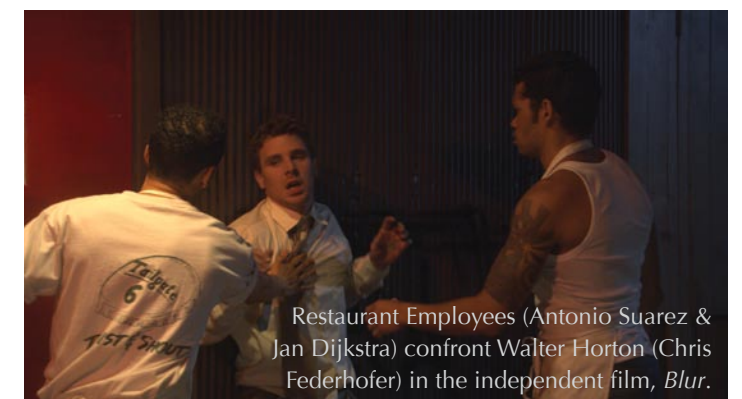
NY Police Officer (Alec Tomkiw) investigates a gruesome scene in the finale of the independent, *Blur*.



Charles (Jordan Meadows) argues with his girlfriend, Melissa (Krie Alden) while his best friend, Joe (John Dylan-Howard) struggles to distract his attention.



Tattered Pursuer (Adonis Kapsalis) tortures running man (Compton Chester) in the independent film, *Blur*.



Restaurant Employees (Antonio Suarez & Jan Dijkstra) confront Walter Horton (Chris Federhofer) in the independent film, *Blur*.



Director Kevin Hall oversees the final audio mix at Sound One.

reverb. Reverb is essential in giving the listener a sense of space. Try blindfolding yourself in your house sometime, and talk in loud short phrases like, "Hello... The time is... Today is my birthday!" Listen carefully to the reverb or "the color of the room". You will be amazed at how quickly you can delineate the kitchen verses the living room, and the bedroom verses the bathroom. All of these spaces have their own reverb due to the materials and shapes in the rooms.

So let's quickly look at the three effects we talked about:

- Phoneizing Effect (this includes EQ)
- Reversing Audio
- Reverb

These three audio special effects are the beginning of many tools available in our arsenal. Keeping an eye on the alternative creative uses of these effects in helping to tell your story is the key

in applying them successfully. But be cautious. As technology has allowed the easy and instant application of these effects and many more, this does not mean they are all effective in your film. Always keep the story your focus, and what your audience will hear a priority.

*Bryant Falk has been a producer and engineer for over 12 years working with such clients as The Ricki Lake Show, Coca-Cola, Sports Illustrated, Valley National Bank, and MTV's The Shop. His company Abacus Audio handles many aspects of the audio production field from creative and production to mixing and final output.*  
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# Indie Composer Joel Diamond

## Scoring is Not a Post-Production Slap-On

by Larry Jaffee

Independent film composer Joel Diamond has been offered scoring jobs to major Hollywood studio films, but he usually turns them down, much to the consternation of his Los Angeles agent.

The reason? He would end up feeling compromised by the studio machine. Preferring to avoid such angst, Diamond aims to stay true to the music in his head no

matter the project.

Instead, New York-based Diamond feels much more at home working on the soundtracks of numerous indie films, which have been his main source of income for the past decade. In the past 12 months, he's worked on seven films, most of which came through word of mouth and referrals among filmmakers.

Perhaps best known for his score of *The Believer* (2001), which was released on CD, and won the Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival, Diamond recently worked again with that film's director/writer, Henry Bean, on the forthcoming *Noise*, a Manhattan-shot independent film that wrapped in late June and stars Tim Robbins, William Hurt and Billy Baldwin. Robbins plays a New Yorker bothered by the city's noise pollution so he complains to the mayor, played by Hurt. Besides his "noisy" score, an homage to avant-garde composers John Cage, Raymond Scott and Schoenberg, Diamond also acts in the film. Among Diamond's better known credits include producing the soundtrack to indie favorite *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) and working as an organist on the soundtrack to *Dead Man Walking* (1995).

Diamond's main advice to aspiring and student filmmakers is to not view music as an almost afterthought, post-production function. He says he comes across that mentality far too often.

"On *The Believer*, I started working on the music the minute Henry [Bean] finished the script," Diamond explains, in an interview at his immaculate home studio/Upper West Side studio apartment, describing his ideal situation. "Henry and I have been working on this for a year-and-a-half already."

Unfortunately, Diamond usually doesn't get that kind of lead-time to nurture a score. "A lot of times I get calls to do a film, they're late and need a composer right away. Or you're called in basically to fix the edits and slap on music. It feels like I'm just going to be doing a bunch of patchwork, rather than when I'm working with someone like Henry even before he shoots. What happens in the end, the music becomes very integrated within the film. That's kind of how Kurosawa works."



Composer Joel Diamond



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- 2003 Freeway Conversations & The Museum of the Imperfect Past (Valencia Biennale Installation)
- 2003 Red, White & Blues (Documentary)
- 2002 The Battle of Orgreave (Documentary)
- 2001 Hotel
- 2000 About Time 2



## Music & Sound

Diamond estimates that he's worked on 25 to 30 films, of which 80 percent the editor uses temporary music, in film production vernacular known as "temp tracks," until they've hired the composer. Often, the music slotted in is beyond the budget's means.

"Temp tracks are always a danger. They use them to either smooth out a scene or get something underneath to make it look better. A lot of times they'll use anything they can get their hands on, and usually something that they can't use. A classical piece, a famous rock 'n' roll piece, whatever they want use. That's usually death for composers. Most composers I know really go ballistic when they start with the temp scores because you have an idea and they have this other idea. Let's face it, editors are obsessive, and they're working day and night on these edits, and they're listening to this music while they editing. They get married to that music in their minds; they love it so much. A lot of times it's the director too. What happens is that the composer is subjected to this, and whatever he or she writes, they're never happy with it. Unless, you tell them, 'You have TEMP LOVE'—that's what we call it—and you're never going to like anything else.' So they must stop that loop in their minds and let the composer do his or her job. It's always an emotional thing for me."

Occasionally, Diamond works with directors who fancy themselves as musicians and think they are capable of scoring the films themselves but hire a pro usually due to being too busy with other tasks related to getting the movies finished.

"If they're really good, then it is a great collaboration. For example, this guy I recently worked with, Raymond Steiner, is not necessarily a musician but used to be a guitar player and is one of the producers on [the forthcoming] *Milarepa* (2006)," Diamond explains. That film, about the first Buddhist poet priest, will have a limited run in New York in September or October, and has already been released in other parts of the world.

"Raymond's temp tracks were great," says Diamond. "They were placed in great places. Everything felt right. I changed everything, but his taste was really good as far as the moods he was setting up. So it was a really good collaboration. We talked, and got along really well. It was fun working with him. He let me go crazy. He said, 'Whatever you want, avant-garde over here?' This is a very Tibetan film, spoken in Tibetan. There were a lot of things I needed to keep very Tibetan, but the other things. There was a storm scene. He let me do anything. He loved it. He thought it was great."

Diamond's varied music career has included producing and arranging albums for other artists, as writing four ballets that were presented by the Cuban National Ballet. Diamond's string quartet, "Danza Caprichosa," recorded by Orchestra Nova, was nominated for a Grammy award. He has also toured as a keyboardist in rock bands fronted by such musicians as John Lydon (Public Image Ltd.), who was previously known as the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten; ex-Rolling Stone Mick Taylor, and Graham Parker.

He scored his first film in the mid-1970s at the urging of a former girlfriend, who was a film editor. "At the time I was doing a lot of touring, arranging a lot of records and playing on a lot of records.

And I was also writing for a lot of classical groups—quartets and quintets at Carnegie Recital Hall, things like that. And she said, 'You should do a film.' In those days I thought it would be corny for me. But I did a film, and I liked it. It was a very small film called *In the Heart of the Garden*. I had a great experience writing it, and thought: 'This isn't bad at all.'"

Diamond has a somewhat unusual process when he takes on a film. "I like to write the end credits first. To me that sums up the whole film, and I can take elements from that and break that apart, and use it for characters or external scenes."

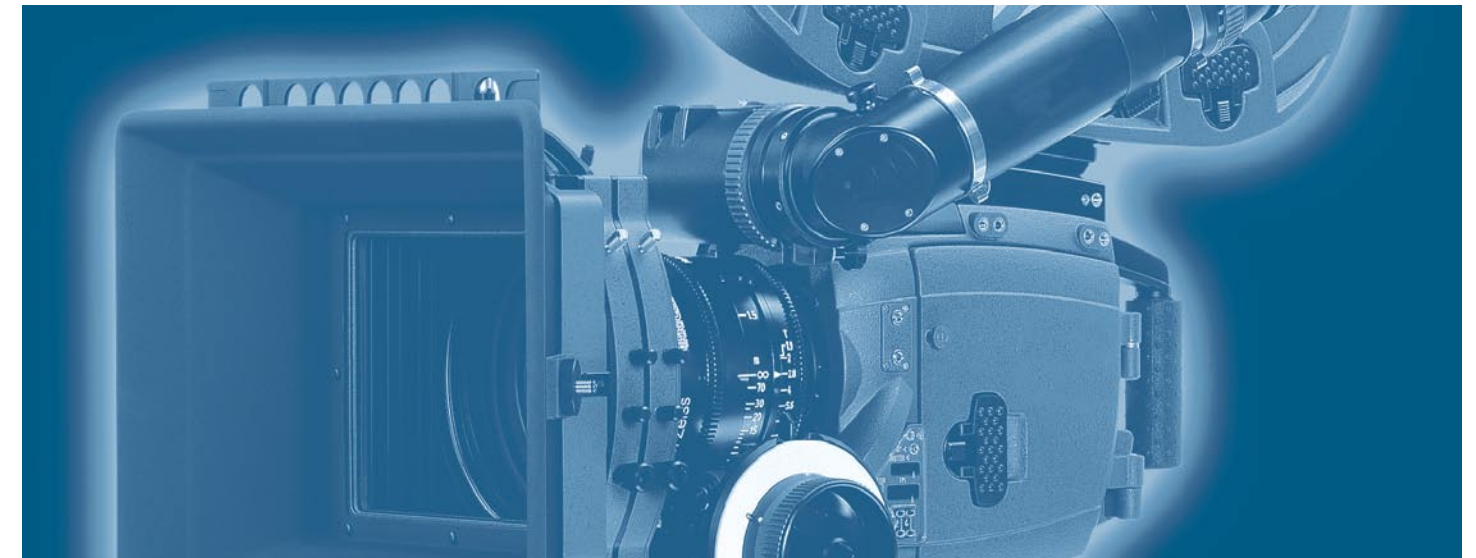
Communication with the director is the key to a great score. "I try to talk a lot, I try to give them an idea of which direction I'd like to go in as far as orchestration and a theme. They either say, yes, or 'No, I'm thinking along this line,' or 'Let's do it this way.'"

While he thinks about the score after he reads a script those ideas take shape when he sees the first footage. "It gets a little more complex than that. You're approaching a scene in many ways. I try to get an overall feel for the film, whether it's used or not. Then I'll work on characters, counter themes, and then specific scenes, whether something is internal or external. I have to figure out how to set up a scene."

Diamond often is odds with his agent over what types of jobs he should take and where he should live. "My agent is out in LA but I'm not crazy about moving out there. To be perfectly honest, I like working on [NY]independent films. The money is not as good, but as long as I can make a living I am happy. In Hollywood you have to write what they want to write. On an independent film, I can write what I want to a certain extent. It comes down to a collaboration."

"He starts screaming at me. I tell him to get me something that will make me feel creative. If you want a hack, or get someone to write those syrupy strings, there are a lot of guys who will do that. I'm not the kind of a guy who can do a good job on something I don't want to do. I have to like a project. It's hard enough to do something you want to do. My agent in LA always is trying to get me these commercial jobs out there. They will fly me out. I go on these interviews. They're very nice people. Then they'd start talking about the film, and you're like 'Wait a minute.' And then you weigh it, and say: 'The pay is really good but how long am I going to work on this film.' You know you're going to wind up in therapy, so I always wind up saying no. I can't go through this."

*Larry Jaffee is a New York-based freelance writer specializing in the entertainment and media business. His writing has been published by The New York Times, Rolling Stone, Hollywood Reporter, and Billboard, among numerous other publications. He may be reached at [lsjaffee@gmail.com](mailto:lsjaffee@gmail.com).*



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# Advice on Film Industry Internships for Students

## Creating a Meaningful Internship

by Fred Ginsburg, C.A.S., Ph.D

The ideal internship is an opportunity for the student to observe and participate in the day to day activities of the production company. The student gets to experience what really goes on behind the scenes, such as sitting in on meetings, overhearing conversations, spending time on the set, watching over the shoulder of the editor, and so on. Maybe even the student can utilize his or her learned filmmaking skills in some manner to contribute to the project.

But in any case, an internship is supposed to be a learning experience.

It is for these reasons that I warn students to be extremely cautious if ever offered a "paid internship." It has been my observation that in most (but not all) instances the paid internship turns into nothing more than an exchange of menial labor in return for some spending money.

When a production company is paying an intern, the tendency is often to regard the student as an employee for which the company expects to get its dollars worth. In our fantasies, the host company puts the student to work in productive and meaningful activities, such as an assistant editor, a member of the camera crew, or even as a Grip or Utility on the set. But after we awake from our slumber, we find the student being kept busy with the tasks that no one in the office wants to do themselves, from making coffee runs to replacing the pink pages in the scripts with the blue revisions.

Production tasks have evolved into photocopying, shredding, collating & stapling, and delivering sealed manila envelopes all around the parts of town that lack any adjacent parking!

Part of the problem is that the young turks who work in the offices of the production companies are fearful of new blood. Although these young execs may be highly salaried, their positions are far from secure and long-term. So when some perky, overly enthusiastic intern gets assigned to them – they see the student as a potential rival and future threat. The student is rapidly demeaned to janitorial status and prevented from showing off their filmmaking talents to the higher ups.

At least when a student intern is not on salary, the production company execs feel more obligated to play host and mentor. Somewhere down the line, they agreed to the university or the professor to take responsibility for the student and to teach him/her "the way the industry really works". There is less temptation to "justify" the intern's worth back to the company.

Should things not work out as anticipated, do not hesitate to resign and seek a new

internship. You are there to learn. You are not there as cheap or free labor. Lending a hand is one thing; but continuously being taken advantage of is entirely different.

When you interview for an internship, discuss what you expect to get out of the internship along with what the host company expects of you in return. Make it clear that although you are willing to spend a reasonable amount of time doing office chores, you also expect to devote most of your internship in a manner productive to your education.

Many students have told me that interning in the Office is often not what they wanted to do. They had visions of spending most of their time in the edit bays or out on the set, rather than in the administrative lobbies. However, they were grateful to get any internship that could get them closer to the major industry.

Why not, then, create your own internship? Rather than just calling the phone number on the 3x5 card that was posted on the "Internship Bulletin Board" and being assigned to a liaison in the "front office", students should consider working the system from the bottom up.

If you want to spend time in a particular specialty, such as editing or camera or sound or screenwriting, then make contact with someone in that field. Except for a minor handful of famous artisans, the vast majority of professional craftspeople would be flattered and honored to be contacted by a student fan of their work. They are generally more than happy to invite a student to come down and observe them, be it in their edit suite or on the set. They will make the necessary phone calls to "put you on the list" at the gate.

Once you arrive, your new mentors will take you around and introduce you to the rest of the crew. After that, it is smooth sailing. You can spend all your time in one department, or move around and visit others on the set. Sometimes, depending on the union regulations, the crew will even allow the intern to assist on some shots. In some cases (rare, but it has happened), the intern has even gotten hired on to the crew!

Now that you have created a meaningful

internship, it is just a matter of maintaining a student journal and doing some paperwork back at the university to turn the experience into something official that will count on your transcript.

If you are interning or observing on a film set, there are a few important rules to abide by.

Be punctual and dependable. If you say you are going to be somewhere at a certain time, be there. If you have been assigned (or volunteered) a task, complete it to the best of your ability. If you don't know how to do something, ask for assistance rather than muck it up.

Never make noise nor talk while the "red light" is lit (i.e., during a take). Don't even walk. Turn off your cell phone. Stay out of the pathway of busy crewmembers.

Never bring a personal camera to the set until everyone knows you and feels comfortable with your hanging out. Leave the director and actors alone (and skip the autographs until you become friends). Spend your time around the crew, not the

celebrities or the execs (until they get to know you). Do not be mistaken for a "fan".

Offer to help any member of the crew, but do not be pushy. Eventually they will take you up on your offer. Feel free to ask some questions, but do not get insulted if someone is too busy to answer them. Make notes and re-ask when things are less hectic.

Remember to be sincere. Don't forget thank-you cards and notes of appreciation.

*Fred Ginsburg, C.A.S., Ph.D. is a Production Sound Mixer with over two decades of experience on feature films, episodic television, national commercials, corporate, and government. He is the author of over 90 articles and "Guide to the Nagra 4.2 and Production Sound Recording." Fred is president of the Equipment Emporium Inc. and co-Executive Director of the National Association of Forensic Video. He also teaches at the California State University Northridge.*

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# Tips for Writing Better Dialogue

## Keeping It Brief

by Sebastian Corbascio



"If you're going to shoot, shoot. Don't talk."  
~Tuco, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*

"Actions speak louder than words"  
~Anonymous

"Action is character."  
~F. Scott Fitzgerald

Writing better dialogue frequently means removing existing dialogue and replacing it with action, or substituting action before putting any dialogue down. All screenwriters have to seriously acquaint themselves with the great films of the silent era, and how the Sennett two-reelers and the Chaplin shorts moved forward and kept the audiences rapt. There are a set of ground rules. The great writers of today are not really doing anything different than the silent era gag writers. The secret? Brevity.

The stage loves words, cinema loves movement. Say what you want to say in the briefest possible way. If that means taking out an entire speech, and replacing it with an arched eyebrow, do so. If you have to choose between the two, arched eyebrow packs a greater punch.

What to do about exposition: exposition that is not ammunition murders a screenplay. In the great scene in *Godfather II* where Hyman Roth (Lee Strasberg) brags

to Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) that "we're bigger than US Steel", Hyman Roth is not saying that for the audience's benefit. He is using the carrot-stick approach with Michael Corleone, telling him that it's in Michael's best interest all around to get on board. Michael will be rich, avoid a gang war and maybe be the first Italian President of the United States. If this speech came out of the blue without the two million not reaching the island, audiences would nod off. It's a brilliant speech, but without the plot points that came before it, it's stunt writing.

The same goes for Jensen's (Ned Beatty) speech to Howard Beale (Peter Finch) in the classic film *Network*. Jensen's Hitleresque speech swaying the already fragile Beale to embrace his world concept is not only a thrill, but serves as a plot point, ultimately leading up to Howard Beale's assassination at the hands of the UBS Mandarin. Without the precedent, and then, third act, it's stunt writing. So as a general rule, avoid long speeches unless they push the story forward.

Gangsters and love stories: why is the gangster genre so enduring? One of the reasons is because the gangster has to think half a second faster than his adversary; often his life depends on it. A nod speaks volumes; a facial tick can bring down an empire. This approach can guide writers

to write more effective dialogue in all other genres (love stories included). In the gangster picture, the dialogue is qualitative, not quantitative.

Exercise: as a writer, try writing a classic two-reel vignette (8 to 10 minutes), a la Mack Sennett or Buster Keaton. Take note when viewing that there is little to no dialogue (in the case of silents and few title cards) and almost pure action. As with all screenwriting, the character has to get from A to B using the shortest way possible; the obstacles create the tension and drama. The writer can create a tension-filled scenario where the protagonist has to get from A to B using no dialogue. These could include a prison break, a prom date, or anything with obstacles to overcome. This is a great exercise to keep the creative muscles in shape. If you are stuck mid-screenplay, it will be a huge help in looking at and re-thinking your screenplay.

*Sebastian Corbascio is a writer/director who lives and works in San Francisco, California. He can be reached at his website [www.greatsocietyfilmworks.com](http://www.greatsocietyfilmworks.com).*



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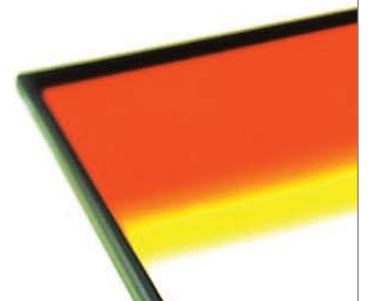
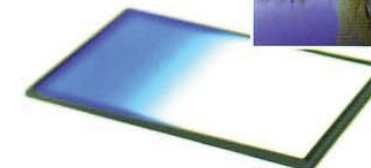
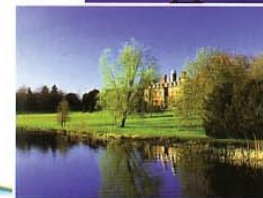
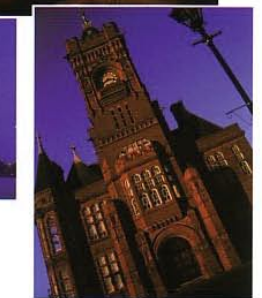
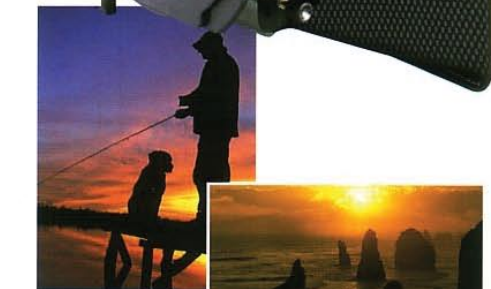
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# Low Budget Documentary Filmmaking

A Journey with Twists, Turns,  
Angst, Strife, and Black Holes

by Chris Cavallari



The road to Eagle Butte, SD

Documentary film production has always been the rogue brother of the filmmaking family. From the earliest films like Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, to more modern (and controversial) fare like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the documentary film focuses a unique, and purportedly unbiased eye on the drama of real life. And while this unbiased eye can delve deep into the human condition, it can only depict that condition through the lens of the filmmaker's eye. It is because of this documentary film has become an important and contentious part of the film industry. Aside from the controversy documentary film seems to invoke, the genre has only recently begun to take hold of the mainstream film going audience.

Early documentary film was generally in the form of travelogues, also called "scenics." These simple films took viewers on a visual journey of real places using a structure similar to that of narrative films. Many times, these films were re-enactments of real life events, presented in a true to story manner. Documentary film really came into its own during the early to mid-twentieth century, when news reporters found it to be an ideal way of bringing stories from the frontlines of WWI and WWII right into the American public's neighborhood theaters. Newsreels took it a step further, many times staging the action to stir up passion from an audience. This type of documentary filmmaking came to be known as propaganda, and was used by governments on both sides of the conflicts to rally support for the cause. By the 1950s and 1960s, films like D.A.

Pennabaker's intimate *Don't Look Back* and Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* introduced the film going public to *cinéma vérité*, a style that took a realistic approach to its subjects. In these films, the camera acted as passive observer, allowing the subjects to create the story. Today's documentary combines many of the styles from the past, creating a new, creative, and – of course – often controversial film genre all its own.

With the accessibility of ultra-portable digital video equipment, it's become simpler than ever to produce a documentary in any number of different styles. That simplicity comes with a price: while digital video acts as the great equalizer, allowing people of all ages and backgrounds to document real life (not to be confused with Reality TV) on the screen, it also has led to a glut of mediocre filmmaking. This glut makes it difficult for the cream to rise to the top.

In 2005, I was asked to produce a historical record of some of the elders in the Lakota Sioux tribe on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota, USA. Armed only with a camera, tripod, some microphones, and my own two eyes, I trekked out to the relatively remote town of Eagle Butte, SD, to record on videotape the wisdom, advice, and teachings of the Lakota Elders. Keeping some basic filmmaking ideas in mind, even the low-budget documentarian can make an interesting and important piece of documentary film.

## Even Documentaries Need Planning

The impetus for the *Lakota Elders Project: A Journey of the Generations* came about in early 2005 when my producers, Susan Dantino of Tunxis Community College (Farmington, CT) and Rochelle Ripley of hawkwing, Inc. (Glastonbury, CT) realized that there was a distinct need for the stories and lessons of the Lakota people to be preserved in some way before the Elders who hold those stories pass on. The oral tradition of the Lakota culture, like many cultures around the globe, is slowly fading as younger generations turn to television and the Internet for their entertainment and learning. Dantino, Associate Dean of Institutional Planning & Effectiveness at Tunxis Community College, and Ripley, founder and president of hawkwing, Inc., a Native American non-profit organization, had met at a presentation on the Lakota tribe at the school, and quickly formed a relationship between Tunxis and hawkwing. From that relationship was born the idea that would eventually become *The Lakota Elders Project*.

When I was brought on to the project, I quickly learned that I would be doing most of the actual production work on my own, assuming the roles of co-producer, writer, director, cinematographer, audio technician, editor, and DVD producer. No crew for this one. This would test my skills as a documentarian and filmmaker.

It all started with an outline. In any documentary, even if you don't lay out a script ahead of time, having an outline can help in planning for the inevitable: at some point, something can and will go wrong. The producers drew up a description of the project and a list of roles everyone would play in the project. The outline also included an outline of the Seven Lakota Values. These values are guides for the Lakota people and are a foundation upon which their heritage is based. Ultimately, these principles served as the guideline for the entire film. The goal of the film was to have a student from Tunxis meet with a student from Si Tanka University in South Dakota. These two students were chosen for being the most likely to gain something from the experience. Each of our roles was detailed in this outline, and carefully coordinated with the contacts at Cheyenne River and Si Tanka.

My next step was to research and purchase equipment. I would be traveling to South Dakota in September, a very dry time of the year in the Great Plains of the US. I knew that I would be carrying most or all of my gear on my person, and that there would be a lot of walking involved. A lightweight camera, microphone, and lighting package would be essential to the project. Determining the camera I would shoot with presented a challenge. I knew I wanted to have a feeling of history and time presented visually in the film, but I also knew that because of the impressively limited budget, I'd be begging, borrowing, and dealing to get much of the gear. Therefore, traditional film was out. That narrowed my choices down to a very few digital video cameras. Having previously worked with the Panasonic DVX100 camera, it was an easy decision to go with its newer model, the DVX100A. This camera shoots in 24fps progressive, and its CineGamma settings produce a beautiful film-like image. These features would give me the necessary look while keeping cost to a minimum.

I was able to borrow a Sony wireless lavalier microphone from a colleague, and I had purchased an Azden SGM-1x shotgun microphone. These would be my workhorses on the project, as I had no audio technician to mix in more sources. The wireless lav was used to mic the main subject of the interview, while the shotgun microphone picked up the interviewer's voice and ambient sound. Mixing of the sources was done in camera using the DVX's on board audio controls. Since I had to concentrate on the shooting as well, I basically used the "set it and forget it" method, except when levels began to peak. I monitored audio with a pair of Sony MDR-V600 professional studio monitor headphones. These supra-aural (over-the-ear) headphones filtered out extraneous noise and let me listen to only the audio that was passing through the camera. Super low budget filmmaking does mean sometimes sacrificing good sound for usable sound, and though I did my best to keep acceptable levels and avoid distractions like wind and pops, a few problems snuck through anyway. Post-production was going to be fun.

I carried all this and my Libec lightweight tripod in the Domke Iguana 20 photo backpack. This pack was amazing. It features moveable Velcro separators that allow you to customize compartments within the main bag, and has several straps and pockets for lashing, compression, and storage. The bag also comes with a pocket that allows you to strap a lightweight tripod to the side or front of the bag. And finally, the bag unzips in three different ways for easy access to gear in different parts of the pack.

Lighting presented a very large problem, one I knew I'd be dealing with the entire project. This problem did, however, stretch my creativity and problem solving skills. Several factors prevented the production from having even a basic lighting kit, not the least of which were budget and crew. There was no budget to rent a kit for an entire week. I was able to borrow a small on-camera light from a colleague, but this would prove to be useless in most situations. Keeping this in mind, and realizing that I had never seen any of the locations in which we'd be shooting, my producers and I drew up a rudimentary interview lighting plan. We were shooting in September, a month in which the weather would be fairly cooperative. Warm temperatures and little rain would allow us to shoot many of the scenes outdoors. Fortunately for us, a Pow-Wow and rodeo were happening that week, so a lot of the shooting would be outdoors in sunny environments. Of course, as any lighting cameraman knows, sun can be your worst enemy on a shoot, causing deep, harsh shadows and very high contrast. My solution to this was to shoot interviewees under the protection of a tent or in the shadow of a building. Backgrounds did tend to bloom out under the harsh light, but it was more important for the subjects to be well lit than the backgrounds.

Indoor shots presented a more difficult challenge. We avoided them as much as possible, but sometimes we just had to do it. In one case, we were shooting in a large, circular room with 30 to 40 foot ceilings. Aside from the sound bouncing all over the place, the lighting was horrible. There were several large industrial room lights on the conical ceiling, and a large circular skylight. The skylight allowed in some very diffused skylight. After some basic



Lakota Elder Leroy Curley (Right) chats with Emmanuel Red Bear under a cooling tent at the Pow-wow.

white balancing and opening up the iris as much as possible, I used the on camera light for a bit of fill light. With no reflectors or additional lighting units, I shot the scene. This whole production had a sort of cinema vérité lighting scheme, though I left out the immediacy of the handheld camera. The elders speak slowly and quietly, so I felt that handholding would really take away from the message.

Camera settings were left at their default levels in the F6 scene file. I had decided early on that I would be shooting in the 24p Advanced mode, which records to tape in a 2:3:3:2 pulldown. This mode produces a more film-like image by recording four full frames for every five frames of video recorded to tape. The remaining two are split field frames. Once in post-production, applying a 2:3:3:2 pulldown filter would drop the last two frames, leaving the four clean, progressive scanned frames. Panasonic's CineGamma setting in the 24pA mode effectively controlled the high contrast light through its knee settings. The DVX100A actually handled the high contrast situations well, giving rich, warm colors while keeping the contrast somewhat under control. This allowed me more freedom and less color correction in post.

### The Night Before

Some form of planning on a documentary

shoot is essential. This becomes no more evident than when something goes wrong. Murphy's Law states that if something can go wrong, it will. When working on a film production, anything that can go wrong, will go wrong...at the very last minute. Such was the case with the *Lakota Elders Project*. Two students were scheduled to work on the film as virtual liaisons between the viewers and the elders: one student from Tunxis Community College, the other from Si Tanka University. The Tunxis student would have acted as a production assistant to me while also helping with the questions. The Si Tanka student was to be the Lakota youth talking on camera with the elder. At 6 p.m. the evening before we were to leave for South Dakota, we received a phone call. The Tunxis student had been in a devastating motorcycle accident, and was in the hospital with serious injuries. She would not be joining us on the trip. Needless to say, this was a blow to all of us, both personally and professionally. While the accident was tragic, we knew we couldn't let this slow us down. We needed to rethink our plans immediately.

### Go With The Flow

The incident from the evening before was only the start of our problems during the 5-day shoot. The Lakota people run on a very different clock than much of the rest of the country. They take their time and are

very deliberate and thoughtful in everything they do. As a result, schedules you set don't always hold true. Several problems presented themselves almost instantly.

My producers had only a little experience in planning a film of this type, and because of "Lakota Time," we didn't have a set schedule of interviewees. Much of our time was spent looking for elders willing to speak with *wasicu*, the Lakota word for white people. It was a difficult search, as the Lakota are very guarded when it comes to *wasicu*. And with good reason. Broken treaties, broken trust, and exploitation have all contributed to a sort of mistrust. Yet the Lakota are very kind and giving people. After some convincing that our intentions were honorable, and that the film was being *done for the tribe*, some people sat down and spoke with us.

While the producers went searching for interviewees, I went about shooting B-roll and cutaways for use in post-production. On a documentary, these pieces of footage can be lifesavers.

Being able to adapt to the situation is important in any documentary shoot, and this one was no different. Eagle Butte is an impoverished town, so people don't always have telephones. Many people also live outside of the main town, and in the US Plains, that can mean they live many miles out in the middle of nowhere. Because of this, it was often difficult to contact not only our interviewees, but also the student from Si Tanka University. Often the Si Tanka student would seemingly appear out of thin air, showing up in the oddest of places. Sometimes, we simply couldn't find him at all. In these cases, one of our producers would fill in for the student. Since we were finding it difficult to schedule elders ahead of time, we often found ourselves just wandering around town, speaking with locals who could lead us to an elder. At one point, I even found myself the only white person in the Tribal Council Chambers during a town meeting. Uncomfortable? Yes. But definitely a learning experience. As a low-budget documentary filmmaker, you will undoubtedly find yourself in many uncomfortable situations. These circumstances may offer the best footage for your film.

### Post-Production

After the shoot, I sat down for what I knew would be a long and tumultuous journey along a road with twists, turns, angst, strife, black holes, and more than a few small plastic toys thrown across the room. Yes, it was time for post-production. And, as any good editor knows, a plan is in order. I had no editing assistant, no intern to do the dirty work of logging for me. I did, however, have a very important document at my disposal. Ripley, who is part Lakota herself, had created a thorough outline that included the seven Lakota values, each value section containing some of the elders who had explained these values through their stories. This outline provided a perfect guide for the film.

The edit room is really where the documentary's story will come to life, and there is no more important phase of editing than the logging of the footage. My plan came about in the logging and digitizing of around ten hours of footage. This part of editing is important because it allows you, as the person who shot the footage, to take a more subjective look at the tapes. I was able to really see what I had shot and pick and choose from the best clips. You *will* eventually get tired of seeing the same interview shot and hearing the same person talking over and over and over again, but you'll also be able to shift and shape the program into something that will not only hold your audience's attention, but pull them in to a gripping, emotional story.

At this point, every editor has his or her own style. Here are a few ideas to keep in mind when editing your documentary. First, log your footage first. Before you let a single byte of information flow through that Firewire cable, make sure you know all your footage: the good, the bad, and the ugly. This will prepare you for the next step: The Edit Decision List, or EDL. In technical terms, the EDL is a list of your logged footage with its timecode in and out points. In this case, however, I'm referring to a basic outline of the story your footage is trying to tell.

Unlike a traditional narrative feature film, your "screenplay" will be written in this phase of production. Allow the narrative to come out and play by giving the film a beginning, middle, and end. Introduce your characters and begin the story in the exposition; hit your first "plot point," a conflict that spins the story into a new direction (e.g., your documentary subject reveals they have a terminal disease, but they're going to do something about it); continue with your Act II where most of the action occurs – let your subjects tell their stories, through their words and actions; hit your last plot point, the climax; then move on to your Act III, where you wrap up all your loose ends. A word of warning: use title cards sparingly, if at all. Title cards – those parts of a film where the filmmaker puts up a screen full of text – are acceptable for getting the audience up to speed quickly, (for example, I used several in the beginning of the *LEP* to give a little bit of history of the Lakota people), or for informing people of the status of a subject long after filming is complete, but using them as a crutch for a lack of content is simply unacceptable and poor filmmaking technique. Avoid this mistake in your planning phase before shooting begins. Allow for the shooting of extra footage, ask more questions than you had

planned – anything to further the story along without using title cards.

### Like a Puzzle

Filmmaking, by its very nature, is a collaborative endeavor. Sometimes hundreds of people come together with the goal of producing an entertaining, interesting, and sometimes educational piece of work. Yet, even when your crew is limited to three people, the collaboration remains key. Documentary film is like a jigsaw puzzle. When you begin, you'll have hundreds of pieces scattered on the floor, with no semblance of a finished product. As you move along, shooting interviews and events, planning and re-planning, dealing with the unexpected, viewing the footage, and cutting it all together, the pieces begin fitting together until finally, they all fall into place. Just like any puzzle, this requires a great deal of patience and determination. It's not easy; so don't expect it to be. Documentary film can be a very personal and intimate journey for the filmmaker. No more so is this true than in the super low-budget documentary, where a few people may fill the roles of many. It can be a very rewarding experience, but it is also one that will require effort above and beyond that of a traditional film production. Planning ahead while being able to "go with the flow" will help to keep you on track and in the game, allowing you to create a documentary masterpiece.

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Filmmaker Chris Cavallari shoots a scene in which Bill Iron Hawk interviews his father, Manny Iron Hawk. Photo courtesy Susan Dantino.

John sits alone in his school cafeteria after the bell has rung and students have gone back to class in *Lone State*. Photo by Rob Hauer, Photoshop by Phillip Van.



# Lens Selection

## Maximize Your Aesthetic by Knowing Your Lenses

by Phillip Van

Lens selection is a gray zone between direction and cinematography. Understanding lenses and valuing the effect that lens selection has on the final aesthetic and tone of a film can benefit a director immensely. Mapping out your lens choices before going into production is as elemental as good shotlists or storyboards. Knowing and feeling what you are seeing before it is in front of you will help you deal better with inevitable changes and variations on set, allowing you to plot these against the backdrop of the work and previsualization you have done, and immediately either get inspired or know that something isn't working.

Lenses should be chosen based on the story and your aesthetic approach to it. In

the past, 35mm lenses were the real-estate of feature films and nice budgets, but with 35mm adapters out now for prosumer DV cameras, even beginning filmmakers can now know what lenses can do for their projects and the differences between them.

### Lens Options and Favorites

There are many different lens sets available for either 2/3" Hi-Def, super-16mm, and spherical and/or anamorphic 35mm formats: Zeiss' newly released Master Primes, DigiPrimes and DigiZooms, or standards such as their Ultra Primes and Super Speeds, Panavision Primos, Cooke S4s, and Cooke and Angenieux zooms,

among many others.

If you have a predisposition for graphic lines and details and are looking for sharp, crisp and exacting glass, you can choose between either Panavision Primos or Zeiss Ultra Primes as options. However, there are no right or wrong answers, and it is all based on the tone and style of the film and the format you choose to shoot on. For some, Zeiss Master and Ultra Primes may work wonderfully on film, but may feel too sharp on other mediums, such as the Arri D-20, Dalsa Origin or Genesis. Depending on your taste, these 35mm HD hybrid cameras may be better accommodated by a set of Cooke S4's, which have a slightly warmer color calibration and a softer, more 'rendered' feel. The proper adjectives to

describe subjective lens characteristics beyond their technical qualifications are a topic of some debate amongst cinematographers. The best solution is to test the lenses for yourself in order to gain a better understanding of each sets' trademark characteristics with respect to the other options available.

You can always supplement your lens choices with a filter kit consisting of Tiffen Black Promists or Schneider Black Frosts, for example, but choosing lenses that suit the project and format before relying on filtration will allow you to play the filters less and stay 'cleaner' and more organic to your format.

### Long Lenses: A Preference and 'Cheat'

Some directors and cinematographers love shooting on long lenses. Part of the inherent beauty of long lenses is their shallow depth-of-field. They can make

35mm feel like an even larger photographic format. But almost everything ultimately depends on your framing, lighting and subject matter.

You can frame something on a long lens so that it feels absolutely distancing, like a telephoto lens on a spy camera. On the other hand, you can "cheat" the long lens for the shallow depth of field associated with a larger format size, if you frame or light intimately enough to offset the "spy cam" feel.

Along these same lines, using long lenses on super-16mm can sometimes help "cheat" the format for something closer to 35mm. With the reduced format size of super-16mm, the approximate super-16mm lens equivalent of say, a 50mm lens on 35mm film, would be a 25mm lens. It would yield a very similar image and frame, only you would get a substantially increased depth-of-field at the same f-stop because your format is smaller. By throwing on a 50mm or 85mm lens instead, for example, then backing the camera off until you achieve a similar frame, you can find a shallow depth-of-field that comes closer to what you would be able to achieve on 35mm film. Again, when or why you should do this is always context dependant, and some shots may suffer for it, but others can gain a tremendous amount.

### 35mm Lenses for a Digital Realm

The shallow depth-of-field gained from 35mm lenses and long lens choices has another great application when it comes to shooting digitally. The mini-35 adapter for DV prosumer cameras and the Pro-35mm adapter for the Panasonic Varicam and Sony F-900, among others, allow 35mm optics to be applied to a much lower-resolution digital format. The CCD chips on DV cameras and ENG styled HD cameras are small comparative to 35mm. They yield a high depth-of-field, which in part contributes to the common claim that these formats appear "flat" with comparison to film.

Like the digital 24P movement in DV and HD, adding the depth of field of film lenses is another way to "cheat" the look of film

inexpensively. At the root of this aesthetic cheat, however, these adapters are helping the digital medium in a very particular way.

When shooting in low light situations, with gain on or with high levels of certain colors in the frame (in Panasonic's case: reds) artifacting, blocking and digital compression become more evident. But these are always factors on digital mediums whether heavy enough to be apparent to the naked eye or not. These issues become pronounced in two cases: when a digital format is projected or when any form of rotoscoping, compositing or significant color correction work needs to be done to digital images.

By narrowing the depth of field and allowing a significant portion of the image to be thrown dramatically out of focus, 35mm lenses clean up and reduce much of the digital compression and "blockiness" that occurs on any digital format. As a result, the use of adapted 35mm lenses helps a digital image in such a way that it doesn't just look more like 35mm, but ultimately screens cleaner and is easier to work with in a compositing or Da Vinci suite, should effects or corrections be required.

### Methods of Shooting: The Sacred Frame

A good rule of thumb is to try to never feel as though your camera placement and lens choices are inevitable or have to be compromised because of a certain location or limited space. Even in a tiny New York City apartment, there are inherent ways to buy yourself more real estate. Consider a nudge of a couch or chair, or the use of a doorway or hallway, as a small adjustment may add immensely to the flexibility of your lens selection and the cinematic integrity of your frame.

One of the reasons thinking about lens selection early on is critical is it can help set the tone and pace of your workflow. Think of your ideal frame and lens choice and make these the things that don't change. Everything around you, all physical and architectural elements can be altered to suit the needs of your frame. You don't necessarily need a huge design crew or a



John eats dinner with his family in *Lone State*. Photo by Rob Hauer, Photoshop by Phillip Van.

Hollywood-sized budget to begin thinking this way. Even on no budget, you can find ways to bend the world to suit your vision.

You may ultimately decide that a living room set is too small. You're in a space with a full crew and actors, and you have to create what you've seen in your head with limited options. If you truly hold your framing and lens choices sacred, you may come up with something that inevitably works better than you originally thought. For example, a crew member searching for a bathroom opens a door to a back hallway you had no idea existed. Soon you're shooting down the hallway, through two doorways, into a kitchen, where your scene suddenly has a new intimacy because the actors no longer feel inundated by the crew. When problems arise, there are ways around every obstacle. Sometimes, good lens selection requires you to literally think outside of the box. Rather than hinder filmmaking, extreme limitations often make your choices more succinct and improve the integrity of your vision.

**Lone State: Lens Selection Applied**

I love going from very tight to very wide compositions. I used the concept recently on a public service announcement that I directed for Metlife and Strang Cancer

Prevention Center through NYU. The idea came from my affinity for Spaghetti Westerns. Director Sergio Leone and DP Tonino Delli Colli played with contrasting extreme close-ups and wide angled shots all the time. They are two of the most inherently dynamic types of shots: going right from the intensity of a human face in close-up to a massive landscape, in which that human is suddenly small or alone.

The PSA is called *Lone State*, and is about an obese boy named Jon who is socially isolated throughout the day at school and tries to speak to his parents at night about his condition, but can't break through.

The whole commercial is composed of only four shots, each a subtle reveal, which begins in a close-up on Jon's face, then dollies back 40 feet, becoming a wide shot of him in his environment. As the shot widens we begin to see where he is, in a cafeteria at a table by himself, in the school gym on a mat in the corner, finally at home with his family at dinner. The shots are designed to aesthetically depict a growing feeling of isolation. They begin in the character's personal space, and slowly reveal the world around him and his lack of connection to other people.

We shot the commercial on a Panavision G2 camera using a Panavised Cooke Zoom 20-100mm lens. Lens selection was

critical. Our initial intention was to shoot the whole commercial on a 40mm Primo Prime. But adding a slight zoom-in against the feeling of dollying out gave the move a new dynamic. It was a far subtler version of the Hitchcock Vertigo concept, where you zoom in the opposite direction of the dolly to make the space around the character feel like it's either receding away or rushing up on him. This didn't pronounce itself with that sort of intensity, but just gave everything a little extra edge. The zoom was also a practical choice, helping us start tighter than the prime would allow, hide speed changes in the dolly and smooth out the move a bit more.

In terms of wide lenses, I particularly love a 16mm prime for 35mm photography. The 20mm end of the Cooke zoom came close and rang true enough to work for our project. On the long end of the lens, we only ventured about as far as the 85mm mark, which was more than enough to suit our needs. The zoom breathed moderately while focusing, but in combination with the dolly and zoom move taking place during the shot, the breathing of the lens became negligible. The lens had a slightly softer, warmer feel, which my DP Rob Hauer and I, combined with soft, wrapping light from large HMI sources backed away from the action and diffused through grid cloth. The actors were lit with a very subtle 2:1 short-side key-to-fill ratio.

The aesthetic plan was to crush the blacks and heavily increasing the contrast ratio during a supervised color correction in post. This look was an integral part of the tone and feel of the commercial. In a case like this, hard light can become extremely problematic, because when you ride up contrast in post, whites clip and blacks crush too quickly. Shooting against the desired look by choosing a warmer lens and lighting softly helped provide the best possible foundational groundwork for adding dynamic contrast in the post workflow.

**The Bigger Picture**

Ultimately as filmmakers we operate in a highly technical medium and require a good understanding of all the elements at play. Prepare using everything available to you and take big steps to plan ahead. This can make pre-production complicated, but the more you labor at this stage, the more you will be mentally available to your actors and crew when you step on set, and the more you can be appreciative of unexpected gifts in performance or lighting that come your way while shooting. Gather everything you can from your lens choices, lighting choices, your pre-production process and the technology available to you so that when you go into production, you can take every bit of it with you.

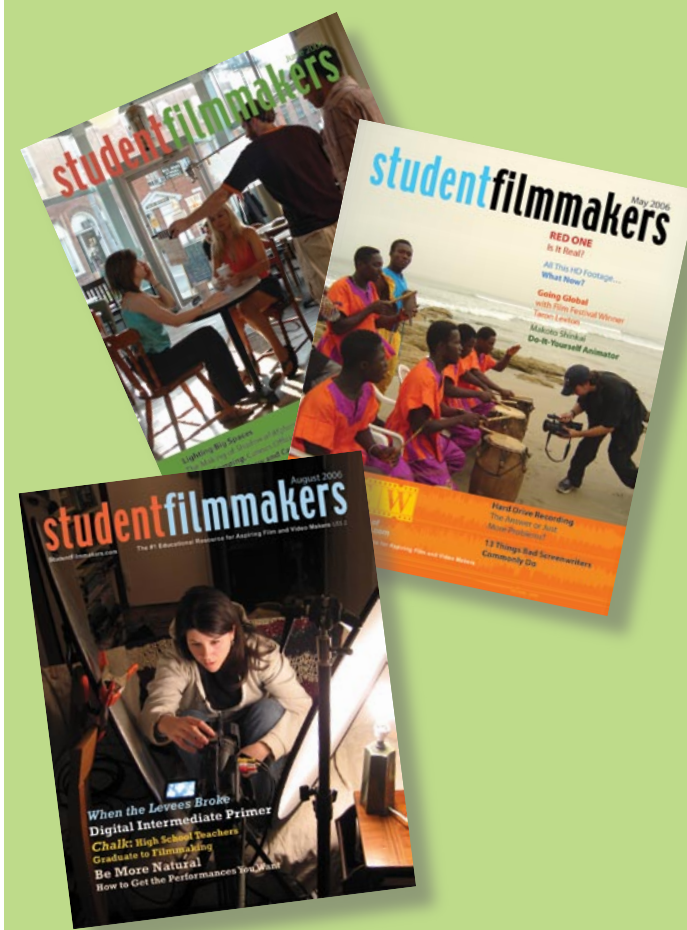
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Phil composes a shot, auditioning his lens on a director's viewfinder. Photo by Jon Rivera.



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Sebastian Corbascio (Photo © Bill Lavallie 2005)



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