

VIDEO SHOOTER

THIRD EDITION

MASTERING
STORYTELLING
TECHNIQUES

BARRY
BRAVERMAN



Video Shooter

Mastering Storytelling Techniques

Barry Braverman

First published 2014 by Focal Press
70 Blanchard Road, Suite 402, Burlington, MA 01803

Simultaneously published in the UK by Focal Press
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Focal Press is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Braverman, Barry.

Video shooter: mastering storytelling techniques / Barry Braverman. — [Third edition]
pages cm

1. Video recordings—Production and direction. 2. Digital cinematography. I. Title.

PN1992.94.B75 2013

384.55'8—dc23

2013006522

ISBN: 978-0-240-82517-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-240-82522-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times

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To my father, who taught me to see the beauty in technical things

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	xiii
CHAPTER 1 The Shooter's Point of View	1
Your Story's Point of View	4
No More Chasing Rainbows.....	5
Wearing Many Hats Now	6
Learning the Discipline	8
New Points of View	9
Look Who's Shooting Now	10
Hire Your Clients!.....	11
You Have the Power	12
CHAPTER 2 Let Me Tell You a Story.....	13
What Makes a Good Story?.....	15
Know Your Genre and Make Sure Your Audience Knows	15
What Does Your Poster Look Like?.....	18
Know Your Log Line.....	19
Embrace Your Limitations.....	19
For Different Reasons.....	20
Your Comparative Advantage.....	20
Limit Your Canvas	21
Respect Your Camera's Dynamic Range.....	22
Shoot the Magic Hour	23
Authenticity Matters	23
The Story Never Stops.....	24
Ethics Matter	25
CHAPTER 3 The Video Storyteller	27
Still Lofty Expectations.....	27
Put a Frame Around the World.....	28
Exclude, Exclude, Exclude!	29
Make 'Em Suffer	30
A Unique Perspective	34
Obscure, Hide, and Conceal	35
Matters of Perspective	36
Box-Girder Bridges, Anyone?.....	38
The Rule of Thirds.....	40
The Golden Rectangle	41
Evoking Pain.....	41
What Kind of Place?.....	43
Embrace the Theory	44
Craft Matters.....	45
Close-Ups Are Your Meat and Potatoes.....	47
Attack Obliquely	48
Shot Progression and Frame Size.....	48

	The Power of Eyeline	49
	Shooting the Less than Perfect	50
	The Story Within the Story	51
	Backgrounds Tell the Real Story	52
	We Are All Liars and Cheats	53
	Know What You Want	54
	Working With the Ego-Crazed	56
CHAPTER 4	The Storyteller's Box	59
	Too Many Choices	59
	Cameras Reflect the Changes	60
	Framing the Argument	63
	2K, 4K, and Higher Resolution	65
	Grappling With the Technical	66
	What You Need to Know	67
	When the Technical Matters	68
	The Technical Nature of the World	68
	The Processor in Your Mind	69
	Let's Have an Analog Experience	69
	Improving Our Digital Recordings	70
	A Bit of Knowledge	71
	The 10-Bit Workflow	73
	Does Your Camera Pass the 10-Minute Rule?	77
	Be Sensor-Tive	79
	Size Matters, Sort Of	81
	The Resolution Ruse	82
	Human Limits to Perception of Resolution	83
	Is the End Game Near?	83
	Pixels in a Grid	84
	Three-Chip Versus Single-Chip	85
	Why Is Compression Necessary?	87
	For Practical Reasons	87
	Redundancy, Redundancy	88
	You Don't Miss What You Can't See	89
	Interframe Versus Intraframe Compression	91
	Selecting a Frame Rate	93
	Why the Goofy Frame Rates—or Why 24p Isn't 24p?	93
	The Many Flavors of 24P	95
	So You're Shooting 24p	95
	If SD Still Lives Within You	97
	Attention Laggards!	97
	Once Upon a Time	99
CHAPTER 5	The DSLR Story	103
	A Matter of Performance	103
	It's Not a Video Camera	104
	More Than Low-Light Capable	105
	Load Shedding	105

Setting Up.....	107
Jello-Cam.....	108
Narrow Depth of Field: Blessing or Curse?	109
The Operational Challenge.....	110
Seeing What We're Doing.....	112
Unsound Thoughts.....	113
Getting to Work	115
CHAPTER 6 Your Window on the World.....	119
Control Your Space.....	120
To Flatter or Not to Flatter.....	121
Maximize Use of the Storytelling Tools.....	122
Go Long for the Touchdown.....	123
Beware of Dubious Claims.....	124
Optical Versus Digital Zoom.....	127
Going Wider and Longer.....	127
Tale from the Trenches.....	129
Why Lenses Look Cheap.....	131
Say No to Small F-Stops.....	131
Why One-Piece Camcorders Make Better Pictures.....	132
Chromatic Aberration Compensation.....	132
Making Peace With Your Not-So-Hot Lens.....	133
How Sweet It Is.....	134
Dubious Focus, Zoom, and Onion Rings.....	136
Cine-Style Lenses.....	136
Source of Enchantment and Frustration.....	137
Excessive Depth of Field.....	137
Lens Adapters.....	139
CHAPTER 7 The 3D Shooter.....	141
The Essence of 3D.....	142
3D Is a Technical Trick.....	144
Depth Cues, Anyone?.....	145
Monoscopic Depth Cues.....	146
Stereoscopic Depth Cues.....	148
Interaxial Versus Interocular.....	150
Where to Set the Screen Plane.....	153
3D Camera Setup.....	155
Avoiding Tolerance Issues.....	156
Screen Size Matters.....	158
Parallax: Getting It Right.....	159
Window Violations.....	160
Thinking About the 3D Story.....	161
The Roundness Factor.....	161
Shedding Your Evil 2D Ways.....	162
The Future Is Glasses Free.....	164
Is 3D Here to Stay?.....	166
3D Postproduction and Output.....	167

	3D Is Coming—Again!	169
	2D to 3D Conversion	170
	Evolution of the Craft	170
	Show Me a World I Haven't Seen Before	171
CHAPTER 8	Story Command and Control	173
	Auto-Everything: Who Needs It?	174
	Down With Auto-Exposure	174
	The China Girl	177
	Riding the Waveform	179
	I Shutter To Think About It	179
	The Synchronized Shutter	181
	Frame Rates and Your Story	181
	Focusing on What's Important	183
	These Guys Are Not Artists	183
	HD Focus Can Be Tough!	184
	Following Focus	186
	White Balance Your Story	187
	To Preset or Not Preset	187
	Setting Manual White Balance	189
	The Illogic of Auto-White	189
	Automatic Black Balance	191
	No Gain, No Pain	191
	Keep the Noise Down	193
	The Timecode Swamp	194
	Serial Digital Versus High-Definition Multimedia Interface	196
	Interconnectivity and Streaming	197
	Monitoring Your Work	198
	More Power to You	199
	Managing Viewfinder Clutter	202
	Animation and Time Lapse	203
	The Magic of Pre-Record	204
	Here We Go Loopy Loo	204
	Shooting in Extreme Conditions	204
	Shooting Wild Life and Wildlife	208
CHAPTER 9	Tweaking Your Story's Look	211
	Getting Started on Your Look	212
	Master Pedestal: Where Is Black?	214
	The Legacy of Standard Definition	214
	Respecting Your Camera's Dynamic Range	214
	Going, Going Gamma	215
	Minding Your Highlights	216
	Auto-Knee	216
	Controlling Chroma	217
	Matrix	218
	Filtering Your Image	219
	Getting Physical	220

Consider a Filter Last	220
Designed for the Task	221
Neutral Density	222
A Polarized View	223
Sky Control	224
The High-Contrast Dilemma	225
The Diffused Look	226
Christian Dior to the Rescue	229
The Matte Box	230
How They Stack Up	231
Warming Up	232
Out of the Fog	232
The Post-Camera Finish	233
Roll Your Own	233
Color Correction	235
Shooters, Take Charge!	236
CHAPTER 10 Making Light of Your Story	239
Think Small	240
Shooters Who Light, Edit, Produce, and Wash Windows	242
LED Lighting Comes of Age	243
HMI Lighting: Expensive But Worth It	245
Fluorescents and the Green Plague	247
Think Big	248
Soft Is Key	249
Choosing a Soft Light	249
Spilling the Beans	251
The Art of Diffusion	251
The Jelly Roll	252
The Standard Setup	253
Lighting Front and Center	254
Having Your Fill	254
On- and Off-Camera Options	255
Lighting in Planes	256
Lighting for Green Screen	257
Why Green?	257
Green Screen Alternative	259
Get a Grip	259
Kooks and Cookies	261
Being Snooty	262
Clamping Down	262
Tape Makes the Man (or Woman)	263
The Ditty Bag	264
Lighting = Craft + Ingenuity	265
CHAPTER 11 Supporting Your Story	267
Getting a Head in Your Support	268
What Pretty Legs You Have	271

	Getting a Leg Up	274
	Place Anywhere.....	278
	You Shoot; Therefore, You Are.....	278
CHAPTER 12	Listening to Your Story.....	281
	An Unsound Proposition?.....	282
	Sound Advice	282
	Bad Connections = Bad Sound.....	283
	Keep Balance in Your Life	284
	Mixing It Up.....	285
	Setting Audio Level.....	286
	For the Love of Mic.....	287
	Riding (Short) Shotgun.....	287
	Going Wireless	288
	Going Boom	289
	Noise Reduction for the Video Shooter.....	290
	Shooting Double System: Is It Necessary?	291
	You are Surrounded	292
	To Improvise Is Good.....	293
CHAPTER 13	Going with the Flow.....	295
	Not One Workflow.....	296
	The Promise of MXF.....	297
	The Beauty of Metadata	298
	We Should Be Less Fearful Now.....	299
	The Advent of SSD	300
	Proxy Video and the iPhone	301
	Outputting Your Story	302
	The Decline of DVD.....	303
	Eye on the Encoded Image.....	304
	Encoders Have Personalities	305
	Scenes That Spell Trouble.....	306
	The Noise-Reduction Imperative.....	306
	Know Your Encoding Mode.....	307
	Blu-Ray, Anyone?	308
	Reaching for the Clouds	309
	The Archiving Challenge.....	310
AFTERWORD	There Is No Best Button.....	313
	Beware the Hype	314
	Resist Complexity	315
	Future of Viewing.....	316
	Rapid Change Is Upon Us.....	317
	Dog-Eat-Dog World	318
	Index	321

Acknowledgements

My many students over the years around the world, who have been and continue to be the source of great inspiration and motivation; my friend Wes Anderson, who taught me how to let go of my stodgy old ways; Mira Nair, who encouraged me to mentor a new generation of East African filmmakers and offer camera craft workshops in far flung places; Carlin Reagan and Dennis McGonagle, the gentle disciplinarians at Focal Press, who exercised almost godlike patience waiting for this manuscript; Donald Lampasome, Don Milano, Tim Kolb, Jason Osder, and Jack James, who offered thoughtful suggestions and advice during the review process; Doug Leighton from Panasonic in the United States and the amazing and charming Janet Lam from Panasonic Singapore, who put up with me through thick and thin and provided me with endless favors; Tom Di Nome at Sony, who supported me more than was perhaps wise or prudent; Wayne Schulman from Manfrotto, who bent over backwards to fulfill my oddest requests; Fujinon's Dave Waddell, who never tired of my questions about lenses; the inimitable Karla Berry, my BFF and the finest film instructor and laughter in the Western World; Driss Benyaklef and Anadil Hossain, my partners in crime who know more about how the movie business really works than anyone; Simone Sultana, my indefatigable collaborator and source of boundless energy in London, Bangladesh, and elsewhere; Lee Bobker at Vision Associates, who gave me my first professional assignment 35 years ago shooting soybean fields; Ira Tiffen, whose vast knowledge, enthusiasm, and love for photography I try to emulate; Sid Platt, my friend and mentor at National Geographic who placed his faith in me as a young inexperienced shooter and sent me to Poland, the Amazon, the North Pole, and other weird places; Ben and Zoe, my fabulous son and daughter, who so graciously posed for dozens of pictures and illustrations; and Debbie, Karen, and my many friends, who've had to put up with me and my difficult ways, and who in their own fashions and expressions of love encouraged me to write this book.

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The Shooter's Point of View

Dear Video Shooter:

This is your task. This is your struggle to uniquely and eloquently express your point of view. Whatever it is. Wherever it takes you. For the shooter-storyteller, this exploration can be exhilarating and personal. It's what makes your point of view different and enables you to tell visually compelling stories like no other video shooter in the world.

In May 1988 while on assignment for National Geographic in Poland, I learned a profound lesson about the power of personal video and point of view. The aging Communist regime had amassed a thousand soldiers with tanks in front of the Gdansk Shipyard to crush a strike by workers belonging to the banned Solidarity union. I happened to be shooting in Gdansk, and despite it not being part of my assignment I ventured over to the shipyard anyway in light of the world's attention being focused there and the compelling human drama unfolding inside.

Out of sight of my government minder, I understood I could've been beaten or been rendered persona non grata, but I took the chance anyway as I was convinced that history was in the making. The night before, the military had stormed a coalmine in southern Poland and had brutally beaten many strikers as they slept. Not a single photo or frame of video emerged to tell the tale, but news of the carnage spread anyway through unofficial channels. The shipyard workers figured they were in for the same fate, and I wanted to record it.

Considering the regime's total control over the press and TV, it was no surprise that the Polish InterPress Office would deny my 16mm Arriflex and me access to the shipyard. But that didn't stop my two Polish friends with less obvious video gear from slipping inside the complex in the back of a delivery van.

Throughout the previous fall and winter, Piotr Bikont and Leszek Dziuomicz had been secretly shooting and editing half-hour newsreels out of a Gdansk church loft. Circumventing the regime's chokehold on the media, the two men distributed the programs through a makeshift network of church schools, recruiting young school kids to ferry the videocassettes home in their backpacks.

As this latest shipyard drama unfolded, Piotr and Leszek vowed to stay with the strikers to capture the assault and almost certain bloodbath. Piotr's physical well-being didn't matter, he kept telling me. In fact, he looked forward to being beaten, provided he could get the footage out of the shipyard to me, and to the watchful world.

But for days and weeks the attack didn't come, and Piotr and Leszek held their ground, capturing in riveting detail the exhaustion of the strikers as the siege dragged on. In scenes reminiscent of the Alamo, 75 men and women facing almost certain annihilation held firm against a growing phalanx of tanks, troops, and feckless provocateurs who occasionally feigned an assault to probe the strikers' defenses.

In the course of the siege, Piotr and Leszek made a startling discovery that their little Sony camcorder could be a potent weapon against the amassed military force. On the night of what was surely to be the final assault, the strikers broadcast a desperate plea over the shipyard loudspeakers: "Camera to the gate! Camera to the gate!" The strikers were pleading for Piotr and Leszek to come with their camera and point it at the soldiers. It was pitch dark at 2 a.m., and the camera couldn't see much. But it didn't matter. When the soldiers saw the camera pointed at them, they retreated. They understood the inevitability of a postcommunist Poland and were terrified of having their faces recorded!



FIGURE 1.1

Solidarity activists Piotr Bikont and Leszek Dziurawski with the Sony camcorder that helped transform the face of Eastern Europe in the 1980s.

As the weeks rolled by, the strikers' camera became a growing irritant to the authorities. Finally, in desperation, a government agent posing as a striker ripped the camera from Piotr's arms. After a frantic chase, the agent ducked into a building housing several other agents, not realizing, incredibly, the camera was still running!

Inside a manager's office, we see what the camera sees: a drab blank wall as the camcorder pointing nowhere in particular dutifully records the gaggle of agents plotting to smuggle the camera back *out* of the shipyard. The camera is then placed inside a paper bag, and the story continues from this point of view: The screen is completely dark as the camera inside the bag passes from one set of agents' arms to another. Alas, the image wasn't much—a black screen with no video at all—conveying a story to the world and a point of view that would in short order devastate the totalitarian regime.



FIGURE 1.2

When an undercover agent suddenly grabbed Piotr's camera, no one thought about turning the camera off!



FIGURE 1.3

What's this? A dark screen? If the context is right, you don't need much to tell a compelling story!

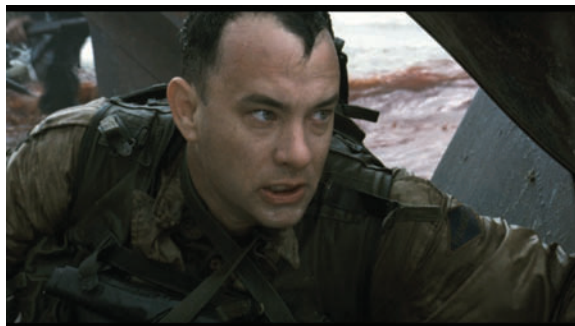
**FIGURE 1.4**

In this pivotal scene from Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), we listen to mostly unseen characters in a dark projection room. Suppressing visual content in this way forces an audience to listen, this strategy being very effective to communicate critical dialogue or exposition

**FIGURE 1.5 a,b**

Conversely, we can force the viewer to focus more on the visual story by attenuating or eliminating the audio entirely. Managing the interplay of picture and sound is the essence of a filmmaker's craft. (b) The muted audio in this scene from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) reinforces the horror of the D-Day beach landing at Normandy.

(a)



(b)

FIGURE 1.6

Ninety percent of a video story is communicated visually. Given a choice, viewers always prefer to watch than to listen. They cannot do both at the same time!



FIGURE 1.7

Show me; don't tell me! Great storytelling requires compelling visuals!

YOUR STORY'S POINT OF VIEW

I'm often asked, "Which camera should I buy?" and "Which camera is best?" These questions are loaded and often laced with fear. My answer is always the same: It's the camera that best supports the *point of view* of the story you've chosen to tell.

There are always trade-offs in whatever camera you choose, and you should be leery of selecting a make or model based on a single feature such as imager size or resolution. High-resolution cameras may have associated drawbacks like inferior low-light response, constrained dynamic range, and a

bevy of shuttering artifacts owing to their large CMOS¹ sensors. These compromises along with a data-intensive workflow can have a negative impact on your filmmaking efforts, so is the highest resolution camera really what you want or need to convey your visual story and the desired point of view?

If a close-focus capability is crucial for your documentary work, then a small compact camcorder with servo focus may be preferable to a full-size model with manual optics. Pricy broadcast lenses will almost always produce sharper, more professional images, but they cannot usually focus continuously to the front element owing to the limitations of their mechanical design.

There is no perfect camera for every application. Every model has its strengths and weaknesses, the compromises in each camera being more apparent at lower price points. If you *really* know your story and the intended point of view, you can select the right camera, which need not be the most expensive or sophisticated. Similar to a carpenter, a plumber, or an auto mechanic, the smart shooter understands his or her tools and how they may advance (or hinder) his or her goals as a craftsman.²



FIGURE 1.8

Shooting on a public pier without a permit? A consumer Canon HF-S100 or DSLR may be ideal. Shooting a documentary for The Discovery Channel about the mating habits of the banded mongoose? The full-size camcorder with variable frame rates and a smallish 2/3-inch sensor is perfect. Secretly capturing passenger confessions in the back of a Las Vegas taxi? The lipstick camera or even the Go Pro fits the bill. When it comes to gear, your story and intended point of view trump all other considerations!

NO MORE CHASING RAINBOWS

The notion of a shooter as a dedicated professional has been eroding for some time. For several hundred dollars and little or no training, almost anyone with a low-end Canon, Panasonic, or late-model iPhone can produce reasonably decent video, which makes for ugly competition among shooters no matter how talented or inspired we think we are.

For the shooter-storyteller to prosper in the current environment he or she must become a 21st-century Leonardo DaVinci. Classical painting, printing presses, and helicopter designs may not be our areas of expertise, but the trend is clearly toward craftspeople who can do it all: shoot, write, edit, produce, and design websites. These days, increasingly, we're talking about the same person.

¹ **Complementary metal-oxide semiconductor**, a digital sensor as compared to analog CCD sensors. See [Chapter 4](#) *The Storyteller's Box*.

² See [Chapter 4](#) for in-depth discussion of how to evaluate camera operation and performance.

Just as strands of DNA compose the building blocks of life and heredity, so too do zeros and ones constitute the essence of every digital device and application. Today's shooter, whether inclined to or not, must embrace the new hyper-converged reality. Whether you're a shooter, a sound recordist, a special effects artist, or a music arranger, it doesn't matter. Fundamentally, we're all manipulating the same zeros and ones.

Thirty years ago on the Hawaiian island of Maui, I spent an entire afternoon chasing a rainbow from one end of the island to the other, looking for just the right combination of background and foreground elements to frame the elusive burst of color. It was, in many ways, a typical assignment for me circa 1985.

Today, I don't think many producers for National Geographic or anyone else would care to pay my day rate for a Wild Rainbow Chase. Why? Because producers versed in the digital tools are far more likely to buy a stock shot of the Hawaiian landscape (or create one in Bryce 3D) and then add the rainbow in Adobe After Effects!

These folks like the rest of us are learning to harness the digital beast, and whereas past shooters were responsible for creating complete *finished* frames, today's shooters are more apt to furnish only the *frame elements* for rearranging and compositing later by a multitude of downstream creative types. After completion of principal photography for *The Phantom Menace* (1999),³ George Lucas is said to have removed unwanted eye blinks from his stars' performances. Alas! No one is safe in this digital run-amok world! Not even actors!

In my camera and lighting classes, I recognize that my students are receiving training at a feverish pace. And what are they learning? To composite, reposition, and alter the color and mood of scenes; to crop, diffuse, and manipulate objects in three-dimensional (3D) space; to align, mix, and dub audio tracks—in other words, to do the combined jobs of an entire production and postproduction staff!

WEARING MANY HATS NOW

In August 2006, director Wes Anderson (*Moonrise Kingdom*, *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*) asked me to shoot behind the scenes for *The Darjeeling Limited*,⁴ a story of three brothers aboard an Indian Railways train chattering across the Rajasthan desert. Wes didn't want just an ordinary behind the scenes (BTS) show. Instead he suggested a more engaged approach, one in which my presence as a shooter and an *interlocateur* would figure prominently.

To fund the project and my five months in India, Fox Searchlight drew on the resources of multiple studio divisions: Publicity, Home Video, Marketing, and the Web. That's how I came to wear several hats: shooting second unit for the movie and editing and producing a 1-hour HBO special, a 30-minute featurette for DVD, 16 podcasts for the website, and 6 EPK (electronic press kit) interviews of the director and cast for distribution to entertainment news outlets. So you see I was no longer just a shooter but an ersatz producer/editor/DVD author and a Web content specialist!

³Lucas, G. (Producer & Director) & McCallum, R. (Producer). (1999). *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* [Motion picture]. USA: LucasFilm. Note that source information for films is provided on first mention only.

⁴Ferozeuddin Alameer, S. M. (Producer), Anderson, W. (Producer & Director), Bamford, A. (Producer), Cooper, M. (Producer), Coppola, R. (Producer), Dawson, J. (Producer), . . . Rudin, S. (Producer). (2007). *The Darjeeling Limited* [Motion picture]. USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

**FIGURE 1.9**

Prowling the streets of Jodhpur, India. A full-size camcorder is ideal for shooting high-detail city scenes and landscapes.

**FIGURE 1.10**

A versatile go-anywhere camera greatly expands the shooter's storytelling palette.

**FIGURE 1.11**

The Darjeeling Limited (2007). Here I double for Bill Murray inside a taxi racing to the Jodhpur train station. The camera beside me offers audiences a unique point of view for the behind the scenes show.

LEARNING THE DISCIPLINE

During the last 10 years, advances in technology have transformed the capabilities of the camera, so much so that today even the most inexpensive camcorder is able to produce excellent images. Given this context for a shooter to be successful, it's no longer a matter of who owns the *tools*; it's who owns the *craft*.

Becoming proficient in the craft was simpler for shooters a few decades ago. We lived in a mechanical world then, which meant when our machines failed, we could look inside and figure out how they worked. We could remedy a problem and gain confidence and ability without having a theoretical understanding of bit theory or the inside track to someone at MakeItWork.com.

In past years the aspiring shooter dutifully pawed over Joseph Mascelli's masterwork *The Five C's of Cinematography*,⁵ which described in exhaustive detail the rudiments of effective visual storytelling. The mastery of the Five C's—camera angles, continuity, cutting, close-ups, and composition—was imperative as shooters had to consider the implications of every creative and technical decision before rolling the camera, or face severe, even crippling, financial pain.

I remember my struggle to raise money for a PBS documentary in the 1970s. After months of frustration and finally landing a grant for a few thousand dollars, I can still recall the anxiety of running film through the camera. Every foot (about a second and a half) meant 42 cents out of my pocket—a figure forever etched into my consciousness. And as if to reinforce the sound of my dissipating wealth, the spring-wound Bolex would sound a mindful chime every second on its maximum 16.5-foot run.

The technology (or lack thereof) imposed its own discipline, and so by necessity, every shot had to tell a story with a beginning, middle and an end. Every frame, composition, lens choice, and background, had to be duly considered. A skilled cameraperson able to manage all this was somebody to be revered and remunerated. It is still this way for the multidimensional shooter of today, albeit the discipline of the craft must now be mostly self-imposed.



FIGURE 1.12

My '66. When it didn't start, you pushed it. No understanding of MXF, USB, or eSATA required.



FIGURE 1.13

The San Francisco cable car is the ultimate expression of the mechanical world we once knew and loved.

⁵Mascelli, J. (1998). *The five C's of cinematography: Motion picture filming techniques*. Los Angeles, CA: Silman-James Press. (Original work published in 1965)



FIGURE 1.14

The spring-wound camera propelled a perforated band of photosensitized acetate around a series of sprockets and gears. The mechanism was easy to see, study, and troubleshoot.



FIGURE 1.15

The manual nature of film cameras imposed a discipline not as readily gleaned from auto-everything digital camcorders.

NEW POINTS OF VIEW

The DV revolution transformed the medium by empowering ordinary people to engage their passions and express their points of view in venues such as Facebook and YouTube. Out of this, we are seeing the incarnation of a new breed of shooters to whom we can now credit a litany of work including

FIGURE 1.16

The DSLR as a serious imaging tool came of age with *Act of Valor* (2012). The sprawling action film grossed more than \$200 million worldwide.



feature films captured in whole or in part with inexpensive camcorders and digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras: *Super Size Me* (2004),⁶ *Once* (2006),⁷ and *Act of Valor* (2012),⁸ shot almost entirely on the Canon 5D Mark II.

LOOK WHO'S SHOOTING NOW

The Five Cs hallowed cinematographic principles may be more relevant than ever, but look who is applying them! It's not just shooters. It's anyone with a hand in the creative process: editors, directors, 3D artists, DVD menu designers—anyone with a Macintosh, a PC, or even an iPad, and that covers just about everyone.

Currently major U.S. news shows are moving rapidly to a one-person-does-it-all model, as show runners and correspondents are being increasingly asked to shoot, record sound, and in some cases even edit their own segments.

In smaller markets and for cable TV, the solo shooter-storyteller is already commonplace. Several years ago, I was asked to shoot several episodes for The History Channel's *Sworn to Secrecy* series. My first assignment required that I fly with the crew to Spokane, Washington, to interview air force pilots undergoing wilderness survival training.

Of course, in shooting such a series, I naturally assumed that audio would be a priority. So on the plane out of Los Angeles, I couldn't help but notice that my "crew" was rather small, consisting in fact of only the 22-year-old director and myself. I expressed astonishment to my boyish colleague, who thought for a moment, then smiled. I looked at him like he was nuts.

"I don't know why you're so happy," I said. "We're doing hours of interviews and we've got no soundman."

⁶Morley, J. (Producer), Pederson, D. (Producer), Pederson, D. (Producer), Winters, H. (Producer), & Spurlock, M. (Producer & Director). (2004). *Super Size Me* [Motion picture]. USA: Kathbar Pictures.

⁷Collins, D. (Producer), Niland, M. (Producer), & Carney, J. (Producer). (2006). *Once* [Motion picture]. Ireland: Bórd Scannán na hÉireann.

⁸Clark, J. (Producer), Haggart, G. (Producer), Leitman, M. (Producer), Mailis, M. J. (Producer), McCoy, M. (Producer), Pollak, J. (Producer), . . . Waugh, S. (Director). (2012). *Act of Valor* [Motion picture]. USA: Bando Brothers.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes shining brightly. “But I’ve got a *cameraman!*”

It was then I finally understood the digital revolution. This newbie director had been hired to write, direct, shoot, and edit a 1-hour show for an award-winning TV series. It was a fantastic opportunity for the budding director; the project drawing hugely on his extraordinary skill set, but it did make me wonder about the shooter’s role in the future, and whether that role would ever really stop expanding into other disciplines such as sound.



FIGURE 1.17

Thinking about the future and the role of the video shooter? Me too.

HIRE YOUR CLIENTS!

Gaining the requisite camera skills takes lots of practice and ample work opportunities. For many folks, the latter point is the bugaboo that may require a new and more radical point of view. First, we must realize that the shooter-craftsperson cannot compete on price. Whatever rate you quote no matter how low, someone will always offer to do the job for less. If you say you’ll shoot a project for \$100 per day, someone with the same DSLR will bid \$50. And if you bid \$50, someone will offer to do it for \$25, and so forth. Working cheap is never in your interest, unless of course that is what you want to be known for working cheaply. But working for *free*—*that can be such a beautiful thing!*

It may seem counterintuitive or even insane, but consider this: Working for free is not the same as working cheaply. Working at less or much less than the prevailing rate lowers the value of your services and diminishes your stature in the eyes of a client. It exposes you to a range of abuses, long hours, and lack of respect. But working for free is a totally different matter. Now *you* hold the power, not your employer, because you’ve hired *him*. You’ve selected *him or her* above all others, so this person owes you, and *that* shifts the relationship dynamic in your favor.

So this is it. First, you identify your dream job and you go after it. You cajole. You charm. And most of all you persevere. Once you land it, you work for free yes, but you also work hard until you are indispensable. You then write what amounts to a ransom note and threaten to leave, at which point your client/employer will likely offer you a paid position, and you say . . . what? *You say no.*

That's right. Instead you say, "Gee, I would really like to work for you and am so excited about this opportunity, but you can't afford me." So you turn your boss down. Whatever he or she offers, you're not interested. Folks, this is psychological warfare. The moment your boss lets you become indispensable, you've already won. There's no point in compromise. You can dictate your own terms.

This is how Hollywood and probably many other industries work. More important than the money, executives are mostly fearful of hiring the wrong person. Such a faux pas can be costly, embarrassing, or even calamitous, for risk-averse execs. On the other hand, if you've demonstrated with passion and confidence that you are the right person for the job, that all they have to do is hire you and their worries are over, you have eliminated their fears, which can only lead to good things, including financial rewards. If you choose your employer carefully, the days you work for free can be among the most lucrative of your career.

YOU HAVE THE POWER

Thanks to the latest low-cost cameras and the ability to reach hundreds of millions via the Internet, the shooter today wields more power than ever. You can use this power for nefarious or unsavory ends as some shooter-storytellers do, or you can use it to transform the world and create works of lasting beauty for the betterment of humankind. It all depends on your point of view and the stories you choose to tell.

EDUCATOR'S CORNER: REVIEW TOPICS

1. Consider a recent news event in which the presence of a camera played a vital role. Did the camera offer a point of view that wouldn't have been available otherwise? Is the camera's point of view more valid than, say, a witness's direct testimony?
2. Is a point of view necessary to create a compelling work? Is a documentary devoid of a point of view possible, given the inevitable shot selection, framing, and editorial choices?
3. Explore the advantages and disadvantages of a shooter wearing multiple hats. Do you feel that this compromises the effectiveness of the cameraperson?
4. Identify three (3) scenes from favorite movies that expertly manipulate picture and sound to maximize the story's impact. Is the handling of sound more critical to a movie's success than managing the picture? Please explain.
5. The proficient shooter often manipulates point of view for maximum storytelling impact. Cite three (3) examples from recent films in which the point of view was deliberately obscured to increase suspense or to add humor.
6. The video shooter has the capability to influence the world in profound ways. Cite three (3) feature films or documentaries that singularly transformed the political or social landscape.

Let Me Tell You a Story

Pressing a camera to your eye and framing a good story is no different from relating a tale around a campfire or writing the great American novel. Fundamentally, we are embarking on the same journey that begins with a single sentence: *Let me tell you a story . . .*

The great director Sidney Lumet once famously observed that *story is the conduit through which all creative [and technical] decisions flow*.¹ This includes the choice of camera, lens, recording format, resolution, and a thousand other technical and nontechnical things.

Searching for the right camera? It depends on the story you intend to tell. Selecting the right focal length lens? It depends on the story you intend to tell. Determining the correct camera placement and point of view? It all depends on the story you intend to tell.

Truth is audiences can't care less if you shoot your story on DV, 35mm Cinemascope, or Fisher-Price Pixelvision.² No one walks out of a movie theater and says, "Gee, that was a great movie, but it was shot 4:2:0." So as you read this book and glean something useful from it, let's keep all the tech talk in perspective. Stories work for different reasons, and can often be quite successful despite a lousy script, poor lighting, or, even I shudder to say, bad camerawork.

The latest and greatest cameras, lenses, and support systems can be fun and consuming, but the successful shooter understands it's really just about telling a compelling *visual* story. As a high school sophomore competing in the 1970 New York City Science Fair, I constructed a picturesque Rube Goldberg device that attracted considerable attention. Cobbled together from an old tube radio, recycled coffee tin, and a hodgepodge of home-ground lenses and prisms, the motley assemblage dubbed "The Sound of Color" aimed to associate wavelengths of visible light with the squeals, whines, and whistles, of an antique radio's oscillator. In an era of Apollo and men walking, driving, and playing golf on the moon, my crackpot creation purporting to *hear* color did not seem *that* out of this world. Still the concept made more than a few eyes roll among the judges, physicists, and engineers that heard my pitch, but despite this, The Sound of Color was a huge success, eventually taking top honors and a commendation from the U.S. Army.

As I think back, the army must have surely realized that one could not *really* hear color. But it didn't matter. The *storytelling* was so engaging that the army brass and everyone else it seemed couldn't look away, and isn't that what great filmmaking and winning science fair projects are all about? Telling a compelling, seductive, *visual* story?

¹Lumet, S. (1996). *Making movies*. New York, NY: Vintage Press. I added the word *technical* to Sidney's quote to help make my point. Sorry, Sidney.

²In the late 1980s, the toy company Fisher-Price manufactured a 2-bit monochrome camera that recorded to a standard audiocassette. Pixelvision's cryptic images continue to attract a following today, as evidenced by the annual PXL THIS Film Festival in Venice, California.



FIGURE 2.1

Every movie, campfire tale, or corporate puff-piece, begins with a single sentence: *Let me tell you a story . . .*

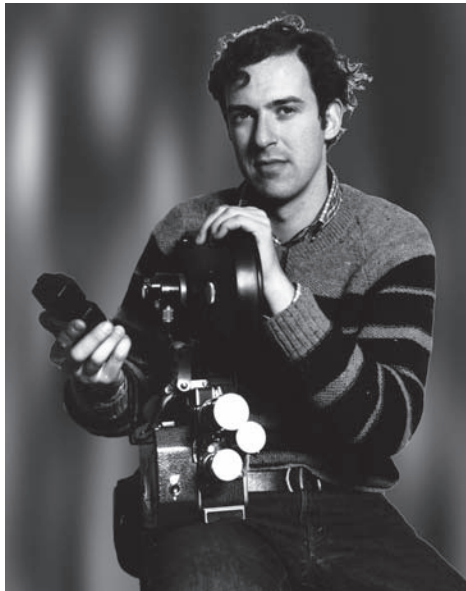


FIGURE 2.2

The successful shooter understands how to translate the words from a script into images that serve the story. Shooting a close-up? How close is close? Should the camera be above or below eyeline? Does a hand-held camera make sense? Should the lighting be sharply angled and dramatic or flat and neutral in color?



FIGURE 2.3

The melding of art and science. Your audience members just want to be told a good story. And they're willing to work hard to help you do it!

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

Just as in any good book or tale recounted around a campfire, our film stories must boast a compelling premise. My science fair project purporting to hear color was intriguing, but interesting *characters* also played a central role. In *The Sound of Color*, the “characters” were the olio of colorful junk splayed across the table: the Chase & Sanborn coffee can turned makeshift heat sink, the 1950s-era Zenith radio outputting screeches and squeals as if from an alien spaceship, the darting splashes of color across the surface of a photocell. To the public and army brass, *The Sound of Color* seemed somehow plausible and relatable—the two criteria that happen to lie at the heart of every good screenplay, movie, or television show.

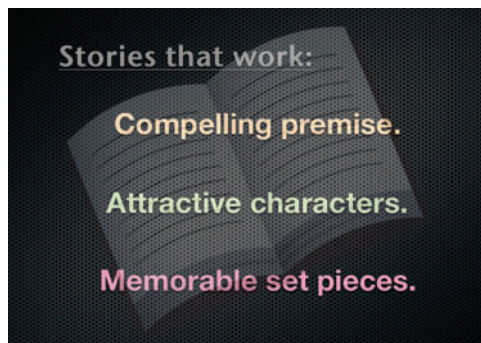


FIGURE 2.4

Every great story has a compelling premise, interesting characters, and memorable set pieces or moments that an audience recalls later to friends. *Wasn't it great when . . .* For the shooter, it is critical to recognize a project's potential set pieces, because it allows the proper effort and resources to be applied where it matters most.



FIGURE 2.5

This celebrated moment from Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)³ provided powerful word of mouth long after audiences left the theater. Shooters reviewing a prospective script should look for such set pieces and consider the most effective way to *have what she's having*.

KNOW YOUR GENRE AND MAKE SURE YOUR AUDIENCE KNOWS

You're reviewing the title offerings at your local video store or Redbox. On what *shelf* is your latest epic? Is it in Comedy? Horror? Suspense? Correctly identifying a story's genre is the first step toward being an effective shooter, and ultimately reaching your intended audience.

³Ephron, N. (Producer), Nicolaidis, S. (Producer), Scheinman, A. (Producer), Stott, J. (Producer), & Reiner, R. (Producer & Director). *When Harry Met Sally* [Motion picture]. USA: Castle Rock Entertainment.

My philosophy regarding genre is simple: If your story is a comedy, your audience should be laughing most of the time. If your story is a drama about starving children in Africa, your audience probably shouldn't be rolling in the aisles. Of course, your comedy may have serious moments, and your drama may be quite funny at times, but the *genre* of the story should be clear from your show's first moments in the *look and feel* of the images and how they're framed, lit, and presented.



(a)



(b)

FIGURE 2.6 a,b

Thinking about your story and genre: How close should a close up be?



FIGURE 2.7

FIGURE 2.8

To prepare an audience to laugh or cry we establish the story's genre from the first frame. In *Barry Lyndon* (1975),⁴ the character and placement of the lighting and candles communicate the desired genre. Stylized titles and music can also help establish the proper tone.



⁴Kubrick, S. (Producer & Director), Harlan, J. (Producer), & Williams, B. (Producer). (1995). *Barry Lyndon* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: Peregrine.

The savvy shooter understands that the genre and story inform every creative and technical decision from camera, format, and lens choice to framing and placement of a key light. The effective shooter provides a stream of cues to properly predispose the audience. A looser close-up may be right for a romantic comedy, while a tighter close-up is more appropriate for drama or horror. Story and genre are one of the same.



FIGURE 2.9

Create a poster for your next production. Is the log line compelling? Do the characters grab you? Would you plunk down your dollars, euros, and yen, to see the movie suggested in the poster?

WHAT DOES YOUR POSTER LOOK LIKE?

Hollywood executives often pose this question in story meetings to better evaluate a filmmaker's pitch. And here's the reason: The poster is a shorthand distillation of the story. No matter if the project is a movie, commercial, music video, or corporate puff piece, the requirement of a well-tuned story idea is the same: to capture its appeal and uniqueness in a single image.

REVIEWING LOG LINES

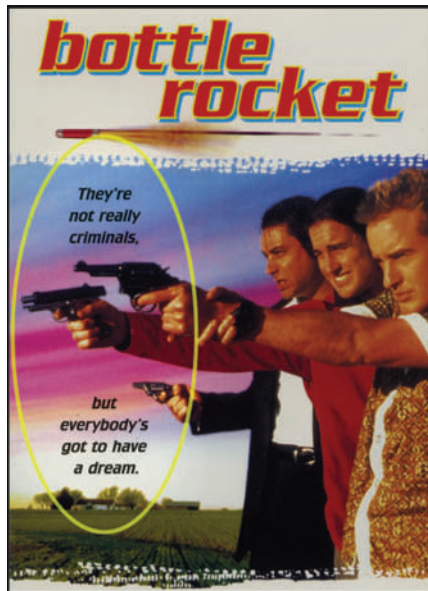


FIGURE 2.10

Understanding the power of the log line . . .

***Bottle Rocket* (1996)⁵**

1. THEY'RE NOT REALLY CRIMINALS. THEY ONLY THINK THEY ARE.
2. BAD AT LIFE. WORSE AT CRIME.
3. ALL THEY WANTED WAS TO BE CRIMINALS. IN THE WORST WAY.
4. CRIME. EVERYONE HAS TO BE BAD AT SOMETHING.
5. UNNATURALLY BORN CRIMINALS.
6. LOUSY IN CRIME. NO HARD FEELINGS.

Understanding the power of the log line, studio marketing departments consider and reconsider a movie's tag phrase ad infinitum. For *Bottle Rocket*, Columbia Pictures considered a long list of possibilities before making its choice.

⁵Boyle, B. (Producer), Brookes, J. L. (Producer), Carson, L. M. K. (Producer), Hargrave, C. (Producer), Lang, M. (Producer), Platt, P. (Producer), . . . Anderson, W. (Director). (1996). *Bottle Rocket* [Motion picture]. USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation.

KNOW YOUR LOG LINE

In the same way a poster coalesces the story into a single image so does the *log line* help communicate the story's premise in a single phrase or sentence. Ideally the few words convey the genre and tone, so the shooter and production team can work together from the same frame of reference.

EMBRACE YOUR LIMITATIONS

Whether bound by a tiny budget, lack of equipment, or too few crew, the limitations imposed on a project can be a positive force. Consider the eloquence and simplicity of Vittorio DeSica's *The Bicycle Thief*⁶ produced in 1948. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the filmmaker had barely scraps of film to capture his story in the streets of Rome. There were no studios or no support teams, nor was there a budget to hire professional actors. The desperate story of an unemployed father and loving son after the theft of their bicycle was reduced to its essence, to a mere few setups focusing on the characters' survival and relationship, which is what audiences really care about anyway.

With today's digital cameras and DSLRs, you don't need much to create a compelling story. In fact, I bet you have everything you need right now to shoot your dream project: If you don't have a camera, borrow one. If you don't have a computer, use one at your local public library. And if you *still* don't think you have the resources to pull it off then, then focus more on your story! You'll be better off for it!

Story, story, story. It's what it's all about. It's all it's ever been about.⁷



FIGURE 2.11

DeSica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). Storytelling stripped to its essence.

⁶DeSica, Vittorio. (1948). *The Bicycle Thief* [Motion picture]. Italy: Independent non-studio production.

⁷This is a pretty good log line for this section!

FOR DIFFERENT REASONS

In 1997, my wife and I attended the premiere of *Titanic*⁸ at Mann's Chinese Theatre. The studio executives in attendance were understandably nervous as the \$200 million epic unspooled in front of hundreds of clearly less-than-enthusiastic industry insiders, including comedian Bill Maher, whose protracted moans of agony I can still vividly recall.

And who could blame him? The movie's trite dialog and banal love subplot were hardly the makings of great movie. Indeed, the polite applause at the film's end only served to underscore the inescapable fact that this movie was going to sink—and sink fast.

Of course, things didn't work out that way, and with the release of a 3D version in 2012, the movie continues to be one of the most popular films of all time. This only confirms William Goldman's often-cited observation about Hollywood that no one knows anything. For me, however, I learned a critical lesson: *Movies work for different reasons*.

In the end, *Titanic* captivated audiences who responded overwhelmingly to the movie's cinematic elements, the impressive set pieces, epic scope, and sweeping score, all serving to captivate the mostly teenage viewers who never questioned the plausibility of Kate Winslet emoting in a sleeveless dress on the ship's bow in the frigid North Atlantic. Audiences worldwide clearly accepted the story and film—hook, line, and sinker.

For the modest shooter the same lesson applies: your stories, whether shot on high-definition video (HDV), 35mm, or an iPhone, can be hugely successful if audiences are able to connect on some level. Of course, it would be foolish to tell a story with the scope of *Titanic* on DV. On the other hand, a more intimate tale such as *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)⁹ might work just as well or better. So when it comes to shooting a project effectively with whatever camera, it is really a matter of recognizing the entertainment value in the screen story and then focusing the bulk of your energy and resources there.

YOUR COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

Every shooter-storyteller needs to recognize his comparative advantage. That advantage may be personal in the types of stories you choose to tell. When you speak with passion, insight, and authenticity, your audiences listen and respond. Only you see the world in the way that you do. Only you have the stories and point of view that you do.

Today's inexpensive digital cameras offer great flexibility and economy. The trick is to recognize the strengths afforded by these devices—and then exploit the hell out of them.

Such was the case for two street musicians in Ireland whose personal experiences formed the basis of a low-budget HDV movie that was later acquired by Fox Searchlight. The scrappy heart-on-its-sleeve love story *Once* (2007) was hardly well shot; indeed, much of it was dark and out of focus! Still, the movie connected with a large and appreciative international audience, who flocked to theaters and to record stores to buy the soundtrack album.

⁸Cameron, J. (Producer & Director), Easley, P. (Producer), Giddings, A. (Producer), Hill, G. (Producer), Landau, J. (Producer), Mann, S. (Producer), & Sanchini, Rae (Producer). (2007). *Titanic* [Motion picture]. USA: 20th Century Fox Film Corporation.

⁹Carroll, C. (Producer), Coleman, C. (Producer), Engelhorn, P. (Producer), Evelyn, A. (Producer), Gottwald, M. (Producer), Harrison, N. (Producer), . . . Zeitlin, B. (Director). (2012). *Beasts of the Southern Wild* [Motion picture]. USA: Cinereach.