

BASICS

FILM-MAKING

Robert Edgar-Hunt



directing fiction

v
controlling the operations of
managing or governing

n
literature in the form of prose
especially novels that describes
imaginary events and people



va
academia

BASICS

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directing fiction

Ethical:
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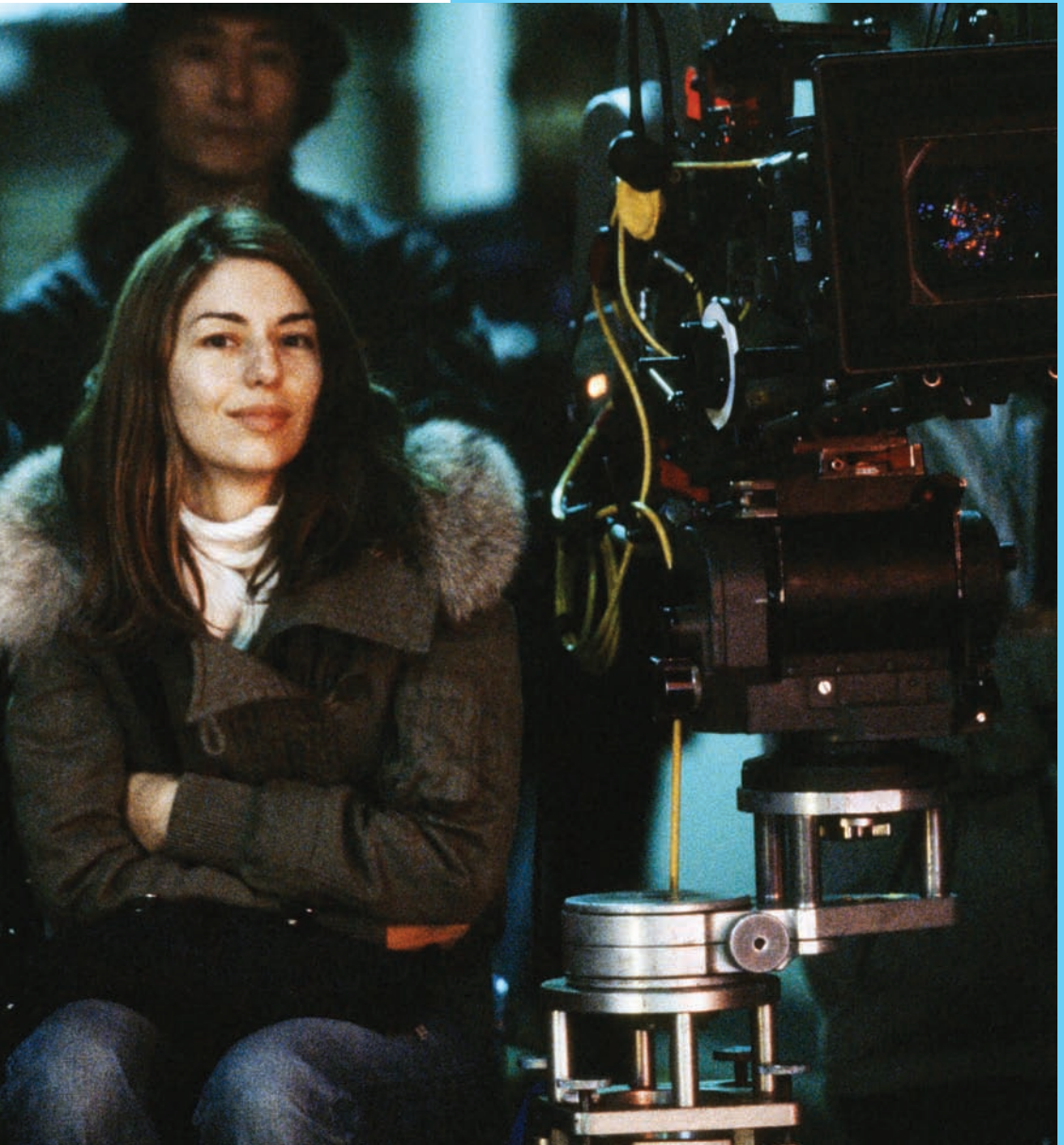
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Lost in Translation
(dir: Sofia Coppola 2003)



The innovative film-maker Sofia Coppola prepares for action on the set of *Lost in Translation*. As the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola, Sofia is part of Hollywood royalty, yet she maintains a unique vision in the factory system.

Table of contents

How to get the most out of this book	6
Introduction	8



Preliminaries 12

Directing: Art or business?	14
The production team	18
Theories and their application	22
Directing: The vision	30
Avoiding Alan Smithee	34
Exercises	36

Pre-production 38

The pre-production team	40
Working with script	42
Case study: Peter Hunt	48
Image composition	50
Storyboards	56
Locations	58
Casting	60
Case study: Mike Leigh	62
Rehearsing actors	64
Mark Herman interview	66
Exercises	72



Production 74

The production team	76
Case study: Robert Rodriguez	78
The director as artist	80
Working with sound and image	84
Setting the shot	88
Case study: Martin Scorsese	92
Production equipment	96
Production effects	100
Working on location	102
The first assistant director	106
Working with actors	108
Non-professional actors	112
Reviewing your material	114
Mark Herman interview	118
Exercises	120



Post-production 122

The post-production team	124
Editing systems	128
The grammar of the edit	130
Case study: Sergei Eisenstein	134
Sound and music	136
The finishing touches	140
Exhibition and distribution	148
Case study: Miles Watts	152
Consent, clearance and copyright	154
Mark Herman interview	158
Exercises	160a
Conclusion	162
Directing and film resources	164
Picture credits	174
Acknowledgements	175
Working with ethics	177

How to get the most out of this book

This book aims to provide you with a detailed introduction to the art and craft of directing a fiction film. Unlike many texts on directing, this book can be read in two distinct ways. Read through *Directing Fiction* from beginning to end in sequence, and discover the process by which a director develops a concept from initial idea through to finished film; or dip into it at leisure as you work to develop your own film, and find guidance on the many stages involved in realising your own ideas.

There are many practical pointers running throughout the book to help you think creatively, get to grips with your film and to guide you through the tricky bits – in the form of exercises, techniques and tips from industry professionals. We have devised these to both help improve your directing skills and to boost your powers of persuasion.

A running glossary explains key terms clearly and precisely

Captions illustrate stills from the work of successful directors

Theories and their application 24–25

Glossary

Christian Metz (1931–1993)
French film theorist and semiotician. His book *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* was hugely successful in examining film structure.

Christian Metz and film language

One of the most renowned film critics is **Christian Metz** and of particular importance is his book *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. In this book Metz provides tools for analysing films down to the smallest detail. Metz breaks down the act of filmic communication into five channels:


1. The visual image
2. Print and other graphics
3. Speech
4. Music
5. Sound effects

What Metz's list suggests is that an audience prioritises the visual image. The danger is that so does the director, but the power of the other four channels of communication is vital. The complexity of film is in the interaction of these channels. Meaning is generated in the intersection of all these.

Each member of a film crew has jobs that look at these aspects in isolation. It is your job as director to unite them. You must also be able to communicate this holistic vision. This might seem straightforward when you have a script to follow, but as Chapter 2 shows, that only gives you the bare bones to work to.

Metz was concerned with breaking cinema down into its smallest elements to establish how meaning was being communicated to an audience: this is why his work is of such importance to new directors. His work developed from linguistics and it is useful to bear this focus on a structured sequence in mind. As Metz said: 'Cinema begins with the sequence of images; it is above all by the ordering of these images that cinema can organise itself into a discourse.' With the term 'discourse', Metz suggests that this is where film starts to generate meaning, and therefore has a social purpose.

The Shining (dir: Stanley Kubrick 1980)



A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand.

Christian Metz, film critic and theorist

With *The Shining*, Stanley Kubrick showed that you can make a genre piece that develops the genre and also does something which is unique. *The Shining* (an adaptation to start with) takes the haunted house theme and delves deep into it, creating a psychological horror movie. Perhaps this is one reason why Kubrick is considered a **culture**.

The production team • Theories and their application • Directing Fiction: The vision

Prenatal/Inf

Exercises 66-67

EXERCISES

The best thing you can do in beginning your career as a director is to build your knowledge about your own subject.

- 1 Choose a film that is considered a classic. Doesn't matter if you don't like the film. What is a classic film that has had to go to the museum? This should be repeated across a range of relevant films. Try to establish if there are any patterns, any similarities or if their place comes to the general audience of each individual film.
- 2 Choose a cult film. These films have an inherent sense of 'cool' and are required to come downsize. Repeat with a range of cult films. What is it that makes them worthy of this status, or is it something that is determined by an audience and not?
- 3 Take a 10 minute section of a film (script) are good and use it with the sound deleted. What is it about the movement of the camera that is of note? What do the music on the sound add? How does the film try to engage you. How does your response to the film change when it is suddenly empty and visually limited. You will have to watch a visual record to the film.
- 4 Watch a film in a different language without the subtitles. Can you still discern meaning? If so, how?
- 5 Take a formal director and look at a piece of their work that is funny within a genre (such as Ridley Scott's films). Compare it with other recent work from the genre. What is it that the watch-er knows director does that makes the film stand out?
- 6 Contact with local film-makers. There are film-makers in schools and clubs around the world. Join a film society. If you can't find one, start one. Try and get to film festivals. Don't worry if it's a local or amateur festival.
- 7 Get hold of a camera, even a still camera, and start looking at the world through a lens.
- 8 Begin a project. It doesn't matter how small or what equipment you use but the process outlined in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 is used worked through in relation to something real and something needed by you.

Photo Credits: © Getty Images

A series of practical exercises will help you realise your concept and develop your script

Mark Herman Interview 66-67

INTERVIEW



Mark Herman is a multi-talented writer-director who has worked in both shorts and features. His work has received public and critical acclaim across the world, including *Barb Wire*, *Golden Dishes* and *an Change*. His short films are *the flu*, *the flu at Harlow*, *Frankie Miller* (1987) and *Unusual Ground*. *Four Conversations* (1997), his feature includes the Venice award character *Felix*. *Blame it on the Rain* (1992), the highly political social realist *Disband '07* (2006), which is concerned with the deactivation of the coal industry and related changes in Northern England, the adaptation of Jim Carver's stage play *Little Voice* (1998), the Newcastle set *Punchy Bawls* (2005), an adaptation of *Hope Springs* (2005), which is a romantic comedy, and most recently the powerful adaptation of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), which focuses on the relationship between two children in the midst of the Third Reich.

Where did you start as a film-maker?

Being an audience member watching films by people like Ken Loach – not that I necessarily related to the thing, it was just an enjoyment of the film that drew me to it.

How influential was the diverse experience you had before and at the National Film and TV School (NFTS), UK?

Being there in the mid-1980s, I was an outsider which meant that I was a bit of a maverick. I had a lot of time to think about these concepts when I watched some courses over what went on. It was about being a writer, particularly so. I had an experience of directing at that time. But when you write the script you see things. You can talk with the crew about the things, but they will always be different to those a different director sees. That's part of the appeal of post-production.

Did working across different media and forms help with the structuring of the story and the content of the story?

Yes, to write the script *Blame You* at Harlow, *Frankie Miller* for production in a film studio, to direct *the flu* in a film studio. These moments when I watched some courses over what went on. It was about being a writer, particularly so. I had an experience of directing at that time. But when you write the script you see things. You can talk with the crew about the things, but they will always be different to those a different director sees. That's part of the appeal of post-production.

All your earlier activities were very solitary, how did you begin to work with a large crew?

At first, it was known as an assistant. I couldn't get a crew together for myself. So I got an assistant. I got an assistant and then I got an assistant director but they were the only ones from the first school. The quality control was a little more relaxed. Having to be more creative outside in the real world, if you get any sense, and work very hard on the making of the crew to make sure they have a similar visual sense of the film to you.

Photo Credits: © Getty Images

A revealing interview with award-winning writer/director Mark Herman concludes each chapter and explores each stage of the film-making process

Chapter navigation helps you find your way around the book easily

Case study: Robert Rodriguez 75-79

CASE STUDY

Robert Rodriguez

Robert Rodriguez's reputation stems from his early work where he often acted as director, producer, actor, composer, director of photography, production designer, sound editor and editor. It is this multi-tasking that makes him notable and interesting in his production process and film form. However, it also makes him one of the most dangerous film-makers to follow as a model for your own career. He works very hard in his own film and it is this that makes his film interesting and valuable – but not someone who you should copy.

The Ten Minute Film School

The Robert Rodriguez Ten Minute Film School provides a great working model and very important message for new directors, which are:

- Be multi-talented.
- Be creative with the camera – don't rely purely on money to solve your problems.
- Be prepared for all contingencies.
- Write and shoot films using what you have around you.
- Write and shoot films using what you have around you.
- Work with your mistakes – nothing is ever set.
- Be pragmatic.


Selected Filmography

- *El Mariachi* (2002) – The first film and the one which made his name was defined by his own approach.
- *Desperado* (1995) – A classic remake of *El Mariachi*, which some people feel rather conceals his identity.
- *From Justin to Kelly* (2004) – A good example of playfulness with genre with a large effects budget.
- *The Faculty* (1998) – A mainstream, but interesting take on the treatment of the *Rocky Horror*.
- *Planet of the Apes* (2001) – A film that is a classic example of how to do it.
- *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003) – Interesting viewing as he works to his own territory and genre of 'hollywood'.
- *San City* (2005) – Recently received an extremely popular introduction with Frank Miller and Quentin Tarantino.

Conclusion

Robert Rodriguez is a multi-talented writer-director who has worked in both shorts and features. His work has received public and critical acclaim across the world, including *Barb Wire*, *Golden Dishes* and *an Change*. His short films are *the flu*, *the flu at Harlow*, *Frankie Miller* (1987) and *Unusual Ground*. *Four Conversations* (1997), his feature includes the Venice award character *Felix*. *Blame it on the Rain* (1992), the highly political social realist *Disband '07* (2006), which is concerned with the deactivation of the coal industry and related changes in Northern England, the adaptation of Jim Carver's stage play *Little Voice* (1998), the Newcastle set *Punchy Bawls* (2005), an adaptation of *Hope Springs* (2005), which is a romantic comedy, and most recently the powerful adaptation of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), which focuses on the relationship between two children in the midst of the Third Reich.

El Mariachi (© Robert Rodriguez 2002)



How do you work with your own limitations? Rodriguez, who directed *Once* and the director/director of photography working on this.

Photo Credits: © Getty Images

Case studies offer insight into the working methods of some of the world's most successful practitioners as well as new film-makers

Despite assertions to the contrary by the rest of the crew, the director is the single most important individual in the film-making process. A film is their vision. Even when working with a script written by someone else, it is the director who breathes life into it; who makes it three dimensional.

The director is responsible for what happens on screen, but this is a long and involved process that can take years, often the majority of which is simply trying to get the film underway. The director is a technician, a business person, a member of the audience, an actor, but most of all an artist. It can be the most frustrating of jobs and also the most rewarding. As a first-time director your most detailed experience of film is as a member of the audience. This is useful as it means you consider your audience and know what, for you, makes a good film. However, as a viewer, you have prioritised the illusion of cinema; you have suspended your disbelief. As a director, you must understand every aspect of the long process involved in creating something that will ultimately appear on a 16:9 screen as flickering light.

How to approach this book

Work your way through the book, chapter by chapter, and you will be certain that you are not leaving things out or building in errors that will trip you up later. Problems with films are often the result of directors ignoring first principles or skipping essential parts of the process. Occasionally, this is through over enthusiasm to be deeply involved in the minutiae of other jobs or (at worst) it is from a deep-seated lack of trust for the crew surrounding them.

Screenwriters can make mistakes and cost is no more than a sheet of paper and their own time. It's very different for directors, for whom there are very few second chances.

Not been put off yet? Good, then carry on reading.

All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun.

Jean-Luc Godard, film-maker

Munich
(dir: Steven Spielberg 2005)



Here we see Steven Spielberg directing *Munich*. When working with actors there is no substitute for clear, effective face-to-face communication.

Why short film?

Everybody wants to work in feature film. It is roomier, more glamorous – it's what draws us to film in the first place. However, most great directors have cut their teeth on a short or three. The short film is a calling card. It is cheaper and has fewer logistical complications than a full-length feature. It is what most of you involved in film production education will be undertaking. It is the best way to practise as well as being valid in its own right.

For those wanting to get started in movie making, the short film has some key advantages over the feature. It takes far less time to prepare, can be more experimental and is much more straightforward to make. The relative size of the crew on a short means you get closer to the experience, closer to each of the departments who will help support and realise your vision.

The added advantage of the digital short is cost and distribution. The burgeoning festival scene and the advent of the internet allows you the opportunity to show your work to a worldwide audience.

The film-maker as student

The biggest mistake that budding film-makers make is to think that study is pointless and that as an 'artist' they will be able to make their film from raw talent alone. The best film directors are those who study their art form, either as formal or informal students. The film-making process has changed little since the advent of the medium and with fewer people and smaller budgets, the digital short revolution has arguably brought the process back even closer to where film started. What is evident is that what can be achieved on screen has developed. What constitutes a good story and how you get from that page of text to cinema has not.

As you read this book, practise and study your art. Watch as many movies as possible; read the critics and evaluate their comments; grab a camcorder and experiment with framing shots in different ways; develop your storyboarding skills; read about different theories of directing.

Before you start the process, remember... directing is hard work. The job can be frustrating, exhausting and demoralising. This book is designed to help you make it fascinating, fulfilling and exciting.

Now, let's start planning.

Chapter by chapter

Preliminaries

Chapter 1 sets out the fundamental nature of what a director is before later chapters examine what a director does. In examining these essentials, it also looks at the tricky balancing act of art and business. Telling you how to 'do it' is impossible and thus guidelines and basic principles are established here.

Pre-production

The relative quality of a film is based on the relative quality of the pre-production process. This is usually the longest part of the process. You'll find headings in Chapter 2 that occur later – this is because if you don't start the process here, it will never happen later. This chapter considers cast, crew, finance, art and audience.

Production

This is where it all happens; Chapter 3 is the action movie to Chapter 2's political thriller. This is the part of the process that attracts people to directing. But this is also the part that needs to be quick and efficient. This is the bit that really costs and where there is little room to make mistakes.

Post-production

This chapter covers what happens when the filming has finished; this is where your rushes take shape and start to actually look like a film. In Chapter 4 the complex linking of image to images, image to sound and image and sound to music is considered. This is followed by notes on distribution and exhibition.

The chapters are interspersed with case studies and a linear interview with Mark Herman, director of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, *Little Voice* and *Brassed Off*.

There is no formula for success. But there is a formula for failure and that is to try to please everybody.

Nicholas Ray, director





PRELIMINARIES

The Eiger Sanction
(dir: Clint Eastwood 1975)



Directing a film can seem like climbing the North Face of the Eiger; a hard slog most of the way. You'll feel apprehensive, exhausted, possibly slightly sick from the 'altitude', but the view from the top is well worth it – and you could end up like Clint.

We all 'love the movies', and plenty of people say they have a great idea for a movie of their own. However, a director is more than a mere film fan.

The role of the director varies according to the genre of film, the type of script and the requirements of the funder or studio. A short film director is different from a feature director and a director for hire will work differently from a writer/director. However, there are commonalities and it is important to address these similarities before looking at the specifics of each directing context.

The dream of seeing your ideas painted with light on a 16:9 cinema screen, and all the effort you put into making the dream a reality, will mean nothing without the ability to translate and communicate these ideas into your chosen form. Patience, concentration, study and resilience are crucial elements of the director's character and tool box.



Glossary

Producer: The producer's primary concerns are finance and logistics. At the start of the film-making process they will be responsible for selecting key members of the crew and at the end of the process they will be responsible for distribution.

Film is an artistic medium. Film theorist Ricciotto Canudo called cinema 'the Seventh Art' in 1912, and this tag has stuck. This definition was based on the philosopher Hegel's definition of the six main arts (dance, poetry, music, architecture, sculpture and painting). Canudo was asserting that cinema bridged the temporal and spatial arts.

One major distinction between cinema and the other arts is its reliance on a team of people working together for a single goal. But remember that there is a hierarchy involved in film production, even though it is a collaborative process.

Directors, producers and cash

Cinema has another distinctive feature. It is often more expensive than any other form, although the output of architecture can be pretty pricey too, of course.

While the director holds the main ideas, the **producer** will often work alongside the director. They are the bridge between the business and the art of film. In these terms, their say over cash is crucial. When working on a major feature, they will link with the studio. On a small budget feature or short, they will keep the funder happy – making sure you are meeting their criteria as much as yours. On a lo-to-no budget, they'll make sure you spend next to nothing or nothing at all.

What's needed?

At root, the fiction director is a storyteller who needs:

- People: Your crew is essential. Directing is your job but film-making is a team activity.
- Equipment: At the start, this might be a pen and paper, but later in the process, it is the tools of the trade (cameras, sound equipment, edit facilities and so on).
- Concentration: Film-making can be a protracted and complex process.
- Resilience: Realising an idea can be frustrating and there can be compromises and knock-backs right the way through the process.
- Knowledge: The best directors are the most astute students of their own medium.

And most importantly...

- Vision: A director becomes a great director when they are able to stamp their individuality on a film without stamping it on their crew.

Trusting your vision to the crew

One further distinctive feature of cinema is its reliance on technology. A sculptor may need a chisel, a painter a canvas and oils, but beyond that they are self-sufficient. Given the need for expertise with technology and the need to share the workload both practically and technically, the director needs the production team. For instance:

- Assistant directors: Often responsible for overseeing specific locations or for cueing actors and crew.
- Second-unit director: Often in charge of directing stunt sequences less important sequences or providing coverage.
- Script supervisor: Responsible for liaising between the director of photography (DoP) and the director. They ensure continuity is maintained and on a non-sequential shoot they are essential. They also deal with **slating**, production notes and notes for the editor.

Glossary

Slating: Slate is used to record a scene number and sync point (via the clapstick) at the beginning of a shot.

Directorial responsibilities

The main responsibilities of the director include:

- Script: Many directors are also writers but even when they are not they have to take words and make them pictures.
- Casting: Finding lead actors, in conjunction with the producer (and on bigger budget films, a casting director).
- Locations: The director will tend to work on the main locations alongside a producer and production designer. These will usually have been pre-selected by a location scout.
- Designing: A director won't have the time to be heavily involved with all aspects of the production, but obviously needs to have a major input into the look of the film.
- Working with actors: Even professional actors need the director to direct.
- Composing: A director works with the DoP to compose shots and provides inspiration for the composer of the soundtrack.
- Editing: It isn't finished until it's in the can.
- Promoting: A film isn't a film unless people see it.



The Lost Squadron
(dir: George Archainbaud 1932)



Here Erich Von Stroheim portrays the stereotypical view of the director; a megalomaniac with a megaphone. Remember that shouting instructions may not be as effective as engaging directly with your actors.



The team varies according to the scope, scale and budget of the production. Whether you have a Hollywood team of hundreds or a lo-to-no budget team of eight or nine, it is best to configure your crew in departments. This is not only because it is established practice, it is a system that allows for important roles and responsibilities to be allocated. The importance and involvement of each department changes depending on whether the film is in pre-production, production or post-production. The director is usually the head of the production department.

Negotiating the production team

The film director unites the team. Often this is the most difficult task of all as the crew will make suggestions. These suggestions may be earth shattering. They may provide an insight into the film-making process that has never before been heard. However, they may also not be so great. In fact, you may find yourself amazed at what is being suggested.

Everyone wants to be a part of the process. Some people enjoy the production management roles, but more often than not, everyone wants part of the creative process – and who can blame them? It is, after all, why you are reading this book. Aspects of the creativity required do belong to different individuals, but it is down to you how much input you want and at what point in the process this will occur. This will be outlined in subsequent chapters.

Setting the parameters from the outset is important. You are there to set the artistic parameters and will then need to negotiate in relation to logistical considerations; these logistics then become the producer's concern. Remember that you can never change regulations regarding working practice, health and safety and budget. Telling your producer they must find more money halfway through a shoot will not go down well – nor will it work.