

Topic no. 55

Director of Photography

Job description

The director of photography, also known as the DP or the cinematographer, assists the film director by establishing the visual look of the movie. As a DP, you'll help tell the story through the artistic and technical decisions you make regarding lighting, film stock, shot selection, camera operation and other elements. A DP's duties and responsibilities include the work he does before, during and after film production.

Visual Style

The director of photography works with production designers, art directors, set dressers and even wardrobe crew and hairstylists to help establish the look of the film and its individual scenes. The decisions made in this area should support the script and the director's vision and result in imagery that the camera can capture.

Film Stock Selection

The selection of film stock can dramatically influence the look of the film. The varying concentration of light-sensitive emulsions on film stock determines the color tones and the degree of graininess viewers see. The decisions made primarily in pre-production -- but also including methods of printing the film in post-production -- help set the mood and advance the film's plot. For instance, an urban crime drama might use a grainy stock to reflect the gritty setting and mood, while a more upbeat feature might be shot on a film stock that supports a lighter, airier palette.

Lighting

In lighting the film, the director of photography might settle on an icy blue look to suggest a physically or emotionally cold environment, or warm shades to set a nostalgic or heartwarming tone. Gordon Willis, the Academy Award-winning cinematographer who worked on "The Godfather" and its sequels, earned the nickname "The Prince of Darkness" for his dramatic and starkly lit compositions.

Camera Operation

In rare cases, the director of photography actually operates the movie camera. More typically, he oversees the camera crew and makes sure the director gets the film he envisioned through the way its shot. This involves choosing the number of cameras involved, and their placement and movement. It also involves framing of the scene, overseeing the use of camera filters and aperture settings, and selecting special equipment. For example, David Lean's cinematographer on his sprawling epics "Lawrence of Arabia" and "Doctor Zhivago" was Freddie Young, an early British devotee of the wide-screen Cinema Scope lens -- ideal for his director's vast, panoramic landscapes.

Three stages of production

Most programs go through **three** main stages:

1. *Planning and preparation*

The preliminaries, preparation, organization, and rehearsal before the production begin. Ninety percent of the work on a production usually goes into the planning and preparation phase.

2. *Production*

Actually shooting the production

3. *Post-production*

Post production includes Editing, additional treatment, and duplication of production.

The nature of the subject will influence the amount of work needed at each stage. A production that involves a series of straightforward "personality" interviews is generally a lot easier to organize than one on Arctic exploration or a historical drama. But in the end, a great deal depends on how the director decides to approach the subject.

Working at the highest quality, directors can create incredible programming by using simple methods. Treatment does not have to be elaborate to make its point. If a woman in the

desert picks up her water bottle, finds it empty, and then the camera shows a patch of damp sand where it rested, the shot has told us a great deal without any need for elaboration. A single look or a gesture can often have a far stronger impact than lengthy dialog that attempts to show how two people feel about each other. It is important to understand the complexity of the production. Some ideas seem simple enough but can be difficult or impossible to carry out. Others look very difficult or impracticable but are easily achieved on the screen. For example:

“Hurry and arc the camera around the actor.” (Difficult: Movement shots are always time consuming, making it almost impossibly to do quickly.)

“Make her vanish!” (Simple: Keep the camera still, have the subject exit, and edit out the walk.)