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Story Development in Cinematography

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Abstract

First off, I've got to argue for the use of the word "cinematography" over "camera". One is to utilize a word I would like to further unpack. Another is to utilize a word that simply implies a relationship to another art form entirely – photography. I often say to my students that some cinematographers initially come from the lighting point of view and some come from the camera, but ultimately what great cinematographers do is understand a story (not just a moment that tells a story – there is a significant difference) – and tell it.

If I say that storytelling is the most and primary function of a cinematographer, then how do we teach storytelling to our students in a classroom? Obviously it is possible to teach them tools of "photography" – lenses/optics, composition, chemistry, sensitometry etc. and lighting – this is an HMI, this is flicker, memorize WAV, etc. However, how do we teach them how to tell a story with these tools? I have been working the last few years on teaching my students story development tools that are appropriate for cinematographers. Tools which as they go forward into their own practice have begun to give real results in terms of not only storytelling, but in the students creating their own relevant visual styles. For them to utilize these tools they need to engage not only in pre-production time, but in story development time – which is a period rarely engaged in at the student level, but is crucial if we want them to become anything other than the takers of pretty pictures.

Keywords: Cinematography, Screenwriting, Story, Film, Pedagogy

Conference Presentation:

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Audio Track Script:

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In this presentation I first will set out to prove that storytelling is the most important and primary function of a cinematographer, then I will explore how to successfully teach storytelling to students of cinematography – who may or may not have any screenwriting training or interest.

I have been working the last few years on teaching my students story development tools that are appropriate for cinematographers. Tools which as they go forward into their own practice have begun to give real results in terms of not only storytelling, but in the students creating their own relevant visual styles. For them to utilize these tools they need to engage not only in pre-production time, but in story development time – which is a period rarely engaged in – either at the student level or in the industry into which they are entering. However story development is the key to creating a visual style and therefore it is critical that we teach them story development skills – appropriate to cinematographers - if we want them to become anything other than the takers of pretty pictures.

But for a cinematographer, what does story development mean, how is it identified and achieved and what is the outcome? What story development skills are appropriate for cinematographers? This research puts forward identifiable tools for other cinematography teachers to use in enabling students to accomplish these ends and gives example analysis that can be used to enable further student interest.

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The first question we must ask ourselves as teachers of cinematography is why a cinematography student would want to know anything about story structure. The vast majority of cinematography oriented students are very heavily interested in technology and photography. These are traditionally aspects of filmmaking that do not directly relate to story – certainly not story told over a period of time. What I mean by this is that a photographer may be interested in the story moment caught in a particular image, but story structure and story development over time are not issues generally associated with photography.

Ultimately all stories happens over time. There is a beginning, middle and end within narrative structure that is inherently a time-based occurrence. Every event that occurs within time has this same beginning-middle-end structure – and as such we search for narrative in almost all events – even those that resist (see the films of Stan Brakhage). We do it even if it is to simply acknowledge what the beginning, middle and end are (certainly the filmmaker chose to start and stop at some point for a reason, do they not?). By acknowledging this relationship between events in time and narrative we begin to understand the crucial difference between photography and cinematography. Acknowledging the relationship between time and narrative is the first critical step in understanding why cinematography is a storytelling medium and not simply a medium of photographic capture. Both events in time and narrative follow the same rules.

Thus my proposition is that an understanding of narrative - or storytelling - lies within the very concept of cinematography. Let's see how many of the world's greatest cinematographers agree with this statement.

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Once a cinematography student evolves past the initial fascination with camera and lighting kit and masters some essential skills, inevitably the more mature issue becomes how does one create the visual style or the look of the film? In the 2006 film *Cinematographer Style*, directed by the cinematographer Jon Fauer, a multitude of the world's greatest cinematographers speak to just this issue. Although I myself have shot several films, I think the chorus that is offered by the cinematic creators of some of the world's most lauded cinematography is the strongest voice that can be offered as to where cinematic style comes from. Here we start with a student favorite - Wally Pfister – cinematographer of *The Dark Knight* and *Memento*.

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[Play Video Clip]

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It is abundantly clear from these interviews that there is universal acknowledgement that the story as represented by the screenplay is the most critical factor in determining the look or visual style of the film. However, for a student who is studying cinematography and not screenwriting, what do they need to understand about screenwriting and story structure in order to turn

that knowledge into a story that is told visually from a cinematographic point of view? How is this transformation from script to visual story actually accomplished successfully?

It needs to be acknowledged that screenplay story structure is a bit of a minefield. A quick search on Amazon reveals over 1600 books in some way related to the subject of writing screenplays. Over 100 of those are strictly manuals attempting to sell the reader on formulas by which to understand and master screenplay storytelling structure. Visual diagrams are often used to pass on simple ideas of story structure to those wishing to be illuminated in story's dark arts.

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Here is an example by the foremost guru of screenwriting, Syd Field, as to the basic three-act Aristotelian story structure traditionally advised in the Hollywood model. It mirrors a basic identification of the beginning, the middle and the end. Or in this case Act 1, Act 2, Act 3 - otherwise known by Field as the setup, the confrontation and the resolution. However you can immediately see, as discussed by Huntley, that the paradigm put forward by Field is actually divided into four distinct sections – with a First Half/Pinch 1 and Second Half/Pinch 2 making up two parts of the second act. This belies the very idea of the most basic three act story structure right from the start. Already things are more complicated than they first might have appeared.

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Moving to another screenwriting guru Robert McKee (whose popular screenwriting seminars are simply called “Story”), we find what first appears to be a more simple system – with three acts of varying lengths. However concepts such as “inciting incident” and “progressive complications”, might actually take a good screenwriting seminar to come to terms with. Additionally this is not the only system that McKee uses to describe the screenplay story structure.

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This graphic is meant to show McKee's concept of the flow of conflict in a story. No longer is the basic concept of beginning, middle and end of much use - other than as an assumption that there must be such things over the course of time. Here we begin to get into psychological mysteries of the screenwriter that most cinematography students are not going to have the briefest inkling of unless they have taken quite an in-depth course in screenwriting themselves.

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This entire matter is made even more troublesome when we look for clarity by referring to another popular screenwriting guru, Linda Seger. Seger does go for a straightforward three-act structure however she again uses jargon unfamiliar to the cinematography student. Furthermore she incorporates a subplot or “B Story” that will certainly muddy the waters for someone still struggling to understand what the basic nature of story truly is.

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John Truby's explanation also does little to help clarify. Though he does take away the subplot device and conforms to the initially proposed beginning/Act 1, middle/Act 2 and end/act 3 structure, the steps along the way are precise and elusive in meaning to the novice. This is made even more complex by his reliance on the narrative structural model as progressed by James Campbell as part of his Hero's Journey concept.

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Vogler's Hero's Journey brings together the complexity of all of the preceding models in that it has the four act structure hidden in three acts, has the intricate specialist terminology, a character development model along side a plot progression and the use of Campbell's Hero's Journey as a base concept.

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In contrast, Hauge breaks the three acts into six stages which are unclear as to which are character based and which are plot based and

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The Dramatica Act Structure, with its attempts to bring clarity to all of these models ends up breaking story structure down into 16 distinct areas of concern which a storyteller must pay attention to tell a successful story on film.

All this is to say that the internal concepts that go into the actual structure of telling a story have gotten so complicated and conflicted at this point that it would be difficult for even a student of screenwriting to tease out an understanding of story structure. Cinematographers have a tendency, as one would expect, to be visual storytellers and so all of these diagrams, with their allusions to vague concepts will most likely do nothing to illuminate the issue.

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Unfortunately the most visual of all of the models I found also seems to be entirely the most vague.

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So little study of what goes into the creation of screenplay story structure appears to be helpful in reinterpreting the ideas into a visual story – which is the ultimate job of the cinematographer. How then does a cinematographer come to an understanding of the key aspects of the written story, as represented by the screenplay, that are necessary to develop such a visual story.

In the end, this understanding develops between two people – the first who interprets the script directly and the second who works with and relies on the first in a joint attempt to tease out the elements necessary to break the story into the series of appropriate photographic images that will ultimately create the visual narrative and resultant style for the film.

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It is evident that the key relationship that a cinematographer has with the script is mitigated through their relationship with the director. It is the director's role to essentially be the "decider". It is theirs to interpret the script and to have the ultimate say, for instance, as to who is the protagonist in the film, whether we like them, are with them, back them, feel sorry for them or desire them to overcome the odds. It is quite possible, for instance, to have an antagonist who is still attractive or perhaps a protagonist who still has an evil underbelly. All of these things are possible and ultimately it is for the director to decide – working within the screenplay – how to interpret that story and its elements.

As an example of how much latitude one can have in the interpretation of a script I use what is called a contentless dialogue scene as created by Robert Cohen in his 2007 book, "Acting One". This scene is almost entirely open to interpretation.

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Read through this scene you will see that there is no identification of any of the exposition necessary to answer some basic questions about the script. I am not going to read it aloud so that it stays as neutral as possible. Take a moment to read the scene for yourself before I continue.

[Read the text on the slide]

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We do not know who these people are. What they want. Where they are. When they are. We also don't know some more complicated concepts such as who is the protagonist or antagonist, what do the characters want. What has happened up to this point. Where are we going after this point. Is the dialogue supposed to be taken at face value or is the script meant to be delivered sarcastically or at cross-purposes? Is one of them lying? Then there are basic referents missing and the role of the audience is unclear. When the one says I'm going away, do we as the audience already know where they are going or is it a mystery to us as well? What do we know in contrast to what the characters know? All of these elements effect what the actual story of the scene might be if it was a segment in a much larger film story.

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Over the course of several years and analyzing this contentless dialogue scene from the point of view of a cinematographer I have identified the key missing elements that a cinematographer would need to know in order to interpret this particular scene into visual information. Each element comes with a series of inherent questions that a cinematographer would need to ask a director in order to develop a visual story out of that scene. As was pointed out earlier, it is possible even with a flushed out story for different director's to

interpret a given element differently. For instance even the choice of who the protagonist is can be open to interpretation in some material – as is evidenced in the contentless scene. Therefore it is critical that the cinematographer is able to get this information and interpretation from the director themselves as the first step in developing the visual story and therefore style of the film.

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Let us start with an example of how this works – using the first very simple element at the top of the list: setting.

When working with my students I will have them form director/cinematographer teams. It does not matter if they are both cinematographers in class, it just means that one of them has to be responsible for making the decisions necessary to interpret the script. Then I give them this scene and I ask them to consider the setting itself.

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In order to do this there are a series of questions that I ask – that are essentially the same questions that a cinematographer would have to know about the story in order for them to do their work:

We start with the most basic question and then move into the more detailed. If you answer these questions for yourself as I speak you will see that you begin to start to create a visual world in your mind and that in turn this is creating a visual story. The questions are as follows:

- Where in the universe are we?
- If it is a planet, which one?
- Where on the planet?
- What country?
- What part of the country?
- What year?
- What time of year?
- Where is north?
- What time of day is it?
- Interior or exterior?

I will take us through one example. For instance if we are stuck out in space or on a distant planet that is quite different than if we are on the Earth. If we are on the Earth, then the Arctic is quite different than Europe. Spain is quite different from the UK. London is quite different from the Dales. The year 1420 is quite different than 2011. Summer different than Winter. North facing windows different from South. And the colour and quality of light at dawn different not only of 4am, but of 12 noon as well. Obviously if we are inside at 8pm in the winter the light source is going to be very different than if we are at 2pm in the summer outside. But it is having answered all of the previous questions make that final answer appear so obvious.

Having made these decisions then I ask students what their key light source would be from the setting and what it looks like. The power of these decisions came into sharp relief when a student chose dawn in Leeds in the present day in winter as his example. I asked what the colour of the light was coming through the windows and he said “grey”. I had just moved to Leeds at the time and coming from Los Angeles, I said “No dawn isn’t grey, it is pink!” The students just laughed. Another time a student from India said that he thought that dawn was yellow. The most simple of story choices such as setting can entirely change the visualization of that story and certainly changes the way we actualize that visualization.

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Getting the answers to these crucial issues is what makes the basis for our technical decisions as well. Obviously in this example of setting, the decisions for lighting, equipment and colour and grading are already raising their head by what is being called for in the scene. But decisions of protagonist and antagonist, character exposition, turning points, conflicts, exposition, point of view, climax and others all translate into technical choices as well, once each is identified and defined in conversation with the director. So I get my students to work together to do just that with the contentless dialogue scene. To answer these questions and then to shoot the scene. I have found that the more of these questions are answered the better the cinematography produced, even at the same year level. Simply engaging students in the process of developing the story visually this way raises their cinematography skills instantaneously and to an amazing degree. It is a light bulb moment for them. As soon as students see what they are able to achieve when they know the story from the inside out, as opposed to just trying to make pretty pictures, their entire attitude towards story changes. They become inspired to become visual storytellers and their attitude towards their technological tools often changes as well.

In order to examine how this phenomenon works in a real world setting, let’s look at an example how far a great cinematographer will go to tell the story above all else and how this choice automatically leads to technical choices which support that storytelling and result in great cinematography.

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Anthony Dod Mantle is one of the top cinematographers working today. His work on *Slumdog Millionaire* has been acknowledged not only by his receiving Oscar and BAFTA awards but by also receiving cinematography’s two top awards – the American Society of Cinematographers Award for Best Cinematography and the Camerimage International Film Festival of Cinematography’s Golden Frog.

I use a film of Dod Mantle’s as an example with my students to give them access to the process. What is interesting is that of course at this point students naturally assume that a professional feature film cinematographer is going to be using the top equipment and is making choices that they don’t understand and can’t yet aspire to. But with the tools they have before them they can create a visual style and tell a visual story, as long as they don’t start

with anything other than story first. With the example I give them, I tell them we are going to look at a film they most likely haven't seen. One that Dod Mantle did before he won his Oscar, but one that was also nominated for the Golden Frog at Camerimage. This is the Danish film *Festen*, written and directed by Thomas Vinterberg. The key thing about this film, besides the inherent intensity and power of the script, is that it was shot using the Dogma 95 style. In this style the director is working under its "Vow of Chastity". The director has to swear "to refrain from personal taste!" and state that their "supreme goal" is "to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations". Therefore as author of this vow along with Lars Von Trier, Vinterberg allowed the cinematographer complete visual freedom to develop the visual story. However as will become evident, this meant that every choice that Dod Mantle made worked in the end to simply support Vinterberg's incredible scripted story.

The other aspect of the Dogma style is that all of the cinematography was to be handheld, so that the setting up of the camera would not get in the way of the flow of the storytelling. I tell the students that the key thing I want them to be aware of is what camera choice Dod Mantle made as a result, why, and how that choice ended up telling the story so well that another choice seems almost impossible in retrospect.

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[watch video clip]

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So Dod Mantle's goal was a new kind of energy and new kinds of imagery. The need for this clearly came out of both the direction needs and the script that he analysed with the director. Surprisingly to accomplish this he disavowed professional cameras altogether to go with this...

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A small amateur palm-corder camera which he used to then shoot a feature film.

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The camera was a mini-dv tape camera with only 470 lines of resolution – as opposed to the 720 lines of DigiBeta with its 4:2:2 colour sampling. By making this choice he was directly undermining the traditional concepts of what is necessary to make award-worthy professional cinematography. But the question is why? What did he achieve in terms of the visual style of the film that told the story in a way that he could not have with another camera. Let us take a look at a clip and see if we can identify what this camera tells us in terms of two of the main characters in the film.

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[watch video clip]

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Clearly Dod Mantle's choice to work with a camera that he could get away from his body and form interesting angles with pays off in storytelling terms. At the beginning of the scene – which is the first scene of the film – the protagonist/elder brother is introduced with classical filmic shots. The camera is relatively static and though it tracks with him as he moves, it in no way matches the frenetic activity that occurs when his younger brother enters the scene. Once the younger brother and his family arrive, the camera suddenly shoots from below, above and around all of the members of the extended family, frequently breaking the line and most often moving as much as the wrestling brothers themselves. The younger brother is introduced as a chaotic element in the story in contrast to the elder's state of extreme self control. This is a necessary contrast in characteristics that hold the film together both in terms of its plot and its dramatic development over the course of the film.

By understanding the characters in the film and the energy necessary to be portrayed, Dod Mantle was able to make a camera choice that would enable him to tell their story in a way that had not yet been seen in other films.

Had Dod Mantle not understood the characters, their conflicts and their roles in the film, he would never have been able to shoot this scene in the expressive fashion it deserved nor to introduce the very nature of the characters into the story with such force.

The choice of camera was not made randomly, nor were the choice of angles, lenses or camera movement. All went towards developing a sense of character and introducing the audience to them at this critical introduction in the film.

Let's look at another example from the same film.

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[view film clip]

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In this scene Dod Mantle is able to continue to utilize the physical nature of the camera to introduce another character – in this case the dead sister. Positioning the camera high and above the other characters – from the ceiling, from the top corner of the room, he is able to give the “ghost's eye view”. This is important to establish as her point of view continues throughout the film as her voice is the final piece to a long standing puzzle that both pulls the family apart and brings it back together at the end. The camera in this case is static – mirroring the fact that the ghost sister is the twin of the elder brother with his controlled characteristics.

The fact that Dod Mantle is able to establish a clear view point for an invisible and silent character is inherently tied to the flexibility that the camera that he chose gave him. Not just the next newest, fanciest or most “top-end” camera,

but one that allowed him to put the camera places that other cameras would not allow him to go.

And yes, the images look rough. They look low resolution and “video-ie”. However the professional cinematographers who judged the entries at the Camerimage Festival were able to understand that visual storytelling was going on. So much so that even with its consumer grade camera this film was nominated for the festival’s top cinematography prize when it was released in theatres.

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So why would a cinematography student want to know anything about story structure? Why would they want to be involved in story development? Because they want to know what cinematographic choices to make – all of which are dependent on the understanding of key elements in the story. Do they need to understand how to write a screenplay? No, most certainly not. But they do need to understand key story development concepts like character, motivation, story arch, plot, setting, and other story elements. They do not need to define them. These can be done by or with the director – who is the key interpreter of the script - but a cinematographer needs to understand these elements well enough to be an informed collaborator with the director if they have any hope at all of actually telling a visual story. There is no visual style to a film without an understanding of the story of the film.

As the great, Oscar winning cinematographer John Toll so concisely sums up...

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[View Video Clip]

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