

S O U N D A N D L I G H T

Martin Phillips and Tim Arnold

ABSTRACT

Many promising student video productions are marred by poor (or no!) lighting and indifferent sound. Doing exactly what it says on the tin, this workshop considered these two important elements of the creative process and focused on the expressive effects that can be achieved even with the simplest equipment. Participants worked in groups to devise their own son et lumière.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Phillips opened this practical creative workshop by noting that although it is sound and light which receives enormous and detailed attention on film and television sets, they are the two areas which are usually weakest in student productions. Indeed it was Martin's view that in far too many cases these critically important elements were simply left to chance.

A short introduction to the key principles of lighting by Martin was followed by a more detailed exploration of sound by Tim Arnold, adviser for media education with Devon Educational Services but also an experienced professional sound recordist. In particular, Tim demonstrated how it is possible to get high quality sound from almost any microphone provided you position it correctly. Equally interesting was the way he mixed voice and music 'live', by moving the microphone between the speaking voice and the loudspeaker on the CD player. Extracts from Devon Education Services DVD The Videomaking Toolkit were used to exemplify points and indicate the sort of information it is useful for students to have when they are making their own films.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

The workshop was then structured around the following abridged training 'manual' which set out those things which the delegates – and in turn their students back at school – should ensure they had thought about before undertaking a practical production:

LIGHTING

It doesn't matter how carefully you compose your shot, if you don't get the lighting right the shot will look dead – or even worse, you won't be able to see things like the expression on people's faces because they are **underlit**. Light is a vital part of the filmmakers tool kit – which is why the chief camera operator is called a **lighting cameraman**.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIGHTING?

Well an obvious one is so that we can see what is going to appear on the screen. But much more importantly, light can be used creatively to make a shot look attractive. There are two main ways in which lighting is used in filmmaking:

■ realist lighting

When successful, actor and set are lit so naturally and unobtrusively that the audience don't notice the technology which has been used to simulate reality.

■ expressive lighting

This is when the director uses light to set a mood or tone for a scene – or even a 'look' to a whole film.



HOW DO YOU SET UP LIGHTING?

It is probably helpful to think about three points where you can set up lights – two points in front of the action and one point behind it.

■ key light

This is the main light used on the set. It will be placed to one side of the camera and directed at the actors it is lighting.

■ fill light

This is placed on the other side of the camera from the key light and is not as powerful. It takes out some, though not all, of the shadows created by the key light.

■ back light

This is placed behind the figure. It defines the figure's outline and separates them from the background to give a more three-dimensional effect to the shot.

There is also the possibility of using what are called **practical** lighting. These are things which actually appear in shot, like a table lamp or a candle.

PLANNING YOUR LIGHTING

There are all sorts of variations which can be used when lighting shots and the best thing to do is try out different lighting set ups until you get the one you think is best suited to the shot. However, it will probably help to think of two quite distinct types of lighting.

■ high-key picture

This type of lighting makes the shot look very bright overall with small areas of shadow. So a bright sunlight (though not necessarily sunlit) outdoor shot would be high-key.

■ low-key picture

The shot looks dark overall with few areas of highlight. Night shots or interiors are often low-key. There may be one section of the shot which is quite brightly lit while the rest is in deep shadow.

When you are planning the lighting for any sequence in your poem film, use the following prompt questions to guide your decision-making. (You could also use these questions to help you when you are analysing the way a director has filmed any poem films you are studying.)



STYLE	Is the light to be high-key or low-key? Or would you describe it in some other way?
SCENE	Is the lighting being used to make the scene look like natural or artificial light?
ANGLES	Is the placement of the key light from a high angle or low angle?
QUALITY	Is the light going to give hard-edged shadows, as you would expect from very bright sunlight? Or will it create a softer, more diffused look, as you would expect on a cloudy day?
PRACTICALS	Are you going to use any practical light sources? What effect will this have on the overall look of the shot?
TIME	Is the shot to look as if it is early morning, midday, dusk, night-time?
SOURCE	What is the source of the lighting in the scene intended to be? Remember – you can ‘create’ sunlight on a dull day by using strong artificial light to ‘lift’ the light level.
MOOD	This is probably the most important consideration. What mood or tone do you want to create? If you get the lighting wrong then the mood will be wrong and the shot will ‘mean’ something different to the audience when they see your film.

SOUND

Much of the sound we hear on films has been added at the post-production stage, so you will look at sound again in that section. During production it is the **synchronised sound** which is recorded.

The quality of the sound you record is as important as the quality of the picture. Far too often amateur filmmakers do not give enough thought to the sound they record. Even if you only have the microphone which is mounted on your camera to work with, you can still plan to make sure you get the best possible sound in the circumstances. The golden rule is to get whatever mic you are using as close to the person speaking as you possibly can.

USING AN ON-CAMERA MICROPHONE

You will be limited by using this type of microphone because as well as the voice of anyone speaking you will also pick up a lot of **ambient sound**. Sometimes you will want to hear some ambient sound; if your poet is sitting on a beach while reciting a poem about stormy weather we might want to hear the sound of waves and the wind. However, we need to control the level of those sounds so that they do not drown out the voice.

You will almost certainly need to set up shots which are no wider than a medium close-up because the camera mic will be close enough to pick up a reasonable level of sound from the voice – and if you are in a noisy environment, like a busy street, you ought to use a close-up.

USING A MICROPHONE WHICH IS SEPARATE FROM THE CAMERA

The advantage of using an external microphone is that you are going to be able to get it much closer to the person speaking while still having the camera set at the type of shot you would ideally like – even if this is a long shot. All professional film crews have someone who does nothing else but record the sound. This **sound recordist** may use all sorts of different types of microphone depending on the situation being filmed and the effect the director wants to achieve. If at all possible try to use some sort of external mic which will allow you to get **close mic’d sound**.

For the practical session, delegates were given:

- Stevie Smith’s poem Not Waving But Drowning
- A selection of production music CDs and a CD player
- Lighting heads, stands and coloured gels
- Camcorders and separate external microphones

Their task was as follows:

VOICES IN TEXT: AN EXERCISE IN SOUND AND LIGHT

Your group is a small independent production company. You are pitching to win the commission to make a late night poetry slot on BBC4. The delegates were given a poem and the following brief to shoot a pilot:

Poetry Matters is a low budget series which BBC4 will broadcast just before the new Jazz series at 22.58 every Friday through September.

The concept of the series is to present well-known poems shot in a way which foregrounds the words and catches the mood – not bury the poetry beneath a deluge of MTV style editing and post production wizardry.

The emphasis in your pilot should be on simple but effective mood creation through judicious use of lighting and careful attention to sound. The end product will be a reading of the poem. No cutaways or graphics or other distractions: it is the reader and their voice who are the sole focus.

Time is short and so is the budget. You will not be editing this piece later, you need to edit 'in camera'.

CONCLUSION

An hour later the results were premiered. All students were awarded A* on the basis that their attention to every level of detail in controlling both sound and light was exemplary!

Martin Phillips was Director of the DCS Digital Media Education Team; He has also been Chief Moderator for A/AS Level Media Studies and is currently an Assistant Principal Moderator for AQA GCSE English. He has written a variety of books and articles on English and Media Studies teaching, most recently GCSE Media Studies for Heinemann (2004).

Martin Phillips has directed more than forty video/DVD resources for secondary schools on Media Studies and Art.

Tim Arnold is Adviser for Digital Media Education for the Devon Learning and Development Partnership and Manager of the Digital Media Education Centre in Exeter.

Tim co-wrote 'Videoconferencing in the Classroom' (2002 and 2004) as part of his work for the DES (now DCSF) Videoconferencing Project and 'Videoconferencing Across the Curriculum' (2009) for Becta. He currently manages a videoconferencing project for the TDA linking schools in the UK, France and Germany, and is a consultant for the TDA's Collaborative Technology in Languages Initiative, developing the use of a learning platform across six schools in Trafford, Niort and Granada.