

Moving pictures

Daniel Chisholm, a winner in last year's DepicT! – a Society-sponsored 90-second filmmaking competition – talks cinematographic technique

sometimes do the camera work myself, and at other times I collaborate with accomplished directors of photography such as Mikolaj Jaroszewicz (probably best known for the Oscar-winning short *Peter and the Wolf*). I find that the lack of a large budget often goes hand in hand with simple, pared-down cinematography, which I think can nonetheless yield great results.

NATURAL LIGHT

When working on documentaries I prefer to stick to natural light, at the most enhancing with a little bounce from a reflector. This allows for quick reaction times to what is happening, and flexibility while dealing with the subject matter, but sometimes leads to over or underexposed parts of the image. This often adds to authenticity and can lead to some surprisingly atmospheric, even beautiful, results.

An example of this is an interview I filmed with one

of the subjects of a documentary I am currently working on. We shot the interview in the evening in his kitchen, which had only one ceiling-mounted light – a nightmare for a traditional interview-lighting scenario. But it so happens that the resulting moody look works very well with the documentary as a whole. I probably never would have captured the same relaxed, natural interview if I had started setting up lights in the interviewee's kitchen.

REALITY CHECK

I feel that audiences are used to low production values thanks to YouTube and mobile phone videos. In some instances, this can be associated with the 'reality' of the material: the shakier and more out-of-focus the footage, the more authentic it seems.

I'm not suggesting that we should all start shooting intentionally ugly footage, but I think we, as filmmakers, are gaining more and more leeway to use footage which



traditionally would have been considered unusable. I went so far as to use hand-held footage from a Canon 5D, without a shoulder rig, for the sequence in *Nati* [Chisholm's DepicT!-winning short film] where the titular nonagenarian uses a chainsaw to trim a cutting from an old olive tree, to become a new olive tree.

LOOKING 'JUST SO'

Having said all that, I have a massive soft spot for thoroughly planned, beautifully lit shots with complex camera set-ups. Visual storytelling really comes into its own when you have the resources to make everything look 'just so'.

One of my favourite projects is a spec commercial I shot early in my career. We had the unusual luxuries of both time and budget on our side. It was a great pleasure spending days poring over the storyboards, discussing angles, visual references, story dynamics.

In the commercial, a baby navigates the dangers of an empty house – a steep flight of stairs, a precariously balanced iron and a bad-tempered dog. One of the concepts was for the overall tone of the piece to be light and upbeat, with the dangers standing out starkly against this bright background.

This is most clearly illustrated by the black iron, set off against the pastel colours of the set and brilliant early-morning lighting. This effect is further emphasised by the angles, focus and movement of the camera, alternating between a vertiginous view from above the iron and the baby's point of view, showing the iron looming up above as the tablecloth on which it stands is tugged by the baby's fingers. The camera movement, focus pull, colour coordination and montage in this scene all play together to create a sense of dread.



Alessio, the subject of Daniel Chisholm's latest documentary work-in-progress



'WHEN WORKING ON DOCUMENTARIES I PREFER TO STICK TO NATURAL LIGHT'

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The trickiest situation, of course, is when there is little time and money, but still a high expectation regarding visual polish. I find this is often the case on corporate shoots, and increasingly everywhere else.

In such situations, the only way to have fun and still produce something that works is to have a great team and to use efficient cinematography.

Working with Mikolaj Jaroszewicz on a number of such productions has made me hugely appreciative of his ability to create a truly beautiful lighting set-up in almost no time at all. He is particularly resourceful in his use of reflectors to augment natural light, which can dramatically reduce the

requirements on lighting equipment. A multi-camera set-up of course saves time on retakes and switching camera positions, and also allows for multi-cam editing in post – again, a huge time saver.

PEOPLE POWER

The biggest source of efficiency, though, is the team. If you have a focus-puller, a clapper loader and a trainee who know one another and their DP, and who are used to working in a high-pressure environment, you won't lose time to matters such as battery changes or empty cards. All that saved time can go into making sure that the shots work and you get that killer performance.

To see Daniel Chisholm's work, visit www.danielchisholm.co.uk



Striking images from Chisholm's varied portfolio: Alessio playing cards, Nati and his chainsaw, the baby and the iron



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The independent director and filmmaker is based between London and Berlin. He picked up the Audience Award and British Special Mention Award at DepicT! 2014 for his short film *Nati*