

Whatever happened to camera craft?

During the recent GTC name change debate, one of the alternatives suggested to Council was 'The Guild of Television Cameracraft'. This might have fitted the bill nicely, as it conveys what we are all about and would have kept the initials the same. Unfortunately, it was let down by the fact that there is no such word! However, James French wonders whether the word 'craft' would actually be suitable in the 21st century, as we seem to be hell-bent on turning ourselves into glorified technicians...

WITH THANKS TO TOBY HORWOOD FOR THE CARTOONS

“It strikes me that many cameramen are now predominantly engineers who happen to also point the camera.”

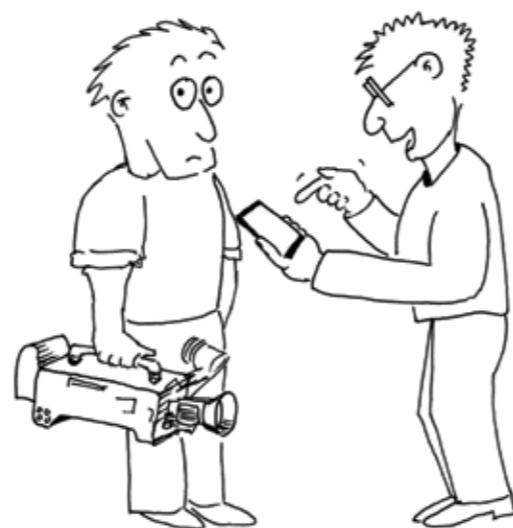
One of the dictionary definitions for craft is: an art, trade or occupation requiring special skill, especially manual skill... I take this to mean some form of artistic appreciation, combined with a dexterity only gained through experience and skill. It cannot be learned from a book or by absorbing the last technical detail of the latest fancy camera – it has to be acquired on the job, through some kind of apprenticeship, whether official or otherwise.

So where do our skills lie? What separates us from the rank and file producing pictures with their domestic video cameras? It was a few years ago when I first started to notice that an increasing percentage of my time was being spent on just keeping up with the technicalities necessary to get

the job done in the modern age – which inevitably meant less time for the artistic and creative side of the job.

Learning the craft

When I started in the industry in the 1970s, it was as a camera assistant on a well-established crew in a broadcast TV studio. For over two years, I rarely did anything more exciting than pulling cables, sharpening pencils and making the tea, but this meant I spent a lot of time watching what was going on, listening to talkback and appreciating the skills of everyone in the studio; not just in cameras, but in lighting, sound, scenery and design as well. Obviously, I had to know about the technical aspects of cameras and I was very interested and keen to learn. However, I was taught in a very generic way. By this I mean it didn't matter what make of camera or lens I was using, because operationally they were pretty much the same. So once I understood zoom angles, depth of field, how to change a lens and where the zoom and focus knobs were, the vast majority of my learning concerned the craft.



CAMERAWORK? IT'S SIMPLE, YOU JUST DOWNLOAD THE 'CREATIVITY' APP!

All the assistants supported one another, although there was a healthy rivalry which helped drive me on to succeed. The discussions at coffee break, and later in the bar, were not about codecs, bit rates and formats – that was stuff for engineers. Of course we were interested in the technicalities but we spent most of our time discussing framing, shot-matching, moving sympathetically with the action or music, pivoting perfectly, and analysing the lighting etc.

I know we have to move with the times but it strikes me that many cameramen are now predominantly engineers who happen to also point the camera. If you look back at the last five years of postings on the GTC Forum, what is the percentage of technical queries as opposed to art and craft ones? I'd wager it is 100:1!

Technicians not artists

So where did this all go wrong? I think we, as a group of professionals, have to take much of the blame for letting it happen. We have sleepwalked our way into making directors and producers think we are, first and foremost, technicians. By becoming so obsessed with the latest cameras, codecs et al., we make it appear that we care more about this stuff than the attributes that actually make us craftsmen and craftswomen. Anybody can learn about the technicalities of a camera from the internet but not everybody has that indefinable something that makes the viewer (or director) go 'Wow'!

Don't get me wrong, I like technically superb pictures as much as the next person but not to the exclusion of all else. A crappy quality camera in the hands of a skilled craftsman will always produce more memorable pictures than the latest, greatest offering in the hands of someone who purely eats, sleeps and breathes bit-rates and codecs.

So I believe it is a matter of perception or, more precisely, how the production team perceives us. Do you think Hollywood directors tell their DoPs what camera they want them to use? Of course not! The director will describe their vision for the film and the DoPs then organise the correct kit for the job and surround themselves with people they want to work with. They won't be told to use someone they don't know, or a camera they don't like, because they are perceived as being in charge of the entire photography process.

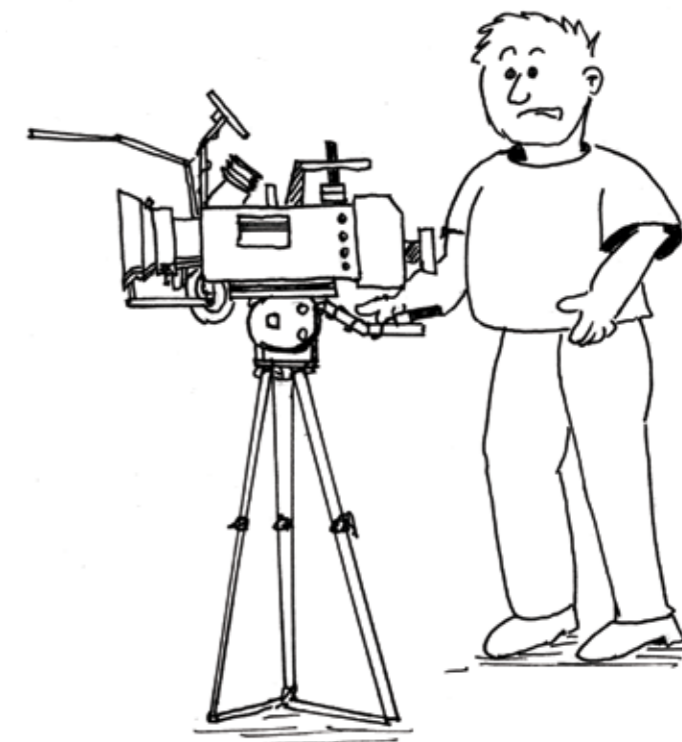
I sometimes find myself longing to be a film cameraman now, which I have never felt before. Their world seems so much simpler and more straightforward – just choose the stock you want and get on with making great pictures. Of course, there is a choice of cameras but at least they all still work in pretty much the same way. Plus, you will be able to choose from a vast array of lenses without having to use adapters and loads of bolt-on bits and bobs, just in order to make the camera operable. The film is removed from the camera and stored carefully. No worrying about what video format to shoot for, where it will be shown, reformatting cards, external recorders, backups, etc, etc.

It isn't so long ago that this was our world too – you simply bought a DigiBeta, a couple of lenses and then got on with the job in hand. Now, the DigiBeta world is long gone, and so, by the looks of it, will be film before very long. What has driven this change? Only one thing – money! Of course, we need to be financially aware but at what point do we actually stop trying to eek some semblance of quality out of little more than souped-up domestic stills cameras and say 'enough is enough'? When we can't operate a camera as

How on earth is this better to operate than a streamlined broadcast camera designed for the specific job?



SEBASTIAAN TER BURIG



IT'S GOT A SELF-ANALYSING OFFSET FLANGE CONVERTER. IT'S GOT A FULL RANGE OF HD CODECS A 3RD GENERATION MOTHERBOARD AND A STRONTIUM 9 PROCESSOR, BUT I'M NOT SURE HOW TO TURN IT ON!

easily as a DigiBeta, or use it as quickly or in as many different positions, then things have gone too far.

Toys and fads

I was once told by a successful daytime producer to book a Steadicam for the following day's show. I asked him what shot he wanted to achieve but he didn't know. He had seen a Steadicam on *How Do They Do That?* and decided he wanted one, no matter how ridiculous the cost. To me, this was completely arse about face. Surely, the idea is to decide the shot you want to achieve and then get in the most appropriate piece of kit? And yet we all see and experience similar ludicrous requests, all the time, in relation to cameras, recorders, lenses, mounts, etc.

Another way in which we play into production's hands is by blindly going along with fads as if nothing else will do or is even worthy of consideration. There are two going the rounds at present: tilt-shift and shallow depth of field...

When tilt-shift videos started appearing on YouTube a few years back, I thought they were very interesting but not likely to be mainstream – how wrong I was! I can hardly watch a documentary (or even the occasional drama) these days without seeing this effect being used in what seem to me entirely inappropriate ways. Why exactly do you want real life to look like a model? For years the model-makers on shows like *Thomas the Tank*

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ALISON CHAPMAN

Tilt-shift (or the art of making reality look like a model) - an overused novelty!



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Engine when out of their way to make their models look as much as possible like real life. Now we are doing the reverse! Why? What does it add to the programme and the viewer's enjoyment of it?

Whether the effect is created in camera or in post, we must never lose sight of the fact that our job is to help tell the story. Whether we like it or not, the moment the viewer starts noticing the technicalities, they are no longer absorbed in the programme - at that point the medium has become more important than the message and, in my view, we have failed!

The shallow DOF obsession

The classic example of this is the current ridiculous obsession with shallow depth of field. Many cameramen and directors talk as if nothing else is worthy of consideration and insist on shooting everything using cameras that are completely inappropriate for the job in hand. So what do we do as cameramen? Do we complain? Do we insist on using the correct tool for the job?

No! We blindly rush out and buy the latest toy, despite the fact that it will probably be obsolete before it earns its keep.

Don't misunderstand me, I like shallow depth of field as much as anyone, as long as it is used appropriately. It can make a mundane interview look much more striking and appealing but why use it on cookery close-ups? It can actually make the viewer feel sick. And why bother with a background at all if the depth of field is so shallow it renders it unrecognisable?

This obsession is currently so omnipresent that a number of excellently designed cameras are actually being discontinued as nobody is buying them because

they don't do shallow depth of field. Until a couple of years ago, these cameras were the bread and butter for probably 90% of all TV output and yet, soon, they will no longer be available. Why are we letting this happen? For the run-of-the-mill programmes that many of us earn a crust making, nothing comes close to these kinds of cameras for ease and speed of use. They are the correct tool for the job!

I recently read on a forum that one of our brethren thought that without shallow depth of field we have no way of being artistic or creative. I am sure a lot of cameramen of old would take great exception to this attitude. It is basically saying that, before shallow depth of field came to video, it was impossible to be artistic or creative. You only have to look in the television archives to know that this is patent nonsense and is actually really insulting to the practitioners of yesteryear.

Besides, has anybody watched *Citizen Kane* recently? Extreme depth of field throughout and yet it is hailed as a masterpiece. How can that be? My theory is that film-makers



LOOK AT THIS GREAT FOOTAGE - I USED SO LITTLE DEPTH OF FIELD, YOU ACTUALLY CAN'T SEE ANYTHING - GENIUS!

were forced into shallow depth of field for years due to the large frame sizes and the need to work with lenses wide open because of the insensitivity of the film stocks. As soon as these factors improved, they were liberated from the straitjacket of shallow depth of field and embraced the new look and feel. This is exactly what is happening now - but in reverse. For years, sensors have got smaller and smaller, allowing for smaller and lighter cameras and relatively cheap long-range zoom lenses. This resulted in cameramen feeling like they were in a different straitjacket and now they have rebelled - big time.

Now, I don't mind a bit of rebellion and really like people who think outside the box but the problem comes when we all follow these trendsetters like sheep, convincing ourselves that it is the only way to go. Shallow depth of field, along with numerous other photographic techniques should simply be treated as one tool in the toolbox. We need to stop confusing trendy technical techniques with artistic ability.

To sum up, while the specifications of cameras, formats and lenses are of interest to all, please let's not forget that what sets us apart from the crowd is our creativity. We want the manufacturers to make cameras to work well for us, not for production teams to force us to use wholly inappropriate technology, simply because of the latest fad. We need the major broadcasters to agree on a technical standard and then stick to it. This will allow us to stop filling our heads with technical mumbo-jumbo, which has little to do with photography, and to get back to basics. Only then will we be once again free to concentrate on the execution of our well-honed skills and rediscover the **craft** of making great pictures.



Camerawork used to be so simple - a DigiBeta and a couple of lenses and you were free to concentrate on making great pictures

Fact File

Lighting Cameraman James French worked at BBC Pebble Mill, Birmingham from 1978-2001 in all areas of broadcast TV, including PSC, ENG, OBs and Studios. He now freelances on OBs, PSC and in Studios.

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