

MAKING THE GRADE

Filling in the grey areas

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I admit it, until last year I often overlooked the importance of grading my work. With the exception of tweaking a white balance or the slight tinkering of highlights, mid-tones and shadows, more often than not I would think, "that's how it looks straight out of the camera and that looks very nice, thank you very much". It wasn't until a colleague of mine showed me a corporate film he'd cut for Microsoft that I suddenly realised how naïve I had been. His film looked incredible! The shadows were a crisp business blue, the skin tones a Hollywood magenta, there were gorgeous light leak transitions; quite frankly the grade had added a whole new dynamic to a video that was essentially an internal talking head's video. I was converted and I'm pleased to say I've never looked back.

When I got the email from GTC with the opportunity to get an inside look at the grading practises at Soho's Prime Focus I was absolutely delighted. It's not often you get to sit in with a senior colourist in a state-of-the-art studio and learn a few tricks of the trade. Did I mention there was free beer? Amazingly, we were also allowed to take our drinks into the studio; a studio that I'm told cost roughly £500K to kit out! I made a conscious decision to keep my beverage as far from the £35K grading desk as possible...

Our mentor for the evening was Tim Waller, a colourist with over 70 film credits to his name. The desk Tim uses is from the Baselight grading system. It's got more dials than a NASA control room and probably looks a lot cooler too! I hadn't actually heard of this system prior to the workshop so from the offset I was learning. The studio itself is large with a comfy leather sofa for clients to sink into whilst they gaze at the gigantic cinema screen in front of them. It certainly beats editing on a laptop...

Tim began the workshop by demonstrating a variety of the software's capabilities on a wide cliff-top shot of the sea. For reference, the shot was taken with a flat profile.

First Tim tweaked the shadows/midtones and highlights, expanding the dynamic range and finding a contrast that gave the image some depth.

Next he applied a gradient filter to the sky, re-introducing some cloud detail. Now we focused on specific elements of the shot. Boosting the midtones and saturation on the cliff face, defocusing the foreground to draw the eye out to sea.

The results were superb and I can confidently say that all in the room were

impressed. Now, it goes without saying that any camera operator who shoots with a flat picture profile intends for the footage to be graded and therefore you would expect a dramatic difference in the final picture. However, what separates the professional grader from the basic image corrector are the additional subtle details like blurring the foreground, lifting specific details on a cliff face, saturating just the grass on the cliff. Tim refocused the eye and turned a good shot into a great shot all within a matter of minutes, and he was taking things slow for our benefit!

Speaking of good shots, the group were very keen to discover what Tim could do to correct less than ideal footage. Whilst there seem to be endless capabilities to the Baselight desk, it was refreshing to hear Tim say quite frankly, "You can't polish a turd...but you can cover it with glitter". Just as if you were to hand your editor some poorly framed shots, giving your colourist a shot that is wildly over/under exposed and expecting miracles is ultimately unrealistic. Besides, Prime Focus charges £400ph so you'd better have a big budget if you hired a lazy cameraman! The line of questioning highlighted the importance of maintaining an excellent cameraman-editor relationship. As we all know, the "Don't worry, we'll fix it in post" approach is never the best solution. An editor can

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only work with what they are given and in a time of increasingly tighter deadlines we cameramen are the first line of defence for ensuring a smooth workflow and a happy client. That said, the programme still performed remarkably well at bringing back detail, sharpening soft (but not too soft) shots, correcting skin tones and even has Photoshop-esque features that can mask and remove unwanted elements that might have been unavoidable on the day. Indeed, comparable to other grading programmes it definitely appears to be a more convenient all-in-one solution.

I don't have £35K to invest in a grading desk! I'm a cameraman! So if investing in a £35K grading desk is an unrealistic acquisition and you haven't got the budget for a £400ph studio, how do you get that professional grade? Luckily, this is quite a saturated market (pardon the pun) and so there are plenty of programmes to choose from. As a videographer I regularly shoot and edit my projects, so having an easy-to-use, affordable and laptop-ready solution is essential. After trying out a whole host of options I came across a package made by a company called Red Giant and instantly knew I'd found my winner. At only £300 it's the colouring bargain of the century and is stacked full of amazingly effective tools. It's called Magic Bullet Looks and with the exception of the Photoshop-esque features of Baselight I can confidently say that it can do everything Tim demonstrated to us during the workshop, although I'll admit he was going easy on us. Looks is exceptionally easy to navigate and categorises its tools in to five areas: Subject, Matte, Lens, Camera and Post. I strongly recommend you give it a go and download the free trial; you'll be amazed at how quickly you can transform your footage.

So what do programmes like Magic Bullet Looks mean for the grading industry?

Just as cameras have become ever smaller, sharper and affordable the grading market is becoming increasingly accessible. New programmes create new workflows and these can mean potentially huge savings for clients. Just think how much time SD cards have saved compared to tape! The invitation for Making The Grade described colour grading as a 'black art' and I feel that perhaps this is no longer the case. Today anybody can shoot an HD video on their phone, throw a few colour presets on it and upload it to the web. Don't get me wrong; this by no means

makes the Average Joe a professional, but the tools are becoming ever easier to grasp and utilise. Some worry that this will breed a new age of 'self-shooters' who are void of the essential skills that make a true operator but honestly I think you can sleep easy. No amount of technology will be able to replace a good eye for composition or creative flair for adjusting colours. Well, not for a long time anyway! Speaking of self-shooters, this is a term that seems to have been 'muddied' on the forums and I'm not sure why. Today, the combinations of these skills are becoming almost the standard for documentary and corporate work. I think if you can direct, shoot, sound record, edit and colour grade and most importantly do them all well, then you have simply managed to adapt to a changing industry and will be all the better for it in the long term. Regrettably, we seem to be drawing more attention to examples of where these combinations have not quite gelled rather than celebrating cases of seamless execution.

Getting back to colour grading, for the foreseeable future I can definitely see grading studios continuing to dominate the television and feature film market, particularly with the emergence of 4K, which is definitely not quite something the average freelancer is kitted out to handle.

Furthermore, it would be very hard to compete with someone of Tim Waller's stellar ability. In fact, it is the people not the software that makes companies like Prime Focus so brilliant and worth every penny. You could have all the kit, all the presets and all the money in the world but none of it is any good unless you really, truly understand how to use it. Or in other words, "All the gear and no idea". Likewise, throw a mobile phone video enthusiast a Red Epic (well don't throw it) and they just might be able to navigate its menu but will they be able to compose a truly stunning shot? Not likely. Prime Focus have invested in the best graders in the world and I'm confident their team could do a better job in Paint than most could in DaVinci Resolve or Magic Bullet Looks. Nonetheless, I can certainly see freelance colourists gaining a stronger foothold in this market as time goes on. There are already plenty of professional grading programmes that run on a laptop and these are only going to get better. It will certainly be interesting to see how companies like Prime Focus adapt to this gradient shift in the market (my final pun). What remains to be seen is whether or not the freelance graders can fit a cinema screen and a demanding client in their homes...

