

## Getting Started

### Thinking Up a Project Idea

Do you have a story that has never been told? Maybe a new point of view on a subject that would change peoples' attitudes? A really funny joke? A terrible secret? A beautiful mystery? A love story?

Filmmakers all begin in different ways. Sometimes it is a haunting question or image, other times it is rage at an injustice and understanding that you have the power to change it by making a larger audience aware. On occasion, it is simply being in the right place at the right time, with a camera in your hand.

Our community, culture, family, personal experience, and innermost feelings are the very best places to look for an idea to express through the medium of video. By tapping into our reality, dreams, memories and fantasies, we can think independently and act originally.

After coming up with the idea, the next most important step is developing it. Whatever the idea behind it is, in order for the final video to work it must have one or more strong and unifying elements running through it. The theme should be what the entire work is about, and should be describable in a few simple sentences. This theme will be the main message to convey in the video, and it will sum up the goals of the work.

The artistic creator — while using his or her inner feelings and self-expression to realize the idea and theme — does not operate in a vacuum. Our goal may be to communicate, and if it is, that means the people being communicated with — the audience — must be considered. Even in the early stages of script development, we must consider who we expect will watch our program and how we think this audience will respond.

It is vital to consider how the audience will react to ideas, themes, subject matter, and presentation. How will the video provoke reactions? How will the viewers evaluate the video? How will the video hold the audience's attention? For example, different formats, styles and dialogue can be used for different age groups, cultures or communities. An idea may be presented in one way for a specially focused group, yet a very different method may be used to express that same idea to a greater "mass" audience. Certain signs and symbols will make sense for some people, yet will be confusing for others. A joke that could provoke laughter from one audience may leave another audience cold. Our audience must be defined, and we must always remember who we are communicating with even while following our inner voice.

## **Knowing Your Point of View**

It is critical for you to understand your own perspective and opinions relating to your subject. Of course, we know what we like and what we don't like, what excites us, and what bores us. We have developed opinions and feelings that are personal and very real to us. Yet, often it feels like nobody else really wants to hear our opinions, and we end up keeping many ideas to ourselves. When it comes time to present our own point of view to others, we often are afraid. We are probably more used to having experts and authorities (politicians, newscasters, teachers or parents) speaking for us and expressing their views publicly. If there has been little opportunity in our own life, we can change that by creating and developing our personal idea and expressing our independent voice on film. Artists continually struggle with this challenge, as they ask themselves: "How can I create a new vision, one that is unique to myself, one that represents my own point of view?" The process of developing our own point of view is always a great challenge, but we need to keep faith that our own views are just as worth while as anyone else's views!

## **Learning More Through Research**

Investigate your topic or idea as much as possible — you must become an expert in the area, even if you are interviewing experts for their opinions. Indeed, because you may otherwise be intimidated by interviewing experts, try to come to your own conclusions about what makes your idea, theme, presentation, and subject special and interesting for audiences.

Methods of research include:

- visiting the library
- reading books and magazines written on the subject
- interviewing people
- viewing videotapes and films on the subject
- conducting surveys

## **Budget — Time and Resource Constraints**

Be realistic about the resources you have available. Know the time constraints you are working under and do your best to stick to them. Film and video makers have a saying that you are always trying to balance three resources:

- Money
- Time
- Freedom (i.e. independence to control your own work)

At best, you can only ever control two out of three of these resources; how you control those two resources will help to determine the kind of production you will make.

## The Look, Feel and Sound of your Film

In addition to developing your theme and researching your ideas, it is important to keep in mind that what you are making is a film as opposed to writing an essay. Film is an audio-visual medium, so you need always to be thinking of how your film will look and how it will sound.

Work on capturing the look or style of the proposed work by observing and collecting the textures and colors and compositions (both visual and sound) that put you in the world that you are going to create. From this book of notes, think about how these might relate to a character, a location or a specific scene in your script. This reference guide is an extremely useful and important shortcut in helping the team understand how you visualize the piece.

The look is most deeply the responsibility of the cinematographer. The film's director often chooses the cinematographer, or Director of Photography, for the look that they have created in the past — their signature style.

As you start to collect your colors and textures, take a fresh look at the work of your favorite directors. How, when and most importantly why, do they use that frame at that angle with that camera movement in the scene? Everything is there for a reason or it should not be there at all. Whether it is the deep focus of Orson Welles or the pop palette of Pedro Almodovar, each visual choice represents more than just the aesthetic choices of that filmmaker. If you are shooting a documentary, the visual style is just as wide open now as drama. There are reenactments, animation of still photographs, archival footage, home movies. These different visual treatments of the same story will result in films with radically different points of view.

Locations — where you shoot your film — are all important in creating your visual style, and in some instances the locations can *be* the picture. A film like *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) makes such use of its brilliant white setting that the landscape becomes a central character in the narrative. When you find the right location, it can give the creative process a certain magic that changes crew and cast in a way that is actually visible on film. It is about stepping in to the universe of the story. Conversely, in a film which relies on special effects and blue screen to create space — either exterior landscape or interior matrix — the space is flat, it doesn't feel lived in, and so these type of films rely more on emotional soundtracks and quick cutting to achieve a sense of place.

Sound is the alternative (or parallel) world to the picture. The sound adds depth and space and reality to what is ultimately a moving 2D visual. In emotional terms the sound is often more important than the images. It often provides the cue to what the director wants you to be feeling. In a great film the space of the picture (what is happening visually) and the space of the sound (what you are hearing) can be completely different, however they work together to create a single experience.

You can never start thinking of the sound too early in the project. What is in the soundscape? Exterior sounds, natural sounds, interior sounds — what kind of mood do you want to create? Is it a certain moment in history — 1968 standing on the corner in Haight Ashbury Spring sunlight, or 2070 on a Mars super highway hungry and out of fuel?

Sound is a much more primal sense than vision and although you can close your eyes during a movie, it is much more difficult to cover your ears. Also as human processors of vast quantities of visual material, most peoples' eyes are far more sophisticated than their ears. All of us have developed filters and standards for sorting and understanding visual material that only a few of us have developed similarly in the field of sound.

#### Music

Music is a very powerful tool. It can instantly create a mood to enhance or set a tone to contrast with the picture. In some films - *Koyaanisqatsi*, for example - the music was written first and the cinematographer listened to the score as he shot the film. In others, such as Fellini's work with Nino Rota, they were complete collaborators. Music is separate from sound and cannot be used to replace it. Silence is also stunningly effective in getting people to pay attention.

#### Songs

Unless you are doing a musical you would be wise to use music very sparingly. Songs have very specific points of reference for each person, so getting the exact known pop song that will work universally is an impossible task. The important thing is not to saturate every scene with a melody because this leaves your audience very little space to have their own experiences of your work. Music is also the ultimate editing tool. This is easily observable in any music video, where the song is laid down first and the picture is cut to the music.

#### Copyright

In a classroom context, you are breaking the copyright infringement if you use a known song, either of the singer (if you use their recording) or the writer/composer (if you record it yourself.) It also means that your film or video cannot be shown at festivals or broadcast on TV. You cannot copy your tapes or show your tapes to other students if the tapes use music to which you do not have the rights. Always get the rights, especially if you are using songs!

#### Narration

Will there be voice over narration (the internal dialogue) of the protagonist? In a documentary, will there be an onscreen narrator (like a newscast) or an informal narrator (or voice of authority) who acts as a guide and storyteller? What language will this person be using? Do they have an accent? Is it a man or a woman?

## **Remember Your Story**

Gathering your resources, doing your research, pitching your pitch every place you go, writing your script, scouting your locations, defining your characters (yes, even in a documentary), storyboarding your shots, thinking about sound design, putting together a crew, finding funding, working with your actors, keeping track of 1,000 details: these are all part of the pre-production process of most media projects. When the multitude of details rises up and feels overwhelming, remember your story — and your reason for telling it.

Materials drawn partly from *TV Eye: A Curriculum for Media Arts, Analysis and Production* By: Branda Miller and Renee Hobbs