



30 CINEMATOGRAPHY TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

1. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Stanley Kubrick and his cinematographer, John Alcott set out to film a scene with candlelights. The result of this solution is nothing short of painterly. Finding the next great camera technique may just be a matter of devising a creative solution to achieve your visual goals.

2. MOTION IN THE FRAME

How you use your frame is critical. You want to keep things active and visually engaging. A director has a lot on a film set to manage. Strategize on where you can insert some cost effective camera movements that will help bring the project to life.

3. EXPERIMENT WITH LENS SIZES

Try slapping a wide lens on for a close up, or a long lens for an establishing shot. Of course you only want to do that if it works for the story you're telling. But experimenting never hurts. Don't ever be afraid to give something a look. Time permitting, of course.

4. THE RIGHT GEAR FOR THE JOB

Get familiar with ALL types of cameras and lenses. If and when the director asks for something out of the ordinary you'll need to be ready with not only suggestions, but also the requisite knowledge to implement them. Knowing how to achieve the same end goals will make you favorite of producers as well. Which likely means more jobs.

5. KNOW THE SCRIPT

Far too often camera crews and even DoP's don't know the script backwards and forwards.

Being a cinematographer is as creative as it is technical. Make sure the ideas you bring to the table are grounded in a knowledge of the material. You're also a storytelling collaborator. Not just a gearhead.

6. MANAGE TIME WISELY

Use shot list software, and go over all the scheduling you can with the AD team. That means working with scheduling software and getting to know it's ins and outs. The crew will often look to you to move forward. Be prepared. Don't let them down.

7. MIXING COLOR TEMPERATURE

Colors pop more when they are laid alongside contrasting colors, and photographed properly. Some of this comes down to production design, but it's also where filmmaking techniques from other departments begin to co-mingle.

8. PUT STORY FIRST

Consider your actors into your overall creation. When you light the space around them, you're ultimately lighting the overall mood. This film technique allows you to experiment with blocking. Separate lighting for actors follows up to lighting specific marks but then your lighting has to change. Occasionally, a quick adaptation will come be great into your shot.

9. STAY INSPIRED

What do you think is the best cinematography ever? Who is the best cinematographer? Of course it's partly a matter of taste. Some of the greatest cinematic creations came partly through that very source of inspiration. Orson Welles considered Ford's work to have some of the best cinematography ever. His inspiration for his own cinematography ideas was so powerful, it led him right into his own all time classic. And new innovations.

10. BE AN ARTIST

Be versed in visual art and design terminology. Take some time to familiarize yourself with great artwork. The tools of creating powerful images may have changed, but the basic principles have remained the same for hundreds of years. Treat your shots, and each frame, like a work of art you want to get right.

11. LOOK THROUGH THE FRAME

Even if you aren't looking through a monitor, it's vital that you look at your shoot through a frame of some kind. Whether it's an old-school director's viewfinder, a still camera, or just your fingers. This frame is what the audience will ultimately see, and you have to be able to picture what's going into it. Any device that helps train your eye to think of the world in terms of the frame will make you a better cinematographer in the long run.

12. EXPERIMENT WITH HARD AND SOFT LIGHT

Hard and soft lighting create very different feelings. Hard light is way easier to control than soft light. Hard lights can be softened, but soft lights can't be hardened. If you really need to control shadows and keep light from spilling everywhere a fresnel will make your life easier than a kino.

13. BRING A QUALITY STILL CAMERA ON SCOUTS

When all else fails, you can use your phone, but ideally you want a DSLR with the same size sensor as your shooting camera. You should also bring a zoom that has the same approximate focal range as the lenses you'll be shooting on. You can test out different focal lengths and find exact camera positions.

14. MAKE A SHOT LIST

You'll want to make a shot list right after a tech scout to determine what lenses you need. A well organized shot list is going to be one of your best tools on set.

15. CHOOSE THE RIGHT LOCATION

Understand what the light will look like there at different times of the year, or day (more on that later). The better your locations, the better your look with potentially less work from you and your crew.

16. KNOW THE MANY WAYS TO ADD DEPTH

You probably already know that all depth in film is, essentially, an illusion. You're tricking the eye into believing that a flat picture has a third dimension it really doesn't have. There are many ways you can add depth, and moving beyond one trick is essential if you want to move to the next level of cinematography.

17. NEVER SAY "FIX IN POST"

Try not to depend on it. The best cinematography typically comes from your locations and lighting. Plus, whatever you can't capture naturally on-set, might take way more time and money to recreate in post. Give yourself TIME to create it. Remember, you are being hired for your expertise in cinematography techniques. Your producer will love you for saving him thousands. Post fixes are way more expensive than having the Art Dept touch up a flaw.

18. YOU'RE ONLY AS GOOD AS THE TEAM YOU WORK WITH

You may not be the most experienced person on set. In fact the most experienced person may be working for you, with years of filmmaking techniques and experience under their belts. Your gaffer and key grip in particular are both highly trained creative individuals. Use them to help solve problems.

19. KNOW HOW TO MANAGE YOUR CINEMATOGRAPHY CREW

Some of the most important filmmaking tips aren't actually cinematic techniques, but people skills. Crews respect clear, fast decision making. They're probably happy to do the work but will become unhappy if they find themselves being told to take down a light and then they have to put it right back 15 minutes later. So be clear and respectful. Take the blame for mistakes. Be a responsible leader.

20. BE READY TO DO IT ALL

On some jobs you'll have to serve as your own gaffer. And electric. And grip. And... production designer. You should have a working knowledge of every role on a set. It's also so you can understand and respect the process of everyone else's work. The set needs to flow, which means you need to be in sync with everyone else.

21. YOUR REEL IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR CAMERA GEAR

Things break, gear gets obsolete, and spending 100K on fancy camera gear will not make jobs come to you. The job is to know how to evaluate the limitations and advantages of your gear, reach into your bag of film techniques, and make the best image under those conditions.

22. DON'T GO INTO DEBT FOR CAMERA GEAR

Invest carefully. Know that your quality of work, and how it is to work with you, will factor in more than how much gear you own. Once Producers know you own some cool gear, they might hire you hoping to get it for free. Or at least heavily discounted.

23. UNDERSTAND MODERN DRONE TECHNOLOGY

Understanding what a drone can and cannot do is important if you want to have a good relationship with your drone pilot. While this 'technique' is about Drones, it really applies to any and all technology that comes along. Research them as best you can. Know how and when to use them.

24. A GOOD CINEMATOGRAPHER REEL KNOWS WHEN TO END

Remember that people have VERY short attention spans. Keep it short. Many directors and producers will decide to turn it off in the first 30 seconds. Don't pad your reel. Shorter and higher quality is better than a few more shots, some of which aren't the best.

25. DON'T ARGUE WITH ANYONE IN FRONT OF THE CREW

Disagreements happen all the time. The first thing you should try and do is see where the other person might be right. Directors can get defensive if challenged in front of people, because they look like they're not in charge. Talking privately eliminates that fear of embarrassment.

26. HAVE AND FOLLOW A WORKFLOW

As cinematographer Art Adams puts it: "Block. Light. Rehearse. Tweak. Shoot. Repeat. Every. Single. Setup." It really is that important. If you can't light the actors, use stand-ins. Make sure they're at least same height and approximate skin tone. All the film techniques in the world can't light someone who isn't there.

27. ALWAYS CHECK THE CALL SHEET

This is what production will send you EACH day. You'll want to know where everything important is on it. They will put in important details about the next days shoot. Many of them you will be consulted on.

28. ALWAYS PERFORM CAMERA TESTS

Learn how to do traditional camera tests with a chip chart, color chart, and human models, and then do them once you get your hands on the camera. With proper testing, you can see exactly how the camera reacts before you get on set and determine a lot of lighting and shooting strategies beforehand.

29. CHOOSE A WORKING STOP

Changing stops shot to shot leads to depth of field inconsistencies, since lens sharpness changes at different stops. For every scene you should be able to choose a single exposure and stick to it for every angle. Shooting wide open almost always means less sharpness when the lens is in focus.

30. TAKE CREATIVE CHANCES

Push yourself creatively. We covered this a bit in other sections. But the overall idea here is to emphasize that taking risks can pay off. Don't be afraid to break some of those rules you're instructors drilled into your heads. Rules were made to be broken. Plus, playing it safe leads to getting into the habit of average/mundane shooting.