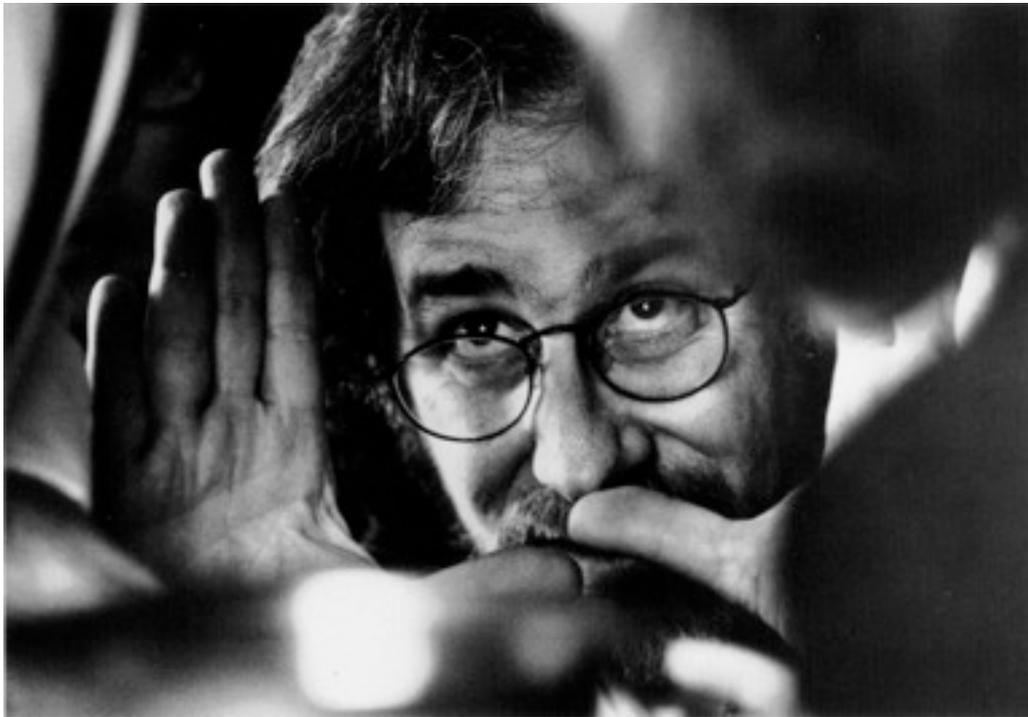# THE FILM LOOK

6 simple steps to consider when making your own movies.

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The Film Look

Some simple steps to consider to achieve a "film look" or "movie look" when shooting your own movies.

What is the "Film Look" that we always hear about as filmmakers?

When digital filmmaking first showed faced a lot of filmmakers tried to emulate what the feel of film looked like on the screen. I remember shooting on Sony digital video cameras at University where we all fussed about how we could change the look and feel of the image in post production by adding grain and changing colours to steer away from a cold and boring digital camera look.

If anything we were really comparing two different mediums, actual celluloid film and digital video which really shouldn't be compared. At the end of the day a camera whether it be digital or film based is a tool to help us as filmmakers tell a story. We should never get too caught up in what medium is better to shoot on otherwise the way we create stories may suffer. Ideally each camera and the creatives/talent that use them are the driving force behind making the equipment work in their favour for the right project.

The film look is in a nut shell how the audience sees a movie on a cinema screen. They see it as being professionally shot as opposed to a home movie that Uncle Joe filmed at your sisters wedding. Now that's the big difference here and people do notice this.

Essentially films are told in a particular way, unlike Uncle Joe's shaking and out of focus videos at your sisters wedding.

So this brings me to 6 things to consider to achieve a film look when shooting your own movies:

1: Frame Rate

Since the dawn of filmmaking 24 frames per second (fps) has been the industry standard frame rate. This means 24 individual frames of image are displayed every second as we watch footage play. I believe a bunch of dudes/technicians tinkered around with this and came to the realization after a few tests that the human eye responds best to this frame rate when watching a film. More information HERE if you want to get deep.

With the development of digital technology and TV, frame rates vary now from 25fps to 29.97fps. Peter Jackson has just shot his Hobbit movie at 48fps double the amount to compensate for the use of 3D technology.

All in all if your digital video camera shoots 24fps then use it as it will offer you a true cinematic look. Don't get too caught up in all the other frame rates when starting out.
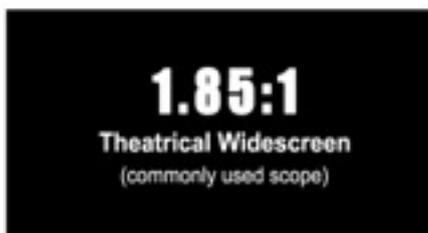
2: Aspect Ratio

All video cameras now shoot widescreen and just about everyone also owns a widescreen TV. Gone are the days of shooting videos in the 4:3 standard TV format. Having said this though there are a few variations of widescreen aspect ratios.

Most prosumer HD video cameras shoot at an aspect ratio of 16:9 which is 1.78:1 in ratio.

Films at the cinema are generally shot at either 1.85:1 or 2.35:1 widescreen ratio.

4:3 (1.33:1) was a commonly used aspect ratio in Hollywood in the beginning. Many classic black and white films were shot in this ratio such as 'Casablanca'. With the introduction of TV filmmakers began taking a whole new turn shooting films in cinemascope and vistavision in order to draw people into the cinemas away from the TV set.

16:9 (1.78:1) is the aspect ratio commonly held by most HD digital video cameras and widescreen television screens on the market.

1.85:1 is a common aspect ratio used by many films you see at the cinema. 'The Avengers' movie was shot in this ratio as the director Joss Whedon liked the height of the ratio which was important for framing the ensemble of superheroes.

2.35:1 is another commonly used aspect ratio seen at the movies. This widescreen ratio offers the potential to capture wide landscapes in an epic style. Framing characters on one side of the frame while leaving a large amount of space to other side of the frame offers a whole new dynamic in the way a story can be told. 'The Dark Knight Rises' was shot in 2.35:1 using IMAX film cameras which shoot on 70mm film.

POST PRODUCTION WORKFLOW

### Taking your 16:9 video footage and making it 2.35:1 aspect ratio

There are a few things you can do in post production with your own movies to take your 16:9 (1.78:1) ratio and turn them into a wider cinema like style ratio.

Remember this is only one particular way of achieving a simple widescreen look. You will have to use the editing program Final Cut Pro 7 to do so.

Firstly, when you are shooting your video make sure you crop your LCD screen or monitor with black tape of some sort of masking to achieve the correct ratio. Be sure to shoot a test bit of video first up and then conduct the following steps to refine your cropping. There's no real way of masking your monitors when shooting best thing to do is test and make an educated guess.

In Final Cut Pro 7 there is a built in plugin called "Widescreen" which can create a letter boxing effect over your footage using black bars. Technically the aspect ratio of your frame will remain 16:9 but it will appear like a much wider image, it's very similar to when you would rent DVDs and watch them on 4:3 TV screens and wonder why there are black bars at the top of bottom of your screen.

First step: Take the bit of footage you want to effect and apply the widescreen filter to it. The widescreen filter is found in the video filter bin of FCP. Video Filter > Matte > Widescreen.
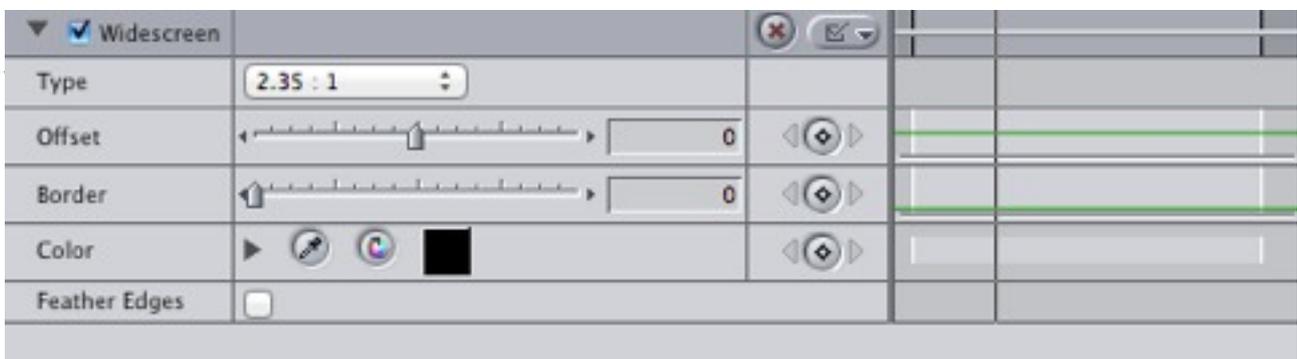
Click on the 'Type' drop down box and you will see a variety of widescreen ratios to choose from:


Once you choose your ratio type you will see the black bars appear over your final footage. You can change the colour of the bars if you wish.

Third step: You can adjust how the footage sits in the black bars by using the 'Offset' function. Moving back and forth of this toggle will shift the footage up or down so you can get what you need in frame. This most likely will save you if you are unsure how you are shooting it on set.

Other than this I would leave the other functions of the plugin alone. From here you can continue editing your video and export it in the normal fashion.

If you do want to go that extra step though and put your films online without the letter boxing showing just the image such as this film below:
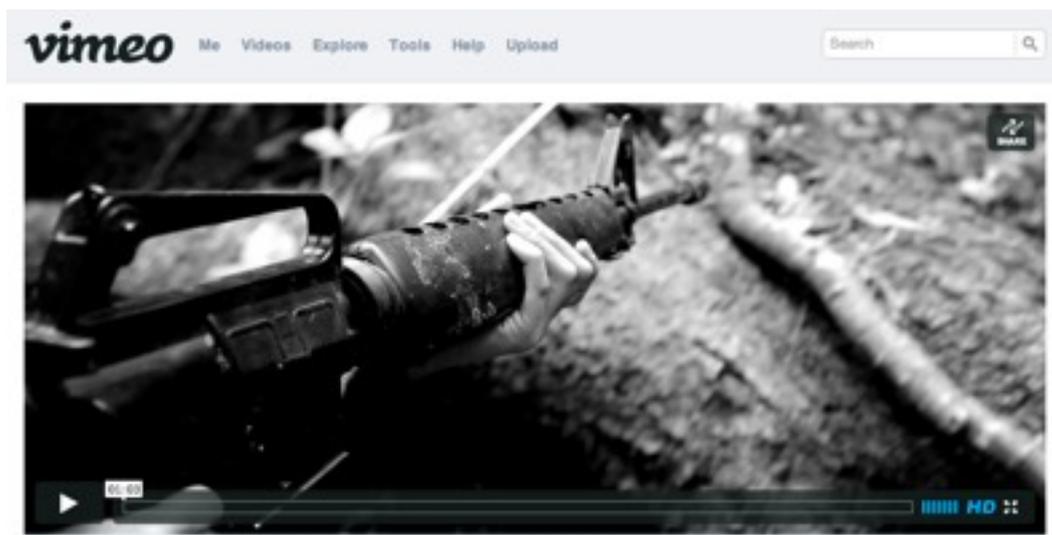
or like on Apple Trailers making them look slick in your browser then I strongly suggest checking out the following tutorial by Philip Bloom HERE: How to Export and Upload 2:35 video to Vimeo in Final Cut Pro

3: Exposure

This is pretty basic. Try not to under or over expose your images, unless that is the effect you are after. Remember it all relates back to the story, scene, character and context of the film you are making. But as a general rule keep your images clean and shoot as evenly lit shots as you can. Well exposed images are easier to colour correct and adjust in post production.

WELL EXPOSED

OVER EXPOSED

UNDER EXPOSED

Key Tips for Great Exposure:

* Forget about filming dead on noon outdoors - the light is harsh unless you are under shade.
* Take note of how the sun acts during the day, avoid filming in harsh light, morning and afternoon is always best.
* Try to not film in uneven lit areas - don't through your background out of exposure
* A cloudy day can be a godsend as the light is evenly spread, this is why European films look so good!
* Use reflectors to bounce light back onto your subjects to lift shadows off faces, do this even if you don't think you need it.
* Always shoot in manual exposure mode on your camera, forget about Auto mode.
* Make sure you keep your images evenly lit.
* Remember your story everything in your film relates back to this.

EXPOSURE IN STORY

It's fair to say once you know the rules you can break them. Check out the two examples below and how the rules of exposure are thrown out the window. Remember it all comes back to story telling.

CHARLIE'S ANGELS: FULL THROTTLE - High key over exposed images to portray the poppy and over stylized world of the female spy trade and bad guys.

THE GODFATHER - Some of the images of Marlon Brando in this film, especially the shots of him in his lair are well and truly underexposed. You cannot see into his eyes at all - which in turn says something about his character, story and keeps the audience on edge.

4: Composition - Framing - Focus

Design your shots so they look dynamic. Every shot in your film should look like a top notch photograph. Plan each of your shots out carefully, consider your composition and focus. Check out the examples below from 'Back To The Future'.

Notice how there is depth to each of the shots. They were not shot against walls. There's something happening foreground, middle-ground and in the background.

Remember it all relates back to the story, scene and character.

5: Movement

A big thing that sets home movies out from films is camera movement. Moving a camera can change the way a scene flows or how a character is represented in a scene it can even change the mood of a shot. Study your favourite films and take note each time the camera moves.

Remember every bit of movement of the camera needs to be there for a reason whether it be to heighten a emotion or push the audience in a certain direction.

A good example of camera movement is the shot in Jaws of Roy Scheider sitting on the beach reacting to a shark attack. Watch what the camera does in that shot and how it heightens the scene and accentuates the emotion of the character.

6: Colour Grading

Lastly, the way your colour grade your film can have a dramatic impact on the final result of your movie. Colour grading can take your movie up a whole new level.

There really isn't a rule to colour grading, again it all comes back to your movies story. Some filmmakers like to really emphasize colours from scene to scene or when a particular character is shown on screen. Colours can dictate a mood - check out the film 'Traffic' if you want to see a in your face use of colour grading to drive a story.

Screen grabs from 'Traffic':

Another use of colour grading can be used to evoke a time in history. Watch 'Saving Private Ryan', notice how they coloured the film similar to the quality of film cameras that would have been used during World War II to give audiences the feel of what it may have been like back then.

So don't colour grade for the sake of doing it because you think it makes your movie look good, that's not the point!

Be careful with colour grading also as you can go far and make your image look like crap when it was ok to begin with.

Here's hoping you have found this information useful!

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