The Digital Filmmaking Handbook

By Sonja Schenk, Ben Long

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THE DIGITAL FILMMAKING HANDBOOK, FOURTH EDITION is a comprehensive digital filmmaking resource for everyone--from beginners to professionals. This book guides you through the modern digital filmmaking workflow from initial concept to finished project and shows you all the tools that will make the process run smoothly and easily. Organized into three parts, just like a film shoot, the book covers preproduction, production, and postproduction. In the preproduction section, you'll go through the decisions necessary to start shooting: writing, technology basics, planning, scheduling, storyboarding, set design, and choosing a camera. Production covers the principal shoot of your project: lighting, using the camera, shooting, and recording production sound. And postproduction wraps up with workstations and equipment, organizing and media management, editing, sound design, color correction, titles, special effects, and delivery of the finished product. Completely revised to cover all the latest digital video technology and innovations, this fourth edition includes information on HD video, shooting with digital SLR cameras, workflows for tapeless recording, and much more. THE DIGITAL FILMMAKING HANDBOOK, FOURTH EDITION will help you navigate the ever-changing developments of new filmmaking technology while keeping the big picture in mind: storytelling.

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Editorial Review

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Notes from Sonja Schenk, Author of *The Digital Filmmaking Handbook*

Sonja Schenk on Film, Video & DSLRs

Shooting film-like projects with DSLRs is an inescapable fact of life in the entertainment industry this year. Since January, I've worked on a scripted feature film, a non-scripted TV pilot, and a big 3D movie; all of them used footage shot on the Canon 5d, 7d, or T2i, and two of them had footage shot on the Go Pro as well (although it did not make the cut in the end).

What have I learned? A lot! Here's the distilled version...

Shooting with DSLRs

Shooting with a DSLR is rather difficult for the camera operator. It's very hard to keep focus and maneuver a camera that's not designed to move at the same time. If you want your footage to look its best, you'll need an AC (Assistant Cameraperson) to pull focus, because your camera operator only has two hands. Special rigs, like those by Zacuto and Redrock, are great; but it's still harder to use these cameras than regular video cameras, especially when not using a tripod. But is it worth it? The footage looks fantastic! It holds its own against stunning 3D digital cinema shot on a high-end Red camera. Not to say that it looks the same, but it looks good, and--more importantly--when you are watching your 3D shots on a big screen, you won't be saying, "Why does that stuff look so bad?"

Recording sound when using a DSLR to shoot video is like taking a step back in time to 30 years ago. Slates, hand claps, all the old school methods for making sound and picture syncable in post are all valuable tools. I know that almost every single person out there is saying the same thing: What about Plural Eyes? Plural Eyes, like its sister product, Dual Eyes, is great. But in my experience, it's only going to get you partway there. When you're in post, and Plural Eyes can only sync 75% of your footage, you will be very happy to have that slate and to have sound and picture that start at approximately the same time. And if Plural Eyes can't sync something, rest assured it will be the stuff that's difficult to sync--noisy footage at a party, footage where the video camera was far away from the sound recordist, and so on.

So what should you do in the field to make sure you can sync your footage easily in post?

1. Record audio with your DSLR camera mic; it's always better if you have a guide track to listen to, even if it sounds terrible and Plural Eyes can't work without it.

2. Start your camera and your sound recording at the same time. Use the old school protocol: say "Roll camera," wait for the camera operator to say "Speed," then say "Roll Sound," wait for the sound recordist to say "Speed," and then use a slate to make a sync mark. The slate doesn't need to be electronic because your DSLR doesn't have a timecode input so you can't jam sync your camera and sound device to the slate. A simple clapper will do and if you don't have that, a hand clap will work just fine. You can also use an iPhone/iPad app like MovieSlate, but I found it to be a tad slow.
3. When you are done with your shot, call "Cut" and make sure your camera & sound person both stop recording.
4. Have your sound recordist voice-slate any non-sync audio recordings (i.e., wild sound and room tone).

By doing this, you'll have one piece of sound for each piece of video/picture. Near the start of each piece of sound and picture, there will be a slate. Your editor can quickly match the audio media to the video files and look for the slate clap and find the sync. It doesn't take that long to sync dailies in post if you shoot this way. But it can be a whole lot harder if you don't. Remember, your editor is "blind." They won't know that you recorded room tone after the second take unless there is a voice slate telling them that's what this piece of audio is. Without a voice slate, they may listen to five minutes of white noise, waiting to find the sync clap.

Also crucial with DSLRs and other types of file-based media on the set is having a plan in place for media management, backing up and transferring files from camera cards to hard drives. There is no standardized way of doing things but I recommend having a day's worth of cards for your camera so that you don't have to delete any cards during your shoot. I also recommend having a media workstation on the set and immediately copying your media to two sets of hard drives as you shoot. At the end of the shoot, store one set as an off-site backup and take the other set to post.

If you are using FCP, make a disk image of each camera card because FCP uses the directory structure of the camera cards. This is an inexplicable pain, as are many things associated with FCP.

DSLRs in post

If you followed the tips above, synchronizing isn't going to be too much trouble. But before you sync, you'll have to transcode your camera raw media. DSLRs shoot using the H.264 codec, which isn't native to either Final Cut Pro or Media Composer. Most likely, you'll choose to transcode to either Apple ProRes if you are using FCP, or Avid DNxHD if you are using Media Composer. There are many flavors of each of these codecs, but for DSLR media I would choose Apple ProRes 422 or Avid DNxHD 115. Frame rates and pixel dimensions vary depending on how you shot the footage. These codecs will not degrade your camera original media and are safe choices.

However, they will make each file about 2.5x larger than the camera originals. A feature film with 1TB of raw media will need over 2TB of storage when transcoded. Transcoding also takes a long time. For the scripted feature, we left our dailies processing overnight every night. For the feature doc, which shot about 80-100 GB/day, it took 12-15 hours to transcode a day's worth of footage.

A word to the wise: if you are going to rename your file or organize your media into folders at the OS level, do so before you import your media into your editing app. Once you do so, it's best to leave it as is. If you must move or rename files at a later date, do so from within your editing app so that the crucial link between your file-based media and your editing software isn't lost.

Once you spend all that time transcoding and synching, your new set of media is going to represent lots of man hours. Time to create another set of backup drives: you'll now have two sets of camera original media

and two sets of transcoded media. You will never regret this. Trust me.

Review

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About the Author

Sonja Schenk is a director, producer, and writer based in Los Angeles. She directed the comedic feature film "The Olivia Experiment," which will be released in theaters in 2014. She has been an executive producer of several popular television shows including "The Bachelor," "The Bachelorette," and "High School Reunion." She began her career as a video artist and exhibited early works at the AFI Festival, Artists Space in New York, and New Langton Arts in San Francisco. After completing her MFA at USC in film, she edited documentaries for HBO, the BBC, Channel 4, Canal Plus and FX and also the indie feature "Britney Baby One More Time," which screened at the Sundance Film Festival, the Rotterdam Film Festival, Outfest, Frameline and many others. She is currently developing a second narrative feature film and is also in preproduction on a documentary feature. She is also the author of Digital Non-Linear Desktop Editing and co-author of the earlier editions of The Digital Filmmaking Handbook.

Ben Long is a San Francisco-based photographer, writer, and teacher. The author of more than two dozen books on digital photography and digital video, he is also a senior contributing editor to Macworld magazine, a contributing editor at CreativePro.com, and the author of several best-selling Lynda.com photography courses. His photography clients have included 20th Century Fox, Blue Note Records, Global Business Network, the San Francisco Jazz Festival, the Pickle Family Circus, and Grammy-nominated jazz musicians Don Byron and Dafnis Prieto. He has taught and lectured on photography around the world, including workshops at the Santa Reparata International School of the Arts in Florence and a class for imaging engineers at Apple, Inc. He occasionally dabbles in computer programming and has written image editing utilities that are used by National Geographic, the British Museum, and the White House.

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