Twelve Tips on Lighting for Video

On Thursday, April 25, WXXI Videographer/Producer Jimmy Day gave a presentation at RCTV15 to 40 members of Rochester Movie Makers, sharing useful tips on lighting for video. Jimmy is involved in shooting and lighting many of WXXI’s works, such as the piece he is currently involved in filming about sculptor Albert Paley.

Jimmy identifies four elements to consider when lighting for camera:

1. Quality (how diffuse the light is)
2. Quantity (the ratio/amount of light)
3. Color temperature (color contrast/color filtering or compensation)
4. Motivation (the perceived source that the light is coming from)

He pointed out that, when compared to other departments of production; lighting consistently takes a considerable amount of money, electricity, people and time to achieve a professional look.

It is essential, especially when filming an interview, to take sufficient time to set up the lighting. He noted that he has been teased about the amount of time and detail he spends on the lighting, so he recommends starting early. RMM Members suggested that a stand-in or even a head that is a wig stand can be used to help determine lighting placement before the subjects and videographers arrive. Additional tips he recommends include:

- Position the key to ensure both eyes of the subject are visible. If one eye is “in the dark,” viewers will not connect with the subject as well. For a person with glasses, elevating the light source somewhat may help reduce glare on the lens. In cases where there is glare that can’t be eliminated, make sure that the glare does not obstruct the pupils of the subject or ask the subject if they would remove their glasses.
• A black grid or “egg crate” in front of or black wrap surrounding the key light can limit the wide spread of light, even when it is so diffuse and soft.

• By dividing sources, the shot is more often improved. To do this, use an edge or back light to differentiate the subject from the background. Keep the subjects and the light spread away from the walls.

• Film typically offers a much higher dynamic range of light to dark (14 stops) when compared to most video cameras (7-11 stops). With video, it is important to consider its limitations since it does not have as large a ratio between the lightest point and the darkest. Because video has less dynamic range, it is more difficult to light dramatically than for film. With video if you light with too much contrast, the shadows will lose detail as well as the highlights, often more than film (with the exception of very high-end video cameras).

• Background is important. Use separate lighting on each background element you want to register.

• If the space you are lighting is mostly white or other reflective surfaces, cover part of the room with black duvetyne (a flame retardant cloth) so it creates a contrast in light in the room, if so desired. Covering a window with duvatyne or cloth is also helpful so as to not fill the room evenly with light.

• When in doubt about lighting for video, light the subject a little “flatter” than with too much contrast because contrast can be enhanced digitally. It is often impossible to adjust an image’s light to appear flatter in post-production.

• When shooting in a room with windows and ambient light from outside, control for outside light by cutting “CTO + 6ND” color-correction gels (orange gels) the size of the windows and adhering them using squeegee or hidden tape. This reduces the contrast between the lighting used indoors and that coming in from outside.

• For simple outside shoots, use reflectors or an overhead or butterfly kit to diffuse the hard light hitting the subject from the direct sun. Generators and HMI lights are suitable for outdoor lighting as well.

• When shooting subjects with dramatically different skin tones, expose for the highlights on the person with the lighter skin, but be sure you can still see the contours of the face on the subject with darker skin. If possible, slightly bring up the light levels on the person with dark skin, especially when shooting video. This will keep the appearance of their natural skin tone but decrease the amount of contrast so the camera will still register the detail on both faces.

• A similar strategy as outlined above may be used when filming people with similar differences in clothing tones. Flags, cutters and screens are commonly used to target certain pieces of clothing that are too bright to bring their exposure down closer to the persons face.

• When setting up lights, always keep safety in mind first. Use sandbags to secure lights, tape down electrical cords and use caution when handling lights.
Many thanks to Jimmy Day for his insightful tips, and for allowing RCTV15 to share them with its readers. Samples of Jimmy’s video work and photography can be viewed at jimdayphotography.com

Rochester Movie Makers, an educational non-profit organization designed to connect those interested in all aspects of filmmaking, meets at RCTV15 at 6:30 PM on the last Thursday of each month. Attendance at the meetings is free and open to the public.