

# The rules remain the same

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**Abstract.** *Technology we use in order to tell visual stories is constantly improving, newer technology superseding the old one at a breathtaking rate. Yet, video technology is a means and does not do the storytelling itself. However, visual storytellers must keep themselves updated with technology in order to get the best of their work. DSLR cameras are taking over and some respected visual storytellers share conclusions of their experiences.*

**Keywords:** *visual storytelling; DSLR camera; HD video capture; shoulder rig; visual storytelling.*

*“At the end of the day a truly great story doesn’t rely on codecs, technology, or camera resolution. It goes beyond that and focuses on something more meaningful. That meaning is entirely up to you to find as a filmmaker, a storyteller, and a creative. Be good to each other out there and let’s collectively raise the bar as we head onward and upward in the future.”*

Alex Buono – filmmaker and film educator

## 1. Storytelling

Storytelling has always been a significant part of history, but the means through which the stories have been told have evolved with each civilization. From the oral histories presented by bards in ancient courts, to the works of scribes during the Renaissance, to newspapers, CNN, and now the Internet, personal narrative has been used to communicate the events of the past. Digital media now combines tradition with technology and allows students to tell stories through voice, text,

photos, audio, and video. Digital stories allow students to take a linear series of events and turn them into a multidimensional experience. It encourages them to communicate, collaborate, and research as well as to infuse media into the process. A plethora of tools exists to create these projects – both in terms of software as well as hardware – and all of them enable students to gain a deeper understanding of history as they explore the most effective way to retell it.

In my opinion there are no modern, old, outdated or cool stories. Just good ones or bad ones. Creating a digital story could be as simple as using a presentation tool such as Microsoft PowerPoint, or as complex as a full video project by which students can tell their stories.

## **2. Visual journalism**

In a world where anyone can pick up a camera, start filming and publishing, the only way to stand out is through the pursuit of quality over mediocrity; to tell remarkable stories in a remarkable way.

Most of all, visual journalism is about quality. It's about creating remarkable non-fiction stories that resonate with audiences, surprise and entertain, and connect people to distant, complex issues.

## **3. Telling the story in pictures**

Today, news stories can be more compelling and more meaningful to their audiences than at any time in journalism's history. Two reporting instruments, the camera and the microphone, make this possible. Journalists can use the microphone to capture the sounds of news events and of people in the news. Most important, television journalists can use the camera to show people as they enact their own stories. The camera and microphone can put viewers at the scene of news events and help viewers feel as if they have experienced something of those events. Visual storytelling is thus among the most experiential forms of news communication, and in experienced hands it can be one of the most compelling forms of the storytelling art.

## **4. Video technology**

New technology is fascinating, almighty and sometimes overwhelming, lighter, cheaper and more userfriendly as ever before, providing a quality of the journalistic work that was beyond imagination a decade ago.

In my opinion, the undisputed star of the moment in visual storytelling is the DSLR, although, starting 2014 a new star was born, the mirrorless interchangeable-lens camera<sup>1</sup> (or MILC). This type of camera provides an interchangeable lens

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1 <http://www.dpreview.com/articles/9716229576/why-make-a-small-sensor-mirrorless-camera>, viewed on 2015.04.14

mount. They do not have a mirror reflex optical viewfinder. Compared to DSLRs, MILCs are smaller because they have fewer parts, and sturdier, as they have fewer moving parts.



The DSLR camera<sup>2</sup>

At least for the moment, DSLR cameras are still leading the pack. A digital single-lens reflex camera (also called a **digital SLR** or **DSLR**) is a digital camera combining the optics and the mechanisms of a single lens reflex camera with a digital imaging sensor as opposed to photographic film. DSLR's are so important because of that "movie mode" hidden in the menu system of the DSLR, which is not just a novelty feature. Together with the emergence of large CMOS imagers, HDSLRs are nothing short of a revolutionary, democratizing, disruptive moviemaking technology, as important as the invention of color film, 16mm, or HDTV. The DSLR is affecting the future of not only cinematography but also photography, as well as how their low-light sensitivity enables a whole new generation of international filmmakers to tell their story.<sup>3</sup>

### *HD video capture*

Since 2008, manufacturers have offered DSLRs capable of recording high-definition video. Compared to the much smaller image sensors found in the typical camcorder, the HDSLR's much larger sensor yields distinctly different image characteristics. HDSLRs can achieve much shallower depth of field and superior low-light performance. HDSLRs typically lack one or more video functions found on other camcorders, such as autofocus while shooting; powered zoom; and an electronic viewfinder. These and other handling limitations prevent the HDSLR

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2 <http://img.comptalks.com/uploads/2012/05/Canon-EOS-60D-DSLR-CAMERA.jpg>.

3 <http://www.photoreview.com.au/guides/pocket-guides/digital-slr/Larger-Sensor,-Better-Photos>, viewed on 2015.01.17.

from being operated as a simple point-and-shoot camcorder, instead demanding some level of planning and skill for shooting. Video functionality has continued to improve since the introduction of the HD/SLR. Among the improvements include higher-resolution video (such as 1080p24); improved autofocus and manual exposure control; support for formats compatible with high-definition television broadcast; Blu-ray disc mastering. In order to get the best DSLR, there are a few aspects that must be taken into consideration, such as picture style, color, shutter, dynamic range or audio options. <sup>4</sup>

## 5. Additional equipment

A whole range of “gadgets”, devices that have been designed to enhance the quality of your work in terms of steadiness, fluency in motion, lighting and sound capture are now at hand.

### *Turning the DSLR into a powerful storytelling tool*

Here is an example on how you should prepare your DSLR for shooting visual stories. It is an example of building a compact rig that works well in studio mode, handheld or on a steadycam. The DSLR is provided with a monitor powered by the same type of batteries as the camera itself.



Additional equipment for video shooting with the DSLR<sup>5</sup>

Further on, the example shows a follow focus, considered mandatory on these cameras and a swing-away matte box feature with removable filter trace as it may

<sup>4</sup> <http://dslrvideoshooter.com/10-must-read-hdslr-guides-for-filmmakers/>, viewed on 2014.10.15.

<sup>5</sup> <https://ieba.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/vdslrs-not/>, viewed on 2015.04.14.

be seen on the video<sup>6</sup> offered by *Vepoch*, a community where film makers and artists who are passionate about exploring spiritual themes and creating progressive social dialogue can showcase their work, form connections and collaborate on projects. In this particular case, it is all mounted on a shoulder rig.

### *The rig*

A shoulder rig is a dynamic piece of equipment which moves with the camera operator. It allows you the flexibility of movement thus increasing efficiency in production.

The use of the shoulder rig gives your pictures a more stable and professional look. Now cameras are small and not ergonomically friendly you need some sort of stabilizing equipment. The rig helps you create the sense of reality that you so desperately try to create. You are looking for gentle movements which you cannot achieve by holding the camera in your hands. Small cameras are sensitive to move-



DSLR camera on a shoulder rig<sup>7</sup>

ment and the shoulder mount ensures that this movement is not passed on to the camera. *Lights Online Film School*, an online education provider offering filmmakers a chance to learn more about screenwriting, directing, cinematography, sound design, editing and producing, provides a sample on shooting video using a shoulder rig and a camera mount.

The decision to use a shoulder rig is determined by what type of story you are trying to tell. All camera movement acts as a visual metaphor for something

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6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkgZtRxHe94>, viewed on 2014.01.12

7 [http://4.bp.blogspot.com/8Xtw1PjCZlg/TjrNEKl\\_iwI/AAAAAAAAACg/gwrS6ahtR5s/s1600/House\\_rig\\_white.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/8Xtw1PjCZlg/TjrNEKl_iwI/AAAAAAAAACg/gwrS6ahtR5s/s1600/House_rig_white.jpg), viewed on 2015.01.07

happening in your story. Shoulder mounted camera movement places the audience in the scene. Let them experience your scene as a participant.

Movement can also be used to give your scene a frenetic feel full of energy. It can also visually punctuate a chaotic moment. There are many types of shoulder rigs, built for different cameras and different purposes.

Operating a shoulder rig requires gentle hands. If the rig is balanced properly, you shouldn't muscle the rig. The camera operator can quickly follow the action but gently work on the focus.

When walking with the shoulder rig, the key is to walk softly, bending up the knees slightly and rolling on the balls of your feet rather than stomping. It's also important to take small steps rather than large steps. Be aware of the surroundings, so you can be on the same beat as your subject. Your goal is to synchronize with the energy of the action in front of you.

The rig shot is not as stable as a steadycam shot. It is not intended to be. It has a movement that brings you, the audience, into the scene as a sort of voyeuristic participant, as seen in the video<sup>8</sup> provided by *The Glass Pixel Studios*.

## 6. Technology does not change rules

No matter how breathtaking tools and techniques may be and how expert you've become in mastering all technicalities, it is time to step back and learn about visual structure and storytelling. Visual structure is where terms like line, space, shape, colour, tone, movement and rhythm must gain a strong meaning for the student. Storytelling itself may be achieved by means of video technology, but technology does not tell stories. Journalists do it.

Oscar-winning filmmaker Andrew Stanton<sup>9</sup>, once said: "Storytelling is joke telling. It's knowing your punchline, your ending, knowing that everything you're saying from the first sentence to the last is leading to a singular goal. And ideally confirming some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings."

Here is an example of how respected professionals make use of technology to tell their visual stories, emphasizing that a good visual story relies on more than technology. One of them is one of the best film educators in the United States, Alex

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8 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhO9sppgxIg>. A review of the PR-1 Prime Video Shoulder Rig from Photography & Cinema -- a lightweight stabilization & support system for your DSLR. In this review, comparative test shots of handheld, steadycam, glidecam, and shoulder rig. Viewed on 2014.10.19.

9 <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004056/>, viewed on 2015.04.14.

Buono<sup>10</sup>. Alex is highly respected as both professional and educator, which clearly makes him my favourite.

*Born in Portland, Oregon, Alex moved to Los Angeles in 1991 to attend the USC School of Cinematic Arts, majoring in film production and still photography. In 2003, Alex received an Oscar Nomination for the short film Johnny Flynton<sup>11</sup>, which he photographed and also produced. Alex repeated the dual role of cinematographer and co-producer on Green Street Hooligans<sup>12</sup>, about London's football subculture starring Elijah Wood and Charlie Hunnam, which won both the Grand Jury Prize and Audience Award at the 2005 South By Southwest Film Festival. He was also the cinematographer of Shanghai Kiss, shot in China. Following, Alex wrote, produced, and shot the documentary Bigger Stronger Faster<sup>13</sup>, which premiered in competition at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and was distributed theatrically by Magnolia Pictures. Other credits include ESPN's award-winning comedy series Mayne Street and 2nd Unit director/dp work for the ABC drama series Detroit 187 and the NBC drama series Chicago Fire.*

*In 2009, Alex's 10th season with Saturday Night Live marked his first experimentation with the DSLR format, shooting the show's title sequence<sup>14</sup> and most of the season's commercial parodies with Canon's 5DmII and 7D cameras. Soon after, Alex was invited to join Canon's "Explorers of Light" program<sup>15</sup>.*

*Alex is a member of the Writer's Guild of America, the International Documentary Association, and the International Cinematographer's Guild.*

*Alex lives in Venice, California where he continues to write and produce with his partner Tamsin Rawady<sup>16</sup> for their production company, Third Person<sup>17</sup>, represented by Hyphen Management.*

Alex Bono is the initiator of the much acclaimed Visual Storytelling Tour<sup>18</sup> which is, by opinion of several respected filmmakers, the best way to educate visual storytellers of all levels of experience.

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10 <http://www.alex-buono.com>, viewed on 2014.10.19.

11 <http://www.alex-buono.com/portfolio/johnny-flynton/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

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13 <http://www.alex-buono.com/portfolio/bigger-stronger-faster/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

14 <http://www.alex-buono.com/portfolio/title-sequence/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

15 [http://www.learn.usa.canon.com/resources/contributors/explorers/buono\\_bio.shtml](http://www.learn.usa.canon.com/resources/contributors/explorers/buono_bio.shtml), viewed on 2014.11.12.

16 <http://www.tamsinrawady.com/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

17 <http://www.thirdperson.com/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

18 The Visual Storytelling Tour delivers an intense educational overview of the artistic elements and core principles of cinematography. Designed for both DSLR and Cine-style camera users, this workshop teaches advanced techniques for lighting, lens selection, blocking, camera movement, audio, workflow, camera settings, visual structure, and more. <http://www.visualstorytellingtour.com>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

In the same respect, Jon Connor of Kessler University, a respected filmmaker himself, wrote about the most important ideas discussed at Masters in Motion<sup>19</sup> ([www.shooteditlearn.com](http://www.shooteditlearn.com)). Masters in Motion is a three-day immersive film-making workshop, held annually in Austin, Texas. It brings together filmmakers from all over the world. Despite displaying the latest in cameras, the vibe of this event was summarized perfectly in this tweet:

“@niceladypro Refreshing going to a 3 day filmmaking workshop where people don’t talk about the camera they shot their video on.”

In the spirit of that quote, some of the most respected professionals in the field of visual storytelling issued ideas that support the statement in the title of this article, that technology enables you to create and produce visual stories, but it doesn’t tell the story by itself. Here are just a handful of these ideas:

### *Cameras constantly change. Lighting and composition don’t.*

In today’s day and age, the speed with which new cameras are released is almost absurd. The emphasis on camera specs and the 4k vs. 1080p discussion has been too much debated via social media and on forums. Camera technology is so good and accessible at this point, that you should focus on mastering composition and lighting. In this respect, Shane Hurlbut, ASC<sup>20</sup>, who is an accomplished director and producer, said: “Don’t listen to what the camera reviewers say. You have to test (the camera) out yourself. You are the artist. You have to see if it speaks to you.”

### *The importance of a strong beginning and end to a film.*

Ondi Timoner<sup>21</sup>, the only filmmaker with the rare distinction of winning Sundance twice, referenced *We Live in Public*<sup>22</sup> and said the opening took eight months to put together, the same amount of time she spent on the rest of the film. You have to engage your audience, pull them in, and make them want to see more. On the other hand, you also have to finish strong. Ending memorably will leave a strong mark in the viewer’s mind.

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19 <http://filmmakermagazine.com/61872-10-things-i-learned-at-masters-in-motion/#.UtKh-7SC5nw>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

20 Shane Hurlbut, ASC is a world-renowned cinematographer who shoots multi-million dollar blockbuster films. He most recently lensed *Need for Speed* in theaters March 2014. <http://www.hurlbutvisuals.com/blog/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

21 Ondi Doane Timoner is an American film director, producer and editor. Timoner has won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival twice. [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0863756/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0863756/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm), viewed on 2014.11.12.

22 <http://weliveinpublic.blog.indiepixfilms.com/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

***Having all the talent and intelligence in the world means nothing if you're not willing to work very hard.***

Oscar nominee and current Director of Photography for the *Saturday Night Live* Film Unit, Alex Buono, believes that one thing is abundantly clear: Filmmaking is not about codecs, cameras or debayering patterns. It is about Visual Story Construction and how it affects your ability to tell a story as a filmmaker. Space, line, shape, color, tone, movement and rhythm can affect how the viewer interprets your film. The point is that without a lot of hard work, without getting your hands dirty, without being able to accept a job doing the grunt work and then doing it as if it were the greatest thing to ever happen to you, you will probably never achieve much as a filmmaker. At its core, filmmaking is a very difficult, labor intensive process, that requires long hours and personal sacrifices. You better have a serious passion for filmmaking or you will be miserable.

***In a demo reel your worst shot speaks loudest.***

This is a statement that belongs to Vincent Laforet<sup>23</sup>, a three-time winner at the prestigious 2010 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival, and a director and Pulitzer Prize – winning photographer. He believes that in a demo reel, you can have all the most amazing shots in the world but the work will be as good as your worst shot. This is a case of quality over quantity. A demo reel should reflect the absolute best you have to offer. Tighten it up. Make it short. If it's not gold, it has to go.

***When shooting outdoors use the sun as a backlight.***

Sean Stiegmeier<sup>24</sup> who has shot as well as directed numerous music videos and commercials, believes, like myself, pretty much in utilizing natural light. He knows and makes use of a lot of amazing tips including using negative fill to shape the light. His biggest tip is to always use the sun as a backlight and then bounce the sun back on the actors as the main source of light. A lot of filmmakers make the mistake of keeping the sun in front of the talent to try to avoid over exposing the sky in the background and thereby create a very flat and unflattering image.

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23 Vincent Laforet is a three-time winner at the prestigious 2010 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival, and a director and Pulitzer Prize – winning photographer <http://shooteditlearn.com/vincent-laforet/>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

24 Sean Stiegmeier. In 2010 he developed and evolved his technique of time-lapse cinematography by chasing after the notorious Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland. <http://www.sstieg.com/info>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

***If you can't tell a story effectively, you are in the wrong business.***

Our job as filmmakers is to manipulate emotions. It's almost become cliché to say, "Story is more important than gear". It may be cliché but it is also true. Without it, we have nothing but a series of nice looking images. As a filmmaker, if you are not able to tell a story, you won't get your message across, which is crucial, no matter what genre you are working in whether it is event, documentary, commercial or narrative.

***Color is crucial to setting the mood of a film and providing information to the viewer about the feeling of a scene or sequence.***

Ian Vertovec<sup>25</sup>, who won four Regional Emmys, the colorist for acclaimed films such as *The Social Network* and *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, is a master of color theory and believes in its importance in filmmaking. It can dramatically alter the viewer's perception of a scene. It also subconsciously gives them clues to how they should be feeling at any given moment and provides a subtle context.

***Sound is under appreciated, misunderstood and a crucial part of any film.***

Erik Aadahl<sup>26</sup>, Oscar-nominated sound designer for such films as *Argo*, *Transformers*, and *Tree of Life*, deals with one of the most neglected aspects by independent filmmakers: sound. Your film will only be as strong as its weakest aspect. All too often when budgeting for a film of any size audio is almost an afterthought, which is terrible because, more than a camera or any piece of gear, audio and lighting are the foundational blocks you must build upon.

***If content is king, authenticity is what keeps the king from being overthrown.***

If you say something and your actions don't back it up you will lose trust. Trust is important. Anything that is worth doing is worth doing right. Never accept mediocrity. Never accept "good enough" because it isn't. Surrounding yourself with a talented, passionate team will give the fuel you need when you feel yourself slacking. Negativity is contagious and poisonous. Positivity, passion and determination are the key components that will keep a crew together no matter

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25 Ian Vertovec studied still photography at Southern Illinois University before transitioning to film editing, cinematography, and digital compositing. His work at SIU won him four Regional Emmys. Ian's recent credits include features *Ender's Game*, *Short Term 12*, and *Snitch*, and short form projects such as the Calvin Klein Downtown commercial and the web series "Tainted Love". <http://www.lightiron.com/projects/talent/ian-vertovec>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

26 Oscar-nominated sound designer for such films as *Argo*, *Transformers*, and *Tree of Life* has worked with the full spectrum of directors from Michael Bay to Terrence Malick. <http://www.hollywood.com/celebrities/3094263/erik-aadahl>, viewed on 2014.11.12.

how much adversity and resistance you are up against. A healthy sense of humor never hurts to make it through long and exhausting days.

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, young visual storytellers should commit their work to do everything in their power to tell stories authentically, passionately and with a renewed focus on the aspects of filmmaking that transcend camera technology. Klaus Pedersen, Creative Director of *Gaffa Media*<sup>27</sup> put it straight: A new camera doesn't make you a better filmmaker, knowledge and experience do.

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<sup>27</sup> Gaffa Media is a Swiss media production company. Their expertise is producing small commercial videos that help companies bring their message and products to life on the web and social media platforms like Facebook.<http://www.gaffa.ch/> Viewed on 2014.11.12

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