



Voice & Vision

A CREATIVE APPROACH to
Narrative Film and DV Production

MICK HURBIS-CHERRIER



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Illustrations by Gustavo Mercado



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Voice & Vision

This book is dedicated to Frank Beaver, Michelle Citron, and Dana Hodgdon—exceptional professors, mentors, and friends whose teachings have remained with me and whose voices echo throughout the pages of this book.

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Introduction

Where does one begin a journey into the world of filmmaking? Film is creative and it is technical. It's a form of personal expression and a universal language. It requires careful logistical planning and inspired spontaneity. It is the product of a single vision and collaborative energy. Film is also the quintessential hybrid art form, finding its expressive power through the unique amalgam of writing, performance, design, photography, music, and editing. And all of it matters. Every choice you make, from the largest creative decisions to the smallest practical solutions, has a profound impact on what appears on the screen and how it moves an audience emotionally.

The central principle behind *Voice & Vision* is the notion that all of the conceptual, technical, and logistical activity on a film project should serve the filmmaker's creative vision. Making a film begins with someone wanting to tell a story, wanting to bring an idea to the screen for the world to see. The next step then involves gathering together the people, equipment, and resources to produce the movie. However, it's quite common these days to hear people who don't want to bother themselves with the technical or conceptual fundamentals of filmmaking say that "it's not about tech, it's not about rules, it's all about the story." That's a little too facile. The fact is, it's not enough to just have a story, no matter how good it is; you have to be able to tell that story well. It's not simply "all about story," it's all about *storytelling*, and in this medium storytelling involves actors, a camera, lights, sound, and editing. To develop your ability to tell a story on film necessarily means understanding the basic visual vocabulary of cinema, the process of production, as well as the function and expressive potential of the tools; like a camera, a light meter, and editing software. In a recent filmmaker's master class the great director Abbas Kiarostami stressed the point that a mediocre idea brilliantly told is preferable to a brilliant idea poorly told. Film is a complex art form and in order to make the right decisions and express oneself successfully you must be clear about what your ideas are and what you want to say, and gain control of the film language, tools, and production process in order to say just that. As James Broughton, one of cinema's great poets, once wrote,

Every film is a voyage into the unknown. . . . It is unwise to embark on the high seas without knowing a few of the laws of navigation. To have a shipwreck before you have cleared the port is both messy and embarrassing.

Voice & Vision elaborates on all of the essential information and skills necessary to ensure that the student filmmaker will acquire the technical, logistical, and conceptual authority needed to "speak in film" with cinematic eloquence and fluency. Think of the book like a map—it may not predict every wondrous sight or challenge you'll encounter on your voyage, but it'll get you sailing into open waters.

Obviously, it is not possible for one book on filmmaking to be a completely comprehensive resource on such a vast and evolving subject. In fact, all of the film books on the bookstore shelves put together don't even manage to say all there is to say—and thank goodness for that. *Voice & Vision* is written for the introductory and intermediate film student or independent filmmaker. This textbook aims to provide a solid foundation in narrative filmmaking, from idea to distribution. This includes essential and detailed technical information on film and digital production tools, a thorough overview of the filmmaking stages and process, and, of course, a discussion of the conceptual and aesthetic dimensions of telling a motion picture story.

■ FILM AS A COLLABORATIVE ART FORM

The act of making a film, on any scale, is an endeavor that requires enormous effort, concentration, and a broad range of knowledge. It also requires the execution of several tasks simultaneously. For this reason, narrative filmmaking is always a collaborative art form, requiring the collective energy and expertise of a team. A filmmaking team can be anywhere from two to two dozen (or more), but the basic dynamic is the same—a film becomes better when everyone on the team is allowed to make creative contributions and when everyone takes serious responsibility for their practical and technical duties. You will see these ideas of team creativity and responsibility emphasized throughout *Voice & Vision*. This book is also written with the understanding that not every film student will become, or even wants to become, a director. Knowing that students can follow so many creative and fulfilling paths in film (cinematography, sound design, editing, art direction, etc.), I have provided ample technical information, creative context, and discussions of aesthetics to thoroughly engage those many students who are enthusiastic about areas other than directing. Whether they are writing, directing, shooting, or editing, the ultimate goal of *Voice & Vision* is to guide each student of film to develop their own creative voice while acquiring the practical skills and confidence to use it.

■ FILMMAKING AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This book was written in an era when film production is undergoing enormous transformation. Digital media are changing forever the technology and procedures for making movies at every stage of the process. When it comes to the question of film and digital video technology, *Voice & Vision* takes its cues from the professional industry and from students, who have both moved toward an understanding of the application and free integration of these technologies far more quickly than the academy. There is no battle between film and video. There are only movies to be made. The 21st-century filmmaker understands the inherent aesthetic characteristics and creative possibilities of originating on film and originating on digital video, and will use whatever they have at their disposal to make great movies. This ambidexterity is demonstrated in the films of internationally renowned directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Lars von Trier, Rebecca Miller, Steven Soderbergh, Spike Lee, Michael Winterbottom, and many, many others. The modern cinematographer is conversant and expressive across the technologies. This can be seen in the work of trailblazers like Ellen Kuras, Robbie Müller, and Anthony Dod Mantle. The crafts of the editor, sound recordists, art director, and sound designer are not significantly altered if one is working on a film or DV project: just ask any working professional out there. It's all about storytelling! And you can tell stories either way. This book does not favor one technology over the other; instead, I try to provide an understanding not only of the different technologies, but of their inexorable convergence as well. One more note; I often use the word "film" as a synonym for movie or motion picture, which means, in my book, that it can originate on DV, be edited and projected digitally, and still be called a film, and the person who made it is a filmmaker.

■ TEACHING AND LEARNING FILMMAKING

Film writing and directing cannot be taught, only learned, and each man or woman has to learn it through his or her own system of self education.

Alexander Mackendrick

The great film director Alexander Mackendrick (*The Ladykillers*, *Sweet Smell of Success*) raises a pertinent issue when he states in his book, *On Filmmaking*, that you cannot teach film, but you can learn it. The interesting twist, however, is that Mr. Mackendrick was also a legendary film *teacher* at the California Institute of the Arts for 25 years, so he must have believed that something about film could be taught, or at least conveyed, and that a teacher plays some role in learning about filmmaking. I believe that you can, in fact, teach a great deal *about* filmmaking. One can teach the essentials of technique, cinematic lan-

guage, the technology, and the expressive capabilities of the instruments of the art form. One can teach an understanding of how the production process itself supports the creation of a movie. One can teach a student a method for recognizing and appreciating exceptional examples of filmmaking from the history of movies. All of this can bring the serious student right to the threshold. The rest of what is necessary, albeit the core of being an artist in any medium, must be learned through example and experience and here a teacher, and a book, can serve as a guide. This core consists of imagination, visual intuition, initiative, an aesthetic sense, and personal style. These qualities can't be taught, but they can certainly be nurtured and developed.

So where do we go to learn those things that cannot be taught? The first thing an aspiring filmmaker must do is watch films, especially the films of the masters, old and new. Writers read great writers, painters look at paintings, and, in fact, often copy the works of masters when developing their craft. It is imperative that young filmmakers look carefully at films for what they express and how the filmmaker actually achieves that particular mood or emotion, or that specific narrative point, or how they develop a theme, or move you to laugh, or cry, or vote, through images, actions, and sound. Movies themselves are our most useful textbooks. Think about it: not one single cinematic storytelling technique in the history of film has become extinct. Every filmmaking technique that has been developed remains part of the lexicon of the art form and it's all there for you to learn from, rework, customize, and apply to your own story. Knowing this, I have included throughout the text numerous illustrations from movies (every one available on DVD). The "In Practice" feature provides brief analyses of scenes or techniques from films that illustrate how a specific technology, process, or technique is used to support a conceptual, narrative, or aesthetic impulse—in essence, the creative application of a principle or a technology. This encourages the student to look at films analytically and to use the wealth of material available for rent as a research tool. You will notice that I reference films from all eras and from all over the world as well as films shot on 35mm, 16mm, Super 16, HD, and standard DV. This book celebrates the vast diversity of voices, approaches, perspectives, and innovations in cinema throughout its history. A smart film student will understand that great movies and creative innovations are as likely to come from Taiwan, Denmark, Brazil, and Iran as Los Angeles. Film is truly a global art form and every continent continues to make vital contributions.

The second way we can learn about filmmaking is to listen to the tales from the trenches of production. Everyone has on-set experience stories: challenges that they faced, puzzles that they solved, issues with that they struggled, ideas that they held on to and those that they had to let go, accounts of their crafty accomplishments, shrewd fixes and innovative work-arounds. It's important to listen to these stories. We learn from the experiences, ideas, ingenuity, solutions, knowledge, advice, strategies, difficulties, disappointments, and successes of other filmmakers, from students struggling with their very first film to seasoned pros struggling with their 30th movie—there are lessons in all of it. Pick up any trade magazine, like *American Cinematographer*, or go to a website like www.filmsound.org, or pick up a book like Laurent Tirard's *Moviemakers' Master Class*, or Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye*, and what you'll find are people with experience in cinematography, sound design, directing, editing, or any other creative aspect of filmmaking, sharing what they've accomplished and what they've learned along the way. You can tuck all of these illuminating stories, all of this first-hand information, into your tool kit and bring it with you to your next project. Then, after you've spent even one day on a film set, you'll have your own stories to share. It's all about storytelling after all.

You will find real world stories sprinkled throughout the book and also in the "In Practice" boxes, which often contain brief anecdotes detailing common and characteristic production challenges from professional film shoots as well as student productions. Many of these on-set stories come directly from the experiences of my students during my 13 years of teaching introductory and intermediate production courses. Some of them come

from filmmakers ranging in experience from first time feature film directors to legendary masters of cinema.

In the end, however, the best way to learn about filmmaking is simply to make films. Here is some advice from someone who's made a few himself:

The advice I would give today to anyone who wants to become a director is quite simple: make a film. In the sixties, it wasn't so easy because there wasn't even super 8. If you wanted to shoot anything, you had to rent a 16-millimeter camera, and often it would be silent. But today, nothing is as easy as buying or borrowing a small video camera. You have a picture, you have sound, and you can screen your film on any TV set. So when an aspiring director comes to me for advice, my answer is always the same: "Take a camera, shoot something, and show it to someone. Anyone."

Jean-Luc Godard (From *Moviemaker's Master Class*, by Laurent Tirard)

So there you have it. What are you waiting for? It's time to make movies!

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