

THROUGH THE LENS OF **NINO LEITNER**

Pro Tips for Great Filmmaking



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NINO LEITNER

Based in Vienna, Austria, Nino Leitner is a digital filmmaker and producer with world-renowned expertise across documentary, commercial, music video, and narrative-style projects. His decade-long expertise finds voice in his extensive writings on the popular camera and accessory review site cinema5d.com, in which he is a partner, as well as his own ninofilm.net/blog.

Nino excels particularly in the commercial world because of his ability to create finely crafted, cinematic videos on a limited budget. Now that DSLRs are putting cinematic filmography within the reach of a mainstream audience, Nino feels more need than ever to share his advice and help lift others up to a higher level of artistry. The following tips are some of his favorites for those looking to expand their fledgling video craft.

Ninofilm.net/blog

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CREATING A CINEMATIC FEEL

There's an emotional and a technical side to creating a cinematic feel in video. Emotionally, you want stuff that doesn't look like real life but rather has a bit more poetry to it. Among other things, technically this can mean less depth of field in your images. For example, I can film your face and have the background completely out of focus, making your face the center of attention. Compare this to a typical TV, newsy look, where everything is in focus. This takes away the cinematic feel.





IT'S ABOUT THE SENSOR

Camera sensor size will influence your ability to control depth of field and get that cinematic effect. Ideally, you want a super 35mm camera sensor or larger, such as those found in DSLRs or many modern professional video cameras. Cheap video cameras have really small sensors, and the smaller the sensor, the more everything is in focus, which makes it harder to achieve a controlled depth of field. Essentially, you are stuck with a very deep depth of field, which severely limits your creative options. (However, smaller lenses have a greater range on smaller-sensor cameras, which is a plus if you need to stay small with your kit.)



GO FOR THE FAST LENS

The faster a lens is, the wider its aperture, meaning the smaller its aperture number. For example, if you have a typical prime lens, meaning a fixed focal length lens, a fast model would be a maximum aperture of f/1.4 or f/2.0. That is a very wide aperture. If I use that lens wide open, I would achieve a very, very shallow depth of field. I could focus on your eyeball or even on the tip of your nose.

LONG LENSES FOR SHALLOW DEPTH OF FIELD

In addition to having fast lenses, you can use long lenses to control depth of field. If I stand further away from you and use a telephoto lens — say, 200mm — and use it wide open, I would get an even shallower depth of field. The longer the lens, the shallower the perceived depth of field becomes.



BEAUTY AND LIGHT

Creating beautiful pictures depends 95 percent on lighting. It's very easy to make stuff look terrible if you don't know how to light or use the light that's already there. As a documentary-style filmmaker, I don't always have 100 percent control over where light comes from. So very often, I'll go into a room, and the first thing I think about is what the natural light from outside is doing to the room. Where can I position somebody in this room in order to make them look good?

Don't work against the sun, work with it. If you shoot an interview inside, try to use the indirect sunlight (or ideally soft light through the clouds) that comes in from outside as the key light. In nature, there's only one light source: the sun. Everything else is just reflections. Follow the same principle. There is one strong light, and all other lights follow this light. Use a fill light to get rid of shadows created by the main light, but make sure that your fill is less intense than the key light. Otherwise, if everything receives the same amount of light you will get a very flat, undesirable image. Contrast is good to create compelling images.





MORE LIGHT: KICK IT

In addition to the key and fill light, you can enhance your images with a kicker, or backlight. A kicker light separates the subject from the background. You can have a light that only touches their shoulders and the back of their head from above, just directly across from your camera. This separates them from the background to some degree, and it can provide a very subtle but dramatic effect.

For me, backlight is the most beautiful light. If you were shooting somebody at sunset, the magic hour, the sun might be above the horizon, and you would have this beautiful, warm light. Don't position a subject with the sun behind your back. Position them with the sun behind their back. Don't be afraid of having backlight, because if you light up the foreground using a reflector or something similar, you will have a beautiful picture. That light hitting the back of the subject's head and body would separate them from the background. If the sun comes straight at your subject, the scene becomes really flat, they get the sun in their face, and then they have to squint.

NOW HEAR THIS

People who are starting out spend too much time thinking about the image and not enough time thinking about audio. The audio layer is just as important as the image. An audience will accept a bad image more readily than bad sound. Think about seeing an interview where you can't understand the person because there is some annoying background noise, like a fountain, but you don't see it. No matter how good the image is, the audience will get very annoyed and frustrated. If you absolutely cannot avoid background noise because of the location, show the sound. If you show the fountain in a shot before you see the person, the audience automatically accepts its presence, because now they know where it's coming from.

If it's the other way around, I don't necessarily need to see a person as long as I hear them talking clearly. This is why radio remains more popular than silent films. More information is actually communicated through audio than through images, but the images transport the emotion.

The first person you should hire on a shoot is a sound recordist. If you don't have the budget, still try to get the best sound you can. When you're selecting a location, always listen to the background noise first.



THE #1 TIP FOR CLEAR SPEECH

A sound person mostly booms audio from above because the closer the microphone is to something, the better the sound, and the head is typically in the top third of the image.

If you're aiming for the mouth with a boom pole microphone, you don't actually hit the mouth. You think you're hitting the mouth from your perspective, but you're actually pointing at the forehead, which is not ideal. Many microphones are very narrow in their pickup patterns, and the correct aim makes a lot of difference. So you really want to aim for the heart of the person in order to point at the mouth. That's the best audio you can get from booming someone. And be sure to get in as close as possible without being in the shot.



SAVE MONEY ON CAMERAS

If you're starting out on a very tight budget, buy a less expensive camera and a better quality lens. Camera models turn over constantly with newer models, and even inexpensive Canon DSLRs or Sony interchangeable lens cameras can shoot decent-looking video nowadays. So spend your money on the lens, because the camera will be obsolete soon, but a good lens can stick with you for as long as your career lasts. You'll get better images from a low-priced camera with a good lens than the other way around.



KEEP YOUR FOOTAGE SAFE

Whatever money you have left after the camera and lens, put it into reliable, high-performance storage. Your files are only as safe as the drives holding them, and fast drives can save you a lot of time. When I'm on a shoot, I use G-Technology G-DRIVE ev models or G-RAID with Thunderbolt drives if I have access to mains power for easy portability and fast data access. Back in production, we work from a G-DOCK ev and a 24TB G-SPEED Studio RAID with Thunderbolt 2. I can't tell you how much editing time saved and peace of mind these drives have brought me. Loss of data is not an option, so maintain regular backups on three different drives. You want to make sure your lovingly crafted work reaches your audience. Make sure your storage will help you achieve that.



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