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TOOLS ARE THE MEDIUM – NOT THE MESSAGE

by DON STARNES, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

There are many more ways to create and distribute movies these days. When I got started as a Director of Photography and filmmaker, there were three formats: 35mm, 16mm and Super-8. Then, of course, there was television (which no one took seriously). Television used videotape to archive things, although we had heard that they had a tape machine with handles on it that you could take outside of a TV station. Son of a gun.

It sounds as though I'm writing this from the Hollywood Retirement Home, but I'm talking 1978 here. You were around then (weren't you?). Except for the abundance of Disco and the scarcity of computers, it wasn't so different. This is recent history. What we knew then is that these different formats are actually different media. Certain people making certain kinds of movies

for certain audiences used 8mm film. Double the width of the film and another set of people would use it to make another kind of movie for another audience. Double the width again (plus a few millimeters) and another set of people would be involved in another kind of movie. Each set of people had its own (sub)culture, each movie its own purpose, each audience its own needs. Film producers didn't worry about those things. They thought about story, character, message (and the budget and profit). Which medium (the tools, the culture) to use was obvious to them.

Pity the poor producer today. Now, in addition to thinking about story, character, and message, the producer has to worry about whether, for example, the background of the interview will cause the QuickTime file to be too large to download at 56K. There are so many tools now: tools to acquire source material, tools to

process the images and sound, and tools to distribute content (we used to call this "shooting, editing and exhibiting movies").

I find that people pay a great deal of attention to media tools. Everybody knows about the tools. I was shooting a medical show recently, an athrectomy that was being narrowcast live to a trade show audience of doctors. As the specialists were inching the steel wire into the large aorta near his heart, the patient, who was under local anesthesia, looked up and asked me "Is that Digital Video or Betacam?"

Did you see Titanic for the special effects? Admit it: you did. It wasn't to find out what happens at the end (I'll blow the ending for you if you haven't seen the movie: [surprise!] the boat sinks). I've seen movie advertisements based on their use of special effects. And now, every studio is doing an EPK (Electronic Press Kit, a "behind the scenes"

movie) to explain how a movie was made 'cause the audiences eat it up. Tools are what people are talking about.

In my work, I've shot every film and tape format except 65mm (IMAX producers take note: I'm in the book). I've seen my work on TV, in theaters, on CDs and on web pages. I've worked with hundreds of producers and directors. I know the meaning of almost all the acronyms. I shoot tests and do my homework. And I know this: each permutation of the tools is really a medium with its own limits.

Limits are not a bad thing; limits are not limitations. Art is defined by its limits. If you stretch a canvas on a frame that is four feet tall and one foot wide, it is unlikely that you are going to paint a grove of trees on it. You are more likely to start imagining one tall tree or a waterfall. The shape of the canvas, its limits, actually helps determine the painting. Similarly, Titanic was

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not photographed in DVCPro. If James Cameron had wanted to make a movie in DVCPro, he most likely would have had a tiny crew and he would have been thinking of documentary style stories about a few characters, with lots of POV shots (Terminator III: I've Got A Point Of View, Too).

I've noticed lots of suffering on media productions these days in regards to the tools. It comes from trying to make a movie fit the medium (or fit more than one medium at a time) instead of using the medium that best fits the movie. It usually goes something like this:

Producer: I want to shoot this documentary in Hi-8 so that we can get in and out fast and be inconspicuous. And I want lots of wide shots to show the environment that these people are in.

Me: Wide shots will turn to noise in Hi-8.

Producer: Oh. How will that affect the blow up to 35mm?

Me: You want to blow it up to 35mm?

Producer: Yeah. Hey, I need the festival exposure to get it on HBO.

or:

Director: Can't we lose the headroom?

Me: Well, then we'd lose his eyebrows in theatrical.

Director: Hmm. Well, how about his red jacket? Can we use that?



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Me: Nope. It would crawl a half-inch across the screen in VHS.

or:

Producer: I know that we had talked about 16mm to Digital Betacam digitized to AVR and print-to-tape on Digital Betacam for distribution on CD-ROM, but I just read about DVcam and that it is supposed to intercut seamlessly with our 35mm stock footage. I also just got a great deal

on a Media 100, and am thinking of DVD instead of CD-ROM. I also just read about Tina Brown going to Miramax from the New Yorker, and about synergy, and about re-purposing your content... and so on.

Director: Yeah.

Me: Let's do what works on VHS. I've got a good idea...

An early cinematographer, the Buddha, wrote that mindfulness (of the limits) was the only way to avoid suffering. Through mindfulness (of the limits of the medium) we attain enlightenment. As best as you can, pick a set of tools, call it a medium, and enjoy its limits. Think about story, character and message. Be an artist.

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I know that there are economic pressures to distribute to different venues. I know that the technology changes every few days. I know that the stakes are high. I know the stress and the fear. That is why I say calming things to producers and directors. For example:

Director: Oh my god! What are we going to do?

Me: We are shooting this for VHS, right?

