Technology Makes it Happen—But it Doesn’t
Tell the Story by Itself

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Technology we used 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 now leading the visual storytelling pack and some respected visual storytellers share conclusions of their experiences.

Keywords: visual storytelling, DSLR camera, HD video capture, shoulder rig, visual storytelling

Introduction

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

The main focus of this paper is the analysis on how the continuous advance in video technology affects visual journalism and visual storytelling. As technology becomes more and more effective at prices that are more and more affordable, somehow the temptation to use everything that technology has to offer grows stronger. Because it’s all there, at your fingertips. This might result in spectacular achievements but how about content? A journalist’s job is to report real lifestories, not to turn everything into Hollywood style filmmaking. The first part of the paper focuses on the primary task of any journalist: Storytelling. And of course, visual storytelling, which should bear the stamp of quality whatsoever. Telling the story in pictures can benefit from the astounding support of contemporary technology, as shown later in the paper, mainly from the stabilizing equipment which provide your videos professional look even in difficult shooting conditions. Yet, quality means professionalism and the story itself must be told by people, not technology. The final part of the paper focuses on some respected journalists’ and filmmakers’ conviction that, even though technology constantly change, the rules of filmmaking remain the same. Lighting and composition never change.

Storytelling

Storytelling has always been a significant part of history, but the means through which the stories have

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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.

Based on my experience as a producer and filmmaker, 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.

**Visual Journalism**

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

There are pictures everywhere. The key to visual journalism is to understand and control these pictures.
Every shot is comprised of a story, visuals, and sounds. Used together, these three elements communicate the
meaning of the picture to the viewer.

Visual stories are being communicated by means of the basic visual components: space, line, shape, tone,
color, movement, and rhythm. These visual components are found in every moving or still picture we see. A
visual component communicates moods, emotions, ideas, and most importantly, gives visual structure to the
pictures (Block, 2008).

All visual stories rely heavily on their visual elements, so you have to decide what is important for the
viewer to see and how they should be shown that information.

The script of a visual story will help guide the choices of what to capture with the camera, since what you
record is only a small segment or cutout window of the total sphere of the physical world around the camera
operator (Thomson & Bowen, 2009).

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

**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.

Every story, no matter how brief or long, has an exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution. The picture
makers have used the visual exposition to provide a visual definition for the family. The visual exposition can
set up the visual structure for all the basic visual components. Any visual component can be assigned to almost
any emotion, mood, situation, or character trait. The visual component choices for space, line, shape, tone, color, movement, and rhythm will help determine the correct lenses, camera angles, locations and design elements for your production. Visual rules give a production unity, style, and visual structure.

**Video Technology**

Historically, the camera has been considered the most important factor in shooting. Now, the computerization of the editing process is changing the standard approach to shooting in video. In addition to professional quality cameras, independent producers are depending on professional camcorders which are inexpensive, offer shooting in HD, have a variety of addons, like lenses, matte boxes, long-life batteries, and more (Kellison, 2006).

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

Recent market surveys show that 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\(^1\) (or MILC). This type of camera provides an interchangeable lens mount. They do not have a mirror reflex optical viewer finder. Compared to DSLRs, MILCs are smaller because they have fewer parts, and sturdier, as they have fewer moving parts.

![Figure 1. The DSLR camera\(^2\).](http://www.dpreview.com/articles/9716229576/why-make-a-small-sensor-mirrorless-camera, viewed on 2015.04.14.)

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, 16 mm, or HDTV. The DSLR

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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.  

**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 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 HDSLR. 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.

**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.

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 be seen on the video offered by Vepoch, a community where filmmakers 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 movement 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.

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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 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.

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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 is 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 provided by The Glass Pixel Studios.

The Gimbal Stabilizer

Handheld 3-axis gimbals are used in stabilization systems designed to give the camera operator the independence of handheld shooting without camera vibration or shake. Powered by three brushless motors, the gimbals have the ability to keep the camera level on all axes as the camera operator moves the camera. An inertial measurement unit (IMU) responds to movement and utilizes its three separate motors to stabilize the camera.

A first look, overview and footage of a 3-axis professional stabilized gimbal can be seen in the video section of DJI Company, demonstrating the abilities of their top product, the Ronin stabilizer.

With the guidance of algorithms, the stabilizer is able to notice the difference between deliberate movement such as pans and tracking shots from unwanted shake. This allows the camera to seem as if it is floating through the air, an effect achieved by a Steadicam in the past. Not limited to handheld shooting,

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9 DJI Company is a manufacturer of professional stabilizers and flying platforms, based in Shenzen, China.


gimbals can be mounted to cars and other vehicles such as drones, where vibrations or other unexpected movements would make tripods or other camera mounts unacceptable.

**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, 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 the best film educators in the United States, Alex Buono. 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, which he photographed and also produced. Alex repeated the dual role of cinematographer and co-producer on Green Street Hooligans, 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, 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 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.

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 for their production company, Third Person, represented by Hyphen Management.

Alex Bono is the initiator of the much acclaimed Visual Storytelling Tour which is, by opinion of several respected

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filmmakers, the best way to educate visual storytellers of all levels of experience.

In the same respect, Jon Connor of Kessler University, a respected filmmaker himself, wrote about the most important ideas discussed at Masters in Motion22 (www.shooteditlearn.com). Masters in Motion is a three-day immersive filmmaking 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, ASC23, 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 Timoner24, the only filmmaker with the rare distinction of winning Sundance twice, referenced *We Live in Public*25 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.

**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.

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In a Demo Reel Your Worst Shot Speaks Loudest

This is a statement that belongs to Vincent Laforet\(^26\), 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\(^27\) 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.

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 cliche to say, “Story is more important than gear”. It may be cliche 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\(^28\), 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\(^29\), 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.


\(^{28}\) 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”. Retrieved from http://www.lightiron.com/projects/talent/ian-vertovec Viewed on 2014.11.12.

\(^{29}\) 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. Retrieved from http://www.hollywood.com/celebrities/3094263/erik-aadahl Viewed on 2014.11.12.
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 how much adversity and resistance you are up against. A healthy sense of humor never hurts to make it through long and exhausting days.

Conclusion

Video technology creates a whole new context for powerful storytelling. A great story will also be a great visual story only if pictures are powerful, compelling and speak for themselves. That is where technology steps in. Better lens and better light sensors mean better picture quality, in terms of resolution, light, color, contrast and everything else that add up to technical quality. Better microphones will definitely add fidelity and a strong feeling of both reality and accuracy to the story. Stabilizers will allow storytellers to make their stories clearer, easier to follow and understand, looking more professional than ever. Lightweight, performant gear allows storytellers to shoot in places that used to be considered impossible to shoot just years ago. Editing can be performed on the spot, in fully professional conditions, using a laptop and an editing software, affordable and easy to use, achieving results that, a short time ago, could be obtained only in sophisticated production studios. Yet the very framework of visual storytelling does not change. It takes a good, instructed human storyteller to put all this above mentioned mechanism to work. Only a journalist in full control of visual storytelling principles can harness performant technology to transmit people’s ideas, feelings and emotions to other people.

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 put it straight: “A new camera doesn’t make you a better filmmaker, knowledge and experience do”.

References


30 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.