



## MORE THAN JUST PURCHASING A DSLR

It is hard to ignore the revolution of DSLR cinema in the past two years. Since the arrival of Canon's EOS Mark II 5D and the exponential growth in popularity among the student population, DSLR shooting has become the standard. DSLRs have revolutionized the cost versus quality ratio. A student can now purchase a \$2500 or less camera that will produce the quality of \$15,000+ camera. Admittedly, I purchased a Mark II 5D and used it on many music videos, promos, and narratives including the 53-minute film, *Nathan and the Luthier*. However, although DSLRs have benefited many students and independent filmmakers to make more cinematic films, many of which lack good cinematography.

Cinematography is defined by Webster as "the art or science of motion-picture photography." However, the cinematographer's job is much more than just setting up a shot or purchasing a camera. He/she works with the director closely to develop a visual style that is executed through the lighting, camera movement, lens choices, and color. This is what many student filmmakers that purchase a DSLR lack in knowledge. They assume that by purchasing a DSLR, their footage will instantaneously look good. That may be the case in comparison to an HD video camera; however, the fundamentals and basics of cinematography are lost. The digital age cinematographer uses a DSLR as a tool and enhancement of cinematography rather than the camera creating the cinematography.

So what makes DSLR shooting so appealing to the untrained eye? Audiences may not know the terminology or why they think a film looks cinematic, but they can still tell what looks student made and what is professional when placed side by side. It is the

cinematographer's job, especially as a student, to distinguish their film with a cinematic quality. DSLRs have equipped students with this capability by utilizing a large sensor. This increases the amount of depth of field (what is in and out of focus) that the camera captures. This is a large reason why students and untrained audiences find DSLR footage so incredibly beautiful. However, when comparing a professionally lit, shot, and color graded film, an untrained audience can tell the difference between decent DSLR footage and good cinematography.

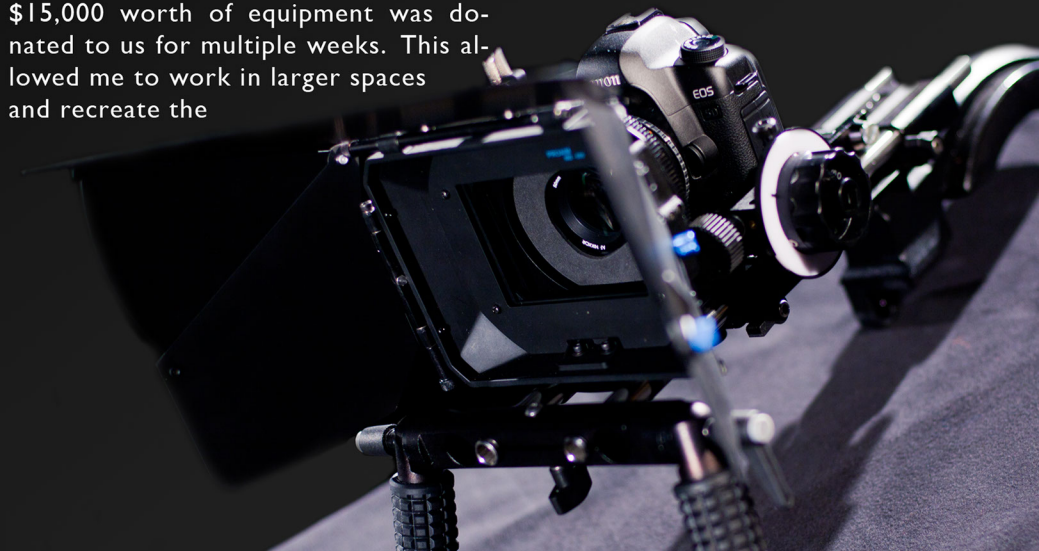


Lighting set up on Nathan and the Luthier Set

My work on *Nathan and the Luthier* taught me a lot about not just working with DSLRs but more importantly, cinematography. Due to a lot of extremely generous friends, colleagues, and professionals that I have met and worked with throughout the past two years, over \$15,000 worth of equipment was donated to us for multiple weeks. This allowed me to work in larger spaces and recreate the

lighting to our needs. Like I stated previously, cinematography involves creating a visual style with lighting, camera movement, lens choices, and color that not only matches the story, but in fact enhances the story. The director, Jake Sherry, and I came up with a look that utilized slow camera moves using a dolly, slider, or jib; intentional lighting placement; a color scheme for each location and scene; and a normal focal length except for key moments. Each of these decisions were made intentionally to further the scene or story along.

Camera movement is a substantial part of cinematography that helps make a film cinematic. With our decision to use static or slight movement in the film, helped convey the monotony and the burden in the characters. However, as the film progresses, more camera movement is introduced, including the use of a dolly, slider or jib. One of my favorite scenes, which was the most complex in terms of blocking and camera movement, was a plan (one continuous shot) scene that involved a small jib on a dolly. The camera starts on the scroll of a violin that is hanging from the ceiling and jibs down to reveal the luthier at the doorway. As he walks





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towards the camera, the dolly pulls back and the jib arms swing around to follow him. He ends up at the exit of the violin shop where Nathan is



cleaning. We dolly into Nathan as the luthier exits the shop to show his mischievous thinking. The camera holds on Nathan as he is contemplating something. He starts to walk towards the camera and it dollies back with him to show his emotion at this heightened moment. He walks past the camera and it pans around to follow him walking to the back room where he decides to investigate a forbidden closet. This scene was a pivotal part of the film not only because Nathan and Alexander's relationship has started to blossom, but this is the first time we see Nathan get closer to Alexander's secret. Although the camera move was extremely difficult and took 21 attempts to get it right, the camera is not just documenting what is happening but is rather part of the scene and action.

Another aspect of cinematography that I find to not only makes the film more cinematic but can direct the audience emotionally is the use of color. As a cinematographer, one should use color as a tool to enhance the story and visuals. From the inception of the film, I

always envisioned the violin shop as Nathan's real home. I used the colors within the violin shop and the color grading to emphasize this. The rich woods, color of the walls, props, and costumes were specifically chosen and placed to accentuate this feeling of warmth. I recall many times when specific props that were blue or green were in the room and I would tell the crew to get rid of it. On the other hand, the rest of the locations and props including the house and nursing home were chose because of the bleakness and blue accents. Specifically, in the house, all of the walls and costumes are blue which when juxtaposed to the violin shop conveys a cold and bleak emotion.

Color grading was used to accentuate the physical locations and our decisions to use certain color palettes in the scenes. I truly believe that all students looking to become cinematographers should learn not only color grading, but color theory. As a student filmmaker that started out in the digital age and not working with film, I see color grading as the digital way to achieve and enhance what filmmakers used when choosing and processing film stocks. In Nathan and the Luthier, Jake and I decided start the film by desaturating the footage and enhancing the bleakness in the film. As the film progresses and Nathan and Alexander's relationship grow, saturation is slowly added back in. Furthermore, in the back room where Alexander's secret is hidden and the basement where Nathan finds the violin, I kept a warm golden tone to the room

but added a little green to the shadows to relate the secrets that the two characters share.



Although DSLRs have changed the independent filmmaking world to achieve high production value at a minimal cost, cinematography is what makes a film look truly cinematic. As a student filmmaker I still have a lot to learn about cinematography, but Nathan and the Luthier has pushed me to think about film in a longer form and how the visuals must progress from beginning to end. Technology will always change and become outdated, but cinematography will continue to be reinvented.

## WUHAWK FUN FACTS

- Nathan and the Luthier was first written about Nathan and a mailman trying to solve a mystery about Pink Flamingos
- We had a 24-hour shoot in which the scene was later cut out
- On the 20th take of the dolly jib plan shot, we thought we got it. Upon review, I had caught 3 frames of the focus pullers hand in the shot, so we did one more take.

