

## Musings on Framing and Operating That No One Asked For

A ways back, an op that I was mentoring through Local 600 asked me if I could make a list of things I think about when operating. I started to jot things down and, over time, have added to it as I think of things. What I realized is that, much like driving a car since I was 16, having operated for 30 years, there are all sorts of things that I do and have learned, that I don't think about. This process has actually made me examine what I do, what I don't do, what I should do, and what I'd like to do, and continues to evolve. I post this not because I have all the answers (in fact a fair amount here has come from speaking with other ops about their process), but, rather, because I haven't really seen it laid out anywhere in a digestible form. Plus, it's fun, and keeps me from having to clean the gutters.

It goes without saying that none of these ideas is set in stone, and that the operating of every shot should be dictated by the needs of the director, DP and actors, and most importantly, should serve the story and not the other way around. There is nothing worse to me than a shot that is about the shot and not about the story. In the end, that's what it's all about—story, story, story—and at any point where something becomes about something other than story, it's not what we should be doing as filmmakers and storytellers. So, in no particular order, and understanding that this is a living evolving document, here goes nothing...

### **Operating Is About So Much More Than Panning and Tilting (Or, Rather, Panning and Panning)**

Using the frame to tell the story is all that operating is. Sure, you need to adjust and you need to do that seamlessly, but the frame is everything.

Frame the story, not the shot.

Know the script and understand what comes before and what comes after. Understand the essence of every scene. If it were up to me, every operator

would sit in on the tone meetings. Understand the story and you'll understand the frame. Understand the frame and you'll tell better stories.

It's clear that, as operators, we are there to be part of the camera crew, to be the physical eye of the DP, but as time goes on, I find that I view myself as part of the writing crew, the acting crew, the editing crew and, of course, craft service (but they continually kick me off the truck) just as much. While all that may sound egotistical, what I really mean is that the writer stopped a while back and gave us these words and as operators, we are some of the last people who help create how those words will play.

Story.

Actors are now going to take those words and bring them to life, so how we frame them, how our operating interacts with their performance, determines how things play.

Story.

Our images will eventually be handed off to an editor, who will want a certain flow and connection to play with within the edit, so everything we create should consider that aspect of the process as well.

Again, story. It's *all* story.

When a writer or editor comes to set to thank you for the work you have done, you know you've truly done something good. And in case I haven't mentioned it, that can't happen unless you first understand, wait for it, the story.



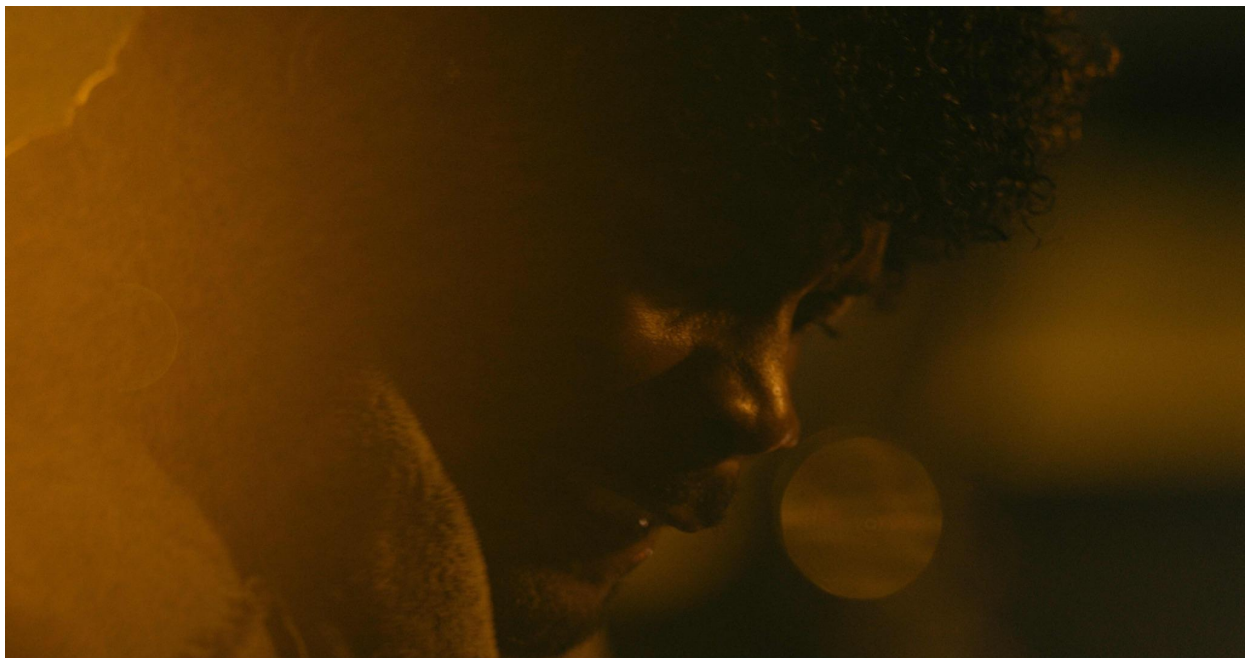
## **Commitment - The Art of Happy Accidents**

I can't recall how many times I have landed a frame where it was not what I intended it to be. Actors blocked, not seeing down a hallway as much as I had intended, etc., etc. Let's face it, I'm not that consistent. And I can't tell you how many times I have embraced that frame, not corrected (because unless you can figure out when to correct where it's not in the cut, why bother? And even then, they often use it and it looks like a mistake) and been, not only pleasantly surprised, but found something completely unexpected that I then tried (often unsuccessfully) to replicate. As operators, I think we tend to try to create perfection so often that we forget that the messiness is sometimes (and often) even better. I'm not talking about panning and tilting but, rather, framing. There is no perfect frame, and often the things that hit you by accident are so much better than what you had planned. The key, in my mind, is to have faith in yourself enough to hold an off-frame and realize you may have to go again to get the exact frame that had been planned.

## **Don't Be Afraid to Fail**

Take chances. The most interesting performances by actors happen when they are right on the cusp of failure—same goes for operating, dolly work, and focus pulling as well. Unless the shot is totally off the rails, creeping dolly fixes, slow focus fixes, minute operator adjustments will draw attention to

themselves. Better to hold steady, commit, and change it on the next one.  
Have faith.





## Let Frames Play

So much of what I see today in films and TV is about camera movement/adjustment that it drives me nuts. Clearly, I'm all about movement as I've been a Steadicam op since cars first appeared on the street, but movement for movement's sake is nothing, and the constant adjustment of frames simply means that operators do not have knowledge or faith. Handheld can't make a bad scene good. Dolly moves can't fix a bad story. All movement should augment the story rather than instruct it, and I'm a firm believer in the idea that camera placement is EVERYTHING. Bad camera placement can't

be undone any more than a bad story can be fixed with lighting or shot design. If you spend time placing the camera, ideally, you should never have to move it unless it's part of the story.

Be proactive not reactive. Letting things play is what happens in the real world. This doesn't mean there is no place for movement, it simply means that movement should make sense and not simply be undertaken to fix something that doesn't work because the camera placement is wrong. This is where letting extreme frames play comes into things. Stop adjusting constantly and just watch. Live out on that edge—that's where the magic happens. Happy Accidents. And on the subject of sliders, they can be great but please understand that just because you have a slider on DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE TO SLIDE. Pick a frame and land it.



### **Foreground, Foreground, Foreground**

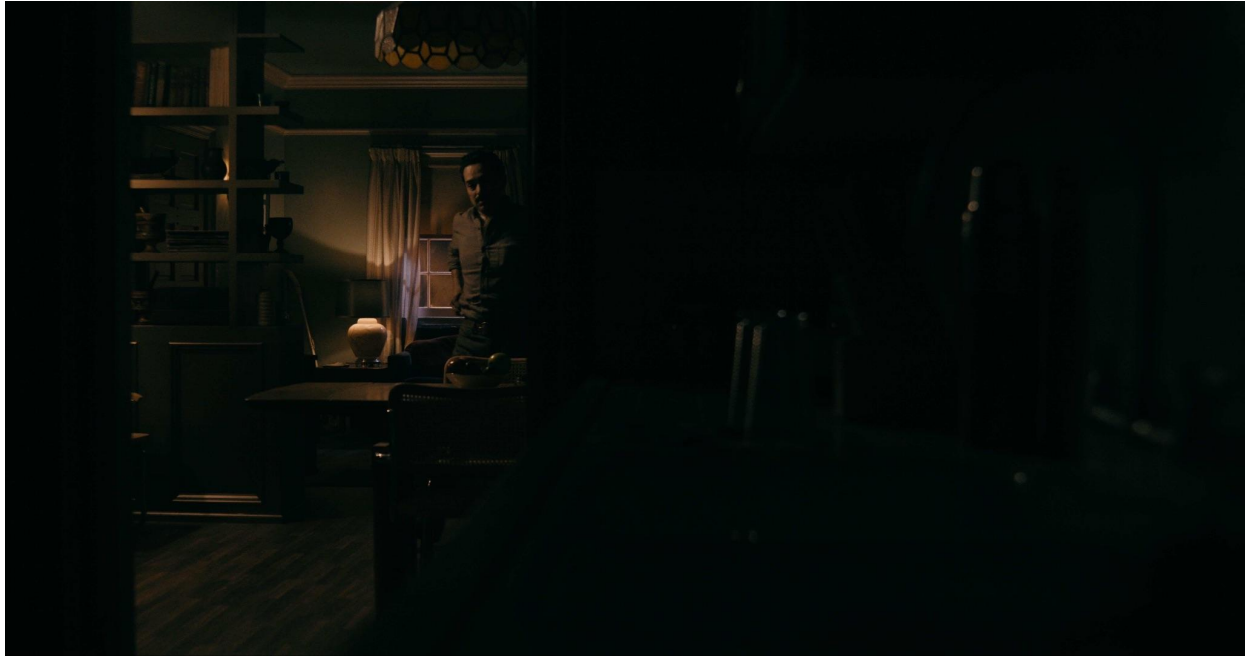
We live in a three-dimensional world. Use it. It's that simple. Even on long lenses, where it's simply an aberration, it can change a 'meh' shot to a great shot.



## **Background, Background, Background**

I don't think operators consider the background of a shot as much as they should, and it's often something that can make or break a shot. The master is usually what it is, but once you get into coverage, depending on your angle, the background can tell so much more as to how it connects to other spaces and or people, or how it does not for specific reasons. (Like Isolating characters or connecting to others when needed.) By changing the

frame—even if the subject is framed exactly the same—and accepting a different background, a shot can become something entirely different. One of the reasons why walking around the action as it is rehearsed is a good idea, as it reveals possibilities for later that often won't happen unless it's staged correctly from the start.



## Framing in General



I didn't discover the rule of thirds until about three years ago. It was pretty funny, actually. I've always just tried to frame things the way they worked for the story, within the environment, that was interesting. But having said that, the more off frames you use, the more it's important to not ignore center punching. Some DPs I work with think that's a cardinal rule that should never be broken, but if you use it in specific instances when it punctuates what is happening in the story, it's a phenomenal tool. There is no such thing as a bad frame, but there is such a thing as the wrong frame, which is a frame that is not telling the story. (Ok, a light in the frame is bad, I'll give you that but clearly it shouldn't have been there right?) Bottom line, never be afraid of a frame that tells the story, regardless of what the 'rules' are. There are no rules, no perfect or 'correct' frames, and no absolute right or wrong. Same goes for headroom. Put people in spaces. Let them play; let the spaces define who they are. And while you are in the master, think ahead about how you are going to play the coverage. And then be ready to chuck that idea when a better one comes along. Frame the story, not the actors and the actors will work within that frame.





## Interesting Frames

It's obvious that everyone wants to make interesting frames, but when looking for them, the single most important thing to come back to every time is story, story, story. Does the frame tell the story or does it detract from the story? If you find the greatest frame, the greatest shot, the greatest move you have ever created in your career, and realize you find yourself watching the shot

rather than following the story, you've just done a great injustice to the film and your actors. Every single shot, frame, composition, move, image we create should seamlessly blend into the background so that the story can take center stage. If you detract from that, you have not done your job.

It seems to me that creating interesting frames is rarely as successful as finding interesting frames. What I mean is there are times when you can ask an actor to make an adjustment or move a prop or something in the frame to help augment a composition and there is nothing wrong with that. But, when you are working with good actors, the interesting compositions you can find without changing a thing are often much better simply because they happen organically. Try working within the world that exists before adjusting the world to your needs.







## **Psychological Framing, Focus, and Movement**

This is a little nebulous and specific to the moment, but it's something I have tried to embrace and continue to do so. I suspect we all do this on some level, but there is definitely a psychology to framing, focus, and movement that, when utilized correctly, can take storytelling to the next level. It's hard to explain without specific examples, but it's a good idea to continually discuss and investigate as the art of storytelling progresses.

Who is controlling the story in a frame? If you have two people, and one is clearly controlling the story, when you get to overs, consider this. Who gets slammed into the corner and barely holds on to the frame? Who has plenty of room and room to spare? Who is uncomfortable and who is completely in their environment? Something to consider with tight overs as well. Don't always think you have to correct when an eye gets blocked for a minute. That can often tell more story than you ever could have hoped for. There's so much to where they are in space in addition to where they are in the frame.





## **The Line**

Clearly important to always know where the line is and where the camera needs to be, but I have become increasingly aware that audiences are sophisticated enough not to be confused by jumping the line. Ideally, it should be adhered to but when there is something significant to be gained by jumping it (*The Insider*), it generally plays, especially when it's just two people in a scene. Same goes for phone conversations. God help me, if I have to have another discussion about what direction someone on a phone is looking. Trust me, the audience will understand that they are talking to THE ONLY OTHER PERSON ON THAT PHONE CALL. The rule of thumb for me is, in the edit, if we jump the line for the moment, will it confuse the audience or not? If not, lighting and everything else allowing, go for it.

## **If It Bumps, Pay Attention**

A lot of improving any shot is listening to your gut and recognizing when something bothers you. I know that when production asks if a cross works, and I can't remember it, that means it worked. Conversely, a cross that does will 'bump' (I'll feel something is off and it bothers me) and I'll notice something is wrong and address it. Same goes for framing. If it works, it works, but if something is off, if something bumps, don't spend a ton of time wondering why, just try and change that aspect of the shot until it doesn't anymore.

Bumps are bad. Listen to them. If they take you out of the story they may very well take the viewer out as well.

## **The Team**

The focus puller, dolly grip, and op are all equal parts of the same team. Yes, as the operator, I may be driving the bus a little more but, in the end, we are all artists telling stories with different tools. As such, we all have our specialties. The best teams are the ones where everyone has the ability to speak and be part of that process. I fully embrace focus pullers making choices, as long as they commit. The key is to understand the story. The same goes for the dolly. If it's someone who is in the game, I'll often let them determine when to make a move or how to do it, because that's the specialty they use to tell the story. And each of us should feel open about expressing ideas, because the best ideas often come from outside of the operator, from people who have a different view of what we are doing.

When it works, when the op, focus puller, and dolly grip are in concert, it's like good jazz, where any one of the three can take the lead, start in a direction, and the other two will seamlessly pick up on it and adjust. The key to me is not to be afraid, to embrace it, to run with it, and to commit. Happy accidents and all that. You may not make every shot perfect, but the ones that come out of the moment will often be far greater than what you could have designed in the first place with plenty of time to mess around. Finally, the key is support and the knowledge that every member of the team is on the same page and no one is going to get burned. That's where the true art starts to happen.

## **Tidbits**

- Camera movement when necessary but, otherwise, try to let them play the frame, even to extreme frames. Try not to adjust frames during a shot unless the shot requires it. Play the space not the subject.



- Blockage is good as is foreground. Dirty frames whenever possible, even if it's an element in the room and extreme angles as well when it tells the story.
- Consider unconventional headroom and pushing subjects to the edge of frame. Land the frame where you want during setup/rehearsal and then move it around to explore things that you might not have thought of.
- Consider masters where the subjects are the smallest part of the frame and even somewhat obscured. Making the viewer work involves them all that much more.
- Right out of the box, start framing each shot with the horizon at 0 degrees. This will assure your verticals and then see if you can maintain. If you need to change that, change it significantly so it's really off rather than one or two degrees off.
- Every frame can have receding lines coming from the corners. As a last look, see what you can achieve if it doesn't change your shot significantly.
- Inserts should never stand alone unless specifically asked for. Every insert should connect to something else in the scene. Start on an insert and pull out to someone. Tilt down from someone to the insert, etc. A standalone insert means a cut and often it's not as valuable as tagging something within the scene.
- Think about the cut constantly and what the editors can use to make a scene better. Even in coverage, consider what might help to start the scene there instead of in a wide master, as you never know when they will up cut a scene.
- B cam should be pushing the wacky. A cam is often stuck with the key shots for a scene. B cam is where the flavor often comes in. B cam ops should embrace that and not be afraid of it. A cam is the sauce, B cam is the spice.

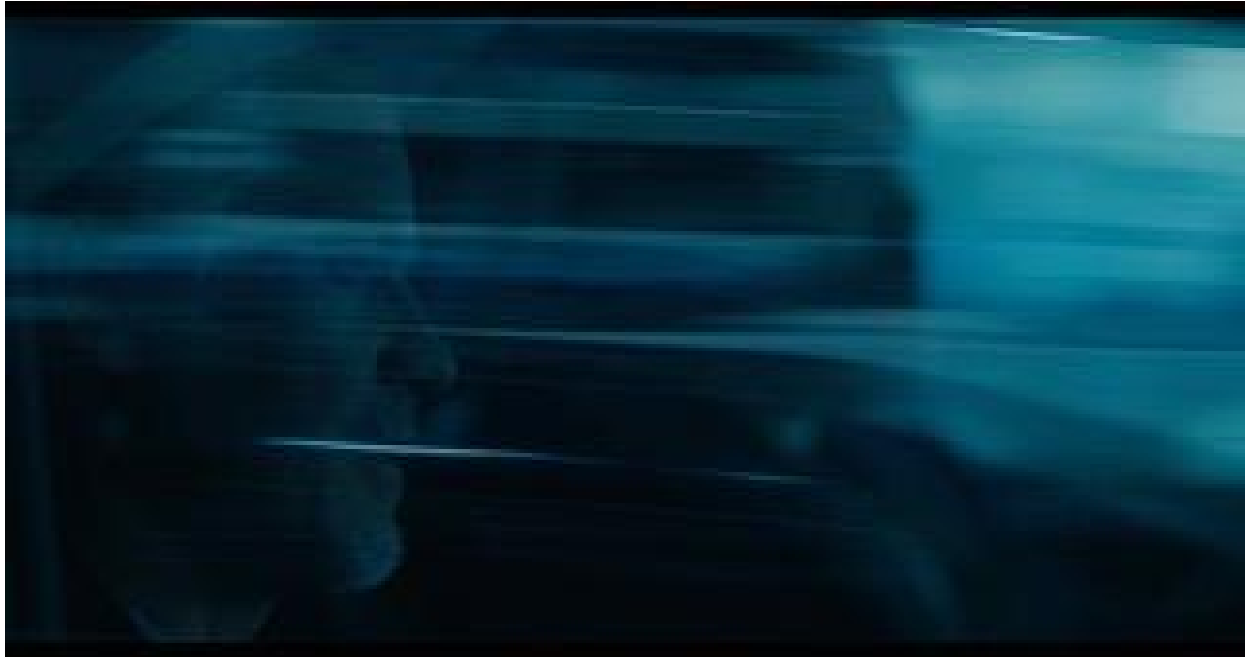
“The irony of what we do, is that if we do it well, no one will ever know we did anything at all” - Steadicam Operator Bob Crone

“You should film like a cat jumps on a table: with just enough effort. Nothing more, nothing less.” - Cinematographer Robby Mueller









<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doaQC-S8de8>