INTRODUCTION

The cinematographer, or director of photography, has an extremely complex and challenging job. He or she must translate the ideas of the director and the writer onto film. The cinematographer must know how to use the camera to capture the images in the most effective way possible, and consider lighting, composition, camera moves and angles, different types of film, lenses and cameras, use of color, etc., when filming each shot. Most shots are filmed several times to ensure that the end result will be just right. Each of these filming segments is called a take. The resulting takes are edited together to create the film’s sequence of action that, in turn, moves the story forward.

ANGLING THE CAMERA

The cinematographer works closely with the director to compose the images that are captured on film. While some cinematographers operate the camera, many others supervise a team that includes one or more camera operators, who do the actual filming, and camera assistants, who load the film, mount the cameras and focus the lenses. For each shot in a film, the cinematographer must plan how far from the subject the camera will be, what kind of lens is necessary and the angle from which the shot will be made. The cinematographer can create very different effects by varying the angle—or point of view—of the shot. A stationary camera can be rotated on the axis of the camera mount (panning); it also can be moved up or down in a 90-degree arc (tilting). When a camera is mounted on a dolly it can be rolled forward, backward and sideways. Cameras also can be mounted on power-operated cranes that allow for even more flexibility. Lightweight hand-held cameras also are used, at least in part, on many films. Most movies are shot with a single camera.

LIGHTING THE SCENE

There are various styles of lighting that a cinematographer can use. Lighting style is generally determined in consultation with the director (and often the production designer), and depends on the setting, mood and character of the story or the scene. Basic styles of lighting are high-key and low-key. A high-key scene appears bright. The cinematographer uses soft, diffused lighting and there are few shadows. In a low-key scene, the lighting is defined by lights that cast sharper shadows. While there are no hard and fast rules about lighting, drama generally is done in a low-key style and comedy generally is done in a high-key style of lighting.

Lighting also is used to create the illusion of depth and dimension, and to illuminate different contours and textures. Depth can be emphasized by back- and side-lighting the actors to create highlights on prominent features and leave the background in shadow. Sometimes color gels are used over lights to enhance the depth of a scene. How the lights are positioned to create shadows controls how textures are viewed. The human face, with its changing contours, provides the greatest lighting challenge of all! Available or natural lighting creates a realistic look to the film, similar to a documentary. Modifying the look of a film during production is known as color correction.
THREE-POINT LIGHTING SETUP

Key light: 45 degree angle above your subject; this is the main light

Fill light: opposite of the subject from the key light; fills in shadows,

Backlight: falls on subject’s head and shoulders from behind separating him from the background

FRAMING THE SHOT

The framing of a shot simply indicates where the cinematographer has placed the borders of an image. For every individual shot in a film, someone has to decide where the camera will be in relation to the actors and the space they are in. The cinematographer’s decisions about the movement of the camera are critical in telling the story effectively. At the beginning of a new scene, the cinematographer will generally include an establishing shot. This term is sometimes used in a very literal way—to describe a shot of the building in which the next scene will take place, for example—but more often it refers to an initial extreme wide shot that establishes the spatial relationships of people and other details that will be shown later in the scene in closer shots. The establishing shot helps the viewer become oriented to the new location. Then, filmmakers shoot a variety of angles, including cutaways; a cutaway is defined as a shot related to the main action but not matched to anything in the main shot you’re cutting away from. This means that the subject has to repeat himself as each new take is filmed; however, this approach makes the story more interesting for the viewer in the completed movie.