



HARROW CINE & VIDEO SOCIETY

www.harrowcinevideo.org.uk

NEWS AND VIEWS

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JULY 2012

An Evening with Paul Kittel

2nd April 2012

by Paul Kittel



Our Chairman has a chat with Paul before his talk

I spilt coffee on my laptop in the run up to this talk and bought a very cheap Netbook as a replacement. This would be my Powerpoint companion throughout my talk to the Harrow Cine and Video Society. As I set up this cheap and temperamental hardware, I noticed Jim Gatt effortlessly tackle all manner of complicated cables and amplifiers for the projector.

I complimented Jim on his expertise, which he modestly brushed off saying, 'I don't want to set myself up as an expert because if something goes wrong I'll get the blame.'

His words struck a chord with me. Here I was preparing to talk to the Harrow Cine and Video Society about the nuts and bolts of documentary filmmaking but I certainly shouldn't be seen as an expert. The truth is, I have always felt reticent about talking about how I make films because no two filmmakers are alike. I wouldn't want to give the impression that I was creating a definitive rule book.

In fact, like any art form, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to films. If filmmaking had strict rules, it wouldn't be fun or creative. Think of F W Murnau,

who broke the perceived rule of keeping cameras stationary, or Jean-Luc Goddard who used jump-cuts to great effect. Without these errant rule-breakers, film wouldn't be nearly as vibrant.

With that enormous caveat, I started to deliver my monologue on how I make films. I went back to basics and how beginners first approach their craft. For many of the assembled amateurs this may have been like teaching granny to

suck eggs, but this seemed the right place to start. Bad habits often start early and can be difficult to shift.

I believe that the best way for a fledgling filmmaker to begin is to edit together a montage.



Paul delivering his talk

Montages are simple collections of related shots cut to appropriate music. These films have done surprisingly well in IAC competitions over the years because they play to the core strengths of film. They're all about gathering and presenting good pictures.

The trouble is, good pictures are usually the first things that a filmmaker neglects. So much attention is lavished on researching the subject that the relationship between the pictures and

words weakens. Consequently the lovely pictures, used so beautifully in the montage, no longer tell a story but are reduced to wallpaper.

The opposite failure in script writing is when the relationship between the words and the pictures is too strong. This is what's sometimes referred to as the school of *Lord Privy Seal*. This is the weak (but somewhat amusing) joke that if someone is writing a script for a report about the Lord Privy Seal (an eminent figure in the government, no doubt) he will cut together quick images of a Lord, a Privy and a Seal.

The bombshell is that voice-over isn't as important as many people assume. Commentary can even damage a film if used incorrectly. Scripts should only be tackled after a more important stage in the film-making process is mastered.

SOT!

In the old days this crazy acronym would have been called SOF. Now, I suppose, we'd call it SOC. It stands for Sound on Tape (Sound on Film in old-money: Sound on Card in modern-money). It's vitally important but horribly neglected. Cameras don't only record pictures, they also record sound; atmosphere, actuality and interview. I work with an executive producer who insists on switching off the voice-over track when he watches a film for the first time. He says that a film needs to be coherent with just pictures and SOT. If it doesn't make sense without a voice-over, he contests; there is something wrong with it.

He's absolutely right and it's a philosophy I still use with all my films. Voice-over should be the last layer to be added to a film and should simply tee-up the action or fill in the gaps that the pictures and audio can't achieve.

Once the film-maker masters pictures and SOT, he is faced with an even greater challenge. He has to give his film personality. This isn't something that can be taught. Giving a film personality is down to the creativity and imagination of the film-maker.

Over the years at BIAFF, I've been amazed by how enthralling I have found films that are devoted to subjects that don't necessarily interest me. This is

usually because these films have an engaging character driving them. Characters are vital to documentaries and give them personality. I would even argue that they're more important than the subject itself.

I remember my dad, who was a stalwart member of Pinner Cine Society, making a film about weaving. Although I don't believe weaving to be the most engaging of subjects, his film enjoyed considerable praise. The reason is because it wasn't actually about weaving. It was about an eccentric nun who had an interesting story to tell. Her interest was weaving but it might equally have been bungee-jumping or stamp collecting. The title of that film summed it up. It wasn't called *The Ancient Craft of Weaving* or *How to Make a Jumper*. It was named after the nun. *Ingrid*.

The final piece of the jigsaw to a brilliant documentary is narrative. Yes, documentaries, like dramas, need plots. They need a beginning, a middle and an end. I have made this point to sceptical film-makers in the past. They have argued that life isn't neat enough for a documentary to have a clear narrative. They add that drama is different because the filmmaker has the freedom to create his own truths but with documentary, the truth takes you in all sorts of incongruous directions.

My response is that, just like a painter who searches tirelessly for the perfect frame for his picture, a documentary film-maker needs to find the perfect framework for his story. Creating a narrative allows the audience to know where it stands. Plot allows the viewer to follow the ebbs and flows and share the emotional highs and lows. Without plot, the film plays out as a one-paced list of facts.

If a subject is thoroughly researched, ironies and connections can be found everywhere. It is down to the creativity of the filmmaker as a story-teller to arrange them in a viewable and compelling way.

This is, perhaps, the single most difficult skill to master. If it's any consolation, I struggle with it on a daily basis.

CBR or VBR - What's the difference?

by Jim Gatt

When creating a DVD, the timeline in the editing program must be compressed to an MPEG format. Many programs give you the option to specify whether to use CBR or VBR and also the bit rate for the encoder but what does this all mean to the user?

CBR is **Constant Bit Rate**, VBR is **Variable Bit Rate**. In a CBR MPEG stream, the encoder uses the same amount of bits for every second of video. So if you set it to CBR with a bit rate of 5Mb/s all of the video will be encoded using 5 megabits per second. For some sections this will be enough, other sections could have been better with more bits per second (because they are more difficult to compress - e.g. lots of motion), while others could have used fewer bits and still look good (easy to compress - e.g. a shot from a tripod with almost no movement in the subject matter).

Do not confuse Mb/s (megabits per second) with MB/s (Megabytes per second). There are 8 bits in a byte.

With a VBR encoding at 5Mb/s, the 5Mb/s would be the average bit rate. You would also set a maximum (and a minimum) bit rate. For the hard to encode sections the encoder will use more than 5Mb/s, for the easy material it will use fewer. But as the average is 5Mb/s, the resulting file will be the same size as the CBR one - i.e. it will take up the same amount of space on the DVD.

The advantage of VBR is that it uses the available space more efficiently. As it can use more bits per second for the difficult stuff there will be fewer artifacts in the MPEG-2 video.

Set top player compatibility should be the same for CBR and VBR. If you want to maximize compatibility for 3

writable DVDs it may help to keep the total audio plus video bit rate at or below a maximum of 7Mb/s.

As many set top players have at least some problems reading DVD±R discs they will encounter read errors from time to time. If the read error exceeds the error correction the player will have to reread the information. While the player is reading again, the video will keep playing from the decoder's buffer. But as the size of this buffer is limited, it will be empty at some point. The higher the bit rate, the sooner the buffer will run dry. When that happens playback will stutter, stall or fail completely.

By using a moderate bit rate, you are giving the player more of a chance to recover from read errors. 7Mb/s isn't a magical figure, it is just a general recommendation - weighing image quality against compatibility. I have seen maximum rates of 8 and even 9Mb/s suggested in FVM but I feel problems would be more likely especially with older equipment.

When choosing your bit rate for compression, the length of the timeline can influence your choice. Using a VBR of 7Mb/s will allow a timeline of just over 1 hour and 23 minutes on a standard nominal 4.7GB disc. Longer timelines will require either a dual layer disc or a lower bit rate.

One simple rule of thumb for calculating the lower bit rate is to divide the length (in seconds) of the timeline into 35000. Using this method will give a maximum timeline length of 1 hour 23 minutes and 20 seconds. (Dividing the timeline length into 36000 can be used but when there are multiple timelines on the disc, overheads are increased and there is a risk of exceeding the disc capacity).

BIAFF 2012

The British International Amateur Film Festival

by Aivar Kaulins



Each year IAC – The Film & Video Institute – holds a week-end devoted to a prestigious film competition, with entries not only from this country, but also from across Europe as well as further afield, this year the USA, Australia, Korea and Mexico.

Each year a different region of the IAC is responsible for organising the event. This year it was in Weymouth on the South Coast, next year it will be in Chesterfield in Derbyshire from the 19th to the 21st April 2013.

It is always held in a carefully selected hotel, with most participants arriving on the Friday morning and booking into previously reserved rooms. In the afternoon of that first day, there is usually a coach excursion to a local attraction, then dinner followed by an A/V Show. This is what used to be called a "tape/slide presentation", but with computer controlled digital photography, we have come a long way since those days, a show well worth seeing.

On the Saturday, there are usually four or five so-called mini cinemas showing a large selection of competition entries. The problem here is deciding which one to choose, but you are guided by film

titles and makers' names, possibly familiar to you.

In the evening, there is a splendid gala dinner – black tie NOT obligatory – with a few speeches and usually a well known guest of honour to say a few



Top Table at the Gala Dinner

words. At Weymouth, this was the actor Michael Medwin, OBE, who over the years has appeared in more British films than almost anyone else, notably in "The Army Game" on TV in the 1950s and 1960s.

On the Sunday, all the major prize winning entries are shown and awards presented before the Festival comes to an end and participants return home, although staying an extra night is also an option.

So what of the films shown? This year there were no less than 350 productions submitted, of which 55 came from overseas. In the two days, 118 of these entries were screened, more than enough to keep the most avid enthusiast glued to his / her seat!

However, the Festival is more, much more than just an opportunity to view fellow movie makers' productions. It is also very much a social occasion, where to meet not only our own members and their spouses, but also to renew long established friendships from other clubs. Usually the event is well supported by Harrow, but this year there were only four members plus two wives. Must do better next year, so put the date for BIAFF 2013 in your diary NOW!



Some of our Members enjoying the Gala Dinner

Photos by Aivar Kaulins

BIAFF at Weymouth

13th to 15th April 2012

An Alternative View by Ken Mills

If you ever want a guaranteed sunny weekend, choose the BIAFF one! On a glorious Friday afternoon Jean, Anne and I went on a guided visit to the Olympic Sailing Academy which was magnificent.



A View of the Weymouth Olympic Sailing Site

We were taken round the site and saw not only the yachting training facilities but also saw children being taught about raft making, and were able to

talk to some Olympic and Paralympic hopefuls.

After dinner we watched the "Peter Coles" AV Competition Winners' show which was excellent. Some of the sequences included some fascinating video so the boundaries are getting very blurred.

On Saturday morning you have the difficult task of deciding which programme of the 4 mini-cinemas to attend, and there are two sessions in the morning and two more in the afternoon.

To start off we saw five videos, projected by the Wimborne C&V Society, the first was a documentary called "Flypast" by Alan Atkinson and others about the aviation history of Coventry and the Midland Aviation Museum which was most interesting. All the selected archive material they used was necessary to explain the story.

The second one was called "Diamond Bird" made by John Sirett from Australia. This bird burrows into the ground to make a nest and to show its tiny size, the makers had placed a golf ball near the entrance of the nest. Not sure where they buried their camera! It was a high quality fascinating wildlife documentary equal to BBC's offerings in this field.

"La Cantina" from the USA was next and was an amusing story which also made a social comment about the way a rude, pompous overfed American couple behaved dining in a Mexican owned

restaurant. Their obnoxious attitude towards the immigrant waiter and owner ended up with some splendidly non-political correctness with their food ending up on them.

The "Dying Days of Fin Cop" from a group in Derbyshire billed as a story started with an archaeological dig at a burial mound and was an attempt to reconstruct what might have happened between warring tribes which caused this slaughter. The idea and photography were very good but the exaggerated make-up on a large number of "ferocious", spear waving lilywhite adolescents rather spoiled it for me.

The final offering before the coffee interval was "An Edwardian Priest" made by John Howden from Chelmsford. This was a very good drama documentary, particularly at this time and we were finally taken to a stained glass window in a church dedicated to a priest who died helping people in the Titanic disaster.

I could go on and mention all eighteen videos we saw during the day – but I won't, coming from Spain, Serbia, Belgium, Sweden, Czech Republic as well as all over the UK, before we sat down to our Gala dinner on the Saturday evening. The food there was excellent and actor Michael Medwin who spoke after the meal was most amusing.

On Sunday morning we re-assembled for the Award Winners show and saw 22 videos varying from a 1minuter to another 54mins. long. They were all interesting, some more than others so I hope that when the IAC have produced some videos for the library we can hire them for discussion.

I was delighted to see that the North Thames Region produced 50 videos against 41 last year – more than any other region in the country. It was also interesting to see that mini-dv entries had dropped from 66 to 35 this year, DVDs up from 127 to 218, Blu-Ray from 12 to 14, and HD tape down from 9 to 8. Another significant change was in format with 16:9, up from 133 to 224 and 4:3 down from 81 to 51. Altogether a great weekend.

Photo by Jean Biskeborn

The President's Cup

By Judy Long

On 16th April we were treated to six entries from Silver Category members for the President's Cup.

After the entries were shown, Ken Mills and Alan Colegrave gave an interesting critique of the films, with some helpful and in-depth comments.

The first film shown was 'Time is at Your Convenience' by Ken Gale. This was a one minute film showing the collection of clocks at Anglesey Abbey, with the last shot drawing back to reveal a clock on display in the toilets. The judges agreed that the film was a nice idea, but felt that the title gave a hint to the punch line, and would have preferred more of a surprise at the end.

The second film was 'A Journey under the Red Sea', 5.5 minute film from Wallace Jacobs, starting with a nice clip of the tower he was to descend, and with some nice steady shots of fish and coral taken from the underwater observatory, some dramatic piano music and a voiceover.

The judges thought the music perhaps overpowered the film and the sound balance between voiceover and music could have been adjusted in the edit.

Alan advised generally that when filming a moving subject such as fish, to keep the camera still unless following one particular fish, and that when filming through glass to get right up to the glass to avoid reflections.

The next film was Jeff Jessop's 6 minute film 'Salzburg', a visit to Mozart's birthplace, and accompanied by the composer's music used to dramatic effect. Near the beginning he showed a statue of Mozart, voicing the teaser that there were three mistakes to the statue. There followed visits to many places of interest around the city, including some interesting camera angles, and a well-judged amount of information. At the end he answered his original teaser.

The judges agreed that it contained lots of interesting footage and was a good holiday film, a difficult genre since the film is often not planned, but the random footage taken has to be edited into a good film later. Ken commented that he would have preferred the question not to have been posed at the beginning, and advised generally that a pan shot in one direction shouldn't be immediately followed by a pan in the other direction.

Alan remarked about the previous two films that voiceovers for a wider audience should usually be impersonal - 'The aquarium has...' rather than 'we saw....', and should avoid the personal feelings of the filmmaker.

The fourth film was the first offering of our newest member, Céline Terranova, and was a very impressive first film entitled 'I love Camden' and featuring the Marilyn Manson song 'Rock is Dead'. The film had lots of colourful and good shots around Camden High Street, market and Lock. The film was very well received and the judges congratulated her. Alan liked the fast cuts and the variety of shots, and thought the film really worked. Ken commented on the good 'bookend' use of the Camden sign at the beginning and end of the film.

Next up was Judy Long's 10 minute 'Morpho and Friends' a documentary about the butterflies in the glasshouse at Wisley, with voiceover and piano soundtrack.

Ken and Alan both agreed that there was too much outside footage of Wisley before the film reached the butterflies in the glasshouse: a classic 'I've filmed it so it's going in' mistake!

They said there were some good shots and the information was interesting.

The last film was Alan Morgan's 2 minute film 'Wowballs', of intrepid youngsters in Liverpool docks tumbling around on the water in blown-up plastic balloons, with waltz music soundtrack and informative voiceover.

The judges liked the interesting and informative commentary. Ken would have liked some bigger close-ups, and liked the

good use and level of the music.

Ken declared the winner to be Judy Long's film 'Morpho and Friends' and she was presented with the Cup.



Judy being Presented with the Cup
by our Chairman, Tommy Kovacs

Photo by Maurice Twelvetreets

ARE YOU A MEMBER OF THE IAC?

by Aivar Kaulins, FAcI.

I would be very surprised if there are any members in our Society who are not familiar with the initials IAC - The Film and Video Institute. But how many of you actually belong to that very worthwhile organisation? Not enough, I fear. Membership of the IAC really does take the joy of movie making one step further along the line, and it is the "glue" that binds together all video societies, locally, nationally and even internationally.

Why not take just five minutes to read all about it from the information posted on our Society noticeboard, or available from our assistant secretary Ken Gale, who has membership application forms available at all times. If you read this during our summer recess, give Ken a call and he will post the forms to your home address.

When you join, be sure to inform our hon. treasurer Alan Morgan of that fact, for the Society is entitled to a £5 rebate for each new applicant.

One of the great advantages of IAC membership is that you can apply for music copyright clearance at a very modest cost indeed - less than £8 a year, which allows you to use copyright music for your video productions. Certain conditions apply; all detailed on the application form, but be aware that without this clearance, the copying and use of copyright music outside a private house is a CRIMINAL OFFENCE!!!! Ignorance of that fact is no excuse.

The North Thames Region of the IAC, to which our Society belongs, also runs a modest lottery called a "One Hundred Club". For just £ 1 a month - £ 12 a year - you buy a share number in this lottery, with draws taking place monthly at NTR Council meetings. Winnings will not exactly change your life-style, but it is good fun, and members of Harrow have a reputation of winning more than their fair share. Long may it continue to be so! Again, application forms available from Ken Gale. Good luck!

Society's Annual General Meeting Held 14th May 2012

The Chairman, Tommy Kovacs opened the meeting and received apologies for absence from Brian Heard and Derek Lucas. In his Annual Report he said that all the Committee had worked hard throughout the year. He was very pleased that two of our members had been made Fellows of the IAC - Alan Colegrave and Aivar Kaulins. Many interesting movies had been made by members to be shown at Club Competitions and our Public Movie Shows had proved to be very successful. Many more quality movies are however required from members so that we have a reserve of material for future Public Shows.

Ideas are required for programme evenings and suggestions as to the sort of technical evenings that might be required for the technical instruction of members.

The Treasurer reported that the funds of the Society were adequate for the time being but we have not yet heard of any increases in next year's room rental charges and he was recommending that annual subscriptions be increased to £30 per member, £43 per married couple and £8 for Associate/under 21's. The report and subscription proposal was approved by the meeting.

The Competition Secretary reported that there had been a slight increase in entries for both the Chairman's Shield and President's Cup Competitions this year although Gold Class entries were slightly lower.

Ludwig Levy won the Chairman's Shield for the Gold Class and Tommy Kovacs the George Hawkins Shield for the Silver one. The Annual Challenge Cup was awarded by an external judge to Ken Mills for his video "Shrinkwrapped"

Elections

The following were elected to the various committee posts.

Ken Mills OBE was re-elected President by acclamation.

Chairman: Thomas Kovacs

Treasurer: Alan Morgan

Vice Chairman: Wallace Jacobs

Hon. Secretary: Maurice Twelvetrees

Assistant Hon. Secretary : Geoff Foord

Competitions Secretary: Nick Gale

Programme Organiser: Norman Lewis

Publicity Organiser: Celine Terranova

Committee Members: Alan Colegrave and Aivar Kaulins.

The Independent Examiner (Auditor) : Peter Barnes.

We were very pleased to welcome Alan Colegrave and Celine Terranova to the Committee and we hope they will bring new ideas to the Society.

Under "Any other business" the President suggested reviving an activity which was tried once quite a while ago. He suggested that members should look out short clips of their video rushes which could then be assembled by different members as an exercise making a film using only these rushes. He asked members to send contributions to him by 21st May.

That concluded the business of the Annual General Meeting.



Ludwig Levy receives the Rose Bowl for winning the Nature Competition as well as winning the Chairman's Shield Gold Category



Nic Gale presents the George Hawkins Shield to Tommy Kovacs for winning the Silver Category of the Chairman's Shield Competition



David Smith was presented with a replica cup for winning last year's Annual Challenge Cup Competition

Welcome to a New member

To finish last season with a new member who also volunteered to join the Committee and look after our publicity was a very pleasant surprise. A big welcome to Celine Terranova who found us having picked up a leaflet in Stanmore library and having tried us out for a couple of weeks, has now joined the Society. She has a Panasonic camcorder recording on DVD and uses Final Cut on her Apple Mac for her editing. Her major interest is in script writing and directing but she thinks she should spend more time practising editing. Her main hobby is writing but is also interested in costume making. We wish Celine a long and happy membership of our Society.

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