

The Craft of Colour Grading

Beyond the Math and Science

Lou Levinson

Color grading applies to visual storytelling, and how a colorist (generally the lunatic at the wheel) gets to where the creative authors (the lunatics navigating) want to go. Usually, for the colorist, this is about translating what the creatives say into imagery on a big or small screen. As an example of how this might be more than it seems, “make it darker” can and usually will mean 6 different things to 6 different creatives.

As a Starting Point:

- All the science has to be locked down
- The Emulations for filmout, if used, tested and not found wanting
- All displays calibrated, and consistent across viewers displays

This cannot be overemphasized. If you can't achieve and maintain calibrations and emulations across the displays being used, you only THINK you know what you're looking at. This means daily, not once at the beginning.

What is a Colorist, and What is it, Exactly they do?

- translators of creative authors vision from ideas to reality
- participants in the creative authoring process itself

See page #1. Also can be participants in the creation of various looks for storytelling. As an example of the latter, we were tasked to create a 1970's look for the 1st Rob Zombie "Halloween", that involved a bunch of testing and filmouts some of which occurred before principal photography started.

The Language of Translation

- Six Degrees of darker
- Creamier, Toastier, ect
- Can we go Farther?
- It's Still Too Green!

The infinite variety of language means you have an infinite number of ways to misunderstand your client. A colorist needs to quickly generate a high degree of confidence in the creative authors that he or she is seeing what they're seeing. Speaking up in a visual world helps. If a client says "it's too green" it's usually not a bad thing to pinpoint where in the picture they're talking about, i.e. "you mean the shadows under the table screen left?"

As an Assistant Creative Author

- What's your Favorite Movie?
- From Botticelli to Vermeer

Many times, a creative author will have some specific looks in mind, whether from other storytellings (movies, etc.) historical or modern art, comic books, you name it. There was one creative author I worked with who had the look for one whole part of his movie based on a book of pictures of late soviet era apartment buildings, etc. If you've never taken a real art history course, the exposure would be great even if the grade turns out to be not so good.

The Mystical Flow

- When It's Good
- When It Isn't
- How the Client Sees

The flow occurs when there is enough consistency of look between sequential shots, viewed in the order they are meant to be viewed in, that the creative authors, and by inference, the average viewer does not get the feeling of anything other than the events being viewed are happening in the purported place and time, in the sequence proffered. If the inconsistencies are large enough, the audience may be jarred out of "story time and place" and back to the realization of being an audience. One of the finer lines to walk as a colorist is when the desired "flow" is just a small, controlled bit off of consistent to create or add to tension of one form or another. Whether trying to perfect the flow, or trying to create a perfectly imperfect flow, the colorist must always be aware that he is piggybacking on how the client sees things, not just how he or she might.

Tools of the Trade

- From a Laptop to:



It's all about how much data do you want to handle and how long you want to wait to do it. What we see here, is 2 Baselight 8's, a Baselight workstation, and a Pixelfarm restoration system all connected together with 10GigE. Total storage is about 250 TB.

Environments



As important as the monitors and calibrations is creating a seamless work environs that doesn't draw attention away from the work at hand. Seen here is a small DI theater with about a 16' picture from an NEC DLP projector.



This picture shows a non-projection grading environs, with a 32" CRT reference and a 50" plasma display that matches to a fairly high degree.

Why Can't We do This Automagically?

- Where is HAL 9000 When you Need Him?

This is actually the pop quiz question. Anyone who thinks they can prove mathematically how two different displays, with differing gammas, gamuts, and white points, with at least one white point significantly off the daylight curve can be made to look the same to enlightened professionals, please submit such for credit and frozen yogurt.