

PRODUCING A SEQUENCE

This is the “Davies” method, it works for me.

Introduction

Aim

Before embarking on any sequence it is necessary to have a clear idea of the purpose behind the sequence. In other words a clear “aim at the top of the light box”.

What

We need to know what we want to convey to the audience, whether it be a particular message or idea (either concrete or abstract); a story (fact or fiction); a dissemination of facts in documentary form; or emotions in their various forms. This constitutes the “WHAT” of the sequence but even more important is the “WHY”.

Why

Every sequence which has had an effect on me has had an implicit but nevertheless well defined reason for its existence, the “WHY”. The integrity with which it has been made has been evident. One may argue that the clearer the WHY, the more the integrity and hence fundamental quality of the sequence. The WHY is much more difficult to define than the WHAT.

Which comes first?

Sometimes you may have a set of images and wonder, “What can I do with these?” Holiday travelogues are produced much in this way, i.e., the sequence is picture led. You may hear a piece of music or song and wish to interpret this. Alternatively you may read a poem, article or short story and use these words to produce the sequence. In these latter cases the music, song or script will determine the photographs required.

I feel that it is the IDEA which is the most important. My best sequences start with a good idea. I then write the script and carefully plan the photography to suit the script.

Photography for AV

I try to think AV before pressing the shutter release. In other words I aim to take images which will produce the best possible dissolves and third images. Therefore, the light and dark areas of the images are important. Light areas are the first to appear and the last to disappear in any dissolve. My preference is to avoid large light areas wherever possible. Dark areas are bonuses in that they provide opportunities for good third images. I try to achieve good composition in the images by using the rule of thirds. However, one particular area where the rule of thirds can be detrimental to the dissolve aspect is in the

case of horizons where large light areas fill the top third of the image. Better dissolves can be achieved by placing the horizon closer to the top edge of the frame or losing it altogether.

Strong shapes can pose dissolve problems. These may be solved by placing the strong shape off-centre and bringing in a subsequent strong shape through the opposite third.

Similarly shaped objects, which will dissolve, can be placed centrally and deliberately superimposed but this implies an eye for registration either in the mind or the viewfinder.

I usually take about three times as many images as I need to allow choices in order to get the best dissolve. I include close-ups, mid-shots and distant shots. I also take a variety of link shots on location. Link shots are sometimes necessary to effect a suitable transition from one section of the sequence to another, or from one image to another which poses dissolve problems. Link shots can be abstracts or, more usually, close-ups of fairly featureless objects, e.g. doors, walls, water, clouds, etc. through which you can bring almost any image.

Sorting the image order

Before sorting the image order, I view every image separately and reject any that are not up to standard in terms of exposure and quality. I do not subscribe to the view that any old image will do for AV just because it happens to provide a good dissolve.

For any sequence the images from which the final selection will be made are set out in the computer 'light box'. The images will have been shot with a development of an idea in mind, therefore they are grouped accordingly in the 'light box'. When sorting the images, I keep in mind the "aim at the top of the light box", and do not include anything that does not contribute directly to the aim. This helps me to develop the idea without going off at a tangent. It is sometimes tempting to include your favourite image even when it does not contribute to the overall idea or story.

There are usually a number of images which will form the start of the sequence. That first image is important, the opening of any sequence is a statement of quality and intent. Having selected the first image then all the suitable candidates for the second image are then compared for suitability and dissolve potential. When selecting these suitable candidates, due consideration is given to light and dark areas, shapes and colour balance. The process is repeated for each subsequent image selection. Be prepared to alter the order of the images if you discover better dissolves between non-adjacent images.

Images to single piece of music

The easiest type of sequence to produce is where a single piece of music is chosen and images are selected to interpret this. However, the relationship between the type of images and the music must be carefully considered. The mood of the music should be reflected in the content of the images. The music will play an important part in 'driving' the sequence, with the images being dissolved in time with the music without becoming too predictable.

Long, slow dissolves and punchy, lively music, and vice versa, are not appropriate combinations. Any change in rhythm should be reflected in the dissolve rate and image change. If anything dramatic happens in the music then there must be a corresponding change on the screen. This type of sequence relies much more on the quality of the dissolves than those sequences with text.

Script writing

If text is used, the script may have been written before, at the same time as, or after the images have been taken. I prefer to write the script, or its broad outline first, then take the images to suit a storyboard. The storyboard may only be mental images stored in the mind or a set of rough notes or sketches of the type of images needed to complement the script.

Ideas for scripts may be culled from any source but I prefer to draw on personal experience and life-scripting, which determine attitude and values. In other words, I write about what I feel closest to and most strongly about.

A good script has a beginning, a middle and an end. Some refer to this as sonata form. It is essential to grab the attention of the audience immediately, to have a 'hook', then have a clear development of the idea with a satisfying end. You have only one chance to communicate your message to the audience, therefore it is important to write the script in short sentences which are easily assimilated. It is also important to allow the script to 'breathe', in other words, allow time for the audience to think about what is being said, rather than have continuous commentary throughout. The pauses will be determined by the complexity of the idea being conveyed. As a rough rule of thumb I would suggest that the script occupies no more than two-thirds of the total sequence time.

It is essential to write words which are intended to be "spoken" rather than "read". We don't always speak in sentences, we speak in conversational style, which is different from descriptive passages in a book.

I try not to describe what can be seen on the screen but add information which would otherwise not be apparent. In other words I don't "talk to the slides" but use parallel commentary.

When writing the script, I keep in mind the "aim at the top of the light box", and do not include anything which does not contribute directly to the aim. This gives me a more structured and coherent production and stops me going off at a tangent. (This also applies to sorting the images.)

After I've written the basic script, I leave it for a while, then come back to it and see if I can improve it. I make sure it flows, I eliminate any superfluous words and I try to make the prose more poetic. The art is to convey as much meaning as possible in as few words as possible. I try to make the script as short and tight as possible, always bearing in mind the aim at the top of the light box.

I try to convey moods, impressions and feelings rather than facts and figures. Therefore I prefer to write stories in the first person in order to achieve this.

Examples, which illustrate some of the points mentioned, are as follows:-

In terms of a hook to grab the audience's attention in "The Survivors", the sequence starts in Polish. The Pole then introduces himself, speaking English in the first person.

When developing the idea I attempt to use imagery in the words with accompanying visuals, or vice versa.

In "Idwal Bach", the words "It felt like Sunday in my heart" are used. This statement is based on personal life-scripting of Welsh Methodist traditions, of hell and damnation, an awe of God, a fear of death, etc. This was an attempt to encapsulate all those feelings in one statement using the imagery of words. The accompanying visual image is of a Celtic cross, dissolved in and out of the previous image as a half advance return, to signify his thoughts.

Again, in "Idwal Bach", a lamb is used to signify the death of innocence and dashed hopes of a bright future when Idwal has to leave school to work in the slate mine. The accompanying words are "Sadness and pride came over me as I left my classroom for the last time. That, and a feeling of what might have been. I realised now what I was leaving behind but I couldn't let Mam down." Another example of visual imagery to complement the script is used in "King Cotton". A close-up of a large, round bottle glass window fades to two metal posts in the pavement outside the original Co-op building in Rochdale, This dissolve is used to depict "The cotton barons grew fat on their profits. The workers grew thin on their labours."

Also in "King Cotton" there are examples of poetic prose with imagery and music or rhythm in the words. "No more the wheezing of fibre-filled lungs, made noiseless by the deafening, lip-reading chatter of loom after loom after loom." "No more fingers split by mending never-ending broken threads."

In the sequence "Y Bugail Tal-y-Braich" (The shepherd of Tal-y-Braich) the shepherd comes home from the market and "A chorus of coins sing in his tattered pockets".

In terms of endings I have found that it is sometimes satisfying to come full circle, in other words end with a similar image to one I started with. For example, in "Idwal Bach" the sequence starts with a scene depicting the family home and its environment. The final image is a similar shot of the family home. The accompanying words, echoing the impact of events, are "Who will look after Mam now?"

Selecting and editing music

The music I choose for my sequences is invariably chosen as background music to create a mood, although I recognise that some producers choose the music to 'drive' the sequence even though the sequence may have script. Normally I would not choose a song as background music where script is used because the listener's attention would be divided between the words of the song and those of the sequence, which would be too distracting. However, in the case of my Welsh based sequences, I use male voice choral pieces to set the mood. The Welsh words will have no meaning to English ears therefore there is no distraction. To me, the words of the song or hymn are very important and are 'right' for what I want to achieve.

Another technique, used in "The Survivors", was to choose two distinctly different pieces of music to represent the two characters in the sequence. In the sections devoted to Emrys Williams' life story some contemporary, forceful, dramatic action music was chosen, in keeping with his experiences. In contrast, for the Pole, Stefan Maslowski, Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante K 364 was chosen. The piece is reputedly a requiem for Mozart's mother but

nevertheless a requiem and the mood and pace is again in keeping with his experiences. Stefan Maslowski was forced to play his violin in the Auschwitz camp orchestra which was allowed to play only German or Aryan music. His father, a viola player, was sent to the gas chambers. The additional significance of the choice of this piece, which was written for violin and viola, is that it is played by the Oistrakhs, father and son, just like Stefan Maslowski and his father.

I listen carefully to how background music is used to set the mood in television drama series and films. Even the piano accompaniment to silent movies let you know when to hiss and boo!

Unless I have specific requirements, as already stated, I prefer to avoid classical music. Firstly, the fluctuation between loud and quiet passages makes it difficult to control the recording levels. Secondly, the listener may already have preconceived ideas of the images relating to the music and these may not match what the producer is trying to convey. For example, I was intending using Carl Orff's Carmina Burana for a dramatic section of a sequence I was making, then a Dutch friend of mine pointed out that the music was widely used in Europe for a coffee advert!

I prefer to use mood music specifically produced for AV or film purposes. Companies such as Boosey and Hawkes, KPM, Soniton and many others have a wide range of CD's available to Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC) members who hold the necessary licences to use copyright music.

These CD's consist of anything up to 50 short tracks, lasting from a few seconds to several minutes, with suitable editing points. They may include tracks produced by different composers but generally the music, on each CD, is played by the same instruments and the tracks are therefore compatible.

I choose music to suit each individual section of the sequence. The music is matched to the mood I am trying to create, backed up by the visual impressions created by the images. The music editing is done in Cool Edit on a pc. This program has now been replaced by Adobe Audition.

The music is chosen according to its suitability rather than its length and is edited as necessary.

The music is made to fit the required time by editing at suitable cutting points. Where two short extracts of music need to be joined, the change from one piece to the next is achieved by cross-fading. By cross-fading I mean laying down one piece of music on track 2, in stereo, and the next piece of music on track 3, again in stereo, with say a four second overlap between them. The Cool Edit 'envelopes' are used at the overlap point to fade out track 2 and fade in track 3. To make the transition as smooth as possible on the ears, I hide the join, if possible, behind a section of the recorded voice. The voice is always laid down on track 1, in stereo. This process will be repeated when necessary throughout the sequence using other available tracks.

Dependent upon the number of mood changes I may have quite a number of music changes in the sequence. I also make use of sound effects to add further to the atmosphere.

Production method

Timing/cue sheets

The difficulty comes when we try to put images, script and music together. It is extremely important that all aspects combine and compliment each other to form an integrated whole. This is where planning is essential and I use cue sheets to help with this. These cue sheets were originally designed for use with analogue sequences but the principle is the same so I still use them to plan my digital sequences. When I have the script in its finished state each phrase or sentence is timed, using the tempo of delivery envisaged for the final production. Pauses are included to allow time for the audience to think about what is being said. Nothing has been recorded at this stage.

The order of the images has been decided upon, bearing in mind the script and planned pauses whilst doing so. As a rough guide I work on an average of 6 seconds per image, 10 images per minute. Knowing the total length of the script, including pauses, enables me to select the correct number of images to fit the corresponding script.

Whilst writing the script and sorting the images I have kept in mind the "aim at the top of the light box" and have avoided including any words or images which do not contribute directly to that aim. I try to ensure that each image selected contributes to the story line or the pictorial development of the idea, or is a necessary link shot.

The Photoshopped images are then turned into jpegs and both sets of images are filed separately in a folder which will eventually contain the soundtrack and both pte and exe files. My digital sequences are either produced from scanned slides or from images produced by my digital SLR camera, which gives me 35 mm format images. My jpegs are then usually 1400X 933 pixels, giving a 3 X 2 format, rather than the conventional 1400 X 1050 pixels which give a 4 X 3 format.

Having satisfied myself that I have selected the right number of images to fit the corresponding script, subject to fine tuning, I then select these images, in their correct order, and view them in the Pictures To Exe program. This program is used by maybe 99% of UK AV'ers. The Continental AV'ers, or diaporamistes, favour Wings and M Objects. Very, very few northern hemisphere AV'ers use GlobFX because of the poor image quality.

I then decide on the dissolve and screen time for each image. These times are written on the cue sheets against each image change, together with the cumulative times.

As a rule of thumb the normal fade from one image to the next is 3 seconds with a further 3 seconds screen time, totalling 6 seconds per image on average. The better the dissolve, the longer the fade time, up to say 10 seconds fade time. Where long fade times are used, I shorten the screen time because the image has already been seen fading up for some time. Short fades or quick cuts are also used, particularly for special effects or to quicken the pace. Those of you using the more up to date PTE dissolves, etc will have your own systems.

Having determined the timings to make the best possible use of the dissolve medium, I then write the corresponding script alongside the appropriate images on the cue sheets. This enables me to ensure that the timed

commentary will correctly match the images. If I am unhappy with the match between the images and the words it will be necessary at this stage to either amend the script, add or omit images, or to adjust dissolve times. Having achieved a satisfactory match between images and words, the next step is to match the music. Pieces of music will have already been selected to create the desired mood for the various sections of the sequence. From the cue sheets I am able to see the planned time span of each section. I listen to the selected pieces of music, noting whether there are appropriate editing points to match the time span required. I listen to each chosen extract, whilst using a stop watch, or other means to record time span, to check the match between associated words, images and music. If the music match is not acceptable then I look for an alternative piece of music. If the music match is satisfactory but the time span to the editing point is slightly out, I will amend the timings on the cue sheets as appropriate. If, because of say a crescendo or dramatic phrase in the music, there is a resulting mis-match between the music and words, images or fade times at a particular point, the planned timings will be amended to rectify this. When I am satisfied that the chosen extracts of music match the images and words, I note the times of the music changes on the cue sheets. Sound effects are also noted in the appropriate places on the cue sheets. The completed cue sheets allow me to see in theory how the images, script, music and sound effects fit together to form an integrated whole. The whole should become greater than the sum of the parts. I am now ready to begin recording.

Making the sound track

The first stage is to record the voice. I use a Sony MZ-R91 digital recording Walkman and microphone. I quieten the house as much as possible and try to eliminate any outdoor noises. I put the microphone on a stand to avoid handling noise. I put the script, in polythene covers, on a music stand to prevent rustling. I practice reading the script aloud several times before recording to check delivery and intonation. I record all the commentary in one session as it is very difficult to create the same conditions on a separate occasion. If I make a mistake I record that piece of script again immediately after the fluff, then edit it out later. At the end I record approximately a minute of the low ambient sound present in the room, to be used when inserting pauses at the editing stage. I never use silence for this purpose. Any silences in the pauses will be detected by discerning ears despite the fact that there will be music behind it. Since hearing a lecture on voice production, I now realise the importance of standing, rather than sitting, when recording the voice. In this way much more can be done with the voice in terms of register, control, etc. I use a close-proximity microphone, on a stand, pointing downwards, just about nose level, my mouth being about a hand's span away from it. By speaking across the microphone rather than into it, this reduces the incidence of popping p's. The close-proximity microphone accentuates the bass in the voice and it may be necessary to reduce the bass content at the mix-down stage.

As the voice is being recorded a second person will be keeping an eye on the LED's to check the recording level and monitoring the input very carefully through headphones to check the delivery and intonation. I try to ensure that no distortion or unwanted sounds are being recorded. Some sentences may be repeated and the best rendition selected later.

Having completed the voice recording, I listen to it again, through speakers, to make sure that I am satisfied with the quality.

The next task is to edit the recording in one of Cool Edit programs, either Cool Edit Pro or Cool Edit 2000. These programs have been superseded by Adobe Audition but I am happy with Cool Edit.

Any unwanted clicks, etc are removed and the best rendition saved. The voice is then spaced out according to the times on the cue sheets and will be timed again because the final recording time may not be exactly the same as provisional timings.

The music is now laid down on another track. As stated previously, I normally use a number of different pieces of music, each piece having been selected to create the mood required at each stage of the sequence. I choose suitable editing points for each piece of music, trying to ensure that the two pieces I am joining are in the same key, etc., then I cross-fade seamlessly. Any crescendos etc. that I am using will have been checked against the voice track. I then run the soundtrack and listen carefully to the voice and music match. If they do not match what I have planned then I edit the voice, or the music, or both. Then before the final mix down I will do a number of trial runs to determine the levels for the music and sound effects in relation to the voice. All this monitoring is done through external speakers, never the computer speakers.

When I'm finally satisfied I mix down the voice and music tracks and save the mix-down as a 'wav'. I then save the mix-down as an 'mp3', and this will be inserted in the PTE program, under music, for that particular sequence. Both the wav. and mp3 files will be filed in the sequence folder along with the original images, jpegs, pte file and exe file.

Final production

In the PTE program it is possible to view the wave form of the soundtrack along with the images and their timings. I try to ensure that the images dissolve to the music. If there is any miss-match, usually very slight because of careful planning, I can adjust the image dissolve or screen times. Precise timing of bells, explosions, etc. can thus be achieved.

When I'm satisfied that the timing is as good as I can achieve I save the pte file then create the exe file.

Final note

I realise that my methods may not suit everyone but at least you may appreciate the process.

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