Book review by Sorrel Penn-Edwards


This is a substantial book – both in weight and in content, its 537 pages are packed with photographs, diagrams, graphs and script examples.

The author, Mick Hurbis-Cherrier, currently teaches in New York’s Hunter College’s Department of Film & Media Studies, and is professionally experienced in film and video production in a wide range of roles including direction, cinematography, and editing.

The illustrations have been provided by Hurbis-Cherrier’s colleague Gustavo Mercado who is also a filmmaker (director, writer and editor), and is particularly noted for his short films *Crossover* (2000) and *Sensitive* (2002).

The professional filmmaking and teaching backgrounds of both the author and illustrator provide appropriate foundations for this book, which takes into consideration the limitations imposed on low-budget film and video makers. It focuses on the making of narrative film and, as stated in the introduction, is aimed at ‘the introductory and intermediate film student or independent filmmaker’ with the central principle being ‘the notion that all of the conceptual, technical, and logistical activity on a film project should serve the filmmaker’s creative vision’ (p.19).

Like many other media production texts *Voice and Vision* thoroughly covers the technicalities of lighting, camerawork and sound recording, as well as the production processes involved in developing a script, tracking continuity, production scheduling, location scouting, and handling people, props and sets. The chapters work through the filmmaking process chronologically from Chapter 1: *From idea to cinematic stories* to Chapter 24: *Finishing, mastering, and distribution* in four parts: *Developing your film on paper, Preparing for production, Tools and techniques: Production, and Tools and techniques: Postproduction*. Hurbis-Cherrier is successful in his aim to provide ‘ample technical information, creative context, and discussions of aesthetics to thoroughly engage those many students who are enthusiastic about areas other than directing.’ (p.20).

This text is not in the form of a technical manual to be shelved as a reference book but is instead a production bible and reader for those actively involved in filmmaking. One of its great strengths is that it not only provides instruction on each area in sufficient detail for those who will work in a specified role, but does so in such a clear explanatory mode that it proves to be easy background reading and assimilation for everyone else involved in the filmmaking. In this way it aims to educate all participants about the holistic filmmaking process.

Hurbs-Cherrier believes that ‘the core of becoming an artist in any medium must be learned through example and experience’ (p.21) and he offers aspiring filmmakers both. Firstly, explanations are liberally illustrated with shots from well known films, as well as simple diagrams, annotated scripts and schedules, or computer screen snapshots. Many employ overhead or profile diagrams to explicate the film shots; for example, an action sequence of shots is shown with a matching diagrammatic sequence of the relative positioning of the subject and the camera. Secondly, each chapter contains a number of ‘real world stories’ with sections highlighting short anecdotes or comments from master to
novice filmmakers. The personal experiences of the author and his filmmaking students also make an interesting contribution.

Another strength of this book is that it covers the range of equipment from 16mm to 35mm film and current digital video, together with their accompanying techniques. It acknowledges that low-budget productions may have to, or want to, use any of a variety of formats from cellulose acetate or video tape to digital at the shooting, editing, and finishing and release stages, and discusses and advises on each.

Each chapter is informed by theoretical analysis, such as semiotics, narrative, and discourse in its discussion of effects of camera angles, editing choices and so on, but without identification of the theory or reference. Mention of such would, perhaps, open a Pandora’s box and may diminish the feeling of wholeness that this book engenders. The word ‘comprehensive’ is overused in commercial blurbs promoting a virtue in a range of texts. Here it is an apt description. This book is immensely readable for, and useable by, the target audience of non-professional filmmakers, although even a professional may find it a useful contemporary addition to their library.

Sorrel Penn-Edwards, previously an educational video and film producer, scriptwriter and camera operator, now teaches Media Studies and English Education at Griffith University, Queensland.