

RUSSELL

As a filmmaker, you have to know the science of life. You have to know the

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fundamentals and why light acts a certain way, or when it hits a certain surface it does something completely different than when it hits another surface. But you also have to know your gear. If you're shooting with an iPhone, you have to know what the iPhone can do. If you're shooting with a very expensive camera, you have to know what that can do.

But in order to reach the poetry, the real poetry, the real subtleties-- and this is where great cinematography is made, it's made in the subtleties-- you have to start with the fundamentals. It may seem boring to you when you're first doing it, but it's going to pay off really well for you when you progress along the road.

It's important for a cinematographer to know those fundamentals of light, know how to get certain effects in many different ways, because often you're called to produce these effects in a very short amount of time. The pressure is on.

I think a great cinematographer is a hybrid of many, many things. First he or she has to be an artist, a technician, a manager, a politician, so many things. And he or she has to do this on their feet, 12 to 14 hours a day. You have to call all these aspects of your life experience in to the forefront when you're challenged by a director to do a difficult scene.

For instance, in *Titanic* there was a scene where Kate Winslet is running down the halls of a sinking ship. Water is coming up to her waist. She's looking for an axe, she's trying to free Jack-- he's been handcuffed to a pipe. All of the sudden the lights start to go out, the ship starts to groan, and she freezes in fear, pinned against a wall.

And the director says, all I want to do is see what she's feeling. I don't want to see her, I just want to know what she's feeling at that moment. And I interpreted that as all I'm going to do is I'm going to put one tiny, little bit of light into her eye and hope to God that the film that we were shooting then exposed enough that we would be

able to bring that out in the end process.

I asked an electrician if he had a small flashlight, which he did. I put some Kleenex over the flashlight to soften it. And then when we shot that scene, I let the light go to almost nothing, and just from the edge of the frame I was holding a flashlight that just brought out a glint in her eye.

I didn't sleep much that night, but I knew that if it worked, I had nailed it not only from an aesthetic and artistic point of view, from an emotional point of view, but bringing what I knew from the technology-- that experience-- that it all blended together. And if it worked-- which it did-- we had a great moment in the film.

When you're shooting your student film, you've got to be thinking about the very same things that I need to think about when I'm shooting something where I have all the resources in the world. There are always limitations, and you have to make those limitations work for you.

And so when you're lighting, what you're really thinking about is how do I bring contrast, how do I bring drama? If I need to bring silliness to the scene, how do I do that?

You're also thinking about how does the lighting-- and that my choice of lenses support that, where I put the camera, how do I tell the story with my lighting?

As you move along in the world of lighting, you're going to learn that there are so many different ways to get the same effect. And the more of those different ways you know, the better off you'll be.

I'm Russell Carpenter, and I'm a cinematographer.