

Questionnaire ON CINEMATOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

(September 1999)

[This questionnaire was prepared to encourage reflected responses on cinematographic practice by practising cinematographers. This was made keeping in mind that most cinematographers are exceedingly busy travelling as well as covering large distances – this was meant to keep them company on their journeys... Also, this questionnaire allows for a long-term engagement and benchmarks our concerns. This was the result of a distillation of three years of research for the project, and was mailed to more than 50 cinematographers.]

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- **Lenses & lensing**
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- **Laboratory & post production work**

- **Viewing conditions**

SECTION VI: Aesthetic Questions

SECTION I: Personal Background & Early Years

1. Tell us something about your family background and the cultural context in which you grew up.
2. Were there any people in your immediate environment who had any interest in, or professional involvement with the visual or performing arts. Did they in any way initiate your interest in cinema or the visual arts?
3. How were films, people associated with cinema viewed in your family and in your immediate circle of acquaintances?
4. Please describe in some detail the 'visual field' of your childhood, (perhaps in terms of colours and light). By visual field we mean the ensemble of things that you saw and that have left an imprint on your memory. These could be details in nature, memories of performances or rituals, or films, or paintings and photographs, things that you saw on the street or in a city, or any other striking visual memories.
5. Do you recall the first or very early films that you saw? Can you tell us something about that experience? What was/were the films? Do you recall anything about the cinema hall, or space where the film was shown, and about the general atmosphere about the space?
6. How did you get interested in watching films? Were you ever a member of a film society or film club? Did you know about film societies?
7. What were your other interests? Have those interests remained with you in later life?

8. Did you have an interest in still photography? Were you ever a member of any amateur photography club?

9. Can you name some of the important films that you saw when you were growing up? Why did you think of them as significant?

10. How, why and when did you decide to become a cinematographer? What were the factors that influenced this decision? Did your family encourage or discourage your choice of vocation?

Was your becoming a cinematographer not a result of a conscious decision, but a result of circumstances? If so, please tell us something about those circumstances.

SECTION II: On Learning to be a Cinematographer

1. Tell us about your education as a cinematographer, did it occur in film school (which institute), or in the industry.

2. If you studied in a film school, can you tell us about your years in the institute, and what your memories are of that time. About the syllabus, and quality of film education and technical training. Things that you were dissatisfied with. Any specific memories of visiting faculty, important workshops.

3. Can you talk about the important films that you remember seeing from this time. In what way was your perception of cinema, and of cinematography, changing as a result of a sustained and formal film education?

4. When you look back on the exercises that you had to do as a student of cinematography, what are the things that come to mind?

5. Tell us something about the experience of shooting your diploma film or first film? If you had to do it over again, what approach would you take? What were the mistakes that you learnt from?

6. Were you attracted to the work of any particular cinematographer/s. If so, what attracted you to their work. Tell us something about the important cinematographic influences on you in this period? Have you found that in the course of time, these influences have varied, or have they remained the same?
7. What if any, were the other sources of influence (outside cinema and filmmaking) on the shaping of your vision?
8. What suggestions do you have about the education of a young person studying cinematography in a film institute today?
9. If you learnt in the industry, what were the sources of information on technical matters? What was the relationship that you had with the cinematographers from whom you learnt your craft? From the point of view of learning your craft, can you tell us about any significant experiences that you had?
10. What is the nature of the relationship between you and the cinematographer/s from whom you learnt your craft today?

SECTION III: On Entering and being in the Profession.

1. Tell us something about how you entered the profession? What were the first few projects that you worked on?
2. What are the kinds of experiences that you had as an assistant? Who were the cinematographers that you worked with as an assistant, on which films and for how long?
3. Tell us something about the different things that you learnt from the cinematographers that you have assisted.

4. How has your experience of being an assistant influenced your relationships with your assistants today?
5. Is there anything in the generally prevalent relationship between assistants and cinematographers that you think needs to be questioned?
6. Can you talk about any devices that you designed or innovations that you brought into practice? How did these come about?
7. Were there any 'improvisations' that you had to resort to, in order to deal with a particular problem or situation?
8. How did you get the 'break' to shoot your first film?
9. Can you trace a graph of your learning curve from film to film, or project to project?
10. Please describe in detail at least 3 important sequences that you have shot in the course of your career. Describe also the work that you had to put in, in order to realise these sequences.
11. Can you tell us something about the problems that you have had professionally and technically and how you have dealt with them? Can you tell us about at least 3 significant professional and technical decisions that you have had to take in the course of your career?
12. Can you tell us about how you have seen the position of a cinematographer change:
 - a) In the industry at large
 - b) In a film unit
 - c) In terms of public perception.

13. How do you react when you hear the statement "The Cinematographer takes too much time to light up"? What are your thoughts about the pressure of time, and its effect on the quality of your work?

SECTION IV: On the Practice of Cinematography.

1. Do you have preferences in terms of what you like to shoot, and why?

- song & dance
- action
- drama
- nature & wildlife
- historical and period based work
- fantasy/science fiction/ special effects oriented work
- work with an emphasis on architecture
- work with an emphasis on graphic elements
- documentaries
- other

2. Tell us your opinion (based on your experience) about what you think is the nature of the relationships between

- cinematographer & director
- cinematographer & art director/costume designer
- cinematographer & choreographer/action director
- cinematographer & sound-recordist
- cinematographer & assistants

- cinematographer & actors (experienced & inexperienced, stars & non stars)
- cinematographer & light boys
- cinematographer & laboratory technicians
- cinematographer & production in charge

In these relationships please talk in terms of what you think is the ideal and what you perceive as the existing reality.

3. What in your opinion is the relationship between the craft of Cinematography and the other departments in film making :

- Art Direction
- Editing
- Scriptwriting
- Music
- Sound

4. Please tell us about at least 3 instances from your experience that clearly illustrates the cinematographer-director relationship. Who are in your opinion the significant directors that you worked with, on which films and for how long? Tell us something about the different things that you learnt from the directors that you have shot for.

5. *"Without a well worked out screenplay/script and an imaginative director who is willing to take risks to open out possibilities for the camera, the cinematographer's labour is not worth the footage"* - Comment.

6. What in your opinion are the different professional and technical demands made on cinematographers in :

- Mainstream Commercial Cinema
- Parallel Cinema
- Documentary
- Ad Films
- Music Videos
- Television Serials
- Television Shows

7. What are the different ways in which you approach working on film and working on video?

8. What do you think is the importance and role of new image making technologies, digital and computer aided image making in shaping the work of the cinematographer today?

9. What are the international trends that you see emerging in cinematography today? What kind of work do you admire in Hollywood, European Cinema, Other Asian Cinemas (Iran, Hong Kong, Japan, China, South Korea etc.) in Mainstream Indian Cinema, in parallel and regional cinema in India?

10. What are the trends that you see emerging in Documentary cinematography?

11. What are the trends that you see emerging in cinematography for advertising?

12. Do you perceive a difference between the cinematography of the mainstream film industries in Bombay, and in the South? If so, what is the nature of this difference? Is there a difference also in terms of the work culture, professional standards etc?

13. Do you think there are different schools of cinematography, in India as well as internationally?

14. What kind of cinematography would you have very negative feelings about?
15. How do you keep up with new trends and ideas in cinematography? What are your sources of information on new developments?
16. What is the level of your interaction with other cinematographers? What issues would you discuss with your cinematographic colleagues?
17. Are there enough forums for debate and discussion on cinematography? What are the role of the associations, guilds and other organisations of cinematographers?
18. What is your opinion about the practice of giving awards for cinematography? Has this helped raise standards? Has it encouraged unhealthy competition and patronage networks?
19. Do you think that cinematography gets the critical attention it deserves in the press and in film criticism/reviewing?
20. Do you think that the ordinary viewing public in India is sensitive to and aware of the contribution made by the cinematographer to a film or television programme?
21. Why do you think there are very few women in the profession of cinematography? And why are so few women taken on as assistants are?
22. What do you think of the payments given to cinematographer?
"Cinematographers are well paid but highly exploited." - Comment
23. What is your opinion on the payments and working conditions of assistants, light boys, grips electricians etc.
24. Do you find yourself having to become involved in protecting the interests of the camera crew often? Why is this so?

SECTION V: Technical Questions and Issues.

1. Pre-production planning

1. Given a choice between Film and Video what would you like to work on and why?

2. What are your preferences in terms of the following and why :

In Film & in Video Accessories & Gadgets

16mm Beta Video Assist

35mm Digi Beta Remote Control

Cinemascope Mini Digi Lighting Fixtures

Hi 8 Steadycam

(In which situations would you choose to work with which of the above)

3. What are the different meters that you feel are essential to your work, and why?

4. What are your preferences in terms of aspect ratios? What, in your opinion is enhanced, and what is lost, when you move from one aspect ratio to another?

5. What are your preferences in terms of film stock, and why?

6. Which camera/s do you prefer to work with, and why?

7. Which lenses do you prefer to work with, and why?

8. Given a choice between working in a studio and a location, what would you opt for, and why?

9. From a cinematographer's point of view, what typically are the things most neglected and forgotten at the budgeting and production planning stage?

10. How much say and involvement do you have in discussions about sets, locations, costumes and props? What are the things that you think have to be kept in mind when discussing these questions prior to production?

11. "If we do a comparative analysis of the heads and amounts of expenditure in an average film, we find that the least amount of money is actually spent on what the film is going to end up looking like" - Comment
12. What are the different kind of tests that you are able to do, and would like to do prior to filming (In terms of equipment and stock tests)?
13. What is your opinion on the general standards of maintenance of camera equipment, lights and accessories?
14. To what do you attribute the absence of innovations in technology, equipment and accessories, especially with relevance to Indian conditions? What can be done to remedy this?
15. What in your opinion is the importance of lab reports on stock tests?
16. How do you decide upon a particular laboratory?

2. Lighting

1. When you begin thinking of a lighting design for a film, do you work towards an overall look for the entire film, or do you work out your lighting scheme in terms of different sequences, scenes and shots.
2. How do you realise 'the look of a film' in your work? Please talk about this in detail, with examples in terms of lighting, framing, saturation, colour and movement.
3. How do you begin to light a set?
4. Do you light for the frame, or for points of emphasis within the frame? Does Lighting determine the frame, or, does framing determine the lighting. Please answer with examples from your work
5. What are your preferences in terms of specular/ bounced/ diffused lighting, and why?

6. What kind of filters do you use, in what contexts, and to what effect?
7. Do you like to work for a 'lit' feeling or for an 'unlit' feeling? Why?
8. Do you ever mix Tungsten and Daylight? In what situations? Why?
9. "The Film Industry wastes a lot of power. There is a lot of unnecessary lighting in films today" - Comment
10. Do you ever consciously make an effort to use fewer lights?
11. How much room or leeway do you give to the possibility of changes in your lighting scheme in terms of variations (clouds, sunshine, changes in the weather etc.) in the light condition in your locations?
12. Do you incorporate such variations into your lighting pattern, or, do you insist on taking shots at particular time and only under pre-determined light conditions?
13. Do you insist on working at a particular aperture setting for a film? Do you have a favourite aperture setting? Why?
14. What makes a location or a set interesting to work with in terms of Light? What can we say is the 'feel' of a location?
15. In a given location or set, how do you consciously incorporate natural light sources, available practicals like lanterns, firelight, candlelight etc., architectural features like pillars, doorways and different elevations in the designing of your shots and lighting?
16. Do you ever experiment in terms of playing with differences in exposure for different takes of the same shot?
17. How do you work in the possibilities of camera and character movement into your lighting scheme for a given shot? Please give at least 3 examples from your work.

18. Do you like to use the idea of moving your camera between different intensities of illumination in a given space? Or, do you prefer evenness in terms of lighting on the set?

19. Have recently developed faster film stocks changed or had any impact on your overall philosophy and pattern of lighting?

20. When do you say that the lighting for a shot is done?

3. Framing

1. "The presence of a video monitor or video assist diminishes the autonomy and authority of a cinematographer on a set in terms of determining the framing of a shot" - Comment.

2. How do you guide the viewer's eye within the frame? Through graphic elements, symmetry/ asymmetry, volume, light or colour

3. What are preferences in terms of working with different camera angles?

4. How do you create depth in a frame? With the help of light, or colour, or both?

4. Lenses & Lensing

1. What are your preferences in terms of working with block and zoom lenses?

2. Which makes of lenses are your favourites? Why?

3. Do you think that variations in focal length have expressive and subjective connotations? Please give examples to illustrate your opinions.

4. Does working in different aspect ratios have any relationship to the kind of lensing that you would go for? Compare between film and TV, and between 16mm, 35mm and cinemascope.

5. What in your opinion is the subjective and aesthetic factors that makes zooming different from moving the camera itself?

5. Movement

1. What is the way in which you approach movement? Do you see movement as a way to move from the whole frame into its details, or to move from details towards the whole?

2. Do you think that movement affects the subjective experience of the duration, or 'time value' of a shot?

3. When you are thinking of revealing a space in your shot division or breakdown, do you prefer to work in terms of a series of camera set ups that move the viewer within the space, or do you prefer a fluid mobile camera on tracks and trolleys?

4. What are your preferences in terms of a choice between a stable frame, which allows for movement within it, and a dynamic, mobile camera? Why?

5. What are the common difficulties and problems that you face in executing camera movements?

6. In which conditions would you consider taking the camera off its tripod and going in for handheld shots?

7. What is your opinion on the use of steadicam shots that are increasingly evident in films today?

6. Colour

1. Do you think of colour in any way other than only in terms of registering the presence of colour?

2. What are the personal associations and cultural connotations that you have with different colours? Do you make use of these categories in working out a colour scheme for a film?
3. What are your thoughts on monochromatic rendition and on working for deep, saturated colours as stylistic options?
4. Do you basically think of a frame in Black and White terms and then add colour (as ornament or flourish), or is your conception of a frame always in vivid colour?
5. How do you work with the art director and costume designer to develop a colour palette for a film?
6. What is the kind of work that you do on colour in the laboratory?
7. To what extent if at all do you play with the colour balance on video?
8. Do you find any difference in the rendition of colour in video and film?

7. Laboratory & Post Production Work

1. What are your thoughts on the grading process?
2. What is the extent and nature of experimentation that you would do in the laboratory?
3. What is the input of the work in the lab into the ultimate look of a film?
4. What is your opinion on the standards of Indian laboratories? What can be done to make for better standards and working conditions in the laboratories?
5. What in your opinion are the essential qualities and features of a good film print?
6. How much space is there for a cinematographer to intervene in video post-production - say in terms of colour rendition and image brightness? If a

cinematographer's presence is taken for granted in a film laboratory, why is he/she generally absent from the entire process of video post-production?

8. Viewing Conditions

1. What is your opinion on the standards of screens and projectors in cinema theatres in India? What can be done to make for better standards and viewing conditions in the theatres?
2. What is your opinion on the quality of telecine transfers in television stations?
3. What is your opinion on the quality of transmitted video signals on television (including satellite TV)

SECTION VI: AESTHETIC QUESTIONS

1. Do you adapt different styles in different categories of filmmaking?
2. Can we make a distinction between 'realist' and 'expressive' cinematography? What are the markers of this distinction?
3. How much freedom do you give yourself in terms of changing your style? Or, do you work towards maintaining a consistent stylistic signature in all your films?
4. Subrata Mitra once said, " Could *Pather Panchali* have been shot with Panavision cameras, and sophisticated accessories?" - Comment.
5. Can an excess of technological gadgets sometimes be a hindrance to the practice of cinematography, and to creative freedom?
6. How does the presence of the human body affect the decisions that you take in terms of lighting for a frame? What is the relationship of the image size of your frame to the volume occupied by the human figure within it?

7. What are the different elements that you take into consideration when you position the human body within the frame? Do these elements change when you move from a studio set to a location, from an interior scene to an exterior scene and from daylight to night?
8. Are there any differences in the way in which male and female figures are lit and framed?
9. Are there any differences in the way in which, the eyes, the face and the body are lit and framed?
10. Do different characters in a narrative demand the application of different lighting codes and conventions?
11. "The visibility of the Star in mainstream films demands its own form of lighting." - Comment.
12. Do you light up the space and then allow the characters to move within it, or, do you light the characters and by doing so evoke the space?
13. "Pragmatic considerations and Time Management determine the aesthetic of a film" - Comment.
14. "Editors spoil cinematographers labours" - Comment.
15. Do you shoot an urban setting differently from a rural setting?
16. "There is a preference for the panoramic eye in the depiction of the rural, and for the dynamic, mobile eye in the depiction of the urban" - Comment.
17. "The mobile camera (extended tracks & cranes and steadicam) have transformed the cinematographic experience and effect." - Comment.
18. Do you imagine the sound track when you are shooting?
19. "Conception of a sound track gives rhythm to the shot taking" - Comment.
20. Is shooting a beautiful object beautifully good cinematography?

21. What is the notion of beauty that you aspire for? What are the aesthetic goals that you set yourself?
22. Have you seen the concept of 'Beauty' change in the course of your career as a cinematographer?
23. Why is the pursuit of 'Beauty' alone the motivation for so much cinematography? Can there be other motivations?
24. Do you find that there is a generally accepted notion of an 'aesthetic minimum' for cinematography today? Does this constrain or enable you? Do you have your own, personal 'aesthetic minimum'?
25. What are the aspects of the cinematographer's craft that you find unrealised in your working life? Just as a Director has the freedom to discuss an 'idea' and develop that into a script or screenplay, why does the cinematographer not have the same freedom to develop a specifically cinematographic conception into a full-fledged script!