

Stephen Lighthill, cinematographer

Stephen Lighthill, ASC, has been a camera operator on film and television projects since the 1960s. Formerly head of the Local 600, the International Cinematographers Guild, he now oversees the cinematography program at the American Film Institute. Here he outlines the many challenges camera personnel confront as they build their careers, and speaks about union efforts to manage the changes taking place in the motion picture industry.

What are the key issues confronting cinematographers today?

I would put pay rates at the top of the list. All cinematographers, except those in the very top ranks, say they are earning what they earned twenty years ago, even less. And you see it across the board. You see it in documentaries. You see it in independent features. Every employer is worried about the bottom line, and everybody is trying to pay you less for your work. Even when we find a job that pays slightly over scale, we're pressured to waive other conditions of a standard contract, like overtime or turnaround time [the rest time between one day's work and the next].

I recently discovered that the International Cinematographers Guild has worked out tiered contracts, which are basically designed to give low-budget producers a break on wage rates, but still require them to make retirement and health care contributions for members. So, although these cinematographers are earning wages that are well below scale, they're still accruing hours that allow them to qualify for health care. The result, though, is that the guild was forced to give up any kind of standard wage structure for cinematographers when they work on low-budget productions. For instance, I recently talked to an experienced friend who used to

make a good living shooting relatively low-budget movies with budgets between \$2 and \$12 million, working at scale or a little over. Now those jobs pay less, with some of the lower-tier contracts offering only \$1,000 per week, which is about half of normal scale for a forty-hour week. Most people have a basic fee that is considerably higher than that.

Lower-tiered contracts are a killer for people who have families. So, now my friend is working in television as a camera operator where he at least gets a regular paycheck. He can go home and take care of his daughters, and he's not so worried about money all the time. He'll go back to being a cinematographer when the conditions are better. This is an experienced guy with great credits. We're moving backward in terms of wages.

I think cinematographers also worry about work hours and safety. The hours we work would be jaw-dropping to other Americans, particularly on one-hour television dramas. I talked to a cinematographer last week who said she had an eighty-hour week over the course of five days. That was normal.

Budget pressures have also threatened a lot of the traditions that give cinematographers their creative authority, including reasonable preparation time. Sometimes producers will let the cinematographers review their budget line items and negotiate—for example, the cinematographer can give up some lighting in order to get a more expensive camera lens—but that's not always guaranteed. Now you'll see producers make decisions very early in the production process because they see it as a way of controlling their budgets. Cinematographers may want to talk with directors to figure out what's appropriate for the story, but the producer would rather dictate the terms and the technology to save money. Or the director will just decide that specific things will be done in postproduction rather than on camera.

The relationship with visual effects would likely round out our top concerns. For us, it raises important questions about our role and what we contribute to filmmaking. When I was president of the American Society of Cinematographers, I had a big meeting with lots of cinematographers who also worked in effects: Dean Cundey, Richard Edlund, and others. I said, "Okay, the academy is pressuring us to establish two categories: visual effects cinematography and traditional cinematography." We kicked the idea around, and I quickly came to the conclusion that this is a very bad idea—a dead end for cinematographers. Ultimately it would ghettoize the people who shoot in a traditional way.

Let's talk about the big picture. What has changed in the industry?

Everything has changed and maybe nothing has changed. People still love stories. People still watch film and television. But what do they watch more? They watch TV more. They go to movie theaters less. I don't care what the box office says, people are going to the theater less. The middle-aged parents who used to be the

bread and butter for the industry are not going to the movies because they can't afford it. A trip to the movies with a family can easily cost \$50. It's expensive to go to the movies. People are watching TV more, people are watching on their cellphones more, people are watching on their iPads more.

There's still a voracious need for production, but the employment landscape is not what it used to be. You see new entities getting into the business to fill the need for content, but what does that mean for cinematographers? In the case of Netflix, the jobs pay pretty well, but in many cases they don't. For example, YouTube is establishing a presence and it now has a production facility in Playa Vista where crews are earning \$10 an hour! They're getting paid checkout-stand wages because YouTube will subsidize a guy and say, "Okay, come on out from Madison to L.A. and work with us. We'll give you a little training and some equipment to help expand your channel." But these creators are responsible for putting their own crews together and can't afford to budget anything other than rock-bottom wages. This puts enormous pressure on traditional wage rates, categories, and the way L.A. does business. And the bigger picture is that even though L.A. remains a center for talent—acting, writing, and directing—many producers are going to go elsewhere to shoot because of government subsidies and lower wage rates.

Another big pressure comes from technology. If you look at any profession—architecture, medicine, surgery—craft is being seriously undermined by the introduction of computers. Whether it's computer-aided design, computer-aided surgery, or what's happening to us in production, things are changing. A producer comes out and sees me shooting with a digital camera, pulling a card out and shoving it into a computer and thinks, "Screw it, my son can do that."

Technology is making our filmmaking tools so much more accessible—I don't like the word "democratization" because it implies a new reality—but filmmaking has always been an art and craft that requires study and experience, and still does. People can go to Best Buy and, for a couple grand, buy a 70D DSLR camera and a laptop to make a movie, but they probably are not telling good stories. I'm sorry. They're just not. To be a storyteller, you have to develop certain skills that define what's good and what's not. Of the thousands of entries that Sundance is getting, very few are good. How many sales happen because of Sundance? Not many. Are there any more sales than there were twenty years ago?

Let's talk about globalization. Are there other places in the world outside of L.A. with deep pools of talent? For instance, if a producer decides to shoot in Prague, is it possible to find good cinematographers there? Or does the globalization of production mean talent from L.A. is now shuttling around the globe?

Obviously everybody's career is different. Many cinematographers have a home in the L.A. area. They don't work here. They work in Atlanta or they work overseas,

but they come back here because the producers and directors are here. Very early in my career I knew I had to build my professional life in Los Angeles. I had an agent here, an address here, a phone number here, but I lived in San Francisco, and my agent and I saw very quickly that that doesn't work. You have to really be in L.A. You have to always come back, no matter where the work takes you. You have to be seen. You have to go to screenings, go to the various events, and be involved in the organizations that are part of the industry. And you have to be here so that if producers have extracurricular things they want you to do, you're ready.

I think there's still a lot of pressure to keep the center of cinematography in L.A. At the same time, there's certainly great cinematography in different countries, but it's not as robust or as saturated as it is in L.A. It also depends on where you're going. If you're going to Munich, sure, but if you're going to Prague, maybe. If you're going further into Eastern Europe, the answer is no. You're going to bring your cinematographer. If you're going even further afield in the Middle East, the answer is again no. You're going to bring your cinematographer.

In your estimation, what are the top ten cities for cinematography talent?

In the United States, you have New York and Los Angeles. That's it. London would be another. There are exceptions, of course. People live in Mumbai or Mexico City. And Stephen Goddard lives in San Francisco, but he never works there. Honestly I don't think I can identify ten cities. Poland is filthy with cinematographers. Are they A-list and known to everybody? No. But they're great because Poland has a really active independent scene thanks to their state-sponsored media funds. The United States doesn't have that type of support available, and it's a tragedy. I'm not talking about incentives for producers. I'm talking about support for artistic endeavor—to recognize filmmaking's potential as a meaningful and provocative creative exercise as well as a commercial activity. Germany knows this; the Netherlands knows it; all the Scandinavian countries know it. And they have a deep enough understanding of this industry that they'll finance coproductions all over the place.

But the United States has always been very blind when it comes to the arts. In the 1980s I made a good living shooting sponsored documentaries about social issues like organizing labor unions, the Spanish Civil War, and other topics. These were generally funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I would do a couple of those a year. I made a great living because of those films in the 1980s. Then Ronald Reagan said, "We can't do that anymore. We're competing with Hollywood producers." Well, the Hollywood producers would never step in and fund a documentary about labor unions in the 1930s. That has to be a passion project for a director who works for five to ten years putting it together. I shot a film about Berkeley in the 1960s, and the producer literally worked on that film for more than a decade. You should subsidize that kind of thing, and we don't do it. And that's a

tragic disservice not only to those issues and debates, but also to my students who no longer have the opportunities I once had to hone their craft and make a living on those productions.

What makes an A-list cinematographer?

A-list cinematographers have achieved recognition from their peers, whether it's from the Television Academy, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, or from the ASC or the British Society of Cinematographers. They have also surpassed conventional standards, and the work they've done has made peers say, "Wow, that's exceptional." Then, of course, you can look at how much they've worked. I think there are a lot of cinematographers who haven't had much recognition, but they just work all the time and consistently deliver what's asked of them. It's difficult to make categories. People are hired for all kinds of reasons. I think the pool of talented and capable cinematographers is deep. I think it's way deeper than the stock of available jobs. The ten-year, ten-thousand-hour rule seems to apply: it takes that much time and effort to make a great artist and crafts-person in film.

What role do agents play in all of this?

They don't play a role. Agents have never played a big role for cinematographers. They may play a big role in negotiating for the very top professionals, like Robert Elswit, whose phone will be ringing all the time. They may also help clients pick future projects, but in general, agents do not get you work. Your network gets you work.

Music videos and TV commercials are a whole different world, though. Those agents are going to the parties, looking for the jobs, trying to sell you. But those are very fashion-oriented kinds of businesses where you can go out and sell. You're basically selling a guy or gal for a three-day shoot, and the producer, director, or art director is desperate for something different. In those kinds of situations agents can help you find jobs and mold your career. When you're dealing with feature films, it's all on you. It all comes from what you've done and who recommends you.

Ask any cinematographer: he can trace how he got every single job in his career. He knows how his name got put in the hat, why it came out of the hat, and how he got the interview. And, because it's all a big network, the strangest people recommend you. A second art director who you were nice to on a set is suddenly a production manager. And he says, "You know, give him a call." It really is focused on personal contacts. In fact, you're much more likely to be suspicious of an agent

because you might worry that the agent is just trying to make money by selling you to some guy who may or may not be so good for you or your career.

Let's talk more about the importance of professional networks. Do cinematographers find themselves working with the same people again and again?

If you're good, your network is something you've worked on for a long time. You get work from your network, but you've also built your network on your own. For instance, you make calls [to potential employers], and you keep track of your calls so you don't bug people. You get involved with a mentor, someone who wants to help you. People don't succeed in this career without someone else wanting them to succeed. The whole business is a process of finding those people, being in touch with them in an appropriate way, and paying attention when someone calls you on the phone. You don't say, "Oh, you want to hire me? Great, thank you." You say, "Gee, how'd you get my name?" Then you send that person who recommended you a thank-you note, and you keep track of the fact that that person recommended you. If you have an opportunity, you also find out exactly why he or she wanted to recommend you. Anybody will tell you that the key to a successful career as a freelancer is working on your network, developing your network.

Are there certain individuals that cinematographers must keep in their networks? Directors? Producers?

Sure, but it depends on where you're looking for work. In the television industry it's all about the producers. They're the ones who make those types of decisions. There are no directors involved at the beginning of the game when they're thinking of who will be handling cinematography. In bigger-budget feature films, many people make cinematography decisions. A director may want you, but a producer may not, and they have to agree at some point. Also, the bond company may say, "I'm not going to trust that person. They've never done a \$100 million movie, so I'm not going to bond it." Then you have to have a producer who's willing to go to the mat for you, or willing to ignore pressures from the bonding agent.

And that will happen?

Oftentimes the bond company will say something along the lines of, "Okay, but if he or she screws up, it's on you." Sometimes the company is worried about the cinematographer's experience, but the most common concern is substance abuse. The bond company will have concerns about someone who has done something on a set at some point in the past. They'll say to a producer, "If something goes wrong,

we're not going to pay for you to find another guy or to pick up the days that were lost. That's going to be on you."

How has the union [International Cinematographers Guild IATSE, Local 600] changed over the course of your career?

Early in my career it was a very nepotistic organization. There were seniority provisions that worked in very exclusionary ways. It was known as the Roster, and it consisted of three groups of people, like an A, B, and C group. You couldn't work if you weren't on the Roster. You couldn't get on the Roster if you didn't work. Finally, the Justice Department said, "You guys are using that to control who is allowed to work. Get rid of it." So they got rid of it. That was a big change.

And there's now a much more serious investment in safety—that's a huge change. There's a passport safety program. You actually have a little card that indicates you've taken the required classes. Everyone has to take them if they want to work. It's especially intense for grips, who must know a range of safety protocols: how many people can be on a camera cart, how many can be on a scaffold, and even how much weight a room can hold. Their training involves a lot of intense geometry and engineering. The studios are on board with the safety concerns, so it's been a great change.

The guild also takes its commitment to training very seriously. As new technology is introduced—whether it's cameras or recording media—crews get trained. If a producer goes to the union, he or she can expect to get somebody who's properly trained and knows best practices. That's a big advantage.

You've mentioned concerns about lower wages and longer hours. How is the union organizing around these issues?

Most of the work is freelance, and that makes organizing tough. It's also very hard to organize productions. A production will be up and running inside a month and then be gone. Still, the IA [IATSE] isn't totally powerless. Many producers say that they're going shoot using nonunion workers, but when they go out and hire people, they're hiring union people. There's just nobody who's any good who is not in the union. Many workers will sign onto a project without saying they are union. Then when they get on the set, they call their local. The union comes down and says, "You've got union people on this, so we've got to turn it into a union contract."

Then those people have to sign a card and follow the regulations of the Labor Relations Board, which require that a union representative write a contract for you. The response is not automatic by any means, but of course you're in big trouble with your local if you go and work on a nonunion site without telling the local that you're there.

Leadership will do an actual organizing drive. They'll get everybody together after work and they'll say, "Please sign the card indicating us as your work representative." They have to do that. So when a union person takes a job that's on a nonunion site they let the union know, and then the union is going to try to organize the site and make it a union production.

If the union can't organize the site, will the person work there anyway?

No. That's nuclear war.

Is it valuable having the union on site?

Absolutely. It maintains wage rates, which would otherwise be quite low. The union comes in and asks the producer to pay wages that they're currently paying but also to pay back benefits, which is 15 percent or 17 percent of pay. So the producer can still pay grips \$75 a day, but they're getting their health insurance paid for and they're getting a little bump in their retirement fund. We have one of the healthiest retirement funds in the country. We don't get paid residuals like writers do. Residuals all go into our union's retirement fund, which actually helps mitigate the pressure on wages. People at least can say that they'll have something there for them when they're in retirement, even though their wages may not be so great today.

But in some ways it has exposed the union as kind of a paper tiger. Wage rates have been deteriorating, but employees do get their benefits. And when the union organizes a production, it sometimes finds nonunion employees who then join, making the union even stronger for the next time.

How many people are in Local 600?

Today the guild is huge—it went from a small local union in Los Angeles to a national local with about 6,500 members. So if it's ever pushed to the wall it has a serious ability to defend itself. It's got a beautiful website and a beautiful magazine with substantial readership. And it has a full professional staff. So the guild is very careful about tracking what people do: who's working and whether their dues are paid. And those people keep bringing new business and attention to the guild. It has helped make us as powerful as the Directors Guild. Anybody above the line is very powerful, but below the line it's a different story. You have to have numbers and you have to be organized. Because of our power, we play a leadership role on the set. This is crucial because producers will intentionally or unintentionally cut every corner they can. For instance we have a standing agreement that if a person feels that they're too fatigued to drive home, a producer has to pay for a hotel room

so that worker doesn't have to commute that night. That's something that has to be watched. Producers must understand that they've got to do that.

You said that the union is the leading force in organizing below-the-line labor on sets. Is this true in other places, or just in L.A.?

There's nothing our union can do in Prague. But in places like, let's say, Wilmington, North Carolina, the union will be able to organize productions because you're in a remote location. The producer has no alternative. There's nowhere to turn. The IA can come in and say to the producer, "Now you're union." They'll go in with the cinematographers and the grips and other groups and say, "Look, this is the labor pool in Wilmington, North Carolina, and they're all in the IA. Make an agreement with us." When people are in a place like New York, it's easier to hide from the union for a few days. But we'll find out about them some way. Even in new locations that pop up in response to incentives, the guild will open offices as soon as a labor pool starts to develop. Our representatives are in place and keep track of everything.

In most places in the United States, you can't hide. Plus, remember, we aren't the only union members on the set. Actors. Directors. Teamsters. They won't do a non-union production in the United States. SAG-AFTRA is a very powerful group, and it uses that power very carefully, but it ends up being good for us. After twelve hours, actors have to be done. When they leave, there's nothing to shoot, so we go home, too.

Does that change once you cross national borders?

Yes, it's a radical change. But the change is not as stark when you cross into Canada, where we have very powerful locals and the government is a fairly progressive supporter of unions. When I went to shoot in Canada, the immigration guy asked why I was there and then called the local union [to let them know I would be working in Canada]. After that call, I worked under a work permit for a certain period of time. I had to leave the day after the permit expired. They watch you very closely, but they're also very supportive. So you're not going to escape from the union structure in Canada.

Once you go into other countries, though, you're in a whole other world.

If increased mobility is a new reality and you're finding yourself shooting in distant places, how does that affect the way you put your camera crew together? Do you often find yourself working with foreign crews?

A cinematographer has relationships with the people he or she works with, and those relationships develop over many years. So when you get a job, you pick up

the phone and your first call is to your gaffer. Then you call your key grip, then your personal assistant, then your operator, your steady camera operator, the people you've worked with before. You may have people you work with in L.A. and people you work with in London. You may be okay leaving L.A. without somebody, but you'll find people you're connected with all over the world now.

Sometimes cinematographers go overseas, and they come back and say to me, "I had a wonderful crew. I had a great experience. I'd love to work with those people again." Just as often they come back and say, "I'd rather die than work with that crew again." Sometimes you're in another country where most people don't speak your language and you're dependent on an interpreter or some similar scenario. Other times directors help you, but basically they're using pidgin English to get through the day. It's very difficult. When you're on the set you sometimes hear conversations that have nothing to do with you, but they give you clues or warnings about how the work is going and what may be ahead. When you don't get those clues [because of linguistic or cultural barriers], things can become very difficult.

Do most cinematographers try to keep their preferred team intact when they travel abroad?

Yes. Part of the problem is that under the basic agreement [with the studios and major producers], if cinematographers take more than three below-the-line people, that triggers a clause in the contract that requires studios to pay residuals to the IA. Most big productions will honor an A-list cinematographer's request for certain crew but then quickly dig in their heels. They'll say, "Gaffers? Sure. Anybody else? No." Then the cinematographers have to make a bunch of quick decisions. They have to decide whether to call their agents to talk for them or whether the director can help at all. Put simply, the question is: How do I best control this situation to get what I need? It can easily become a big political mess. You have to negotiate your way through it very carefully. Some cinematographers simply walk away. It happens all the time.