

# 8 Shooting an Interview

You hear people say, 'Don't worry, it's only an interview'. But being able to set up and shoot a good interview is an important aspect of the cinematographer's work. Further, it is also the key to being able to tackle much more complex set-ups in the future. Much like understanding three-point lighting, it is the base for moving on to handle more dramatic and creative work. So keep in mind that every interview you shoot is a vital part of the process of learning and gaining experience. No two interviews are ever the same. There will be different locations, interviewees, subjects and logistical problems, and these will all have to be properly solved if you are going to shoot the ideal interview.

It is generally understood that interviewees are much more comfortable when filmed in their own surroundings, such as their home or office. You will have to adapt to this even though, from your own point of view, neither of these options may be the easiest of places to film in. On the other hand, the location will open up other opportunities to gain extra material or 'coverage' that will enhance the interview. It will also offer the opportunity to cut away from the interviewee (to enable you to avoid the static shot known as the 'talking head'). This is really important because if you do not have other visual material to enhance the talking head, then your interviewee might as well be talking on the radio!

## THE SCENARIO

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Here is a fictional scenario we can use because it highlights all the individual elements of the process of shooting an interview. You can go on to adapt many of the areas and discuss them, write them up in a

reflective log and even go and shoot them.

*Mrs Williams is an eighty-five year old widow. Her husband died two years ago, so she has sold the big house in the country they lived in and bought an apartment in the centre of town so she could get to the shops without having to rely on public transport. Her apartment is in a newly built block and she has lived there very happily for the last three months. That is, until she received a letter from the council informing her that the builders had not been given all the permissions to construct the building. After much legal wrangling the council have decided that they will demolish the building and have given the residents six months notice to leave the property. A television researcher has discovered her story and has asked Mrs Williams to take part in a documentary they are producing about rogue builders.*

You have been commissioned to put together a crew, gather the necessary equipment, as specified by the company, and meet the programme director and the interviewer to shoot Mrs Williams' interview.

## THE RECCE

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Your first task will be to see if it is possible to conduct a recce (reconnoitre) of the location, especially the interior of the apartment. You could of course recce the exterior at any time before the shoot. Why would this be useful? Let us go through it step by step.

### EXTERIOR LOCATION

In terms of coverage we will want to give the editor some 'set-up' or 'establishing' shots – in other words some visuals that will accompany the commentary or 'voice-over' that will introduce Mrs Williams and the situation she is in, before the actual interview itself takes place. For example this would include:

Shots of the town centre that reveal where she lives;

Shots of the apartment block that reveal its location in terms of the

town centre;

Wide shots of Mrs Williams approaching the block with her shopping;

Mid shot of Mrs Williams approaching the front entrance of the apartment;

Close-up of Mrs Williams as she enters the building.

All of these shots will have to be built into the shooting schedule, but the problem to be solved, on the recce, is at *what time of the day it is best to do them*.

Think back to the section on light, and in particular the fact that the sun is on the move throughout the day. You need to look at all five sequences above in terms of when the sun will be in the correct position to shoot them. It may be inconvenient, but you may have to spread the shooting of these scenes throughout the day, as and when the sun positions itself correctly for you. This attention to lighting detail will assist in achieving the best results. You could of course ignore this and just shoot all of these locations one after the other as it is more convenient, but will that will reduce the quality of the interview.

### Tip: Unfamiliar Territory?

If you are asked to film establishing shots in a town you are unfamiliar with, then go and buy some postcards. They will identify the most photogenic parts of the town and the position to shoot them from.

## INTERIOR LOCATION

It is always good practice to do a recce of the interior if at all possible, as there are many things that determine what kit, especially lighting, you might need on the shooting day.

The main considerations are:

## *VENUE*

Size of the room in which the interview will take place. You need to consider that there will be two people in shot at certain times, the interviewer and interviewee. Is there room for this and can you also place your lights, especially the backlight, in the Position you want them?

Which floor of the block is Mrs Williams apartment on? If you want to gel the windows to balance the interior in terms of illumination and colour temperature (see lighting section) you will not be able to do this if she is not on the ground floor, as the colour correction and/or neutral density gels must go on the outside of the windows if they will be seen in shot.

## *LIGHT*

What direction do the windows face and how will the movement of the sun affect the visuals over the shooting day? Will there be sunlight coming into the room at one part of the day and not another?

The colour of the ceiling – you might want to bounce light off here as it is often a good way to give ‘fill light’ to the set-up. This will be fine if the ceiling is white but not if it is any other colour, as this will not give light of the correct colour temperature. The same is true for the walls.

Can you spread the electrical load from your lights evenly and without difficulty?

## *SOUND RRECORDING*

Are there any extraneous noises from within or outside the apartment that cannot be controlled during the interview?

## *EXTRA SHOTS*

Look for any other ‘set-up’ or establishing shots that can be filmed inside the apartment.

### **Cinematographer Ossie Morris: A Recce Gone Wrong**

One mistake I made in my career was the opening sequence of the film *Our Man in Havana* (1959). The background to the titles was a girl in a swimming pool, on the top of a very high building. We had to get the camera up about fifteen floors to the top and

get it out on to the swimming pool area.

Now I wanted to do it very early in the morning with a back light because I thought it would be different and it would look nice. So I got everybody out early, and we go up in the lift and open the door to go out on the roof and I could not believe what I was seeing. I couldn't see anything of the background, it was misty and smoky and it had flared in the back light and you could have been on the ground floor.

It was obviously a waste of time and I've got everybody up there but what could I do? I stopped everything and went downstairs and said, Look it's my fault, I'm sorry I've made a mistake. I said if you want somebody else to take the film over I'll go, but I'm sorry. That's the one mistake I've ever made in my career and after that I made absolutely sure that I went to see every location we were going to shoot on.

## PLANNING THE SHOOT

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### SHOT LIST TIMETABLE

Having done the recce you can now plan how to shoot it and advise the production team in terms of putting together a shot list with times for the day's filming. For example this could be:

Crew meet with production to discuss day's filming.

**09.00**

09.15 Production team meet with Mrs Williams to discuss interview. Crew to film various shots in town centre. Recce has established which buildings will be correctly lit between 9.15 and 10.15.

**10.30** Crew take shots of the east side of the apartment block whilst the sun is still illuminating it.

**11.00** Shoot establishing shots of Mrs Williams making tea in her kitchen. This will also help make her feel more comfortable and less nervous

with the production process before the main interview begins.

**11.45** Shoot the apartment block from the south side now that the sun has moved around to that position.

**12.30** Shoot Mrs Williams walking up to building and then entering.

**13.00** Set-up and light for interview in anticipation of sun being in correct position in 90 minutes. We will use natural daylight so will convert the tungsten balanced light of our filming lamps to daylight balanced light by using CTB filters on the lamps (see [Chapter 6](#)).

**13.30** Crew and production lunch break.

**14.30** Shoot interview.

## CRUCIAL DECISION: CAMERA LEFT OR RIGHT?

In this type of interview situation, the interviewee will be seen to be speaking to an interviewer and not directly to the audience as a newsreader does. In other words they will be speaking and looking at the interviewer who will be on either the left or right of the camera rather than looking directly down the lens of the camera. Before you can set up the camera and lights you must know and get the director's agreement about which side of the camera the interviewee should look. This is normally referred to as *camera left or right* or *screen left or right*.

Why does this matter? Firstly, it affects the quality of the film. In a film with several interviews it is important that they do not all look out of the same side of the screen as this would be visually boring. More importantly, you may be interviewing people with conflicting views and in this case it will appear more natural if they look out of different sides of the screen as they speak.

Secondly, knowing which side of the camera the interviewee is looking

out of will enable you to know approximately where to set your key light and other lights. As you will have discovered in [Chapter 6](#), you need the key light to form a shadow on the side of the face that is prominent to the camera; in other words we see the face from dark to light.

### Tip: Where Should I Put the Key Light?

Until you can do this without thinking about it, just remember that the key light should be placed on the same side of the camera as the *interviewer*. Exactly where and at what height will depend on the facial features of the interviewee you are filming.

## FURNITURE AND POSITION

Pick the most comfortable chair for Mrs Williams to sit in.

Pick a similar one for the interviewer to use so that they will be approximately the same height. This avoids the subjects looking artificially high or low as they talk to each other and we do not see tops of heads or under the chin.

Put the chairs close enough together so that each can hear the other easily but not so close that they bump knees.

Place the interviewer's chair as close to the camera as possible so the interviewee's face will look just off camera. You want to see both eyes of the interviewee, not a profile.

## LIGHTS

Set your key light on the same side of the camera as the interviewer and just above head height. You will be able to position this lamp accurately once the interviewee is in position.

Set the fill light close to the camera and at about the height of the lens. This light must not cause a shadow. (If you could shine it down the lens itself that would be perfect.) If necessary, place a diffuser over the lamp so the quality of light is as soft as possible.

Set the back light in a position that is opposite to the key light. In practice and in small locations, this can be the most difficult lamp to set.

When completed, ensure that all lamps are turned off at the mains and that cables are not a trip hazard whilst you take a break.

## DISCUSS SHOTS WITH DIRECTOR

Agree shot sizes with director, in practice three different sizes would be normal, remembering to change when questions are being asked. The editor will use the interviewer's questions at that point, so the change of shot size will not be seen by the viewer.

Agree whether to zoom in or zoom out if Mrs Williams gets emotional, as she is likely to do as she tells her story. This is important. There is no correct or incorrect way here, but if you are behind the camera you should know what the director wants you to do.

## THE INTERVIEWEE ARRIVES

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### LIGHTING

Turn on the lights before inviting Mrs Williams to sit down, as it will be more comfortable for her than turning them on afterwards.

Check eye lines: Mrs Williams should be looking at the interviewer and her eye line should be *just* off camera. You need to see both her eyes, *not* a profile. Remember that facial expression and especially the eyes are as important as the words being spoken.

Carefully set the key light, now you have the subject in front of the camera.

Balance with the fill light and set backlight.

### READY TO SHOOT



Check microphones have been placed and set properly.

Check Mrs Williams is comfortable and ready to begin.

White balance the camera.

Carefully check focus by zooming in to the subject's eyes.

## BEGIN FILMING

Shoot her interview, changing shot size whilst the questions are being asked. Three sizes of shot would normally be sufficient.

When this part of interview is over, check with director and interviewer that they are happy with it and do not require any further material from Mrs Williams.

## FURTHER SHOTS?

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You can now set up the other shots that will help cut the interview together.

The 'wringing hands' shot. This will normally be used by the editor as a last resort if you have not provided sufficient cutaways. In an emotional interview though, this shot will be required as interviewees do tend to express their feelings and it could be useful for the editor.

Pull the camera and lights back, in order to get an over-the-shoulder two shot facing Mrs Williams.

Double check with the production team that there is nothing else to shoot from this direction as you will now need to move the camera and re-set the lights in order to film the questions.

### Tip: Check Before Moving Anything

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It is vital to check that this stage is completed before you

actually move anything as you do not want to have to re-set lights and camera.

## SHOOT THE INTERVIEWER

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Position the camera to face the interviewer, keeping the focal length setting on the lens and the distance from the subject the same as the previous over-the-shoulder two shot. It is important that these shots match and that the distance they appear to be apart looks the same from each angle. Keeping the focal length and distance the same will ensure that the distance between the subjects does not appear to change when the film is edited.

When repositioning the camera, check that you have not 'crossed the line' (see [Chapter 5](#)). In an interview situation this would be disastrous as the subjects would not appear to be looking at each other, but rather looking in the same direction out of the same side of the screen.

Check focus on the interviewer and compose a matching two-shot. You will need to see the interviewer listening to the interviewee.

Move the camera forward so you get a matching shot to the main interview with Mrs Williams. Get the interviewer to ask the questions again so you now have them in vision. (Advise Mrs Williams that there is no need to answer them.) Change shot sizes as previously.

Film some 'noddies': simply the interviewer nodding in agreement to something Mrs Williams is saying.

At this point double and triple check with the production team that they have everything they need from the interview itself.

Finally, with Mrs William's permission, film some further cutaways, for example family photographs, certificates or ornaments. This may seem unnecessary, but these can often save the day in the editing room.

## Tip: Matching Interviewee and Interviewer Shots

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In order to ensure that shot size and perspective match when you reverse the camera angle to do the shots of the interviewer, make a note of the focal length setting on the lens and the distance from your subject.