

# Basic Digital Cinematography Concepts

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**Reviewing *Digital Cinematography* by Ben de Leeuw (AP Professional, 1998, 265 pp., ISBN 0-12-208875-1); includes CD-Rom**

**D***igital Cinematography* appears to be little more than a stack of 3 × 5 notecards masquerading as a book. In essence, this deceptively thick and weighty volume is a glossary of disemboweled descriptions of important cinematic concepts. These concepts are illustrated with low-impact black-and-white photos of computer-generated frames filled with deformed computer-generated beings. The volume includes the now-obligatory CD-ROM full of digital movies showing these same unnerving beings in action.

The deception begins with the title: "Synthetic Cinematography" would give the intended audience a clearer sense of the book's subject matter. The cover art, depicting a cine camera and the traditional live-action movie film strip, adds to the deception.

Notwithstanding his opening faux pas, the author appears sincere in his desire to instruct novice computer graphics artists in a craft that has drawn on cinematographic principles. This rudimentary introduction focuses on the basic filmmaking components of setting, lighting, camerawork, and action, with only minimal time devoted to advanced effects. These components are developed with uneven authority: the book provides reasonable guidelines for basic lighting but falls short in the area of motivated composition and camera motion.

The book is structured into lesson chapters that contain explanations, tips, and playtime problem sets. For instance, the author's introduction of the camera is followed by a description of standard lenses, a helpful tip, long lenses, a helpful tip, and so forth. This structural consistency encourages the student to assume a methodical, hands-on

approach to learning. Unfortunately, this approach is best realized through an inspirational base of examples, an element sorely wanting in this publication. Play time in this chapter is exactly that: shoot a subject with a long lens, look at a background with a wide-angle lens, look at your subject with a wide-angle lens, and so on. The methodology of play is important to building decision-making confidence.

While the words convey the basic concepts, I have rarely seen a less inspiring volume about computer graphics. Students—particularly computer students—learn from the example of others. In this volume, the author alludes to the lore of movies, but seems to entirely ignore computer graphics as a new and distinct field. He provides no insightful presentation of the challenges, nor does he ground the practice with past artistic work. Instead he chooses to illustrate the various principles using horrid homegrown black-and-white sample images that provide minimal information to the student.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the author avoids any mention of the computer or computer graphics programs. How do we make an object or a setting? How do we evaluate our software? How do we build responsive underlying programs? This omission makes the entire volume suspect. Why not pick an "old standard" filmmaking text—such as Ed Pincus' *Guide to Filmmaking* (Signet Books, New York, 1969)—and play with the concepts of lighting and camera position in the physical world before moving onto the computer screen? The novice programmer or 3D designer who thumbs through this publication will find neither inspirational examples nor a palette of exceptional techniques. In fact, this publication can only contribute to the rise of mediocrity as published works about virtual 3D worlds become increasingly available. **MM**

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