



JUDGING AUDIO-VISUAL SEQUENCES

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Following my recent involvement as a jury member at the AVFest in Adelaide, I've been asked to give my views on judging sequences. We all have different approaches and viewpoints, therefore judging is very individualistic, but I'll tell you what I look for.

We need to consider the visuals, the sound track and the general concept and its originality. If I was to use a marking system then 25% of my mark would go to the audio side, 25% to the visuals, and 50% to the concept and originality. This means that the highly polished sequence with good slides and good soundtrack but which has a totally boring and unoriginal concept will not score as highly as a slightly less technically polished sequence but which has a highly original concept or idea. If the scoring had been 33%, 33%, 33% then the more polished looking sequence, which bored the pants off us, and could possibly, score more highly than the one which is slightly less polished but is innovative and original.

I feel that judging sequences is a qualitative rather than a quantitative process, so I don't give marks as such. The A, B, C marking method used in AVFest is a sensible one. Using this system the A's are definite prize winners, the B's are ones which merit discussion as possible prizewinners, whilst the C's are those that are not going to be considered for prizes.

So, what am I looking for in a sequence? In the visuals I am looking for good photography. There are too many people outside the A.V. fraternity who think that you can use all your old duff slides to make a sequence. However, I'm not looking for a string of exhibition slides but for slides which have been specifically taken to support the story line. I look particularly for good dissolves/transitions i.e. good use of two (or more) images. I also look for imagery. The sequence is set in the Middle Ages, therefore impossible to photograph the characters involved, so I used shadows. This technique seems to work quite well.

When judging the audio side of the sequence I think that most audience members have difficulty picking out good sound tracks because they "flow" past the ears, creating the desired mood with no glitches. It's only the poor ones which register because you hear all the hiss, butts, level problems, etc. So train your ears to hear good sound tracks, listen carefully. I look for, or listen for, a well written, original script. Those with an original script, written by someone who started with a blank page, will score more highly than those "lifted" from a CD. I'm listening for the text to be delivered by a voice which suits the subject matter. (In Poland I've seen American films where both male and female voices have been dubbed with powerful bass Polish voices. Imagine Marilyn Munroe speaking with a butch Polish voice!). In the recent AVFest we had "The passing of Chief

Dan George” where the narrative is spoken by a Yorkshireman purporting to be a Native American. For me, it works, but I can see others having great problems with it.

I’m listening for a script which doesn’t “talk to the slides”, in other words it doesn’t describe what we can see on the screen but tells us something we can’t see. I’m listening for a script which has been written in conversational style, one intended to be spoken, rather than read. There is a difference. I’m listening for well chosen music which creates a mood, or reflects what is happening on the screen or in the script. If several pieces of music are used then I’m listening for seamless cross fading. I would advise against using well-known classical pieces because the images conjured up in the head of the listener may not be the same as those conceived by the author of the sequence. If sound effects are used then I’m listening for subtlety of use. I don’t want to be deafened by a dawn chorus of birdsong at 100 decibels! Unless they are there to have a strident effect I would prefer to hear subtle sound effects which just disturb the silence or are just audible above the rest of the soundtrack. I like to be able to hear the voice above the rest of the soundtrack, in other words there should be sufficient separation between the voice and the music.

If there is no text, in other words it’s a slide-sound sequence, I look for pictorial progression and a set of slides which interpret the music rather than illustrate it. It’s also no use having a higgledy-piggledy set of slides which look as though they’ve been chucked up into the air and used the way they have fallen. When making a slide to music sequence (a “series”) it’s worth bearing in mind, the FIAP recommendations. They have set a time of 12 minutes for a diorama (an AV with text to us) but have a limit of half that time, 6 minutes, for a “series”. In other words a slides to music sequence is not expected to hold the audience’s attention for more that 6 minutes.

There are some judges who hate “moving” sound and “still” images. For example, we see on the screen a picture of a man supposedly speaking. We don’t see lips move but we hear the speech. It doesn’t worry me but if you wish to get over the problem I can quote an example used in a well known Belgian sequence, which is based on a trial. When the defendant is speaking we see the judge, when the judge is speaking we see the defendant. In any context where you have slides with text then the eyes win over the ears every time. So if you want the audience to listen to your words, or for your words to say more, your pictures should say less. Have slides on the screen which contribute to the storyline but which don’t overpower the words by having too great a content. In terms of concepts or subject matter my preference is an inherited one. The Celts have a tradition of story telling and this is the type of sequence I like to see. This brings me to my last but very vital point.

A judge can’t say “I like it” or “I don’t like it”, you have to JUDGE it. Sequences with subject matter which doesn’t interest you, or which you may find objectionable still have to be judged. For instance, you may hate blood sports but you still have to objectively judge a sequence on bullfighting.

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