Making an Audio-Visual Sequence

Theme

Originality & Interest

Grab your audience's attention and tell a story. Will it produce an emotive reaction from the audience? Is it absorbing? Will the sequence work in its entirety? Does it express originality?

Your idea, your images and the audio must all work together in harmony. The whole sequence should feel like that it is greater than the sum of its parts.

Preparation

Do you have a stunning set of images and try to find a soundtrack that's about right, or do you have the audio in mind before you start? Either is acceptable.

If you don't yet have the images, put firm ideas together before you go shooting and write them down. Better to do this than go away for a trip only to return with two-thirds of a set of pictures.

Images

Raw Materials

Bring together a wide spread of related images. Consider using several focal lengths and shooting angles. Create a variety of images appropriate to the subject and avoid repetition. You will need opening and closing shots.

Do your main subjects have suitable backgrounds? Avoid distractions on and around the subject.

Images should have impact, especially as they will be visible for a short space of time. You may have to be creative to introduce a variety of colour. If you apply filters to the images, be consistent.

Ensure all the gaps are filled. In addition to the general shots, you will also need establishing shots and images that show details. You can shoot fill-in (B-roll) images at home afterwards, such as scans and close-ups for documents, maps, artwork, equipment or clothing.

Competition rules will vary on the acceptability of video but its addition is usually fine if done delicately.

Do you need images that can be used as backgrounds for titles? Allow space in the images for text.

Image Quality and Orientation

Images should have good composition, accurate exposure, focus and depth of field and accurate or consistent colour balance. Not every image needs to be a 10. Print quality images aren't essential; however, you will still need a good range of tones, accurate colours and sharp (but not oversharp) images. Horizons should be level. Set the aspect ratio in the project and fill the frame with your images. Be careful mixing mono and colour. If applying treatment, be consistent.

Images should be mostly, if not all, landscape orientation and have the same aspect ratio. Their dimensions must be at the resolution of the projector and larger if you are panning or zooming. Mobile phone and compact camera images can be adequate, if treated correctly. 4K images are typical. Avoid any black gaps around the images. Saving at 95% quality makes for smaller AV files.

Third-Party Images and Copyright

Depending on the use of your work you may be able to use historical media or someone else's images; it is your responsibility to ensure you have copyright clearance. It may be counter-intuitive but your own soft picture will count against you whereas a good licensed picture won't.

Whilst it is permissible to reproduce artwork, maps, photographs and diagrams in books, it is not always ethical to do so.

Sound

Appropriate Music

Recordings should be high quality and fit the images perfectly. Expressive music for expressive pictures. Subtle music for subtle pictures. Avoid abrupt changes unless they fit the sequence. Your own sound effects can help.

Copyright

Ensure you own any commercial media you've used and have the correct licences and copyright clearance. Royalty-free and copyright-free music are available.

The IAC's scheme is the easiest and cheapest to access if you are a member of a PAGB federation affiliated club. Crediting the composer or performers of the music is forbidden when using The IAC's copyright scheme.

File formats

WAV is the best quality uncompressed format. M4A/AAC and MP3 are compressed formats so use a high bitrate of at least 256kbps. You might not be able to hear the difference, but others will.

Editing & Mixing

Make sure the volume is loud enough without clipping peaks. Don't cut a familiar piece of music. The music should not overpower the speech so fade down to around 20% under speech. Fade in and out smoothly and delicately. If you have to use old recordings, remove any hiss from tape and clicks from vinyl. Be precise. In competition/awards, audio faults are marked as for image issues.

Speech

Ensure you have a well-written, script that can be spoken and ensure it sounds natural. Pay attention to good microphone technique and record in a silent area that doesn't echo (unless that effect is relevant). Someone with a theatrical background may add more gravitas. Artificial (AI) voices have improved greatly in recent years and can be considered.

A good voiceover will really lift your sequence to the next level.

Blending it all together

Software

Choose software that is easy enough to use and flexible enough to do what you want – PTE AV Studio (Pro) is most often chosen. Generated transitions should be smoothly rendered on your computer. In the project settings, turn off any start-up images and menus. Hide the mouse and any navigation bars. Set the resolution and all other options for maximum quality.

Sequence

Do you have a Beginning, Middle and End? Are you telling the story? Do the images flow? Are you holding interest throughout? Are all the same type of images together? Wrap up neatly, maybe with an unexpected twist in the tail. Do not use "The End" or "Thank you for watching" as the sequence's completion should be obvious. Be concise; sequences are rarely too short.

Audio Timing

Make the pictures fit the sound precisely. Transitions should be aligned with phrases and/or beats

in the music. Speech must overlay appropriate images. Make sure the pace matches the material.

Transitions

Aim for simplicity and avoid gimmicks. Don't mix landscape and portrait images. Imply motion with a transition. Look for the "Third Image" between two images. Blend monochrome and colour with a fade on the same image.

Titles & Text

Should be effective, simple and not intrusive. 3D effects and shadows can work well and give a sense of depth. Choose the font carefully and avoid standards like Arial and Times New Roman; many free ones are available.

Text effects provided by AV software can be ineffective. Avoid garish and mixed colours. Make text visible for enough time to be read and that is always longer than you think.

Movement

Only pan and zoom if it adds something to the sequence. Does the zoom draw attention to a segment of the image? Does the pan have a defined start and end? Zooms and pans should continue from the start of a slide to the end of the transition to the next one. Be smooth.

Finally

Always have someone else to look at your sequence so that you know it is interesting enough and they can check for any mistakes.

Publishing your AV to an HD MP4 file is often preferred to work on more devices and is easier to skip back and forth when reviewing. Pay attention to Bit Rate (not too high) and Frame Rate (60p is smoother). EXEs may be best quality on some PCs but might not work on some Windows versions.

Consider the PAGB Awards for Photographic Merit in Audio-visual: Credit, Distinction and Master.

Resources

AV Preparation Software (paid)

PTE AV Studio (PC & Mac, formerly PicturesToEXE), FotoMagico (Mac), Photopia (PC), Adobe LightRoom, DaVinci Resolve (Free)

Sound Software

Editing: *Audacity (free, PC & Mac), Adobe Audition, Apple Logic Pro (Mac)*

Converting/ripping CDs: *iTunes, Exact Audio Copy*   *AI voices (Free option): ElevenLabs*

Fonts (free)

Google Fonts, DaFont.com, wFonts.com

Advice & Music Copyright

RPS (AV news), PAGB (e-News issue 134, Awards), Beckham Digital, The IAC F&VI, MCPS, PRS, YouTube music

Audio-visual on YouTube, etc.

Ian Bateman, Mark Allen, Martin Addison, Sheila Haycox, Exmouth Photo Group's AV Group