

Creating a Great AV Show

by Paul Sparrow

The medium of photography has always lent itself to telling stories. From groups of documentary photos to a single image that sums up a dramatic situation or a comic take on a subject, they can bring a new understanding of our world.

But when photographic images are combined with music in to an audio-visual “show” it can create in the viewer an emotional response to the imagery well beyond what is there. The medium of the AV presentation can be used to heighten the "experience" of the viewer to the visuals presented.



When creating an AV show it's important to consider *how* that interplay between the two components is done. Today the technology allows for so many possibilities that sometimes that overall connection between the images and the audio gets lost in the translation.

First it's important to have a structure for your show and a central “theme” for the overall presentation. A series of great individual photographs that goes back and forth between different subjects without any thought for how they work together can seem disjointed. Think of the images like links in a chain... one following another connected together in sequences rather than just individual images that have to stand on their own.

You can avoid “image fatigue” by mixing up the visual approach with different image sequences that say different things about your central theme. This will keep your audience visually interested in what's coming up next rather than boring them with repetitive imagery.



Half the “experience” of an audio-visual show is the soundtrack that accompanies the images. It’s just as important that the audio support the images as it is that the images support each other. What music and/or sound effects you select and how the images are placed in relation to them will affect the emotional response to the images and how the audience will “see” them. Music can add emotional weight and impact to the images as well as add structure to them that would not be evident with the images alone. Music can be used to link sequences together and can dictate the pacing of the images from one to another. So it’s necessary to put in just as much effort into music selection and how the soundtrack is constructed as you’ve put into taking and creating the photos.

Sound effects can be used as a way of creating a sense of reality... a “you are there” feeling. They can also be used as a way of introducing different sections from one subject to another.

Choosing the right music for your images is important but *how* those images go to that music (the timing) is central to the overall cohesiveness. Many slide show programs can be told to “automate” the timing between the images and music but this is a BAD idea. It’s like using the “auto” features in Photoshop to process your image files, it might be faster but you never get the best result. When constructing the soundtrack think of how the images will flow to the music. People always ask me “how long should a image sit on the screen?” and my answer is “it depends on the rhythm and flow of the music”. Generally it’s best to “time” the image pace to the music’s rhythm... fast changes with fast music, slow changes with slow music.

Also use the changes within a piece of music as a way to go from one image sequence to another. Think about using different pieces of music to divide the show up into different sections. Even short shows that go through a variety of image sequences can benefit from multiple pieces of music that break the show into sections.

Most slide show programs allow for countless transitional effects, image movements and animation. These can be used as a great way to add dynamic points within the show that draw attention to a specific image or heighten the impact of a sequence. But the over use of transitional effects draws attention to the transitions themselves and sometimes overpowers the content. Using transitional effects arbitrarily just as an effect without any thought of how they’ll be perceived in the show’s overall structure will create a disjointed presentation.

So a great AV show is more than just showing a bunch of impressive images with some background music. But when done right with the images and music paired together they affect each other with their interplay. And this interplay ultimately dictates how successful the show is and how good that final “experience” will be for the audience.

This abridged article was first published in Canadian Camera © Paul Sparrow 2014.

For examples of my audio-visual work please visit:

<http://vimeo.com/paulsparrow>