

Course outline: Cinematography

The MFA in Cinematography is a specialisation within the broader **MFA in Film, Television and Games**.

The responsibilities and tools at the disposal of the Cinematographer is something that is ever changing as we advance into the digital realm. However, the fundamental role of the Cinematographer is still as it was in the 1920s – to tell the story via images. At the NFTS we seek to balance both the traditional role of our craft – by teaching using 16mm and 35mm film – as well as using Digital cameras and technology of all shapes and sizes that can aid in storytelling.

Your first day at the NFTS is seen as the day you enter the Film industry. By the time you leave the NFTS, you will have the skills and craft, through your own work and application, to cope with any situation that might arise. You will be confident in front of people and be able to work in high-pressure environments: our modules are designed to stretch your thinking and creativity whilst also making demands on your stamina and personality.

An important part of your time at the NFTS is that you feel free to experiment, try out ideas and “fail” amongst friends. The NFTS is a safe space where the required result is that you learn from your bold ideas and sometimes make mistakes. We tailor a number of our modules to enable the Cinematographer to relate to the Director and the other key crafts in a truly collaborative way, enabling and encouraging discussion about everything ranging from the script to colour choices involved in Production Design, Costume and Make-up Design.

During your time at the National Film and Television School, you will produce at least three short films to industry standard, including at least one shot entirely on celluloid.

The course will:

- Give you an understanding and knowledge of shooting on 16mm or 35mm;
- Enable you to collaborate with other creative students and tutors to produce your work and understand your role and where it fits in the team;
- Teach you film grammar and give you an understanding of the evolution of Cinematography and how technology has shaped storytelling;
- Provide access to state-of-the-art lighting and cameras so that you can get hands on experience with equipment being used in filmmaking today;
- Enable you to develop a showreel of short films, commercials and promos as well as an understanding of how to pitch yourself to potential employers.

Year One

The first year contains three assessed modules, and a wealth of other exercises and workshops:

- Module 1 – Interpreting the Scene (ITS)
- Module 2 – Beyond Time
- Module 3 – First Year Film (FYF)

MFA in Cinematography
Commencing January 2026

Module 1: Interpreting the Scene (ITS)

This module is a collaborative exercise involving the Fiction Directors, ADFM, Sound Recording, Editing and Sound Design students. The aim is to shoot a scene from a pre-existing script, working together with the other disciplines to design the look, movement, blocking and coverage of the scene.

Assessment is based on the final scene as well as how you work as a team and how your photography elevates the mise-en-scène.

Module 2: Beyond Time

Beyond Time expands on the ITS by introducing you to the Producers who join the team. Unlike Interpreting the Scene, you will be dealing with an original piece of material written by the Directors, however still exercise based. You will be shooting on 16mm with your classmates acting as your crew.

This project comes with limitations and the creative way you and your team approach those limitations will reflect on your assessment on this module.

Module 3: First Year Film (FYF)

This module comes at the end of the year and is seen as your final piece of work of the 1st Year. This module brings together all the disciplines to make a short film written by the Screenwriters. The final short film will be between 15-20 minutes in length and the film will feature in some cases set-builds and the final film will be graded by the Colourists.

The shooting period is 4-days and you will be HoD of the camera department, with an AC crew from the Assistant Camera course.

This film is the first wholly original short film you will be making at the NFTS: previous films have gone on to receive BAFTA nominations. We encourage you to think creatively, collaborate and compromise where needed.

You will be assessed on the final film but also your contribution during pre-production in helping shape the look and style of the film.

Other Workshops (Selected)

Alongside and in between the Modules there are a number of exercises, workshops and seminars including:

Springboard Cross Specialisation Introductory 1 Week Workshop

A cross-school and interdisciplinary introduction to film and television, looking at cinematic language and televisual language through the prism of storytelling. We will also be focusing on the key triangle of Director – Cinematographer – Designer with specific workshops in the afternoons.

Craft of Cinematography

This 4 week period is designed to give you the fundamentals of shooting on 16mm. We'll be covering exposure, camera movement, lighting and framing all of which expands on the groundwork that is covered in your Foundation prior to starting the MFA.

3DDD – Short Tales

This workshop gives you the opportunity to put into practice what you have learned and introduce you to shooting with the Directors and Production Designers. You'll create a "Short Tale" based on a single word given to you by the tutors. You'll be filming in a small studio space, so imaginative thinking is key.

Take One Painting

This workshop is delivered alongside the Production Design and VFX students. The aim is to recreate a painting on the Main Stage with each department contributing their craft – Production Design – create the set; Cinematography – recreate the lighting and look of the painting; VFX – use the latest technologies to expand the set through set extensions.

Character of Place

This workshop represents your first chance to work alongside the Animation Department. During your time at the NFTS you will have various opportunities to work with the Animators culminating in the Grad Animation film which you will be assessed in the 2nd Year. Character of Place challenges you to think creatively within the world of pixilation, and together with the Animation Director and Production Designer you will develop and shoot a short-animated film over two days.

Cinema Language, Active Looking

This two-week workshop is designed to act as a "pause and reflect" moment within the curriculum. Designed by Nina Kellgren BSC the workshop is aimed at getting you to understand cinema language, why we light in certain ways, how light interacts with objects and the mood it can create. The workshop also begins to explore movement and developing shots.

The Billy Williams BSC Workshop

This workshop was designed by Oscar-winning Cinematographer, Billy Williams BSC. You'll be set a series of lighting challenges which you will shoot on 35mm, each designed to test your knowledge of exposure, framing and movement. You will be assessed by your tutors (including Billy) on how you approach these challenges.

Health & Safety

Training in the principles of Health and Safety, including procedures and process for risk assessments is paramount to the Cinematography MFA. We work alongside the Mark Milsome Foundation and require all our students to:

- Take the Mark Milsome Online Passport;
- Be trained on all equipment used by industry professionals;
- Be trained in Emergency First Aid in the Workplace.

Management and Leadership Training

Throughout the two years the size of crews you will be working with will increase. The year begins with a Gaffer working alongside you as we explain the relationship between Cinematographer and Gaffer. By the completion of the First Year you'll have acted as the Director of Photography with 1st AC, 2nd AC, Loader, Gaffer, Sparks and in some cases a Steadicam Operator and Grip under your leadership. You will also have had the opportunity to practice those roles yourself, and well as that of an Actor! Learning how to manage your team and the responsibilities you have as HoD is paramount to the course.

Year Two

During the second year of the course Cinematography students focus will move into several key areas:

- “Digi Film” - Film no 2 shot with a Digital camera.
- Grad Fiction - Film No 3 shot in a choice of formats.
- Animation Films - either 2D, stop motion or a mixture.
- Commercials.
- Preparing to enter the industry.

The second year contains the following three assessed modules:

- Module 4 – Digi Fiction
- Module 5 – Grad Animation
- Module 6 – Grad Fiction

Other workshops and seminars are also included during the year, providing valuable further opportunities to learn.

Module 4 – Digi Fiction

Digi Fiction is designed to take what you’ve learned on First Year Film and move it to digital with an emphasis on less is more and experimentation. Digi Fiction comes with a smaller crew, smaller budget, less shot days but is a film where we desire you to take risks, to try and fail if needed.

You will be assessed on your creative approach to problem solving, how through locations, time of day and scheduling you are able to make the most out of your limited camera and lighting package and produce what in some cases can be truly original films.

Module 5 – Grad Animation

Grad Animation is a varied module which will depend largely on the style of animation you end up working on. For those of you who work on stop-frame animations you will find your focus being on miniature sets, Dragonframe (the software used to build stop frame animations) and micro focused lighting. For those of you that end up working on the styles such as CG, Multi-plane or Mixed Media there will be other challenges – this could be how you tell the story through images, how those images are created or even in some cases some live action shooting with actors.

Assessment is based on the final film as well as your involvement in the development and creation of the look, style and storytelling of the animation. For this module we will bring in Cinematographers who have specialised in the field of animation and can guide you.

Module 6 – Grad Fiction

Grad Fiction is in many ways your calling card after you leave the NFTS. This film will have the largest budget and the largest remit for you. It will challenge you as a Cinematographer as you will be dealing often with a scale and complexity which you’ve not yet had.

The Grad Fiction film involves a 7-day shoot where Production Designers will have the ability to build sets if needed, and you may have the opportunity to hire in specialised equipment subject to availability (e.g. Anamorphic lenses etc.). For those of you that wish to shoot 16mm or 35mm

there will be a pitching process where we will be able to gain access to stock and processing if successful.

With Grad Fiction more than any other, the key is collaboration – to work alongside your fellow students and problem solve and find solutions. To location scout with not only the look in mind but the logistics of how you will get your team and equipment to specific locations. You will be tutored along the way with meetings to assist you in breaking down your screenplay as well as support on tech recce to help you plan your equipment requirements.

Assessment is based on the final film as well as your involvement in the development and creation of the look and style of the film as well as how you manage the shoot in your capacity as HoD of the Camera and Lighting department.

Cinematography Dissertation

During the year students also complete their Dissertation (the outline of which dissertation is delivered in Year 1).

As part of the work necessary to qualify for an MFA, each student is required to produce an independent written dissertation or video essay. This runs from the start of the 1st Year to May of the 2nd Year. Following discussions with the Cinematography Department Dissertation Tutor, and Screen Arts tutors in the first half of the 1st year, students deliver 500-word outline proposal by June of the 1st year; 2000-word detailed proposal and structure by November of 1st Year (students may not progress into 2nd year if they fail to deliver this). Full draft dissertation of 7,000-10,000 words (including sources and bibliography) must be delivered by April of 2nd Year and following discussion with tutors, final version of dissertation by May of the 2nd Year.

An alternative option of a twenty minute video essay is also available to MFA students.

The aim should be to undertake original research of an investigative nature, which extends the boundaries of specialist knowledge within particular areas of Cinematography.

The dissertation may encompass any aspect of Cinematography, but should focus primarily on the aesthetic and creative aspects of films and filmmaking. Students are advised to use the dissertation to help explore and develop their own practice, interests and identities as Cinematographers.

More specific areas might include: detailed history of a style or approach to cinematography; an examination into the career and approach of different cinematographers or an exploratory dissertation with original sources into a specific subject matter.

Other Workshops (Selected)

Alongside and in between the Modules there are a number of exercises, workshops and seminars including:

Take Two Painting

This workshop gets you to approach lighting and framing a set in different styles, from Film-Noir to the Musicals of the 50s and 60s. You'll also be challenged to think about movement and how through creative use of camera and movement you can often encompass a scene in a single take.

Commercials

During your 2nd Year you will have the opportunity to work with the Directing Commercials students. These one-day shoots to spec given by an advertising agency teach you the discipline of remaining on message while increasing your showreel to allow you to get commercial work upon graduation.

Camerimage

As part of your 2nd Year we will contribute funds to allow you to attend Camerimage in Poland. This world renowned Cinematography festival is a wonderful chance to meet other filmmakers from around the world and see some truly original films and documentaries.

Ready for Work

This workshop is designed to give you the knowledge of what to do after you graduate. You will hear from agents about what they are looking for in a Cinematographer, from an independent financial advisor about freelancing and your rights, from alumni about their experiences upon graduation and you'll learn how to pitch a script to a Producer/Director.

Visits To Industry

As part of your on-going learning you will visit several rental and post-houses each designed to introduce you to future contacts you can use upon graduating and on your graduation films.

In Conclusion

Our Cinematography graduates are a rich and diverse mixture of people – our courses aim to encourage that difference and allow you to find your own unique way to express yourself, whilst also being a leader and member of the team. Throughout the course you will have the opportunity to hear from different voices and as well as hear the stories of the alumni – each designed to build your knowledge and confidence for graduation.