LIGHT METER VERSUS PICTURE MONITOR

The key to achieving consistently good results in lighting for video is using a light meter in the same way one does in lighting for film. The idea that a picture monitor on the set makes lighting for video faster and easier is one of the great fallacies about video. In fact a picture monitor is a very unreliable and inefficient tool in lighting.

First of all, a picture monitor requires that the camera be fired up and shooting the composition that is being lit. Prelighting a set or lighting while the camera is being set up or adjusted is impossible if one is dependent on the picture monitor.

Second, picture monitors, especially the type one is likely to have on the set as opposed to in the van or near the recorder, are notoriously unreliable. Setting up a picture monitor is to some extent a matter of subjective evaluation of the image it is displaying, and the image on a monitor may not be an accurate indication of what is actually being recorded. A picture monitor is comparable to timed dailies with no indication of the printer light. It shows you one way the scene can look, but it does not really tell you what with.

Moreover, a picture monitor does not really enable you to do consistent lighting from one setup to the next. The picture monitor tells you nothing about how the levels compare to those in a previous setup. It is entirely up to your memory to compare what you see to what you saw earlier.

Consulting a picture monitor to evaluate lighting will probably require walking back and forth from the set to the monitor repeatedly during a setup-unless you abandon the set altogether in favor of a work station near the monitor from which you instruct your crew via an intercom. Neither is a very efficient procedure. The best place from which to light a set is on the set and next to the camera or the position where it will be placed.

Generally, if you ask the production company to provide a monitor for you on the set, you will get a modified home receiver or the monitor that has received the least maintenance. Even if you bring your own monitor, the ambient light levels on the set will wash out the picture so much that you cannot judge contrast in the image.

It is also inadvisable to become dependent on a picture monitor for lighting, since there will occasionally be times when it is not possible to have a monitor. When the camera is battery powered, for example, it will probably not be possible to have a picture monitor; but you may still have to light.

Using a light meter that you can carry around with you as you work is really the simplest and most efficient method of lighting. Using a light meter properly also ensures consistency from scene to scene. When you are lighting a set, the video camera and picture monitor are really just the world's most expensive and clumsy light meter.

There is another problem associated with the use of a picture monitor as a tool for evaluating lighting. It tends to invite lighting by committee. While a good monitor may promote constructive discussion of lighting in some instances, there are also plenty of instances where discussions of the lighting based on what the scene looks like on the monitor may be fruitless and counterproductive.

If you are still unconvinced about the use of a picture monitor in lighting, consider the following: Anyone who shoots video will at some point inevitably have to insist that the producer or the client ignore the way the image looks on the monitor. You will know that it is not an accurate indication of the image you are recording; but if you yourself have been referring to the monitor while lighting, your ability to persuade them that it is unreliable will be considerably diminished.