

FROM THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *COLOR CORRECTION HANDBOOK*

# COLOR CORRECTION LOOK BOOK

CREATIVE GRADING TECHNIQUES  
FOR FILM AND VIDEO



ALEXIS VAN HURKMAN

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# COLOR CORRECTION LOOK BOOK: Creative Grading Techniques for Film and Video

Alexis Van Hurkman

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## DEDICATION

To Rod Gross, director and producer, who hired a green young editor and made him learn After Effects 3.0; I blame you for helping start me on a long and successful career.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Because you do not have to imitate, like painters, sculptors, novelists, the appearance of persons and objects (machines do that for you), your creation or invention confines itself to the ties you knot between the various bits of reality caught. There is also the choice of the bits. Your flair decides.*

—Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004)

If you're reading this in the bookstore or online to see whether this book is for you, it's important that you understand what this book is *not*. This book will not teach you the basics of color correction, nor will it teach you how to balance shots in a program to play as a seamless whole, how to isolate features of an image for specific adjustment, or how to achieve desirable skin tone. These topics are all covered in the *Color Correction Handbook: Professional Techniques for Video and Cinema*, which you're advised to read first if you're new to color grading.

This book *will*, on the other hand, show you how to have lots of visual fun stylizing the images your clients give you.

In the ideal world of some cinematographers, the photography of an image would be entirely controlled by the director of photography (DP), primarily via images captured in-camera, with whatever balance of light and shadow, interplay of glow and volume in the lighting, and intended color interaction conceived on the set, recorded faithfully, and enhanced carefully by the colorist under strict supervision for the eventual benefit of the audience. Gordon Willis, A.S.C., articulates this point of view in an interview with Casey Burchby in the May 23, 2013 *LA Weekly*:

*In today's moviemaking, you have lost the integrity of the original image. You've lost the integrity of the person who's thought things out and wants a certain thing to be achieved on the screen. Because if you don't have a contract that says no one can change anything, everyone who loves a dial—and they all seem to love dials—gets ahold of it and things turn into magenta, they turn into yellow, they turn into some of the most insane applications of “creative thinking.” There are people who should know better, who have been making movies for a while, who get into this damn room with those dials and they start doing things they never would have thought of doing. They go, “Well, we’re here. Let’s blow up seven bridges.”*

Fair enough.

However, as anyone who's been in production knows, time and budgets are the enemy of grand plans for in-camera effects, and it's often the case that the best intentions are defeated by the need to get through however many pages in a day

are necessary to get back on track. This can make the effects contributions of the grading department essential to achieving a desired look.

Cinematographers who've gone through enough digital grades usually come to understand the range of options that a skilled colorist makes possible. The prudent cinematographer learns to incorporate the knowledge of what sorts of adjustments and looks are easy in post, and—more importantly—which ones are not, and incorporates that knowledge into their shooting strategy.

Thus, the colorist's job is no longer to simply balance, fix, and optimize. Stylizations and effects once created by the film lab are no longer photochemically available. In truth, you the colorist have *become* the lab, and these sorts of image stylizations are now part of your job description.

Additionally, in a world of increasingly flawless digital reproduction of radiometric light, the quality and consistency of digital image capture threaten to become boring, and it's not uncommon for directors to long for the idiosyncrasies and imperfections of older recording methods. Or, they long for you to show them something completely different, to differentiate the look of a given project from the last 50 projects that were shot with that camera.

This book aims to present a useful collection of creative grading techniques designed to give you an arsenal of stylizations you can use when the client asks for something special, unexpected, and unique.

The techniques I present in this alphabetically organized book are the types of corrections you'll make for music videos, advertising spots, and even re-creations and dream sequences within more conventionally graded programs, all of which will benefit from your ability to create something a little more wild. This book presents a variety of strategies that you can experiment with.

And that's the key: I've worked to present techniques that are *strategies* more than they are "looks." Most of the creative techniques I've chosen to cover are highly customizable and can be tailored to suit your particular purposes. More likely, you'll find yourself mixing and matching them in order to create your own unique effects. No two movies, spots, or series will have the same needs, although many of the stylizations you create can be categorized as variations on familiar, recognizable techniques.

Have fun!

## SPECIAL THANKS

I want to first extend a very deep, heartfelt thanks to the filmmakers who have graciously allowed me to abuse their work in public within this volume. All of these projects are programs that I've personally graded, and they represent a fair spectrum of what you'll see out in the real world. All were terrific clients to work with, and I sincerely appreciate their contributions to this book:

- Josh and Jason Diamond (directors) for excerpts from their *Jackson Harris* music video and their narrative short, *Nana*.
- Matt Pellowski (director) for excerpts from *Dead Rising*.
- Sam Feder (director) for excerpts from his documentary feature *Kate Bornstein: A Queer and Pleasant Danger*.
- An excerpt from my own narrative short, *The Place Where You Live* (me, Director) is featured as well, and I'd be neglectful if I didn't thank Marc Hamaker and Steve Vasko at Autodesk, who sponsored the project.
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I must extend additional thanks for the use of clips from programs I didn't work on but which provide unique qualities that are valuable to the examples I needed to show:

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I also want to personally thank Karyn Johnson (Senior Editor, Peachpit Press), who initially championed the first edition of the original *Color Correction Handbook*, went on to encourage a second edition when the time was right, and then went the extra mile in convincing Peachpit to publish a whole additional volume when I ended up writing 200 pages too much. Karyn, every colorist who buys both of these books owes you a debt.

Last, but very certainly not least, I want to thank Stephen Nathans-Kelly (Editor), who in *both* editions has gamely reviewed each increasingly enormous chapter, now in both books, for treating my prose and technical content with delicacy; this stuff ain't easy to edit. With Karyn, Stephen, and Peachpit Press's support, I've continued to create exactly the books that I wanted to, with no compromises. I hope you enjoy it.

## A NOTE ABOUT IMAGE FIDELITY

In all instances, I took great care to present realistic grades within this book, and yet it's often the case that certain adjustments required exaggeration to be noticeable in print. Unfortunately, knowing that a digital edition was going to be made available, I've been in the unfortunate position of having to serve two masters with a single set of images.

I feel that the results serve the purpose of illustrating the topics admirably, although I cannot guarantee what certain images will look like on every possible digital device to come. To those of you who are reading this on your tablets, phones, smartwatches, augmented reality devices, and VR goggles, I hope you like what you see.

## A NOTE ABOUT THE DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

Throughout this book, you'll see examples of scenes in commercially produced shows that are used to demonstrate various concepts and techniques. The downloadable content includes a wide variety of corresponding QuickTime clips that you can use as a playground for experimenting with the techniques discussed. These clips are the raw, uncorrected source material for each example, and can be imported into any grading application that's compatible with Apple ProRes media. For more information about the media on the disc, please see the Read Me file that accompanies the download.

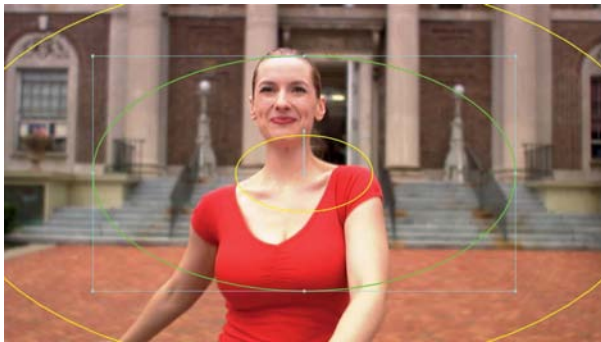
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# CHAPTER 4

## BLURRED AND COLORED VIGNETTES

This next technique is another way of using shapes/Power Windows to make some wild iris effects. The basic idea is to use a shape to add a combination of color and/or blur to the outer border of an image. I first pulled this out for a dream-sequence opening in the feature *Oral Fixation*. Shortly thereafter I also saw the same idea used in 2008's *Wanted* (Stephen J. Scott, Supervising Digital Colorist, EFILM) to indicate altered perception for a character's point of view (POV) shot. This technique works best when you're using a shape with an extremely soft edge. In the following example, a soft oval is used to limit a Gaussian blur and Gain color balance adjustment toward red to the outer edge of the image (**Figure 4.1**).



**Figure 4.1** A blurred, colored vignette provides an easily altered sense of reality.





This idea can be combined with an aggressive grade inside of the shape or with the cross-processing simulation technique presented in Chapter 5 to create nonlinear alterations to image color.

In **Figure 4.2**, a seemingly innocuous establishing shot of a house is lent a faded, vintage air by virtue of two different curve operations messing with the color channels, one inside and one outside of the vignette.

**Figure 4.2** Different cross-processing simulation effects applied to the inside and outside of a vignette. The blurring is already there, courtesy of the moving camera's motion blur.



Never underestimate the effectiveness of a simple vignette.

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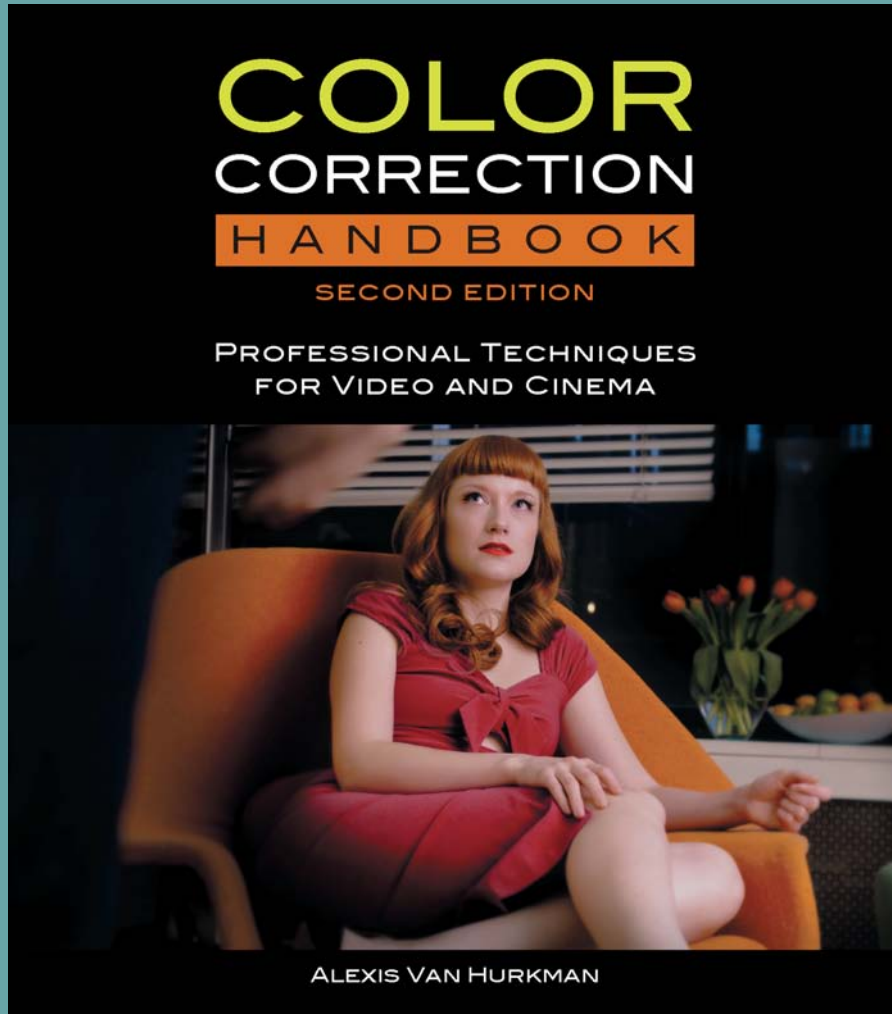
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