

Film Gaffer? Role and Responsibilities

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Abstract - What is the gaffer? Gaffer is a British slang term for old man / godfather or grandfather, or the head of a group of labourers, so the sight of that title in movie credits has probably triggered some laughs from moviegoers. But although the idea is funny, this is not a special film job for old fogeys - the gaffer is actually the head electrician on a movie set. In British theater, the term was used to describe the man who adjusted the lighting, and that came from the city lamplighters who used a "gaff," a pole with a hook on the end, to light the gas lamps in the streets. The term has been used for the chief electrician in films since the 1930s. The Oxford English Dictionary has a citation from 1936, a 1929 book on motion picture production also uses the term. Sometimes called the chief lighting technician, the gaffer, along with the key grip, works directly under the director of photography (otherwise known as the DoP or cinematographer). The gaffer and key grip handle the physical and technical labor that make the DoP's vision into reality -- the gaffer and his or her crew are in charge of lighting, and the key grip's crew work with the cameras. The DoP, gaffer and key grip are always in close communication during a shoot. The key grip is the head grip, in charge of the labor and non-electrical equipment used to support and modify the lighting. Grip equipment includes stands, flags and gobos, etc. The gaffer's job is definitely a technical and administrative one, but depending on the DoP's working style and their relationship, the gaffer can also have some creative freedom with the lighting and lighting effects. The Grip Department supports all non-electrical needs on set, most notably lighting and rigging). They set up gear for the camera, such as vehicle mounts, tripods, dollies, and cranes. The dolly is a vehicle with a camera mount; the vehicle runs on dolly tracks, allowing for smooth camera movement during a scene where the characters are walking, for example. Long before shooting starts, the gaffer goes through the script and makes notes of possible special lighting situations and what equipment might be needed. Then he or she will go with the director, DoP, key grip, best boys and producers on a tech scout -- they'll visit the studio and different filming locations to figure out exactly what each scene or shot calls for in terms of lighting, cameras and manpower. Afterward, the gaffer is responsible for writing up - and sticking to - a budget for the electric department.

Keyword - Film, Lighting, Gaffer, Cinematographer, chief electrician in films, Director of Photographer or Dop

Introduction

Gaffer is a British slang term for old man / godfather or grandfather, or the head of a group of labourers, so the sight of that title in movie credits has probably triggered some laughs from moviegoers. But although the idea is funny, this is not a special film job for old fogeys - the gaffer is actually the head electrician on a movie set. In British theater, the term was used to describe the man who adjusted the lighting, and that came from the city lamplighters who used a "gaff," a pole with a hook on the end, to light the gas lamps in the streets. The term has been used for the chief electrician in films since the 1930s. The Oxford English Dictionary has a citation from 1936, a 1929 book on motion picture production also uses the term. Sometimes called the chief lighting technician, the gaffer, along with the key grip, works directly under the director of photography (otherwise known as the DoP or cinematographer). The gaffer and key grip handle the physical and technical labor that make the DoP's vision into reality -- the gaffer and his or her crew are in charge of lighting, and the key grip's crew work with the cameras. The DoP, gaffer and key grip are always in close communication during a shoot. The key grip is the head grip, in charge of the labor and non-electrical equipment used to support and modify the lighting. Grip equipment includes stands, flags and gobos, etc. The gaffer's job is definitely a technical and administrative one, but depending on the DoP's working style and their relationship, the gaffer can also have some creative freedom with the lighting and lighting effects. The Grip Department supports all non-electrical needs on set, most notably lighting and rigging). They set up gear for the camera, such as vehicle mounts, tripods, dollies, and cranes. The dolly is a vehicle with a camera mount; the vehicle runs on dolly tracks, allowing for smooth camera movement during a scene where the characters are walking, for example. Long before shooting starts, the gaffer goes through the script and makes notes of possible special lighting situations and what equipment might be needed. Then he or she will go with the director, DoP, key grip, best boys and producers on a tech scout -- they'll visit the studio and different filming locations to figure out exactly what each scene or shot calls for in terms of lighting, cameras and manpower. Afterward, the gaffer is responsible for writing up - and sticking to - a budget for the electric department.

Having a competent, efficient crew is probably the most important factor in making sure that budget isn't blown. The gaffer usually gets to pick his or her own crew, including the second-in-command best boy. During production, the gaffer watches rehearsals to get an idea of what lighting setup will be needed, given the conditions and time of day. The DoP might give specific instructions on filters and where rigs and meters need to go, or the directions might be more general -- which is where the gaffer's creativity and judgment come in. The gaffer and crew continually adjust those settings as the scene is filmed,

tweaking things between takes. The gaffer and DoP will usually watch dailies throughout the day to make sure all the lighting is exactly the way they want it.

Gaffer Job Description (in short) : The gaffer is the head of the Lighting and Power Department on a film set. They work in Pre-production and during production to help achieve the desired cinematic image through setting up light and running cables. what does a gaffer do on a film set?

To say it simply, the gaffer is the chief lighting technician of a film crew, and sometimes and traditional name "Gaffer" is dropped in favor of the more official lighting technician. If it has to do with lighting, the gaffer is in charge of it. This means the gaffer not only has to have mastery over the vast array of lights, lighting equipment, and lighting techniques that may be used while filming, but the position also requires knowledge of the set and requirements of the script and director. working together efficiently is one of the most important qualities for any film crew, and it is part of the gaffer's responsibility to make sure all lighting workers are up to speed with changes that are being made and can work well with other members of the crew - which means staying out of the way as much as offering assistance.

Gaffers should not be confused with the key grips or boss grips, although there is some overlap. Grips focus primarily on the construction and equipment aspects of filming. Grips can be found building scaffolding, or tracks for lighting or camera equipment to move across. The key grip oversees all the other grips, while the gaffer oversees all the lighting staff, and depending on the film crew the gaffer will probably be in charge of the grips who are working on lighting at that time. Both the key grip and gaffer also have "best boys" or seconds who tend to care of logistics like transportation.

Of course, there is a lot of lighting work that needs an expert touch, meaning a qualified electrician who can monitor electrical current requirements and make sure there are no overloads. The gaffer needs to hire a professional electrician who can handle the depends of the film industry like the rest of the crew, and most gaffers have one or two electricians that they depend on for the more delicate or dangerous lighting work. Other electric and lamp operators are also beneath the gaffer and take orders from him.

But a gaffer's job goes beyond logistics and mechanics. The crew working with the lights has to be constantly available, and they all work 12-18 hour days for weeks and sometimes months at a time as the movie or video is being shot. This can put a lot of stress on the lighting crew and makes for short tempers and accidents waiting to happen. It often falls to the gaffer to make sure the team meshes well, that they have respect for one another and are close enough to each other to forgive mistakes and learn from one another—a talent not easily measured in training or tests. For this reason, people interested in being gaffers are often encouraged to work with several different film crews to get a feel for the job and what is required, even if they have been to film school and know all the techniques by name.

The Role of a Gaffer

Both on and off the set, the Gaffer or Chief Lighting Technician is one of the most important positions around. Though the average movie goer most likely has no idea the job even exists, they probably don't know what 99% of the other crew is/does either.

From the time a DoP signs on to a project, the race begins to bring on all the preferred crew, arrange and determine all of the lighting needs for the film including day shoots, night shoots, generator (power) needs as well as any specialty lighting gags and much more. This work is generally finished in a short amount of time as most low-budget feature films, short films, music videos, etc. are given very slim to no prep. time. Having a strong relationship with the cinematographer is vital at this stage.

Depending on factors like budget, shooting length, camera format, location, and more, the Gaffer will choose which units are right for a look and scene the DoP wants to achieve. Because of all the factors at play, a Gaffer must know most of the 100+ units (lights) in order to make the best decision for each specific use. Understanding and translating the DP's vision onto paper, and into rental forms is something that requires a strong technical knowledge as well as a creative mind for how those units will be set and adjusted. These technical breakdowns can be even more vital when working on a stage for long periods of time when hundreds or even thousands of units will be hung from the overhead grid. This is most often the case with television and feature film. At that stage, a Gaffer will bring his Best Boy Electric into discussion so that they can begin to formulate these ideas into detailed requirements which one, or many rental houses will need to fulfill. Specifically, the BBE will make sure there is enough cable to distribute power around the set, to the lights, etc. as well as all the contents of the lighting truck, generator and most of the paperwork for the Electric Dept. like contracts, call sheets, etc.

Once production begins, the DoP and Gaffer should be highly familiar with the look and desired feel for the show. It would be very inefficient to constantly be asking the DoP what they'd like to see for the next scene or setup. As a Gaffer, a large part of the job is executing the lighting plan for each setup by communicating with Electricians to bring certain lamps to the set, and roughing in the look. Once the Gaffer is happy with the progress, he'll call in the DoP, so that they can make final adjustments and have "last looks" before the cameras roll. This process continues from the first day of shooting to the last, and is a balancing act between lighting quickly between setups, lighting efficiently as to minimize the number of relights, as well as prepping units for larger setups later in a day and wrapping units effectively back to the truck to minimize the wrap time at the end of a day. Additionally, when not on the set, the Gaffer may talk with the BBE about future setups or scenes requiring larger or specialty lights. These may be picked up at a later date and will need to be orchestrated with other departments to make sure they are at the right place at the right time. If not, you could delay shooting or even cause something to be rescheduled which you never want to do.

Working as a Gaffer is a little like being a General orchestrating troops into battle. Even though you may have a strong battle plan, Murphy comes around and you realize that things change quickly. It's important to be on your toes and ready for anything. Orchestrating Electrics around the set and working on multiple elements all at once can become overwhelming, so again, you should know the look and style inside and out. You can never meet with the DoP in pre-production too many times. Being a good manager of the department is just as important as lighting the set for the DoP. Without good communication, time management and the respect of the crew around you, things will slow down and you'll become the 1st AD's best friend, which you don't want.

Responsibilities of a Gaffer

- Responsible for the execution and sometimes design of the lightning plan that would have been created in Pre production in conjunction with the DoP.
- Responsible for managing lighting, including labor needed, lighting gear and electrical instruments.
- Have a strong technical knowledge and a creative mind to know which units are needed to achieve the DoP's look and how to translate that into reality.
- Decide on what/how much lighting gear is needed.
- Make sure the amount of power available in the set fulfills the requirements, if not then must brainstorm ways to work around this.
- Become familiar with the Look of a particular film/show throughout the shoot to be able to set up a lighting plan without having to always consult the DoP during every scene, the DoP will make tweaks when desired.
- During technical recess have enough technical knowledge to understand - what is required of him/her and their team, what problems must be faced and ways to work around them. Is a generator needed? Is the location spacious or very compact? Where is good to stage all the gear?
- Be creative enough to supply any special lighting "Gags" for a particular shot or scene.
- To serve the look of the film, help the DoP achieve this look and make the DoP and all the HoD's look good.

Conclusion

A gaffer is the head of the lighting and electrical department, responsible for working with the director of photography to achieve the lighting design desired for each scene. They are sometimes referred to as the chief lighting technician.

Gaffers go through a film's script and observe rehearsals carefully to get an idea of what type of lighting setups and equipment are needed for each scene. During tech scouts, they examine the conditions of filming locations at estimated shooting times to get better insight as to how they need to modify their lighting controls and instruments. Being aware of camera setups and angles also helps gaffers create the appropriate lighting setup.

Gaffers use a variety of tools and lighting accessories to change color temperature, add contrast, manipulate intensity, control softness, and adjust direction. Some examples of lighting effects that gaffers create are:

- Replicated sunlight
- Soft candlelight flickers
- Mood effects such as flashing red lights during disastrous events
- The passage of night into day or day into night (use the color Gels)
- Street lights reflected on a driver or passenger's face

Gaffers have a whole team to help them execute lighting setups for each scene. According to me, "the set-up of all lighting instruments, cables, generators, and accessories is directed by the gaffer, supervised by the best boy, and carried out by the crew of electricians."

Gaffers also

- Study the script and consult with director to assess what lighting is required.
- Discuss the production designer and Production controller/manager.
- Discuss the Costume designer.
- Discuss production requirements with the camera operator.
- Select lights and equipment to be used and organize any additional equipment .
- Set up, focus and operate light fixtures and equipment.
- Choose and combine colors to achieve the desired effect.
- Operate the lights during the performance.
- Use manual or computer control consoles to control lighting throughout a production.
- Use devices such as barn-doors, scrims and other attachments to control lighted areas.
- Perform routine maintenance functions such as replacing lamps and damaged color filters or patterns and maintain lighting equipment in safe working conditions.
- Explore new techniques and special effects.
- Place and focus lighting fixtures for any given scene to be photographed.
- Distribute power and work lights around the set and support areas (including actor's trailers, portable production offices, catering, etc.).
- Management of electrical generators.

They also hire professional electricians who are aware of legal regulations regarding electrical safety requirements and can keep a close eye on electrical currents to make sure that there are no overloads as well as handle sensitive lighting and electrical work. Gaffers and the electrical department are responsible for operating, maintaining, and repairing all electrical equipment on set, with the exception of audio and camera equipment.

The Film set electrical department hierarchy is as follows:

Electrical lighting techs (rigging electrical lighting techs) report to the Best Boy (Assistant Chief Lighting Technician or ACLT) who reports to the Gaffer (Chief Lighting Technician or CLT), who is the head of the department. The Rigging Best Boy (Rigging Assistant Chief Lighting Technician) reports to the Rigging Gaffer (Chief Rigging Technician) who is the head of the rigging, but not the department.

I learn a lot just by working & research of the Gaffers role and responsibilities on the technical aspects of production. The separation of duties between the Electrical Department and Grip Department is strictly enforced. Now I have a better understanding as I watch credits at the end of a film

"I have also experienced working with world known Gaffer "Moolchand Dedhia" in Mumbai an international Production house- Flirting vision Pvt. Ltd., Auckland/ Mumbai, 7 days shooting schedule in 2018 " Johnson's Baby" all product ad film."

Note: Gaffers need to have many years of experience under their (tool) belts as members of the electrical crew, then as a best boy electric. Building relationships in the early years is crucial - most of the time, a gaffer will get recommended for a job by a DoP they've worked with before. Sometimes it also helps to take no union jobs as a gaffer before hitting the big time in a union job. The gaffer on a big-budget film generally makes \$35,000 to \$45,000 for a 12-week shoot. The natural next step up the ladder for a gaffer is DoP, although some choose to stay where they are.

Some Notable Gaffers

- [1] Moolchand Dedhia (World best Gaffer, India)
- [2] Shaikh Akbar (India)
- [3] Sheetal Dedhia (First Women Gaffer, India)
- [4] Juan Jose Alcaide (USA)
- [5] David Light (New York)
- [6] Bob Field (USA)
- [7] Bob Finley III (Los Angeles), etc.

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