**Working Magic: The Occupations of the Film Industry**Alex Ibrahim, cinematographer  
Interview by Julia Fernandez  
Fall 2012 **Alex Ibrahim:** I took a twisty path.

**Julia Fernandez:** Yeah?

**AI:** I actually went to school for computer science, electrical engineering, math, and physics.

**JF:** Oh, wow.

**AI:** And I came back to film which I’d been interested in high school as a hobby, but at the time I didn’t take it very seriously as a possible career. “Oh, that’s what lucky people do,” you know. There’s not a lot of money in it. So I had all these pragmatic reasons for doing other things, but I didn’t find any satisfaction. Turns out I was right. It’s not a very pragmatic business. You need a lot of luck as well as a lot of hard work to get ahead. And hard work will just help you tread water. But I’m very much more satisfied with about one-tenth—one-fifteenth possibly—the income that I had as a science person.

**JF:** So did you go to school for film at all?

**AI:** No, I didn’t. My film background is entirely self-taught. There are a lot of jobs on a film set. As a cinematographer my focus is the camera department, lighting, and the grip department. Camera is pretty obvious what it does: it takes the pictures. Lighting: well, if you don’t have light you’re making radio, not film. And the grip department is one that confuses a lot of people. They’re responsible for moving things but also all for the practical temporary construction. So if I need a platform to put the camera on or some kind of a trellis to hold the set up or something like that, that’s grip department.

So I’m responsible for those. And they’re very practical pursuits. When you leave those departments—and now I’m getting afield from my expertise—you get into like wardrobe. Well, you need to know how to sew; they don’t teach sewing at film school. You get into production design; that requires a design background as well as a film background. So all of these other areas of study need to combine in order to create a successful film. You’ve probably seen student films where people are just wearing everyday clothes. They go someplace and it’s a white wall.

**JF:** And they just don’t look very good.

AI: It’s boring because there’s nothing in the film to create interest.

**JF:** Right.

**AI:** You need all of these crafts, and more importantly you need to know how they relate. And the only place you can learn that is on a film set where all these craftspeople come together. You don’t get that in film school. In film school, you talk about—well, they talk about; I didn’t attend—mise-en-scène and the meaning of the film grammar. You know what? We don’t talk about that on set.

**JF:** Okay, so that kind of ties in with my next question. What are some of the skills or personality traits that you would say that a cinematographer or director would really need to be successful, to be a valuable member of a team?

**AI:** First thing any senior filmmaker needs to have is tremendous organizational skills. And I’m not talking about just the aptitude some people have for being organized. You need to actually have the skills and the practice of organization, because when you go to make a film, a lot of filmmakers talk about it in military terms because it’s a lot like having a plan for a war. Because you get out there and the conditions in the field—on set—they provide friction of all sorts.

And so you need to have plans and contingency plans and backup contingency plans because it’s not going to go the way you want. And all of that preparation, none of it’s going to be useful on set unless you have tremendous control over the location. What all that really does is prepare you to really understand what you are trying to accomplish, so when you change plans you have a strong sense of where and how you should change them. So organization, number one.

Number two, perseverance. There’s an adage I once heard about musicians, which is probably just as true if not more true in film: you’re going to have to work in obscurity for twenty years and then one day you’ll become an overnight success.

**JF:** That’s good.

AI: You have to do it. You just have to make some films and get them done. And making a feature film is a tremendously complicated and expensive exercise. That’s why you have to persevere. You have to persevere when all of your friends and family, everyone who cares about you, people you respect in the industry are like, “give it up.” You still have to say, “Nah, I’m just going to keep going.” So, perseverance. But if you’re interested in film, go make a film.