PRACTICAL GUIDE

The Colorist

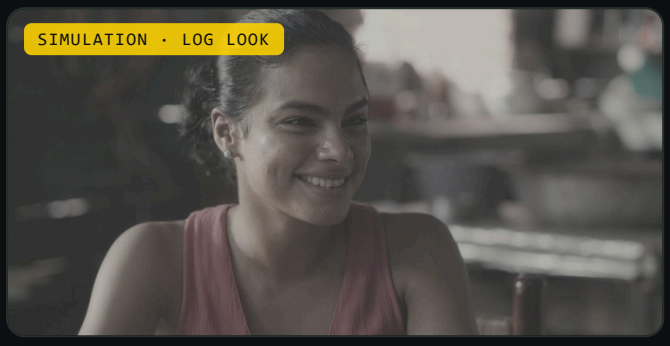
Working with a colorist from pre-production



by Luis Taveras · Colorist

What comes out of the camera isn't the final image

Especially in log or RAW, the camera records raw material: a flat, gray, low-contrast image designed to keep as much information as possible. The colorist is the one who finishes building that image and turns it into what the audience will see.



This is what an uncorrected log file looks like: flat and gray.



The same image with the final grade.

What a colorist does

- [ ] **Matches every shot** so a scene shot over several days with several cameras feels like one moment.
- [ ] **Enhances the work of the cinematographer and the gaffer**: adds light where it couldn't be placed on set and takes it away where there was too much.
- [ ] **Enhances the color palette** and, on many projects, creates it with the production designer and the cinematographer.
- [ ] **Guides the viewer's eye**, adds **texture** to the image and cares for every actor's **skin tone**.
- [ ] **Creates the emotion** of each scene with color and delivers a correct image for cinema, TV and streaming.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

Matching: one single moment

Every shoot day, every camera and every change in light leaves a different mark on the image. Without matching, the audience feels jumps even if they can't explain why.









Above, the same scene with different color casts (simulation). Here, the real shot already matched in the grade.

Matched: the scene feels continuous.

The palette, from pre-production

The palette is decided before the shoot, between the director, the cinematographer, the production designer and the colorist. That way wardrobe, sets and light already push toward the final look.



Warm home.



Cold office.



Neon party.



Golden sunset.

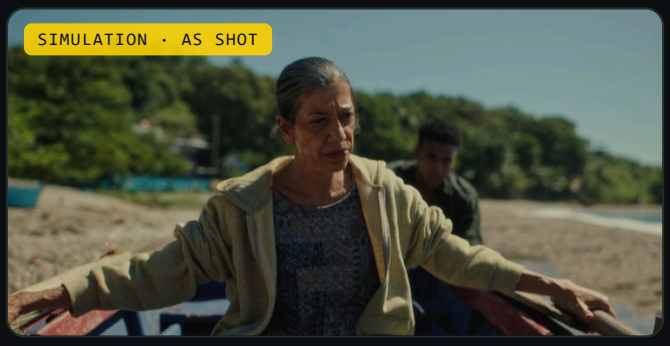
Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. *Sintel* (2010) and *Tears of Steel* (2012) © Blender Foundation · durian.blender.org · mango.blender.org · CC BY 3.0 license.

When the colorist comes in

1. **Pre-production.** Reads the script or treatment, studies the references and proposes the look with the director and the cinematographer.
2. **Camera test.** Skin, wardrobe, sets and lights are shot with the real camera and lenses, and the colorist grades them to validate the look.
3. **Show LUT.** That test produces the LUT (or CDL) used on the set monitors, so everyone works while seeing something close to the final result.
4. **During the shoot.** The DIT applies the look to the dailies and passes notes to the colorist.
5. **Post-production.** Once the edit is locked, the colorist grades shot by shot in a calibrated suite, with the director and the cinematographer.

What color can't do

The colorist doesn't work miracles: blown highlights and detail lost in black shadows can't be recovered, and bad lighting doesn't become cinema. Color multiplies what was done right on set.



Untouched image: flat, no direction.



With the final grade: light guides the eye.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

What to hand over to the colorist

- [ ] **The camera original files**, never a compressed export.
- [ ] **The editor's timeline** as XML, EDL or AAF, with the edit locked.
- [ ] **A reference video** of the edit (offline) to compare shot by shot.
- [ ] **The show LUT or CDL**, and the look references agreed in pre-production.
- [ ] **Camera reports**: model, profile (log/RAW), ISO, white balance, lenses and filters.
- [ ] **Delivery specs**: color space (Rec.709, P3, HDR), resolution, frame rate and format.
- [ ] **Real dates** for the grade and for review sessions with the director.

Common mistakes

- [ ] **Calling the colorist at the end**, with little time and little budget.
- [ ] **Thinking a downloaded LUT is enough**: a LUT doesn't match shots or care for skin.
- [ ] **Having the editor do the color** to save money: they're different crafts.
- [ ] **Sending compressed exports** instead of the original files.



Original footage: every detail for the grade.



Exteriors matched shot by shot.



Look agreed from pre-production.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. *Sintel* (2010) and *Tears of Steel* (2012) © Blender Foundation · durian.blender.org · mango.blender.org · CC BY 3.0 license.

Quick checklist for your next project

- [ ] **Talk to the colorist in pre-production** and share the script, treatment and references.
- [ ] **Define the palette** with the production designer and the cinematographer.
- [ ] **Run a camera test** with real skin, wardrobe and lights.
- [ ] **Shoot with an agreed show LUT** and in a format that keeps information (log, RAW, 10-bit or more).
- [ ] **Good exposure is still your job**: protect the highlights and the skin.
- [ ] **Hand over everything organized**: originals, timeline, reference, LUT, reports and specs.
- [ ] **Book time** to review the color with the colorist.

1 to 10: a 9

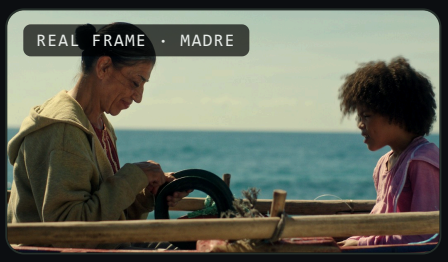
In the film industry, the colorist is a 9: not a 10, because they don't work miracles. But when the director, the cinematographer and the colorist work together from the start, color takes the story to another level.



Skin cared for at night.



Vivid, clean color.



Natural daylight.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Luis Taveras

COLORIST

Luis Taveras is a colorist, member of the Colorist Society International, with five feature films and more than 500 music videos. His credits include *Madre: a dos centímetros de ti*, winner of five awards at the 2025 New York Dominican Film Festival, and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, which premiered at the United Palace in New York. For him, color is the last place where a film can still change its emotion, and the skin always has to feel true.

5	500+	10
feature films	music videos	years in the craft

What I do

- Color grading for film
- Music videos
- Commercials and brands
- Cinema mastering and delivery (DCP)

Member, Colorist Society International · ID 98523302

DGCINE Film Agent · SIRECINE AC-PTA 18224

Planning your next shoot?

I'd love to collaborate with you on the color of your next project. Write to me and watch my demo reel.

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#colorist #colorgrading #cinematography #preproduction #filmmaking #luistaverascolorist