

# TRANSITIONING TERMINOLOGY

**Warning:** some readers may find the histories of these terms, or the terms themselves offensive or triggering.

## “UBANGI”

**Film usage:** accessory used to offset the camera from the dolly

**Origin:** “ubangi” entered the North American English lexicon from the exploitative business of human zoos.

Various groups in the Americas and Africa have practiced lip stretching body modification for thousands of years, some of whom used plates of increasing sizes to gradually increase the degree of stretching.



In the 19th and 20th centuries, some African people were exhibited in Europe and North America as part of zoos or circus “freak shows”. The people on display were compared to animals, presented as “savages”, forced to wear costumes based on exaggerated images of “primitive” people according to White expectations.

In 1930 the Barnum & Bailey circus advertised one group of African people who wore lip plates. The marketing team arbitrarily chose the name of the Ubangi River because it sounded exotic. To be perfectly clear, the African people being exploited did not self-identify as Ubangi, nor were they from anywhere near the Ubangi River. None of the major African groups which use lip-plates today (e.g. the Mursi, Chai, and Turma) live anywhere near the Ubangi River.

Regardless, the exhibit planted the term “ubangi” in North American vocabulary as referring to African people with lip plates. The film industry slang term was likely coined based on the superficial resemblance between the offset and stretched lips, unaware of the degrading context of human circuses.

The term should be retired from film sets because it is an inaccurate cultural reference with an exploitative and disgraceful origin. There is no valuable film-specific history to preserve, and there are viable alternatives already in use.

**Replacement words:** “offset”; “dolly offset”

# BEST BOY

**Film usage:** assistant to the department head in grip or lighting

**Origin:** some sources suggest the film industry borrowed the term from British sailors or tradespeople, or possibly the theatre world. A hypothetical example cited might be that someone needing help might ask a department head for the latter's "best boy", meaning to borrow that department's most experienced worker.

Today, best boy is one of few gender-marked job titles left in film. We've already phased out "cameraman", "boom man", and "script girl", in favour of camera operator, boom operator, and script supervisor.

**Replacement words:** "best electric" / "best grip" used by IATSE 849 in Atlantic Canada, or "2nd grip" / "2nd electric" used by ACCP (Association of Canadian Commercial Production)

## Why does it matter?

Given that the grip and electric departments currently tend to be heavily male, changing this job title can be a small way of making those crews more welcoming to women and people with non-binary gender identities.

Some productions change callsheets to read "best girl" instead of "best boy" when a woman works that role, but this fix may be irrelevant to people with a non-binary gender identity who may not wish to identify as "best boy" or "best girl". Rather than track everyone's individual preference for their version of the job title, a single gender-neutral term would eliminate this unnecessary hassle for 2nd ADs and other production personnel.

It should remain an available option that one can choose to identify as a best boy / best girl on an informal basis, however the default in official documentation (call sheets, rate charts, agreements) should be changed over to an inclusive gender-neutral term.

Even though "best boy" has historically been used for everyone regardless of gender, that does not make it gender neutral. Studies support the case against gender-marked job titles, because those marked titles can shape peoples' expectations of which gender belongs in that role and who does not.

For example, one 2012 Polish study found that in a simulated job application process, female candidates using feminine versions of job titles were evaluated more harshly than equally-qualified men using the default masculine job titles; women applying using the masculine version of the job title were still evaluated more harshly, but not as badly as if they used the feminine job title.

Changing language is only one small part of moving towards a more inclusive work environment. Other initiatives are absolutely necessary to dismantle our industries' inequalities, and we should not ignore this one opportunity simply because alone it is small. Remember that it takes a lot of small changes together to achieve a big change.

## “BAMBOULA” / “BAMBOOLA”

**Film usage:** 4' x 8' wooden frame covered in black duvetyne fabric

**Origin:** “Bamboula” is a racist slur in France today. The term originally referred simply to a drum played by African slaves and their descendants primarily in Haiti and Louisiana, as well as a dance which would accompany that music. This term became corrupted by European and North American people, who began using it as a dehumanizing shorthand for Black people with connotations of those individuals being “primitive” or “savage”.

It's not impossible that the film usage began innocently, perhaps a grip enthusiastic about esoteric musical history felt the skinning of a 4x8' frame resembled a drum such as the bamboula. After being coined, slang spreads when people hear new terms and choose to repeat them--did bamboula spread because other grips back then were familiar with Caribbean/Creole music, or were they more familiar with the word as a slur against Black people?

Even if the origin of the film slang was clean, today the word is still a racist slur in France and should be retired from film vocabulary here given that Canada and France have major cultural and economic ties in the form of immigration and co-production partnerships.

**Replacement words:** “4 by 8 solid”



## “CHINESE” BARNDOORS

**Film usage:** barndoors oriented with the longer leaves on top and bottom of the lamp's face, especially when narrow  
E.g. “*Go Chinese with those barndoors*”

**Origin:** a crude reference to stereotypes that Chinese peoples’ (and other East Asian peoples’) eyes are narrow and/or “slanted”. White North Americans have referenced these stereotypes for hundreds of years, usually when mocking Chinese people or framing them as abnormal / outsiders.



Ethnic references are not universally acceptable or unacceptable, but rather should be evaluated on their historical and modern contexts.

Example: the camera term “Dutch angle” references German Expressionism in early cinematic history and is not tainted by racism against German or Dutch people, whereas “Chinese barndoors” is based off racist mockery and discrimination that continues into the present day.

Eliminating this term from the film vocabulary is one small act we can do towards eliminating this mockery and discrimination from our society at large.

**Replacement words:** “horizontal”; “landscape”; “pinched”; “squeezed”  
E.g. “*make your barndoors landscape*”; “*pinch up those barndoors*”

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