

Trends in Cinematography

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Talk to any DP today and you'll get a clear picture of the latest trends in cinematography, and all say that the digital revolution has made this is a challenging and exciting time to be working in movies. While digital cameras are getting smaller, lighter and increasingly user-friendly, paradoxically, film labs are busier than ever, and the newest film stocks are helping to ensure that the reports of film's death are premature.

Many DPs and directors agree that the digital format will ultimately take the place of film, but that day is still a while away for most filmmakers. For digital visionary and legendary Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather*, *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*), that day arrived some time ago. "Electronic cinema, or digital cinema if you want to call it that, has become a reality," he says. "Cinema has gone digital and is edited on electronic machines and now ultimately will be shot on electronic cameras." Coppola's most recent films, *Tetro* and *Youth Without Youth*, were shot digitally with DP Mihai Malaimare who used the Sony HD F900. "We shot *Tetro* on location in Argentina and Spain, and *Youth* in Romania and Bulgaria, and I used the F900 with a beautiful set of DigiPrime lenses and an HDSR deck, the Sony SRW1, and the image quality we got was just amazing," says Malaimare. The DP's move to an all-digital pipeline started 10 years ago when filmmakers began doing DIs. "It's been so exciting working with a pioneer like Francis who predicted the arrival of electronic cinema back in the late '70s. Now, with all the new cameras like the [Sony] F23, F35, RED and [Panavision] Genesis, it's a reality."

More and more DPs are embracing the Red camera, and the system probably doesn't have a better cheerleader or bigger fan than Steven Soderbergh, a top director who also operates his own camera. He recently used the Red to shoot *The Girlfriend Experience* and *Che*, his epic four-and-a-half-hour film biography of the Latin American revolutionary. With eclectic work ranging from *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Kafka* and *The Good German* to *Erin Brockovich*, the *Ocean's Eleven* franchise and *Traffic* (which won him a Best Director Oscar), Soderbergh says his days of shooting on film are probably over. "Unless I was really going for a specific look that I just felt I definitely could not get any other way, I can't imagine not shooting digitally from this point on," he says. "The benefits are just so significant for someone who likes to work the way I do, so it just seems pointless to go back to film."

For Soderbergh, there are "so many" strengths to the Red camera. "You've got to start with the sensor itself, and from an aesthetic standpoint I really like the way the sensor sees things," he explains. "I like the way it sees light and I find it to be unique, and I don't think the image it captures and generates looks like any other digital camera. And then from [a] design standpoint I think it's been very ergonomically constructed, considering what it is — it's light and small. And I love recording on the flash cards."

There's no umbilical [so] you're not tied to anything. We were working with [RED's] Build No. 1 on Che, so there have been a lot of improvements since then. I shot *The Girlfriend Experience* on Build 18, so they keep making it better and better.

Soderbergh also notes that the Red is very affordable. "The fact that you can put a package together for a comparatively pretty small amount of money is just fantastic, and [that] enables someone with not a lot of cash to go out and make a film that looks spectacular," he says. "Now it doesn't solve the biggest problem which we all confront — the script — but it has certainly leveled the playing field significantly, and now I'm very curious to see how this all plays out. I think Red has now shipped 3,000-plus cameras, so it'll be very interesting to see what results on the feature side from all these people having Red cameras. But for me the opportunities are endless, and it's just such a lush image. So I feel like I'm getting a film that looks a lot more expensive than it is. For instance, *The Girlfriend Experience* only had a budget of \$1.7 million and it looks a lot more expensive than that. We shot anamorphic and it looks really big."

The director also recalls the benefits of using the Red on Che. "Just practically in terms of the film we were making, it enabled us to move much more quickly and easily than if we'd been shooting film. We shot the second part first, and we shot that part backwards, so that the first material we shot was the big gun battle in this big ravine. And if we'd been trying to shoot it with film and hauling magazines up and down all the time, we'd have gone nuts. Also, there are only a few scenes in the entire film where I actually used a light. It's almost all available light, so huge savings right there. I didn't even order a film package, which had everyone on the production freaked out. I was adamant that we use the Red."

Brandon Mastrippolito, an experienced cinematographer whose credits include the new ABC comedy *Better Off Ted*, *Swingtown* for CBS and *Veronica Mars* for UPN, is another big fan of Red. "I shot *Better Off Ted* with the Red and the Genesis, and the Red camera's really opening doors for young filmmakers who don't have any backing to get a movie made," he says. "Hard drives are cheap, and I'm starting this low-budget \$1.5 million indie film and shooting on Red." The DP also likes Zeiss primes, Duclos lenses and Angénieux Optimo zooms, which have great clarity, sharpness and a wide range of lens sizes. "For the last six months I've had [Optimo zooms] virtually bolted to my camera. [And] Duclos keep my lenses in the very best shape and maintain them, and there's probably only three companies like that worldwide."

Anthony Dod Mantle is another top DP making great use of smaller and lighter digital cameras. Mantle, whose credits include the Oscar-winning *Last King of Scotland*, won this year's Best Cinematography Oscar for his inspired, kinetic work on *Slumdog Millionaire*. The British DP previously worked with *Slumdog* Director Danny Boyle on *28 Days Later* and *Millions*, and he was used to a run-and-gun approach to filmmaking. But when it came to shooting on location on the streets of Mumbai, Mantle had to be extremely flexible in his methods. The team originally planned to shoot certain scenes using highly advanced SI-2K digital cameras and shoot the rest of the movie on film, but Boyle didn't want to take large, cumbersome 35mm cameras into the slums. Smaller, more flexible digital cameras enabled them to shoot quickly with much less disturbance to the local communities. For a cinema vérité feel, the DP also used a "CanonCam," a Canon still camera that takes 12 frames per second. "If people see a still camera, they don't think it is recording live action," reports Boyle. "We'd record stuff like that, as well as occasionally using the traditional film camera, so it's a mixture of different technologies that we used in the film. Whoever was operating the camera would have a hard drive strapped to their back."

Top DP Alan Caso has worked on *Reindeer Games*, *Six Feet Under* and *Lie to Me*, and is currently shooting the new NBC drama *Trauma* in San Francisco. "I'm using Sony F35s, which basically reworked the Genesis with new electronics," reports Caso. "The show's approach is to use multiple cameras and do a semi-rehearsed take, and then grab something different on take two, and then put it all together. Screen direction? Come on, this is the 21st century." The DP loves the freedom and flexibility offered by

the latest digital cameras. "The movie camera has had a century of trimming down to be this lean, mean fighting machine, and we now have cameras weighing under 10 pounds. So for me, the big trend has been freeing up the HD camera so that it can compete with film, and not just in terms of the look. Quality-wise, it's now on a par with film — it's just a different medium with a different quality."

Caso shot "Lie to Me" with a Panavision package and Primo lenses. "I shoot both film and digital," he says. "It depends on what's needed, and for "Trauma" I wanted more of an edgy, urban look, so I'm using Cooke and Zeiss glass as they're right for the show. And the F35s really came through in the last few months with some great upgrades, and now you can put lightweight recording elements right on the camera." Caso also sees digital cameras dominating the market due to converging outside forces. "Technology advances can be triggered by outside forces, such as the bad economy and ongoing actors' strike threats. Those forces really opened up the HD market when they reached critical mass."

Emmy Award-winning DP Crescenzo Notarile, whose credits include the hit CBS/Touchstone show "Ghost Whisperer," also sees a trend towards HD, especially in TV. He notes that "producers are always looking to save time and money, and HD can do that."

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