

Film Rules

Why 10 of the world's top cinematographers have still not bought into the digital revolution

by *Bob Fisher* | Published in MovieMaker November 30, 2009



Guillermo Navarro shoots *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Leonard Shelby found himself unable to sleep, tormented by memories he'll never have, terrified of a future he'd eventually forget. The moonlight coated the apartment walls with a shade of gloom that only the most haunted people can truly understand. The light was just strong enough for Leonard to thumb through a few photographs, praying some semblance of a memory could be recalled. Still, deep within, he knew he'd eventually forget; that haunting shade of blue shining off those walls had never been more poetic.

Fortunately, moviemaker Christopher Nolan—and his trusty cinematographer, Wally Pfister—decided to stay true to tradition when they shot the 2000 thriller, *Memento*, in high-quality 35mm film. If Nolan had caved in to the new wave of digital video making the rounds among even the most ardent traditionalists, audiences would have been faced with a silhouette of Leonard stumbling around in the dark, gazing deeply into Polaroids they only wished they could see.

"Film has an enormous range of exposure latitude, which gives us infinite creative flexibility," says Pfister, who is currently collaborating with Nolan on *Inception*, their sixth co-venture. "I can underexpose film by three stops and overexpose it by five stops within the same frame. That allows me to record details in the brightest highlights and darkest shadows—the way the human eye sees them. That is simply not possible in any video format."

"The range of colors that you can record with the best digital cameras is also a joke when put head-to-head with 35mm negative," continues Pfister. "Why anybody would replace a proven image capture system with vastly inferior technology is beyond my comprehension." The following nine DPs agree.

JOHN LEONETTI, ASC has earned close to 30 cinematography credits, but every project is a new adventure. He recently completed production on his first 3-D film, Alexandre Aja's *Piranha 3-D*, which was produced with a single camera in 35mm anamorphic format.

"We shot on film for practical and aesthetic reasons," says Leonetti. "There was only one night scene; the rest were mainly daylight exteriors filmed in Lake Havasu, Arizona. We anticipated temperatures as high as 110 degrees, which would have caused problems with electronic cameras, and a two-camera digital 3-D rig would have limited our maneuverability... We have to remember that film-making is an art form as well as a business, and we should never compromise our ability to tell stories."

Invictus, a dramatization of the true story of how Nelson Mandela used the 1995 Rugby World Cup games in South Africa to draw the people of his formerly divided nation together, marks the eighth collaboration between Clint Eastwood and TOM STERN, ASC.

"I listened to Clint's vision for characters and emotions, and chose the right paint for my palette," says Stern. "About half of the scenes are unscripted rugby action filmed in available light. Steve Campanelli, my operator, was chasing the action with either a hand-held camera or a Steadicam. Film gave us the latitude we needed to move from dark shadows to bright sunlight in the blink of an eye."

JOHN FLINN, III, ASC grew up in the industry, as his grandfather and father were studio executives. Flinn has played multiple roles, including stuntman, actor and director, in addition to shooting more than 150 episodes of narrative television and more than a dozen TV movies. He has earned seven Emmy nominations. Flinn's most recent venture is the series "Saving Grace," which is produced in Super 16 film format.

"There is something about the chemistry of film that helps to create an illusion of fantasy," Flinn says. "I'm transported to an imaginary world when I'm watching film projected on a cinema screen. It's the same feeling that I got when my parents read me fairytales when I was a kid. Digital images have a kind of in-your-face reality, like watching a live television newscast. It's not the same feeling."

Some 20 motion pictures have been based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, but the latest version is the first collaboration between director Guy Ritchie and PHILIPPE ROUSSELOT, ASC, AFC.

"We produced the film in Super 1.85 format because we want the audience to see the heights of buildings that were miles away in the background," says Rousselot, who earned an Oscar for *A River Runs Through It* and additional nominations for *Henry & June* and *Hope and Glory*. "During the 1870s, London was lit with gas lamps and arc lights on tall towers, which created a harsh, blue glow. There was no practical way to light those scenes, but film gave us the flexibility of shooting day for night without compromising the look. We put the final touches on those scenes during DI timing, making the sky darker, turning the sun into the moon and playing with tones of clouds and reflections in the river."

PETRA KORNER is a rising star in the galaxy of cinematographers. She has earned five film credits in the past two years, including her collaboration with Wes Craven on *My Soul to Take*. She was the 2009 recipient of the Women in Film Kodak Vision Award for Cinematography.

"Film and video are different mediums," says Korner. "Video is electronic rather than organic. It doesn't take a cinematographer's eye to see that. Film is much better at holding highlights and reproducing true black tones. It's our responsibility to tell producers, directors and the upcoming generation that all they have to do is look at the two mediums side-by-side and make informed decisions."

CALEB DESCHANEL, ASC has earned Oscar nominations for *The Right Stuff*, *The Natural*, *Fly Away Home*, *The Patriot* and *The Passion of the Christ*. He shared his thoughts about film versus video, and the new generation of KODAK VISION3 films in particular, after collaborating with Nick Cassavetes on *My Sister's Keeper* earlier this year.

"I love the 5219 (500T) stock," says Deschanel. "It holds details better in the shadows and highlights, and gives you a lot more leeway for making decisions about what the audience sees and doesn't see. There were moments in the movie where we wanted things to look idyllic and make the audience think, 'Ain't life grand?'"

MICHAEL GOI, ASC, president of the American Society of Cinematographers, collaborated with veteran scribe Dan Gordon, who took a rare turn at the helm on *Expecting Mary*.

"This is an extraordinarily emotional story," Goi explains. "Dan's script and the wonderful cast deserve the warm, fantasy look that only film renders. I suggested producing *Expecting Mary* in the two-perf Techniscope format that Sergio Leone pioneered in Italy some 40 years ago. That made 35mm film an affordable option for this very low-budget project."

"The National Parks: America's Best Idea" is the 17th time that BUDDY SQUIRES has collaborated with Ken Burns on a documentary. Squires hiked through 57 national parks with Burns, shooting film in unpredictable weather ranging from snow and rainstorms to bright, sunny days. In his backpack he carried his reliable Aaton XTR camera, three lenses, a tripod and an ample supply of Super 16 film.

"Film provided the latitude we needed to record nature at its best," Squires says. "That was important, because there is a purity to the accidents of nature that you could never plan. One day I was filming a river of lava flowing from a volcano off a cliff into the ocean, when I noticed rays of the setting sun were dancing off the red hot liquid rock. It was a primal display of fireworks created by nature. I immediately turned the camera on it. The colors, tones and textures we recorded are the next best thing to being there. Film is a proven, archival medium, and we were recording history in the making."

GUILLERMO NAVARRO, ASC, AMC also stresses the importance of the superior archivability of film. He has earned some 30 credits for Spanish and English language films and won an Oscar for Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*.

"We know about history because our ancestors carved hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone, sculpted statues, wrote stories on parchment and invented the Gutenberg press," Navarro says. "Film is the Rosetta Stone of our times. We have a moral obligation to preserve our films for future generations." MM

For more insights from other top cinematographers addressing the film versus digital issue, visit the "Film. No Compromise." section of www.kodak.com/go/motion.

