

# Pioneering Agent Crush

**“Long after *Thunderbirds* ended, I knew the magic formula of puppet characters and model effects was a sure fire winner,” says Sean Robinson. At six years of age, he started building models based on the well-known television programme.**

**Seventeen years ago, Robinson met his hero, Derek Meddings, the man behind the machines in *Stingray* and *Thunderbirds*, who subsequently taught him the secrets behind his 40 year career.**

Now, the ingenious British director has achieved his goal of creating and bringing to the big screen a pioneering live action feature that combines traditional moviemaking techniques with animatronic puppets, miniatures, models and cutting edge special effects. “Directing *Agent Crush* has been second nature to me” Robinson muses, “but I want to make it clear that it will not look anything like *Thunderbirds*. I have pushed the concept into the 21st century.”

Robinson was advised at the outset by an experienced effects supervisor that much of the effects model work would need to be shot on green screen. “I knew that some green screen elements were inevitable, but I believed we could shoot our New York high-speed car chases for real and in camera. So after a few heated discussions, I put my foot down and we achieved truly stunning shots in camera, with small sets and a low budget. We also changed the whole dynamic of the crew’s thinking. Our success is due in no small part to director of photography Peter Field, a veteran of many blockbuster movies, including *Casino Royale*, *Alien vs. Predator* and *Hot Fuzz*

(2nd unit), who believes that nothing is impossible.”

“Model shoots are notoriously tricky and command the highest levels of concentration. Peter has had to think on his feet, lighting a set in minutes while preparing to shoot another, but the shots look incredible. His effortless genius with lighting makes everything seem real and the New York street scenes, which have already been seen in the US, fooled Hollywood into thinking that we shot a plate. In fact, we built part of a 1/12 scale model. Peter’s lighting gives the impression that there is far more scenery than actually exists.”

## Genius

“John Gamble, 1st camera assistant and focus-puller, is incredible. He followed models flown on wires at a fair rate of knots down tunnels, along street sets built five feet in the air and through truly bone-shattering explosions. He gets the camera in impossible places and the image is always perfect. We couldn’t have made *Agent Crush* without Terry Bamber, our assistant director whose enthusiasm for his craft is

an inspiration to us all; and Digby Milner, our genius special effects supervisor.”

“Sean and I are taskmasters” admits his brother, producer Barrie Robinson. “We’ve been through hell to get this movie financed. Shooting on 35mm was a must, but without Kodak stock, high speed cameras and advanced head and techno cranes, we would not have been able to capture in camera the high-speed flying shots with explosions going off all around!”

“The model build was executed by Chris Clarke and his colleagues at Crawley Creatures. They excelled themselves,” he continues. “Each head mechanism took less than two weeks to complete and, with only enough time to make one head for each character, we’ve incorporated enough animatronics movement to cover most expressions. The main characters have nine to 11 servos in a head the size of an orange! Chris used a three rod system to control major head and body movements on the ¾ puppets used for close-ups; each has quick release arms of different types attached by clips.”

The challenges of finding in-camera approaches and an organic feel to the shots were of paramount importance to DP Field. “It was exciting to revisit traditional techniques and be innovative and resourceful, without relying on CGI/digital post to tell the story,” he comments. “My initial reaction was to shoot *Agent Crush* like a normal action film and scale the techniques to the puppet world as the script took our characters on adventures the scale of *Indiana Jones* and *James Bond*. We needed to wow the audience, especially in the chase sequences.” The DP captured his vision as closely as possible on the negative and only tweaked in post at the final grade.

## Keeping it simple

Choosing KODAK VISION2 500T 5218, Field kept his lighting regimes simple. “The high speed gave us good depth of field, so lighting large sets for up to 150 fps wasn’t difficult,” he states. With ARRIFlex 435s, Cooke S4 prime lenses and a lightweight Angenieux T2.6 15mm–40mm zoom – “a gem of a new lens”, he used a toblerone sliding box rig to push



Tool  
KODAK Look Manager System

the camera along narrow tunnels, as well as on overhead tracking rigs to fly cameras, models and the new Key Head, a small multi-axis lightweight remote head used on virtually every set.

### Continuity

Field decided with lighting gaffer, Steve Roberts, to install 14 x 10kW on dimmers around the sky backing. "As a result, whichever way the camera faced, we had the front, back and side light we required. We also used Kino Flo BarFly lamp units to light 1/3 scale puppets at close quarters in tandem with Kino Flo ParaBeam units for a powerful but evenly controlled soft source. We lit several sets on the same stage at once; one was against green screen and involved 1/3 scale puppets, necessitating fine degrees of control over lighting, whereas other sets required 20kW, 24kW Dinos and numerous Dedo lamps tucked into dark street corners. They were balanced against a flame ball explosion at 150 fps!"

Field used the KODAK Look Manager System to create a

photographic style and guarantee continuity through post-production to the finished answer print. Tom Balogh, who had worked with him on *Hot Fuzz*, produced digital stills that matched the negative characteristics and look, and helped telecine house Arion to deliver daily graded rushes that matched their vision. "KLMS produced thousands of high resolution digital images for PR use by our production company and maintained the project's designated style through the various stages of post-production," says Field.

Director Robinson concludes. "If we had stuck to green screen, digital and CGI effects, *Agent Crush* would have looked like any other kids' movie. Instead, it is a unique piece of work. If I had to sum up what makes it stand out, it's hearing the crew saying how much fun they're having. After all, we flew a car down the streets of New York while setting off huge explosions; then we blew up a train in Siberia and flew around the Statue of Liberty!"

*Agent Crush* was screened at the Canadian Film Festival in September.



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