

Gatlif, gypsies and Liberté

After scooping the Cèsar Award in 2006 for best cinematography on Pascale Ferran's *Lady Chatterley*, director of photography Julian Hirsch has now discovered the unusual world of director/producer/screenwriter/actor/composer Tony Gatlif.

Film stocks KODAK VISION2 200T 5217, KODAK VISION3 500T 5219

Winner of Best Director at Cannes in 2004 for *Exiles* (*Exiles*), Gatlif has long been intrigued by identity and rootlessness. In *Liberté* (*Freedom*), his new drama feature with Hirsch, the Algerian-born director of gypsy descent sets out to tackle the status of gypsies during the German occupation of France in World War II. A relatively unknown part of French history, this is a fictional work – but one that is largely based upon eye-witness accounts. It stars Marc Lavoine, Marie-José Croze and James Thiérée.

After visualising the universally-recognisable 1930s image of *Lady Chatterley*, just how did DP Hirsch handle *Liberté*, a period film set just a decade later? "Apart from the fact that I rarely remember how I work on a film" he says humbly, "I am wary with this type of film of creating a visual gap between nature, light and the sun, which are all unchanging, and costumes and props which originate from another time. For me, it is a question of forgetting such an impression so that the audience can experience the film in the present."

Grain and colours

In order to help connect the two elements, Hirsch shot with KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 and KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 in 2.35 format with a Moviecam 3-perf and Zeiss lenses. "The lenses' depth of field is very sharp and I greatly appreciate their blur layer," notes Hirsch. "The grain and colours of the two Kodak stocks combine really well. I used them mainly without filtration, sometimes adding an 85 or an ND, but without any diffusion or low contrast. I find that too

artificial. Tony Gatlif loves cinema and wide shots, so I opted for 5217 on daylight exteriors; it is a stock which I find is more defined and more exact than 500T. I used 5219 for almost all the interiors. The choice of film stocks was also due to the fact that Tony is an impatient and intuitive director who is capable of changing his mind at the last moment. With this sort of director, you need to use films you know well – and this was the case with 5217." Hirsch also used the two stocks with director André Téchiné in quite difficult conditions in *Les temps qui changent*, *Les témoins* and *La fille du RER*.

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Shooting for *Liberté* took place during the gradually shortening days of autumn near Saint-Bonnet-le-Château in central France. "The flexibility and scope of the stocks proved particularly useful in capturing the powerful, natural ambiances during the long takes of which Tony is fond, whether it was a question of fog, early morning or late afternoon scenes," says Hirsch. "Determining what exactly a period image is remains a question that haunts all DPs. While the question is universal, the response can only be subjective. Everyone has their own point of view," he muses.

"Even if there are many colour photos from the time of the German occupation of France," Hirsch continues, "there is generally a tendency to portray this period in black-and-white. This is a photographic task which can be justified, but it doesn't interest me because it's just too graphic. Fortunately, Tony preferred to show me photographs and postcards from the 1940s with pictures of Épinal on which the colours appear to have been brightly painted. The result

1 Filming a scene for *Liberté* of people waiting to board a train. The dolly track is clearly visible.



was surprising as it closely resembled the characteristics of the grain I'd imagined for the film with quite sensitive stock. These images were the real foundation for our colour work on this film."

However, Hirsch's real source of inspiration with regard to the image of the period film was to give a 'Pasolinien' look to the costumes. *Medea (Médée)*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's memorable 1969 film based on Euripides' Greek tragedy, is one of Hirsch's favourite films in this style. "It is as much to do with Pasolini's cinematic working style as it is the way he used exterior lighting on location. It's a reference which was very precious and extremely useful to me in my work – but I kept it secret during the filming."

Transylvania

Shot in eight weeks in a highly colourful environment, the dominant colour of *Liberté* is green. "We filmed a lot in the countryside and in wooded places, and to avoid the colour reflecting on the skin, I often re-lit faces with an overhead light – generally at camera height – with Chimeras and Joker-Bug 800s," says Hirsch. "To have lights which 'moved' in a work set-up in progress proved extremely valuable. My main light sources were 4K HMIs and Pars, and for evening scenes I used tungsten. The 1K and 2K Chinese lanterns were also very useful, either high up or on the ground with dimmers for 'fire' effects. In digital post-production my work will consist of toning down the greens and other colours without ruining a result that must absolutely remain coloured."

The relocation to Transylvania to reconstruct a gypsy internment camp was related to a question of extras. Hirsch explains: "Even today in Romania, there are whole villages with gypsies similar to those who found themselves in France in the 1940s and who are the true characters of the film. In France, it is impossible to find 200 extras who can speak original Romany: a language that varies according to whether someone comes from the Ukraine, Romania or Hungary, and is spoken in very slightly different ways. Suffice it to say that on set there was no room for improvisation."

Director Gatlif was more insistent than ever that the narrative thread was maintained throughout the film and that *Liberté* relates a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. "This is a film on which shooting took place in an almost traditional way for the director, and whose screenplay will perhaps seem more conventional than his previous works," remarks Hirsch. "For example, whenever it was possible, I often suggested using tracking shots, which in his mind would have taken time or indeed would have been complicated to set up in the forest. However, from the moment when he was able to see for himself that this wasn't the case and we could actually use the same tracking scene in different ways without it being noticeable, I think he took delight in it. There was also a change in his usual approach to the use of focal lengths. While his previous films were mostly shot in short focal lengths, the equipment and rendering of long focal lengths in *Liberté* combine more strongly in the sense of the image about which we have spoken."

And how do you place a historical film like *Liberté*, which is based on real-life characters and tackles the fate of a gypsy clan in German-occupied France, into Tony Gatlif's long career? "It is meant to be both educational and informative," concludes Hirsch. "That explains why the script is more inclusive than normal. Its narration is intended to make the viewer understand what really happened to travelling gypsies in 1940s France."