

Filmmakers' Forum

Mandy (Gemma Harvey) makes her case in the feature *Don't Let Him In*. During preproduction, cinematographer Vincent De Paula made his own case for why the feature should be shot on Super 16mm film.



Negotiating the Best Shooting Format

By Vincent De Paula

Many years ago, when I decided I wanted to be a cinematographer, I looked to paintings as a strong visual reference. I discovered Vermeer's masterly treatment of light, de Hooch's use of color and perspectives, Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, and Monet's Impressionist style. I learned about the techniques these painters had used to master their craft, and the tools they applied to their work.

Like other artists, cinematographers must understand the tools that can be applied to our work, choose the tools that best suit the story at hand, and apply those tools in ways that will maximize their distinct characteristics. Because we are responsible for the look of our projects, choosing the right format should be an essential part of the process.

A couple of years ago, I flew to London to meet with director Kelly Smith, who was looking for a cinematographer to shoot his debut feature, *Don't Let Him In*. It was a low-budget independent production, so the word "digital" arose quite frequently in our conversation. We talked for a long time, discussing a lot of visual references and the style Kelly had in mind for his movie.

Because of the project's budget (just under \$1 million), the producers had already decided on digital acquisition. When I read the script, though, it became clear to me that shooting on film would be more appropriate; the story had a very organic feel, and most of the references Kelly and I discussed were films from the

1970s, such as *Straw Dogs* (1971). I knew I would have to struggle to achieve that look with a digital format, and I believed film would not only help us obtain the desired look, but also give us better production value. It would give us a texture, color rendition, character and resolution that no other format could, so I really pushed for it. I didn't want to hear, "Let's shoot on the Red and make it look like film."

I decided Super 16mm would be the best format to help us achieve the visual texture Kelly and I had discussed. To persuade the producers that this was the right path, I had to show them that the movie's style was perfectly suited to film acquisition, and I also had to prove that shooting film would be cost-effective. Producers often cite the costs of processing negative and transferring footage when they argue for digital capture, and one of the reasons I successfully made a case for shooting Super 16mm was that it turned out to be more cost-effective.

There are many hidden costs in digital acquisition, and these combine to contradict the notion that it is a cheaper way to shoot. When I'm on a digital shoot, it seems to take more people to get the same job done. You must also use expensive HD monitors, numerous hard drives and a lot of cabling, whereas on a film shoot, I just need a feed for the director's monitor (if he requires one). I can therefore move more quickly, saving production money.

Furthermore, the post path for projects that originate on film is seamless and proven, whereas with digital files and hard drives, the same work is a bit more complicated and technically challeng-



De Paula (at camera) snaps a digital photo as a reference for the colorist while director Kelly Smith (left) studies the scene.

ing. Most of the time, this results in a longer post process and the need to involve more people.

I have found that film-originated features get more attention and support, and this proved to be true for *Don't Let Him In*. My contacts at Kodak were willing to give us a fantastic deal on film stock, and iLab in London gave us a great deal for the processing and transferring of the negative. Film-camera packages proved to be cheaper to rent, and there was no need for all the monitors, cards, hard drives, cabling and tents. On the post end, Technicolor London gave us a deal on the digital intermediate. Overall, with the deals we got and our workflow, it proved to be about 15 percent less expensive to shoot Super 16mm than to shoot with a high-end digital camera.

Of course, my choice was not based on cost alone, but also on aesthetics. *Don't Let Him In* follows two couples spending a weekend in the English countryside, where they cross paths with the wrong person. The main setting was a Buckinghamshire cottage whose rooms were all very small and confined, with no places to rig any lighting.

This precarious situation was actually



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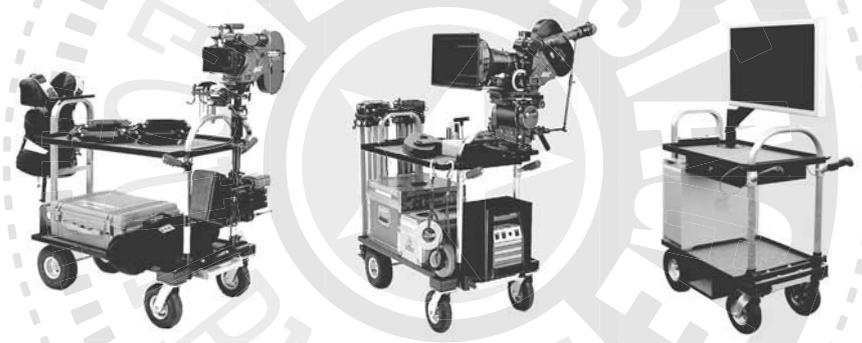
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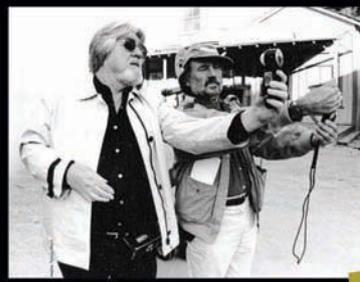
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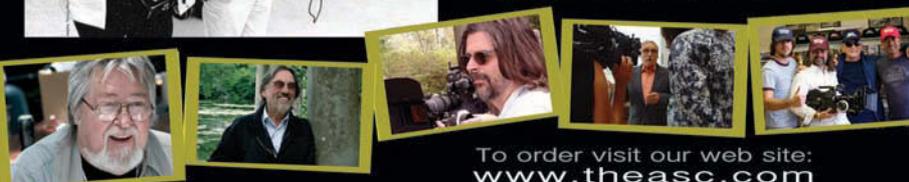
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In addition to the film's cramped cottage location, De Paula had to contend with night exteriors while working with a small lighting package. "This was one of the strongest points I made in my argument for shooting film," he says. "Film would enable us to do faster setups on location, and I could really dig into the shadows."



a good fit for the look we wanted, because we were after a claustrophobic feel with a minimal, naturalistic lighting style. The story called for fairly dark environments, and the budget meant that our lighting package would be quite small. This was one of the strongest points I made in my argument for shooting film: film would enable us to do faster setups on location, and I could really dig into the shadows.

An example of this was a scene we shot at dusk under a lot of foliage from nearby trees. The light was fading very quickly, and I didn't want the actors to lose the rhythm of the scene, so instead of switching from the film stock we were using, Vision2 200T 5217, to a faster one, Vision3 500T 5219, I carried on shooting,

knowing that the information would still be there on the negative. Although I was underexposed by as much as 2 or 3 stops, the rushes proved me right.

Under these extreme lighting conditions, I knew where the exposure would be on the negative, and I knew how I could manipulate that information later on in post. Had I shot that scene on a digital format, I probably would have spent time playing with the settings in the camera's menus, compromising the look while slowing the production down and losing the available light.

Also, I have found that although digital cameras, especially the latest ones, are very good at seeing in low-light conditions, the resultant image can have digital

noise and other artifacts. Many times I find it hard to rescue information from the blacks when color correcting a digitally originated image. At the time we started prepping *Don't Let Him In*, I wasn't happy with the noise and quality of the blacks we could get from a Red One shooting at our low light levels.

As we began seeing our rushes during the shoot, everyone was really thrilled about the look of the picture. They realized film had been the right choice. In post, it was a huge advantage to be able to go back to the negative, color correct on the latest Baselight system in front of a 14' screen, and have all of that picture information in the negative. In the end, we produced a picture that has the look and style we envisioned from day one.

It's worth repeating: cinematographers are responsible for the look of the stories we shoot, and we should be given full responsibility when it comes to choosing the format. In Kelly's own words, "The decision to shoot on 16mm [gave the movie] a richness and depth that digital video hasn't simulated yet. The [result] will look a lot more expensive than it really was."

I want to believe that I can continue to choose the proper formats for the projects I shoot. It is one of the many creative decisions cinematographers make, and it is crucial to the success of our work.