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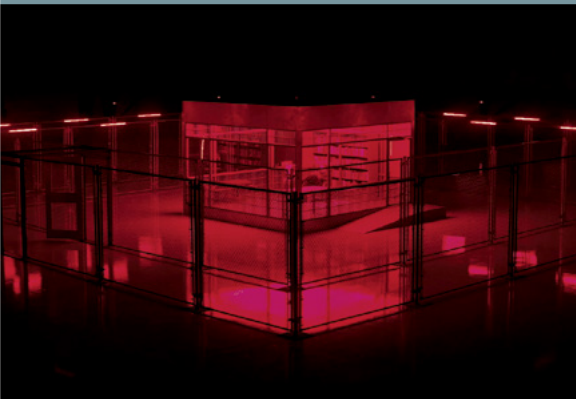
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A Relay for Surreal Vérité

In the first episode of Netflix's breakout hit series *Maid*, 25-year-old Alex makes the lifechanging decision to leave the trailer home she shares with her emotionally abusive alcoholic partner, Sean, who is also the father of her young daughter, Maddy. Unemployed and lacking formal education, Alex has no means to support herself and her child, so she takes a job cleaning houses, as she and her daughter bounce from domestic violence shelters to mouldy subsidized apartments, all while grappling with her dysfunctional family, including her mother, Paula, who struggles with undiagnosed bipolar disorder and her newly sober father, Hank.

Series creator and showrunner Molly Smith Metzler adapted Stephanie Land's *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* into the 10-episode limited series, which stars Margaret Qualley (Alex), Nick Robinson (Sean), Billy Burke (Hank) and Andie MacDowell (Paula). Released last fall, *Maid* quickly became one of Netflix's most watched shows internationally, according to media reports. By all accounts, few TV series have captured the cruelty of poverty in America with as much nuance and unflinching detail as *Maid*, the often-uncomfortable emotions it generates made all the more palpable through the actors' strong performances, as well as its carefully crafted images. Flashback scenes and fantasy sequences depicting Alex's private thoughts and insecurities are among the creative choices that make the viewing experience of watching *Maid* so visceral.

The three cinematographers behind the look of *Maid* – Quyen “Q” Tran (Episodes 1, 2, 9 and 10), Guy Godfree csc (Episodes 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8) and Vincent De Paula csc (Episode 5) – worked closely with digital imaging technician Robert Popkin to craft a look for the show, with Tran also directing Episode 8. The four of them recently sat down for a conversation highlighting the important but often misunderstood role of a DIT, perhaps all the more instrumental on a series shot by multiple DPs. As Popkin puts it, the number one priority of a DIT is maintaining the integrity of the image, and the collaboration with DPs often begins in preproduction, as was the case on *Maid*.

Quyen Tran: We did a lot of testing and a lot of looks before we actually started shooting because we were trying to go for very visceral vérité with surreal moments. There are these moments where Alex pops out of the present situation and goes into a flashback or surreal moment, or a magical realism moment. So it was important to distinguish between those three. And so we tested a lot of lenses. We went with Panavision Vancouver, used the Panaspeeds as the main set, but then detuned a couple of lenses for these moments of surrealism. We detuned the lenses to create a more smooth, soft, vignette-y feel. And so those lenses had lower contrast. And we had more rainbow flares, characteristics which were used in very specific moments, but overall, we went for a very naturalistic approach.

Robert Popkin: We explored a number of different filmic emulation LUTs, knowing that we'd want to use the film grain process. [Digital colourist] Tim Stipan supplied a number of them, I built a couple of them, and we just flipped through them in the camera test. And we got to a couple that we liked. And then that's where Tim and Q took the footage from the camera test. Ultimately, the decision was made to use K1S1, which is kind of an off-the-shelf, standard LUT, but it also makes the image look more natural, doesn't look too tweaked, which would have been the wrong look for this show.

Guy Godfree csc: Q did a great book of images from camera testing, a visual reference book of the look to demonstrate the intent to the rest of the creative team, and for myself and Vincent to reference as well. That was something that you did with Rob, is that correct?

Tran: That's correct. Rob was very involved in the camera tests because what we were trying to do is establish one LUT and so Rob and I talked about the different looks, and Rob is a photographer so he has an incredible eye and would bring so much to the table with regards to the look that we were going for. There was a lot of nighttime involved, so we didn't want something that was too aggressive. You want to use just one LUT for a show, just for the post workflow aspect of it, just to make things smooth, make sure everything matches up. So we created a couple of different looks and then LUTs, which created a very soft palette. Working together with production designer Renee Read, we developed a palette that was suitable across the board that would accept a LUT, which we could then in post grade with some grain and colour treatments, as well. Because for the flashbacks and those other moments we used a Super 16 2-stop push for the grain. I use this program called LiveGrain just to help smooth out everything and it just gives a more filmic look without actually shooting on film. From the camera test, we took those screen grabs, and then I made a little book for Vincent and Guy as a guide; it's very specific and intentional. I think Vincent and Guy did a phenomenal job and just elevated the show even further after I left, and Rob of course was so important in the camera test development.

Vincent De Paula csc: I got the look book as well, and it was very easy for me to identify with and connect with the story, this organic, raw, naturalism. It's kind of my language. It's almost like light is a stage for the actors and you let them perform. And on this show, because it was pretty much handheld the whole show, it's like a dance with the actors. We dance with them on the stage, and we follow the story with them. One of the things I like about working with the DIT is I rely so much on you guys to allow us to capture



As DPs, you don't often get to work side by side; having a good DIT on team keeps you cohesive. For us, Rob was that collaborator.

- Guy Godfree csc





the vision that we have, to remind us that we have a vision that we want to still carry throughout the whole of the post pipeline.

Godfree: As DPs, you don't often get to work side by side; having a good DIT on team keeps you cohesive. For us, Rob was that collaborator. It's actually one of the topics I think is interesting. Because Sean's trailer set was consistent top to tail on the show. And we all had to take it down in all kinds of weather, nights, days, transitions, ins, outs, splits. We were all over that place. Which means we all had different approaches to the same set. It is fun to see the similarities and the differences.

Tran: Guy was so wonderful because he really worked hard to maintain the integrity of the look that [director] John [Wells] and I established in the pilot, and we had multiple conversations, and he would even text me or call me throughout his block of shooting. I just feel very lucky and fortunate to have brought this wonderful team on who were so willing to take on the

baton and continue the look. But Rob in the DIT position is so instrumental in maintaining that because what I love to do is catalog the shot so that we are able to very quickly reference those images. Let's say you're shooting in the trailer set, and then weeks later, we have to shoot a pickup. I'm like, "Hey, Rob, can you go to Episode 101, scene 28, Charlie," and he's quickly able to pull it up, we can take a look at it, we can look at continuity, which is a huge asset to have with the DIT, and that's not necessarily in the job description. I really love to quickly pull up those reference frames so that we can look at the lighting and the continuity and make sure that everything is kosher, because when you're shooting pickups especially, you want to make sure that it's within that world. So that's where I really rely heavily on the DIT not just as continuity, but also when I'm operating the camera. He is my second set of eyes.

Popkin: Speaking about the stills references, I think that's one of the biggest tools to help an incoming DP know what we did previously. I think part of



Top right: Tran and Godfree set up a shot in one of the many difficult access forest locations for Episode 8.
Middle: Tran consults storyboards for a complex sequence in a forest created entirely by the art department outside Sean's trailer.
Bottom: DIT setup on the back of a gator to facilitate quick company moves between distant locations in a remote forest.
© Robert Popkin



my job working with alternating DPs is to as much as possible inform them of a look that's been established, you know, how we approach the camera settings in this particular set, and this is the look that we did here. And you back that up with the stills references. We bring that up on the screen, so here's how we approached this on the last episode. And, of course, every DP works a little bit differently, and so you have to make sure that every DP is comfortable working how they work but then they also are informed of what we did previously.

Godfree: I would download the day's stills to my iPad, and it was so useful. Also, I could reference Q's stills from her episodes. What was very useful was that you would see what had been done before on a given set and it gave you permission to go, "Oh, Q went that far?" And we wouldn't try and do the same thing necessarily, but you knew what the basis was, and you allowed yourself to evolve within it, which was great.

Popkin: Yeah, and you could be given permission to follow your instincts. Like, if you saw what we did before, then you're like, "Okay, now I can trust my instincts and shoot it however I feel it should be knowing how it was before," instead of just trying to emulate a particular look that was set up at the beginning of the pilot.

Godfree: It happened in the Social Services office. Because I think that was shot early on in the pilot block, and when I got there later in Episode 6, I was like, "Do we turn these practicals on? Can I push from the windows to keep the shape, or do I hold the top light?" You have all these questions, and so seeing what's done before, it gives you permission and insight to go, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to embrace that; I'll go with that," or go, "No, I feel like I want to do something different today, because it's a different day, it's a different scene, a different place." So just having a point of reference was really fun for me.



De Paula: I used to say that the gaffer was my best friend on set. And I think now the DIT is my best friend on set. You know, when I was in Europe, I was always operating on my shows. But when I moved to North America, it's more the operators. I like to stay away from the [video] village as much as I can, because I like to be part of the performance. And that trust I have with you guys, I have trust in you to create that vision that I want to carry throughout the show. You can't operate and look at the other monitors. Developing that trust takes time, but I want to have that trust, then it's just so smooth and it's more fun. But I've noticed through the years that there's so much on your plate these days – whether camera management, data management, workflow management – to protect our vision.

Godfree: Q set the look in the pilot block, I picked it up, Vincent did one and I took another block, and then Q comes in as a director – and I'm shooting – and she says, "Okay, we're going to really wind this up." We had such

permission to go for it, because she set the show's look, we speak the same language; we really started to mature the approach and change things. And it was really satisfying, because this is the part of the show where it starts to get darker, the episode where [Alex] is pulled into the couch. This was this great idea that Q had about her being swallowed, and it was so satisfying to do. Our only "studio" build, we were in this curling rink; we built a little section of the trailer with a false wall behind the couch.

Tran: But I think one of the beauties of setting up a look is knowing when to break it. And especially in Episode 8, where everything goes upside down. I wanted to really literally make the world go upside down, and so I broke all the rules. I got Guy on board and was like, "We're going to do this episode, we're going to build a forest, we're going to build stage." So I think part of the beauty of knowing to break rules is when you understand them so well and you know the characters, you know the evolution of the story, that

The crew prepares for a beach scene.
📷 Robert Popkin



when it comes to a certain point in the narrative, you are able to take those chances and you're able to leap off the very strict guidelines that you set up initially to create something that is a huge turning point in the story. It was just so wonderful to know the language of the show so well because you set it up and then to have the opportunity to direct to then go in a totally different direction.

De Paula: I think it's really important breaking those rules that you have established because it makes it even more meaningful as well. *Maid* was

this raw, organic handheld feel. And when it came to my episode, the episode with this house, I wanted to give a personality, a character to this house as well. And for me to allow the viewer to get into that was to maybe start getting into the dolly. So, there's going to be a studio-mode dolly creep in that we do that maybe we haven't seen much before, but, automatically, the viewer gets into that because I'm breaking a rule that has been established before where everything is handheld. All of a sudden, this perspective of this house inserts a new kind of language. And I think being allowed to do that is what we strive for as cinematographers. 🐦

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