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Digital Praxis supports the world’s first 100% Digital Cinematography feature film – Silence Becomes You

“A couple of effects shot apart – we needed 500fps for a mermaid sequence and fire/water vfx shots – the whole movie was shot using a pair of Thomson Grass Valley Viper cameras,” Steve explained. “All of the time the cameras were running in FilmStream mode – uncompressed raw RGB LOG – and all the action was captured to S.two DFR disk, backed up to LTO2 data tape. The offline started on set, which is really boosting the speed of the finish. And it looks terrific.”

Silence Becomes You is the story of two sisters living in a dysfunctional paradise who bring home a man on a dare. Sexual and emotional intrigue builds the tension, and the film turns into a thriller when it becomes clear that a fourth party – the father of the two girls – is still orchestrating the action. Someone is going to suffer, but who?

The director of *Silence Becomes You*, Stephanie Sinclair, is a painter whose style could best be described as magical realism. She is also a poet and writer, and for 15 years has been associate artistic director of the King’s Head Theatre in London. With a background like that, it is not surprising that the movie focuses tightly on the performances of the actors, set in a highly stylised environment in which the quality of the images tells us as much about the dynamics of the relationships as the script does.

“I had worked with Stephanie before, on the Oscar-listed short *The Dance of Shiva*,” Steve told me. “London facility MotionFX had also got into a dialogue with the production company, Dragonfly Films, to do the whole project digitally. We formed an agreement whereby MotionFX would be co-producers of the movie, and my company would work with them to guarantee the digital technology, scene to screen.”

The film was shot at the end of 2004 on location in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. “The Saturday night/Sunday morning socialising, which tended to include most of the UK and Lithuanian crew, was just amazing,” Steve recalled. A whole range of set-ups, from interiors of the manor house to some very testing outdoor shots, gave the acquisition kit a thorough workout.

Two Viper cameras were used, sometimes on the same set locked to a common timecode, sometimes as principal and second unit. Each camera was set in its FilmStream mode, delivering

10 bit LOG raw RGB image data. One unique feature of the Viper is that it can shoot in native 2.37:1 widescreen, and this was used throughout the shoot.

Although a solid state on-camera recorder is to be launched for Viper at NAB this year it was not available during the shoot. Each camera had a DFR disk recorder from S.two, built into special wheeled enclosures by MotionFX. The whole rig can be battery powered if necessary, and the production had large 24V packs capable of 3.5 hours continuous operation.

In FilmStream mode, because it is capturing a very wide range on a logarithmic scale with no video-style processing, the Viper output tends to look flat on a conventional monitor, with a distinct green cast. How did the director and crew adjust to that?

"The DoP, Arturo Smith, often chose to see the unmodified 'green' log image, as he liked to see the full range being captured to understand the true level of shadow and highlight detail in the recorded image," Steve reported. "The talent and director preferred an image looking closer to the graded final." While the Viper has the option of a corrected output to HD, so rather better than a conventional video assist, on this set they used the output of the S.two recorder, which also has a monitoring look-up table and can deliver "corrected" HD pictures.

"For critical beauty shots, where light level wasn't an issue, MotionFX developed optical filters to balance the colour characteristics prior to capture were used," Steve added. "This reduces the camera operation by about a stop, depending on the density of the filter being used, which in turn depends on the colour temperature of the light."

Shooting on Viper meant for instant reviews on set, via either a Sony 23" HD LCD screen or an Apple Cinema Display driven by a Black Magic HDlink card. Each evening there was the opportunity to see the dailies projected, thanks to a JVC HD projector, although this was not always used: "The dailies review process became intermittent at best, partly due to the confidence the production team gained with the quality of the images being captured," according to Steve, who added that this was "a very positive endorsement for digital cinematography."

He made another important point about on-set monitoring of digital capture, too. "It enables selection to be made via informed judgement, reducing the variables for offline. We can happily delete those takes that are never going to be considered, such as fluffed lines, missed cues or bad focus pull. Again, this is a big advance over traditional celluloid film- based dailies."

At the end of each day the S.two disk packs were archived onto data tape twice: one for post and one for security. This is likely to be the first movie to feature a credit for a DFR - digital film technician!

At the same time the dailies were also transferred, at HD resolution, to the offline system, based on Apple Final Cut Pro. Audio was recorded to the S.two recorders as well as DAT, so synchronised sound was no problem for the offline. Together, this means that the editor gets the pictures

precisely as framed by the director, and perfectly synchronised location audio, as soon after it is shot as you need it. Again, this is a big workflow improvement over shooting on film.

What were Steve's overall conclusions after principal photography? "The equipment - including Viper cameras, S.two DFRs and operators - worked at -14_C without problem, got bounced around in the back of some very rickety old cars, was set up in the middle of a wood in a metre of snow, got hooked to the back of a low-loader for through-the-windscreen two shots, on 12V and 24V batteries, local mains and production generators, and in all cases performed flawlessly."

Problems? "Early on we had an issue with bringing the camera equipment into a warm interior from the freezing outdoors - we were trying to do too many shots in not enough time. It resulted in back-focus shifts during shooting, making the image appear slightly soft.

"As it happens, these first interior scenes were part of a fantasy sequence which was planned for post production manipulation, so part of our job had been done for us!"

What about the economics of shooting digitally? "We ended up with over 33 hours of material, at a shooting ratio of about 18:1. That corresponds to around 25 terabytes of data, and is the equivalent of 180,000 feet of 35mm film," he said.

"For any independent film production running a relatively small budget, as with *Silence Becomes You*, it would be impossible to shoot such an amount of 35mm film. Even with a relatively good lab deal, the cost is going to be around 80p a foot for the negative stock, processing and telecine to offline," he explained. "Add film dailies, transportation, risk in transit insurance and so on, and the likely total makes the traditional approach cost a minimum of £150k.

"Going the digital cinematography route costs an average of £35 per minute of material to get to the same point, or around £70k. For independent film making this is a significant difference. And that does not take into account the benefits of immediacy, interactivity, short decision making timescales, full quality dailies and so on."

One last question on this subject. Some people say that bonding companies are reluctant to look at digital cinematography. Any problems there? "Discussions with the bonding company was not the issue many may have expected," Steve reported. "In reality, the safety measures, and particularly the duplicate data tapes, mean that possible data losses are very limited - a lot less worrying than a lab failure while processing 35mm."

The plan for post production is very straightforward, with what we now look on as a conventional digital intermediate workflow, in this case on an iQ with 10TB of disk array, at MotionFX's facility in London. The benefit, of course, is that the digital footage goes straight in without need for telecine and a first grade.

The EDL from Final Cut Pro will be loaded into the iQ and the whole movie auto-conformed from it. A split screen run through the whole movie will show any errors in the conform, then the director

and editor can refine the cut, working in a large room with a digital projector to get the feel of how it plays on the big screen.

Regular shipments of data tapes were sent from Vilnius to MotionFX to allow the effects and 3D work to start. As these elements are completed they too are loaded into the iQ and automatically replace the placeholder shots. The final cut and on-line DI will be performed at MotionFX's Shepherds Bush studio

Silence Becomes You looks set to be a stunning film. Director Stephanie Sinclair created some remarkable sets and worked hard to create dramatic looks in camera. The high sensitivity of the Viper allowed scenes to be shot with available light, and natural winter sunlight was used even for many of the interior scenes.

Producer Karl Richards said "Using the Viper gives us a lot of latitude in post to achieve the 'heightened sense of reality' look that Stephanie was after. I cannot say enough good things about the way the Viper workflow helped us stay on budget and do things we would not be able to do with film. The on-screen pictures are the closest I have ever seen to a filmic look without shooting 35mm."

And for Steve Shaw, "digital cinematography works, and works well. We expected far more problems than we encountered, and were amazed by the ease of the production process."

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About Digital Praxis

Digital Praxis is a consultancy operation specialising in supporting companies working with the digital film arena, including technical, operational and creative support.

Clients include manufacturers, production companies and post-production facilities.

Digital Praxis has set up and managed Digital Intermediate operations across the globe, from Europe to America, Asia to Africa; worked on numerous Digital Cinematography productions, as well as Digital Intermediate post-production projects.

Additional information can be found at www.digitalpraxis.net.