

The Alternative for digital cinema in Spain



Cinematographers are amongst the professionals most affected by digital processes. On an artistic level they are responsible for the look of the film and in many cases they also operate the camera. For them the debate between digital or conventional cinema, between pixels or emulsions, is still premature.

Kiko de la Rica is one of the leading figures in a new generation of talented Spanish cinematographers who are open to new technologies. He has worked in films such as *Salto al vacío*, *Pasajes*, *La Comunidad* and more pertinently *Lucía y el sexo*, a key movie for the development of digital filmmaking in Spain. Kiko de la Rica recently finished shooting the comedy *Descongélate*, by Felix Sabroso and Dunia Ayaso, produced by El Deseo, which premiered last 22nd August.

De la Rica is convinced that digital and photochemical formats are different but equally valid, and there is no point comparing them. "There have been many attempts to compare the two formats and I think that's a mistake. Digital technology is steadily approaching the quality of photochemical formats. For the cinematographer of *La comunidad* working in either format is not very different. "Lighting is used in similar ways, what changes is the way in which its captured. Both formats are very versatile in terms of latitude"



Kiko de la Rica

De la Rica thinks that one of digital filmmaking's great advantages are the fact that one can see the result on a monitor in real time. "You have a direct control of the image on the spot, with the values for the blacks and a different range of whites, and you can see that without having to imagine it or going through the lab".

Current digital processes have made the relationship between postproduction technicians and cinematographers a lot closer, although the latter's work during the shoot is still crucial.

"Lucía y el sexo"

De la Rica was responsible for the photography of the first Spanish feature film shot entirely on digital format: *Lucía y el sexo*. The experience in this film is a perfect gauge for the creative possibilities of digital filmmaking. Julio Médem knew he wanted to make the project on video due to its great functionality. He wanted to work with a small crew to be able to focus on the actor's work. "Our first tests with small DV cameras hinted at its possibilities. When the alternative of High Definition appeared, Julio (Médem) decided he wanted to use it" says De la Rica. The reasons for this decision were simple: HD offered the desired functionality with great picture quality while allowing for multiple takes. "The tests we did with the Sony CineAlta camera confirmed these ideas".

It was the first time that this kind of camera was used in Spain. "The Sony camera had a menu with control settings that were saved onto a memory card. The lenses sometimes limited us, but this is changing and there are now lenses that work very well with this kind of digital camera"



Kiko de la Rica is quick to answer when asked about his favourite format, but he acknowledges that some projects demand digital technology. "Personally I prefer photochemical supports, the richness of their contrast, their colour, texture but depending on the project the digital format can be necessary, as we found with *Lucía y el sexo*. If this film had been shot in 35mm

it would have been completely different. Julio (Médem) was very clear about the look he wanted the film to have: on one hand, the images from the island of Formentera, which were very luminous and cold, whereas the ones from Madrid appeared darker and more natural, but they both needed to co-exist as a cohesive whole". While transferring to 35mm they used a sensitive emulsion to achieve a grainier, special texture.

Kiko De la Rica has worked in other projects where digital processes were important even though they were shot using photochemical supports. Lately he has worked on *Torremolinos 73*, which was presented on April 30th. The whole film was scanned (Telecine Spirit Datacine), post-producing and colour grading digitally (Specter and Megadef) and later filmed back onto 35mm with an Arrilaser. Kiko De la Rica supervised the procedures with the technicians at Molinare. For De la Rica this working method emphasizes the artistic component of the cinematographers work, since digital technolog offers him more tools to achieve the desired result. The director of photography of *Pasajes* thinks that digital filmmaking is today a viable alternative, but the photochemical format still has a lot of life ahead of it, "they are two formats that will co-exist and there is no need to compare"

Tote Trenas is another renowned cinematographer with extensive experience. He has worked in films such as *El laberinto griego*, *La leyenda de la doncella*, *Suspiros de España y Portugal*, *Solas*, *Fugitivas*, *La Marcha Verde o Impulsos*, amongst others, which makes his a qualified opinion on the subject. For him the key factor when it

comes to choosing between High Definition or conventional film is to know how the final product will be broadcast. "Its very different to work on HD for television than in film or even advertising. When you shoot on HD for a film that will be shown in theatres the key step is the kinescoping. Prior to that you have controlled the treatment of the image, the post-production and the colour grading, and the following step is the kinescoping in which the lab is involved". Furthermore, one must take into account other factors, such as the lenses used and the planning during the shoot. ? Shooting on High definition "Trenas adds - always causes problems with wide angle lenses and wide shots, whereas long lenses are close shots work perfectly"

According to Trenas, a key question is whether the audience is meant to know that the film has been shot on HD or if its been a "shy HD". "Most of the time its used as "shy HD" because its used as if it was film. I believe this is a mistake because HD is a very noble format that doesn't need to hide its own personality its own essence".

Tote Trenas



The cinematographer in Suspiros de España y Portugal agrees that there is no point comparing. "HD has a different texture and its own characteristics. You have to take into account the final destination of the product, what processes will take place during the shoot and the costs"

Tote Trenas believes that at the moment digital cinema doesn't offer too many advantages for the DoP. "It's the director who benefits most, since he can have more

takes, but this can become a problem when it comes to editing" Just as his colleague De la Rica explained, the biggest advantage for the cinematographer is the possibility of watching the results in real time, avoiding unpleasant surprises.

As for specific details such as the use of filters, Trenas has very strict convictions. "I don't like using filters in conventional cinema, and much less in HD, where most filters can be added during post-production. It's different in traditional cinema, because many kinds of filters such as texture ones have to be used during the shoot"

Tote Trenas has used the two brands of cameras in the digital market, Sony and Thomson. The main difference between them is that the Sony works with compression whereas the Thomson doesn't. "Working without compression is an advantage of working with the Thomson, but it is also an inconvenience because you need a space a space to store the image. The Sony camera is easier to handle. In my opinion the Thomson is better for shooting in the studio, but the Sony is better for shooting on location". Both cameras use the same lenses and Trenas in both cases used Primo lenses and Canon HD zooms for their great reliability.

As for the supposedly closer relationship with post-production technicians, Trenas thinks the situation hasn't changed all that much: "what happens now is that instead of colour grading in the traditional lab, you do it in post-production, in the digital lab which offers greater possibilities whether you are shooting on 35mm or HD". Tote Trenas has also worked extensively in advertising and the process is very similar to that used by digital labs for cinema.

It's becoming increasingly common to shoot on 35mm and later scan the whole film to treat it and colour grade it digitally. "When you realize a project using this method you have to capture the image as well as possible and try to get as much information as possible to be able to treat it"

Trenas thinks that when the film is going to be treated in a digital lab, the techniques used during the shoot don't have to be very extreme, since they can be later accentuated in postproduction. In any case, the DoP in *Fugitivas* shares the opinion that nowadays working with negative offers many advantages. "It's a very versatile format, and it's so rich you can achieve practically anything you want with it. Traditional labs still have a long life ahead of them: as long as theatres keep projecting in 35mm that won't change". He does think however that digital processes offer greater possibilities in post-production and image manipulation.

Trenas is aware that traditional cinema is very durable. "Now I'm shooting a film on Super 16 about the , that will be later digitally treated and transferred to 35mm. 12 years ago I shot some footage of the "on HD with the Japanese NHK, with 1250 lines, when that system was state-of-the-art. If I had shot that on 35mm instead of the

NHK those images could now be used. The problem with electromagnetic processes is that they become obsolete, that footage I took with the Japanese camera is useless. A negative sign is that in 2003 there are several different systems of HD, perhaps in 2010 there will be more systems and the ones we know will be useless. If I was a director I would shoot everything on 70mm to get as much information as possible and then transfer it to whichever format was necessary. In 50 years, a film shot in 70mm will be ready for use"

At the moment Tote Trenas carries out his work as cinematographer in the successful TV series *Cuéntame como paso*, job he combines with his work in cinema and advertising. For him, his ideas can be applied to the televisual medium.

Cuéntame is a show made in different formats: the majority is shot on Digital Betacam, but there are also scenes 35mm, Super 16, Super 8 and even archive footage. All these formats are eventually telecined, colour graded and broadcast at an amazing speed (sometimes the shooting is done on a Monday and the episode is broadcast on the Thursday). Until the final master is produced the DoP has complete control over the image, something that rarely happens in cinema, although in the end it depends on how each individual tunes their TV at home.

For Tote Trenas, the main problem for digital cinema to succeed in the long-term is piracy. The current plans for digital cinema of sending the films to the theatres via satellite have huge costs and piracy complicates it even further. Trenas feels that even films that have been used as examples of the advantages of digital film have not exploited its possibilities fully, such as *Attack of the Clones*. Given the budget that George Lucas was handling it didn't make sense to shoot digital. Trenas thinks that the result would have been better if they had shot on 35mm and then scanned the whole film "There is comparison between the images of the first trilogy and those of the most recent two, considering that the comparative price of the format is irrelevant" In his opinion, digital cinema is adequate for other types of projects, such as *Lucia y el Sexo* ?a great film whose digital format is an essential element of the text".

The cinematographer Andrés Torres is a specialist in digital film. He's been working in the industry for over 30 years and has been part in more than 120 films, mainly as camera assistant. As DoP he has worked in 3 films (*Vivir por nada*, *Clara*, *Entre Cienfuegos*), as well as working extensively in advertising, which allowed him to work with new tools and more pertinently with HD. During the 14 years he has worked in that industry he has shot more than 800 spots for important agencies which have won numerous awards.

Andrés Torres felt many years ago that digital formats were going to have a huge explosion. That's why in the 80's he took his master on video signals. That and his accumulated experience allowed him to be the DoP in the first spots shot on Hi8 and

Betacam SP, and years later also on some of the first ads in digital systems and HD. Torres coincides with his colleagues in that the great difference between HD and traditional cinematic formats is the texture of the image and that the lighting process is very similar. As for the camera crew there aren't relevant differences, since both formats require the same members, that is DoP second operator, assistant and camera assistant. This is so because HD shoots usually require large crews.

Regardless of this Andrés Torres sees digital as the future. In his opinion digital will become the standard (not in the short-term) because it offers many advantages besides the quality of the image, such as its reduced volume, storage and even the environmental question, because photochemical formats generate polluting waste. "In future many films will be available on domestic formats, such as Internet or Home Cinema. Important cinematic events will still be projected on 35mm for a long time. As for the labs I don't think they will disappear, but they will have to evolve like other aspects of film"



With the new digital processes cinematographers must know the characteristics of certain equipment that offer a great control over the image and new creative possibilities. Inferno, Flame or Megadef for digital colour grading, etc "Knowing the possibilities of these tools will make the DoP's work easier and better, being able to shoot in the knowledge that he will be able to manipulate the image in a certain way." He agrees with his colleagues on the importance of the work during the shoot. "The freshness and weight of an image shot live cannot be created in post production. Even in Attack of the Clones the audience is aware that they are watching a computer generated image, which can be very spectacular but doesn't have the magic of cinema"

On the other hand, the DoP for Clara thinks that HD can cause problems during the shoot, " high-speed effects, changes in shutter speed, etc. cannot be done with digital cameras, but these things can be done with photochemical formats", which suggests that the two formats are compatible and complimentary. "If a sequence has many effects its better to shoot in HD (like Lucas did) and avoid the film's scanning to 35mm. This way you avoid an expensive and time-consuming process. However if what you are after is the exquisite quality of the 2k or 4k, it's a lot better to shoot on 35mm and then scan the film. Each format offers its own advantages, sometimes its better to shoot on 16mm because it offers a texture and a grain that is the desired look. In fact nowadays photochemical emulsions are so perfect that its hard to achieve the look during the shoot and so the images are scanned to be manipulated in postproduction".

An example of this is Schindler's List by Steven Spielberg, for which Kodak created a special negative with the emulsion wanted by the DoP. The film won the Academy Award for Best Photography, by Janusz Kaminski.

In advertising its increasingly common to work in HD, "the French and Belgians are very clear about this. The camera I use for these campaigns is the Sony HDW-F900 which allows you to manipulate the signal because the CineAlta series record at 24fps and it wont go any further. You could say Sony CineAlta are practically prototypes. With the Sony 900 you can manipulate the signal, use different shutter speeds and you can control a series of parameters better than with the CineAlta". The final result is excellent, as is shown by the fact that many of the companies that Torres has worked for (Coca-Cola, El Corte Inglés..) have huge resources."The HD camera's control over the image is so great that the colour grading I did during the shoot was the one that was finally broadcast". Another proof that one of the advantages of HD is the possibility of seeing the results in real time. "If you light it, shoot it and colour grade it, the image feels more like your own. Furthermore, in HD shoots the director can see the results on the monitor. However, one mustn't forget that every film is different and the digital lab is where all the details that determine the quality of the image are touched up. There are certain things during a shoot that are better left alone, and treated during postproduction in a more relaxed environment than that of a shoot".

Digital processes can cut costs in a production, but Andrés Torres thinks that a producer shouldn't choose HD simply because its cheaper, but because the film demands that format and form of expression. He's not a fan of comparing the formats either "It's a mistake to compare them, each one is appropriate depending on the project".

Another inconvenient Torres has is the "addiction" to "the button", the button available to anybody "I think it's a grave mistake that anyone feels capable of

manipulating images. A director has a film in his head and he has to transmit this idea to the other technicians so that they can do their work and he can focus on things like directing actors. The possibilities of digital processes are so exciting that in the long term they can be harmful for the film and the production costs if the filmmaker isn't sure about what he wants".

To conclude this article we hear the opinions of an authority in HD filmmaking: Alfonso Parra. His work includes titles such as *Carlos contra el Mundo*, by Chiqui Carabante, shot on HDCAM and later transferred to 35mm, just like *El Regalo de Silvia*, by Dionisio Pérez and *La flaqueza del bolchevique*, by Manuel Martín Cuenca. Alfonso Parra has worked with digital formats since their appearance as an extension of analogue video. Parra Thinks that there are great differences between 35mm and digital from a photographic point of view.

"Both formats are very different and require different treatment, for example in the control of the highlights, in the use of colour, in the depth of field. The shoot itself is still exactly the same, except that we carry tapes instead of cans of film" The cinematographer for *El Regalo de Silvia* thinks that the relationship with postproduction technicians is still close with digital processes. "Perhaps with digital formats we spend more time with the colour grading technician due to the complexity and diversity that these systems allow when working with the image.

Like his colleagues, he sees the shoot as the defining moment to achieve the desired image. "Post-production is when the final image is composed, but never the moment when the image is created. During the shoot you decide how the camera is going to capture the images, the contrast of the scene and the mood of the sequence"

About the future of digital filmmaking Alfonso Parra raises a series of questions that confirm its standardisation is a matter of time.



Alfonso Parra en el rodaje de "El regalo de Silvia"

"What were the prospects for computers, such as Avid and the like, for film editing a few years ago? What were the prospects for digital photographic cameras? These questions have been answered and I think they can be applied to digital filmmaking. I think its just a question of time before digital takes over from analogue in most production"

Alfonso Parra continues committed to HD : "We are preparing a film to shoot with two HDCAM's and Sony's new software this coming October". By David Serra.

