

Motion in the waves

For his motion control shoot of a TV on the rocks with the water lapping over it, Geoff Boyle had to find a suitable time between rough tides.

Article first published: Nov/Dec 2007



Yeah, this is a great location guys but have you looked behind you? I know it's great in front of the camera so it doesn't matter what's behind the camera, but will you please just take a look?

Yes, the shot will be great, tide coming in over the rocks, cliffs in the background, motion control move so that different parts of the shot can be at different speeds/exposures but will you please look behind you!

Ah! The beach is lower than where we are. Exactly! If we do the shot here, we die! We'll be cut off by the tide and we know that it comes over these rocks, so we're going to die!

So that's how I found myself on a beach near the Mumbles, Swansea. It was our second choice location, but it had a couple of advantages: we could get the kit in there; the other location might have needed an airlift to get the MoCo rig in and, even better, we wouldn't die. At least we wouldn't drown; at 3am we may well die of hypothermia – 3am because we had to rig and remove the MoCo rig and track between high tides.

The location was a bay with a lighthouse: we wanted the tide to reach maximum just as the sun passed behind the lighthouse. This gave us a window of a couple of days. We would attempt the shot at dawn when the sun was in its hero position and also in the late afternoon when we would get wonderful low level sunshine. Hmm, plans go bad very quickly when the sun turns to clouds, wind and torrential rain.

Monday, we travel to Swansea and build a 24ft ramp out over the beach and rocks so that we can move out over the sea as the tide comes in. This is a masterpiece of rigging; it's not going to move for anyone! We also put camouflage netting over the surf guards' hut.

The shot is for Sky's Movie channel sponsor Panasonic. We are to start parallel with a Panasonic TV, so we see it edge on and just a thin line, and we'll then move around and down to reveal the lighthouse in the background seen through the TV screen. It's all to be done in one shot in a 150deg move that is a combination of track jib, pan and tilt, as well as a focus pull. We intend to do multiple passes so that we can have tide coming in over the rocks and clouds scudding through the sky, shadows on the lighthouse, etc.

Obviously a MoCo shot, but one that requires a small rig. I'd hoped to have been able to set a move that had us moving in a straight line, but that didn't work. The CGI guys didn't want us to zoom, so we had to add some swing with a jib. This meant that the tiny rig I had intended to use couldn't do the job, but Stuart and Neil of Stalwart came to the rescue with their custom-built mobile rig. I'd worked with them recently on a series of Sharps and Moben commercials and knew how fast they could be. They'd have to be fast, as they had to rig and de-rig between tides.

I used a zoom, even though we'd been asked not to, but I only used it as a variable prime; I knew that we'd need some flexibility because of the nature of the location. The lens was a Cooke S4 15-40mm and the camera was a 435 from Take 2. I decided to use the new Fuji high contrast/saturation stock Vivid, as we had all decided that we wanted a punchy look.

It was as a result of my carefully calculating exactly when we'd get the optimum combination of light and tide that we found ourselves rigging at 3am on the Tuesday morning.

Rigging in the rain, the dark, did I say rain? I meant torrential downpour! Just as we were all about to pass out from hypothermia or get washed away by the waves we couldn't see until they hit us, we decided to quit. There are times that you just have to accept that it isn't going to work, back to bed.

We got news that there might be a break in the weather that afternoon, so we all trooped back to the beach and rigged the track and MoCo unit. It was raining, it was windy, but nothing like it had been. We rigged the camera, fine trimmed the move and started to try some passes, but we were sure that we would have to come back on Wednesday.

Suddenly, we got a gap in the clouds, we shot pass after pass and got most of what we needed. I was only missing a pass with the tide in close, lapping – well crashing – over the rocks in front of us.

Geoff, Geoff, a plaintive voice was heard, we've got to pull the rig out before it gets washed away. Nah, it's okay, just another take; just one more (again). In the end I had to say enough and let them get the rig out. As the photographs show, it was a close thing!

I was hugely disappointed when I saw the final result and they hadn't used the last takes of the waves. I think that this is probably the worst weather conditions I've ever used a MoCo rig in. Of course, now I know that it worked...



Geoff Boyle

Reel Show cinematography editor Geoff Boyle's recent feature films as director of photography include *The Mutant Chronicles*, *Dark Country* and, currently, *Street Fighter 2*. He received his first camera, a Brownie 127, when he was eight. From then on the future was clear. After art school in the late 60s, he worked as a stills assistant. One day he was asked if he knew anyone who could film a concert. Of course he did! He moved into film and shot documentaries for TV, 10 years or so of *20/20* for ABC and a lot of music videos. In 1985 he shot a 'making of' about the Pirelli calendar. Terence Donovan liked the way he lit and asked him if he shot commercials. From 1990 to 2005, he has shot almost entirely commercials, with occasional sidetrips into drama, a short he shot – *About A Girl* – winning a BAFTA in 2001. He also shot special effects on *Enemy at the Gates*, won the SMPTE Eastman Gold medal in 2000 and was made a fellow of the BKSTS that year. He started the cinematography mailing list (CML) in 1996 with 60 members. It now has over 3,000 members in 148 countries and is acknowledged as the pre-eminent internet site for cinematography.