

Filtering in software

Why filter in camera when you can achieve the same results in post? Geoff Boyle takes a look at Tiffen's DFX Filter Kit to see whether they really match the company's optical filters.

Article first published: July/August 2007



Using the center spot filter.



With the infra-red filter.

Tiffen has been threatening software that would emulate their filters for a very long time now. It's been a kind of Holy Grail for DPs who shoot a lot of VFX and blue/green screen work. You want to shoot the main body of the film/commercial with filtration of some kind – I've always been partial to light Pro-Mist and/or very light Double Fogs – but you can't use them on the VFX shots because they'll bugger up the key.

So what do you do? Shoot with the filters except for the VFX shots and trust the guys in post to match the look? Shoot with no filters and trust the guys in post to add the filtered look to the entire production? How do you communicate the look? Do the guys in post know what a Black Pro-Mist 1 looks like? Will they remember to add it?

A long time ago, Tiffen started to work on software to emulate its filters, but it would only work on SGI machines and in Autodesk Flame. It required a huge amount of computing grunt and was never released. So imagine my surprise as I wandered around NAB this year and saw a finished domestic product – yes domestic! Not a really expensive piece of pro software, but software that costs between \$99 and \$499 depending on which version you get. But of course, being a domestic product aimed at happy snappers it wasn't going to be very good was it?

Well it may be aimed at a wide market but it's anything but a low-end product. It comes in many versions, from a basic standalone package for Mac or Windows at \$99, through a fully comprehensive standalone for \$199, to a plug-in for After Effects and Final Cut Pro at \$499. There are also plug-ins for Photoshop, I've been testing the middle version. OK, it's meant for stills rather than moving images, but it has all the same functions, including one that I found really interesting – a batch mode where you can apply a grade or filter look to a series of pictures.

Err, you mean if my film is in DPX files – it is – I can grab one frame, grade it and then, say, apply that grade to the entire 8,294,400 frames that make up my film? The answer is yes, I haven't tried that yet, but I'm thinking about it.

Lab processes

The package includes an emulation of every filter in every grade of every Tiffen glass filter; there is emulation of every lab process you are ever likely to want, from Bleach Bypass to Cross Processing; there are theatrical lighting gel emulation, IR or X-ray film and thousands of others. You can adjust the parameters of every filter to create your own individual or combination filters.

I thought that if I was going to test this software, then I'd better use images that I hadn't used filters on and that hadn't been played with in TK or post, and I had to go back over 20 years to find some! I had great fun playing with old Robert Palmer music video images. I first used the auto setting, and I must say I prefer the look to the 'normal' one, but that's no fun! Let's see what circle spots or chocolate circle spots look like. I could alter the center and softness of the spots, so I moved the center to just under Palmer's nose, and then played with various degrees of fade and softness: great fun, but even more fun was switching to Infrared, X-ray or Bleach Bypass – all of which are infinitely controllable.

Then I started thinking about using the software as a pre-viz tool with a director: it's always very hard communicating the exact degree of filtration that you intend to use and what the end effect will be. So now I can just show them!

There's been a debate raging over whether we should use magenta filters when shooting with the Viper. Well that's easy now, just try it. I've compared a raw Viper image to one with a 30CC magenta filter applied, we don't need to talk about it – we can SEE it.

There are all kinds of making tools built into the software, and they're really easy to use. This means that you don't have to use the filters the way you have in the past. If you want just someone's face diffused and not the rest of the picture, then just draw a soft mask around the face and apply the diffusion only inside the mask. Or maybe you'd prefer the background to be a bit more out of focus, then draw the same mask and apply the de-focus filter outside the mask.

The possibilities are endless, I hope the illustrations give you some idea, but go to www.tiffen.com and download a trial version. I promise you will go back and buy a license!



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.