

The happy curse

Geoff Boyle looks at new Digital Cinema cameras at NAB, while looking back at a year that has brought us the Sony F23, the SI-2K Mini and, of course, the Red camera.

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It's that time of year, approaching NAB, when I look back at the last year and see what has been delivered, what has been improved and what is just a plain waste of time. Over the past couple of years I have shot with most of the high-end digital cameras, and overall have enjoyed the experience. The two cameras I have missed out on using are the ones from the big film camera companies – the Panavision Genesis and the Arri D-20. However, they have both made major strides forward.

Panavision has released a FlashRAM-based recorder that is interconnection-compatible with the Sony SRW1 portable HDCam SR recorder. It has a 21-minute record time, double that of the Grass Valley Venom recorder, and it is capable of working with the Sony F23 too. Arri's D-20 is now capable of recording log output and RAW data to hard disk recorders, such as the S.two Take 2 or the Codex portable.

OK, so let's get to cameras that I have used, starting with the Grass Valley Viper. Will we finally see the Viper Plus or a Viper 2 at NAB? The one thing that is very clear now is how far ahead of everyone else Grass Valley was when it first launched the Viper six – or is it seven years ago? Only now are the other cameras starting to pass it in terms of performance. C'mon guys!

Speaking of which, the Sony F23. A great camera. Learning from all the mistakes of the F900 and the Viper, Sony has delivered a production camera for high-end work that is just terrific. It has a very low noise level and is capable of being set in a wide gamut color, DCI spec, range, and with a log output this is ideal for those of us who want to shoot like film and then tweak in post. It will also work like a television camera if you really must!

Sony F35

A number of people (particularly those with F23s) have been worried by the announcement of the Sony F35, with its single 35mm-sized chip, rather than three 2/3in chips of the F23. Other than that, it is the same as the F23. But I don't see the problem. Of course, a few people really want to use 35mm lenses, but a whole lot more get caught up in the hype. They forget that a 16mm-sized image sensor (16mm, in fact!) has been the standard outside the US for a very long time, and there are positive advantages to using the smaller image sensor in a lot of situations.

The Phantom HD is now very much a working camera. From the prototype I used on *Mutants* 18 months ago, it had morphed into a full kitted-out production camera by the time I was shooting the final models for *Mutants* eight months ago! It has a full 35mm-sized sensor and runs from not a lot to 1,000fps. It's not just HD, it also shoots full 2K, although the maximum speed is slightly reduced at 2K. Add a Cinemag with 512GB storage and you've got a production-friendly camera. It's only a matter of time until someone shoots a whole movie with one. I'm available from late June!

SI-2K Mini

I'm concentrating on the Silicon Imaging Mini because a lot of these have already been delivered, but they're only just starting to deliver the one-piece units. I have to say up-front that I love these cameras. I've used them since the first prototype, which had software changing every day and a lens mount held together with PTFE tape, to the incredible system that it is growing in to today.

You want a detachable OLED V/F with a proper film-style P+S Technik eyepiece (ie, one that isn't made of the cheapest plastic you can find), has proper optics that can be reset to a given value? Certainly! You want a real reflex V/F where you can see a picture even when the camera is turned off and resolution and color are only limited by your eyes? Certainly! You want to be able to use C-mount, PL-mount or B4-mount lenses? Of course you can! You want to create looks for your images in advance or when you're on location and embed that

information in the image without altering the RAW image? You mean you can't on other cameras? You want a 360deg Circlevision rig made from eight SI-Minis or a few 3D rigs in various configurations? Then talk to ParadiseFX, which has built some great rigs with them. I also know that the SI-Micro is on the way. Now there's a camera that is truly 3D-friendly.

Red One

The last camera I'm going to write about is the Red One. This is really difficult. Jim Jannard and I had a stand-up row at NAB two years ago, and this row spilled over on to the net and so on. We have since patched up our differences, and I have to say that he, or he and his team, have done a terrific job.

They have gone further and faster than any other camera company. The only problem I see is that they haven't quite got there yet. I think it was a mistake to release a beta camera without initially shouting that it was a beta. But they've now got to the point that they're finally delivering viewfinders for the camera (I hope that they now have more than one monitoring output capable of working at the same time). They've started to deliver the hard disk recorders, thus removing the four-minute limit of the CF cards. They're now on version 14 of the software (whereas I shot *Dark Country* with version 8). At NAB they'll launch the little version of the Red – Scarlet – but maybe they should concentrate on getting the Red One right first.

However, for everything negative that I say about the camera and its performance, it has one overwhelming redeeming feature: the pictures out of it look bloody good and, let's face it, most of us will put up with all kinds of shit to get good pictures! I'm really looking forward to the next Red!

There are inevitably going to be a lot of cameras at NAB that are like either Red or SI; I know of three at the moment. The thing is Red and SI were the trailblazers; they have re-shaped cinematography between them (and let's not forget the Phantom).

The old Chinese curse says, "May you live in interesting times." Well, as far as I'm concerned, those of us in the camera department are well and truly cursed!



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.