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by Bonnie Goldberg

Digital Darkroom

Still photographer Doug Hyun uses digital tools to capture *Path to War*

“Now listen, Doug. I know most directors don't really appreciate your job or even your presence because they feel that what you do is not that important,” John Frankenheimer told still photographer Doug Hyun, as he pulled him into the 125 degree heat of the Mexican jungle. It was the first day of shooting on HBO's *The Burning Season*, and the legendary director wanted to make his position on still photography clear. “Not here. Not now.” Frankenheimer continued. “Your pictures are going to be very VERY important. And I am going to be closely monitoring what you do and how you do it!”

“I should have been intimidated,” Hyun recalls. “But, instead I felt comfortable and alive! ‘I want you to get exactly what I frame,’ John continued. ‘And, if you can't achieve that, I need you to come and tell me so we can arrange for you to have your chance.’”

“I was just naive enough to take this literally or I would have been scared to death to simply ask the director to re-stage a scene just for stills,” Hyun continues. “Don't get me wrong, I did get plenty of setups. But, the task of filming a Frankenheimer epic with a cable movie shooting schedule does not exactly leave a lot of time for stills. Not to mention that he is generally on Steadicam with a 17mm lens hovering two inches off the actor's nose.”

Hyun's trial was by fire. His first scene was of a mob rushing down stairs and into a tiny square room to kidnap Raul Julia, who was doing a radio broadcast. “The Steadicam followed them in, and I was pressed into a small alcove by the angry mob,” Hyun recalls. “Then I heard ‘that voice,’” he laughs. “‘Doug Hyun! What are you doing

there? Shoot my shot not your shot, the shot is a 17mm right here!”

“What if I throw on a costume and barrel down the stairway, just to the right of camera?” Hyun asked Frankenheimer. “John said ‘Sounds like a good idea to me!’ and I got some great shots.”

Of course other days were not so fortunate for Hyun. He heard, “Move to the Left – you're in the shot!” and he heard, “Move to the right – you are still in the shot!” “It was then that I realized he didn't want to see me on the set at all,” says Hyun. This is when Doug Hyun taught himself the art of disappearing.

Whatever he did, it was right. This film was the beginning of a long-standing relationship between director and still photographer. “In a Frankenheimer film it seems there are mandatory scenes because they are part of his vocabulary. Prisons, riots, war, love, the political rise, and the inevitable fall that

instigates character change and redemption. Frankenheimer's films make us confront ourselves as a society. We learn that what we were sure was right, is wrong and that what we thought was wrong was simply what had to be.

“The scariest challenge with John was not behind the camera, but in front of the camera,” says Hyun. On *Path to War*, he needed to cast someone as the first official White House Photographer Yoichi Okamoto. Many of the scenes in the film are homage to Okamoto's amazing documentation of Johnson's term in office.

HBO's Tom Bozzelli, contacted Hyun about his availability for *Path to War*. “Tom explained that the project was to be directed by John Frankenheimer and he asked if I was prepared to photograph the show digitally.”

Still photographer Doug Hyun matches Director John Frankenheimer's exact shots for *Path to War*, one of the first productions to be captured solely with digital stills.



photo by Doug Hyun

Hyun recalls.

Since acquiring his Canon D30, he had used the new digital camera as an adjunct to his Canon film cameras. For the film *Sorority Boys*, the story called for a full screen slide show and composited images of a man falling out of a window. The D30 and Photoshop work appears full screen in the film, lying to rest the concerns of enlarging a digital image.

"The Canon D30 was a backup to film on shows like *James Dean*, *Spider-Man*, *Showtime* (where Hyun worked as additional photographer), and other projects," Hyun explains. He would finally get to use it and the rest of the digital tools for an entire project.

From Hyun's point-of-view, digital is inevitable. Instant review is a big factor. So is eliminating the task of refrigerating, and



The Canon D30

shipping delicate emulsions all over the globe. "Being able to change ISO at the touch of a button and the elimination of the snip and judging process is also great, not to mention the ability to custom tailor the color balance for each scene," he adds.

"With the rapid turn around required by many films today, often times the slow turn-around of processing and editing still photographs and the necessity of approvals by the actors means only the very early shots are available for press and advertising," he continues. "The availability of the very best stills of the film does not always comply with the schedule of marketing and publicity."

Labs such as SuperColor share Hyun's vision of a digital still future. "SuperColor's workflow has the photographer shooting and delivering the images by CD. SuperColor's Branded service Ivia Network then converts, numbers, and archives the images on their secure website," Hyun explains. "Approvals, kills, sorting, and international distribution can take place over the Internet. A logistic dream come true."

Because this was the first feature to



photo courtesy of HBO

shoot all digitally, the main concern from HBO was quality. Bozzelli and Hyun conducted tests with the D30 Canon (a professional digital camera priced at \$2500.00 for the body). "The D30's use of a CMOS (sensor) as opposed to a CCD has allowed greater quality for less money and less energy (the batteries last almost all day)," he explains.

"We did various lighting set ups and ISO settings from 100 to 1600," Hyun adds. "We recorded the material with the wonderful IBM one-gigabyte Microdrive."

This miniature hard drive, the size of a postage stamp allows for around 250 uncompressed images (Canon Raw Setting).

"The tests were done using large Jpeg and Canon Raw settings," he adds. "The first question clients have about digital is, 'how large can you blow up a shot and how does it compare with the resolution of film?'" he explains.

The answer depends on how the image will be used. The D30 does not compare with a 4 x 5 view camera and 64 ISO film, but it does match or surpass 35mm Ektachrome EPJ pushed to 800 ISO (a typical application of film).

My computers since the early eighties have always been IBM," he continues. "Though I was managing with my PCs as far as scanning, retouching and printing was concerned, the patronizing words of my fellow photographers (mostly all Mac users) would come to mind whenever my PCs would freeze or crash. I decided to give Mac a try. My first MAC, a PowerBook G3 500 with 512 megs of RAM was expensive but cool and slick. For most tasks it was great, but when it came to handling hundreds of photographs per day and keeping them in

As well as being the still photographer for *Path To War*, Doug Hyun was actually cast as White House Photographer Yoichi Okamoto.

order, the Mac was slowing me down. For me, the Mac interface, instead of being easier, is less organized.

"On *Path to War*, the decision was made to shoot in Canon Raw format. The Raw file is a little over three megs in size and when converted to a Tiff grows to 8.9 megs. My G3 using the Canon Browser software would convert a file in an agonizing 3.5 minutes. On my Gateway Solo9500 Pentium III 850mhz machine, I can do that in 18 seconds. On my new AMD Athlon 1800XP the same task takes 9 seconds. I am sure someone will write a better conversion program for the Mac sometime soon but the reality is that PCs have the market share and most programs are written for the PC platform first," he says.

"HBO is set up with Mac computers, so they asked me to convert all the files prior to burning them on CD and shipping," he says. "Imagine if the average day produces 250 images. Times 10 seconds each conversion time. And then burning CDs (700 megs or 78 images per disc) and you can sort of get the picture of what my nights and weekends looked like after the usual 12 hour day.

"DVD Burning looks promising for lessening the load. They hold almost 5 gigs per disc, but the cross platform or just burner to reader compatibility was an issue, so I toughed it out with the CD Roms.

"I love Canon, but their software was cumbersome for handling this kind of volume," he adds. "My wife, Betty, discovered the 'Breeze Browser,' from Chris Breeze of Breeze Systems. He is a programmer/photographer who, seeing the need for a quick

and simple program, which could organize, edit, convert, number, and rotate images in large batches, took the existing Canon software engine and came up with a simple yet powerful and affordable program. This program does not exist for Mac, and this is a real problem for the Mac user who wants to shoot in the highest quality setting with his Canon.

"*Path to War* suddenly took on a new – and high pressure – dimension with the decision to go digital. My box and on set gear include: Canon EOS 3 with Motor-Drive, Canon A2E, 16-35mm f2.8, 28-70mm f2.8, 70-200mm f2.8, 35mm f2, 50mm f1.4, 85mm f1.8, 135mm f2, 75-300mm f4-5.6 image Stabilizer, EOS 540 flash, Quantum Turbo Battery, two IBM 1 GB Microdrive Compact Flash cards, a Gateway solo 9500 Pentium III 850 with 512 megs of RAM and an on-board CD Rewriteable Drive, a Digital Wallet for immediate downloading of digital files, two Maxtor 80GB External firewire drives, and the Fujifilm Pictography 3500 Thermal Dye Transfer printer.

"In Area 51 [Hyun's mobile digital lab] we have an AMD 1800 XP Tower system with 1 gig of RAM and a 120 gigabyte RAID hard drive system. RAID stands for Redundant Array of Independent Disks. It's basically two [or more] fast IDE drives

working as one with the effect of [theoretically] having half of the access time or twice the speed of just one drive. We also have an Epson 1280 inkjet printer for up to 13" x 44" prints (for production of prop posters and graphics) and a Nikon scanner for the odd film job.

"A typical day on the set of *Path to War* would start with empty memory cards and setting up the camera. The D30 can be programmed via the computer to control saturation, sharpness, and contrast. These factors are also variable when converting a RAW file.

"Color temperature or white balance can be automatic, or preset for Tungsten, daylight, fluorescent, strobe or custom. I don't have to buy that expensive color meter after all. By using a piece of white paper as a reference and the custom white balance setting. I can establish a 'look' under any combination of light sources. The cinematographer can then tell me hotter or cooler and I can create an example of what his film will look like. Prints can then be made on the Fujix and sent with the film to the timer for an exact reference. No more need to shoot 2.5 stops under to guard against overlit looking dailies from overzealous Telecine operators. Just a simple request to your stillsman

will do.

"Coverage of the scene is pretty normal, but say we are outside in noon light, shooting people in hats. The digital camera is still not the equal of film when it comes to contrast latitude. Though lowering the parameters for contrast and sharpness can help, when a highlight is gone, it's gone.

"So in reviewing your first shots you notice that shadow detail in the faces in this scene are too low. Because I have made a point to ask what the cameraman is using as a working ISO I can make an exposure based on his F-stop and show him what it's going to look like. On more than one occasion this has resulted in the addition of a light or reflector to narrow the contrast level and open the shadows.

"Now I meet with the publicists at lunch and learn that *The New York Times* would like to run a piece on the film and that a shot of the director and leading man are needed on the east coast yesterday or sooner. We stop in at Area 51 (stills trailer) and flip through the day's take on Breeze Browser. A suitable shot is found, but the director's eyes are closed in the perfect shot of the actor.

"No problem as I open this and another file (with open eyes) in Adobe Photoshop. Using the lasso tool I select the open eyes from file B and paste them into file A. Then, by tweaking my selection with the free transform command, I can make them fit right in. We print the file and have the actor and director approve the shot while he is in touchups. Now once online I can email the retouched and approved image to the editor in New York and the shot runs the next day.

"Next John calls me over and he is in front of his trailer with some account executives for a major advertising agency. They have made the journey to lunch with John and show off a concourse vintage Ferrari. 'Come on Doug, can we get a picture please?' I shoot the shot and they go in to have their lunch. Before they have finished desert I am presenting them with three perfect 9 by 12 glossies. Of course, thanks to Adobe, not a hair is out of place and the person who had walked through the background is magically turned into an ivy-covered wall.

"The day continues and I have produced about 200 images. The editing process has already been underway between shots in the camera and at the laptop between scenes. I have even found the time to go ahead and burn several CDs and have a jump on my homework".

The issue of digital cameras on the set other than those of the still photographers promises to be a hot topic. "It's not uncom-



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mon to find wardrobe, props, or makeup and hair using digital still cameras on a daily basis. Many will also have an Inkjet printer set up in their trucks and be handing out gift photos or posting pictures of the actors.

"When an actor comes to me complaining about a picture he has seen on the set and I have no idea where it came from – this is a real problem. When prop men begin producing portraits for set dressing this takes work from the still man. And when a man can be hired at a low rate to shoot digital stills under the title of preview man this is really a threat to our survival as still people.

"Our first line of defense is to be the best, most knowledgeable, and efficient digital magicians on the set. On *Path* the prop man asked me to make a print for a prop newspaper and when he felt my print wasn't up to snuff, he asked if he could give it a go on his printer. This inspired me to buy my Fujix Printer the next day and rest assured I was doing all the prints on the set after that!

"I also proposed to HBO that instead of having the actors and crew contacting them for prints that I could do that as well and charge the same fee as the pro labs do, but saving a big headache for the studio. They agreed and I was able to in my spare time take care of all the photo requests to the actors and deliver them on the set. This definitely raised some eyebrows, but when they saw that it was really a logical workflow, it was accepted.

"The savings of going digital are immense," Hyun concludes. A roll of 35mm to buy, test snip, judge balances, stamp, and sleeve is around \$40.00 per roll. Out of this, one or two images might make the final edit. Now, add the expense of running four trips to the lab, editing, filing, duping, storage space, the need for multiple sets of proofs and the poor guy who shreds one at a time, the killed photos, and you see why I say that digital is the 800 pound gorilla. You have got to take notice."

Of course, like many other still photographers who are moving into a new era, Hyun is concerned about the future. He is actively working with the Union and his peers to insure that this new technology is accessible for everyone concerned.

"The amount and cost of equipment and training a still photographer needs for the transition to digital isn't cheap," Hyun says. "We are still functioning in a world where the box rental hasn't changed in 15 years. I am sure that, once studios realize how much we can be of service to them – and how much we can save them – they will begin compensating us accordingly." ●

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