

Digital in the Arctic

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***The Fast Runner* proves that DV can handle feature-film-style scenery and color.**

As a DV filmmaker, I am interested in DV features. In fact, I have watched movies solely because they were shot on DV. The quality of DV features varies, but it's always been obvious that the movie was shot digitally, usually because it lacks the crispness and depth of film. *The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)*, a three-hour epic from Lot 47 Films, was a surprise: I could not tell it was DV.

Though I knew it was shot on video, I had to keep reminding myself that I was not seeing film.



*The camera captures several shades of the icy white scenery for *The Fast Runner*, one of the first truly film-like DV features.*

The Fast Runner tells the story of two brothers divided by a woman and bitter revenge. Set against the backdrop of the Arctic Circle (Baffin Island in northeast Canada), the story is based on ancient Inuit legend and was written by the late Paul Apak Angilirq who unfortunately died of cancer before production began and directed by Zacharias Kunuk. With a modest budget of only a few million dollars and shooting in a climate where temperatures normally fall in the negative double digits, the subtitled movie is truly a personal vision come to life. The technical achievements that brought this story to the screen are frankly amazing.

New York cinematographer Norman Cohn used Sony's DVW-700WS, a digital Betacam camera that supports widescreen. At the time we bought it in early 1998, Cohn says, it was the best portable video camera available in the world the first digital Betacam with obvious advantages over previous analog SP. It was also first with a 16:9 widescreen option, and we liked that feature at the time, knowing we may have a possible transfer to film in the

future of our productions.

Now, whereas many independent domestic filmmakers are stocking up on PAL equipment, the NTSC Betacam unit has had its true feature-length test and passed with flying colors. And the scenery could not have been more challenging. With a combination of stark icy whites, contrasty sunlit scenes, and low-light nighttime shots, the range of lighting could not have been more diverse. The Sony unit is pricey (a quick Web search showed \$250 to \$750 a day rental rates): not exactly a drop in the bucket to a video producer with a several million dollar budget, but it may be a wise choice for those wanting to cover the gap from video to film. What this particular camera offered the production was the ability to shoot at such a high resolution that the typical soft feel or grainy atmosphere in low-light situations is almost nonexistent.

I have to admit, the digital camera was superb, Cohn asserts. It was very reliable and especially good in low light, as well as in high-contrast situations. Really problematic is the high contrast in the whites, especially when the sky is slightly overcast and becomes indistinguishable from the snow. I got excellent results even with +6 gain; in fact, I often used +3 in low light, and results were great.

Although Cohn downplays the Arctic cold experienced during production, the weather conditions had to be taken into account. Actually, believe it or not, video works well in the cold, Cohn says. You just have to keep your batteries warm, as well as your hands. You have to be especially careful with wires, because believe me, they can freeze and snap like dry spaghetti. In addition, you have to be careful with moisture and condensation every time the camera comes indoors from the cold. But in general, video works fine to about 30 to 35 below, after which, it starts to get weird!

One thing that strikes you when you watch the movie is the style in which it was shot. Rather than doing traditional back-and-forth cuts, most of the scenes in *The Fast Runner* are shot wide and atmospheric or close up and intimate. There are shades of a documentary, but the movie is pure narrative. It's a question of applying the knowledge of videography and transferring it to a motion picture for the big screen.

Atanarjuat [The Fast Runner] is a long-form dramatic video made by experienced video makers thinking in video aesthetics, Cohn explains. The unique look is least of all technical, as most people can't see the difference in the film transfer, and mostly in the style of shooting. It's in the perspective of the eye through which the audience gets to see: long realtime takes with fewer quick cuts, lots of unplanned shots, a

living camera that gets inside the action rather than watches passively from the outside. Cohn adds that because they were shooting on video, they were allowed more takes and alternate ways to shoot various scenes. We definitely had more risk-taking in the shooting because of less fear of waste, in the mentality of a video shooter compared to a film shooter. We could also be more aggressive in the use of the camera. These are hard things to explain in words, but as you see in the film, they are real visible differences, which results in a huge impact on the final dramatic effect.

Cohn primarily attributes his shooting style in this movie to what he has been



Cinematographer Norman Cohn, on location in northeast Canada, used his experience as a video installation artist to shoot the movie.

shooting for three decades as a video installation artist. The audience for his work is limited because video art generally circulates in a marginalized world, but Cohn feels this background brings a lot to his filmmaking. His less traditional cinematic film movements, with a dizzying array of cuts and pans, attempt to discreetly record the lives of the subjects. So the focus is on the characters and not on the amazing camera calisthenics. Cohn does not know video any other way.

One part of the magic of *The Fast Runner* and what sets it apart from other DV features, is the look of the transfer, which was done by Digital Film Group, Vancouver, British Columbia. They used a proprietary method called Smooth Motion that converts the 60 fields of NTSC-interlaced video to 24fps of film. The process maintains all the resolution and eliminates the motion artifacts typically seen in DV feature films, improving the resolution and giving the video a film look.

Cohn offers some final advice for videographers who want to make the leap into feature films. Always use the best camera you can afford, he says.

There are good reasons why the high-end and low-end digital cameras have a \$100,000 spread. And bear in mind that when you get a camera that good, digital shooting requires a digital shooting style, neither film nor TV, but more like guerrilla video from the old days. Applying your video skills set to the film medium works in ways you might not have imagined.

Professionalizing a video aesthetic is what allows digital filmmaking to have an original look, Cohn adds. This look is obviously not for every subject matter or shooting style, but recognize that film and video are not the same medium. When we shot *The Fast Runner*, I wanted our film to look not quite like video, not quite like film, but something distinct and visually equal to or superior to either: a new format. And in the end, it did.

feedback

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For more information

The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat): www.lot47.com/thefastrunner

Digital Film Group: www.digitalfilmgroup.net

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