



On the set of *COLD MOUNTAIN*,  
(l-r) Director Anthony Minghella and  
DP John Seale, ACS ASC.

Special Thanks to Miramax Films.

# A Conversation with Cinematographer John Seale, ASC

## *Format and Digital Technologies*

by Jacqueline B. Frost

### Intro on Aspect ratio for formats

In discussing format it is necessary to understand **aspect ratio**, because each of the formats mentioned have a different aspect ratio, which has to do with the presentation of your finished project. Aspect ratio is basically the height and width of the frame and it is measured in a ratio that has to do with how much wider the image is in relation to the height of the frame. The ratios are determined

by dividing the width of the frame by the height, so sometimes they are written as 1:85:1, or 2:40:1. Regular 16mm film has an aspect ratio of 1:33 which is a square frame, or 4:3 in video, super 16mm has an aspect ratio of 1:66 which means that it is a bit wider than it is tall, but it is not a completion format and is usually blown up to 35mm or presented on High Definition. HD has an aspect ratio of 1:78, regular 35mm film is 1:85 which means it is wider than both super 16mm and HD, super 35mm film has an aspect ratio

of 2:35, anamorphic is 2:40 and 70mm is 2:65, these last three are considered wide screen formats.

There are numerous aesthetic reasons to select one aspect ratio over another, and definitely aesthetic reasons to choose film over HD or visa versa. As a director it is important that you understand the various formats available so that you can have an educated conversation with your cinematographer and come up with the best format to suit your film.

**If you were to pick a format what would be the one that you would suggest?**

**John Seale, ASC:** A lot of people push us into shooting in the anamorphic format, and I used to shoot with anamorphic lenses, but they're so damn slow; they're 4.5, and it's a constant battle to get interiors lifted up, you can do it of course. I resisted super 35mm for a long time, but then I did a film where I had torches and low light levels and had to have 2.8, so I went into super 35mm. In the

old days super 35mm had a prism that optically converted super 35 to anamorphic, and everything was fine up to that moment, and the prism was the failure. The end print result for the cinemas in full anamorphic squeeze were a disaster, so I resisted using super 35 for that reason, then all of a sudden they solved the prism problem, so I swung over.

But for *English Patient*, Anthony (Minghella) and I sat down for a long time and talked about format, why would we go anamorphic and why wouldn't we go 1:85? 1:85 is an actors format, you can get a nicer single out of a 1:85. With anamorphic now you're going to have the other actor in there somewhere either a little dirty foreground which I like, to relate, but not a clean single. Using anamorphic is a different bag in terms of coverage, so Anthony and I went back and forth with this. No studio was there to tell us what they wanted. Harvey Weinstein had footed the bill and he wasn't hammering us about format. So we mulled it for a long time and finally the edict we came out with was 1:85 because it's a movie about people in the

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desert, not a desert with people in it. So we shook hands on that. A lot of people have argued because the desert is a flat format, which anamorphic fits perfectly and we knew that, but we also argued against David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. It's fantastic, unbelievable, but we didn't want to do that. Anthony said, I will never want to start on a beautiful mountain range and come down and find the movie; we'll always cut to the movie, and I had to remind him a few times about that when he'd ask, 'could we start there and come down?' ... 'No, we can't, Anthony, the camera is not programmed to do that,' I'd say. Because you end up cutting those shots out in the end anyway, so we worked very hard to set up a shot that had the desert in the background so then the cars or whatever would bring you right into the movie. I think it helps to keep the pace up, but the majesty of it is still there. I like that because it's making the movie first and the cinematography comes second.

#### What do you think of digital technologies, and working with the Digital Intermediate?

**John Seale, ASC:** I love the DI. It's one of the greatest tools we've ever had. Some of the boys are disagreeing with it, they want to stay traditional, and I think they're crazy. Because you always have the problem of actors and emotion, so if you've got an actress and she's all wound up, she's going to cry, it's a very emotional scene for four hours, and you're changing angles and relighting and things like that. I always have an appreciation for the actors, that they have to maintain this emotion for 4 or 5 hours and I'm trying to help as much as I can by going as fast as I can with the relighting knowing that I'm going to turn around, the gaffer is already patching stuff in so when we turn around it's only 6 1/2 minutes and not an hour. I try to help them as much as I can that way, but what I've found with the DI is that you can help them even more because of all of a sudden the sun goes in, its gone black, and you think, oh my gosh, I've got to peel that ND off the window, but the actress is crying and she's ready, and I just say, okay, I'm ready, and I go because now I know I can rotoscope the window pump it back up and put it in again. So that DI means that the actress can do her thing and we're not slowing her up. Instead of saying, sorry, it's going to be 20 minutes and throw a latter outside and peel off the gel – rubbish, you just rotoscope it and re-trim it to match and you can get into the eyes, if you can't get a light into their eyes and see their emotion, so you can put sunnies on and pump their eyes up. Lots of little things you can do to make a better film. Not necessarily to make us (the cinematographers) look better, but just to make a better film.

But then you get some people, like the studios that want to see the eyes. I recall one big director's wife said she wanted to see the eyes on every person in this film, so they roto-scoped the eyes on every actor because the directors wife demanded it. A lot of

people don't give eye lights when actors are really hammering a performance. I believe you need to. I always try to put a pin prick of light in the eye, a little inky way down that doesn't light them but reflects the eye, or a little glint down here, because you can't see the eye but you know it's there and to me it just makes all the difference.

On *Cold Mountain*, I was using heavy chocolate and tobacco grads, right down to the rim of that big crater after the bang, and all the soldiers had come to the edge and the record showed these vaporized, soiled horses and men hanging over the hole for eight hours or so. I tried to create that, and it's very dramatic, but while shooting fairly loosely with zooms and tilting up from the bottom up to the wall I couldn't put the grads in because you'd have to slide them in as you tilt up, and then you see the thing coming down, it's a nightmare. But with the DI now you just rotoscope it across and lock it in and track each frame or whatever, and you track that grad all the way, you can have hard edge, soft edge, you can do what you want. So when we were doing *Cold Mountain*, we didn't have a DI for it, and I said that's okay, but when we got to the battle scene, I said, uh oh, I'm in trouble here, we're tilting up and down from the edge of this crater, and I can't get the grads in. So Anthony said, all right, how about I go and I push for a DI for the battle scene? And I said, thank you very much, just for that. So we got it for the entire film, thank God. Because you are able to trim little things, it doesn't matter how good you are because you are able to sit there and just increase that a bit, or drop that. It's nice, it's like the final brush strokes. The basic thing for me with a DI is that you speed up the set and that's where it helps everybody. I'm a great believer in staying on schedule and budget. If we are able to do that then it means that maybe the studio doesn't waste a lot of money and can make another film.

#### So the DI just helps you to keep shooting faster, you aren't shooting differently necessarily, but you are shooting more economically?

**John Seale, ASC:** Exactly, you know it's like a hot wall or something, and the gaffer will say that wall is hot, should we knock it down or something? And I'll just say DI. He'll say I can do it, and I'll say, how long, twenty minutes? He'll say, yeah? I'll say no, let's go, we'll roll, we're ready, just DI, and we can track it out as the camera pans, it's fantastic. I don't know what the guys who want to stay true blue (traditional photo chemical process) are thinking, whether it's just simply because they want to put it all on the negative, and it's my negative and nobody can change it. But the studio can change it anyway. I had a terrible DI once, that was a disaster, because of the control they can get, what they can do with the image that I had

created on the negative, where I feel it's was just a polishing thing, they were changing the whole concept of the visuals.

#### So that's the whole downside of the DI.

**John Seale, ASC:** It is, and it is going to continue to be a downside for all cinematographers. There are terrible stories going on, like directors not telling the DP that they are doing a DI, and he does it or the power hungry Executive Producers who do their own DI, this is a true story, the director is doing a DI in one room, and down the hall the DP is doing his DI and unbeknown to him the Execute Producer is upstairs doing his own, and he's not a cinematographer, he's a storyboard artist made good, it's frightening what can happen, what will happen.

#### Do you think you will ever shoot in High Def?

**John Seale, ASC:** I haven't yet, I have been asked by a director and I'll do it, I want to do it. It's the future; I'm not frightened of it. On *Poseidon*, I deliberately went for digi dailies. I heard so many guys complaining, and I thought I'll do them because I never have and I kind of liked them better than the film dailies. I better watch my mouth around here.

I've talked a lot with Dean Semler and the guys who have used digital cameras, and they are not adverse to them at all. I've always believed that HD is simply another style. I was over at Panavision, and they had a comparison from Allen Daviau, and I couldn't tell the difference. I mean, boy, it was subtle, too subtle for me to worry about. Once again I figure the audience will be used to it in the first three shots after that they just watch the movie. To me it's not a problem. I noticed that Panavision is gearing all the way to HD. They've refined that Genesis down to a heavy hand holding camera.

It is the future, and I think people need to bite the bullet and realize they are not going to be the DP's that we have all have known, the magic man who walks around with the cape saying 'spot that, flood that,' nobody knew what you were doing. It's gone. Because now they are all going to watch the monitor. Nobody will have to go to dailies because they know what they are getting right there on set. If it's a properly color corrected monitor and it would be, and you just light for that monitor that's what you're getting.

It won't take long before a smart producer will say get rid of those DP's, put a good operator in, the lighting could almost be done by committee.

John Seale, ASC is an Academy Award-winning cinematographer for *The English Patient*, who was also nominated for *Cold Mountain*,

*Rain Man* and *Witness*. He has worked with a list of directors that reads like the who's who in directing, including, Ron Howard, Anthony Minghella, Peter Weir, Sydney Pollack, Barry Levinson, James L. Brooks, Lawrence Kasdan, Rob Reiner, Chris Columbus, Brad Silberling, John Badham, and Michael Apted, just to name a few. This excerpt is from a conversation we had in Santa Monica this past fall.

Jacqueline B. Frost teaches cinematography and advanced film production at California State University, Fullerton, and regularly teaches cinematography for directors through the UCLA Extension. Jacqueline has shot numerous short films, independent feature films and documentaries that have screened in film festivals around the world. She has also taken on the role of Producer, Director and Editor on many projects. Jacqueline continues to freelance as a cinematographer in the Los Angeles area. Her upcoming book, "Creative Collaborators; Cinematography for Directors" will be published by MW Productions.

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