

LIBERTY'S FALL

Cloverfield, the brain child of TV Producer J.J. Abrams, was to have the HD Digital look from the start. We talked to the film's DIT during the 'hush hush' preamble to the premiere. HD Mag's Nicki Mills reports

Speed Racer might have had six Sony F23s but *Cloverfield* had five different digital HD cameras and a film camera; there's records being broken all over the place and the pace of digital cinematography shows that 2008 is going to be truly a breakthrough year.

Cloverfield was cloaked in the kind of secrecy that Hollywood PR people revel in and people in the trade just find tiresome. But this film was so doused in 'need to know' propaganda that the crew who made the trailer weren't even in on the details of the production. The film's DIT Nick Theodorakis was asked to help on the trailer but a refusal to tell him more about the production and a withholding of the script made him dubious about making the rest of the feature: "I didn't know who was involved and what the eventual project was when I was hired to do the trailer." Nick was lucky enough to persevere and not pass over the opportunity of working on one of the most exciting digital movies of the last few years.

It may have been J.J. Abrams' background in TV episodics like *Alias* but he had always wanted to make a digital movie. Nick Theodorakis explains how digital was the only way forward: "This movie was approved 'Digital' even before a script was written. The very essence of the movie demands that it is video. The look of the movie dictates that it has to be video."

The essence and the look that Nick is talking about is the 'POV/YouTube/Handycam' feel that they wanted, but don't mention *The Blair Witch Project!* "Ideally we wanted to shoot for the style of the picture which in this case is more of a 'Handycam' image. But unfortunately Handycams don't track for visual effects so what we have to do is get the highest quality image for visual effects because of the heavy amount of compositing and the lowest quality image in order to suspend disbelief.

"The two were consistently fighting one another but in order to solve that we came up with a myriad package of cameras that we could use on the picture. We tested all of them to see which one's cut against each other, which one's wouldn't cut against

each other, how you could cut against them and what post production processes we could do in order to accomplish one seamless image that are very long and arduous takes – 10, 15 minute takes."

If you've seen the film or even the trailer you'll know exactly what Nick is talking about. The film starts from the POV of someone who makes a going away home video and then mixes some incredible VFX seamlessly in the same shot, from then on the VFX don't let up in a monster thrill ride.

"That had never been done before. We wanted to avoid the phrase 'Blair Witch' as much as possible because it was not what we were doing. But a low fidelity image, a reality-style, almost YouTube image treated as a big budget FX heavy motion picture was a very new thing."

The film definitely references movies that were made post 9/11, maybe too much for some New Yorker's fragile shells from those dark days, but you can't blame them for catching the mood of video content right now – 'Every day footage from everyone' is how Nick describes the genre.

Of course going down to Times Square and buying the first handycam you see won't cut it for a major motion picture, even if that's the look you're after. They ended up with six different cameras that everybody shoots with.

Nick was brought to the movie to design a workflow from the cameras to post: "Essentially I was brought in to create the post workflow for everyone, I actually wrote a huge 30 page white paper on how we would deal with all the different cameras. We decided to record sound on the cameras through MS microphones in conjunction with Sky Walker Sound, there were lots of and lots of technical details per camera which I had to manage throughout the show."

Cloverfield was going to be mostly a Viper shoot, maybe as a result of Michael Mann's *Collateral* with all those 'wide open' long shots through Los Ange-

les. Fortunately for Sony the movie coincided with the launch of their brand new F23 HD movie camera and Nick tried one out: "We asked Band Pro if one was available as we had lots of low-light night and available light shooting to do and wanted to see how it coped. We did a test with it on a corner in LA with no lighting. We tested both F23 and Viper with some shutter and gain adjustments. The amazing thing about the F23 was when we were in the screening room we went through all the Viper stuff and everyone was quite cool about it and then we put up the F23 footage and you could actually hear gasps from the execs. You could see way down in to the distance. Way into the cloud you could see colour and haze of the smog in to the distance. We were even using a Mini Mag on some buildings quite a way away and it was showing up. The low end detail was phenomenal!"

The movie ended up shooting with the Sony F23, Grass Valley Viper, Panasonic HVX200, a Panasonic AVC HD camera, Panavision Genesis for a couple of plate shots and one high speed shot for a visual effect element with film.

Cloverfield seems to be the ideal place for a DIT with Nick splitting his skills among several departments all looking for direction. Some DoPs won't have them on set but you can't argue that when you are dealing with a patchwork of data flying around from set, to dailies to post, having a guy nursing the workflow is a must.



See and hear *Cloverfield*'s DP and DIT talk about how they shot the movie in our third Digital Edition @ definitionmagazine.com/digital