

A look at Clint Eastwood's Sully with Colourist Maxine Gervais

FilmLight



Technicolor harnesses Baselight's high-resolution capabilities for big-screen retelling of 'Miracle on the Hudson'.

Creating the look of a miracle

French-Canadian colourist Maxine Gervais, now at Technicolor in Los Angeles, has developed a close working relationship with Director Clint Eastwood and cinematographer Tom Stern, going back to Eastwood's adaptation of the musical Jersey Boys and more recently American Sniper. Their latest collaboration was on Sully, the biographical drama that tells the back story of Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger including his famous 'miracle on the Hudson' when he landed his A320 passenger plane on the river, saving 155 lives.

"I was involved with Sully from the beginning" Gervais recalled. "I usually supervise dailies for them, which we do in Baselight. They decided to go with a different camera this time so there were technicalities that we had to discuss and test in pre-production but overall we kept a similar colour workflow," she added.

Eastwood and long-term collaborator, Director of Photography Tom Stern used an ARRI Alexa 65 camera to capture the film at 6.5K resolution and finished in 4K, ready for distribution to IMAX HDR theatres. After the success of American Sniper on IMAX screens, they wanted to film more optimally for IMAX to provide authenticity and intensity to the movie, particularly lending impact to the dramatic flying and landing scenes.

Gervais ran tests with Tom Stern to determine which camera would best suit the large format needs. "Based on the pristine resolution, detail and sharpness, we felt confident in the Alexa 65 large-format camera," Gervais said. "We decided that the most efficient approach was to record the full 6.5k resolution from the camera and grading from the raw data, doing the de-Bayer live in Baselight."

"People love seeing the intensity on the big screen," according to Gervais. "But we knew that the climax of the movie - the take-off, the collision with the flock of birds, and that remarkable water landing - would be gripping in IMAX."



Technicolor Colourist Maxine Gervais

Feeling the Cold

US Airways flight 1549 took off from New York LaGuardia airport for Charlotte on 15 January 2009, but just a couple of minutes in to the flight it hit a flock of Canada geese which took out both engines. Not wanting to glide to a nearby airport with the risk of crashing short into residential areas - captain Sullenberger took the bold decision to land on the only available clear, flat surface: the Hudson River.

The January weather plays an important part in the movie's retelling of the story. The air temperature at around 3.30 in the afternoon, when the aircraft landed on the river, was around -7°C (20°F).

"It was freezing in the Hudson River and we wanted to make sure that it looks and feels that way, that you experience the cold along with the tension and urgency of the situation when you see the movie," Gervais said.

Inevitably, effects played a big part in Sully. All effects were delivered in 4K and some scenes had eight element mattes, e.g. to separate the plane, the water, the New York City background and the foreground. To manage this creatively, Maxine Gervais praised the Baselight software she uses.



Sully

"The composite grading tools gives me the ability to stack and treat every element," she said. "I could grade and manipulate in real time without processing or rendering, even while working with this large amount of data."

The dailies to the finishing

"The benefit of collaborating on the dailies is that from early on we could already establish the aesthetic as a team, so when we got to the DI we were already in a good place. It's all been done on-set with the FilmLight tools, so you build from there when it reaches the finishing suite.

"It was decided from the start that the best approach was to record in the full 6.5K resolution, and I would work with the raw camera data and debayer live in my Baselight," recalled Gervais. "This required working with MPC to create a workflow where the VFX shots matched the rest of the raw footage both in terms of colour and sharpness. The result was a workflow where I was able to have complete control over the images in the DI, and able to deliver finished files of the highest quality."

"Basilight gives you a lot of creative strength, and you can do a lot of intricate looks, but you can also work in a very traditional way to get a real film grade."

"The overall DI process is very organic; there's a lot of communication," Gervais added. "With the Malpaso team we recognised that the feel was realistic. We needed to create distinct looks for the entire film, whether for the dramatic event itself or for the flashbacks, it was just a slight shift in the feel."

Gervais primarily worked with Stern, but editor Blu Murray also had a line to the grading suite to ensure his notes were

heard on the narrative. "We get in a good place before Clint comes and reviews the picture with us," she said. "He will give his notes and feelings about certain things, and we'll go and tweak those.

"We'll get a sign off, and that's pretty much how it's been going."

The IMAX experience

Because the movie was slated for an IMAX release, there was the need for regular reviews. "We applied the look of the evolving DI onto the VFX so they could actually review the VFX at IMAX," Gervais recalled.

The effects were largely created at MPC and were in the hands of VFX supervisor Michael Owens. "Everyone was able to give notes and react as we went because it was being reviewed in the IMAX environment. It was a great way of working."

"It was freezing in the Hudson River and we wanted to make sure that it looks and feels that way, that you experience the cold along with the tension and urgency."

She emphasised that IMAX was really the goal for this movie, so there was no question of using 2K VFX in a 4K finish. "Resolution was important," Gervais highlighted. "Hence the choice of camera, and there was no question of doing 4K VFX.

"We worked closely with MPC to create a workflow so that the VFX matched the raw footage in terms of colour and sharpness," she said. "The result was a workflow where I had complete control over the images in the DI to deliver finished files of the highest quality.

"This is my third collaboration with the Malpaso team, and Sully is definitely high-tech in every sense of the word from a DI point of view. We had to ensure that the look would hold up, that the VFX and non-VFX shots would balance out, the blacks and the highlights would be pristine, and that the resolution was perfectly preserved to meet the exacting standards of IMAX."



Maxine Gervais grades *Sully* on Baselight with the Blackboard 2 panel

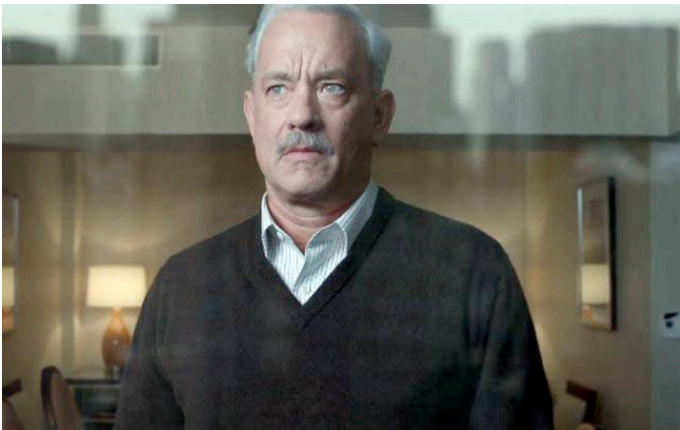
Talking of the IMAX review process gave Maxine Gervais the chance to tell a Clint Eastwood anecdote. "We used the IMAX screening room at Universal Studios for some of our reviews, which is part of the public park, where visitors come for the tours.

"During our screenings a special valet parking service was arranged, but one day we were waiting for Clint," she recalled. "We saw him coming from a completely different direction. He had self-parked and was walking just like a regular guy at Universal.

"The tourists all recognised him, and Clint is just super mellow," Gervais said. "It puts things in a different perspective when you see someone like this being so humble and definitely 'no red carpet'.

Baselight grading system

Maxine Gervais is strongly committed to Baselight as her preferred grading platform. She was particularly positive about the ability to perform composite grading, on multiple layers, in real time. "It gives you a lot of creative strength, and you can do a lot of intricate looks, but you can also work in a very traditional way to get a real film grade."



Tom Hanks in *Sully*

The initial camera tests also involved Baselight. It was important to match the raw footage with different sharpening settings in Baselight to get the absolute best out of the images.

She quoted the flashback scenes as particularly good examples of composite grading. "I love Baselight's composite grading where you can blend layers in additive, subtractive and other modes," Gervais explained. "In some ways it is a bit like Photoshop in that each layer becomes an element.

"For example, you can key a certain hue on a layer, boost its saturation, and diffuse it a bit, and then blend this in additive mode with another layer that has a set saturation, then play with the level of blending," she added. "It is fast and non-destructive. The compositing capacity can serve a creative yet intricate look as well as produce some basic VFX. And it just keeps getting better."

In terms of colour space, Baselight was again instrumental in creating all the deliverables. IMAX was seen as the main creative intention, but even then there was the opportunity to show the movie on a traditional 14 foot Lambert Xenon projector and the newer breed of high brightness laser projectors. The movie also had to be output in conventional 2.35:1 in traditional and high dynamic range variants.

"Once we were signed off I went to IMAX and worked with their colourist," Gervais recalled. "We looked over the movie, noted what could be done, and made sure those notes ripple across the reels nicely just to push it where the blacks and the highlights and everything felt really beautiful.

"Basilight is my system of choice. With Baselight, the sky really is the limit."

"HDR is really amazing," she states. "It will be great when more theatres switch to laser projection, and when more televisions have HDR capability because it will redefine the way we do DI - it will be our starting point.

"I also feel that, because of Baselight and the internal colour science, it is also very easy to move between colour spaces," Gervais added. "Basilight is my system of choice. Along with the solid colour science and real-time rendering, it far exceeds my expectations with its creative strength, which gives me complete freedom to create the looks my clients demand. With Baselight, the sky really is the limit."

Head Office & EMEA

London, UK
t: +44.20.7292.0400
info@filmlight.ltd.uk

Australia

Sydney
t: +61.2.8746.0602

China

Beijing
t: +86.139.1073.7940

Germany

Berlin
t: +49.151.2345.5668

India

Mumbai
t: +91.9819.426.677

Japan

Tokyo
t: +81.3.6801.6280

Mexico

Mexico City
t: +52(1)55.5165.2132

Singapore

Singapore
t: +65.9670.3283

Thailand

Bangkok
t: +66.891.259.009

USA

Los Angeles
t: +1.323.785.1630

www.filmlight.ltd.uk



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