

The colour of 'The Beguiled'

Sofia Coppola took the best director prize at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival for her movie *The Beguiled*. Set in Virginia in the steamy summer of 1864, the plot sees Colin Farrell as a wounded and deserting Union soldier take refuge among the staff and students of a girl's boarding school, among them Nicole Kidman and Kirsten Dunst.

Coppola was keen to heighten the drama by constraining the atmosphere, emphasising the heat and humidity, and by creating a very painterly sensibility. To help her, she recruited noted French cinematographer Philippe le Sourd, who in turn brought colourist Damien van der Cruyssen. The two had first worked together at Mikros Images in Paris: Cruyssen is now colourist and director of DI at The Mill New York, which uses Baselight for grading.



An early decision was that the movie would be shot on 35mm film, maximising the use of celluloid with a 1.66:1 aspect ratio. While this caused a slight inconvenience in the workflow - the film was shot in New Orleans, processed by Fotokem in Los Angeles with the digital rushes then having to cross the continent for finishing in New York - the artistic drivers were strong.

"On 35mm the lights melt together," DoP Sourd explained. "We were able to get a look closer to sfumato from Renaissance painting, and the pictorialist photographers like Edward Steichen.

"The 1.66 format helped to capture the loneliness and imprisonment of the women's monastic life during the Civil War," he added. "In a medium shot, the camera could only focus on the gestures and body language, not the set or the landscape. The format captured the intimacy of the women's gaze and perspective."

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The look of the film was set when Sofia Coppola and her production designer, Anne Ross, researched the period. Philippe le Sourd then joined them to discuss the characters and how they would be reflected in the imagery.

"The exteriors were shot at very specific times of the day," Sourd recalled. "We shot at dusk and sunset to amplify the sense of immediate danger, for example.

"At the same time, I had to duplicate the oppressive tone for the interior daylight, and for the night interiors with candle light. I tried to use as few lights as possible to really capture the most natural aspect of a scene. The challenge was to keep a consistent look without an obvious digital colour correction, to keep the sense of the 35mm film grain."

DoP Philippe le Sourd and colourist Damien van der Cruyssen first met at the turn of the century, when the latter was a telecine assistant at Mikros Images working with Bertrand Duval, who graded the commercials Sourd was working on. When Cruyssen moved to New York in 2009 the pair hooked up on a Davidoff commercial, and established a regular partnership.

The team was completed in 2016 when Sofia Coppola was invited to direct a production of *La Traviata* in Rome. She asked Sourd to film it; he asked Cruyssen to grade it. When *The Beguiled* was planned, everyone was excited to get involved.



How did the decision to shoot on 35mm affect the finish?

"It added two days of pre-colouring to balance out the scans," according to Cruyssen. "There was a lot of inconsistency in the scans that needed adjustments before Philippe could walk in the room.

"But the benefits of shooting film were great for the overall texture and natural contrast that negative stock has," he added. "There is a richness in the skin tone that is very difficult to replicate with digital formats.

"For *The Beguiled*, Sofia had complete trust in Philippe regarding the final colour, and most of the DI was just with Philippe attending," Sourd said. "Sofia came in a few times. She was very discrete, yet very attentive.

"She has an excellent eye and sense of visual direction. I especially remember one comment for a scene that gave the tone to our collaboration: she told me to put my 'elegance' filter on. I took that to mean bring down the contrast, keeping it soft, moody yet natural and, well, elegant."

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DoP and colourist were regular collaborators on commercials. Did this mean they had a flying start on the grade for *The Beguiled*?

"Not really," said Cruyssen. "In many ways, I'd say I had to unlearn everything I do in commercials.

"In beauty commercials we always strive for a shiny picture, whereas one of the goals in this movie was to create a look

that was painterly and matte," he explained. "The look was done in camera, so we used very few windows or keys.

"Philippe and Sofia wanted a natural light, so we tried to avoid as much as possible any digital manipulation. Most of my layers were film grade, video grade, curves and six vectors."

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Both spoke of influences by painters and early photographers like Steichen and Julia Margaret Cameron as key influences on the look. Specific lenses were made and used on set to create a bokeh like a Petzval lens. A lot of smoke was used to soften the atmosphere.

The DoP was present for much of the finishing. As Philippe le Sourd explained, "colour grading is a very interesting process to review your work, and most important to polish it."

For Cruyssen, the biggest challenge "was to make the exterior and interior scenes all belong to the same sweaty southern confined atmosphere. The exteriors often felt bright and sunny, and too distant from the softer and darker moodiness of the interiors. We had to make the two meet elegantly.



"We chose to have neutral nights rather than cool, to help transition with the very warm candle-lit scenes. This movie is all about low contrast, so we had to find the sweet spot.

"Towards the end of the movie is a morning scene in the kitchen that we spent a lot of time on," Cruyssen recalled. "We tried different things but we were not satisfied. It was Sofia with her fresh eyes that helped us to go back in the right direction. We warmed the scene up to fit better with the surrounding sequences."

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The whole project used the comprehensive Truelight colour management system to ensure consistency of imagery between viewings and between deliverables. Towards the end of post, the Baselight system was upgraded with FilmLight's latest 5.0 release, which allowed Cruyssen to take advantage of the new DRT Family feature in 5.0; this feature ensures that Baselight automatically selects the most appropriate version of a DRT for the particular viewing condition. By switching to the Truelight CAM family - FilmLight's default Colour Appearance Model - Baselight easily generated the four separate delivery masters: theatrical DCP, theatrical print, Rec.709 video and HDR video.

The result of the whole process was an award-winning movie that also charmed and delighted audiences. The DoP put at least some of that down to colourist Damien van der Cruyssen, with skills Sourd described as including "patience, passion, creativity and perfection."



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