

I went to Chater Cameras in Berkeley California on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to interview ohn Chater the owner and have him speak about the kind of equipment that was regularly hired. I went to a city near to Los Angeles which is sufficiently far away from Los Angeles as a center of 'cinematic excellence' to be feature in equipment hire, but not be a dominant factor. This proximity to LA would of course play back in the consciousness of the film-makers in San Franciso and surrounding territories, but the work that's done in the area would be less about cinema and more about the kind of work that is accomplished worldwide where cinema is not a governing element of the hire of equipment. Chater Cameras also have a large equipment base and have owned some of the foremost cutting edge equipment and keep abreast of developments within Digital Cinematography – all of which made them ideal to interview. However, like many a cameraman (and John still regularly works as such) in the end he did not want to go on camera.

It could be argued that non-cinematic work requires simple digital video equipment to accomplish what is needed for corporate video's, promos, television documentaries (and lower level commercials) – but the reality is that the cat is out of the bag with regard to data based cinematography and every cinematographer be he or she Director of Photography, Lighting Cameraperson, or camera operator needs to be involved in understanding the new medium. A recent edition of an LA community newspaper featured the article: 'Film is Dead'. The message has finally taken hold – film is no longer dominant as a production medium. Not because the cinematographers don't want to use it, because they do –it's more about the economic issues as seen by the studios. Using Data Cinematography basically costs them less. Christopher Nolan gathered an eminent group of film-makers together to screen the first 5 minutes of his latest Batman outing with a view to asking for support from fellow directors to maintain the use of film for feature films – but of course the directors might have the power to demand a particular something for their production because they are seen as bringing home the bacon in the short term - however in the long term, due to the production of features requiring less cost in digital, that will be the dominant factor in changing the landscape from film to data video usage.

So to a local equipment supplier, with the preceding issues as the background hum in this very-near-to-LA- production scene: John Chater said that he didn't go to NAB, the yearly event held in Los Vegas to highlight what the equipment manufacturers have been innovating all year as a response to the preceding years demands from cinematographers worldwide. John didn't go because he's sick of being 'sold to'. He knows what's what through the act of, as Lord Alan Sugar would have it, 'smelling what's selling'. He knows what the production companies want for their shoots, as advised by their cinematographers and directors. He's completely aware that they're affected by the 'buzz' as generated by NAB and how that conditions the desires of cinematographers, but he's also aware that reality has to take hold and becomes a more dominant factor in the choices made in local production.

John said: "LA wants high resolution and ease of use, it wants film-style thinking. That's partly why the Alexa has been so successful even though the Red One and the Red Epic are higher resolution cameras". The Alexa, to paraphrase John, "produces a pleasant image straight away and produces a 'creamy' highlight". John characterised the Alexa in terms of actors as being like James Stewart whilst the Red was more Robert Downy Junior. The first always turns in a good performance and the second may or may not turn up on set and you may get a brilliant performance. "That analogy of course is neither fair to Red nor to Robert Downey Junior (as he's changed his act from his more addicted days). Red is now dependable and will turn in a good performance if the person handling it knows what they're

doing. But it's the perception that counts and given that many Film-oriented DP's are saying I want an Alexa for a shoot – then everyone else follows. This is provable as a conditional idea because Peter Jackson and Ridley Scott are both using Red's Epic on Prometheus and the Hobbit respectively and you know for sure that these makers know exactly what they're doing". One other point is that people at Chater say that the money is spent at the front end with Alexa (it costs three times the cost of the Epic) but an equivalent amount is spent at the back end sorting out Red footage. I'm not sure that this is in fact true, it being a sensibility rather than mathematical fact.

“Alexa is 2k and produces a nice image and is simple to use. The simplicity of use leads to an increased demand by camera assistants on their DP's”. As John said “if Alexa were 4k it would be a killer piece of equipment”. But 4K is problematic in the real world (as it stands) and this leads us to the take-up on the F65. John said that they had purchased an F35, but got rid of it for various reasons. John told me that they'd learnt a valuable lesson with the F35 and got out just in time – It was cutting edge but did not have support from the production community.

The F65 is similar. It's a 4k oversampled piece of imaging equipment. Here 'oversampled' means it's an 8k chip outputting a 4k image (because as the Shannon Niquist Sampling theorem states, you need to sample a frequency twice to produce the correct frequency, therefore you need 8k to produce 4k). It's generally agreed that Red One's 4.5K chip produces 2.8 – 3.2k image. DP's at the top end obviously want high resolution but they also have older deeper allegiances than the intermediate operator, Sony. Arriflex fits the bill with film credentials and have generated a camera with a sensor functioning from a 'sweet-spot' that is attuned and calibrated for a pleasant sensibility in terms of image generation – and puts out a simple QuickTime pro-res file that can work in pretty much any workflow. The F65 is very back-heavy in terms of recording the signal and then processing it. Sony are making the SR recorder work with it so that will win over the post production houses, but it may just disable the simpler production position that is now becoming a little fed-up with a continuous development of equipment and demands from DP's, driven by the carrot of greater excellence being dangled in front of them by manufacturers.

Within the issue of higher resolution there's the issue of having the right lenses and John says he's in the ridiculous position of ordering some Cooke lenses (as the rolls Royce choice of DP's for film) but that they're “noticeably soft” on high resolution digital equipment (like Epic's or indeed the F65), “but if that's what the DP's want”, then he'll finally crack and buy some in. He didn't say they were soft for 2K and the Alexa, which they shouldn't be of course – but the implication is that fashion rather than technical excellence rules.

There's an old saying that DP's are like cows in that when they hear a loud bang, they all turn their heads to find out what's happening – in other words, sometimes fashion creates a headlong stampede after the thing that drives the industry at that moment. With regard lighting styles, when the fashion hits for a certain kind of light, then everyone tries to use that light. With cameras it's the same. When Roger Deakins said he liked the Alexa (and by implication he didn't say this about the Red, therefore he likes the LAexa more than he likes the Red) with so many academy award nominations behind him, he must know that the Alexa is a better camera. But Chater said that doesn't follow of course, instead it means that Deakin's more comfortable with that camera – and of course in his case what he's comfortable with will of course enable him to produce excellent award winning images.

With regard DSLR's, Canon's new C300 is part of the shooting scene (for a while) but the equipment scene is one of movement and flux. Also "with DSLR's, everyone's a DP". Very few people are aware that DSLR's output GoP structured images and are therefore technically inferior to high end Data Cameras which output every frame as a good frame. Others have commented that "everybody is a DP until proven otherwise". However fashion promotes the DSLR for various reasons - it has a common heritage with photography and we've now seen a long convergence between 'video' cameras and SLR/DSLR's so it's not a surprise that convergence has become 'integration'. But the skill problem remains the same. Young kids can read the basics of photography and where before the skill's were implicit in the act of faith that waited until the film was developed - now whatever is tried can be checked immediately. Somewhere between waiting for a result and it's immediate retrieval lies the absence of experience that is in fact the deciding factor in a DP - where critical reflection on experience married with material results and a long study of aesthetics imbues the DP with a kind of wisdom that 'the fresh kid can't have'. Of course, the 'fresh kid' will one day stop being the callow youth and turn into the middle-aged and then the wizened old man or woman, replete with a canniness about generating the beautiful and appropriate image - but in the short term, John Chater was suggesting that the froth involved in the medium has to take time to settle down before we can see who of those young people claiming the title and mantle of 'Director of Photography' are still doing that job after the enthusiasm has passed.

After interviewing and transcribing the conversation with John - and do forgive my verbatim and paraphrasing report style - overall I believe John was saying 'business as usual' as I know from my acquaintance with him over the last several years that he's 'seen it all before'. I actually ran a facility in Soho in the early 1980's and it was my belief then, as now, that every 5 years there's an influx of new technology which comes trumpeted by early adopters as being 'game changing' in its effect, but after the dust has settled, what's left is a landscape where those with the commitment to remain as professional image makers and the suppliers of the best and most appropriate equipment are still there with their number added to by people as serious as themselves.