

Absolutely CINEMATIC

Four leading cinematographers
on the Panasonic VariCam

Extracts from presentations at the UK VariCam Workshop
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Location: Dolby Screening Room, Soho




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Preface

Panasonic Broadcast & ProAV was pleased to host the first ever UK VariCam workshop at Dolby's prestigious Screening Rooms in London's Soho Square. We ran the day in co-operation with Codex and the two sessions were well attended by cinematographers, camera operators and members of the broadcast media industry alike. It provided an opportunity for cinematographers who have used the VariCam to describe their experiences from using it on a number of productions and to show the footage that was captured on VariCam. The resoundingly positive feedback we received from the cinematographers in attendance is outlined here.

The speakers

William Wages, ASC

John Christian Rosenlund, FNF

Vanja Cernjul, ASC

Oona Menges



William Wages, ASC

"What you don't see is what you get"

The Workshop began with ASC award winner and Emmy-nominated DOP William Wages. Atlanta-based Wages' latest project, shot exclusively on the VariCam LT, is Sun Records, an eight-episode drama based on the musical Million Dollar Quartet.

The story centres around an important moment in rock and roll history, dramatising an impromptu 1956 recording session involving Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Johnny Cash. Shot in Memphis, Wages talked of his high regard for the VariCam since first testing it out in a low light shoot for Warner Brothers.

"Since the VariCam LT came out that's all I've been

using. It's literally a night vision device. The first shoot I used it on [NBC TV series Revolution] we were working with Warner Brothers, and they didn't know about the LT and were sceptical, so I had to shoot and prove to them that it was capable. I set up a scene involving four people around a candle, using just that light, and it won them over.

"Sun Records was the first shoot to use the LT straight from the factory, so we had four brand new cameras and it was like the paint was still wet on these things. Most of it was shot at 5000 ISO and I almost entirely ran with a Steadicam setup. Because the camera was so much lighter we got a good two hours of extra production time as the operator could wear the thing all day.

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“It’s literally a night vision device”



Wages also talked of the savings the LT’s powerful low light performance enabled, “Production didn’t believe that we could go without a significant amount of the lighting and that the cameras could cope; they had an extra truck full of equipment on hand that we got rid of in the end because it was just redundant.

“With this camera the lighting package is a tenth of what we would be using five years ago, and that’s important for the production company because I can go to them and say you can save all this money on air conditioning and power. In years past, we’d also need a pre-rig crew to come on-set beforehand and cable up everything, knocking holes in the walls on set for the lighting. Now I don’t cable up anything and most of the time I’m using very little lighting.

“Aircon costs in the US are huge,” said William Wages. “So if you can cut it by two-thirds that’s a major selling point for production companies. As a DOP the camera helps to start pushing the business side away from me and allow me to focus on my creative work.

“I can really count on the fact that the look that I’m going to get out of it is right. I remember using film back in the day but I would even go as far as to say that this is better than anything film produced. It becomes more about the art of it rather than the mechanics of it, because you know the camera is going to cope and as a DOP that is very liberating.”

“We had a whole extra truck of lighting equipment that we got rid of in the end because it was just redundant.”



John Christian Rosenlund, FNF

Norwegian cinematographer John Christian Rosenlund was up next with his Oscar shortlisted historical drama *The Kings Choice*, following the Norwegian royal family as they cope with the WW2 German invasion.

The audience was treated to a sequence from the film that was shot on the VariCam 35, in which German soldiers advance on a group of outnumbered Norwegian soldiers and open fire.

“The 35 survived a winter Norwegian night with temperatures deep into the negatives.”

Shot using a zoom lens, Rosenlund spoke of the intent to create a documentary-style feel. “We wanted it to be as true-to-life as possible, because it’s based on an event that really happened. The VariCam 35 survived a winter Norwegian night, with temperatures deep into the negatives. We couldn’t have had the camera enclosed in a rubber case or anything to protect it because we were constantly moving around and I needed flexibility.”

“We also shot the whole sequence at 5000 ISO, and it was something we simply could not achieve with the other cameras that we tested without ruining the feel that we wanted to create – especially at one point where during the scene a German soldier let off a flare and the whole area is lit up brightly. For this scene we used a single 450W light off to the side to light the scene and that was it.”



Vanja Cernjul, ASC

Also invited to speak at the event was Croatian cinematographer Vanja Cernjul, who has used the VariCam 35 to create HBO eight-part series *The Deuce*. He has also used the VariCam 35 on Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black* and *Marco Polo*.

“It’s good to be able to use less fuel and need less air conditioning because we can scale down our lighting package.”

“The *Deuce* was created by David Simon, who is perhaps best known for *The Wire*. Knowing his commitment to authenticity we wanted to shoot as close as possible to natural light.”

“The *Deuce* is set in 1970s New York and we primarily shot on location, so we had a lot of dolly shots and in-car night work. We had some resistance from HBO at first because they had no experience with

the camera, but we shot a street test and the look that we got from it was enough to convince them.”

“This shoot had a lot of moving around between locations as well as within scenes, so the fact that the camera was really compact went down well with the producers.”

“We started working with it and we gradually used less and less light; it’s amazing when you have the freedom to pick where you want to shoot without worrying about light.”

“For me personally it’s not just about the light levels alone that this camera can work with, it’s also the freedom to work differently. I can think about the way I set up scenes in a different way.”

“Film sets are often really bad for the environment, so it’s also good to be able to use less fuel and need less air conditioning because we can scale down our lighting package. It’s not always just about cost.”

“My next project in March will be on the VariCam Pure. It’s a theatrical release so I want it to be as clean as possible and the uncompressed RAW is ideal for that.”



Oona Menges

The last speaker on stage was up-and-coming DOP Oona Menges, who used the VariCam Pure in a test shoot around London. She is one of the first DOPs to work with the camera in the UK.

“We shot in a dark field... there was very little ambient light at all... the idea was to push the camera to its limits and give it a real test”

Developed in conjunction with Codex, the Pure is capable of capturing 4K RAW at up to 120fps with an industry-standard workflow via Codex's Production Suite in providing all required deliverables.

The shoot was supported by rental company Movietech, who supplied the Leica lenses used by Menges. “We shot in a dark field in Barnet. London was perhaps a mile away in this footage so there was very little ambient light at all – there was no moon either. The idea was to push the camera to its limits and give it a real test. We just had a bonfire and an M18 light about forty metres away off to the left for light and shot at 5000 ISO.”

“By being able to shoot at such low light levels you can give the actors more space because you don't have to need the lights so close – you can position them much further away.”

“We had one of the actors run off into the dark and it was difficult for him to completely disappear because the camera was still picking him up!”