

The compact and lightweight camera and lens combination enabled great flexibility to grab a variety of shots with relative ease

Recreating history's darkest times: how *Rise of the Nazis* got its look

Rise of the Nazis is a powerful three-part docudrama series exploring how Hitler and the Nazis took power in Germany in the 1930s and transformed the country from a democracy to a dictatorship. The story is told by historians and experts, illustrated with atmospheric reconstructions. It was made by 72 Films for the BBC and filmed by GTC award-winner and member, DoP **Duane McClunie**.

I have worked on several films with *Rise of the Nazis* director Julian Jones, and the genesis of our visual approach to *Rise* was in a series called *Elizabeth I's Secret Agents* that I had shot for Julian and director Chris Durlacher in 2017. For *Elizabeth* we shot the drama sequences with a loose, wide-open documentary style, as though we were intimate bystanders in history. The difference with *Rise* was that we were now in the 1930s, taking on a period of history where cameras and film crews actually existed. This gave us the chance to push the documentary feel into something more literal, to create the feeling that we really were a film crew with behind-the-scenes access to the story as it unfolded. To enhance this construct, sometimes we would work with full access to the characters, being able to photograph them up close, which would contrast with scenes shot to give the impression that we were more restricted, being held at a distance, just grabbing snippets of the action, perhaps at the end of a corridor or surreptitiously through a window.

With all this in mind, we decided our main shooting mode would be handheld; whilst this was predominantly a creative decision, it was a practical one, too. We were working on a small budget and we only had 11 days to shoot Julian's very ambitious scripts. Before the shoot, the 1st AD was tearing

his hair out regarding how long our days were likely to be, but Julian and I were confident that, given our experience on *Elizabeth* and our background as documentary film-makers, going handheld would mean we could shoot quickly without track, cranes or other toys to slow us down.

Our choice of camera was a no-brainer. ARRI cameras are well known for their more filmic and less digital look, their great latitude, and for being extremely user-friendly and quick to use. The ALEXA Mini has the added advantage of being lightweight and compact, so it was the perfect choice for the long handheld takes. This was also an advantage when manoeuvring the camera easily, without grip equipment, into a huge variety of positions, such as overhead looking down on people, or running safely through crowds with a stripped-down camera. It was also easy to configure working around cars, both interior and exterior.

The glass speaks

Next came lens choice. Julian wanted two things: a soft, dirty, non-digital look that evoked 16mm, feeling organically of the 1930s era; and the ability to get as close as possible to the actors in certain scenes, at times literally over their shoulders.

To achieve this, I felt we needed glass that offered speed, softness, low contrast and flare. After tests, I settled on vintage (circa 1990) uncoated Zeiss Super Speeds. They look great wide open (even if creating a tough challenge for Richard Ing, the focus puller), have minimal colour fringing, and the deeply out-of-focus areas just look amazing as they blend together and add so much atmosphere to the shots. Also, as I don't like using large, heavy lenses, the Super Speeds were perfect on that front, too.

We took the classic set, which included the 18, 24, 35, 50 and 85mms, but on our test days we soon realised that the wider lenses would be our go-to choice for most scenes; we were often close in to our cast, filming over a shoulder and seeing the side of their face, yet needing to see who, or what, was in front of them as well. The wider lenses were perfect for this, although the extra angle of view on the 18mm meant there were only limited occasions when we could use that lens. Also, because our documentary style of filming meant we moved around a lot, from shooting out wide to then getting in close, we needed to choose lenses that would work throughout the scene.

Reframing for history

Perhaps our biggest leap into the unknown was the decision regarding aspect ratio. From our first discussion, Julian was adamant about shooting the drama scenes with a 4:3 aspect ratio to lend a more realistic 1930s documentary feel. Neither of us had filmed in open-gate 4:3 before, and so the tests were a learning curve in how to frame our shots now that we had the extra height and narrow width that comes from using the full sensor. It is a very different way of thinking about shot composition, and we got a lot of our references from watching 1930s documentaries like John Grierson's *Housing Problems* as well as modern handheld 4:3 films such as *Son of Saul*. We both felt confident that 'baked-in' 4:3 was the way to go, and we quickly discounted the 'safer' option of shooting 16:9 and cropping in post.

So, we were very happy with the 4:3 full sensor look for the 1930s drama, but wanted a more contemporary feel for the modern-day expert interviews. Julian wanted the ability to resize interview frames in post, so I suggested shooting our experts in 16:9 aspect ratio, but for them to be reframed



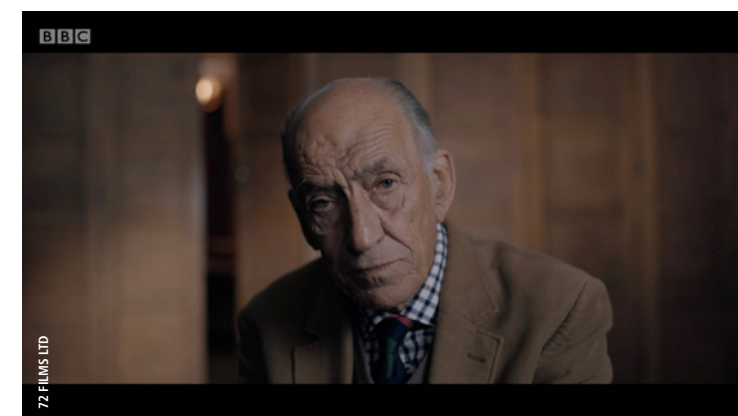
Paul von Hindenburg, the President of the Weimar Republic, being inquired by Hitler into subsequently appointing him Chancellor in 1933

in post, by applying a bespoke narrower crop. We felt this solution offered a contemporary cinematic doc feel for the talking heads that made them distinct from the drama without being jarring when cut together.

Looks are everything

The next decision concerned LUTs. Julian's reference material included many surprising and unstaged behind-the-scenes photographs of Hitler and his inner circle, from the mid-1930s, taken by a photographer called Hugo Jaeger on some of the earliest Agfa colour film stock. It's a common perception nowadays that the Nazis were always hunkered down in dimly lit rooms and moody bunkers, and yet this clearly wasn't the case. Here, in these images, were the most evil men in history creating the outward appearance of respectability, having soirées with smartly dressed people in opulent, colourful buildings, surrounded by fresh flowers and fine furnishings.

Several shots in *Rise* directly reference those photographs and, to bring this grotesque world to life, I experimented with a large variety of LUTs. Ultimately, we decided we would use a few different LUTs as the films span several years, and are set in a diverse range of locations. We camera-tested down to a shortlist of potentials which could then be viewed in situ; from these we chose a contender for the final look, or at least a good steer in the right direction. To assist me in keeping track of the looks we had used on each scene, we catalogued them into folders for reference, which also helped me choose the look for the following scene. The effect of each LUT on the image was then further enhanced by a naturalistic yet stylish approach to the lighting.



General Sir Mike Jackson talks about von Hindenburg and his role in Hitler's rise

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Julian would often block a scene with the actors but not with me, so I wouldn't have any detailed idea of what was about to happen. On “action” I would follow whatever unfolded in front of me in pure documentary coverage style.

Documenting drama

Although I have shot a couple of narrative features before, and Julian has directed episodic drama, when it came to the *Rise* shoot, we were essentially doc people going into a narrative world. To speed up our filming and to maintain a more documentary feeling, we had full 360 degree sets wherever possible, so we could shoot in any direction. Julian would often block a scene with the actors without me around, so I wouldn't have any detailed idea of what was about to happen. On “action” I would follow whatever unfolded in front of me in pure documentary-style coverage. This approach worked well, but it meant that everyone had to be out of the way, and put a lot of pressure on both me and my excellent gaffer, Eggy. We had to come up with lighting choices and positions for lamps that were out of vision yet still gave us the look we were after; a bit like when lighting a scene for multiple camera angles (which is always a struggle in itself), but working with just the one camera.

Eggy quickly dialled into our very naturalistic and speedy way of working, which could mean anything from no lights at all, to a lot of simple edging, to more complex setups, such as scenes in a courtroom or beer hall – but even these were lit with pretty broad strokes; we used a lot of practicals.

For one particular night scene, I was filming an actor in a moving car with Eggy following us with an orange-gelled panel light, constantly panning it as he ran, to simulate street lights that the car was passing. Lo-fi, but effective and brilliant work.

The shoot, which was in Lithuania, went incredibly well. From the first setup on day 1, we knew that the aspect ratio, camera and shooting style were working a treat and so we could crack on, feeling confident throughout the rest of the shoot. We trusted that the production value which came from our choice of camera, glass, actors and the practical decision to be non-gripped (the tripod was only used for setting the lighting, after which we'd go handheld) meant we could cover many scenes per day. These were all crucial factors that, when combined, enabled us to achieve so much with so little.

Watch those weather apps

The weather is always a scary factor when on a tight schedule. As we had just 11 days for filming the three one-hour episodes, we had to keep our foot on the gas at all times. Luckily we had no blowouts due to adverse conditions, even despite an unexpected snowstorm that came in on one occasion, making filming a summer wedding scene a bit of a challenge. Our location for this was a very large conservatory where, thanks to its large window-lined walls, snow could clearly be seen falling outside. After a minor freak-out and hasty head scratch, I decided to close the heavy net curtains

Duane gets in close to the chilling re-enactment of Nazis rounding up and arresting communists



LUKAS SALJAJ/72 FILMS LTD



RICHARD ING/72 FILMS LTD

Duane prepares to film marchers fleeing Nazis, whilst running with them

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This gave us the chance to push the documentary feel into something more literal, to create the feeling that we really were a film crew with behind-the-scenes access to the story as it unfolded.



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Hitler is now Chancellor of Germany

that luckily were already set in, and our largest HMIs were placed outside in the snow to replicate the warm, summer sun the script required but had failed to show. In fact, come to think of it, until I wrote this now, no one would have known there'd been a blizzard outside!

We had to depict a few fight scenes and, once again, we wanted to get right in amongst it, our shooting style making it very immersive for the viewer, which could at times be quite challenging for us. For example, some scenes had us running down the streets with our camera slimmed down to its most compact mode. With crowds running away from armed soldiers, the air heavy with smoke, as I darted in every direction, whipping erratically from one person to another, things were particularly demanding for focus puller Richard. Somehow he niftily kept up with me, doing an amazing job of maintaining focus throughout, until letting it drift soft at just the right moments. Filming handheld really helped to maintain the pace, as did using a small, lightweight camera. All the crew were fantastic, but in particular a big thanks to my local AC who unfailingly loaded the camera up, and then relieved me of it straight after a take, time, after time, after time.

For the fight scenes, we used a local stunt team who, just like the rest of our amazing local cast and crew, we managed to get onboard with our naturalistic style. They embraced our unconventional coverage, which meant none of the usual long, lingering shots or cutaways of their excellently choreographed setups; instead, we opted either for short, perfectly timed glimpses that told the story, or longer, uncut takes from an observational POV perspective. There really was



LUKAS SALNA/72 FILMS LTD

Richard Ing preps the ALEXA Mini on Hartinger's car



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Filming the examination of a murdered prisoner

no traditional coverage whatsoever.

Even though some of the casting went down to the wire, the actors were incredible. They all looked amazing, but what really made the difference was that they were truly inspired by the project and so put their all into it. Our Hitler was so convincing, from all angles, with his research into the Fuhrer's mannerisms adding the menacingly uncompromising intensity that was required on set. Seeing a fully kitted-out Hitler chatting casually to an equally authentic and believable Hermann Goering in the lunch line can be the type of situation that we in the world of production take for granted – but it's still a bit disturbing!

Overall, the days were very well structured and, amazingly, we didn't drop that many scenes, and *almost everything* we shot made it to the finished series. Where we did lose time, we often made it up elsewhere and on occasions, we even found ourselves improvising new scenes, because we had made the day ahead of schedule. When does that ever happen?!

Fact File

Duane McClunie's core work is in documentary and brand films and, while a majority of his documentaries are in the realms of history, science and art, he's by no means limited to any particular genres. Recent productions that Duane has filmed include the *Civilizations* series, the upcoming series of *Frankie Boyle's Tour of Scotland*, drama content for CNN and a six-part doc series shot on anamorphic (about which he can say no more as it's still under an NDA). Duane won a GTC Award for Excellence in 2019 for his work on *Civilisations* and has this year been nominated for *Rise of the Nazis*.

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