

VIEW THROUGH A LENS



*Pieter de Vries is one of our top cinematographers, and a huge Mac fan, writes **Barrie Smith**.*

The Australian film and video industry holds a firm place in this country's cultural landscape: the Jackmans, Kidmans and Gibsons – yup, even naughty Mel – are loved; the Weirs, Luhrmanns and Schepisis have a popular following as directors and cinematographers such as Oscar winners like Dean Semler ACS, John Seale ACS and Russell Boyd ACS are recognised in the street.

A standout in the industry as a director of photography (DoP) and cinematographer is multi-award-winner Pieter de Vries ACS, who has not followed the traditional path in shooting feature films but rather immersed himself in television documentaries. Not surprisingly, he is well known to decades of viewers as the man behind the camera of some very high-profile titles.

Spending a morning with De Vries at his Sydney Northern Beaches home I asked why he calls himself a cinematographer; his early career was in film capture but his current output is almost entirely in HD video.

"It's all about moving images, not so much about how they're captured," De Vries says. "It's no longer relevant to think of moving pictures as being only images recorded on motion picture film. It comes from the cinema and its motion picture heritage, but video and digital recording is so entrenched that the title 'cinematographer' is still relevant.

"It's to do with recording images, using composition, movement, lighting, and not so much about the camera platform. It could even be a Super 8 movie camera."

In his view, film techniques signify the gold standard. He predicts there may well still be a place for film – some cinematographers and directors just love that particular texture, and at this point, only film can deliver it.

Never an easy life. Much of De Vries's work is known to the viewing public because of the challenging projects he's used a camera to record. One such enterprise was a group of four one-hour TV docs filmed in China with director Scott Hicks in 1988.

"In 1988 things in China were very different than they are today," De Vries says. "We were the first foreign crew to ever get permission to film with the Chinese People's Liberation Army and we had three months working in winter and summer.

"The challenges were enormous, mainly because we were dealing with army people and not film people. Language was a huge problem, just communication, even though we had translators for every occasion."

De Vries says of the trickiest times of his career was in the shooting of *Rat* on Super 16mm in 1997, and jokingly says he is "on the home stretch with the plague!" But seriously, he gives a lot of credit to director Mark Lewis, who specialises "in doing quirky animal films".

Lewis always wants a "cinematic feel" in his work, so it needed to be lit and photographed in a cinematic way to give a dramatic, but believable look.

"The challenge for me," De Vries says, "was to light areas where I needed rats to move and then organise the rats to run through that particular pool of light, stop momentarily and then move on to somewhere else. The challenge was in coordinating the production values, the intricate lighting required and getting rats to cooperate with that.

"Luckily, it was pretty easy because we had a great wrangler, a rat wrangler. We had about 70 rats on that, at any one time."

Rat earned De Vries the Australian Cinematographer of the Year Award at the 1998 Australian Cinematographers Society Awards, plus an Emmy nomination in 1999.

The world in 3D. Turning to his use of high-definition (HD) cameras to shoot 3D footage, De Vries says the benefits are that you can shoot for over an hour without needing to change magazines, "and of course it's much cheaper", but he adds that there are inherent problems working with 3D using a hand-held camera.

"You have to keep the cameras in registration in regard to convergence, the angle at which the lenses are pointing inwards, otherwise the audience will have eye strain if they are not converging correctly.

"Vertical mismatching of convergences can also cause a problem. It's a harrowing experience at times because you're not only worried about composition and exposure, you've also got this extra dimension of convergence to be concerned with. It can render a scene completely unusable."

Keeping up with HD. When asked what he thinks of the current HD systems – RED, Viper, Genesis and so on – De Vries says he feels "there is a place for them all – they're part of that palette that cinematographers can draw on. For many people it comes down to the camera format they feel comfortable with."

As a cinematographer he must keep on top of everything that's happening and adds that it's not like

working with film, where only the lenses and film stocks tend to get better every year.

"With HD cameras, the hardware tends to change as well as the circuit boards to improve image quality, so from a cinematographer's point of view it's very, very challenging. With a new camera you have to go back to school and learn how to use it. But once you've learnt the basics, then your work as a cinematographer just kicks in, the lighting skills are all there and nothing is different."

Credits

A very, very short selection from Pieter de Vries's long career:

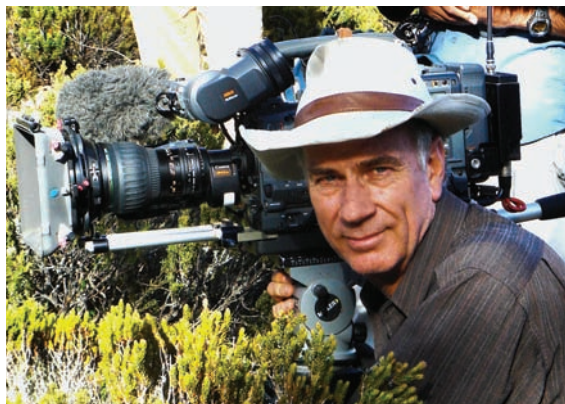
- 2009 – *On Tour with the Queen*. 4 X 1 hr series filmed in New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji and Australia
- 2006-2009 – *CIA - Crime Investigation Australia*. Now in to his third year shooting the drama reconstructions for this high-rating crime investigation series.
- 2008 – *Darwin's Lost Paradise*. Retracing Charles Darwin's Beagle journey in the Galapagos Islands, USA, France, Germany, UK, Cocos Islands and Australia.
- 2005 – *Philip Glass - a Portrait in Twelve Parts*. Directed by Scott Hicks, the film documents the life and work of this renowned US musician and composer leading up to his 70th birthday celebrations.
- 2001 – *Ghosts of the Abyss*. Large format (Imax) film centered on an expedition that revisits the wreck of the *Titanic*. Directed by James Cameron.
- 1997 – *Rat*. Quirky look at life in New York from the rats' point of view.
- 1988 – *The Great Wall of Iron*. Documentary mini-series about the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Winner of the Peabody Award 1990 USA. Directed by Scott Hicks and filmed in China and Tibet.



Using the RED camera for a Maxibon ice cream TV commercial.

right: De Vries
on location in
Tasmania.

far right:
conducting an ACS
masterclass.



The RED camera he finds exciting as the “camera is still evolving. It’s been readily accepted by everybody, mainly because of the image quality and pricing.”

He recalls it arrived “with a sensational marketing strategy that was very, very impressive. Then they followed up with a very, very impressive product as well. Now it’s out there, it’s working. They listened to DoPs too.

“Because of its design and software, RED is sort of challenging things along the way, so I think it shows an incredible leap of faith on the part of many people in the industry to actually get behind it. In a way it’s kind of fulfilling itself by the very fact that so many people have become involved with it.”

Budget video. On the opposite end of the film-maker’s scale, many people are going out, buying a \$2000 camera and making movies – and there will always be a place for them, De Vries says.

“They have a great story, they have the time,” he says. “And the quality of digital cameras in terms of bang for buck is so high now ... previously you’d have to save up for years to buy a 16mm camera and even then you’d spend two weeks just learning how to load the film magazines.

“These days you just load a tape or whack in a card and off you go, so it’s released people to take an idea all the way through.”

A good story can be told with only a consumer format camera, De Vries says, “but it has to be a very good story in order to carry it because often the pictures and sound – if bad – are things that people are not always willing to overlook.

“Getting things right at the shooting stage pays off in the edit and I’ve been running workshops for a number of years to show people how easy it is to do just that.”

“I don’t think quality will ever lose its place in the system.”

Glass houses. De Vries was part of the 2007 theatrical documentary on Philip Glass – *Glass: A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts* – but director Scott Hicks shot most of the movie. How did his work rate?

“Scott was always going to shoot most of this film because of his wonderful relationship with Philip ... and Scott is a very visual person,” De Vries says. “We think very similarly and have similar ideas about framing.

“He knows the way I construct shots and there is an incredible similarity in the way we think visually. So, from our very early days, I knew he had a wonderful eye. I spent time with him, showing him, not how to be a cinematographer, but how to get the best out of that particular camera.

“When a director like Scott is working with his subject, he has a very strong idea about what he wants. He’ll leave the camera rolling because he knows something is going to happen. And at the end of the scene he’ll allow the shot to run for a long time. This is the advantage of being a director and shooting it at the same time.”

High drama. When I ask De Vries if he’d consider shooting drama, he quickly answers: “I *have* shot drama but the majority of my work has been in the area of documentaries and commercials. I haven’t chased features. I do love documentaries. I love the work, the kind of ebb and flow of the way a documentary works. I enjoy working with real people.

“I’ve always been a stills guy, always taking stills. I love the thought of being plumbed into a landscape and the essence of what I see, and I know that by shooting in a certain way, by using certain lense sizes I can find the shots.

“When I’m in doco mode I love the compactness of the crew and as a consequence of that, the people who we choose to travel with are carefully chosen, as much for their personalities as their technical skills – so they’re good people to be around.”

You’ve won a heap of awards including a pile from the Australian Cinematographers Society (ACS). Are they any help in getting business?

“I think they’re part of your profile but they don’t stick up like a neon sign. It’s always great to be recognised for the work that you do.”

Mac muso. De Vries's computer experience has been almost 100 percent Mac from day one.

"I grew up with the, very early models, going right back to the 512K," he says. "Being a musician as well I used to do a bit of writing, so I came up, of course, through Logic and Cubase composition tools.


"I've basically gone along for the Mac ride all the way, even through the bad old '90s when there were all sorts of stumbles (by Apple). At one stage I thought of jumping ship but I'm so glad I didn't."

Now, he says, Macs are part of everything he does. "They maintain my Website and maintain contacts with overseas producers by email. I do quite a bit of writing and the have a lot to do with my stills work ... I shoot a lot of production stills when I'm away, and for the workshops I run. For these I use Final Cut Pro, Aperture and Photoshop.

"My main working computer is a MacBook Pro with two gig of RAM. I try and run it as leanly as possible. There are a lot of video and image files, which I keep on separate portable hard drives. We've got six Macs that are all networked. They range from Power Mac G5 iMacs to Intel Power Mac G5s. We're looking to upgrade a couple of the computers at the moment."

Tough shoots. In closing I asked De Vries about tough shoots he's had to deal with.

"The toughest shoots for me tend to be related to weather," he says. "I spent 11 months in South America working on a documentary series, and that was physically very hard and involved working long hours.

"But the locations were amazing and it's incredibly stimulating work," he adds. "I still pinch myself to think how can a bloke like me has ended up in a job like this." 

Video Workshops

Pieter de Vries is one of Australia's most popular teachers of video cinematography and lighting techniques. His workshops, conducted regularly in Australia and overseas, are structured for both beginners and experienced shooters and are very well attended.

Despite the extraordinary colour rendition and resolution of modern digital video cameras, he points out that image quality alone is not the makings of a good-looking film.

"Mastering buttons and dials can just be a matter of browsing the operation manual, but there is nothing in a manual about solid composition, creating mood through exposure level, simple lighting set-ups or even something as simple as making best use of available sunlight," he says. "There's certainly nothing written in a manual on how to string together a fabulous and engaging sequence."

All of these points are covered in De Vries's workshops and he is always delighted and encouraged to see the difference in craft when former participants send him finished copies of their films: "I've become quite addicted to the reaction of students, seeing them smile as the penny drops, the techniques unfold and they discover things that up until now, only the pros knew."

— To find out more about future workshops please contact Pieter De Vries on pietdv@ozemail.com.au or www.pieterdevries.com.au



A recent workshop conducted for the Australian Video Producers Association.