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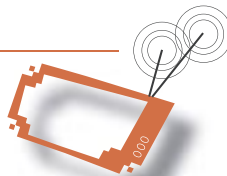


Cover Image: The cover image is a collage of images of EDN events from its ten years of existence.

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Give Me an HD Coffee Break

Sunny Side of the Doc has found a new home in La Rochelle, and this year's event was all about the arrival of High Definition. The omnipresent HD fever has not caught on with the DOX reporter yet.

By Ben Kempas

La Rochelle

First impressions first. It's day 1, and I've already had enough of La Rochelle, ignoring the fact that I haven't even arrived there. I'm stuck at this train station somewhere in the west of France. My flight to Paris was delayed, I queued for hours to get a train ticket, I missed my connections, and now I'm stranded in Poitiers. In other words, La Rochelle is just so much harder to get to than Marseille, the previous location of this international documentary market. Day 1 is nearly over when a local train finally brings us into La Rochelle and a miracle happens. Instantly, the Atlantic wind blows away all the clouds – and my grumpy mood. I used to like Marseille for its cultural mix, its craziness, its chaos. Now I find myself loving La Rochelle: peaceful, relaxed, not so hot. The seafood is just fantastic, and I email Ulla Jacobsen, the DOX editor, to propose an article on the best restaurants. She convinces me that this article should be about Sunny Side's overall theme, "High Definition". Oh well, Ulla, here you go. But what exactly should I write? High Definition – that reminds me of our enthusiasm five years ago when we were proud to be the first cameramen in Germany to do a comprehensive comparison between Sony's then brand-new HDCAM format and all those traditional film and video formats. The results were exciting, but in the following five years of camera jobs, I only shot on HDCAM once: a fiction short. All the documentary work – be it independent or commissioned – continued to be on "SD" (Standard Definition).

Picture Quality Back to TV

It wasn't until the arrival of HDV and small DVCPROHD cameras that the doc world really started to get excited about the need for High Definition beyond wildlife or docu-drama programmes. Numerous special events here at Sunny Side are dedicated to those shiny, incredibly detailed pictures. Or as Gregory Moyer of the US-based VOOOM Network describes it at Sunny Side, "HD puts visual storytelling back into television. You can hold an audience closer and more passionately. We should celebrate this tool, increasing the immediacy and intimacy of the documentary." Well, maybe. As filmmakers, we know so many

other factors that make our work immediate or intimate, so I start to wonder how important a factor pixel resolution really is. Still, I really agree with all these enthused panellists telling us that "HD is a way to get back the quality we lost a long time ago."

HDV: a Pipe Dream

Broadcasters are starting to define requirements for HD delivery. However, the common assumption that an "affordable" format like HDV would give indie filmmakers equal access to HDTV broadcasters turns out to be a pipe dream. Shana Vickers-Jacobus says that Discovery HD Theater would not accept HDV footage contributing more than 15 percent to the running time of any HD programme. According to the BBC's John Willis, they simply don't accept any HDV for their HD trial service. He reminds us how compression gets worse "when you stuff it into an MPEG and squeeze it into a transmission slot together with 10 other channels."

These restrictions on HDV are similar to the ones on the use of "up-converted" SD footage. When delivered to Discovery HD Theater, SD should not account for more than 25 percent of the programme, never to be used for more than one minute at a time. I learn this at the panel called "Wildlife: 100% HD" on the second day, where everyone agrees how amazing HD is in no-light situations, or in the macro world, or when filming predation scenes from the air. The Varicam's film look mixes very well with existing film footage, and Shana Vickers-Jacobus strongly recommends producers to "talk to the post house from day one, keeping in mind the conversion costs when dealing with different frame rates." Especially for wildlife productions, lenses are now more expensive than the actual camera. As Neil Nightingale of the BBC's Natural History Unit has observed, "An 800mm zoom lens reaches the limits of what a documentary cameraman can do or keep in focus." Plus, the reliability of the cameras is a big problem. In the middle of the Mongolian desert, both HD cameras of a ZDF production gave up, and Ralf Blasius was relieved that his crew had brought 35mm backup equipment.

HD-Ready TV Sets

Later this same day, I'm at one of many presentations in the "HD Village" that are in French only, which I unfortunately don't understand, so my thoughts are elsewhere. The event is called an "HD Coffee Break", so I start to wonder what "HD Coffee" tastes like... Does it have more coffee beans per cup, or is it just about finer grinding? My head is starting to spin. More people on more panels tell me that the HD breakthrough is here because so many people have already bought TV sets that are "HD ready". Looking at the tech specs of all these sets, I notice that their vertical resolution is not 720, not 1080, it's in fact 768 pixels. Why? I don't have a clue. All these sets that are sold as 'HD ready' are clearly not 'true' HD, they just make the audience believe they were watching HD. The screens are derived from the computer world, hence the funny figures. The additional conversion of the signal will not do it any favours. Note to self: delay purchase of new TV set until "truly HD ready" screens appear on the consumer market.

Same Filmmaking Rules Apply

It is Day 3, all these HD pictures continue to look brilliant on professional monitors and beamers, and today's discussion is entitled "HD: (R)EVOLUTION?"... One panellist apologises for having brought the wrong tape, so we only get to see his shiny High-Definition showreel in traditional TV quality. What's the point, I wonder. Most guests keep on saying how HD changes everything – producing, shooting, editing – except for one director on the panel: Richard Dale. He proclaims, "Nothing has changed." Needless to say, I like this guy. He insists that the rules of filmmaking are still the same. No, you don't edit films in a different way just because they are High Definition. In fact, you may choose different cuts when a film is made for a bigger screen size – but that has always been the case. "HD feels a bit like an IMAX moment, but that's it." Dale explains how on the set of their HD productions, they spend a lot of time shooting wide open, using many grey filters, aiming to avoid the sharpness of HD pictures and achieve more film-like aesthetics. Obviously, HD is predominant in dramatised and reconstructed programmes. Yves Jeanneau, the boss of Sunny Side and moderator of this talking shop, invites the audience to a screening of Richard's latest film, *9/11: Dawn to Dusk*. Ironically, *9/11* was not even shot on HD.

Which HD Camera to Buy?

"That 9/11 film was mind-blowing," David Herman tells me later that night. David is a farmer in rural England and a truly independent documentary maker. He loved his Canon XL-1, he is still in love with his XL-2, and he wants to know what he should love next. HDV and the rumours of 12-frame dropouts scare him. "So what should I buy? An HVX200?" The answer comes from the BBC's John Willis: "HDV is crap. So cut a Z1 and an HVX200 in halves, just take the camera block of the HDV and add the rear end of the DVCProHD. You'll also want to add an exchangeable lens." He predicts such a solution in the below-EUR 10,000 category "within the next 12 to 18 months." Sony's brand new XDCAM HD format could be a step in the right direction, Willis explains.



In the "HD Village", EDN member David Herman checks out the new HVX200: "It's a brick!".

While so much about HD still needs to be sorted out, the pioneers of High Definition are already much further ahead. The pioneers, that's NHK, Japanese television. In La Rochelle, they beat the drum for their ultra-high-sensitivity models ("Super-HARP HDTV") and the new ultra-high-definition technology ("Super Hi-Vision"), possibly six times better than today's HD. That's way too much for my brain, I've had enough definition for now...

Technical Problems with New Cameras

Back home in Munich, I visit my favourite production company. They just bought three of the first XDCAM HD camcorders that John Willis was talking about, and they encountered some unpleasant surprises, including a technical bug that no-one can explain. The miracles of High Definition.

Hey, over all this HD craziness, I nearly forgot to mention my favourite restaurant in La Rochelle. It's in the old port and called André. Their moules marinière alone are a reason to come back. The town's relaxed atmosphere has really taken Sunny Side of the Doc onto a new level, and I'm ready for next year's edition. However, I'm not quite "HD ready" yet. ☒

Ben Kempas

is a Munich-based filmmaker and cameraman. He's a co-host of The D-Word Community, an online forum for documentary professionals (www.d-word.com).

High-definition signals can be recorded in various formats: HDV is low end, HDCAM is high end, DVCProHD and XDCAM HD are in-betweens. HDV is derived from Mini-DV but has been criticised for its low data rate, high compression, and dropouts being up to 12 frames long.

Memory for Max, Claire, Ida and Company

Canada 2005, 112 min.

Director: Allan King
 Production: Allan King Films
 World Sales: Allan King Films
 Tel: +1 416 964 7284
 th@allankingfilms.com



Memory takes us inside the halls of Toronto's Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care to explore how personal attitudes and relationships nurture well-being and impact memory in the over-80 set. Allan King's main characters are Max Trachter, his sweetheart Claire Mandel, and Claire's friend Ida Orloff, all of whom reside on the fifth floor of the centre. They and the other residents on the floor suffer from various forms of memory loss. King also weaves into his story how the residents cope with the isolation of living in a nursing home. Despite the charming décor and caring staff, the people who reside at Baycrest are separated from their friends, family, and past lives. Some find solace in the company of their fellow residents while others lament their loneliness, loss of identity, and lack of freedom. Bette Davis, the actress, famously declared in her later years, "Old age ain't for sissies," and with *Memory*, Allan King takes his second look in the past four years at people nearing the end of their life. His previous film, made in 2003, *Dying at Grace*, dealt with hospice care and death.

King, a Canadian master of cinéma-vérité, has been making documentary films since 1956. He chooses to call his approach "actuality drama" since he strives to record the immediacy of the moment and to create films that maintain the emotional integrity of what the crew captures. *Warrendale*, about emotionally disturbed children, was King's first "actuality drama". King doesn't shoot or edit. In his opinion, his strength is his conceptual ability. He sets his films in motion by selecting the story, winning the trust of the characters, and then stepping away to let the very able talents of his cinematographer Peter Walker and sound technician Jason Milligan capture the results. His editor, Nick Hector, shapes the story and then presents it to King for comment. It's an interesting working method given today's propensity for one-person do-it-all yourself documentary filmmaking. And one well worth investigation given the results on display here.

Memory is a superbly crafted documentary with impeccable sound and camera work. The editing treats everyone in the film with respect yet doesn't shy away from showing emotionally fraught situations. Careful pacing lets the film unfold with just enough dramatic tension to carry the audience forward through scenes many people may find difficult to watch. The film closes on a sentimental touch – an audience-pleasing image of promise and hope for the future – instead of the more ambiguous reality most of us will likely confront.

Robert M. Goodman

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