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It is without doubt the case that one of filmmaking's defining characteristics is **cinematography**. The process of capturing the scene, composing the images and framing the shot is what is surely unique to filmmaking. French filmmaker Robert Bresson famously argued that cinematography is the essence of cinema:

"Cinematography is a writing with images in movement and with sounds."

"Two types of films: those that employ the resources of the theater (actors, direction, etc...) and use the camera in order to reproduce; those that employ the resources of cinematography and use the camera to create"

Robert Bresson, Notes for the Cinematographer

This is the great challenge for cinema: is it simply filmed theatre i.e. recording the event that is happening in front of it - and I've seen my fair share of that - or can it aspire to a unique art form in itself?

As Bresson says:

Your camera catches not only physical movements that are inapprehensible by pencil, brush or pen, but also certain states of soul.....which it alone can reveal" (Bresson, 97).

I wonder what Bresson would have made of the changes taking place in filmmaking as it inexorably moves into the digital domain. My suspicion is that he would have approved. Digital allows a more flexible response. If you think back to **Festen** – one of the first all digital productions that I remember seeing. It allowed the camera to freely roam and observe rather than work with the artifice of elaborate constructions where actors have to "hit their mark". One of the actors at the time described the liberation of not worrying where the camera was and being able to concentrate on the performance.

However some of the problems for digital imaging in filmmaking have been its ability to capture light in as nuanced a way as film: the subtlety of chemical grain replaced by the harshness of digital pixel. There were also problems in capturing movement, in both what the camera is looking at and when the camera itself moves. There were also quite fundamental problems with digital's inability to deal with depth or more precisely everything would be in focus – the foreground and the background regardless of whether you wanted it that way.

The extent to which the layperson is aware of this I don't know but I remember in the early days of digital projection (the early days being less than 10 years ago!) these factors being very real problems. With advances in technology and quality of resolution these problems are decreasing.

A major breakthrough on the cinematography side has been the evolution of the **RED camera**. In 2005/6 Jim Jannard, an American designer, businessman and fanatic photographer got together a host of programmers and technicians to begin tackling these limitations of digital. Their solution was the RED camera that seemed to resolve all the above issues and more, delivering a film quality image on digital. Importantly, it was cheap (by film camera standards).

In the film making community where much scepticism lay about the rush into the digital image, the arrival of the RED was a road to Damascus moment. When **Peter Jackson** – he of Lord of the Rings trilogy, and much more - heard about it he gave Jannard a call to put the camera through its paces in New Zealand. American director **Steven Soderberg** was immediately taken by the camera and shot **Che** Parts 1 and 2 on the RED. Here is what he says – note the zeal.

"This is the camera I've been waiting for my whole career: jaw-dropping imagery recorded on board a camera light enough to hold with one hand. I don't know how Jim and the Red team did it - and they won't tell me - but I know this: Red is going to change everything."

This – to the cinema going public – has been an invisible revolution but revolution it is none the less. In our **Sunday Brunch: Revolutions in Cinematography** slot this month we are screening films at the forefront of this revolution that were shot digitally on the RED. These include the aforementioned CHE plus the quite brilliant

South African science fiction **District 9** (note it was produced by Jackson) and finally **The Social Network**. We are also hosting a conference on the impact of Digital on the aesthetic of cinema at the end of March. This will be being recorded and published on our dshed.net website. The conference organiser Terry Flaxton, himself a cinematographer, is doing invaluable research in this area at Bristol University. You can see some of his research at <http://www.flaxton.btinternet.co.uk/>

Just when you thought you were getting your head round the technology along comes something that completely blows preconceptions out the window. That something is Uruguayan film **The Silent House** – a tense thriller/horror - that is extraordinary for not only being shot in a single take and but also being shot on a digital stills camera. Never mind the fact it was made for circa \$6000. The quality might not hit the resolution standards of some purists but it is an effective chiller whose low res feel only adds to the atmosphere.

Finally if you want to see two examples of what I think Robert Bresson was driving at with “certain states of soul.....which only it (cinematography) can reveal” then Lance Hammer’s **Ballast** and Aleksei Popogrebsky’s **How I Ended This Summer** are two excellent examples. Both – one from America, the other from Russia – eschew the literary elements of cinema and immerse the viewer in the world of the characters and the film through a poetic use of cinematography. Essential cinema.

Ballast opens on Fri 15 April.

How I Ended this Summer opens on Fri 22 April.

The Silent House opens on Fri 8 April.

The **Sunday Brunches** run throughout Sundays in April.

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/programmes/163/>