



Episode 009: Peter Doyle

JOSH PETOK

Thanks Peter for coming on to the podcast.

PETER DOYLE

Thanks for having me.

JOSH PETOK

So you started around the 90s, but you were mainly focused on doing visual effects. What brought you over to doing solely just color?

PETER DOYLE

I'd been doing visual effects really just as digital had kicked in. I was working with Kodak over in Rochester on the Cineon Digital Intermediate System as they called it at the time. And while I was doing visual effects, I was mainly focusing on the kind of compositing and color side of visual effects.

To an extent, I had always liked color aspect of compositing and in some ways it kind of just been waiting for the digital technology to be practical enough to grade in the way people were kind of grading pretty much commercials using telecine chains, but at a much higher res, and with the control compositing can bring. Cineon kind of offered that whilst, obviously at the time, the technology wasn't as fast and as realtime as it was now. It was quite good, pretty much what I focused on.

The first project where I really made the move exclusively over to grading was The Lord of the Rings when Andrew Lesnie, the DP, and Barry Osborne, the producer, Peter Wheel had the discussion about how to make Middle Earth look unwieldy, you know, to have some kind of magical look. It was felt, obviously digital compositing would be the way to go. But, to try and do an entire film or Nuke or, at the time, Shake was just not really practical. So, we looked at different alternates. Working with New Line Cinema, we basically commissioned a software package that was really streamlined to do the functions grading in a more practical way then perhaps a compositing package. So, it kind of went from there.

JOSH PETOK

Is this what eventually became Lustre or was that something else?

PETER DOYLE

Yeah.

JOSH PETOK

Ok.

PETER DOYLE

It was the Jaszberenyi brothers when they had their little company in Budapest with Colorfront. And I approached Aron and Mark, and we specced out, basically what this thing should do. Then they wrote it and it grew from there.

JOSH PETOK

So, as you were saying, you've had the opportunity to work with a lot of talented directors and DPs. Do you think that they shaped the way that you approach grades?

PETER DOYLE

Without question. I really see my function, I mean there's several things, but ultimately a translator. Which is to take the creative direction and the brief from DP and director and frankly to translate that into technical operations. I mean, it sounds rather dry, and perhaps a little academic to reduce the craft of color grading into technical language but ultimately that's it.

If a DP asks for, "Can you give me a flashed blacks with a blue hue?" I will translate that into, well we tone map a binary matte so that we can lift the blacks on the curve and perhaps run a blur or a special filter to emulate what a flashed black in a film lab would do. So, it's kind of like a translation process in, in my opinion.

And obviously, I'd like to think I have my own thoughts about that. But, I see my job as really two things, and that's to take on board what asked for and try to, at the best of my ability, understand what that is and then to translate that into a series of technical operations. And then B, is to join in that discussion and say, "Ok. So this is what you're thinking, and now that we've seen that, what do you think about this or this?" Definitely, they shape what we do, I think anyway.

JOSH PETOK

The kinds of films that you've worked are so vastly different. As you'd said, you'd worked on Lord of the Rings, but you've also done movies like Big Eyes and Inside Llewyn Davis. Most people would be really surprised that the same colorist had worked on all three of those projects. Does your approach change based on the different style of these films?

PETER DOYLE

No. I mean there's certain practical decisions. Certainly, Inside Llewyn Davis was Joel and Ethan. It was pretty much an indie film, so the budgets are little more limited. In some ways the approach changes. Well, the cold reality is that budgets will dictate to an extent the approach. Then, the second is that the relationship is a little different. It's always a three way conversation between the DP, the director, and the colorist. So that kind of relationship and how that evolves can change.

Directors are human beings, surprisingly. And so, they're just different people. There's just a different dynamic involved.

So I guess that's a very long winded way to answer the question which, I guess, I could have answered. The approach changes not so much in process, but really in terms of reference and the evolution of the particular look or style of the film. That becomes very dependent on the director and the little world that the director has. If you think of each film as really is own little kingdom, if you're working with the Wachowski's or the Cohen's or Peter Jackson or Tim Burton, they have their own little world and they will work with their team, specifically, their production designer, their conceptual artist, and their DP. You're really coming into a particular family. So the dynamics are very different with each group on to itself. The objective is the same, which is a film that reflects the creative intent of everyone involved. But that process tends to be a little different. It's different in perhaps the references and how you go about trying to find the looks involved.

Somebody like Tim Burton and, at least, the way I go about finding specific looks for those films, it's quite a different process to something like the Cohen Brothers, which again, is quite a different process to David Yates from Fantastic Beasts. So that, perhaps, is what changes. The process itself is we're still making 2K DCPs and we're still using software and we're still use cameras, so that side of it is kind of the same. Interestingly, I've found that the big change is actually the language, and the references, and frankly, the assumptions of the understanding and the references changes.

JOSH PETOK

So do you feel like there's some directors that give more freedom or are there other directors that are pretty hard line. They have a real defined idea of what it's supposed to look like?

PETER DOYLE

Yes. Although, to an extent, the directors that have a very specific look in mind would probably not be booking somebody like me to grade the film. It's a little bit more of a collaboration. Certainly, some directors do have a specific intent in mind. And certainly, the process will start with a pretty clear idea of where it should go. And that's why I think it's very important that my job is, as I was saying, is to deliver on that. But then, in the process, because it is an evolution, to perhaps also offer an alternate if there is an understanding of what the intent is. And that's more about the emotional intent of the film rather than with a literal interpretation.

Obviously, you'll get the script and you'll get: night, winter, rainy, New York. I mean, that's pretty specific where it's to be. And obviously, the DP is the first point of reference to finding that look. The choice of lights... The budget will then dictate how much they get to wet down the streets. Night is also, is it like very neon, modern, one car, why kind of world? Or is it vintage, where there's, frankly, no electric lights at all so it's all gas? They're all decisions definitely driven by DP, production design, motivated, or informed by, script and director.

That's then looping back on the emotional intent. Night is to be very scary night? Or a happy night? Or a romantic night? I see my job to come in where lighting and lenses and production design can't take it any further. Then we start to use whatever image processing tool are available to take that further. So, if it's to be an evil, scary night that might mean super heavy blacks, very monotone look. It's then up to your interpretation, then offering up whatever you think that could be.

That's where, you could say, yes, directors have a very specific idea. But it would be very unusual if a director has an absolute hard line visual idea of exactly how this thing should look. Because even to say I want a crisp red blah blah blah, even that is open to interpretation. It's that kind of mutual investigation is what gives, at least for me, that's why I do the job. That's what I find quite interesting.

JOSH PETOK

The great thing about some of your work is you get a brief from something like Inside Llewyn Davis where they say, "This should be sad." But yet, you don't fall into all the general pitfalls that somebody would just say, "Well, lets just make it blue because it's sad." You actually have taken it in a completely different direction.

PETER DOYLE

That's what I really like about working with Bruno Delbonnel. Great DP and consummate professional and also technically perfect. So it means that when we agree what's needed, Bruno's amazing. He'll go off and say, we build some look and we agree a contrast ratio of six stops and a color temperature of blah blah blah is really what we need. I mean, the guy's amazing and that's really then how he will light it.

In the case of Llewyn Davis, it was quite an academic approach: Album cover, free wheeling, it's New York, Winter, 60's. You can't get any more specific brief then that. It's the same street, the same clothes. But, the twist, which is where you've got very clever directors like the Cohen's, and that's but not black and white. So that opens up a whole thing.

So, to be inspired by this album cover, but we don't want it black and white. So basically, you get the script, and in that case, sitting down with Bruno, and really just having an interpretation. And again, where I feel my job is like translation. And that's to be really quite literal about it. It's to go: Ok. This is a film from the 60's, so we're doing clothes of the period. Everything to be as it was, so basically, it's a period film. So, what would a film shot at that time look like today? I mean, like literally. What would a color film from the 60's look like today?

We then investigated, if we shoot this on 16mm, what would it look like? Really, it raised a lot of questions. But along the way, what became apparent is that we look at film prints, as in sitting in 2016, when we look at films from that period, unless there's a few of us that are very special and blessed by being able to reach into the archive and run a genuine color print from that time, we are looking at high quality telecine / restored films from that time. So we're not actually looking at a

genuine film print from that time. We're, in fact, looking at a modern transfer of a print from that time. I thought, why not just pretend that the film was... that we just found this old film print from the time. So that would mean that you would be running a fifty year old color film print. And that would mean Eastman Kodak print, even though there was Technicolor 3 strip process still being used, but that was really expensive and still being used. Because it was such a cumbersome process with the cameras, you would be shooting a New York on the street film on 3 strip. It would be handheld, like the French New Wave, Godard. That kind of thing, on an Eastman Kodak stock. If you're saying, an Eastman Kodak stock, color, fifty years old, it just would have faded to all hell. And you go, ok, faded. Which part? The green layer would fade through to magenta.

Based on that, we really just did build a transform, and basically a look that was inspired by the idea of a super faded film print that's still color. So then, having built truly a literal interpretation of what that would look like, you know, there's no way we can sit through two hours of this film because it just looks exactly like it did. Just way too much.

So then, it was like an interpretation of what's good about this. What are the visual cues about this? It became apparent that just by sneaking back in the skin tones, which then gave the audience something to really lock on to. In terms of the film, we felt that was kind of interesting. The other part of that was, because it was winter and it would be low light, in the 60's film stocks really were not that fast, which meant that you'd be shooting very wide open and high speed lenses really didn't make an appearance until the late 60's, early 70's. So, you're talking pretty bad, crappy lenses shooting wide open. So they're just going to flare and be super soft. We emulated that in the DI room and really gave it that super soft, slightly blurry image which is what an old lens of the time would look like. At least, I felt or proposed that would be our memory, or that's kind of a modern day response to what a film from that time looked like.

Then in terms of skin tone, we're talking people of students, musicians, that really have no money, so they're not going to be that healthy. And it's winter and it's New York so they're going to be super pale. So we've got this idea of adding a skin tone, but then having the in joke of that they're pale anyway.

Having done that, which is quite a literal, very analytical approach to it, that's how we came up with that look. And obviously, along the way you have a few philosophical guidelines, which is, no we're not going to make it sepia. No, we're not going to make it black and white. Obviously, you just come up with a couple manifestos. If, for no other reason, just to start narrow down your options.

If you sit in front of a box with an image that you can do anything with, you're not going to get anything done because you just end up in this loop of madness. I've just found that, particularly with Bruno, we will just come up with just a manifesto. That helps us not slip into some of the cliches, at least I hope it doesn't.

JOSH PETOK

You've also said, especially on these higher budget films, that you need to grade a film three times before getting to what it really needs to look like. Is there something about seeing it incorrectly that actually can make that powerful as well?

PETER DOYLE

Yeah. Absolutely. You just need to see how the film runs from start to finish as an arc and how the different scenes work with each other. So, it starts to become like a mix and match model, which is, you'll have couple of quite radically different looks for all these different scenes, but it's then how do all these different looks work with each other?

If we take Llewyn Davis, there were actually on the table a few different interpretations of that for the different scenes, but once we ran the film, and just had a feel for it, and once T-Bone put in his music, and once we had a feel for what the film was going to be, it became apparent that it would actually work better to in fact have the one look for the entire film. Which then pulled it back together into this day in the life, circular type thing. That was one of the few films where we in fact wanted to take out a color arc, because you really are ending on the same shot you started with.

JOSH PETOK

Right, because that serves the story.

PETER DOYLE

Exactly.

JOSH PETOK

It's futile what we're doing and it should all be that same level.

PETER DOYLE

Yes.

JOSH PETOK

One thing that I really have noticed in your work too is you constantly are pushing the boundaries. On Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, I understand you pushed the limit to what the color could be printed on the film. And something we as colorists do is we're constantly thinking about rules like don't crush blacks, don't blow out highlights. And with a lot of these things, there's such high stakes. What gives you the courage to push the limits of all of these so called rules?

PETER DOYLE

I don't know. I'm just an angry, young man.

They're not really rules, you know, because I spent a lot of time working with manufacturers, I've spent a lot of time with Fuji in Turkey where I worked on the record out stock, the IDI,

where we really changed the blue layer to get it sharper. And we actually had in development, a new print stock where we had more silver. Basically, it was a film stock that had much deeper blacks. We cleaned up the whites. It meant that the skin tones became more Eurasian rather than classic Kodak North American, as you'd expect from Fuji. But, they pulled out of the print business.

But, to answer your question, they're not really rules and you really have to ask, "Who said you shouldn't crush the blacks?" It's like, "Sorry?" It's all about what's on the screen. There's a standard joke when I work with different colorists, when it's a really big film, and I have colorists helping out on rushes or set grades, I'll ban the vectorscopes and the waveforms because I don't know what purpose they serve. Certainly, I will have a high quality filtered, very large histogram, which allows you then to check for when rules are being broken. And I consider rules that are being broken to be things that compromise the image quality. So, a low bit depth, crushing whites, or frankly, clipping if it's an ugly image.

It's more things like that. Like noise, or dead pixels. There's technically things that are unpleasant to look at. But, in terms of other boundaries, it's not even that they're there to be broken, it's like, who actually said they were boundary anyway?

In terms of color on a print stock, I always been amazed how animation films can get the colors that they can. They can look absolutely beautiful. So why not do that with live action films? Particularly, with something like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, which is like, "Is it real life? Is it animation?" Tim comes from his background of drawing and animation. If you approach it with a philosophy, or a commitment, that this is an animation film but it's just shot with real people on a real set. But, the aesthetics are about animation, why not? So that's what was driving that film plus it was kind of a bit of an homage to the original film. So the idea of having these incredibly rich, somewhat hyperreal films, or colors, was the motivating force there.

JOSH PETOK

Sometimes we actually have this weird conflict as colorist too. There's this great quote that says, "I work really hard to make it look like I did done nothing." As a colorist, you don't want to really call too much attention to what you've done. But you also want to support the story. So how do you really walk that line?

PETER DOYLE

That's a constant thing and there is something fascinating... I'm in the process of re-mastering for HDR a couple of films. And, you could say, films from each decade tend to have their own look, and that's really driven by the technology. Either by the print stocks, or the lenses at the time. Everyone's reaching for the vintage lenses to get that vintage look. But, what I'm noticing, and I'm hearing this discussion elsewhere as well, you could say the 2000's was really about DI. It had an enormous impact on the look of films. Pretty much by 2007/2008, a DI and a DCP was pretty much the standard. But, then with the digital cameras, the signature of the DP has been somewhat removed, in

that, it's the holy grail that every color looks the same, particularly with ACES and the IDTs and the uniform color space, and now that frankly everybody knows what they're doing. It's all really settled down. But what's happened along the way is that the look of films has been pulled back a little bit because the looks were dating the film a little bit. With something like Lord of the Rings, we got away with it with all this pro-mist and all this magical stuff.

That kind of makes sense because it was the film of the time and the aesthetics, but you couldn't do a film like that now otherwise it would start to look like something out of the 60's with David Hamilton photography or whatever. But, I think striking that balance between the look overtaking the film or not, that's just, I think, without being pretentious, that's just what taste is. As in, you will run the film with the team. It's important to run the full film, in context, in a cinema, with some kind of temp sound, and it's intuitive. You will just know that, wow, the look is starting to take over now. It's just feeling a little weak, or this should be quite and ebullient moment. This should feel a little up. The cast should be looking great, but we fell in love with our blacks to the point that this is starting to feel like some super art film then instead of some happy film, for example. That's just about pacing. Like, when does an editor know to stop cutting? When does the sound mixer know when to pull back on the music and let the dialogue go? I think it's very much the same with grading. When do you know that the look is just starting to take over? Or, it's not appropriate? It's just instinctual. It's just about finding that look. Will a period film handle another look? And sometimes working with David Yates say on "Fantastic Beasts" or "Tarzan," we've really gone quite out there with our looks. But then we'll run it and we'll realize, the final kiss goodbye, in whatever film, now that we've got the music, now that we've got the dialogue, now that we've got the cut, we've got the performance, and then we've got the look on top of it, it's like, it's just too much. It's just killing it. So what do we pull back on? Do we pull back on the mix? Or the music? Or the grade? So, it's just finding that sense of appropriateness.

JOSH PETOK

And you've done these really big, big films, Lord of the Rings... But now you've actually had the opportunity to do some things for the small screen as well. I noticed you recently did an episode of Black Mirror on Netflix. Working with the small screen, did that change anything about the way that you work?

PETER DOYLE

Yeah. One of which was absolute terror because I know nothing about broadcast specs. It's like, sorry? Scale? Black? You've got legal lifted? Wow wee! Ok. But fortunately, working at Technicolor there's a solid team that can help you with all that sort of thing. There were a few things, just the aesthetics of a light emitting screen, like a monitor. It is certainly a very different sensation to a reflected image, a projection screen. The white point was something that took me a little while to get used to, D65, D600 and D5\ . You don't have to be quite the perfectionist in some areas because it's a smaller screen. It's not like 60 feet wide. But then, what I found interestingly, in other areas, you need to be much better because the MTF of a monitor is actually a lot sharper. Technically, in some ways you need to be more on top of certain things. But then in terms of aesthetics, it was interesting

you could work with more contrast, which was not something I was really expecting. Because historically with monitors, I always just taking the DI grade down to the 709 for the video deliverables. So, you're always trying to emulate what you've done for the big screen. But to come up with a specific look for Black Mirror, it was interesting that you could reach for and use more contrast, because there's less flare on the image. So that was interesting.

JOSH PETOK

Back to the technical stuff too. You were mentioning that you were working in HDR as well. And this is a huge thing for colorists that we have the ability to see into shadows more and we can brighten up images. What's been your experience working with it?

PETER DOYLE

Well, I've actually done bizarrely quite a lot of HDR, both at 4000 nit and 1000 nit. I might be saying something contentious and that's, it's not that different. Yep, you certainly have a lot more contrast or dynamic range, but like a soundtrack when digital sound came out with Dolby SRD and then Atmos and then DTS, certainly you had more dynamic range but you're not running an entire soundtrack at full volume. So likewise, you're not running the brightness of a grade at full 1000 nits because it's just physically unpleasant.

And likewise, a DP spends an awful lot of time on set building in their contrast ratios. Practical lights being just at the right thing and really relying on the lookup table because that's defining their look. Just because you can ripple that apart and now have the practicals screaming at 1000 nits, nobody actually wants it that way. That's unfortunately just the manufacturer's not understanding, frankly, the visual medium and I think that will settle down over the next year when I think manufacturer's finally understand and get sick and tired of being told by just about everyone, "I'm sorry. But this is a really unpleasant image to look at."

That said, to have that ability is fantastic. Muzzle flares and wand zaps and interactive lighting cues. To have that dynamic is great and to really be able to design in some ectoplasmic life force thing whatever that is. No longer does it have to be just a white out. It can actually be some beautifully textured, slightly brighter image. But other than that, the blacks, the actual blacks of the monitor are pretty good. We could always see those blacks anyway before, it's just that they were physically at a different light level.

So, in some ways, my response to HDR is until somebody can really lock down on the ambient light level, you run the risk of it actually being a bit of an arms race. The brighter the monitor, you just turn up your ambient light level, and now you're back to where you are. That said, there's a lot about it to have... the monitors themselves are pretty good. The Dolby Pulsar obviously still has some way to go, but in principle, it's pretty good. But even then, the Sony 300, 1000 nits? Full screen? It doesn't happen. There's still a lot of issues there.

JOSH PETOK

You ended up switching over to... You were previously on Lustre, as you had said before, even since it's very inception, and then in around 2009 you switched over to Baselight. What made you choose that system over something else?

PETER DOYLE

The toolset and the image quality. Of all things really, the image quality was full 16bit float. And obviously I spent a lot time with the team. Their whole approach to the colorspace concept, it was very early days but when ACES was a mere concept it become clear that was getting to be integrated quite well.

JOSH PETOK

You choose not to use the Blackboard or the Slate panels. Since you have the ability to do that, why have you chosen not to use those?

PETER DOYLE

They're too big. For me, it's really a pragmatic decision. I just have my little keyboard with a whole bunch of custom macros. Maybe a Tangent panel to just give me the smooth controls. Works for me.

JOSH PETOK

You also have a really strong technical and almost scientific knowledge of color. Do you think that it's important for other colorists to have that same mathematic background in color too?

PETER DOYLE

I would say yes, just because it makes it easier, feel more in control. But that said, there's still some very fine colorists that work a little more intuitively. I would say yes, but then that's just my opinion.

JOSH PETOK

Thanks for coming on to the podcast. I really appreciate it.

PETER DOYLE

No problem. Thanks a lot.