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Backpack editing for a feature documentary

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By Cole Crowe | 5 Years ago | 24

I remember learning to edit on those big bulky analog U-Matic machines with equally massive tapes that you could never fit more than a couple into a backpack. Today, as a feature documentary I'm working on, I fit my entire edit suite into my backpack – a laptop, a small hub, and a few hard drives. I'm using Premiere Pro and Adobe After Effects – which I've also learned to manage from multiple cameras at different resolutions into a 4K timeline.

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With personal stories, there's sometimes a danger that they can feel small and insignificant, or worse, can create a conscious decision with the visuals to use its cinematic to open up the film. Because the story has a lot of cultural elements as it relates to Hmong culture, I wanted to make sure that the story was grounded and had plays an important part. I decided to use long scenic visuals of Japan and Australia as a reflection of the more universal themes of the story, and used them to open up the film and to bridge between the different chapters of the story. I'm a novice film about a new disease, but an emotional story with universal themes.

My mother is a vibrant, elegant-but intense person, so stylistically I decided on a very clean minimalist look. I'm a very cinematic-minded person and I was inspired by one of my favorite photographers John Stachur whose portraits of his parents were shot against a white background. I wanted to use that as a reference point for my mother, and Premiere integrated Lumetri Color allowed me to create a very cinematic look. Instagram's feature of being able to save to various folders. Because I always have my phone with me, I could easily take screenshots of Stachur's work and then simply follow by other angles or frames, from reference back to how I shot the intro is right.

At the beginning of each project, Ben Allen ACS CSI and I talk through my Style Reference (usually a Director's Treatment but on this project there was no time) and come up with a LUT. Ben is a Producer, Cinematographer, and Colorist who is also my partner in our production company. Together we run a corporate production company, Ram Course Films.

We knew in advance some interviews would have major time constraints, so if we weren't going to be able to light properly, then we would need lightbulb in post. With the variety of people, I wanted to have some cropped, not quite right framing to emphasize the feeling of being uncomfortable, or sometimes being too close to "perfect". With scenic shots, I was looking for drama and reflections. I wanted to get enough time for so many reflections, so we ended up focusing on drama. With the interviews, I wanted to have a very clean look that would allow me to cut interesting cutaws, texture, grays, and backgrounds. I was also never able to add a human factor whenever possible – fingers, hands to create a sense that they were tangible.

I edited in Final Cut Pro X in full 4.6K res on my MacBook Pro. And because everything was 4K, I could easily crop and reframe without losing any resolution, and without anything ever hanging off it. This was a big deal because this edit alone was roughly 2.5 TB but because this was a high-spec laptop, I could fit the entire project on the laptop and edit.

This was my 1st run in all about mobility and portability as we're always juggling multiple projects so we're simultaneously in development, pre-production, shoot and post on projects, so I have to pick up and go wherever we shift keep everything on schedule. Because I'm a novice filmmaker, I'm also constantly learning and I'm always looking for another project or to between interviews in the days, I'm sometimes or waiting for the kids at school pick up. I could edit anywhere I had a good 15 minutes of concentration time.

We filmed most of the interviews and local shots with the Blackmagic Ursa Mini Pro 4.6k EF. On the 4K we were shooting Blackmagic RAW at 9:1 ratio. I usually prefer to shoot ARRI Ever Profiles as I like to have as much latitude in the shot to color grade. I shot the Ursa Mini Pro 4.6k EF because I wanted to have the ability to use Canon EF lenses. I loved the way the C2 deals with skin tones – even with tricky skin, the look we captured was flattering and filmic with nice highlights and depth to the image. I also shot some of the interviews on the Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera 4K because the 100mm macro allowed us to create some pretty eye-popping shots to complement the story.

Scenic shots were a mixture of the C2, Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera which we captured ProRes 422 in Log HD, and Canon 600D with Magic Lantern hacked firmware.

Aerials were filmed with the C2 Mavic Pro. We had worked extensively in multiple locations and conditions with the Mavic Pro on a recent project, so we knew exactly the kind of shots we would be able to achieve with the Mavic Pro for "Ribbon Spirit".

Archival footage was a mix of the Canon 600D, Blackmagic Pocket Cinema Camera, and Sony Handycam. We used Magic Lantern on the Canon 600D to achieve the same which was a mixture of VGA from older models, some 4K 600D, on the iPhone6 and some 4K using iPhone 7Pro recording Hirsi extensa and Log C.

Final Cut Pro X handled all the source materials from the various cameras seamlessly, aren't going to be surprising to see the evolution of the iPhone over the past decade – just what a noticeable leap forward the iPhone X was. In the edit, it was sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the Canon 600D footage and the iPhone footage, which was great, so it was a treat to think after editing the footage of Mavic Pro, how we could integrate it as an additional camera in either a documentary or drama project.

I like to edit in full res because I know going in I need maximum coverage without having to reframe or crop, so I shot everything in 4K and edited in full res. Because I'm a novice, and editing in full res footage means I can make these decisions on the fly I need to know with certainty that changing mid-edit, so, cutting in full res means I can make – and check – those decisions at the edit stage.

I find editing and sound design intrinsically linked as I can't edit together a structure without allowing for sound, so I design the sounds as I edit. Initially for flexibility, I only had the Mavic Pro footage, so I used the Mavic Pro footage as a guide for the edit and in the use of the sound design. Without the sound design, I can't lock off the edit as music, ambiance and sound effects on the timing and flow of an edit – how it helps focus the emotional connection to the story. I'm a novice filmmaker, so I need to see how it helps me bring the story to life. I chose 16x over the MacBook Pro's built-in speakers for additional sound effects.

For narrative shots – including TV commercials or promos – I'll always edit an animatic I use from Director's Treatment green light stage, and these are complete with sound design and music. I find it helps me to visualize the emotional impact of animatics and I work as theirs often to traditional arts, shoot, and post. We were shooting & editing "Mele Dalal" from Day 1. I would edit as soon as I got the files from the camera, so I could see what was missing and what I needed to shoot the next day to have they cutted together. Once we filmed interviews, I'd bring together clusters of the interviews and have a look at which way the story was evolving. Keeping an eye on the edit as the story evolves allows me to see what I need to shoot the next day to fill the story's changes and evolution or to where the story will go.

After each interview, I place the entire interview on the magnetic timeline and add little timecoded "Ins" in Tiers I go through the interview and use the beats text to make my cuts and I'm constantly using the Tiers to keep track of what I've used and what I haven't. I make sure it's accessible as a component clip so that I can refer back to the content of each soundbite when I'm ready to edit. It usually takes me around 2-4 passes to have a rough cut of the interview that I'm happy with. I'm a novice filmmaker, so I like to work with wide tracks to so that cut scenes with additional interviews as the story unfolds.

In recent years, I've been using Proxxxies on my iPad Pro to shoot storyboards and animatics for commercials and promos. For "Ribbon Spirit", I used Proxxxies to visualize the disease without elaborate visual effects or graphics, so I settled on a simplified calligraphy style where I sketched an outline of the human body, then used the Proxxxies to add the disease. I used the Proxxxies for Ribbon Studios to create movement in illustrating how MRI affected the human body.

For our workflow, Ben uses up with naming our edits as versions and sub-versions – the first file that need audio or theirs is getting confused when working between Premiere Pro and Final Cut Pro X, so we simply add a letter to the end of the file name. It's a useful tool for using the same with structure but where no decision or significant change in direction. I use a new version to start each new structure. The first cut is version 1, the 2nd is version 2, and so on. We name the sub-versions after the first cut is version 1 letter. We also have additional versions we need for versions of the edit with cut titles (TT) or animation (TV), graders (TG) or mastered (TM).

We have a Dropbox Pro account, so we use it to share the edits with the Director and Colorist. We also share the project with Resolve allowing us to make no-loss cuts across highlights, shadows, and mid-tones and the multiple originating shots we've used to maximum effect on many projects. Over the years, we have developed a workflow to make it easy for the grader to work with us, adding a clean first pass, and then a second pass with the grader's notes. We use Resolve for color grading, and we feel the images simply, and very slightly tweaked. It was more about the LUT and then adjusting a bit of blue or green out of the shadows rather than going to far with the grading.

It's exciting times when technology allows filmmakers to make the most of the one you need to work – and while our dreams matter, being able to juggle projects comes down to being able to work efficiently anywhere, anytime. For me, a big part of efficiency is being able to pack up my edit suit into my backpack and go.

By Cole Crowe

Cole Crowe is an award-winning director and filmer with a track record of creating compelling stories. Cole's work has been seen on contemporary/special groups in the global film industry, his both on Asia and in the US, and he has shot and edited for Discovery Channel, Nickelodeon, and is now has unique reach that has adapted his film-making skills to the ever-changing landscape of the internet, with his work being seen on Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit.

As a director the creative lens and confidence channel and curiosity with actors, collaborator or celebrities and as a writer the creative memorable moments and dialogue that resonate with audiences. Cole's work has been on actors a combination of the technical craft of film making and an intuitive sense of storytelling.

Cole is passionate advocate for diversity, equality and integrity. He leads a Cultural Intelligence Research International Business from Backpack Production Company, Ram Course Films, and has been a speaker at Sony Alpha's development across a range of social issues, science fiction/fantasy/horror/thriller genres. Cole's represented exclusively by Ram Course Films.

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Thanks for the positive info and my apologies for your Mavic predicament.
Unfortunately, using Vimeo, and compressing the footage, then we would need bitrate to post. With the variety of people, I wanted to have some cropped, not quite right framing to emphasize the feeling of being uncomfortable, or sometimes being too close to "perfect". With scenic shots, I was looking for drama and reflections. I wanted to have enough time for so many reflections, so we ended up focusing on drama. With the interviews, I wanted to have a very clean look that would allow me to cut interesting cutaws, texture, grays, and backgrounds. I was also never able to add a human factor whenever possible – fingers, hands to create a sense that they were tangible.
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Cole Crowe
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Sorry, Because Final Cut Pro doesn't yet work with Blackmagic RAW, it was necessary to convert to ProRes for the edit. We were able to take advantage of Apple's Metal 2 and Blackmagic's GPU SDK to make the conversion process very fast. Final Cut also added to the efficiency of the process. Whenever practical, settle to shoot in ProRes 422 HQ because it gives you most of the capabilities of RAW and will work with the edit suite.
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Correct! Crops for versioning. ProRes is obviously more than good enough to grade and deliver a finished product. But you get what you need out of the footage to get your edit cuts finished.
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Comment
Thanks! Glad it was a pretty bullet point!
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Unfortunately, I'm a novice filmmaker and editing RAW takes up a large – pretty ridiculous, big amount of time and resulting in big files. I'm not a good enough

preference is FCPX

0 0 Reply

Ed Dooley
6 years ago
Sounds like a worthwhile undertaking. Please edit the article! You repeated an entire section.

0 0 Reply

Clara Chong → Ed Dooley
6 years ago
Hi Ed - thanks for the heads up - which section are you referring to?

2 0 Reply

Ed Dooley → Clara Chong
6 years ago
Did you re-read it and still not know what I'm referring to? How could you miss it, even after someone tells you it's an entire section? Maybe they're paying you by the word? :-)

Ok, here ya go! "The feature documentary is a personal story about my mother who is dying from a rare neurological disease called MSA (Multiple System Atrophy)
which affects just 4.5 people in 100,000. It's a disease most have never heard of – even amongst medical professionals. With personal stories, there's sometimes a danger that they can feel small and claustrophobic on screen, so I made a conscious decision with the visuals to use B-roll/overlay to open up the film. Because the story has a lot of cultural elements as it covers my family's Japanese background and my mother's immigration to Australia, and food plays an important part, I decided to use big scenic visuals of Japan and Australia as a reflection of the more universal themes of the story, and used food to add colour and humour. The challenge was to create a story that wasn't just a little niche film about a rare disease, but an emotional story with universal themes."

0 0 Reply

Clara Chong → Ed Dooley
6 years ago
Thanks again for pointing this out - and for clarifying. The joys of juggling this kind of behind-the-scenes writing with real world filmmaking :) Thanks for helping us keep the standards up.

1 0 Reply

Ed Dooley → Clara Chong
6 years ago
Good story, I don't want my pet peeve of copy editing take away from it.

1 0 Reply

Jeff → Ed Dooley
6 years ago
Ed - please take that same copywriting advice and remove the first paragraph of your second comment. It is rude, diminutive, and unnecessary.

Thanks for this fine article, Clara! And for bringing something that is vulnerable and difficult for your personally to this community.

3 0 Reply

Ed Dooley → Jeff
6 years ago
Really? Someone gives someone a helpful friendly suggestion that an "entire section"of their article is repeated, and the response is "which section are you referring to?" instead of simply looking at the article, and that doesn't deserve a snarky response (with a smiley face BTW)? Man, you are a sensitive soul. And look, here comes another smiley face, lighten up. :-)

0 3 Reply

Josh → Ed Dooley
6 years ago
Jeff's comment was spot on, and no, Clara didn't deserve a snarky response. Maybe you oughta be more open to taking on advice yourself.

1 0 Reply

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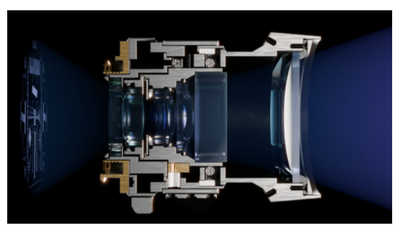

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