

Emmy-Nominated Cinematographers Reflect on How TV Has Helped Their Craft Evolve

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At the dawn of television, feature cinematographers were leery of becoming involved in the new medium, which many associated with diminished prestige. TV's shortcomings in comparison with the glories of the silver screen included severe time constraints, tight budgets and the vagaries of network distribution.

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Now, with the advent of what many are calling TV's golden age, the segregation between film and TV cinematography is a thing of the past. This year's Emmy-nominated DPs have many reasons for embracing the small screen. (The four who were contacted for this story spoke before the DP winners were announced at the Creative Arts Emmys.)

Two-time Oscar-winning cinematographer John Toll, previously known almost exclusively for his cinema work, came onto Netflix's "Sense8" after making two features ("Cloud Atlas" and "Jupiter Ascending") with its creators, Lana and Lilly Wachowski.

He says his decision to shoot for television on the project was a natural extension of that working relationship. The international shoot took Toll to Berlin, London, Mexico City, Mumbai, Nairobi, Reykjavik and Seoul — an itinerary worthy of a blockbuster movie.

"The story required seeing all the characters in their various environments, so a creative decision was made to shoot everything in practical locations," says Toll, who is Emmy-nominated for the series. "Visually, this meant adopting an approach that allowed us to stay very mobile, flexible and fluid." Another factor in drawing talent from the feature world: script quality and content.

Cinematographer Rodney Taylor began his career shooting for Imax screens and operating the camera on narrative features. His credits as a DP include "That Evening Sun," "Supremacy" and "Swimmers."

This year, Taylor is Emmy-nominated for his work on HBO's "Ballers," and he's currently shooting "Star," a one-hour Fox dramatic series about a trio of talented musicians.

"One of the reasons I was attracted to television is that the stories are very often like the stories we used to tell in independent film," says Taylor. "I don't change my approach to the work — it's about using light and the camera to tell stories. My background in indies taught me a lot of ways to work quickly and efficiently, and that's an advantage."



Counterclockwise from top: “*Fargo*” exec producer Warren Littlefield, left, with DP Dana Gonzales; cinematographer John Toll, right, on the set of “*Sense8*”; DP Rodney Taylor, left, with “*Ballers*” episode 106 director Simon Cellan Jones.

Taylor adds that the TV schedule prevents prep and scouting to the extent that is standard on features. “I’m thinking about the edit a lot as I’m shooting, and I’m maintaining a consistent vision as directors rotate through,” says Taylor. “I’m

trying to create a very cinematic viewing experience, using flare and other techniques to break down the image. We're telling one continuous story over the whole season, so it's like a feature film that is far longer, with more time to develop the characters. I really like the format."

TV cinematographers are bringing in gear formerly used almost exclusively on features, such as anamorphic lenses, to add cinematic sweep and scale. ABC-Marvel's "Inhumans" and Netflix's "Altered Carbon" are being shot with the large-format Arri Alexa 65 camera, which is sometimes referred to as the digital equivalent of VistaVision.

Overreliance on the close-up — formerly a defining trait on the small screen — is a thing of the past, especially at trendsetting outlets like Netflix, HBO and others.

DP Dana Gonzales, an Emmy nominee for FX's "Fargo," creates a different look for each season depending on the characters, period and story. He based the 2:1-framed, blue-deficient look of the most recent season on cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel's imagery for the Coen brothers' feature "Inside Llewyn Davis."

"The breakthroughs in the technology behind television have sped up significantly just in the past few years," says Gonzales, who has done extensive second unit work on features and served as DP on such movies as "Felon," "Snitch" and "Shot Caller." "All the elements — filtration, lenses, aspect ratio — are going to elevate the material. Good cinematographers will be pushing the technology further, especially when they have the support from producers."

Feature DP Paul Cameron ("Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales," the "Total Recall" remake) turned to television to lens the pilot for HBO's "Westworld," which earned him Emmy and ASC Award nominations.

"Essentially, it was doing a really good film in a small period of time," he says. "Expectations were high; HBO and Warner Bros. were very supportive; [creator] Jonathan Nolan had a vision; and there was an A-level cast and crew."

As the Hollywood studios withdraw from making smaller, riskier dramatic films for theatrical release, television is picking up the creative slack, Cameron believes. "Suddenly you have these very high-concept dramatic shows being done for

Showtime, FX and Amazon,” he says. “Now, when I read a script, I try not to think of it as one or the other. There might have been a stigma in the past, but the game has changed.”

Whether the increasingly blurry line between film and television disappears entirely in the future still remains to be seen.

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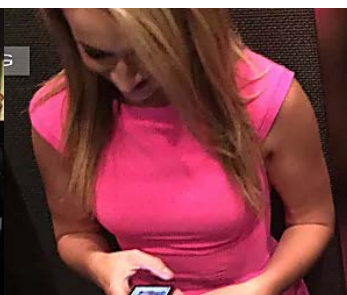
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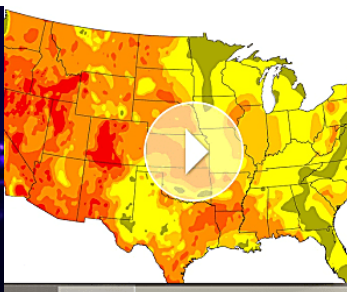
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