



Explosive: Direct Line ads were inspired by the final scene of *Antonioni's Zabriskie Point*

Every now and then a DP gets thrown something challenging. It's even more challenging when you are also the director. No more so than the idea from creatives Ian Brassett and David Anderson at M&C Saatchi in London. They were inspired by the final scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, which captures a house exploding in beautiful slow motion set to the music of Pink Floyd. Debris glides through the air in a surreal, psychedelic way.

They wanted to shoot cars nose diving, cascades of water falling onto furniture, hundreds of bricks dropping on cars and wrecking balls smashing walls. All of this was to be placed in a non-specific white room; something resembling an art gallery and was to be shot at 1,000fps. Quite a departure for the insurance company Direct Line, yes the one with the red phone.

From the moment we received the call from Graham Fink (creative director at M&C Saatchi), Paul McNally (producer) and I had to put the whole project together in three weeks. Our immediate concerns were, a) what format to shoot it on, and b) which studio to use. But technical questions about water, pyrotechnics and the natural forces of gravity and water also needed an answer: what height, for example, did we need to drop the car?

In terms of format, I felt that exposing for white walls and water highlights would look good on film as it has the latitude. Many of the current video formats such as the Phantom V5, Tornado and Weiss camera systems have very small latitude. (Having used a Phantom V5, I knew it to be only about two stops.) The Tornado not only needs a Quantel suite and operator on set, but there is also a 'delayed live' in the viewfinder making operation difficult. And none of those cameras come close to the quality of film, since they are basically SD video resolution.

But to light such a large area for a Photosonics film camera gave me another headache - I'd not shot such a large area before at 1,000 fps. I would have to light up to stops of between 32 and a half and 45 and a half for the Photosonics systems with the slow Pentax stills lenses. The other big problem was film's instability for post work as well as the unreliability of the whole set-up when you came to turn over. Building the sets up in post had its problems too: all the detritus bouncing off the walls would mean that, in trying to put it all back together, it would end up looking like an event created in post and the creative team wanted a real event 'in camera' just as they had in *Zabriskie Point*.

For a time I went down the Photosonics film camera route; the lighting budget, meanwhile was getting pretty big, and kit had to come from two different rental houses. The obvious thing to both Paul and me was to do all this out of doors - but not in England in December. The two giant sets were finally constructed on a back-lot in Cape Town. In South Africa the sun's path is very high in summer, so once the sets were silked we could get the stop and have a pretty big window for matching the light for any plate shots. We angled the sets to the best sunpath and built a 40'x40' frame and prayed that the notorious winds in Cape Town would not get up too much. Shooting outside made sense for things like the height of the car drop which in a studio would have been a mere 25' or so.

Finally I looked at one more non-film camera, which was the very new Phantom HD. I went over to Pirate (the only guys who had it in the UK) to check it out. The simple test was to point it outside and look at the exposure across their car park in sunlight. Reassuringly it had the latitude to deal with the whites and was a true HD (1920 x 1080 pixels) high-speed camera, having the resolution and massive 14-bit colour depth to make the images look good. This camera made the whole shoot possible. We did not need as much light as a Photosonics film camera, and the quality and latitude were good enough to get beautiful images and not compromise the photography. We decided on using two Phantom HD cameras - shipping another one over from LA.

Another great feature with video of course is knowing you've got the shot straight away: with

Beautiful Destruction

(a homage to *Zabriskie Point*)

the Phantom HD, playback couldn't be better - immediate and on an HD monitor. Further, the playback monitor has a timeline across the bottom to allow ins and outs to be marked for cropping the take at source - resulting in quicker downloads and less wastage in post. The digital option gave us the facility to review takes quickly and without that the on-set decisions would have been hard to make. On such a tight schedule having to wait for film rushes clearance the next day could have been disastrous, let alone the potential for negative damage.

Being able to get rushes to the editor (Ray Stephens) who was cutting with us on the shoot was imperative to finishing off the films in time; two of which had to be on air before the shoot was finished!

Dropping the car on its nose was an event where no one knew quite what was going to happen. We all imagined/hoped that the car would shatter, with pieces of bodywork and detritus flying off which would look spectacular at 1,000fps. Using a giant construction crane we took the car to about 100ft up and dropped it on two cables attached to the bottom of the set. Engines were removed and all the structure of the cars loosened as much as possible. We set pyros to trigger on impact, to help blow out the doors and the wheels. But pyros are tricky to disguise and can spoil the naturalism of the event. (If you put too much in the result is more like an explosion and the flame has to be removed later.)

We squeezed the 40'x40' silk over the set. Of all things, the release trigger for the car drop failed, and the wind picked up, swinging the car around. I closed my eyes at this point and prayed. But then the trigger worked; the car hit its target and compressed like a sheet of water.

Nothing much flew off and the compression on impact had minimised the effect of the pyros but when we played the whole thing back at 1,000fps with all the glass and disfiguring metal we entered a different world - the suspended reality of high-speed photography. It was quite simply stunning - "beautiful destruction" in every way. We solved the problem of the lack of car parts flying around with a series of plates built around the final impact of the car. We

employed a mixture of pyro and good old-fashioned filmmaking, as the SFX guys went up ladders pulling bits off and throwing them towards the camera. We did have to resort to some post-production, but not before getting 90% of the action 'in camera'.

The second sequence had a new set of difficulties. Water is always a problem on set and never goes where you want it to go. The post-production options for the "Splash" film (a room set within a 'gallery' space with thousands of gallons of water dropping into it) were a lot more restricted, as it is a lengthy process to comp in water. It was tricky enough getting the water to drop on the set in the right place, much less creating an even waterfall entering the top of frame and dropping without any fracture at the beginning. All the water was poured from four giant tip tanks cascading down onto a wooden 'sill', which creates the spread of the waterfall. In hindsight it might have been easier if poured from one tank. We would then not have had the problem of trying to co-ordinate the four manual tipplers. Getting the right amount of water and tip speed was critical. The water picks up a lot of air when it hits the 'sill' and trying to get the right amount of backlight to pick out the water was another case of trial and error. Just when we had it all worked out there would have to be another adjustment and another room set would be trashed! However, no-one said it was going to be easy and I think that the end results speak for themselves, especially when seen widescreen at the cinema.

Pyrotechnic work was often very minimal and just enough to create the destruction. The SFX team was helmed by Max Poolman and crossed over into Gideon Van Schoor's stunt co-ordination. Michael Ganss from Pirate looked after the technical side of the cameras with the help of data capture guru Graham Austin. When we shot exploding car parts, Michael connected a 'start trigger' to both cameras and the explosive charges. By pressing one button, the cameras started together followed immediately by an explosion.

For me 35mm is still unsurpassed both for its latitude and the rendering of colour and skin tones. High definition is always a bit too sharp and a bit too hard for me. Colour



Suspension of disbelief: this is going to be one hell of a ride

rendition, at least with this generation of HD cameras, is never quite as good. However, in the case of this shoot, a true HD camera like the Phantom HD opened up the possibility of high-speed photography that would not have been achievable before both in terms of budget and time. The Phantom HD allows for a much bigger area to be shot at high speed and opens so many creative possibilities film can't offer both budget-wise and technically. The Phantom holds the whites and can handle highlights in water, and I was very

pleased with the way the results look. It still has that very sharp HD look but then this was a high-concept glossy commercial and the sharpness worked well for the project.

John Pardue, director of photography. The series of eight commercials were made for Direct Line Insurance, produced by Paul McNally. The Production Company was Frivolous Films @ Serious Pictures. Agency M&C Saatchi, London.



Nose dive: the car compressed like a sheet of water

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