Pour En Finir Avec "L'effet Steadicam"

by Jean Marc Bringuier

The complete article originally appeared in Cahiers Du Cinema. In this excerpt, Jean Marc has given us a Gallic feast of ideas that are useful for discussions with operators, novices, and producers.

Panaglide and Steadicam are tools a filmmaker may use to stabilize some of his views of the world. They are expected to free the creators' minds of several old constraints of the traditional and subtle art of dealing with the logistics of moving a film camera. Despite the looks of entranced zombies often displayed by their users, and various mythical tales spread by both devotees and detractors, Steadicam and Panaglide are not part of the supernatural. When used correctly, they should merge smoothly to the already abundant range of devices aimed at gliding a camera in space.

The only valid use of film equipment, however sophisticated or exciting, is to help tell a story or instill a visual atmosphere. It does require individuals to struggle with it. I'm not just hinting at the sweat dripping from the operator's face (nor at the production manager's pallor...) for Cinema will always be a team sport. It was certainly not the dollies used by Hitchcock which created the well-known suspense, through some hidden secret of their technology, but indeed the inimitable style of this Aristocrat of Vision. He knew how to float his relentless Eye, through the scenery and around his preys, blending actors, film technicians and machines in a subtle and oppressive harmony. All the rest is nothing but silly ironware.

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Report from South Africa

Chris faces many of the same problems we all do, plus a few that are unique to his troubled land. We've talked many times over the last few years, including last spring when I was in South Africa.

Chris Haarhoff: I recently amalgated my Steadicam with a great rental house down here, the Movie Camera Company. They were unable to resurrect their own Steadicam, a Model II, and so I joined forces with their own in house operator, Gilbert Reed, thus reinforcing the well held Steadicam notion that unity is strength. He and I canvass our own work independently and share work that comes directly to M.C.C. We have the support of the company's rental establishment, and especially of their workshop for all accessories. It's

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Tinsel Virtuosity

These two floating instruments still seem to be a hot issue, particularly in France. Their mere presence on a set sparks off, now and then, endless Gallic polemics, and tears of despair can occasionally be shed as a result of some of their uses. They happen to be double-edged: when correctly mastered, they can deliver very delicate visual arabesques, with the grace of a feather. But they can also abduct the meaning of the shot, inflate egos and lead the operator astray for many years.

Every serious camera operator will agree that fine-tuning his manual adaption to the traditional camera supports, fluid or gear heads, is but a minute part of his task. As a demanding front-row spectator, he is concerned, above all, about making his visual and auditory attention even acuter and more responsive to every nuance of Comedy. The virtuosity of the classical operator can only take root in a field of rigor.

Using a carried-and-stabilized system such as Steadicam implies a thorough and frustrating re-learning of gestures, shooting postures and ways of monitoring the shot. But it does also entail, as a dreadful consolation, that novices quickly reach a point where they can start turning junk into tinsel, with a vengeance. This spurtly regression towards gaudiness swiftly sweeps away all previous subtleties. The disease (whose only known therapy seems to be years of hard training) strikes especially hard in the ranks of those who have poor graphic culture and little love of the Seventh Art. Its most insidious symptom seems to lie in the anaesthesia of any visual coherence. One suddenly catches the illusion of being capable of lasciviously doing everything by oneself, while soaring in a nirvana of smugness, from which you feel you might even look down on poor old Newton.

"One suddenly catches the illusion of being capable of lasciviously doing everything by oneself, while soaring in a nirvana of smugness, from which you feel you might even look down on poor old Newton."

Complacencies

Steadicam may appear as the ultimate high-tech cult-gizmo, but it hasn't re-invented the Motion Pictures. A sequence-shot certainly won't captivate anyone, unless a delicate balance is struck between composition...
Jean Marc working on the feature "King David."

...and traveling effects. On top of all this, a subtle chaining up of highlights and rests in performance and camera work has always been a must, not to mention the ferocious hunting down of boring sections. Nothing new under the sun, really, as no solid camera crews using traditional means would contradict, when they are entangled in intricate choreographies, desperately exchanging glances as they try to shape up their ballet.

The artistic quality of the photography of a movie, together with the cameraman's adrenaline levels, suffers much from a camera that tends constantly to ferret about in all axes, when not motivated by the plot. These convulsions are by no means the symptom either of a genetic taint of the shooting device, or of a Parkinsonian derangement that inevitably afflicts all Steadicam operators. It's a known clinical fact, though, that a few of the latter spend considerable time selling aerobics demos to directors.

There certainly are better ways of hoisting the colors of one's specialty than prancing and sprinting one's way to a dubious celebrity. On the other hand, some directors are convinced that Steadicam can magically wipe out all the hardships entailed by long-drawn-out shots. Cuing people, lining up all camera positions, coordinating all the moves of actors and technicians alike, while fondly watching performance, sound and light...this indeed is the name of the game, and it has to be so forever, if one is after quality in the thorny field of sequence-shots. No technology can bypass it, whatever far-out medium you come up with, be it radio-controlled Sherpa, Louma, or even Sputnik.

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An American Graft

Italy, which hasn't remotely reached our volume of movie production, boasts nearly 40 Steadicam units and the whole of Europe almost a hundred. This inevitably raises questions about the 7 or so only to be found in France. It is customary in most English speaking countries for Steadicam and Panaglide to shoot large sections of feature films, and it seems to be a deep-rooted habit, judging by their transparent integration in the visual fabric of films. The USA is bubbling with training workshops. Veterans gather with novices to pass on their craftsmanship (and assorted jokes), in a magnificent-looneys-on-their-funny-flying-machines sort of atmosphere. As I attended -three times as a trainee and twice as assistant/instructor- I can bear witness to this cocktail of fun and hard work. You rub shoulders with the world's best operators, and occasionally outstrip them... at frisbee. I'm trying neither to evangelize my compatriots, with a candid pro-American pitch (especially in these days of heavy invasion of our cathodic-ray tubes), nor to advocate ruinous pilgrimages in quest of the only other worldly detergent that can make your Steadicam shots whiter, but it has to be admitted that the graft hasn't taken deeply in the cinematographic culture of my Cartesian sweet home.

It so happens that, six years ago, I paid this lack of interest by a forced exile in other European countries, after a few years of Don-Quixotism wasted in a feverish and awkward defence of what was considered as a Yankee gadget.

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New Life For Old Vests

Steadicam classes tend to be accompanied by arpeggios of ripping velcro as vest components unintentionally pull open. Unscheduled quick-releases, and unmotivated chest- and hip-strap blowouts have long ceased to be comical, but continue to undignify the proceedings, ruin takes and occasionally damage equipment despite mounds of gaffers tape.

We have all endured the vest's shortcomings for years and several fixes have been proposed. Here's another inexpensive solution. A few weekends ago I looked over my old vest - veteran of many encounters, cut and crushed beyond hope of comfort, front plate cracked in two places, unrecognisable but for its brief appearances in American Cinematographer - and decided it was finally time to let character give way to the restoration (and improvement) of function.

Throwing out all the pads (for health's sake they probably should have been burned or dropped off at the Jersey shore), I was left with the vest shell and the unattractive alternative of purchasing new pads (costly), or fabricating my own. Being one who enjoys the fine art of customization, I trekked down to the local camping store to find a sheet of EnsoLite (as in sleeping-bag pads). After some experimentation, I procured a spray adhesive so effective it took lighter fluid and a screwdriver to get it off my hands (BFG Plastilock, S707). I then fabricated a multi-layered foam padding which, although it might disintegrate in time for the end of the universe, will at least never separate from the suit itself. It actually looks quite good. The padding is in three layers, two of aqua blue with a thin layer of strong dark blue nylon bonded to the side next to the body to absorbing friction and sweat. Although I would have preferred the material in black (unavailable), the light color attracts more attention, which, as you may know, is basically ok by moi.

During this process I also decided it was time to redesign all the straps as well - not, for a change, with velcro, but rather with nylon webbing (in black) and those plastic buckles used for backpacks, hip packs, etc. All aficionados of 'tech' will certainly have seen them. In fact, I have employed a small version of this buckle as a back strap, after a double hernia operation a few years ago (not Steadicam related) made the vest's tendency to jam into one's groin when using heavy cameras temporarily indisputable. In addition to keeping the vest from dragging down in front, the back straps also prevent the hip sections from slipping down under the waist strap when tightened.

These buckles come in a variety of sizes (all black) and are extraordinarily strong and lightweight. They tighten like a vice, but loosen if you slightly lift one end. Squeeze the two male prongs together and they immediately snap open. Perhaps not a quick release, but close, and at least intentional. Thin, they rest unobtrusively against the vest. I chose the wider type as they matched the breadth of the original belt hardware, although I eventually replaced or eliminated it all anyway. Each of the four straps incorporated one male/female mating buckle. Although all four could be opened, the two on the left side are used, as before, to "de-suit."

I decided to have the straps tighten cross-chested, toward the center spar. It's far easier to pull them tight, and avoids the "Self-Chiropractic" aspect of reaching around and struggling to tighten the old version. Because the strap lengths must accommodate both winter and summer garb, I purposely left them long. Rather than tucking their remaining lengths under the vest, I put velcro on the ends so that they could be overlapped and kept flat against the vest. Surprisingly, the velcro adhesive stuck instantly to the nylon webbing. (The mating habits of materials are occasionally inspiring.)

Clearly some refinements will be forthcoming, but by and large I can't help feeling this may be a solution long overdue. The snugness of the vest can now literally take your breath away, and there is virtually no chance of the straps coming loose or wearing out. Although it is possible to overtighten the suit (previously unthinkable), and getting in and out gracefully requires a process of re-education, I am mostly happy with the
results. Finally, the nylon webbing comes in a variety of colors so one now has an additional fashion option as well—"This month's operator is velcro-free, and displays the aqua-lined suit trimmed in day-glow orange nylon. Here he comes down the runway now; let's give him a big hand!"

Ted Churchill

Please refer to page eight of Volume 1, Number 1 of the Letter for an effective way to modify the back pad of your Model II vest and eliminate the need for mounds of gaffer's tape. Combine this with the advice above and you'll have a great vest. There's also a picture in the same issue of Ted's famous vest before the overhaul.

- Ed.

**Classifieds**

**For sale:** Steadicam Model II with frame line generator, DeRose battery housing mod, 51 lb adjustable arm, (has quick change LH/RH pin but no articulated elbow) vest, chargers, batteries, cases. Arm just rebuilt. $22,500. 43 lb adjustable arm with quick change pin but no articulated elbow, fully rebuilt. $5,500. Overnight chargers, new $150. Other miscellaneous items available. Call Derrick at Whitehouse A.V. 805 498-4177. Fax: 805 499-7947.

**For Sale:** Now available for Steadicam Model I and II Owner/Ops: ARTICULATED ELBOW, made of composite materials (carbon fiber and epoxy), total weight 12.5 oz. Install in less than ten minutes. Simply remove hinge, slip on ARTICULATED ELBOW, install and fasten eight screws, and you're ready to go! A simple process to enable your Steadicam's upper arm to move like Models III and IIIA, a full 360° for added operating flexibility. Modification kit complete, including 8 screws and special washers. For more information, contact PRECOM INTERNATIONAL, 201 492-9256.

**For sale:** BLIII camera #35829 with right hand pistol grip, sliding bridge plate, 2 cables, one set of Zeiss prime lenses with PL adaptor, $85,000. BLII #’s 35296 and 35517, both with right hand pistol grip, sliding bridge plate, 2 cables, matte box, lens strips, and set of Zeiss primes lenses in bayonette mount, $40,000 each. Also many accessories, Arri IIC's, etc. Contact: The Power Broker, 117-F Riverside Drive, Newport Beach, CA. 213 470-7569, Fax: 213 474-7705.

**For sale:** Steadicam Model III-A with 54 lb arm, vest, cases, 4 batteries, PAG rapidcharger, 2 CP chargers, Coherent video transmitter, spare plates, spare dovetail, spare vest receiver. Purchase new 1/89. $37,000. Call Mike Gallagher at 301 882-0377 and leave message.
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a really reassuring arrangement that I would recommend to any other operators who are able to work closely with a rental house. Gilbert and I support each other, and I can go wavesailing knowing that my rig isn't rotting in a cupboard.

"You just can't say yes to everything. Every shot you take is promoting Steadicam. If Steadicam can't do it well or safely, then don't do it, because you'll end up doing it again and again."

SL: How is the film industry doing?

CH: Pretty good. The industry here seems to be picking up and movies are getting more interesting. Gilbert and I are on the leading edge. Before we were competitors, but now we can cover more ground. The major problem we face is affordability. Scheduling gets too tight, too much is scheduled for a day, and you end up compromising your work. We feel Steadicam must become a consistent tool, not just one for stunt shots.

SL: How are you working to avoid that?

CH: It's difficult. You can undercut yourself too much, you can give it away. But that doesn't work in the long run. We try to work on as much low budget stuff and show the film community what we can do; that's really the basis of our work now. And I'm refusing to do risky things—shooting off motorbikes or running down muddy embankments into rivers while in low mode with the Arri III in plastic just barely able to stay above water... Maybe that's just the life of a young operator, but those kinds of shots and the monster's POVs aren't very interesting on the screen, either. It's not worth it. Safety's a big consideration and I've gotten uneasy with stunts. Too many squibs and fire sequences getting out of hand. A couple of people have gotten killed in pyrotechnic accidents, not while I was operating, but it's happening. You just can't say yes to everything. Every shot you take is promoting Steadicam. If Steadicam can't do it well or safely, then don't do it, because you'll end up doing it again and again.

The most important thing for me now is educating people about the Steadicam. I want to be shooting longer sequences, four minute scenes, dramatic stuff that I can help design a series of shots for. Unfortunately, the industry here isn't geared to that very much. That kind of shooting seems to be few and far between. But it's getting better. There are a lot of foreign movies being made down here, and better films are coming in.

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SL: When I was in South Africa, the crew I worked with was fairly integrated... was that typical?

CH: Mostly so. The young filmmakers are well prepared to make anti-apartheid films and the crews are integrated. Some of this has backfired recently, though. The film technicians union is black based, as are most of the unions in South Africa. And the union is very dogmatic about which films it sanctions. And while films are becoming a vehicle to push anti-apartheid, a lot of films can't be shown in festivals unless they are strictly anti-apartheid. For instance, Jobman and The Stick, two films that showed a certain level of injustice, but weren't strictly anti-apartheid couldn't get shown at the London Film Festival. And they can't be shown here, locally. So that viewpoint or sensibility is lost.

There are two types of films being made here, tax-based and independent. The tax-based films are mostly awful, tax scams, really, and the scripts must be vetted by the government. That's de facto censorship. If your work totally apart from the tax system, you can make any sort of film you want, but at your own peril. Footage can be seized and other unpleasantness, but most of this is in the past, I hope.

SL: What sort of jobs do the blacks hold?

CH: They're mostly at the ground level. In the camera department there are some loaders I've worked with that were okay, and there are some gaffers that are top-rated. There are two routes to positions in the film industry here, college or university, or apprenticeship, up through the ranks. Colleges and universities are open to blacks, but I don't know of any that have gone that route. There was a foreign producer who made a picture over here and sprinkled black faces in various positions, but it was unnecessary. There are a lot of good black sparks, grips and gaffers. There are also strictly black productions, and two black TV stations. They program in a particular language. There are seven different black languages here. In the past, they were cheaper productions, but now that's where the money is. The advertisers know that the blacks form the biggest market for their products, so more and more money goes into advertising and the quality is getting very good. The black productions are largely unpoltical; the anti-apartheid films are being made by the liberal whites.

There was a false boom in the industry here in the last few years, a lot of foreigners making quickie movies. But that set up the infrastructure that is now making movies here. What's left is more serious, and will, I hope, supersede movies like Dry White Season and Cry Freedom. These movies were not made by South Africans and don't speak to the present conditions. I think that future films made by South Africans will both be an education and entertaining.

In many ways, petty apartheid has fallen away and there's a lot more openness. But recently I was working on a commercial for South African Airways in the Northern Transval, a conservative stronghold. We booked in to a resort, but when we got there at 8 pm, they barred us from entering. We had a 13 year old black boy with us, one of the artists (talent). We were shocked. We'd stayed at the same place several years ago while working on The Gods Must Be Crazy II with no problem. It was okay then.
We asked them why it wasn't now. They said they were now under a different administration and were allowed to be strictly white. It came as such a shock to us. It's not like 20 years ago, and when you run into it it's still a bit of a fright. It's ironic; here was the national airline trying to portray a new South Africa to the world, and we couldn't shoot in our own country.

SL: Does apartheid affect your own work?
CH: Serious film technicians won't work for certain folks, the SATV, for instance. It's just a mouthpiece for government news, seriously tainted news at that. Many technicians feel as I do, and won't work for them. Largely, in the film industry, the people and their sentiments are anti-apartheid.

SL: Back to your Steadicam. How do you like sharing your rig with Gilbert Reed?
CH: It works well. Gilbert is really committed to Steadicam, and that makes all the difference.

When we kicked off the arrangement with M.C.C., we were determined to modify the rig to the max and understand more about trim. We studied TRIM II (Vol. I #2) and checked straight into a nut house. Then we decided to set about discovering more about the rig in the real world. At the Masters, Garrett had suggested quietly that the way to test trim would be to set up your rig so that it could spin unhindered, around and around. We went the route of losing the J-box and machining a uniform weight as the camera. Then we found fore and aft positions on the sled for various configurations; with and without camcorder, Coherent, etc. That told us a lot about the sled.

Check this out:
First, precession due to a false axis from side to side is the real gremlin in the works. We installed a small weight to counter the tripper and make the electronic package perfectly trim.

SL: It was that sensitive?
CH: Yes. And we found we had to line everything up very carefully for consistent results. A slight shift of the monitor to the left or right really made a difference. Cables have a profound effect on trim. I think Ed DiGuilio ought to consider putting the wires up the post.

The effect we got with the side-to-side imbalance was similar to what you described as the Betacam Effect. The camera just seemed to roll over. It was very strange.

"One of those Continental Body Mounts...rents out of a competing rental house and it actually gets used about ten times more often than the Steadicam. And it's a piece of junk."

Anyway, all that took about four days of fiddling around, taking notes, and retesting. We then removed our carefully machined weight and ran our tests with every camera in the rental house. We found that every camera with every configuration needs a different setting of the fore and aft. As a result, we have added a fine measure on the side of our rig for calibration. Even the movement of film from top to bottom of the mag is a change. The change of lenses, particularly the 18mm T 3 or T4, which pushes the matte box way out further, makes a big difference. We also found that it was very difficult to trim for a good spin if the rig was unusually bottom heavy.

SL: But that contradicts the theory. Placement of the gimbal shouldn't matter if it's in dynamic trim.
CH: But it does. The whole exercise took two weeks, but I think it is the only effective way of coming to grips with the realities of trim. We found that there were often two sweet spots, and one of them, under certain conditions, was with the sled slightly back heavy.

SL: That can't be. That goes against... Under what conditions?
CH: That's what we found. When using a camcorder, you have to rack the electronics/battery very far forward for neutral balance. This puts the battery relatively close to the monitor, in a fore and aft sense. We found that under these conditions, a slightly back heavy sled made for a perfectly trimmed, dynamically balanced rig. Perhaps it's because the battery is at such a steep angle to the monitor. I don't know. As I said, Trim II put me in the nut house. Working it out in the real world took two weeks, but this is what we found out.
A perfectly balanced rig is wonderful to use. It will even seek level in a whip pan. You don't even have to think about it anymore. It may indicate why beginners have so much problem with whip pans.

SL: It seeks level?
CH: Yes. It's amazing: it's a really different feeling. It really behaves well and you don't have to think about your pans. It was really fun to watch the rig on our set up. You'd spin it hard, and if it started out of kilter or wobbly, then it would just settle down into a nice horizontal pan, like a frisbee. It was really worth the effort to figure it all out.

SL: Wait until this hits the Letter.
CH: Speaking of the Letter, we've got a problem down here that I bet no one else is facing. One of those Continental Body Mounts that Garrett described in the last issue rents out of a competing rental house and it actually gets used about ten times more often than the Steadicam. And it's a piece of junk. Gilbert and I are trying to arrange a shootout between the Steadicam and it, because the footage is really awful.

SL: If the footage is so bad, why does it get rented all the time?
CH: Because people don't know better, and because anyone can rent the thing without any training. And maybe one shot in a whole day comes out okay, but it's not cheap to rent either. After the shootout, everyone will know what a piece of junk it is, and maybe that will help both our business and the quality of work we're seeing. But right now, it's still stealing work away from the Steadicam.

Garrett hopes to continue Chris's investigations at the European Masters later this month, and come up with some practical rules or strategies for getting a Steadicam in still more perfect balance. He will report back on this and other discoveries in the next issue. - Ed.
Nobody was interested in it at that stage, except for some shoddy stunts. I don't at all regret going abroad because I found the opportunity to pick up some pointers on big films. That also enabled me to doctor the galloping Steadicamania of my beginnings, in the days when I used to feel like a one-track-minded glider pilot unwilling to land (and incapable of doing so). To help me come down to earth with a bump, I even received the radical eye-opener and frenzy-soother of six months of parade ground treatment (in the whole range of precisionism) from a tortured, London-based, Jupiterian, and thoroughly brilliant American director. I didn't, though, get the chance to reach the peak of 102 takes with a BL, an unequalled record held by my Master Garrett Brown (the inventor of Steadicam) for a famous shot in the maze of the "Shining."

I wonder, in the same breath, whether an excellent heart pump, strong legs and a very good back, all wrapped up in sharp orthopedic science, are not the necessary (but not sufficient!) impediments for those who rate themselves specialists of this enthralling pursuit. Steadicam operators share with other professions the fact they make a living on their body (and on their diplomatic touch), so we'd better keep both ready for the triple somersault backwards we may be at risk to be paid into. In my view, backache simply does not exist if we fine-tune our physique as carefully as our gear, and keep it on the supply side. Real trouble is more likely, in fact, among Sparks who spend large portions of their lives juggling HMI ballasts...Having said that, I must admit that our modern BL IV's or Moviecans offer, on top of their extreme silence, the unsophisticated joy of having half of our own weight floating besides us, in a gracious ballet which will certainly benefit in precision and repeatability if our body succeeds in keeping pace. The Spirit can not breathe on the Steadicam if the Flesh is weak and flabby.

**Ritual Psalmodies**

Filming with carried-stabilized cameras is taken on the serious side in the UK, if one is to go by the many weeks of work usually apportioned to their specialists by Productions which are not necessarily all American. It must be said that one is expected there to additionally deliver classical second unit work.

This comes in very handy for a clever use of this expensive contraption, which, far too often, is consigned to a ghetto. A round trip ticket between fluid and geared heads, hand-held shooting and Steadicam (used either hardmounted or with the harness) is a very good way to level one's head and hands off. You may then acquire a clear feeling of the
registers in which each instrument plays best.

In contrast, being called on a feature in France boils down, quite often, alas, to intoning the ancient Litany of the early Steadicamites' Liturgy: Thou Shalt run, Thou Shalt climb and Thou Shalt be ready to take nasty bumps. I emphasize this last issue (which caused many a frenzied workmate to over-fantasiize) because, in my humble opinion, Steadicam is a dud with helicopters (in which Tylers and other Helivision are what the doctor ordered), a dud (and a dangerous one... with horses, and is practically unusable in places where a violent wind or stream of air caused by high speed tends to seriously perturb the delicate balance of masses required for precise work.

Of course, one often ends up making do when the shooting must go on at any cost. I have a fond memory of these Vietnamese extras on "Full Metal Jacket," clenched-teethed volunteers for the camera wind-breakers fatigue-duty, clinging with the energy of despair, in pairs and in several ranks, to wicker boards bending in gusts of a wind which threatened to send the whole party into the nearby Thames. All this was to make it possible for me to zigzag, in a relative calm, among Marines bloodied up to their ears, and very busy playing their noisy games in the imitable English mud.

Concerning the damnation to run, I always found it wise to pass the relay to our friends the Grips. According to the lay of the land and to the shot contemplated, one shouldn't hesitate to hint at a surrealist list of contrivances to be pushed, pulled or even driven. The camera operator can then devote his three arms to the finesse of jolt-free shooting. Grips have always been keen experts in navigation and it would be criminal not to use their talents for the masochist fear they may steal the show.

A Steadicam operator, who is too often pigeon-holed into his specialty, should ideally be capable of adapting himself to any directorial requirement: from the Baroque style all in sophisticated twists and volutes, to the Jansenist rigor of those who can't see the world other than through a 50mm, nor forgetting the obsessive cutters or those who are wary of gratuitously pretty movements. I personally tend to feel that the only gauge of quality for Steadicam work is its humble fusion in the full score of the film, when framing respects the intimate music of actors and script, while gliding over cinematographic challenges. Technicalities are never so perfect as when nobody is aware of them.

This opinion stirs up my perfectionist scruples about assembling a "show" reel: the shots of which I'm most proud are on the subtle side. The real Magic of the Silver Screen rapidly wears thin when tools take over, or when some of their addicts declare their fascinating ventral appendage to be a necessary evil, on the way to a doubtful paradise.

Jean-Marc Bringuier

The J-Bracket

There have been a few changes since we last went to press. First, Diane Bowersock is no longer with us, much to our dismay. We wish her the best in her new job. We haven't found anyone to replace her yet, either.

Secondly, I've moved a bit further west of Philadelphia into more permanent lodgings. My new number is (215) 524-5979, Fax 524-5946.

In other news, there are a couple of workshops coming up in addition to the Palm Desert Classic. The Maine Photo Workshops will be holding one in November, burrrr... and there's going to be one in Sweden in December.

Contact MPW at (207) 236-8581 for the workshop in Camden, Maine. For the workshop in Sweden, call Jarl Hoffman, (01) 31-19-2115 for details.

Other news: There seems to be a cornucopia of new gadgets and after-market do-dads out there, some from new sources, and some from our old suppliers. I try to steer as many as I hear of into the Letter (see the Classified section), but I'd love to hear from the bold pioneers who have bought these gadgets and find out how well they work. Even Cinema Products is coming out with new toys (the side-to-side plate of the IIA is very nicely done), and there are rumors of a vest that will fit WOMEN! I'm spreading this rumor in the hope that it becomes true.

Jerry Holway
Recently, I was invited to a meeting with a producer and director from a production company that had won the contract for "RED SHIELD APPEAL," a one shot, 90 second commercial for The Salvation Army, an organization that helps the needy in Australia.

Now they needed to know how to do the shot. Should they use a crane, dolly, tracking vehicle, snorkel lens? Having been through the basics during the Masters course last June in Rockport, and having already put a Handlebar Rig into development on a previous film, I thought this would be a great opportunity to put it to the test on a real job. I told them I had the answer. The lens would be inches off the ground and I would be using the Steadicam!

They were doubtful. "But we know you can only get so low comfortably, and this is a move of 90 seconds, and you'll never be able to keep it that low and be stable etc., etc!" My answer to them was "It's all in the handle bars!" A date was set for a test.

The test was to determine lens size, lens height, speed, how far (in distance) does one travel in 90 seconds, and also we wanted to test the concept itself. If it all worked, then we'd proceed to the next step and choose a location.

On test day, as I started assembling the gear, I overheard the production manager exclaim, "They really are Handle Bars!" So there I was with this baby sitting on the ground ready for take off. What I needed next was the boffin, someone who doesn't think or complain...

"So there I was with this baby sitting on the ground ready for take off. What I needed next was the boffin, someone who doesn't think or complain..."

Ian navigates the gutters and sidewalks of Sydney.
Ian's camera path is hidden in here somewhere.

seemed happy! When I saw the test it was clear that following a reference line is a big no-no. I imagined that it wasn't there on the screen and thought, "What a great angle; we haven't seen this before! The ground passing by is unusual, and the end frame, a crane up to hip height, makes it that much more unusual!"

Shoot day: Low Mode, BL III, 18mm Zeiss lens, 5274 Eastman, 25fps. The Key Grip was my partner (no more boffins, this was for real). We get a half day for rehearsal, half day for the shot. As we rolled camera and my little circus of technicians moved from Action to Cut, the Assistant Director's department was busy co-ordinating extras, vehicles, motor bikes, push bikes, and people walking and jogging. After many hours and many adjustments to image and action, we had it in the can.

At the end of the day I was very happy with our results. I felt the concept had worked. It was definitely simple and flexible. Any change of the action or the path of camera happened instantly, with no major dramas.

While operating in the "Boffin Mode," I was learning all the time. I found there wasn't much room for error with regards to gimble to Handle Bars' clearance. The bending over for such a low shot was a killer, I have to admit. Also, as I was manoeuvring over bundles of papers, tracking around news paper stands, slipping past stop sign posts, dropping down into gutters and popping back up again, my Key Grip and I had to do some really fancy foot work together. Be sure to choose a grip you don't mind being close to all day long.

"RED SHIELD APPEAL" goes to air in Australia as this article goes to print, so I am not sure what the commercial reaction will be. I am certainly happy with the final results of both the 90 second and a shortened 60 second version of the commercial. And, of course, the Handle Bars fit nicely into my vest bag these days.

Ian also bubbles on The Great Barrier Reef
Report from New Zealand

Now don't get me wrong. After running an older rig for three years I've got a lot of respect - even a relationship - with that unit. But if anyone needs convincing to step up to a new rig our market experience should be noted.

From the time we flew off the plane with the new rig, we have more than doubled Steadicam's usage in New Zealand, and we are expanding people's perception and use of the beast each month. That exercise is made so much easier with a rig that has all the extras and looks like the promises you've made.

On the downside, earlier this year we had a disaster with a pin in the arm snapping and the rig and BL IV hitting the deck. More about that in the future when research reveals the full extent of the problem. Thankfully, insurance covered it and we're up and running again.

Last week we had a course specifically for camera assistants, dealing with everything from the history of Steadicam to the latest technology. They guys (and gals) had the chance to focus pull a reenactment of the fight scene from Mad Max III. It proved to be a worthwhile exercise and once again put the emphasis on that difficult role of focus pulling from a platform as versatile as Steadicam.

In short, it's been a terrific 18 months with our new rig and we feel that we're taking it to the market down here, which, up until recently, had reverted to commercials. However, earlier this year I did some Steadicam on the Australian feature Confidence (starring Bryan Brown, Michael Jenkins directing, Russell Boyd DOP). More American feature work is promised here in New Zealand in the near future. Will keep you posted.

John Mahaffie

Workshop in California

The Palm Desert Steadicam Workshop will be held December 3-9, 1989. The workshop is sponsored by Cinema Products and will be taught by Ted Churchill and friends. Enrollment is limited to 25 people. The fee is $1,200.00 per person plus room, board, and travel expenses. For further information, contact Chuck Jackson at Cinema Products: 3211 South La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90016. Phone: 213 836-7991, Fax: 213 836-9512.