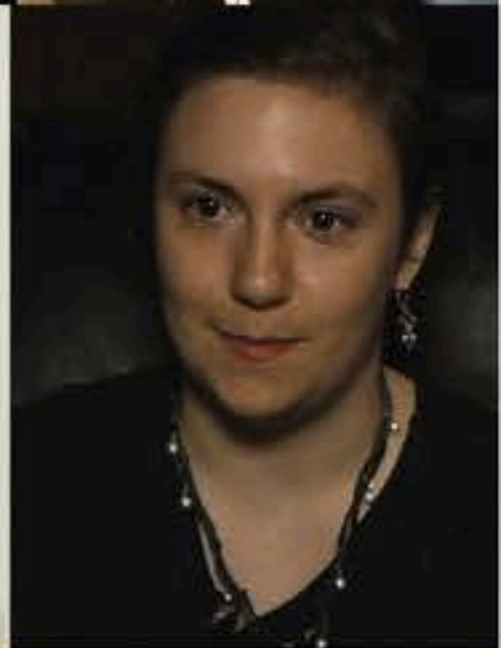




# IS DIGITAL REPLACING FILM IN THE MOVIES? IS THAT GOOD?



A DOCUMENTARY CALLED *SIDE BY SIDE* LOOKS AT BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE. BY JACK CRAGER



In still photography, the digital revolution has transformed the industry—the vast majority of shooters now use digital gear as opposed to film. But in the world of moving images, the digital-versus-film debate is just reaching a fever pitch. “I think we’re at a tipping-point moment, when people in the movie industry are finally accepting that maybe digital looks as good as film,” says Chris Kenneally, director of the documentary *Side by Side*, which deftly explores both sides of the debate. “No longer is film totally superior, in the look of it. And that’s a huge milestone. The main thing that people were holding on to film for was that it was better. But now you could make an argument that maybe it’s not. Or how much better?” Co-conceived and produced by actor Keanu Reeves, Kenneally’s documentary surveys more than 70 movie professionals, including such big-name directors as Martin Scorsese, James Cameron and George Lucas, as well as renowned cinematographers such as Vittorio Storaro and Michael Chapman. Other voices include Sony Pro President Alec Shapiro, who speaks about breakthrough technologies and actors such as John Malkovich on camera-set atmospherics. Available on Netflix and iTunes, the film had a brief theatrical run and premiered on PBS on August 30. Reeves hosts and interviews the subjects, bringing warmth and charisma to the talks. “Keanu’s style of



Top Row (L to R): George Eastman House Archive, Rochester, New York; IMAX film negative, Los Angeles, California; Technicolor film developing lab, Los Angeles, California. Second Row (L to R): Lana and Andy Wachowski, Berlin, Germany; Steven Soderbergh, Los Angeles, California; Lena Dunham, New York, New York; Third Row (L to R): George Eastman House Archive, Rochester, New York; Robert Rodriguez, Austin, Texas; Bottom Row (L to R): Vince Pace, Keanu Reeves, Kyle Blackman and Chris Cassidy photographed by Justin Szlasa, Sheperton, England; Keanu Reeves and Greta Gerwig, New York, New York; James Cameron, Santa Monica, California.



## "EVERYTHING COMES DOWN TO ONE THING. IF YOU DO SOMETHING WITH YOUR HEART, IF YOU DO SOMETHING WHERE YOU ARE CONVINCED OF HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT IT, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU USE."

interviewing made these folks relaxed, honest and funny," Kenneally says. "It's a technical subject, but people have passions and feelings about what they're discussing."

Indeed, the emotions run deep, whether it's cinematographer Reed Morano waxing lyrical about the aesthetics of celluloid or director David Lynch both lauding and lamenting digital. "It's exciting, because it's a reinvention of a new medium," enthuses film auteur Scorsese about digital. "The photochemical process has worked its way through our culture. We're on to another level."

"I thought a lot of the more experienced guys who had come up using exclusively film would be more pro-film," Kenneally recalls. "But a lot of them had no problem switching to digital, or were excited about it, and that surprised me a little bit."

*Side by Side* outlines the historical arc of analogue film and the relatively short digital era. It spotlights innovative digital motion-picture cameras including the Sony HDW-F900 (first available in

2000), the Panavision Genesis (developed with Sony and released in 2005), the Red Digital Cinema I (2007) and the Arri Alexa (2010).

"It also takes you through the stages of filmmaking, from capturing a movie through editing it, color-correcting, visual effects, distribution and exhibition, on through archiving," Kenneally notes. "And there's the argument weaving through all that: This is how we did it on film and this is how we did it digitally, and people's opinions about that."

One of the compelling arguments in favor of film is its longevity as an archiving tool. In the digital realm, constant changes in technology often render formats obsolete; when storing works, you might even need to archive the player needed to view them. With film, not only is the work well preserved, but all you'll need to view it is a light source. "The only way you can make sure anything in a moving image is going to be around, maybe 60 or 70 years from now," opines Scorsese, "ironically enough, is celluloid."

Even George Lucas, an avid digital champion, concedes that in digital storage, "there are problems with it." But, Lucas says, "they're going to solve those problems—I'll guarantee that." Kenneally adds that "we couldn't get anyone to give us a hard answer" about digital archiving. "For images, maybe film is still the best way to preserve it. But things have been lost that were shot on film as well—not stored properly, or not kept track of. It's a matter of taking care of what you create."

Visually, *Side by Side* is a feast. Clas-

sic cinema footage is shrewdly used to illustrate points, and expository graphics were created with the help of New York City production house Noisy Neighbors. The actual interviews, shot by director of photography Chris Cassidy, were done in myriad locations, often with makeshift lighting. "It was shooting the DPs [cinematographers] that made me the most nervous," Cassidy says. "There were a few interviews where the subjects suggested I move my light 'a little over this way, a little over that way.' It was pretty surreal."

Cassidy started his career shooting film as a still photographer. "I used to literally live in the darkroom, developing, printing, getting your hands all dirty," he says, but he now calls himself "a true digital guy. Digital looks great, is faster, cheaper, cleaner workflow, more accessible. I can get on board with all those things."

These points are all made in *Side by Side*, as well as counter-arguments favoring film. "It really depends on the project, the story you're telling, what the director and the DP want," says Kenneally. Or as cinematographer Michael Ballhaus says, in the documentary's final words: "Everything comes down to one thing. If you do something with your heart, if you do something where you are convinced of how you feel about it, it doesn't matter what you use." ▀

**Below (L to R):** Chris Kenneally, Chris Cassidy, Justin Szlasa and Keanu Reeves photographed by Kyle Blackman, Hollywood, California; Chris Cassidy, Justin Szlasa, Chris Kenneally and Keanu Reeves photographed by Stephen Lukas-Bradley, ARRI, Burbank, California.



### SET IT INTO MOTION

Dip your toe into the debate by watching the *Side by Side* trailer in our digital edition at <http://bit.ly/1dr5Cvq>

