

Post Magazine

Red Spot

Founded by producer/VFX supervisor Emery Wells about 18 months ago, Katabatic Digital (www.katabatic.tv) in New York specializes in Red workflow. They got into Red early and one of their two cameras bears the serial number 40.

In early 2008, while Wells and company were proving out their Red workflow, they found unexpected rental demand, simply by word-of-mouth and online forums. "Everybody wanted to shoot with it and there were very few out there," Wells says. "That's part of our business now."

Wells says Red cameras, and other new high-end digital cameras, are much more closely tied to the post end of things. "Now, what you decide to do in-camera really has an impact on post production, so it's really important to bridge the two worlds of production and post."

Katabatic's business model provides soup-to-nuts services, starting with Red rental and including on-set technicians and ultimate post services. Wells notes that there are more cameras (the Phantom, Sony's F-35) starting to acquire digitally in their own raw file formats. This can cause customer confusion "and they're changing all the time, so we try to stay on top of everything."

Katabatic also offers color grading and finishing. "We have a 4K Scratch DI suite here and that's the main focus of the post side of our business," says Wells, who is also a bookable colorist. He contends that his VFX skill set carries over quite well to color and DI.

Since Assimilate's Scratch was also an early Red adopter, including ingesting Red raw R3D files, purchasing Scratch was an easy decision. "It's become the backbone of our post pipeline. It has really excellent data management and it's clear that we're moving into a tapeless acquisition/workflow environment. The Scratch conform tools are really strong."

Katabatic recently finished an all-digital Miller Chill commercial created by Saatchi & Saatchi, New York, and currently airing nationally. (Unlike Corona, this beer already has lime flavor in it.) Acquisition was a combination of Red and Phantom — Phantom for its ability to capture images, such as a beer pour, at very high speeds for very slo-mo playback. Katabatic and Wells worked with a new editorial shop, Ladies & Gentlemen (www.ladies-gentlemen.tv), which handled art direction and editorial. "Ladies & Gentlemen provided us with an EDL of the cut," Wells says. "We did a one-light grade, did our repos, etc., and then rendered out DPX plates of everything for Ladies & Gentleman to use for compositing. They did a rough grade of the footage in After Effects and applied their speed ramps. They then sent the material back to us where we refined the grade in our Scratch suite — which is properly color managed — laid in graphics, titles, and mastered to D-5 with a 5.1 surround mix." Typically, Katabatic works in the acquisition format's native frame rate and resolution, such as 24p, Wells says, adding that interlace can always be added at the very end. Katabatic worked on Miller Chill's footage in 4K and the Phantom high-speed shots in 1080 — all combined in Scratch. The Red imagery was scaled down to 1080 to match the Phantom but, "we had access to the full 4K at any time, we were just viewing it in 1080. We can punch-in and pan-and-scan and know that we're not going to run out of resolution."

But do you really need to shoot 4K for television spots? "My answer is always, 'yes.' You always want to start with the best acquisition format. But no, you definitely don't need to post the whole thing in 4K. We have Scratch and the ability to work in 4K, so there's no performance hit — it doesn't take any longer and we don't charge clients more for a 4K grade." The Miller Chill spot was directed and shot by Michael Schrom.

For a Rocca Wear spot (a young woman is shown, uh, waiting for her man), slo-mo was achieved in Red, which can over-crank to 120fps with a drop-down in resolution to 2K. "For broadcast that's more than adequate," Wells says. Rocca Wear was shot and directed by Dewey Nicks. Katabatic recently finished spots for Snickers and Avaya as well.

Even when Katabatic does not get the whole soup-to-nuts job, they help enable clients' workflows with services such as one-light color correction and a 24-hour "digital lab" service, providing needed upconverts and downconverts and "transcoding of all kinds."

The new Snickers spot was cut in Final Cut. Wells recommends that serious Red spots be done in a mimic of the traditional offline/online model. "We rendered 720p ProRes files for the offline edit and all the metadata is carried through — your source timecode, your real ID — and we have the ability to bake in a one-light look so the footage is somewhat representative of what you want your final to be. The raw footage on its own looks pretty bland and boring."

Freelance editor TJ Herrington, once finished, sent Snickers back to Katabatic with an EDL and a reference picture, and Wells and company matched back to the 4K in Scratch. They loaded in all the R3D 4K media and did a data-conform and color corrected only what was needed for the spot. Wells says, "Assimilate had a much deeper access to the [Red] file format. They are continually reading from the R3D file and doing the de-Bayer and the color matrix is being applied to that file completely in realtime." The Red camera boasts a 12-bit linear sensor and Katabatic wants to exploit its image capture without taking a loss-y intermediary step into DPX files. "Working completely natively, the whole time, in that raw file format allows us to access the full range. We can bring back lost sky detail, we can bring stuff up in the shadows — that stuff's just not there if you were to go to DPX."

Katabatic's Scratch system uses RAID storage by Dulce Systems which Wells describes as "phenomenal."