DISNEY 'PLAYMATION'

The commercial 'Disney Playmation' was directed by Misko Iho and I was involved early in the project. Knowing that the film would include scenes with Iron Man and Star Wars immediately got me excited. We referenced both the look of the Iron Man and Star Wars movies, but we mainly got inspired by the latest Star Wars trailer. We also worked closely with ILM and Marvel to get the look right.

I guess I've had an inspiration to grade these kind of images ever since seeing the 'Empire Strikes Back' when it first came out and Star Wars right after on a re-run. Before seeing those movies, even more importantly, I was bitten by the sci-fi visuals bug after seeing the '2001 Space Odyssey' back in 1978.

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>
> *- Henri Pulla -*

Stripped down color settings

I used Assimilate Scratch for grading and material management. The commercial was shot on RED Epic with the Dragon sensor, and with RED material it's important to strip down all the color settings chosen during the shoot. Those settings are for viewing pleasure only. For grading, you want to get to the colors the sensor actually captured. In fact, for this project, I made a PDF to make sure everyone in the post pipeline would be sure how to decode raw data.

After you have made the correct decoding settings you can treat the image like any Log file. It will look dull and flat to start with but you can pull out all the colors available and thus have the best freedom to tweak it.

You might want to make a Log to Linear conversion of the VFX shots before you send them to the VFX guys. The Embassy, who made a spectacular job with the 3D and VFX, has a Linear workflow. I got Linear EXR files back from them, which I again converted on the fly to Log for tweaking the final grade.

First balance

Sometimes, I feel like it’s important to first balance the shots throughout the film. I try to keep things simple, adjusting gamma values of the Log data while looking at it through a pleasing contrast curve. Maybe some lift and gain tweak. For some reason, I use the colorist panels and balls less and less and rather look at the numbers of the RGB components. Like one click lesser green... one click more blue...

Sometimes, if the shots are very different, I don’t feel it's necessary to first balance them at all. This can be the case when working with commercials. Then I would start tweaking every shot individually from scratch without comparing too much and just aiming to pull a pleasing look.

Exposure levels

In grading, proper exposure levels are in your eye and mind. Nothing is proper or everything is. Sounds like fake philosophy now doesn’t it? However, I tend to feel I shouldn’t clip available blacks or highlights. You can have a contrasty look without clipping. But then again, sometimes the narrative of the film seems to tell "clip everything, make it hard, destroy the image"... then I obey. At least I will explore where that road leads.

On 'Disney Playmation' we avoided having a grade that was too rough, and a video look. We put our bets on beauty and a smooth cinematic look, whatever that might mean.

I usually try to avoid too many LUTs along the way and try to do things as simple as possible so that I can check what was really there in the original material. For me, LUTs might be needed at the end of the pipeline and of course, when doing VFX you need some viewing LUTs to be able to see how the shot was intended to look.

Creating the look

Colorists tend to have unique approaches for getting the results they want. For me, it's important to first create a preliminary look, then re-evaluate the chances of succeeding with it, next taking a break and hopefully sleeping over it, and eventually, coming back and tweaking it to what we feel suits the film best.

Usually, director's, DOP's, agencies', end clients' opinions matter a lot and define which path you will eventually take. Those people usually know better what they had in mind when starting the whole process. They can also decide whether some of the grading choices I give might be better or worse for the whole big picture. This might include brand colors and all sorts of opinions or plans made for the whole campaign way earlier than when I was involved in the project.

Living postcards

I have worked a lot with director Misko previously, and he likes his films to feel like living postcards with a very fictive

look. One of the main choices for creating this look is using anamorphic lenses, and usually slightly global smoke added on location of the interior shots.

Considering grading, we might have slightly lifted blacks and highlights never reaching 100%.

We often separate the characters from the backgrounds by tweaking the skin colors and clothing to be more colorful and try to simplify the palette as much as possible. We usually avoid anything with high contrast or color saturation.

On pixel level tweaking I do grain reducing for chrominance channels while decoding raw (to get clean skin tone keys, for example) but during grading, we usually add some grain, fuzziness and then sharpening to get what we call 'film scan' look to avoid a too clean and lifeless high-quality digital camera look.

I might use blurred luminance keys to get things visible on dark areas. I might do the same to compress highlights. It might be a good idea to use drawn masks to push or pull things less or more visible. A vignette with slight darkening and desaturation towards image edges might do.

Above are just examples. You never know what will work. On other films with other directors, production companies, DOPs, etc. there are usually really different types of approaches and then you go with that. The beauty of this profession is that one technique or theory does not make any other obsolete

Skin tones

I do grain removal on chrominance channels to get clean and peaceful keys from skin tones. Neatvideo is an excellent software to handle the grain reducing. You can easily separate the luminance and chrominance grain. If you have a good grain sample and leave the luminance grain untouched the effect is nonvisible to the eye, meaning all fine detail, hair, eyelashes, etc. are well visible.

Regarding artistic choices on skin tones, I usually try not to overdo skin. Everything is relative to the dominant light color. Skin also reflects surroundings. Sometimes you want to have healthy clean skin, which often looks more stylish like it has makeup. Sometimes you want it to be more natural, leaving all the variety of the colors and faults, which makes it more documentary style, more real.

A room full of people

I know many people, for example, VFX artists, who would make great colorists. I don’t think it’s that hard technically if you have a good eye and some imagination. Just go for it and practice your skills.

What prevents many people from liking this profession, I think, is the hassle and stress that comes with clients attending the sessions usually with a deadline right behind the corner. You might have a room full of people communicating with you and everyone will have their own opinions and wishes. Sometimes people start arguing about completely different approaches. The colorist will have to maintain objective, taking all opinions into account, giving options, looking like it's all under control and not getting confused. Most importantly, don’t start arguing because of your personal opinions. It's better to convince everybody that the best options you can give are actually their ideas. I think it is really healthy to listen to others. They might give you new ideas that will enhance your skills.

Personally, in the beginning of my colorist career, I felt I wasn't social enough for this job. I am unable to hype convincingly. I am quieter than the average person. I felt I told my opinions either too straight or too complex... These days I try to make my weaknesses look like strengths with a humoristic approach.

Henri Pulla