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Film calls all the shots in 'Lincoln'

Eye on the Oscars: Below the Line

By TODD LONGWELL

While shooting digital may be the prevailing trend for everything from micro-budget indies to blockbuster tentpole releases like "Skyfall," it was never an option for "Lincoln," as far as director Steven Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski were concerned.



Steven Spielberg and his d.p. used film, not digital, to shoot 'Lincoln.' The choice informed creative decisions by the rest of the crew and gave the film its grainy look, capturing a dark and gritty era in U.S. history.

"This movie needed to be made on film because that's how we make movies," says the Polish-born Kaminski, who has shot every movie for Spielberg since 1993, winning Oscars for that year's "Schindler's List" and 1998's "Saving Private Ryan." "As long as film emulsion is being made, we will make it with film emulsion."

For "Lincoln," Kaminski used a high-speed film with visible grain for the interiors, and a less grainy film stock for the exteriors evoking the cold crisp air of the film's winter setting.

"I just like how grain emulsion looks," Kaminski says. "I'm not too crazy about grainless images."

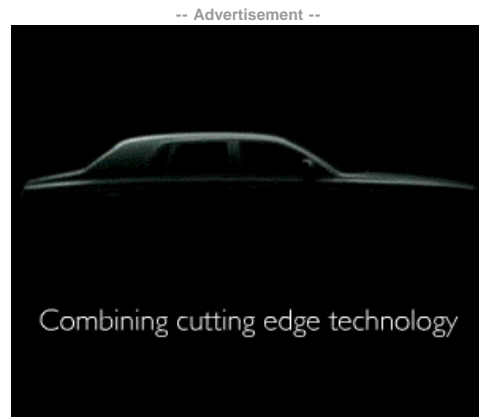
But the high level of grain in "Lincoln" had a higher aesthetic purpose, which was put into sharp relief when Kaminski showed production designer Rick Carter a shot demonstrating what the film would have looked like had it been shot digitally.

"If you're working on a period piece, digital image has clarity to the point of almost distraction," says Carter, who has worked with Spielberg on seven previous films, including 2011's World War I drama "War Horse."

"The Civil War era was the first photographic era, the first presidency in America recorded by cameras," Carter says, so we think of the period as having a "grainy black and white sensibility. While we didn't go black and white, the very clear imagery would have distracted from your submersion into that period."

Carter says the brightness and clarity of digital would have also clashed with the dark reality of those war years, both visually and emotionally.

While people in the Civil War era didn't live in a black and white world, their environment was a gritty one. "There was no pavement so there was a lot of dirt and dust, as well as coal smoke," says Carter, who earned an Oscar for his work on the digitally shot "Avatar." "So this is a pretty monochromatic period to be evoking, especially those three months in the winter when the film is



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set. And after four years of Civil War, the toll on the people and the places is so horrendous."

Carter and Kaminski worked together to make sure the colors and the tones in the background stayed relatively consistent, ensuring that elements didn't pop out as too light or recede into darkness.

"For instance, when I started painting the trim in the White House, (Kaminski) asked if I would tone it down so it would balance with the (darker) wallpaper," Carter says. "Even the maps that we had on the walls were all toned down. That's something you could still do in digital, but I think you'd have even more problems, because it would tend to heighten the contrast, and the amount of post-production that would have been required to degrade it or make it more atmospheric would have been more difficult to achieve."

Such post-production tweaking is "great when you're creating a landscape from Mars or you're turning people into 18-foot aliens," says makeup designer Lois Burwell, but not an a more intimate period movie like "Lincoln."

Nonetheless, Burwell faced other challenges during production: the film's 35mm film stock added too much magenta to the skin tones. "It wasn't apparent on the set but it did bounce out when you looked at the rushes," says Burwell, an Oscar winner for "Braveheart" who worked with Spielberg four times previously. "The best thing to do is to remove as much magenta from the skin tones (with the makeup) as you possibly can."

The end result of all these artistic efforts is a film that strikingly captures a dark era in U.S. history that gave re-birth to the nation.

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