BY ISA TOUSIGNANT

# GRAND MISHAPS: Technology Patron Daniel Langlois on the Hits and Misses of the Digital Wonder of THE BARONESS AND THE PIG

I'm a self-avowed twit when it comes to technology—among other things—but I had an inkling something was amiss when I noticed the light beam coming from the projection booth. It was late November in Montreal, and I'd just finished seeing *The Baroness and the Pig*, the Daniel Langlois–produced, Michael Mackenzie–directed, first–ever widely distributed feature film made entirely in HD (high definition) digital technology. The point of the film—more important than its narrative, if one is to believe both members of the press and the producer—is its groundbreaking technology: the way what was previously seen as a cold and inhuman medium can "appear as lush as any film stock," in Langlois's words. And yet, within the setting of Langlois's own baby, Ex–Centris, a cinematic megacentre situated on St–Laurent Street and designed specifically for its adaptability to such technological developments, a mistake was made, and what we were presented with was a 35–mm print of the digital original. Gotta love the irony. I asked Langlois what I'd missed.

"What was important to us at Media Principia with this film was the experiment," he said from somewhere in Europe, on a digital phone. "We started production three years ago, at the very start of digital high definition, and the adventure was to see if we could make a feature film about a subject difficult to transcribe into digital—a period piece, with detailed costumes, dramatic lighting, subtle colours and a lot of warmth in the images. The kind of film normally the territory of Hollywood and produced at an extremely high cost. The experiment turned out to be fascinating, because we realized that the quality of the digital images is absolutely extraordinary. Everyone involved was surprised to see how warm we were able to make it feel, how arresting the texture and details were."

*The Baroness and the Pig* is not a strong film, but it isn't half as weak as the reputation it garnered at its launch last fall at the Toronto International Film Festival. Set at the turn of the 19th century, it tells the story of a scientifically curious American baroness (Patricia Clarkson) in Paris, who, abandoned by her uncaring husband (Colm Feore), decides to open a salon. As the centrepiece of this salon, she adopts her very own *enfant sauvage* (Caroline Dhavernas), a child raised by pigs in a nearby village farm, whom she begins educating in human ways. But the Parisian cultural milieu is closed–minded and competitive, and soon she finds herself blacklisted because of her radical ideas and her husband's ill intentions. Her only remaining friend is Emily, the porcine girl.

Images courtesy of Film Tonic.

The film's textures and hues are indeed remarkable, and the psychological link that's created between the alienated high-society woman and the socialized "animal" is interesting and well acted, though perhaps not fully developed. Accomplished Toronto playwright Michael Mackenzie adapted his own script, and this reflects his first foray into filmmaking. The script was chosen by Media Principia, Langlois's production company devoted to the development of digital film, mainly because of the challenge it represented as a period piece, or, as Langlois puts it, "because it was the last of things people would expect to see made in digital HD." As described by the producer, it wasn't the easiest project for Mackenzie to cut his teeth on. "I absolutely wanted to make this film with a budget of under $5 million US, which is a tiny budget, especially for this type of film," he explains. "So we limited the shooting time. We had nine weeks of shooting. For a first-time director, it was hard to adapt to, but we figured what we don't have time to get, we'll do numerically once we get back to Montreal."

In an effort to cut costs, the shooting took place in Hungary instead of France, which meant a location cost of approximately $500,000 for the duration of the shoot, as opposed to an estimated $4 million. It also meant that all recognizable Parisian elements had to be digitally created. "There were a lot of parts of the baroness's house that never existed, which we created in 3-D," says Langlois. "In fact, when you see the whole house at once—it never existed. What demonstrated even more potential for the medium, though, was that since Michael lacked the time and experience to shoot everything he wanted, there were all sorts of important and crucial shots for the film where there was no movement. But thanks to the quality, to the high numeric density we had in our images, we recreated entire camera movements. Nearly a quarter of the film's movement—dollies, crane shots—are synthetic. They were never actually filmed. It gave us the ability to elevate the film to the level it deserved in relation to the script. Even though the original shoot had been good in terms of visual quality, it lacked general dynamism. We were able to rework it because it was shot in digital. Had it been 35 mm, we wouldn't have had enough resolution to do it."

Digital HD is quite amazing, really, in what it represents for filmmaking. This technology already means much lower costs for production and a new form of directing that emphasizes post-production. But it also promises a revolution on the distribution front. "What we did in Toronto [at the film festival] was in addition to showing the film in digital HD, we delivered it via satellite," says Langlois. "And that's really important, because digital technologies, for me, are important creative tools, but they're even more important as a means of distribution for independent cinema.

"My personal drive is independent film, not Hollywood cinema, and the only way to create a network to have access to cinemas from around the world will be by separating productions from the present distribution network. The only way to do that—because the costs of 35-mm prints are so high—will be by delivering films either by satellite or by land by digital means in order to avoid ever spending on prints. A single print of a 35-mm film costs between $2,500 and $3,000. So when you've got a small movie, you think humbly, 'Shall I make three copies or six copies?' And you've got to worry about the physical damage the film might suffer, which in turn might reduce the length of your run. Whereas with digital, an independent film—unlike an American blockbuster which has to make its money back in the first two weeks—can live two or three years playing around the world, and the copies will always be in perfect shape."

The problem rests in establishing a large enough network of cinemas able to function on a digital platform for the system to function. To date, there are only 150 such cinemas worldwide, one of which is, of course, Ex-Centris. But it's a growing trend, and one Langlois is backing with the infectious energy and excitement for which he is known. "I'm always interested in making accessible either the tools or the opportunities for the public to interact with new technologies," he says. "I try to bust through all hegemony. That's one of my main motives. It doesn't always work, you know, but it's still what I find most fascinating."

In other words, progress is right around the corner, as long as the projectionist knows how to man the machine.

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