

# Practical Virtues

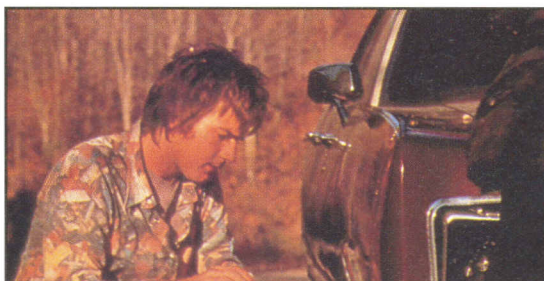
Four Directors Discuss the Limits of Digital Production

**E**very year brings another wave of change to the production business. While computer advancements have rocked the postproduction side of the industry, directors face an increasingly daunting array of technical choices. Some directors choose simply to ignore technology: Woody Allen told *The Daily News's* Pete Hamill that he writes all his screenplays out long-hand on yellow legal pads, types them up on a manual typewriter he has owned for 40 years, shoots on film without a video tap, and edits on a flatbed. So it is possible to ignore the computer and still direct film.

Yet most directors use computers to enhance their creative choices. In this issue, we look at the work of four feature diverse film directors—Danny Boyle, Jean-Jacques Annaud, Guillermo Del Toro, Agnieszka Holland—and discuss how they have adapted to the recent changes. For many directors, special effects are often best used for “invisible” effects; the old, practical methods of filmmaking turn to be quite reliable.

## The Editors

From top: *A Life Less Ordinary*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Mimic*, and *Washington Square*.



## Danny Boyle: Extraordinary Circumstances

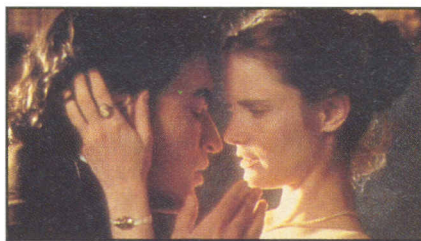
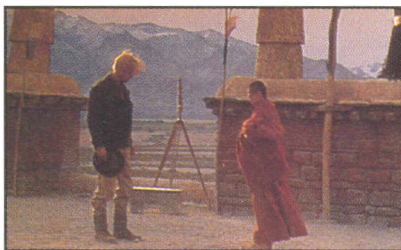
**I**n Danny Boyle's latest film, *A Life Less Ordinary*, in a modern riff on William Tell, a bullet rips through the apple atop the butler's head in a slow-

motion explosion of tortured fruit. Determined to do the shot practically, Boyle insisted on high-speed slo-mo cameras. Finally, daunted by their tiny film capacity and rigorous maintenance demands, the director reluctantly agreed to have the bullet digitally inserted.

“It's a slippery road though, isn't it?” Boyle says, with a touch of mock paranoia. “One minute you're adding a bullet, the next thing you know someone's

whispering in your ear, ‘See that telephone pole you don't like in the shot? We can take it out.’ I'd rather chop it down. It would be more of an adventure really, breaking the law and all.”

The lawless fantasies might seem out of place for a distinguished theater director. Boyle's many credits include the Royal Shakespeare Company and years of BBC television, before his collaboration with writer John Hodge and producer Andrew MacDonald began on *Shallow Grave*.





In Boyle's short film-making career, he has avoided computer-generated effects. The famous swimming-in-the-toilet scene in *Trainspotting* was all live—full of the “cheats” he'd learned on the British stage. “A lot of people said the only way to do this was with the computer. But we did it the way we would have done it in the theater. It's a trick. If you give the audience an image that's convincing, they will solidify it for you. That's how the eye sees; it makes things solid and real. That creates the magic.”

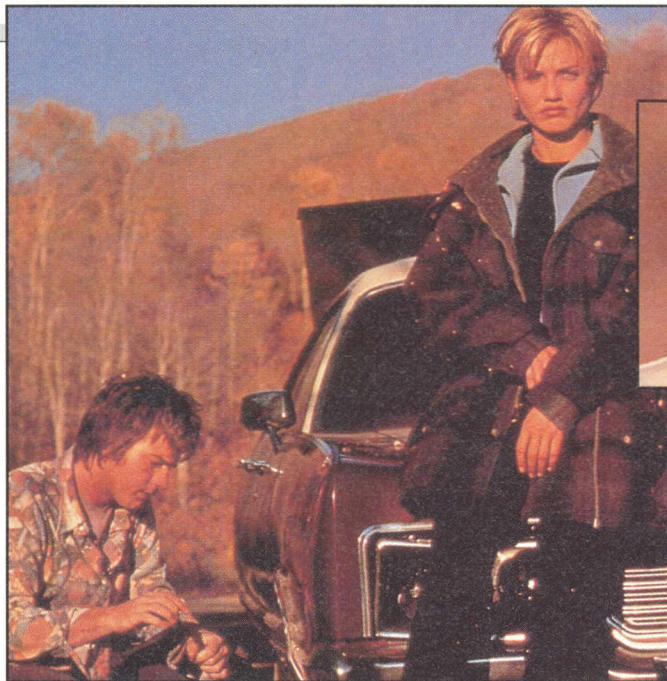
The reason for Boyle's approach is not nostalgic devotion to his thespian roots. “I just don't like to leave things,” he explains, “I think a really dangerous thing about the technology now is that you just leave things. Someone's always telling you, ‘We can take that out; we'll be able to do that later.’”

At \$12 million, *A Life Less Ordinary* (Fox) is his most expensive feature (his two previous films cost about \$4 million combined). Only the tiniest percent of the budget was spent on digital effects—apart from the apple shot, there is an exploding heart, which Boyle also tried to shoot practically in a tank. “We fucked up,” he admits. “And it's because I compromised on it because of costs. Of course, in the end we spent 10 times more trying to recreate it in computers.”

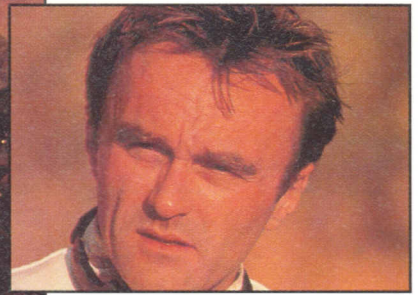
Boyle continues: “I admire the people that use the computers brilliantly, like Zemeckis, but one of the things about that kind of work is you have to think ahead, you have to plan everything much more thoroughly. I like to try to plan as little as possible. It's very hair-raising for people, because a film crew loves to know what they're doing. But I love being able to change things at the last minute.”

**F**or Boyle and his collaborators, the script's the thing. When filming begins, script and casting are the only givens. In post, Boyle would rather spend his time tinkering with narrative structure than compositing, and he edits with writer Hodge nearby.

On the set, Boyle directs like a sorcerer, hovering, cajoling, mixing it up with his actors as he has always done for the stage, confident in immediacy above all else. “There's really no point in rehearsing eight weeks ahead of time, because in eight weeks an actor's life can change and it will completely change the scene for him. You feed off the adrenaline of people coming into a scene on the day and all of us not knowing what we're going to do with it. So I always start the day by clearing the crew away and rehearsing the actors. Then we have the pressure of this \$20,000-an-hour crew that's had



**A Life Less Ordinary is Danny Boyle's first foray into digital effects.**



their breakfast, waiting just outside the door.”

Because Boyle works with a collaborative team—the same producer, writer, DP, editor, production designer, and lead actor—all this living in the moment seems to work. Boyle's own preparation for *A Life Less Ordinary* included a Kerouac-style roadtrip across an America full of karaoke and gun shops. It's easy to imagine his

rainy, seat-of-the-pants set in Utah as some wild west adventure, just as it's clear he relates to the joy, desperation, and urgency of the Edinburgh junkies who run pell-mell through the opening of *Trainspotting*.

“You try to create the circumstances that work can happen in, so that everybody can contribute. Then it's live. It's happening *now*, it could screw up, anything could happen.”

The ultimate filmmaking-as-life-experience naturally pops into Boyle's mind. “I think something changed after *Apocalypse Now*,” he says wistfully, “like the world decided filmmaking had to be safer. Because Coppola genuinely created chaos on such a monumental scale. The movie that came out of it was a modern masterpiece because it was more like the modern world than anything else, more modern than the world of computers. No one will allow you to do that anymore. But I think every director's dream really is to take a crew up the jungle and drive them all insane. I can't think of anything more noble. You can't do *that* with a computer.”

**Cynthia Wischart**

## Jean-Jacques Annaud: Dollying The Lama

**J**ean-Jacques Annaud knows his most recent film, TriStar Pictures' *Seven Years In Tibet*, isn't what people have come to expect. “It's strictly about humanity,” he says of the film, which tells the story of famed mountaineer Heinrich Harrer (Brad Pitt) and his relationship with the Dalai Lama. “Any effects that we used didn't come at the expense of story or character, but instead were necessary to enhance the images we wanted to create.”

Indeed, all of the 130 effects shots completed by Magic Camera, London, fall into the transparent effects genre. “The viewer cannot recognize when we used certain tricks,” he says. “And that's how important postproduction



has become. To tell the truth, that's fine with me. I'm all for creating a spectacle, but I don't want the method to become the audience's primary concern."

Annaud has spent his entire career seeking this sort of relationship with ticketbuyers. Many of his previous films (*The Bear*, *Quest For Fire*) have concerned themselves primarily with naturalistic images, relying more on plot structure and character development than on a constant barrage of eye-popping visuals.

*Tibet* is certainly no different, as the film weaves an intricate tale about the education and rebirth of mankind. The film's original plan called for Annaud and his international crew to film in India, close to Tibet. But filming difficulties and scheduling problems forced the filmmakers to find a backup locale. The decision came to set up camp in Uspallata, Argentina, a small town whose landscape offered promising possibilities and lent itself to proper set construction.

Uspallata was home for three months, during which Annaud and production designer At Hoang constructed the Tibetan city of Lhasa. A large warehouse in the nearby city of Mendoza was converted into a sound stage and doubled as production headquarters. After their stint in

South America, the shoot moved north, settling near British Columbia for four weeks to complete filming.

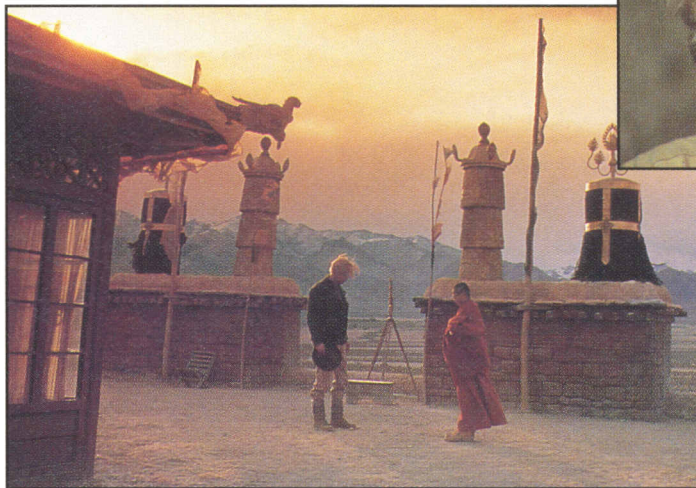
While all of these wondrous and complicated locales might seem a bit daunting—even to an experienced director—Annaud felt comfortable because of the "director-friendly" waters around which he finds himself navigating.

"I have the freedom to move, and that makes anything easier to shoot," he says. "Five years ago, directors were tied down to their locations, and now there are always options. Effects are also becoming so much cheaper. I shot a scene in a cave, and I wasn't originally satisfied with the background. Usually, I would not have proceeded because I wasn't 100 percent happy. This time I didn't worry. I knew the work that could be done to improve the scene in post was going to be less expensive than finding another location. If I had insisted on reality, we would have wasted an entire day searching and prepping. That's a perfect example of how filming has indeed been altered by the evolution of post."

Annaud's legendary attention to detail informs this production. "I always storyboard every minute of my films," he says, "and that was certainly true with [*Tibet*]. In order to keep control of the movie and keep every element to my liking, I needed to come in overly prepared. I had meetings with Magic Camera for months to show them everything I wanted. I had a full list with every shot, and they knew before filming even started what they would have to complete."

Annaud's makes it clear that his preparatory nature and usage of a grand visual style do not translate into a heavy reliance on effects. "They're not a crutch," he maintains. "Having the ability to complete or produce something in post doesn't mean they should always be looked upon as a savior. Talented directors today still know that the physical production of the film comes first, and post can be used for augmentation."

With *Tibet*, Annaud continued a grand tradition, involving himself with all postproduction efforts. "I won't say I'm among the most proficient with visual effects, but I've learned how to use them from watching people work on my films."



Jean-Jacques Annaud used post tricks to solve some location problems.

He has also learned that the director's role has changed significantly. "All of us have a new job responsibility," he says. "We have to know more than how to look through lenses.

We have to be familiar with the tools available to us and know the ins and outs of postproduction. Without educating ourselves on the new filming landscape, we'll all be more than a little lost."

Michael Speier

## Guillermo Del Toro: Judas Priest

Sci-fi and horror are the genres into which director Guillermo Del Toro most comfortably fits. His debut feature film, *Cronos*, a 1993 Mexican vampire flick, took six to seven years to get off the ground. "The problem with launching *Cronos* was that it was too artistic," says Del Toro. "I have this almost suicidal tendency to try to do films with a lot of *artistic expression*. I feel these genres, although non-prestigious, are more challenging and entertaining."

That opinion is not Del Toro's alone. Many of cinema's greatest directors—from John Ford to Walter Hill—chose to work in genre.

Serving the needs of genre isn't just some intellectual exercise, however. In order to service the effects for his films, Del Toro opened his own special effects company, Necropia, in his home town of Guadalajara, Mexico. The effects company went out of business shortly after the release of *Cronos*.

While working on another Mexican project, *The Devil's*



*Backbone*, which was thwarted by a collapse in the Mexican economy, Del Toro laid the groundwork for his latest film, *Mimic*. "I started getting offers to do work in studios in the States," he says, "but I wanted to remain in Guadalajara, so I started being what I call a round-trip filmmaker. I would work in the States and then come back to Guadalajara and work on the screenplay."

A Dimension Films release, taking place mostly in New York City's subways, *Mimic* centers around the Judas breed, a bio-engineered insect bred to kill cockroaches. The bugs reappear as monstrous creatures which mimic the human form in order to survive undetected. The film stars Mira Sorvino as an entomologist.

With over 12 different insect puppets, created at The Character Shop, Hollywood, and over 105 effects sequences done at both Hybrid Technologies, Montreal, and C.O.R.E., Toronto, Del Toro says, "The most difficult effects sequences were those we had to shoot on set, which were the puppeteering of the creatures. I am in love with special effects as long as they are used without being showcased. My problem with effects, both when I used to make them and when using them as a director, is to remind everyone that effects have to be treated like any other shot in the movie," he says.

"During production you have to take into account that the creature is not there and therefore you have to generate all of the elements. Coming from an effects background, which includes optical effects as well, I have no problems understanding this," says Del Toro.

The roaches were computer-generated. "Roaches are hard to control in groups," says Del Toro. "They are individuals and will not move in packs. It is kind of like every roach for himself. We needed to coordinate them, so we computer-generated them with software written at Hybrid Technologies. Each effects house has its own idiosyncrasies about software. One place was more obsessive about lighting while the other one was worried more about the movement of the creatures. At this stage of life, all postproduction illusions do nothing but free the filmmaker," he says. "They do not hamper your freedom."

Seventy percent of the film was shot in the studio at Cine-Space, Toronto, where the subway stations and underground were built. "I loved shooting in Toronto, and would love to shoot there every time because the crews are fantastic," says Del Toro. The \$28 million production took two years from conceptual drawings to postproduction. "If I had to compare *Mimic* to *Cronos*, I would say the scale of *Mimic* was much larger, and the tone was very different. *Cronos*



Guillermo Del Toro's *Mimic* called for computer-generated roaches.

was like a quiet quartet and *Mimic* was like a full-orchestra fling." He continues: "I think it was a matter of scale and resources. As long as you get the resources to get

the scale into submission you are fine. If you get too much, it is crazy, and if you don't get enough it is crazy, but in a better way. I found it easier this time around because I did not have to build everything. In *Cronos* I had to design, produce, ensemble the effects in the movie, and do the post-production myself." This time, Del Toro had a little help.

Jennifer Vacchio

## Agnieszka Holland: Multiple Takes

When reviewing some of Polish-born director Agnieszka Holland's contributions to the world of cinema (*Europa, Europa, The Secret Garden*), one may marvel at the care taken in production design, the complexity of story, and the attention to detail, both visual and emotional. Exciting tricks of postproduction, admittedly, don't spring to mind. But post works in mysterious ways, and often that which goes unnoticed is the best trick of all.

Holland's most recent film, Disney's adaptation of the Henry James novella *Washington Square*, demanded the recreation of New York City's harbor of the late 19th century. This called for some matte paintings, a technique used in another period piece, Martin Scorsese's *Age of Innocence*. But perhaps the most significant postproduction story is that Holland, long a warrior of the Steenbeck, used the Avid for the first time on a feature.

"I really appreciate that it's so fast. I'm always nervous in the cutting room because everything takes such a long time. Plus, you can work out some very basic effects," she says. This was actually the second time Holland edited on the Avid. The first was for an original one-hour Showtime piece called *Red Wind*, part of the *Fallen Angels* anthology produced by Sydney Pollack.

After working out the first cut of *Washington Square*, Holland and the film's producers chose to project it on film, rather than just view it on the Avid. "I think this is really necessary, especially when the visuals have such importance." Holland is also leery of mistakes that can go unnoticed while watching dailies on a monitor rather than on a screen.

Aside from the obvious influence digital nonlinear editing