

FLORIAN BALLHAUS, ASC  
INSURGENT

ELLEN KURAS, ASC  
A LITTLE CHAOS

RE-BLAZING  
THE BIG TRAIL

# American Cinematographer

The International Journal of Motion Imaging

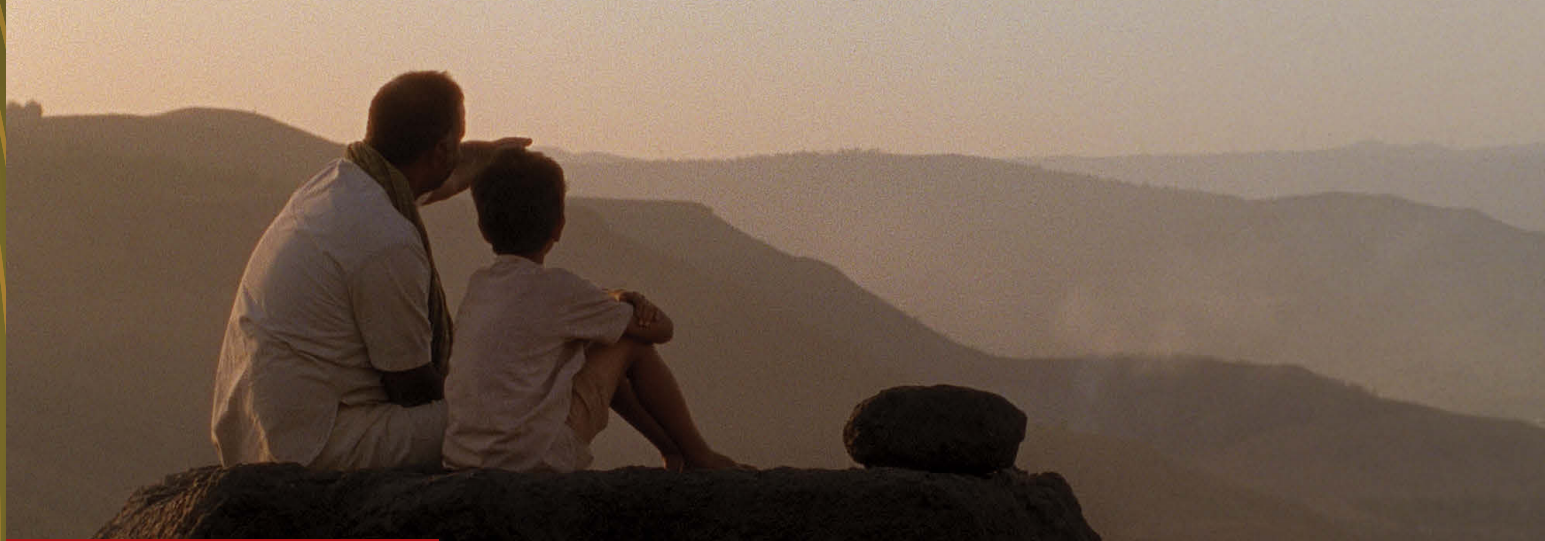
APRIL 2015

## CHAPPIE

TRENT OPALOGH ACTIVATES  
REBEL ROBOT

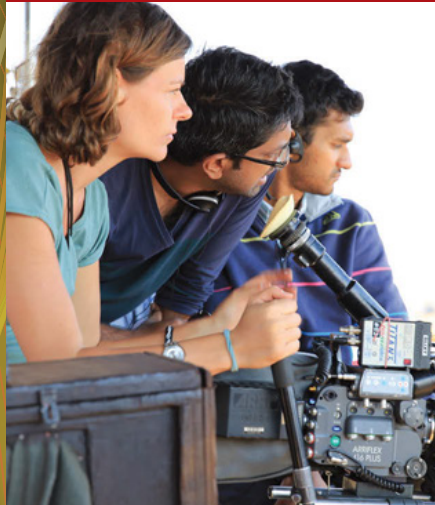


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## SUPER 16 DELIVERS CINEMATIC IMAGERY FOR

# UMRIKA



Cinematographer Petra Korner's latest feature, *Umrika*, starts out in a small mountain village in India in the mid-1970s. When Ramakant, a young boy from the village who discovers that his brother — long believed to be in America — has actually gone missing, he begins to invent letters on his behalf to save their mother from heartbreak, while setting out on a journey to find him.

The script has humorous and dramatic aspects, but Korner and director Prashant Nair agreed that it should be photographed with a classic dramatic approach.

"We never intended for this story to have an indie-film look per se," Korner explains. "We wanted something atmospheric and cinematic, but also warm and vibrant, especially in the first act. We talked about the village having a certain enchantment, almost bordering on magic

realism, while being careful to never get near caricature or an overly exotic stereotype of India. And we created a stark contrast with color and lighting with the rest of the film, which takes place in Mumbai in the 1980s."

In looking at reference materials and identifying the right approach, Korner realized that Nair responded to a film aesthetic. "I started looking at all the films we were referencing in terms of look and feel, and we realized that even the most recent ones had almost exclusively been shot on film.

"Texture and timelessness played a big part," adds Korner. "*Umrika* is a period film, encompassing the '70s and '80s in a region of the world where nothing is slick, minimalistic or clean. To photograph this place and this period — which we all associate with a very organic, textured look — in a modern-feeling medium felt double-wrong."

Korner says 35mm 2-perf format was comparable cost-wise with high-end digital, but there were no sync-sound 2-perf cameras available in India, which initially led her to Super 16.

"We then critically viewed a lot of Super 16 films, and came to the conclusion that aesthetically it was the perfect choice for *Umrika*," Korner reveals. "We knew that grain and texture were going to be a considerable part of the look, especially since we wanted to crop our already small negative to a widescreen 2.35:1 aspect ratio, and we were ready to embrace that.

"Super 16 is also a fantastic format because the small cameras, in our case the ARRI 416, are fast and easy to set

up and switch from handheld to studio modes," she says. "They are rugged in all terrains and weather conditions, and there is a proven workflow in post."

The film stocks were KODAK VISION3 500T Color Negative Film 7219 for interiors and night exteriors, rated at E.I. 320, and KODAK VISION3 250D Color Negative Film 7207, rated at 200, for day exteriors.

Korner chose lenses with an eye to counteracting the inherent softness of Super 16, while not wanting

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something that imposed an overly modern or sharp look. She used COOKE S4 glass, augmented by a couple of SK4s at wider focal lengths.

The approach to color was extremely detailed. "Contrary to most Indian films, we avoided garish primary colors and indulged more in the tertiaries," she says. "In the village, you cannot find any hint of blue, other than the open blue skies. The mother plays a very important role in the film, and we assigned a specific shade of magenta to her character that is always

present in some way. When the boy leaves the village, he takes his brother's scarf with him, which also has the mother's color. In the city we made sure to eliminate most warm colors reminding us of the village, especially yellows and reds. These colors only resurface with Radika, the girl our protagonist falls in love with."

She adds, "All of our day exteriors look rich and wonderful; we had plenty of sky detail, and in all the scenes inside the dim village huts, we were still able to

capture the rich world going on outside through the open, glassless windows and door frames.

*Umrika* won the Audience Award at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival in the World Cinema — Dramatic category, and was also nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. Nair and Korner agree that shooting on film was the right choice.

"Every single department answered with glee when told," she says. "Actors are always happier, because they know that film is more flattering when it comes to skin. ADs are happy because they have observed that everyone is more concentrated and focused on a film set. Directors learn to cut between takes again, which makes the editorial department happy. All departments have this precious time between takes to make quick adjustments. Colorists are much happier with film, because they have so much more to work with, not only in terms of latitude, but also in terms of color information."

Korner notes that the film workflow wasn't always easy in some of the more remote locations, "but everyone who

looks at the final result agrees that it was certainly worth the extra effort. I am a strong believer that any system is only as good as its final result. I think it's wonderful to have luxuries like instantaneous dailies, but if that means that the movie we are all working so hard on won't look as good in the end, I prefer waiting two days!"

Color grading was done by Stefan King on a DaVinci Resolve at Ambient Recording in Berlin.

"Something that film will always have in its favor is the fact that it helps audiences suspend their disbelief much faster than a look we subconsciously relate to modern technology," concludes Korner. "Film is still the more cinematic medium, and *Umrika* is an inherently cinematic story."



**Photos:** Top, left and right pages: Scenes from *Umrika* (photos by Petra Korner). Left page inset: Petra Korner, director Prashant Nair, and 1<sup>st</sup> AC Aakash Raj. Bottom: Korner and Raj on location. (Photos courtesy of Petra Korner)