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A Deadly Connection



Cinematographer Christian Sebaldt, ASC and director William Malone bring horror online in the hallucinatory cyberthriller

feardotcom



Article written by Douglas Bankston for the American Cinematographer magazine, September 2002 issue

Medical-school dropout “Dr.” Alistair Pratt (Stephen Rea) practices his simple cure for birth –

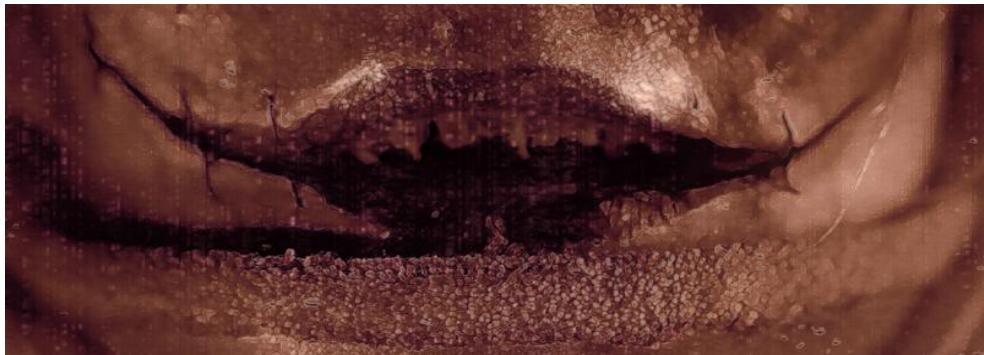


that is death – by torturing women for all to voyeuristically see on the morbid Web site feardotcom. Attempts by detective Mike Reilly (Stephen Dorff) to catch the serial killer have reached a dead end. But then Reilly and his colleague, Department of Health worker Terry Houston (Natascha McElhone), receive some unexpected assistance from the ghostly presence of one of Pratt’s victims, Jeannie (Gesine Cukrowski), whose seductive spirit haunts the Internet and psychologically torments visitors to Pratt’s site. “Do you want to

watch?” she coos. Well, of course you do.

Responsible for bringing the terrifying details of *feardotcom* to the screen were director of photography Christian Sebaldt and director William Malone. Malone is a horror enthusiast who has helmed such features as the 1999 remake of *House on Haunted Hill* and otherworldly episodes of the TV series *Tales From the Crypt* and *The Others*. Sebaldt, whose father was a TV commercial director and composer, grew up in Munich, Germany, and trained at the Bavaria Studios and Lab while periodically working as a camera assistant. He spent 12 weeks working on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lilli Marleen* (shot by Michael Ballhaus, ASC and Xaver Schwarzenberger) and shot some second-unit footage for the film. Afterwards, he became a cinematographer and producer of award-winning commercials. Bitten by the motion-picture bug while working with Fassbinder, Sebaldt eventually moved to Los Angeles to concentrate on long-form projects. He has since filmed such features as *Race to Space*, *Caroline at Midnight*, *Addams Family Reunion* and *The Adventures of Galgameth*.

Sebaldt’s connection with Malone happened in a somewhat roundabout way during the production of *House on Haunted Hill*. The cinematographer’s wife, Mary Seward, was the script supervisor for the show, and Sebaldt dropped by the set. He recalls, “I visited Mary on the set and got to know William, a highly intelligent and gentle guy and a true fan of the genre. We hit it off, and when William and his talented first-unit director of photography, Rick Bota, told me they needed a second-unit cameraman, I jumped at the chance. William was open minded, and I wound up creating a series of moody, creepy and sexy images by shooting through pieces of



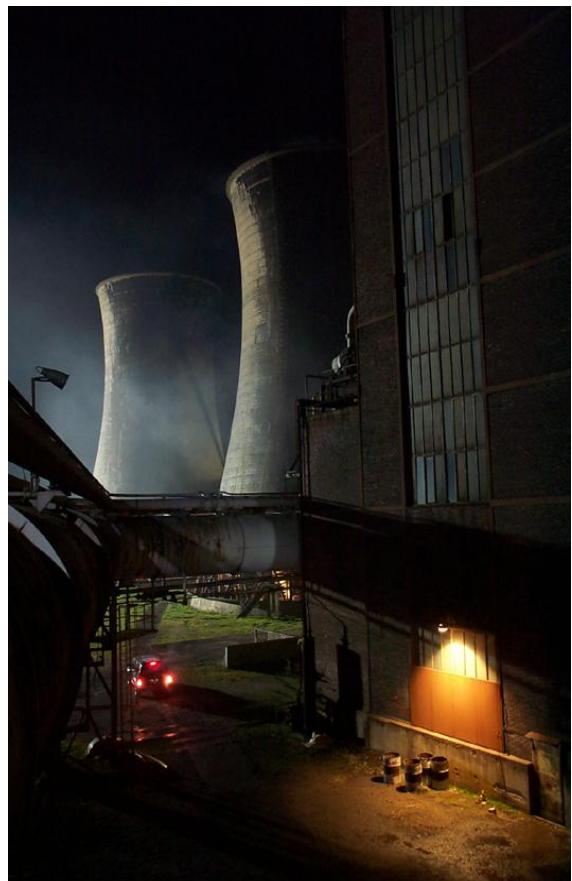
Plexiglas I had warped at home, and projecting bloody red fluids onto bodies – just weird stuff. When he saw the dailies, he said, ‘You’re shooting my next movie!’”

After some time had passed, Sebaldt received a call from Malone, who was prepping *feardotcom* in Luxembourg. Sebaldt traveled to the tiny country, which is nestled between Germany, Belgium and France, and spent four weeks formalizing the look of the film with Malone and the German duo of production designer Jérôme Latour and art director Regine Friese. Their visual references included the gritty, monochrome music video for Bush’s “Greedy Fly” and Dariusz Wolski, ASC’s stylishly expressionistic photography on *Dark City* as well as the classic German Expressionist films of Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau. “From there, it developed into its own look,” Sebaldt says. “We wanted something that was dark and mysterious and had a lot of backlight in certain areas with a subtle use of smoke to give it a little texture.” Malone adds that, “*feardotcom* is a modern film, but I wanted a film noir feel with a lot of shadows and dark areas. I also really wanted a desaturated look.”

Filming began in the winter, when there was no shortage of rain — a boon to the production because much of the story unfolds during downpours. A former steel plant in Luxembourg was pressed into service; a few of its gigantic halls were converted into soundstages, and one of the buildings also housed the production company’s offices. With a few exceptions, most of the movie was shot in Luxembourg. “Because Luxembourg is so small, we had several locations that happened to be in France,” Sebaldt says. “It’s not that we chose France; it’s just that if you drive for 30 minutes, you’re suddenly *in* France.”

As for working in the tiny country, Sebaldt observes that “getting a roll of gaffer’s tape takes 24 hours.” There is not much of a film industry in Luxembourg, and a high degree of preplanning was necessary because of the longer import time required. “I felt that we were well prepared,” he notes. “We knew exactly what we wanted. When we needed a Musco light for a gigantic exterior shot of [steel plant] cooling towers, we knew that two or three weeks in advance and had it brought in from England. That was the only way to survive in Luxembourg. It’s like an island.”

Assembling the crew was a complicated, multi-cultural affair, and skilled members arrived from numerous countries: gaffer John Donoghue and best boy Andrew Cole from England, A-camera/Steadicam operator Alessandro Bolognesi and second-unit cinematographer/B-camera operator Luigi Cecchini from Italy, and key grip/dolly grip Jean-François Roqueplo from Belgium. First assistant camera



Christopher Taylor came from the United States. “Because of the different languages and levels of experience, it was tricky,” Sebaldt admits.

Sebaldt framed *feardotcom* in the Super 35mm 2.35:1 aspect ratio for a blowup to anamorphic. About 90 percent of the film was shot using Kodak Vision 500T 5279 stock (rated at 400 ASA) because light levels were so low. “The whole movie was shot at a T2.8,” he affirms. “It almost became a joke on the set — I would be measuring and it would still be a T2.8. Vision 500T was my preferred film stock for this movie because it’s so clean and crisp and easy to work with. But I still did a bunch of tests to prove to everyone that we wouldn’t have any problems with grain. We did a test where we blew it up to an anamorphic print, and it looked fantastic!” A few day exteriors called for Kodak Vision 250D 5246 to provide as much stop as possible in the gray winter light. Kodak SFX 200 was employed for blue- and green-screen shots needed for the foreground elements of visual-effects sequences. “Everything was overexposed by a third of a stop,” Sebaldt notes. “There literally was no visible grain, even with the intermediate steps.”

The lack of grain was aided by the fact that no optical blowup was utilized to create the film’s anamorphic release prints; Malone and Sebaldt planned from the beginning to take *feardotcom* through a digital intermediate process. “My secret hope and dream, just like the director’s, was that we’d take this movie into the digital realm and play with contrast there,” the cinematographer offers. “We both think the Kodak stocks, especially the print stocks, are too contrasty, too glossy and have a look that we thought didn’t fit this film. We both were pushing early on to have a digital intermediate created.”

Even though the digital intermediate was *not* given an immediate green light by the producers, the filmmakers took a risk and began shooting with that goal in mind. As filming and rough editing progressed, the producers saw how much of an advantage the digital intermediate would provide



visually and gave the go-ahead. Malone explains, “When we sorted out the financial aspects, it actually ended up a wash in terms of what it would cost us, because the digital intermediate also gave us things like the optical squeeze, normal optics, fades and dissolves. It really wasn’t going to cost them a penny more to go in this direction.”

“Vision 500T has such an incredible range that I was not worried about having rich, dark areas in the original,” Sebaldt says. “I knew that once we reduced the contrast in post, we would find lots of detail where it was needed. I wanted to make sure the film had enough dark areas to begin with, as opposed to turning up the contrast and creating a phony, contrasty look in post. I feel that if you have good contrast in the original, it will look great later.”

The dark, contrasty sets were photographed with two Arriflex 535Bs and a 435 from ARRI Munich; a Moviecam Compact was used for Steadicam work. A basic set of Zeiss Superspeed lenses was on hand, along with other high-speed, Zeiss wide-angle lenses (down to 14mm) and telephotos (up to 300mm). Also in the lens cache were Malone's own CinemaScope anamorphic adapter, which was

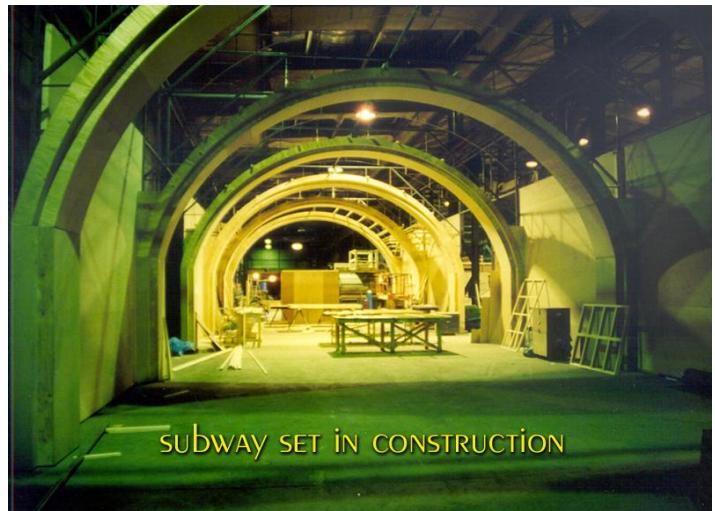


Movement appears to be more dynamic.”

Two camera units were always ready to go to take advantage of multiple-camera possibilities, often with unsettling, off-kilter camera angles. However, a lot of camera movement was built into the style of the movie, and second-camera opportunities were chosen carefully so the two cameras would not interfere with each other. “The moment you have Steadicam, a second camera becomes almost impossible to use because of the movement you’ve created, and the A camera was on Steadicam almost exclusively for months and months,” Sebaldt notes, wryly adding that “our poor Steadicam operator, Alessandro, was not abused but ‘used.’”

Sebaldt did use two cameras on certain setups for the film’s unsettling opening scene, which is set at night in a heavy rainfall. Internet authority Polidori (Udo Kier), an unfortunate visitor to *feardotcom*, creeps down some stairs into a subway station. Panicked and delusional, he barely escapes being crushed by a speeding train but is literally frightened to death by the experience. With the main camera situated on a remote head crane and fixed with a 14mm lens to track the wide shot across the remarkably detailed station set, a second camera managed to capture close-ups. “I usually don’t change the lighting much for close-ups,” Sebaldt says, “so whenever possible, we tried to shoot a close-up at the same time with a 135mm or so lens. The cameras were not in each other’s way. We didn’t shoot in opposing directions, though, especially since we did so much backlighting. There was no lighting equipment to light Udo Kier’s face. For close-ups, I walked with

used to create effects similar to a Kish Optics Mesmerizer, and a T-Rex lens system that functions like a Frazier lens. No filters were used. “We shot most of the film with wider lenses,” Sebaldt details. “I think they add a bit of drama visually. Actors moving toward or away from the lens become larger or smaller in frame more quickly than with long lenses.



Subway set in construction

the Steadicam operator or with the crane holding an 18-by-18-inch bounce card wrapped in crumpled household aluminum foil that bounced back the strong backlight. I kept it moving constantly so it would not be a steady light.”

Because of the lack of dedicated lighting units for faces, Sebaldt’s approach throughout the film was to illuminate an overall environment so the light would react naturally to the actors’ performances. “In the back of my mind, [I wanted] to give it some realism and avoid having the constant beauty light that you find in many movies,” he confirms.



Another good example of Sebaldt’s environmental lighting can be seen in the round loft apartment occupied by computer expert Denise’s (Amelia Curtis). This set was built onstage at the steel plant.

In one scene, Detective Reilly brings her a heavily damaged computer recovered as evidence so she can search its hard drive for any clues, and this leads

her to the *feardotcom* Web site. Naturally she goes mad and dies gruesomely. Sebaldt lit the set in a way that offered freedom of movement for both the actor and the cameras. “The more equipment you put on the set, the more you restrict actor and camera movement,” he says. “I think the best way to light any set is from the outside to give the director freedom to stage the scene the way he or she wants.”

Sebaldt’s most important light for this setup was the Arri X 2.5K HMI, an open-faced light with a reflector that creates crisp shadows. The Arri X was strategically placed outside the set and aimed through a large, rain-battered side window, projecting a rain-effect pattern onto the actor, the set walls and the columns. Once that light was placed, other HMI Pars ranging from 1.2K to 4K and gelled with 1/2 CTO were positioned outside to light additional windows or provide depth to certain spots on the background. The apartment’s interior lighting was practically motivated and boosted with fluorescent units hidden near the practicals — a 2’ tungsten Kino Flo underneath a desk and several 4’ 2-bank daylight Kinos hidden behind columns or out of frame to throw light reflections on the dark, wood-paneled walls. Tungsten 650-watt lamps raked up some of the wood columns. A few small tungsten units cast a glow in a background hallway to add depth to the interior. “If we pushed in to a close-up,” Sebaldt says, “I’d follow with a flashlight and a bounce card to get a little sparkle in the eyes or a hint more exposure on the shadow side if it was too dark.”

Before Jeannie’s ghost leads Reilly and Houston to the demented Pratt, Houston must first find Jeannie’s badly decomposed body, which is at the bottom of an old treatment plant holding tank. The underwater set was constructed in a dome-covered building, a former public pool, located about 30

minutes outside the city of Luxembourg. The production filled the pool with a complex set of pipes, tubes, railroad equipment, gravel and other “junk”, and then added water, resulting in instant murk.

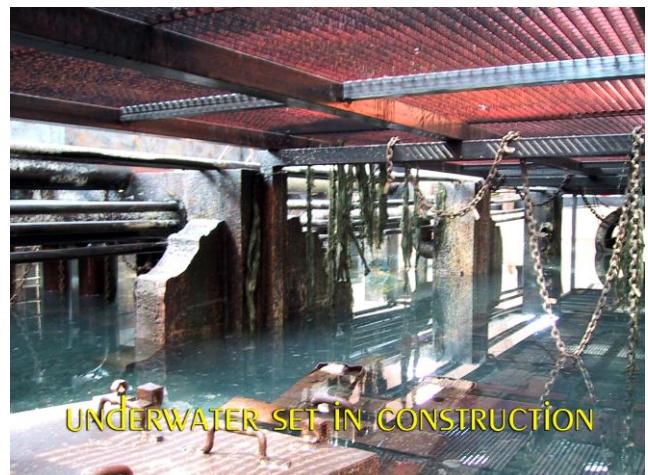
“While they were trying to filter the water, I went in with a diving suit and mask, and I couldn’t see anything,” recalls Sebaldt. “This was three days before the shoot. But we got lucky: by the day of the shoot, it had cleared up sufficiently. We hired a very good underwater cameraman from Munich, Max Bestle, who came with equipment and assistants.”



don’t have enough time, the only way to light it is to create sporadic lighting here and there and direct the actress or stunt double into the right areas,” Sebaldt says. “Finding good shots that were well-lit ended up being easier than I thought. I wanted to make sure it was really dark, because in theory there is no light whatsoever.”

For topside sequences, which were shot at another massive steel plant location, a barrel of burning flames provided a motivating source, and it was bolstered by a 4K Xenon with double layers of full CTO aimed from a safe distance into a 4’x4’ piece of Mylar placed at one end of the pool. A small fan caused the Mylar to shimmer, mimicking the flickering fire. Sebaldt notes that because the pool was so large, the fire effect just didn’t carry that far underwater.

The whole pool was covered with black plastic suspended 8’ above the water so no daylight would contaminate the underwater set lighting. Below the water surface, a 1,200-watt HMI Hydro Flex HydroPar was placed in each corner of the pool. Four-foot underwater daylight fluorescent tubes and a few tungsten-balanced tubes were scattered behind pipes and other junk. “When you have such a large set underwater and you



After being led to a giant cooling tower by the alluring specter, Reilly and Houston interrupt Pratt, saving a woman from what he boasts is the “finest scalpel work on the Internet.” The circular, metallic set, an impressive piece of engineering by production designer Latour, was constructed in the massive hall of another shuttered steel-forging plant, located in France. Sebaldt recalls, “When we decided on this huge location [of about 500’x200’] for the set, it had windows on three sides of the building, so our truly brilliant riggers, Mario and Nick Matic — whom we lovingly referred to as the

Super Mario Brothers — had to spend three days hanging Duvetyn outside to darken the whole building.”

A platform was built 40 feet above the floor (the hall ceiling height was 150') and covered with metal grating. Some 35' above that, a metal ring was suspended to support the weight of the heavy

walls, which leaned against the center ring. A majority of Sebaldt's multi-tiered lighting for the sequence originated 20 feet below, on another platform that held two 6K HMI Pars and two 4K HMI Pars. These units were bounced into large containers of water filled with mirror shards on the hall floor; the containers were made of 12"-high wood and ranged from 12'x12' to 8'x25'. Crewmembers disturbed the water during shots to give life to the bounced light shining up through the metal grating. To round out the lighting of this environment, about 10 tungsten Pars were aimed through the metal grating to provide little splashes of light on the walls and to help with exposure. “It sounds like a lot of light,” the cinematographer says, “but once it went through the metal grating, very little ended up on the walls.”

In addition to some small practicals and four or five daylight fluorescent tubes within the set, the only other source used to light the actors was a 4K Xenon aimed into a

4'x 4' mirror suspended within the metal ring above. “Because we couldn't go up there once the set was dressed and the actors were in, we literally predetermined an angle during construction that we hoped would work,” Sebaldt says. “[We figured that] if there was a problem later, [we'd] try to move the Xenon. I was always thinking that we'd try to have the set self-lit so that if an actor walked anywhere, he or she would be lit. We were required to supplement [the light] a little bit in this set only for certain close-ups.”

Sebaldt, who had the luxury of viewing film dailies throughout the shoot courtesy of Arri's laboratory in Munich, never flinched when it came to mixing color temperatures. “I was not too worried about mixing pure HMIs with a Tungsten practical because we were hoping to talk the producers into letting us determine the colors and contrast in digital post, which we ended up doing,” he says. “That gave the film the look it has now and also took out those



extremely colorful images that I didn't like, such as the subway station, where I mixed pure HMIs coming through the openings in the ceiling with pure Tungsten practicals. That could have been a terrible, blue-orangey mixture, [but] we were able to reduce that."

For this desaturation and contrast reduction, Cinesite in London was charged with creating the digital intermediate, the first time the London facility had tackled the digital color-grading of a full feature film. The Super 35 footage was scanned at 2K resolution, and Sebaldt and Malone worked with senior colorist Paul Ensbey and his Pandora MegaDef color-grading system to fine-tune the imagery, occasionally using Power Windows to further tweak certain areas within the frame.

"Everyone who considers a digital intermediate shies away from the cost at first," Sebaldt says. "But everybody who has used it once — producers, directors and cinematographers — will never want to be without it again. The look is more consistent, you can push the look much further than [you can with] another method, and you can do all of your dissolves right there without costing anything extra. We needed to go from Super 35 to a squeezed negative, and that was done in the computer with no loss of quality. I was just astounded." Adds Malone, "The biggest scare was that we weren't sure the technology was really ready. In the final analysis, I think it looks terrific. Cinesite did a great job."

The show's visual effects were handled by Das Werk in Germany and Media Cube in Italy. The (very) graphic artists of DoRo Berlin created the disturbing Web site that the unfortunate voyeurs visit.

Cinesite filmed out the squeezed 2.35:1 digital intermediate with Kodak's Lightning II gas laser recorder onto Kodak's Vision 5242 intermediate film. Answer prints were made by Technicolor in London on Kodak Vision 2383.

"Working with William Malone on *feardotcom* was a dream come true and very easy for me," Sebaldt beams. "Here's a man who knows how to tell a scary story on film! Even when the pressure was on, he never raised his voice, and was always the center of gravity for the strange circus a movie set can so quickly become. We also had a strong and creative crew that never got tired of contributing. It was a wonderful experience, and I can't wait for the next challenge with William. I know we'll push the envelope even further."



note:

Feardotcom was released by Warner Brothers in 2,700 theaters in the US in September, 2002.