

DP Dante Spinotti on *Public Enemies* Working with Michael Mann, Lighting for HD, and Going for Deep Focus



By Debra Kaufman / Jul 1, 2009



Public Enemies, the John Dillinger biopic directed by Michael Mann and starring Johnny Depp, Christian Bale and Marion Cotillard, is one of the summer's most hotly anticipated films. The feature pairs Mann with his frequent collaborator, cinematographer Dante Spinotti, ASC, AIC, who also shot – on 35mm film – Mann's *The Insider* (1999), *Heat* (1995), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and *Manhunter* (1986). This time, having had good experiences with the three Genesis-shot features already under his belt (2007's *Slipstream* and 2008's *Deception* and *Flash of Genius*), Spinotti shot digitally, using the Sony CineAlta F23 camera system. *Film & Video* caught up with Spinotti in Australia, where he is prepping for another F23 project, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, directed by Michael Apted.

Top: Dante Spinotti, photo by Peter Mountain; All images courtesy Universal Pictures

I understand that Mann originally thought he might shoot *Public Enemies* with film. What convinced him to stick with digital acquisition?

At the beginning, Michael Mann was considering shooting film, doing a more traditional approach. Then we did a set of tests and the digital camera responded very well and was slightly sharper than Super 35mm, so we saw the sharpness of the image wasn't a problem. Then we looked at the potential that the digital camera gave us. First, you see what you're doing right away. Artists who write or paint, all these people see what they do. Even if you write music, you can listen to it and make adjustments. You have time to think. Not so in making a movie. The final product is based in the fundamental decisions you make in the last two minutes before you roll the camera. With traditional photochemical film, you could say it'll look like this or that. But it's not like seeing exactly what you're photographing. So that's one major objective.



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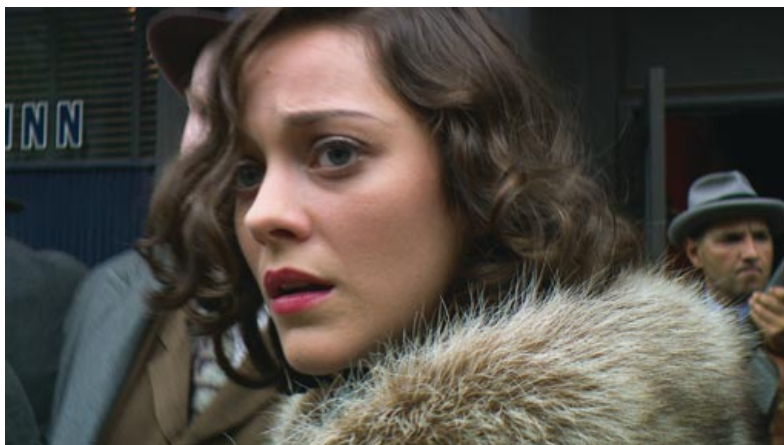
Also, the way the digital camera sees in the shadows is great, especially in a case like *Public Enemies* where you're aiming for a very strong realism. That means you can light in a way that the audience is participating in an event as opposed to looking at something that's constructed and lit so the film has a look. It's a very different approach. This is also because the camera can be on the shoulder of the operator, so the operator is like a person looking at what's happening. Because of the elasticity you have in lighting, especially in the darkness, you don't need to use the kind of a lighting that depends on spotlights and traditional Hollywood lights. You can work with existing lights and adjust them.



Why not go with a digital camera you'd already used? Why did you decide on the Sony F23 for *Public Enemies*?

Michael likes depth of field, images with deep focus, and that camera has a chip that's more like 16mm that gave us that depth of focus. It's the same reason why I chose the same camera for the film I am going into now, *The Chronicles of Namia*. The depth of field works in our favor. The camera also has an advantage in the sense that it is much more elastic. You can adjust gamma curves and gain for incredible control over the image. You can also shoot much bigger energy in the sense that you can have a zoom lens and the camera can move around in a quicker way.

In addition to the three F23s, we also had Sony 950s and an EX-1, which is a very small camera, very compact, so it can be handled in a simple way. We took the 950s down to the body, with the recording deck attached by cable. Any interior car shots or energetic Steadicam shots of bank robberies, would use the 950s in this way.



What did you and Mann particularly like about the image you got with the F23?

Depth of field. Genesis is like 35mm. The F23 you can compare to 16mm. When you think about documentaries and other projects shot in 16mm, you have lots more depth of field. [And] the image is sharper with the F23 because of the digital technology, so there isn't a loss of a quality in using a smaller format as opposed to the wider 35mm format or the Genesis.

Co-producer Bryan Carroll on the Technology Behind *Public Enemies*

A turning point in the career of *Public Enemies* producer Bryan Carroll came when he worked as a film and visual effects editor for James Cameron on *Titanic*. "That's what sparked my interest

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The other reason is the zoom lens [lenses used included Zeiss DigiPrimes and the Fujinon T1.8 zoom] on the F23 has an f-stop of 1.9 or 2.1, so it transmits a lot more light. It's comparable to a 35mm lens. So that basically, no matter where you're shooting-street exterior or dark interiors-you can keep the zoom on the camera because it's as bright as the prime lens. It allows the operator to trim the shot and tweak it. That's one of the main reference notes of today's filmmaking: most of the time the shots are correctly trimmed to the exact frame needed. In the past, you'd see more conservative kind of framing because you didn't have the agility of moving the camera that quickly.

into shooting movies digitally from script to screen," he said. When he met Michael Mann, the director was thinking of shooting the night scenes in *Ali* digitally. "And that's how I got involved with Michael, using what I had learned from many years in the digital realm," he said. "I brought that in and started building a bullet proof system, knowing we would end up on film."

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Michael likes to shoot even dialogue scenes with a lot of kineticism and athleticism, so that was another reason [we went with the F23].

How much of the film was shot handheld?

Quite a bit. The camera was moving quite a bit, over the shoulder with medium to long lenses to capture dialogue. It was hard work for all the operators, Lucas Bielan and Roberto De Angelis.

What was your lighting package?

We worked with set decorator Rosemary Brandenburg and production designer Nathan Crowley with the gaffer Bob Krattiger and myself. We would work out some practical lighting, like a chandelier or table lamps or floor lamps, lighting that was very similar to the truth. In 1933, the areas of darkness were much wider than they are now. In those days, between a dim streetlight and another dim streetlight was a big space of darkness. Having a digital camera allowed us to deal with those things in a different way.

We had one gun battle at night where there's a car chase through the forest. To light the road, we used two Bebee Night Lights, which covered a lot of the road throughout the chase. For a long stretch of road, we changed the headlights in 10 of the period cars to put more powerful headlights controlled by a dimmer. When we look at them from the front, we brought the lights way, way down. They were actually dim. When we shot inside the car, we used the headlights to light the road. And then we used Diva or Vista lights on the bumpers. Far away, we'd have HMI lights in the sky so you see the silhouette of the forest. These combos of lights were sufficient for an incredible action scene of a car chase. We also did a lot of tests with the glow from the machine guns shooting. They emitted a lot of light from the front of the barrels, so they were all practical and would light the scene, or at least the faces of the actors.

How did you do dailies?

Michael likes to do a basic color-correction inside the camera itself and then we would obviously do a color-correction on the side monitor. The signal we were recording was already very much in the direction of the look of the scene we wanted.

What can you say about post-production?

With the digital camera, you know what you're going to get into when you get into post. You don't say, "We'll fix it in post." You say, "We make it in post and fix it in the camera." You know the potentials you have in post, so you work with your camera so you can reach those potentials when you go into post-production.

The DI was with Stefan Sonnenfeld at Company 3. Michael has been working with him since he started making movies there. It's a very precise combination of how the DI equipment is lined up at Company 3 and the way the lab reacts. I was there for a couple of the weeks of the DI, but the whole process lasted for a long time so I wasn't able to follow the whole operation. I was also there for early film transfer tests.



Final thoughts on using the F23 and on digital production in general?

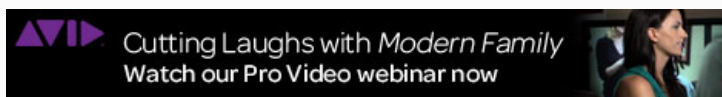
You may use different formats for different movies. The ARRI D-21 works for anamorphic and is good for exteriors. You can also go back to film. Why not? Film has some remarkable advantages in recording highlights as opposed to digital technology as it is now. You can adjust different cameras and make different choices depending on the film. As far as the quality of the digital images, we're going through some very interesting 3D experimentation in filmmaking, which I think will be a thing of the future. Stereoscopic 3D in this age is very effective and beautiful and is interesting for taking you more inside the story, and that will take place with digital. I suspect these cameras, the F23 and Genesis, will continue to make steps forward in terms of more sharpness, tonal range, recording of the highlights and so forth.

Once you make tests and decide which camera you're going to use, you don't look back. You make the camera be a part of the movie. I think *Public Enemies* worked out in an interesting way. Even the aspect of doing a period film with modern technology was interesting.

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Community

Jan Rus • 3 years ago

Finally someone understood that a movie does not have to look 100 percent film in order for the video picture gives you is much more important than the disadvantages. All you do is ask yourself "did it look like film?, did it feel like video??" Ask yourself if the cinematography se

cinematographer

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Julian · 3 years ago

I thought the story was great, the motion blur was a problem...took me out of the story! night scenes.Pity. Still love Dante Spinotti work, always will.

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Detective Boogie · 4 years ago

I've seen the movie in germany on film. Well..."Knowing" was RED, wasn't it? With "Know happened???" I mean you sit there in the screening room, you sit there cc'ing it...i think you love the story so much i hardly can't remember what it was about :(Pls don't get me wrong. wondering what happened with PE.

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fred Barnes · 4 years ago

It looks like a freakin security cam. Talk about flimsy DOF. I wouldn't shoot a freakin...carp

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Dmh · 4 years ago

It's scary to hear a veteran DP talk about cameras and lighting like he's a middle school vi as disappointing as Public Enemies was though. Spinotti needs to research and test came was one of the ugliest films I've seen. Also, film handles a much wider range than digital se technology explains why the film's appearance sucked. Check out www.filmordigital.world

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Gail D. · 4 years ago

I read the article and all the comments before I went to a free screening of Public Enemies since all my industry and non-industry friends had told me the story was horrible and it w From the first frame, the video noise was too much of a distraction. The shaky cam (my c movie look amateurish. Sure it worked on Cloverfield (Yikes! A good comment on that on renowned DP. I noticed no one has mentioned that you could actually see the make up fr enough to survive the video image. I will say that I thought the story plodded along at ar matter. If the only thing new about the movie was the "way it was shot" - wow - what a f

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timo · 4 years ago

saw the movie in a sneak preview, digital projection (2k) with a good sound system and ev was very disapointed. the look was not working with the story at all. the way too shaky c not want to get to an ending...sad to see those great actors in such a poor movie.maybe work for the audience and not only people who are interested in trying out new looks...

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WG · 4 years ago

The film looked too much like the History Channel. I understand that Mann was trying sor distorted Zoom lens deep focus look along with the off-timing editorial was off-putting.

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RPM · 4 years ago

It was somewhat difficult to suspend my disbelief during Public Enemies because of the vic screen or a quick pan, it really got ugly. I especially noticed how bad it was when they're c completely distorted with artifacts all over the place. The lights were a bunch of mush. Wi member of M.P.S.E. and Motion Picture Editors Guild...so I know what I'm talking about.) I they didn't have any 'movie magic'. When I see, and hear, a movie like this, I want dynan dull thuds, but, come on, this is supposed to be a friggin movie! Overall, I didn't like this fil characters. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

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imm · 4 years ago

What a load of crap. Trying to sound like the bok was deliberate. Sounds to me like they ' shoot it, and the studio said we'll give you 30. Make it 25. And can you shoot it in a mont

...and the...
Horrible, horrible looking movies.

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Robb • 4 years ago

After watching this movie, I sat silently in the theater in awe.....In awe of how disappointed of respect for Michael Mann. I really expected more from such a great director and what c

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Dan\l • 4 years ago

From the opening scenes on, this movie bugged me. The motion blurring in addition to th from the story.I so wanted to enjoy the settings, costumes, and cars from a good period quality. Bummer!

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composite1 • 4 years ago

What is with you film purists endlessly whining about 'oh it wasn't film!' Film is great and so pallet as filmmakers has grown beyond expectation. I saw 'Enemies' in a crap theater with moviegoer. I did notice the muted colors but then quickly realized it was an artistic choice. all. Visually it felt more real without all the hollywood polish. I had no problems with the 'vic engaging enough that I didn't care. And the posters who said, 'the awful cinematography films at their film school' I ask, what would you have done to make it 'look' better and to tl

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BSR • 4 years ago

I thought the sound and picture problems were only in the theater I saw the film in. Guess they would have shot film. Too start the article off with Mann wanting film, then deciding c school look better. I was very distracted throughout. Plus the story was very disjointed. F

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Adam • 4 years ago

I was so looking forward to this film being a big fan of Mann, Depp etc, and the period. Sa cinematography spoiled it for me. From the ill judged handheld camera work largely at od cinema scenes were practically buzzing with video noise, whilst the exterior night scenes, j ridiculous.A real mess, and a missed opportunity.

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CoreyB • 4 years ago

I think this video movement in feature films is a response to Reality TV. If we associate vid in this way as more "real" than film.Not sure if that's a good thing.When talkies came out,

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Voyeur • 4 years ago

Truly THE WORST looking movie I have ever seen. Long live film.

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Picklepuss • 4 years ago

Film vs. digital is not a religious argument in the movie biz. We've been shooting negative which don't translate to still photography. The F23 is representative of newer digital came representative of the previous generation of cameras, the EX-1 being basically the down-t over town like a cheap suit" as Philip Marlowe would say. A shining example of how NOT to direction, though.

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mike o • 4 years ago

Worst looking film I have ever seen. What a mess. A prime example of how to screw up y

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Philip • 4 years ago

video is like energy saving light bulbs:makes sense on paper, looks crap.what was wrong v

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PK • 4 years ago

This is so cool because the New York Times review of PE was gushing over how great it is as a still photographer to watch you guys going through the same film vs. digital religious argu

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Tim T • 4 years ago

In-camera color correction? In-camera color correction? "The signal we were recording was the scene we wanted." I hope he's just being simplistic in his explanation and they used a LUT dailies. But judging by how awful this looked, and how inconsistent the color was, I don't

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Phil • 4 years ago

I couldn't help it, I wanted to love this film. Especially the hand-held shots and how the sc that every shot made me think I was watching something from the BBC on PBS and my i distraction and I really wish they used film for this time period.

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thxapproved • 4 years ago

Unfortunately there are many cinematographers who are just getting into shooting video a previous incarnation, really know how to make video look like film. Mr. Spinotti is a very t worked with video enough, the trick to "the look" can be an elusive one, even though it i technologies (Genesis, RED, Arri, SI, etc.), should talk to the guys in the trenches who ha comical to watch the Hollywood guys make these discoveries and grand statements, whe things long ago. Meh.. just watched the trailer. Looks very well shot and lit. The only prob camera). I noticed this issue with films shot with the Thomson Viper. This happens a lot w keep the shutter speed at at least 1/48th of a second. Some cameras default to 1/24th o about shooting film or video. Many of you have been exposed to scenes captured digital film, it's simply another tool in the cinematographers' arsenal. And one final thing we may

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Chribbe • 4 years ago

I saw the trailer and thought it looked soo video. The motion blur and the roll off in the hi story! Would have liked to seen this shot on film or Red.

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Sebastian • 4 years ago

I agree that the video look took away from a period piece with the sharpness and deep fc focus to help the film look and in this case produce nostalgia... Big supporter of digital cine many times, although in some cases -like daylight- you can't really tell it's video.

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Tharp • 4 years ago

Some of this movie was beatiful but alot was not. Some or the wides were amazing but w So when it comes to the dof it really didn't matter as much. The motion is really what ruin and floated around. For some reason the way it felt shoulder mounted did not feel the sai tv based. At moments this movie felt made for tv. Depp really made this movie.

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daniel • 4 years ago

I just saw this movie and have been a big Mann fan for years. I think the digital had pros ; at. It does add a sense of verite, but that is based on an association in our minds from se technology, and for that reason distracts from the sense of being in the 1930s.

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Aaron Collins • 4 years ago

I saw the trailer for Public Enemies and it looked really good. I can't believe that was digita Plus it was shot in my hometown Chicago.

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Mark Modare • 4 years ago

I completely agree with halfmac's statement. The movie felt so much like video tape that

more abstract and taken out of the film than being a part of its original intention.

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qed • 4 years ago

Thank you, saw enemies last night, for bringing the steam engine and ford trimotor out of mechanical history front and center with cinema and staging The presence of mind associ well. The forest scens were wonderful. Bravo for lighting it with the variable vintage light p memory of the rfection in the still river of an elipsed stone bridge, more. qed

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rob • 4 years ago

Jesus Christ. USE FILM.

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Oscar Avalos • 4 years ago

I understand why everybody (specially traditionalists/purists) hate the way this movie was filmmaker understand and actually praise the work done in this movie, loved the contrast sensation of realism, not so much as "look at this beautiful classical piece that looks like a f happened and it's almost as if you were watching in-your-face news coverage of it(anybo I'm not connected in any way with this movie, my name is Oscar Avalos and I work indep

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Mark Sullivan • 4 years ago

I saw the film today. I did enjoy the all the handheld work as well as the look. Seemed ver it on the sides of the dancing scene.

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JT • 4 years ago

I have to concur with halfmac, just saw it in the theater as well. While many of the F23 sh easy to spot. High shutter speed in many areas looked very uncinematic - like a History C harshly clipped in a way that was surprisingly bad. Lots of places with gainy noise in the s visually overall.

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ASCfan • 4 years ago

Just saw this last night (Jul 1). omg, Yes to the last comment. Noticed right away movem lack of(or difference) of motion blur was very apparent when people moved quickly, even with lots of shadow - HD noise verrrry noticeable (equivalent to film grain). Im guessing as any HD picture, but the gamma, the sort of muted overall color of the image couldve be my screening, not sure if anyone else had this problem, but the sound lapsed in the theat track. anyways, thats my 5 cents.

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Kevin Mulvey • 4 years ago

I saw the movie in Chicago. Hoping for more of Dillanger's history. Some of the scenes we scene everyone's flesh tones were dark amber, it looked like a wonderful location but we c that in that era interiors did not have hilights in every nook and cranny like the clubs of tc great, but I thought it was HD video when in one scene we see an early evening sky, sun area that was over 100 ire had a magenta like outline separating the bright part of the sky to me. I wish I didn't care about this. Thanks.

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halfmac • 4 years ago

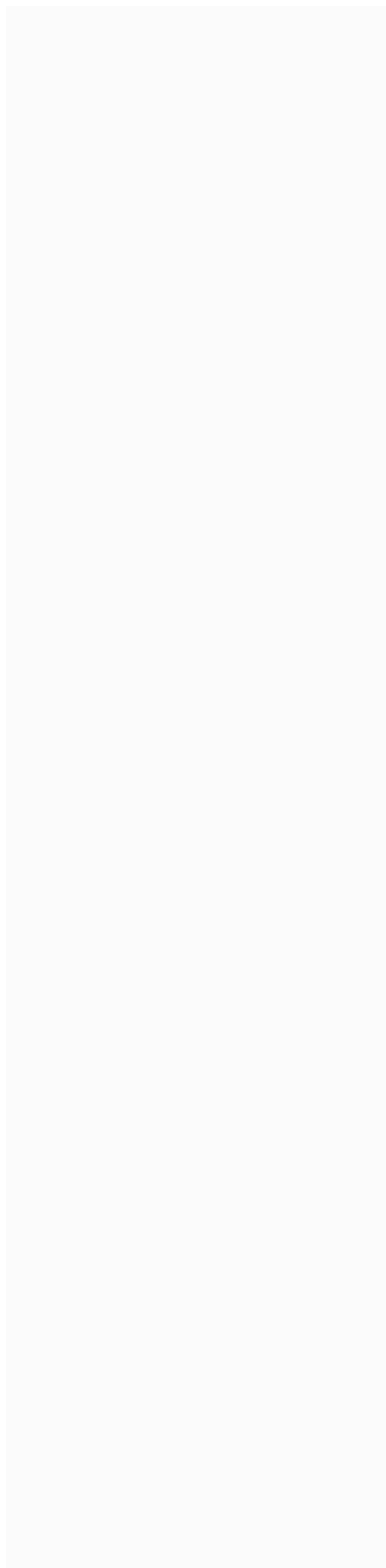
Just saw the film on film at the local theatre. A very good movie but I hated the motion b video. The blur was not natural and I feel took away from the story, especially a period pk

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Steve Wargo • 4 years ago

It's a pleasure to watch Michael's movies. He shows us the entire scene where the younge background way too much. Bravo to this team for doing it right, every time.

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