



# THE Genesis OF Semler

Oscar-winning cinematographer Dean Semler discusses his experiences using Panavision's Genesis camera on *Click*, *Apocalypto* and *Get Smart* **BY MARK EDWARD HARRIS**

**Australian cinematographer** Dean Semler has had an illustrious career spanning three decades. He first rode to international prominence following his work on the cult classic *The Road Warrior*, a film that also catapulted Mel Gibson to international stardom. Other fare through the years includes *Dances with Wolves* and *City Slickers*. With the Panavision Genesis in-hand, Semler teamed up with Gibson once more on *Apocalypto*, a feature widely praised by critics. *HDVideoPro* caught up with Semler on his latest feature, the remake of the iconic TV comedy caper *Get Smart*, this time starring comedian Steve Carell. Semler also utilized the Genesis for that production, and here he shares his insights into Panavision's camera and the use of HD in filmmaking.



**HDVideoPro:** You shot in many locations for *Get Smart*. How did the Genesis perform in different locations?

**Dean Semler:** We shot most of the film on stages and locations in LA, but we did travel to Montreal, Washington, D.C., and Russia. The Genesis is fantastic to use for so many reasons, especially in low-light situations. For example, we shot in Red Square at night with ambient light bouncing off the surrounding buildings without the requirement to set up big lights.

**HDVideoPro:** What else have you found useful about using the Genesis?

**Semler:** I actually used it as a very expensive light meter for a restaurant scene shot in Montreal for *Get Smart*. The place had small chandeliers and little sconces on the walls. We brought the Genesis in, set everything up and then put a wide-angle lens on to take a gander at the scene. I went with a gain boost and had about a 270-degree shutter. It looked beautiful on the monitor. I put in two small 500-watt spots with diffusion for the actors, and that was it. If this scene had been shot on film, I'd have rigged more lights.

**HDVideoPro:** Can you briefly discuss diffusion? Do you find actors are wary of performing in front of high-definition cameras?

**Semler:** I use Tiffen's Pro-Mist or an HD diffusion filter manufactured by a company called Formatt. These take the edge off the image slightly. But the advice of my colorist, Steve Bowen at EFILM, is that I don't need to do this. Just keep it clean. You also have to remember that if you're transferring to film, it'll add a grain and softness to the final image.

**HDVideoPro:** What about in-camera filtration?

**Semler:** No, I still use glass on the front. I find that the filter in the camera for day correction, from tungsten to daylight, is a little too warm for my liking. It feels more like an 85B. I personally have a system that I understand and used successfully for many years. I start ND-ing down if it's bright and sunny and, as it gets darker, I take them off.

**HDVideoPro:** Have you had any technical issues with latitude shooting with HD?

**Semler:** People talk about issues with highlights. I've never experienced any problem with them. I look at the monitor and I see everything the way it's going to be. If I think there's going to be a problem, I'll look at the waveform monitor.

**HDVideoPro:** How did the decision to shoot *Apocalypto* in HD come about?

**Semler:** Mel Gibson came to me four or five years ago and asked me what I knew about digital electronic image capture. I told him I had done a few preliminary tests on the Genesis camera. Then we looked at footage shot by Alan Daviau in Paris with HD and film, intercut and projected on film. Mel was impressed, so I did some scouting alongside him in Mexico. But the shoot was delayed for a year, so I shot *Click* with Adam Sandler. That was actually the first movie I shot in HD on the Genesis.

**HDVideoPro:** Why did they decide to go with the Genesis on *Click*?

**Semler:** I was introduced to Frank Coraci, producer and director on the project, and we went out to Panavision who demonstrated the camera. They thought it was a terrific image so we went with it.

**HDVideoPro:** How was the experience using the Genesis for the first time?



**Semler:** I was comfortable with the experience because we were shooting in Los Angeles. I knew Panavision was 45 minutes away from the set if we experienced any problems. I also had a gamma box called a Colorstream from EFILM, the digital postproduction house where I've finished about six movies on digital intermediate. It creates a generic HD-looking image on a high-definition monitor specifically designed around a film-stock negative, the Kodak 5218, a 500 ISO stock.

So what I see on the monitor as I'm shooting makes it look like 5218. I also had the option to choose my own release print stock. In the case of all of Adam Sandler's pictures, it was on Kodak's Vision stock, overall, a gentler stock than most. *Apocalypto* was transferred onto Premier Print stock that has really gutsy blacks, so the colors pop.

**HDVideoPro:** How did the Genesis perform in Mexico? You must have had concerns venturing out to such a remote location with new technology.

**Semler:** We knew it was going to be hot and humid—really difficult conditions for any camera. Day after day, it was over



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Two pawnbrokers auctioned off the mat. Darin tastes partly obese cats, however one chrysanthemum laughed lamely. Speedy subways annoyingly towed five irascible televisions, because Kermit abused two Macintoshes. One trailer noisily towed chrysanthemums, even though the almost obese Macintosh marries one



100 degrees with incredibly high humidity, but the camera survived. We had to ramp up for certain scenes, so Panavision delivered three Genesis cameras that could shoot up to 50 fps. We also used the 435 ARRIFLEX for speeds up to 120 to 150 fps.

**HDVideoPro:** What are your general thoughts on HD filmmaking?

**Semler:** It's smart filmmaking. The director now can run for 50 minutes without cutting. It's great for actors because they can stay in character. It's an exceptional tool for comedy, specifically on something like *Click* with Sandler, because it allows for a lot of improvisation. You just keep rolling while the actors are hot.

**HDVideoPro:** With *Apocalypto*, you often encountered situations with great contrast, yet you were able to keep things under control. How difficult was this to achieve?

**Semler:** The camera is based in the 400 to 600 ISO range. By going to a plus-one gain or a plus-half gain, I could up that ISO reading quite easily. I also discovered that I could adjust the shutter; we actually went with a 360-degree shutter at times, which essentially means there's no shutter per se. That gave me yet another stop of light. So suddenly we've gone from 500 ISO to around 2000 ISO. I shot many scenes in the jungle pushed this far with no filters on prime lenses—good because their lens speeds are faster than zooms.

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**HDVideoPro:** How about various scenes where hundreds of actors were gathered around campfires?

**Semler:** Traditionally you hide small lights on flicker boxes around rocks or logs on scenes like this. Then your angles are restricted and you can't employ too many cameras, but the scenes you refer to in *Apocalypto* were literally with a whole village of people sitting around a fire listening to a Mayan storyteller who was the real McCoy. It was as black as the inside of a cow's ass, so I asked the special-effects supervisor Jesus “Chucho” Duran to put propane fires of different sizes in various spots around the village. This created the perfect lighting scenario.

I was able to put three cameras up, which was hugely advantageous for continuity matching the actor's body positions and body movement.

**HDVideoPro:** How did your style evolve? What were some of your influences?

**Semler:** I started shooting news in Australia and took to using cameras immediately. You had to go out and come back with the goods. I started there when I was 19 years old. I was shooting 16mm black-and-white.

I liked the feeling of being able to tell a story in pictures. I even shot the Beatles concert when they came to Australia. Then I got into documentaries and current affairs, made a lot of cinema



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shorts—small twenty-minute films—and started to shoot 35mm.

One of the first movies I shot was out in the desert—anamorphic shots of the landscapes that George Miller and his partner Byron Kennedy saw. They invited me to do the second Mad Max film *The Road Warrior*.

Once I did that, many doors opened up in America. I learned so much from George Miller, especially in the art of action and the art of not being afraid. Don't be afraid if the sun doesn't match, if it's cloudy, if it's sunny, if there's camera shake.

**HDVideoPro:** Any advice for cinematographers just starting out?

**Semler:** Have a sound knowledge of the photochemical process of photography. Understand your negative, your print and your color. Take advantage of the digital image-capturing equipment that's out there and utilize the ability to manipulate your image digitally. It's so easy to get a show reel today.

People who have ideas for small films need to go out and make it happen. You can create one for almost nothing on any digital camera and do the post on your own computer. Then show it to people. Keep knocking on doors. Try to get onto a film set just to experience the reality of filmmaking. Be a PA on a movie. Film school is great, but there's no substitute for actually being out there in the mix on a real film set.

HDVP

Dean Semler is presently shooting with Panavision's Genesis cameras on location for Roland Emmerich's latest epic, 2012. For more on Get Smart, visit <http://getsmartmovie.warnerbros.com>.



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