***Filmmaker Magazine* – *Side by Side***

**Chris Kenneally Director Interview**

by Billy Brennan

Over the past few decades, film’s iron-clad grip on the motion industry has gradually been chipped away by emerging digital technology. Yet it hasn’t necessarily been a smooth transition. Traditional celluloid film has gone largely unchanged as a medium for a century and has been the canvas on which works from *Casablanca* and *Apocalypse Now* to this summer’s blockbuster *The Dark Knight Rises* have been cast. As the saying goes: old habits die hard. In this case, for good reason, as film produces a picture quality, texture, and dynamic range unparalleled by digital.

But digital technology has continued to make leaps and bounds in terms of stacking up to film’s digital qualities while going far beyond its predecessor in terms of versatility, cost, and accessibility. *Side by Side* is an eye-opening documentary that looks at the art of filmmaking—the dominant visual form of expression in our time—from the perspectives of the masters, artists like David Lynch, James Cameron, Vittorio Storaro, and Anthony Dod Mantle. We are shown the history and the debate, learn the players and their tools, and are left with a sense of self-determination and possibility rather than a strict idea of right or wrong.

Director Chris Kenneally began his career as a writer in Boston before being bitten by the film bug, moving to NYC and getting knee-deep in everything from post-production and editing to writing, directing, and producing. Much like his film’s subjects, the director exudes passion and enthusiasm while holding his own views on film, digital, and the future of moviemaking. We had a chance to sit down with Kenneally to continue *Side by Side*’s dialogue on the state of the industry and the art that results.

**Filmmaker:** How did you get involved in starting the *Side by Side* project?

**Kenneally:** I was working with Keanu [Reeves]; he was producing a movie called *Henry’s Crime* that he was also starring in. He was a true producer, he was there for all the boring stuff that most producers are like, “ah, I can’t make it today.” But he was really curious and a lot of the questions that you hear in the doc were conversations that he and I had, or he had with other facility people.

We were in Technicolor and there’s Don Sienna, who’s the old master of traditional photochemical coloring, and then the young digital guy; they’re sitting there side by side with the digital next to the film, looking at the prints to hope they looked the same. And Keanu was like [impersonating him], “we should make a movie about this.” [laughs] I was like, “yeah, let’s do it.”

He had seen *Crazy Legs* and he was like, “you’re a director, let’s do it,” and I went, “yeah, let’s do it!” And then I got home and was like, “what the hell, man, this is going to be so boring. No one’s going to want to watch this…” So a big goal was to make it interesting and the reaction we’ve gotten is that people seem to enjoy it and I don’t think it’s just a dry, educational, textbook movie. He [Keanu] really puts the subjects at ease and they say some unguarded things and there are some funny moments. I hope people enjoy it.

**Filmmaker:** How much of a driving force was Keanu in getting this made?

**Kenneally:** He was huge. I mean, first of all he’s Keanu Reeves and that helps. Then having passion for something, that’s even more important and he was so passionate about this. He was like, “I want to talk to this person, I want to talk to that person.” We would reach out to people and if we got really stuck Keanu would jump in. He wrote like a typewritten letter to Christopher Nolan and mailed it to him like, “*please* give us twenty minutes.” [laughs]

We had talked to Christopher Nolan’s people and they were like, “yeah, he’s busy for the whole year.” “*The whole year?!* You don’t have twenty minutes?” Keanu’s like, boom! Type-type-type-type-type. Then it was like, “alright, let’s just do this, like, come into my trailer.” We banged it out and it was one of the best interviews in the movie. So yeah, Keanu’s passion and enthusiasm had him involved. He was not just some producer or a guy that popped in to do an interview. This was something he really cared about.

**Filmmaker:** To me, it was great to see what exactly the roles of a director of photography or an editor or a colorist entail. Why do you think it was so important for audiences to understand that in order to get how important this shift in the industry is?

**Kenneally:** It’s changing a technology and a way of working that hasn’t really changed that much in a hundred years—which is amazing and says a lot about film and the people who pioneered it. They really got it right. That surprises me more than things that change all the time, like something five years ago is old now. With film, I can’t *believe* how long it’s been around, how great it’s been, and how it’s developed. I think people will be interested in that.

As far as explaining, I know that a lot of people don’t necessarily know what a D.P., and a director of photography, and a cinematographer are. What’s the difference? There’s not really a difference. I know certain cinematographers who say [in French accent], “I am a cinematographer, I am not a director of photography!” Well, okay. It’s words. But to see how that process works; people know there’s a camera and then someone cuts it and it comes out on a screen, but there are a lot of other people who have to be a part of that image chain to really make it look like it does on the screen. And these people really care about that.

That’s why there’s sometimes a resistance to new technology. “Is it going to be as good as the last thing? Because we don’t want to go backwards, we want things to get better and better and better.” That kind of inspired me, to see these guys really fighting to make sure things looked good.

**Filmmaker:** There are both camps—very resistant to digital and embracing it—but it almost seems like a rule of thumb of D.P.’s being reluctant to let go of them being the only ones who could really *tell* how it was going to come out as it was being done.

**Kenneally:** That was one of the big shifts. These guys and women are craftspeople. They know this camera; they know the kind of light and what stock they’re using and lenses and how that’s going to look. They know all that in their mind after years of practice. Now you pop out this digital camera and any schlub in the room can point to it. But these guys are no joke, they’re not just some person flipping on a camera. They *know* what they’re doing, the last thing they need is to be second-guessed by everybody.

And the directors, a lot of them I felt kind of liked the new technology because it gives them a little more control. They’re not so reliant on the schedule and like “don’t worry, tomorrow it will be beautiful”. So you can see certain directors are like “let me do *everything* myself,” which is kind of a different kind of art form evolving than what shooting on film was. These two positions will always be collaborative but nowadays the crews get smaller and smaller so each person has more responsibility.

**Filmmaker:** What do you think of the age-old question of it being art-pushing-technology vs. technology-pushing-art?

**Kenneally:** I really think it’s both. The guys who developed the CCD chip, even as they came up with the concept in their notebook, they were like “this could probably be used in imaging devices like cameras.” Immediately they knew that this type of circuit could use electrons that measured photons in a certain manner that could be used to show images. Whether that’s art or news, certain people latched on to the digital technology for certain reasons and scientists and creators may not have even realized. Then the artists came back and asked them for different things; or the company saw that certain people would be able to use *this.* This is the simple answer, but I think there is definite interplay in that both of them push each other.

**Filmmaker:**Dogma 95 was one of the watershed moments discussed in the film. How important do you think that really was in pushing digital forward?

**Kenneally:** It was big. I mean, I remember hearing about “Dogma 95” and I think they made a great brand, but *Celebration,* everyone references that. Someone used this new technology for something that it had never been used for before, this cinematic movie; and because of the technology they were able to do so and get shots in a certain way that may not have been as easy to do with the previous technology of film or other cameras. That was definitely a moment of, “wow! This little cheap camera can do that?”

But then you realize that it’s not the little cheap camera that did that, it’s the *guy* who shot it. It’s the tool in the hand of a master. Leonardo DaVinci and I can both be using the same paintbrush but I’m not going to paint the *Mona Lisa*. So, people are like “what camera did you use for this?” but you would never ask “what brush did you use? What paint did you use?” It’s the final creation that matters. I think that people who are great visual artists are going to be able to create that with whatever.

**Filmmaker:**Yet there is a lot of discussion in the film about the evolution of certain digital cameras. Do you think that that is going to lessen the focus on where it should be, i.e. the people?

**Kenneally:** Well I wanted to show the growth of the digital technology and we just hit on the cameras that were the milestones. That’s sort of the story: is this little chip going to grow to *be* as good as film; because it’s *not*? And here are all of the obstacles that it had to overcome to get to where it is today.

I wanted to show that progression, but ultimately it comes down to the story and not necessarily what camera you use. Then again, digital allows you to tell different types of stories and allows different people that would not have had an opportunity. Anyone in the world can get their hands on some sort of digital camera and tell the story. And there are ways to distribute it or show it online and share it with the world. To me, that’s what’s revolutionary about it: being able to share and capture information.

**Filmmaker:** There was some sentiment in the film that that accessibility was not necessarily a good thing; that we would just be watered down by an inflow of bad movies.

**Kenneally:** I think it’s great. There’s more bad, okay…there’s also more good. There’s more of everything and there are also more ways to filter it, more ways to communicate. You don’t just show up at the movie theater maybe having read one review by one guy, hoping you share the same opinion with him. Now there are comments and there are sites with people and opinions that maybe you like and you trust. All that information is out there, so I think it’s easier to sift through things and easier to find things you *like.*

**Filmmaker:** From working on this project, what have you personally learned about filmmaking?

**Kenneally:**  Even though I was working in the business during a lot of this history, just being able to take a moment and go back and find out what the milestones were. Just like the whole thing of Anthony Dod Mantle being there for *Celebration*, that’s like milestone one. Then, *28 Days Later* which was when they made the camera that could shoot 24 frames so they could change it to film—because that’s what they had to do back then. That’s Anthony Dod Mantle too. And then, the first movie shot mostly on digital that wins “Best Cinematography” [*Slumdog Millionaire*], Anthony Dod Mantle again. I was like, “I *have* to talk to this guy.” Things like that kept popping up and it was interesting.

**Filmmaker:** Mentioning Anthony Dod Mantle as the cornerstone in a way, if you were going to pick one “character” that the story wrapped around, I remember Danny Boyle making a joke about how he had said, “you know, I’ll never win an Oscar.” But then he does. Do you think that was one of those moments where digital is widely accepted in the industry now and becoming sort of the standard?

**Kenneally:** Absolutely. For me, like three or four years ago—maybe five years ago—if someone was shooting on digital it doesn’t mean it’s a bad movie, but it’s like “oh, they didn’t have the choice to shoot on film; they didn’t have the budget or they weren’t respected enough and had to do this *indie* thing.” Or it was a bigger person who *wanted* to do something edgy like Michael Mann or David Fincher wanting to be on the cutting edge. Or it was a big digital effects thing and it just made sense to already have the images digital. And now, it’s at a point where some people are choosing digital actually *because* of the way it looks, for aesthetic reasons not just ease of use or budget.

**Filmmaker:** Where do you stand on where it’s going to head in the future and the “death of film”?

**Kenneally:** There is a certain sadness and nostalgia because I respect film, I love film, and I’m amazed at what people were able to do with it. But it’s getting smaller and smaller; people are going towards shooting digitally. Ease of use, economics, and quality now—that was like the last piece, the quality is getting better. I think it’s going to be around, like records or things like that. There are certain people who still use analog equipment because it has a certain quality you can’t quite replicate on digital. With the big guys film will be around to operate because they have that choice and the power to have the choice. But if you’re up and coming and saying, “I’m going to shoot on film,” and someone else is paying for it, they’re going to be like, “no, you’re not.” [laughs]

**Filmmaker:** Has making this project made you more aware of how you are going to work heading into the future?

**Kenneally:** Going forward it has totally inspired me. I’m a big believer in the democratization and the freedom of it. I want to see the promises of this revolution actually take place. What I’m doing now is directing and writing and also producing a web series where we’re going to say, “look, we don’t need to go out and get a major actor because we don’t need the funding, we can do it for less money. We can do it for less money because we don’t need as big a crew; because we don’t have as big a crew we can do it faster. But we can make it still look great.” It can look great, you can choose the *best* actor, you can tell the story you want to tell. It doesn’t have to be something that is going to appeal to everybody in the world and you can show it on the internet. That’s really made me feel like this is such an exciting time for cinema and to be a filmmaker.