

Merge Works at Speed of Thought for 3D Post, 4K Workflow, and Restoration in SCRATCH

Colorist and compositor Jerome Thelia and photographer David McLain founded Merge six years ago in Brooklyn, New York. At the core of Merge's in-house tool kit are systems they believe unify production and post production: the RED ONE™ 4K Digital Camera and ASSIMILATE's SCRATCH® Digital Process Solution.

Merge integrates post and post-production processes, merging old and new media to create powerful visuals for print, web, broadcast, and movie audiences. Thelia and McLain work as a production company, co-directing and co-producing their projects and collaborating directly with their clients: companies like Jockey, Horny Toad and Nau (retail clothing), National Geographic, as well as ad agencies and filmmakers.

"Collaboration is an important component of our creative workflow so that we can quickly get to 'the nut' of what visuals will best meet the goals of the client – what visually conveys the message, displays the product, or beautifully entertains," says Thelia. "By doing so, we can expedite the project and use the budget and resources wisely."

Thelia adds, "A key aspect of our approach to business is using the latest technologies and best tools to create high-impact visual media. We chose the RED 4K camera and SCRATCH 4K workflow as our digital tools to enable us to give more value to our clients, with high-end results, lower costs, and in less time. If a project calls for a complex workflow, we can do it.

If it calls for quick turnaround, we can do that too, which is not the case with traditional hardware based tools."

"RED shoots imagery beautifully at 4K resolution, and SCRATCH brings a tremendous amount of speed and power to a data-centric workflow. As a colorist I can work at the speed of thought – a phenomenal way to create and enhance imagery," says Thelia. "With its GPU driven, data-centric approach, SCRATCH has taken the DI world by storm for both short-form and long-form projects. It gives us the ability to work directly from the native REDCODE 4K files to do the conform, color grade, and finishing in real time, and I can easily drop the VFX into the timeline grade. The output to HD and SD broadcast material and other deliverable formats is truly astonishing."

The Projects

Horny Toad - "Horny Toad (www.hornytoad.com) has a clear vision of what they want – new and creative ways to show their clothing lines in photography, video, broadcast spots, and short



Image courtesy of Merge; SCRATCH used for color grading of Jockey commercial

film," says Thelia. "We've collaborated with them now for five years as their production company for branding, visual identity in stills, and digital cinema. We all continually brainstorm together for the best media and creative to display their products."

Thelia adds, "All Horny Toad visuals – high-rez stills and action – are shot with RED, and then we smoothly transition the R3D

files into SCRATCH. SCRATCH works beautifully for color correcting and enhancing stills, and of course the conform, color grading, and finishing of live action.”

“For Horny Toad we use the same RED material in SCRATCH to create multiple, high-quality deliverables. For example, we can scale the 4K digital cinema work down 1080 HD or lower for the web, which makes perfect sense when you see the final images,” says Thelia. “All our clients want multiple deliverables – web videos, SD DVDs, Blurays, feature quality DPX output, and stills. The SCRATCH pipeline is big enough and highly efficient so that it’s able to accommodate this need within a few mouse clicks. The clients love this – they can see all the materials in real time and know all the media matches up for a campaign.”

Jockey - In the fall of 2008, Jockey art director Eric Olson challenged Merge to create a new ending that matched the look and feel of an existing high-end broadcast spot originally shot on 35mm film in Prague. McLain and Thelia took a small crew and a crane on location to the golden wheat fields of Palouse, WA and used their RED 4K camera for the shoot.

For in-house post production, Thelia used SCRATCH for color grading and VFX. The spot was re-cut to accommodate a new ending, which included a VFX light blast to transition into the wheat field; paint and roto touch-ups were applied to the models and the wheat field.

Thelia notes, “On the Jockey spot, we used a typical array of tools for compositing and editorial, but SCRATCH was always the hub in the workflow. I’ve seen more than a few jaws drop when I show clients what’s possible in SCRATCH, and you’re always in real-time grading from 4K R3D files.”

Jockey Art Director Eric Olson, says, “Merge has a unique production model that integrates shooting and post. The final shot really brought our spot to a new level at tremendous value, relative to a traditional production company,” says Olson. “Having a rough-cut on my iphone the morning after the shoot was pretty cool. Everything with Merge, from production to post, stills, and VFX, is nimble and collaborative.”

Jean-Luc Godard’s “Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais D’Elle” (Two or Three Things I Know About Her) - Criterion, the distributor and acclaimed film preservationist company,

chose Jerome Thelia of Merge to do a significant portion of the restoration, all the grading and re-mastering of French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard’s *Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais D’Elle* (1967). A PAL transfer done some years earlier from Eastmancolor film had been supervised by Raoul Coutard, cinematographer for the original film, and was used as a color, framing and timing reference in the SCRATCH grading process.

The film was shot like a dramatized documentary, illustrating and exaggerating the emotionless lives of characters in the new Paris of the 60s, where commercialism mocks families getting



Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais D'Elle*; image courtesy of Criterion and Jerome Thelia; SCRATCH used for color grading and restoration

by on small incomes; where prostitution is a money-spinning option; and where people are coldly resigned and immune to the human nightmares of Vietnam, and the possibility of future atomic war.

“We used the DP supervised PAL transfer as the reference for color within SCRATCH” says Thelia. “Our goal was to clean up yet maintain the original texture and look of the film, while making the most of the latitude of a new HD transfer.

Thelia adds, “For numerous shots, I used SCRATCH Scaffolds to isolate elements for clean-up and restoration. We were able to preserve the details by keying highlights and roto-out, revealing more details than ever before seen in the film.”

Thelia had several working sessions with Lee Kline and David Phillips of Criterion. “It was exciting to work on the project of these two filmmaking icons, Godard and Coutard. The review sessions were intense because we all realized the historical importance of remaining true to their color palette and look of the film, while extending the dynamic range of the shots in a way never seen on video.”

Thelia’s deliverables to Phillips were DPX sequences to be used for further work by Criterion’s in-house restoration team.

Stereoscopic Post for Ghost Robot

Recently Merge added a stereoscopic tool set/workflow, beginning with a stop-motion stereoscopic promotional piece for the Bonnaroo Music Festival (<http://ghostrobot.com/bonnaroo/>), produced by NYC-based Ghost Robot. Shot with twin DSLRs, the stop-motion piece was graded and stereo enhanced using the SCRATCH stereo tools. “A common issue in stereoscopic workflow is the difference between the left-and- right eye color caused by the use of a beam-splitter rig in the shoot.

SCRATCH’s split-screen capabilities and lightning-fast grading makes it a snap to match left to right. Since the piece is one continuous take, 30-40 grading se-ups were key-framed seamlessly over the course of the three-minute piece - another powerful time saver in SCRATCH.”

Future Thoughts

“While we clearly support the growing number of RED users and projects, we can support other formats as well in the SCRATCH data workflow,” says Thelia. “SCRATCH has the power and depth of tools to support any size imagery project, whether in

stills or high-end motion. We like to integrate a variety of new media elements and styles into our work, and SCRATCH gives us the flexibility to do so.”

Thelia adds, “ SCRATCH has already ‘been to the moon’ with performance, its real-time workflow and quality output, and we see it getting better and better in each new software version. We’re loving it, but most importantly, so do our clients.”

Jean-Luc Godard’s Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais D’Elle; image courtesy of Criterion and Jerome Thelia; SCRATCH used for color grading and restoration

