

the *DI R*-evolution

Cool and Fast DI Grading with SCRATCH at ACHT FRANKFURT

The trouble with neophytes can be their seemingly boundless enthusiasm. But when you realize their passion is based on the tangible, the proven, the concrete, that's when their excitement becomes both understandable and infectious.

Ralf Drechsler, digital artist and co-owner of post facility ACHT FRANKFURT in Germany, along with his colorists and engineering team, are among the latest converts to the SCRATCH Data-Centric Workflow Solution™ from ASSIMILATE™. Drechsler, a purveyor of leading-edge digital visual effects in Germany for over 15 years, knows a potentially revolutionary product when he sees one. SCRATCH's ability to do real-time primary grading at 2K and 4K, along with its full suite of tools for selective grading, are making a huge impact.

"Quite simply, SCRATCH is brilliant," says Drechsler. "We have been playing around with many different digital grading technologies, and the coolest and fastest of these by far is SCRATCH™. It's not just a playback and review system, it can do so much more. Clients who have graded projects here with SCRATCH really like it."

A high-end editing and visual effects house, ACHT has expanded from a core crew of four when it launched just two years ago, to a team of over 25 since the summer 2005. Based around the creative reputations of its digital artists, the company attracts commercials from leading advertising agencies Saatchi & Saatchi, BBDO and McCann-Erickson; TV graphics for ZDF; and music videos for Guano Apes, Silbermond and Robert Smith. Drechsler himself is fanatical about film and, since the arrival of SCRATCH, has been instrumental in planting the company's credentials into the German film business. ACHT has already handled several Digital Intermediate (DI) projects and has a major feature film scheduled for SCRATCH DI at the end of 2005.

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Drechsler confirmed his decision to invest in SCRATCH at the IBC 2004 tradeshow in Amsterdam, and was up and running with the system soon thereafter. "Our technical mission is to build a streamlined and efficient pipeline for the future, and SCRATCH is at the core of that strategy. I want our whole facility to become truly resolution-independent and to be highly flexible. While film is ever-popular, it's inevitable that more and more people are going to acquire their pictures using HD cameras and will want to grade those pictures at a facility where the HD workflow is streamlined and efficient."

Drechsler added, "When we first saw SCRATCH, its own workflow looked very smart and we could see immediately how it could play a wider role in our developing pipeline. The big advantage for us is that we have been able to work with ASSIMILATE's R&D department from an early stage of the product, to offer our ideas, and have these implemented. They have been very responsive to our input. We also meet up often with other SCRATCH beta users in Europe to share ideas, techniques and experience using SCRATCH, and talk about our broader, common issues and how these can be solved."

First Projects

"Our clients love SCRATCH," remarks Drechsler when asked about the first clients to have used SCRATCH. "The speed is incredible and it's very interactive and easy for them to follow what we are doing - they get actively involved in grading sessions." ACHT's SCRATCH system runs on BOXX hardware, AMD Dual Opteron Processor 250 with 2Gb RAM, with an Nvidia Quadro FX4000 graphics card, Intel Dual 1Gb network card, plus 1Tb of Ultra 320 SCSI Raid storage.

Early productions to get the DI treatment through SCRATCH include short films *Click* and *Funny Funeral*, both shot on 35mm with the film footage scanned to HD at 1920 x 1080. The DPX file conform and all grading of both films were completed in SCRATCH, with the results mastered at HD resolution and printed back to film for international distribution.

SCRATCH has also been deployed on a music video for German diva Dariah, which was shot on HD and graded to give a modern, highly desaturated look. On this project, it was discovered that the HD footage contained fields as well as frames, but this was easily resolved in SCRATCH using plug-ins that convert footage into frames.

Drechsler is also encouraging the next generation to get to grips with DI in the form of students from the Ludwigsberg Film Academy, one of the world's top film schools who used SCRATCH for a graduation film.



SCRATCH SCAFFOLDS used on music video of German diva Dariah; Camelot Film

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- Ralf Drechsler, ACHT FRANKFURT

"I can't say enough about the speed and simplicity of SCRATCH, which make it so impressive and engaging," says Dreschler. "On all these projects we have used it to do classical primary grading at real-time, plus selective grading. We work with the client to create the overall look they want and then set about fine-tuning their images. In our grading work with SCRATCH we're isolating parts of the picture - applying masks and vignettes around faces, skies, clothing, highlights - all of the time, adjusting these as required, perhaps animating a color grade over time or grading through shapes. For grading, SCRATCH is the fastest I've ever seen. It's exactly how it should be."

ACHT has configured its SCRATCH with the CP200-BK grading control surface from Tangent devices. "Tangent provides nice results quickly and has pushed SCRATCH ahead of other systems," says Dreschler. "Our colorists here like the sheer performance of the system, and how they can create and manage things like fades and softness. It's much, much better than grading with a pen and tablet - it's a completely different world in fact."

Value for Euros

Cutting-edge performance and feature sets apart, Drechsler says that good old-fashioned value-for-the-money proved a big hook when considering their investment in SCRATCH.

"What you get for the price is fantastic - a rapid, interactive and creative system, with the benefit that upgrading is really cost-effective. For example, when we need additional storage we don't get financially penalized by having to buy one manufacturer's proprietary hardware, we can just buy off-the-shelf," notes Drechsler

"What's also valuable is that ASSIMILATE has developed its ASSIMILATE Performance Lab (APL), which provides information about workstations, storage and other subsystems that have been certified for use with SCRATCH - it's a great resource for our engineering team."

With SCRATCH established in the pipeline, Drechsler is planning a series of events for advertising agencies and film production companies designed to show the results of shooting, posting and grading HD (1920x1080) versus 35mm and 16mm film. The point is not to prove the benefits of one medium over the other, but rather to show that ACHT is capable of producing excellent results with both.

Drechsler is acutely aware of the debate DI has generated amongst the global cinematography community, and believes SCRATCH has gone a long way towards solving some of the big issues cinematographers have with the process.

"In DI, directors of photography (DPs) might want to do intensive selective grading to finesse their images. That's fine, SCRATCH gives them all of that. But some projects may not require that level of intensity, or DPs may not have the time and will want to work quickly to do a high-quality primary grade. We can give them that too. With its performance and pricing, SCRATCH is approaching an important crossover where DI can be the same price as, or cheaper than, a traditional film intermediate -- and this is where the revolution really starts."