



# The director's cut



After a career working on some of the best known feature films of the past 30 years, **Gerry Gavigan** finds a new creative satisfaction in shooting film stills of Britain's brooding landscapes. Keith Wilson has a preview

*Above* Dunstanburgh Castle, Northumberland, July 2001. 'I had been here several years before when I was making a documentary story about the salmon curing in Craster and always wanted to go back. This was taken at sunrise from Embleton Bay' Linhof 6x12cm with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, Lee 0.6ND graduated filter, 1sec at f/22, Gitzo tripod

FOR SOMEONE WHO has worked professionally with 35mm for more than 30 years, whose results with that format have been seen by millions around the globe, it may seem surprising to know that Gerry Gavigan considers himself to be something of a novice in the art of landscape photography. But then Gavigan's 35mm work is not of the still variety. He is an assistant director of feature films with a list of credits that add up to a fairly lengthy opening night red carpet: *Star Wars*, *The Elephant Man*, *Enemy at the Gates*, eight of the last nine James Bond films and the soon to be released blockbuster, *Troy*.

In his role as a first assistant

director, Gavigan has made big action films something of a speciality. It is a role that has taken him to more than 40 different countries, working in locations grand enough to accommodate the creative designs of the director as well as the widescreen format. Best of all, a big feature like *Troy*, which was shot mostly in Mexico, means he can spend most of his time outdoors. 'I'm least happy being stuck in the studio,' he says, 'I prefer being outside.'

Being outside also means he can use the little spare time off set to indulge in his growing passion for landscape photography, a pursuit

he finds almost cathartic after the frenzied and crowded pressure of making a feature film. 'When you're working on a film you're surrounded by sometimes hundreds of people and the job is to be very much in charge of those people,' he says. 'When I've finished a film it is a great relief to get away and work on my own. I love the still picture anyway. I think it's more lasting than a piece of film and it's a great discipline now to work solely on my own and make all decisions for myself, and that is very satisfying.'

After decades of overseas shoots and Hollywood hype, Gavigan's softly spoken Glaswegian



**Above** Eastbourne, winter 1997. This was taken from the pier and not shot strictly as a landscape. It was the result of a documentary project I was doing on resorts out of season and marks the time when I was crossing over from photojournalism to landscape  
*Mamiya 7 with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, 1/30sec at f/5.6, B+W KR3 warm-up filter, Gitzo tripod*

accent remains unmistakable. He is the antithesis of tinsel town, living in quiet seclusion with his family in the West Sussex countryside, grateful for the anonymity that comes with being crew instead of a top-billing director. After spending a year doing the technical course at Glasgow Drama School, the young Gavigan went into the theatre. A chance meeting with Sir Alec Guinness at London's Royal Court encouraged him to break into films as a runner at EMI Studios in Elstree, rising through the ranks from third assistant to second, then first assistant director.

So, with *Troy* in the can and ready for release what is the difference in roles between Gerry Gavigan – first assistant director – and Wolfgang

Petersen, *Troy's* director? 'It means you run the floor for the director,' Gavigan explains. 'You set the background action, run all the extras, you have to prepare the film for the director and you carry out his instructions on how he wants the scene to look or how it is to be run. Generally speaking, he looks after the actors and you look after the background.'

Being outdoors and preparing backgrounds for filming during 'golden hour', is it any wonder that Gavigan is so drawn to shooting landscapes? I put it to him that the nature of his work must have given him a well-trained eye for landscape photography. 'I always strive to get the background looking as natural as possible within a scene,' he replies. 'I don't know if it has

necessarily helped my landscape photography, but I think I opted for the panoramic format because my whole life is working with cameras that take an image of that shape.'

Gavigan uses a Linhof 6x12cm instead of the wider 6x17cm format because, as he says, with 6x17cm your eyes 'tend to scan across the whole image, whereas with a 6x12cm you can confront the whole image and it's a bit like watching a film screen.'

It was in India, after filming one of his first Bond films, *Octopussy*, that he first began to feel the excitement of photography. He found the local people so willing to be photographed that in one town he built a daylight studio in the square. 'I had people queuing to be photographed, a la Irving Penn and

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Avedon,' he quips. 'Those portraits were my first published work and that's where I got the bug for photography, in India.'

He also attained satisfaction from photographing in black & white, particularly for documentary work, and on a return trip to the Himalayas a few years later produced a set of mono pictures of Tibetans that eventually became his first published work.

'I preferred black & white because it unified everything,' Gavigan recalls. 'You could shoot exteriors, you could shoot interiors, you could balance the light. I prefer it for documentary work because it makes you concentrate on the picture as opposed to being seduced by the colour. Some people do well with colour. I didn't at that time.'

Encouraged by these results he joined a picture agency, who encouraged him to shoot in colour, but the real transition from black & white happened in Australia when he was documenting the working lives of stockmen and riders in the Outback. 'I was trying to shoot black & white and colour, and eventually chose colour because I couldn't cover action with two different films,' he explains. 'I was influenced by the reds and warmth around me and began using the 81 series filters. It made me start to think what you can do with colour.'

He also talked to film cameramen, who use graduated filters extensively in their work, and soon he was trying out all manner of grey and



coloured grads before settling in recent years on the neutral density grads made by Lee Filters. He has also been influenced by the large format work of OP contributors David Ward and Joe Cornish and in January began making his first 5x4in landscapes with a borrowed Linhof.

'Their pictures have a very different look to what I'm shooting, and I think in a way a camera system influences how you shoot,' he says. 'I'm definitely influenced by the way I see other photographers work with filters and things. But I also feel I've got something to say myself. I'm not necessarily going to try and copy what they have done. I want to put my stamp on my feel for the light. I guess their work excites you because you see they've got great things in great exciting light. The influence is to go out and look for

**Above** Glen Coe, March 2002. 'For four days this low cloud was right down to the road hiding everything. Then the pass to Glen Coe cleared for just a few minutes, long enough for me to get a few frames before it all clouded over again'

*Linhof 6x12cm with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, exposure not recorded, Cokin 81b warm-up and Cokin grey grad filters, Gitzo tripod*

that really exciting light, which we've always done in film.'

Gavigan is used to getting up early for the light as cinematographers favour dawn shoots and the 'magic hour' around sunset. In that respect the two mediums are driven by similar desires but he prefers to shoot his landscapes at the day's end because he believes, like many photographers before him, that the warm light is 'the most seductive to a landscape'.

**Below** Seven Sisters, East Sussex, November 2003. I had been there before trying to get the sunset lighting up the cliffs but the sun was always in. On this occasion it literally slipped under a long horizon cloud and I managed to get four frames before the light had gone from the cliffs

*Linhof 6x12cm with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, 4 seconds at f/32, Lee 0.6 ND grad, centre-spot grad and 81b warm-up filters, Gitzo tripod*



# INTERVIEW



**Above** Arundel, West Sussex, September 2002. 'I had been twice before trying to get this shot around 3.30pm. I wanted the light hitting the reeds and giving shape to the castle and waited for this bank of cloud to build on the horizon to make the castle and cathedral stand out'

*Linhof 6x12cm with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, 1/8sec at f/11.5, Lee 0.3 ND grad, polariser and 81b warm-up filters, Gitzo tripod*

Whatever his choice of format (he has worked with 35mm, 6x12cm, 6x7cm and now 5x5in), wideangle lenses feature prominently in both his landscape and documentary work because, he says, 'I like to put the viewer beside the oil worker, the cowboy, whoever it is I'm shooting'.

It's interesting to hear how a man whose life has been spent looking after backgrounds for Hollywood epics is now driven by what he can put in the foreground of his British landscapes. It has led to him scaling down his use of the Linhof 6x12cm in favour of more conventional formats. 'I'm now trying to bring in more foreground than I did with the earlier stuff and making myself more familiar with the Mamiya 7, because it is actually easier to frame a panoramic. I try to do it so that

the main area of interest is on the camera right, because we read from left to right and it's like a full stop there, but I'm now trying to do more from the foreground up.'

Such is Gavigan's absorption in the British landscape that he has turned down several offers from film directors since finishing *Troy*. Indeed, he was happier spending a week this winter in a tent in the Scottish Highlands than in the warmer climes of an overseas set. Not for him the big skies of the American West or Australia's Outback, instead he expresses real passion for the dark, brooding skies of a British winter.

'It maybe stems from the atmosphere I felt the first time I was in Glen Coe,' he rationalises, 'this brooding, heavy darkness and I've sort of gone for that ever since. I'm

just really keen to travel as much as I can in Britain and photograph Britain. I think it's so photogenic. We have so much change, so many different geographical environments in such short distances, plus an ever-changing light. The thing that encourages people to go and photograph Durdle Door, or Ashness Bridge is because they know their light will be different from somebody else's light. But if you were doing that in Arizona, the light would be the same at that same time of day at any point in the year.'

Said like that, I feel a glowing warmth in my bones as the sleet hits the office windowpane. After all, when it stops, those first rays of sun breaking through the clouds over the South Downs could make quite a background. ❖



**Left** Wheal Coates tin mine, Cornwall, July 2002. 'I spent two weeks concentrating solely on shooting landscape, it was my first photo expedition to Cornwall and for this image I bracketed by a third of a stop'

*Linhof 6x12cm with 65mm lens, Velvia 50, 1/4sec at f/16, Lee 0.3 ND grad, polariser and 81b warm-up filter, Gitzo tripod*