

## PICTURING *SILENT HOUSE*

DSLR Video Goes Big Time, in Real Time

**W**hat is it *really* like to experience your worst nightmare? With crops of found-footage horror films popping up like dandelions—from *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999 to the *Paranormal Activity* series, *Quarantine*, *The Last Exorcism* and *Apollo 18* to *The Devil Inside* in 2012—it's refreshing to see a different take on the horror experience.

The directing team of Chris Kentis and Laura Lau bring to life *Silent House*, an American remake of the Uruguayan horror film *La Casa Muda*, which was inspired by true events. Like the original version from writer/director Gustavo Hernández, *Silent House* is a horror experience told in real time and in (seemingly) a single shot.

Alfred Hitchcock made the “long take” concept famous with his 1948 film *Rope*. Since then, only a handful of filmmakers have tried to duplicate the feat of showing an unedited real-time view of a story: Mike Figgis' *Timecode* presented four uninterrupted takes simultaneously on a dual split-screen; Aleksandr Sokurov's historical drama *Russkiy Kovcheg* (*Russian Ark*), about Peter and Catherine the Great, was shot in an apparent single take; and Spiros Stathoulopoulos' *PVC-1* was a single-take drama about a pipe bomb placed around the neck of an extortion victim.

Kentis and Lau enter this small fraternity with *Silent House*, starring Elizabeth Olsen, Adam Trese and Eric Sheffer Stevens. John (Trese), his daughter Sarah (Olsen) and his brother Peter (Stevens) make a trip to their lakeside home, which is in a state of horrible disrepair. They are to spend this long weekend getting the house ready for renters.

The house has no electricity and all the windows have been boarded up, naturally, so the trio works inside by lanterns and flashlights. The large old mansion feels like a labyrinth of dark rooms and darker corners.



Left: Director of photography Igor Martinovic (with camera) and Elizabeth Olsen.

Right, top: 1st AC Ludovic Littee takes over camera operation for a dramatic escape from the house.

Right, bottom: Director of photography Igor Martinovic covers the action as Sarah (Elizabeth Olsen) discovers one of the many dark secrets of the house.





Elizabeth Olsen, carrying her own keylight, and Eric Sheffer Stevens

Sarah hears some unexplained noises; thus begins the tense real-time journey as she becomes convinced they aren't alone in the creepy old house.

Behind the camera for *Silent House* was director of photography Igor Martinovic (*Man on Wire*, *The Tillman Story*, *Red Riding: In the Year of*

*Our Lord 1980*, *Nurse Jackie*). "I had spoken with the two directors [Kentis and Lau] previously about another project, and they came to me and said that they wanted to do a horror film and do it in one continuous shot," recalls Martinovic. "I thought, 'What a great opportunity!'

"Subjectivity was the core of our visual

approach. From the outset it was clear to us that we had to make the movie through the main character's perspective," continues Martinovic. "Therefore, we decided that at the beginning of the film the framing would be very conventional. As the film progresses and Sarah's complex character keeps spiraling into darkness, we started playing more with off framing and negative framing to represent her state of mind—of being cornered, being trapped. The frame becomes her oppressor. We used the same approach to lighting: in the beginning the lighting scheme is based on actual light sources, and then slowly lighting becomes more stylized and not quite as motivated by the actual sources."

#### THE 12-MINUTE LIMIT

It may seem surprising for a film that intends to achieve a single, uninterrupted 88-minute take that the Canon EOS 5D Mk II, a camera with a 12-minute file record limit, was the production's camera of choice. The cinematographer explains, "In order to define what camera and format we were going to shoot on, we had to determine what was the most important factor in the decision. The concept here was to get the camera into as subjective an angle as possible, to really get into the perspective of the main character. At the time we shot the film, about a year and a half ago, the 5D Mk II was the only camera that could give us what we needed. It was very small, high quality, affordable, and we could get it into tight spaces, move easily with it, transfer it from one operator to another when needed—it provided us with the flexibility we required. Today, it's already a different game. There are three or four cameras on the market that I would have considered using for this project, but at that time, the 5D was the only real option that fit all the requirements."

The production had to embrace the 12-minute record limitation, very much like Alfred Hitchcock had to do with the just-over-10-minute takes per film magazine on *Rope*. The *Silent House* team made efforts to hide the transition points by moving in front of objects or whip-panning, hiding the edit however they could. The process allowed them to break the shooting into 12-minute takes and repeat a take, if necessary, before moving on to the next 12-minute segment.

"We rehearsed for two and a half weeks," explains Martinovic. "These were full rehearsals

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Above: Director of photography Igor Martinovic with Canon EOS 5D Mk II camera, Redrock Micro handheld rig and smallHD monitor

Below: *Silent Hill* co-directors Chris Kentis and Laura Lau



with all the actors, camera and the entire crew. We would record the rehearsals and then replay and analyze them. As you can imagine, the choreography was very complex. The shooting itself was done over three weeks. The tricky part was that while we were shooting, things would change in the house—certain props would have to be moved behind the camera, some special effects rigged while camera was rolling in another room, a lot of logistics. We were lucky that most of the time we were in one location—the house—although some of the movie takes place near the water and outside of the house.”

#### ONE TAKE, INSIDE AND OUT

As the horrors mount, Sarah gets proof that her family is not alone in the house. Her father has been attacked and lies bleeding on the floor upstairs. Sarah finds all of the doors locked, the windows barred—her last hope is to escape through the basement.

In a single take with no cuts, the camera follows Sarah out through the basement and over to a desolate road, where she encounters

her uncle driving back from an errand. Sarah gets into the car and goes back to the house, waits for a time while Uncle Peter goes in with a handgun to rescue his brother, and then goes into the house herself.

The shot started with camera assistant Ludovic Littee operating the camera in the basement and running with Olsen through the woods surrounding the house. When Olsen gets into the car, Littee handed the camera off to Martinovic, who was waiting in the back seat. Martinovic then drove with the actors—with Littee chasing quickly behind—back to the house. When Eric Sheffer Stevens, playing Olsen’s uncle, gets out of the car to go into the house and rescue his brother, Littee quietly slipped into his seat and Martinovic handed the camera back to his assistant for coverage from the front seat. When Olsen finally makes her run for the house, Littee handed the camera back to Martinovic, who continued camera operation back into the house in one continuous take. It is a feat of camera logistics that few filmmakers have attempted.

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## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Helping the cinematographer and his assistant to accomplish these incredible balletic feats of operation was a handheld rig from Redrock Micro. A prototype on-board monitor from smallHD allowed the cinematographer to monitor 720p from the 5D Mk II; a feed-through of that HD signal went into a wireless transmitter in a backpack to feed the video village.

Camera assistant Littee used this wireless 720p signal and a Preston wireless follow focus system to pull focus remotely while the cinematographer ventured through the house.

Martinovic shot primarily with a Zeiss CP.2 28mm prime lens, with support from the 21mm prime. The 5D was set at 320 ISO and the cinematographer shot wide open at T2.1 for the most part.

"We were wide open all the time," Martinovic submits. "We wanted to have that shallow depth of field for the duration of the movie. Shallow depth of field is a lot like darkness—you never know what is lurking behind you, out of focus. We used both darkness and depth of field to enhance the horror element of the story."

Since the film starts outside in daylight, the cinematographer had to devise a system that would enable a single camera to move from daylight to inside a very dark house in a single shot. He used two circular polarizers that, when rotated against each other, create a variable ND filter, allowing him to compensate for the lighting difference between exterior and interior locations.

The cinematographer treated the house's interior like a set on a soundstage. Lighting was rigged into the ceiling where possible or handheld by the actors in the shot. Lighting rigged overhead was fed into dimmers so that it could be controlled as the camera and actors moved throughout the house. Lighting cues were worked out in the two weeks of rehearsals. Actors, effects,

camera and lighting were choreographed into a precision machine.

"Since there was no editing involved, the real challenge was to create pacing and rhythm while shooting the film," Martinovic continues. "You're doing your editing in-camera using camera movement and actor's blocking to control the rhythm. There was no luxury of speeding up or slowing down the pacing with

clever editing—everything had to be decided in advance.

"Technology is developing so quickly these days, it's very exciting. All this new technology is giving us an ever-expanding array of tools that allows us to explore new directions. Things that were impossible to do years ago are a lot easier to accomplish today, and that opens up new doors to more creative storytelling." **dv**

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