

Short Takes

An Award-Winning Perspective

by Stephanie Argy

Classic forced-perspective trick photography rules in the music video for Chikinki's "Like It or Leave It." Cinematographer Jake Polonsky called his experience on the video "an unusually scientific method of shooting."



On the video for Chikinki's "Like It or Leave It," cinematographer Jake Polonsky had the chance to experiment with forced perspective — and saw his efforts rewarded with a Best Cinematography prize at the 2004 Creative and Design Music Vision Awards in London, which honor work on music videos in the United Kingdom.

Chikinki's previous video (for the song "Assassinator") had attracted a lot of attention because it had a cut on every single beat of the song. For "Like It or Leave It," directors Si & Ad wanted to do something equally distinctive, and they decided to use in-camera techniques to make the various band members appear to be different sizes. "The band really liked the idea," says Polonsky. "They're quite a left-field band. And after the last video, they're used to shoots that require patience."

When he started out on the project, Polonsky didn't have any experience with forced perspective, but he quickly learned about it. The technique goes back to the earliest days of cinema, but its most notable recent use was in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, where it was used to place hobbits and humans side by side in the same shots. "If you know that it's forced perspective, you can see it, but if you don't, it's the most believable illusion," says Polonsky.

The technique is a simple matter of physics: two subjects are positioned at different distances from the camera, but as long as the depth of field is sufficient to keep them both in focus, they appear to be much closer to each other but completely out of scale. "It literally was as simple as looking at a depth-of-field chart," he points out. "It's an unusually scientific method of shooting."

The video was partly shaped by the art department's ability to find oversized and undersized props, such as enormous desk lamps and chairs and miniature guitars and drum sets. As new items were found, the directors would adjust the video to incorporate them. Knowing that there would be only one day to shoot, they also had to be very precise about which setup would go with which part of the song, something that made the process more enjoyable for the musicians. "The thing that bores bands is having to endlessly repeat the song," says Polonsky. "Here, we were doing different pieces, with only one or two setups that ran all the way through. The directors had timed it all out."

Ultimately, there were about 35 different setups, and Polonsky says that his favorites were the ones in which some sort of gag happened in the shot. In

Frame grabs courtesy of Jake Polonsky.

one setup, for example, the band is performing with guitars on stands nearby. As they play, a giant hand comes in and removes one of the guitars — which, in reality, was one of the miniatures.

The video was shot within a very long stage at Pinewood Studios, because some of the images required the camera to be as far as 100' from one of its subjects. The aesthetic of the video is very plain, with the background comprising nothing more than the bare stage walls. "What was good about doing it in that environment is that it was very abstract," says Polonsky. "I liked the idea of the band being in this constrained space where impossible things were happening in terms of scale."

Once the filmmakers were on the stage, the shoot was simply a matter of moving props and people back and forth and lining them up by eye. Many of the shots required the background subject to be raised on decks, so most of the time the floor of the stage is out of view. There is also no camera movement, a relative rarity in the realm of music videos.

Polonsky's camera on the job was an Arri 16SR-3 equipped with Zeiss Superspeed primes. "I tried setting up the first couple of shots on a zoom, but the resolution was not quite good enough," he admits. "I wasn't quite convinced that the two elements looked right together. In this case, it was a question of needing really sharp images." Once or twice, Polonsky used a two-point star filter to get a few kicks, but on the whole, he kept his images clean. "There was no reason to use diffusion on a job like this," he asserts.

His stock was Eastman Kodak Vision2 500T 7218, which he has found to be impressively sharp. "The first time I used it, the telecine artist couldn't believe it was a high-speed stock," he says. "16mm stocks used to be quite noisy. Now, as long as you're not printing or blowing up, you can use it, and you can do things more quickly."

One key to making the forced-perspective gag work was the choice of lenses. Originally, the directors thought

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Above: Polonsky sold the forced-perspective gags by properly positioning the subjects and maintaining enough depth of field so that both foregrounds and backgrounds remained in focus. **Right:** To make band members appear as though they were about 6" high and performing on a Ping-Pong table, a regular-size Ping-Pong table was placed close to the camera at the same height as a bridge positioned farther in the background on which the band members stood. To help sell the illusion, the lead singer interacted with oversized ball and paddle props.

that wide-angle lenses would be most appropriate for the shoot, but Polonsky found that the effect is less convincing at the wide end of the lens spectrum, so he wound up using the 25mm lens most often. "It seemed to be one of the more believable relationships, in terms of perspective," he says. "The more compression there is, the more convincing the effect is. Your eye understands it

as being real. The effect doesn't look very believable on a wide angle lens, because as soon as you get distortion, you can tell it doesn't look right."

To get the depth of field necessary for the effect, it's also essential to be very stopped down; most of the time, Polonsky found himself working at f16 or f22. "It's the same concept as pinhole photography: once you have a small

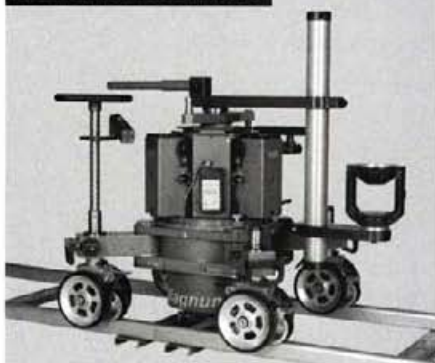
enough aperture, depth of field is almost infinite," he explains. "People don't generally use lenses at that stop, though, because it means you're not using as large a part of the lens. As a result, the image quality isn't as good."

Working at that kind of aperture also means using a lot more light than usual. But Polonsky says he was lucky, because he only had to light certain



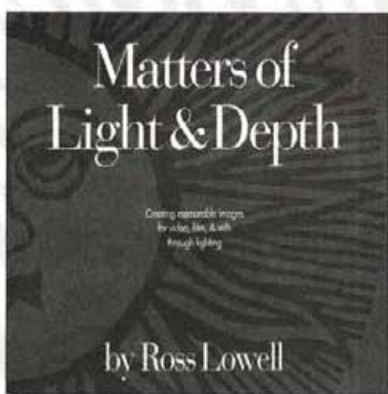
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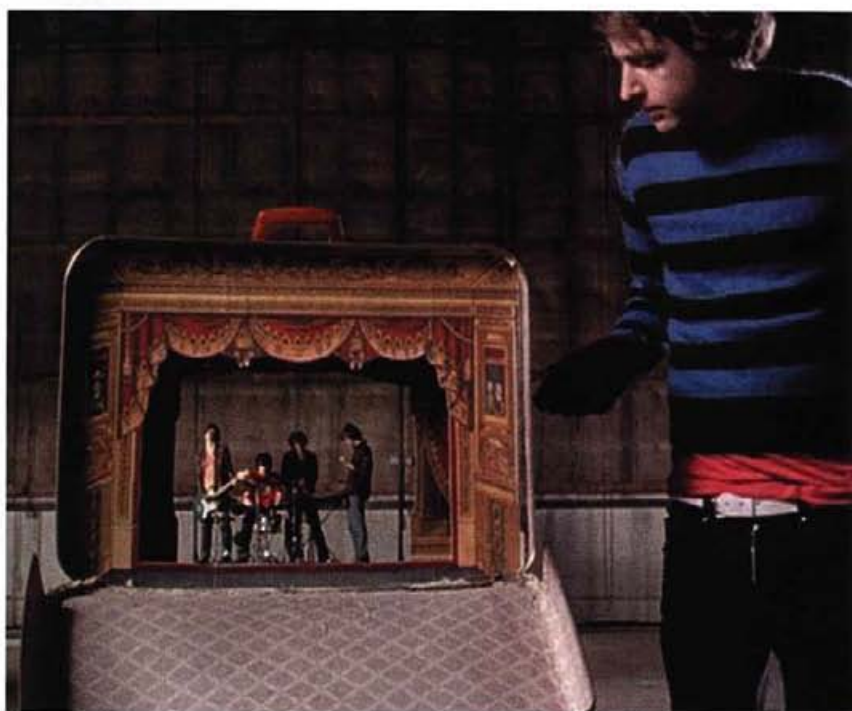


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Above: An oversized "lunchbox" provides the perfect stage for the musicians. **Below:** The video employed the same forced-perspective compositions as those used for *Hobbits* on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

areas of the frame. Each subject in a frame was lit by its own sources, and as long as all the elements in the image were effectively at the same stop, with light coming from the same direction, they would fit together. His lights were all tungsten fixtures, and his main sources were Maxi-Brutes and Arri Studio T12 lights. "The T12 is one of my favorite lights," he says. "It's a single bulb, relatively high in temperature, and

it's fairly convincing when you want to make things inside look like they're lit by the sun. It requires more power to run, but it's definitely one of the most appealing-looking lights out there at the moment."

According to Polonsky, the United Kingdom has a very strong music-video industry, but as in the United States, budgets have shrunk drastically over the last four years. "There's a lot of very low-



budget work, and a very small number of high-budget projects, but the middle has disappeared," he notes. To him, the situation seems to be a bit of a paradox: there are now a larger number of music-video channels and an increasing interest in DVD compilations of videos, but while music videos are consequently even more useful to record companies than in the past, the companies want to pay less and less for what they get.

The result is that production companies and crews are forced to be ever more resourceful and imaginative, and find ways to make do with less. Yet at the same time, he believes that the standard of videos in the U.K. is the highest in the world. "Audiences here are more skeptical about how they respond to people trying to sell them things, so they're quite demanding," he says. "In England, and in Europe generally, there is a high level of visual sophistication in what people expect, and it's rare to do a standard performance video. The budgets may be limited, but because we have a big alternative and independent music-video scene, directors often have the freedom to pursue things that are different. On the whole, it's jobs like this that stand out as being visually inventive and not run of the mill."

Despite the ingenuity and detail of his work on the "Like It or Leave It" video, Polonsky admits that he didn't really expect to win the Creative and Design Award for Best Cinematography. "A lot of the videos it was up against were really beautifully lit. But ours had an understated quality, because we were trying to make it look real, rather than like a music video, and I think people really responded to the humor of it."

He adds that as a cinematographer, he finds it nice to do jobs that are a little out of the ordinary, or something that he hasn't done before. "That certainly was the case with this video," he says. "Now that visual effects are so easily achievable, it's nice to have someone come up and say they want to use an old-fashioned optical technique. It genuinely was a very clever idea." ■

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