



MARTIN AHLGREN

photo courtesy of Martin Ahlgren

In episodic filmmaking, the one thing you never have is time. Even as budgets have grown and productions have become more ambitious with big sets and large crews, you're still under pressure to work very fast. On *House of Cards*, you're making an hour-long episode in 10 days, consistently shooting six pages every day. On a show with more stunts, like *Daredevil*, you may have a two-page day of fight choreography and then a 10-page day of dialogue to make up for it.

The hierarchy of creative decision-making in episodic is different from that of features; directors answer to showrunners, writers, and networks, and need to create inside of the framework of an established series. As a DP, you need to provide continuity in the look of the show, but I also think it's my responsibility to embrace the energy and fresh ideas of new directors, to take the series further and to explore new territory.

Pilots are creative but can also be heartbreaking. There is so much work that goes into setting up a new show, and when it's not picked up, not even that first episode gets seen. Amazon streams its pilots to let the audience decide, so at least they don't just disappear. On the other hand, with a direct pick-up of a whole season, like on Netflix, you have a chance to finish the complete vision without worrying about selling it all in the first episode.

Some producers think they're saving money and "putting it all on the screen" by hiring one DP to shoot all episodes (rather than hiring alternating DP's). Seriously, we don't cost that much money, and if you're interested in putting money on the screen, you're better off having a DP with enough time to come in well prepared instead of just flying by the seat of their pants.

On *Altered Carbon*, we did two-episode blocks as alternating cinematographers. When one block was ending, a new director would take over the main unit with the other cinematographer, while the outgoing director and DP would continue with the standing tandem crew to finish the block. This made it possible for us to finish our own episodes, while also allowing time in between blocks to prep with the next director.

Some old-school television directors will tell you we need to get more coverage because "they" will want options. No, not necessarily. "They" like a strong point of view, and you can be bold. On *House of Cards*, we would look at a scene and try to figure out

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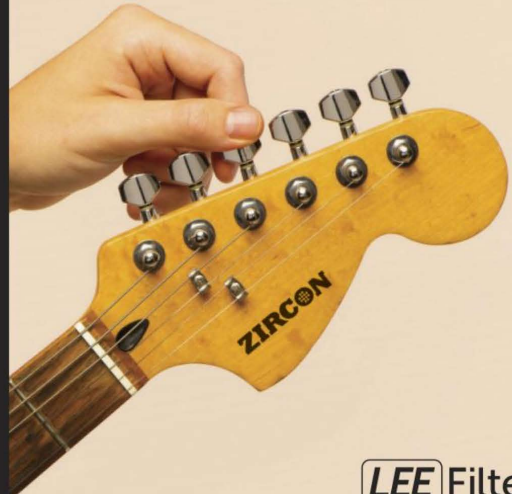
the most efficient way of telling the story and communicate the point of view, without creating unnecessary coverage just for the sake of it. On *Daredevil* it was possible to think up and execute extended long takes, with no coverage outside of the "oner."

The old thinking that television needs to be brightly lit talking heads no longer holds true. Stories can be told visually with moody lighting and wider shots. And that rule that every actor with a line of dialogue needs a close-up? I have worked with directors who, for the close-up, will roll camera late and only for a few specific sentences, to make sure that there won't be the option of editing together the scene only with tight shots, as sometimes happens in conventional television.

You need tandem units, second units, third units, and a crew shooting plates for visual effects. With bigger ambitions but still tight

schedules, more things need to be shot simultaneously. The main unit starts fight sequences with the principal actors, and they're finished the following day on the same set by second unit and stunt doubles. On *Altered Carbon*, a fully staffed and equipped tandem unit ran about 50 percent of the time, and we had to bring in additional crew for second-unit cleanups. Toward the end of the season, we were running four units on a few days to get it all done in time.

Sometimes it's better to spend more money up front to get it in-camera instead of relying on post. For *Altered Carbon*, we were creating a world that was 350 years in the future and that required some extensive visual-effects work. However, because we were making 10 hours of finished film, it actually made sense to spend more to build complete sets that worked 360 degrees, and that way keep the visual-effects shot count down. We only shot on green screen a handful of times the entire season. (Flying cars, hello!)



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