

An artist gets bored of the same colour palette

Rob Tarrant, Panasonic's European Product Manager, discusses the much anticipated release of the VariCam

So the wait is over.

The brand new VariCam was launched at IBC in September. Above all else that means extra choice for high end episodic dramas, advertising and movies, where it has to be said the choice has been limited for far too long.

Since the introduction of the original VariCam in 2002, the first high definition camera-recorder with the ability to over or under crank and create beautiful cinematic images, Panasonic's engineers have strived to bring a new, innovative camera to the production market.

Feedback from the industry is that many of the DOPs want to expand their creativity and the new VariCam will deliver exactly what they want.

The third generation camera arrives in two new variants, the VariCam35, Super-35mm 4K camera and the VariCam HS, high speed 2/3 type camera. It features a modular design, allowing the camera head to be separated from the recording module, enabling users to switch between the two camera heads, to best suit the shoot.

The camera module and the recording module can be connected via an umbilical cable, which is likely to make it a popular choice when working with jibs, cranes, or anywhere where size and weight are crucial.

For cinematography, this may mean taking both front ends to get additional creative freedom, but having only one system to learn, one codec, one workflow and with less kit to carry.

This modularity brings with it options.

The VariCam 35 utilises a new Panasonic super 35mm MOS sensor for 4096 x 2160 (17:9) 4K image capture; this imager boasts an impressive 14+ stops of latitude, and faithfully captures high-contrast, wide dynamic range imagery without compromise.

The VariCam HS has high speed 1080p image capture at up to 240fps, so the camera is aimed at the production of extraordinary high-definition imagery, for the most demanding documentaries, sports or SFX slow-motion applications.

What is more, our engineers have taken the DYNA chip from our 3D camera technology to enable simultaneous recording in two different formats, as well as in proxy. Together with its in-camera colour grading function, this means, for instance, that it is possible to record in 4K master and HD simultaneously, then produce dailies and begin colour grading on set. This will help production companies to streamline their workflows greatly.

In terms of storage, we have developed the expressP2 card, specifically to capture 4K or high speed HD images. The card and drive offer fast transfer speeds (up to 2.4Gbps) and provides 72 minutes recording time in 4K/25p mode, all on camera, without having to wheel an additional storage cart behind you.

The camera also features a newly-developed OLED electronic viewfinder (EVF) with optical zoom functionality. Really handy are a series of green boxes, which indicate which parts of the image are in focus. The bigger the box, the greater the focus.

So what about those colours? Well, beyond the innovative design, the real benefit of the VariCam, getting DOPs excited, is the range of colours which, frankly, they won't have experienced before.

Powerful colour management capabilities provide a much extended colour gamut for truly impeccable image fidelity and full fidelity mastering of original source material.

Inherited from original VariCam, the VariCam 35 features a V-Log curve, specifically tuned to produce images full of emotion, which maps an impressive 14+ stops of image data to the recorded file. The VariCam 35 permits the assignment of various LUTs to individual recording channels and camera outputs. For example, shoot UHD and record non-destructively with the V-Log LUT, but assign a "baked-in" 709 LUT on the HD / proxy recording for a real-time normal contrast look for editing and pre-grading.

In layman's terms, the 'Panasonic look' is back, and it's looking better than ever.

A lot of the talk at IBC and the recent big trade shows has been about 4K workflow, but the average DOP doesn't care too greatly about the edit, they just want to make sure they are providing the best possible footage for post-production teams to work with.

That's not to say the VariCam is not workflow friendly, it is. But what will get the average DOP excited, is how the VariCam 35 demonstrates just how powerful a camera's colour rendering can be.

Reds are pure and just, not varied shades of orange or pink. The red seems to pop in a way that I haven't seen before.

We seem to have nailed the yellows too, a key to the rich flesh tones which Panasonic cameras are known for. Flesh tones are warm, alive and unlike those captured by any other camera.

But secondary colours too are delivered beautifully. Browns and purples are rendered accurately and subtly.

This ability to provide contrasts for secondary colours is where the camera can really start to win some admirers. At the moment the choice available to DOPs is a range of cameras that render secondary colours very similarly, meaning that subtle colour variations can be lost.

The showreel created for IBC demonstrated this perfectly. There is a scene where there is a clothing rail, seen through a rain soaked window. It is possible to pick out individual colours, such as tans, greys and browns, the subtleties of which, in my opinion, would be lost on other cameras at this end of the market.

Every colour leaps out without garish contrasts, and they can be reined in where appropriate offering camera operators the most accurate and beautiful palette to play with.

But nightscapes are where, for me, the camera gets even better. Panasonic hits the mark when capturing accurate, saturated colours.

The showreel includes a scene in which sodium yellows from street lights sit alongside neon blues, and neon yellows. Even in this dark Los Angeles city scape, red cars and white cars are discernable from a helicopter mounted camera. The image is captured with a clarity that is unlike anything else too, it's possible to read the 'Staples Center' sign, in a pillar box red on the front of the building's dark frontage. In a nightscape, that is very impressive.

Unlike the old VariCam, better suited to nature documentaries and episodic programmes, the new VariCam 35 (which is more than capable for those applications) is aimed squarely at high end costume dramas, advertising and productions for cinematic release.

We listened to the response when we first showed the VariCam at NAB and tweaked the concept to offer the most up to date camera on the market.

We're very excited about VariCam and feel it can help us get back to a position of strength in high-end film making, where we have great heritage. Maybe our new offering can be as pivotal in the rise of 4K as the original VariCam was to the rise of HD just over a decade ago.

The first showreel for the VariCam is now available on Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/105522587>