

## NIGHT VISION

DIRECTOR/CINEMATOGRAPHER  
SEAN THONSON ON HD AFTER HOURS

BY JOHN FEINS

Sean Thonson first became interested in still photography at a very young age and hardly recalls a time when he did not have a camera in his hands. He began a study of light and composition that eventually led to his award-winning career in directing and cinematography.

In 1992, Thonson made the transition from still photography to film—becoming one of the world's top directors in the field of high performance automotive advertising. His prestigious client list includes Alpha Romeo, BMW, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Ferrari, Fiat, Ford, GM, Hyundai, Honda, Kia, Lexus, Mazda, Mercedes, Nissan, Saab, Toyota, Volvo, and Yamaha. He specializes in action, sports, and especially spots that feature big vistas and landscapes.

From the alternatively sultry and very funny Corona Beer spots shot on the beaches of Mexico to the spectacular purple flowers over geothermal fields in Nexium's "Geyser" filmed in Iceland—everyone has seen Thonson's vivid and beautifully contrasted style of filmmaking. Recently, shooting Saatchi & Saatchi Toronto's "Cell Splitting" for Toyota Matrix, he took his first foray into high definition.

A Matrix speeds through a cityscape at night past clubs shrouded in blue glowing mist beneath towering skyscrapers beaming in gold and white. Suddenly the car splits into multi colored versions all racing each other and fishtailing at high speeds on the wet streets to a pulsating beat.

Thonson gives us myriad angles from street level to above the skyscrapers, within the cars to numerous intense points of reference along the way all with tremendous definition of light. Each storefront, pixilation in the animated billboards, and grain of the damp, black avenues reflects along the sleek exteriors of the vehicles as pristinely as would seem possible.

How did you come to work in high definition?

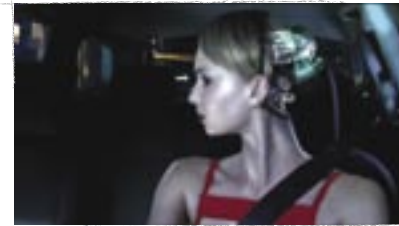
**Sean Thonson:** *I had a project where I had to shoot at night—I do a lot of nighttime shooting with film cameras—and I was talking with my grip and he had just done a feature called 'Collateral' just before it came out and he said they had been shooting at nighttime without any lights. So I did some testing between film and high def at night and it was just incredible how much detail there was. I was preparing for a really quick action sequence for a cinema-release commercial so it had to have a big film quality. I did a lot of testing under different light conditions and the sensitivity of the light was amazing. You could shoot with hardly any light at all—just streetlights or under bridges—and it was beautiful. So I shot my first commercial with high def.*

What kind of equipment were you using?

**Sean Thonson:** *I was using a Sony F700 with 24P. I was using their HD optical lenses which are the same optical lenses that I have for my film cameras, that they converted to video cameras, very, very sharp. I get really great select focus. I did my telecine work with Stefan at Company 3 and he said*



Director/Cinematographer, Sean Thonson



*it was some of the best night stuff he had ever seen. You could not really tell between high def and film. It just looked like really beautiful film.*

Did you do any testing at daytime and notice a difference?

**Sean Thonson:** *I tested in daytime and I would rather shoot film in the daylight than high def. It gets a little bit, I don't know exactly how to describe it, almost like hard—a little crisp feeling at daylight, the colors are a little poppy. It is not quite as smooth feeling as film. You can do post and bring that up, and it was just my initial test, but for me in daylight, film is still better. Nighttime there was not a question.*

*I shoot cars a lot and when you shoot cars at night you have to bring out big, huge lights that just wash the buildings. What that does, the way it affects the cars, you have to try to bump up your ambience—sometimes you have these huge light sources. Because we were shooting downtown with just a variable light, all the little lights off all the buildings became a huge, broad source, like Christmas lights, just a whole bunch of tiny lights and when they reflect off the car there are these points of light and it was much more interesting than just washing the building with a big 20K.*

*I took the meter out under the streetlight and I have 500 SA and it didn't even read on the meter, it just kept saying 'E'—no light; no outside shoot.*

*I took the high def camera, set it up, we tweaked it, and looked through and saw a perfect, beautiful little set: just the three streetlights and the lights of the store. We could not believe it. We were able to shoot right there without any lights at all.*

*There is a huge difference. It does not even really matter about the meter. You just put it up and you look at it and if you have an engineer, he can bring it up and extract the colors for you right there, engineer it on set, and do all the color tweaking right there. This allowed us to shoot through tunnels and, you know, I have shot a ton of car stuff before and you spend hours and hours of lighting with Condors and balloons and stuff and this was really high energy, Roman style, driving through a city and we were able to shoot everywhere. It was unbelievable.*

Is that color adjustment process different from film?

**Sean Thonson:** *What we did was have an engineer on set to give us a nice even look. We didn't really go way out. Then I did a tape to tape later in post, just like I would do on film. Because you actually see what you are getting right then, you know when you've got it—it's not like waiting for dailies.*



How did the client respond? Were they involved in the decision to go high def?

**Sean Thonson:** *That was a decision I had to push them into. The spot was for cinema, for cinema release. It was really critical that we saw it on a big screen and solved the polarity problem, the detail, before they would say okay. I had just shot a bunch of*

nighttime stuff and realized just how much I was going to have to do to the city given the amount of days I had to shoot this job and there was quite a bit of post because I had some CGI cars I was doing as well. So once I showed them the test, once I got through sort of a long process and once they saw it on the screen they said 'Go for it, it's beautiful.'

Was there a budgetary consideration in shooting HD, or were any additional costs made up on the lighting and post end?

**Sean Thonson:** It was really kind of a wash in that way. That was not any part of the decision. It was more the speed of the shooting that was more of an issue; how fast I was going to be able to get this stuff done. It was all my time—how much I was going to be able to shoot.

This was not just letting a little sun on a building, you know, this was blocks—these six cars racing through the city. It was going through blocks up in Toronto. We were shooting a street that looked kind of like Times Square and we were just in natural light and we had kind of an old wharf with just streetlights, so I knew as far as lighting if I really wanted to have the action be real and not have to try to keep it in these little pools of light, like I would have to if I lit, then we would go high def. That was a good decision in terms of the freedom and the ability to shoot in all kinds of conditions very quickly.

So you did save money in lighting and post?

**Sean Thonson:** Absolutely, absolutely. Probably would not have been able to do it if we had done it in film.

Did HD change how you work with dailies?

**Sean Thonson:** You are mostly going to go back and do final touches but you pretty much look at what you have. You're looking at almost final, right there. Clients really like that. So often you have to say, 'Don't worry, you are only looking at video.' Now you say 'You are looking at the real thing.' You're done and you can move on. The same as with a digital camera. You say, 'I got it.'

How about your two roles as a director and as DP?

**Sean Thonson:** When you separate the roles, the director is mostly watching a monitor so it's going to make the director's life easier because you are going to see a much sharper picture, going to see a lot of detail and, similar to the client relationship, you're not going to have to listen to the DP say 'Don't worry.' You're able to watch it happening. Doing both roles, I am usually shooting so I don't have that problem. I go at it from a DP standpoint. Usually I adjust my light to the monitor, which is really nice and quick. So it will be different when it is two people.

Would you mix the mediums for a project that used night and day?

**Sean Thonson:** I would probably not mix on the same scene but I would mix if you went from a daytime sequence to a nighttime sequence. I would do a transition like that no problem. It is really sharp, almost surprisingly sharp. You know, with film you try to get the sharpest lenses to get it that sharp and then all of a sudden you look at it and you say, 'Wow. That's sharp.' So it's almost like when you look at it, it is a definite look and you can go back and soften it up a bit but it has something that we have all been trying for—trying to get the sharpest, crispest film.

Then here it is a high def picture and it is almost too big of a jump, it's almost too sharp. You see things. Like with people, you have to be very careful how you light skin and faces. You have to be careful how you light and how close you get because you see every detail, every pore on the skin.

From a DP standpoint, are you going to evaluate a lot more of the equipment and your options in HD?

**Sean Thonson:** What I was surprised at when I shot was how flimsy all the camera equipment felt. Just the way all the accessories—matte boxes and handles and all that stuff—fit together still to me did not feel as precise and machined as well as film cameras as a whole. I think that's going to be a quantum leap. Just the way the hardware goes together, the handheld clips and the matte boxes, it was a little bit too lightweight material. Being an operator you get so used to the feel of a camera.



The new cameras are going to be more ergonomically familiar, and even free from recording cables.

**Sean Thonson:** That I am looking forward to. That part is amazing. I had that camera and we put it on the Ultimate Arm, a fifteen foot arm that goes on top of the car, that can go 360 degrees around the car, and we had the high def camera on that thing swinging around out there and it held up fine. The lightness of that camera really helped out on that because it allowed us to move that crane around a lot faster. That was one thing that was great. The crane operator was saying he had never operated it that fast before.



Have the new opportunities opened up by HD been understood by the creatives at agencies who present concepts and storyboards to clients?

**Sean Thonson:** I don't think so yet. I think the nighttime that I have seen is the biggest advantage. Obviously the other advantage is dialog. Being able to run dialog without having to switch every four minutes; switch a mag out. That is a huge advantage. Especially for documentaries, that would be a lifesaver. To let that run without having to worry about changing magazines is phenomenal. Everything is a lot lower profile, you're a lot

more undercover, you're not so imposing and all that. It is really a nice feature and a huge advantage.

In the next couple years will all the advertisers feel they must shoot in HD?

**Sean Thonson:** I don't think it's going to happen that fast.

Yet with so much more HD being broadcast, might your advertising clients be interested in having HD spots to go along with them and not have a drop off in quality at commercial?

**Sean Thonson:** I think people are just starting to become aware of that. Unfortunately HD is not widespread enough yet. A lot of people have not changed over yet to HD-compatible television sets; but I think people are becoming more aware. As a younger generation comes along, they're going to be more used to HD, and the film look that we have all been raised with and consider more pleasing, that is going to become outdated. People will say, 'Why does that not look sharp?'



It's what you're used to—what people perceive as the right look once your perceptions change. You know, ten years ago nobody was computer literate and now my five year old is working on a computer. So they are going to be raised with a different medium and I think HD is going to come on to be the medium of choice.

High Def **000**