

## ONE BATTLE, ONE VISION

To craft Paul Thomas Anderson's road movie with a difference, Michael Bauman set off on a multi-city shoot to capture the director's wild and wonderful story of epic proportions almost entirely on VistaVision, taking the format to new heights.

BY: **ZOE MUTTER**

When Michael Bauman discovered the concept, scale, and ambition of longtime collaborator director Paul Thomas Anderson's latest project, it was evident it would depart from their previous filmmaking ventures. Anderson's vision for the expansive action thriller *One Battle After Another* would see cast and crew shoot across 10 US counties, capturing a gritty, expansive road movie on a grand canvas.

Written and directed by Anderson, and 20 years in the making, the film is loosely based on Thomas Pynchon's 1960s-set novel *Vineland*. In Anderson's reimagining, the story shifts to present-day America, where washed-up revolutionary Bob (Leonardo DiCaprio) lives off-grid with daughter Willa (Chase Infiniti). When his nemesis (Sean Penn) reappears after 16 years and Willa goes missing, Bob—or Pat, as he was known when he was a member of dissident group the French 75 before going into hiding—races across the country to find her, battling consequences from his past.

As an audience member, Anderson wants to see a story he can relate to and that is emotional. "For me, that emotion usually comes from a story about family, from the ways in which we love and hate," he says. "This is the first film I've made in a long time that is contemporary, and that's very freeing. It was a lot of fun because we could go wild and shoot what we wanted when we wanted to shoot it, rather than wait for period cars and things to roll up."

Bauman adds: "The scope was different from anything we'd done before. Paul wanted to push it as far as possible, which is where the VistaVision format came in as the locations were going to be on a grand scale."

Invented in 1955 by Paramount Pictures to use a larger portion of the 35mm camera negative and later adopted by Warner Bros. with limited use, VistaVision photography has been enjoying a resurgence recently, partly due to *One Battle After Another* being filmed and presented in the format. In conventional 35mm motion picture photography, the film runs vertically through the camera and projector and each frame is four perforations high. In VistaVision, the film runs horizontally, and each frame is eight perforations wide. The larger frame means double the resolution and a bigger, brighter projected image, with less grain and greater detail than conventional 35mm film.



Testing allowed the filmmakers to determine the format's reliability when capturing action-packed scenes on the move and how best to achieve the desired texture (Credit: Michael Bauman/Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

Already a supporter of capturing cinematic stories on celluloid, Anderson was captivated by the texture and scale of films shot using large-format VistaVision. "In other words, bigger is better," he says. "It gives you a very deep, rich, beautiful image, but it's not entirely practical or as easy as shooting with a regular 35mm camera, so it went out of fashion in the early '60s."

Bauman was already familiar with Anderson's process, having shot productions on film with him such as *Licorice Pizza* and *Phantom Thread* during their decade-long collaboration. But this was a new filmmaking experience, bringing both technical obstacles and artistic opportunities.

## One production after another

Bauman and Anderson's collaborative process is rooted in a shorthand that allows the director to improvise as well as work with precision. As Bauman highlights, once Anderson finds a team he gels with, he does not want to let them go: "Operator Colin Anderson SOC has shot six movies with him, producer and assistant director on this film, Adam Somner—who sadly passed away last year—has also worked on six, I've done five, and script supervisor Jillian Giacomini has worked with him for a very long time," says Bauman.

For Paul Thomas Anderson, collaboration is the best part of making a movie: "The camaraderie you feel with the people you're collaborating with, the trust you put in them, the way you admire and hold each other up when you're tired or need support, it's a team sport for sure, and I'm surrounded by people I just love; that is a family. It's the foundation of everything."

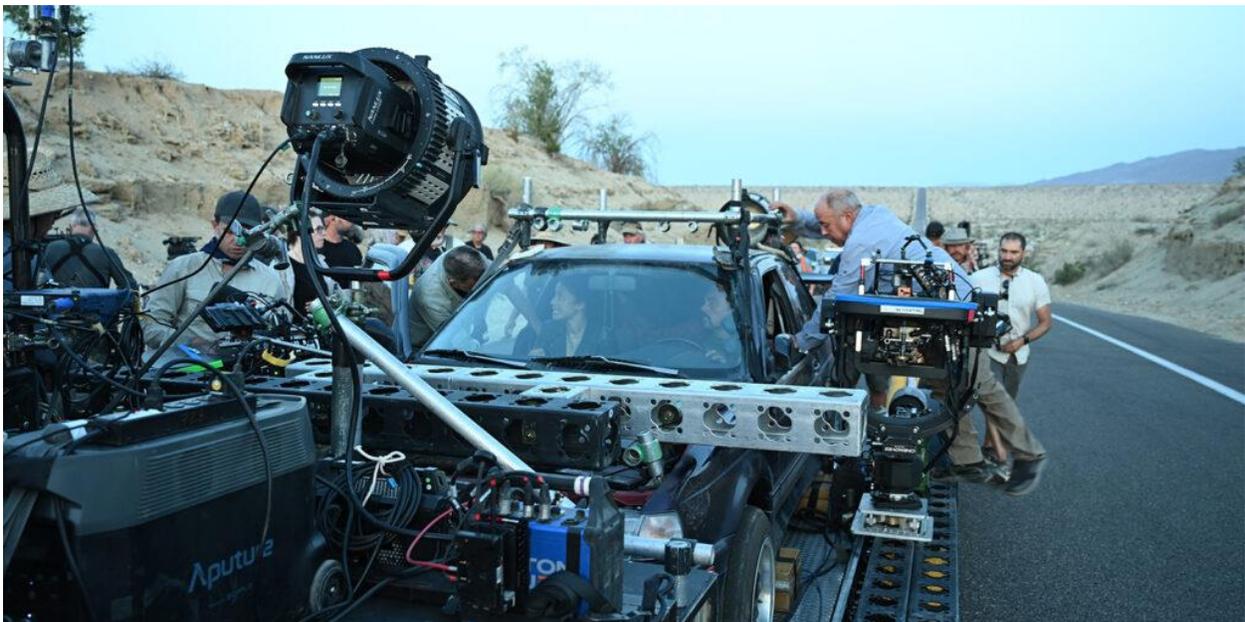
That unity proved essential on a production that functioned, as Bauman highlights, like a traveling circus, moving from one city to the next in quick succession, never staying in one place for more than five or six days. "It was about building an environment where Paul could

thrive—experiment, rewrite, and let the actors discover things on the day,” he recalls. “Much of our creative process is referencing our past work too.”

## Spontaneity and imperfection

Anderson was influenced by the naturalism, energy, light levels and contrast of *The French Connection* (1971) and also referred to *The Last Detail* (1973) when looking to combine immediacy and spontaneity with fast-paced narrative in *One Battle After Another*. “Its imperfections and the way it had been shot with little money impressed Paul—he wanted that energy,” says Bauman.

Referring to qualities Anderson admired in both films, he and Bauman carried out around 15 different tests including stock and lens to ensure they could be realised in a large-format VistaVision workflow. “There were also in-depth practical tests to see how the cameras behaved on cars, Steadicam, handheld,” Bauman explains. “VistaVision was recently used by Lol Crawley ASC BSC on Brady Corbet’s *The Brutalist*, but mostly in controlled setups. We wanted to see if the system could keep up with us when strapped to cars and bouncing around.”



Car chases were designed by Anderson, stunt coordinator Brian Machleit, and others, using Matchbox cars for blocking (Credit: Michael Bauman/Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

Testing allowed them to determine the format’s reliability when capturing action-packed scenes on the move and how best to achieve the desired texture. “It was about figuring out what we could get away with,” Bauman says. “We wanted those imperfections but also needed to know under what circumstances the system may struggle.”

## Vast vision, nimble workflow

Anderson’s desire to embrace 8-perf VistaVision stemmed from his passion for photographing and finishing on film. “Paul’s never going to shoot digital,” Bauman says. “He commits to a

format, and his goal is to shoot and finish on film. He always asks, ‘How does it end up on 70mm or the biggest format possible? And then how does it end up on IMAX?’”

As the director loves using the original negative, the VistaVision prints were created from the negative, with any visual effects needing to be filmed out. Offering “massive resolution, but with the flexibility of many more lens options,” the majority of the film was captured on Beaumont (Beaucam) VistaVision cameras, with the A camera body provided by cinematographer Giovanni Ribisi and two additional bodies from Geo Film Group. Some sequences were captured on Super 35 on the Panavision Millennium XL2, when space was restricted or the Beaumont camera’s noise was an issue.

“We used the Millennium XL2 sparingly, and earlier in the film rather than later, when we needed a longer run time than the Beaucam was capable of, and once or twice to overcome sound issues,” camera operator Colin Anderson SOC says.

A unique aspect of working with Anderson which Bauman enjoyed was assessing 35mm print dailies rather than digital scans. “Paul insists on watching prints,” Bauman says. “We travelled with a full mobile projection booth comprising a VistaVision projector and two Super 35 projectors to screen footage each night. We always carried a print of *The French Connection* too, in case Paul wanted to rewatch it and refresh our visual sensibilities.”

## Dynamic duo

Though Bauman holds the film’s director of photography credit, he crafted the visual language closely alongside Anderson, who is always deeply involved in lens and camera selection. “Paul has a lens addiction,” Bauman laughs. “Dan Sasaki at Panavision is his enabler. Paul will say, ‘Let’s get lenses from the ’70s,’ and Dan shows up with carts full of lenses.”

They tested and assembled a treasure trove of glass—some that worked for both VistaVision and Super 35, and others only VistaVision compatible—including Panavision Primos (65mm, 75mm), Ultra Speeds (35mm, 150mm, 200mm), H Series (55mm), System 65 (24mm); Leica Geos (35mm, 50mm, 80mm); Zeiss Jenas (85mm); Pathé lenses (50mm, modified by Sasaki); Voigtländer Heliars (35mm); and Zeiss Super Speeds (50mm, 55mm, 100mm, 127mm, 300mm), and Canon (1200mm and 1000mm).



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Panavision also developed a prototype set of lenses for the film through close collaboration between Sasaki and Anderson, who have a 20-year creative relationship. Anderson liked the look of Panavision's legacy Super Speed lenses he used on films such as *Phantom Thread*. Movies shot by Gordon Willis ASC with Super Speeds were also often referenced by Anderson and Sasaki.

To achieve a similar look to the Super Speeds while covering the VistaVision format, the Panavision Special Optics team built new prototype primes, with 18mm, 25mm, 40mm, 43mm, 65mm, and 83mm focal lengths used for the film.

"1st AC Sergius Nafa laid all the lenses out in prep, and it looked like Christmas morning. Paul was in heaven," Bauman says. "Serge used to work at Panavision and is a total gearhead as well as a gifted focus puller. We couldn't have done it without him."



Keeping up the story's momentum was a priority (Credit: Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

While Anderson immersed himself in lens exploration, Bauman—also a veteran gaffer and co-founder of the International Cinema Lighting Society (ICLS)—concentrated on lighting and image consistency. “Paul has strong opinions about lensing; I’ll shape the lighting and we meet in the middle,” Bauman explains. “On *Phantom Thread*, I took the title ‘lighting cameraman’ in homage to John Alcott BSC on *Barry Lyndon*. That spirit carried through here—it’s always a back-and-forth.”

For a sequence that required an aerial perspective from a helicopter, Dylan Goss, aerial director of photography, adapted his setup to capture footage in VistaVision – yet in a modern gimbal. Working closely with producer Will Weiske, Goss overcame challenges posed by the camera’s shape and size, which initially prevented it from fitting into the stabilised gimbals now more typically used with digital systems.

“There’s a fairly hard wall in terms of hitting the size limit for the camera package to fit in even the largest aerial rig,” Goss says. “Paul insisted the chase be shot as a one, which for running time then required a 1,000-foot mag. We already had a big zoom that also grew in size with format-specific optics added on. It was a big ask.”

## Texture and emotion

The adventure audiences experience in *One Battle After Another* is both emotional and geographical. Bauman designed the lighting progression to reflect this arc, much of it dictated by the locations. “Early in the film, for sequences at Bob’s house in the hills in Eureka, we tried to keep the lighting intimate and warm,” he says. “As the story evolves, the light becomes harder, and we played off that contrast.”

Naturalism dictated much of the look. In the opening sequence, Perfidia (Teyana Taylor)—Bob’s fellow radical and mother of his child—is seen walking along a roadside near an immigration camp, lit almost entirely with existing practicals. “Roadside sodium lamps, industrial colour—the harshness was important,” Bauman explains. “We then cut to the woods, where it’s more about naturalism and playing those two worlds against each other.”

Anderson thrives on environments that allow for improvisation. Bauman incorporated flexibility into every setup, lighting in 360 degrees so actors could move freely. Fixtures were embedded into sets, practicals were used wherever possible, and cherry pickers were minimised.



Bauman's lighting background, alongside longtime collaborators gaffer Justin Dickson and key grip Tana Dubbe, helped navigate unique and sensitive locations (Credit: Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

Bauman's lighting background, alongside longtime collaborators gaffer Justin Dickson and key grip Tana Dubbe, helped navigate unique and sensitive locations such as California missions. "Justin and Tana found solutions while being nimble and respectful," he says.

While Anderson prefers "real lights"—incandescent and HMI sources—practical realities often required compromises. "Paul bought three Lowel Tota light kits from eBay for \$75 and said, 'What if we light the movie with these?'" Bauman laughs. "We tested them; they're fragile. But he responds to their quality of light, so Justin ended up incorporating them into the lighting package and we used them for certain environments.."

The multi-faceted LED and incandescent package supplied by Warner Bros and Lux Lighting included Nanlux 1200B and 2400B, Rosco DMG Dash units, Astera Titan Tubes, 12-lights, and T12 incandescents. "We leaned on LEDs for speed and power sensitivity but tried to shoot incandescent if possible because I love their look and feel. Generating heat with incandescents was not viable at some sensitive locations," Bauman explains. "It was all about bounce and negative fill—keeping things natural and grounded."

To realise Anderson's vision, Dickson and his crew used the Aputure CS15 to light buildings in the background. "As we were shooting VistaVision, we saw a lot, so we had to do much of the lighting from the ground, and the CS15 could light two or three buildings at a time rather than one person or building," he says.

Dickson chose the "beautiful sodium" CS15 over tungsten because it "had a lot of punch and reach," giving flexibility without using excessive power. "Even though it was an expensive movie, we didn't have all the cable, manpower, or generators in the world; it would have been too much. A simple solution was a battery pack down the street, combo stand, and Aputure fixture to light buildings."



Anderson thrives on environments that allow for improvisation (Credit: Michael Bauman/Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures)

Dubbe's grip department developed rigs to subtly shape light, setting up negative fill and building clusters of incandescent bulbs with small reflectors. "We used what we called 'bling lights'—something Chris Menges BSC and Harris Savides did very well using small collections of low-wattage bulbs to highlight different spaces," Bauman says. "We also used a lot of umbrellas."

Dickson was impressed by how Anderson tied the story into multiple cities while making it feel like one. "Paul has this level that can go higher and higher and he has an expectation. It taught me to give everything I have; it's like no other film he has done, and I learned so much."

## On the road

As DiCaprio highlights, *One Battle After Another* is not a traditional action film: "It's not something that feels manipulated by technology in any way. It's very bare bones—real cars, real environments, and situations that feel tactile. It's Paul Thomas Anderson's version of action, which is unique to any other action film that we're used to seeing."

For visual authenticity, Anderson opted to shoot on location. Aside from a few days on stage at LA North Studios in Santa Clara, the shoot traversed small towns and vast parks across California and Texas, including Humboldt County, Stockton, San Juan Bautista, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, and El Paso, as well as a few days in Los Angeles and Sacramento.

Sacramento was ideal, according to supervising location manager Michael Glaser, because it "has not been filmed much and features striking brutalist architecture not found in LA." El Paso's limited late-night life, with many businesses closing by 6pm, allowed the production to capture nighttime driving sequences.