

# BIG PICTURE SPOT



WHAT'S MORE FUN THAN SHOOTING A HIGH-END COMMERCIAL SPOT WITH DAVID BECKHAM ROARING ON A MOTORCYCLE THROUGH THE EUROPEAN COUNTRYSIDE? MAYBE PAIRING THE MASSIVE ALEXA 65 SENSOR WITH LEICA PRIME LENSES ... FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER.

BY  
MARGOT CARMICHAEL LESTER

**HOW BEST TO  
FURTHER LEVERAGE  
THE POPULARITY  
AND GOOD LOOKS  
OF INTERNATIONAL  
FOOTBALL STAR  
(AND STYLE MAVEN)  
DAVID BECKHAM IN A  
COMMERCIAL SPOT? FOR  
FRENCH MEN'S-CARE  
BRAND BROTHERM, THE  
ANSWER WAS HAVING  
BECKHAM CRUISE THE  
WELSH COUNTRYSIDE ON  
A RADICAL MOTORBIKE,  
AND HEIGHTEN THE  
DRAMA BY SHOOTING IN  
BLACK AND WHITE.**

LOCAL 600 CINEMATOGRAPHER MAX GOLDMAN (WHO IS BASED IN NEW YORK CITY AND WHOSE RECENT SPOTS INCLUDE NIKE'S STUNNING KYRIE VS. QUESTLOVE AND APPLE'S IPHONE 7 SPOT) SHOT ON THE ARRI ALEXA 65 USING NEW LEICA THALIA PRIMES – ONE OF THE FEW LARGE-FORMAT LENSES ON THE MARKET THAT FULLY COVER THE CAMERA'S OPEN GATE. MARGOT CARMICHAEL LESTER CAUGHT UP WITH GOLDMAN TO FIND OUT JUST HOW FUN THIS PROJECT WAS AND HOW TO OVERCOME ANY INHERENT CHALLENGES OF TAKING SUCH A BIG-FORMAT SYSTEM ONTO THE OPEN ROAD.

**What made you say yes to this project?** Max Goldman: The main reason I decided to work on this project was the director – Anthony Mandler – with whom I've worked for many years. He always pushes me to capture the most sophisticated images possible. He believes in the power of cinema and is willing to back up my ideas and let me take risks with the cinematography.

**Is it fair to say commercials lend themselves to exciting new visual journeys?** Definitely. Commercial clients and directors I work for are always pushing me to experiment visually. They want the imagery to make you stop and look. The world is filled with average images bombarding us every day. I believe most brands want their images to stand out from the rest. This way we will pay attention and engage.

**Did you get much direction from the brand and agency creative teams?** Almost none! They wanted to make something with a level of art to it and really let us do whatever we wanted. They trusted us, and they were very happy with what we delivered. Oftentimes the clients will have a few small thoughts about the imagery. But most of the time, they've seen my reel so they know what kind of work I do.



The type of commercials I do rarely have actors or dialogue – they’re always led by the camera. This allows a certain freedom to discover. The director sets the scene and then the camera is free to search for the most interesting way to capture it. I try to react emotionally to a scene – let my instincts guide me. It’s all about the lens choice, camera movement and light.

**Let’s talk about your innovative choice to pair the ALEXA with the Thalias.** Our goal was to make sure the countryside in Wales felt overwhelmingly vast to emphasize the idea of a lone man on a motorbike traversing the land. The ALEXA 65 gave us the right feeling of scale. We were only interested in the two types of shots, the first was seeing the motorbike as a tiny speck within a massive wide shot. We could really push the width of these frames, as the seemingly infinite resolution of the ALEXA 65 resolved even the smallest detail. The second type of shot was the exact opposite – remaining on a wide lens but moving in very close to the subject. This wide-and-tight framing made David look like a giant filling the frame. We weren’t interested in anything else in between.

**Did the large-format sensor help or hinder this particular approach?** I would say that the size of the ALEXA 65’s sensor gave us another tool to help us pursue our desire for scale and scope. The large-format chip allowed us to give depth to shots that normally have infinite depth of field. Even in the wide frames, you could see the background going soft. The focus would be at 40 feet, and the background would

be slightly soft. This was another great way to see scale and have the ability to direct the audience’s eye within a wide frame. It allows both scope and intimacy – a combination that could not have been achieved with any other digital camera.

**Why choose the Leica Thalia Primes?** I was drawn to the Leicas because I had read that the glass was modeled after some of the Leica M-mount still lenses, and I love to use my M lenses on my still camera. They have some of the best fall-over I have ever seen. They’re sharp where you want them and soft where you want the fall-off. So when I heard about the Thalias, I got really excited.

**And pairing them with the ALEXA 65?** They were great, but they were actually a little too clean and clinical for my tastes. But that’s coming from someone who loves the imperfection of vintage lenses! The Leicas are great lenses, and they have their place – I just like my optics a little bit dirty. To combat this cleanliness, I had to shoot every shot wide open. I also softened the lenses with a variety of Tiffen filters depending on the shot.

**Did the combination create any special challenges for you and the crew?** I pushed the entire production to use the ALEXA 65–Thalia combination, and the biggest challenge was getting everyone on set to realize the aesthetic value of this camera and lens combination. To the untrained eye, it can be difficult to see the effect of the large chip. It can be especially challenging when you are viewing the image





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MAX GOLDMAN

outside on a 17-inch VTR monitor! But I knew this was going to be an issue, and I talked the DIT into acquiring a large 4K monitor that he rigged in his van. This giant monitor was the best way to combat anyone’s fears about the camera. Viewing the imagery on it was a game changer. You could really feel how robust the image was! Once everyone could see all the infinite detail and the incredible fall-off, they were very excited about the camera and lenses. The demo gave us all a boost of energy. We felt like we were breaking new ground, and it united the team.

**This may be the first time this equipment has been used together. Why is it important for DP’s to experiment and innovate?** Innovation and experimentation are the only ways to make personal imagery. I want my images to have unique signatures. Images are like children; they should reflect your personality. Every time I pick up a camera and a lens, I’m trying to break the format. I’m looking for that happy accident – making an image that’s on the verge of what looks like a mistake.

**Would you say experimentation lengthens a DP’s career?** Yes, I feel that experimenting is

the key to a long career as a cinematographer, and you must consistently evolve. Anyone can pick up an ALEXA and make a decent image. But like any creative tool, it needs to be pushed to the limit to get interesting results. It’s always important to try new formats and new lenses, to find new fresh technical approaches to every project.

**What prompted you to shoot this spot in black and white?** I don’t think people realize how much additional depth and shape color photography gives the imagery. Without those additional depth cues, you really have to work hard to shape the black-and-white image. When I shoot black and white, I feel like the approach is more akin to that of a sculptor. You have only two choices: shadow or light. There are gray tones in the middle for detail, but it’s where you find the highlights and the darks that really gives the image that three-dimensional quality.

**How would you characterize the way you used black and white in this spot?** I like my black-and-white images to be on the moodier side – dark but with detail in the lower mid tones and controlled highlights. If you look at the exposures of the great still photographer Sebastião Salgado, he uses the mood in the clouds to create drama. For this spot, I became obsessed with the clouds in Wales. Fortunately, on our shoot days we got lucky. We wanted a dark, moody sky, and the weather truly cooperated. I exposed for the sky and dug out the lower mid tones later in telecine. It is always a little scary for a director to see a dark image as we are shooting. But Anthony comes from a stills background, and he trusted me to expose the best image. The ALEXA 65 has incredible range without ever getting noisy, so I knew I could dig out the lower mid tones in post to give us that Salgado look.

**Any advice for an emerging generation of commercial DP’s?** I always try to have an innocent outlook on every new shoot, almost like it was my first shoot ever. Then you can embrace the challenges that come your way and enjoy the challenge of something you have never done before. 