

Cinepost
(www.cine-post.com)
Egypt

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—Hani Halim
Co-owner and Technical Director
Cinepost

Cinepost adds gloss to Egyptian films with Autodesk Lustre

Egyptian facility brings DI and RED to the Middle East.



Image courtesy of CINEPOST.

Over the past couple of years, the Egyptian film industry has undergone something of a revival. In 1997, just 16 feature-length Egyptian films were made. Ten years later, that figure had risen to 40 films, along with a huge improvement in box-office takings. In 2008, Egyptian films made around \$50 million USD in Egypt, compared to just \$10 million USD in Egypt for Hollywood movies*. There has also been a noticeable improvement in quality, while the post-production industry has embraced new technologies such as digital intermediate (DI) and, more recently, the RED® camera.

With 15 years' experience in the post-production industry, Hany Halim is one of the pioneers of DI in Egypt. He set up one of Egypt's first DI facilities in Cairo in April 2008, offering a full range of post-production services for the commercials, music videos and film industries in Egypt and the Middle East.

"Egypt is at the heart of the Middle East film industry, but DI is very new to Egypt," explains Halim, who is co-owner and technical director of Cinepost. "Until a year ago, we used to send all our scanning, printing and grading work to London. But since founding Cinepost, we've done the DI for ten feature films in just ten months."

Halim hired French colourist Fabrice Bulan from Laboratoires Éclair and invested in Autodesk® Lustre® digital grading software through Autodesk reseller Brainwaves. "We decided to invest in Lustre because it's very easy to calibrate using the look-up-tables," says Halim. "It's also from the same family of products as Smoke and Flame which we're used to using."

As well as Lustre, Cinepost uses the Autodesk® Smoke® editing and finishing software, Autodesk® Flame® visual effects software, Autodesk® Maya® 3D animation software and Apple® Final Cut Pro. According to Halim, the biggest challenge the company faces across all its DI projects is time: "We usually have a maximum of ten days, but often less than that," he says. "By using Smoke for finishing and visual effects while grading at the same time with Lustre, we save a lot of time. This has saved the day many times!"

Cinepost had the opportunity to put this time-saving workflow to good use when working on Asef Ala Al Izaag (Sorry For The Disturbance), a comedy-drama by Khaled Marei about a troubled young aviation engineer (Ahmed Helmi) who starts dating a beautiful girl (Menna Shalabi), only to have his life turned upside down when he finds out he's suffering from schizophrenia and has been hallucinating about his late father and girlfriend.



Image courtesy of CINEPOST.

"The film was shot in Egypt using lenses which gave it a warm look," explains Halim. "We used Lustre to help enhance the warm feel throughout most of the film, and to help create a colder look for the end of the film when the main character takes his medication." Cinepost had just six days to complete the grade, and the film went on to be a major success at both film festivals and the box office. It was one of the two highest grossing films in Egypt in 2008 and won first prize at the Egyptian National Film Festival. It also took home Best Film, Best Director, Best Script and Best Production at the Egyptian Catholic Center Cinema Festival.

Lustre was also put to the test on a particularly challenging scene in the recently released One Zero. Directed by Kamla Abu Zikri, the film has several sub-plots about different characters from various walks of life, brought together by the 2008 Africa Cup final between Egypt and Cameroon. A dinner scene had been shot in daylight so Cinepost was tasked with making it look like night time.

"We usually use Smoke to create masks to use in Lustre, but for this we created the masks in Lustre," says Halim. "We had to mask most of the people sitting at the table, and after spending two days on the scene, you can no longer tell that it was shot in daylight."

Not content with pioneering DI in Egypt, Halim is now breaking new ground by introducing the Egyptian film and video industries to the RED camera. The company invested in a RED camera in April this year and has been renting it out at least once a week ever

since. "The RED camera is very new to Egypt but it's already proving very popular for shooting commercials and music videos because it offers very good quality," says Halim. "We're also trying to get it into the feature film market."

Before adopting the latest version of Lustre which supports REDCODE RAW, Cinepost had two different workflows for working with RED files: "We would edit QuickTime proxies from the camera and then calibrate these edited files with Lustre. Or we'd use Lustre like a telecine machine and grade all the footage before doing the editing and visual effects."

"With the latest version of Lustre, we can read the files directly from the RED camera which gives us major time savings," he says. "A commercial with about 300GB of 4k material would take about two days to transform into DPX files. Now we can start grading as soon as we get the RED files in."

As well as grading several commercials and music videos shot on the RED camera, Cinepost recently used Lustre to grade The Shoemaker, a short film shot on RED by Aahed Saleh, a Saudi Arabian director who lives in New York. The short focuses on the life and relationships of an Iraqi shoemaker after his release from Abu Ghraib prison where he was held during the US invasion. From XML EDL files, certain shots were selected to be conformed and graded in Lustre which included relighting footage shot in the middle of the day to make it look like the sun was going down in the evening.

According to Halim, clients were initially sceptical that an Egyptian facility could create the same quality of work as European facilities: "They didn't believe that what they saw on the monitor would look the same on the big screen," he says. "But once they see the end result, they're very happy with the quality they can now get in Egypt."

With a little help from Lustre, Cinepost has succeeded in bringing award-winning DI to Egypt - on a par with any European or Hollywood facility.



Image courtesy of CINEPOST.