

## Black Field

Paul Suderman had collaborated with director Danishka Esterhazy on three short films when she asked him to photograph her first feature *Black Field*. The shorts had been done in a variety of formats: 35mm, Super 16, and digital video, specifically the RED One camera.

"Danishka's shorts were highly visual with plenty of great images to shoot," says Suderman. "We both felt from the beginning that *Black Field* should be shot widescreen and on film. It would have been unjust to shoot her great script on video. The period of the story, and the need for film's greater overexposure latitude and ability to hold details in the sky, also argued for film. Also, I just felt subjectively that film was right for this project - and what is filmmaking, if not subjective? We fought hard to make *Black Field* on film."

The 2-perf Techniscope format was a perfect compromise. "The extremely small budget seemed to argue for a video format, and that worried me immensely," says Suderman. "We budgeted out other formats, and in the end we were able to shoot film because of the 2-perf format."

The story, partially inspired by the Gothic novels of the Brontë sisters, depicts two sisters on an isolated, remote farm in the 1800s. Suderman says that Esterhazy's evocative script sparked his imagination. "Even on my first read-through, I imagined some scenes that ended up being very close to what we ultimately filmed," he says. "It helped that the story took place in a place that I love - the prairies of Canada, where huge skies and flat land combine to create an austere landscape. We used that barren landscape to amplify the sisters' loneliness and vulnerability."

The filmmakers knew that the 2-perf format's widescreen aspect ratio would work well with the empty panoramas.

"Another benefit was the ability to shoot two close-ups in one frame," says Suderman. "When the two sisters are threatened by a stranger to their farm, they instinctively stand close to each other, visually underscoring their relationship."

"We used that barren landscape to amplify their loneliness and vulnerability."

Although Suderman had never used the Techniscope format, he had no qualms about adopting it. He used KODAK VISION3 500T 5219 and 250D 5207 negatives. "I care most about lenses and film stock," he says. "I was thrilled with the VISION3 stocks. The 2-perf negative area is smaller than other 35mm widescreen options, so the finer grained stocks really came into their own. I thought the stocks looked really tight. We were able to get our dailies in 1080p MPEG2 files, so I immediately could see how fine the grain structure was."

The approach was to tell the story as simply as possible. The tools were a Panaflex GII camera, Primo lenses, a tripod and a dolly. "We eschewed the use of cranes or zooms, and tried to let the actors bring their characters to life in front of the camera, rather than bringing attention to the camera movement," says Suderman. "We felt that shooting a close-up on a 40mm with the camera closer to the actor helped the audience feel more involved in the scene, as opposed to using a 100mm or 150mm from 12 feet away."

*Black Field* premiered at the 2009 Vancouver International Film Festival.



3 Sara Canning as Maggie and Ferron Guerreiro as Rose in a scene from *Black Field*. (Photo by: Rebecca Sandulak)