

mo-sys *spotlight on*

Jim Van Dijk

Two Heads Are Better Than One



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From the confined freneticism of *'Burnt's'* restaurant kitchen to the pressure cooker of *'August: Osage County's'* full family reunion, and the epic fantasy action of Amazon Prime's fantasy hit series, *'The Wheel of Time'*, A-Camera and Steadicam Operator Jim van Dijk's long list of credits is packed with dynamic frames in locations big and small. Jim is, however, a man who always wears two hats. The first hat is that of the seasoned craftsman, delivering stunning

shots whatever the conditions, to realise the director's vision. The second hat is that of a businessman with an entrepreneurial eye for camera tech innovations that has kept him in constant work for over thirty years.

In a rare window of availability, taking a day off, away from the set, we took the opportunity to sit down with him over a coffee and explore the dualities of Jim's approach, that have served him so well throughout his career.

Jim van Dijk,
Shia LaBeouf,
Adriano
Goldman and
Robert Redford
working on
'The Company
You Keep'





Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 2

As Jim will go on to explain, he has always owned a lot of his own equipment, and this has allowed him to focus not on one specific technique or style, but rather on becoming an operator who can deliver any type of shot.

Jim's approach is to have all his tools available, at all times, allowing him to remain agile and adaptable to requirements on set.

Steadicam and Remote Head

"I've been doing Steadicam for over 30 years and, using a remote head for probably 25. They're all tools to me. So, it's whatever the shot requires. That's why I personally own an L40 and a G30. The L40 has been around for a long time. It's a perfect head, but I'm also testing out the L20. I like to rent the heads together on a show, because one works differently from another, from one shot to the next."

"As far as making a choice between the Steadicam or the L40, or the G30, it's really dependent on the way the director wants to tell the story, but also what kind of terrain we're in. On a recent shoot we were on the ice, chasing hockey players, so we used a sled with the G30 and the L40, depending on the shot, rather than Steadicam."

Risk and Reward

For Jim, owning his own equipment is about more than tools for the job. He puts on his business hat.

"I own a lot of my own gear and I'm very comfortable with new technology. I like innovation and to get in at the beginning. Here in Canada, I was one of the first owners of RED cameras. I bought one and then I bought another fifteen, with all the lenses and accessories, and started a small rental house. We actually did the first TV series in the world that was shot on RED, 'Sanctuary'. It was so early on that they wouldn't insure us for production. So, it was a bit of

a risk, but I'm sort of familiar with taking a little risk. If I see some potential, even if it might take a little work, I'm willing to take the chance."

In light of his positive experiences with the two-axis L40 remote head, Jim's entrepreneurial eye was caught when he discovered that Mo-Sys was developing a three-axis, gyro-stabilised remote head.

"I think we were going into Covid at the time, there was a lot of hype and desire for remote heads. Mo-Sys were developing a new head, the G30.



Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 2



Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 2



Jim van Dijk on steadicam working on 'Wheel of Time' Season 2

And I think that's where the relationship with myself and Mo-Sys really took off. I was very interested, especially based on the success of the L40, and I thought, 'OK, this would be a great investment'."

With that same willingness that had led Jim to buy fifteen RED cameras, he took the opportunity to get in early on the G30.

"On 'Wheel of Time', we were in Prague when we first got the G30, which was one of the first in the world. The key grip, who had been one of the first owners of another remote head, came out and warned me

very clearly, 'Look, it's going to be difficult because we're at the forefront - you just got a stay calm and we'll, you know, figure things out'. We got through any issues and the G30 has worked brilliantly through one-and-a-half seasons."

As a businessperson, Jim's educated risk paid off, but, of course, as the camera operator on-set, with all the responsibility of the job, there were some understandable early nerves.

Hot and Cold

"Obviously, I had some nervous days at the beginning, but I'm not scared to take the heads anywhere now, regardless of weather conditions or other challenges. As you get comfortable with a tool, see how it performs and have experience with it, you get more and more confident as to what it can do. On 'Wheel of Time' we took both heads out in three different countries and really worked them hard, in the winter and the rain, and also the desert, with the forty-plus degree heat of South Africa. They performed. The G30 just works - it's really solid."

Business hat on again, Jim thinks back over the success of his decision to get in early with the G30, recalling one incident that crystallises why he feels he made the right choice.

"I did have one problem that turned out to be nothing - a little voltage restrictor that caused an issue. Mo-Sys sent their head robotics guy from London to Prague. He fixed the problem right away and then spent two days with us, watching us work. He learned a lot from that visit and took that information back to Mo-Sys, sharing it with the other members of the robotics team."



Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 3

For Jim, this is where, regardless of which hat he's wearing, having a direct relationship with the manufacturer is invaluable.

Customer and Partner

"Anytime I have an issue or a suggestion or anything, I get close-to-instant feedback - within 12 to 24 hours. At times I kind of feel like I am the only customer at Mo-Sys - I just get treated so well. I really appreciate the fact that I can just call up and if there's an issue or something that I need help with, or a suggestion, it's dealt with right away."

Jim's experiences with Mo-Sys also carry a duality. At once, he is a customer, who purchased his L40 and then his G30, but he is also a pioneer adopter of the G30, who worked with Mo-Sys, providing feedback from his experiences on-

set. This has led Jim to become a huge fan of the Mo-Sys hardware ecosystem.

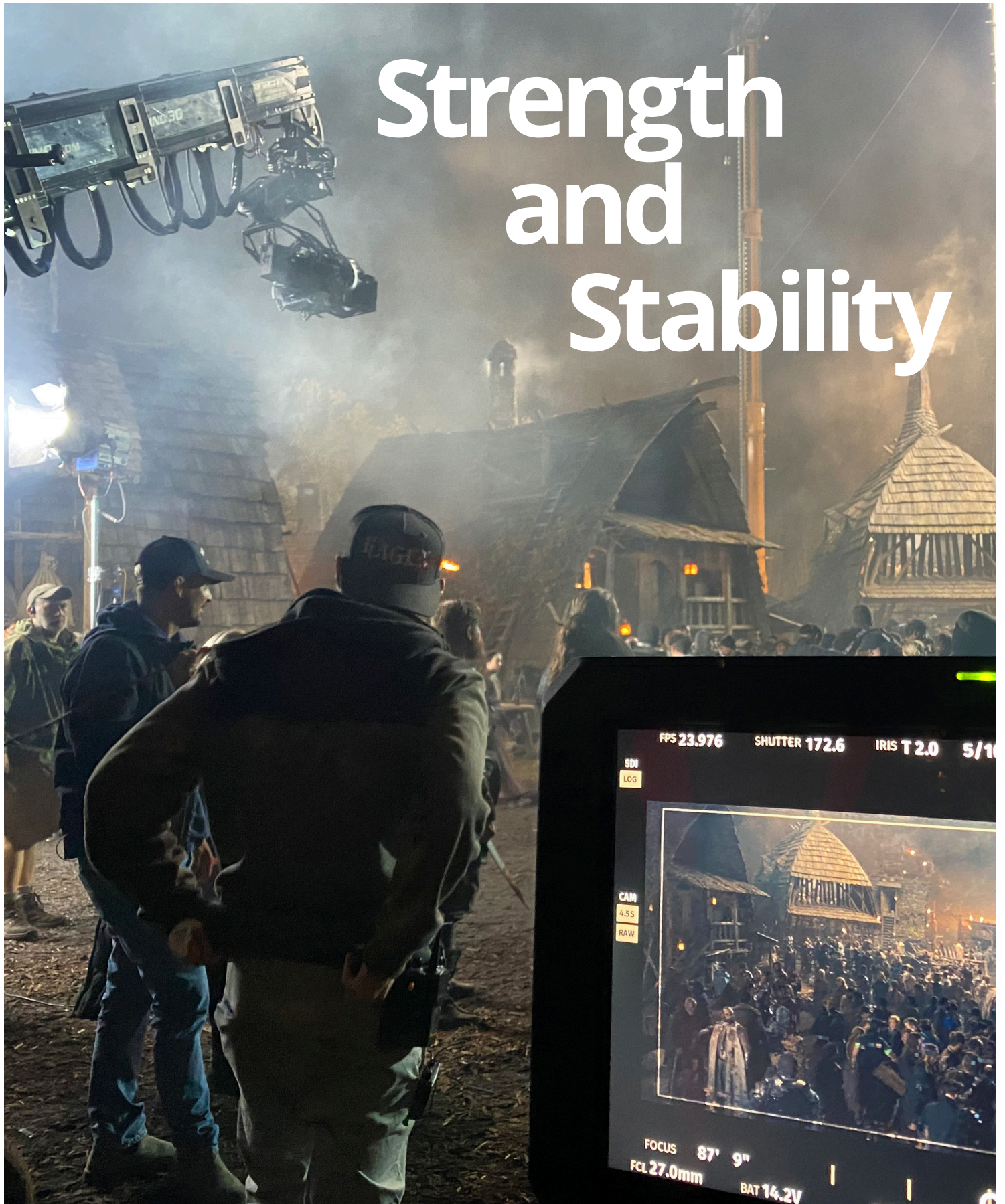
"The thing I like about Mo-Sys is that it's plug and play. Pretty much everything in one package will work with another package. So, in my case I had three Mo-Sys heads, all working on one show, and we could pretty much pull one head off and put another head on, interchange cables - just everything, instantly."

Jim's eyes light up as he casts his business hat to one side, excited to start discussing his work with the G30.



Jim van Dijk using his G30 on
'Wheel of Time' Season 3

Strength and Stability



Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 3

"The great thing about Mo-Sys is that the products are designed so that I can tech the heads myself. Compared to a lot of other, bigger stabilised heads, the G30 is really easy-to-use, and I've learned how to use it very quickly."

It turns out that the G30 has become the bedrock of Jim's on-set workflow.

"Sometimes we're running through rough ground and if it's rough or if we want to use the dolly, we'll use the G30, but also, we could be on an interior all day, using the dolly. We can use the G30 and we don't have to lay any track or dance floor. It just makes the day quicker. We're able to set up immediately for a shot without waiting."

For Jim and his team, the G30 is now a standard way to speed up the shoot, reducing the need for laying track.

"A lot of shows will build standing sets, and the floor is typically plywood, trying to build the floor so that you can build your track as quickly as possible. But if the floor is built well, even if there's a few little bumps or ripples, you can run the G30 on the dolly in upright mode without track and there's no problem. Like we ran it all day in a 1500 to 2000ft² house, running all day without issue. When you're hanging the head, with the isolator? We run it around on cement floors and sidewalks and everything - running the head around in an arena in the back hallways."

Jim' doesn't just use the G30 as a convenient time-saver though.

"We were running an anamorphic 180mm close-up for a walk-and-talk down a bumpy path in the woods. Normally you'd lay track or go Steadicam in a rickshaw, but instead we were able to put the Black Arm on a rickshaw and run it all day. Rock solid," Jim laughs, "and much more enjoyable for me to not be running it on the Steadicam!"

Beyond saving him some unnecessary exertion, Jim starts to discuss the key features that make the G30 superior to other three-axis, gyro-stabilised heads.

"When they see the G30, people that have worked with other remote heads are always impressed by the design, because it does look very different. Maybe the G30's frame makes the head look a little bigger, but really, it's not any larger than some of the other larger stabilised heads that use the wishbone frame..."

Of course, the G30's unique design isn't just an aesthetic choice, but rather, an engineering solution that overcomes the limitations that others have not.

"Often, you're hanging, looking straight down on a crane. It used to be so frustrating using other heads because you would lose control of one of your axes! For me, the biggest feature of the G30 is that you retain control when you're pointing straight down or nose mounted - you're able to use all three axes, pan, tilt and roll. You can't do that with those wishbone designs."

Another feature of the G30 that Jim often relies upon is the strength of its motors.

"With the G30, you're never going to exceed the weight restrictions, ever! It's a wonderful thing to have such a robust head, that's almost overpowered. We never, ever worry that we're going to put too much weight on it."

Pondering the issue of camera package weights, Jim switches hats again, taking a broader view of industry trends.

Size and Weight

"The biggest challenge right now is that everybody's getting smaller cameras, but bigger glass. So, every show I'm doing now is anamorphic, because everybody wants a new look for their digital cameras, but camera packages aren't getting any lighter... The package we just had on the last show, lens and camera, was probably 30 pounds. We were using the Cooke anamorphic on the last show. They are heavy pieces of glass! One or two of those lenses are getting close to ten kilos... eight kilos for sure!"

The next conundrum requiring Jim's thinking cap is how to balance these new packages.

"So the other challenge is balancing - when you're balancing that heavy front glass with that lighter camera on the back. We have to move things around a bit and add some extra weights, which makes the whole package heavier. For a fully built camera with some of the anamorphic lenses, you're probably looking at fifteen, sixteen kilos, and that's not putting on zoom lenses or anything. It wouldn't be hard to get up to twenty..."

Jim Van Dijk with his G30 and the L20 on set





Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 3

Once again, this is where Jim has benefited from working with Mo-Sys as a pioneer partner, trialling the L20, delivering feedback to the engineers and helping to refine the solution for these latest camera trends. The results of this collaboration? Jim is impressed.

"With the advent now of smaller jib arms and smaller cranes and smaller cameras, it's the perfect head. It's light, amazingly robust for its size and gets into tight spaces. I'm super impressed with it. When you're at a location and there's no elevator... It's fantastic! It's basically a baby L40. It's a really beautiful little head."

So, with a camera operator's hat on, why the L20?

"If I was to get into a tight spot, or I want to get into a car, or I want to be on a very small jib, or even just run around with it on it for the day on the dolly then it's the L20. It's a no brainer. It's got a smaller footprint, it's easy to use and it's super light. This is a great remote head."

Jim swaps hats one last time...

"I would buy an L20 to go with my G30, because that's a perfect match. I can use the same console, because everything's the same. All I actually need is the head and I can plug and play."

Jim pulls focus, framing up on the business he has built and how Mo-Sys technology has supported it.



Win – Win

Jim van Dijk using his G30 on 'Wheel of Time' Season 3



"Financially speaking, for their capabilities, the L40 and the G30 are really competitively priced, compared to other remote heads. So, it's amazing - I have the ability, in my case as a private owner, to have two heads that I can pick and choose from any time on set, for a whole production, and I don't have to charge an arm and a leg for that or bring in a head tech."

Jim raises his coffee cup, a twinkle in his eye as he continues.

"As a matter of fact, as I'm sitting here, both my L40 and G30 are on a show right now, with the second assistant that I work with. He's tech-ing them, but he's also doing his normal job. The producer is extremely happy and I'm sitting here having an interview, drinking coffee and making money."

We drain our respective cups as Jim encapsulates his entire approach.

"These heads work whenever I work because I make a deal with the producers that they love. They're happy to do a run of show, with very significant cost savings, versus bringing in a bigger head, with techs, one day at a time, and I'm still making a good dollar. I think I've had the G30 now for two-and-a-half years and the L40 for close to six, and they're both paid off, making money. It's a win-win situation that allows me to pick whatever tool I want that makes the Director and the Director of Photography happy."

As it turns out, Jim's business may not, in-fact, be a duality of craft and earning potential, but rather a holistic solution with benefits across an entire production, that ensures he will never be short of work.

Cheers to that Jim! Thanks for the coffee.

Jim Van Dijk CINEMATOGRAPHER | CAMERA OPERATOR | STEADICAM OPERATOR



Jim Van Dijk with his G30 on set



Jim Van Dijk with his G30 on set



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mo-sys

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