

‘Westworld’ DP Paul Cameron on Creating a New Reality for Season 3 and Directing Episode 4

BY ADAM CHITWOOD MARCH 31, 2020



Ever since the first trailer for [Westworld](#) Season 3 debuted, fans realized the new season of the popular HBO sci-fi series was going to be very different. With the setting now moved outside the titular park and into the real world, as we follow Dolores (**Evan Rachel Wood**) on her path towards combating humanity, the show needed a new look. And for that, the producers turned to the cinematographer who helped create the original look of *Westworld* in the first place: **Paul Cameron**.

Cameron is a veteran cinematographer whose work ranges from **Michael Mann**'s *Collateral* to **Tony Scott**'s *Déjà Vu* and *Man on Fire*. He has experience with massive films like *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales* and the *Total Recall* reboot, as well as gritty thrillers like *The Commuter*.

But for *Westworld* Season 3, Cameron had to visualize a future world that felt at once realistic and elegant, returning to the series he helped jump-start by shooting the pilot. For the new season, he explained in our interview that he and the *Westworld* team scouted the world to find the most accurate stand-in for showrunners **Jonathan Nolan** and **Lisa Joy**'s vision of *Westworld*'s Los Angeles. The winner? Singapore.

Cameron explains how Singapore's architecture is most fitting for how our world might change in the coming decades, while also discussing drawing inspiration from **Spike Jonze's** film *Her*. But a change in scenery isn't the end of the road for visualizing the show's third season. Cameron also explained how, in crafting nighttime scenes, the show brought in digital cameras for the first time—but only for the wide shots.



Image via HBO

Almost all of the medium shots and closeups were still shot on good old fashioned film. Cameron also explained how he came to land the job of directing the fourth episode of this season.

It's a long and wide-ranging conversation, and I'm splitting it up into two parts. The portion of the interview you'll read below is a spoiler-free conversation about Cameron's work as a DP visualizing the world of *Westworld* Season 3, but check back on Collider on Sunday night and I'll have a full-on spoiler conversation with Cameron about specific plot points from the episode he directed. You won't want to miss it.

You have a bit of history with this show. You shot the pilot, and then you came back and shot the first episode of Season 3, which very much feels like a reboot of the series a little bit. The visual language has changed a little, the story has changed quite significantly. I was wondering if you could talk about your experience on the pilot versus your experience coming back this year and resetting the show?

PAUL CAMERON: It was great to have the opportunity in the beginning of the series working with [director] Jonathan Nolan and Nathan Crowley, the production designer at the time. They set the tone and feel for what *Westworld* was going to be. I think we were very successful in tying in Utah, and the locations there. We did a bunch of stuff where we took walls from L.A. and we bought them out to Utah, and we did the reverse angles through windows, practically people on porches.

We had a way of tying these worlds together, so when Jonathan called and said, "Hey listen, I really want to do this re-establishing of L.A. and *Westworld* on a timeline here in 2058," that to me was redefining the show again, and this is another great experience now with Howard Cummings, the current production designer, and Jonathan. It was great, a lot of discussions upfront about what the city would feel like, what's the future city going to feel like, what's L.A. going to feel like, what's our

perception? We want it to be in the *Westworld* reality, so I think we talked a bit about *Her* and Spike Jonze.

Her used Shanghai for L.A. and we came up with this similar idea, like finding a city somewhere in the world that really represented, I think more than anything, obviously Jonathan's rendition of what he'd like to see L.A. in 2058.



Image via HBO

We traveled around Asia, and within a few cities, but decided we would use a lot of elements from Singapore, and actually shot some principal photography down there as well. We took a nice scout, photographed the hell out of it, and Howard started to do some concept art, and we started to feel what the city would look like.

I think the biggest difference specifically is we have this vision of the future that's predominantly this *Blade Runner* or Ray Bradbury 3D holograph miniature of Asian noodle houses, cool neon, and cool buildings defying gravity. We all know if we grew up in a city, the cities don't really change over hundreds of years or thousands of years necessarily, not that much. This vision of the holographic future is something hopefully we don't have, hopefully we're burning ourselves out of vices and overdoses of imagery now.

So to get to the point, what did we find in Singapore? We found these beautiful vertical buildings with incredible gardens that have foliage hanging four stories down or balconies that are suspended out defying gravity with city parks 30 floors in the air. Singapore did it right. They have very limited space in that country, they think they're going to have a tremendous number of people in the future, they built ahead. They went vertical, and in going vertical, they built parks on the 30th floor on the rooftops, and they have suspension bridges between buildings with parks. That was something that we kind of took from that world.

And then I think naturally through scouting and everything, the modern aspects of Singapore at night. A lot of locations where we would have practical lighting or graphic lighting or graphic reflection to always have something in frame that kind of felt a bit like the future as much as we could or was appropriate.

Season 2 very much sets up this idea that the hosts are going outside the park. When you and Jonathan started talking about this vision of the real world and Season 3, did he already have a very specific idea of what the world

outside the park looked like or were you guys just more inspired by these trips to Singapore and wherever?

CAMERON: I think, again the best thing for me is being part of the conceptualization. I think Jonathan had an idea of what he'd like the city to look like, and I think once we made it Singapore, and once we did some concept art and figured out, "Okay, how are we going to tie the practicality of L.A. into the visual vision of Singapore?"



Image via HBO

It definitely evolved as we scouted. We traveled for 17 hours, get off the plane, we'd be out for 16 hours, go out and have dinner and drinks, get up three hours later, and scout for 16 hours. We got very excited about putting a vision together. It was a very collaborative, fun experience. I'm just very fortunate to be part of it.

It's massive. Even the first episode of this season, which you shot and Jonathan directed, it feels like a movie. There are so many different locations, and so many different sets, and you're only focusing on two of the main characters of the entire show. You can't even fit all the other characters in. What was that experience like just from a technical standpoint of juggling all of this, while also inventing a new visual language for the series a little bit?

CAMERON: Yeah. I love working and shooting with Jonathan because I know the visual bar is set so high... The challenge was, we've got the beauty of Los Angeles knowing there's going to be some CG enhancement, and then there's the practical photography in Singapore. How do we tie it all in? It was a little bit of a daunting challenge in the beginning, but I feel like once we saw a little more concept art from Howard of how to tie in.... MacArthur Park in Los Angeles is a great example of it where the drone comes and goes with the drop-off of Dolores' murderer, we kind of mapped in this version of L.A. and Singapore, and all those backgrounds.

That became the road map for me, that concept art. I'm like, "Oh, I get it." To begin to see all those elements come together, and I think lighting-wise we talked about it, and we said, "Listen we really love the look of the show that we established in 2015 on the pilot, and how do we stay consistent but update it a little bit?"

I think for Jonathan and for Lisa and the gang over there, they really do love certain classic beauty, and I think that was something that, how do we make it make a modern feel and have this kind of classic beauty? I did a number of tests with film, and we just touched on the possibility of shooting digital at night because

specifically with some of the new cameras out there you can shoot at a very high sensitivity.

Yeah, I was curious about that because I know *Westworld* largely shoots on film.

CAMERON: You can render some pretty amazing low light images. In the testing of that we loved having these brighter, punchier, snappier night wide shots and when we go on a close up, we shoot on film. Long story short on that, I knew this was going to happen. We said, “Okay, why don’t we carry a Sony Venice for the night photography, and we’ll do some big wide shots on it? And then as soon as we get on mediums and close ups we’ll switch to film,” because I think Jonathan, Lisa and myself agree that close ups look so much better on film still, and all you have to do is, do the side-by-side in any movie theater and you’ll see why.

Yeah. I was curious about that because there’s a tendency on a lot of “prestige TV” to go very dark nowadays, especially with a lot of nighttime scenes. It doesn’t feel overly brightly lit, it doesn’t feel like it’s punishing you with neon, but I do like that there’s an elegance to the nighttime scenes in the season.

CAMERON: Oh thanks, I appreciate that. That is a good way to put it. The other big thing you’ll see is the night landscape in the future, you know we can see it happening now. We’ve all grown up with the orange sodium and green mercury vapor lights at night, forever. We had to connect color temperatures at night, and it kind of defined nights around the world.



Image via HBO

Now, there’s a lot more white LED lights installed into Los Angeles in some areas. Singapore specifically also has a lot of clean white LED lights. That’s enhancing the elegant factor a little bit, it’s not the dirtier orange and green movies and shows we’ve been seeing for the last 10 years.

But then you also have in the first episode this season, Caleb, which is a human lead character. He’s a blue-collar worker, which is the first time that a lead character on the show has been from a lower class. We’ve seen so many of the rich and fabulous. What were the conversations of visualizing that character’s world?

CAMERON: Reading the first draft of episode one, and a rough outline for the season, and seeing this introduction of Aaron Paul's character Caleb was great. Just with the character fantastic. Aaron Paul, even more fantastic. It's the same themes we've been dealing with in the show up until now, and I think it's something that Jonathan and Lisa feel very strongly about as creators and writers, is that we're all stuck in our own loops, our own behavioral loops in our own lives. We might think we're free, but in many ways a lot of what we do and how we do it is predetermined.

This character is quite fascinating to me because you can see he's talking to his buddy that he went through the war with and has passed away, but it's this futuristic therapy thing where they can carry on their conversation as if he's still alive. It's fascinating. And then as we see Caleb go on and try to get work, he gets denied work, and he can't even talk to a human being. He's being rejected by a virtual assistant, and he makes a decision to make some fast money. He goes on this Rico application, which is basically like Grand Theft Auto where you can engage in crime, and go make some money, and rack up points. It's like the Uber of crime.

I love this whole thing of no matter what he does, it seems he just found out he's at a crossroad where he is rejecting this virtual relationship, and the fact that he's accepting that his fate is just really hopeless. It's just fantastic, and the moment that we shot the Aaron Paul coming around the corner with Evan dragging her body down the side of the tunnel wall, and you hear his voice, "Are you all right?" And she walks out of the darkness into the light and takes a lot to look at him, and it was just one of those things like, "Okay, this is what we're looking for." And I could see that with Jonathan and all the other people on the set that, "Holy shit, this is good." These two guys coming together, this going to be fun. He's a great addition.

Yeah, that shot is a fantastic. You directed an episode this season, I was curious how that came about because I know *Westworld* is just an insanely complicated production. It's very long, it's very grueling. It's not a small task to come on and direct one of these episodes.

CAMERON: It was interesting because when Jonathan and Lisa called for the initial scout to [serve as DP on] the first episode of Season 3 here, Jonathan had already said, "Look, we've all talked about it, and we would love for you to direct an episode. It's probably going to be Episode 4, we'll let you know, but we really want you to do it." I was like, "Great, thanks. I'd love to do it." And then I realized these are top actors on a top TV show.



Image via HBO

There's no real difference when you walk on a set with actors like that, it doesn't matter whether you're shooting a huge movie or TV show or a short film. You're walking on a set with top actors and you're directing, you better have your game going. When you've got showrunners like Jonathan and Lisa and the writing at this level, and the production design at this level, it's okay. I'm comfortable walking in and doing that very much as the DP, but suddenly I just agreed to directing Episode 4, and I realized, "Wow, this is going to be a great challenge."

Look for a spoiler-filled chat about *Westworld* Season 3 Episode 4 specifically on Collider on Sunday, after the episode airs on HBO.

