



Ice and Fire

As official stills photographer for the *Game of Thrones* TV show, Helen Sloan is in the thick of it – from the crowded studio sets in Northern Ireland to Iceland’s freezing heights and the baking sun of Morocco.

Game of Thrones has taken the world by storm – it’s broadcast in 170 countries and with 19 million viewers across all platforms, it’s HBO’s most-watched TV series. Particularly as it’s also said to be the most pirated programme of all time.

In this medieval fantasy production, adapted from the novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, clans fight over the reign of the fictional land of Westeros. Intrigue, power struggles and strong characters – in particular many powerful female leads – keep its audience rapt. The show’s unpredictability is another reason for its appeal – there are no real goodies and even main characters played by well-known actors are often killed off – in fact the more famous the actors, the more likely they are to meet a gory end. At the end of season four, 133 named characters had been killed, mostly with swords, knives, poison, arrows or fire.

The high standard of acting, design and cinematography has also been recognised by the industry – so far *Game*

of Thrones has won 114 awards – including a Golden Globe and various Emmys.

‘In this show there is something for everybody’, says Helen Sloan, the *Game of Thrones* principal set photographer. ‘From the complex stories to the cast and costumes and the fantastic backdrops and locations, there’s plenty to keep people captivated and the international and diverse fanbase is evidence of its wide appeal.’

Helen remembers having posters of actors on her bedroom wall as a teenager, thinking that one day she would like to take photos of movies – she still can’t quite believe her dream has come true. ‘When I got to photographing some of the same actors I’d had on my wall, I was a bit star struck. But you quickly realise that they’re colleagues and you simply don’t have time to be star struck. They work extremely hard and I have a huge amount of respect for them.’

Helen has been working on *Game of Thrones* since shooting the pilot and says that the look of the show along with the stills photography was a natural evolution.

‘When we shot the pilot I just did it in my own style and the photo editor loved it,’ she says. ‘The way the style of the photography developed was pretty organic. We came up with this great look by combining the stills photography and the footage. I feel very lucky that I have been given the

LEFT: A portrait of Gwendoline Christie playing the warrior Brienne of Tarth in the TV adaptation of the *Song of Fire and Ice* novels. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 200, 1/125 (q) f/8

RIGHT: Eddard Stark, played by Sean Bean in the *Godswood* for the first episode of season 1, filmed in Saintfield in Northern Ireland. D3, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II, ISO 1000, 1/100 (q) f/5.6





LEFT: Jack Gleeson is an Irish actor portraying the king Joffrey Baratheon, who claimed the Iron Throne and ruled the seven kingdoms. Photographed on set, this image has been widely used by fans of the show on social media. D800, AF-S NIKKOR 50mm f/1.4G, ISO 100, 1/125 Q f/10

RIGHT: The crew is setting up a scene near the Viti crater in Iceland to film the aftermath of the battle between the White Walkers and their army of Undead Wights and the men of the Night's Watch. D3, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 800, 1/250 Q f/5

FAR RIGHT: Richard Dormer, playing Lord Beric Dondarrion. There were a couple of lamps set up, but this dark was mainly lit by the fire. D3, AF Nikkor 85mm f/1.4D IF, ISO 2500, 1/400 Q f/3.5

opportunity to shape this look. I don't have any favourite or standard settings, because the stage and the light changes every day, so they are different for every shoot, but obviously for dark scenes I have to open the lens up as I'm shooting action and can't have the luxury of a slow shutter. As a rule, I like to keep my focus quite deep.'

After each day's shooting, Helen grades the images in postproduction, adjusting the colour, tone and contrast to match the deeply atmospheric results you see on screen.

As the unit photographer, she has to document every scene for HBO's online guides to the show. Looking at the detailed schedules, she decides with the photo editor if she should be with the Dragon or Wolf Unit, which shoot simultaneously.

'I quite often find myself running between units. It's crazy busy', she says. 'I also have to find time to grab the actors to shoot portraits in a makeshift studio for publicity stills – and then there's the behind-the-scene stuff.'

As well as for publicity purposes, the images are also used by HBO for all of the show's merchandise.

Helen has to reflect the *Game of Thrones* look as it was originally intended by the creators, but there's plenty of



opportunity to let her creativity roam.

'When we shoot the studio scenes I try to stick quite closely to the look of what the film cameras are capturing, but if we have an exterior shot I get to be more creative. I can interpret the scenes in my own way – I can choose my own angles and shoot between takes.'

Every TV and film set has a stills photographer – not just to chronicle the work, but also for the photographer's personal vision. It takes a certain skill and ability to capture dramatic images that encapsulate a story in one frame as well as work well

I get to be creative and can interpret the scenes in my own way, especially between takes, when I can choose my own angles

on posters, DVD covers and advertising.

Helen has to be ready to go at 8am, when work starts on set. She watches the rehearsals to plan where to put her cameras, observing the movement of the scene so she isn't in the way. This is harder than it may seem. 'If you walk onto an empty film set it looks massive,'

she explains, 'but by the time you have added two cameras, four grips who rig the camera, two camera operators, two camera dollies, two boom operators, the costume and make up people, myself and of course the actors, the room is full and we all struggle to find a space. I call it human origami.'

'As stills photographer, you have to be a bit of a ninja, because I have to find the third camera angle, while being invisible. Everybody has a job to do, so there has to be a lot of respect and a great deal of negotiation of who goes where.'

There is more space when filming on





location. Many of the stunning exterior shots are filmed in Northern Ireland, but Helen has also travelled to Morocco, Malta and even Iceland. 'Iceland was my favourite,' she says. The scenery was unbelievable beautiful. We filmed scenes for the first episode of season three in snowy mountains beside the Viti crater. The northeast of the island is one of my favourite places in the world; it was so quiet and perfect.

When the productions wrap at 6pm, the second part of Helen's job begins: the editing. As well as selecting, grading and retouching the images, she also has to file and meta-tag teach one, with the actors' names and any other relevant information. They're then sent off to New York.

'It's a lot of work on top of the shooting,' she says. It's all-encompassing; we all work

When the productions wrap at 6pm, for Helen the second part of her job is only starting: the editing.

long hours and miss our families, but you just have to jump in headfirst. It can be a very intense atmosphere, but there are also a lot of laughs. We are like a big family and have lots of fun. The crew and actors socialise a lot and there are some great parties. There's also a lot of kindness. You can be feeling pretty miserable, standing in a quarry in the pouring rain, knee-deep in mud and horse poo with 400 extras screaming and swinging swords with six hours to go and somebody brings you a hot cup of coffee and suddenly, it's all ok again.

We try to do nice things for each other, because little bit of friendship goes a long way. **N**



Comment on this story by visiting our Facebook page. To see extra content, download the tablet edition.



FAR LEFT: Ygritte and Jon Snow hug in a dramatic scene. No expense is spared for this series, which is known for its elaborate costumes and sets – each episode is estimated to cost around \$6m. D3, AF-S NIKKOR 70-200mm f/2.8G ED VR II, ISO 5000, 1/125 @ f/3.5

LEFT: The Iron Throne is central to the show and now also available as a replica for \$30,000 from the HBO shop. D810, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 1600, 1/50 @ f/5

BELOW: Most of the sets are in Northern Ireland, where shooting takes place between July and December with one season filmed per year. D3, AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f2.8G ED, ISO 400, 1/400 @ f/5



Lights, Camera, Action

Think you could lug all this equipment from set to set on your back? You know nothing!

I have to transport cameras and the bulky sound blimps between sets and locations, for which I use a modified dog trailer with 30cm, all-terrain wheels. The special effect guy helped me weld on a handle and change the base and now it's perfect to get my equipment round the often muddy and rough terrain.

I use the D800 for the posters and studio work because of its high resolution and the D3S on set.

It can be really tough working in, often extreme weather conditions, on the crowded set and with the low light, but I get on great with my cameras. The biggest technical challenge is the lighting. The scenes are beautifully lit – but often in



TOP: The dog trailer Helen uses to get cameras and sound blimps around the set.

quite low light because HD film cameras don't need as much. Luckily Nikon cameras are great for this. I don't think I could do *Game of Thrones* with any other camera.

I push them to the absolute limit in terms of environment and shutter activations. Nikon cameras are so well built. So far I have shot more than half a million images for *Game of Thrones* alone and the cameras are still going great and isn't that the true test of the quality of a camera?

I use Aquatech soundblimps – a casing to eliminate sounds, so the shutter noise doesn't register on the soundtrack of the film. They have buttons that correspond to the ones on the camera, so you can change the aperture, shutter speed and focus from the outside.

The lens I use most is the s24-70mm f/2.8. It's my workhorse, but my favourite lens is my 85mm f/1.4. It's a beautiful portrait lens and I love it. It's so crisp and fast it's just gorgeous.

I love the quality of the photos I get from Nikon equipment. I have worked with other cameras, but Nikon is just right for me. It's like your favourite pair of jeans that have the perfect fit.'

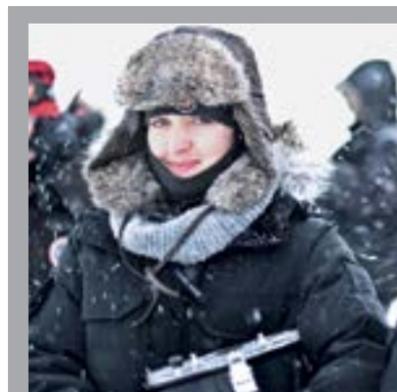


Photo: Ollie Butler



Helen Sloan
twitter.com/helenstills

CLIENTS

TV and film companies, such as HBO, Universal, Playtone, Channel 4, BBC and Sky.

WHY NIKON

I have been shooting Nikon since I got my first F3 as a teenager. I have used other brands, but Nikon has always felt right. It feels sharper and simply better and I like the ergonomics of Nikon cameras. It's great, because once you find something that works and you can rely on, it frees you to be artistic so you can concentrate on being creative.

IN THE BAG

The D3S, D3 and D800, the AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8G ED and AF Nikkor 85mm f/1.4D IF as well as Aquatech blimps to stop any sound from the camera reaching the soundtrack.

NEXT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT?

The D4S

KIT BAG



Nikon 800



Aquatech Soundblimp



AF-S NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8G ED



AF Nikkor 85mm f/1.4D IF