

Introduction

“No one will ever go see a film because the cinematography is magnificent.”

This ostensibly deflating judgment is made near the end of *Reflections* — not by a Hollywood studio executive or producer, but by the great French New Wave cinematographer Raoul Coutard. The self-effacing aphorism by Jean-Luc Godard’s longtime key collaborator reveals the most fundamental truth at the core of this book: no matter what techniques, in or out of camera, that the feature film cinematographer develops, his fundamental purpose is to support and enhance the dramatic and narrative flow of the film. Cinematography, even in all of its magical splendor, is, ultimately, merely the handmaiden of drama.

This is the simple reality that underlies the amazing revelations by the eclectic and far-flung group of image creators who are profiled here. Many books on film technique explore the myriad styles and aesthetics available to filmmakers. What gives *Reflections* its unique and exciting perspective are the detailed descriptions and revelations by notable “masters of light” as they recreate for film students vivid examples of the lighting of a single shot from their work. In other chapters they lead us through a shot-by-shot description of an extended key sequence from one of their favorite films. These tutorials are accompanied by

detailed photos and diagrams that guide us effortlessly through the sometimes-complex alchemy of the work itself.

Stephen H. Burum, ASC sets the stage in the first chapter by demonstrating how he tests a film stock. As a rationale, he uses the analogy of a Renaissance master: “Don’t you think the great fresco painters of the Sistine Chapel knew when the plaster was exactly right, and when it wasn’t?” He compares the technique of mixing pigments and plaster to the systematic exposure of multi-layered color film emulsions made by the cinematographer before beginning a new project. His metaphor is only the first of dozens of allusions to painting that these “painters of light” will explore in their individual presentations. Other chapters offer detailed descriptions of laboratory photochemical processes to control the color, density and contrast of the finished film. Also explored is the alternative method of scanning the negative to a digital intermediate for corrections.

But the heart of this book’s journey is the Virgil-like presence of gifted cinematographers who lead us through the multiple circles of image creation (which is not to imply, of course, that cinematography is a hellish pursuit). The late Jordan Cronenweth, ASC, in a chapter titled “The Single Source,” recreates a lighting setup from *Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film

that won him the first-ever ASC Award. This short chapter introduces several other themes which harmonize throughout the book. The collegial comradeship of cinematographers and the passing of the torch are abiding realities in an art that requires so many years of apprenticeship. This point is nostalgically illustrated by a photo of then-camera operator Cronenweth seated on an apple box behind a rack-over BNC camera during the production of *In Cold Blood*. He looks over his right shoulder at us. Seated to his left is camera assistant Bobby Thomas, and to the right is cinematographer Conrad Hall, ASC.

Throughout the book, cinematographers acknowledge the debt they owe to the camera artists for whom they have worked or who have guided the formation of their own aesthetic. In a chapter titled “The Moving Source,” Philippe Rousselot, ASC, AFC cites his own mentor, the late Nestor Almendros, ASC, as a seminal influence. “He put things in their proper place by maintaining... that the act of looking was more important than the existing techniques, habits and rules — you had to start by looking, period,” he insists.

Early in my own career I met the legendary Karl Struss, ASC at a museum retrospective of his still photography. A student of the Photo-Secessionist master Clarence White, Struss won the first Academy Award for cinematography for his stunning work on *Sunrise*. A few years prior to this encounter, I had served as Almendros’ camera operator on *Days of Heaven*. But it was a viewing of *The Conformist* that had held me in thrall to the mastery of the then-unknown Vittorio Storaro, and which galvanized my dream of becoming a cinematogra-

pher. The roots of love and influence among cinematographers grow deep and this book is, more than anything else, a celebration of that spirit.

Also sprinkled like spice throughout the text are cinematographers’ allusions to key films of their predecessors. Two-time Oscar winner John Toll, ASC, who worked with both Cronenweth and Conrad Hall, talks about Cronenweth’s inspiration for his work on *Blade Runner*. Initially, Toll thought to overlook the influence of Gregg Toland, ASC on this film, despite Cronenweth’s insistence. But he concludes that “when you look at *Blade Runner* you understand what he means... You see a wonderful blend of the classic, stark, high-contrast compositions... and highly original contemporary lighting.”

Owen Roizman, ASC tells a different story in the chapter “Hard & Soft.” He regrets how few top feature film cinematographers he was able to study under, since much of his experience was gained while shooting commercials. “Before I shot *The French Connection*,” he says, “I had never lit anyone sitting in a car... and I didn’t know how to go about it.... So, I used to take my wife out to the garage and shoot her with a few small lights. We’d practice some of the scenes that I was going to have to face with Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider.” Roizman received the first of his five Oscar nominations for this film.

Throughout the book, a constant refrain is sung by all of these distinguished artists — that the cinematographer’s greatest goal in making feature films is the exploration and revelation of the landscape of the human face. Pyrotechnics in camera movement and

arresting compositions aside, these artists are, finally, portrait painters, the contemporary embodiment of a centuries-old tradition. In a paean to the use of his signature light, the Chinese lantern, Philippe Rousselot, AFC rhapsodizes that “when you see the purity of a face, you shouldn’t light it from the side or too far away.” He talks about the paintings of the great artist of Arezzo, Piero della Francesca, and his works’ glowing light. “You know, I have always wanted to light the actors from the inside. Imagine that you could make them swallow some kind of luminous potion that would make them light up. It would be *magnifique*.” Likewise, in a chapter titled “Anamorphic Portrait,” Steven Poster, ASC further celebrates the human face by recreating a dramatic close-up from *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

If light is the cinematographer’s elixir, is shadow his toxin? Rembrandt and Caravaggio, both masters of darkness, are two painters who are touchstones for the work of Henri Alekan. In a chapter titled “*Beauty and the Beast*,” the legendary master takes us through a brief history of French cinema, from the days of his silent-era apprenticeship in the glass-ceilinged stages of Billancourt Studio, to his stunning work on Wim Wenders’ film *Wings of Desire*. Starting as assistant to the German émigré Eugene Shuftan, Alekan rose to become a collaborator with Jean Cocteau. Alekan explains that “everything that is shadow, penumbra and darkness suggests a dramatization of the subject. I need no further proof of this than the immense work of great painters.” His own painterly book *Des Lumières et des Ombres (About Light and Shadows)* offers comprehensive metaphysics of Manichean dimensions. In the

very next chapter, “Filling the Shadows,” Fred Elmes, ASC addresses screen darkness. He believes that “by not explaining everything with light, darkness gives my imagination an opening. Darkness is like leaving stones unturned.”

Despite the inherent drama of light and shadow as key elements of the cinematographer’s repertoire, there are many other techniques that can add subtle modulation and definition to a film. In following chapters, three giants of American mainstream film — Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC, Haskell Wexler, ASC and Laszlo Kovacs, ASC — give detailed and articulate analyses of their unique approaches to American storytelling. Zsigmond’s vanguard experiments in image manipulation defined the restlessness of Seventies cinema just as much as his current classicism pays homage to his Hungarian roots. Wexler’s commitment to political and social issues informs the aesthetics and style of his theatrical work, which is always grounded in an arresting realism. This ethos is punctuated by his whimsical recollection of advice he received from an old sailor. Wexler reveals that while talking to the sailor, “[I] was going on and on about politics. [The sailor] turned to me and said, “Kid, why don’t you learn to tie a proper bowline first, and then we can talk about changing the world.” Wexler, who has since won three Oscars, has certainly earned the right to try to change the world, and he explains the joys of shooting DV as a run-and-gun documentary filmmaker. Kovacs, in “Candlelit Dinner,” guides us light by light, filter by filter, gel by gel through a deceptively simple but elegant two-shot of UCLA students at a dinner table. Its thoughtful simplicity is a hallmark of this artist’s style.

In three more stunning chapters, Allen Daviau, ASC, Darius Khondji, ASC, AFC and Vittorio Storaro, ASC, AIC take us on a detailed journey through some of their signature films. Daviau tells how the necessity of shooting a key scene for *Fearless* at a cramped practical location demanded that he reach deep into his imagination to solve a seemingly impossible lighting problem. The timely accident of seeing a shaft of real sunlight penetrate the tiny room while he was on a location scout inspired him to create a simple but elegant solution. Khondji leads us through a shot-by-shot odyssey of light and shadow during the scene in *Seven* where two detectives spot a serial killer in the corridor of a seedy hotel, prompting a memorable foot chase through hallways, down stairs and into alleys. Each setup is a blazing explosion of contrasting color and movement. In the next chapter, Storaro, the “cinematographer’s cinematographer,” creates a veritable cosmology of color as he explains the life “journey” of Pu Yi in *The Last Emperor*.

But finally, it is Raoul Coutard who brings us back to earth in his chapter, titled simply “*Breathless*.” He talks about a 1993 film, *The Birth of Love*, that tested even his ability to improvise. “There was no way of knowing what the actors were going to do.... My lighting had to cover all of the possibilities. And if an actor happened to walk toward a light source, the gaffer had to put his hand out to block it.” This anecdote becomes a departure point for a nostalgic but closely scrutinized look at a famous sequence from the New Wave classic that launched the

career of Jean-Paul Belmondo and made the luminous Jean Seberg a cultural icon. Coutard reveals how Godard insisted that the film be photographed as a “reportage” (documentary), handheld, without lights or direct sound (Coutard’s camera was the cacophonous but reliable Éclair Cameflex CM3). The centerpiece of the film is a 23-minute scene between Belmondo and Seberg, staged in a hotel room. Nothing and everything happens here. Coutard points out that “you’ll notice that the rhythm of the actors’ speech is peculiar; there’s often a pause between lines. That’s because all the dialogue was spoken by Jean-Luc during the shot, and the actors would repeat each of his phrases.”

The reductive aesthetic that permeates the very emulsion of *Breathless*, a film now more than 40 years old, demonstrates once more that the essence of cinematography is nothing more than intense observation and the sensitive use of appropriate tools to capture the truth of the drama. The Danish Dogme movement, with its technical innovation of employing small digital video cameras and accompanying minimalist aesthetic, has a clear kinship to the “Nouvelle Vague.” New techniques build on older ones, yet it is imagination, not equipment, that creates memorable films. The sensitive eye of the cinematographer is the modulating instrument; the elaborate equipment is only a means to an end. Godard himself had the last word with his famous statement that “all you need to make a film is a girl and a gun.” Of course, he should have added “a cinematographer to capture it.”

To the Reader

“Film is light”

— Federico Fellini

*“The audience’s identification with the actor is really an
identification with the camera”*

— Walter Benjamin

Like all artists, cinematographers have a deeply personal approach. They offer their unique perspective to the director and to the story. I hope that this book will contribute to your appreciation for the boundless variety of lighting, the wonderful diversity of cinematographers and the depth of their creative work.

Don’t be intimidated

This book starts and ends with the emotional content of film images, yet as befits a technological art form, some of this book is technical and some of it is aesthetic. If you’re a poet, don’t be intimidated by the numbers but start with the diagrams instead, and imagine the flow of light across the set. If you’re an engineer, don’t be intimidated by the aesthetics: look at the images and feel the emotions they convey to you. How flashing or bleach-bypassing work is not as important as what the resulting images look like, and the emotions they evoke.

Read any which way

Although each chapter makes a course-like progression from technical basics to sequence design, my hope is that you will feel free to skip around to a particular theme or cinematographer. I have tried to write the chapters so that they can be read independently, and there are bold headings to facilitate jumping to your favorite topic or ferreting out a tidbit of interest. Once again, the best place to start is the images: the workprint frames, movie stills, even the lighting and technical diagrams.

Hybrid Cinema

I strongly believe that the future of cinema will be hybrid, a mixture of photochemical and digital techniques creatively applied to shooting, post-producing and projection. I regret that I did not have time to cover the digital ventures of cinematographers like Yves Angelo, John Bailey, ASC, Anthony Dod Mantle, Tak Fujimoto, ASC, Jean-Pierre Sauvaire and David Tattersall, BSC. I

would also have liked to depict the digital intermediate processes developing at companies like Duboicolor, Eclair and EFilm. I hope to make up for this omission in future publications. Nevertheless,

whether you're shooting film or digital, it's still all about light, and the knowledge imparted here applies to anyone setting up a shot on a bright location or a dark set.