CHAPTER TEN

The Cinematographer

The cinematographer transposes the written word into a visual storytelling. Academy Award winner (for *The Godfather* trilogy) Gordon Willis saw himself as a visual psychiatrist using his talent to evoke memories, identification, and emotions: "You are moving the audience around as you see fit" to put them into the right position to see and feel the best performance.

Actor Michael Caine tells the story of watching the day's takes (called the *dailies*) with his director. The director commented that he hadn't seen something Michael did during a scene. When Caine asked him where he was sitting during the take, the director said he was over to the side. To which Caine replied, "That's why you didn't see it. The camera is over here directly in front. You didn't see what the camera saw." In today's digital world, that interchange would not occur because the directors watch the entire shoot on a monitor in order to see *exactly* what the live camera sees. Recall my earlier comment that it is the camera angle, not the viewing angle, that matters.

Another Academy Award cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) suggests that if you consider the director to be the conductor of the orchestra, then the cinematographer is the concertmaster or first violinist. He supervises the camera team, lighting

crew, and a team of *grips* who are responsible for moving the cameras and tripods into the right positions. When overhead shots are called for, the grips set up a *dolly* and build tracks, making sure the crane is moved to the correct spot.[1]

In order to attain the meaningful visual design, the cinematographer not only works closely with the director, but also the production designer. The *production designer* guides key personnel in other departments (such as the art department, including construction and decoration; costume designer; key hair and makeup stylists; special effects director; and a locations manager) to establish a unified look for the film. Finally, the cinematographer works with the film editor to make sure the chosen shots contain the right color and correct density for each scene. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro likes to refer to this group as the "coauthors" along with the screenwriters.

Many times directors insist on working with the same cinematographer on their movies. Among the most notable are Stephen Spielberg with Janusz Kaminski, Ingmar Bergman with Sven Nykvist, Bernardo Bertolucci with Vittorio Storaro, and Orson Welles with Gregg Toland. The same is true for the film editors, although they are less known to the public. Two of the long-time editing combinations are: Martin Scorsese and editor Thelma Schoonmaker (Scorsese at one time was one of Schoonmaker's assistants in the cutting room), and Quentin Tarantino used editor

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1 A "dolly" is simply a wheeled platform on which the camera is placed. Often the platform runs on a track alongside the character or object being filmed.

Sally Menke on all of his films until she died suddenly in 2010.

Although *The Guardian's* movie critic Jordan Hoffman is only referring to the director, it is obvious the cinematographer had a big part in creating the following described scene in *I Smile Back* (2015): "Laney's rock bottom – well, her first rock bottom anyway – is a nicely photographed haze of pill and booze gobbling mixed with one of the creepiest scenes of self-gratification put to film. Director Adam Salky has an eye for camera placement, holding close on faces and making warm interiors feel menacing."[2] The reviewer believed the movie as a whole was only average, but he made it clear there was an element (the cinematography) that viewers could really appreciate.

Emphasizing that the cinematographer's job is to understand the story and find the images to tell it, three-time Oscar winner Conrad Hall (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *American Beauty*, *Road to Perdition*) says: "I think visually so that if you turned off the soundtrack, people would stick around and figure out what was going on." Another award winner Haskell Wexler (*Bound for Glory*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Blaze*) described how the lighting used in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* caused a subliminal effect on the audience.

Three-time Oscar winner Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Now*, *Reds*, *The Last Emperor*) took time off from films to research the meanings of color and light. He published his findings and thoughts in a must-read book for all film

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2 *The Guardian*, U.S. online version, January 25, 2015.

aficionados: *Writing with Light, Colours, and the Elements*. According to Storaro, the color scale with meanings is:

"BLACK is the color of Conception

RED is the color of Birth

ORANGE is the color of Growth

YELLOW is the color of Awareness

GRAY is the color of Waiting

GREEN is the color of Knowledge

BLUE is the color of Intelligence

INDIGO is the color of Consciousness

VIOLET is the color of Maturity

the sum of these colors is

WHITE, the color of LIFE."[3]

A simple instance of this in use can be found in *The Last Emperor* (1987). The movie's first scenes were shot with a red filter, indicating birth or beginning, then yellow became the

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3 Vittorio Storaro, Writing with Light, *Colours and the Elements* (Milan, Italy: Mondadori Electa, 2010).

dominant color as the young emperor becomes aware of his surroundings and position. Peter O'Toole, who played the teacher, brings a bicycle to the palace for the young emperor. Storaro required the bicycle be green. Examples of art within the art.

Other cinematographers use the same colors for other reasons. The most frequent is the use of a yellow tint to convey a time past. (Examples: *The Godfather* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*)

In addition to conveying symbolic meaning as described earlier, color can be used to provide a flow of the narrative and, like hard and soft light, to control the mood and tone of the scene. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), there is a scene describing how Benjamin's friend Daisy gets hurt. Benjamin is narrating the story and provides a simultaneous description of the facts transitioning back and forth between the story of a woman on the way to work and all the little incidents that occurred in that process and Daisy and her friend at rehearsal. The scenes with Daisy are in full color while the scenes involving the woman have a dark patina that makes the shots appear to be almost in black and white with a touch of color. This tonal distinction aids the viewer in following along by distinguishing the two scenarios.

Lighting

In a May 2004 article in the International Cinematographers Guild (ICG) magazine, writer Bob Fisher reports that just before receiving his first Academy Award for *Apocalypse Now*, Vittorio Storaro said:

> "To me, making a film is like resolving conflicts between light and dark, cold and warmth, blue and orange or other contrasting colors. There should be a sense of energy, or change of movement. A sense that time is going on — light becomes night, which reverts to morning. Life becomes death. Making a film is like documenting a journey and using light in the style that best suits that particular picture... the concept behind it."[4]

The cinematographer's primary tools are the camera with its lenses and set lighting. Although sometimes there may seem to be more, there are only six basic variables to lighting a scene:

- the type of light (i.e., hard or soft);

- the texture;

- the intensity;

- the direction from which it is coming;

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4 www.cameraguild.com/magazinestoo101.htm.

- the height; and

- the color.

For a number of these variables, there are numerous variations on a spectrum. Each lighting variable helps to convey the message of the film. We will not go into the details of the effect of each lighting technique here, but suffice to say that each one can help direct the viewer's attention, show the point of view, and create a mood or emotion. Lighting can also help to soften or exaggerate an actor's natural appearance. Often, just from the contrast and dissolve of the lighting in a particular scene the viewer can begin to figure out what is coming next.

Once the cinematographer has found the desired lighting balance, it is incumbent upon them to maintain a continuity from shot to shot. A change of the camera position must be accomplished without a major change in the light value. Obviously, if sunlight or moonlight is coming through a window, the light will change slightly based upon room location. But if the camera is switching over-the-shoulder shots, there should be no material changes in the lighting. Occasionally a viewer might notice a close-up shot seems brighter. This adds to the viewer's perception of being right in the middle of the conversation. It adds a little more reality of presence.

A hard light properly placed creates shadows. It gives an ominous feel. "The more intense and sharp the Energy vibrant with emotions, such as visible light, the deeper and denser the Shadow. ... Shadow has always been used

to visualize the dramas, anxieties and emotions of man."[5] Today's cinematographers learned from old film noir movies how to effectively use single-source lighting and how to use darkness as an important element. For example, diffuse lighting can create a soft, cool feel that subliminally communicates the sense of menace in a character.

The same visual lighting device or effect can have more than one meaning. Dark images may indeed be a sign of danger or evil; they can also reflect a character's emotion, such as sadness or loneliness.

The combination of lighting with creative framing can result in dramatic effects. Consider this excerpt from *New York Times* critic, A. O. Scott's review (May 1, 2014) of *Ida* as he beautifully describes the art found on the screen, reflecting a careful corroboration between cinematographer and director:

> "Filmed in the unusual, boxy aspect ratio of 1.37:1, and most often deployed in static long shots, the film's images sometimes suggest Vermeer lighting with the color taken away, and the compositions manage to seem at once classical and off-handed, with the subjects often located in the screen's two bottom quadrants. As in Bresson, the effect is to draw the viewer's eye into the beauty of the image while simultaneously maintaining a contemplative distance from the drama.

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5 Storaro, Writing with Light, Colours and the Elements, 12.

The director never presumes access to the inner lives of his characters. He keeps them low in the frame, with unusually ample space above their heads, creating a kind of cathedral effect. Ida and Wanda can seem small and alone, lost in a vast and empty universe. But their surroundings often achieve a quiet grandeur, an intimation of divine presence."

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Vittorio Storaro that provides tremendous insight into the preproduction process:

"Photography really means writing with light. . . in the sense that I'm trying to express something that is inside of me. With my sensibility, my structure, my cultural background, I'm trying to express what I really am. I am trying to describe the story of the film through the light. I try to have a parallel story to the actual story so that through light and color you can feel and understand, consciously and unconsciously, much more clearly what the story is about.

  As soon as I read the script and I speak with the main auteur of the film, the director, and I have the first direction about where the movie should be going, I try to find a way to understand how to conceptualize an image, from the photographic point of view, of the story itself. I try to find what is the main idea and how it can be represented in

a symbolic, emotional, psychological, realistic and physical way. That's my approach.

Light is energy. . .Light and color send vibrations back to our body. They affect our metabolism and hence what we perceive. ...Changes of light temperature change the mood and message. ...So you should be very strong in selecting only that kid of light, that kind of tonality, that kind of feeling and that kind of color that you think is right for that story. ...I am talking about the unity of the work itself." [6]

6 Dennis Schaefer and Larry Salvato, *Masters of Light: Conversations with Contemporary Cinematographers* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984), 219–232.