THE ART OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

by Patrick Keating

I watch the Academy Awards every year. For me, the high point usually arrives about halfway through the ceremony, when they announce my favorite award: Best Cinematography. Of course, I then will stick around for minor awards like Best Picture, but the suspense is often over. Ever since I was a child, I have always loved the pictorial aspects of the cinema, and the film with the best cinematography is often the film that best fulfills the cinema’s potential as a pictorial art form.

For my favorite category, the Oscars usually reward splashy, spectacular films like Memoirs of a Geisha or The Aviator. However, most cinematographers insist that the art of cinematography is not necessarily an art of spectacle. In fact, if you ask a group of cinematographers (also known as DPs, or directors of photography) to describe their work, the typical response will sound like this: “When people tell me they thought the film was beautiful, then I know that I failed. Good cinematography is invisible.” Such a response might suggest that cinematographers are paragons of modesty, but they are actually a very confident group, quick to cite Rembrandt and Caravaggio as the distinguished forebears of their craft. So what is it that makes cinematography an art?

Decades ago, Hollywood cinematographers defined the art of cinematography as an art of storytelling. Rather than distract the audience with spectacle, the cinematographer’s job is to keep the audience’s attention rapt on the unfolding narrative. This does not mean that style should be neutral. Quite the contrary: the key to the art form is modulation. All stories are about change; as the stories change, the style should change. A well-photographed film is a film that shifts smoothly from comedy to drama, action to romance, always keeping the mood of the cinematography in accord with the fluctuating arc of the story. When no one notices the cinematography, it is because the images have set the right tone for the story, no matter how many moods the story may present. The tools of cinematography may have changed over the years, especially with the wide adoption of digital techniques, but most Hollywood cinematographers still adhere to the basic principles practiced during the Studio era.

For instance, consider the 2007 film Atonement, photographed by Northern Ireland’s Seamus McGarvey. The film was nominated for Best Cinematography, largely on the strength of a single spectacular shot depicting the evacuation of Dunkirk. While the shot is certainly masterful, McGarvey’s artistry can also be found in the film’s subtle details. The story presents events from three different time periods, and each period has a distinctive look. For the first period, set in 1935, McGarvey did something that sounds a little strange: he placed a Christian Dior stocking behind the camera lens. Because the stocking is completely out of focus, it does not turn the image into a blurred abstraction. Rather, the fashionable French hosiery enhances the image by giving it a soft, hazy glow. When the film shifts to the second period (1940), McGarvey takes the stocking out, and uses a filter to produce a subtler soft-focus effect. For the end of the film, set several decades later, McGarvey eliminated the filtration to produce a cleaner, harder look. The audience is not supposed to notice these shifts—it would be very distracting if we were all thinking about the stocking behind the lens!—but the patterned modulation in visual style heightens the story’s shifts in theme and tone.

When it comes to modifying the image, cinematographers have many variables to consider, including the choice of film stocks, the control of lighting, and the manipulation of the image in post-production. Steven Spielberg’s cinematographer of more than a decade, Janusz Kaminski, is famous for experi-
menting with different film stocks. Their 2005 film Munich was set in several different countries, and Kamiński varied the look of the film by using five different film stocks, each one differing from the others in terms of color, contrast, and grain. During the classical studio period, cinematographers only had a handful of stocks to choose from. Now, cinematographers like Kamiński can choose among dozens of options—or they could choose to shoot the film in high-definition digital video, which further expands the choices available to these painters of light. Last year’s Oscar winner, Slumdog Millionaire, combined traditional 35mm film shooting with hours of footage shot on handheld digital video cameras, a combination that results in the film’s distinctively kinetic collage style. Going in the other direction, Christopher Nolan’s summer blockbuster The Dark Knight, mixes 35mm footage with an even larger film format—Imax—to heighten the grandeur of the film’s action scenes, most notably in the exhilarating sequences of Batman swooping into an illuminated Hong Kong skyline.

In addition to supervising the camera crew, the DP is in charge of dozens of members of the lighting crew (including gaffers, best boys, and electricians). In fact, many cinematographers believe that lighting is their most important task, and it happens before an image is ever captured by a lens or the director shouts, “Action.” During the classic studio period, glamorous lighting was the norm, as evidenced by the iconic faces of the great silver screen divas, such as Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich, and Greta Garbo. But contemporary films are much more likely to sacrifice the artifice of glamour in the name of realism. Many cinematographers cite Gordon Willis’s work in the first two Godfather movies as a turning point for this transition. Instead of softening the actors’ features with bright frontal lights, Willis lit them from above, casting dark shadows over their eyes and bringing out the wrinkles on their brows. Ironically, though Willis’s work has proven to be among the most important contributions in the “look” of contemporary American cinema, he was not even nominated for an Academy Award in 1972—though the Academy recently redressed that oversight by giving Willis an honorary Oscar for his lifetime of achievement. Another important innovator in the move toward realism over glamour was Conrad Hall, who won three Academy Awards over the course of a long career, including a posthumous award for The Road to Perdition. In addition to using the somber shadows that had long been associated with the gangster pic, Hall developed a carefully calibrated color design for Perdition, as when the domi-
nant palette of desaturated grays shifts to garish reds and blues in order to create a seedy atmosphere for a crucial murder scene. The transition is as striking as the moment when Dorothy steps out of black-and-white Kansas into Technicolor Oz.

Once the negative is exposed, the film gets sent to the laboratory for processing. For the last one hundred years, cinematographers have exerted control of a film's final image with careful post-production manipulations. In the silent era, DPs consulted with lab personnel to determine how much to "push" or "pull" the negative, thereby substantially lightening or darkening the overall effect. Digital technology has revolutionized a cinematographer's ability to secure a desired look. For proof, look only to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, shot by Andrew Lesnie. Although the film is best known for its eye-catching special effects (such as the computer generated images of Gollum), Jackson and Lesnie also use the new tools to extend a much older tradition—the tradition of modulating cinematic style in various ways to fit the ever-changing mood of the story. Using digital color correction tools, the pair chose vibrant hues for the pastoral Shire, a desaturated palette for the somber kingdom of Rohan, and bold oranges and blacks for Mordor. In achieving a cohesive look for Middle Earth across this epic nine-hour film, one might be surprised to learn that Lesnie and Jackson shot much of the film on standard 35mm film stock, using digital technologies to enhance the image and amplify the moods.

Having trained as a cinematographer myself, I remain endlessly fascinated by cinematographers' ability to solve complicated technical problems. As a film historian, I am equally interested in film as a major form of cultural expression. In my film studies courses, we study how the smallest aspects of film style can have a large impact on the meanings of the works, just as a scholar of literature might study meter and rhyme in order to grasp the significance of a poem.

For film scholars and cinephiles the world over, thanks to a parade of Oscar-vying titles, dreary December and January remain the brightest months of the movie-going year. I have come to accept that critical buzz magnetically attaches to arresting performances and daring directors. However, my love for the movies, both professionally and personally, rests in watching the skilled artisans behind the camera achieve success in what for many remains an overlooked art.

*The Road to Perdition* earned an Academy Award for cinematography.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Patrick Keating, assistant professor of communication, teaches courses in film studies and video production and chairs the interdisciplinary minor in film studies. He earned a B.A. (Film Studies) from Yale University, a M.F.A. (Film Production) from the University of Southern California, and a Ph.D. (Communication Arts) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His recent book, *Hollywood Lighting From the Silent Era to Film Noir*, was published in 2009 by Columbia University Press in the Film and Culture Series. Among many, his two favorite movies are *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960) and *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949).