Cinematographic Techniques

In Film and Video

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

This work will be an analysis of cinematography and how cinematographic styles work; it will show the work of Conrad Hall in his movies *Road to Perdition* and also *American Beauty.* First, it will describe Conrad Hall as a person and how he became the great cinematographer he is and was. Second, it will treat how cinematographic styles can be used and after this it will show how they were used in *Road to Perdition.* It will show how Conrad Hall used for example the depth of field, the focus, the lighting and the camera movement for this movie and how they have an influence on the story.

CONRAD HALL

The time from the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1970s was a good time for American cinematographers, because they were called by a new generation of directors to visualize certain film genres in a new way. Amongst these prestigious cinematographers who came out in this time, was a man called Conrad Hall.[i]

Conrad Hall (June 21, 1926 – January 4, 2003) was born in Tahiti as the son of the writer and author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, James N. Hall. He studied filmmaking at the USC and he founded a small production company with two fellow students. They were hired to make industrial films, TV commercials and to shoot location footage for feature films. In the early 1960s Hall was started to get hired as camera assistant and so he worked his way up to be a camera operator. He started getting credit for his work as a cinematographer and he won the Academy Award for best Cinematography for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), American Beauty (1999)* and *Road to Perdition (2002)* and he is a member of the A.S.C., the American Society of Cinematographers.[ii]

"Cinematography is just the language of storytelling; it's not academics, it's not literature, it's just pictures," he once explained. "Of course, it's a very complex language. The piano has only 88 keys, but just think about what they can do. Likewise, the few things that cinematographers have to work with can create nuances in the story that are infinite and just as complex as music." [iii]

Hall was asked once, how he knows where he has to point his camera, he answered: "I point it at the story. I'm not trying to characterize the people in the film; the actors do that. I'm trying to frame them in an appropriate emotional context for the scenes." Conrad Hall saw himself as a storyteller, which is not surprising as the son of writer James N. Hall, he said "I found that I could be a storyteller like my father, but by using visuals." [iv]

Paul Newman was so impressed by Conrad Hall after working with him on *Harper* and *Cool Hand Luke,* so he hired him to work on *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which ended up to be Conrad Halls first work where he received an Academy Award for Cinematography.

> *"Cinematography is infinite in its possibilities... much more so than music or language.""* – Conrad Hall [vi]

CINEMATOGRAPHIC STYLES AND TECHNIQUES

"Cinematography is the art and craft of the authorship of visual images for the cinema extending from conception and pre-production through post-production to the ultimate presentation of these images. All and any processes, which may affect these images, are the direct responsibility and interest of the cinematographer. Cinematography is not a subcategory of photography. Rather, photography is but one craft, which the cinematographer uses in addition to other physical, organizational, managerial, interpretive, and image manipulating techniques to affect one coherent process. Cinematography is a creative and interpretative process, which culminates in the authorship of an original work rather than the simple recording of a physical event. The images which the cinematographer brings to the screen come from the artistic vision, imagination, and skill of the cinematographer working within a collaborative relationship with fellow artists." [vii]

This is a definition of cinematography by the American Society of Cinematographers itself, the most highly reputed guild of cinematographers. They see the cinematography as an art process, that exists through the whole production of a film and that everything that happens connected to cinematography, is the responsibility of the cinematographer. Cinematography is further not like photography; the cinematographer uses more different techniques like the physical, managerial and image manipulating technique. The images that are brought to the screen of a cinema, are the creation of the vision, imagination and skill of a cinematographer.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC STYLES AND TECHNIQUES

Cinematography techniques are of vital importance to any filmmaker as they help tell the story of the film in the most effective manner possible. As a cinematographer, it is important to learn the most precise and effective cinematography techniques to not only do the job effectively, but to keep up with the ever-evolving world of cinematography techniques. Cinematography is often defined as 'painting with light' and as such, it is important to remember that it is a discipline that is both technique and art. Cinematographers often use the following five cinematography techniques. [viii]

DIGITAL VIDEO LIGHTING

Lighting is of course one of the most paramount aspects of cinematography – in fact, it is probably the single most important element that needs to be successfully achieved for a filmmaker to create the kind of film he or she desires. With the plethora of digital video cameras flooding the market in the last ten years, many amateur and professional filmmakers alike have had to struggle with learning how to properly light a scene shot with a digital camera. Some filmmakers believe that a digital video can be shot with inferior cinematography and still appear comparable to an actual film in the end. This is not the case. The rule for successful digital video lighting is simple: a digital video has to be lit like it was shot on film for it to appear as though it was shot on film. There is no shortcut around this and every cinematographer knows this. Cameras come and go, but the tried and tested techniques are permanent.

THREE POINT LIGHTING TECHNIQUE

The standard lighting technique used by cinematographers is known as the three point lighting technique. It is named as such because it includes three separate lights positioned to illuminate the subject being filmed. It can be adjusted to enhance or diminish light ratios, shadows, shading, etc. The three lights involved with this standard technique are known as the key light, the fill light and the backlight. The key light is the primary lighting device used to illuminate the subject being filmed from the front. The fill light is typically placed at an angle and adds to the lighting in order to achieve the desired effect. The backlight is, of course, shone from behind and focuses on creating a contour of the person or scene being filmed.

SIZE OF SHOT

Another technique that has a profound effect on the way a film is perceived is the size of the shot. For example, a subject being shot at close range will have a much more dramatic and intimate effect on the viewer than a scene shot from several hundred feet away. The most common shot sizes utilized by cinematographers are the following: extreme close-up, close-up, medium shot, long shot, and establishing shot. Most of these are self-explanatory, with the establishing shot being a shot that indicates to the viewer that change of location or time has occurred.

Matte

Matte is an old technique used by cinematographers and film editors that combines two separate shots or images into one shot. This is generally applied to situations where an actor must be placed in a different environment than that in which they were originally shot. This was particularly popular back in the 70s and 80s where many television shows and films depicted characters in locations created separately during production. For example, many of the *Superman* films show Superman flying through space. Of course, the actor did not fly through space but was superimposed over a background, which made it look as though he was flying through open air. This technique is being slowly phased out with the advent of green screens and other technology that seamlessly blend actors with any type of background.

Forced Perspective

Forced perspective is a technique applied by not only cinematographers, but engineers, architects and even army personnel. Simply defined, it is an optical illusion that convinces the viewer that they are seeing an object (or person) from a distance that is in fact completely different from the actual distance at which the object is placed. This is achieved by using objects that are not of standard size, which manipulates the brain into thinking the object is farther or closer than it is in reality. For example, recall the old monster movies of the 1940s in which it appeared as though giant monsters (like Godzilla) were attacking hordes of civilians. In actuality, these giant creatures were simply large dolls or models shot at a distance, which made them look like they were towering over their victims below. This is the most common example of forced perspective in modern cinema.

ROAD TO PERDITION

The description is taken from the movie *Road to Perdition* itself and uses techniques and styles from the book "Cinematography – Theory and Practice" by Blain Brown and "Cinematography for Directors" by Jacqueline Frost.[ix]

Road to Perdition is one of the great movies, which shows the great art of cinematography done by Conrad Hall from 2002. Hall photographed the second film directed by Mendes, the first film was *American Beauty*, the period gangster movie *Road to Perdition*, produced by Richard Zanuck, who said, "With *Road to Perdition*, you could virtually take every frame of his work and blow it up and hang it over your fireplace. It was like Rembrandt at work." [x]

Based on a graphic novel authored by Max Allan Collins, *Road to Perdition* is a story about the Irish Mafia set in 1930s Chicago. The core plot of the movie is the relationship between fathers and sons; after his professional life tragically impacts his family life, hit man Michael Sullivan sets out on a joyless journey of self-discovery with his son, Michael Jr. Along the way, Sullivan must come to terms with his adoptive father, Irish crime lord John Rooney. "*Road to Perdition* is a period movie in which there are no double-breasted, pin-striped suits and no spats," Mendes says. "I was trying to get away from all the clichés of the gangster genre." [xi]

"The thing that makes this picture work so well is a kind of honesty," Hall says. "It's a sort of honest reality that doesn't try to be theatrical in any way. There is no blue moonlight, no green vistas, none of that kind of stuff. The film has very carefully crafted compositions, it's meticulously cut, and it's paced very gently and slowly — all of which is good for the story." [xii] Of his photography, Hall says that "I'm not trying to characterize the people in the film; the actors do that. I'm trying to frame them in an appropriate emotional context for the scenes. How are their characters behaving in those scenes? Are they behaving like human beings? My goal is to make

a given scene emotionally accessible for the audience. I just try to make it real. Whatever the story is trying to say to the audience dictates to me the mood I should use to reach that audience. In this case, the film is about a father who's trying to raise his son so that the boy won't grow up to be like him. It's a powerful story with great performances, but it's not a fun-and-games type of movie. It's a stark story set in the Depression, and it has a serious message." [xiii]

The inspiration for the lighting in the scenes for the movie came from the art of the painter Edward Hopper, particularly Hopper's "New York Movie" from 1939. Cinematographer Conrad Hall and director Sam Mendes wanted to create atmospheric lighting for the film's scenes that are similar to Hoppers paintings, applying a "less is more" attitude in terms of lighting. Hall also shot scenes that were wide-open with only one point in the depth of field sharply focused. Hall considered the technique to provide an emotional dimension to the scenes. The cinematographer also used unconventional techniques and materials to create unique lighting effects. One of Hall's methods was to use black silk in daylight exterior scenes to filter the light enough to create an in-shade look.

THE MELANCHOLY WORKS OF PAINTER EDWARD HOPPER WERE A MAJOR INFLUENCE ON THE LOOK OF THE FILM. THIS SHOT AND THE NEXT OF SULLIVAN AND HIS SON MICHAEL JR. (TYLER HOECHLIN) SHARING A MEAL IN A DINER OFFER A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THE HOPPER AESTHETIC, IN WHICH LIGHT AND SPACE ARE USED TO CONVEY EMOTIONAL SUBTEXT. [xiv]

Hall purposely distanced the camera from Hanks' character, Michael Sullivan, at the beginning of the film to establish the perspective of Sullivan's son, who is unaware of his father's true nature. Hanks's character was filmed as partially obscured and seen through doorways, and his entrances and exits took place in shadows. A wide lens was used to maintain a distance from the character.

But Conrad Hall was not just working on the camera; he also worked with costume designer Albert Wolsky and production designer Dennis Gassner to give the film a cold look. "The palette for the movie was very muted," Mendes says. "Very early on, Conrad and I talked about creating a sense of great contrast within images by using hard light from the side and chiaroscuro. We wanted dark backgrounds and dark sets with dark, muted greens and greys. Albert Wolsky's costumes are all very controlled, with soft outlines and very soft silhouettes." Hall offers, "I felt that a less

colourful palette was best suited to the story. The film's period trappings — the cars, the costumes and the architecture — dictated much of the look, so the photography was more about capturing our story in that heavy Depression atmosphere in a naturalistic way." [xv]

Hall is also a person who uses methods that others would say are unorthodox in some way, that make his lighting effects very unique. "He's totally different from most cameramen, and he uses a lot of trickery that he's learned over the years," says Bill Young, Conrad Hall's camera assistant for *Road to Perdition*. "For example, he'll use black silk for daylight exteriors because it cuts a perfect amount of light to make a scene look as though it's in the shade. White silk makes light flare, but black silk doesn't bring all that flare back and doesn't fill the whole scene up with fill light. On this film, we never shot in harsh sunlight; we always used black silks to dim down the scene and then relit it the way Conrad wanted it to look. He also uses different papers and double softs, and mixes hard and soft light almost constantly." [xvi]

"Conrad is an intuitive creature," affirms Mendes. "I knew from working with him on American Beauty that the most important thing for him is a kind of telepathy on the day you're shooting. However much you plan with Conrad, he will always want to be left free to improvise on the day of shooting. He understands that a pretty image is not something that advertises itself; beauty is in the textures of light and the way light hits a wall, or it's in the 'weight' of the image and how people move through space." [xvii]

AMERICAN BEAUTY

The description is taken from *American Beauty* is taken from the movie itself and uses techniques and styles from the book "Cinematography – Theory and Practice" by Blain Brown and "Cinematography for Directors" by Jacqueline Frost.[xviii]

In *American Beauty* this is demonstrated beautifully through camera techniques, lighting, and the framing of the shot. Camera techniques include aerial, deep focus, pan, shallow focus, slow motion, soft focus, and the tracking shot. Lighting is more than just shining a light on a character. The cinematographer must know how to manipulate the lighting to create the mood and the correct throw of the light. He must know when to use soft light and when to use hard light to create the lines and shadows desired. The framing of a shot also adds to a movie. Framing the shot is the placement of objects and people in a scene to create the mood or to direct the viewers' focus. These are all elements to think about when watching a movie and they are all shown superbly in *American Beauty*.

American Beauty is narrated by Lester Burnham, the husband of Carolyn Burnham and father of Jane Burnham. He informs the audience that he has less than a year to live but in reality he is already dead; and the whole movie looks back at his life through his eyes. Lester Burnham is a 42-year-old who is unhappily married and is despised by his wife and daughter. Behind the red door of their home, the family is falling apart, Lester gets drugs from Ricky Fitts and starts a relationship with Angela, a friend of his daughter. In the end, Lester is killed by Colonel Fitts (Ricky's father).

The movie opens with an aerial shot of the street where the Burnhams live. The nameless, one of many streets in the city, provides a sense that the Burnhams are small and unimportant in the world. For the first part of the movie, Lester is shot from above and small in the shot, making him seem small and unimportant. However, as the film progresses and Lester becomes more powerful, shots of him

tend to come from below, depicting his power. Also in the office the camera shoots a still deep focus shot, or a shot that keeps the entire image in sharp focus, of the cubicles in the office showing the ceiling. The shot of the ceiling with the lights glaring down makes the scene feel oppressive, like the office is more powerful than man. When the neighbours come to welcome the Fitts to the neighbourhood, the camera shows Colonel Fitts opening the door and when the door swings in front of the camera, it switches to a shot of the people at the door. Cutting the scene when the door swings by makes the scene appear seamless and smooth to the viewer. A swish pan, or a very fast panoramic camera movement, is used when Ricky is filming Jane through his window and his dad comes in yelling. Ricky turns fast to look causing the camera image to blur giving a sense of chaos to the scene. After Lester is shot, he talks about his life and remembers the good times. A left to right tracking shot is used for this scene, making all the memories flow together smoothly and the left to right movement of the camera imitates his life. These are just a few examples of the camera techniques used in *American Beauty* to help bring the movie to life.

Lighting also plays an important role in the audience's perceptions of characters while creating the mood for the scene. Lester has a dream where he walks down a hallway and finds Angela in a bathtub in a room filled with steam at the end of the hall. The entire scene is in soft light, light not directly from the source, to provide the impression of a dreamlike state. Also whenever Jane and Ricky are together, they are filmed in low soft light. The darkness and the soft light help add to the romantic mood and create a kind of calm feeling about the shot. Lester wants to get in shape for Angela so he goes down to the garage to find his old weights. He then undresses and looks at his reflection in the window. The shot of Lester looking at his reflection is lighted from above to make him seem overly chubby.

One of the best examples of framing the shot are the shots of the Burnham family at the dinner table. Carolyn is seated at one end, Jane in the middle, and Lester at the other end of a long table. This long shot frame that includes all the

people and some of the surrounding environment shows the distance between Carolyn and Lester and yields the impression that Jane is just caught in the middle. After an argument at the dinner table Lester talks to Jane in the kitchen. The camera shot from outside through the window shows the window pain splitting Lester and Jane as a sort of dividing line between them giving the impression of a wall.

Many people share the opinion that American Beauty is a great movie. Michael Wilmington and Jay Carr, two men that review movies, both agree. "It's a picture with a great cool shiny surface, and it boasts superb actors, witty and iconoclastic writing, vigorous and imaginative direction and brilliantly stylized cinematography" states Wilmington (Wilmington). Also, "...a millennial classic" says Carr. *American Beauty* received five, well deserved, Academy Awards – one of them for cinematography.

CONCLUSION

For cinematography to be good, the techniques used should not be apparent to the viewer: they should only add to the movie. Conrad Hall shows his style and mastery of the camera and lighting in *American Beauty* and *Road to Perdition*. The audience is not consciously aware of the techniques used but subconsciously they have a big impact on the viewers' emotions. Truly, Conrad Hall is a master of the big screen.

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