

Cinematography and Visual Style

Understanding the collaborative roles of the cinematographer in the development and production of South African fictional feature films

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work, save insofar as indicated in the acknowledgements and references. It is submitted towards the fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts by creative project and dissertation in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Eran Tahor
29th of June, 2016

Abstract

In this dissertation I examine the roles of the cinematographer in fiction feature film production. I begin the discussion with a historical review of the emergence of cinematography as a specialised field in early cinema. This corresponds with developments in camera technology that enabled accurate framing, lighting and the possibility of movement. In order to provide a framework for further discussion, the first chapter proceeds with a review of formal definitions and less conventional definitions of the role of the cinematographer. The focus in these discussions is on the cinematographer's engagement with the design, development and application of a unique 'visual style' in the articulation of the director's vision for the film. A large component of this research pertains to the work of the cinematographer in South African feature film productions. The second chapter presents an analysis of two very different South African feature films *Oil On Water* (Matthews, 2007) and *SMS Sugar Man* (Kaganof, 2008). I was the cinematographer on both productions and the discussion engages a reflexive mode of analysis. The third and final chapter is an analysis of the accompanying film *Impunity* (Mistry, 2014), which forms the creative component of this research. I conclude with establishing that the creative engagement of the cinematographer in the design of a coherent visual style contributes to a nuanced and engaging cinematic experience and richer visual vocabulary.

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to present a comprehensive analysis of the creative, collaborative and technical contributions of my work as a cinematographer to the production of three South African feature films: *SMS Sugar Man* (Kaganof, 2008), *Oil on Water* (2007) and *Impunity* (Mistry, 2014). The written thesis will engage this topic as a self-reflexive study and will form the analytical component of the dissertation. The feature length film *Impunity* will be the creative component, to be submitted together with the written thesis.

In the first chapter I will present an analytic framework for this research. I will begin with an overview of the evolution of the role and agency of the cinematographer since early cinema history. This section of the literature review will focus on the development of imaging machinery as the likely cause for the emergence of cinematography as a specialised field. However, a review of the historical evolution of cinematography since 1896 until today is beyond the scope of a single section. Rather, the discussion will focus on key moments of cinematic development in the early twentieth century. Following this I will present various perspectives on the roles of the cinematographer in relation to the development and production of fiction films, and the significance of 'visual style' (Salt, 2009; Delbonnel in van Oosterhout et al., 2012, pp. 176–7), as the contribution of the cinematographer to film development, production and post-production .

Discussions in critical literature and popular media on the subject of cinema have been concerned almost exclusively with the role of the director as the driving force in the making of films. Interviews, discussion forums and critical reviews in magazines, academic literature, film reviews and popular marketing attribute many of the formal and stylistic aspects of the film to the director. Perhaps as a result of this there are more than a few directors who have become household names: (Alfred) Hitchcock, (Steven) Spielberg, (Ridley) Scott, (Christopher) Nolan and (David) Fincher¹. However, a different picture emerges in industry publications

¹ This list of names is based on popularity ratings in online resources such as IMDB.com.

and technical filmmaking books, journals and magazines², where the cinematographer is regarded as the serious shaper of meaning, and the collaborative process between the director and the cinematographer is foregrounded. Indeed, a closer examination of the work of some established film directors reveals their consistent commitment to an ongoing collaborative relationship with the same cinematographer on almost every film they make: director Jean Luc Godard and cinematographer Raoul Coutard, Steven Spielberg and Janusz Kamiński, Ingmar Bergman and Sven Nykvist, Wes Anderson and Robert D. Yeoman, Bernardo Bertolucci and Vittorio Sttoraro, Ethan and Joel Cohen and Roger Deakins, Wong Kar Wai and Christopher Doyle, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Emmanuel Lubezki. This handpicked list of director-cinematographer teams highlights the pivotal role of the cinematographer in film production³ in the international arena. It suggests that cinematography and visual style may be critical in cinematic articulation of story and theme. This is opposed to the popular and academic misconception of the director as the single creator. South African film productions do not have the same kind of lineages, and the cinematographer is virtually invisible in the histories of filmmaking. Therefore, a critical study of the role of the cinematographer and an analysis of the collaborative relationship between the director and the cinematographer should be useful to academic researchers and practicing professionals. This critical study can potentially benefit film educators in curriculum development and pedagogy. It may also benefit a range of practitioners who want to engage in a critical examination of their own practices as part of a professional track development.

The creative and technical challenges faced by cinematographers in South Africa have not been discussed or adequately documented, this in spite of the annual growth in the number of locally produced films⁴. There are currently two main publications in South Africa specifically focused on various aspects and forms of production; these are: *Screen Africa* and *Callsheet*. Both publications occasionally address matters of production relating to

² Some notable examples of these are: American Cinematographer Magazine, ICG Magazine, British Cinematographer Magazine, Sight and Sound, AV Specialist (see also (Brown, 1996; Frost, 2009; van Oosterhout et al., 2012; Wheeler, 2009)

³ This is further supported by Bertolucci (Bertolucci, 2003) and Frost (Frost, 2009),

⁴ National Video and Film Foundation (2015), *Research Reports* [online] available from: <http://nfvf.co.za/home/index.php?ipkContentID=87&ipkMenuID=39> [accessed on 12 November, 2015]

cinematography but these lack in depth of analysis and are inadequate to profile the elaborate process of feature film cinematography. Additionally, there is no critical discussion that can be found on the topic of cinematography in South Africa. It is therefore important to develop a body of research that addresses the dearth of analysis⁵.

I have chosen to analyse and discuss three very different films that I worked on as cinematographer. Each of these projects required a very different set of roles and obligations: *SMS Sugar Man* (Kaganof, 2008) is “the first feature film shot entirely on a cellphone” (Meijer, 2009). It involved innovative production modalities and a re-shaping of the cinematographer’s roles. *Oil on Water* (Matthews, 2007) was a different production in almost every respect. It enjoyed a considerably larger budget and generous sponsoring of cinematic equipment. The film was shot with a combination of 35mm and 16mm emulsion film stock. There are several factors that position *Oil on Water* and *SMS Sugar Man* at opposite poles in terms of their production modalities, cinematography and visual style. The discussion and analysis of these films should therefore enhance the scope and relevance of this research.

After reading the script for *Impunity* I was convinced that this could be an important film. The script is vastly different from many other contemporary South African films in terms of the philosophical reach of the controlling idea and the scope of the production. There are many challenges presented by the script in relation to budget and locations. The film’s script operates on multiple levels: it is a nuanced thriller with a strong political statement, it is potentially a radical depiction of violence and sex, and boldly interrogates possible connections that exist between them, all within a contemporary South African context. *Impunity* would have been a difficult project for the cinematographer on multiple levels: technically, in terms of addressing both the director and the producer’s ambition for the very large scope of production, set against the reality of a restricted budget and also creatively, as the film presents challenges concerning my response as cinematographer to complex and nuanced ideas offered by the director about genre, story format, performance and themes. These I will examine in a separate chapter in terms of the concept of visual style.

⁵ This is based on my research of academic libraries and industry related literature.

A significant part of this research is based on my professional experience as cinematographer on a number of key projects. Although most of these projects are not specifically mentioned, other than the three films which I will discuss, the experience I gained in the process of their creation informs some of the arguments and reflexive discussions presented here. For this reason, I have included in the appendix section a list of the more noteworthy projects, which I believe considerably shaped my experience and my understanding of what cinematography is (see page 74).

This research should be useful to cinematographers who must constantly meet new challenges, and directors who seek to develop a deeper understanding of their collaborative partnership with the cinematographer and extract more production value out of the project's development phase. Additionally, it is hoped that the case study analysis will be valuable to film producers in terms of budget planning, their understanding of film technology, scheduling, and decisions about production locations. Finally, it may benefit further academic research concerned with the collaborative shaping of meaning in contemporary film production.

This dissertation analyses the contribution of the cinematographer to the development and the imagery of films. Therefore, the first chapter will focus on the following topics, which concern the forces, ideas and materials that shape the work of the cinematographer: definitions of cinematography and possible roles of the cinematographer, history and development of cinematography, technical aspects of the craft of cinematography, the collaborative work with the director and understanding visual style as it relates to cinematography.

Chapter 1 - Questions concerning the role of the cinematographer

Introduction

The global arena of film production, which naturally includes a diversity of production economies, cultural and geographical setting may offer very different practices and views on the role of the cinematographer. Considering the aesthetic and economic diversity between classical high budget Hollywood studio production, Art House cinema, Indo-Asian cinema or third world cinema, it becomes clear that a range of interpretations regarding the role and contribution of the cinematographer exist today (Van Oosterhout et al., 2012). It is therefore important that I discuss some definitions of cinematography in order to understand and delimit the creative, collaborative and technical domain of the cinematographer.

It is important to note that the collaborative project between the director and the cinematographer during development and production is almost exclusively discussed in technical books and magazines that focus on the craft of cinematography. Elsewhere, such as in academic film theory and notable critical publications this collaborative project is largely ignored, and the shaping of the meaning of the film is attributed to the director and, in some specialist publications, the scriptwriter. However, as I will argue, this collaboration is crucial to understanding and engaging with the meaning of the majority of films. The cinematographer's contribution is discussed from a technical perspective - this generally includes detailed analysis of decisions made about which cameras, lights and lenses used in production. The emphasis is usually on how these, and other tools, were creatively deployed in response to the director's vision of the film and interpretation of the script. While the importance of cinematography's deployment of imaging technology is widely acknowledged (see my discussion on role definitions below), ignoring creative interpretations and collaborative processes allows for only a partial understanding of the construction of films.

While it is commonly expected that clarity of vision is achieved ahead of production in order to utilise budgets optimally and energise the film with stylistic coherency, it is my experience as cinematographer in the South African film production economy that the reality of the

collaborative project is often radically different. Restrictive production budgets result in contractual agreements that allocate insufficient time for development. The outcome therefore may be viewed as a rushed development phase that prioritises production scheduling and budget spending at the expense of a more substantial development of thematic and visual ideas and the consequent planning of the production phase. There are a few exceptions to this⁶, but they are rare. This, I propose, may be an insufficient investment of resources, which must be allocated to creative development in order to move the project to the next phase (production) in the value chain. Lack of development will very likely have significant negative impact on filming and editing during the production and post-production phases. A closer and critical consideration of the value of bringing the creative team together to produce a coherent and meaningful thematic and aesthetic vision for a feature film project may highlight its significance in order to draw the attention of the various stakeholders (financiers, distributors, producers and also film theorists) to its essential role.

Historical perspective on the changing role of the cinematographer and the changing realm of imaging technology.

Over the course of cinema history there has been a gradual shift in emphasis regarding the role of the cinematographer from a competent imaging technician, to a more creative role as a specialist in the creation of images (Fauer, 2006). This shift is gaining velocity in recent years with the increasing production of films that rely on the latest inventions in computer-generated imagery (CGI), green-screen and scanning technology.

The emergence of the cinematographic medium in the late nineteenth century parallels the invention of flexible emulsion film technology which was developed for the Kodak stills camera (Salt, 1983, p. 40). Prior to this, the photographic reproduction process involved using glass and other hard material plates on which the image was photo-chemically recorded. Logically, in order to record a movement in time from a single point of view, several sequential images must be recorded with consistent time intervals between them. The natural

⁶ Such as the short films *Lamentation* (Doherty and Kaganof, 2015) and *3-SAI* (Emmanuel, 2007)

phenomenon of “persistence of vision”⁷ was discovered in 1824 (Association of European Cinematographers, 2003, p. 22) and although several attempts were made at the time to build imaging devices that generated and displayed images in rapid sequence (e.g. Thaumatrope in 1825 or the Phenakistiskope), none were adequate to provide the technical platform for the emergence of cinema. The invention and development of progressively advanced image technology opened the way to a range of exciting experiments in the reproduction of reality in order to “categorize the material things of the world” (Badger, 2007, p. 24). While there was some correspondence between the medium of photography and the emerging cinematic medium (1895-1900), none of the well-established techniques in photography, such as diffused light, shallow focus and bounced lights were used in the early period of cinema production. Furthermore, none of the cameras which were used in film production at the time had a viewfinder. Framing was done, rather crudely, by removing the back of the camera and looking directly through the aperture. Indeed, evidence of the cinematographer’s imprint is largely absent even in later film productions, such as Méliès *The Conquest of the Pole* (1912) and Chaplin’s early films (*The Fatal Mallet* 1914, *The Masquerader*⁸1914). Salt’s detailed review of the history of cinematic visual style and his analysis of the history of image creation technology is relevant here. It reframes the domain of the cinematographer in relation to creative possibilities: in the limited technical environment, when framing, camera movement and lighting are not part of the filming process, and therefore aesthetic choices are hugely constrained, so that a discussion on the creative role of the cinematographer would be almost meaningless. Indeed, in the absence of aesthetic choices at the time, the role of the cinematographer may have been limited to the consistently accurate cranking of the camera handle. Inversely, when controlling the properties of the cinematic image (movement, lighting, contrast, colour, framing and composition) is enabled by advanced technology, it is the mastery of the technology by the cinematographer that enables creative choices, richer cinematic vocabulary and should greatly influence the process of planning and pre-visualisation.

⁷ Persistence of vision describes the preservation of an image on our retinas for about one tenth of a second, during which time, in darkness, the displayed image is replaced by the next image in a sequence which creates the perception of motion.

⁸ *The Masquerader* includes several scenes of a film set, we see the set, the actors and the cameraman. The cameraman passively observes the scene while he turns the crank handle, which emphasizes the point about his creative role.

Composition and framing are image properties that are often referred to in the analysis of films and the theoretical discourse of cinema. It is therefore important to establish the role of cinematographic technology in enabling these and other stylistic devices. Camera panning and tilting were introduced in 1905, but their use was limited. Indeed, the inclusion of the cinematographic devices of panning and tilting was an exception in films of that era (Salt, 1983, pp. 77–78, 154). The difficulty in using camera movements as storytelling devices was rooted in camera technology. The absence of any view-finding apparatus made accurate compositional decisions impossible during filming. Until the introduction of motorised film movement in the camera it was the cameraman's task to wind the crank handle at a consistent speed, in order to move the film through the camera's gate and record the scene at a consistent frame rate. The common frame rate of hand cranked cameras was 16 frames per second, this amounts to two turns of the handle per second at eight frames per turn (Van Oosterhout et al., 2012, p. 29). This made the simultaneous task of panning and tilting very difficult and the likely cause of its rarity.

The introduction of motorised cameras and the inclusion of accurate view finding apparatus paved the way for experimentation and creative possibilities in composition and camera movement. One of the earliest films that made extensive creative use of these technical developments is *The Last Laugh* (Murnau, 1924 – with cinematography by Karl Freund). This seemingly rudimentary development, one that is automatically included in every camera today, had an enormous impact on the emergence of cinematography as a specialised field. Together with the evolution of artificial lighting, we see the emergence of distinct visual style in the work of cinematographers such as Henrik and Julius Jeanson, G W Bitzer, Carl Meyer and Raoul Walsh.

This speaks directly to my review of the definition of cinematography in the previous section, and in part, supports the conclusion drawn. Throughout the history of cinema, cinematography has been impacted by technical discoveries which challenged and offered new creative opportunities to cinematographers. The creative use of technology in filmmaking is implicit in the work of the cinematographer. In his meticulous analysis of filmmaking technology alongside the evolution of the cinematic language, Salt details the

emergence of the “cinematographic angle” (Salt, 1983, p. 103), which he describes as types of compositions unique to cinema that could not be reproduced in photography. Cinema’s departure from its origin in stills photography may very well be symbolic of the emergence of the cinematographer as an imaging specialist, a role that engages technical and creative competencies. Coinciding with the introduction of arc lights in the early twentieth century, both Salt and Leitch observe a shift towards “pictorial” cinematography - or the reference to various forms and movements in painting in the design of the visual style of films, which is so widely applied in modern cinematography (Brown, 1996; Salt, 1983).

Filmmaking technology is advancing at a rapid pace and new modalities are devised and updated regularly in terms of employment, roles and designations in the global film production economy. This has significant impact on the role of the cinematographer. New technology both liberates and restricts new generations of cinematographers to narrower production frameworks in terms of budgets and time frames. On the one hand, it can be argued that innovation in the early days of cinema may have given birth to cinematography as a highly specialised and creative professional field, and that innovations in image technology continuously inspire and give birth to new forms of visual storytelling. The corollary of this is that technology is fast becoming the dominant factor that defines both form and style in filmmaking (Frost, 2009; Kiwitt, 2012). The increasing use of CGI, 3-D cinema and technical breakthroughs in Virtual Reality (VR) present challenges to the creative agency of the cinematographer (Benjamin, 2013). For example, one of the more significant stylistic choices in the cinematographer’s palette are depth of field and grading. With recent developments in the Light Field camera technology and 16bit depth filming, which are likely to become technical conventions, the main aesthetic choices of depth of field, contrast, colour and exposure will be relegated to the post-production phase rather than the cinematographer’s own decision making process.

The question almost forces itself: is modern image creation technology offering more creative freedom, or does it increasingly replace creative choices and interpretations with technical processes? This may potentially mean a gradual full circle return to the early condition of the cinematographer as a “technical hand” in the construction of films, in a way that was discussed earlier in this chapter. While digital imaging technology is significantly more

complex today than it was in the early history of cinema, growing technological trends may subjugate the role of the cinematographer to that of a skilled technician, ignoring many other subjective and creative aspects of the craft. While it may be clear that cinematography involves both creative and technical operations, this is an important concern.

With relevance to the overarching question that this dissertation aims to explore, it raises the question of the role of the cinematographer during the different phases of production. In order to explore this question in more detail and develop a more critical understanding of the role of the cinematographer, the discussion in the following two sections will focus on possible definitions, perspectives and positions on cinematography in terms of creative and technical practices. I will also attempt to explore the shifting collaborative terrain of the cinematographer's work in contemporary film production.

Classic or formal definitions of cinematography

In his seminal work *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Bresson refers to the act of cinematography as a "writing" of the visual text: "Cinematography is a writing with images in movement and in sound" (Bresson, 1997, p. 2). For Bresson, cinematography is a form of writing that produces and arranges images, movement and sound in the construction of meaning. Bresson's definition is broad and does not exclusively define the work of the cinematographer. Indeed, Bresson himself explains that his use of the term 'cinematography' includes the work of the director with performance and dialogue. Although Bresson's definition may seem out of place in a chapter that aims to define the role of the cinematographer, I am using his classification to begin a reductive process in which I search for a narrower definition of cinematography that can be more applicable to the critical analysis of this dissertation. I find it interesting that Bresson does not make a clear distinction between the role of the director (himself) and the cinematographer (lighting cameraman) in his writing. Instead, Bresson creates a category – *cinematography*, which describes the creative and technical space in which a film is created. Rather than assigning specific roles to persons which denote specific areas of specialisation, we have in Bresson a collective and creative metaphysical space that comprises the various aspects of and occupations in the production of a film. Immediately apparent is the collaborative property inherent in this

category: at least several key role players participate in the project of writing with images.

Bresson's statement is significant in another way; it locates cinema exclusively within the visual-sonic domain⁹, and re-imagines it as visual text. For Bresson the act of generating images, editing them and producing a film is the act of writing a visual text with the use of materials such as physical objects, movement and light energy. It brings to mind Sebastião Salgado's definition: "A photographer is literally someone who draws with light. The photographer writes and rewrites the world with light and shadow" (Salgado and Wenders, 2015). Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro proposes a similar view: "Cinema is a language of images formed by light and darkness and by the internal elements of colours, through which stories must be interpreted" (Thompson, 1992). Both Storaro and Salgado, although operating in different visual mediums, are established pioneers who continuously re-imagine the way in which materials such as shadows, movement, light and colour can be used in the production of images.

The reference to writing with the use of lights and colour as "material" is recurrent in discussions involving cinematographers. The definition of cinematography therefore may be considered as the use of the cinematic apparatus to harness photo (light) energy in the project of writing the visual text. The emphasis here is on the use of materials in the production of images. This could potentially lead to a reductionist definition of the role of the cinematographer; one that may simply restrict creative agency, and exclude the important process of thematic interpretation from the role of the cinematographer.

Bresson, perhaps intentionally, deviates from the generally accepted and practiced definition of cinematography, which is stated in the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) manual as:

The cinematographer's initial and most important responsibility is telling the story and the design of a "look" or visual style that faithfully reflects the intentions of the director... it is mandatory for the cinematographer to do this on

⁹ According to Philip Brophy: "Cinema is one hundred per cent image and one hundred per cent sound" (Martin, n.d., p. 21)

budget and schedule. (Goi, ASC, 2013, p. 3)

I would argue that Bresson includes some of the preoccupations of the cinematographer that may be missing in the narrower, more restrictive definition by the Society of American Cinematographers.

The above Hollywood mainstream definition of the role of the cinematographer in the various phases of production is in the opening pages of the 10th edition of the American Cinematographer's manual. Since its first edition (Mascelli, J. 1960) the ASC manual has been a useful resource for aspiring and professional cinematographers around the world¹⁰. It is abundant in technical information, charts, white papers and articles on the technical evolution of imaging tools. It therefore offers a very specific reading, predominantly technical, and provides tested methodologies and techniques to achieve specific, predefined and measurable goals: "on budget and schedule". In the next section I will discuss less technical approaches to the roles of the cinematographer.

Less conventional practices of cinematography

I always try first to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between... In writing a screenplay it is essential to separate clearly the dialogue from the visual elements and, whenever possible, to rely more on the visual than on the dialogue (Hitchcock in Truffaut et al., 1984, p. 61)

A cinematographer's creative signature is often considered as the "visual style" or "look" of a film. However, in a purely visual medium the terms "visual style" and "look" apply to almost every aspect of the making of a film. In line with Hitchcock's statement above, we may consider how the story's historical context can be conveyed through choices of location (architecture), lighting, costumes and makeup, means of transport, artefacts (or "props") and in terms of the colour palette. Each of these speaks to a collective memory contained in a multitude of mediums (e.g. paintings, photographs, magazines and newspapers) as representations of specific historical periods. Every aesthetic choice made in terms of the

¹⁰ This statement is based entirely on my experience, having worked as 2nd assistant camera (AC), 1st AC and camera operator with a large number of South African and international cinematographers.

above shapes the meaning of the film on a number of levels in terms of historical context and social background (of the characters). Historical context shapes viewers' expectations and agreement of what is possible in terms of character and plot. We would not, for example, accept a resolution to a crisis in the form of a text message sent by one character to another in a story that takes place in the 18th century. Many creative professionals collaboratively contribute to the complexity of stylistic and aesthetic nuances that produce the visual world of the film.

The expression of specific ideas through aesthetic choices may not always be immediately apparent and may require interpretation by the viewers. As a case in point we may consider that "night time" in early black and white cinema was signified by a red cast over the entire frame, or that a "close-up" was produced in early cinema by a black vignette as opposed to the established contemporary use of long focal-length lenses. The deployment of these aesthetic choices as signifiers of meaning was commonly practiced by filmmakers in Europe and in the United States and accepted by the audience. It is thus possible to establish how complex ideas can be visually expressed without recourse to expository dialogue. This ties in with Bresson's use of a broad classification of cinematography, one that captures the work of both the director and the cinematographer. Bresson's passionate acknowledgement that "My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use..."(Bresson, 1997, p. 7), should therefore not be read as a proclamation on the shortcoming of film scriptwriting, but rather as highlighting the unique role of powerfully engaging cinematography in visual storytelling. The term "visual style" therefore must be reconsidered in terms of its specific application to cinematography.

Cinematographer Andrew Laszlo offers a different, perhaps more specific approach to understanding the role of the cinematographer. He fuses both aspects of the craft (creative and technical) in his interrogation of the difference between "recording an image and creating an image" (Laszlo and Quicke, 2000, p. 27). According to Laszlo, the fundamental difference between the act of "recording" and that of "creating" images is inherent in the agency of the cinematographer. Laszlo makes a distinction between two different types of approaches to generating cinematic images: one in which the image is an instance that is being sampled, scanned or recorded by using the camera set (camera, film and lens), and another where the

components of an image must be intentionally created and assembled before the scene is filmed. Laszlo describes these 'components' as objects that reflect light and colour, and also the cinematographer's decisions about exposure, camera position, composition and frame size, all of which correspond with and inform the setup of the scene (Laszlo and Quicke, 2000). Laszlo's approach embraces both creative and technical competencies in producing the cinematic text. He balances creative and technical imperatives with the objective of creating "memorable films such that have an emotional and psychological impact on the viewer" (Laszlo and Quicke, 2000, p. 2). When reviewing Laszlo's writing it is important to acknowledge its personal and reflexive position. Laszlo's education as cinematographer is rooted in classic 1940's and 1950's Hollywood cinema. It was a style of cinematography that followed strict and narrow guidelines with regard to the *mise-èn-scene* (Salt, 1983, pp. 312, 327). Laszlo's creative transition from established and formal modalities is evident in his earlier films *Warriors* (Hill, 1979) and *Southern Comfort* (Hill, 1981), in which he eschewed "good photography" in favour of "bad photography" (Laszlo and Quicke, 2000, p. 10) and may offer insight to the reader about Laszlo's emphasis on creative interpretation as tantamount to technical competencies.

Adhering to formal guidelines positioned the cinematographer as a technical gatekeeper. A cinematographer was chosen for a project based on his ability to consistently and reliably produce high quality cinematic images. This is in terms of exposure and lighting, when working with the technical limitations of lenses, lights, cameras and emulsion film stocks that were available at the time. With a few notable exceptions, such as Greg Tolland's photography on *Citizen Kane* (Wells, 1940) and *Grapes of Wrath* (Ford, 1940), this view was hegemonic in the first half of the twentieth century. A growing emphasis on creative interpretation could be considered a response to technical developments in the medium in terms of the quality and sensitivity of the recording medium, the advent of lighting tools, and camera and lens technology. These provided a much wider range of creative possibilities that may have gradually liberated the cinematographer from the narrow confinements of limited technology, by enabling the development of a diverse and rich visual vocabulary. This is in line with cinematographer Allen Daviau's statement that the practice of cinematography is tantamount to the "mastery of technology in the service of art" (Arnold et al., 1992).

The production phase is where materials such as performing bodies, objects and scenes are organised and recorded through the manipulation of reflected light in the camera. The arrangement of these materials and the *mise-èn-scene* should cohere with the director's vision and the essential meaning of the film. The question that arises from this is how ideas (about meaning) connect with and shape the creative cinematic process of image production. This question has significant empirical implications in understanding the process of developing and producing the film: how can images be designed for the purpose of articulating and expressing pre-conceived theoretical ideas or, as Deleuze asks, what does it mean to have an idea in cinema? (*Qu'est-ce que l'acte de création?*, 1987). How can specific ideas, which are articulated and communicated in language and text, be given expression in the cinematic medium? Can they be re-imagined and communicated in a language of images? Critical discussion and further research into cinema as language is beyond the scope and aim of this dissertation. However, the questions above are relevant to my research with respect to the significant role of a coherent visual style in the process of developing and shaping the meaning of the film. We can describe this process as the development, processing and transference of ideas from the abstract domain of thought and language to the empirical process of generating images with physical materials.

With Bresson we may consider cinematography as the total processes that result in the final film; a space shared by the director and the cinematographer. Whereas the director's preoccupation is predominantly with dialogue and performance, the cinematographer is preoccupied with the shaping of light - the writing material of the visual text, the positioning and movement of the camera in relation to the scene and the technical concern of correct filtration and exposure. Together, the director and the cinematographer develop the director's vision in a way that guides the production process. In the development phase they creatively and technically process and pre-visualise the film, a creative process that crystallises a set of ideas to be committed to in the production of images, and hopefully articulated in the finished film.

Considering collaboration from the perspective of visual language

One of the perennial problems in attempting to define and ring-fence the cinematographer's responsibilities is that there is, in truth, an area of overlap with those of the director, and to a lesser extent the producer. Any fixed definition of the role of the cinematographer falls short of capturing the full spectrum of what could be expected of the cinematographer during the production process and the creative process involved in generating the images for any specific film. In reality each production, and, in that, the unique relationship that emerges between the director, producer, and cinematographer, re-establishes the cinematographer's duties and contribution (Frost, 2009; Laszlo and Quicke, 2000). Frost attempts to address this complexity by offering a simpler, more practical take on the collaborative process during production: the director authors performances and the cinematographer authors the images (Frost, 2009). Underlying the different approaches to collaboration is a commitment to and communication of a vision for the film between the director and the cinematographer.

The director, who would normally engage more extensively in the development of the film, creates a vision for the film based on his personal stylistic preferences, interests and interpretation of a story and the controlling idea. There are many variants to how this is achieved; notable is the famed Hitchcock practice of detailed and meticulous planning (Truffaut et al., 1984). We can find a more intuitive and responsive approach adopted by renegade Hollywood auteur, David Lynch (see *Inland Empire*, 2006 and *Side by Side*, 2012). Irrespective of differences in approach and application, common to all is the basic premise of the development and communication by the director of a coherent vision for the film pertaining to a wide range of ideas, but with a focus on story, style and performance.

These ideas form the basis and framework for the collaborative process before, during, and usually after, the production phase. In this sense, the film may be considered a visual articulation of pre-existing intentions and ideas. It is reasonable therefore that a discussion on the collaborative process of generating images in response to ideas should focus on the relationship between images and ideas that informed them, or should consider possible ways in which cinematographers respond to ideas in the creation of cinematic images. The

director's vision and the communication of that vision therefore are at the heart of the collaborative project.

The use of cinematic tools and techniques in composition, movement and lighting could be considered the physical manifestation and the expression of ideas in cinema. Deleuze elaborates on the question "What is it to have an idea in cinema?" by saying that ideas "are consecrated to specific domains" (*Qu'est-ce que l'acte de création?*, 1987). Deleuze concludes that ideas are inseparable from the medium or "mode" of their expression. This is of particular interest here, since it follows that ideas in cinema are 'consecrated' (using Deleuze's term) to the medium of cinema and can only be expressed visually. In other words, we may consider that cinematography is a language that is distinct from other modes of expression (e.g. writing, theatre, painting or music), in the way it processes and expresses ideas.

Significant in this regard is Shaviro's position on the unique property of the camera, the cinematic apparatus in the hand of the cinematographer:

"The camera does not invent, and does not even represent; it only passively records. But this passivity allows it to penetrate, or be enveloped by, the flux of the material world. The automatism and non-selectivity of mechanical reproduction makes it possible for cinema to break with traditional hierarchies of representation" (Shaviro, 1993, p. 32)

Shaviro makes an important distinction here between two possible modes of reading cinematic images: one in which the film is offered as visual representation of the filmmaker's ideas about "matter, life and movement", and another in which the film "enters directly into a realm of matter, life, and movement" (Shaviro, 1993, p. 32). Shaviro argues that "cinematic images are not representations but events" (Shaviro, 1993, p. 23). From Shaviro's perspective the director's vision informs the creative process of generating the images that make up the film, while the cinematographer engages practically with the apparatus (camera and lights), and applies technology and skill to create powerfully engaging images in response to the director's vision.

Badiou affirms this view by saying that story and plot may not be the real subjects of a film. Rather, it is the director's vision, in "what the film takes a stand on", together with "what

cinematic form it does so” that shape the meaning of the film (Badiou and Baecque, 2013, p. 11). Badiou concludes that “artistic organization” is precisely that which “affirms the film’s subject” (Badiou and Baecque, 2013, p. 11). For Badiou, aesthetic choices are essential to the film’s subject as are its cinematic form and specific point of view. This refers back to Laszlo’s distinction between recording and creating the images of the film: in the creation of images the cinematographer interprets and responds to the director’s vision by manifesting a visual style that articulates that vision in the medium of cinema. Implicit in that process is the demand for a high level of technical competency and visual literacy.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the director and the cinematographer creates a framework of ideas that inform and shape the generative process of the film’s imagery. This is premised on the director’s vision and the cinematographer’s response to it, which together form a kind of aesthetic strategy for the film at hand. It determines the cinematographer’s use of technology and aesthetic choices. This raises questions however which pertain to personal traits; some directors are known for imposing detailed plans for the production restricting almost all aspects of the cinematographer’s aesthetic choices (Benjamin, 2006; Probst, 2004). On the other hand, the absence of a director’s vision may undermine the collaborative project and may compromise the film’s visual and aesthetic coherency.

Chapter 2 - Creative and collaborative aspects in relation to the films *Oil on Water* (Matthews, 2007) and *SMS Sugar Man* (Kaganof, 2008)

Introduction

In the previous chapter I focused on various discussions and ideas about the possible role of the cinematographer as “image creation specialist”. The chapter presented ideas and arguments that considered both the creative and technical aspects of the craft. Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider these in separate terms. The chapter concludes with a discussion on “visual style” as a key aspect of the role of the cinematographer in the planning, development, production and post-production stages of the film. In this chapter I will examine in depth how visual style is conceptualised in response to the script (or story idea as in the case of *SMS Sugar Man*) and the director’s vision during development, and how it was created during production.

Visual style is both shaped and constrained by multiple discourses and registers alongside the ‘purely’ creative ambition of the filmmakers. In every film project, a diversity of issues impact and shape the arrival at the visual style that is eventually undertaken. In the following two chapters I respond to this diversity of issues by adopting a plurality of writing modes, namely interpretive, technical, academic and logistical. The inclusion of reflexive accounts, technical considerations and creative interests alongside a critical academic mode of writing will contribute to the discussions at hand and the development of arguments. I will use these modes of writing interchangeably in order to steer the conversation between the diversity of factors and interests that invariably shape the resultant visual style of the film.

As case studies I have selected to work with two South African films: *SMS Sugar Man* (Kaganof, 2006) and *Oil On Water* (Matthews, 2007), on which I worked as cinematographer. The objective of this chapter is to extract possible meanings of the term “visual style” in relation to cinematography in order to analyse the cinematographer’s role in the development of scripts into films. The analysis of visual style in each film will be considered in terms of:

- Format (digital or film and type of cameras used)

- Composition and framing (types of composition and placement of the camera in relation to the subject and scene)
- Movement (choices of camera movement style)
- Lighting and colour
- Contrast

Finally, this chapter focuses exclusively on feature film case studies. This is largely motivated by my professional experience. As professional cinematographer my personal pre-occupation and preferred format is 'long form' feature film production. This choice is motivated by the wide range of creative challenges and possibilities that each new project brings to light. Feature film development and production endeavors often require that the cinematographer is involved in the development of story, the creation of a coherent visual perspective, the practice and crafting of a personal visual style and contribution towards the shaping of the meaning of the film. The outcome of these processes is usually based on experience, creative intuition, personal interpretations, skill and collaborative effort. I have therefore chosen to explore these, in a predominantly reflexive mode of analysis, within the critical academic framework. My ambition with this dissertation is to critically engage with and develop a high level of understanding of my own intuitive creative practices in the profession of cinematography.

Oil On Water (Matthews, 2007)

Introduction

The film *Oil on Water* (Matthews, 2007) begins as a seemingly happy and light romantic melodrama. The two main characters are Anna and Max. The viewer learns at the beginning of the film that Max is taking art classes in which Anna works as a figure model. In a conversation that follows it is revealed that Anna studies journalism. The story is located in contemporary Durban. Anna and Max meet during an art class workshop. A light conversation quickly develops into a romantic interest and the story moves forward through a swift portrayal of key moments in their developing relationship to a time later in their life when Max and Anna are settled together. The viewer finds Anna and Max settled comfortably in a

beautiful house, surrounded by a warm group of friends and their lives seem to develop in a steady and comfortable track around their respective interests. Anna is working on her development as investigative journalist and Max is an artist working upstairs in their attic studio.

This part of the film, which serves to establish the specifics of the relationship history takes on an episodic narrative form. The story weaves together different time locations, moving between moments in the couple's past: their meeting, courting and moving in together. The present time is described and expressed with moments in the couple's life: meeting friends and family, Max painting in the studio, Anna's investigative work and their leisurely walks on Durban's beach. Anna's voice-over narrates many of these scenes in which she muses on life's meaning, the journey ahead and the finding of purpose and meaning. These anecdotes appear to be extracted from her own writing. The viewer is thus offered a view of this relationship, its history, context and possible future as the story navigates through a tapestry of moments and picturesque locations. The viewer is thus introduced to the world of the story, the history of the main characters, their biographies, some back stories (old love affair, a grandparent who died), and some of their values. It is therefore possible to conclude that the first act of the film ends 46 minutes into the story, when the plot takes a sharp turn to an ostensibly dark phase.

After 46 minutes of predominantly establishing an expository flow of scenes that develop an upbeat and positive tone to the plot, the viewer finds Max alone in his studio. The mood is eerie, the lighting is dim and contrast is exceptionally high. The dominant warm colour tone that prevailed up to this moment is replaced by cool blue tones. Max is alone facing an obscure and unfinished painting, his gaze empty and frightening as he suddenly collapses in front of the canvas. Obscure voices whisper unclear words in the background and the camera moves steadily and slowly around Max.

It is important to note that a reading of *Oil On Water* as a classic arc plot should locate the inciting incident in this scene. The inciting incident, according to McKee, "is the primary cause for all that follows" (McKee, 1997, p. 181) and indeed this scene is a major turning point directly because the complication that changes the course of the story is introduced here.

This however may be a flaw in the story structure since it only occurs after 46 minutes of story time, almost halfway through the film, and therefore does not leave enough time for the main part of the story to develop and resolve before the end. Indeed, according to McKee the inciting incident may occur somewhere before the end of the first half an hour of the film; if one accepts McKee's definition of classic plot structure then *Oil On Water* appears to fail in its attempt to follow this cinematic story telling form. Since this section provides a detailed analysis of the film, identifying this structural flaw is important as it may explain in part why the film appears to lose tension, progress sluggishly, at times even aimlessly during the long (46 minutes) first act.

As Max is depicted in his studio, the viewer notices an odd perspective shift which forms around the main painting in the frame: painted trees appear to pop out of the canvas taking on the form of three-dimensional objects. The shot ends on a close-up of Anna's painted face on the canvas and then morphs into the real Anna opening her eyes. The face of Anna on the canvas is missing the eyes creating a foreboding image, the morphing from this into a perfectly matched close-up of Anna's real face is an ominous effect in the way the real and the imagined are deceptively interlinked.

From then on Max becomes increasingly disconnected, distracted and appears to be tortured by internal psychological events of which others, including Anna, are unaware. In the scene that follows the first act, Anna and Max are sitting on the deck of a restaurant. It is a bright morning and the place appears full. Anna accepts an invitation by phone to a social event and when she tries to confirm with Max he replies aggressively. Moments later, when he is left alone, Max believes that everyone in the restaurant is staring right at him. In the scenes that follow, Max is startled when he has a vision of Anna's distorted figure, and in a later scene he is convinced that they are being observed from outside while he and Anna are alone at home. Max becomes progressively nervous and on edge. He cannot sleep, he paces alone at night, or is found staring blankly at the ocean, unresponsive. At times his demeanor is menacing, alarmingly edgy and potentially violent. The voices that Max hears get louder and more persistent, his hallucinations become increasingly invasive, until, in a pivotal scene 60 minutes into the film, Max experiences a terrifying hallucinatory episode while working in the studio and, as the voices he hears get louder, he finds himself trapped in the world of one of his

paintings. A second, more violent, hallucinatory episode climaxes when Max destroys his own studio. The scene that follows becomes a turning point in the story as Anna and Max try to come to terms with the radical changes that have transformed their life together. This scene occurs 70 minutes into the film, and marks the point at which Anna realises that something beyond her understanding is steering her partner and reshaping their life together.

Max becomes persistently enigmatic, incoherent and unreachable. In the following three scenes the couple's friends are evidently aware of and concerned about Max's behaviour. Anna seems to be on the brink of giving up her attempts to contain and understand this. After a sequence of about 15 minutes, we find Anna alone in Max's dark studio. She looks at his paintings which appear to be reflections of his hallucinations and inner torture. At some point we realise that she is not alone there, Max is standing at the door. This time they do not talk, and Anna leaves. This brings the film to the final sequence that intercuts between Anna's meeting with Max's father, where she learns the truth about Max's schizophrenia, and a series of shots that depict Max taking his own life. When Anna returns home she finds Max dead in their swimming pool, the cool deep green of the water mixes with the dark red of Max's blood in the final wide shot of the scene. The film ends with an epilogue in which Anna speaks to an audience in a gallery opening of Max's work.

The script for *Oil On Water* was finalised by the time the cinematographer came on board this project. When discussions began the script was presented as a complete and final blueprint for the film. Therefore, much of the meaning and vision for the film were extracted, developed and designed from the final script. The development period was defined as predominantly the breakdown of each scene of the script into individual shots, the choice of locations, design of lighting setups and the finalisation of the list of all cinematographic equipment and scheduling. Altogether the development and planning phase of *Oil On Water* was about three weeks.

The story arc of *Oil On Water* moves from a hopeful and positive beginning through a turning point to a tragic ending. The theme revolves around a misdiagnosed mental condition that throws the characters into a spin of misunderstood events, which in turn result in the collapse of family structure, disconnection, disruption and violence. These two binaries, of hope and

inspiration, and dark tragedy, shape the trajectory of the main story arc. Therefore, as cinematographer, I thought of these ideas from the outset as important cues in the development of the visual style.

Background and development

Director Peter Matthews and I worked on several commercials together before we embarked on this project. The leap from the short form of commercials to the significantly longer form of feature films was our main challenge and therefore, at the initial stage of development, the main focus of our conversations. Commercials are usually driven by a focused, concise and singular premise performed in an overtly stylized visual platform. The arrival at this premise in the creative development phase is highly scrutinized by various stakeholders who are invested in the outcome. These stakeholders are usually the client, that is the firm that invests in the project in order to promote itself and communicate its brand to the targeted audience. Another important stakeholder is the advertising agency, the account holder who is given the mandate by the client to conceptualise and creatively develop the idea for the commercial. The production company and the director must develop a creative vision in response to the concept and storyline, which are created by the advertising agency and signed off by the client.

The development process between the director and the cinematographer in the production of commercials is therefore considerably short. It follows strictly the creative and aesthetic vision which is developed and agreed to (indeed contractually “signed-off”) between the production company, agency and client. The intended message, usually expressed in a punch line, and the aesthetic must engage the viewer and communicate the brand values. For the cinematographer, commercial production offers an opportunity to focus entirely on visual details and technical craft. During filming, there is considerably more time allocated to designing and setting up each shot in terms of the *mise-èn-scene*. Perhaps because of his background in commercials Matthews focused on the aesthetic outcome right from the beginning of our mutual engagement in the development of the vision for the film.

Format

Two categories of format are available in contemporary cinema production: digital and film. Analogue image creation, such as beta, remain as an archival medium and in some cases, such as in South Africa (at the time of writing of this dissertation), used in broadcast. The producer's ambition from the start was a cinema release for the film, film festivals and later on, DVD release. The choice therefore at the time of preparing the film for production was between the digital and film formats.

Being a small budget film project it made financial sense to choose a digital format for production. While the cost of hiring digital cameras is similar to that for film cameras, and in some cases higher, the cost of material, i.e. the film stock for film cameras, is significantly higher. In 35mm film one roll of 500 feet can record up to five and a half minutes of footage, while a single digital tape, which is significantly cheaper, can record half an hour to forty-five minutes. With the introduction of solid state and hard drive recording, the cost of storage has been further reduced. Overall, the production workflow with the digital format is usually considerably cheaper.

Moreover, digital distribution platforms, at the time of going to production (2006), were rising in numbers both locally and abroad. International festivals had been using digital projection as the standard viewing format for almost a decade, these include notable festivals such as Sundance, Berlin Film Festival and Tribeca amongst many others. Digital release was beginning to dominate distribution networks especially in the domain of independent cinema. The digital format has indeed become a stylistic hallmark of the independent sector of film production (*Side By Side*, Kenneally 2012).

Cost is an important production concern that prominently influences creative and stylistic choices. When the costing of *Oil On Water* began at the early stage of script development, the discussions revolved around a preference for digital format. However, once the conversation between the director and the cinematographer were underway and a coherent visual style began to emerge, the possibility of choosing an emulsion film format was seriously considered. There were several reasons for this, and I wish to start by establishing some of

the pertinent differences between the two formats in terms of performance, visual style and the production processes.

As described earlier, there is a significant difference in the possible duration of the recorded shot (take). From the start of recording (camera roll) the possible take duration is significantly shorter with emulsion film. Therefore, in a restricted budget economy it is important to calculate, plan and anticipate the duration of each shot for two main reasons: first, that there is enough film in the camera magazine to record the full duration of the shot – for if not, a new roll of film must be loaded -and secondly, in order to accurately calculate the cost of production. Generally, it is calculated that the cost of film stock averages one third of total production expenses. Each scene has to be meticulously pre-planned, and every shot pre-visualised in order to calculate as accurately as possible the total number of film rolls which are to be used for the entire film. As a result, the number of takes available for each shot (or setup) is much lower with film than with digital filming. This leaves marginal space for improvisation or additional takes (due to performance, dialogue or exposure and camera operating issues). Added to this is the fact that emulsion film stock comes in only two possible colour balance sensitivities: tungsten (for most artificial lighting, especially in interior and night shoots), and daylight. This necessitates an accurate scene breakdown for the entire script in order to allocate the correct number of daylight and tungsten film rolls for the entire production. The material difference in recording time has an impact on filming style and performance. Emulsion film production requires each setup to be well rehearsed before recording begins in order to avoid wastage and to make sure that the whole take can be recorded at once. There is much greater leniency in digital filmmaking in terms of performance improvisation and longer takes, since recording is far cheaper.

Despite these significant differences the final choice of format was film. The main reason for this was aesthetic; both the cinematographer and director were of the opinion that the inherent latitude and dynamic range of the emulsion film format corresponded with the visual style being developed. At the time of production, although significant breakthroughs were made in digital technology, film's latitude, the range of exposure tones between over and underexposure, exceeded that offered by digital technology and allowed for a wider variety of tonal and colour range. In terms of the gradual transition from the established

“picturesque” style of cinematography at the beginning of the film to an aesthetic of “turbulence”, such that it agitates, disrupts and disturbs by means of high contrast, tonal range and colour balance.

The choice of format in the case of *Oil On Water* reflects the filmmakers’ preference for a unified aesthetic vision in spite of financial constraints. The discussion in this section reflects the entanglement of financial and aesthetic choices: how they affect one another and indeed, how the boundaries which separate the two are blurred. This also speaks to earlier discussions in this dissertation on the role of the cinematographer and further highlight the diversity of implicit responsibilities in the development stage.

Movement

In most of the scenes that precede the turning point of the story, camera movement takes on the form of ‘floating’ through the physical space of the scene. This gives the impression that the camera scans the scene in front of it. The camera seems to be objectively observing, unresponsive to dialogue, as if unaware of its own possible dramatic function in the construction of meaning. The overall aesthetic ambition was to internalise a formal approach to composition and movement. The camera is the eye that sees the scene unfolding before it, and operates as a still observer adhering to classic, centralised framing principles. In this way the appurtenances of comfort will guide the frame and speak to a life of stability and affluence that hide the unfolding horror within the character’s psyche. The aesthetic response to the theme of misunderstood schizophrenia is the gradual unravelling of classic, formal cinematography in stages that follow closely the beats of the story with darker tones and an unfolding disruption of compositional conventions that were established earlier in the film. The overall trajectory of the development of camera movement and composition is one of gradual shift: establishing a formal style that positions the camera as the observing static eye, allowing the props that speak to a life of security and comfort to guide the framing, and at the same time gradually resisting these formal guidelines, repositioning, reframing and altering camera movements in a way that contradicts the visual style that was established in earlier scenes. In a way, the seeds of transgression were sown from the outset in the setup of ironic tension, in the form of increasing disruption of the formal cinematic visual approach

suggestive of the looming internal catastrophe of the main character and the impact of this on his environment.

One of the main caveats to this approach is holding back from overwhelming the story and its intended performative nuances with lavish camera movements. An important example of this is described in Oukaderova's critical essay on the film *I Am Cuba* (Kalatozov, 1995):

I remained cold to everything which took place on the screen—though, in essence, these were tragic events: people die, sugar cane burns down, policemen break up a demonstration with fire hoses—I look at all of these, but it doesn't touch me. Why? My opinion is such: behind the frenzied dynamics of the spatially free camera hides a temporal stasis. Everything is emotionally dragged out. The episode is clear, it seems the meaning is revealed—but[,] no, one more run of the camera, one more panorama. (Oukaderova, 2014, p. 4)

This critical insight leveraged against the film's groundbreaking use of camera movement came out when *I Am Cuba* was released in the USSR in 1964; or as Oukaderova says:

Anchoring the initial critical dismissal of *I am Cuba* was a perception that the film's formal and narrative means fundamentally undermined one another, that its extraordinary camerawork undercut the stories it told. (Oukaderova, 2014, p. 4)

This point of criticism highlights the importance of the collaborative project in bringing the various aspects of the story and film into harmony, as it speaks directly to the role of the cinematographer in the development of a visual style that coherently responds to story elements.

It is important to add however that on the second public release of the film in 1992, after a long period of obscurity, the film received critical praise for the very same style it was faulted on some three decades earlier. This may suggest that the parameters for perception, understanding and appreciation of the cinematic imagery are at the very least fluid.

The final choice made in the development of the visual style for *Oil On Water* was to begin with subtle, stable camera movement, enabled by tracking and craning camera support

systems. The movement should at first complement and harmonise with compositional elements such as the movement of actors in the space, or in line with architectural design elements. As the plot progresses however, camera movement gradually contradicts and subverts the movement style that was established at the beginning of the film: stability is undermined by shaky camera movement, direction of movement resists architectural guidelines and operates against the spatial logic of the actors' movement. The motivation for this was to release the camera from "serving" the plot, instead camera movement responds to internal events that are not always visually apparent.

Composition

One of the first steps in the process of developing and expressing the director's vision for *Oil On Water* was to create a series of paintings that signified Max's shifting mental state, the escalation in schizophrenic episodes. Since the lead character is a painter, creating those paintings presented a blueprint for the trajectory of his story. Additionally, the paintings were visual expressions of invisible, internal events. This created the opportunity, during development, to anchor the conversation between the cinematographer and the director with clear visual references. The paintings presented a destination mark for the final breakdown of formal guidelines, or the classic approach to composition, which was established as the visual style of the film at the beginning. Therefore, the progression in the unravelling of formal compositional guidelines was designed to perform a diegetic function that visually expresses the main character's internal narrative.

Bordwell describes compositional motivation as "the arrangements of props and specific use of lighting if necessary as well as the establishing of a cause for impending actions so that the story can proceed" (Bordwell in Hayward, 1996, pp. 233–4). To paraphrase Hayward's example of compositional motivation: light and focus can be used to direct the viewer's attention to a staircase in the composition of a dimly lit room. This functions as compositional motivation for a consequent action, which in this example could be a person walking across the room and taking the stairs. Action may also counter compositional motivation, where the frame prompts an action through the use of screen direction and negative space but then moves to recompose in a way that disrupts the very same action it motivated. This is skillfully used in Reygadas' *Stellen Licht* (*Silent Light*, 2007) and especially *Japón* (2002). An example of

this in *Japón* is the repeated use of camera movement to frame a conversation or specific action, the camera then continues to move, ignoring the action prompted, and while we hear the conversation off screen the camera continuously to pan across the surrounding landscape.

Contrast, Light and Colour

The discussion of the possible impact of colour balance and colour tonal values on viewers' emotional response, interpretation of story and resonance with the theme can be found in interviews with cinematographers, technical publications (such as *American Cinematographer*, *100 years of European Cinema* and *Shooting Time*), and critical essays (see Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002). Painter Wassily Kandinsky developed a theoretical framework for a discussion of the psychological impact of colour in painting. Kandinsky argues that viewers' psychological responses to visual artefacts can be directed through the use of specific colours. Kandinsky proposes an assessment of responses to certain colour categories, or rather, the emotional evocation attached to specific colours in his essay *Concerning The Spiritual* (Kandinsky, 1977- and especially chapter V: The Psychological Working of Colour). Cinematographer and published writer Vottotio Storaro applies Kandinsky's theory of the psychological impact of colour to the cinematic medium. Storaro proposes a theory that attempts to establish the psychological impact of colour in cinema and how colours are instrumental in the shaping the meaning of the film. He argues that a categorical appreciation of the psychological impact of colour in evoking specific interpretations of and responses to scenes and, in some cases, the entire film is possible. Storaro defends this argument in his *Writing with Light Colours and the Elements* (Storaro, 2010) and in the documentary *Writing With Light: Vittorio Storaro* (Thompson, 1992). His approach to colour is evident in films such as *The Conformist* (Bertolucci, 1970), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *1900* (Bertolucci, 1976) and *The Last Emperor* (Bertolucci, 1987), where he eschews the naturalist approach to cinematography in favour of subjective expression saturated with highly stylised and evocative colour choices. These colours, according to Storaro, were chosen because of their inherent emotional impact.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to establish how the impact of colour on the viewer could be measured. Therefore, the theory of the "psychological working of colour" is presented here as a possible framework for the analysis of the cinematographer's approach to the

development of a visual style in the film *Oil On Water*. It is proposed here as reference for this discussion, and that a consideration of certain colour choices could be motivated by the desire to evoke in the viewer certain emotional and psychological responses and not exclusively the outcome of an intuitive response to the script.

There are two aspects in the approach to colour design which were considered during development: overall colour tone and colour balance in the *mise-èn-scene*. Overall colour tone is achieved during filming by means of lens filtration and lighting in relation to colour temperature of the lighting. Since the choice was made for emulsion film format the designed colour palette was a result of the relationship between the chosen film stock, namely tungsten or daylight, and the type of lighting used on set. For example, daylight film stock used in natural light will generally produce natural, or realistic, colour tones whereas the same stock used in a scene lit with low colour temperature value will result in a visible bias towards “warm” or yellow-orange scene tone. Special filtration can be used to either “correct” specific colour bias or augment it. There is a growing variety of such filters with many creative possibilities. It is important to note that there are many subtle differences in choosing one method over another in order to achieve certain colour tones in specific scenes. The choice can be determined by the personal preference of the cinematographer together with his specific experience.

The opening scenes of *Oil On Water* are photographed with warm tones and a balanced colour contrast that resonates with compositional choices (see *Figure 1*). The wide shots include warm highlights and locations were filmed close to sunrise or sunset in order to augment the formal elements of the picturesque. The ambition which was discussed during development was to establish a classic romantic melodrama, to embellish the choice of locations for the scenes with a balance of warm tones and attractive texture. As cinematographer, I had to interpret this vision and produce technical documents and scene-by-scene breakdowns that map out this visual strategy. The guiding principle was, as with the other aspects of the cinematography, to gradually disrupt this balance as the plot shifts around Max’s growing demise. This was done first with a gradual shift from the dominance of warm tones to a decidedly cold palette. Therefore, each scene had to be planned with respect

to the location, time of day and also in terms of its position along the arch that traces the subplot. The changes were subtle at first, as in the earlier underwater scene. They then progress into night scenes with an unbalanced colour palette containing unmotivated colours that punctuate the composition (see *Figure 2.*). Slowly the viewers are taken into an entirely different visual world of the story. Contrast is increased and slides off the established scale towards a much higher key-to-fill ratio. Characters appear to slide into darkness, step into light and disappear again. The visual logic which was established at first disintegrates and collapses into itself as imagined events blend with reality. The objective that guides this visual strategy is not simply to invoke sympathy, but to somehow express Max's complete loss of reference to the real. The film tries to take the viewers deeper into Max's psyche, to reflect his pain and fear as the horror of his turmoil becomes palpable.

SMS Sugar Man (Kaganof, 2008)

Introduction

The feature film *SMS Sugar Man* is the brainchild of South African filmmaker, novelist and poet Aryan Kaganof¹¹. Kaganof is a unique artist in the South African landscape in that he has decidedly chosen a transgressive and experimental mode of filmmaking. Kaganof moved to the Netherlands in 1983 to avoid conscription in South Africa. He took on an activist role, as member of the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement (AABN) and began his studies at the Netherlands Film & Television Academy (NFTVA) in 1990. Kaganof's earlier films such as *Ten Monologues from the Lives of the Serial Killers* (Kaganof, 1994) and *Shabondama Elegy* (aka *Tokyo Elegy*. Kaganof, 1999) are early expressions of his chosen mode of narrative and visual style. His feature film *Wasted!* (Kaganof, 1996) reportedly pioneered the use of digital acquisition with transfer to 35mm film for projection in feature film workflow. This, according to Kaganof, enabled maximising the scarce production budget resources over the period of filming, while being an authentic stylistic response to the core thematic ideas of the story. The importance of this biographical exposition in the context of the film analysis is that it points to Kaganof's disposition to overlay and blend technical innovation with creative

¹¹ At the time the artist was still using his birth name "Ian Kerkof". In 1999 he changed his name to "Aryan Kaganof". I am using the name "Kaganof" in all cited references and work titles in order to avoid confusion.

intentions. This will be further discussed and established within the analysis that follows the introduction. The desire to invent, to subvert established modes of representations and narrative forms underlay many of the discussions between the director and the cinematographer; it shaped much of the plot, character development, methodology and approaches to the cinematography.

The plot of *SMS Sugar Man* revolves around Christmas eve in Johannesburg. The characters are established first: Sugar Man is the work name of a pimp, and the viewer is introduced to him as Sugar Man drives around the streets of Johannesburg in a large vintage car. There is at first no particular aim or defined route for his journey, mostly due to the a-chronologic style of editing. The scenes jump forward in time and then back to the driving sequence until we finally learn that Sugar Man is *en-route* to pick up three female characters, who are given the eponymous title of 'sugars'. These are: Selene, Grace and Anna. We don't know much else about them, indeed whether these are their real names or not. In the early establishing scenes of *SMS Sugar Man*, Selene, Grace and Anna are depicted getting dressed, putting on makeup and snorting cocaine and these scenes establish the bold and direct approach of the film to nudity. It is also the part of the story where the viewers become aware of the different relationship each of the sugars have with Sugar Man.

The sugars are taken to a five-star hotel where they meet their clients. The range of clients is eclectic as they form the elite in contemporary Johannesburg 'interracial' power dynamics. The basis for the relationship between the clients and the sugars is transactional but it is not always clear what the service that the prostitutes offer really is. While it is expected that the clients are paying for sex, with the exception of one scene there is no sexual contact between the clients and the prostitutes. The first client is a wealthy and obtuse father who sends his disillusioned and morose son off to his first sexual encounter; the second is a judge who is in love with Selene; then there is a wealthy young man who is there for the show-off; a client who fetishizes the power of the clergy and subverts the words of the scriptures; and an elderly man who sexualises maternal tenderness. Through these scenes of sexual encounters between prostitutes and their eclectic range of clients, the viewers connect with a vision of contemporary Johannesburg with its unique power-politics that is devoid of emotions, of

human connection and which is instead filled with representations, or as in Meijer's reading of the film: "All life is superficial" (Meijer, 2009).

Alongside these client-prostitute scenes the plot revolves around the search for Selene's father. In the early part of the film Sugar Man sets a contract with a shady character called Scorpion to find and kill the father of Selene's child. We do not know why since Sugar Man's motive is never exposed. From the beginning of the film Sugar Man reveals little of his thoughts, motives and emotional world. He projects a cold and businesslike world view when he explains that "Women are sugars. Men are wallets. Money is God. Life is very simple" (*SMS Sugar Man*, Kaganof 2007). However, as the story progresses we discover a man who wrestles with his conscience, tormented by love and unwittingly guided towards self-destruction. Most of the character's names are aptronymic: clients are wallets, prostitutes are sugars, their pimp aptly named Sugar Man, a hit deal is ordered with a man called Scorpion, the hitman is Attila and the informant is Crackwhore. Selene, Anna or Grace: we never know if these are their true names or pseudonyms. The rules for the world of the story are thus revealed; characters are named after their trait or function in the transactional world of the plot. Representations replace true identities in the world of the story.

Once the characters are introduced and the plot to kill the father of Selene's child enters the fray of the story, the viewers are shown a series of encounters between the sugars and their wallets, and while these scenes allude to transactional sex there is never a sexual encounter between Selene, Grace and Anna and their male clients. Appearances replace physical sex as a guiding premise and the theme of the film. As the plot progresses Sugar Man wrestles with his conscience and his mental decline is physically manifest. The hit he ordered turns on itself as we discover towards the end of the film that Sugar Man is the father of Selene's child "the only woman I ever loved". So, in fact, Sugar Man orders and pays for his own death.

SMS Sugar Man weaves liberally different subplots which do not always come to some kind of pay-off as we would expect from a classical story structure. The story structure may be defined as anti-plot with perhaps some elements of the mini-plot structure. McKee describes this as:

This set of anti-structure variations doesn't reduce the Classical but reverses it, contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles. (McKee, 1997, p. 46)

The world of the film is dense, liquid and muddy as plot threads, and logic, frequently transform and change the direction of the story. The only love relationship that is truly developed to the point where it becomes the only sexual contact between characters in the film is Grace and Selene's love for each other. True to its established form, all other sexual acts in film are premised on the exchange of money for performed intimacy devoid of physical contact.

The end of the film is a black and white sequence that looks like a court case. The characters assemble as Sugar Man, the accused, faces the witnesses. One by one Anna, Grace and Selene stand as witnesses and challenge Sugar Man, who seems to be condemned to death as guns are pressed against his head and, eventually, fired. The lines "I gave you everything" and "You took away more than you gave" are spoken repeatedly by different characters thus changing context and meaning.

The final scene is the first daylight scene in the film, in the breaking dawn we see Sugar Man, Selene and Jacqui, their daughter, deliver what appears to be deliberately clichéd lines of dialogue in affected theatrical performance style. In the end Sugar Man promises a happy end to this story if they all move away from this place together. "A happy ending", he explains, "is never easy".

The development process for the film was a protracted period of about two months. The film was scheduled for production at the end of December for a specific reason: Johannesburg changes dramatically during this time. The streets begin to empty since many people go away on holiday while light decorations pop up in malls, roads and other public spaces. This lends the city an eerie emptiness, a vacant body that recalls Reed's Vienna in *The Third Man* (Reed, 1949), or Resnais' Hiroshima in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Resnais, 1959). City lights and incandescent Christmas décor became an important part of the visual vocabulary of the film and set the dominant colour tone throughout the film. Kaganof describes this as "There was

a basic concept that we are going to shoot a feature and the story of the film will take place in one night, a Christmas story, an ironic kind of dark, bleak and negative Christmas and it will be shot on a cellphone, I wanted to improvise” (Kaganof, 2016). The guiding premise during development was to find the right locations that tell the story, and improvise around that.

In an interview that I conducted with Kaganof for this research he argued that there was never a ‘development phase’, rather that the film emerged steadily out of the materials of our camera testing:

“You (the cinematographer – Eran Tahor), came on board and we did tests. We got a lot of phones in and you tested them, most of them looked terrible but the Ericsson looked great, for the standards then, and for the limitations then. And I fell in love with it, I thought ‘this is beautiful we could really do something with it’. So in a way it didn’t start out with a vision but the reality (of the technology – ET)” (Kaganof, 2016)

However, Kaganof and I collaborated on a series of ‘tests’ for a period of about two months prior to production. During this period, we tested many different types of mobile phone cameras, mostly at night and occasionally with the inclusion of different members of the cast. Since we were adopting a completely new technology in the production of *SMS Sugar Man*, these tests and the discussions that emerged ostensibly formed the developmental phase of the production. I will discuss this phase in detail in the following section.

Testing

These ‘tests’ with the newly discovered imaging technology of cellphone cameras were conducted exclusively at night. There were generally different pretexts for each of these tests: examining specific locations, looking at the cast and how they interacted with each other or the testing of long driving journeys around the city, mostly Hillbrow and Berea to see how the technology responded to the lights, colours and contrasts. At the time of preparing for the film, research showed that no such project existed prior to the production of *SMS Sugar Man*. Therefore, the technical workflow, scene design and approach to lighting had to be developed from the ground up.

Finally, the development phase, or the protracted testing period, took on the form of collaborative exploration. For many days prior to the beginning of production we tested the

look of many different cellphone cameras, and how to use this technology to tell a cinematic story. It became evident almost from the start that conventional strategies of working with performances and the development of scenes in the design of shots would not work here. Hence, the development period can be codified as a process of trial and error in which known, established conventions of filming were tested with new technology. Every filming session was scrutinised in a viewing session and together, director and cinematographer, forged a new uncharted pathway to working with cellphone cameras in visual story telling.

In order to develop this discussion further I will examine the following key moments in the film:

- The opening sequence of the film. This 10-minute sequence is narrated by Sugar Man's voice-over. There is a short scene of dialogue somewhere on a fire escape platform on a building in Hillbrow, where Sugar Man is asking Scorpion to arrange a hit for him. In the rest of the sequence, Selene and Grace are preparing for a work night while Sugar Man is driving to fetch them.
- Dialogue scene between Selene and Grace in which Grace learns that Selene has a daughter.
- 'Court' scene, and final scene of the film.

Format

Cellphone camera technology at the time of filming was in its very early stages of development. The recorded images were highly compressed 3GPP file format, with a video resolution of 320P. The camera phone recorded video at 30 frames per second only. This is very different to the frame rate used in PAL (50Hz) areas, such as South Africa, or 24 frames per second commonly used for cinema release. My concern as cinematographer from the outset was the inherent degradation of the filmed material once it was projected on cinema screens, or even displayed on a television screen; the most basic PAL resolution domestic screen (720X576) is three times more detailed than the footage we produced. Our tests showed up on the screen as heavily pixelated, clearly visible artefacts in the form of square blocks flickered on the screen bearing the stylistic hallmark of hidden camera footage (pencil cameras) in insert magazines or perhaps security camera footage. My concern was however

not shared by Kaganof, who argued for the aesthetics of experimental (or underground) filmmaking:

They are about ‘what you see is what you get’. You don’t need bright lights, you need something that is different, you need something that is ‘itself’ and if you can capture that to some extent that is enough. This is why I was more than happy then, years before the technology (of cellphone cameras – EranTahor) to use something that was actually sub-par but for me it was above par already. (Kaganof, 2016)

In a sense, *SMS Sugar Man* was a natural development in the underground film aesthetic.

It became clear that this specific and almost entirely unmodifiable aesthetic is the vision for the film and that, in fact, much of how the story develops would be born out of that. The patina, a kind of visual verdigris, forms a large part of the viewer’s experience of *SMS Sugar Man*. The reversal of logic is thus performed: the aesthetic was chosen first as the guiding vision for story development.

It was impossible to manually control the frame rate, exposure control or focus. Changing lens sizes or zooming in were also not possible at the time. Basically, all the commonly applied tools of cinematography were not available to the cinematographer. One may therefore question the very agency of the cinematographer in the development, design and implementation of the look of the film. The reader may recall a previous section in this dissertation that engages the early history of cinema: what was the role of the cinematographer, if indeed there was one, at the time when imaging technology did not allow for movement, colour, exposure controls and camera operating? In *SMS Sugar Man* the cinematographer had to forego all cinematographic conventions, the tools of the craft, and create new ones. In the following sections I will discuss in detail the various aspects that pertain to the elements of visual style.

Composition and movement

Prior to the scheduled first day of filming it became apparent that the visual style of the film must be developed in response to the technical limitations of the cellphone camera. Kaganof describes this as follows:

I would say that the development was how you and I, the cast, crew and the producers all adapted to the reality of the camera. The actors and actresses moved their bodies in response to your proximity; you were 'up their nose'. So the development was how you developed as people in the car with something that nobody had ever done before, no one knew how to act for mobile phone, you couldn't do those classic decoupage staged things, you couldn't do a *mise-èn-scene*. It was the development of an internal aesthetic that was unique to this project that you couldn't sell on as a formula. We discovered and invented something which had a lot of weaknesses, it had a lot of flaws and the flaws are in the film. (Kaganof, 2016)

In other words, the cinematographer could not interpret a director's vision and develop in response a look for the film from stock cinematic conventions. Rather, a vision had to be worked out of the materials that we collected during development. Indeed, development time was devoted equally to the labour of abandoning conventions and creating new pathways.

In "adapting to the reality of the camera" it became apparent that composition and movement are interlinked. The camera had a single lens, with a field of view that approximates that of 14mm or 18mm lens on a Super35mm camera, which calculates at approximately 80°- 85° horizontal field of view. This lens could not be modified in any way; no zooming was possible either. There were therefore only two possibilities in terms of composition design:

- Design each scene with carefully planned assembly of individual shots, using the same lens size for each shot but at a different camera-to-subject distance. It is important to note that while this convention is commonly practiced, it relies on the possibility to change lens sizes in order to achieve the ideal perspective for each shot type (e.g. wide-shot, medium-shot or close-up).
- Combine movement with composition to develop for each scene a unique architecture and move between different shot sizes using a single lens.

During the process of testing and in line with the vision of 'discovering' the appropriate style for the film, the first option was quickly discarded. The dynamic nature of the apparatus, its mobility on the one hand and inflexibility on the other, in terms of responsiveness to

brightness range and forced automated colour balance and exposure settings¹², necessitated an intuitive approach to camera operation to be synchronised with the subject's movement in the space in relation to lighting. The opening sequence of the film clearly establishes this approach. We see Sugar Man's car parked outside a well-lit lobby. As Sugar Man enters the frame and walks around the car the camera moves with him and in a single move rotates around the centre of the frame in a complete 360° circle. There is sense of a liquidity in the image, the camera is not objective, the floating camera draws the viewers' attention to itself. This somewhat ostentatious camera movement and composition strategy may be read as the Brechtian Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), that of hindering the viewer from identifying with the characters by means of recalling the viewer's attention, in this case, to the machinery of image production.

The operability of the camera presented the possibility for the body of the operator to be the 'machine that sees': camera and operator were interlinked and completely integrated with the actors within the physical space of the scene:

You (the cinematographer – ET) were stripped of all your defenses ... the ontological reality of being in the space with the camera denied you of all the tools of identity that operate as a DOP on a film set. That is beautiful, that vulnerability comes through especially in the scene with John Matshikiza because it's not just John who is being vulnerable, it's you Eran Tahor the cinematographer... it's all terribly intimate, it's uncomfortable ... it was wonderful, we were all just inventing this stuff. (Kaganof, 2016)

Lighting, Colour and Contrast

The opening shot of *SMS Sugar Man* presents an upside down image of a car and Sugar Man walking out of a well-lit building towards it. As Sugar Man moves around the car and gets in, the camera makes a 360° turn around its axis keeping Sugar Man in the frame. This should invoke a sense of "sliding down" the rabbit hole: the viewer is invited into a fabled space that

¹² As cinematographer I was in conversation with the development team engineer at SonyEricsson in Stockholm. We discussed the possibility of modifications to the software that would allow manual colour and exposure controls. This however never materialized, possibly due to the costs involved but more likely due to SonyEricsson's marketing guidelines at the time.

rhymes with the tune of its own internal logic. The dominant colour palette is warm and saturated, as if a digital version of an oil painted canvas. There is nothing naturalistic about this rendition of the scene, rather, the viewers are introduced to an impressionistic view, a kind of digital impressionism. There is clear and intentional performance of the medium's own artefacts in the scene: low resolution pixel blocks disrupt clarity and even the most minor dimming of lights results immediately in a black image. The filmmakers may thus be inviting the viewer to wrestle with the images, to peer and to scrutinize the material in order to digest its content.

As Sugar Man drives through the street at night, light and shadow interplay, illuminate and conceal him, as he drives under the street lights. The composition is a static profile close-up; his face reflects a saturated red orange tone. Sugar Man is silent as he drives on and a dark shadow masks his face when he drives through the gaps between street lights. If this scene were filmed with a conventional cinema camera, the sharpness and darkness of the shadow would have been lost. The dynamic range of the camera's exposure would force a smoother transition and gradation between light and shadow. When filmed with a cellphone camera Sugar Man's close-up becomes a silhouette against the passing street scene through the car window, no gradation possible or visible: the shot is deconstructed in a somewhat binary code: what we see is light and the total absence of light.

As the viewer studies Sugar Man's face, the play of light and shadow reveals and conceals his face repeatedly. This type of chiaroscuro references Caravaggio's *Calling of Saint Matthew* or *Supper at Emmaus*. Much like in Caravaggio's paintings, the intense contrast of light and colour tones shape the dramatic content of the scene and seem to reveal the psychological dimension of the character. This high contrast tension between light and shadow adds a sense of theatricality, of a 'staged' space, it seems to intensify the dramatic core of the scene.

Later in the sequence we see Sugar Man walking down a well-lit hotel corridor. This is where he introduces himself in a voice-over, and in a way explains the narrative mode of the film "I am keeping this as a diary so that you know when things went wrong" (Kaganof, 2005). We then see an image of the Hillbrow tower, shot through the back window of a car, the shot ends in a pan to a day exterior scene of Sugar Man in the car at a traffic intersection. This is

one of only three scenes in the film which were shot in daylight, all other scenes were filmed at night. The saturated red sky seen through the back window of the car creates an eerie image and the Johannesburg cityscape appears menacing. The camera holds on this composition for a long while as the car glides through the city streets, the persistent dwelling on this single image allows the viewer to appreciate its dramatic function. The visual world of this film speaks of isolation, a tragic solipsism that hems Sugar Man in. This is one of the most iconic images of the film, one which highlights how the visual style of *SMS Sugar Man* fosters a sense of the isolated world of the characters, of estrangement and macabre irony. The lack of detail invokes discomfort thus consistently performing as the underlying psychological dimension of the story. The emphatic use of this shot in the film also demonstrates the unique development format of *SMS Sugar Man* for in fact it was one of the earlier test-driving shots which were filmed before production began.

Conclusion

The analysis of the two fiction films in this chapter underscores the diverse position of the cinematographer in the South African production economy. In comparison to definitions of the role of the cinematographer which were discussed in the previous chapter, South African cinematographers largely operate in very low (and even micro) budget productions, where scarcity of resources, such as time, equipment and crew, necessitate wider areas of engagement at all levels of production. This is somewhat different from the positions occupied by cinematographers in more established (and better funded) industries, usually in developed countries, where official role definitions and contractual agreements are regulated by local unions and guilds. In South Africa, professional film practitioners do not fall under any such industry's specific governing body. This on the one hand allows for a wider range of areas of influence and intervention for the South African cinematographer, as is evident from the analysis of the two films. On the other hand, this reality presents a grey area that can be exploited, especially when a production must deal with dire financial constraints.

Overall, ways in which the cinematographer contributes to the visual articulation of stories in feature films mainly reside in the development and practical application of a coherent visual style. The analysis in this chapter considers visual style in terms of specific parameters:

format, composition and framing, movement, lighting and contrast. *SMS Sugar Man* and *Oil On Water* required the cinematographer to design and apply each of these parameters in very different ways.

Chapter 3 – Impunity (Mistry, 2014)

Introduction

The cinematographer's professional and creative career development track is often focused on specific production formats. These may vary across a wide range of existing formats; from short form commercials and music videos to long form documentaries, TV series or feature films. The reasons for choosing to focus on a specific format as a career track in cinematography are usually based on personal interests. Indeed, while the tools of cinematography are quite similar across the range of production formats, the role of the cinematographer in each, the creative and technical requirements and the engagement with the finishing process of the project are quite different. The offer to be the cinematographer on Mistry's foray into feature film directing was therefore timely. Doing the cinematography for *Impunity* would allow me to apply and critically examine the topics which I explore in this dissertation. I therefore believed that it would be valuable to this study.

The overall intention in this chapter is to examine *Impunity* as the creative outcome of the discussions presented in this dissertation and some of its conclusions. It will also be presented as a specific case study in attempting to further understand the critical role of the cinematographer in the South African film production landscape. I will use the methodology previously deployed to critically engage with the film, explore the processes and dynamics that shaped it and engage with critical responses to the film. It is important to note that the story presented in the final distributed film is different from the script from which it originated; this is not uncommon in independent low budget filmmaking. For the purpose of coherency, I will mostly discuss the story structure of the completed film and refer to the script only where it is relevant to the discussion.

The cinematographer and director's collaboration on the film *Impunity* offers a unique and valuable case study for this dissertation. Director Jyoti Mistry is an academic staff member at the Film and Television Division in the Wits School of Arts. I therefore expected that the experience of developing and filming *Impunity* should be different from my engagement with *Oil On Water* and *SMS Sugar Man* in the way that critical academic thinking would inform the discussions. Indeed, our conversations about this project were imbued with a heavily conceptual and theoretical mode of ideation. The thinking around the meaning of the film and the exploration of stylistic choices were informed by some of Mistry's academic and creative work¹³. It is hoped therefore that the inclusion of the academic framework in some of the thinking in the development and production of *Impunity* will be useful to this study.

Impunity is a daring and complex story mainly because of the attempt to weave at least three main narrative strands. These are told in a sequence of events that connect characters who are very different from each other in terms of their background, occupation and social circumstances. Contemporary South Africa in this film, is the stage that holds the space in which the story is performed: it is a metaphysical and political space that informs character challenges and choices and thus the overall story. *Impunity* contains scenes of violence, nudity and explicit sex, and with little self-censorship as part of its makers' critical stance. The film's exploration of and commentary on political power, racial differentiation and the phenomenon of radical violence in South Africa could be read as brazen. These themes and how they informed the cinematography of the film will be discussed in detail in the section titled *Controlling idea, theme and director's vision*.

Story and Script

Impunity opens with a sequence of wide shots on a desolate beach. The camera is handheld and the landscape depicted is a desolate sandy beach with Echo the only person in it. The camera follows Echo as she walks on the beach and then cuts abruptly to a driving shot depicting tall sugarcane blur past on the side of the road. This in turn is intercut with graphic

¹³ Some of Mistry's published work that formed the basis for discussions are *The Bull On The Roof* (Mistry, 2010), *We Remember Differently* (Mistry, 2005), *Yoni* (Mistry, 1997)

shots of real life violent events, armed robberies, road accidents and scenes from the Marikana massacre. The scene then returns to the beach to a long and pensive wide shot of glistening black rocks on the water's edge, with waves in the background. Echo and Derren are seen washing blood off their hands in the seawater.

From there the story moves to a dark smoky bar somewhere in Durban. This is where Echo and Derren meet for the first time. The film jumps forward in time again to the beach, this time depicting Echo and Derren in an erotic sex scene, as the scene progresses and their passion heats up the scene is intercut with a violent scene at the bar in which Derren tries to save Echo from being raped by the bar owner. In the confrontation between the three the bar owner is killed and the couple flee. The sex scene at the beach and the rape and murder scene at the bar are continuously intercut as the story progresses, making implicit connections between sex and violence as a theme in the film. The killing of the bar owner prompts Echo and Derren's escape, it also sets in motion the violent events that follow and it is a major turning point in the film. Echo and Derren's story arc begins in this scene. Therefore, this story event may be identified as the inciting incident and the end of the bar scene marks the end of the first act. The inciting incident scene ends eleven minutes into the story.

Impunity, however, follows a disrupted narrative structure. A large number of sequences are non-chronological and the viewer often sees the consequence before the action itself is revealed. This clear and deliberate choice was made by Mistry at the time of editing the film, and is a major departure from the script, which does follow a chronological narrative structure.

Echo and Derren remain at the desolate beach for some time, the scene describes moments of their time together and alone as they pass the time in hiding. At some point they decide to move on, they go to visit an old friend of Derren's who has done well and lives in an upmarket golf estate house somewhere further down the coast. A sequence of landscape shots portrays their journey inland and the two end up as surprise visitors in Michael and Karen Kelly's upmarket home. Passions mix up as sex turns into violence and at the end of this part of the film Derren and Echo kill Michael and Karen. They stay in the house for a while before leaving, enjoying for a moment the spoils and luxury of the mansion.

At the end of this section of the film, as the viewer is taken back to the desolate beach, security camera footage is interspersed with the beach sequence. Mistry decided to use actual scenes of violence, all filmed in South Africa. This edited selection of robbery scenes, police heists and muggings are explicit and brutal. Mixing these scenes together with the stylistically different footage of the film imbues *Impunity* with gruesome realism. The use of this footage also establishes a second, very different visual style to that of the filmed footage. *Impunity* thus combines two ontological spaces, that of 'real' and 'fiction'.

The next plot turn finds Derren and Echo serving tables at a lavish cocktail party. As with the end of the bar scene, this scene begins with shots of Echo and Derren which were given a stylistic treatment that resembles security camera footage. The plot constantly moves between the two spaces of fiction and reality through a third visual space that integrates both. In this third space, the iconic style of security camera footage is embedded with various shots of Echo and Derren which were originally filmed with a different, more cinematic visual style. The shots depict Echo and Derren as they flee the bar and later in the film, in the cocktail party scenes, when Derren and Echo serve as waiters. The angle of view in these shots is usually high, emulating familiar security camera positions. The third space plays on viewers' expectation of what should be read as fiction, and what should be viewed as real by creating a story space that combines the two readings. Its performance within *Impunity* blurs the line that separates fiction from reality.

The cocktail party ends with another murder. The mauled body of Zanele Majola, the would be wife of young political star, Lifa Mapufo, and daughter of a minister is found dead in a game reserve on the morning following the party. The viewers know that during the night before Zanele and Derren shared a moment of passion, and Derren is arrested as a suspect. This plot twist introduces two new characters into the film: Naveed Khan and Dingane Fakude, their story arc interweaves with Echo and Derren's. The suspects are taken into separate interrogation rooms and their intimate space together is crushed. They are now both crushed under the pressure of the justice system, which has its own rules and operational logic. The viewer quickly learns that detective Dinagane Fakude was assigned this case from the top,

and justice might not be his main interest. He may have been called by Lifa Mapufo to cover up for the real murderer.

In the interrogation sequences new story details come to light but none which lead to the conviction of Derren and Echo. Eventually the four drive together on an inland journey to Pretoria, where hopefully this interrogation and conviction process would come to an end. There seems that Dingane has little interest in the truth, as he frequently reports to and updates both the minister and Lifa. Truth, justice and political interest are forces that shape the lives of the characters involved in this investigation and, as with 'real' and 'fiction' discussed earlier, lines become blurred. Naveed and Dingane try to get a complete picture of the events that occurred on the night of Zanele's murder from Derren and Echo. In the process, the film keeps cutting back to prior events, which further complicate and disrupt the narrative. The truth becomes layered, fragmented, perhaps unattainable, it is possible that no space exists in *Impunity* that could contain it. At some point Echo and Derren together with the two investigating detectives go on a road journey to the headquarters in Pretoria, where hopefully the investigation can be completed.

The car provides an intimate space for the four characters as they wrestle with their conflicting objectives, positions and consciences. Justice and crime are signified by this mix of characters and their opposing motives. Conversations lead to conflict as it emerges that while Naveed wants to get to the bottom of this case and find the truth Dingane is only interested in framing Derren (and consequently, as the story later reveals, protecting someone else). At some point Naveed realises that there is an important secret which has been hidden from them throughout the interrogations: Echo and Derren kidnapped a little girl, Marise, and she must be found. Naveed wants to go back and find the girl and a conflict erupts between him and Dingane, who wants to push forward, get to Pretoria and end the investigation. In the nearly violent argument, Dingane is accused of serving the will of his masters rather than pursuing truth and justice. This moment in the film reveals the main theme of the story: the tension and conflict between justice and truth. In my reading of the script as cinematographer I sought to engage this tension in visual terms, which will be explored in more depth in the following sections of this chapter.

As the story goes back to the moment of kidnapping Marise, elegiacal visuals describe Echo's subjective point of view as she and Derren drive through a rural landscape on their way to the border. At some point, the car glides in slow motion alongside a farmyard. This is where Echo observes through the window of the moving car a moment in which Marise is abused by her father. For Echo, this brings back the memory of the rape scene earlier in the bar. Deeply empathetic, perhaps in a twisted attempt to redeem herself and restore her own power, Echo kills Marise's mother and she and Derren take the girl with them. We discover this during Naveed and Dingane's argument which conforms with the film's established narrative logic: cause and effect do not follow each other chronologically. Naveed's passionate commitment strikes a chord with Dingane and they set off back to the game farm to find Marise.

They eventually do, and in a moment of rushed chaos Derren manages to escape. This leads to an intense scene of a fight between Derren and Naveed who implores him to give himself up because he can "still have a life". Derren replies, shouting from his hiding place, that "there is no space for a white man in this country", thus revealing one of his major character motives, and in a manner consistent with the film's penchant for controversial directness. When the fight ends all five return to the car and continue to a nearby police station. This scene bears the formal characteristics of final resolution to the main narrative strands and can therefore be read as marking the end of the second act.

In the final act of *Impunity* Naveed and Dingane part as friends while Derren and Echo are lead out of their cells towards the car that will drive them to Pretoria. Unwittingly the police staff allow them to cross paths with Marise and her father who are being seen by the paramedics. This invokes a strong emotional response from Echo who has thus far been mostly restrained. Shouting erupts as Echo suddenly pulls out a gun she has been hiding since she removed it in secret from the car in the scene when Marise was found and saved. A standoff ensues as Echo points the gun at the police, Dingane understands immediately what is going to happen and pleads with her to stop, but it is too late. Echo aims at the policeman and they open fire. Echo drops in a pool of her own blood and in her final moment we go back to the magical beach, the only place where she found true solace, a mythical heaven. The story ends with the death of the main character and the parting images of Echo floating in the sea.

Director and cinematographer collaboration

As cinematographer I had a rare opportunity in *Impunity* to engage with the script and the director for a longer period of development and planning than is usually afforded. This is because the project was proposed to me six months before it was scheduled for production. As colleagues we had the time to engage with the film on multiple levels over a number of meetings and conversations. Mistry brought into our conversations a critical mode of ideation and her analysis of various conceptual ideas about the story. We discussed thematic ideas in great detail and how these related to the script. The most important set of thematic questions we discussed were:

- How should sex and nudity be visually expressed in *Impunity*?
- Violence is performed with a startling banality in the script. How are we going to visually speak to this idea?
- Dingane and Naveed are representatives of the law and the justice system. However, their interpretations are quite different from each other. Naveed seeks the truth, and believes that legal justice should serve the truth. Dingane understands these terms clearly but seems serve the will and power of those higher than him in the order of political hierarchy. How do we visually address this tension?
- The story follows Echo and Derren's journey towards the border. After they are caught, the journey takes a turn inland and we follow their route to Pretoria. Landscape plays an important role in *Impunity*. How do we give expression to this role of the South African landscape in shaping the meaning of the film?
- The desolate beach is attributed with mythical qualities. It is the only place where intimacy is performed uninhibitedly. It is a place that holds solace, comfort and happiness for Echo. It is the place she returns to in her dying moments. How should this site be treated visually?

An important aspect of the director-cinematographer relationship is reconciling different points of view. Cinematographer Andrew Laszlo offers the following insight:

Collaboration does not mean surrendering one's ideas and convictions. In fact, at

times, collaboration is strengthened by a point of view that's different from one's own particular perspective, but one that's always offered in the best interest of the film. (Laszlo and Quicke, 2000, p. 22)

Laszlo accepts that different positions are inevitable and valuable in creative collaborations. When handled positively they may produce results and decisions that improve the story and enhance the film. Based on my experience of different types of prior collaboration on a number of creative projects I agree with Laszlo's position. It can be argued that in many cases disagreements are not only inevitable but are instrumental and a positive component of creative development in films.

In comparison with *Oil On Water* and *SMS Sugar Man*, there was much less emphasis on the material aspects of production and possible methodologies in our discussions. As the development progressed we decided to test some possible practical applications of some of the ideas we discussed in theory. The director and cinematographer, at this stage, were motivated to test possible collaborative methodologies in practical terms. The framework for the tests was to compare working methodologies with emulsion and digital film production. To that end Mistry invited actors to perform specific roles in an improvised manner. We filmed five scenes in the course of one day using the Super16mm film camera and Arri Alexa digital camera for each scene. As cinematographer, I was also interested in testing spherical and anamorphic lenses in order to evaluate their optical properties in the development of the visual style of *Impunity*.

It is important to explain that an anamorphic lens optically squeezes the width of the image it projects, thus distorting the natural ratio of vertical to horizontal lines. The use of anamorphic lenses produces an image that appears "squeezed": taller and narrower than its normal proportions. Later in post-production the image is un-squeezed and objects in the frame return to their natural proportions. This process produces a final image that has an aspect ratio of 2.40, and a much larger negative¹⁴ area (55% in comparison with the more frequently used 1.85 aspect ratio) (Goi, ASC, 2013, p. 69). It allows for more background and foreground detail to be included in the composition even of tighter shots such as close-ups.

¹⁴ Negative area is the space within the frame around the subject of the composition

In the case of *Impunity* this visual device helped produce compositions that include background and foreground elements, e.g. landscape, in the frame. Landscape elements thus featured more prominently in the film, and became more integral to the story. The use of anamorphic lenses produces other optical effects such as shallow depth of field and distinct types of flares that create a distinct visual style.

My ambition as cinematographer was to produce in the tests a series of images that have different visual style properties. The director and cinematographer would then examine how these images relate to the thematic ideas that came up in earlier conversations. This, I believe, grounded further discussions in concrete terms as they relate to the materiality of the images. It also provided the space for the process of making decisions about the visual style of the film to take shape. When the results of the tests were screened in a small cinema at the post-production facility, Mistry and I analysed and discussed each shot in terms of its visual properties. We began to consider which of the shots that we viewed would work as the reference for the chosen visual style of *Impunity*. There were several choices which we considered, the most important of which was the difference between the emulsion film footage shot on Super16mm and the footage shot with a digital camera. I will discuss these differences and the final choice in the following section.

Visual style

Format

Most of the test footage was shot in an interior location. A few shots were taken during sunset and at night. Almost every shot was taken twice: once using a Super16mm camera and again with a digital camera. The anamorphic lenses were only tested in some of the interior shots and the night scene tests.

The projected footage of the Super16mm material was mostly warmer in tone. It had an intense grain, especially in underexposed areas and in the night shots. The contrast was sharp at times but lacked definition in the low key, or dimly lit scenes. Mistry strongly believed that the grainy texture referenced the iconic and familiar style generally associated with

independent, low budget 'underground' cinema. We both agreed that it energised the images, disrupted clarity and therefore could work well to express the theme of violence, and the tension between Naveed, Dingane, Echo and Derren, across the entire film. The Super16mm footage appeared to have a force of authenticity commonly associated with low budget, third world cinema. In comparison the digital footage, shot with the same lenses appeared sharper. It had no visible grain (or noise – as is the case with digital imaging), and the colours were deep, natural and saturated. The footage was overall crisp with generous gradation across the exposure range, it allowed for more detail visibility in under and over exposed areas of the frame. As Mistry and myself scrutinised and discussed each shot a different type of engagement began to emerge in our collaboration. We began to relate ideas to materials, and we had tangible references which we had produced to further develop our approach to the filming.

My concern as cinematographer, and especially based on my experience with *Oil On Water*, was that *Impunity* would require considerable performance improvisation, and possibly, that new ideas regarding the story and characters would emerge during production, which could require more materials and filming than planned during pre-production. This would mean allowing for additional film stock to be available during the filming to accommodate this. In light of budget constraints, I strongly believed that this production would be an unaffordable excess. Shooting on Super16mm would require restrictive scheduling, a limited number of takes and no improvisation.

There was at the same time another serious concern: South Africa was making a fast transition to a digital only production economy, and the Film Lab was losing its financial viability. It would very likely shut down near the time of our scheduled filming. Developing and processing Super16mm emulsion film in the lab requires skill and attention to detail. Super16mm is prone to scratching and dirt marks. I was concerned, especially since parts of *Impunity* would be filmed out of town and raw footage would have to be shipped and our material could suffer as a result. Indeed, the Johannesburg Film Lab slowed down their processing and development at the time of production and completely shut down shortly after. Therefore, although it was agreed that the Super16mm footage presented us with the right visual style for the film, the final choice was the digital production format. It was agreed

that the Super16mm footage would serve as reference for the planned grading of the digital material, in order to achieve the desired visual style.

Composition

The anamorphic lenses used during the tests were Panavision G series primes. The resultant footage had a shallow depth of field and overall softness that offset the inherently crisp image produced by the digital format camera. When light sources were included in the scene, the lenses produced wide flares across the frame, a familiar characteristic of anamorphic optics. During the test, it became clear that the specific type of anamorphic lenses that would be available for the production would be very heavy for handheld camera operations. The G series lenses are longer and much heavier than their equivalent focal size spherical lenses. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to handhold the camera in the many interior car shots, in other tight spaces and on long handheld takes. However, it was almost immediately decided that the wide screen aspect ratio of 2.40 would help express the important role of our specific choices of locations and landscape as part of the story. The final decision therefore was to use spherical lenses and compose for an aspect ratio of 2.40 during filming. Later in post-production, after the offline assembly and final edit, the entire film would be cropped to the desired frame size. This would entail the use of wider focal length lenses than usual in order to allow for a much wider frame size, which in turn would result in deeper focus and the inclusion of more background detail in the composition.

The stylistic choice of a wide screen format necessitated a considered approach to subject framing, specifically in terms of subject placement in relation to screen direction. The reason for this, as discussed earlier, is the expanded space within the frame. Background details form a significant part of the meaning of each sequence, this fact alone influenced many of our location choices, since we understood that it would be difficult to conceal parts of the space which do not work for the story. This was especially important when it came to choosing the beach location, and indeed the producer, director and cinematographer team surveyed a number of potential beach locations until we found one that worked for a 360° setup plan. This practically means that every part of the location could be visible during the filming. This approach is exceptional in low budget film production because it requires the exclusive use of the filming location, which was potentially problematic in light of the large number of

scenes involving nudity. However, it was regarded as an important stylistic choice in the telling of the story, one which could effectively engage the viewer with the specific thematic importance of the beach and that of the South African landscape in general.

During the interrogation scenes, Echo and Derren were occasionally composed with most of the negative space behind them, in order to emphasise their state of physical and mental incarceration. This is contrasted with the wide composition at the beach in which they were generally placed in the centre of the frame, with the landscape balanced behind them. The different approaches to composition in these scenes became effective in the editing as the film repeatedly cuts between the interrogation room and the beach.

As cinematographer I used a different approach in the Kelly's house. The rising tension that plays out between the four characters is described with the formal choice of positioning them at the extreme sides of the frame. At times, parts of a character's body remain outside the frame, especially in close-up. This would disrupt the viewer's expectations and increase the level of tension.

Dialogue scenes in the moving car comprise a large part of the film. Looking and being looked at play an important part of shaping character dynamics in the driving scenes. There was therefore a deliberate choice to use mirrors in order to include the characters' gaze and reaction to this in the same frame. Mirrors were constantly adjusted and 'framed' in such a way that both characters are aware of each other's gaze, and could respond to this. The viewer would become aware, for example, of the multiple possible readings of Dingane's gaze and at the same time how Echo plays on desire and sexual attraction to gain power. Such intentions are difficult to express as dialogue, as it would likely be perceived as expository and fake. Composition, matched with performance and crafted in editing, is an effective visual approach to expressing these nuances.

Movement

There are two dominant camera movement styles in *Impunity*:

- Stable movement using tripod, crane and dolly shots. This approach to movement was used in the following scenes:
 - The interrogation scenes
 - Most of the scenes at the Kelly's house
 - Cocktail party scenes
 - Parts of the beach scenes
 - Shots that portray minister Kwame Majola
 - The scene at Naveed's house before he leaves to start the investigation
 - The first dialogue scene between Echo and Derren outside the bar
 - When Zanele Majola's body is revealed.
- Handheld shots, some of which are disruptively shaky, were used in the following scenes:
 - Parts of the beach scenes
 - Parts of the bar scene and the entire rape and fight scene
 - Parts of the interrogation scenes
 - The scene in which Echo's bag is stolen
 - Finding Marise, Derren's escape and his eventual capture
 - The closing scene of *Impunity* in which Echo dies.

Based on my analysis of the script I proposed to Mistry that we begin with carefully crafted steady camera movements in the interrogation scenes and move towards the anxiety reflected in the shaky handheld camera movement as the story progresses. This was based on the fact that the script originally opened with the interrogation scenes and then moved back in time to earlier parts of the story. The interrogation scenes were quite loaded with tension but they took place in small spaces with little movement of the actors. My intention therefore was to intensify the tension between the detectives and suspects by locking off the camera, or moving it slowly. This should confine them to a compressed physical space.

The beach scenes balanced a mixture of handheld camera movement with carefully composed locked off shots. The locked off shots reveal the expanse and natural beauty of the beach and allowed the editor to use them as long pauses. The final edit includes many of these shots that stay on the screen for a relatively long duration. It is a reflection of time that

is synonymous with this utopic site, of a meditative and reflective mental space before the calamity that follows. My intention as cinematographer was to produce iconic shots that resonate and remain in the viewer's mind to counter balance the intensity of the violent and sexual scenes. These picturesque compositions of the beach present an imagined ideal moment for Echo whose search for liberation ends in self-destruction. I hope this recreates Echo's character in a more complex and layered manner.

Light, Colour and Contrast

During the development stage, discussion revolved around the intention to punctuate different sections of *Impunity* with distinctively separate colour values. The following is a brief description of each of these sections and their intended colour schemes.

Beach scenes were filmed in winter, at a location north of Durban. The sunlight at that time of the year is generally soft and quite warm. The shorter hours of daylight in winter are a major disadvantage in a low budget production. The arc of the sun across the sky is due north and quite low allowing for more definition and contrast during almost the entire day. The dominant colours in the scene are the pastel blue sky, blue-green of the sea, the warm sand and the green treetops in the distant background. The specific location used was chosen because it could be photographed naturally, with little additional lighting. I chose to slightly overexpose each shot in order to create a bright overall tone with desaturated colours. The actors' skin tones in many of the compositions matches the warm tone of the sand with no colour contrast between them, as if they naturally fit in this landscape. The overall colour palette is balanced across the frame in a way that creates a sense of belonging. This sense of the place speaks to the thematic function of the scenes on the beach; it further anchors the story in Echo's subjective point of view. It is important to note that the viewer is never told why Echo and Derren decide to leave the beach; it remains unresolved throughout the entire film as a point of tension.

The Kelly's house scenes are imbued with cold tones and very high exposure value. The main source of lighting appears to be the big window behind the bar. In the Kelly house interior scenes, I used lens filtration that augmented the glare effect that comes from the window.

The desired effect of this was twofold: it should provide visual motivation for the intentionally overexposed photography, and function as constant visual agitation that in part augments and supplants the rising level of tension and the violent explosion towards the end of the scene.

The house walls are white and the overall décor and settings impose a sense of a showroom rather than an organic living space. This was deliberately designed and constructed to intensify the discomfort and tension between the characters in the space. Another possible reading of this chosen aesthetic may be the film's comment on golf estate lifestyle in South Africa. There is a moment in the Kelly house when Derren is left alone in the lounge and stands opposite a sculptural artefact (see *Figure 1*). The sculpture is a formless human bust that rests on a low shelf. The high key lighting and flat contrast make the white sculpture almost merge with the background wall. The shot in which Derren examines the sculpture is composed as a standoff between two bodies (*Figure 1*), and the shot's prolonged duration appears as an ominous, foretelling pause. Indeed, much later in the sequence Echo smashes the same sculpture on Karen Kelly's head, perhaps articulating the banality of violence as a recurring theme in the film. The poverty of colour range and the dominance of muted blue against white in the Kelly house, presents the appearance of the red colour of blood with a startling effect.

The sets for the two separate interrogation rooms were constructed in a soundproof studio. Production designer Esme Viviers and I worked closely during the development stage and planned the construction of the two adjacent rooms. The walls were made of mobile flat panels painted to a designed colour scheme and texture. The panels were painted on both sides and could be turned around, so that two different rooms could be created with a fast turnaround. The corridor outside the interrogation rooms was filmed at a different location. The creative intention in the design of the interrogation rooms was to articulate the anxiety of confinement and at the same time to blur the power balance between captors and captives. Naveed and Dingane want information, the truth and a confession whereas on the other side of the interrogation table Echo and Derren want to save themselves. All four are confined in the tight, vexing space of the cramped interrogation rooms, hemmed in by their own desires and ambitions. The interrogation rooms were painted with dark grey and muted

green tones and the lighting scheme further enhanced the effect of the 'walls closing in'. Most of the lighting sources were above the actors which emphasised a very high contrast ratio allowing the background to become very dark. During the construction of the interrogation rooms I asked the production designer to place a wide canopy lamp very low in the room in order to be able to include the light in the shots composed with a 2.40 widescreen ratio. The light globe pierces through the dark space, a constant factor that operates to aggravate the sense of confinement and the escalation of anxiety. The world of the police station interrogation rooms was designed with reference to a chiaroscuro style in order to provide a dramatic context for the thematic tension in these scenes (see *Figure 5*).

I anticipated that one of the more difficult scenes in the script in terms of the filming process would be Echo's accident at night inside the game reserve. Echo tries to escape with Marise in the back seat of the car sometime during the cocktail party. In the film we see this in a sequence of flashbacks but in the original script it was a fully developed scene. Night filming naturally requires a large amount of lighting and filming in a remote location would be difficult, if not impossible, under low budget constraints. Further, Mistry wanted this scene to be filmed almost entirely in a single shot, a continuous event that would explode on the screen in real time. In order to do this, and follow the driving car at night I suggested that the scene should be filmed as Day-For-Night.

With Day-For-Night, a scene is filmed during the day with the cinematographer's specific use of underexposure and lighting creating the appearance of a night scene. In designing the visual style of this scene in *Impunity*, I mainly referred to the work of cinematographer Christopher Doyle in the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002). This allowed the accident scene to be filmed with long continuous takes, creating a sense of an event unfolding in real time with the intention of invoking in the viewer a greater sense of empathy, and intensifying the impact of surprise.

Conclusion

The planning of the production phase, based on the various components of the visual style, was comprehensive. Every scene was broken down in detail, in terms of the equipment which

would be used and, some of the more complicated shots were pre-visualised. This helped to get the main team members to follow the specific requirements of the production schedule breakdown and achieve the goals for each day. The daily pressure in feature film production can be daunting, more so when resources are strained due to budget constraints. Overall, the production averaged about five minutes of screen time per day. Considering the large amount of time spent on travelling to the various locations, this is a positive outcome of the meticulous planning.

The editing process of *Impunity* was long, spanning a period of several months. Different versions of the film were edited and considered, and two different editors, in collaboration with Mistry, tried their hands at constructing a story that worked and satisfied the director, producer and executive producers. The final version of the film differs from the original script. Therefore, the analysis of the outcome in this chapter pertains solely to the final, officially distributed version of the film.

It should not be considered unusual for new creative ideas, which differ from those initially scheduled, to emerge during production. Making last minute creative changes is a process of negotiation between the director, assistant director, cinematographer and producer. There are several areas of impact that should be measured against the creative benefit of changing the original plan. The list includes: meeting the objectives of the production schedule, the possibility of increasing costs, changes to story structure and additional resources that may have not been allocated. This occurred several times during production and was dealt with successfully. For example, the Kelly house scenes were especially complicated by the fact that performance was restricted by the safety demands of stunt actions. There is a considerable amount of violence in the scenes: the smashing of the sculpture, the gun firing, a physical fight and a bashing with a golf club. Mixed with these are moments of intimate nudity and slow-paced tension expressed in long pauses. The Kelly house scenes were almost entirely re-designed at the location after rehearsals. In this case the organic approach worked well for the scene; it opened the space for improvisation and possibly improved the development of the story.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the overall plan was to use the footage which was shot on the Super16mm emulsion film format during the tests as a visual reference for the desired visual style of *Impunity*. The digital camera provided a significantly different type of aesthetic especially in terms of grain texture and exposure range. The intention was therefore to exploit the benefits of digital capture, and revert to the look of the Super16mm footage by means of post-production image manipulation. The final grade process is the last stage of the post-production phase in which the final version of the edit is re-captured from the camera's original 'raw' material in the highest possible technical quality. This material then is reshaped and treated digitally in terms of colour, texture and contrast. Any special effects that were created are inserted here and the multiple visual layers are given a uniform look. It is an important phase of the production especially for the cinematographer for mainly two reasons:

- The visual style which was planned, worked on and calculated for every shot of the film is shaped and finalised during the final grade.
- The technical capabilities of contemporary production digital cameras can produce images with a wide colour and exposure latitude. The range of these often exceeds that of most display devices. Therefore, there usually exists a wide range of image manipulation possibilities during the final grade, to the extent of significantly altering the visual style of the film from what was originally planned for and implemented during production.¹⁵

The process of the final grading of a feature film usually takes up to two or three weeks, and can be a costly line item in the production budget. However, in the case of *Impunity* it is my understanding that budget constraints precluded the possibility of such a lengthy process. Instead, the final grade was done in only three days. Due to the time pressure, the producers decided that Mistry alone would participate in this process, without the cinematographer. Before the start of the grading process, Mistry and I discussed in theory the desired look, and what stylistic changes should be made to the original 'raw' camera material. The final visual

¹⁵ In discussion forums and interviews about cinematography the topic relating to the essential involvement of the cinematographer in the final grade is given serious consideration, see "Grading, DI and Telecine" forum at www.cinematography.com and www.cinematography.net edited discussion forums.

style of *Impunity* is different in some respects from what was originally planned after the tests. This is to be expected since new stylistic possibilities that better serve the story can emerge during the final grade screening. The creative process of designing the visual style for a feature film is organic, ongoing and continues through the different phases of production to the very end.

Impunity was officially selected for screening at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). Considering the international prestige of this festival, this may be an important achievement for the film. *Impunity* opened for public screening in South African cinemas on 28 August 2015, and remained on circuit for only a week. International and local reviews were mostly critical of the film's narrative structure and the explicit and disturbing violence. Poplak concluded in his *Mail & Guardian* review of *Impunity* that:

this strange, confounding, disturbing film discards narrative coherence for mouth feel – this is about textures... It's an approach that will not satisfy everyone – the TIFF crowd seemed baffled – but perhaps that's the point. Cinema doesn't have to tell it straight (Poplak, 2015)

I agree with Poplak's view that the viewer should search for meaning in the textures, visual style and montage sequences of *Impunity* alongside the film's narrative threads. Poplak does not argue here that narrative coherency and a strong visual style are mutually exclusive, but rather that in *Impunity* visual style articulates thematic elements that may be absent in the narrative. This view supports in part the analysis of *Impunity* presented in this chapter, namely that the exploration of violence, sex, love and betrayal is articulated by the film's visual style in scenes or sequences that do not offer a coherent narrative thread.

As cinematographer I was deeply invested in the development and the production of the film. Therefore, it would be hard for me to assess here the success or failure of my work on *Impunity* in an objective manner. In some way I believe that the choices of widescreen, composition style and my lighting support the story. The visual style of the film could be considered a kind of aegis for a disrupted unfolding of the story. I was successful in achieving the intended look in some scenes more so than in others. Most notable of these for me are the interrogation scenes, the beach scenes, the cocktail party scene, the bar scene (especially the exterior night scene), the prayer scene and some of the driving scenes.

From my position as researcher, if it is indeed possible for me to embody this separation of roles, I would argue that the originally intended visual style, which was designed following the screening of the tests could have worked better to express the “strange, confounding, disturbing” (Poplak, 2015) style of filmmaking in *Impunity*.

Conclusion

Cinematography emerged as a specialised field in visual story telling in the early nineteenth century. This is largely due to critical developments in camera and lighting technology, alongside evolving perspectives on the unique power of visual style to express thematic ideas. The cinematographer’s most significant contribution to the development and production of films is the design and implementation of a visual style that engages with and articulates thematic ideas, the world of the story and, most importantly, the director’s vision.

Early cinema productions, prior to the inclusion of a viewfinder and motorised camera operation, show that the camera was used almost exclusively as a passive recording device¹⁶. The *mise-en-scène* was arranged and constructed to fit a pre-established frame that did not change during the recording. The performances, settings and actions were ‘presented’ to a static frame in ways that resembled theatre stage. Because of the poor sensitivity of early emulsion film stock to light and colour, scenes were brightly lit with little or no consideration of the expressive potentialities of contrast and lighting effects.

A marked shift in the role of camera and lighting operations is evident with the introduction of cameras equipped with an accurate viewfinder and motorised operation. Cinematic vocabulary became richer with the increased use of elaborate camera movements and the creative manipulation of lighting. Developments in emulsion film stock sensitivity enabled a wide range of expressive contrast possibilities. The richer cinematic vocabulary made possible

¹⁶ Méliès’ use of double exposure at the time was still done within the confinements of static camera and flat, directionless lighting.

by developments in imaging technologies stimulated the creation of a range of visual techniques designed to express the internal world of the characters. Thus, camera and lighting techniques were mobilised to express a wide range of thematic concepts. Cinematographers began to step in to the production phase as important contributors, partners to the director and to some extent co-authors during the production phase. Cinematography emerged as a field in visual story telling that focuses on the use of technology in the construction of a 'visual style' that serves to express the director's vision.

The discussion on the role of the cinematographer in chapter one culminates in highlighting its collaborative nature. While different approaches to cinematography and the role of the cinematographer in film production were considered it is evident that the construction of a coherent visual style is essentially a collaborative process. The director and the cinematographer must engage in the development of a cogent vision for the film, the discussions therefore focus on possible ways in which this vision can be achieved. Technical resources, specific crew roles, location settings and production time frame are considered in order to construct a visual style in terms of movement, composition, framing, contrast, lighting and colour. With major advancements in imaging technologies, recording formats play an increasingly important role in these discussions. The cinematographers' expertise, creative processes and signature styles are essential factors in the development and production phases.

Cinematographer Roger Deakins explains that "without the inspiration and vision of a director, the work of the cinematographer remains no more than technique" (Deakins in Van Oosterhout et al., 2012, p. 167). Deakin's statement illustrates the essential role of the director's vision in shaping the cinematographer's engagement. It can therefore be argued that the lack of a director's vision will produce an ineffective collaboration with the cinematographer and potentially an incoherent film. The film's cinematography would be a meaningless and confusing display of creative skill if it is not guided by the director's vision of the story.

In the analysis of the films *Oil on Water* and *SMS Sugar Man* I attempted to identify and understand the forces that shaped the construction of their visual style, as well as the roles

of the cinematographer in development and production. It is possible to identify common roles and areas of responsibilities to both films; these are:

- Professional competencies and knowledge of a wide range of technologies are essential, be it 35mm cameras and lenses or mobile phone cameras. The cinematographer must be able to anticipate how the use of any specific filming format will affect the logistical concerns of production budget, schedule plans, filming ratio, locations, the post-production grading phase and, in some cases, different distribution platforms.
- In every production the cinematographer must engage with the story, thematic ideas and, most importantly, understand the director's vision in order to construct a visual style. Different productions, and personal traits define and shape how this is done and therefore methodologies vary significantly between projects. Hence, the cinematographer must be a versatile creative collaborator.

It is impossible to define the level of authorship or co-authorship that can be attributed to the cinematographer. The levels of control and influence the director and producers have over the construction of the film's imagery vary significantly between projects. Chapters two and three clearly demonstrate that some directors focus mostly on performances and leave much of the film's imagery to decisions made by the cinematographer, such as Mistry in *Impunity*. Others keep tight control over almost every aspect of the film, such as Matthews in *Oil on Water*. Kaganof invited an unusually long term and highly involved collaboration with the cinematographer during which time almost every aspect of the film's visual style, the world of the story and production methodologies were forged. Therefore, the division of labour and the roles of the cinematographer are contingent on the parameters that shape the collaborative process in each unique project.

Significant effort, skill and financial resources go into the development of ideas into screenplays. This is a process that can take months, sometimes years before the film is financed and goes into production where the action, dialogues and settings are transferred into images and sound through an immense technical and creative effort. The screenplay's intrinsic value resides exclusively in the ability to transform its story and thematic elements into images, or, in using Bresson's definition of the term, into cinematography. Pasolini's

argument that the screenplay is not a work of literature is premised on this statement (Pasolini, 1986), and cinematography therefore is linked to every phase of the film's development.

The film's visual style is an expression of the cinematographer's unique signature. The cinematographer relies on technical knowledge, experience and skill in order to realise creative stylistic choices. Understanding the qualities and creative potential that the cinematographer adds to the development of films would empower producers and directors with meaningful terminology. An understanding and recognition of the roles of the cinematographer would inform reasonable expectations: cinematography cannot fix story problems but it can enhance the visual articulation of a well-constructed story.

The cinematographer is an essential ally for the director in the development of films. During the development phase the cinematographer brings to the discussions technical knowledge, specialisation in image design and experience in different modalities of production. The ongoing detailed engagement of the cinematographer with the creation of a visual style is an important creative force that significantly shapes the meaning of the film and viewers' experience. An experienced cinematographer can add to the film's patina a nuanced and multi-layered articulation of abstract thematic ideas. The cinematographer's visual style shapes the visual world of the story and characters and expresses the director's vision and unique point of view.

Final thoughts

Unions and guilds in the established North American and European industries provide guidelines that clearly define the professional role of the cinematographer. Professional contracts rely on these guidelines to define the roles, responsibilities and duties of the cinematographer in the production. The developing South African film industry does not have such guidelines, and this could be a major drawback for local film productions. The cinematographer's involvement in the different stages of production and post-production must be understood and codified within the specific economy of South African film productions. Otherwise, the cinematographer's professional development in South Africa will

continue to be compromised by this lack of coherency. Therefore, the South African film industry would benefit from further critical research and development of this topic.

Developments in imaging technology stimulate and challenge conventional visual storytelling techniques. At the time of completing this dissertation (June 2016), The American Society of Cinematographers held an international summit conference to discuss the possible futures of cinematography. The main topics of discussion were “The future of the cinematographer”, “Cinematography in virtual reality” and various models of collaboration with the director. The possible introduction of new virtual reality imaging technology into the world of filmmaking may force the cinematographer to “bring something new to VR (in order) to have input into this medium. We have all kinds of nifty tools we use to tell stories that we have to rethink in this new medium.” (Stump speaking at “ICS 2016 – Part V,” n.d.). This statement reaffirms that the roles of the cinematographer continuously evolve and are re-imagined.

The list of contributing participants to the conference comprises cinematographers and directors from Europe, Asia, South and North America. It is a regrettable fact that not a single African representative was included in the conference¹⁷. This should raise questions regarding perceptions of the role of the cinematographer in African production economy, specifically in state institutions, such as the South African NFVF, which is responsible for the development of a local film industry. It is hoped that in light of the steady increase in the number of local film productions in South Africa, the important role of the cinematographer and contributions to the development of a local (perhaps even national) cinematic identity will be given more serious academic, professional and institutional consideration.

¹⁷ For a full list of participants and reports on the various discussion forums see: <http://www.theasc.com/site/news/international-cinematography-summit-launches-at-asc-clubhouse/>

Appendix

Figure 1 Oil On Water

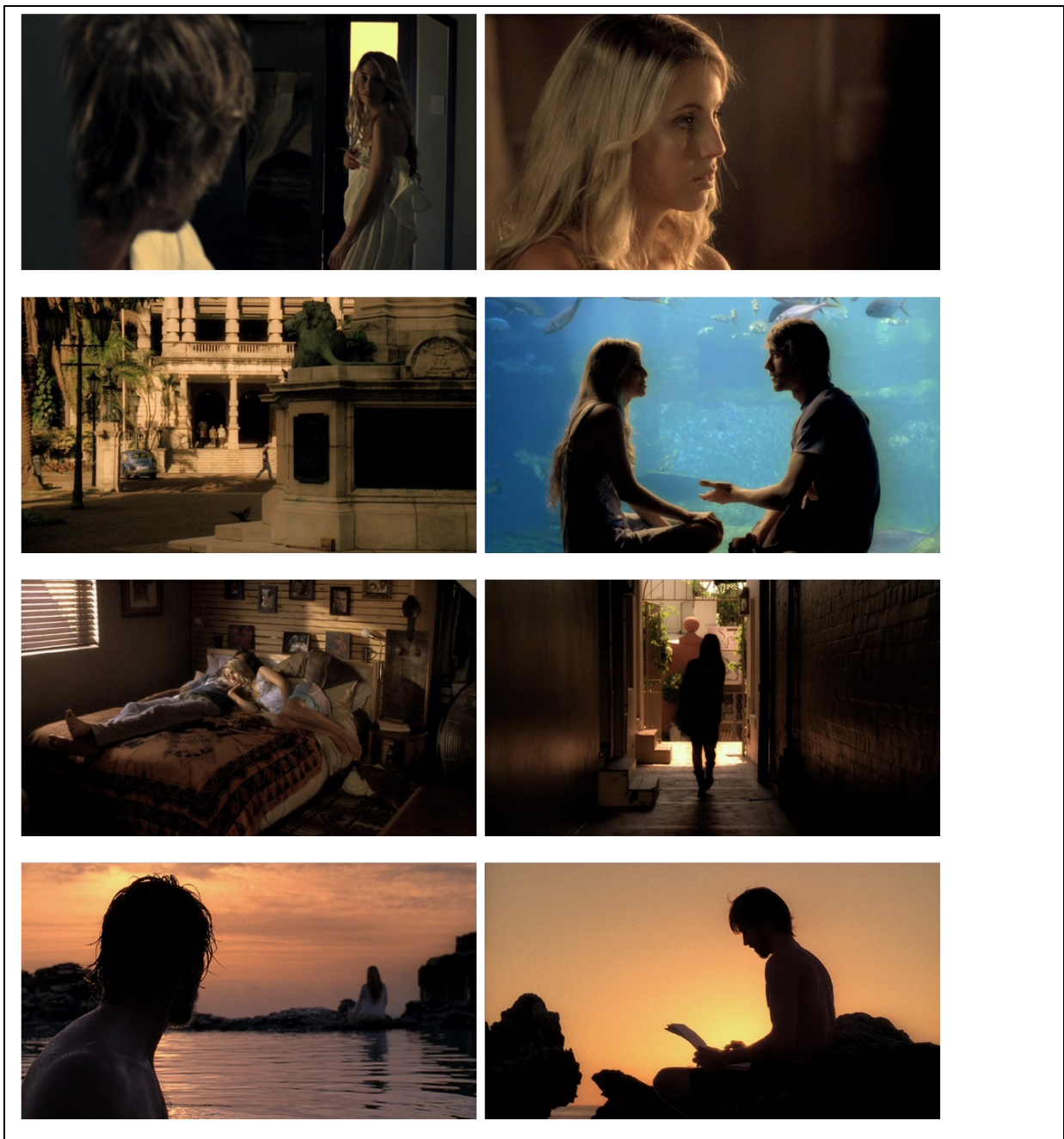


Figure 2 Oil On Water

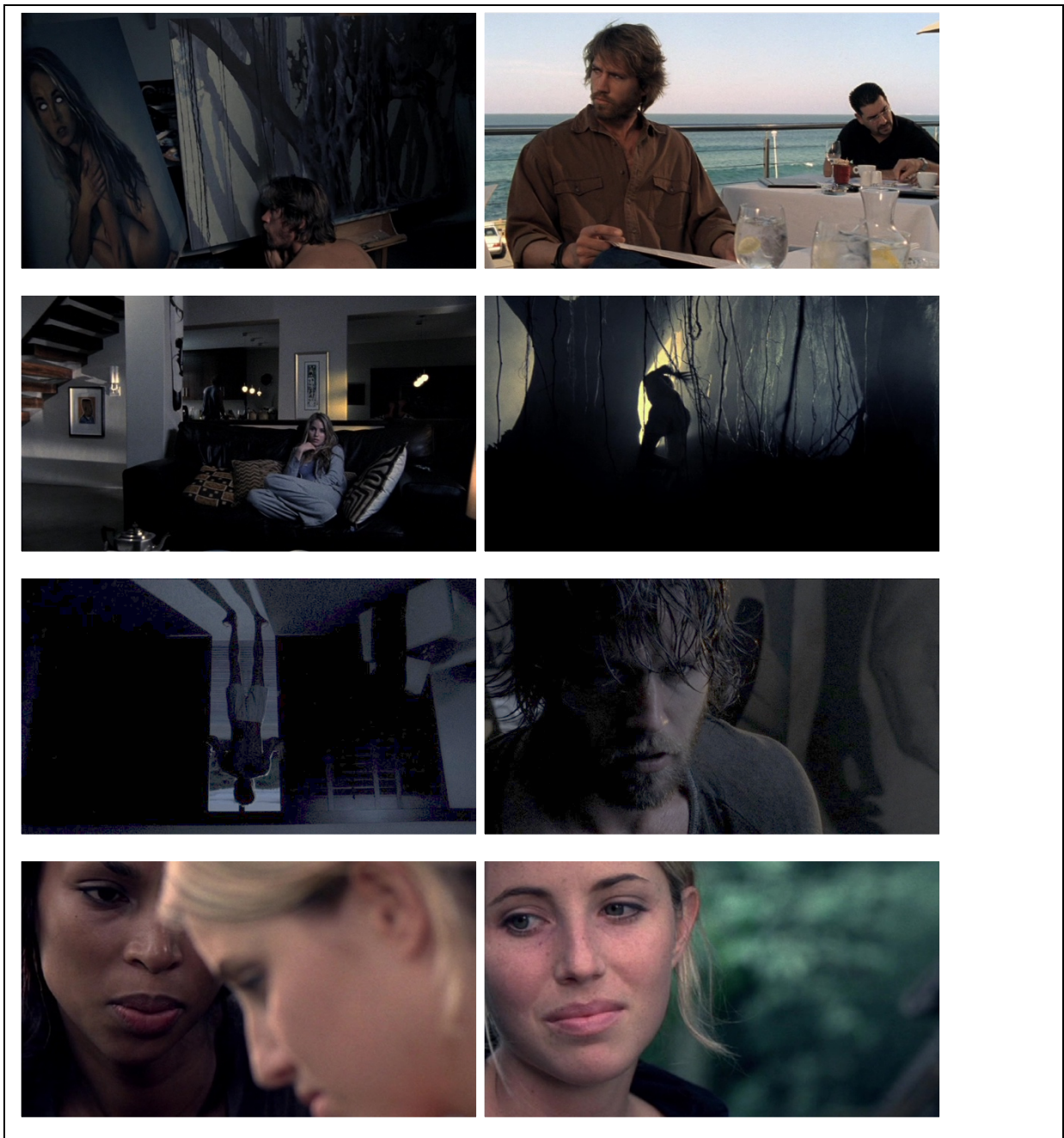


Figure 3 Impunity



Figure 4 Impunity



Figure 5 Impunity



Figure 6 Impunity



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Reygadas, C. 2002. *Japón*

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Thompson, D. 1992. *Writing with Light: Vittorio Storaro*

Welles, O. 1941. *Citizen Kane*

List of key films and other projects on which I worked as cinematographer:

3SAI (Emmanuel, 2007)

A Place Called Home (Omotoso, Moloi & Nikiwe, 2006, 2008)

Cryptid (Roodt, 2006)

Lamentation (Kaganof and Doherty, 2015)

The Three lives of Phillip Wetu (Paklepa, 2009)

The LAB (Berk, 2008)

The Rose Is Dead (Moloi, 2011)

Important discussion forums and online articles:

1. *CML - Cinematography Mailing List* [<http://www.cinematography.net/>]
1. *The American Society of Cinematographers* [<http://www.theasc.com/site/>]
2. *American Film Institute* [<http://www.afi.com/>]
3. *British Society of Cinematographers* [<https://bscine.com/>]
4. *British Cinematographer Magazine* [<https://britishcinematographer.co.uk/>]
5. *European Federation of Cinematographers* [<http://www.imago.org/>]
6. *Cinematography.com* [<http://www.cinematography.com/>]
7. *Film and Digital Times* [<http://www.fdtimes.com/>]