



D E A R C O L O R I S T



by
Catherine
Pantazopoulos
Freelance
Colorist
Toronto

The colorist and DP: a conversation

In an industry that all too often wants to ignore the real issue of visual talent — Can one tell a story with pictures, colors, feelings? — I want to talk about communication on a sensitive, artistic level. This article is a brief question/answer between a colorist and a DP: myself and DP Alar Kivilo, CSC. I hope it shares a small part of the process of a creative relation. Kivilo lives and works in LA. His credits include *The Glass House*, *Frequency*, *A Simple Plan*, *The Invaders*.

Pantazopoulos: Alar, what is the creative process that happens for you in creating a picture to be captured on film? When you look at a set, a location, what are your basic thoughts regarding look, lighting, film stock, etc.

Kivilo: The capturing of an image on film is the culmination of months of immersing oneself in the world of the script. Once I have read the script, I open my mind and my gut to a barrage of images, thoughts, feelings. I research the world where the story is taking place. I look at photographs, paintings, movies and the world around me, constantly hoping to find material that will inspire me. This vast barrage of ideas and feelings, slowly gets distilled into some concrete approaches regarding film stocks, lenses, aspect ratios, color, lighting and camera movement.

When these concrete ideas are finally arrived at, I share them with the director and the production designer and eventually with everyone involved with the making of the film.

Pantazopoulos: What are your thoughts when you are lighting a scene? Do you take the telecine process into account?

Kivilo: I am not a very technical cinematographer and I work very intuitively. It is almost impossible for me to describe, after the fact, how I arrived at lighting a scene. I have spent months inputting my brain with all manner of thoughts regarding the script, and when I am lighting — although I am reacting to what is happening physically in front of the camera — I believe that I am being subconsciously guided by all that input. Often, mistakes will happen: a light might get kicked out of place or as a light is being moved to the specific spot. I might discover something new, and I will then go off in that direction. Lighting is a process of discovery. One tries to find the most economical and simple way of expressing the emotion in a scene and telling the story in a clear and engaging way.

I generally do not make a distinction

between shooting for the big screen and TV. In both, I try to give the colorist or timer a strong negative. It is however, comforting to know that in the telecine process there are so many more things that can be done to the color, contrast and exposure than in a film finish. In a film finish I will try to get very specific with the look in the original photography, knowing that there is less I can do in post production to change the look of the images.

Pantazopoulos: What is the most important film-to-tape process for you in terms of people and gear?

Kivilo: The fact that one can add subtle nuances to the look of the film that were impossible to do during principal photography due to time and money constraints. It is another important step in the process of distilling a story down to its bare essence. What I look for in a colorist is someone who understands the story and has a passion for their craft. The transfer process offers up an unlimited palette for image manipulation. The colorist must choose from this vast array of possibilities: only those things that support the story and respect and elevate the original photography. I am not interested in something just because it happens to look cool. I am very excited about the fact that I will be doing a digital answer print on *Hart's War*, starring Bruce Willis, shooting in Prague, which gives me a vastly expanded range of colors and contrast with which to create.

Pantazopoulos: As I did with you on *Black and Blue*, I usually go to the shoot on the first day to see the first scenes I would be transferring, the set, the colors, the feeling and lighting that you were creating. How did you feel about that? I then came onto the set once a week to share what I saw in the transfer suite and to check the screening set-up you were using to view dailies — the monitor set-up, contrast, color, etc. — so that there was a consistency between transfer and screening. Did it help?

Kivilo: You were the first colorist in my experience to do that. It is such an obvious and smart thing to do. I am surprised that I had never met or even heard of anyone else doing this. By being on the set, you become an organic part of the collaborative process. The more one immerses oneself in the film, the more one is open to creative impulses that elevate the film.

It is very important to set up standards that one can measure discrepancies against. If I know

that what I see and what you see match, then we can have a fruitful discussion about the images.

Pantazopoulos: A couple of days into the shoot (and of our talking on the phone at the onset of each day of transfer) you told me to follow my instinct. What did you imply by that, in terms of the process and communication? How do you believe the creative and technical process of film transfer merge and evolve to an intuitive level between DP and colorist?

At one point, I remember there was a carnival (amusement park) night scene where an accident occurred. The scene was warm but I took the chance and made it warmer, almost red. I was concerned that I had gone too far, but it felt as if the scene called for it. Although I was worried about my wide interpretation of your work, when we spoke you said, "You read my mind." What do you think happens on a creative technical level in a case like that? Does it build confidence in a type of co-creating interpretive aspect of film transfer?

Kivilo: I have a very simple tool for judging imagery: my eyes. In one set of dailies I will immediately know if the colorist and I share the same taste and feeling toward the images. When I find people around me (directors, crew, colorists, etc.) that I can have stimulating non-verbal communication with, it is like finding gold. You had the right instincts and produced dailies that I was happy with, so it would be foolish for me to restrict your input in the creative process by being overly specific. Everyone brings something to the process. When the process is too specific and dictatorial the room for interpretation is restricted and I believe the work suffers. A colorist is by nature very similar to the cinematographer. We both have to master certain technical skills before we can be creative, and we both work for the final image. The work you do is a natural extension of the cinematographer's work.

Pantazopoulos: As a DP, what is the most frustrating aspect of film transfer and color correction?

Kivilo: It is frustrating when there is no creative bond and you start to see your images slipping away. Because there are so many ways to manipulate the image, one can easily get lost. The high cost of transfer time always adds an element of tension that is not conducive to creating. It is often very hard to articulate what it is that you want to see, so again, it is important that there be chemistry between the cinematographer and the colorist.