

Article**Bitopan Borborah****Natural Lighting in Cinema**

Natural lighting in cinema! Is it possible to complete a cinema by discarding artificial light and instead using natural light completely? For many lighting in cinema constitute only notions like key light, back light, fill and highlights. They are not at fault since this is what conventionalist has been doing for years with established film lighting concepts or norms, though there has always been existed the more creative as well as innovative bunch of cinematographers who believed the most beautiful light was natural light and tried their best to explore the same often with splendid results.

Now the question is how to define the natural light? Very simply put, a lighting source that closely replicates natural sunlight or taps natural light sources like

sunlight or even household lights for achieving realistic result can be considered a natural light. In the history of cinema there has always been proponent of natural light amongst the cinematographers, however most notable amongst them are Sven Nykvist, Subrato Mitra, Nestor Almendros, Raul Caurtad, Andrew Lazlo and indeed Miroslav Ondricek, who had shot Milos Forman's classic *Amedous* completely with natural light. Incidentally to achieve natural light both Sven Nykvist and Subrata Mitra, legendary filmmaker Ingmar Bergman and Satyajit Ray's cinematographer respectively, invented bounced lighting method on different occasions. It was in Ray's second film *Aparajito* (1956) that Subrato Mitra literally had to create a soft light which was characteristic of the Benaras houses in which they had shot few important scenes earlier. Ray wrote in his memoir *My Years with Apu*: "The shooting in Benaras would consist of all the scenes supposedly taking place except the ones in Harihar's house, which Bansi was to build in the studio. These houses, especially those in the Bengali neighborhood in Bengali *tolla* usually fall into a pattern. As you enter you find yourself in a curved courtyard, which is surrounded by rooms. The source of light is the sky above the courtyard. Subrota had planned to reproduce the overhead shadowless lighting effect by stretching a sheet of cloth above the studio-built courtyard and bouncing the light back from it. As it turned out, it worked so beautifully that it was impossible to tell that the shooting was done in the studio. The system of bounced lighting was used ten years after by Bergman's cameraman Sven Nykvist, who claimed in *American Cinematographer* that he was its originator." Ray also wrote in an article: "Subrota, my cameraman, has evolved, elaborated and perfected a system of diffused lighting whereby natural daylight can be simulated to a remarkable degree. This results in a photographic style, which is truthful, unobtrusive and modern. I have no doubt that for films in the realistic genre; this is a most admirable system." On the other hand Sven Nykvist narrates his story to an interviewer named Andrew C. Bobrow of *Filmmaker's Newsletter* like this: "When I started out, I thought a cinematographer was a man who took very beautiful, well-exposed shots. As a matter of fact I didn't know very much about lighting when I started with Ingmar Bergman. The first picture I worked on with him was called *Sawdust and Tinsel (The Naked Night)*. It was about the circus. We didn't talk much about lighting then. The next picture was *The Virgin Spring*. It was in black-and-white. That was when he got me interested in lighting. From then on, we discussed the lighting for every picture and tried to make an effort for everyone.



The next picture was *Winter Light* (1961-62), a very, very difficult picture. It all took place between 11 and 2 in the evening. It was in a church in winter and there was no sun at all. There was no light coming in except from the cloudy sky, so we couldn't have any shadows at all. And we tried to make it look exactly like that. We spent almost a month in churches in the north of Sweden, where we were shooting, studying the light. We watched it every day between 11 and 2. I took snapshots every fifth minute, which I put into the script. I changed my whole photographic style by starting to use reflected light. Now, when I put on direct light, it hurts in my heart. I'm not a very good technical photographer. I know it. But I think it's very good to have your technique down and then be as artistic as possible in your lighting."

In an interview Nykvist says: “It has taken me 30 years to come to simplicity. Earlier, I made a lot of what I thought were beautiful shots with much backlighting and many effects, absolutely none of which were motivated by anything in the film at all. As soon as we had a painting on the wall, we thought it should have a glow around it. It was terrible and I can hardly stand to see my own films on television anymore. I look for two minutes and then I thank God that there is a word called simplicity. I prefer to shoot on location because in the studio you have too many possibilities-too many lights to destroy your whole picture.”



It must be noted that Ray and Bergman, both ardent followers of new realist cinema, throughout their career always preferred realistic style of story telling and opted for outdoor shooting and natural lighting in their numerous films. During an interview by Jonas Sima, advocating simplicity and praising Nykvist, Bergman

once noted: “If one knows one’s material and knows the various elements involved in producing a film, it can be made with very, very simple means. More often than not it’s the people who know nothing or very little who use most elaborate apparatus. It’s their ignorance that complicates the whole procedure.... Take a cameraman like Sven Nykvist, a technically clever cameraman, one of the cleverest in the world. All he needs to work is three lamps and a little greaseproof paper. One part of knowing what to do is simply eliminate the masses of irrelevant technical complications, to be able to peel away a mass of superficial apparatus.”

One of the famous cinematographer of cinema’s history Andrew Laszlo, also an advocate of natural lighting says in reference to his film *Southern Comfort*: “the guide was to use minimal amount of lighting, and keep it at a level where it would not be noticeable. My credo as applied to lighting and special effects was always that it was good if you didn't see it.” In his autobiography *Very Frame a Rembrandt* he also says “As film technology evolved, lighting equipment

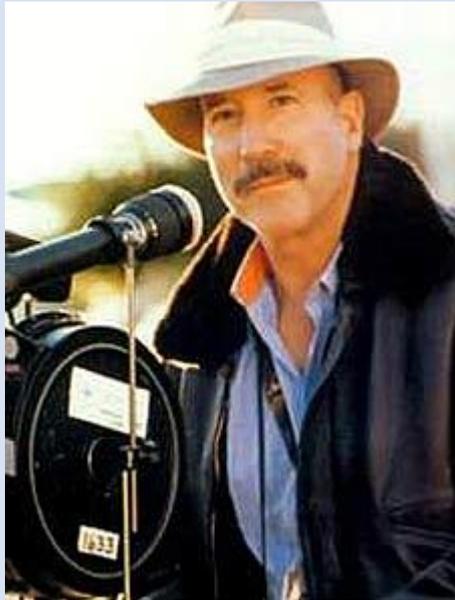
became more refined, and film stocks and lenses became more sensitive, so the necessity of more light on the subject for the sake of exposure alone diminished. Modeling took over as the more important element in the creation of an image by lighting. The realization that withholding light was as important to the creation of the image as adding light became obvious, and in most cases became an overwhelming element in the creation of the image. The great master painters, Rembrandt, Van Eyck, Hals, Vermeer and many others - all taught us that less light, used in realistic and artistic manner, made the images more natural and interesting.”



Amedeus

Nestor Almendros is another legendary filmmaker, whose work ranged from *French New Wave* to Hollywood and who had always believed in purity of image and absoluteness of truth. Rustin Thompson while writing his biography in *Movie Maker* titled *Myth-making With Natural Light: Nestor Almendros* noted- “When I think of cinematographer Nestor Almendros’s work on *Sophie’s Choice*, I see Meryl Streep’s translucent skin. I see a Brooklyn boarding house in the crisp afternoon sunlight, the monochromed evil of a Nazi rail yard, with searchlights scanning the faces of the doomed. When I watched *Sophie’s Choice* again recently, I saw something else: an attitude of gravity, a burnished intelligence in the sets, the performance, and the photography that seems now,

when compared to the routine cacophony of crap that passes for movies nowadays, to be some relic of a lost tribe, an example of the kind of moviemaking that slowed down, reached high, and moved us. I mourn that type of movie, and that depth of intelligence. And I mourn the fading of Nestor Almendros' light. He was an artist of deep integrity, who believed the most beautiful light was natural light.”



“Since I lack imagination,” Almendros wrote in his marvelous book, *A Man With A Camera*, “I seek inspiration in nature, which offers me an infinite variety of forms.” Almendros, who died in 1992, shot seven films for Eric Rohmer, nine for Francois Truffaut, and four for Robert Benton. He worked with Alan Pakula on *Sophie's Choice* (1982), Robert Benton on *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) Martin Scorsese on his *Life Lessons* episode in *New York Stories*, and won his Oscar for Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). It is interesting that Almendros was actually inspired by non other than Subrata

Mitra, which he confided to Govind Nihalani in New York in 1980. As he narrated his story, when Almendros was studying cinematography in a Paris institute, they showed *Charulata* (1964) over there, and he was totally fascinated by the visual quality of that film. Then he made an effort to understand how Mitra achieved the quality, and once he knew it, he tried the same thing in his own exercise film at the institute. In Europe till then there had been a wide use of a particular kind of lighting originating in Hollywood, with a strong influence on European, and particularly French cameramen. They naturally started laughing at Almendros' different style of lighting. They said, ‘what are you doing? This is no way of lighting!’ But once they saw Almendros' results, they started slowly changing to it.

In his autobiography Almendros explains how he used mirrors to illuminate the interiors of peasants' huts, how he caught the sun's reflection and bounced it off the whitewashed walls. It is in the films he shot for Rohmer that his veracity is at its most simple and elegant. Almendros was one of the first cinematographers to work exclusively with bounced light, which merely complimented the

daylight or reinforced incandescent lamps one would normally have in an apartment. In Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's* (1969), which he shot in black and white, he kept the lamps in the frame and had white panels placed off-screen to reflect additional light onto the actors. The apartment was painted white with black furniture. For the night scenes he used the existing street lamps, usually working at the widest possible lens aperture. This approach, a simple rendering of character and setting, never distracted from the purity of performance and theme that Rohmer looked for.

Elaborating about Almendros' forte, Rustin Thomson says Almendros was always true to a light's source, true to the emotion evoked by the cast and color of light as it changed through the day. He rejected the typical lighting schemes of the '40s and '50s, which called for key lights, backlight, fills and highlights. He preferred to first capture or augment existing light, then shape and bend it. He respected light's truth-telling element, the way it can expose and conceal. It is in the films he shot for Rohmer that his veracity is at its most simple and elegant. "My job was to simplify the photography, to purify it of all the artificial effects of the recent past," said Almendros who it is said pulled out all the stops for *Days of Heaven* (1978) to win the Oscar in ease. To that end, he and Malick studied the silent films of Griffith and Chaplin, they used real firelights to illuminate faces, they recreated the arid loneliness of Andrew Wyeth and the inviting interior warmth of Edward Hopper, and they achieved all of their special effects in the camera. For the stunning shot in the locusts sequence where the insects ascend to the sky, they dropped peanut shells from helicopters and had their actors walk backwards while running the film in reverse through the camera. When it was projected everything moved forward except the locusts!

In his biography, Almendros tells of his struggles with his union crew, of how he would walk through the sets turning off lights, of how he would push the sensitivity of his negative, of how he went against standard wisdom by shooting actors from below against a white, burned-out sky. "Nature's most beautiful light," Almendros wrote, "occurs at extreme moments, the very moment when filming seems impossible." *Days of Heaven* was a movie made in those precious minutes between sunset and nightfall.

Now let us discuss the work of Roul Coutard who achieved instant fame as soon as Jean Luc Godard's *Breathless*, the hallmark of *French New Wave* was



Roul Coutard with Godard

released 1959. As Godard broke all the prevailing notions about filmmaking, his brief for Coutard was to shoot the film without artificial light in natural settings and with the camera on his shoulder or held by the hand and also insisted that the film be photographed as a 'reportage' (documentary). As the period is widely known as the *nouvelle vague* era, Coutard's work with Godard fell into two categories: black and white films, which were all shot full frame, and color films, which were all shot in windscreen. The black and white films are notable for their use of hand-held camera work and natural lighting, which lends them an unpolished quality. "Of course it was an artistic decision. This was over 50 years ago. The way we did it then is of no interest today. Now you have faster films and a lot more possibilities, but then it was a revolutionary way of working. It changed a lot of things in filmmaking. During the shooting of *Z* with Costa Gavras in Algeria at a camera club meeting, I was even accused of taking work away from electricians because of my use of natural light"- Coutard said in an interview on completion of fifty years by *Breathless* in 2010.

Few conventionalists apart, hopefully both Godard and Coutard continue to inspire good number of new breed of filmmakers, who are now keener to follow the road the famous duo had taken in the late fifties basically in pursuit of making simplistic, economical film on fastest possible time. For their reprieve, technology has now become handy as the new generation of light equipments like Fluorescent light (Kino Flo), Craft lamp or Conch lamp (basically plastic light, can be given desired shape), Light-flex, Space-Lites including the now vogue HMI or Hydrargyrum medium-arc iodide light are all complementing in favour of minimalist way of lighting. On the other hand, new film stocks are so sensitive that as Andrew Laszlo sums it up rightly: “the new stock had the sensitivity of the human eye and in some cases more. I learned to realize that if I can see it, I can shoot it.”

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