**Q&A**

**with Vittorio Storaro ASC, AIC**

Vittorio Storaro, ASC, AIC, had mixed emotions when Francis Ford Coppola contacted him about handling principal cinematography for *Apocalypse Now*.

“I was elated by the possibility of having an opportunity to work with Francis Coppola on this ﬁlm,” he recalls. “However, the work Gordon Willis did with him on *The Godfather* was so exceptional my ﬁrst thought was that they should be doing this together, too. It was only after Francis convinced me that Willis simply wasn’t available for this ﬁlm that I felt I should do it.” Even then, Storaro admits to having certain concerns. “I knew this would be a very difﬁcult movie to control,” he says. “On all of my previous ﬁlms I was able to create a concept or look by deciding how to control the use of light. However, this ﬁlm had such an enormous scope I knew control was going to be very difﬁcult to achieve.”

As the world now knows, Storaro accepted the challenge and undertook a project requiring principal photography in the Philippines over a l5-month period, from February 1976 through May of the following year. When Storaro stepped up to the podium at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion to accept the 52nd annual Oscar awarded for cinematography, he thanked Coppola for giving him the freedom to totally express himself during the ﬁlming of *Apocalypse Now*.

In those few, simply stated words, Storaro capsulized the creative license Coppola issued to the cinematographer, allowing him to pursue the look which distinguished *Apocalypse Now* in what would have otherwise been very difﬁcult, if not impossible, conditions. “No one anticipated ﬁlming *Apocalypse Now* would be such a long and difﬁcult challenge,” Storaro says. “We were working a long way from home. Almost all of our scenes were ﬁlmed at practical locations, and many of them had enormous scope in terms of the sheer numbers of people and the size and kinds of landscape involved. The weather was very bad during a long, rainy season. It was a very difﬁcult challenge. Only the vitality and forceful personality of Francis [Coppola] kept us going, trying to retain the level of energy and to keep the look that we established during the ﬁrst sequences ﬁlmed.”

We had the opportunity to speak with Storaro only hours before the Academy Awards ceremony. He had ﬂown in from Finland, where he was working on location for Paramount Pictures on the ﬁlming of *Reds*. The following are excerpts from our interview:

*American Cinematographer*: **Tell us something about yourself and how you got started in cinematography?**

**Vittorio Storaro**: I was born in Rome in 1940. My father was a projectionist; however, he had always had his heart set on being a cinematographer. He put his dream into my heart. I attended various schools in Rome, where I studied ﬁlmmaking. I soon discovered that making ﬁlms was a part of my life, a way of expressing my own ideas, my entire being.

**What do you mean, specifically, when you say ﬁlmmaking?**

**Storaro**: To me, cinematography means writing with light on ﬁlm so it creates certain images, moods and feelings when it is projected. There are several styles that have evolved in the culture of ﬁlmmaking, which are evident when you study the work of different cinematographers of varying nationalities. I believe my work now is the sum of the culture created by the cinematographers who preceded me. Even the movies that I attended as a youngster while I was studying were a part of my education. What I watched became part of my unconscious memory. What a cinematographer does, then, is take all of that knowledge and add his own personality, or point of view. The quality of the results reﬂects the sincerity with which a cinematographer handles an assignment.

**Were there specific cinematographers who influenced your work?**

**Storaro**: There were many. Michelangelo Antonioni was one. His ﬁlms, made mainly during the 1950s, used light in a very realistic way, which had an effect upon the way the stories were told. There are others who used more classical lighting methods. However, I am also inﬂuenced by paintings, books, pictures and faces. Just seeing the way that the light falls on your face while we are talking is knowledge that seeps into my memory to be called upon and used at some future time.

**How did you get started?**

**Storaro**: I was working as a camera assistant and operator while I was very young. I started when I was around 20. I very soon had an opportunity to express myself when I shot a black-and-white science-ﬁction ﬁlm for a friend. It was my only black-and-white movie, and it was never seen in the United States. But it was my ﬁrst opportunity to really express myself on ﬁlm, and like a ﬁrst love, you never forget it. Franco Rossi, a writer/director in Italy, saw this ﬁlm, and he was looking for a young cinematographer to shoot *Smog* in 1962. So by the time I was 22 or 23, I was already making movies. After that, it wasn’t so easy.

**What happened?**

**Storaro**: There was a period of around two years when I didn’t work. I studied and read, and did some local cinematography in Rome. During this period, I came to realize that I had acquired much technical knowledge like a computer, but I had to start thinking more about how to use it to tell stories. After that period, I started again as an assistant until I got my next opportunity.

**What was that?**

**Storaro**: Bernardo Bertolucci telephoned me and asked if I remembered him". We had met on an earlier ﬁlm. He asked me if I wanted to ﬁlm *Before the Revolution* for him. That was done in 1965. Later I did several other movies with him that were important to me, including *The Conformist* (1970) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972).

**Are there ﬁlms that you have made that are particularly important to you?**

**Storaro**: I told you before, the ﬁrst movie is like the ﬁrst love. I remember crying two days before we ﬁnished production because I was thinking I would never have these experiences again. I might do ﬁlms that are 100,000 times bigger and better, but this will always be the ﬁrst time. However, in general, the most important ﬁlm to me is always the one that I am working on. If you don’t have that attitude about life, you miss opportunities to really appreciate what is happening around you. To do anything right, it must have your full concentration. I had just completed shooting *1900* when Francis contacted me about *Apocalypse Now*. Once I accepted that assignment, that became my most important ﬁlm until it was completed.

**Did Coppola ever tell you why he wanted you to shoot Apocalypse Now?**

**Storaro**: The ﬁrst time I met him was when he visited the set of *Last Tango in Paris*. He was there to visit with Bertolucci. We just said hello. Later, we met a second time while he was doing a ﬁlm in Rome. We spoke for about two to three hours. I was surprised at how easily we communicated, even with my poor English. I felt very close to him, like a brother, in a very short time. Later, when he wanted me to do *Apocalypse Now*, he told me that he got the idea of asking me because he admired the work that I had done on *The Conformist*. When we talked, he made me feel that he respected my judgment, and he would give me the freedom to express myself. That is why I decided to accept the assignment.

**Do you consider that you have a certain style of cinematography?**

**Storaro**: To me, making a ﬁlm is like resolving conﬂicts between light and dark, cold and warmth, blue and orange or other contrasting colors. There should be a sense of energy, or change or movement, a sense that time is going on. Light becomes night, which reverts to morning life becomes death. Making a ﬁlm is like documenting a journey and using light in the style that best suits that particular picture . .. the concept behind it.

**What was the concept or the look that you were trying to achieve with *Apocalypse Now*?**

**Storaro**: The original idea was to document the impact of superimposing one culture on another. I was trying to show the conﬂict between technical and natural energy, for example — the dark, shadowy jungle, where natural energy reigns, compared to the American military base, where big, powerful generators and huge, probing lights provided the energy. There was a conﬂict between technology and nature, as well as between different cultures. I tried to use the lights and camera to suggest this. Remember the USO show with the Playboy bunnies on that huge stage? We framed them in those big spotlights in a way that conﬂicted with what the eye expected to see against the background of the jungle. It wasn’t glaring. It was just a suggestion, something that slightly disturbed the eye. Mainly we tried to use color and light to create the mood of conﬂict in subtle ways. The way that a red ﬁre in a camp contrasted to a blue or black gun in the foreground, or the way that the color of a weapon stood against a

sunset, or how an American soldier with a blackened face was seen against the green jungle or blue sky that all helped to create the mood and tell the story.

**From your perspective, what were some of the difﬁculties in shooting *Apocalypse Now*?**

**Storaro**: Technically, the most difﬁcult period occurred during the rainy season, which lasted from August through December. It was especially difﬁcult at night. We had to handle and protect cameras, lenses, dollies and lights as best we could. Then, on the nights when the rain didn’t come, we had to create it and perfectly match the artiﬁcial rain to the sequence where it was real. There were no secrets for doing this that I could share. It was very difﬁcult work.

**You qualified that answer by saying “technically.” What were some of the human dif- ﬁculties of working on a big picture like this for so long a period of time?**

**Storaro**: We were working a long way from home. Almost all of our scenes were ﬁlmed at practical locations, and many of them had enormous scope in terms of the sheer numbers of people and the size and kinds of landscape involved. I don’t believe anyone anticipated that it would be that long and difﬁcult. The ﬁrst sequence we ﬁlmed was the Americans’ counter-attack on a native village. It was a very powerful sequence. Once we achieved that, there was no going back. We kept working harder to retain that level. The look of *Apocalypse Now* evolved day by day. We tried to use the changing light and seasons to our advantage to establish the ﬂow of time.

**You mentioned the use of light and color. How about the darkness you employed in scenes involving Marlon Brando?**

**Storaro**: The role that Brando plays represents the dark side of Civilization, the subconscious, or the truth that comes out of the darkness. He couldn’t be like us, sitting here and talking. It couldn’t be normal. He had to be like an idol. Black is like a magic color; you can reveal patterns and moods against a dark scene that aren’t possible in other ways. When I saw this scene in my head before we shot it, I pictured it in black, with Brando always in the shadows or the dark side. Coppola gave me the freedom to express this idea.

**In shooting scenes like that, was there any concern on your part about being so far away from the laboratory handling the work?**

**Storaro**: You are always concerned with this. lt is human nature. The ﬁlm (Eastman color negative ﬁlm 5247) is very good. It has the latitude to show the contrasts between the whites and blacks. I believe that it is even more sensitive than Kodak says. I think the ﬁlm registers the love and emotions that the cast and crew put into making it. This is very difﬁcult to explain, but I believe that the ﬁlm accurately recorded the emotions that we were pouring into production every day, scene by scene. We were changing and learning as we produced this ﬁlm, and all of that energy is captured and shown on the screen. That’s part of the emotion that captivates audiences. lt isn’t a conscious thing, like lighting or framing a certain way to achieve a certain effect. It’s the energy that you put into the movie being registered on the ﬁlm. However, it was also very important for me to know that the laboratory knew what we were trying to achieve. The work was clone by Technicolor in Rome. It gave me a great deal of conﬁdence to know that Ernesto Rinaldi, a color timer who has worked with me from the beginning, was there. We usually didn’t see dailies until a week later. But Ernesto knows how I think and see things, and he brought our ideas to their ﬁnal conclusion. Obviously, the lab is very important. It is the ﬁnal step.

**What about the equipment used for ﬁlming Apocalypse Now?**

**Storaro**: Technovision, an Italian company, modiﬁed Mitchell reﬂex cameras to use Cooke anamorphic lenses made in England for this picture. The lighting equipment, dollies and everything else were conventional.

**You worked so long on this ﬁlm, and so much good footage must have ended up on the cutting room ﬂoor. Does that bother you?**

**Storaro**: I don’t worry about what is cut. It’s the concept that is important. Maybe footage that was cut was important because it created a mood leading to something we shot that was used. You make a movie step by step. What counts in the end is what is on the screen. In the picture that I am doing now, *Reds*, we may shoot two million feet of original negative before we are ﬁnished. While I am shooting each scene, it is very important to me. In the end, I will care about what is on the screen.

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