MAGYAR Film művészek Hollywood 1974

Hollywood's Image Makers

He is the Quiet Man on every movie set. Usually dressed in faded, casual clothes, a shade less flamboyant than the director's, he sports a photographic filter on a cord around his neck. Before the camera starts rolling he can be seen silently scrutinizing the set, instructing the camera operator where to place the camera, telling the gaffer how to adjust the lighting, running an exposure meter over the faces of the actors, peering through his contrast filter to check the relationship between light and shadow and then, once everything is set, asking the director to step up to the camera and approve his setup of the shot. "Action!" the director yells, and the Quiet Man stations himself beside the camera to determine whether all that painstaking preparation has, in fact, solved one of the most fundamental and demanding problems of moviemaking—that of achieving the right dramatic look.

He was once known simply as the "cameraman." Then he acquired the fancier title of "cinematographer." Lately, he has won an even heftier screen credit: "director of photography." And just as the American director was finally granted signature status during the 1960s so that today the sophisticated public thinks not only of an Alfred Hitchcock film but a Stanley Kubrick film, a Peter Bogdanovich film or a Robert Altman film, so the cinematographer may well achieve something like that status in the 1970s. Recently, while filming "The Naked Ape" in Gainesville, Fla., John A. Alonzo, a much-in-demand cinematographer whose most recent credit is the elegant, evocative "Chinatown," was stopped by two students who saw his name on his neck viewfinder and said: "Hey, you shot 'Harold and Maude,' didn't you? You're really on a visual trip!"

As, it seems, is all of Hollywood. Whatever their other merits and faults, American movies have rarely *looked* better than they do today—thanks largely to a rising new breed of cinematographers like Alonzo who have learned from the pioneering ingenuity of old masters like James Wong Howe and Gregg Toland. They have capitalized on some extraordinary advances in film technology to create a cinematic palette that ranges from the lush "period" look of a movie like "Chinatown" to the supercharged lyricism Vilmos Zsigmond supplied for "Deliverance" and Haskell Wexler's gritty realism in "American Graffiti."

Sharpness: Versatility—not innovation—is the hallmark of the new cinematographers. After all, D.W. Griffith's ace cameraman, Billy Bitzer, is credited with pioneering the development of such enduring cinematic staples as the close-up, soft-focus photography, the fade-out and back-lighting more than 50 years ago. The stunning deep-focus photography by Laszlo Kovacs on "Paper Moon"—in which the foreground and infinite background of the scenes could be seen with equal sharpness—had already reached its apogee in Gregg Toland's spellbinding work for Orson Welles's "Citizen Kane" back in 1941. And that slow 360-degree turn of the camera used by Michael Nebbia to end "Alice's Restaurant" had been achieved in 1945's "The Hitler Gang" by Ernest Laszlo, the 68-year-old president of the old-guard American Society of Cinematographers.

There were other great innovators of the past—men like Charles Rosher and Karl Struss, who established the camera-

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man as a genuine creative artist with their Renoiresque work in the 1927 classic "Sunrise"; the great naturalist Wong Howe; Sol Polito, who masterminded the sharp, straightforward look of Warner Brothers melodramas in the 1940s, and Leon Shamroy, the visual author of Twentieth Century-Fox's spectaculars of the '50s. But they worked with far less freedom and ease than the new breed.

In the old days, most cinematographers toiled under the rigors of servicing a studio's individual "look" or a star's elaborate requirements for glamour. Now, with the studios' power broken, "hot" cinematographers like Kovacs, Zsigmond and Alonzo parcel out their services like leading men to directors with whom they feel artistically compatible. The only star who demands—and requires—elaborate glamorizing is Barbra Streisand, who has insisted that only the left side of her face is photographable. And a flood of technological improvements in the last decade—Panavision's development of the lightweight and soundless Panaflex camera, the development of superhigh-speed color film and a wider range of lenses and lights—has reduced the cinematographer's legerdemain to acts as simple as changing a lens or adjusting a dial.

Ominous: The payoff is greater freedom to match a film's visual style to its raw material—a freedom that can produce dazzlingly "right" results in the hands of a new master like Gordon Willis, who supplied the warm, beautifully ominous look of "The Godfather" as well as the cold, futuristic look of "The Parallax View." "It is a freedom, above all, to be different," says Conrad Hall, who at 47 is one of the most esteemed older members of the new breed for his photography on such films as the gorgeously lyrical "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and the gritty,

dimly naturalistic "Fat City." "In the old days there was a right way and a wrong way," says Hall, who demonstrated his versatility by shooting the upcoming "The Day of the Locust" using the most old-fashioned studio techniques. "Nowadays, the only criterion is whether a method works for the particular film."

Getting that method to work requires enormous sensitivity to the film's material. "Everything you do should make some kind of statement," says Kovacs, a Hungarian émigré who at 40 is one of the most celebrated of the new cinematographers ("Easy Rider," "Five Easy Pieces," "Paper Moon" and "Slither"). "The environment you shoot makes many statements about your characters. The background becomes very organic. The foggy islands of the Pacific Northwest explained the tight little family world of 'Five Easy Pieces'." His close friend Vilmos Zsigmond, another Hungarian émigré whose credits include "McCabe &

Mary Ellen Mark—Lee Gross

Kovacs: Making it real

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Mrs. Miller," "The Long Goodbye," "Images" and "Cinderella Liberty," stresses the same point: "The cinematographer is lighting the *mood* of the picture. Blocking off sunshine and making the day look rainy, that's when the cinematographer is like a painter, creating mood by the color of the light he's using."

Groove: Although most cinematographers now get involved in preproduction discussions with the director and art director on the look of a picture and its locations, the best operate like William Fraker, a former assistant to Hall, who has risen to the top rank with films like "Bullitt," "Rosemary's Baby" and "Day of the Dolphin." "It usually takes from six to ten days after beginning the filming," Fraker says, "to know what the picture's going to look like. Then we're in the groove, the visual starts working with the drama and you go with it."

And in keeping with their freewheeling, organic approach, the leading new

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cinematographers share an abhorrence of slickness, a penchant for using as much natural light as possible, a concern for making things look "real." It was Kovacs's work on "Easy Rider" that set the pace with its low-budget techniques, its use of lightweight, hand-held equipment, its reliance on natural light, its unabashedly "cinematic" look of sun flashes in the lens. Says Kovacs, whose previous credits included mostly quickie motorcycle flicks: "You work under the most natural conditions to re-create reality. You try to follow the natural look of lighting even in interior scenes. Before 'Easy Rider,' sun flares had been unheard of. We said 'If it happens, let it happen'."

Following "Easy Rider's" enormous success, "let it happen" became "let it all hang out." "Cameramen are fantastic faddists," the greatly respected veteran Haskell Wexler told NEWSWEEK's Martin Kasindorf, and for a while the faddists had a field day jiggling their hand-held cameras, fixing images with dramatic zoom shots through glass coffee tables, shooting through fog filters to create blue-highlight halos around the actors' heads—doing anything to assert the camera's presence in the action. "But now," says Alonzo, "there's a retreat. Commercials started doing that stuff too much, and we're trying to find a less obtrusive way of giving audiences the feeling of being present at something real."

Translating: Their "retreat" notwithstanding, the new Quiet Men of film are getting increasingly assertive about their status in the movie world. Although the top ones earn as much as $100,000 a year from their weekly wages, Kovacs, Hall, Wexler, Fraker and Willis are leading a campaign to have cinematographers included in the "package" of flat, guaranteed "above-the-line" salaries along with the director and the stars. Nonetheless, they concede—happily—their subordination to the director, and see their primary job as that of translating his thoughts to the screen. "If I think the director is wrong," says Hall, "I tell him. But *he* makes the decision. Anyone who goes against that is a fool—and defeating the natural process of moviemaking."

In fact, surprisingly few of the new cinematographers aspire to being directors—although there have been some notable exceptions like Wexler, who made a notable directorial debut a few years ago with "Medium Cool," and Nicolas Roeg, who directed the stunning "Don't Look Now" after many years as one of Britain's top cameramen. "It satisfies me if I work with a director who appreciates me," says Zsigmond, who has collaborated three times with one of the most visually appreciative directors in the business, Robert Altman. "I'm a necessity." And so he is. As his old friend from Budapest, Kovacs, likes to point out: "In our films, you can turn the sound track off and still have something extraordinary to watch."

—CHARLES MICHENER