

D.P. Phedon Papamichael Talks the B&W Imagery of *Nebraska*, Lighting Movie Stars and his Online Film School



Bruce Dern in *Nebraska*

by [Rania Richardson](#)
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[Alexander Payne](#), [ARRI Alexa](#), [Bruce Dern](#), [George Clooney](#), [Nebraska](#), [Phedon Papamichael](#)

Cinematographer Phedon Papamichael is finding a new audience of fans with his striking black-and-white camerawork in *Nebraska*, a father-and-son road trip starring Bruce Dern and Will Forte. With this third collaboration with director Alexander Payne, following *Sideways* and *The Descendants*, Papamichael is on a list of potential Oscar nominees. He was recently included in a Hollywood Reporter roundtable of five top cinematographers, a series that often portends year-end award winners. His other work includes James Mangold's *Walk the Line* and Oliver Stone's *W*. He just completed *Monuments Men* with George Clooney.

Papamichael was born in Athens and studied photography and art at the University of Munich. His father worked for John Cassavetes as a production designer and art director on films such as *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence*. He has shot dozens of features and has directed several, including *Lost Angeles* in 2012.

I spoke with him by phone from his home in Los Angeles, the day before his sixth trip to Camerimage in Poland, the biggest festival dedicated to cinematography, where *Nebraska* was in the main competition and he was a on the jury for student film.

Filmmaker: How did you prepare for *Nebraska*?

Papamichael: Four months before we started shooting, Alexander and I got into his mom's car and just drove from Billings, Montana and did the route of the trip all the way down to Nebraska. He really wanted me to experience the whole voyage and get a sense of the land. One of the things that struck me about it was driving into these towns where you see it says, "Population 16,000," and we'd drive down Main Street and it would be void of people. I'd ask, where are all the people? [One time] was actually a nice, warm late summer day, and Alexander said, "I guess they're all inside watching television," which is funny because later in the movie there are scenes where people are not really communicating with each other — they're just comatose, staring at the television or napping on couches.

One of my favorite shots is just the two brothers. You come from the kitchen where the women are talking and then there is a cut to a shot of Bruce as Woody and his brother are passed out on the couch. It's such a simple shot. It's just one shot, but it says so much about what's going on. It really gets a reaction from the crowd. That's Ron Howard's father who plays the brother, Uncle Ray.

Filmmaker: Could you talk about the technical aspects of the film?

Papamichael: We chose Cinemascope and shot anamorphic lenses. We had this widescreen aspect ratio, which really lends itself to the story in terms of the big open plains and the loneliness and isolation of our characters that we can place into these wide frames. Because of the pacing of the film, we also had time to sit on some of the compositions and take in the land with its sad and poetic quality.

It also lends itself to really punching in on close ups and getting into the faces. Not having flesh tones, you're able to see all the details, like Bruce Dern's face, with all the textures and lines and, of course, his white hair. You put him in a little bit of a backlight or in some sun and his hair just glows and he becomes this ghostly figure. I think it works really beautifully for his character, in contrast to the open land, and underlines the motif of isolation.

Black and white eliminates the distraction of having colors, although it's more stylized. In a way it gives the story its own world of reality that allows you to focus in on these characters and on the mood of this particular place.

Filmmaker: What equipment did you use?

Papamichael: We used the digital Arri ALEXA camera with Panavision anamorphic lenses. It was an older set of lenses, the C-series originally assembled in the '70s. The older glass helped the look of the movie, since they don't necessarily resolve as sharply as more modern lenses would. The ALEXA records in color but our dailies were transferred to black and white. In this case we added actual film grain so you have the texture of film. You shoot film grain off a grey surface and you capture the film grain movement. You put a layer over the digital image, which is very clean and has no movement.

Filmmaker: Did you watch movies during pre-production for visual reference?

Papamichael: We do watch movies in preproduction. In general, we watch movies that don't necessarily relate to what we are about to do. On *Sideways* we watched Italian comedies and De Sica, really just for pacing and style. For *Nebraska*, he had some obscure black-and-white Japanese films from the '60s. Alexander mentioned *Stranger Than Paradise* to me in terms of how he wanted minimal coverage, and to play a lot of scenes in wide shot. He watches *Paper Moon* once a year regardless. I watched that and *The Last Picture Show*.

Filmmaker: Do you see many movies in general?

Papamichael: It's really sad that a lot of the European films and smaller films just do the festival circuit in Europe and don't get a theatrical release here. I'm an Academy member so we get some screeners, and I go to their foreign film screenings.

Most of the movies that I wouldn't go see otherwise, I see on airplanes because I travel a lot. There's something that happens on airplanes — maybe it's the lack of oxygen, but I get very emotional. I find myself watching these movies I'd never go see and then I find myself crying a lot.

Filmmaker: I know what you mean. I was sobbing during *Beginners*, and then dinner plopped down on my tray table.

Papamichael: It's crazy! I watched *Remember the Titans*, about a coach and a football team. I'm a sucker for sports films, and I cried like four times. If I went to the theater I'd probably not like it or even walk out on it, but in this environment I was really engaged.

Filmmaker: What's important to you about capturing the specifics of a location?

Papamichael: In *Descendants*, local people said that we captured the light of Hawaii and what it feels like to live there, not just what comes out of the office of tourism, beautiful sunny images of beaches. It's overcast. It rains. There's traffic. There's poverty. To hear the locals tell you that you hit a note that's very accurate is nice to hear.

For *Nebraska*, we took over this one town, and the locals were very supportive. They really embraced us and were excited that we were making a movie there. Alexander has a way of connecting with people in a very personal way. He cast a lot of the local population to play smaller roles in the movie and made them feel part of the filmmaking process. It's not like this big

Hollywood film is rolling into town. He knows everybody's name — the man in the post office, in the grocery store, the woman in the bar, every crewmember. He knows their names on day one.

He has the ability to create a film family, as he calls it. On *Sideways*, we all thought it was very unique because of the amazing setting and the wine drinking. We thought it would probably never happen again, but when we went to Hawaii for *The Descendants* seven years later, he was able to create exactly the same environment. He brings back his key crew, I've done three movies with him now, so all my crew has worked on all of those. He creates an intimate set and is very respectful of what everybody does. With every grip, he admires and respects the art form of setting the C-stand correctly and cutting light, and with the gaffer, how he lights the set. He thinks these are all of equal importance, and it makes everybody who works on the movie feel like they are part of it and contributing to it, so therefore they give their best.

Filmmaker: Do you approach shooting a movie star like George Clooney in *The Descendants* differently than any other actor?

Papamichael: [Clooney] does have movie star qualities in his face. I've done three movies with him, *Ides of March*, *Descendants*, and *Monuments Men*. You're lighting with stand-ins and then they leave and George steps in... and then it looks like a big movie. Certain actors — Tom Cruise has it and Brad Pitt has it — the camera loves their face and you can't find a bad angle. It's very easy to light them.

On *Descendants* it was a very real world with the lighting and how we approached it, with fairly simple shots. We don't really design shots and we don't storyboard. We take locations that feel real. Alexander almost has this dogma on not altering locations, like when we shoot a bar, it's really a bar and the set dressing, everything that's in frame already, we leave. He's very particular about authenticity. Very often we juxtapose our actors with real people, non-actors, for example, in *Nebraska*. In the first bar they go to where they're serving beer, she's actually the owner of the bar. The waitress in the restaurant works exactly those tables in the restaurant! It creates a very real environment.

When you put Clooney in that sort of environment, it shows a different side of him. It shows him more human, accessible and not a movie star. You find little vulnerabilities in him that perhaps in other roles or other films we haven't discovered yet. It's also the way we dressed him in *Descendants*. George said the first day he came for the wardrobe fitting he had these pants up high with a belt and a Hawaiian shirt tucked in. He knew, everything goes out the window now — he's going to be completely open and vulnerable to portray this character without any vanity.

With Bruce Dern it was the same thing. On the first day of the shoot we did a little test shot and he stepped on his mark and he asked, "What do you want me to do?" And Alexander said, "Don't do anything, just let us find it." We discover this character as we go along. It's an organic process where you discover the film as you make it. Hopefully, you discover it quickly and it kind of tells you where you want to be with the camera and how you want to shoot it. We'll do rehearsal, the actors inhabit the space that we provide, we see how they behave and then it takes Alexander and me about two minutes where we discuss that we'll start over here and do this shot and then maybe we need this and this. They're usually very economic shots because they just catch and pick the moment. We try not to do any fancy camerawork to distract from the story.

Filmmaker: You've said that cinematographers have more set experience than directors.

Papamichael: By nature as a director you don't really get to work as much because you're in development much longer. Since Alexander directed *Sideways*, he's done two movies and I've done at least seven. Because we come in when the pictures are in place, we have more set experience, but it's important to understand that although cinematography is a very important element of the filmmaking process, it's not the only one. Cinematography has to serve the story and not just create beautiful images. It has to fit organically with the story the director is trying to tell.

I've directed. When you go through the whole process it involves casting and getting the money together, picking locations. Then in editing you really understand why sometimes these things we conceive of or design on set don't really work and you almost have to reinvent or recreate the film for a third time. The first time is when you write it, the second time is when you shoot it, and the third time is when you edit it.

Filmmaker: What do you see for the future of cinematography?

Papamichael: There is a new generation of very talented cinematographers coming out, and I hope they find a way to succeed in this business because it's changing a lot through the digital technology. Before that, cinematographers had this mystique about them because nobody really knew exactly what they were doing because they were the guys with the light meter and the viewing glass and they talked to the lab. It's unlike any other position in film because everyone else feels like, "Oh, I can write, I can direct, I can edit," but with cinematography it was always a little bit of a mystical thing. Now with video technology you

are able to see the final product almost on set, on the monitor, and everybody can walk up to the monitor and have an opinion.

It's not a bad tool because now I'm in a position where I can discuss with the director exactly what we want to accomplish. I don't have to say this will eventually be a very dark scene silhouetted against the windows, because it's three stops underexposed, and the window is three stops overexposed.

I can now show him on the monitor and ask, "Are you comfortable with the fact that we don't see any details in his face here and we're playing this intentionally in silhouette?" And the director can feel comfortable with that and actually encourage you to take more risks. Before you were in the position of just explaining it to them and then you had to wait for dailies. Maybe you were a little more conservative because we didn't want the director to have regretted his decision.

Filmmaker: Are there any young cinematographers we should watch?

Papamichael: There are great emerging cameramen such as Adam Stone, who shot *Take Shelter* and *Mud*. These kinds of film are becoming rarer. There used to be a whole mid-range budget, not big tent poles and comic book films, but more mature dramas that have been eliminated by the studios, although Fox Searchlight and a few others still make them. Young cinematographers are finding themselves in a position where the pictures that they should be doing are being occupied by established cinematographers like myself, who are looking for quality material. Since they've been in the business a long time and maybe their kids are out of college and their mortgages are paid off, they can afford to do these smaller movies at a lesser rate, and it's preventing the ones who should really be shooting these movies — the younger generation — from moving up. The rates are being reduced, so it's difficult to start a career as a cinematographer. There's so much competition and people will work for very little.

Filmmaker: Why do you think there are fewer women in the business?

Papamichael: I think a lot of the emerging cinematographers who are very good are women. Historically, it was considered a man's world because you would traditionally work your way up the camera crew and it was like the military with the whole union system. You had to be strong. You had to carry the mag cases and the big lens cases and shoulder the camera, and the physicality discouraged [women] or they were told, "this is not for you." Things have changed, and now you can shoot with a tiny digital camera.

Filmmaker: Do you have any advice for the next generation?

Papamichael: The most important thing for a director or cinematographer is to find a group of people pursuing the same goals you are, and try to form a group or crew. Ultimately, it's about taste and what you like, and to be your most creative and bring your specific talent to it, it's helpful to do it with people who want to do the same kinds of movies you want to do. That's one good thing about film school — that you are exposed and can meet people in the same stages of development. Then go out and make movies. Shoot! It's the number one advice.

Just start working. Even if it's just as a PA or an intern. On every set if you just meet one person who you connect to, you can slowly collect a crew you want to work with. My chief lighting technician, the gaffer, Rafael Sanchez, I've done 30 movies with him. I first hired him when he was twenty-two and now we're over fifty. Find people and stick with them.

Filmmaker: I hear you are starting an online film school with Wally Pfister (who often works with Christopher Nolan) and Janusz Kaminski (who often works with Steven Spielberg).

Papamichael: We all started at Roger Corman. I got my start there in the late '80s. Wally and Janusz were at AFI and they would come and crew for me to make some money on the side while they were in school. We can look at our careers going back 20 years and we all sort of succeeded in this system. We've become established cinematographers but we all had different paths.

The course will be career advice and things that are not taught in film school, nothing technical. It will cover how to balance a career and family when you travel so much, how to read a script, analyze a script, if you should buy your own camera, how to make choices and how those choices affect your long-term career. I wanted to create a film school that just answers these kinds of questions from working cameramen. It won't be how do you color correct something, but what are the politics in the room with a big director and a colorist in postproduction — who's really calling the shots? It's called [Advanced Filmmaking](#) and we're in the final phases of completing it. There is no launch date, but it should be early 2014.