

Shooting “Nebraska” – An Interview With DP Phedon Papamichael



Paramount Vantage

Phedon Papamichael’s cinematography in “Nebraska” has received outstanding achievement nominations by organizations including the Broadcast Film Critics Association and the San Francisco Film Critics Circle. Yet, praise that’s tickled him the most came from Haskell Wexler, the Oscar winning DP behind films including “Bound for Glory” and “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”

“Haskell Wexler enjoyed the film, and was asking me about the film stock I used,” said Papamichael. “He didn’t know it was digital. I was so pleased an Oscar-winning cinematographer couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Nebraska” is Papamichael’s third consecutive collaboration with director Alexander Payne. From his initial reading of the script, Payne intended to shoot the film in black and white, a choice that naturally suited both the director and cinematographer.

“There wasn’t an intellectual or symbolically creative reason for black and white, it just seemed to be the appropriate format,” said Papamichael. “As Alexander and I were growing up, a lot of film language was taught to us in black and white. He grew up watching black and white westerns and Japanese movies; I grew up in Munich absorbing the German new wave, so we came together very naturally on the decision.”

Papamichael’s first instinct was to shoot on black and white film, however the production’s budget and the mechanics of shooting a road movie dictated the digital choice. During the pre-production stage, Payne and Papamichael set out on a three-day trip from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska, similar to the journey depicted in the film. Packed into a Toyota belonging to Payne’s mother, Papamichael shot black and white stills on a panoramic still camera and 52-22 black and white stock. This footage became his reference point for the digital image.

With much of the movie shot in a car as well as other found locations, Papamichael chose the Arri Alexa camera. Shooting at 80-1200 ASA, he was able to use minimal lighting equipment and setups. He utilized Panavision anamorphic C series lenses, feeling the 70’s designed glass lenses would contribute a quality of grain and slight flaws.

Although numerous features were shot in black and white throughout the last decade, the studio was hesitant to commit to the cinematic choice. They requested delivery of both a black and white and a color print. Initially planning to utilize color filters to

enhance the contrasts, the need for a color print forced Papamichael to shift gears. He decided to focus on isolating colors to affect contrast. Matching the image to 52-19 color film stock, he utilized backlights with color gels to light backgrounds, used Arrimax 18Ks shooting into the sky to create a glow, and worked with the production and costume department to employ uncommon color choices in the sets and wardrobe.

"The garage had a beige building, and the scene became hot and flat. I asked them to paint the barn red," said Papamichael. "I'd ask for characters to wear checkered shirts in red and green. The crew occasionally looked at me funny, and sometimes they needed convincing. They worked on creating a particular aesthetic and didn't want to ruin the palette."

Once shooting was completed he informed his colorist to "go crazy with it, do whatever you want to try but never get to." Papamichael discovered there was no problem in matching the Alexa raw file to both color and black and white. Once the black and white was digitized, he added a layer of 52-48 film stock grain to the footage for affect.

Throughout the shoot, Payne worked alongside Papamichael on set, or squeezed together in the hatchback of a car. No shot lists were created – rather, decisions were made within minutes of set ups. While cinematographer Radon Popovic spent a week gathered second unit shots of the buildings, traffic and landscapes employed in the film, Papamichael and Payne also gathered 2nd unit material from the RV Jack Nicholson's character drove in "About Schmidt." Long stretches of highway and cow pastures were captured from the vehicle, even actor Bruce Dern's authentic pee breaks were captured from the van and used in the movie.

While some images were shot on the fly, the composition of each scene in "Nebraska" is very deliberate. The camera often stays in a wide shot, allowing the audience to explore and digest the frame. This type of shooting allows the story to unfold at moments when no dialogue occurs, such as a scene where Woody (Bruce Dern) and his son (Will Forte) sit with their extended, non-verbal family watching football. Papamichael has traveled around the globe and is delighted that audiences consistently respond to the situation with laughter.

"The air compressor scene could be a ten minute short itself," said Papamichael. "The shot of the owner's car driving in the distance always gets a huge reaction. I've traveled with the movie and seen it in different countries and the laughs are consistent from culture to culture."

Papamichael is grateful to have re-teamed with Payne. He deeply enjoys the collaborative process between director and DP in achieving unique aesthetics. He's re-teamed with a few other directors over the years, including James Mangold and George Clooney, whom he met when shooting Payne's "The Descendants." Working on a Payne film, he enjoys reconnecting with many of the same department heads, and the family atmosphere Payne cultivates by hosting weekly pasta parties and movie nights for all crew members, including the PAs.

"When I was working on 'Sideways' I told an assistant that they'd never have an experience as nice as this again, but Alex did the same thing during 'The Descendants,'" said Papamichael. "Everyone felt like family."