

**In THR's first Cinematographer Roundtable, Barry Ackroyd ("Captain Phillips"), Sean Bobbitt ("12 Years a Slave"), Bruno Delbonnel ("Inside Llewyn Davis"), Stuart Dryburgh ("The Secret Life of Walter Mitty") and Phedon Papamichael ("Nebraska") reveal the biggest surprises about being a DP, the directors who have inspired them and why the movies they shoot aren't always the movies we see.**

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Their stock in trade is capturing images, and this year the films on which they worked have traveled from the bloody cotton fields of the antebellum South and the lonely roads of Nebraska to the choppy waters off Somalia, with stops along the way at vintage Greenwich Village coffee shops and remote locations in Iceland. When [The Hollywood Reporter](#) invited five noted directors of photography to its first-ever Cinematographer Roundtable, they also showed themselves to be adept with words. Taking part in the lively discussion were **Barry Ackroyd**, 59, of *Captain Phillips*; *12 Years a Slave*'s **Sean Bobbitt**, 54; **Bruno Delbonnel**, 56, of *Inside Llewyn Davis*; *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*'s **Stuart Dryburgh**, 61; and **Phedon Papamichael**, 51, who shot *Nebraska*. What was on their minds? The ongoing transition from film to digital photography, of course, in which they all are embroiled.

**What would most surprise people about the reality of being a director of photography?**

**BRUNO DELBONNEL:** We don't have a clue what we're doing. (*Laughter.*)

**SEAN BOBBITT:** Most people really have very little idea of what we do, so they would be surprised by the breadth of requirements [inherent] to being a cinematographer. It's not just cameras, or film or lenses; it's the technical side and nontechnical stuff. You're running a crew, you know? The interpersonal relationships that you have to develop with the director, designers, hair, makeup, costumes. The filming is actually the easiest part.

**BARRY ACKROYD:** It's also the thing you can't put your finger on, but the thing that's most interesting. That moment when you switch on the camera.

**STUART DRYBURGH:** It's the pen you're using to write the story.

**When you're working with a director for the first time, how long does it take you to develop a rapport?**

**PHEDON PAPAMICHAEL:** I've done three movies with **Alexander Payne**, and I remember on *Sideways* -- he'd worked with only one DP prior to that -- it took about two weeks. I would see where he would stand during rehearsal, and that's usually where he'd want to place the camera. But it varies. Some people are in tune with what you're doing; you have the same instincts. With others you have to find a common language.

**Bruno, *Inside Llewyn Davis* was your first time working with the Coen brothers. What was that like?**

**DELBONNEL:** It was great. They do their own shot list, and it's then "suggested" to me as they do with [DP] **Roger Deakins**. It's a bit harder working with Tim Burton. I did two movies with Tim, and you never really knew what he wanted. We'd block the scene with the actors, and we have to be very fast to react because an hour later you're supposed to shoot. You have to be a bit more flexible. I don't really try to understand the director. (*Laughter.*)

**Barry, how did you and Paul Greengrass prepare to shoot *Captain Phillips* given the challenges of shooting on water?**

**ACKROYD:** I would always say, "You can't fight nature, whether it's daylight or sunlight ... you can't fight it." But that's what Paul likes about how I work; just get the situation set up as real as can be. I'll light it as much in advance as I can. This was the third film I'd done with Paul. And all I have to do is glance at him and get that moment of connection. When I shot on the first film, *United 93*, with him -- another very physical and hard film -- I struggled with every take. Halfway through shooting, we had a party at Paul's house and I met his wife, Joanna. I said to her, "I think it's going all right, but Paul doesn't talk to me, so I'm not quite sure." She said, "What? He comes home, he gets in bed with me at night and just talks about you." (*Laughter.*) Then I realized it was all right, you know? Everyone is different.

**Stuart, what was your experience working with Ben Stiller on *Walter Mitty*?**

**DRYBURGH:** He is a man with a very strong vision for the film. He's a collector of photography and his Walter Mitty character is an archivist of

photography. So maintaining a photographic look to the film was very important to him. But every working relationship is different; the combination of cinematographer and director, it's almost like you become one organism.

**ACKROYD:** You take years to build your own character and have your own signature, but they have to fit into the director's vision. Anyone who wants to be a cinematographer, I say, "It's about telling someone else's story, but with your voice." That's how we secretly think we know what we're doing. *(Laughter.)* But this is my impression of what you see around the table today: quiet, gentle people. You have to have a certain degree of arrogance but not enough to make you into a bully.

**BOBBITT:** And some directors are only interested in actors, others only interested in images. And most directors are somewhere in between that. If they have no interest in the camera at all, there is an awful lot of pressure ...

**PAPAMICHAEL:** That's no fun!

**BOBBITT:** ... but also an awful lot of reward. If you get it right and it works, you're certainly guiding the film visually.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** I prefer somebody who knows what they want. I've had directors who say, "Do that thing you do with the light and the lenses ..." And that was the least enjoyable experience I've had making a movie.

**Have you ever worked on a movie with a director who was intimidated by you, knowing he didn't have the knowledge you had?**

**BOBBITT:** That's not unknown, particularly with a first-time director. But I think part of the job is to not intimidate them; reinforce the fact that you're there for them, but it's their film.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** And for every movie to look like it's their movie.

**Monitors are on set now, so a lot more people can see what you're doing. Is that a good thing?**

**PAPAMICHAEL:** It depends. If you're working with a director who's in sync with you, it's a good tool. It becomes more complicated when actors, hair and makeup, wardrobe, production designers are getting involved. My directors restrict other people from using it. With Alexander Payne, we didn't have a typical video village; we had an onboard monitor and that's it.

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**Have any of you ever been in a situation where an actor goes around the director and says to you, "I'm concerned about how you're lighting me"?**

**DRYBURGH:** Very early in my career, on *The Piano*, in fact, **Sam Neill** was concerned that I was shooting him too much in silhouette. He felt we weren't seeing enough of his face in order to get the performance. Luckily [director] **Jane Campion** came to my defense and said, "No, Sam, I want it that way. Don't worry, we'll know what you're thinking." And I think, "Well, OK." (*Laughs.*) We've had monitors on set for a long time, which certainly helped opened up the possibility of people commenting on their own performance or producers or writers or whoever else was there getting involved in the credit process if the director permits them. What I do miss is that there were the happy accidents in film; you'd see the dailies and there was something in the way the sun flared in the lens or some reflection you hadn't been aware of. And they're often some of the most beautiful images to emerge.

**BOBBITT:** And the directors trusted you to do your job. If they weren't going to see rushes till the next day, they would turn to you and say, "Are you happy with that take?" And it would be, yes I am, or no I'm not. That would be it.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** And now they don't say anything.

**What films or directors have most inspired you?**

**ACKROYD:** I'd have to say **Ken Loach**. He gave me my first real break. [DP] **Chris Menges** is my mentor because Chris taught Ken Loach how to make films, and Ken taught me how to make films. I'm very passionate about political filmmaking, and making things that the world would actually listen to, and all that comes from Ken Loach. Simple answer.

**DELBONNEL:** For me, it's [**Andrei**] **Tarkovsky**. He's the master because he used every way of telling a story. You have very long takes. He used light. He used acting. For me, he's the ultimate director.

**Several of your projects this year are on film, which isn't the case for a lot of your peers. What are your thoughts on film versus digital?**

**DELBONNEL:** What's annoying me is, they are pushing toward digital but we have no choice. And I like to have the choice of saying, "I think this movie should be done on film. On Super 8, or whatever." But I have no choice. The

choice is talking about what we want to achieve. And what I want to achieve is related to the script and the story, and then to where the director wants to direct it with the actors, with the production design. They always compare us to painters, which I think is wrong. But there is a major difference between water color and oil painting. So I want to be able to say, "Oh, this is the thing that I could do with water color instead of oil painting." On **Tim Burton's** movie *Big Eyes*, we wanted to shoot on film. And we shot in Vancouver, but the Vancouver and Toronto labs shut down, and we had to ship everything to L.A. And it cost a fortune. Going through customs and shipping and X-ray -- we don't want that. So ultimately, Tim decided to go with digital because it's a low-budget movie.

**BOBBITT:** We've been fortunate because we've been living through that point of transition. And there was a period, which is fast disappearing, where we had those choices, phenomenal choices. In no other time in history have cinematographers had that choice. And it's a shame to lose that. I don't understand why film has to die for digital to succeed.

**DRYBURGH:** There's been a bit of a rush to the lifeboats with these labs closing in the Southern Hemisphere. Film is going to continue to have a life. It is going to continue to be a choice. Many directors will say, "I think this should be on film. We shot *Walter Mitty* on film, and it might be my last major film project. I also think a lot of actors look at themselves on a screen shot digitally and then at a screen shot on film, and they go, "I look better on film." And they're actually right. [In digital] you start seeing lines on people's faces that really aren't there. I find myself using diffusion filters that I haven't used in 20 years, just to be kinder to the faces of the people I'm photographing. And it's weird: It's not because you're trying to make them better than they are in person; you're actually fighting the tendency of the digital camera to make them look worse.

**What advice would you give actors about how to work better with their cinematographer?**

**DELBONNEL:** You don't give advice to actors!

**BOBBITT:** The relationship with actors is like with directors. The relationship you develop with them is in reference to what they need. So of course you're trying to put them at ease. The role of the cinematographer is to create a space in which the actors move. And give them the freedom to find the performance. And keep 'em in frame as best you can.

**Getting back to digital, besides the fact that you are losing the ability to choose between film and digital, do you have any other concerns ?**

**ACKROYD:** The thing we love about film is that it works in a physical way. You can carry so much of it on your shoulder because it's made of celluloid and chemicals. The chemicals burn up in a way that is very comparable to your eye. Rods and cones in your eye are burning up. It's very sympathetic to the eye. It gives you that grain and texture that we're used to in our real lives. And we're going to lose that.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** I don't think we're just going to continue to improve the image at a rate that we have been. People already are saying, "This is starting to look strange. It's too sharp."

**ACKROYD:** The TV screens I see in hotel rooms ...

**PAPAMICHAEL:** Oh, those are horrible. I was staying at a hotel and they had the new LCD. Everything looked like it was video.

**DRYBURGH:** It's about Blu-ray. Everything like a video game.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** I have a nice plasma; it still looks OK. But even non-cinematographers, like my wife, are starting to say, "Why does this look like this?" When the projectors and cameras get to a point where you're picking up too much detail and things are too sharp, I think people are going to respond to it somehow. I don't think there is a need to keep developing it. We're going to start being in the business of degrading [the digital image]. That's what I'm doing. For *Nebraska*, I shot on an Alexa [digital camera], but with old Panavision lenses and stuff.

**DELBONNEL:** But that's what's wrong. We're using digital cameras and we want it to look like film. So how contradictory is that? It's absolutely ridiculous. And we use filters just to blur the image a little bit because the lenses are too short. So it doesn't make sense. It's an odd medium, but we have to learn the language of digital somehow. It's a new generation. My daughter is 9 -- we have a big plasma at home -- and she's used to watching those kind of images.

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**OK ... 3D: For or against?**

**ACKROYD:** Well there's no doubt, against.

**BOBBITT:** Well, I wouldn't say against, but just a bit mystified.

**DRYBURGH:** Usually unnecessary, rarely very successful. I think *Avatar*, which is responsible for the whole resurgence of 3D, is very successful in 3D and enjoyable. But in most cases, it's fairly unnecessary.

**ACKROYD:** It's a gimmick. It sells tickets that are a little bit more expensive. That's the desire.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** But actually there's a theory that -- I can't confirm -- but it's a sort of conspiracy theory that the studios were pushing 3D because it forced all the theaters to change over to digital projection in order to be able to show their products, these big commercial movies. There was initially this argument that studios wanted to eliminate film so they don't have to make all these prints and ship them all over the world. Now we're sending a little hard drive that's the size of an iPhone and theaters are saying, "It's a big cost for us to get rid of all our projectors and put in these expensive digital projectors, so you guys, the studios, should pay for it because you're benefiting from it, too." For *Nebraska*, I'm like, how many prints are we actually making? We're making 10. But what about Europe? I asked the studio, "How about all these markets that haven't been able to switch over?" They go, "Well, you know, they're out of luck." Get with it or you're out. The other problem is the labs all shutting down. No one's making prints.

**ACKROYD:** There's practically only London, yeah. There's also Paris. We're hoping the French will keep it. (*Laughter.*)

**PAPAMICHAEL:** I was in Berlin and every lab there was still printing for me, but you know that's becoming a problem. We can't even make prints.

**DRYBURGH:** Where I come from in New Zealand, if you shoot film in Australia or New Zealand, the nearest lab is in Bangkok, Thailand. And that lab survives because there's still a lot of print distribution in Asia. They have a major release printmaking lab. But the lab in Melbourne closed, then Peter Jackson closed his lab in Wellington. If you shoot film anywhere in the Southern Hemisphere now, it's Bangkok or Los Angeles. Nobody wants to send negatives halfway around the world for processing.

**ACKROYD:** Only like three or four years ago, I was working in Serbia on *Coriolanus*, and Kodak built a lab in a house for us.

**Have any of you worked on a film, say, 10 years ago, and it comes out on Blu-ray and you look at it and think, "This isn't the film I've shot"?**

**DELBONNEL:** Always. Always.

**ACKROYD:** I'll be watching and it's in the wrong format.

**So what is it like to devote your lives and careers to creating images that you know exist only momentarily in their absolute best state, that may never be seen by most people the way you would like them to be seen?**

**BOBBITT:** At least you get a chance to see it once. All you can do is hope that people will see an approximation of that. I've been to screenings where I've had to get up and walk out because I just couldn't bear to watch the film in the state it was in. But at the end of the screening, people say, "That was fantastic. That was beautiful. Well done!" and you're thinking, "If only they had seen the real thing." We would drive ourselves mad if we worried too much about it.

**ACKROYD:** I think there are four stages of a film. It's the stage starting at the script that we shoot; that's the stage we love. Then there's the edit, which creates a third film. And then the fourth film is the one that the audience takes away with them. We make films for an audience. I don't make a film for myself. What's moving to me is when you've spoken to an audience; people say it's changed their lives a little bit.

**BOBBITT:** I find it very difficult to watch my films because all I see are the mistakes. There's not an awful lot of enjoyment involved. I'd rather watch other people's films.

**PAPAMICHAEL:** If you watch it after five to 10 years, it's a whole new experience. You've sort of let go of it.

**ACKROYD:** You're finally seeing it more like the audience does.

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