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Wally Pfister on Phedon Papamichael & Darius Khondji

Eye on the Oscars: The Cinematographer

By

Two cinematographers have had an incredible influence on the early years of my career and my growth as a cinematographer: Phedon Papamichael and Darius Khondji.

Phedon and I have been friends and colleagues for 22 years. I first worked for him on a film called "Streets," a Roger Corman epic that Janusz Kaminski was shooting second unit on, and employed me as an electrician.



Darius Khondji

While Phedon, Janusz and I were still making our way on smaller films, Darius exploded into our field of view in 1991 with a French-language film called "Delicatessen." The contrast, the color, the lighting was something we were in awe of, and became a source of incredible artistic inspiration. Darius followed up with extraordinary work in "The City of Lost Children," then "Seven," and created a new gold standard for our generation of cinematographers, particularly for me, as I continued struggling to free myself from the shackles of low-budget, straight-to-video movies.



Pfister

So it was no surprise to see that fantastic sense of color and contrast envelope the screen yet again in Darius' latest collaboration with Woody Allen, "Midnight in Paris," in which a writer visiting Paris (Owen Wilson) is fantastically

transported back to the 1920s where he meets nearly every great artist, writer and musician of that era, including Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The warm yellow/red glow that has become the default color palette on Woody Allen films for many years is present here, but there is also a balance of colors from across the spectrum, painted softly, that support the romantic nature of the fantasy sequences.



Phedon Papamichael

While the present-day scenes are brighter and slightly less color-saturated, the night sequences come alive and warmly transport us to 1920s Paris with their mood and expanse of color range. Darius is an expert at this, and his love of Paris seems to be evident in the photography.

"The Ides of March" is quite a different experience than that of the fantastical world of "Midnight in Paris" but equally pleasing. This is reality-based political drama with a string of strong performances and a serious theme. As far as I am concerned, it's the most inspired work that Phedon (who also shot "The Descendants") has done in years.

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The look and feel of the photography is mature. The contrast, the composition, the tone shows the work of a cinematographer that is in sync with the director's (George Clooney) vision and is adept at following the mood of the dramatic structure of the film. Phedon's naturalistic photography darkens and increases in contrast as the film's theme grows more ominous. He is an intelligent cameraman, and that shows in his tastefully use of cinematography as a dramatic tool.

It is worth noting that Darius and Phedon shot their work on film. The color range, the contrast, the sharpness, is far more pleasing to me than those shot on any digital medium, and yes, there is a difference. I sincerely hope we continue to have the choice of what format to use as technology races ahead and industry standards change and begin to limit our options. There is much that will be lost if film goes away completely, and I fear we will not fully understand exactly what until it is too late.

Wally Pfister, who won an Oscar for his d.p. work on Christopher Nolan's "Inception," is in post on his third Batman film for the director, "The Dark Knight Rises."

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