

LET THERE BE LIGHT!

The motion picture cameraman has only begun to share the blinding Hollywood limelight

By LAURENCE STALLINGS

The cameraman is seldom celebrated in films. An occasional one wins notoriety or chance fame; but there is no critical estimate of his worth which approaches intelligent comprehension of his contribution to films. And in a place as publicized as Hollywood it is significant that the cameraman is virtually left out of the publicity:

I think this only partly explained—this deliberate reluctance by studios to capitalize on the cameraman's art—by reason of his being affiliated with organized labor. True enough, this makes him—in a world where the white-collar worker carries the class—sociologically damned. For in a society more or less paced by actors the cameraman, unless of unusual attainments, rarely makes the social grade. Not, however, that he cares; for like most advanced technical workers he prefers the society of his own kind. But this does not entirely explain the cameraman's obscurity.

Various professional photographers among still men—notably Steichen and Stieglitz and Genthe—are greeted as savants by the literati. The movie cameraman never attains that degree of recognition. Who has read a monograph on the art of Clyde de Vinna? Surely this man, who has ranged from the snow scenes of *Eskimo* to the palms of *White Shadows*, from the jungles of *Trader Horn* to the wintry combers of *Captains Courageous*, is worth considered study.

It must be that the popular mind believes all that is necessary to photograph a film is the electric power to turn the camera shaft. Yet more and more the cameraman is making the main point in the constant effort of films to increase the illusion of depth and perspective in motion pictures. In an out-of-doors film of any pretension, it may not be exaggerating the case to say that, for every fifteen minutes a director has for rehearsal, a cameraman requires forty-five—and the average hour of labor in a working-day schedule will find the sixty minutes divided in that proportion. The extraordinary depth and quality of photographic images in motion pictures must not be taken for granted, or easily attributed to the sensitivity of the new gray emulsions to the spectrum. The cameraman, more than the chemist, contributes to the great clarity of such shots.

For example, you who sometimes attempt, even with the best of miniature cameras, to achieve depth in a sandy landscape on a bright day often find the printed

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picture turning up flat and shallow. Your movie cameraman, observing the same scene, would spray with water the foreground for a thousand yards of such a scene. It is not uncommon for a cameraman, working in Nevada or Arizona, to require a whole corps of water sprinklers and painters. A cameraman will actually paint the base of a cliff black, to kill the conflicting lights of his scene.

Out-of-door perspective, where light is in abundance, is rarely photographed until nature has been improved upon. Interiors sometimes require even more detail. There are lights for almost every point in an interior scene. An actress may play a short piece of dialogue from a mahogany-backed chair. Before she is photographed lights have been plotted for every point of detail, with individual spots for such things as a chair arm, a chair back, a cross-light shadow—and this a mere set-dressing before the star herself is lighted to show her best features, with cunning elimination of her less appealing characteristics. Photography is actually the physical action of light upon the chemistry of silver oxides. The cameraman is the physicist. He is the creator who first says, "Let there be light."

I should say that the comparative obscurity of the cameraman in a field where all other elements of success are publicized *ad nauseam* is somewhat due to the nature of the screen. The sheer speed of hurtling images gives little time to appraise any particular shot; and the shot itself is composed of figures which, for glamor and appeal, transcend in the popular mind the work of the cameraman. It is taken for granted that his work is to make the star beautiful, the hero handsome, etc. Yet such is nothing like the whole story.

For a study of light and shadow, one could do well to watch the work of Matè in showing the gradual degeneration of Miss Barbara Stanwyck's face in *Stella Dallas*. Matè must begin with a young girl, acerb and handsome, and slowly change her into a middle-aged, blowsy dame—over-fat from interminable gormandizing of chocolates, over-sentimental and slipshod. Granted that Miss Stanwyck brings her own artistry to the process, and more-than-granted that King Vidor is coaxing her into attitudes (some of which must have made her cringe), there is still the superb comment of Matè's camera upon the transition.

No reviewer ever mentions this, or comments upon it with discernment. Yet a still photographer, had he made a series of portraits of Miss Stanwyck in such a ruse, would have won great acclaim in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* for his rendition. Perhaps Georges Perrinal, who used Charles Laughton in *Rembrandt* throughout in the key of the great Dutch master (a good hat at a bad angle, a single overpowering spot of light) was called upon for infinitely more than ever a still photographer must produce. Laughton was moving at all times, gesticulating and capering. Doubtless Perrinal had to calculate—in

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the early morning hours before shooting schedules began—those points of light in a dozen angles for each shot. The sheer physics of the craftsman in this picture was of far greater interest than the subject matter of the picture itself.

It is, I think, a bad sign when a picture such as *Rembrandt* is mostly admired for its photography. I have heard debates as to the value of the cameraman's craft in a good film, and believe that good (or bad) photography cannot affect the general sum of the picture in more than a tenth of its parts. In other words, a good picture may be heightened by ten per cent if the camera work is outstanding, and conversely a bad film can be improved by only ten per cent. As always, story and cutting are the main assets, with cast and director the chief factors in the general effect.

A great star can, in some cases, actually convert a poor picture into a good one. More often than that, a good director can save an otherwise bad picture. Perhaps the reason for the comparative obscurity of cameramen lies in the fact that even the best of them cannot retrieve a bad film. My opinion is that in no picture can the cameraman be directly responsible for a hit by artistry of his photography. Sometimes, of course, his organizing skill can save a lax director's neck—but in that case he is being a director, not the cameraman.

It is no longer possible to identify the work of individual craftsmen. There must be fifty exceptionally good ones in Hollywood, each of them capable of reproducing for a director the exact effect he desires. (Trick shots are almost always executed by a technical staff which does nothing else.)

Of course the director has his favorites. I've known Lewis Milestone, when preparing a huge undertaking, to go painstakingly over each shot with Arthur Edeson before the picture began. W. S. Van Dyke's choice is always de Vinna. Occasionally a star is powerful enough to dictate her selection of cameramen—in which case she usually craves Bill Daniels. A lady who wishes to appear more lovely than nature intended will settle for Oliver Marsh. . . . And so it goes, with frequently the producer, thinking in terms of time and money, ruling all choices of secondary consideration to the prime virtue of speed. In Hollywood speed is sometimes obligatory, but for my money I would choose Lee Garmes every time. That would mean a lot of money, for Mr. Garmes doesn't work for potatoes.

Even the ace cameraman is at the mercy of both star and director. The finest studies of a good head will never reach the screen unless that head is famous. The most elaborate shots will fall upon the cutting-room floor unless the director has pointed them for story and action. Thus the cameraman cannot make his own luck or force his own skill. Should the cameraman be grateful for the luck of photographing some star whose every turn is of

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interest, some of the disadvantages of the star system could be cited to temper this point.

Think of the fine photographers who spend weeks at work with diffusion effects and soft lenses to protect the famous lady who is starting to slip. Consider the hours spent using low lights to burn out the fatty chin, the thickened arms, the crow's feet. For every break a cameraman gets—say a head of Miss Virginia Bruce against a white background in plenty of light—there will be a picture in which Miss Blank—nearing forty—must be delineated as a sixteen-year-old flapper. (I knew a photographer in the old silent days whose interminable job was to make beautiful a lady whose beauty had vanished. He had one lens which could do it, and he carried that lens around his neck on a string as an amulet.) Such turns of fortune are in the run of the game. As Sargent reputedly said to the fashionable portrait painter, "My boy, we're in a pimp's profession."

The cameraman, however, has balm for his hurts. Even though he may be called upon to gild an occasional lily, or diffuse into rich grays a scene which, his conscience tells him, should be blindingly clear—he has no lack of lights and aides. The chief juicer, or electrician of the set, obscure though his reputation may be, is sometimes as keen as the cameraman. Often he will arrange light bridges and batteries of arcs some time in advance so that a cameraman, arriving upon the set, finds his own work a mere refining of the electrician's. . . . I do not wish to create the impression that the cameraman is a lonely soul, battling against odds, whose work goes unrecognized. He's doing all right.