

Contemporary Cinematographers

on Their Art

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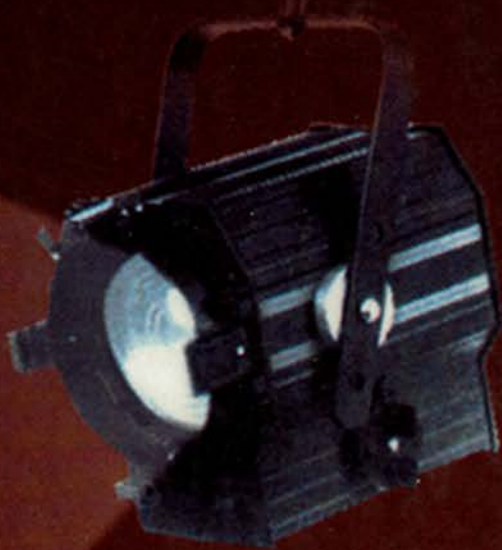
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**Pauline
Rogers**

CONTEMPORARY
CINEMATOGRAPHERS
ON THEIR ART

Pauline B. Rogers



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Foreword

As a child, I escaped a world that was out of my control by creating pictures in my head. I would write the words and direct the actions of real life scenarios or put myself into current television or movie dramas, making events come out as I willed. Most of the time, the pictures were in black and white. However, there was the occasional vivid Technicolor story. There was never a thought of who created the colors and the pictures. Even when I began working on television and feature film sets, the cameras and lights were only those "things" that got in my sightline as I tried to concentrate on the words I needed to hear. The cables were merely obstacles that helped me trip over my own feet.

It wasn't until ten years ago, when I began to write about how pictures were made, that I had any sense of the importance of the cinematographer. Even after doing close to 400 interviews and visiting several hundred sets, I am still amazed at what the Director of Photography does. I'll never forget the incredibly beautiful lighting I saw on Stephen Goldblatt's Batman Forever set, or the complex, yet simple, overhead rigs Dean Cundey had designed to fly Robin Williams as well as cameras and lighting over a basketball set, for one of the funniest sequences in Flubber. I still can't believe Tom Ackerman could silk so much foliage inside the Hughes hangar and make it really look like George of the Jungle was really in the Jungle! And a few days ago, while I was playing tag with the television remote control I landed on not

one, but two of Emmanuel Lubezki's projects. The texture of Like Water for Chocolate still intrigues me and I found yet another incredible visual in A Little Princess.

Fortunately, many of these interviewees have become life-long friends. Occasionally, I will stress those friendships by asking some very dumb questions. Payback time comes when I visit their sets. I've been talked into riding a buckboard onto a remote location, only to find out that it is a breakaway – the hard way. To understand the reality of a gimbaled set, I've been cajoled into taking a ride, assured that it will rock only 15 percent – Sure! To see how rigs work below the water in tanks, I've been invited to look over the edge, and landed inside!

It's okay, because the childishness is all part of the making of a motion picture or television show. I admire every one of these people who ply their art, and it is an art, often under tremendous pressure, in highly volatile political situations, and sometimes in extremely tense moments, yet still retain a wonderful sense of humor.

Although I understand only a little of how they do what they do, I know they are often highly underrated individuals. Although technically classified as "below the line," they are responsible for one of the most important parts of a project – the picture. I agree with the Vittorio Storaro's concept – lighting is another actor in the drama. And the cinematographer is responsible for that actor's performance.

I hate to see this all important quotient of a project discounted – or even ignored. I've received hundreds of press kits, yet rarely is the Director of Photography mentioned, let alone his background and credits. When I see one-sheets or newspaper and television ads, or even

trailers, everyone's name seems to flash on the screen or be printed on the paper – but the cinematographer.

I've heard horror stories about the break down of contract negotiations, when an agent asks for a reasonable salary for pre-production and post production involvement. It is only right that these talented people be involved in the whole process – not just the days on the set. If Tom Ackerman hadn't camp in the art department's offices when *Jumanji* was being prepared, there surely would have been even more difficulties in putting this intriguing picture together. If Don Burgess or Dean Cundey weren't allowed to participate in the post process of *Forrest Gump* or *Contact*, and *Jurassic Park* or *Casper*, carefully created visuals could have gone amok. Often times, to protect the integrity of what they have worked so hard to create, cinematographers will literally donate their time, to follow through effects, post production, timing, and whatever else is necessary to keep a single vision throughout the project. And that isn't right. However, that is the way it often happens as budgets get more and more out of control on the "above the line" side of the picture.

Fortunately, directors and actors are beginning to go to bat for their cinematographers. And, as pictures become more and more intricate, studios are beginning to see the light. (No pun intended). However, instead of making the job easier, these pressures to perform on ever shortening schedules takes a toll on the cinematographer and crew. It becomes a trade off, "we'll give you the equipment, the CGI, but you better not fall behind, or else."

In approaching the design of this book, I have tried to select significant cinematographers who are working in all fields of lighting, camera, and CGI. Each chapter isn't just about what technique these people used on a

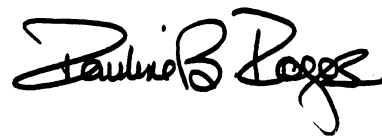
particular project, it is as much the sum total of how they got to each film they discuss. Who they were before they began "in the business" has contributed to how they function within this world unlike any other. As Donald M. Morgan says, he "failed miserably" at several things before he became a cinematographer. An unprecedented four A.S.C. Awards, numerous Emmy Awards, and other nominations have shown that he found more than a home behind the lens. Jo Mayer thought she would be an economist until she spent her "spare time" lighting productions at Smith College, then in her off time while working on Capitol Hill. An introduction to John Houseman made her career take a sharp turn.

*To include the paths and lessons that brought each of these cinematographers to where they are today meant I was able to cover fewer people than originally intended. Fortunately, or unfortunately, many of the original list of interviewees became so involved in current productions that it became impossible to complete their chapters to satisfy us both. Although I have learned much about how John Seale A.S.C. created a few of the images in *The English Patient*, we haven't been able to cover this or his other projects completely due to his involvement in *City of Angels*. Jack Green A.S.C. and I started to discuss the 20 plus films he has done with Clint Eastwood, as well as his involvement in *Twister* and the two *Speed* pictures. However, fine tuning his first directorial debut (*Traveler*) took precedence. Over the years I've worked with and watched John C. Flinn III A.S.C. do amazing things on television projects such as *Jake and the Fatman* and *Babylon 5*. However, *Babylon's* grueling television schedule and back to back *Babylon**

two hour movies have precluded our conversations on his work, going back to Gunsmoke and Hawaii 5-0.

It is my hope that these cinematographers, along with other highly talented Directors of Photography such as Laszlo Kovacs A.S.C., Vilmos Zsigmond A.S.C., John Schwartzman A.S.C., Phil Meheux, Dante Spinotti A.S.C., Robert Richardson A.S.C., Michael Ballhaus A.S.C., Daryn Okada, Ken Ralston, and many others will be at the top of the list for a part two should the readership demand a follow up to Contemporary Cinematographers on Their Art.

Until then, I salute every one of these men and women who fight the political battles, the ever surprising invasion of Mother Nature into their well planned exterior shots, and the often exasperating nuances needed to perfect their stunning interiors. I hope to continue to visit sets, ask dumb questions, and even be the butt of tension-breaking practical jokes, as long as the industry and the talented people behind the images will allow me. Maybe, some day, I will really understand the difference between HMI and Tungsten lighting and be able to see why they send a grip running for a double in place of a single.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Pauline B. Rogers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'P' and 'R'.

When you are trying to fight a computer, with very little knowledge of that tool, patience, knowledge, and tolerance of friends and associates is vital. Of course, this book could not have been accomplished without the help of the cinematographers involved. I could not have made my deadlines with out Hollie Meyer's help in transcribing hours and hours of interview tape. Thanks to Chandler Warren, The DiLeo family, Maria Carpenter, Dixie and Michael Robillard, and Doug Barnard, several computers managed to turn out camera-ready art that actually looked like the original concept of the project. Also, special thanks to Marc Messenger (for the over/under rig art) and Frank Kaye at Panavision.

"You have to have a colossal stockpile of faith in yourself to do this job. There's no personnel office where you consult a neatly printed job description. And, ultimately, when you crack open your meter case at six in the morning, feeling like you aren't exactly God's gift to cinematography, you are left with only one resource – yourself."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Ackerman', with a stylized, cursive script.

Tom Ackerman A.S.C. and his family moved to Montecito, a quiet and elegant suburb of Santa Barbara, California, in 1995. However, until recently, he still had to pause when he gave visitors directions to the new house. Ackerman is one of the busiest cinematographers in the business, known for his calm and controlled approach to the challenging task of shooting comedy.

"Maybe it is because of what I like to call a 'normal' childhood," he says, as he settles into the office in his classic Monterey Colonial home. "I grew up in Iowa, far from where movies were made." Ackerman's father had been a newsreel "stringer" during the 1930s, later becoming a projectionist. Ackerman grew up at his father's theater, hanging out in the projection booth or in the manager's tiny office with a bay window that allowed a view of the screen.

"It was sort of a mid-western *Cinema Paradiso*," he recalls. "My view of the world was essentially the movies. It was classic black-and-white, pure Hollywood." Ackerman was hooked. He began to scour movie fan magazines for behind-the-scenes photographs. The tweed-jacketed crew members and exotic array of shooting gear caught his attention.

"The activity was usually centered around the camera," he says. "With the director often hunkered down right next to the matte box, it was obviously the core experience.

"When I went to the University of Iowa, I became a Theater major and took every broadcasting and film production course available. But, despite some great teachers, I never really saw any connection to working in the industry. It was a more academic approach."

Ackerman's introduction to the "industry" came during the summer break following his freshman year, as a mail messenger at NBC's Rockefeller Center headquarters. "I got pretty good at finishing my mail runs under schedule, which gave me time to hang out in the master control room," he says. "I saw the first Telstar satellite feed live from Europe. I also got a kick out of watching the guys wrangle the studio cameras down on the stages where they were taping soap operas. They were unbelievable, the way they wrapped around those pedestal dollies, making all their own moves, pulling their own focus."

Ackerman returned to the University of Iowa excited about the possibilities in broadcasting. By that time, the war in Vietnam was well underway. Enrolled in Air Force ROTC, he was intrigued to hear that career opportunities existed for Motion Picture Officers. "When I went on active duty as a 2nd Lieutenant with the 1365th Photo Squadron in Orlando, Florida, I was actually very gung-ho. Of course, my enthusiasm waned a bit when I did my tour in Southeast Asia. The motto of the 600th Photo Squadron was 'We Kill 'Em With Fillum.' I think that was overstating the case, since we posed, in my opinion, next to zero threat to our opponents.

"We had production abilities that could have been used to make documentary films about the air war. We had eager-beaver film school grads commanding detachments all over Southeast Asia. We had cameras, labs, unlimited film stock, and free access to what was going on. But no. WE got to bolt gun cameras to F4's and give briefings not on the great photography but on our gun camera failure rate."

While in the Air Force, Ackerman began what would become a life-long friendship with documentary filmmaker Peter Vogt. After his discharge, Vogt became Production Manager for Oscar-winning documentarian Charles Guggenheim, also an Iowa grad. With Vogt's help, Ackerman wrangled an interview with the Washington based Guggenheim, and eventually a job.

"Charles Guggenheim had a tremendous influence on me," Ackerman says. "He was a great lover of photography.

But he also wanted an idea behind the image. I did a lot of editing at that time and he taught me how to be ruthless, especially with my own footage. He was a purist in that he used voice-over very sparsely. He wanted the pictures and the live dialogue to convey the story. The narration he did write tended to be poetic rather than nuts-and-bolts de-scriptive.”

It was a concept that would be echoed years later when Ackerman was working as camera operator with Vittorio Storaro on Francis Ford Coppola’s *One from the Heart*. Storaro also advocated cinematography as a thoughtful process, rather than the slapdash form it sometimes had assumed in Hollywood.

“Vittorio insists that the photography authorship isn’t an ‘add on’ element,” Ackerman explains. “So, on the set, it is not just ‘pop this’ or ‘roundy-round and slam in for a tight one.’ If you can’t support the shot with an idea then maybe it shouldn’t be a shot. If the lighting has no design philosophy behind it, just a random process of whatever seems nice on the day, then how can it express the values of a story being carefully told. Now, it is hard to be this principled when you are setting a five-camera stunt and the sun is going down. But it helps set the tone for a more informed approach to the work.”

In 1973, Ackerman moved to Los Angeles to form a production company with another ex-Air Force friend, Mike Robe. The partners did well, but in 1979, Robe sold his first spec script and Ackerman finally received a much-coveted card in IATSE Local 659. The decision was made to downscale Robe/Ackerman and get on with what they had originally come to town to do.

“I got in the Union as a Director of Photography, but the DP thing didn’t mean much, coming out of the world of small non-union production. It was obvious – there were some great photographers out there to learn from. And I was ready to pay my dues,” he says.

Ackerman dropped back to operator, working as a day player and on many B-camera assignments. Eventually, he graduated to A-camera, working on projects like *The Gangster Chronicles* mini-series and several television movies. One of

his last operating assignments was *One from the Heart*, "It was a nice way to go out," he reflects.

"Coppola was onto the Electronic Cinema thing way ahead of the time when most other people in town felt comfortable with it," Ackerman reflects. "The die-hards didn't even want a video tap on the camera. It was thought to be a sort of 'intrusion' into what had been the province of the operator. And a director was supposed to be able to trust what happened in the frame until dailies. I think the last few years have shown that Francis was exactly right in his predictions. There has been a revolution in the way video has changed film shooting and finishing."

After *One from the Heart*, Ackerman resumed working as a DP, doing commercials, music videos, and the occasional low-budget feature. "The hours were brutal on the music videos," he remembers with a slight wince. "My own record was a 27-hour day. I saw dailies I hardly remembered shooting. The most fun I had shooting was with Marty Callner. The first time I met him he told me 'Lighting is God.'

"One of the clips we did was for Stevie Nicks, where I designed what came to be called the 'mirror matrix,' an array of 48 two-inch mirror squares mounted on a monofilament grid. The monofilament was stretched taut, like a drum skin. When the stage was smoked up and the Xenon was directed onto the mirrors it bounced back as a cluster of brilliant shafts of backlight. We tapped rhythm on the monofilament grid and choreographed them to Stevie. Computerized light cues were a rarity then, so we had to find crew guys who understood music." Several weeks after the video was released, there was a parody of it on David Letterman, Ackerman's technique and all. He had arrived.

When pushed to reveal the name of his first feature, as Director of Photography, Ackerman is vague at first. "It was a good experience but not one to write home about," he says. "A cheesy horror film for Cannon called *New Year's Evil*. It was an 18-day schedule for about four hundred thousand dollars.

"We were using one of the last Cinemobile production vans in which all camera, lighting, and grip equipment was compartmentalized on a single vehicle. It had an on-board

generator and the crew, in theory, could work very efficiently. The company's equipment and rolling stock had a low reputation for reliability.

"We had one Brute arc. It was my only 'big gun' for night exteriors, along with a couple of Maxi-brutes and four big-eye 10ks. The negative was ASA 100 and without Zeiss super-speeds, which were T1.3, we couldn't have done much night work. Still, there are some parts of the film I can look at and see that the craft was pretty good. At least, not embarrassing.

"In fact, it is amazing what you can accomplish with very little. In *New Year's Evil*, there was an elevator shaft scene in which the killer, played by Kip Niven, terrorizes the passengers in the lift. It was all shot on a practical location downtown – no mock ups, no blue screen, no process work. For some of the coverage, we mounted an Arri llc on the roof of the elevator. I was doing my own operating and could hear the counterweights whizzing past my head as we moved up and down the shaft. We're talking about three inches of clearance!

"I think we had one night to do the entire sequence, which on our schedule was a bit of a luxury. A big contrast to the elevator scene at the construction site in *Baby's Day Out*, where we used a set that filled the National Grand Armory in Chicago and had 16,000 amps of light, lots of prep, lots of days, and lots of visual effects.

"Obviously, it's better to have the big tools in your kit," Ackerman says, pragmatically. "But there was a strange sense of freedom on the really low budget projects. You couldn't have much equipment, so this required a simpler approach. No distractions. When I do a picture now, we usually have all the bells and whistles. It can give rise to a certain anxiety level. If you've got a Super Technocrane on the set, you're going to be trying really hard to find a way to use it. There's no doubt in my mind that we make certain shots just to exploit the equipment."

Ackerman's first job as a Union cinematographer was in 1983, on Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*. "Tim wanted to emulate the look of the great J. Arthur Rank horror films of the 1940s and 1950s," he explains. "He wanted to convey that

extremely graphic, almost wood block simplicity of those black-and-white B-movie images. I was also influenced by Gabriel Figueroa's brilliant work and Stanley Cortez A.S.C.'s photographics on *Night of the Hunter* for Charles Laughton. Tim also wanted to edge it with the surreal, almost Da-da-ist feeling of the German classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

"In *Night of the Hunter*, there was another parallel to *Frankenweenie*," Ackerman continues. "Cortez was working on some very elemental sets. The film was being done inexpensively and the scene in which the children escape Robert Mitchum by floating away in a pram was shot on stage with little more than water to float the boat, clumps of reeds and cattails, and a painted backdrop featuring a silvery moonlit sky. It was mostly the light that made the illusion.

"Tim always wanted to boil down the shot to the basic elements. It was a half-hour film and every minute had to be strong. He kept urging us to 'keep it simple.' This was an aesthetic choice, not something to keep us on schedule.

"What made the project really unique were the elements created by Tim and his close ally Rick Henrichs," Ackerman explains. "They designed all the gravestones with a surreal quality, whimsical and ominous at the same time. They took the light beautifully."

When *Frankenweenie* was finished, the story of a boy resurrecting his dead dog was deemed too unsettling for a G-rating. It was never shown theatrically, only belatedly seen on the laserdisk release of *Nightmare Before Christmas*. However, the powerful talent that created it had not gone unnoticed.

"A cinematographer's opportunities accelerate tremendously if he works with a director whose career takes off," Ackerman says. "But, when Tim asked for me on *Pee Wee*, I didn't have big screen credits to convince Warner.

"You have to have a colossal stockpile of faith in yourself to do this job," he continues. "There's no personnel office where you consult a neatly printed job description. And, ultimately, when you crack open your meter case at six in the morning, feeling like you aren't exactly God's gift to cinematography, you are left with only one resource – yourself."

Soon *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* and *Back to School* catapulted Ackerman onto the A-list of comedy shooters. “There used to be a misconception about how comedy should be lit,” Ackerman asserts. “‘Broadly and flatly.’ My approach has always been to light in a way that intrigues the eye. Why should a comedy be shot differently?”

“There are certain disciplines I observe. One has nothing to do with the look but relates to composition. At some point in a comedy, and this is especially true in John Hughes’ work, there is a need for the camera to set up a joke, to include some elements in the frame and exclude others, to express a certain point of view that helps draw the audience in. Often it is a series of cuts that add up to the joke, each one of which rests on the others. You can look at Buster Keaton’s movies to see how brilliantly this can be done.

“But, the need for precision doesn’t need to conflict with beautiful imagery,” he continues. “When I did *Dennis the Menace* for Nick Castle, in 1992, John Hughes had conceived a movie with several levels of interpretation. On one hand, the brief was to paint a loving portrait of small-town summer in the eyes of a little kid. On the other, we were to carefully assemble specific comedy beats that showed the torture exacted by Dennis upon Mr. Wilson (Walter Matthau). Added to this challenge was the need to shoot many of the idyllic summer scenes on a soundstage. Restricted night work hours with children plus the onset of a harsh Chicago winter made it impractical to stay on the Evanston neighborhood streets beyond mid-October.

“The night situations were no more difficult than usual. We always have to impose a look and find practical sources to generate light. I’m not very fond of movie ‘moonlight’ if it is the only thing happening, or for grossly artificial sources that look glued-on instead of organic to the scene.

“In the Wilson neighborhood, the idea was to create a safe, cozy feeling at night and make it look like the kind of place where kids can go out after dinner and play kick-the-can. I decided to use the warm light from windows, porch lights, and street lamps to key various elements in the scene. Half blue moonlight would etch out the basic shapes and we

would paint in pools and nice little nooks of warm light from there.

“In some cases, we could splash things around pretty liberally – a 5k skypan with its wide throw could be placed flat on the ground. It gave a beautiful glow in the distant background. It would be way too crude for use up close, but looked great in the distance.

“The stage day exteriors were another story. To recreate daylight artificially is a major undertaking. There are many elements involved. It isn’t just getting a strong source which, thankfully, is easier now that we have 20k incandescent lamps. You also have to achieve the ambiance – the glow of the open sky, the multitude of ways light is reflected. The color contrast between cool sky light and warm sunlight has to be seen.

“Of course, you don’t want to overdo it,” he adds. “In a real exterior situation, we usually use a lot of ‘negative fill,’ if the natural light is too flat. And, if reflective surfaces are involved, especially vehicles, you have to make sure the open sky source is seamlessly perfect. This is pretty obvious, when it is a car commercial, using the big Fisher Light. But, when you translate that onto a large set like the Wilson backyard in *Dennis the Menace* or the construction site on *Baby’s Day Out*, you are talking about thousands of square feet of gridcloth. Out of necessity, the grid is usually rigged in separate frames or Super coops. So, the rigging reflects like crazy on the sheet metal if you are shooting cars. We usually try to break up the equipment reflections with tree branches or structural elements.”

Before Ackerman got to perfect these elements of shooting comedy and recreate the exasperating Dennis, he teamed with the now famous Tim Burton for what has become a cult comedy *Beetlejuice*, a movie that broke all the molds.

“Reading *Beetlejuice* was a bit of a jolt,” Ackerman recalls. “Here’s a dead guy, a molding lounge lizard, who takes the protagonists on a kinky trip through the after-life. Anyone who has seen the movie knows that level of surreality. But with only the screenplay in hand, the uncharted design aspects were a little unsettling. The look of the film had to

work, had to illustrate the bizarre and absurdist qualities that were so much a part of the story.

"I spent a lot of time with Tim during prep, exploring the visual logic of what we were going to do. We couldn't just use surreality as a crutch," he explains. "The use of color evolved from these discussions – yellow and green pervasive in the after-life, white 'color-corrected' light dominating the 'real world.' In some cases, such as the scene in which Beetlejuice is conjured up during a seance, the after-life colors follow him into Charles and Lydia's farmhouse. And, as the action becomes almost carnival-like, with the B-man literally ejecting house guests through the ceiling, I pushed things into a more theatrical mode by using follow spots and shadow 'reveals.'

"The approach to the visual effects also evolved during prep. As had been the case with *Frankenweenie*, Burton urged a simple approach. Although blue-screen was used in the sand worm attack and for when Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis' characters shrink into the model village, several key composites were achieved in-camera.

"When Geena's character had to dissolve away from Beetlejuice's grasp in the seance, we did it as a mirror shot. She's supposed to be sitting next to him, which required that the set geometry be duplicated in a 'black zone' situated 45 degrees off axis of the fully-illuminated set. It's not a very big deal to use a mirror to make a ghost-like superimposure in-camera. But, in this case, she had to appear solid, then become transparent, then vanish. In order for her to be opaque, we had to subtract all light from her position on the main set, her key on the black set was up 100 percent. Then, as she dissolved away, we took her key light down to zero and cross faded the isolated background light on the main set up to 100 percent.

"*Beetlejuice* is a strong film," Ackerman continues, "not as a result of the bells and whistles but because Tim had a vision of it and invited the rest of us onto the ride. Incidentally, as strong as Tim's concepts were, he wasn't very specific about the photography. He would issue some elliptic clues, but was definitely not into macro-management. But Tim had such a profound belief in what he wanted to achieve, that I guess I was inspired to the right conclusions. Visceral is a