Cinematographers

What is a cinematographer? The term covers two technical functions, sometimes but by no means always combined: the *chef-opérateur* (or *directeur de la photographie*) responsible for lighting and overall control of the image quality, and the subordinate, but still vital, *cadreur* or *caméraman*, who takes up the position behind the camera, places it appropriately in each scene and executes the movement. There is another sense in which the cinematographer's functions may be described as split: creative yet technical, autonomous yet subordinate to the director, he or she is both an artist and an artisan. On the one hand, the work is highly skilled, and still requires specialist training which few directors have benefited from. The stars of the profession, in demand nationally and internationally, are free to choose their projects and securing the required cinematographer is an important part of pre-production. On the other hand, cinematographers are trained to be technicians for hire, offering a precise and semi-scientific expertise; and, at least below the very top levels, they are inserted into a highly regulated, union-based industrial structure from which directors are by and large excluded or exempt. Despite the dramatic developments in the field of cinematography in France between 1950 and 1980, which led some established members of the profession to feel that their status and place in the world was changing completely, these fundamental factors remained stable. The low-budget, personal, 'spontaneous' projects of the New Wave and its fellow travellers could no more dispense with the *chef-opérateur* than could the most elaborate literary reconstruction concocted in the name of the *qualité française*. Producers tentatively risking their capital on untried directors with big ideas might indeed insist on the reassurance of a reliable and experienced professional handling the camera, as when Georges de Beauregard strongly encouraged the novice Jean-Luc Godard to work with Raoul Coutard on *À bout de souffle*. Even the would-be guerrilla film-makers of the early 1970s generally saw to it that someone in their production team had training in the arcane interactions of light and celluloid.

Nonetheless, the arrival of the New Wave and the changes it wrought in the process of film-making fundamentally altered the nature of the work which this important personage was required to do on set. The studio cinematographer of the 1950s was a highly paid architect of light, responsible for sophisticated resources in an extremely controlled environment. His job ('his' with no exceptions) was to set off the material, particularly the actors, with the aid of complex arrangements of projectors which required time to set up. As Nestor Almendros, pioneer of the new generation, critically remarked: 'In the past, the cameraman was like a dictator, you know. There was so much time for preparing the shot and so there practically was no time for the actors to rehearse or the moviemakers to make the movie' (Salvato and Schafer 1984: 8). At worst, the situation allowed cinematographers to exploit their mystique and inflate their importance; at best, it offered opportunities for imagination and artistry which even Almendros came to cautiously regret. He told Christian Gilles in 1989: 'we need to return to the rigour of the cameramen of the 1930s and 40s, but without forgetting the valuable lessons of this school of cinema [the New Wave]' (Gilles 1989: 28).

The principal novelty demanded by the new school of film-making was flexibility and mobility. The ethos of location shooting in the name of observation, and of directorial control in the name of artistic expression, coincided with the increasing availability of new technical resources, the fruit of wartime research efforts geared to filming in the field. For French film-workers, the turning point was Éclair's portable 35mm Caméflex camera, marketed from the late 1940s (see also Chapter 20). The Caméflex was lighter and a great deal more mobile than any 35mm camera which had preceded it (Gilles 1989: 72). Sensitive filmstock further freed the cameraman from dependence on spotlighting. The mobility which the young directors craved was thus within their grasp, but translating it into images was still a technical skill, and one which the studio magicians did not necessarily have, and in many cases were not interested in acquiring.

The new productions required flexibility in other ways, too. They were directorial projects, conceived according to *Cahiers du cinéma*'s auteurist assumptions and carried to production by their directors' convictions. The cinematographer was expected to be a part of that project. He could no longer be a 'dictator', primacy was given instead to his ability to adapt and translate a directorial vision. He was also required to work quickly. Budgets were limited, and time was money; natural light changes according to its own uncontrollable rhythms; and location shooting, especially in central Paris, does not lend itself to long preparations.

The stars of the 'old school' were not necessarily able to adapt. The most famous case of a career eclipsed by the changes is probably that of Henri Alekan, whose high-profile re-emergence in the 1980s marked a new reassessment of the possibilities of cinematography. Alekan remained militantly opposed to speed-working and to natural lighting. His interview with Gilles is an emotional and eloquent defence of construction ('emotion can only arise from a special arrangement, a deliberate balance of lights, shadows and contrasts'), and an attack on the 'diffuse' lighting made fashionable by the vogue for naturalism where 'the subject is drowned in an indifferent light' (Gilles 1989: 21). From 1960 until 1981, he worked almost exclusively with Hollywood-affiliated directors, especially Terence Young, on undistinguished projects, before returning in the new decade in partnership with the most prestigious names in film art: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Raúl Ruiz, Wim Wenders.

The 1960s and 70s were in search of spontaneity. It was supplied by relatively new faces, with backgrounds in war photography (Coutard) or in documentary and underground projects (Almendros). The new generation was inspired by the unexplored technical country opened up by the Caméflex, by the artistic excitement of eagerly creative directors, and by their responsibility as trained professionals on young teams wielding the *caméra-stylo* as the image found itself designated *the* site par excellence of cinematic expression. Others soon followed in the footsteps of Coutard, Almendros or Henri Decaë. Philippe Rousselot commented of this period: 'People like [Bruno] Nuytten, [Yves] Lafaye, [Jean-François] Robin, myself and many others, plunged into the breach with an arrogance and a disdain for the rules which our elders certainly disapproved of, quite rightly no doubt' (Champetier 2010).

The turn of the 1960s thus marked a generational break which translated into an almost complete renewal of the hierarchy of the profession, and instituted lasting changes in working patterns. While the stylistic fashion for diffuse lighting would wane – and was in any case never as hegemonic as the prestige of Coutard and Almendros might lead one to believe – speed and adaptability would remain absolute requirements for success in the field. Even more centrally, the New Wave's method of production was to settle the position of the cinematographer as the director's essential and privileged partner, charged with giving form to a necessarily shared vision. Despite the laments of a few nostalgics such as Claude Agostini, this certainly did not represent a devaluation of the profession, perhaps the reverse; but it did personalise it to an even greater extent than had hitherto been the case (Gilles 1989: 15). When collaboration is so close, personal relations become vital to employment, more vital even than technical expertise; and the careers of successful post-New Wave French cinematographers – up to the present day – regularly reveal partnerships with one or two directors.

Case Study: Raoul Coutard

Jean-Luc Douin has summarised the widespread consensus regarding Raoul Coutard as follows: 'Ask anyone, a willing spectator, a cinephile, anyone in love with images. Ask them which DP incarnates the New Wave. Without hesitation they will tell you Raoul Coutard' (Coutard 2007: 11). Coutard's career began as a war reporter, filming in difficult conditions with the kind of direct, portable equipment which the cinematic establishment in France had scarcely taken into consideration. In Indochina he became friends with a fellow cameraman, Pierre Schoendoerffer, who would later report: 'We very quickly made a pact: "the first one to get a foot in the door in cinema pulls the other in with him"'(Biscioni and Maillet 2001: 74). When Schoendoerffer was engaged by another influential acquaintance, Joseph Kessel, to work on the film *La Passe du diable* for an ambitious young producer, Georges de Beauregard, he did, indeed, pull Coutard into the project; and so the inexperienced but adventurous *chef-op* came into contact with the inexperienced but adventurous De Beauregard, whose next project was to become *À bout de souffle*. It is usually reported that De Beauregard 'imposed' Coutard, whom he now knew and trusted, on the even more inexperienced Godard; it was certainly the producer who suggested the partnership, but the two men immediately appreciated each other. According to Douin, Coutard was willing to withdraw if Godard wished to continue working with Michel Latouche, who had shot his three short films (Coutard 2007: 11). However '[Godard] had good reason to believe that Coutard, used to working on the spot in uncomfortable conditions, was the man for the job' (Coutard 2007: 12). As for Coutard, Schoendoerffer recalled that 'he was very impressed with Godard', and, unaccustomed to working in the studios, the shoestring resources did not discourage him (Biscioni and Maillet 2001: 76; Coutard 2007: 64). The stratagems required for shooting *À bout de souffle* have become part of the legend of the New Wave: the difficulties Coutard and Godard faced together cemented a bond which was to last throughout the 1960s and to be briefly reactivated in the 1980s. Meanwhile, Coutard was engaged to work with François Truffaut on *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960) (among others), with Jacques Demy on *Lola* (1961), with Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin on *Chronique d'un été* (1961), and with other surfers on the wave like Pierre Kast or Philippe de Broca, while maintaining his friendship with Schoendoerffer.

Coutard seems to have felt immediately at home with the improvisational immediacy which Godard requested of him, and he remained remarkably faithful to it throughout his career. Another pioneer of the new cinematography, Decaë, rapidly chose a different path, and by 1964 was accusing Coutard of working with Godard because 'Godard's films are like journalism, and that technique should indeed be restricted to journalism'