In Deep Shadow

Exploring Theatrics, Narrative, and Film Noir

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> *It's dark. The street is wet and the fog hangs heavy and warm from the rain, which has*
>
> *finally let up. I walk, much later than I would normally. The air suddenly chills and I*
>
> *pull my collar up to try to cover my neck, but it's no use. I hear a cry from the alley*
>
> *ahead of me. I should have just kept walking. I should have kept away from that alley*
>
> *and not looked at what was in deep shadow. But I didn't.*

In Deep Shadow is a series of large-scale, digital and photographic images that focus on gritty

storytelling and dramatic cinematography. Above is an excerpt from the screenplay I wrote

describing the detailed narrative that the images of *In Deep Shadow* are based upon. Heavily

derived from cinematic aesthetics, specifically film noir, these images operate as if stills from

climatic moments in a film. Projected and played one at a time in a sequence, the images tell the

story of light shining through the darkness.

To tell this story and to take these images, I functioned as a full movie-crew. I scouted

the setting, set the lighting, cast my actors, and directed each shot to create each scene. In almost

every scene, I had to photograph during the day due to limited access to campus buildings and

scheduling conflicts of my actors. To make each of these shots appear as it was taken at night to

follow the timeline of my story, I would digitally manipulate the images to make them darker

and more sinister.

I have been greatly inspired by film noir aesthetics. The chiaroscuro lighting, the

dramatic asymmetrical and angular compositions of shots, and the melodramas told have all

played a major role in my project. Film noir defines a style of filmmaking primarily in

Hollywood between the 1940s to late 1950s (iMinds). Films of this aesthetic follow similar

visual choices of chiaroscuro lighting, meaning extreme lights and darks with few mid-tones, and

many of these types of films center on dramatic and mysterious narratives, often about detectives

and crime and are sinister in nature (iMinds). I began looking at film stills from the movies of

Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Huston, and Joseph H. Lewis and realized that that this

what I wanted to create for my senior thesis project; a film noir narrative that is full of suspense

and intrigue. The still that I have included below had been particularly inspirational to my

project. From the film, *The Big Combo* by Joseph H. Lewis, this still shows a shadowed woman

running out of a dark room. The dim and selective lighting, the heavy use of shadow, and the

asymmetrical composition were all very influential when planning my own shots. When I

started to focus my project on creating a narrative through a series photographs or stills, I

realized that I was most drawn to images in which a melodrama was unfolding. I was drawn to

scenes of suspense and mystery, and I realized that film noir would be the perfect genre to begin

my research and to look at for inspiration.

A still from The Big Combo, *directed by Joseph H. Lewis.*

Post-WWII Italian cinema was also highly influential to this project. Created in 1970, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* follows the troubled life of an Italian man who struggles with political pressures and a weak conscience. Using heavy color overlays and dramatic lighting, Bertolucci creates a visual language and a style of cinematography that mirrors the inner thoughts and confusions of the main character. In my piece, I also use heavy color overlays to create a visual language for the viewer. When the story's villains are present, an ominous yellow hue permeates the image. *The Conformist* borrows many film noir stylistic choices and became greatly influential to my project.

A still from the opening sequence of The Conformist.

In more modern times, a film that greatly inspired me was the 2011 film, *Drive,* by Nicolas Refn. Deemed a "neo-noir", this film employs many conventions found in film noir and

is the story of a quiet man who moonlights as a getaway driver and finds himself in trouble with mobsters (Craig). The solemn main character, the Driver (who never is given a formal name in the film), is a modern take on the classic film noir male lead of the unlikely hero. This gritty crime story is composed of heavy shadows, thematic color overlays, and graphic shot compositions and is permeated with a somber yet intense atmosphere (Craig). This film inspired me to keep my own work as a present day film noir interpretation as opposed to making a 1940s-1950s period piece.

Drive movie poster.

Moving from the silver screen and into the realm of two-dimensional art, one artist whose

work has motivated my own is Gregory Crewdson. A photographer out of New York, Crewdson

creates elaborate shots and cinematic scenes. Exercising complete control over lighting, the

expressions of his models, and setting, each photograph is saturated with drama. Created by

Crewdson in 2004, the scene shows a middle-aged couple turning in for the night, but is charged

with a melancholy atmosphere through the blue toned lighting and the distant spatial relationship

of the models, creating a sadness that fills the photograph. As a comment on suburbia and

domestic life, Crewdson masterfully lights the scene to create emphasis on each of the characters

and further establish the gloomy and cheerless mood that permeates the scene. I want to create

Beneath the Roses (Woman at Vanity). 2004.

images that act as cinematic scenes that speak for themselves, and Crewdson's work is one of the reasons why I chose to create photographs instead of an actual film.

Cinema has been a passion of mine from a very early age and when I began to think of about what I would make for my senior thesis project, I knew that I wanted to create a story. That is when *In Deep Shadow* was born. I started to read through screenplays and movie scripts, particularly the 1944 screenplay *The Big Sleep*, a complex crime story following the protagonist Philip Marlowe (Faulkner). After reading through many different screenplays and old crime novels, I began to write my own screenplay. From this writing, I developed the plot for *In Deep Shadow*.

The story opens on the early pivotal moment on the screenplay in a dark alleyway with a shot of the two villains of the plot conversing while the leading man, Dan Tracy (played by Paul Provenza), peers around the corner at the scene. A yellow overlay is associated with the villainous characters, named Cary Cooper (played by Endi Poskovic) and Tony Lansby (played by Jim Cogswell) and is persistent throughout the entire piece. This yellow hue becomes a menacing thematic color and is present when the main characters are near the villains. As apparent in the opening sequence, the entire images are heavily saturated in this color and the

color intensifies throughout the scene.

Opening shot: picturing both villains conversing with one another.

After the opening scene, the next sequence shows the two villains conversing with one another in a dark room. With no narration or accompanying text, I want the viewer to create this conversation for his or herself, though the conversation that I wrote in the original screenplay is that they are discussing what they will do about Dan, knowing that he witnessed their crime and may go to the authorities. The last picture of this sequence shows Cary Cooper looking menacingly out of the frame of the image and foreshadows the coming events. The scene then fades to black, signaling the next sequence and a change in location.

Foreshadowing image of the villains.

The third sequence consists only two images as well, and shows that Dan fully realizing the weight of his situation, having just witnessed a murder. The last image of this scene depicts Dan (pictured on the right of the screen) looking out towards the viewer and this photograph leads into the next sequence of images by creating a visual link to the opening picture of Laina Linley (played by Lindsey Meekhof) in the fourth scene. In this image, Laina mimics Dan's position by looking out toward the viewer from the left side of the screen, now occupying the empty space vacated by Dan. By playing these parallel compositions one after the other, the viewer imagines that these two characters, in fact, share this space and establishes a relationship between Dan and Laina. By doing this, I connect these two characters without having them physically interact in a shot. I employ this same device at the end of this scene. After Laina ascends the stairs towards the ominous yellow light, the transitions between the images switch to fast jump cuts. Suddenly, a hand is placed over her mouth and the next image shows her hand lying on the ground to suggest that she knocked down or rendered unconscious. The image of her hand fallen stays on the screen for a long time to enhance the suspense until the final image

of this sequence is revealed, showing Cary looking down menacingly at her limp form. By

shooting this image from a low angle, the viewer feels as if they are seeing Cary from Laina's

fallen position and the viewer knows that Cary, by his expression and proximity, is the assailant.

By showing these images in succession establishes a relationship between these two characters

without having to show a literal image of their interaction. This keeps the mysterious and

suspenseful quality of the images and enhances the feel that one is watching a film or viewing a

narrative.

Cary looking down at fallen Laina.

Filled with action, the fifth scene of *In Deep Shadow* keeps the feeling of suspense high.

The scene opens with an image of Dan looking out a window, as if waiting for something, when

jump cut! Cary is right behind him! The fight is short and the scene quickly fades to black,

leaving the scene unresolved. I want the viewer to be kept on his or her toes. I want the viewer

to frantically wonder which one made it out of the fight, our handsome hero or the brooding

villain. The next short scene offers no answers except that only one person made it out of the

altercation, as the viewer sees (after a few shots of an empty, eerie, and now quiet building) a lone shadow descending the stairs.

The lone shadow descending the stairs.

In the final scene, I attempt to resolve some aspects of the story, but keep an overall feeling of ambiguity and mystery to allow more interpretation from the viewer. However, the final scene attempts to answer some of those questions but still leaving much of the story up to the viewer to create. In the final sequence, I show Laina regaining consciousness and walking back to a spot she was shown at previously in the story. There, she waits for something and soon the *something* arrives. The scene ends with a picture of Laina with a subtle smile and the viewer is soon shown that Dan is walking towards her. This tells the viewer that he made it out of the fight and has now joined Laina, also showing the viewer that there is in fact some relationship between the two characters (but leaving it up to the viewer to decide what that relationship is— for me, it is that they are in love). The scene fades to black and the story ends.

Ending

In the screenplay that I wrote, the story is thoroughly developed and the ending resolved. The story begins the day before Dan witnesses the crime committed by Cary and Tony when the main character accidentally bumps into Laina, commonly known in the film industry as a "meet/cute". The story unfolds with Dan on the run from the mobsters, and Laina quickly becomes tied up in the drama. In the screenplay, there are side characters, sub plots, the leading lady has a more dubious role in the drama, the characters develop and evolve, and the story takes place over a three-day span. However, when I began shooting each scene of the story and sequencing the images, the story grew less and less effective with each additional scene and character and began to lose much of its suspense and mysteriousness. I decided to pare down the picture narrative, only including the most exciting and vital pieces of the story. With this in mind, I decided that the image sequence of the story takes place during one night and only include the events that I had mentioned in the above passages.

When watching the sequence, I want the piece to be slightly ambiguous in order to allow the viewer to fill in the blanks. I want the viewers to create their own back-stories for the characters, to ask questions like, "Did the leading man and woman already know each other?" or "Was he killed?" With the ending slightly ambiguous and unresolved, I want the viewers to create the ending for themselves or be able to continue the story in their minds if they so choose. With more room for interpretation and inviting the viewer to employ their imagination, I found that the story retained its enigmatic feel and sense of intrigue that it was beginning to lose with the addition of unnecessary of the subplots and secondary characters of my screenplay.

The scene fades to black after this image, leaving the scene unresolved.

My desire to retain the story's suspense and ambiguity are also the reasoning behind why the piece is not narrated or why there are no words to accompany the images. The story told through the image lies solely within each image itself. Through the heavy use of shadow and the thematic color overlays, I want the viewer to feel the sinister air of the alley at the beginning of

the piece and intensity of the fight scene near the end of the piece. Each expression of the

characters speaks for itself and allows the images to remain full of emotion without needing a

narration to tell the viewer so.

To further the feel of the cinema in these pictures, the pictures are sequenced and paced

accordingly to the part of the story they pertain to. In the opening scene of the piece, the images

begin at a moderate pace of roughly four seconds per image with subtle cross dissolves, meaning

that one image slowly fades into the next image. However, the scene quickly escalates and the

pace of the images quickens. The transitions between images change to jump cuts, where one

image abruptly changes to the next. This creates a jarring effect when juxtaposed against the

smooth cross-dissolved transitions, and increases the feeling of panic. This happens in three

areas of the story; in the opening sequence, when Laina is lured into the mobster's trap, and

finally when Cary sneaks up on Dan and a fight ensues. In the opening sequence, the jump cut

occurs when Tony catches a glimpse of Dan. An image of Dan peaking his head around the

corner jump cuts to an image of Tony looking in Dan's direction. This jump cut gives the

illusion that Tony snaps his head and sees Dan. By doing this, I mimic the fast, choppy action

scenes of film in my still images and heighten the intensity of each scene.

My biggest ambition for *In Deep Shadow* is that the viewer will imagine that they are

watching a story unfold and expand on this story themselves.   I hope to one day further this

project and edit the screenplay into a novel to be able to share with others. For me, this story has

taken on a life of its own and though a silent projection on a wall, each image speaks volumes.

It's been three years now and the night still bothers me. In my apartment, I turn on all

the lights, always. Everything is illuminated so nothing can hide in the shadows. I still

don't like to walk at night, nor does Laina. But it's been three years. Three quiet years.

Maybe they are actually gone, maybe they will stay locked up. Maybe.

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