

# **The Cinematography of Roger Deakins: How His Visual Storytelling Reflects His Philosophies**

Jeff Leu

*Cinema and Television Arts  
Elon University*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in  
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

## **Abstract**

*Cinematography is a visual medium that connects the film experience to the viewers. Just like directors and actors, certain names of cinematographers become common in the industry. Roger Deakins, who has a career spanning many decades and popular titles, is regarded as one of the best directors of photography of all time. This qualitative content analysis examines 15 of Deakins' films that were nominated for Best Cinematography category at the Oscars in order to determine what makes his art so memorable. Themes that emerged were his ability to utilize framing and composition, camera mobility, and lighting techniques to naturally tell the story respective of the directors' inputs.*

## **I. Introduction**

From director to gaffer, producer to sound mixer, it takes an entire team of dedicated artists to make a movie happen. The camera is the tool that lets the audience see, and directors of photography (DP) handle this particular tool. They provide the best shot by adjusting lights and shadows, deciding what should be in the background and what should be focused, and choosing the angle. One man who has mastered this art form is 15-time Oscar nominated cinematographer Roger Deakins. Since 1995, he has dominated the film industry and award shows, becoming a household name within the cinematography world (Desowitz, 2018). While he has worked on many Coen brothers' movies like *Fargo* (1996) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007), he has also earned award nods with *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Unbroken* (2014), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the latter being his first Academy Award win. As James Chressanthis, another DP on many television productions, describes: "The brilliance of Roger's cinematography lies in something very difficult to achieve: It's completely transparent to the audience because it looks and feels real" ("Cinematographers on Cinematographers," 2011).

However, what exactly does Roger Deakins do, and how is he so successful at it? As mentioned before, a DP's job is to manipulate camera angles and lighting to portray a message. It needs to feel genuine to the moment and context of the scene, as well as evoke a reaction out of the viewers. The story doesn't have to only rely on the writing, because the camera has the ability to depict emotions without explicit dialogue. While Deakins himself says he strips cinematography down to the basics, and that it's "not about pretty images and beautiful compositions, it's about something that just feels right" (Chagollan, 2015b), he still

---

**Keywords:** cinematography, qualitative content analysis, composition, lighting  
Email: jleu@elon.edu

---

is widely regarded for his artistic craft. He has masterfully kept a consistent, effective theme throughout his works to become one of the best in the business.

The goal of this research is to understand how Roger Deakins uses a range of techniques from camera movements and angles, “mise en scène,” and balance of light and shadows to fully display a variety of emotions in his shots. All these aspects of cinematography naturally arouse the viewer’s brain, bringing the director’s vision to life.

## **II. Literature Review**

This section examines the techniques of cinematography, highlighting the significance and meaning behind certain choices. It also explains the relationship between directors and cinematographers, and how Deakins has aligned his work to the directors’ visions.

### ***Fundamentals of Cinematography***

Filmmaking is a multidimensional medium. There are so many pieces that come together to create a movie, and the camera should not be ignored. It is not only just a tool to capture footage, but another way to tell a story. It is the lens of the viewers peering into a scenario like a fly on the wall. When it comes down cinematic elements involving the camera, there are three characteristics: mise en scène, movement, and lighting.

Mise en scène, which literally translates to “staging,” is the term for what appears in the frame at any moment. That includes things like actors, props, and costumes. The camera’s specific role would be the composition, such as the angle and type of shot. An angle above the subject shows a much different power dynamic than an angle below the subject, same as a wide lens shot feeling much less claustrophobic than a telephoto lens shot (Block, 2008). These all affect the visual arrangement on screen, which implies certain relationships between the elements (Mamer, 2003). Selecting the frame is so vital to filmmaking, as filmmakers must direct the audience’s attention (Brown, 2016). It is the most obvious, yet also most subtle, form of persuasion.

A film is never purely static. Camera movements add dynamics to a shot and keep it from getting stale. However, it should not just move for the sake of moving; it must have a purpose. Following a character through trucks and dolly allows a moment of empathy; pans and tilts expose information that were previously hidden (Block, 2008). These elements of filming confirm a sense of natural reality (Bacher, 1978). Staging of the action in the frame, especially in relation with the camera, makes the cameraman “catch” what is “happening” realistically (Bacher, 1978). This adds another layer within the third dimension, instead of a flat profile that static shots typically demonstrate.

Lighting’s sole purpose is not to just fill a space and help the eye see, it also can be used in a way to illustrate a tone. Harsh lighting setups that emphasize straight lines and edges on a subject provide an unsettling feeling, while soft lighting that nicely envelopes the subject seems less intense and more angelic (Block, 2008). And the focus should not be just light itself, but the absence of light. Shadows are equally significant since they play a big role in setting the scene, and it looks natural. The painting of light within a frame goes a long way in determining the general character of the image, and what message the filmmakers want to put out for those watching (Mamer, 2003).

Cinematography is not simply something anyone can just pick up a camera and do. It requires lots of planning and careful execution. Motivation should always be in hindsight, and present in a way that includes all required story elements (Lucas, 2011). It can be artistic, contributing a mood or sense of pace, but it must fit. In other words, is it good for the story? The director and DP must negotiate that.

### ***Directors’ Philosophies***

In terms of creative decisions, the director is essentially in charge, though in collaboration with all the department heads. When a DP maintains a good relationship with the director, the DP is often invited back to work on another project. Such is the case for British director Sam Mendes, who has worked with Deakins on five separate occasions, including the James Bond film *Skyfall* (2012) and the one-take Best Cinematography winning war film *1917* (2019). Denis Villeneuve, a French director who has burst onto the American cinema

---

scene in recent years, is another frequent collaborator, the two working on *Prisoners* (2013), *Sicario* (2015), and his other Best Cinematography winner *Blade Runner 2049*. However, Deakins' go-to team seems to be Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, better known as the Coen brothers. The directors with eccentric tastes on classic genres have worked with the cinematographer on 12 separate films, starting with *Barton Fink* (1991) and the more recent *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). All these directors have different styles, yet Roger Deakins has managed to fulfill their visions. In the end, it came down to what he does best: keeping it simple.

Simplicity is a philosophy for Sam Mendes. Instead of crazy blockbuster action or over-the-top special effects, he opts for studying the psyche of characters (*Sam Mendes—Behind the Camera*, 2016). *Jarhead* (2005) was the first time Sam Mendes and Deakins worked together as a pair. The story puts an existential spin on a Marine's experiences during the Gulf War (Thomson, 2005). Deakins described how Mendes emphasized that "it wasn't a conventional war story... it's really about these kids being taken somewhere they don't understand, to fight a war they don't understand" (Thomson, 2005). *Revolutionary Road* is about an unhappy marriage in suburban Connecticut. The key, explained by Mendes, lay in staying close to the main characters and having the cinematography reflect that (Bosley, 2009). Roger Deakins was all about reverting to basic rules of camerawork, and a matter of keeping it easy to follow.

For Denis Villeneuve, the naturalist look is the driving force, although still keeping the route of simplicity. During *Prisoners*, a movie about a man trying to find his daughter's kidnapper, they shot during Thanksgiving, using the darker light of fall to convey a more depressing tone that replicated the storyline (Chagollan, 2015a). With *Sicario*, a story about a strike team fighting back against Mexican drug lords, it was the other end of the spectrum. They shot in the Chihuahua Desert in order to capture the harsh, brutal lighting of the sun (Benjamin, 2015). To maintain the state of realism, the pair researched photographs and locations while constantly updating a storyboard until production (Benjamin, 2015).

The Coen brothers' oeuvre is a bit of a wild card. Their films range from a variety of genres, though always in the realm of absurd grittiness, quirky humor, and insightful characters. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) blends comic hijinks and social commentary (Conard, 2012). A film about a trio of men in pursuit of freedom and treasure, it is a modern satire loosely based on Homer's epic poem in *The Odyssey*. The style evoked old movies and the Depression, utilizing faded earth colors for a full effect (Toscano, 2009). *No Country for Old Men*, on the other hand, is an outlier Coen brothers work. It is not unusual for the directors to take on dark themes, but previous films always had a level of meta-irony, in which the stories were meant to be consumed as a detached reality (Conard, 2012). The plot centers around a cowboy who finds a briefcase full of cash, an escaped sociopathic killer trying to retrieve said briefcase, and a sheriff trying to stop the violence. Deakins decided to play with silhouettes and shadows much more, as if the harshness of the real world was dawning upon everyone. As the DP says, "That is what great filmmaking is – an exploration of ourselves" (King et al., 2009). The camerawork modeled what each character represented in the United States, and what the code of human ethics have become (King et al., 2009).

## **Deakins' Craft**

Roger Deakins does not own a style, rather he alters his style to suit the project that he's on (*The Filmmaker's View*, 2017). His craft is purely based upon the combination of basic cinematography rules and what the director needs. Even after nearly 40 years in the industry, Deakins feels like a newcomer on every set, noting that "any way a film looks is a product of prep on that look, on that film, and how that sort of developed." (*The Filmmaker's View*, 2017). However, what sets him apart from other cinematographers is his instinctual personality and hands-on methodology.

Starting out in documentaries, Deakins learned to think quickly and take a simple approach to his craft. It taught him to have a sixth sense in what is about to happen and what belongs in the frame, where one should position the camera to interpret the scene while working quickly and instinctively (Chagollan, 2015b). That is exactly why, even though the technicality of his shots is elementary, his mind and vision creates the world to fill the space and make it that much more special. He still spends effort and time to perfect a scene so that it leaves a lasting impression (*Roger Deakins: Breaking Down the Master Cinematographer*, 2018).

Roger Deakins is also the type of DP to operate the camera. In Hollywood, the cinematographer sometimes never touches the camera, but leads the visual department in where to set up and how to capture the shot (Kilhefner, 2018). He does not believe in this method, since it can impede on his creative process. "There's so much about the movement of the camera and the composition, you want to be open to the little

---

things that happen on a set,” Deakins explains. “You can’t be if you’ve got to communicate with an operator” (*The Filmmaker’s View*, 2017).

In the end, Roger Deakins adds complexion to already known fundamentals. He bases his framing and composition on instinct, then adds on touches of lighting, mise en scène, and movement for artistic purposes. Hardcore film nerds and casual moviegoers alike can relate to his shots. In turn, his name remains present when awards season rolls around.

### III. Methods

This study is a qualitative content analysis of the 15 films for which Roger Deakins received an Oscar nomination for Best Cinematography. These films were chosen for nomination because of their exceptional camerawork and critical acclaim, making them a logical way to study his technique. Each movie was examined by its cinematography, specifically how his craft fit the feel of each piece while maintaining certain visual elements and themes to portray a shot. In order to do so, the basic fundamentals of cinematography were considered, such as mise en scène, camera movement, and lighting. The directors’ inputs were also studied to better understand Deakins’ justification of how to shoot the scene. Table 1 provides the name of the movie, the year it was released, and who the director was.

**Table 1. Movie Title, Year, and Director**

Movie	Year	Director
The Shawshank Redemption	1995	Frank Darabont
Fargo	1996	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
Kundun	1997	Martin Scorsese
O Brother, Where Art Thou?	2000	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
The Man Who Wasn’t There	2001	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
No Country for Old Men	2007	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford	2007	Andrew Dominik
The Reader	2008	Stephen Daldry
True Grit	2010	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen
Skyfall	2012	Sam Mendes
Prisoners	2013	Denis Villeneuve
Unbroken	2014	Angelina Jolie
Sicario	2015	Denis Villeneuve
Blade Runner 2049	2017	Denis Villeneuve
1917	2019	Sam Mendes

It is important to note that qualitative research is not generalizable, but instead provides insight into how his art is so memorable to critics and audiences worldwide.

#### Research Questions

The following research revolves around these questions:

RQ1: What are some of the recurring themes in how Deakins effectively frames his shots?

RQ2: How does the way Deakins shoots reflect his philosophy as a cinematographer?

RQ3: How does Deakins craft a film’s visual style in respect to the directors’ inputs?

---

## IV. Findings

While each film varied in genre, mood, and story, the cinematography remained exceptional and purposeful throughout. Roger Deakins' choices of shots improve the fundamentals of camerawork yet manages to maintain a relationship with the directors' inputs.

### *Mise en Scène*

Of the 15 academy nominated films, five are particularly noted for framing and composition. These include technical aspects such as choice of lens and angles and what they contribute to the story, but it can also include what's within the frame like lines, shapes, and spacing. *The Reader* is about a boy whose romantic relationship with an older woman ends abruptly. He finds out years later that she is on trial for a Nazi war crime. While the story revolves around the setting of the Holocaust, director Stephen Daldry hoped it would not be digested as a Holocaust film, rather about human relationships and consequences (*RT Interview*, 2009). Therefore, Deakins depicts many of the early scenes with intimacy as audiences witness the growing love between the two main characters.

Figure 1



Roger Deakins aids the audience in understanding the bond between Michael and Hanna by framing the two together within the confines of the bathtub (see Figure 1). By employing a wider lens and staying close to the subjects, the claustrophobic environment feels more intimate, as if they were sharing each other's personal space. However, later in the film the framing strays away in distance, and surface division starts to appear.

Figure 2





Surface division is described as dividing the screen into smaller areas for the visual storytelling of disconnect (Block, 2008). In another scene, Michael is recollecting his thoughts upon seeing Hanna again several years later (Figure 2). He does not attend any of his law school parties, instead chooses to observe from a distance. Seeing the different actions in each room shows how Michael does not feel at place in the world anymore. A similar tactic is used in Deakins' first Academy win, *Blade Runner 2049*.

**Figure 3**



The visually stunning movie revolves around a Los Angeles police officer on a quest to find a former blade runner. As depicted in Figure 3, the steel railing and beams separate Officer K from a giant purple advertisement, reiterating his disconnect from the technological dystopian society he lives in. While one can argue that a futuristic society offers more traditionally gorgeous shots than a historical period piece, Deakins applies similar techniques of cinematography that enhances both narratives, proving his philosophy that visuals must aid the story not overarch it.

Geometric shapes are subtle and common mise en scène tools for eliciting natural reactions (Block, 2008). *Kundun*, a 1997 film directed by Martin Scorsese, recounts the story of the Dalai Lama's early life. As seen in Figure 4, the circular shape of the telescope and human head instinctively places a sense of naturalism in the brain (Renée, 2016). Since the Dalai Lama's story is about his journey to spiritualism, Deakins opted for rounder mise en scène. Viewers are meant to feel at ease and unthreatened as the story moves forward, mirroring the protagonist's arc. In this film, Scorsese stepped away from his usual violent mob dramas and into a story characterized by serenity. He wanted the audience to watch an experience rather than a spectacle (Suton, 2019). With the help of Deakins, a color and shape palette was created among backdrops of luscious scenery. Deakins said the movie was "very much a poem, rather than a traditional narrative film, more of a mood piece than anything else" (Suton, 2019).

**Figure 4**



Deakins' work in Coen brothers movies demonstrates his varied approach. As for *Fargo*, the Coen brothers were fresh off of the very stylized *Hudsucker Proxy*. The directors wanted to contrast that with a stark style, mirroring the dead, wintry times of North Dakota. Deakins chose to employ dull mise en scène with few landscapes, in which the brothers noted became another form of stylization itself (Burwell, 2017). Following up with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the brothers returned to their stylish roots. Scheduled to shoot in the summer, Deakins had to find ways to desaturate the greens for the look of old, hand-tinted postcards that the directors favored (*Escaping From Chains*, p. 1, n.d.). "The film was also the Coen brothers' first experience shooting in a widescreen format, which Deakins had suggested because of the importance of the landscapes and epic nature of the story" (*Escaping From Chains*, p. 2, n.d.). By stepping back and not letting his cinematic ego take over his mindset, Deakins allows his storyteller brain to activate and produce the best film possible.

*Fargo* often opts for straight geometric shapes such as squares. A film about a man's attempt to kidnap his wife for ransom money in order to overcome a struggling, mundane life, the shapes within the composition must reflect the plot. The protagonist, Jerry, has financial problems and is trying to invest in the construction of a parking lot for income. After being turned down by his wealthy father-in-law, he angrily walks to his car. The blocks of trees and his angled car are all spaced equally in frame as he walks through the square crossroads of his tire tracks (Figure 5). These shapes represent manmade stability that is often viewed as boring, which is an obstacle the character must overcome (Renée, 2016).

**Figure 5**



Another technique Deakins utilizes is lines. Lines indicate a direction for viewers to follow, as the human eye is naturally drawn to them (Block, 2008). Figure 6 shows isolation, and a long road to nowhere and uncertainty, a problem the protagonist falls into when conducting his ransom attempt (Figure 6). He does not know what is going to happen next as everything spirals out of his control. Deakins effectively uses a straight line, a basic cinematic technique, to further drive the story in a visual manner.

**Figure 6**



This contrasts with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* where Deakins frames lines to show a long journey ahead. The adventure film centers on three escaped inmates travelling through the south in search for treasure. With a line splitting the frame in half down the middle, it provides a deep space shot of rural America, indicating a sense of hope for the characters as they journey through their story (Figure 7).

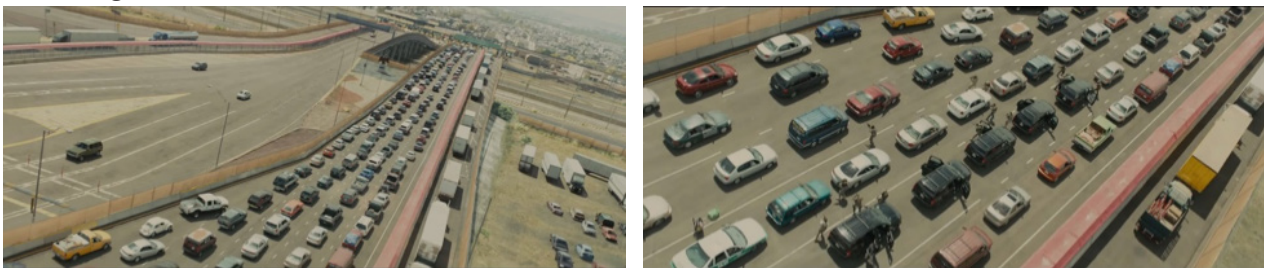
**Figure 7**



### **Camera Movement**

The mobility of camera is often practiced in order to give a feel for reality. It can connect moviegoers with the characters, contribute points of view, and reveal hidden objects within the frame (Block, 2008). In a tense highway sequence in *Sicario*, the United States task force and Mexican drug cartels draw their guns at one another, with Deakins providing a helicopter shot from above.

**Figure 8**



The camera tilts down from a crowded highway of the U.S.-Mexico border to reveal a strike team approaching cars with their guns up (Figure 8). This nerve-wracking moment was emphasized by the use of moving aerial footage, because it feels like a bird's eye view as if it were happening in real time. During shooting, New Mexico was in the midst of monsoon season, so Deakins was worried that much of the aerial cinematography would overtake the film due to vast cloud formations. However, he and Villeneuve adapted with the unexpected changes to paint the landscape as a threatening, oncoming character (Raya, 2016).

Later, within the same scene, the camera operates with more movement, this time from the protagonist Kate Macer's point of view. The FBI agent looks around in horror as the opposing forces open fire, then she realizes a man in the sideview mirror about to shoot her (Figure 9). Deakins thrusts the camera into her viewpoint, as it pans left to right in a panicked manner, mimicking her current mindset. When she sees the man, the audience also sees him in a moment of empathy.



**Figure 9**

A similar approach can be found in *True Grit*. In this story about a teenage farm girl trying to find her father's killer, the story introduces one of the main characters, a lawman named Rooster Cogburn, through the point of view of the young protagonist. She shuffles through the crowd in the courtroom where he is being tried for shooting and killing criminals instead of detaining them (Figure 10). The slow camera track behind the back of men's heads once again pushes the viewers into the character's eyesight, and they meet Rooster along with her. Deakins adds, "I have an overall kind of approach to cinematography that it should be as simple and as submissive to the script as possible, because I think so much of it is about the relationship between the camera and the actors" (*The Cinematography of True Grit*, 2011).

**Figure 10**

There are also times when the camera movement can be empathetic without the use of a point of view. *Unbroken*, tells the story of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic runner who gets captured during World War II. There is a scene where he runs the 5,000-meter race in the 1936 Summer Olympics. In the final lap he begins overtaking the other runners as the camera tracks in front of him, capturing his sweat-beaded intensity and determination. It is not a point of view, yet keeping the camera stationed on him throughout the last lap offers another touch of connection (Figure 11). After he sets a record for the fastest lap at 56 seconds, the audience understands his elation as they followed and watched him the entire time. Director Angelina Jolie recounts during preproduction the tendency to include shaky cameras or quick cuts between multiple angles in the shot list to convey energy, only for Deakins to jokingly laugh and say to not do such "tricksy shots" (*Angelina Jolie – Unbroken*, 2014).

**Figure 11**

The battlefield drama *1917* presented Deakins with a unique challenge: shooting it as if it was one continuous shot for nearly two hours. The film tracks two British soldiers as they race through a carnage-strewn landscape to deliver a message that might save 1,600 lives. In the climax of the film, we see Lieutenant Schofield running perpendicular to the first wave of troops, avoiding explosions and other soldiers (Figure 12).

**Figure 12**



When director Sam Mendes pitched this idea, the concept of a continuous take had already been done before. Yet, he wanted to take it a step further by keeping it action packed and consistent to real time. “It was fundamentally an emotional choice. I wanted to travel every step with these men – to breathe every breath with them. It needed to be visceral and immersive” (Breznican, 2019). In order to achieve such a technical feat, Deakins operated with Steadicams, drones, motorcycles, cranes, pickup trucks and multiple assistants to keep the camera moving, carefully stitching in places to hide editing cuts (*How “1917” Was Filmed To Look Like One Shot | Movies Insider—YouTube*, 2020). This required a huge amount of preproduction and rehearsals, earning him another accolade for Best Cinematography, his second in three years.

Lastly, movement can yield a refreshing take from an outside source. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy is wrongfully convicted of his wife’s murder and sentenced to life in prison. He experiences the brutality of prison life and plots his escape, which leads to an iconic movie shot. After trudging 500 yards through a sewage pipe, Andy escapes prison. Tearing off his dirty shirt, he extends his arms out to the downpour of rain as the camera jibs (a mechanical crane pulls the camera vertically in space) towards the sky (Figure 13). It adds a feeling of a someone answering his prayers, akin a higher being protecting him. According to ScreenRant, this famous shot was originally sequenced for Andy to further trek down the river, cross a field, and board a train, but due to time constraints the DP improvised the same feeling of grace in a shorter version (Jones, 2019). He claims he hates that he “over-lit it,” although fans are unlikely to say the same on such a pivotal moment in cinematic history (Jones, 2019).

**Figure 13**



Given these examples of camera movement, one can understand how highly Roger Deakins believes in maintaining a balanced relationship. His priority is not to compile a list of gorgeous screenshots, it is to boost the director's narrative with every other aspect of filmmaking.

## Lighting

Lighting is an essential facet to film, not only because it helps audience see what's happening in the shot, but also because it illustrates specific emotions. Roger Deakins is known to be an expert in lighting various scenarios because of his realism approach (*Roger Deakins: On Lighting—YouTube*, 2018). He likes images to look natural and lit by motivation (NPR, 2009). In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, a noir film about a man, Ed, who blackmails his wife's boss and unveils darker secrets, the black and white footage gave him a chance to accent lights due to high contrast within the grayscale.

Figure 14



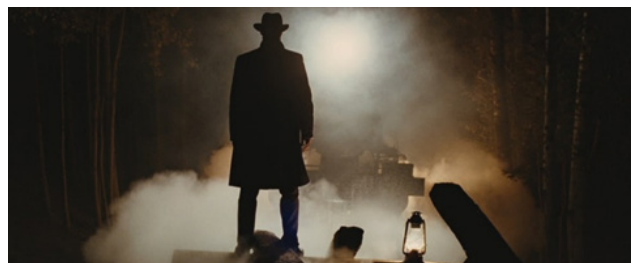
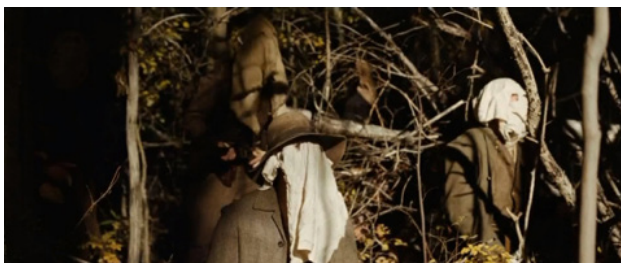
Figure 15



When Ed is sentenced to death, he is escorted to an execution chamber (Figure 14). The even lighting within the white room emphasizes the stark contrast on the black suit, chair, and men watching from the window. This imagery, albeit chilling, can be viewed as a heavenly reference. The pure whiteness of the room represents purgatory, and the contradicting blackness are the judgement. In another scene, Deakins plays around with shadows, something he does not shy away from (NPR, 2009). The intense spotlight looks interrogative, as a lawyer is questioning the wife (Figure 15). The shadows present a huge role, foreshadowing the imminent doom of the protagonist. An alternate method for shadows is realism, as the contrast and harshness act as stressors (Block, 2008). This work remains the Coens' first and only foray into black and white, and they trusted Deakins to capture the "noir" style with common lighting techniques (Orr, 2014).

With *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, a dramatized depiction of the true historical story, a train robbery occurs within the first act. Accompanied by a haunting score, this event reproduced a thrilling event set during the night. Tree branches casted ominous shadows on the white masks, while Jesse James' silhouette stands like a ghost in front of the train (Figure 16). Andrew Dominik, the director, had visualized this sequence to be dark and gritty. Thus, the DP lit the scene as if the lanterns and train light were the only sources (Pizzello & Oppenheimer, 2007). This gang of thieves were infamous and talked about like a scary story, and the lighting painted them in that style.

Figure 16





Likewise, Deakins continued his thematic use of lighting in *No Country for Old Men* and *Prisoners*, both films telling the story of harsh reality and character studies. In one scene, the sheriff investigates a motel where a serial killer was staying. While the viewer sees both in sequential order, the two never actually were there together at the same time, though the harsh lighting implicates a possible encounter. Deakins describes the thought process behind shooting that scene the way the Coen brothers intended for it to look, “They were keen that the day exteriors really felt burned and oppressive...contrast the heat of the daylight and the darkness of the night interiors” (*Cinematographer Roger Deakins on shooting the Coen Brothers’ No Country for Old Men* (2007), 2014).

Lighting includes color, too. In *Prisoners*, an officer drives the main character’s daughter to the emergency room after an encounter with her kidnappers. The blue glow of the police car siren opposes the red blood on his face, exhibiting the officer’s morals and duty, no matter how brutal the situation (Figure 17). The distinction of the two colors highlight his anguish and pain, an insight on his character.

**Figure 17**



Finally, in the 2012 spy film, *Skyfall*, James Bond is shown in multiple shadows and silhouettes throughout the film, whether it's fighting, running, or investigating. Then, there is a moment of affection when he joins his lover in the shower (Figure 18). The switch from harsh to soft lighting allows Deakins to capture a personal moment between two characters. It is a break from all the action and slows down the pace to give viewers a chance to see the human side of Bond. Sam Mendes once again praises Deakins' ability to assimilate to any genre and create the visuals based on what is on the script page, even if it is a phenomenon like 007 (Lambie, 2012).

**Figure 18**



These examples, while aesthetically stunning, all feel like they belong to each individual film. He uses lighting to its fullest potential, finding various ways to contribute emotion to any piece. This display of recurring – yet unique – themes in his cinematography proves his ability as an artist. What proves his legitimacy as an artist is his philosophy: having healthy collaborations with directors and faithfulness to the story.

---



## V. Conclusion

This study has some limitations. Deakins is credited as cinematographer on 80 titles, which would be an even bigger sample pool to find consistent thematic elements. A future study could include survey studies with both film fanatics and casual moviegoers, since art is subjective and can be interpreted in multitude of ways.

In this study, it is evident that Roger Deakins can manipulate cinema in a plethora of ways to create something beautiful. With framing and composition, he understands certain techniques, and can alter the perspective to adapt with their respective films. He proves he is a master of his craft by knowing how various storytelling can form the camera's motion. He does not shy away from specific lighting setups and shadows if it feels natural. His masterful eye for the camera has consistently satisfied the style of each individual piece he's worked on because of his philosophy: "I didn't want anything to be a pretty sunset for the sake of a pretty sunset" (Raya, 2016). It is clear that he focuses on complementing the screenplay rather than overshadowing it. At the age of 70 with two straight Oscars under his belt, Deakins continues to connect writing to beautiful aesthetics in this visual medium.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Laura Lacy, an instructor at Elon University, for her guidance and assistance throughout the writing of this article. The author also wishes to thank the Elon University School of Communications.

## References

- Angelina Jolie – Unbroken*. (2014, December 30). Retrieved from <http://www.icgmagazine.com/web/angelina-jolie-unbroken/>
- Bacher, L. (1978). *The mobile mise en scene*. Arno Press.
- Benjamin, B. (2015). Villeneuve's vision. *American Cinematographer*, 96(10), 44–44.
- Block, B. (2008). *The visual story*. Focal Press.
- Bosley, Rachel. (2009, January). Close focus. *American Cinematographer*, 28–41.
- Breznican, A. (2019, September 30). *How World War I drama 1917 pulled off playing as one continuous shot*. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/09/1917-one-shot-sam-mendes-interview>
- Brown, B. (2016). *Cinematography theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Burwell, C. (2017, March 19). *Fargo: The unforgettable dark comedy that set the Coen brothers up as a recognizable voice in American cinema*. Retrieved from <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/fargo-unforgettable-dark-comedy-set-coen-brothers-recognizable-voice-american-cinema/>
- Chagollan, S. (2015a). Deakins, Villeneuve reteam on "Sicario." *Variety*, 329(10), 79–80.
- Chagollan, S. (2015b, September 15). Roger Deakins relies on gut instinct. *Variety*, 329(10), 71-72,74,76.
- Cinematographer Roger Deakins on shooting the Coen brothers' No Country for Old Men (2007)*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGCGE0OZ9cw>
- Conard, M. (2012). *The philosophy of the Coen brothers*. The University Press of Kentucky.
- Denis Villeneuve on Roger Deakins and the legend of Blade Runner*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYMD1WuLvCM>
-

- Desowitz, B. (2018, May 25). *Best cinematographers of 21st Century: Deakins, Lubezki, Khondji*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/best-cinematographers-21st-century-roger-deakins-lubezki-khondji-1201968068/5/>
- How "1917" was filmed to look like one shot*. Retrieved from | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMBnvz-dEXw&list=FLEGpJPKEaoRhvmOpncXiLag&index=12&t=0s>
- IMDb. (n.d.). *Roger Deakins*. IMDb. Retrieved October 3, 2019, from <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005683/>
- Jones, M. (2019, October 18). *Shawshank Redemption cinematographer hates the movie's most iconic shot*. Retrieved from <https://screenrant.com/shawshank-redemption-cinematographer-roger-deakins-hates-iconic-shot/>
- Kilhefner, J. (2018, December 27). *The difference between a camera operator and a director of photography*. Retrieved from <https://careertrend.com/difference-between-camera-operator-director-photography-15086.html>
- King, L. C., Wallach, R., & Welsh, J. (2009). *No Country for Old Men: From novel to film*. Scarecrow Press.
- Lambie, R. (2012). *Sam Mendes interview: Skyfall, stunts & cinematography*. Retrieved from <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/23157/sam-mendes-interview-directing-skyfall-stunts-cinematography>
- Lucas, R. C. (2011). *Crafting digital cinema: Cinematographers in contemporary Hollywood* [Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin]. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/905174474/abstract/C47D4FDA127B4740PQ/1>
- Mamer, B. (2003). *Film production technique: Creating the accomplished image* (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.
- NPR. (2009). *Roger Deakins, keeping an eye on the small things*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114249616>
- Orr, C. (2014, September 18). *30 years of Coens: "The Man Who Wasn't There."* Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/09/30-years-of-coens-the-man-who-wasnt-there/380377/>
- Perez, R. (2013, December 20). 'Prisoners' director Denis Villeneuve's discusses our "best shot of the year." Retrieved from <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/12/prisoners-director-denis-villeneuves-discusses-our-best-shot-of-the-year-90684/>
- Pizzello, S., & Oppenheimer, J. (2007, October). *The assassination of Jesse James*. Retrieved from [https://theasc.com/ac\\_magazine/October2007/QAWithDeakins/page2.html](https://theasc.com/ac_magazine/October2007/QAWithDeakins/page2.html)
- Raya, A. L. (2016, January 6). *Sicario DP Roger Deakins on his craft, Emily Blunt close-ups & that Blade Runner project*. Retrieved from <https://deadline.com/2016/01/roger-deakins-sicario-cinematographer-editor-oscars-1201675882/>
- Renée, V. (2016, October 9). *How cinematographers use geometric shapes to tell stories with visuals*. Retrieved from <https://nofilmschool.com/2016/10/how-cinematographers-use-geometric-shapes-tell-stories-visuals>
- Roger Deakins: Breaking down the master cinematographer—IFH*. Retrieved from <https://indiefilmhustle.com/roger-deakins-cinematographer/>
- Roger Deakins: On Lighting—YouTube*. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUg1j3NT3i4>
- RT Interview: Reading the reader with Stephen Daldry*. (2009, February 17). Retrieved from <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/rt-interview-reading-the-reader-with-stephen-daldry/>
- Sam Mendes—Behind the camera*. (2016, March 16). Retrieved from <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2015/11/04/sam-mendes-behind-the-camera/>
-

- Suton, K. (2019, September 13). *Kundun: Martin Scorsese's serene meditation on the transient nature of life*. Retrieved from <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/kundun/>
- The cinematography of True Grit*. (2011, January 31). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0-dXh\\_IsiQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0-dXh_IsiQ)
- The filmmaker's view: Roger Deakins – Personal connection through cinematography*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pD9FRu2yL4>
- Thomson, P. (2005, November). A war of the soul. *American Cinematographer*, 36–47.
- Toscano, M. M. (2009). Homer meets the Coen brothers: Memory as artistic pastiche in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* *Film & History*, 39(2), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1353/flm.0.0125>.
-