

## Naturalism in Cinematography: Examining the Work of Emmanuel Lubezki

Mallory Siegenthaler

*Cinema and Television Arts*  
*Elon University*

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

### Abstract

*Films would not have the same emotional and visual impact on viewers without a cinematographer. Cinematographers are responsible for eliciting audience emotion through various camera techniques. They do not receive significant recognition from the general audience for their contributions to films. Emmanuel Lubezki is a contemporary filmmaker with many credits and awards to support his mastery in cinematography. This study analyzes six films that Lubezki shot for three distinct directors. These films each earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Cinematography. The findings suggest a feeling of naturalism to Lubezki's visual style across all film titles.*

### I. Introduction

In Alfonso Cuarón's dystopian thriller *Children of Men* (2006), Theo Faron (played by Clive Owen), sits in the back of a car alongside two other characters. In front are the driver, Luke (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor), and Julian (played by Julianne Moore). They are on a paved road in a wooded area. Theo and Julian banter with each other, then blow a ping pong ball back and forth. The passengers are laughing. However, they are interrupted when a flaming car rolls down the hill and crashes into the road. A crowd of people rush down the hill and start attacking the car. Luke puts the car in reverse and presses the gas pedal. The crowd runs after the car. A motorcyclist catches up to the car and shoots Julian in the neck, killing her. In defense, Theo swings the car door open, flipping the motorcycle. Soon, the car passes a group of police cars going the other direction. However, one police car turns to chase them. The police catch up and stop the car to interrogate the group. Luke pulls out a gun and shoots the two officers. The car drives off as the officers' bodies remain in the street.

As described, this scene seems like a typical car chase scene with multiple fast cuts and insert shots. While this scene has the complexity and flair of a blockbuster film, the execution is far from typical. This scene was captured in one seamless take—a shot duration of nearly four minutes. The visual style is similar to that of a documentary. The camera has a handheld feeling of movement, simply following the action without the use of multiple cuts. This long, documentary-style take is the work of Emmanuel Lubezki. His desire to push technical and visual boundaries has earned him a place as one of the most influential contemporary cinematographers.

---

**Keywords:** cinematography, film analysis, naturalism, filmmaking  
Email: msiegenthaler@elon.edu

---

A cinematographer works closely with the director to shape the visual look and film of a film, or film language. The cinematographer is responsible for crafting the film's visual style in addition to making technical decisions concerning the camera and lighting equipment. Lubezki has been nominated for an Academy Award in Cinematography eight times. In 2014, he won for the first time for *Gravity* (2013). The next year, Lubezki won again for the cinematography of *Birdman* (2014). And the following year, he won his third Academy Award for his work on *The Revenant* (2015). His three-year run of winning the Oscar for Best Achievement in Cinematography was a first in the award's history (Busch, 2016). Lubezki's historical victories demonstrate his mastery of cinematography.

This paper intends to explore Lubezki's visual philosophy through his use of composition lighting, camera angle, camera movement, and shot duration. These decisions are made in tandem with the director so that, along with the narrative, the film has a significant visual impact on viewers. For a film to be impactful, the visuals must contribute to the story and characters. This visual impact would not be significant without the contributions of a cinematographer.

## II. Literature Review

### ***Components of Cinematography***

A film without cinematography is simply a screenplay. Johanna Heer, an Austrian cinematographer, describes the craft as “a fascination with drama. The camera transforms the script onto the frame” (Heer, 1982, p. 48). Cinematographers transform a screenplay through the key components of cinematography. The cinematographer takes *mise-en-scène*, camera movement, and lighting into consideration when developing the visual style of a film.

*Mise-en-scène* is a term traditionally used in theater but has found another meaning in film. The term “*mise-en-scène*” translates to “staging in action” (Columbia University, n.d.). Early cinema was shot much like a stage production, so the term followed. Everything within the frame is considered to be a film's *mise-en-scène*. This component is important because it “gives a fuller illusion of life to the cinematic rendering” (Greven, 2015, p. 77). The visual components within a frame help render an alternative world in film. Famed director Martin Scorsese said, “cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out” (Brody, 2011, para. 6). Components such as location, set design, and costumes are important aspects of the production that ultimately end up in the frame.

Additionally, the key aspects of cinematography are included in the *mise-en-scène* as well. The camera placement, camera angle, and composition should complement the production design and wardrobe, furthering the story. The cinematographer, with the director, makes these decisions relating to the camera placement, angle, and composition in order to show the spaces and details of the film's world.

Camera movement is how the camera moves through the cinematic space. It allows the audience to feel like they are immersed and moving with characters. Movement can also help convey the emotions of the characters or contribute to the pacing of the story. The movement can be as simple as the camera remaining in one position and tilting up and down or panning left and right. However, it can also include crane or dolly movements where the entire camera's placement shifts. The first significant camera move was operated by Eugenio Promio, who would mount the camera on a moving train, or other moving automobiles (Columbia University, n.d.). It would allow spectators to have the sensation of moving with the objects. But now, with more advanced technology, cinematographers can control movement through robotic machines or computer-generated imagery, or CGI (Columbia University, n.d.). Since films are a two-dimensional medium, camera movement helps establish a three-dimensional world through its exploration of space.

The most important role of a cinematographer is arguably determining the lighting of a film. Described as being “painters with light,” cinematographers must determine the quality, quantity, source, direction, and hue of light in a scene (Clarke, 2017, p. 110). Light is how filmmakers traditionally exposed celluloid film to create an image. However, it is also effective for dramatic storytelling. The lighting contributes to the tone of a scene or movie, creating a dramatic—or undramatic—atmosphere (Columbia University, n.d.). For example, the film noir genre enforced its dramatic tone with low key lighting (Columbia University, n.d.). These films are generally pretty dark, but the objects and people in the light are brightly lit. Film noir filmmakers play with light

---

and shadows creating a dramatic effect. This creates great contrast and a feeling of suspense and drama. Contrastingly, high key lighting is when everything is evenly lit providing very little contrast between light and dark. It occurs frequently in the comedy genre of film and television.

The role of a cinematographer cannot be reduced to simply capturing images. Johanna Heer writes, “a cinematographer who is exclusively interested in visuals never can be a good cinematographer. The cinematographer has to have an awareness, an interest, a concern for the philosophy, the ideas, the politics of the film as these areas are naturally also portrayed and conveyed in the cinematography” (Heer, 1982, p. 69). In addition to visual acuteness, a cinematographer must understand dramatic structure and storytelling.

### ***The Director-Cinematographer Relationship***

To the general audience, the role of cinematographer is often overlooked. Most of the praise goes toward the actors and director. While the director is responsible for envisioning the world, the cinematographer helps execute that vision. The American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) is an exclusive organization of cinematographers dedicated to “the purpose of advancing the art and science of cinematography and bringing cinematographers together to exchange ideas, discuss techniques and promote the motion picture as an art form” (Birchard, n.d.). The ASC attributes the overall look of the film to the cinematographer (Misek, 2010). The cinematographer sets the look of the images based on the director’s vision.

The film industry is a collaborative workforce, so the cinematographer and director must inspire and understand one another to create a strong, cohesive piece. Johanna Heer argues that the director-cinematographer is a “delicate bond” that must “be experienced as an equal relationship” (Heer, 1982, p. 69). The ASC stresses three words to explain the craft of cinematography: loyalty, progress, artistry (Birchard, n.d.). The loyalty aspect is important when collaborating with the director.

Within the collaboration framework, the lines of film auteurship can also become blurred. As part of film criticism, the Auteur Theory “holds that a director’s film reflects the director’s creative vision, as if they were the primary ‘auteur.’ In spite of—and sometimes even because of—the production of the film as part of an industrial process, the auteur’s creative voice is distinct enough to shine through all kinds of studio interference and through the collective process” (Chaudhuri, 2013, p. 80). Sometimes it is easy to determine the director of a film based on visual auteurship. However, it is also possible to determine the cinematographer based on the visual look. This idea is true for Lubezki’s filmography. The modern cinematographer is no longer just a technician or craftsman, but “a skilled professional making a valuable contribution to the cinema – a contribution that could best be described as aesthetic” (Keating, 2010, pp. 15-16).

### ***Lubezki’s Partnerships***

Terrence Malick, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu have one thing in common: their frequent collaboration with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki. These directors are arguably considered to be auteur filmmakers. However, Lubezki has been able to meet their visions while maintaining his distinct aesthetic preferences.

Terrence Malick and Emmanuel Lubezki have collaborated on four feature-length films: *The Tree of Life* (2011), *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), *Song to Song* (2017), and *The New World* (2005). Lubezki earned Oscar nominations for Best Cinematography for his work on *The Tree of Life* and *The New World*. Malick’s films are known for the use of natural settings (Trumbore, 2011). His films are less plot-driven and pose more philosophical questions (Graham-Dixon, 2017). Because of the poetic nature of Malick’s films, Lubezki has more ability to showcase his visual preferences. Lubezki enjoys working with Malick and said, “he is somebody looking to tell stories with a pure filmic approach where the movies are not based on theatre, but are much more purely cinematographic” (Lubezki, 2011, p. 22).

Lubezki describes Malick’s storytelling approach as being built up of “those little moments” (Lubezki, 2011, p. 22). While shooting *The Tree of Life*, Lubezki felt like the pair were making a documentary film. The sets are full of “chaos” but in a positive way (Lubezki, 2011). Malick attempts to create organic, spontaneous moments in life so that the camera perceives just that.

Alfonso Cuarón and Emmanuel Lubezki have collaborated on six films: *Love in the Time of Hysteria* (1991), *A Little Princess* (1995), *Great Expectations* (1998), *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), *Children of Men* (2006), and *Gravity* (2013). Lubezki earned Oscar nominations for *A Little Princess* and another for *Children of Men*. He won his first Oscar for his work on *Gravity*.

---

Unlike Malick, Cuarón's stories vary from project to project. Lubezki describes him as being a reptile: "When he changes his skin, every time he finishes a movie, his next will be completely different from the previous one. This movie (*Gravity*) was very different and I was excited to work on it" (Thompson, 2018, para. 3). Cuarón has an affinity for a long shot duration. While *Gravity* and *Children of Men* have different film languages, they both employ long takes.

Cuarón's films *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Children of Men* have the documentary sensation similar to Lubezki's work in the Malick films. The camera takes an objective perspective. Cuarón describes the camera as "not trying to make a judgment or a commentary, that everything there would be just the commentary itself" (Thompson, 2018). The films were inspired by Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1967), which Cuarón said they "loved for its naturalism and documentary feel" (Udden, 2009). Lubezki mostly used available light, handheld camera movement, and allowed light to enter the barrel of the lens similar to a documentary. However, they had the camera equipment and post-production resources of a blockbuster film (Udden, 2009).

A less frequent, but recent, collaborator of Lubezki is Alejandro G. Iñárritu. Lubezki was the cinematographer for Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2015) and *The Revenant* (2016). For both of these collaborations, Lubezki won Oscars for Best Cinematography. Iñárritu's film world "is one where almost no one can escape the wrath of life unharmed" (Ruimy, 2016, para. 3). Iñárritu's characters suffer from the brutality of humanity, so the cinematography must reflect those hardships.

When Lubezki first started working with Iñárritu, he employed, "rhythmic long takes and surrealist imagery... What they created was a new language for cinema, one in which the cinematographer had as much of a role in the creative process as the director" (Ruimy, 2016, para. 5).

Similar to his long takes for Cuarón, Lubezki shot *Birdman* as if it was one continuous take. They did not shoot the full movie in one take, but most of the sequences range from 10 to 15 minutes (Picone, 2015). In *Birdman*, Lubezki allowed for lens flares, adding another point of visual interest in the frame.

While Lubezki has his aesthetic preferences, he is also able to adjust them accordingly. "The director is the author of the movie, so in the end I'll do whatever he wants me to do," Lubezki said. "But my job is to tell him what I see, and tell him honestly. Especially before you're doing the shooting, you have to be absolutely sincere" (Ordo, 2015, para. 17).

This study examines Lubezki's works and observes how his preferred approaches to cinematography. This study expands knowledge about the craft of cinematography, and also takes a critical look at one of the most successful cinematographers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Research Questions**

The following research attempts to answer these questions:

RQ1: How does Lubezki approach the basic aspects of cinematography?

RQ2: What is Lubezki's distinct visual style?

RQ3: How does Lubezki's visual style vary when working with different directors?

## **III. Methods**

This study is a critical film analysis of six films that credit Emmanuel Lubezki as the cinematographer. These films were selected because Lubezki collaborated with the three directors—Malick, Cuarón, and Iñárritu—discussed in the literature review and they include his Oscar nominations for Best Cinematography. Because of Lubezki's critical recognition, it only seems sensible to analyze these films to fully understand his aesthetic preferences.

This paper will only examine the films' cinematography, analyzing the key aspects of cinematography: mise-en-scène, camera movement, and lighting. In addition to analyzing the cinematography, this paper will take into account the context in which they are used. The directors' own visual preferences will also be mentioned to explore Lubezki's consistencies and differences. Table 1 displays the movie, year, and director of the films studied.

---

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

Movie	Year	Director
<i>The New World</i>	2006	Terrence Malick
<i>Children of Men</i>	2007	Alfonso Cuarón
<i>The Tree of Life</i>	2012	Terrence Malick
<i>Gravity</i>	2013	Alfonso Cuarón
<i>Birdman</i>	2015	Alejandro González Iñárritu
<i>The Revenant</i>	2016	Alejandro González Iñárritu

## IV. Discussion

### *Lubezki's Cinematography Techniques*

#### **A. *Mise-en-scène***

Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2006) is described by film critic Mark Cousins as "having paradise and watching it slip away" (Cousins, 2007, para. 5). Because of this, Lubezki makes sure that nature and the environment are dominant within the frame.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the characters Pocahontas and John Smith, the two protagonists of the film, are taking up a significant amount of space within the frame. Malick wants to tell a story about the developing relationship between these two people. He wants to portray the idea that the world is what connects them. Lubezki is responsible for getting this idea across, so the environment is always shown, even during intimate character moments, similar to Figures 1 and 2. The use of a wider lens allows Lubezki to capture more of the natural landscape, which contributes to the story of English settlers discovering this "new world." Viewers are captivated by the landscape, similar to how John Smith and the settlers felt upon discovery. Landscape and nature create the *mise-en-scène* in this film.

Similarly, in Malick's *Tree of Life* (2012), Lubezki highlights nature in each frame. Because this is an abstract, philosophical film, Lubezki had the freedom to shoot cinematic landscapes including only nature within the frame as shown in Figures 3 and 4.



Figure 3.

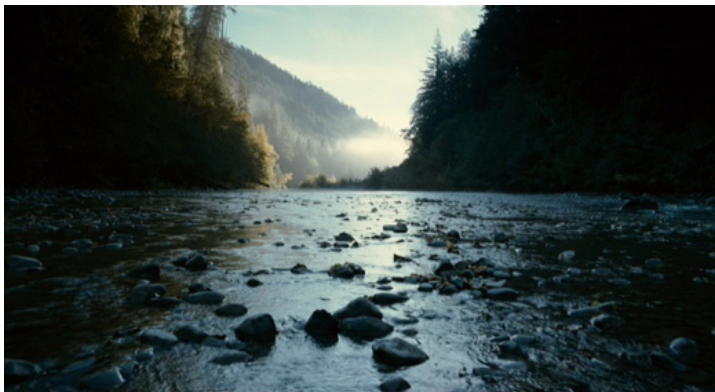


Figure 4.

While both films are high-budget studio productions, Lubezki's work with Cuarón differs between the two films *Children of Men* (2007) and *Gravity* (2013) (Isaacs, 2016). *Children of Men* takes place in a dystopian universe. To capture this world, Lubezki ensures that the objects within the frame add to the fact that the characters are living in a dystopic environment.



Figure 5.

Because the dystopic world is important to the narrative, Lubezki often isolates Theo from the chaotic environment to show his sense of loneliness. In Figure 5, Lubezki uses surface division to show Theo's isolation from the rest of the group. The wall divides Theo mentally and physically from his peers. Instead of simply showing Theo in the frame, Lubezki ensures that Theo's group appears in the background separated by a physical wall to have a deeper visual and emotional impact on viewers.

---

In contrast to the previous films, Lubezki relied on visual effects artists to capture the world in *Gravity* since it takes place in space. Benjamin B., senior European correspondent for *American Cinematographer*, notes that Lubezki creates a “beautiful but dangerous environment of space with a groundbreaking level of realism and detail” (B., 2013, para. 2).



Figure 6.

While realism and detail are often attributed to Lubezki’s style, the environment captured in Figure 6 is not real. Except for the actors, the entire image is made up of CGI, which contrasts the documentary feel of *Children of Men*. The increased presence of virtual space presents a new role for the cinematographer. A cinematographer must learn how to adapt to working with visual effects artists. During the *Gravity* production process, Lubezki said, “I had to learn to use some new tools that are part of what cinematography is becoming” (B, 2013, para. 4). With the use of visual effects, critics question the artistry in cinematography now that CGI is becoming more prevalent to build a world.

Despite the prominence of CGI, Lubezki must still be strategic in his camera placement and movement. Realistically, space simply looks empty and black, so Lubezki had to find a way to make space visually interesting. To pique interest, he used Earth as the background and framed the actors and subjects in front of it. The use of Earth as the background provides visual consistency and guarantees visual interest throughout the film.

Lubezki’s only films with Alejandro G. Iñárritu earned him two Academy Awards for Best Cinematography. *Birdman* (2015) follows the story of washed-up actor Riggan who hopes to jumpstart his career again through a Broadway production. This film is a character study, so the camera focuses on Riggan and attempts to capture his inner feelings.



Figure 7.

Lubezki’s use of wide lenses for close-ups creates a claustrophobic feeling for both Riggan and the audience, as in Figure 7. It conveys the feeling that the world is closing in on him and a sense of hopelessness. “The wide lenses allowed me to be very, very close to him but still feel the [others] around him,” Lubezki said. “In a normal movie, a close-up is a couple feet from the actor. Here the camera is probably 3 inches from his eye; you can see microscopic performance” (Ordo, 2015, para. 8). The camera closely follows the performance of Riggan allowing the audience to study the character and his acting with a careful eye.

---



Figure 8.

*The Revenant*, shown in Figure 8, tells the story of frontiersman Hugh Glass and his quest for vengeance and survival. Lubezki focuses on both Hugh and the environment in this film. Both character and environment are important in telling the story. In Figure 8, Hugh is the main point of focus, but the environment is still visible and apparent. “We wanted a strong, visceral, immersive and naturalistic experience for the audience – not just to follow the journey of the central character, but to make it feel as if it was actually happening in front of their eyes,” Lubezki said, “We wanted the audience to feel the sheer cold, to see the breath of the actors on the lens, and experience the powerful emotions in the story” (*British Cinematographer*, 2017, para. 5). In both of his films with Iñárritu, Lubezki uses a wide lens and gets close to the actor to capture every little movement and expression of the character.

### **B. Camera Movement**

There is one thing in common through Lubezki’s work as a cinematographer. The camera is never still. The camera is always moving in some way. For Malick’s films, Lubezki’s camera operator Jörg Widmer said, “When actors move their hands and touch each other, you can follow the hand, and then you come back to a close-up, so if it’s all in the movement it looks so natural. It’s like the flow of water. It’s really a very immediate way of telling a story. So, you can totally react to whatever they do” (O’Falt, 2020, para. 21). Lubezki establishes a sense of freedom by reacting to character movements rather than anticipating them.

Lubezki followed this same philosophy in *The Revenant* but with minor adjustments. Iñárritu wanted the film to look like it was unfolding in real-time (Salisbury, 2016). Lubezki used handheld movement that typically reminds viewers of a raw, documentary feeling. “Alejandro likes the camera to look slightly accidental, as if you have maybe missed something, or you arrive slightly late – it gives the audience a feeling of the suddenness of events,” Lubezki said, “It’s very different to the style in a Terry Malick movie, where the camera is more lyrical, conscious and descriptive” (*British Cinematographer*, 2017, para. 11). When working with both Malick and Iñárritu, Lubezki uses the camera to react to the character’s movements. However, in *The Revenant*, the movement is a little rougher and sharper. While in Malick films, the movement is more refined.

In his films with Cuarón and Iñárritu, Lubezki shot long takes of continuous movement. The long take in *Children of Men* was described in the introduction of this paper. This camera movement was achieved through an electronic camera rig. The camera was able to follow the action of the vehicle by using this electronic rig. Cuarón’s *Gravity* does the same thing and opens up with a 13-minute-long continuous take (B., 2013). It is a view of Earth from space. The camera slowly gets closer to the space station as it reveals the astronauts. Benjamin B. writes, “the 3-D feature is enhanced by long takes and fluid camerawork that immerse the viewer” (B., 2013, para. 2).

Iñárritu’s *Birdman* is intended to look and feel like one continuous shot the entire time. Lubezki had to strategically shoot the film in order to allow the editors to cut seamlessly between each shot. He only included movements that felt motivated given the context of the story. In an interview, Lubezki said, “I also wanted to be sure that we weren’t doing that just to do it, the camera movement was organic to the story. I hate the word organic, but it was really part of the story, part of the energy of the characters ... We added a couple of cuts, but the movements help get the audience into the world of the characters, so the movie feels immersive and immediate” (ARRI, 2014, para. 7). In these films, Lubezki created a more immersive experience through his use of long takes and motivated camera movement.

---



### C. Lighting

The hue, quality, direction, and type of light are all important decisions that a cinematographer must make when lighting a scene. However, this study is not a technical study of Lubezki's methods, so the research only includes a general discussion of lighting. When Lubezki lights a scene, he usually opts for available—natural—or practical lights—lights visible within the frame. He only seems to add artificial lighting when needed.

In both *The New World* and *Tree of Life*, Lubezki used available light and practical light. Since both films stress the role of nature, it is a logical choice to use sunlight as the main source of light.



Figure 9.

Figure 9 shows Mrs. O'Brien—played by Jessica Chastain—in *Tree of Life*. She is positioned right beside a window. Aside from the fact that she is looking out the window, she is positioned there because it provides light on her face. Lubezki uses the sunlight coming through the window to light the right side of her face. However, he does not add any fill light to light the left side of her face. It remains dark like the rest of the room. The high contrast in the lighting on Mrs. O'Brien's face is typically used to show a character's uncertainty in life.



Figure 10.

In *Children of Men*, many scenes take place outside or in buildings with large windows; therefore, Lubezki has the opportunity to use available light often. Because there are many car scenes in this film, the easiest way to avoid moving lights with the vehicle is to light with the sun. In Figure 10, Theo's face is dark because the sun is behind him. However, the sun lights the outline of the car and the field behind him. Because Lubezki aims the barrel of the lens at the sun, the light creates a lens flare, which adds another point of visual interest and sense of naturalism.

---



Figure 11.

*The Revenant*, as shown in Figure 11, only used available light, which limited the number of daily shooting hours (*British Cinematographer*, 2017). Lubezki had to consider the sun's position, quality, and hue of light at each point in the day to create the look of this film. On set, Iñárritu had the actors rehearse until the perfect light presented itself, which then prompted Lubezki to roll the camera (Salisbury, 2016). In Figure 11, Hugh is lit from behind by the sun. The sun creates an outline around Hugh's profile and adds several highlights to the high points of Hugh's face. Similar to Figure 10, Lubezki aimed the lens barrel at the sun, thus outlining the character and creating a lens flare. The sun's high position in the sky lights the entire landscape as well as Hugh. Lubezki captured the vast environment in which Hugh is surrounded. Through this lighting, Lubezki emphasizes Hugh's isolation in the wilderness.

In *Birdman*, many of the scenes take place inside, so the opportunities for available light are more restricted. However, this film is centered on a Broadway production. This allowed Lubezki to utilize stage lighting and practical lighting to capture the image.



Figure 12.

Figure 12 shows Riggan in a stage production. The theater lights in the background are not doing much to light the scene, but they do create an atmosphere. The light exposing the characters is coming from off the screen, but it is clear that it is a stage spotlight. The spotlight lights the side of the characters opposite to the camera. Similar to Figures 10 and 11, the light hits the highest points of the face and body, creating an outline around the characters. These three stills also show a visual preference that Lubezki uses: the lens flare.

In contrast to the previously described lighting techniques, *Gravity* uses artificial lighting. This decision is logical considering the film is shot in studio spaces and visual effects make up a large part of the mise-en-scène, such as in Figure 13.



Figure 13.

Lubezki lit the exterior space scenes by using nearly 2 million lights, which is a laborious and innovative practice (Picone, 2014). “In space, there is no atmosphere or water vapor to reflect and refract particles of light. All light from the sun and spacecraft are direct and unfiltered, a unique look rarely as realistically portrayed as in *Gravity*,” New York Film Academy writer Jack Picone said. “By using 1.8 million individual LED lights, the film was able to make space look more like space, even on a subconscious level the audience may not fully realize, which furthers the immersion into the world of the movie” (Picone, 2014, para. 6).

Although *Gravity* relies heavily on the work of visual effects artists, Lubezki is still able to maintain his preferences for naturalism. In this film, Lubezki employs his signature use of lens flares to make the environment and its light seem real. He strategically uses artificial lighting to achieve the most natural-looking light. Space films have a little more freedom in lighting since many people do not know what the available light looks like in space, but Lubezki stays true to his aesthetic style, opting for naturalism.

### ***Lubezki’s Cinematography Style***

While Lubezki collaborates with varying directors on differing stories, there is one commonality among his films: a sense of naturalism. His visual style changes depending on the film’s story, but there are key components to his approach to the craft that remain the same. As previously stated, Lubezki often employs long takes, lens flares, and handheld movement often associated with documentary filmmaking. Although Lubezki employs CGI and new technology to supplement his cinematography, he makes sure that his images are realistic and give off the sense of being natural.

Lubezki’s 2015 Oscar win for *Birdman* proved that “a return to muscular methods in natural conditions can reinvigorate an aesthetic” (Clarke, 2017, p. 121). Even with the expanding digital capabilities for film, Lubezki’s realistic approach to cinematography is still relevant and appreciated in contemporary cinema.

Lubezki’s ability to capture human emotion and seemingly organic moments while employing the craft of cinematography is why he is considered an influential contemporary cinematographer. He has a deep understanding of how light works and how to use film aesthetics, such as *mise-en-scène*, movement, and lighting to elevate a director’s vision and narrative.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study has its limitations, such as the sample size. The study only observes six films, but Lubezki has served on 46 titles as the cinematographer. This study also does not take into consideration other genres of work he has worked on, such as commercial work. This research uses criticism from professional filmmakers and film critics and does not present any general audience opinions, which presents another limitation of the study. There are multiple approaches for a study of Lubezki’s work, and this one analyzes only the top critically acclaimed films. This study should be considered as a general, introductory analysis of Lubezki’s work.

It is clear that Lubezki has proven himself a master in cinematography. He can work with directors well, furthering the film’s narrative and causing an emotional impact. With his use of *mise-en-scène*, camera movement, and lighting, he is able to create a sense of realism and naturalism when capturing a film’s world and its characters. Since many of these films are character-driven, Lubezki is influenced to capture images that truly capture the characters’ emotions and journey. He knows how to tell a story in the most natural,

---

organic manner. It is arguable that Lubezki has his own signature and sense of auteurship based on the consistencies of his preferences through these six films. He will continue to provide a sense of naturalism through his preferred cinematography techniques in his future work.

## Acknowledgements

The author is appreciative of Dr. Jane O'Boyle for her guidance and support throughout the editing and publication process. Additionally, the author would like to thank the professors in the Cinema and Television Arts Department for being valuable resources and fostering her interest in cinematography.

## References

- ARRI. (n.d.). Emmanuel Lubezki ASC, AMC on "Birdman." Retrieved from <https://www.arri.com/en/company/arri-news/news-stories/2014/emmanuel-lubezki-asc-amc-on-birdman->
- B, B. (2013, November). Emmanuel Lubezki, ASC, AMC and his collaborators detail their work on Gravity, a technically ambitious drama set in outer space. Retrieved from [https://theasc.com/ac\\_magazine/November2013/Gravity/page1.html](https://theasc.com/ac_magazine/November2013/Gravity/page1.html)
- Birchard, R. S. (n.d.). About: The American Society of Cinematographers. Retrieved from <https://theasc.com/asc/about>
- British Cinematographer*. (2017, August 15). Grizzly adventure: Emmanuel Lubezki AMC ASC, "The Revenant." Retrieved from <https://britishcinematographer.co.uk/emmanuel-lubezki-amc-asc-the-revenant/>
- Brody, R. (2011, August 18). Cinephile follies. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/cinephile-follies>
- Busch, A. (2016, February 28). The Revenant's Emmanuel Lubezki wins Oscar for best cinematography. Retrieved from <https://deadline.com/2016/02/emmanuel-lubezki-oscars-best-cinematography-the-revenant-2016-academy-awards-1201710646/>
- Chaudhuri, A. (2013). Auteur theory and its implications. *International Journal of Advancements in Research & Technology*, 2(11), 80-87.
- Clarke, J. (2017). Elegies to cinematography: The digital workflow, digital naturalism and recent best cinematography Oscars. In J. Graham & A. Gandini (Eds.), *Collaborative production in the creative industries* (pp. 105-124). University of Westminster Press.
- Columbia University. (n.d.). Columbia Film Language Glossary. Retrieved from <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/>
- Cousins, M. (2007, November 19). Praising "The New World." Retrieved from <https://cinephiliabeyond.org/the-new-world/>
- Graham-Dixon, C. (2017, November 30). Where to begin with Terrence Malick. Retrieved from <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/where-begin-terrence-malick>
- Greven, D. (2015). Mise en scène and film style: From classical Hollywood to new media art. *Cineaste*, 40(3), 77-78.
-

- Heer, J. (1982). Cinematography. *BOMB*, 1(2), 46-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40422330>
- Isaacs, B. (2016). Reality effects: The ideology of the long take in the cinema of Alfonso Cuarón. In S. Denson & J. Leyda (Eds.), *Post-cinema: Theorizing 21st-century film* (pp. 474-505). REFRAME Books.
- Keating, P. (2010). *Hollywood lighting from the silent era to film noir*. Columbia University Press.
- Lubezki, E. (2011). The light fantastic. *Sight & Sound*, 21(7), 22–23.
- Misek, R. (2010). The “look” and how to keep it: Cinematography, postproduction and digital colour. *Screen*, 51(4), 404-409. doi:10.1093/screen/hjq045
- O’Falt, C. (2020, January 6). Working with Malick: Inside the dance between camera, actor, and light in *A Hidden Life*. Retrieved from <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/01/a-hidden-life-terrence-malick-process-cinematographer-jorg-widmer-valerie-pachner-august-diehl-interview-1202200111/>
- Ordo, M. (2015, January 22). Cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki aimed high on *Birdman*. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-et-mn-en-emmanuel-lubezki-20150122-story.html>
- Picone, J. (2014, November 17). The best cinematography: Looking at *Gravity*. Retrieved from <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/best-cinematography-looking-gravity-2/>
- Picone, J. (2015, March 30). The best cinematography: A look at *Birdman*. Retrieved from <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/best-cinematography-look-birdman/>
- Ruimy, J. (2016, June 11). The visual poetry in the films of Alejandro González Iñárritu is beautiful & brutal [Video Essay]. Retrieved from <https://theplaylist.net/the-visual-poetry-in-the-films-of-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-is-beautiful-brutal-video-essay-20160611/>
- Salisbury, M. (2016, January 6). Emmanuel Lubezki on the grueling shoot of *The Revenant*. *ScreenDaily*. Retrieved from <https://www.screendaily.com/awards/emmanuel-lubezki-on-the-gruelling-shoot-of-the-revenant/5098541.article>
- Thompson, A. (2018, December 14). Cuarón tells Lubezki how he filmed *Roma* - Even one quiet shot needed 45 camera positions. Retrieved from <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/12/roma-emmanuel-lubezki-alfonso-cuaron-cinematography-1202028167/>
- Trumbore, D. (2011, January 14). Cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki provides insight on Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*. Retrieved from <https://collider.com/emmanuel-lubezki-the-tree-of-life/>
- Udden, J. (2009). Child of the long take: Alfonso Cuarón’s film aesthetics in the shadow of globalization. *Style*, 43(1), 26-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.43.1.26>
- Wu, R. (2020, February 10). The hallmark of comedy: Making your talent pop with high-key lighting. Retrieved from <https://www.premiumbeat.com/blog/cinematography-tips-high-key-lighting/>
-