



Charlone mixes for **Blindness**

Blindness Blindness

In 2004, Cesar Charlone, ABC earned an Academy Award nomination as well as the Golden Frog at the Camerimage International Festival of the Art of Cinematography for his first feature-length collaboration with director Fernando Meirelles on *City of God*. Their second feature together, *The Constant Gardener*, was nominated for nine BAFTA Awards, including Best Cinematography in 2005.

Blindness is their most recent project. Based on the allegorical novel by José Saramago, the film tells the story of an epidemic of blindness that society attempts to contain through quarantine. A sighted woman pretends to be blind in order to follow her husband into the quarantine. She witnesses the thin veneer of civilization stripped away, both inside the quarantine and out.

Saramago describes the blindness experienced by the characters as a sea of milk. This provided a cue for Charlone. "Fernando wanted to be very faithful to the book," says Charlone. "I looked through my library of photography and painting books, found some interesting images, and played with them in my computer. I made a CD of the images and showed them to Fernando, who agreed that I was on the right path. Fernando is very democratic - he enjoys working with the actors and leaves most of the cinematography to me."

Charlone was drawn to extremely white and washed-out images, but he wanted to hold solid blacks in the frame. Overexposure also caused some concern because it can result

in electronic noise in the digital intermediate (D.I.) stage. After experimentation, he decided that the right approach was to expose the film normally and use post techniques to blow out the whites while leaving the blacks solid. "Your eye instinctively finds the black area in the frame," he says. "Leaving something black in keeps the image from becoming boring."

Night scenes provided another challenge. "We wanted a similar look but how can you use a washed-out image while still letting the audience understand that it is night?" he asks. "I decided to light the night scenes very hot, and cut the light extensively to create dark areas in the frame. The characters might be in a harsh light, but there is something in the background that is very dark, indicating night."

The production shot roughly 10 percent of the 12-week shoot in Montevideo, Uruguay, Charlone's hometown, with the remainder of the schedule split evenly between Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Ontario, Canada. Charlone chose to work with local crews at each location. He says that their enthusiasm was infectious.

The main Canadian location was a disused prison in Guelph, Ontario, that served as the mental hospital where the victims are quarantined. "The hospital was a dream to shoot," Charlone says. "It was perfectly kept and I got to choose a cell for myself - a place to work on the pictures at the end of the shoot day." Charlone shoots digital stills of each set-up, and later manipulates them in the computer. These stills are then sent to the dailies timer as a rough guide.

"The great secret about D.I. is that you guarantee that the dailies will look quite similar to what you want in the end," he says. "Otherwise, the producer, director and editor can fall in love with the unfinished images during six months of editing, and then when you try to execute your original intention, they don't like it."

Vista Vision

Charlone used three different film formats: Super 16mm, Super 35mm in 1.85:1 aspect ratio, and eight-perf VistaVision, a horizontal format that results in an image area about two-and-a-half times the size of a 35mm frame. All the images were scanned into digital files.

"Because this film is about the eye and about looking and seeing, I wanted as much information as I could get," he says. "Shooting scenes in VistaVision was well worth it. At times we scanned the bigger frame at 6K and got beautiful images. The definition and resolution on the screen are amazing."

Charlone chose three film stocks, each of which he used in all three formats. For day, he used mainly KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 and sometimes VISION2 250D 5205 films. In night situations, he used KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film.

He usually used three cameras to cover a scene. "We had a big Panavision 35mm camera capturing the main storytelling," he says. "Let's call it the conservative image.

Then I had a 35mm Aaton with a little zoom, looking for a strange or awkward image, perhaps something relating to the theme of the eye and optical sensations like reflections and distortions. Sometimes we'd set that camera on a sandbag on top of a C-stand that was inside a cleaning bucket with wheels. That way I could move it easily. Since I was capturing very abstract compositions, I wanted the lines to be very democratic and natural, so I chose a 40mm lens."

"The C camera was a Super 16mm Aaton A-Minima that I own," he says. "We used that camera to capture what we called 'God's POV.' We would just set it anywhere and see what it captured. Some very powerful shots just happen randomly."

Charlone says the majority of the look, especially for the day scenes, was accomplished in the digital intermediate. "I am very digital-dependent," he says. "My background is in still photography and I always enjoyed the lab work, retouching the pictures and looking for interesting effects. Once I became a cinematographer, I worked on many commercials, using the telecine in a similar way. I believe in capturing a very well-exposed negative with the maximum amount of information, and then bringing that into digital post."

"Obviously, I was lighting quite brightly in some areas and quite darkly in others for the look we designed," he says. "But I didn't worry much about flagging, because I could make those adjustments afterwards."

formats

The digital intermediate was done at Technicolor in Toronto. "I was given the best support," says Charlone. "I worked with Jim Fleming, a digital film colorist who was with me through all the tests, and Trevor White, who was the colorist and did the dailies. I was very happy." Charlone has no hesitation in putting Super 16-originated images on the big screen along with 35mm and even VistaVision-originated material. "It's thanks to the great quality of the film stock, and because of the digital intermediate," he says. "I especially love the slow stock, the 5201. That stock is amazing. You can shoot in Super 16 and put it on the big screen and you don't see the grain. If you get very into it, you might notice that some of the Super 16 shots have a bit more grain, obviously, and less resolution than the eight-perf material, but it flows naturally and it's comfortable. If there was a 35mm camera that had the definition of eight-perf VistaVision and the lightness and ease of use of the Super 16 Aaton A-Minima, I'd use only that. With the A-Minima, I can move so easily and get intense scenes very close to the actors. It gives me so much advantage in that sense that it outweighs the small difference in resolution."

Charlone recently made his debut as a director. The film, *El Baño del Papa, or The Pope's Toilet*, became Uruguay's official submission for the Best Foreign Film category of the Academy Awards competition. He shot it entirely with his Super 16 Aaton A-Minima camera.

Blindness premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and is slated for international release this autumn.