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Passage from Film to Digital

Preview:

Vittorio Storaro and Woody Allen on "Cafe Society"



Anthony Raffaele, Senior Colorist



I am a senior colorist at Technicolor Postworks New York. I became involved with Woody Allen's "Cafe Society" when Vittorio Storaro requested a Baselight colorist who could do both the dailies and the final grading. The stars aligned for me to be in that position. It's more and more unusual for the same person to do dailies and DI, but it's definitely a way that I like to work.

Vittorio established looks at the outset. After we met in New York, the production started in L.A. I flew to L.A. and met with Vittorio. It was funny. He said, "We're not going to do anything right now. We'll just talk." We sat down and he started explaining the concepts behind the film and what he was looking for. He went over the script, pointing out his feelings for the story, the different types of looks that he wanted emotionally and how those emotions translated into visual concepts.

There were three looks. The Bronx, L.A. and then New York. For example, the Bronx was supposed to be a softer palette. It was poor. Lower toned, subtly less contrast and cooler. L.A. was more vibrant, new and fresh. More colorful. Warm. Brighter. The New York look was more of a merging of the two, bringing something back from Los Angeles, with a luminance, brightness, a fresher look. It's a little cleaner in tone as far as color palette. But it's still vibrant and brighter. These looks were saved to SD card as LUTs. And then Simone D'Archangelo loaded them into Livegrade on his DIT cart on set.

The language between the cinematographer and a colorist is often vague and creative. Vittorio sat down and showed me some of his inspirations artistically, from Vermeer and Caravaggio to Norman Rockwell. I did lots of research on Vittorio in advance. I watched most of his films and read most of the interviews he had given. I began to understand his language. But sitting down with him, discussing and then working with him was a wonderful evolution from that first conversation we had in Los Angeles to what we have now.

We set the looks physically, technically, and artistically—beginning with the primaries. For the Bronx, we softened the contrast a little bit, brought down the highlights, and brought up the shadows. We used Baselight. I feel Baselight is a tool designed for serious artistic color correction. Not that you can't get the looks with another system, but I like the manner in which it handles the timeline, the color palette, the layers. It has additional tools, like diffusion plug-ins, grads, keys, windows, sharpening, noise, and grain. You can add camera shake or stabilization.

In terms of workflow, the media cards came back to me with CDLs and DaVinci Resolve framegrab stills with circles and arrows and notes from Simone and Vittorio. Every day, I went through all the shots and applied the LUT that I already had. Then I'd make adjustments according to their notes. They did not shoot a lot of footage. I think the most they shot in a day was maybe an hour, a little less than a Terabyte. Grading the DI did not take long. I started with the CDL, the on-set LUT, and our output LUT (also known as the Show LUT). And then, as Vittorio might say, I would add my collaboration. The material is 4K but I graded in HD for dailies. One of the assistants then synched and logged it all up with ColorFront OSD (On Set Dailies). A lot of care was taken to keep the naming structure so the dailies files mirrored the 4K file structure. Vittorio got a Blu-ray copy and the editor got HD files for the Avid.

For finishing, we got the EDL from editorial, pulled all the RAW media files from the LTO, and conformed in Baselight. Then I graded on the fly from the RAW in 4K. We graded using ACES, with the BaseLight converting to XYZ. ACES enabled me to obtain better black levels for Vittorio.

Working with Vittorio is like getting a degree in art history and cinematography. We discussed technical color science, black levels, density, red to orange, warmth, coolness. We also discussed the emotional aspects, with Vittorio's art references. If I did not know the works of art, Vittorio would virtually take me to the museum. If you really want to do something special when you're in a grading suite, you need to be able to discuss both the technical aspects and the emotional feel of the story line.

One of the big changes that many of us colorists have experienced over the past five to six years is the change from film to digital. Many colorists who were sensitive to the film look are able to reference the feel, look, density, color, tonality of film and translate it to the digital medium. I think that Vittorio has done it with this passage of his from film to digital. He wasn't shy about shooting with strong highlights and low shadows to get a great contrast ratio. And his camera seemed to do it as well. But, at the end of the day, the camera doesn't matter as much as the cinematographer using it. Vittorio is an amazing artist. But he's also highly technical. Don't let him fool you. He knows what he's talking about on every level: artistic, digital, technical.

Working with Vittorio was like being taken inside the inner circle of what it means to be a true filmmaker. Vittorio is prepared from the beginning. When I sat down with him in L.A. he had a notebook three inches thick with scenes drawn out on each page, accompanied by art references, cut-outs, swipes, notes. He starts from day one with ideas about the emotions of the movie and he carries those through the entire project. He's a Maestro. He would say, "Hey, can we try this? Can I look at that? What if we try it, tell me, show me."

It's amazingly refreshing because when you take the time, if you care about the project, care about his intentions, if you think about what he's asked you to do, displaying those emotions, feelings and looks, if you put the time in to come up with ideas about what he's looking for, then he wants to listen to you and explain everything. He's absolutely a perfectionist. But he's the most collaborative cinematographer I've ever worked with.