

# APPROACHING CINEMATOGRAPHY STUDIES: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

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## Abstract:

This article discusses the issues that arise from approaching cinematography from an academic perspective, aiming to demonstrate how the so-called Cinematography Studies may well turn into a brand-new discipline which can provide, nurture, and ensure its long overdue academic consideration. My contribution specifically aspires to establish a consistent framework that provides an interdisciplinary method to apply while considering Cinematography Studies. First off, the essay addresses the various historical calls for such a discipline. Considering cinematography as a collaborative art form, the paper connects cinematography either to style, techno-aesthetics, and technology issues or to the highly innovative notion according to which DoPs would gain the (co)authorship of the movie they work in. The foundation of Cinematography Studies comes then from the inextricable combination of different academic approaches, such as Film Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, and Festival Studies. Eventually, we consider how such an interdisciplinary method, which also relies on the professional network of peers, is required so that Cinematography Studies can bridge academic and filmmaking worlds.



## Keywords:

Cinematography, cinematography studies, film studies, media studies, festival studies.

*Cinematography Studies focus on  
a crucial yet largely unexplored area in film and studies:  
the substantial communication between  
critical studies of cinema and film production practices.*

Roberto Schaefer<sup>1</sup>

## 1. CALL FOR A DISCIPLINE

The appearance in 2021 of the peer-reviewed journal I now write for is the undeniable and clear evidence of the not-easy yet long overdue academic involvement, investigation, and debate intended by the so-called Cinematography Studies. Also, *The Cinematography Journal* offers indeed the opportunity to consider all the calls for an academic discipline expressed over the decades and from different perspectives by separate authors. For instance, introducing *La luce nel cinema*, Di Giammatteo (1982) advises that:

Someday soon we will need [...] to study the lighting, the devices and the people who handle them. An invitation and a motivation to ensure a meaningful connection with that neglected reality that in movies is erroneously called photography. Neglected because self-evident (movie image would not exist if photography did not exist). Neglected also because difficult and uneasy to discuss (p. 8<sup>2</sup>).

In a similar way, presenting some of the articles written by cinematographers between 1929 and 1937 for *The International Photographer* magazine, Sterling (1987) claims: “There can be little argument that cinematography is the life blood of the motion picture, but despite this the

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1. Schaefer (2017, p. VII).  
2. My translation.



cinematographer has never received anything approaching the recognition given to the director or the screenwriter” (p. VII).

Paying tribute to cinematographer Gianni Di Venanzo, Lizzani (1997) takes the opportunity to claim that:

The history of cinema is not only a succession of genres, narrative genres, and stars representing [...] certain myths or trends. The history of cinema is also the progression of the technologies, the evolving of lights and shadows on the surface [...] of the frame (p. 85<sup>3</sup>).

And then again, introducing their collection of interviews, Schaefer & Salvato (2013) note:

The auteur theory, the notion that the director should be considered responsible for everything in a film, is now in decline; [...] The cinematographer is thus being recognized along with writers, producers and performers as a major participant in the filmmaking process, not only artistically and technically, but also in terms of salary, credit and even public recognition (pp. 3-4).

If – as quoted in Salomon (2019) – Karl Freund claims in 1926 his intention “to show that the role of the camera has been wrongly subordinated so far to the other elements and that it is the mission of the camera to create a mode of expression specific to the cinematographic language” (p. 90), the pioneering volume by Vladimir Nilsen (1937<sup>4</sup>) is the sole text on cinematography published over the next 30 years, a period during which Film Studies rather tend to focus on a chronicle of directors, genres, productions, distributions, performers, and storytelling. According to Nilsen, the camera operator should be appreciated as a true artist involved in creating the cinematic artform (Gatti & Gatti, 2000, p. 1).

3. My translation.

4. The volume consists of a preface by Sergej M. Ėjzenštejn (p. 6), and the following chapters: “The Compositional Construction of the Shot” (pp. 15-120); “Methods of Working Out the Scenario” (pp. 121-136); “Creative Problems of the Cameraman’s Art” (pp. 137-227). It is worth remembering that Vladimir Nilsen (St. Petersburg, 1906 - Moscow, 1938) begins his career as camera assistant to *Eduard Tisse* and works as cinematographer in Grigorij V. Aleksandrov’s movies.



The subsequent and systematic attempts undertaken separately by Burch (1969/1981), Bordwell & Thompson (2019<sup>5</sup>), and especially Salt (2009<sup>6</sup> and 2006) foreground both technique and style within film studies, address their technological and aesthetic contexts, and ultimately lay the foundation for cinematography as a collaborative filmmaking procedure worthy of academic consideration.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONNECTIONS

Cinematography is indeed the ideal combination of art and technique.<sup>7</sup> Their innermost connection leads to acknowledging – as the quotation at the opening of this article implies – that since cinematography is a collaborative art, Cinematography Studies should involve both critical interpretation and techno-aesthetic examination (Schaefer, 2017, p. VII), say an interdisciplinary method, to achieve the proper academic assessment.

Beach (2015), a scholar at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles, identifies cinematography as the simultaneous combination of technology, inventiveness, and collaborative artistry. Accordingly, the discipline of Cinematography Studies should embrace Leon Battista Alberti's declaration in the third and final episode of *L'età di Cosimo de' Medici* (1972):

To those artists who fall in love with practice without science [...] let it be answered [...] that there is no art that ignores science. In our workshops there is a combination of conjecture and technical-scientific activity, of manual work and theory.<sup>8</sup>

Cinematography Studies would then refer to Moholy-Nagy (1947), who posthumously promotes the necessity of the technical interaction between visual arts, and Youngblood (1970), who assumes as follows: "One can no longer speak of art without speaking of science and technology"

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5. The first publication of their work dates back to 1979 and is now in its twelfth edition.

6. The innovative first edition dates from 1983.

7. For further information see, for instance, Brown (2021), Cowan (2019), Van Kets (2018), Bowen (2017), Keating (2014), and Verstraten (2012).

8. My translation.



(p. 415). So does Yuri Neyman when he concludes, as quoted in Van Kets (2018), “If we fail to redefine our special role as artists with technological tools, we will forever lose our place as visual artists” (p. 304). Conceptual connections can also be traced in New Film History, which debates the linear perspective in the history of cinema (Elsaesser, 2001), and Media Archaeology, which – as Parikka (2012) puts it – inaugurates “new perspectives on [...] cinema and the development of related screen and viewing technologies and practices” (p. 9).

After all, the idea of cinema(tography) as a collaborative art form is still best described in Panofsky’s analogy (1934/1995), according to which filmmaking resembles the modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral:

It might be said that a film, called into being by a co-operative effort in which all contributions have the same degree of permanence, is the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral; the role of the producer corresponding, more or less, to that of the bishop or archbishop; that of the director to that of the architect in chief; [...] and that of the actors, cameramen, cutters, sound men, make-up men and the divers technicians to that of those whose work provided the physical entity of the finished product (p. 119).

Gordon Willis, interviewed by Schaefer & Salvato (2013), echoes these words, stating that, “Movies are craft, they’re not art. The art comes out of the craft” (p. 284). Thus, as the American Society of Cinematographers (2013) recollects in their pivotal manual:

It is essential for the cinematographer to have a thorough grasp of all technical options, including choice of film and digital cameras, lenses, cranes, dollies, and other platforms for moving cameras, new emulsions, and such special techniques as aerial and underwater photography, blue and green screen and other visual effects, as well as the capabilities of equipment rental houses, labs and post-production facilities (p. 3).

Technology affects style decisions and, vice versa, filmmakers’ expectations inspire new tools, turning the history of cinematography into an inextricable combination of both technical advancements and creative

achievements. When Keating (2014) affirms that “the causal relationship between technology and style can go both ways. Just as a new technology might spark cinematographers to explore a new style, the stylistic preoccupations of cinematographers might push the industry to invest in certain technological research” (p. 3), he may acknowledge the crucial contribution by Béla Balázs (1930/2010), who first theorizes the connection between *technē* and *poiēsis* in film:

In art the means exist prior to the artistic development. [...] For development is dialectical. Technical innovation stimulates the idea of a new art. But once the idea has been awakened it [...] goes on to inspire technical innovation itself, giving it direction and confronting it with specific tasks (p. 184).

The technological determinism that distinguishes the film device (i.e. cinematography) is reasserted by Panofsky (1934/1995) shortly afterwards: “It was not an artistic urge that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new technique; it was a technical invention that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new art” (p. 91). Cinematography is indeed the vital and perpetual adjustment of the technological evolution that encourages creative solutions.

Debating Cinematography Studies may also benefit from the Media Studies. After all, Canadian film historian Gaudreault (1999/2009) argues that “cinema was so intermedial that it was *not even* cinema” (p. 156<sup>9</sup>). Although it has evolved into a language itself with its own grammar and syntax, cinema maintains interdependent connections with other media. Cinematography also broadens its creativeness thanks to the other media, from painting to sculpture, from literature to music and to video art, not to mention photography – cinema’s primal principle. As a matter of fact, the film medium and the photography medium are inherently tied if considered from the cinematography perspective, as foreseen by Moholy-Nagy (1925/1969): “All photographic processes reach their highest level in the film” (p. 33). Even though it is Higgins (1966, but also 1978, 1984, and 1997<sup>10</sup>) who first coins the term *intermedia* in the Fluxus milieu, the contribution by Youngblood (1970, pp. 345-398) is also crucial

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9. Italics in original.

10. See also Clay & Friedman (2018).



to our conversation: in 2012, for instance, Vilmos Zsigmond (A.S.C.) and Yuri Neyman (A.S.C.) launch the Global Cinematography Institute (Los Angeles), whose educational programme is called “Expanded Cinematography” – not incidentally.<sup>11</sup> As Geiger & Littau (2013) remark: “Intermediality becomes a useful concept for [...] the intertwined histories and transformative relations between old and new, mechanical and electronic, analogue and digital, word-based and image-based media. Its scope ranges across history, technology, and aesthetics” (p. 2).

Understanding Cinematography Studies may also involve the notion of remediation, a neologism coined by Bolter & Grusin (1999), which expands and deepens the assumption by McLuhan (1964). Theorizing that “a medium is that which remediates, it is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, [...] of other media” (p. 65), they conclude by saying, “We can see how film refashions the definitions of immediacy that were offered by stage drama, photography, and painting” (p. 67). Remediation is therefore an intermedial process that persists within the cinematography as cinema and photography converge in the realm of the image.

Borrowing the intuition provided elsewhere by Bellour (1990/2012), eventually Cinematography Studies place themselves *between-the-images*:

*Between-the-images is that space still new enough to be treated as an enigma, and already established enough to have limits. It is not my concern here to write its history [...]. Nor is it a matter of coming up with a theory [...]. Instead, the question has mainly been to try and put into words an experience [...]. There are the images that preceded it – painting, photography, and cinema; there are those that it has brought into being, the new images (pp. 17-18).*

We can therefore validate Cinematography Studies as a new intellectual horizon within which we can, in many ways, investigate the ontological tensions *between-the-images* and across their technological, conceptual, and theoretical issues.

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11. For further details, visit the Institute website: <https://www.globalcinematography.com/>





### 3. METHODOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

The cinematographer is involved throughout the making of a film – from the early stages of the script discussions in pre-production to the final stages of colour correction in post-production and screening checks. Most importantly, every single choice relating to the visual structure of a movie is taken by the cinematographer in close collaboration with the film director, by virtue of a mutual connection based on a profound, creative, collaborative, and intellectual understanding. Talking to Björkman, Manns, and Sima (1973), Ingmar Bergman acknowledges as a matter of fact that “the impulse comes from me, and the enormously careful, subtle and technically clever execution is all Sven Nykvist’s work” (p. 35).

The cinematographer, Schaefer & Salvato (2013) emphasize further, “must help and support the director in getting exactly what he wants, even when the director is not fully able to articulate it himself” (p. 1). What Clarke (2017) defines as “collaborative partnership” (p. 107) is indeed the “collaborative process” Beach (2015) refers to in the subheading of his volume. Beach himself indicates that:

As a general paradigm, the cinematographer is responsible for discovering, inventing, introducing, and improving new visual technologies that the director can then apply in the creation of cinematic art. [...] The cinema represents an interactive collaboration between technology and art, a creative encounter in which the director and the cinematographer personify these two different forces (p. 1).

Since cinematography is a collaborative art form, its studies should consider the relationship between the cinematographer and the other artists involved in the filmmaking process – primarily the director, but also the screenwriter, the production designer, and the costume designers. The conversation should also reflect on the way the cinematographer connects to the storytelling. It is no coincidence that, talking to Etteggui (1998), Roger Deakins confesses, “It’s all about the script and the story” (p. 162); Ronnie Taylor, as Ellis (2017) reports, proposes to “make sure the photography doesn’t get in the way of the story” (p. 65); and Luca Bigazzi tells Spadafora (2014) to always be devoted to the narrative of the film (pp. 52-55).





The appropriate way to comprehend all these connections is to learn about them directly from the cinematographers themselves. That is why the interviewing process is de facto the most efficient method Cinematography Studies can rely on, since this *technique* does help gather production insights (i.e. technical procedures, visual concepts, and aesthetical significance) as presented by their own makers. If Cornea (2008) reports that, “In film studies’ qualitative research, the use of the interview has usually been confined to examinations of audiences. [...] Few academics perform interviews themselves” (p. 118), Van Kets (2018) suggests that “Methodologically speaking, this approach helps to bridge the gap of understanding between academia and industry” (p. 296).<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, academia should credit magazines published by cinematographers’ societies themselves (for instance, *American Cinematographers* and *British Cinematographers*). Cinematography Studies would indeed benefit from referring to such magazines. They in fact allow us to read interviews, learn crafting details, understand technical matters, and retrieve most of the information. While they are not peer-reviewed journals, they are a most reliable source for Cinematography Studies, and academia should consider them equal to scholarly publications.

The professional network of peers – represented, for instance, by cinematography festivals, societies,<sup>13</sup> and federations – may also contribute to a methodological way to address our conversation. Venues and events such as film festivals offer not only an excellent opportunity to make interviews possible but are now legitimized by academia in the wake of Festival Studies (the discipline emerged within Film Studies at the dawn of 2000s<sup>14</sup>), and their contribution may add further material to the academic perspective of Cinematography Studies.

For instance, “Camerimage – International Film Festival of the Art of Cinematography” is the world’s most significant event devoted to cine-

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12. The interviewing approach in Film Studies is inaugurated by *Cahiers du Cinéma* through their glorious *entretiens*. Needless to say, the French critics regarded the technical features (such as lens, lighting, editing, sound mixing, frame composition, and shot duration) as an integral part of any aesthetic film consideration.
  13. Please note that in 2019, the American Society of Cinematography celebrated its hundredth anniversary and the British Society of Cinematographers its seventieth.
  14. Major contributions to Festival Studies appear in print in de Valck (2016) and Iordanova (2013).



matography, so much so that Rapold (2015) calls it “a film festival where cinematographers are the stars”, and Heuring (2015) adds, “For cinematographers, all roads lead to Camerimage”. After all, launching the festival in Poland in 1993, its director Marek Żydowicz did state that:

It is mainly directors and actors who attract attention at festivals, competitions, or film reviews. The role of cinematographers [...] is usually underappreciated. Yet, the creation of moving pictures by means of a camera goes back to the sources of the cinema and camera storytelling.<sup>15</sup>

Camerimage – which now takes places permanently in Toruń (Poland) and annually awards the competitive Golden Frog for best cinematographer – suggests an alternative approach, first and foremost technical rather than critical, to film festivals: professionals gather to celebrate cinematography’s art and technology while the program includes screenings, talks, seminars, tributes, trade shows, and practical demonstrations. Moreover, such a format does help aspirant DoPs to connect with the most acclaimed professionals, affirming, says van Oostrum (2019), “the value of the arts [...] and [...] the value of communication between artists – all of which Camerimage has embodied since its inception” (p. 14).

Although less popular than Camerimage, “The International Cinematographers’ Film Festival Manaki Brothers” merits the due recognition for being far more longstanding than the Polish event. The North-Macedonian festival, once called *Manaki Encounters*, is in fact “the first and oldest film festival dedicated to the creativity of cinematographers across the world”<sup>16</sup> and was founded in Bitola in 1979 as a tribute to Yanaki and Milton Manaki, pioneers of cinematography and ancestors of the Balkan cinema. The Golden Camera 300 competition award itself is named after the 35mm Bioscope 300 camera the brothers filmed their documentaries with.

Imago is yet another essential source for an extensive and effective approach to Cinematography Studies. Founded in Rome in 1992 as “European Federation of Cinematographers” by the initiative of Luciano Tovoli (A.S.C. - A.I.C.) and the adhesion of the Italian (A.I.C.), French (A.F.C.),

15. Declaration retrieved from <https://camerimage.pl/en/o-nas/>.

16. Retrieved from <https://www.manaki.com.mk/about/>.



British (B.S.C.), and German (B.V.K.) societies of cinematographers,<sup>17</sup> Imago is today an “International Federation of Cinematographers”, or:

An international non-profit making association of international utility [...], with creative-artistic, cultural, scientific, moral and educational aims. IMAGO is not a Union, but a Federation that works to inform and promote the importance and relevance of cinematography to the general public, film colleagues and the cultural-political environments.<sup>18</sup>

As custodian of the professional interests of its members and their peers, Imago promotes cinematography literacy (through prominent editorial works, for instance<sup>19</sup>), pursues legal recognition for cinematographer’s (co)authorship,<sup>20</sup> and represents an undisputable reference point for those willing to approach the discipline.

So, in conclusion, Cinematography Studies can indeed become a brand-new academic discipline. By considering cinematography both as art and as science, and by connecting its creative and technical relevance, Cinematography Studies can achieve the broadest academic consideration by involving the aspects discussed so far – not to mention that such a new academic examination would even disclose a hidden and inner history (Beach, 2015) within the film culture. We have provided Cinematography Studies with a consistent theoretical and conceptual framework just as we have presented a method for approaching them. Most importantly, since we have defined cinematography as a collaborative art form, we understand that such a new expanded discipline of Cinematography Studies requires an interdisciplinary method (which emerges from Film Studies, Media Studies, and Festival Studies, and which implies making interviews, attending festivals, reading professional magazines, acknowledging societies and federations) that bridges academic and filmmaking worlds and relies on the professional network of peers.

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17. In 2022 Imago counts on the membership of 57 associations from around the world and represents over 5,000 cinematographers.

18. Official statement retrieved from <https://imago.org/about-us/about-imago/>.

19. See Imago (2003).

20. “We aim to work simultaneously to have the cinematographer recognised as co-author of the film. [...] But a great deal of work still has to be done”, declaration retrieved from <https://www.imago.org/index.php/about/item/4-aims-of-imago.html>.

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