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TV Criticism: Dr. Glantz

Image and Sound Essay

“They’re Not Allowed To Look Away”: The Unique Cinematography of “1917”

Introduction

The movie “1917”, directed by Sam Mendes, won the academy award for best cinematography in 2020. “1917” earned this award and many others thanks to the work of cinematographer Roger Deakins. The film centers around two British soldiers tasked with delivering a message across no-man’s land and into German territory with the goal of stopping an attack and sparing the lives of 1,600 men, one of which is the brother of one of the main characters. Roger Deakins and his team worked many hours in pre-production to create a movie that has attention-grabbing cinematography including techniques such as continuity editing and unique lighting to give the audience a fully immersive experience.

Single Shot film, Camera Techniques

One of the most widely discussed topics about the movie “1917” is that it was shot in a series of long takes taken with a singular camera and edited together to give the audience the effect that the entire movie is one continuous shot. Director Sam Mendes states that the idea for a single-shot film was “baked into the very fabric of the script... two hours of real-time, no cuts” (Studiobinder, 2020). With the goal of no cuts, Deakins faced the issue of continuous movement head-on; the camera could only move forwards with the characters, never backwards. In order to achieve this, the camera had to be able to move a full 360 degrees around the characters, enabling the shots to fully ground the audience in the characters’ reality. Without the ease of cutting, it was vital that every movement of the camera be rehearsed to match the actors

blocking. The cameramen utilized several different filming techniques in order to keep up with the soldiers without using cuts such as attaching the camera to a crane, walking or running after the characters on foot using a steadicam, or even riding on a motorcycle to keep up with actors on the run during action shots. In order to ensure that the film could be successfully shot without cuts, Mendes and Deakins spent many hours meticulously planning each and every movement of the camera during pre-production. After all the film was shot, the long cuts were edited during post-production together using continuity editing to ensure flow between cuts. With this technique, “1917” was assembled to look like one long continuous shot.

The director hoped that by producing “1917” to look like a single-shot movie, the audience would be fully immersed in the film. The viewer is meant to feel as though they are in the shoes of a WWI soldier, or as Roger Deakins states, “There's no way the audience is let off the hook, it's almost claustrophobic. They're not allowed to look away,” (StudioBinder, 2020). “1917” introduces readers to the horrors of war, and without cuts, the viewer doesn't receive the relief of stepping away from the violence. Instead, the viewer watches all the action in real time, seeing every moment of the action. As a result of this experience, the audience starts to feel the exhaustion and the desperation of the characters. When asked about his chosen filming technique, Roger Deakins stated that long cuts were essential to the immersive experience because “just as the characters in the film cannot stop moving, neither can the audience,” (StudioBinder, 2020).



Cameraman filming the actors on foot using steadicam (StudioBinder, 2020).

Lighting

In addition to using continuity editing and singular camera footage, the movie “1917” further immerses the audience by employing unique lighting techniques. Roger Deakins was able to masterfully manipulate light to tell the story of these two young men in “1917.” For example, almost all of the light sources used to illuminate the sets and characters are either natural daylight or what is called practicals, or lighting that is not out of place for the film. Director Deakins made the choice to use natural lighting and practicals because of the 360 degree rotation of the camera. If artificial lighting was used, it would show up in the frame. For this reason, all sources of artificial lighting in the movie were practicals such as LED lights made to look like gas lanterns. Filming almost all shots in completely natural light was difficult for production due to the fact that filming could only happen on cloudy days as too much sunlight would result in shadows. In order to get the clearest footage, filming could only happen on cloudy days. Scenes that took place indoors or underground, however, were lit up using practicals. Some examples of

practical lighting in “1917” are oil lanterns that can be seen in the meeting with Colonel Mackenzie or in the French woman’s underground room. Blake and Schofield are also seen using flashlights in the German war bunkers. The scene with the most unique and memorable lighting in the movie “1917” occurs at night. Without sunlight or a flashlight, Schofield runs through a destroyed city and the only sources of light during the entire shot are flares being sent up in the night sky. These flares illuminate the sky for short periods of time, creating deep shadows and a strong contrast between the light and dark areas of the shot.

Roger Deakins embraces the dark rather than using fill lights in the movie “1917” in order to fully ground the viewer in the world of the soldiers. By combining darkness and practical lighting, Deakins is able to focus the viewer’s attention on what is important in the shot, whether that be an oncoming threat or the fear on a soldier’s face. For example, when the rat falls from the ceiling in the German bunker, the soldiers are startled and shine their flashlights on it, just in time for them, and the audience, to see that it is headed right toward the tripwire. By keeping the audience literally in the dark, Deakins creates a feeling of mystery and danger in his sets. The audience only sees what the characters can see, making the audience feel on-edge, just as the characters are. The use of only natural light and practicals to film “1917” is vital to allowing a 360 degree field of view and to fully immerse the audience. By using unique lighting techniques such as all-natural lighting, practicals as the main source of light, and simply staying in the dark, Roger Deakins creates feelings of mystery and fear while producing a fully immersive experience for the audience.



Blake and Schofield light up the German bunker using practicals, flashlights. (StudioBinder, 2020)

Conclusion

Director Sam Mendes chose to film the movie “1917” to look like one long take in addition to employing unique lighting techniques to fully ground the audience in the world of “1917.” In order to achieve a one-shot film, the movie was shot in several long takes using a 360 degree field of vision and assembled using continuity editing. Deakins used these techniques with the effect of creating a seamless timeline in which the audience was fully involved. Lighting also played an important role in the cinematography of “1917.” With almost artificial lighting, indoor scenes were shot with practical lighting. Darkness is emphasized throughout during shots which take place at night in order to portray the feelings and experiences of the characters to the audience. By employing long takes, 360 degree field of vision, and natural lighting, Deakins is able to create a fully immersive experience for the viewer.

Work Cited

StudioBinder. (2020, July 6). *Breaking Down the 1917 One-Shot — Roger Deakins Talks Camera, Lenses, Long Takes, and Cinematography* [Video file]. Retrieved February 14, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uwjS7d4ntA>