

a softlight man

Mark Irwin continues his interviews with cameramen as he talks to Billy Williams, the Director of Photography on the shoot of *The Silent Partner*.



Billy Williams, Director of Photography, discusses a scene in *The Silent Partner* with director Daryl Duke.

Originally there was only softlight: hard, baked California ultraviolet diffused through cheesecloth onto outdoor sets with glass roofs and breakaway walls. Then came progress: artificial light, color stock and a slow swerve away from what was "natural" to what was "illuminated."

The return to natural or "source" lighting made its way during the late sixties and seventies, until today it is much accepted and much imitated.

*This interview is with a cameraman who, years ago, was faced with the old artificial style of lighting and chose to start (albeit unknowingly and not altogether alone) a trend that ended with the style of soft light that we have today. During that time he photographed *Billion Dollar Brain*, *Women in Love*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *The Wind and the Lion*, *Voyage of the Damned* to name only a few. He was in Toronto to shoot *Silent Partners* this summer, and I spoke with him just before the last day of shooting.*

Cinema Canada: *Tell me about **Silent Partner**: Is it set in Toronto or is it anywhere, USA?*

Billy Williams: Oh no... the screenplay is from a book which is Danish, but was written for Toronto and for the Eaton Centre. It's Canadian financed, Canadian crew and director, largely a Canadian cast. What I've tried to do is get the feeling of being in a city, of being in Toronto in particular. And not having been here before, I was very excited about the look of the city; I mean, it's probably been done before but I can't say I recall a film about Toronto.

Cinema Canada: *Was there ever an image of this country given to you through Canadian films?*

Billy Williams: Well, you have the National Film Board of Canada. I come from a documentary tradition, in that I worked for Edgar Anste for about five years and he was a close friend of Grierson; John Grierson, Edgar Anste and Humphrey Jennings being the forefathers of British documentary film. I worked for a company called British Transport Films, which still exists, and I was an assistant... along with David Watkin and Robin Painter, now both cameramen.

Cinema Canada: *So that's how you started in the film business?*

Billy Williams: My father was a cinematographer who entered the industry in 1910. He was in the British Navy in World War I, filmed the surrender of the German Fleet at Scapa Floe... a marvelous feat which I've seen on television recently. He did everything from newsreels to features, and I started as his assistant.

Anyway, I left British Transport Films because I wanted to be a cameraman in my own right and there didn't seem to be any opportunity there. I shot my first film when I was about 25, which was very young then (1954). It was a little appeals film for a charity organization. The next film I did was for an oil company. It was called **Rivers of Time** and it was sponsored by Iraq Petroleum... about the historical tradition of the Middle East and its influence on civilization going back about 3000 years B.C. Eighteen years later I went back to Iraq to film the first ten minutes of **The Exorcist**, and on the crew we had some of the same Iraqis who'd worked with me eighteen years before.

Did you stay in documentaries?

When I first came into the industry, commercials, documentaries and features were very much divided. You had to start in features and work your way up. But when commercial television came in, and commercials, it provided a link between the three, because a lot of the directors were out of live television and they were looking for different cameramen. So I began as a documentary cameraman, became a commercials cameraman and then a feature cameraman.

What was your first feature?

Actually, **Billion Dollar Brain** in 1966 was my first major film. I'd worked with Ken Russell previously but only on commercials.

Russell has a very powerful visual style, sometimes too powerful. Did he have that before you met him or did you help develop it?

I wouldn't say I helped develop it; I mean, he's always had a very strong visual style. I found him a very challenging and exciting person to work with. He's not a man whom you have to agree with all the time. There were times when I disagreed with him and would argue my case, and he would argue his, and somewhere along the line we would reach a

compromise. I think he really likes that in a way. But you have got to be prepared to do battle with him. There was this particular scene in **Women in Love** where we had a very big argument. It was long scene under a huge tree and all the principles in the cast – Glenda Jackson, Alan Bates, Oliver Reed...

The table scene...?

The table scene right near the beginning...

With the fig...?

With the fig... Well, that was shot at Kettlestone Hall which is the ancestral home of the Curzon family... a long table was set up under this huge beech tree. Looking one way, you looked out onto a very brightly lit lawn. Looking the other way, you looked back into more trees. So that when you had people on each side of the table – when you looked out into the bright sunlight – those people without light were in silhouette. When you looked back the other way it was a totally different balance. The blocking of the scene was that Alan Bates had his back to the bright light. He had most of the lines – it was his scene, but there were cuts to establish all the other persons. Well, Ken didn't want me to light it. I said I could light it so that it wouldn't look lit, because I had brutes (this was before HMI lights) – I had about two or three brutes and I put them through very big silks so that the light was very soft. Whenever I shot towards Alan Bates, who would have otherwise been in silhouette, I used this soft fill light. It still kept him underexposed compared to the background, but I think that the scene worked with that light.

Russel just didn't want it to look lit?

He didn't want it to look lit. I think somewhere back along the line, when he was at the BBC, he perhaps worked with cameramen who overlit scenes. I think it's very easy on location – on exteriors – if you've got lights, to over-use them. I think everybody's been guilty of that sometime. He has an aversion to the use of lights on day scenes. He accepts them on night scenes, of course, but if you want to use lights on a day scene you've got a battle. So I had a battle and I won it. In fact, **Women in Love** is the one film which had every situation, every type of lighting and opportunity for one to push for: low key day, very bright day interiors, soft summer light in England around the Lakeshore, under the trees, candlelight, twilight, dusk, firelight...

How did you light that... was that a set?

No, that was a location in Derbyshire. It was an old house near this lake. We shot the drowning scene there which we had to do at the last light. We did it for three evenings just to get the last five minutes of the light. But the wrestling scene was done in a large room with a huge fireplace. It had a real fire, and when I discussed with Ken Russell how we were going to shoot it, I said if you can get setups where the fireplace is on the side of frame, rather than middle of frame, I can get a better light. I had lamps very low, just out of picture with what we call a full CTO, to simulate the same color as the fire. Then I found the best way to get firelight was to use branches, leaves... shimmering... you have to sort of perfect the technique.

The thing that always impressed me about the style of light that you use is the broad area softlight; you have silks or lots of time to bounce light. I guess that's really become traditional commercial style.

Well, when I first started on features I was sort of half and half between hard light and soft light. I was really developing soft light style when I first started on features. But in recent years we've had polystyrene, which I think is

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a marvelous asset for reflected light. It's so easy to fix, light as opposed to damaging, clipping things onto walls or ceilings. And of course we've got small quartz units which are very small and compact, which make bounce-lighting a lot easier and quicker. The control of it is something that one just has to work on in terms of flagging and controlling the direction of the light by the angle of the polystyrene – or alternatively, by going through tracing paper.

With minibrutes or something wide...?

Yes, minibrutes or 5's or 2's or whatever... I mainly use polystyrene, and when I came over here I found they were using a different type of board which I didn't adapt to so well...

Foamcore.

Yes, I got them to use one-inch polystyrene which is what I prefer. And I used that almost entirely on interiors, perhaps occasionally using a hard light to pick up some furniture or something that is very dark. I very seldom use hard light on faces or interiors. But on night exteriors it's a totally different thing, and softlight doesn't work on night exteriors except as a filler. You have big areas to cover and I prefer a sharp look to night exteriors.

I suppose that during the thirties and forties and fifties right up to the sixties – even today – there are cinematographers who only use hard light. You can get exactly what you want by flagging and controlling the light with gauzes and so on; but unless you do it very well, it can look artificial. I use hard light sometimes but I try to disguise it, and certainly shadows – hard shadows – bother me enormously. One can accept one hard shadow, but more than one and I get really bothered about it. I always find a diffused shadow much more acceptable.

Speaking about softlight, I know that in Britain you still don't very often use what in Canada we call softlights, actual units. Or do you?

Not very much. I think most people are bouncing off polystyrene, particularly the younger cameramen. But you see somebody like Unsworth; his work is absolutely superb, but it has changed a lot over the years. If you look back on Geoff's earlier films you'll find that he was using hard light. He's changed his style now and his work looks much better.

Let's just consider your position as a cameraman with different directors. Do you sort of gauge their temperament at the start and anticipate how things are to happen on the set, or does it just happen?

Well the director-cameraman relationship is a marriage; you have to work very closely together. I think you use each other as sounding boards, in terms of the visual interpretation. Obviously the director's first consideration is his screenplay and storyline and his relationship with the actors, but when it actually comes to putting it on film and what to do with the camera, then his relationship with the cameraman has to be a certain creative balance: a certain amount of give and take and a freedom to express ideas. I've found that John Schlesinger, probably more than anyone, is extremely receptive and understanding and yet has his own idea of how he wants to do things. But if you have a better idea, he'll go with it. He's not too proud to say, well, your idea is better and I'll go with that. You can talk to Schlesinger; I enjoyed working with him enormously and would like to work with him again. He puts so much into a scene. Every film he does he prepares in terms of script and sets and the style; he's really exciting to work with.



Billy Williams behind the camera assisted by Tony Palmieri; the Salvation Army watches with interest.

What is he working on now?

He's preparing a subject to do in England. He hasn't shot in England for a long time, not since **Sunday Bloody Sunday**, which was a very satisfying film to do. Interestingly enough, they had a special preview of **Women in Love** before it was released. He came along with his producer and they talked to me and said they liked it very much and asked if I was interested in shooting **Bloody Sunday**, as it was called then. I said I'd like to very much. When we got really closer to it, I had a chance to talk to Schlesinger about the look of the film. He liked what I had done in **Women in Love**, but he said that it was a very romantic, strongly visual film. **Sunday Bloody Sunday** he said, is an intimate story about three people, with lots of detail; it's a very personal sort of film and I want it to be well photographed, but I don't want the photography to dominate in any way. So I accepted that limitation. I thought it was correct. If anything, I would say that I underphotographed it in order not to come into conflict with what the story was about. I think that one has to do that sometimes – I hate the use of photography or effects or of a lens that becomes obtrusive.

Do you find that directors expect a certain look from you? Do they hire you to do what you did on another film?

I try not to get myself typecast too much. I think each film demands its own look. I wouldn't like to feel that my photography is always looking the same. Each scene and each set demands certain things emotionally in order to feel right, so that I come into a set and read a scene and decide on the style for it. Then the next thing can be quite different. I don't feel that you have to have a continuity of lighting style throughout the movie because life isn't like that. You can go from this room where we're lit by soft window light and go to a nightclub. You can go out there and sit at a café. Each one of those things needs to look different. They don't need to look the same. And I think you've got to give the film variety if that's what it should have. I think that by giving it variety, you're giving the audience a change of view. The cinematographer can direct that viewpoint by the use of the lens and composition and shapes – the lights, the darks, perspective, movement – we have a lot of control in that sense. There are very few directors who are fully aware of what the cinematographer can achieve. Very few. Kubrick is one of them. And he has absolute control of style.

Is Russell one of those few directors?

He is similar to Kubrick. I wouldn't say that he's as expert as Kubrick; Kubrick is technically without equal. On the other hand, Russell has a great emotive quality which I think is very good. The only trouble is, I think, it gets out of control; it has to be subdued. In working with Russell, I felt that I was toning him down, or toning down his ideas from time to time. Whenever I work with a director I express what I feel and he can either accept it or reject it; you don't sit back and just accept everything as gospel. I haven't worked with Ken since **Women in Love** and the reason for that is that he wanted me to shoot **The Devils** and I didn't want to do it. And although we are still good friends, he hasn't asked me to work with him.

I like to be totally involved in the use of the camera setup, the camera movement, the choice of lens and the way it's lit. I think those areas are terribly important to me. Now the degree to which the director wants to participate in those is up to him. Some directors are very strong on the use of a lens but are not so involved in the lighting. The cinematographer is always the junior partner of this marriage I talked about earlier. I mean I *have* to give way, but if I feel very strongly about something, I disagree with a director. I will argue as forcefully as I can so that he is aware

of what I feel, and then it's still up to him to say, "I'm the director and this is the way I want to do it."

Has that happened on this film?

Well, funnily enough, it happened over the choice of a location. I came into this film with only a week's preparation and there was not enough time for most of the key people to prepare fully. This is not common, but this was the case. There was a choice of two places for the exterior of Elliot Gould's apartment. The exterior was a key set; it was terribly important the way it looked and where it was. I was shown two and they had virtually decided on one of them. When I saw the two of them, I was absolutely convinced they'd picked the wrong one... in visual terms, in terms of staging and so on. I was absolutely amazed that the director and the art director had made this choice. So I argued my point. It was somewhat difficult because I had only met the director two or three days before. But we went back to what was the second choice and took the art director there and we went back to the first... and eventually they changed their minds. We shot in the place that I liked, and we just finished there last night. It was great. Everything worked. You couldn't have built a better set on the studio lot. From the script, I had envisioned a picture in my mind of what that building should look like. It's an old apartment block, and it had to have a normal entrance, and it had to have a fire escape exit for reasons in the plot. The place we chose was an old building built at about the turn of the century with a lot of character and new buildings springing up all around it. This, to me, is Toronto. You've got little areas of the old city, Victorian buildings, and the skyscrapers shooting up around. Fortunately, you've retained a lot of the old city.



The Eaton Centre disguised as the First Bank of Toronto.

I know a lot of shooting occurred in and around the Eaton Centre. What problems did that present to you?

Well, it turned out to be fairly difficult because we had to build the bank (which is our main set), and a lot of the screen time takes place in this bank which is situated in the Eaton Centre. Also, there was a lot of linkage between the escalators in the other area of the Eaton Centre and the bank foyer and so on. The space that was available for us in which to build a set had limited head room because of the air conditioning system. So the art director had to build a set which would fit into the existing shape. The result was that because we were very short of preparation time, I was very busy shooting while he was designing the set. So I

finished up with a set which had inadequate light sources for a bank (which is a place that usually has fairly bright light.) I wanted a lot of overhead light and very soft key, and I was disappointed when I found that I was very lacking in headroom. It led to a lot of work in terms of clipping up polystyrene and bouncing light, instead of having it there available in an overhead fitting, which is what I would have preferred. I had an overhead fitting there, but it was a very strange one which let very little light through. And the other thing, of course, was that there was an enormous amount of glass. One of the disadvantages of bounce lighting is that it's more difficult to hide the reflections. Instead of using a smaller unit you're bouncing off a larger area of say, a four foot piece of polystyrene, and it's much more difficult to lose the reflection. So the bank turned out to be very difficult but the results are fine. It was very hot because we blocked off all the air conditioning in the ceiling for the sound.

Had you worked with Daryl Duke before?

No, I had never met him before and we got on very well indeed. He's a very fine director with a great sense of humor. I'd certainly be happy to work with him again.

Were you ever shooting high speed lenses and available light or...?

I was shooting high speed lenses using a little light – not a lot. I put myself between six and ten-foot candles on some of the night scenes and it looked very good. It's very tricky with the focus. But we don't have Chemtone here and we don't have it in England; I would very much like to experiment with it.

How about flashing – actual mechanical flashing as opposed to chemical flashing – have you used that at all?

No, it's only been used once or twice in England. I know that Vilmos used to do it. I had quite a long chat with Vilmos recently and found him to be a very intelligent and interesting person. And Lazlo too. Vilmos has used that quite a bit over a period of years.

I know that when he shot McCabe and Mrs Miller they flashed it at Alpha Cine in Vancouver, and he really created that sort of look on that film.

Yes, I think he has a lot of style, but for myself, I don't like that form of treatment. I don't like to present an au-



A well-chaperoned stroll in the Beaches as Williams chats with Céline Lomez.

dience with an image in which it's very difficult to see anything. That's **McCabe and Mrs Miller**, that combination of softlight and underexposure, flashing and gauzing or whatever. I think that you finish up with such a flat negative that it has no point of emphasis, and as I was saying earlier about composition and use of light and dark, you must direct the audience's attention; there's got to be something in that frame which is going to hold their attention. Even if it's only for a couple of seconds and then you move on to something else and your attention goes to that. I find that this overuse of fog filters or flashing or gauzing is knocking everything down and evening it all out. I think you're losing dramatic emphasis...

I know Zsigmond was more or less relieved from Funny Lady for some of those reasons and it seemed quite unfair. He and Herb Ross wanted it to look like Cabaret and someone higher up wanted it to look like Hello Dolly... he wasn't Harry Stradling so... Has that ever happened to you?

No. I've always enjoyed photographing beautiful ladies and that's one of the bonuses of our job, always to work with beautiful women: Faye Dunaway, Glenda Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner, Liv Ullman, Susannah York. You have to find a way to photograph them so that they look their best and I don't think that that need come in the way of the overall look of the film. When you're photographing a closeup of Elizabeth Taylor, then you've obviously got to do your best for her in terms of everything you have at your disposal. When you're photographing a long shot of the set, it's a different shot. It's when you come in close and think of all the details in the skin and the wrinkles and the lines; you don't want to see those unless she's playing a character in the movie.

Aside from Vilmos Zsigmond, how do you feel about any of the other American cameramen?

Well, I think they have several good cameramen there. I think that maybe some of the British cameramen are a little ahead of them. I like Conrad Hall's work very much; I thought his work on **Marathon Man** was excellent. I thought Owen Roizman on **Network** was very good and Victor Kemper on **The Last Tycoon**...

Are you familiar with Gordon Willis?

Oh I think Willis is very good, although when I first saw the **Godfather**, I found it a little oppressive – he always uses toplight and he doesn't tend to vary too much.

How about the Europeans?

I spent some time with Sven Nykvist in Munich; I was just finishing **The Devil's Advocate** and he was just starting **The Serpents Egg**. He's very good.

By the way, who directed The Devil's Advocate?

Guy Green.

What was it like working for an ex-cameraman?

He's a bit conservative in his choice of lenses and he's inclined to look at the shot through a 35mm or 50mm; I much prefer a 25mm or 29mm look and a 75mm or 100mm look or longer. But he's from a slightly older school (became a cameraman in 1944, won an Oscar for **Great Expectations** in 1947, started directing in 1953).

There are two or three Italians who are very good... Pasqualino de Santis, Guiseppe Rottuno, Storaro who just finished **Apocalypse Now**. I think the Italians are better than the French.

There's a fellow named Guareneri...

Guareneri, yes... he's very good you know; he's a soft light man. □