



Five standout features garner Best Cinematography nominations for Film Independent's Spirit Awards.

By Jim Hemphill



# Spirit Awards Salute Cinematography

Five features were singled out for Best Cinematography nominations for the 32nd Film Independent Spirit Awards — projects that represent the highest levels of achievement by directors of photography shouldered with ambitious goals and modest resources. To honor their outstanding work, *AC* takes a look at *Moonlight*, shot by James Laxton; *The Childhood of a Leader*, shot by Lol Crawley, BSC; *The Eyes of My Mother*, shot by Zach Kuperstein; *Free in Deed*, shot by Ava Berkofsky; and *American Honey*, shot by Robbie Ryan, BSC.

*Moonlight*

**Director:** Barry Jenkins

**Cinematographer:** James Laxton

Appropriately enough, given *Moonlight's* heralded use

of Miami settings, its roots begin at Florida State University, where cinematographer James Laxton and director Barry Jenkins first met. Laxton shot Jenkins' student films and continued to work with the director, most notably on Jenkins' acclaimed 2008 debut feature, *Medicine for Melancholy*.

"Because of my relationship with Barry, I had been hearing about *Moonlight* for a few years before I actually read the script," Laxton recalls. When he did finally get his hands on the screenplay, Laxton was deeply moved by its tale of a young gay black man's coming of age, told in three distinct time periods. "My initial response to the script wasn't necessarily from a cinematographer's perspective, or even a general filmmaking one," he says. "It was more about how haunting and impactful the emotions it evoked were." After a second and third reading of the piece, Laxton began to see the visual possibilities and agreed with Jenkins on an impressionistic

with Arricam ST and LT cameras, and opted for a set of Cooke S4 lenses after a series of tests with director Brady Corbet. “I like to test stock and lenses as much as possible prior to shooting, and Brady and I looked at some older lenses with more aberrations and less technical precision,” he says. “These included Cooke S2s, Bausch & Lomb, and Canon K-35s, but ultimately we felt that using these lenses in order to accentuate a period felt like too much of a contrivance.”

Crawley looked to the paintings of several artists, including Vilhelm Hammershøi, Anselm Kiefer and Rembrandt, for inspiration. “Rembrandt’s technique of rendering shadow areas of his paintings through purples and browns as opposed to rich blacks was very important,” he explains. The cinematographer adds that late ASC member “Harris Savides’ work on *Birth* exemplifies this approach, and his bold use of underexposure inspired me to underexpose the day interiors by 1½ to 2 stops, and also work with very little light for the night interiors and exteriors. This meant that I was forced to really dig for information in the shadows during the final color timing, creating very pleasing, lifted blacks.”

The cinematographer notes that influences only take him so far, however. “It’s essential that the work doesn’t feel too closely indebted to other filmmakers,” he says. “Of course the way I choose to light or frame is the product of 41 years of influences, but I’m always trying to respond to the scene played out in front of me and react appropriately to the story and tone through lighting and camera movement.”

In an effort to evoke period, Crawley strove for authenticity. “My approach is usually one of naturalism and realistic motivation of light sources,” he says. “I wanted to remain historically accurate to the lighting of 1919, while also using this low illumination to support the unsettling dark menace of the story. Gas lanterns, low-level exterior street lighting, and faltering electrical lighting existing only in

the public rooms of the house all served to motivate a low exposure on the negative.”

In terms of camera movement and composition, Crawley tried to simply respond to the moment. “There are undoubtedly conscious and unconscious influences continually acting upon us,” he opines, “but I try to allow these two elements of cinematography to evolve in response to the instruction of the director or from a certain instinctive reaction to the rehearsal of the scene — or the space itself.”

This intuitive approach was aided by Crawley’s serving double duty as an operator on the film. “I think operating places you in a very intimate, sensitive and privileged position behind the camera,” Crawley notes. “I try to be respectful of the actors’ time in front of the camera and communicate clearly and concisely if any changes need to be made between takes.” This sensitivity was especially important on *The Childhood of a Leader*, which featured a young actor at its center. “I regarded it as an honor to be the first person to really capture actor Tom Sweet on camera,” Crawley says. “Coming from a background of working with non-actors or inexperienced actors, I aim to make the intrusiveness of the camera as comfortable as possible.

“I think the greatest challenge of shooting any film,” he adds, “is remaining truly focused, connected and consistent in your responses and choices as best you can over a relatively long period of time. Nobody wants to have to reshoot any part of the schedule, and when working with particularly critical exposures, there is always a risk that you’ll push it too far, the stock will fail to respond, and you’re not left with the image you intended.” Crawley acknowledges, however, that working in that way “is also where some of the most engaging images are found, so it’s ultimately a very rewarding process.”

## *The Eyes of My Mother*

**Director:** Nicolas Pesce

**Cinematographer:**

Zach Kuperstein

*The Eyes of My Mother*, directed by Nicolas Pesce, is a chilling and poetic adult fairy tale about the evolution of a young serial killer, a girl isolated in a rural home who grows up to commit horrible crimes after encountering trauma in her childhood. For cinematographer Zach Kuperstein, identification with his disturbing and disturbed protagonist was paramount.

“Even though the lead character is a killer, we still wanted the audience to sympathize with her and care about her,” he says. To that end, Kuperstein eschewed the gritty look of films like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, and shot *The Eyes of My Mother* in shimmering, meticulously lit and composed black-and-white. “I was heavily influenced by Gregory Crewdson’s photography,” Kuperstein recalls. “He created cinematic still photographs in which he was somehow able to make wide shots seem like close-ups. You feel very intimate with the subjects, even though you can see their whole environment around them.”

In studying Crewdson’s photographs, Kuperstein realized that many of them were shot at dusk or just after sunset, when there was still a bit of ambient light coming from the sky. “We tried to shoot some of our night exteriors at precisely chosen times of day in order to get the same effect,” Kuperstein recalls. He notes that he also looked at Conrad Hall, ASC’s work on *In Cold Blood* for inspiration. “There were modern influences as well,” he adds, “like the TV show *Hannibal*, which had sleek and clean black-and-white sequences. We wanted our black-and-white to be in that style — not to feel aged or like a period film, though the movie is in fact a period piece.”

This also informed Kuperstein’s decision to shoot digitally in 6K with Red’s Epic Dragon and Cooke’s Anamorphic/i primes, recording to Redmag SSDs. “The idea was to

# Spirit Awards Salute Cinematography

Right: Cinematographer Zach Kuperstein checks the frame on the set of *The Eyes of My Mother*. Below: A young Francisca (Olivia Bond, left) learns to be unfazed by death from her mother (Diana Agostini), a former surgeon.



confuse the audience temporally,” Kuperstein says. “It could be the Fifties, or the Nineties, or the present. I felt that shooting in black-and-white while using a sharp digital sensor with new Cooke anamorphic lenses would both disorient the audience and make the main character feel more isolated — we’re never quite certain of where or when she is.

“Black-and-white did a nice job of softening the gore,” he continues, “which fit well with the ‘less is more’ aesthetic we were going for.” Kuperstein notes that during shooting he captured all the color information, but used a black-and-white LUT, emulating Phedon Papamichael, ASC’s monochromatic work on *Nebraska*. “The idea was to isolate the colors of the production design in post to manipulate the brightness values,” Kuperstein explains. “It’s similar to the idea of using a yellow filter on a black-and-white negative to darken a blue sky.”

Kuperstein adds that after an initial bit of adjustment, shooting in black-and-white was a liberating experience. “Not having to worry about color just gives you one less element to think about,” he says. “Gels weren’t a thing; you save a lot of time not worrying about tungsten or daylight, and you can get away with light being a lot harder, which also saves time on set because hard light is easier to control. We could use a 1K Chimera soft box as our key light and it looked great — whereas in color, I think just a soft box would appear unnaturally lit to my eye.”

The cinematographer reports that it was also interesting to create depth and contrast using light and shadow as opposed to color — though this also created challenges, particularly in some night interiors set in a barn. “The slats in the wall made it easy to shoot the day sequences, because we would just simulate sunlight peeking through,” he

recalls. “But how do you motivate the light at night? Ultimately, we realized that motivation didn’t matter — it just had to look different. So we put a pool of light overhead, keeping the wall in the background in deep shadow.” Giving due credit, he notes, “My long-time gaffer, Ted Maroney, was integral to the lighting process and to our experimentation in black-and-white.”

Throughout the shoot, the cinematographer tried to find unexpected places to put the camera — often coming up with special rigs, or with unique solutions to challenges like capturing a complex action in one unbroken shot. “The flexibility and precision of my first ACs, Cory Fraiman-Lott and Ben Dewey, made it possible to rig the camera in all the unusual ways we did,” he says. “In one long take the camera started with key grip Andrew Naugle operating it, then he handed it off to another grip, Mike Kim, who lowered it onto my shoulder so I could walk into the house from outside and do an exposure rack. Shots like that are a lot of fun to figure out with my crew, and really rewarding to execute.”

## *Free in Deed*

**Director:** Jake Mahaffy

**Cinematographer:**  
Ava Berkofsky

A powerful film about the role of spirituality in marginalized lives, *Free in Deed* tells the story of Melva (Edwina Findley), a single mother who turns to the church for help in dealing with her young son Benny (RaJay Chandler) who is challenged with extreme autism. Abe (David Harewood), a well-intentioned but troubled faith healer, tries to help, but his efforts end in tragedy. For cinematographer Ava Berkofsky, the key to visually interpreting the material was finding a way to express a point of view for the story’s spiritual forces.

“In my early conversations with director Jake Mahaffy, he said he wanted it to have a ‘relentless driving force towards the inevitable tragedy of