

ABSTRACT

The Cinematography of *Closet Memories*

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The cinematography of a film heavily influences the audience's mood and their perception of tension. The way a director of photography uses lights and the camera can enhance or destroy the moments of a film a director has built. Keeping this knowledge in mind, the cinematography of *Closet Memories* uses film noir lighting, a mixture of handheld and smooth camera work, and other techniques to maintain the emotional content of the film's scenes.

The Cinematography of *Closet Memories*

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

John Alton says that the first thing a cinematographer must do in preparing for a film is to determine the key of the picture, the visually stylistic category into which the film falls (Alton 34). Alton classified films as comedy, drama, or mystery. Comedy is brightly lit, while mystery is very low key to enhance shadows. Once a key has been established for the picture, a cinematographer can then break down a script.

While films often are stylistically similar to others in their genre, the type of picture does not limit the key of the film anymore. Genres draw from multiple styles, no longer limited to the three major categories of which Alton speaks. Filmmakers incorporate elements from comedy in mystery, from action in mystery, from horror in comedy, and so forth. However, no matter what stylistic hybrid the film will become, the process of determining the visual style should be the first goal of the cinematographer when breaking down the script.

In crafting the film's visual style, my goal was to create an understanding of my own personal technique. It is not enough to answer questions such as, "why did you light it that way," or "why did you choose such and such lens," with the phrase, "because it looks good." As a responsible filmmaker, I need to understand why I like the things I like, and also how these things affect the audience. My goal is to understand the theory behind the art of cinematography.

Closet Memories does not clearly fit into any distinct film genre, but instead draws from multiple areas. It is a film about a high school girl who devises a plan to

shoot up her school but has a change of heart, only for her plan to be set into motion anyway. Elements in the story are drawn from psychological thrillers, mystery, drama, and action. This genre amalgamation is what initially drew me to the film, as well as a chance to work under the writer/director. The thought of getting to craft a visual style that incorporated multiple visual genres was exciting. The film draws from both the obvious influences, such as psychological thrillers and high school movies, as well as the obscure, such as cinematographers who subconsciously drive my personal lighting style.

During the preliminary discussions I had with the director, we both agreed we wanted a stylized yet natural look to the image. That is to say, while we did not want flat, high-key lighting, we also did not want extreme shadows that seem unmotivated or out of place in a high school setting. One of the struggles of the film was to craft a visual style that both felt motivated and also stylistically appealing. Looking at the visual styles of other high school films, there is a wide range. *Brick* (Johnson) has dark exposure, flat lighting, and cool color tones. Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (Van Sant) is lit high-key, with a washed out film grain and long tracking shots reminiscent of documentary films. On the other end of the spectrum is *Assassination of a High School President* (Simon), a neo noir film reminiscent of *Chinatown* (Polanski). *Assassination* is filmed in a low-key style, with harsh shadows lighting the character's faces as they walk the dark halls of a private school. In the middle of the spectrum exists a wide variety of high school dramas and comedies, such as *Mean Girls* (Waters) and *Juno* (Reitman).

The visual styles of psychological thrillers helped to further refine the key of this film. Most psychological thrillers consist of low-key night and interior lighting offset by high key outdoor daytime shots during the peaceful or happy times. A look at films such

as *The Game* (Fincher), *The Usual Suspects* (Singer), and *Memento* (Nolan) could lend help in the crafting of the look of this film.

Once the key was established for the film, a decision over camera style and lens choices was the next step in preparation. As with every other facet of this preparation, communication with the director was key. With *Closet Memories*, there is a shift halfway to two-thirds in, when the action quickens and tension builds. Our options were to shoot handheld throughout the film, which is currently in vogue; to shoot on a tripod, which feels more cinematic; or a hybrid of both. A look at the film categories above, as well as other genres such as action helped to craft these answers.

The last group of films to research consisted of those that I personally find aesthetically pleasing. Renaissance painting apprentices would copy their master's works to learn the craft, and in doing so would take on facets of their style. Similarly, cinematographers emulate the films that inspire them. While I know which films I find beautifully shot, I do not know why that is. However, these cinematographers and their techniques manifest themselves in my own shooting style. Among these filmmakers are Wally Pfister, who filmed all of Christopher Nolan's films in addition to *Moneyball* (Miller) and *The Italian Job* (Gray); Janusz Kaminski, Steven Spielberg's cinematographer; and Gordon Willis, who filmed *The Godfather* (Coppola) and is credited as Wally Pfister's greatest influence.

Cinematography books were used to study theory. While there are many technical manuals on how to operate and use various pieces of equipment, these were less helpful than theoretical books. The theoretical books provided insight and planning into the filmmaking process. Most film students understand the mechanical process of

shooting wide shots and close ups, but the goal of this project was to not only complete a film, but to do so in a way that specifically impacted the audience.

A study of chiaroscuro in art as well as film was also included. Chiaroscuro, which is Italian for “light-dark,” can trace its roots to the Baroque period of painting. Its use of well lit subjects with very dark backgrounds and a use of negative space is evident in the cinematography of the film noir genre.

None of this research discounts the fact that this is still an art form based on aesthetics. Cinematographers are not technicians who capture photons onto celluloid for the purpose of manipulating an audience. They light and frame shots that please them aesthetically, often without the conscious decision-making of how placing a light will affect the audience. These instincts are built up over time through exposure to films as well as study of technique.

My overall goal in doing this project was not to use it as a springboard into the industry. Having already been there, I realize that my talents and passion do not lie in production alone, but in a convergence of production and theory. I used this project as a method of understanding techniques from a filmmaker’s perspective. Many of the great film theorists were filmmakers themselves, and I believe that having the background in both production and theory provided an interesting perspective into the art.

The project was a film whose cinematography style had been carefully constructed to impact the audience. This film used elements of psychological thrillers, action, teen-angst high school films, and film noir to craft a visual style that impacted the audience. In addition, the film and accompanying paper provide insight into the method and reasoning of filmmaking, which can be further explored in future years in academia.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Much of the literature on cinematography takes the form of how-to manuals teaching basic skills such as proper framing, lighting, and shot types. These books include such explanations as what a wide shot, a close up, or an over the shoulder is, and the names and uses of various kinds of lights and camera gear. They also briefly discuss fundamental terms and definitions, such as depth of field, focal length, and basic lighting terms. Among these books are *Cinematography: The Classic Guide to Filmmaking* (Malkiewicz and Mullen), *Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video* (Schroepel), *Filmcraft: Cinematography* (Grierson and Goodridge), and *The Set Technician's Handbook* (Box). However, these skills and terms are fundamentally ingrained in an experienced shooter such as myself, and as a result, these books are not as useful. They answer the question how to film something rather than why a certain technique works.

Many of the cinematography books contain both theory along with basic fundamental how-to skills, such as Blain Brown's *Cinematography: Theory and Practice* (Brown). Brown begins his chapters with fundamental knowledge, such as how a wide-angle lens expands the image. He then discusses how using a wide lens can psychologically affect the audience by adjusting the audience's perception. Wide lenses exaggerate movement along the z-axis, making objects feel like they are moving quicker along this axis. On the other hand, a long lens will compress the space on this axis, creating a psychological effect of claustrophobia as well as making fight scenes appear more dramatic than they actually are (Brown 56–57).

Brown also discusses how to build a sequence of shots, and how a director of photography (DP) should shoot with the edit in mind. While much of the shot selection is up to the director, he should work in conjunction with the DP to formulate these shots. And the DP should act as a backstop to make sure the director and editor have enough coverage. In crafting a selection of shots, Brown emphasizes that no matter what techniques and rules are employed, a singular principle called the Prime Directive should be followed; “do not create confusion in the mind of the audience and thus distract them from the story” (81).

The Filmmaker’s Eye also discusses shot selection (Mercado). The book opens with a discussion of the impact of a shot from the film *Up in the Air* (Reitman, *Up in the Air*). In it, Mercado discusses, with illustrations, a wide shot of Anna Kendrick sitting alone in an office surrounded by rolling desk chairs. Despite not being visually stunning, the shot affects the audience because of how it used technical elements and rules within the narrative to impact the audience. Mercado’s approach to cinematography in his book is to explain filmmaking techniques with an eye toward the narrative. In essence, he teaches in an opposite fashion of the technical manuals and fundamental camera books listed earlier. Instead of listing rules for framing close ups and wide shots, he discusses them through the lens of narrative impact and also discusses how to break these rules he establishes. Mercado believes that the filmmaker should “make the technique work for the specific needs of your story” (15).

Another area Brown talks about in his book is lighting technique. Most lighting books, like the ones listed above, contain a vast list of lighting fixtures and a simple description of their uses. For instance, an HMI produces arc light that reduces flicker at a

daylight color temperature (Malkiewicz and Mullen 106). Brown takes it a step further and explains why certain lighting techniques are used and how they impact the story. He analyzes the lighting in a baroque painting, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Caravaggio, and discusses how the light is a visual metaphor. Chiaroscuro lighting in the painting creates contrast, causing the characters to stand out from the dark background (Brown 68).

The discussion of the baroque painting and its chiaroscuro lighting techniques are used to analyze cinematography in noir films. Brown states that “Noir was the birth of the protagonist who is not so clearly defined as purely good or evil” (69). Describing the visual metaphor of lighting using film noir as an example, Brown talks about how the use of negative space and darkness will enhance the dramatic effect of the character; having them half in, half out of the light causes the audience to see a character as not completely good or evil, but conflicted (Brown 71).

Terry O’Rourke’s article, “The Art of Low-Key Lighting,” discusses the use of shadows to add mystery and drama to a scene that may not be readily apparent in the script but is needed in the film. He also talks about how contrasting high- and low-key scenes can increase the mystery in the darker scenes and emphasize the confidence and happiness in the lighter scenes. “Light creates shadows, and it’s your creativity that interprets all that,” (O’Rourke 54). In *All the President’s Men* (Pakula), the scene where Woodward and Bernstein confidently walk through the brightly lit high-key office is contrasted with the dark parking garage where the character Deep Throat is surrounded with mystery.

Brown also discusses the technique of creating aesthetically pleasing shots via lighting. He emphasizes depth to create the illusion of a three-dimensional world on the screen and convince the audience the film is a real world event. Of the various techniques to create depth, he eschews flat lighting in favor of shadows. Using film noir as an example again, he talks about using the backlight to separate the subject from the scene. Moving the key light to the side or back increases the illusion of depth and creates a more aesthetically pleasing image. Keying the subject from the back also creates the effect of a dark scene without underexposing the shot, and dark scenes tend to be more mysterious and dramatic (Brown 113).

John Alton's book, *Painting with Light*, is similar to the other technical manuals listed above, but Alton also explains the cinematographer's mindset when prepping for a film. He goes into great lengths about creating a visual key in the preparatory phase of the film before the cinematographer is able to do anything. The visual key will determine the overall look and tone of the picture. Alton also discusses how darkness can be used by the cinematographer to affect the audience. "In the dark there is mystery" (Alton 44). He discusses how people are conditioned to believe that evil happens in the darkness, and when people see the dark their imagination takes over. By using these concepts of keeping scenes dark and the technique of keying a subject from upstage, as Brown and Alton describe, the film can have an overall darker and dramatic feel.

Masters of Light details the cinematographer's mindset through a series of interviews with famous cinematographers (Schæfer and Salvato). Gordon Willis discusses lighting the *Washington Post* offices in *All the President's Men* (1976) with fluorescent lights as opposed to bringing in incandescent lights. His reasoning was that

he wanted to maintain a natural look, which added a degree of difficulty in the color correction process, but was worth it because it maintained the illusion of reality for the office (297). He also discussed working with directors and that the role of the director of photography was to be an extension of the director's vision, ultimately.

I reference the Gordon Willis chapter in detail because of his impact on Wally Pfister, the cinematographer who won an Academy Award for *Inception* (Nolan, *Inception*). Pfister grew up loving Willis's work on *The Godfather* (Coppola) and *The Godfather II* (Coppola), specifically his use of shadows. In an interview with Emanuel Levy, Pfister discusses how his background in the news world influenced his naturalistic style. However, in order to increase the drama of the baseball scenes and enhance the isolationist feel of the players in *Moneyball* (Miller), he sculpted the light in the game scenes by shutting off half the stadium lights. While it is a stylized version of how we typically view a game, having the hard backlight and dark shadows visually tells the story in a way that enhances the film (Levy).

When looking at films to craft a visual style for *Closet Memories*, the director and I decided to study both completely natural looking films as well as highly stylized ones. The tone of the film and the director's overall vision played an integral part in the visual style. A study of the types of films similar to the genre of *Closet Memories* provided insight into how we should shape the overall look of the film.

The film *Brick* (Johnson) is a touchstone of the high school thriller genre. The film is full of grit, and the writing embraces the noir genre. However, the film did not fully embrace the visual style of many noir films, such as hard light and harsh shadows, because of the low budget nature of the production. Rian Johnson used locations draped

in shadow, but due to a lack of lighting equipment, the lighting throughout the film is very flat. So while *Brick* is one of the seminal high school thrillers, it does not contain many visual techniques that can be applied to the cinematography of *Closet Memories*.

Elephant (Van Sant), Gus Van Sant's film about a high school shooting, was shot by Harris Savides in a very documentary style. Savides employs incredibly long tracking shots in which a student walks through the halls of a school. The audience experiences the environment of high school through the background and interactions of the students. Even, flat lighting and a grainy film stock are used to further enhance this documentary style. *Elephant* (Van Sant) was released shortly after the actual documentary on high school shootings, *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore), in which Michael Moore investigated the series of events that lead to the Columbine High School shooting. This look and style is used in conjunction with the slice-of-life nature of the film to ground it in reality. The film does this in a way that makes the impact of the shooting more grounded in reality to the audience.

On the other end of the visual spectrum is *Assassination of a High School President* (Simon), a neo-noir comedy about a high school journalism student who investigates a simple story only to have it unravel into a larger mystery. Reminiscent of *Chinatown* (Polanski), the film visually matches most noir films. Large windows and dark hallways cast harsh shadows across character's faces. Unlike straight noir films, however, certain scenes soften the falloff of the key light via added fill and diffusion. This effect enhances the comedic moments of the film, while maintaining shape and depth to the overall picture. Characters are often backlit from large window sources to create separation from their background and create a darker environment.

In the middle of the visual spectrum are high school comedies such as *Juno* (Reitman) and *Mean Girls* (Waters). The high-key setups and bright ambient light put the audience at ease. Unlike the film noir thrillers, there are no shadows that house mystery and danger. While the gritty documentary look of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* grounds his film in a form of reality, the polished Hollywood look of these comedies separates the narrative from the audience's world, allowing them to escape into the story. These high-key techniques can be applied to the less intense moments of *Closet Memories*. The high school comedies utilize soft light on the actors' faces to polish and smooth their faces. While shadows are present, they are subtle on the actors' faces due to the slow falloff.

Many of the films in the psychological thriller genre utilize chiaroscuro lighting techniques. *The Usual Suspects* (Singer) is a dark and typical low-key film. Most of the action takes place at night or in dark rooms, and harsh shadows cover most of the characters to enhance the mysterious mood of the film. Even in the iconic shot where the suspects stand in a lineup, a hint of darkness surrounds the characters. They appear to be evenly lit from the front, but their dark clothing and the bright white wall behind them seem to cast their faces into shadow.

Memento (Nolan, *Memento*), Christopher Nolan's independent thriller, deviates from the traditional visual style of psychological thrillers. The non-flashback sequences, which are told in reverse order, are lit very brightly in a naturalistic manner. For much of the film, the characters interact outside during the day, a taboo setting for creating mystery and drama. They speak in diners full of windows, with a low lighting ratio crossing their faces and soft falloff from the windows. Wally Pfister maintained a

naturalistic visual style throughout this portion of the film. However, in climactic moments, the characters move indoors, where harsh shadows and darkness cover them. The film maintains the naturalistic style, but due to the setting the characters can be lit in a more traditional low key. To contrast this visual key, the flashback sequences are shown in black and white with the low-key lighting normally associated with films of this genre.

Masters of Light discusses the director-cinematographer relationship through a series of interviews. The most important aspect between the two is communication. It is vital for the sake of the picture that they agree on the look of the film. The cinematographer's role is to implement the director's vision while incorporating his own photographic style, but often times it is difficult to flesh out exactly what that looks like. Conrad Hall states that referencing other films that match the desired look helps to communicate the visual style (Schæfer and Salvato 159).

Communication between the two parties is very important, but so is preparation. It is important for the cinematographer to walk the set with the director or view a rehearsal to get an idea of how each scene will transpire. This will allow the cinematographer to mentally prepare the lighting setups and be on the same page as the director. Often, directors will not have a completely visual idea on how to film a scene and will ask the cinematographer for help. Directors come from various backgrounds before they direct a film. Some are actor-directors who focus mostly on the performance, and these directors require more input from their cinematographers. Others are visual directors who have a firm understanding of how the film will look, and the cinematographer does not have to carry the all the angles and shots in his or her head

(Schæfer and Salvato 117). But regardless of the director's background, he/she and the cinematographer need to be able to communicate to create the best possible vision for the film.

The last element of research is the technique of handheld movement. In *Cinematography: Theory and Practice* (Brown), Brown identifies handheld as a method of achieving camera movement that predates the invention of many of the camera rigs available presently. As a result of its unstable and shaky frame, it fell out of fashion, but it regained popularity in the past 10 to 15 years especially in the realm of reality TV. Because handheld is synonymous with reality TV, audiences associate any footage shot this way as being more visceral. Handheld trades spacial awareness and cinematic visuals for heightened presence and emotion. Typically, these shots are closer to the action and create a sense of immediacy for the audience. They remind the audience of documentary films and reality TV and as such imply the audience "is there." Handheld provides an energy and immediacy to the frame, and it also increases the hectic feeling of chaos (Brown 216).

The research that has been discussed comprises the areas that are most important to this film. The research into lighting theory can provide insight into my own personal aesthetics and intuition. Research into psychological thrillers, film noir, high school films, and chiaroscuro can aid me in creating a visual style that is aesthetically beautiful in addition to being impactful to the audience of the film.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

After discussions with the director and researching literature and films on this subject and genre, we decided that the key should be a stylized look with a high contrast and desaturated colors. Harsh, dark shadows cover the intense dramatic parts, while the lighter, happier moments are in a higher key, but still with a lighting ratio that provides shape and depth. The tone of the film is darker, with cool color tones. The shooting hallucination contains a look that makes it clear to the audience it is in fact a hallucination to avoid confusion. And the flashback scenes to her childhood have a visual differentiation, again for audience coherence.

There is a shift in the film at the moment when Liz gets shot. This is the moment in the film when everything changes. The film is no longer a slow psychological thriller at this point; it is an action film. People are chased, there is gunplay, and people get shot. In both the lighting and the camera work there is an indication to the audience of this shift in the film. Story wise, the power is killed to the school. The visual result is a dramatic shift from high-key lighting to a darker low-key setup. Hard shadows play across the characters' faces, and the dark hallways are lit with slashes of light rather than even ambient light. The camera shifts from tripods and dollies to handheld, which increases the intensity of the scenes.

Scenes 1 and 2

The film starts with a bang, literally. After a short monologue over black, a gunshot rings and the audience is immediately faced with the barrel of a gun. This scene is a peek at how the film is going to end, but in an odd, jarring sense. Questions fill the audience's mind as they try to piece together what is going on, who has been shot, etc. Close ups of the barrel with some slight overexposure assist this effect. Then the cops run in, guns drawn, with the outside light pouring into the gym. Thankfully, the gym interiors most likely will be darker than the outside, so no camera tricks will be needed to get the overexposed effect. When Austin is shot, a close up and extreme close up with long lenses captures the intensity of the moment. There is a shot transition when Austin falls to create a matched cut transition to the opening shot in scene three.

Scene 3

Scene three starts with Austin falling after being struck by a volleyball, but transitions the audience into the beginning of the timeline by matching the death fall from the previous scene. An overhead shot of Austin falling diminishes her character's power as the camera looks down on her. When Lacey approaches Austin to get the ball, an over the shoulder shot looking up at Lacey establishes their power roles, and a slight Dutch tilt enhances Austin's disorientation after being struck. When Austin gets up, a slight dolly move side to side gives a shot transition to the next scene.

Scene 4

Austin is incredibly isolated in scene four as she sits alone in an empty classroom. The room is darker, and the harder shadows create a mystery about her. A dolly shot

from outside the classroom increases the isolation of the subject with a frame in a frame technique. When Mace approaches Austin in the room, a matching dolly shot from behind Austin will connect the shots together. Coverage includes close ups and medium shots of both Mace and Austin, as well as inserts of Austin writing in the notebook.

Scene 5

The transition to the next scene is jarring. The odd over-the-shoulder angle looking down on Austin does not match the previous close up, which results in a jarring effect for the audience. To also enhance the time shift, the lighting is dramatically different, despite the fact that it is the same classroom. The lights are on at this point in time, so a high key setup with fluorescents fits with the naturalistic visual key established at the beginning. The practical bulbs were changed to cool whites that burn at 4100K to create consistency, while the subject was lit more brightly to create separation with the rest of the room. A close up of Mr. Nathan as he stands over Austin was filmed looking up to enhance his power in the scene, and a wider angle lens was used to create a disorienting effect. The wide shot captures Mr. Nathan moving back to the board, and a second shot covers both Mr. Nathan and the door when Mace comes in late. The effect of Mace running in late is enhanced with a cut. When Mace sits down, a medium two-shot of Mace and Austin connects the two of them. To complete coverage of the scene, medium shots of Mace, Austin, and Mr. Nathan will need to be filmed.

Scene 6

The purpose of scene six is to enhance Austin's alienation from the student body, as well as show her in the planning stages of the shooting. Not a lot of coverage was

needed, since there are no conversation scenes. A medium tracking shot coupled with a rising jib shot from behind is all that is needed for this scene. The hallway was lit brightly with a high key setup. To create depth in the shot, then, sun slashes shone from the classroom doors and at the ends of the hallways. Also, the practical light fixtures were manipulated to create subtle hot spots to enhance the depth in the scene and be more aesthetically pleasing.

Scene 7

A moving shot to start scene seven provides some continuity with the movement in the previous scene. The lighting is high key due to both the outside nature of the scene and the playful nature of Mace's banter. The struggle was to make sure the actors had separation from the background, that the lighting had various luminescence levels to create depth points in the shot for aesthetic purposes, and that the actors' faces were not blown out by the direct sun. Diffusion softened the light on their faces, and mirror boards were used to bounce backlight onto the actors.

Scene 8

In the scene where Austin arrives home, the main crux is when she eavesdrops on her father's phone call with work. The paranoia of the scene is heightened as she tries to figure out if her master plan is unraveling by a two shot that racks between the two characters. Austin's panic is allowed to come out in this two shot with her father literally over her shoulder, and the rack focus between the two enhances the connection.

Scene 9

Austin's room has a low-key, moody feel. I believe the character is still conflicted in this scene, and having her half lit helps enhance this effect. Because the scene is largely an amalgamation of various shots, the map planning shots and weapons being lined up was done in simple sweeping shots. A shot looking directly overhead connects her working on the map. The shots of her having a family picnic as a younger girl needed to have a nostalgic quality and stand out from the rest of the film. Shooting it with a super 8 camera accomplished this with the quality of the image, the filmic color look, and the 4x3 aspect ratio.

Scene 10

The school hall in scene ten has a similar look to the one in scene six. The lights are on, it's daytime, and so the same fluorescent bulbs used earlier light the hallways. Like before, a light with some diffusion highlighted the main characters to separate them from the rest of the students moving around. Because it is a deep hallway, lighting depth points help keep the image from becoming too flat. Although it had the potential to be cliché, the camera-inside-the-locker shot was filmed to provide an extra perspective of the scene. The blocking of the two female students bumping into Austin prevented this shot from being distracting, as the frame-in-a-frame helped isolate Austin from her schoolmates. Catching Austin's reactions to the girls talking about Mace, and possibly seeing the girls behind Austin gave this shot actual meaning without turning it into a simple trick shot. The part where Elliott gets the key from Austin and then meets the Young Man character was crucial in laying breadcrumbs in the audience's mind that something is going on. To accomplish this, over-the-shoulder and dirty shots, where part

of a character obscures a portion of the frame, connect Austin watching Elliott when he talks to Young Man.

Scenes 11-14

The character Austin is at a crossroads when she enters the gym. She is about to go through with her plan of shooting up the school. But then Mace comes and recognizes her, and she questions whether she should go through with it. Austin was lit with a higher lighting ratio on her face, and there were some shadows and darkness in the entrance. To maintain the consistency of the other school shots, Austin's key light was softened with some diffusion.

The hallucination scenes needed to have a look that differentiated them drastically from reality. Enhancing the contrast and over-saturating the colors will also provided context for the audience. All the gunshots were filmed from Austin's perspective to create context. Instead of using POV shots, we filmed over-the-shoulder and dirty-framed shots, since this entire sequence takes place in her mind. We filmed her from below to enhance her power in the scene and make her the superhero of her own fantasy.

Scene 15

When Austin runs into her room, having been made aware of the horror of her plan, there is a hectic, almost panicked feeling to the scene. Handheld movement enhances this effect, as well as extreme close ups combined with quick pans of her opening the bag and dumping the contents out. When Austin calms herself at the realization she did not go ahead with the shooting, the camera shifts back to being on a tripod. Austin cries in the corner during the final shot of the scene. To enhance this

emotion, the camera is placed above her looking down to weaken her in the audience's eye, and then jibs away to make her appear even smaller. The jib out also creates closure to the first section of the film and prepares the audience for the second chapter.

Scene 16

The next scene after the hallucination and panic scenes is of a new Austin. Taking place two months later, she is more confident, and she has friends now. Her relationship with her father is slightly better. As such, the lighting is high key while still maintaining some shape. The playfulness and embarrassment between Austin and her father comes through in the actors' performance. The camera work is simple to allow the actors freedom to perform, without constricting them to tighter frames. The critical moments are Austin's reaction when her dad mentions Mace and she gets embarrassed, and when she gives a small smile before she drives off.

Scene 17

In scene seventeen, Austin is with her friends and is relaxed. She is a part of a group now. Through discussions with the director, we decided that coverage of all five actors in such a short scene, with cuts back and forth, might be distracting to the audience. Therefore, this scene takes place in one tracking shot to allow the actors to interact without distracting from the scene.

Scene 18

The crux of scene eighteen is when Austin realizes that something is not right. Elliott is in the hallway, and he is clearly up to no good. To separate Elliott from the rest of the crowd, he is completely still as the crowd moves around him. The hallway was lit

with a high key level to match the earlier scenes in the school, but sun slashes were placed out of a classroom to provide the motivation needed to illuminate Elliott. A slow truck of Elliott with a matching reverse shot of Austin and her friends help to clue the audience into what Austin knows, that something bad is about to happen.

Scene 19

The action begins to pick up in this scene. Austin pulls her friends back around the corner to convince them they cannot go to the gym. It is a quick scene, but at the moment when the lights go out and Liz gets shot, the panic on Austin's face and the shock on Mace's are the most crucial. The scene shifts tone to handheld again to provide the hectic, visceral tone. As the characters run away, a whip pan between Mace to his now dead sister connects his issue of abandoning his sister later on in the script.

Scene 20

The lighting motivation for the closet in scene twenty is provided by the little bit of light in the seam of the door. A very soft interactive light, with a very soft background light providing depth, enhances this effect while giving enough illumination. Mace at first is powerless as he frets over his sister's death, and then gains power when he gets angry with Austin, believing she might be in on the shooting. As his frustration builds and he slams Austin against the wall, his face falls deeper into shadow, which matches his dark feelings towards Austin in this moment. Austin stays strong throughout the scene, and needs to convince Mace she is trustworthy. Close ups of both characters, as well as two-shots capture these moments. Panning shots of the three other characters increase the intensity of the scene.

Scene 21

When Austin leaves the closet, there is a tension to the scene. Will she get caught? Was she in on it the whole time? The audience feels her remorse when she sees Liz's dead body. The tension builds because she is out in the open staring at a dead body in the hallway as shooters roam the halls. Music obviously helps to build the scene, but a slow push in of Austin's hand as she reaches for Liz increases the visual tension. This tension is cut when she hears the gunmen shoot the girl in the classroom and a dark figure approaches her from behind. A dolly forward as Mace and Austin run away amplify their movement to the door, and a quick pan back to the hallway where the shooter comes around the corner creates tension with the audience as to whether they were seen or not.

Scene 22

In the following scene back in the closet, Eric, Lacey, and Jordan feel what the audience is feeling. Were Mace and Austin caught? Are they dead? A slow push on them and an intercut to the door help enhance this feeling as well as build the tension of the scene. When the door opens and the audience feels relief, a tilt up to Austin gives her a hero posture. A hard hit with a backlight also enhances this hero shot, as it creates a halo-like effect on the back of her head.

Scenes 23-25

In scene twenty-three, the characters make their escape. A slight camera move with Austin when she leans around the corner to look at the exit helps connect the audience to the moment. While in earlier scenes we put neutral density gels over the glass doors, the exit doors did not have any in an effort to create an overexposed blown

out look. This look, used in many Spielberg films, creates a sense of hope. As they run, the shooter sees them and takes off after them. A combined dolly forward with a jib move creates an epic feel for the audience. This is the chase scene, and our heroes are going to make it. A POV of the students' running helps the effect that they are almost free. The gunman will not catch them, and freedom is a few feet away. This moment of jubilation is then taken away when a second gunman cuts off their path. Silhouetting this gunman creates a stark contrast to the bright light outside the exit, and his near faceless features emphasize the inhumane act the gunmen are taking part in.

When the shooters address the group, the light through the exit provides the motivation for the light. It is a crowded scene, with seven people in the mix, but because only a few people actually speak, there are only a few lines of action to have to worry about. Rack focuses between the speakers continue the handheld style that is being used in the latter part of the film.

Scenes 26, 28, 30

The filming of scene twenty-six (combined with twenty-eight and thirty) was large and complicated. Before the fighting begins, there are three major lines of action: Elliott and Austin, Austin and Mace, and Elliott and Mace. The movement of Elliott compounds this as he moves through the scene. Not crossing the line of action was crucial in placing camera setups. The audience needs to wonder if Austin is switching sides to the shooters. Would she betray Mace and her friends in this moment? A close up of Austin as she appears to struggle and then gets set to shoot Mace helps the emotion of this scene and her conflict. Longer shots, and very little movement contrast the later action scenes and allow the actors to work. Then, when she raises the gun and shoots

Elliott, the camera movement becomes hectic. Inserts of people panicking and running, filmed at a higher shutter speed, provide ambiance coverage much like in the hallucination scene. However, as this is not a hallucination, the camera is not tethered to Austin's perspective. It was important to show the key points of action such as the gunmen being taken down, but because of the chaotic nature of the scene and the handheld style, a master shot was not necessary, nor entirely possible due to a lack of extras. The end of the scene is the same as the beginning of the film, which was already addressed.

Scene 27

The flashback in scene twenty-seven was shot from a security camera type of angle. The lighting already had been established in the previous scenes in Austin's room, so the wide-angle lens on a high camera was able to capture Elliott going through Austin's things. A single camera shot with jump cuts captured all the information quickly without losing the tension of the scene in the gym.

Scene 31

The intent of scene thirty-one was to start where scene twelve left off. Mace has offered to save Austin a seat, and instead of just watching him go, we see the change in her person as she decides not to shoot up her school. As she walks out the door, the camera dollies back. This is the closing shot of the film. A final shot of Austin being lit in the doorway, having made her decision to preserve everyone's life, is a good ending shot. A hard hit from a sun slash outside the gym, coupled with the dark shadows from inside the gym, can be viewed as a metaphor for her resolving her inner conflict. Also,

the shot is aesthetically pleasing, and leaves a good image as the last thing the audience sees.

The cinematography of *Closet Memories* is a mix of multiple styles. It contains both high- and low-key lighting styles, as well as smooth and handheld camera work. The difficulty in creating the hybrid style was to do so in a way that meshed the two styles without drawing unnecessary attention to the shifts. By focusing on the emotional content of the film, we were able to execute these changes in an organic way without diverting the audience's attention from the story. For all the camera tricks and lighting techniques that went into the production of this film, we learned that the story needed to be the sole motivator over all decisions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Closet Memories

Please click the following link to watch *Closet Memories*.

Ruth Sabin. *Closet Memories*. 2012.

CHAPTER FIVE

Closet Memories: Looking Back

Closet Memories is not a perfect film. As with most films, what was planned out did not come to pass. The failure to execute the plan was a result of the filmmakers' ambition and taste rather than poor skill. Had we set the bar low and only set out to shoot what we knew was possible to accomplish, the film would have been an exercise of routine and rote expression rather than an exploration of creativity and ideas. While I cannot judge whether the film is a success or a failure because I am not completely certain art can succeed or fail (or what that means), I do believe that we succeeded in producing a creative piece that deals with the violence of school shootings visually and emotionally.

Overall Filming Logistics

When we began planning shots for *Closet Memories*, we realized that a large number of setups would be required to accomplish the kind of coverage needed while filming in a short span of time. Multiple characters each required medium shots and close ups to be able to provide the type of emotional cuts needed for filming. As a result, the director and I decided to film with two cameras simultaneously.

We decided to film on the Canon 5D and 7D while using Zeiss lenses. The fact that the 7D views images from a closer perspective than the 5D due to its 1.6x crop factor actually benefitted us. We were able to get mediums and close ups at the same time, nearly cutting our shooting time in half. Our typical setup would be to place a 85mm lens on the 5D and a 35mm lens on the 7D. On the 7D, a 35mm lens mimics the field of view

of a 50mm lens on a full frame sensor. The result would be to have a perfect medium and close up shot with each camera.

We also planned out all our shots. While most directors will arrive on set with a shot list, we sat down and mapped every shot out, including time and lenses. For instance, the scene where Austin comes home and talks to her father would normally be written with a shot list of a wide shot for both characters, as well as two mediums and two close ups. Our planning included time for each shot as well as which lenses we would have, and we sequenced the shots so as to not have to change lenses. The shot list with the order and lenses was then distributed to the camera department so they would be able to be prepared to quickly change lenses and cameras without waiting for specific instructions.

While this level of pre-production was more time intensive, it allowed us to move more efficiently on set. It also allowed for the creativity and freedom to add shots if time permitted. Because every shot was timed out to the minute, we could see if we were getting ahead of schedule and plan an extra insert or cutaway, or we could see if we were behind and needed to combine some shots.

This method of preproduction helped us most on the final day in the gym. The scene was incredibly complicated, with thirty extras, over fifteen setups, multiple moving shots, and a special effects shot. The entire scene was drawn out on a white board in a back room in an effort to keep the director and myself on the same page (Fig. 1). I do not believe we would have been able to complete the more complicated days without the planning system we implemented at the beginning.

Fig. 1. Shot Diagram of the Scene

Camera Movement

The initial goal of the camera movement in the film was twofold. First, dolly and jib shots were used to create smooth transitions from one scene to the next, as well as infuse energy into the film. Second, the camera work would shift to handheld after the gunplay started to increase the intensity of scenes.

The dolly and jib shots to open and close the scenes created smooth establishing transitions that maintained a sense of energy from scene to scene. However, other uses of moving shots were hit and miss. In scene four, when the protagonist Austin first meets Mace, we had three dolly setups. The first two were parallel dolly moves that caught Austin and Mace's faces, respectively. These two moves were intended initially to open the scene and cut between on Mace's entrance. However, in postproduction, the editor

decided to open the scene on an insert of Austin writing and used only one of the dolly shots to show Austin working and capture the beginning of Mace's entrance into the film. The third dolly setup was a counter move designed to capture Mace entering the classroom right to left, with the dolly moving left to right. This type of shot theoretically would show the room while adding energy into the scene. The director and I felt very certain about this move, and we thus did not shoot any other wide shots capturing the actor's movement. Unfortunately, the shot feels awkward and out of place. It lacks subtlety, and it draws attention to itself, the opposite of what a good camera move is supposed to do. In hindsight, there was little motivation for this shot other than we thought it would look good and add production value to the film.

As a cinematographer, it was very easy to fall into the trap of wanting to mimic the epic camera moves from films. These moves seem like they make the film bigger and appear to add to the overall production value of the film, but they do not always make the film better. In conversations with the editor, we decided one of the best scenes was scene 21, where Austin views the gunmen in the hall, then stares over Liz's dead body. There are not a lot of cuts, and the shots are fairly static. The shots are not complicated, but they are complex. The lighting creates depth, and the few camera moves enhance the story without drawing attention to their existence (Fig. 2). Ultimately, well-composed shots with complex lighting and depth create far more production value than large, sweeping camera moves.

Handheld Movement

The shift from tripods and dollies to handheld movement was designed to increase the energy of shots and thereby raise the intensity of scenes. We were fearful of the

change to handheld for two reasons: 1) the shift would be so drastic that it would bring attention to itself, and 2) the handheld style would be too close to the action, resulting in

Fig. 2. A simple, well-composed shot trumps a complicated camera move

the audience losing spacial awareness. To combat this, we filmed with shorter lenses to minimize the side-to-side sway of the camera operators. We also stayed consistent with our earlier dolly shots but placed the camera on a handheld rig instead of a tripod to add the subtle handheld energy. These little adjustments helped keep a visual consistency with the tripod and dolly portion of the film while subtly impacting the audience.

Lighting

As mentioned in earlier chapters, choosing the correct lighting key was one of the main focuses of this project. The director and I wanted a mix of high-key and low-key lighting styles that would match the tone and mood of the scene while maintaining an overall natural look. For much of the film, we maintained this style.

In the high-key hallway scenes, a Kino Flo fluorescent light was rigged over subjects to make them stand out in the shot, but for the most part, the hallway was lit using the school's own practical fixtures (Fig. 3). Similarly, the outdoor scenes were lit naturally using the sun, with only bounce boards used to backlight or fill the (Fig. 4).

The low-key scenes were lit fairly easily. Often, a single source was used as the key light. In the classroom scene where Austin meets Mace for the first time, the large 1K lights were placed outside the window to mimic the sun streaming in through a classroom. Our artificial sun provided a soft falloff across Austin's face, and small hits on the desk chairs around her provided lighting depth to the image (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3. High-Key Hallway Scene

Our lighting struggles took place in the gym. A last minute location change shifted our location. We had scouted a high school's gym that had a large window, which could be used as a source. But we had to move to a middle school's gym, which

Fig. 4. Outdoor Scene Lit with Bounce Boards

Fig. 5. Low-Key Classroom Scene

had nearly no windows. Unlike the school hallways, the gym's high ceilings prevented us from matching the color temperature of all the bulbs or do any kind of light rigging. The lighting fixtures themselves were wired in an odd pattern to the circuit board, so flipping off banks of lights to create streaks and shape to the gym was also not a

possibility. While we conceptualized a dark gym with a streak of light illuminating the insides in the preproduction phase, we were unable to get anything like this lighting style and still maintain a motivated lighting setup. As a result, the gym scenes are very flat. They are also too brightly lit, since within the film's continuity, the power was taken down when the characters begin shooting (Fig. 6).

Looking back at the gym scene, I can't help but think about what I could have done differently to match the look we agreed upon. There were many issues with creating lighting continuity in the space. A small six-inch wide window next to a gym door would not have allowed a large enough shaft of light to provide motivation for the.

Fig. 6. Gym Scene

stylized light we wanted. The only solution I have come up with after the fact is that I should have put a Kino Flow on a stand and moved it around for close ups and medium shots to provide separation of the actors from the background. However, this technique would not have provided enough shape to be able to mimic a dark, powerless gym, and

would not have maintained the lighting continuity established in the wider shots. The trade off in maintaining continuity throughout the scene was that the shots are inconsistent with the rest of the film.

It is a shame that the gym scene broke from the overall key of the film. Up until that point, the low-key shots contrasted with the high-key shots to increase the psychological effect of the shadows. As the film builds in intensity, the film becomes visually darker. Then the film cuts to the gym scene and the key of the film is broken. The audience is robbed of intensity in the climactic moments. Had Austin had the dark shadows across her face, the ambiguity of her actions could have been intensified. Elliot's reveal could have been more dramatic with the low-key lighting. Lastly, the lighting difference could pull the audience out of the cinematic experience by asking a simple question: if the school's power is thrown, how are the gym lights on?

Color Grading

We aimed to achieve the desired image in camera rather than rely on postproduction techniques. Color and exposure were set to try and match with one another as much as possible. This was partially in an effort to speed up the postproduction phase and partially due to a lack of experience in color grading. I had previously color graded in a very limited capacity, tweaking the exposure and color of a picture while staying fairly true to the original footage. My initial expectation of the color grading process would be to take the image I filmed and get them all to match in color and exposure levels. However, I had never worked with someone who had the color grading experience of our editor.

The color grading process began once picture was locked. Our editor gave me a pre-graded version of the film and told me to take notes on what I wanted out of it. I watched the cut, but due to my inexperience, I made very few notes. I was upset that the closet and gym scenes were too bright, and he had mentioned that we could bring the levels down in post. But other than that exposure tweak and some color matching, I was not sure of the overall texture of the film.

The editor very patiently sat me down in the bay and talked me through what I wanted visually. Without looking at the film, I told him I wanted cooler tones, and a more contrasted look. We found some films that we liked visually and tried to match the level of desaturation. A desaturated image with cool color tones appears serious and less friendly to an audience than saturated colors or warmer tones, and we felt this look would visually match the emotional content of the film. He then began entering the info I told him I wanted into one of the scenes, and we tweaked it until we came to a visual texture we both liked. After the main palate was selected, the grading was merely a process of going scene by scene to establish a similar palate, and then going shot by shot to make sure every shot matched.

The most eye-opening lesson of the color grading process was that the exposure of lighting meant little to the final product. Yes, the picture could not be under- or over-exposed, but as long as the luminescence levels were safely between zero and one hundred, the contrast and overall brightness of the scene could be set in post. What mattered for a cinematographer was how he shaped the light. This lesson was no more apparent than in the closet scene. While I had been upset that I had lit it too brightly, the overall shape of the light existed in the image. The subjects were lit with a soft light

from the front, with a small hit of backlight to separate them from the background. In the pre-graded version, the highlight on the side of his face exists, but the rest of his face, while slightly in shadow, is still visible (Fig. 7). Because the light was shaped, we were able to lower the overall exposure of the scene and still keep the highlights in the color grading process. Thus, we were able to place Mace's face into shadow when he became violent while still maintaining an outline of his features, enhancing the emotional content of the film (Fig. 8).

Compositing

One of the issues we ran into when filming was a lack of extras. We needed to fill a gym full of people for the pep rally, and we needed over fifty student hostages for the climactic scene. However, we only had twenty to thirty extras and often had to pull crew members to fill space. In order to accomplish the shots of full bleachers, we used a twelve foot green screen. We locked the camera on a tripod and strategically arranged the extras to fill the frame. We then moved them closer using post it notes to mark their place on the bleachers, and built a new layer. Four layers were used to create a full gym scene (Fig. 9), and due to strategic placement of extras, the average viewer would not be able to notice the fact that some people are in the shot four times (Fig. 10). The downside of having to composite the shot was a lack of motion on the shot. Initially, the camera tracks with Austin as she enters the gym. The next shot would have been from the side, with the camera on a jib on the dolly slowly rising up as Austin surveys the gym before she begins her violent rampage. However, because any kind of shift in the camera would render the green screen useless, a locked off shot had to be used. A motion control rig would have been able to accomplish a moving shot that would be

Fig. 7. Pre-Graded Image of the Closet Scene

Fig. 8. Post-Graded Image from the Closet Scene

composited, but unfortunately renting one was outside our budget. However, one of the serendipitous benefits of filming in the gym with flat light was that it provided the perfect amount of even light on the green screen. This meant we could film the green screen

much quicker than if we would have had to light the screen evenly for compositing purposes.

Fig. 9. Gym Scene Pre-Composited

Fig. 10. Gym Scene Composited

Communication

The communication between the director and myself was strong thanks to a strong working relationship and a strong preproduction phase. However, there was still creative tension on set at times. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Director-Cinematographer relationship is dependent on the individuals. Some directors are very controlling, while others allow their cinematographer the freedom to explore.

Having worked with the director on multiple projects, I was allowed a lot of freedom on set to run the crew and set shots. I found myself taking on the duty of protecting the director in addition to my traditional lighting and camera roles. I tried to make sure that we had enough coverage of shots, and that our look matched what we discussed during pre-production. On every previous project our roles had been reversed, so there were a few instances that tension built between us. I believe I overstepped my bounds a few times, insisting on some shots that ultimately would not be used in the cut because they were not in line with the director's ultimate vision. However, there were instances where my insistence on getting certain shots helped the director and the film. One instance was in the shot where Mace and Austin run away from one of the gunmen into a second closet, and the camera whips back to see the gunman standing in the hallway. During the initial few takes, the gunman actor turned the corner right as the camera whip panned back. However, I felt that the director would ultimately want some kind of beat before the gunman appeared, to give the audience the feeling of uncertainty as to whether the protagonists were seen. I asked the director for an extra take where the actor waited a beat longer, and she acquiesced. This ended up being the take in the film.

An instance where I feel I overstepped my bounds was in Scene 5, where Austin sits in a full classroom and zones out. The director wanted a simple dolly in on the actress' face, but I felt that a more complex shot would help the film by increasing the production value. The jib was placed on the dolly, and a complicated move where the dolly pushes in as the jib swings in on Austin was attempted. Because of the type of shot, a complex focus pull was also required, which was outside the experience of our young crew. Lastly, the jib started high above the actor and came down, and our camera assistant was too short to smoothly accomplish a move like this. Had I not insisted so strongly on a complex shot, we would have been able to get a solid push in shot in a few tries. Instead, we spent an hour attempting a shot that ultimately did not make the final cut of the film.

The collaborative aspect of the filmmaking process relies heavily on communication between the director and cinematographer. While the cinematographer may have ideas that can contribute to the overall makeup of the film, the vision of the film is ultimately the director's. He/she must be the one to make the final call of shots, and the cinematographer must be willing to remove ego for the greater good of the film.

Scene 31 Re-examined

Scene thirty-one was intended to pick up where scene twelve left off. It was meant to provide the explanation to Austin's motivation for not completing her plan, and also for sacrificing herself to save everyone else. However, scene thirty-one was not filmed at the same time as scene twelve. We lacked the extras that we had during the filming of scene twelve to create the ambiance of the pep rally. In addition, Mace was yelling in the earlier scene due to the noise level, but here he spoke at normal volume

levels. These two logistical issues result in a psychological twist for the audience. Some interpretations read this scene as a tag to the film, the way it was originally intended. Austin does not shoot up the school because Mace notices her. However, a second interpretation was noted after some screenings in which reality is questioned. The multiple flashbacks and hallucinations cause the audience to question the reality they see in front of them, and as a result, this final scene makes them wonder if the entire film happened inside Austin's head. The film begins on a sequence where Austin is shot, so this whole film could be a look back at her life from the afterlife, or it could be a hallucination. This reality questioning scene is similar to the ending of *Inception*, where the audience wonders whether the lead character actually returns home to his children, or if it is all inside a dream like much of the rest of the film.

While the *Inception*-like ending was not intended, it is not undesirable. It changes the film and creates a sense of ambiguity of all the events. However, that is not necessarily a bad thing. The ambiguous ending makes Austin's actions less definitive, but also emphasizes her character more. Whether this is an explanation of the events leading to Austin aborting her plan, a hallucination, or an alternate reality of some sorts, the audience is left analyzing Austin's character and her attitude towards shooting her school. At the end of the film, the audience wonders about what would make someone shoot their school, and the thoughts that go through that person's head, which was the original intent of the script. I believe that by failing to match scene thirty-one with scene twelve both in the visuals and in the actors' performances, our filmmaking team serendipitously stumbled into a better film.

Conclusion

Closet Memories was an experiment in lighting and camera work. It showed the effect of shadow and light on an audience, both in the well-lit high and low key scenes, as well the lack of impact flat bright scenes had in climactic moments. The film was a learning experience demonstrating the importance of story and emotion over camera work. The cinematographer's Prime Directive that Brown discusses is of utmost importance: Do not distract the audience from the story (81). Cinematographers who wish to shoot dramatic thrillers must investigate the emotional content of scenes and match lighting tone while maintaining an overall style. *Closet Memories* demonstrated the importance of camera and lighting both in its successes and its failures.

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