Cinematic Impressionism

Bruno Delbonnel, AFC enlists for *A Very Long Engagement*, a stylized World War I drama that tracks a Frenchwoman's dogged attempts to determine her fiancé's fate on the battlefield.

by BenjaminB

Unit photography by Bruno Calvo

From the first harrowing crane shot snaking through a muddy World War I trench, *A Very Long Engagement* plunges the viewer into an epic, color-charged vision of battle-torn France. Based on the bestselling novel by Sébastien Japrisot, this operatic motion picture tells the story of a young woman's relentless investigation into the death of her fiancé, who was condemned by a military tribunal and sent out to die with four other soldiers in the bleak "no man's land" between the French and German trenches. Denying all evidence to the contrary, Mathilde (Audrey Tautou) stubbornly refuses to believe that her beloved is dead, and enlists the services of a detective to find out all she can about the incident and those involved.

The resulting, far-flung investigation takes us back and forth in time: scenes at Mathilde's home on the coast of Brittany are set in 1920, but flashbacks transport us to the battlefield three years earlier and to other locations throughout France. In addition to bloody battles, the story's ambitious sweep includes scenes set in rural Corsica, a series of bordellos, Montmartre, train sta-

Opposite: To create this moody tableau of the film's heroine walking through Montmartre after dark, cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel and colorist Yvan Lucas composited together day and nighttime footage. Daytime footage of clouds was incorporated into the scene to give the formations more definition in the frame. This page, top: One of the condemned French soldiers makes his way through "no man's land" on the World War I battlefield in the Somme. Below: To provide a stark contrast to the battle scenes, shots of Mathilde's bedroom in Brittany were given a warm, inviting tone.

tions, a field hospital and a military cemetery. The narrative involves a cast of colorful characters, including the avuncular detective, Mathilde's homespun aunt and uncle, a cowardly pimp, a failed revolutionary, a loyal friend and a murderous prostitute. In order to delineate the many strands of this dense detective story, the screen occasionally splits into two or more images that convey the exchange of letters and phone calls or remind viewers of important plot points.

Despite its scale, *A Very Long Engagement* is ultimately a love story driven by a woman's unwavering faith. Director Jean-Pierre Jeunet and cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel, AFC place this simple tale in a world that is more of a personal vision than a historical reenactment. From the very start, Delbonnel's richly colored images transport the viewer past realism and into what could be called cinematic impressionism. As the film reaches its emotional conclusion, the viewer is left with an unforgettable patchwork of multi-hued memories.

Jeunet and Delbonnel's last collaboration, *Amélie*, garnered five Academy Award nominations, including one for Delbonnel's cinematography. The cameraman also earned an ASC Award nomination for his work on the film. *A Very Long Engagement* certainly attempts to capitalize on this success; the mammoth project involved almost seven months of shooting, dozens of locations and a budget of approximately 45 million Euros. Warner Bros. demonstrated its faith in the project by agreeing to co-produce the film in French and by giving Jeunet complete artistic freedom, including final cut. Delbonnel says the design of the film's cinematography was aided by Jeunet's propensity for meticulous preparation. Prior to shooting, the duo worked out and agreed upon a series of guiding principles that would dictate their use of lenses, lighting and color.

In his own approach to cinematography, Delbonnel seeks to limit the variables. On *A Very Long Engagement*, he used only two negatives, Kodak Vision 200T 5274 and Vision2 500T 5218; he employed the latter only when he didn't have enough light to use the 74. He is rigorous about exposure, checking the calibration of his three light meters with his gaffer every morning. He relies upon incident readings, only using a spot meter if he's dealing with a bluescreen shoot or some other specialized application. "I'm not extremely technical," he confesses. "I do exposure tests, but from there I don't move; I stay within the results of my tests. I know that I have three stops above and three stops below, and I play within that range — unless I want the image to be burned out, when I'll go five stops over, or if I want to the image to go

Frame grabs courtesy of Éclair Laboratories (from Vision Premier release prints); photo of crane by gaffer Michel Sabourdy.
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Right: French soldiers huddle in their rainy trench, a.k.a. Bingo Crepuscule. Delbonnel sought to lend these scenes an "oppressive" look and feel. Below: To help control the lighting for the trench, a 460-square-foot frame was suspended above it to block out the sun. The frame was hung from a 70-ton crane and could be tilted to change its orientation.

black, when I'll go six or seven stops under. I've always used Kodak stocks, including their print stocks, because I know them by heart, and they correspond to my way of working. I lock things in early on so that I can focus on lighting and not worry about technique."

For Delbonnel, the release-print stock is an integral part of his cinematographic design. "Everything is linked, and on this show I worked with Vision Premier [2393] in mind from the start," he says, adding that he and Jeunet had to fight for that print stock because it's more expensive.

Although Jeunet gives Delbonnel considerable freedom in the lighting of a sequence, the director is adamant about one aspect of his films. "Jean-Pierre wants to see as much as possible in the frame," says Delbonnel. "One of his guiding principles is to show everything; he doesn't like complete darkness, and there is almost none in the film. An example is a sequence set in a small shed where the condemned soldiers eat at night. I wanted to play it almost abstract, with just the faces visible, but Jean-Pierre wanted to show a little of the background. To get the feeling he wanted, I lowered the contrast a bit so that we still had a sense of the space. In this film, we went further toward darkness than we had before; we even did a few shots in silhouette, where Jean-Pierre agreed to let things go dark."

Another signature trait of Jeunet's work is his systematic use of wide-angle lenses, often placed very close to the actors. Short focal lengths yield a more exaggerated perspective and greater depth of field than longer lenses. For the viewer, the increased perspective heightens the three-dimensional quality of camera moves, while the depth of field keeps more in focus within the frame.

For *Very Long Engagement*, which was shot in Super 35mm 2.35:1, Delbonnel used Arricam Studios and Lites and an Aaton 35-III, all outfitted with Cooke S4 lenses. He used no diffusion on the lens, as he prefers to diffuse with lighting. He notes that the Cookes also naturally soften the image. "For this film, I felt that the Cookes corresponded to my lighting, and the brand also offers a great range of short focal lengths: there are eight lenses between 14mm and 35mm. Working with Jean-Pierre, we could have returned all the lenses above 32mm to Technovision — if they had rented to us by the lens, we could have made some savings!"

The picture was shot principally with 21mm, 25mm and 27mm lenses to give it a strong visual coherence. Delbonnel stresses, however, that it's more difficult to light for wide lenses than long ones. "With short focal lengths, there's a feeling of depth, but the background is a little soft. It's not a beautiful softness, though, so you have to rework the background lighting. You can't just add fill light, because the image quickly becomes flat. Because you

Left: Mathilde's fiancé, Manech (Gaspard Ulliel) observes an enemy plane as he seeks refuge by a tree in no man's land. Below: The crew executes a circular dolly to capture a key moment in the sequence.

can't create depth with soft focus — for example, to isolate a face from the background — you have to do it with lighting.

"Jean-Pierre wants everything to be pretty sharp. I'm therefore obliged to work at a closed-down stop, at least a T4/5.6 in interiors; otherwise, it's too hard for the assistant. But even with a 21mm, if you're doing a close-up of an actress who's 50 centimeters away from the camera, you're going to get some softness in the background no matter what the stop. You need to close down the aperture just to keep both the nose and ears in focus!"

Wide lenses are traditionally avoided for close-ups, because the heightened perspective can make faces bulge in an unflattering way, especially when the actor is close to the camera. Yet *A Very Long Engagement* is rife with beautiful wide-angle close-ups of Tautou. Delbonnel explains that each face is rendered differently by a given lens, and before shooting *Amélie*, the filmmakers sought the ideal lens for the actress. "We did tests to find out the focal lengths and the camera height that suited her best. Jean-Pierre doesn't like to have a camera at eye height, so there's always a slight tilt up or down. With a short focal length, a tilted camera quickly becomes significant in terms of perspective. We found the slight tilt angle, usually a tilt up, which was the limit that Audrey's face can take. We saw that her face worked well with the 25mm and 27 mm. The 21mm still works for her, but you have to be careful; the 18mm doesn't work, nor does the 35mm."

The close-ups in *A Very Long Engagement* have a peculiar intimacy, with the actors' gaze often almost head-on into the lens. Delbonnel describes Jeunet's camera positions as "inquisitive, almost peering into the actors' soul." The director likes eyelines very close to camera. During dialogue scenes, the crew sometimes taped a foam cushion on the camera side, so that the offscreen actor could press his face against the camera to help direct the eyes of his on-camera counterpart. On modern sets, cameras are festooned with wires and accessories, but Delbonnel says that Jeunet wants a "naked camera" to allow himself and his actors access, and to avoid distracting the players. This often meant stripping the camera of its mattebox, a highly unusual configuration.

Much of the film's poetry is created through fluid camera movements. The camera is often on the move, whether creeping around a dialogue scene or swooping above a battlefield. Jeunet designs the shots with extensive storyboards, and he avoids traditional master shots and over-the-shoulders. As is often the

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One of Jeunet's stylistic signatures is his unconventional use of wide-angle lenses for close-ups. To maximize the effectiveness of this tactic, Delbonnel conducted tests with lead actress Audrey Tautou to determine the best lenses to employ. "We saw that her face worked well with the 25mm and 27mm," the cinematographer reveals. "The 21mm still works for her, but you have to be careful; the 18mm doesn't work, nor does the 35mm."

case on European films, Delbonnel did all of the A-camera operating, and he also operated the frequent crane shots, which were accomplished with a Technocrane and SuperTechnocrane. Valentin Monge operated the numerous Steadicam shots.

Delbonnel prefers soft lighting, noting that "it's essentially a question of sensibility. I really love soft light, but I have a lot of problems with hard shadows; it must be my way of seeing the world. But while my lighting is very soft, I want it to be contrasty." He adds that he has a propensity for side sources, and he avoids frontal lighting, even for fill. "I've seen other cinematographers make sublime images with frontlight, but I just can't do it. Every time I try it, it doesn't look good to my eye. So it comes back to a matter of taste."

The most daunting part of the shoot was the six weeks set in the trenches. Delbonnel offers, "We wanted an oppressive sky, with the feeling that the sky was pushing down on the soldiers below. We also started out with the rule that there would be no sunshine in the trenches, and that there would always be sunshine at Mathilde's house in Brittany." The filmmakers were able to hew to their rules with a few notable exceptions, including a sunlit battle that could not be rescheduled. Although the resultant scene is beautifully backlit, the cinematographer didn't want any sequences to be "too beautiful to depict the horror of war."

The trenches were roughly 220 yards long, and Delbonnel made a daring proposal: to build a 460-square-foot frame and suspend it above the trenches to block out the sun. The weighty frame would be suspended from a 70-ton crane and equipped with a hydraulic system to tilt its orientation. "Everyone looked at me as though I were crazy, but I told them that it was the only way to shoot when it was sunny and ensure continuity. That sunk in pretty quickly." With a laugh, he adds, "I actually asked for two frames to begin with, but that didn't go down."

Delbonnel had the giant frame tinted a slight gray-green to lend an overall cast to the trenches below. The frame served alternatively as a light filter or light source. From Transpalux, the production rented "La Grue," a huge crane outfitted with six 18K HMIs that would provide light through the frame when there wasn't enough exposure in the trenches. When the production added cranes to provide rain, the vast location began to look like a giant construction site. For night exteriors, "La Grue" provided a

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The filmmmakers lent a comforting glow to both exteriors and interiors set at the house in Brittany. According to Delbonnel, "We started out with the rule that there would be no sunshine in the trenches, and that there would always be sunshine at Mathilde's house in Brittany."

slight backlight, with top fill light generated by three 8K helium balloons and, sometimes military flares.

Down in the trenches, Delbonnel further colored the daytime image by adding an 81EF filter on the lens. The resulting images had a bluish tint that combined with the soft greenish fill from the frame above. When needed, he had his electricians carry an 800-watt HMI on a pole in front of the actors "to bring out their eyes."

When the filmmakers moved to studio interiors — like Mathilde's home, a string of bordellos, or the detective's office — he continued his strategy of a soft light coming from above. "My gaffer and I developed a luminous ceiling that can be part of the set," he reveals. "It's made of very dense, brushed cotton — the same cotton that set decorators use on their sets — and I light through it. The light is spread evenly over the whole ceiling and it gives a base fill level that separates the elements of the set. There are even some scenes where it's in the shot!" For a day interior, he might set this overhead "shower" at 1½ to 2 stops below key.

Delbonnel uses space lights or 5K soft lights to pierce through the ceiling. He adds that the units are patched through dimmers so he can warm the color temperature quickly and easily. If the ceiling is out of frame, he sometimes turns off lights to create a brighter center that helps separate the actors below from the background.

On set and on location, Delbonnel typically keys his lighting with large sources, such as Dino lights for the Brittany day interiors. "It's a classical choice that goes back to the work of cinematographers like Vittorio Storaro [ASC, AIC] and John Alcott [BSC]: the bigger and farther away the source is, the more you can work it — cut it or diffuse it. I keep things simple. In general, I start from a big source and play with the distance of the fixture and the diffusion in front of it to soften the light more or less. One great advantage of a big source is that it will wrap around a face. I will only use spots in the background. Again, I never have light behind the camera;

it either comes from the side or from above. I add very little inside the set; I try to build the lighting as a function of the set and the frame."

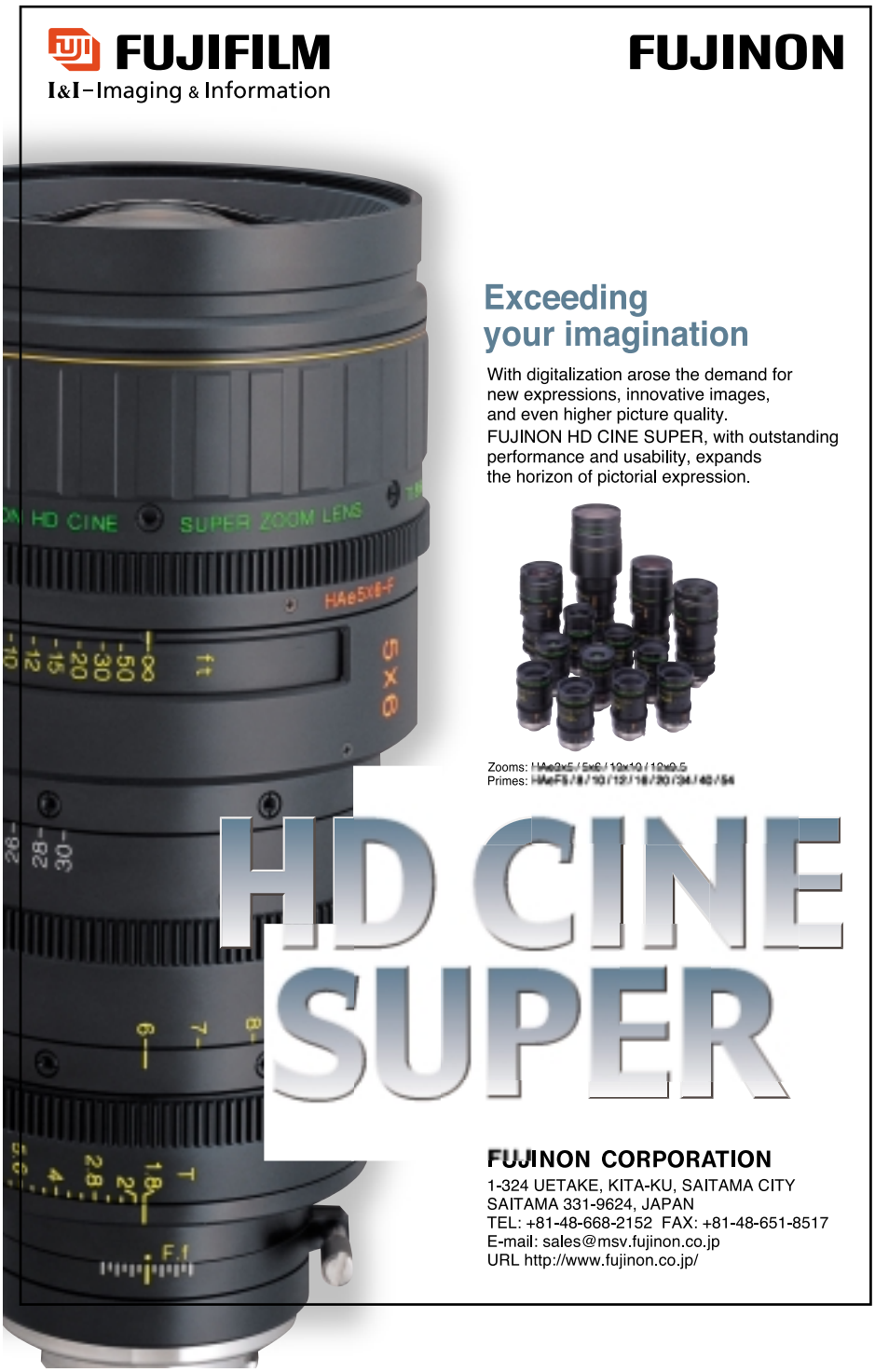
Although he avoids lights on the set, Delbonnel occasionally uses a Kino Flo Flathead 80 with diffusion to supplement a large source. "The Flathead allows us to be near the actors because it doesn't heat up." When using reflectors, he avoids white. "I don't like white reflections on the skin — you feel them." He uses a gold reflector instead, or creates bounce light off a straw gel.

Delbonnel stresses that his lighting is not realistic. "Realism doesn't interest me! I strive for an unrealistic approach. It's very important to me, and it's why I don't do certain films. For example, in this film we have scenes set in 1920, but there is no gaslight." He adds that the strong colors of the film are "an affirmation that what you are seeing is not reality. We're not reconstituting a period; we're not doing sepia. We're in a world that has existed, but isn't a reference to other depictions."

At this point in the discussion, the cinematographer pauses to praise Gordon Willis, ASC. For Delbonnel, one of the landmarks of cinematography is Willis' pioneering use of skirted bay lights (or "chicken coops") to illuminate scenes from above in the *Godfather* movies. Prior to production on *A Very Long Engagement*, Jeunet screened the flashback sequences of *Godfather II*, set in Sicily and New York, for key collaborators as a reference for designing a warm color scheme. The color palette of *Engagement* is quite a bit more varied, however, and contributes much to the film's modern look.

Delbonnel broadly divides the film into the "cold" colors of the wartime trenches and the "warm" world of peacetime. The key color for the film is brown, "sometimes a reddish brown, as in Mathilde's bedroom; sometimes a yellow brown, as in the hospital; and sometimes a greenish brown, as in the trenches. Brown is what ties the two parts of the movie together. We didn't want a completely unified tone. The color is warm and rather monochromatic, but we always sought to bring out spots of other colors. For the trenches, the image is cold and always anchored on the blue of the French soldiers' uniforms."

Delbonnel singles out Éclair Laboratories colorist Yvan Lucas for his contribution to the film's sophisticated range of colors. In the 1990s, Lucas made great contributions to the application of silver-retention processes like ENR, notably on every Jeunet film that has used them. "Yvan is one of the best timers in the world," Delbonnel says, adding with a chuckle,



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Right: Mathilde's dark counterpart, imprisoned prostitute Tina Lombardi (Marion Cotillard), provides our heroine with crucial pieces of the story's puzzle. During postproduction, flashbacks were sometimes composited into various sequences as a stylish way to help viewers follow the narrative. Below: Seeking revenge for her own lost love, Tina seduces a villainous commandant before dispatching him with some very unkind cuts.

"I wish I had his film credits! He has an exceptional eye. He's not just someone who times my image. I want him to bring something to the image. We talk a lot. There were some rushes where I told him, 'Do this, and if you want to, try something else.' Sometimes he goes too far, and sometimes it's better than what I imagined."

In a telephone interview, Lucas explains that Jeunet and Delbonnel asked him to follow the production "from initial tests, to hi-def timed dailies, to timing, to the first theater screenings, and through to the DVD." Using a Discreet Lustre, Delbonnel and Lucas spent six weeks on the digital intermediate (DI) at Éclair, where they were visited frequently by Jeunet. "I come from photochemical processes like ENR, and I always strive to conserve the grain, the substance of film," says Lucas. "I'm a little traditional that way." He notes that the look of *A Very Long Engagement* was refined by a kind of "virtual" cinematography. "It's as if Bruno had put more filters or gels on his lights, but in the DI. We stayed in the spirit of traditional timing, but with a lot more possibilities. To me, the feel of the film corresponds a little bit to ENR."

A key component of the color timing was desaturating the image and then enhancing certain colors. For the peacetime footage, says Lucas, "we added red to the blacks and desaturated, which yields a brownish hue. We then increased selected colors, and this added color was made more important because of the desaturation." Delbonnel adds that "once you get past the basic opposition between warm and cold, the color is linked to the nature of the set. But [it's linked] even more to the [location] of the sequence in the film and its proximity to the trenches or to Brittany."

When the filmmakers tried heightening several colors in the frame, recalls Lucas, "All of a sudden, the image became normal, so we decided pretty quickly to only strengthen one color. It became the

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Cotillard's prostitute adopts an ironic disguise as Delbonnel seeks divine inspiration.

rule for the film, but there were exceptions. For example, in the Orsay train station, we wanted to showcase the blue-greens of the glass façade and the brown of the costumes." Lucas cautions that the amount of coloring required a delicate touch. "Obviously, the colors are not realistic, but if we had gone any further with them I don't think we would have been able to include as many different hues in the film — it would have been too much. Bruno and I always strove for finesse."

Delbonnel recalls that the colors for the trench scenes were the hardest to come by. "We got the color by seeking out the clay brown of the earth," he says. Adds Lucas, "I can't even describe the color of the trenches. I can't call it green or blue-green. We ended up calling it a clay hue. Our job was difficult because everything is linked to the contrast, and there were also those blue-gray costumes that had to be strengthened."

Delbonnel reminds us that faces are essential to cinema. For the trench scenes, he shot tests to find a pale, greenish makeup for the actors that would remain white when he later warmed up the image digitally. "In the trenches, despite everything else, you go to the faces. The faces have a different tone than the rest of the image. That's why I didn't want just one color, because an image where everything is the same tonality doesn't direct your eye. In cinema, the viewer's eye must go towards the actors' faces."

For peacetime scenes, Lucas notes, "We brightened the faces by

putting a little gold in the midtones and the whites." While working on peacetime exteriors, the team sought to create golden browns. "For the split-screens, though, we never tried to respect the original colors, but rather to contrast them. So they are very marked." To further direct the viewer's eye, Delbonnel asked Lucas to use Power Windows to add a slight vignetting to much of the film, which subtly harks back to early silent films.

A Very Long Engagement was output via Arrilaser directly to an interpositive, skipping the usual negative stock generation. Lucas observes that the resultant image is "a little sharper. Even though there's not a huge difference, you're a little closer to the original negative." He adds that Delbonnel's choice of Vision Premier print stock was essential to the DI, because it renders "beautiful blacks and increases the apparent sharpness," compensating for the slight loss inherent in the 2K process.

As Delbonnel looks back on the production, he takes time to thank the many collaborators who made it possible: Steadicam operator Monge, gaffer Michel Sabourdy, first AC Eric Vallée, key grip Bruno Dubet and post supervisor Lionel Kopp. He also cites Technovision's Natasza Chroscicki, Transpalux' Didier Diaz and Éclair's Olivier Chiavassa for their support, and credits Duboi's Alain Carsoux and his team for "stunning" visual effects.

Asked about the impressionistic feel of *A Very Long Engagement*, Delbonnel offers, "In the past, I always thought it was false to compare cinema to painting. There's been a century of cinema, which is distinct from photography and painting. So my references have always been the great cinematographers, like Gianni Di Venanzo and [ASC members] Conrad Hall, Sven Nykvist and Vilmos Zsigmond. However, the DI is a new step in the creation of a film. With this process, we can start to work with elements that are close to painting, and we can work on contrast and color relationships that were impossible with photochemistry." ■

TECHNICAL SPECS

Super 35mm 2.35:1

Arricam Studio, Lite; Aaton 35-III
Cooke S4 lenses

Kodak Vision 200T 5274,
Vision2 500T 5218

Digital Intermediate by
Éclair Laboratories

Printed on
Kodak Vision Premier 2393