

American Museum of the

Moving Image

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MASTER CLASS: THE ART OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

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AN AFTERNOON WITH CONRAD HALL

Sunday, September 29

2:00 p.m. A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH CONRAD HALL

FAT CITY

Columbia, 1972, 96 mins. Restored 35mm print source: Sony Pictures.

Directed by John Huston. Produced by Ray Stark. Written by Leonard Gardner from his own book. Photographed by Conrad Hall. Edited by Margaret Booth. Music supervised by Marvin Hamlisch. Production design by Richard Sylbert. Sound design by Tom Overton and A. Piantadosi. Principal cast: Stacy Keach (as Tully), Jeff Bridges (Ernie), Susan Tyrrell (Oma), Candy Clark (Faye), Nicholas Colasanto (Ruben), Art Aragon (Babe), Curtis Cokes (Earl), Sixto Rodriguez (Lucero), and Billy Walker (Wes).

The screening will be followed by a discussion with Conrad Hall, moderated by Peter Dowd, Curator of Film.

4:15 p.m. A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH CONRAD HALL

SEARCHING FOR BOBBY FISCHER

Paramount, 1993, 110 mins. 35mm print source: Paramount.

Written and directed by Steve Zaillian, based upon the book by Fred Waitzkin. Produced by Scott Rudin and William Horberg. Photographed by Conrad Hall. Edited by Wayne Wahrman. Original music by James Horner. Production design by David Gropman. Sound by David Lee. Principal cast: Max Pomerac (as Josh Waitzkin), Joan Allen (Bonnie Waitzkin), Fred Waitzkin (Joe Mantegna), Bruce Pandolfini (Ben Kingsley), and Vinnie (Laurence Fishburne).

The screening will be followed by a discussion with Conrad Hall, moderated by Peter Dowd, Curator of Film.

7:00 p.m. INTRODUCED BY CONRAD HALL

IN COLD BLOOD

Columbia, 1967, 134 mins. **Restored 35mm print source: Sony Pictures.**

Written, produced, and directed by Richard Brooks. Based on the book by Truman Capote.

Photographed by Conrad Hall. Edited by Peter Zinner. Original score by Quincy Jones. Production design by Robert Boyle. Sound by William Randall, Jr., A. Piantadosi, and Richard Tyler. With Robert Blake (as Terry Smith), Scott Wilson (Dick Hickock), Alvin Dewey (John Forsythe), Paul Stewart (Reporter), Gerard S. O'Laughlin (Harold Nye), Jeff Corey (Mr. Hickock), John Gallaudet (Roy Church), James Flavin (Clarence Duntz), Charles McGraw (Mr. Smith), and Will Geer (Prosecutor).

About Conrad Hall

As one of the most revered and influential cinematographers, Conrad L. Hall (his son, Conrad W. Hall, has also becoming a noted director of photography who recently shot *Panic Room*) first made his mark amidst the cultural shifts of 1960s Hollywood. University of Southern California film graduate who literally pulled his career out of a hat, Hall worked in television on shows such as *The Outer Limits* to develop his skills. With *Morituri*, *The Professionals*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *In Cold Blood*, *Hell in the Pacific*, *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, he contributed to an emerging new sensibility in cinema and used innovative lighting techniques—from sunny, golden hues to expressive black and white—to give film a new and varied look without imposing his own aesthetic. His compelling photography for socially dynamic films continued throughout the next decade, with his work on *Fat City*, *Electra Glide in Blue*, *The Day of the Locust*, *Marathon Man*, and *The Rose*. After nearly a decade's absence behind the camera, (he has been vocal about his disapproval of violence that has become so prevalent in Hollywood films) he returned to form, impressively shooting *Tequila Sunrise*, *Jennifer 8*, *Searching for Bobby Fisher*, *Without Limits*, and *A Civil Action*. Recently, he has found a worthy collaborator in Sam Mendes, shooting *American Beauty* and *The Road to Perdition* to great acclaim. Hall has been nominated for nine Academy Awards, winning two (for *Butch Cassidy and American Beauty*), and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Film Critics. —Lucas Hilderbrand.

Conrad Hall

Films as Director of Photography:

Road to Perdition (2002, directed by Sam Mendes)
American Beauty (1999, Sam Mendes)
A Civil Action (1998, Steven Zaillian)
Without Limits (1998, Robert Towne)
Love Affair (1994, Glen Gordon Caron)
Searching For Bobby Fischer (1993, Steven Zaillian)
Jennifer Eight (1992, Bruce Robinson)
Class Action (1991, Michael Apted)
Tequila Sunrise (1988, Robert Towne)
Black Widow (1987, Bob Rafelson)
Marathon Man (1976, John Schlesinger)
Smile (1975, Michael Ritchie)
The Day of the Locust (1975, John Schlesinger)
Catch My Soul (1974, Patrick McGoochan)
Electra Glide in Blue (1973, James William Guercio)

Fat City (1972, John Huston)
The Happy Ending (1969, Richard Brooks)
Tell Them Willie Boy is Here (1969, Abraham Polonsky)
Trilogy [Segment "A Christmas Memory"] (1969, Frank Perry)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969, George Roy Hill)
Hell in the Pacific (1968, John Boorman)
Rogues' Gallery (1968, Leonard Horn)
In Cold Blood (1967, Richard Brooks)
Cool Hand Luke (1967, Stuart Rosenberg)
Divorce American Style (1967, Bud Yorkin)
The Professionals (1966, Richard Brooks)
Harper (1966, Jack Smight)
Incubus (1965, Leslie Stevens)
Morituri (1965, Bernhard Wicki)
Wild Seed (1965, Brian G. Hutton)
Edge of Fury (1958, Robert J. Gurney Jr. and Irving Lerner)

From the article "Talking with Shooting Stars: Interviews with 14 of the World's Greatest Cinematographers," by David Geffner, *MovieMaker Magazine*, July, 1998:

Why was Conrad Hall the only DP who got everybody's vote when MovieMaker compiled this list? Maybe it's his six Oscar nominations for films like *The Day of the Locust*, *In Cold Blood*, *Morituri*, *The Professionals*, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, and *Tequila Sunrise*. Or for winning the little gold guy for what is arguably the most popular western of all time, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Spanning nearly five decades, Hall's career is still going strong with the upcoming Steve Prefontaine bio-pic, *Without Limits*. Most legends are looking to step down by the time they get this kind of universal respect. Hall's just getting revved up.

MovieMaker: Was there a key moment you can point to when you knew you would end up being a cinematographer?

Conrad Hall: Well, there was a moment alright, but it was pure chance. I had no plans to be a cinematographer-none whatsoever.

But I thought you went to USC to study cinema.

No, I went to USC to study journalism. I got a D+ in one class and I didn't feel like repeating it so I had to pick another major and cinema sounded exciting. After I graduated from USC, I started a partnership with two other students to make documentary films. We did anything that came our way. We weren't selective at all. During one slow period, we decided to option a short story-"My Brother Down There," by Martha Foley-and make a film of it. We wrote the script and did the budget together, and when we were ready to shoot we realized we had to divide up the jobs. So we put the three top jobs in a hat-producer, director, cinematographer-and picked. I suppose you can guess which one I got stuck with!

If you had to come up with a single element a DP needs to succeed, what would it be?

Sleep! They work you 14-16 hours a day now and it's really hard to be creative and sharp without a lot of rest! (laughs) But seriously, I believe a DP needs to stay contemporary to excel at his or her craft. You need to evolve, not just technically, but also as a person-to be wiser, kinder, more educated. To stay contemporary is to be truly alive in your work and your life.

From a profile by Julian Petley and Denise Delorey, *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers: Writers and Production Artists*, (St. James Press, 1992):

As David Engelbach points out in *Millimeter*, “in the two years following *In Cold Blood*, Hall shot Stuart Rosenberg’s best film *Cool Hand Luke* and John Boorman’s strangely stylized adventure *Hell in the Pacific*. It was a period of genuine creative growth for American films and Hall was in the center of it. New directors had come along anxious to make critical, imaginative statements and eager to sue the medium more imaginatively. During this period, every other interesting movie seemed to be shot by Conrad Hall.”

For all his interest in using film as a social medium, Hall is not a cinematographer who tries to put a personal signature on all his films. As he once said, “I don’t think I have a style. I know I don’t want one.” Somewhat self-effacingly, Hall chooses the style to suit the material, as Engelbach suggests: “from the slick romanticism of *The Day of the Locust* to the hard-bitten realism of John Huston’s *Fat City*, he has managed to portray and illuminate, through the visual atmosphere he imparts to a film, the psychological and emotional content of the material which often lies beneath the surface of the written script.” If one is looking for stylistic signatures it is certainly possible to detect a preference for widescreen formats, and a gradual move away from the saturated color which distinguish, for example, *The Professionals* and *Harper*. ...

On the other hand, Hall’s films can be taken separately and admired for their individual beauties—the soft pastels of *Smile*, the flashlight murder in *In Cold Blood*, or the rich tones of *Butch Cassidy*, which have been described by one critic as “alternately lyrical and foreboding.” Equally sumptuous was *Day of the Locust*, which Hall describes as “a golden picture. I thought that this was a story that involved everything that was golden, not only the times but the money, the sunsets, the era and the idea of the moth drawn to the flame,” that is, the losers lured towards destruction by their romantic dreams of fame and fortune. Rather than concentrate on the meagerness of the characters’ actual lives Schlesinger and Hall decided that the look of the film should evoke fantasies. As Hall himself explains it: “Karen Black’s character, when she’s thinking about movies, always sees the glamorous aspect of it and always sees herself in it even though her life is nothing. So the visual approach was one that coincided with her dreams to make it more palatable for the audience. To me the best way to tell that story is to match the despair of it. But then again, if you did it that way, you’d have to somehow make despair palatable at the box office. I think that’s possible.” Possible or not, this is what Huston and Hall tried to do with *Fat City*; as Hall puts it “photographically speaking, I tried to make it real. I tried to make it the way it is. I tried not to make it look like a motion picture; I tried to make it look like a social study of down-and-out people rather than a slick way of looking at down-and-out people. I didn’t want to beautify it in any way that would make it seem attractive. I made it abrasive; I tried to make the photography abrasive just as their lives were.” Hall deliberately goes for an anonymous look to match the anonymity of the characters’ lives, simply following the action as opposed to obviously adding anything to it. “If I could’ve hid the camera, it’s what I would have done,” adds Hall, a remarkable and revealing statement for one of Hollywood’s top cameramen.

From an interview with Conrad Hall, *Lighting Dimensions*, July/August 1977:

“It wasn’t until I got out of school and into the motion picture industry and I had to do the lighting myself that I learned what light really did. *You don’t ever learn much about light until you do it yourself*, and I don’t mean until you ask somebody else to do it for you, like a gaffer. When you place the light yourself, barndoor it, cut it or measure it, these kinds of things deal with the light itself and teach you a lot more than having someone else do it. I’d like to add here, that it’s important to study something that’s aligned to lighting, like painting; and it’s important simply to watch life, in addition to the technical aspect. While I’ve never been much for studying painting in regard to light, I know that other cameramen have, and I think it’s valuable. I have been involved in seminars where I’ve had very little to say because I never studied lighting through painting. But *I* have studied lighting by watching life—watching how it plays out its effects on people and on things. That’s how I became aware of light as a changeable and dramatic force.”

Fat City

From a review in *Variety*, May 24, 1972:

For his first film in the U.S. in over 10 years (since *The Misfits*), John Huston has brought off a terse, sharp, downbeat but compassionate look at the underside of small-town American life in the west, actually in central California in the town of Stockton.

It is about boxing, about failures, about part-time agricultural workers, but really about those who, in defeat, still have meaning. The allusion stems from the old American dream of another chance, a reward for trying and for triumph in competition. Huston has been blessed by a sparse, sharply incisive and brilliantly dialogued script by Leonard Gardner from his own much praised novel.

In *Fat City*, Huston catches the feel of the community with a lean, no-nonsense economy, a hard-boiled but humanly alert feeling which raises the tale from a purely naturalistic lowlife depiction of the characters to make a statement on the life style of the drifters and those who accept a moderate place in the small-town hierarchy.

Good handling should get *Fat City* playoff at home and abroad. Stacy Keach is extraordinary as a laconic, hurt ex-boxer who makes one more try, but then falls back into his drinking and drifting ways.

Jeff Bridges is fine as a young man on the way up who befriends Keach. Susan Tyrrell is effective as the sleazy but humanly disarming alcoholic who lives with a black man and tries to find a niche in a society still harsh toward interracial intimate relationships. It is she who stays with Keach while her man is in jail and then turns Keach out when he comes back.

Nicholas Colasanto is intriguing as the smalltime fight manager on the tanktown circuit who tries to create winners and though not a racist, with a Mexican wife, he realizes there has to be a place for whites, too, in a game that is usually a hope and out for the more economically and socially oppressed.

The excellent work of cinematographer Conrad Hall is also to be noted as he catches the grays and feel of a smalltown with his subdued but suggestive colors while crisp editing and a fine choice of settings combine to make this one of those sharply reflective American films which have a timely crispness, but transcends it to make a statement on man's endeavors, sans hokum sentimentality, or, above all, copping out. Music is also an asset.

For some reason, pic was non-competing as an homage to Huston but certainly would have shown well in competition.

Searching For Bobby Fischer

From a review by Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 11, 1993:

"There was a boy, a chess player, once, who revealed that his gift consisted partly in a clear inner vision of potential moves of each piece as objects with flashing or moving tails of coloured light: He saw a live possible pattern of potential moves and selected them according to which ones made the pattern strongest, the tensions greatest. His mistakes were made when he selected not the toughest, but the most beautiful lines of light." From *The Virgin in the Garden*, by A. S. Byatt
Child prodigies are found most often in three fields: chess, mathematics and music. All three depend upon an intuitive grasp of complex relationships. None depends on social skills, maturity, or insights into human relationships. A child who is a genius at chess can look at a board and see a universe that is invisible to the wisest adult.

This is both a blessing and a curse. There is a beauty to the gift, but it does not necessarily lead to greater happiness in life as a whole.

The wonderful new film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* contains in its title a reminder of that truth. Bobby Fischer was arguably the greatest chess player of all time. As a boy, he faced and defeated the greatest players of his time. In 1972, after a prelude of countless controversies, he won the world chess championship away from the Russians for the first time in years. Then he essentially disappeared into a netherworld of rented rooms, phantom sightings, paranoid outbursts and allegiance to a religious

cult. He reappeared not long ago to win a lucrative chess match in Yugoslavia, for which he was willing to lose his citizenship. His games are models of elegance and artistry. His life does not inspire envy. *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, a film of remarkable sensitivity and insight, tells a story based on fact, about a “new” Bobby Fischer—a young boy named Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc) who was born with a gift for chess, which he nurtured in the rough-and-tumble world of chess hustlers in New York’s Washington Square Park. His parents are at first doubtful of his talent, then proud of it, then concerned about how he can develop it without stunting the other areas of his life.

The film is the first intelligent one I can remember seeing about chess. That is the case even though no knowledge of chess is necessary to understand it, and some of the filmmaking strategies—such as showing most of the moves at lightning speed—simply ignore the periods of inaction in games. It is intelligent because it is about the meaning of chess, a game that has been compared to war and plundered for its lurking Freudian undertones, and yet is essentially just an arrangement of logical outcomes.

In the film, Josh learns the moves by watching them played in the park. At first his parents, Fred and Bonnie Waitzkin (Joe Mantegna and Joan Allen), are even unaware he can play, and there is a sweet scene in which the boy allows his father to win a game, to spare his feelings. Josh’s first teacher is a black chess hustler named Vinnie (Laurence Fishburne), who uses an in-your-face approach and advises unorthodox moves to throw an opponent off. Eventually Fred becomes convinced his son needs more advanced tutelage, and hires the brilliant but prickly Bruce Pandolfini (Ben Kingsley), a difficult case—but then all good chess players are difficult cases.

The difference in strategy between Vinnie and Bruce is much simplified in the film, and comes down to whether you should develop your queen at an early stage in the game. For the film, the queen is just a symbol of their opposed styles; the movie is really about personalities, and how they express themselves through chess.

The screenplay by Steven Zaillian, based on Fred Waitzkin’s autobiographical book, is best when it deals with the issues surrounding competitive chess. Is winning, for example, the only thing? Is chess so important that it should absorb all the attention of a young prodigy, or is his development as a normal little boy also crucial? Why does one play serious chess in the first place? There is a cautionary moment when Fred Waitzkin sees his first professional chess tournament - an ill-fitted room filled with players, mostly men, mostly silent, bending over their boards as if in prayer - and is warned that this is the world his son will inhabit.

By the end of *Searching for Bobby Fischer* we have learned something about tournament chess, and a great deal about human nature. The film’s implications are many. They center around our responsibility, if any, to our gifts. If we can operate at the genius level in a given field, does that mean we must - even if the cost is the sort of endless purgatory a Bobby Fischer has inhabited? It’s an interesting question, and this movie doesn’t avoid it.

At the end, it all comes down to that choice faced by the young player that A. S. Byatt writes about: the choice between truth and beauty. What makes us men is that we can think logically. What makes us human is that we sometimes choose not to.

In Cold Blood

From a review by Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 9, 2002:

In Cold Blood was the great best seller of its time, and a year later Richard Brooks made a stark black and white film from the book, using Conrad Hall’s widescreen compositions to capture the flat, wide, windswept plains where the murders took place. He had originally hoped to use Paul Newman and Steve McQueen as the two killers, but that casting would have hopelessly skewed the film in the wrong direction, making Smith and Hickock into glamorous Dostoevskian heroes who would have been wrong, all wrong, for this sad and shabby story. Eventually he found two newcomers, Scott Wilson and Robert Blake, who embodied the drifters with their unshaped, witless personalities. As individuals, a psychiatrist in the film tells us, they would have been incapable of murder; together they formed a personality that took four lives. The Smith character says: “When Dick first told me the

plan, it didn't even seem real. And then the closer we got, the more real it became." The plan was for him to kill the Clutters; Hickock, who knew himself incapable of murder, wanted to leave no witnesses, and so found himself a man "crazy enough" to pull the triggers. That Smith, who is the nicer of the two, the one who wants to back out, who feels pity for the Clutters, is the one who kills them is explained in the film by flashbacks to his own tortured childhood. In the most famous line from book or movie, he observes, "I thought Mr. Clutter was a very nice gentleman. I thought so right up to the time I cut his throat."

The film generated controversy from those who found it gratuitously violent (even though all the killings take place offscreen), an apology for murderers, a kneejerk liberal attack on capital punishment. It was much more shocking in 1967 than it would be today; and was linked with *Bonnie and Clyde*, another 1967 film, in punditry about the decay of Hollywood values. But it won Oscar nominations for Brooks' direction and screenplay, Conrad Hall's cinematography, and the score by Quincy Jones (which launched his Hollywood career).

In Cold Blood achieved renewed notoriety in 2002 with the arrest of Robert Blake for the alleged murder of his wife. Conrad Hall's most famous shot began to turn up on all the newscasts: A closeup of Blake's face on the night Perry Smith is scheduled to be hanged, with light shining onto it through a rainy window so that the rain seems to be tears running down his skin.

To the degree that there's any connection between *In Cold Blood* and Blake's real-life troubles, it can be explained by typecasting: Robert Blake, in person and in many of his characters, seems born to be a victim pushed around by others, dismissed because of his short stature, carrying old grievances and wounds. For his entire professional life he was haunted by resentment about the way his family and the studios treated him as a hard-working child star, who was in the Our Gang comedies (billed as Mickey Gubitosi and later as Bobby Blake) and played Little Beaver in the Red Ryder movies; he had made nearly 100 features and shorts by the time, at 10, he had a bit role in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, as the little Mexican boy who sells the lottery ticket to Humphrey Bogart.

Blake's unhappy childhood seems to find a mirror in the tortured childhood of Perry Smith, who is seen in flashbacks idolizing a glamorous Mexican mother who appears with her husband in a rodeo show before alcoholism turns her into a prostitute. The moment of Herbert Clutter's murder, in the movie, is intercut with a flashback to Perry's enraged father turning a shotgun on the boy and pulling the trigger; unloaded, that gun seemingly waited for decades for Smith to pull its trigger and shoot back at his father.

Just as Capote plundered real lives for his "non-fiction novel," so Brooks shot on real locations, using Holcomb and the actual Clutter home, and hiring local people as extras. There is creepy voodoo at work in scenes where we see actors recreating the Clutter's happy lives in the very house where the real family lived. Was this necessary? When I interviewed Blake in 1968, he said: "If we shot it in Nebraska, people would say, 'Isn't that just like Hollywood? It happens in Kansas and they shoot it in Nebraska.'" "

Brooks' great achievement in the film is to portray Smith and Hickock as the unexceptional, dim-witted, morally adrift losers they were. There is an outlaw tradition in Hollywood that tends to glamorize killers, but there is nothing attractive about Perry Smith, chewing aspirin by the handful because of the pain of legs torn apart in a motorcycle accident, or Dick Hickock, fixated on "leaving no witnesses." The film follows them on a road odyssey down long, lonely highways, shows them escaping to Mexico only to return, reduces their dreams of wealth to an extraordinary sequence where they team with a little boy and his grandfather in collecting empty soda bottles for the 3-cent redemption fee.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible by a generous grant from the Pinewood Foundation.

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