

„Mank”: On the philosophy of the virtual world of film



AUTHOR: Andrej Kozina

SOURCE: *Imdb.com*

Fincher’s “poem of the modern world” *The Social Network*, written by Aaron Sorkin, was named one of the best movies of the last decade (among other things, even better than Quentin Tarantino!). Lately, though, the director was more involved with the television series than movies, so he gave us a chance to immerse ourselves in the complex and fascinating mind of serial killers on Netflix, through two seasons (there won’t be a third one), with the series called *Mindhunter*. In the history of cinematography, he’s known for movies such as *Seven*, *Zodiac*, and *Fight Club*: and in an anthology known for his use of a digital camera Viper (*Zodiac*) and the first Redica for *The Social Network*. He did not return to Film any longer and is one of the proponents of digital recording.¹

¹ Let us remind ourselves, George Lucas made the first step in digital recording, consider how the resolution wasn’t half as good as the one on the Film - but since Lucas needed it for an easier workflow, it is understandable why he slacken up. Later, Peter Jackson gets the opportunity to test the first (“related to Film”) digital camera produced by the owner of a sunglasses company, and his goal was to offer filmmakers a solid alternative for digital recording; it was the beginning of the RED came-

You can watch Fincher's latest film on Netflix; with the proviso, it will be shown in some cinemas (following the rules of the Oscars). "With the arrival of the Pandemic, there's also radical measures related to cinema distribution that has been talked about a lot in recent days ..." - the very thought of how the *blockbusters* will be available through the HBO Max platform (which isn't available in Croatia!) and in cinema, has awakened some ghosts. The very idea of watching movies at home is newer: earlier, due to the complexity of the process, "home movie" was a utopia - later first at the tape level (16, 8), and then with the development of television - it became a possibility. Of course, at first glance, watching movies at home seems like an innocent act, but if done wrong, it can be disastrous for the "author's stamp". Namely, watching a movie on TV does not necessarily mean that it is calibrated. It is a well-known fact - which filmmakers try to fight against - that the TV is calibrated, and excessively so, in order to attract customers, and not as is correct! Correct calibration depends on the color *gamut* that the TV has (how many colors it can display): we have several options; REC 709 (most common gamut), DCI - P3 (cinema), REC 2020 (4K, HDR). All above goes beyond ACES (which is made as the broadest gamut and, theoretically, by color representation can compete with Film; shows all the colors that the human eye sees). ACES (Academy Color Encoding System) is available in the color editing program (DaVinci Resolve, for example), but it hasn't yet become standard anywhere else. TVs that faithfully display content are expensive, and although the authors fight for their commercial availability (and to return *motion blur*, among other things), it is still better known to filmmakers than to the audience. But today, when that choice depends on the audience (in the virtual world), I think the same should be common to them because now they are the ones who keep the Film with proper projection; something that

ra. The first official use of the RED camera had a rough start on Steven Soderbergh's film *Che* (1 and 2), where most of the film was shot on a camera that was in the test phase; at the end, thanks to that trial period, he soon satisfies Fincher's high standards in the *Social Network*, and the rest is history. In the *Mind Hunter* series, Red even makes a special camera on Fincher's demand which is more ergonomic; because the usual RED cameras are just the "brain", the rest filmmaker adds by himself as needed ...

once did it those who were in charge of projectors, when recorded on the Film (paragraphs II and III in Kubrick's letter).



December 8th, 1975

Dear Projectionist:

An infinite amount of care was given to the look of "Barry Lyndon"; the photography, the sets, the costumes; and in the careful color grading and overall lab quality of the prints, and the soundtrack - all of this work is now in your hands, and your attention to sharp focus, good sound, and the careful handling of the film will make this effort worthwhile.

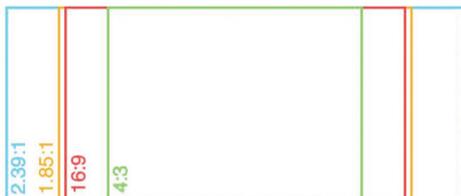
Please also note the following:

1. REEL 3B - CHANGEOVER DOTS ERROR:
 - a) The first changeover dots at the end of Reel 3B are correct.
 - b) The last changeover dots at the end of Reel 3B are not correct. They are 1 ft. 9 frames early.
 - c) We have scribed an "X" on to the print on the correct frames for the last changeover dots.
 - d) Please use the "X" as your last changeover cue, instead of the dots.
2. "Barry Lyndon" was photographed in 1-1:66 aspect ratio. Please be sure you project it at this ratio, and in no event at less than 1-1:75.
3. There should be no less than 15 foot lamberts of light on the screen, and no more than 18.
4. "Barry Lyndon" runs for three hours and four minutes (184 minutes).
5. The first half of the film runs for one hour and forty-two minutes (102 minutes).
6. There is an intermission 6 minutes into Reel Six.
7. After the intermission card, there are fourteen feet of black frame, followed by an academy leader to enable you to line up Part Two.
8. Part Two starts in Reel 6, with music, over a black screen, and after nine feet, the Part Two title fades in.
9. Part Two runs for one hour and twenty-two minutes (82 minutes).
10. Hopefully, you have been supplied with an LP record or a tape of the film score.
 - a) Please use Side 1 for the pre-film music.
 - b) During the intermission, play Side 2, starting with Band 2. You can play this for as long as you want, to the end of the record.
 - c) If you play music after the film, repeat what you did on the intermission.

Yours sincerely,

Stanley Kubrick

When we talk about services that show movies (virtual cinemas), we can't help but mention frame ratios: for example, the same film seen on Netflix or HBO has a different cutting (even if it is intended for **2.39: 1** cutout - *cinemascope*) - IMDB:

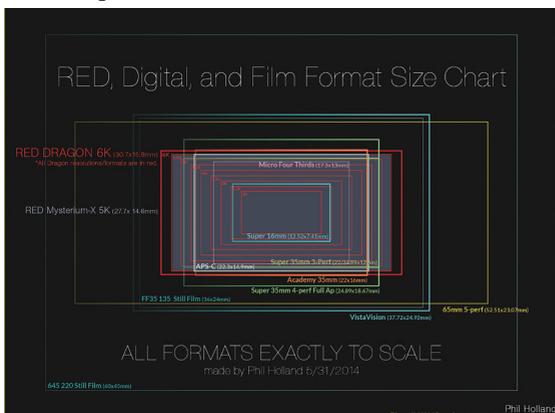


Source: Neil Oseman

The cutouts of the frame come from the frame ratio of the Film (on which the image was taken) because when the sound arrived, there had to be room for it: Cameraman Enes Midžić writes the following about that in the dictionary of film terminology *Speech around the Camera*:

„3. Format - a technical procedure by which it's achieved certain image ratio: *standard, super 8, super 16, super 35, cinemascope, panavision, vistavision, IMAX, OMNIMAX, etc.*” (Midžić 2006: 67).

If we were to compare this to the resolutions (which we use because of the pixels/sensors), then it could be approximately the same be compared as follows:



Izvor: Phill Holland

All the above-mentioned leads us to this: if the film was shot in a specific format, it should be viewed in that format because all creative decisions are made with that one in mind (including color). As an example of misrepresenting the desired format, I'll show you two same scenes (same) with two "virtual cinemas": HBO and Netflix, from the third sequel about Harry Potter, in some opinion one of the best, directed by Oscar winner Alfonso Cuarón:

HBOGO:



NETFLIX:



Both services show colors a little differently. On Netflix, for example, Movies are more granulated than on HBO. But what we want to draw attention to is the frame, precisely how much is cut in the first example – what is seen in the second example; if the author reaches for the cinemascope, there is a reason why he did it, as it should exist for every stylization on film. The director of *The Jurassic World* gave an excellent example of this: where he explains to us how he chose a **2.0: 1** ratio for the film because he wanted a blend between the original ratio of Spielberg: **1.85** (recorded in 1.37: 1)² and the spectacular: cinemascope, and found it in a ratio patented by the great director of photography Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Today*). The techniques of adapting a movie to the 4:3 screen of the first televisions were various, but today it is considered that **16:9** is best for displaying all ratios because it contains them all, *resulting in black bars on the side on which there's no information*; before, the proportions were decided by the cinema - whether the film would be released in 1.85 formats (because some screens were not cinemascope) or either in cinemascope (which had to show 1.85 movies). Today it's decided by "virtual cinema" in synthesis with the monitor (meta plate) on which you watch it. Of course, sound also belongs there, but we won't go deeper into something that is supposed to be an introduction to properly talking about virtual film/cinema: the point is simple, for both filmmakers and viewers, the film becomes binary code - which changes the game's rules! Festivals and cinemas are moving into the same, but are they ready? The time will show. I believe we don't have to worry about whether the cinema will survive - because they also thought before that it wouldn't...

The first thing you see about *Mank*, if we look at him correctly, is how he was filmed on an achromatic sensor - today, even for

²The film was shot on 35mm Film (negative), horizontally, in that ratio, for the effects; and the wanted ratio was the one in which we can watch it today: 1.85 (slightly wider than 16: 9, which most likely is on your screen).

black and white movies, it's more common to shoot in color (LOG - color profile, free, which captures an extensive dynamic range of 14+) and then in the process of montage move the same - but there is an alternative, and *Alexa has its own monochrome version, and also Redica*. Shooting in black and white technique, as opposed to removing color, is better because such a sensor captures much more information/details than the usual one, made mainly by red, green, and blue. *Before, when you wanted to shoot in black and white movies, they would buy a black and white film roll. Mank isn't trying to make any bold statement that it was better before, he's just trying to merge the best from the "two worlds," which for Fincher is the use of analog techniques on the digital recording, but also vice versa.*

The film is, metafilmically, extremely literate; we have stylistic solutions like printing scene with font of an old typewriter, darkened parts that use lights in the scene (which is a product of how film reacts to light), sometimes there's a stain on the tape - it used to happen due to damage to the projector - the graininess, which everyone uses today, is not maximal here but minimal, which then means that other stylistic solutions also comes to expression; everything is set stylistic to take us back to that time, from music to the *philosophy of life in Hollywood (Byronism)* that everyone longs for - but also doesn't hesitate to show the dark side of it; in either way, it doesn't romanticize her. The only thing romanticized is the character of Orson Welles, the similar intervention we have in the movie *Trumbo* (about the famous eccentric screenwriter of the film *Spartacus*) where Stanley Kubrick appears only in ellipses; but here we actually see Welles, on the movie set, holding the receiver and finally looking at Mank face to face - Welles is portrayed romantically as New Hollywood viewed him, not old ones - like a genius, no lunatic - which I think is a good intervention; although it seems

to me that he was “sacrificed” for the story, which I like less - but so were others too. This is not a documentary but a critique of Hollywood and fascist art. It was directed quite safely, no matter what Fincher’s layered directing; however, it also finds a way to stylize that security. Annular dramaturgy; nicely “dances” - as well as the topic of the Film (*Citizen Kane*) - in between introspections, retrospections, and other narrative techniques which are used on one level metaphorically represent a very long and layered first draft, which Orson sketched on what we know today. In Orson Welles’ group, it is said that a lot of it is an interpretation; but as Mank himself says in the film (I paraphrase): “life cannot be successfully portrayed if it is not interpreted and stylized”. Somehow it seems to me that there need to be some kind of artist so the film would be fully understood; because it speaks of a type of *eccentricity of the philosophy of language* art that lives in two worlds: the sensory and the one of ideas; Mank’s eccentricity is result of his art and it becomes at some point “fascist” towards those close to him: somehow the fascism of the artist, visible very well in the character of the conductor in the play *An orchestra rehearsal* that I watched recently in Zagreb Youth Theater, then in the movie *Phantom* thread in the main character, which is attributed - more or less - to a number of artists (Van Gogh, Tesla, Welles, Kubrick ...) is difficult to portray: the theme (philosophy) of life that is here, in my opinion, very directly presented; and yet it is stylized by these transitions of dark parts, introductions to scenes written like scriptwriting and with maximum synthesis of life and *art like some kind of justification, such a phenomenon*³ - which can be completely deviant, which Fincher doesn’t even try to hide - neither does Oldman - with his acting, which has a dose of masochism and arrogance precisely because of that aspect, but never so much that it wouldn’t be at least a bit cute. Hollywood doesn’t do a lot of movies about screenwriters, *Trumbo*

³Madness finds justification only in the result - more precisely, it must in some way benefit the community; George Lucas’s, at first sight, crazy idea, when it became a global phenomenon, received all possible support - but in the same way, it lost it ...

is one of the rare examples, but it should also be considered that, although Trumbo has some characteristics of eccentric; like writing in a bathtub, that isn't the focus of the film, the focus is the politics that conditions such a system, and the question is whether good screenwriters should write bad films; and for what price?

Here the whole movie is based on that eccentricity of the screenwriter of *Citizen Kane*, who can only be the same in its own way - about the process of making that cult film, you can watch a fascinating "documentary" (TV movie) in HBO production *RKO 281*. Filming a movie with a black and white sensor while editing it with classic techniques, Fincher puts us, in a specific way, into the narrative of postmodernism: a critique of the classics, but also modernity. This is undoubtedly an important film in a world that tries to combine traditional values with modern ones.

The best way to check if your monitor is calibrated or not is to check which color profile it has; that way, you will know the boundaries - which movie doesn't have but digitally has - and pay attention to black and white film, try to recall a cinema experience; other methods exist but are expensive, and the critical mind can do a lot, only if one thinks.

Have a pleasant living in a world of ideas!

Sources:

Midžić, E. (2006.) *Govor oko kamere: Rječnik filmskog žargona, kolokvijalnih i stručnih izraza stranog podrijetla*. Zagreb: Croatian Film Association.