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FILM AND TV SCHOOL

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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**THE CINEMATOGRAPHY OF RACHEL MORRISON**

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Thesis advisor: Vidu Gudaratna

Examiner: Petra Dominkova

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Kinematografie

**MAGISTERSKÁ PRÁCE**

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Praha, 2021

## Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

**THE CINEMATOGRAPHY OF RACHEL MORRISON**

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date: .....

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Signature of the candidate

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## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce představuje práci první ženy, Rachel Morrison, nominované na Oscara v kategorii "Nejlepší kamera". Na základě analýzy některých děl, které vytvořila, můžeme lépe identifikovat její vizuální styl: Subjektivní naturalismus. Tato studie je založena na sérii on-line Zoom rozhovorů, které jsem uskutečnila s Rachel Morrisonovou. Během rozhovorů, jsme diskutovali o jejím osobním a pracovním životě.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the work of the first woman nominated for an Oscar in the cinematography category, Rachel Morrison. By analysing some of her works, we can identify her visual style: Subjective Naturalism. The analyse of her work is based on a series of zoom interviews I have done with Morrison where we discussed her work and personal life.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This thesis shall analyze the subjective naturalist style of the first woman to be nominated for an Oscar in the cinematography category, Rachel Morrison. As a female cinematographer, I would like the readers to acknowledge some female directors and cinematographers throughout history, so, in the introductory chapter we will recount some history of women behind the camera (directors and cinematographers). We will conclude this chapter with a summary of Rachel Morrison's biography and some personal questions I have asked her through a zoom interview.

In the second chapter, we shall describe both terms, subjectivity and naturalism in cinema. The chapter will end, as well, with a transcript from my zoom interview with Morrison where she depicts her style in her own words. Then, in chapter number three, we will analyze her Subjective Naturalist style in such films as *Any Day Now*, *Fruitvale Station* and *Mudbound*. To do so, I have chosen some scenes from these films which, in my point of view, have a higher level of subjectivity. In the two zoom meetings we had, we discussed those scenes. Therefore, my observation of her work will be depicted in the film analysis at the end of the thesis with Morrisons' collaboration.

By the end of this thesis readers will acknowledge some other pioneering women who revolted in the film industry in the past and understand Morrison's style.

### **1.1 WOMEN BEHIND THE CAMERA**

Women have been striving for a place in the film industry since the silent era. Although this thesis concentrates on the work of Rachel Morrison, a cinematographer who stands out in the film industry by being the first woman nominated for an Oscar in the cinematography category, I feel the need to mention some of the female filmmakers who stood up in a time in cinema where women had no right to have a career. I would like to mention female filmmakers such as Alice Guy-Blanche, Louis Weber, Dorothy Arzner and Mary Pickford because these women were pioneers of their time using cinema as a tool for social awareness and the empowerment of women.

Alice Guy-Blanche, born in France, was one of the first directors in the history of cinema. In 1896, a year after *The Train Arrival* by the Lumier's brothers, she directed *The Cabbage Fairy* in 1896 which is considered one of the first narrative movies. She was also the first filmmaker to create film musicals. She moved to the States to run the new Gaumont Film Company in New York and then decided to be her own boss and built Solax Studios in New Jersey

where she directed around 50 films out of 300 that were produced in her company. She pioneered cinema as an art, using storytelling in a very sophisticated and sensitive way. In a documentary about her, *Be Natural*, it is said that she was an influential source for Eisenstein's film<sup>1</sup>s. Unfortunately, her name was erased in the history of cinema by her male colleagues and it wasn't until 1953 that she was recognized by the French Government. In 2011, Martin Scorsese awarded her with the Director's Guild of America saying:

'A pioneer in audiovisual story-telling....more than a talented business woman, she was a filmmaker of rare sensitivity, with a remarkable poetic eye and an extraordinary feel for locations.<sup>2</sup>'



1 Alice Guy-Blache

Another female director in the silent era was Lois Weber. Her movies were also an instrument to make people aware of social issues beyond entertainment. She wanted to tell stories that would influence people's minds. To do so, she approached Alice Guy Blanche who, at that time, was running the American Gaumont Film Company. Her film *Where Are My Children?*, made in 1917, talks about birth control,- in a time where activists were put in jail for promoting abortions, the film was very successful. The film exposes the subject of women rights on abortion, a decision and law that was imposed by men. She clearly exposes in her film how a women's subject such as the right of abortion, is being judged by men. Lois Weber's storytelling was excellent, a pioneer of her time through the use of a moving camera and superimposition, the latest technique, probably having been taught to her by Guy-Blanche.

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<sup>1</sup> Information taken from the documentary *Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché*, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Alicia Malone *Backwards and In Heels*. (United States of America: Mango Publishing Group, a division of Mango Media Inc. 2017), p. 24.

While Weber and Guy-Blanche were the female filmmakers in the Silent Era, Dorothy Arzner was the only female filmmaker in the Golden Era in the 30's. She was the first woman to be part of the Directors Guild of America and also the inventor of the boom microphone<sup>3</sup>. Arzner started working as a script typist, before moving on to be a screenwriter, film editor and finally she became a director. It is said that she was ahead of her time, a fierce feminist and a lesbian. Her films concern women's issues and their relationships. Pauline Kael, a film critic claimed that *Christopher Strong* is one of the rare movies told from a woman's sexual point of view<sup>4</sup>. It was in this film where Katharine Hepburn was discovered, playing a very independent woman who was a pilot. In Arzner's last film *Dance, Girl, Dance* made in 1940, she exposed the male gaze; how women are persuaded to be part of male entertainment, certainly Arzner presents the issue of women being seen as objects which is still an issue in today's cinema.

We also have to mention another very important woman in the film industry of the silent era, Mary Pickford, who started in the industry as an actress. Pickford facilitated the employment of women in the studios and was the co-founder of the Film Studio United Artist and the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences. Her angelic look did not stop her from fighting for her salary. Her fierce behavior made her become the most acclaimed and pricey actresses of her time. She managed to earn more money than Charlie Chaplin, her male counterpart. Together with him, D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks, they formed the United Artist Corporation. Thanks to Pickford many female directors in the Silent era were hired and recognised but what has happened with female cinematographers? Were there any "camera-women" in the Silent era and the years since?



2 Lois Weber



3 Dorothy Arzner



4 Mary Pickford

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<sup>3</sup> While shooting *The Wild Party*, Arzner noticed that her actress couldn't move properly and she was aware of the microphone, so she asked her crew to put the mic on a fishing rod and dangle it about her actress. The boom mic was born.

<sup>4</sup> Alicia Malone *Backwards and In Heels*. (United States of America: Mango Publishing Group, a division of Mango Media Inc. 2017), pp. 46-50.



## 1.2 WOMEN BEHIND THE LENS

It is difficult to give a precise answer to the question regarding how many women were operating the camera as since the beginning of the history of cinema women have been unfairly deleted from it or pushed away. Cinematography has always been and is still considered as a man's job. It requires an immense amount of technical skill which men believe that women could never gain. In Europe, there are rumours stating that the two pioneering women who operated the camera in the early 1900's were Georgette Méliès,<sup>5</sup> daughter of Méliès, who may have been helping her dad when he needed a second camera operator. The other woman, Laura Bayley who helped her husband, George Albert Smith, operate the camera for him. There is an interesting movie of his, *Grandma's Reading Glass* 1900 which features a point of view shot exploring subjectivity for the first time. One wonders how much his wife was involved in the story telling. We do not have exact records of these facts unfortunately.

However, in the American film industry, there are a few female names that history attributes as "the first camera-women" or even first "camera-maid". The names of two women behind the lens highlighted in the film industry during the 10's and 20's are Grace Davison and Dorothy Dunn<sup>6</sup>, who both shot newsreels professionally. During those decades, the American press was advertising over and over the title of the novelty and oddity of the first woman cracking a camera. Davison and Dunn were perhaps the first ones appearing in the newspapers and magazines but there were other female operators like Francelia Billington who was also an actress. She said:

*"I'm so accustomed to operating the machine now that I forget that there is anything unusual in it, [...] but I suppose that it is still a novelty to see a girl more interested in a mechanical problem than in make-up".*

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<sup>5</sup> Pamela Hutchinson, *'Ever heard of a woman cameraman?': why female cinematographers get overlooked*, 2018

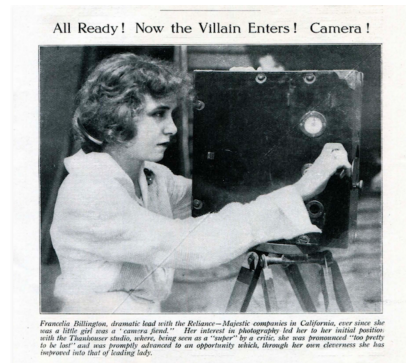
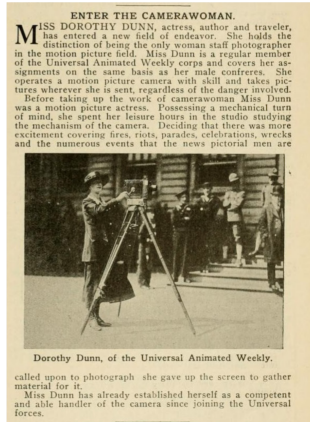
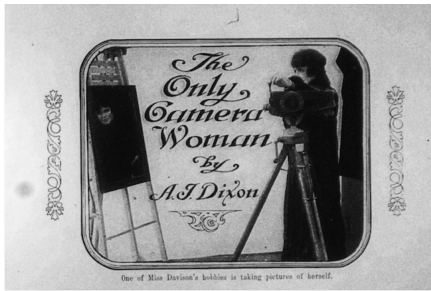
<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/25/woman-cameraman-snubbed-mudbound-rachel-morris-nominated-oscar>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

<sup>6</sup> Marsha Gordon and Charles "Bluckey" Grimm, *"Lights, Camera-maids, Action!": Women Behind the Lens in Early Cinema*, 2020

<<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/lights-camera-maids-action-women-behind-the-lens-in-early-cinema>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

<sup>7</sup> Marsha Gordon and Charles "Bluckey" Grimm, *"Lights, Camera-maids, Action!": Women Behind the Lens in Early Cinema*, 2020

<<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/lights-camera-maids-action-women-behind-the-lens-in-early-cinema>> [accessed 20 February 2020]



- 4A. Grace Davison "The Only Camera Woman," by A.J. Dixon, "Picture-Play," January 1, 1916
- 4B. Dorothy Dunn "Moving Picture World," June 9, 1917
- 4C. Francelia Billington "Photoplay," November 1915

Why was cracking the camera such a dubious job for women? In that era, men could neither expect a woman to develop the technical skills required to operate the camera and expose a good picture nor to be able to handle the camera as they were too heavy for a woman to carry (unfortunately, these thoughts are still present today, in the 21st Century). Fortunately, in the beginning of the 20th century there were women who delved into those technical skills and demonstrated to other women that there is no such thing as a "man's job". Before 1930 there were 25 female operators out of the 600 documented American motion picture camera operators. As mentioned before, along with Dunn, Davinson, Billington, we have to add the names of Margery Ordway (picture below) who was subtly made fun of by a magazine, and Angela Murray Gibson who documented herself perhaps with the idea of showing other women that they can do it!



5 Margery Ordway, "Photoplay," October 1916

<sup>8</sup> Marsha Gordon and Charles "Bluckey" Grimm, "Lights, Camera-maids, Action!": Women Behind the Lens in Early Cinema, 2020  
 <<https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/lights-camera-maids-action-women-behind-the-lens-in-early-cinema>> [accessed 20 February 2020]



6A. Angela Murray Gibson: Library of Congress Paper Print Fragments, 1921, Registration for The Wheat Industry

6B. Angela Murray Gibson: "Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World," March 10, 1928, Page 31

6C/D. Louise Lowell: 1) "Motion Picture Magazine," January 1921 2) "Photoplay," February 1920

Unfortunately, in the 30's, after the Depression in America, film studios and so movies were financed by banks and the old male bankers would not trust a woman directing or photographing a movie so, between the 30's and 60's there were just two women directing in Hollywood, Dorothy Arzner (mentioned before) and Ida Lupino who started as an actress but made her career as a director from the late 40's.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, there were no female camera operators working in the studios during those decades but in the next few decades we started to see women who shoot documentaries and low budget films.

There were no camera women recognized in the industry of cinematography until 1980, the year in which the American Society of Cinematographers accepted the first female member, Geraldine Brianne Murphy who was also the first woman to shoot a major studio film. In the 80's, only 2% of cinematographers were women, contrasting with the new data of 6% in 2019<sup>10</sup>. This number has timidly increased thanks to the equality gender task and feminist movements like #MeToo #womenbehindthecamera amongst others, where women in film fight together against the patriarchal film industry. However, this number is still low when talking about big budget studio movies where there are just 4% of women cinematographers.

During the last two decades, within the indie filmmaking and documentary films sector, we note that there are 16% of female cinematographers working on such films. We have to mention female cinematographers such as Nancy Schreiber, who received the ACS's President Award being the first woman to possess it, Mandy Walker, Agnès Godard, Ellen Kuras, Natasha Brier, Clare Mathon, Polly Morgan, Reed Morano and, the one who made history, Rachel Morrison.

<sup>9</sup> Alicia Malone *Backwards and In Heels*. (United States of America: Mango Publishing Group, a division of Mango Media Inc. 2017)

<sup>10</sup>Women and Hollywood, *Statistics* <<https://womenandhollywood.com/resources/statistics/>>[accessed 19 June 2021]

I decided to write this thesis about Morrison's cinematography style because she has made a huge impact for women currently working in the Film Industry, concretely, to women working as cinematographers. Her work in the Indie filmmaking industry has impacted and influenced my way of seeing behind the lens in many aspects. Thanks to her work I comprehend in depth the importance of representing characters' emotions on the screen using techniques such as a subjective point of view and naturalistic lighting which add realism and authenticity to the film. The purpose of this thesis is to learn about Morrison's cinematography style which she happily named Subjective Naturalism.<sup>11</sup> But, before delving into her style it is necessary to know more about her persona and her life's experiences which, somehow, might have been an influence in her career.

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<sup>11</sup>(author no found) *Finding Traction: A Conversation with DP Rachel Morrison*, Musicbed Blog, 2019  
<<https://www.musicbed.com/blog/filmmaking/cinematography/finding-traction-a-conversation-with-rachel-morrison/>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

### 1.3 BIOGRAPHY: RACHEL MORRISON



7 Rachel Morrison

'In many ways I believe it's an advantage to be a female DP because we stand out in the crowd. We are more memorable. And occasionally we actually get sought out for projects with particularly sensitive subject matter. But where it has felt like a disadvantage is when bigger budgets are involved. This seems to be changing actually but up till now, I still wasn't getting offered studio projects where so many of my male counterparts were.

It's taken me a minute to figure this out but I try to do my best to work with directors who I like, respect and trust and who I feel will treat me accordingly, which hasn't always been the case. I try not to distinguish between genders just as I don't want people to do that to me.'<sup>12</sup>

In a still male-dominated industry like the film one, Rachel Morrison has found a remarkable place by being the first woman nominated for an Academy Award for her cinematography work in *Mudbound*. In 2018, thirty two years after the American Society of Cinematographers accepted the first female member mentioned before, Geraldine Brienne Murphy, they have finally appreciated the work of one of their 20 females associates –and so, nominated Morrison for the outstanding Achievement in Cinematography in Theatrical Releases award. A few months later, she became the first woman nominated for an Oscar. Furthermore, Morrison stands out in the cinematography craft by being the first female cinematographer who has shot a Marvel movie, *Black Panther*. To understand Morrison's imagery, we have to get to know a bit more about her and her path in the filmmaking industry, from shooting TV Reality shows to indie films to a Marvel blockbuster.

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<sup>12</sup> Answer from an email she sent me in 2018.

A 43 years old woman, mother of two, Rachel Morrison, describes herself as a child, the kind of kid who dares other kids to jump out of the higher tree, 'I was Dennis the Menace'<sup>13</sup> she said. The first person she saw with a camera was her mum who used to always be around taking family photos. Morrison got interested in photography and started taking photos of anyone who allowed her to.

'Photography was a way for me to freeze time and to capture the moments that were happy and healthy.'

Morrison's childhood was surrounded by family health problems. Her mum was diagnosed with cancer when she was seven years old and her father was not healthy either. Her parents died when she was a teenager. She found refuge in photography, a place to capture the reality to be recalled at a later date. She went to high school at Concord Academy, in Massachusetts, an independent school where awards and competition were banished. During her high school's years, she pursued her passion with photography, thus she decided to continue her photography passion and studied at the New York University where, in the end, she graduated with a double major (Photography and film). After a couple of years of shooting documentaries and TV reality around New York, she decided to further her studies in cinematography and concentrated more on her passion, narrative films. So, she went to the American Film Institute in Los Angeles thinking that after her masters she would be able to tell stories that get into the audience's hearts.

Unluckily, that did not happen to begin with, after graduating from the AFI, she found herself shooting tv reality again. She shot 24 episodes of *The Hills* where she mastered the technique of lighting for multiple cameras and the fast rhythm of working on tv. Although *The Hills* job gave her the money to pay off her school loans and be economically settled she felt that it wasn't the right place for her.

'I was so close to doing what I wanted to be doing, but the content wasn't there. They weren't stories I wanted to tell. I wasn't making anyone cry. I knew all along that it wasn't where I wanted to stay, but the day finally came when I had to let go of the safety net and see where I landed.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> (author no found) By Time: Rachel Morrison < <https://time.com/5179594/rachel-morrison-firsts/> > [accessed 20 February 2020]

<sup>14</sup> (author no found) *Finding Traction: A Conversation with DP Rachel Morrison*, Musicbed Blog, 2019 <<https://www.musicbed.com/blog/filmmaking/cinematography/finding-traction-a-conversation-with-rachel-morrison/>> [accessed 20 February 2020]



She knew she had to escape from the Tv show but she couldn't find the right moment until one day, someone offered her to shoot a commercial for a week for a very good salary. She asked one of the producers at *The Hill* if she could have a week off. Surprisingly, the producer said no, so she bluffed her believing that she would keep the job but, fortunately for Morrison, the producer found a replacement. Although it was devastating for her to realise that she was replaceable, this was the trigger to quit the show and slowly start moving towards the narrative field.

'It's about being patient, not caving. If you do a halfway decent job at something you don't want to be doing, then for the next two years of your life, those are the only kinds of scripts you're going to get<sup>15</sup>.'

Morrison spent two years waiting for the right script to come. In 2011 she met director Zal Batmanglij and they shot *Sound of My Voice* which won at Palm Spring director watch and premiered at Sundance. This was the door that opened for her into the Indie filmmaking industry. After *Sound of My Voice*, Morrison got many scripts but she followed her gut instinct and waited for the next person's story to tell. That story was *Any Day Now* (2012) directed by Travis Fine. It is a beautiful film about a gay couple in San Francisco who wanted to adopt a child with Down Syndrome in the 70s. The film made a great festival circle, winning the audience award at the Tribeca. Her imagery is realistic and authentic, it complements the story and adds a subjective feeling into it.

In the same year 2012, she was shooting Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*, in a 16mm film, which tells a true story about Oscar Grant III who was killed by a police officer on New Year's Eve of 2008. With her work on *Fruitvale Station*, she received the Kodak Vision Award by Women in Film Crystal + Lucy Awards, cementing once and for all her reputation in the industry. The Coogler and Morrison collaboration was like love at first sight which is why he called her when he got sent his next project, *Creed* (2015), with a much bigger budget. Unfortunately, she had to turn it down as she was due to have a baby in the middle of the production. She missed the chance of shooting a 35 million dollar movie. However their bond was so strong that Coogler called her again to shoot his 200 million dollar Marvel film, *Black Panther* (2018). It is fair to say that female cinematographers like her, have to prove themselves even more than their male counterparts. As Morrison recently stated, she had to shoot five one million dollar movies before shooting a two million one, and five two million ones before getting to a ten million dollar film. In 2018 she got the chance to shoot *Black Panther*. She said that it was the first movie where she did not know all the names of her crew.

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<sup>15</sup> (author no found) *Finding Traction: A Conversation with DP Rachel Morrison*, Musicbed Blog, 2019 <<https://www.musicbed.com/blog/filmmaking/cinematography/finding-traction-a-conversation-with-rachel-morrison/>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

However, before getting into the Marvel world, she lensed other indie films such as *Little accidents*, *Cake* and *Dope*, all of them very acclaimed in well known festivals like Cannes, Sundance and Karlovy Vary amongst others. But, the film that took her to the acme of her cinematography career was *Mudbound* (2017) directed by Dee Rees. It was with this film that she got her Oscar and ASC award nominations. This was the first big budget movie she shot before *Black Panther*, she finally had the chance to deal with a big budget to demonstrate to producers that she, like many other female cinematographers, are able to manage a bigger crew and equipment. In *Mudbound*, Morrison states that it was a learning process, the weather conditions were constantly changing: “we could have a sunny day and ten minutes later be covered in rain and mud”<sup>16</sup> Rees and her came up with two shooting plans: A and B for dry and rainy days.

Recently, she shot Benedict Andrews’ directorial debut, *Seberg*, a film about the life of the French New Wave icon Jean Seberg which has its premier at camerimage 2019. Morrison also gave birth to her second child, and made a phone application called Cinescope to help filmmakers choose the right aspect ratio. Due to the pandemic she had to stop the production of her directional narrative debut, a film about Claressa “T-Rex” Shield, the first american woman to participate in the Olympic games in the female boxing category. However, Morrison has been directing some episodes on tv shows and advertisements before.

I will conclude this section of the thesis with some personal questions that I asked Morrison in a zoom interview. I think these questions will show a little more about Morrison’s character.



8 Rachel and Nelisa Alcalde (zoom interview)

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<sup>16</sup>Zoom Interview 23/06/20



### **1. Do you have a ritual before starting a shoot?**

You know what? I have to fill up the ritual and the last, I don't know, four or five years, maybe longer actually where, and this is so silly, but it's like symbolic, but I changed my contact lenses on the first day of every shoot. It's almost like I give myself, they're not contacts that you change every day. They're contacts that you keep for a while. But no matter where I am in the cycle of my contact lenses, I like to start a project with fresh eyes. When this all went down with foot strong, I was two days in. So I just put new contacts in to start the film. And then when we went down, my first flight back on Friday night and Saturday morning, I felt this urge. I felt like I needed to throw out my two day old contact lenses, even though they weren't due for months and start to see the world with fresh eyes again like that, that's become this weird ritual of mine. I'm trying to think what else, as a director, I think I'm going to do, this is something that Ryan always did, to make time at the beginning of every shoe, no matter how rushed you are to just like, talk about the project and talk about how grateful I am that everybody's coming together and all of that. But yeah, I think that the main one is just the contact lenses.

### **2. I saw you operating with your left eye, is that right?**

I have a goofy eye. You're a righty or lefty. It's just, I've always shot. I've always looked. Maybe I just have a stronger left eye, but I've always looked through. I can't look with my right eyes through a lens.

### **3. What do you prefer to shoot, studio movies or indies?**

I prefer the informality of the independent film, it's nice to have a little bit more time now and a few more toys. Like if I could have that, I mean, some people will do it. Some people shoot over the course of a year. You know, they do it with a small crew and largely natural light, but they take their sweet time with it. That would be lovely. I don't know. Now that I have kids, I don't know how sustainable that is, but I like the idea that is really appealing to me, cause it's always that triad, right? Like time, time, manpower, and money. And it's like, if you don't have money and you're manpower, you need time. And like, that seems like a pretty great way to do things. Actually, it's a little that having, a family gets tricky.

### **4. I see yourself as a quiet person, how are you on set?**

I'm not a force. Like I'm kind of what you see right now, which is, I think I'm pretty grounded. I have said this in the past, but like I do think as women, and maybe this is changing, but for me coming up before me too, or time's up or any of that, like there's such a fine line that we tread and it's like, if you're too quiet, you're a pushover and you're indecisive.

And if you're too loud, you're bossy. It's like you get pigeonholed so fast. So for me, I think I just sort of loved out or worked out for me that like my natural personality is neither of those things. I'm not shy, but I'm not big. And so this sort of middle is kind of that's my lane anyway. Like I don't get in screaming matches with people. I don't get too worked up about life. Like I tend to roll with the punches pretty well. And so that it just sort of lends itself, I think, to collaborative filmmaking and working with people, there's a lot of big personalities in this industry and like to add to that, usually, it doesn't go too well.

## **5. How do you react when you encounter a problem on set and there isn't any obvious solution?**

There've been a few occasions where, for one reason or another something isn't working like, 18 K's foot ring and you're depending on that light or technocrane move. Like you don't have quite the right length or something, something where it requires you to stop down. Usually it's like, I'll pull the director aside and just be like, look, I'm really sorry. We're having this technical issue. Like, do you think K's giving us problems? We're going to need it, it's not going to be a quick fix. Like we're going to have to troubleshoot it. I know you were right in the middle of this thing, if I had another, if I had a quick fix for you, I would present it, but I don't. So we're gonna just have to stop down. And by choosing your battles, directors don't hear that from me often. So when they do, they know it's legit, you know what I mean? It's not like every day, I'm like, you got to wait for me. I got an emergency, it's like, if every day you have an emergency, your director is gonna be pretty, it's like the way. You need another half an hour to light. I'm sorry, I'm shooting, you know? So you kind of pick your battles, I guess. The most anxious I get or have gotten is losing natural light. Like when you need natural light for a scene or you're trying to shoot something in just the right time. And then you, you see I'm a little bit more frantic on my side, like when, when everything's moving too slowly and I know we're gonna lose light, you know, it could be like that it's four thirty and we don't lose light till six. And people don't realize that we have more than an hour and a half's worth of work, whatever it is. But like, that's when I start to turn a little bit, like, I grabbed the first AD and I'm like, dude, you gotta go. And like, then I grabbed the end. But you start to feel a little bit of my frenetic energy, and at my worst, you'll see me running around the set being like, guys, we're losing light, we gotta move. But, for the most part, you just, you try to preempt all that. You try to talk to the people whose job it is to run around set and say that. So you start with the first AD and as long as they're effective, you don't need to be the ones to be screaming, like as we can with their head off.

## **6. What do you do when things are not going as you expected then?**

This is something that I think is a trap that everybody falls into the first five years of their career or whatever. But like the thing about filmmaking, and I've said this too is like filmmaking subjective. There are no right answers. There's no or yes, it's not- yes or no right or wrong answer. And so you can spin out thinking about, did I do it the right way? Is this right? Is this wrong? Is this the best way? And it's like, because you will never know. That's like, literally you could spin out. And so I think the biggest thing is starting to understand that what feels right to you is right. You know what I mean? And that way there's decisiveness, right? Like if you start approaching something in this way, just stick with it.

Even if you're halfway through like, this might have been better, but like, there is no there's no real yes or no. So it's like, especially when people do like to think, or they're quick to think of women as indecisive, or she doesn't know what she wants, or, you know, better to just stick to your guns, knowing that there's no concrete evidence, that way would have been any better than what you're doing. Like you could start going out with it, you're not going to be like if it was a math equation and you started doing it wrong and you realized that there's actually a right answer, then you course correct in a way that four plus four is eight, four plus four is not six, but like film isn't like that. So it's just, you have to sort of have faith that the direction you're going on is the right direction for the project.

## 2. MORRISON'S STYLE: SUBJECTIVE NATURALISM

### 2.1 VISUAL STYLE IN CINEMA

Before depicting subjective naturalism style, we have to clearly differentiate style from the term film genre. They are both commonly used interchangeably. Film genre helps the viewers to categorize films by their narrative structures, for instance, drama, western, comedy, musical, horror... Although these film genres have certain specifications with regards to their narratives and even to their visuals. Filmmakers can choose different ways to tell a specific genre and the choice of these different ways are called styles. For instance, a clear example would be a director wanting to make the comedy genre more stylish using long takes and dramatic lighting rather than the usual-standar visual style of comedy which is characterised by using flat beauty lighting and shot-reverse-shot editing technique. So, the different visual techniques of telling a story creates a film style and it is the style that makes one filmmaker stand out from another. Thus, the use of certain techniques which are employed along the film helping filmmakers to tell the story in a defined way is called film style. The different film techniques used are mise-en-scene, cinematography (lighting and frame), sound and editing.

Borwell defined film style in his book *An Introduction to Film Art*:

Style, then, is that formal system of the film that organizes film techniques. Any one film will tend to rely on particular technical options in creating its style, and these are chosen by the filmmaker within the constraints of historical circumstances. We may also extend the term "style" to describe the characteristic use of techniques made by a single filmmaker or group of filmmakers. The spectator may not consciously notice film style but it nonetheless makes an important contribution to the film's ongoing effect and overall meaning.<sup>17</sup>

What does Borwell mean when he mentions that 'the filmmaker's style is constrained by historical circumstances'? In the same book, *Film art: An Introduction*, he explained that in the silent era, technical choices were limited for filmmakers and it was those limitations which helped filmmakers create a style. If we translate this to the films nowadays where the digital offers a wider spectrum of possibilities, more than in the film era, we can say that even though there are still some limitations there are much more advantages which facilitate filmmakers in creating or searching for their own style. There are two huge advantages of this digital era: the ergonomics of the cameras and the sensibility of their sensors. Cameras can be positioned at any imaginable place because of their size, we can still have a big studio camera like the Alexa 65 but we can also

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<sup>17</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 5th Edn. ( USA: McGraw Hill Inc) p. 334.  
[https://archive.org/stream/filmartintrduct00bord\\_0#page/n3/mode/2up/search/overall+meaning](https://archive.org/stream/filmartintrduct00bord_0#page/n3/mode/2up/search/overall+meaning)

shoot high quality video files in a very small camera such as the GoPro. Their other improvement is that they can record in very low lighting conditions hence filmmakers can now shoot films with natural light conditions without the addition of film lights if they need to.

How could we, filmmakers, use the advantage of the new cameras' ergonomics and high sensibility to create a style? As mentioned before, there are cameras which are much smaller and lighter than they used to be. This has given the chance to new filmmakers to achieve long shot sequences to create a specific style in the film which was always a desire of the old filmmakers such as Hitchcock. For instance, the German film *Victoria* 2015 directed by Sebastian Schipper and shot by Sturla Brandth Grøvlen is one continuous shot with no cuts, using the technique of a hand held camera during the two hours and twenty minutes that the film lasts<sup>18</sup>. This movie could not have been made back in the days where cameras weighed around 30 kilos and we could not shoot for more than 22 minutes per 1000 foot magazine shooting in two perforations.<sup>19</sup> Filmmakers like Hitchcock, in *Rope* 1948, wanted to tell a story which happens in one room in a continuous shot, the technical restrictions of his era meant he needed to use intelligent and unnoticeable cuts which make the film look like it is filmed in one single shot. Another example of this style is *1917*,<sup>20</sup> directed by Sam Mender and lenses by Deakins. *1917* makes the audience think about the movie as a single shot like *Victoria* one. The film uses the same approach as Hitchcock in the *Rope* but furthermore, it pushes the boundaries by using the latest technology like small cameras and grip equipment to tell a story of World War I where characters are constantly moving from interiors to exteriors.

Rachel Morrison also takes advantage of new technologies. The hand-held camera operation is associated with a subjective point of view, and it is one of the techniques that Morrison has been developing along her career, from shooting TV reality shows such as *Room Raiders* to indie films such as *The Sound of my Voice* which was shot with a DSLR or *Any Day Now* shot with a red one.

Another remarkable advantage of the camera's technicality is their sensitivity to light. Although film stock is now more sensitive than before, digital sensors go even further than film in terms of sensitivity to light. This means filmmakers are able to shoot in very low lighting conditions. They do not need a massive amount of light to expose like you do when shooting on film. Now, new upcoming cinematographers could rate their camera at 5000 ISO<sup>21</sup>. This has revolutionized the indie filmmaking industry by helping filmmakers make their movies, making the film industry more affordable for everyone. It is fair to mention that this aid does not mean an easier life for the filmmaker, in

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<sup>18</sup> In 2002 a film called Russian Ark was shot on a steady cam in a single shot throughout the In 2002 a film called Russian Ark was shot on a steady cam in a single shot throughout the Winter Palace of the Russian State Hermitage Museum.

<sup>19</sup> a 1000 foot magazine in a 35mm shooting 24fps in four perforations gives us around 11 minutes, using a two perf camera we would have 22 minutes of footage.

<sup>20</sup> Deakins recently won his second Oscars with this movie.

<sup>21</sup> The Panasonic Varicam LT has a dual sensitivity of 800ISO and 5000ISO.

particular, the cinematographer who still needs to understand the characteristics of light to then be able to re-create a particular atmosphere that best represents the character's emotions. Morrison does it at its best, she has the capacity to recreate reality adding authenticity to the film with her naturalistic way of lighting which is the second characteristic in her cinematography style: naturalism.

So here we have the two techniques used by Morrison, a handheld camera and naturalistic lighting that her style covers. She is able to represent naturalism with a visual subjectivity in her films which for the majority are dramas that create a sociological impact. To represent this genre she has chosen a subjective naturalist style helped by her vast knowledge about camera equipment and her thorough study of lighting.

## **2.2 SUBJECTIVITY IN RACHEL MORRISON'S WORK**

'I've started to coin the term "subjective naturalism" for my style. I believe in authenticity but that you can exaggerate things as the stakes get raised. for instance a particularly dramatic scene justifies more high contrast lighting...'<sup>22</sup>

For the purpose of the research, this paper does not depict subjectivity in terms of the psychology of the spectators (subject), if doing so we would have to talk about individual beliefs and sociological influences of the subject. Instead, this chapter concentrates on briefly describing how filmmakers use visual subjectivity in films, and so, how Rachel Morrison uses it within her work.

In cinema, subjectivity adds veracity by portraying the experience of what it is like to feel as if we are in the character's mind and taste his/her feelings experienced throughout the narrative of the film. How is subjectivity created on the screen? Visual Subjectivity is created with the help of different techniques such as sound, editing, lighting, camera positions and mise-en-scene. These techniques are more specifically called film forms which, as mentioned before, are used by filmmakers to create their styles but also to portray different degrees of subjectivity.

In this chapter we will concentrate and analyse visual subjectivity which is created by the camera. Along the history of filmmaking, practitioners and scholars have sought to bring the audience closer to the characters involving them in the action. In particular, cinema tries to imitate literary narrative where the narrator and protagonist are the same person, in other words, in literary narrative, the reader identifies more with the protagonist because it is written in first person. It is commonly accepted that the camera carries out in film a

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<sup>22</sup> Rachel Morrison answer from an email she sent me in 2018.

function identical to that of the narrator in the literary narrative. In doing so, the narrator and the camera are the only viewpoint for the spectator. To be able to achieve this point of view, filmmakers just have to place the camera in place of the protagonist<sup>23</sup>.

One of the filmmakers who pushed this idea of visual subjectivity as literary narrative further was Robert Montgomery in his film *The Lady in the Lake* (1946). In this movie, the director wanted the audience to see through the protagonist's eyes and experience his actions. Along with his director of photography, Paul Vogel, he wanted to experiment with subjectivity, to make the audience participate in the story, and, to do so, they used the technique of putting the camera on the actor's head. In those times, because of the weight and size of the camera, it was not possible to achieve this but they found a way to emulate this technique.

Long takes also add subjectivity and Montgomery uses them instead of successive cuts. All the characters were required to look straight into the camera. This means he uses the camera as a unique character's point of view through the entire film, in this case, camera and spectators see through detective Philip Marlowe eyes, played by Montgomery himself. But, did Montgomery and Vogel, his cinematographer, succeed with this experiment of putting the audience into the character's mind? What degree of subjectivity is added by this technique? And is that the only option to explore and represent subjectivity in cinema?

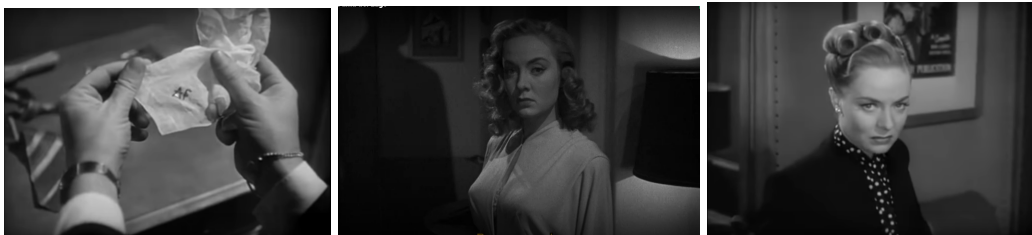
In fact, visual subjectivity in this example is not the perfect way to entrance the audience by the character's emotions because although we are watching the subjective point of view of the character, the detective Marlowe, which makes us experience his reality, we do not connect emotionally with his mind. We are just observers of his reality. As mentioned before visual subjectivity makes the audience engage psychologically with the characters emotions and experiences putting the spectator into the protagonist's skin. In the example of *The Lady in the Lake*, we are simple passengers observing and following the narrative from the character's point of view, we are Montgomery eyes but do we connect with his feelings?

In my opinion, this degree of subjectivity should be called an objective subjectivity where spectators don't experience the ultimate empathy with the character but rather they see and discover the plot at the same time that the protagonist. In this movie, *The Lady in the Lake*, we observe the reality of the protagonist, to later guess who the killer was. In the same way that *Room Raider* portrays Morrison's subjective point of view showing us reality.

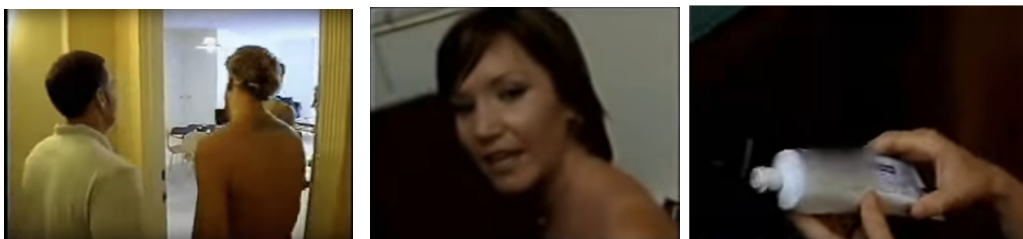
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<sup>23</sup> Julio L. Moreno, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1953), pp. 354-355

*Room Raider* was a Tv reality show where three guys compete to have a date. To be able to win, a girl (the date) visits their rooms individually without knowing which room is who's. The girl chooses a guy depending on how their room was. Here, the camera is not on 'the girl's head' as it was in *The Lady in the Lake* but instead the camera shows the subjective point of view of Rachel Morrison whose job was to show the audience anything the girl sees. Morrison followed different people showing the audience the room and the characters. We are discovering the rooms at the same time as the girl does. Morrison used a hand-held camera which adds subjectivity and also realism to the show. Morrison's point of view makes us observe the reality of the girl. Thus, as with the *Lady in the Lake*, this subjectivity is not connected emotionally and psychologically but physically.



9 Group of screenshot from *Lady in the Lake*



10 Group of screenshots from *Room Raider*

On the contrary, a higher degree of subjectivity is presented in *Fruitvale Station* directed by Ryan Coogler, which encapsulates subjectivity firstly by its editing and then by the camera work which concentrates on Oscar, played by Michael B. Jordan. Coogler decided to start the film with some of the real footage of that tragic night, by doing so, this forces the audience to acknowledge the heartbreaking end that none of the characters in the movie are aware of. Only the spectators know the fateful end. This technique is called the bomb effect<sup>24</sup>. Drama is increased when the spectator knows more than the main protagonist.

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<sup>24</sup> This effect was introduced by Hitchcock to create suspense within the audience.



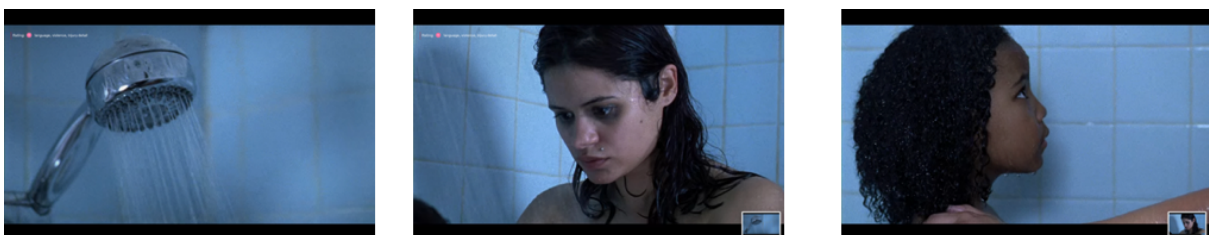
To summarise the film that will be analyzed later on in this paper, we see the last day of Oscar Grant, a young African-American killed by a police officer. Although this editing choice plays an important role in the way the viewers react and connect to the story by strongly empathising with the protagonist, in parallel, another strong degree of subjectivity is added by the unobtrusive lighting and under-privileged sense of framing. The camera fixes its lens on Oscar's surroundings and thoughts, taking the spectators on an emotional trip guided by the narration of the film and enhancing the empathy towards Oscar, his family and friends who will suffer his loss. Morrison's camera work is shocking and although we are not Oscar's eyes all the time, we are in his mind.

It is relevant to mention a small anecdote related to Morrison's work in this film. Haskell Wexler, acclaimed academy award winner, after watching *Fruitvale Station*, contacted Morrison to complement her achievement of subjectivity in this film. Morrison expresses her admiration for him in her social media before he sadly died:

'A few years ago, I got an email out of the blue from Haskell Wexler asking if I would like to have lunch with him. For me this was a dream come true- to dine with a personal hero and legend. He had seen *Fruitvale Station* randomly and said he recognized himself in the camerawork. In fact he said the subjective experience we achieved in that film was his ultimate goal as a cinematographer. I have never received a greater compliment and likely never will. I will remember that day forever. RIP Haskell Wexler.<sup>25</sup>'



11 screenshots from *Fruitvale station*



12 screenshots from *Fruitvale station*

<sup>25</sup> Rachel Morrison Instagram 27 December 2015 <[https://www.instagram.com/p/\\_znA3qhnut](https://www.instagram.com/p/_znA3qhnut)> [accessed 20 February 2020]

For visual subjectivity to successfully happen at a higher degree, filmmakers ought to tell the story with different camera positions which represent the character's emotions at most. Morrison has become one of the most successful filmmakers using visual subjectivity narration. By first choosing the right script and collaborators and then through her imagery which makes the audience connect to the story and the characters feelings. As she said in one of the interviews for Musicbed her goal is to tell stories 'that make people cry'<sup>26</sup>. How does Morrison achieve her goal? By helping the audience to emotionally engage with the story by using subjective camera positions and naturalistic lighting. Further on in this paper we shall analyse the visual subjectivity and naturalistic lighting in particular scenes from Morrison's most acclaimed work. But for now, we should learn how naturalism is represented in her imagery.

### 2.3 NATURALISM IN CINEMA

'It's funny how often people think natural lighting is actually natural. Most of the time it's not but even sometimes when it is just practicals or window light, you are still determining what level to set the practicals, how close to place them to the actors, what time of day to shoot the scene, whether to open or close the blinds... as DPs we are always shaping the light to the scene and then it's just gut instinct or taste mixed with stakes that determines the levels.'<sup>27</sup>

Oxford dictionary defines naturalism:

(in art and literature) as a style and theory of representation based on the accurate depiction of detail.

Naturalism was a broad movement in the nineteenth century which represented things closer to the way we see them. Naturalism in painting and photography is associated with landscape pictures but in fact, it describes reality which involves the representation or depiction of nature and people<sup>28</sup>. Naturalism is related to landscape paintings or photographs, but it also encompasses portraits of people in their environment influenced by aesthetic and culture, and by the subjectivism of the artist. Here are some examples of naturalism in painting and photography along the history of the naturalism movement. Further along we will explore how Morrison is influenced by some of the naturalistic photographs on her work in *Mudbound*.

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<sup>26</sup> AUTHOR not specified. *Finding Traction: A Conversation with DP Rachel Morrison*, Musicbed Blog, 2019 <<https://www.musicbed.com/blog/filmmaking/cinematography/finding-traction-a-conversation-with-rachel-morrison/>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

<sup>27</sup> Rachel Morrison answer from an email she sent me in 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Encyclopedia of art history, *Naturalism*, 2020 <<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/naturalism.htm>> [accessed 7 April 2020]



13 Painting by Thomas Eakins



14 Photograph by Dorothea Lange



15 Photograph by Gordon Park

Throughout their career, the majority of filmmakers sought to closely represent reality in fiction films. They sought to embrace the nature of the characters and their surroundings and depict them based on the narration of the script and their perception. So, how does Morrison achieve the naturalistic/realistic look that is inherited in her work?

'I don't try to make things look better than they are,  
I just try to make them look the way they are'<sup>29</sup>.

Natural light plays an important role in setting up Morrison's style. As she said, lighting is a reflection of what is at stake emotionally in a movie. Filmmakers, especially cinematographers like her, use natural light as part of the story telling as it serves as one of the main tools that enables to set the mood for a scene expressing the character's minds and so adding subjectivity. To explain Morrison's use of natural light, I have decided to use as an example a particular scene on *Mudbound* which was analyzed in an article from the American Cinematographer Society magazine. There is one particular shot in *Mudbound* where Laura MacAllan, played by Carey Mulligan, is sitting on a porch at twilight (see picture 16 from the movie), here, natural light acts as the main element which reinforces Mulligan's state of mind exposing her feeling of solitude to the viewers. The screenshot from the movie is blue, grey and depressed, reflecting the character's emotions. However, in the ACS magazine interview, the editor

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Eagan, *Mudbound: American Dream meets American Reality*, American Cinematographer, 30 November 2017

<<https://ascmag.com/articles/mudbound-american-dream-meets-american-reality>> [accessed 7 April 2020]

decided to show a still taken by a photographer on the production (see picture 17). The photograph is taken in the magic hour and depicts a different emotion.

A feeling of solitude and the thought of something missing in the life of Mrs MacAllan is without doubt enforced by choosing the right moment of the day to shoot, taking advantage of the natural light at dusk. Morrison described this scene in her interview for the American Cinematographers Magazine:

'With certain things it really depends on the right time of day. This is not a Terrence Malick film where we could shoot only at dusk and dawn. I don't know what we would have if we could. I don't think that it was supposed to be beautiful all the time. But dusk feels a certain way, it resonates almost the way a smell is a sense memory, and certain smells will take us to a place. I think everybody knows dusk, that feeling of the last few rays of light. You can't achieve that any other time of day. You can't light dusk<sup>30</sup>.'



16 Screenshot from Mudbound



17 Photograph by ASC magazine

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30 Daniel Eagan, *Mudbound: American Dream meets American Reality*, American Cinematographer, 30 November 2017

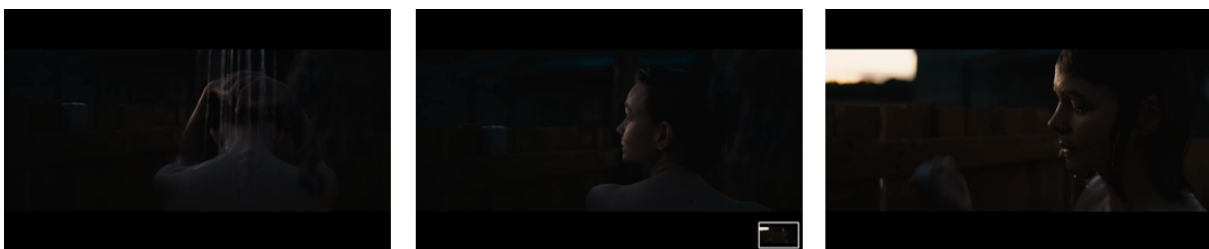
<<https://ascmag.com/articles/mudbound-american-dream-meets-american-reality>> [accessed 7 April 2020]

I had the pleasure to interview Morrison and asked what her opinion was about this particular shot and her interview. Morrison showed her disappointment and told me that the editor chose the beauty shot taken by the photographer on set. She reiterates how important it is to acknowledge the tone of the scene. She said that while shooting *Mudbound* they had to split the schedule as the heat was unbearable, sometimes while breaking for dinner the most beautiful sunsets were happening, she joked around by saying that she suffered by seeing those heartbreaking sunsets but on the other hand she had to stick with the story, and that beautiful light wasn't right all the time for *Mudbound*. In the still from the ACS magazine we look at a beautiful woman (Carey Mulligan) relaxing in the sunset peacefully while in the still from *Mudbound* we truly engage emotionally with the character's emotion in that moment . We see Mulligan lost deep in her dark thoughts and that's why shooting at dusk was necessary. Morrison did not miss the sunset, instead she was looking for a different mood to connect the audience with the character's state of mind.

It is important to add another example of *Mudbound's* shot at dusk. Readers should imagine how this scene would be if it was shot in the magic hour with a golden-pinky sky. For me, it could have seemed like an advertisement of a beautiful woman taking a shower. But, what Morrison wanted to communicate was the feeling of hope and despair, as she said, where there is despair there is hope.



18 Screenshots from *Mudbound*



19 Screenshots from *Mudbound*



Morrison not only has a full understanding of natural light but also a vast knowledge on artificial lighting which helps her to engage naturalism in her work. Obviously, we differentiate natural light from the artificial one because the latter is a human invention which supplies us with visibility in the darkness of our homes or in a night exterior. Morrison then uses artificial light as she uses natural light to represent a feeling, communicate an emotion and recreate reality with a naturalistic look. As she explained, one of her goals on set is to create a naturalistic look interfering the least on the actors' performances. But, as all cinematographers know, this is sometimes impossible to achieve. When this happens and lights are not in an ideal position for actors to move naturally, Morrison tells them:

'Here, you're in the shadow. If you want a moment in the shadow, stand here. If you want to be seen, stand here'<sup>31</sup>.

I believe that this is a very natural answer to confronting and solving the problem of cinema lights that can't be avoided on set and, sometimes can be an inconvenience for the actor's performance.

Morrison also skips the cinematic rules, like in the images below which are taken from *Mudbound*, one of the most striking scenes and where lighting also plays an important role. In this scene, Morrison breaks the cinematic rule of how to present violence in film which normally is represented by cold colors like green or blue. But, in this scene, Morrison fights against that rule to take advantage of the real and natural moment. In those times, in many places, torches served as the source of light during the night. Torches are warm, contrasting with the cold colors and tones that normally portray violence, but in this scene we experience violence with colours that are associated with romanticism.



20 Screenshots from *Mudbound*



21 Screenshots from *Mudbound*

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31 Daniel Eagan, *Mudbound: American Dream meets American Reality*, American Cinematographer, 30 November 2017  
<<https://ascmag.com/articles/mudbound-american-dream-meets-american-reality>> [accessed 7 April 2020]

For me, a naturalistic look on lighting together with a subjective camera point of view are necessary to achieve a visual subjectivity that represents the characters' reality and feelings and so engage the audience with a high degree of subjectivity. I agree with the idea of naturalism and subjectivity being inherited in Morrison's style but to assure myself I have interviewed Morrison to ask her what subjective naturalism is for her and how she started to explore this style.

## **2.4 MORRISON SUBJECTIVE NATURALISM STYLE BY MORRISON.**

After giving some information about subjectivity and naturalism in films, I would like to add part of my interview with Morrison in this section. On the 21st of May 2020 while the world was falling apart because of COVID-19, I was setting up an interview with Rachel Morrison. In this section we will learn what subjective naturalism means for Morrison and how she achieved it.

### **1. How do you define Your cinematography style? How would you define Subjective Naturalism?**

It is a good question, the way I came about that term was really thinking about what my work has in common. Cause, obviously, there are some other crossovers with themes, I'd like to think that the styles themselves are quite different and the color palettes are quite different, things like that. But, I like to think that I have found something pretty consistent which is this term I came up with which is Subjective Naturalism. **The cinematography is informed by the subjectivity of the characters' experience.** It is really about trying to translate an internal process. Try to represent the character's emotion into visuals I guess, this is kind of vague, not like a one line answer... for me it means that the lighting, the camera work...everything... is informed by what the character is experienced in that moment, when they are in a particular critical place in their emotional journey you have a lot of creative licence to minimise someone in the bottom corner of the frame or silhouette them, or have a strong backlight or flare... it can feel motivated so you can take liberties with naturalism, it will resonate because it represents the character's emotion. If you overdue for instance, minimise someone on the bottom of the corner when they are in the dentist it feels like...Look at me, I'm doing a cool shot! So that's it. I don't have a single definition for it. It is just that the camera work and the lighting can be a reflection of the psychological state of the character.

## 2. Do you think you always shoot Subjective Naturalism?

I certainly look for projects where I feel like the characters take an emotional journey and where there are stakes like they're like for me as much as other genres do other things really well, I don't know that like comedy, you ever get to a place where you don't have to be life or death moments in comed, or emotional life or death moments. And like so there's just only so much you can do.

## 3. How do you differ Realism from Naturalism?

I think Realism is very literal. *Fruitvale Station* is where I learnt about what I tried to do and also about what Ryan tried to do. We were trying to find this balance. For instance, for Ryan a morgue in real life is bright, just a wash of fluorescent light. He wanted the imagery to feel like what it is, where I would say YES! but a woman seeing her son in a morgue there is something more specific on that. I wanted to have the light like it was coming from the body, so we found this balance. I remember him saying: this doesn't look like a morgue and me, it doesn't look like a mother seeing her son, so we both compromised.<sup>32</sup> I guess the difference for me is the motivation. Realism is motivated by what actually is. Subjective is motivation by a character's emotions.

## 4. In *Room Riders*, subjectivity is added just by the hand held operation, but we are not emotionally but we are not emotionally and psychologically engaged....

Yeah. And to me, that's as simple as the fact that there isn't, it's not emotional storytelling, you need a story to provide to be able to have emotional storytelling, otherwise, there's no amount of subjectivity that's going to make something that has no stakes exciting.

What's interesting? Obviously filmmaking is this long process and everybody brings something to the table. So when you start, you're almost sort of asking the director what they want to tell the audience. And then when you're in the room as a DP camera operator, you're actually also being informed by what the actor is putting and that might change slightly from, or hopefully it's just adding another layer to what the director's intention was, but you also have to leave room for instinct. I think that's one of the things, I mean, one of your questions I saw, do I storyboard or do I shot list? I'm pretty against storyboarding. Cause I feel like people get so committed to the idea of the thing before you've even been in the room with it.

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<sup>32</sup> It will be analysed on chapter number III



## **5. So, you don't do shotlist or storyboards?**

The nice thing about shots list is for me anyway, it's much more about intention, like understanding, getting on the same page with the director that like in this moment we want a character to feel clustered trapped. Right. And so what, what are our options for showing that somebody is trapped? One of them is shortsighted in the character, putting them up against the edge of the frame. One of them is minimizing them in a wide shot, like ideas like that. But you're not saying exactly where in the space you're going to put the person. It's more just like, the intention of those moments and that way, if the actor wants to change the blocking up or do something that you hadn't imagined, you can still translate the idea into a slightly different visual, but your ideas are the same.

## **6. Was there a "lightbulb moment" where you decided I want my style to be Subjective Naturalism or it came overtime?**

It was kind of just an evolution. And like, once I got out of reality TV and out of my first few features, at least when I was coming up, you just say yes, because you want the experience. Especially for me, because at the time it was still shooting on film and like very few digital cameras that came out were silver expensive. Like you couldn't just make a movie. So it was like, if somebody wanted you to shoot a movie before you even read the script, right. You're just like I'm here. But as I started to kind of be able to hone in a little bit on the scripts that I wanted to tell and the story that I wanted to tell. I think the first was just that I wish there was something slightly consistent about the projects I was drawn to. And it was that there were emotional journeys and there are stakes, there were things, there are messages. And there were things that people were trying to communicate. And then, some films are handheld, some are steadicam, some are colorful somewhere. De-saturated like, it's not so much. I mean, I'd like to think that to me, anyway, most great cinematographers say that it's much more about adapting to the story and not just sort of doing one look that they apply to everything. There's a few notable exceptions, who I would probably argue, that are maybe doing themselves a disservice by still lighting the same way that they always have. But it's letting the story, they paid for the way that I shoot. And then, I just was looking for what's consistent. The consistent thing is that it's always motivated by the characters.

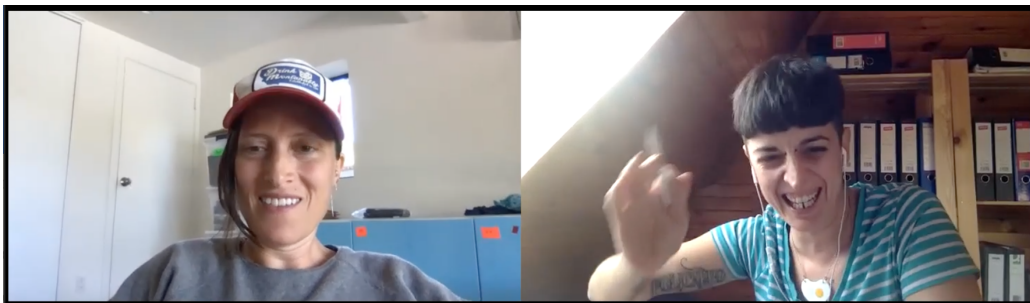
## **7. My reference to Subjective Naturalism is you but What are YOUR references and inspiration in Subjective Naturalism.**

Like so many and yet, I don't know if there's any one reference where I can be like, oh, that was the one, Ryan's reference for *Fruitvale Station*, which I think was a really great one. And it has kind of become a fairly consistent reference for me is *The Prophet*. It's the idea of a very singular kind of experiential filmmaking where, typically speaking, until recently when cameras were so much cheaper, but like documentary filmmaking, it used to be one camera. And it could only be in one place at one time. You would miss some moments or you would play some moments on the back of somebody's head, or you would be caught outside of a room and looking through a doorway while somebody is crying, facing the other direction. But there's something that feels very real about it and organic about it because at least on a subjective level, the audience doesn't feel like there's lenses in every direction. Like it doesn't feel like in reality in cinema to get a wide shot from, 50 feet away and then a closeup from three feet away, you had to do more than one take, like there's no other way to have a camera here and have a camera here. And on a subjective level, the audience realizes that where you're the hope is it, you make them forget. But I think, some part of an intelligent audience understands that it's like the actors had to perform it multiple times or similarly, if you have three cameras pointing at the same action, a car turns over and he cuts here there's a subjective awareness that there were three cameras shooting that moment.

And I think what Ryan was trying to do is the feeling of one camera who is living, who's basically walking through life and reacting as the, as the character reacts, you know, the operator becomes almost an essential part of that dance, right? The idea is you can only capture the thing once and it's like, you make that split second decision and that's it. And you commit to it. You can't do it six different times. And so that was the methodology behind *Fruitvale Station*. And I think I really learned a lot from that experience. It has definitely informed other things that I have done, most of my other projects since then have had two cameras, but I usually shoot it as if it's one, basically one camera as the hero and half the time the other camera will sit out. It's not just trying to jam to the camera then, because usually when you're trying to shoot with two cameras, you're compromising both shots lightly. So when you use this kind of storytelling, it is, you know what I mean? Because you want it to be moving through space with the character, organic with the character eye lines that feel close to the character like that. It just lends itself to subjectivity better than two cameras.

**8. When you pick up a script, what are the elements in the script you look for?**

I mean for *Fruitvale Station*, which is really like free for all. I cried when I read the script. You just know that there's something special there and that if you don't screw it up, you can help elevate it. I could tell on the page that Ryan had something to say. And then when I talked to him on Skype, with our first interviews on Skype, because he lives in San Francisco, it was like this just a really intense connection. And it, you know, I knew how special he was. But I think it was that that set the bar for everything else. You know what I mean up until then. *Sound Of My Voice* was a classmate of mine. I also thought it was a unique project and that I liked that he was trying to sort of push some boundaries and stuff and you know, and again, was still in the mood of: do you want me to shoot a movie? great I'm in!



### **3. ANALYSING RACHEL MORRISON'S WORK: ANY DAY NOW, FRUITVALE STATION AND MUDBOUND.**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION: ANY DAY NOW, FRUITVALE STATION AND MUDBOUND**

After watching Morrison's filmography, I have decided to analyze her style in movies such as *Any Day Now*, *Fruitvale Station* and *Mudbound* since I found that in these films, we specifically discover and see Morrison's subjective naturalism style at its peak. The three films have an interesting common point which catches my attention the most. All of them are social dramas inspired by true events, with *Fruitvale Station* being based on a true story. Before analysing Morrison's work in the films mentioned above, I find it interesting to point out the reason for choosing these particular films and so, what the films are about. In my interview with Morrison, she stated how important it was for her to pick up a script. For her, the characters in the story have to take her on an emotional journey.

The first film I watched by Morrison was *Any Day Now*. I read an article about her in a *Variety's* article *Breaking Through* where they mentioned her work in *The Sound of My Voice* and *Any Day Now*, both films premiered at Sundance, the former directed by Zal Batmanglij and, the latter by Travis Fine. Her powerful picture in the article caught my attention in such a way that I decided to search for her work. I was so absorbed by the narrative of the film that I immersed myself in the characters and the plot and completely forgot the reason I wanted to see the film in the first place: its cinematography. The second time I watched I tried to concentrate on Morrison's use of the camera and lighting to tell the story, I was impressed by her unnoticeable and raw camera work; the naturalistic lighting and the subjective camera angles that make the audience engage with the story and follow the character's emotions rather than contemplate stunning moving pictures.

*Any Day Now* finds its dramatic narrative through the inspiration of true facts. For instance, director Travis Fine dramatizes George Arthur Bloom's screenplay which narrates the story of an economically unstable homosexual friend who befriends an autistic boy who is unable to talk. The boy was abandoned by his druggie-prostitute mother and left with his grandmother who couldn't care less. However, Fine's narrative ended up telling the story of a gay couple in San Francisco in the late 70s who want to adopt a fourteen year old boy with down syndrome called Marco played by Isaac Leyva. Marco lives with his drug addict mum in a flat beside Rudy's, played by Alan Cumming. Rudy is economically unstable and works in a gay club doing lip sinking performances dressed as a woman. During one of his performances he meets Paul, played by Garret Dellahunt, a divorced lawyer who has never experienced a homosexual relationship. Both of them fall in love and fight for Marco's custody but

unfortunately, justice is unfair. Unfortunately, *Any Day Now* did not get the recognition it deserved in the western world but it received great acclaim in Japan where the film was called *Chocolate Donut* as Morrison mentioned in the interview.

In *Fruitvale Station*, the characters in the film are based on real people who, unfortunately, experienced the tragedy on New Years day of 2009. The film dramatizes the last day in the life of Oscar Grant, played by Michel B Jordan, a 22 year old young African American man, who a BART Police Officer named Johannes Mehserle cold-bloodedly murdered at the Fruitvale Station in Oakland, California. In a truly remarkable way, director Ryan Coogler converts to fiction the last day of Oscar's life, recounting particular chapters in Oscar's life with warts and all.

*Mudbound*, on the contrary, is based on a novel by the same name. Hillary Jordan, the author of the novel, assures us that although the novel is a fictional narrative, she based the book on stories told to her by her mother and grandmother about a rural farm they spent some time on. She was also influenced by reading about black troops' experiences during World War II. The movie tells the story of two different families of farmers, one white and the other black, who dealt with life after World War II.

Director Dee Rees adds authenticity and fills the film with inspiration from her grandmother Earnestine Smith's journal (see photos 22). Even though it is a fictional drama it was shaped by the experiences of people who were involved in those events and lifestyles<sup>33</sup>. Rees says:

'My grandmother ... told me how she and her brother, Clarence, used to ride on the back of her mother's cotton sack. That's why there's a scene like that in the movie," Rees told the *L.A. Times*, later adding, "My grandmother said, 'I will never be a citizen in this country.' And what she meant by that was that this country will never see her as a first class American citizen. She'd always be a problem, or a reminder. I wanted to explore how these black soldiers are received [abroad] first as Americans then as black men. But here, they're received only as black men, and I don't know if they're ever seen as American<sup>34</sup>.'

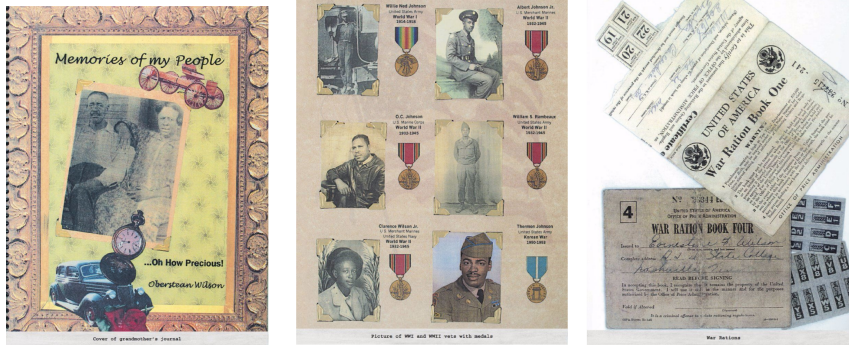
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33 Johnny Brayson, *Is 'Mudbound' A True Story? There's A Reason The Netflix Drama Feels So Real*, *Bustle*, 17 November 2017

<<https://www.bustle.com/p/is-mudbound-a-true-story-theres-a-reason-the-powerful-netflix-drama-feels-so-real-5466932>> [accessed 7 April 2020]

34 Johnny Brayson, *Is 'Mudbound' A True Story? There's A Reason The Netflix Drama Feels So Real*, *Bustle*, 17 November 2017

<<https://www.bustle.com/p/is-mudbound-a-true-story-theres-a-reason-the-powerful-netflix-drama-feels-so-real-5466932>> [accessed 7 April 2020]



22 Page from Ernestine Smith's journal of Dee Rees' great grandmother (from Los Angeles Time)

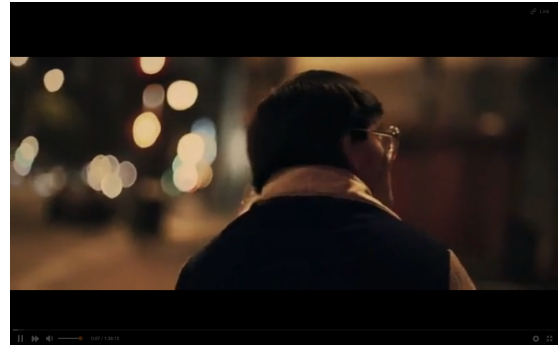
To start with the analysis of the films, as mentioned before, Morrison granted me two interviews last summer when the world was about to collapse. So, to complement my analysis I have asked Morrison about scenes/shots in these films that caught my attention and made me think about her style. I felt very lucky to have the opportunity to bounce ideas off of Morrison who is a very sensitive and humble human being.

### 3.2 ANY DAY NOW

Some can argue that her camera work and lighting are not perfect in this film which is understandable, as it is one of her first low budget feature films. Others will see in those imperfect shots a cinematographer who understands what needs to be shown to the audience to connect with the characters. As Morrison mentioned <sup>35</sup> *'This film was a challenge as it is a period movie made with no budget.'* I remember my surprise when I asked her about why she took the decision of shooting a 2.39:1 aspect ratio, she told me that it was purely decided because of the budget. They didn't have enough money to dress the locations completely so cutting off the top of the frame helped her to avoid modern ceilings, lights, extinguishers... It was interesting to hear her honest answer. Many times as a cinematographer you feel the need to take artistic decisions to implement the subjectivity of the story but other times you just have to be objective and take decisions that will help the style of the film. However Morrison took the pragmatic decision of shooting in that aspect ratio and we can see great examples of subjectivity in this film.

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35 Zoom interview



23 screen shots from the first scene, Marco, *Any Day Now*

The first great example of subjectivity is seen at the very beginning of the film. It is interesting to see how the three main characters are presented, especially Paul and Ruddy played by Garret Dillehut and Alan Cumming respectively. The film opens with different shots of Marco, played by Isaac Leyva, wandering along the streets of San Francisco during the night. A hand held Camera follows him from behind. The camera is so shaky that when I asked Morrison about this shot she couldn't even look at the screen, it was too embarrassing for her. She told me that even though the film was shot on the red one camera, this particular scene was a collection of pick up shots<sup>36</sup>. The red one was not available at the time the pick up shots were scheduled so they had to use a Sony F3 which Morrison dislikes. She complained about many aspects of the camera but particularly its ergonomics which is one of the reasons why the shots are shaky. I agree, camera movements are not smooth enough for the film industry standard, however, when we see Marco for the first time, the shots imply some characteristic of his persona: he is a kid who carries a doll so he must be a sensitive kid and might be lost.



24 Paul's character, *Any Day Now*



25 Rudy's character, *Any Day Now*

After Marco's introduction, which is the opening scene of the film, Paul is presented to us right after a shot of an entrance to a gay bar. We see Paul in a profile close up, we don't see his entire face, just his profile framed very tight on the left side of the frame in a low key. He is sat inside his car, parked opposite the entrance of a gay bar in West Hollywood. For me this is a very

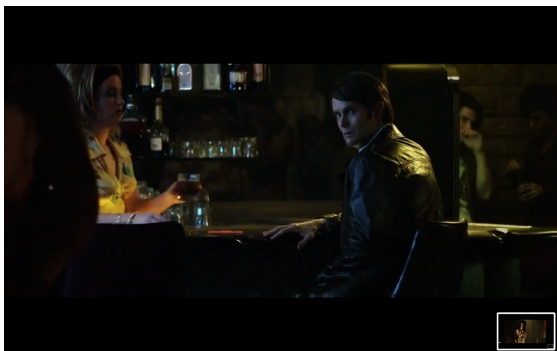
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<sup>36</sup> Pick up shots are shots that weren't shot during the main production of the film.

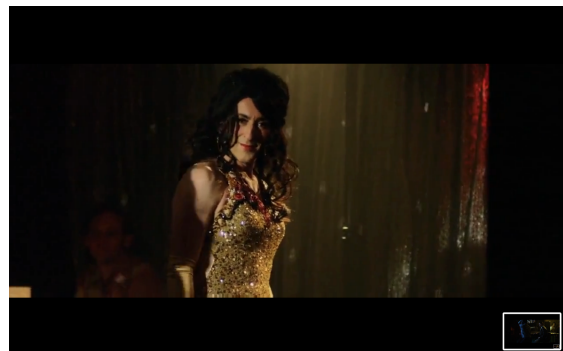
subjective way of telling us something about his character. The choice of presenting Paul in this way makes us wonder about him. This profile shot implies that the character might be hiding an aspect of their personality, and this aspect is what we will discover along the film. I have to say that diegetic music plays a big role in this film, particularly in this scene, which reinforces Paul and Ruddy personalities. However, this analysis will only be concentrating on camera work and lighting.

Opposite to Paul, Rudy is presented from the front in a high key close up, shining like a star. Rudy is dressed up as a woman while performing a song lip syncing. In this way, Ruddy, contrary to Paul's personality, is presented as he is: sexually open and not afraid of being that way. We also see the lighting used to represent Rudy with that red in the background, suggesting his vivid way of life, perhaps dangerous in that period. The film is set in the seventies where the gay community was still oppressed.

The scene continues building the differences between the two main character's personalities. We see Paul entering the gay bar and Rudy who quickly spots him. Paul sits at the bar and looks at Rudy. They both make the first connection, we perceive that connection. The lighting and framing plays an important role in this scene not only because it represents the mood of the bar but also because it suggests something about their personalities. Paul is sat in the bluish shadowed cold area of the bar while Rudy is vividly lit on the stage. What are these shots telling us? As viewers, what do we feel about them when we see this scene?



26 Paul, *Any Day Now*



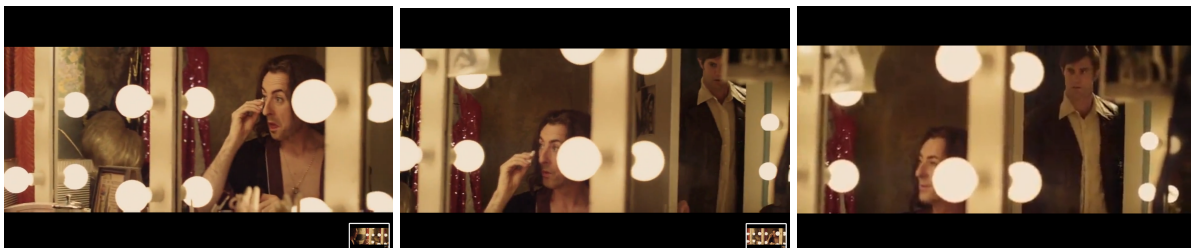
27 Rudy, *Any Day Now*

If we analyse in depth the way Morrison decided to light Paul in this particular shot (picture 26) we can imagine Paul as a cold, mysterious man who enters into a gay bar. Is he gay? Is he a cop? A bluish light is coming from the top left, illuminating the right side of Paul's face leaving the left side in the shadow. We can observe that the light is set in such a way that we can see Paul's left eye in the light as well. It is important to know where he is looking and the way he does it. Lighting here plays an important role as it is a very contrasted scene but this kind of light allows us to see his eyeline. The contrast



is created by the shadow and the bright parts of the frame but also by colors. We see the blue light that illuminates him but there is also a warmer yellow light which helps Paul to stand out in the frame. He is surrounded by this yellow light although he is in the cold blue light. Seeing the film for the first time, this shot makes me think of Paul as an odd character who is in this kind of bar for the first time. However we feel as if he is a mysterious character. The yellow lights that surround him make us feel that he is connected to space and to Rudy who appears in the next shot (picture on the right).

Rudy (picture 27) is also surrounded by a warm light, and the frame also contrasts here. Rudy is lit in a similar way, we can see both of his eyes. The light on him is harder, perhaps implying that he is a stronger character. However, the light in the background is softer with a touch of red light in the top right corner. How can just a touch of red light create a great level of subjectivity. Rudy's shot is from Paul's point of view. It is the first time Paul sees Rudy, a man who dresses up as a woman to perform in a gay bar... I'm already assimilating Paul's perspective and for me seeing Rudy in this frame with that pinch of red and the strong light on him make me want to know more about him, and, obviously about their connection. Will they meet again? Will they connect?



28 *Any Day Now*

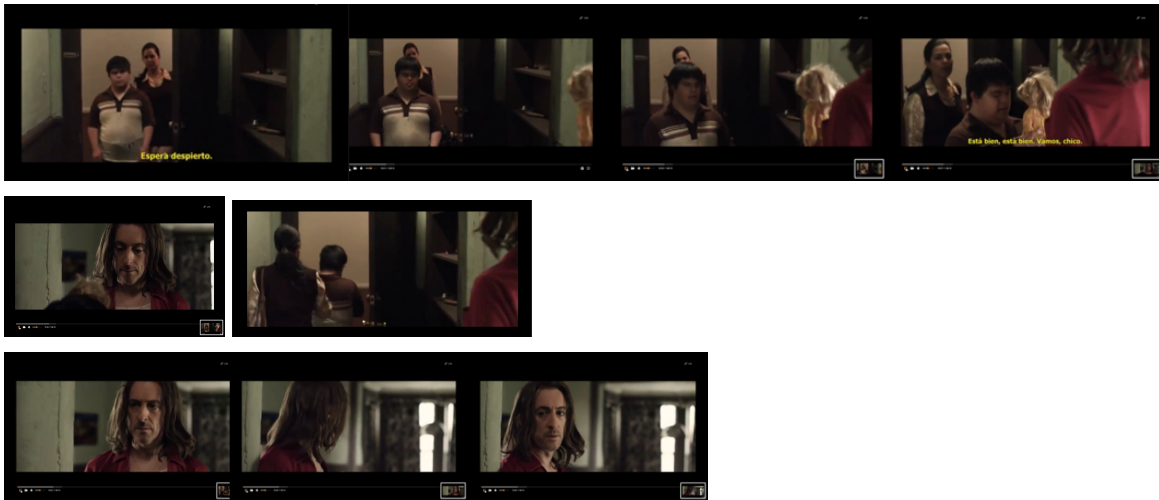
The next scene starts with a close up of Rudy taking off his makeup then another close up of his workmates who are doing the same. They all are in the dressing room after their performance. After these close ups which help us to recognize each character, there is a wider shot that helps us locate ourselves in the space. They are talking about that stranger who came into the bar, Paul. After the wider shot we see Rudy's reflection in the mirror (picture 28) suddenly we hear a knock on the door, Rudy asks to come in. The camera pans right and tilts up to discover Paul who is at the door. We see both of them in the mirror. It is said that mirror shots help to express the psychic character, in this case, this mirror shot helps us to understand the connection between them.

It is a simple little sequence shot but I think this shot predicts part of the plot. We see Rudy in his world, his reflection in the mirror and in that same mirror someone else is reflected too, Paul, who interferes in Rudy's life. When I interviewed Morrison, I asked about this shot and this is what she told me:

' You have somebody self centered in focus on himself and the person who breaks that is Paul. It makes sense for the story as Paul is the person who is going to take Rudy out of himself.'

This is a subjective sequence. I think her style flourishes with this shot, naturalism is implied in this sequence as we feel those warm lights in the mirror of a backstage wardrobe and subjectivity is also latent. We feel their connection, we feel Paul entering into Rudy's life. They could have shot this sequence in a series of shots, like, for instance: single close ups on Rudy and on Paul, as they did at the beginning of the scene where Rudy and his workmates are presented in a series of single close ups and then a wider shot where we see them together. We connect them in the last shot. However, when showing the connection between Paul and Rudy, the director and cinematographer decided on that simple sequence shot of their reflection in the mirror. This connection between the two of them differs from the connection that Rudy has with his mates. This difference is shown just by using a sequence shot where the camera moves showing both of them in the frame.

Another subjective scene that I discussed with Morrison in the interview happens not very far into the story. To set up the scene I will try to summarize where we are in the film. Rudy finds Marco alone, he seems abandoned. The speakers are still blaring loudly from the night before when Marco's mum had a party with a friend before going out. Rudy invites Marco to his place and remembers that Paul is a lawyer and has his contact number. He tries to reach him but his secretary is being quite annoying so he takes Marco and decides to go to Paul's office directly where unfortunately he finds no further help. However, they (Marco and Rudy) come back home to discover that Social Services have come to bring Marco to a care home because his mum has been charged with drug possession. During the whole scene we can feel Rudy's emotions of sadness and concern about Marco who even though they just met feels the need to help him but feels helpless. The point of the scene is to connect with both Marco and Rudy, but especially Rudy. We learn that Marco is a boy with down syndrome whose mother doesn't care about him and we also learn how Rudy is a caring person. I am interested in two particular hand held shots (below) which I think is what brings us closer to the characters even though we are just sixteen minutes into the film.



29 *Any Day Now*

Marco Leaving is shot handheld (see pictures 29). There are two shots which I think are a clever way of telling the story and make us connect with the characters. Morrison's subjective naturalism is stunning here. We see Marco at the door coming toward the camera where Rudy stands with his toy. The shot is built consciously. We see Marco first and then the camera pans to the right to discover his toy and Rudy. I believe if this would have been shot by another camera person it would have been different. Perhaps they would have done a shot of Marco, then his point of view where we would discover the toy. Instead, Morrison expresses this moment in one shot and it gives importance to the toy which is what Marco looks at. Her documentary skills came in handy here as she mentions in our interview:

'I think so much of that really where my training from documentaries comes in handy. When I watched that shot I was thinking Marco's eyes went to the doll so we should feel the way to the doll. There are those little things that are split seconds almost like instinct reactions as opposed to what you could really plan.

I can't articulate but I would say try to tell stories of what you see in actor performances, try to time....The reason I don't like storyboarding is because you don't want to have such a notion of what the scene is gonna be that doesn't give the actor to be spontaneous and doesn't give me room to react to their spontaneity.'

'I start with an intention of a scene, I know it is gonna be a medium close up but where to put the weight of the frame...and yes sometimes I make a very clear decision of where to frame them to minimize them or put them against the window....But other times it is really just feel with the actors, I move with them, I experience the space for the first time with them. If they do their job well,

each time they enter the room it would be a difference experience so I'm just reacting to that'

As she said, to build such a scene, first of all, you have to have great actors who react spontaneously for her to follow their reactions. She knew the doll was what Marco was looking at so she panned to the doll and we felt the connection that Marco has with his doll. Then with Rudy's close up, when he looks back, she also pans a bit to show the window, then Rudy turns to the camera again and Morrison stays there. We are with him. These little hand held movements feel natural and allow us to engage with the story straight away.

### **3.3 FRUITVALE STATION**

'Fruitvale was probably my favorite film although *Mudbound* is up there.'

*Fruitvale Station* recounts Oscar Grant's last day. It follows him on the last day of his life. The whole movie is shot in hand held following Oscar, until he dies, then the camera shifts and the film becomes about his mum and girlfriend as Morrison mentions.<sup>37</sup> When I asked Morrison why she decided to work on this film, she said that it made her cry when she read the script, therefore she was very passionate about making this film. It is the kind of story she likes to tell. She told me that Ryan Coogler contacted her because of her experience in documenting reality, he knew he could trust her instincts. They had a skype call where they both felt connected and that is how their relationship, director-cinematographer, started. Even though they only had three weeks of preparation she mentions that Coogler Ryan had thought in careful detail about a lot of things. For instance, blue represented safety for him like water, home... whereas yellow represented danger like the yellow line in the subway. They also played with a one point perspective. I have chosen three scenes to analyze which I think, again, draw viewers to the character's emotions and make us feel what the character is experiencing in that particular moment. It is a great example of her style.

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<sup>37</sup> Morrison zoom interview 25/05/2020

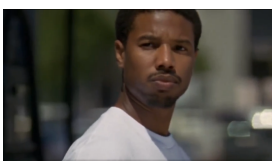
The first scene I will analyze is the scene of the dog which, for some critics, was a very controversial scene. Coogler admitted in an interview at Huffpost that that particular scene was invented to fill the gap<sup>38</sup>. The scene is seen by some critics as an unnecessary manipulation of the viewers as they are pushed to empathise with Oscar, as a good African American man who befriends a dog which immediately after is run over by a car. The camera follows Oscar who suffers and cries at his loss. As this scene is mentioned it is only fair to expose Coogler's response to this criticism:

"When you hear about them in the media, you hear about them doing horrible things. You never hear about a pit bull doing anything good in the media. And they have a stigma to them ... and, in many ways, pit bulls are like young African-American males. Whenever you see us in the news, it's for getting shot and killed or shooting and killing somebody -- for being a stereotype. And that's what you see for African-Americans in the media and the news."<sup>39</sup>

Even though in this particular scene Ryan Coogler seems to force the audience to empathise with Oscar, the viewers' empathy is enhanced throughout the film because of the subjective camera operation and the naturalistic lighting that Morrison achieves. The whole scene is hand held, like in the whole movie, it is about following and feeling Oscar's emotions.



30A Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30B Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30C Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30D Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*

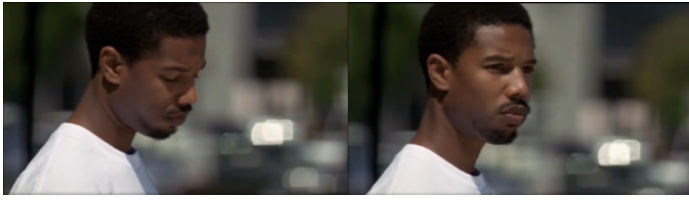


30E Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*

<sup>38</sup>Mike Ryan, HuffPost US, 13 July 2013  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ryan-coogler-fruitvale-station\\_n\\_3580960?ri18n=true&guccounter=1#slide=2014937](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ryan-coogler-fruitvale-station_n_3580960?ri18n=true&guccounter=1#slide=2014937),  
 [accessed 7 April 2020]

<sup>39</sup> Mike Ryan, HuffPost US, 13 July 2013  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ryan-coogler-fruitvale-station\\_n\\_3580960?ri18n=true&guccounter=1#slide=2014937](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ryan-coogler-fruitvale-station_n_3580960?ri18n=true&guccounter=1#slide=2014937),  
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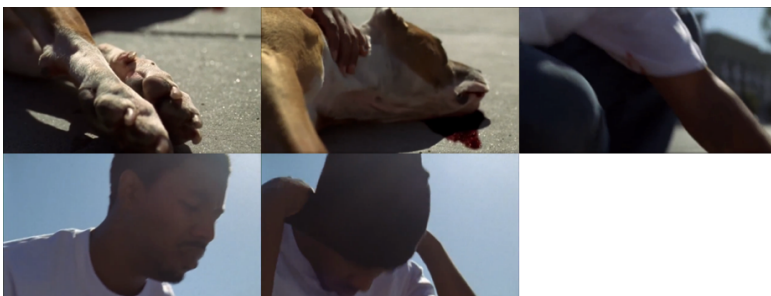
30F Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30G Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30H Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30I Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*



30J Dog scene, *Fruitvale Station*

The scene lasts three minutes and has ten different cuts (see pictures on previous page). It starts with Oscar in a petrol station, the first shot is the fuel hose then the camera tilts up to reveal Oscar. So information is obtained just by this shot of a close up of the fuel hose and Oscar. Then we see a close up of Oscar who is looking at something, then it cuts to his point of view, he was looking at the dog. In that same point of view, Oscar's shoulder subtly appears on the right side of the frame. Then, it cuts to a medium two shots of him and the dog. We learn Oscar is a dog lover. He gets back to finish filling up his car with petrol. We are on a medium shot and it then cuts to a close up of him where we hear the sound of the dog being run over off screen. It cuts to the same medium shot as before where Oscar starts running, trying to catch the car. The camera runs following him from behind, then the camera very subtly starts slowing down at the same time as Oscar does (image number 30G). Oscar stops and so does the camera, he walks back to the dog and the camera follows him backwards. Then there is a cut, and the camera is now following him close to his shoulders, he picks up the dog and puts him aside. Then, another cut, we see a close up of the dog's paw, the camera tilts to the dog's face, it is dead, Oscar covers its eyes. The camera follows Oscar's hand, then tilts up to see his face, he puts a hat on. Oscar visibly feels sad about the dog's death. Finally, we have a wide shot of the petrol station where we see Oscar leaving the dog on the pavement and heading back to the petrol pump, there is a train crossing right to left in the background.

It is in this scene, where we notice Morrison's hand held operation the most. Definitely, her background in documentary and shooting reality has positively influenced her camera operation skills. It is interesting to point out that Morrison was operating this scene, actually, the whole film, with six inch platform shoes. Morrison had to get to the same height as Michael B. Jordan who plays Oscar. So, she followed Mathew Libatique's advice and bought herself a pair of platform shoes which gave her the extra six inch height needed to be at the same height as the character. She recalls how ridiculous it was to be running with those platform shoes in this particular scene. Regardless of the technical aspects, the scene serves as a tool to empathise with Oscar, which is what some critics were frowning on as it seems like a cheesy way of saying to the audience: look, he is a good guy. On the other hand, it also implies a feeling of death. The audience knows Oscar will die so by seeing the dog's death we unconsciously think about Oscars' end. This idea is reinforced in the last shot of the scene where we see the Subway train crossing in the background. Oscar died on the Subway platform. Both Morrison and Coogler studied the emotions they wanted the audience to feel and they succeeded in what they were trying to achieve with this ending in the scene.



31 Platform scene, *Fruitvale Station*

The second scene I have chosen for the analysis is the platform scene where Oscar is shot. I have decided to analyse this one because of its challenges. They were shooting in the same place where the event took place, so it was extremely emotional but also stressful as they had four hours to shoot twenty shots as Morrison expressed in her interview. It is in this kind of scene where good planning comes into place. She stated that they were rehearsing in a parking lot beside the location. 'It seemed like a football match, everyone running from side to side, even my gaffer was running with me with a light on him'.<sup>40</sup> I wanted to concentrate on the part of the scene where they have already disembarked from the train and the police have arrested them. Some people might argue that the hand held operation is too shaky. They are right but is it not that shakiness that provokes in us, viewers, an uneasy feeling, tension, fear? Are these emotions not the same ones that Oscar feels?

This scene is a waterfall of emotions, and by choosing to make it in hand held, it increases the feeling of these emotions and makes us connect with Oscar. There is one particular moment where the camera moves around as if not knowing what is going on. It is at this precise moment in the film where none of the characters in the scene knew what was happening, in particular Oscar. They were on a night out for New Year, and whilst coming home in the train Oscar had an unfortunate encounter and then, all of a sudden, Oscar and his friends find themselves surrounded by the police who mistreat them. I have decided to upload this scene so readers can have a better understanding of the camera movements. The level of subjectivity in this scene is implied by those fast pans and tilts with the camera on Morrison's shoulder. It appears that she is both the viewer and Oscar.<sup>41</sup> However in the midst of the shakiness of those moments she also has the time to make more stylish shots (see pictures 31). Again, this is not about making stylish, beautiful shots, this is about telling the story in a subjective way. Sometimes as filmmakers we have the need to shoot beautiful images but we must not forget about the story we are telling. In this scene we

<sup>40</sup> Morrison's zoom interview

<sup>41</sup> Link to the scene: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Sqj-Hvo\\_EdU8YZ1bNfL4xF8yM7z8Ur\\_9/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Sqj-Hvo_EdU8YZ1bNfL4xF8yM7z8Ur_9/view?usp=sharing)



see how a shaky camera communicates the emotions of that moment in Fruitvale station but also how a more stable camera shows us Oscar laying on the floor after being shot. The tension is over, now there is a feeling of uncertainty.

Before moving to the analysis of the next scene, I'd like to point out one shot that, for me, tells a lot about the work that Morrison and Coogler have done for this film. Before they go out, Oscar and his girlfriend leave their daughter at his girlfriend's sister. We can see Oscar playing with the kids, he is a great father and uncle. Oscar is on the floor playing with the kids, his head is down in the same way before the police officer shoots him. These shots are not a happy accident, they are thoroughly planned to be unconsciously stuck in the viewer's mind.



32 Screenshots from *Fruitvale Station*

The last scene to be analysed in this chapter is the scene where Oscar's mum sees him in the morgue. It is a very interesting scene to analyse because it is here that Morrison had to defend her style to Coogler.

'I had to take Ryan to the side and pitch my idea'<sup>42</sup>



33 Morgue scene, *Fruitvale Station*

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<sup>42</sup> Morrison's zoom interview.

Morrison was searching to define her style, at this moment in her career she was deciding what she wanted to tell and how. This scene is a great example of what she was aiming for. This is a great example where we can differ realism to naturalism, and objectivity to subjectivity. In the scene we see Wanda, Oscar's mother played by Octavia Spencer, at the morgue where her son Oscar lays dead. We can say that the scene is about a mother who sees her son dead in a morgue. When Coogler came onto the set and saw what Morrison was doing in terms of lighting, he told her that the morgue did not look like a morgue. The place where the body laid was too dark around the edges and too bright in the main body and Coogler thought it was not real. Morrison took him aside and started pitching her idea.

'This is a mother watching her son in a morgue, it is about how she sees him, it is not about how a morgue looks like.'<sup>43</sup>

Morrison wanted to light the corpse brightly with a light coming from above, perhaps implying a light coming from God who is taking her son. Coogler respected Morrison's view of the scene and both ended up compromising their vision. I believe that Rachel's sensibility and understanding made viewers experience the characters emotions. She has the ability to represent a human's emotion. Naturalism in this scene could be argued as some might oppose the way the scene was lit. In film, filmmakers like Morrison and Coogler have the power to avoid representing reality to imply an emotion. Naturalism is expressed here in a more subjective way. Morrison is thinking of how Wanda sees her son dead. Therefore, it is about Wanda's feelings. Naturalism here is expressed in the emotions.

To summarize, we can say that Fruitvale Station was the film where Morrison defined and refined her style. Taking the emotion of the characters to drive the audience's attention throughout the story. Camera seems to inherently be walking through life and reacting as the characters reacted. As she stated before, the cinematography is informed by the subjectivity of the character's experience. It is about trying to translate an internal process.

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43 Morrison's zoom interview

### 3.4 Mudbound

Although Morrison's favourite film is Fruitvale Station, she made history with *Mudbound*. She got an Oscar nomination for her work in this movie. The film tells the story of different characters who intertwine. The story is told by their different perspectives and it has two elements in common. As Morrison stated in the zoom interview 'it is about hope and despair'. She has various motifs for each character but always leans towards the main idea of representing hope and despair. This film was the most challenging one for Morrison not only because of the weather conditions (Morrison got heat exhaustion)<sup>44</sup> but dealing with director Rees was not great. Rees had a very clear idea for the film in her mind, actually, she had storyboards which she was very strict about following, not leaving Morrison space to pitch her ideas, to tell the story in a more subjective manner. However, Morrison took advantage of having a second camera. If she felt that there was a better shot to tell the story, Morrison would set up A camera with the shot that Rees had in the storyboards and then set up B camera to capture the story in a subjective way. Ninety per cent of the shots that Morrison set up on Camera B ended up in the final cut.

Before analyzing some of the scenes, I would like to explain a bit about *Mudbound*'s preparation. As a cinematographer who believes in pre-production, I asked Morrison about the pre stage in this movie. For me this movie is the best in terms of cinematography. The first thing Morrison told me was that this story should have been shot on film but ended up being shot on digital. She tested a lot. First thing she did was a test with 35mm film, 16mm and digital. She said 16mm was not right because of the scope of the landscape, the resolution was not right. So, she then did another test with 35mm film and digital with both spherical and anamorphic lenses. She and Rees loved the film texture. When they presented those tests to production, they told them that if they wanted to shoot on film they could but they would have less days of shooting. As Morrison stated the production was already short, twenty-nine days, she couldn't afford losing five extra days. Therefore, Rees and Morrison decided to shoot on digital. What Morrison tested after deciding for the digital was how she could get a digital image that looks like film. So she shot some tests using 1600 ISO and then in the grading she would add some grain to the image and by doing that she realised what she obtained was very close to film. Therefore, after a long period of testing, a decision was finally made; digital was the medium to shoot *Mudbound*. Digital combined with anamorphic and spherical glass.

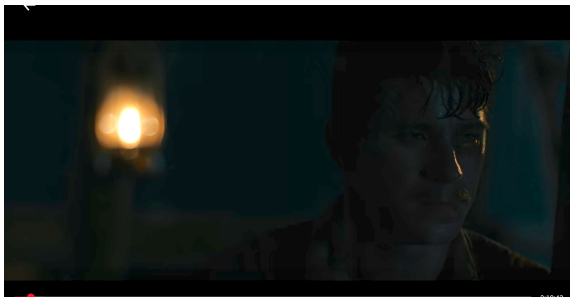
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44 Zoom Interview.

When I mentioned to Morrison how much I loved the way she made the moonlight for *Mudbound* she told me that another of her tests was testing the color of moonlight in the farm. She said that normally when she has to film a moonlight in a city she goes for white color but for the farm she felt white was not right. She started testing with green and blue gels, she mentioned LEDs were not as available as nowadays, so gels were the only viable way. She arrived at the conclusion that by using a combination of those gels she could achieve a turquoise color and that is the color of the moon on the farm. I also shared with her my feelings about these two shots (see pictures 34) from the film. I told her how the moonlight with that small light in the distance in the left frame of the right picture evokes a kind of loneliness, sadness but also hope for the character. She answered that 'that is what it was all about!

'The light represent a hint of hope positive whisper of despair

More color separation between the moon and the candle, you feel the warm because you feel the cold...that's the idea...it wouldn't work for everything but for this yes'<sup>45</sup>



34 Screenshots from *Mudbound*

I thoroughly enjoyed talking to Morrison about this movie. I can see the evolution of her techniques, also I have to mention that this film had a better budget than the previous ones. For me, it is the best technically speaking.

It was also challenging because of the complexity of the story, they have different characters with different storylines, all of them are important in the film. When I asked her about what kind of visual rules she and Rees have for the characters she mentioned one in particular which I also spotted. For the character of Laura MacAllan played by Carey Mulligan they had the idea of using smoother movements and warmer colors when in the city and colder and hand held when in the farm. I have chosen two different scenes, in the first one we see Laura MacAllan in her parents house, in the city. The second one is one of the last shots in the movie where she is in the farm walking behind the coffin of her dead father in law. I think it is in these two scenes where we notice these motifs. Also it is in these scenes where the character of Laura has changed since she is no longer a city girl after having spent months on the farm.

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45 Morrison's zoom interview



35 Scene from *Mudbound*



36 Scene from *Mudbound*

I've chosen these two different scenes which are at the beginning of the film, because I think they show the characters emotional states, it differentiates the two psychological states that Laura's been through. The first shot shows Laura's present which is unstable, fragile, uncertain...while in the second one, we see Laura's past before getting married. The camera movement is much smoother and together with the warm color, reflects her feeling of discovery, stability, cosiness. In the second one (picture 36), we see Laura, her future husband and her family sitting at a table. We see her in the background, the camera is on a dolly moving closer to her, we notice she seems smaller in the frame than the rest evoking the idea of a girl whose future is being decided at that dinner table. On the contrary, in the first scene, where the shot opens with her, we see her as a woman whose life wasn't as she expected but has made her stronger. She walks towards the camera, with the camera in handheld mode. Morrison was walking backwards with a wide lens. We notice how delicate her hand held operation is, how precise she walks with the characters, we barely notice that there is a camera walking backwards in the mud. She told me that the trick is to move with the characters, to get into their rhythm, feeling and following them. The composition of this shot subjectively implies the relationship between the characters.

We start with Laura and the camera showing her children, then we see Jamie McAllan who is Henry's brother and the one who kills his dad. The characters are played by Garret Hedlund and Jason Clarke respectively. The shot ends on a medium close up of Henry who is leading the walk carrying his dad's coffin, then in the midground is Jamie and then Laura in the background. Jamie is in the middle of the relationship in which Laura and Jamie had a romance, they are both secretly in love. Laura has definitely changed during the film, her character has evolved. This can be seen when comparing these two shots. It is interesting to see how in the first scene the camera gets closer to her in a smooth manner in contrast to the last scene where the camera starts on her and then distances from her in a very rough manner.



37 KKK scene, *Mudbound*

For the next scene to analyse, I chose the KKK scene (picture 37) because of the combination of a hand held camera and a crane, studio mode operation. I was fascinated when I saw the use of this combination as some directors are a bit sceptical about using these two different modes within the same scene. However this combination is what brings a level of subjectivity. It creates the difference between the KKK and Roncel and Jamie. In the scene we see the KKK led by Pappy (played by Jonathan Banks), Henry and Jamie's father. They have Kidnaped Roncel (played by Jason Mitchell) and they are bringing Jamie who will be asked to kill Roncel. He refuses so they both end up being beaten up. They make Jamie decide what part of Roncel's body they should cut off, his tongue, eyes or balls. As we can see this scene contains a lot of violence and racism. We see the two worlds of America in the 40s where racism was rife. There are two gangs. In this case, the KKK is against Roncel and Jamie.

To reinforce the difference between the two, Morrison and Rees decided to use a combination of studio mode and hand held. They used the studio mode to show the scope of the KKK and hand held for Roncel and Jamie. We can see that the shot of the crane reflects the KKKs views, while the use of a hand held gives us a perception of Jamie's impression.

'we wanted to establish the spectacle of everyone at the top, in some moments we were objective and others we wanted to show the subject perspective'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Zoom interview



### 38 *Mudbound*

The pictures above are from the scene where Laura discovers Jamie in Pappy's room. Jamie has killed Papa during the night. During this film analysis, I have always talked about the degree of subjectivity expressed by the camera. I have not mentioned the other characteristic of Morrison's style which is naturalism. Naturalism is a term imbued with lighting. Morrison's way of lighting seems so simple, real and in harmony with the feeling of the scene that we don't notice any lighting artifacts. For instance, Morrison told me that in some of the scenes in *Mudbound* she had to use M18 arri lights bounced from inside, she explained that she has never wanted to light from the inside and it was the first time she had done something like that. I decided to analyse this scene because it has another small scene inside where we see Jamie killing Pappy during a stormy night. The scene starts with Laura coming into the hut calling Pappy who is dead in his bed, Jamie is sat beside the door and tells Laura what has happened. We then see Pappy sleeping during the night. The camera tilts up and discovers Jamie, it is very dark but thanks to the lightning we recognize Jamie.

In both of these sequences, the lighting plays an important role together with the camera movement. The first one happens in the early morning light which reflects peacefulness and in a more obvious way the new start. In this case, this kind of lighting was suitable because of both the story line and also because it is the perfect quality of light to evoke a feeling of tranquility. In this part of the film, that is the emotion to be felt, as after the storm, comes the calm. The previous night during the violent scene with the KKK, there was a storm.

In the second sequence where Jamie kills his dad, I also have to point out the well executed camera movement which is perfect from the first shot to the last. Composition plays a big role in this one however and lighting surprises the viewers the most. When the camera tilts up we see a shadowy figure but suddenly there is a lightning bolt which lights up the character, revealing Jamie's face. How did Morrison rely on this natural event to enhance the story? Obviously, the storm and the lightning were created by the video effects and lighting team, however what a subtle way of creating intrigue and tension using the natural elements of a storm.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to mention that my interview with Morrison was incredibly helpful to analyse this film in particular. I have to say that everything exposed here was discussed with Morrison who agreed on my analysis. This film would not have been cut this way if Morrison would not have used her Bcam as a tool to tell the story in a subjective manner. As I mentioned before, Rees had a different idea of how to tell the story. Morrison started seeing a better way for the story to be told. As Rees was very fixed on her storyboards Morrison decided to take advantage of having a second camera to place it in the most subjective place.



## 4. CONCLUSION

Because Morrison made history by being the first woman to be nominated for an Oscar this thesis exposes some of the greatest women who made films along the history of cinema but, who unfortunately, weren't given the credit they deserved.

'It seems unfair that I was the first woman to be nominated, there were a lot of them behind me who weren't visible enough because of the time they lived'<sup>47</sup>

Rachel Morrison, along her cinematography career came up with a term to define her own style, subjective naturalism. As she mentioned, it is all about translating the characters' emotions into imagery. When defining a style we have to search for a common theme or motif found in all the work made by the artist. By analysing Morrison's work in different films we found the subjectivity of her work. The way she operates the camera or where she places the camera makes the audience connect with the character. Her naturalistic lighting makes us forget about the lighting artifacts behind the scenes and engage with the story.

'I'd like to think that the styles themselves are quite different and the color palettes are quite different, things like that. But the one thing that I always found pretty consistent is, from that I sort of came up with a subjective naturalism, which is that, the cinematography is informed by the subjectivity of the characters' experience. So it's really about trying to translate, an internal process. It's about trying to translate a character's emotional journey into visuals. I certainly look for projects where I feel like the characters take an emotional journey and where there are stakes. They're like for me as much as other genres, do other things really well, I don't know that like comedy, you ever get to a place where it's like, you connect emotionally with a character's life or death. So there's just only so much you can do.'<sup>48</sup>

'Some films are handheld, some are steadicam, some are colorful somewhere. De-saturated like, it's not so much. I'd like to think that most, that to me anyway, most great cinematographers are, it's much more about adapting to the story and not just sort of doing one look that they apply to everything. There's a few notable exceptions who I would probably argue are maybe doing themselves a disservice by still lighting the same way that they always have. For me, it's

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47 Morrison zoom interview 21/05/20

48 Morrison zoom interview 21/05/20

letting the story, they paid the way that I shoot. And then, I just was looking for what's consistent. The consistent thing is that it's always motivated by the characters'.<sup>49</sup>

Morrison starts by choosing a script where she can highlight her style. Scripts must contain characters who take an emotional journey throughout the story. The audience will be engaged with the characters thanks to Morrison's imagery. We can not forget that film is about collaboration, in this case, a collaboration with the director who together with the cinematographer create the style of the film. An important step in the cinematographer's career to define their style is to know what kind of story they want to tell.

'My advice that I would say to anybody starting out is to go and shoot a documentary about something intense. You can only live in real time once when you are doing documentaries with one camera you have to start trusting your instincts, where to be, what feels right.'<sup>50</sup>

Even though she knew from the beginning what sort of cinema she wanted to make, it took her a while to take that step. This was due to her economical situation. She started shooting reality shows and documentaries to pay the bills. Years later, she would realise how much this influenced her career as she gained a lot of skills whilst operating such as learning how to take fast decisions and trusting her instincts. However she quit her job and decided to wait for the right script to come. The script has to be character driven. For her to embark on the project, the character in the script has to have an emotional journey. In that sense, she flourishes, enhancing the character's emotions with her imagery. Naturalism is another characteristic in her style. To find the naturalism in her work we need to look at the way she lights. Lighting also plays an enormous role in Morrison's style as she said lighting does not need to be real, it needs to feel right to represent a character's emotion.

'I think realism is quite literal, the literal experience. Fruitvale Station is a great example of that. It was where I learned a lot about what I try to do. I think Ryan wanted Ryan to feel Fruitvale Station real but keep the heat. The scene on the morgue, for instance, a morgue in real life is bright. It's just a wash of fluorescent light. And so he wanted the imagery to feel like, but a woman seeing her dead son in a morgue... There's something much more specific about that.'<sup>51</sup>

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49 Morrison zoom interview 21/05/20

50 Morrison zoom interview 23/06/20

51 Morrison zoom interview 21/05/20

'I wanted the light to feel like it was almost coming from her son's body. And so we found this balance where it's like, initially I think I lit it in such a dramatic way that he was like, wait, this doesn't feel like a Mork to me. And, and then we turned on all the fluorescents and suddenly it doesn't feel like a mom seeing her dead son to me. And so it's like, we found this balance where it still felt real to him. And it felt like an experience that you might have in a real place. But, ultimately, the thing that was generating the light was this emotional encounter. So I guess it's about finding that line, right? Realism is just shooting something for what it is exactly.<sup>52</sup>

In the films we analysed in this paper we found Morrison's lighting to be unnoticed so it feels natural. That is one of the main achievements for a cinematographer. Their work must be invisible so the audience engages with the story and characters in the story. Some might argue about the lighting and camera technique used in *Any Day Now*. However we must mention that this movie was made with a very limited budget (less than half a million). We can definitely see the evolution of her techniques over the past years, we can see the development of her operating skills and also, the evolution of her lighting, although we have to mention that her lighting skills were always there. She knows what feels right. However, for me, this development has a lot to do with the budget of the production which increased with every new project, giving her the opportunity to work with better equipment and crews. If we compare *Any Day Now* with *Mudbound* we see Morrison's work in her acme in *Mudbound*. Her way of lighting the scenes and the precision surrounding the time of shooting, was rewarded with a nomination for an Oscar. We also have to mention her way of working with Rees, giving her what she was asking for but taking advantage of the second camera to shoot subjectively.

In a film, a character driven story must be found for Rachel to embark on the project. Subjectivity on film is achieved by evoking an emotion with visuals but, again, we must not forget that we need a strong story. I have chosen these films because of their authenticity, similarity to the real world and the naturalism impregnated in them. My idea of filmmaking leans toward social dramas, stories that make me and the audience aware of the past/present socio-political issues and question myself about humanity. Just like Morrison, I also aim to tell these kinds of stories hoping to one day find them and influence the viewers' minds.

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52 Morrison zoom interview 21/05/20

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