




ARTS
ILLUSTRATED

A dark, atmospheric night scene. In the upper right, a bright, glowing moon is partially obscured by wispy white clouds. Below the moon, the dark silhouette of a building's roofline is visible against the night sky. In the lower right, a faint, glowing green light source is visible, possibly a window or a light fixture. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

Time passed with the grace of light.
And once again, a new story began
in the inside of darkness.



Photo Finish

A film set photographer might have to be out of sight but always needs to remain in focus as Hollywood photographer Kimberley French tells us

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The chaos on a film set is seldom palpable. It's always just beneath the surface, like pulse underneath your skin, always throbbing, always alive, always sending out subtle signals that can sometimes be unexpectedly euphoric and sometimes utterly devastating. Into this heady mix of film shoot reality enters the film set photographer – not exactly someone intrinsic to the filmmaking process, but not someone you could do without either. The film photographer is like cotton blowing in the wind, settling into comfortable anonymity, alighting at inconspicuous corners and quietly delighting at the view of the world from there. It's precisely for this reason that

this extremely precarious balance the photographers have to maintain of feathery lightness and earthy presence, that I have always felt, out of all the different forms of photography, film still photography is probably the toughest of the lot. It requires you to be invisible, create frames with existing lighting that you cannot control, tip-toe around actors and still get your shots, and work gruelling hours, dealing with a multitude of energies around you. It requires you to find a different kind of focus, one that isn't entirely about the shot you are going to capture, but more about the way you position yourself, like burying your feet in the sand and allowing the waves to wash over you. 'I keep myself

grounded by reminding myself that I am not really relevant to the process of filmmaking, and then go from there. I read the script, understand the story before they start filming and start thinking about ways to tell the story in one frame – what image will be the iconic one, the still that everyone remembers? What photograph will tell the story in a similar way to what the filmmakers are attempting? Will they be in a similar language? Will they be true to the story and characters? The work is so challenging that I have to work very hard in every way to make good photographs, the expenditure of energy alone keeps me grounded,' says Kimberley French, who got her



Still from the film *The Revenant*, 2015.

first camera from her grandmother when she was seven, studied literature and then photography, worked as a freelancer for five years, and encountered the world of film photography through a chance conversation with an independent filmmaker friend. Her stills for films like *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Twilight Saga*, *the Assassination of Jesse James*, and more recently *The Revenant* are telling narratives of her understanding of the medium and the process, while giving us a glimpse of the photographer, too, whose strength seems to stem from her quietly powerful frames that arrest you with all that isn't seen or said. French's stills are a lot like Ernest Hemmingway's Iceberg Theory and what he said: 'The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water'.

Excerpts from the interview

Working in different conditions, with different on-screen aesthetics – colour, make-up, costume, set design – and different actors/directors/DOPs, how do you position your individual sensibility when it comes to your photographs? Is it more about the angle, the frame of the shot, or the emotions captured? What do you personally veer towards?

It's about all of those things, and more. Sometimes I don't even quite know why a particular photograph works. It would have to have these elements plus a kind of magic. Emotion is certainly a key element, but if it's framed badly it won't translate, it won't sing. It takes a bit of intuition in the moment to know where and when the photograph lives; it is so easy to miss it, by a fraction of a second, by the turn of a head, by

someone or something in your frame. I know when I've captured something special, when it will end up being used for publicity or advertising.

How intrinsic is the film photographer to the process of filmmaking? And how involved are you within that process?

I'm not involved in the process of making the film. However, on *The Revenant* I was asked at the beginning of filming to give the director 10–20 processed selects per day for two weeks. After two weeks he liked them so much, I was asked to continue providing them every week. I created a particular look and went into the digital darkroom every Saturday for the seven months of filming. I think they provided Alejandro with a finished look at the film, and perhaps inspired him. He told me a few times how much he



Kimberley French
 Photograph by Stewart Bradley.

● Still from the film *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, 2009.

● Still from the film *Brokeback Mountain*, 2005.



Still from the film *The Revenant*, 2015.

loved them. It was an unusual situation, as normally the raw files are sent to a lab in Los Angeles to be processed (as per my instructions). I haven't ever had the opportunity to be super creative and process so many of my selects into a definitive look. Taschen Books exhibited 30 of those photographs at their gallery in Los Angeles on February 24, 2016, three days before the Academy Awards, to announce a collector's book of the same photographs. I had no idea at the beginning of filming *The Revenant* that so many of the photographs would end up in the public eye. There are over 250 in the 'key set', released to the world, an astonishing amount, considering that usually there are less than 50. *The Revenant* was also a unique experience for me as a set photographer, because there was no artificial lighting at all. Just Chivo, his motion camera, and me and my still camera.

How would you define a challenging film shoot? Is it more about overcoming equipment failure or more about working with difficult people?

Both. Hopefully there are neither on a film, as both can be very frustrating, and make an ordinarily very challenging job impossible. I'm lucky. I haven't had many issues either way.

*When you work on films like *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Revenant*, both of which are deeply sensitive and impactful films, how do you maintain that objective*

eye for your shoots? What I mean here is, when you find you are getting emotionally invested in the subject and the story, how do you use that to your advantage?

I welcome becoming emotionally invested, it makes for extraordinary art. In fact, if I'm not invested, I'm not making good photography. It transforms and motivates everyone who works on the project. Nothing is objective; storytelling is intrinsically subjective, and I really do believe that every single crew member on a project lends energy, motivates the telling, and is a part of it.

I understand that it isn't normal practice to have the unit photographer also shoot the posters for the film's



Still from the film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, 2007.



Still from the film *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, 2009.
All images courtesy of Kimberley French.

publicity, but you have been lucky in that respect. How different is this process then, how does your thinking change?

It's a completely different job. On-set photography is like photojournalism, and special or gallery photography is like advertising or fashion studio work. I work alone on set, on specials I work with the advertising people from the studio, four to five assistants and a big lighting kit in a studio setting, over a few days. We work with concepts; it is very planned. Set photography is hardly ever set up, it's much more organic. Some of my film poster credits are actually set photographs, not made during a special, but captured during the filming. I believe these are the best kind of image for a poster; they contain the magic, the energy of the film. I still enjoy photographing specials as they are just vastly different ways to make poster images.

You said in an interview 'People love to ask if I'm shooting Nikon or Canon, but I say that it doesn't really matter, it's the person operating the camera. It's a tool.' I am curious to know how you view this tool then. As an extension of your creative spirit or as the beginning of your creative expression?

I see the camera as an extension of myself. It is just an object until I pick it up. I'm not very interested in discussions about cameras or the technical aspects of it, unless it involves discussing the creative along with it. There is so much emphasis these days on equipment, and the perception that cameras make the photograph. We're having the wrong conversation. Is the photograph good? If so, who cares what tool made it in the end? Does the photograph move you? Who made it? That's all that matters.

You have worked on two Oscar-winning films, and the hugely commercial Twilight series. Do you get a sense of these things, of where or how the film is positioned, and does that affect the way you design your frame?

Sometimes when reading a script before working on a film, I know. It's undeniable. I always resonate with the characters and story, I must always be invested in them to do good work; there is no other way. If you don't, the work is ordinary. Much the same way everyone on the film must be invested, and when they are, magic happens.

And finally, what is more overwhelming – the 'newness' of every film experience or the monotony of the process?

It's never monotonous on a film set! Overwhelming, every day.

