

How has Roger Deakins challenged cinematographic conventions within the genres of sci-fi, action and thriller?

Fundamentally, when one considers the deviations from genre conventional attitudes, the discussion often begins and ends with the director themselves. Though these people are often in control of the final product, it isn't fair to assume that various departmental heads haven't provided evidence to subsequently influence the choices of said director through pre-production and production itself – creative conflict births product redefinition.

The Science-Fiction (Sci-Fi) genre often routes its visual aesthetic in cooler tones, with a common choice being to represent some sequences in a clean, controlled, sterile environment with little to no movement. Though the genre has began to adopt many sub-genres, leading to a heavily stylised spread of productions that either conform or subvert this. One example being the original *Blade Runner* (1982), which took on a neo-noir look. Deakins's work on the Denis Villeneuve sequel to the cult classic *Blade Runner* found him commonly utilising a subdued tonal range. No matter whether the backdrop was futuristic Los Angeles or the surrounding areas, the environment routinely echoed the decaying societal backdrop. This physicalising of an almost 'toxic' essence also helps in our understanding of the world – something which as a concept is key in this genre. The sequence in Las Vegas especially shines as an example of this. Besides acting as a weathered representation of the old world, the pathetic fallacy is framed to characterise Rick Deckard and his values. And though it could be argued that the original film, *Blade Runner* (1982), utilised the smog of LA to paint its neo-noir aesthetic through shrouding of information and adding edge to its painting of the city, the later sequel allows for the look to overwhelm its characters in big bold swathes of light. To act in contrast to this is the film, *Life* (2017), lensed by Seamus McGarvey. Though a reflection of the idea presented earlier, that Sci-Fi is so stylistic currently, *Life* conforms more to the original image that the genre put forth into audiences' minds. One concept being the choice of movement within a scene or setup. Though *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) chose to keep its cinematography grounded in terms of realistic and often subtle ways, *Life* (2017) reflected the zero gravity through free-flowing, weightless shifts. And as the narrative draws to a close, with Calvin almost overtaking the ship, anti-clockwise rotations further skew our perspective. With a proposed connotation that the unnatural movement likens itself to the negative outlook of the situation. *Life* (2017) also utilised space in a way to construct its environment. An example of this being in how the interior of the station utilises positive space through a deep depth of field in order to convey the claustrophobic life within, and to furthermore anchor the genre trope of the importance of technology. This was juxtaposed by the exterior of the ship being composed in ways that took advantage of negative space, connoting the isolation and loneliness in space itself. Similarly, space in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), more specifically the scene in which Joi's affection is paused to receive an incoming call, proposes K lives in a world of loneliness and isolation with his seemingly only love to be nothing more than a display of his desire. Comparably the use of the colours blue and orange are frequent in both, though subject to differing interpretations. Throughout *Blade Runner 2049's* (2017) marketing and film itself, the colours echo the theme of time. A common narrative convention of the genre, this theme links to the narrative through age. The new age of Los Angeles being soaked in a blue futuristic glow whilst the old world of Las Vegas emanates orange. Whereas in *Life* (2017) we see the contrasting colours used to instigate a sense of comfort, i.e sanctuary and risk. An example being how in the opening shots we see the Earth to be framed with a warm glow as we tilt downward to reveal the International Space Station in a deep blue glow of nothingness. One final consideration within the three texts is the attitude towards lighting females. Throughout *Blade*

Runner 2049 (2017), we see stark, contrasting images over the many female characters as well as the traditional soft lights. Whereas in the original we see a more traditional, more flattering approach. *Life* (2017) almost straddles the middle, though it hides behind a more narratively grounded approach. This has always been one of the conventional approaches to cinematography, one that transcends genre itself. And here we see how Roger Deakins has swayed from the first film's approach in order to conform to the current societal thought on gender equality in film.

The action genre is one of the most well-defined genres in existence. Titles such as *Shooter* (2007) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) were joined by *Sicario* (2015), the last being lensed by Deakins. With Deakins's work in documentary, both photography and film, this film stands proudest to embody that experience. The camera is very often placed in a way that the body language of the actors sets the mood, not through the typical quick cutting between shot sizes and aided by movement – a very static sense of observing. One example being how after the scene at the border crossing, Kate is seen to explode with anger in a very long shot. To watch human interaction take place without any type of cut to mirror the intensity of such an event is to truly observe. Though it also connotes a sense that Kate is a part of something much greater than herself, which is equally represented as a narrative theme throughout. In contrast, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) varying degrees of closeups – medium, big, extreme – are used to further the intensity and to ramp up the adrenaline rush of the sequences. These are also coupled with quicker shutter speeds for the viewer to interpret action gesture codes with heightened attention, achieved through visual stimulation. *Shooter* (2007) goes one step further and frames a lot of its action sequences through the scope of a rifle, giving weight to the perspective of the audience. Similarly, to *Sicario* (2015), however, is the film's use of helicopters in slow-motion sequences. As they anchor the military iconography, they also give weight to the location ahead. In *Sicario's* (2015) case it furthers the tension as we see Juarez ahead, a location characterised to the audience as a danger zone. The colour palette of *Sicario* (2015) brings contrast to the other productions too. *Sicario* (2015) presents us with a moderately stylised view, with Mexico taking on a sickly tone to reflect its uninviting nature throughout the film, and overwhelming neon lights as Kate falls victim to Ted at the bar scene. *Shooter* (2007) brings us a uniform look established through the format of film stock pushed to bring a highly contrasted look based in orange and teal – a common cinematic trait to play on colour theory. This look reflects the gritty military aesthetic, typical of action films within the time period. These hard light and high-key sequences bring an edge of seriousness to the actions and narratives. Unlike other genres in which the exposition may be hidden in the darkness, action movies tend to present their themes in a straightforward manner – a basic good vs evil scenario. Matt Workman of *CinematographyDB* (2016) presents the idea that within film theory, shooting a subject below the horizon line likens them to be an oppressed group. The scene in question, where we see the police officer's household below the city's horizon line reflects the low-income environment. Similarly, in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), we see Nux framed below the horizon line also. And from the film's narrative we are clearly presented with the idea of him being expendable to his superiors. With regards to the lighting, *Sicario* (2015) uses the natural world to influence its style in most times. For example, we see Kate washed with a red light that is shown to be a red curtain. However, this red light comes right after she responds to a threat again her life, with her dispatching the threat. It could be construed that this may have been her first kill, or perhaps she was affected by the near-miss moment. Other examples include the special forces taskforce quietly approaching the tunnel under the cover of darkness – something Deakins beautifully emboldens with secrecy with his depiction of silhouettes against the sky. To contrast, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) looks to an over-exaggerated, highly-saturated orange and teal environment. This visual style reflects the intensity of the world, whilst evoking the harsh conditions that have been left behind for the characters to

populate. Though even at night, the characters remain high-key even under the blue night sky. The only instance of subdued lighting is used to reflect how close Max is to death after waking up following the crash – when he's almost bled dry by Nux.

No Country for Old Men (2007) is a cult classic by many standards. Though he lost to *There will be Blood* (2007), it remains one of his strongest works. Almost as a precursor to *Sicario* (2015), Deakins's work on *No Country for Old Men* (2007) paints the desert in a high-key sickly tone. With high contrast night scenes, the work embodies his naturalistic lighting DNA that is recognised to be one of his signature characteristics. In contrast, another film of the thriller genre – *Zodiac* (2007) – relies on low-key lighting in order to create an unwelcoming, uncomfortable sense of instability throughout. The television show *True Detective* (2014) also incorporates low-key lighting, with a contrasting high-key for its interview segments of the narrative. Similarly, yet uniquely, *No Country for Old Men* (2007) takes the composition of these interviews and transforms it into centrally framed singles-only conversation. These conversations run throughout and pose the audience to treat the subject with distinct interest, as if Deakins wants nothing else to contaminate the reading of the character's performance, surrounding and space – they are placed under a figurative spotlight to be analysed. The movement of *No Country for Old Men* (2007) is also quite subtle in comparison to the other research texts. More than often, our interest in the way of exposition, i.e. conversations, is increased through Deakins's choice to dolly in. This technique is frequently revisited throughout the film. In comparison, Fincher's characteristic style shines through within *Zodiac* (2007). This can be seen in the scene in which the Zodiac writes to the newspaper office. The letter becomes a motivator for the narrative, with everything moving past it – it becomes an intense symbol that the world bends around. The two could be seen to be contrasts of cinematic style, though again Deakins reinforces his choice of subtlety. *True Detective* (2014) does opt for the slow dolly in to increase our attention as valuable information is exposed, so one could say that Fincher's style is the unconventional one in this case. As with most of Deakins's work, he often opts for a medium-to-deep depth of field for the surroundings to remain influential in scenes. All three of his films mentioned throughout this essay poise characters to be a part of their environment, with its effect on them in equal measure. *Zodiac* (2007), however, opts for a more genre-typical approach in allowing for depth to remain deep when in a comfortable space. For example, when Robert enters Bob Vaughn's house in the red herring moment, the space becomes a danger. Depth becomes lessened and other elements such as more defining shadows on Bob's face, and even hiding Bob in the darkness itself become more frequent. *True Detective* (2014) opts for the same technique when we see Rust approaching Marty's house. The swaying camera movements and shallow depth of field, dropping the house ahead into a blur, connote a mystery ahead. The framing of *No Country for Old Men* (2007), again similarly to what was later used in *Sicario* (2015), places its characters in wide shots that allows for them to act in the presence of their backdrop. By allowing for us to observe the subject and their movement, the film shifts to almost becoming a documentary on the three characters. Another note on the framing emphasises the use of the medium closeup (MCU). The whole of the scene, bar the counter cutaway, relies on this singular frame size in order to aid Chigurh's coin conversation at the gas station. Without deviating to intensify the shot, Deakins maintains discipline and allows for the story to increase the tension in an otherwise regular place of conversation. *Zodiac* (2007) turns to right to left readings of its frames as the situation heightens around the killer's activities. As with *Life's* (2017) anti-clockwise movement, these readings of a frame go against our human instinct and therefore translate to an uncomfortable psychological feeling. One key difference between the two films especially is their representation of a dead body. Fincher opts to show the cab driver's body from below, whereas Deakins has framed Moss from a high angle. One could suggest that the angle above shows Moss as finally being caught, finally

becoming less than the smart individual we see leading the chase. But in *Zodiac* (2007), the body is not reduced to a lesser position. Where it is commonplace to look down upon the body, Fincher almost avoids it in respect – as if to say that the innocent death isn't to be suggested as lessening the man himself.

To conclude, I believe that this short exploration of Deakins's work against other productions within each genre is not enough to quantify a definitive response. We have arguably reached a point in cinema whereby so many genres have subgenre integrations or fully become hybrids, that the guiding conventions become skewed to encompass all distinctions. One could argue that Deakins has always grounded himself in the genre of the project he's working on. However, it is clear that he is a cinematographer with his own unique style that either influences, adapts or evolves the artform.

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