POST-CINEMATOGRAPHY

Perceptual, Technical and Ethical Conditions of the Director of Photography's Work in the Contemporary Audiovisual Regime

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In memory of Tomás Pladevall AEC

As a director of photography, I often find myself wondering why we are generally the ones who reflect least on our own art and craft—the creation of moving images—while this task more frequently falls to film critics, writers, or philosophers. It is evident to anyone that cinematography has undergone a profound transformation since the advent of digital technology, and not only from a technical standpoint, but also—decisively—in its ontological condition.

An ontological transformation implies a change in the very mode of being of something: not merely in its external forms, functions, or appearances, but in what constitutes it as what it is. This is not a technical, stylistic, or historical variation, but an alteration of the very conditions of cinematic existence.

An ontological transformation occurs when a phenomenon can no longer be defined by the criteria that previously guaranteed its identity. In this sense, post-cinematography designates the set of practices, aesthetics, and audiovisual production regimes that emerge once cinema ceases to be defined by its photochemical support, its classical cinematic apparatus, its industrial logic, and its narrative processes, and instead begins to operate as an unanchored, "liquid" language, transversal across multiple media, screens, and temporalities. It does not refer to an "after cinema" understood as disappearance, but rather to an essential displacement of cinema as a medium for the creation of expressive images. Post-cinematography thus names the state of cinema once it ceases to be a delimited medium and becomes a mobile, transmedia, and processual language, defined more by its operations than by its support or exhibition apparatus. It is not a format or a

specific aesthetic, but a regime of meaning production without a clear traceability.

One of the key factors behind this displacement is digital technology and the framework of the ultraliberal consumer society that sustains it. Immediacy, plasticity, and ultimately the ability to dispense with the real mean that cinema no longer depends solely on celluloid, nor even on the camera itself or on the reality placed in front of it. The digital allows images to be generated, remixed, or simulated through algorithmic procedures and automated processes.

In this sense, the cinematic image ceases to be an index of the world and becomes an operation. Where one once acted upon the film camera—starting the motor, threading, loading film magazines—today, with the digital camera, one interacts.

The makers of moving digital images around the world number in the millions. They largely share the same tools and the ideology that sustains them: a society of the polished, the clean, and the smooth, which embodies a vision of positivity in which all negativity is eliminated (1). The digital image both represents and, at the same time, uniformly generates this way of looking.

The trap inherent in this technology becomes apparent when so many DOPs add simulated noise and analogue textures to digital images: an operation that attempts to restore a lost materiality without questioning the perceptual regime that produces it. This trap thus results in a void within the images, with no other alterity than the subjectivity of the viewer. Nothing behind, nothing in depth. The negativity of confrontation is denied—a condition necessary for an image to move us through beauty.

Why, then, does the supposed beauty that fills digital images fail to affect us? To affect is to displace the subject, to draw one out of oneself and place them elsewhere, where, for an instant, one is unsettled by the suspension of the self. Beauty is not the aesthetic quality of something recorded with taste or elegance, but a form of revelation.

Such revelation depends, among other things, on attention and duration—conditions scarcely compatible with the regime of immediacy that today structures a large part of digital experience: not seeing, but a superficial gaze; not contemplation, but the gesture of giving a “like” or sliding images with a finger across a mobile screen. In this sense,

the dominant condition of digital technology proves problematic for the possibility of revealing beauty in our images. Thus, the very support of cinematography appears fractured in its historical continuity as it had been constituted since its inception.

The classical cinematic apparatus—configured as the darkened theatre, the projector, and the spectator seated immobile in their chair—has been replaced by multiple screens, fragmented viewing, and constant interaction with what is filmed, whether through repetition, pausing, or creative transformations external to the original makers. Within this new regime, the moving image no longer organises attention but merely circulates at speeds that make it impossible to sustain, thereby nullifying a condition necessary not only for aesthetic revelation but also for the acquisition of knowledge from information.

The data that constitute the digital image, in themselves, lack thickness: they produce information that circulates at the speed of light. This condition entails a profound mutation of cinematic time, which abandons closed durations and the more or less linear editing of classical narrative—supported by a stable causal structure—in order to transform into an open and infinite temporality. Works thus become mutable and versionable, articulated through non-hierarchical narratives: the film ceases to be a finished object and becomes a process without clear direction, without beginning or end, destined for continuous consumption online.

Under these conditions, the notion of authorship loses its validity. Creation is no longer necessarily attributed to the director, just as the spectator ceases to be passive and no longer occupies the fixed and collective position once afforded by the cinema theatre.

The spectator no longer occupies a passive or stable position, but instead becomes a hybrid figure: user, operator, re-editor, and witness. This essential transformation of cinema redefines the tools of narration and, inevitably, the role of the director of photography.

In this context, the shot—classically understood as a stable and closed unit, with a beginning, an end, a duration, and a clear position within the narrative structure—no longer operates according to the same principles. The shot was born in production and died in editing; that is, it coincided with

its own event and was responsible for itself. Today, by contrast, the shot can be reframed, altered through algorithms, reused in other contexts, and fragmented and recombined in a potentially infinite manner.

The shot thus ceases to be a closed object and becomes a reservoir of visual data. And data, by their very nature, can only circulate and sustain visual information, encountering serious difficulties when operating in other domains proper to art and aesthetic transformation.

The framing that defines the shot is no longer definitive: many of its decisions can be made later in post-production, without the need to film again. Within a single shot, almost everything can be modified—its depth, colour, light, or rhythm—so that it ceases to be the time of what was lived or filmed and becomes an accumulation, a symptom of processes that are, in many cases, automated.

A shot can appear in another film for which it was not originally conceived, circulate as a clip, or be edited by users and spectators, losing its narrative anchorage, its singularity, its "here" and its "now". It can be cut up, slowed down, sped up, superimposed, or interpolated, thereby eliminating any guarantee of temporal continuity. The shot thus becomes modulable and loses its condition as an event.

In classical cinema one works with the image-as-act; in post-cinematography, with the image-as-data. In post-cinematography there is no event—there is management. Under this condition of the shot, all risk disappears: error is corrected, time is distorted, and fragility—the contingent—is simulated, something the digital does remarkably well. This situation has an important ethical consequence: the image can no longer fail, but neither can it commit.

Although this condition does not manifest itself identically across all production contexts, it decisively structures the technical, perceptual, and labour horizon of the contemporary image.

This is not an ontological condemnation of the digital as such, but a critical analysis of the regime of production, circulation, and control within which these images operate.

Not only has the shot changed its status; light has as well. From being a physical phenomenon, light comes to be registered as information: simulation, metadata, and parameters. It no longer guarantees truth, but coherence; it no longer

represents, but functions and submits to production processes. Light had always occurred prior to the image, and the image was its consequence, guaranteeing a causal relationship with the world. Light was the index and the image the trace: something had been there.

With post-cinematography, the digital image no longer requires a real lighting situation in order to exist: light ceases to be a cause and becomes just another variable within a system. Light is now discrete and calculable—vectors, layers, curves, nodes, masks—which implies its isolation from both space and time. Light is fixed: nights are illuminated through highly sensitive sensors and adjusted later in post-production; daylight is darkened, and luminous coherence is, in many cases, deferred until afterwards.

The decision of what to see and how to see thus shifts from production to post-production, and with it the ethical dimension of light is lost. What now matters is that light "works"—a term drawn from the logic of consumption—which causes it to cease responding to the real and instead submit to a regime of legibility. And the question that, as a DOP, seems inevitable to me is this: what does it mean to film when light no longer responds primarily to the world, but to a regime of legibility that precedes it, inscribed within a system of its own coherences?

This ontological transformation of light affects not only its origin or its treatment, but also the optical decisions that structure the perception of space. The society described by Byung-Chul Han—one of polish, brightness, and fatigue—also finds its reflection in our images, even if we are not always aware of it. It is symptomatic, for instance, that in recent years lenses with the widest possible T-stops have proliferated—Sigma's T1.5, ARRI's T1.8, or Leica's T0.95—apertures that would no longer be necessary given the high sensitivity of contemporary digital sensors.

This excess of aperture has become normalised across much contemporary cinema and television: from the insistence on close-ups uprooted from space in *Euphoria*, to the apparently humanist yet optically isolated intimacy of faces in *Nomadland*; from the repeated use of defocus as a form of emotional opacity in *The Son*, to the dissolution of space-time as a blurred experience of memory in *Aftersun*. In this sense, whereas the use of wide-open apertures once functioned as a "defensive"

operation, intended to resolve a technical problem of insufficient light in exposure—that is, a lack—today these maximum apertures produce an excess. This is not a quantitative excess, but a perceptual one: an excess that literally erases depth of field, fragments space, and eliminates the value of sharpness as a construction of space-time.

Space thus ceases to organise the image and becomes background: a surface rendered uniform and polished by a "smooth" texture that calls into question any spatial hierarchy, weakens composition, and replaces clarity with an immediate sensory experience, tied to a form of negative narcissism. In this context, "the open aperture eliminates depth, interiority, the gaze" (2).

Images conceived in this way render faces non-expressive—*in an essential sense*—and instead expose the inner void of the characters: close-ups that are optically precise yet semantically opaque, in which proximity no longer produces understanding and the "polished" face is transformed into a facade, a hollow mask, without background or depth (3).

This drift stands in radical contrast to classical and modern cinema, where depth of field was not a technical residue or a limitation, but an ontological condition of the image. Not because that cinema was free of contradictions, industrial determinations, or normative decisions, but because the image was still defined by its causal link to the filmed world. In Dreyer, the face acquires density only because it inhabits a continuous space that sustains it; in Mizoguchi, the world unfolds in depth as a moral field; in Antonioni, the relationship between figure and ground constructs the very time of experience, and space never dissolves—it weighs.

It is no coincidence that certain contemporary films, such as *First Cow* or *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, consciously inscribe themselves within this genealogy: even while working with low light sensitivities and wide apertures, they refuse to erase space and instead preserve distance, duration, and the coexistence of bodies and environment. There, the aperture does not open in order to isolate, but to allow coexistence; not to erase the world, but to sustain it as a condition of meaning. In such cinema, to see better is to understand better.

In dominant post-cinematography, by contrast, this logic is denied: radical defocus ceases to be a punctual decision and becomes the affirmation of an unstable perceptual regime that

renounces organising the world as a legible space and replaces understanding with sheer sensory immediacy. This perceptual mutation does not constitute an isolated stylistic problem, but a structural condition that necessarily redefines the position of the director of photography.

All of this affects our art and our craft, and it does so in multiple ways. In classical cinema, the director of photography fulfilled a clear ontological function: to ensure that the image existed as a coherent luminous trace of the filmed world, as image-matter (4). In post-cinematography, the essential transformation occurs when the image ceases to be defined by its physical origin and comes instead to be defined by the operations that produce it, modify it, and circulate it. In this way, the DOP no longer captures images, but configures conditions, designs processes, and works within an ecosystem of multiple windows of exposure.

Translating this transformation into the specific role of the director of photography requires abandoning the inherited definition—"the person responsible for the image"—and formulating a more precise one, aligned with the current state of audiovisual creation. Under this new condition of cinematography, it is necessary to avoid nostalgia and to assume that the camera is no longer the sovereign origin of the image, that correct exposure alone no longer defines the DOP, and that production has ceased to be the decisive moment. The DOP thus shifts from asking "how the shot looks and is constructed" to asking "under what conditions this set of images can exist, transform, and remain recognisable". This includes, of course, decisions related to capture, but also those affecting post-production, viewing, and circulation.

The director of photography therefore becomes responsible for ensuring that the image does not dissolve. This is not a matter of style, but of operative visual identity in the strict sense. In this regime, the DOP does not "illustrate" the director's vision or that of others, nor do they embellish the narrative or confer an aesthetic quality upon it; rather, the DOP designs the conditions under which images come into being, are transformed, and remain recognisable as such.

We might seek to support the DOP with all that has been outlined above, but reality, as always, is stubborn and far more complex. The unilateral and crushing vision imposed by the industry—the major industry—particularly the North American

one, upon peripheral contexts eager to emulate it, establishes conditions that severely limit what a DOP within post-cinematography can actually do.

In most of these contexts—series, platforms, co-productions, and peripheral markets—the aesthetic of the image and the conditions of its appearance are determined by executive producers and showrunners, so that cameras, workflows, and creative LUTs arrive already predefined. Under these conditions, the cinematographer cannot choose the camera or lenses they consider appropriate, does not define the workflow, and in many cases does not even supervise the colour grading or the final master.

This is not an anomaly, but rather a widespread condition across much of the cinematic world, with only a few exceptions. These exceptions appear both within the heart of the major industry—despite business models built on mass distribution and data control—and in those contexts that, precisely because they are not fully subjected to an industrial logic, still allow for a margin of creative decision-making.

Within the contemporary industrial regime, the cinematographer no longer guarantees the "being" of the image, but instead manages its material viability within an imposed framework. In many cases, they work with images that are not their own, preventing their collapse and sustaining a minimum level of physical, temporal, and perceptual coherence. They do not design the system, but they prevent its total degradation.

The cinematographer thus becomes a technical interpreter, a mediator of demands that are often contradictory. They no longer define what the image is, but rather under what restrictions it can still exist as cinematic.

Today, the cinematographer is a structurally subordinated figure operating at the point of maximum concreteness of the image, ensuring its filmability and legibility within visual ontologies decided by others. To frame the loss of authorship as a structural condition implies definitively abandoning the nostalgia of the author and analysing audiovisual creation through its material relations of power, rather than through its professional mythologies.

This loss of authorship does not occur by accident, but is actively promoted by production systems in order to guarantee aesthetic continuity across episodes and seasons, enable the interchangeability of crews, and maintain industrial

predictability alongside the stability of a product designed for consumption. Within this framework, a personal vision or an individual character is not an added value, but an obstacle to these objectives.

What exists in the current model is a form of distributed authorship: decisions are fragmented across instances that do not truly enter into dialogue with one another—although they may communicate—structured by a hierarchy of power that enforces compliance in every artistic task. The paradox is that, within this context, the cinematographer is held responsible for the image while exercising increasingly less power over it, since they do not control it. Authorship disappears, but symbolic responsibility remains.

This way of being a cinematographer proves catastrophic and generates a self-disciplinary effect: every possibility of aesthetic dissent is reduced, internal critique is neutralised, style is turned into a template, and creativity into compliance. The question is no longer “What image do I want to create?”, but rather “How far can I go without breaking the imposed framework?”

In this sense, the image ceases to respond to an intention and instead conforms to a systemic logic. It stops being the expression of a gaze and becomes the symptom of a structure.

The loss of authorship is not a crisis of the contemporary creator, but a structural condition of the current audiovisual regime, in which aesthetic decisions are fragmented, hierarchised, and externalised to the point where the work ceases to have an identifiable author and becomes the manifestation of a system. It is therefore not a matter of asking how authorship might be recovered, a question that tends to lead to romantic fictions.

The relevant question is what forms of thought, ethics, and practice are possible when authorship—the authorial act—ceases to be the foundation of creative work. This is not an ethics oriented toward solutions, but a way of critically inhabiting a condition we did not choose.

Far from being merely a symbolic reflection, this way of understanding the image-making process is fully embedded in the organisation of labour itself: contracts negotiated per episode or per block, the absence of control over the final master, a strict segmentation of functions, and the possible—and anticipated—replacement of cinematographers. The labour

structure presupposes that no one should be indispensable. Talent, creativity, and heterodox gazes thus become an obstacle to the system's reproducibility.

The image-making process is divided in an extreme manner: the cinematographer shoots and, in many cases, is reduced to managing crews and time on set; a different team generates the dailies; another adjusts the colour; another adapts formats and technical deliverables. Each of these links operates under fixed deadlines, answers to a different supervisor, and lacks an overview of the whole. The result is that no one has access to the work in its entirety.

From a labour perspective, this situation generates a strong structural and personal tension, since the cinematographer signs their role and their name remains associated with the image, yet they lack real power over the final result. Ceasing to be responsible for the image thus produces an asymmetry between visibility and decision-making capacity, and the image ceases to be a proposal and becomes a form of compliance.

Moreover, this post-cinematographic system—embedded in a framework of high competition, more or less short-term contracts, and weak labour protection—leads to a form of aesthetic censorship. Not because cinematographers lack the ability to formulate and defend their proposals, but because doing so may entail the loss of their job. Within this framework, the question is no longer "What image is necessary?", but rather "What image will not put me at risk of losing my job?"

The process by which crews fail to consolidate, directors and cinematographers rotate and become interchangeable, prevents the accumulation of criteria, the development of an internal aesthetic, and the possibility of long-term authorial creation. Within this context, the image neither embodies an intention nor crystallises a gaze, and it ceases to respond to a unified responsibility vested in the cinematographer.

In summary, the loss of authorship in contemporary audiovisual production does not constitute a creative crisis, but rather the direct effect of a labour regime based on the fragmentation of work, technical standardisation, and the planned replacement of professionals.

This industrial form is not new. One need only recall the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, 20th Century

Fox, among others—which operated through assembly-line production, with a strict division of labour and a style imposed by each studio, where authorship was diluted into the brand. In that context, the cinematographer was not an author, but a specialised worker.

As was the case then—and as is the case today—the image did not seek to reveal, but rather to sustain a narrative system oriented toward profit production. The author was not the filmmaker, but the studio; today, that place is occupied by platforms.

However, there is a decisive difference between that mode of being a cinematographer and the current one. Contemporary industry does not merely eliminate authorship; it eliminates the very event of the photographic gesture. The studio era operated according to a disciplinary logic, that of "duty"; the present, by contrast, is governed by a logic of performance and self-exploitation, in which an authorship that does not truly exist is simulated, while total involvement is demanded in situations where almost nothing is actually decided.

A paradox thus emerges: while in classical Hollywood the system was authoritarian yet transparent in its hierarchy, the current system is flexible but erases any trace of the gesture. In the past, one knew one was a cog in the machine; today, an environment is constructed in which creativity is demanded at the very moment the framework neutralises it. And this affects us not only as makers of audiovisual images, but as subjects of a material experience involving light, time, and the body.

Is it still possible today to engage in a photographic practice that consciously assumes this industrial legacy without falling into either nostalgia or the simulation of authorship?

Post-cinematographic ethics should not be oriented toward the recovery of authorship. The professional cinematographer does not control the work, but can decide how to operate within that loss of control. Ethics thus shifts from the "what" to the "how".

A first decision, grounded in honesty with oneself, consists in not feigning authorship where none can exist: not symbolically appropriating decisions made by others, not presenting as one's own style what is merely an industrial template, and not confusing "correct" execution with any form of personal expression.

The task is not to locate zones of control, but zones of responsibility: to identify what depends on each of us, to assume it with rigour, and not to answer for what lies beyond those boundaries. This ethics is fundamentally played out in material terms: a defensible exposure, the preservation of information, and the making of reversible decisions.

This pragmatic ethical stance allows one to avoid both cynicism and total, submissive obedience. To comply with the imposed framework while pointing out real risks or critically documenting problematic decisions—leaving a technical record when necessary—makes it possible to continue valuing and caring for our own craft, which constitutes a form of resistance, albeit an individual one.

This valuation implies, for example, not trivialising technical decisions, not accepting standards that undermine long-term work, and not normalising practices that degrade the image.

It is also a responsibility—especially for cinematographers of a certain generation—to transmit the knowledge of cinematography from the contemporary framework developed here, without losing historical perspective. Not through superficial and spectacularised forms of knowledge, widely disseminated across social media, but through the sharing of criteria, the explanation of decisions, and the assumption of their consequences. Likewise, it is necessary not to foster romanticised, regressive, or short-sighted visions of the professional world in which younger generations are developing their careers today.

NOTES

(1) References here are made to the essays by Byung-Chul Han *The Saving Power of Beauty* and *The Burnout Society*, published in Spanish by Herder.

(2)(3) Byung-Chul Han, *The Saving Power of Beauty*, p. 27.

(4) Term coined by José Luis Brea in *Las tres eras de la imagen* (*The Three Ages of the Image*), published by Akal / Estudios Visuales (2010).

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