Vittorio Storaro, ASC, AIC is one of the most revered and influential filmmakers of our time. Born in Rome in 1940, he joined with director Bernardo Bertolucci to make The Conformist (1970), which revealed a bold and singular sensibility behind the camera. In 1972, the duo made Last Tango in Paris, an instant classic that shocked the cinema world and earned two Oscar nominations. Storaro made eight films with Bertolucci (The Sheltering Sky, Little Buddha) and went on to make films with Francis Ford Coppola (Apocalypse Now, Tucker: The Man and his Dream; One from the Heart), Warren Beatty (Reds, Dick Tracy, Bulworth), and most recently, Woody Allen. He earned Oscars for Apocalypse Now, Reds and The Last Emperor and has been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Cinematographers and the Camerimage International Festival of the Art of Cinematography, among many others. Throughout his career, he has been an enthusiastic advocate for the prerogatives of the cinematographer, always emphasizing the importance of passion and emotion in his artistic journey.

Q&A with
Vittorio Storaro
ASC, AIC

Interview By Peter Critchary
Edited by David Heuring
Question: How did you get started as a cinematographer?

Storaro: I was very lucky, because my father was a projectionist with a big company in Italy, Lux Film. Without any doubt, his desire was to be part of the images that he was screening, and watching those images probably pushed me to start with photography and cinematography. He put his dream on my shoulders, and step by step it became my own dream. One day my father came home with a piece of machinery. I didn’t know what it was. It was an old projector that the company was no longer using. He put this machine on a little table in the courtyard, and asked myself and my older brother to paint the back wall of this courtyard white. When the daylight was gone, he set up chairs for our family. Suddenly I saw the light come out, and an image appeared on the wall. It was Charlie Chaplin – *City Lights*, I later realized. That is my first memory of cinema, and it was incredible. I also remember going with my father to work, and watching images through the square window in the projection booth. I heard the noise of the projector instead of the sound of the film. So I was looking at the moving image, and I became fascinated by it. I always loved to go with my father to work because I loved to see the moving image. To me, cinema is an expression of moving images.

My father pushed me to study photography, and I did five years of study in photography. We were poor, so in the afternoon I was working in the laboratory, and later, a photography studio. I was learning theory in the morning, and the practical elements of photography in the afternoon. I was only 16, too young for the Italian national film school, so I spent two years at a small film school, and then, two years studying cinematography at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Roma, the best school there was at that time in Europe, which was my dream. At that time, there were only three people selected each year out of 500 applicants. It was a narrow window, but I was determined to jump through. My concentration and will were so strong that I won the selection. Today, the course is three years, and one is able to experiment without the pressure of film production. I was so happy because I was able to study what I really loved without having the kind of pressure that everybody was telling us about in the industry. The beauty of being a student is fantastic. But as a student, and even later on when I started to work professionally, I always pushed myself to research, to study, to know, to amplify my knowledge, particularly in art, because in school they were only teaching about technology. Technology is very important in the sense that technology helps you to express yourself. You can have a brilliant idea, but if you don’t know how to write you don’t become a poet. If you don’t know how to play an instrument, you don’t become a musician. If you don’t know how to materialize your ideas, you don’t become a cinematographer. To know the history of cinema is very important. That’s what you’re supposed to do in school, and to know the tools, to know how you can materialize your concept. The first time I saw a painting of Caravaggio, I realized that I didn’t know anything about painting. I didn’t know anything about philosophy, and I didn’t know anything about music, and so on. So I remain a student, even to this day, because it’s a wonderful blessing to have the will to know.

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Q: What were your first steps in the professional world?

Storaro: I was very well prepared, at least in a technical way, and I started my career. I quickly became an assistant camera operator, and I was the youngest camera operator in Italy at 21 years old. I was a camera operator for seven years, and several directors proposed me as a cinematographer, but I declined, because I felt that I was not ready. It was not the appropriate time to move on from the search for the language of camera movement and the composition of the image. I did not have the necessary magnetic feeling with the director. Step by step, I built not only my technical knowledge but my artistic knowledge, which in my opinion must work together for creative cinematography.

Q: How did your relationship with Bernardo Bertolucci come about? What is the secret of your collaboration?

Storaro: Bernardo’s father, Attilio Bertolucci, was a poet, one of the greatest poets we had in Italy. Attilio Bertolucci’s close friends were Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alberto Moravia, so Bernardo practically grew up in the company of these great writers. I did a picture with Bernardo when I was an assistant, Before the Revolution. I was 23, and he was 22. Even then, he came to the set with a viewfinder and he was trying to find the proper way, in his opinion, to shoot an image. He was not even asking Mr. Aldo Scavarda, the cinematographer, what he was thinking. This was something that belonged to him. When I was 28 years old, I felt I was ready to move into cinematography, and I made my first movie with a wonderful director, Franco Rossi. Soon after that, Bernardo also called me, and it felt so appropriate to work with him. For a time, I didn’t work with anybody else. When you’re young, you feel that you want to go in one direction. Step by step, you realize that what you’re really doing is searching to prove, to materialize your thoughts, to realize your dream, to understand who you are, to try to answer your own questions.

The Conformist, the movie we made in 1970, was an important moment, and a big presentation all around the world. Our collaboration stretched for 25 years, and eight movies together from The Spider’s Stratagem, The Conformist, Last Tango in Paris, 1900, La Luna, The Last Emperor, The Sheltering Sky and Little Buddha.

Q: May I ask why your collaboration came to an end?

Storaro: He never clearly told me the reason. It was something he needed to do. He told me that he needed to do something that would surprise everybody. It seemed to me that he almost needed to prove that he could do a movie without me. I don’t know how this idea came into his mind, but some people were aware that his name was no longer a single name. Instead, it was a double name: Bertolucci/Storaro. I said, “Bernardo, you are free to do whatever you want.” At one point later on we spoke about a great story, the unknown life of Jesus Christ, but at that time he began to have some health concerns, and he told me he didn’t have the energy to do that kind of project any longer. I assured him that we could do it, that we were using this great camera, the F65, and that he could direct the camera and the actors from a big monitor. John Huston did something similar – he had trouble moving, but his mind was perfect. He told me he would think about it. I would love to start this new journey if it’s possible.
Q: You were ahead of the technological curve on One from the Heart in 1981.

Storaro: Mr. Francis Ford Coppola saw The Conformist in New York, and later on he called me to do Apocalypse Now, which was perhaps even more important as my presentation to the international film industry. When we did the One from the Heart with Francis, in his mind there was at that moment the beginning of a big change with electronic cinematography. Along with Sony, he had the idea to record an entire film in video, and he wanted to use all the new technology as much as possible, in a very modern studio. I was in complete agreement with him in that regard – the use of the video camera next to the film camera, the use of electronics in editing and postproduction, and the use of any electronic tools to prepare the picture. But I was not in agreement with him on recording the film in the standard definition that was available at that time. I said to Francis, “I’m sorry, but I think it would be a major mistake for us, because your ideas are probably more advanced than the technologies. The images might look beautiful in a small screening room. But there’s no way we can maintain that quality level when they are transferred to film and shown on big screens in every theater around the world.”

Francis proposed that I help choose the technology for this studio. I told Francis that my desire was to control all the light in the studio through one light board. He brought me to Las Vegas to a huge convention of technology, and he showed me the beautiful toy which was the light board, and I said “This is what we need.” With that, I was able to change all the light within the studio during the same shot, during the same sequence, during the same moment that a character was moving from place to another, from one emotion to another. When I went back to Italy, I needed the same system, because the story required an eclipse of sun. From that moment on, I have always used the light board – even the last movie I did, with Woody Allen.
Q: Were you involved in some early tests with high definition cameras, correct?

Storaro: Three years later, Sony made a proposal to many television companies around the world to test the first high definition video camera, and I was involved through the Italian television company. Sony knew my background and work with Francis Ford Coppola, and they needed people who were used to expressing themselves on the big screen. Giuliano Montaldo and I did a short film in Venice, the most difficult location possible. It was a very interesting experiment, the very beginning of an attempt to understand what was possible to capture with that camera. The chance to see the image that we were recording was a revelation. There was no longer a question mark about how it would look later on, in the cinema, after development. It became a conscious act at that moment.

But the technology was not, in my opinion, ready to compete on the big screen with images recorded on film. Soon after that experiment, I wrote a long letter to Sony with my opinion on the elements that needed improvement. I was very happy that less than one year later, they came back to Italy to do another experiment with RAI, a strong company that was in a position to push high definition into national distribution. The camera was the first prototype, even before it was called CineAlta, and I was very happy to see that all the suggestions from around the world, including mine, were incorporated into this camera. This was about 1984. Later RAI made a proposal to me and Giuliano Montaldo to make Julie & Julia, the first film to be made with HD video system. We couldn’t agree to do it unless they agreed to present the film as an experiment with technology that was still in development. At that time, we felt that the high definition tools were hand to improve it. I was teaching at the time at the Academy of the Image at the University of L’Aquila, and over the course of ten years, I used the camera to do students. The video image gave us an incredible opportunity in expression, but it was not at the highest quality. It was not time yet, in my opinion, particularly for some specific films.

Q: How does technology influence creativity in filmmaking?

Storaro: The companies build the tools we use to materialize and express our ideas. Without it, the idea stays in your mind. I’m always collaborating with many companies. What’s in your mind is not always appropriate for the tools at the time. I’m always pushing the technology to go further, to give me what I need. That’s very important. Only by using the technology can you say, “It would be great if you can change this or adapt that.” Step by step, these cameras, for example, grow up. Practically speaking, if you don’t marry the technology with creativity, you cannot perform your creativity in any art.

As for technology’s effect on creativity, it was major adventure to my mind when I could see exactly in color what I was doing without any question about what the image would be the day after.

I was seeing my dailies in the moment that I was recording, on the monitor. I was able to look at my own thoughts. You can see your creativity in front of you. If I was thinking it may be better to have more light or more contrast, and so on, I was able to see right away. You’re not guessing any longer, you don’t dream any longer. You know how that image is supposed to be recorded in order to give that kind of emotion and expression. So, to me, that change marked a great jump between my innocent time, and the mystery of recording an image, to the conscious, with an image in front of you. I realized that the period in which the cinematographer was the only one who knew how an image would be seen by the audience was finished, because everybody can see the image. Of course the cinematographer should be educated in not only technology but also in the symbology, physiology, and dramaturgy of the visual elements.

Q: Tell us about your thought process in creating the visuals of Muhammad: The Messenger of God.

Storaro: The principle of Muhammad from the beginning of his journey was that he believed in one single God. At Mecca, every caravan from Persia, Syria, China, Arabia was crossing this sacred city. Each one wanted to build a statue representing their divinity, so there were hundreds of them. Muhammad said that this idolatry was wrong. Others were against him because it was bad for business, and eventually Muhammad had to escape to Medina. And later he returned to Mecca and destroyed the idols. So that is the reason why the philosophy of Islam is not to visually represent Muhammad, because that image would become another idol. So I knew that in our movie we could not show the face of Muhammad. In fact, we show only the back of the little child. The point of the story is for everyone to go to see the picture and learn the history of Islam of that moment, and to understand why you cannot see the face of the prophet.

Muhammad: The Messenger of God is the first segment of a trilogy that will build the entire history of the prophet. The government of Iran planned this not only for Islamic culture, but for international culture, to present what they believe is the appropriate reading of the Quran. In my opinion, each person is free to represent their faith in the way they think is appropriate, but each one should respect the other. That’s the union of the different religions, that respect. I don’t think we have a different God if we speak a different language or if we have a different belief in different history, even if you call it different names. You can represent what you believe, express your faith in the appropriate way, according to your culture. That’s the most important thing.

[Director] Majid Majidi asked me to stay close to him during preproduction, and I worked closely with the production designer, the costume designer, the makeup artist, and so on. I stayed for a year in preproduction, which I loved, because the best thing we can do is to prepare well. I became as knowledgeable as possible in the references from history, painting, photography, and imagination, even in the way the women, men, children are praying there today. For me, it was really an incredible impression.

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Muhammad was done in Iran in such a variety of different environments and weather conditions, which meant it was not appropriate for an electronic camera, in my opinion. We shot in the desert near the Persian Gulf in sandstorms, 50 degrees Celsius in desert and zero degrees in the winter time. Plus, to capture the different high levels of the light in the desert, the darkness of night was, let’s say, too extreme. That was not yet the time. We used film.

But during the period of preproduction, production and postproduction, which took about three years, the industry changed completely. Digital projection came to any theater, they stopped making prints. Technicolor closed their office in Rome. After Muhammad, I had close to three years in which I did not find a project that was appropriate. By the time I met with Woody Allen, I felt the time was right for capturing with digital.

Q: I generally think of you as an epic visionary, so your collaboration with Woody Allen surprised me. For me, he is a more minimalist filmmaker.

Storaro: Usually the best collaboration, at least for me, is when you capture a very inner concept from the director. It becomes a dream project for the director, and that dream becomes your dream. This movie is about a Jewish family that lives in New York. One member of the family goes to Los Angeles to be a film agent, so the story goes back and forth between the Bronx in 1935 and Hollywood in 1935-40. First of all, I loved the fact that this is really a Woody Allen movie in the sense that he’s the narrator. I recognized his personality in it. He is deciding if it will actually be his voice doing the narration, and I hope it will. With narration, we can be more free, in some ways, in telling the story. With a narrator, you lose contact with reality, and the world is a painted picture, which can require some kind of visual reference in connection with the social, political, artistic period of the film. That something I usually like. It can give me several approaches. That period in Hollywood is very interesting, in the sense that you can have a lot of reference from photography, from painting, and from the German influence at that time. And between the two worlds, there are some opposites, and some similarities. I always like a kind of dialogue and balance between opposite elements.

At the beginning we made it very clear the fact that the way that he was thinking the visualization of the picture could be was exactly the way I was already reading the script. I spent two hours with Woody speaking about the vision for the film, and I had prepared myself with three different styles – the Bronx, Hollywood, and the character’s return to New York, when he’s participating in a higher social level, with dinners in tuxedos.
We spoke about the kind of capture we wanted for the movie, because recently, without any doubt, there has been a major revolution in the film industry. I thought that the time was right for the Sony F65 – based on my experience with HD going back to 1983, and on my use of the first CineAlta as a teaching tool at the Academy of the Image, and on my experience using digital on Carlos Saura’s movie, *Flamenco, Flamenco*. I wanted to see what I could achieve through digital media, without many of the elements we had in photochemical. I flashed the original negative of *Apocalypse Now*. I flashed *Last Tango in Paris*, and I flashed every positive print from that moment on in order to have more tonality in one area, but I also used an ENR system to have a better black in another area. So I always try to add more information than normal film color had. The F65 was the closest to my dream camera that existed.

At the time I had begun my previous film, *Muhammad: The Messenger of God*, which was in 2010, I had done 59 films, and 58 of them were done on film. When I spoke with Woody, I told him it was time that we face one special word: progress. It’s something we can speed up or slow down, but we can’t stop it. Practically, in Italy we no longer have Technicolor and we no longer have Kodak. We can’t be attached to one way of working. Visual expression goes back to cave paintings, painting on wood, on canvas, black & white photography, color, 3D. Now is the time for digital. Through all of my experiments, I have pushed to have a specific level where I can feel comfortable. The only camera, in my opinion, that is at that level is the Sony F65 – not only because it can give us 4K, 16-bit color, which is the minimum that we can consider to be as close as possible to the level of film, even if it’s not yet there. For me, it’s either 4K 16-bit or film negative. The F65 and the F55 are not perfect yet, but very close. But the camera also can deliver the 2:1 aspect ratio that I love, inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of “The Last Supper”. Woody was not willing in the beginning, because he was used to film. But I convinced him to make this step.

Q: Many cinematographers push back on 4K, they don’t want it. They think it’s not filmic. They think it’s too sharp, too much visual information, whereas film traditionally has been very soft. But you’re saying that your requirement for digital is 4K.

Storaro: At a minimum, yes. No doubt the image is different, but we must try to do our best to improve it, to elevate the level on film capture one more time. Some cinematographers are focused on more sensitivity. To me, that is not the problem. I’m not in agreement with my peers who love to work full aperture so everything is soft on the eye. Perhaps some of the younger cinematographers don’t love to use light. They don’t know the philosophy, the relationship between this kind of light over here and this kind of darkness over here. The meaning of the different elements of visual art, and what they can do to the human body, to the human mind in showing an emotion – that’s what I’m talking about. But sometimes it seems that I am the only one.
Q: I understand you also used the F55.

**Storaro:** When I began to prepare the film with my DIT, we realized that probably F65 was a little too heavy for a Steadicam. So I used the F55 for the narrator, and the F65 for normal capture. At the beginning, they told me, “Vittorio, don’t waste time or money on a big monitor for Woody, because he never looks at the man who’s doing the shooting. He always looks at the actor directly.” But I insisted on Woody having the best monitor possible. We ordered 25-inch Sony monitors that were calibrated by Technicolor. I wanted to see exactly what he was going to see later on, as far as I can. On the first day we were doing makeup and costume tests, I put the monitor over there for him. My monitor is on the side because I use my light board console to adjust the lighting according to the image. I don’t use my light meter. If I had a specific question, I would call Woody over to see the image. But he didn’t pay too much attention. The first day of actual shooting, he started to like it. And soon after the first shot, he never stopped to ask what was on my monitor because he was able to see the image all the time. And I think we made a great experiment between the two of us.

Q: What are your impressions of the camera after having made this film with it?

**Storaro:** The F65 is a great camera, but it’s not the final one, in my opinion. Some particular elements have to be improved. I asked my camera operator, my assistant and my DIT for their opinions on how it could be improved, and I wrote a long letter to Sony in Tokyo. The most important improvement has to do with the sensor. It is not possible to work with only one sensor for every kind of light. A single sensor is not able to capture all the information you need from darkness to white. We used to have in cinema four different films – two for daylight and two for tungsten light, at different levels. If I were shooting in daylight in bright sun, I would have a specific film that is able to capture as much information as possible. If I go in interior, in daylight, I would have another film. That gives me the maximum range of possibilities. If I go in tungsten light, I also have two different choices, 200 or 500 ASA. I can choose my sensor according to where I am and which kind of light I have. It is not possible to have one only sensor with 800 or 1250 ASA, especially in exterior. Also, we are in a cage when it comes to neutral density. We’re forced to use neutral density of .09 or .18, otherwise we cannot film. This is absurd. If I cut the sensitivity, in practice, I cut the information in my darkness, in my bright light. That’s not good. That is a compromise. When you put strong neutral density on top of the image, it becomes flat, and you tend to lose the emotion of an image. That kind of flat recording doesn’t allow for all the necessary color range. And when I try to push it in the color correction, it begins to look like a video image. Perhaps the image is too thin, too superficial, too video. A camera must give me the chance to record as far as possible all my information, without any additional filtering between. I would like to be free to capture the elements that are in front of me to start with. After, if I need to, I can use diffusion, I add a net, I can flash. I can use any additional element. Those are the only things that I really do not like at all about the new camera.

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Q: Which lenses did you use on the Woody Allen project?

Storaro: Cooke, the English series. To me, Cooke is the one because Cooke built their lenses for cinema. Other companies usually use photographic lenses, rehoused for use with cinema cameras. We need serious lenses to record the plastic movement of light on the face, for example, from maximum brightness to the maximum darkness, the penumbra, as Leonardo called it.

Q: And how did you approach the project with respect to lighting?

Storaro: That is a complex topic. The lighting system we use is very special lighting system, all tungsten light and going through a light board. I love to have control of the lighting in a single console, so I can not only adjust the different levels of light to my satisfaction, I can also change the mood during the same shot. That’s the most important thing for me.

Q: Is Woody Allen happy with the imagery?

Storaro: For the moment it looks like he’s very happy. We’ll see after the digital media. The digital intermediate will be very important once again to achieve on the screen the maximum of what the camera was able to capture.

Q: Generally, what are you looking for in the content for our cinema?

Storaro: I think each one of us in every profession, particularly in cinema, tries to do what is appropriate for our personality. So many times in my history I have said “No, thank you” to different projects – not because the project was wrong, but because it was not going in the direction that I felt was my direction, my need to discover, my need to know, to grow up in a different way compared to another director, or another story. With all due respect, the meeting between cinematographer and director is elective affinities. You have to feel that you’re thinking in a similar ideological direction.

Storaro: That’s a very important question. For example, a company sent me an email yesterday asking me to participate in a program by choosing five images in my life that describe my journey. At the beginning, you don’t know exactly who you are, what you’re searching for. You are some kind of dreamer. I was lucky to meet a young girl when I was a teen, she was 16, at the same moment that I was ready to do the examination into Italian high school. Having the chance to grow up together and achieve a balance between family life and creative life, personally and professionally, was most important. Without that kind of relationship, I could never leave my house for one year, go to Iran and do Muhammad, and be serene in the knowledge of what’s happening to my house with my wife and children and my grandchildren. Without that, I could not have my mind free to create something. Other moments: the day we moved into our house – I was 26 – and the moment I first saw my daughter – those are images that stay with you. I also remember the first dailies of the first movie I did as a cinematographer. I remember the numbers counting down on the screen, and boom, the first images appear. The moment I saw my thoughts materialized, I felt incredible emotion. Another example that comes to mind is the day I arrive on the set, and Bernardo Bertolucci says he wants to start from a place that is totally the opposite of what I was thinking. In that moment, you don’t know what to do, because you haven’t given any thought or ideas to that direction. That moment forces you to search within yourself and find a new idea. You open a new door, and discover a new area. When you see through that door, that is a great emotion and a great moment.
Q: What is good cinematography?

Storaro: Probably the world itself telling you that you are right. I’m not a painter. People often tell me that I am painting with light. That is not true. I am a writer of light. Cinematography requires multiple images. Photography is an expression in one single image. I’m not a good photographer. I am a cinematographer. I need more than one image. I need time to develop the idea, and a specific rhythm. So image, word, and music are the three elements for my creativity. With images, we are using a very universal language, images, to express ourselves. A writer can use his own words to express a concept, to express an emotion. And a musician does the same thing using notes. Today, we are at a moment of history in which images are much more international. This is the century of images. Images don’t need translation. If you make a great film, everyone can understand. Cinema is the common art because it incorporates all the other arts: literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture. It becomes the tenth Muse.

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