

focus on film

After collaborating on several features, including the motor racing drama *Michel Vaillant* and the sophisticated thriller *L'Empire des loups* (*Empire of the Wolves*), director of photography Michel Abramowicz, AFC and producer Luc Besson have once again joined forces on *Taken*, but this time the DP's cinematography is radically different. *Taken* is raw and devoid of cinematographic effects.

The pair's latest action feature relates the story of Bryan, a retired CIA agent (Liam Neeson) who settles in Los Angeles after his divorce to be near his estranged daughter Kim (Maggie Grace who played Shannon in the *Lost* series). Kim announces she wants to travel to Europe with her girlfriend so they can follow the U2 tour; then she sets about persuading her father to agree to her demands. Despite the serious risks entailed in letting her go, Bryan reluctantly gives in but, soon after the young women's arrival in Paris, they are kidnapped by an Albanian prostitution network. The

former spy has to utilise his skills and ingenuity to track Kim down before she is lost forever.

Searching

"*Taken* tells the story of a man alone who is searching for a family member in a third world country whose language he doesn't speak," says Abramowicz. "He lives like an Indian tracker with just his weapons, contacts and skills. What I like is the linearity in which this story is told. It goes from point A to point Z in a completely unrelenting way. When he strikes, he doesn't just injure his adversary. He has no soul. He utilises Israeli army combat methods in which every blow is intended to kill. *Taken* resembles one of the true 1950s B movies from RKO. Liam Neeson is determined to find his daughter at any price and my objective with this film is to be effective to the same degree as his character."

But how does one define an implacable approach with light and how can the lighting complement or match the relentless perspective of the story? "In my interpretation," continues Abramowicz, "it translates to a very dark and harsh rendering of light. We must immediately feel how much this former spy, in spite of himself, is plunging into a terrible milieu. The image treatment must resemble hard cement which, if you brush your hand over its surface, you can feel its roughness. Working on something this raw pushes me further into using low contrast with periods when nothing is lit... except the actors to whom I must give greater emphasis. Not seeing the eyes of actors bothers me quite a lot. I can choose to leave an actor in deliberate obscurity, as in the case with Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, but as soon as I see him I must distinguish his eyes. It is more so with someone like Liam Neeson, fresh from the Actor's Studio. Certain things only take place in his eyes and I must capture them. When faced with such recurring adversity, his character's only

solution is to move forward and, as a cameraman, I am obliged to follow a similar path in determining, as he does, the unique lighting solution for each frame and setting."

European rendering

Abramowicz chose two parallel but strikingly different images for *Taken*. The first 20 minutes of the film, which is set in Los Angeles, has an 'American rendering'; the rest of the story has a 'European rendering'. Abramowicz explains: "While everyone uses the same cameras and the same film today, there is a curious difference that is lost between the American image



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and the European image. In order to separate the two worlds of *Taken*, I researched and found the American look by working quite classically in the United States, saturating the colours, polarising and illuminating the characters like stars with lots of light. On the other hand, when the hero – Bryan – arrives in France and we understand that something is happening, I quite abruptly take the camera from his feet and shoot him almost constantly at shoulder height. Even the Steadicam shots deliberately become somewhat bumpy. The constant is my use of diffused light because I don't want to obtain a video texture after digital post-production. It may seem a bit contradictory to my desire to achieve the relentless image I have just described, but I don't care. Above all I want to preserve the film's cinematic imaging."

The process to which Abramowicz refers is all the more significant in *Taken* because, towards the end of the film, there was a requirement for him to light nearly two miles of a lengthy pursuit between a car and a

boat along the banks of the river Seine in Paris. "The electrical requirements for filming in 35mm were impressive," he continues. "Because I had a portable digital video camera at my disposal I ended up using HD. Only the large frames of Liam Neeson remained on traditional film. My good fortune in achieving a texture in these circumstances stemmed from the fact that the sequence was shot at night. It's different during daylight as HD generally retains an image knockout and one inevitably resorts to an electronic image. With quite a lot of filtering and Kodak VISION Premier Colour Print Film 2393 for the final shoot, the image texture was close to that of film."

At one point Abramowicz thought of using KODAK VISION2 Expression 500T 5229, but it seemed to him that it would be a little too soft for this type of film. Instead he settled on KODAK VISION2 500T 5218, a stock he hadn't used for five years. "5218 provided me with a unity of texture," he remarks. "With a beautiful subject and a beautiful actor, I no longer wanted to trademark the light as my own. I had to feel the ambiance and ensure it matched the film. I can only aid the audience's experiences with light, for example the anguish of a character – which is exactly the case in *Taken*. I wanted to accompany the story, not suck the lifeblood from it. Apart from using 5kW or 10kW Fresnel lenses for contrast in a room or to create night time effects, all my electrical foundations are in fluorescent light. It mixes in the eye and allows me to illuminate an actor without a particular light source being discerned. This kind of light is sufficiently diffuse to make the whole scene iridescent without emphasising it; I don't know of any other light sources capable of achieving the same result. The story of *Taken* truly implies this kind of sober lighting style."

Challenge

Abramowicz admits he's even ready to do without lighting on a film if it makes sense. "I have no preconceptions, no system. I arrive on set as a virgin. I observe, I listen and I try to absorb the subject as well as the references given to me. This is what I look for and this is the challenge."

Shot in English with Panavision cameras equipped with Primo optics, *Taken* was directed by Pierre Morel (*Danny the Dog*, *Taxi 4*, *13th District* (*Banlieue 13*)). The feature was co-produced by Europa Corp Studios and Twentieth Century-Fox Productions and will be distributed worldwide in early 2008.



by **Michel Abramowicz AFC**

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