

# American Cinematographer

## Trip Cinema

In *Saturn*, Drew (Scott Cann) and Sarah (Mia Kirshner) spend much of their time taking drugs and making out. The upper frame is set in Drew's loft, which cameraman Matthew Libatique often lent a green tint primarily through the use of fluorescent fixtures. The cameraman created a crisper ambience for Sarah's apartment, shown below.



## *Saturn*

Director: Rob Schmidt

### Cinematographer:

Matthew Libatique

*Saturn* tells the story of a forlorn motorcycle mechanic named Drew (Scott Caan) who is enmeshed in an intense period of soul-searching. Unsure of his path in life, the young man spends most of his days nurse-maiding his father (Leo Burmester), a gifted engineer now crippled by Alzheimer's disease. Wandering the streets one night, Drew meets up with Sarah (Mia Kirshner), a wild woman with a taste for fast cars, designer drugs and kinky love. Drawn into Sarah's web of seduction, Drew begins to question his destiny's direction and whether or not love is truly a transcendent force.

"This is a very tough movie about love, so I wanted to be able see the actors perform, which meant much longer takes," says writer/director Rob Schmidt, who is currently collaborating with cameraman Bobby Bukowski on MGM's *Crime and Punishment in High School*. "I also wanted the camerawork in *Saturn* to have a subjective feeling, as if Brooklyn is being seen through the eyes of this messed-up kid. I wanted a dreamy, druggy feeling with lots of subjective focus."

Obtaining this idiosyncratic imagery was no problem, since Schmidt and cinematographer Matthew Libatique are quite familiar with each other's talents. The pair first worked together during their graduate-student days at the American Film Institute. In fact, Schmidt served as the cameraman's gaffer on two short films — *Protozoa* and *No Time* — which Libatique shot for fellow student Darren Aronofsky. Libatique would later join forces with Aronofsky on the film  $\pi$  (see Sundance Film Festival coverage in *AC* April '98).

*Saturn's* muted palette stems

from Schmidt's own rather subdued view of the world. He suffers from red-green color blindness, but can still discern saturation levels. The director also sought a color scheme that reflected the semi-autobiographical film's downbeat tone. He explains, "I wanted [visuals] that came out of black-and-white still photography — predominantly dark, low-contrast images with very solid blacks. The images would go from solid black to low contrast and never hit white unless they totally blew out."

To achieve a muted tonality with deep black tones, Libatique utilized a VariCon (set at about 30 percent, depending on the lighting situation) while shooting with his Arriflex BL-4. A Tiffen Soft/FX filter reduced sharpness and helped Libatique render Schmidt's so-called "dreamy, druggy feeling." Besides underexposing some of the interiors, the cinematographer also conjured up other in-camera trickery. During a dope-driven coupling between Drew and Sarah, Libatique sporadically blurred the imagery by alternating between sharp and soft focus. Additionally, using an 85mm lens, he panned along the pair's intertwined bodies as first assistant James Ferrara stopped and started the camera to produce flash frames. Libatique explains that the combination of these techniques produced a "very soft yet full image, but the lighting is edgy enough so that the contrast still shows."

For added contrast control, Libatique considered subjecting his footage to FotoKem's skip-bleach process, but after conducting tests on various negatives and prints, he found that it produced a look that was too severe for his tastes. Instead, inspired by Darius Khondji ASC, AFC's imagery in *The City of Lost Children* and *Seven* (see *AC* Oct. '95), Libatique opted to use FotoKem's version of the ENR silver-retention process. "Using skip-bleach took

# Hip Cinema

things a little too far, creating a much harder film,” Libatique describes. “With ENR, you can perform different strengths. At an [IR level] of 50, we were able to maintain a certain sense of softness, while at the same time regaining the black levels.”

Nearly all of the film’s interiors were sets constructed within a spacious (though rat-infested) industrial loft in Brooklyn. Both Schmidt and Libatique credit production designer James Chinlund for lending a disordered design to the deranged engineer’s living quarters, filling the space with real and fake industrial castoffs. Libatique produced illumination to underscore the mournful mood. “The apartment, loft and workspace combine to create an intentional metaphors for the father’s condition,” the cinematographer notes. “You can see remnants of his brilliance, but the space is a mess, because that’s exactly what he’s become.

“Meanwhile, we lit Drew’s face with a fluorescent green to reflect the heavy responsibility he has in fixing bikes and taking care of his father,” Libatique adds. “Basically, Drew lives in their shop, so his bedroom mimics what’s going in the center room — hence the green fluorescents. I let the natural color of the cool lights overtake the film to create a greenish hue. In Drew’s room, I set up six 8’ fluorescent tubes, and I would control the contrast with neutral density gels, by turning them on and off, lighting specific spots.”

According to Libatique, his multi-tinted lighting style in *Saturn* takes some cues from Christopher Doyle, HKSC’s photography in such Wong Kar-Wai pictures as *Chungking Express* (AC Sept. ’95), *Happy Together* and *Fallen Angels* (AC Feb. ’98). Like Doyle, Libatique elicits emotion by exploiting the harsh haze produced by fluorescent tubing, as well as auras cast by street-lamps and glowing neon signage. “Stylistically, *Saturn* could be

described as ‘Wong Kar-Wai and Chris Doyle meet *Breathless*,’” Libatique says. Indeed, *Saturn*’s fluid camera moves recall the intimate shooting style of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1959 classic, which was shot by Raoul Coutard.

Creating a counterpoint to the grim reality of Drew’s daily drudgery, the exchanges within his father’s bedroom are imbued with an amber haze that cuts through the ailing man’s shadowy bedroom. “For those scenes, James came up with some beautiful practicals [strip lights coming through muslin] that were hung over the father’s bed. The design of the fixtures reflected the fact that the character had been an

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engineer, and the warm light is a metaphor for the father and son’s relationship and love.”

Flashbacks of Drew and his Dad during happier times are also marked by golden ambiance. For those sequences, Libatique warmed up the actor’s skin tones by using an antique suede filter. To fuzz the focus during these nostalgic interludes, he smeared Vaseline on the filter as “a low-fi technique to create a look that’s different from the film’s reality.”

While shooting night exteriors on the streets of Brooklyn, Libatique pushed his low-contrast Kodak Vision 320T 5277 stock by one stop to lend some grain and realism to the nocturnal vistas. “When you’re working with 800 ASA and shooting at a T1.3, everything outside suddenly becomes ambient fill,” he says. “I didn’t want overly-lit night exteriors, so my mantra was to make the light look natural and give it some direc-

tion. I used lot of Par cans to splash light here and there to create edges, and to augment sources that already existed. For one shot of Drew in a phone booth, we used existing sources coming from a brightly lit bodega in the frame. The Tiffen Soft/FX filter we used made the lights glow and every highlight bloom.”

From the outset, Schmidt and Libatique knew that the photographic look they wanted for *Saturn* would demand extensive manipulation of the emulsion during postproduction. The cinematographer maintains that exploring and learning special lab processes only enhances one’s command of the visual language. “Some films have a lot of camerawork and lighting, but on *Saturn*, it was a pretty equal division between camerawork, lighting and lab techniques,” Libatique states. “For me, the lab is the final stage of photography — the more specific I can be [at that stage,] the more specific the film will look in the end. On  $\pi$ , for example, I worked very closely with the lab. It’s my knowledge about the lab that created consistency in the film; it’s really a matter of control.”

— Andrew O. Thompson