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### Benoit Delhomme on Shooting the City at Night

No Big Lamps, No Zoom Lenses, and a Near-Documentary Style For Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering*

By Bryant Frazer

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His very first screen credits included an assistant camera stint on Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring*, but Benoit Delhomme's name first became familiar to arthouse patrons in the mid-1990s, when his elegant, understated cinematography graced acclaimed films like Anh Hung Tran's *The Scent of Green Papaya* and *Cyclo*, and Cédric Klapisch's *When the Cat's Away* and *Un air de famille*. He made his big English-language move working with David Mamet, Mike Figgis and Michael Winterbottom, and honed his style on demanding projects like *The Loss of Sexual Innocence* for Figgis and *Sade* for French director Benoit Jacquot.

His films have been characterized, in general, by a sophisticated control of color and a strong sense of place. Those talents were on full display in director John Hillcoat's Australian western *The Proposition*, which played Sundance last year and offers an appropriately forbidding widescreen vision of an especially grimy and violent frontier. There's nothing especially grimy about the version of London at night that we see in Delhomme's work for Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering*, although Delhomme says he took pains to let London look like London, and not like some stylish cinematographer's idea of what a big city at night should be. *F&V* talked to him about making actors comfortable, making the DI serve the story, and the influence of Wong Kar-wai, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Ingmar Bergman.

**Click here to read the *F&V* interview with *Breaking and Entering* production designer Alex McDowell.**

**F&V: How did you connect with Anthony Minghella for *Breaking and Entering*?**

BENOIT DELHOMME: I met Anthony a few years before, when I shot the beginning of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Anthony had shot the entire film in Italy, and after a few months of editing he realized they had made a mistake by cutting, for budget reasons, the beginning of the original script, which took place in New York. Anthony was very clear with me: John Seale would be his first choice, but he wasn't available. By pure coincidence, Anthony had just seen *Cyclo*, which I did in Vietnam with director Tran Anh Hung, and he liked the look. So it came out of the blue. I remember the call from my agent saying: "Anthony Minghella would like to shoot with you in the streets of New York, like a documentary crew." In fact, we shot with 200 technicians. I had never seen so many trucks of equipment in my life! That's how I met Anthony.

When he was writing *Breaking and Entering*, his first original screenplay since *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, he decided he wanted to shoot it with someone he hadn't worked with before. So, logically, he didn't think of calling me. He met many DPs, from many countries. And I think one day his wife told him something like: "If you're not happy with the people you've met, I think you should talk to Benoit. You've only worked with him a few days." Well, wives can be more persuasive than agents. Finally, as I was shooting an ad for some French instant coffee in Prague, I got a call from Anthony, who said, "Benoit, sorry to call you very late in the process. I'm going to make a film that's very weird and personal, nothing like the films I've done before. Do you want to help me?" That's how we connected again.

**Did it affect your work to come in late?**

On my first meeting with Anthony I could feel he had discussed the subject of "style" for this project a lot with other DPs. He still was not sure about the look he was after, but he was not doing another beautifully lit period costume drama. He told me he was very much affected by Wong Kar-wai's movies. I was surprised, because it seemed quite far away from Anthony Minghella's style. He then talked of *Cyclo* and its powerful use of saturated monochromatic colors. He also liked the texture in the streets, a feeling of real life but with something more. He also talked about Krzysztof Kieslowski and *The Decalogue*. He wanted to make this film more real than everything he had done before, I think. I can only guess. When you meet a director, you never know exactly why he called you. They often don't know very well how to express what they want, so you have to guess a lot. Sometimes

their best ideas are well-hidden, so you have to get into their mind. The first meeting is really a crucial moment where I often get all my ideas without noticing it.

**Wong Kar-wai's films are interesting because he gets so intimate with his characters. And there's a requirement for intimacy in this film.**

That's very true. Intimacy is the key word! I think Anthony wanted, first, to be more visual without having to show a lot of things. He used to work on beautiful landscapes and big locations, and he used to impress people with that — intimate stories in big landscapes. And suddenly it was London. We were worried about it. I think we said, together, "London can be ugly on screen. We all know that. But we have to make something out of London." So I worked to find something touching in the ugliness of London.

**You had to approach two different types of London, too. You had the King's Cross neighborhood, where all the construction is taking place and where Jude Law's design firm has an office, and then the more upscale neighborhood [Primrose Hill] where Jude Law's character actually lives.**

Of course. Anthony wanted also to make a portrait of London nowadays. This film is full of symbols and metaphors in terms of words and also visually. I quickly understood why Anthony talked to me about the Kieslowski movie. His film *Blue* also helped me find a style. King's Cross means something and Primrose Hill means something different, and I wanted to push the differences with the lighting.

**Did you shoot exteriors on location?**

We shot a lot in the streets of London. It was key for Anthony to be able to shoot on the street without reorganizing [for every shot]. We shot many scenes hiding the camera in a box. At the beginning of shooting, we decided to put Jude Law and Juliette Binoche on the street, walking, and just capture what we saw. So I was in a kind of box, covered with green plastic, and we were shooting Jude Law walking amid people in King's Cross, and it was just fantastic — all the life there. It was the first time Anthony had worked like that. He's used to working with 500 extras on *Cold Mountain*, but this time he couldn't just recreate London life. So this was new for him — shooting on the streets and being very discreet and putting the actors in real-life situations.

**Can you talk about specific technique – lenses, film stock and lighting decisions?**

I suggested a smaller package than Anthony would have normally. It was important to me to be able to offer him the possibility to go handheld at any time, and to always have a lighter solution compared to what he was used to. I used one Arricam Lite, one Arricam Studio, and one Arricam 235, which is a very small, lightweight camera. We worked in Super 35. We used a set of Ultra Prime Zeiss lenses and a set of Zeiss high-speed lenses. I knew that Anthony was used to putting a zoom on the camera for every situation. But using a zoom, you never know the scale of the shot, and there's always a tendency to zoom in and go tighter, tighter. On this film — perhaps thinking of the Kieslowski style — I really wanted to establish very precise decisions of what we wanted to put or not in the shot. I like to compose carefully. So we went with Primes and Anthony just made jokes every day about me hating zooms. "Oh, you are like the guys from *Cahiers du Cinema*. You can't shoot with zooms because zooms are evil. It's not directing to use zooms!" I am not as extreme as Jean-Luc Godard, who thought that using zooms or tracking shots was a political question, but I often think it's easier when you get with the director to say, "Let's use the 35," or "Let's use the 50." If you say you want the same lens at the same time, you know you're on the same page. In terms of film stock, I used mainly Kodak Vision2 5218, and 5217 for some exterior daytime. My choices were always geared toward using minimal light.

**Was it challenging to get the kind of set-ups you wanted on location?**

We were working at night. I try not to do big pre-lights with cherry-pickers and big lamps. I always started from the look of the night in London, and just tried to add some street lamps. We bought a lot of sodium lights and mercury lights — real streetlights — and we were just rigging them to buildings to put more light on the street. I always try to work quite wide open, to make things more real, so everyone on the set had the feeling I was working with no light at all. Sometimes I pushed the film stock by one stop to get an exposure. And that's the look of the film, really. Anthony pushed me to take a lot of risks. He'd say, "I'm sure we will see more than you think," and he had a good instinct. It was quite scary sometimes, because you can actually see more on film than you can see with your eyes. That's the beauty of filmmaking, in a way.

So I did a 360-degree pre-light without cinema lamps. The more I work, the more I try to avoid big lamps. At night people like to work fast. And Anthony was surprised because we could work from any

angle without having to call a re-light. We worked precisely with Alex McDowell [the production designer] so Anthony could put his camera anywhere in these action scenes and we already had an interesting look.

### **Can you talk a little more about your interaction with Alex McDowell?**

From the beginning the major preparation for me was the lighting design of the office [for Jude Law's landscape-design firm], which was a kind of abandoned factory. It was such a big open space that we had to plan the lighting very carefully with Alex. I couldn't hide lamps, so we had to put practicals everywhere for the night or dusk scenes. [There are skylights] up on the roof, so during the day I was mainly working with daylight, like the old studios in the past, when they had no powerful lamps so they opened their roofs. The nice thing with Alex was we could talk about the meaning of the story, and we'd try to go with the character, to make the set a metaphor for the character.

What I appreciate with Alex is he never tries to make things bigger than they look in the script. He's done huge things with Spielberg only because the story asked for it. I think he was very good at making the office look modern and clean, and making Juliette Binoche's apartment very small, like real life. He's very bold in the choices he makes. Also, Alex will never build a set that you can't light. It seems strange, but many designers don't want to know how you are going to light the space they built, and of course they forget to give you space to put a lamp! Alex would always come to me weeks before shooting a set to talk about lighting strategy. Again, to make things more real, we decided to work with practicals in all the locations, even the Primrose Hill house. For all those scenes with Jude Law and Robin Wright Penn, we had enough practicals and a lot of small spotlights built in the ceiling so I might only have to add a Chinese lantern to light a close-up of Robin or Jude.

### **What about color choices?**

We had ideas about colors from the beginning. We had this autistic young girl, and Anthony realized from talking to psychologists that autistic children don't like strong colors at all. Colors give them a strange reaction. So their parents try to put them in an environment of beige, white places. This is what we did with the Primrose Hill place. Everyone worked in the same direction — Alex, and Natalie [Ward] for the costumes. It was a team working together to build an autistic, muted environment.

### **It also makes it feel sort of sterile.**

Exactly. It's funny. Talking with Anthony and thinking of this Swedish woman [Robin Wright Penn's character], I said, "I'm thinking of Ingmar Bergman movies." There's one film, *Autumn Sonata*. And I couldn't stop thinking of Bergman and Sven Nykvist's style when we were shooting the scenes in the Primrose Hill house. There's a dinner scene where they have an argument with their daughter – a family crisis around the dinner table. And it's all beige white, and the only color you have is the green of the salad leaves on the plates. I really like this scene because everything is going in the same direction – the story, the design, the costumes, the lighting. For me it's a very simple scene, but it's a real success. It may be too subtle for people to notice what was done – we tried to make something so muted, and that's more difficult than making things more obviously beautiful.

### **In Minghella's films, the level of craft among all the contributors is very high. How does he cultivate that?**

He has a real talent to push every department in the right direction. He knows very well how to explain the meaning and the mood of the scenes to the actors and technicians. He always asks you to bring what you have to bring, and he makes you feel free to say anything you want, even if he will always keep his direction. The first time I met Anthony for *Breaking and Entering*, he said, "Please, Benoit, teach me how to make this kind of film." That's the Anthony Minghella I know. He is saying, "I don't know how to do it," to give you the confidence to do it. I think he likes to do this with everyone. One of his key sentences on the set is: "We want no individual egos — we want the ego of the film." Very often he would say to Jude Law or Juliette Binoche, "There is no scene. Don't make a scene. Try not to know where you're going." Which was a way to say, "You have nothing to prove to me." And he was getting beautiful results.

### **What do you do as a cinematographer to try and help the actors along that path?**

[Laughs.] I am also trying not to make a scene! I'm trying to be as discrete as I can. I'm trying to make the actors feel that I'm as sensitive as they are. That's the first thing I would do: show them that my work is as fragile as their work. I'm not like some technician who will say, "I'm ready, this is perfect, what are we waiting for?" I will never tell them where they have to look to be more beautiful – to make them more conscious of how they look. I try to avoid that kind of relationship. I try to have the lamps quite far away, and not have the actors feel they're in the light or not in the light. I'm

playing something when I'm a DP, especially when I'm operating. I'm playing the film. I think they can feel that with me. They can feel I'm one of them. I try to put the technical problems away.

Anthony likes to do a lot of takes without stopping for someone adjusting things. Since we're doing DI now I will never adjust the lighting between two takes. I will always avoid touching the flags to fix a small detail. The DI gives me a greater freedom.

**Because you know you don't have to go down to the last detail for each shot. You can adjust it later.**

Yes. The mood of the set is the key. I would hate killing the energy of the actors, for sure. Sometimes the most beautiful take in terms of performance happens when the sun is coming in and out, and you're thinking, "Oh my god, I'm going to lose two stops, overexposed and underexposed in the same take." And some DPs will just say, "Sorry, we have to cut." I never cut now. The more I work, the more I can cope with accidents in the lighting. I can let real life get into the set.

Actors like to try different things on different takes. And when I operate I try to operate in a different way, trying different moves. That's the beauty of filmmaking, to adapt to what you see. I don't really like for everything to be too perfect, to have real operators who do perfect moves. I prefer to have my move, with perhaps some little accident. It's important, as a DP, to give something to a film — a bit of who you are.

**One of my teachers in film school was Stan Brakhage — the avant garde filmmaker. And he said one of the most important things when you're watching a film is, if the camera was handheld, you should try to feel the heartbeat of the cameraman.**

Yes, that's beautiful. I agree. Some guys try not to breathe, but I think that's a mistake. It's a mistake to pretend there's no one behind the camera. You have to know when to be discrete and when to be less discrete — those are different layers and normal contradictions in filmmaking. Anthony, in a way, wants people to show their own ego some days, and some other days to disappear behind the ego of the film. He's very firm and very flexible at the same time. Some parts should be very controlled, some parts should be more loose, and some parts very fragile. Some parts will be visual and some will be wordy.

We tried many styles in this film. Some people will say it's not as consistent as his films before, but I think that's what I like. It's more fragile, because he's showing something that's more personal. As he was putting more of himself in this film he was also trying new effects with the camera and montage. His idea about shooting in glass and reflections just came on the set, at the last minute. We improvised a lot on this film, probably more than he had done before. If he wanted to improvise a reflection shot or something like that I'd say, "Great, let's do it." I love to work like that.

**Those shots [through windows and showing reflections in glass] weren't planned out thematically?**

No, no, no. We had many themes in the film. The autistic girl and the muted colors, and the idea that autistic people see the world through a glass, in a way — like an invisible glass. And we had the free-running idea [the athletic style, popular in Great Britain, of hopping from rooftop to rooftop]. It's like when you have some colors on your palette, but you don't know when you're going to use them. Anthony, at one point, knew we had found something with the reflection idea. We did a reflection shot one day, and suddenly you had the feeling that Jude Law was transparent and the young girl was superimposed on the image of him, and I knew I was touching feelings with this. Anthony used it more and more in the film. Also going out of focus in the film, and coming back to crisp focus. Nothing was planned. It was part of the palette of effects we built for the film together.

**Can you talk a little more specifically about the DI?**

Well, obviously we were able to match shots nicely in the DI. I didn't want to push the effects too much. I tried to do very subtle desaturation or saturation. I really wanted to find nice, muted colors for the Primrose Hill world, and Anthony loved the result so much that we had a tendency to make the entire film like that. I reduced the color saturation in the King's Cross world. Personally, I would have pushed the extremes, increased the differences between the neighborhoods but the autistic world, in a way, won. The DI also helped me to go back in some scenes. When you see the film cut together, and think of the ideas you had at the start, you find you need to re-adjust these ideas. Sometimes you've gone too far and sometimes you haven't gone far enough. That's the beauty of the different layers of the filmmaking process. You have the script, the shooting and the editing — and then when you grade, the film becomes another film.

**Have you done DIs before?**

Yes. On *The Proposition* [a revisionist Western set in the Australian outback], I did the opposite. I pushed the texture, I pushed the colors. The DI helped me a lot. On *Breaking and Entering* it was almost a luxury, but on *The Proposition* I was working with the structure inside the shot, applying windows, putting more contrast on one side of the frame. It was, graphically a more designed film, more landscape driven. We tried to make more powerful images, make the landscape more weird than it was. On *Breaking and Entering*, I tried to protect the actors a lot in the DI, trying to work more for the faces than for the location. I would always choose Juliette Binoche's or Jude Law's or Robin Wright Penn's face, even if I would lose something in the background. In *The Proposition* I was trying to make everything look as dusty and dirty and sweaty as I could. I tried to make the actors look as weird as the landscape in the DI. Every film gives instruction, and this is the beauty of being a DP.

**I saw *The Proposition* at Sundance, and the audience was so wrapped up in it — you heard them gasping or sucking in their breath because some of the shots were so startling.**

That's the kind of filmmaking that relies on the power of images. You have to feel the fear, and feel how uncomfortable it is for this guy [Ray Winstone's character] to be out there. It's nice when you can make the audience feel something so strong. You don't have this every day.

**Do you like to watch your films in theaters, with regular audiences?**

You know, I'm never really happy with how it looks. Things like colors and contrast — you always complain about something and anyway it is too late to change anything! I like to see DVDs, but I don't really watch my own films. When my own work is done, I need urgently to go to something new — to an unexplored place. It's not my job to go into the theaters. I don't do it really. When the audience is telling me they feel something so strong, like with *The Proposition*, it's great. For me, the best thing is when the actors tell me they like themselves in the film. That's the best compliment, the most important one.

**Click here to read the *F&V* interview with *Breaking and Entering* production designer Alex McDowell.**

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