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VARIETY

Matthew Libatique and Gregory Crewdson on Capturing Light

Matthew Libatique

Gregory Crewdson. Courtesy Gagosian

For photographer Gregory Crewdson and cinematographer Matthew Libatique, light is the central force of their work. Whether capturing still life or moving images, light structure is essential to their storytelling.

Crewdson who is known for his elaborately-staged, heightened-reality compositions captured his latest work, "An Eclipse of Moths," which is currently on exhibit at the Gagosian gallery in Beverly Hills through Nov. 21.

Libatique has shot "A Star is Born," "Black Swan" and "The Prom."

The two sat down to swap notes about light and how 1955's "The Night of the Hunter" influenced their work.

How does light come into play for you?

Gregory Crewdson: The central one that I think we both use [to fight off dread] is light. Light is really a redeeming force. I think we both use it to tell stories. I would love to hear you talk about how you use light in terms of a narrative code because it's different from movies.

Matthew Libatique: It is. But from "Twilight" and every exhibition, your work has always been a place point of study and reference. Even at 24 frames a second, you have to start with a single image.

For a cinematographer, what that is taking that still image and seeing how we can make it work at 24 frames per second, and because of the demands of cinema, storytelling, cuts and edits, it's about how do we bend the light to make sure that we take a moment that takes two hours to shoot it make it feel like it was only five minutes.

Light is a tool that both rides the fence of being seen and unseen. You have to understand your narrative to know what you can get away with. Should I see where the lights coming from? Or should I have the light take a backseat? Should the light be the lead guitarist in the band or should be should it be the drummer?

Crewdson: Despite the large production scale with the use of lights, what I'm really interested in, is you just want the viewer to fall into a world that feels recognizable and complete. There's a paradox there, where you're working to use light subjectively with authority and intent but at the same time, you want it to all in another way to be kind of seamless and invisible.

"The Night of the Hunter," 1955 Everett Collection / Everett Col

Libatique: Depending on the content, the capacity for light to be in the forefront is dictated by the content. If the light is apparent, and it's really in your face, maybe through color, quality, or direction. All of a sudden, there is a drama to it. In "Twilight," the drama is in the light. It's almost punk rock. Then you look at the current exhibition, you could sort of see that the light is receding into the environment, and I think those choices are beautiful choices to make.

Was there an early film where lighting really stood out for you?

Libatique: "Night of the Hunter" was one of the first black and white movies I saw where I was wondering what was happening here. That was before I had an understanding of theatrical lighting.

All the other films I had seen of that period in time were so bright and they seemed to exist for the actor's faces in the dialogue, and this system of celebrity.

"Night of the Hunter" wasn't beholden to a system of celebrity. It was beholden to a narrative, mood and atmosphere. It blew me away. There's also "Last Tango in Paris and "The Godfather."

Crewdson: I'd put "Night of the Hunter" right up there. I love how it views the world through a children's point of view where things become filled with terror, but also mystery and wonder and of course, that beautiful journey downriver where the landscapes transformed into this very theatrical place.

My favorite sequence is the underwater sequence. I was indirectly influenced by that in "Twilight" and this picture of a woman floating.

I would add Terrence Malick's movies, particularly "Badlands," and his use of magic hour and ambient light and the vastness of that Western landscape. "Blue Velvet" is a key movie for me in terms of contrast. There's an endless list.

Libatique: When I was younger, I was poring over as much as I could to try to find a reference. I've done so much of that work at this point in my life, that I feel like I have it so embedded in terms of it – it shaped me. Some things I haven't been able to replicate or achieve but I still tried to do them.

Crewdson: "When you're coming of age, when you're in your 20s, those are the movies that you see in film class or wherever, those are the films, that shape you and define you and then, you absorb them into your worldview, and try to reinvent it in one way or another. It becomes part of your way of seeing the world and you don't really change your influences.

If you see something that blows you away and you admire, it's too late to absorb.

Libatique: With new things, I think that we can see new things, but see where they came from and you can see what the reference is. I do see stuff that has been reimagined. If it hits a reference that I share, it blows me away.