

WOMEN TALKING - CSC MAGAZINE ARTICLE

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The **Road** *of* **Possibilities**



BY TREVOR HOGG
SPECIAL TO CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

An anaesthetic made for cattle was secretly given to the female inhabitants of a Mennonite colony in Bolivia by the men in the community in order to rape them. The story made international headlines in 2009 and a decade later inspired novelist Miriam Toews to publish *Women Talking* in which after one of the rapists is caught, the matriarchs of the fictionalized Mennonite colony of Molotschna gather to decide whether to stay or leave. The film rights were purchased by Oscar-winning actress Frances McDormand who approached filmmaker Sarah Polley about writing the screenplay and directing the adaptation, which stars McDormand, Rooney Mara, Claire Foy, Jessie Buckley, Judith Ivey and Ben Whishaw, and had its world premiere at the 2022 Telluride Film Festival.



Getting to witness firsthand Polley evolve from an acclaimed actress into a respected screenwriter and director is the cinematographer responsible for lensing *Away from Her*, *Take This Waltz* and *Women Talking*. "It has been wonderful watching Sarah decide to engage in increasingly challenging concepts," Luc Montpellier csc notes. "This requires a lot of bravery as a filmmaker. Her will to tackle major issues that exist among humans has had a major impact on me as a cinematographer. Our approach on *Women Talking* was the same as on all the other films we've made together: story is the primary motivator on the choices we make photographically. We believe every film deserves its own visual language, and much effort is put towards finding this honestly."

The vast majority of the narrative in the book takes place within a barn. "That in a film medium can become quite a tedious journey. You have to engage the audience on a visual level to keep the story moving and world build. It is amazing when you're adapting a work into another medium. You have to almost rethink a lot of how you're going to approach the similar and same themes," Montpellier says, adding that shifts in tone were essential to have the viewer experience an emotional journey and to make the

performances believable. "Sarah attempted to write a screenplay and we tried to design a movie that would be conscious of what you're thinking and feeling at certain moments so that we can give you the space, whether it be through laughter or silence. Having that extra year to prep the film because of the COVID-19 situation enabled us to dig deep into how to design that. I'm proud of that about the film."

Each line of the script was dissected by Polley and Montpellier to understand the dynamics between the women congregated in the barn. "The film begins with the three families having different points of view as to where they stand, and then that starts shifting," Montpellier explains. "Sarah created this amazing document that outlined where the turning points occurred. It was almost like a second script that just showed various points of view. We designed the camera movement within the barn to always accentuate a moment as opposed to being only coverage. Whether it was crossing an axis or going outside to the children or when we cut to a three shot. We shot in the ultra-widescreen 2.76:1 format to have the faces fill the frame all of the time to get this sense of a collective. We actually ended up shooting the interior of the barn in a studio [Enercare Centre at Exhibition Palace] with



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bluescreen around it so that we could control the views of the outside. I also needed to freeze time because a lot of scenes happen at sunset and dusk, and those we had to extend a little bit to give the actors time to perform.”

A real barn in Pickering, Ontario, served as the blueprint for the practical set. “Our production designer Peter Cosco (*Damien*) did an amazing job of creating the colony in an empty field,” Montpellier states. “We ended up putting in roads and constructing buildings for where the houses of Scarface Janz (McDormand) and Mariche (Buckley) were. Those were all real shootable structures on the actual property. We captured the plates that would be inserted into the bluescreen [with the help of Ghost VFX], but when filming the sun rising where it was supposed to set in the film, we ended up reversing the shot. There is a shot of the little girl in Salome’s (Foy) arms and the sun sets behind her. That is the visual climax of the film because time was an important aspect of the story. It was critical that you felt like the sun was moving through the entire film and that the men could come back at any time.” Rather than depicting sexual assaults, the focus is on the aftermath. “It’s more about the reaction of the women as opposed to the actual act. The flashes in the film were just enough to make you feel a

certain way and empathize with the women enough to understand what has happened. What you see is exactly what we shot.”

Throughout the film, a road is often seen in the frame, serving as a prominent symbolic visual presence. “It’s like the road of possibilities that they’re hoping for but is still unknown,” Montpellier notes. “We didn’t want the roads to terminate. Every time you see a road in the film it goes off into nothingness.” Closeups were seldomly utilized, “except for Mariche, who is always fighting the group. When cutting to her in a wide aspect ratio you feel she is alone within that frame. I shot in large format with the RED MONSTRO sensor of the Panavision Millennium DXL2, but when you get that big of a sensor it’s a shallow depth of field. Panavision in Woodland Hills, California, has these lenses called Ultra Vistas that essentially give you the benefit of large format focus but the quality of how anamorphic defocuses the background. As much as we wanted to go wide angle, when you put a wide-angle lens to frame a bunch of faces, you still have the ability to have shallow depth of field so you can pick within the frame who is speaking and who you want to focus on.”



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Two Panavision Millennium DXL2 cameras were running at all times and paired with two sets of Panavision Ultra Vistas lenses ranging from 21 mm to 250 mm. "I got attached to the 40 mm lens because it filled this wide-angle view that you're picking up on, but when you got close to the actor's face – the camera was sometimes three feet away – it felt like you were there," Montpellier remarks. "You also got to manipulate the focus and it didn't distort. It was a good quality lens to represent our actors in a true way. You were able to put five to six faces in the frame, which was our mandate. When you start moving with that aspect ratio there is something magical that happens. Sarah talked about how the film is supposed to be a fable because it's not a documentary. It's a comment on what happened. Having this wide frame gave it a magical feeling where it's not quite a reality but is based on a reality. All of the visual decisions were made that way, even the palette."

Colours were desaturated to create a gothic aesthetic. "We chose to keep a little bit of colour because it enabled me to have a colour gap to be able



to sell time of day," Montpellier reveals. "We also wanted the film not to be too heavy as an image and for you to feel hope whenever we went outside. I wanted to show the beauty of the colony, faces, costumes, of it all. We toyed with the idea of shooting black and white; however, it felt too period and inaccessible to an audience because it would have said, 'This isn't about me. It's about another time.' You don't quite know what time it is, but then there is some set decoration that comes up that is more modern like a gas lamp or the truck arriving with the music playing, and suddenly you know that you're not in a historic time. That was important because you needed to insert yourself into the story. Also, when you strip colour away, you are forced to lean in and look at what the essential elements are in the filmmaking which is the story. I'm hoping that you will lean into the image, listen to what is said and see how we were guiding you through the film."

Photographer Larry Towell, a native of Ontario, was a major visual reference. "Larry had unprecedented access to Mennonite colonies and produced these beautiful photobooks. One of them is called *The Mennonites*," Montpellier

says. "That was a major influence for us because every still has so much emotion and is very immediate. He enabled us to figure out how to create a frame or camera movement without doing too much that is extremely expressive." On *Women Talking*, the ASA varied from 800 to 1,600 at night. "The noise floor of the MONSTRO sensor is extremely low so it keeps things clean," Montpellier says, explaining that three LUTs were created with the full spectrum of colour being captured. "I primarily used one which is based on Fuji print stock. When we did *Away from Her*, Sarah's first film, we were shooting on film, scanning the negative and doing DI work. This LUT was in the projector so that Mark Kueper and I could simulate the print stock. Over the years, we have been using that same LUT but have been adapting it to different projects because I'm in love with what it does. I still use a light meter on set because it's the way I work. I love being intimate with the light, not always being glued to a monitor."

For the studio set, a custom lighting rig was constructed. "There were these massive soft boxes that had hundreds of Arri S60 SkyPanels in them



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that you can adjust," Montpellier states. "The SkyPanel has become the workhorse of the film industry because they're so versatile. My key grip Rico Emerson and gaffer Scott Phillips built these soft box pancakes that were 40 x 70 and we had four of those outside of the barn doors. Because there were slits in the barn doors, I wanted you to feel the landscape beyond the barn even when the doors were closed so you could see the shape of the hills. The soft boxes hung on motors outside of the barn to essentially create the sky. But you could also instantly hit a button and program a dusk or sunrise look; that mixed with three other 20Ks that were on trusses and outside of the windows gave me the sun. The soft box would give me the reflection of the sky within the set and a sense of time of day, but then I was

literally able to put the sun anywhere I wanted around the set."

In addition to Emerson, Phillips and Kueper, key support for Montpellier were A camera operator Sean Jensen and B camera operator Lainie Knox. "I wanted the cinematography to support these performances so you didn't feel bored and it felt cinematic as opposed to theatrical," Montpellier says. "Witnessing these wonderful performances was like being present for a master class in acting. I am truly humbled by what these women accomplished, as we asked them to give it everything they had. Truly amazing. I've been enjoying the ride, and the film is probably the most important one I've worked on." ❧