

lighting with 'paper moon' kovacs

for internal use only

RE: A Lighting Workshop With Laszlo 'Paper Moon' Kovacs

CANADA COUNCIL FILE NO: 2957915389

OPERATION: Foot-candle

AGENT: (Code name) Mighty Buck

TARGET: You are to proceed to the lighting workshop in Rockport, Maine, USA. Posing as a cinematographer you will secure practical information on lighting for features. On returning to the motherland this data is to be used to reduce the balance-of-trade deficit.

OPERATION DATES: July 1 - 7, 1979

OPERATION COST: \$704.00

by david mcnicoll

For several years the Maine Photographic Workshops have held week-long workshops in cinematography and film production. Featured cinematographers have included Con-

rad Hall (Cool Hand Luke), Vilmos Zsigmond (McCabe and Mrs. Miller), and this year, Laszlo Kovacs (Easy Rider, Paper Moon, F.I.S.T.). David McNicoll was among four Canadians who attended the July workshop: a workshop like no other, for this was the year of Operation Foot-candle...

The target was clear. In preparation I had spent my childhood watching their films, wearing their clothes and listening to their music, so I was ready...

The morning mist had changed from a double fog No. 2 to a double fog No. 1 as I wound my way south along highway No. 31 in a late-model Chevy. I was wearing Hollywood blue sneakers. My disguise was perfect. The car weaned its way through the last-chance-to-fill-up, smelly, hard-working border town of Cornwall, up over the bridge to my first real test -- the American Customs.

"Where are you from?" he said.

"Ottawa," I said.

"Where?" he said. Panic. Did he know of my mission to pick Laszlo Kovac's brain?

"Oh, it's a small town north of Ogdensburg," I offered.

As I pulled away, a slight smile turned the corners of my lips. The kilometers miled by. Sixteen straight hours is a long time to drive alone. It was mid-evening when the car rolled down the main street of Camden and up to a restaurant.

The woman was still playing the harp when the rabbit arrived at my table. Bleary-eyed I looked down at my plate and tried to smell the ginger and lemon swimming around the rabbit leg. I put a piece in my mouth — it was a stop overexposed. Then it was time for sleep. Tomorrow was a big day.

At the opening session of the workshop the screening room was a hive of activity. It took me awhile to find the other agents, and I must admit it was rather tedious having to go up to everyone and say, "The geese are flying north." Still, I found them all — we were four and they were sixty. Then Laszlo took the stage.

"... I'll be your friend and I want you to be my friend. I'm going to learn a lot, we're going to get close. ... We're not verbal people, we're visual people.."

This was going to be tough. He was

David McNicoll is a free-lance filmmaker living in Ottawa. He has been a free-lance cameraman for the CBC, has received Canada Council film grants, and has directed and produced two dramas.

Technical Postscript

On several days each of the groups would be given two to four lighting set-ups. Usually we had 100 amps. of power with a variety of lights, from the 150 watt inky to the 4KHMI light. The locations varied (church, motel room, Victorian house and night street scenes) and we tended to change job functions with each set-up.

It would be impossible to reproduce the practical experience one gains in a workshop. Besides, as I was unofficially fired twice by Kovacs in one day, would you trust me to give information?... Still, here's a description of one set-up:

Assignment: Film a couple inside a 'traveling' car at night with the camera fixed on the hood.

Problem: The car must remain stationary in a vacant parking lot - The Poor Man's Moving Car.

There was a great deal of discussion about how to move the car, without moving it, but in the end, with clues from Laszlo, the following solution appeared:

Based on the block test, the footcandles for the simulated dashlight were set to give the general mood for the short. The intensities of the other lights were varied depending on the light source they were simulating. Thus the car was filmed in limbo with no background visible. With the exception of the 'dashlight'; all the other lights were mobile.

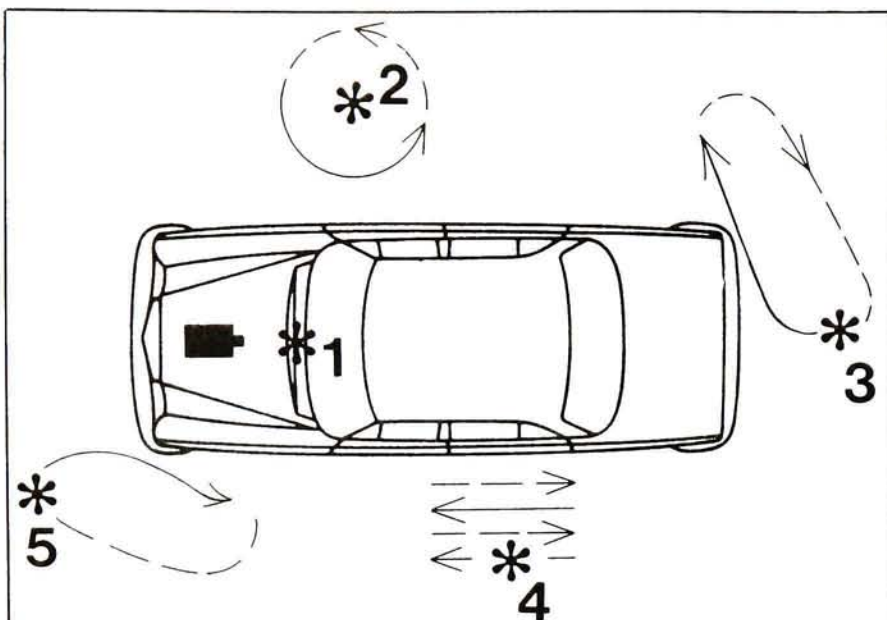
It was a gas to watch the shot being filmed with the set full of 'fireflies' trying to be passing trucks, red lights and street lamps. Then the car was rocked slightly to give a natural movement to the actors, and finally rain was added to flare the lights through the windows.

The actors climbed into the late-model Chevy and the car was wheeled out of the parking lot. Their lives had reached a turning point. It was too late to go back to the Victorian house and too early to go to the motel room. But the rain was washing away their pain and her face told of pleasures to come. He wondered why two grips were gently rocking the car...



See p. 28 for further graphic explanation of light placements.

5



1. Dash or utility light. (situated on dash, the Key light is the only stationary light on the set: low key.) **2. Passing Street Lights** (From about fifteen feet in the air a light is rotated across the windshield to simulate passing street lights: low intensity.) **3. A vehicle passes** the 'traveling' car from behind. (The grip slowly raises the angle of the lights until they catch the back window, then he carries the lights past the car :medium intensity.) **4. Random lights** (Sometimes colored, varying intensity, acts to give definition to the actors.) **5. A vehicle passes** the car from the other direction. (The intensity builds to roughly double the intensity of no 1, as the two cars pass.)

a wiry sort of person, someone to be reckoned with. The first thing he does on a project is shoot a block test. This consists of taking a number of shots of a face where the only variable is the number of foot-candles in the key light: everything else is held constant. Varying the key from 10fc. to 500fc. gives him a complete density range for the film stock he is using. He then alters the density to give the look/mood he wants for a given scene. Thus, for a night car scene he would need 20-80fc for the key depending on the mood and the test results. He doesn't rely on the ASA rating of the film. Naturally the block test was to be our first class exercise — which turned out to be a fiasco. There was a mad crash as dozens of us, all hotshots, tried to do everything at once. Of course we all wanted to look well-lit for Laszlo. Call it 'the dance of the sixty light meters'...

God save us from our expectations! For a start almost everyone wanted a kiss from Laszlo, someone even wanted to light like Rembrandt...in a week? Still, after a cou-

ple of muddled days — most of us having watched our expectations founder and float out to sea on the tide — the lighting assignments started to roll. We continued to pass unnoticed among them, gathering the info we so badly needed. The dress and even the accent had proved easy enough, but all those clams, mussels and lobsters I had had to wash down with wine... It was sheer hell.

The crisp waitress smiled at me as she left a cup of steaming coffee along with some blueberry pancakes. A snug little restaurant beside the cinema had become our breakfast stop. I watched a pat of butter slide off the pancakes. I desperately wanted to give the waitress a block test, but she wasn't having any of it. So, over to the cinema for the morning analysis of the lighting step-ups.

Much to my chagrin it turned out that Laszlo was our friend. (Spying sure is hard on one.) He guided us through our painfully inept questions, then toured the bunkers giving us sometimes-not-so-gentle sugges-

tions for improving our set-ups. You can imagine my pain at having to accept his friendship simply to gain information which would later be used against him.

Soon the week was over, but not without casualties. They broke Doug's ankle. Clever the way they made it look like a volleyball accident, and poor Michel, with his accent, he never stood a chance. Even Tom nearly bought it with a question on screen morality. More lobster (ugh) and wine, and then I made my escape. With the Chevie pointed at Augusta, the salty smell from the ocean soon faded, but I couldn't help thinking about that crazy Hungarian. Some of the wingy things he had said rang true - "When I'm working I never wear a watch, they try and psyche you out," or "Film is like a person, you have to talk to it."

My heart grew strangely heavy as I approached the border. They weren't so bad. Still, war is war, isn't it? The Canadian Customs building was squatting in front of me. The officer turned towards my open window. The color of her eyes matched her khaki shirt. That would have to be changed. There wasn't enough fill on her face and she needed a slight kicker. My eyes slowly moved up the crease line of her trousers...

"Are you Canadian?" she interrupted. (Don't fence with me, I thought.)

"Yes."

"How long have you been out of the country?" (Surely she must have been advised.)

"A week."

"How much alcohol did you bring back?" We had been fooling around long enough. I leaned forward and whispered the shibboleth "The geese are flying north."

"Eh?..."

"The geese are flying north," I repeated.

"The geese flew past here months ago," she corrected.

"Eh?"

"Oh go ahead," she said in despair.

The building pulled away in my rear-view mirror. I've never been able to understand Customs, since all the most important items can always be stored up here in the brain -- or as Laszlo used to say, "up here in the kidneys"..... Film he knows. □