

Production Slate



Married couple Vanessa (Angelina Jolie Pitt) and Roland (Brad Pitt) grapple with their troubled relationship in the feature *By the Sea*.

Reflections on a Marriage

By David E. Williams

In the 1970s-set romantic drama *By the Sea*, a despondent, retired dancer named Vanessa (Angelina Jolie Pitt) and her writer's-block-afflicted novelist husband, Roland (Brad Pitt), retreat to a remote, sun-blasted Mediterranean hotel while he seeks inspiration. Their marriage in tatters, and divided by a mysterious trauma, the pair discover a strange sense of unity in a shared fascination with the attractive, vivacious newlyweds occupying an adjoining room (Mélanie Laurent and Melvil Poupaud).

Jolie Pitt also wrote and directed the feature, and in seeking a visual collaborator, she reached out to cinematographer Christian Berger, AAC, BVK. She had discovered the Austrian cinematographer's work through watching the video *A River of Light* on YouTube; Berger, in turn, was immediately attracted to her script, which arrived with no writer or director's name attached. "That was a bit of a mystery at the time," he remembers with a laugh, "but I was immediately taken with this story of interesting people and very human issues. That's what always draws me to a project."

Envisioning a style reminiscent of classic 70s European cinema for the film, Jolie Pitt "was incredibly well-prepared and focused," says Berger. "Angelina and Brad wanted to make a non-commercial film. It was an opportunity for all of us to experiment and explore as artists — to create something delicate and special."

In a document she prepared for the film's cast and crew, Jolie Pitt notes, "There is a freedom in not making a commercial film. You can be bolder and experiment. It is emotionally more challenging and creative. As an artist you want to be able to try things, and to

avoid safe choices sometimes."

Berger suggested Jolie Pitt shoot *By the Sea* in 2.39:1 widescreen, in part to take advantage of the story's coastal settings, horizons and landscapes. Berger elected to use Alexa XT Plus cameras, recording in ArriRaw to internal Codex XR Capture Drives, paired with Arri/Zeiss Master Primes plus an Arri/Fujinon Alura 45-250mm (T2.6) zoom.

The cinematographer has used Arri Alexa models on many of his past projects. "I was initially drawn to the camera because I could transfer my long experience with film cameras, and the image quality of the Alexa is also quite pleasing," he says.

For *By the Sea*, Berger says he chose not to work at higher ISO settings than the standard 800 ASA, because he can sense the electronic "amplification of the image." He also feels one of the greatest limitations of digital cine cameras is their lack of lower-sensitivity settings. "I would switch to 400 for bright daylight, but that still meant using thick ND filters. What is the point of the incredible quality of lenses we have today if we are forced to do that? Here the film negative still has its advantages."

For the film's interiors, though, the Alexa's higher sensitivity facilitated the relatively low-light, naturalistic approach Berger employs via his Cine Reflect Lighting System, which grew out of his painterly observations about the behavior of natural light. "In the natural world, all light comes from a single source — the sun — which generates a multitude of reflections, creating all the complex textures, tones and colors we see," says Berger, whose father was a painter.

Frustrated with the equipment of the time, Berger began to experiment with what would become the CRLS while shooting

Top: Cinematographer Christian Berger, AAC, BVK's crew constructed a lighting truss over the seaside hotel where the film's characters vacation. Bottom: The truss accommodated Berger's Cine Reflect Lighting System, which includes 1.2K parallel-beam HMIs that can be projected into custom, precisely engineered reflectors.



director Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (AC May '02), refined it in their follow-up collaboration *Caché* (AC Jan. '06), then continued its evolution while filming Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (AC Jan '10), for which Berger won an ASC Outstanding Achievement Award and earned an Academy Award nomination, among other honors.

The CRLS system comprises an economical number of lamps — 1.2K HMI CRLS parallel beams and CRLS-adapted Dedolights — and a multitude of custom-designed, high-tech reflectors of various

sizes and shapes, with textured and colored surfaces. These reflectors are engineered for precise light modulation and distribution, enabling predictable and accurate results.

The CRLS lamps rarely illuminate the subject directly. Instead, aimed at the reflectors, the beams are softened, shaped and redirected exactly where intended, reducing cumbersome spill light. Often, multiple reflectors are dipped into a single beam, producing a variety of effects. This also allows for the creation of a key, backlight and fill light from a single source, dispensing the need for flags, cutters, scrims and gels.

With the high-efficiency system, a beam can travel greater distances — from lamp to reflector to subject — and keeping lamps and the associated cabling and hardware away from the set results in a cooler, less cluttered work environment for cast and crew.

"It's rare we are able to light from any great distance, due to stage or location constraints," Berger says. "But if I have 10 meters from my lamp to a CRLS reflector, and then the light travels another 10 meters to the subject, I effectively have 20 meters, which improves the aesthetic of my light."

"This creates an organic decline of light intensity inside a room," the cinematographer continues. "Thus the actor can approach the window [without becoming] overexposed. The quality of the shadows and the shadow zones are correct; the involvement of all the materials in the room adds up. When one understands and respects the natural ways of light, it can be used to wonderful effects to create incredibly rich atmospheres. Light can flow and work unimpeded." (More information about the CRLS can be found at www.thelightbridge.com.)

After a week of blocking in Los Angeles, the *By the Sea* production relocated in September of 2014 to the secluded Mgarr Ix-Xini on the Maltese island of Gozo.

Berger and Jolie Pitt discuss a scene. "It is always important for me to create the famous 'safe space' for actors and directors, and to keep the technical dictate as small as possible," the cinematographer notes.



Settings included a practical hotel location and seaside town sets devised by production designer Jon Hutman, who had worked with Jolie Pitt on her two previous directorial efforts, *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (shot by Dean Semler, ASC, ACS) and *Unbroken* (shot by Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC; AC Jan. '15).

The most complex lighting situation the film presented was the hotel, which overlooks a scenic bay and sits precariously on the edge of a rocky cliff high above the azure waterline. Here, much of the action would play out in the couples' respective rooms and balconies, requiring Berger to produce a variety of daylight and nighttime looks — often shooting either night-for-day or day-for-night in order to meet the modest production's tight schedule. (For night-for-night scenes, Berger and his crew created moonlit seascapes over the entire bay area by using only a few 1.2K HMI CRLS parallel beams with reflectors to modulate the light's shape and diffusion.)

Due to restrictions that prevented rigging on the hotel itself, or on the abrupt drop-off below the structure's façade facing the bay, gaffer Jakob Ballinger designed a large, freestanding lighting truss over the entire building. The truss incorporated four 12x6x2m overhead grid frames that could

be independently extended or retracted by motor drive; this simulated the position of the sun as it passed overhead each day. On these sections, Ballinger's team also mounted a series of 1x1m and 50x50cm CRLS reflectors on articulated arms, as well as separate sunlight-blocking sails.

On the narrow ledge of ground between the hotel and the cliff edge, 10m below the grid frames, a line of 10 CRLS parallel lampheads were pointed up into the reflectors, which redirected the modified light to illuminate the hotel interior. "While the CRLS parallel beams remained almost stationary, the angle and intensity of my light could be quickly altered and fine-tuned by adjusting the lightweight reflectors," says Berger. "We could modulate from soft to hard light or change the light distribution within a room."

This overall setup also meant "we could always maintain a completely free view of the sea or the rocky hills through our hotel windows," Berger explains. "There were no stands or cables to dodge or hide. This was essential, as Angie wanted to constantly feel the location and have the sea and landscape visible beyond our foreground. It is always important for me to create the famous 'safe space' for actors and directors, and to keep the technical

dictate as small as possible."

In their room, Vanessa and Roland grapple with their shared grief, commitment to one another, and the later stages of married love, and their emotions often contrast with those of their amorous neighbors. "They spend a lot of time watching the other couple in an unconventional manner, which was not naturally cinematic," Berger notes. "It was a quite static situation, but never boring."

Through the careful staging of the action — and with actors Laurent and Poupaud often almost out of frame, partially seen in a mirror, or positioned in extreme foreground and background — the voyeuristic effect remains interesting and believable. Berger used a 27mm lens to shoot these scenes, resulting in a consistent point-of-view effect that would have been undermined by the use of different focal lengths.

For a scene in which Roland and Vanessa drive from a nearby restaurant after a late night of dinner and dancing, Berger went absolutely minimal for a head-on two-shot of the couple. He simply mounted sets of 30x30cm CRLS reflectors to the process trailer, on which the couple's Citroën convertible rode. The reflectors redirected the sodium-vapor streetlights from a

Right: The crew strategically placed CRLS reflectors and 1.2K HMIs to create "moonlit" vistas. Below: Berger considers a night-exterior car scene, for which he used 30x30cm CRLS reflectors to redirect the location's practical sodium-vapor streetlights.



carefully chosen road, and Berger shot the scene at 800 ISO with his 50mm Master Prime set at T2.

"It was the simplest solution and the most effective, as the small amount of light on their faces is in perfect sync with the background, and keeps the night-street atmosphere alive," Berger muses. "As they drive through light they brighten, and into shadow they darken. I dislike the artificial quality of conventional car-interior lighting. Trying to coordinate with lamps and dimmers to match reality is just impossible."

Throughout the shoot, the cinematographer enthuses, "my crew worked as a precision team. I would be lost without them: camera operator Gerald Helf, focus puller Dieter Knestel, second camera and Steadicam [operator] Robert Stopfer, [digital-imaging technician] Christian Wehrle, with Emmanuel Aubry and Carlo Barber on dolly and crane — and, of course, gaffer Jakob Ballinger and his team."

The digital grade was completed at EFilm, where colorist Mitch Paulson graded 3414x2198 files in Autodesk's Lustre 2015

for a final 2K output. Particular attention was paid to the balance between exteriors and interiors, and maintaining the largely monochromatic palette Jolie Pitt sought. "She was very careful with colors," Berger says. "For instance, she used red to punctuate certain scenes, often on objects of importance, such as Roland's portable typewriter."

"This film was really an experiment for Angelina as a director and an actor," concludes Berger, who is grateful to have collaborated on her passion project. "It was not only an opportunity to tell an interesting story, but a playground for her, Brad and the other actors to try different things. I hope to believe that my way of handling the set helped make that happen. While some cinematographers are seeking the biggest and strongest lights possible, I believe less is more. It frees the director and helps the cast to focus on what they do best: great performances."

TECHNICAL SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa XT Plus

Arri/Zeiss Master Prime, Arri/Fujinon Alura

