

Lighting and shooting **“Tomorrow By Midnight”**



As soon as I read the script I knew we needed to be very proactive with lighting and set design or the movie would become visually monotonous.

The story logically breaks itself into several different and distinct moods:

- 1) **The beginning.** It's a normal night as a group of 20-somethings go in search of the perfect movie to watch together. To parallel the “typical day” motif I kept the lighting very realistic, but flattering. The night exterior parking lot is mostly available light. We found a center which matched our interior design and had some good, bright signage and parking lot lights. To give some dimension I added one bright backlight. This was done with two 10K Fresnel lights on a crane arm.



The exterior video store and interior video store were two completely separate locations. The exterior was shot in North Hollywood. The interior was shot on a set in a stage in Venice, CA. This is the reason there are those large illuminated movie poster signs in the windows. The director wanted windows in the front so the confrontation with police later in the movie would be more dramatic and we could pound spotlights into the store. But because of how many shots it would involve there was no way to practically replicate the outside on set, nor the inside on location. After some thought I suggested the large illuminated posters which would block most, but not all, of the windows obscuring details of what is on the other side. Fun fact: Those illuminated posters were only one sided. That side was always facing towards camera, whether from inside or out.



Another note about the parking lot, though this takes place later in the movie: the telephone booth (just as fossil now as the idea of a video store and VHS tapes) was lit using the existing fixture in the booth, which was a large overhead soft fluorescent light which spread from edge-to-edge in breadth and width. In its native form it washed the interior broadly and brightly with light and was not the look I wanted. So I used an approach I often find optimal – I removed light, instead of added it. I had the grips use black tape to cover 75% of the light, leaving only a small triangle which then moodily illuminates Alexis Arquette’s face when he is making the call.



When we shot the film apparently the name we used for the video store was not properly cleared. We had a very large and expensive exterior sign hung on the outside which had to be replaced with VFX when, after the film was edited a lawyer discovered a legal conflict.

Even though I had shot mostly 16mm or 35mm film (“Tomorrow By Midnight” is the latter with anamorphic lenses) at this point in my career all of those projects had still finished on video. So my experience of color grading was the digital telecine process, which is very sophisticated and adept. You can manipulate a single color independent of others and control things like shadows, or highlights without affecting other things.

“Tomorrow By Midnight” was my first film project for which a positive physical 35mm film print was struck from the negative and therefore it was my first (and to date only) experience dealing with coloring using printer lights. The process is a REAL drag. You only have three colors of lights you can control and you manipulate the balance between them. So each scene is balanced between cyan, magenta and yellow. But forget anything like power windows, or isolating individual colors. Contrast was what you captured in camera and could not be changed. The film overall could be printed brighter or darker, but you could not crush the shadows or blow out the highlights without taking the whole exposure along with it. God I HATED the process.

Fortunately I was able to get 99% of the film timed to look pretty nice. But those shots where the sign had been digitally replaced had come out of the computer with the color balance slightly off. If I remember correctly there was a slight greenish cast in the whites, or something like that. Because I could not isolate that with the printer lights I could not time the bastard out no matter how hard I tried. And that’s another thing about printer lights – you’d better be patient. You don’t get immediate satisfaction like you do in a digital color bay. The lab technician prints sample strips of each scene using several various combinations of the lights and presents them to the DP to physically inspect with a magnifying glass. The DP gives feedback about what should be changed – then has to leave and come back another day while new strips are created. This goes on until you arrive at the look you want then those light ratio numbers are input and an answer print of the entire film printed accordingly which you can view and give further notes on.

So the process trying to get those shots with the replaced sign in them were maddening. Of course when we did the film-to-video transfer it was a snap to get the wonky VFX corrected properly (which is why you did not see the problem I am talking about.) Those systems were nowhere near as powerful as modern color solutions, but they were already far better than those archaic printer lights.

Today, even with a film answer print, what is known as a “DI” – or Digital Internegative – is the standard mode of correction. In 1999 that did not exist. Any electronic transfer was only NTSC Standard Definition quality. So there was no going back to the pristine resolution of the native film making the idea of a DI inconceivable.



Once our group gets inside the store we had the colorful movie posters, facing inward, at the front. We also put neon signs around the store advertising different genre sections: Action, Comedy, etc. (There was a deliberate reason for these which I will return to later). Since the mood at this point was normal with no

untoward surprises expected I created an overhead fluorescent feel inside the store. Remember this was a set built on a soundstage. So for most of these shots there is no ceiling at all.



The beams you see across the ceiling are there to hide the absence of a ceiling in wide shots. There is a word for what those are – and I forget what that is at the moment.

In some shots, especially later in the film you DO see a ceiling. The set designer had created actual ceiling pieces for the entire store so we could place those in when we wanted to.

The beams, as you can see had lights in them. I also had lights overhead in between the beams. All of these were 3200K 4x4 Tungsten Kino Flos. For the ones in the beams – since the camera sees them – the set designer created or bought a proper light cover so you would not see the movie lights inside.

This setup was supplemented from shot to shot for creative effect with things like specific lighting for faces, backlights, etc. I would also turn lights behind the camera off or use large flags to take light away to give contrast to faces.



- 2) **Party time!!!** So now our gang of young people has commandeered the store using questionable judgement and behavior and are goofing around in a party atmosphere. The tension is ratcheted up a bit. Madcap fun, with a dark edge, is what this part is about.

I knew I wanted to make this scene feel and look different to break visually from the open. I decided I would like to use color, reminiscent of a night club, to evoke this feel. To motivate that color we decided the set would have those different-colored neon signs. I cannot remember if they were custom made or off the shelf from a prop rental house. During the first, normal segment, the signs are fairly inconspicuous. But when the kids hijack the store they shut off the store lights to make it look like the store is closed, making the neons the brightest source remaining on in the room.



The signs of course were not nearly bright enough to light the characters, and if they had been they would have been overexposed to camera. So above each sign is a movie light – probably a 650 fresnel, or a 1K Fresnel Baby (I don't remember) with a colored gel corresponding to its paired neon.



Again in coverage and from shot to shot additional lights were brought in to create an optimal aesthetic.

Soon things take a bad turn. Alexis' character gets hold of the gun, police arrive, and one of the friends, Cosmo, gets shot.



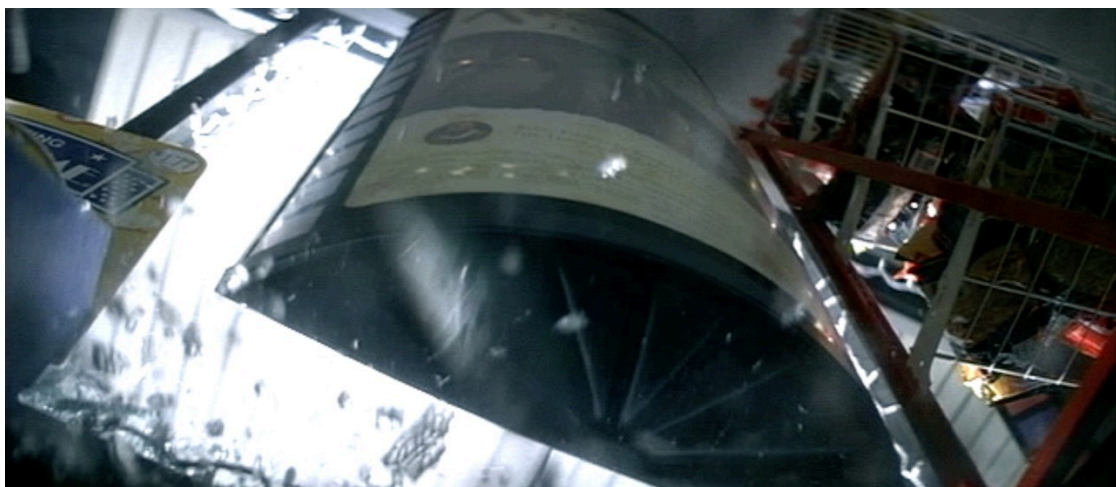


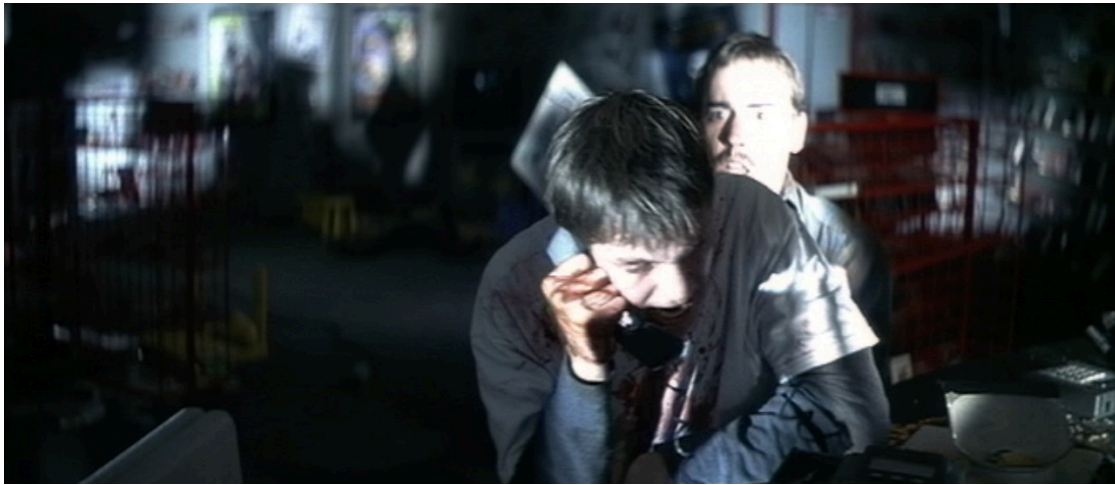
- 3) **Standoff.** Big changes to the look and camera work in this part of the movie. Now the cops' searchlights are pounding through the front windows. On the location they were actual cop search lights. In the studio we used (I think) about 10 – 2K fresnel Juniors. Since we had the movie posters the audience cannot see what is actually out there which helped a lot.

This lighting treatment created a lot more contrast in the scene and the colored lights were turned off making everything more monochrome.



To accentuate that I had made an early suggestion about set design. You will notice that the walls of the video store are mostly gray, with logos and a bright yellow and orange band around the top. This was very intentional. In all the early scenes, with the cameras at eye level and all the characters standing, the store is bright and cheerful. But in this section when characters are on the floor, or Alexis is towering over them the camera is no longer showing those colored bands. Everything is gray, further pushing the monotone of the lighting and powerfully influencing the mood.





- 4) **Last stand.** When things become dire the police turn off their search lights. No lights remain on in the store. The only remaining source of illumination is the flickering static on the TV monitors. This mirrors the stark despair of the moment. Colorless, dim, with the flickering being a metaphor for anxiety.

I used tungsten Fresnel lights – probably 300s or 650s - above each monitor connected to a flicker box to create this look. I don't remember for sure, but I suspect there were two lights per each TV to create a broad spread.

- 5) **The end.** In the final moments the film cuts to black. All the light is gone and the only thing that remains is the sound.

If I were to make this movie today the biggest changes would be that I would very probably substitute RGB LEDs, like Arri S30s or Arri S60s for the fresnels over the neon signs. I would likewise replace the flickering TV light effect with those same incredibly versatile units.

I hope you enjoyed this tour of the lighting and camera work (and a little set design and post) for the film. I am very proud of my work on that film and my heart is continually broken that it is stuck in a legal limbo. This is why there is no HD or 4K version available

