James Wong Howe: In Glorious Technicolor

By 1937, James Wong Howe had long been established as one of Hollywood’s premier cinematographers. In Hollywood, he had built a strong reputation for being a brilliant artist, a gifted problem solver, and a strong-willed, exacting perfectionist. While his artistry and creativity repeatedly resulted in a first-rate final product, his stubborn meticulousness was often viewed as tyranny by his collaborators – especially those on the technical crew. By that point in his career, he had also developed a signature photographic style emphasizing natural, usually low-key lighting. Howe’s penchant for natural lighting made him David O. Selznick’s first choice to photograph *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Howe’s first film shot in Technicolor.

Since Technicolor was extremely expensive, Hollywood used it sparingly, usually reserving it for animation, fantasies, and musicals. Since *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was none of those, Selznick and Howe opted to use the color to emphasize the natural, rural quality from Mark Twain’s original novel as opposed to the vibrant, often garish effect Technicolor photography usually achieved. In fact, the finished film looks very much as if Howe had been inspired by Norman Rockwell’s illustrations, which were commissioned by Heritage Press for their 1935 edition of Twain’s book. The vibrant early Technicolor process made Howe’s constant desire to make the images look natural a challenge. “I tried to subordinate background color,” he said, “and confine the major coloring of any scene to the players.” ¹
While shooting *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Howe immediately found himself at odds with Technicolor cameraman Wilfred Cline, especially during the climactic cave sequence. As Howe often recounted the experience, “We’re in a cave, there were a lot of lighting effects, and the Technicolor man said, ‘Jimmy, you haven’t got enough light.’ I think I had 350 or 400 foot-candles. He measured and said, ‘The least you can go is six hundred.’ So I bring it up to 600. But it didn’t feel right. I didn’t think the audience could believe it. So I went back to 350, and opened the lens a little bit more. I didn’t care about the background, but Technicolor wanted everything sharp.”

Despite protests from the Technicolor company, producer David Selznick sided with Howe’s use of low-key lighting. When the film was previewed, the only negative response was that the cave sequence was too frightening for children. Selznick responded by trimming a shot involving bats and cutting one hysteria-filled close up of Ann Gillis, the actress playing Becky Thatcher. He otherwise left the cave sequence intact. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was enthusiastically received, but James Wong Howe had so infuriated the Technicolor corporation, he was not permitted to shoot in the process for another ten years (with one notable exception). This was probably a mixed blessing for Howe, who preferred filming in black and white because he found it easier to make the lighting look natural. “You can fake a ‘true’ look in the color laboratory, “he said, “but then it becomes an achievement of chemistry, not of cinematography.” The intervening decade also allowed the Technicolor company to further refine its process and create faster film which did not require as much light.

Despite Howe’s being banned from using Technicolor until 1949’s *The Eagle And The Hawk*, he did contribute the color cinematography for the brief, but effective live
action sequences of Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*. This was the first live action footage ever filmed at the Walt Disney Studio. The sequence was shot against a vivid blue cyclorama with the performers mostly seen in silhouette and shadow. Even orator Deems Taylor’s face can barely be seen in medium close ups as he introduces each segment. The silhouettes were incorporated partly to disguise the fact that the “musicians” seen were Disney employees and not the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra and because Walt Disney wanted to smoothly combine the experience of attending a classical music concert with the animation soon to follow.

Once Leopold Stokowski ascends the podium to conduct the Bach Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, Howe lights him from below with intense colors coordinating with the various instruments’ pitch and location. The camera remains static with the exception of a few graceful dolly shots with the camera moving closer to Stokowski and during brief harp solos. As the fugue builds, the musicians’ multicolored shadows multiply against the background before dissolving into abstract animation. While working on Fantasia, Howe also photographed actor Bela Lugosi to be used as animator’s reference footage for the devil figure, Chernabog in the Night On Bald Mountain sequence, but Howe’s footage of Lugosi was not used.

Even though Howe spent his career opting for naturalism in his photography, in those rare instances when he was called upon to photograph fantasy or musical sequences, such as in *Fantasia, Bell, Book, and Candle*, the dream sequences in *The Old Man And The Sea*, and the musical numbers in *Funny Lady*, his color photography is stunning.

Several times during his career, Howe revisited filming stories in small-town rural America as he had in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. *Picnic*, released in 1955, took
place in Kansas. Unlike depicting Kansas in the gray and desolate manner in which it was portrayed in *The Wizard of Oz*, Howe’s typical story-driven approach emphasized the characters’ constant, desperate efforts, through their chosen clothing and décor, to bring color and beauty into their otherwise drab daily environment. This is especially apparent in the nighttime picnic scene in which the paper Chinese lanterns effectively turn Madge and Hal’s dance into a romantic encounter that changes the course of both of their lives.

Even though filmmaking became technically more advanced over the course of Howe’s career, each film brought on new challenges that called on his talents as a problem solver. The films’ scripts often called for images that required special effects or unusual techniques, but rarely noted how they were supposed to be accomplished. The ending of *Picnic* required that Hal (William Holden) and Madge (Kim Novak) part ways, but it was up to Howe and director Joshua Logan to figure out a way to make the moment impactful and meaningful. To accomplish this, Howe’s solution was an unorthodox one for Hollywood films at the time:

“I suggested to Joshua Logan, the director, that we use an aerial shot that would pull back and show the train going one way and the bus another, all in the same frame. It turned out to be the most interesting shot in the whole film and an excellent way to end the picture.”

For *The Old Man And The Sea*, director John Sturges required a shot of a bird landing on Spencer Tracy’s hand. Since it was Howe’s job to get the shot, it also became his responsibility to obtain a cooperative bird. “I didn’t want to have to coax the bird all day to fly down from its perch out of camera range into the boat,” Howe
explained, “so I weighted down its feathers with beebee shot and it flew down into the boat by Tracy’s hand almost immediately. Then Tracy moved his hand over slightly and it hopped right onto his hand. This shows how much luck there is involved in filmmaking. It could have taken hours to get that bird to hop onto Tracy’s hand.”

By the time he photographed *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*, Howe’s long career had allowed him to be self-referential. The film contains visual references to his previous “small rural town” films, including *Hud*’s drug store bookrack and *Picnic*’s Chinese lanterns. In a scene in which Alan Arkin waits outside a movie theatre, a poster for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is clearly visible. Howe’s clean and sparse color photography perfectly evokes the desperate loneliness of Carson McCullers’s characters. One moment that perfectly captures Howe’s style in terms of his efforts to keep the lighting natural while serving the story occurs when John Singer (Alan Arkin) and Dr. Copeland (Percy Rodrigues) examine an x-ray. When the doctor turns on the x-ray viewer, we suddenly see both of their faces as illuminated by the soft, yellow light as they take in the x-ray’s sobering revelation.

Howe’s most convincing work was, obviously, that which was shot on location. *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* is a rare example of a film actually shot in the location (Selma, Alabama) where it takes place, requiring no major alterations to the environment. *The Old Man And The Sea* took place in Cuba, but the Gulf Stream waters were so turbulent, the production had to be moved to Hawaii. In the case of *The Molly Maguires*, major cosmetic work had to be done on the area where the film’s events took place, both to recapture its look from a century before and to give the film the bleak, “black and white” look that Howe and director Martin Ritt desired. They repainted the local houses
and establishments with subdued colors and stripped the trees of all colorful blossoms, using helicopters, sprayed coal dust over the entire area.

Howe also got the opportunity to go back under the ground as he had in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer where, once again, the darkness had to look as though it was being lit only by individual flames from the miners’ caps. In the earlier film, Howe had attached the actor to a harness containing an electric light. For The Molly Maguires, Howe put small but powerful lights on the caps of the actors not facing the camera to illuminate those actors who were, giving off the illusion that all of the light in the cave was coming from natural flames.

James Wong Howe first attained recognition based on his ability to make Hollywood actresses look glamorous. His move toward achieving naturalism in his lighting shifted his focus from glamour to realism for the bulk of his career, but in 1975, he was called out of retirement to give the glamour treatment to Barbra Streisand for the film Funny Lady. Though fighting illness, he not only managed to satisfy Streisand’s concern about her onscreen appearance, but was able to imbue the film with the stylized look classic film musicals produced decades earlier.

During his career, James Wong Howe’s insistence on perfection garnered him immense respect from his peers and made him many enemies. Director Martin Ritt recalled, “Crews hated him, he was very rough, he would scream at them.” 6 But Howe knew the value of holding his ground, claiming:

“There are lots of rules to be broken in photography, and you’ve got to have courage. You’ve got to stick your neck out. You’re liable to get some scars, but it’s worth it.” 7
End Notes:

1George Stevens, Jr., *Conversations With The Great Moviemakers of Hollywood’s Golden Age At The American Film Institute* (New Liberty Productions, Inc., 2006), 132,

2Stevens, *Conversations With*, 138,


7George Stevens, Jr., *Conversations With The Great Moviemakers of Hollywood’s Golden Age At The American Film Institute* (New Liberty Productions, Inc., 2006), 140,

Bibliography:


Filmography:

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1938). Norman Taurog

The Wizard of Oz (1939) Victor Fleming

Fantasia (1940). Ben Sharpsteen

The Eagle And The Hawk (1950). Lewis R. Foster

Picnic (1955). Joshua Logan

The Old Man And The Sea (1958). John Sturges

Bell, Book, and Candle (1958). Richard Quine

Hud (1963). Martin Ritt

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter (1968). Robert Ellis Miller

The Molly Maguires (1970). Martin Ritt

Funny Lady (1975). Herbert Ross