



SCENES FROM A MOVIE

Photographer **Anthony Mandler** has made the crossover into feature films. Having shot countless music videos for artists such as Jay-Z, Rihanna and The Killers, he is now set to direct the long-awaited movie *Vlad*. Here he talks to **Sean Samuels**, US Editor for *Hungry Eye*, about what it's really like to work in the film industry.

Left: Actress Marley Shelton
photographed for *Flaunt* magazine

Sean Samuels: You are working on two feature films. Can you tell me more about them?

Anthony Mandler: The first film is *Vlad*, which is taking big steps forward. We are exploring cast, exploring budgets and locations. We have a script that we love and we are starting to take meetings about it with actors. It's a big movie and will require a clever crew and schedule to work out how to film it all. We are talking about shooting in Romania, where there could be weather issues. For all we know, stuff could get locked off for six to eight months. The other film, *Die in a Gunfight*, is a smaller movie, which will be more mobile and shot faster. It's set for the East Coast of America and we have a lot more flexibility as to when we can start it.

Sean: What are the films about, and what do you love about their stories?

Anthony: I have always been attracted to stories about characters dissolving; especially male characters that are hitting crossroads and having to make decisions which are emotional and intellectual, as well as physical. I want to see how these decisions are made, and how they relate to the world the characters are in. *Vlad* is essentially a revenge story, but at its core is a story about a child who loses his innocence at a young age and spends the rest of his life trying to rebuild the Camelot of his youth. In defending that honour he loses his mind.

Die in a Gunfight is about a kid who doesn't really feel a part of anything, especially his family and the world around him. The only thing that makes him feel is fighting and getting punched in the face, until he meets this girl that turns his world upside down. The story is set in a dystopian version of New York City and is loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet*.

I've always had a curiosity with the idea of power and the perceived rise and fall of it in reference to central characters in stories. I think both films deal with this idea in one way or another; whether it is a more external concept of power as in *Vlad*, or the power the main character in *Die in a Gunfight* feels by isolating himself from society.

Sean: Working with a company such as Brad Pitt's Plan B on *Vlad* must be a great experience.

Anthony: I have incredible faith in the company's opinion. They have worked with an impressive range of directors and this makes their insight into the filmmaking process invaluable. We might have long conversations before making decisions, but at the end of the day, we always do what's best for the project.

Sean: With so many people involved, do you ever feel you are losing control of your personal creative vision?

Anthony: When working on features, being the keeper of the concept can be difficult. But the hope is that you have a studio, a producer and a team that believes in you and who will back you up. You do have to find a balance, however. If you are too rigid you are going to get conflict back and you won't achieve your objective. You have to be cleverer than that. If you are too lenient and give up everything then you won't get what you want. If you're not careful the creative can die a death by a thousand cuts.

Sean: What's the worst part of the business?

Anthony: At the end of the day, all you want is to sit with an actor and hope that opportunity leads to being on set with them. But there are a lot of challenges before that, and this is when the business side can go against the creative side. Getting a film through production is a slow dance. You can't push it. There is a lot of money on the line and a lot of decisions have to be made about where that money goes. If you don't have that business understanding then it can be really frustrating for everyone.

Sean: With this in mind, how many people will have an input into the script for *Vlad*?

Anthony: Generally it's the head of the studio and their team, the producers, the writer and I, but of course that tree grows as artists, managers and agents are involved, and then the actors. Once the physical production department gets involved they might say the budget is too high and request that you cut scenes, or figure out how to execute them in a different way. Then you are back into the business side of things that dictates the creative.



Musician Jay-Z for Island Def Jam



Actor Colin Farrell for British GQ

Sean: You were a very successful photographer.

Why did you move into moving image?

Anthony: I actually became a photographer out of hobby and frustration. I went to the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, as well as a film school in Italy. I also worked for the director Michelangelo Antonioni [whose first English-language film, *Blow-Up*, won the Grand Prix du Festival International du Film in 1967]. I graduated with a deal to make a movie, but instead of it going into production, I spent the next couple of years in development watching it come together and then fall apart. So at the age of 24, tired of waiting around in offices, I just walked away. Photography was a passion and it seemed like the next appropriate step for me. I got an agent and started working straightaway. It turned out to be a great decision because I spent the next 10 years travelling the world and creating my own little movie moments. Photography was always a way to exercise my directing. I was relentless in exploring the dark, cinematic side; even when it hurt my career. Eventually, though, I built up a niche corner where it worked. So the journey back to film was about resolving previous desires. It wasn't an easy jump, but my work in the music, advertising and editorial world prepared me for what was to come. Previous clients and relationships from photography became relationships in the music video and commercial world. In essence I was always trying to get back to the moving image. I used my photography as an opportunity to create frozen cinematic moments.

Sean: Working with Antonioni, what did you learn from him?

Anthony: He would stare at photos of actors for hours to see if they felt right next to one another. He could walk into a location and know in 20 seconds whether it was going to work or not. He had the vision in his head and it was always so clear. It was never a conversation with anyone else; either it worked for him or it didn't work at all. It was truly an auteur's vision. I fear that world has gone, given the collaborative process in Hollywood today. His was not in a developmental situation. When he finished the script, that was the script

they made. It was not about notes or anyone else's opinion; it was what he and the writer wanted to do. That's an idealistic world to grow up in. It's not based in the reality of the world we live in today, unless you are going to make very small movies. So for me it's taking what I can from this experience, adding it to the tool belt, and using it as a technique when I get the opportunity to.

I have always been moved by images. I was fortunate enough to have a mother who was a writer and a lover of film. She exposed me to the arts at a very young age. I was caught by it. At one point I wanted to become an architect and spent a year-and-a-half in school before realising that it was not the creation of buildings that I loved; it was the subjective relationship that happens between a person and the space that they are in, and how they affect one another. There was a fundamentally narrative and cinematic concept in that realisation for me.

Sean: What are you trying to say with your work, both moving and still?

Anthony: With my stills work I was looking at these narrative moments that were frozen – images in the present that had a past and a future – but without any real understanding of what had happened, or what was going to happen. I always loved that tension. I was attracted to it.

With videos, I grew up as a child of MTV, watching the work of Chris Cunningham, David Fincher, Mark Romanek and Jonathan Glazer. These guys were telling incredible stories, where their narrative was building a medium on top of the music medium to create a third medium. In essence it was a new world and I was really intrigued by that.

The concept for Jay-Z and Kanye West's *Run This Town* originated in my travels to violent Third-World countries. There I saw that true power was less about money and more about the idea of strength in numbers; people ready to die for you. We ignored the typical ways, like I said, of expressing power that are so common in music videos – mainly money – and tried to get to a deeper social story.

Sean: Who are some of your influences?



Actress Leonor Varela, Cuba 2008



Opposite: Actress Gretchen Mol, Los Angeles 2007
Above: Actress Leonor Varela, Palm Springs, California 2007

Anthony: I love the photography of Sebastião Salgado. He is a documentary photographer, but when I study his images they are like massive movies to me; they are like Kubrick stills, or John Ford stills. They have this size, scope and symmetry to them. It's unbelievable that he is able to capture that by just standing back as a viewer. It feels as if they are orchestrated, but that just shows his sense of patience and commitment. I love that idea of just watching. I also love and respect the work of Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu. They create chaos on their sets, mix the pot up, then stand back and watch. They stoke the fire then, rather than try to control the elements of it, they stand back and shoot realistically. They create things and really push everyone they work with. When things get too controlled, the rawness and organic nature disappears. When things are too raw and organic, there is a symmetry and graphic nature that is missing. I am interested in the relationship between those two concepts.

Sean: You have worked with sound on your music videos, but how do you feel about working with and capturing dialogue?

Anthony: When moving into features there is an adjustment to working with dialogue and dialogue-driven material, but music is still really important to me when creating the mood. I was always fascinated by filmmakers who work with silence. Terrence Malick is known to do silent takes at the end of every scene, giving him this whole other layer to play with. Sound has always been an important element for me; whether it's the sound of silence, music or dialogue. It holds the same place that light does for me; the addition of it, the subtraction of it or the shape of it.

Sean: What has it been like always working in a culture of celebrity?

Anthony: As a photographer, when you work with models there is a sense of ownership. They become puppets in the play. With actors you are dealing with their personality; what they are willing to do and what they are not willing to do. When an actor is doing a film they are participating for the greater good of the production, and there's a need to be



Footballer David Beckham for *Men's Health* magazine



Actress Eva Mendez for *Flaunt* magazine

fearless in their work. When doing commercials, videos or photo shoots with that same celebrity, that fearlessness doesn't always exist. There are outside influences that often get in the way. There is judgment and, often times, a guarded willingness. It's a good training ground to learn to be clever and how to get what you want. You learn how to manipulate, which is a great tool. To me, all the great filmmakers are great manipulators. At the same time, a lot of the relationships I have are built on friendship and trust.

Sean: Finally, is there a part of the creative process you love the most?

Anthony: I enjoy being involved in every step of the process and I pursue it like a child. However, I am happiest when I am on set. I just love shooting; the camera is there and nothing else matters. I can hear the film moving through the box and my heart is pounding. That's when I see the magic come to life. It might be the actor, the lighting, or something as simple as the way a flare rips across the frame. I just love being inspired by the language of film. I've always seen it as trench warfare; it's dirty, it's messy, it's raw and it's loud. But for me there's nothing else like it.



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Right: Actor Gerard Butler for *Men's Health* magazine
This page: P Diddy for *The Source* magazine