

NEW YORK—During one particularly luminous scene in Terrence Malick's "Days of Heaven," harvesters are at play in the fields where they toiled all the day. A cascade of lavender light—natural light—unfolds across their sun-drenched faces, across the golden wheat, ushering in the darkness that will bring the peace of night.

"It's the magic hour," explained Nestor Almendros, the Spanish-born, internationally trained cinematographer who marks his American debut with Malick's film. "Actually, it's only about 20 minutes; the time from sunset till complete darkness, and the most beautiful light of the day, when the light is truly magic, because you don't know where it comes from."

He said the scene could not have been shot had Malick's film been made in the customary fashion. It's the cinematographer's single-minded determination to bring natural lighting back to the movies.

"As with Impressionism, when tubes were invented that permitted painters to go outdoors and catch instant light, so, when fast lenses came, the moment came for natural light."

The 48-year-old Almendros was awaiting the release of his second American project, Jack Nicholson's "Goin' South," and anticipating work on writer-director Robert Benton's "Kramer vs. Kramer," starring Dustin Hoffman. But he was explaining what makes the stunning visual experience of the Malick film unique.

Panavision fast lenses were used for the many shots that explore wide open range or extreme light. "Had these lenses not existed the film could not have been made, or it would have been banal.

"Obviously, light gives mood to the movie, becomes a character in the movie, but it also creates a certain distance for the audience." Almendros said the look of the film was intended to carry over from the period stills accompanying the opening credits. "The audience believes the period."

Almendros, who described his style as "simplicity," said he used as little equipment as possible—no gauze, no filter, no diffusion in front of the lenses. Actually light from bonfires, and lanterns—propane bottles—illuminate much of Malick's film, Almendros objecting to the traditional use of electronic, counterfeit light. "I can always imagine gaffers waving things in front of the lights, to appear as flames. And I don't believe it!" He said natural light was about to be revived in the latter days of black and white. "But color was a setback; the lenses weren't fast enough.

"Of course, in the beginning there was natural light; the studios had no ceilings!" Almendros believes the era of "sophistication" between D. W. Griffith and "Days of Heaven" was a misguided one. And, not surprisingly, he blamed Hollywood for the "inertia" he said delayed continued experimentation with the possibilities, now recognized by himself and colleagues such as Gordon Willis, Mick Chapman and Haskell Wexler. Almendros recruited old friend Wexler—an Oscar winner for "Bound for Glory"—for the last 19 days shooting of "Days of Heaven," due to an endless Canadian summer that prevented shooting vital snow sequences before Almendros had to meet a prior commitment to film Trauffaut's "The Man Who Loved Women."

"The Germans brought all their fancy lighting to Hollywood, and then everyone else—even the socialist countries—came to



Spanish-born cinematographer Nestor Almendros on the "Days of Heaven" set.

CAMERAMAN OF 'HEAVEN' SAYS, 'LET THERE BE LIGHT'

BY CLARKE TAYLOR

Hollywood to learn. Also, directors of photography of the past were tyrants, and in order to justify their enormous salaries and their influence, they had to create a big machine. An army of technicians proved their power—and made what they were doing appear mysterious. Plus, there were more salaries and bigger budgets, which made everybody happy.

"Actually," said Almendros, "films are made by very few people." He credited producers Bert and Harold Schneider, Executive producer Jacob Brackman, art director Jack Fisk, costume designer Patricia Norris, himself, and of course, Malick, for making "Days of Heaven."

At least one other, a specialist in animal photography, Ken Middleham, was enlisted to supervise the camera closeups of locusts. Almendros said two to three weeks were required to shoot an invasion of the pests, million of which had been imported

to the location from farms throughout Canada.

And he said he involved himself with every aspect of the process. "If you have ugly things, you can't shoot beautiful pictures," he said, citing absolutely no conflict among the creative artists. "It was a blessed picture."

Almendros was self-taught in that watching movies and studying classic painters—Caravaggio, Vermeer, Latour—"helped me more than any course in cinematography. From the start, school was awful!"

He studied in Italy (later, New York City College), where "the professors were giving us the one, two, three of lighting, useful only in that we knew they were wrong and we created our own ideas in opposition. We sensed they'd come to a dead end with artificial, glossy light. Still photography was ahead of us, and we wanted to bring this

experience of natural lighting—the experience of painting—to film."

Almendros also learned in Cuba, where he lived for 15 years after his Loyalist father exiled his family from Franco's Spain. He said he learned by being forced to work with little equipment that not only could films be made with very little, but that scarcity was better.

He said he also learned simplicity from Eric Rohmer ("My Night at Maude's," "Chloe in the Afternoon," "Claire's Knee," "The Marquise of O" and "Great Freedom" from Trauffaut.

Almendros first met Malick at the recommendation of the Schneider brothers. He screened Malick's "Badlands," read his screenplay for "Days of Heaven" and met the young director, "an artist from head to toes."

"There is a kind of craziness, a madness, about him; an obsession with his work and a total dedication to film. There's a fever on him that you only find in great artists. He's also a great technician, whereas many artists refuse technology."

Of their collaboration, Almendros said merely, "He pushed me to go beyond even my own direction. He'd tell me to take risks, when usually you're discouraged.

"Terrence would want to go on shooting after sunset—into the magic hour, as he called it—but the crew never agreed. We won a few to our cause, but it got worse and worse, day by day." Responsibilities were unclear. Were propane burners to be carried by gaffers, electricians or prop people? "They don't like what they don't understand."

But in speaking of the "reactionary minds" of the industry, Almendros also said, "we're at a turning point." Traditionalists are bending.

"Six, seven years ago, candles or lanterns were symbolic. Starting with 'Barry Lyndon' they had a function again—to light!—and as soon as this happens, audiences will no longer accept fakery.

"I believe it's in Hollywood where things are really happening now. Amazing, that at first they were so slow. In Europe there was neorealism, then the New Wave, but Hollywood kept making movies the old way. Suddenly, you can tell they're up to experimenting."

Almendros said he takes into account the possibility of intrusive photography. "But in 'Days of Heaven' the photography is a function of the film. Look at '2001.' There was little story, incomprehensible, really, but people loved it." But he described his work on a documentary of Idi Amin as completely reportage—"Not at all aesthetic." And he said he hopes audiences will leave "Kramer vs. Kramer" moved by the story and not overwhelmed by beautiful photography. (Almendros concepts will carry forth, however, as he will use fluorescent lighting in many office sequences. "The light that's really there . . . I hope people don't see my work too much; I want to help the director. But, then, they won't call on me to do many kinds of movies, say, musicals. There's really little distance between Rohmer, Trauffaut and Malick.

"But I see 'Days of Heaven' as a turning point in my career. I learned to be more confident about taking risks, more confident about using available light. Before, I'd make concessions, play it safe. Now, I realize you can work on the edge, be on the edge of falling." □