Harrowing Rites of Passage

Interview by Frederic Goodich, ASC
Compiled by Jean Oppenheimer

A thin line separates fantasy from reality in the enigmatic black-and-white Finnish drama Concrete Night. The film’s lyrical, high-contrast cinematography earned director of photography Peter Flinckenberg, FSC the Spotlight Award at this past February’s ASC Awards, as well as the 2014 Jussi Award (the Finnish Oscar) and a Golden Frog nomination at the 2013 Camerimage Film Festival.

Directed by Pirjo Honkasalo, Concrete Night revolves around Simo (Johannes Brotherus), a troubled 14-year old with an ill-defined sense of himself and his place in the world. He lives with his boozy, neglectful mother (Anneli Karpinnen) and his morally bankrupt older brother, Ilkka (Jari Virman), in a cramped Helsinki housing project. This tale of lost innocence takes place over a 24-hour period, during which Simo accompanies his prison-bound brother on a nocturnal swing through a seedy part of Helsinki and has a fateful encounter with a photographer who lives across the courtyard.

Frederic Goodich, ASC discussed the production with Flinckenberg and gaffer Jani Lehtinen when they were in Los Angeles for the ASC Awards.

Frederic Goodich, ASC: Concrete Night opens with a surreal sequence that introduces some of the major themes of the movie as well as its visual elements. A close-up of Simo’s face in the bathroom mirror, with steam rising around him, is followed by a shot of the boy witnessing a railroad bridge collapse over a river, plunging a speeding train into the water. Suddenly Simo finds himself trapped underwater inside the train, swimming through weeds and debris as he searches for a way out.

Peter Flinckenberg, FSC: We wanted the story to have a dreamlike quality. Pirjo didn’t want to explain everything that was going on; she wanted to leave some things open so that viewers could come to their own interpretations.

For a long time it had been my dream to shoot a black-and-white film. During preproduction we looked at a lot of black-and-white photography and watched a number of black-and-white films. Little by little my brain [entered] black-and-white mode. I started having black-and-white dreams!

Goodich: Did you do tests with the production designer to see which colors would give you the black-and-white tones you were looking for?

Flinckenberg: We ran extensive tests for two days, and they were very important in determining what material and tones to have
on the [interior apartment] walls — how shiny they were, how much glare they produced, the amount of lacquer to put on the walls, and what angle was necessary to get the glare. We wanted a strong sense of how hot it is. It's summertime and you feel the burning sun coming through the drapes. We also tested different makeup and black-and-white filtration to affect the contrast, but chose not to use these methods because they limited the grading possibilities too much.

[We established] the tonal range with lighting while we were shooting — we didn’t want flat images to push in post. We shot Concrete Night in 2.39:1, primarily using an Alexa Studio 4:3 [in ProRes]; we didn't have the money to shoot ArriRaw.

We also tested a 35mm film camera and Kodak 5219, 5213 and 5207 stocks for certain scenes. I would have preferred to shoot the entire movie on film, but we had a massive number of night shots and I knew we would benefit from the ability to go up to 1,600 ASA with the Alexa, if needed. Also, the closest film labs have unfortunately closed down and we didn’t have the option of waiting for the dailies [to determine if any reshoots were necessary] — so the decision [to use digital] was clear.

We don’t have many good-quality anamorphic lenses in Finland. We ended up using a set of [Vantage Film] Hawk C-series anamorphic primes. I liked their softness; I didn’t need to use much filtration. The only new lens we had was a 35mm Hawk V-Series prime. I wanted it for its close-focus ability; it was sharp, and I occasionally used some Ultra Con filtration to match the older set.

**Goodich:** Did you use any zoom lenses?

**Flinckenberg:** No. I am not a fan of zooms. Sometimes in a documentary — [and in those cases] I will often choose [an] older series of Zeiss Super Speeds — but not usually then, either. The most complicated scenes to shoot were the underwater ones, which we shot with a Red Epic Mysterium-X in a HydroFlex, because we couldn’t get the housing for the Alexa. Jani’s underwater lighting was terrific.

**Jani Lehtinen:** Underwater scenes were meant to be all in color, so we went for a rich color contrast. In the sinking train [car] we used 4-foot [HydroFlex] HydroFlo single fixtures — fitted with Kino Flo 5,500K tubes — from Panalux, London. It was the only time we used...
any fluorescents, and we wanted them in the shot; they were flickered with a dimmer. Above the surface, 12K Dinos and a lot of Par cans which were connected to a dimmer board slowly flickered, creating massive waves of light. For fill, we bounced one 6K Par. We used a 4K Xenon for [the underwater shot where Simo is floating toward the light]. For the black-and-white shoot, we used mainly tungsten Fresnels. Arri T24s have a beautiful 'shadow' quality, which was needed for the poetic noir of this film.

**Goodich:** Was the shot of the bridge in the opening sequence CGI?

**Flinckenberg:** I like to do things as real as possible. We used an actual bridge and the real boy standing on the shore, about 50 feet from it. I shot a plate with an anamorphic lens to make the proportions as real as possible. Then the whole collapsing bridge and train hurtling into the water were created in CGI, with backgrounds shot in different locations. We see the cathedral, oil refinery and other key locations of the story in this scene.

**Goodich:** The characters seem to be living almost on top of one another in an intimacy that made me uncomfortable at times.

**Flinckenberg:** The apartment [which was built on a soundstage] is a very enclosed space. Simo, Iikka and their mother are very cramped. Pijo wanted the feeling that there is no air, no space to breathe. We used hazemakers, as well as dust particles floating in the air, to [emphasize] this idea.

**Goodich:** There's a shot of Iikka standing at the window, and his triple image is so evocative. We see the back of his head at the window and the reflection of his face in the glass. He looks almost demonic, with his nose and lips distorted. Just beyond that reflection, however, is another reflection of his face, but not as distorted. There is real poetry in these images.

**Flinckenberg:** We didn't plan the multiple reflections [which were caused by the double set of windows commonly used in Scandinavia to insulate from the cold]. We had planned it as a wide shot from behind Iikka, followed by a front shot. But as soon as we saw the double reflection, we embraced it.

**Goodich:** Did you ever use a polarizer?

**Flinckenberg:** I almost always use a polarizer, often to change the contrast of the image and sometimes as an ND filter. I like the control. I also like to use [Century Optics] SwingShifter as my macro lens because it gives me control of what I want the depth of field to be — although we couldn't use the full 4:3 sensor with them [so spherical capture was necessary]. I wasn't playing much with the shift, but rather with the focus, which is what I use to tell much of the story.

**Goodich:** When Simo and his friend board the metro, you have a light aimed directly at the lens.

**Flinckenberg:** That was an Arri T24. We use those lamps [for creating] sunshine, and on this show the big Fresnel glass is seen in the shot many times. We were laughing with Jani that usually we try to bring the light source close to the frame, but this time it's often in it. It was important to have continuity in the light — in Finland you never know what the weather will be.
We shot the film in autumn when the sun is low in the sky, and generally there are more clouds. That was an especially difficult scene to shoot, both because we were working in a metro station and because we didn’t have much time to do it.

Lehtinen: We couldn’t close the station and had to use the metro with real people in it. It was challenging, rather than complicated.

Goodich: There are so many reflections in the metro station, and they have a kind of liquid quality.

Flinckenberg: The reflections are natural. Simo is searching for himself throughout the movie. [At several points in the film] he gazes at himself in the mirror, but his face disappears in the steam. The story’s subtext is: ‘Who am I? What am I?’

Goodich: You do your own operating, don’t you? Did you have a second operator?

Flinckenberg: I always operate; it’s because [of my] documentary background. Finland doesn’t have the concept of two operators, although we did occasionally use a second camera on the film. The B-camera operator was Aarne Peltomaa.

Our crews aren’t very big and our shooting schedules are tight. When you have so few days, it has to be planned very carefully, although we’ll deviate from the plan if we see that another angle is better. For me, the most wonderful part of filmmaking is the planning with the director, when you have all these possibilities. Of course, reality hits you at some point, in the form of a producer saying that what you want isn’t possible. On this movie, our wonderful production company, Bufo, really understood the importance of details — for example, wetting down the streets when doing a black-and-white film.

We rehearse the actors before shooting, and then I draw a floor plan for every scene. I tape each scene on the wall in the production office. I have a system on the computer where I print the scene — what is happening in it, thoughts I have for those scenes, and what special things we need for the camera. As we find locations and actors, I add photographs. I also put markers where we have dramatic changes in light, or need the Steadicam or greenscreen. When the process of pre-planning is complete, I basically have the whole film [mapped out] in that...
room, as well as in my head.

**Goodich:** You told me that Honkasalo had a strong vision for the scene when Simo and Ilkka enter the restaurant’s restroom.

**Flinckenberg:** It was influenced by a scene from Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*.

**Goodich:** Was that the most influential visual reference for you?

**Flinckenberg:** No — in terms of the lighting, a big inspiration was *The Man Who Wasn’t There* [shot by Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC; AC Oct. ’01].

**Goodich:** Tell me about the cathedral that the brothers visit.

**Flinckenberg:** That church was a very important place for me, personally. When I got into Helsinki University of Art and Design, [Finland’s] main film school — they only take two cinematography students a year — we had to submit photographs. One of my best photos was a shot in this church; there was this perfect beam of light hitting one of the [icons of the] saints. We re-created this [image] with the help of a Xenon bouncing off a glass surface.

[After the cathedral scene,] the two brothers walk beside the water and discuss their mother. It’s a small scene. We had only one Blonde, from a high angle from the right, and a little bit of smoke; the rest is just 1,600 ASA and a location with enough light in the background.

**Goodich:** In the scene where Ilkka is taken away in the car, you shoot through cracked glass, and the viewer gets a sense of what’s going on from the multiple images.

**Flinckenberg:** Shooting through cracked glass was another wonderful idea from Pirjo. Another thing I am proud of is that we rarely used CGI; we used lights to tell the story in poetic ways, like the murder scene.

**Goodich:** The murder scene is all
played in one shot, and the camera moves very slowly — it's like a seduction scene.

**Flickenbery**: That's the only scene we really tested during preproduction. We didn't have a Technocrane; we just had a grip pole to move the dolly. It moves with the rhythm of the music, which the photographer (played by Juha Ulfak) puts on — a soprano singing an opera aria. The music is very important in this scene. We rehearsed with the music and shot with it to get the rhythm.

The photographer's world is totally different from Simo's — a completely different atmosphere. We see his point of view of things, and we wanted to suggest his sense of wonder. It is a kind of spiritual world that Simo is entering; it's mystical. Pirjo doesn't like to be too specific, but that's my interpretation of it.

**Goodich**: How long did it take to grade **Concrete Night**?

**Flickenbery**: Two weeks. Jussi Myllyniemi was the colorist. We used [Assimilate's] Scratch [and finished in 2K]. People in Finland really like technology. It's a small film industry, but technically we are on a very high level.

**Goodich**: **Concrete Night** felt to me like an American, underground, avant-garde film of the late Forties, Fifties or maybe even the Sixties. It's more an exploration of tone and mood. The film is more about relationships than plot, and many of those relationships are expressed visually. **Concrete Night** has a master-shot approach to filmmaking.

**Flickenbery**: The trend now is to shoot so many angles and [lots of] dialogue, and you kind of 'over-explain' everything. Pirjo, who is also a cinematographer, knew exactly what she wanted, and almost everything we shot was used in the film. I felt so lucky to have a script that had so much potential and a director who had the confidence to tell the story with pictures.

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