

Richard H. Kline: A Life Behind the Camera

By Ray Morton

Cinematographer Richard H. Kline photographed some of the most memorable and innovative films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in a career that took him from medieval days in King Arthur's court to the twenty-third century bridge of the starship Enterprise and brought him face to face with serial killers, femme fatales, state-sponsored cannibalism, deadly viruses, talking chimpanzees, giant gorillas, and Rodney Dangerfield

Kline was born in 1926 into a family of cinematographers: his father, Benjamin H. Kline, was a prolific cameraman who photographed the classic film noir *Detour*, and his uncles, Phil Rosen and Sol Halperin, were also directors of photography and influential members of the American Society of Cinematographers. Was it always Richard's intention to follow in their footsteps? "No," says Kline. "I always had ambitions to become a lawyer, but then the war happened." When the 16-year-old graduated from high school in 1943, World War II was in full swing. Knowing his son would join the military when he turned 18, Benjamin Kline offered to get Richard a job at Columbia Pictures. "My father said 'Look, I can get you in as an assistant cameraman until you have to go into the service and that way...you can go into the photographic division.'" Richard accepted his father's offer and went to work at the Gower Street studio in the summer of 1944. His first assignment was as a slate boy on the 1944 film *Cover Girl*, starring Rita Hayworth and Gene Kelly. Within four months, he had learned enough to qualify as a first assistant cameraman, the initial step to becoming a full-fledged cinematographer (the first assistant is responsible for setting up the camera and pulling focus during a take; the camera operator is responsible for framing shots and moving the camera; the cinematographer is responsible for the lighting and photography).

Kline spent a year at Columbia, assisting on films such as *Klondike Kate* (1943), *The Return of the Vampire* (1944), and *A Song to Remember* (1945). He entered the Navy in 1944 and, as his father had hoped, was stationed at the Photo Science Library in Washington, D.C. He later shipped out on the U.S.S. Los Angeles and spent almost two years in China as the vessel's photographer. After being discharged in 1946, Kline enrolled at U.C.L.A. to begin his law studies. He was waiting for classes to start when he received a call from Columbia. "They said 'We heard you were out and we have a picture we'd like you to go on. You'd have to leave tomorrow and it's in Acapulco.' The minute they said 'Acapulco,' I agreed to go."

The picture was the classic thriller *The Lady from Shanghai*, directed by Orson Welles (who also co-starred with his then-wife, Rita Hayworth). In a job he describes as "the best assignment I ever had," Kline worked not only with Welles, but also with Errol Flynn, whose yacht, the *Zaca*, was one of the movie's principal settings. Apart from a brief cameo, Flynn did not appear in *Shanghai*, but came to Mexico to skipper the *Zaca* for the production. Along with the rest of the crew, one of Kline's responsibilities was to referee the nightly bar fights that would break out between Welles and Flynn after the two had spent several hours heavily "unwinding." By the time the film wrapped, all

thoughts of a legal career had vanished and Kline chose to remain in the film industry. For the next several years, he worked on dozens of productions, including *It Had to Be You* (1947), *To the Ends of the Earth* (1948), several installments of the *Blondie* series, and *The Harlem Globetrotters* (1951). In between feature assignments, he worked on the 1948 *Superman* serial and a few Three Stooges shorts.

When television arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kline's career slowed. "There were less films being made...and, because I had low seniority, the union wouldn't let me work unless everyone else above me was working." Kline found occasional employment in T.V.—on *The Burns and Allen Show*, *Our Miss Brooks*, and assisting legendary cinematographer Karl "Pappy" Freund (*Dracula*) on *I Love Lucy*—but as work grew scarcer, he decided to return to college. Learning that the G. I. Bill would pay for him to go to school anywhere in the world, Kline opted for France, where he spent three years studying art history at the Sorbonne. By the time he returned to the U.S. work conditions had improved and Kline resumed his career.

Promoted to camera operator, Kline gained invaluable experience working for legendary "B" movie producer Sam Katzman on movies such as *The Magic Carpet* (1951), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), and *Rock Around the Clock* (the only project on which Kline worked with his father, who was the picture's DP). "We did 108 features in six years—all between six and twelve days. A lot of film went through the camera." Advancing to "A" pictures, Kline operated for legendary cameramen such as Burnett Guffey, James Wong Howe, Phillip Lathrop, Joseph Walker, Charles Lange, Jr., Ray June, Robert H. Planck, Harry Stradling, Sr., Lionel Linden, and Charles Lawton on a long string of pictures, including classics such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Nightfall*, *Pal Joey*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Last Hurrah*, *Bell Book and Candle*, *Elmer Gantry*, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Experiment in Terror*, and *Days of Wine and Roses*. Ultimately, he assisted or operated on over 200 movies and numerous television episodes.

Kline finally became a full-fledged cinematographer in 1963, but only after a dispiriting false start. He was in Rome working on *The Pink Panther* when he received a telegram from director John Frankenheimer, with whom he had just worked on *The Birdman of Alcatraz*. "I still have the telegram. It said 'Want you as my cinematographer. Repeat—cinematographer. Contact me immediately.'" Frankenheimer was preparing the thriller *Seven Days in May* starring Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster and wanted Kline to photograph it. Thrilled, Kline immediately called the director and accepted. After *Panther* wrapped, "I reported to John and he had bad news. He was very apologetic, [but] he said that Kirk Douglas—who was aging and concerned about his looks—was not willing to try a new cinematographer."

The setback hit Kline hard. "I pouted for about a week and then I got a call from Ray Johnson, the head of the camera department at MGM. He said 'There's a producer over here who would like to meet you.'" So I went over and I met William Froug." A well-respected television writer and producer, Froug had just finished a pilot starring James Franciscus about an idealistic high school teacher called *Mr. Novak* and was looking for a

director of photography for the series. He offered the job to Kline, who was grateful, but wary. “I said ‘Please, I’ve just had a terrible disappointment. Are you sure you’re in the position to make me [a cinematographer]?’ Froug said ‘All I have to do is pick up the phone.’ So I immediately said, ‘Pick it up.’” Froug called Ray Johnson and told him to start Kline the next morning. Richard was thrilled, but a bit mystified. “I said [to Froug] ‘We’ve never met and you’re hiring me as cinematographer. How did this happen?’ And he said, ‘Well, I have three favorite directors...and I asked them if they were going to elevate an operator to a director of photography, who would they recommend?’” The directors were Boris Sagal, Lamont Johnson, and Richard Donner and all three recommended Kline.

Richard served as director of photography on *Mr. Novak* for two seasons. When the show ended in 1965, he decided to shoot only pilots—he wanted to get back into features and knew that if he accepted another series he would not be available if a big screen assignment came along. So he spent 1966 shooting prototype episodes for *The Mouse that Roared*, *12 O’clock High*, *T.H.E. Cat*, *The Monkees* and a period mystery series for Warner Bros. called *House of Wax*. When the latter failed to get picked up as a series, Warner decided to shoot some additional footage to pad it out to feature length and release it to theaters as a “B” picture. As a result, the retitled *Chamber of Horrors* (1966) became Richard Kline’s first credit as a director of photography on a feature film.

While Kline was shooting the additional footage for *Chamber of Horrors*, Broadway legend Joshua Logan, then preparing to direct his big screen adaptation of Lerner and Lowe’s hit musical *Camelot*, happened to see some of Kline’s dailies and, impressed, asked him to photograph the King Arthur-themed picture. Shot in Spain and on immense sets constructed on the Warner Bros. lot, *Camelot* was a very expensive and prestigious production. Given the huge stakes, many cinematographers, especially a relative newcomer working on his first big studio picture, might be tempted to play it safe. Kline, however, had no such qualms. To give the picture a naturalistic look, he decided to employ an experimental technique that he had read about in a technical journal and pre-exposed the negative by photographing a blank white card, and then rewound the film to shoot the scene at hand. This procedure muted the brilliant Technicolor hues just enough to make them seem more real. Pre-exposure did carry some risk—if overdone it could ruin the scene being shot, necessitating expensive reshoots—but Kline tested the process thoroughly before principal photography began and was confident that he could control it satisfactorily. However, when some studio executives heard about it, they told studio head Jack L. Warner that Kline was doing something that could endanger the company’s multi-million dollar investment. Alarmed, the easily excitable, always irascible Warner—who up until that point had been sending Kline telegrams complimenting him on his beautiful footage—charged to the set and confronted the astonished director of photography in typically profane fashion. “He was furious,” Kline recalls. “‘What the f**k are you doing to my film?’ he shouted. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked him. ‘They told me you’re doing something dangerous.’ I said ‘Really? Aren’t you happy with what you’ve seen?’ ‘I love it,’ he replied. So I said, ‘Well, come in tomorrow morning at six and I’ll show you what we’re doing.’” Not interested in getting up that early, Warner decided the issue wasn’t worth pursuing. “‘Aw, f**k ‘em,’ he said. ‘I’ll straighten those

a**holes out...’ And off he marched.” Despite this encounter, Kline loved working with the legendary mogul: “He was a colorful guy—foul, but good foul. He was so good to me. I was invited to visit his home [and] I played tennis with him also.”

To shoot the wedding between Arthur (Richard Harris) and Guinevere (Vanessa Redgrave), Kline used another novel technique—years before Kubrick did it in *Barry Lyndon*, he lit the scene entirely with candles. Over 1,000 were used—so many that the first ones were burning out by the time the last ones were lit. To solve this problem, Kline employed a team of thirty prop men to ignite all of the wicks simultaneously and then doubled the effect by placing mirrors in strategic positions around the set. Richard’s artistry and innovation on *Camelot* earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Cinematography.

Kline’s next project was *The Boston Strangler* (1968), one of several high profile films from the 1960s that used multiple images in a single frame to tell their stories. The film’s director, Richard Fleischer, laid out the design of each multi-image frame with production illustrator Fred Harpman and it was up to Richard to capture all of the individual pictures—which the production team called panels—necessary to assemble these cinematic mosaics. To do this, Kline photographed each panel separately at a 1:1 ratio, meaning that each image was filmed at the exact size it would appear in the final composite. This eliminated the need to increase or decrease the size of the panels optically and thus avoided adding a lot of unnecessary grain to the final composites when they were assembled in the optical printer. Since each panel would only occupy a small portion of the overall mosaic, when filming them Kline would only light the portion of the shot that would appear in the panel (since the rest of the image wasn’t needed). In doing so, he once again made studio executives (who did not understand the technical aspects of what he was doing) nervous—after screening the dailies, they gave him grief for leaving the edges of edges of his shots dark.

In 1971, Kline teamed with Robert Wise on an adaptation of Michael Crichton’s novel about a killer virus: *The Andromeda Strain*. The film begins in a small desert town where most of the inhabitants have been killed by microbes brought back on a satellite from outer space. While shooting this opening, Richard underexposed and then force-developed the film, which dulled the colors to create an appropriately stark and barren look for the devastated village. This same process was later used in scenes set in a secret laboratory where scientists race against time to stop the virus to make the complex appear properly cold and sterile. Wise and Kline wanted the lab scenes to have a documentary feel to them, so they had all of the interior sets built with four walls, ceilings, and practical lamps that Richard used to light the scenes, all of which contributed to the illusion that the film was shot in a real place.

With *The Mechanic* (1972), Kline embarked on a five film collaboration with director Michael Winner that would go on to include *Death Wish* (1974), *Won Ton Ton: The Dog Who Saved Hollywood* (1976), *Firepower* (1979), and *Death Wish II* (1982). Such longevity was not assured—the notoriously demanding Winner had a reputation for being hard on his crews and was known to fire personnel who displeased him on the spot (when

Winner hired Richard for *The Mechanic*, he acknowledged his volatile rep by quipping “Well, you’ve won. Or maybe you’ve lost.”). Fortunately, Winner and Kline hit it off and began not only a long professional association, but also a warm personal friendship that continues to this day.

In 1973, Richard lent his talents to two very different views of a dystopian future. *Soylent Green* presented a nightmarish vision of a society driven to cannibalistic extremes (symbolized by the title food, made from...well, you know) by overpopulation. Reunited with director Richard Fleischer, one of Kline’s primary challenges was to find a way to create the sickly green haze that permeates the polluted air of 1999 New York. “I had a 2 x 2 box that I rigged [in front of the camera lens] that also contained a little fan. I would squirt green smoke into the box and the fan kept it moving a little bit...so [the haze] wasn’t just dead.” The biggest challenge on *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (1973) was the budget. “They were running out of money and spent as little as they could. There was a lot of pressure on us.” Still, Kline—a fan of the *Apes* concept—enjoyed working with the “great cast” (which included Roddy McDowell, France Nuyen, and Paul Williams) and the “enormously clever and effective” make-up. “Everybody worked quite hard, but it was fun to work on. I really enjoyed it.”

After photographing the provocative, sexually themed college drama *The Harrad Experiment* and its 1974 sequel, *Harrad Summer*, Kline got another chance to experiment on *The Terminal Man* (1974), the screen version of Michael Crichton’s novel about computerized mind control. To reflect the protagonist’s distorted state of mind, Kline and director Mike Hodges decided to give the film a monochromatic design: apart from the skin color, everything in the film—the clothes, the props, the settings—would be either black, white, or gray. This was achieved practically through art direction, costume design, and careful framing (“We never shot a sky,” Kline recalls.) The concept seemed viable in theory, but when screening the initial dailies, Kline discovered that after a few minutes, the eye began to interpret the monochromatic color images (including the flesh tones) as if they had been shot in black and white. “We were losing the effect of what we were trying to do, so I began introducing little bits of color—like a red exit sign—at certain points throughout the film.” Seeing these bits would subtly remind the audience that they were indeed watching a color film rather than a black and white one.

Following further collaborations on *The Don is Dead* (1973) and *Mr. Majestyk* (1974), Richard Fleischer asked Kline to work with him on the notorious sex and slavery potboiler *Mandingo* (1975). “He called and said ‘I’m sending a script over and I’d like you to do it’ and I said ‘Fine, I look forward to it.’ Anyway, I read about five pages and [they] were full of atrocities—just embarrassing atrocities. I called him back and said ‘Listen, I can’t be a part of this. Really, it’s just too cruel and it’s a subject I just can’t imagine anyone would want to look at.’ And he said ‘Listen, you’ve got to do it because I’ve already signed.’ And I said ‘Well, I can do it on one condition—that we don’t emphasize anything. He agreed, so we made it an artistic film in a way—shooting three-quarter back shots of people and things like that—to take the edge off the atrocities.”

In late 1975, producer Dino De Laurentiis engaged Kline to photograph his \$25 million remake of *King Kong*. Richard considers De Laurentiis to be “the best producer I ever worked with. He had a lot of experience in filmmaking. Unlike many producers, he wouldn’t try to do things cheaply. If you told him that you needed something [to make the picture], he would ask if you really needed it and if you said yes, he would give it to you. Sometimes he’d even give you two. He was a risk taker...and he worked hard. He was a doer. There’s no one like him today and I can only say good things about him.” Directed by John Guillermin, the film was realized using both a full-sized Kong—a forty foot tall hydraulically operated robot and a supplemental pair of hydraulic arms created by Carlo Rambaldi and Glenn Robinson—and a miniature one—actors Rick Baker and Will Shephard wearing suits and masks fabricated by Baker and articulated by Rambaldi. The full scale and miniature portions of the Kong scenes were usually filmed concurrently, so Kline had to move back and forth constantly between stages, working intently to ensure that the lighting on the miniature sets matched that on the full scale ones (a feat that required all of the lighting elements to be adjusted proportionately—for example, a twenty foot wide beam of light shining on the full scale set had to be reduced to a three foot beam on the 1/7 scale miniature stage). The film was filled with composite shots, which required Richard to illuminate a 100 ft. x 80 ft. blue screen with up to twenty arc lights at a time. There was also extensive location shooting in places ranging from the valleys and beaches of Kauai to the stone canyons of lower Manhattan. For the film’s final scene—in which a huge crowd surrounds Kong (played in this instance by a full size Styrofoam prop) after he has fallen from the top of the World Trade Center—Kline had to use every available movie light in New York City to illuminate the vast plaza between the twin towers. To capture overhead shots of the action, the cinematographer and his camera crew had to position themselves at the end of a narrow wooden plank that extended six feet out from the roof of the North Tower, 1,300 feet above the plaza (alas, no picture of them doing this exists because, as Richard reports, “the stills man was afraid to go up that high”). Kline labored on *Kong* for over a year and, although there “was not one easy shot in the entire picture,” he found it to be a truly memorable experience (“You could make a movie about the making of that movie”). On first night of shooting, Dino De Laurentiis told Richard to “think Academy Award” and Kline responded to his producer’s pep talk with stellar work that earned him a second Oscar nomination for Best Cinematography.

After shooting *The Fury* (1978) for Brian De Palma and *Who’ll Stop the Rain?* (1978) for Karel Reisz, Richard rejoined Robert Wise for 1979’s *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, a notoriously difficult production hampered by faulty planning, management indecision, special effects snafus, and an incomplete script that was rewritten constantly throughout the lengthy shoot. A large percentage of the film’s story unfolds on the bridge of the starship Enterprise. On the *Star Trek* television series, the bridge was always colorful and brightly lit, but on *The Motion Picture*, Kline—in conjunction with Wise and production designer Harold Michelson—opted for a darker, low-key look. This was in part a creative decision—such a scheme fit the mysterious mood of the story and the conception of the Enterprise as a real vessel akin to a modern naval submarine, whose bridges tend to be gray and dimly lit. It was also a practical one—the readouts on the bridge’s monitors (which were 16mm film loops rear projected from behind the set) would wash out if the

bridge was too bright. The reduced illumination created focus problems—because low lights levels produce a shallow depth of field, Richard had to use split field diopters (sometimes up to three at a time) to keep the entire bridge in focus across the widescreen compositions and conceal the splits with shadows and bright spots and by aligning them with vertical lines in the set.

In 1981, Kline was asked by screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan to shoot Kasdan's first film as a director, *Body Heat*. The sultry neo-noir was supposed to be filmed in New Jersey, but a Screen Actors Guild strike delayed production. By the time it was over, it was too cold to film in the Garden State, so production moved to Florida, which, as movie luck would have it, was experiencing the coldest winter in the state's history. Richard needed to use a lot of heavy filtering to make the story look as if it was taking place during a heat wave as scripted. One of his fondest memories of the production came from the first day of shooting. The film featured a lot of nudity, so to defuse the awkwardness, stars William Hurt and Kathleen Turner took off all their clothes and then "stood at the entrance to the [set], had the crew line up like at a reception, and then moved down the line introducing themselves to get it out of the way."

One of Kline's more offbeat projects was 1983's *Breathless*, an American remake of Jean-Luc Godard's classic *A bout de souffle* (1960): "It's different from the original. Richard Gere is so good in it—his acting in the finale is just unbelievable." The colors in the film really pop, which was a deliberate choice made to mirror the lead character's love of comic books. "It was meant to be a cartoon," Kline recalls. "More real than real." Not long after, he worked on one of the most notorious flops in Hollywood history: *Howard the Duck* (1986). "I think there's a much better version of the film on the editing room floor, I really do. They had to rush it out. They didn't have a chance to test it—that's one of the reasons [it didn't turn out well]. And also the voice for the duck [Chip Zien instead of the originally hoped for Robin Williams]—they could have had a better choice." Although Kline worked on several more features throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, he spent most of his time photographing and directing television commercials. His final feature credit was on 1997's *Meet Wally Sparks*, a slight comedy that nevertheless gave him a chance to develop a personal friendship with the film's star, comedian Rodney Dangerfield, a man whom Richard describes as being "surprisingly serious off camera...but delightfully unique."

In 2006, Kline reached the pinnacle of his profession when he was awarded the American Society of Cinematographer's highest honor: its 20th Annual Lifetime Achievement Award. He is currently at work on several screenplays that he also plans to direct. Looking back over his career, Kline is nothing but pleased: "Nothing can compare to the motion picture industry. It's a combination of everything that exists in the world. You have a chance to see the world and meet the greatest of all people—creative people. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Copyright © 2012 by Ray Morton

Originally published in *Cinema Retro*