



Artur Zurawski

GOAL WAS TO PORTRAY SALMAN AS A TOUGH CHARACTER WALKING THIS EARTH: ARTUR

BY MANOJ SHARMA • 2 MONTHS AGO • CINEMATOGRAPHY, E-ZINE

If it is a Yash Raj film with Salman Khan in it as the leading star, one can not compromise on the visual quality. A whole lot of engineering goes behind making such larger than life, epic films look a certain way that they do. We spoke to the cinematographer who shot *Sultan* and tried to get an insight into his method, the method of Bollywood, and how he found a middle path between the two.





Cinematographer Artur Zurawski during the shoot of Sultan

How did *Sultan* happen and what drew you towards this project?

I think that this film was a consequence of *Mardaani*. The producers were rather happy with my contribution to *Mardaani*. That's why they risked another project with me. Reading the script, I knew that Salman Khan will be the main hero. My director (Ali Abbas Zafar)'s brief was that we have to make a larger than life yet real story. I was happy with my first reading of the script. I found it quite gripping and emotional. For me, story is always the most important element. The way I function is that even if I get a film that has immense possibilities for a D.O.P to attain challenging visuals but if the story isn't interesting, then I wouldn't convince myself to do that film. This is so because in the longer run such decisions could frustrate you.

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Since the film is based on wrestling, what did your research and references comprise? Did you'll refer to any videos/wrestlers/styles in particular?

After reading the script, I had conversations with my director and tried to get from him as much information as possible. He showed me documentary videos and stills from *kusthi akhadas* (Local wrestling rings) from Haryana.

I knew about Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) but I never took it seriously. When I spoke with my 12-year-old son about the script, I was surprised to know about his knowledge on the topic. (Smiles). He told me about a female Polish MMA wrestler in USA. *Sultan* was a new experience for me because I wasn't familiar to this kind of wrestling.

My director's brief was that we have to make a larger than life yet real story

In *Mardaani*, your last project with YRF, you shot action. *Sultan* too has several action sequences. Please talk about the difference in both the treatments and their choreography in terms of camera.

There was no major technical difference while shooting the chase sequences for *Mardaani* or *Sultan*. I was always fortunate to have the support of talented action directors. In *Sultan*, shots were more sophisticated and shot mostly by multiple camera setups. The action team would prepare previews beforehand and we would modify it according to our needs and to suit reality.

Everything that we did, we did to stick to the director's brief to portray action realistically rather than using the super slow motion stuff. Apart from a few training scenes of kids that were shot in the night, all the other *kushti* scenes are exterior day sequences only. To have complete control over light continuity I covered the whole area by huge fabric skimmers. This would cut direct sunlight and to get proper contrast 18K Arrimax lights were used.

All the MMA Delhi stadium sequences are interior ones and here my light structure was more sophisticated. I started from designing the main ring light. It was important to have proper light enhancing the fights but also the fixtures had to look like designed modern structures. Here I wanted quite powerful yet not too contrast top light for ready-to-expose high speed Phantom shots. Rajnish Hedao (Production designer) and I discussed the requirements. We designed an octagon top huge softbox with hanging T12 and 5K lights above. Additionally, on the edges I added LED light to get an extra cold bluish colour tone as back-light. Also, the outer circle of this construction was equipped with moving remote controlled 'intelligent lights'. And then, I kept changing the light scheme for each fight sequence separately to get a look which was in sync with the way the story was progressing.

Salman Khan in and as Sultan

Salman Khan has a certain image associated with him. How did you compose for that larger than life look and at the same time keep Sultan's character intact? Technically, talk about the things you strictly avoided in terms of composition.

To reiterate, this story was written as a real one. Our goal was to portray Salman as a tough character walking the earth. In most of the Indian hero-oriented movies, the cinematography is overdone. It means that light and colours are very saturated. That's more than what we see in reality, and ultra slow motion and super wide angle is part of this language. Here, Ali (Abbas Zafar, Director) and I were convinced that avoiding that grammar will make this narrative much better.

READ: WANTED TO MAKE SULTAN WITH SALMAN AND NO ONE ELSE – ALI ABBAS ZAFAR

Please talk about the film's equipment. What camera did you shoot the film on and the lenses, filters and rigs used.

My main camera setup was two Alexa XT. And many times we had three or even more cameras. For aerial shots I used RED DRAGON. For some action sequences the Phantom camera was also used.

I decided to tell this story with anamorphic optics. I wanted a rich image filled with maximum amount of data and covering the full sensor. Also that is something that by default gives you a more cinematic look. The audience is very experienced and they feel that something big is happening when watching anamorphic images. And this film was designed as a big, epic movie. I tested different anamorphic sets, but finally all those old "glasses" didn't match the story. I wanted a modern look, but without huge anamorphic artifacts like breathing and bended lines on the edges. So finally, I decided to get on board Zeiss Master Anamorphic lenses. MA lenses are totally free of all these artifacts. I didn't want the audience to actually be able to feel the technology. I wanted a clean and magnificent image. But for one special scene I used Leica Summilux spherical lenses to get another desired look.

In most of the Indian hero-oriented movies, the cinematography is overdone

What was your lighting scheme for outdoor and indoor sequences. Please talk about it in detail.

I was trying to learn what the sun is doing in all those locations and was following it using artificial light or by

modifying sun light. The most important part of lighting for me is to learn how light works in real locations. I am always trying to make the light design a very simple one. During the day we have the sun but we also have reflections. Light is being bounced from different structures. Sun light is being filtered by clouds or just softened by smoke, dew, etc. But there is always only one sun. That's why the audience feel that light is natural or artificial.

Another situation is during the night. In reality, city light sources and village light sources are quite different from each other. But the big question hanging in front of me was whether I should continue with the light scheme of the village or modify it for my own night-look according to the story.

In both day or night conditions the existing light was just a beginning. A feature film is not recreating reality for me. But it is creating from the beginning. One can never recreate what is there in the real world. All you can do is create a cinematic world of your own from the beginning. You have to find a film language for the story and follow this same language throughout the film. If your grammar has no unity, the audience will be disconnected feeling that they are just watching some well shot visuals, but just pieces of shots. There isn't any harmony.

In reality, if we watch some great landscapes from our holiday stills, we mostly get disappointed after watching them because we feel that something is missing. And we try to explain to our viewer that in reality it was better. This is because every image is filtered by our eye, our mind and experience. Somebody will remember the green colour of the grass as green, somebody else as yellow. They will always be interpretations very far from the so-called reality. That's why a filmmaker has to create his own colours to propose his vision to the audience. And if this vision is consistent, the audience will be inside the story and not get distracted by so called natural or real colours. Natural and real doesn't exist in a film.

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There are couple of songs in the film. *Mardaani* did not have any song as such. How was the experience shooting the songs? How was it different from shooting the rest of the film?

I can't say that the songs needed any special treatment. They are closer to a commercial ad film shoot but in terms of cinematography this is just another scene. You have to follow the music and you have to be very precise from edit point to get the best flow effect. Here I had the support of two music directors. I like dance and I was having fun. The only issue for me was the sound level which is always on the higher side in India (Smiles).

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Please talk about the overall colour palette you chose for the film. How does it change as the film progresses? Talk about the colours that you strictly avoided and why.

My palette is progressing but it is very subtle. The part of the story where we see the aged and not fit Sultan, the colour and contrast there is low. The black is very soft. But when he starts to fight for his love, the image becomes more rich in color and high in contrast. The very intensive outfits of Haryanvi women are dimmed down and by this we focus on emotions rather than on the background.

In the film, you have created a Haryanvi village. Please talk about all that went into it.

Oh yes! The set was a big deal. The story is happening mostly in Haryana and Delhi. We were scouting beautiful villages. But very soon we realized that shooting in real locations will be a big issue due to Salman. Crowd control

could turn into a nightmare.

We shot in existing locations only when it was really necessary. Like wide open landscapes, fields, etc. But a huge amount of job was done on the set in Film City. And I was impressed by our Production Designer's efficiency. Rajnish Hedao has built a copy of the Haryanvi village. More than 600 people were building it and I was amazed at how precise they were. During the shoot I would almost forget that we are on the set. And I am sure that the audience will be fully satisfied feeling no difference between the set and real stuff. Most of the film has been shot on built-up sets. Also we made set extensions combining real space with the set. Here the VFX team has done its job very well.

The light matching was a task for me. Haryana has quite harsh (light) while light in Mumbai is very often filtered by clouds and the sky is just milky. That's why on Mumbai sets I had to keep my sun or artificial light softened properly.

I am sure that the audience will be fully satisfied feeling no difference between the set and real stuff

So far you have shot with YRF which is a leading production house. Do you wish to work in regional cinema and with smaller production houses as well? Please talk about your future projects in the pipeline.

As I said at the beginning, the story is most important for me. I just don't want to spend my life telling something not important or telling something just to entertain people.

Also very important for me is the way how the story is told and here I also contribute in a constructive manner. Even if the director's vision is already locked, I can help to find a significant, proper language.

And yes - I am open to approaching new producers and directors if the stories they have grip my heart. Simple!

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Name	Artur Zurawski
Job Title	CINEMATOGRAPHER

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