



Chris Chomyn Interviewed

By [John Klyza](#) - March 23rd, 2007

Before you experience Phantasm 3 on DVD in digital clarity, I present a long-lost interview with the talented Cinematographer of Phantasm 3: Lord Of The Dead and Phantasm: Oblivion, Chris Chomyn. This was conducted in April, 2001, and I found him to be quite friendly and detailed in our discussion. Next time you watch the last two films, take time to appreciate the qualities of color and visual detail present.



Let's start off with the basics, Chris. What is your background, pre-Phantasms?

Phantasm III was my first real feature film as first unit cinematographer. Before that I had shot some second unit photography as well as many short films as a film student and even two features, one as a film student and one just after graduating from school, but P3 was my first film with a budget over a million dollars.

Before going to film school, I had worked as a freelance still photographer; as well as a gaffer and grip on a number of films, tv movies, commercials, etc....so I had a strong photographic background.

How did you get the Phantasm 3 gig? You were in contact with Roberto Quezada, right?

I met Roberto on Silent Night, Deadly Night, part IV—He was the UPM and he hired me to shoot second unit. After that, we lost contact, but when Phantasm III came along, Roberto thought of me, tracked me down and introduced me to Don.

Had you watched the first two Phantasms before working on the movie?

I had seen Phantasm when it was first out and remembered it as a scary film. I had never seen P2 so Don gave me a tape. I watched it, but didn't think it looked right for P3. P3 had a totally different feel from either of the first two. P3 was more action/comedy oriented. We wanted to keep the film moving, and at the same time, play up Reggie's comedic nature. We hoped to do this without losing sight of the fact that we were making a sequel to a great horror franchise.

What kind of prep-work did you do prior to the shoot, and then once on set?

After reading the script, I had a number of ideas which Don and I discussed at length. We also had the usual logistical issues to solve, namely how to shoot all the shots of the chrome spheres without seeing the camera and crew. As you probably know, almost all of the shots of spheres in P3 were shot in camera...there are two morphs and a couple of blue screens of the Tall Man. But all the flying balls are done in camera - which was different approach from the one used on P2, where they were handled as post effects.

Kerry Prior did a fantastic job taking our original concepts and making them even better. Of course, first unit shot some of the flying balls whenever a principle actor was involved, but the singles were shot as an effects unit.

We began shooting in January, and I spent the Christmas holiday staring into Christmas ornaments wondering how I would be able to light and shoot without seeing everything reflected in these chrome mirrors. It was very challenging but Don was very supportive and trusting. He believed in me, and I was determined to do a good job for him, and for myself.

Phantasm 3 had a very rich, colorful look to it. Was this due to the heightened comedy and fantasy elements of this entry?

We selected a more richly saturated color palette due to the themes and moods inherent in the material. I also tried an experiment, using colored light in a pavlovian way to trigger the audiences' response to impending terror by the Tall Man and his minions.

Specifically, In the early part of the film, I used a very saturated blue almost indigo, called Congo Blue whenever the Tall Man or his minions were present. Later, I began introducing this color before they arrived, with the hopes that the subconscious color association would act as a catalyst for an emotional response in the audience.

Tell me about the “death corridor” sequence. It was beautifully lit, very surreal.

The death corridor was tricky and after shooting it I figured out a better way to do it, but hind sight is always more clear....and given the constraints of time I think it turned out well. The budget was tight and room on our stage was tighter, so there was no real room to build a set. Instead we opted to put up a temporary set constructed of aluminum speed rail and black draperies. We suspended the pipe and covered the rigging with the draperies to hide the mechanics of it....it also lent an ethereal air to the location. The folds in the

material, also added to the feel. The trick was to make Mike walk into the light, but when we turned around to see his reactions, we didn't want a flat front lit image. We cheated Mike to walk in backlight, then rolled a light on a rolling stand next to Mike as he walked toward camera, and toward the light. So even though he was acting as if he was walking toward the light, the look had a bit more texture, shape and depth than it would have had he actually been walking toward the light. Then when we cut to the shots from behind Mike, he is actually walking toward the light again.

If I had more time, I think I would have liked try another option...namely to construct the corridor of bleached muslin, then light it with Maxi-brutes from outside, so the walls glow....then do everything else the same....I think the glowing walls, would add to the ethereal quality we were going for. Of course, it would be nice to have the time to set it up, look at it and decide which method is best....but on low budget films, there is never enough time to do that, so we must make choices, and go with our gut instincts.

How did you get around revealing the crew in the reflections of the spheres? I know it's an oft-asked question of participants from the first film but it must have been harder in part 3 due to all the complex sphere scenes.

If you look closely, there are a few shots where you can see the crew. But for the most part we were really successful at hiding the artifice. I probably shouldn't reveal all of our secrets, but I will tell you a few bits of information. First....no one looks at the spheres. The audience looks at where the sphere is going....if the blades are out, they want to see the contact, they watch the blades. Second, for those times when the viewers do look at the spheres, we had to carefully hid the camera and crew. In some instances we build faux wall flats and had them painted to match the sets. By cutting a hole in the flat for the lens, the crew could shoot from behind this wall. As long as the flat was lit to match the walls, the device passed unnoticed.

In the long mausoleum corridor we used a mirror so that the ball would reflect the unseen wall of the mausoleum, which was in reality the wall that was in the background, reflecting in a mirror then again in the sphere.

In the hospital room, we used 4x4 frames of silk to hide behind. These are usually used to diffuse and soften light, but in this instance, they served to hide the camera and crew.

Of course, we employed many other strategies, but these should give you an idea our basic approach.

Did you have any say in the color scheme of the costumes and set dressings?

I discussed the set design and color schemes with Don and Production Designer, Ken Aichle, in pre-production and as an ongoing concern throughout production. As with all productions, some ideas are utilized, and some are not. That's the nature of collaboration. Still, Don was very open to my input and encouraged me to maintain an open dialogue about all aspects of the film.

Geeky question - how was the "sphere eclipse" effect in the dry lake bed scene accomplished?

The Tall Man commanded it and it happened. He truly wields awesome power.

Tell us about the deleted underground bunker scene. That must have been an interesting sequence to shoot.

When you are working with Don Coscarelli pretty much everything that comes out of his mind is interesting to shoot. The challenge is to make it believable within the context of the world he creates. The underground bunker scene was no exception. The art department built a cave, that was really remarkable, very textured, painted kind of a dark mauve color. We then systematically cut holes in it, had the rough edges finished, and I lit it through those holes, so the cave was almost black, but for the light that penetrated through the holes. The actors were blocked so that the critical action happened in the light - narrow shafts of light that selectively hit only what we wanted to reveal at any given moment.

It worked well, but sometimes you shoot a scene and only realize afterwards that it doesn't belong in the movie.



What did you do between working on Phantasm 3 and 4?

Immediately after P3 I slept for a long time. It was an exhausting project. Then when I woke up, I returned to my life as a cinematographer. That means, shooting when jobs come my way, looking for work when I have the time, reading scripts and interviewing for films - the hard parts of being a freelance cinematographer.

I was lucky in that I kept pretty busy shooting commercials and industrial films, a few music videos and some interactive projects, when interactive meant laser disk pre-CD Rom, pre-DVDS.

I also produced an independent feature: Joe Joe Angel & The Dead Guy, an off beat comedy about a man who dies and is sent to purgatory. Before he can enter heaven, he has to atone for his sins. Unfortunately for

him his guide through the wasteland of purgatory is Joe Joe Angel, a foul mouthed slacker with a bad attitude.

Now that P4 is behind me, I have a new film which has not yet been released, [Lockdown](#), I continue to look for interesting projects. And between gigs, I teach cinematography at USC.

Back when they intended to shoot the Roger Avary script Phantasm 1999, how much did you plan until it became apparent that it wasn't going to be shot, but the scaled down Phantasm: Oblivion was?

I was excited to shoot Roger's script, and I was really hoping it would happen. But I didn't do too much preparation, because there really isn't much of a point unless the budget is there to make the film. Without the money, it is all just theory. Money makes it possible. It also forces limitations which can help in the creative process.

There have been times when I have begun pre-production before all the money was in place, but those are not the norm. On P 1999, Don didn't want any of us to waste our time on a project that wasn't going to get made, so we talked a bit about it, but we reserved the real work for when the money was in the bank. We all still remain optimistic about that project.

Moving onto Phantasm: Oblivion, it has a very unique look to it. Lots of harsh light, coldness and detail in the photography. You can almost see the pores in everyone's faces, the cracks in every mountain and every scratch in the Cuda.

Like all my films, the look starts with the themes and subtext inherent in the script. The script for P4 had a very different feeling from P3. There was a raw quality that I thought I could capture on film though choice of film stock, lenses, camera placement and lighting.

Whereas P3 had a more polished look that I felt worked for the tone of the script, I thought P4 needed an edge. We approached the film from a "less Hollywood" "more Guerilla" mentality. The coldness you mention I think is really more of a starkness. I did contrast warm and cool lights, let the shadows go dark to maintain an air of mystery.

One thing I tried, but wasn't 100% successful in doing was when the tall man was present, I tried to let part of him blend into the background, whereas when Reggie or Mike are on screen, I tried to separate them from the background, so the audience would always feel as though the Tall Man might be lurking in the background, part of any shadow.

This wasn't entirely successful, because some of the locations and scheduling limitations didn't afford me the means to accomplish this. Still, I did achieve it whenever the situation allowed, and I think it adds to the look of the film, in a subconscious way.

Was it a nightmare to recreate Phantasm 3's final scene of Reggie pinned against the wall by the spheres?

It was a challenge. We only built a small corner of the set. But the problem became the spheres, they reflected the rest of where the set should have been. So we had to cheat using some makeshift flats and lighting to try to mask the artifice. Then when we cut around to Reggie's POV on Angus, we had to cheat Angus into the corner where Reggie had been sitting, change the lights and angle so the audience wouldn't

feel that we were shooting into the same corner, and at the same time maintain the feeling and quality of the scene from P3.

Were the flashback scenes somehow tinted in post production? Because it doesn't feel like "oh, we're going back to the 70's"... there seemed to be a whole visual unison between the past/present scenes.

They weren't tinted per se, but they were printed to look like part of this film. It was all old footage that Don had, but the print stock and telecine technology have dramatically improved over the years, so that we were able to use the footage seamlessly.

I heard there was negative damage and that there had to be reshoots of the final scenes.

This was a few years ago and so I am trying to remember. I don't remember returning to the location to re-shoot anything. But I do know we had a monster scratch down the middle of the film in one section of the final scene. Fortunately my 1st Camera Assistant, Joe Waistell caught it, and we were able to clean the camera, reload, reset and re-shoot the damaged shots right then. It was disturbing to find the damaged footage, but we were lucky to find it then, and not back in LA a week later.

Of course, I may be remembering it incorrectly, as it was a few years ago.

Do you have a scene or shot out of both films that you're particularly proud of?

I am proud of a lot of the work in both films, each one for different reasons.

In P3 the poor man's process shots in the car at night were the first shots we shot, and the first time I had shot poor man's process, and it cuts together with the night driving footage really well. It looks believable. These were also unscheduled when we shot them. We were rained out of our scheduled location, and none of the sets were ready, so this was the only thing we really could shoot.

Outside Tim's house, when Tim lets Reggie out of the trunk, it was starting to rain, so we shot the wide shots first, before the rain got heavy, then we built a tent to shoot the close ups, the quality of the daylight changed dramatically, and I had a very small lighting package for the day exteriors on that film. But I was able to re-create the feeling of the light, so unless you look very closely at the background behind Tim, you don't know it is pouring rain in that scene. (Of course, the sound work for that scene is key in helping to hide the fact that it is raining.)

When Jody comes to get Reggie at the Motel and he steps out into the dry lake bed, that was very challenging. We shot the entire scene on stage. I kept detailed notes about my lighting so I could match it on location. But there were budgetary considerations that prevented me from bringing ANY lights on location. So we set up the wall flat. Built a tent around it, and using reflectors (Shiny Boards) and opening small flaps in the tent, I was able to light the interior to match the set. So when Reggie opens that door and steps out onto the desert floor, he is really there. The effect works and it's all done in camera.

The night campground sequence where the Tall Man tries to come through the space gate was also particularly challenging as we shot that sequence on three separate days with no fewer than three weeks between any two days. This type of schedule makes matching very difficult. Those night exteriors were actually shot inside our warehouse/stage against black draperies. The lighting had to be very controlled to hide the artifice of the stage.

The challenges in P4 were many; they were complicated by the fact that we had a smaller budget, smaller, less experienced crew and shorter schedule than on P3. So in many ways, every set up was a major achievement.

The night exteriors in the desert were challenging because we had to maintain an expansive feel to the set, while keeping the area confined so we could light it effectively.

All of our interiors were challenging because we were working in such a confined and limited space. There was really no room to work properly, so we had to find new ways to solve our problems.

There are many more, but these illustrate the working methodology of creating the Phantasm Films.



What's Don Coscarelli like from a working relationship standpoint?

I met Don on Phantasm III and we became fast friends. We like working together. We are able to disagree and use the conflict of our ideas to reach new ideas that are better than either of us began with. Our friendship extends into our personal lives.

Do you believe your work was translated well to the video editions?

It has been quite along time since I have watched either film; but, I think the video transfers of both films are quite good. This is largely due to Don's insistence that we have enough time to do the transfer properly. It is also largely due to our colorist, Robert Tomachefski. Robert has a keen eye, is fast and patient. He is an excellent co-collaborator and works tirelessly to deliver the best video transfer possible.

The Phantasms are always shot in 1.85:1 ratio... has there ever been any talk of shooting in 2.35:1 anamorphic?

I believe we did discuss shooting P4 in 2.35:1, but passed on the idea for a combination of aesthetic and financial reasons. Though if we do have the chance to shoot Roger's Phantasm 1999 script, I'm sure we will revisit this discussion. That is a film that might lend itself to shooting in either anamorphic or Super 35.

Photos are courtesy of Chris Chomyn - www.chrischomyn.com