VANITY FAIR

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Shot List

How *Nickel Boys* Pulled Off the Year's Most Radical, Vital Cinematography

Director RaMell Ross and DP Jomo Fray take a deep dive into their film's bold visual approach, which compels viewers to experience an abusive Jim Crow–era reform school through the eyes of its victims.

By David Canfield
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As writer-director **RaMell Ross** prepared to start filming on his first narrative feature, *Nickel Boys*, precision was key. “Our shot list was 33 single-spaced pages, typed out—every single scene was calculated on where the camera goes,” says cinematographer **Jomo Fray** (*All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*). Ironically, such thorough outlining made room for surprises. Ross and Fray often improvised as they operated the camera, tracking an actor’s movement they hadn’t expected or catching a stray detail in the lens. “RaMell was trying to make each of these shots feel as if they truly were coming from a set of eyes that have never seen the moment before,” Fray says. “There was true wonderment.”

The conceit, executed through innovative first-person POV cinematography, makes this searing adaptation of **Colson Whitehead**’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel feel like no other movie. The opening act follows teenager Elwood Curtis (**Ethan Herisse**), whose day-to-day life with his adoring grandmother, Hattie (**Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor**), in Jim Crow–era Tallahassee is punctured after he is falsely accused of a crime. Curtis lands in the abusive, segregated reform school known as Nickel Academy (based on the real-life Dozier School for Boys). Until this point, we have not yet seen Elwood’s face, because we’re taking in everything that happens to and around him through his own eyes; this changes when he meets and bonds with a peer named Turner (**Brandon Wilson**) at Nickel, with the camerawork then shifting to toggle between their dual perspectives.

It’s an immersive and stark approach that examines their experiences at Nickel through to a brutal climax and a stunning twist. “To give subjectivity to the Dozier School boys is fundamentally mind-blowing,” says Ross, an Oscar nominee for his 2018 doc, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*. “In literature, you’re allowed to write from the inside, but at least most cinema is from the outside. This allows them to see and to give them vision, to force the audience to participate in their subjectivity.”

It’s a movie that makes viewers think about what they’re seeing as much as *how* they’re seeing it—especially since Ross and Fray’s style favors some of the most striking, poetic imagery in film this year. Capturing those visuals required both technical mastery and a profound emotional investment. Breaking down six crucial frames from *Nickel Boys* (in theaters December 13), the pair reveal how they pulled it off.

THE HANDS

Ethan Herisse and Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

At Nickel Academy, Hattie finally visits her grandson, Elwood, after previously struggling to make contact—and brings disappointing news about her efforts to bring him home. In one of the film's signature, distinctly POV shots, we watch Elwood process the news.

Jomo Fray: This shot was really unique in the movie, because I was operating the camera handheld and Ethan, the actor in the scene, was sitting right next to me. It's an intense moment between Hattie and Elwood, and where the gaze goes says so much about where the character is in their mind—what they're thinking, what they're processing, how much they can take in, what they can't take in. Sometimes it's hard to make eye contact when you're hearing things you don't want to hear, and I remember as the camera kind of drifted away from Aunjanue, I was staying away and letting it process. She hits the table and she says, "Elwood. Elwood, look at me"—which is not in the script. It forced *me* back to reaching her gaze.

RaMell Ross: We realized, almost the more we miss things—the more that we're late, the more that we're early—the more it feels alive. I think this was the first time that it kind of truly merged, where camera-as-Jomo and Elwood-as-historical-character existed simultaneously, as multiple subjectivities. It was truly something, to hear her smack the table and have Jomo sort of pop up. From that moment on, the way that Jomo moved the camera was way more as an Elwood than it was as a Jomo—because he became more implicated than we had even imagined would happen.

THE MIRROR

Brandon Wilson as Turner, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

*The first time we follow Turner without Elwood, he accompanies one of the school's volatile white employees, Harper (**Fred Hechinger**), on a secret side hustle. This shot, as they're on the road out of the academy, captures both the perilous power differential between them and the thrill Turner feels at being able to escape Nickel's confines, if only temporarily.*

Ross: This is the first time we're seeing Turner outside of the cafeteria—the first time we're in his gaze, in his own world. Thinking about who Turner is as a character, master of his

universe and just trying to get by, we thought it would be really interesting to have him simultaneously be introduced through this playfully violent act of Harper, who's beside him, but also have him enjoying the freedom that he's earned through his conniving way of moving through Nickel. It was quite easy to write this image and imagine it, but difficult to pull off.

Fray: It was really about getting the feeling of Turner's body in that car—the feeling of the violence, of looking around. This was one of the first VFX reflection shots that we did in the production. So although we had had a lot of prep with our VFX team and kind of talked through all of our approaches—we had a plan A, a plan B, a plan C for getting these—we also FaceTimed in with them on this day so they could see each of the rigs and get an idea of what we were doing and how we were doing it. First and foremost, and I feel really grateful for them as a team, we're trying to have things as naturalistic as possible. There was very little green screen work in the movie—it's getting assets and then rebuilding those assets until the image is what we needed them to be.

Ross: There are no single-use images in the film; there's no such thing as an image that has a strict narrative utility. This image is talking about Turner's slight vanity; it's talking about his freedom with being able to chew bubblegum; it's talking about the control that Harper has over him, the playful use of violence. Very plural. It's deeply rich and it's also, what, six seconds long? But you learn almost everything you need to know about the relationship between him and the institution.

THE CAKE

Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

The tight, loving bond between Elwood and Hattie anchors the film. This scene, taking place just before Elwood leaves for Nickel, finds him watching his grandmother in a painful, vulnerable moment—at the second she catches him snooping.

Fray: My voice gets tight in my throat even thinking about this one, where you're witnessing me-as Elwood-as-camera witnessing someone that they love essentially spiraling, and holding all of these violences that they always had. This is just another marking in a long list of aggressions from society to her and her family and her blood. Traditionally in cinema, this might be just a medium-wide shot looking in. But again, with this camera language, seeing the door jamb actually means that it's a person who hasn't crossed over the threshold to come into the room. They're seeing this happen, and they're slowly moving forward—toward this character having a really emotional, almost private moment.

Ross: It feels like Elwood is tiptoeing towards her, not wanting to disturb his grandmother, as if she's done this before, maybe. He's not too concerned, because if he was, he

would've said something earlier on. It seems like this is her mode of actually breaking off pieces of pain in order to control them. As they spill outside the container that she's making, she takes it off the knife and now she can push this thing away—it's accessible and it's tangible. Elwood watching Hattie—knowing that he's leaving, knowing what she's feeling, yet seeing her calm and composed—is part and parcel with his optimism. She's not screaming; she's not on the floor; she's not crazy. She's definitely on the brink of something, but she hasn't crossed the line. Her resourcefulness in managing her family's pain over the course of the years, as it hits its apex right here, is something that Elwood takes forward with him into Nickel. He gets beat, but yet he still tries to find a way.

Fray: The camera looks around, and I connect it more to my spine and my body—as RaMell was saying, it was a tiptoeing in. It felt, as the character, like I'm trying to not be large or impose my subjectivity onto the space, which actually feels a little bit closer to what cinema traditionally does in creating images. You have Elwood watching and wanting to know from somewhat of a distance until he comes in, and then they both start speaking with one another.

Ross: I love that, because it emphasizes the world going on outside of the camera's presence. Even though the camera was creeping toward Hattie, Hattie doesn't look at the camera, doesn't look at Elwood; it's traditional camera language. But the fact that she turns and looks into his eyes, I imagine, is a bit of a shock to the viewer—reminding them that the camera is subjective.

THE JUMP

Ethan Herisse, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

Ross calls this one of his favorite moments in the film. In it, Elwood and Turner are sitting together and chatting at Nickel, with the POV switching periodically. Running in a pack, a group of boys then literally jumps over them. The camera takes in Turner's perspective as he reacts with a surprising terror, then sees his friend watching him in genuine concern—while Ross and Fray subtly collapse the movie's many timelines during the chaotic sequence.

Ross: Right before Turner is talking, Elwood is looking at Turner, emotional. Elwood looks left, sees the boys running; the boys jump over both of them, the camera goes up to see the boys, and then falls into Turner's perspective. When it falls into Turner's perspective, the boys are men—they're no longer boys. Complete new people. Grown men running around the space.

Fray: This was a shot with a pretty heavy stunt component into the look. As an operator, I'm looking at Elwood as Turner, and then over us comes three of the boys. We have to create a

vaulted surface to kind of spring off of, because we really wanted to almost see their bodies go over the top of us in the shot. We were really drawn to the lenses, because they had this real sense of volume to them, like we're underneath these people jumping and they're only maybe a foot and a half, two feet off of where they camera is, or where the eyes would be. It was a lot of orchestration to build that platform off camera, and to shoot it in a way that we could still see everything—and cheat out all of the apparatuses and the pads that are built around us for the stunt to happen safely. But to still feel that danger, but also wonderment—depending on whose perspective you might be looking in.

Once the boys hit the ground, Turner tracks them running away and where they're going, but Elwood just looks at Turner, knowing that his friend had this real explosion. He's seen Turner be so cool under pressure, and this almost feels like a schism—the compassion you see in Elwood's eyes, the way that Elwood's eyes would always go to who's hurting the most, does say something about him as a character. For Elwood, that might be a feeling of wonderment of seeing these boys jump over him, and then a feeling of like, Oh, this really upset my friend.

Ross: One also must wonder, as an audience, why this is so terrifying for Turner. The act itself, of the boys jumping over them, seems probably the most playful and the most harmless and almost nonchalant for a playground—to have a response that's so extreme, it's very concerning to Elwood.

THE SHEETS

Ellis-Taylor, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

In the film's moving flashbacks, we see the world through Elwood's eyes as a young child—here, a short but wondrous (and complicated) sequence of being surprised by his grandmother in bed.

Ross: I was also a camera operator, and I tried to do this one, but I just couldn't do it. I don't know what went wrong. I did the first four or five takes and it just wasn't working. And then I begrudgingly was like, "Here, Jomo, you do it."

Fray: It's a deceptively hard shot.

Ross: This was one of the ones we were most excited for, because it's so much a quotation of cinema language: *The Tree of Life* and every movie that's used a kid's perspective, with something that is ephemeral and ecstatic happening. This image means so many things. It is almost recklessly beautiful and emotional.

I'm just remembering my frustration in being on this bed and going from that fireplace on the right and then trying to come back. [*Laughs*]

Fray: We ended up running late for some logistical reasons, so this ended up being shot night for day—so that was already kind of difficult. The light is created, so you're not riffing off of it the same way that you would natural light. And Elwood is a child here, so Elwood would have a different way of moving. Elwood, as an adult, wouldn't have as long a neck as RaMell and I have and as much control. The feeling of volume and space and presence and perspective was really hard in this one, where we got on the bed and then we put the camera and it was like, "Hattie feels like she's two feet away from you. This doesn't work." Then we pulled the frame off, and we just had a mattress on the ground, and it was like, "Now we feel too far away."

A camera with sentience was the thing we were talking about. It was always about what it is to not capture how we see, but to capture how it *feels* for us to see—which sounds semantic, but it isn't. If you were to have a camera system that mimics how we go through the world, it would probably be something like Steadicam. But because of the grammar of cinema, handheld actually feels more inside the body, more present. We wanted a largeness to this, because Elwood as a body is so small here. We were changing the lenses, changing the height of the distance of the camera to Hattie. In the end, we might've even put Aunjanue on apple boxes so she was higher up, to create this feeling of the child's perspective. Me and RaMell, we are adult men, so we are physically taking up more space than he would as a child. This one really tested us, thinking about this concept of: How do you shoot the feeling of a human perspective?

THE APOLOGY

Brandon Wilson, Courtesy of Orion Pictures.

Turner has just confessed to not giving Elwood a letter that his grandmother wrote for him. Here, Turner takes in the reaction from his friend, who's sitting on the ground and avoiding eye contact.

Ross: I think we could say, hypothetically, this is the first time that Turner's ever apologized for something. He's watching Elwood looking down, twiddling these leaves, and tearing this leaf apart. Not only guilty, but he's taking ownership for something. He's taking ownership for the way in which he's making other people feel. Being down and looking up to him, Elwood looking up to Turner, is quite indicative of the way in which Turner's disappointed him, because we're monumentalizing Turner in this moment. He trusted this guy and is a bit lost now.

Fray: This was the last setup on the first day of production, so there was a way in which the whole crew was still wrapping their mind around this approach. This was the first scene of that day that was explicitly emotional and was explicitly two characters speaking to each

other; in this shot and its reverse shot, the camera operator, **Sam Ellison,** operated both of them, so I had an opportunity to watch at the monitor. It was the first time that day where people were like, “Oh, okay. I can start to see this working.”

Ross: In a traditional film, you would just see the characters acting and then you would feel the relationship. But as Jomo mentioned, everything was so fractured, by design, so that we could on-ramp ourselves into it. This gaze, Ethan’s gaze up toward Brandon, is so piercing that regardless of how far we shot those from each other, in that moment everyone was capable of connecting those images. I guess it served then as a bit of an accidental proof of concept, which Jomo and I didn’t need. But maybe others did. [*Laughs*]

This interview has been edited and condensed. Awards Insider’s Shot List spotlights the year’s most impressive cinematography.