

## Emmys: Chris Manley on *Mad Men*

AUGUST 21, 2012



*Mad Men* was doused with 17 Emmy nominations this year, including one for Outstanding Cinematography. Created by Matt Weiner, the one-hour drama takes viewers back to the 1960s and centers around the lives of a group of advertising agents. Stepping in since the start of season two, DP Chris Manley, ASC, found some down time to let us inside one of AMC's most sought out television series.

**S&P: This is your third Emmy nomination for *Mad Men*. Has your reaction changed over the years?**

*Manley:* Well, the thing with *Mad Men*, for me, is the pilot episode was done by Phil Abraham. He eventually was nominated and won the Emmy that year. It's very important for me to at least be nominated to feel like I'm maintaining the high standards Phil started. When I don't get nominated, I feel like I dropped the ball somehow. On the other hand, there are so many great new beautiful shows out there. Like *Boardwalk Empire*. *Game of Thrones*. That have multiple DPs. I always expect those guys to lock up the nominations, so when any of the other shows, including ours, gets a nomination, I'm surprised.



Chris Manley, ASC

**S&P: The episode up for consideration is *The Phantom*, season 5's finale. What made you want to submit this particular one over the others?**

*Manley:* Funny story. For the Emmys, cinematographers submit a continuous six minutes. Meaning, it can't be cut together like a reel. I was talking with Matt Weiner (show creator) and he said without hesitation, you should submit the last six minutes of *The Phantom*. I always take those recommendations with a grain of salt as I kinda feel like I know what

excites cinematographers. So I went ahead and reviewed the entire season. I did a marathon watching at double speed making notes, trying to find the best six. Eventually, I arrived at that exact same conclusion Matt mentioned. The final episode and the final six minutes of that episode.

Part of the elimination process is when we do this thing where we check in with each character mentally and emotionally. It happened twice in season 5. In the *Lady Lazarus* episode and with *The Phantom*. This is where we move the camera to underscore the emotions the characters are feeling.

In our dialogue scenes, we utilize a transparent camera, an invisible camera technique where we don't want the audience to feel the camera is there. But in these moments, when the character is reflecting, we'll do the pull-backs or push-ins within the scenes for a cinematic feel which are really nice. It came down to those two episodes, but for me, the finale was stronger photographically.



Don and Megan Draper's Apartment

**S&P: Season five's storylines are not as dark as previous years. Did you change some of the tone of the sets to coincide?**

*Manley:* Dan Bishop, our production designer is really great at nailing the time period we're in. When we went into the new office and he showed me the color palette, I understood where he was going, (laughing) but at the same time, I mentioned all this white is going to kill me at some point. Don's new apartment has a lot of white to it as well with big windows. It places Don in a very bright optimistic setting to show that he's doing well. It seems to be working very well.

**S&P: Don's bedroom, on the other hand, seems quite the opposite.**

*Manley:* You're right. It's interesting you bring that up. There are a lot more dramatic scenes in that set. The room itself is painted with a bit darker color and because of the windows only being on one side, it has heavier contrast.

**S&P: There is very little camera movement in your shot compositions. What are the challenges behind staying true to the show's 1960's feel of television?**

*Manley:* The challenge lies in using the right lens for the shot without regards to B camera and only using B camera if it's useful after A camera is set. A lot of TV shows, because you need coverage, and because you're cutting to a strict time format and shooting eight pages a day, you tend to automatically set up two cameras. In doing so, both shots get compromised a little because they are fighting for real estate on the set making you use longer lenses than if you were shooting single camera style.

What I liked about season one was the lenses felt very basic and old fashioned. Back then, 25mm, 50mm and 75mm lenses were the work horses. You shot almost everything with those lenses. 100mm was very exotic. We try and stay in the range as well. We are not too strict about it, and work with zoom lenses so we can change focal lengths rapidly on set, but we'll stay in that range of 25-75mm. Our wide shots are usually 25-27mm; medium shots are typically 38-42mm and close ups in the 58-62mm range.

**S&P: Your camera techniques have to get quite creative.**

*Manley:* They do. Doing jobs outside of *Mad Men* you realize how nice it is to have the whole tool box at your disposal to choose from. I did the *Homeland* and *Revenge* pilots, and we used the steadicam and telephoto lenses, which are quite sexy. On *Mad Men*, we may have a scene that's perfect for a steadicam situation, but we instead get creative and say to ourselves, what would they do in the 1960's. We have to get creative while working within the show's artificial boundaries. It's a different type of fun.

**S&P: Are you still shooting 35mm?**

*Manley:* No, actually. We switched to the Arri Alexa. It's crazy. The people over at Lionsgate wanted to do it. Matt was a bit unsure if it would work so we shot a bunch of tests with film versus the Alexa, and the Alexa looked great. We ended up going with it and Technicolor, the people who do our post. They added a digital grain effect to make it look like the 5219 film stock we were using.

**S&P: How do you feel about moving away from film?**

*Manley:* I'm on the fence about it. I love film. I love the Alexa. When we discussed the issue about switching, I knew it would give me a little more creativity going into my fourth season so that was a bit exciting. But if we

stayed on film, I knew that it might be one of my last opportunities to shoot on it.



Don Draper (Jon Hamm)

**S&P: How has the Alexa changed your approach to lighting?** *Manley:* The first season was more of an old fashioned style of lighting. Over the seasons, Matt wanted to go in a more naturalistic direction, which is more of my default style of working so it got easier.

I generally rate the Alexa at ASA, but after a few weeks, I put my meter in the drawer and it hasn't come out since. If you set your meter to 800 ASA, it's too bright. Our swing sets are working at far lower lighting levels than we ever have, which I kind of like, as it help our ability to keep it looking naturalistic.

With the Sterling Cooper office, we are building up the light levels to the overhead fluorescents and the backing. The office lighting levels are at

their normal tone, but now I'm putting ND filters in front of the camera. For wide shots, I'm using an ND6, and for close ups, I will have an ND3 on there to make it a little easier for the focus pullers.

**S&P: You've been able to shoot over 50 episodes of *Mad Men*. Can you share some of your most beloved sequences?**

*Manley*: I love the sequence I submitted this year. It was great. But there is one that really comes to mind. It was during season four, the *Blowing Smoke* episode. There was a scene where Don buys a painting from his ex-girlfriend, Midge Daniels, who is now a heroin addict, and Don is considering it at his apartment at sunset. Photographically, it was one of my favorites.

**S&P: When you first read a *Mad Men* script, how do you break it down?**

*Manley*: It's pretty tricky. Because I am not alternating with another DP, I do not have a lot of time to prep. I'll read it and get my first blush on the episode where I'll format ideas about how we want things visually. It can be difficult. A lot of the times, I work with the time of day. I am always asking our script supervisor what time is it in the story. If it's 3pm, depending on the time of year, I can make it look midday or I can push it to a later afternoon look depending on the needs of the scene to add warmth and contrast. Or if it's overcast, I can give a cooler look that's flatter and softer.

Matt will also write cues in the script to explain what he sees visually. When I see them, I am very sensitive to his notes and try to create what he had in mind. I don't have a whole lot of contact with Matt day-to-day (he's too busy writing), but if I do have a question, I'll call or text him to discuss it. If I come up with something that's a bit unorthodox that he might not like, I'll check with him first, and usually he'll say it's a fantastic idea – let's do

that. After four seasons and a movie together, we have a pretty good mind meld at this point.

**S&P: What were the collaborations like before then?**

*Manley:* It took some time. When I started the show, I was getting a lot of notes from other producers and ADs about what Matt does or doesn't like. I was going off second hand knowledge of what he wanted from me, which was a little frustrating. He spends a lot of time in the writer's room, so when he came to set, it was just to share with the director how he envisioned the blocking for a key moment. He'd discuss it and then get out of there. So it wasn't until the end of season two when I got to work alongside him as he directed the season's finale. I really got to see inside his head and by the start of season three, I was much more comfortable.

**S&P: How is it working with Matt?**

*Manley:* It's great. He'll use a lot of references to films. Occasionally, he'll say something like; this episode should be like *La Notte*. We'll all watch *La Notte*, and then see what he has in mind. He'll do that with other movies as well. He is a true cinephile. I am too to some extent. I worked as a projectionist in a revival house, and I've seen an awful lot, but when I met Matt, he was throwing titles at me I never heard of. I always get excited when I throw one back he hasn't seen.

**S&P: Are you still over at LA Center Studios?**

*Manley:* Yes. And still shooting 8 days per episode.



**S&P: There is a scene where Christina Hendricks takes the majority owners upstairs to show them the new floor. There was a wide shot. Very symmetrical. Can you talk about your approach to that scene?**

*Manley:* Matt had some ideas about that scene and shot. That scene contrasts nicely with the scene before where Don is visiting Megan on set of her commercial. We track back with Don forever and behind him is just this dark, dark stage with the commercial set bright in the background.

This shot and the one you mentioned, Matt wanted them to be very similar. But because of the surface of the floor and budget consideration, we knew the best way to do it would be with a 50ft Techno Crane, but that was the more expensive approach. We explored every conceivable option to get those shots, and in the end, we had to bite the budget bullet and use the 50ft Techno Crane. Our executive producer, Scott Hornbacher, managed to pull money from other places and he made it work.

**S&P: Who do you collaborate with on set?**

*Manley:* It starts with the director and how to cover the scene. I am happiest when I am alone with the director and we are clicking on all cylinders. It's most fun when it's a 50/50 collaboration. Don Devine, my A camera operator, my gaffer, Mike Ambrose, and key grip, Pat O'Mara, are all fantastic. Everyone on set is unbelievable. We're family.

It always makes us laugh when we find out a better way to do something on set more efficiently even though we have been doing it for three years. You think to yourself, why haven't we been doing this all along. Mike loves to bring me literature about new lights and what could be useful for our show. And Pat, if I describe to him something I need, he'll come to me with a piece of equipment he handmade himself. It's fun.

**S&P: Are you part of the final grading process?**

*Manley:* I do as much as I can. Very often if I have a later call time on Friday like 10am, I'll go into Technicolor and sit with Tim Vincent, our final colorist, at 7am to go over an episode. The great thing is, Tim knows what I like and he knows what Matt likes, so the grading process gets easier and easier as the years go by.



Megan Draper (Jessica Pare)

**S&P: You've lens'd *Mad Men* since its second season. You even directed an episode this year. How have you grown as a cinematographer from working on *Mad Men*?**

*Manley:* I've been with the show four years now, and last season, I wanted to juice my creativity a little bit. I wanted to start thinking about the photography in the show on a deeper level as part of the narrative. Being here for such a period now has allowed me to do so because I don't have to micro-manage anymore. Everyone knows the look of the show and knows what required so I can attend more to the narrative. It's been great.

The reason I wanted to direct, partly, was to see if I enjoyed it, which I did, but also to understand what it's like sitting in that chair. To get their perspective. And it worked. It made me a better cinematographer. One of the most important things I learned was that waiting for lighting is excruciating. Now that I have been there and know what they are going

through, I sympathize more in when they get anxious about time. Also, the same goes for the actors. I understand the technical aspects can be at odds with the actor's process. I know from my training you don't want that to happen. You don't want to get in the way of their process. Now, I really feel it from the stand point of the actors and the director as a cinematographer, and want to give them as much time and freedom as possible so they can deliver the best performance.

**S&P: If you took home the statue this year, who would you thank first?**

*Manley:* It's not about the awards. It's really gratifying to be nominated and recognized so I don't get upset when I don't win. But if I did, I'd thank Matt first. Although, I might thank my wife first so I don't forget about her at the end. We've been together a long time and I'd be nowhere without her.

S&P would like to thank Chris for talking to us about his work on *Mad Men*. The Creative Arts Emmys will be held September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012, at the Nokia Theatre LA LIVE in Los Angeles.

Photos: Michael Yarish / Frank Ockenfels/AMC

<http://soundandpictureonline.com/2012/08/emmys-chris-manley-on-mad-men/>