



# Conclave: A Conspiracy of the Cloth

Stéphane Fontaine, AFC and director Edward Berger tap classic 1970s thrillers for a modern drama.

By Mark Dillon

**D**espite its contemporary story, the Vatican City drama *Conclave* is reminiscent of the classic paranoid thrillers Alan J. Pakula directed in the 1970s — and this is by design. “The times of the 1970s are back, that feeling of paranoia, mistrust and being watched that Pakula was so masterful at capturing,” says director Edward Berger. “I wanted to make a political-conspiracy thriller, and I thought I could do this not in Washington, D.C., but in Rome.”

To help realize this vision, Berger reached out to Stéphane Fontaine, AFC after being impressed by his work on Jacques Audiard’s *A Prophet* (AC March ’10) and *Rust and Bone* (AC Dec. ’12), as well as Pablo Larraín’s *Jackie* (AC Jan. ’17) and Francis Lee’s *Ammonite*. “He’s a master,” says Berger. “He’s also beautifully unassuming and great to collaborate with. He’s a humble guy who’s trying to find the truth in the movie.”

The truth in *Conclave* is dark indeed. Adapted from Robert Harris’ 2016 novel of the same name, the film begins in the wake of the pope’s death. Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) is tasked with organizing the conclave where his fellow cardinals, summoned from around the world, will elect the new pope. Candidates include the progressive Bellini (Stanley Tucci), the reactionary Tedesco (Sergio Castellitto) and the popular





Tremblay (John Lithgow). As Lawrence's work progresses, he learns of secrets that threaten to corrupt the process.

Of Pakula's famous run of conspiracy dramas — *Klute*, *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men* (AC May '76), all shot by Gordon Willis, ASC — *The Parallax View* was particularly inspirational for *Conclave*'s visual strategy, says Fontaine. "Edward liked that kind of [precision] in the framing. In our early conversations, we even had the thought of doing each scene in one wide, static shot. There are quite a few of those in *The Parallax View*. The frames are rigid; it's as though the characters are trapped and there's no way out.

"The Roman Catholic Church has strong structures and rules, and we needed to find a way to translate that strength into the compositions," he adds. They achieved this by anchoring frames in the geometry of courtyards, columns, doorways, staircases and tiled floors — a network that often appears to dwarf the cardinals and nuns moving within them.

### A Juggler and an Architect

Berger and Fontaine brought differing yet complementary approaches to the project. "I feel like I'm a juggler, and Edward's an architect," the cinematographer says. "I'm happy improvising, blocking with the actors and finding the best way to shoot a scene. Edward likes preparing, up to the point where we shot-listed the whole movie and storyboarded much of it. He's got a fantastic eye for architecture and geometry and a determined approach to composition."

One reward of such careful preparation is that "it's much simpler to find an answer to an unexpected problem," Fontaine continues. In addition, "when actors show up and start rehearsing, they've got their own



Opposite: Cardinals O'Malley (Brian F. O'Byrne, left) and Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) confer on sensitive Vatican matters. This page: Lawrence casts his ballot during the traditional assembly to elect a new pope. At right in top photo, Stéphane Fontaine, AFC sets a frame for the scene.

take on the scene, and since we were so prepared, it was easy to adjust."

Storyboarding proved especially important for the half-dozen balloting scenes, as the filmmakers were concerned that numerous shots of the cardinals writing down their choice, walking to the urn and depositing their votes could feel too repetitive. Each of those sequences was designed to offer varying coverage and moods.

### Lighting Faces

*The Godfather*, another 1970s drama preoccupied with themes of power





**A carefully flagged LED fixture and another positioned for backlight set the appropriate tone for a dialogue scene.**

and succession that Willis photographed, was referenced for its top-lit opening scene of Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) holding court in his den. However, the *Conclave* team had to achieve a delicate balance; much of the drama is conveyed by the actors' faces, yet the cardinals are sequestered during the voting process, with windows obscured by shutters, curtains or blinds, leaving the interiors dim.

"Edward was interested in how we [might not] need to see the characters' eyes," Fontaine recalls.

Amid high security, the cardinals are shuttled between the clergy guest house, Casa Santa Marta, and the Sistine Chapel, where the voting takes place. Both sets were built at Cinecittà Studios in Rome under the supervision of production designer Suzie Davies. "In the Casa Santa Marta, our ceilings were made of fabric, which meant I could push sources through to create pools of light that were neither totally flat nor flooded," Fontaine recalls.

Gaffer Alessio Bramucci describes the ceiling fabric as "pelle d'uovo," a fine muslin, above which they positioned Arri SkyPanel S120-Cs. "It provided a good match with the look of the marble walls," he recalls. "Its off-white look spreads light very evenly and softened everything.

"We made extensive use of practicals fitted with Astera Nyx bulbs," the gaffer says, "and although the rooms were quite small, we were able to add tiny sources such as Astera Helios tubes or HydraPanels to create some depth while still providing space for the actors to move around freely — the scenes are full of tension and emotions."

Another go-to for faces was a German product made by Carpetlight, a battery-powered, translucent fabric panel with dimmable LED ribbon

lights sewn into it. The production carried two each of the CL21 and larger CL42 units, which can be mounted or easily handheld. Bramucci recalls, "They were new on the Italian market, and we had some issues with the CRMX signal to the dimmer board, but lighting-console programmer Francesco Cruciani worked it out using a GrandMA2. The Carpetlight panel is lightweight and comes in a kit full of accessories. It allowed us to quickly sneak in a light without distracting the actors, and the quality on skin tones was very good."

### **A Compact Package**

Fontaine, who does his own operating, chose to capture with the Red V-Raptor 8K VV. "It really comes down to what you are comfortable using on set," he observes. "I've been using Red, and they've improved their cameras to the point where the Raptor is perfect, at least to my eye. I love that I can tweak colors on the fly using RedControl, their dedicated app, and then discuss what I've done with my DIT, [in this case] Francesco Maffei."

Maffei recalls, "Rather than shooting with Livegrade, Stéphane preferred to have a quick grading session at the end of the day with DaVinci Resolve, using the ASC Color Decision List he made in camera. Pigraide in Rome would check the integrity and prepare the dailies and deliver them to Goldcrest in London [for the final grade]."

Fontaine shot in the standard Rec.709 color space, and is not a fan of creating looks with LUTs. "I do my best to get a satisfactory result on my calibrated monitor on the set, with an eye on the waveform," he says.

Another feature of the V-Raptor he appreciates is how easily he can alter photosite count and sensor size. His main acquisition format was Redcode Raw 7K MQ, but he switched to HQ for VFX shots in the Sistine Chapel, where set extensions were required. "We would shoot at 6K, 7K





## Director Spotlight | Edward Berger

By Mark Dillon

### **American Cinematographer:** How did you approach working with Stéphane for the first time?

**Edward Berger:** We shot-listed the entire movie, but then, on the day, we might look at the rehearsal and think, 'Why don't we put the camera here instead?' Stéphane is very intuitive in terms of camera placement and lens choice. I learned to have a discussion with him and the crew, and never to force them. Both Stéphane and I had to feel the camera was in the right place; that's how we ended up with a good shot.

We tested cameras and lenses together — I'm open to testing everything with my cinematographer. I keep coming back to the Tribe7 Blackwing7s. They're a spherical lens that gets me close to the actors. I like wide-angle lenses for close-ups, and they feel intimate without being too polished. They have a beautiful falloff on the edges. I test every time, but the Tribe7s have been my favorites on a bunch of movies.

or 8K," Fontaine says. "Edward was keen on shooting close-ups with a wide lens on the widest sensor. We did most of our close-ups of Ralph with a 27mm in 8K. I could change the sensor size in two seconds. The same lens will have a different personality depending on the size of the sensor it covers."

He shot most of the picture with Tribe7 Blackwing7 lenses. "They are very consistent in color across the range," he says. "I also like a light-weight package, so the tiny Red camera with these small lenses worked well for me. And you don't have giant gaps between focal lengths; it's 20.7mm, 23.7mm, 27mm, 37mm, so you can be very precise." He adds that D-Vision Movie People in Rome was able to provide the production with one of the first 23.7mm available.

Fontaine stayed mostly in the 27mm-57mm range, and because the widest Tribe7 lens at the time was a 20.7mm, he used 15mm and 18mm Arri Signature Primes for the balloting scenes in the Sistine Chapel to capture the scope of the set. For scenes that were slightly more

### **What made *The Parallax View* such a strong influence on this film?**

That movie is always tense, and it feels like the walls are closing in. It's claustrophobic and deliberately paced. Pakula would shoot Warren Beatty from behind for two minutes in a wide shot in the dark, and then cut around into a mid-shot at the defining moment that makes you lean in and ask, 'How will he react to this line?' He chooses the means of filmmaking so precisely, and to study that was a tremendous inspiration.

### **Conclave has many static wide shots that emphasize the size and shape of the Church locations.**

That's part inspired by Pakula, but it's also what the architecture of the Catholic Church is: vast spaces [intended] to make you feel like an ant in the universe of God. It was a given that we would re-create the Sistine Chapel, which is old, ecclesiastical and round. Our other big set was the Casa Santa Marta, where the cardinals stay during the election, [and I wanted that] to be the opposite: square, shut in and claustrophobic. They are sequestered and locked away from the world, so it needed to be dark. It needed to be lit by fluorescents so when the door to Ralph Fiennes' room closes, all you hear is his breath and the hum from that light above his bed. It feels like a jail to represent what he is going through.

### **What were some considerations that played into your decision to shoot 2.40:1?**

We tested 4:3 [1.33:1], 1.85:1, 2.20:1 and 2.40:1. Because of the jail-like [environment], we even tested 1:1 after I saw Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* [shot by André Turpin]; it starts in 1:1, then there's a scene where the boy, who suffers from mental-health issues, and his mother are driving across a bridge to a retreat, and it opens up to widescreen. This had a profound effect on me, and I thought maybe we could do something like that. But ultimately, 1:1 would have been too restricted. Also, we had a responsibility to our financiers, and 1:1 is not an easy sell.

4:3 was great because it felt like it confined the cardinals and focused our vision, but it wouldn't have served the entire movie. We went for 2:40 because we wanted it to be a cinematic experience, but I composed as much as I could for 4:3 by using shadows and framing through doors to cut off the image at the sides. Then, at the right moment, we would be able to have a great vista and a great wide shot. I would try to use the best of both worlds.

observational, such as dining scenes, he turned to 57mm, 77mm and 107mm.

The cinematographer also used an Angénieux Optimo 19.5-94mm and, for an intense emotional moment in the Sistine Chapel, an Optimo Ultra 12x 36-435mm. The shot starts tight on Cardinal Adeyemi (Lucian Msamati) and does a long zoom out to reveal the other candidates in an otherwise empty room. "So with just one shot, we were able to transition seamlessly from the real world to a place where all the emotions of these men were palpable," he says.

The fact that the characters are often working at cross purposes mandated substantial coverage, so the filmmakers ran two cameras whenever it felt appropriate. Most of the time, B-camera/Steadicam operator Alessandro Brambilla covered a totally different angle or character. The cameras were typically on dollies and sliders, often fairly static. "We were trying not to be showy with movement," Fontaine says. "Too often, you can be overwhelmed by camerawork, and that didn't feel right



for this film. Being very quiet and humble felt more effective.”

Some of the rare moving shots appear early in the film to establish setting and action. In a complex Steadicam shot in the Sistine Chapel, Lawrence and an assistant discuss the cardinals’ imminent arrival as workers prepare the space. The shot provides an overall sense of the room while conveying the activity.

### An Iconic Space

The Sistine Chapel set was repurposed from another project and restored by production designer Davies and her team. It stood about 20’ tall with bluescreen above to facilitate CG set extensions. The filmmakers wanted to emphasize the claustrophobia of sequestration, which was challenging in the widescreen 2.40:1 aspect ratio. (See sidebar, opposite page.)

Though Fontaine characterizes the production as “an LED shoot,” the Sistine Chapel space called for some large tungsten sources. When voting begins, the windows are covered with metal sheets, which dictated a darker set. The initial plan was to rig Arri SkyPanel S60-Cs on a grid up high to facilitate the creation of different moods, but budget dictated otherwise. “We ended up using tungsten balloons that Stéphane adjusted,” Bramucci explains. “Switching off bulbs rather than dimming was how he could lower their intensity and keep the temperatures ideal.”

The chapel space was primarily lit with two 13’x6.5’ 10K balloons (provided by ALF Service) on a truss over the center of the room, with a third balloon over the entrance. The balloons were rarely at more than 60 percent, providing soft ambience. To suggest windows on each side of the set, the crew positioned Arri SkyPanel 360-Cs with soft boxes and egg crates on trusses, matching the exact positions of the windows in the real chapel. These were alternated with ETC SolaFrame 3000 moving lights.

“Stéphane came up with the brilliant idea of putting 6.5’-by-6.5’ unbleached muslin frames on the opposite side of the moving lights, which gave us that soft fill you would naturally get from the windows, and often with a different color temperature to create separation,” says Bramucci. Sources on the floor for close-ups included Carpetlights, SkyPanels and Cream-source Vortex8s.

The narrative takes a violent turn when a bomb explodes outside the Sistine Chapel, shattering windows and sending a wave of dust and debris onto the cardinals. Shooting this scene was saved for the end of the schedule



**Top:** Tungsten balloons mixed with SkyPanel LED units helped illuminate the production’s Sistine Chapel set. **Above:** Fontaine notes that the now-disused Carlo Forlanini hospital in Rome was employed for multiple scenes: “Cardinal Lawrence alone in a large room with columns as the shutters are closing; the arrival of the sisters in the morning; Sister Agnes’ office; and a huge stairwell with large frosted-glass panels, where Lawrence learns about the arrival of Cardinal Benitez.”

because of the massive cleanup required.

As one of the windows blows out, a burst of daylight shines through. “After the button was pressed for the special-effects explosion, we had a moving light bring some light onto the fresco of *The Last Judgment* on the altar wall

in the background, and simultaneously there were tons of dust particles and pieces of cork in various sizes to replicate what a natural explosion would look like,” Fontaine recalls.

The explosion and lighting were carefully synced. “Both the special effect and the light



**Tech Specs:** 2.40:1  
 Cameras | Red V-Raptor 8K VV  
 Lenses | Tribe7 Blackwing7; Arri Signature Prime;  
 Angénieux Optimo, Optimo Ultra



**Above:** During an emergency meeting, the cardinals are stunned to hear from the mysterious Benitez (Carlos Diehz). **Below:** Lawrence confronts the popular but compromised Cardinal Tremblay (John Lithgow).

were controlled via DMX on Francesco's dimmer board, and it all went on a trigger," Bramucci says. "We did several tests a couple of nights beforehand to make sure there wouldn't be a delay between the explosion and the light."

### Focus on Color

Colors in the sets and wardrobe were the focus of much of Fontaine's preproduction testing. Red dominates the palette, and the ochre-colored walls of a Vatican courtyard (shot at a 12th-century church in Rome), the gold wallpaper in a hall where Lawrence makes an

introductory speech (shot at the 17th-century Palazzo Barberini), and the blue seats of a large meeting room complement the tone. The cardinals are usually attired in red, but also wear black cassocks. The nuns' habits are blue-gray, but Fontaine notes that because the women in the church, represented by Sister Agnes (Isabella Rossellini), seek a voice in the proceedings, the hue couldn't be too muted. "We didn't want them to disappear," he says.

Fine-tuning the colors was also a priority in the final grade, which Fontaine carried out with colorist Andrew Daniel at Goldcrest. Daniel had

also graded Berger's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (AC Nov. '22) and *Patrick Melrose*.

"One of Andrew's great qualities is how quickly he understands your expectations," Fontaine says. "What I was after made perfect sense to him. We spent four days together before Edward joined us to let us know how he felt about what we had done. I tried not to go against what we had shot. Mostly, we cleaned up the colors and made sure they still had a painterly quality."

Daniel says he and Fontaine worked toward a strong first pass: "We knew that reds, purples, blues and whites would play a big part, but we also wanted to create a level of clandestine darkness that was still accessible. Stéphane's lighting was sublime in achieving this, and we got into the arena we were happy with quite quickly with very specific use of midtones and curves in the lower blacks. That allowed us much more time to drill into the specifics of those colors."

Fontaine says his main concern in the final color grade was going too far. "I'm not a fan of heavily graded films, as it can often take the audience out of a movie. We kept it simple." ☐



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