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# *American* **Cinematographer**

OCTOBER 2018

An International Publication of the ASC

**I THINK  
WE'RE  
ALONE  
NOW**

**REED MORANO, ASC  
SHOOTS AND DIRECTS  
THE END TIMES' AFTERMATH**

**PLUS: WHITE BOY RICK TAT RADCLIFFE, BSC**



# Into the Night

Director-cinematographer Reed Morano, ASC crafts an unlit look for the postapocalyptic drama *I Think We're Alone Now*.

By Patricia Thomson

"I think there's this idea that you have to see *everything, all the time*, when in reality we don't. I thought it would be interesting to push the boundaries of what you don't see and how it conveys loneliness and isolation," says Reed Morano, ASC, who had ample opportunity to do just that when directing and shooting *I Think We're Alone Now*, an intimate, postapocalyptic film with the sparest of lighting schemes.

It makes sense for the story, which takes place in a small town on the Hudson River shortly after everyone has dropped dead from an unspecified cause, save a few lone survivors. Morano set a rule for herself: Because there was no electricity in this world, she would forgo film lights in all night scenes and use only the tools the survivors had at hand or could plunder from hardware or camping stores: battery-operated flashlights, solar-powered LED lanterns, headlamps, computer screens, car headlights, car interior lights. The rule was broken only once or twice.

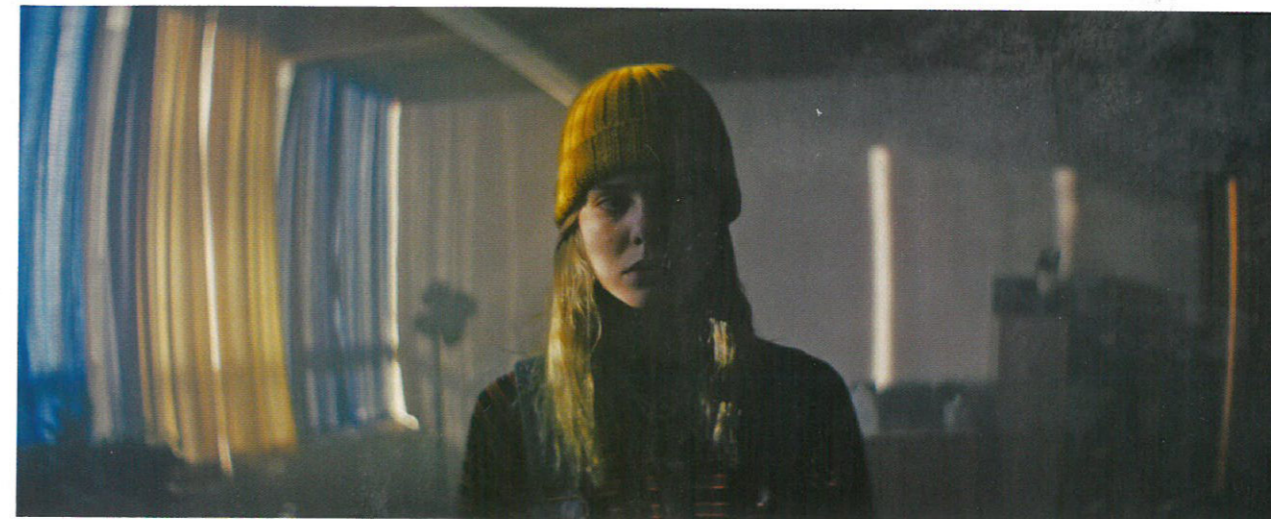
"Personally, it's my favorite work because I felt like I didn't fuss so much," says Morano by phone from Dublin, where she's directing *The Rhythm Section*, a revenge thriller with more than 10 times the budget. "I set up very simplistic and minimalist parameters for myself and didn't overdo

anything. I didn't want anything to feel lit."

Peter Dinklage, who produced and costarred, asked Morano to direct the low-budget independent movie. Morano then hired herself as director of photography. "In many ways, it's easier for me, because I'm in control of how fast we go," she says of doing double duty. "I know what it's going to take to get each scene. I know how many shots I'm going to do. I know how I plan to cut it together. If I'm tight on time, I know my 'get out of jail' card. So I have everything in my head and don't have to wonder, as a cinematographer, is this director going to do 55 takes?" In sum, "It's also very empowering, because I'm working for myself so I know the risks I can take — so I take *more* risks."

She no longer has the anxiety of wondering whether she's capable of doing both jobs simultaneously; 2015's *Meadowland* proved that she could. And last year's Emmy and DGA award for helming the first three episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale* provided a big validation of her directorial chops.

With *I Think We're Alone Now*, she's back in the driver's seat — but in an economy car. Principal photography was just 24 days, all on location. Cast and crew were miniscule. Grip and electric gear fit on one truck.



That's fitting for what's essentially a two-hander. Dinklage plays Del, an introverted librarian who thinks he's the last man on Earth, and the movie's first 13 minutes wordlessly follow his routine to restore order in his deserted town: He goes house by house to scavenge batteries, clean the refrigerators of rotting food, and drag out the dead to bury, pocketing family photos to file in his personal town archives. He fishes in the river for dinner and has pilfered a good supply of wine that he enjoys nightly in the library, which he's turned into his home. But Del's solitary routine is shattered by the arrival of a loquacious, extroverted young woman, Grace (Elle Fanning). He initially rebuffs her, but eventually lets her stay. In the final act, Del discovers something Grace already knows: They're not alone after all.

"Based on the original script," Morano says, "another director might have made a light buddy movie." But she wanted to explore the psychology of these divergent personality types under trying circumstances, and she wanted to immerse viewers in their emotional world, making a POV film that was naturalistic but moody.

In setting the look, the right anamorphic lens was key. Morano had been shooting stills of her two young boys with a 58mm Helios, an old Russian lens she'd found on eBay. She loved its peculiar bokeh, which had "a



Opposite and this page, top: In the feature *I Think We're Alone Now*, Del (Peter Dinklage) is an introverted librarian who thinks he is the last person on Earth — and then he meets Grace (Elle Fanning). Above: Director-cinematographer Reed Morano, ASC (right) discusses a scene with Dinklage.

painting-like effect on the background," she notes, and wanted to emulate that. Morano was able to test some options on a commercial she directed and shot for National Geographic. In the end, it was the quirky Lomo round-front anamorphics that came closest. "They were just gorgeous," she says. "Weird, painterly, just something more abstract and broken-down about them. I wanted to give visual clues to the audience that this world is real, but a bit heightened. Shooting those lenses wide open looks so trippy in the background."

The production carried one set, from Arri Rental in New Jersey, that was shared by two cameras, with the 35mm and 50mm being the workhorses, supplemented by a 75mm, 100mm, and two Angenieux Optimo anamorphic zooms (30-72mm A2S and 56-152mm A2S [both T4]). The Lomos did have one issue: "When we pulled focus on certain lenses, the front barrel would spin," Morano notes. "Which means the matte box would spin as well, and that would be extremely distracting for the actors. And with a polarizer, that

Behind-the-scenes photos by Beka Venezia and Danielle Girdwood, courtesy of Momentum Pictures.

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Top: Del initially rebuffs Grace but eventually comes to appreciate her company. Above: Morano lines up a day-exterior shot.

defeats the purpose.”

Needing a camera with internal ND filters, they went with Arri’s Alexa Mini. “ACs Tim Metivier and Pat Sokley were ace for figuring out the most efficient ways to work with the Lomos,” she notes. Morano shot without any diffusion filtration, rated the cameras at 1,280 ASA, framed for 2.39:1, and recorded 2K anamorphic 2048x858 ProRes files to memory cards. The LUT created for the production was originally a little more muted than the final look.

Morano also liked the Lomos for their unique mix of circular and oval multi-colored flares. “One circle will be

green, one will be blue, one will be another color,” she says. “I like these flares because they feel a little ‘alien.’”

Production took place from March to May 2017 in several Hudson River towns. Haverstraw let its main commercial street be completely locked down, Hastings-on-Hudson provided the library exterior and stacks, Dobbs Ferry the library-staff floor, and Congers the neighborhood houses that Del searches.

The most important practical location was the Hastings-on-Hudson Public Library, which Morano found by Googling “big window library.” She knew she’d be pushing daylight-

balanced lights through windows, as her modus operandi is to give actors complete freedom of movement, and this film’s world-without-electricity scenario made that mandate all the more essential. Perched on a hill overlooking the Hudson River and Palisades cliffs, the library had a wall of plate-glass windows that faced the river to the west, with the bonus of a terrace with southern exposure. That enabled a lighting approach that gaffer Jason Velez summarizes as “screaming backlight and negative fill. That’s essentially what we were doing everywhere.”

The production did have its share of film lights — with Velez’s 48’ truck carrying units ranging from Arri 18K HMI Fresnels; to smaller Arri M18 and M40 HMIs; to Rosco DMG Lumière LEDs, specifically the SL1 Switch and Mini Switch. “But we did 95 percent of the movie with bounce boards and sunlight, and battery-powered lamps and flashlights,” Velez notes. “We’d say, ‘Is Grace going to wear her headlamp? Let’s turn that on and flare the heck out of the lens,’ and [key grip] Tommy Kerwick [Jr.] would provide a bounce board that he’d hand-hold next to Reed. That’s how we did the movie.”

Sticking to Morano’s rule for night scenes meant a heavy reliance on props. “Reed was always making requests to the art department to make sure Del had battery-powered lights lying around,” says the gaffer. “So they were constantly bringing in camping



Left: Battery-operated lights provided by the art department were used for night interiors. Below: Del and Grace eat at a table in the library, with a view of the magic-hour sky.

lanterns and weird things that would take batteries and [would thus] work in our apocalypse.” These were un-doctored devices, often augmented naturally: a flashlight pointing toward the bathroom mirror when Del washes up; another set down beside a big jug of water, turning it into a light source; a headlamp on a table.

Some night scenes were trickier than others, though. One that had them stumped was meant to occur under a black sky and heavy rain. In the prior scene, Del had made it clear to Grace that he’s happy on his own and doesn’t want her around. She gets in her car to leave town, pounding the steering wheel in frustration, then is interrupted by a knock on the window. It’s Del, who’s afraid he might regret her leaving and suggests a trial period.

Having initially considered — and ultimately rejected — the idea of using a lighting balloon, “I thought, ‘Let’s light it like it *really* looks at night outside if there was no electricity,’” Morano says. She landed on the idea that Fanning could wear one of the headlamps her character collected, which would provide not only a backlight for her and frontlight for the rain — when the camera follows her to her car — but it would also provide illumination for her and Dinklage after the car door closed and the interior light went out. When Dinklage arrived, Morano instructed Fanning to tip her headlamp



upwards, so its light would bounce off the car ceiling. Dinklage also held a solar-powered lantern offscreen.

“The only thing we did,” Velez says, “was put two 750-watt ETC Source Four [ellipsoidal spots] in front of the car, mimicking what the headlights would do, because it was an old car and the headlights were weak. When we’re looking out the windshield, those lights were basically front-lighting everything in the distance.” He resisted the urge to do more. “Every once in a while, I tried to add an LED light stick or something,” he notes. “But it just didn’t feel right. If [Dinklage and Fanning] could silhouette against a backdrop that was [created by] the headlights, and she had that headlamp on — flaring the lens — and if we couldn’t see her face but could make out what was happening, that was our movie. And that’s what we went with.”

Back at the library, Morano

wanted to make the most of the river view, and would often wait for the right time of day. A number of scenes take place over dinner, when the characters eat in the library at tables adjacent to the windows. “I wanted to use real magic hour,” the director says. And as there was no budget to put a moon over the river, “it was about maximizing the location and having it look the best it could look. So I wanted to shoot only when I could still see outside the windows — light enough to see across the water, but just dark enough that it feels almost night.”

They had seven days in the library, so there were only seven possible dusks. Morano planned to use every one. That’s one reason she brought Mike Heathcote in from Toronto — the camera operator on all 22 episodes of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. He handled Steadicam on the movie, plus Morano knew he’d be a good partner when

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Top: Morano frames a shot of Fanning in a boat. Above: The director-cinematographer stands by a Grip Factory Munich GF-Multi Jib while capturing a wide shot of Dinklage's character fishing in the river.

cross-shooting handheld with two cameras, which is how she intended to beat the light at magic hour. Heathcote would train his camera on Fanning, while Morano, seated on a box beside a 7" monitor, would operate Dinklage's shot with her right eye in the viewfinder, while simultaneously watching Heathcote's framing on the monitor with her open left eye.

"We shot really fast," Velez attests. "On most films, there's one magic-hour scene. And with most directors, you're lucky if you get the whole scene within that timeframe." He

adds with a laugh, "With Reed, she'd always prioritize the right light in as many scenes as possible, and since we had so little time, she'd schedule *two* scenes at magic hour — and as a bonus, put in a sunset scene just before! It was like, 'Man, that's going to be a heck of a one-hour day.'"

They successfully captured almost all the magic-hour scenes without any film lights, eking out the last bit of ambience with bounces. Because of the library's position on a hill, "we really didn't have a lot of real estate out there," says Kerwick. "Otherwise, we would

have put bigger bounces a bit farther away. But we had to keep things local, so we had 8-by bleached-muslin bounces outside those windows to help stretch out magic hour."

Only once did they opt to employ Arri SkyPanels. "We ended up being backed into a corner with our library schedule, and were forced to shoot two very big scenes during the same dusk," says Morano. One scene, which takes place in the "big window room" in the Hastings-on-Hudson Library, involved real fireworks over the Hudson — Del's first clue that he might not be the sole survivor. The other was a scene in which Grace is projecting a 16mm film of *My Favorite Brunette* in a small window room adjacent to the main window room. "We had to shoot them completely simultaneously," says Morano. "We were literally running back and forth, alternating setups, and it was just so insane. Every time they reset the fireworks, we'd run into the projector room and shoot another piece of that scene. Then the moment the fireworks were reset, I'd run back into the large window room, and Peter would quickly change his shirt and we'd do another take." By the last setup, it was pitch dark and SkyPanels were turned on for subtle fill in both rooms.

Yet even with the addition of these LEDs, Velez recalls the illumination being unsettlingly minimal. "I'd watch the dailies for the fireworks scene, and think, 'Oh my God, it's dark as hell. Reed is going to fire me tomorrow!' Then there'd be a flash and you'd see his face and go, 'That's gorgeous!' Then it was back to darkness — but Reed was all in, always asking, 'What can we do with available light? How can we push this camera?' It was cool."

"We were all a little nervous, but ultimately I knew it would be fine," Morano says. "I've had to shoot at very high ASA with almost no light in the past, where other people might be horrified. But that's what we had to do toward the end of this scene, and by adding some very subtle fill to light up

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Morano and production designer Kelly McGehee employed various curtains to “create what the feeling and tone of the room is” for day interiors, the director-cinematographer notes.



his eyes, it prevented the image from getting muddy and it looked much more realistic when he’s walking up to watch the fireworks.

“Day interiors were lit with film lights to keep the time-of-day continuity, but they were typically outside the windows,” Morano continues — and these were always tempered with atmosphere, diffusion and negative fill. Morano considers herself a grip-heavy cinematographer, and this project was no exception. “I use a lot of negative fill, almost everywhere,” she says. “Any time light was pushing in from outside and I could hide some negative on the opposite wall, I would. We were using a lot of atmosphere, and because it tends to lift all the light in the room, we needed the negative. I like to build the contrast in-camera rather than later in the DI. The atmosphere is nice because it soft-

ens everything, but it lowers the contrast. If you add the negative, it becomes more moody but still retains that creamier quality.”

Having worked with Morano on several prior projects, Kerwick knew what to bring. Duvetyn and black floppies served in tighter spaces, such as the neighborhood houses. Outside, light from an M18 or M40 would typically go through 1/2 Soft Frost. If a skip bounce off the floor was too strong, Kerwick would get out a 1/4 Grid Cloth rag. “That would knock it down and give a beautiful softness to it,” he says.

Sheer white curtains added another layer of diffusion. “I collect photos of curtains,” the director says. “I often make folders [in] the cloud and have my department heads join them, and one of my folders was ‘curtains.’ The curtains create what the feeling

and tone of the room is.”

Being a larger space, the library could accommodate bigger rags, up to 12'x12' in size. Kerwick relied on Magic Cloth, a diffusion he likens to 129 Heavy Frost. “It’s a very beautiful, well-rounded diffusion that gives a very even distribution of light,” he says. “It gave a soft, ambient light to the library.”

Magic Cloth was necessary whenever the camera was placed within the stacks looking toward the river-view windows — a setup repeated in various iterations throughout the movie, often with characters almost silhouetted against a strong, atmospheric backlight. The problem was the windows on the opposite side of the room. “It looked bland with light coming in from both directions,” says Morano, “so in order to create contrast, I wanted to take down one side, but not completely lose it.”

Using Magic Cloth, Kerwick would let in a bit of ambient light through the windows as needed, and other times everything behind the camera was veiled in black. “Black ceiling, blacks on every wall out of frame,” says Velez. “Black duvetyn, black paper — everything’s negative fill. Once that was done, every once in a while we’d bring in a little bounce board. But for the most part it was, ‘How much can I bring down the camera side?’”

Another important space was the library’s staff-only downstairs floor, where Del has set up his living quarters next to a room with a rudimentary kitchen. This practical location was in Dobbs Ferry, in classrooms attached to Aldersgate United Methodist Church. The location was tented for both day and night, and here is where the curtains played a big part in creating mood, Morano explains. She and production designer Kelly McGehee had chosen to replicate some mismatched curtains they’d seen on a location scout, with McGehee making textured orange-gold curtains for the kitchen, and gold and blue for Del’s bedroom. “The curtains were so thick, they were doing all the work,” Morano says. “But we also had blinds underneath, and opening or clos-

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Dinklage, Morano and Fanning work through a scene.

ing those still managed to change things dramatically.”

Velez recalls one happy accident with this particular piece of set dressing. In the wee hours of the morning, the production was shooting an emotional scene between Grace and Del in the kitchen. Shortly before, she'd discovered Del's folders on the town's inhabitants and the family photos he'd taken when

cleaning each house. She approaches him when he's eating and, drawing uncomfortably close, confronts him about the photos and his lack of connection with anyone.

In this moment, the gold curtains were drawn and some sunlight was meant to slip in. Velez went outside and flipped on an 18K Fresnel that had been roughly positioned but not yet finessed,

then came back in to see how it would need to be adjusted. As he recollects, “I walked back inside and Reed grabbed me and said, ‘Look at this! It's perfect. Let's not touch anything!’ Literally, the light just happened to be in the right spot before we even touched it.” In fact, that moment when Grace pushes into Del's space — an apt metaphor for their entire relationship — became the film's most widely used publicity still. “It's funny,” Velez reflects, “I see that photo all the time and think, ‘Wow, sometimes it just happens.’ And somebody was in the right spot to say, ‘Isn't this beautiful, where that light is right now?’ That was Reed that day.”

Morano adds, “When something's good, knowing when *not* to mess with it is also very important.” It was different when she was exclusively a cinematographer, though. “When I would [shoot] before I was directing, I would always mess around with the setup because I had the time to do so,”

she says. “That was my main focus — how everything looked — so I was super-particular. Now, because I'm splitting myself between so many things, all I need to know is exactly what I want, and when I have it, I just stop myself there, because time management is everything in this situation. That can open you up to more happy accidents as well.”

For the final grade, Morano teamed up with Tom Poole — her colorist since 2013's *Kill Your Darlings* — who worked with Blackmagic Design DaVinci Resolve over seven days at Company 3 in New York.

Morano prefers to get her results in-camera as much as possible. “It's like I'm imagining that I'm going to be in an apocalypse myself!” she says. “I don't want to rely on trying to get it right later.” As a result, she adds, “the DI was not that difficult.” Fine-tuning was mostly about matching shots, particularly in the magic-hour sequences that bled over into night.

At Poole's suggestion, Morano notes, “we went a little more true with the colors” compared to the LUT. “What's great about Tom is he knows how to bring out a very filmic look while keeping it vibrant.” Moreover, she finds Poole to be very astute about red-flagging popular trends. “Sometimes you look at all these movies from a single year, and it seems they were all shot by the same person, because of trends in looks, lighting and lenses,” Morano says. “If I was stuck on a look, he'd push me into a different zone.” But there are certain things she knows she likes, such as added grain and variations in saturation within the same frame, which she applied here. “I like it when certain colors pop more than others, so there's not just color contrast but also saturation contrast within the frame.”

Overall, Morano is happy she abided by her unorthodox rulebook and that the team managed to create a postapocalyptic world that feels more

unlit. “I wanted to light this film in a very particular way, but we also made sure not to allow ourselves to overthink everything. I recall one of the night interiors where we committed to using a few strategically placed battery-operated practicals. As I crumpled up a napkin in front of Grace's headlamp on the table, creating a soft bounce for her face, I realized that I had totally lost track of time because I was having so much fun finding all these weird objects to light with! Being the director, I ended up having to be the one to rein myself in.”

## TECHNICAL SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa Mini

Lomo, Angenieux Optimo