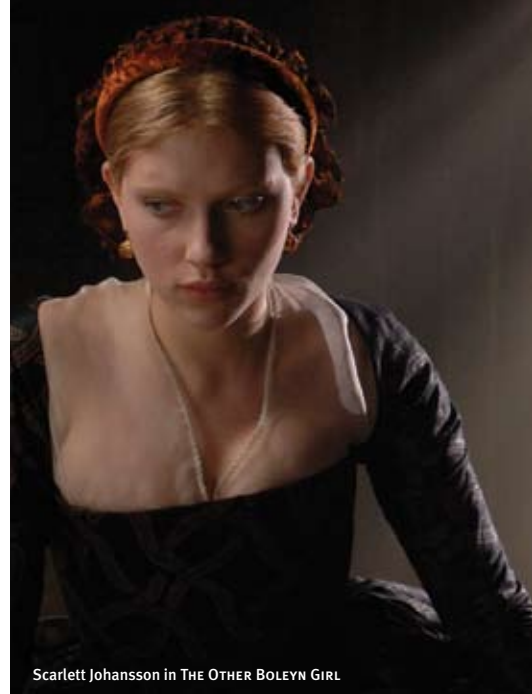


# Still Photographs

# Run Deep

An interview with  
stills photographer  
Alex Bailey



Scarlett Johansson in *THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL*



Alex Bailey on location in Cambodia. "Do follow the instructions given on location. There were landmines to the side of this path. Support the ban landmines appeal." Photo: Simon Smith-Hutchon

**T**HE PARADOX OF THESE STILL photographs is that they are often thought to be images from the film even though they have been shot separately by a stills photographer. A thankless and invisible job? British stills photographer Alex Bailey argues otherwise in his new book *Movie Photos* and spoke to *movieScope* about one of the least-known specialisations in photography and filmmaking.

Bailey got his start as an assistant photographer on *ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES* (which was shot at the Shepperton Studios) and has since worked as a stills photographer on such high profile titles as *TROY*, the *LARA CROFT* films, *BRIDGET*

His book thus partially fills an information gap about stills photography. "Initially, I was lead by the myriad of questions asked of me by young photographers and those with a vested interest in movie marketing and publicity. This began to structure the book. Then it was a question of deciding what key relevant information was required to give a valuable—but not overwhelming—insight into what is required from a set photographer and the circumstances in which they will have to perform these assignments."

"To a great extent the mechanics of movie making is relatively formulaic," explains Bailey, "and therefore, a stills photographer is led in particular directions by the course

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Because cinema is a visual as well as a commercial medium, film stills are a vital part of any movie marketing campaign. Still images do not only find their way onto the poster and website of the film, but are also published in conjunction with journalistic endeavours ranging from reviews to interviews (just flick through this issue of *movieScope* to get an idea) and puff pieces.

By Boyd van Hoeij

*JONES'S DIARY* and *ATONEMENT*. He recently completed work on the new Richard Curtis comedy *THE BOAT THAT ROCKED* and Guy Ritchie's *SHERLOCK HOLMES*.

His book *Movie Photos*, which is subtitled *A Guide to Marketing and Publicity Photography*, is both something of an autobiography as well as a practical how-to guide. A necessity, according to Bailey, who argues that the absence of formal education "is mainly a disadvantage. With so little guidance and information available, entrance to this highly rewarding and satisfying area of photography is almost restrictive."

of filming. This inevitably leads to certain similarities in the function of performing stills assignments for all photographers. However, a photographer's individual creativity and ability will mould and personalise an assignment.

"As a photographer on set, you are there to represent the movie through your own eyes. However, your work is also dictated by the director of photography's 'creative style' for the film—in particular the lighting (as opposed to the camera work). This is one thing that you can do little about visually. Sometimes, of course, you

Rhys Ifans and Bill Nighy in *THE BOAT THAT ROCKED*

may not want to change anything, as the lighting works well for you, but on other occasions it can be very frustrating, as for the benefit of the stills photographer the lighting could be enhanced. This is a frustration one has to live with when filming in the studio. Working outside with daylight of course gives the set photographer a great deal more creative freedom.”

The book goes into quite some detail about the key people on set that are important for a stills photographer, including, besides the cinematographer, the director and the production designer. “Directors tend to leave the bulk of the photographic emphasis to the discretion of the stills photographer,” says Bailey from experience, though he does specify that directors “often do have opinions about key images from particular scenes that they feel will represent the movie best. It is important to establish these pre-conceived images and ensure they are achieved—quite often with the direct help and vision of the director. Production design really provides a photographer with the canvas on which to work and as such, it is a *fait accompli*. Fortunately I have been blessed to work on some brilliant canvases. Among the best has to be Sarah Greenwood’s work on *ATONEMENT*: the Dunkirk beach scenes especially.”

Citing Joe Wright’s *ATONEMENT* and *PRIDE & PREJUDICE* among his favourite work experiences, Bailey says that period films do indeed often offer more opportunities for visual riches. Still, according to the stills photographer there are also great shots to be had “if it is a contemporary film with a creative twist—horror for example—then there is something visually exciting to get your teeth into. Generally though, period pieces, be they something from the 1960s, like the new Richard Curtis that I

Brenda Blethyn and Keira Knightley in *PRIDE & PREJUDICE*Robert Downey Jr. in *SHERLOCK HOLMES*



Nonso Anozie and Daniel Mays in *ATONEMENT*  
 “An evocative image of soldiers walking through a poppy field, I love the sense of movement from their legs in the poppy stems, like wading through waves. A slight diagonal adds to the feeling of movement and the sun’s position is perfect for my taste.”

recently worked on, or *SHERLOCK HOLMES*, which is set in Victorian times, or ancient Troy, are more inclined to get the creative juices flowing. For modern or contemporary pieces that are not genre films, you need to think outside of the box—and not rely on what is obviously presented to you to photograph. You need to consider the storyline and conceive images that may not appear in the production but define the film. A good example of this is the photos I took on *THE HISTORY BOYS*.”

About the general public’s approach to stills photography, the professional shutterbug and newbie writer is clear: “I would love to think that people consider images from films that much! I believe the general public actually do take more notice of the specials photography from a film (*Editor’s note*: the shots taken outside the on-set, in-the-film context) and these images are credited to the photographer, and rightly so. Stills from the film are often uncredited and a lot of the time, I think the public are unaware that they are shot independently by a photographer and not lifted from the footage itself. These images are representative of the movie and it could be argued that it is a good question as to who should be credited with these images: the cinematographer, the director, the production designer or the stills photographer?”

One of the biggest changes in the world of filmmaking and the stills photographer in particular is the advent of digital equipment. Bailey explains: “It’s had a huge impact on my working practice; not least losing the restriction that a single roll of

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film with only 36 exposures imposes. That is a revolution in itself. Of equal benefit is the ability to instantly view what you are shooting, allowing you to experiment more and therefore producing a wider range of imagery from a scene. The biggest benefit though has to be the distribution, where once we relied on duplicating the original material, which resulted in a substantial loss of quality. Now, by always working

from original electronic files, the quality of print reproduction in print media has improved incredibly. As far as the impact of working on films being shot on a digital format is concerned, I cannot say there is any particular difference for me. Essentially movies shot digitally are the same technically as those shot on film—lighting wise that is, which is what concerns me the most.”

One thing that became clearer for himself while writing the book was a question that had been bugging the photographer for some time: should a stills photographer be considered a technician or a photographer? “It became apparent to me that I do approach film assignments as a photographer and not as a technician. In the early days of the Hollywood portrait, the talent was taken to the photographer’s studio, where he would bring his artistic ability to the photo shoot, shooting the actors in appropriate hair, make-up and costumes. They would light and style the promotional photography in their own individual, creative way. When stills photography went on set, mainly with the advent of the 35mm SLR camera with interchangeable lenses, making stills on set possible in the late 1960s and 1970s, there seemed to be a move to the set photographer becoming a technician and referred to in the way one might other technicians on a set. It seems that the film stills photographer as such was invented but with a technical brief rather than an artistic one. If all one does as a stills photographer is position oneself next to the movie camera and replicate in stills what is filmed, then arguably one is little more than a technician as the only challenge is to decide what film, lens and shutter speed to use—all technical issues! Hence why film stills photography has been, and is, almost frowned upon and sometimes not taken seriously in the wider photographic world. I have always campaigned to be known as a photographer specialising in movies and not as a stills photographer and I believe this is reflected in the style of photography I produce from a film set.”

“In the book, I have tried to offer inspiration and guidance to young photographers and photography students and one of several points I have tried to get across is that of business acumen. Yes, of course one needs to have photographic ability that can be developed given the right environment, but that alone is not enough! What will make a career are the determination and the ability to succeed *and* a great deal of talent!” ■

[www.alexbailey.com](http://www.alexbailey.com)  
[www.moviephotos.info](http://www.moviephotos.info)