

Randi Altman's post**Perspective**™

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Technicolor PostWorks John Crowley on color grading 'The Americans'

By Randi Altman

Just a couple of weeks ago, FX's *The Americans* aired its third season finale, and it was a good one. Who would expect anything less? This drama follows a Russian husband and wife who are undercover in the DC area during the Cold War. They look American, sound American and have two kids, who truly are American.

The show is shot in New York and gets its color grading from New York-based [Technicolor PostWorks \(@post-worksNY\)](#) via colorist John Crowley, who works directly with the show's DP Richard Rutkowski. He and Rutkowski started talking back in October 2013, right before the show started shooting Season Two. You may remember we covered the [audio post](#) for *The Americans* back in early March. Another New York post house, Sync Sound, and specifically Ken Hah, provided these services.

We hope you enjoy our conversation with Crowley.

What direction were you given in terms of the look?

The show is about two KGB spies posing as a suburban American family living in the Cold War-era of the 1980s. There are a number of looks that take place throughout the show. For example, scenes in the Jennings household are meant to have a warm, pleasant, comfortable feeling. When they are on a mission, the feeling is generally mysterious and somewhat foreboding.

With that being said, the one constant feel was to make the images seem more filmic. Since the show is shot digitally using the Arri Alexa cameras, the show's creators and DP were looking for ways to make it feel more representative of the period. One of our first discussions was the use of film grain. We wanted to treat the footage with the right amount of grain for specific set-ups. For example, brighter day scenes may have a touch more grain than darker night scenes. The goal was to convey the feel of a more nostalgic look as one may expect from that time period.



John Crowley

What were some descriptions or terms used? Did they provide examples of similar looks, etc.?

Instead of referring back to Season One for the look and the feel of the show, Richard and I spent some time looking through a number of still photography books of the late '70s, early '80s. We discussed how shadow detail fell off in certain parts of the frame and the amount of saturation there was in skin tones. We would also talk about how on occasion certain frames needed to be shaped by using vignettes and gradients to accentuate where the light source was coming from. The main description for the show was to have a "rich" image without it being overly saturated.

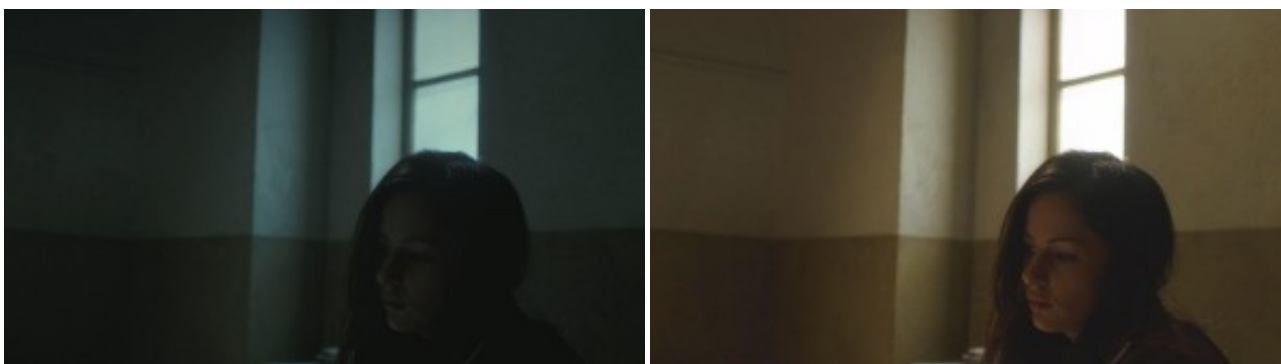


***The Americans* takes place in the '80s, so right off the bat there is a different look and feel. Can you describe that?**

There's no mistaking what era the show takes place in. The types of clothes, cars, hairstyles, eyeglasses are all representative of the early 1980s. The set design is extremely accurate. This and the spectacular cinematography is what gives *The Americans* that special look. The colors and tones of the show are not saturated at all, so it's my job to make sure that look is portrayed in the final product.

What about the look of the Russian Embassy, or even the Russian prison in comparison with the look of the US Embassy and the character's suburban homes?

The Russian prison has one of the most unique looks of the show in my opinion. I really like what Richard was going for with this set-up because it's a look you seldom see. The color pallet of the prison has more of a cyan, greenish, cold feeling in comparison to all the other locations in the show. I think we really captured the feel of a place that is unappealing and unpleasant to be in.



It never seems very sunny or bright on the show... more grey. I know they shoot in the fall/winter, so I'm sure that comes into play? Is it also a plot point — the Cold War and all?

That is a great observation, but it's pure happenstance if we're talking about day exterior scenes. I do think the "grey" days fit nicely and enhance the mood of those particular scenes. On occasion, there have been some exteriors that were shot on sunny days. But again, the objective was to tone down the saturation in skin tone, trees and buildings to give a pleasant, but less vivid feel.

How/when does the footage get to you?

I receive a 2K ProRes 4444 file, which is conformed by our online editor. This is usually a “locked cut,” but on occasion there have been times we needed to open up the show for various reasons. I’m given an EDL that has CDL (Color Decision List) values in them. CDL is a set of functions with the purpose of effecting the “Offset” — the lift/black level, the “Slope,” which is the gain, and the “Power,” which is the gamma. It also includes a saturation value. These CDLs were created by the show’s DP and myself, weeks before production began.



What tools are you using?

I’m using the FilmLight Baselight to do the final color correction. I have to say the flexibility and power of the Baselight is second to none in my opinion. It allows me to have a limitless amount of layers, it gives me the ability to shape frames by using vignettes to darken walls, to use various gradients to suggest lighting effects, to track faces for skin tones and do basic visual effects.

What is the review and approval process?

I get to work on the show unsupervised, but with notes given from the DP. Once I’m done with my first pass, Richard will review the episode and present a final round of notes.

Is there anything I haven’t asked that’s important?

To be a part of a show such as this is an extreme privilege. I feel very fortunate to play a role in the show’s success. I take much pride in my work and spend a lot of time paying attention to detail. The eye-catching photography, the highly accurate set design, the terrific acting and the captivating scripts demanded that I was on top of my game for all 13 episodes.