Almost thirty years have passed since Masters of Light, a series of interviews with more than a dozen cinematographers, was first published. At the time, we hoped that the interviews would be interesting, important, and relevant to aspiring cameramen as well as everyday filmgoers and movie buffs.¹ What we did not anticipate was that the book would become a classic, remaining in print all these years, to be read by an entire generation of students, aspiring cameramen, and professional cinematographers throughout the world.

In the initial review of the book in The New Republic, the film critic Stanley Kauffmann commented that the work of the cameramen presented in the book probably represented the high-water mark of cinematography as we know it.

Coincidentally, many years later, in December 2011, the director Christopher Nolan gathered together many of the most important filmmakers in America at the Directors Guild, ostensibly for a screening of the first six minutes of his new film, The Dark Knight Rises. Once the directors were assembled, however, he made a plea for saving 35 mm film. The Dark Knight Rises was shot on celluloid, he explained, and he wants to continue to shoot on 35 mm film, the dominant format of the movies for more than a century.

But the digital age is encroaching on film and traditional cinematography: in 2012, the majority of theaters are showing films in the digital format. By 2015, it is expected that only 17 percent of theaters will be projecting celluloid, and thus 35 mm film, for all intents and purposes, will be dead.

That evening, Nolan encouraged filmmakers to assert their right to choose the format for their films. If enough directors strongly make their wishes known, he believes, film will have a better chance of surviving in this pervasively digital age. To boil it down to its essence: 35 mm is the gold standard of filmmaking; nothing else looks quite like it.

So perhaps, looking back on it now with the perspective of time, the late twentieth-century period covered by Masters of Light was actually, as Kauffmann presciently suggested, the golden age of cinematography. Many of the films discussed in the book are now considered classics, and many of the cameramen featured in the book
are considered some of the best and brightest who ever stood behind a camera. For many years, their work represented the high point for the electrochemical process known as 35 mm motion picture film cinematography.

At present, only three of the cinematographers interviewed here are still making films; many have retired or passed on. In this reissue, we refrained from making any changes to the original text; some of it is now dated or even archaic and probably becoming more passé as days go by. But these interviews are like snapshots in time, capturing what it was like to be a cinematographer during that period. The challenge of being both an artist and a craftsman in that time are discussed in detail, as well as how those problems were resolved with insight and creativity. If, in the twenty-second century, someone wants to know how movies were made back “in the dark ages,” the cinematographers profiled here paint a portrait of their work in their own words.

We do not remember who said something to the effect that we will long remember those who have gone before us. Our addendum to that truism would be that anyone who gets behind a camera today is standing on the shoulders of the giants in this book. We feel both honored and privileged to have documented the lives and times of these cameramen, and we will always feel a special bond with them and their work. They are truly “masters of light.”

Larry Salvato
Dennis Schaefer
July 2012

1. As mentioned in the foreword, when the book was initially published there were no women in the professional union. That situation is changing dramatically, but we have chosen to retain the term cameraman, using it as a gender-neutral synonym for cinematographer.