

# He's the Scot who's won 11 Oscars... so why have you never heard of him?

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OSCAR winners are rarely the type to shy away from the camera – and, in a sense, Iain Neil is no different. He has spent most of his professional career staring into the Hollywood lens, bagging along the way an almost unrivalled collection of 11 Academy Awards.



Filming freedom: Mel Gibson during the making of Braveheart, whose battle scenes relied on a lens designed by Iain Neil, right

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The Scot's most recent award came in 2001 for Panavision's Pismo Macro Zoom Lens, which allows directors to zoom in to within inches of an actor's eye.

The lens was famously used in a key scene in Minority Report, Spielberg's futuristic thriller starring Tom Cruise and Samantha Morton based on a short story by Philip K Dick about a specialist police department that apprehends criminals based on knowledge from psychics about crimes that haven't happened yet. In the film, Morton lay in a pool of water as the camera hovered within inches of her iris. The camera then pulled back high to reveal three people lying in the pool.

**M**R Neil said: 'When we designed the lens, we made a conscious decision to include the extreme macro, this real close-up, because we knew you could get that unique kind of shot. The lens produced an imaging effect that hadn't been done before. We couldn't have shot that any other way.' After leaving Panavision eight years ago, the father-of-one now

Despite his remarkable haul – equalling three-time winners Daniel Day-Lewis, Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep and double-winning Cate Blanchett combined – few movie-go-

ers will know the name of this unassuming Scot or realise how he has transformed the way we see films.

For this singularly focused talent has spent a lifetime grinding away behind the scenes to design the state-of-the-art camera lenses that make the world's biggest stars sparkle and allow directors to shoot scenes once thought impossible.

That dramatic shot in *Minority Report* zooming out from an extreme close-up on Samantha Morton's iris? The exhilarating fight scenes involving thousands of extras in *Braveheart*? Such memorable movie moments – and countless others – relied upon the mix of science and artistry conjured up by Hollywood's best kept secret.

Now, the inventive 58-year-old could be set for further glory after he submitted yet another cutting-edge lens design for consideration by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

A twelfth Oscar would see him supplant art director Cedric Gibbons – credited with designing the gold statuettes – as second on the all-time awards list for an individual. Only Walt Disney, with a runaway 26, would have more.

Glasgow-born Mr Neil, who holds more than 150 worldwide patents, reckons lenses he has helped design are used on around 40 per cent of Hollywood blockbusters.

He said: 'My lenses have been used in thousands of movies. A director or producer reads a story and wants a certain shot and my job is to make that happen. I don't really think about awards; they are the icing on the cake, really.'

Although he could walk down Sauchiehall Street unnoticed, the Strathclyde University physics graduate's work has put him on first name terms with movie greats such as Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and Ridley Scott.

Having served an apprenticeship with Glasgow optical firm Barr and Stroud, he worked for Leica in Canada before being poached by Panavision, the specialist motion picture camera rental giant, to head up its optical division.

The company, formed in the 1950s to capitalise on the widescreen boom, was widely regarded as the

home of cutting-edge vision technology. He said: 'I hadn't really thought about taking a job in the movie business, but it sounded fun. And everybody in films is bothered about how they look and they demand the best lenses available.'

He added: 'In almost any movie, there are things that come up; you know, the actress doesn't like to be looked at from the left or if there's a wee bit of distortion in a lens and they don't like what it does to their nose, so you better use the 40mm lens instead of the 50mm.'

EXPLAINING what drives lens technology he told the story, from before his time, of Frank Sinatra shooting the 1965 war movie *Von Ryan's Express*. He said: 'The studio 20th Century Fox said they were going to shoot it anamorphic [a system that stretches the image to widescreen] in Cinemascope, which they owned.

'But, in certain situations, if you focused really close with Cinemascope lenses, people's faces would change shape and get fatter. It wasn't a huge effect, but it was known in Hollywood as

the “anamorphic mumps”. And from what I was told, Frank Sinatra didn't like his face looking fat.'

It was a problem that plagued Hollywood in the 1960s, as movie studio executives balanced pandering to a film star's ego with making a film that could be delivered on time and on budget. That was, until one company solved the problem.

Mr Neil continued: 'At that time, Panavision came out with some lenses which pushed the point that their lenses didn't do this. Panavision got the movie.'

Screen siren Elizabeth Taylor, famously paranoid about her appearance, wanted the lens to be deliberately tweaked so that in the close-ups she looked thinner than she was, he said.

'Nowadays, it's less of an issue because the stars don't have the same power. They may get paid a lot but I don't hear them looking at a picture saying “Oh I look fat, we're going to have to reshoot this thing”. It happened with the big stars 40 or 50 years ago, but film-makers don't have the time or money to do it now.'

Today, lens innovation often has more to do with logistics, such as making cameras more portable, or allowing the director to do things a previous generation of film-makers couldn't even dream of. Problematic battle scenes in Mel Gibson's 1995 historical epic *Braveheart* were solved with another of Mr Neil's award-winning lens, the Panavision 11:1 Primo Zoom lens. Filmed in Ireland, the crew had to overcome torrential rain and mudslides to try to shoot battle scenes containing thousands of extras without the whole thing descending into farce. It was one of the most difficult film shoots of Gibson's career, although the actor, who was deeply involved in the technical side of the film as well, said that he was very proud of the clear images of the battle scenes when he saw it on the big screen.

'The thing I wanted out of the battle sequences was clarity,' the star said years later. 'I've seen a lot of these battle movies and they just turn into mush. I broke it down to archers and horses and hand-to-hand and who had the high ground and the low ground, everybody was clearly delineated, even though it was often the same bunch of people playing different parts.'

'We had the guys from the Irish Army, and one day they were all dressed like Scots and the next day they'd be English. I think there's a scene where somebody actually kills himself.'

Mr Neil remembers it differently. He said: 'They are all running around and throwing swords and carrying on and you can't really control that, so the cinematographer basically has to try to get the shots he needs by shooting through these crowds as best he can with closeups, long shots and wide angles.'

'What was needed was some cameras with pretty big zoom ratio like 11x zoom and they had to be widescreen anamorphic lenses. *Braveheart* was one of the first movies to use this lens arrangement. What was special was that they were able to catch the shots they needed at all.'

The Scot's most recent award came in 2001 for Panavision's Primo Macro Zoom Lens, which allows directors to zoom in to within inches of an actor's eye.

The lens was famously used in a key scene in *Minority Report*, Spielberg's futuristic thriller starring Tom Cruise and Samantha Morton based on a short story by Philip K Dick about a specialist police department that apprehends criminals based on knowledge from psychics

about crimes that haven't happened yet. In the film, Morton lay in a pool of water as the camera hovered within inches of her iris. The camera then pulled back high to reveal three people lying in the pool.

MR Neil said: 'When we designed the lens, we made a conscious decision to include the extreme macro, this real close-up, because we knew you could get that unique kind of shot. The lens produced an imaging effect that hadn't been done before. We couldn't have shot that any other way.'

After leaving Panavision eight years ago, the father-of-one now runs his own optical technology firm Scot-Optix in Lugano, Switzerland, where he lives with his wife, Stella, the daughter of a United States diplomat.

Recently, he has been working on lenses that lend more 'human' skin tones to digital cameras, whose images can appear too harsh. He said: 'The trick is a blend, ensuring you produce all the hi-tech sharpness and contrast but also give the picture a warmer, almost filmic look and not like a computer screen.'

If he is lucky, the work may yield another 'Sci-Tech' Oscar – which are actually plaques, as the golden statuettes are reserved for winners in the main categories.

But, as the bumper winner said: 'It doesn't matter if it's a statue or a piece of paper, the point is it's an Academy Award – and they're all pretty hard to come by.'