

HEADLIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

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SWITCH ON LEXUS'S NIGHTVIEW AND YOU MAY FIND THAT, DEEP DOWN, WHAT YOU REALLY WANT TO DO IS DIRECT.

HOLLYWOOD MAY BILL ITSELF AS THE entertainment capitol of the world, but in truth, its chief export is envy. We don't want to simply see our favorite stars' movies; we want to live in their houses, hang out at their day spas, and send our mutt to the same pet psychic to whom they take their corgi. Within the town itself, the air of aspiration is as thick as the smog. Everyone covets another's station: The assistant wants to be the producer; the producer wants to be a studio head; and just about every bartender, paperboy, and real estate agent wants to be an actor. People like me—writer-slash-layabout-slash-bon-vivant—want to do a little bit of everything. But deep down, I'm no different from the guy who made my breakfast at the diner this morning: What I really want to do is direct.

With the Lexus NightView system—a near-infrared camera located behind the LX 470's rear-view mirror that captures a natural image of people and objects beyond the view of my headlights—I can direct a thousand tiny features as I negotiate the Hollywood Hills on the way to a late-night coffee. Positioned in front of the steering wheel, the NightView allows me to see 500 feet ahead, or 50 percent further than with high beams. The projected image is reflected in front of me on

the bottom of the windshield and is about five inches by one and a half inches, around the same ratio as the CinemaScope of *Spartacus*, only many times smaller.

The first thing I notice is that the NightView picture is surprisingly rich and detailed. I see a jogger talking on his cell phone while he runs; even in dark sweats, he's lit up like a Roman candle by electromagnetic waves. I can tell what kind of shoes he has on by the swoosh logo slashing across the display. I swear I've seen entries at major film festivals with lesser production values than this.

Indeed, under the NightView's cinematic-ready gaze, even the most mundane nocturnal moments take on an Oscar-worthy flair. I catch a woman in a black dress, her arms around the neck of a lanky fellow in a porkpie hat who's leaning on a hatchback. Projected in glorious black-and-white, it looks like the final clinch of a doomed affair. *I think he's on to us*, I imagine her whispering to him. When I turn onto Sunset Boulevard and head for the café, I spot a man leaving a run-down duplex toting a duffle bag overstuffed with glowing white boxes. What's in there, I wonder. Stolen loot? Who did this guy double-cross?

Of course, I realize that the point of this system is not to inspire another wave of

Spielberg knockoffs. The NightView is meant for the prowling cat, the hungry raccoon, and the other wayward suburban critters that dash in front of us when we're heading home at night. But this is not an issue you can force: The previous night, I'd spent hours with my girlfriend roaming the back roads of the Angeles National Forest hoping to see a coyote or deer, and all we spotted were a couple of slow-moving sedans. Determined not to let that happen again, I place my coffee in the cup holder and head back into the hills, toward Los Angeles's sprawling San Fernando Valley. Come and get me, tabby.

What's the old saw? Be careful what you wish for? Moments after I turn onto the famed mountain road of the stars, Mulholland Drive, some creature—which a second later I identify as a shockingly quick yet plump house cat—makes a mad dash across the twisting two-lane road. It moves so fast it's hardly more than a blur in the bottom corner of the NightView display. But the blur is enough to help me spot it in time to break and miss the thing without swerving, which is fortunate. Swerve too far on Mulholland Drive and you end up at the bottom of the L.A. basin. Remembering where I am, only one thought passes through my head: My God, I almost killed Jack Nicholson's cat!

Having tasted more suburban pitfalls than bargained for, I take the freeway back to town and head for Dodger Stadium, where the hometown team is in the eighth inning of a tightly contested game with the hated San Francisco Giants. I park at Angels' Point, a lookout perched high above the stadium, which shimmers in the NightView's display. I think of the pitcher's arm tiring, the child in the upper bleachers nodding off to sleep, the Dodger Dog vendor wishing the game would end so he can get home to his wife, and the thousands of other tiny dramas that spill out into the evening looking for a little direction. □

