

Light and Dark

Generally speaking, the **cinematographer** (who is also known as the director of photography, or D.P.) is responsible for arranging and controlling the lighting of a film and the quality of the photography. Usually the cinematographer executes the specific or general instructions of the director. The illumination of most movies is seldom a casual matter, for lights can be used with pinpoint accuracy. Through the use of spotlights, which are highly selective in their focus and intensity, a director can guide the viewer's eyes to any area of the photographed image. Motion picture lighting is seldom static, for even the slightest movement of the camera or the subject can cause the lighting to shift. Movies take so long to complete, primarily because of the enormous complexities involved in lighting each new shot. The cinematographer must make allowances for every movement within a continuous **take**. Each different color, shape, and texture reflects or absorbs differing amounts of light. If an image is photographed in depth, an even greater complication is involved, for the lighting must also be in depth.

There are a number of different styles of lighting. Usually designated as a lighting *key*, the style is geared to the theme and mood of a film, as well as its **genre**. Comedies and musicals, for example, tend to be lit in **high key**, with bright, even illumination and no conspicuous shadows. Tragedies and melodramas are usually lit in **high contrast**, with harsh shafts of lights and dramatic streaks of blackness. Mysteries, thrillers, and gangster films are generally in **low key**, with diffused shadows and atmospheric pools of light (1-16a & b). Each lighting key is only an approximation, and some images consist of a combination of lighting styles—a low-key background with a few high-contrast elements

1-16a *Red* (France/Poland/Switzerland, 1994), with Irene Jacob and Jean-Louis Trintignant, cinematography by Piotr Sobocinski, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski.

During the Hollywood big studio era, cinematographers developed the technique of **three-point lighting**, which is still widely practiced throughout the world. With three-point lighting, the **key light** is the primary source of illumination. This light creates the **dominant** of an image—that area that first attracts our eye because it contains the most compelling contrast, usually of light and shadow. Generally, the dominant is also the area of greatest dramatic interest, the shot's focal point of action, either physical or psychological. **Fill lights**, which are less intense than the key, soften the harshness of the main light source, revealing subsidiary details that would otherwise be hidden by shadow. The **backlights** separate the foreground figures from their setting, heightening the illusion of three-dimensional depth in the image. Three-point methods tend to be most expressive with low-key lighting such as this. On the other hand, when a shot is bathed with high-key illumination, the three sources of light are more equally distributed over the surface of the image, and hence are more bland photographically. (*Miramax Films*)



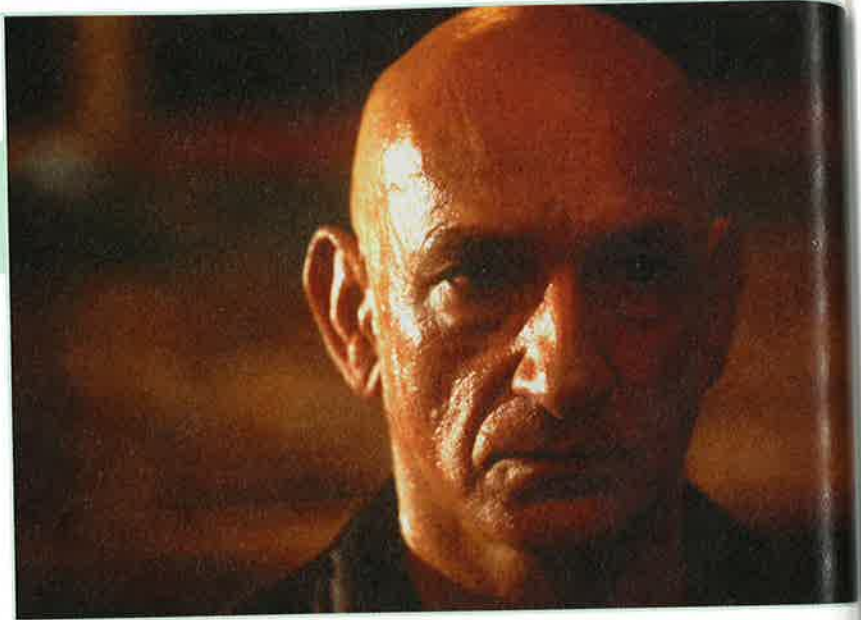


1-16b *Mr. Brooks*
(U.S.A., 2007), with Kevin Costner, directed by Bruce A. Evans.

The source of light can radically alter our response to a character. The low light source of this image, for example, creates a sinister, eerie effect, despite the fact that Kevin Costner is a handsome man. He doesn't look handsome here, just creepy. (MGM Distribution)

1-16c *Suspect Zero* (U.S.A., 2004), with Ben Kingsley, directed by E. Elias Merhige.

Side lighting can be a useful technique to symbolize a character's divided nature, plunging half his face in darkness, the other half in light. (Paramount Pictures)



in the foreground, for example. Movies shot in studios are generally more stylized and theatrical, whereas location photography tends to use available illumination, with a more natural style of lighting.

Lights and darks have had symbolic connotations since the dawn of humanity. The Bible is filled with light-dark symbolism. Rembrandt and Caravaggio used light-dark contrasts for psychological purposes as well. In general, artists have used darkness to suggest fear, evil, the unknown. Light usually suggests security, virtue, truth, joy. Because of these conventional symbolic associations, some filmmakers deliberately reverse light-dark expectations (1-12a). Hitchcock's movies attempt to jolt viewers by exposing their shallow sense of security. He staged many of his most violent scenes in the glaring light.

Lighting can be used realistically or expressionistically. The realist tends to favor available lighting, at least in exterior scenes. Even out of doors, however, most filmmakers use some lamps and reflectors, either to augment the natural light or, on bright days, to soften the harsh contrasts produced by the sun. With the aid of special lenses and more light-sensitive film stocks, some directors have managed to dispense with artificial lighting completely. Available lighting tends to produce a documentary look in the film image, a grainy texture, and an absence of tonal balance. For interior shots, realists tend to prefer images with an obvious light source—a window or a lamp. Or they often use a diffused

kind of lighting with no artificial, strong contrasts. In short, the realist doesn't use conspicuous lighting unless its source is dictated by the context.

Formalists use light less literally. They are guided by its symbolic implications and will often stress these qualities by deliberately distorting natural light patterns. A face lighted from below almost always appears sinister, even if the actor assumes a totally neutral expression (1-16b). Similarly, an obstruction placed in front of a light source can assume frightening implications, for it tends to threaten our sense of safety. On the other hand, in some contexts, especially in exterior shots, a silhouette effect can be soft and romantic.

1-17a *Double Indemnity* (U.S.A., 1944), with Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, directed by Billy Wilder.

Film noir (literally, black cinema) is a style defined primarily in terms of light—or the lack of it. This style typified a variety of American genres in the 1940s and early 1950s. Noir is a world of night and shadows. Its milieu is almost exclusively urban. The style is profuse in images of dark streets, cigarette smoke swirling in dimly lit cocktail lounges, and symbols of fragility, such as windowpanes, sheer clothing, glasses, and mirrors. Motifs of entrapment abound: alleys, tunnels, subways, elevators, and train cars. Often the settings are locations of transience, like cheap rented rooms, piers, bus terminals, and railroad yards. The images are rich in sensuous textures, like neon-lit streets, windshields streaked with mud, and shafts of light streaming through windows of lonely rooms. Characters are imprisoned behind ornate lattices, grillwork, drifting fog and smoke. Visual designs emphasize harsh lighting contrasts, jagged shapes, and violated surfaces. The tone of film noir is fatalistic and paranoid. It's suffused with pessimism, emphasizing the darker aspects of the human condition. Its themes characteristically revolve around violence, lust, greed, betrayal, and depravity. (Paramount Pictures)



1-17b *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (U.S.A., 2005), with Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer, written and directed by Shane Black.

Film noir has remained popular even up to the present, though often with a revisionist twist. *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, for example, contains the requisite noir lighting style, the squalid Los Angeles milieu of crime and deception, the fatalistic voice-over narration, and an occasional corpse that needs to be discreetly disposed of. The revisionist angle is the film's black comedy, including the private eye Perry van Shrike (Kilmer), AKA "Gay Perry," who's ruthless, tough, and—you guessed it—gay. (Warner Brothers)

1-18 *The Return of the Jedi Special Edition (U.S.A., 1997)*, directed by Richard Marquand.

High-contrast lighting is aggressively theatrical, infusing the photographed materials with a sense of tension and visual anguish. This dueling sequence is rendered more dynamic by the jagged knife blades of light that pierce the pervasive darkness. High-contrast lighting is typical of such genres as crime films, melodramas, thrillers, and mysteries. The lack of light in such movies symbolizes the unknown, deceptive surfaces, evil itself. (*Lucasfilm Ltd.*)



1-19 *Coach Carter (U.S.A., 2005)*, with Samuel L. Jackson (holding basketball), directed by Thomas Carter.



Lighting as characterization. This movie is based on a true story of Ken Carter, an inspiring high school basketball coach who whips a bunch of rowdy, undisciplined players into a winning team. The lighting from behind the coach lends him a "spiritual" aura, as though he is being blessed by God's bountiful light. (*Paramount Pictures*)

When a face is obviously lighted from above, a certain angelic quality, known as the halo effect, is the result. "Spiritual" lighting of this type tends to border on the cliché, however. **Backlighting**, which is a kind of semi-silhouetting, is soft and ethereal. Love scenes are often photographed with a halo effect around the heads of the lovers to give them a romantic aura. Backlighting is especially evocative when used to highlight blonde hair (1-20a).

Through the use of spotlights, an image can be composed of violent contrasts of lights and darks. The surface of such images seems disfigured, torn up. The formalist director uses such severe contrasts for psychological and thematic purposes (1-18).

1-20a *Braveheart (U.S.A., 1995)*, with Sophie Marceau and Mel Gibson, directed by Gibson. (Paramount Pictures)

Art historians often distinguish between a "painterly" and a "linear" style, a distinction that's also useful in the photographic arts. A **painterly** style is soft-edged, sensuous, and romantic, best typified by the Impressionist landscapes of Claude Monet and the voluptuous figure paintings of Pierre Auguste Renoir. Line is de-emphasized: Colors and textures shimmer in a hazily defined, radiantly illuminated environment. On the other hand, a **linear** style emphasizes drawing, sharply defined edges, and the supremacy of line over color and texture. In the field of painting, a linear style typifies such artists as Sandro Botticelli and the French classicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

Movies can also be photographed in a painterly or linear style, depending on the lighting, the lenses, and filters. The shot from *Braveheart* might almost have been painted by Renoir. Cinematographer John Toll used soft focus lenses and warm "natural" backlighting (creating a halo effect around the characters' heads) to produce an intensely romantic lyricism. Wyler's post-World War II masterpiece, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, was photographed by the great Gregg Toland. Its linear style is austere, deglamourized, shot in razor-sharp deep-focus. It was a style suited to the times. The postwar era was a period of disillusionment, sober reevaluations, and very few sentimental illusions. The high-key cinematography is polished, to be sure, but it's also simple, matter-of-fact, the invisible servant of a serious subject matter.



1-20b *The Best Years of Our Lives (U.S.A., 1946)*, with Harold Russell, Teresa Wright, Dana Andrews, Myrna Loy, Hoagy Carmichael (standing), and Fredric March; directed by William Wyler. (RKO)