

# Lighting



**and Light Effects**

Whether natural or artificial light is used in making a film, it has a big influence on the look and mood that is created.

Natural light can vary from bright, clear and sunny



Richard Farnsworth in *The Straight Story* (1999)



to the softer English sunlight in *Atonement*

to dull and gloomy



which both reflects and is a metaphor for the mood of the people in *Whale Rider* (2002)

to threatening, as in *The Princess Bride*



Mandy Patinkin and Cary Elwes

to the glowering winter light of Minnesota



*Lars and the Real Girl*

to the pouring rain...



... the skies weeping as the political prisoners are brought to the detention centre that only one will leave alive, in *V for Vendetta*.

to the drama of storm in *Moulin Rouge*



Here the storm is more than just bad weather; it is also a metaphor for the troubles facing the hero and heroine.



**the importance of lighting**

Lighting is responsible for significant effects in each scene, as is demonstrated in these scenes from *American Beauty*.



The symmetrical composition is reinforced by the unified effect of the lighting



the light falls in bars across Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper) – a metaphor for the way he is trapped within his own life.

Light can draw attention to specific areas of interest,



and create wonderful effects by its interplay with dark areas.





Lighting can give depth to a scene, while also bringing out texture and detail in setting, decor, and clothing.



Patrick Kennedy and Keira Knightley in *Atonement*

**qualities of light**



## high-key lighting

indicates a brightly lit scene with few shadows; usually provided by one source of light (the 'key light').



Michael Sheen in *The Queen*



Kristen Stewart in *Into the Wild*

## low-key lighting

is where the lighting is more towards the greyer and darker scale, where there is a good deal of shadow, and where the key light is less bright and does not dominate.



Jim Carrey in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

## 'high-contrast' lighting

is where there is strong contrast between bright light and shadow, with a small amount of in-between grey scale



Nicole Kidman in *Moulin Rouge*

This lighting scheme is often associated with "hard-boiled" or suspense genres or styles such as *film noir*, as in these examples from Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958).

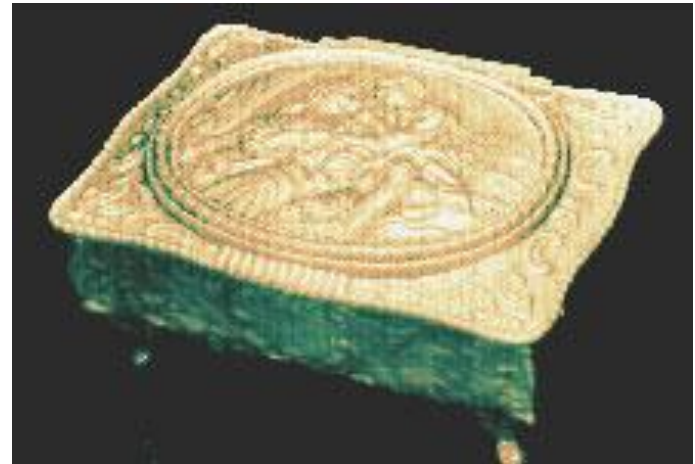


Light can be either hard or soft light.

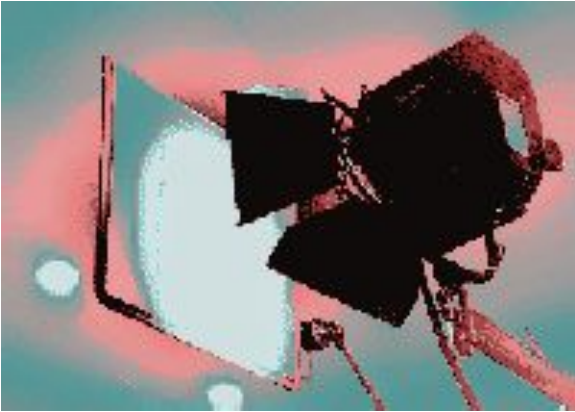
**hard light** clearly illuminates areas, sharply outlines and illuminates characters, brings out detail and texture, and markedly separates light and shadows



**soft light** covers a wider area with a more diffuse light, diminishes outline and clarity of characters, minimises shadow, and reduces modelling of detail and texture.



Spun-glass diffusers are used over the front of studio lights to soften and diffuse their beams, and to reduce the intensity of light.



Umbrella reflectors create a soft lighting effect in still photography.



Soft light tends to hide surface irregularities and detail, so the the surface carving is barely noticeable

Hard light gives a hard, crisp, sharply defined appearance, and casts a sharp, clearly defined shadow.

Sources include the light from a clear, unfrosted light bulb, a focused spotlight, or the noonday sun in a clear sky.





When hard light is used to illuminate a face, imperfections in the skin stand out – a less than flattering look.



Pat Thomson and Barry Otto in *Strictly Ballroom*



the harsh light of Africa illuminates the scene of ambush  
and murder in *The Constant Gardener*



and is pitiless in its illumination of another scene of murder



in contrast the light of London is soft, grey, melancholy

**three-point lighting**

Three-point lighting is the standard method used in visual media such as film, still photography and computer-generated imagery.

It is a simple but versatile system which forms the basis of most lighting.

Once you understand three-point lighting, you are well on the way to understanding all lighting.

The technique uses three lights called

**the key light,**

**the fill light**

**and the back light.**

## key light

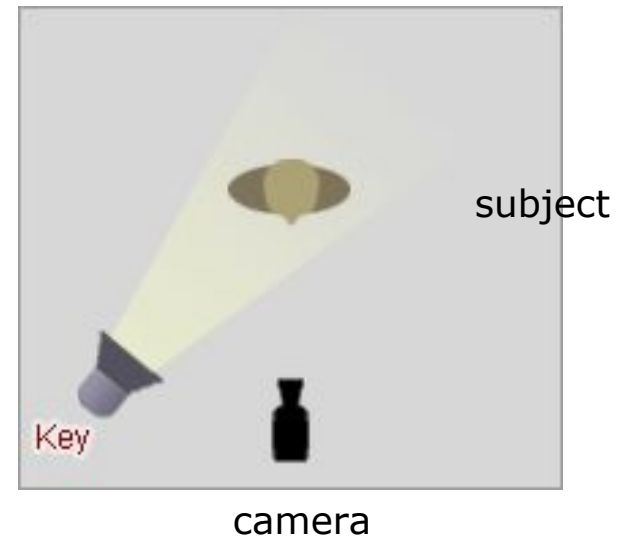
This is the main light.

It is usually the strongest and has the most influence on the look of the scene.

The key light is placed to one side of the camera/subject so that this side is well lit and the other has some shadow.

It provides **hard light**, like that from the sun on a clear day: a bright light with hard-edged shadows.

It provides excellent modelling by highlighting the shape and contours of the subject.

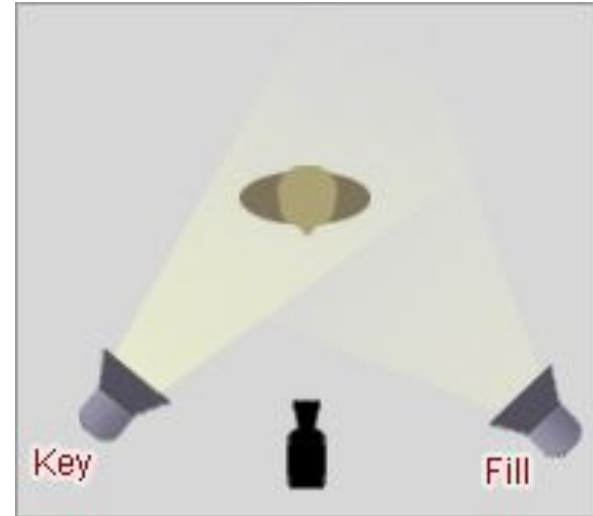




## fill light

This is the secondary light and is placed on the opposite side to the key light.

Its light can be likened to indirect sunlight or reflected light from the environment.

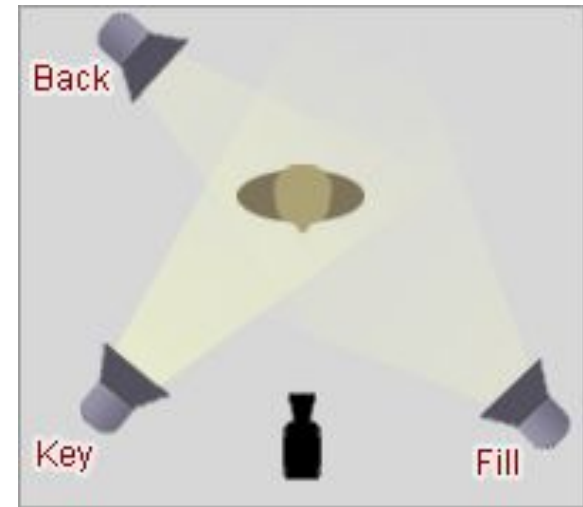


It is used to fill the shadows created by the key. The fill will usually be **softer** and less bright than the key and casts soft indistinct shadows.

It is sometimes referred to as the 'highlight' as it is often used to give a sheen or highlight to an actor's hair.

## back light

The back light is placed behind the subject and lights it from the rear.



Rather than providing direct lighting (which the key and fill give), its purpose is purely for modelling – to provide definition and subtle highlights around the subject's outlines.

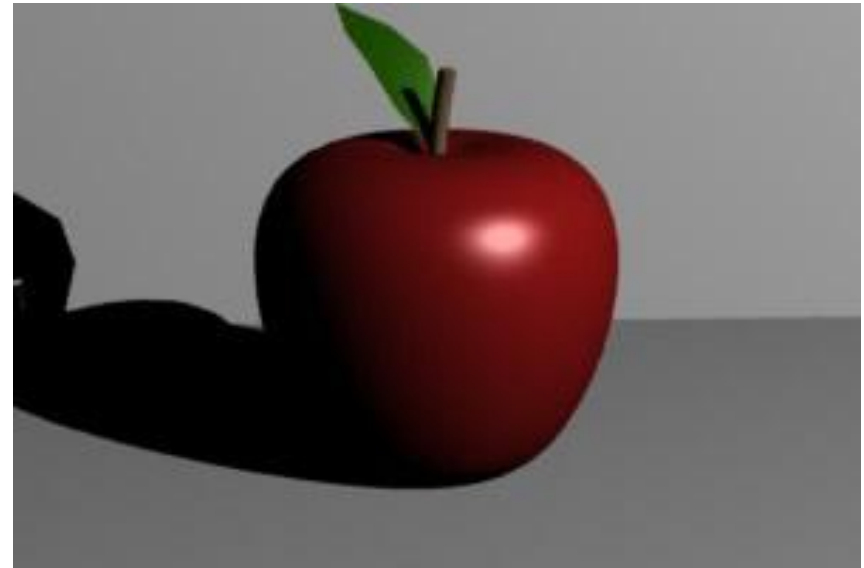
This helps separate the subject from the background and give a three-dimensional look.

## illustrating lighting

The following images of a computer-generated apple are from an online lighting tutorial.

### key light only

the key light has been placed to the right of the camera and has created very sharp shadows.



It looks okay – is identifiable as an apple – but doesn't show any real depth.

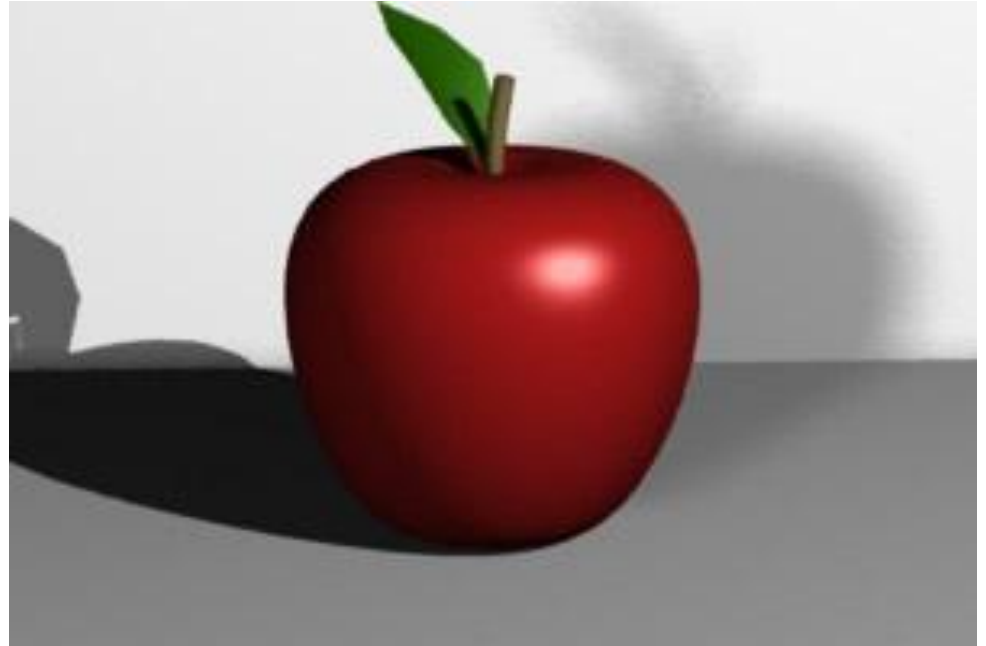
## fill light only

The fill light is usually on the opposite side of the camera from the key, so in this case it is on the left.



As it should be a soft light (created by use of filters or diffusers) the effect is similar to the key except the shadows are less defined. The apple looks flat and artificial.

**key + fill**



Using both key and fill gives that all important depth so that the image looks more three-dimensional.

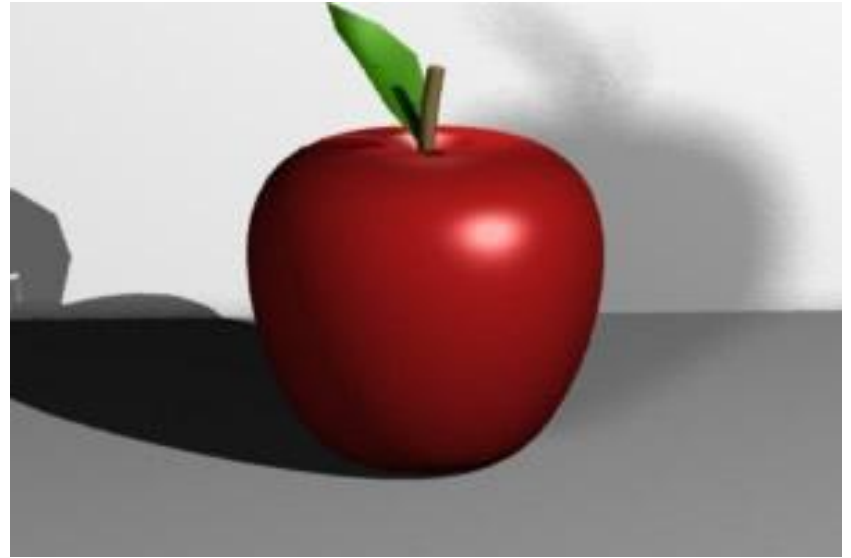
## **backlight only**



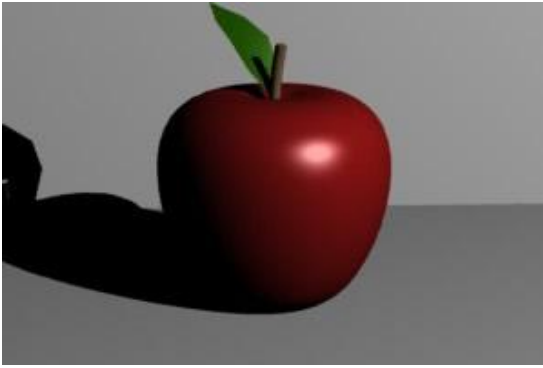
The backlight provides very subtle highlighting to the apple, most of which is in darkness.

## key + fill + back

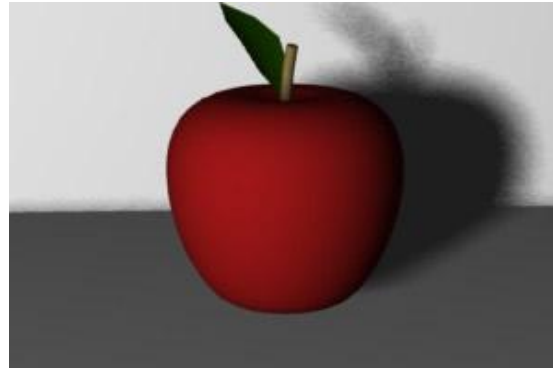
Beautiful! A complete view of the apple.



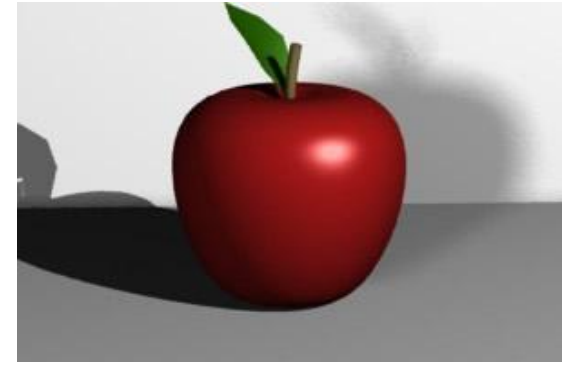
a fourth light could be used at the back to remove the remaining shadows.



key light only



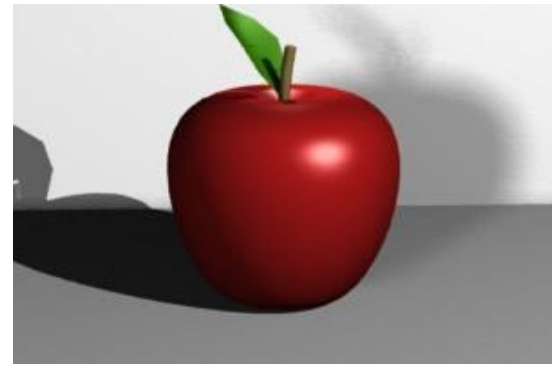
fill light only



key + fill



backlight only



key + fill + back



**lighting faces**

How does this translate when people are photographed?



key light only



adding a fill light lightens the shadows  
created by the key light



key and fill



back light creates more depth in the composition, and puts a highlight on her hair

These shots from Douglas Sirk's *Written On The Wind* (1956) demonstrate the classical use of three-point lighting.

Laurel Bacall and Rock Hudson are made to look glamorous by the balanced lighting.



Lighting affects the appearance of a character, defining or diminishing facial characteristics and making faces appear attractive or unattractive.



balanced lighting enhances the face of Kirsten Dunst, here with with Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man*

side lighting and shallow focus create the opposite effect on Willem Dafoe.



lighting manipulates our responses to characters, as we see in these shots from Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*



Christian – innocence



Zidler – sinister



Warner - threatening



Marie – concerned



Satine

glamorous and exciting

sincere



playing a double game





Side lighting, if angled carefully, can model the face and bring out detail, as in these shots from *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999)



Larisa Oleynik

Heath Ledger



and *Juno*



but it can also highlight only half the face, leaving the other half relatively undefined or in shadow, suggesting bewilderment



Anthony Hopkins as Burt Munro  
in *The World's Fastest Indian* (2006)

or a two-sided or mysterious personality.



Hugo Weaving in *V for Vendetta*

Here it is a metaphor for the way Briony is torn between her affection for Robbie and her fear that he is attacking her sister.



Saoirse Ronan, in *Atonement*

The heavy shadow is a visual metaphor for the curious half life that the depressed Barbara Fitts leads.

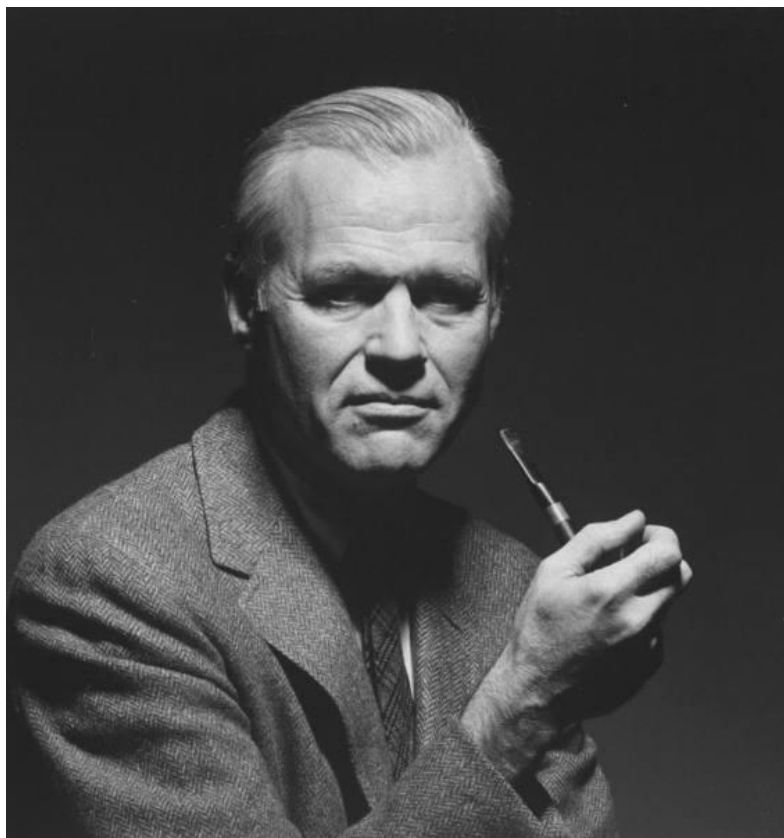


Alison Janney in *American Beauty*

side lighting can be used to create a sinister effect



Top lighting creates deep shadows in eye sockets and under the nose, which can be stern or threatening.





while bottom lighting shadows and distorts the face, making it appear sinister or evil.



though not always



Thora Birch in *American Beauty*

Back lighting does not bring out details in the face, but highlights the edges of a character, creating a kind of rim or halo around the head and especially the hair while separating the individual from the background — as a result it tends to make the character more angelic or ethereal.



a judicious mixture of front and back lighting creates a mystical effect for Frodo's first sight of Arwen (Liv Tyler), in *The Fellowship of the Ring*

**time of day**

The most obvious function of light – apart obviously from allowing us to see images – is simply to establish time of day



the Rooster, T.I. Fowler, greets the day in *Chicken Run*

though this can result in some stunning shots:



Burt Munro sleeps in his car on the Bonneville Salt Flats,  
in *The World's Fastest Indian*



Robbie (James McAvoy) rereads his letters from Cecilia by the light of dawn in France in *Atonement*.



Viola de Lesseps' home in the morning, in *Shakespeare in Love*





and in the early evening



the sun goes down in  
*Danny the Champion of the World*

## **Magic Hour**

The hour of sunset, when the lighting is said to have a magical feeling which can be imparted to the film.



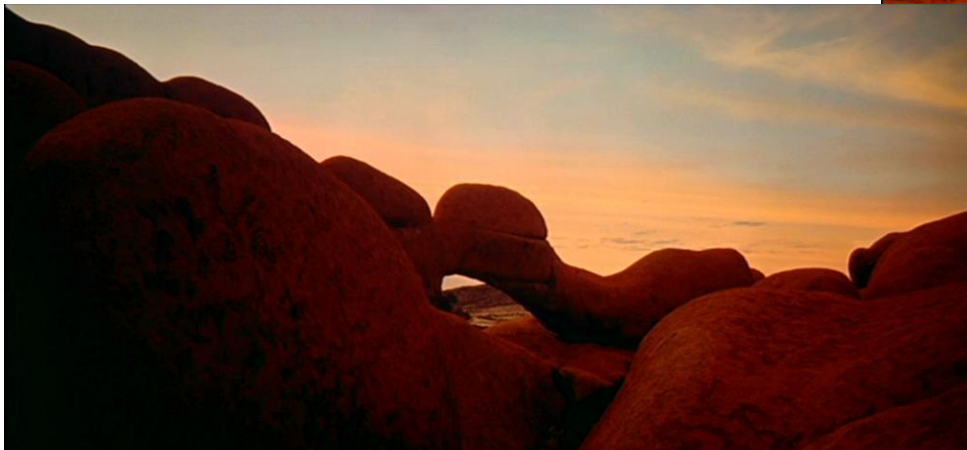
Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* (1989)



Jeremy Irons walks home late at night, in  
*Danny the Champion of the World*

time of day can have metaphorical significance

the opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey* opens at the dawn of humankind – appropriately set and shot at dawn:



**creating mood  
and atmosphere**

Using bright, clear, even illumination suggests  
sunniness, joy, and security, and is therefore frequently  
used for comedy.

as in *A Knight's Tale*





and *Sione's Wedding*





no shadows – literally or metaphorically – in the story of *The World's Fastest Indian*, with Anthony Hopkins



the family members in *Little Miss Sunshine*, on the other hand, face all sorts of problems under the relentlessly blue and sunny sky



Billy Elliot faces his problems under a greyer sky.

More diffuse, greyer lighting

can convey inclement weather;

can communicate the more sombre and unhappy spirit of a serious drama;

or can be a metaphor for the emotional distress of characters.

An opening scene like this one, with Ryan Gosling in *Lars and the Real Girl*, can set the tone for the whole film.





Helen O'Hara, writing of *Lars* in *Empire*, suggests that "In the bright light of a more Hollywood sun, such a delicate love story could never have survived."

Most films, however, will have many changes of mood within the course of the story.





Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* opens with a picnic scene in a bright sunny Tuscan day.



but mischief is planned by the villainous Don John  
(Keanu Reeves) in a dimly lit room.



Franco Zeffirelli opens his film of *Romeo and Juliet* in a brightly lit piazza, where young men quarrel as their hot blood stirs in the summer heat.



but the melancholy Romeo appears from shadow, in softer light

Orson Welles begins his 1946 thriller, *The Stranger*, about a Nazi war criminal hiding out in an America town, with typically sinister *noir*-lit shots,



which establishes a mood of foreboding in contrast with the sunny American town, and prepares for the dark secret it hides.





When JM Barrie flies kites with the Llewlyn Davies family in *Finding Neverland*, the day is bright and summery.



But when Barrie (Johnny Depp) goes home to his wife Mary (Radha Mitchell) and his unhappy marriage, the light is more sombre.





He invents wonderful and fantastic stories for the Davies boys to act out. These sequences are lit with a clear, bright, hard light.



the uniformity of the light echoes and reinforces the uniformity of the housing in *Spider-Man*



The light in *The Truman Show's* Seahaven is even, bright, always sunny – what people are supposed to want it to be all the time,



except that it is artificial – Truman's home is inside a huge dome and the weather is controlled by a computer program.



the viewers at home

- or in the Truman Bar



- are lit more naturally

So lighting is an important tool for creating mood and atmosphere in individual scenes as well as for an entire film:



the flatness of the light and the grey décor powerfully communicate the severe depression of Barbara Fitts (Alison Janney) in *American Beauty*.



the gloom of war is captured in the pinkish-grey  
light of France in *Atonement*



Light is a primary means for creating sinister or disturbing moods



the wicked Maman (Ankur Vikal) in *Slumdog Millionaire*



Russell Crowe as 'John Nash, spy' in *A Beautiful Mind*



Ryan Phillippe in *Crash*



behind prison bars in *Richard 3*

# styles of lighting

Two general schools in cinematography have been referred to as '**naturalism**' and '**pictorialism**'.

The first favours a key light that seems to come from a source in the scene or from a natural outside source;



Keira Knightley in *Bend It Like Beckham*



Jamie Bell in *Billy Elliot*





Jason Bateman in *Juno*

the second favours any placement of the key light that gives the most striking visual image.



Mena Suvari in *American Beauty*



Don Cheadle in *Crash*

In practice, many films will use both, as these shots from *Atonement* show.



Keira Knightley and Brenda Blethyn, lit naturally

Saoirse Ronan, lit pictorially





natural

pictorial



and from *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008)



natural lighting





pictorial





pictorial

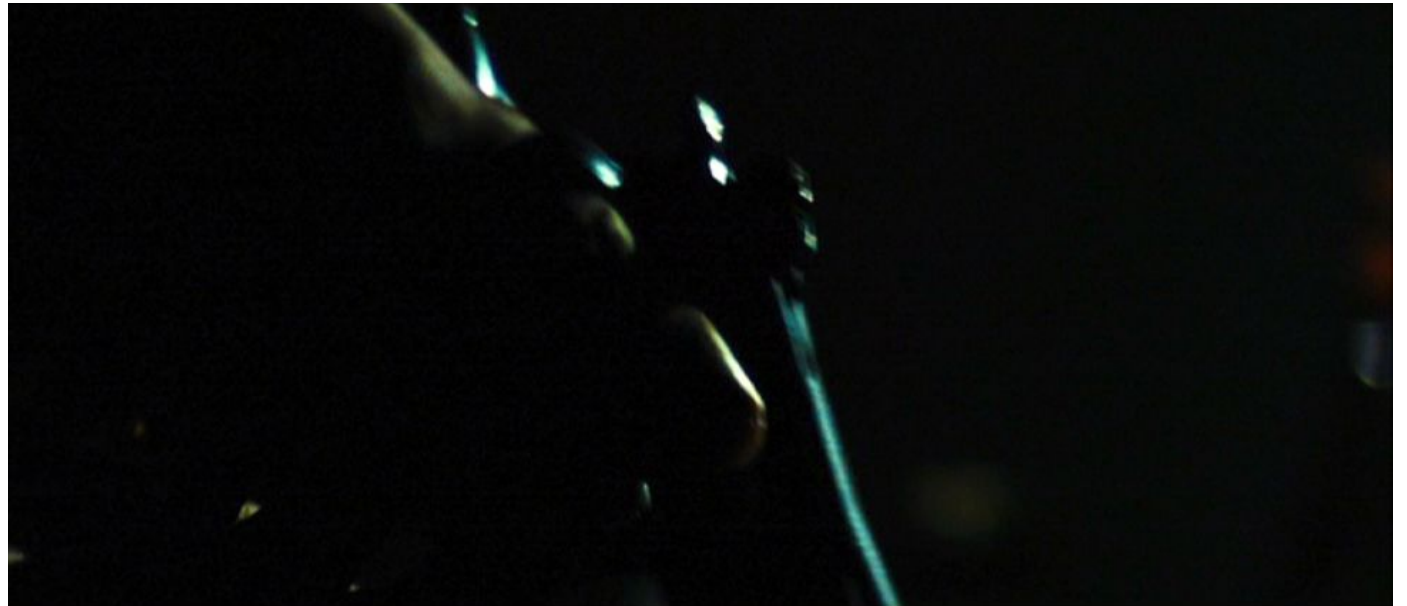


natural





pictorial





natural