Light and Lighting Techniques in Film

Lighting is one of the major elements in a film and is basically responsible for the fact that we see any image on the screen at all.

But, in more specific ways, lighting is responsible for both the quality of the images and for much of the film's dramatic effect.

Lighting is responsible for significant effects in each scene.

* attention it can draw to major areas of interest
* lighting can give depth to a scene
* it can bringing out texture and detail in setting, decor, and clothing.
* affects the appearance of a character, defining or diminishing facial characteristics and making faces appear attractive or unattractive.
* lighting is responsible for the mood and atmosphere of individual scenes as well as the entire film.

In general, there are two basic types of *luminaires* (sources of light)

* the floodlight, which gives a large area of diffuse illumination. It covers a wider area with a more diffuse light, diminishes outline and clarity of characters, minimizes shadow, and reduces modelling of detail and texture.
* the spot-light, from which a beam can be focused to light or highlight a specific area. It clearly illuminates areas, sharply outlines and illuminates characters, brings out detail and texture, and markedly separates light and shadows.
* Various pieces of equipment help to create the desired lighting effects; filters control the colour of light rays; and portable reflectors soften and diffuse light.

Basic setup of lighting

* The **key light** is the major *luminaire* that illuminates the subject of the image and is normally placed to the front and side of the subject.
* The **fill light** is generally placed on the opposite side and fills in the shadows of the subject.
* The third *luminaire* in this traditional configuration is the **back light**, which highlights the edges of the subject and separates it from the background.

There are numerous variations of this basic kind of lighting. Terms commonly used in describing the dominant style of lighting for a scene are:

* **High-key** lighting indicates a brightly lit scene with a minimum of shadows and a key light that is bright and dominant.
* **Low-key** lighting indicates a scene 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.
* A scene, however, with strong contrast between bright light and shadow, with a small amount of in-between grey scale, is called **'high-contrast'** lighting.

The general effect of a character's appearance is significantly determined by the angle or direction of the key light.

* Front lighting flattens out the face, diminishes contour and detail, and softens or even blurs the features – such lighting can diminish the appearance of aging or make a person more attractive, but it can also make the face somewhat characterless.
* 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.
* Top lighting bathes the character in light, as if the illumination were coming from heaven, giving them an angelic or spiritual appearance.
* Bottom lighting shadows and distorts the face, making it appear sinister, threatening, or evil.
* Side lighting can highlight only half the face, leaving the other half relatively undefined or in shadow, thus suggesting a two-sided or mysterious personality.

In general, bright, clear, even illumination creates a mood of happiness, joy and security, and is therefore frequently used for comedy.

More diffuse, greyer lighting can convey inclement weather and communicate a more sombre and unhappy spirit.

Greyer light with more shadows is effective in mystery films, *film noir*, or horror films; high-contrast lighting can be effective in drama or thrillers.

Dramatic contrasts in light and shade (**chiaroscuro**) are often used to heighten tension or create an atmosphere of fear or threat.

Two general schools in cinematography

* '**naturalism**' - a key light that seems to come from a source in the scene or from a natural outside source;
* '**pictorialism**' - any placement of the key light that gives the most striking visual image.