

# LIGHTING

WITH JIM SOTO





**Light is to a filmmaker what paint is for an artist.**  
**- Anonymous**





# And Light Was Good!

The importance of lighting in filmmaking cannot be stressed enough. Without light there could not be film. What water is to a hose, or what fire is to a stove, light is to a camera! The most important element a camera records - is light. A badly lit scene can ruin a movie as much as bad acting can. Proper lighting can affect the mood of an audience and their perception of what the director is trying to communicate.





Filmmaking is all about capturing light. A bright light draws the viewer's eye. A scene can be lit by natural light (the sun, moon or other light sources) or using powerful and expensive artificial light. The way a scene is lit influences how the audience will react emotionally to the film.



Vibrant colors and soft light were used to create a trance-like dreamy look in *The Neon Demon* (2016).



- Natural light is free and it's all around. Sunlight can be controlled by the use of reflectors and diffusers. These are used to fill certain areas with light or to remove hard shadows.



- Artificial light can be easily manipulated in a set to create more specific lighting conditions.





The angle and direction of light gives your audience clues about where and what time of day the scene is taking place. Painters have long understood that the quality of light in a scene can hide or reveal things and influences the viewer's reaction.



Natural light, created by the sun, is the most basic form of lighting as seen here in *The Revenant* (2015).



In feature films the lighting is a high priority because how well the movie is lit influences how the audience perceives the production values of the movie and therefore the quality of the movie. Badly lit images can do more to make a film look amateurish than any with the possible exception of bad sound.



Instead of going for flat lighting, shadows were cast on faces for dramatic effect in *The Shape of Water* (2017).





**In documentary films the light is given much less consideration because it often isn't possible to control the light and audiences are used to documentary movies having a "news footage" look. A feature filmmaker can choose to use documentary lighting to create a sense of realism.**



# Lighting Basics

Every lighting set-up provides a specific mood, emotion, atmosphere, and aesthetics to the overall film viewing experience. Without light, it is not possible to see anything, and it is not possible to shoot a film.



A "chiaroscuro" light design can be seen in this scene from *Bladerunner* (1982).



# Lighting is needed in film production because...

1. **Film's Exposure** – The primary reason why lighting is needed in a film production is because of the technical requirement for proper exposure of every shot in the film. Just like with photography, overexposed or underexposed footage is problematic. If you shoot a scene, it's meant to be clearly seen, right?
2. **Mood and Treatment for the Film** – The scenes in a cinematic project employ distinct looks and exude certain emotional levels, according to what the story evokes and what the director intends for it. These are achievable through proper lighting. Different light designs elicit different emotional responses from the audience.



3. **Scene Enhancement** – Even though natural light is usually available, a film production still generally needs to utilize lighting equipment to improve how the scene registers on camera. Without proper control of light in a scene, a shot usually looks flat, dull, and boring. Lighting enhances the look of the elements on screen.
4. **Scene Continuity** – Since shooting all the scenes chronologically is not required, a certain house shown in a movie may be actually shot from different houses on different times and days. Lighting puts continuity to match the time of day for the film's related scenes amidst the fact they were really shot at different times and places. Lighting gear can alter the kind of light that strikes the screen to make it look like morning, noon, afternoon, or evening, or the winter air looking very cold, the sun from outside looking harsh, or the sky looking overcast.



# HARD Light

For shadows with no transitional edge / gradient, a point light source is required. Hard light casts strong, defined shadows. With a textured surface at an angle, hard light will accentuate textures and details in objects. A hard light, coming from a single source such as the sun or a spotlight, creates a harsh appearance. They also create harsh shadows on the background as well as on the face and features of your actors. The prettiest actress can look homely in hard light.





# SOFT Light

Soft light refers to light that tends to "wrap" around objects, casting diffuse shadows with soft edges. A soft light, coming from a large area of lighting or many small lights, creates a soft, gentle or romantic look. It generally takes much more power to create the same amount of soft light compared to hard light. Many old films had to use hard lighting because the film was so insensitive to light.

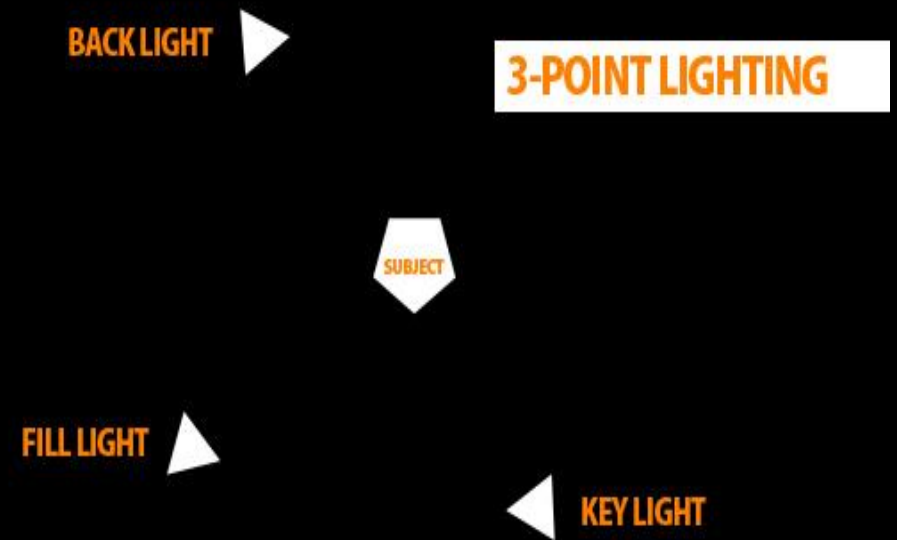




# The Three Point Lighting Technique

The *Three Point Lighting Technique* is a standard method of lighting used in film. It is simple but versatile and forms the basis of most lighting. The technique uses three lights. They are:

- **Key Light** - This is the main light. It is usually the strongest and has the most influence on the look of the scene. It is placed to one side of the camera/subject so that this side is well lit and the other side has some shadow.





- **Fill Light** - This secondary light is placed on the opposite side of the key light. It's used to fill the shadows created by the key. The fill will usually be softer and less bright than the key. To achieve this, you could move it further away or use a soft box.
- **Back/Rim Light** - The back light lights the subject from behind. Rather than providing direct lighting (like the key and fill), it provides definition and subtle highlights around the subject's outlines. This helps separate the subject from the background and give a 3-dimensional look.





# Lighting for Specific Genres

Some of popular movie genres include drama, comedy, action, horror, musical, romance and many others. The type of film such as fiction/narrative, documentary, or animation also affects how a movie should look and how it must be technically, thematically, and artistically presented. For instance, a horror movie uses light to make scenes look sinister or eerie; animation typically uses a lighting treatment that showcases colorful and eye-catching scenes to get children's attention and let them have fun watching the scenes; and a musical utilizes light to make a theatrical performance look dynamic and flamboyant.



Different film genres require different light designs. Observe the differences between an Epic Romance and a Horror film.



Notice the soft highlights and low contrast in this scene from *Titanic* (1997).



Notice the sharp shadows and high contrast in this scene from *The Conjuring* (2013).

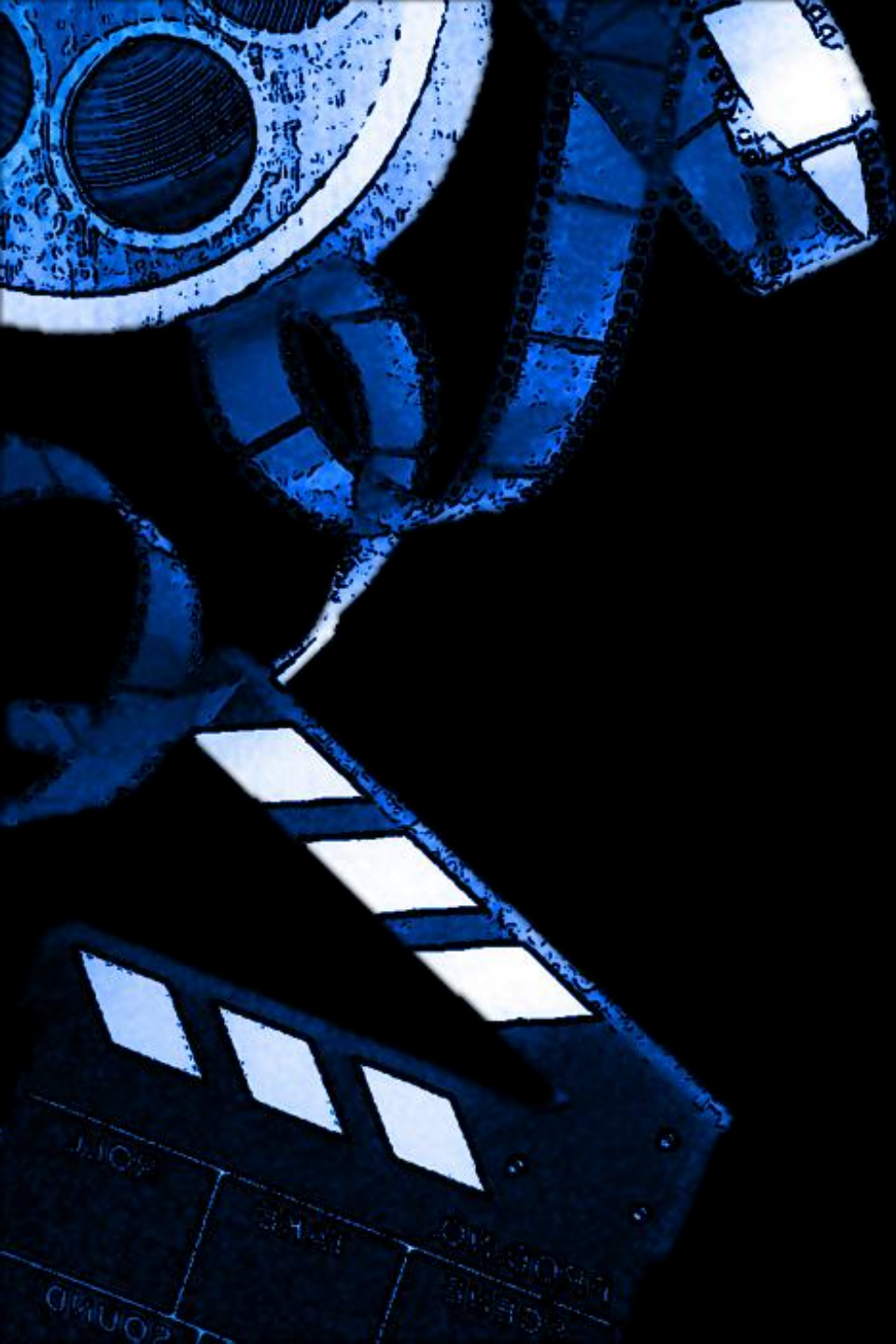
**How are they different?**



# RESHOOT

1. Give four reasons as to why light is important in a film production.
2. When would you use hard light in a shot? Soft light?
3. Explain the Three Point Lighting Technique and what each light point is supposed to accomplish?
4. What type of lighting would you use for a family drama? For a crime thriller?





Next:

# CAMERA SUPPORT

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