

Lighting in Filmmaking

Film lighting styles and techniques tell audiences when a film is set, where they should focus their attention, and how they should respond throughout the movie. By using spotlights focused on the face of an actress, the filmmaker can highlight her beauty. By using minimal lighting, as in the thriller *Seven* (1995), the filmmaker can create anxiety, mystery, suspense.

The Cinematographer

On a movie set, lighting is the responsibility of the cinematographer, also called the Director of Photography (DoP, for short). The cinematographer is responsible for:

- lighting the set and actors
- setting up and moving the camera
- selecting appropriate lenses and film stock for each shot
- creating the “look” or visual style of a film

What is a Lighting Key?

A lighting key is really another way of describing the kinds of choices cinematographers have to light a film. Different lighting keys are signs filmmakers use to suggest certain meanings for audiences. In large part, the lighting key a cinematographer chooses to use will be determined by a film’s theme or mood.

So, for instance, comedies and musicals generally use **high key lighting**, which means that most shots are brightly lit, with few shadows. High key lighting suggests a natural or “real life” setting for a movie. It’s the kind of lighting we see in most Hollywood movies and the important point to remember is that there is absolutely nothing natural about this kind of look. In order to create high key lighting, extremely bright lights, positioned very precisely for each shot, have to be used. Because this style is so common in Hollywood films, most audiences simply accept it as the “natural” look for movies. It’s not. What it is, is the glossy style Hollywood filmmakers have made the most predictable “look” in mainstream movies.

High contrast lighting is dominated by harsh lines of light combined with dramatic streaks of blackness. This lighting style tends to use shadows and can look haunting and eerie when it is used well. As a sign, high contrast lighting suggests a sense of anxiety or confusion. It can also be used to suggest a corrupt world which haunts and threatens the characters on screen.

Low key lighting uses shadows and directed pools of light to create atmosphere and suspense. It is often seen in crime or gangster movies. Low key lighting suggests an air of mystery. Horror movies often use this style of lighting in exaggerated form by over-lighting (placing a light above the face) or under-lighting (placing a light under a face) actors to create a dramatic or distorted effect.

It should be noted that different styles of lighting can be used effectively in the same movie to convey different moods and events. For example, the filmmaker may introduce low key lighting to indicate that the hero is in danger.