

The Influence of Rembrandt

For cinematographers, as well as generations of art lovers, Rembrandt is the acknowledged master of light and shadow. His chiaroscuro technique has influenced some of the most important light-cameramen in cinema history. In her study of the relationship between painting and the cinema, 'Moving Pictures', Anne Hollander argues that without the paintings of the 17th century Dutch master, many of the masterpieces of the cinema would not have been possible.

Clips mentioned in this section are not available to view on the website but are readily available to buy or rent from the usual outlets or from other mentioned sources.

"The great Northern European painters", Hollander writes, "beginning in the 15th century, used light as if it was alive, inviting it and coaxing it to expand and create its own visions. Light and shade, the essential components of photographic and cinematographic art, were first given their true freedom by Rembrandt, their decisive enlargement into the imaginative world. Moving camera poetry was made possible by him. It was Rembrandt who single-handedly raised the stakes, and set the standard the camera would have to meet."

Anne Hollander points to paintings by Rembrandt such as the very late Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis or the 1646 Adoration of the Shepherds as examples of artwork which generates a deep emotional response in the viewer through the play of light and shadow: "Inspired lighting puts the atmosphere into motion, so that it overflows the space and reaches toward the viewer; meanwhile the figure style and compositional mode suggest continuous motion in a shifting frame. The result is moving drama without strong colour, vigorous action or surface detail."

Jack Cardiff and Gordon Willis, both Oscar-winning cinematographers, have spoken about the influence of Rembrandt on their approach to lighting. Jack Cardiff is the cinematographer of the Red Shoes and Black Narcissus. Gordon Willis is the cinematographer of the Godfather trilogy, All the Presidents Men, Kluge and Woody Allen films such as Annie Hall and Manhattan.

The BBC series Moving Pictures includes a 20 minute feature on the work of Jack Cardiff in which he discusses his love of painters such as Vermeer and Rembrandt: "I believe that if they had existed today, these painters would have been magnificent cameramen. Most of the painters used a front light which is 45 degrees high which went onto the face making a shadow under the nose. Here you can see a painting by Rembrandt that uses the same lighting as this photo-image of Marlene Deitrich."

Black Narcissus: (01:16:00–(01:21:25)

This unsettling film explores the dangers of both emotional restraint and unchecked passion. *Black Narcissus* is one of the most visually stunning technicolour films ever made. This scene is a famous example of Michael Powell's expressionist technique.

A 3 minute feature on Gordon Willis is included in the DVD of extras in the *Godfather* collection. Willis discusses his approach to period lighting in the *Godfather 2* and analyses a number of key scenes from *Godfather 1* and *2* that employ chiaroscuro techniques derived from his study of the paintings of Rembrandt.