

Painting with Light: John Alton

John Alton is considered by many to be the greatest of all noir cinematographers. Alton perfected many of stylised camera and lighting techniques of film noir, including radical camera angles, wide-angle lenses, deep focus compositions, the baroque use of low-level cameras and a sharp depth of field. His groundbreaking work with director Anthony Mann on films such T-Men, Raw Deal and He Walked by Night is considered a benchmark in the noir genre.

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.

John Alton also gained fame as the author of the seminal work on cinematography 'Painting with Light', which is still in print. In the book, Alton discusses the importance of 'Jimmy Valentine lighting' or the positioning of a key light directly below the faces of villains, so that they take on a grotesque look. There are examples of this lighting composition in his films with Anthony Mann and in the noir classic, The Big Combo. Another unique Alton visual trait is eerie, off-center compositions in which an isolated figure is briefly glimpsed at the extreme lower corner of a frame.

The BBC series **Moving Pictures** includes a 20 minute feature on the work of John Alton in which he discusses how he studied the paintings of Rembrandt in European art galleries. The feature explores Alton's black and white work with Anthony Mann as well as his celebrated colour photography on films such as An American in Paris and Elmer Gantry.

A Personal Journey through American Movies: (02:23:00–(02:25:22)

In the BFI DVD 'A Personal Journey through American Movies', Martin Scorsese discusses the work of John Alton in his exploration of the noir genre.

T-Men (directed by Anthony Mann): (00:34:32 - 00:35:00)

In this sequence, two men hold a conversation over a lampshade, and Alton photographs them from below the lamp, aiming straight upward at their chins and using an extreme wide-angle lens that makes them look grotesquely elongated.

