

Three Point Lighting

The classical Hollywood studio film is an example of three-point lighting – key, fill and back lights used in combination to light the subject. Three-point lighting is the most commonly used lighting scheme and it can enable us to understand how lighting affects one’s perception of a character or a setting.

The **key light** is the main source of illumination, but if used alone it will leave shadows.

Another light is therefore required to fill in these areas of darkness and to soften the shadows the key light has cast. This has become known as the **fill light**, a secondary light source of slightly less intensity than the key light which is placed at eye level.

Yet even this combination of key and fill light must be supplemented further if a director is seeking to create a sense of depth. The third light source that provides the necessary depth is known as the **back light**, as it is placed above and behind the subject. Used on its own, the back light alone would create a silhouette of the subject. But the triple combination of key, fill and back lights, separates the subject from its environment and creates a feeling of depth.

Lighting techniques can be divided into high key or low key categories. A low-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in an image of almost uniform brightness. This is termed **high-key lighting**. This is a standard, conventional lighting scheme employed in Hollywood genres such as the musical and the comedy.

A high-contrast ratio of key and fill light will result in **low-key lighting**, producing dark shadows and a night time effect, faces will often be bleached white against a black background. Genres such as horror and film noir employ low-key lighting for its atmospheric shadows and intense contrast of light and darkness.

Cinematographers use light and shade to direct the audience’s attention to a particular part of the filmic space. Lighting can often be used as a characteristic of the style of a whole film or over a number of scenes. The classic Hollywood film is usually characterised by a full lighting effect – high key lighting. This approach to lighting was developed in the early days of the studio system to ensure that all of the money spent on creating the image, designing the set, etc, could clearly be seen.

The use of low-key lighting to create shadows and atmospheric effects originated in German Expressionist cinema. These stylised techniques were incorporated into the Hollywood style of lighting in the 1940s and 1950s in a series of films that later became collectively known as film noir. Many of these films were directed by German émigré directors who had worked on the original German Expressionist films.

Deep focus cinematography is a technique used to keep several planes of the shot in focus at the same time (foreground, medium ground, background). By allowing several actions to be filmed simultaneously, deep focus cinematography offers an alternative approach to the use of editing to present actions in a series of separate shots. More often than not, directors employ a combination of deep focus cinematography with extended long takes to enable them to dispense with editing. Some directors, such as Woody Allen, use these techniques in order to generate a better, more assured performance from the actors.



[Flying Saucer and Rock and Roll 3](#)

This black and white sequence is an example of low-key lighting. The director employs this lighting style throughout the film to create a mood of threat and danger.

'Visions of Light' is a 90 minute documentary, available from the British Film Institute, that charts the history of cinematography. Many of the most accomplished light-cameramen in cinema history feature as well as key films such as Citizen Kane and the Godfather. The opening sequence provides a useful introduction to the art of cinematography. The documentary includes many examples of both high-key and low-key lighting. 'Visions of Light' also contains a short section devoted to the work of Greg Toland, the cinematographer on Citizen Kane. It would be useful to view this feature on Greg Toland in combination with the Citizen Kane clip listed below.

Citizen Kane: (00:17:58–00:21:55)

This clip is not available to view on the website but is readily available to buy or rent from the usual outlets.

In the work of Orson Welles, the long take and deep focus cinematography are combined to create stunning black and white compositions. Orson Welles is one of the most celebrated directors in film history and his first film, Citizen Kane (1941) has been consistently voted the best film ever made in successive polls by film critics and filmmakers. In this famous scene from Citizen Kane, Welles uses the long take with deep focus cinematography to execute a brilliantly expressive backward tracking camera move and keep three planes of the shot constantly in focus – the young boy in the background; his father in the medium ground; and his mother in the foreground. This technique is also known as composition in depth and for Welles it was an aesthetic in itself.