

Lighting in Layers

by Serena Lee

The first thing you see is the brightest.

The next thing you see is not actually there.

Owing to the fact that they imply more than one light source, double shadows have come to signify dubious morals and hidden motives. The doubling of light creates an uncanny presence; subconsciously we do not register this as a contradiction of the pervasive unity of first light, commonly accepted as natural – we only recognize that having more than one shadow doesn't feel quite *right*.

This isn't something I can just explain to you; it's a look, you know? Reminds me of this photo - old postcard, wildgrass at magic hour, soft focus, too grainy but in that cheesy 1970's way...but not quite. Like that but not quite.

They were talking about the Look again; she was trying convince him of a certain economy of light and shadow. It was an obscure aesthetic that she kept returning to, always with a flustered incoherence, that was exacerbated by her dislike of collaboration. He was convinced that fluorescent would solve all their problems, but she stood her ground.

The position of the Backlight from the Key allowed for ample space should the subject feel inclined to flail around, but this was uncertain. Uncertain as to whether or not the subject would move at all. Uncertain as to the colour and grit of its surface. They had mentioned another product shoot, but this was too hot for hand cream or toothpaste. Besides, this was bigger and more complex than squishy little tubes; there was the potential for diverse flattery. This was a set with real promise; it could handle stucco, even velour. It was a clean look; good enough for gloss print, good enough for TV, good enough for those expansive lightboxes in airports that are viewed in horizontal passing from moving sidewalks.

I'm not nostalgic, I'm just using that as an example, okay? ... but I don't know what you know, so I'm just giving you a simple example because that way I know you know what it is I'm talking about... Don't call me that; that's not the point...no, it's not about nostalgia! I just want a specific look.

An effective description of the subject can be achieved by lighting in layers; the trick is to consider light as a sharp blade that carves away shadow to reveal surfaces, defining the edges and thus the form of the subject. In its addition, light subtracts, and shows the contours that are perceived as limits; where the subject begins, ends, and is separate from the surrounding space.

This method of description achieves the impression of natural light, consistent with broadcast standards, leaving the viewer undistracted by mise-en-scène and focused on action.

This is not just yellow, that's what I'm trying to tell you, it's not just a colour or a temperature adjustment or whatever... You can't just colour correct it, I mean, you can't just slap on a filter in post-. No, no, I'm not - no, it's not about nostalgia, come on - this is not decorative, it's important.

He was taking Chinese brush painting classes when they had started working together. The project hours had been adjusted to accommodate those Wednesday evenings. In rudimentary passing, he had mentioned how grass is stroked, compositions contrived, edges implied. She knew that he had a thing for negative space. This diagrammatic first impression had always irritated her, much like West Coast jazz did; she was exasperated by his brand of abstraction.

To avoid double shadows, the Key dominated from its angle, five degrees from the centre line. It was almost balanced to daylight, as was the Backlight; the Fill on the other hand maintained the warmth typical of tungsten and was considerably more diffuse than one would expect.

Presumably the confidence of the Key had been adjusted for the Special Glint. The studio had a growing industry reputation for their new development in flattery. Power tools were among the early subjects. The effect resulted from a winning combination of minute focal and tonal adjustments in the Key that consequently dictated the placement of the Backlight. This set in particular would give the impression, to those in the know, that an extraordinary look was being triangulated, but it would be just as easy to assume that the lamps were only waiting to be nudged into a conventional formation. At first, the Glint required a temperamental arrangement that was prone to overheating; one subject had fainted on such a set although the incident had been more or less attributed to hairspray. This brand of flattery for print was a game of focus, but ultimately the degree of its success would depend on the subject.

What's wrong with re-inventing the wheel? ...I agree, yes, simplicity, sure, but look, bottom line is, I just can't stand the fluorescents. Look, we can afford to do something new – what's wrong with you, don't you at least want to try this out?

Among the many things to take into account when lighting the subject:

- whether or not it is stationary
- whether or not it will melt
- whether or not to feature curves, edges, or angles
- the diversity of its reflective and absorbant surface qualities
(for example, in the case of the subject being eyeshadow on a model, featuring an increased amount of minerals and therefore an increased light-refracting quality that gives her a “shimmer”)
- the floor, the wall, ceiling or other reflective surfaces, none of which appear in the shot, but could possibly interfere should the subject begin to move
- the things that might enter the shot, some of which might be solid or not
- the good angle/good side (an obvious one, but nevertheless, important)

The floodbox was a nice touch – they were trying something new. The floodbox covered the Fill light which at first glance appeared to be tungsten but upon uncovering, one would immediately see that it was in fact a fluorescent light with a combination of orange and yellow filters, applied casually with tape that was now beginning to melt. Fluorescent lights naturally emit a faint green tone, barely perceptible to the human eye but noticeably garish on screen. They are favoured because of their moderate temperature; it is only after prolonged periods in tight spots that they begin to heat up, but then it is always a manageable heat. Nevertheless, thick leather gloves on any set are a wise precaution.

Once, when they used to do most of the installation themselves in the smaller venues, she noticed a fleeting attraction to him. They worked closely in those days, and in retrospect she chalked it up to the combination of his profile and the splendid old redheads they had been using. His accentuated angles had caught her off-guard; she resolved to ignore it. They would use those lamps for several more shows until they had all burnt out or were lost to the European Union's dispassionate commitment to sustainability. She knew he had finished his last cup of coffee for the morning and she could hear him relent through sarcasm:

So you want to reproduce the Kodak tungsten look of sunlight that's slightly crisper than late afternoon Northern Ontario indian summer as it would appear through oak trees on an enclosed veranda facing south-west through late 19th century farmhouse windows, in a white cube studio with three-point lighting?

In most cases with three-point lighting, the Backlight is not worth mentioning in great detail, however the importance of shadow is not to be underestimated. Edges carved out of shadow by a correctly considered light reflect bulk and space.

A typical example of overly dramatic backlight is the photo on the cover of *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*, where the halo of his hair is treated as a discrete effulgence, discrete from the blue background, discrete from his face in shadow.

They agreed to meet for lunch to re-discuss shadow. She tossed her phone into her purse, grasped her keys, and slid on oversized animal-print sunglasses. Groping her way out of the darkened hallway, she braced herself for the noon outside.

Adjustments can be made to the subject, the lights, the set, and where applicable, the camera – but there is no simple answer for counter-acting, compensating, embellishing, capitalizing on the qualities of reflection and absorption:

do you spray some glycerin on the subject? vaseline?

do you sand it or hairspray it to dull excessive shine?

It is difficult to come up with solutions on set, under pressure, in the heat of the moment. Gaining familiarity with basic three-point lighting will allow you to comfortably improvise in manipulating light and shadow for effective narration.

There were footsteps in the hall. Entering, the gaffers cursed from the corners of their mouths; someone had forgotten to strike the set and now the lights were needed in the next studio. The gaffers sensed that the lamps could not be rushed and fished out their leather workgloves. They pulled the plugs and slouched in the wings, waiting for the lights to cool in the dark.