

Goal 2: Creating Mood

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Ways to use lighting to develop elements of story such as character and plot.

“It is difficult to articulate the subtleties in cinema, because there aren’t words or metaphors which describe many of the emotions you are attempting to evoke.”

—Conrad Hall, present-day Cinematographer

The lighting of a scene sets an emotional tone. As much as music can evoke instinctive reactions so can different types of lighting. These reactions are subconscious and, for the most part, universal. Whether the lighting is bright and the colors of the objects revealed, high or low contrast, or monochromatic, all influence the mood of an image. Lighting plays a critical role in creating mood and ambience; it closely relates to the story and purpose of a piece.

This chapter takes an in-depth look at **goal two of lighting: creating mood**. Creating mood involves many subtleties, and like a musical score, it should have a consistent flavor for an entire narrative, yet at the same time vary from scene to scene to enhance the storyline at that particular moment.

4.1 VISUAL TENSION

Images may have greater or lesser degrees of visual tension. An image may have balance and unity or be unbalanced and chaotic. It may be restful to the eye or full of movement. It may have a harmonious color scheme or be full of contrasts in color and value. All of these attributes will add up to create the level of visual tension in an image.

Visual tension leads to emotional tension. The visual tension in our images should be designed to parallel the story. As the action becomes more dramatic, the visual tension should increase; as the action becomes more peaceful, the visual tension should decrease. Thus, as image crafters, we partake in bringing the audience emotionally into the story being told.

4.1.1 CONTRAST

“Contrast is what makes photography interesting.”

—Conrad Hall, Cinematographer

One of the greatest visual contributors to the mood of an image is the level of contrast in the image. The term *contrast* has several meanings, a few of which are listed below. Contrast, in all of its forms, creates tension.

con-trast

1. to set in opposition in order to show or emphasize differences;
 2. the use of opposing elements, such as colors, forms, or lines, in proximity to produce an intensified effect in a work of art.;
 3. the difference in brightness between the light and dark areas of a picture, such as a photograph or video image.
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Visual contrast creates visual tension. In reference to imagery, the term *contrast* usually refers to the range of values found in the image, in other words, the *overall contrast range*. Images may be categorized as being either high contrast or low contrast. High contrast images have a large range of values, all the way from black to white. Low contrast images, on the other hand, have a limited range of values, such as using only mid-grays. High contrast images have more visual tension, while low contrast images have less visual tension.

High contrast images are often used to add drama. Renaissance painters often put even simple still lifes in high contrast to give the subject presence. Having a full range of values may even in some cases make an image more visually interesting. Combining high contrast with a dominance of dark values will create an oppressive, isolated, sad or scary feel (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Primitive man had an instinctive fear and caution of the dark, for dangers can be lurking where one cannot see. Dramas typically use high-contrast lighting. Horror films use high contrast with a dominance of dark values.

Figure 4.2 High-contrast lighting and an odd up-light on the face of the bust create an eerie mood in this still life (Damien Wisdom).



Figure 4.3 Taking a tip from the film noir genre, this environment uses shadows, low light angles, and contrast to create a feeling of mystery (Geoffrey Crowell).



Low-contrast images have less visual tension and often seem safe, cheerful, or in some cases even stagnant (see Figures 4.4 through 4.6). Scenes with even illumination and few shadows usually create a comfortable and predictable feeling. Comedies and sitcoms, for example, are typically well illuminated with few shadows as are newscasts and children's cartoons.



Figure 4.4 Low-contrast lighting is perfect for this playful character (Leandro Ibraim).



Figure 4.5 Limiting both color and contrast enhances a peaceful feel in the still life of fruit (Andrea SipI).



Figure 4.6 Overall bright lighting and lively colors are well suited to this image from the comedic short *Drag'N'Fly* (SCAD-Atlanta students; lighting artist Bianca Gee).

Contrast is more than just the range of values in an image, however. Another definition of contrast is the juxtaposition of any type of dissimilar elements. We may have dissimilar values, colors, shapes (rounded vs. angular), horizontal and vertical lines, moving vs. nonmoving objects. For example, lines in parallel have no juxtaposition contrast and little visual tension (Figure 4.7). Dissimilar orientation of lines and objects, on the other hand, will create greater visual tension (Figures 4.8 and 4.9). The key to this type of contrast is that the elements be significantly different and that they be placed next to or near each other.

Figure 4.7 A gradient from black to white has a full contrast range but lacks visual tension.



Figure 4.8 Juxtaposing black and white areas creates more visual tension.

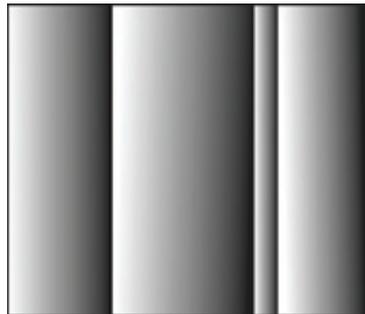
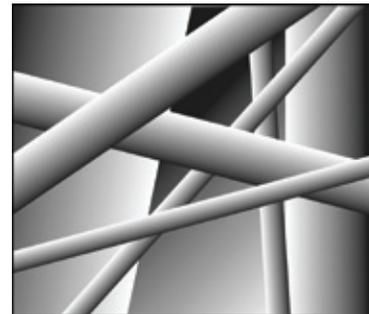


Figure 4.9 Contrasts in both value and shape increase the visual tension even more.



Lighting establishes the contrast level of a scene. Lighters control the contrast of a scene by adjusting the intensity of their lights, making some areas brighter and others darker. Contrast can be reduced by brightening shadows so these areas are not significantly darker than areas under direct illumination. Lighting plays a direct role in juxtaposing contrasts in value by illuminating objects so that bright edges appear next to dark ones. The hardness or softness of the light affects mood as well. Dark, crisp shadows and harsh transitions (as with hard light) lend themselves to stark moods. On the other hand, light, blurry shadows and gradual transitions (as with soft light) lend themselves to gentle images and softer subjects. In general, hard light produces more contrast and more visual tension, while soft light produces less contrast and less visual tension. (For more on soft and hard light, see Chapter ??, “Light Diffusion.”)

4.1.2 HIDING AND REVEALING ELEMENTS

Choosing which elements to hide or reveal is a powerful storytelling tool. When tonal values are used to conceal areas the audience wants to see, mystery, suspense, or anxiety are produced. Often the “bad guy” is introduced in silhouette. Perhaps a person’s eyes, which are naturally the focal point in a face, are concealed (Figure 4.12). Other times we may clearly reveal an element previously hidden. Figures 4.10 and 4.11 show how lighting can affect the mood, even on the simplest of subjects.

In *The Godfather* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola; cinematographer Gordon Willis), the mafia leader Don Corleone was characteristically lit in a manner to hide his eyes and thus hide his thoughts, making him inscrutable (see Figure 9.1). During his final moments, however, additional light reveals his eyes and softens his features, leaving him seeming exposed and vulnerable. Lighter values can also conceal, such as using a white mist in the classic horror film *The Fog* (1980), or as in *Sin City* (2005) where the cannibalistic Kevin likewise had his eyes hidden, in this case by glasses that were always a graphic white.

One of my all-time favorite scenes is from the great film *Apocalypse Now*. Based on a novel by Joseph Conrad called *The Heart of Darkness*, the film follows a young captain who is seeking out a Green Beret who has disappeared into the deepest jungles of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. The Green Beret, named Kurtz, is suspected to have gone insane and has established himself as a god among a violent native tribe. When late into the film we finally reach Kurtz, he is shrouded by darkness. Light slowly reveals the long anticipated and enigmatic character. At first, and all we can see are his hands, brightly lit and symbolically washing in a bowl. Next a thin line of illumination outlines the back of his shaved head. Finally, he leans slowly into the light and his face appears out of the darkness.



Figure 4.10 A simple subject, lit without contrast or tension.



Figure 4.11 A simple subject lit to convey a sense of mystery.

An important principle in lighting is, *What is not lit is as important as what is lit.* Don't believe that when lighting you have to show everything. As modern-day cinematographer Sven Nykvist has said: "Nothing can ruin the atmosphere as easily as too much light."

4.1.3 THE UNEXPECTED AND CHAOTIC

Elements that are unexpected or chaotic create visual tension. When it comes to lighting, this can be any unusual light. Placement affects mood most noticeably when the light placement is odd or unexpected. For example, an upward-pointing light on a person's face is so unnatural that it's often used to represent villains or to create a disturbing feeling. Or a light may flash on and off, as in the case of a lightning storm or a strobe. An interior light that flickers is likely to create an uncomfortable feeling as well, especially if the room suddenly goes completely dark. In *Apocalypse Now*, the varying colors of fireworks going off during a battle scene enhanced the feeling of chaos and madness. In *Toy Story 3*, in the scene where the toys are facing possible destruction in the trash compactor, revolving spotlights heighten the sense of danger and urgency. Figure 4.13 shows a student short about a monkey trying to disable a self-destruct button, in which a flashing red siren increases story tension.



Figure 4.12 Hiding what the audience wishes to see creates tension.

Figure 4.13 The short *Monkey Business* (Chris Palmer) uses a flashing warning light to enhance the urgency of the monkey's dilemma.

4.2 COLOR AND EMOTION

"Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways"

—Oscar Wilde

Different colors and combinations of color evoke emotional responses. Throughout the history of man, color has been linked to symbolism and emotion. Linking color with emotion is part of our everyday language: a person may be "green with envy," so mad they "see red," or they "feel blue." Evidence of color symbolism occurs as early as 200,000 years ago in primitive cave paintings where red, the color of blood, is believed to have symbolized life (Figure 4.14). A brief look at any culture will reveal color linked to powerful symbols, intended to conjure specific emotional reactions.



Figure 4.14 Paleolithic rock painting of equines in the Lascaux caves of southwestern France, 17,000 B.C.