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Lighting for Video

Lighting is at the heart of all photography regardless of the format. It's about using your camera to tell a story and the way that you, as the storyteller, use light to enhance that story.

Photographers and videographers alike observe natural light and the way it impacts on things. It could be harsh summer sunlight that casts strong overhead shadows, or a ray of warm late afternoon light that rakes across a room after a rain shower. Light, and the way it falls, sets a mood. One challenge for the videographer is to be able to observe these naturally occurring moods and recreate them with artificial lighting.

Pulling out the right light for the occasion is essential to shooting sequences that have impact and style, as well as making your life a little easier.

There are only a few situations where adding lighting will not improve the look and mood of a scene. So when should you think about setting up lights?



Consider extra lights when you need to:

- Enhance mood
- Separate planes to convey depth
- Reveal character and texture
- Complement composition
- Direct attention in a scene
- Lift the overall level of light of a dark location



Enhancing Mood

Just one light placed in the right position can completely change the look of a scene. Permitting the light to strike a particular part of a subject or a particular area in a scene, results in strong contrast.



Lighting offers a way to convey depth by highlighting just a few chosen planes in the scene and letting other areas remain in darkness.



This increase in contrast is a valuable quality and it happens as you close down the iris to set the exposure based on the area of the scene that is illuminated. This has the effect of darkening unlit areas and provides gutsy light and shadow, so essential to an otherwise flat scene.

With the aid of reflectors or bounce boards, the contrast can be lessened and trimmed to taste by bouncing light from the light source back into the scene.

A few well placed lights can work wonders in a scene and blocking some of that light from selected areas can immediately take it into a different realm – a transformation from the ordinary into the unexpected. This is only a fraction of

the 'magic' that creative lighting can weave, and it offers a possible answer to the problem of an otherwise flat and boring scene.

Light that skims the surface of objects reveals textures that are not often noticed. Any plane will benefit from light that skims



Set at the correct angle, a single light source will reveal surface textures.

along the surface in the same plane.

At the same time, this single light can create quite dense shadows. Use collapsible reflectors or a bounce board to reflect light back into this shadow area. Bouncing light will reduce the harshness of the "texture light" without diminishing the overall look.



Scenes that have been lit seem easier to compose. Creating light and shade provides more opportunities for balanced composition.

Lighting that enhances your images provides a commanding visual advantage, but the addition of thoughtful composition makes a powerful combination. Playing off lighting and textures, balanced composition seems relatively easy.



Stills and video cameras have an eagerness to show absolutely everything in a scene and tend to "see" into dark areas. This can give you flat results.



By limiting the output of light to just selected areas, it's possible to direct the attention of your audience, sometimes for dramatic effect.

It is quite a job to create dark places in flat evenly lit interior scenes and, without additional lighting, it is an almost impossible feat. Lighting will enable you to create dark areas by providing lit areas, the areas that

become the basis for setting your exposure. You will now be in a position to direct audience attention to those parts of the scene by hiding the ordinariness of other parts.



Attaching a light to a Magic Arm provides a safe out of the way solution.

There are times when there is just not enough light to record decent video. This is certainly the time to bring out a light or two. Setting a light in a corner and pointing it at the ceiling is usually the fastest and easiest solution as the resulting bounced light immediately lifts the overall brightness of the room, and does it without creating too many shadows.

From a safety aspect, attaching a light to a Magic Arm provides a safe, out of the way, solution. Operation of the light through a dimmer adds further control.

When not to Light

- When there is sufficient light level and you have little time
- When you are not able to easily hide your lights and stands
- When you feel that there is sufficient interesting natural light to tell your story.

If you are presented with a well illuminated large area, the best option could be to shoot with the available light. Unless you are in a position to enhance the whole area with lighting, it may be better to go with it, just as it is. Choosing not to light, you will be able to maximise your time by shooting substantial coverage - you will not be limited by potentially difficult lighting shadows, lighting stands and electrical cables. It's a tricky call sometimes.

Putting a Basic Kit Together

One of the key features of a versatile lighting kit is the inclusion of a number of different types of lights – a variety of lighting fixtures that each have an individual or unique quality. The lights should be chosen with your potential shooting situations in mind. These could include:

- Open face/hard lights – intense, hard-edged, focusable from spot to flood
- Semi-open face/hard lights – broad beamed and usually non-focusable
- Soft lights – soft, even, flattering, creating soft shadows
- Spots – hard but controllable
- Fresnel lights – hard and focusable from spot to flood
- Fluorescent lights – soft and very flattering with cool operation. Daylight or tungsten tubes are interchangeable
- HMI lights – they provide high output and instant hard daylight balanced light
- LED lights – soft, cool operation and dimmable

However, having a case full of lights is not the only thing. Creating real mood in your video images means directing how and where light falls, and of almost equal importance, where it does not fall.

To “paint” with light, controlling and creating shadow, you’ll need to have a number of additional bits and pieces, so there is lots of room for improvisation.

- collapsible black cutters
- gobos, nets
- cookies & flags
- umbrellas
- black wrap
- coloured gels
- diffusion material
- black & white bounce boards
- reflectors & scrims
- silks, cutters, and flags, almost as many tools to restrict and modify light as there are to generate it.

With thoughtful composition and the right exposure settings, these tools can form the basis of a lighting kit designed to create dramatic images. You can turn the ordinary into something extraordinary.

It’s a good idea to be familiar with the different kinds of lighting fixtures because each one has its own sweet spot. Here are some of the common types of lights used.

Open Face Focusable Lights

Their output can be dimmed with a correctly rated electronic dimmer and shaped with Cinefoil (aka Blackwrap). They are the perfect lighting source to bounce into reflectors, umbrellas,

These lights are compact and versatile. The hard, direct output can be modified with little fuss. The light itself can be focused to make a brighter, narrower beam or widened for broader output. Either way, they produce hard, dark shadows that can be very dramatic.



white ceilings or walls. The barn doors (the hinged rotating metal panels) are usually relatively large and designed for maximum containment of the light and limiting the unwanted light spill.

Examples of open faced lights are: 800W Laniro Red Heads, 2000W Blondes, 800w Arrilights, 1000W Lowel DPs and 500W Omni-lights.

Open Face Non-Focusable Lights

Similar in some respects to open face lights which can be focused, they have a broader beam that is ideal for attaching diffusion materials. An example is the Lowel Tota-light.

Soft Lights

These are designed to output soft light and only soft light. This is sometimes achieved by bouncing the lamp backwards into a large integrated reflector or by attaching a soft box to the front of the lamp housing.



Softlights have the advantage of emitting light that produces an attractive soft wrap-around effect making gentle graduation from light to dark, all without creating hard shadows. Working with softlights has lots of plusses but there are a few minuses.

They provide even coverage which allows subjects or objects to move about relatively freely within the lit space, however, they have to be positioned quite close to the subject to give them real sense of shape. As a result, it can be tricky keeping them out of the shot.

Because of the broad output of soft lights, they produce a considerable amount of scattered light spill and it can be a challenge to cut this light off light coloured walls. This can be done using large surface cutters at the light source.

To achieve a decent cut, flags, black collapsible disks and other tools designed for blocking light and creating shadow areas, need to be positioned closer to the subject. Hard light sources make

this task easier – they have a longer throw and are easier to shape.

Examples of soft lights are: the Lowel Softlight, Rifa-lites and Westcott soft boxes.

Fluorescent lights

Flouros as they are often called, output cool soft light at several times the output of incandescent halogen sources. The colour temperature (daylight or tungsten) of the light can be changed by simply swapping over to a different set of fluorescent tubes. This has the benefit of maintaining the high output level as light absorbing colour correction gels are not required to be fixed in front of the tubes to make this colour conversion.

Examples of Fluorescent Lights are: Lowel Caselites and Kino-Flo's Diva-Lites.

Compact Spot Lights

A few compact spots are essential to a lighting kit. While a kit consisting of spots only would be quite limiting, their use in combination with other light sources adds an edge, and is the foundation of a well rounded and versatile lighting kit.

Examples are Dedolights, Peppers and the Arri Junior 150.

Fresnel Lights

These lights feature an optical lens consisting of concentric rings of segmented lenses. This construction results in a controlled directional beam. Fresnel lights can be focused to light very specific areas and have very little spill as the barn doors are very effective at cutting the light output. They too can produce hard light, but tend to operate at cooler temperatures than open face lights.

Some examples of Fresnel Lights are: Arri Junior 300 & 650 plus.



HMI Lights

HMI lights are used in the film and television industry because of their intense output, as well as their efficiency. The colour of light they emit is close to that of midday sunlight.

These lights are used extensively to fill in the harsh shadows created by the sun on exterior location shoots. Being very powerful, they have enough punch to fill in the shadows on bright sunny days. Because the colour temperature is that of daylight, HMIs with their blueish output (relative to tungsten light), are often used with special gels to create a "moonlight" effect for night shoots. With proper insulation these lights can also be used for underwater lighting.

Examples of HMI lights are: ArriSun 2.5k through to 20k and the compact Dedolight 400D.



LED Lights

Relatively new technology in video and film lighting, Light Emitting Diodes – LEDs. Lights can be used to produce a flattering soft and cool spread of light that has quite special qualities. They have extremely low power demands when operated with batteries and are usually balanced to daylight. Many LED lights have dimmers built into them and their output can be altered with virtually no colour shift.



Conclusion

In my next article things become very interesting. I'll show you how to position your lights and how positioning is the key to creating stunning images, using just one or two.