

Lighting Design in Film:

How Lighting Techniques Communicate Story, Characters and
Worlds

Faye Langan

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy
for the BA (Honours) Degree in Design for Film – Production Design

Submitted 12/02/2026

Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Faye Langan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'F' and 'L'.

Faye Langan

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my thesis supervisor Dr, Nina Holmes for her guidance, encouragement and patience throughout writing my thesis. I would also like to thank my family for supporting me during this thesis especially my Dad, Brian Langan who gave me an added perspective by reading my thesis and giving me feedback.

Abstract

In this thesis I explore the importance of lighting within film and how it helps expand the audiences understanding and reception of both plot and character. I have chosen and analysed specific films that represent various uses of lighting in film in particular coloured lighting and its psychological and physiological effects on the viewer, how specific forms of lighting can represent aspects of a character and how light can be used to build and depict worlds. I use a combination of academic sources, visual analyses of films and interviews from the minds behind these lighting choices in order to portray my points. I want to show that by simply putting some extra thought into lighting film you can achieve an interesting and useful layer to the art of film.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Lighting with Colour	5
La La Land	6
Saltburn	13
Climax	19
Chapter 2: Light and Character	30
La La Land	30
Plainclothes	36
Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Murder Mystery	40
Chapter 3: Lighting Worlds	44
Social Class	44
Multiverse	48
Surreal Horror	52
Conclusion	62
Bibliography	64

List of Figures

- Figure 1: Film Still, *A Stranger on the floor* (1940), Boris Ignter, United States, RKO Productions + Figure 2: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), John Huston, United States, Warner Bros Available at: <https://theoldshelter.com/chiaroscuro-1940s-film-noir-atozchallenge/> <https://www.theroxytheater.org/show/the-maltese-falcon-in-35mm/> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2026]. _____ 1
- Figure 3: Painting, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* Caravaggio, M. M. da (1599–1600) Available at: <https://fstoppers.com/historical/was-caravaggio-first-master-light-514582> [Accessed 6 Feb] _____ 2
- Figure 4: Tv Show Still *Stranger Things* (2016-2025), Matt Duffer, Ross Duffer, Netflix Available at: <https://www.netflix.com/title/80057281> [Accessed: 29 Jan 2026] _____ 3
- Figure 5: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 6
- Figure 6: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 6
- Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] Figure 7: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 7
- Figure 8: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 8
- Figure 9: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 9
- Figure 10: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 10
- Figure 11: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 11
- Figure 12: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 12
- Figure 13: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 12
- Figure 14: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 12
- Figure 15: Film Still, *La La Land*, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY> [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026] _____ 13
- Figure 16: Film Still, *Saltburn*, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025] _____ 14
- Figure 17: Film Still, *Saltburn*, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025] _____ 15
- Figure 18: Film Still, *Saltburn*, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available _____

at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	16
Figure 19 and 20: Film Still, Saltburn, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to Painting, The Calling of Saint Matthew Caravaggio, M. M. da (1599–1600) Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	16
Figure 20: Film Still, Saltburn, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available	
at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	17
Figure 21: Film Still, Saltburn, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available	
at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	18
Figure 22: Film Still, Saltburn, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available	
at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	18
Figure 23 : Film Still, Saltburn, (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Available	
at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.d6674b8e-5b88-45be-9361-63dd98818413?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb [Accessed 12 Nov 2025]	19
Figure 24: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	19
Figure 25: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	20
Figure 26: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	21
Figure 27: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	21
Figure 28: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	22
Figure 29: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	23
Figure 30: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	24
Figure 31: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	24
Figure 32: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	25
Figure 33: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	26
Figure 34: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	26
Figure 35: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	27

Figure 36: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	27
Figure 37: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	27
Figure 38: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	28
Figure 39: Film Still, Climax, (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films Available at: https://www.primevideo.com/dp/amzn1.dv.gti.b6b44a1d-1ace-f01f-6a13-8eb71b3ab8c9?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb (Accessed: 4 Jan 2026)	28
Figure 40: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	30
Figure 41: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	31
Figure 42: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	31
Figure 43: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	32
Figure 44: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	33
Figure 45: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	34
Figure 46: Film Still, La La Land, (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8tfq2fKFvY [Accessed: 12 Jan 2026]	35
Figure 47: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	36
Figure 48: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	37
Figure 49: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	37
Figure 50: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	38
Figure 51: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	38
Figure 52: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	38
Figure 53: Film Still, Plainclothes, (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon Available at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uuid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026)	38

at: https://www.rakuten.tv/ie/search?uid=207410&q=plainclo&content_type=movies&content_id=plainclothes (Accessed: 9 Jan 2026]	39
Figure 54: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	40
Figure 55: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	40
Figure 56: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	41
Figure 57: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	41
Figure 58: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	41
Figure 59: Film Still, <i>Wake Up Dead Man</i> , (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81458424 [Accessed: 8 Jan 2026]	42
Figure 60: Film Still, <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> , (2014), Anderson, 20 th Century Studios Available at: https://www.disneyplus.com/en-ie/browse/entity-6a6e4a89-b567-47af-9943-1b5230a2d6cd?distributionPartner=google [Accessed: 17 Jan 2026]	44
Figure 61: Film Still, <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> , (2014), Anderson, 20 th Century Studios Available at: https://www.disneyplus.com/en-ie/browse/entity-6a6e4a89-b567-47af-9943-1b5230a2d6cd?distributionPartner=google [Accessed: 17 Jan 2026]	45
Figure 62: Film Still, <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> , (2014), Anderson, 20 th Century Studios Available at: https://www.disneyplus.com/en-ie/browse/entity-6a6e4a89-b567-47af-9943-1b5230a2d6cd?distributionPartner=google [Accessed: 17 Jan 2026]	45
Figure 63: Film Still, <i>Parasite</i> , (2019), Bong Joon Ho, South Korea, CJ ENM Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5NP31XCyVM [Accessed: 17 Jan 2026]	46
Figure 64: Film Still, <i>Parasite</i> , (2019), Bong Joon Ho, South Korea, CJ ENM Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5NP31XCyVM [Accessed: 17 Jan 2026]	47
Figure 65: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026]	48
Figure 66: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026]	49
Figure 67: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026]	49
Figure 68: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026]	50
Figure 69: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026]	50
Figure 70: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026] to <i>Fallen Angels</i> (1995), Wong Kar Wai, Hong Kong, Kino Lorber Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/fallen-angels/umc.cmc.5m4aec1bqgnl54e5k35ma0jfa?action=play [Accessed: 9 Feb 2026]	51
Figure 71: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026] to <i>The Matrix</i> (1999), Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, United States, Warner Bros. Pictures Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPGpstr0rtU [Accessed: 9 Feb 2026]	51
Figure 72: Film Still, <i>Everything, Everything, All at Once</i> , (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24 Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B0DG9PFN8T [Accessed: 14 Jan 2026] to <i>Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon</i> (2000), Ang Lee, United States, Hong Kong, Sony Pictures Classics Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGPEa7E8jOk [Accessed: 9 Feb 2026]	52

Figure 73: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	53
Figure 74: Picture, Study of how different colours of light can manipulate an image from Article (2009) Alberto, Research Gate Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-47-Incidencia-de-la-luz-sobre-los-objetos_fig16_216601511 [Accessed: 11 February 2026].	54
Figure 75: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	54
Figure 76: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	55
Figure 77: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	55
Figure 78: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	56
Figure 79: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	56
Figure 80: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	56
Figure 81: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	57
Figure 82: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	57
Figure 83: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	57
Figure 84: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	58
Figure 85: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	58
Figure 86: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	58
Figure 87: Film Still, <i>Suspiria</i> , (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available at: https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051jlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play [Accessed: 20 Jan 2026]	59

Figure 88: Film Still, *Suspiria*, (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available
at: <https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051ljlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play>
[Accessed: 20 Jan 2026] 60

Figure 89: Film Still, *Suspiria*, (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available
at: <https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051ljlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play>
[Accessed: 20 Jan 2026] 60

Figure 90: Film Still, *Suspiria*, (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available
at: <https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051ljlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play>
[Accessed: 20 Jan 2026] 60

Figure 91: Film Still, *Suspiria*, (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziata Available
at: <https://tv.apple.com/ie/movie/suspiria/umc.cmc.6s4z051ljlevqsobrtlixje25?action=play>
[Accessed: 20 Jan 2026] 61

Introduction

In this thesis I've chosen to research the topic of lighting within film. A requirement for every film you've ever seen whether it's the illumination or lack of illumination, intentional or not, it's there. In watching some of my favourite films, I realised that lighting repeatedly impressed and stuck with me, especially when it was used intentionally to drive the narrative of the plot or to further explore characters. While this is such a useful and relatively simple concept it is underused in modern cinema. Good 'lighting is the craft of storytelling instead of simply filming with available light and just getting it recorded for convenience'. (McClellan, 2020, 211)



Figure 1: *A Stranger on the floor* (1940), RKO Productions Figure 2: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Warner Bros

The 1940s and 1950s in cinema, also known as the film noir era, is often considered the golden era of lighting. Invariably shot in black and white, these films limited the tools available to portray story visually were limited, so cinematographers relied heavily on light and shadow to create their shots. They mainly used Chiaroscuro lighting: 'an artistic technique that uses contrast between light and dark to create a sense of depth and form'. (Zama, 2017) This created high-contrast, striking visuals that were both creative and effective.



Figure 3: *The Calling of Saint Matthew* Caravaggio, M. M. da (1599–1600)

During this time, filmmakers drew inspiration from great painters such as Caravaggio or Vermeer. These painters had studied light in great depth from an interesting perspective as ‘Painters must tell the whole story in a single frame’ (Blain Brown, 2002, 158); by drawing from these experts, often referred to as the ‘masters of light’ (Rob Baggs, 2020), cinematographers of the film noir era often produced incredibly rich and coherent images.

However, following the introduction of Technicolour, which quickly became a more popular way of making films around the same time as film noir, this chiaroscuro lighting became less utilised. Technicolour required a huge amount of light to achieve its bright colours, creating ‘over-lit, super bright images. Cinematographers fought for lighting with shadows’ (McClellan, 2020, 212). This was ‘a setback for natural, expressive lighting’ (Blain Brown, 2002, 159)

Despite this, black and white films continued to be expressive and artistic. We never quite returned from this in terms of lighting and in today’s ‘digital world; cameras are more sensitive to light, producing realism and we’ve lost the quality of “sculpting with light’ (McClellan, 2020, 212). Lighting has become lazy for most contemporary films as often ‘digital

filmmakers are no longer using light to push story; they're just using light for convenience' (McClellan, 2020, 212). While this has been present for a long time in recent years we've seen even more of a shift from film as artistic expression to commercial money maker. 'Digital has come to be working with 'found light' (available light), because it's easy and fast' 'Fast and convenient is 'documentary style', not Art.' (McClellan, 2020, 213)



Figure 4: Comparison of lighting in similar scene in season 4 and 5 of *Stranger Things* (2016-2025), Netflix

This cheap, quick method of lighting film has been coined 'Netflix Lighting' (Aldredge, 2025). With streaming services now the main way viewers consume TV and film, and the constant demand for new content, this way of lighting has become more common. This can even be seen when comparing early and later seasons of some TV shows. For example, the earlier seasons of *Stranger Things*' (Duffer, 2016) were filled with interesting choices of light and shadow, creating high contrast and layers adding to the overall atmosphere of the show. However, the final season is dominated by flat dull scenes, lacking in imagination, favouring visibility and a clean shot over artistic intent. All these choices and cutting corners lead to uninspiring works of film with very little depth, not taking advantage of the full scope of tools filmmaking offers.

Through this research and as I became increasingly aware of the predominance of flat, uninspired lighting in modern cinema, I wanted to seek out films that did use lighting to the greatest extent and advantage. Films that took inspiration from the great lighting techniques of the past and added their own artistic vision. Filmmakers that ask themselves: Why? What is the purpose of this light? What or who does it represent? How will this be

perceived by the audience? There are so many ways in which lighting can be used to contribute to the development, expression and the audience's understanding of the plot and characters.

In Chapter 1 I look at coloured lighting and its psychological and physiological effects on the viewer. I analyse scenes from the films *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), *Saltburn* (Fennel, 2023) and *Climax* (Noe, 2018). In Chapter 2 I explore how lighting is used to represent characters and express their inner worlds and emotions through analysing scenes from the films *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), *Plainclothes* (Emmi, 2025) and *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Murder Mystery* (Johnson, 2025). Lastly, in Chapter 3 I look at how light contributes to world building, focusing on representations of social class in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014) and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), creating a multiverse in *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* (Khan, 2022) and portraying a surreal horror world in *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977).

This research gives a diverse but concise analysis of the importance and effectiveness of intentional lighting within film. By visually analysing my chosen films, drawing from academic resources as well as interviews with the cinematographers or directors, I provide insights into the reasons why certain choices were made, while also examining the impact lighting has on the viewer's perception of each film.

Chapter 1: Lighting with Colour

The use of coloured lighting can have a profound effect on the viewing experience and overall impact of a film. While the choice of colour is often assumed to be purely for aesthetic reasons there has been a lot of research into how it can affect and influence people, both psychologically and physically. This can provide important insights when analysing the visuals of a film.

Colour is often used to represent emotions and character traits and to drive narrative development. 'Cool colours such as blue, green and grey are linked to detachment and logical reasoning over emotions. Warmer colours have gained associations with beauty, nature and feelings.' (Barnwell, 2017, 155) Colours evoking emotions are often linked to what different colours symbolise and represent. 'Red recalls to mind a feeling of danger, a warning. It also suggests blood, life, love stimulating, wine, passion, power, excitement, anger, turmoil, tragedy, war, sin and shame.' (Barnwell, 2017, 159) Blue 'always seems so distant and may be soothing but it still radiates seriousness, cold and yearning with an undertone of sadness.' (Keller and Weiss, 2010, 40)

Studies also show a difference in physiological reactions to warm colours and cool colours. Research into physiology shows that 'under red lighting our bodies secrete more adrenalin, increasing our blood pressure and our rate of breathing and actually raising our temperature slightly. Yellows and oranges have a similar effect but not as warming as strong reds.' (Zelanski, 1999, 28) By contrast, for cooler toned colours 'research shows that green or blue will slow our heartbeat, decrease our temperature and relax our muscles.' (Zelanski, 1999, 28) As seen in the 'Bellantoni experiments.' (Barnwell, 2017, 153).

Colour has the power to transform and inform the viewers' experience of a film. Below, I consider three films that use colour in a highly effective way: *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), *Saltburn* (Fennel, 2023) and *Climax* (Noe, 2018).

La La Land

La La Land (Chazelle, 2016) is a bright colourful film centred on the relationship of two characters, Mia and Seb, both with each other and with their own careers. The film, including its lighting is heavily inspired by theatre creating a deliberately artificial setting. Coloured lighting is used to frame and develop the story throughout the film. It is used both to show emotion and to assign specific symbols and roles to them.



Figure 5: Red light seen in *La La Land*, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Red light here represents passion and love. We first see red lighting when Mia is singing into the bathroom mirror about her hope that she might meet someone she loves in the future. We next see red used to backlight Mia outside the bar when she first hears Seb playing music. Red is used again when she runs away from a dinner with her partner, whom she is unhappy with, in order to meet Seb at the cinema.

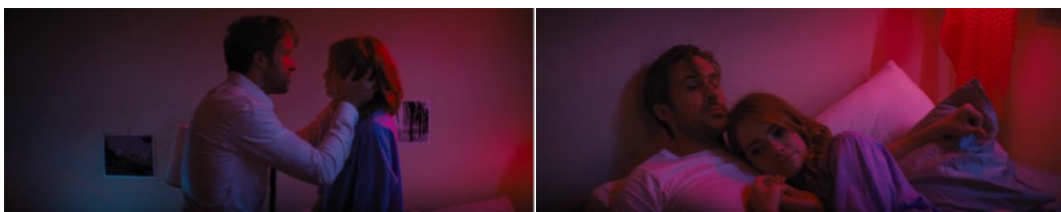


Figure 6: Apartment lit with red light in *La La Land*, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Later, when they're in a relationship together, Mia finishes reading Seb the play she wrote, and their conversation is full of love, hope and passion. The room is saturated in red, representing their love for each other and excitement about their future careers.



Figure 7: Red light seen in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Red light also fills the backstage right before Mia performs her failing play. The last time red is used is during an imagined reality sequence, showing what could have been if they had stayed together. Red represents key points in the film when the characters are full of love and passion, when their relationship was hopeful.



Figure 8: Blue light on Mia in crowd in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Blue lighting represents sadness, melancholy and sometimes nostalgia in this film. We see Mia lit in bright lighting, happy to see Seb performing on stage and pursuing his dream, until she realises he is not passionate about the music he's playing. The lighting on Mia shifts to deep blue as she is saddened to see him selling out and losing his passion for jazz.

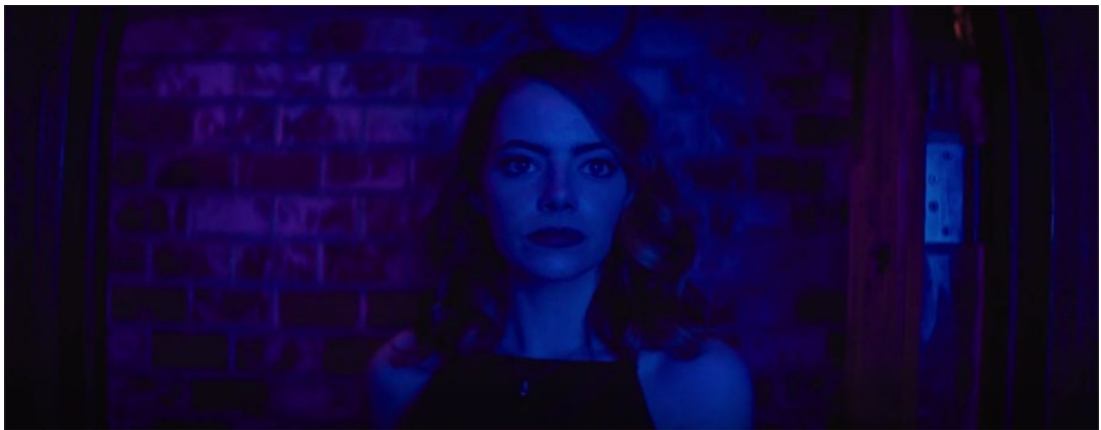


Figure 9: Blue light on Mia in final scene in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

In the final scene, we see Mia walk into Seb's jazz bar with her husband. She sits among the crowd in a sea of blue lighting as she watches Seb perform. The melancholic atmosphere is represented by this blue light as she watches him finally pursuing his passion. She is happy for him but nostalgic and sad for what they had and what could have been.



Figure 10: Green light while singing in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Green is used to represent impending danger to their relationship. They are drenched in green light as they sit together, singing a song full of love, right before the breakdown of their relationship.



Figure 11: Apartment in green light in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

This green light again fills the apartment after Mia goes to Seb's "sell-out" concert. They eat a candlelit dinner against the backdrop of a green glow, holding a difficult conversation about their career paths. They realise that, in order to pursue their dreams, a future together may not be possible.

Throughout the film Seb is represented with the colour red in his costume and likewise Mia is often seen in blue. In moments of harmony, love and happiness, red and blue lighting combine in a perfectly blended purple.

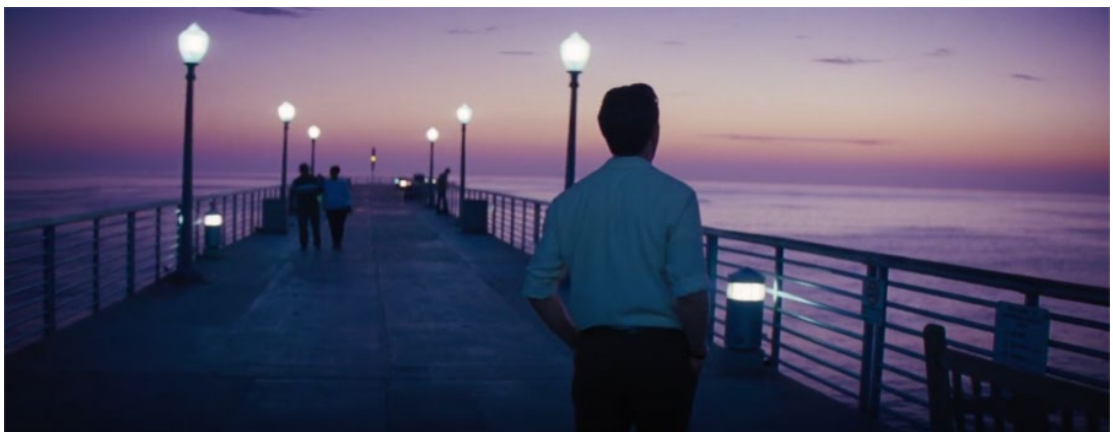




Figure 12: Scenes showing purple light in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Seb is framed by a purple glow from the sunrise after first meeting Mia; things are going well. During their day in the planetarium, a bright purple light shines as they dance.



Figure 13: Mia half lit in purple, half in blue in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

But we start to see a separation when Seb fails to come to Mia's opening show, with Mia half lit in purple, half in blue.



Figure 14: Purple light on couple in imagined reality in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

In the montage showing what could have been, Seb and Mia sit together in a purple glow, happy in their relationship.

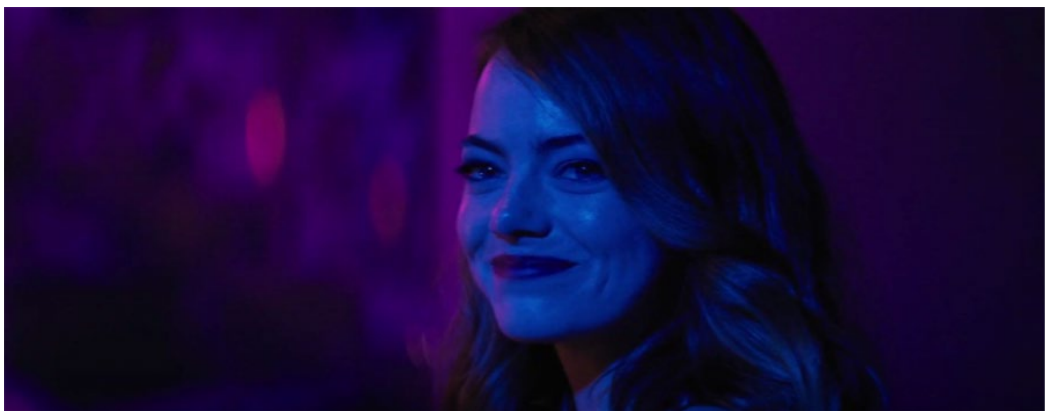


Figure 15: Final scenes showing purple light in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

In the final scene she turns from purple light to look back at Seb, her face now in blue and backlit with purple. They smile at each other, accepting that they are separated now and their time of harmony is behind them.

Saltburn

Most of *Saltburn* (Fennell, 2023) is shot using chiaroscuro techniques which involve beautiful contrasts of light and shadow taking 'inspiration from art, specifically the work of Caravaggio, known for his intense realism and use of strong contrast of light and dark' (Ford, 2023) noted by an interviewer in the Vanity Fair interview with the director Emerald Fennell and cinematographer Linus Sandgren. However, towards the end of the film as tensions build and untruths are revealed, there's a brilliant use of coloured lighting to express the characters' feelings and foreshadowing future moments in the story.



Figure 16: Oliver in birthday candle light in red room in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM

In the staircase scene, we see Oliver after his lies have been discovered, at his birthday party with the Catton family. A gorgeous, rich red light floods the screen with Oliver at the centre, his face lit by his birthday candles. The cinematographer, Linus Sandgren, described his lighting choices in this scene: “he’s basically inside the body of the Catton family” (Ford, 2023a). As the guests sing “happy birthday”, it becomes clear that none of them know Oliver’s name, despite being at his birthday party. He is the centre of attention yet utterly alone. As the only person highlighted in this candlelight, Oliver is isolated from these strangers. The red lighting that drenches this

scene also foreshadows what's about to occur – several deaths, including a bath full of blood.



Figure 17: Oliver at his birthday party in blue lit room in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM

Following this realisation of his isolation, Oliver is shown walking around his birthday party in an intense blue light, representing the sadness and loneliness of his situation. He looks around at all the people that once were his friends, all preoccupied and ignoring him. He watches on in this intense blue sadness as Felix is talking and eventually leaving with a girl. Oliver follows him, eventually killing him in the maze.



Figure 18: *The Catton Family's lunch after Felix Catton's death in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM*

A later scene opens with Oliver and the remaining Catton family sitting around the dining table having lunch, after finding Felix dead. There is an empty chair, an obvious absence where Felix should be. However, in shock and denial, the family are avoiding the subject, instead discussing unrelated mundane topics about last night's party and the cake.



Figure 19 and 20: *Farleigh at dinner table in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM with light comparable to: The Calling of Saint Matthew Caravaggio, M. M. da (1599–1600)*

Visually we are met with a subdued but brightly lit room pierced by sunlight from the windows, a familiar lighting style used throughout the film. These strong beams of light were heavily inspired by painters such as Caravaggio (Barnwell, 2017, 143). Bright natural light has been a defining feature of the summer at *Saltburn* (Fennel, 2023), reflecting the happy and pleasure-filled lives of the characters.



Figure 20: *The Catton Family's lunch after Felix Catton's death in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM*

The scene in the dining room is interrupted when the butler approaches the father, saying: "May I be permitted to close the curtains, sir? The coroner's outside and they need to pass the window." (Fennel, 2023) The father agrees and asks him to get it over with quickly. There follows a gradual shift in the atmosphere as tensions rise. Some try to continue the bland conversation as each curtain is closed, slowly turning the room red and dark. The sister pours a glass of wine, completely zoned out as the glass overflows, creating a vivid image, red wine spreading on a stark white tablecloth, like Felix's death staining the perfect family.



Figure 21: Venetia at the Catton Family's lunch after Felix Catton's death drenched in red light in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM

There is a struggle to close the last curtain as tensions grow, until finally the family is plunged into a sea of red and black, during which they hear Felix's body being wheeled by. At this moment, the darkness of their family's fate has become undeniable. James, Felix's father tries blocking his ears to drown out the noise and Elsbeth, Felix's mother begins coughing and spluttering. Venetia, Felix's sister begins drinking her wine, letting it spill down her white top. Although this contrast is not as obvious as the red wine against the tablecloth, it blends into the red hue of the room. Later, she lights a cigarette to ease her stress. This lit cigarette was previously used as a strong juxtaposition to a dark night sky, but it now blends in. Everything is coloured red, everything has changed.



Figure 22: The Catton Family's lunch after Felix Catton's death drenched in red light in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM

Farleigh becomes upset as the people around him pretend everything is okay but he can't pretend any longer. This brings the father to his breaking point. He becomes enraged, anger practically bursting out of him, he is "seeing red." He exclaims, "Eat it, eat it and shut up" (Fennel, 2023) to Farleigh. A further conflict finally leads to the exile of Farleigh from the family.



Figure 23 : The Catton Family's lunch after Felix Catton's death drenched in red light in Saltburn, (2023), Fennel, Amazon MGM

Climax

Climax (Noe, 2018) is a film that uses coloured lighting creatively and effectively to develop its story. The film is centred on a group of dancers at a party in their studio after hours. All is normal until it turns out the sangria they had been drinking had been spiked with LSD. We follow the group as they descend into chaos, much of it signified through changes in the lighting used throughout the film.



Figure 24: Relaxed scene before chaos in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

The first half of the film depicts the group chatting and dancing in mainly natural white light. As the evening progresses, and after a lengthy dance sequence, characters start to notice that something feels off, and they realised they've been spiked.



Figure 25: Scenes showing green side of room in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

The main character, Selva, starts to get overwhelmed as everyone, including herself, begins to show the effects of LSD. She walks away from the main brightly lit area to the other side of the room, which is dimly lit with green and red, representing her anxious energy and the feeling of impending danger ahead. This is the first time we see an entire shot drenched in colour, as opposed to natural light, visually signifying the turn the film has taken.



Figure 26: Selva trying to gain comfort in a hug in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

She heads back into the main studio where everyone else is gathered, still lit with the natural lighting, to try and get a grasp on reality. She hugs one of the dancers to calm herself down, then has to clean the floor where somebody has urinated. She accuses another character of spiking the drink. The contrasts between the coloured lighting and natural lighting shows a clear distinction between reality and the drug-fuelled minds of the dancers.



Figure 27: A mother lock her child away in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

One of the dancers has her child with her. When the dancers start to become more erratic and unpredictable, she brings him through the green half of the room, emerging into the colourfully lit corridors for the first time. She leads him through the chaos into a small storage room lit with interior warm white lighting, a glimpse of reality and safety amongst the insanity. Telling him it is for his own protection; she locks him in the room.

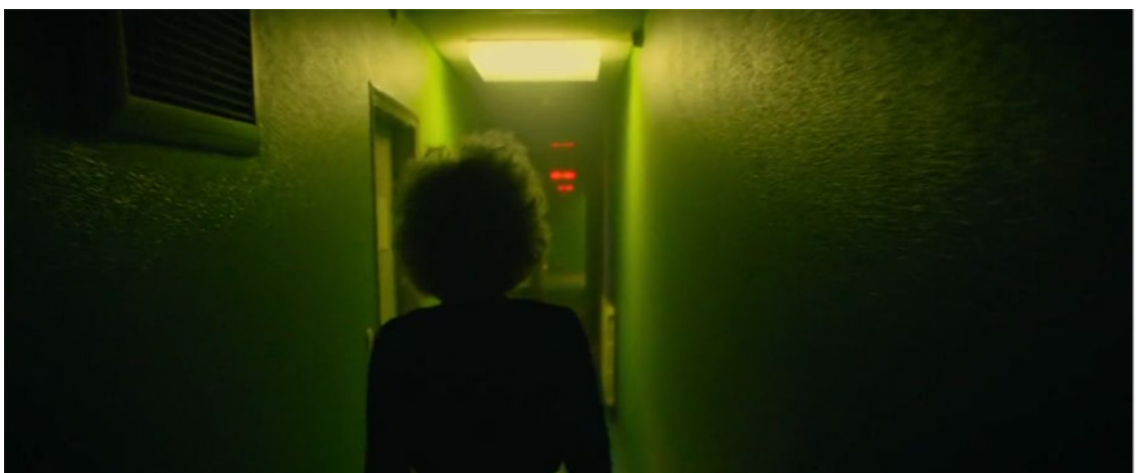


Figure 28: Ivana walking through halls lit with coloured lights in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

We then see Selva and another dancer, Ivana, walking through coloured corridors and rooms, each new space having either red or green light, before arriving at a room saturated in blue.



Figure 29: Lou distressed in blue lit room in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

Here she meets a distraught and upset woman, Lou, who is pregnant and sober. She explains her awful situation before she gets kicked in the stomach, the blue light filling the room accentuating the distressing scene.



Figure 30: A woman on fire in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

We then move into a room where we witness a character as her hair accidentally catches fire. The bright glow of the raging fire, which would in normal lighting be a stark contrast, drawing everyone's attention to the danger, instead blends into the red room, so it does not feel as drastic to the audience. There's so much chaos that nothing is shocking.



Figure 31: Lou walking around sober in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

Lou, whose sober state is made more apparent due to how intoxicated everyone else is, is trying to find calm and safety somewhere. As she walks through the corridors, the lighting alternates between natural and coloured lighting; she's confronted with chaos at every corner. By now, everyone except Lou is too far gone. The atmosphere is becoming more intense, aggressive and unsettled.



Figure 32: Selva going crazy lit in red in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

We see a character truly losing her mind, rolling around the floor, messing with her clothes in distress in a pink and red living room blending into the background. Referencing this scene, the cinematographer spoke of the deliberate choices made: “(she was) in front of the wallpaper with its forest design. I remember lighting it in a pinkish red, so she blends into the background in a very strange way with a lot of color separation. A kind of unreal lighting, like an image from a fairy tale, in the middle of hell.” (Reumont, 2025)



Figure 33: Selva in a bathroom in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

She then tries to find reality in a room with a mirror and green light as she drenches herself in water from the sink, trying to splash sanity into herself.



Figure 34: People going insane in the studio in Climax, (2018), Noe, A24

By the final sequence, all characters are at the end of their tether, entirely mad. Back in the main studio with the natural lighting, the camera slowly spins around, giving brief glimpses of every horrific event happening in the room, until the viewer becomes as disoriented as the characters themselves.



Figure 35: An entirely red room after main lights turn off in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

As we are reaching the “climax” of the film, the main lights suddenly switch off and we are plunged into a strobing rich red light.

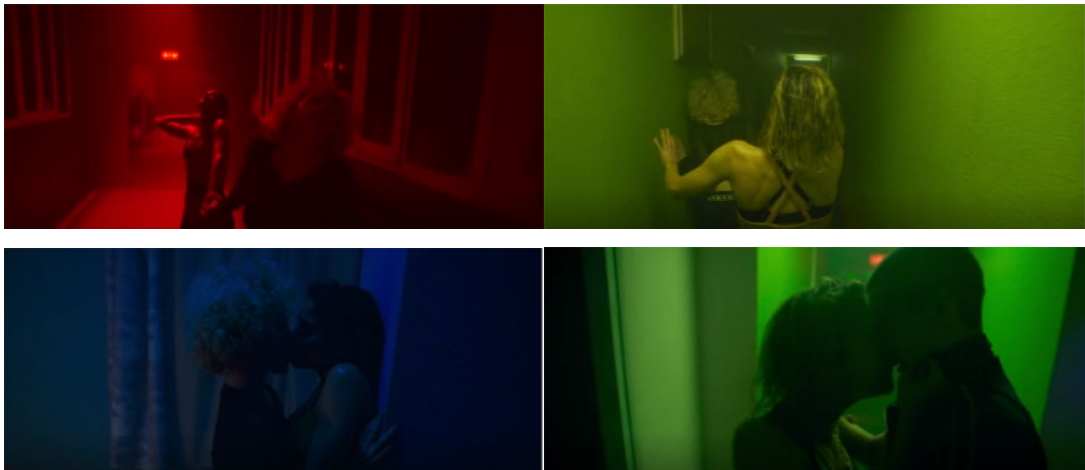


Figure 36: Series of scenes showing in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

For one last time we see all the richly coloured rooms of chaos. We see characters kissing, getting upset and being distressed.



Figure 37: Scenes drenched in red in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

Then we return to the main room filled with violence, chaos and pure insanity.



Figure 38: Doors opening bringing us back to reality in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

The film ends with the doors being opened by emergency rescuers. White light shines in, hitting the viewer with reality.



Figure 39: Final scenes in *Climax*, (2018), Noe, A24

We are confronted with the horrific journey we've been on with these dancers, by flicking through a montage of the various bodies in distress. In choosing to light *Climax* (Noe, 2018) with rich changing coloured lighting, the filmmakers envelop the viewer in the chaos, forcing us to share the characters' experiences and understand their mental state.

La La Land (Chazelle, 2016), *Saltburn* (Fennel, 2023) and *Climax* (Noe, 2018) all use colour in varying ways to convey different meanings but overall, they all prove how colour can enrich and develop a story visually. In chapter 3 there is further analysis of how coloured lighting helps to build the surreal horror world of *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977).

Chapter 2: Light and Character

In this chapter I shall be discussing how different sources of light can be used to represent characters and their inner worlds. Lighting can effectively portray emotions, feelings or thoughts without dialogue, body language or changing the physical set. In a manner of speaking, how a character is lit can turn the human brain inside out, externalising the internal feelings of a character. In the films I will discuss, very specific and deliberate choices of lighting have been made to portray characters. I will approach my analysis with the idea that you should 'study visual design as nothing in the frame is accidental. Every element, every colour, every shadow is there for a purpose' (Brown, 2002, 158).

La La Land

Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016) uses different types of lighting to define the characters and their passions in an effective way. Mia is often lit in three-point Hollywood style lighting. This choice of lighting represents Mia's passion being to become an actress, as it is the most common form of lighting used within film. By contrast, Seb is lit in spotlights, as if he was on a stage, because his passion is to become a jazz musician. This lighting is used both for passion for their career and for each other and love.



Figure 40: Mia in three-point lighting in *La La Land*, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

The first time we see this lighting used for Mia is when she's at a party, looking at herself in the mirror. She has hope for a better future in love and in

her career. The lighting here is not as obvious compared to later in the film; it's more subtle, marking the beginning of her passion.



Figure 41: Mia in three-point lighting in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

When walking home from the party, Mia stumbles upon a jazz bar and walks in to hear the music. As she stares at the piano player who we later find out to be Seb, the bar grows dim, with only her face being lit up by three-point lighting. She is full of passion, her smile gleaming in the bright light.



Figure 42: Seb in spotlight in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Later in the film we then meet Seb playing in a jazz bar and get the other point of view of the earlier scene. The lighting is just standard dim bar

lighting. He's being told to play a certain list of songs; he obliges and plays the songs, without enthusiasm, from the paper he's been given. Then he chooses to start playing an original piece, something he's passionate about. As soon as he plays the first notes, the bar around him grows dimmer and the spotlight shines on him, getting brighter as he plays with increasing passion. He's in his element; he cares about what he's playing. He's alone with his music and his passion; it's powerful and intimate.

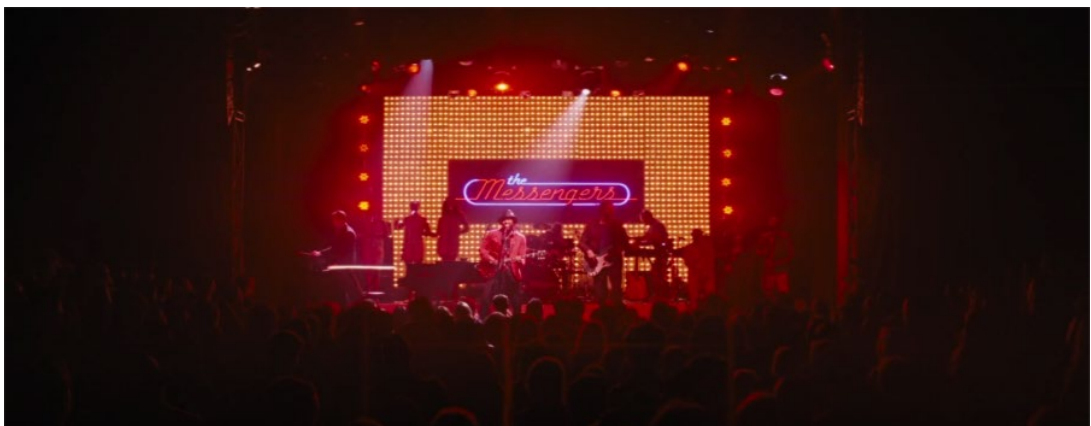


Figure 43: Seb in stage spotlight and on a fully lit stage in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Later we see Seb on a stage, playing jazz music to a large audience. It starts off with him under an actual spotlight as he plays, clearly coming from stage lighting as opposed to the unknown motivation of the spotlight in the bar scene. Mia is watching from the crowd, happy to see him successful. However, after the intro is played the entire stage lights up, no longer a spotlight on Seb, who blends into the background. He becomes a backing track to the main singer. He's playing 'fake' jazz, almost pop songs, something he'd never have played before. He has no passion for this type of music. Mia reacts with horror at what he has become, his spotlight dimmed. She wonders where his passion has gone.



Figure 44: Scenes showing lack of three-point lighting in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

Other scenes focus on Mia trying to pursue her acting career. Her one-woman show, which is a failure, is lit by dull, cold stage lighting.

Her early auditions for small roles in different films are held in the same basic brightly lit rooms under fluorescent lighting. However, she then gets a call back in which the entire story of the film is based and built around her. A project she can be truly passionate about.



Figure 45: Mia in three-point lighting in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

In this audition, she's asked to tell a story. When she begins telling her story the room becomes dark, and yet again, she is lit by Hollywood style three-point lighting. She is full of passion, putting all her emotions into this audition. This is her one shot; this is what she wants to do.



Figure 46: Final scenes showing Seb in spotlight and Mia in three-point lighting in La La Land, (2016), Chazelle, Lionsgate

In the final scene, the two forms of lighting are played out one last time. It's five years later and Mia has found herself wandering in with her new husband to Seb's jazz bar. She sits in the crowd as Seb walks up and starts playing music. The spotlight is on him and in the crowd, we see Mia lit up in a similar way to when she first saw Seb play. We are then transported into a montage of what their lives could have been if they'd stuck with each other. Before being transported back to reality, the lights dim. And they go their separate ways.

La La Land (Chazelle,2016) demonstrates how the use of different lighting techniques underlines the separate interests and passions of the characters. We experience how they are feeling in the world rather than what is objectively happening. It's a very simple idea yet extremely effective in this film. The lighting becomes a visual cue as to how they're feeling on the inside and towards each other.

Plainclothes

Another film that makes excellent use of lighting to represent characters is Carmen Emmi's *Plainclothes* (Emmi, 2025). This film depicts a young police officer, Gus, in 1990s New York who goes undercover to enforce anti-gay laws, conflicting with his true identity as a gay man. Throughout this film he deals with a lot of anxiety due to this tough position, at the same time as he is grieving his late father. Whenever he experiences panic and anxiety, to avoid being overwhelmed he looks into a light bulb and counts '1,2,3,1,2,3'(Emmi, 2025), a technique for him to relax and remain calm. This is shown by intense close-ups of the bright blinding lights.



Figure 47: Seeing the lightbulb for the first time in *Plainclothes*, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

The first time we see this light bulb is when Gus is freaking out in a cubicle, thinking about the innocent people he's arrested. Stressed and overwhelmed, he stares into the light as his panic heightens.



Figure 48: Lightbulb is shown during moment of panic in Plainclothes, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

Later on, Gus sits in the police station watching a training video on what to look out for and who to arrest. Tension builds as the projector flickers and flashes on his face as he watches and remembers the innocent gay people he has arrested, who he knows are not unlike himself. Again, at this tipping point of anxiety, he stares into the ceiling light.



Figure 49: Lightbulb shown during moment of panic in Plainclothes, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

The most intense use of this light bulb happens after Gus discovers that a letter from his lover is missing, confronting him with the possibility that his secret has been found out. In severe panic, he runs downstairs to the basement and turns on the light bulb, staring directly into it as he grows more flustered, more panicked.

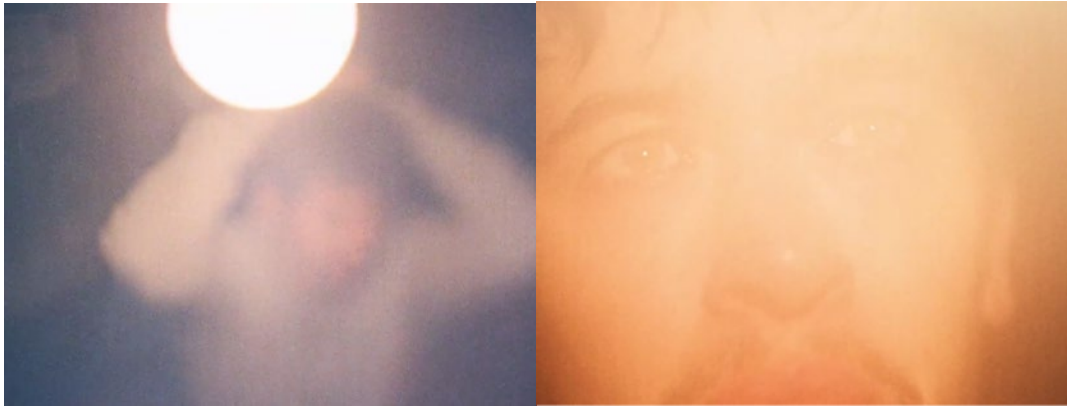


Figure 50: Lightbulb shown during moment of panic in Plainclothes, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

Sweat drips from him as if he's looking into the sun, burning up from it. He tries to calm himself down by remembering the last moments before things were broken off with his lover.



Figure 51: Red light is seen mimicking red light from rear car lights in Plainclothes, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

The tension of the scene continues to rise until the breaking point when he turns off the bulb and he's plunged into a bright red glow, intercut with flashes of his memories of his lover driving away, leaving Gus behind in a similar red glow from the taillights of the car.



Figure 52: Lightbulb scene for the final time during moment of panic in Plainclothes, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

In the final moments of *Plainclothes* (Emmi, 2025). Gus is trying to calm down in the kitchen, staring yet again at a bright bulb. But before he can repeat the second '1,2,3'(Emmi, 2025), his uncle comes in, interrupting him before he can feel relaxed and bring down his anger and tension. His uncle starts talking about the letter, believing it was addressed to Gus's late father from his father's lover. Our main character had been using his late father's name. The uncle talks negatively about what he thinks he has found out about his brother, unaware that in fact it is Gus's letter.



Figure 53: Scenes showing chandelier during a fight in *Plainclothes*, (2025), Emmi, Magnolia Pictures

Gus struggles to contain his anger but it boils over and he explodes, physically attacking his uncle. The dining room light swings from the ceiling, in and out of frame. Gus ends up pushing his uncle out the window, after which we finally see him tell his truth, that the letter is his.

Throughout the film the use of a single light bulb marks the high points of anxiety and stress is an effective way of portraying to the audience similar feelings of stress as we are forced to look into this bright light. Unlike some of the other films mentioned which use various lighting techniques the light bulb is a diegetic light which is a light that is shown within the story, the characters can see and interact with it. (Fiveable, 2025)

Thus, this lighting motif being more of plot device to drive narrative, indicating stress and guilt oppose to using specific lighting techniques to portray this panic, showing a different but equally as effective approach to representing character with light.

Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Murder Mystery

Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Murder Mystery (Johnson, 2025)

is a film which touches on themes of faith and religion under the guise of a classic whodunnit murder mystery. Lighting is used to show the struggle characters face in their faith and belief at difficult points. Light is often seen as a symbol of God – the sun being his creation, he is the source of light in people's lives: 'Strong beam of light is the hand of God itself' (Brown, 2002, 159). It is no surprise that light itself plays a role in this film.



Figure 54: Benoit Blanc talking about his faith in *Wake Up Dead Man*, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

Towards the end of the film, the priest, Fr Jud Duplenticy, asks detective Benoit Blanc how he feels when he's in the church. Blanc begins talking about the architecture, but soon moves on to his grievances with the church, its practices and his general disbelief in God. As he is ranting, the church becomes dark, the sun has left, God has left.

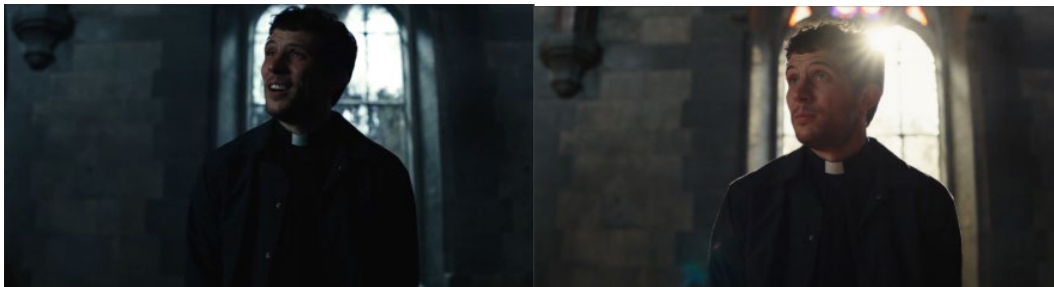


Figure 55: Fr Jud accepting Blanc's views in *Wake Up Dead Man*, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

The priest responds, giving a refreshingly open-minded view, agreeing with the detective, but he posing the question: 'Do these stories convince us of a lie or do they resonate with something deep inside us that is profoundly true?' (Johnson, 2025). As he says this the light rises behind him through the window, giving the priest an almost halo-like effect.



Figure 56: Benoit Blanc leading up to the reveal in *Wake Up Dead Man*, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

As the film approaches its climax, Blanc describes the crime in detail before the great reveal. The church is darkly lit as he discusses how difficult this impossible crime was to solve, saying it is ‘One which draws me, an unbeliever in every sense of the word, into the realm of belief.’ (Johnson, 2025).



Figure 57: Beams of light flooding the church in *Wake Up Dead Man*, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

The detective is about to reveal who the murderer is when a strong blinding ray of sunlight comes through the windows, shining directly on him, stopping him in his tracks.

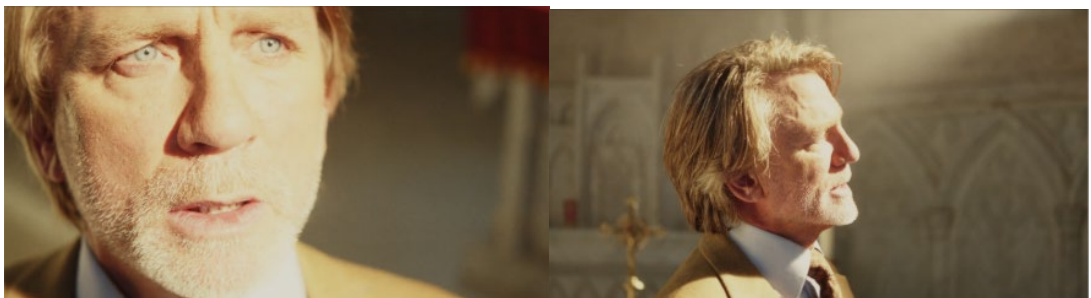


Figure 58: Benoit Blanc's Damascus moment from *Wake Up Dead Man*, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

He's asked if he's okay and he simply replies 'Damascus'(Johnson, 2025), a direct reference to the pivotal moment in the Bible when Paul is converted on 'the road to Damascus', and becomes one of Jesus' disciples: 'suddenly a light shone around him from heaven'(The Holy Bible, NKJV, 9: 3) He was blinded by the light for three days. This led him to his faith in the grace of God.



Figure 59: Benoit Blanc claiming he cannot solve this case in Wake Up Dead Man, (2025), Johnson, Netflix

The detective says 'I cannot solve this case'; 'scales fall from my eyes'(Johnson, 2025). He had a revelation, although it was not what was expected. He had not suddenly become religious, but he had gained faith in the priest and grace for the enemy. He chose to not take all the glory of figuring out the killer himself instead, allowing the murderer to confess to the priest under God's roof, allowing her to stay true to her faith despite the circumstances. This use of light to represent God in Christianity is not a new concept in fact 'Light is one of the most ancient and significant metaphors adopted by Christianity by which to understand the significance of Jesus Christ.' (Whidden, 2014).

Light is used in this film not only as a direct biblical reference to God, but also to more generally represent faith and hope, both in lack and abundance, as these characters grapple with their personal faith and beliefs.

The lighting choices in these three films have one thing in common: they are all ways of portraying the characters inner worlds silently, essentially wearing their hearts on their sleeves. In these shots we see light 'used not just to illuminate (the) characters, sets, or objects, but also as a main focal point' (Ablan, 2002).

Chapter 3: Lighting Worlds

In this chapter I want to discuss creating and defining worlds through the use of lighting. World building is an essential part to every film and ‘When such works are well made, they can pull their audience in so skillfully that not only is one’s imagination stimulated without much conscious effort, but the whole experience is a pleasurable one.’ (Wolf, 2014, 16). It should be a device to drive the story telling as ‘World-building is often something that occurs as a background activity, allowing storytelling to remain in the foreground of the audience’s experience’ (Wolf, 2014, 30). Lighting can contribute to the creation of these worlds immensely. I will draw on topics covered in previous chapters, especially colour and different lighting methods, and how they are used to create worlds for different genres and to represent real world divides.

Social Class

Lighting can be used to define and create worlds separated by social class, with different lighting used for the rich and the poor. ‘Social class is one of the most widely used concepts in modern sociology and social science’ (Levine, 2006, 2). In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014) we follow a lobby boy, Zero, and a concierge, Gustave, as they work in a hotel for rich people, providing a glimpse of the ‘behind the scenes’ lives of the workers.

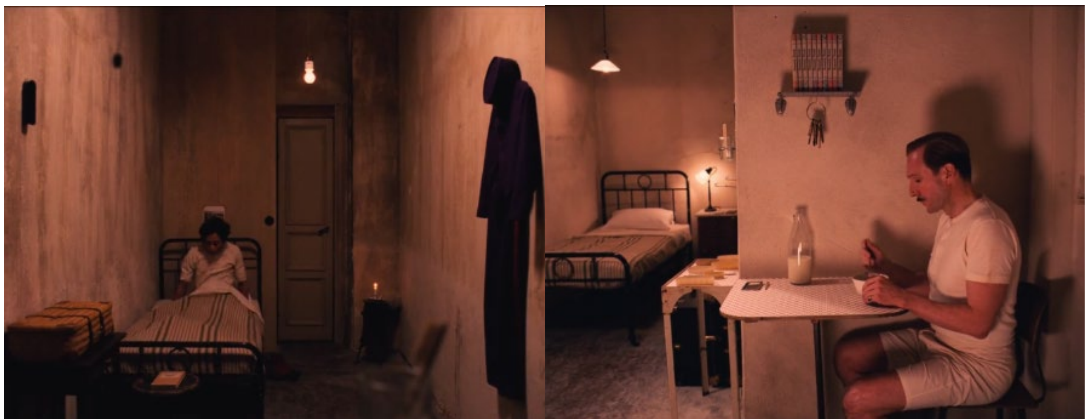


Figure 60: Workers living quarters in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, (2014), Anderson, 20th Century Studios

Zero comes from a rough background with very little experience or education but he has landed himself this job. His bedroom in the servant quarters is dark and dull with one single bare lightbulb to light the whole

room. Gustav's quarters are similar, but as he's slightly above Zero in status, there is a little more light in the room.



Figure 61: Workers working environments in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, (2014), Anderson, 20th Century Studios

The same can be said for the working areas with harsh fluorescent overhead or single lights, purely practical and dull.



Figure 62: Wealthy side of the hotel in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, (2014), Anderson, 20th Century Studios

In contrast to this, the public areas of the hotel consist of huge rooms where the rich stay, bathed in extravagant lighting and chandeliers. A huge number of lamps line corridors and the lobby area. These differences in lighting highlight rich versus poor, lack versus excess.

This method of using light to define class and social status can also be seen in the film *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), which follows two families: the rich Park family and the poor Kim family. While the homes they live in show the difference in status quite starkly, with the Park family living in a modern

mansion and the Kim family in a cramped semi-basement apartment, these settings also open up a great opportunity to represent class with lighting.

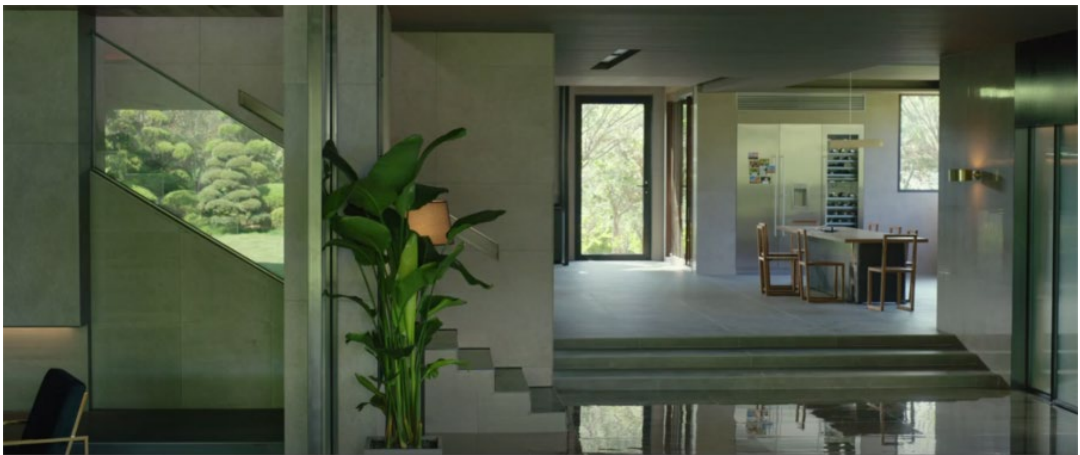


Figure 63: Rich Park Family house in Parasite, (2019), Bong, CJ ENM

The Park family mansion has big high windows, bathing them in beautiful natural sunlight all day. This shows how comfortably and happily they're living, emphasising their high social status.



Figure 64: Poor Kim Family house in *Parasite*, (2019), Bong, CJ ENM

By contrast, the Kim family have one thin basement window that lets in only a small amount of sunlight, forcing them to rely mainly on harsh artificial fluorescent lighting. They're uncomfortable and cramped. The low light and lack of ease in getting sunlight show their struggles as lower-class citizens. Both *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014) and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019) use quite simple and logical light sources for different scenes. Marxists in reference to social class say 'Capitalists could not exist without workers, for all value was produced by the labor of workers' (Levine, 2006, 2) and that this class system is 'based on exploitation.'. In order for the rich people in these films to live such luxurious lives they must draw from somewhere else, the workers. The choice to show these small differences between classes adds an extra layer into the world building, subtly informing the audience of each character's status within the world.

Multiverse

Everything, Everywhere, All At Once (Khan, 2022) is a science fiction film that takes place across the multiverse. Using a limited amount of time and budget, the crew had to come up with a creative way to make over 50 visually distinct universes. Amongst other tools, the filmmakers used both lighting and colour to achieve this, allowing for drastic visual change without having to build a whole new set.



Figure 65: Natural light at start of film in *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24

We begin in the main universe with relatively natural lighting. In their home we see lots of practical lamps with white light and daylight creating a dim room with a comforting feeling. Similarly, we see overhead office fluorescents

lighting another scene in this main reality both using light that makes sense for the circumstances, not particularly stylised. This sets an easily identifiable base to come back to.



Figure 66: First sign of the multiverse in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24

Colour can be used for colour coding to distinguish between two worlds or realities. This 'helps tell (the) story and ensures the audience can navigate between them' (Barnwell, 2017, 158). Coloured light can be an integral part of this coding, defining separate spaces.

When Evelyn, the main character of *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* (Khan, 2022), realises she has powers and can shift between parallel universes, we see the shift in lighting, the main natural light juxtaposed with a world with a green hue. This different lighting becomes code for which universe is which such as the universes defined by different genres using different colours which I touch on later, helping the audience's understanding of the story.



Figure 67: Different coloured lighting showing multiverse in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24

The film also uses a variety of techniques to show the switch from universe to universe. Rapid switching is signified by close-ups of a character's face as different colours flash across it.



Figure 68: Light at different angles in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24

Another interesting use of lighting to show change is when a light is bounced around a face in a triangular path. This highlights how angles of light can manipulate our perception of the object we're looking at.



Figure 69: Different coloured lighting in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24

During one of the final scenes, two characters fight across the entire multiverse. Rapid lighting changes are used to show these quick shifts between different worlds. The characters stay the same while the background and lighting on their faces change creating drastically different shots without having to change too much in terms of set or costume etc.

The film also plays with genre, with each universe based within a different genre, and they are lit accordingly



Figure 70: Comparison of scene *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24 to *Fallen Angels* (1995), Wong, Kino Lorber

For example, the romance world is inspired by Wong Kar Wai's lighting style. We see quite dimly lit scenes with the only lighting being this green tinted light creating a moody atmosphere very similar techniques can be seen in *Fallen Angels* (Wong, 1995) so for those viewers who have seen Wong Kar Wai's films will hopefully notice these similarities and brought into those romance films instantly.



Figure 71: Comparison of scene in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24 to *The Matrix* (1999), Wachowski, Warner Bros. Pictures

The sci-fi action movie is reminiscent of *The Matrix*. Using a lot of darkly lit shots with bright backlighting and unnatural light like greens to create unease and add to the sci-fi atmosphere.





Figure 72: Comparison of scene in *Everything, Everything, All at Once*, (2022), Khan, A24 to *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000), Lee, Sony Pictures Classics

The action Kung Fu world is inspired by *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000). We see brightly lit scenes with a washed out almost dreamlike feel recreating the original scenes almost exactly. By using these familiar aesthetics including lighting style and atmosphere, the audience can connect what they're seeing on screen with a pre-established world. Half the job of defining the world is already done.

Overall, this film shows how effective light can be at defining space, setting the mood, and establishing genre.

Surreal Horror

In *Suspria* (Argento, 1977), the world building relies heavily on the lighting to portray its surreal horror atmosphere. The cinematographer Luciano Tovoli used a lot of rich bright colours, sticking mainly to primary colours saying “(he) used usually reassuring primary colours only in their purest essence, making them immediately surprising, violent and provocative. This brings the audience into the world of *Suspria*” (Williams, 2018). In discussing his use of such bright colours, as a way to signify that it was not only a horror but also surreal, Tovoli says ‘a horror film brings to the surface some of the ancestral fears that we hide deep inside us, and *Suspria* (Argento, 1977) would not have had the same cathartic function if I had utilised the fullness and consolatory sweetness of the full colour spectrum. To immediately make *Suspria* (Argento, 1977) a total abstraction from what we call “everyday reality” (Williams, 2018). Throughout the film deliberate choices of lighting are made in order to create an uneasy atmosphere and also represent the evil and supernatural throughout the film, this gives the audience visual clues to the plot.



Figure 73: Colourful scenes in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzioni Atlas Consorziate

Suspiria is centred on Suzy, an American ballet dancer who goes to Germany to study dance. Suzy and her roommate Sara begin noticing strange occurrences. After several deaths and oddities, Suzy discovers that the ballet boarding school is run by a coven of demonic witches. Colour symbolises various occurrence that happened throughout the film. Coloured lighting can be used to distort the image, changing the visuals without touching the set at all. Different coloured lights can affect other colours differently. Yellow lighting makes all colours look more orange in tone while making orange look more yellow. Green light intensifies greens while muting all other colours. Blue light mutes every colour except for green, blue and violet. Red light ‘destroys colour’ (Varley, 1983, 154) it distorts all colours into red shades and blends a large number of different colours into a blanket of red with high contrasts of light and dark being the only thing to distinguish objects. This is utilised throughout the film to create surreal, uneasy imagery.



Figure 74 Study of how different colours of light can manipulate an image from Article (2009) Alberto, Research Gate

Red is used to represent ‘the aggression and danger, the blood that the unknown pursuer will soon force out of your body’. (Williams, 2018)



Figure 75: Blood and death as a girl is stabbed being exaggerated with red light in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

This is evident in the scene showing the first death of a ballet student at the school. Rich red lighting engulfs the victim's body as she is being stabbed, the blood blending in with the red light.



Figure 76: Red light showing danger in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Red shows up throughout the film when danger is approaching, representing evil intention. The main character, Suzy, is often saturated in red light, giving an stained glass quality to the image when she's in immediate danger.



Figure 77: Red light showing danger in dance class as Suzie is ill in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Early in the film, we see red when she first feels ill in dance class. There's a beautiful shot of red light streaming through the open door, framing her as she succumbs to her fate.



Figure 78: Red light representing poison and danger in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

When we see Suzy flushing her food, which has been drugged, down the toilet, the whole bowl is lit vibrant red. This same idea can be seen earlier when a red spotlight, lights the plate of poisoned food.

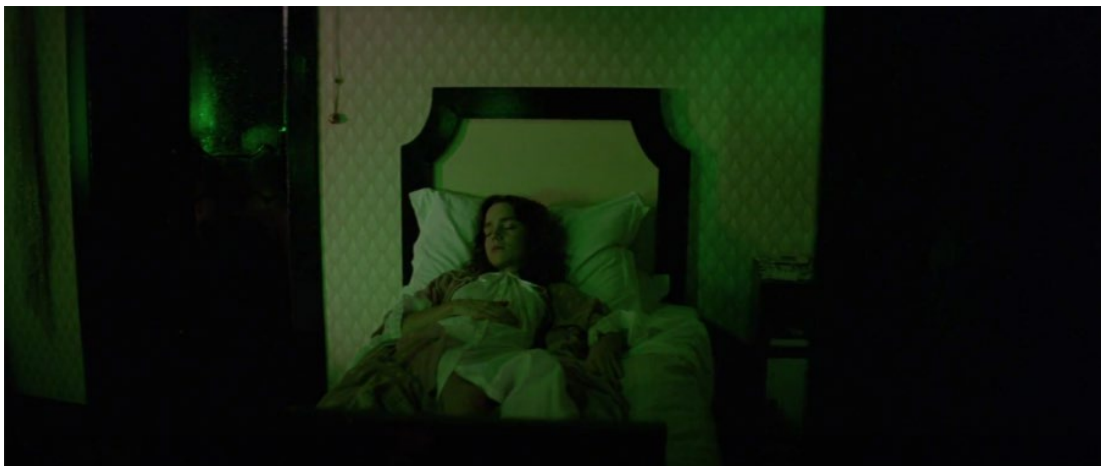


Figure 79: Green light showing illness as Suzie is sick in bed in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Green lighting in the film often indicates sickness and anxiety, used to disturb the audience. When Suzy is becoming ill from the drugs, the room takes on an awful hue of green, making her look sicker.

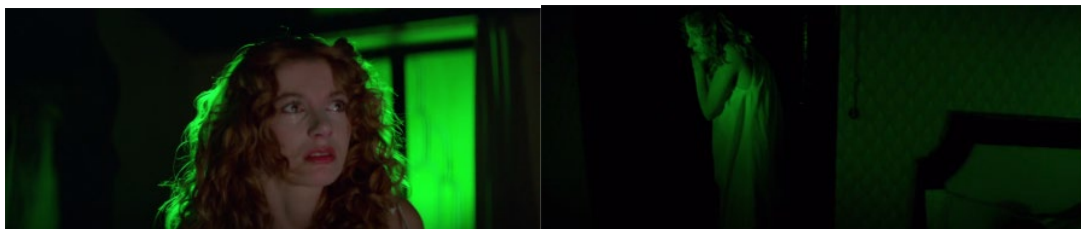


Figure 80: Green light showing anxiety of her Suzies roommate in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

This same sickly green is used when Sarah, her roommate, starts hearing things but can't wake Suzy up. Our view of her anxiety is intensified by this green blanket of light.



Figure 81: Blue light showing death in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Tovoli said 'the blue is the terrifying death sentence already pronounced and a colour that accompanies you into the sinister world of death'. So, when we see these scenes covered in rich blues, after a while the audience associates the colour blue with what they know is coming next, creating an eerie tense atmosphere using light alone.



Figure 82: Red shadows and green light showing danger and sickness after the head of the school has poisoned Suzie in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Tovoli also uses shadows and silhouettes in an interesting way throughout the film. In the scene where Suzy is being drugged, the witches appear as odd red silhouettes, their faces lit with red, representing the danger they are inflicting on Suzy.



Figure 83: Red lit room after the girls are forced to sleep in the studio due to an infestation in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Red is also used effectively in the scene where we are first introduced to the leader of the coven. The dancers have all been forced to sleep on beds in the studio due to a maggot infestation in their dorms. Curtains are put up for

privacy and when the lights are turned off, the scene is plunged into a sea of red. Suzy and Sara hear a strange snoring noise but don't know where it's coming from.



Figure 84: Villain in background in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

We as a viewer see a red silhouette of the evil leader lying down behind the curtain, eerily close to them while the girls remain unaware.



Figure 85: Silhouette of villain in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

The final scenes take place in the leader's lair, where we again see the silhouette of the leader.

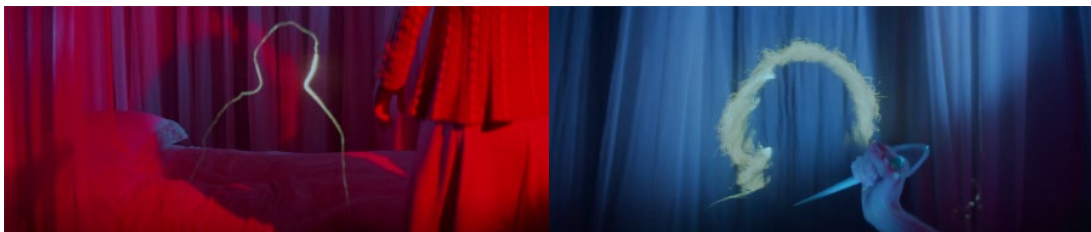


Figure 86: Backlit Villain in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

When Suzy tries to identify them by pulling back the curtain, it is revealed that the leader is not a tangible thing. This is shown effectively through a

visual of an outline created by light. When the leader or villain is stabbed, they become more human-like, though they remain a strange backlit figure.



Figure 87: Colour lighting representing unknown danger in Suspiria, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

The film also makes use of natural warm lighting to represent safety. There is a scene, before the first death, in a brightly lit room where people chat casually, until we see one of the women hear something strange. The camera zooms out until we are outside the window. The warm white-lit window is surrounded by colour. The woman goes to the window and eventually gets pulled out and killed by the mysterious pursuer, establishing that the coloured light represents evil and the supernatural.



Figure 88: Yellow representing illusion of safety in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

The same can be seen when Sarah is running away from this unknown force through cold blue off-putting lighting. She reaches a window lit with a warm yellow light, “a momentary illusion of safety” (Williams, 2018), a beacon of hope.



Figure 89: Yellow representing illusion of safety and threat of blue barbed wire in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

She makes it through and we see an open door with the same warm yellow light on her way out on the other side. However, she falls into a pit full of the “shining metallic blue of the barbed wire, like a carnivorous plant that will capture and almost digest you” (Williams, 2018). This is where she meets her demise.



Figure 90: Suzie running out of house in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

This idea is followed through to the last scene when Suzy is running from the building, trying to get away from the evil inside. She goes through various

striking, brightly lit rooms before eventually making it out, where she's met with a beautiful bath of natural light. She is finally safe.



Figure 91: Final scene in *Suspiria*, (1977), Argento, Produzioni Atlas Consorziate

As I have shown, in *Suspiria* “light takes an almost poetic function, become an active subject within the story” (Leonardi, 2024). Thought has been put into every choice made with light, creating a truly enchanting and engrossing film experience. According to an *Atmosfera* article on *Suspiria*’s (Argento, 1977) use of light, “in horror cinema, relationship, light and darkness create their language, establishing a dialectic. In Argento’s films, light can simultaneously reveal, threaten or enchant. Making light a representation of the supernatural, revealing what inherently cannot be seen” (Leonardi, 2024). *Suspiria* shows what can be achieved with truly expressionistic and artistic choices when it comes to lighting.

While these films all have drastically different goals, they all use lighting in an interesting and effective way to build a world to immerse the audience into. They do this without taking away from the story itself adding to the visual experience and understanding of the films each in unique ways.

Conclusion

In researching for this thesis, my understanding and appreciation of the importance of lighting in film for both aesthetic and narrative purposes have grown. I believe this highlights what a true shame the direction that modern lighting seems to be taking is. There's no question that lighting creates more interesting shots and scenes from a purely visual standpoint, but as we can see, this is not its only purpose.

In Chapter 1 I looked at coloured lighting and how it brings great opportunities in storytelling, influencing the audience in both psychological and physiological ways drawing from the vast amount of research other people have done in regard to colour theory and its effects. It can also represent character emotions of and set the mood or symbolise specific things like blood or death. It can even manipulate our perception, using certain colours, omitting others, etc. This is shown through my analysis of how coloured light represents Seb's and Mia's emotions in *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016); how coloured light-saturated scenes represent characters' emotions and plot points in *Saltburn* (Fennel, 2023); and how, in *Climax* (Noe, 2018), coloured lighting shows the characters' descent into a drug-fuelled chaos. In Chapter 2, I discussed how lighting can be used to represent certain aspects of a character, from specific styles of light, such as spotlighting and three-point lighting representing characters' passions for jazz music and acting respectively in *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016); to a lightbulb portraying a character's panic and anxiety in *Plainclothes* (Emmi, 2025) and lastly, to the use of beams of light to represent faith and God in *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives out Mystery* (Johnson, 2025). Finally, in Chapter 3 I explored how, using some of the methods mentioned before and combining with others, filmmakers can create or elevate worlds from light alone. Starting from simple use of lighting to reflect the real world circumstance of social class differences in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Anderson, 2014) and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), to creating countless universes in a science fiction multiverse in *Everything Everywhere All at*

Once (Khan, 2022) before lastly looking at how a surreal horror world is built using intense colours of light in *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977).

Overall, this thesis demonstrates how broad the topic of lighting film is and how deep and innovative filmmakers can really be in their use of this simple medium of light. I have only touched the tip of the iceberg of lighting in film. There were some briefly mentioned topics that could definitely have further research such as the history of lighting, especially in the 'Film Noir' genre; the chiaroscuro technique and how paintings have influenced lighting in film; the use of practical lighting such as candles or lamps; genre-specific lighting and going into greater depth on the use of lighting to create worlds such as futuristic sci-fi.

Throughout this process, I have found there is a dearth of research into this topic. I had to expand into broader research topics including theatre and more general lighting. I also found that interviews with the cinematographers gave an excellent and direct insight into the reasons for their lighting choices.

I think this thesis will help contribute to the limited research in this specific topic. I am hoping this will also help in advocating for more interesting and thoughtful lighting in film, bringing lighting back to the art it once was, as well as advancing it further, given how far lighting technology has come since the early, pioneering days of film.

Bibliography

Books

Ablan, D. (2002). *Digital Cinematography & Directing*. New Riders.

Anderson, K., Ross, I., Nicholson, D., Zeplin, P. and Eamon D'Arcy (2001). *Performance Design in Australia*. Fine Art Publishing.

Barnwell, J. (2017). *Production design for screen : visual storytelling in film and television*. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Blain Brown (2002). *Cinematography theory and practice ; imagemaking for cinematographers, directors & videographers*. Amsterdam [U.A.] Focal Press 08.

Keller, M. and Weiss, J. (2010). *Light fantastic : the art and design of stage lighting*. Munich ; London: Prestel.

Levine, R. (2006). *Social Class and Stratification*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

McClellan, P. (2020). *Production Design*. Routledge.

Palmer, R.H. (1998). *The lighting art : the aesthetics of stage lighting design*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Varley, H. (1983). *Colour*. Marshal Editions Limited.

Wolf, M.J.P. (2014). *Building imaginary worlds : the theory and history of subcreation*. London: Routledge.

Zelanski, P. and Mary Pat Fisher (1999). *Colour*. London: Herbert Press.

Films

Climax (2018), Gasper Noe, France, A24, Wild Bunch, Arrow Films

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon (2000), Ang Lee, United States, Hong Kong, Sony Pictures Classics

Everything, Everywhere All At Once (2022), Daniel Khan, Daniel Schienert, United States, A24

Fallen Angels (1995), Wong Kar Wai, Hong Kong, Kino Lorber

La La Land (2016), Damien Chazelle, United States, Lionsgate, Summit Entertainment

Parasite (2019), Bong Joon Ho, South Korea, CJ ENM

Plainclothes (2025), Carmen Emmi, United States, Magnolia Pictures, Curzon

Saltburn (2023), Emerald Fennel, United Kingdom, Amazon MGM Studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Suspria (1977), Dario Argento, Italy, Produzionini Atlas Consorziate

Stranger Things (2016) Matt Duffer, Ross Duffer, United States, Netflix

The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014), Wes Anderson, United States, 20th Century Studios

The Matrix (1999) Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, United states. Warner Bros. Pictures

Wake Up Dead Man: a Knives Out Mystery (2025), Rian Johnson, United States, Netflix

Articles

Alberto, J. (2009) *7 incidencia de la luz sobre los objetos.*, *Research Gate*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-47-Incidencia-de-la-luz-sobre-los-objetos_fig16_216601511

[Accessed: 11 February 2026]

B, M. (2023). *Exploring Parasite's Colour and Lighting*. [online] ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378462774_Exploring_Parasite [Accessed 3 Jan. 2026].

Websites

Aldredge, J. (2025). *What is 'Netflix Lighting' and Why Do Streaming Shows Look the Way They Do?* [online] No Film School. Available at: <https://nofilmschool.com/what-is-netflix-lighting> [Accessed 21 Jan. 2026].

Ananth , P. (2022). *Semiotics and colour symbolism: A case study of La La Land*. [online] Talking Film. Available at: <https://talkingtalkies.home.blog/2022/04/08/la-la-land-a-study-in-semiotics-and-colour-symbolism/> [Accessed 5 Jan. 2026].

Rob Baggs (2020). *Was Caravaggio the First Master of Light? | Fstoppers*. [online] Fstoppers. Available at: <https://fstoppers.com/historical/was-caravaggio-first-master-light-514582>. [Accessed 6 Feb]

Camp, S. (2017). *Talk Film Society*. [online] Talk Film Society. Available at: <https://talkfilmsociety.com/articles/talk-film-summer-camp-lighting-suspiria-1977> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2026].

Derschowitz, J. (2023). *How the 'Everything Everywhere All at Once' DP Went From Music Videos to Multiverses*. [online] Backstage.com. Available at: <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-cinematographer-interview-75933/> [Accessed 11 Jan. 2026].

Deikova, M. (2023). *Across the Multiverse – World-Building Cinematography of Everything Everywhere All At Once*. [online] CineD. Available at: <https://www.cined.com/across-the-multiverse-world-building-cinematography-of-everything-everywhere-all-at-once/>.

Eugene (2025). *The Sexiest Scene of the Year? It's in 'Plainclothes'*. [online] Instinct Magazine. Available at: <https://instinctmagazine.com/the-sexiest-scene-of-the-year-its-in-plainclothes/> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2026].

Fiveable (2025). *Practical and Motivated Lighting*. [online] Fiveable. Available at: <https://fiveable.me/cinematography/unit-8/practical-motivated-lighting/study-guide/taFJSUOQT4ZxJRYZ>.

Ford, R. (2023a). *How 'Saltburn' Uses Images to Combine Gothic Beauty and Grotesque Imperfections*. [online] Vanity Fair. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/saltburn-cinematography-interview-emerald-fennell-awards-insider?srsltid=AfmBOoom65bz2Gsx5Qw6nHHhfO1-l7uHgFIUoSFlw-BhmGHog63YpFww> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2026].

Ford, R. (2023). *Welcome to Saltburn's Twisted Gothic Tale*. [online] Vanity Fair. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/08/saltburn-first-look-emerald-fennell-interview-awards-insider?srsltid=AfmBOoqEXAoq5RyfJsxJXChJsPfnCvlunpSu4riu1OfUnQ0tJwND079r> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2026].

Leonardi, P. (2024). *How Dario Argento used light in his most iconic movies | Atmosfera*. [online] Atmosfera Mag. Available at: <https://www.atmosferamag.it/dario-argento-movies-inferno-phenomena-lighting/> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2026].

Lucas Blue (2025). *A BREAKDOWN of the Clues, Symbols, and Social Commentary in Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery*. [online] YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h524lFqwk3w> [Accessed 7 Jan. 2026].

MORELLO, N. (n.d.). *Coloured Lighting and the Aura of Hollywood in Damien Chazelle's*. [online] issuu. Available at: https://issuu.com/mesjournal/docs/issuu-msj6-2_winter2021/s/14795206.

Nelson, T. (n.d.). *Acts 9 NKJV - - Bible Gateway*. [online] www.biblegateway.com. Available at:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%209&version=NKJV>
[Accessed 7 Jan. 2026].

Pleines, M. (2022). *How Dario Argento Masterfully Used Lighting In Suspiria*. [online] /Film. Available at: <https://www.slashfilm.com/809979/how-dario-argento-masterfully-used-lighting-in-suspiria/> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2026].

Reumont , F. (2025). *Benoît Debie on filming Climax – The Belgian Society of Cinematographers*. [online] Sbcine.be. Available at:
<https://www.sbcine.be/?p=10204> [Accessed 7 Jan. 2026].

Salik Waquas (2024). *Cinematography Analysis Of La La Land (In Depth) - Color Culture*. [online] Color Culture. Available at:
<https://colorculture.org/cinematography-analysis-of-la-la-land-in-depth/>
[Accessed 5 Jan. 2026].

Scheetz, C. (2025). *EXCLUSIVE: Russell Tovey & Tom Blyth get intimate in this Plainclothes clip—the hottest scene of the year - Queerty*. [online] Queerty. Available at: <https://www.queerty.com/exclusive-russell-tovey-tom-blyth-get-intimate-in-this-plainclothes-clip-the-hottest-scene-of-the-year-20250918/> [Accessed 17 Jan. 2026].

Williams, D. (2018). *Suspiria: Terror in Technicolor - The American Society of Cinematographers (en-US)*. [online] theasc.com. Available at:
<https://theasc.com/articles/suspiria-terror-in-technicolor>.

Williams, J. (2025). *'Plainclothes' Exposes the Brutal Poetry of Closeted Desire GAY45*. [online] GAY45. Available at: <https://gay45.eu/plainclothes/>
[Accessed 6 Jan. 2026]

Zama, S. (2017). *Chiaroscuro photography in film noir*. [online] The Old Shelter. Available at: <https://theoldshelter.com/chiaroscuro-1940s-film-noir-atozchallenge/> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2026].