



## A Critical Scrutiny of Cinematic Lighting Technique in Cultural works of Selected Yoruba Nollywood Films

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**Abstract.** It could be reiterated that, of all the components of mise-en-cadre, cinematographic lighting is one of the most important features but this component had received little attentions from most Nigerian film critics or scholars. In most cases, this element is only used to explain or buttress relevant points in film theory and discourse. However, in this study, attention will be devoted on the deployment of cinematic lights and the various techniques used in selected Nollywood films. In the creative deployment of the 3-point lighting technique in selected cultural works of Yoruba Nollywood films, the researcher employed a library study, descriptive analytical cum studio diagnostic approaches as the basic methods of data gathering. The observation research method is deployed as secondary source of information. While a structuralist hypothetical approach is equally employed as a theoretical framework. In this exploration, the paper reviews the concepts of cinematic lighting before zooming on to discuss the key light, fill light and backlight as components of the 3-point lighting system. Practical analysis and demonstration are thus carried out with concrete sample shots from selected Yoruba films. Finally, it is recommended that a 3-point lighting technique should be creatively utilised as innovative device through which a director and the light-designer could create impressive and wonderful pictures and thus improve on the quality of Yoruba films.

**Keywords:** 3-Point-Lighting, Cultural works, Nollywood, Yoruba films

### 1. Introduction

Lighting is basically meant for illumination. However, in videography/cinematography and creativity, lighting is more than illumination. Like the human eyes, it is with the aids of the lights that images could be captured through the lens of a camera and deployed for different dramatic purposes.

In this exploration, the study is divided into three segments of literature review, discussion, analysis and summary, conclusion and recommendation. An attempt will be made in this paper to review relevant literatures and bring in the related theoretical framework. Hence, library study, descriptive analytical cum studio diagnostic approaches and observation research methods will be deployed as means of data gathering while structuralist theory will serve as theoretical framework. Under the discussion and analysis segment, the subjects of the key light, fill light and backlight will be discussed. This will be followed by different analyses and demonstrations with appropriate samples on the manifestations of the key light, the fill lights and the backlight on Yoruba films. Finally, the researcher will summarise and make his conclusion/submission and recommendation.

### 2. Theoretical Framework

It has been revealed above that, library study and studio diagnosis approaches are used as the basic methods of data gathering while observation is deployed as secondary source of information and that, a structuralist approach is employed as a theoretical

framework. In this section of the literature review attempt will be made to define and explain how each of each of the research methods and theoretical framework is employed in this research work.

### 3. Library Study

In deploying a library research method, which Elmer E. Resmuson library (2020) believes involves the step-by-step process used to gather information in order to write a paper, create a presentation, or complete a project, efforts are made to identify and locate relevant books, journal articles and films that provide required information, analyzing the films before developing and discussing relevant data and ideas from the selected films. In using this research method, the researcher employs meticulous watching of the selected films and engages in systematic analysis that incorporates elements of descriptive analytical and studio diagnostic approaches.

#### 3.1 Descriptive Analytical/ Studio Diagnostic Approaches

According to Rajeck (2017), “Descriptive analytics exists to highlight the features and characteristics of a data set by using a summary. It is typically used to convert a large amount data into a small amount of information which is easier to understand.” Furthermore, as Rajeck (2017) states on his overview on diagnostic analytics, the paper engages in diagnostic analytics discusses on what is and examines why it is, using investigative techniques to discover a causal relationship between two or more data sets. That is to diagnose relevant data and determine the factors and the relationship that exist between two or more variables.

From the foregoing, studio diagnostic approach could be described as an enquiry that uses studio equipment to examine different relationships that exist between two or more components/data sets in cinematic sequences/shots or filmic system. In this case, the current research uses diagnostic techniques in identifying or analyzing relevant cinematic components and determines the various relationships that exist between two or more variables of the selected cinematic system.

#### 3.2 Observation and Structuralism.

The observation research method is deployed to complement both the descriptive analytical method and the studio diagnostic approach which are the basic research methods. The goal of the study in

using this method is to critically observe in the studio, the various Yoruba films selected for this research exercise in order to gather reliable insights on the working system of each film selected for this research and to capture required information/data on the features of the selected shots.

According to Nasrullah Mambrol (2016):

Structuralists believe that the underlying structures which organize rules and units into meaningful systems are generated by the human mind itself and not by sense perception. .... A structure can be defined as any conceptual system that has three properties: “wholeness” (the system should function as a whole), “transformation” (system should not be static), and “self-regulation” (the basic structure should not be changed).

In deploying structuralist approach as a theoretical framework in this study attempt is made to diagnose and analyse the components of a 3 point lighting technique and its functionalities as a section of the cinematic lighting system. Within this context, this essay recognises the key light as the lighting instruments that are within the same directional flow as the key camera. For instance, in a ghost light scenario were all the lightings are rigged and focus as back lighting, the key light are still the dimmed determinant lighting that is substantially dimmed sometime to almost zero percent are the key lights because it is based on this lighting and the increased lighting of the lightings at the back of the scenarios that the camera is manipulated to achieve the ghost effects.

### 3D LIGHTING.

#### The Cinematic lighting technique

The lighting technique could be conceived in this study:

...as any system/source of illumination that permits the camera to capture the action on set/location or permits audience to see the various movement/images on screen, draws attention to gesture, articulates textures and when manipulated with shadow conceals important detail to create suspense. (Ola-Koyi, 2017)

In carrying out a detail discussion on a 3-point lighting system and relating it to other features of cinematic lighting, the study engages in critical examination/diagnosis of the lighting system and its manipulation in the selected Yoruba movies.

According to Adorama (2018), proper lighting techniques on screen, "...are essential in creating stylized and natural-looking film scenes that look much closer to real life as digital sensors and film don't react as well to light as our eyes do." Detisch (2020) on his part submits that, "Every cinematographer is an artist who makes creative decisions on how to guide the viewer's eye within the frame using lighting equipment." While in establishing the process on how a motion camera captures images with the aids of light, Branston and Stafford (2006: 400) assert that:

Light is captured by the camera via the lens and passes through the aperture to reach the film or video light sensor. The lens and aperture function just like your eye focusing on the subject controlling the amount of light.

Having looked at how the camera captured and record images with the aids of light, there is a need to examine in detail the various light-set-ups required for a cinematic production or videographic recording.

The Analysis:

As observed above in deploying structuralist approach in the analysis of a point lighting technique in Yoruba films, the study identifies and discusses the underlying lighting structures in selected shots from narrative films, diagnoses various lighting setups/organizations, considers the relevant units of frames in line with the lighting rules and decodes the viewer's perception or how the human mind generate meanings or interprets the various sequences of frames in selected films.

The concept of a 3 point lighting technique (the three point lighting system) is the first to come to mind if one is to examine or consider the various aspects of cinematic lights sources,. This 3 point lighting system is a standard requirement in motion picture production and in film criticism. In film study, it is also required to understand better other aspects of the cinematography lighting techniques. Fundamentally, this 3-point lighting system has to do with creative manipulation of "the key-light", "the fill-light" and "the backlight".

According to Detisch (2020):

The most basic lighting in film is the three-point lighting. Lighting from three directions shapes your subject and sets them apart from their background. To achieve this, your film lighting equipment needs to face your subject from three directions: front, back and side (generally).

From the available documents on this 3-point lighting, one could reiterate that the manipulation which occurs in "...the lighting of the scene will start from the assumption that any subject normally requires two light sources: a key light and a fill light." (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004) However, in a standard Hollywood production the backlight is always added to complete the trinity of the lighting system. At this point, there is a need to look at the nature of (a key light, a fill light and a back light) and the roles of each of these three types of light required in a 3-point lighting system.

### 3.3 Key, Fill and Back light

A key light is a powerful light that often serves as a primary source in lighting in filming a scene. It is usually very bright, providing the dominant illumination and casting the strongest shadows behind a subject. In reaffirming this fact, Adorama (2018) declares that:

The key light is also known as the main light of a scene or subject. This means it's normally the strongest light in each scene or photo. Even if your lighting crew is going for a complicated multi-light setup, the key light is usually the first to be set up.

The key light is the most directional light and it often diagonally hung/positioned in the front / above the subject. It usually corresponds to the motivational lighting source on set. Using *Amelie (2001) as point of reference*, Detisch (2020) describes the key light thus:

The key light is the light that registers most prominently in your frame. So, when you look at the image of *Amelie* above, you'll see that the screen-right portion of her face is brightest. That's the key light.

According to school of thought thinks key light is the main light on a subject and it is usually placed at a 45 degree angle to the camera-subject axis. While using a high key lighting method, it is on record that the key light provides all or most of the light in the scene. In a low key lighting situation, the key light provides much less of the total illumination.

A fill light on the other hands, comes from less intense lamp placed at complementary angles. It is usually placed in a position near the camera. As the name connotes, it "fills in," and as a less intense illumination, it softens or eliminates shadows cast by the key light. Another school of thought believes that a fill light is an auxiliary light, usually from the side of the subject that can soften shadows and

illuminate areas not covered by the key light. According to Adorama (2018):

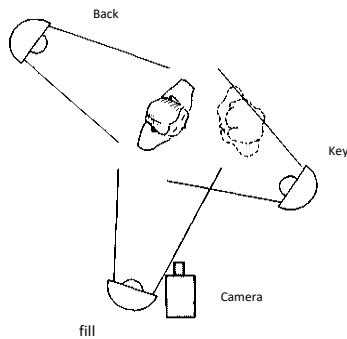
It is noticeably less intense and placed in the opposite direction of the key light, so you can add more dimension to your scene.”

Because the aim of fill lighting is to eliminate shadows, it’s advisable to place it a little further and/or diffuse it with a reflector (placed around 3/4 opposite to the key light) to create softer light that spreads out evenly. Many scenes do well with just the key and fill studio lighting as they are enough to add noticeable depth and dimension to any object.

A back light is the main source of light placed behind the subject. When used without the key light or the fill light it results in a silhouette. But when either the key or the fill light is used it gives partial silhouette of the subject on screen. In most cases, it is placed higher than and directed towards the camera to separate the subject from the background. Adorama (2018) is of the view that: “Backlighting is used to create a three-dimensional scene, which is why it is also the last to be added in a three-point lighting setup.” He equally reiterates that backlighting is usually placed “...a little higher from behind so as to separate your subject from the

background.” The backlight could also be diffused to reduce the intensity and to cover a wider area of the subject. Although a backlight is located at the back and above the figure and deployed to separate the subject from the background, yet it could be used to create depth in a given shot. In Detisch’s (2020) words, “The back light gives an edge light to the rear portion of your subject. Often, the backlight shoots down from a higher angle.”

As the name suggests, backlight comes from behind the subject filmed. From all indications, it can be positioned at any angles: high above the figure in a frame, at either sides or at both sides of the frame, pointing straight at the camera, or placed below the frame. As established, when used with no other sources of light, backlighting tends to create silhouettes, as in 02. But when placed at the left back side of the images in this frame it tends to create partial silhouette as in 16. The noonday sunlight could also be employed to serve as backlight as captured in 09 and in 17, where in each of these frames the image is established with noonday sunlight that helps to separate the image for instance, in 09 from the bushy background, while in 17 it helps to sculpt out the actress from her background in the shot.



01. The basic lighting techniques of Hollywood cinema or a Three-point lighting system ,(Bordwell and Thompson 2004:194)



02. In this shot taken from *Ite Oba*, the sunlight serves as backlighting which tends to create silhouettes as it is used with no other sources of light.



03. In this shot, the noonday light is used to establish the fact that the action in one of the staircases of the Onijogbo’s palace occurs in daytime.

In demonstrating and summarising the basic arrangement of a three - point lighting system, Bordwell and Thompson (2004: 194) explicate thus:

*Classical Hollywood filmmaking developed the custom of using at least three light sources per shot: key light, fill light, and backlight. ....The key will usually be closer to the figure or brighter than the fill. Typically, each major character in a scene will have his or her own key, fill, and backlight. If another actor is added [as in the dotted figure in... 01], the key light for one can be altered slightly to form the backlight for the other and vice versa, with a fill light on either side of the camera.*

Thus Bordwell and Thompson identified the movement and fluidity of lighting which is a basic functional characteristic of lighting in all media.

#### 4. The Manifestations on this Study.

It could be established that the key lighting could come on the figure in a frame from any angle of the shot. For instance in *Saworoide* (02), one could see how the sun light serving as the key light of a frame comes from the back on the figures resulting in silhouette picture. In this frame, the key light is repositioned from its customary spot (of the left hand side of the camera) to come on the figures from the back. This shooting arrangement in which the characters are placed before the sun thus attests to the fact that the key light could be a backlight for the screen images.

In 03, one could see how the key light is repositioned to come on the characters from the right side of the frame, while in 04, the key light comes from the left side of the frame. From these two samples, it could be stated that the key light stationed in either the right or the left side of the frame is regarded as a *cross-lighting*.



04. In *Saworoide* film, the director used this top lighting technique to depict the effect of the horror of cold blood murder on an innocent boy had just witness the evil of human action .



05. A top lighting technique is used in this shot to glorify the aesthetic structure of the drum "Saworoide" from where the title of the film is derived.



06. The under-lighting technique is used to reflect the synchronization of both the false lighting and the authentic lighting.

The key light in 05 is from top right side of the frame resulting in *top lighting*, while the frame in 06 where the key light comes from down-left side of the frame could be regarded a sample of *under-lighting*.

Based on these samples, it could be stated that the key light in any given frame could come on the image from different angles. As one could see above, the key light could equally be deployed for different dramatic, filmic or aesthetic purposes on screen.

Having considered the key light and the various ways in which it had been invoked in Yoruba films, efforts will now be shifted on the examination of films where only the key and the fill light techniques are used. A sample shot where this technique is used could be found in the film *Aja Meji* (07). In this frame, a strong key light from offscreen left throws a shadow on the curtain at the right. The dim fill light from the right side of the frame inconspicuously highlights the person standing and throws a cast shadow of the standing figure on the blue wall behind the settee, while revealing a diffused face of the actor sitting on the settee.

In examining another frame from *Baba Jayejaye-2* (08) a key light from offscreen left reveals the appearances of the two characters in the frame while casting their shadows on the wall and the door respectively. The fill light from offscreen right on the other hand highlights the frontage of the bar.



07. A strong key light from offscreen left throws a shadow on the curtain at the right. The dim fill light from the right side of the frame inconspicuously throws another cast shadow of the standing figure on the blue wall behind the settee



08. A key light from offscreen left reveals the appearances of the two characters in the frame while casting their shadows on the wall and the door respectively, while the fill light from the offscreen right highlights the frontage of the bar



09. In this shot from *Kolo Kolo* the image is established with noonday sunlight...

According to Bordwell and Thompson (2004:195):

*...three-point lighting system demands that the lamps be rearranged virtually every time the camera shifts to a new framing of the scene. In spite of the great cost involved, most Hollywood films will have a different lighting arrangement for each camera position. Such variations in the light sources do not conform to reality, but they do enable filmmakers to create clear compositions for each shot.*



10. Due to the fact that the lighting design is fixed throughout the whole scene, the lighting arrangement is just used for illumination, hence, one could not say this is a good example a shot with variations of the light sources, even though there are different shifts in the positions of the camera during the subsequent shots on this scene.



11. In this shot, the key is from offscreen left and the fill light from the offscreen right and there is no backlighting.

They equally feel that when the actors move, the director must decide whether to alter the lighting system. By overlapping different key lights, the filmmaker can maintain a constant intensity as actors move around the set. Although in Nigerian experience, constant shift in lighting may not be particularly possible in all scenes. However it is very advantageous in the sense that, it will prevent distracting shadows and highlights from moving across other actors. From all indications, one could say with some levels of certainty that the tradition or the practice of rearranging the lighting setup in order to keep up with shifting camera positions and refocusing has not taken a deep root in Nollywood film shooting experience for so many reasons. Firstly, majority of director will prefer working with the noon sunlight (09) because it is cheaper and easy to use. Secondly, some of them lack the expertise or technical knowhow. Hence, one could see that, in scenes with presumed multiple lighting demands, one could hardly identify which of the lights used is the key light, the fill light or the back light on these frames.

Samples of some shots with challenging lighting system could be found in 07, 10 and 11. In 07, it could be identified that a two point lighting system of *key* and *fill* lights is used but in this frame, one could hardly point out which of the two lights (the key or the fill) that is throwing any of the cast shadows at the back of the standing figure in this sitting room.

Although one could hardly point out, the specific object/cast to which the light set up is meant for, but one could identify the dichotomy in the key and the fill lighting design in this shot (10) taken from the film: *Alase*. To be specific in 10, one could say the key light is from (offscreen) top left side of the frame while the fill light is from the right side of the frame. From what one can see in this narrative, the lighting design is not adjustable but fixed and static throughout a whole scene. The impression one gets from this is that the lighting arrangement is meant just for general illumination with no special cast as the main focus towards which the lighting setup is directed. Consequently, one could say that, this shot from the film: *Alase* is an example of a frame with unchangeable light sources, thus there is no consideration of changing the key and the fill lights for different camera positions.

In the same way, one could identify another fixed lighting setup with no consideration for different camera positions in 11. In this frame, the setup is established without a back light but used a two point lighting set up of the key and fill lightings. From all indications, the key light is from (off-screen) left, while the fill light from the right. Again, one could hardly point out which of the cast on set the light set up is directed to. Aside from the identified usages of the key and the fill lights, it could be stated that the fill light could equally be used to eliminate cast shadows, create soft lighting environment or reveal diffused lighting system on screen or deploy in generating suspense in a narrative, especially in the horror movies.

With a closer examination of the film: *October 1*, which Ola-Koyi (2018) described as a “...film that tells the story of the night”, one would appreciate better the various usages of backlight. For instance, in *October 1* (12), taken from the film *October 1*, the ray of the backlight which comes from the upper left side of this frame, highlights the neck and the right shoulder of the human image from the back.



12. The backlight which is used basically to separate this image in *October 1* from his background could be identified with the ray of the light which comes from the upper left side of this frame, that highlights the neck and the right shoulder of the human image from the back.



13. The backlight invoked in this frame helps in separating the simultaneous actions that are occurring at different levels of foreground and background in this frame.

In 13 which is another shot from the same film, the lighting set up of the shot plays a significant impact on actions in the frame. First on this shot, the backlight deployed helps in revealing two different acting arenas of - the foreground and the background in the frame and the concurrent actions that are going on at both levels. Moreover, the ray of the noon light behind the figure in 16 helps to carve out the image from his background. In each of these cases in 15 and 16 frames, the noonday light used in each frame helps in establishing the distance between each image and the walls or adjacent buildings in the street behind this image. Similarly in 14 the ray of backlighting placed at the left side of the frame helps is sculpting out the image of a smiling girl from her background. Again it highlights the space that exists between the girl's

neck and the part of her headgear that falls on her back.

In 17, one could see that the noonday light is again employed in separating the two women by the door from their background which is the outside of their house. Here the sun light outside the house serves as the backlighting, highlighting the view outside the door while sculpting out the images of these two actresses standing by the door and presenting their images in partial silhouettes.

In looking at the use of this back lighting technique from another angle, one could see in this particular frame in 17 that backlight is capable of producing an unobtrusively illuminated contour as revealed with the two figures in this frame. From this frame in 18, this background lighting technique used with other lighting sources

results in the projection of an image behind the lead person in a silhouette structure on screen. In this frame, one could see that, the outcome of the image so produced silhouette on screen is a result of the placement of figures within the lighting arrangement in this frame.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study efforts had been made to review relevant literatures and related frameworks. Specifically on the key lighting, it is established that key light can serve many purpose in a cinematic narrative and lighting system. That, when the key light is stationed at different points of the frame, it could result into a top lighting, an under-lighting or a cross-lighting, depending on the needs and the choices of the director of a film project. In addition to the previously stated functions, the key light could be deployed in creating harsh shadows, when used in the hard lighting set up/technique. It could also be utilized in drawing attention of the audience to the main object/subject in a sequence or pointing to an area of the frame/scene. As previously demonstrated above, it could be deployed in highlighting the contours of an image or subject. Again, when a key light is deployed as a back light without combining it with the fill light, it results in showing on screen a strong silhouette of the image. The fill light as employed in a shooting process helps to eliminate cast shadows, create soft lighting environment, reduce intensity of the key light or reveal diffused lighting system on screen. In addition to these functions, fill lighting could also be deployed with other techniques when creating directional lighting/side-lighting. It could be utilised in generating horrendous images or in creating other dramatic effect/suspense, or deployed to replicate subtle lighting coming from outside of a set/room. In the case of backlighting technique, attempt had been made to demonstrate in detail how backlight could be placed at any angle of the frame, deployed in separating or carving out the image from its background, revealed its capability of highlighting illuminated contour of images or used in creating silhouette or partial silhouette of any given image on screen, and helped in establishing the distance between two images in a frame.

In conclusion, one could say, having demonstrated with concrete sample of shots/frames from Yoruba and indeed Nigerian films, some directors/light designers of Yoruba films especially those whose works are cited in this study have improved greatly in the creative deployment of a 3 point lighting technique in their productions. Therefore, it could be recommended that cinematic lighting system on Yoruba film screens should not be seen or deployed

only as a means of generating or creating mire illumination during the shooting of a production. But, rather, the lighting system (especially a 3 point lighting technique) should be creatively utilised as innovative device through which a director and the light-designer could create impressive and remarkable pictures and improve on the quality of Yoruba films.

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