

Once Upon a Time, There Were Keylights

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It seems that the world is conspiring against the traditional keylight. Once the most important light source in a lighting setup, its prominence is steadily diminishing. There seem to be two major factors in its demise: the aging of the populace and improvements in camera pickups.

Although these developments are independent, like media companies and telcos, they have converged in recent times to virtually obliterate keylights from our screens.

The role of the keylight is to define the shape and structure of the things we're photographing, whether those things are people, cans of beans, wildebeests, 18-wheelers, the World Cup or a skyscraper. As the video medium is still only two dimensional, by creating highlights and shadows from the features of our subjects (noses, horns, handles, etc) the keylight helps us to incorporate three-dimensional information into our pictures.

The reverse is also true, when we add false shadow information to an image to mislead our viewers into believing that captions, computer-generated images, glass mattes and flat pieces of scenery are three dimensional. The bizarre make-up still worn by classical ballet dancers and many "traditional" community theatre performers originates from the time when stages were washed with shadowless flood lighting, thereby requiring everything, including props, scenery and performers faces, to have shadows painted on them to make them look even slightly real.

In the days of the tube camera, particularly in the time of the image orthicon tubes found in monochrome and early color cameras, camera resolution was not too amazing. When you then factor in the fairly primitive electronics throughout the transmission chain and the less than stellar performance of some early television receivers, it becomes apparent that the pictures seen by the viewing audience needed every bit of help that we could offer.

A strong keylight and a sharp, defining backlight, were essential to give some clarity to what could easily become murky images. This is the basis for the three-point or key, fill and backlight style of lighting that was treated almost as a catechism for television lighting for several decades. The late Dean Collins, a man who spent many years teaching the art of lighting and photography all over the world, described this style of lighting as using specularly and shine to define the subjects of our images.

The advent of better pickup tubes and more accurate image transmission chains reduced the need for such dramatic contrasts, and ushered in an era of more naturalistic lighting styles where color and texture provided most of the definition for our subjects.

The keylight was not entirely dispensed with, but the need for sharp shadows from hard-edged light sources diminished. In particular, the strong backlight, and the hair shine that it produced, looked very corny in second-generation color pictures.

CCD CHIP CAMERAS

By the time the CCD chip landed in the back of our cameras, bringing with it both higher sensitivities and higher resolutions, we were pretty much at liberty to be clever and artistic without having to worry too much about overcoming problems in the broadcast system. Finally key/fill contrast ratios were no longer dictated by issues of image separation, or impenetrable masses of murky black.

As the chip arrays have acquired more pixels and smarter processing, our keylight remains important as a means of revealing form and texture, but no longer needs the artificial sharpness of the fresnel spot, or of that abomination, the television studio softlight. The intelligent and careful choice of the texture, position and intensity of a keylight are now as much a part of the art of picture making as were the brush strokes of Carravaggio, as he brought his pictures to life by painting in the light and shadow.

SUPERMARKET LIGHTING

The sad reality however, is that the improved sensitivity and definition of contemporary camera chains has been used as an excuse by many to light the subject with a wash of low-contrast, almost shadowless, light. This enables the director and producer to change the shots or the talent without having to call in a lighting director to make the pictures right-TV studios with supermarket-style illumination.

The baby boomers, as they start to acquire wrinkles, yet remain in denial of the passage of time, are the other felons in this case. Long ago, motion picture directors of photography began the process of pandering to the egos of aging actors by obscuring their wrinkles with silks and meshes over the lens, and by drastically reducing the contrast range of the lighting to diminish the visibility of the wrinkles.

Baby boomers still want to see their generation on the screen, yet believe that they haven't yet started to age, so we now have battalions of presenters and actors who demand to be lit by softlight to camouflage the wrinkles that have evaded plastic surgery and laser therapy. Despite the inescapable fact that a face looks like a parody of a human being when lit from below by banks of florescent softlights, producers and directors are acquiescing, hoping that nobody will notice.

The only bright note in this sorry tale is that if the current generation of producers, designers, talent and lighting directors have eschewed the keylight as being too yesterday, then there's a damn good chance that the next generation will take it out for a spin, just to be different from we annoying baby boomers.