



## THE NARRATIONAL ROLE OF LIGHTING DESIGN IN THE LIGHTS OF THE DARK CITY

### KARANLIK ŞEHİR'İN IŞIKLARINDA: IŞIK TASARIMININ ANLATIMSAL ROLÜ

Saygın Koray DOĞANER<sup>1</sup>



ORCID: S.K.D. 0000-0001-7077-0551

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:

<sup>1</sup> Saygın Koray Doğaner  
Batman University, Türkiye

E-mail/E-posta: sayginkorayd@gmail.com

Received/Geliş tarihi: 11.04.2025

Benzerlik Oranı/Similarity Ratio: %3

Revision Requested/Revizyon talebi:  
15.05.2025

Last revision received/Son revizyon teslimi:  
13.06.2025

Accepted/Kabul tarihi: 27.06.2025

**Etik Kurul İzni/ Ethics Committee Permission:**  
There is no element in the study that requires ethics committee approval. / Çalışmada etik kurul onayı gerektiren bir unsur bulunmamaktadır.

**Citation/Atıf:** Doğaner S. K. (2025). The Narrational Role of Lighting Design in the Lights of the Dark City. The Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication, 15 (3), 1136-1161. <https://doi.org/10.7456/tojdac.1674124>

#### Abstract

This study focuses on the narrative role of lighting design in the film *Dark City* and examines how various lighting techniques contribute to the processes of establishing atmosphere, creating narrative rhythm and reflecting character psychology. The aim of the research is to demonstrate that light is not only a visual or technical element but also a fundamental carrier of narrative. In the descriptive and interpretive analysis, different types of lighting such as pool of light, pulsing light and piercing light are categorised and their emotional and symbolic effects are evaluated. Each type of light is analysed in the context of specific scenes, showing how the lighting supports the protagonist's fragmented identity, internal conflicts and the film's themes of memory manipulation and dystopian control. The findings reveal that when light is consciously positioned in the frame, it enhances not only the visuality but also the emotional and intellectual depth of the narrative. In the film *Dark City*, light does not only serve realism. In the film, light design becomes a structural element that expands the meaning of the narrative by interacting with the audience's perception. As a result, light design in this film functions as an indispensable component of cinematic narrative and provides a powerful expression of themes such as illusion, control and self-discovery.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Lighting Design, Narration, Visual Storytelling, Dark City, Perception and Reality.

#### Öz

Bu çalışma, *Dark City* filminde kullanılan ışık tasarımının anlatımsal rolüne odaklanmakta ve çeşitli aydınlatma tekniklerinin atmosfer kurma, anlatı ritmi oluşturma ve karakter psikolojisini yansıtırma süreçlerine nasıl katkı sağladığını incelemektedir. Araştırmanın amacı, ışığın yalnızca görsel veya teknik bir unsur değil, anlatının temel bir taşıyıcısı olduğunu ortaya koymaktır. Betimleyici ve yorumlayıcı yöntemlerle yürütülen analizde, ışık havuzu, yanıp sönen ışık ve delip geçen ışık gibi farklı aydınlatma türleri kategorilere ayrılarak bunların duygusal ve simgesel etkileri değerlendirilmektedir. Her bir ışık türü, belirli sahneler bağlamında ele alınmış ve bu sahnelerde aydınlatmanın baş karakterin parçalanmış kimliğini, içsel çatışmalarını ve filmin bellek manipülasyonu ile distopik kontrol temalarını nasıl desteklediği gösterilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, ışığın bilinçli bir biçimde kadraj içinde konumlandırıldığında yalnızca görselliği değil, anlatının duygusal ve düşünsel derinliğini de artırdığını ortaya koymaktadır. *Dark City* filminde ışık, yalnızca gerçekçiliğe hizmet etmekle kalmaz. Filmde ışık tasarımı izleyici algısıyla etkileşime girerek anlatının anlamını genişleten bir yapı ögesi haline gelir. Sonuç olarak, bu filmde ışık tasarımı, sinemasal anlatının vazgeçilmez bir bileşeni olarak işlev görmekte ve yanılsama, denetim ile öz keşif gibi temaların güçlü biçimde ifade edilmesini sağlamaktadır.

**Keywords:** Işık Tasarımı, Anlatım, Görsel Anlatı, Karanlık Şehir, Algı ve Gerçeklik.

## INTRODUCTION

In cinematography, light is not only an element that provides technical illumination of the scene. In cinema, light is a narrative tool that establishes the atmosphere of the narrative, shapes the inner world of the characters and deepens the emotional connection of the audience with the film. Lighting in cinema has continued to develop since the early periods of film production and has changed depending on time and technology. Lighting techniques are basically one of the main elements that support storytelling. Recent neurocinematic studies show that lighting direction and intensity can guide viewer attention and emotional response at a subconscious level (Mäkinen & Näsi, 2022). Lighting emerges not merely as a background component but as a key narrative force that operates on both visual and psychological levels.

In the early cinema period, the use of light was limited and remained at the level of providing the basic lighting function. The main reason for this situation can be interpreted as both technological limitations and the immaturity of the film language. The equipment used in the first film projections brought along certain limitations in line with technological possibilities, such as the necessity of dependence on strong natural light sources or fixed artificial lights during shooting, as it required low-sensitivity film strips. Considering the conditions of the period, it is understandable that technical equipment such as cameras and film rolls, which were the basic components of the cinema technology of the period, were quite limited in terms of photosensitivity. This situation stands out as a factor that increases the dependence on intense and continuous lighting in order to obtain images. Therefore, film shootings had to be carried out mostly in open areas where maximum efficiency could be obtained from daylight and during daylight hours. On the other hand, since cinema had not yet been able to fully overcome the influence of the theatre tradition, its narrative language was largely based on the visual logic of the performing arts. In this context, lighting applications are also used for the sole purpose of ensuring physical visibility. Therefore, the potential of light to contribute to the creation of dramatic meaning remained an unexplored element. It was only with the evolution of technical developments and cinematographic understanding in the 1920s that cinema discovered light as a conscious means of creating atmosphere and meaning as a form of artistic expression.

In the 1920s, German Expressionism transcended the classical functions of light in cinema, creating dark atmospheres that reflected the subconscious and inner conflicts of the characters. The films used light not only as a means of illumination but also as a means of constructing meaning. In productions such as *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), light and shadow draw a thin line between reality and imagination, taking the viewer on a mental and emotional journey. In this period, lighting became a powerful tool of expression that reveals the psychological layers of the narrative.

Hollywood adopted a more regular and symmetrical narrative language with the ‘Three Point Lighting’ system (Butler, 2011, 35). Especially in the 1930s and 1940s, this type of lighting is observed. However, the film noir wave of the 1940s emphasised themes such as crime, betrayal and moral ambiguity with low key light and deep shadows. In the 1950s, colour films and Technicolor technology led to a brighter and more saturated use of light. In this period, especially musicals and melodramas presented idealised and dreamlike atmospheres with the technical possibilities offered by lighting. In the same period, Italian New Realism and Japanese cinema preferred natural light and built their narrative structures on simplicity and reality.

In the 1960s and 1970s, revolutionary approaches in cinema were reflected in lighting techniques. From these years onwards, the use of light in cinema takes on a more natural and experimental form with new waves and independent cinema movements. With the advancement of technology in the 1980s, stylised and artificial lighting comes to the fore. For example, *Blade Runner* (1982), with its innovative approach to lighting techniques, presents a dystopian atmosphere with neon lights. In the 1990s, the development of CGI technology enabled the integration of light with digital effects, and in the post-2000 period, digital cameras and high dynamic range images enabled both minimalist use of natural light and hyper-stylised, bright scenes. Thus, light has become a flexible and versatile tool in film narrative, expanding the possibilities of narrative structure.

Each decade of cinema has developed different perspectives on how light is interpreted and used in cinema. Light becomes not only a technical necessity but also a language of expression that reflects the cultural, technological and aesthetic codes of each period. In this regard, Elsaesser and Hagener (2015) suggest that cinematic lighting can act as a sensory form that conveys narrative meaning through affective experience. The history of cinema can be read as a process in which light is redefined and attributed different meanings in each generation.

In this study, descriptive and interpretive analysis approaches from qualitative research methods were used. Within the scope of the research, firstly, the existing literature on the relationship between light design and cinematic narrative was reviewed, and then the types of light used in the film *Dark City* were examined. The use of light in the film was evaluated in terms of how it affects the emotional tone of the scenes, the psychological state of the characters and the rhythm of the narrative. In this process, the symbolic and structural role of each type of light in the narrative is revealed by analysing the positioning, intensity and form of light in the scene. The study aims to analyse how the light design in the film supports the thematic depth by bringing together theoretical knowledge and visual examples.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design based on descriptive and interpretive analysis methods. The aim is to examine the narrational functions of lighting design in the film *Dark City*, particularly how different lighting techniques contribute to the construction of atmosphere, character psychology, and thematic structure.

As a first step, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify the theoretical frameworks and prior academic discussions related to cinematic lighting, visual narration, and mise-en-scène. The collected literature helped to build a conceptual base for the analysis.

Following this, the film *Dark City* was watched multiple times in full and partially, focusing on key scenes where lighting played a prominent narrational role. During each viewing, attention was given to the positioning, direction, color, intensity, and rhythm of the lighting, as well as the emotional and symbolic meanings it generated within the narrative context.

The analysis process was divided into two main phases:

1. **Thematic Classification:** Specific lighting effects were grouped under conceptual categories such as *pulsing light*, *piercing light*, *pool of light*, *filtered light*, and *wavering light*, based on their visual qualities and narrational impact. These categories were developed through interpretive abstraction rather than rigid coding schemes.
2. **Scene-Based Analysis:** Selected scenes were analysed in detail in terms of how lighting design interacted with camera movement, character development, and narrative progression. Screenshots were taken and interpreted to visualise the theoretical arguments.

Rather than relying on quantitative coding or empirical measurement, this study emphasizes interpretive depth and theoretical insight. The visual analysis was guided by concepts drawn from film theory, lighting design principles, and narrative semiotics.

This methodological approach allows for a holistic understanding of how light, beyond its technical function, actively contributes to the storytelling process and creates psychological depth within the cinematic experience.

## PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF LIGHTING

Considering that cinema, as a visual language, operates through its own rules and structures, light appears as one of the most basic narrative elements of this language. If we accept cinema as a language, light can be considered as an intonation that functions as an emphasis within the syntax of this language. Lighting techniques sometimes function as an exclamation that strengthens the meaning of the sentence,

and sometimes as a subtext that reveals hidden meanings. Within the cinematographic structure that produces meaning through image, sound and movement, light both shapes the visuality and conveys the emotional and intellectual background of the narrative to the audience.

According to Alan Wurtzel, lighting, as both a scientific and artistic tool, has functions such as creating depth, emphasising, creating emotional impact, determining time and regulating visual aesthetics (1979, p. 111). These words of Wurtzel can be interpreted as a reference to the structure of film grammar. The function of light in film grammar is not limited to the illumination of the scene. Lighting determines the atmosphere of the space, makes the character's mood visible and shapes the emotional perspective from which the viewer approaches the narrative. For example, in a narrative that wants to emphasise the loneliness of a character, a pale light source filtered from a single point is used to make the audience intuit the introverted world of the character. On the other hand, warm and soft light spread over a wide area can give the narrative a peaceful and inviting tone. Here, light is not only a technical element, but also one of the forms of narrative discourse. Just as the angle and movement in the use of the camera construct meaning, the direction and intensity of light also give meaning to the narrative.

While creating the atmosphere of the scene, light offers the viewer clues about the space and this effect is achieved by the way the light is placed and directed (Barnwell, 2011, 138). Light in cinema not only shapes visual reality. By reconstructing the perception of time and space, it determines from which plane the audience will approach the narrative. In this respect, light is not only a physical element of illumination, but also a symbolic indicator that determines the narrative rhythm and intellectual layers of the scene.

In film narrative, light plays an active role in the construction of the world of meaning, just like metaphors in literary texts. A dim and fluctuating illumination can make the character feel lost in a spiritual void or drifting in blurred memories of the past. In contrast, strong light arrangements with clear lines support the narrative's search for sharpness and clarity. For example, in an abandoned space, intermittently flashing red lamps become an element that increases both the physical danger and the psychological tension of the character. On the other hand, natural daylight used in a wide and open landscape can add freshness and hope to the story and strengthen the audience's connection with the character. Thus, light stands out as one of the basic elements that establish not only the space but also the entire mood of the narrative.

A consciously designed lighting scheme makes visible the inner worlds of the characters, the narrative functions of the locations and the moments of plot twists. A pale light at the end of a dark corridor can not only represent the exit, but also imply that hope persists even in the weakest moments. Or an iceberg bathed in white light under the sun, emphasizing not only the physical isolation but also the character's spiritual exhaustion. In this context, light, as a wordless but powerful narrative element, draws the viewer into the story and enriches the sensory layers of the film without the need for any dialog.

Before deciding how to organize the light in a film scene, it is necessary to think about the meaning and emotional tone that the scene adds to the narrative. Lighting is not limited to making the space visible. On the contrary, it is a means of expression that supports the conceptual integrity of the story and integrates with the essence of the narrative. The lighting planning developed by the director and the cinematographer together is meaningless if it is not constructed as an important component that determines the emotional depth with which the audience will experience the scene. Therefore, rather than a technical necessity, lighting design can be considered as the result of a creative process that shapes the layers of narrative meaning and involves the audience in the inner world of the narrative.

The first question to be answered in the lighting process is from which point of view and in what kind of atmosphere the story will be conveyed. Will the goal of the narrative be presented to the viewer with absolute clarity and simplicity? Or will a conscious ambiguity and an intuitive depth of meaning be created in its visual world? This basic choice directly affects the direction from which the light will come, its intensity, color tones and shading. For example, a space homogeneously illuminated by broad daylight can serve a narrative in which reality is presented in all its nakedness, while pinpoint and

intermittent light sources can develop an aesthetic understanding that leads the viewer to an intuitive interpretation and creates intellectual gaps.

The use of light in cinema is not limited to the function of making space and characters visible; it is also a critical component that determines the intellectual axes of the narrative. Sometimes a warm, diffused light emphasizes a character's inner peace or nostalgic memories, while in other cases, a blinking light source can make us feel the character's mental turmoil or the distorted structure of the surrounding reality. Any use of light should be handled with a planned and aesthetic awareness, in harmony with the meaning that the scene wants to convey.

### **THE BASIC ROLES OF LIGHTING IN NARRATION**

Cinema is an art form for intellectual experiences in which moving images are transformed into a temporal narrative. In this narrative order, lighting not only makes a scene visible, but also functions as a fundamental layer that shapes the narrative structure of the film. Light does not merely reflect a narrative; it constructs it, makes sense of it and consciously directs the viewer's perception through narration. In this context, the purpose of lighting is to play a holistic role in the film production process through narrative techniques, bringing together its aesthetic and sensory dimensions.

Rather than thinking of lighting as a technical necessity, considering it as a constitutive element of the emotional, aesthetic and semantic layers of the narrative offers a more comprehensive perspective. The time period or physical environment in which a movie takes place is often established through lighting choices. The use of different types of light in the studio provides an important function to create different meanings. From the warm colors of daylight in exterior shots to the cold reflections of moonlight, each detail woven with many types of light affects the viewer's mindset about time and space. In this context, the director's choice of lighting as a form of expression becomes a part of the narrative.

The atmosphere of a narrative is largely determined by the setting of the light. The brightness and intensity of light can bring the viewer's emotional distance from the scene closer or further away. For example, an unclear light source can help create an uncertain or dreamlike atmosphere, while direct light supports moments of sharp tension. Therefore, through lighting, which is one of the forms of expression that feeds the narrative structure of the film, the audience is provided with a conscious viewing experience.

Lighting also has an important role in conveying the intellectual processes of movie characters. In other words, in addition to making a scene technically visible, lighting is also an effective means of expression in conveying the mental worlds of the characters to the audience. The intensity, angle and color of the light falling on an actor's face plays a decisive role in making sense of that character's mental state, inner conflicts or emotional fractures. A bright and direct light that sharpens the facial features often emphasizes the pressure, anxiety or tension that the character is under, while a softer and more diffused lighting can indicate the character's peaceful, fragile or withdrawn states. Light thus creates a layer of meaning and facilitates the viewer's approach to the character's inner world. However, the choice of a face or action that remains in the dark often indicates a situation that has not yet been explained in the story, a situation that contains uncertainty. This partial visibility arouses curiosity in the audience and suggests points that the narrative consciously conceals. In contrast, in scenes where a character's face and surroundings are fully illuminated, openness is at the forefront. In this way, the character's thoughts, actions and intentions are more clearly presented to the audience. This is particularly evident in moments of character transformation or at the story's nodal points.

Along with the lighting, the camera's position, shooting angle and focal length add new layers of meaning to the narrative. Each frame becomes not only an image but also a dynamic space that structures meaning. Camera movements and light working in harmony direct the viewer's eye to a certain point and increase the dramatic effect of the scene. For example, a light source from above can create a sense of pressure or judgement on the character, while a light source from below can make the character appear more threatening or uneasy than he or she actually is. Light, as the main element to which the eye is directly directed, makes sense of the frame and reshapes the film as a compositional element. Every



detail, from the perception of depth to the establishment of symmetrical balance, is revealed through lighting. While the saturation ratio or simplicity of colours defines the quality of the light used, it also contributes to the emergence of options that create new visual meanings through reflections, shadows and different types of light obtained by refracting and changing the direction of light as it passes from one surface to another.

### **THE QUALITY OF LIGHT**

The creation of meaning in cinema is shaped not only by the sequence of consecutive images, but also by the function provided by the light that directs these images. Since the image has limited expressive power on its own, one of the most effective elements that deepens the meaning created is the light itself. Each light source has the potential to make the viewer think about the themes contained in the narrative, the psychological states of the characters and the meaning of the space in time. Light is not only a visual element, it is one of the basic building blocks of the narrative and shapes the intellectual structure of the story. An atmosphere suitable for the narrative structure is created with lighting styles, and many functions, from revealing the inner worlds of the film characters to directing the viewer's subconscious, circulate in this way.

The function of light in cinematography is not limited to the need for physical illumination. Light can be considered as a regulator that invisibly constructs the narrative structure of the film and organises emotional and intellectual meanings. With its direction, colour, intensity and distribution, light determines whether a scene is perceived as tense or peaceful, realistic or dreamlike. For example, dim and indirect lighting can create an introverted, contemplative atmosphere in the viewer, while intense and direct lighting can emphasise an open and precise situation. In this context, light is not only a visual factor but also the main narrative tool that affects the way the audience makes sense of the story.

The structure of light is usually analysed under two main headings based on whether the source is natural or not. Natural light, as an element that strengthens the story's perception of reality, is fed directly from natural sources. Organic sources such as daylight, twilight, moonlight can point to the ordinariness or sincerity of the characters' lives. Man-made artificial light sources, on the other hand, are more controlled and used with a conscious preference by the director. Many types of light, such as studio lights, spotlights or neon, fall into the artificial light category. These choices are decisive not only for visual design but also for creating meaning in cinema.

### **Natural and Artificial Lighting**

In films, lighting is the main element that reinforces the sense of reality of the scene or, conversely, creates an artificial feeling. The use of light offers the viewer different perceptions of the emotional and physical world of the narrative. Through the intensity, direction and diffusion of light, the scene sometimes gains depth and volume, while at other times it can leave a flattened and superficial impression. Similarly, the correct or exaggerated use of light contributes to presenting the scene in an exciting or monotonous atmosphere (Malkiewicz & Mullen, 2005, p. 282). The natural or artificial quality of light is considered as one of the most powerful tools that shape the perceptual world of the audience.

Natural light stands out as the main factor in the construction of reality. It is used to support realism in cinema. Especially in low-budget independent films or stories that directly touch real life, the preference for natural light brings the narrative closer to everyday life. Artificial light is an important tool that emphasises the fictional structure of the narrative and dramatically shapes the atmosphere. The unique approaches of different directors carry the function of light beyond formal boundaries and make it a central element in the meaning world of the story.

In many films, natural and artificial light sources are combined with contemporary camera technologies to strengthen the perception of reality. Images obtained from handheld cameras, phone cameras and fixed security systems are integrated with the lighting of the scene, giving the viewer the feeling of 'being there'. Each of them uses unique techniques to emphasise different functions and meanings of light.

### **Hard and Soft Lighting**

In cinema narrative, the amount of light and the direction in which it is used stand out as one of the basic elements that shape not only the form of the images, but also the mood of the scene and the mental world of the characters. The intensity of harsh light sources is adjusted depending on the characteristics of the camera, the distance between the light and the object, and the reflective capacity of surfaces (Zettl: 1981, p. 138). When an intense light is given from a certain angle, especially from a narrow direction, the boundary lines of the objects or people in the scene become clear, and all kinds of details on the surfaces become sharply visible. 'Hard light is the light that creates hard shadows on the object or person and generally comes directly from the light source' (Çalışkan-Nişancı, 2021, p. 2331). This kind of application is a method that is frequently used, especially at moments when the tension structure of the story increases, when the character is in a dilemma or feels under psychological pressure. For example, a harsh light applied from a right angle creates strong contrasts on the character's face, thus making him visually feel his inner turmoil or the weight of his decisions. At the same time, the rest of the space is left in darkness, creating the perception of a threatening or unsettling environment. The clear distinction between bright and dark areas evokes a constant state of tension in the viewer and creates a sense of unconscious unease.

Intense and directly projected harsh light sources serve the purpose of revealing the surface features and physical details of objects or persons in an eye-catching manner. This type of lighting creates distinct contours and highlights all the details of the surface texture in a way that the viewer can recognise. At the same time, it allows the shadows of environmental objects or figures to be reflected sharply and clearly on the stage. For example, the shadows cast by tree branches or the silhouette of a body against a wall are clearly emphasised by the use of harsh light. This kind of lighting is especially preferred to underline the intense dramatic effect or psychological pressure elements in the narrative (Algan, 1999, p. 64). This type of lighting is used only in moments of difficulty or intense emotions (Kafalı, 1990, p. 188). When we take a closer look at the use of hard light, we see that it is generally preferred in crime stories with dark themes or in films with pessimistic content.

Soft light generally reduces the shadows created by hard light and does not produce distinct shadows on its own (Combes and Tiffin, p. 157). In contrast to hard light, light applications that spread over a wider area and provide a soft brightness change the emotional tone of the scene and create a relaxing effect on the viewer's perception. In this kind of lighting, the boundaries between shadows and illuminated areas are almost indistinct; transitions are smooth and sudden contrasts are avoided. Such a method is used to emphasise the theme of trust and warmth between characters in a story. For example, in an intimate conversation between two characters or in scenes where trust is at the forefront, such lighting allows the viewer to relax emotionally. However, in nature-centred shots or scenes where childhood memories are recreated, wide and soft light sources give the inner world of the characters a peaceful and optimistic atmosphere. Such scenes not only provide visual relief, but also transform the narrative structure in a positive way.

To put it briefly, the intensity and distribution of light directly affect the emotional and intellectual structure of the narrative. When strong and distinct light is used in the tension-laden parts of the story, the psychological tensions of the characters are more clearly conveyed to the audience. On the other hand, when softer and widespread light is preferred, the scene is given a peaceful and balanced atmosphere. Thus, light goes beyond being merely a tool that makes the physical space visible; it becomes one of the main elements that direct the emotional experience of the audience and shape the meaning world of the narrative. Through the use of light, the director and cinematographer create the spirit of the scene and draw the audience deeper into the inner world of the story.

### **THE USE OF LIGHT SOURCES AND COLOR IN CINEMA**

In technical terms, lighting aims to provide sufficient light intensity for the camera to produce a clear and appropriate image and to regulate the colour harmony of this light directly or with additional equipment (Zettl, 1981, p. 131). The quality of light, both in terms of its source and its colour, constitutes one of the building blocks of film language. When the director and cinematographer consciously choose each light source and tone, the viewer not only has a visual experience, but is also enabled to reinterpret

the story in line with subtexts.

In the language of cinema, the use of the direction and tones of light is not limited to creating the visual composition of the scenes, but also functions as one of the basic tools that build the layers of meaning of the story. The direction of light and colour choices strengthen the viewer's perceptual relationship with the scene. Thus, the perception of space goes beyond the physical level and deepens. The forms of illumination and the intensity of colours support the conceptual unity in the background of the narrative, contributing to the audience's reading of the subtexts in the story and making a more comprehensive understanding of the situations in which the characters find themselves. With this approach, light and colour cease to be merely visual preferences and become a form of expression that mediates the intellectual dimensions of the narrative.

### **The Source of Light**

The functions assumed by the light used in film production, depending on its source and position in the story world, is one of the basic building blocks of the language of image. The physical or fictional presence of light in the narrative universe is generally analysed on two different planes. The first one is the light sources that are visible in the frame and whose existence is clearly proved in the story world. The second one can be characterised as light applications that are outside the frame, whose physical presence is not shown to the audience, but affect the atmosphere of the scene.

The first group of lights includes directly observable lighting elements such as any lamp on the stage, led lights, flashlights, car headlights. Such light sources strengthen the credibility of the narrative, because when the audience associates a visible light source in the environment of the characters, they accept the reality of space and time more easily. This method of illumination, which takes place within the story world or, in other words, within the narrative universe, and which the audience sees first-hand, creates a sense of reality that is consistent within itself.

Light applications, which are used to add dramatic intensity or symbolic meaning to the scene and whose physical source is not explained, function to deepen the emotional and conceptual layers of the narrative. This kind of lighting finds an intuitive response in the viewer's perception rather than reality. For example, a strong beam of light that suddenly illuminates the character's face in a dark room directs the viewer to the character's inner world, while the physical origin of this light is not questioned. In such cases, light not only supports the visual integrity of the scene, but also provides intuitive clues to the character's mental or emotional process. It aims to establish an emotional connection with the viewer rather than the logical continuity of the narrative. On the other hand, the repetitive use of light sources in cinema may be a conscious choice to emphasise certain narrative elements and deepen layers of meaning. The inclusion of the same kind of light source in the scene during certain events or in similar psychological states of the character creates a recognisable trace in the viewer's memory. For example, the morning light constantly filtering through the same window can point to a specific memory. Such an arrangement strengthens the visual memory of the narrative and provides thematic continuity between scenes.

In cinematography, the source of light is not only a technical choice, but also a powerful narrative tool that establishes the formal and conceptual integrity of the narrative. The use of light, whether its source is shown or not, affects the way the viewer is involved in the narrative, on the one hand concretising the internal reality of the narrative, on the other hand creating intuitive areas of meaning and bringing the viewer closer to the emotional centre of the narrative.

The light source and its colour work together as two elements that cannot be separated from each other in a film. The visibility of the source determines the effect of the colour of the light on the narrative. For example, the light of a signboard visible in the frame reflects a blue light throughout the scene, reflecting both the atmosphere of the space and the psychological state of the character. In this case, both the source and the colour ensure the integrity of the narrative.



### **Colour of Light**

In film production, lighting is not only expected to make visual elements visible. While light provides a wide range of tones in the scene, it maintains the consistency of colour values and plays a determining role in colour balance. In addition, it strengthens the perception of the form and size of the objects in the space and increases the level of reality of the scene. Lighting also assumes functions such as emphasising the textures and details of surfaces, creating atmospheric effects, and adding emotional depth to the narrative. Ensuring the correct exposure and creating a light environment suitable for the general structure of the image are among the basic tasks of cinematographic light (Brown, 2014, p. 104). The colour of light is one of the basic components of the world of symbolic meaning as well as creating atmosphere and emotion in the film. Each colour is loaded with cultural and psychological associations and these associations fulfil certain functions in the film narrative.

Changing the general colour temperature used in a film scene can directly affect the perception of the audience and the meaning they attribute to the scene. In this context, it is possible to create certain impressions in the audience about the emotional intensity of the scene, the physical condition or glamour of the characters, or even the environmental conditions. For example, cold tones with low colour temperature can make the character look sick or tired, while warm tones can strengthen the feelings of vitality and attractiveness. The same method also guides the perception of the time period in the scene in terms of the part of the day or how the weather conditions should be perceived (Hurkman, 2014p. 187). Colour-related lighting arrangements reconstruct the relationship of the objects or characters in the scene with the audience.

Warm and cool colours shape the emotional and visual structure of the narrative by carrying different layers of meaning according to film genres. In thrillers, warm colours such as red emphasise danger and pressure, while in action films the same tones reinforce moments of speed, energy and conflict. In sci-fi productions, cool colours are generally preferred; blue or green lights create a sterile, technological and alien atmosphere. In the melodrama genre, warm colours emphasise emotional intensity and romantic bonds, while cool colours reflect a character's loneliness or sadness. In comedy films, bright warm colours promote cheerfulness, mobility and optimism, while the use of colours is usually subdued and understated.

In art cinema, on the other hand, colours are not only an element that supports the narrative, but also symbolic tools that reveal the character's inner world and thematic depth. The deliberate restriction of the colour palette or the use of contrasting colours aims to increase the aesthetic and intellectual interaction of the viewer. In this kind of cinema, light and colour carry not only visible but also invisible meanings. Therefore, the colour of light is not only an aesthetic element but also one of the basic building blocks of genre and artistic expression.

The colour of light is a powerful tool that shapes the narrative universe of cinema. Considering the colour and source of light together expands the narrative universe. While the appearance or invisibility of the light source in the frame, its inclusion or exclusion in the story world determines the level of reality of the narrative, the tone and meaning of the colour reveals the emotional depth of the scene. The lighting preferences decided by the director and cinematographer together appeal to the conscious and unconscious perceptions of the audience, giving the narrative a multi-layered experience. Therefore, the quality of light is not only a technical element in film language, but also an intellectual element that affects narrative and expression.

### **DIRECTION OF LIGHT**

Light in cinema is not only a visualisation tool. Lighting techniques are also a powerful form of communication that builds the emotional and conceptual layers of the narrative. The direction of light plays a decisive role in determining the mental states of the characters, the atmosphere of the scene and the subtext of the narrative. The angle from which the light comes directly affects the meaning to be created. In this context, the direction of light should be considered as one of the syntactic elements of cinema language.

In film language, the direction of light is a powerful component that makes the psychological and emotional structure of the narrative visible. Depending on its direction, light can reveal the character's inner world, determine the distance between him/her and the audience, or add symbolic meanings to the narrative. Below, the effects of light coming from different angles on the narrative are discussed with a unique approach.

### **Side Lighting**

In a scene, light directed from a side angle illuminates one side of human figures and objects while creating dense shadows on the other surfaces, increasing the prominence of forms and creating the effect of division on the visual plane (Kars, 2003, p. 117). Side light is often used in the language of cinema to express the inner dilemmas of the character. The fact that one half of the face is illuminated and the other half is left in shadow symbolises the ambivalence between good and evil, hope and despair, reality and illusion.

This lighting technique suggests that the character is in the process of a decision that has not yet been finalised or that he is experiencing a mental tension. For example, a light coming from the left side on the face of a character sitting alone at a table and questioning his past may indicate that he is about to let go of his past experiences. On the other hand, an intense light coming from the right can be designed as an image that supports the character's desire to open up to the outside world and the transformation process. In any case, the light coming from the side creates depth and encourages the viewer to take a closer look at the character's psychological world. The light coming from the side points to a dilemma and strengthens the perception of depth in character design.

### **Back Lighting**

Backlighting is created by using a light source directed from behind the main figure or object in the scene. When used in conjunction with frontal light sources, a line of light is created that clarifies the contours of the character or object and slightly illuminates its surroundings. This effect is often called 'edge light' in cinema. Edge light increases the depth effect by separating the figure from the background and provides visual clarity (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012, p. 132). In this lighting scheme, the light source can be positioned from a variety of angles, primarily over the figure, from the side or towards the camera.

Backlighting silhouettes the figures, creating distance between the individual and his/her surroundings and offering the viewer a conscious experience of alienation. Backlighting is often preferred to emphasise unknown or obscure aspects of the character. When a figure remains in a completely dark shadow and only its outlines glow, it reveals a mysterious side of the character that is still unresolved. For example, a character who enters the door of a dark space and is silhouetted by a strong light coming from his back can be perceived as either a saviour or a threatening figure. This technique is also used to create a divine or sacred meaning. Characters surrounded by a strong backlight often signify a purifying or transformative role. However, this form of light can also isolate the character, making the viewer feel distance from the character.

### **Top Lighting**

In lighting from above, the light source is positioned directly at the apex of the figure or object and the light is directed downwards at an almost right angle. At the same time, a controlled illumination is provided throughout the space with the effect of light coming from above. This technique is particularly used to strongly emphasise the character's face or certain areas of the scene. The overhead light can increase the dramatic effect of the scene and make the character's facial expression more prominent (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012: 132). A face illuminated by overhead light often deepens the eye sockets and facial features, which can also make the character appear more threatening or emotionally repressed, so it is important in which scene and in which context this light is used.

Overhead lighting is usually applied regardless of the light source and is used especially in scenes where religious themes are prominent (Karavit, 2006: 26). In this context, the light coming from above strengthens the narrative structures that represent authority and superior power over the character. When an authority figure is illuminated by an intense golden light coming from above, the character is

perceived as a glorified, almost divine being. However, the same light can also represent a divine judgement falling upon a character. The meaning of light differs according to the context of the narrative. In a scene, the light coming from above creates a star image for a singing musician, whereas the light shining on a character injured by falling to the ground does not have the same meaning. We can say that the key words for this type of light are authority, oppression, fragility, star image and divine or sacred characteristics.

### **Under Lighting**

The Under lighting method is created by shining the light source from the lower part of the figure or object in the scene. Depending on the context in which it is used, under light can serve different functions. It is often used to increase the sense of threat and uneasiness, especially in scenes with tension and horror themes. This method creates an unusual and disturbing visual effect by emphasising facial features and other anatomical features in unusual ways (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012: 132). In other words, this technique, which is frequently used especially in horror films, creates exaggerated expressions on the character's face thanks to the shadows created by the light coming from below, and causes unease in the audience by unexpectedly illuminating the character's facial features.

Down lighting is often used to express unnatural and disturbing situations. This type of light draws attention to alienation and threat in the film world. For example, the light reflected from below on the face of one of the characters gathered around a fire can add a supernatural and threatening atmosphere to the story he is telling. The light coming from below can also be constructed as a deviation from reality and a harbinger of a supernatural being

To summarise briefly, light from the side symbolises inner conflicts and the search for depth, while light from behind makes unknown and mysterious areas visible. Light from above implies authority or an important character, while light from below reinforces threatening atmospheres. In all cases, the direction of light is not only an aesthetic choice, but also a fundamental linguistic element that helps to see the subtext of the narrative.

### **SPECIAL CASES AND OTHER LIGHTING METHODS**

In addition to the lighting methods that have become classic due to their widespread use, there are also lighting techniques obtained through experience in filmmaking processes. The light emitted by fire, columns of light emitted in the atmosphere and appearing vertically, all kinds of lights from lightning to flashes that start suddenly and go out at the same speed, water or all kinds of surface reflections, all kinds of lights that are part of the scene and are part of the decor or lighting that gives the effect of light are included in this group. The main common point of this lighting group is that it is used in the story (Milerson, 2007, p. 446- 457). In general terms, Milerson divides the lighting techniques used in film production into two main groups: classical methods and experiential methods. To put it simply, experiential techniques are based on the 'organic integration of light from natural or artificial sources into the story'. For example, the flickering light of fire or the reflections of water not only illuminate the scene, but also become a tool that reflects the inner world of the characters or the tension of the plot. These techniques provide the viewer with a 'realistic' atmosphere, while the source of the light is visible in the scene (e.g. a fireplace or a street lamp), allowing the viewer to focus their attention on the story rather than the technical elements. On a more complex level, the 'narrative function' of such lighting comes to the fore. For example, a sudden flash of lightning is not only a physical source of light, but can also symbolise a character's inner conflict or an unexpected turning point. Lamps as part of the decor help the viewer to read the subtext by emphasising the social status of the characters or the historical context of the space. As Milerson emphasises, the success of these techniques depends on the director's ability to construct light not as a 'random effect' but as a narrative element appropriate to the language of the story.

"In most fiction films, the table lamps and street lamps you see in the mise-en-scene are not the main sources of lighting for filming. However, they are not visible light sources. But these visible light sources will motivate the lighting decisions made during the production. The director will usually try to create a lighting design that is compatible with the resources on set" (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012. p. 133-

134). Bordwell and Thompson emphasise the critical distinction between visible light sources in fiction films and real lighting sources. At a basic level, this can be explained as follows: A table lamp or street lantern on a set is not usually the main source of light used by the technical crew, as these sources may be inadequate or uncontrolled. However, these objects determine the motivation of the light in the scene. For example, if there is a candle burning in a room, the director and cinematographer use professional equipment that mimics the warm tones and soft shadows created by the candle.

In order to meet the need for light in filmmaking, it is important to balance the two seemingly conflicting needs of realism and technical imperatives in a dialectical harmony. In the story world, visible sources not only manage the viewer's perception, allowing them to logically find where the light comes from, but also allow the film crew to overcome technical limitations. For example, a scene set in front of a car headlight can be illuminated by various set lights, but it gains importance to the extent that the direction and colour of the lamp are referenced, giving the viewer a natural feeling. This creates a kind of illusion of realism, but also allows for emotional emphasis, such as the partial light/dark balance on a character's face.

We can talk about the emergence of a meaningful whole with the direct or indirect contribution of lighting methods used as *mise-en-scene* elements in film production to the story world. In other words, the lighting methods, which are considered together with the story world and handled as a part of the decor, become functional through serving the narrative. Therefore, the choice of light as a form of expression should not be considered separately from the narrative. All kinds of light elements considered as *mise-en-scene* are used especially in special situations that are important for the narrative, expanding the meaning of the story world and causing the formation of connotations. In this context, other lighting methods should not be considered separately from general forms of lighting and should be taken into consideration when deciding on the lighting techniques of the film.

At a basic level, lighting guarantees the visibility of the scene and at the same time conveys the emotional states of the characters or thematic conflicts to the audience. The balance between the narrative sources of lighting and the use of non-narrative technical interventions paves the way for the formation of connotations while maintaining the coherence of the narrative. In this context, lighting preferences should be evaluated not only with aesthetic concerns, but also as an active narrative element that serves the language of the story, and should be designed in harmony with general lighting techniques, bringing together both visual and intellectual participation of the audience. In short, lighting should be considered not as a passive element of the *décor*, but as an active producer of meaning that deepens the narrative universe and offers a multi-layered structure.

Various forms of the use of light can be categorised as pulsing light, piercing light, pool of light, filtered light and undulating light in the context of specific situations. It can be said that such categorisations aim to provide a dynamic framework that is open to interpretation rather than precise boundaries. Especially considering the contextual flexibility of concepts in social sciences, it is more appropriate to interpret these groupings as a representation rather than an absolute scheme. In this context, generalised approaches have been adopted due to the multi-layered nature of the concepts. Therefore, the groupings presented here are evaluations based on theoretical possibilities rather than empirical data.

### **Pulsing Light**

It is one of the types of light that flashes intermittently and repeats at irregular frequencies. While it indicates moments of tension, chaos and crisis, it is an element that describes moments of panic and imminent danger. Flashing light disrupts the flow of time and creates a sense of unease in the viewer. For example, in the scene of a character's escape from a place, the intermittent flashing of a broken lamp metaphorically shows not only the abandonment of the place, but also the character's mental dissolution. This type of light subconsciously triggers a state of alarm. The flashing siren lights of emergency vehicles, on the other hand, are not only the arrival of help, but also a visual warning that the situation has evolved into an irreversible crisis.

### **Piercing Light**

Piercing light is the most dangerous type of light for film characters. This light usually indicates a loss. For this type of light, it can be said that it is a warning that the film characters will face a serious situation or loss, or it can be stated that it is used to search for something, to track what is lost, or to reveal the truth that remains in the dark. Narrow-angled and intense beams of light from a single source direct the character's attention to a specific point in the scene and force the viewer to focus. For example, when a film character investigates a crime scene with a flashlight, the sharp borders of the light, if shone on another character's face, produce meanings that foreshadow a situation such as death or injury. With this type of light, both the darkness of the space and the limitation of information are made felt. The car headlights used in night shots reveal the narrowing of the physical and psychological field of vision and symbolise the uncertainty of the future. Penetrating light types such as car headlights, flashlights or lasers damage the people or objects in front of them and cause loss.

### **3. Pool of Light**

A pool of light is a narrative device that expresses the isolation or enclosure of a particular space or group. This type of light, which is usually concentrated on a specific area, is used to emphasise social interactions or emotional bonds within the space. The round and soft light falling in the centre of a dining table can show the intimacy of the relationships established there, while the dark areas around the table can make you feel threats from the outside world or loneliness. For example, in a family dinner, the light that illuminates only the table and leaves the rest of the areas in darkness tells the transience of the state of being together and its detachment from the outside world. On the other hand, a pool of light that remains on a character sitting alone can express his exclusion from society or his isolation in his own inner world.

### **4. Filtered Light**

This type of light, also described as cut light, contains meanings such as division or fragmentation. The streaks of light filtering through the window curtain or the light passing through the branches of a tree indicate fragmentation. It is an appropriate type of light to represent the fragmented nature of past memories and the transience of time. This type of light blurs the boundaries between past and present. Like other types of light, this type of light should also be evaluated through the context in which it is used. For example, the linear beams of light filtering in through the shutters in the window of an old house underline the nostalgic mood as it evokes the past due to its oldness. Filtered light produces a meaning that is neither completely clear nor completely erased, visualising the complex nature of remembering as well as fragmentation and fragmentation.

### **Flickering and Wavering Light**

Flickering light, created by the reflection of water or flickering light by the flicker of a flame, is often used to depict the fragility of perception of reality and mood swings. For example, in a scene in which a character sits by a lake, the flickering lights reflecting off the surface of the water may suggest his mental turmoil and uncertain future. Similarly, the flicker of flame in a candlelit room contributes to the restless atmosphere of the story and the character's inner tension.

In film language, light types play a decisive role in the emotional tone, psychological atmosphere and narrative dynamics of the narrative. Flashing lights indicate danger and chaos, while piercing lights emphasise loss and the unknown. Pools of light are a powerful way of expressing both inclusiveness and isolation. While filtered light expresses fragmentation and division, undulating and flickering lights visualise the fragile structure of time and memory. All these genres are effective tools of expression that constitute the visual language of cinema art.

## **THE LIGHTS OF *DARK CITY*: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIGHTING TECHNIQUE AND NARRATION**

The camera movements used in the opening sequences of the film are constructed in such a way as to make the viewer a partner in the character's mental turmoil. The film opens with a prologue scene, in which the camera moves across the city, gliding between locations, while the atmosphere is established through strikingly flashing lights. In all the city lights we see, a sense of flickering is created, sometimes



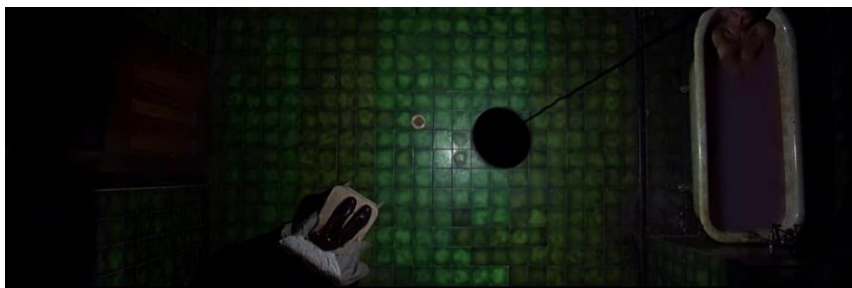
distinctly, sometimes almost imperceptibly. This flickering lighting is first seen when the clock strikes midnight. Then, the red warning lights on the cranes in the city, a sudden lightning bolt illuminating the sky during a subway passage, a cinema sign reading ‘Now Showing: The Evil Late Show Nightly’ and finally Dr. Daniel P. Schreber's face form a visual integrity. These visual elements aim to create tension, alienation and threat perception in the audience from the beginning of the narrative.

In the opening sequence of the film, the flickering light of the hotel sign drags the viewer into an atmosphere of uncertainty and inner conflict. This visual motif betrays the director's intention to gradually escalate the tension and hints at the unreliability of the location. The intermittent lighting technique fragments the perception of time and reflects the chaotic state of mind of the character. As a matter of fact, the transformation of this place into the epicentre of the murders in the following scenes confirms the visual prediction at the beginning.



**Figure 1.** Pulsing Light Effect in the Hotel Scene

The blinking beam of light seeping through the round window metaphorically depicts the dissolution of Murdoch's unconscious. The innocence connotation of the character sleeping in the bathtub with his naked body contrasts with the threatening elements around him. The hypnotic rhythm of the ceiling lamp emphasises both the imminence of physical danger and the fragility of mental balance. The cracked and distorted reflection in the mirror embodies the breaking point of the perception of reality.



**Figure 2.** Pulsing light effect from the rhythmic motion of the ceiling lamp.



**Figure 3.** Cracked mirror reflecting distorted pulsing light.

The lantern that breaks during the character's exit from the room harbours deep symbolic layers. The movement of the fish from the lantern to the bathtub represents the resistance to life despite the limited freedom, while the broken syringe reminds of the presence of disturbing traces of the past. This visual dialectic reflects Murdoch's struggle for existence in the artificial world. The survival of the fish foreshadows the character's ultimate salvation. As a matter of fact, the movement of the fish from the fishbowl to the bathtub at the beginning of the film is the same as John Murdoch's movement from the *Dark City* to Shell Beach at the end of the film. The bathtub is relatively better than the lantern and the artificial sunlight is relatively better than the *Dark City*.

The image of Shell Beach on the postcard shows that memory manipulation is one of the central themes. This depiction of a false paradise, illuminated by side lighting, calls into question the manipulative aspects of the human mind. The reason why this postcard is lit from the side is to create duality and depth. The fact that part of the Shell Beach postcard is illuminated and the other half is left in shadow points to the ambivalence between good and evil, hope and despair, reality and illusion. Showing the character's face in half light and half dark is an internal conflict narrative technique frequently used in the history of cinema. This composition visualises Murdoch's identity crisis and the necessity to make a choice



**Figure 4.** Side lighting on the *Shell Beach* sign reveals spatial ambiguity.

The balcony scene dominated by blue tones can be read as a faint reflection of the desire for freedom. In the *Dark City*, the first colour we see of freedom is blue, and it also appears very faint. The camera approaches John Murdoch's face in the close-up and we see a faint child. The appearance and disappearance of the image of the child symbolises the surfacing of the character's repressed memories. The camera returns to John Murdoch's face again. Thus, we realise that this scene is a dept of knowlege scene and this image is shown as a sudden depthti. These memories belong to Murdoch. On the other end of the phone is Dr Schreber. The light in the phone booth where Dr Schreber makes the call is a flashing light and the use of light here emphasises the danger. Dr Schreber communicates from an isolated place dominated by flashing light, informs Murdoch of the presence of pursuers and emphasises

that he must escape immediately. During the chase that begins after this warning, it is observed that beings identified as Strangers enter the scene. As Murdoch escapes from his location, he notices the suspension of the chronological flow and the state of collective immobility. All the characters in the hotel are frozen. The motif of the freezing of time deals with the domination of social control mechanisms over the individual on an allegorical level. The Strangers' transformation of the city into a laboratory presents a dystopian critique of the process of de-identification of modern man. Murdoch's resistance through the act of escape can be interpreted as a glimmer of hope for the potential of human will for liberation.



**Figure 5.** Pale blue evokes illusory freedom and false memory.



**Figure 6.** Half-shadowed by side lighting, Murdoch's face symbolizes duality.



**Figure 7.** The pulsing light in the phone booth suggests danger.

In the first scene introducing John Murdock's wife Emma to the audience, the scene is illuminated with a distinct light coming from above while the character is singing. This scene not only presents a visual aesthetic, but also carries a deeper meaning on the narrative plane. The direction of the light from above is associated with a technique often referred to as 'starlight' in the language of cinema. This kind of lighting adds a mysterious but at the same time sublime atmosphere to the scene. This light, which is used to highlight Emma's face in particular, presents the character as a sacred or idealised figure. In this way, while Emma's beauty is visually emphasised, at the same time an important sign is given about her emotional weight in John's life. The lighting arrangement in the scene leaves Emma's surroundings in darkness so that all attention is focused on her. This approach not only makes the audience feel her special position in the narrative, but also allows the character to shine like a kind of 'star'. The light signifies not only Emma's physical beauty but also her symbolic value in the narrative. The theatrical structure of the scene positions Emma as a stage performer, implying her central place in John's inner world. This shows that Emma is not only a wife, but also a figure representing John's sense of belonging and his struggle to remain human.

Later in the film, the meaning of the visual messages given in this first scene deepens. Emma's effect on John is not just about past memories; on the contrary, she is an indispensable bond for him, a hope of salvation. At the end of the narrative, although John questions and leaves many things behind, he can never give up Emma. Despite the fact that the character has a different identity, that is, she is no longer the Emma of the past, John wants to get to know her again and build a new life with her. This attitude reveals that Emma is not just a piece of memory for John, she is a figure symbolising reality and belonging. Therefore, the placement of Emma at the centre of the scene by the light from above is not only an aesthetic choice, but also a conscious directorial choice that emphasises the emotional and symbolic weight of the character within the narrative.



**Figure 8.** Top lighting is associated with the 'star lighting' effect in cinema.

The laboratory scene, which forms the intersection point between Dr Schreber and Emma, is built on a completely opposite lighting philosophy. The cold-toned fluorescent lighting rising from the lower layers of the space resembles the clinical sterility often encountered in science fiction cinema. However, the use of light from an unconventional angle (from the ground level) is a conscious intervention to disturb the perceptual balance of the viewer. The light coming from the ground is contrary to natural light sources such as the sun or the moon. This artificiality gives the viewer a sense of reality that 'does not belong to this world', just as the rats show that they do not belong in the labyrinth. This technical choice emphasises the contradictory nature of the artificial universe in which the characters exist, triggering ethical questions about the process of manipulation of human memory. The rats, illuminated and objectified only from the ground, imply isolation and a metaphysical void, pointing to the existence of a world beyond logic. The cold light coming from the floor in the laboratory-like space with lab rats in it emphasises emotionlessness. Especially the visual parallelism between the spatial positioning of the rats and Emma's stance creates a metaphor for the fragility of the human condition.



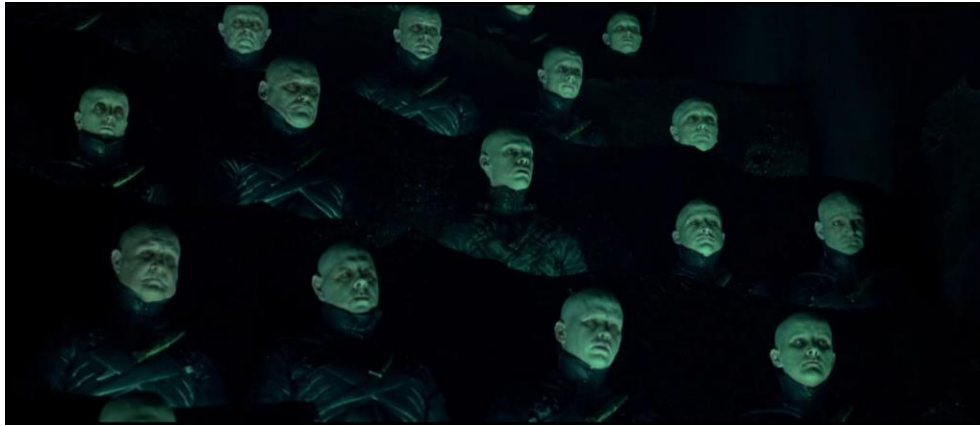
**Figure 9.** Underlighting evokes an uncanny sense of otherness.

The dialectical tension between Emma's location and the lighting paradigms of both scenes embodies the film's fundamental philosophical conflict. The vertical illumination of Emma represents the resilience of human emotion and individual memory, while the horizontal lighting systems in the laboratory embody the cold rationality of technocratic control mechanisms. This opposition functions not only at the level of visual composition, but also as a representation of an ontological struggle. This aesthetic tension between the romantic tones of the overhead light and the clinical brightness of the fluorescence seeping through the floor evokes a subconscious sense of discomfort in the viewer, opening the door to a deep reading of the dystopian universe of the film. The fact that cinematographic choices create layers of meaning at this level is proof of how sophisticated the visual language of the film has become.

The flash of the camera used by the police team investigating the hotel murder in the film becomes one of the basic codes of visual narrative. While the sharp bursts of white light momentarily tear the dark atmosphere of the crime scene, it is observed that this technical choice assumes a semiotic function. The fact that half of Detective Frank Bumstead's face is illuminated by the flash light while the other half remains in darkness creates a visual allegory for the character's inner conflict. While this flashing light points to the danger the detective is in, it reflects the language of modern cinema open to psychoanalytical readings. Each flash is not only a physical act of documentation, but also a metaphorical expression of the detective's questioning of reality in his mind. The character's placing himself at the centre of danger in his quest for justice is identified with this visual tension between the brightness of light and the depth of shadow.

The under-lighting technique applied in all the appearance scenes of the Strangers, representing the antagonist forces, is a frequently used code for the representation of evil in the history of cinema. Sharp beams of light rising from the ground create antinaturalist deformations on the facial features of the characters, while developing a disturbing aesthetic language directed at the viewer's subconscious. This lighting method embodies the psychological tension of the dystopian universe through its dialogue with the distorted perspectives of 1920s German expressionist cinema. While the exaggerated shadow play on the faces of the Strangers points to the ontological uncertainty of the inhuman beings, the feeling of unease created in the viewer finds its visual counterpart in the Lacanian concept of 'the other'. The increasing intensity of light at each scene transition systematically escalates the perception of the imminence of the threat.





**Figure 10.** Underlighting consistently marks the Strangers as antagonistic figures.

The backlighting technique preferred in the scenes of emotional tension between John Murdoch and Emma plays a key role in visualising the psychological distance between the characters. This method, which transforms the figures into silhouettes, creates a conscious alienation effect by restricting the viewer's access to the inner worlds of the characters. In particular, John's identity crisis following his memory loss is identified with the opaque shadow curtain created by the light from behind. This visual metaphor depicts the individual's disconnected relationship with his past and the fragmentation of his sense of self. The invisibility of the source of the light represents the uncertainties in the character's unconscious, while the blurred transitions in the borders of the silhouettes give clues about the fragile structure of the perception of reality.



**Figure 11.** Backlighting visualizes the emotional distance between John and Emma.

The water surface reflections used in the pool dialogue between Dr. Schreber and Mr. El constitute an important example of the diegetic use of light. The blue-toned pool of light created by the pool transforms the space where the characters are located into an aquarium atmosphere. This visual choice is designed to emphasise Dr Schreber's marginal position and emotional isolation within the Strangers community. The play of light dancing on the fragile surface of the water reflects the character's inner fluctuations and instabilities on a metaphorical level. The sharp illumination of Mr. El's body language during the dialogue makes the inequality in power dynamics visible, while Dr. Schreber's half-lit body carries clues about the scientist's moral dilemmas. The ambiguity of the boundaries of the pool of light creates a profound subtext about the character's crisis of belonging and epistemological questioning.



**Figure 12. Figure 11.** Pool of light evokes an aquarium-like space, emphasizing

The intermittent flickers of light surrounding the Strangers entities in the film become a visual warning system for the existential fragility of these antithesis characters. The intermittent rhythm of illumination through flashing light evokes the motif of ‘system failure’ frequently encountered in science fiction cinema and creates a perception of threat to the viewer's subconscious. This technical choice metaphorises not only the physical vulnerability of the characters, but also the unstable foundations of the artificial order they have established. Indeed, the collective collapse of the Strangers in the final sequence confirms the predictive quality of these light patterns. The ontological revolution triggered by John Murdoch's resistance is embodied in the paroxysmic intensity of the lights, shedding light on the paradoxical fragility of control mechanisms. Each flash turns into an epistemological tremor that makes visible the limits of dystopian power.



**Figure 13.** Flickering light evokes the sci-fi trope of system failure.

In the dialogue between Emma and Mr Hand by the river, the reflections of water on Emma's face create an optical palette that draws a psychoanalytic portrait of the character. The light refractions dancing on the fluid surface function as the visual equivalent of the Bergsonian concept of ‘duration’, emphasising the relativity in the perception of time. This visual composition, in harmony with the tidal structure of the water's reflection, reflects the unresolved conflicts in Emma's memory and the paradox of identity. While each wave movement presents a dynamism parallel to the repressed layers of reality in the character's unconscious, the constant deformation of the reflections points to the permeability of the boundaries between reality and fiction.



**Figure 14.** The water's wavering reflection mirrors Emma's inner conflict and identity paradox.

At the crime scene, the red flashing lights of the police car are placed at the centre of the visual narrative, embodying the basic codes of the film language. The traditional meanings of the colour red in cinema, such as danger, urgency and violence, assume a function in this scene that predicts the end of the characters. The rhythmic interruptions of light focus the viewer's attention on the visual stimulus while at the same time systematically increasing the narrative tension. The parallel development between the physical death of Detective Bumstead and the erasure of Emma's identity in the following sequences reinforces the role of this light motif in the film. Rather than a purely aesthetic choice, the choice of colour functions as a semiotic device that supports the tragic trajectories of the characters. Each burst of light foreshadows the impending loss and manages the audience's expectation on a structural level. This technical choice is an important example of how the visual elements of cinema can be integrated into the narrative.



**Figure 15.** Red lighting foreshadows death and identity erasure, reinforcing its symbolic role.

The use of light in the interrogation scene provides an example of technical analysis in the visual representation of character interactions. The intense focal light surrounding the table is a new adaptation of the traditional 'spotlight' technique. This lighting scheme not only defines the space, but also functions as a symbolic tool that visualises the psychological positions of the characters. At the beginning of the scene, the two characters are lit at an equal distance, signalling the possibility of a temporary reconciliation. As the dialogue progresses, a direct relationship is established between Detective Bumstead's physical movements and the use of light. The character's movement away from the table and out of the light field is a classical cinema technique reflecting the change in power dynamics. This movement symbolises both professional hierarchy and emotional detachment. The half-light and half-darkness of Murdoch's face in the brightly lit area where he is alone emphasises the

character's internal conflicts and social isolation. At the turning point of the scene, the Detective's positioning on the shadow border constitutes the spatial representation of power relations. While this choice visualises the cold logic of the judicial system, Murdoch's body language, which shrinks in the light, embodies the tension between guilt and victimisation. The shrinking of the light field with the dialogue tension directs the viewer's attention to the facial expressions of the characters. At the end of the scene, the illuminated area where Murdoch is left alone becomes a powerful metaphor representing the loneliness of a highly aware individual. This technical approach reveals the film's ability to integrate the visual language with the narrative. Conscious choices in the use of light and shadow create not only aesthetic but also semantic layers, offering the viewer an intellectual reading space. Such a functional use of cinematographic elements is an indication of the meticulousness of the production's visual narrative discipline.



**Figure 16.** The detective steps out of the pool of.

The pool scene in the film not only creates a visual impact, but also presents a powerful cinematic narrative that reflects the psychological states of the characters and the general atmosphere of the story. The dialogue between Dr. Schreber and Murdoch in this scene draws the viewer deeper into the inner world of the characters. The flickering and undulating lights reflected from the water surface of the pool are not only an aesthetic choice, but also an important visual element that symbolises Dr. Schreber's mental confusion and inner conflicts. This play of light reflects the character's uncertainty about the future and the dilemma he is in, while at the same time adding a deep sense of unease to the scene. This use of light is like an extension of the dark and threatening atmosphere that prevails throughout the film. Although Dr. Schreber seems to intend to cooperate with Murdoch in this scene, his behaviour makes it clear that he is in a complex state of mind. As the conversation continues, he suddenly points his gun at Murdoch, creating a sudden tension in the audience and reinforcing the character's unreliability. This unexpected move also reveals the extent of Schreber's fear and pressure. At the same time, his attempt to force Murdoch to inject the syringe in his hand shows how intense the external pressure on him is and that he cannot make his decisions freely. These behaviours of Dr. Schreber reveal that he carries both his desire to help Murdoch and his fear of the mysterious beings called Strangers at the same time. He is in an inner dilemma; on the one hand, he wants to stand by Murdoch for the salvation of humanity, on the other hand, he is under the pressure of these powerful and threatening beings and hesitates to go against them. This situation shows that Schreber is not only a scientist, but also a character who acts with the instinct of survival, faces fears, and has weak and human aspects. This dialogue between the dim lights of the pool and the reflected water redefines the power dynamics between the characters. At the same time, it forces the audience to witness the decision-making processes of the characters. Dr. Schreber's behaviour in this scene proves that he is not just a side character, but rather a critical figure determining the course of events. Thus, the film not only offers the viewer a science fiction experience, but also constructs a powerful narrative about the depths of human psychology.





**Figure 17.** The flickering water reflections symbolize Schreber's inner turmoil.

The final scene of the film carries an intense and striking meaning on a thematic level as well as a visual one. In this scene, we witness Murdoch's first encounter with daylight after going through a long and painful process of inner transformation. However, the light encountered here is not a naturally occurring daylight; it is an artificial light created through Murdoch's supernatural abilities. Although this light is technically fake, it symbolises reality on a visual and narrative level. At this point, it is not the quality of the light but the meaning it carries that is important. The characters' re-emergence into the light of day, albeit through an artificial light, is an image of hope that comes after the darkness and obscurity in which they have been imprisoned for a long time.

This moment when Murdoch meets Anna is not only a meeting but also a crossroads where identities, emotions and reality are questioned. Emma's assuming the identity of Anna shows how individual memory and self can be shaped by external interventions, while Murdoch's maintaining his feelings for her despite this new identity reveals that love can overcome obstacles such as time, space and identity change. Anna is no longer Emma, at least outwardly; but the love Murdoch feels for her is genuine enough to render this change insignificant.

This artificially constructed daylight does not only represent a physical enlightenment. It is also a symbol of Murdoch's recovery of his humanity, his emotions and his essence by getting rid of his inner darkness. He takes the first step of his newly constructed reality in this scene. Therefore, the false light does not overshadow the reality of the emotion it represents. On the contrary, this light, which Murdoch has created with his own hands, is the embodiment of his belief in his love and his desire to build a new world.



**Figure 18.** Murdoch's conjured sunlight, though artificial, symbolizes hope and narrative rebirth.

This point in the film stands out as a moment when the boundaries between the artificial and the real are blurred, but the emotions become clear with their purity. Everything in sight belongs to a simulated



world; the city, the sky, the sea and even the sun itself. However, a love that blossoms in the midst of all this false structure reminds the viewer that reality is not only about physical conditions. Reality is, in a sense, constructed by what we believe and feel. In this context, Murdoch's love for Anna powerfully demonstrates that genuine feelings can exist even in an artificial world.

As a result, the artificial sunlight we witness in the final scene of the film, although not a reality in the classical sense, represents the point reached by the emotional and existential journey of the characters. The light that Murdoch has created symbolises that he has become not only a subject but also an agent shaping his own world. And the reunion that takes place under this false light, no matter how artificial it may seem, is the birth of a truth: Love can survive despite identity changes, erasure of memory and manipulation of reality. In this respect, the scene deepens the philosophical layers of the film and invites the viewer to reflect on the meaning of being human.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the narrational role of lighting design in *Dark City* and demonstrated that lighting is not a secondary visual aid but a central storytelling mechanism. Through detailed scene-based analysis, the research revealed how light functions to shape atmosphere, deepen emotional tone, reflect character psychology and guide viewer perception throughout the film.

Different types of light such as pulsing, piercing, pool, filtered and wavering lights were identified and categorised based on their visual features and symbolic narrative meanings. For instance, the pulsing lights seen in the hotel sign and the phone booth scene evoke a sense of instability and crisis, disrupting the flow of time and suggesting psychological distress. Piercing lights like flashlights or car beams draw attention to confrontation, loss or danger, particularly in scenes of pursuit or discovery. Pools of light were used to isolate emotional spaces and create intimacy or detachment depending on context. Filtered and wavering lights, often shaped by water or partially obstructed sources, conveyed the fragmented nature of memory and perception.

The direction of lighting also played a crucial role in conveying internal states and thematic layers. Underlighting was consistently used to portray the Strangers as threatening and non-human. In several scenes, this same technique was applied to Dr. Schreber, aligning him visually with these antagonistic forces and suggesting his internal conflict. Side lighting, which left half of John Murdoch's face in shadow, visually represented his fractured identity and the ambiguity between illusion and reality. In emotionally charged encounters between Murdoch and Emma, backlighting created silhouettes that emphasized their emotional distance and the instability of their connection. In contrast, top lighting in Emma's performance scene highlighted her as a symbolic figure of purity and longing, reflecting Murdoch's emotional dependence on her presence.

The use of concentrated light sources in moments of narrative turning points was another recurring pattern. When Detective Bumstead stepped out of a lit area, his movement reflected a descent into confusion. Blue-toned lighting surrounding Schreber expressed detachment and marginalisation. Water reflections in the pool scenes illustrated the characters' psychological instability and moral hesitation. Flash photography at the crime scene fragmented the visual continuity and mirrored the disruption of memory and control.

In the final scene, Murdoch's creation of artificial daylight marked a crucial thematic resolution. Although the light is not natural, it symbolizes the character's reclaiming of agency and his emotional rebirth. This moment is not about the source of light but about what it represents. It signals renewal and the possibility of shaping one's own reality. The artificial light becomes a metaphor for inner truth rather than environmental realism.

Ultimately, lighting in *Dark City* serves not only to make scenes visible but also to articulate deeper emotional and philosophical meanings. It creates rhythm, tension and harmony in the visual language of the film. Rather than functioning as a background tool, light emerges as an active narrative device

that helps construct the viewer's understanding of identity, control, memory and transformation. This study concludes that light in cinema can operate as a language in itself, shaping how stories are told and how emotions are communicated beyond dialogue or plot.

## REFERENCES

- Algan, E. (1999). *Görüntü yönetmenliğine giriş*. Çözüm İletişim Hizmetleri.
- Barnwel, J. (2011). *Film yapımının temelleri*. Literatür Yayınları.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2012). *Film sanatı* (E. Yılmaz & E. S. Onat, Trans.). De Ki Yayınları.
- Brown, B. (2014). *Sinematografi: Kuram ve uygulama* (S. Taylaner, Trans.). Hil Yayınları. (Original work published 2012)
- Butler, A. M. (2011). *Film çalışmaları*. Kalkedon Yayınları.
- Combes, P., & Tiffin, J. (1978). *TV production for education*. Focal Press.
- Çalışkan, F., & Nişancı, İ. (2021). 'Kış Uykusu' filminde iç mekânlarda aydınlatmanın anlatı ile ilişkisi. *OPUS Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 17(35), 2323–2361.
- Elsaesser, T., & Hagener, M. (2015). *Film theory: An introduction through the senses* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hurkman, A. V. (2014). *Color correction handbook: Professional techniques for video and cinema*. Peachpit Press.
- Karavit, C. (2006). *Işık gölge: Görsel sanatlardaki serüven*. Telos Yayınları.
- Kafalı, N. (1990). Ussal ışık yönlendirmesi ve efekt aydınlatması. *Kurgu Dergisi*, (7), 167–190. Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayınları.
- Kars, N. (2003). *Televizyon programı yapalım herkes izlesin*. Derin Yayınları.
- Mäkinen, V., & Näsi, S. (2022). Ecological approach to cinematographic lighting of the human face. *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 10(2), 270–282. <https://doi.org/10.2478/bsmr-2022-0020>
- Malkiewicz, K., & Mullen, M. D. (2005). *Cinematography: A guide for filmmakers and film teachers*. Simon & Schuster.
- Murnau, F. W. (Director). (1922). *Nosferatu* [Film]. Prana Film.
- Parramon, J. (1993). *Işık ve gölge*. Remzi Kitabevi.
- Proyas, A. (Director). (1998). *Dark City* [Film]. New Line Cinema; Mystery Clock Cinema.
- Scott, R. (Director). (1982). *Blade Runner* [Film]. The Ladd Company; Shaw Brothers; Blade Runner Partnership.
- Vardar, B. (2012). *Sinema ve televizyon görüntüsünün temel öğeleri*. Beta Yayıncılık.
- Wiene, R. (Director). (1920). *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [Film]. Decla-Bioscop.

Wurtzel, A. (1979). *Television production* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Zettl, H. (1981). *Television production handbook* (4th ed.). Wadsworth Publishing Company.