Introduction

> Light is at once universal and elusive.
>
> (Paul Hills, *The Light of Early Italian Painting*, 1987)

> To choose to talk about light in cinema is to choose the evidence, with its traps.
>
> (Jacques Aumont, *L'attrait de la lumière*, 2010)

Light is cinema's most essential quality. Illumination is not only the means through which the image is created, it is also the material, either natural or projected, through which the image is made visible. As Mike O'Pray has noted, film and photography use light as both agency and object.[1] Fundamentally, then, films *are* light. And yet, perhaps as a result of light's all-encompassing nature, across the history of narrative film theory and criticism, its aesthetic attributes, its visual impact and emotional affect has thus far been marginalised, mentioned only in biographies of cinematographers or in relation to practical techniques, confined to debates around certain film cycles such as film noir, or amalgamated into more general discussions concerning *mise-en-scène*. Although a number of books touch on lighting aesthetics, from Arnheim's descriptions of the film artist's power to induce emotion according to where he places his lamps in *Film as Art*, to Schivelbusch's notion of a viewer hypnotically

submerged in flame-like screen light in *Disenchanted Night*, to O'Pray's investigations into light's sculptural, modelling capacities in *Film, Form and Phantasy*, at the time of writing only a single recent monograph – Jacques Aumont's small, philosophical, essential *L'attrait de la lumière* concentrates entirely on the seductive visual power of cinematic light.[2] The pervasive, nebulous nature of illumination in the cinema makes it a problematic unifying subject. It is at once ubiquitous and difficult to grasp, flickering across the faces of every character on the screen and spectator in the audience, pushing into the corners of every shot, infiltrating the image on every level.

While all films need light as a means of vision so that the spectator can literally see the actors, sets and scenes, this book is concerned with the use of light as an artistic narrative tool that creates meaning. It focuses on over fifty films in which light has transcended its diffuse functional boundaries and been elevated to a position of narrative and emotional importance, transforming it from an inconspicuous element of film style to an expressive and essential component, emphasising light's status as 'a representational element in its own right, along with figures and objects'.[3] The films are primarily, but not exclusively, drawn from the dominant modes of narrative cinema, the canon, as well as the popular: the aim is to suggest a means of navigating the use and meaning of light from within the known histories of the moving image, from cinema's earliest moments to its most recent digital manifestations. It seeks to use films that are familiar and readily available, so that the reader may revisit, reimagine and actively participate in the study of film light.

Since the aesthetic study of illumination is relatively uncharted, especially within narrative cinema, it seemed pertinent for an introductory study such as this to return to cinema classics and frequently negotiated favourites including *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, Murnau, 1922), *The Third Man* (Reed, 1949) and *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, Godard, 1960) as a means of grounding the arguments and

analyses within cinematic history and of highlighting the rich textural qualities of these films that allow multivalent readings and varied perspectives. Simply put, the canon is the most logical place to start. This is not to say that a study of light's aesthetic import in avant-garde and experimental cinema is not needed, but rather that since much of the work on alternative filmmakers and film artists from Stan Brakhage and Holis Frampton to Maya Deren and Lis Rhodes, or more recently the work of Tacita Dean and Ben Rivers attests, like the artists themselves, writers in this field have always been sensitive to the lyrical importance of illumination, to the link between cinematic ontology and its visual affect(s). It is narrative cinema in which light has hitherto been ignored. At the same time, the inclusion of more recent films such as *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005) and *A Single Man* (Ford, 2009), bring the work up to date to push past the canon, extending the field of study towards the popular and the critically contentious. The use of these films notes light's visual and emotive importance to both the general viewer and the populist filmmaker. The films I refer to, while particular in their use of light, are also often used to illustrate a trend. While they are examples that can stand in for any number of films that use light in similar ways, they are also exemplary and significant in their use of light, earning their place in the canon and in the popular imagination, precisely because they use varying shades and swathes of light at key moments not only as the agent and object of their vision, but as one of the defining methods of their emotive narrative exposition.

Across all the chapters, as the book's title implies, this work is particularly interested in the way filmmakers have harnessed light's expressive qualities in an attempt to make both the visual experience evoke wider narrative information (for the aesthetic decisions to connote meaning) and to induce or heighten emotional responses in the spectator. This is not to say that the book is concerned with emotion or meaning as subject matter, with the various theoretical stances attached to the viable and engaging work on emotion in film studies seen

in cognitive film theory and the work of Murray Smith, Ed Tan and Cynthia Freeland, or to the recent widespread attention devoted to 'affect' or the 'haptic' in film studies.[4] Rather, this book is engaged in the project of examining the visible, textual connections between aesthetic lighting decisions and an intended spectatorial response, regardless of whether that response is actually experienced. It is about the way certain instances of illumination and darkness seem to encourage particular emotional experiences and narrative associations. To borrow Smith's term, in this context, the 'structure of sympathy' emerges as much from the kind of light that strikes a character's face as it does from the extent to which we engage with their words and actions.[5] This is not emotion and meaning as theory, but as illuminated stylistic endeavour.

In order to confront the difficulty of analysing such an essential but amorphous subject across the history of cinema, taking in multiple modes, genres and meanings, it has been necessary to impose a structure. As such this book maintains a basic opposition between illumination and darkness. The dialectic reinforces the sense that in the cinema the absence of light is as significant as its presence: film can only be experienced through the interplay between what is lit and what is not. The division of this book into two sections – Part I 'The presence of light' and Part II 'The absence of light' – notes a visual and emotional distinction as opposed to an oppositional critical stance, highlighting the fundamental visual nature of cinematic light as a dualistic sculpting tool, its ability to create areas on the screen that are not only illuminated, but that also languish in shadow, its capacity to both prioritise and conceal people and spaces. While intense light dominates attention, darkness lingers in stark silhouettes, black doorways and moody blue twilight. Both states are equally significant in the history of cinema. While every chapter necessarily engages with both light and dark, this relationship offers a way of engaging with the fundamental elements of cinematic illumination: in Part I, how people, and particularly faces, are illuminated; how

architecture sculpts natural illumination; how the imaginary is created with light, as well as suggestions regarding the various meanings associated with these types of illumination. Only then are we able to concentrate on what happens when light leaves the screen, when it wanes or disappears, focusing on the creation of suspense, the partial illumination used in contemporary representations of history, and twilight cinematic states. These darker chapters of Part II do not oppose, but rather work in dialogue with the first brightly lit Part I. Each one continues to engage with notions of characterisation, environment and artifice, while expanding the study to include a light-oriented focus on our understanding of film genre and relationship with film history. Across all these chapters themes of realism, illusion and spectacle emerge, repeat and are reinforced.

At the same time, this book attempts to be sensitive to the complex, shifting and multifarious nature of cinematic light, emphasising its varied tones and intensities, its constant pliability, its suggestive and associative uses. While light is either visible or missing, shadows and spotlights, electric illumination and the lyricism of cinematic dawns and dusks all suggest that presence is itself *heightened* by absence, while the reverse is also the case. In between the two poles of a total white-out and a pitch-black void, innumerable combinations of light and shade encourage varied, yet specific readings. Stylistically recalling the expressive criticism of writers such as Andrew Klevan, Steven Peacock, George Toles and William Rothman, this book is also interested in the synthetic unity of film's components of style heralded by V. F. Perkins in *Film as Film* (1970). As such, each of the chapters notes light's intersection with other areas of film form to produce and suggest meaning – with set design, gesture, camera movement, costume, monochrome tones and coloured hues – while emphasising the notion that light also produces its own distinct affects: if lit in different ways an empty room can evoke varying atmospheres, temporalities and emotions from the comforting golden sunlight of a day's end, to the harsh

blue-white hues of eerie science fiction. Although difficult to define, cinematic light *can* be grouped into areas of meaning, examined in associated patterns.

Chapter 1 'Identity' looks at how the face and the body have been lit, from the development of functional lighting to the Hollywood Studio 'star close-up' and the way in which faces and bodies are fetishised by light into objects of sympathy, desire, revelation and individuality. Films in this chapter include *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Dreyer, 1928), *Blonde Venus* (Sternberg, 1932), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953), *The Third Man*, *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) and *Morvern Callar* (Ramsay, 2002). It argues that dramatic lighting tells the spectator where to look and who to look at, it isolates the face and body, attracting the gaze and encouraging an emotional attachment to protagonists whose identities are formed through moments of expressive lighting.

Chapter 2 'Authenticity' focuses on the use of naturalistic daylight to provide authentic, energetic experiences that use verité aesthetics to create 'modern' characters, from Italian neo-realism to the *nouvelle vague*, from British kitchen-sink dramas to Dogme 95. Films include *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, De Sica, 1948), *Breathless*, *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961) and *The Celebration* (*Festen*, Vinterberg, 1998). This chapter suggests that 'natural' light in the cinema is as constructed as artificial studio lighting and thus must be understood as a similar form of cinematic 'spectacle'.

Chapter 3 'The imaginary' examines the ways in which light has been used expressively to create magical alternative worlds and authenticate fantasy spaces, from *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) to *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951) to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977) and *Three Colours: Blue* (*Trois couleurs: bleu*, Kieslowśki, 1993). In these films light is the medium through which the imaginary is realised, it verifies computer-generated landscapes and marks out alien races as 'other', while at the same time highlighting more recognisable environments as internal character fantasies.

Part II 'The absence of light', focuses on dark, interstitial and existential illumination. Chapter 4 'Mystery' looks at chiaroscuro and expressive lighting techniques across a range of film genres that limit the use of light to create suspense, threatening atmospheres and ambivalent protagonists. Films include *Nosferatu*, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C'era una volt ail West*, Leone, 1968), *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) and *Batman Begins*. Here shadows, tunnels and hiding places both protect and threaten, putting illuminated existence under threat, encouraging spectatorial anxiety or fear, and harbouring confused, morally ambiguous characters who at once seek out, yet remain afraid of, the dark.

Chapter 5 'The past' argues that when reconstructing history, films often reproduce the lighting styles and techniques of previous eras in order to substantiate their versions of the past, especially with regard to film noir lighting aesthetics. Here the past is dimly lit, a gloomy, almost unknowable shadow of a memory that is fading, while conversely stark monochrome reduces light to certainties, offering up distinct, oppositional myths of the past. In this chapter, films including *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (Coen, 2001), *Sin City* (Miller and Rodriguez, 2005) and *A Single Man* will be examined to show how black and white, subdued or darkly coloured lighting is used to historicise character and place, creating a muted, photographically familiar, self-referential film world.

Finally, Chapter 6 'The magic hour' focuses on moments of twilight in cinema as an interstitial state between waking and dreaming akin to the cinematic experience itself. It shows how digital technological developments are allowing films to depict twilight states with greater ease, where light (and character identity) is always dying but never dead, and where waxing or waning illumination indicates both alternative, interior selves and dream-like dislocations from reality. Films include *La notte* (*The Night*, Antonioni, 1961), *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963), *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001). Part II

of the book does not oppose, but rather works in dialogue with Part I. Each chapter continues to engage with ideas of characterisation, environment and artifice.

While some films generally lean towards one style of lighting, at the same time they all use different kinds of lighting at various times, often in contradictory ways. In order to express the breadth of light used and the range of its emotive affect, multiple scenes illustrate the discussion throughout. In each chapter, close light readings allow significant relationships between films that would not normally be placed together to surface, in turn illuminating them in new ways outside of their traditional generic positions. Key instants of arresting expressive light, including the moment Harry (Orson Welles) runs down dark tunnels dripping with torchlight at the end of *The Third Man*, Julie's expressive coloured waves of despair in *Three Colours: Blue*, and the kaleidoscopic space-blasts of transcendental split-scan technology in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), are discussed a number of times, re-examining their use of light to suggest various meanings. As Patrick Keating notes below, as context shifts, so too does our interpretation of a film's lighting style:

> We should resist the temptation to assign a fixed meaning to any one lighting technique. The same device can appear in dozens of different conventions, as in the following options: When you are photographing a night exterior, consider low-key lighting. When you are photographing a male character actor, consider low-key lighting. When you are photographing a crime scene, consider low-key lighting. The fact that low-key lighting can serve in multiple conventions means that its own significance is not fixed. Low-key lighting does not mean 'sinister' lighting, and backlighting does not mean 'angelic' lighting. Just as we need context to understand the meaning of a word, we need context to understand the meaning of a lighting technique.[6]

This book is neither a technical manual on lighting technology, nor is it a history of lighting in the cinema. Instead, using detailed

1 *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick's luminous Star Child

textual analysis to re-evaluate a broad range of well-known films, it attempts to show how an understanding of the ways in which light has been used aesthetically can transform our understanding and appreciation of cinema's emotive attractions. Ultimately it argues that as the screen shimmers and shifts, our relationship with film light and its meaning is similarly transformative and complex, encouraging us to variously and vicariously feel, remember, marvel and witness. While light reveals character identity and expresses emotional experience, it also, in its transformation of time and space, delays and absorbs the viewer formally, forging heightened connections between spectator, protagonist and image. Light's atmospheric luminosity seduces the eye, and in turn encourages a kind of concentrated, emotive and valued cinematic gaze. Through a discussion of light, cinema begins to reveal itself: not just the angles of its sets, the emotions of its characters or the intensity of its atmospheres, but its apparatus and ontology, its manipulation of environment and time. This book is not intended as the last word on the aesthetics of cinematic illumination, but rather, it is hoped, one of the first – an initial tentative gesture towards the light. As Aumont suggests at the end of *L'attrait de la lumière*: '[T]here is no limit to the expressive ambition that one can have in cinema about and thanks to light.'[7]

Notes

1 M. O'Pray, *Film, Form and Phantasy: Adrian Stokes and Film Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 196.
2 See R. Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: University of California Press, 1933/1957), pp. 66–7; W. Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 220–1.
3 O'Pray, *Film, Form and Phantasy*, p. 198.
4 See M. Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); E. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (London: Routledge, 1995); L. Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Latin American Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); C. Plantinga and G. M. Smith, *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999); J. Halley and P. Ticineto Clough, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
5 See Smith, *Engaging Characters*, pp. 4–5.
6 P. Keating, *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 2
7 Jacques Aumont, *L'attrait de la lumière* (Crisnée: Éditions Yellow Now, 2010), p. 77.