The visual style the director seeks for a film will influence the decisions the cinematographer makes about lighting the scenes. There are several general choices he must make about his lighting technique. Will it be hard or soft? Will it be high- or low-key? Will it be lit to a great extent with practicals or from sources outside the frame? Each of these basic decisions will greatly affect the look of the film.

HARD VERSUS SOFT

Before we go deeper into the subject of composing with lights we have to look at the character of light itself. Light can be hard, soft or gradations in between. Hard light casts strong shadows and the softest light is shadowless. Hard light is generated from a small source whereas soft light comes from a large one.

The hardest source of light known in nature is the noonday sun; an overcast sky is the softest source known. It is as if a diffusion material has been stretched from horizon to horizon. The illumination comes from all directions and cancels out the shadows.

Over the years lighting designers, cinematographers, and gaffers have designed a vast array of lighting instruments to produce both hard and soft lights.

The hardest light in general use is the arc. Its light, created between two carbon electrodes, is smaller and brighter than the filament of an incandescent bulb. A Fresnel lens is used with an arc to bring the light into a narrow beam. Incandescent lights with Fresnel lenses also fall in the range of hard lights. Open-ended lights can be hard or soft depending on the size of the reflector and on the
type and positioning of the bulb. The softest are boxlike soft lights and a variety of lighting instruments made in the studio that consist of rows of bulbs behind a diffusion screen. Even softer sources can be created by placing very large diffusion screens in front of conventional lights or by bouncing light off large reflective screens onto the subject.

Soft light produces much lower light levels for the same wattage used than hard light and it falls off with distance much faster. In the days of slow emulsions, its use was limited mainly to a general fill function. With the advent of fast color film stocks, however, soft light sources became adequate as the main modelling light. Many leading cameramen developed a style of lighting that utilizes soft light as the chief light source in a majority of scenes. Other equally distinguished cinematographers continue to favor the predominantly directional focusable key lights; these should be chosen carefully for a particular area and function. There is, of course, a middle ground, which might be to use predominantly soft light but accentuate modelling with some harder sources.

Soft light technique is basically area lighting, which creates a more natural look. Since less equipment is involved it actually helps to keep the production moving at a better pace, especially when less professional actors and directors are involved. It also allows the actors more freedom of movement on the set. These attributes become rather important with today’s budget considerations. There is a drawback to using soft light, however. It is difficult to control because, originating as it does from a large source, it spreads in all directions. Therefore huge black screens (flags, teasers) are needed to cut off the light from certain parts of the set.

Soft light falls off rather sharply also; therefore it must be positioned relatively close to the subject. That becomes problematical in a wide angle shot when a large area of the set is in the frame.

Jordan Cronenweth, ASC

Soft lighting is much more difficult to control than hard lighting. It is not what you light that counts but what you don’t light. Anybody can go back there and turn on a beautiful soft light; take a light and bounce it off a white card and get 10 footcandles or 15 footcandles and say, Ready. But to control it you have to do many things. You can take it off the actor and just hit the back wall and silhouette him, or you can take it off the back wall. You can make a shadow. You can put a bottomer on it, or a topper, or a sider.

Soft lighting gained its popularity because it gives the scene a more natural, less “filmic” look than hard lighting. At the same time it has a danger of lacking character. In the final analysis, it is just another “brush” to paint with, but not the only one.

Caleb Deschanel, ASC

I think that soft lighting is very limiting. There are certain scenes or certain locations that call for that, or certain kinds of moods or atmosphere. I think that soft lighting mainly came as a result of the fact that film reacts a little bit differently than our eye does to light. Soft light was a means of achieving on film what we have a tendency to see with our own eyes. You very rarely see lighting in real life with real strong back light.

A cinematographer would be unwise to judge a style of lighting on its own merit. Sometimes the qualities of soft light that seem less interesting are just the qualities needed to serve the story.
Caleb Deschanel, ASC

The argument between hard and soft light is kind of weak because in a sense you really make your judgment based upon whatever the story is. There is a tendency to think that the philosophy is soft or hard lighting, but in reality the philosophy is what film I am doing. Basically you should have at your disposal any range of lighting styles.

One has to have practical experience in both styles of lighting to be able to mix and match them effectively.

Haskell Wexler, ASC

Everybody should still work in hard light as well. Not to do it and to say that it has to be all soft light is like throwing away part of the artist's palette. I think that the more variety you can have, the better it will look. To be able to light well in hard light makes the soft lighting a piece of cake, because a soft light is very forgiving. Soft light, uncontrolled, is still acceptable photographically. It is really hard for soft light to look bad, but it is not hard for hard light to look bad.

Wexler has hit on an important point here. He continues:

One reason why soft lighting is so popular is due to the fact that there is more improvisation today which is tolerated by the soft light. It is possible to utilize in soft lighting what we have learned from hard lighting and a lot of good cameramen actually do that.

In immediate and practical terms, the character of light will be initially designated by the time of day. Day interiors are affected by sunlit windows. Many cinematographers call sunlight coming through the windows "sourcy" light, meaning that it is well defined in its origin. Practicals, or lights visible in the scene, are also sourcy.

Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC

Lighting depends on the picture. I really believe that daylight scenes should be lit softly except for harsh sunlight coming through the window, which is sourcy. But most daylight scenes are very soft and should be handled like a bounced light, no shadows and all that. But night interiors and night exteriors are, in real life, very sourcy. Sometimes you have hard light with practicals. Candlelight is a sourcy light. You really try to follow reality as much as possible. I do not like to light with hard sources anymore unless that is the way it is in real life. Almost everything nowadays is done through some diffusion material, unless you elect to be sourcy.

If you go too soft in the lighting, it just becomes boring. The difficult thing is really to light softly but to create a contrast at the same time. This is a difficult thing to do. Soft lighting can be more or less directional depending on the mood of a scene and the kind of set.

Directional light can be made soft through diffusing and bouncing. Soft light can only become partially directional with the use of flags, grids and teasers. Creating varying degrees of softness and directionality becomes one of the important methods used to create mood through lighting.

Richard Kline, ASC

In directional lighting we will take a unit and we can slip in a soft material like a spun glass a diffusion material which softens the light. You can use frosts and you can also bounce the directional light, which I do quite often.
Take a very strong light and bounce it off the card and then box it in with gobos, rather than [using] the generality of the overall soft light. It all depends on a scene. When I do a film I try to get a variety of looks because if the whole picture is soft-lit it becomes boring, and I have seen that quite often. Yes, it is pretty; each frame is gorgeous; but after a while it is meaningless because it is repetitious. It is a question of the overall picture so you have the variety of looks, and not just for the sake of variety. Most of the time in a story there is generally a night and a day, which require different looks. There are different times of a day and there are different rooms, which could dictate a different look. Sometimes you achieve it strictly through a bounce light. A bathroom or a kitchen, which are usually soft during the day, are ideal places. This might be a place to use the overall soft light, I think, but then again you come into a living room and it is usually down a bit, moodier, even if it is very soft. There are usually darker areas; you can make a set look soft and still go directional.

Experienced cinematographers see soft and hard light as two extremes in the whole range of light characteristics, each useful for certain applications.

James Crabe, ASC

To try to differentiate lighting generally by saying that there is hard lighting and there is soft lighting, one has to remember that there are a million variations between hard lighting and soft lighting, too. I certainly think that today the tendency is to use more soft sources that are more akin to what we experience in life, except in a tungsten situation at night where light bulbs and small sources are casting hard shadows. Much of what we see is bounced light and with the faster film it can be done.

I think the pendulum always swings [first] one way and [then] the other when you think that at the very beginning of motion pictures, the first studios were covered with muslin that would allow only soft light to come through. But, of course, there are many possibilities and effects available to soft lighting. Anyone who dismisses it as being easier to do or just a cheap shot is not really thinking about it. It is difficult with soft lighting to keep the sources out of the shot, usually because you often want them around a little bit. You can always put a junior up, out of the set, or a Baby, or something, but to have a large radiating source like a bounce card from an interesting angle, particularly on real locations, quite often takes a lot of effort and thought.

Although cinematography began with soft lighting, for a good fifty years hard lighting predominated. The slow emulsions required lights with a "kick" to them. The resulting style was characterized by sharp shadows and well-defined areas of light. This created a rather dramatic, stylized quality. Since the sixties the trend toward more realistic treatment of the story has led the way to soft lighting. But the pendulum continues to swing.