

Lighting for Darkness

Many students want to film scenes set at night but are unsure how to light them to create the look and feel that they require. I have often seen underexposed shots that just look 'muddy'. Just reducing the light, or camera exposure, does not give good results. So how DO we light for darkness?

As always, it's all about cheating! Yes, night-time is dark, but the camera doesn't deal with darkness very well, so we have to bring in some light, but it is the placement of light which makes all the difference. Look at this example from *Fight Club*, yes his face is dark, but it's the highlights catching the sides of his face that allows us to read the image and see his movement and expressions. Without these highlights, he would just disappear into the background. Also note the use of lights in the background to add to the feeling of night-time.



Another example, this time from *Near Dark*, similar lighting but with a little fill light in his face and the rim light is more exaggerated. Note that the fill light has also created catch lights (the little spots of light, reflected in the eyes). Plus, to add to the atmosphere (and stop the background being completely black) they have added some smoke which is being lit by the lights from behind.



This shot, from War Horse, places the key light at 45° to camera left and 45° above the subject's eye line to give a more classical, Rembrandt lighting look (the shadow from his nose goes down, under his cheekbone). It also has a backlight, gelled blue to simulate moonlight but leaves out any kind of fill light to give the contrast that you get at night, outdoors. The background is far enough away to light separately, just enough to register but not to distract.

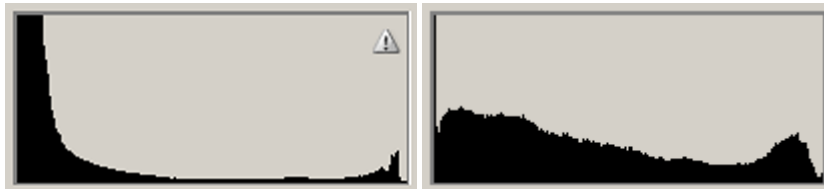


Another shot from Warhorse, this time indoors, so all of the light is warmer. Also, note that the Key light is much softer as the light has been diffused so it is not so harsh. The back light is harder (and brighter) than the key to give her some edge definition and a reflector placed on camera right to fill in the shadows on her face.



All of these shots are considered to be 'low-key'. There are large areas that are dark with very small areas of highlight and some filled areas of midtone. Daylight scenes tend to have much more midtone, more highlights and less dark. Also, night-time shots tend to have very high contrast ratios, especially when the scene is set outside. Indoors, light will bounce around, off all of the surfaces to provide some fill light, so we are used to seeing indoor shots looking softer, whereas outside, there is little for the light to reflect off, so the shadows are much darker.

Compare the histograms from the Fight Club image, on the left, with a typical daylight scene from Mad Men, on the right. You can see that there is very little information in the midtones and highlights in the Fight Club scene whereas the Mad Men scene has plenty of everything.



As for colour, outdoor night scenes tend to be lit by either moonlight (blue), streetlights (either harsh orange or greenish) or lights from some other source (colour depends on source). Indoor shots depend on the light source that you are simulating. Household lighting is usually much warmer in tone at night, so add some extra orange to give that illusion of warmth, whereas industrial areas tend to have a colder green colour from the fluorescent lighting. As with anything, have a look at real world examples and see if you can create the illusion of that lighting. Don't try to recreate the lighting exactly, as it will not look good, but create the feeling of that light instead.

Remember that what you can see, the camera may not be able to, so you may have to add in more light than you expect to create the look you want. This applies double to lighting for darkness. To create the high contrast ratios, you need to be able to darken the background/shadow areas and, if you don't have much light, the camera will have to be at its widest aperture (and probably need some gain too) to be able to register *anything*. You need to be able to 'crush' the dark areas, so you will need more light to be able to see the highlights clearly. Always remember to judge your lighting through the camera, at least until you are so au fait with lighting to be able to judge it by eye. The untrained eye can fool you into thinking the shot will look great but, when you try to shoot it, you will find you have to make adjustments.

Another thing to consider are transient light sources that occur at night, like passing car headlamps, traffic lights, flashing signs, lightning, explosions etc. All of these can be simulated and can allow your audience to temporarily see things that may have been hidden. This can be a useful technique to show surroundings near the start of your scene without having to have the entire scene lit constantly (and therefore destroy the feeling of darkness) or to build tension by allowing your audience to glimpse things only for a moment.

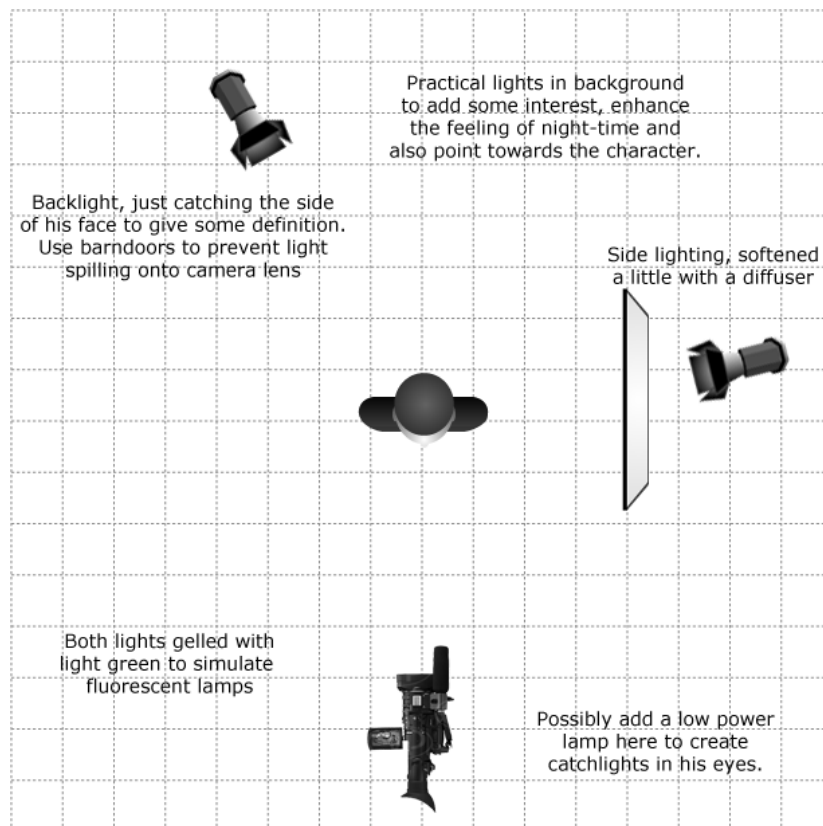
Streetlights (whether real or simulated) can be quite a useful tool for varying your lighting. If, for example, you want to only show glimpses of your actors, you could have them walking between the pools of light created by the streetlights.

If you want to shoot night scenes, look at how it has been done by the experts and see if you can work out where the lights were placed by looking for reflections of light sources in the actors' eyes and by seeing where the shadows fall. Remember that light travels in straight lines, so tracing a shadow back towards the object that is casting it and then extending that line further will always lead right back to the light source.

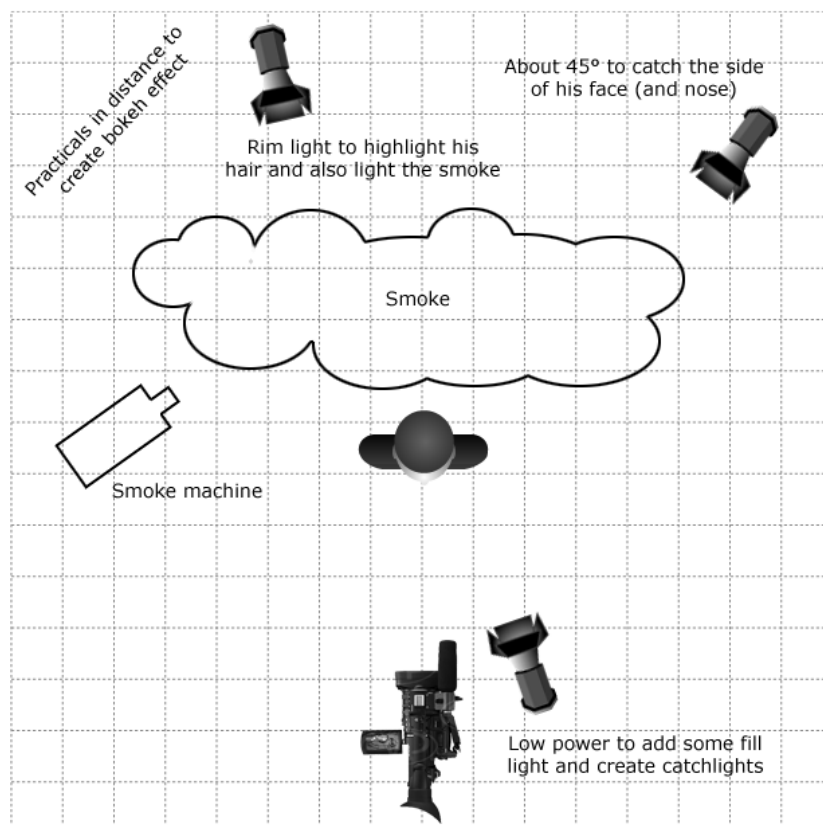
This is just a brief outline to lighting for darkness but no handout can replace actual hands-on experience and so, before you shoot, make sure you have practiced with the equipment you are planning to take. If you have any questions, please ask, we are always willing to give advice where we can.

Appendix

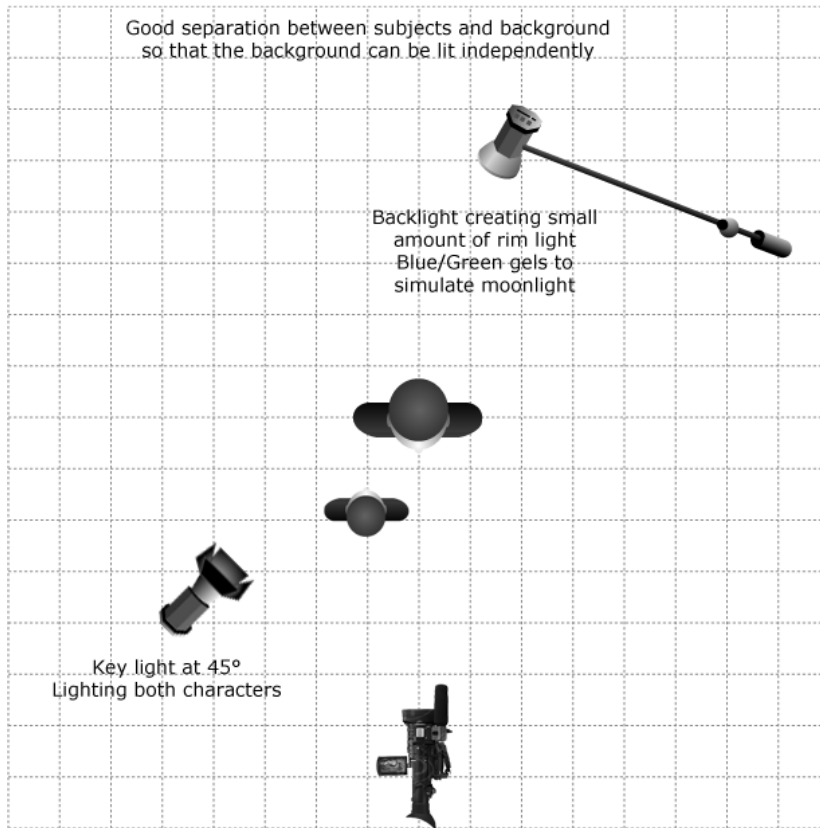
Just for fun, I have had a go at designing the lighting situations in the images above, to give you an idea of how they may have been created. The diagrams are not necessarily how they *were* shot, but rather how I think you could light a scene to look similar.



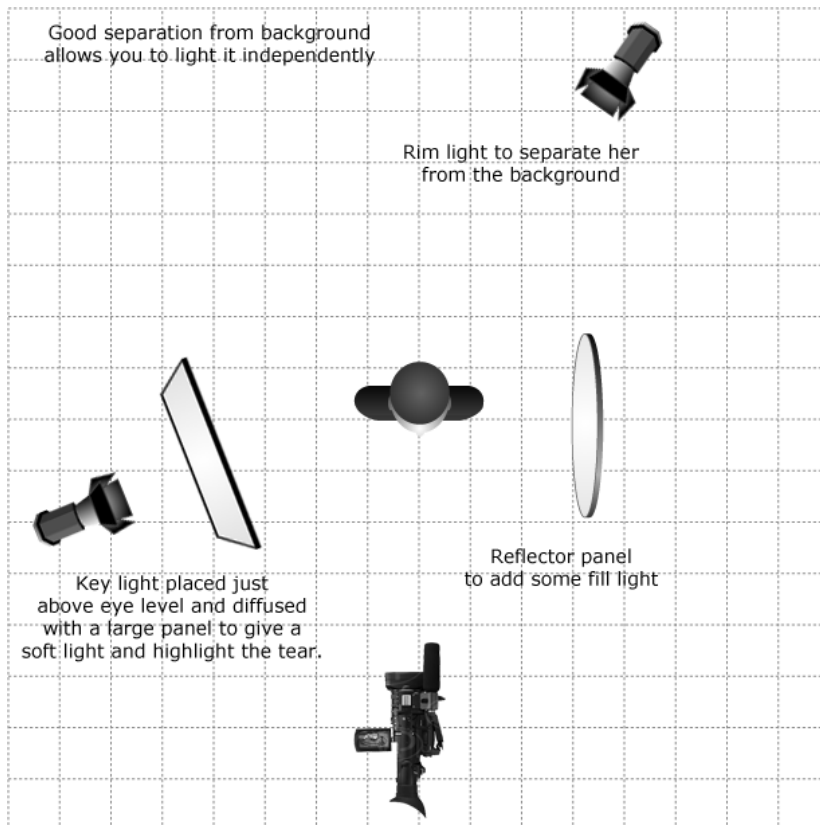
Fight Club



Near Dark



War Horse (External)



War Horse (Internal)