

# **Sourcelessness**

How has softlight affected naturalism in early european cinema?

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Screen Studies

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# Introduction

This project looks at the evolution of softlight, I will look at how the evolution of soft light and how it is used to create a natural-looking image. To further understand its historical evolution, I will look at some of the key cinematographers who have used and contributed to the evolution of soft light and how they have used it to create more realistic images. I will focus on three film movements and periods, among other influences, from 1940 to the 1970s.

The movements I will look at are Italian neo-realism, French cinema from 1950 to 1960 and British kitchen sink/new wave from 1960 to the 1970s. I will also look at individuals and smaller movements that have used realism to great effect, like Ingmar Bergman and the Polish Film School movement.

Whilst soft lighting is a naturally occurring phenomenon that has been used in cinema since the beginning. However, the goal behind using it has not always been realism. This is partly because of realist film movements like Italian neorealism started gaining critical acclaim 40s.

Whilst soft lighting is a naturally occurring phenomena how it is used has a great impact on the image going from a more realist look of a room where sunlight is scattered into a room like in *Fish Tank* (2008). Figure 1 is a good example of this and one can't see when the light affecting the subject is coming from.



Figure 1: *Fish Tank* (2009)

The opposite to this would be *The Construct* in *The Matrix* (1999). Sourceless nature of *The Construct* is a perfect example of how soft light can have the polar opposite effect by having no visible shadows or light source.

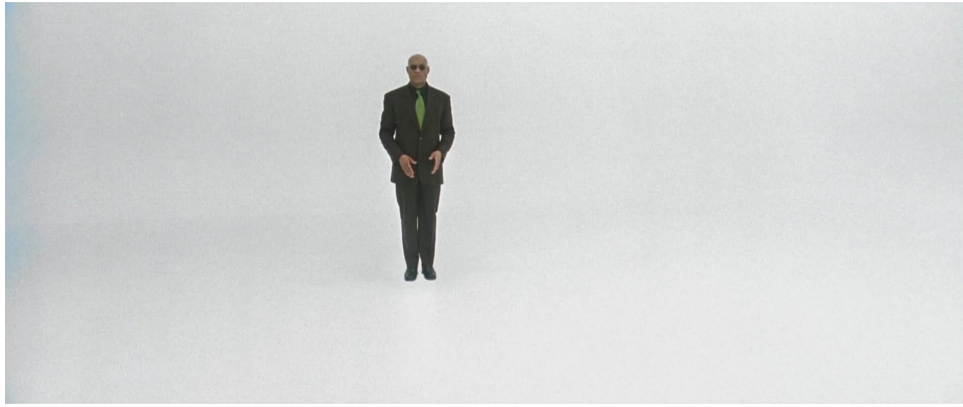


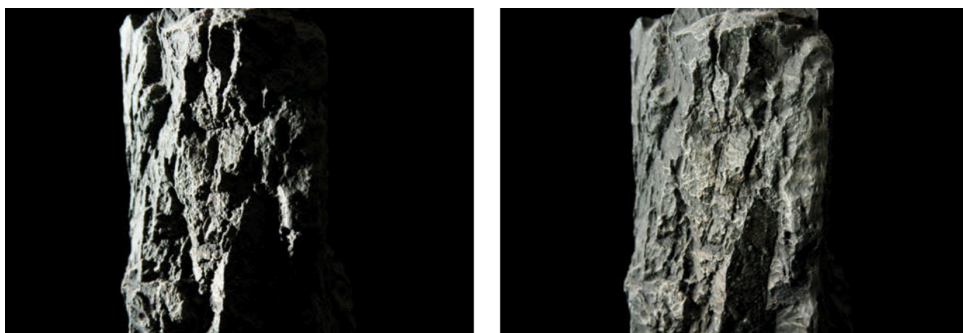
Figure 2: *The Matrix* (1999)

## What is soft light?

To be able to understand the history of soft lighting i will look at the ways soft light is created and the effect it produces Jay Holben discribes this process will in two issues of the American Cinematographer entitled Shot Craft: Light Quality 101 (Holben, 2020)

“The closer the source is to your subject, the softer the light will be. As light becomes softer, the shadow transition becomes longer and more gradual.”

” Soft light is, by its nature, very low in contrast\_. It can be non-directional and even feel “sourceless,” meaning that it’s hard to determine what direction the light is coming from. It can hide the texture of an object, even at extreme angles. Extremely soft light can create a nearly shadowless environment.” Holben (2020)



Examples of hard light and soft light from the same raking side angle on a stone with a heavily textured face. Note that the hard light accentuates the appearance of the texture while the soft light greatly reduces it.

Figure 3: *Light Quality 101* (2020)

This sourcelessness can be used to either create a natural looking image for example in one of the main beinfits of “soft lighting is more generalized in a space allowing actors to move more

freely, or for the blocking to be changed in the last minute.” (Mullen, 2012)

When using softer lighting in a film there are some inherent benefits and drawbacks. — in his essay puts it best

one of the major drawbacks to using softer lighting from a non artistic point is that it requires a lot more light to get a good exposure.

## **The Benefits**

faster turnaround as a scene would not have to be relit for every shot

## **The Drawbacks**

greater power requirements as

would this work if this doesn't work just one more test

## **Pre Realism**

looking at the soft 1930's and lens filters

“Earliest silent movies were shot in studios under glass roofs with muslin cloth stretched across, so were under soft light. One of the most popular lights in the silent era were Cooper-Hewitts, which were gas-discharge fixtures in tubes, a cross between a mercury vapor streetlamp and a fluorescent tube, and produced a soft light. Cinematographers like Charles Rosher did lovely lighting effects by mixing hard carbon arc lamps with soft Cooper-Hewitt lamps. So soft lighting is not a modern phenomenon.” (Mullen, 2012)

“Sound killed the use of the noisy Cooper-Hewitts (as did color). But many 1930's movies still created soft lighting using tungsten lamps through spun glass or silks. By like all styles, people became tired of it and the sharper, crisper look using harder lights became the norm by the 1940's” (Mullen, 2012)



Figure 4: *Der letzte Mann* (1925)

## Italian Neo Realism

During an interview in *Masters of Light*, Néstor Almendros discussed the look of Italian films during the neorealist movement talking about the use of softer and more natural lighting, mentioning G.R. Aldo (born Aldo Graziati) as one of the most influential people during this time because of his revolutionary work on *Umberto D.*, (1952) and *La terra trema*, (1949)

Néstor Almendros also discussed where this softer lighting style might have originated “Films of the period like *Open City* and *Shoeshine* made by other cinematographers had an interesting look, not because the director of photography wanted it that way; it was due to lack of money.” (Schaefer and Salvato, 2013:5)

“Andre Bazin, proclaimed neo-realism as a cinema of “fact” and “reconstituted reportage” which rejected both dramatic and cinematic conventions and which “respected” the ontological wholeness of the reality it captured, just as the narrated screen time in neo-realist films often “respected” the actual duration of the story.” (Fellini *et al.*, 1987:4)

## **Ubaldo Arata**

### **Rome Open City (1945)**

Roberto Rossellini

“Roma città aperta was shot in the same way that conventional feature films were shot at the time, mostly in a studio. However, the production was ‘poor’ for purely historical reasons: electrical power and production funding were scarce and unreliable. The ‘look’ of a film is largely the product of the lighting. For the interiors, mostly shot in a studio, the filmmakers had no alternative but to use large amounts of artificial light, and one problem they faced was that of getting power for the lighting units. They had a generator, but fuel was hard to obtain. Once they had solved the problem by purloining current from a nearby American forces newspaper office, there was no reason why the DP should not light his sets in the normal way (except that Arata found himself short of bulbs for the lighting units).” (Wagstaff, 2007)

## **Anchise Brizzi**

### **Shoeshine (1946)**

Vittorio De Sica

## **G.R. Aldo - Main Focus**

“Aldo was even before Raoul Coutard in using indirect lighting, using soft lighting. And I think that’s because he came to motion pictures from still photography. He came to the cinema not through the usual way of the period, which was to be a loader, an assistant, a focus puller, a cameraoperator, and after all that, many years later becoming a director of photography. He came straight from still and theatrical photography and only because Visconti imposed on him. That’s why his lighting was so unconventional for the period. He had not come down the same path. But he really was a source of inspiration. Other films of the period like Open City and Shoeshine made by other cinematographers had an interesting look not because the director of photography wanted it that way; it was due to lack of money. They looked interesting in spite of them. I’m sure that if they had given those cinematographers more money and technical support they would have done something very professional and slick.” (Schaefer and Salvato, 2013:6)

“What is more, the formation of many neo-realist cinematographers in the field of photojournalism or

the newsreel should not be underestimated: two out of the three key names of cinematography of the period come from photography and the newsreel. These were, Aldo Tonti, who was a photojournalist before his cinematic debut and his great work on Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943),<sup>23</sup> and Otello Martelli, director of photography on Rossellini's *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946) and Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso Amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949), who worked at the Istituto Luce (responsible for newsreels) during the war. The third, Aldo Graziati, cinematographer for Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1948) and Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948), represents an exception, a case of the confluence of a strictly photographic culture in film (as well as a reconciliation between set photography and cinematography). Graziati was a professional photographer, though self-taught, who trained by studying the light of the paintings of Caravaggio and doing an apprenticeship in the photographic studios of Paris, first as a portraitist and then primarily as a set photographer.<sup>24</sup> I will later briefly compare Graziati's and Tonti's contribution to Visconti's cinema and the parallel evolution, in terms of documentary, of set photography, a practice that once again demands a close comparison of cinema and photography in those years." (Hill and Minghelli, 2014:194)

"Visually, *La Terra Trema* is a very modern movie and *Umberto D* is too, as well as *Senso*. Aldo photographed them." (Schaefer and Salvato, 2013:7)

aldo invoated in that space to create his look and feel

## **La Terra Trema**

Luchino Visconti

## **Umberto D. (1952)**

Vittorio De Sica

"It might be hard to understand now but these films had a profound affect on European cinema. They inspired the French 'New Wave' of Goddard and Truffaut; the 'Kitchen Sink' realism of the 60's in the UK; the students of the Polish Film School" (Deakins, 2017)

## **French Cinema and its New Wave**

Italian neorealism on the French New Wave was significant, and it helped to shape the movement's focus on realism and its rejection of traditional cinematic forms and conventions. This influence can



be seen in the work of French New Wave filmmakers such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, who were heavily influenced by Italian neorealism and its techniques and approaches

From 1950 to 1960, France was rife with artistic experimentation, including one of the most influential film movements. The Nouvelle Vague brought upon us the birth of auteur theory. In the age of experimental auteurs, there were also experimental cinematographers, most notably the likes of Raoul Coutard, Henri Decae and Léonce-Henri Burel.

### **Cinematographers not being part of film movements**

## **Raoul Coutard**

I am going to prioritise either Raoul Coutard or Léonce-Henri Burel - i need to figure out who of the two was more inspirational

Raoul Coutard's more notable work with soft light was in (*Le petit soldat*, 1963)



Figure 5: *Le petit soldat*. (1963)

(*Le petit soldat*, 1963)

(*Le petit soldat*, 1963)

Coutard was known for his ability to work quickly and efficiently, and his use of natural light allowed him to shoot in a variety of locations without the need for heavy and expensive lighting equipment. His use of soft light was instrumental in the development of the French New Wave style of filmmaking.

“It might be hard to understand now but these films had a profound affect on European cinema. They inspired the French ‘New Wave’ of Goddard and Truffaut; the ‘Kitchen Sink’ realism of the 60’s in

the UK; the students of the Polish Film” (Deakins, 2017)

## Henri Decaë

Look at Henri Decaë’s work with Jean-Pierre **Melville** and François Truffaut on 400 Blows Henri Decaë also worked with Jacques Dupont

He started out as a still photographer

Decaë began his career in the 1940s, and quickly gained a reputation for his ability to create naturalistic, highly detailed images.

he was also known for his ability to shoot on location, which helped to further enhance the sense of realism in his films

## Léonce-Henri Burel - Main Focus

Although Robert Bresson’s work is not thought to be part being part of the French New Wave, However it still was none the less highly influential in a multiple of ways, his way of lighting being one of them. The lighting in Bressons’ films had evolved through multiple films and Cinematographers, two of the most notably being Philippe Agostini and Léonce-Henri Burel. Agostini’s films with Bresson had softer elements with elements of softer lighting using the standard techniques of to achieve soft lighting. However, this change with Bressons’ collaboration with Léonce-Henri Burel where this technique was used to a far greater extent, most notably on the films Diary of a Country Priest (1951), A Man Escaped (1956) and Pickpocket (1959).

However, Bresson’s work was distinctive and did not necessarily conform to the conventions of the French New Wave, so he is not always considered to be a part of this movement

he is often considered to be a filmmaker who worked outside of traditional film movements and developed his own unique style and approach to cinema

look at the catch light used in A Man Escaped and how it gave life to the image

the inefficiency of lights and how they aren’t very light efficient so they need strong lights to power

(soft light was used since the beginning of cinema how)

# The British cinema and the Kitchen Sink

The British kitchen sink drama movement emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and was characterized by a focus on working-class characters and the harsh realities of life in industrial cities such as London and Manchester. Like Italian neorealism, the British kitchen sink drama movement sought to depict the world as it really was, without the glamorization or escapism of traditional British cinema. This movement was led by filmmakers such as Tony Richardson and Ken Loach, who were interested in using cinema to tell stories about the lives of ordinary people and to explore social and political issues of the time. Overall, while the direct influence of Italian neorealism on the British kitchen sink drama movement is difficult to determine, it is likely that the two movements shared some common influences and aesthetic approaches.

Some well-known examples of British kitchen sink films include *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *A Taste of Honey*, and *Look Back in Anger*.

## John Alcott

how technology is used to

looking at John Alcott and creating even more reflectors Much later new varieties of reflector materials were developed for Kubrick and cinematographer John Alcott.

“HMIs were invented because there was a demand for ever larger sources of light that could be softened down or bounced to appear more naturalistic. Much later new varieties of reflector materials were developed for Kubrick and cinematographer John Alcott.” (Deakins, 2017)

## Ozzie Morris

Ozzie Morris’ use of space lights and

*“It’s interesting to look at the work of Geoffrey Unsworth and Ozzie Morris because they came out of the British studio system and their lighting styles was always a mix of old-school hard light and more modern soft-light techniques – and then compare them with someone like David Watkin who came out of shooting industrials, documentaries, and commercials. Also, look at Unsworth’s work on ”2001” (1968), which is mostly soft-lit”* (Mullen, 2017)

## Geoffrey Unsworth

2001: A Space Odyssey

“It was the demands of such cinematographers for a softer look, especially in the shooting of commercials, that influenced what the film equipment manufacturers made rather than the other way around. The development of Space Lights made economical sense when film directors and cinematographers demanded their large interior stage sets looked real. HMIs were invented because there was a demand for ever larger sources of light that could be softened down or bounced to appear more naturalistic. Much later new varieties of reflector materials were developed for Kubrick and cinematographer John Alcott.” (Deakins, 2017)

## Other European Movements and influences

show when there are similarities and differences

just an overview

just to contextualise ## Polish Film School Movement Looking at how they also took influence from Italian neo realism

The Polish Film School was a film movement that emerged in Poland during the 1950s. It was characterized by a focus on realism and social commentary in its storytelling, as well as a distinct visual style. The movement was influenced by Italian neorealism and the French New Wave

notable cinematographers who worked during the Polish Film School movement include Jerzy Wójcik, Edward Kłosiński, and Witold Sobociński. Wójcik is best known for his work on Andrzej Wajda’s “Ashes and Diamonds,” while Kłosiński is known for his collaborations with Krzysztof Zanussi, including on the film “Illumination.” Sobociński, meanwhile, is known for his work on Wajda’s “The Promised Land” and Zanussi’s “The Constant Factor.”

### Jerzy Wójcik

**Ashes and Diamonds**    Andrzej Wajda

**Witold Sobociński**

**The Promised Land**

**The Constant Factor**

**Ingmar Bergman**

**Sven Nykvist**

worked with tarkofski

## **Conclusion**

Seperate cinematographers from the movments as they arnt liked to a spicific movement but more foucsing on films

cinematographers hope over the line and have more diversity

soft light is not inovative but to do it well does involve skill

soft light vs natural light

## List of Figures

Figure 1. *Fish Tank*. (2009).

Figure 2. *The Matrix*. (1999).

Figure 3. *Der letzte Mann*. (1925).

Figure 4. Holben, J. (2020) *Light Quality 101*.

Figure 5. *Le petit soldat*. (1963).

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