

# **Sourcelessness**

How did soft light and naturalism co-evolve in early European  
cinema?

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# Introduction

This essay is an historical perspective on naturalism and the development of soft light in film. It will aim to investigate the way in which the use of soft light allowed for a more natural and realistic representation of images on screen and how the demand for this kind of image, in turn, pushed the technological advancement and development of soft lighting.

One of the main drawbacks to “this approach to lighting is that it only works well in all-white rooms, particularly” (Salt 1983:253) due to the white paint reflecting the light better and somewhat mitigating the inefficiency of bounce light.

The second drawback, clearly seen in *Le Petit soldat* (1963), is that the “eyes of the actors are slightly shadowed” (Salt 1983:253), as seen in Figure 1. This is due to the light coming from the top and is caused by “an absence of ‘catch lights’ [/eye light] showing in the actors’ eye-balls, which are those tiny reflections of the light sources which are conventionally considered to give ‘life’ to the actor’s expression in close shots.” (Salt 1983:253). This is normally solved by using a “low-wattage light fixture or white bounce card placed close to the camera [to create] a highlight in the eyes” (Box, 2020:60)



Figure 1: Actors Eyes are darker in *Le Petit Soldat* (1963)

One reason why Raoul Coutard was able to shoot using more natural lighting and bounce light was due to his choice of film stock. Although the specific type of film stock used on the film *Le Petit Soldat* (1963) has not been substantiated, it is known that in Jean-Luc Godard’s first film with Coutard, *À bout de souffle* (1960), Ilford HPS (400 ASA) was utilised, with a “special development” that increased the film speed to 800 ASA (Salt 1983:253). This process provided an extra stop of light, which was critical in Godard’s desire to shoot all the scenes on location using available light (Salt 1983:253).

The French New Wave became immensely popular, and Raoul Coutard was the central figure who brought about “these radical changes” (Salt 1983:253), towards more naturalistic cinematography,

mainly with his use of bounce lighting. Soon these new techniques were adopted in Europe, and “towards the end of the ’sixties, began to have their first effects on American lighting.” (Salt 1983:253)



Figure 2: *Ashes and Diamonds*. (1958)

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# **Appendices**

## **Appendix A: A definition of realism**

“First, it should project a slice of life, it should appear to enter and then leave everyday life. As ‘reality’ it should not use literary adaptations but go for the real. Second, it should focus on social reality: on the poverty and unemployment so rampant in post-war Italy. Third, in order to guarantee this realism, dialogue and language should be natural – even to the point of keeping to the regional dialects. To this effect also, preferably non-professional actors should be used. Fourth, location shooting rather than studio should prevail. And, finally, the shooting should be documentary in style, shot in natural light, with a hand-held camera and using observation and analysis.” (Hayward, 2017:235)

## **Appendix A: Soft Lite Discription**

The light took the “form of a large sheet-metal box about three feet square on the open side, and with a very irregular interior surface painted matt white. Long quartz-iodine lamp tubes shone onto this surface from behind a narrow baffle that stopped them radiating light directly forward, and after a number of reflections from the white walls, the light emerged from the front opening of the box as a non-directional glow: indeed very like the light emerging through a north-facing window of rather small size.” (Salt, 1992:255)