3 point lighting and why it sucks

by Richard Yot ©2008

http://www.itchy-animation.co.uk/tutorials/light01.htm
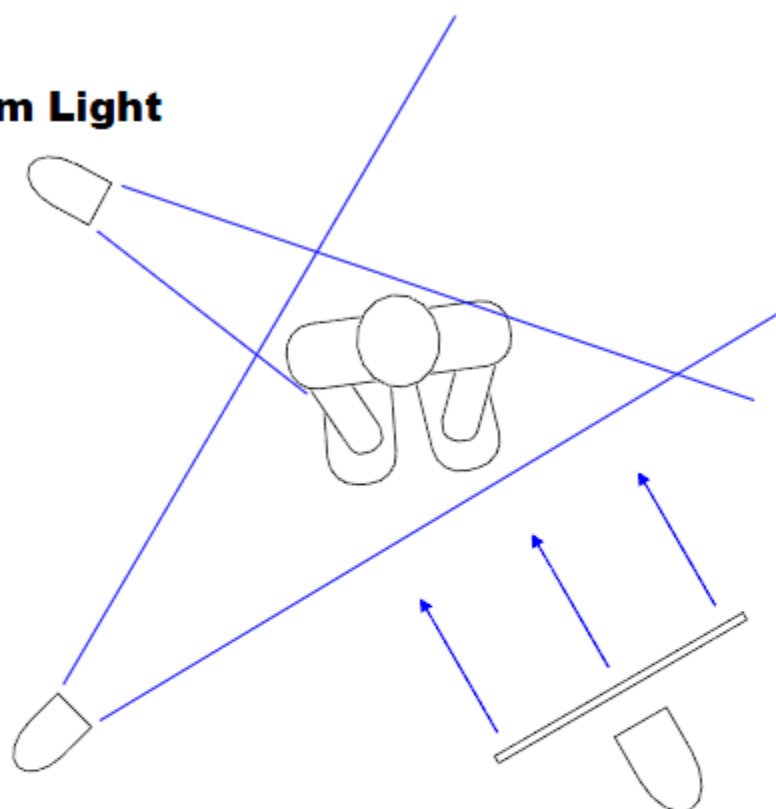
Light Part 1

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3d textbooks often describe the classic 3 point lighting set up and encourage beginners to use this as an effective way of lighting their scenes. It was originally developed as a way of lighting photographs and its one benefit is that it is easy to learn and understand. It comprises of a bright main light coming from one side, and dim fill light coming from the opposite side and a back light behind the subject which is used to pick out edges and highlight form.

The biggest problem with this set-up is that it is artificial and doesn't reflect reality. The use of back lighting especially should only be considered if you are looking for a specific effect since it is so dramatic and recognizable. Back lighting can be very effective but it should be used with flair rather than blindly applied to every situation. The kind of light that 3 point lighting creates simply does not exist in nature and therefore it looks fake. The fact that it is taught in so many textbooks also lends it an air of cliché and it has therefore become tired and boring.

It has long since fallen out of favor with photographers and film-makers anyway, so you will rarely see it in product shots or mainstream films. If you are looking to light an environment or an object it is far better to try and put some of your own creative thought into your lighting and study what happens in nature to then devise your own solution.
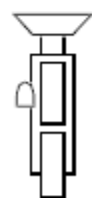
Everyone has seen those cheesy photographic studio portraits that rely on formulaic lighting: they all look exactly the same as each other because the photographer uses the same lighting every time. The result is a boring and lifeless photograph, if you want your own art to avoid cliché and be cheese-free then avoid textbook formulas and think for yourself.

Rim Light

Key Light

Fill Light

Camera