Beyond Three Point Lighting

by Walter Graff

Pick up any book on lighting for film and television and you'll see the all too familiar paradigm of three-point lighting. While three-point lighting is a wonderful place to begin, once you get out in the real-world it's important to expand on the concept or you'll never understand the nuances of lighting.

Where in the world do you find a real-life situation where three-point lighting actually exists? Outdoors during the day there's only one source of light, the sun. Indoor rooms are most often lit by multiple sources that create soft generalized lighting, such as florescents, or by fixtures that light specific areas, such as spot lights on tracks. A room might even have something as simple as a single fixture hanging from the center of the ceiling. The point is, flawless three-point lighting does not occur naturally. I say as a lighting design, it's an antiquated concept that was great for studio work in the fifties and is a good introduction to lighting in textbooks, but is obsolete in the world of modern television as it relates to single camera field production.

When I light something or someone, I am trying to imitate light as I might envision it would fall naturally in the same setting. I am also trying to add a bit of light to a person or thing in order to enhance a two-dimensional video format. This is done through modeling of the light on the subject. I don't believe that lighting should completely change things but merely enhance things; simpler is better.

So if even illumination, three-point lighting doesn't exist in the real world, and I am trying to imitate real life without re-inventing the wheel, what do I do? I use a variation on the theme. Take the three examples below. Each is a variation of the textbook lesson on lighting, and each uses various elements that are successful not because of a preexisting formula, but rather because they simply work in the situation at hand. They offer a god means of lighting a person without lighting them flat as a textbook three-point set-up normally does and without having to use too many fixtures. I'll take a moment to talk about each and the thinking behind it.

The photo above is of a professor from Princeton University. We were interviewing him for a show that will air on The History Channel. The room used was given to us for the interview. This can be a blessing or a curse. In this case, it was a blessing, since the room had wonderful green wallpaper and many objects to use as a background.

There are two lights illuminating the talent and one illuminating the background; a mere three lights for the entire set-up. The lights on the talent are arranged in a variation on the traditional three-point lighting scheme. The main source of illumination (sometimes referred
to as the key) appears to comes from the left as we look at the shot; it is actually on the right side of the frame—a Lowell Omni light with a 600 watt bulb. The barn doors are closed to make a narrow box on the front of the fixture, thereby keeping leaking light to a minimum.

This fixture is aimed across the front of the talent's face and into a 36-inch flex-fill (white side) on a stand that bounces light onto his face. To fill in the darker side of the frame, I am allowing the light spill from the barn doors to hit him. Although the barn doors are painted black, the light is so intense that it still reflects off them enough to fill him, but is not too bright.

Below is a diagram of my standard set-up of the type described above.

Sometimes I use a back/rim light and sometimes I don't. In most circumstances it's not necessary because I let the background go soft and therefore don't need to accentuate separation. Often I find that when they are very noticeable, back/rim lights impair the overall quality of a picture. In this case though, the talent's dark jacket needs a bit of help.
The rim of light created by the back/rim light I'm using just outlines his shoulder without being a bright unnatural light. In addition, I let a little bit wash across his hair. I am using a 1/2 CTB gel on the fixture, which is a 150-watt Cool Lux open face. CTB looks great on gray hair. The fixture has a dimmer on it and is adjusted so that I can get the right illumination easily.

As for the background, I am using another 600-watt open-face fixture projected through a cucoloris, which subtly breaks up the light hitting the back wall.

As you can see, the lighting in this photo is far from three-point, and for good reason. Three-point lighting might be a reference point, but the texture, modeling and mood of one's lighting are what create depth in a two dimensional picture.

Below are two other interviews done the same day.

The lighting design in the photo above is identical to that of the last set-up. Perhaps one of the only differences is that my key light is a bit more diffuse because as I looked at this gentleman, who was very tall and thin, I felt too much shadow would be uncomplimentary to his face. Therefore, I softened the throw on his face by widening the beam of my fixture. I also used an edge light on him because I felt that his skin tone and clothes and the window behind him were too similar a tone and a bit of highlight around the edges would serve to separate them.

In the photo above, I am lighting the shot with only two fixtures, one on the talent as a bounce light and the other on the wall in the background. This is an example of the phrase "simpler is better". Notice that she is wearing all black. This can look rather unappealing when put in front of a neutral background, as it means you either get dark or light tones with nothing in between. Back lights do not do anything for me in a situation like this. However, color does. Notice the colored glass figures on the table in the distance. They were part of a collection of colored glass tubes I found in the room. I placed them in the shot along with the vase for texture. The slight reflection in the table behind looks good too.

In order to give the wall some depth, I used two gels, a 1/2 CTB and 1/2 CTO. Both are clipped to my open face fixture so that the blue covers one half and the orange the other, giving me a bit of color contrast on the wall. What's great is that instead of using two fixtures, I used one fixture with two pieces of gel and saved space, set-up time, and power consumption. Here's a note about lighting women. My formal education in lighting began with 'old school" gaffers (guys that used to work on films in the forties). They all taught me one rule: you always light a woman's face flat. You can do anything you want to a man's
face, but for woman to 'shine', you need to have light that appears less modeled and flatter on her face. Over the years, I have found this to be generally true. I have just a bit of modeling on her face, since that worked for me, but on the whole quite less than I would normally use for a male in the same setting. If you want to see some good examples of how to light women watch any of the old black and white films. Notice the difference in the close-up shots of women. A more recent example is the original Star Trek series from the 1960's. Not only are the women lit flat, but they use an obvious filter to soften any single shots of women. When they cut between single shots of Captian Kirk and the women he deals with in his 'exploration', you'll see what I am talking about.

Notice one important thing about all three pictures. None of the talent is brighter than the background in any shot. In fact they are at least even with the brightest part of any background. I find in video that if the people blend more with the background instead of blatantly standing out from it, the overall shot is a lot more pleasing to the eye and has less of a 'video look'.

In the end, my suggestion for everyone is to experiment. Start out with what you have been taught and take it a step further. Don't let your lights dictate how things are going to look. Rather, use the lights to dictate how you want it to look.