

# AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

## Three Video Essays on Lighting and Time

Watching a narrative film is a richly temporal experience. We anticipate what happens next; we are surprised when things turn out differently; we remember the beginning when we watch the ending. An appealing feature of the video essay as a form of scholarship is its promise to deepen our awareness of film's temporality. Here, I offer three video essays about light unfolding in time. The first examines *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937); the second, the films of Josef von Sternberg with Marlene Dietrich (1930-1935); the third, *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952).

Like George M. Wilson, I see the 'three headlines' scene as a key to the interpretation of *You Only Live Once* (1936: 16-38). Awaiting the outcome of Eddie's trial, two newsmen ponder which headline they will use. Wilson analyses this scene to develop a larger argument about the potential unreliability of Lang's cinematic narration. I propose that the scene develops a contrast between photography and cinema. Each photograph offers a single depiction of Eddie, lit to appear friendly or cruel, as if character were permanent and therefore visible at a glance. But the film represents character dynamically. Eddie changes, and so does the lighting. Lighting may make Eddie look good or bad momentarily, but we should refrain from passing absolute judgement on

him because he is innocent in some circumstances and guilty in others.

The early films of Josef von Sternberg similarly employ lighting as a tool of characterisation, shifting in style to suit the changing mood of each story. His collaborations with Marlene Dietrich develop a new approach to lighting, exploring variation as a principle for its own sake. As Deborah Thomas and George M. Wilson have explained, von Sternberg's films encourage us to see Dietrich as Dietrich – as a star playing a role. Rather than taking us out of the story-world, the resulting dual awareness enriches our understanding of her characters' transformations (Thomas 1990: 13; Wilson 2011: 174). Shifting from moment to moment, the lighting of the Dietrich movies encourages us to appreciate the performer's contributions to the films' malleable compositions. The actor's movements energise each shot, generating suspense by obliging us to wait for the privileged moments when her face catches the light perfectly.

We might expect Neorealist lighting to depart from the careful modulations that characterise certain Hollywood films, but many Neorealist films also depict light changing over time. As Christopher Wagstaff has argued, the idea that Neorealist lighting was natural is a myth; even the early classics combine natural lighting with artificial illumination for aesthetic purposes (2007: 100-104). In *Umberto D.*, one sequence represents the gradual transition from evening to night. The cinematography is just as careful as that of a Hollywood film, but the purpose is different. In *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951), the gradual shift from evening to night plays on our anxieties about whether the villain will accomplish his goal on time or not. In *Umberto D.*, the gradual shift expresses an attitude – an attitude of respect for the nuances of the everyday world. These nuances are worthy of representation, whether they generate suspense or not.

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### Works cited

- Thomas, Deborah (1990) 'Blonde Venus', *Movie*, 34-35, 7-15.
- Wagstaff, Christopher (2007) *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wilson, George M. (1986) *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wilson, George M. (2011) *Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Watch the audiovisual essays here:

Three Headlines: Lighting and Time in *You Only Live Once*  
<https://vimeo.com/282748346>

Dietrich Lighting: A Video Essay  
<https://vimeo.com/268916255>

From Evening to Night: A New Look at Neorealist Lighting  
<https://vimeo.com/275646845>



*You Only Live Once* (1937)