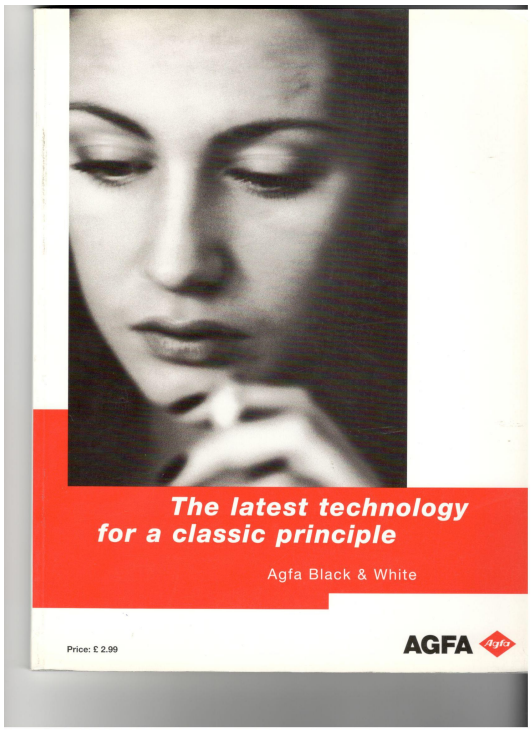
Stealing the Light

Have you ever looked at a magazine and wondered “how did she do that lighting?” We're going to look at one of the best instructional tools we can have as a photographer, our ability to steal someone else's light.

Here are a few photos scanned from our books in the club and taken by me in order to illustrate a few points about studio lighting. .

First, remember that most lighting is simple. The simpler the better, too many lights in a studio are hard to control, they start leaking.

Here's our first example:



A scan of the front cover of a product catalogue, probably 15 or 20 years old, photo by Thorsten Zuckerstatter. How was this shot lit? Obviously from about 45 degrees to our left, check out the shadow on the nose. She has turned her head slightly to our left so we can assume the length of that shadow is a bit shorter than we would expect. By turning her head toward the light the photographer may have been shortening that nose.

Look at the brightness of the left side of her face compared to the right, now look at the softness of that shadow on her nose. This light must be close to her face for it to fall off that fast, and for the shadows to be that soft. Is it a softbox? I doubt it, the shadows are still fairly sharp.

What is that bright spot on her hand? And what's with that zit on her forehead? There was a time when digital processing didn't exist and people had skin.

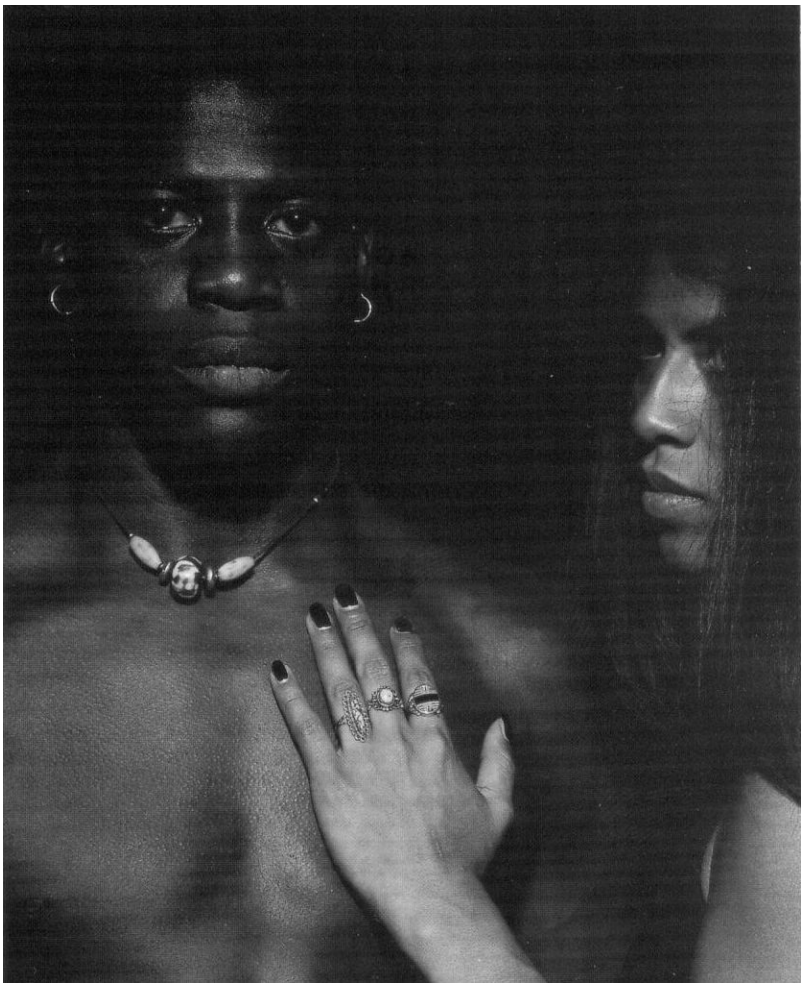
Our second shot illustrates the softbox that we all love so much today:

This is a great shot from 1997 by Inez and Vinoodh, improved I think by fifteen years of fading on our bookshelf. Note how the hands frame the face.

Now look at that face, smooth skin, no pores, no shadows to show wrinkles. Even without looking at her eyes to see the square highlight of a softbox you can tell that's what was used. In this case it's straight on, above the camera. Note that the shadows on the face are equally distributed to the sides, while the neck is slightly more in shadow. Yep, one softbox directly above the camera. Look at that neck, it's barely a shadow, very “open” as we say. That's a characteristic of the softbox. Big light, close up means that there are no sharp shadows, the light is coming from too wide an area, too many directions, to show shadows. That's why there are no pores or wrinkles on the girl, and barely any on the hands which look oddly androgynous but I'm fairly certain are male just from the size of them. Finally, look at the background, it's white with no shadows at all. That's a background light, likely two softboxes one on each side, which are set to a couple of f-stops brighter than the face light. More than two stops and you'd probably see flare around the edges of the hands. Speaking of those hands, check out the slight rimlight on the backs of the fingers, that's probably bounce off of the floor or spill from the backlights. It can't be from the face light, light doesn't bend although sometimes I would swear it does.

Before digital editing we had to rely on soft focus lenses and, about 60 years ago, the softbox. Yes it's that old, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn were using softboxes and white paper in the 1960s to create those beautiful fashion faces we still expect to see.

The third shot goes back to that Agfa catalogue and is also a face light from zero degrees by Joachim Badura.



This is also lit from above the camera, just like the softbox shot but it looks entirely different doesn't it? Look at the highlights in his eyes, they are just pinpricks, this is a spotlight (or a softbox set up a mile back with a 2400 watt second powerpack turned up full). No backlighting, probably grey or black background to negate any light spill. See how much more sculpting is done on the faces than with the softbox, this is “man's lighting”, designed to show the character of the face, wrinkles, pores, bring them on. The woman's face is similarly dramatic and you can see how much shaping is done when a spotlight is set up at the side of the face. Same lighting position, quite different effects due to the size of the light.

Here is one of my own spotlit shots to illustrate some trickery.

So, a spotlight from the left, obviously (actually a light with a reflector and a grid, not a real spotlight with fresnel lens... boy do I love those, they're so 1930s). Can you analyze the lighting setup? One spot with blue and white together? Blue background paper? Nah, white background with a blue filtered background light. How many spotlights on the model? I was going to say two but then I looked more closely (you think I remember the stuff I did last decade?). Look at her hand, She's holding a mirror which will reflect a very faithful light, the edge of the mirror is making quite a sharp shadow on her chin.

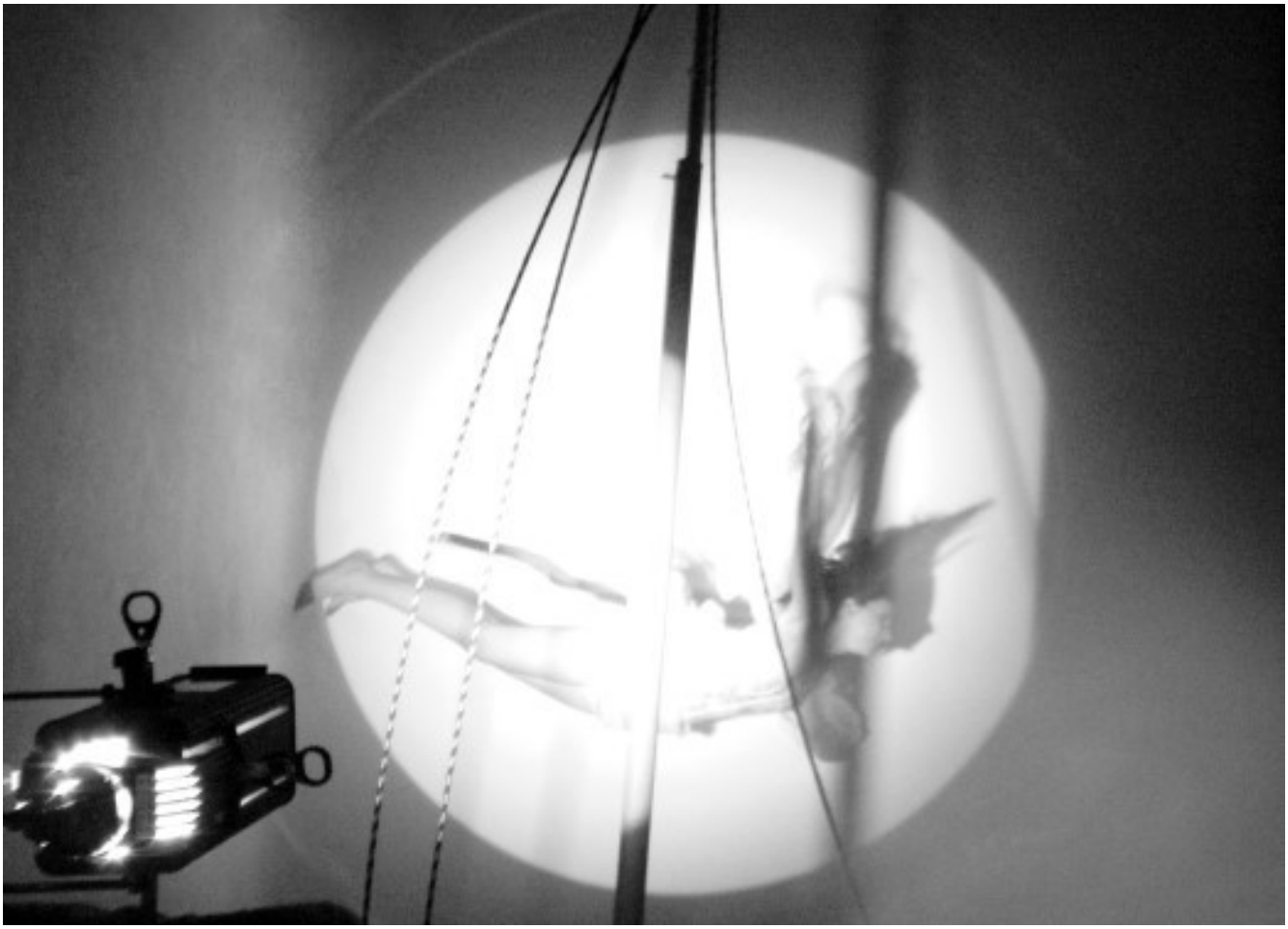
We haven't talked about gobos yet (go betweens) but I would have put a black flag between the spot on the model and the background to prevent any spillover which would have dimmed the blue background effect.

Next we have one of my portraits from 2008 it looks like.

We know this one. Softbox from our left side, you can see it in her eye and in the soft falloff in the shadows. It must be about her head height, there is no shadow from her nose on her upper lip. I'm pretty sure there is no background lighting, I probably didn't bother, and look how the background is slightly brighter on the right just above her shoulder due to spill .from the softbox.. Now, there is one more light here and that's a “hair light” from our right hand side, it's a spot, it's pretty sharp, in fact it's blown out some of her hair. Is that a problem? Not for me, I'm too old to worry about blown out highlights or unreadable shadows. If you worry, back off the power to the hairlight and put a white card in her hands (below the camera) to open up that other eye by reflecting some of the softbox light upward.

I rarely use softboxes and when I do I tend to get a bit perverse with them, this was likely me experimenting to see if I could make a softbox look like a spot. At that studio I suspect I could have backed the box up fourty feet and powered the thing up all the way (4800 w/s pack and a head to match) but I didn't. Check the eye again, I just kicked it around to the side (the light stands were on rollers, I really did kick them around).

Speaking of that studio, here's a shot to show (actually show) a very specialized light. It's an optical spot which was capable of taking pattern cookies.



The light is there in the bottom left. Here's our poor model plummeting to earth from the top of the tent! Well, not really, look at the light again, it's not just a prop, it's the actual (only) light and it's sideways. Since that light was too heavy to mount sideways, that means the photo has been rotated, see the “guywires”, they're bending to the left (down). The pole is actually a lighting boom. We had a lot of toys in that studio... and a lot of room. The floor of the swept background can be seen on the left side, the edge of the spot is very close to the floor so the model didn't have to jump very high to get into the light.

One final shot to look at, just to see what sort of silliness one can get up to with lights and how we can usually figure it out just by looking.

Well OK after staring at it for a while I'm saying it's a digital projector and two grid reflectors as rim lights with barn doors or gobos to keep their lights off the background. See how the pattern bends as it hits the sweep from wall to floor? See how the shirt is somewhat less blue on our right side compared to the left? Those streaks of light on the floor carry on right up to her hair so the rim lights were what we might call strip lights (we do call them that if they're softbox-like), but created with gobos. I love how the light on the floor is so much sharper after it hits her skirt than before.

This must be a flash and drag shot, see her left hand, it's blurred, so the rimlights flashed, then went dark while the shutter on the camera remained open to record the digital pattern on the darkened backdrop. Flash the lights, drag the shutter, the only way to balance weak lights (the projector) with strong ones (the flash). I can imagine my instructions to the model, lean over until you're about to fall, then freeze. That hand was likely heading toward the floor to stop her falling over. I love my models.

So there you have it, go out and see if you can steal the light off some of your favourite photographers.

Kim Taylor
Oct 13, 2015