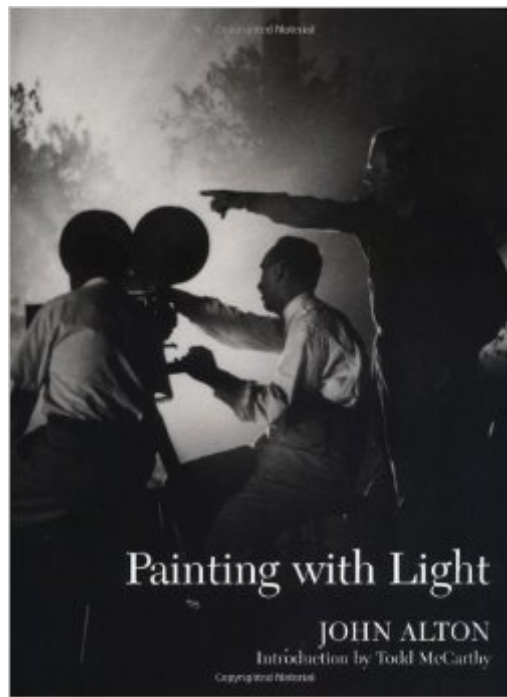


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# Painting With Light



## Synopsis

Few cinematographers have had as decisive an impact on the cinematic medium as John Alton. Best known for his highly stylized film noir classics *T-Men*, *He Walked by Night*, and *The Big Combo*, Alton earned a reputation during the 1940s and 1950s as one of Hollywood's consummate craftsmen through his visual signature of crisp shadows and sculpted beams of light. No less renowned for his virtuoso color cinematography and deft appropriation of widescreen and Technicolor, he earned an Academy Award in 1951 for his work on the musical *An American in Paris*. First published in 1949, and long out of print since then, *Painting With Light* remains one of the few truly canonical statements on the art of motion picture photography, an unrivalled historical document on the workings of the postwar, American cinema. In simple, non-technical language, Alton explains the job of the cinematographer and explores how lighting, camera techniques, and choice of locations determine the visual mood of film. Todd McCarthy's introduction, written especially for this edition, provides an overview of Alton's biography and career and explores the influence of his work on contemporary cinematography.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Painting with Light" is a reprint of cinematographer John Alton's 1949 book that began as a series of articles for "International Photographer" magazine. The book earned Alton appreciation among students of cinematography and the ire of those already working in the field. Students welcomed a how-to book by one of Hollywood's masters. Cinematographers found Alton lessons arrogant and

too narrow, as the book advocates Alton's signature, somewhat controversial, style of using few lights. In any case, John Alton is one of the most studied cinematographers in Hollywood history, best known for his low key lighting in film noirs such as "T-Men" and "The Big Combo". And "Painting with Light" provides insight into why and how Alton chose the style he did. An Introduction by film critic and documentarian Todd M. McCarthy provides a biography of John Alton and a filmography. John Alton starts out by saying that his techniques may be applied to still photography, and there are a couple of chapters toward the end of the book dedicated primarily to still photography, so photographers take note. The equipment that Alton describes is outdated, of course, but the reasoning and techniques may still apply, especially to those interested in low key lighting. The book starts out by introducing the cinematographer's equipment and describing basic lighting set-ups. Film noir fans may be particularly interested in Chapter 3, "Mystery Lighting". Alton found "the most beautiful photography is in a low key, with rich blacks", and he talks about creating it here. Chapter 4, "Special Illumination", explores some situations also common to film noir, such as streets, rain, fog, and moonlight. Chapter 5, "The Hollywood Close-up", might be applied to portrait photography as well as movies.

First off, I want to note that the author DOES cover still photography in this book even though the major emphasis is on film techniques. As someone who has always considered lighting to be vital, learning more lighting techniques is a passion. I was naturally drawn to this one. It didn't disappoint. Very convincingly, Mr. Alton makes his case for the way lighting and setting can affect the whole tone and mood of a film. He also reveals how some difficult situations, filming against snow, can be overcome. This was a seminal book of 1949 and I'm glad to rediscover it, even though I wasn't born in 1949 and I came to it late but had the luck to see an earlier edition. As you can probably tell, the cover photo is riveting and the contents are also compelling. I did want to note what may, perhaps, be obvious to some readers: film techniques and the ability to manipulate lighting have come a long way since 1949. Special effects can be used. But I come to this book with a still photographer's background and I'm thrilled to be able to use the information in both film and still photography. If you are prepared to take what is here and remember when this book was written, you'll find an abundance of riches. For those who like noir type photos or movies, you'll be thrilled when Alton discusses how to use weather to your advantage - whether that be rain, snow, fog, etc. Also, a confession: I prefer black and white photos and films - in many instances - so I was particularly delighted to read Alton's words about "rich blacks", two words that might not seem to be joined together - rich and black (and I'm not talking politics or class here).

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