

# Lighting and themes in 127 hours essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There are plenty of films based on a true story and various ways to use lighting as a part of Mise en Scene to make all of those films seem more realistic or in sometimes unrealistic whichever is the director's and cinematographer's take on the story. Danny Boyle's take on Aron Ralston's true story of cutting his arm off to live has been to make it as realistic as it possibly can be. The film was shot on and off set, mostly in constructed set of the canyon where Aron Ralston, portrayed by James Franco, was trapped with his arm pinned between a large boulder and the canyon wall.

The scene of which lighting and themes this essay will discuss about starts from the point where James Franco's character has just freed himself and starts running through the canyon towards his freedom and climbs off the cliff. The themes of the film 127 Hours (2010) are entrapment, desperation, will to live and surviving. The lighting reflects on the themes and changes with them in the shots.

For example when Franco's character is trapped the lighting is shadowy and lights his face in a way that enhances the desperate mood of the shot or where the character feels hopeful of his survival he is looking towards the light which brightens the mood of the shot. Several emotions and themes are shown through the variations of the lighting. In the chosen scene the lighting is used in ways to make the story look and feel real, and also to draw viewer's attention to the desperation of the situation in the dark canyon as well as embody character's relief and enjoyment when he gets out of the canyon.

The lighting in the scene is positioned off set while character remains down there in the canyon and it is directed downwards to give the contrasting effect to the viewer of light and dark which represents freedom and entrapment. For the first half of the scene the lighting technique used is low-key lighting. It creates stronger contrasts and sharper shadows (Bordwell 2010, p. 136). The low-key lighting is changed to high-key lighting for the second half of the scene, which creates lower contrasts and is softer light.

Josef von Sternberg has said that “ the proper use of light can embellish and dramatize every object” (Josef von Sternberg as quoted in Bordwell 2010, p. 131). As much as the lighting in this scene is used to state Franco’s character’s state of mind it is also used to dramatize the scene and character’s struggle. This applies throughout the whole film and not just in this particular scene. Lighting intensifies Franco’s character’s facial expressions as well as during his run through the canyon the lighting is darkened and more shadowy most of the time to create realistic condition but it also adds the feeling of length to the run.

In the part of the scene where the character is running through the canyon the lighting changes constantly between darker and lighter. It is darker when he struggles and lighter on the easier parts of the distance between his trap and freedom. In the shots that are taken in the canyon the light is colder than in the ones that are taken outside. The fill light is used to soften the contrast of shadows on characters face while he is in the canyon (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2011, p. 111).

For the first half of the scene, placed in the canyon, light is constantly coming from above as sunlight between the cracks of the earth to the canyon. Franco's character also keeps looking up to the sunlight after he has been freed from his trap. The character has done that many times before in the film as desperately hoping to be free and now he finally is. Now he is looking up and thanking God or some higher power for his liberation from certain death. One can see the sunlight, which the character has gotten 15 minutes each morning, as a glimpse of hope, representing freedom and also life itself.

The lighting plays really important part in the film as a reflector of character's emotions. In the shot where Franco's character runs through the canyon and gets out, the light brightens to extreme, through cinematographic manipulation, and fills the whole image leaving only parts of character's bag visible. It reflects the freedom and also the relieved state of mind the character is in but it also expresses the blinding effect that bright sunlight has for person's eyes when moving from dark to light.

After the blinding brightness the lighting fades back to a realistic state, as character's eyes adjust to it. The real sunlight is the main source of lighting for the rest of the scene while the character goes down from the cliff.

Available light, which is from the sun, can be soft or hard. It is entirely depending on what time of day and year it is, from what angle the sun is shining, the amount of clouds and where you are geographically (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2011, p. 110).

Usually filmmakers complement available light with artificial light sources to gain more control over the lighting (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2011, p. 111).

Also in 127 Hours artificial light is used to soften shadows or to eliminate shadows on character's face. The shot that is taken from above after character takes his cap off and stares at the sky and yells out of excitement, the light is natural and soft and creates naturalistic shadows to the canyon. Character embraces the sunlight.

After that he starts jumping a bit, it is a victory moment for the character and the lighting highlights it. As conclusion it can be said that all of the themes in the film 127 Hours are developed and represented precisely through the lighting. The lighting gives to the viewer cues about the overall mood of the scene and can also hint what is going to happen next by changing. Throughout the film the lighting is one of the most important aspects which is to set up the moods, represent the themes and dramatize, highlight and intensify the story of Aron Ralston's survival fight.