

ILLUMINATING EMOTION: THE ROLE OF LIGHTING IN SHAPING ATMOSPHERE IN *KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of lighting in creating atmosphere and conveying emotions to the audience in the film *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016), an animated film produced by Laika Studios. The film uses stop-motion technique. In this film, lighting is not just a technical element, but it functions as a narrative tool to support the development and expression of emotions, characters, and story themes. This study uses a qualitative method, which is content analysis of several key scenes in the film that show variations in lighting such as color, contrast, and light intensity. The results of this study show that warm lighting is closely associated with memories, hope, and love. Meanwhile, cool lighting represents sadness, danger, and the supernatural world. This study also finds that lighting is used to differentiate between two distinct realms, the human world and the spirit world. The lighting in this film also reflects the emotional journey of the main character, Kubo. In conclusion, the lighting in this film not only enhances the visual aspects of the story, but also plays an important role in conveying meaning, emotions, and the atmosphere of the narrative. This study is hoped to contribute to the field of animation, especially in understanding lighting techniques as a visual language in cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: Stop-motion animation, lighting techniques, emotional storytelling, mise-en-scène

INTRODUCTION

Kubo and The Two Strings (2016) is a stop-motion animated film produced by Laika Studios that blends elements of Japanese culture and mythology with modern lighting technology to create a unique visual experience. In this film, lighting is not just used to make scenes look beautiful, it also plays an important role in showing the characters' emotions and building the atmosphere of each scene. It helps guide the audience through the emotional journey of the characters and adds depth to the storytelling without relying heavily on dialogue. Despite the film's visual appeal, many viewers may not fully realise how lighting choices influence their emotional response or how these techniques support the story's development.

The study aim clearly focuses on exploring how lighting plays a vital role in shaping both the atmosphere and emotional storytelling in *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016). This research also aims to identify the role of lighting in creating the mood and tone of various scenes, from moments of fear and tension to peace and resolution. It also seeks to define how lighting is used to convey the emotions of the main character, Kubo, as he goes through personal loss, bravery, and growth throughout his journey. In addition, the study intends to analyse the relationship between lighting techniques such as brightness, colour temperature, and shadow placement and the overall emotional and narrative atmosphere of the film. Through this analysis, the research hopes to show that lighting in stop-motion animation is not only a visual tool but also a powerful method of non-verbal storytelling that enhances audience engagement and emotional understanding. Despite growing scholarship, few studies analyse how lighting functions narratively in stop-motion. This paper addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework

This research applies an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to analyse the role of lighting in *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016). Lighting in film is more than a technical necessity; it is a complex semiotic system that

shapes atmosphere, conveys emotion, and embeds cultural meaning. To account for these dimensions, this study draws on three complementary perspectives: *mise-en-scène* theory, psychological approaches to colour and light, and cultural symbolism within Japanese aesthetics. Together, these frameworks provide a multi-layered foundation for examining how lighting in stop-motion animation communicates narrative and emotion. *Mise-en-scène*, broadly understood as the arrangement of everything within the frame, provides a fundamental lens for analysing cinematic lighting. According to Gibbs (2002), *mise-en-scène* encompasses elements such as setting, costume, movement, and crucially lighting. Within this framework, lighting is not treated as a neutral or purely technical aspect but as a compositional structure that organizes visual meaning.

Lighting shapes spatial depth, directs audience attention, and establishes mood. High-key lighting, for example, conveys openness and harmony, while low-key lighting, with its heavy contrasts and shadows, evokes tension or mystery. By situating lighting within *mise-en-scène*, this study recognizes it as an integral narrative device that interacts with other visual elements to guide interpretation. This theoretical lens enables close reading of Kubo's lighting strategies as part of its broader cinematic design, where each frame's composition contributes to emotional storytelling. While *mise-en-scène* emphasizes compositional function, psychological theories highlight how lighting affects human perception and emotion. Gurney (2010) emphasizes that colour and light have profound psychological associations that can evoke specific moods and responses. Warm tones such as orange and yellow often produce feelings of comfort, nostalgia, and intimacy. Conversely, cool tones like blue or green are linked with melancholy, detachment, or fear.

This perspective is particularly relevant for animated films, where lighting choices are intentional and meticulously crafted. In *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016), shifts in colour temperature often mirror Kubo's emotional journey—from the golden warmth of familial memory to the cold blue tones of isolation and danger. Applying psychological theories of colour and light allows this study to interpret how audience emotions are influenced by specific visual cues, reinforcing the narrative without reliance on dialogue. Beyond compositional and psychological dimensions, lighting also carries culturally specific meanings. Yeo (2021) highlights how Japanese aesthetics often attribute symbolic values to colours and light. Red, for instance, is associated with courage, vitality, and protective energy, while blue symbolizes spirituality, sincerity, or sorrow. These cultural associations shape audience interpretation, particularly in a film like Kubo that integrates Japanese mythology and visual motifs.

By situating lighting analysis within Japanese cultural symbolism, this study acknowledges that meaning is not universal but contextually grounded. When Kubo employs red lighting during climactic battles, it resonates not only as a psychological signal of intensity but also as a culturally coded representation of courage and transformation. Similarly, blue-tinged spiritual realms carry dual significance: psychological melancholy and cultural associations with the ethereal. This cultural perspective enriches the analysis by situating Laika's artistic decisions within the broader semiotics of Japanese tradition.

Taken together, these three frameworks—*mise-en-scène*, psychology, and cultural symbolism—allow for a layered interpretation of lighting in Kubo and The Two Strings. *Mise-en-scène* situates lighting as a structural element of cinematic composition; psychological theories explain its affective impact on viewers; and cultural symbolism contextualizes its meaning within Japanese aesthetics. By integrating these perspectives, the study can move beyond purely formal analysis to capture how lighting operates simultaneously as visual design, emotional stimulus, and cultural signifier.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lighting is often referred to as the **silent storyteller** in animation because of its powerful role in shaping the emotional tone of a scene and guiding the viewer's focus (Katatikarn & Tanzillo, 2016). It helps to establish the mood, suggest the time of day, and highlight key elements within the frame. More than just a visual effect, lighting contributes deeply to how stories are told and understood. In stop-motion animation, where every element is handcrafted and physically lit, lighting becomes even more critical. It enhances the textures and materials of the models and sets, creating a sense of depth, realism, and emotion (Shaw, 2017; Walsh, 2019). Techniques like using hard lighting to build tension or soft lighting to evoke calmness show how lighting can directly affect the audience's emotional response.

Gibbs (2002) explains the emotional impact of lighting through the concept of *mise-en-scène*. According to his theory, different lighting setups can reflect different **emotional states or themes** within a scene. High-key lighting, which is bright and evenly lit, is often used to suggest happiness, hope, or peace. On the other hand, low-key lighting, which uses more shadows and contrast, is used to create feelings of sadness, fear, or mystery. The use of colour in lighting also plays a key emotional role. Red lighting may represent danger or passion, blue lighting is often linked to sadness or emotional coldness, and warm tones like yellow or orange are usually associated with comfort, joy, and nostalgia. These lighting choices do more than decorate the scene, they reflect the characters' emotions, help with smooth scene transitions, and signal shifts in the film's emotional or narrative direction.

Despite the importance of lighting in animation, most existing studies focus on its role in CGI or live-action films. There is limited academic work that explores how lighting is used in stop-motion films, especially in terms of emotional storytelling and narrative structure. Stop-motion animation, which relies on physical lighting in miniature sets, presents unique challenges and creative possibilities that differ from digital or live-action productions. This research addresses that gap by focusing on *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016), a film that demonstrates how advanced lighting techniques can be used to express emotion visually, separate the human and spiritual worlds, and support themes from Japanese culture (Yeo, 2021).

By analysing *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016), this study aims to show how lighting in stop-motion animation functions not just as a technical requirement, but as a powerful visual-emotional tool. The research will explore how lighting choices contribute to the atmosphere, support the development of the main character's emotions, and enhance the narrative meaning of the film. This focus adds to the limited body of work on stop-motion lighting and offers insights into how lighting can be used more purposefully in animated storytelling.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at analysing the visual elements of the animated film *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016). The primary goal is to understand how lighting contributes to the creation of atmosphere and the expression of character emotions throughout the film. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of the film's visual and symbolic elements, focusing on how lighting operates as a narrative and emotional device in stop-motion animation.

The data collection strategy involves content analysis of selected scenes from the film. Scenes are chosen based on their emotional intensity and variation in lighting techniques. Focus is given to moments that show a clear transition between the human world and the spirit world, as well as scenes that reflect emotional changes in the main character. These moments are significant as they demonstrate how lighting enhances the viewer's understanding of the story and the internal state of the characters.

A case study approach is used, with *Kubo and The Two Strings* treated as a single case. This method allows for a detailed exploration of lighting within one specific film, offering insights into how various lighting techniques such as the use of shadows, brightness, and colour tones are applied to different narrative situations. By narrowing the focus to one film, the study can conduct a deep visual analysis of key scenes rather than broad comparisons across multiple films.

For data interpretation, each selected scene is analysed using visual and symbolic analysis techniques. The study examines elements such as light direction, intensity, contrast, and colour temperature, linking them to emotional themes such as loss, hope, courage, and memory. These visual elements are not only examined for their aesthetic contribution but also for their symbolic meanings and emotional effects on the viewer.

Overall, this research design supports the study's objective by connecting specific lighting techniques to the emotional and narrative structure of the film. The combination of content analysis and case study allows for a rich, focused understanding of how lighting in stop-motion animation functions as a tool for visual storytelling and emotional engagement.

RESULT AND FINDING

The visual analysis of *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016) reveals that lighting plays a crucial role in shaping the film's emotional and narrative experience. Through careful observation of key scenes, several lighting patterns and techniques emerge that reflect character emotions, guide audience perception, and distinguish between different narrative spaces. The film uses a range of lighting strategies including colour tones, intensity, shadow, contrast, and digital enhancements to communicate mood and support storytelling without relying heavily on dialogue. These findings highlight how lighting functions as a powerful non-verbal language that enhances the emotional depth and thematic structure of the film.

Table 1: Scene-Based Analysis of Lighting in *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016) Based on Emotional, Visual and Cultural Interpretations

Scene	Author	Lighting Type	Visual Features	Emotional / Atmospheric Impact
Kubo and Mother on Boat (Opening)	Gibbs, 2002; Walsh, 2019	Low-Key Lighting	Dark tones, bluish tint, heavy shadows	Suspense, fear, mystery; foreshadows hardship
Temple Flashback Scene	Yeo, 2020; Kooijman, 2016	Warm Lighting	Golden hues, soft edges	Nostalgia, familial love, emotional safety
Nighttime Journey	Shaw, 2017	Cool Lighting	Dim blue, soft foggy background	Loneliness, fear of the unknown
Battle with Sisters	Gibbs, 2002	High Contrast	Hard shadows, sudden light shifts	Tension, chaos, emotional confrontation
Final Scene with Moon King	Katatikarn, 2024	Rim + Backlight	Strong backlight, glow around Kubo	Hope, transformation, emotional closure
Kubo Playing Shamisen at Village	Katatikarn, 2024; Gibbs, 2002	Three-Point Lighting	Warm key light, soft fill, rim on hair	Joy, connection, childhood innocence
Mother's Memory Projection	Walsh, 2019; Kooijman, 2016	Diffused Lighting	Hazy, glowing background, low saturation	Melancholy, memory, dreamlike emotion
Entering Spiritual Realm	Aditya, 2016	Color Shifting	Cyan-to-violet transitions, flickering	Awe, curiosity, heightened awareness
Kubo Alone at Night in Forest	Shaw, 2017; Gibbs, 2002	Underlighting	Light from below, eerie shadows	Isolation, fear, psychological pressure
Reunion with Parents (Ending)	Yeo, 2020; Katatikarn, 2024	High-Key Lighting	Bright, balanced tones, radiant white	Peace, warmth, emotional resolution

The visual analysis of *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016) reveals that lighting plays a vital role in shaping the film's emotional tone and narrative clarity. By examining selected scenes, several lighting techniques were identified, each contributing significantly to how emotions and story elements are communicated visually. These include the use of colour temperature, contrast, light direction, intensity, and hybrid lighting (practical and digital). The following examples illustrate how these techniques were applied throughout the film to enhance emotional impact and symbolic meaning.

In the opening boat scene, low-key lighting with a dim blue tone sets a tense and somber atmosphere. The stormy visuals and deep shadows visually communicate danger, emotional loss, and isolation. This lighting design introduces the viewer to the film's emotional depth and signals a difficult journey ahead. Symbolically, the darkness and rough sea mirror the mother's struggle and the overwhelming odds she faces. The use of blue light and shadow aligns with Gibbs (2002) and Walsh (2019), who suggest that low-key lighting evokes fear and emotional distance in cinematic storytelling.

The temple flashback scene, in contrast, uses warm golden lighting to evoke a sense of peace, safety, and emotional warmth. The soft glow surrounding the characters suggests a treasured memory and highlights the deep bond between Kubo and his mother. The warm tones create an atmosphere of familial love and nostalgia, which enhances the emotional value of the memory. Culturally, the light signifies spiritual comfort and

maternal care. Yeo (2020) and Kooijman (2016) explain that such lighting is effective in reflecting emotional intimacy and cherished personal histories in film.

The night forest scene introduces cool, desaturated lighting with bluish tones and fog, creating an atmosphere of emptiness and loss. This visual style reflects Kubo's emotional state like lonely, vulnerable, and disconnected from safety or guidance. The lighting supports the narrative moment where Kubo is physically and emotionally lost, separated from both family and spiritual protection. As noted by Shaw (2017) and Gibbs (2002), cool tones and reduced saturation are commonly used to express emotional isolation and internal struggle in visual media.

During the attack scene involving Kubo's aunts, the film employs harsh, high-contrast lighting with strong spotlights and deep shadows. This lighting design adds intensity and visual chaos, mirroring the sudden danger and confusion of the moment. The emotional effect is one of stress, urgency, and fear. Symbolically, the heavy contrast represents the presence of evil and imbalance brought by the sisters. According to Gibbs (2002), high-contrast lighting enhances tension and moral disruption, making it a powerful tool in conflict-driven scenes.

A significant shift in lighting occurs when Kubo enters the spiritual realm. Here, glowing tones such as purple and cyan dominate the frame, enhanced by volumetric light and glow effects. These hybrid lighting techniques heighten the mystical quality of the setting and signal a clear transition from the human world to a spiritual dimension. Emotionally, this shift evokes awe, curiosity, and slight unease. Culturally, glowing light is often used to symbolise divine or otherworldly presence. This aligns with observations from (Aditya 2016) and Yeo (2020), who highlight the use of colour shifts and digital enhancements in creating magical environments in animation.

In the final battle scene with the Moon King, Kubo is framed by strong rim lighting and a red glow, casting a radiant outline around him. This visual effect positions Kubo as a heroic figure and intensifies the emotional climax of the film. The red glow signifies power, courage, and transformation, while the shadows behind him reflect the darkness he is overcoming. This contrast between light and shadow represents the triumph of good over evil. Katatikarn (2024) and Gibbs (2002) support the use of such lighting to mark emotional highs and the resolution of inner conflict in visual storytelling.

The memory projection scene uses soft, diffused lighting to create a hazy, dreamlike quality. The lighting mimics the appearance of faded photographs, enhancing the nostalgic tone of the moment. Emotionally, the scene feels calm and reflective, inviting the viewer to connect with the theme of remembrance. Symbolically, the soft light represents the fragile nature of memories and their importance in shaping identity. Walsh (2019) and Kooijman (2016) suggest that diffused lighting effectively captures the emotional weight and symbolic value of personal history in animated narratives.

In the village performance scene, three-point lighting is used to create balanced illumination with clear visibility of both Kubo and his audience. The lighting design supports the mood of joy, unity, and cultural storytelling. The scene highlights Kubo's role as a storyteller and his connection to the people around him. Warm tones and even lighting reflect harmony and shared experience. Katatikarn (2024) and Gibbs (2002) note that balanced lighting is often used to represent social cohesion and narrative clarity in visual media.

When Kubo is alone in the cave, underlighting is used to cast shadows on his face, leaving parts of his expression hidden. This lighting technique emphasises fear, insecurity, and emotional vulnerability. The cave setting, combined with shadows and limited light, visually communicates Kubo's internal conflict and fear of the unknown. Shaw (2017) discusses how underlighting can be used to reflect psychological unease and emotional instability, particularly in moments of isolation.

The final scene of the film uses high-key, bright white lighting to create a sense of peace, healing, and spiritual resolution. The full illumination and open space visually signal closure and emotional acceptance. This lighting represents the end of Kubo's journey, both externally and internally. It reflects harmony and the reunion of memory, family, and identity. Yeo (2020) and Katatikarn (2024) emphasise the use of high-key lighting in concluding scenes to symbolise clarity, peace, and emotional release.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how lighting in *Kubo and The Two Strings* (2016) contributes to the emotional tone and atmosphere of the story. Through a close analysis of specific scenes, it became clear that lighting plays a significant role in expressing the emotional journey of the main character, Kubo. Elements such as lighting colour, intensity, and contrast were used not only to enhance the visual appeal of the film but also to reflect key emotional moments such as fear, sadness, hope, and courage. These lighting choices helped the audience understand the character's inner world without relying heavily on dialogue or narration.

The use of lighting also helped to visually separate the human world from the spiritual realm. This distinction supports the film's deeper themes of memory, loss, and self-discovery, which are central to Kubo's growth as a character. Warm lighting was often used in scenes related to family and memories, evoking feelings of comfort and love. In contrast, cool or dim lighting appeared in moments of danger, confusion, or sadness, showing Kubo's struggles and fears. This proves that lighting functions as more than just a technical requirement; it acts as a form of visual storytelling that communicates emotion and meaning in subtle yet powerful ways.

While the research offers valuable insights into how lighting supports narrative and emotion in stop-motion animation, it does have some limitations. The analysis was based on a single film and relied mainly on the researcher's visual interpretation, without considering how real audiences perceive or respond to the lighting. Therefore, the findings may not represent a universal reaction to lighting techniques, especially across different cultures or viewer backgrounds.

Future research could address these limitations by including audience studies to understand how viewers emotionally respond to lighting in stop-motion films. It would also be beneficial to compare lighting techniques in other stop-motion animations from different studios or regions to identify common strategies and cultural differences in visual storytelling. Such studies could deepen our understanding of lighting as a narrative tool in animation and further highlight its impact on the audience's emotional experience.

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