CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. S5, 2026 (Special Issue S5)

Lighting Childhood on Screen a Visual Analysis of Natural and Artificial Light in Contemporary Cinema

Renuka Kantilal Thange[1], Dr. Hitesh Sharma[2]*

[1]Research Scholar, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, Assistant Professor,School of visual Arts, Bharati Vidyapeeth,Pune-Satara Road, Dhankawadi, Pune, India
Email id : : renukathange24@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor,Department of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan
E-mail: Hitesh.bid@banasthali.in
***corresponding author**
Dr. Hitesh Sharma
Assistant Professor,Department of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan
E-mail: Hitesh.bid@banasthali.in

ABSTRACT
Light in cinema is both a material condition of image-making and a narrative resource through which viewers interpret space, emotion, character, and social reality. This article examines how natural and artificial illumination contribute to the representation of childhood in three contemporary films: The Florida Project (Baker, 2017), Room (Abrahamson, 2015), and Petite Maman (Sciamma, 2021). Using a qualitative, interpretive comparative approach, it considers how lighting interacts with colour, framing, setting, and performance. The films offer contrasting visual environments: saturated exterior daylight and social exposure, restricted interior illumination and confinement, and restrained naturalistic light and intimacy. Drawing on scholarship on cinematic lighting, visual methodology, and childhood in film, the article argues that lighting helps shape how childhood becomes visible on screen. It may suggest freedom and exposure, enclosure and vulnerability, or intimacy and reflective attention, depending on its narrative and spatial context. The article rejects a fixed opposition in which natural light is inherently truthful and artificial light inherently false; both can be modified and used expressively. It offers a lighting-centred framework for future scene-based research and does not claim audience-response findings or measurable causal effects.
Keywords: cinematography; natural light; artificial light; childhood representation; visual storytelling; film aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema makes stories visible through an organised relationship among light, shadow, colour, framing, movement, and time. Lighting is often discussed as a technical matter—exposure, direction, intensity, colour temperature, and contrast—but these decisions also participate in the production of meaning. As Thompson (2015) argues, cinematic light can carry emotional and narrative significance beyond its practical role in making an image legible. Brown (2024) similarly connects lighting practice with the shaping of mood and visual impact. Light is therefore not simply placed on a subject; it helps determine how the subject is encountered by the viewer.

The representation of children offers a particularly revealing context for examining this relationship. Childhood is not a single or universal experience; it is represented through cultural expectations, social conditions, adult perspectives, and cinematic conventions. Lebeau (2008) shows that the child figure in cinema can embody hope and fear, vulnerability and disturbance, while Lury (2010) examines how children can challenge conventional narrative and visual structures. A film's lighting can reinforce, complicate, or resist these constructions. Brightness may suggest play and openness, yet it can also expose precarity. Darkness may communicate threat, but it can also create privacy, tenderness, or a space for imagination.

This article explores how natural and artificial light contribute to the visual construction of childhood in three contemporary films: The Florida Project (Baker, 2017), Room (Abrahamson, 2015), and Petite Maman (Sciamma, 2021). These films are not treated as representative of all contemporary cinema. Rather, they form a purposive corpus of contrasting visual approaches: a brightly coloured world shaped by outdoor spaces and precarious living; an enclosed domestic environment in which limited space and changing illumination are central to the protagonist's experience; and a restrained, intimate visual world organised around memory, relationships, and a child's point of view.

The central argument is that natural and artificial illumination should not be treated as fixed opposites. Daylight is shaped by location, weather, diffusion, exposure, colour grading, and camera placement. Artificial sources can

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

imitate daylight, motivate practical sources in a scene, or deliberately depart from realism. The meaningful distinction is therefore not simply between 'real' and 'manufactured' light, but between the different visual and narrative functions that lighting performs within a film.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND GAP

Film-lighting literature provides substantial technical and aesthetic guidance on the construction of cinematic images (Brown, 2024; Landau, 2014), while studies of childhood in cinema examine the child as a narrative, cultural, and symbolic figure (Lebeau, 2008; Lury, 2010). These bodies of scholarship offer complementary foundations, but a focused comparison of how lighting choices shape the screen representation of childhood can make their relationship more explicit.

The research problem addressed here is how lighting contributes to the viewer's interpretation of children and childhood across contrasting cinematic environments. The article does not claim that this topic has never been studied. Instead, it proposes a specific analytical contribution: bringing lighting direction, softness, contrast, colour, source motivation, and spatial distribution into a single framework for interpreting childhood representation. This framework can help film scholars and cinematographers discuss lighting as a cultural and narrative practice rather than only as a technical craft.

3. AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Aim

To examine how natural and artificial illumination function as visual and narrative devices in the representation of childhood in selected contemporary films.

3.2 Objectives

To identify the principal visual functions of naturalistic, motivated, and expressive lighting in the selected films.
To examine how lighting interacts with colour, framing, setting, and performance in constructing childhood.
To compare how different lighting strategies represent openness, confinement, vulnerability, intimacy, and agency.
To develop a scene-analysis framework that can be used in future research on cinematography and childhood representation.

3.3 Research Questions

How do natural and artificial light contribute to the visual representation of childhood in the selected films?
How do lighting qualities interact with setting, colour, framing, and narrative context to shape emotional and social meaning?
What does a comparative lighting analysis reveal about the relationship between cinematic aesthetics and representations of childhood?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Light as Cinematic Expression

Lighting in moving-image production involves technical control and aesthetic judgement. Brown (2024) discusses the practical systems and creative choices through which cinematographers shape image, mood, and visual impact. Landau (2014) emphasises that lighting should support the emotional moment and atmosphere of a scene, rather than merely provide enough illumination for exposure. These approaches make it possible to examine lighting as an active part of storytelling.

Thompson's (2015) study of film light is especially relevant because it considers illumination in relation to meaning and emotion. Light can establish a sense of realism, but it can also create stylisation, ambiguity, mystery, or heightened feeling. A window-lit room, for example, is not automatically naturalistic: the direction, contrast, colour, and continuity of the light may be carefully controlled. Similarly, a visible lamp or ceiling fixture may function as a practical source while additional off-screen lighting shapes the image. The visible source and the actual production method should therefore be distinguished.

4.2 Childhood as a Cinematic Construction

Lebeau (2008) argues that the child figure in cinema is ambivalent, capable of carrying cultural hopes and fears rather than simply representing innocence. Lury (2010) likewise examines the child's distinctive place in

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

cinematic form and storytelling. These perspectives encourage analysis of the visual conditions through which children are shown, including scale, camera position, duration, colour, and illumination.
Lighting can make a child appear exposed within a large environment, enclosed within a restricted space, or held within an intimate visual field. These meanings do not arise from lighting alone. They are produced through the relation between the child's body, the environment, camera distance, movement, sound, and narrative knowledge. A careful analysis must therefore avoid assigning a universal meaning to brightness or darkness.

4.3 Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Rose (2022) presents visual methodology as an approach that considers images in relation to their production, visual organisation, and social circulation. Applied to cinema, this means analysing not only what a frame depicts but how it organises attention and what cultural assumptions its visual choices may activate. In this article, lighting is considered alongside colour palette, contrast, spatial depth, framing, and narrative context. The film is treated as a constructed visual text, not as transparent evidence of children's real-world experiences.

4.4 Analytical Framework

The article uses five connected dimensions: (1) source and motivation—daylight, practical sources, or constructed illumination; (2) quality and direction—hardness, softness, backlighting, side lighting, and diffusion; (3) tonal and chromatic organisation—brightness, contrast, colour temperature, and saturation; (4) spatial function—openness, enclosure, depth, and separation; and (5) narrative function—how illumination supports the scene's emotional and social meaning. These dimensions provide a consistent vocabulary for comparing films without assuming that one lighting type produces the same effect in every context.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This article uses a qualitative, interpretive comparative visual-analysis design. It combines concepts from cinematography and visual methodology to examine how lighting operates within selected film texts (Brown, 2024; Rose, 2022; Thompson, 2015). It is not a quantitative experiment, an audience-response study, or a systematic review. No participant data are collected or claimed.

5.2 Selection of Films

Three films were purposively selected because each places a child at the centre of its narrative while offering a contrasting visual environment: The Florida Project (Baker, 2017), Room (Abrahamson, 2015), and Petite Maman (Sciamma, 2021). The sample is intentionally small to allow close interpretive comparison. The films differ in narrative setting and visual style, making them useful for exploring how lighting can contribute to the representation of childhood across exterior, enclosed, and intimate spaces.

5.3 Analytical Procedure

The comparison is organized around selected sequences that make each film's spatial and emotional lighting strategies especially legible. For each sequence, the analysis considers the narrative situation, apparent light source and motivation, direction and softness, contrast and colour, framing and spatial arrangement, the child's position within the frame, and the sequence's narrative function. These dimensions are used as interpretive prompts rather than as a quantitative coding scheme. The discussion draws on published cinematographer interviews and critical writing to contextualize production choices where available. Exact timecodes and shot counts are not reported because they have not been independently verified for a specific viewing edition; scene-level observations should therefore be checked against the films before journal submission.

5.4 Scope and Limitations

The analysis is limited to three films and cannot represent all national cinemas, genres, production budgets, or cultural contexts. Apparent natural light may be modified through reflectors, diffusion, fixtures, grading, and other production choices; a viewer cannot reliably infer the complete lighting setup from the finished image alone. Interpretations of mood and meaning are qualitative and should be supported by specific, verified scenes in the final manuscript.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

6. COMPARATIVE VISUAL ANALYSIS

6.1 The Florida Project: Daylight, Colour, and Exposure

The Florida Project (Baker, 2017), photographed by Alexis Zabe, centres on a young child living with her mother in a low-cost motel environment near Orlando. Its vivid palette and frequent exterior settings create a visual world associated with play, movement, and immediate discovery. The British Film Institute's review notes the film's sherbet-coloured setting, twilight balcony lights, and sunset imagery, while production reporting describes the use of 35mm film and colour grading to balance the child's vivid view of the world with harsher social realities (Bunish, 2018; Stables, 2017). These details support an analysis of brightness and colour as deliberate aesthetic choices rather than simple signs of happiness.

In this visual register, illumination can make outdoor space feel expansive and available to play, while also exposing the characters to the social and material conditions around them. The contrast between a child's energetic movement and the instability of adult life creates a productive tension: visual brightness does not erase hardship. The film therefore challenges a simplistic equation between high-key or colourful imagery and positive emotional meaning. Lighting works in combination with production design, colour, performance, and narrative information.

A scene-focused reading can begin with the children's movement around the Magic Castle motel and the sequence in which Moonee and Halley share a cupcake beneath resort fireworks. The BFI review identifies the fireworks and the motel's twilight lights as memorable visual moments (Stables, 2017). These sequences can be analysed for the relationship among bright colour, evening illumination, public space, and the child's imaginative experience. The final author review should record exact shot details and timecodes from the viewing copy used; none are invented here.

6.2 Room: Enclosure, Restricted Space, and Changing Light

Room (Abrahamson, 2015), photographed by Danny Cohen, places a child and his mother within an intensely restricted physical environment before their eventual transition into a larger world. The contrast between enclosure and openness gives the film a strong spatial structure. Within the confined room, illumination is experienced in relation to limited space, repeated surfaces, and a small number of visual boundaries. Light from a window or a practical source can become narratively significant because it marks the relation between the enclosed interior and the world beyond it.

The film's visual design invites an interpretation of light as a spatial condition rather than a generic symbol. In an interview, cinematographer Danny Cohen describes the decision to shoot in a genuinely small room and explains that the transition after the escape was intended to make the outside world feel enormous to Jack (Wasley, 2015). This production account supports a focused comparison between the restricted interior and the first exterior spaces. The analytical point is not that a specific lighting level automatically causes fear or freedom, but that illumination, framing, and spatial scale work together to organise the viewer's experience of the child's changing world.

A scene-focused comparison should place an interior sequence from the room beside the escape and the first exterior sequences. Cohen's account confirms that the filmmakers intended the change in space to register as a major perceptual reversal for Jack, who initially experiences the room as his whole world and later encounters the outside as unfamiliar and overwhelming (Wasley, 2015). The analysis should describe visible differences in framing, spatial depth, brightness, and contrast after rewatching the film, while distinguishing direct visual observation from production testimony.

6.3 Petite Maman: Restraint, Intimacy, and Childhood Perspective

Petite Maman (Sciamma, 2021), photographed by Claire Mathon, offers a quieter and more intimate approach to childhood. The film's restrained visual style and attention to everyday spaces allow small gestures, pauses, and relationships to carry narrative weight. In this context, naturalistic illumination can support a sense of continuity between bodies and environments. Rather than making light conspicuous, the image can invite sustained attention to faces, movement, and the relationship between a child and the surrounding space.

The film is useful for considering how relatively unobtrusive lighting can contribute to intimacy without reducing childhood to sentimentality. Soft or balanced illumination may preserve detail across a face and environment, while restrained contrast can avoid imposing an exaggerated emotional cue. However, the interpretive point is not that natural light is inherently more truthful. Naturalistic appearance is an aesthetic effect, and it may be produced through deliberate cinematographic choices. The relevant question is how the film's visual restraint supports its treatment of memory, kinship, and a child's perspective.

A scene-focused reading can compare the forest and house interiors, paying particular attention to the transition between exterior autumn light and interior spaces. Mathon's interview confirms that the interiors were built on a

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

stage and that artificial lighting was layered to maintain a coherent natural feeling; she also notes the use of child-height framing to align the image with Nelly's perspective (Webb, 2021). These are documented production choices. Claims about the meaning of a particular shot should still be grounded in the researcher's own close viewing rather than inferred from the interview alone.

6.4 Cross-Film Comparison

Taken together, the three films suggest that the meaning of illumination depends on its relation to space and narrative. The Florida Project uses bright exterior environments and vivid colour in ways that can hold playfulness and precarity together. Room makes restricted space perceptible through its enclosed setting and the contrast between interior and exterior worlds. Petite Maman offers a more restrained visual approach in which light can sustain intimacy and reflective attention. These are interpretive tendencies, not universal rules about lighting or childhood.

Film	Visual emphasis	Potential lighting function	Interpretive caution
The Florida Project (2017)	Bright exteriors; vivid colour	Play, movement, exposure, and the coexistence of delight with precarity	Brightness should not be equated with happiness or security.
Room (2015)	Confined interior contrasted with the outside world	Enclosure, boundaries, transition, and changing spatial awareness	Dimness and brightness have no fixed emotional meaning.
Petite Maman (2021)	Restrained, intimate visual style	Attention to faces, gesture, everyday space, and relational intimacy	Naturalistic appearance is still a constructed aesthetic.

7. DISCUSSION

The comparison supports three propositions. First, lighting participates in the construction of childhood by shaping the spaces in which children are seen. Exterior daylight may make movement and environmental detail prominent; restricted interior light may foreground boundaries; restrained illumination may support sustained attention to relationships and gestures. These interpretations are consistent with cinematography scholarship on lighting as an expressive and narrative resource (Brown, 2024; Thompson, 2015), and with film scholarship that treats childhood as a culturally complex screen figure (Lebeau, 2008; Lury, 2010).

Second, the natural/artificial distinction is inadequate as a complete interpretive model. In production, daylight can be redirected, diffused, supplemented, balanced, or altered in post-production. Artificial lighting can be hidden, motivated by visible practicals, or used to create a deliberately stylised image. The finished film often combines these methods. Analysis should therefore describe visible qualities and narrative functions, while avoiding unsupported claims about exact on-set equipment or technique.

Third, lighting can contribute to ethical and social readings of childhood without becoming a deterministic code. A child's vulnerability is not created by shadow alone, nor is agency guaranteed by bright light or open space. Cinematic meaning is produced through a wider arrangement of story, performance, sound, editing, and visual form. This approach is consistent with scholarship that treats the child in cinema as culturally complex rather than as a universal symbol of innocence (Lebeau, 2008; Lury, 2010).

The article's main contribution is methodological: it brings technical lighting categories into conversation with the cultural analysis of childhood. For cinematographers, this framework makes explicit how lighting decisions can organise audience attention and spatial experience. For film scholars, it provides a way to describe the formal qualities through which childhood is represented. The production interviews and film criticism used here are contextual sources rather than substitutes for direct scene analysis (Bunish, 2018; Stables, 2017; Wasley, 2015; Webb, 2021). Future work could apply the framework to a larger, culturally diverse corpus and pair it with interviews or audience research, provided those methods are conducted and reported transparently.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

8. CONCLUSION

This article has proposed a comparative framework for examining natural and artificial illumination in the representation of childhood in contemporary cinema. Through an interpretive reading of The Florida Project, Room, and Petite Maman, it has argued that light functions as more than a technical requirement: it helps organise space, direct attention, establish visual tone, and shape the viewer's encounter with children on screen. Brightness may coexist with precarity, restricted illumination may convey both confinement and familiarity, and restrained naturalism may support intimacy without guaranteeing authenticity.

The central conclusion is that cinematic light should be interpreted contextually. Neither natural nor artificial light possesses a universal emotional meaning. Their significance emerges through their interaction with framing, colour, setting, performance, duration, and narrative development. A lighting-centred approach can therefore enrich film analysis by connecting cinematographic craft with the cultural meanings attached to childhood.

The study is limited by its small purposive corpus and its interpretive method. Further research should document scene selection and timecodes, analyse a wider range of films and national cinemas, and investigate how cinematographers describe their lighting choices. Audience studies could also test whether particular lighting patterns are interpreted consistently across viewers, but no such audience claims are made here. With these extensions, lighting analysis can contribute to a more precise account of how cinema constructs, rather than merely records, childhood.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, B. (2024). Motion picture and video lighting: For cinematographers, gaffers, and lighting technicians (4th ed.). Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Motion-Picture-and-Video-
2. Lighting/Brown/p/book/9781032370347
3. Bunish, C. (2018, June 6). The DP-colorist relationship: The Florida Project. Post Magazine. https://postmagazine.com/publications/2018/may-1-2018/the-dp-colorist-relationship-the-florida-project/
4. Lebeau, V. (2008). Childhood and cinema. Reaktion Books. https://reaktionbooks.co.uk/work/childhood-and-cinema
5. Lury, K. (2010). The child in film: Tears, fears and fairy tales. I. B. Tauris.
6. https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/child-in-film-9780857711281/
7. Rose, G. (2022). Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials (5th ed.). SAGE Publications. https://www.sagepub.com/shop/buy-a-book/visual-methodologies-5-277282
8. Stables, K. (2017, November 9). Film of the week: The Florida Project paints a hardscrabble wonderland in candy colours. Sight and Sound. https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/film-week-florida-project-paints-hardscrabble-wonderland-candy-colours
9. Thompson, L. (2015). Film light: Meaning and emotion. Manchester University Press.
10. https://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9780719086335/
11. Wasley, A. (2015, December 21). Cinematographer Danny Cohen on Room & The Danish Girl. The Credits. https://www.motionpictures.org/2015/12/cinematographer-danny-cohen-room-danish-girl/
12. Webb, O. (2021, February 16). Q&A with DP Claire Mathon AFC about the spellbinding Petite Maman. Cinematography World. https://www.cinematography.world/qa-with-dp-claire-mathon-afc-about-the-spellbinding-petite-maman/

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM