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The art of film lighting as an essential tool for cinematography: A study case of the innovative use of light by cinematographer Diana Olifirova in the TV series *Heartstopper* (Lyn, 2022).

Bachelor's thesis in Film-video production

Supervisor: Eva Bakøy

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Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 2

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis is a visual analysis of film lighting and its impact on the work of cinematography in the TV series *Heartstopper* (Lyn, 2022). Using film aesthetic and technological perspectives, I am going to examine how the cinematographer of the series, Diana Olifirova, used film light in an innovative and unique way as a tool for visual storytelling and building emotional realism. By experimenting with light sources, implementing color symbolism, and interconnecting characters with light, *Heartstopper* reflects on the complexity of human experiences and challenges the standardized approach to lighting a scene.

Abstrakt

Denne bacheloroppgaven er en visuell analyse av filmlys og dens innflytelse på kinematografien i tv-serien *Heartstopper* (Lyn, 2022). Med bruk av filmestetikk og teknologiske perspektiver vil jeg undersøke hvordan fotografen i serien, Diana Olifirova, bruker filmlys på en innovativ og unik måte. Samt som et redskap for visuell historiefortelling og bygger emosjonell realisme. Med eksperimentelle lyskilder, bruk av fargesymbolikk og sammenkobling av karakterer og lys, reflekterer *Heartstopper* den komplekse opplevelsen av å være menneske og utfordrer den standardiserte tilnærmingen til lyssettingen av en scene.

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1. Introduction

It is very common for creators to analyze unique audiovisual elements while watching motion pictures, TV series, and many other forms of media. For the most part, we want to know how the frames and shots were achieved, and what influenced the quality and the production of the finished project. This is exactly what I caught myself doing while watching the TV series *Heartstopper* (Lyn 2022). How did they manage to get such a colorful shot? How was this light source placed? What does this particular color symbolize? Many other questions lead to my interest in the light work of the series and the ways it affected the cinematography. In many ways, the artistic practices of light and camera used in the show were a big inspiration for my cinematography work for the bachelor films and acted as a main reference for my artistry. I believe it is highly relevant for me to deep dive into the light/camera analysis of *Heartstopper* and the craftsmanship of its director of photography, Diana Olifirova, in order to have a better

understanding of how to use the light to my advantage in my main occupation as a filmmaker focusing on visuals.

To be more precise, in this bachelor thesis, I plan on researching the relationship between cinematography and film lighting, the effect that light has on the camera work, as well as on the unique ways lighting can be used. I believe that light is one of the main instruments for cinematographers to create visual material and be able to visually tell a story. Moreover, I find it important to focus on the practices beyond the traditional conventions and rules of film light in cinematography, for example, the “polished” studio Hollywood light practices, and rather on the modern and experimental use of lighting and how it impacts the story.

Nowadays, we live in the stage of visual content where the dominance of TV series over films is highly noticeable, thus I would focus my analysis on the TV series *Heartstopper* and how the cinematographer Diana Olifirova creates a visual story about a queer relationship, and how she uses the light to bring her images to the next level. Moreover, I find it important to bring more awareness and recognition to the works of women cinematographers and their successes, as the camera and light departments of the film industry are highly male-dominated. Such experimental camera and light work by the woman cinematographer contradicts and challenges the traditional cinema film light methods created by male filmmakers in the past.

I find both the topic of light and camera work, as well as the craftsmanship of *Heartstopper* a thoroughly interesting case for research of depiction of a queer story with the use of light. It makes it possible to draw similarities with emotional realism, the ability to express and exaggerate feelings with audiovisual elements, shown in the TV series *Euphoria* (Levinson 2019), and look into the similarity of light design in both series on the emotional level.

2. Research method

In order to find answers to the question of the importance of film light, my work is going to be based on the film aesthetic and technological perspective of research. In that way, I am going to be analyzing a variety of artistic aspects of film production and how they contribute to the

cinematic experience as a unit. Primarily, my focus on the film aesthetic approach will bring more understanding of how visual elements like the light design as part of cinematography, and its stylistic choices impact the story of the TV series *Heartstopper* and investigate their innovative traits. With visual examples from the show I will go deeper into how Diana Olifirova uses film lighting as a storytelling device, creates symbolic meanings and interpretations, as well as manipulates the viewers' perspective of the real and magical world.

In order to prove my point of innovative light in the show and further research the film form and style of *Heartstopper* I am going to refer to several books that explore the concept of light in film production, which are *Lighting for Television and Film* by Gerald Millerson that focuses on the technicalities of light, as well as *Film Art: An Introduction* by Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, that looks at camera and light from an aesthetic perspective. The books about cinematography are going to help me understand how camera and light intersect with each other, and the ways light affects the picture captured through the camera lens, such as *Cinematography: Theory and Practice: Imagemaking for Cinematographers and Directors* by Blain Brown and *Digital Cinematography: Fundamentals, Tools, Techniques, and Workflows* written by David Stump. Additionally, I am going to look into articles written by film critics concerning the production aspect of *Heartstopper*, including interviews with the DoP Diana Olifirova. In order to be able to recognize the unique and innovative traits of the lighting in *Heartstopper*, firstly I am going to identify the main characteristic of the standardized light practice created during the classic Hollywood cinema era with the use of the book *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir* by Patrick Keating.

3. Light as an essential tool

3.1 “Why is film light important?”

The process of film production consists of a variety of interconnected elements working cooperatively and following a mutual goal: to create an immersive cinematic experience by building characters and the visual world of the story. “This visual world is an important part of how the audience will perceive the story; how they will understand the characters and their motivations.” (Brown 2012, p. 2). Cinematography with its conceptual tools, like light and color,

are a big part of shaping the visual aspect of the film. However, I believe that lighting as an instrument in film is often overlooked, as a result, one of the main questions of my work is going to be “Why is film light important?”.

3. 2 Lighting as an essential tool for cinematography

The role of a cinematographer includes a variety of things: artistry, technical knowledge, as well as delegation of responsibilities to the film production crew. As an artist, a cinematographer has to be able to use composition, lighting, and color cohesively in order to build a visual world of a story, which puts him/her in charge of three departments: camera, light, and grip (Stump 2014, p. 341). “In order to succeed, he or she must know the tools of lighting, must know the theory and practice of using lenses, and must know how to evoke emotions with light and shadow.” - says David Stump in the foreword chapter of *Digital Cinematography*, establishing the connection between the camera and light right from the beginning (Stump 2014, foreword). Similarly, Blain Brown, in *Cinematography: Theory and Practices*, points out that “light and color are some of the most powerful tools in the cinematographer's arsenal.” (Brown 2012, p. 8). In that way, a cinematographer creates a cinematic language of a film which adds layers of depth to the story (Brown 2012, p.8). That depth and meaning are primarily built by controlling lighting and color, which takes most of the cinematographer's time on set (Brown 2012, p.8). The reason behind that comes down to how light affects the frame in a variety of ways. The camera's ability to capture the image in itself is highly dependent on light in the matter of exposure, tonal range, image quality, and depth of field. Not only does it problem-solve the issue of darkness and brightness of the picture, but it also reveals the texture and details of subjects, alters the perception of distance and size, adjusts the color temperature, implies time of day and weather conditions, provides visual movement and visual continuity and a lot more (Millerson 2013, p. 39, 40, 41). Lighting is “much more than just making things visible” and its main advantage is how flexible it is and easy to control (Millerson 2013, p. 38, 39). Besides its effect on the form of films, light has the ability to influence the viewers on the emotional gut level allowing them to interpret the story and cause intense feelings (Brown 2012, p. 69). Cinematographers figured out the ways to construct certain common lighting practices, as well as to experiment with light and find their own unique styles, similar to the subject of my thesis, Diana Olifirova. Her work is one of the examples of how the new camera and light technology affected storytelling and created

new trends in film light. For example, the simplicity of LED light in its use, color gels, and Bluetooth/WiFi-controlled light bulbs encouraged an intensified creative use of color, mixing of light sources, as well as practical and motivated light. Diana Olifirova is one of the filmmakers that prioritizes lighting and relies greatly on the artistic use of light that both elevates the camera shot and brings visual cohesiveness to the whole story. “Filmmakers who take a dismissive attitude toward lighting are depriving themselves of one of the most important, subtle, and powerful tools of visual storytelling”. (Brown 2012, p.76). From personal experience as a DoP, I believe this statement to be true for the reason that neglecting the power of light in camera work can mean losing an opportunity to implement a human touch of a filmmaker through symbolism, subtext, emotional depth, and connection to the audience.

3.3 Classical Hollywood lighting practices

As mentioned previously, filmmakers were able to create common and standardized light practices. Therefore it is crucial for any analysis of lighting to take into account the Classical Hollywood lighting style that was developed from the 1910s and established a canon of light techniques and conventions. Light as one of the visual elements was meant to serve the narrative of the story, the overall traditional Hollywood style of filmmaking. The main components of the traditional lighting were storytelling, invisibility, illusionism (Keating 2010, p. 107). The use of light had to contribute to the continuity principle of classical Hollywood cinema, creating a consistent composition from shot to shot for narrative clarity (Bordwell and Thompson 2019, p. 36, 128). Classical Hollywood filmmaking is primarily characterized by a practice called three-point lighting, which uses at least three sources of light: key light, fill light, and backlight (Smith, Bordwell, and Thompson 2017, p. 128). Alongside this standard of lighting, the high-key light design was often implemented in the classic Hollywood cinema, which used fill light and backlight in order to create an overall low contrast of the picture (Smith, Bordwell, and Thompson 2017, p. 128, 129). Additionally, by using the practice of figure-lighting, filmmakers were able to highlight specific actors and create contrast between the masculine hard light and soft light on female characters (Keating 2010, p. 128). The overall traditional film lighting created a flattering look of actors and focused on the naturalistic and balanced picture.

4. *Heartstopper*

4.1 Plot summary

To understand the reasoning behind the choices of audiovisual elements, it is crucial to talk about the series itself and its background. Firstly, *Heartstopper* is a British television drama series that was acquired by Netflix and is adapted from the graphic novel *Heartstopper* by Alise Oseman (“Heartstopper (TV Series 2022–)”, n.d.). Right after its release in 2022, it gained popularity and was one of the most-watched Netflix English series. It unfolds a coming-of-age queer story about a young boy named Charlie Spring and his journey of falling in love with a schoolmate Nick Nelson. It is a story celebrating queerness and inclusivity, about youth that struggles with figuring out the matter of sexuality and relationships. The TV series is focused on portraying the magic of falling in love as a teen, as well as the challenges of accepting your own self in the tough setting of school. Not only does it depict romantic relationships, but it also explores the concept of friendship portraying Charlie’s friend group of Tao, Elle, and later Tara and Darcy. *Heartstopper* is known for its warmth, softness, and comfort of a teen romance that implements features of the original graphic novel with the help of 2D animations. The review for Guardian written by columnist Rebecca Nicholson called it “possibly the loveliest show on TV” (Nicholson 2022), and I find this to be a fair description of the show’s overall atmosphere.

However, despite the fact that the setting of the series is very soft, in a way simplified and childish, the themes that it tackles are extremely relevant for adults. It opens up about the struggles of coming out publicly, and the prejudices and bullying that come with it. Moreover, the series provides a highly mature view of the spectrum of sexuality, expression, and queerness. Therefore, the creators of the show had to find a way of combining the two extremes, enhancing reality, and expressing it with audiovisual elements that could help them to visually story tell.

4.2 Cinematographer Diana Olifirova

One of those creators is Diana Olifirova, the director of photography who played a huge role in shaping the story's visual elements. Olifirova is a Ukrainian cinematographer based in London, who has a lot of experience in working with camera, light, and storytelling, and was one of the few people chosen for BAFTA Breakthrough in 2022, especially for her work on *Heartstopper*

(Olifirova, n.d.). She was chosen to do cinematography on this show based on her previous works, a variety of short films, commercials, music promos, and TV series, including *We Are Lady Parts* (Manzoor 2018).

In the interview for National Film and Television School Olifirova mentions that one of the main questions standing in front of her before the production started was how does one show love visually? (Olifirova 2022, 5:23). How do you show falling in love with the camera? How do you contribute to the celebration of a queer story through technical aspects of film production? Diana Olifirova had to make artistic choices in order to achieve the portrayal of young love, its progression, as well as how it is seen through a queer gaze.

The inclusivity of the story itself is also reflected in the diversity and inclusivity of the production crew. It is known how for the longest time traditional film canons were usually associated with male creators, which contributed to the distinctly male-dominated camera and light departments of film production, an example of that is The Academy Awards which have not had a woman cinematographer as a winner in their 94 year history (McGovern 2022). However, the times are changing and *Heartstopper* is one of the examples of that. By acknowledging Diana Olivirova's talent and allowing a woman cinematographer to take one of the highest roles in the production, traditional artistic practices are being challenged. Such goes hand in hand with Olifirova's experimental and quite untraditional use of film light and camera, which I am going to go in-depth further in my analysis of the visual elements of *Heartstopper*.

5. Innovative light in *Heartstopper*

One of the main questions of my thesis comes down to the reasons why I believe the use of the light of *Heartstopper* can be considered innovative, and challenging to the already existing light practicing standard, so I am going to mention several points that characterize the unique traits of the light in the series.

5.1 Storytelling through light

One of the main characteristics of the lighting in *Heartstopper* that contributes to its innovative style is the ability to use light as a storytelling device. In order to create a fully immersive experience for the viewer, the creators are adding multiple emotional layers of depth to the story and the use of light helps them in that way. This is done in several different ways:

Winter VS Summer

Firstly, the light is used as an indicator of space and time in the story. According to the Manchester Evening News article, the series was filmed from April of 2021 up until June 2021 (Becquart 2022). However, during the short production time, it was important to capture different seasons of the year. The plot of the story starts off with winter, while the finale of the series ends with the spring/summer season, which is quite symbolic, as the main character Charlie's last name is Spring. Here it was important for the cinematographer Diana Olifirova to create a visual contrast between winter and summer. It is noticeable how the first episode primarily consists of natural cold-toned daylight (Figure 1). It depicts a cold wintery beginning of the whole story itself, including Charlie's own journey. The visual style of such a wintery beginning is done by the use of naturalistic light, as well as a colder light balance in the camera. Gradually increasing the use of colors and warmer tones in further episodes are meant to reflect the transition to summer and Charlie's story progress. Contradictory to the hard natural light of winter, spring and summer greets the viewer with a soft warm light (Figure 2) that is achieved by using pearlescent filters that reduce the value of highlights by softening them and reducing the sharpness and contrast (Brown 2012, p. 247). According to Diana Olifirova in the British Cinematographers article, she was gradually adjusting the filter throughout the series in order to create the contrast between the two seasons (Parkinson 2022).

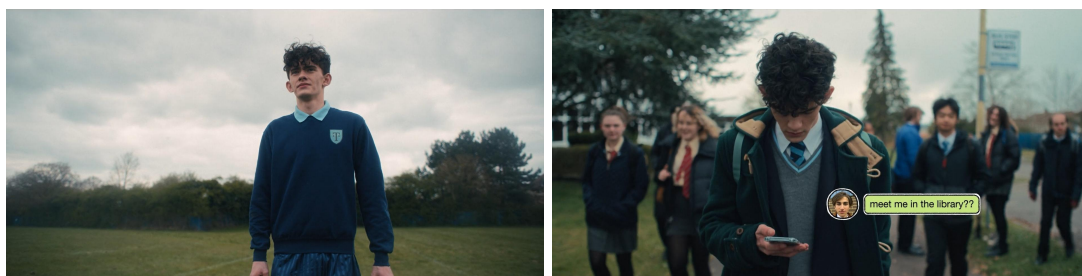


Figure 1. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 1



Figure 2. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 8

Charlie and Nick: visual and emotional connection

Another way that *Heartstopper* uses light as a storytelling tool is by portraying the visual connection between Charlie and his love interest Nick, as well as indicating the progress of their relationship. As established above, the series starts off with the dominance of natural lighting and gradually implements a variety of colors, the same happens to Charlie and Nick's relationship. The viewer follows the two characters on their journey of becoming friends first, developing a crush, falling in love, and expressing deep feelings for each other. Olifirova makes great use of the light in order to translate such a journey and reflect on the emotional connection with the visual connection of the two. She is able to achieve such reflection in several ways. Firstly, *Heartstopper* uses color symbolism in order to link Charlie and Nick together. Color in itself as a communication tool provides one of the most powerful ways to visually storytell and appeal to viewers at an emotional gut level (Brown 2012, p. 228). Often in the series, the warm soft yellow light from the actual sun, or artificial sunny daylight, or the practical light in the scene indicates the welcoming, safe, and intimate atmosphere between the two. As the yellow color is a big part of the series in general, the light in the yellow warm tone can symbolize the warmth and comfort the characters experience around each other, similar to what Bruce Block writes about the orange color in the film *The Piano* (Campion 1993) (Block 2021, p. 160). For example, let us look at the screengrabs from season 1, episode 2 of both Charlie and Nick in their bedrooms (Figure 3). The characters are both in their own space and are separated by the camera, however, the warm light emotionally connects them. Earlier in the episode Charlie and Nick have just experienced for the first time what it means to spend time with each other, they have had fun going on a walk and watching a movie together right after. Now they are both reminiscing over what happened, Charlie is texting with his friend group about the hug they shared, while Nick is looking through pictures they took together. This is a very intimate moment for both of them, thus the light set-up

of the shots creates a special bond and a warm setting between the characters. The key light source is the overhead string light for Nick and the overhead “MUSIC” light sign for Charlie. Both have one or two additional practical lamps, but the rest of the room is dark and lit by the moonlight. The light highlights the emotional depth of the relationship between Charlie and Nick and their strong inner connection.



Figure 3. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 2

Another example of the emotional and visual bond between the two characters is visible in episodes 2 and 3 of the series (Figure 4). In episode 2 Nick looks through Charlie’s Instagram page and one of the pictures triggers a vision of Charlie being bullied at school. Previously in the series, it has been stated that Charlie had been a victim of bullying after coming out as gay. In the vision, Nick is facing Charlie who is surrounded by animations of people. The key light of the scene is a very dark blue overhead light which filled the whole room with a dimmed cool-toned blue color light. Fast forward to episode 3 of the series, a highly eventful episode set at Harry Greene’s birthday party, which was shot in a spacious building of Hampton Court House School in London (Parkinson 2022). Nick is encircled by Harry, who is the series' main bully, and his gang. The tension is built up and Harry intimidates Nick and casually warns him to stay in his social line. The same exact dark blue key light of the scene that I have established earlier interconnects the characters in their experiences and ties them together. The cinematographer chose to not add any neutral light in addition to the color blue light, which in a way makes the two characters isolated, lonely, and trapped in the space by the dominating blue hue (Block 2021, p. 165). In this way the second episode foreshadows the content of the third episode by executing the same light set-up, thus contributing to the closeness and interconnection of the relationship.

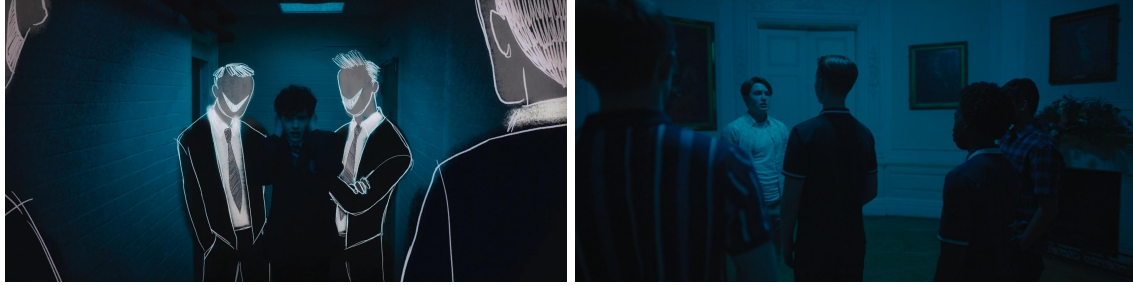


Figure 4. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 2, 3

Light as a symbol for change

Light as a storytelling device in *Heartstopper* is used as a symbol that indicates change. The most famous scene of the series works as an example of that. In episode 3 of the birthday party mentioned earlier, one of the most climatic scenes of the TV series takes place. The scene depicts Tara and Darcy on the dance floor, having the time of their lives and enjoying the music (Figure 5). Nick is in the crowd looking for Charlie and noticing the two girls. He observes them and how happy they are to just enjoy each other's company. Right at the moment when Tara and Darcy decide to kiss in front of everyone, the lights around them change colors and directions, creating a fast-moving flow of all the visual elements. Nick is witnessing the openness and freedom of the two girls, who are not afraid of being themselves. The change of light interconnects with the personal and emotional change in Nick. Such a significant moment makes a shift in the character's own self-discovery, pushing him towards finally accepting his desires. Tara and Darcy, as an example, encourage his self-acceptance and coming to terms with his sexuality and feelings for Charlie. The changing strobes of light are connected to the emotional beat of the scene and the character's change in mentality and as a result, symbolize the next step in Charlie and Nick's relationship, the start of their romantic journey.



Figure 5. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 3

Light as an indicator of safe space

The visual storytelling of *Heartstopper* adds emotional depth to the characters and their backgrounds with the very intentional use of light as a symbol for a safe space. To be more specific, I am going to focus on Charlie Spring's safe space, which is an art room at his school. The first time the audience is introduced to that place is in episode 1 when Charlie comes to the room to talk to his teacher about Ben, who is manipulating Charlie on a romantically emotional level (Figure 6). From here the viewer becomes aware that even during the times when Charlie was getting bullied, he was able to open up about it to his art teacher. Later in the series, in episode 4, the art room becomes a secret meeting spot for Charlie and Nick where they can be themselves and do not need to hide from anyone (Figure 7). In order to show the meaning of the room visually, through the lens of the camera, Diana Olifirova makes great use of artificially creating sunlight, imitating the actual sun, that fills the whole space with the warm-toned color temperature light source that is put outside of the location. Additionally to that, the classic overhead school light panels have a soft warm yellow-tinted glow, which is a way of showing that the art room is welcoming Charlie's presence there. By adding yellow-tinted strips of sunlight into the room that is softly hitting the characters the room fills up with comfort, safety, joy, and freedom to be who you are without any judgment (Millerson 2013, p. 138). Such light contributes to the room's significance in the world of *Heartstopper* as a safe space for self-expression and self-acceptance, as well as visually establishes the moods and tones of the scenes shot in there.

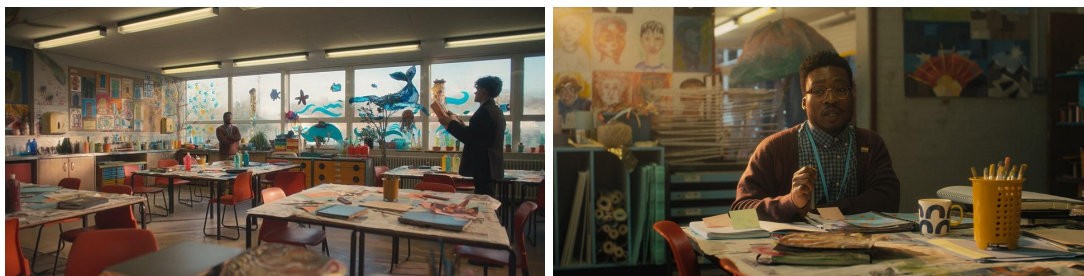


Figure 6. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 1



Figure 7. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 4

In contradiction, the light in the locker room of the school's rugby team is completely different from the art room (Figure 8). The key light comes from the outside the window imitating a grey cloudy daylight, as well as an overhead cold temperature overhead light that creates harsh shadows. Such showcases the opposite effect of a safe space provided by the warm soft light in the art room. Here the light is used to create a non-welcoming intimidating atmosphere for Charlie, as the room in a way symbolizes fear, structure and order, and toxic masculinity. The cold setting of lighting interconnects with a place of unsafety, stress, and unease.



Figure 8. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 3

Sexuality

The complexity of sexuality and coming to terms with the character's desires are shown in *Heartstopper* very vividly through the lighting, which is another example of how light is used in a unique way. Early stages of exploration of sexuality tend to consume the whole day-to-day life, it is a constant battle of emotions and feelings. Metaphorically, this is similar to how the light absorbed the whole scene in the bowling alley in episode 5, where two colors are in a battle with each other (Figure 9). In the episode, Charlie invites his closest friends, including Nick, to his

birthday celebration at a bowling alley. The location itself embraces intense pink and blue color light that creates an overall purple fill and shadows, which are exactly the colors of a pride flag representing bisexuality. The lighting relies on the overhead color light tubes, with lots of practical light which consumed all parts of the location, the main bowling area, the bathroom, the hallways, and the gaming area. Here the light is highly saturated and there is nothing that neutralizes it. It is a primary source of lighting that dominates over everything else. Pure colors like pink and blue attract direct attention in the scene (Millerson 2013, p. 125), which is a bold choice the filmmakers possibly made in order to guide Nick into finally confessing his feelings for Charlie.



Figure 9. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 5

These points demonstrate how the cinematographer of *Heartstopper* was able to use the power of light in an innovative and intentional way that allowed the light to tell a story, instead of simply lighting a scene. Such use of light not only compliments the story but also creates an emotional depth, foreshadows and conveys emotions, as well as creates emotional contrast between characters and scenes.

5.2 Emotional realism

Diana Olifirova's unique and innovative approach to lighting the scenes falls heavily to the creation of emotional realism to depict the story, or "magical realism", as Olifirova refers to it (Parkinson 2022). During my research on emotional realism and its traits, I have discovered that there is a lack of theoretical and analytical material on it as of yet. I believe, that the notion of developing an emotional realism in film is quite a new concept, however, I was able to draw some similarities from HBO's TV series *Euphoria* (Levinson 2019), which is how I learned about the concept in the first place. One of the few articles I was able to find is written by Matt

Grobar, a film reporter for DEADLINE, who states that according to the cinematographer of the show, Marcell Rév, the aesthetic basis for *Euphoria* was mainly the characters' emotional state, and not the realistic traits of the world surrounding them (Grobar 2020). Sam Levinson, the director of *Euphoria*, wanted the show to visualize how teenagers see and romanticize their life, depicting how the characters feel, as well as how reality feels by characters (Grobar 2020). In the interview for New York magazine, published by Matt Zoller Seitz, a film critic and filmmaker, Levinson says: "We established early on that each scene ought to be an interpretation of reality or a representation of an emotional reality. I'm not interested in realism. I'm interested in an emotional realism." (Seitz 2019). The show itself gets some criticism for not being realistic in its depiction of current teens, however on the other hand, it also gets quite a lot of praise for the portrayal of human experiences and interactions in an intense and elevated way which resonates with young people, whose every sense is heightened and everything feels like a life-or-death situation (Seitz 2019).

I believe this is highly comparable to the filmmaking in *Heartstopper*, in the way it uses its elevated visual aesthetics and style in order to portray the common experience of having a crush, falling in love, and having troubles with friendships as a young teen. *Heartstopper* with its maximalism and surrealism in the use of artistic practices, like camera and light, shows how emotions and feelings can be perceived in an extraterrestrial, out-of-this-world type of way. I am going to further explain how the show achieves this through its use of lighting.

Light and emotions

A significant part of emotional realism in *Heartstopper* lies in its ability to use lighting as a communicator of emotions. Here are some examples of how the film light reflects the emotional state of the characters. The scenes that depict Charlie and Ben's dynamic and relationship are always lit differently from the other parts of the series, episodes 3 and 7 are examples of that (Figure 10). The use of strong colors like neon green and red, as well as the deep contrast created by the harsh and dark shadows signify the danger and unsafety of the situation (Block 2021, p. 260). Not only the light communicates Charlie's emotions, but it also reflects on the character of Ben, who is dealing with internalized homophobia and cannot accept his sexuality. He is dealing with his trauma by harassing and manipulating Charlie. As a result, his fear and insecurity are

expressed by high contrast which adds visual intensity to the frame (Block 2021, p. 260), deep shadows, and neon lighting, which is quite uncharacteristic for *Heartstopper*. Such tension and uncertainty bring negative emotions that are intensified by the vivid cold and dark aesthetics of the film light.

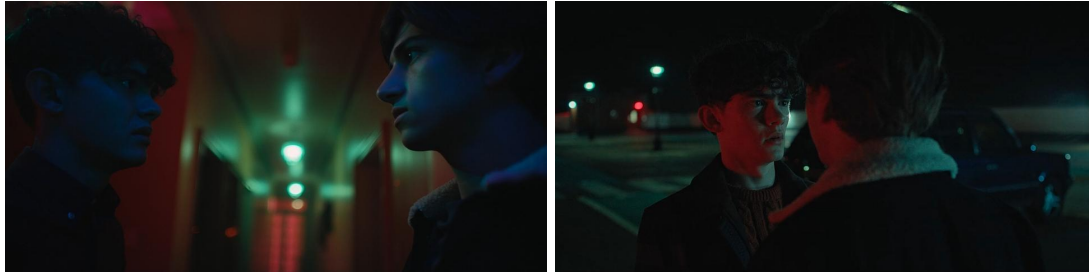


Figure 10. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 3, 7

Nonetheless, the light used for Charlie and Nick’s romance is quite the opposite. The scenes exploring their relationship are primarily lit by warm golden tones, soft highlights, and shadows, creating lens flares that add dynamic to the scene (Figure 11). To depict the innocence, softness, hopefulness, and tenderness of young love and its emotions, the film light uses pastel colors, warm hues, and intensified natural lighting, like sunlight. The screengrabs from episodes 2 and 6 work as an illustrative example of that.

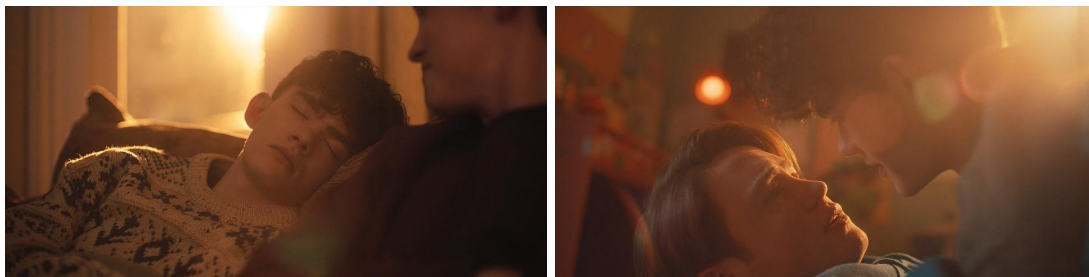


Figure 11. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 2, 6

Light as a transition to the magical world of animations

The innovative use of light in *Heartstopper* showcases its ability to create a visual transition of light to the animations created for “Heartstopper moments”, as the crew refers to the emotionally important beats in the relationships between characters (Eagan 2022). Such moments are usually

presented by the 2D animations made in post-production. The animations transport the characters to a world of their imagination. They are seen throughout the whole show, in a way paying tribute to the graphic novel that the series is based on. The cinematographer makes a choice to create a transition from the real world of the story to the magical world with the use of light, which is a part of the emotional realism of *Heartstopper*. The experience that the character is going through is common and realistic, however, the way it is being perceived is heightened and exaggerated, exactly how a teenager would interpret even the smallest thing. One of the most recognizable moments of that is depicted in episode 5 when Elle and Tao are playing the game together in the bowling alley (Figure 12). During an intimate moment when she looks at Tao, her glasses spark up with the colorful stars. This was achieved in real life by LED bulbs shaped like stars, which was a decision made by Olifirova in order to combine them with 2D animations (Eagan 2022). The light created in such a unique way makes a visual transition from reality to the world of the camera. It intensified Elle's secret glances at Tao and strengthened its importance.

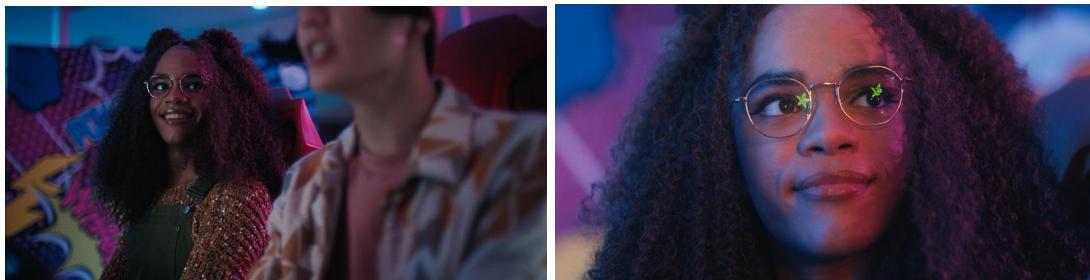


Figure 12. Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 5

One more example takes place in episode 4, after Charlie got injured at a rugby game, Nick tries to take care of him (Figure 13). The two have just had their first kiss, and as a result, all the emotions are heightened and exaggerated. There is a soft pink backlight behind the window, which makes it very diffused and glowy. When Nick touches Charlie, the animation that matches the pink light perfectly appears, making the whole room magical and romantic, connecting reality with the dreamy world. Every touch feels new and has a meaning in that stage of a relationship, and that is exactly what *Heartstopper* intensified.



Figure 13. *Heartstopper: Season 1, Episode 4*

6. Conclusion

In the conclusion part of my thesis, I would like to come back to the primary questions asked at the start of my research work: what effect does light have on cinematography? Why is the lighting in *Heartstopper* can be considered innovative? How does Diana Olifirova use the light in a unique, non-traditional way? I believe it is essential to summarize my analysis and highlight the main arguments.

Light affects cinematography on both technical and emotional levels. From the film technical perspective, light is what allows the art of cinematography to manipulate, capture and transform the picture, “Cinematography begins with light.” (Stump 2014, p. 1). From simply delivering light and color information to the camera’s sensors, it is the element that influences the image quality. Additionally, from a film aesthetic perspective, it helps the cinematographer to convey emotions, tones, and atmosphere on screen. Lighting is a tool that creators use to give the scene emotional depth and extra meaning. *Heartstopper* showcases how light is able to connect two characters together on a spiritual level, depict how a relationship progresses, and indicate the state of a character mentally and physically. Similar to how the director uses words and dialogue to communicate the meaning to the audience, the director of photography uses light. In my case, Diana Olifirova uses lighting to visually shape the narrative, and guide the viewers throughout the story. Contrary to the traditional use of light whose main purpose is to create a polished and consistent picture, the cinematographer of the show experiments with light design, creating both flattering and elegant shots in order to depict romance, as well as harsh and threatening ones to portray fear and danger. In that way, the light in *Heartstopper* is an essential part of the cinematic language. The visual choices by the creators of the series contribute to the concept of emotional realism that unfolds the story from character’s emotional point of view. Experimenting with

practical and motivated light sources, color hue extremes, mixing color temperatures - all this reflects on the complexity of human experiences, emotions, and feelings, as well as contradicts the standardized approach to lighting a scene. I believe that TV shows like *Heartstopper*, as well as *Euphoria*, play an influential role in setting visual trends and styles of filmmaking for the current and future generations of filmmakers. The example of their unique and unconventional ways of implementing a human touch through lighting and camera work signifies the importance of self-expression and encourages creators of contemporary film production to embrace creativity to the fullest and break the existing rules of filmmaking.

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Figures

Figure 1 -13: Stills retrieved from ShotDeck: Heartstopper (2022).

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