

Kicker Usage In Fine Portraiture

This article belongs completely to Ed Shapiro, a professional photographer, who contributed a lot to the art. It is based on the content of a topic of forum. I have to thank Ed for covering this topic. I could not find any place where Ed gathered and published his knowledge, so I decided to extend the audience of the forum where he posted this topic. So here it goes...

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What Are Kickers?

On Hollywood sound stages and traditional portrait studios no one is ever happy with the real names of various pieces of equipment. Photographic and cinema - photographic terminology and nomenclature can fill endless thesauruses and glossaries with cute or slick nicknames. Fact is, the nicknames are more descriptive, in a dynamic way, than the real names. These nicknames are the onomatopoeia of lighting. As an example, a deeply designed flood-light reflector is known as a "scoop" - you can just imagine this thing scooping up the light and throwing it across a set, exactly where it is needed. A metal housed indirect soft-box type unit is called a "broad" because of its' broad and even lighting pattern. A mini-broad has the same sort of effect but the "mini" prefix based on its' smaller size and hence, smaller spread of light. Miniature spotlights are referred to as inky-dinks. The lingo often describes the shape and size of the unit but more importantly, the lighting effect that it can produce.

So the volatile, "kicker" a feisty little guy that gives "kick" to portraits. It allows you to "kick in" some addition light exactly where it is needed to make your photographic statement and to enhance certain aspects of your subjects. Kicker light usage is very popular in traditional portraits of men. In its' softer form, oftentimes called the "accent light" or "the angle's touch light" it can have a beautifying or ethereal effect on woman's, and children's portraits.

The effectiveness of the kicker is based more on its' position in the scheme of things rather than exclusively on its' physical size or configuration. It is mainly an "angle of incidence" thing. Remember the theory - The angle of incidence = the angle of reflection. If I were to draw a lighting diagram, the main light can live in an arc from 20 to 90 degrees from the camera/subject axis and the kickers live in the 95 to 135 degree arc. Some workers call them side/back lights for that reason. As a rule of thumb - light striking the subject from those more acute angles show up on the film (or digital card) as stronger even if the power setting is the same as the main light and the two units are equidistant - ergo the KICK. An effective kicker can be a 16" parabolic reflector, a smaller parabolic, a fresnell spot light, a mini spot or even an optical spot. In conjunction with other umbrella lights or soft boxes, an umbrella or soft box can serve as a kicker - but with less precision. Metal reflectors can be used with or without barndoors, snoots or diffusers, depending on the desired effect. Hair lights are also kickers.

Are Kickers Hard To Use?

Yup! They certainly are, at least until you get the hang of them. Practice, experimentation and testing should be done unless you are an old hand portrait lighting. More than any light form, a badly placed kicker can louse up a perfectly decent portrait in less than a second. Because of the sheer relative strength of the lighting (caused by that high angle of incidence) highlight detail can be totally blocked up rather than enhanced and stray light can wreak havoc by causing hot spots on foreheads, chins and noses. Misplaced reflection can alter the play of light on the subject's face and misdirect the viewer's eye away from the motif of your portrait. When I was doing a lot of print judging- poorly placed kickers were a virtual serial killer of otherwise good portraits.

Is It Worth It?

Yup? Using and creating various lightings will convert you to from a picture-taker to an artist painting with light. Once mastered, your complete lighting control will certainly make your portraiture stand out as a cut above the rest. There are times when "less is more" and a simple one light source will be enough to create a magnificent portrait. On the other hand- why be a "one note" photographer. Kicker usage can sometimes make the difference especially where theatrical portraits are concerned. When subjects have striking features, they can be emphasized with fine kicker usage. In some cases the so sought after three- dimensional illusion is driven home by these auxiliary lighting functions.

So What's The Trick?

My favorite set up for classical portraiture is this. I use all 16" parabolics except for the background and hair lights. After the pose is established (2/3 face works well with kickers) I bring in my main light (usually) to a modified loop pattern and feather off the light (towards the camera) and bring in the kicker - feathering it off (towards the camera as well)). Rather than totally overlapping the beams, I try to lawyer them so that the main light takes over where the kicker leaves off. I then bring in the FORM FILL - this a mobile fill light that follows the nose of the subject (usually slightly higher than camera level) that again is layered and feathered so as to take over from the main and begin to illuminate the shadow side of the face with out catching the near ear of the subject. If the shadows are still too inky - a reflector or splash light is added to improve the ratio. The kicker and hair-light are brought in from the same direction as the main light. The hair-light's function is to continue the main light's glow into the hair and help with shadow detail - not the turn dark hair to white by burning out the detail in the hair. Very light or white hair requires very little or no hair-light in order to prevent blocked up highlights - you want to see the color or tone in the hair.

The splash light can be a small bare bulb or bounce light (behind the camera and high) that is operating a t 3-4 stops below your camera-room set up - just to pop a hint of light in the darkest of shadows. When photographing kids or jumpy people I replace the form fill with a fixed fill - the exposures will be more consistent but the form fill yields the most modeling and form of any other fill light placement - true classical wrap around lighting.

As far as the diffusers are concerned - you will have to test to SEE the results. They can be used for toning down the effect of the kickers. Barndoors are also handy for controlling the lights and especially keeping the kickers out of your camera lens- mega-flare can result! Use a good deep lens shade! You will soon discover how to control the degree and quality of kick that you can expect from various configurations and therein lays the key.

Kicker lights are very effective both in color and black and white photography. In black and white work however, I find that kicker usage, as well as all lighting techniques, are far more critical. In black and white there are no color contrasts to help separate the subject from the background and to create more three-dimensionality in various planes of the face - that is all done in the lighting. The skilful application of kickers can make the difference between a mediocre black and white image or one that just about jumps off the page. The defuse and specular highlights make the difference.

Using soft-boxes and umbrellas as hair lights and kickers is possible- that based on positioning of the lights. In actual use it is however, somewhat difficult. Kickers should be more of a controlled light source where barn doors, grids and snoots can be used to keep stray light off the background, the forehead and the camera lens. The hair light should come in from in back of the subject and feathered slightly toward the camera. To make sure that there is no spillage in the forehead observe the hair light with the other lights temporarily turned off or turned away or place your own hand near your subject's brow and check for unwanted light.

The first word of advice is to consider your studio space, if you have a small studio with low ceilings and you intend to start using these techniques you will find enormous limitations and technical difficulties to achieve good results at the beginning. Plan some experimental sessions to find out what works for you, for your space, and for what you already have in terms of equipment and gadgets. If you haven't used kickers and hairlights, most likely you do not have the adequate hardware, you can improvise and create wonders with cardboard and plumbing stuff, this will help you

understand what you really need for your studio space. I have seen a lot of people try to use soft boxes, strip domes and umbrellas after watching some videos or tutorials by professionals, but when it is time to apply all these concepts in a tiny shooting space this is when hell starts, so my advice is to keep it simple and avoid large diffusers like soft boxes, umbrellas etc, unless you have enough space and power control to work with. For small studios it is always better to use grids, snoots, or barn doors, think about the weight and angle a stand would need to hold a soft box as hairlight! interesting eh? remember these setups may easily fall over your model, so take precautions.

The second word of advice is to be aware that all these techniques require having much more control over the independent settings of your flash units to obtain proper exposure control. If for example you own a power pack with limited control over independent flash heads you could be in trouble, if added to this you don't have enough space to move lights away to achieve a specific reading from this head... bad again. This is why a lot of starters end up burning the exposure of a particular kicker or hairlight. If you do not own "yet" fun gadgets like barn doors, grids and snoots you will depend 100% on the use of flags, gobos, etc, to limit or control the spill. The use of gobos or flags also needs space (sometimes even an assistant), so be aware of this too. If you own monolights, or your power pack allows for very precise output control for each head, then your life will be easier, if not.... well just be aware of what you are getting into.

I am not trying to discourage anyone from experimenting with new lighting ideas, just try to plan ahead, visualize, and really evaluate if you are ready for the new technical crossroads you will encounter, if you are still having trouble with basic stuff like controlling lighting ratios, achieving consistent exposure, etc, then leave the kickers and hairlights alone for some time until you feel you have the main concepts well established on your mind.

Some of the previous comments prove that the same stuff will not work for every photographer, simply because each one of us has different style and space to work with, so for example a grid of 10 or 20 degree will not work the same for everyone because the angle will work in relationship to the distance from the subject, and this distance will in most cases be determined by the background height (in the case of a hairlight), ceiling height, power of that particular head, is the model steady (seated), is she going to move?, etc. So it is a combination of factors, without even including what effect the photographer is going after. So think about all this before planning your experimental sessions, good luck.

Firstly, allow me to relate a story from my past. I was up in Rochester N.Y. to have some problematic equipment looked at by the engineers at Graphlex (remember them). They told me that my equipment could be debugged in a few hours and to return to pick it up later in the day. Not having the time to take the Kodak tour- I went back downtown and decided to do a little window shopping. On the main street there was a 5 and dime store- similar to Woolworth's- and in the window there were the most beautiful portraits on display. I did a double take- what were these prints, clearly the work of a master, doing in a dime store window? Perhaps just a remote display advertising the photographer's studio? I had to investigate! I entered the store and surprisingly enough, there was a counter adorned with frames containing more beautiful portraiture and a wall with more 16X20s and 20X24s- every one a show stopper. I was greeted at the counter by none other than the master himself, Henry Litchner, Master Photographer/Craftsman - one of the nicest people I ever met in the business. I told him that I was a portrait photographer and he immediately showed me to his "camera room" - virtually a closet!

In that tiny space he had a large wooden portrait camera, equipped with numerous adapters to accommodate 8X10, 5X7, and 4X5 cut film holders as well as a 2 1/2 X3 1/4 roll film adapter. There was an old set of Ascor flash units - their wires neatly tucked away in the corners. There were both low and high key backgrounds and yes, there were kickers mounted on some pipes near the wall. My funniest recollection was that Henry had to stand along side the camera and latterly stick his head in the narrow space between the ground glass and rear wall in order to focus and compose his images.

That 3 hour lesson at Henry's studio was the best training I ever had in improvisation and ingenuity - not to exclude Henry's elegant and very human approach to fine portraiture.

So this is what I can tell you:

- Keep your lighting equipment, especially the kickers, very low profile (as to size) An 8" diffused parabolic with small barndoors and serve well as a main light, form fill or a kicker.
- In small camera rooms umbrellas and soft-boxes can be used for fill and perhaps main lights- but never kickers.
- 6" or smaller heads can be used as kickers- they are best equipped with snoots, grids or small barndoors.
- Use the deepest lens shade you can find that will not vignette your images.
- In small studios you don't need enormous amounts of fill light. The unseen secondary light bouncing off walls and the ceiling will tend to fill in quite well, so that all you might is a small amount of additional fill light to bring up the shadow detail. TEST!
- In a very small studio, when doing low key photography, you might need to install some black window shades or black foam-core on the walls near and along side of the subject in order to avoid too much unseen secondary light which over-fill your images by robbing them of rich shadows.
- To control the intensity of kicker lights, when working out of a single power pack, try these tips: Use diffusion sheets to reduce the light coming out of specific head. If some ratio switching exists, you might be able to plug your kicker into the channel with lesser output or run 2 kickers off one channel thereby splitting the power 50-50. You can also work with the main light and fill light at a higher power setting - bringing up the working F-stop and leaving the weaker kickers behind in output, so to speak. Remember that kickers look stronger, even at the same distances and power settings because of their sharper angle of incidence.
- Use "pole cats" - spring loaded poles to keep the kickers as close to the walls as possible thereby avoiding lens flare-out or having parts of the equipment show up in the composition. The kickers should be able slide up and down the poles - old Reflect-A-Sol clamps are very good for that. For economy plumbing (galvanized) pipe or plastic (ABS or PVC) drain pipe can be substituted .

I know that this sounds like a lot of work - but once you get used to using those kickers you wont want to be with out them for certain jobs.

It is better to have the kicker come from the same side of the subject as the main light - otherwise there is a disunity of lighting.

The other problem is that your kicker caused a hot spot on the forehead- that is because the kicker light is too high or needs a little barn door or gobo to shade that area. That area of the head can be a trouble spot because the natural skin oils and/or some perspiration can gather there. That combined with the high angle of incidence and some light coming from the main can cause quite a burn out of the highlights. You want specular highlights but also defuse highlights with detail surrounding them.

The ratio seems ok but on my screen the main lighting looks a bit muddy - perhaps bring in you main a bit closed and move back the kicker and feather both toward the camera. The nose shadow indicates the main light is a little low.

Next thing is to photograph your assistant because YOU need to see the correction on that ground glass. Kickers can not be left in a stationary position- you need to move them (vertically and latterly) to accommodate various subjects. Try to bring the kicker into a position where it lights the bridge of the nose with our touching the near part of the cheek. Then try to bring it around back so it only lights the far side of the face. Then bring it out where it forms a classic Rembrandt lighting on the face and use the main as a form fill to open up (lighting wise) the near eye. Do full and 2/3 positions. Moving that light all over the place will help you master and discover you kickers- Post again soon.

It is true that hard kicker lighting is sometimes more appropriate with portraits of men- especially those with rugged complexions, With the ladies I use the kicker (in 2/3 face) portraits to rim light the far cheek , nose and oftentimes the area outlining the upper lip- some photographers call it the angel's touch.

If you are going to do this, have your subject put her hair up or off the face. To accommodate the long hair on her face, you had to bring your kicker o too far and you ended up with what is called an unclean lighting pattern.

You can use an umbrella or a soft box as a main light but you will have to diffuse the kickers a bit to match the softness and readjust the outputs of the kickers to get the proper ratio.

On some of you test shots the camera is too low - shooting the nostrils. The camera should be slightly above eye level. You also might consider decreasing the amount of light on the background.

Kickers also look good with soft focus lenses and filters. Try that, but make sure that NO stray light is falling on the lens. Hard light-soft focus/ soft light - hard focus - some say!

If at first you don't succeed... you know the rest - good progress so far. Have your lovely subject fix her hair in party mode and soot me a masterpiece soon.

Remember this rule - Kickers will accentuate certain aspects of the face and body. There are cases where kickers will distract the viewer's eye or emphasize a feature which should be de-emphasized. Therefore, use your kickers prudently.

Some faces benefit from some good old soft lighting. If you want to glamorize the subject you can put that "benched" kicker to use with some crazy hair-lighting.

As most of the photographic community knows, Yosif Karsh passed away last year. He was the all time greatest classical portrait photographer of our time. I consider myself extremely fortunate and blessed to have met with him, at this Ottawa studio, on several occasions. Suffice it to say that I can write a book based on those visits. This year we also have lost his brother, Malak, a master scenic and commercial photographer of the highest order and a wonderful portraitist in his own right.

The making of a Karsh portrait even transcended the remarkable lighting and composition. There were meticulous laboratory procedures that entailed the use of special developers. He handled an 8x10 view camera as if it was a 35- with incredible speed and his way with people was inimitable - to say the least.

I know this sounds crazy - but every time I try to emulate his style I feel foolish. You've seen Elvis impersonators - I think some of that is morbid and gross. I don't want to be a Karsh impersonator - I think that would be disrespectful and I also think that I wouldn't do a very good job at it. Nevertheless, I have been looking at his books since I was a kid and those meetings did rub off on me. So with all due respect and with fond memories of the Grand Master himself - I do this every once in a while- kickers, pyro developer and all.

Ed Shapiro

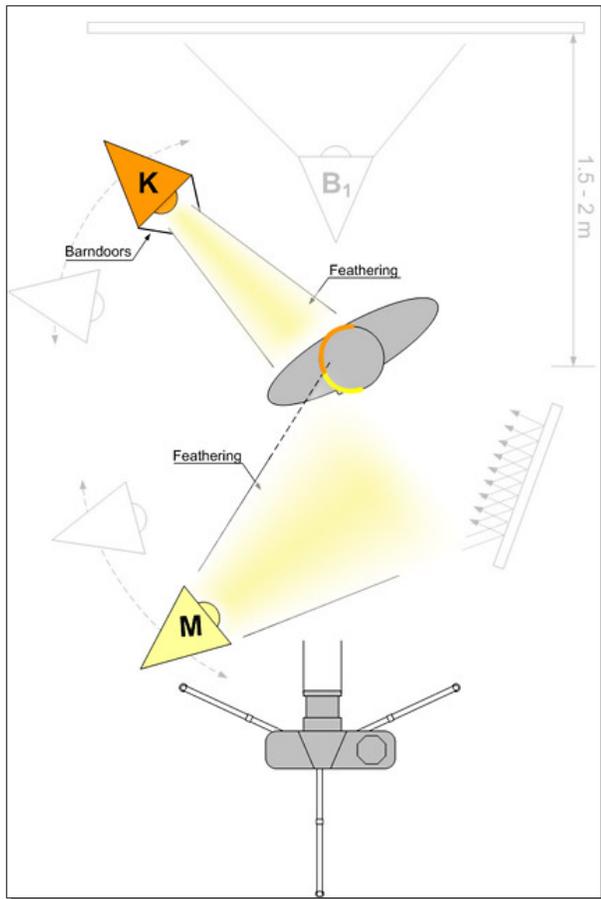
A few additional words by Ed (taken from another thread):

I love kickers but...

You have to understand that they can bake or break a portrait. The rule of thumb goes like this. Anything that you aim a kicker at will become emphasized in the final photograph. If you want to emphasize skin texture, the shape or contours of the face, any facial feature or the hands of any particular subject then bring out the kicker(s). The down side is that some of this emphasis can be unflattering or distracting if the kickers are not used judiciously and precisely.

In most cases FEATHERING and BARNDOORING are the keys to effective kicker usage. Say you were making a 2/3 view of a subject with parabolic light sources, it is wise to bring in the kicker so that it produces a highlight to outline the far cheek and the nose. The kicker should always come from the same direction as the main light or a disunity of lighting will occur. Feathering and barndooring the light so that no light spreads to the area between the

far cheek's outline and the highlight on the nose and the upper lip. Then bring in the main light and feather it off so that it does not overlap but rather continues where the kicker begins to fall off. It sounds complex but let your eyes help you.



The best thing to do is shut down the modeling lamp of the main and fill light so that you can place that kicker and hair light exactly where you want them. Next, switch on the main light, aim it and feather it off (toward the camera) until you see the highlights from the kickers POP! Once you have seen this happen it will be easier to recognize the effect when you see it again. When you are placing the kicker, if you notice that it is bringing out skin conditions or causing any other aesthetic problem that is the time to turn it off. When the hand(s) are included in the composition, you want to make sure that the kicker or even the main light is not overexposing them. Because the hands do not get as much sunlight as the face, they can be much lighter than the face to start with, causing the viewer eye to drift away from the face. Over lighting the hands with a misplaced kicker will exacerbate the problem 5 fold, because the light coming from a more acute angle will appear brighter even if the power output is lower or equal to the other lights.

So...practice with those barndoors, diffusion sheets and gobos and feather your head off until you see the effects. Oh - if anyone out there is not familiar with the term "feathering" it means using the peripheral part of the beam of light rather than the "hot spot" that lives in the middle of the beam. This works especially well with parabolic reflectors and spot lights. It also works (to some degree) with umbrellas and soft boxes, however, the effect is not as pronounced and is more difficult to control. The light is not moved laterally, but is rotated on its' stand until the desired effect is achieved. There is a loss of light when you feather off the hit spot so you must make all

your tests with the lights in their aesthetic (feathered) positions.