PRACTICAL GUIDE

Why Does It Look Cheap?

The shooting mistakes that cheapen an image the most, and how to avoid them, from the colorist's point of view



by Luis Taveras · Colorist

It's almost never the camera

Today any production can shoot with the same camera as a TV series. And still, many images keep looking cheap. When a colorist receives that footage, the problem is almost never the camera: it's what happened in front of it. These are the six mistakes we see most, what the colorist can do with each one, and what can no longer be fixed.

	MISTAKE	THE COLORIST CAN…	BUT CAN'T…
1	**Shapeless light**	Add contrast, suggest light with windows	Create the shadow that isn't on the face
2	**No separation**	Darken the background with masks	Invent the backlight and the depth
3	**Art with no intent**	Enhance a palette that already exists	Invent a palette
4	**Bad exposure**	Lower whites, lift shadows carefully	Recover clipping or clean underexposed skin
5	**Mismatched lights**	Fix with masks shot by shot	Do it quickly and without it shimmering
6	**The file**	Soften a little, add grain	Remove digital harshness and banding

The idea of this guide

None of these mistakes is a camera mistake. They're about light, art, exposure and decisions on set. And all of them can be avoided before you roll.



The untouched image: flat.

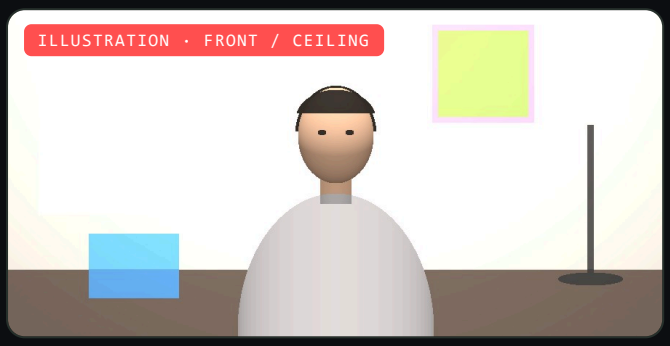


The same scene with the final grade: light guides the eye.

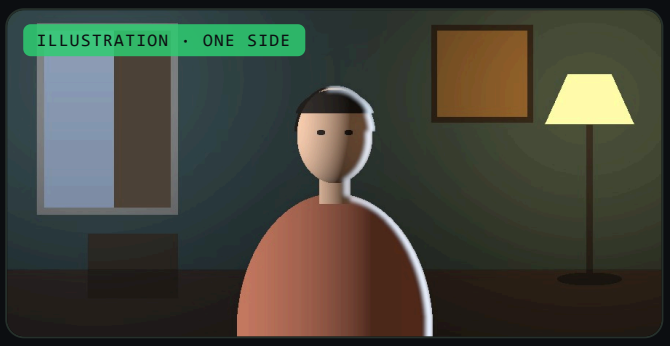
Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras.

1 · Shapeless light

A big light from the front, or the ceiling lights on, lights everything equally. The face has no brighter side and darker side, the background gets the same light as the actor, and the image goes flat. The colorist can add contrast, but contrast isn't shape: if the shadow isn't on the face, there's nothing to build it from. With windows and masks they can suggest some light, but relighting every shot is expensive and almost never looks natural.



Everything in the same light: no shape.



Key from one side: the shadow creates shape.

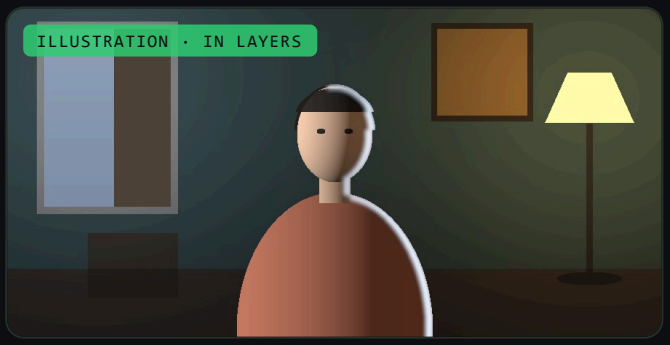
- [ ] **Turn off the ceiling lights** and work with sources that have direction: a window, a diffused panel to one side.
- [ ] **Let one side of the face fall** into shadow; control the fill with flags or black fabric.
- [ ] **Light the background separately** and less than the actor.

2 · No separation

The actor stuck to the wall, no backlight, no depth. In film the background is darker or a different color, and there's a light that lifts the character's outline. When everything is on the same plane of light, the colorist has no layers to separate, and the viewer's eye doesn't know where to go.



No backlight, background lit the same.



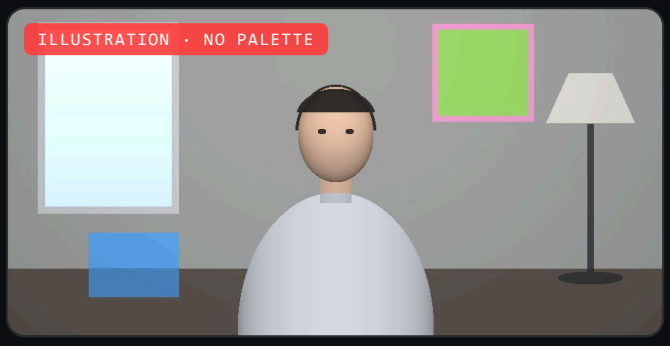
Darker background, another color, and a backlight.

- [ ] **Move the actor away** from the wall as far as the location allows.
- [ ] **Add a backlight** that outlines hair and shoulders.
- [ ] **Give the background a different value or color** than the skin.

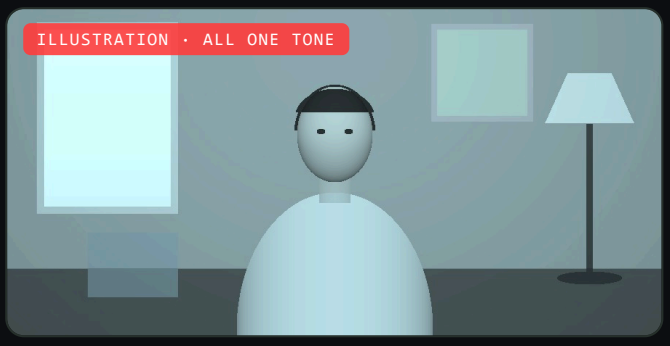
Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. Illustrations from the video's animation. Educational simulations made on real frames, marked as such.

3 · Art with no intent

White walls, wardrobe chosen without thinking about color, props that say nothing. The colorist can enhance a palette, but can't invent one. If there's no color intent on set, all that's left in the grade is pushing everything toward one tone, and it shows.



White wall, wardrobe with no intent.



In the grade all that's left is tinting everything.

REAL FILMS · THE PALETTE IS BORN ON SET



Warm home.



Cold office.



Neon party.



Golden sunset.

How to give it intent

- [ ] **Define a 3-to-5-color palette** per scene or per character, with the production designer and the cinematographer.
- [ ] **Avoid pure white** on walls and wardrobe: it clips easily and steals the eye.
- [ ] **Separate the skin**: wardrobe and background shouldn't share the skin's tone.
- [ ] **Share the palette with the colorist** from pre-production.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. *Sintel* (2010) and *Tears of Steel* (2012) © Blender Foundation · durian.blender.org · mango.blender.org · CC BY 3.0 license.

4 · Exposure

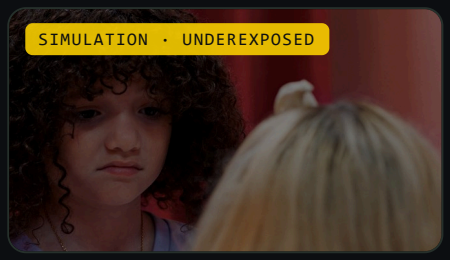
Clipped highlights have no information: the colorist can pull the white down, but what appears is a gray patch with no detail. And underexposed skin, once lifted, fills with noise. Either way, the colorist ends up rescuing instead of creating.



Pulling down clipped white = gray patch.



Well exposed.



Sunken skin: lift it, get noise.

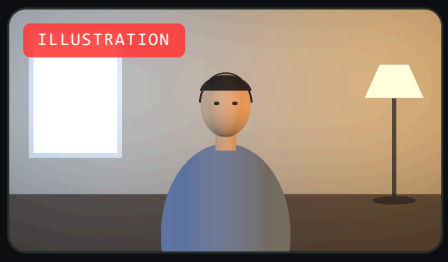
- [ ] **Measure** with false color or a waveform, not with screen brightness.
- [ ] **Protect skin and important highlights**; a lamp or a sky can clip if it's a decision.

5 · Lights that don't match

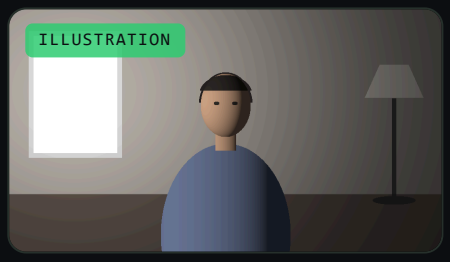
A face with window light on one side and an orange bulb on the other, with no intent, comes out two-colored. The colorist can fix it with masks shot by shot, but it takes time, and as soon as the actor moves the correction shimmers.



Cool window and warm bulb on the same face.



No control: two-colored skin.



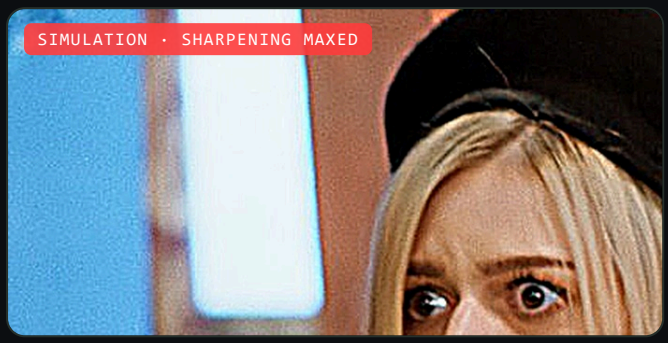
One queen light: clean skin.

- [ ] **Choose a queen light** and turn off, cover or correct the rest (CTO / CTB gels, LEDs at the same temperature).
- [ ] **If you mix on purpose**, keep the mix in the background, never on the face.

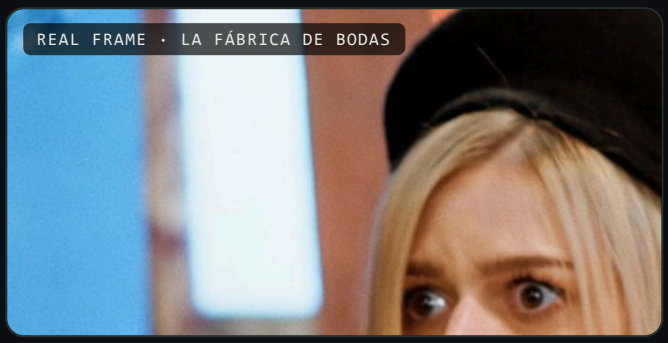
Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. Illustrations from the video's animation. Educational simulations made on real frames, marked as such.

6 · The file

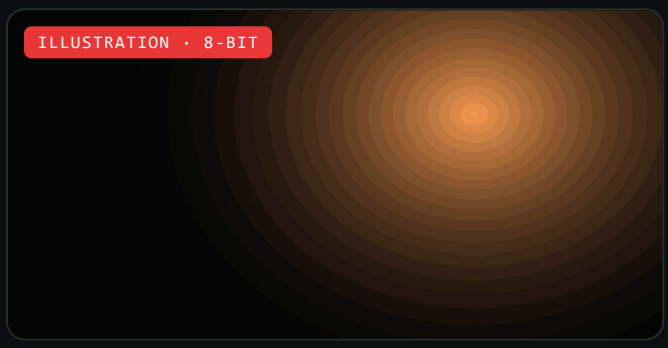
Shooting 8-bit, with heavy compression and in-camera sharpening at maximum, leaves hard edges and stepped gradients. A cinema image is soft. That digital harshness can't be removed in the grade: it can be disguised, but not undone.



Hard edges and halos around skin and hair.



The original image: soft, with natural detail.



Stepped gradient when graded.



The same gradient at 10-bit: smooth.

SETTING	LOOKS CHEAP	LOOKS LIKE CINEMA
Bits	8	10 or more, or RAW
Color	4:2:0	4:2:2 / 4:4:4
Codec	Heavily compressed H.264 / H.265	ProRes 422 HQ or higher, or RAW
In-camera sharpening	High	Off or minimum
Profile	Factory contrast and saturation	Log or RAW for the colorist

Sharpness comes from the lens and the focus

Cinema detail comes from a good lens, accurate focus and a file with information. In-camera sharpening just draws halos around edges. If a shot needs more definition, the colorist adds it under control, only where it's needed.

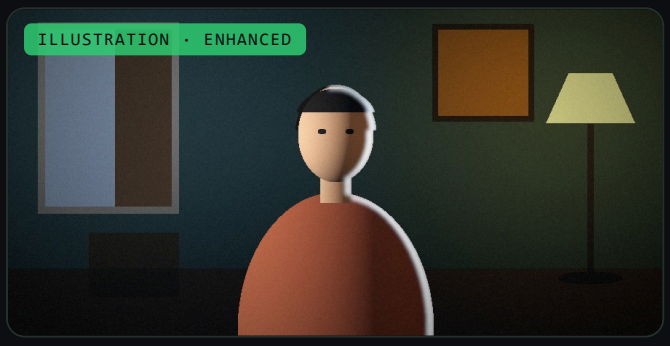
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Before you shoot: quick checklist

- [ ] **Light with direction**: ceiling off, one side of the face in shadow.
- [ ] **Separation**: actor away from the wall, backlight, background with another value or color.
- [ ] **A decided palette** with art and camera; no pure white without a reason.
- [ ] **Measured exposure**: skin at its level, highlights protected.
- [ ] **One queen light** and the rest matched or corrected.
- [ ] **A cinema file**: 10-bit or more, heavy codec, sharpening off, log or RAW.
- [ ] **Talk to the colorist** before the shoot: camera test and show LUT.

From fixing to enhancing

When this is done right, the colorist stops fixing and starts enhancing: adding texture, depth and emotion to an image that was born with quality. That's where a video stops looking cheap.



Shaped light, layers and color: the colorist enhances.



Interior with several sources, all decided.

REAL FILMS



Art and warm practicals.



Depth and cool color.



Skin separated from the background.

Frames from *Madre* and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, color graded by Luis Taveras. Illustrations from the video's animation. Educational simulations made on real frames, marked as such.



Luis Taveras

COLORIST

Luis Taveras is a colorist, member of the Colorist Society International, with five feature films and more than 500 music videos. His credits include *Madre: a dos centímetros de ti*, winner of five awards at the 2025 New York Dominican Film Festival, and *La Fábrica de Bodas*, which premiered at the United Palace in New York. For him, color is the last place where a film can still change its emotion, and the skin always has to feel true.

5	500+	10
feature films	music videos	years in the craft

What I do

- Color grading for film
- Music videos
- Commercials and brands
- Cinema mastering and delivery (DCP)

Member, Colorist Society International · ID 98523302

DGCINE Film Agent · SIRECINE AC-PTA 18224

Planning your next shoot?

I'd love to collaborate with you on the color of your next project. Write to me and watch my demo reel.

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#cinematography #lighting #colorist #colorgrading #productiondesign #luistaverascolorist