

I Want it Cheap, Fast and Ugly

I was called in for an interview to storyboard an episode of an hour-long dramatic series for ABC. This was a fairly unusual request, because most episodic dramas have very short preproduction schedules. For that reason, as well as financial concerns, most of these series forego the storyboarding process.

This particular show had some unique challenges. They explained to me that most of the episode was to take place on a bridge at night. And a portion of the story took place on top of that bridge. The production manager had estimated that they would need five days to shoot the bridge sequences. The problem was, they were only able to secure the location, a bridge in downtown Los Angeles, for a single night.

The production designer planned to build a full-size model of the lower portion of the bridge in a parking lot at the studio. Then, on one of the stages, the top of one of the bridge's arches would be constructed. They needed to storyboard to plan out which shots had to be accomplished at the original location, which could be taken on the parking lot set, and finally, what needed to be done on the stage set.

The producer and director took a look at my portfolio and asked when I could start the project, as shooting was scheduled for the next week. I agreed to start immediately, and then the producer asked if he could speak with me privately for a moment. (Watch out for this one, my mother's voice whispered in my head.) When we were alone in his office, the producer closed the door. He walked over to me and said in a soft, intense voice, "I want them fast, I want them cheap, and I don't care if they're pretty."

He wanted the job done and me out of there as soon as possible. Only in the most dire of circumstances would this producer agree to hire an illustrator. And he didn't want the clock ticking his dimes away for any longer than was absolutely necessary. I called my assistant and we hammered out close to 150 frames in the next 3 days. I delivered the project by the weekend and they were pretty in spite of it all. No extra charge.



*Lifeboat 1944*

## 6 Composition

**"I never look through the camera, you know. When in doubt I draw a rectangle then draw the shot out for [the cameraman]. The point is that you are, first of all, in a two-dimensional medium. Mustn't forget that. You have a rectangle to fill. Fill it. Compose it."**

**Alfred Hitchcock**

# Composition

## Introduction

# 6

There are two ways of viewing a film: passively and actively. The passive viewer sits back and enjoys the show, rarely asking why particular choices of composition or camera placement have been made. The active viewer not only sees and hears the film, but also is involved in exploring it on a deeper level — one which is not immediately apparent to the casual viewer.

Elements such as the color of the setting, the movement of the camera, and the position of objects or placement of people within the frame are experienced on a subconscious level. Sometimes this information is recognizable on the first viewing (especially if you are an active viewer and pay attention to these details), but it often requires a second or third viewing to see past the action and dialogue in a film and pick up the subtleties of its visual storytelling.

By taking an active role you can begin to participate in the thought processes and active decisions that are used to form the work of art. Once you have learned how to actively observe, you will find that in addition to enjoying the film as entertainment you will be investigating each image as an expression of the narrative. The graphic, two-dimensional structure of the frame is a powerful medium of communication. A great deal can be absorbed by looking at the various ways that directors, cinematographers, and art directors can manipulate the composition of the frame to maximize its use as a strong storytelling device.

This chapter will cover different approaches to breaking down the frame and its composition into their component design parts and investigating how decisions of line, form, depth, and texture affect the “read” of the picture.

The first section will explore the relationship between composition and story. The narrative structure of a film and the atmosphere and tone of its story can be read in its images as well as the dialogue and action. Visual choices affect the way the audience understands the characters and their surroundings. Different approaches to composing the frame such as the use of open versus closed framing and other practices will be explored, along with ideas on positive and negative space and other fundamentals of composition.

The rest of the chapter will focus on the formal aspects of design as it applies to the film and video frame — including graphic composition as expressed in strategies of symmetry, balance, and randomness, among many other forms. The qualities of value, contrast, and texture will be covered as well.

One note of caution: There can be a tendency toward trying to create a design template for the purpose of expressing story and character through imagery. Beware! Looking for absolute meanings to attach to specific camera angles or colors can be misleading. Each shot must be considered in the light of what has come before it and what is to come after it. It is the context that imparts meaning, not a slavish adherence to formulas.

## Composition: Formal Considerations in the Design of the Frame

### Overview of Chapter:

#### The Frame

- Positive and Negative Space
- Depth cues
- Overlap, focus, scale
- Symmetry
- Balance
- Series
- Randomness
- Shape
- Circle, arc, square, triangle, spiral, rectangle, linear
- Diagonal, horizontal, vertical
- Texture
- Contrast, value
- Framing devices
- Open and closed framing



*October 1927*  
Example of  
randomness

## The Frame

Our world has an endless horizon. Look up, down, turn in any direction and you are met with a seamless cyclorama of imagery. The frame is a tool that we use to break up this panorama into digestible pieces. The frame is a cropping device that snips away what we, as designers and directors, do not want the audience to see. The audience can be placed in a unique relationship with a character or environment through the specificity of these choices. The possibilities are limitless.

The manipulation of point of view is a powerful aspect of storytelling that is played out in the placement of objects and/or people inside the frame. The frame is a mobile window that can open onto any section of a scene, at any distance we desire. Because of this mobility, we can present the world with a more precisely composed structure than we usually encounter in our everyday lives. The camera can structure images of the world that are remarkable in their symmetry or randomness, their balance or internal geometry. Before exploring the specifics of these compositional strategies, there are a few general topics of two-dimensional design that need to be introduced.

## Positive and Negative Space

There is a well-known illusion in which, while a person gazes at a drawing of a candlestick, it seems to transform into a double portrait. Using a contour that can be read in two ways to separate the black and white areas of the frame creates the illusion. The eye reads the white area as an object and sees the image as a candlestick, or favors the dark areas and sees them as silhouetted profiles.

This perceptual trick illustrates the play of positive and negative space. Positive space in a composition is an area that defines an object or figure. It is form. Negative space is that area which defines the space around these forms. Both spaces require a designing eye, but often the negative space is ignored, considered to be somehow less important than the positive space in frame composition.

In fact, they are locked together in a dance of mutual support. A shot of an apple sitting on a table is as much about the atmosphere around the apple as the apple itself. And aside from aesthetic considerations, the negative space can also hold the possibility of movement, surprise, or danger coming from outside the frame. The examples of film frames in this chapter highlight the various approaches to composition.



*October*  
Example of positive and negative space

## DEPTH IN THE FRAME

Depth within the frame is illusory. The frame or screen is a flat form; the depth we perceive is a result of fooling the eye — we believe that we see a third dimension where there is none. There are a number of visual cues that the eye and mind recognize as references to depth:

- A change in scale
- Overlapping objects
- Changes in focus or depth of field
- Color shifts

These visual cues imply the existence of a space beyond the screen. Learning to recognize and use them offers expanded control over the visual construction of each shot.

## Change in Scale

A friend of mine was working as a set dresser on a feature being produced in Los Angeles. One day during preproduction, the set decorator gave him a list of items to round up for the next set. My friend noticed a large array of children's items on the list, from clothes to outdoor furniture to tiny lighting fixtures. He was confused. There were no children in the script. Could the designer be padding the shopping list with objects he needed for his own home?

The answer came the next day when they arrived at the set, which was built on a sound-stage. Most of the story they were filming took

place in a New York apartment and its rear courtyard. In order to make the most of the limited stage space, the production designer designed the "buildings" surrounding the "yard" to 1/2 and 1/4 scale. The little clothes and furniture were to grace the balconies and windows of the scaled-down buildings, which through the camera appeared to be in perfect proportion and a great distance away.

Raise your hand up so that it is positioned about 12 inches from your face. Now look beyond your hand to some architectural element in the room or on the street outside a window. Notice the relative size of your hand to the wall or the door. There is a severe diminishing of perceived size as an object recedes into the distance.



Art directors can use this knowledge to fool the eye into thinking that a set is much larger than it truly is. If you build a wall in the distance at half scale, the audience will "read" the wall as being much farther away. Increase the scale and the eye will tell the brain that the wall is much closer. Place a tall actor in the middle ground of a composition and a shorter actor's head in the foreground will be even with his.



*Alexander Nevsky* 1938

3/4 size buildings

full size building



*Queens Logic* 1988  
production designer: Edward Pisoni

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## Overlapping Objects



M 1931

An infant thinks that when her mother disappears into the next room she no longer is part of the world. Through repeated experience the child learns that out-of-sight does not mean out-of-existence. We grow and begin to know the world in more explicit ways, and the sight of a body partially hidden by a piece of furniture does not panic us into calling 911 for fear that the body has somehow lost its legs. We learn early on that appearances are deceiving, and the image of one object obscuring another is interpreted as a spatial cue.

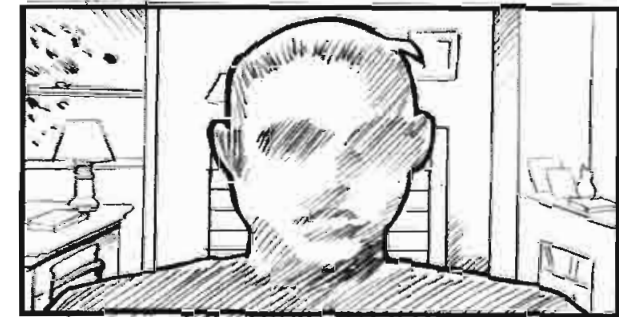
In film, overlapping objects occur when the camera is positioned so that one form partially obscures another. When you raise or lower the camera, more of the hidden object will come into view. Our eyes judge distance and depth by the density of the superimposed items and the amount of visual information that is hidden.

## Change in Focus and Depth of Field

Focus and depth of field are a function of the lens length and the aperture used during exposure of the film. A shot with a narrow field of focus can emphasize a figure, for example, by throwing the surrounding environment into an indistinct haze. This forces the audience to concentrate on one plane of space while de-emphasizing the remaining depth of the frame. Using a wide-angle lens will

offer a much deeper depth of focal plane and integrate the object into its environs. A change in focus during a shot, a rack focus, leads the audience's eye through the frame by changing the plane of focus as they watch.

Another, though less common, use of depth of field can be found in the zolly, or zoom-with-a-counter-dolly shot. In this camera move, the characters or object being viewed will often stay the same relative scale while the lens length changes. The scale is maintained by the movement of the camera on a dolly that counters the zooming activity of the lens. The composition does change though, as seen in the following examples.



Close-up with wide lens before Zolly



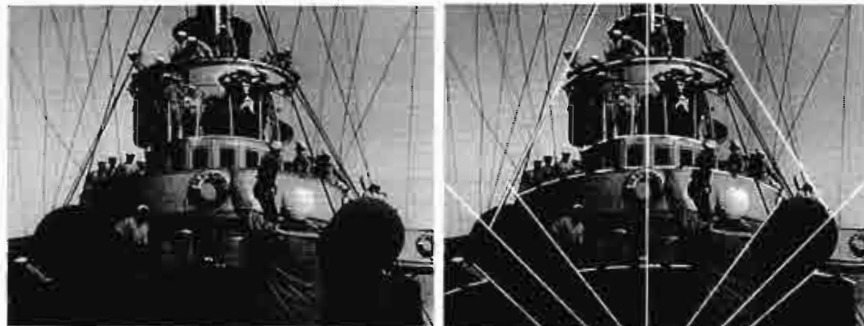
Close-up with long lens after Zolly

## COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES

Film and video are media that primarily use representative imagery to tell their stories. But we can also look to abstract design principles for ways to move the eye around the frame. Each frame or shot can be composed according to one or more two-dimensional design strategies. Even so-called "random" or "documentary-style" setups can be devised using these compositional structures.

### Symmetry

A symmetrical frame is one that is always balanced: For every form and line on one side of the frame, there is a corresponding form or line on the opposite side. Symmetry is also characterized by an "angle of reflection." This angle is an imaginary line that runs through the frame and separates the two mirror-image halves vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.



Angle of reflection

There is also a type of symmetry that is known as "radial symmetry," where rather than a line of reflection, the symmetry is constructed around a center point. Forms that radiate out from a pivotal spot create balance.

A one-point perspective setup often creates a symmetrical frame automatically. When the camera's picture plane is parallel to the set and the camera is positioned in a central place relative to a wall or a street, the resulting frame will often have a strong symmetrical element.

### Asymmetry

The asymmetrical frame is more than a frame that simply lacks absolute symmetry. It has, as an overriding aspect of its design, a variety of forms placed without regard to any mirroring plan.

### Balance

In the three-dimensional world, balance is a matter of physical weight. Circus performers, construction workers, and grocers all depend on the accurate measurement of weight in order to perform their tasks with ease and precision. In the 2-D world of the screen, issues of balance are measured differently. Size, scale, value, and color, among other elements, create visual weight.



The symmetry of one-point perspective



M



Potemkin

The balanced frame is equally weighted on both sides of the composition. Balance is not mutually exclusive to an asymmetrical frame. A distribution of differently scaled objects, contrasts in value, or even variations in color can create an asymmetrical composition. The element of balance is something that can be sensed, if not measured. It creates a world in which the eye travels unimpeded around and through the various forms it encounters.



October

### Imbalance

Imagine a frame composed of a feather on one side and an elephant on the other. What does your eye travel to first, and where does it return? The imbalanced frame has a weight problem. This is not to say that there is something necessarily wrong with an imbalanced frame. The weight issue can always be worked to the advantage of the director or designer. If you are aware of the situation, you can utilize the composition to manipulate your audience's attention to a particular object or event. It is also an effective way to allude to the space outside the frame.

### Series

Imagine a camera facing the side of a large office building. Rows of windows, all the same shape and size, fill the frame. The only variety comes from small, individual touches that are visible in each cubicle. This is a frame that is structured by a series.

A series is created by a repetition of form or line within the frame. The eye is met with a pattern that is repeated over and over. The viewer's attention will be immediately drawn to any element that is out of step in the established order.



October

### Randomness

Randomness is more than an absence of order. It is an arrangement that alludes to a world that has not been touched by the manipulation of human hand or mind. This approach is deceptively difficult to achieve. In fact, it may take a great deal of planning to create a composition that looks random. Our minds demand order. Even when we attempt to create a less-than-orderly arrangement of objects, going against the mind's natural inclination to order is surprisingly difficult, and the "ordering" human hand can often still be seen or sensed in the design. Only skillful blocking that carefully mirrors chaotic movement will create a crowd scene that appears disorderly.



October



Alexander Nevsky

## Lines and Shapes

A line is a vector, a connection of one point to another; it plots direction. Within the frame it can act as a powerful guide to lead the eye from one place of interest to the next. There are many examples of compositions that use linear strategies to structure the frame. Horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines are among the most commonly used in film, video, and other two-dimensional projects.



Stagecoach 1939

Film and video share a compositional similarity in that their formats are both limited to a rectangle that is horizontally oriented. The **horizontal line** is a reflection of the line that defines the width of the frame. Lines that mirror the horizon serve to underline the expanse of the rectangle. They can also create two or more rectangles within the frame. This compositional approach is often found in westerns, where man's vertical stance is seen against the backdrop of an expansive horizon.

**Vertical lines** are reflections of the sides of the frame. They are found in shots or frames that feature a figure against a field, buildings against the sky, or any other element that reaches up in defiance of gravity.



Potemkin

The **diagonal line** splits the frame into triangles. It also serves to move the eye in a direction that leads outside the frame. This can be used to create dynamic motion from one shot to the next as well as movement within the single frame itself. The diagonal approach supports asymmetry and imbalance in the frame.



Potemkin



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## Circles, Squares, Triangles, and More

Sometimes a simple geometric shape serves as the structuring element of a shot. Of course, every shot starts with the inescapable rectangle of the frame. The horizontal orientation is a given, no matter which aspect ratio is being utilized. What we sculpt inside that rectangle is another matter. In the three adjacent frames you can observe familiar shapes that offer strong, simple solutions to structuring the space inside the borders of a rectangular frame.



Triangles

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Squares

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Circles

Goldiggers of '33



## CONTRAST, TEXTURE, AND OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE IMAGE

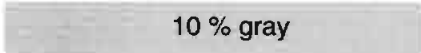
There are also some subtler methods of manipulating the eye aside from the obvious graphic structure of the frame. The texture of each form and the contrast between their values can express something about the world and the characters that inhabit the space and the time of the story. These elements are not as easily noticed by the audience but can contribute to the overall “read” of the picture.

### Contrast

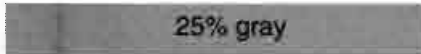
Contrast cannot exist without comparing one part of a frame to another. The type of contrast that this section refers to is one that is created by the juxtaposition of areas of different **value**. Value is the relative lightness or darkness of a color or a tone.

Contrast is often measured in terms of its percentage of relative darkness. Black is expressed as 100% and white as 0% so that a middle gray can be called a 45-55% value of gray. Values are not just used in black-and-white situations. Each color or hue has its own value translation, or relative lightness or darkness that can be expressed in terms of value.


The term “high contrast” refers to the use of a large spread of values within the frame, so that you will see both deep blacks and bright, sparkling whites within the same scene. A “low contrast” composition uses a limited spread of values, perhaps only 40% of the possible array of lights and darks.



10 % gray



25% gray

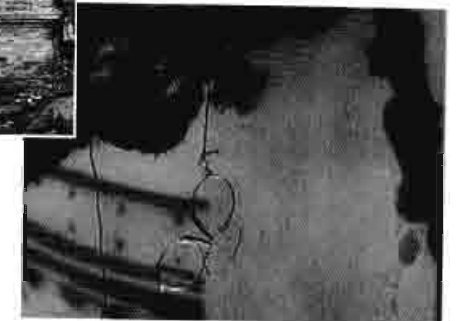


75% gray



100% black

The eye interprets darker values as receding in space and lighter ones as coming forward in the picture plane. Observe the frames to the right to see how your attention moves through the space in these examples of high and low contrast compositions.



*Potemkin*

### Texture

We tend to think of texture as something that is felt through the skin, an element of our sense of touch, not of sight. Although the world of images is flat, there are a variety of ways to add texture to a shot. The most all-encompassing is through the choice of different film stocks and lenses. It is beyond the scope of this volume to cover all the possibilities in this area, but a general understanding of grain and depth of field can be useful for anyone involved in creating images on film and video.

Texture can also be seen in the surfaces of nubby fabric, plastered walls, and the shiny chrome of a 1950s Chevy. There are times when an abstract shot of a broken-down wall or a rain-slicked street will tell the viewer something about the story that no line of dialogue or shot of action can manage to do.



*Alexander Nevsky*

## Color

A spot of color in a gray landscape draws the eye to it regardless of its placement or scale. This powerful element of composition is so complex that it evades a thorough treatment in this book. Let it suffice to say that color is an element of composition that is uniquely powerful and subtle at the same time. There are many excellent essays that take on this topic; a list of recommended sources will be found in the Bibliography (page 219).

## SUMMARY

This chapter has covered some of the most common strategies for structuring the frame. They are not mutually exclusive. Many frames use a combination of these elements and function beautifully in terms of aesthetics and narrative.

Of course, there are scripts that don't need such tightly composed shots. The liberal use of hand-held shooting, as seen in John Cassavetes's *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives* (1992), Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and in innumerable films shot in the "cinema verite" style, precludes the necessity of heavy preproduction visualization. In fact, to do so would be counter-productive to telling those particular stories.

The script usually leads the way but story can be subsumed by style. In other words, there is a delicate balance between the form of the composition and the content of the story. Use these tools with precision, but not necessarily in every frame or circumstance. Each decision carries the weight of the history of making pictures — perhaps a daunting challenge, but one that can also inspire new ways of seeing and telling great stories.

## Exercise: Composition Gridding the Screen and Painting the Frame

- Chose a film that you admire, but have not had a great deal of time to observe. (The film can be in color or B&W, but I recommend starting with a film that is black and white; with a gray scale image there are fewer elements to contend with, and fewer materials to assemble.)
- Stretch a piece of clear acetate over the screen of your television or monitor and secure it with tape on all sides. Then, with a chisel tip black marker, draw two diagonal lines that extend to each corner of the film frame. Where these cross in the center, draw vertical and horizontal lines that bisect the screen. (Remember that if you are watching a film that is being presented in a letterbox format, you need to draw the diagonals to that proportion, *not* to the corners of the screen.)
- Watch the film and observe the composition of each shot with reference to the lines on the screen. (It helps to have the volume on low.)
- Make note of the shots that interest you in terms of their visual structure. Then take three pieces of illustration board that have been cut to the aspect ratio of your film. I recommend using 9" by 16.5" for the 1.85 ratio or the equivalent for other ratios. Paint gray scale interpretations of the compositions of your chosen shots. You don't need to slavishly try to copy the frames. Allow yourself some creative freedom and have fun.



Example of grided screen

*Potemkin*

# From Word by Marcie Begleiter to Image

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