

Setting Up Your Shots

Great Camera Moves Every Filmmaker Should Know

2nd Edition

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BASIC CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

I set out to write this book because I wanted to reach beyond the basic cinematic elements that many filmmaking books describe. One of the best ways to learn about these constructs is to watch as many movies as you can. Unfortunately, not everyone who's interested in filmmaking can dedicate that kind of time to the process. This book simplifies the ordeal by compiling the most common and distinct filmmaking techniques taken from hundreds of films.

It can't hurt to go over the basics before we arrive at the next "plateau" of cinematic techniques. I have attempted to provide methods for conceptualizing each element — a way of visualizing what the technique actually looks like. Visualization skills should allow you to look at the world around you in a new, cinematic context. This new sight is similar to what artists see when they start to recognize lines and colors in the world, allowing them to create abstract representations of reality.

A NOTE ON CRAFT

The American film industry is not exactly renowned for its focus on craft. It's a business-oriented machine, where often the realities of cold hard cash outweigh the desires of individual filmmakers to stretch the boundaries of film with unique and interesting ideas. If you do ever manage to secure the financing for a film of your own, you might have only one good chance to demonstrate your skills as a filmmaker. So be prepared.

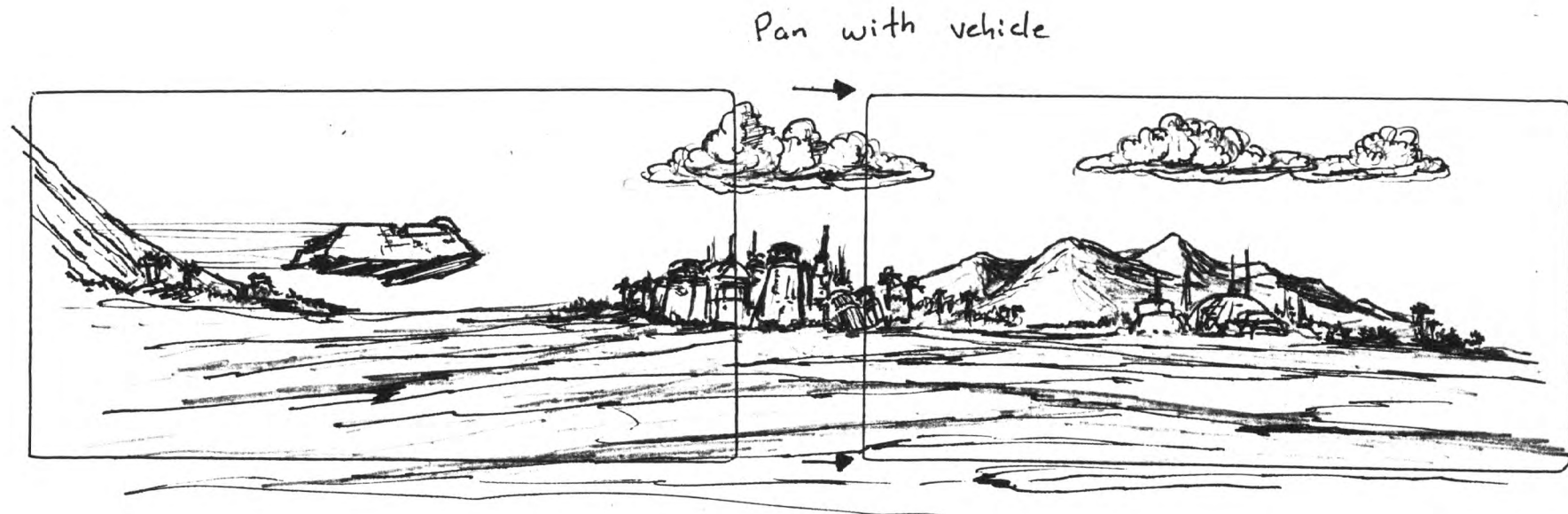
PAN

What does it look like?

Pan is the horizontal axis of camera movement. When the camera pans, it turns left and right. To conceptualize a *Pan*, stare straight ahead and turn your head to the left and to the right. *Panning* is commonly used to look across a very wide panorama that doesn't fit within the camera frame — a landscape, for example. This technique can be used within a scene to follow characters or vehicles as they move around. This is known as re-framing the shot.

Where can I see it?

In Zulu, the camera *Pans* across a seemingly endless line of Zulus on a hill, toward the British waiting in the foreground. Robert Redford is discovered at the bar with a simple *Pan* in The Way We Were.



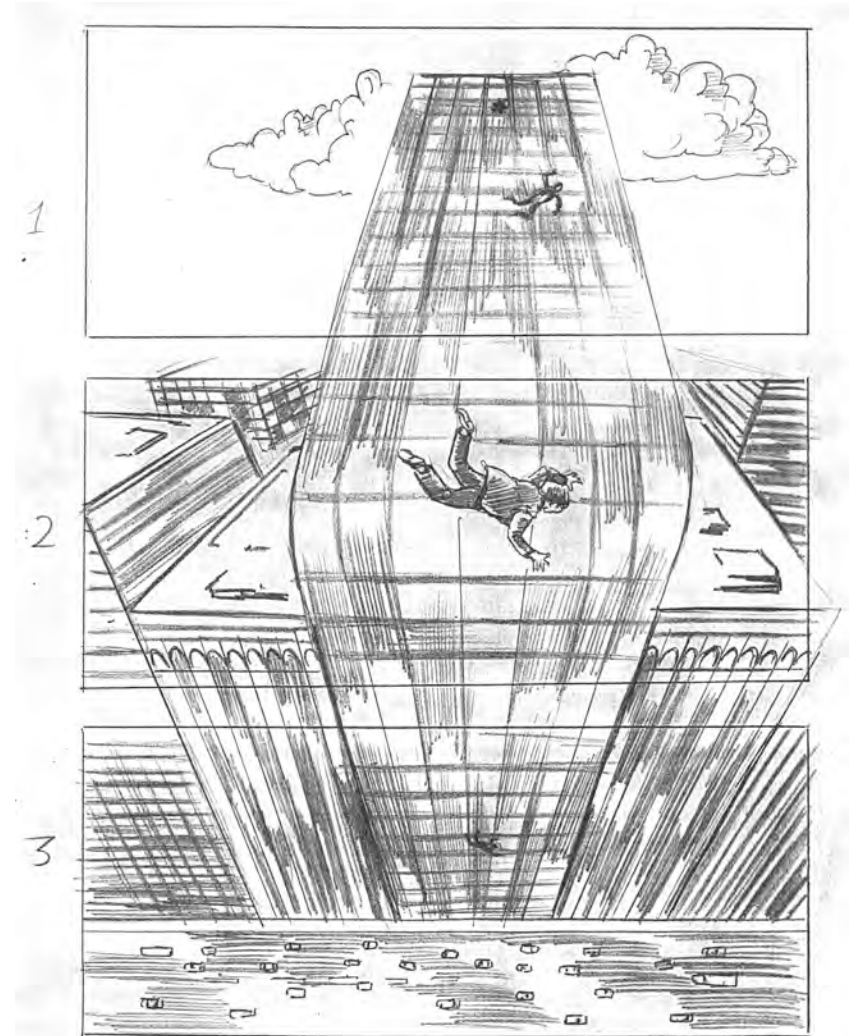
Pan

TILT

What does it look like?

Tilt is the vertical axis of camera movement. When the camera tilts, it pivots up and down. *Tilting* is commonly used to look over tall objects such as a cathedral or an office building.

To conceptualize a *Tilt*, stare straight ahead and pivot your head to look up and down. Like the Pan, this technique is used within a scene to follow characters in motion — known as re-framing the shot.



Tilt

DOLLY, TRACKING SHOT

What does it look like?

Also known as a “Tracking Shot,” *Dolly* is a very natural technique — the camera simply moves horizontally through space. The energy of this technique is similar to a person walking or riding on a moving platform — a wheelchair, for example. To conceptualize a *Dolly*, turn your head toward what you are interested in. Then walk forward and watch the world go by. This is how a *Dolly* movement looks to an audience.

Dolly movements may or may not use an actual dolly. Generally some kind of platform with wheels, the dolly moves along tracks that determine the direction of movement. Tracks must be used because pushing the platform over uneven ground results in shaky and erratic camera movement. The Steadicam is an alternative device that allows a camera to be carried, without experiencing the bumps and jiggles usually associated with handheld camera work. This makes the camera appear to be “floating” through the air. If a camera operator has a steady grip, handheld cameras can create dolly-like movements as well.



Dolly

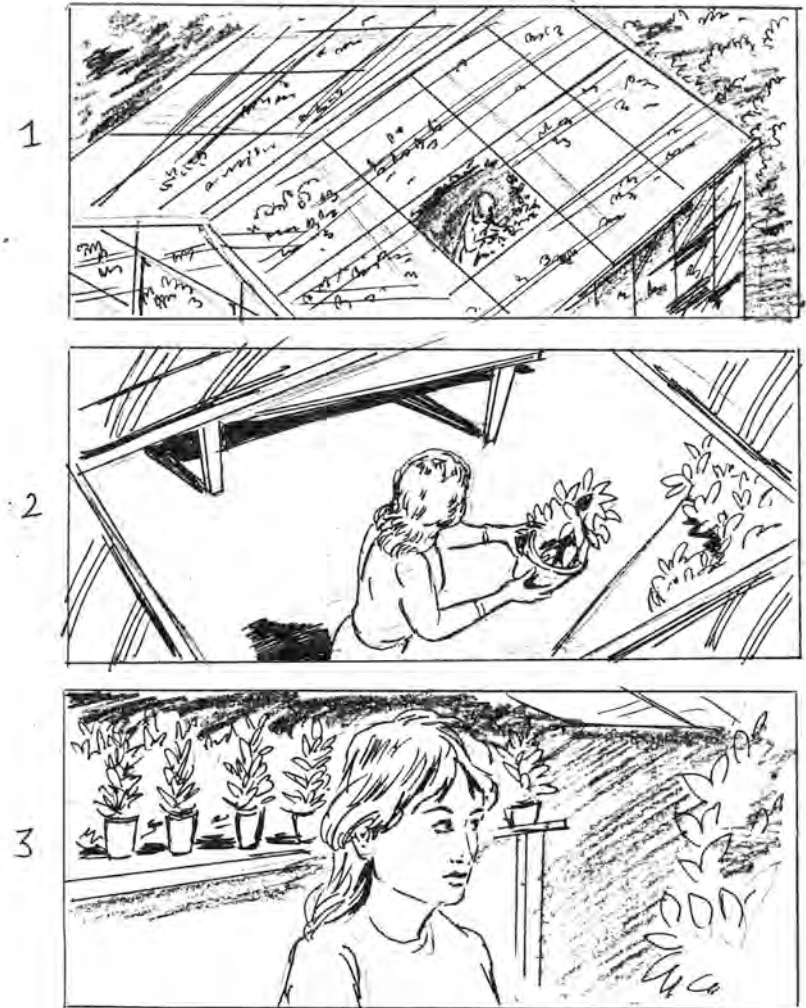
MECHANICAL

What does it look like?

Mechanical techniques include the use of devices that allow filmmakers to create unique and interesting camera movements. These are easier to conceptualize when we can move as the camera does — which is possible if a device has a platform that we can sit or stand on.

Cranes and Jibs are the most common examples of mechanical devices. Each of these devices has a mechanical “arm” on which the camera is mounted. This arm hinges on a pivot that frees the camera to move through space, allowing the creation of sweeping, dramatic camera movements.

There are many other specialized mechanical devices available. Each device creates a unique type of motion that alters the audience’s perception of a film in some special way.



Crane Sequence

PULL FOCUS

What does it look like?

Pulling Focus is considered a natural camera technique. The camera lens operates similarly to the way our vision functions. Our eyes continually alter focus whenever we look at objects at alternating distances in our field of view.

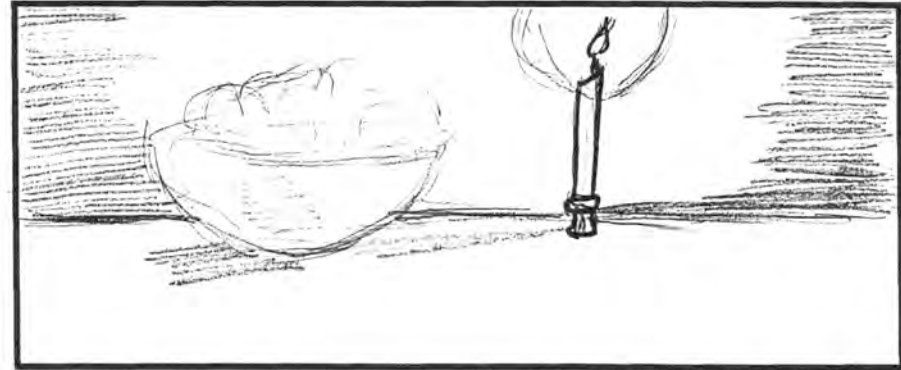
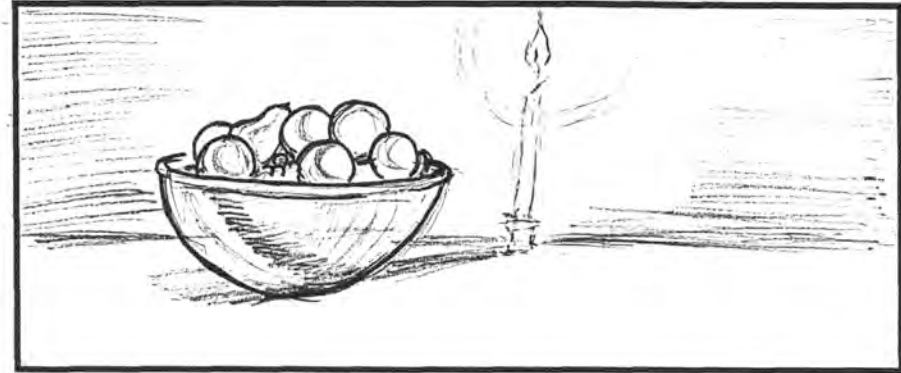
We can either be focused on something close to us or on something far away. Since we generally don't have the ability to focus on both at the same time, our eyes must *Pull Focus* to compensate.

When making a film, *Pulling Focus* is often necessary because most camera lenses don't keep the entire scene in focus. As the camera pans, tilts, and dollies, a crew member called a "focus puller" will adjust the focus to match whatever the camera is looking at and to compensate as actors move through the scene.

To conceptualize this technique, consciously focus on objects at different depths as you look around.

Where can I see it?

In Apocalypto, the camera shows a man being chased, then quickly *Pulls Focus* to reveal the group of men chasing him.



Pull Focus

ZOOM

What does it look like?

The focal length of a camera lens determines the distance that the camera can “see.” Zoom lenses allow the focal length to be gradually changed. With a *Zoom*, the frame may transition from a wide shot to a close-up without ever moving the camera.

The *Zoom* is considered an unnatural technique because our eyes aren’t able to incrementally change their focal length. Because of this, *Zooms* are often used for effect.

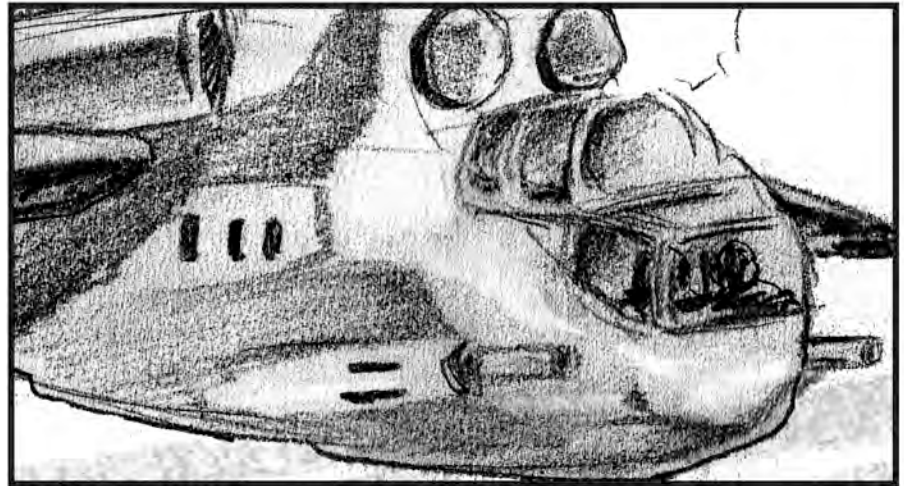
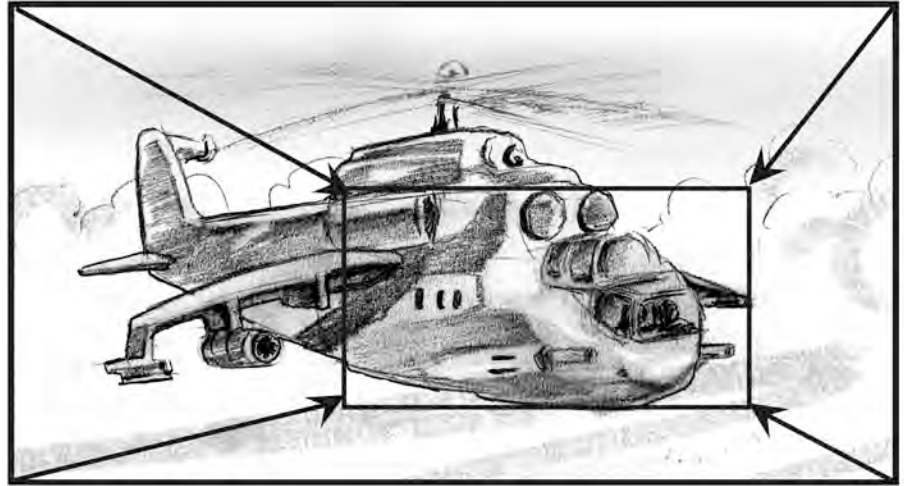
A very slow *Zoom* can be a subtle alternative to a dolly movement in locations where there is no room to rig a dolly and track. A very fast *Zoom* — a whip zoom — can be used to draw attention to objects in a scene.

Where can I see it?

Fluttering *Zooms* are used in G.I. Jane during action sequences. Fluttering *Zooms* are also used in Opera, in conjunction with the sound of a heart beating. The camera *Zooms* in toward and out from still photographs in Soylent Green.

In Zatoichi, an emphatic whip zoom shows a samurai’s face as he’s told his rival’s name.

The Color of Money uses both fast and slow zooms in many scenes. The Wild Bunch showcases many different kinds of zooms — slow, fast, short, extended, zoom in, and zoom out.



Zoom

TRANSITION

What does it look like?

A *Transition* is any method for switching from one image or “frame” to another.

The simplest of all *Transitions* is the cut. A cut may appear almost seamless to the audience, or it may be used to create harsh jumps in time and space.

Dissolves are very common in movies. A dissolve layers a new image over the old one, gradually increasing the new image’s opacity until the transition is complete. Dissolves create a “soft” *Transition*.

Fades slowly change to an image from a colored screen or from an image to a color. The fade color is usually black, but not exclusively. For example: fading to white frequently shows some kind of “explosive” *Transition*. A fade to red could induce the imagery of blood; or blue of the ocean. Fades often begin and end scenes.

Effects *Transitions* use a special effect to transform one image into another. Examples of effects *Transitions* include wipes, page turns, vertical blinds, and morphing. Effects *Transitions* may be accomplished with specialized equipment such as an optical printer, or with a computer.

Where can I see it?

Several horizontal wipe *Transitions* are used in Red Beard.

Effects *Transitions* give Star Wars the feel of an old science fiction B-movie. At the end of Jacob’s Ladder, the scenery fades to white as Jacob ascends into heaven with his son.

MONTAGE

What does it look like?

What is *Montage*? There are at least a few recognizable definitions for the word. The most common of these is: a specific sequence of images in a film, usually without words and often set to music. For clarity I choose to call this the “Montage Sequence.” Many films use this technique to express the passage of time or a sequence of events with little or no dialogue.

According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, a montage is “the combination of elements of different pictures, esp. photographic.” If we go by this definition, then a montage is simply a series of images — like the cuts in a film. Therefore, every film is an example of montage.

Perhaps the most unique description of montage can be found in the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the forefathers of modern film theory. Eisenstein said that montage can be seen in films, and that its essence can be seen everywhere — in writing, in music, in art. Eisenstein’s definition of montage allows for a broader definition — the collection of “elements” that build something — the tastes, sights, sounds, textures, and smells. Because film is purely an audio-visual medium, film montage is based on building up structures that affect the visual and aural senses.

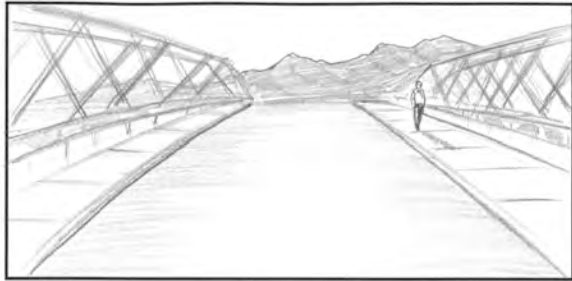
Even though montage is a very important aspect of film, it can be detrimental if not used correctly. André Bazin, a respected French film critic, argued that the lack of montage can actually be beneficial for certain types of films. The reduction of splicing and cutting in a film gives the audience a more realistic perception of the story’s time and space. Without montage, a director cannot cut away to hide falsehoods and mistakes.

Where can I see it?

In *Babel*, *Montage* is used when Cate Blanchett’s injured character is transported by helicopter to a hospital. The entire sequence is shown entirely with images. No dialogue is used.

FRAMING TERMS

Common terms used to frame objects within a scene are generally applied to actors, but can refer to inanimate objects as well. Examples are: a close-up of a phone or an extreme close-up of a coin slot. A director will often capture a collection of master shots, medium shots, and close-ups to provide a variety of footage during editing.



Master/Establishing Shot



Full Shot



Medium Shot



Medium Close-up



Close-up



Extreme Close-up

EXERCISES

- **Pick some of your favorite movies and watch them again.** Instead of watching them for the story, concentrate on the basic techniques the director uses, such as pan, tilt, dolly, mechanical, pull focus, and zoom.
- **Watch for different types of transitions.** Keep an eye out for cuts, fades, dissolves, and wipes. If you have the capability, slow the playback to observe quick transitions in slow motion.
- **Learn about montage.** There are many good books on the subject, including the works of Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin. Montage is a fundamental element of cinema. By exploring this technique, you'll greatly expand your knowledge and your ability to comprehend how films are made.
- **Seek out montage.** Not only will you see montage in movies, but you'll discover that it's a fundamental aspect of art, music, and other fields of creation. Observe how smaller components are combined to create the collection of elements that an audience enjoys.
- **Watch for close-ups, establishing shots, extreme close-ups.** Observe how the director changes the meaning of a shot by the way he frames actors or objects in a scene.



COMPOSITION TECHNIQUES

What is composition? Composition describes the way a director positions, groups, arranges, and views objects within the frame when he's filming a scene. Maybe he composes the shot so that the good characters are all on the left side of the screen and the evil characters are all on the right. Maybe he tilts the camera slightly to add tension to a scene.

The ideas behind composition are inherited from thousands of years of art history, and are every bit as meaningful in the world of motion pictures. This book is by no means meant to be an authoritative subject on framing and composition. There are plenty of good texts already written on that subject. However, some of the composition techniques that are used most often in filmmaking are included here.

CAMERA HEIGHT

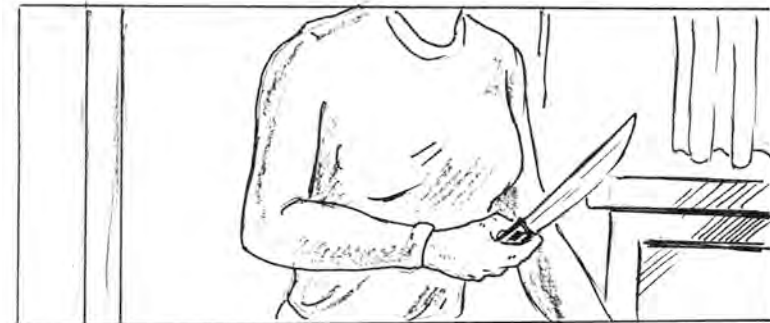
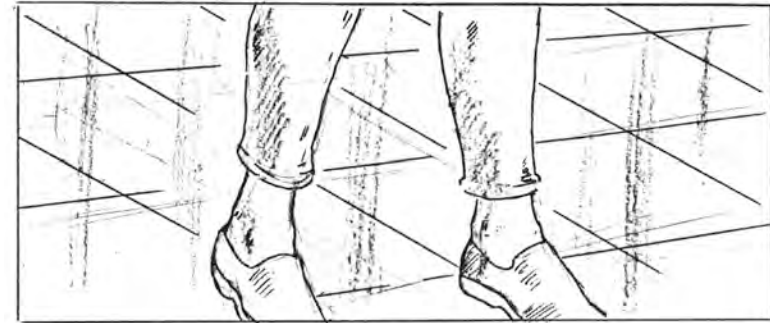
What does it look like?

The height of the camera has a considerable effect on the meaning of a shot.

If you only show a person's feet, there is a mystery — who are they? This is a very common technique. If you show their upper body but not their face, you discover more about them (they might be doing something with their hands), but you still don't really know who they are. Finally, when the camera is brought up to eye level with the actor, the mystery is resolved and the character is revealed.

Where can I see it?

See Rosemary's Baby, near the end, in the scene where Rosemary is carrying a knife. The camera alternates *Camera Heights* to show different aspects of her emotional state. Her feet, the knife in her hands, and a close-up of her fear and anxiety all heighten the effect of the scene.



Camera Heights

DRAMATIC ANGLE, EXTREME ANGLE, BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

What does it look like?

A *Dramatic Angle* adds to the emotional impact of a scene. A low camera angle makes characters and objects seem tall and powerful. A high camera angle gives the characters a diminished feel — as if the audience is looking down on them.

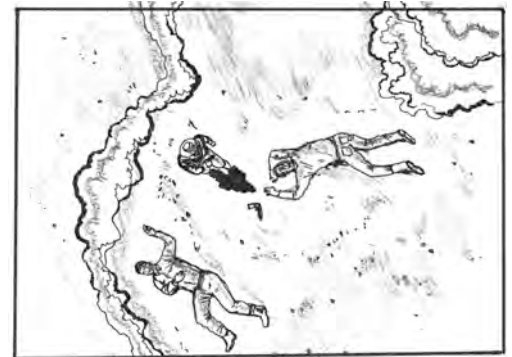
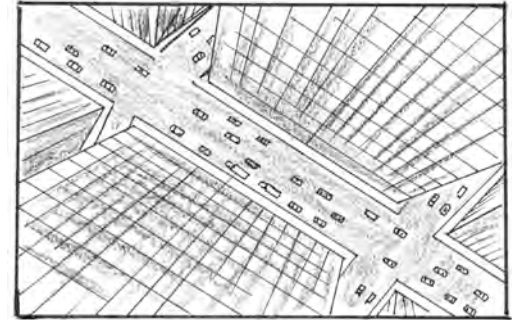
An *Extreme Angle* is a magnified version of a *Dramatic Angle*. An extreme low angle might start below the feet of a subject, staring up into the sky. An extreme high angle could be the view from the top of a tall office building, looking down on the insignificance of humanity.

A *Bird's-Eye View* is an *Extreme Angle* in which the camera is positioned directly above a scene, facing straight down.

Where can I see it?

A high *Dramatic Angle* is used to view the carnage after a shootout in Taxi Driver. A high *Dramatic Angle* is used in Niagara as a man kills his wife. A low angle is used in Stray Dog to view a conversation. Most of the frame is filled with the clouds above.

The Crow uses many *Extreme Angles* to achieve the aesthetic of a comic book, a medium which commonly exaggerates angles and perspective. In Terminator 2: Judgment Day, many of the sequences with the Terminator are shot from a low angle. This technique enhances his image of strength.



Dramatic Angles

SCREEN DIRECTION

What does it look like?

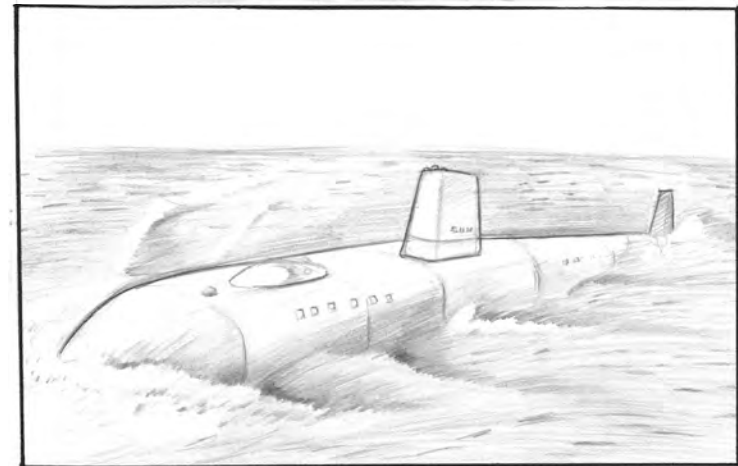
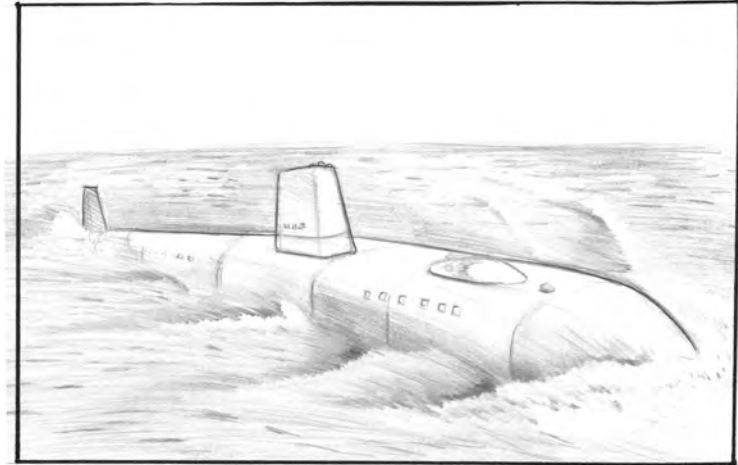
Essential to establishing the visual flow of a collection of shots, *Screen Direction* is simply the direction an object is facing in a scene — left or right. *Screen Direction* can maintain a visual continuity when making cuts, or it can be used in a non-standard way to add impact to a scene.

For example: If a director is filming two actors talking to each other, he might want to use close-ups. He must be careful to always film the actors from the same side. If he doesn't do this, one of the actors might face the right side of the screen in sections of the dialogue and the left side of the screen in others. This would be very disconcerting to an audience.

This is commonly referred to as the 180° rule — you must stay within a 180° arc of the actors in order to maintain consistent *Screen Direction*. Of course, all rules can be broken at the director's discretion.

Where can I see it?

In Das Boot, the submarine always faces toward the right side of the screen when traveling out to sea and toward the left when coming back to port.



Screen Direction

TILTED HORIZON, CANTED ANGLE

What does it look like?

Also known as a “Dutch Tilt” or a “Canted Angle,” *Tilted Horizon* simply involves tipping the camera slightly to the side in order to increase the tension in a scene.

This technique is most effective when there are strong horizontal and vertical lines that the non-uniform camera angle enhances.

Because our eyes are used to seeing everything straight up and down, the diagonals that result from *Tilted Horizon* tend to attract our attention.

Where can I see it?

Tilted Horizon is used extensively throughout The Third Man. *Canted Angles* are used in The Fisher King to indicate Parry’s mental instability.



Tilted Horizon

EXTREME CLOSE-UP

What does it look like?

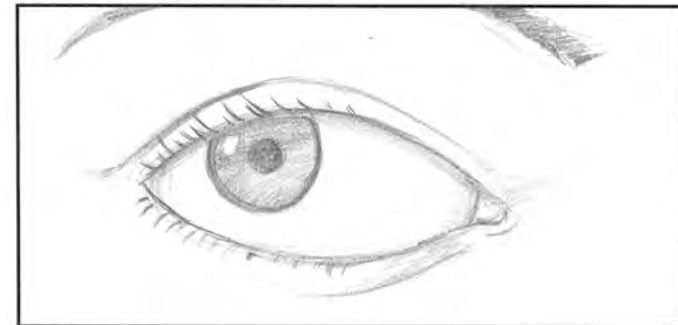
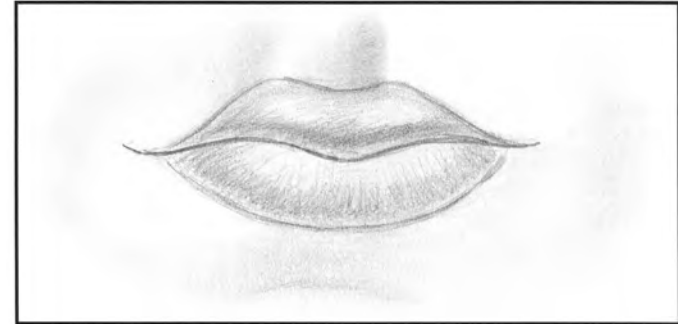
An *Extreme Close-Up* is simply a magnified view of a small object, causing it to fill the entire frame.

Extreme Close-Ups are effective because we are not used to seeing an abnormally magnified level of detail. By filling the frame with a singular feature, the audience's attention is drawn to that subject, to the exclusion of everything else.

Extreme Close-Ups can be used to emphasize a particular scene or a sequence of dialogue. For example: if a character is nervous, the director might cut to an *Extreme Close-Up* of the actor wringing his hands or shifting her eyes.

Where can I see it?

In *U Turn*, *Extreme Close-Ups* are frequently cut in at odd intervals with the action and dialogue. In *The Fifth Element*, we see an *Extreme Close-Up* of Leeloo's eye opening as she discovers the horrors of war.



Extreme Close-Ups

STAGING

What does it look like?

Staging is somewhat the opposite of montage. Instead of cutting between wide shots, close-ups, reversals, and cutaways, *Staging* involves filming in very long sections.

Staging derives its name from its similarity to watching a play being performed on stage. When you watch a play, there is no camera to cut back and forth between the actors. The audience sees all of the action being performed from a single distance and angle.

Where can I see it?

Rope is an experimental Hitchcock film composed of extremely long takes. Woody Allen is known for filming scenes as very long sequences without cutting. This gives the actors more freedom to improvise, because they don't have to worry about how the editor will splice the cuts together in post-production.



Staging

DEEP STAGING, PLANAR STAGING

What does it look like?

Deep Staging involves placing the characters in the frame at excessive distances from each other, emphasizing depth. One character could be all the way down the hallway, while the other character sits in close-up toward the front.

Planar Staging has roots in the theater, where all the characters are lined up on a stage. *Planar Staging* emphasizes a flat surface for staging a scene.

Where can I see it?

In The Virgin Spring, the characters line up at a dinner table as an example of *Planar Staging*. In The Outsiders, a deep frame is used. Dally runs in the foreground and a cop car is far in the background on a rain slicked street.

In Red Beard, four doctors sit to have a meal. They are composed left to right, facing the camera, an example of *Planar Staging*.

Citizen Kane makes considerable use of *Deep Staging*. In 2001: A Space Odyssey, there is a conference in which the speaker stands at a podium far in the background.



Planar Staging



Deep Staging

LEAD THE EYE

What does it look like?

A director can compose a scene in such a way that objects within the scene *Lead the Eye* toward a specific object, character, or section of the frame.

Leading the Eye is often accomplished with the use of a long object such as a fence, a winding road, a dinner table, or even a line of actors. The advantage of this technique is that it makes it easier for the audience to figure out what to focus on in a complicated scene, or it can simply be used for aesthetic effect.

Where can I see it?

In Through a Glass Darkly, a long pier *Leads the Eye* out into the ocean. In Witness, a group of Amish sit in a line. This line of actors *Leads the Eye* toward a block of Amish standing in the background. Witness also uses long roads and fences to *Lead the Eye*. Liv Ullman runs down a long road in Shame, searching for her husband.

A row of burning Chinese junks *Lead the Eye* in The Sand Pebbles. A curving road *Leads the Eye* in How Green Was My Valley. A long stone wall *Leads the Eye* to a duel in Barry Lyndon.

A row of parking meters *Lead the Eye* in Cool Hand Luke. Railroad tracks also *Lead the Eye* far into the background in another scene. A line of lamps on a table *Lead the Eye* to a CEO in the background in Network. A flagpole *Leads the Eye* in Fearless towards Jeff Bridges below.

A truck rolls down a hill over a long road in Paper Moon. A bridge *Leads the Eye* in Thunderbolt and Lightfoot.



Lead the Eye

3'S AND 4'S

What does it look like?

A helpful technique is to realize that the human eye naturally forms bonds and connections between objects within a scene. Our sense of natural composition often sees harmony in objects that form triangles, or groups of 3's. This can be useful when composing scenes with a small number of actors, or a couple of actors and an object or icon in the background.

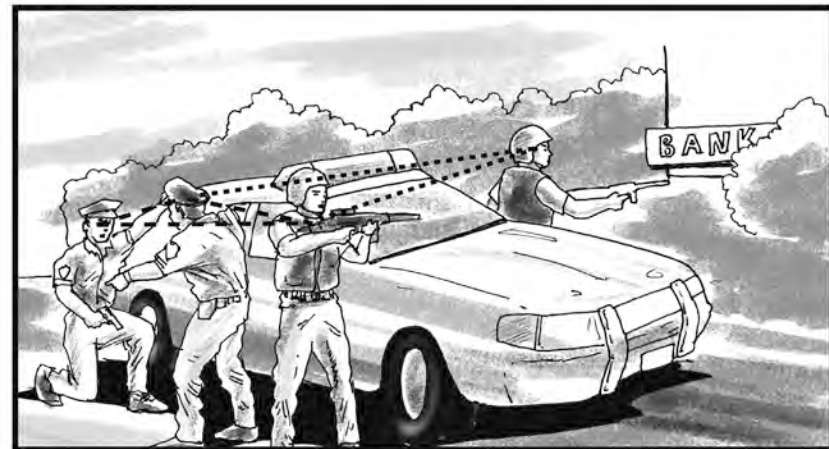
In more complicated scenes, in which there are more than 3 characters, it may be helpful to conceptualize each group of actors as their own separate 'triangle group'. If you're trying to shoot a scene with lots of characters, and they're all changing positions this can be useful. Keeping an eye on the triangle groups should help you maintain a reasonable composition as the scene shifts and changes.

Where can I see it?

In The Seventh Seal, Jof, Mia, and Antonius sit and discuss their lives in a 3-type composition. In Signs, the four members of the family form their own 4-type composition, consisting of two triangles with a shared line. In The Big Lebowski, three men sit in a theater, discussing their plans.

In Winter Light, as two characters talk, a large crucifix in the background makes up the 3-type composition. In The Life Aquatic, two actors talk in a bar. Extras in the background form 3-type compositions as an "addition" to the two actors in foreground. A detective at a bar, the crowd behind him and dancing girls on stage form a 3-type composition in Le Cercle Rouge.

Jim, his mother on the stairs, and his father are all arranged in a 3-type composition in Rebel Without a Cause.



3's and 4's

INTERIOR FRAME

What does it look like?

The frame created by the film camera to surround the image we see on screen is the exterior frame. For added effect, the filmmaker can add an *Interior Frame*, such as a window, a bush, or a door.

This effect isolates the characters even further within the frame and makes the scene stand out from a group of actors performing in an open space.

Where can I see it?

In Children of Men, we watch a character through a pane of broken glass that is used as an *Interior Frame*. In Signs, we see the family eating dinner through the door of a restaurant. This is also seen in The Last Wave. In 13 Tzmeti, the *Interior Frame* is a window pane as a roof worker watches a couple talking below. In 8 1/2, a child is framed by the raised arms of a statue.

In Winter Light, we see a woman in her classroom as if standing outside in the hall. In The Silence, *Interior Framing* is used to show a woman in the bathroom through the bathroom door. In Dirty Harry, we see Clint through a broken window. Dustin Hoffman is framed through Mrs Robinson's arched leg in The Graduate. *Interior Framing* is used in Nevada Smith as the character approaches the house where his parents have been killed.

We see a dead agent framed through a light shade in The Ipress File. A sequence is framed by a windshield as a character searches for a kidnapped boy in Shoot the Piano Player.



Interior Frames

LAYERS

What does it look like?

Within every shot and every scene, the director has the opportunity to compositionally build up his scene in *Layers*. Background objects can add hints or details to what is going on in the midground. Foreground objects can appear to emphasize depth. Midground objects can be used to separate the foreground and background *Layers*.

This technique is useful in building up detail in a scene. Remember, a cinematic shot is more than simply pointing a camera at a face or an object and rolling the camera. Every detail within the scene can be used to alter the audience's perception of the story and/or cinematic context.



Layers

Where can I see it?

In *Gloria*, a woman shoots through a car full of men. The bullets speed from the background, through the midground, through the foreground, toward us. This use of *Layers* is very effective in emphasizing the impact her actions have by stacking several actions into one frame. In *Cast Away*, Tom Hanks loses his precious volleyball. Director Robert Zemeckis uses *Layers* to show the audience where the volleyball is, but not the character. In *Cast Away*, we see a picture of a wife marrying her new husband in the background *Layer* of a scene after Chuck Noland comes back from the island. In *Titanic*, *Layers* are used to show a whistle in the foreground. This whistle doesn't seem important at first, but later on it will be crucial to ensuring Rose's survival.

In *The Yakuza Papers*, many Yakuza are *Layered* in groups throughout the scenes. In *The Eagle Has Landed*, portraits of Hitler face the camera in a foreground *Layer*. In *Bonfire of the Vanities*, we see a gargoyle head in the foreground layer, and New York in the background far away. In *Do the Right Thing*, characters move between the foreground *Layer* (inside the restaurant) and the background *Layer* (outside, seen through the restaurant window) without cutting.

A scene in *Paper Moon* has three *Layers*: a ticket salesman in foreground, Ryan O'Neal in the midground, and Tatum O'Neal in the background.

MULTI-LAYER ACTION

What does it look like?

With *Multi-Layer Action*, the audience watches one scene occur in the foreground while another occurs in the background.

This can be an exciting way to bring together storylines or to show the relationships between multiple story paths in a film.

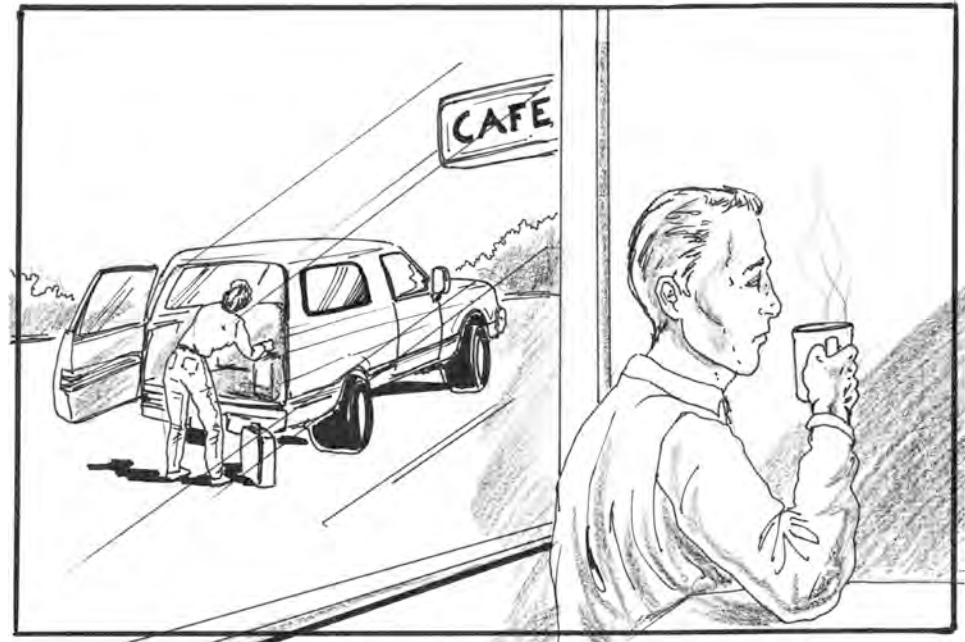
Where can I see it?

In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, we see two pirates with a chest, a woman, and three men fighting with swords. Each of these character groups is acting in a separate layer of the scene.

In *Shoot the Piano Player*, three people argue in the background while the main character stands in the foreground and we hear a voiceover of his thoughts.

In *Red*, the camera focuses on two layers of an exterior scene. In the foreground is a man's girlfriend, walking toward his apartment. In the background, a model runs outside to turn off her car alarm.

In *Touch of Evil*, Vargas is on the phone in the foreground. A cop and a gangster in custody stand outside, seen through the window.



Multi-Layer Action

EXERCISES

- **Read a few good books on composition.** You can find this information in books about photography, fine arts, graphic design, and more. Composition has been studied for thousands of years. There is plenty of material on the subject.
- **Visit an art gallery or read a photography book.** Try to identify the compositional techniques you have learned within a work of art. Use these techniques in any films you direct.
- **Watch some movies and concentrate on how the director composes objects in a scene.** Skilled directors will use every cinematic technique available to them, including composition.
- **Practice composition.** You don't need an expensive film camera to do this. You can practice with pencil and paper, or by simply observing the composition of objects in the world around you. Also look at magazines, billboards, logos, and any kind of graphic design to see composition at work.