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## **1 Introduction**

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In the following pages we want to describe different techniques used in movie-composition and the importance of the use of these.

These methods mean much more than you can think of. The atmosphere, the interpretation and the entire whole depends on how the director makes use of the mentioned rules and guidelines.

We have tried to illuminate the most used methods in media-production, in addition to how to use them in different cases.

## 2 Image composition in movies

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### 2.1 The screen

Concerning the dimensions of the TV, we know that it is almost impossible to composite images of a high quality. For instance, it is difficult to show beautiful landscapes or create a large distance between persons having a conversation. Much energy and creativity should be used to avoid this fact.

This can be done for instance, by not showing walls, ceilings etc. in a room. The viewers know that a room have these things, and "puts" those elements that are mentally outside the borders of the screen, in there themselves.

In this way we can break the borders of the screen and create space on the outside. In the picture of a screen, there are six spaces to work with:

- The four sides of the screen (left, right, top, bottom)
- The space behind the camera
- The space in front of the camera

So, it is not necessary to show entire objects. The viewer adds the missing, themselves.

But, if we composite within the borders of the screen, we can use this to make a feeling of claustrophobia, which this composition does.

A composition that breaks the borders of the screen, gives a sense of a larger and wider image. This "impossible" format can also be obtained with black areas in the top and bottom.

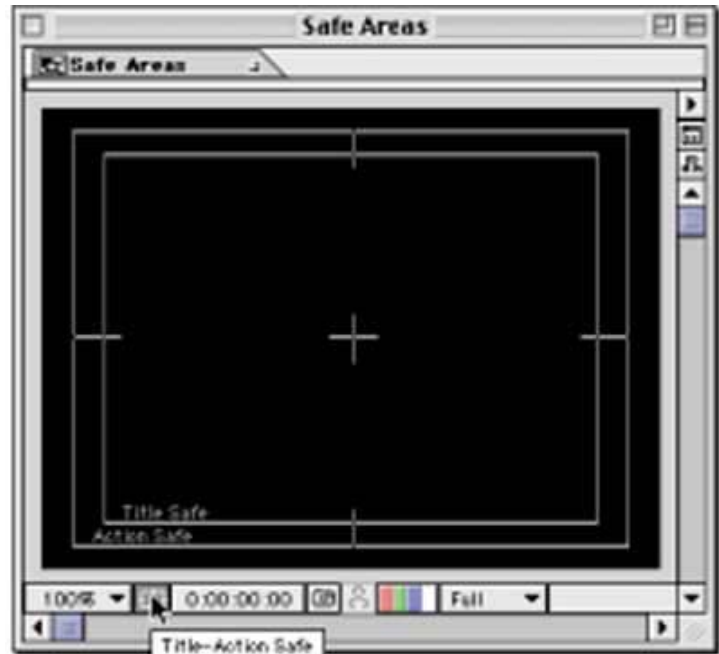
Rules that you have to consider when you make movies are for example the rules about action- and title safe areas.

The action safe area is the region on the screen there is 5% from each edge. It is assumed that any action and happenings outside this area will be cut out of the scene by the television. It is though a good idea to let the background be, even if it goes out of the area. This assures you that no black or empty space is seen on the screen. Just not anything that is expected by the viewer to see.

The title safe area is the area that is another 5% from the action safe area. You have to keep your titles inside this area to assure that all the titles are readable.

These basic rules are made to make your images fit in an optimal viewing on a standard TV.

(I.e. 10% of each edge on the screen should be filled with nothing important. This ensures that the viewer gets both the action and the titles.)



When these things are considered you can keep on making your movie, by starting to think about how to build up the scenes.

## 2.2 The zones of the screen

It is tempting to see the screen as a piece of white paper, on which we can freely start making pictures. But it is an instinct to us all to see the screen for what it is, because we get very structural presentations from it every day. The News is a very good example on how we use certain zones, in a very structural way. The reporter have a static placement in the picture, the logos are placed in fixed spots, and the same rules with the subtitles and nametags.

The two horizontal zones above and at the bottom are reserved for names etc. The centerfield, the field in the middle, is the place for all the action. Then there are left and right fields used for different things on turn, but the left have a special importance. This is where our attention are fastest caught, and it is here people from the advertising business put in their information. Centerfield are also used for this. If the name of the product is not in these two fields, at least we can be certain that the composition starts here.

The centerfield is, sadly, the most used field. Sad because it is a lack of imagination to always draw all attention towards the centre of the screen. And that can be a ruining of all films using this method.

Maybe a scene starts outside a house, and we have to go inside and introduce a person with importance to the story. Maybe there is a tree standing in the garden. In that case we could place the angle so that we have the tree in the left side of the picture with its branches hanging towards the middle, above the door. If we equal the picture with an open window in the right side of the screen, we have a centre-oriented picture. Then we can cut to the next picture from inside the house with the person in the middle.

In this way we can mask the composition of the picture, and in the same way we help the viewers to quickly adapt themselves to the next shot.

This would also be a typically thing to do if we would have a scene with two persons fighting, and at the same time a third person are sitting in the middle. This would be a scene of a longer period of time. The one person could be placed at the left, looking right. We shoot the scene from this angle. After that we take the scene with the person on the right side looking towards the left, and maybe moving a little towards the left. At last we take the angle with the person in the middle. When these are put together, the effect will be that two of the persons are fighting over the left side, and the third person is caught in the middle.

This shot is an example of balance. The two outer characters assure that the picture does not tilt and the character in the middle gives the picture a kind of a symmetric view.



Taken from the movie: Minority Report by Steven Spielberg

We can also let one of the persons go out of the screen, which have an effect of attention on the room outside the screen. This makes the picture more alive and not fake at all.

We could also use a frame in front of the camera, and record through the hole of the frame, so that we only use the centerfield of the picture. The effect of this would be that the screen seems larger, because the viewers imagine that there is something behind the frame – like

more room, which they can not see.

The zones must not lock the viewers' attention in a certain spot for to long time. They are meant as a tool for the director to continue the course of the film, and with this we should never be afraid to break the frames of the screen.

### **3 Reading Pictures**

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When we read a book, we do it line by line until the author ends it with a period. Pictures are friendlier in the sense that we can cope with them in a matter of milliseconds, and read many things in it. Indeed films are moving pictures, so this means that we have to stop and wait to be sure that everyone understands the meaning. But still there is enough time between the shifting of the pictures to let us think of the one problem: Where in the picture, do we start “reading”?

We miss the structural lines of a book, in the movies. Therefore the director has to explain the viewers where to start their reading of the pictures. –If there is a certain spot, he wants us to focus on, or if the focus point is free of choice.

#### **3.1 Bounding the reading of pictures**

The bounding form of reading pictures we all know, because this is what we use, when we are looking for something. We have a perception of the shape, colour etc. of how the object should be. The same can be used in film, if the director makes it clear what we are looking for. The simplest are to use faces, concentrate on close-ups, but we can also use colours or geometric shapes. In this way we can force the viewers to start their reading on a certain spot in the picture.

##### *3.1.1 Reading extension*

The reading extension is a method used to make the viewers chose their own point of focus. We fill the picture with individual objects to stimulate the viewer, to seek upon the picture to at last get an experience of a whole. This will often be shots of landscapes, or a street filled with people, that use this method.

#### **3.2 Composition in movies**

When the main purpose and story of the film are made, the developments of something we can compare with the measure in a piece of music are made. All the separate pieces that are individual, but has to be gathered together to form a whole, is an important development.

We have three forms of picture-composition in film:

1. Composition within a single camera-shot
2. Composition between two camera-shots, where one follows the other
3. Composition between a series of camera-shots

In all three methods we use some ground principals of composition, but actually it is important to keep the musical kind of ideas at all times. This helps to keep a sort of rhythm and whole in the film, so that we avoid chopping it up in little parts by mistake. We keep thinking forward, instead of halt because of a brilliant composition, and try to keep the rhythm so we keep a straight line.

What the pictures contains, are luckily a matter that no theoretic should take care of. Some people prefer nice, “eye-candy” pictures for their entertainment. Others want close encounters of life. This is as good as any, as long as the film has the personal touch of the director.

### **3.3 Composition within a single camera shot**

Many people are of the opinion that the size of the picture are to small. –This could be because of people that compare the screen on a TV with the screen of a cinema, or because the composition is wrong. A wrong composition could be that the picture is filled with things that do not really matter, and then they conflict with the attention of the viewer.

Every time someone records something with the camera, they make a composition, which means that they select something to focus on, and cut out the rest. And at the same time they are bound by the dimensions of the screen

Different ways to easily fill the screen with objects and persons could be:

#### *3.3.1 Rule of third*

We can cut the screen in three parts in same size in every direction. For this we can use a delete able marker to draw two lines in vertical direction and two in horizontal, and then we have some clear areas for use in composition.

This rule can be used by having an object in the





foreground of the left vertical fields, and in the middle horizontal field we have something in the background.

By using this composition, you achieve a more interesting and balanced shot.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3.2 *The golden mean*

Used through generations the compositional principal called "the golden mean", have been the most used method for image harmony and attention.

The golden mean, divides the image in nine parts, which are made by drawing lines  $\frac{3}{8}$  from each of the sides. This pattern is used for composition. Elements of importance are placed in the intersections, and the field in the middle gathers the attention.

Horizontal lines are, in this way, perceived as harmonic when they do not split the image right over.

Basically this form of composition is a splitting of the screen.



Taken from the movie: Minority Report by Steven Spielberg

This is an example of this theory. The character splits the screen in the middle with the left side of his face which gives us an obvious focus-point.

When we use the golden mean, we have to keep in mind that we are only able to use this within the screen, on the image shown.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.susanchambers.com/learn/greatpictures2.shtml>

The image can be divided in three axis of composition:

- Left/right axis, in which the left side are “heavier” than the right
- Up/down axis, in which the top are “heavier” than the bottom
- Foreground/background axis, in which elements in the foreground are “heavier” than the ones in the background.

Concerning the placement of elements:

- A placement in the top appears dominating.
- A placement in the bottom appears weak and evading.
- A composition in a tight frame, create a feeling of claustrophobia.
- A loose frame, create a perception of freedom and lightness.
- Elements placed in both the left and right of the screens, would create a counteraction.
- Elements placed together in the middle, would seem as they are related/attracted to each other.
- A dynamic balance is created by using elements of different sizes and shapes.
- A non-dynamic balance are created by placing identical elements appear in balance.<sup>2</sup>

The more clear and saturated a colour is, the more ”weight” it appears to have. Isolated objects have more “weight” than grouped objects.

Colours can be used to gather elements, and to separate them. They can be used to create depth and balance.

### **The eye are being attracted**

We can attract the focus of the eye with:

- Motion
- Contrast in light, from light to dark
- Saturated colours
- Huge masses
- Guidelines

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.cybercollege.com/tvp023.htm> & <http://www.cybercollege.com/tvp024.htm>

- Regular repeating shapes
- Irregular and complex images
- From foreground to background
- From left to right
- From top to bottom
- A focus in the middle

Other elements that can be used for getting attention are:

- Light
- Big objects
- Sound

For instance the eyes are by nature, focused on big objects and discriminating small objects. But the small element can draw attention by using a saturated colour.

In short – colours sound and motion draws attention.

### 3.3.3 *Depth*

The screen itself is flat, and has only two dimensions which are height and width. But with the composition of elements, guidelines and colours we can create a third dimension: Depth. This is created by using perspective of foreground, middle ground and background. Perspective lines can also be used for creating depth.

Colours as well, can be used. Warm and saturated colours draw attention, while cold and bright colours have a tendency to fall back. In movies warm colour are used for the foreground, and the cold colours for the background.



Taken from the movie: Minority Report by Steven Spielberg

The light and blurred background makes the foreground seem more obvious and clear.

### 3.4 Composition between two camera shots or more

The shapes of geometry are very good to use as “skeleton” for the construction of the picture. As this skeleton the triangular might be the best. With its simple shape, the equilateral, it appears calmed and stabile, when resting on the one side.

#### 3.4.1 *Triangular*

If we record a person sitting, with his arms resting on a table, we have exactly this composition with his arms and head being the calmed triangle.

With this we can, in the next shot, show people on the street within the same triangle.

The two frames below are an example of this. The first frame has the focus-point in the middle with a form of a triangle which takes us to the next frame where the focus-point stays the same place.



Taken from the movie: Magnolia by P. T. Anderson



Taken from the movie: Magnolia by P. T. Anderson

The triangle can also appear unstable and threatening, and all it takes is that it has to rest on one of the angles. This composition method contains a lot of options, so it can take some time with the storyboard, if we want to draw in the lines.

### 3.4.2 Circle

The circle is a concentrated shape and its circular lines give a sense of motion. In paintings containing battle scenes, this has been used a lot, in shape of a spiral.

In movies, the motion is already there, so the circle has not the same importance, but is more used as a part of a composition together with triangles and squares. Typically in portraits, where the triangle makes the frame around the circle on the face could be an example.

As a crossing between two or more frames, we can start with the circle used on a wheel, and after that capture a face that is used as a component in a pointy triangle. Motion combined with the circular shape can also be used as composition. We could also try to follow a bike, and then in the next shot we see a detail from it (the bell for instance), which make a good powerful crossing.

An example could be in the Gladiator, where the Colosseum has the shape of a circle. This is the centre of the happening. The crowd expects to be a part of a bigger whole, which would be the fighting and the killing. The shape of this Colosseum gives the viewer the impression of something huge to come. And as the movie goes on, this arena becomes a part of a whole.

The last fight in the movie is centred further, by making a circle in the circle with warriors, around the two main-characters. (As seen in the screen dumb below)



Taken from the Gladiator by Ridley Scott

### 3.4.3 Square

The shape of the square is already in the shape of the screen, and all too often it is used as a calm frame of a picture, which is the component with the object in the middle.

When we capture a scene with some persons that are having a conversation, they will usually form a square, a rectangle. If this should be made more exiting, we have to use this rectangle more efficient.



We could draw this rectangle and deposit the length of the short side to be used on the baseline. In this way we get two squares that overlap each other and a field in the middle in which we can place a person. If we then draw the diagonals of the two squares, we get yet some fields to use in our composition.

In one shot we can use the whole rectangle, in the next just one of the squares, and after that one of the triangles made from the diagonals.<sup>3</sup>

These composition opportunities have to be a natural part of a movie, so that they serve the viewers the things that the director wants them to understand, and also to keep the kind of “rhythm” mentioned earlier. Often we can come to a halt, when we have to make a sequence through several shots. But here we can make use of the geometric shapes.

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<sup>3</sup> Viggo Holm Jensen & Henning Pryds - Videoteknik Fortælle teknik

## 4 Conclusion

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In the previous we have lightened up the meaning and the importance of the use of movie-composition in general.

All these methods is applied and put together in a certain way that gives the director perfect control over the viewers' experience of the messages he want to give them.

The methods are also very necessary if you want to keep the audience through the entire movie. If the film does not have the right composition, the audience gets confused, and that is not the purpose. The explained rules are therefore good guidelines to create rhythm and harmony in the movie.

With our examples of the different compositions we verify the significance of the theories in movie-making. And we show that it is possible in any chosen movie to find the used composition-methods.

## **5 References**

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### **BOOKS:**

Henrik Brøndsted – Video, Håndbog for billedmagere.

Viggo Holm Jensen & Henning Pryds - Videoteknik Fortælle teknik

Allan Casebier – Filmforståelse

Per B. Katz & Henrik Poulsen – Fokus, en grundbog i film, tv, video

### **INTERNET:**

<http://www.cybercollege.com/tvp023.htm>

<http://www.cybercollege.com/tvp024.htm>

### **OTHER MATERIAL:**

PDF-files from Arthur Stein's class