

FROM: FILM PRODUCTION TECHNIQUE  
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WEEK

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## Creating the Shots

### The Language of the Camera

Motion picture film is made up of a series of still photographic images. When projected in succession, these images provide the illusion of movement. Each individual photographic image is called a *frame*—a discrete entity that, just as in painting, has shapes and forms arranged in a *composition*. A sequence of frames is called a *shot*, which is commonly defined as the footage created from the moment the camera is turned on until it is turned off. Despite several styles of film that have specialized approaches, the shot is generally considered the basic building block of a film.

If the shot is the film's basic building block, the *setup* is the basic component of a film's production. Establishing a setup, also referred to as a *camera position*, *placement*, or, simply, *angle*, is just what the name suggests: arranging the camera to execute a shot. If you need a simple shot of a character saying "Yes," you have to set up the camera, do some basic set decoration, work out the lighting, record the sound, and so on. If you then want another character to respond "No," you have to go through the same process to execute that shot. A setup may involve something as simple as a single line of dialogue or it may cover extensive material that will be used throughout a scene.

Beyond these basic definitions, it is important to start thinking of the shots as accomplishing goals, dramatic or otherwise. A shot may show us a necessary piece of information or help create an atmosphere. It may serve as a simple delivery device for a line of dialogue, or produce associations that would not be elicited without its presence. A shot does not have to be discussed in a purely narrative (story) context. Like an abstract detail in a pointillist painting, it may be one piece in a grander abstract plan. It may add to the kinetic energy (movement) of a piece, such as in music videos. All shots have a purpose and must be thought out in terms of their relationship to the greater whole of the film. A shot has to do something because, whatever its content or purpose, its presence will have an impact.

When discussing shots, the idea of choice is key to the filming of any action—simple or complex, conventional or unconventional. Filmmakers repeatedly face a deceptively simple question: *Where do I put the camera to "cover" this action [this line of dialogue, this facial expression] in a way that is involving and dramatically effective?* Although covering the action implies a purely functional approach, there must be

an internal logic to the way the camera is being used—a logic that fits the dramatic context and the formal approach of the material being shot. There must be a reason why a closer shot is used at a specific point. There must be a reason why you withdraw from the action with a wider shot at another point. A scene in which the presentation has not achieved some internal logic will appear shapeless and “undirected.” The choices made will structure the viewer’s perception of the scene and contribute to defining the shape and meaning of the film. The determining factors in choosing specific shots are the context of the material and the greater structure of shots in which each single shot participates.

Overshadowing this idea of choice should be an awareness that all the decisions made on a set (camera, lighting, sound, and so on) are driven by the demands of the editing room. Each shot must be approached with a sense of the whole film in mind—a process called *shooting for the edit*. A film crew comprises many skilled professionals, all of whom must at some level understand how the scene being filmed is going to cut together. The sound people must know what the editors need to cut the audio tracks. The cameraperson must think about what compositions will cut together and whether the scenes are being appropriately covered. The lighting crew needs to understand that the quality of light must be continuous from one shot to the next.

With the exception of a few specialized approaches, virtually every film—whether narrative, experimental, documentary, or animated—has to confront this question of the relationship of the camera to the subject and surroundings. Some common strategies for shooting scenes—and having a strategy is crucial—are developed throughout this text, but any plan must come from the filmmaker’s understanding of the materials at hand and the dramatic needs of the subject matter. Whatever the approach to shooting, keep in mind that someone (possibly you) will have to fit all the pieces together. The beginning of the process must be informed by the end.

## The Shots

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Though this text devotes much attention to the *technical* elements of filmmaking, developing a thoughtful and intelligent approach to using the camera is the long-term goal. These first chapters propose the development of a menu of what many consider the resources—or the language—of cinema (see figure 3-1 for a summary). Such a list risks simplifying many complex issues, but the following should serve as an introduction to an array of commonly used shots employed to achieve specific dramatic goals within individual scenes. In determining a strategy for filming any action, whether straightforward or complex, the choices are limitless.

## Proxemics

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*Proxemics*, from *proximity*, refers to the distance between subject and camera. Essentially, there are three basic positions: long shot, medium shot, and close-up. There are many points in between and outside these three, such as medium close-ups and extreme long shots, but these alternative positions can be seen, and will be treated, as variations of the basic three. In studio television production, shot descriptions are very clearly defined and, especially when given as part of the instructions to a camera operator, have very specific meanings. In film production interpretation of specific positions is not always so rigid.

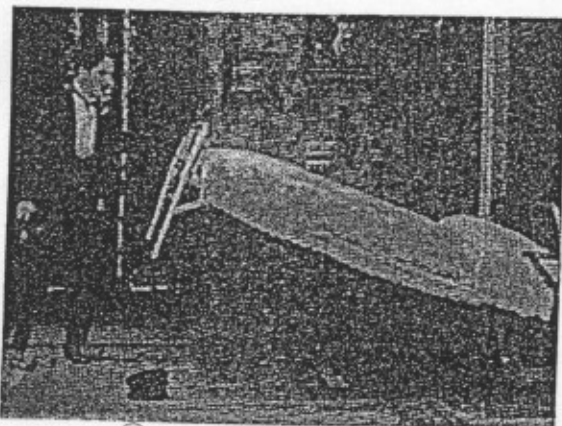
**2-1**

A long shot includes the full human body or more  
Anthony Hopkins in Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999)

**2-2**

A full-body shot, or full shot, includes just the person  
from head to toe

Charlie Chaplin's *One A.M.* (1916)

**2-3**

In an extreme long shot, subjects often look remote  
and isolated

Steve Buscemi in *Fargo*

**LONG SHOT**

A *long shot (LS)* is any shot that includes the full human body or more. **SEE 2-1** A shot that includes just the person from head to toe is alternately called a *full-body shot* or a *full shot*. A shot in which the subject is exceptionally far away from the camera is called an *extreme long shot (ELS)*.

The LS tends to be random in the information it presents. If there is a general shot of people in a space, it would be difficult for viewers to distinguish which character or characters are supposed to be the main subject of the shot. Momentarily discounting the notion that many elements, such as lighting, costume, and composition, can direct our attention to specific parts of the frame, we cannot logically value one character over another in a long shot. Closer shots are then used to convey much more specific information.

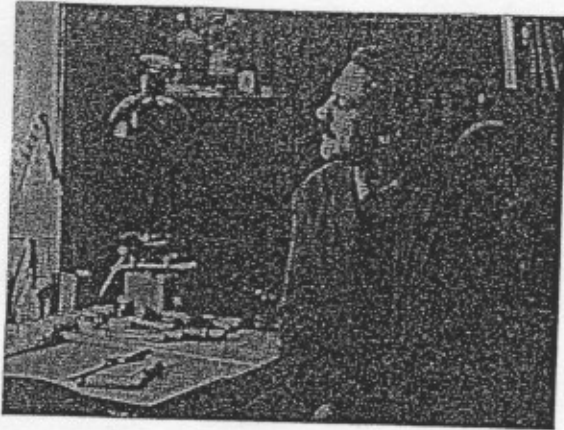
The full-body shot was much used by filmmakers in the early years of filmmaking but has fallen into modest disfavor in recent years. Director Charlie Chaplin shot almost exclusively in full-body shots. **SEE 2-2** He wanted the viewer to see both his body language and his facial expressions, without the involvement of closer shots or the clutter of complex editing.

The long shot, and even more so the extreme long shot, can also be used to diminish the subject. Presenting a lone figure in a vast landscape will make the figure appear overwhelmed by the surroundings. Westerns are well known for using both the LS and the ELS to achieve this effect, giving us rugged individuals within vast panoramas of untamed space. Other genres use this effect as well: In Ethan and Joel Coen's *Fargo* (1996), a character (Steve Buscemi) buries some money in a vast wasteland of snow and ice. **SEE 2-3** The emptiness and emotional aridity of the space give visual representation to the insanity of hiding a treasure with no visible landscapes for retrieval, serving as a metaphor for lives led with no visible relation to meaningful action—lives with no bearings.

**MEDIUM SHOT**

The shot of a person from the waist up gives more detail than the full-body shot but is generally neutral in its presentation of the subject. **SEE 2-4** The *medium shot (MS)* represents how we interact with people in life, at least in American culture. When two people speak, they generally address each other in something roughly approximating the medium shot, which literally puts the viewer on equal footing with the subject being filmed. We rarely get right up into other people's faces to speak. In current parlance that would be invading their space. On the other hand, we rarely address people in long shot except as part of a stiff, formal address or



**2-4**

A medium shot shows a person from the waist up  
Bruno Ganz in Wim Wenders's  
*The American Friend* (1977)

in the initial stages of being introduced to someone. In a medium shot, the subject is neither diminished nor unduly emphasized.

The key word in describing the MS is *neutral*. This is an arguable distinction because many see the full-body shot as equally neutral—if not more so—because it does not necessarily emphasize a particular element. There is merit to this argument, but the long shot's tendency toward randomness and diminishment often gives it additional dramatic baggage.

### CLOSE-UP

The *close-up* (CU) is essentially a head shot, usually from the top shirt button up. **SEE 2-5** Anything closer than that is an *extreme close-up* (ECU). The *medium close-up* (MCU), which is from midchest up, is also frequently employed.

The CU is the shot that provides the greatest psychological identification with a character as well as amplifies details of actions. It is the point in which the viewer is forced to confront the subject and create some kind of internal psychological self. This identification in a CU can occasionally be so intense that the shot becomes claustrophobic. The close-up creates a tight and confined space. It has very strict boundaries both for an actor's performance and a viewer's sense of a character's freedom of movement. The viewer can get the sense of an oppressive and menacing closeness—an in-your-face effect.

Close-ups are also used to amplify details. The interrelationship of these shots can be particularly successful in creating suspense. A classic example of this is in

**2-5**

A close-up is essentially a head shot  
Jurnee Smollett watches the adults from a  
distance in Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997)

Alfred Hitchcock's *Sabotage* (1936), in which a woman (Sylvia Sidney) realizes that her husband (Oscar Homolka) was involved in the death of her younger brother. As she serves him dinner, she starts glancing at a large carving knife. The film cuts from close-ups of the carving knife to the woman looking at it. It then cuts to the man looking at the woman. She looks at the carving knife. He looks at the carving knife and then at her. This goes on for a brief period as the tension mounts. She finally takes the knife and stabs him. This type of editing is a very common and effective device for creating suspense.

It is clear that the sequence of LS-MS-CU represents a natural and logical progression of moving closer to a subject. The sequence also represents a general movement from information that is random and undifferentiated toward more-specific information. This simple progression is one of the mainstays of the conventional approach to scene construction. (Basic principles of scene structure are discussed in chapter 3.)

## ANGLES

Although the term *angle* is often used on the set to designate simple camera position (setup), it also has a more limited meaning in terms of camera resources, that is, the height and orientation, or level, of the camera in relationship to the subject.

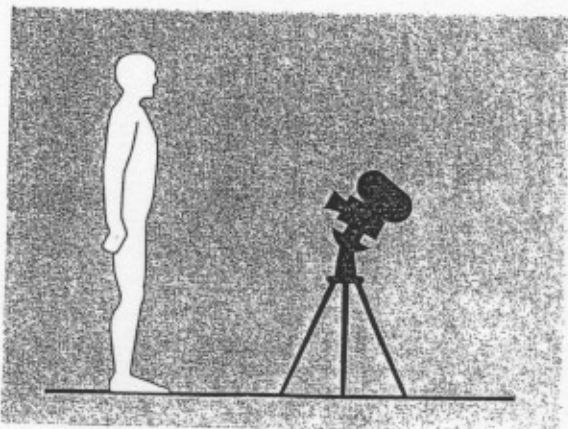
### LOW-ANGLE SHOT

A *low-angle shot* is one in which the camera is below the subject, angled upward. **SEE 2-6** It has a tendency to make characters or environments look threatening, powerful, or intimidating. A classic example of the extended use of this shot is the presentation of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). **SEE 2-7** A scene involving a country kid's first day in the big city is another, albeit clichéd, example. The viewer is presented with low-angle shots of skyscrapers looming over the awed onlooker.

The low-angle shot can also give a distorted perspective, showing a world out of balance. This can produce a sense of both disorientation and foreboding. A good example comes from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). In an eerie cemetery scene, James Stewart is consistently filmed from below, making the framing of background

#### 2-6

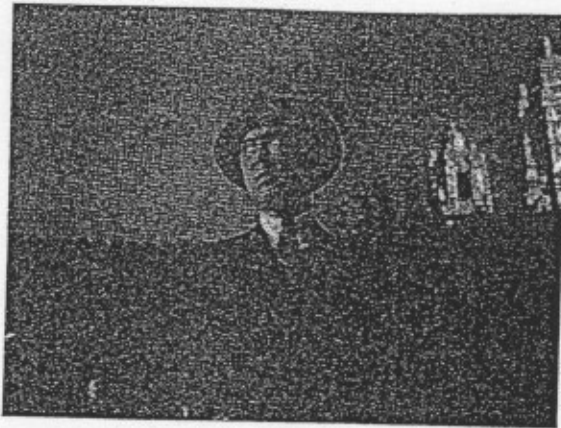
In a low-angle shot, the camera is below the subject, angled upward



#### 2-7

The effect of this typical low-angle shot is to make the character seem powerful and intimidating  
Bill Nunn in *Do the Right Thing*



**2-8**

This low-angle shot features distortion between the foreground and background, which can be intentionally disorienting  
James Stewart in *Vertigo*

elements disorienting. The arrangement of the steeple and trees in the background gives the shot a very ominous tone. **SEE 2-8**

Foreground elements can also become distorted. Video artist Bill Viola used this notion to good effect in one of the movements of *Ancient of Days* (1978–81). The section has a lengthy shot of what is apparently a huge boulder in the foreground with a group of tourists milling around in the background. As the tourists move, we slowly start to realize that the perspective may be fooling us as to the size of the boulder. By the end of the shot, we realize that the rock is no more than a foot or so tall.

**HIGH-ANGLE SHOT**

The *high-angle shot* is obviously the opposite of low-angle, and its effects are the opposite as well. The camera is placed above the subject, pointing down. It tends to diminish a subject, making it look intimidated or threatened. This is the conventional way of making characters look insignificant.

Fritz Lang's masterpiece *M* (1931) has a classic exchange that incorporates both high- and low-angle shots. The film has a scene involving two men arguing, one of whom suspects the other of being the child murderer who is the focus of the film's story. One man is short (the accused) and the other tall (the accuser). The scene is then an interplay between high-angle and low-angle shots in which the viewer sees each man's perception of the other. **SEE 2-9**

**2-9**

A. Establishing shot  
Fritz Lang's *M*



B. High-angle shot



C. Low-angle shot



## EYE-LEVEL SHOT

*Eye-level shots* are those taken with the camera on or near the eye level of the character or subject being filmed. Eye-level shots tend to be neutral. Much like the medium shot, an eye-level shot puts the viewer on equal footing with the subject being filmed. It has none of the diminishing or exaggerating qualities of the high- and low-angle shots.

A significant majority of shots in theatrical films, as well as a high percentage of shots in episodic television, are shot at eye level. High- and low-angle shots can be misused, occasionally implying things about a character that are not justified dramatically. For all the stylistic bravura of the Radio Raheem shots in *Do the Right*

*Thing*, some critics have wondered if the character should have appeared so threatening.

All of this said, most directors will tell you that they will not put the camera directly at eye level—they will position it just slightly above or below. True eye level is considered too confrontational, too direct to the audience.

### 2-10

The bird's-eye view takes the high-angle shot to an extreme

Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*



## BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

The *bird's-eye view*, also called an *overhead shot*, is actually a variation of the high-angle shot but is so extreme that it has an effect all its own. This shot is from directly above and tends to have a godlike, omniscient point of view; people look antlike and insignificant.

Many classic examples of the bird's-eye shot are, of course, found in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). In one of the film's early bird attacks, the townspeople are gathered in a diner near a gas station. A gas station attendant is struck by a bird, and gas spills out around the pumps. It is ignited, and the birds start to attack as the firefighters and townspeople try to cope with the blaze. Suddenly, the film cuts to a perspective several hundred feet above the action. **SEE 2-10** As birds float serenely in the foreground, the futility and chaos of the human response to nature's revenge looks small and pitiful.

### 2-11

The oblique shot (Dutch angle) is generally used to convey a world that is off balance or out of kilter

Carol Reed's *The Third Man*



## OBLIQUE SHOT (DUTCH ANGLE)

In an *oblique shot*, also called the *Dutch angle*, the camera is tilted laterally on a tripod so it is no longer parallel with the horizon. The oblique shot takes the straight lines of the world and presents them as diagonals. It is generally used to give an overwhelming sense of the world's being unbalanced or out of kilter. One of the classic employments of the oblique angle is in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), a mystery set in post-World War II Vienna. The tilted shot is largely responsible for the film's overall sense of a world where human values and actions are distorted. **SEE 2-11**

The 1960's "Batman" television show also used the oblique angle extensively. In this case the effect is campy, the action being highly stylized to exaggerate the effect. To a certain extent, the oblique angle is problematic for just this reason: It is so transparent in its effect that it virtually announces its own cliché. Many critics have found fault with *The Third Man*, claiming that the use of the oblique angle eventually becomes predictable and finally banal.

When a technique like the oblique angle is used, we must also recognize that employing a camera that is level with the world has certain aesthetic assumptions. With a level camera in such a high percentage of what we see in films, it begins to appear so natural that we rarely even question it. As with some of the other approaches, such as medium shots and eye-level shots, a level camera is used when subjective judgments are not desired. The level camera approximates our general perception of the world.

### POINT-OF-VIEW SHOT

A *point-of-view shot* represents the perception or viewpoint of a specific character. It is not used as frequently as one might at first presume, primarily because camera vision and human vision are decidedly not the same. The eye has unselective focus—the constantly shifting gaze is somewhat random and chaotic in its focus of attention. If you watch a dance, your eye might randomly go from the dancer's feet to her hands, to her face, then back to her feet. The human gaze shifts with only minimal structure to the view it creates. A camera's vision is considerably more focused and selective.

Many films, however, use the point-of-view shot effectively. Horror films have come to use it quite extensively—for instance, replicating the point of view of the killer as he relentlessly stalks his prey. The selective focus actually seems to aid the effect, representing a maniacally focused perception. Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1946) is a classic exploration of the point-of-view shot. The entire film is played from a detective's perspective. The viewer sees what he sees. It is an interesting experiment, but eventually becomes so artificial that the approach is seldom duplicated except as snippets within a larger whole. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* has a much more common and successful approach to the point-of-view shot. The film constantly shifts from the looker (James Stewart) to what he is looking at. The film is very voyeuristic, as are many Hitchcock films, in its constant positioning of the viewer and the viewed.

## Movement

Clearly, camera movement is a critical aspect of the way films work, in terms of both the kinetic energy it can provide and its employment as a storytelling device. The German filmmakers of the 1920s are credited with exploring and perfecting many of the effects that can be achieved with the moving camera. They are responsible for what is generally referred to as *fluid camera technique*—an approach to shooting that smooths out or eliminates entirely any bumpy camerawork, moving from composition to composition in an efficient and timely manner. This was the approach adopted by classic Hollywood cinema and, although challenged by more-informal camera techniques, remains an important philosophical approach to shooting. Later chapters address some of the character of the difficult-to-define kinetic aspects; focus here is on the employment of movement in a storytelling mode.



## 9

## Composition

AS in painting and graphic design, *composition* in film refers to the arrangement of shapes, volumes, and forms within an artistic frame. It is a key—possibly *the key*—element in a film's overall visual design. There are many films in which the composition is formulaic and uninspired. More often than not the composition is thoughtful and workmanlike. On a few celebrated occasions, the composition is inspired, taking the film into that rare arena of visual poetry. Whether or not it reaches this lofty status, effective composition is rarely noticed. There are, however, poorly composed films that leave the viewer unsatisfied, with the uncomfortable feeling that something is amiss—that the film is creating a world that is not only out of balance but also lacks internal cohesion.

Whereas a painter has the ability to thoughtfully predetermine the positioning of elements in a composition, the filmmaker has a more complicated task. This, of course, is because of the added dimension of movement. The key to composition for the film frame is the awareness that composition is dynamic, always in flux, ever changing. Whether you are dealing with camera movement, subject movement, or both, the elements in the frame will almost always be changing position, and you have to think out each composition in terms of what is occurring at all times. You can start out with a perfectly balanced frame, and one small movement by a character—something as simple as shifting body weight—can make the composition fall apart, the frame becoming completely unbalanced. Thus, the person shooting has to plan a response to the movement of both the subject being filmed and the camera itself.

### The Director of Photography

Effective filming can be done by a single person with a camera or by a full-scale feature crew. Whether working on your own or with a crew, the creativity and care needed for effective shooting remains consistent. The *director of photography (DP)* has two primary responsibilities: composition and lighting. There are also many unstated expectations. Primary among these is the ability to evaluate whether the individual shots work within the greater context of the film. This can range from simply making sure the shots look good, to making sure that they have the appropriate pace and dynamic visual energy, to—most important—evaluating on a shot-by-shot basis whether the shots will cut together. A DP with experience in the editing room brings a valuable perspective to the process.

When you view a film, you are looking at someone's (the DP's) conscious approach to composition. He or she has had to *line up the shots*—that is, look at what is in front of the camera and decide how to arrange it in relation to the boundaries of the film frame. Beginners quickly learn that there is a big difference between looking through a camera and shooting. Anyone can look through a camera, but it takes a creative eye to produce framings that are both consistently dynamic and part of a cohesive vision of the whole.

The DP's role is obviously central. Many beginners venture into filmmaking with an innocently formed intent to become a DP. Indeed, there is a certain romance to the camera. It sits at the center of attention on a set, almost like a throne, with its minions scurrying about, ministering to its needs. Once you learn a little about the camera, however, you realize that a DP has to be part mathematician, part magician, and part personnel manager. It soon becomes clear that people have very high expectations of you. Beyond serviceable composition, the unwritten expectation is that you will bring life and animation to the subject—even if that subject is somewhat less than spellbinding on its own. I know DPs who cannot sleep the night before big shoots, with butterflies created by the tension associated with high expectations. There is no substitute for getting it right, and there are hundreds of things that will conspire against the easy execution of even the simplest shots.

## The Frame

Beyond content issues that can be analyzed on an interpretative level, the formal elements of a *frame* demand equal consideration. The term *formal* refers to the choices one makes beyond the narrative structure of a film—the lighting, the camera angles, employment of movement, and all the other resources discussed in the menu in chapter 3. In a sense, *structure* is the straight line of the narrative, and *form* is the variation in the presentation of details from that line. When Jim Jarmusch uses single takes to cover scenes in *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), the scenes themselves and their order are the structural elements and the single take is the formal approach. When cinematographer Haskell Wexler pre-exposes film to create a milky, old-feeling image in Hal Ashby's film biography of Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (1976), that is a formal approach. Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992) is suffused with red, creating a visual analogy for the ease and warmth with which the people live. Color, shape, the play between light and dark, the texture of the image, the dynamics of movement, and a host of other formal elements—all add immeasurably to the impact of an image. More than simply establishing atmosphere or mood, formal elements shape the way we perceive characters and events.

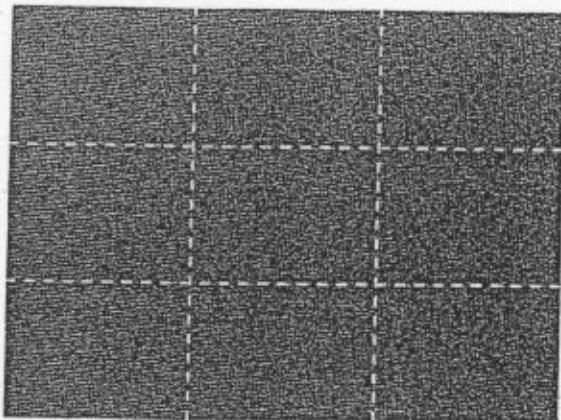
Composition should never be looked at schematically or as being dominated by any unbreakable rules. There are, however, a number of commonly accepted principles that need to be considered. Examples that illustrate these principles could go on forever, as could examples of exceptions—compositions that play against accepted conventions. The goal here is to put forth a few straightforward ideas that can serve as an impetus for further exploration on your own.

### **BALANCE AND THE FRAME, AND THE RULE OF THIRDS**

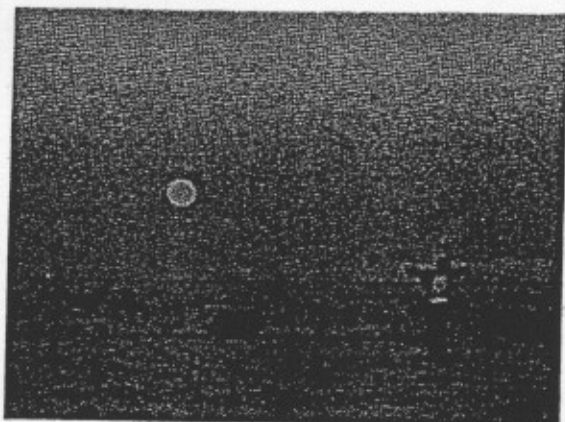
The dominant compositional principle, the *rule of thirds*, is a guideline for creating a balanced frame, by drawing four lines that divide the frame into thirds horizontally and vertically. **SEE 9-1** Areas and objects of visual interest are then put on these lines to balance the composition.

**9-1**

The rule of thirds is a guideline for creating a balanced frame

**9-2**

A typical rule-of-thirds framing  
Terrence Malick's *Badlands*



Balance is a key to and a natural component of composition. Both human perception and movement are dependent on a sense of equilibrium. Observation has shown that human beings want literally to have both feet on the ground when either confronting visual phenomena or moving through them.<sup>1</sup> The human eye—actually, the processes of the mind—relentlessly attempts to impose balance on natural phenomena. The mind can find balance in triangles, abstracting a center point or finding an axis that balances the weight of the form. Rectangles and squares immediately suggest their own internal balance. Trapezoids and a number of other shapes lend themselves to similar treatment.

Other shapes announce balance less openly but still lend themselves to the eye's desire for equilibrium. Circles have no immediate balance, and yet the eye will be drawn to the center, create an axis, and thus suggest balance. Even completely free-form shapes will often have some center of balance. Forms that do not suggest balance are said to have stress, which is discussed in the next section.

Just as the eye looks for order in abstract shapes, it desires to impose order on an artistic frame—a composition. The rule of thirds simply gives artistic form to this natural human ability to create balance. Whereas balance in painting and still photography is at least superficially straightforward, balance in film is complicated by movement. Many framings that look unstable by themselves are balanced by movement. Still, some relatively straightforward examples can be shown. Terrence Malick's *Badlands* is an engagingly visual film. One scene, roughly halfway into the film, has Kit (Martin Sheen) aimlessly walking across the plains. **SEE 9-2** The horizon is on the bottom thirds line, with the moon in the upper left, balancing Kit on the right.

Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945, Milton Krasner, DP) has a wealth of examples of classic balanced compositions. One scene has a group of reporters questioning the main character during a train ride. **SEE 9-3** The balancing of the three faces, the two characters on the vertical thirds lines, and the hands

with the cards is a classic balanced composition and also a common strategy for handling a shot with three people.

It may be difficult for the experimental part of our nature to admit, but the rule of thirds is the basis for much film composition. Its application can be so conventional and lead to so much predictable composition that one almost wishes there might be another starting point. The rule of thirds is a natural reflection of human perceptual experience, however, and must be given careful consideration. If you were to take four strips of film tape and put them on your television set according

1. Much of the experimentation regarding the psychological ordering of perceptual experience has been done from the perspective of Gestalt psychology. Donis A Dondis's *A Primer for Visual Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974) and the work of Rudolph Arnheim are excellent sources for those interested in the studies of perceptual experience.



to the thirds lines, the results would be stunning. You could marvel at the power of a simple straightforward composition or agonize over the depressing sameness of it all. Whether you are looking at a routine television show, a studio-age Hollywood film, or the most on-the-edge narrative piece, the lines would almost invariably intersect obvious areas of interest within the compositions. Although one may want to venture past this fundamental principle, the rule of thirds remains a starting place.

An acquaintance of mine sniffed when I mentioned that I teach students the rule of thirds. "A recipe for boring composition," he intoned. Despite the snootiness of the comment, there is a certain amount of truth there. Composition should be arresting and dynamic rather than formulaic and conventional. The past one hundred-plus years of modern painting have been a direct reaction against conventions dating to the ancient Greeks and further formalized during the Renaissance. And yet one has to learn how to draw a straight line before one can draw anything else. The notion that "anything goes" can be an even more disastrous recipe for composition. There is a big difference between composition that is new and challenging and composition that comes out of nowhere and is bad. Like it or not, a high percentage of the composition you see derives from some form of the rule of thirds.

### 9-3

This classic balanced composition is a common strategy for handling shots with three characters

Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street*



## GENERAL DESIGN CHARACTERISTICS

Working DPs frequently invoke the names of great artists when discussing their approach to specific films. With the goal of creating rich, complex, and subtle images, a study of the historical development of the graphic arts—painting, graphic design, and photography—provides valuable schooling for the inexperienced cinematographer. A knowledge of the breadth of approaches to the arrangement of elements in a composition, the handling of line and shape, the shaping and direction of light, and the incorporation of content elements to produce meaning informs the framing and arrangement of any image.

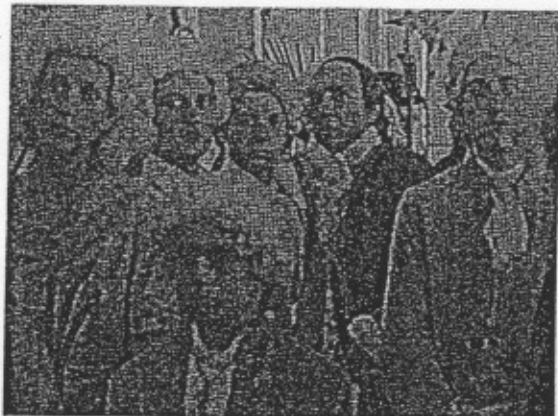
Student images are frequently criticized for concentrating on foreground elements (the subject) to the exclusion of a shot's background—an idea that is more complex than simply what is behind the subject. It is that extra information, that detail, that gives an image its context and character. This does not mean that cinematographers need to be imitative of specific works, nor should their work become static and arty. Just as there are books of painting and still photography designed for the coffee table, there can be coffee-table movies. But the sense that a composition can have a "painterly" quality is a key first step in moving toward a necessarily complex approach to the image.

A short list of conventional design characteristics will necessarily leave many things out. Images dominated by horizontals tend to be restful and suggest stability. Verticals suggest strength and power. As might be suspected, diagonals tend to suggest imbalance, although when employed in highly structured arrangements, diagonals can create powerful images as well. The German expressionists, in their fascination with heroic myth, created paintings and films with dominant vertical elements. Leni Riefenstahl's famous and notorious *Triumph of the Will* (1935), an ode to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, is an excellent example of a film that uses vertical and diagonal compositional elements to suggest strength and power.

**9-4**

Costume and arrangement of peripheral characters  
direct viewer attention

Milos Forman's *Amadeus*



Color is a key element in creating associations and tone. Blue is considered a cool color, both emotionally and physically. Red is hotter, suggesting warmer emotional content. Browns and greens are earth tones, suggesting naturalness and security. Lushness and brightness play a significant role in the texture of an image, as do muted and desaturated tones.

Compositions can also be arranged to direct viewer attention to specific parts of the frame. This can be done with lighting, arrangement of shapes, and design elements such as costume and makeup. Pools of light can be used to direct attention to specific areas. An example of two of these elements can be found in Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (Miroslav Ondricek, DP). **SEE 9-4** As Salieri hears Mozart conduct a recital for the first time, he advances through the audience in awe. The composition is designed to direct our eye to Salieri. The dark costume makes him stand out from the other concert-goers, and the arrangement of peripheral characters creates lines that, when followed, lead the eye straight to Salieri.

### COMPOSITION AND CONTENT

The foremost consideration in composing for film is that the image should be a meaning-producing instrument. This is difficult both to accomplish and to discuss. The concept of images producing meaning has long been analyzed in painting, graphic design, and photography, but no single discussion could ever be definitive. This is as it should be, the potential for any artistic expression being unlimited. It is not simply what is in the frame that creates meaning; it is also the way the subject is framed, arranged, and lighted, using all the resources discussed in other chapters.

On a purely content level, a few typical examples will be helpful. Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978, Nestor Almendros, DP) recounts a romance between a poor migrant worker (Brooke Adams) and a wealthy young farmer (Sam Shepard). Many of the film's images are dominated by the farmer's house, an impressive but isolated structure (based on a painting by Edward Hopper) designed to suggest some of the same emotional qualities in its owner. Frequently, the house is framed in the background of the migrants' activities, serving as a constant reminder of both the workers' reduced circumstances and the vast gap between them and the owner. One particularly telling sequence has the Brooke Adams character surprising the farmer as he sits in the tall grass, watching the sunset. As the two characters speak, the farmer's opulent home in the background dominates the space between them. **SEE 9-5** The visual arrangement of the shot itself suggests the relationship—the chasm—between the two characters. The house—and all it represents—will always separate them, no matter what events occur later in their relationship. What might appear to be an innocent encounter is literally overshadowed by this dominating symbol of class distinction.

Ivan Passer's *Cutter's Way* (1981, Jordan Cronenweth, DP) provides a similar example. The story involves several friends living on the fringes of society, who suspect a rich man of committing a murder. At one point two characters go sailing to escape the mounting tension. **SEE 9-6** As their boat plies the waves, an oil rig dominates the background of virtually every shot. As a symbol the open sea generally suggests freedom and openness, a place where people can escape the ever-present demands of a complicated social existence; but here the placement of the oil rig continually reminds us otherwise. It is omnipresent. The employment of *visual subtext*—

**9-5**

Visual arrangement of elements symbolize the relationship of the characters

Terrence Mallick's *Days of Heaven*

**9-6**

Visual subtext is meaningful information not present in the narrative but implicit in the visual presentation

Ivan Passer's *Cutter's Way*



information not present in the content and structure of the narrative but implicit in the visual presentation—is crucial in creating a complex image.

### COMPOSITION AND STRESS

Whereas many shapes suggest internal balance, there are others that cannot resolve their imbalance. These shapes and arrangements are said to have compositional *stress*, also referred to as *tension*. Sometimes stress can be resolved by either implied or actual elements moving in the frame. Other times that stress is purposefully unresolved, creating an artwork that challenges conventional formal interpretation.

Although most American films of the studio age relied on balanced compositions, *film noir* was the first style in commercial features to exploit compositional stress significantly to give a sense of a world in which something was catastrophically wrong. Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949, Russell Harlan, DP)—a classic independent, low-budget film noir—has many images that lack conventional balance. The film chronicles a couple's fascination with guns. Their eventual descent into criminality ends with the couple (Peggy Cummins and John Dahl) fleeing the police by car. In this final scene, the characters' mental strain has a reciprocal representation in the imbalance of the composition. **SEE 9-7**

Although the impetus for the film noir sensibility faltered in the 1950s, the importance of compositional stress was rediscovered by cinematographers of the '60s and '70s, a sensibility continued in the films of David Lynch and others. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1971, Vittorio Storaro, DP), a film that extensively influenced visual style of the period, has many intriguing examples of unbalanced compositions. An early scene in a radio station sets the visual tone, with a stark composition of the film's protagonist (Jean-Louis

**9-7**

Compositional stress gives a sense of a world in which something is very wrong

Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy*





**9-8**

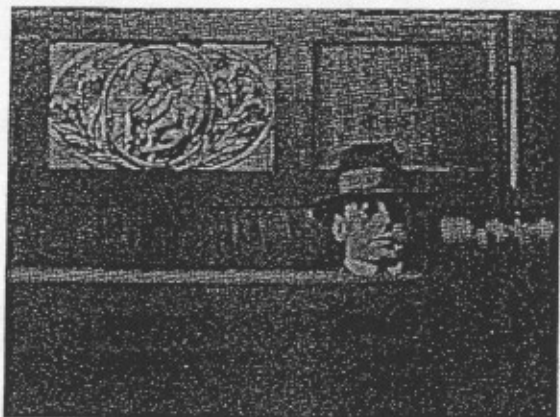
Stark, unbalanced compositions can reflect ambiguous content

Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*

**9-9**

Compositional stress caused by elements with disproportional weight

Jean-Louis Trintignant in *The Conformist*



Trintignant) having a conversation that is as ambiguous as the composition. **SEE 9-8**

Another famous composition from *The Conformist* demonstrates a different kind of imbalance. **SEE 9-9** The lines of the image are very symmetrical, yet the face has too much weight to balance the other elements in the frame. In this case there is almost a rule of thirds-like division and yet the weight given individual elements creates a very unbalanced image.

Compositional stress often creates the expectation of resolution. When a space is left open, the expectation is created that it will be filled. An example of this is a shot of an individual sitting at a bar. If the empty bar stool next to the person is included in the shot, the expectation is created that the seat will be filled. If the shot is more conventionally balanced, someone forcing his way into the composition might be perceived as intrusive.

Horror films take particular advantage of this tension. Space is used to create the expectation on the part of the audience that something, usually bad, is going to happen. The open door behind the unsuspecting character is going to be filled by whatever representation of our inner fears the film is exploiting. Our expectations can be either fulfilled or frustrated. John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) has several situations in which the viewer is aware that the killer is near. Characters oblivious to the danger are shown in shots that have space left for the killer to enter. But the film purposefully increases tension—keeps us on the edge of our seats—by not delivering. When we get the relief of a more conventionally balanced composition, apparently signaling the passing of danger, Carpenter increases the shock by having the killer appear, violating the equilibrium.

## STRESS AND PHOTOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Images can achieve stress through methods other than simple compositional imbalance. For example, elements specific to photography can be employed to create tension. Leaving elements out of focus can create confusion and frustration, particularly when the image is designed to make us want to see the subject. Distorting lenses can be a contributing factor as well, showing objects that are out of proportion in relation to the size of other elements in the frame.

Wide-angle lenses are frequently employed to create this type of stress. The bending of foreground elements mixed with the elongation, making background images appear smaller, can create exaggerated effects. The couple from *Gun Crazy* is often presented in shots that fragment their presence between the foreground and the background. **SEE 9-10** This is an issue of *scale*—the size of objects in relation to one another. Although it might be argued that these shots have some internal balance, the distortion of relationships definitely adds an element of stress.

Also from *Gun Crazy*, the companion shot to figure 9-7 is a good example of distortions of scale. **SEE 9-11** The steering wheel is so distorted in relationship to

**9-10**

Use of wide-angle lens to create stress  
Peggy Cummins and John Dahl in *Gun Crazy*

**9-11**

Use of distortions of scale to create stress  
John Dahl in *Gun Crazy*



the face that, despite some internal balance, compositional stress is clearly an issue. Long lenses too can create a confining and distorting perspective. The prelude to one of the key musical sequences in Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) has an excellent example of this. **SEE 9-12** The song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" is set in a beautiful alpine beer garden. The establishment of this setting, however, which conventionally might be shot with a wide-angle or normal lens to give a complete view, is shot entirely with a long lens. The subtle claustrophobia—the lack of expected openness—creates apprehension that is borne out when the deceptively bucolic atmosphere turns menacing as it evolves into a pro-Nazi songfest. In Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), the long lens is a factor in the scene where Ada's note to Baines (played by Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel) falls into the wrong hands—a prelude to the film's violent action. **SEE 9-13** Filmed along a fence line in the hills, the squashed and angular compositions are so distorted that the scene is invested with an undertone foreshadowing the impending conflict.

**9-12**

The long lens can create a mood of claustrophobia and apprehension  
Bob Fosse's *Cabaret*

**9-13**

The squashed and angular composition foreshadows impending conflict  
Jane Campion's *The Piano*





## Lining Up the Shots

As stated, lining up the shots consists of looking at what is in front of the camera and deciding how to arrange it in relation to the boundaries of the film frame. This conscious approach to composition is the responsibility of the director of photography.

### HEADROOM AND EYEROOM

The predominant content element in most shots in narrative films is most frequently one or more people. When a person is the focus of compositional interest, where is the viewer's eye drawn? Usually to the eyes. When people are composed on film, the eyes are almost always on the top thirds line. **SEE 9-14** If the eyes are lower, you will probably have problems with *headroom*—the amount of space above the head. Too much headroom tends to diminish the subject. **SEE 9-15** This example obviously overstates the effect; less exaggerated effects diminish to a lesser degree.

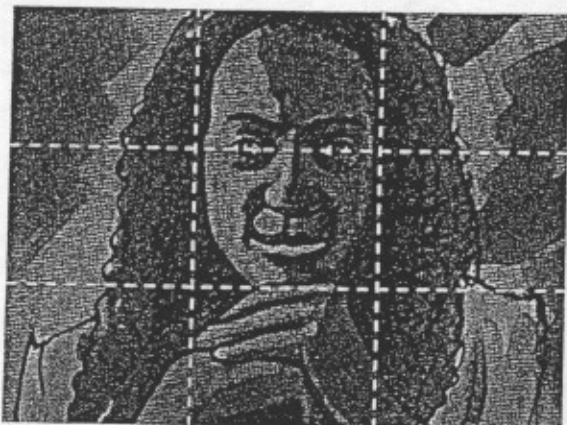
Individual cinematographers handle headroom differently, but generally keep the top of the head close to the top of the frame. Headroom is more critical in close shots; close-ups with an inordinate amount of headroom definitely diminish the subject. A little more headroom can be allowed in longer shots, although putting the eyes below the top thirds line can produce disagreeable results. Some cinematographers maintain that you can err on the side of too little headroom as well. Cropping that is too tight can make a character look constrained, as if in a room with a low ceiling.

*Eyeroom*, or *looking room*, refers to the practice of giving characters space in the direction they are looking. A character looking frame-right would be composed around the left thirds line and vice versa. If a character is not given eyeroom, the shot will feel confined, as if sight is somehow limited or the character's face is pressed up against something.

Many cameras have viewing systems with crosshairs or ground-glass centers. Beginners occasionally mistake these for compositional aids, thinking that they are supposed to put the crosshairs right between the subject's eyes. I like to call this the "assassination theory of composition." I once saw this theory applied in a videotape of a man giving a very powerful speech. It was shot by an obviously inexperienced

#### 9-14

People are almost always composed with the eyes on the top thirds line



#### 9-15

Too much headroom diminishes the subject





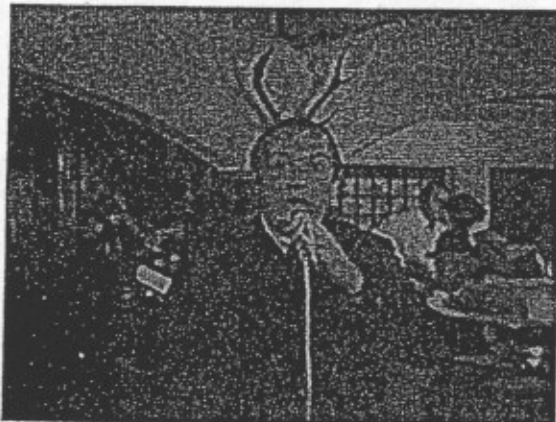
camera operator, who consistently kept the speaker's eyes right in the center of the frame. Given the limited options of taping a speech from a fixed camera position, the operator did about the only thing one can do: zoom in and zoom out. When the lens was zoomed in, the effect was bad, though not entirely unacceptable. But when the lens was zoomed out, the cavernous space above the speaker's head made him appear tiny and unimpressive, completely subverting his powerful oration.

### CLEANING THE IMAGE

It is usually necessary to "clean" the image of any elements that draw the viewer's attention to undesired parts of the frame or that make for an odd visual presentation. In the first case, this refers to objects that either are an unwarranted distraction or are hovering around the edges of the frame. If an object, say, a chair leg, is barely protruding into the frame, it will draw attention to itself. The viewer's eye will unconsciously search it to see what it is. The more difficult it is to read, the bigger the distraction and the more it will disrupt the frame. The solution is to position the object entirely outside the frame or enough in the frame that the viewer can unconsciously recognize it without effort. The longer an image is held, the more the viewer will search the frame. If the viewer's attention is held by an element in the frame that is confusing, it can detract from simple involvement.

Josef von Sternberg, one of the greatest of all visual directors, once stated that when presented with a shot of a character seated in a chair, he would be sure that all four chair legs were in the shot. His assumption was that the chair would appear to be on the verge of collapse if proper support were not evident. Although this may show a lack of faith in the viewer's ability to understand images, the point is nevertheless made. That which an image needs, it must have. That which an image does not need should be eliminated.

The latter case refers to background and, to a lesser extent, foreground, elements that are peculiarly positioned, such as telephone poles coming out of people's heads, and light switches, household plugs, and similar objects that because of their positioning appear attached to the body. Mel Stuart's *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) has an effective parody of the problem. **SEE 9-16** A television reporter is framed in such a way that the antlers of a trophy in the background appear to be coming out of his head. Although this example is a good gag, it can create peculiar effects when not desired. My favorite example is a student who unknowingly positioned a distant highway on a level with the ears of an interview subject. Cars entering one side of the subject's head and exiting the other side, though hilarious, completely destroyed the credibility of the shot.



#### 9-16

Distracting background image  
creates peculiar effect  
Mel Stuart's *Willie Wonka and the  
Chocolate Factory*

**9-17**

This example of cheating in positioning the characters defies logic but often goes unnoticed by the viewer  
 Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*

**CHEATING**

Shifting elements in the composition to balance the frame, thus improving an otherwise problematic shot, is called *cheating*. Most cheats are relatively simple: Moving items on a table, shifting furniture, or relocating artwork on a wall is frequently enough to fix an untenable frame. Continuity is a key concern when cheating, although experience helps in understanding what you can get away with.

Cheating applies to the positioning of characters as well. If a character is blocked in a specific way for one angle, there may be a difficult background element that creates a problem—say, a door frame or light switch—in another angle. To eliminate the problem, simply move the actor in the appropriate direction either to cover up the offending object or to allow recomposition to exclude it.

Alfred Hitchcock, who seemed to delight in these simple manipulations, did a cheat in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956, Robert Burks, DP) that defies logic, but which still goes largely unnoticed by the audience. The scene involves two couples sitting across from each other at a table. **SEE 9-17** Although both couples are shoulder to shoulder when facing the camera, they are several feet apart in their respective reverses. Shooting a conversation like this is always a challenge due to questions of the line and shifting perspective. This example represents an adventurous solution, one that may have left a less prestigious director making explanations to studio chiefs.

Directors of photography are always adjusting things, fussing with the set, and rearranging props to get the perfect composition. With an eye to the camera, a camera operator's asking a props person or set dresser to slide things a little bit one way or the other is common. Sloppiness is acceptable only in a few specific applications, and DPs will generally work hard to achieve an image that is clean and not confusing.

**MOVEMENT AND ANTICIPATORY CAMERA**

As suggested in chapter 2, much of the camera movement in film is not noticed by the viewer. It is movement that responds to—or, more accurate—anticipates subject movement. *Anticipatory camera*—an approach to cinematography that is particularly associated with classic Hollywood cinema—is structured, highly choreographed camerawork that leads rather than follows movement, making adjustments for the

movement of characters in the frame or the entrances of others. Not all camerawork is this formal, but the approach so dominates cinematography that it influences the way one thinks about shooting.

Thus, the DP must respond intelligently to shifting elements within the frame. A common example is a two-shot in which one of the characters exits. The initial frame can be balanced for two people, but that balance falls apart once one person leaves. The solution is to pan slightly in the appropriate direction to rebalance the frame. Whenever there is movement in the frame, the DP is confronted with a question: What should be done to compensate for the movement? Generally, failure to adjust results in poor framing.

Just as performance is rehearsed, camerawork is rehearsed as well. During the final blocking of the scene in rehearsals, the actor's movements should become consistent, and a plan for shooting can be devised and rehearsed. If the actor shifts her weight or turns to face a new direction, the responding movement of the camera can be perfectly timed to anticipate that action. If the actor is going through a bigger movement, the camera can accommodate it by drifting or moving boldly in the appropriate direction. The key is rehearsal so that the camera operator knows the movement and has a planned response.

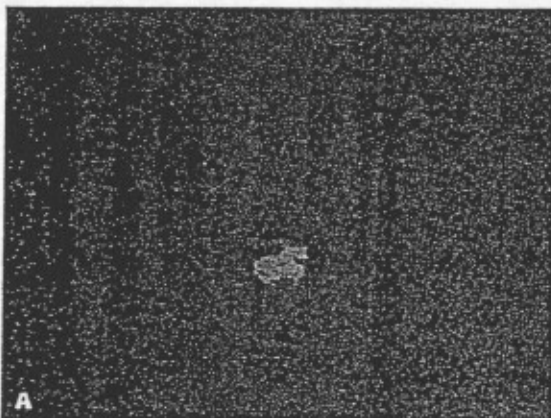
The concluding scenes of Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* have many excellent examples of camera movement used to create a balanced composition and anticipate movement. In one scene, where the main character, Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson), is overwhelmed with guilt, he begins hearing the voices of the people whose deaths he has caused. In one shot he tears away the canopy on his bed to find the source of the voices. The camera starts with a balanced composition of the bed sheets shielded by a canopy. **SEE 9-18A** In an exceedingly subtle move that is a perfect demonstration of this concept, a quick tilt is done to create room for Chris as he enters the frame. **SEE 9-18B** The camera does not react *after* Chris enters the shot; it starts the movement just before he enters the frame and is finished by the time he reaches his final position. On the surface a move like this appears to be almost inconsequential, but it is with responses such as this that camerawork achieves much of its subtlety and fluidity.

Broader movements benefit from thoughtful planning as well. A shot following the one just described leads Chris through a complex movement. The shot starts with Chris seated on the bed. **SEE 9-18C** The camera starts to dolly out to give Chris

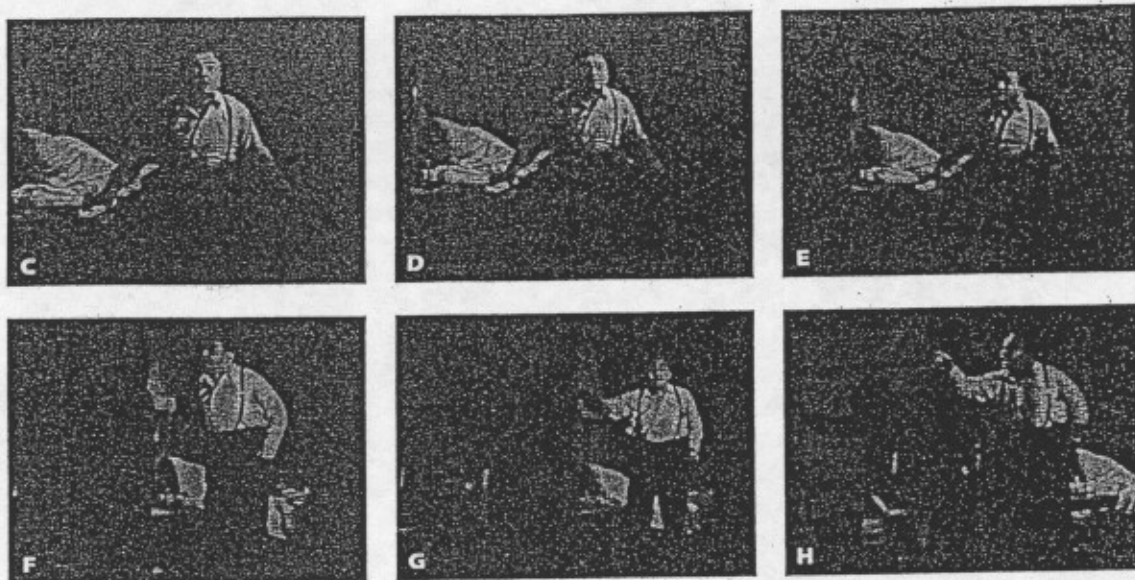
### 9-18

Using camera movement to create balance and anticipate subject movement

Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street*





**9-18**Using camera movement to create balance and anticipate subject movement (*continued*)Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street*

room to stand. **SEE 9-18D** Before he stands, Chris looks frame-left. **SEE 9-18E** The camera anticipates this by drifting left to create eyeroom, also anticipating the direction Chris will go when he rises from the bed. The camera does not give full headroom for Chris's final position when standing, as that would create too much headroom while he is still on the bed. The top of the frame is completed in a tilt timed to his rising. **SEE 9-18F** The camera then continues to drift frame-left as Chris advances through the room. **SEE 9-18G** Both camera movement and character movement are then perfectly timed for an ending composition, allowing room for a striking shadow of Chris as he points to something. **SEE 9-18H**

Anticipatory camera movements are the result of choices that must be made constantly while preparing each shot, working out strategies for covering the action in front of the camera. A camera operator must respond to all subject movement. Failure to do so results in compositions that may begin well but which wind up out of balance.

On a set there is constant dialogue among the director, the DP, the camera operator, and the talent regarding the inclusion and arrangement of elements within the frame. Although most movements of this nature are planned in advance, the camera operator should be ready for minor adjustments. The biggest mistake novice camera operators make is to find a good beginning composition and then lock down the tilt and pan, as if this is the framing the world should have forever. The camera operator generally wants to have the tilt and pan unlocked (usually both on tight fluid) to respond to subject movement.

Planning and executing movements that are assured and decisive is an important goal for a beginning cinematographer. You can always tell when a cinematographer has not quite decided what to do in a specific situation. There is a tentative quality to the movements that betrays the operator's lack of confidence. Part of maturing as a camera operator is building confidence in your judgment and showing conviction in the effects you are trying to accomplish.

### MOVEMENT AND COMPOSITIONAL BALANCE

Frequently, camera movement is necessary to create balance in a composition that has been disrupted by or simply needs to follow the action. DPs will often use elements in the foreground or background to balance compositions. As characters move, however, these balancing elements can become liabilities unless appropriately managed.

The opening of the previously discussed scene from *Scarlet Street* has Chris entering his rented room. Elements on a table in the foreground are used to create balance as he walks through the room. As he comes in, he is balanced by a bottle frame-right and a wall light fixture frame-left. **SEE 9-19A** As he moves across the room toward a window, the camera dollies left while panning right. **SEE 9-19B** In the resulting composition, Chris is balanced by a coffee pot and cup at frame-left and the window at frame-right. **SEE 9-19C** Balance is a key goal here, but these elements are also used to create a sense of depth in the image. Why the dolly? Could a pan have been done instead? Although this movement may have been a feature of a grand plan on Lang's part (as befits the main character's name, there is much crossing imagery in the film), it also could have been just one of those things that was worked out on the set. Within the confines of the set, a pan may not have created the final composition that Lang and DP Milton Krasner felt was appropriate.

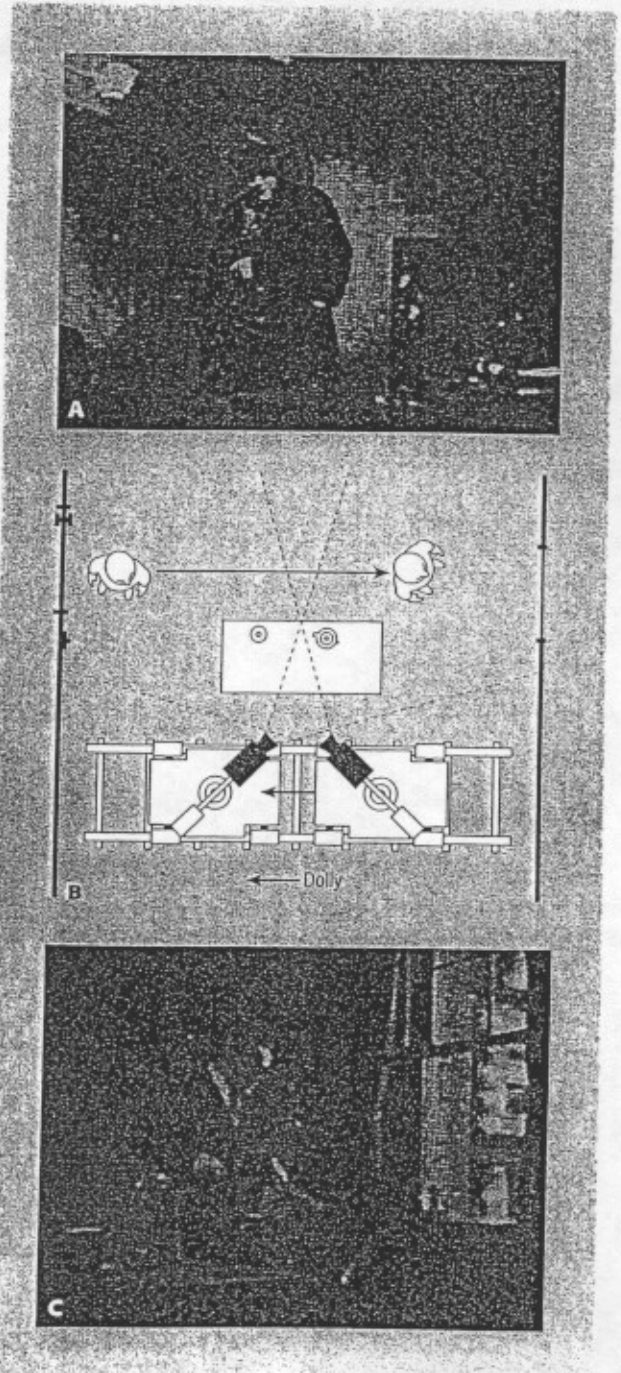
### SUBJECT MOVEMENT TOWARD OR AWAY FROM THE CAMERA

A subject moving toward or away from the camera almost always requires some adjustment. If the composition is correct at the beginning of the shot, a character would move out of the top of the composition as he approaches the camera if no correction is made. **SEE 9-20** A tilt is usually in order, often with a pan incorporated for any horizontal changes. The key to executing a good move is to find some aspect of the composition that is going to remain relatively stable; in this case, keeping the appropriate headroom would be a key issue.

The previously mentioned shot from *Amadeus* concludes with a stunned Salieri approaching the camera. **SEE 9-21A** As Salieri comes closer, the camera is subtly and fluidly tilted to give the appropriate headroom for the new composition. The timing is immaculate, with the headroom

#### 9-19

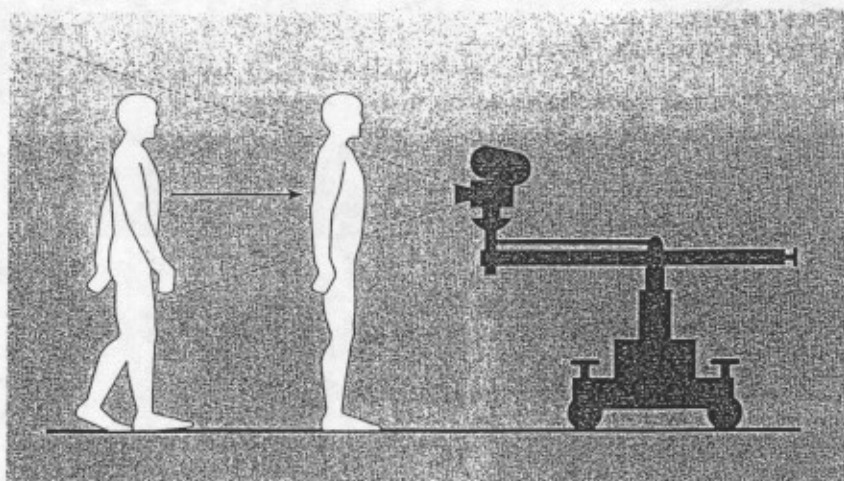
Using camera movement and foreground and background elements for compositional balance  
Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street*



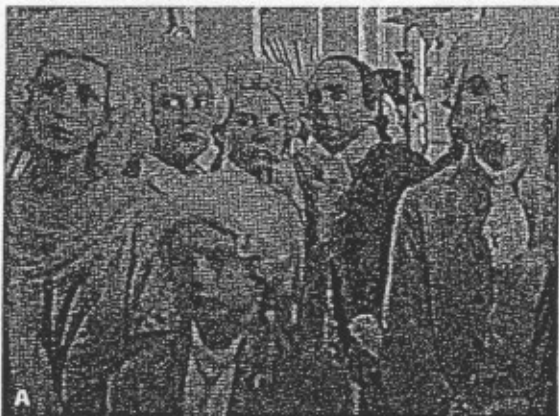


**9-20**

A character approaching the camera moves out of the top of the composition, necessitating a tilt

**9-21**

Tilting to give appropriate headroom as the subject approaches the camera  
F. Murray Abraham in *Amadeus*



kept perfectly even throughout the move. By the end the camera is at a low angle that exaggerates Salieri's features and diminishes the peripheral characters in the background. **SEE 9-21B** Movement like this requires rack focusing as well.

### CAMERA MOVEMENT TOWARD OR AWAY FROM A SUBJECT

The same principles apply to dollies and zooms toward and away from a subject as with subject movement. A tilt is almost always necessary, and often a pan as well. **SEE 9-22** Despite the aesthetic differences between a dolly and a zoom, when considering compositional adjustments made necessary by their use they become virtually synonymous.