

Film Directing Fundamentals

Nicholas T. Proferes

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See Your Film Before Shooting

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Contents

Chapter 1 - INTRODUCTION TO FILM LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

The Film World	3
Film Language	3
Shots	4
Film Grammar.....	5
The 180-Degree Rule	5
The 30-Degree Rule.....	8
Screen Direction	9
Film Time	11
Compression	11
Elaboration	12
Familiar Images.....	12

Chapter 2 - INTRODUCTION TO THE DRAMATIC ELEMENTS IN THE SCREENPLAY

Spines	14
Whose Film Is It?.....	16
Character	16
Circumstance	17
Dynamic Relationships	17
Wants	18
Expectations	18
Actions	19
Activity	19
Acting Beats	19

Chapter 3 - ORGANIZING ACTION IN A DRAMATIC SCENE

Dramatic Blocks	21
Narrative Beats	21
The Fulcrum	22
Dramatic Elements in Notorious Patio Scene	22
Notorious Patio Scene Annotated	23

Chapter 4 - STAGING

Main Functions	30
Patterns of Dramatic Movement	32
Changing the Stage Within a Scene	33
Staging as Part of a Film's Design	34
Working with a Location Floor Plan	34
Floor Plan and Staging for Notorious Patio Scene	34

Chapter 5 - THE CAMERA

The Camera as Narrator	40
The Reveal	40
Entrances	41
The Objective Camera	41
The Subjective Camera	41
Where Do I Put It?	42
Visual Design	45

Introduction to film language and grammar

The film world

The first dramatic films were rendered as if through a proscenium. The camera was placed in position and all the action in the scene took place within that camera frame. The audience's view was much the same as a theater audience sitting frontrow center. The American director D. W. Griffith was one of the first to move the audience onto the stage with works like *For Love of Gold* (1908), *The Lonely Villa* (1909), *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), and the highly influential, but strongly racist, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). "Look here!" he said to the audience with his camera—"Now, here!" Griffith was not only moving the audience into the scene; he was then turning their seats this way and that—moving them into the face of a character, then in the next instant pulling them to the back of the "theater" to get a larger view of the character in relation to other characters or showing the character in relation to his or her surroundings.

The reason for putting the audience into the scene is that it makes the story more interesting—more dramatic. But by moving the audience into the action, and focusing their attention first here, now there, the director can easily confuse and disorient the audience. The geography of a location or the wholeness of a character's body becomes fragmented. Whose hand is that? Where is Character A in spatial relationship to Character B? Usually the director does not want to cause confusion. Rather, she wants the audience to feel comfortable in this film world—to be spatially (and temporally) oriented—so that the story can take place unimpeded. Usually, the director wants the audience to know, "That is Bob's and, and Bob is sitting to the right of Ellen" (even if we

Film language

Once film became a series of connected shots, a language was born. Every shot became a complete sentence with at least one subject and one verb. (We are talking about an edited shot here, as opposed to a camera setup, which may be cut into a number of edited shots.) Like prose, a film sentence/shot can be simple, with only one subject and one verb, and perhaps an object; or it can be a compound sentence/shot, composed of two or more clauses. The type of sentence/shot we use will first depend on the essence of the moment we wish to convey to the audience. Secondly, that sentence/shot will be contained in a design of the scene, which may be an ingredient of an overall style. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), where there are but nine sentences—each 10 minutes long (the length of a film roll)—each sentence contains many subjects and a host of verbs and objects.

Let's look at a simple sentence/shot: a wristwatch lying on a table, reading three o'clock. Without a context outside this particular shot, the sentence reads, "A wristwatch lying on a table reads three o'clock." The significance of this film sentence — its specific meaning in the context of a story—will become clear only when it is embedded among other shots (sentences). For example, a character is someplace she is not supposed to be, and as she leaves we cut to the very same shot of the wristwatch on the table reading three o'clock. Now the shot (the sentence) is given a context and takes on a specific significance. Its meaning is clear. The character is leaving behind evidence (which could cause her trouble). The fact that it is three o'clock might very well have no significance at all.

Shots

Professionals in the film industry don't usually refer to a shot as a sentence. But in learning any foreign language, we have to think in our native language first in order to clearly formulate what it is we want to say in the new language, and the same principle applies to learning to "talk" in film. It can be extremely helpful before you have developed a visual vocabulary to formulate the content

of each shot into a linguistic analogue (the prose and syntax of your native language) in order to help you find the corresponding visual images. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that film, unlike the words of the screenplay, is rendered on the

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