DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital Humanists

Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders

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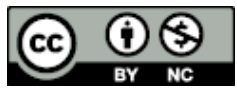

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11. Shots and Compositions Considered

Despite following all of the rules and guidelines outlined in the preceding chapters, it is still possible to shoot an ineffective or poorly composed shot. Too much or too little headroom, or clumsy placement of the audience's focal point, can all have a detrimental effect on the way a shot looks or — more importantly — how it feels.

In *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*, our short film about the 2016 presidential election, there appeared this clumsily framed moment:

Fig. 32. The framing of this shot is of a notably poorer quality than the framing in the rest of the film.

The bodies of the two subjects, relative to the camera, are at a slightly awkward angle. In addition, there is a significant amount of empty, or dead, space around the pair. A more effective way to frame that same shot — or rather, a way the shot could have been improved upon in the post-production process — would have involved the removal of much of this dead space (see Figure 32).

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Fig. 33. By zooming in on the footage and reframing the results, a more effective alternative composition reveals itself. This version of the shot was not included in the final cut of the film.

Whilst cropping this shot does not entirely solve the compositional issues at its heart, it does alleviate them. Far more effective than hoping to deal with a problematic image in post-production, however, is paying close attention to one's compositions as they are being constructed, capturing material that does not need to be rescued at a later phase in the production process. Composition is important. Even an untrained onlooker can tell the difference between good and bad composition, even though they may have no idea why one shot feels less satisfying to them than another.

Consider the near-final moments in which the character of Andy emerges from the sewer in Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). As he bursts out of the pipe, the camera tracks with him, following its subject as he moves further from the outlet and into, we might assume, ever-purer waters. He stumbles as he moves, frantically ripping off his shirt. The camera had remained close to Andy throughout most of this process, a reflection of the enclosed space from which he has just escaped. At last, free of his prison-issued clothing, Andy stretches his arms out in jubilation — and the camera cuts. No longer claustrophobically close to its subject, it now looks down upon him, his outstretched arms filling the frame. And then the camera moves, pulling back to free Andy from the metaphorical cell created by the edges of the shot (see Figure 33).

The audience looks down on Andy in his moment of triumph. It is an angle that emphasises his vulnerability in an almost ironic manner. He is vulnerable, to be sure, but this is a shot that is meant to communicate inner strength. It is a brilliant clash of visual and narrative symbols; the triumphalism of the pose versus a camera angle that might otherwise diminish its subject. Even if one were unfamiliar with the rest of the film, the visual language of this sequence alone would serve to communicate its core themes.[1]

Fig. 34. In Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*, the triumphant finale sees the camera pan back as it looks down on the protagonist, his arms outstretched. The edge of the frame frequently represents the limits of the observable cinematic universe to the viewer. We know that the subject in the above photograph exists in a space that extends far beyond the limits of this frame — but the edge of the frame, and the subject's relationship to it, nonetheless impacts how an audience respond to the shot. In Darabont's film the frame is not static, as it is in the above homage. The camera movement serves symbolically to free Andy in a way that cannot be replicated in still photography.

Andy's face is never pressed against the edge of the frame during this camera move. An implied degree of looking room exists around his head and face. Had he not been looking up but, instead, was looking straight ahead (and so the audience looking down upon the top of his head, rather than his upturned face), his position in the shot would not have felt as satisfying. As Andy is looking upwards, however, it is the space around the character's face and head that matters — it radiates outwards.

1 *The Shawshank Redemption*. Directed by Frank Darabont. Culver City: Columbia Pictures, 1994.

Consider also the way in which the camera movement complements the emotion of the subject's movement. The way the camera spirals away from Andy, as if it were a feather on the wind — free, in other words. This sequence is a masterclass in compositional effectiveness. It does not matter that it comes from a drama. What matters is that it demonstrates how a few seconds of screen time can communicate a vast array of emotions, ideas, and themes through skilled and considered compositional framing.

From a different sort of dramatic movie comes the establishing shot of two comedic, but heroic, robots in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983). It is the first time in the film that any of our heroes are seen. R2D2 and C3PO stand in the centre of the frame, walking, with their backs to the camera, down a desert road at the end of which their destination can be seen — the palace of the galactic gangster, Jabba the Hutt.

In this shot, director Richard Marquand uses one-point perspective in order to emphasise the distance the characters must travel; they are on a long and potentially dangerous journey. The shot emphasises the pair's isolation and, with it, their vulnerability. They are dwarfed by virtually every feature around them. In the distance, a huge, alien castle lurches up against the horizon, looming over them. We instinctively understand that this must be the pair's destination. What perils or adventures await them? This shot raises the question; and then primes us for the answer.[2]

One-point perspective effectively conveys distance, allowing for roads and environments to plunge towards infinity. The following shot from *Aftermath* (see Figure 35), though very different in terms of subject and narrative use, works in a similar way to the first shot of R2D2 and C3PO in *Return of the Jedi*.

It is a sunny day in New York. A school bus (a symbol of education, learning, and innocence) disappears down a long road towards an uncertain future. As it turns down the road, a fire engine (a symbol of disaster, danger, and heroism) passes in front of the camera. As the school bus grows smaller, a voice begins to speak about Donald Trump — a controversial topic at the time. In post-production, a slow, subtle zoom was added to the shot, allowing the camera to (virtually) track forward. It thus chases the bus as it moves, albeit far too slow to

2 *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Directed by Richard Marquand. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 1983.

Fig. 35. *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*, directed by Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid (0:31–0:38).

keep pace with the vehicle (see Figure 35). The movement of the camera emphasises our inability to grasp that which eludes us. As a metaphor for the 2016 election, this was a symbolically effective and relevant shot.

This shot is the result of a combination of factors:

1. Skilful composition on the part of our second unit, who captured this footage.
2. Blind luck, thanks to the unexpected presence of the school bus and fire engine — and a route that took one down a road towards infinity as the other passed in front of the camera.
3. Choices made in the post-production process — the addition of the zoom and the frame's desaturated colour palette.

Despite the way in which all of these factors combined to create a symbolically satisfying shot, it is its composition that serves as the foundation of its success. Even had there been no school bus or fire engine, no desaturation or zoom, the shot would have remained well-composed, containing a degree of inherent beauty.

Infinity and its first cousin, symmetry, are powerful tools. In Jared Hess's film, *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), there is a moment when the film's protagonist sits perfectly centred on a sofa, with furniture laid out symmetrically at either side. The subject is placed in the dead centre of the frame. The shot encapsulates the perfectly balanced world into which our protagonist fits so uneasily. Despite the fact that even his

body is arranged symmetrically, the (literally) slack-jawed subject could not look more out of place.[3]

Symmetrical or centre-framed shots allow filmmakers to use balance in interesting ways — but sparing use of them is encouraged. Life is rarely experienced or perceived in a balanced way and, therefore, a lack of symmetry is to be expected in everyday moments. In Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), when Christian Bale's Batman confronts Heath Ledger's Joker in the police interrogation room, neither character is centred. There is an inherent imbalance in the scene that reflects the imbalanced nature, not just of the characters, but the nature of their encounter. When watching such scenes, it is helpful to mentally project the 'rule of thirds' grids over them, to see how these guidelines have been followed or disregarded to shape, inform, or subvert a film's core themes.

Note how, in *The Dark Knight*, the tip of Batman's cowl *just* touches the top of the frame in the police interrogation scene (1:25:40–1:30:05). The shot would have felt less clear had the tip of Batman's head, rather than the tip of his costume's ears, been touching the top of the frame. In this case, the details of the character's costume serves to define the precise amount of head room the character requires.

Likewise, the Joker is framed carefully, conforming to the 'rule of thirds', as well as those of head space and looking room. In following those grammatical rules, the Joker is freed to visually demonstrate his disregard for society. To the character's left (our right) there is a small amount of space — not enough to dwarf the character and not so little that the character is pressed up against the edge of the frame. His head has adequate space, allowing the character to exist comfortably within the spatial field defined by the camera. He is technically a prisoner, but he is unconstrained within the frame. Batman, who is much closer to the camera, looms large over his nemesis, the camera looking down slightly upon the Joker, as if to emphasise his vulnerability in the face of Batman.

The camera angle, coupled with the Joker's relative size to the larger-than-frame Batman, signals to the audience that his character *should* be in a vulnerable situation. But, like the shot of Andy's redemption at the

3 *Napoleon Dynamite*. Directed by Jared Hess. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2004.

end of *The Shawshank Redemption*, the camera angle is quasi-ironic. The Joker is, of course, where he wants to be; his vulnerability is an illusion, something evident from the clash of symbols (the camera versus Ledger's body language) on display. Even without having watched the film previously, it would be possible to deconstruct the contested power hierarchies at the heart of this scene simply by studying a single frame from it. Such is the power of careful and considered composition.[4]

In the below frames (Figures 36 and 37) from *Aftermath*, we utilised a similar compositional framing technique to that deployed by Nolan and his collaborators. As Figure 37 shows, it follows the 'rule of thirds', but where Nolan's camera looks down towards the Joker, ours is angled up towards our subject, subtly empowering them.

The shallow focus in the shot concentrates the audience's attention onto the subject, encouraging them to pay attention only to their face and, by proxy, the words and signals being issued them: an ironic smile, a nuanced and well considered turn of phrase, a twinkle in the eye. In the context of our film, the environment around this subject was comparatively unimportant, so we were free to shoot with a shallow focus. What mattered was the subject's perspective on Trump and his presidential campaign. By keeping our focus as shallow as possible, the audience was left with no choice but to concentrate their attention entirely onto our subject.

By looking up at the subject, strength is implied. His balanced and reasonable critique of Trump, a man who is, economically speaking, far more powerful than this person, is the source of his strength. As a result, we are reminded that the democratic process can level rich and poor.

The subtle desaturation of this scene (and indeed the entirety of *Aftermath*) helps to provide it with a despondent subtext. The power of the voter is tempered by the possibility of their defeat. In *The Dark Knight*, Nolan does not colour-grade his footage as we do. Instead, he creates a world in which colour is seldom seen but, when it is, it is bright and clear. In this way, the Joker's outfit stands out in a world built (but not graded) around blues and greys. If colour is rare in the world of *The Dark Knight*, it is a deliberate omission by those who inhabit it. They have literally created a world dominated by shades of grey — the contrast between the brightly coloured Joker and the black-costumed superhero

4 *The Dark Knight*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. Burbank: Warner Bros., 2008.

at the heart of the story is sumptuous. Good and evil do battle in a world of moral ambiguity.

With documentary, opportunities to design the colour scheme for an entire world are more limited. But by considering one's compositions and carefully selecting what appears and does not appear within a given frame, strong thematic ideas can still be communicated effectively.

Fig. 36. *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*, directed by Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid (3:51–4:06).

Fig. 37. *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*, directed by Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid (3:51–4:06).