**C H A P T E R One**

**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)

**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. Secondarily, that sentence/shot will be contained in a *design of the*

*scene*, which may be an ingredient of an overall *style*.

**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 screen in a series of images that, when combined in

a sequenc **FILM GRAMMAR**

Film language has only four basic grammatical rules, of which three are concerned

with spatial orientation as a result of moving the audience into the action. The

fourth also deals with space, but for a different reason. All of these rules must be

followed most of the time, but all can be broken for dramatic effect.

**THE 180-DEGREE RULE**

The 180-degree rule deals with any framed spatial (right-to-left or left-to-right) relationship

between a character and another character or object. It is used to maintain

consistent screen direction between the characters, or between a character and an

object, within the established space.

When a character is opposite another character or object, an imaginary line

(*axis*) exists between that character and the other character or object.e, gives a meaning that goes beyond mere words.

**THE 30-DEGREE RULE**

If we are going from one shot of a character or object (Figure 1–7) to another shot

of the same character or object without an intervening shot of something else, the

camera angle should change by at least 30 degrees.

The effect of disobeying this rule is to call undue attention to the camera;

it seems to leap through space. If the rule is obeyed, we do not notice this leap.

But in some instances, disobedience can be dramatically energizing. In *The Birds*

(1963), Hitchcock ignores the rule to “punch up” the discovery of a body of a

man with a series of three shots from the same angle, each shot coming dramatically

closer: medium to medium close-up to close-up. (Three is the magic number

in this style of *elaboration*, as well as in other stylistic and dramaturgical aspects of

film. Given any two types of patterns we anticipate the third, creating dramatic

tension.)

**SCREEN DIRECTION**

The sections that follow explore various aspects of screen direction.

**LEFT TO RIGHT**

If a character (or car, or any moving object) exits a frame going from left to right

(Figure 1–8), he should enter the next frame from the left if we intend to convey to

the audience that the character is headed in the same direction

**RIGHT TO LEFT AND UP**

Psychologists have told us that those of us who grew up moving our eyes from left

to right when we read, find it is more “comfortable” for us when a character in a

film moves from left to right. When they go from right to left, a tension is created.

Maximum tension is created when the character moves right to left and up

**FILM TIME**

Our stories *unfold* in time as well as in space, and the ability to use both in service

of our stories is of paramount importance. A simplistic view of the use of time

in film—but one that contains much storytelling savvy—is that we shorten

(compress) what is boring and lengthen (elaborate) what is interesting.

**COMPRESSION**

We are not talking here about the compression that takes place in the screenplay,

such as a year, or even ten years, played out in five minutes of film time (an

absolutely essential component of nearly all screenplays).

**ELABORATION**

Here we want to take a moment and make it larger, to stretch time

Elaboration can also be used to *prepare* the audience for what will happen next,

and, at the same time, create *suspense* about just what it will be. In Eric Rohmer’s

film *Rendezvous in Paris* (1997, French), the artist/protagonist in one of the three

stories is seen walking back to his studio in a protracted series of shots.

**FAMILIAR IMAGES**

A familiar image can reverberate with the harmonics of a previous moment, making

the present moment larger. Scharff comments, in *The Elements of Cinema*:

We know that cinema thrives on repetition and symmetries. The familiar image

structure provides symmetry in the form of a recurrent, stable picture that “glues”

together scattered imagery, especially in scenes that are fragmented into many shots

or involve many participants. . . . Normally, the familiar image is “planted” somewhere

in the beginning of a scene, then recurs several times in the middle, with

resolution at the end.

**STORYBOARDS**

Storyboards are drawings of each individual shot. They are a visual manifestation

of a long investigative journey and can be very helpful in communicating the

director’s vision to others. But the beginning director should be warned. Storyboards

should be the end of the process: annotations of moments in an overall orchestration.

Because they are static renderings of moments, they often prevent the beginning

director from seeing the flow of the scene and realizing the *connecting tissue*

between each of these moments

**C H A P T E R Two**

**DRAMATIC ELEMENTS EMBEDDED**

**IN THE SCREENPLAY**

We talked in Chapter 1 about elements that appear on the screen, but there are

many elements embedded in a screenplay that if unearthed by the director will help

supply clarity, cohesion, and dramatic power to what appears on the screen.

**SPINES**

There are two categories of spines we will be dealing with. The first is the spine of

your film, or its main action. Before we get to the dramatic definition of a film’s

spine, an analogy using representational sculpture may be helpful.

**WHOSE FILM IS IT?**

Most successful films have a protagonist, and *the first question in our detective work*

*on the screenplay is: Who is the protagonist in our film?* Another way of asking the

same question, one I believe is more helpful for the director, is: Whose film is it?

Which character do we go through the film with? Which character do we hope or

fear for—hope that she will get what she wants, or fear that she will not?

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**CHARACTER**

Paul Lucey, in his very fine book on screenwriting, *Story Sense*, states that one of

the main tenets of his dramaturgy is “Write simple stories and complex characters.”

*Although film takes place in the present, character is created in the past*. Character

is everything that has gone into the making of our characters before they

stepped into our film: genetic inheritance, family influence, socioeconomic conditions,

life experience, and on and on. Of course, some influences are more relevant

to our stories than others, and we should limit ourselves so that we do not become

bogged down with the nonessential. Keep this analogy in mind: *A film is like a train*

*ride in which characters embark on their journey with just enough baggage for*

*that trip*.

**CIRCUMSTANCE**

Circumstance is simply the situation the characters find themselves in. It can be,

from the character’s perspective, objective or subjective—real or imagined. In

a feature-length screenplay, the circumstances, especially for principal characters,

are more often than not made explicit in the screenplay

**DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIPS**

The relationship we are referring to here is not the societal relationship; that is,

husband/wife, boyfriend/girlfriend, father/son, mother/daughter, and so on. These

static relationships are facts of the story and will come out in exposition. What we

want here is to find the ever-changing dynamic relationship that exists between any

two characters—the one that supplies what I call the *dramatic juice*.

**WANTS**

*Wants differ from spine in that they are smaller goals (objectives is another term*

*sometimes used) that must be reached before the larger goal of the spine can be*

*achieved*.

**EXPECTATIONS**

A character may want something, but do they expect to get it? Are they afraid of

what might happen, or are they confident? This psychological state is important for the audience to know so that they can more fully access the particular moment in

the story

**ACTIONS**

Drama is told through the actions of your characters. These actions must be conveyed

to an audience in order for them to fully appreciate, as well as understand,

the story.

**ACTIVITY**

It is important to distinguish between action and activity. Suppose you are sitting

in your dentist’s reception area reading a magazine. Are you waiting or reading?

Most likely you are waiting. As soon as the dentist is ready for you, you will drop

the magazine. So what is the reading, in dramatic terms? It is an activity that accompanies

the action of waiting.

**ACTING BEATS**

An *acting beat* (also referred to as a *performance beat*) is a unit of action committed

by a character. There are literally hundreds of these acting beats in a featurelength

film. Every time the action of a character changes, a new acting beat begins.

Each acting beat can be described by an action verb.

**C H A P T E R Three**

**ORGANIZING ACTION IN**

A DRAMATIC SCENE

**DRAMATIC BLOCKS**

A *dramatic block* can be likened to a paragraph in prose: it contains one overriding

dramatic idea. Keeping our dramatic ideas separated gives them more force and

power, and makes them clearer to the audience. And, as in prose, when we move

on to another idea we begin a new paragraph, acknowledging to the reader the progression

of thought, or in the case of a dramatic film acknowledging narrative or

dramatic change and/or escalation. Acknowledging change gives the audience a

sense of forward momentum—of narrative thrust.

Identifying our dramatic blocks will help us to incorporate *spatial renderings*

into our staging; that is, “geographical paragraphs” that will contain a single strong

“idea” (one *main* action).

**NARRATIVE BEATS**

Why does a director move a camera, or cut from one shot to another? Why does a

director have a character move from one side of the room to the other? Is what they

do random, or can it be explained? If it cannot be explained, it cannot be taught.

I believe it can be explained, and not just for some films but for all dramatic/

narrative films.

**THE FULCRUM**

In a dramatic scene, a scene where the *character whose scene it is* wants something

that is difficult to obtain, often the most important narrative beat is the *fulcrum* —

the moment in the scene where things can go either way for that character. One

could call this the turning point, but I prefer to use that term in regard to the film’s

overall dramatic structure (*turning point* is often used to denote the plot point that

occurs at the end of the first and second acts). In a feature film with, say, ten dramatic

scenes, there might be two turning points but ten fulcrums

**C H A P T E R FOUR**

**STAGING**

**MAIN FUNCTIONS**

Staging has eight main functions, outlined in the following.

1. The most obvious job of staging is that it *accomplishes the functional and obligatory*

*physical deeds of a scene*. In other words, it *renders the action*, as in, for

example, “Jack and Jill go up the hill. . . . Jack falls down. . . . Jill comes tumbling

after” or (in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*) “Lear dies.”

2. *Staging makes physical what is internal*. When staging is used in this way, it helps

make the psychology of a character more available to the audience. In an overt

action scene, or even in an entire action film, there may be very little need for

this kind of staging, but the more psychological the scene—the more *inside the*

*head of the characters*—the more a director will call upon this function of

staging.

3. *Staging can indicate the nature of a relationship*, and do it quickly and economically,

as in for example, a man sitting behind a large desk while another

man stands in front of it. Coming upon this staging without knowing anything

about the two characters, we 5. *Staging can resolve spatial separation*. “Separation” occurs when a character is

shot within a frame that does not contain the other characters (or objects) in a

scene. To “resolve” this separateness—to define, clarify, or reaffirm for the audience

where a character is spatially in relation to another character or object—

a shot that places the disparate characters/objects in the same frame is needed. would very likely assume that the man standing in

front of the desk is a subordinate.

4. *Staging can orient the viewer*. It can familiarize us with a location or point out

a significant prop. One way of doing this is to stage the action so that our character’s

movement in the space reveals the relevant geography of the location. In

this way the viewer can be apprised of a window our character will later jump

from or a door that someone will enter, or they can discover a prop that will

have a significant bearing on the plot. An example of this is the hypothetical rifle

hanging above the mantel, which Chekhov referred to in discussing dramatic

craft.

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shot within a frame that does not contain the other characters (or objects) in a

scene. To “resolve” this separateness—to define, clarify, or reaffirm for the audience

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6. *Staging can direct the viewer’s attention*. It can make the viewer aware of essential

information.

7. *Staging can punctuate actions*. It can be used as an exclamation mark, but can

also be used to formulate a question, or to supply a period in the middle of a

shot.

8. And of course, *staging is used in “picturization”*—in helping to create a frame

for the camera to render.

**PATTERNS OF DRAMATIC MOVEMENT**

Dramatic movement occurs when there is a change in the dynamic relationship

between characters, as when an *ally* becomes a *foe*, or a *knight in shining armor*

becomes a *ball and chain*. When there is no change in the dynamic relationship—

when there is stasis between characters—it is not dramatic. That is not to say that

these relationships of stasis do not exist in film; they are common, but they do not

contain the *essential* dramatic movement of the scene or film.

It is helpful in staging to be aware of this change in dynamic relationships, and

to realize that there are only two overall *dramatic movements* possible between characters,

and both can be expressed spatially.

**CHANGING THE STAGE WITHIN A SCENE**

At times, the director will need to create a different atmosphere for the next

dramatic block to occur. It could be as simple as moving the actors from a lighted

area to one that is darker, or from a table to a couch. The main concept here is

that a particular part of the location is saved for this particular part of the

scene. We may be aware, tangentially, that this other stage exists, but its evocative

power is not used up.

**STAGING AS PART OF A FILM’S DESIGN**

In the theater the director is more likely to work out her staging with the actors

present on the set or a facsimile thereof, and rely heavily on the actors’ input. This

makes good sense on the stage, but I do not recommend it for the film director. This

is in no way meant to imply that the film director does not listen to suggestions

from the actors, the director of photography, the dolly grip, or her mother for that

matter.

A caution about staging and movement on the screen in general: *Even though*

*the action might seem to proceed with sufficient alacrity on the set, you should*

*understand that once that same action appears on a screen and receives the concentrated*

*attention of the viewer it will often seem slower*.

**WORKING WITH A LOCATION FLOOR PLAN**

A floor plan is simply an overhead or bird’s-eye view of the location. Although some

locations do not lend themselves to working with a floor plan, most do. The floor

plan helps you to “choreograph” a scene before rendering it with the camera. It

allows you to work out staging for the actors that takes into account not only their

character’s actions but all of the story or plot requisites of the scene

**C H A P T E R Five**

**RESPONSIBILITIES**

**OF THE DIRECTOR**

**DELEGATING AUTHORITY WHILE**

**ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY**

Many of us have trouble delegating responsibility. We want to do everything ourselves

because no one can do it as well as we can. Even if that were true, we do not

have enough hands, nor are there enough hours in the day to handle all of the countless

tasks that must be taken care of. So, we must choose those who help us with

great care. Then, once we have chosen we must trust them to do their jobs.

**THE PRODUCER**

The producer’s job is to do everything possible to help the director achieve his artistic

goal. She is a key figure in giving the director the support and encouragement

every director needs to cope with the pressure of filmmaking. That’s the ideal goal,

but there are many kinds of director/producer relationships, and most start with

who brings the project and the money to the table.

If it is the producer, we have the hired-gun relationship

One of the greatest assets a producer must have is the ability to anticipate what

could go wrong at any stage of the production, for the Peter Principle is always

lurking around the corner of any film set. A cool head and an ability to think on

one’s feet are essential assets for any producer

**THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR**

In reading *Something Like an Autobiography* by the great Japanese film director

Akira Kurosawa (*Rashomon*, 1959, Japanese), I was struck praise he lavished on his assistant director, a man who served him in that capacity

for many years. Even on a small film, the assistant director (AD) is of paramount

importance to the director. Thus, the director must choose with great care the person

who occupies this position.

On smaller productions, such as the ones my students undertake at Columbia,

the roles of producer and AD differ from the roles filled by these key personnel on

larger, professional shoots. In the student film or low-budget area, their duties are

often more extensive and onerous, as they may be forced to make do without important

assistance, such as location managers, transport coordinators, payroll, and a

number of assistants and second assistants.

In preproduction, the AD coordinates with the director and the DP to schedule

the shots that are to be required at each location, and to schedule, with the director’s

input, the most efficient order in which to complete the shots.

During production, the key role of the AD is to ensure the smooth running of

the set: to ensure that all personnel are informed of the schedule and given “call

times,” and if need be to organize transportation for both cast and crew. The AD

coordinates with all of the various departments (camera, grip, electric, sound,

wardrobe, hair/makeup, props, *and cast*) to ensure that everyone is aware of the

schedule. Equally important is to inform all departments if there is a change in the

schedule.

The AD is responsible for on-set discipline and is vitally important in affecting

the on-set atmosphere. He will call for quiet before each shot, and at the end of

each shot he will announce the next camera setup.

**A REALISTIC SHOOTING SCHEDULE**

The length of a shoot is usually dependent on the budget. How many days can you

afford to keep the cast and crew together, and pay for the rental of equipment and

vehicles? This restraint almost always conflicts with the amount of time the director

would like to have. So, the preparation we have gone through in this book will

stand the director in good stead. The actors will have been prepared, the staging

and camera will have been worked out. And yes, it will not go exactly as planned

**WORKING WITH THE CREW**

It is a good idea in the training of a director that they become conversant with the

different craft disciplines. It is not necessary that the director become proficient in

these disciplines, although that certainly does not hurt. It is more important that

the director have a clear visualization of what she wants and the ability to convey

that to others. Much of what the director wants from the various craft disciplines

will be conveyed by the AD. And the same clarity that is essential in directing actors

is needed in directing a crew. The director must state clearly the dramatic or atmospheric

function of the color of a room, of the props, costumes, hairstyles, and

makeup.

**WORKING WITH THE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

The most professionally intimate relationship on the set, aside from director/actor,

is director/director of photography. After all, it is the DP who controls the key to

the final images that are projected on the screen. In film, only the DP will really

know what those final images will look like, so trust must be implicit in the relationship.

And although the DP’s first responsibility is lighting, the director will

invariably rely on him for concurrence on framing (a good eye to bounce off is a

welcome friend to any director) and choice of lenses.