**University of Gondar**

**College of social science and Humanities**

**Department of Film and Television Production**

**Cinematography handout**

 **2nd year students**

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 **April 2020**

**Basic Rules of Composition**

**There are some simple cinematography techniques that will have a great impact in making your videos look more professional.**

**The Rule of Thirds is a technique of dividing the frame up into a 3x3 grid, splitting your frame into nine boxes. Our natural impulse is to put our subject dead center, but a centered subject will look like they’re caught in a spotlight, and by dropping them in the center of the frame, it gives them nowhere to go. Instead, by positioning your action in any of the four vertices where those nine boxes meet, you create a balance in your composition that feels more natural.**

**For example, a side view of a person driv- ing a car: on the top left vertex is the driver’s head and shoulder, which follows their arm down to the lower right vertex to the steering wheel. This creates a nicely bal- anced frame of the driver on the top left and the wheel on the lower right.**

**Relatives of the rule of thirds are Head Room and Look Room. Just as the rule of thirds splits up your frame to add balance, head room and look room mean to give your subject a little extra room in wherever direction they’re facing. If you are filming a public speaker, position them so there’s a little less room at their back and a little more above their head.**

 **Subconsciously, we picture the edge of the frame as a wall, so by giving your subject more look room and head room, there is a space for them to speak into. By not giving them enough look room, they’ll look like they’re talking to a wall!**

**Varying your shots will keep your audience interested by giving them something new to look at or an object presented in a new way.**

**Find unique ways to show everyday things. Observing a scene from the height of your camera operator can get dull; one way to avoid over-reliance on this point of view is to meet your subject on its own terms. If you are filming someone setting down a glass, rather than show the person from the torso up setting the small object on a table, make the glass your subject and position your camera on the table, then watch as a giant drink fills the frame. Your audience will know that because you took the time to focus on this object that it must be important and helps keep the visual element of the story from growing stale.**

**Add depth to a composition. Rather than imagine the scene taking place on a single plane, use the foreground, midground and background to create depth in a scene. For example, a factory worker has entered his boss’s office to ask for a raise.**

**The subject of the scene, the worker, is in the midground, while the large, looming figure of his boss occupies the fore- ground. Behind them, the factory scene hums along with dozens of other workers. You have tied the three key elements of the scene (the worker, the boss, the factory machines) together in one visually rich composition.**

 **These are just the simple rules, but they will do a lot for improving the look of your compositions, and will help you to start thinking of the frame as a canvas where you create your images.**

* Good composition is arrangement of pictorial elements to Form a unified, harmonious whole.
* A camera operator composes whenever he positions a player, a piece of furniture or a prop, Placement and movement of players within the setting should be planned to produce favorable audience reactions. Since viewing a motion picture is an Emotional experience; the manner in which scenes are composed, staged, lighted, photographed and edited should motivate audience reaction, according to the script's intent.
* The camera mechanically records all properly exposed, sharply focused images with equal clarity.
* Composition should not be employed in a by the-numbers fashion to record pictorially beautiful Images devoid of character, meaning and movement.
* Of all rules by which motion pictures are made, compositional principles are the most pliable.
* The most dramatically striking scenes often result from rule breaking. There are times when deliberately poor compositions will aid the story telling. For instance, a film on slum clearance would actually be enhanced through employment of unbalanced, cluttered, poorly composed scenes. Such scenes would irritate the audience, and express the need for decent housing.
* Composition reflects personal taste. A cameraman with artistic background: inherently good taste; an inborn feeling for proper balance, Form, rhythm, space, line and tone: an appreciation of color values; a sense of the dramatic, may create good compositions intuitively.

 Even a mechanically-minded cameraman with limited artistic inclination , can learn to apply the basic: principles of good composition by developing better understanding of visual and emotional elements involved in recording story-telling images.

**STILL vs. MOTION PICTURE COMPOSITION**

Still photographs freeze the *decisive moment* in one stationary image. A still photograph may *suggest* Motion, but it deals in *space* relationships only. It can, therefore, be well composed only within its singular frame of reference. A *motion* picture, on the other hand, is composed in both *space* and *time.* The time dimension is just as important as linear dimensions and placement of the pictorial elements within the frame . A motion picture is a Progression of varied size images, *Space* and *tune* relationships between various elements may remainthe same or change as the picture progress. The size of the various images may remainthe *same,* or *change* from scene to scene; or *during* a scene if the players advance toward orrecede from the camera or if the camera is dollied, panned , tilted or zoomed. This constantly changingimage pattern tends to complicate motionpicture composition.

**GOOD CAMERA WORK BEGINS WITH COMPOSITION**

Composing the scene is the cameraman’s function. He must arrange the various pictorial elements in to a semblance of order before he can light the player s and the set; plot player and/or camera movement, break down the sequence into shots , and decide a on the various camera angles required to cover, the action . Until the scene is composed, the camera operator is not sure just what he is going to shoot. Even outdoors on uncontrollable subject matter, which cannot be prearranged , the cameraman can choose camera angles that provide him with the best viewpoint,

Consequently, the best composition.

COMPOSITIONAL RULES

* Because composition involves artistic taste, emotional awareness, personal likes, dislikes, experience and background of the individual cameraman, strict rules cannot be applied. While composing a scene is not a mechanical process. Certain mathematical and geometrical factors may help insure success. The principal difficulty in composing for motion pictures is dealing not only with shape of people and objects, but the shape of motion.
* A beautifully-composed static scene may become a senseless shambles when

 players ,objects , vehicles , or the camera move !

* The motion picture cameraman must remember that rules of static composition cover still photographs, drawings, paintings, designs. Because of the static content of many shots, still compositional rules may he successfully applied to motion Pictures scenes with fixed pictorial elements.

A scene may break all compositional rules and still attract the viewer's eye to the significant player or object in the picture, merely by movement or sound dominating the frame. A poorly positioned player, for instance, may attract attention by raising his voice. Even though obscure in position, a secondary action may attract more attention than the principal action.

This does not imply that good composition should be disregarded and action and dramatic dialogue substituted to capture viewer's attention.

The rules of good composition should be utilized whenever possible, particularly when the scene consists of more or less static action - such as in establishing long shots, Players at rest in key positions during dialogue exchanges. And any time dramatic emphasis must be attracted to dominant subject matter. Esthetic values should not be neglected because of eye-and-ear attraction of sheer movement and mere sound. Players and objects should be harmoniously arranged within the setting and moved about with artistic effect striving to capture pleasing pictures at all times; regard less of player and /or camera movement, and the need for continuous composing as the scene progresses.

**COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE**

LINES

FORMS

MASSES

MOVEMENTS

These compositional elements speak a universal language, which trigger similar emotional responses in almost every viewer. Properly integrated and employed in an artistic, imaginative intelligent manner. They comprise a compositional language, which may convey the desired mood, Character and atmosphere.

LINES

Compositional lines may be actual contours of objects or imaginary lines in space. People, props, buildings , trees. Vehicles, furniture - may all be expressed in straight, curved, vertical, horizontal, diagonal or any combination of contour lines. While moving about in the scenes, or following action, the eye also creates transitional lines in space. Such imaginary lines, suggested by eye movement or subject movement, may be more effective than actual compositional lines.

For instance, the viewer's eye may travel in a curved pattern, formed by the grouping of several players. It may move in a diagonal line as it follows an airplane taking of, Or in a vertical line described by an ascending missile. The linear composition of a scene is dependent, therefore , not only on actual con tour lines but by transitional lines created by eye movement.

For most effective composition, real lines should not divide the picture in to equal pans. Neither strong vertical nor horizontal lines should be centered. A telegraph pole or the horizon, should not be placed in the middle of the frame. The frame should not be divided into two equal parts with a diagonal line from one corner to another as formed by the side of a mountain.

Unless formed by buildings, columns, trees or other lines, as par t of a repetitious pattern, straight lines should not parallel any side of the frame. A single strong line at the side, top or bottom of the picture should be irregular, rather than absolutely vertical or horizontal.

Viewer interpretations of various compositional lines as follow:

* Straight lines suggest masculinity, strength.
* Softly curved lines suggest femininity, delicate qualities.
* Sharply curved lines suggest action and gaiety.
* Long vertical curves with tapering ends suggest dignified beauty and melancholy.
* Long horizontal lines suggest quiet and restfulness. Paradoxically, they may also suggest speed, because the shortest distance between two-points is a straight line.
* Tall vertical lines suggest strength and dignity.
* Parallel diagonal lines indicate action, energy, violence.
* Opposing diagonals suggest conflict forcefulness.
* Strong, heavy, sharp lines suggest brightness, laughter, excitement.
* Soft lines suggest solemnity, tranquility.
* Irregular lines are more interesting than regular lines, because of their visual quality.

**15 Essential Camera Shots, Angles and Movements**

What are the essential shots, camera angles and camera movements a filmmaker should know about? Here they are:

More than anything else, good cinematography is about choosing the right shots for your project. Although there’s practically an infinite variety of shots to choose from, we can break them down into basic categories. In this article, we’ll look at the 15 essential camera shots you need to know, and break them down into three groups:

* Shot sizes
* Camera angles
* Camera movements

Once you understand the basic principles of each type of shot, you can use them as building blocks to make more interesting combinations.

**Shot Sizes**

**Shot size** refers to how big or small the frame is in relation to the subject. Does your character fill the frame or are they so far away as to be nearly invisible? What else is visible in your shot? Multiple characters? Objects? Landscapes?

Let’s look at the 5 most important shot sizes and see how they work:

**Close-up (CU)**

The **close-up** is one of the most common shot sizes in cinema. It’s used when you want to highlight the facial features of your character without any other distractions in the shot. A typical close-up shows the character’s face from their forehead to their chin.

However, there’s room for some variation. An **extreme close-up** goes further, often showing nothing more than the character’s eyes. Think of a classic Western in which two characters stare each other down before a duel. This shot draws the viewer’s attention to facial features and expressions that would be lost in a wide shot.

**Long shot (LS)**

A **long shot** is in some ways the opposite of a close-up. It shows the character’s entire body in frame, from their head to their toes. This gives the viewer a better sense of the subject’s surroundings, and conveys information that would be lost in a close-up.

Long shots are often used in action scenes, when it’s important to see how the character is moving through his or her environment. You might cut from that extreme close-up of your two dueling characters to a long shot that shows just how far they’re actually standing from each other, giving the viewer a better perspective on the scene.

One variation of this shot is an **extreme long shot,** in which the character is so far away they’re nearly lost in the frame or obscured by their surroundings. Think of a character riding off into the sunset, getting smaller as they get further away from the camera.

**Medium shot (MS)**

The **medium shot** or **mid shot** is somewhere between a close-up and long shot. A typical medium shot shows the subject from their head to their waist. It’s close enough that you can still see their face, while also including some of their body language.

You might use this shot when a character is carrying an object or pointing a gun. Or, if they’re sitting at a desk, you can show them writing in a book, while avoiding wasting valuable screen space on their feet or their knees.

It’s also useful for when a character is moving through the frame, since it contains enough background information that the viewer doesn’t get disoriented.

**Single, two shot, three shot**

Another way to categorize a shot is by the number of people in the frame. We call this a **single shot**, a **two shot**, or a **three shot**, depending on how many people are in it.

Typically, you’ll combine this with one of the other shot sizes we’ve already looked at. For example, you might use a two-shot close-up for a scene of two characters kissing. Three characters in an office might call for a medium three shot.

**POV**

Finally, there’s the **POV** or **point-of-view** shot. This is used when you want the viewer to see what the character is seeing or feel what they’re feeling. It can be a static shot or you can combine it with one of the camera motions that we’ll look at later.

**Camera Angles**

The next category that we’ll look at is **camera angle**. Once you’ve decided on a shot size, you can add a bit more perspective to your shot by choosing an angle. The camera angle can help you create a sense of fear, empathy, or disorientation in the viewer.

**Eye level**

The most neutral camera angle is the **eye level** shot. The camera points straight ahead at about the same level as the subject’s face. This is how you would shoot an interview scene if you wanted to maintain a sense of objectivity.

The goal is to let the viewer follow the action without manipulating their emotions. While it’s called “eye level,” it doesn’t have to be a shot of the character’s face. You can get an eye level shot of an object by maintaining a neutral camera angle.

**Low angle**

A **low-angle shot**adds some subjectivity to the scene. Instead of facing straight ahead, the camera looks up at the subject from a low angle. This can make a character appear threatening, dominant, or in a position of power relative to another character.

As with some of the other shots we’ve looked at, you can vary the intensity of it. A slight low angle might be used to convey a sense of authority, such as a teacher looking down at a student. An extreme low angle shot might be used to show a monster like Godzilla or King Kong bearing down on other characters.

**High angle**

The reverse of the low angle shot is the **high angle shot**, which creates the opposite impression, and makes the subject of the camera seem small. For example, a shot from King Kong’s POV might point down from a higher angle to show how powerless the characters are in relation to him.

You can also take this to the extreme with a **top angle** or **bird’s eye view**. This shot looks down on the character from above and can be used indoors or outdoors. For example, you might look down on your subject entering a church or stadium.

Or, you could use this to show your character running away from a helicopter, in which case it would be an **aerial shot** or a **drone shot**.

**Dutch angle**

A **Dutch angle** is one of the most common ways to convey disorientation. For this shot, simply tilt the camera to one side so it isn’t level with the horizon. You might use this shot to show the POV of a drunk character stumbling down the street, or in a horror movie to give the impression that the walls of a haunted house are closing in.

**Over-the-Shoulder (OTS)**

An **over-the-shoulder shot** is another angle that can shift a viewer’s perception of the scene. A OTS shot is generally a close-up of another character’s face from “over the shoulder” of another character and is used to convey conflict or confrontation.

You could also use an OTS wide shot to show a character looking out over a landscape or moving through an action sequence, when you don’t want to use a POV.

**Camera Movement**

The third category that we’ll look at is **camera motion** or **movement**. Most of the shot sizes and angles we’ve look at can be used as either static shots or moving shots. By adding motion to a scene, you can move between camera angles easily, sometimes even within the same shot. Let’s look at 5 common camera movements here:

**Pan or tilt**

The simplest camera movement is a **pan** or **tilt**. A **pan** is when you keep the camera in one place and turn it to the side, and a **tilt** is when you turn it up or down.

If your camera is on a tripod, then you can simply turn the head of the tripod, just as you would turn your head to one side to get a new perspective on a scene. If a subject stands up, you can turn an eye-level shot into a low-angle by tilting the camera up as they rise.

A pan or tilt is also a good opportunity to experiment with speed. You could spend an entire minute slowly panning from left to right to show off a room or a landscape, or you can do a **whip pan**, in which the movement happens so fast that it becomes a blur.

**Tracking shot, dolly shot, or crane shot**

The key to a pan or tilt is that the camera itself doesn’t move, so the viewer feels mostly like a spectator. If you want to move with a subject and make the viewer feel like a part of the action, you can use a **tracking shot**, **dolly shot**, or **crane shot**.

Typically, a tracking shot moves sideways, a dolly shot moves forwards or backwards, and a crane shot moves up or down. Depending on your equipment, you can use these movements separately, or combine them to move on multiple axes at once.

**Zoom**

A **zoom shot** moves into or out of the frame by using a zoom lens rather than moving the camera. You can turn a medium shot into a close up by slowly zooming in on a subject’s face as they deliver an emotional monologue. Or you can zoom out to reveal a character or object that wasn’t previously in frame.

A zoom can be slow and subtle so that the viewer barely notices it happening, or it can be more obvious to give the shot a *cinema verite* style.

**Random motion**

**Random motion** is used to create energy and intensity, particularly in an action scene. Think of *The Bourne Identity*, in which the camera bounces around so quickly that the subject of the scene isn’t even always framed in the shot.

While random motion can be effective in creating a sense of disorientation, sometimes it can be *too* effective, leaving viewers dizzy and confused.

**360-degree motion**

The last type of motion that we’ll look at is **360-degree motion**, in which the camera moves entirely around the subject of the shot. These shots can be challenging to do on large film sets, because they require hiding the crew and equipment from view, but they’re more common in the days of Steadicams and CGI.

*The Matrix* used a special camera setup for its 360-degree fight scenes, but you can also use a handheld camera or a drone.

**Compound motion**

The great thing about camera motion is that you don’t have to restrict it to one axis at a time. You can combine movements to move in multiple dimensions at once and create more complex shots. Let’s look at two popular compound shots:

**Dolly zoom**

The **dolly zoom** is used to create a sense of vertigo or unease. It was famously used in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*. In this shot, the camera moves forward or backwards while the lens zooms in the opposite direction.

**Single Take**

A **single take**combines multiple movements, shot sizes, and angles into one extended shot. Rather that cutting from a long shot to a close-up, for example, the camera might track, zoom, pan, and tilt between a variety of different shots.

This can be the hardest to get right, but it’s an effective way to orient viewers to a new environment, such as with the opening shot in *Goodfellas*. It can also lend a theatrical feel to a movie, as in *Birdman*, which is made to appear like one very long shot.

**Try it yourself**

These are 15 of the most essential camera shots, angles, and movements in filmmaking, but remember, they can be combined in an infinite number of ways.

Here’s a simple chart I’ve designed to help you come up with more creative shots. Start off by choosing a **camera angle** from the first column, a **shot size** from the second, and a **movement** from the third.

Try a few different combinations, and don’t be afraid to experiment and see what works best for your scene. You can always get a few different shots on set and decide which one you like best in the editing room.

Before long, you’ll be able to put the chart away and rely on your instincts. After you’ve done this many times, it will start to become second nature to you.

**TL;DR**

I’ve divided 15 essential camera shots into three groups of 5 each: Angles, Shot Sizes and Motion. Together, you can create an infinite combination of shots for your film projects.

**Camera Angles**

1. Eye level – camera points straight ahead. Intention is to be objective.
2. Low angle – camera points up from a lower angle. It makes the subject dominating.
3. High angle – camera points down from a higher angle. It makes the subject diminutive. A variation: Top angle or bird’s eye view – special case when you want to show the topography of a location. Aerial shots fall under this.
4. Dutch – tilted angle. It draws attention to the fact it’s not a balanced frame. Something is literally off kilter.
5. Over the shoulder (OTS) – not strictly an angle, but it’s a specialized shot that deserves its own place. Confrontational by nature.

 **Shot Sizes**

1. Close up – facial features and expression is more important than anything else. Variation: Extreme close up – you probably want to chop something off for an even closer look.
2. Long shot – When you want to add action and location along with the subject. Variation: Extreme long shot – when the location is more important than the character at that moment.
3. Medium shot or Mid shot – half of a person, roughly, where body language is important while eliminating distracting elements of the background.
4. Single, two shot, three shot. etc. – Number of people in frame decide this. You can combine this with a CU, MS or LS.
5. POV – as if the audience were the subject.

**Camera Movement**

1. 360 degree – showcase the subject by moving around it.
2. Zoom – when you want to get closer or further away without making an emotional statement.
3. Pan and tilt – when you want to observe the space from a single vantage point, follow the subject so you feel like you’re a spectator observing. The movement happens on a pivot.
4. Tracking shot, crane, dolly – when you want to follow the subject and be more involved with the space and location. The audience is drawn into the world.
5. Random – camera shake or motion to provide energy.

 **Compound Motion**

You can combine motion into more complex shots. The two most popular examples are:

1. Dolly Zoom or Vertigo Shot – where the camera dollies in/our and zooms in/out (the opposite direction to the dolly movement) at the same time.
2. Single take shot – where the action is a complex choreography of different camera angles, shot sizes and motion. The toughest and most time consuming to pull off.

That’s it! By using a combination of angles, shot sizes and motion you can create an infinite variety of shots. Happy filmmaking!

**Lighting for Digital Video and Television**

**Why Is Lighting Important for Television and Video?**

If you’re fairly new to television, video, and digital movie production, you may not really have a sense of why lighting is so important. After all, today’s cameras are so light sensitive you can often get away without any additional lighting. The only thing you don’t understand is why sometimes your shots are overexposed or contrasty; and you may not be able to figure out why one shot will look like a Hollywood film and the next will look like a really bad YouTube video. If, on the other hand, you’re more experienced in television and event video production, you may understand a lot about the basic issues of controlling contrast and exposure—but would find it challenging to light a realistic night scene or simulate natural lighting in a living room for a dramatic movie.

These situations are very different from flat studio lighting and a classic three-point interview setup. Whether you’re a rank beginner with a video camera or a moderately experi- enced video user who wants to get into the more advanced world of dramatic moviemaking, I hope this book will prove to be a helpful guide to understand- ing lighting and how it contributes to effective image making. The real key to fine lighting is not only to simulate reality, but to communicate the proper mood and feeling to the viewer. You need to know more than just basic techniques or tricks; it’s best to have an understanding of how certain looks will communicate to your viewers. You need to develop an artist’s eye for light and shadow and color, and the techniques for reproducing them. Ulti- mately, great lighting is an ongoing learning experience that can graduate from craft and technique to the realm of art. In this book, we’re going to travel through the world of television, video, and digital movie lighting in a fairly methodical way, so that you build an understanding of the “why” behind the “how to.” If you’ll come along for the

journey (rather than cheating and just flipping through to find a setup diagram or two), by the time we’re finished you’ll understand the principles behind the techniques. At that point, you’ll be able to improvise, to create new techniques for unique situations, rather than having to fall back on some textbook diagrams; and it means you’ll be able to do a better job at any lighting scenario.

Why is lighting so important to great video? There are a number of different reasons, some of which have to do with the camera itself and the way the imag- ing system translates light into an electrical signal, and others of which have to do with the fundamentals of human perception.

 But just as important is the fact that we’re creating an illusion. Like a magician, we’re trying to convince the viewer of something that isn’t quite true. We’re trying to make it seem as if col- ored plasma flickering across a flat glass screen are actually lions and tigers and bears and people, the great outdoors, the grandeur of space, and the depths of the sea. We’re trying to create the illusion of depth and size in a tiny flat plane. And even more difficult, we’re not really trying to capture what the eye sees. We’re trying to capture the mind’s interpretation of what the eye sees, which can be a wholly different thing. But more on that later!

Good lighting is important for quality video in three different ways:

First, you have to have proper

 ■ exposure, enough light to generate a sig- nal from the CCDs and raise the signal to a proper level, but not exceed the limits.

Second, you have to create the

 ■ illusion of depth through use of highlights and shadows so that the viewers forget they are watching a 36” 3 20” rectangle of glass with flickering plasma behind it.

 Third, you have to use tricks and i llusions to create

■ mood and feeling with the lighting, just as the music director will create mood and feeling with the music.

**EXPOSURE AND CONTRAST**

The most obvious way in which lighting is important for video is in basic exposure. Like the wag said, “without lighting all you have is a black picture!” You have to have enough light on your subject to excite the electrons in the camera’s imaging chips to a certain level. It doesn’t matter that you can see it—if the camera can’t see it, your video is toast. You’d think this would be obvious, but it’s amazing how many people will try to create a night scene by just shoot- ing in the dark. This is probably one of the most common “postmortems” that I do, when folks bring me their videos and ask what went wrong. The producer of an independent short brought me some raw camera footage to review a scene his crew had shot out in a field at night with a Sony VX-1000 the first popu- lar DV camcorder—and one that was notori- ous for its poor low-light performance. They had (almost) all the right equipment, but they really had no idea how to use it, and the result was dreadful. They’d shot in a field with no easily available power, so they brought a small generator and several lights.

 Unfortunately, they didn’t bring enough “stingers” so when they got the generator far away enough that it wouldn’t interfere with the audio, they couldn’t get the lights very close to the subjects. Then, rather than concentrating the light all on one side (which might have just barely worked), they distributed them around to create a flood of weak, flat lighting. Then they turned on the AUTO EXPOSURE control on the VX1000—a true beginner’s mis- take. Since the VX1000 was very poor at lowlight situations to begin with, the AUTO circuits kicked in full gain to try and make the scene look like a fully lit room, rather than a dark night scene. With the gain all the way up to 118 db, the result was a flat, grainy picture that looked like surveillance video.

The one thing it didn’t look like was a night scene. “What can we do?” wailed the producer, who had now wasted a whole day on this scene. I drew a diagram, using the same lights they had used but lots more stingers to bring the lights closer to the subjects. I put most of the lights in a group on one side with ¼ blue gels. I used one ungelled light as a kicker from the rear on the other side, leaving the camera side unlit. Then I showed their young shooter how to expose manually. The results were pretty good, giving a feeling of a moonlit night. I think they even gave me a credit in the roll! But just as you must have enough light, too much light or too much contrast can be a problem as well.

 If a backlight is too intense compared to the key, the highlights will be “hot”—over the electronic definition for full white—and may “clip” so that there is no detail in that area of picture. If the camera operator stops down to expose for the backlight, then the rest of the subject will be underexposed and the picture will seem too contrasty. Overexposing causes worse problems than underexposure because some- times the result can’t be repaired.

There’s a local station where I live where nearly all the location news footage is grossly overexposed. I don’t mean a little bit, I mean grossly. Large portions of the picture are clipped white, and the dark areas are medium gray. When they interview a person of color, it’s not uncommon for the person to look almost Caucasian. When they interview a Caucasian, the face is a white blob with little detail. The studio (though I don’t like the lighting aesthetically) is at least properly exposed, accentuating the difference in the location footage. But once you have a basic level of exposure, what do you do with it? It’s fairly easy to blast several thousand watts on a scene so that it gets the electrons in the camera hopping, and then stop down until the viewfinder’s zebra indica- tor goes away and you’re not overexposed. But it’s much harder to find the nuances that will really convince the viewer’s eye and mind of texture, feeling, and mood. This is where the acceptable gets separated from the great.

**BEYOND BASIC EXPOSURE**

Great lighting begins with the creation of an illusion of depth.

 Keep in mind that no matter how much television is a part of our lives, the TV screen is still just a flat piece of glass with flickering colored lights. Although it has height and width, a television screen is fundamentally two-dimensional: it has no depth. No amount of great acting or wonderful music will create that illusion of the third dimension; it’s entirely up to the lighting designer to create the feeling of depth. This is done through careful crafting of highlights and shadows, the visual cues that the brain uses to interpret depth. In fine art, the use of light and shadow to create a sense of depth is known as chiarascuro. Together with the refinement of perspective, it is an essential element of great Renaissance art. Most local news studios, talk shows, and soap opera sets are flat lit with loads of light and almost complete elimination of shadows. This is done for con- venience and economy. The result is a very flat, two-dimensional feeling. The eye doesn’t find the cues that help the brain interpret depth, so it’s hard to figure out how deep the set is and how far the anchors (or actors) are from one another. We’re used to the look from seeing the evening news regularly, so it doesn’t bother us, but boy does it telegraph “LOCAL NEWS” to the viewer. Use that lighting scheme for a drama, and it just won’t work. Contrast this to the realistic lighting used in many TV dramas of the last two decades, such as Dick Wolf’s Law and Order or Aaron Sorkin’s West Wing.

These shows make very heavy use of light and shadow, often lighting close-up subjects heavily from one side with a large, dif- fused lighting source and leaving the other side in near darkness. The standards for television drama lighting have increased dramatically in recent years.

Despite intense production sched- ules, the production teams on these shows work hard on their lighting to convey the feeling of depth and dimension. Light patterns on walls, mixed-color temperatures, and shadows all cre- ate a feeling of the depth of the scene—but also clearly cue the viewer as to an off-screen light source that is appropriate to the set.

While some of these shows write new rules for lighting, most films and dramatic programs borrow heavily from what I call the Holly- wood visual vernacular, the peculiar set of visual cheats and shortcuts that have developed over the last hundred years of filmmaking. Vernacular, of course just refers to “common language.” These tricks are part and parcel of the common visual language of movies. Many of these aren’t very realistic at all, but are a type of visual shorthand that we have been indoctrinated to by years of watching Hollywood films. It’s important to have a sense of these cheats and what they are associated with in the minds of viewers. Why? Because they work.

They are much like the tried-and-true cheats of the theatre, techniques that work, tech- niques that the audiences are used to and accept without question. In the live theatre, there’s an expression that’s quite important: “suspension of disbelief.” The phrase, which originates with Coleridge\* (he was talking about poetry), has come to mean the state in which the audience is fully engaged in the illusion of the drama.

 In practice, it is a balance whereby the actors, direc- tor, and crew use techniques and conventions to create a certain semblance of reality—and then the audience meets them halfway by “suspending disbelief” in the patent fakery. It’s a delicate balance, easily broken; the audience will only go so far. If an actor drops out of character or does something utterly incongru- ent, the spell will be broken. The audience’s attention will be focused on the fact that this is an actor pretending to be Romeo, not Romeo himself.

If the tech crew makes a gross mistake (the phone rings long after it has been answered or the gunshot sounds before the policeman has gotten the pistol out of his holster), so too the spell will be broken. The audience will go so far, but no farther. But those tried-and-true “cheats” that I mentioned above are, in a way, a part of the unconscious contract between audience and play actors. They are a set of conventions everyone accepts more or less willingly, cheats that the audi- ence will accept, obvious artifices that still will not break the all- important suspension of disbelief.

That’s what the Hollywood visual vernacular is about— artificial devices that work without interrupting or unduly jostling the audience’s suspension of disbelief. A great example of “stock” Hollywood vernacular lighting occurs in one of Elvis’s films, G. I. Blues. It’s a bedroom scene where he sings a lullaby to Marla’s baby. This room was lit pretty much in Hollywood formula fashion, effective, but certainly not breaking any new ground in lighting design.

The bed and Elvis are intensely lit with thousands of watts of studio lights, while the rest of the bedroom is broken into a pattern with several blue-gelled lights with cookies. I think I even recognize the pattern of the standard Mole-Richardson cookie! This broken pattern of blue light on the walls is Hollywood code for “this is nighttime.” The light level in the room is actually quite excessive for what the scene portrays, and it really doesn’t actually look like any dimly lit real bed- room I’ve ever seen. But with the exception of directors of photography (DPs), light- ing designers, and gaffers, no one notices! Most viewers accept the scene without question, their “suspension of disbelief” fully engaged.

As unrealistic as some of these tricks are, they are effective. The viewer will watch the scene and accept the effect and the mood without question. While it may be exciting to rewrite the rule book and create new techniques that speak to the viewer, let’s face it: it’s not always going to work. Sometimes it will; other times, it will flop or call such self-conscious attention to itself that it disrupts the viewer’s involvement in the story. But even more to the point, most of the time you don’t have the luxuries of either time or budget to mess around and experiment. It’s often more effective (and realistic) to simply use the old rule- book to convey the right effect. The real key here is to communicate the proper mood and feeling to the viewer. I’m always a bit bothered by the folks who seem to feel that filmmaking is some kind of personal experience that they are allowing the audience to witness. As far as I’m concerned, the art is in creating an experience that communicates to the viewer.

 If you fail to connect to the viewer, if you are so completely about your own experience or vision that you don’t consciously accommodate the perceptions of the viewer, your art will likely flop. Lighting that calls attention to itself, that sets the wrong mood, or focuses the eye on the wrong part of the picture is lighting that has failed. It’s like a soundtrack that uses obviously arti- ficial sound effects, or an actor that makes the viewer turn to their neighbor and say “What wonderful acting!” Truly wonderful acting immerses the viewer so much in the character and the story that the viewer would never think to make such a comment.

Whether you use a hackneyed Hollywood trick to create that mood or come up with a new and creative technique of your own, the important point is to cre- ate an illusion that will fool the eye—or rather the mind—of the viewer. Great lighting, like great music, will reinforce the emotional or psychological impact of what is happening onscreen. Suppose for a minute a scene of tension in which the main character is hiding in a darkened room when suddenly the door slams open and a mysterious new player enters the scene. We don’t know who he is or what his intentions are; he might be an axe murderer or he might be the good guy.

 It could be effective to use a strong dramatic backlight, silhouetting the new player in the doorway. A bit of mist floating around makes the light beams visible, creating a sort of nimbus around the silhouetted figure. Tie this in with a dramatic chord in the background music, possibly a dolly forward, and you’ve got a great scene that will have the audience on edge. Now imagine a very different scene: the first kiss of a teenage couple. Unsure of themselves, that spark has crossed like an electric shock between them as their eyes met; both move tentatively toward one another, hesitant, sensitive to any cue of withdrawal or rejection. Now apply the same lighting, the same music, the same dolly move. Yuck. While I suppose that I can stretch my imagination to find a spikey, edgy sto- ryline with tense characters where it might work, it’s really not too likely. You want soft lighting; you want the rest of the scene to fade away a bit to convey the way that the young lovers’ attention has collapsed until only the two of them exist.

 Now, these may seem to be extreme examples, and in fact they are. The extreme example is there to make a point. You need to decide what feeling you are trying to convey, and you also need to have an understanding of how certain looks will communicate to the viewers. We are all trained by a hundred years of movies into certain perceptions. You need to think out how to create that feel- ing, that sense of place, mood, or circumstance before you even set up the first light. With a little practice, some tricks and techniques, and an understanding of how all this works, you’ll be able to set up the proper mood quickly and with only a few instruments. Of course, there is room for experimentation, for new effects, for lighting that breaks the rules and makes the audience uncomfortable without understand- ing why—rather like Hitchcock’s combination of zooming in and dollying out at the same time, which created a creepy feeling that most people couldn’t put their fingers on.

 But my message to ambitious students especially is this: you have to learn how to do it by the rules before you can know how to break the rules! In the next chapters, we’re going to walk through the basics, the tricks, and the techniques so that we can get to the ultimate point of the book, the creative art- istry of truly fine lighting. This will give you the foundation from which you can springboard—perhaps into new lighting visions that no one else has tried!

***What Do We Expect Lighting to Do for Us?***

* *Mood and tone: emotional content*
* *A full range of tones: gradations of tone*
* *Color control and color balance*
* *Depth and dimension: foreground, mid ground, background*
* *Shape and fullness (3D)*
* *Separation: Subjects against the Background*
* *Texture*
* *Exposure*
	+ ***Color Temperature***
	+ ***Either warm (yellowish) or cool (bluish), and***
	+ ***It is used to describe the color characteristics of light,***
	+ ***Measured in degrees of Kelvin (°K).***

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***Light Quality***

1. ***Hard light:*** *-*
	* *it is directional (natural or artificial)*
	* *Has concentrated beam of light*
	* *clearly defined shadows (light & dark) areas*

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 *Soft Light*

* + *diffused illumination, indirect or indistinct lighting*
		- *Shadow is Soft and detail visible.*

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***Types of Lighting***

* ***Key Light***
	+ ***It is the main or predominant light on a subject***
	+ ***It gives shape, form, and definition to the subject***
	+ ***It is that it is the light that creates a shadow of the subject.***
	+ ***In a moving shot, an actor may have several keys and move from one to the other.***
* ***Fill Light (Filler):-***
	+ ***A light that balances the key light***
	+ ***It is a soft light or usually placed near the camera on the opposite side from the key***
* ***Backlight:-***
	+ ***a hard source placed behind the subject***
	+ ***Create a rim of light along the top and an edge of the subject***
	+ ***By creating a corona isolates the subjects and makes it stand out***

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***Background Light:-***

* + *bringing out texture and shape of items,*
	+ *there giving the scene a more directional look.*

Good Luck!