The Age of the Image

REDEFINING LITERACY IN A WORLD OF SCREENS

Stephen Apkon

Farrar, Straus and Giroux ■ New York

6

GRAMMAR, RHYTHM, AND RHYME IN THE AGE OF THE IMAGE

Perceptually, films are illusions, not reality; cognitively, they are not the blooming, buzzing confusion of life but rather simplified ensembles of elements, designed to be understood.

—DAVID BORDWELL, *Film Historian and Theorist*

Who hasn't seen a television show, film, or YouTube video and thought, *I could have done that*? You can. But it takes some practice and some understanding of film grammar and technique. The reason it all seems so easy is a combination of the seductive nature of images and the way the majority of what we watch has been composed and constructed.

Since the advent of Hollywood editing, back in the earliest days of cinema, the goal of filmmakers has been for us to feel the movement of the camera but not to be aware of it, to look past the construction of the media, to ignore the seams in the material. Just as an Olympic diver smiles and hides the effort as she catapults skyward and manages to pull off multiple flips while seemingly twisting in both directions, good storytelling—whether oral, in print, or visual—typically hides the construction and the hard

work that go into making it. Both the medal-winning dives and the best stories are more intricate than they appear.

We are not starting from scratch, however. All the times in our lives we've spent feeding at the trough of television, movies, the Internet, and other assorted screens, consuming supersize amounts of visual media—all that time was not wasted, not one minute of it. We have reaped the side benefit (albeit unintended) of building sophisticated databases of visual information and language that we now must learn how to access. Each movie, sitcom, news broadcast, or Internet video we have seen has been internalized and has helped our understanding of visual language evolve and deepen.

Just as the writer has tools and structures to use in his craft, so, too, does the visual storyteller. Concepts of written texts (exposition, plot, metaphor) and principles of composition and grammar have their equivalent ideas in visual media, which is "written" with a different set of tools. It is important to begin to develop a facility with each of these tools, and to understand the essential principles of composition. Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, published in 1914, lays out essential rules for written composition. While the book is still relevant, no one would argue that each of its rules must be followed religiously. Plenty of great literature and written text violates one or all of Strunk and White's rules. Still, there is a need first to understand these rules of composition before you decide to break them. This is true also for visual media.

This chapter is intended to function as a basic primer for visual storytelling, rooted as it is in some of the timeless rules of film vocabulary that have been proven effective since the very first days of Hollywood. It is not a technical manual—those are readily available elsewhere, and the truth is, the tools of creation are all pretty intuitive and accessible. It is also not merely a guide to

acquiring these skills in the service of making visual media. The truth is that every day, we are more and more inundated with constructed images. Just as knowing grammar and appreciating the construction of a sentence, paragraph, or story make you a stronger, more sophisticated reader, acquiring a facility with visual storytelling skills will make you a stronger, more sophisticated viewer. You will be able to see what the "writer" of images is doing, understand her rhetorical devices, and even know when and how you are being manipulated. You will then be in control—at each moment deciding whether to study the construction of the narrative, be attentive to the manipulation of the piece, or simply sit back and allow the images to flow over you like a dream. In any case, you will be making a choice rather than having the choice made for you. In this case the ancient maxim "Knowledge is power" is true, but one could add to it: "and is readily available."

Two important notes: Filmmaking is, usually, a highly collaborative process. Sit through the credits of any film and you realize how many specialized functions there are. Screenwriters might be the ones to take the first steps in bringing a particular story to life, but many others will join in before the story is finished. For our purposes, we'll focus on the perspective of the director, who is ultimately responsible for what ends up on the screen. When we hear the term *director*, we think about the artistic soul in the canvas folding chair yelling "Action!" or directing actors within a scene. These images are true, but the real essence of the job is the "chief storyteller," or the person who "directs" the audience—at each moment directing our focus; showing us what to see, what to hear, what to understand, and what to feel. We'll use that orientation in its broadest sense in order to touch on the critical aspects of creating visual media.

Also, there can be substantive differences between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking, between narratives and documentaries.

For our purposes, we will move between both these worlds, since the core issues of storytelling are similar in both.

The Tools

While the writer has pen and paper (or keyboard and printer), the visual storyteller has a camera, microphones (or other ways to source sound), and editing systems that allow for the construction of story. All your power as a filmmaker can essentially be placed into three large buckets: frame, sound, and editing.

- **Frame**. Everything we can see: the images on the screen, the faces of the actors or subjects, the motions they make, the lighting, the background, the props, and even the text.
- **Sound**. Everything we can hear: from voice-over narration to dialogue to sound effects, music, or ambient sound.
- **Editing**. Everything that constructs a story: the movement from scene to scene that guides us through a story; how images are placed next to other images to create new or deeper meanings; how sounds are mixed and laid over images to drive emotion or narrative.

Now imagine the contents of each of these buckets being poured into one larger bucket that holds everything together. That larger bucket would be called *story*, the heart of the entire enterprise.

Some of the steps for creating literate stories, whether written or visual, are quite similar and even commonsensical, but the choices you make and the language you use vary greatly. All involve a working dynamic of frame, sound, and editing.

There is no foolproof formula for excellence, no tricks that

work across *all* kinds of stories, but there are some clear steps to making a piece of literate visual media.

So you are ready to grab a camera and microphone and head out to begin shooting. My first piece of advice: put them down. Visually driven media is powerful because it can be multilayered, rich in sensory information, and complex in the choices that are made in its construction. Writers have the advantage of an eraser or a Delete button, and they can craft their story and introduce new elements as often or as late in the process as they would like. Filmmaking, however, requires us to commit to the story and essential elements well *before* we begin the construction or editing process. It can be difficult (and at times expensive) to bring all the essential people and locations together to shoot new scenes, and in the case of documentary filmmaking, the moments we'd like to capture might never be replicable.

Before we get into the basics of frame, sound, and editing, let's first address intention and planning. Preproduction can spell the difference between a literate or an illiterate visual text, and the most effective directors typically address four basic elements of this process up front.

Preproduction: Intention and Planning

1. Know Your Goal

Just as with any form of communication, you have to start by knowing what you are trying to achieve. Are you advocating for a political cause, attempting to change minds, motivate action, inform, amuse, entertain, or outrage (to name just a few potential goals)?

The answer to this question will begin to shape many of the choices you make in constructing your story—from the form and length, to the way you shoot it, work in sound elements, and edit with a particular mood in mind. All the choices we encounter in the making of a moving image can be framed by one overriding question: What are we trying to accomplish at each moment and in the larger piece?

The goals you might envision are limitless, but the clearer you can be about this question, the greater your chances for success. Whatever the goal or goals, the effort is captured within what we see, hear, and feel. And we are led there by the powerful and intoxicating combination of frame, sound, and editing, the choices of which are going to be (or *should* be) influenced by your primary goal. So first, you must know that goal and be able to describe it to yourself in one sentence.*

2. Know Your Audience

For whom are you making this? You might be trying to communicate something to a handful of people who already have basic knowledge of what you are talking about, or you might be trying to reach a mass audience not at all familiar with the subject. In either case, recognition of who your intended audience is will help you shape a literate piece. If you are generating a short advocacy piece that plays on collective cultural knowledge, you can use images as metaphors, or even choose the type of construction to use to tap into this.

* A question that relates to this: How do you know if you're succeeding? With film studios, success is purely related to box office results, but for many other filmmakers it is about critical reception. Your video might be expressing a point of view in a local or national debate. Or it might be about delighting a family member with something that celebrates him or her during a family occasion. Considering your metrics of success up front is helpful for refining your goal and shaping the piece.

When Hillary Clinton set out to make a campaign commercial back in 2007, she enlisted the help of her very recognizable husband and a small film crew and headed to a local diner to create a parody of the last episode of *The Sopranos*, a show that months earlier had been watched by close to twelve million viewers on its premier broadcast and millions more in the succeeding few months. She was banking on the fact that almost everyone watching her video had some previous knowledge of this series and episode.

If you were to show Hillary's video to anyone who has not seen *The Sopranos*, even down to each individual shot and edit, it would seem amateur and campy, or might not even make sense. This is why the campaign chose not to buy airtime on television, but rather to put the video out on the Web and trust it to go viral among the vast community of *Sopranos* fans (and potential Clinton voters), who they hoped would share it with one another. They would get the references without need for explanation—understanding the message and humor, while hopefully achieving the campaign's goals of connecting their candidate with the national mood and giving her a more playful, hip image.

Your piece does not exist outside the context of all the other media your audience has consumed, but in fact is in a dialogue of sorts with it. The more you know your audience, the more you can tap into this database of cultural and visual references.

3. Choose the Appropriate Format

What is the best method for telling your story? The experience of the piece will be conveyed through not only the linear narrative, but also the essence of the structure. Your answers to the two questions just posed—goals and audience—will help drive this decision, and this decision will then drive everything else.

The genre of the film makes a big difference. There are certain

accepted structures or tropes within each genre that allow us to anticipate the range of what we will see next, allowing for us to process the information more quickly.

An easy example: we know in a romantic comedy that the formula is essentially "boy meets girl" and they fall in love, boy loses girl, boy and girl find each other again and overcome all obstacles to live happily ever after. With Shakespearean roots in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or more modern fare such as *When Harry Met Sally* or one of my youngest daughter Maayan's favorites, *The Notebook*, literally thousands of films follow this formula. We as an audience count on a predictable structure in these stories, and are disappointed and surprised when they fail to materialize.

Of course, we can also play on this when we purposely subvert expectations. That's when the stories can get really interesting. For all the romantic comedies that follow a conventional structure, there is an *Annie Hall* or *500 Days of Summer*, where boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and girl stays lost forever, as it often is in life. Other genres include gangster movies, detective stories, coming-of-age dramas, film noir, documentaries, and horror movies (just to name a few), and each has its own conventions.

Just as with narratives, audiences immediately begin to sense what kind of structure a filmmaker is employing, and the more consistent you are, the better chance of keeping the audience with you. If this is your first time thinking about how to create a visual story, it is not likely that you'll be jumping into a ninety-minute narrative or documentary film. Rather, you might be making a film to celebrate your parents or your child, or to tout a local candidate, or to support (or rally against) a particular issue. While these might be only three- to five-minute films, they are stories—and should be well told if you want them to work.

And speaking of length, remember where your story will be

viewed. If it is meant for the Internet and will be watched on a computer screen or iPad or cell phone, keep it short, and you'll have a better chance of its being seen.

4. Plan, Plan, and Plan Some More . . . and Then Show Up

Most visual stories actually start in print. A screenplay, or script, lays out all the dialogue, action, and even camera movement that will later be shot. It allows you to plan how the story will evolve, what the characters will say, and even how the camera will move in order to help tell the story. There are specific conventions to screenplays, and some very good books that can teach you how to structure yours. You might want to consider a software program, such as Final Draft, that can assist you in formatting your screenplay properly. Also, there are some good tutorials embedded in this software.

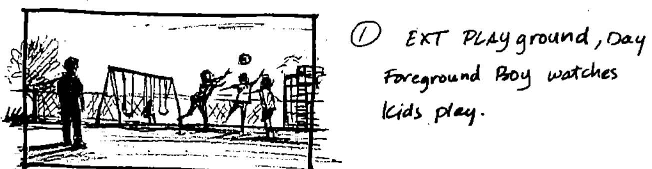
If you are working on a documentary, you likely don't have a screenplay or script to work from, but your planning should still begin with paper and pen. Try to describe what story you are hoping to tell, who your characters are, in what style you will be shooting, and where the conflict might be. By doing this, you will begin to orient your mind and your eyes for when you are ready to pick up the camera. The more you approach the project with intent and forethought, the easier it will be to know and feel where the camera should be and whom you should be following as your documentary story unfolds.

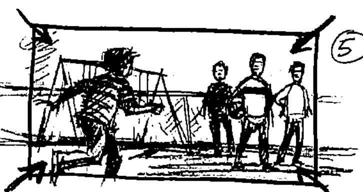
The next part of the plan is to imagine each of the scenes—what you want to show. An easy way to do this is to write a storyboard, which is like a cartoon strip that represents what a series of shots looks like. Take a piece of ordinary paper and draw a series of rectangular boxes that represent the screen. Then use crude stick figures and lines to indicate what images will be in each sequential shot. This is a visual map for how your film will progress. It isn't necessary to draw up a storyboard when you're shooting raw, unrehearsed video of, say, a city council meeting or a baseball game or a birthday party, although it can be extremely helpful to imagine what it might look like in order to anticipate the shots you'll need in the editing room later. For a narrative film, this stage is especially important. When you're ready to use your editing software to chop up that video into sequential shots that tell a coherent story, you'll find the storyboard invaluable.

At the Media Arts Lab, we use storyboarding with third-graders to help them visualize their written stories before they actually begin putting words to paper. They are always shocked to find out that this storyboard process is exactly what is done with the blockbuster films they see in the theater. The storyboarding process has been used throughout Hollywood history and can be one of your most important planning tools. Don't worry if you don't know the right way to format a screenplay, or can't draw to save your life, let alone draw a storyboard. Free or relatively inexpensive software packages are available to help you with these processes, including sophisticated storyboard applications for the iPad and other devices. It is helpful to play with these applications, as getting comfortable with the storyboard process can help immensely as you visualize your stories. There is also a slew of books that can provide more details if you want to go deeper. Check the notes on sources for some more specific suggestions. But the basics are as simple as we've just laid out here, and you can begin today.

Your screenplay and storyboard can then be broken down into a shot list. While your audience will be forced to watch your film in the order in which you construct it, it isn't necessarily shot sequentially. Think about a dialogue between two characters that involves the camera alternating between them. The camera isn't shifted each time you see a cut. Instead, all one character's lines are

A BASIC STORYBOARD SEQUENCE





shot first, and then the other's, and then the footage is chopped up and put back together in a different order. This is true of entire scenes. So a critical step in the narrative filmmaking process is to create a "shot list," which is essentially a list of each time the camera is turned on and off and what will be in its frame.

Frame: Show Your Story—Don't Tell It

Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out.

—MARTIN SCORSESE

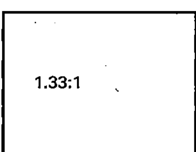
Frame is everything we can see. The images on the screen, the faces of the actors or subjects, the motions they make, the lighting, the background, the props, the text. The choices within the frame are determined by what you want the viewer to see. This involves focusing the camera just as an eye focuses on what's in the field of vision.

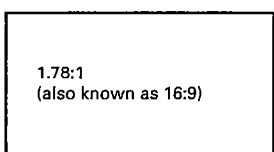
1. Selecting the Right Frame

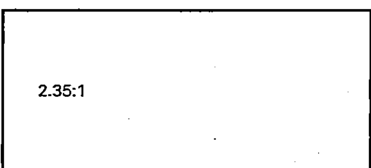
Unlike the painting or photograph hanging on your wall, which was first created and then fitted with a frame, in filmmaking you first have to choose the dimensions of the frame you will be filling. The size of the frame is also referred to as the "aspect ratio." This means the relationship between the width of an image and its height. If you have purchased a television anytime in the last twenty years, you know that the dimensions of TV screens have changed. The traditional formula for TV screens, and the shows broadcast to them, was that the screen was 1.33 times as wide as it was tall. This was set up to mimic the dimensions of early films, and in fact, in the classic movies of the 1930s and '40s, that's what you'll see. The recent silent film *The Artist* used this ratio to great effect.

After World War II, studios began to shoot their films in new wide formats and "Cinemascope," which has an aspect ratio of 2.35:1. The horizontal dimension of the screen kept stretching out into a broad canvas. (For those of us under the age of sixty, this is simply the proper dimension of a movie.) This shape promised a distinguished and majestic product, and it gave each film that feel, even when the movie itself left something to be desired. There has been an increasing convergence between cinema and television in recent years, however, and the aspect ratio for the new generations of television monitors and the programs broadcast on them (and most computer displays) is typically 1.78:1 (also referred to as 16:9).

Most cameras today give us the choice as to what aspect ratio we'd like to have for our film, and this setting can be found on the console of your camera. The aspect ratio is the first important piece of emotion we can communicate to our viewers. If we are looking for something to have an "old-television feel" or a grainy, hard-scrabble look, we might opt for 1.33:1. If we'd like it to have a more dramatic, bijou cinematic feel, we'd likely go with 16:9, 1.85:1, or another wide aspect ratio. Aspect ratio is one of the most basic elements of film language. (Note: Using the same aspect ratio you will be shooting in as your frame in your storyboard will make visualizing your film easier.)







2. *Filling the Frame: Shot-by-Shot Composition*

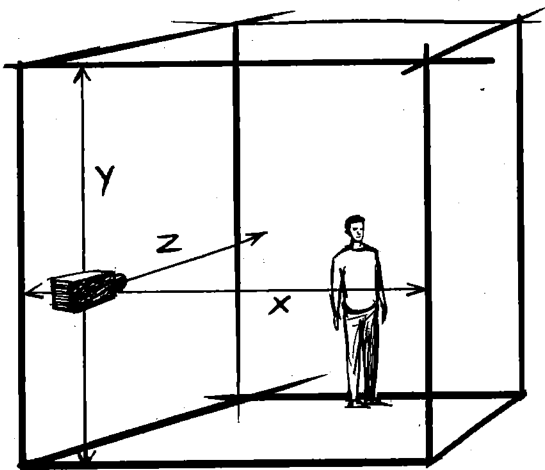
Now that you have your frame, you have to decide how to fill it. It helps to think not of a movie but of a still picture. Remember that a film or video is really not moving but is an optical illusion with anywhere from fifteen to thirty still images cycled and projected each second. When we take a camera and focus it on something, we are creating a universe that exists *only* within the frame. When we watch a piece of visual media, we in essence contract with the filmmaker that we will lend him our eyes, in the form of his camera, and he will take over and direct our eyes to see just what we need to see at any moment.

The basic element of the frame is the composition of your shot, which has roots firmly planted in the long history of painting and other visual art. The artist gets to decide what will be in the picture, where the various things in the picture will be placed relative to one another, what will be in focus or out of focus, what will be lit or not lit for emphasis.

If you have ever picked up a camera (or a cell phone) to take a picture and positioned the subjects to make for a better shot; or zoomed the camera in or moved closer in order to have your subjects more fully fill the frame—which likely means all of us—you already understand the basics of composition.

When you create motion pictures, you shoot many of these individual frames, which will be combined in various ways to tell a larger story, but it is helpful to think of each frame as a small story nested within the larger one.

What is within the frame inhabits a three-dimensional space. If everything were on the same plane, as in a two-dimensional world, we would need to talk about only left and right and up and down, which are represented by the x axis and the y axis. But in a three-dimensional world, we introduce depth, which is captured



by the z axis, which extends into infinity behind the screen. While visual media have been viewed largely in two dimensions, they are shot and experienced by the viewer as a three-dimensional world.

There is often more than one object in a frame, and the filmmaker must decide how the different elements of a scene (or what is captured in the frame) relate to one another. Is one above the others, or placed farther away from the camera or more in the background? Is someone or something pushed to the extreme side of the frame, away from the main action? These are questions of composition.

A classic example of this kind of use of composition within a frame comes from *Citizen Kane*, which is considered by many to be one of the greatest films ever made. Directed by twenty-six-year-old Orson Welles, the movie is an encyclopedia for visual storytelling. One particular scene highlights this idea of composition on different planes within a frame. When Charles Foster Kane is a little boy, we are inside his house, with his mother sitting at a table with the lawyer. Both are on the right side of the frame, in the foreground, about to sign papers. His father appears

farther back, on the left side of the frame. Between these two groups we see a glass window, and through the window we see the young Charles Foster Kane playing in the snow, unaware of what is happening inside the house. Welles keeps each of these planes in focus, so we see three different pictures telling a larger story to great effect: a young boy in the hands of distant forces of which he is unaware.

On an even more basic level, almost any movie you see will contain a wide variety of shots where the things in the frame (either characters or objects or landscapes) appear in different sizes, and we'll get different information and have a different experience of each of these different-size items as a viewer.

If we are attempting to bring the viewer "into a world," or a new place within that world, we might locate our camera at a distance from the subject and create a series of *extreme long shots*, or *long shots*, each one getting progressively closer to where the story or that sequence of the story will take place. These kinds of shots can function as *establishing shots* to help us locate our story. They might be extreme long shots that show an entire landscape in which the story will take place, or they might focus on a smaller landscape. An exterior scene of a house might precede a shot of an interior, telling the audience that this is where the scene is taking place: not just in a random room or set, but in this particular building.

In fact, most of these kinds of exterior/interior shots are quite often "cheats." The interior is shot either on a set or in a completely different location than the exterior, establishing shot, but the filmmaker colludes with the audience to tie these two shots together and create meaning. D. W. Griffith pioneered the use of establishing shots and interior shots, and today very few things you watch don't utilize this visual grammar. In fact, many shows or movies start with this convention. Everything from *All in the*

Family to *Family Guy* begins each episode this way. Establishing and interior shots can also be used in reverse, as we exit a world and leave the film to return to our own realities. This simple technique can help make your stories more understandable and more literate.

By choosing different kinds of shots, you can also force the viewer to engage with a character or an object more deeply and more intimately, or see something more closely. A *full-figure shot*, or *full shot*, allows us to see an entire subject or object within the frame without moving too close. This is like a play where we can see the entire subject as well as the context of where he is or what he is doing.

Full shot

A *medium shot* brings us closer along the z-axis to an actor or object. This is often shot from the waist up, and is close enough for us to see facial expressions and feel a sense of connection, while also being able to see body language and the context of the environment.

Medium shot

The *close-up* typically frames a person from the shoulders up, and allows us to continue to see some contextual information from the rest of the environment, although the shot is firmly focused on the speaker or one smaller aspect of a subject. The close-up can create emotional intimacy with a character, as we are brought into his private space. This technique is also used in documentaries that feature interviews of subjects, to establish them as important characters with something to say.

The *extreme close-up*, or *ECU*, creates the sense that we the viewer (as represented by the camera) are intimate with the subject. When the ECU is of a person's face, this kind of composition can allow us to crawl inside a character's head, especially when the shot is focused on her eyes. This can be contrasted to a *point-of-view* (or *POV*) shot, which allows us to crawl behind her eyes to see what she sees. The close-up or extreme close-up can also be used to highlight an important element, such as a gun or a clue that we will eventually need to solve a mystery, or help highlight

what is at stake in your story. In this way, the shot forces us to assign priority to the information it provides. If the shot is used inappropriately, your viewers will start to lose trust in you, so use it judiciously.

Close-up

Extreme close-up

You will likely be mixing a variety of these kinds of shots in order to tell your story. While in many ways film acting has its roots in theater, and documentaries have their roots in lectures and oral presentations, the camera creates a substantial difference. There is an intimacy with the camera as it is moved and as shots are framed that bring the audience closer to the subject. These moments in many ways become smaller and more real, and the actors need not emote as in plays. This contributes to our experience of the film or visual story as being more authentic. Using each of these different shots can help bring your story to life in amazing ways.

Here's an example of how they might be used together.

In Hitchcock's thriller *Notorious*, Ingrid Bergman's character's identity as an American agent has been uncovered by her German husband (played by Claude Rains) and his mother. The two decide they must poison her slowly so as not to arouse suspicion. In one scene, they are all sitting around the coffee table in the morning. The camera fixes on Claude Rains as he uses a draw poker, a syringe-like instrument, to poke a hole in his cigar. The camera then pans (or swings) over to a coffee cup at Ingrid Bergman's lips. Without a word being said, we in the audience understand that poison has been "injected" into the coffee. Later in the film, as the poisoning progresses, Hitchcock draws on this knowledge as the characters are again sitting having coffee. We understand what is going on, and Hitchcock uses several extreme close-ups of a coffee cup to heighten the tension and to ultimately convey the moment that Ingrid Bergman understands she is being poisoned when he connects an image of her eyes and an image of the cup.

In choosing what to put in each frame, it is important to think about what is going to help the viewer stay within, and deepen his involvement in, your story—where the camera or the viewer's eyes need to be focused at each moment. So, for us, if we are shooting

a scene of a boy trying to explain to his teacher why he was late once again and the boy keeps making up bigger and bigger excuses, as an audience, we might learn more about what is actually happening here by focusing on the amused and nonbelieving teacher while we listen to the boy.

Or we might be hearing from a boxer about the toll of a life in the ring. We could be focused on the boxer telling his story, or we could find ourselves staring at two hands twisted in arthritic pain, with bulging knuckles that belie the quiet, aging voice of someone who long ago left the ring. Either of these shots could be right, depending on the larger context of the piece, but they are important choices we make in constructing a literate story.*

Sometimes it is about not what is in the frame, but what is outside the frame. There is probably no one better at this than Hitchcock, who didn't put the moments of true violence on the screen, but left them to our imaginations, which is often more terrifying if set up well. In the famous shower scene of *Psycho*, we do see a victim and a perpetrator. We see a knife in the air and we hear screams, and the unmistakable phallic symbol of the knife held

* Sometimes the image that conveys the most meaning is found in the characters' eyes or the hands, or some other aspect of their physicality, and sometimes it is found elsewhere, such as in their environment. One of the Maysles brothers' classic films, *Grey Gardens*, chronicles the life of then-eighty-year-old former socialite Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter, Edie, who at the time were living as near recluses in an old, decaying mansion in tony East Hampton, New York, notwithstanding their familial connections to former First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. The film is full of amazing shots of the two women vamping and playing to the Maysleses' camera, yet some of the most powerful images in the film are not of the mother and daughter, but rather a recurring series of images throughout the film of an old wall in the house that is slowly being eaten away by a family of raccoons living inside it. It is literally being eaten away from the inside, and time and decay are measured by the raccoons' slow destruction.

close to Janet Leigh's abdomen, but we never see the actual act of stabbing. Anyone who has had the terrifying pleasure of watching this film can understand how one can use a series of images (in this case fifty different shots combined to create the three-minute sequence) to tell a story.

Composition of the frame is a question of what we are capturing not just with the camera, but from what perspective.

3. Placement of the Camera: From Where Is the Viewer Looking?

Just as we allow the filmmaker to hijack our eyes through composition, we also agree to sit wherever he would like, allowing him to have us view a scene from any place that suits his fancy. That's the contract.

But we're now the filmmaker, so the first question for us is: Where is the camera (and ultimately our viewer) sitting? If the camera is placed on the sidewalk and directed straight ahead, level and low, we might see only feet walking along the path ahead. Or the camera might be at waist height, capturing only midsections.

You might choose to place the camera low and tilt it upward, in what is called a *low-angle shot*. This gives us the sense that we are looking up at the character or shot, and is often used to make the subject more important or powerful. Think of how any political campaign ad shoots its candidate from slightly below in order to impress upon the viewer the candidate's stature. When taken to an extreme, the low-angle shot can also be used to make someone appear menacing—so be careful here.

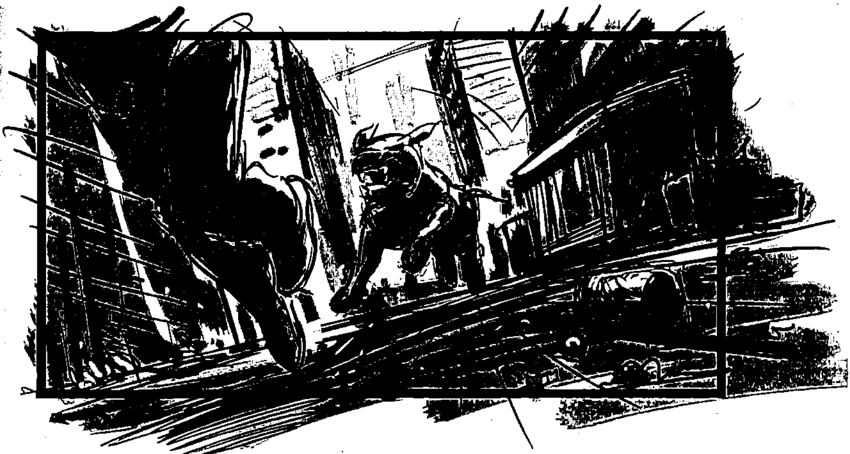
The reverse of this would be to place the camera higher than the subject it is shooting and to shoot down at it—a *high-angle shot*. This technique can put the character into a weaker or powerless position. These two techniques might be used together in a two-person dialogue scene where the camera angles are exaggerated to

Low-angle shot

emphasize one person's power over the other. This technique is often used to contrast the relative size of two subjects within the frame in political or advocacy pieces, with the candidate that is being touted shot from below and displayed larger in the frame, and the opponent shot from above and displayed smaller in the frame.

High-angle shot

Another technique that filmmakers use to change the viewer's perspective is to shift the camera from its usual position of being essentially parallel, or level, with the ground and creating what is called a *Dutch angle*, or *canted shot*. This technique creates a sense of unease and discomfort within the viewer, as the world he is watching is quite literally "askew."



Dutch angle shot

We might also have the camera be positioned in the line of sight of a character in order to create the sensation that we are seeing the scene directly from his perspective or point of view (hence the term *point of view* or *POV shot*). A character is pictured gazing at something we can't see. The next shot is of that thing, and we, the audience, suddenly inhabit the eyes of the character. "It is natural to suppose that the camera is an extension of the eye," says the philosopher Stanley Cavell. Then it ought to follow that if you place the camera at the physical point of view of the character, it will objectively reveal what the character is viewing. But the fact is, if we have been given the idea that the camera is placed so that

what we see is what the character sees *as he sees it*, then what is shown to us is not just something seen but also a specific mood in which it is seen.

If you've watched any television at all, you're familiar with the *over-the-shoulder shot*, typically used in a conversation between actors or, in a documentary, between interviewer and interviewee. The camera is placed behind one of the characters and captures the back of the person's shoulder and head on one side of the frame, while looking at the front of the other person. The image would be typically reversed within the scene to capture the complementary shot from behind the other person in a series of *reverse shots*. This puts the viewer in the room with the two people, but clearly "outside" the dialogue.

Again, you will likely use many of these kinds of shots even within the same piece. The more comfort you have with the effect of each of them, the more facile and effective a visual storyteller you will be.

4. A Few More Grammatical Ideas on Composition

The filmmaker can choose to focus the viewer's eye not just through what is in the frame, but literally what is in focus in the frame. We might place a subject in the foreground of a shot, and while we see the background—perhaps the landscape she is standing in, or even another character—this other element could be out of focus, not making the subject compete for our attention in the frame. The focus might also change within a shot, shifting our focus. Or we might be in a POV shot and the character who is "seeing" with the camera is focused on a nearby object. Everything beyond this is out of focus. Then the focus resolves to a new object. This is called *rack focus*, and it effectively shifts our gaze and attention from one place in the frame to another. We also might choose

to have the shot deliberately out of focus, if it is a POV shot from someone who is drunk or otherwise visually impaired, or we might show his view of the world through a Dutch angle, to convey his state of mind. Again, the camera is the viewer's eye.

When it comes to composition, there are no universal rights or wrongs—it all depends on what you are trying to achieve at any particular frame of your story. There are, however, a few general rules that can help you create more engaging visual images.

One of those rules can be traced back to the field of painting and is referred to as the *rule of thirds*.

John Thomas Smith, in *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, published in 1797, quotes the eighteenth-century painter Sir Joshua Reynolds:

> Two distinct, equal lights, should never appear in the same picture: One should be principal, and the rest sub-ordinate, both in dimension and degree: Unequal parts and gradations lead the attention easily from part to part, while parts of equal appearance hold it awkwardly suspended, as if unable to determine which of those parts is considered as the subordinate. And to give the utmost force and solidity to your work, some part of the picture should be as light, and some as dark as possible.

White, meet black. So far, so good. But then Smith adds a caveat:

> Analogous to this "rule of thirds," I have presumed to think that, in connecting or breaking the various lines of a picture, it would likewise be a good rule to do it in general, by a scheme of proportion; for example in a design of landscape, to determine the sky at about two-thirds; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two: Again, two thirds of one element (as of water) to one third of another element (as of land).

This has been an artistic and photographic standard for many generations, and we ought to make use of it. Think of the person or thing you'll be shooting. Then draw a line breaking the y-axis of a frame into three equal pieces; then do the same for the x-axis. You'll end up with a tic-tac-toe-like box of nine squares imposed on the frame. There are four points of intersection within the frame.

The rule of thirds says that your eyes will be naturally drawn to each of those intersecting points and that the lines are natural points of division within the frame. You can take advantage of the audience's natural inclinations by working within this framework. Try placing the main focus of the frame at one of these points of intersection instead of dead center. In addition to this, a lesser but interesting object might be placed at an opposite point of intersection, effectively to balance the frame.

In the example below, we notice the composition that places both the protagonist's eyes and the object of his attention, the diamond ring, at key coordinates of the grid.

The rule of thirds, like other rules, is ripe for being broken—

Rule of thirds

and of course there are many wonderful cinematic shots that place a character squarely in the center of the frame. The knowledge from the eighteenth century remains true: the rule of thirds works by creating more pleasing, effective visual messages. Of course, visual storytelling is not just about creating pleasing visual images; it is at its core about story—so don't take this rule too literally. Play with different compositions and see what each of them does for your particular story.

You'll find, even when you place your character or object directly in the center of the frame, that the eye line (or the subject's mouth, or some other central characteristic you'd like your audience to focus upon) will find itself on one of the lines of division suggested by this rule. You should also use this rule as a way of guiding the composition of your shots in regard to environment.

As an example, imagine you are shooting a landscape that has a horizon line between land and sky. If you want the viewer to be focused on the land, you might have the horizon line two-thirds of the way up in the frame. Or, alternatively, you might switch this if you want the viewer to be focused on the sky. If you were to split the frame in half and place equal amounts of sky and land in the frame, your viewer would be less directed, and hence more unsettled.

Another rule that needs to be considered while you are composing your frames is the *180-degree rule.* Visual language allows us to combine a variety of individual shots to create a larger story. This story exists within a world that we ask the viewer to inhabit, and as it turns out, while the viewer is able to make certain, almost intuitive connections with these images, there are parameters that disconnect the viewer from that world. The 180-degree rule refers to one of those situations. Imagine a scene with two people in it. One is on the left side of the screen looking right, and the second is on the right side of the screen looking left, perhaps looking at

the other character if the two are in dialogue. The camera can be placed in different places to capture different shots that will be combined to create the scene, but if it strays too far—more than 180 degrees, or more than halfway around the circumference of the scene—the characters will end up on opposite sides of the screen. This is unconventional and can wreak havoc on an audience (and the literacy of your visual story).

A few more hints. Don't crowd your human subject unless the story's intent is to leave him or her with no metaphorical space to breathe. Leave some head space or air between the frame and your subject. Or you might choose to move the frame in on the forehead, but you usually don't want to cut off the frame in the middle of the head.

Similarly, if your human subject is facing in one direction, you don't want to place him just on that side of the frame. By giving him space to move or gaze in a certain direction, you invite the viewer to do the same. Also, don't cut your characters or subjects off at the joints (e.g., the knees), as this is uncomfortable to the viewer. It turns out that we have no problem "filling in the blanks" and seeing the off-screen parts of a character if he is cropped *between* joints, but have a hard time visualizing anything more than a character with no feet or shins if he is cropped *at* the joints.

With every rule, we could of course find many examples of films that have broken it—sometimes with dismal failure, and sometimes to great effect, but it is often the case that the times that rule-breaking works is in films meant for very sophisticated cinephile audiences who can appreciate and understand the dialogue between that particular visual story and the conventions of film grammar.

As we would say to a young student who wants to be an improvisational jazz musician, first learn the notes, chords, and conventions. Then go out and break the rules. Unless your project is

intended to be a candidate for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and you are determined to create your own cinematic language, the closer you stick to these rules, the more literate your efforts will be.

5. *Moving Stories: Creating Motion*

Up until this point, we have been talking about a still image that captures a singular moment in time. But there is a point where cinema and moving images divert from the world of painting and photography. Our images will be moving—or at least sequentially projected and shuffled in a way that expresses movement, one of the first grand illusions of cinema.

Movement can come from two different elements, whether in isolation or in combination. We can experience the movement of things within a frame (e.g., a person moving or a ball flying through the air), or we can experience the camera moving either through direct movement (e.g., the cameraman walking forward into a scene) or the movement of a lens (e.g., zooming in or out).

Each of these has a different visual effect. When the body of the camera is still and either things move in front of it or the lens shifts, with the camera as our eyes, we experience the movement the way we would in real life if we were standing still and adjusting our gaze. When the camera moves, it is as if we the viewers move, which is a whole different sensation.

The situation where the only things moving are the objects in front of the camera is in some ways the easiest to understand, but it takes some thought to control. We talked earlier about the positioning of people and things within a frame. But when we talk about movement of these things within a sequence of frames, we are talking about *blocking*, a term and a concept directly borrowed from live theater.

Blocking is how you keep the action neatly inside the frame. You can accomplish this either by making the frame large enough to accommodate all the movement, or by ensuring that everyone rehearses his movements in order to be in the right place at the right time and to stay within the frame. This is where the term *hitting your mark* comes from.

Of course, it's not just the things in front of the camera that can create motion, but also the camera itself. When we begin working with new students, we use the most basic camera—and in fact, even your cell phone can do the trick. If you wanted to get closer to a subject than in the previous shot, the simplest thing to do would be to use the zoom feature on the camera. The lens is moving, and not the camera. The eyes of the audience are adjusting their frame of vision, but the body is still not moving.

If we were to keep our bodies still but swiveled our heads, we could be looking up or down, left or right, reframing what we saw. This would equate to a camera on a tripod being swiveled up or down, left or right. The vertical movement is referred to as a *tilt*, and the horizontal movement is referred to as a *pan*.

Imagine yourself sitting on a park bench reading the newspaper. All you see are the pages in front of you and the small bit of sidewalk at the bottom of your gaze. Two shoes walk into your line of sight beneath the bottom of the paper; the rest of the body is blocked by your newspaper. You might look down and focus on the feet as you put the paper aside. You then slowly begin to move up the legs, and your gaze continues to rise until you reach the top of a very large character staring down at you. This would be an example of a *tilt*. If you began to turn your head down the pathway to see who might be approaching from your side, this would be an example of a *pan*.

Another option is physical movement of the camera. This

entails walking the camera forward, or allowing it to slide on some sort of track, which is where the name *tracking shot* originates. This can also be called a *dolly shot*, as in some cases the camera is moved not on tracks, but on wheels. Tracking shots are smoother and can move in any direction, toward or away from something, from side to side, up or down, diagonally—virtually any direction you can imagine, each creating the sense of movement in the audience. The smoother the movement, the more the viewer will sense she is almost floating, as opposed to the kind of movement our bodies typically experience. We experience this subtle difference as a viewer, but nonetheless suspend our awareness and allow the camera to take us for the ride.

Walking the camera creates a unique sensation for the viewer, as we physically feel the movement of the camera in a way that is more connected to our body. It gives the resulting film a raw, unofficial feel, used to great effect in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Battle of Algiers*, and even in the television comedy *The Office*. The walking camera is called a *hand-held shot*. Roger Ebert calls it a "queasicam." The viewer experiences it in relation to the still, fluid, beautifully composed cinematography of Hollywood and feels it to have a certain sense of authenticity. It can feel more "alive" and unmediated—or it can make your story unwatchable, or the viewer sick, if it shakes enough.

One of the most profound examples of the distinction between zoom and a tracking shot comes from the epic film *Shoah*, a documentary about the Holocaust made in 1985 by French director Claude Lanzmann. He brilliantly uses movement of the camera along the tracks of a railroad, footage that is intercut with other scenes within the film but recalled at several moments.

As we first approach a concentration camp, the shot begins at a distance, moving toward a large prison-like compound. As the camera nears, we recognize the compound's gates as those of Auschwitz, and place ourselves on the outside of a concentration camp. We experience the physical movement of the camera, as if we, too, were literally traveling those train tracks, being taken into a camp. Just as we get to the entrance of the camp, the camera halts like a boxcar that has stopped in its tracks. Yet our gaze is being taken inside the camp through the lens of the camera, which begins zooming in. We experience these moments completely differently, more as voyeur than visitor.

Through this simple camera technique, we understand that Lanzmann is saying that he (and we) can move only so close to the experience and gaze in, but we can't inhabit that world in any real way outside of what the camera can impart to us through testimonies of survivors.

Undoubtedly your camera has some sort of zooming capability, and you have substantial experience with this function. Other features might seem a bit more intimidating, and you might also think of them as prohibitively expensive. They don't have to be. You can find inexpensive tripods that allow you to tilt and pan, and there are many sites on the Internet that can help you improvise the kinds of expensive tools that Hollywood studios have access to. There are plenty of creative ways to mimic equipment like tracks and dollies and Handycam equipment that allows for fluid camera movement. My son found a design for a Handycam system in one of his (and my) favorite magazines, *What Works.* The design used an old dumbbell lying around in our basement and a few dollars of supplies from the hardware store. My son jumped on it, and within an hour he was out in the street, camera and homemade five-dollar Steadicam in hand, running alongside

a friend who was skateboarding. He even enlisted me to run all around the neighborhood and up and down stairs through the house as he chased me with his video camera. The footage was remarkably stable.

Your pans and tilts might be unsteady and not very fluid at first, but this will change quickly with a little practice. Getting comfortable with camera movement can help make your visual stories more deeply engaging and can better allow you to take full advantage of the language and grammar of filmmaking.

6. A Self-Contained World: Everything in the Frame Is Story

Mise-en-scène, French for "stage setting," refers to all the visual aspects of the film. While it can incorporate composition and even camera movement, for our purposes it refers to all the physical elements represented in the frame. This includes the set design, props, costumes, lighting, and even the acting.

It is good practice to keep the frame filled only with things that are relevant to and consistent with the story being told. Sets shouldn't be cluttered with stuff that distracts the viewer, unless that is your objective (or the character's environment is meant to be messy and confusing). Mise-en-scène, as with the other aspects of visual storytelling, is all about choices, and there can be a lot of them.

An important thing to keep in mind is that the camera captures everything it is pointed at, from the movement of things within the set or environment you are shooting to the set or environment itself. Everything lying on a table next to an interview subject or actor becomes part of the story, and the viewer can either find meaning in it (at best) or be thrown out of your story if that item is in conflict with the rest of the film (at

worst).* Everything in your frame should have a purpose in advancing the story.

Lighting can be used to help focus the viewer on particular images within the frame, and can also lend an overall sense of professionalism to your project. There are whole crews that focus on lighting in a studio film, but it is ultimately the responsibility of the cinematographer.

The good news is that not only has the technology of digital cameras made visual storytelling more accessible and less expensive, but also digital video cameras are designed to deal with light conditions much more effectively than film cameras.

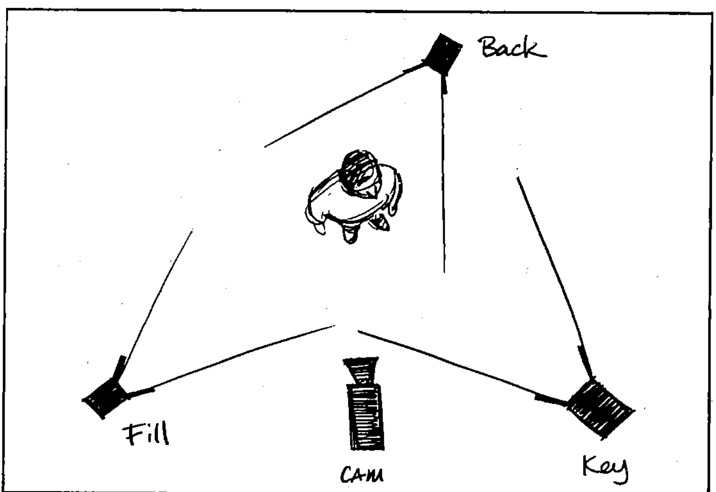
Depending on what you are shooting, you may want to use only natural light, as it is often easy for a viewer to sense the use of artificial light in a frame, which can send a message as to the authenticity of the image that may conflict with your story.

You can often take advantage of natural light coming in a window or, if you are outside, near where you've placed your subject. If you have ever taken a family photo outside, you know that by positioning the subjects so that the sun is behind the camera, you will get your clearest picture. You can use this natural light by bouncing it off something light-colored (try white poster board) and directing it exactly where you want it to shine. If you are inside, experiment with other sources of light. Lamps and even candles can be used to great effect.

If you're working on a project that includes subject interviews, whether in a documentary, public service announcement, or cam-

* Some people even make sport of this. You might have heard about the wristwatch on Charlton Heston in the famous chariot race of *Ben Hur*. This is a myth, but it is true that one of the characters in the Civil War film *Glory* can be seen to be sporting a digital watch. As a visual storyteller, you are a world builder, and that world must make intrinsic sense lest your viewers find their way out of it.

paign commercial, and you want to add an element of professionalism to it, you'll likely want to use the most typical lighting setup, which is called *three-point lighting*. Essentially you have one light pointed at your subject from an angle, illuminating his face (called a *key light*); one less-bright light from the other side (called a *fill light*), which balances the key light while softening some of the shadows the key light creates; and a third light (called a *back light*) placed behind your subject, most typically on the side. This light helps create a separation between the subject and the background of the shot and adds dimension to your images.



Three-point lighting

Plenty of filmmakers, especially documentary filmmakers, purposely don't use any artificial lighting and just move around the lights already available wherever they are shooting, to create more pleasing shots. Their films still manage to look pretty good. So don't feel too intimidated by lighting. Your knowledge (and comfort) will naturally grow the more you shoot. If you'd like to

delve deeper into this topic, there are some excellent books and guides, which I have listed in the notes on sources.

Often one of the last things that comes into the frame is text, added after you've finished shooting. These could be *title cards*— the words that appear on the screen to orient viewers as to a location or period, identify a speaker, or provide some other bit of background that cannot be expressed through the images themselves.

There is one guiding principle in using text: it should always support and have integrity with the rest of your story. Think about the scrolling text in the opening minute of *Star Wars*, which disappears off into the universe. It not only provides us with important information, but in the way it is presented, it also helps set the stage for the story and alerts the viewer to the style of film he is about to see.

Your editing programs, even the simplest ones, will offer plenty of options and guides for the placement of text. The more you play with this, the more you'll see the possibilities.

Sound: Your Secret Weapon (or Your Downfall)

Notwithstanding the sentiment of people such as silent film star Mary Pickford, who complained that "adding sound to movies would be like putting lipstick on the Venus de Milo," sound is a crucial part of visual media today. Even though this book is about the age of the image and the importance of visual media, most moving images rely on sound in order to convey meaning.

Sound with filmic visuals evolved at roughly the same time as radio stations were blinking to life in the 1920s, and the two art forms complemented each other. Live theater could rely on visual cues to bring one into and advance a story, but radio had to rely

solely on sound. Radio plays would include not only the actors' dialogue, but also voice-over narration, sound effects, and music or a soundtrack. From the familiar notes of the *William Tell Overture* as the narrator pronounces, "The Lone Ranger rides again!" to the sound of horses galloping, tumbleweed blowing, or townsfolk buzzing, sound is designed to create character and narrative and to take us from scene to scene.

Sound can spell the difference between an effective piece and one that flops. A piece can suffer from relatively poor visuals, but if you can't understand the dialogue or the sounds don't make sense in the context of the story, no image, no matter how high its quality, can save you.

We tend to think of sound as a single track, yet in reality it has several layers. If you were to look at the edit tracks of any feature film, you would actually find many more tracks devoted to sound than to image. Even if you are superimposing several images on top of one another, at any given moment you essentially have a minimal number of images on the screen at a time. Let's look at some of the layers that can help you construct your stories.

1. The Soundscape of Your World

The most primary sounds within a scene will invariably be all the *diegetic sounds*, which means the noises that might logically be found in the actual environment within which the scene is set. Such sound might be recorded at the time you are shooting, or added in later. The most common example of this is dialogue, but it could also include everything imaginable in the world portrayed in that scene: car doors closing, feet hitting the pavement, dogs barking.

The key here is that the sound must make sense in that world or it could distract from the image and throw the viewer out of

the scene. For instance, if the camera places you squarely in a parked car sitting outside a restaurant, you shouldn't be able to hear a conversation in the restaurant (unless, of course, the table is bugged and the man in the car is a spy).

Diegetic sounds should work in support of the scene unfolding on the screen and should help give it depth and dimension. While shooting, focus on getting the sounds you absolutely need, such as dialogue, and avoid those sounds you absolutely don't want in your project. You might be able to eliminate some unwanted sounds later, unless they are captured at the same time you are recording someone speaking, or recording some other sound you hope to use later. There is a reason directors yell, "Quiet on the set!"

In fact, unless you are the only one present while you are shooting (in which case you have to focus on both sound and image), it is often helpful to have someone else with you who is thinking about only sound while you or someone else thinks about image. Both are separate components of storytelling that ultimately need to be as strong as possible to support the whole project.

Equipment can be minimal. Every video camera, or even cell phone with a video function, captures sound. If you are shooting with a video camera, you might invest in an inexpensive but upgraded microphone that sits on top of your camera, or you might consider a digital voice recorder that enables you to separate the sound from what the camera records and allow someone else on the crew to record sound.

You'll be able to supplement some of the natural, environmental, diegetic sounds later in the process either by re-creating them or by using sounds available from the many free sound libraries on the Internet. A number of my favorites are listed in the notes on sources.

One final hint here: consider room tone. Every environment, whether inside or outside, has an essential ambient sound. Try being quiet for a moment wherever you are. Even in the silence, there might be a baseline hissing of heat or air-conditioning, or other environmental sounds. When you go to edit your audio tracks, you will find that you are cutting up the audio in the same way you do the video, and you'll have large gaps of space in the silence. You will need these environmental sounds, or room tone, to keep the viewer within the world of your film. Whatever environment you are shooting in, quiet everyone down and record a few minutes of silence within that space. This simple technique will be invaluable later in the project, and can make for an effective piece of visual (and aural) media.

Sharpen your skills by paying close attention to the layers of sound that make up your environment. Stand on a street corner and take careful note of all the sounds you hear, from the buses rolling by, to the wind blowing the leaves in the trees, to the distant patter of children playing—whatever makes up that particular scene. You'll find it is like looking at stars: the more you stare up at the sky, the more stars you begin to see. So, too, with sounds in your environment.

2. Sound Beyond the World of Your Story

Once you have built this layer of diegetic sound, you can move on to *nondiegetic sound*, which refers to everything on your audio tracks that doesn't come from the immediate world depicted on the screen. Narration or sound effects that are added for emphasis are two examples of nondiegetic sound that can be used to construct a soundscape. Another nondiegetic sound is the music, which is often referred to by itself as the soundtrack (in actuality, it is typically *one* of the sound tracks).

If you were to stop and think about your favorite movies, chances are there would be a musical soundtrack beneath the

images. Music works similarly to images in terms of evoking primal emotional responses in our brains, as it is prelingual. The sound editor David Zieff calls it "fairy dust." It can work *in concert with* images to elicit various emotions, or it can work *in contrast to* images to create different effects. Who could have imagined the choice of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to accompany the stylized violence in the haunting scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, as young hooligans brutalize their victims? Yet that piece of music brought those images to a wholly different level.

I had the opportunity to sit in the editing room with Jonathan Demme while we were producing the documentary *I'm Carolyn Parker*. Demme is one of those directors who are keenly attuned to music, and he has an extraordinary library of songs on his iPod. We sat with a particular scene and played it over and over again, each time with a different song playing underneath it. With each song, whether upscale New Orleans jazz, a more bluesy song, or even a Middle Eastern percussive song, the images on the screen would morph in front of us and take on different meaning and emotion. The wrong music can risk turning a serious scene into campy overstatement or a comic scene into something unfunny, but it can be a powerful addition to the experience of the viewer.

Sound can also be an effective bridging tool in connecting disparate scenes. Just as you can *match on action* in a cut, you can also *match on sound*, seamlessly bringing the audience from one space to another. The sound of a door slamming might be matched up with the sound of a completely separate shot of a gavel being pounded by a judge in a courtroom. Just as with images, matching these kinds of sounds can take the viewer from one scene to another.

To tie scenes together, many editors like to make use of an *L-cut*, in which a character speaking in an oncoming scene has his voice overlaid onto the fading moments of the previous scene. This

simple technique brings the viewer into the next scene through sound, and when the image follows after, we are already firmly entrenched in the scene and don't experience the cut between the two images as jarring. You'll start recognizing this technique in just about any movie you see today.

Sound can also be a crutch. Film is a visual medium, and if the images and filmic language don't carry the story and we over-rely on sound, chances are our work will not be as effective or as literate as it can be. Visual storytelling is about showing and not telling; it is often the case that the more minimal the amount of words, the better.

To become a storyteller in this medium of the twenty-first century is to become a keener observer of the world around you—in regard to both images and sounds. And once you have captured these elements, you are ready for construction.

Editing: Assembly Required

The essence of cinema is editing. It's the combination of what can be extraordinary images of people during emotional moments, or images in a general sense, put together in a kind of alchemy.

—FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

This is the last stage of the storytelling process, but the one where it all comes together. Editing is often called *cutting*, because before the days of digital, someone picked up scissors, cut out the desired frames, and then spliced them together to create a coherent line. Alfred Hitchcock always argued that the better term would have been *assembling*, as it is the assembling of images and sequences that creates a visual narrative. We always shoot more than we use.

Visual stories work because of the compelling nature of images

and because of how our brain is wired to receive them, but the true power of this medium resides in the magic that happens when images are put together to create a meaning that didn't exist until that moment. Think of individual shots as your words and sentences. In the editing process, they are spliced together to create sequences and scenes that are then combined to create narrative.

Walter Murch, editor of many great movies, including *The Conversation*, *The Godfather*, and *The English Patient*, is also a wonderful writer about the process of editing. "What is the audience going to be thinking at any particular moment?" he wonders in his book *In the Blink of an Eye*. "Where are they going to be looking? What do you want them to think about? What do they need to think about? And of course, what do you want them to feel? If you keep this in mind (and it's the preoccupation of every magician), then you are a kind of magician. Not in the supernatural sense, just an everyday, working magician."

1. Using Editing to Create Reality

As an editor, you are connecting images that are displaced or discontinuous from one another. This might involve subtle breaks, such as the shot of a person with a bag slung over his shoulder opening a door, to a later shot of him walking into the living room and putting the bag down on a chair. For purposes of moving the narrative along, the editor might choose not to show us a continual shot from the door to the living room, but we still understand these two to be connected.

The shots should be different enough so as to create a context in which the viewer can mentally "draw" what is not shown. If the shot after the cut is too close to where the last shot ended, we are jarred into seeing the obvious camera work and edit. This is referred to as a *jump cut*. An example of how language has evolved, it

has also been used by many filmmakers to great effect. But don't do it unless you intend to—and you understand its effect.

Classical Hollywood cinema is based on the concept of *continuity editing*, in which the transitions of both sound and images are constructed in such a way that we do not feel the break, or the cut. These transitions allow, even seduce, the audience into experiencing the story as one piece of direct, personal, and immersive moment of reality. If a filmmaker is telling a story, just like a novelist, the narrative won't necessarily be linear or continuous. In fact, if there is more than one character, there will likely be multiple threads that are all relevant to the plot, but we ought to see it as one continuous moment. Harold and Carl Kress said it most simply: "We don't want the audience to know it's a film."

2. Using Editing to Tie Together Different Places and Characters

Editing enables the filmmaker to connect images happening within the same scene and to juxtapose images from different scenes happening in different physical places or even different times. This is called *cross-cutting*.

Think of a scene in which a woman is tied to a set of train tracks. We see a close-up of her struggling, and then we cut away to an image of a train racing along the tracks. We might flash between these two images, and as the shots of her struggling gain in intensity and the alternating shots of the train fill the frame more and more, we feel our hearts racing as we understand the implications suggested by the disparate images—which are no longer disparate in our minds. These images might have first found their way to the screen in the 1914 film serial *The Hazards of Helen*, but they have become a familiar trope—even being echoed by a woman saved by a duck in an Aflac commercial. Editing allows you not only to advance a scene along a faster time line, but also to

connect completely disparate images to create new meanings and story.

3. Visual Metaphors: Written Through Editing

If you are trying to connect a moment with a particular emotion, you might look for visual metaphors that convey that emotion. You might also want simply to imply the passage of time or space. A series of images connected to one another, but not part of the narrative plot—think of the change in seasons and the falling of leaves from a tree—can do this in a way that is succinct and clear: through montage.

Think back to the original *Rocky*, in which we see images of Sylvester Stallone running through the streets of Philadelphia, passing under the elevated train tracks, hitting a speed bag, doing one-arm push-ups, using a side of beef hung from a hook as his heavy bag, back to the one-arm push-ups in the gym, out to a shot of him running through the streets by the waterfront, and ultimately up the stairs of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where he dances and shadowboxes triumphantly. All this virtually without words, except for the theme song for the movie—"Gonna Fly Now," written by Bill Conti. Regardless of what you thought of the increasingly manipulative *Rocky* franchise of movies, seeing this montage will capture your imagination, even through the cheese.

4. Editing Can Hide the Blemishes

In the case of either a documentary or a fiction film, you might use editing to cover unwanted moments, such as camera movement in your footage. You will often be shooting with just one camera and without the ability to do more than one take—especially

if you are trying to have your story feel less constructed and rehearsed.

One choice, of course, is to show the camera movement. You might, however, also be manipulating the focus of the lens between the moments while continuously shooting, and this makes for a less-than-pleasing image. This is where *B-rolls* or *cutaways* come in. If you take time during the shoot to get some shots that capture the environment, or perhaps the object the character is talking about or holding, or anything that you think can help tell the story in place of the image of the person speaking, you'll be able to use these shots to cover the places in which you want to continue to use the audio track from your shoot but where the image itself isn't helpful. Thinking ahead about this can save you many gray hairs in the editing process.

5. Moving from Frame to Frame: Make Transitions Work for You

The language of editing is not just in the shot selection and assemblage, but also in the very transitions between frames. While a variety of techniques is available—and they all have their place (please, though, not the magic wand coming across the screen that always seems to crop up in wedding and bar mitzvah videos, with painful results)—let's focus on the three principal transitions you'll likely make use of.

A *cut* is when you make a sharp transition from the end of one shot to the beginning of another without hesitation. It might be used within a scene to tie together various camera angles; or between scenes, to emphasize the connection between images. In contrast to this, a *dissolve* essentially overlaps the final frames of one image and the first frames of the next, so that the viewer experiences the two clips literally morphing from one to the other. This creates a more fluid transition and can help tie the two scenes

together, while also serving to denote the sequential passage of time or a change in physical space. A third option is the *fade-in* or *fade-out*, which utilizes the gradual softening of an image and then the intensification of the next—with the effect of coming out of one scene completely before we are taken into the next.

These techniques are almost used as punctuation in your visual stories, and when used well, they can lend a real sense of professionalism to your piece. And with today's editing software, the good news is that it is extremely easy to move effortlessly between each of these techniques to see what will work well at each transition.

When you are shooting, the tendency is to stop recording when you think you have your shot. But if you do this, you'll find yourself stuck later. Extra frames—both at the beginning and end of a clip—are critical to making transitions, so start your camera rolling several frames before you begin your scene or your interview and let it roll for several seconds afterward. Trust me on this: you'll be thankful you did. Otherwise, you might miss a telling facial expression. And the extra length makes it easier to eliminate the chaff.

6. *The Technical Stuff: What Do I Need?*

Even though the language of editing is still firmly rooted in film's early days, the actual physical process has changed significantly. While the first century of editing was done by literally splicing frames of film together, which necessitated a linear process, as each frame was joined together in sequential fashion, the advent of computers and digital technology introduced new opportunities and work flow. Editing software is readily available today for your PC or Mac, or even your tablet or cell phone. While the screens and technology might differ with each of the various software pro-

grams or applications, the digital process is basically the same. You will first log all your footage—breaking it up into individual shots or takes. These will be placed into individual bins, which you will label, to find them more easily later.

You will then take clips from each of these bins and place them in a time line, trimming them to where you want to come in and out and lining them up against other clips to form an assembly. You'll do this with both audio and video tracks in what could be a multiplicity of layers, and then you'll begin the process of putting in transitions and moving from an assembly, to a rough cut, and then a fine cut, and ultimately a finished cut.

7. *The Story Unfolds and Unfolds*

Editing is a process of construction. A table is a good metaphor. You first get your individual pieces together (the legs and the top), and then you assemble them with glue and pegs or nails. Once the table is held together, you go through many steps of sanding, finishing, lacquering, and finishing some more, before it is ready to be used. Editing is about not only connecting images and cutting and then assembling clips, but also establishing the overall pacing and rhythm of a film or visual story. There is a cadence in successful pieces that is similar to the way particular songs catch our unconscious desire for musical patterns that touch a deep place in us. "We are all rhythmic creatures," said David Zieff, "even if we don't realize it."

Step back in the editing process and try to feel those rhythms. Often the soundtrack or even music that is playing in the room while you are cutting can help you find them—and trust your instincts. Walter Murch talked about the best cut coming at the point when the viewer would naturally blink. The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson talked about this as "the decisive

moment" he was looking to capture in his still photographs. As Cariter-Bresson wrote in his 1952 book of photographs entitled *Images à la Sauvette*, "There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment." Your job as editor is to identify these moments and use them to tell your larger story.

A Note on Technology: Don't Be Intimidated

Don't think that you need expensive, sophisticated gear. Several years ago I had the great pleasure of being invited to be one of seventeen people documenting the Dalai Lama's visit to Central Park. I was a less experienced shooter than the others and was intimidated when I saw many people showing up with big shoulder-mounted camera rigs. Then I met Rickie Leacock.

Rickie is a legend among documentary filmmakers, having worked with Robert Flaherty on *The Louisiana Story*, and Robert Drew on *Primary*. Leacock was one of the pioneers of the direct cinema approach to documentaries, which stressed an observational kind of shooting and constructed visual stories without the use of narration or interviews. He also was one of the founders of the film program at MIT—so it was easy to imagine him as a technologist. Yet here was this man approaching with an easy smile and a small consumer video camera in his hands that was at most a fifth the size of the cameras that I and everyone else was holding. We seventeen filmmakers had been given the same mission—go out and find whatever story you would like to tell, and then shoot it.

It was a magnificent day, with the park teeming with New York City's human fauna. Everything in sight seemed to call for the camera's attention. And the cameras were rolling like crazy, at anything that moved and a lot that didn't. By the end of the day,

the seventeen of us had gathered together again. Everyone had shot hours of footage and was busy emptying their pockets of mini-DV cassettes. I approached Rickie as he was opening his camera to take out his tapes, to ask how his day had been. He held out what I saw was a single tape, holding a paltry nineteen minutes of footage. On it, he said, was a beautiful story. And it was.

I watched much of the footage that others had shot, and it was a mind-numbing cascade of images. Then I watched Rickie's. He had captured the entire day in brief: the sweetness of children with their families, the delight of the crowd in the day, and the Dalai Lama connecting with an adoring audience with his humor, humility, and wisdom. The images Rickie captured that day told a complete story—well beyond the hours and hours amassed by everyone else, with cameras that cost five times as much.

My point here is that it is not about the technology you use, but what you do with it.

Taking Your First Steps: or, Where Do I Go from Here?

This all may sound hard. It can be. It is one thing to be able to listen to a Mozart symphony and identify all the layered instruments, notes, and structure, and quite another to pick up each instrument and play it. Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Martin Scorsese have spent lifetimes honing their craft, and they have teams of professionals working with them on each aspect of their productions.

Yet this should not scare you away. For every Spielberg, there are scores of individuals just like you learning to use these new instruments of literacy to tell their stories with astounding success. Start with simple, direct, short pieces and get your feet under you,

and your comfort and proficiency will grow. Once you sit down in front of your computer and editing software, you will find that the construction process that is editing is actually quite intuitive.

There are reasons for this. We have been viewing these things for a lifetime. To take the next step on the way to real visual literacy, both receptive and expressive, is to practice critical close viewing of a professional piece of media. Pick your favorite film and then turn the sound off. See how tension is established, how character is established, how place is established. See how the story is actually an amalgamation of shots that, when pushed together, create meaning. Pause on a crucial shot and study the composition. Think of where the camera is placed and how things are framed. Then turn on the sound again and see how it works to deepen or alter what is on the screen.

Let your children watch television, watch it with them, and then talk about what worked and why. Whether it is a feature film, a sitcom, or the seven o'clock news, you'll begin to see the patterns within a piece of media, and you will be more literate as a result.

Watch the commercials, too. Record them and watch them again. Slow them down and watch them again. The people who produce them are familiar with all the tricks I've just described, and they use them promiscuously to get you to buy companies' products.

Start small. If narrative filmmaking is what excites you, try to tell a small story, or create just a scene. If you are interested in documentaries, shoot an interview with a family member and then watch it to see how the choices you made impacted the footage. Try to construct simple digital stories the way we do with our students at the Media Arts Lab, using images that already exist in your family albums; or shoot new images for the piece and exercise new muscles of framing and composition. If you want to make a political commercial for a local candidate, study the multitude of

pieces that exist on the Internet to understand the tropes that can be drawn on to make your piece more literate.

The language of filmmaking, like the English language itself, is not static but constantly evolving. The Internet can be a vast wasteland of badly told, ineffective stories—you can learn as much from what doesn't work as from what does—but it is also filled with examples of wonderful, powerful, compelling stories told by today's emerging culture of visual storytellers, and those storytellers look just like you and me.