

Joseph Mascelli, THE FIVE C'S OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

"Composition"

INTRODUCTION Good composition is arrangement of pictorial elements to form a unified, harmonious whole. A cameraman 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 viewer's attention should be concentrated on the player, object or action most significant to the story at that moment. The camera mechanically records all properly exposed, sharply focused images with equal clarity. Stimulation of audience response the non-mechanical factor can be best conveyed by the cameraman through direction of dramatic emphasis where desirable. This is accomplished by accentuating the motions and emotions, which make the story live in the viewer's mind.

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. To break the rules effectively, however, it is first necessary to comprehend the rules thoroughly, and to realize why they are being broken.

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. Pictorial and psychological impacts upon the viewer would be doubly effective. He would not only want to see slum conditions corrected; he would also like to straighten the scenes that subconsciously disturb him!

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 photographs such as these jet air craft in flight may suggest motion. Because they deal in space relationships only, stills may be well composed within singular frame of reference.

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 time relationships between various elements may remain the same, or change as the picture progresses. The size of the various images may remain the same, or change from scene to scene; or during a scene. If the players advance toward or recede from the camera; or if the camera is dollyed, panned, tilted or zoomed. This constantly changing image pattern tends to complicate motion picture composition. To produce a successful photograph, a still photographer must apply compositional rules correctly. A motion picture cameraman, however, can simply center a moving image in his finder and regardless of poor composition, improper placement in the frame, unsatisfactory background or numerous other pictorial faults, holds the viewer's attention through sheer movement alone! If abused, however, movement-which should be the motion picture's greatest asset can very easily become its greatest liability. Good motion picture scenes are the result of thoughtful compositions and significant movements, of players and/or camera. Unsatisfactory scenes are the results of thoughtless compositions and meaningless player or camera movements, which distract rather than aid in the story-telling. Although the cameraman should be primarily concerned in telling the story with movement, he must guard against insignificant movement of a subordinate player or unimportant object, which may detract from the principal player, action or object. Such movement can be particularly distracting in quiet scenes that are more or less static in nature. Since the viewer's eyes is easily attracted or distracted by any moving object, the cameraman should guard against undesirable movement anywhere in the scene.

GOOD CAMERA WORK BEGINS WITH COMPOSITION

Even on subject matter impossible to prearrange, the cameraman can choose camera angles which provide the best viewpoint and the best composition.

If scene should awe audience by beauty, vastness or grandeur of setting, a long shot, or extreme long shot conveying proper mood and atmosphere should be used.

Composing the scene is the cameraman's function. He must arrange the various pictorial elements into a semblance of order before he can light the players and the set; plot player and/or camera movement; break

down the sequence into shots, and decide on the various camera angles required to cover the action. Until the scene is composed, the cameraman 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, and consequently, the best composition.

The cameraman should approach composition with the question: "What can I do with this subject matter that will aid in telling the story?" Players' actions and setting often suggest a particular compositional treatment. Script and subject should be analyzed to determine the audience impact intended. Should the viewer become moved to pity, tears or laughter? Should the audience be awed by the beauty, vastness or grandeur of the subject? Or should they be sold on a particular product, process or technique? Whatever the script's intent, the scenes should be composed to provide the proper pictorial aspects, and inspire the desired psychological response in the viewer. Pictorial thinking and appreciation of psychological compositional devices by the cameraman will produce intended mood.

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 motions. 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 be successfully applied to motion picture 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 attractions of sheer movement and mere sound. Players and objects should be harmoniously arranged within the setting, and moved about with artistic effects, striving to capture pleasing pictures at all times; regardless 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.

A receding curve suggests distant space, since it carries the eye into the picture.

Whenever possible, scenes should be composed in depth to impart three-dimensional quality to setting.

Lines should not parallel any side of the frame unless formed by a building or columns,

trees or other lines, as part of a repetitious pattern. The series of vertical lines are in keeping with the dignity of the modern Music Center.

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 off. Or in a vertical line described by an ascending missile. The linear composition of a scene is dependent, therefore, not only on actual contour lines but by transitional lines created by eye movement.

For most effective composition, real lines should not divide the picture into equal parts. 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 part 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. Silhouetted lines, paralleling one or more sides of the frame such as a doorway should be recognized, or they may suggest image "cut-off" caused by a mis-aligned filter holder or matte box.

Viewer interpretations of various compositional lines 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.

Parallel diagonal lines converging in distance convey action and energy-reinforced by glare of sunlight on welded rails.

These figures form transitional lines in space, suggesting a pyramid conveying to viewers solidity of player relationship.

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.

Various combinations of lines may influence each other and convey different meanings. Unopposed verticals, beginning at the bottom or ending at the top of the picture, appear to extend beyond the frame.

However, short secondary horizontals, such as a roof, may be used to contain a vertical composition within the frame. Short horizontal lines are useful as accents to help a series of strong verticals from becoming monotonous. Conversely, long horizontals may also be accented or broken up by short verticals, meeting at right angles or crossing. Curves require stronger straight lines for accents and contrast. A series of curves may weaken a composition unless reinforced by vertical or horizontal accents. A profusion of curves or diagonals may result in confusion, and should be used only to express shocking excitement or uncontrolled action.

Lines that lie flat on the picture surface, or recede into the distance, convey different meanings. Whenever a vertical or horizontal line becomes a diagonal, it appears to recede from, or advance toward the viewer. A tilting shot of a building indicates that it is falling backwards. An angled shot of a straight road creates the impression that it is a diagonal, receding into the distance. A geometric curve creates a pattern that lies flat on the surface of the picture. A receding or diminishing curve, however, suggests distant space, since it carries the eye into the picture. A diagonal line parallel to the picture's surface suggests a moving, falling or other action line, such as a falling tree. A diagonal receding into the distance, suggests a space line. Pairs of such diagonals, such as railroad tracks, seem to converge and meet at infinity.

Meanings conveyed by lines are also influenced by such forces of Nature as gravity. Diagonals are dynamic. Usually they suggest instability, because they are basically fallen verticals. A vertical tree becomes a diagonal when it falls. Lightning is a strong, sharp, jagged diagonal line. Rain drops or snow flakes form a series of softly falling lines. Rivers or meandering streams create curves as they follow the contour of the earth.

Lines also express speed qualities, which can add dramatic emphasis to the picture. Straight, angular or jagged lines, such as lightning streaks, give impressions of speed, forcefulness or vitality. Softly curved lines slow eye speed and create a leisurely or deliberate pace. Most beautiful curves attract lingering attention. Since they do not impede progress, unbroken lines make faster viewing than broken or erratic lines.

FORM

All objects, whether natural or man-made, have form. Physical forms are easy to recognize. Forms created by viewer's eye movement from one object to another are not always easy to recognize, unless pointed out. Thus, many abstract forms exist solely in viewer's minds in the space created by several physical objects.

Transitional lines which describe forms in depth such as triangle formed by this derrick loading Polaris missile into nuclear submarine are compositionally stronger than forms which appear to lie on surface of screen.

A reverse triangular composition with apex at bottom may also be used to compose three people. While it may be weaker in form, it is an excellent choice in this instance, because standing players dominate centered player. Composition would be weakened if player at right were absent.

Eye movement from one person or object to another may describe a triangle, a circle or other form. Many experienced cameramen subconsciously utilize certain compositional forms without actually analyzing them. They have learned through experience that certain groupings of people, furniture, objects, vehicles and structures present harmonious pictures. Transitional lines created by the viewer's eye moving from one object to another may result in an esthetically pleasing effect.

The following compositional forms should be considered as both physical forms and abstract forms existing in space. They should also be considered as existing in depth, from front to back of the picture, not solely as flat, two-dimensional forms lying on the surface of the picture.

A triangular form suggests strength, stability, solidity of the pyramid. It is a compact, closed form which causes the eye to continue from point to point without escape. A tall, thin triangle is related to the vertical, and is found in Nature in evergreen trees. A short, squat triangle is related to the horizontal and, because of its broad base, possesses greatest stability. Mountains are composed of a series of triangles. Triangle compositions are very useful for grouping people because a significant figure can dominate through added height. It is much easier to compose in three's, or other odd numbers; because a single compositional element may become the center of interest by rising up and creating an abstract triangular composition with the lower positioned figures on either side. A reverse triangle, with its apex at the bottom, may also be used although it lacks the stability of the pyramid, which rests on its base. In this fashion, two adults may be effectively composed with a child between them.

A circular or oval form also tends to tie in and hold the viewer's attention. A circular object, or a group of figures or objects arranged in a circular pattern, causes viewer's gaze to wander without escape from the frame. A circle of light, such as that produced by a spotlight, may be employed to encompass a player. Yet, the rest of the framed area remains dark; discouraging viewer's attention from straying from center of interest. A circle or oval lacks the broad base and stability of the pyramid or triangle. A base may be provided, however, by a shadowed area, a foreground frame, or some other lighting or compositional device.

The cross is one of the few compositional forms that may be centered, because its four arms radiate in all directions equally. The cross inspires a sense of unity and force. It is awesome and powerful because in many minds it symbolizes the Almighty. The cross may be placed off center of the picture; but it should not be placed too close to the side of the frame, or part of its radiance will be weakened.

Radiating lines are a variation of the cross, since they supply multiple arms from a centrally located hub. There are many excellent examples in Nature flower petals, tree branches, snowflakes, etc. Radiating lines seem to expand and attract, especially if twirled, and their action spreads joy and laughter. While radiating lines may be either straight or curved, to be most effective, the center of interest should be located near the hub. Unlike the cross, however, the hub need not be near the center of the frame.

Various L-shaped forms suggest informality, and are very flexible because they provide base and upright in combination. An L-shaped composition is useful for landscapes, or establishing long shots; where a broad base created by a shadow area, a walk, a wall or a road, extends horizontally to one side of the frame with a tree rising in a strong vertical. A solitary figure at one side of the frame may also form an L with the ground or floor. The L can provide repose, through its base; and dignity, through use of figure or object rising in the frame. The strongest L composition results when the upright occupies the left or right vertical line created by dividing the frame in thirds. An accent at the opposite bottom cross lines will provide the opposing compositional weight required for a balanced picture.

MASSES

The words shape, form and mass are often used interchangeably. Shape has to do with the spatial aspects of an object, its physical shape as defined by its contour. Form may be physical or abstract as explained in the preceding pages. Mass is the pictorial weight of an object, an area, a figure or a group made up of any or all of these. Masses are either single units, such as a large body of water, a mountain peak, a ship or an airplane; or a large head in close-up, or a combination of several figures or objects closely grouped or integrated so that they appear as a single compositional unit.

Lines and forms can dominate a composition by their esthetic or psychological value. They may attract the viewer's eye through sheer beauty or the viewer's senses through their emotional appeal. Pictured masses, however, capture and hold attention through the power of their heavy pictorial weight. They may also dominate by their isolation, unity, contrast, size, stability, cohesion, lighting or color.

Strength is added to an isolated mass, if it is separated from its background by contrast, lighting or color. Such treatment will cause a mass to stand out from a confusing, conflicting or otherwise "busy" background.

A unified mass is strengthened when several figures or objects are tied together; so that they combine into a dominant group. Wildly scattered groupings should be avoided. A dark mass will stand out against a light background, or a light mass against a dark one through contrast. This is the simplest way to provide emphasis, and pull a figure or object away from the background.

A mass may be a single pictorial element such as a mountain peak or it may consist of closely grouped figures that appear as a single compositional unit. A large mass captures viewers' attention through the power of its heavy pictorial weight.

A large mass will dominate the scene if contrasted with one or more small masses. Size of mass can be increased in relation to the frame through careful choice of camera angle, lens focal length and placement in the picture.

A finely-composed mass with a heavy base, presents an immovable appearance which will dominate through stability. The pyramid form, particularly with a dark foreground, is very effective when massed into a dominant full-frame pictorial element.

A compact mass without projections, jagged edges or other protuberances will dominate the scene because of its cohesiveness.

Massive lighting effects, especially if shot against a darker background, will dominate by creating unity and contrast. A burning forest, a streak of sunlight through church windows, a fireworks display, or the backlighting rays of sunlight on the water are all dominant masses created by light alone.

A predominating color, such as a large blue shadow area or red-streaked clouds illuminated by a setting sun, may create a massive color effect. Primary or highly-saturated colors are most effective when used to dominate the scene.

MOVEMENTS

Compositional movements are a particularly important aspect of motion picture photography. Complete movements may be only suggested in still photography. They may be both suggested and depicted in motion pictures. Movements possess esthetic and psychological properties, which may convey varied pictorial and emotional connotations to the viewer. Movement may be created by the eye going from one point to another within the scene, or by following a moving object. Such eye movement results in transitional lines which are similar to compositional lines.

Movements may change during a shot, or a sequence of shots, to match the changing character, mood or tempo of the action. Meanings of various compositional movements may be described as follows: Horizontal movements suggest travel, momentum, displacement. Left-to-right movement is easier to follow, more natural, smoother. Reading from left to right has pre-trained the audience to accept such movement; and to follow it with little or no effort. Right-to-left is stronger, because it is "against the grain." Since left to right offers less resistance, it should be used for travelogue panning shots or similar easy-going action. Right to left movements should be employed where a stronger, more dramatic opposition must be depicted, such as the hero moving toward the villain. Ascending vertical movements suggest aspiration, exaltation, growth, freedom from weight and

Descending vertical movement suggests heaviness, danger or crushing power as portrayed by this waterfall.

Lockheed Co.

This one-fifth scale model of proposed supersonic transport plane being readied for wind tunnel test, appears as if in actual flight because it is angled in ascending line.

matter such as smoke ascending from a candle, or a missile rising. Since an upward movement is uplifting, it may be employed for religious subjects. Feelings of lightness, free flight, happiness, elevation may be conveyed by such movement.

A descending vertical movement suggests heaviness, danger, crushing power, such as portrayed by a pile driver, an avalanche or a waterfall. Such downward movements may portray doom, imminent death or destruction.

A diagonal movement is most dramatic because it is the strongest. Diagonal movements suggest opposing forces, stresses and strains, power, overcoming obstacles by force such as in battle scenes. Diagonal movement may be suggested even in many static scenes by a Dutch tilt angled camera, which creates slanting dynamic lines. Thus, a statue, a building a dominant player, may be given added dramatic impact by diagonal treatment. A lower-left-to-upper-right diagonal motion should be used for an ascending movement, such as climbing a mountain. An upper-left-to-lower right diagonal motion should be employed for descending movement, such as lowering an object. Zig-zag diagonal movements such as lightning flashes suggest swiftness and menace. Crossed diagonals suggest opposing forces, such as crossed swords in battle scenes. Curved movements suggest fear; such as a curved snake, or fascination through fear. Circular or revolving movements, however, suggest cheerfulness, as found in amusement park rides. Revolving movements also suggest mechanical energy; such as wheels of industry or travel.

Pendulum motion suggests monotony, relentlessness, such as prison scenes or the back-and forth pacing of nervous person or caged animal.

Cascading motion suggests sprightliness, lightness or elasticity such as a ball bouncing, water rapids or a child skipping or playing hop-scotch.

Spreading or radiating motions suggest centrifugal movement, such as concentric ripples on the surface of a pool resulting from a stone thrown into the water. Radiating movement may also suggest growth from the center outward. Spreading motion suggests panic, such as in a mob rioting. Radiating motion suggests radio broadcasting, or any activity emanating outward from the center of interest. Interrupted movement, or movement that changes direction, attracts greater viewer interest than continuous movement or movement in a constant direction.

Movement toward the viewer is more interesting because it increases in size. Receding movement decreases in size and loses viewer interest.

BALANCE

Balance is a state of equilibrium. If all forces are equal, or compensate each other, they are said to be "in balance." An out-of-balance figure or object will usually topple over. Physical balance, therefore, is influenced by the law of gravity, by compensating forces and the power of attraction. Unbalance upsets the viewer because it disturbs his sensibilities, and creates unrest in the brain. That is why some pictures may not "look right." A properly-balanced composition is subconsciously agreeable, because the various elements are combined in an acceptable picture. On special occasions, the cameraman may wish to disturb the viewer, and purposely presents an unbalanced composition. Ordinarily, the scene should be presented so that the laws of balance are observed.

Pictorial balance in motion picture composition can be either complicated or enhanced by player and/or camera movement. Moving players or vehicles and the necessity for panning, tilting or dollying the camera, require continuous composing as the scene progresses. Motion pictures compositional balance is a series of pictorial compromises based on key positions of players and pauses in the action when elements are at rest. Static scenes require better balance than moving scenes, where action will attract the viewer's eye,

Lower-left-to-upper-right diagonal motion should be used for ascending movement. Angling this mobile-launched jet fighter, so that it moves across the screen in this manner, results in a dynamically effective shot. If this shot were filmed from the opposite side, it would depict the aircraft with an opposing transitional line which should be used for descending motion.

Movement toward viewer is more interesting, because it increases in size as it advances. Movement of Marines rushing forward in this amphibious landing is further reinforced by jet fighters flying toward the camera.

Real life balance is concerned with physical weight. Pictorial balance is concerned with psychological weight, which is influenced by relative eye attraction of various compositional elements in the picture. Each element attracts in accordance with its size, shape, tonal value, color, movement, direction it faces, contrast with its surroundings and placement in the frame. Balance may be considered as a pair of balances or a seesaw. A large static object on one side of the scene may thus be counter-balanced by a small moving object on the opposite side such as a tiny car moving toward a large mountain because they both have equal psychological or pictorial weight.

The location of a compositional element within the frame influences its weight. A figure or object placed close to the center of the frame possesses less compositional weight than one nearer the side because it exerts little influence on the seesaw and cannot tip it either way. Therefore, a lighter weight element may be moved further away from the center; while those of heavier weight should be positioned closer toward the center to keep them in balance. Placing a heavy weight element too far to either side of the frame will unbalance the composition and cause it to topple visually.

This scene is pictorially interesting because fuel truck is in background, framed by airplane wing. It would lack interest if shot square-on, with aircraft and fuel truck in straight line-up across screen.

The following compositional weight factors should be considered on the basis of all other factors being equal :

A moving object possesses more weight than a stationary object. This applies regardless of size. A relatively small moving object particularly if light in tone, brightly colored or contrasted against the background will command more attention than a large stationary object.

An object moving toward the camera becomes progressively larger, and therefore carries greater weight than a diminishing object moving away.

The upper part of a picture is heavier than the lower part, because a higher object appears heavier than a lower one.

Since most viewers' eyes automatically move toward the right, the right side of the frame can obviously attract and hold more attention than the left side. Thus, the left side of a picture can support greater pictorial weight than the right side.

An isolated object possesses more weight than an object crowded, merged or stacked with others. This applies whether isolation is achieved by positioning, lighting, contrast, color, or other factor. An object will appear heavier if placed at the side of the frame, since the center of the picture is compositionally weakest.

A large object in a static scene will carry more weight, since it tends to dominate the picture regardless of position or other factors.

Regularly-shaped objects carry more weight than irregularly-shaped objects.

A compact object, with mass concentrated around its center, will carry more weight than a loosely-joined object. A vertically-formed object will appear heavier than an oblique object. A bright object will possess more weight than a darker one. A high-key, light-toned object appears to advance toward the viewer; while a darker object recedes into the background. A black area must, therefore, be larger than a white area to counter-balance it. A bright surface appears relatively larger than a dark one, because of irradiation effect.

Documentary subjects such as this high speed space capsule ejection seat test with instrumentated dummies may be formally composed when two objects are of equal interest.