Film Techniques

an introduction

The drama, the attraction, of film lies not so much in what is shot – that's the drama of subject – but in how it is shot and how it is presented through editing.

– James Monaco, *How to Read a Film*

If a writer uses the word 'rose', the reader is free to imagine any of a thousand different possible roses.

When a film-maker shows us a rose, we all see the same rose.

But we can be told a vast amount about the rose, much more than a writer can tell us, by the way it is filmed

– from above

or below,

close

or distant,

frontally lit

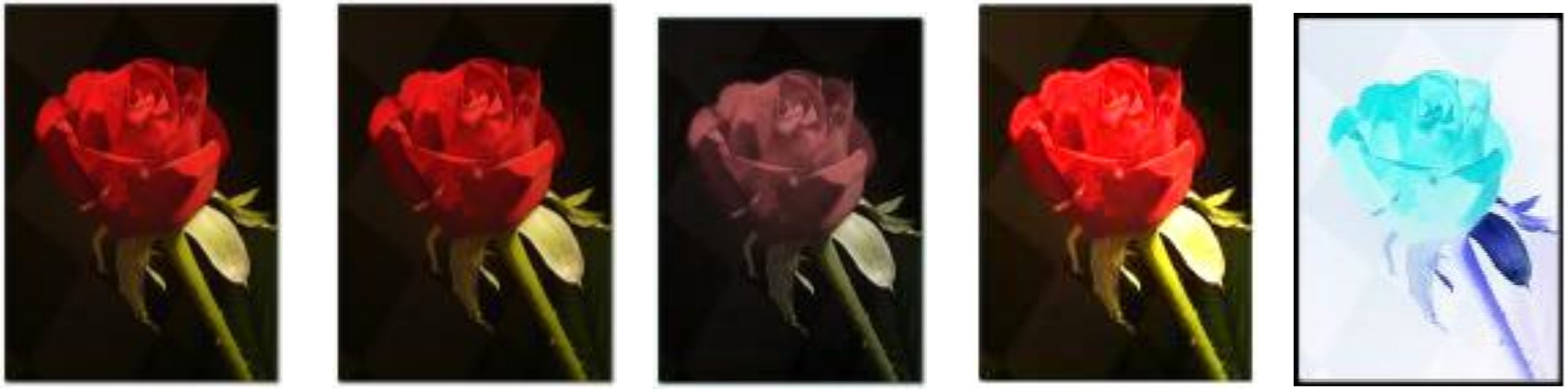
or back-lit,

moving or still, in full colour,

black and white

desaturated colour,

or special effect



accompanied by music or silence, and so on.

Atmosphere can be created, symbolism implied, metaphors intended – all in a brief moment.

The possibilities are endless

And every image, every frame, of the film will be the result of dozens of decisions about <u>what</u> will be shown.

– and <u>how</u>: distance angle lighting colour

and how to present it via editing:

what will come before it? after it

this is its **context**

shots can be described according to their **content**

CU

TWO

LS etc

or their **purpose**

master PAN ZOOM

EST POV CRANE

bridging

more of this later

Part 1: Useful Terms

diegesis

mise en scène

composition

diegesis

a useful word to know if you want to write effectively about film

the diegesis is the **world** of the film

– the objects, events, spaces, and the characters that inhabit those spaces,

and the things, actions and attitudes not explicitly presented in the film but inferred by the audience.

The viewer constructs a **diegetic world** from the material presented in a narrative film

so that each film will have its own unique and distinctive world:

The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)

Heavenly Creatures (1994)

The Shawshank Redemption
(1994)

The Constant Gardener
(2005)

Different media have different forms of diegesis.

The worlds created in the theatre tend to be less naturalistic than those of film.

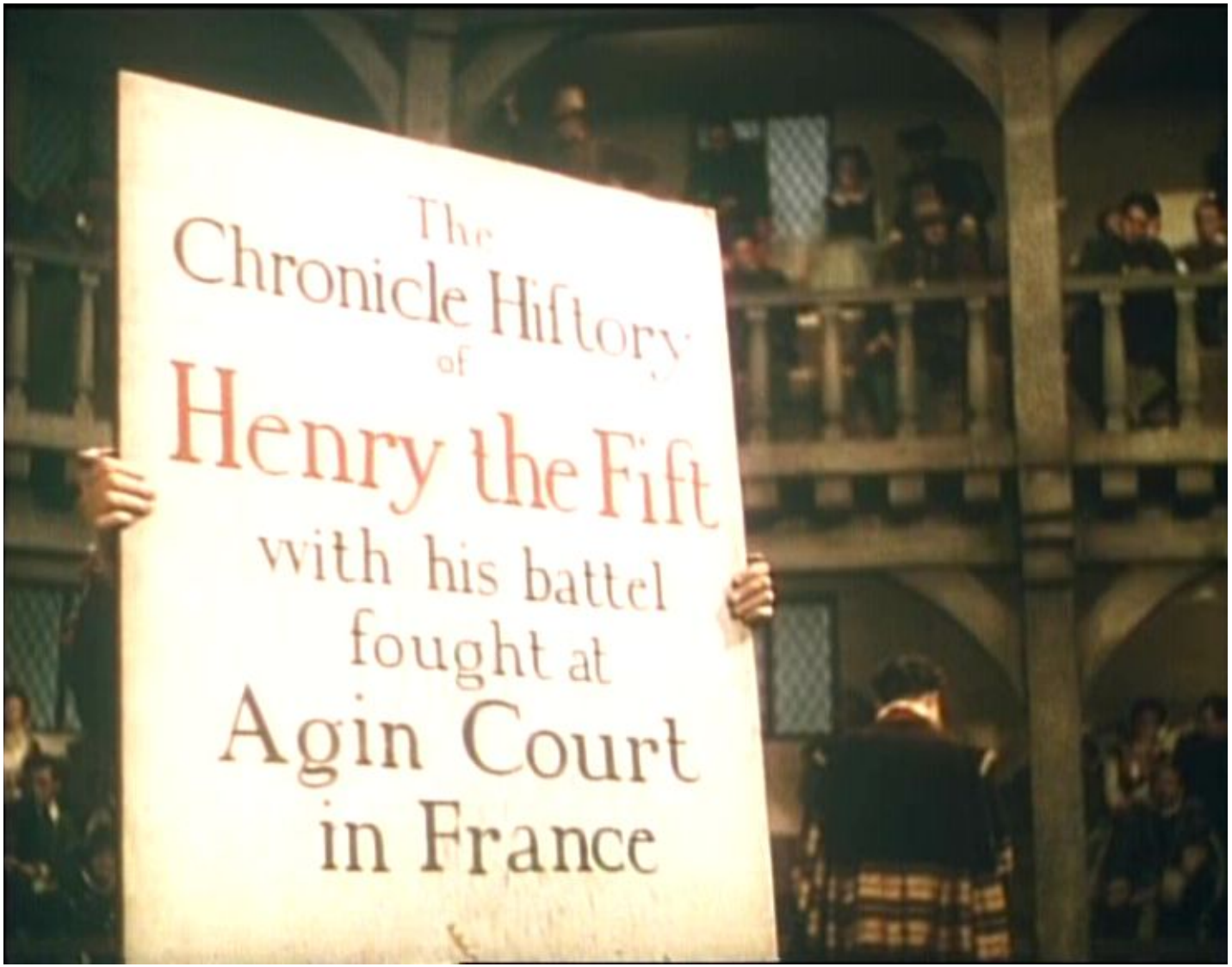
Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of Shakespeare's play *Henry V* is mostly filmed realistically on the battlefields of France.

But Olivier begins on the Elizabethan stage, so the initial diegesis is one of actors performing the play

The film opens with a long crane shot across a detailed model landscape of 16th century London.

to the Globe Theatre

where a placard announces the play,



and the actors begin their performances on the stage of Shakespeare's theatre.

Olivier as Henry V

As the play gets under way, the action shifts to France

In other words, the film shifts its **diegetic register** from the presentational form of the Elizabethan theatre

to the representational form of mainstream narrative cinema.

mise en scène

This refers to all the things that are 'put in the scene', as well as the way that we are shown them.

Or, put more technically, it means the arrangement of visual weights and movement within a given space.

In live theatre, that space is usually defined by the proscenium arch.

In movies, it is defined by the edge of the picture – the **frame** that encloses the images.

Hugh Grant in *About a Boy* (2002)

composition

is the arrangement of people and objects within the frame

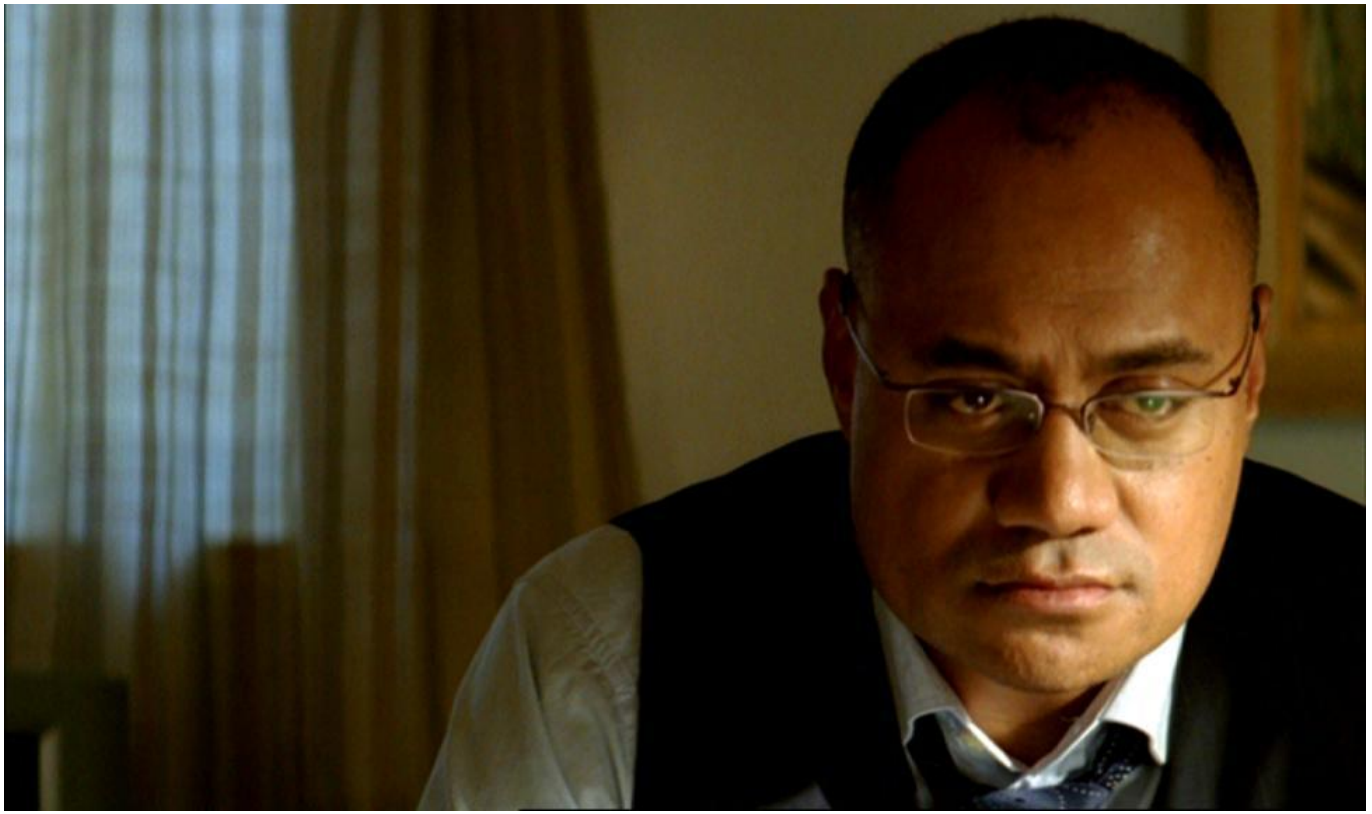
we can talk about **surface composition**

and about **composition in depth**

surface composition is demonstrated by this shot from the head titles of *Sione's Wedding* (2006):

the Auckland buildings are reduced to a surface pattern of horizontals and verticals.

or in this shot of Oscar Kightley in the same film



the composition is quite flat; he makes a pattern of solid curves close to the picture plane with contrasting soft indistinct verticals behind

He sits to the right of the frame, unbalancing the composition, and suggesting the character's unhappiness.

as the camera pulls back, the composition remains a surface pattern: the blank TV screen, the blank window, the white cupboard doors and the unattainable woman in the picture are all rectangles contrasting with the sagging curves of the character.

it is no longer quite so unbalanced; the cupboard with its white doors balances Albert in his white shirt.

now the composition is one **in depth** as well: the lines of the carpet, the window on the door and the mirror, on the cupboard, on the bedspread, all point towards the sad figure on the bed.

The **shape** of the frame is an important factor in the decisions about composition and how the *mise en scène* will be presented.

The shape is decided by the **aspect ratio** that the director decides to use.

Before the 1950s, all films were shot in an aspect ratio of 4x3,

but the need to compete with television, which was keeping movie audiences at home, led to the increasing use of wider and wider screens.

In the 4x3 aspect ration, the classic TWO SHOT is intimate, and focuses attention on the two participants

as in this MCU TWO shot of John Grillo and Jeremy Irons from *Danny the Champion of the World* (1989), a made-for-television film.

This MCU TWO creates a markedly different effect in widescreen:

James Franco and Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man* (2002)

and even more so in this shot from *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006)

Steve Carell and Paul Dano.

The wide anamorphic ratio leaves space between and behind.

aspect ratio of 1.33:1

aspect ratio of 1.85:1

aspect ratio of 2.40:1

The shift to widescreen in the 1950s coincided with a shift from interior, dialogue-dominated films:

Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn and James Stewart in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), filmed in 1.33:1

James Stewart and Grace Kelly in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), filmed in 1.66:1

to exterior and action-dominated:

Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

This shift from dialogue-dominated to action-dominated was not necessarily caused by the frame change, but it is more difficult to photograph intimate conversations in widescreen.

framing

refers to the relationship of the objects in the shot to the frame

tight framing

is usually used for close shots.

The composition is so carefully balanced and harmonised that the people photographed have little or no freedom of movement.

MS THREE of Ed Stoppard, Adrien Brody and Frank Finlay in *The Pianist* (2002)

The tight framing underlines the concern of the three at what they are seeing.

loose framing

usually in longer shots

The composition is looser and freer within the confines of the frame so that the people photographed have considerable freedom of movement.

A much looser MS THREE shot

John Turturro, Tim Blake Nelson and George Clooney
in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)

The loose framing is appropriate for an open road shot – and also has a more comic tinge.

Will Patton and Denzel Washington in *Remember the Titans* (2000)

The looseness of the shot underlines the emotional distance between the two men, while allowing a great deal of information about Will Patton's character to be incidentally revealed.

Another consideration for directors is what is referred to as 'open form' or 'closed form' filming.

open form: the subject is free to break the frame, to exit and enter the picture. This makes us aware of what is going on around and beyond the frame.

closed form: the subject remains within the frame at all times.

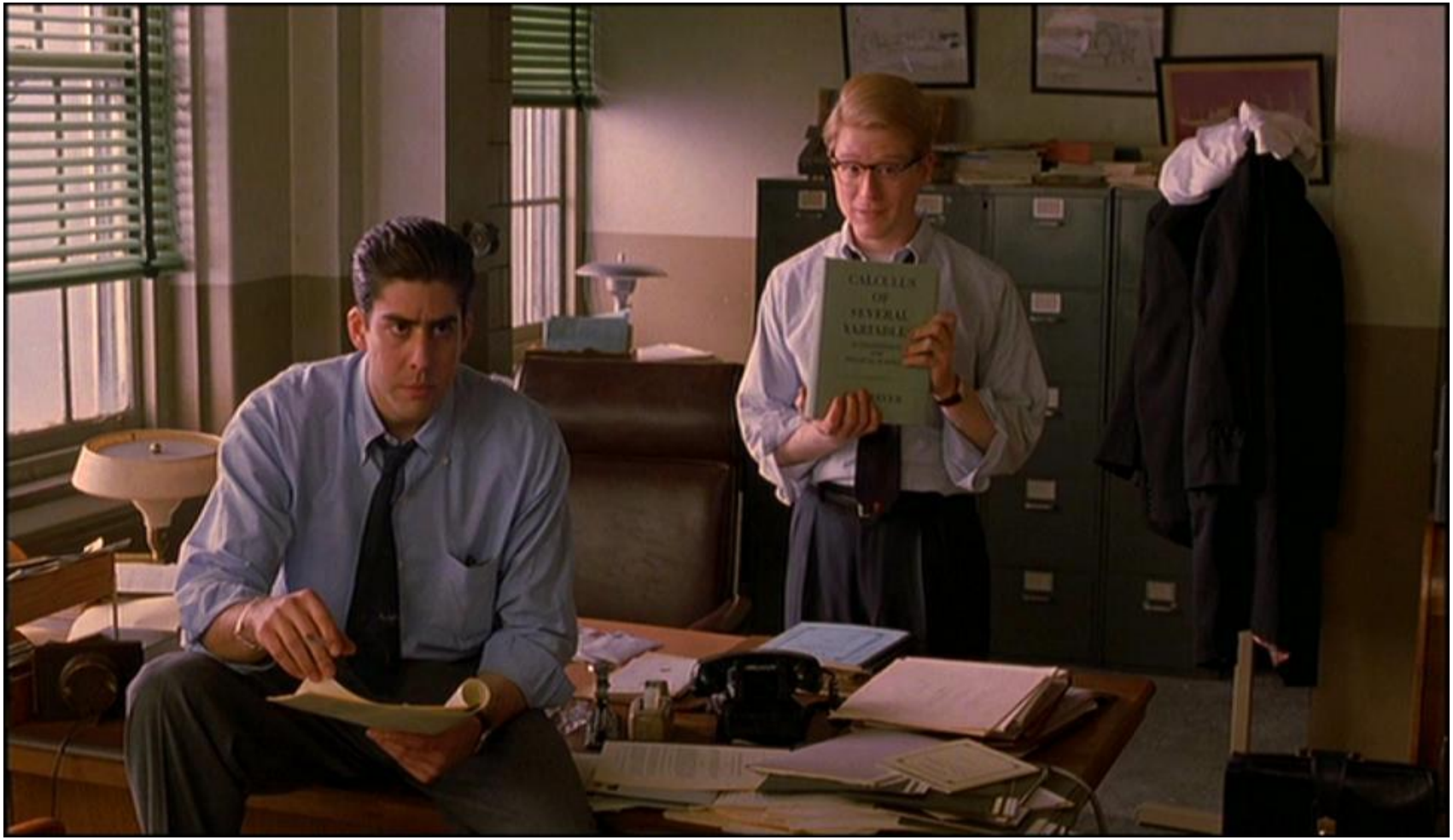
Closed form, in essence, is all about control.

Rehearsal and planning establish where and how the camera and performers will need to move in order to keep everything framed appropriately in a continuous shot which will also convey all necessary information.

Each individual shot is approached in this manner, which explains the benefit of storyboarding in pre-production.

Closed form is the prevalent style in Hollywood films, and the one expected by mainstream audiences,

such as *Back to the Future II*



Adam Goldberg and Anthony Rapp in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)

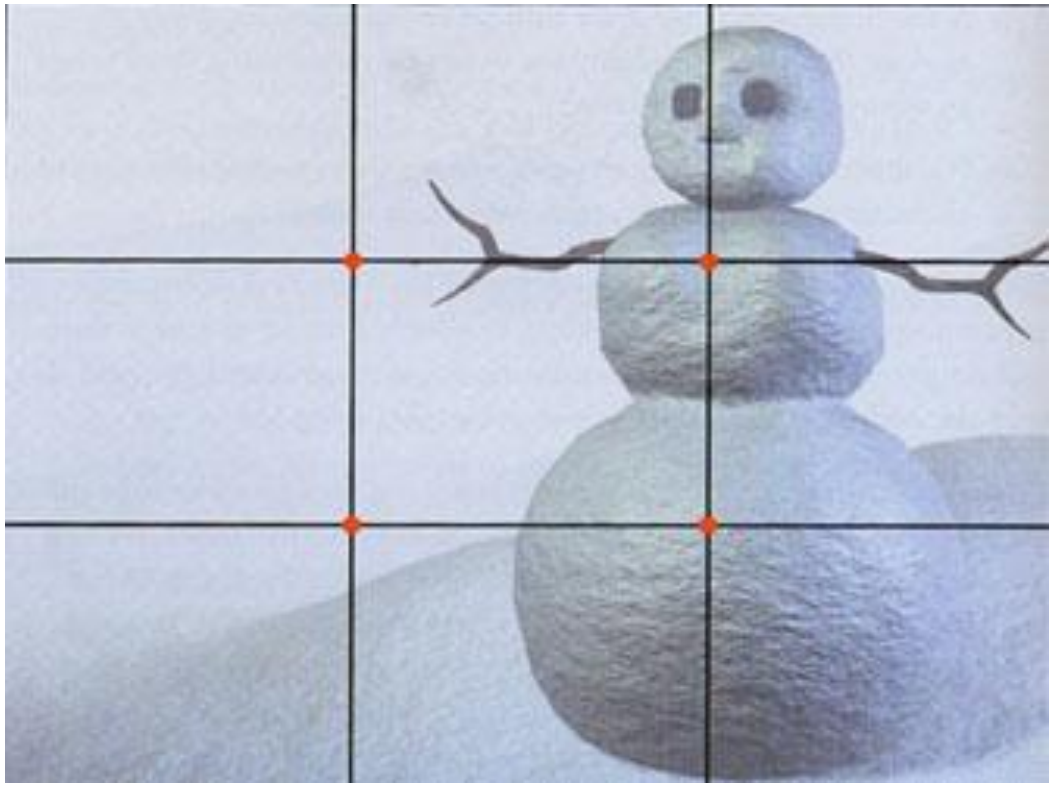
loose framing, closed form – and a beautifully composed shot

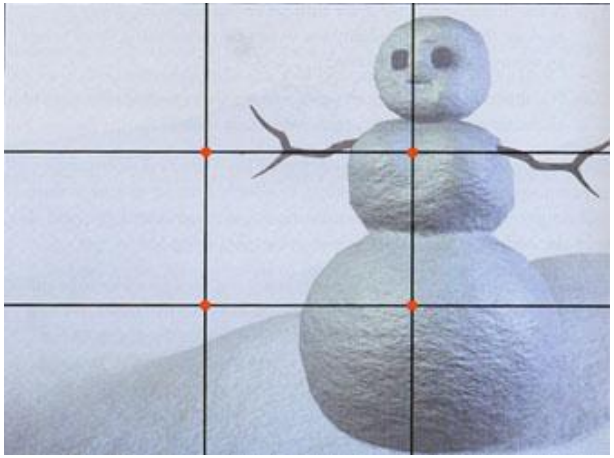
which brings us to

the rule of thirds

for centuries, artists have followed this rule of composition, and photographers and cinematographers have followed suit

The rule of thirds divides the frame into thirds both horizontally and vertically.



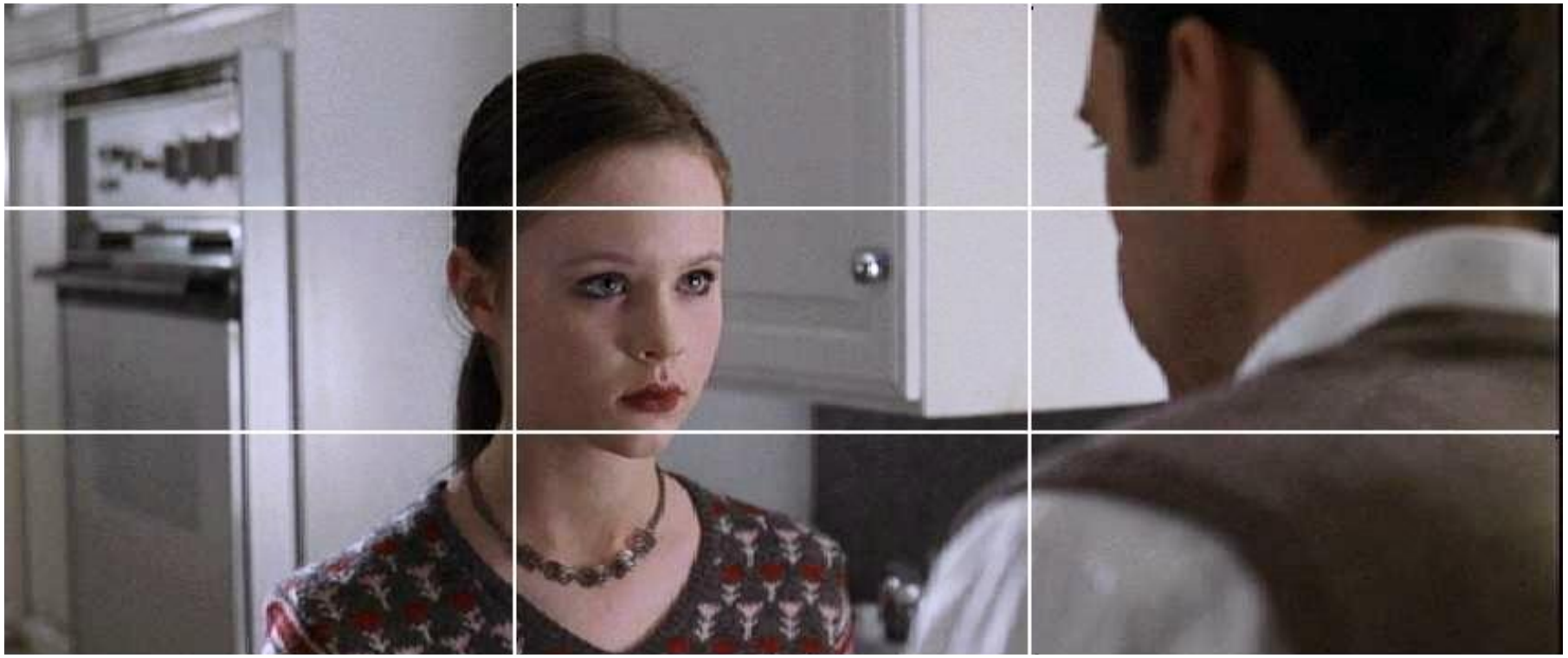


The points where the vertical and horizontal lines cross are aesthetically pleasing spots to place subjects or to have perspective lines converge.

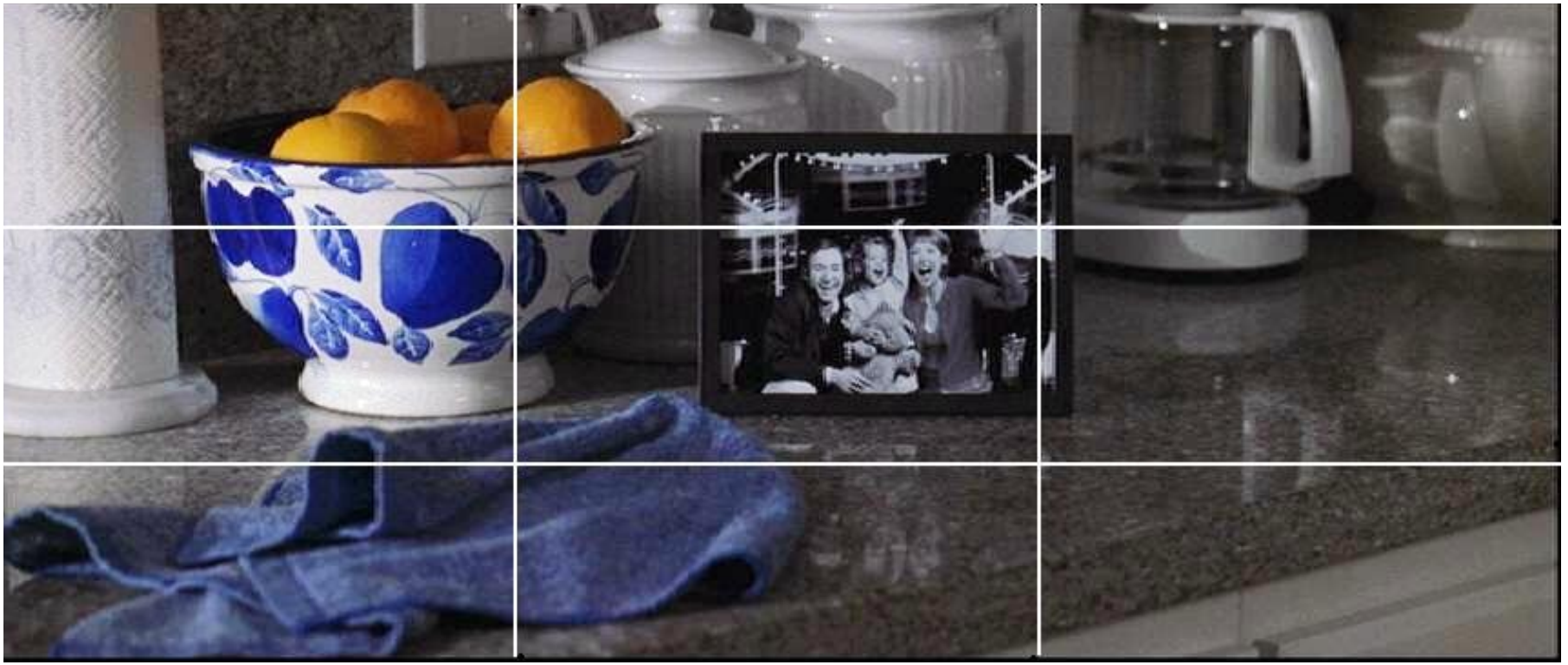
Look at the way these shots have been composed with the 'rule of thirds' in mind:

Note how each of the two figures is just to the left of a vertical, and how each of the nine segments contains a point of interest.

Thora Birch in *American Beauty* (1999)



Thora Birch and Kevin Spacey in *American Beauty*



American Beauty

Of course, movement affects composition; characters will not always stay in the same relationship to the frame.

When an object is placed centrally, it can become confrontational,

as in these shots from *American Beauty*:

the gun is right at the centre of the frame

The other mathematical basis for composition has also been used for hundreds of years.

It provided the measurements for the beautiful proportions of ancient Greek Temples:

It is variously called the **golden section**, the **golden ratio**, the **golden mean**, or the **divine proportion**.

Without getting into complicated mathematics, it is a proportion based on a ratio of 1:1.618.

Although architects no doubt measured, artists, photographers and cinematographers usually use their eyes: it is the most pleasing of proportions

as in this superb shot from *Atonement* (2007): the horizon falls on the Golden Section.

Keira Knightley in *Atonement*

diegesis: the world created by the film

***mise en scène*:** everything that is shown within the frame and the way it is shown

composition: the arrangement of the people and objects within each frame

of the three, ***mise en scène*** is probably the one you will use most when you write about film

Cinematic *mise en scène* encompasses both the **staging of the action** and the **way it's photographed**:

set design,

costume,

props,

composition,

lighting,

and the general visual environment,

as well as camera placement and movement,

placement of actors,

and what they say and do.

In fact, everything that takes place on the set prior to the editing process.

Kevin Spacey at work in *American Beauty*

Everything in this shot is the result of a decision that has been made: what is on Lester's desk, the placement of his desk, what he is wearing, how he is sitting, what he is saying, the light and colour and so on. It all comes under the label of *mise en scène*.

In this scene from *American Beauty,* Thora Birch is seated back in the picture space – the table and objects in front of her separate her from her parents as a visual metaphor of the emotional gap between them.

Buttercup (Robin Wright), on the other hand, is comfortable in her home which encloses her and surrounds her.

The Princess Bride (1987)

Paul (Matthew Macfadyen) is far from comfortable visiting his brother after a long absence.

In My Father's Den (2004)

His stance is unrelaxed, the composition is unbalanced and the frame seems to press down on the top of his head.

The different aspect ratios emphasise the difference…

… which is why films need to be seen in the appropriate ratio.

Everything in the frame is there for a purpose.

The two boys in this shot from *Remember the Titans* are talking to each other because they have to.

The distance between them underlines their mutual hostility, and the scene is set against the stunning architectural background which subtly evokes the entrenched racism of the establishment.

On a conventional 4x3 aspect ratio TV set, the scene loses its visual impact and its metaphorical resonance because it is shown like this:

and then this

even when the result is not as drastic as that, reducing widescreen to a smaller ratio can make the picture looked cramped,

as in this shot from *The Matrix* (1999)

which should look like this:

The reduction of a widescreen film to 4x3 for conventional television sets – done by a technique called 'pan and scan' – is, in the words of director Martin Scorsese, "technically redirecting the film".

The picture loses quality as part of a shot is enlarged to fill the TV screen, and there is a loss of emotional impact when part of the original composition is lost.

Look at these examples from widescreen films; the parts of each shot that are removed have been darkened.

(Apologies for the poor picture quality of some of the images.)

The first are from John Ford's epic *How the West was Won* (1962), shot in Cinerama to capture the huge spaces of the West.

The Indians attack the wagon train.

the whole shot, with the 4x3 aspect highlighted

what is seen in the 4x3 version

we see this

when we should see this:

The famous chariot race in *Ben-Hur* (1959), filmed in Panavision, becomes in 4x3, says Scorsese, "a confused blur".

from this

to this – in which Charlton Heston's pose is pretty meaningless, since we don't see what he is reacting to.

we see this

instead of this

this

instead of this

It is not just action pictures that are damaged by this process, as Stanley Donen's 1954 musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* demonstrates.

Instead of this

we see only this

Important characters can be lost, as in this scene from Vincente Minelli's *Gigi* (1958):

In 4x3, Gigi (Leslie Caron) is cut off, even though she is the one singing.

and, a few seconds later, it is Hermione Gingold who is lost.

This is not a trivial matter.

The representation of **space** has a significant impact on the reading of a film.

The **depth** of the space depicted is as important as the breadth.

deep space

when significant elements of an image are positioned both near to and distant from the camera

these objects do not all have to be in focus

Gandalf leaves the Shire in *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Jess joins the practice in *Bend It Like Beckham* (1999)

In **shallow space** the image is staged with very little depth.

Truman is trapped between a wall and two insistent characters, with a hint of depth (and freedom) tantalisingly shown to one side.

The figures in the image occupy the same or closely positioned planes, as in this shot also from *The Truman Show* (1998)

Holland Taylor, Jim Carrey, Laura Linney

Again, the metaphor of being trapped is powerfully created by the shallow space.

Shallow space can be staged, as this is;

or it can be achieved optically, with the use of a telephoto lens, as in this shot from *Spider-Man*:

the telephoto lens reduces the distance between his own house and that of the girl Peter Parker yearns for

telephoto shot

an image shot with an extremely long lens

The effect of using a long lens is to **compress** the apparent depth of an image, so that elements that are relatively close or far away from the camera seem to lie at approximately the same distance.

In this shot from Brian Helgeland's *Payback* (1999), we can see there is a considerable distance between the fallen body and the red car.

When a telephoto lens is used for a close-up of the shot Mel Gibson, his face looks as if it is pressed against the car.

The telephoto lens creates a shallow space which combines with extreme canted framing to suggest the physical and psychological disarray of a man who has been betrayed, shot and left for dead.

Here the shallow space – created by wall and door – added to the mesh in front creates an almost flat effect – an effective metaphor for the way this character is trapped in her own world.

Mirando Otto plays an agoraphobic in *In My Father's Den.*

the deep space behind her son, however, creates a quite different effect

Deep space in the opening shot of *The Player* (1992)…

which follows almost immediately – within the same tracking shot – after this very shallow space, with Tim Robbins hemmed in by the window and the wall of his office.

This shot from *American Beauty* brilliantly achieves both effects in one frame.

On the right, Wes Bentley stands with his camcorder in shallow space; on the left, the TV screen shows what he is filming, and so creates the illusion of deeper space.

A **wide shot** does not refer to the actual width of the shot, since the frame width cannot alter.

It refers more to the content and purpose of the shot.

A **wide shot** [WS] gives a broad view of an area, and conveys scale, distance, and geographic location.

Extreme wide shots [EWS] are often used as **establishing shots**; they often have great depth as well:

Hobbiton, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Bilbo's birthday party

Lars and the Real Girl (2007)

Little Miss Sunshine

WIDE EST. SHOTS can be of interiors also, as these two shots from *V for Vendetta* (2005) illustrate:

Evey (Natalie Portman) is shot in LS but the **purpose** of the shot is to show her within her room, so it is better described as a WIDE (or an LS WIDE)

Another EWS shows the home that V has made for himself in a forgotten crypt.

establishing shot/re-establishing shot

sometimes it takes more than one shot to set up a scene

In the initial sequence of *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), director Tsui Hark uses three shots to establish the locale.

Three musicians are shown against a fireplace in what looks like a luxurious room.

the second establishing shot shows us the other half of the room – shot/reverse shot – and reveals a party going on.

After several close ups, a third establishing shot – a **re-establishing shot** - shows once again the spatial relationships introduced with the establishing shots.