visual language

MORE THAN JUST A PICTURE

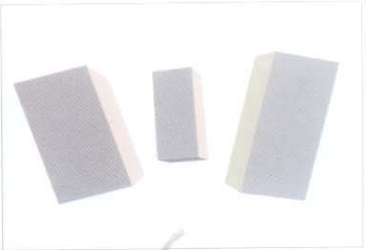
Let's think of the frame as more than just a "picture" — it is information. Clearly some parts of the information are more important than others and we want this information to be perceived by the viewer in a certain order — we want the information organized in a particular way. Composition is how this is accomplished. Through composition we are telling the audience where to look, what to look at and in what order to look at it. The frame is fundamentally two dimensional design. 2-D design is about guiding the eye and directing the attention of the viewer in an organized manner that conveys the meaning that you wish to impart. It is how the artist imposes a point of view on the material that may be different from how others see it.

If all we did was simply photograph what is there in exactly the same way everyone else sees it, the job could be done by a robot camera; there would be no need for the cinematographer, videographer or editor. An image should convey meaning, mode, tone, atmosphere and subtext on its own — without regard to voice-over, dialog, audio or other explanation. This was in its purest essence in silent film, but the principle still applies: the images must stand on their own.

Good composition reinforces the way in which the mind organizes information. In some cases it may deliberately run counter to how the eye/brain combination works in order to add a new layer of meaning or ironic comment. Composition selects and emphasizes elements such as size, shape, order, dominance, hierarchy, pattern, resonance and discordance in ways which give meaning to the things being photographed that goes beyond the simple: "here they are." We will start with the very basic rules of visual organization then move on to more sophisticated concepts of 2-D and 3-D design and visual language. The principles of design and visual communication are a vast subject; here we will just touch on the basics in order to lay the foundation for discussion.

2.1. (previous page) Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew (1600)*. See a disscussion of this painting also in the chapter on *Lighting As Storytelling*. (Reproduction courtesy of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome.)

2.2. In its own way, this frame from the finale of *The Big Combo* (Allied Artist, 1955) is as much of a unified visual composition as is the Caravaggio. It is not only graphically strong, but the many visual elements all work together to reinforce and add subtext to the story content of the scene.



2.3. (above) Balance plays a key role in visual tension.

2.4. (left) An unbalanced frame from *The Third Man* (London Film Prod., 1949). It both creates visual tension appropriate to the tone of the scene and also draws the viewer's mind to what is off-screen.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Certain basic principles pertain to all types of visual design, whether in film, photography, painting or drawing. These principles work interactively in various combinations to add depth, movement and visual force to the elements of the frame.

UNITY

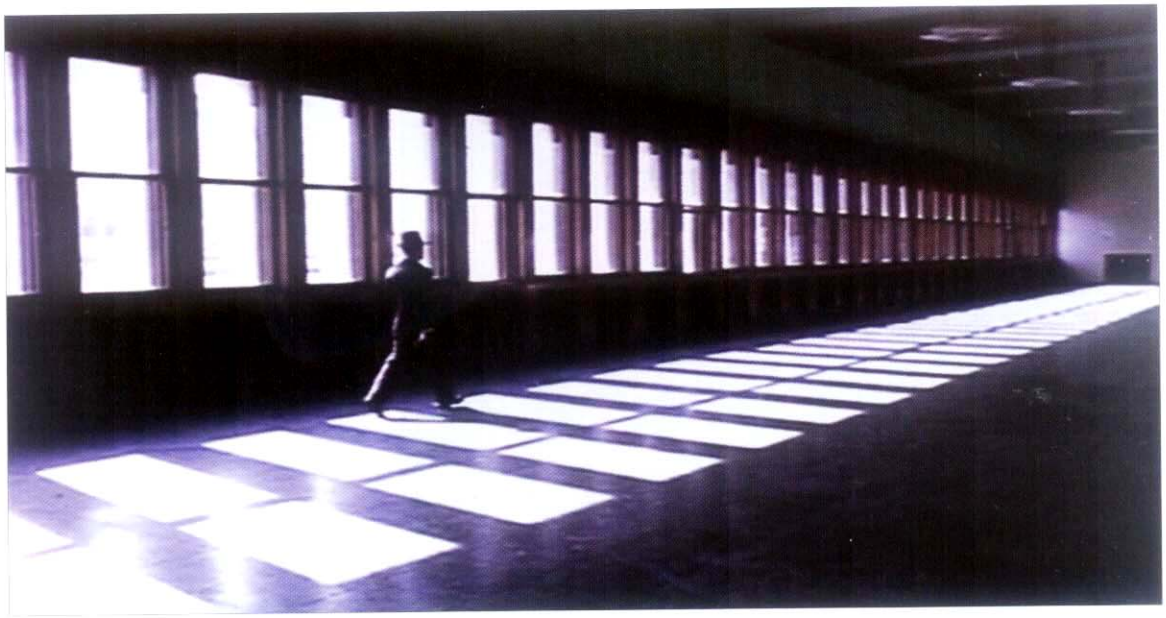
Unity is the principle that the visual organization be a "whole," self-contained and complete. This is true even if it is a deliberately chaotic or unorganized "informal" composition. In Figure 2.1, Caravaggio's powerful composition uses elements of line, color, positive/negative space, chiaroscuro and other visual elements to tell a visual story that is powerful and subtle at the same time. In Figure 2.2, this climactic final shot from *The Big Combo* uses simple, graphic frame-within-a-frame composition to tell the story visually: having defeated the bad guy in a shoot out, the hero and heroine emerge from the darkness into the light — both are completely unified designs.

BALANCE

Visual balance is an important part of composition. Every element in a visual composition has a visual weight. These may be organized into a balanced or unbalanced composition. The visual weight of

2.5. (below) Visual rhythm.

2.6. (left) Rhythm with an ironic twist in this shot from Stanley Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* (MGM/UA, 1955).



2.7. Many elements of visual design work together to make this extremely powerful shot from *The Conformist* (Marianne Production/ Paramount Pictures, 1970).

an object is primarily determined by its size but is also affected by its position in the frame, its color and the subject matter itself. A number of factors can be used to create a balanced or unbalanced visual field.

VISUAL TENSION

The interplay of balanced and unbalanced elements and their placement in the frame can create visual tension, which is important in any composition which seeks to avoid boring complacency (Figure 2.4). Visual tension plays a role even in composition which is balanced and formal, such as Figure 2.3.

RHYTHM

Rhythm of repetitive or similar elements can create patterns of organization. Rhythm plays a key role in the visual field, sometimes in a very subtle way as in Figures 2.5 and 2.6 and 2.7.

PROPORTION

Classical Greek philosophy expressed the idea that mathematics was the controlling force of the universe and that it was expressed in visual forces in the Golden Mean. The Golden Mean is just one way of looking at proportion and size relationships in general.

CONTRAST

We know a thing by its opposite. Contrast is a function of the light/dark value, the color and texture of the objects in the frame and the lighting. It is an important visual component in defining depth, spatial relationships and of course carries considerable emotional and storytelling weight as well.

TEXTURE

Based on our associations with physical objects and cultural factors, texture gives perceptual clues. If we can perceive a great deal of texture, we know that an object must be relatively close, as the farther away something is, the less we can perceive its texture. Texture is a function of the objects themselves, but usually requires lighting to bring it out as in Figure 2.8.

DIRECTIONALITY

One of the most fundamental of visual principles is directionality. With a few exceptions, everything has some element of directionality. This directionality is a key element of its visual weight, which determines how it will act in a visual field and how it will affect other elements. Anything that is not symmetrical is directional.

2.8. (top) In this shot from *The Conformist*, texture and contrast are emphasized and reinforced by lighting.

2.9. (above) Lighting, perspective, choice of lens and camera position combine to give this Gregg Toland shot tremendous depth.

2.10. Overlap in a composition from the noir film classic *The Big Combo*.

THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL FIELD

In any form of photography, we are taking a three-dimensional world and projecting it onto a two dimensional frame. A very big part of our jobs in directing and shooting is this essential idea of creating a three dimension world out of two-dimensional images. It calls into play a vast array of techniques and methods, not all of them purely design oriented, as we shall see later. There are, of course, times when we wish to flatten the perception of space and make the frame more two-dimension; in that case the same principles apply, they are just used in a different fashion.

DEPTH

Except where a perception of flat space is the goal, we are often trying to create a perception of depth within what is actually a flat two-dimensional space. There are a number of ways to create the illusion of depth in a two dimensional field: figure 2.9 shows great depth in a visual field.

- Overlap
- Size change
- Vertical location
- Horizontal location
- Linear perspective
- Foreshortening
- Chiaroscuro
- Atmospheric perspective

OVERLAP

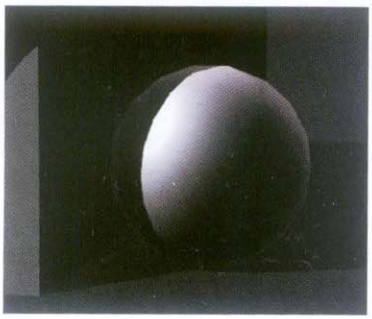
Overlap clearly establishes front/back relationships: something "in front of" another thing is clearly closer to the observer; as in this frame from the noir classic *The Big Combo* (Figure 2.10).

RELATIVE SIZE

Although the eye can be fooled, the relative size of an object is an important visual clue to depth, as in Figure 2.11. Relative size is the key component of many optical illusions and a key compositional element in manipulating the viewer's unconscious perception of the subject. It is, of course, the main element of Hitchcock's rule as discussed in the chapter *Filmspace*.

2.11. (top) Relative size is key in this shot from *High Noon*, but clearly linear perspective and overlap also play a role.

2.12. (above) Kubrick uses linear perspective to convey a sense of the rigid military and social structure in *Paths of Glory* (United Artists, 1957).



2.13. Chiaroscuro is what makes this shot from *The Black Stallion* mysterious and engaging. (United Artists, 1979.)

2.14. Chiaroscuro usually involves a high contrast ratio.

2.15. Foreshortening is especially noticeable with the human form.

VERTICAL LOCATION

Gravity is a factor is visual organization; the relative vertical position of objects is a depth cue. This is particularly important in the art of Asia, which has not traditionally relied on linear perspective as it is practiced in Western art. See the chapter on *Lens Language* for an example of how Akira Kurosawa translates this concept in his use of lenses.

LEFT/RIGHT

Largely a result of cultural conditioning, the eye tends to scan from left to right. This has an ordering effect on the visual weight of elements in the field. It is also critical to how the eye scans a frame and thus the order of perception and movement in the composition.

LINEAR PERSPECTIVE

Linear perspective as we know it today was an invention of the Renaissance. The architect and artist Leon Battista Alberti (1406-1472) first formulated the rules of constructing perspective drawings, elaborating on earlier observations by Brunelleschi. He also formulated the theory that beauty is harmony. For us in film and video photography, it is not necessary to know the formal rules of perspective (except in some cases in visual effects work and shooting for front or rear projection) but it is important to recognize its importance in visual organization. Kubrick uses it to reinforce the rigid, formal nature of French society and military in Figure 2.12, a frame from *Paths of Glory*.

FORESHORTENING

Foreshortening is a phenomenon of the optics of the eye (Figure 2.15). Since things that are closer to the eye appear larger than those farther away, when part of an object is much closer than the rest of it, the visual distortion gives us clues as to depth and size.

CHIAROSCURO

Italian for light (chiara) and shadow (scouro, same Latin root as obscure), chiaroscuro, or gradations of light and dark (Figure 2.14), establishes depth perception and creates visual focus. Since dealing with lighting is one of our major tasks, this is an important consider-

ation in our work. Figure 2.13 is a shot from *The Black Stallion.* See also Figure 2.1 — Caravaggio, is of course, one of the great masters of chiaroscuro.

2.16. Atmospheric perspective is an important element of this shot from *City of Last Children* (Studio Canal+, 1995) not only for the sense of sadness and isolation but also because it is a set built in a studio. Without the sense of atmospheric perspective added by the smoke and backlight, it is doubtful the illusion would hold up so well.

ATMOSPHERIC PERSPECTIVE

Atmospheric perspective (sometimes called aerial perspective) is something of a special case as it is an entirely "real world" phenomenon. Objects that are a great distance away will have less detail, less saturated colors and generally be less defined than those that are closer. Most of this is a result of the image being filtered through more atmosphere and haze. Haze filters out some of the long (warmer) wavelengths, leaving more of the shorter, bluer wavelengths. Its most immediate application in film and video is often seen when shooting with backdrops or translights (very large transparencies used as backgrounds). Often they will have too much detail, which gives away the fact that they are close to us and not real. The solution is to fly a large net between the back of the set and the translight. This decreases detail and creates the perception of haze. See Figure 2.16.

FORCES OF VISUAL ORGANIZATION

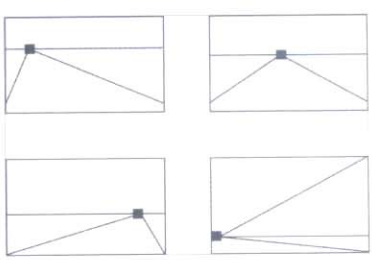
All of these basic elements can then be deployed in various combinations to create a hierarchy of perception: they can create an organization of the visual field which makes the composition coherent and guides the eye and the brain as it puts the information together. These include:

THE LINE

The line, either explicit or implied, is a constant in visual design. It is powerful in effect and multifaceted in its use. Just a few simple lines can organize a two-dimensional space in a way that is comprehensible by the eye/brain (Figure 2.17) The types of line are many, but there are a few that deserve special mention for their importance in visual organization.

2.17. (below) The brain organizes these simple lines into something meaningful.

2.18. (bottom) The sinuous S; a specialized type of line that has a long history in visual art.



2.19. (top) Line as form and movement in this frame from *Seven Samurai*.

2.20. (above) The classic sinuous S in this shot from *The Black Stallion*.

THE SINUOUS LINE

The sinuous line, which is sometimes referred to as the "reverse S," is a constantly recurring theme in visual art (Figure 2.18) and has been since it was used extensively as a compositional principle by the Classical Greek artists; it has a distinctive harmony and balance all its own, as seen in these examples from *The Black Stallion* and *Seven Samurai* (Figures 2.19 and 2.21).

COMPOSITIONAL TRIANGLES

As with the sinuous curve, triangles are a powerful compositional tool. Once you start looking for them, you will see compositional triangles everywhere — they are a fundamental tool of visual organization. Figure 2.22 is a frame from *The Big Sleep*, an outstanding

2.21. (left) The sinuous S and its use in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*. As we will discuss in *Lens Language*, the use of a long lens is also an element in bringing out this pure line element of the composition.

2.22. (left below) Compositional triangles in the film noir classic *The Big Sleep*. (Warner Bros., 1946.)

example of the noir genre. The compositional triangles keep the frame active even through a fairly long expositional scene.

HORIZONTALS, VERTICALS AND DIAGONALS

The basic lines are always a factor in almost any type of compositions. Nearly infinite in variety, they always come back to the basics: horizontal, vertical and diagonal. Lines may be explicit, as in these shots from *Seven Samurai* (Figure 2.19 and 2.23) or implied in the arrangement of objects and spaces.

THE HORIZON LINE AND VANISHING POINT

Our innate understanding of perspective lends a special association to lines which are perceived as horizon lines, lines of perspective and vanishing point. Figure 2.16 shows how ingrained the horizon line is in our perception: three simple lines on white space are enough to suggest it.

THE POWER OF THE EDGE: THE FRAME

As we visually identify an object or group of objects in a frame, we are also subconsciously aware of the frame itself. The four edges of the frame have a visual force all their own. Objects that are close to the frame are visually associated with it and viewed in relation to it

2.23. (above) Vertical and diagonal lines in *Seven Samurai*.

2.24. (right) Verticals and horizontals in this shot from *JFK* (Warner Bros., 1991) are especially strong given the wide screen aspect ratio. Notice also how the unbalanced frame and negative space on the right side are especailly important to the composition. Imagine if they had framed only the "important elements" on the left. It would not be nearly as strong a composition and would not work nearly so well for wide screen.

2.25. (right, below) Diagonal lines are crucial to this shot from *The Conformist*.

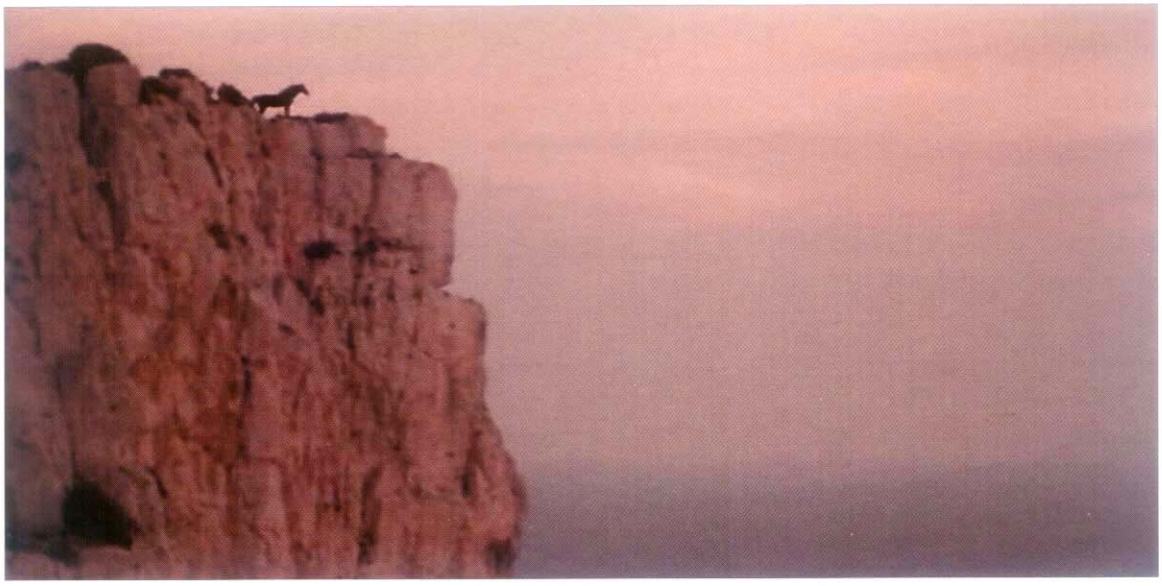
more than if they are farther away. The frame's field of forces exerts visual weight on the objects within the frame and any grouping of elements in the frame are affected by it, even more so as the objects or groups of objects are very close to or even overlapping the edge. The frame also plays an important role in making us aware of those spaces off-frame: left/right, up/down and even the space behind the camera — all part of the filmspace of the entire composition and crucial to making the visual experience more three-dimensional.

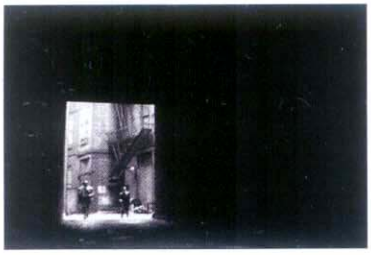
OPEN AND CLOSED FRAME

This is particularly true in the case of an open or closed frame. An open frame is one in which one or more of the elements either pushes the edge or actually crosses the edge (Figure 2.26). A closed frame is one in which the elements are comfortably contained within the frame (Figure 2.27). Although we look at the frames here as still photographs, most frames of a motion picture are dynamic.

2.26. (top) An open frame composition from *Seven Samurai.*

2.27. (above) Closed frame composition: *Dr. Strangelove* (Columbia/Tristar, 1961).



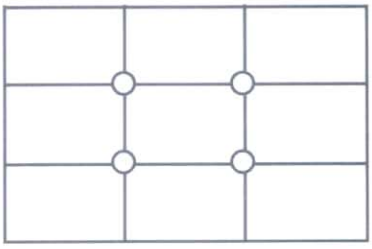


2.28. (right) Negative space and unbalanced composition in *The Black Stallion*.

2.29. (top) Formal composition from *Days of Heaven* (Paramount Pictures, 1978).

2.30. (above) Frame within a frame: *Killer's Kiss*.

2.31. The rule of thirds.



FRAME WITHIN A FRAME

Sometimes the composition demands a frame that is different from the aspect ratio of the film. In this case, filmmakers often resort to a "frame within a frame" as in this example from *Killer's Kiss* (Figure 2.30). Frame within a frame is an especially important tool when working in a wide format such 2.35:1 or High Def — 1.77:1.

BALANCED AND UNBALANCED FRAME

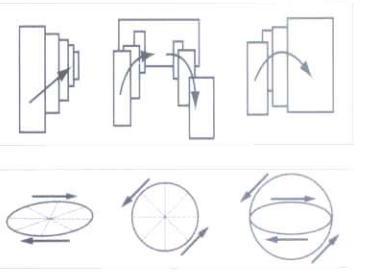
We touched on balance before; now let's look at it in the context of the frame. Any composition may be balanced or unbalanced. This can be further broken down in to balanced/formal, balanced/informal, unbalanced/formal and unbalanced/informal. This shot from *Dr. Strangelove* (Figure 2.27) is both a closed frame and also a formal/balanced composition. Using formal geometry to comment on social structure is a constant in Kubrick's work; see also examples from *Barry Lyndon*, *Killer's Kiss* and *Paths of Glory* in this and other chapters. See also Figures 2.29 and 2.30.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

The visual weight of objects or lines of force can create positive space, but their absence can create negative space, as in this frame from *The Black Stallion* (Figure 2.28). The elements that are "not there" and thus unseen have a visual weight as well. In the frame from *The Third Man* (Figure 2.4) the off screen look suggests that unseen and unknown elements are at play in the story — which is, of course, about a mysterious and unknowable city.

MOVEMENT IN THE VISUAL FIELD

All of these forces work in combination, of course — in ways that interact to create a sense of movement in the visual field. There are also cultural factors which influence our understanding of space. One of many is that in Western culture we read from left to right and from top to bottom. This influences how the eye moves in the frame. All of these factors combine to create a movement from front to back in a clockwise fashion and top to bottom, also usually clockwise (Figure 2.32). This movement in the frame is important not only for the composition but also plays an important role in what order the viewer perceives and assimilates the subjects in the frame. This influences their perception of content.



2.32 and **2.33**. (top and above) A number of forces combine to create movement in the visual field.

2.34. (left) Strong movement in the frame reinforces character relationships and subtext in this shot from *Seven Samurai*.

FILM AND VIDEO COMPOSITION

The film and video frame have some of their own broad rules of composition that have become generally accepted rules of thumb — as with all such guidelines, the exceptions are nearly as numerous as the application. In general, all of the visual forces we have discussed so far apply to composition in film and video. There are also a few special cases specific to composition of the moving image which deserve mention.

Often we work instinctively on the set and "fiddling around till it looks good on the monitor" has become a dangerous bad habit. It is perfectly possible to work this way, but being able to think out and preplan a composition in advance is time saving and can be indispensable if the camera had to be pre-rigged in a position before the action.

THE RULE OF THIRDS

The rule of thirds starts by dividing the frame into thirds (Figure 2.31). Again, a ratio of one third to two thirds approximates the Golden Mean. The rule of thirds proposes that a useful approximate starting point for any compositional grouping is to place major points of interest in the scene on any of the four intersections of the interior lines.

MISCELLANEOUS RULES OF COMPOSITION

If ever there were rules made to be broken, they are the rules of composition, but it is important to understand them before deviating or using them in a contrary style.

Don't cut off their feet — generally, a frame should end somewhere around the knees or include the feet. Cutting them off at the ankles will look awkward; likewise, don't cut off their hands at the wrist — this is especially disturbing. Naturally, a character's hand will often dart in and out of the frame as the actor moves and gestures, but for a long static shot, they should be clearly in or out.

Watch out for TV Safe — as video is currently broadcast, there is considerable variation in the size of the picture on the home screen. For this reason, most ground glass markings include both the entire video frame (TV broadcast) and a marking that is 10% less, called TV Safe. All important compositional elements should be kept inside TV Safe.

Heads of people standing in the background — when framing for our important foreground subjects, whether or not to include the heads of background people is a judgment call. If they are prominent enough, it is best to include them compositionally. If there is enough emphasis on the foreground subjects and the background people are strictly incidental or perhaps largely out of focus, it is OK to cut them off wherever is necessary.

If the situation does call for not showing their heads, you will probably want to avoid cutting through their heads at nose level. For example, in a scene where two people are dining, if the waiter approaches and asks them a question, you clearly have to show all of the waiter. If the waiter is not a speaking role and he is merely pouring some water, it would be acceptable just to show him from the shoulders down, as the action with his arm and hands is what is relevant to the scene.

BASIC COMPOSITION RULES FOR PEOPLE

HEADROOM

Certain principles apply particularly to photographing people, particularly in a medium shot or close-up. First is headroom — the amount of space above the head. Too much headroom makes the figure seem to be lost in the frame. Headroom is also wasted compositionally as it is often just sky or empty wall — it adds no information to the shot and may draw the eye away from the central subject. The convention is to leave the least amount of headroom that doesn't make the head seem to be crammed against the top of the frame. As the close-up gets bigger, it becomes permissible to leave even less headroom. Once the shot becomes a choker, you can even give the character a "haircut," and bring the top of the frame down to the forehead. The idea is simply that the forehead and hair convey less information than the lower part of the face and neck. A head shot cut off above the eyebrows seems perfectly normal. A shot that shows the top of the head but cuts off the chin and mouth would seem very odd — unless it's a shampoo commercial.

NOSEROOM

Next is noseroom, also called "looking room." If a character is turned to the side, it's as if the gaze has a certain visual weight. As a result, we never position the head in the exact middle of the frame. Generally, the more the head is turned to the side, the more noseroom is allowed. Think of it this way: the "look" has visual weight, which must be balanced.