

CHAPTER 10

Balance

There is something incredibly satisfying about balance in art. While you may not be able to define it (yet), most people know it when they see it. From architecture to paintings to photography to cinema, balance is a tool used by artists of all mediums.

The concept of balance has many applications in composition. You might have spatial balance between areas of the image but then the color scheme, shapes, or tones might be off-balanced.

So, we can consider whether specific elements are individually balanced or whether the entire image overall has found its own

holistic balance. Symmetry is one such way to approach balance in composition.

Symmetrical balance

Symmetrical balance is achieved in work of art when visual elements are arranged on both sides of either a horizontal or vertical center line in equal weight.

Symmetrical balance is difficult to achieve by accident. When artists incorporate symmetry into their work, it is with direct intention. Why would an artist base their entire composition around symmetrical balance?

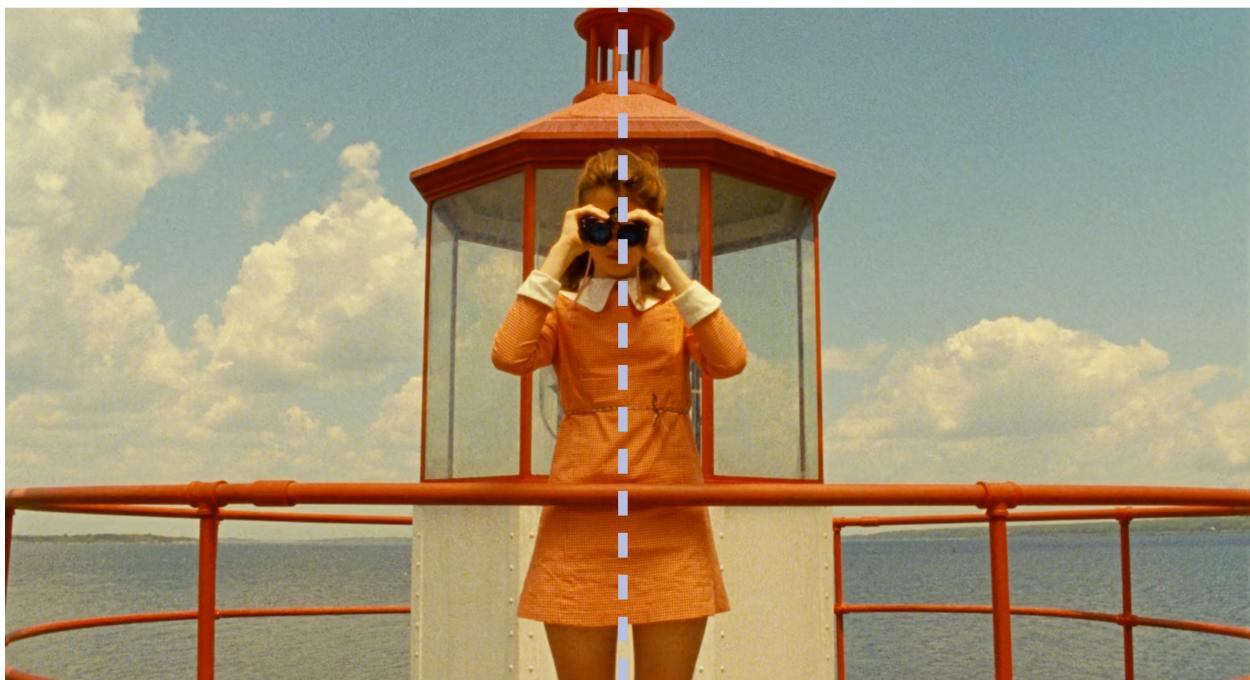
The visual nature of symmetrical balance draws attention toward itself. While this can take away from the naturalism or realism of a composition, it can be an effective tool to direct the viewer's eye to a focal point.



Image by Roc Isern

The equally balanced weight on both sides of a composition will more often than not direct their eye toward the center of the frame.

[Wes Anderson](#), one of the masters of symmetrical balance in cinema, uses symmetry for this effect in his work. In nearly all of [Anderson's best films](#), you can find a shot that uses symmetrical balance to draw focus toward a character. In fact, it is one of the key characteristics of [Anderson's directing style](#).



Moonrise Kingdom (2012) • Symmetrical Balance

Within art, symmetrical balance can have its pros and cons. The effects we mentioned above can benefit an artist's work depending on what they are trying to create and communicate.

On the other hand, a symmetrical composition can be rather predictable and push the area of boring. If one side of the composition is exactly like the other, then one half of the frame is redundant. Instead, many modern artists have leaned into the use of asymmetrical balance.

Asymmetrical balance

Asymmetry might simply seem to be the opposite of symmetry. However, there is much more to it than that. [Asymmetrical balance](#) is the technique of using differing visual elements of unequal weight on both sides of a composition to achieve a sense of balance.

The nature of asymmetrical compositions is characterized by visual variety as a way to evoke a sense movement by allowing differing elements to carry the eye.

In this iconic painting, the power and movement of the colossal wave can almost be felt because of the asymmetrical balance.



The Great Wave off Kanagawa by Katsushika Hokusai

The left side of the frame is filled with the positive space of the wave. The right side is filled with empty negative space, creating a sense of movement of where the wave is moving toward.

By creating balance between differing visual elements, artists tend to create a connection between them. The **juxtaposition** of two unlike things makes viewers innately want to compare and contrast them.

In [Arrival](#), one of Denis Villeneuve's best films, asymmetrical balance is in a shot's composition used to capture the emotions between humans and aliens.



Arrival (2016) • Asymmetrical Balance

Note how asymmetrical compositions are used to underscore the barrier between the alien species and humans. The asymmetry creates tension, yet a connection at the same time.

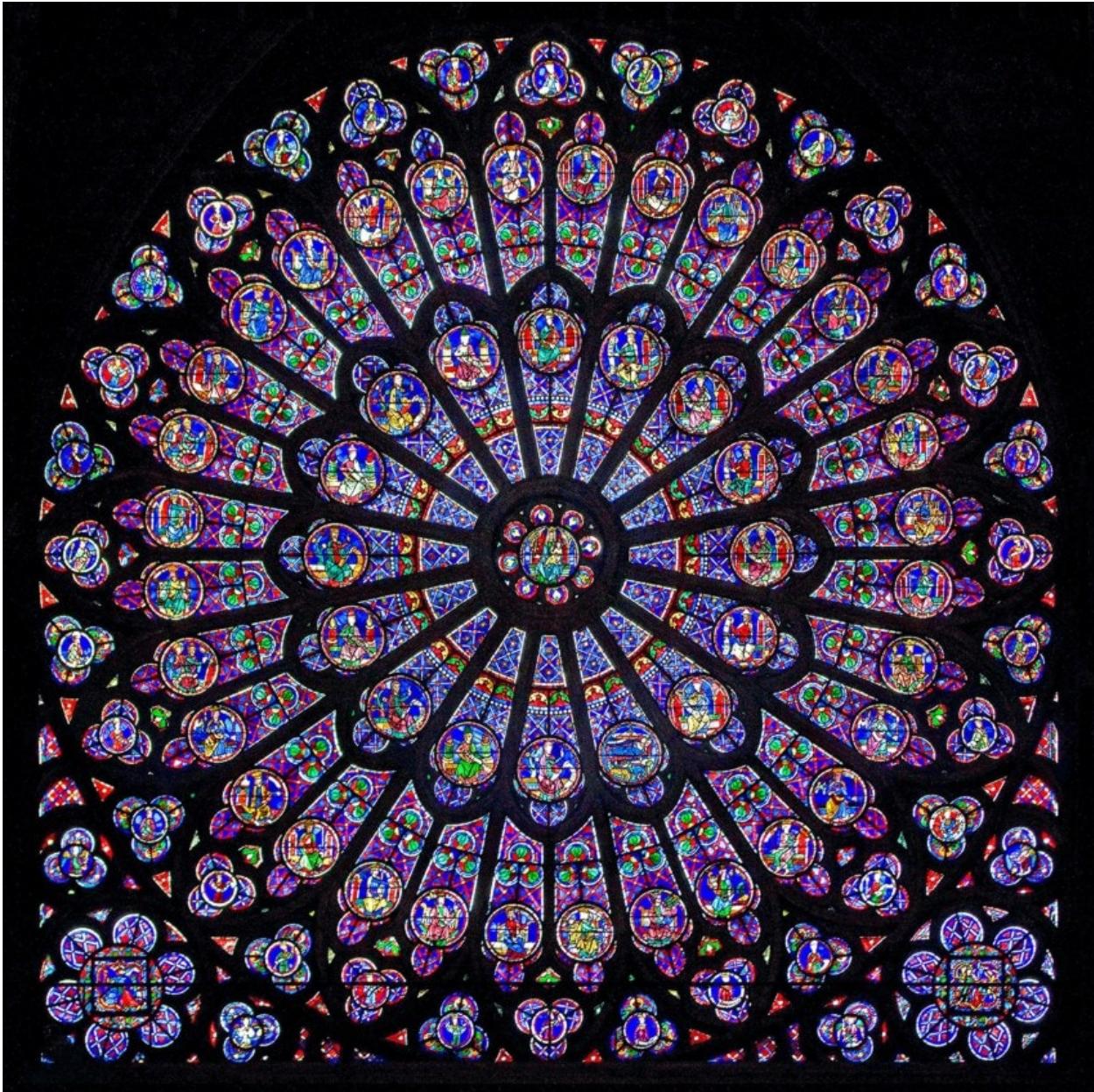
This technique can be used for specific effects two create a sense of balance, movement, and variety in a composition. Besides symmetrical and asymmetrical, there is yet another form of balance to consider.

Radial balance

Radial balance is the arrangement of visual elements around a central point. Radial balance is often a type of symmetrical balance that is circular in nature.

The circle is perhaps the shape that humans have been drawn to the most throughout history. One of the best ways to apply the circle in art is through radial balance.

As the visual elements radiate, they form an orderly pattern in an image that can add depth, evoke a sense of movement, and create a point of focus in an image.



Rose Window • Notre Dame Cathedral

Photographers have found ways to utilize long exposure to create radial balance from the light emitting from stars as the Earth rotates.



Photo by Bartosz Wojczyński

The result is an image that captures the visual direction of the Earth's rotational movement in space.

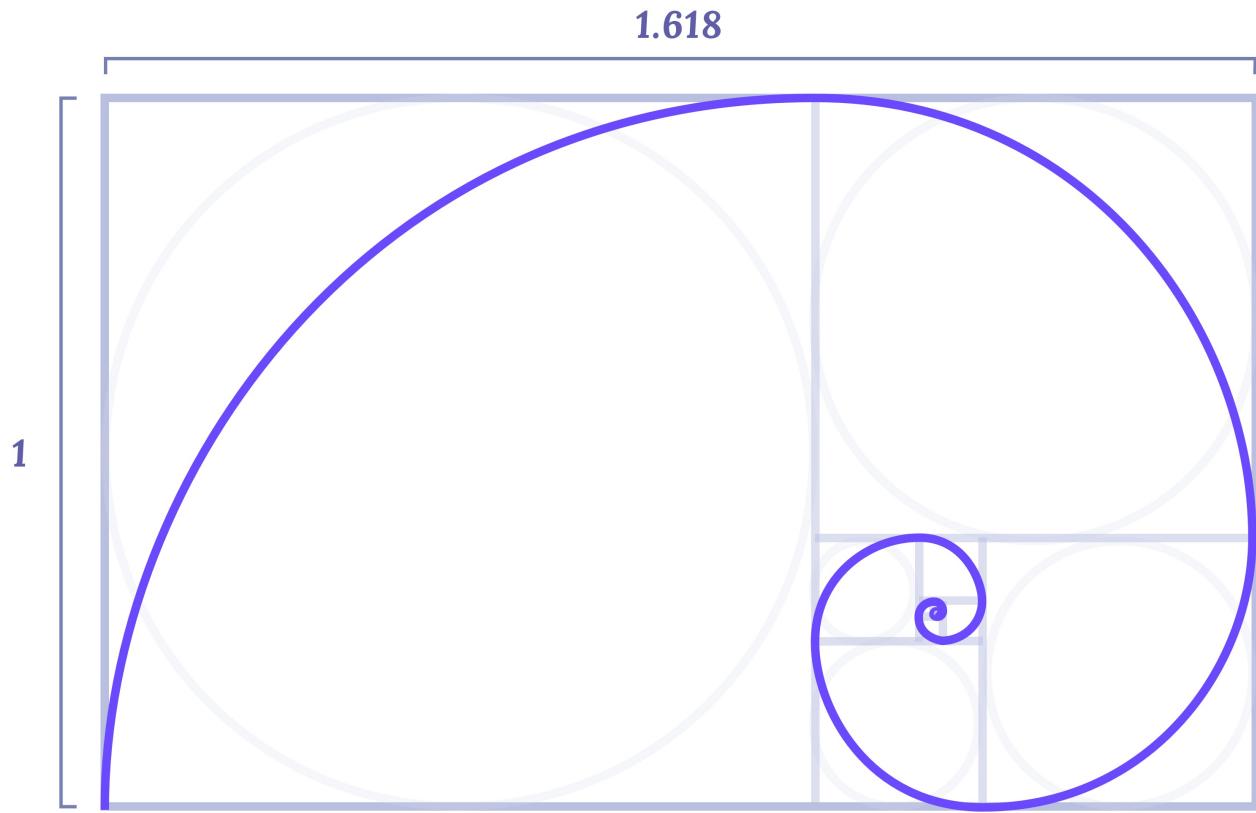
Golden ratio

As a mathematical and artistic principle of mythical scale, the Golden Ratio is often misunderstood and mislabeled. Based on a

ratio found in many places, artists using this ratio are often after perhaps the most “natural” balance to their compositions.

Renaissance art works, ancient architectural designs, and even fruits have all been observed as taking on the Golden Ratio. But what is it exactly?

The ratio itself is an irrational number starting as 1.618, otherwise known as “phi” (pronounced “fee”). The ratio (1.618:1) is a way to measure the relational distance between things. As a rectangle, it looks like this.



The Golden Spiral

And if you continue to divide that rectangle by the Golden Ratio, you can create a swirling line through each division. This is known as the Golden Spiral.

In this painting, Salvador Dalí composed the image using these spirals as a way to combine the divine with the scientific.



The Sacrament of the Last Supper • Salvador Dalí

Using the Golden Ratio and the Golden Spiral in your compositions is certainly an advanced technique and it's not for every artist nor every image. It's just another tool to have in your back pocket, should the occasion arise.

Balance (or the lack thereof) can be a way to bring dynamics into your compositions. In the next chapter, we'll explore a similar strategy that creates relationships within the visuals using contrast.

CHAPTER 11

Contrast

Contrast in art is the technique of using unlike visual elements in juxtaposition to create meaning and intensify the characteristics of the work. Artists utilize various elements at their disposal to create contrast such as shadows, light, color, size, shapes, and more.

Contrast has often been called the golden rule for creating art as it is one of the best tools to engage a viewer and create meaning.

First and foremost, contrast is a simple and efficient way to create meaning. When we see two unlike in juxtaposition next to each

other, our mind automatically compares and contrasts them. As mentioned, just about anything can be used for contrast when composing an image. Let's look at a couple popular elements.

Contrast in subjects

Sometimes, contrast is not meant to be subtle, it's meant to make a statement. One of the more head-on ways to use contrast in your work is to use contrasting subjects. What these subjects may be and how they contrast depends on what point, concept, or story you are trying to communicate.

Using contrasting subjects is especially effective in telling a story when it comes to still photography. Still photography does not have the luxury of communicating information through movement or sound like cinema.

But a lot of meaning can be drawn from the subjects you choose and contrast between them.

In this process, we can interpret the meaning the artist is trying to communicate. In addition to telling a story, contrast can be used to reinforce a story's **theme**.

For example, the title of this photograph is “Old & Young” and you can see why. The shot is literally divided into two, the children together in the background, while the old woman sits in solitude.



Old & Young by Soumyendra Saha

Consider the image below from Banksy and how subverted expectations of the subject matter creates rich contrast on a thematic level.



Banksy • Thematic Contrast

Beyond the actual content and meaning of a composition, contrast can do wonders to how a work of art looks.

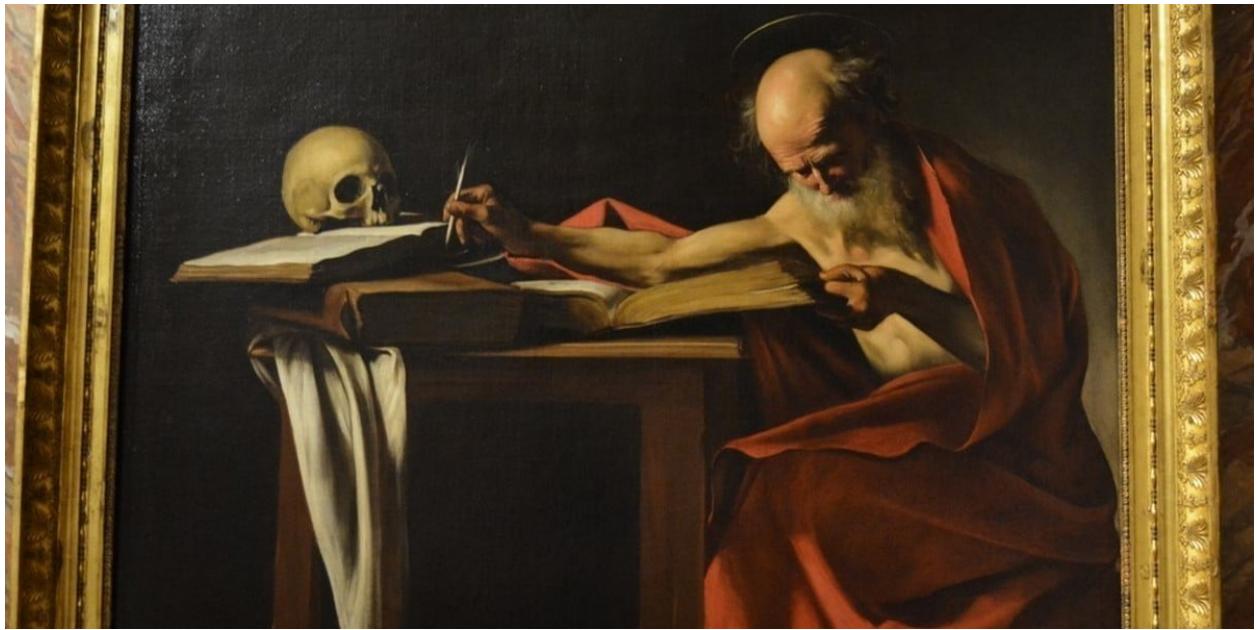
Specifically within 2-dimensional mediums such as paintings, photography, and cinema it can be difficult to portray 3-dimensional reality.

Contrast in lighting

One of the most fundamental ways to incorporate contrast into a composition is through light and shadow. This adds immense amounts of depth and dimension to a shot.

Trailblazing artists like Rembrandt and Caravaggio pushed this idea of contrast in their paintings. Their high contrast technique and style later became known as [chiaroscuro](#) (translated as the combination of “clear, bright” with “dark, obscure”).

Much of the lighting styles in cinema draw on contrasting techniques forged in Renaissance paintings. These artists changed how contrast was used in composition. In following example, notice how Caravaggio uses the contrast between light and dark to make his subject pop from the background.



Saint Jerome Writing by Caravaggio

In this shot from *There Will Be Blood*, one of Paul Thomas Anderson's best films, Daniel Plainview comes to the realization that the man claiming to be his half-brother is not whom he seems. You can see how the subtle subtext of this predicament is intensified by the use of light on Daniel and the shadow that falls onto the imposter.



Contrast in There Will Be Blood (2007)

Contrast in color

In addition to light and shadow, color is another tool artists have to create contrast in their work. Colors are impacted by each other and play off of each other. This is a simple explanation of the importance of [color theory](#).

Within color theory, complementary colors create contrast when juxtaposed in the same composition. A simple example of this can be warm and cool colors such as orange and blue as you see here.



Color Contrast • Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

Color contrast can be a powerful tool that holds meaning and makes an image much more striking. Complementary colors not only creates more contrast, but adds visual variety to your composition.

Whether you use contrasting subjects, colors, or exposure in your composition it's important to be intentional with what you are using contrast for.

We've just scratched surface that color plays in composition. In the next chapter, we'll explore this idea more detail.

CHAPTER 12

Color

The role of color in any image cannot be overstated. For many artists, color is an extremely powerful tool in rendering their vision. This is not to discredit black and white presentations, which have their own well-regarded aesthetic.

There is a lot to consider with color. Once you've locked in on a color, there are secondary choices to be made related to the saturation, brightness, and especially how that color might interact with any other colors. Color theory is fascinating area of study and if you'd like an introduction, you can download our previous E-book, [How to Use Color in Film](#). But with a basic

understanding of the color wheel, bringing meaningful color in your work is certainly worthwhile.

Color schemes

There are a few established color schemes to give you a head start as you explore the world of color. Each has their unique visual storytelling attributes. [Complementary color schemes](#) provide the most amount of contrast because they fall on opposite sides of the color wheel.



Amelie (2001) • Complementary Colors

Triadic color schemes are created between three colors of equal distance or position on the color wheel. In this example from Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*, a triadic combination using saturated, primary colors helps create images that really pop on screen.



Pierrot le Fou (1965) • Triadic Colors

Analogous colors sit next to each other on the color wheel. These combinations yield a more consistent color palette without slipping into a full monochromatic scheme, which utilizes gradations of a single color.



Traffic (2000) • Analogous Colors

Like everything in art, color can be wildly subjective. Some artists prefer maximum saturation while others thrive on the absence of color. There is a lot of symbolism with color but there are always exceptions to the rules.

The next chapter is about tone and how to think about color and light in much more specific terms.

CHAPTER 13

Tone

Tone is a consideration of bright and dark, both in terms of light and color. In general, tone has much less to do with the content of the image and more about the feeling it exudes. An overly bright image with saturated colors will have a markedly different tone than an image bathed in shadows and muted colors.

Likewise, a gradient of tones is what helps give an image depth and life. If you're after [Realism](#), capturing a spectrum of tones is almost required.

Tonal contrast is similar to using light and shadow for contrast. The difference is that rather than focusing on [exposure](#), tonal contrast is geared specifically toward the tones of black, white, and everything in between in a composition.

When it comes to tonal contrast, there are few artists you can learn more from than the legendary photographer Ansel Adams.



Ansel Adams • The Tetons and the Snake River

If you plan to use tonal contrast in your black and white work to create more dimension, be sure to learn about Ansel Adams' zone

system. Adams developed the zone system as a means of creating more range and detail within a black and white image despite the lack of color.

Tone is also used to suggest the emotional qualities of an image. No matter the subject matter, the tonalities we see can sway an image in a multitude of emotional directions. Think of these descriptors for the types of colors used — warm, cold, bright, dull — and you can imagine the feeling an artist is going for.

Types of tone

We can think of tone in two ways — global tone and local tone. Global tone looks at the entire image, which might be a consistent color or a combination of many.

Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* has an obvious and consistent global tone with a dynamic range of yellow tones.



Vincent Van Gogh • Sunflowers

Local tone is more specific, focusing only on a portion of the image. This is more applicable when there's greater contrast

(lighting, color, etc.) in a composition, where one area is distinctly different from the rest. In this painting, Cotan creates many areas of contrast, from the bright quince surrounded by black in the upper left to the darker cucumber on the bottom right.



Juan Sanchez Cotan • Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber

As you can see, tone can have an immense impact on how you might compose an image. Once you've settled on your subject, the decisions then become about presentation and how tone will contribute should be high on your list of priorities.

CHAPTER 14

Angle

Assuming you've made all your decisions regarding "what" we see in a composition, let's finish with one last consideration — "how" we see it. In this context, angle specifically refers to the point of view given to the viewer on whatever image you're presenting them.

This perspective can have a dramatic effect on the composition. A photograph looking down the side of skyscraper is a very specific point of view. A [low angle shot](#) in a movie looking up at the subject is another angle loaded with meaning.

Let's run through some of the basic angles and how they interact, evolve or complicate the other elements of composition.

Parallel angles

When an angle is parallel, this simply means parallel to the ground. The height of the camera can vary greatly but the perspective is always aligned with the ground.

[Eye-level shots](#) are extremely common, especially for portraits. This is ideal for capturing a “neutral” perspective on the subject. The artist presents them “as they are,” letting the viewer make their own judgements.



Photo by Marc Ducrest

While you can't change the angle of the camera, you can experiment with different camera heights for different effects. A ground level shot, for example, might be just enough of a perspective shift to emphasize the composition.

Perpendicular angles

Perpendicular angles intersect the ground at 90 degrees, either looking straight up or straight down. These are more extreme angles with which to compose an image because they are perhaps the least “natural.”

The [overhead shot](#), which looks down on the subject at 90 degrees to the ground, is often used to create an omniscient but neutral perspective.



Kundun (1997) • God's Eye View

Sometimes called the “God’s eye view,” we are given a unique viewpoint but perhaps without any judgement or bias in either direction.

Diagonal angles

In between parallel and perpendicular angles, we have what we will call diagonal angles. Somewhere between zero and 90 degrees to the ground, these angles can give the image an extra layer of perspective.

Whereas both parallel and perpendicular angles are relatively “neutral” when it comes to framing the entire image, there is much more opportunity to create a bias with diagonal angles.

For example, a low angle looking up towards the subject is often used to give them a sense of power or authority. The following shot from *Se7en* is fascinating because serial killer, John Doe, is a captive prisoner, yet this angle lets us know that he actually holds all the power in this situation.



Se7en (1995) • Low Angle

Likewise, a high angle looking down on the subject can do the opposite, making them vulnerable or powerless.



Dune (2021) • High Angle

No matter your medium, the angle you choose will have an unspoken influence on how the image is read. By choosing a specific angle, make sure it aligns with the story, message, or idea you're trying to get across.

CHAPTER 15

Conclusion

As you can see, there is a lot to consider in composition. Or perhaps it's better to say that there is a lot you *can* consider. While there are a lot of concepts out there, don't let them interrupt your creative process.

Instead, the goal is to familiarize yourself enough with these techniques so that they become a natural extension of your process. You might just find yourself automatically considering scale, contrast, and shapes.

As you develop your own aesthetic, you will naturally gravitate to one or more of these compositional elements. Again, studying composition isn't about forcing yourself and your work to meet external expectations — it's merely a way to help you organize and strategize how to get the vision in your head out into the world.

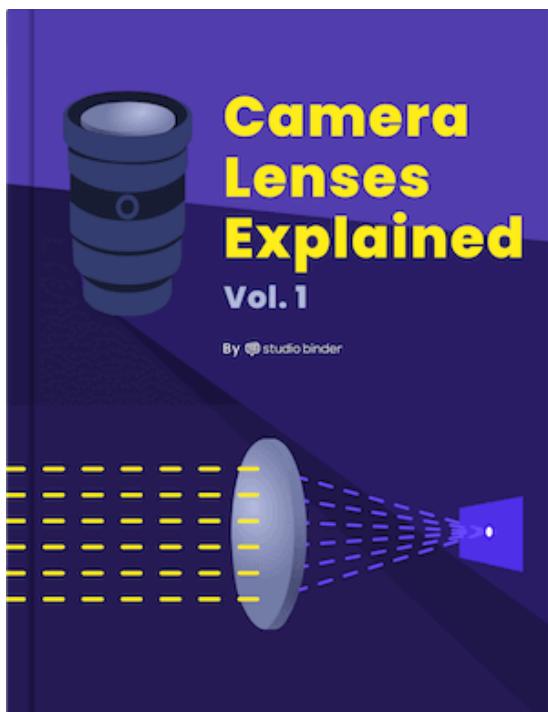
More Resources

Now that you've finished reading this guide, don't stop there! If you're craving more resources on filmmaking, film theory and production how-to's, visit the [StudioBinder Blog](#), our [YouTube Channel](#), and our [Free Resources & Templates](#).

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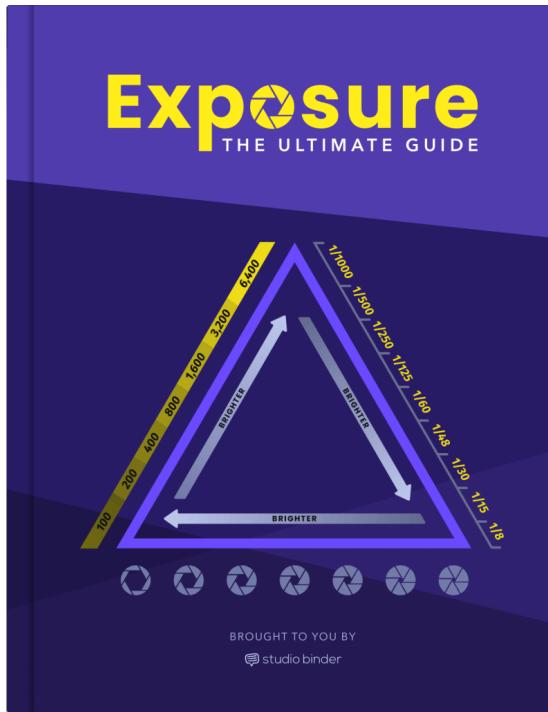
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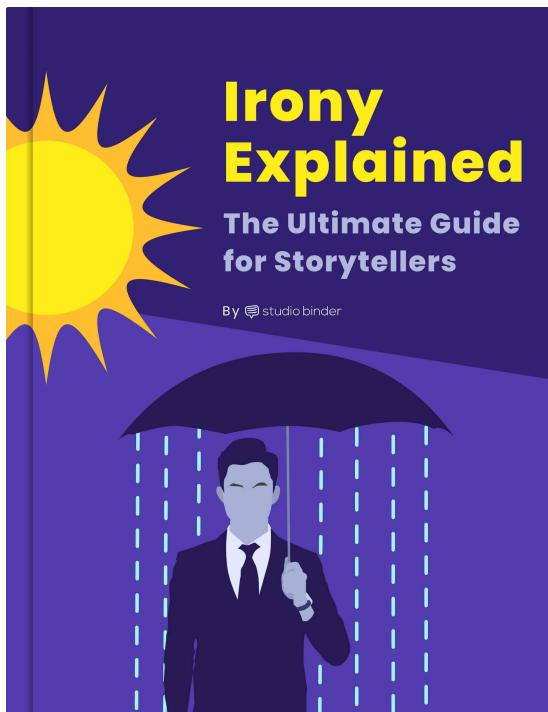
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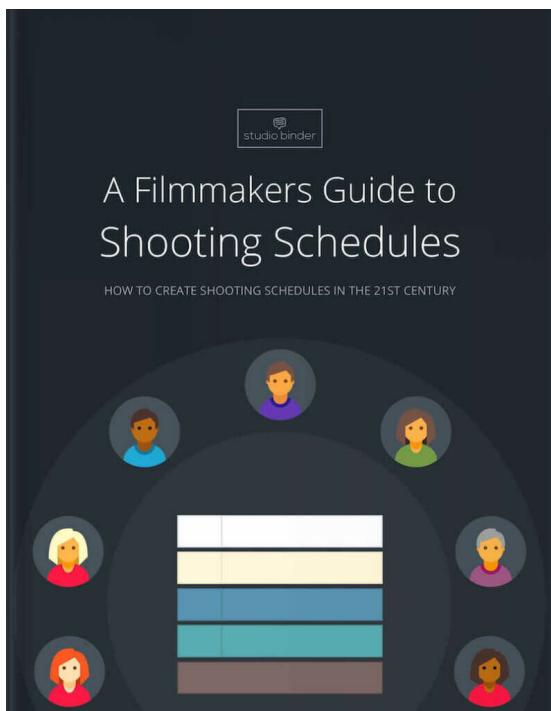
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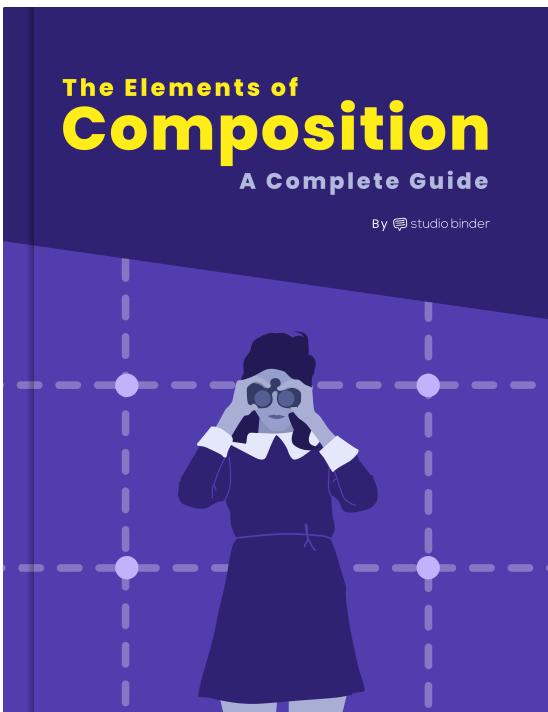
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