Basic principles of anamorphic composition

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Unity is made in the world by drawing squares over it.
— T. E. Hulme, 'Cinders'

A note on critical methodology

At once and the same time the motion picture image is both a flat, two-dimensional pattern of light and dark and an illusory three-dimensional reproduction of the scene that appeared in front of the camera. Critics and audiences almost never notice the two-dimensional pattern, responding instead to the stories that unfold in the illusory three-dimensional world. It takes an unusually assertive image—something like the bone tossed into the air in prehistoric times in 2007 that with a cut instantaneously becomes a similarly shaped spaceship in flight—to make viewers notice a graphic element as such while a story takes place. When I first began to view anamorphic films to see whether there were any compositional strategies filmmakers might have used in the 1950s and 1960s to organise the wider image, I expected that whatever I might discover would be embodied in the apparent three-dimensional space of the image. Yet as I studied films from those years, I found myself unexpectedly attending to the two-dimensional qualities of their images, especially at moments of shot change and camera repositioning. Increasingly, continuities of line and shape came to define composition in ways I had never expected. Eventually, I came to understand that these two-dimensional qualities served as formal keys to the disposition of three-dimensional elements. And in understanding this, I realised that traditional methods of cinematic analysis were no longer appropriate.

Not surprisingly, once I concentrated on the two-dimensional qualities of the image as graphic design, I discovered that the language and assumptions of typographers and graphic designers were much more relevant to understanding anamorphic composition than I ever expected. Most useful of all has been the concept of the grid as a rational and objective regulative system. In books and magazines the grid insures a uniformity of lay-out from page to page. The quartered grid in anamorphic filmmaking provides a similar uniformity of composition from shot to shot. The two-dimensional pattern of the grid that underpins the placement text and image on the printed page functions equally well to underpin the placement of a film's apparently three-dimensional elements. Josef Muller-Brockmann's suggestion in Grid Systems in Graphic Design, the standard work on the subject that "as a controlling system the grid makes it easier to give the surface of space a rational organisation", applies equally well to the motion picture image as to the printed page. I explain the experiences that brought me to the ideas discussed in this essay in order to alert readers that what they will encounter here has little to do with traditional ways of discussing cinematic composition. Instead of discussing the placement of camera and actors as a directorial decision, for example, I shall define their placement according to a grid uniformly designed into a film's sets.

As one might expect from my unusual approach, my discussion is not based upon written documents. Rather, its conclusions are drawn from the careful examination of more than one hundred anamorphic films released between 1953 and 1965. Those films released before 1960 were filmed primarily in the CinemaScope anamorphic process; the

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films after 1960 were filmed primarily in the Panavision process. The exact anamorphic process is less important, however, than the level of professional and technical expertise available for the set designs of the films. By the middle 1960s little was left of the highly skilled studio craft departments that existed when CinemaScope production began in 1953. And with their closure, and the concomitant rise in filming on location in pre-existing buildings the level of design control required for the compositional strategies I believe were used in anamorphic filmmaking up to 1965, or so, became impossible.

Using examples drawn from typical films, my aim is to define and illustrate the basic compositional rules that underpin most anamorphic filmmaking during the first dozen years or so of its existence. (None of my conclusions about the basic compositional strategies common to anamorphic films apply to films made in VistaVision, the non-anamorphic widescreen format developed by Paramount. However, as one can see in The Carpetbaggers (1964), for example, when Paramount ended production in VistaVision and adopted Panavision in its place, it also adopted the compositional strategies based upon the quartered grid that had been in use in the other studios.)

For the sake of clarity, I begin with the most basic compositional strategies based upon the division of the frame into a grid of equal quarters. Subsequent examples demonstrate how the continuing presence of this grid stabilises composition during editing both across straight cuts as well as at those static moments when the camera pauses during tracking shots. I then explain how such decor elements as doorways and pieces of furniture often are designed as modular units to fit one or two quarters of the frame’s grid. This discussion of decor as modular elements leads, in turn, to an examination of how modularity is employed, as well, to create form matches during lap dissolves that also stabilise composition across this kind of change of shot.

**The quartered frame and its possibilities**

Understanding anamorphic composition begins with the recognition that it is the format’s frame (Fig. 1) which determines composition, not the shape nor the number of the elements photographed within the frame. Photographed elements constantly change; the frame is unchanging, remaining constant from shot to shot throughout a film. Dividing the frame into quarters creates a consistent grid with which to regulate the placement of camera and actors (Fig. 2). Though regularly employed in most anamorphic films, the quarterly divisions are rarely apparent. Rather, as this frame from The Tender Trap (MGM, 1955) illustrates, the quarterly divisions are more subtly designed into the architectural details of the set (Fig. 3). Here, the centre dividing line falls on the back edge of the bookcase. The right dividing line coincides with the front back edge of the unit. The left dividing line falls on the edge of the doorframe visible in the room behind Charlie Reader.

The anamorphic format is often lauded for its realism. However, as this shot illustrates, CinemaScope composition often depends upon the set’s ability to be photographed simultaneously as both a plausible setting and a geometrically patterned flat.
Fig. 4. Composition may only use the central quarters.

Fig. 5. A frame enlargement from The Robe (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1953) composed to limit interest to the central quarters of the frame.

Thus even though the divisions occur at what realistically would be different depths of the picture space, the fact that the evenly spaced divisions also coincide with sharp changes in tonality makes the image readable as a flat pattern. In other words, thanks to the precise placement of the camera to register these divisions, the image is simultaneously recognisable as a realistic, plausible space, and a flat arrangement of lighter and darker panels. As my remaining examples will show, the camera is placed regularly, and with great precision, to insure that details designed into the sets divide the frame into quarters.

Though simple, the quarterly division of the frame is quite flexible since all four quarters need not be used in any shot. The two central quarters, however, are the most important for they are generally the focus of interest (Fig. 4). Simple mathematics, as well as the conservative nature of studio filmmaking, suggest why this should be so. The CinemaScope frame was initially twice as wide as the regular 35mm frame. Thus the two central quarters were originally the same size and shape as the Academy ratio, the previous standard. Placing action within the central quarters offered a practical way of coping with the wider frame based upon using the old Academy ratio within the new format. The addition of an optical soundtrack and the subsequent thickening of the frame lines finally reduced the proportions of the CinemaScope image to 2.35:1. As a result, the proportion of the central quarters was reduced to slightly less than the Academy ratio; filmmakers adjusted to this reduction by situating actors on or slightly outside the frame's left and right division.

When CinemaScope was introduced, critics declared that it would take a talented director to use the wide format artistically. However, because the quartered frame seems to have been an industry standard from the beginning, no process of discovery was necessary. Thus despite the critics' expectations, it makes no sense to speak of an evolution in CinemaScope composition. The compositional strategies I describe here existed from the beginning, equally as much in The Robe (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1953), the first film released in the format, as in Dr. Zhivago (MGM, 1965). Here, for example is a shot from The Robe composed to use only the two central quarters (Fig. 5). Critics hailed George Cukor the following year for mastering the CinemaScope frame by similarly masking some shots in A Star Is Born (Warner Bros., 1954).\(^5\) That this had already been done in The Robe may have passed unnoticed because no critic expected such 'artistry' from its director, Henry Koster. In fact, both The Robe and A Star Is Born employ the quartered frame to establish and maintain composition.

As the frame from The Robe illustrates, there was no need to use all four quarters all the time. A pair of consecutive shots from It Started with a Kiss (MGM, 1959) show how set design could be used to leave the same outer quarter plausibly empty in consecutive shots (Fig. 6). In this instance, two different curtains fill the left quarters of these consecutive shots. As simple as this may seem, the similarities in the curtains' colours, folds, and textures, along with their precise positioning within in the frame, create a form match across the cut (Figs. 7–8). Where the fully quartered shot in The Tender Trap demonstrated how set design could determine camera placement, the form match in this pair of shots illustrates how set design in determining camera placement can also determine editing choices. In this instance, composition works to stabilise the image across the cut by leaving the left outer quarters entirely devoid of interest in both shots. The frame remains wide, but having been cued to attend
to only the three right quarters in the first shot, viewers' attention remains fixed on the same portion of the image during the second shot, instead of having to search the entire expanse of the frame for information.

A pair of consecutive shots from *A Farewell to Arms* (Selznick/Twentieth Century-Fox, 1957) illustrates the same strategy using the right outer quarter in consecutive shots (Fig. 9). The open ambulance door fills the right quarter of the frame as Lt. Frederick Henry is being evacuated to a hospital after having been wounded (Fig. 10). In the next shot, the edge of the ambulance's windshield coincides with the quarterly division. Here, too, there is a match across the cut, this time elegantly using colour in a play of positive and negative space. The whiteness of the ambulance's open door is matched by the snow and the white smoke of battle that fills the same portion of the frame in the second shot (Fig. 11).

**The continuity of the quartered frame in an edited sequence**

The sequence of Lieutenant Henry's return to his unit following his recuperation illustrates the subtlety with which elements built into a set can be designed to function as quarterly divisions that guide composition. In this series of seven shots the key elements are a pair of flanges or elongated pegs protruding from the set's back wall. The sequence begins with Lieutenant Henry's entry into Captain Bassi's office (Fig. 12). In this establishing shot the centre and right dividing lines coincide with the left ends of these elements. In the shot of Lt. Henry that follows, the left dividing line coincides with the outer edge of the doorway visible behind his coat sleeve (Fig. 13). A closer reverse shot of Capt. Bassi matches the same left division to the right end of the flange (Fig. 14). In the shot that follows of Lieutenant Henry seen from behind Captain Bassi's back, the right dividing line coincides with the left end of the flange (Fig. 15). (In the preceding reverse shot, this had been the right end of the same flange.) A subsequent shot repeats the initial shot of Lieutenant Henry with the outer edge of the doorway still defining the left dividing line (Fig. 16). A reverse shot begins as the master shot of the two men ended (Fig. 17). Captain Bassi walks toward Lieutenant Henry. Because the camera is immobile, the centre and right dividing lines continue to coincide with the left ends of the flanges, just as they did in the earlier shot from this set-up. As Captain Bassi turns and walks back toward where he had stood the camera tracks in for a closer shot of him (Fig. 18). When he and the camera stop, the two flanges bracket his head and their outer edges coincide with the left and right dividing lines.

**The quartered frame in camera reframing**

There is little figure or camera movement in this.
series of shots from *The Sun Also Rises*. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to capture clearly the stages of camera movement in a series of still images. Nevertheless this pair of frames illustrating the beginning and end positions of a single camera move in *The Robe* can at least suggest how the quartered CinemaScope frame could be used for composition at the moments during a long take when a mobile camera pauses. The shot begins as a fairly close shot of Marcellus Gallio leaning against the cross on which Christ has been crucified (Fig. 19). The right dividing line coincides with the edge of the cross. Marcellus’ torso fills the left centre quarter.

When he feels a drop of Christ’s blood fall on his arm, he begins to back away and the camera simultaneously cranes upward and slightly to the left so that at the end of its move the right dividing line continues to coincide with the vertical edge of the cross (Fig. 20). Now, the left division coincides with the end of the cross’s arm and through Marcellus.

**The quartered frame as modular unit**

A series of shots from *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* (MGM, 1960) illustrates how decor elements could be designed as modular units, each of which fills an entire quarter of the frame. The sequence begins with Kate and Larry MacKay in their apartment kitchen. In the first shot, the refrigerator fills an entire quarter of the frame. Its left edge coincides with the centre dividing line; the edge of its open door coincides with the right dividing line (Fig. 21). The left dividing line falls on the edge of the window frame. When Larry begins to leave the apartment to take the dog for a walk, the camera moves slightly to the right and pauses (Fig. 22). The reframing moves the refrigerator one unit or quarter of the frame to the left. Its left edge now coincides with the left dividing line, not the centre dividing line. Now, the right edge of the refrigerator coincides with the centre dividing line. In addition, the open doorway and its frame, or casing, are also a modular unit, filling the space between the centre and right dividing lines. Following a lap dissolve showing Larry’s return with the dog from their walk, a straight cut returns us to the kitchen, with the camera further to the right and drawn back a bit from its last set-up there (Fig. 23). Despite the repositioning of the camera, the background elements in this new view are also modular. The width of the break front defines the left and centre dividing lines, while the doorway to the right fills the space between the centre and right dividing lines.

**The quartered frame in lap dissolves**

As the modular forms suggest, geometry and space-filling shape are more important for the purposes of composition than the apparent reality of decor elements. Form matches of these kinds are especially common in lap dissolves, as illustrated by this one from one apartment to another in *The Tender Trap* that uses both realistic decor and two-dimensional pattern to match shapes within the continuing quartered frame (Fig. 24). The lap dissolve begins in Julie Gillis’ apartment after Charlie Reader has left and
Figs. 12–18 (left and above). Frame enlargements from seven consecutive shots in *A Farewell to Arms* illustrating the continuing use of the quartered grid to control composition across a series of shots.

Figs. 19–20 (below). Frame enlargements from the beginning and end points of a continuous crane shot illustrating the continuity of the grid during a camera move.
concludes as Charlie enters his own apartment. The left dividing line which falls on the decorative trim to the left of the light switch in Julie’s apartment becomes the back edge of the break front in Charlie’s apartment. The edge of the door frame to the right of the light switch coincides with the front edge of the break front. The left edge of the open doorway behind Julie coincides with the left edge of the door Charlie opens. The right edge of the open doorway in Julie’s apartment coincides with the same edge of the door Charlie is opening. Additionally, the right dividing line falls on the outer edge of the open door’s frame in Julie’s apartment and coincides with the comparable architectural detail of Charlie’s front door, as well as the edge of the open door of the bar at the right side of the frame. Finally, the column of the floor lamp in Julie’s apartment coincides with the other edge of the open bar door.

An intriguing lap dissolve that challenges spatial understanding occurs in The Student Prince (MGM, 1954). Here, too, the transition involves a doorway as Kathie leaves the kitchen to serve a meal to diners (Fig. 25). In the shot with which the dissolve ends, Kathie is in the same place in the image, but what had been the doorway, its right frame, and a defined portion of the wall adjacent to it, are radically transformed. The door frame and adjacent wall now seem to be a single architectural form, while the open doorway is an open dining space extending past what appears to be a corner of a wall. It is impossible to tell where Kathie is in relation to where she had begun. Indeed, the play of two-dimensional pattern and three-dimensional illusion is so deceptive that one cannot be certain immediately how to read the new image of the dining room. Despite the depth indicated by smaller background figures, for example, the image seems almost as flat as it was when the dissolve began in the kitchen because the long expanses of wall in both images seem equally flat, despite the slight recession suggested by the angle of the ornate mirror beside the diners.

There are several conclusions about received opinion regarding anamorphic composition to be drawn from my discussion. While anamorphic filmmaking retained classical conventions of editing, it combined them with new, rigorous rules of composition. Thus basic CinemaScope composition is not as loose as the English critics at Sight & Sound initially feared or the French critics at Cahiers du Cinema had hoped it would be. A decade later, the English critics associated with Movie followed the Cahiers critics’ lead in arguing that CinemaScope composition, based upon mise-en-scene, was the creation of the film director. V.F. Perkins’ commentary on a scene in The River of No Return has often been quoted to support this claim:

As Harry lifts Kay from the raft, she drops the bundle which contains most of her ‘things’ into the water. Kay’s gradual loss of the physical tokens of her way of life has great symbolic significance. But Preminger is not over impressed. The bundle simply floats away off-screen while Harry brings Kay ashore. It would be wrong to describe this as understatement. The symbolism is in the event, not in the visual
pattern, so the director presents the action clearly and leaves interpretation to the spectator.7

David Bordwell has challenged the claims of Barr, Perkins, and the other Movie critics, arguing that the classical norms of studio filmmaking were easily modified to accommodate the wider anamorphic frame.8

As I have argued here, however, the matter is more complex than critics have recognised. While their claims are valid as they apply to the editing of the illusory three-dimensional aspect of the image, they ignore the rigorous two-dimensional patterning adopted by filmmakers to underpin that editing. The reliance upon a continuing grid and heightened use of geometrical matches argues that the adjustment filmmakers made to accommodate the wider anamorphic image was greater than critics have suspected. CinemaScope and early Panavision composition demanded the cooperation of set designer, director of photography, and editor to such a great extent that the director was probably much more limited in his ability to compose a shot than has been believed. Exactly how limited remains an open question. Laying out the basic principles of anamorphic composition common to most films as I have done here is the first step in answering the question, for these principles establish the otherwise unremarkable background against which truly uncommon compositional mastery will stand out.

Notes


3. In doing this I fill in what Charles Barr left unexamined in his influential essay ‘CinemaScope: Before and After’, *Film Quarterly* 16.4 (1964): 4-24. Where Barr sought to identify directors who were masterful in their use of the CinemaScope format, I mean to define the otherwise unremarkable norms of CinemaScope composition.

4. For a naïve compendium of various subjects that supposedly can and cannot be treated properly in the CinemaScope format, see Christophe Pinel, ‘La breche de l’écran large: de Chrétien au Cinema-

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**Fig. 24**. The beginning, middle, and end of a lap dissolve in *The Tender Trap* illustrating the continuity of line and shape from one image to another. The two apartments share more common elements than might be apparent at first sight.

**Fig. 25**. The beginning, middle, and end of a lap dissolve in *The Student Prince* (MGM, 1954) illustrating the surprising spatial transformation possible with two-dimensional continuity.
5. It was the masking of the outer quarters of the frame during one sequence in *A Star is Born* that made Penelope Houston, the editor of *Sight & Sound*, grudgingly admit after a year's resistance that the CinemaScope format might be used aesthetically by a director as artistic as George Cukor. See Penelope Houston, "A Star is Born," *Sight & Sound* 24.4 (Spring 1955): 194–95. Ronald Haver vaguely describes how Cukor and his associates struggled to discover CinemaScope composition in *A Star is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 133–135. As this essay suggests, CinemaScope composition hardly required any great skill to master.

6. Anticipating the advent of anamorphic films, English and French critics drew opposite conclusions from the shared assumption that the size and shape of the CinemaScope image would require long takes and long shots because traditional editing would make it difficult for audiences to follow the changing position of on-screen action. The English critics associated with *Sight & Sound* feared the format would lessen the possibility of traditional composition and restrict film to little more than photographed theatre. The French critics at *Cahiers du Cinema* welcomed looser framing and longer takes believing they were the realisation of André Bazin's prophecy that cinematic evolution would lead to an increasingly realistic cinema. For the English view, see Richard Kohler, "The Big Screens," *Sight & Sound* 24.3 (January–March, 1955): 120–124, and Walter Lassally, "The Big Screens (2)," *Sight & Sound* 24.3 (January–March, 1955): 124–127. For a survey of the welcoming attitudes of the French critics see the dossier of articles on CinemaScope that appear in *Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s, Neo-Realism, Hollywood, The New Wave*, Jim Hillier (ed.) (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), 270–283. Hillier's introduction to this dossier compares the French and English reactions.


8. Bordwell first calls Perkins' claims of Preminger's objectivity in this sequence into question in "Widescreen Aesthetics, and Mise en Scene Criticism," *The Velvet Light Trap* 21 (Summer 1985): 18–25, arguing that despite the lack of editing there are a number of cues in the sequence directing viewers' attention to the bundle. Here, as well as in a discussion of *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, Bordwell insists that the stylistic norms of classical filmmaking were easily adjusted to accommodate the anamorphic image: "...in Hollywood filmmaking, the classical norms poured old wine into new, narrow bottles." See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The U of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 201. Bordwell discusses the classical qualities of the raft sequence in greater detail in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (eds) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 363. More recently, Bordwell has even questioned the possibility of the depth of focus associated with the mise en scene style because the slow speed of colour film in the 1950s would have made it impossible except in bright, outdoor scenes: "By the mid-1950s, cinematographers working with colour widescreen processes had largely resigned themselves to out-of-focus backgrounds on close-ups and medium shots." See, David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1998), 238.