# 5

INTRODUCTION to FILM PRODUCTION

L I G H T I N G

Although the first small film studios, such as Edison's Black Maria, were built upon rotating tracks to allow filmmakers to capture appropriate amounts of natural light, by the 1920s, large firms used dark studios that effectively manipulated artificial light. This section of Chapter 5 focuses on the classic lighting system utilized in that era—three-point lighting—for it will serve as the basis for the lion's share of scenes shot by student filmmakers. It was in the 20s that the three-point lighting system became the standard for cinematographers—and as its name suggests, it features three lights: the **key** or main light source, the **fill** or secondary light source, and the **backlight**. The backlight often serves to outline figures within a scene, or make them "pop" against the scenery, while the key and fill lights allow the lighting technician to control the light-to-shadow ratio on a character or object.

THREE-POINT LIGHTING

THE KEY LIGHT
While the position of the key light need not be left of the camera, it will always provide the most light of the three light sources on a three-point lighting set. It illuminates the bulk of the shadows/darkness covering the character's face.
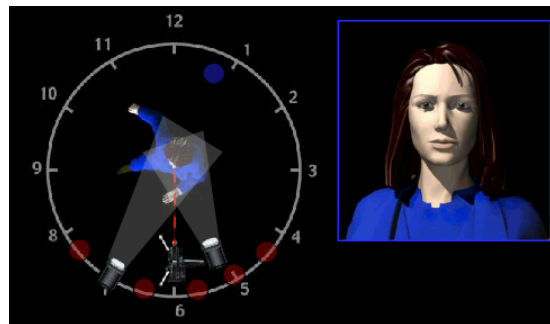
THE FILL LIGHT
Although this source provides much less light, it is nonetheless essential to the lighting process, for it allows the cinematographer to control the light-shadow ratio with greater precision. Notice how the fill light in the graphic to the left minimizes the ominous shadows left by the key light.
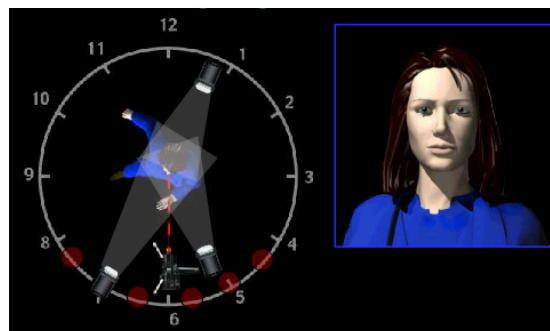
THE BACKLIGHT
Though the light it provides is subtle, the backlight helps viewers differentiate the character from the space that he or she occupies. Here, the frame of the female character's head is better distinguished from the dark background thanks to the backlight.

F R A M I N G

As you begin to visualize shots within a scene for your original films, the framing techniques discussed in Chapter 1 will serve as a foundation for your cinematography and storyboarding process. However, in order to streamline or simplify the production process—that is, the actual filming of a scene—a brief look at what's known as the "180 degree rule" will be essential.

In addition, this section of Chapter 5 will familiarize you with the ways in which movement is charted on screen—through the X, Y and Z axis, respectively. Finally, a more extensive section on various applications of the "rule of thirds" will demonstrate how actors and objects within a shot can be juxtaposed around one another in order to achieve various moods, symbolic effects, etc.

THE 180-DEGREE RULE

In the shots below (from The Coen Brothers' 2007 film *No Country For Old Men*), a store clerk (positioned to the audience's **left**) and antagonist Anton Chigurh (positioned to the audience's **right**) have a menacing conversation—one in which Chigurh intimidates the clerk into choosing heads or tails in a coin flip that, unbeknownst to the clerk, is for his life.

Notice how, as the characters trade lines, the camera shoots each from a constant position; the clerk is always shot from behind Anton and vice versa.


ANTON
What's the most you ever lost on a coin toss?

STORE CLERK
I don't know. I couldn't say.

As the graphic to the right illustrates, the characters are positioned on an imaginary line—which is essentially a 180-degree marker—that the cameras never cross. If the cameramen were to cross this line and begin filming Anton from the left, the shot might become visually confusing; at times directors will choose to do so, precisely because they wish to disorient the audience for a particular reason. But filmmakers who wish to shoot dialogue-heavy scenes almost always abide by the 180-degree rule.
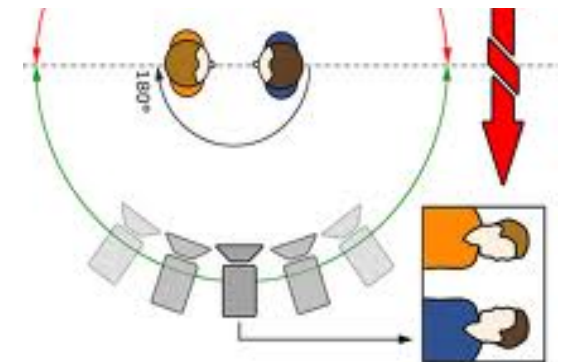
F R A M I N G

As the previous section illustrates, the 180-degree rule is crucial if one wants to avoid confusing an audience; however, Jennifer Van Sijll, author of *Cinematic Storytelling*, argues that a character must be positioned thoughtfully on the 180-degree line to help add dimensions to a story.

THE X AXIS (Horizontal)
In terms of left-to-right movement, we're a culture most comfortable when any visual work—whether it be a film, a book, or even a comic strip in the Sunday paper—leads our eyes from left-to-right. Consequently, many filmmakers exploit this by placing good or innocent characters on the left side of on-screen conflicts and bad characters on the right.

Unlike the stills from *No Country For Old Men* on the previous page, however, the stills here from *The Sopranos* (1.1-1.4) play with traditional good-character-left / bad-character-right juxtapositions; in this scene, mob boss Tony Soprano sits to the left, and his therapist to the right. This seating arrangement only adds to a central aspect of the show: the depiction of Tony as an impossibly charismatic killer who the audience often finds itself rooting for, despite his horrifying criminal activity. It's one of the many tricks creator David Chase employs throughout the show to make the audience feel like one of the many groups that Tony manages to con.

1.1

DR. MELFI
Panic attacks are legitimate…emergencies…

1.2

TONY SOPRANO
…whatever happened to the strong, silent type?

1.3

TONY SOPRANO
Could I be happier? Yeah, who couldn't?

1.4

DR. MELFI
[…but] do you feel depressed?

F R A M I N G

THE Y AXIS (Vertical)

Unlike the X-Axis dichotomy, the up/down or north/south polarity of the **Y-Axis** is good in its entirety. According to Van Sijll, the **Y-Axis** represents the linear path, the straight and sure track amidst the otherwise unruly and bumpy world around it. Thus, to stay on track is to stay in control and remain in the ordered part of the world.

In the first four stills to the right from Season 1 of *The Sopranos*, the camera depicts Tony driving at night in a storm. As he squints through the downpour, Tony begins having a panic attack. By the time he reaches for his Prozac, however, Tony blacks out completely. An 18-wheeler subsequently hits Tony, throwing him from the driver's seat and through his windshield. Immediately after the accident, Dr. Melfi passes; she is initially shocked by the scene and—as later shots reveal—appears grief-stricken when she sees the sealed bottle of Prozac in Tony's dead hand. As errie, non-diegetic music rises to a crescendo, she awakes suddenly, and realizes it was all a dream. *In the subsequent scenes, Melfi confesses to her own psychiatrist that she feels responsible for Tony's crumbling life—symbolized here via the car swerving off of the Y-Axis entirely.*
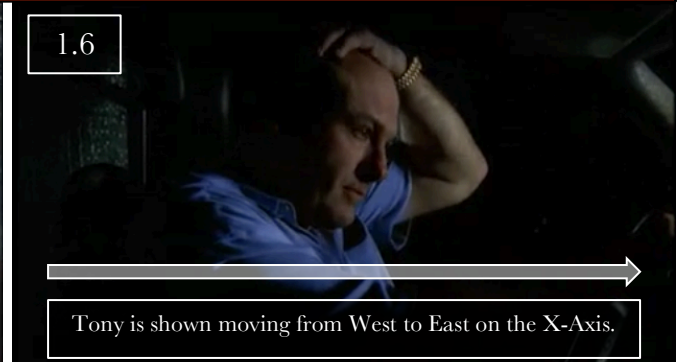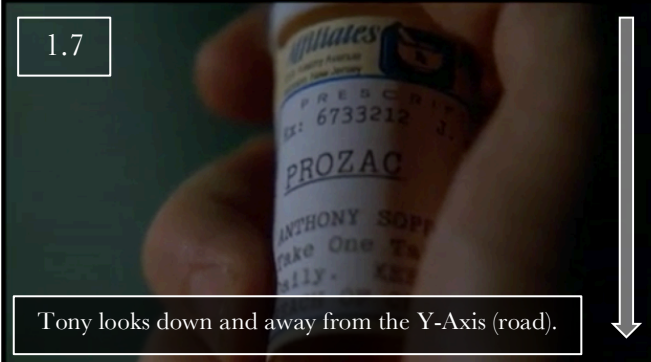
1.5

Tony travels, in control, South along the Y-Axis.

1.6

Tony is shown moving from West to East on the X-Axis.
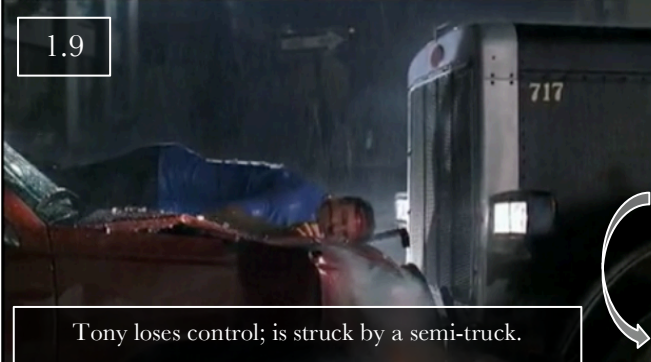
1.7

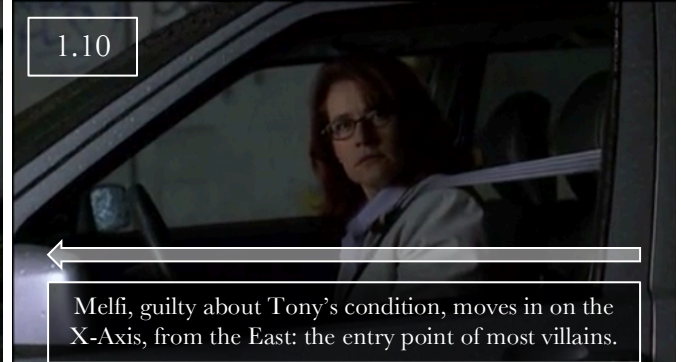Tony looks down and away from the Y-Axis (road).

1.8

Tony collapses; he begins to swerve off the Y-Axis.

1.9

Tony loses control; is struck by a semi-truck.

1.10

Melfi, guilty about Tony's condition, moves in on the X-Axis, from the East: the entry point of most villains.

F R A M I N G

THE Z AXIS (Depth)

The **Z-Axis** allows a filmmaker to play with depth; it is the imaginary line that runs from the immediate foreground to the deep background. As the "Focus Archetype" column in Chapter 1 illustrates, skilled cinematographers can stage action on all three "major" planes within a frame—that is the **foreground,** the **middleground**, and the **background**. Technically, a deep focus shot (such as the one featured in Image 1.11 to the right) requires a cinematographer to use a wide-angle lens and lighting that is strong enough to render subjects or objects in the deep background visible.

Although the image to the right is from only a promotional still for *The Sopranos*, the cinematographer utilizes the **Z-Axis** in a way that allows him to foreshadow plot points in the final seasons. For one, only one subject lies in the foreground: Tony. Months before the season even premiered, this image foreshadowed the distance that would grow between Tony and both of his families. That Dr. Melfi, his psychiatrist, is the sole figure in the middleground emphasizes how far Tony is from his blood relatives and peers in the New Jersey mafia; her ghostly look only drives this point home with greater force. Moreover, the crisp images of everyone in the background allow us to see to the lack of cohesion amongst the show's secondary characters; not even Anthony Jr., Meadow, or Carmela (the son, daughter, and wife, respectively, of Tony—all pictured on the far right) can manage to look each other in the eyes as Tony sulks in the foreground. And finally, even the inanimate objects in the scene help underscore the chilliness of the scene—the open French doors and the frame around it (which should be a glossy white) clearly read as blue: a color that is often "washed" over images in post-production to make viewers feel the coldness—whether physical or emotional—within the scene.

F R A M I N G

STORYTELLING VIA CAMERA POSITION

THE TWO-SHOT

The **two-shot** typically consists of a frame in which two figures are shot side-by-side Depending on the director's intent, this method can emphasize harmony or discord. Take Image 1.12 on the right; in it, Tony and his wife Carmela attend their first therapy session together. And although they sit close together, their body language and lack of eye-contact here (and throughout the whole scene) draws our attention to the ironic distance between them.

1.12

WATCH THE SCENE HERE
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clG_1sqOsBs&feature=relmfu

THE OVER-THE-SHOULDER

Like the two-shot, the **over the shoulder** shot can convey a variety of things: it can magnify one character's love or hate or interest etc. for another. It does, however, tend to always highlight the voyeuristic quality of the scene; the **over the shoulder** draws attention to the fact that we are watching someone watch someone else. One of the most famous recent examples of this shot is from AMC's *Mad Men*; in 1.13, the main character Don Draper's habit ob observing others (for his ad executive job) is highlighted.

1.13

WATCH THE SCENE HERE
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o82Az6qd5M0

THE POINT-OF-VIEW SHOT

According to Van Sijll, the point of view shot is often used, for the protagonist's sake, so that the audience may become more intimate with his or her perspective— conversely, she argues that when we're provided with an antagonist's point of view, it instills fear in us (156). In this scene from *Mad Men*, the cinematographers use POV to demonstrate how Don's second wife, Megan, is being oggled by the casting director at an audition; in this case, the shot attempts to make viewers uncomfortable.

1.14

READ ABOUT THE SCENE HERE
http://www.tomandlorenzo.com/2012/05/mad-style-the-other-woman.html
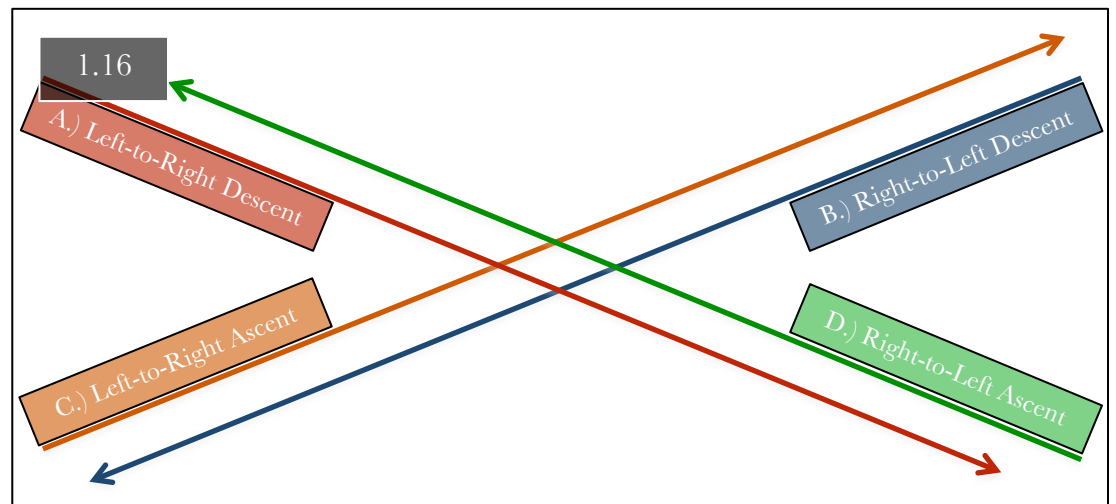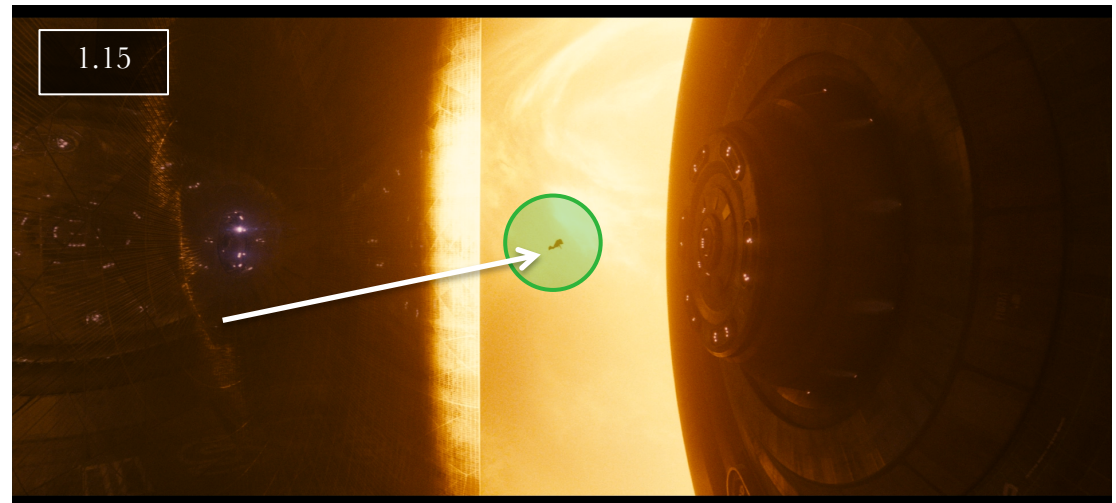
F R A M I N G

THE X/Y AXIS (Diagonal)

The **X/Y-Axis** charts the four diagonals that crisscross every frame. Insofar as motion or movement is concerned, each diagonal represents a specific level of difficulty in any given character's movement. In light of the fact that left-to-right movement has positive connotations to it, both the left-to-right descent and ascent are considered easier than their right-to-left counterparts (see Image 1.16).

In *Cinematic Storytelling*, Van Sijll outlines the following hierarchy for diagonal movement (8):

A. Easiest
B. Less Easy
C. Difficult
D. Most Difficult

Consider, then, Image 1.15 from Danny Boyle's 2007 film *Sunshine*; in it physicist and astronaut Capa (Cillian Murphy) makes a daring jump from one spaceship to another, more powerful ship—one that happens to be home to a nuclear bomb designed to "re-boot" the dying sun. As other excerpts from this scene suggest, Capa struggles mightily to

make it from the ship on the left to the "payload" carrying ship on the right. This struggle is depicted cinematographically in part by the left-to-right ascent Capa attempts here.

1.15

1.16
A.) Left-to-Right Descent
B.) Right-to-Left Descent
C.) Left-to-Right Ascent
D.) Right-to-Left Ascent

F R A M I N G

THE RULE OF THIRDS (Balance/Imbalance)

While Chapter 1 briefly outlines what the "rule of thirds" is, here you're provided with brief guidelines about how to exploit this rule in order to "speak" cinematically about balance/harmony and imbalance/disorientation.

The first still (1.17) from *Sunshine* exemplifies **balance**; here the ship's psychologist, Searle, stands perfectly centered in the "viewing room," where the whole crew can enjoy overwhelming views of the sun behind special, radiation-proof shields. Indeed, much of the film revolves around humankind's attempt to find its place in the universe—and in scenes like this, Boyle hints the harmony they're looking for is not far off. While the "rule of thirds" suggests that characters not be positioned dead center in a frame, when a cinematographer wants his images to express harmony or unity, centering things and making everything in the frame symmetrical is just what he or she might want to do.

The second still (1.18) serves as a counterpoint to the harmony and balance of 1.17; as the crew finds its big brother, Icarus I (which was launched and lost years ago), stranded near Mercury, tension rises. Accordingly, Boyle begins favoring disorienting shots, jump-cuts, etc.—Capa even begins to have nightmares in which he falls into the very surface of the sun. This sort of **unbalanced** imagery—which features Capa on the right and a scorching void on the left—interrupts or frustrates the serenity conveyed earlier in the film; to be sure, in the film, this nightmare-sequence is accompanied by Capa's distorted screams.

1.17

1.18

F R A M I N G

SIZE (Power/Helplessness)

As the section in Chapter 1 on Frames illustrates, the size of a subject or an object—in relation to the frame—is incredibly significant. The size of a character in relation to the other actors or objects around him/her often tells us how important—or, on the contrary, insignificant—that character is in the scheme of a scene.

In *Sunshine*, the cinematography oscillates (i.e. moves back and forth) between the theme of human life as insignificant and human life as essential to the very life of the solar system at large. Image 1.19 comes from a scene near the film's end in which Capa (now aboard the Manhattan-sized bomb designed to kick-start the sun) travels into the heart of the sun. As the scene progresses, the cube-shaped bomb (most visible in the small still in the bottom-left corner of 1.19) becomes so small that it vanishes out of sight entirely. At this point, Capa's mission seems especially doomed, given his size in comparison to the behemoth sun.

In 1.20, however, Boyle moves back and forth between the eye of a female crew member and the sun itself. The eye is shot in an extreme close-up here, and it looks roughly equal in size to the sun itself. This framing is no mistake, nor is the frame adjacent to it, in which the crew member's body looks roughly equal in size to the sun. Here, Boyle provides a much more optimistic suggestion about the fate of the Icarus II's mission and the relevance of humankind in the universe.

1.19

1.20