5-2-2007

Snakes and Funerals: Aesthetics and American Widescreen Films

John Harper Cossar

SNAKES AND FUNERALS: AESTHETICS AND

AMERICAN WIDESCREEN FILMS

by

HARPER COSSAR

Under the direction of Greg M. Smith

ABSTRACT

The study of widescreen cinema historically has been under analyzed with regard to aesthetics. This project examines the visual poetics of the wide frame from the silent films of Griffith and Gance to the CinemaScope grandeur of Preminger and Tashlin. Additionally, the roles of auteur and genre are explored as well as the new media possibilities such as letterboxing online content.

If cinema's history can be compared to painting, then prior to 1953, cinema existed as a portrait-only operation with a premium placed on vertical compositions. This is not to say that landscape shots were not possible or that lateral *mise-en-scene* did not exist. Cinematic texts, with very few exceptions, were composed in only one shape: the almost square Academy Ratio. Before 1953, cinema's shape is that of portraiture; after 1953 cinema's shape is landscape. Widescreen filmmaking is not simply an alternative to previous visual representation in cinema because no equivalent exists. Widescreen is quite simply a break from previous stylistic norms because the shape of the frame itself has been drastically reconfigured.

With the proliferation of HDTV and widescreen computer monitors, certain aspect ratios that were once regarded as specifically "cinematic" are now commonplace both in the home and in the workplace. This project outlines a project that traces the innovations and aesthetic

developments of widescreen aspect ratios from the silent era of D.W Griffith, Buster Keaton and

Abel Gance all the way through to current widescreen digital manifestations of web-based media

and digital "blanks" such as those created by Pixar. Other chapters include close textual analyses

of "experimental" widescreen films of 1930, the development of "norms" for widescreen

filmmaking in the early CinemaScope era of the 1950s and examinations of the experimental

multi-screen mosaics of 1968 and beyond.

INDEX WORDS: Widescreen, HDTV, Letterbox, CinemaScope, Auteur, Genre, Preminger,
                 Tashlin, Ray, Sirk, Fleischer, Griffith, Gance, Keaton, Aesthetics, Aspect
                 ratio

SNAKES AND FUNERALS: AESTHETICS AND

AMERICAN WIDESCREEN FILMS

by

HARPER COSSAR

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

SNAKES AND FUNERALS: AESTHETICS AND

AMERICAN WIDESCREEN FILMS

by

HARPER COSSAR

Major Professor:	Greg M. Smith
Committee:	Matthew Bernstein
	Kathy Fuller-Seeley
	Jack Boozer
	Angelo Restivo

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction
Title: "Snakes and funerals: Aesthetics and American widescreen films"[1]

You can now visualize your scenes in their entirety … and not be cramped by thinking of them in terms of "cuts," "dissolves," "close-ups" and "inserts." A director no longer will have to worry about cutting down a scene of enormous scope to fit the narrow limits of the old-style camera. — Jean Negulesco on directing *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953, 176)

The arrival of the wide screen with its opportunities for a new screen shape throws us once more headlong into questions of purely spatial composition. And much more — it affords us the possibility of reviewing and re-analyzing the whole aesthetic of pictorial composition in the cinema which … has been rendered inflexible by the inflexibility of the once and for all inflexible frame proportions of the screen. — Sergei Eisenstein (writing in 1928), 1970, 48-4

With a little adjustment and with some help from the supply companies and the professional associations, widescreen filmmaking offered only trended changes in the classical style. — David Bordwell (1985, 36)

In early 1919, D.W. Griffith and Billy Bitzer are shooting scenes for the melodrama

Broken Blossoms (1919). The filmmakers wrestle with sequences that feature Lucy (Lillian Gish)

in extreme peril and utter loneliness. A wide shot of the seedy London waterfront does not quite

portray the requisite hopelessness and abandonment that Griffith and Bitzer desire. Griffith

pushes Bitzer to arrange a shot that foregrounds Lucy's isolation. Ultimately the filmmakers

narrow Lucy's vertical world and subsequently accentuate the horizontality of *mise-en-scene* that

she must navigate with a letterbox-like matte.

---

[1] The title derives from a quote that is alternately credited to both Cecil B. Demille and Fritz Lang referring to CinemaScope's usefulness. Lang, however, actually says CinemaScope "wasn't meant for human beings. Just for snakes and funerals" in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963). Lang is also quoted as saying CinemaScope is "a format for a funeral, or for snakes, but not for human beings: you have a close-up, and on either side, there's just superfluous space." (Higham and Greenberg, 1969, 122)

Illustration 1

An iris would constrict and focus attention in a circular shape within the boxy confines of the Academy Ratio composition. Thus, rather than show Lucy's isolation, an iris would only reduce what the viewer sees and thereby not emphasize the enormity of the environment in comparison to Lucy's diminutive figure. Griffith and Bitzer choose the horizontal stylistic flair of the letterbox-like matte to exaggerate the tension of the moment. Griffith and Bitzer used this type of matting sparingly before in both *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) to make even more spectacular epic scenes of battle or set design. Why do the filmmakers choose these moments to accentuate the horizontal viewing perspective? More to the point, why would Griffith and Bitzer choose to emphasize the horizontal axis over the vertical?

More than four decades later in Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* (1968), the police and Boston society are frayed by the menacing, brutal murders of Albert DeSalvo (Tony Curtis). Throughout the film, Fleischer fractures the screen into multiple shapes and aspect ratios within the singular and "inflexible" Panavision (2.35:1 anamorphic) frame. In one exemplary camera and editing flourish, the camera cranes down behind a wrought-iron fence and settles on a framing in which the visual field is divided into five vertical panes corresponding to the fence

posts. Suddenly, the five windows spring to life (accompanied by five disparate audio tracks) and alternate both shape and size as separate narrative units.

 Illustration 2

The discord and cacophony that results in such a division of the screen is palatable. The viewer struggles to focus on one particular or perhaps central visual frame, but the screen's width paired with the contrasting narrative units is stunning. Women throughout Boston describe their fear and what measures they've taken to avoid DeSalvo's brutality, as all five panes shriek with terror and panic. The screen presents a paralyzing volume of narrative visual material to be consumed. Why does Fleischer choose to portray this scene (and others like it throughout the film) in this fractured and jigsaw puzzle style? Do certain genres encourage such experimentation?

Both of these examples feature attributes that are hallmarks of this project — experimental uses of widescreen aspect ratios in genre films. Ultimately the case studies featured throughout this project are stories of aesthetic experimentation with widescreen techniques that rail against the "inflexible frame." In one sequence, Fleischer conveys the story of a split-personality serial killer within the confines of a fractured, rectilinear frame. In *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith embellishes Lucy's desperate and impoverished state by deploying a widescreen matte

within the Academy Ratio frame, thereby colonizing readily available vertical space. Griffith and Fleischer both use what I will term a widescreen "rupture," but for subtly different ends; one shows an isolated, vulnerable woman overwhelmed by a city and the other serves as metaphor for a city whose women live in terrifying panic. Filmmakers and scholars alike have struggled with what exactly widescreen aspect ratios do differently than its primary predecessor, the Academy Ratio. The answer to this question does not lie primarily at the feet of technological differences between widescreen processes such as Todd-AO or CinemaScope, nor can it be understood exclusively by uses of anamorphic lenses or varying film stock perforations. Widescreen must be addressed aesthetically; in short, what differences between the Academy Ratio era and the widescreen era are apparent on screen? These questions must examine not only cinematographic style such as close-ups, landscape shots and camera angles and movement but also questions of set construction, blocking of actors and length of take. How do these shifts in film style and production allow for adaptation to established genres like the Western or the melodrama? How does the wider visual field affect the parsing of narrative events?

To understand these differences as they are manifest in widescreen films I propose a typology that is supported by selected case studies. This typology suggests that widescreen's aesthetic history can be examined as moments of stylistic experimentation. When examining widescreen's historical significance, scholars have often focused upon the role of special interest firms or industrial adoptions of technological changes in film equipment. The scholars who have addressed aesthetic considerations of widescreen's implementation often stop short of noting exactly how widescreen's introduction influenced filmmaking style. This project chooses to supplement the previous work on widescreen with aesthetic arguments that have gone underreported. Generally, this project looks at widescreen as a series of aesthetic experiments

that result either in ruptures or new norms of film style. Both ruptures and norms can function within this typology as either physical and/or stylistic manifestations of their respective categories. Therefore, ruptures can be either physical or stylistic and are the predecessors of norms with regard to widescreen aesthetics. What exactly qualifies as a rupture, and when (if ever) does a rupture become a norm?

To define stable and recurring aesthetic trends within the Hollywood group style, David Bordwell in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) argues that a hallmark of the classical Hollywood cinema mode of production is the reliance upon "fundamental aesthetic norms" (5). Bordwell suggests that the classical Hollywood mode of production offers "bounded alternatives" and "functional equivalents" for stylistic variations within a group style. In short, within the logic of the classical studio era, there "is always another way to do something" (5). While I agree with Bordwell's brilliant and astute survey of the classical Hollywood group style overall, I propose that the introduction of widescreen formats stretch literally the bounds of alternative or equivalent stylistic devices.

If cinema's history can be compared to say painting, then prior to 1953, cinema existed as a portrait-only operation with a premium placed on vertical compositions. This is not to say that landscape shots were not possible or that lateral *mise-en-scene* did not exist. Cinematic texts, with very few exceptions, were composed in only one shape: the almost square Academy Ratio. Before 1953, cinema's shape is that of portraiture; after 1953 cinema's shape is landscape. Widescreen filmmaking is not an alternative to previous visual representation in cinema and no equivalent exists. Widescreen is quite simply a break from previous stylistic norms because the shape of the frame itself has been drastically reconfigured. Therefore, the reason I choose the harsh term of rupture to examine widescreen aesthetics at different points throughout film history

is precisely for the extreme, irreversible break in film style and production that occurs in 1953 with the "introduction" of widescreen as a new physical norm.

A rupture locates a specific break with previous traditions of aesthetic composition, angle or movement. By precisely pinpointing the departure from the previous model of representation, one can suggest what aesthetic choices and decisions the filmmakers faced and how they experimented with wider compositions, letterbox mattes, fewer close-ups, etc. For certain instances of momentary narrative heightening, filmmakers experimentally break with the previous aesthetic forms, as evidenced above by both Griffith and Fleischer. By departing from previous traditions of framing, the filmmakers develop new aesthetic possibilities of framing action. For the ruptures surveyed in this project, these breaks evidence the lack of scope in the Academy Ratio proportions. These ruptures locate exact points of either physical or stylistic experimentation; the experimental aesthetics are clearly on screen and thus can be analyzed in proper historical and formal context.

Eisenstein (1928) asserted that the "creeping rectangles" of the widescreen era rupture the traditional, verticality of the Academy Ratio. The ruptures discussed within this project challenge traditional conceptions of widescreen criticism by offering specific terms of analysis as examined within case studies. For example, widescreen filmmakers foreground the extended horizontal breadth of the wide format, because this trait, above all else, is what differentiates from what has come before. The rupture then is not merely the fact of greater horizontality with the wider frame, but also the stylistic and aesthetic adjustments that follow its introduction. This leads to the distinction that must be made between physical and stylistic ruptures. Physical ruptures occur when filmmakers physically alter the geometry of the framing field. This may be something as exotic as Abel Gance's Polyvision, as is discussed in the "Precursors" chapter,

when the director multiplies the Academy Ratio proportions by three. A physical rupture is also

characteristic of Fleischer's multi-image fracturing of the Panavision (2.35:1) frame, as

discussed earlier. Usually, physical ruptures emphasize horizontality whether within a

widescreen aspect ratio or not, such as the case with Griffith's widescreen-esque masking

devices. In short, physical ruptures occur when the geometry of the "inflexible" frame is altered

to foreground widescreen aesthetic dimensions.

Stylistic ruptures within widescreen are foregrounded when filmmakers take existing

stylistic tropes and rework them in ways previously underutilized. Stylistic ruptures may/may not

result in conversions of film style norms. For example, as discussed in the chapter entitled

"Invention," two 1930 filmmakers — Raoul Walsh and Roland West — are on the forefront of

the seemingly imminent conversion to widescreen that the film industry is debating shortly after

sound's debut. Both the directors and cinematographers experiment with stylistic ruptures as

they shoot widescreen and Academy Ratio versions simultaneously. As the case studies will

demonstrate, close-ups in the 70mm/65mm versions of the films do not necessarily equate to

close-ups in the Academy ratio versions. Issues of stylistic experimentation between the

disparate versions are also apparent with regard to camera height and movement, not to mention

a variety of considerations involving set design. In short, the examination of stylistic ruptures

and experimentation with widescreen aesthetics have gone underreported in the literature

surrounding widescreen, and this project seeks to fill that void.

Central to this project are experimental, stylistic shifts from Academy Ratio tropes to

widescreen aesthetics and how such shifts can be historically addressed. While the above

example from *The Boston Strangler* is a unique characteristic of wide filmmaking, let us

consider another, more subtle example. Nicholas Ray's blocking in an early scene in the police

headquarters from *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) depicts Judy (Natalie Wood), Plato (Sal Mineo) and Jim Stark (James Dean) from left to right across the CinemaScope (2.55:1) frame. Judy is spatially separated from both Plato and Jim by a detective's office window.

Illustration 3

Ray's composition allows all three to occupy the same visual space without a cut to emphasize which of them might be most important in the group. They are all central and equal in Ray's telling of teen angst. Ray composes the frame both horizontally and diagonally, and blocks the principal leads along the frame's width. Ray's stylistic rupture is here very different from the physical ruptures of Fleischer's multi-image technique, but both are experimental options of widescreen aesthetics. The new framing strategies of Ray and Fleischer (not to mention the innovative blocking techniques, adapted camera movements and changes in set design) are characteristic of the ruptures experimental widescreen aesthetics necessitate.

Before launching into a discussion of widescreen's history and criticism, it is useful to define exactly what this project considers to be widescreen films. Widescreen texts are either narrative films produced with aspect ratios (image width to height) at or in excess of 1.66:1, or scenes that exploit widescreen characteristics (i.e., the Griffith/Bitzer example). Although this project leans heavily upon the films of the 1950s and '60s shot in aspect ratios of 2.35:1 and

greater, silent films, early sound-era films and online/new media ventures that use a letterbox aesthetic to imitate widescreen processes are all fair game. One of the hallmarks of this project is the number of texts considered, from different eras utilizing any number of film/digital formats and processes.

This project poses the question: Is there a singular widescreen aesthetic, or rather must we consider widescreen films to be a variety of special and distinguishing aesthetics? Certain scholars such as Andre Bazin and Charles Barr (examining a limited sample of early widescreen films) posit that there exists a singular widescreen aesthetic with unique characteristics and tendencies. However, both Bazin's and Barr's assertions are limited in scope as they focus on a few scenes from a few widescreen films. Other scholars such as Barry Salt and John Belton suggest that widescreen possesses a variety of different aesthetic possibilities but fall short of naming them specifically. Instead they suggest that technical adaptability to new lenses, cameras and/or film stocks, or rising average shot lengths account for most if not all of widescreen's changes in visual poetics. In this project (which is greatly indebted to the aforementioned scholarship), I am operating under the methodological rubric of aesthetic analysis. As such, my analyses will show that there are a variety of widescreen aesthetics that change over time from ruptures to norms. A distinctive goal of this project is to broaden the scope of widescreen aesthetics in the number of films, auteurs and genres under consideration (and the historical bounds of when widescreen films were/are made).

While expanding the historical sample size of widescreen films analyzed is productive, this project's main goal is to examine widescreen aesthetics as experiments carried out by auteurs. Auteurs within the classical studio era worked in generic vehicles, yet still were able to contribute their own unique signatures to their textual creations. In *The Classical Hollywood*

Cinema, David Bordwell (1985) outlines parameters for evaluating the classical group style of Hollywood filmmaking from 1917-1960. Beyond enumerating "devices," "systems" and "relations of systems," Bordwell suggests that these characteristics "identify to what extent Hollywood filmmaking adheres to integral and limited stylistic conventions" (3-8). Bordwell also contends that the concrete manifestations of these choices can be found in both the film auteurs and the genre films they directed. Within the classical Hollywood era, Bordwell argues that "identifying the 'author' with the narrational process, either within a film or across several films, is the approach most pertinent to the history of film style" (78). Auteurs in the studio system, by and large, made genre films. By "unearthing" their unique renderings within generic vehicles, we can discern their stylistic and narrational signatures. It is within these devices, systems and signatures that widescreen is best interrogated and investigated.

The classical Hollywood era depended upon the economic efficiency of the genre film. The genre film is a site of widescreen criticism that heretofore has remained underanalyzed in the scholarly literature. A central aim of this project is to expand and nuance the importance of generic analysis when discussing widescreen aesthetics and the experiments that auteurs engage in. Moreover, if the genre film is the economic stabilizer for the Classical studio era and these generic texts depend upon creative experimentation by auteurs to yield innovative reworkings of their formulas, then the site of aesthetic experimentation within widescreen films is best examined in genre texts with auteurs at the helm.

This last supposition leads to the questions posed by Bordwell *et al.* in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*: if we are to interrogate and enumerate specifically the bounds of the "typical film" in search of both norms and ruptures within the widescreen canon, why should the work of auteurs take precedence? Shouldn't we instead examine the "typical film" directed by *metteurs*

en scene? This question is certainly *apropos*, but this project chooses to focus narrowly on the aesthetic experimentation of auteurs because these unique individuals are responsible for narrative innovation within filmic narrative form and visual style. As Tom Gunning (1991) writes of the "narrator system" emerging in the early 1900s, "through filmic discourse … images of the world become addressed to the spectator, moving from natural phenomenon to cultural products, meanings arranged for a spectator. The filmic narrator shapes and defines visual meanings" (17). Thus, if the genre film is indeed the currency *de rigueur* for the studio era, and these texts depend upon the personal and innovative reworkings of the standard formulas by auteurs to "shape and define visual meaning" for the spectator, then it follows that experimental, aesthetic choices in widescreen filmmaking are best analyzed within genre films and auteur directors.

Because of widescreen filmmaking's unique position within film history, it is difficult to imagine a technological/aesthetic shift that is comparable, but the advent of sound is somewhat analogous. The conversion to sound produced many of the same challenges as that of widescreen – new aesthetic considerations, new technological trials and confusion over how best to use the new filmmaking tools. In his book chronicling the film industry's conversion to sound, *The Talkies*, Donald Crafton (1997) discusses the notion of *foregrounding*. Foregrounding, according to Crafton, occurs when a technological change accentuates "the unique or novel properties of a medium" (12). Crafton goes on to discuss sound in terms of foregrounding not only as technical display (the actual utilization of some new technology) but also how trade publications and technical firms used the technology itself as something to behold. Like widescreen, sound was unique from an industrial transition perspective, but how was sound actually used aesthetically and for what ends? Crafton's terminology of foregrounding is a structuring focus of this project

in that widescreen was experimented with and ultimately unveiled as the new norm due to its "unique or novel" properties.

The sound analogy is also appropriate because widescreen technologies could have debuted alongside sound in the late 1920s. However, studio executives, already feeling the strain of sound's economic commitment (Belton, 1992, 51-52) could not justify new projectors and screens in addition to sound. Thus, widescreen processes languished until the early 1950s when a combination of industrial, social and technological factors ushered in wide film formats. Hollywood enjoyed its peak financial year in 1946, but after the Paramount decree of 1948, which resulted in the divestiture of Hollywood's exhibition rights, the industry's profits and audience began to dwindle. Scholars such as Tino Balio (1990), John Belton (1992) and Thomas Schatz (1997) have written explicitly of these changes – urban flight, the rise of recreational sports, the car culture, and of course, television – as being economic drains on Hollywood in the early 1950s.

From an industrial vantage point, widescreen is often regarded as one of the box office saviors of the 1950s when profits were hard(er) to come by. The experiments with widescreen's visual aesthetics have largely remained under analyzed. The advent of widescreen cinema's "introduction" in 1952 was a novelty deployed by an industry needing a boost in profits. The technology for widescreen aspect ratios had existed very early in cinema's history but was only unveiled when it was deemed financially feasible.

While scholars have documented the industrial, social and cultural changes that led to Hollywood's introduction of widescreen filmmaking, the discussions have tended to be limited in scope; they have been centered on certain canonical texts like *River of No Return* (1954) or have been prescriptive/teleological in nature (Bazin). Critical response in the five decades since

widescreen's implementation has only rarely considered its significance, or more to the point, whether widescreen has any *aesthetic* significance. The scholars that have tackled widescreen from the perspective of aesthetics have couched their arguments as either: 1) the realization and logical progression of Bazinian realism, 2) that widescreen formats represent a shift toward more active participation by the spectator (a position Bazin also attributed to deep-focus cinematography (Barr, 1963; Bazin, 1954)) or 3) that widescreen offered temporary challenges but quickly was assimilated into the Hollywood style (Salt, 1985; Bordwell, 1985).

This project differs from previous studies of widescreen filmmaking in that few scholars have addressed the way in which widescreen's absorption *altered filmmaking aesthetics*. The very dimensions of the film frame changed (physical rupture) with the "debut" of the industry-wide widescreen formats (physical norms). Had there been formal film studies programs in place in 1952, the textbooks and texts would have needed significant revision almost immediately because the very parameters of *mise-en-scene* were altered drastically because of the experimentation involved in developing new norms to cope with wide film formats.

What is generally known about widescreen aesthetics? What does widescreen do *differently* than the Academy Ratio? Does widescreen filmmaking involve a fundamental shift in the aesthetic arrangement of elements within the new image (as André Bazin and Charles Barr claim, although via different arguments); or is widescreen *mise-en-scene* simply an adaptation of pre-widescreen aesthetics in a wider format? Does widescreen fulfill the promise of "freedom of participation" and extend cinema's "ability to reveal aspects of phenomenal reality" through the elimination of the montage and reliance upon the long take, as Bazin asserts? (Bordwell, 1985, 20) Widescreen proponents have argued that through the widening of the image area, a more realistic and authentic set of aesthetic considerations emerges from filmmakers who assimilate

their productions to widescreen formats. Specifically, several critics have garnered the spotlight with regard to their work on wide film aesthetics. A summary of their major conclusions regarding widescreen's unique attributes is both useful and prudent to examine.

Widescreen criticism

Widescreen's aesthetic cornerstone, according to critics, is that it restores "continuity of both time and space" that was absent or "latent" in the Academy ratio (Bazin, 1953, 683). Certain scholars have tackled particular areas of widescreen criticism and analysis. Charles Barr's "CinemaScope: Before and After," (1963) — an essay David Bordwell calls both "extraordinary" and "a landmark" — argues that widescreen cinema challenges spectators to be "alert," but that widescreen filmmakers should strive for a "gradation of emphasis" regarding its implementation. Barr's contention is that widescreen cinema (particularly CinemaScope) offers the possibility of "greater physical involvement" for the spectator and a "more vivid sense of space" (11). Barr asserts that widescreen films represent a different experience than that of Academy Ratio films by composing action horizontally and using fewer cuts.

David Bordwell ("Widescreen" 1985) surveys earlier scholars' critiques of the aesthetic and *mise-en-scene* of widescreen cinema and presents a slightly under-whelmed assessment of widescreen's impact upon filmmaking practices and reception. Bordwell claims that while widescreen filmmaking may have caused a slight experimental bump in the road for the Hollywood Classical Cinema, he asserts that technicians and filmmakers quickly adapt to the newly widened frame with little difficulty.

John Belton (1992) in *Widescreen Cinema* offers both a cultural and ideological critique of the industrial and social factors present in widescreen's adoption. While Belton's book serves as an informative and indispensable guide to the diffusion of widescreen technologies, Belton

stops short of offering specific terminology and/or a typology for aesthetic criticism with regard to widescreen. Belton's book is the most well-known and often cited academic text with regard to widescreen. As this project has grown over the last several years, many of my colleagues, when they learn of my research focus pose the question: How does this project differ from Belton's work? As aforementioned, Belton's work centers upon the technological innovations and implementations throughout widescreen's history. Belton's focus is not exclusively the narrative implications of widescreen or the importance of the intersection of genre and auteur. This project seeks to expand upon the excellent work of Belton and to broaden the scope of what widescreen criticism entails.

As the above survey indicates, critical reactions to widescreen aspect ratios and their importance to the canon of film studies are, at best, conflicted. Barr's essay, however, is the fount from which most aesthetically-based widescreen criticism springs, and therefore it necessitates a bit of unpacking. Barr's contention is that widescreen formats and their attendant "special potentialities" achieve an aesthetic unattainable by Academy ratio films (4). Barr asserts that "the more open the frame, the greater the impression of depth: the image is more vivid, and involves us more directly" (9). He goes on to explain that "it is [this] peripheral vision which orients us and makes the experience so vivid . . . this power was there even in the 1:1.33 image, but for the most part remained latent" (10). This notion of some intrinsic power or feeling of "what it [the world within the film] is like" (10) that exists in widescreen films but is "latent" in Academy ratio films is underdefined. By contrast, this project expands the number of textual case studies and gives a more longitudinal scope of widescreen's history to investigate the existence of any widescreen "latency" in Academy Ratio films.

Barr's assertions regarding widescreen's "potentialities" rely heavily upon one sequence from Otto Preminger's *River of No Return*. Barr's general assertion (like Bazin and Perkins before him) is that widescreen achieves greater realism through the use of the long shot and long take, and the minimal use of montage and/or editing. Thus, Barr praises the idea of greater open space within the wider frame, and as such, Barr claims that the need for insert shots that command the spectator to "look here and look at this" is eradicated. Barr further praises the advantages of widescreen in Nicholas Ray's films *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957). In both films, Barr sees the format as lending itself to "greater physical involvement" and thus portraying imagery as "completely natural and unforced" (11). Barr contends that such involvement and natural aesthetics are due to widescreen's use of long shots and airy visuals that could not exist in the Academy ratio.

The supposed embodiment of the widescreen aesthetic (and one that Barr builds on) actually begins with V.F. Perkins' (1962) critique of a scene from *River of No Return*. The scene shows Kay's (Marilyn Monroe) valise as it drops into the river's current and floats downstream. Perkins finds this scene significant because "Kay's gradual loss of the physical tokens of her way of life has great symbolic significance. But Preminger is not overly impressed. . . . the director presents the action clearly and leaves the interpretation to the spectator" (18). Barr responds to this analysis in kind: "the spectator is 'free' to notice the bundle, and when he does so, free to interpret it as significant. . . . An alert spectator will notice the bundle, and 'follow' it as it floats downstream. The traditional method would be to make its significance unmistakable by cutting in close-ups" (11).

Two key points are made here by both Perkins and Barr: 1) Preminger's treatment of this scene is *different* from pre-widescreen practices because of the lack of cuts to close-up, and 2)

the spectator is given agency *in the interpretation* which presumably is also a hallmark of widescreen aspect ratios. Interesting here is that Bazin (2004) makes similar comments about deep-focus cinematography's "special potentialities" years before the advent of widescreen. Bazin writes that the deep-focus cinematography of Orson Welles and William Wyler (among others) functions in (at least) two ways that previous cinematographic techniques did not. Bazin states that: 1) "depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys in reality," and 2) deep-focus cinematography "implies … both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress" (50). It is an understatement to stress the similarity of the positions offered by Bazin and both Perkins and Barr. Deep-focus cinematography is Bazin's original "fin du montage" (a position he also attributes to widescreen), and Perkins and Barr stake similar claims upon widescreen. If such characteristics were present with deep focus, then a typology of widescreen-specific attributes is still under-defined.

From a different vantage point, Bordwell challenges and praises Barr's assumptions and observations with regard to widescreen's potentialities as well. Bordwell (1985, Widescreen aesthetics) examines a different sequence from Barr in *River of No Return* (an interior conversation between Matt and son Mark), and reports that the scene is simply the Hollywood classical narration filling gaps and answering questions previously opened.[2] Further, Bordwell states "there are moments in most films, including Hollywood ones, when style is neither thematically significant nor narratively functional." As a neoformalist, Bordwell ultimately

---

[2] It is important to note that Bordwell's analysis of *River of No Return* differs from previous scholars on a number of fronts. One difference in particular that is beyond the scope of this project is Bordwell's his attention to cues on the film's soundtrack for guiding the viewer's gaze within the frame. Certainly, more research is needed with regard to the use of sound with motion pictures and widescreen films in particular.

concludes that widescreen criticism and aesthetics must strive to "reconstruct the choice-situation from which it issues, that situation to include not only the functionally equivalent options taken (deep-focus versus montage) but the boundaries which such prevailing representational norms set upon all such choices." Bordwell argues for a "historical frame of reference" (24) with regard to widescreen criticism, and this project proposes to further flesh out the history of widescreen from the silent era and extending into the realm of new media.

This project differs from those of Barr, Bordwell and Belton in both focus and scope. Previous scholars have addressed widescreen's technological and industrial lineage and have sparingly considered the aesthetic and stylistic ramifications of widescreen poetics. My goal with this endeavor is to more closely examine widescreen's unique potentialities via an expanded sample of films than previous scholars have analyzed and by taking a more longitudinal viewpoint. By framing widescreen's significance in terms of experimental aesthetics that rupture (physical/stylistic) previous filmmaking trends, the norms of the 1950s discussed in the widescreen literature will be expanded and defined more explicitly. Additionally, I address not only the previous literature of academic studies, but also the trade and technical publications *Motion Picture News* and *American Cinematographer*.[3] What is being said with regard to widescreen in these publications is of primary importance because these publications provide historical reference points. These documents recognize before widescreen's introduction in the 1950s that wider films offer new aesthetic challenges, and cinematographers such as Arthur Edeson and William Stull comment specifically upon the rupturing nature of early widescreen productions.

---

[3] Some of the technical/trade publications examined in this project have been previously cited by widescreen critics.

This project has three goals: First, an examination of widescreen's aesthetic and experimental history prior to the introduction of CinemaScope and other processes; that is, to explore the pre-history of aesthetics with regard to widescreen filmmaking. Second, to expand the literature with the concept of rupture as specific historical sites of deviation from the canonical group style within genre films with auteur directors. Third and finally, widescreen should not be thought of simply as a number of film processes introduced to an industry that needed an economic jumpstart in the early 1950s. Rather, widescreen since the 1950s has come to define the very shape of cinema and the Academy Ratio relegated to the shape of televisions and computer monitors. In this light, experimentation that occurs after widescreen's initial introduction in 1953 is of primary interest. Auteurs continue to mine and experiment with the bounds of what the new shape of cinema (post-1953) is best suited for and how can such a shape be appropriated for multi-screen imagery, adapted to new media texts and finally become a modular formal property of the digital age that may be recomposed to accommodate multiple aspect ratio utterances of a single text. To better explain how this project will proceed, I will address and outline the structure of this study and the methods employed to examine the films.

The following questions are the primary framing devices by which this project is governed. All of the following questions have yet to be exhausted concerning wide films. Some questions pertain to the Classical Hollywood canon and others are genre and/or era specific. If scholars have left widescreen under-analyzed with regard to aesthetics, what then should a study of wide film aesthetics focus on? This project will center on the following questions:

Structuring (meta) question:
What experimental, aesthetic choices are observable in narrative widescreen films both before and after the shift from the Academy Ratio?

Clearly previous scholars have examined thoroughly both industrial and technical considerations of widescreen poetics. Therefore, this project will look at texts as they are represented pictorially on screen. Further, that which is on screen represents a series of aesthetic and experimental *choices*. These choices are sometimes technical, but typically they embody the innovative aesthetic and visual dilemmas necessary to adapt to the newly wide format. David Bordwell (1997) in his meta-critique of historical poetics, *On the History of Film Style*, describes one way visual style may be examined and compared within the structures of camerawork: a) close-ups, b) landscape shots, c) angles and d) camera movement (33).[4] These aesthetic devices will guide how all other queries in this project are structured. For example, what sort of experimental poetics do early widescreen filmmakers deploy to try and adapt to the newly widened visual landscape? How are norms (such as shot/reverse shot or the cutting tropes of Master shot ∏ two shot ∏ alternating singles) disrupted by the horizontally elongating the frame? Do camera angles and complex movements function within wide films in the same way that they had prior to 1952? Finally, I have delimited the sample under inspection to narrative fiction films. Therefore, specialty processes such as Cinerama and IMAX are not within the purview of this project.

Supplemental question #1:

Using the aesthetic rubric enacted with **close-ups, landscape shots, angles, and camera movement**, what norms emerge with regard to wide filmmaking? If widescreen norms are present, what function do they serve, and how does the wide film necessitate refunctionalization?

---

[4] Bordwell advocates the "problem/solution" method of inquiry. This project follows the Bordwellian model of examining aesthetic choices within a range of historically available possibilities, but focuses and narrows those choices to camerawork and specifically how the use of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement are the primary obstacles that widescreen must conquer.

In this particular instance, choices of text will be of utmost concern. I will examine not only texts previously canonized by other scholars such as *River of No Return* (1956) but also films such as *Bigger than Life* (1956), *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) and *The Tarnished Angels* (1958). While these CinemaScope era films are important to determining both ruptures and norms, also key to this study is the notion that wide film aesthetics were experimented with even in the pre-widescreen era; that is, I will show how filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith, Buster Keaton and Abel Gance attempt widescreen aesthetics in a sort of preemptive manner. Griffith uses a horizontal matte, much like home video's letterbox to show protagonists' isolation or to magnify their surroundings. Keaton shows great affinity for the long shot and uses it in a way that minimizes cutting in order to display his gags. Gance, in his masterpiece of film technique *Napoleon* (1927), uses Polyvision (triptych) to display various actions occurring simultaneously and within a screen that could expand for a spectacular effect. These texts and their relation to the developments of further experimental uses of widescreen aesthetics are addressed in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

Supplemental question #2: Is the "widescreen aesthetic" present in whole films or simply in momentary aesthetic ruptures?

There is a magnificent moment in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* when the 2.35:1 CinemaScope frame reduces to the proportions of a television screen (Academy Ratio) in order to mock the presumed competition that was posed by the household technology. As aforementioned, ruptures represent the unique physical or stylistic foregrounding of widescreen aesthetics. In this light, it is tempting to deem widescreen aesthetics as nothing more than a manifestation of Eisenstein's (and later) Gunning's "cinema of attractions" or merely visual novelty and spectacle. However, whereas Gance used his Polyvision triptych for a 17-minute spectacle sequence in *Napoleon*'s climatic scene and Frank Tashlin mocks the small proportions

of television in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, do films such as *The Boston Strangler* (1968)

or *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) exploit the wide frame throughout? Perhaps these films

embody distinctive manifestations of wide film aesthetics and achieve poetics possible *only* in

wide films.

> **Supplemental question #3:** Certain genres – horror, western, melodrama – utilize space and
> its allocation in specific ways. Certain auteurs have historically been associated with their
> enactments of particular genres. How does widescreen influence/propel such strategies?

There is a certain pleasure of predictability in viewing genre films because of the textual

and historical contract between filmmaker and spectator. Certain genres such as the horror film,

the Western and the science-fiction film, not to mention the melodrama or musical, use visual

space as a textual element and perhaps even as a foreboding spatial character. As will be

discussed later, among the first studio experiments with widescreen are with established genres

— the Western (*The Big Trail*) and the horror film (*The Bat Whispers*). Further, certain *auteurs*

are associated most widely with their genre films. One of this project's contributions to the

existing widescreen literature is that of investigating generic uses of widescreen. The existing

literature suggests that widescreen has the potential to bring forth spatial and realistic

characteristics that remained latent in the Academy Ratio and that widescreen aesthetics simply

represent an assimilation of a new technology. Lacking in both arguments are the roles of auteur

and genre; the canonical widescreen films — *Rebel Without a Cause, River of No Return*, etc. —

are widescreen manifestations of established genres. Additionally, the role of auteur and

widescreen is one that lacks sufficient analysis. Ask any film scholar whom are the great

widescreen directors, and you will quickly get *auteurs* of renown — Nicholas Ray, Otto

Preminger, Douglas Sirk, Elia Kazan, etc. — but little is documented with regard to their

distinctive use of and experimentation with widescreen (excepting Preminger and *River of No Return*).

The above questions will serve as structuring principles and guidelines throughout this project. The overarching (meta) query throughout this project will focus upon the experimental relationship of ruptures/norms between wide films and those in the Academy ratio of 1.33:1. Other supplemental questions will be based upon that meta question but will be focused in slightly different directions. Since widescreen aesthetics are a matter first and foremost of camerawork, the typology of **close-ups, landscape shots, angles, and camera movement** will inform and shape each chapter and each supplemental structuring question.

Before outlining the chapters and the case studies these questions address, a certain methodological aspect of this project deserves a bit more discussion. The examination of widescreen aesthetics, and my endeavor in particular, must be sensitive to the modern home video choices such as laserdisc, DVD and online formats, not to mention the variety of monitor options available. Because of the prevalence of pan and scan video versions, many films have not been distributed or exhibited in their proper aspect ratios. Even in the heyday of CinemaScope mania in the early 1950s, large CinemaScope theaters were not in great supply, and thus such films were often projected in different aspect ratios than originally intended (Belton, 1992, 134-135). That said, outside of a theater, where a projectionist may/may not project a film as intended, home video viewers of the last 20 or so years have the option of viewing many films from the past in the properly masked proportions (Frumkes, 1991). Therefore, the texts under consideration for this study are either in a digital format (laserdisc, DVD or online) or in a VHS letterboxed version.[5]

---

[5] Even home video formats touting "original aspect ratios" are sometimes dubious. For more on

As will be discussed later with regard to online letterboxed texts, viewing digital versions on traditional 4:3 monitors (16x9 and HDTV are still relatively uncommon) must weigh into the critical discourse and analysis. Director James Cameron has actually termed letterboxed texts as "short screen" rather than widescreen because of the masking process and loss of valuable monitor real estate (Millick, 1992).

If these are the framing questions that will focus and guide this study, what texts are to be selected as "worthy" or "representative?" In this way, this study is the beneficiary of quality scholarly work that has gone before. For example, Bordwell and Barr discuss Preminger's *River of No Return* at length, and both regard it as a canonical wide film. Additionally, Marshall Deutelbaum (2003) analyzes a wide variety of texts of anamorphic wide films from 1953-1965. Essentially, this project is organized around case studies of certain texts that fit within the purview of aesthetic analysis and historical significance. The choice of films for this project need not presume comprehensiveness with regard to the film canon as Bordwell *et al.*'s "typical film" from the "unbiased sample" presumes (1985, 388-396)[6]; rather, by examining a variety of widescreen aesthetics within case study films from various historical periods and genres, the various poetic possibilities of widescreen will become more fully developed.

While this project is not a strict chronological history of widescreen, it does have certain historical arc. Chapter one, "D.W. Griffith, Buster Keaton, Abel Gance and the precursors of widescreen aesthetics" focuses on stylistic choices that can be read as forerunners of wide film

such cases see *Eallonardo v. MGM* (www.mgmdvdsettlement.com). In this case, MGM and its DVD distributors (Best Buy, Target, etc.) settled a class-action lawsuit for some 325 titles which the plaintiffs, Warren Eallonardo and Joseph Corey, allege "certain representations on the label and package insert of MGM's widescreen DVDs are false and misleading because MGM's widescreen DVDs for films shot in the 1.85 to 1 aspect ratio have the same image width as MGM's standard screen format DVDs."(*Eallonardo v. MGM*, 2004, 2)

[6] Interestingly, the "unbiased sample" includes only four widescreen films between the years of 1953-1960. Aspect ratio data was unavailable for *The Night Holds Terror* (1955).

poetics; that is, what experimentation took place in the silent era with regard to widescreen aesthetics and what auteurs are deploying such stylistic devices? What experiments did filmmakers attempt via both physical and stylistic ruptures that may be "precursors" for the norms of widescreen's "debut" in the early 1950s? Through a textual analysis of aesthetic choices (close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movements) in Griffith's films *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), we see that directors of pre-widescreen films use widescreen poetics such as letterbox masking to create a wider image rather than a vertical composition. Also, Buster Keaton often uses the long shot and resists cutting to close up to show his gags in full space — two techniques often considered hallmarks of the 'Scope films of the 1950s. Keaton's technique is quite evident in both his short films (*The High Sign*, 1921) and features (*Our Hospitality*, 1923). Finally, one cannot discuss precursors to wide films without examining Gance's bravura use of his Polyvision triptych to close *Napoleon*.

Chapter 2, "*The Big Trail*, *The Bat Whispers* and the 'invention' of widescreen style in 1930" highlights two unique wide films produced just after the coming of sound. Both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* were shot in both wide and Academy ratios simultaneously. Certainly an important factor here was the need for product differentiation, as the film industry was wavering with regard to the widescreen "question" in 1930. Both films in their wide versions had few exhibition opportunities. Therefore, an industrial analysis of their production is not as significant to this study as is the side-by-side comparison of both formats. What better way to establish exactly what different choices could be made with regard to close ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement than to examine two films shot in both formats simultaneously? *The Big Trail* is a Raoul Walsh western starring John Wayne, and the 70mm Grandeur version of the film was photographed by noted cinematographer Arthur Edeson, A.S.C.

(*All Quiet on the Western Front, Frankenstein, The Maltese Falcon, Casablanca*) for Fox.

Donald Crafton (1997) has noted that not only was *The Big Trail* filmed in two cinematographic

formats, but it was also shot (with different casts) in at least 4 other languages to compensate for

the European markets Hollywood relied so heavily upon in the silent era (428-429). Edeson's

70mm compositions and camera set-ups differ greatly from those of the Academy version shot

by Lucien N. Androit. The same cannot be said for the low-budget thriller, *The Bat Whispers*.

Like *The Big Trail, The Bat Whispers* was shot by two different cinematographers

simultaneously, yet the compositions and camera set-ups in the latter vary little from format to

format. A textual analysis of aesthetic techniques in both films will prove useful in developing

what norms might look like for wide films to come. As David Bordwell (1997) writes, this type

of historical poetics "invites us to reconstruct decisions made by active agents, and it treats

persons as concrete focus for stability and change. … The history of style will be the history of

practitioners' choices, as concretely manifested within films" (150). As aforementioned, implicit

within the discussion of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* is the role of genre in widescreen

films. The auteurist applications of widescreen aesthetics and genre will be more fully developed

in the following chapters.

In chapter 3, "New norms for widescreen: Preminger, Ray, Tashlin and Sirk," I approach

the very fragile subject of group style and new norms. As Barry Salt (1983), Bordwell, Staiger

and Thompson (1985) and Bordwell (1997) have noted, film style, technical advances and the

emergence of physical/stylistic norms cannot easily be mapped in a teleological fashion. Rather,

the old adage of necessity breeding invention is more apropos. The experimental widescreen

forms present in the silent era films and the widescreen films of 1930 suggest that the widescreen

norms have not been exhaustively historicized. Further, Bordwell (1985) has written,

"widescreen filmmaking offered only trended changes in the classical style" (364). While I must agree with Bordwell that, classical filmmaking style *as a whole* did not change significantly in the post-widescreen era, the ruptures/norms that emerge with regard to close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movements have been underreported. Salt and Bordwell *et al.* agree that filmmakers did not readily understand and/or accept the new technology of wide filmmaking. Therefore the concept of experimentation and the typological configuration between ruptures and norms will be a fixture with regard to textual analysis. For example, Otto Preminger states that he embraced CinemaScope and Panavision because they allowed greater use of his long-take aesthetic whether in musicals like *Carmen Jones* or political thrillers like *Advise and Consent* (Bogdanovich, 1997, 626-627). How does Preminger's long take aesthetic adapt to the wide frame? How are close ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement used differently from the previous norms of the Academy Ratio era?

It is here that the subject of norms and the need for their mapping is necessary. Barr and Bordwell have authored the best-known scholarly analyses of what wide films do uniquely. However, both authors really only consider Preminger's *River of No Return* in any depth with regard to stylistic poetics (although they do take glancing blows at the films of Kurosawa and Kazan). Therefore, the chapter here on norms represents a more thoroughgoing of wide film aesthetics simply by challenging Barr's and Bordwell's observations with more case studies and the framing structure of how wide films exploit close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movements.

Additionally, this project benefits from the greater availability of home video options of wide films on both VHS and DVD than previous scholars' work. A major focus of this project is to build on David Bordwell's challenge to progress "toward a widescreen aesthetic" and define

more specifically how widescreen aesthetics change historically (1985, 22). The larger film sample within this project's case studies and the specific focus upon ruptures, genre and auteur are the methodological instruments employed. However, I am faced with the question of how to select a representative sample of widescreen films that showcase the new norms. Throughout this project, the role of auteur is important. This will already be apparent with the aforementioned directors — Griffith, Keaton, Gance, Walsh. Therefore, the widescreen films of the 1950s that will be analyzed here are based upon influence and reputation of the filmmakers. Otto Preminger and *River of No Return* seems an obvious choice given the critical response to both the filmmaker and the seemingly canonical status of this widescreen text. Another widescreen filmmaker of influence is Frank Tashlin. The director's use of widescreen aesthetics serves at least two functions: 1) parody (Tashlin loved to mock the widescreen proportions in relation to both traditional theater and television) and 2) comic-strip aesthetics (Tashlin was a commercial artist and cartoon director prior to his feature film work). Tashlin's film *The Girl Can't Help It* represents his playfulness with the wide frame and a further analysis of his compositions reveals productive insights with regard to physical and stylistic norms. Third, the films of Nicholas Ray are both alluring and problematic simultaneously: alluring because scholars revere his widescreen sensibilities and problematic because there are so few of them available from the 1950s era. However, the analysis of *Bigger than Life* (1956) is both productive and interesting with regard to Ray's widescreen compositions and the fashioning of new physical and stylistic norms. Finally, the 1950s films of Douglas Sirk offer possibilities for both widescreen aesthetics and genre. Sirk is known not only for his Expressionist visual style but also for his tormented melodramas that reveal a darker side of the American life in the postwar era. Sirk's film *Tarnished Angels* (1958) is a valuable text to examine Sirk's use of widescreen in melodrama.

As these films represent a wide range of genres and visual styles (not to mention various widescreen processes), the examination and revelation of stylistic and aesthetic norms is significant. Finally, these directors have been chosen based upon their influential status within the Hollywood canon. Innovation, experimentation and influence, is evident in the analyses of widescreen poetics used by Preminger, Tashlin, Ray and Sirk.

The following chapter concerning "*The Boston Strangler, The Thomas Crown Affair* and the ruptures of 1968" is really an analysis of *non-normative* filmic uses of the wide frame. That is, ruptures feature wide film's unique properties foregrounded as subject. Ruptures occur in wide films when the unique attributes of the wide frame are exploited, and as previously mentioned these ruptures may be physical and/or stylistic. For example, *The Boston Strangler* (1968), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) and *Timecode* (2000) all use a multiple screen aesthetic to distribute different narrative lines and to present a variety of vantage points for the spectator. In this way, the Classical Hollywood Cinema technique of coverage (multiple takes of one scene from a assortment of camera angles) functions not to give the editors or directors a choice in post-production but rather to give the viewer a *choice* of which visual narrative to follow. While in both *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*, this technique of multi-framing is used as a rupture in 1968, Mike Figgis tries to project new norms by filming *Timecode* (2000) entirely in four consecutively running quadrants all fitted within 1.85:1 aspect ratio. Additionally, physical ruptures occur in films like *Superman* (1978), *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Brainstorm* (1983) and *The Horse Whisperer* (1999) when a film's aspect ratio literally expands or contracts screen space. In these films, screen space may begin in the Academy Ratio (1.33:1) and expand or contract at critical narrative junctures to emphasize important shifts in the characters' world. Such physical and stylistic ruptures foreground the widescreen visual field and

reflexively reveal the significance of such horizontal framing manipulations. Finally, while the literal ruptures mentioned above do constitute the most apparent and shocking widescreen foregrounding, they are not the only manifestations of widescreen's ability to rupture. As will be apparent in the films of the "Norms" chapter, auteurs such as Preminger, Tashlin, Ray and Sirk employ the wide frame and its compositional possibilities in ways that are both visually and thus narratively ruptured.

Finally, new media possibilities are ripe with experimentation with regard to wide film aesthetics. The final chapter "To widescreen and beyond: New media, digitextuality and Pixar " examines online and video gaming texts that use widescreen-esque views in an effort to reproduce cinematic qualities and thus present their products in terms of high-brow consumption strategies. This manifestation of widescreen occurs at the furthest reaches of the experimentation typology; are these physical/stylistic ruptures and norms, or are they some new creation that relies more upon reflexivity and pastiche? Further, many video games, regardless of whether they are of first-person shooter or sport genres, deploy cutscenes or cinematics. Because online content faces many challenges — different operating systems, monitor sizes, screen resolutions, and monitor widths (not to mention download speeds) — it seems that content producers want to achieve MIVI (maximum initial visual impact) and the panache of letterboxing by colonizing monitor space (Garfield, 1992, 77). Colonization is a physical rupture that involves the collapsing of the native monitor's aspect ratio and the demarcating effect within the screen space that requires some visual redirection of the viewer's gaze. Computer work space is colonized by the video game or online ad interface — the letterbox masking isolates the work space portion of the monitor from the letterboxed, passive consumption portion that video game and ad producers want viewers to consume. New media providers utilize the letterboxed wide aesthetic to cue

participation or spectatorship. The letterboxing of ads employs not only the colonization of monitor real estate, but also signifies an aesthetic choice as well as a consumption strategy associated with cinema. In addition, video game and other online content providers deploy the letterbox aesthetic to cue players/viewers when it is appropriate to participate and when to simply watch and consume.

This final chapter focuses primarily on the aforementioned new media producers who utilize the letterbox aesthetic, but the chapter also examines texts such the Pixar film *A Bug's Life* which was produced simultaneously in both Academy and wide formats digitally. Pixar is significant in that, like its video gaming counterparts, Pixar's texts are digital blanks; that is, the *mise-en-scene* of a Pixar film exists only in digital form. There is no soundstage or cinematographer to consult with regard to framing aesthetics. Rather, the digital mattes are composed in both formats from the first storyboard. Also, HDTV and its new framing strategies offer new possibilities with regard to television texts that are broadcast in both formats, but are contingent upon consumers' access to decoding technologies such as add-on decoder boxes or HD tuners to view them in their 1.78:1 aspect ratio. These new media directions further explore the ontological possibilities associated with digital convergence not in light of aesthetics. That is, with CinemaScope films one could only consume them in their intended aspect ratio in a CinemaScope theater. However, wide texts such as online films or letterboxed video games colonize monitor space to convert any monitor's format into the desired aspect ratio.

This project differs from previous scholarly considerations of wide filmmaking in both scope and its textual focus. By analyzing specific aesthetic parameters (close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement) under the rubric of experimentation, this study differentiates itself from previous scholarly attempts. Therefore, in this project, I am not concerned primarily with

such considerations as technical formats (CinemaScope, Todd-AO, Panavision, etc.), although I will occasionally comment upon their aesthetic differences. Rather, I am operating under the notion that wide film formats were deployed first as experiments of aesthetic difference.

The initial trials are deployed by the likes of Griffith, Keaton and Gance in the silent era and by Walsh and West in the early sound era. It is only after these pioneers have experimentally elongated the screen's dimensions that widescreen is officially deployed by a film industry with shrinking profits. The very parameters of the film frame more than doubled in width with the initial wide formats, and filmmaking crews had to adapt new framing and compositional strategies to justify the new frame dimensions. The aesthetic capabilities of widescreen filmmaking resides somewhere in the gaps between experimentation and norms, technological evolution and standardization, and auteuristic artistry and generic amplification. It is my contention that by examining specific camera techniques – close-ups, landscape shots, angles and camera movement – and regarding these decisions as either ruptures or norms that wide film's aesthetic differentiations from the Academy frame will be evident.

Finally, this project will focus much effort upon the revelation and importance of both genre and auteur with regard to widescreen aesthetics. As is hopefully clear by now, the role of both genre and auteur is under analyzed in the existing widescreen literature. This project's scope — from pre-sound experiments with widescreen to the new media/online manifestations of widescreen visual style — lengthens and nuances the history of widescreen aesthetics. Further, this study will demonstrate the usefulness of textual and *mise-en-scene* analysis with regard to specific technological changes. Too often, scholars consider technological shifts – color, stereo sound, digital cinema, etc. – from industrial standpoints that obscure the accompanying aesthetic alterations. The aesthetic and textual aspects of such technological modifications are simply

implied or worse yet, disdained as destroying what came before. For this reason, Crafton's concept of foregrounding with regard to the transition of sound is the only comparable aesthetic shift to that of wide films. Sound's introduction meant that actors with only aesthetically pleasing faces could no longer work if their voices were not equally as pleasing. In that light, how do cinematographers, set dressers, art directors and lighting specialists adapt and experiment to the newly widened framing area?

Finally, this study is dear to my heart. I have always marveled at the wide frame even when others around me cursed the "black bars" or have failed to have disdain for "pan and scan" versions of wide films. I have always believed that wide filmmaking is something different because of the reactions of my students, most of whom have never known anything but wide filmmaking. When they are exposed to Academy films, they discover the different framing strategies and how they present narrative in specifically vertical compositions. When we discuss wide films and their representation on home video formats, students are often outraged that films have been "recomposed" (Belton, 1992, 218-228). This is the primary reason I have chosen to confine my analysis primarily to that of aesthetics. The wide images present upon the screen — the aesthetic and textual enactment of the narrative — are the primary consideration of this study.

Chapter One:
D.W. Griffith, Buster Keaton, Abel Gance
and the precursors of widescreen aesthetics

… the cinema at its material base is a technological form — one in which technological

innovation precedes the aesthetic impulse (i.e., no artist can express him- or herself in

cinema in ways which would *exceed* the technological capabilities of the machines).

— David Cook (1990, 6)

(Abel) Gance did not enlarge the screen simply to stun the audience with a larger picture.

As well as gigantic panoramas, Gance split the screen into three, into one central action

and two framing actions. In this way, Gance orchestrated the cinema.

— Kevin Brownlow (1968, 559)

A discussion of wide film aesthetics cannot begin in earnest without at least some

acknowledgement of how widescreen aspect ratios in and of themselves are physical ruptures

from the established norm of the Academy Ratio. How did the Academy Ratio become an

established norm? Why wasn't cinema a more horizontal medium from the beginning? Wouldn't

a flexible screen shape be more adaptable to a variety of genres and textual elements? This final notion of a modular and flexible screen shape will be addressed at greater length in Chapter 4. A brief, historical survey of aspect ratios is warranted to specifically pinpoint how engineers, filmmakers and various other practitioners have wrestled with the Academy Ratio proportions from cinema's very beginnings.

The Academy Ratio and 35mm film are formats that were standards for more than 60 years of cinematic history (1889-1952) with few deviations. Both standards arrived out of (Thomas Edison assistant) W.K.L. Dickson's decision to split the Eastman Transparent Film, a 70mm stock, in half to more economically experiment with raw stock. John Belton (1992) concludes that by dividing the raw stock, Dickson doubled "the amount of footage he could obtain from each roll and, at the same time, avoid any waste" (19). Ironically, the Fox Film Corporation reversed this decision for product differentiation by *not* dividing its 70mm Grandeur film format in 1930 (the aesthetics of Grandeur are discussed in Chapter 2). Rick Mitchell (1987) reports that Fox "chose 70mm for Grandeur because it was exactly twice the width of 35mm film and meant no wastage of stock for film manufacturers" (38). Although Dickson "never explained why 35mm film and the 4:3 aspect ratio were chosen as formats," it can be hypothesized that Dickson, a still photography enthusiast, settled on these proportions for the aforementioned efficiency of dividing the 70mm raw stock, but also because the division yielded dimensions that mimicked the "ratio of width to height in nineteenth-century photographs" (Belton, 1992, 17). Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey and Ottomar Anschultz can all be suggested as influences upon Dickson's aesthetic decision, but the Lumiere brothers' adoption of the 4:3 proportions "solidified" the position of the 35mm standard for early cinematic texts.

One can imagine that Dickson's experience in still photography and his exposure to his father's career as a "distinguished English painter" would give the Edison protégé a predilection for what has been called the Golden Section (1.618:1).[7] (Belton, 22, n 43) Dickson, however, chose the 1.33:1 dimensions because he was no doubt encouraged by his employer to seek economic efficiency over classical notions of beauty. Additionally, Dickson's initial experiments with moving images consisted of portraits and two or three shots, but not landscapes. This speaks to the absence of landscapes in the early Kinetoscope films. (Belton, 1992, 22)

One can surmise that even from cinema's earliest exploits and uses, the choice of imagery, framing and *mise-en-scene* showed a certain bias toward vertical compositions rather than horizontal configurations. Ironically, after Dickson parted ways with Edison he presumably also parted ways with the Academy Ratio, because Dickson helped develop the Latham Eidoloscope that produced an image of 2.33:1. While the Eidoloscope (or Panoptikon) was ultimately unsuccessful in competing with Edison's MPPC 35mm standard, film projection to hundreds of customers (rather than individuals on Kinetoscopes) did become the norm and the Lathams "looked to wide-gauge film" to secure an image that did not degenerate (as did the

---

[7] This ratio has wide ranging mathematical, architectural, musical and artistic implications. It has alternately been called the golden mean, golden number, golden proportion, divine proportion, golden section, golden cut, or *sectio divina.* From the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, there has been an especial appreciation for the horizontal-rectangular frame. Visual arts and architecture leaned just as much to the horizontal-rectangular as they did to the square (there seem to be few Old Masters paintings that are square). Books and posters and other printed visual arts of the 18th and 19th century were either vertical-rectangular (for pages of text, portraits or Constable's clouds; or horizontal-rectangular (for any image of a landscape, or action such as battle scenes). In the theatrical tradition, some early proscenium arches were square, but as spectacle and reality took over the theatrical scene in the latter 19th century, stages and proscenium arches grew wider and wider. Especially interesting to note is the 18th and 19th century popularity of panoramas, giant paintings and 3-D dioramas that showed a great cityscape, natural wonders like Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, or famous battles like Waterloo or the battle of Atlanta. These visual spectacles were in horizontal-rectangle form, or on large drums that slowly rotated. For more on the panorama as a narrative tool, see Oettermann, Stephan. *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997.

smaller Kinetoscope) when projected. Rick Mitchell (1987) details the importance of aspect ratios with regard to theatrical projection by reminding us that "picture size was limited by the balcony overhang, which would cut the top of the screen off for those in the back of the first floor" while simultaneously producing "an acceptable picture in the last row of the top balcony" (37).

In this light, widescreen aspect ratios have always "remained latent" (as Charles Barr indicates) within the very shape of the Academy Ratio, but needed technological ruptures, generic impulses or auteurs to bring them to the fore. With the silent era trilogy of D.W. Griffith, Buster Keaton and Abel Gance, widescreen aesthetics begin to emerge as the auteurs struggled to contain their texts within the confines of the 4:3 proportions.

Some thirty years before widescreen's adoption by the film industry, a select group of auteurs were using widescreen aesthetics to accentuate and strengthen narrational power within generic vehicles. In the history of cinema, few filmmakers elicit more reverence, controversy and high-minded rhetoric than Griffith, Keaton and Gance. Discussions of these three vastly different auteurs ring throughout film history as highly influential exemplars of sustained creativity and ingenuity. This chapter focuses on this trinity of filmmakers in a new light — as "precursors" of and experimenters with wide film aesthetics in the way of both physical and stylistic ruptures. By pushing the bounds of stylistic norms, these auteurs direct the viewer's attention with widescreen poetic devices to broaden the impact of either epic or comedic generic tropes. As Kristin Thompson observed in the silent era, "not all of the many experiments that were tried in the early teens became part of Hollywood's paradigm. Only those solutions which held promise to serve a specific type of narrative structure caught on and became widely used" (1985, 157). These select

auteurs are seeking to expand the stylistic possibilities of their chosen generic vehicles as a manifestation of their distinctive and unique directorial signatures.

Therefore, this articulation does not suppose or proffer a teleological progression from these filmmakers and their physical/stylistic hallmarks to their peers or even to the "coming" of the widescreen heyday of the 1950s. Rather, this chapter serves to highlight a portion of aesthetic film history that is vastly underreported with regard to these most ballyhooed directors.

Each of the three silent era directors discussed are regarded as exemplary of distinctive stylistic/narrative traits throughout their *oeuvre*. Through a textual analysis of aesthetic choices (close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movements) present in these silent era texts, the revelation of widescreen aesthetics in the form of physical or stylistic ruptures will become apparent.

In Griffith's films *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), the director uses widescreen techniques such as masking (physical rupture of Academy Ratio frame) to create a wider image rather than a vertical composition. These narratively unmotivated choices show that Griffith recognized possibilities implicit with the "inflexible" frame that had yet to be exploited. By deliberately seeking to elongate his composition, Griffith "ruptures" the filmic frame in ways previously unseen by an auteur of his caliber.

While Buster Keaton does not mask his images for lateral compositions the way that Griffith does, he often relies on the long shot and resists cutting to show his gags in full — two techniques often considered hallmarks of the wide films of the 1950s. In addition to these stylistic ruptures, Keaton also employs the use of physical ruptures such as quadrant sets to produce an effect very much like that of split screen that will resonate with the vibrant 1960s multi-image techniques of *The Boston Strangler* (1968) and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968).

Keaton's techniques are quite evident in both his short films such as *The High Sign* (1921) and features exemplified for us in *Our Hospitality* (1923).

Finally, one cannot discuss wide films and aesthetics without examining Abel Gance's bravura use of his Polyvision triptych to close *Napoleon* (1927). As the epigraph by Kevin Browlow suggests, Gance sought to "orchestrate" the filmic frame (or frames) in ways previously unrealized or, more likely, unimagined. By horizontalizing the frame(s) (to say nothing of the enlargement of the viewable screens when projected) Gance's physical rupture predates the CinemaScope era by some 25 years. The orchestration of the trifurcated filmic frame suggests further the director's dissatisfaction with the "inflexible" frame proportions of the screen.

The choice of films for this chapter (and indeed throughout this project) need not presume comprehensiveness with regard to the film canon; rather, by showing a variety of widescreen aesthetics within case study films from various auteurs and genres, the various poetic possibilities of (in this case pre-) widescreen will become more fully developed.

The questions specifically posed within this chapter are: 1) how do these ruptures occur in light of the rubric of close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement? 2) What are the auteuristic tendencies and/or benefits of utilizing ruptures within these cases? Finally, 3) how important is genre to the textual and technical decisions of the filmmakers and how do such generic considerations influence visual style?

The two Griffith films under consideration, *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm*, are both melodramas. Griffith's association with the melodrama makes the use of the masking techniques discussed later even more salient. Griffith and cinematographer Billy Bitzer often experimented with iris and masking techniques to privilege certain areas of the frame over

others. Kevin Brownlow describes how Griffith and Bitzer expanded the canon of filmic technique writing that in practically all of Griffith's "little stories … there was some experiment, however insignificant" (1968, 22). In the Griffith examples, I am interested in the use of the landscape shots because in these momentary ruptures of widescreen-esque masking, Griffith and Bitzer are striving for what Charles Barr will cite some 44 years later with CinemaScope as a greater emphasis of space. This chapter is concerned with why Griffith and Bitzer "experiment" purposefully in both *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm* with physical ruptures of aspect ratio within the image. Before addressing this question, which is the central question posed by the Griffith/Bitzer examples, it is useful to examine what previous scholars have written about Griffith's style.

Tom Gunning's (1991) analysis of Griffith's Biograph films from 1908-1909, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of the American Narrative Film*, examines Griffith's understanding of the stage melodrama and its application/adaptation to the screen. In his discussion of Griffith's visual style, Gunning seldom mentions the specific use of an iris or masking shots as vehicles for Griffith to inscribe himself as narrator, but does note that Griffith (in *The Country Doctor*) uses framing strategies to display the "juxtaposition of human form against the monumental form of nature"(235). Gunning's attention to Griffith's visual poetics is one that is understandably anchored to the distribution of narrative information via editing techniques. This chapter aims to build upon Gunning's revelations by expanding Griffith's tools within the "narrator system" to those of widescreen aesthetics and specifically the use of letterboxing masks. Building upon Bordwell's description of directorial "cues" that articulate the Classical Hollywood Cinema, Gunning defines exactly what is at stake in unearthing Griffith's specific use of devices to tell a story and how they serve to point to an active narrator:

The narrative discourse of film involves a unique transaction between showing and telling. The photographic imagery clearly possesses a unique ability to show. But how do films pick up and indicate the significant elements within this detailed and contingent reality and endow them with a narrative meaning? What is it that tells the story in a narrative film? What are the marks within the film … by which the film conveys its story to the viewer? (18)

Certainly Gunning addresses many of Griffith's "transactions" and defines "what tells the story in a narrative film." This chapter builds upon Gunning's work but narrows the focus to Griffith's use of the letterbox mask within *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm* to situate himself as the narrator of the story. By interrogating the narrator's use of this device within the films, we may better understand how Griffith "endows" these devices power and thereby exacerbates generic formulas via widescreen aesthetics.

Barry Salt (1992) argues that Griffith's "achievement lies … in the detailed way a piece of staging is invented and worked out" in such films as *The Drive for a Life* (1909) and *The Girl and her Trust* (1912). (82) Salt stops short of giving Griffith/Bitzer credit for inventing rupturing techniques such as the iris and mask/matte but does acknowledge the team's mastery of both. Salt identifies the mask/matte as an "opaque sheet of material placed in front of, or behind, a lens to obscure part of the image it forms."(326) While Salt acknowledges that masking/matted shots were used as early as 1901 in films like *As Seen Through a Telescope* and again with *Peeping Tom* in 1902, Salt writes that these masks were often used as representative POVs — to imitate the look through a telescope (iris) or the view through a keyhole (keyhole-shaped mask).

Therefore, the use of these devices in early cinema is that of mimicry and imitation and is not striving for some greater or "more vivid sense of space," but rather the restriction of where the eye can look within the frame. This is the quite the opposite notion of scholars such as Bazin and Barr when commenting upon widescreen techniques 40 years later. In addition, these restrictions rupture what Eisenstein calls the "square frame" by creating strange shapes *within the frame* that require a viewer's redirection, not to mention a sort of cognitive interplay to ascertain what such a device's presence signifies.

More specifically, what are we to make of these horizontal mask shots in *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm*? Are these physical ruptures simply momentary visual experiments which, Brownlow writes, Bitzer "resisted as being against tradition"? (1968, 22) Scott Simmon (1993) states in his book, *The Films of D.W. Griffith*, "What can be rediscovered to admire in Griffith's work? The answer would have to run something like this: his skill at developing and, to an extent, inventing the grammar of the cinema, and in particular, his mastery of tempo of parallel montage, as most spectacularly displayed in the intercutting of close-ups shots" (16). Griffith's goal was to maximize narrative distribution through melodramatic generic structures. Why would he *choose* to spectacularize (via a physical rupture) the visual frame in the two films under consideration? How do melodramatic tropes factor in these directorial decisions? To fully understand the consequences of such queries, a fuller examination of early melodramatic codes is apropos.

In *Melodrama and Modernity*, Ben Singer (2001) defines melodrama as "a set of subgenres that remain close to the heart and hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality" (37). Singer acknowledges that defining specifically how these "tear-drenched dramas" operate depends upon the critic's point of entry. While melodrama can

be nebulous to pin down, Singer announces that a primary and unwavering component of melodrama is "a certain 'overwrought' or 'exaggerated' quality summed up by the term *excess*" (39). Melodramatic excesses can be legion; the textual qualities can be excessively wrought with visual style as will be discussed in the work of Nicholas Ray and Douglas Sirk in chapter three and melodrama can "activate various … visceral responses" from the spectator. (39) Singer further builds the argument of what qualities culminate to constitute a melodramatic text by citing Lea Jacobs' idea of "situation." Situations, within melodramas, are "striking and exciting incident(s) that momentarily arrest narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic tension" (41). While Singer readily acquiesces that "situations" as a defining trope of melodrama are "very broad and malleable" that are difficult to distinguish in relative terms of intensity, nevertheless the concept of "situation" is a useful lens by which to examine melodrama. (42)

If melodramas can be defined by excessive situations that use stylistic means to exaggerate the emotional state of "characters on the verge of hysteria and collapse" or to embellish "a truly evil villain that victimizes a(n) innocent, purely good soul," then the use of certain filmic devices and directorial "cues" to "activate" these situations seems logical. (Singer, 39) For Griffith, the use of the letterboxing mask at certain "situations" not only adds power to the melodramatic punch of the film, but becomes a device by which the director can infuse the text with a personal and signature stylistic flourish. Such physical ruptures throughout this chapter are read as distinctive directorial decisions to violate the restrictions of the Academy Ratio frame and expand the generic range of "overwrought" situations by means of devices and stylistic choices that point to an auteur's imprint.

Broken Blossoms is the story of Cheng Huan (Richard Barthlemess), a Buddhist who journeys to the West (London) to bring his Buddhist teachings to the Anglo-Saxons. Cheng Huan is quickly and brutally corrupted by the Limehouse district's allures of drugs and gambling. Lucy (Lillian Gish) is a frail and virginal creature who is the victim of a brutish, prizefighting father Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). Cheng Huan and Lucy share a platonic love that is doused by Battling's racist and violent temper. All die tragically in this cruel demonization of the urban industrialized city: Lucy at the hands of her father; Battling from Cheng Huan's gun; and Cheng Huan by his own hand.

Broken Blossoms appeals to several of the structuring questions posed in this project concerning widescreen aesthetics. As aforementioned, issues of genre and auteur are of importance, but all of these case study "precursors" are momentary or fleeting ruptures of the standard Academy Ratio. Therefore, while they are "attractions" or spectacle to be sure, they are purposeful ruptures of the visual field for some desired narrative effect: to announce and foreground the role of the narrator actively constructing a story for the specator. In *Broken Blossoms*, much like the telescope POV and keyhole masks, Griffith's goal in using the letterbox mask is to constrict the viewer's visual field and inflate Lucy's sense of dread in encountering the fearful, Limehouse streets. Griffith and Bitzer provide an early manifestation of the short screen in *Broken Blossoms* to show not only the restricted space Lucy occupies but also the vastness and loneliness of her world. The first experiment with the short-screen masking technique in *Broken Blossoms* occurs when Lucy goes out to buy dinner with only the foil and ribbon her mother has left her. Her cruel father Battling Burrows has left her to do the shopping but provided her with no funds, only the promise of a beating if his dinner is not ready upon his

return from carousing at a local bar with prostitutes. Griffith and Bitzer show Lucy's isolation, as well as the squalor of the Limehouse district through the implementation of the horizontal mask. (Illustrations 1.1-1.2)

Illustration 1.1

Illustration 1.2

By restricting the composition vertically, Griffith and Bitzer force the viewer to scan the image horizontally. This recalls the "orchestration" Brownlow (in reference to Gance) refers to in the epigraph that begins this chapter. Scholars such as Eisenstein, Gunning, Salt or Simmon all refer to Griffith's mastery of formal montage, but most of this literature refers to Griffith using montage intercut with close-ups. Such is not the case here, in that the masking that normally

occurs with a Griffith montage sequence (and *Broken Blossoms* has one for its brutal climax) is a traditional iris or vertical mask to restrict the horizontal visual field to that of the central character in lieu of a close-up and/or new and time-consuming camera set-up. The rupture here is in keeping with Griffith's auteurist tendencies to alter the visual frame with masks of various shapes, but the selection of the horizontally "short screen" mask is significant as it exacerbates and fulfills melodramatic generic ends of isolation.

This horizontal masking is repeated later in the narrative after Battling Burrows has beaten Lucy mercilessly and she stumbles hopelessly through the streets.

Illustration 1.3

Illustration 1.4

Obviously, the set has been repurposed from Lucy's shopping trip, but the structural *mise-en-scene* remains intact. This time, Griffith has removed the pedestrians and signage to further isolate Lucy. This framing and the psychological mood these shots invoke is a very similar to what John Belton (1994) attributes as the hallmark of the film noir mode beginning in the 1940s — the ability to induce anxiety or provoke "an uneasy feeling" (187-188). This "uneasy feeling" invoked here by Griffith serves his generic purposes; Griffith's melodramatic goal in *Broken Blossoms* are to show the depravity of the urban, modernized world. Drug use, child abuse, murder, racism are all part and parcel in the world of Cheng Huan, Lucy and Battling Burrows in *Broken Blossoms*. By isolating the most helpless character of all, Lucy, Griffith further preys upon on our anxious state. Lucy is the only figure in the film that receives such an isolated framing, so what narrative end is Griffith trying to accomplish with such a device? Griffith uses the device to assert his authority within generic structures of "a truly evil villain" and what havoc is wrought upon an "innocent, purely good soul." For Griffith, the use of the letterboxing mask is a way to excessively depict the fact that Lucy's world is literally closing in on her and she is powerless and helpless to enact any sort of change.

This poses a particularly salient issue with widescreen critics in the years after CinemaScope's introduction: Bazin and Barr comment upon the greater expanse of space with the wide film and how it provides verisimilitude that Academy Ratio films lacked. Griffith, however, experiments with the physical rupture of the horizontal mask device to restrict a viewer's interpretation of the *mise-en-scene*. By using the letterbox-esque matte, Griffith controls the viewer's gaze for emotional impact. In these momentary ruptures from *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith chooses not to use close-ups of Lucy's despair and isolation but rather shows Lucy in the contextual view of her surroundings via the landscape long shot; she is so small and

helpless, and the environment dwarfs her. This landscape, long shot and physically rupturing horizontal mask serves several purposes: 1) it causes a redirection of the viewer's gaze; 2) this redirection is generically motivated by melodramatic reversals and recognitions of changes in stature — class, monetary, morality — of a protagonist, Lucy; 3) the rupturing is generically motivated and reaffirms Griffith's presence as auteur.

Richard Koszarski (1990) remarks on this notion of Griffith's parallelisms with regard to the relative visual weight of characters when contrasted to their surroundings. Koszarski writes that Griffith's films "demonstrate how human lives are inextricably bound up with the larger forces of culture and history. … others [have] made much of Griffith's debt to Dickens in his ability to characterize through carefully developed imagery, but what Griffith really took from Dickens was the ability to balance the intimate and the epic within the span of his broad narrative canvas" (214). The "ability to balance the intimate and the epic" is certainly evident in the examples from *Broken Blossoms* and will become even more so by examining rupturous moments in *Orphans of the Storm* (1921).

Orphans of the Storm is an epic melodrama about two orphaned girls Henriette (Lillian Gish) and Louise (Dorothy Gish) tragically separated during the French Revolution. Henriette is revealed to be a product of the aristocracy, but she cares for her blind sister, who is abducted by gypsies and thieves. As with *Broken Blossoms*, the relevance of *Orphans of the Storm* to this project is not only Griffith's use of horizontal masking that predates widescreen but also the generic narrative structures by which the framings are subsumed. In *Cinema Stylists*, John Belton (1983) writes that in *Orphans of the Storm*, Griffith "repeats a single melodramatic structure over and over again … the destruction of the family unit. With each repetition, the act becomes more powerful, more involving, and more emotionally devastating" (169). Interestingly, Griffith used

the horizontal mask as a short screen device in *Broken Blossoms* to isolate the battered Lucy. The purpose of the letterbox-like technique is to show, again the destruction of the family unit, but the single figure bearing the brunt of the abuse is Lucy and her character is thus singled out in the visual field. Using the experimental, horizontal mask in *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith literally shows a cinematic world that is closing in on poor, helpless Lucy. Where Griffith uses the mask to isolate Lucy in *Broken Blossoms*, the masking techniques in *Orphans of the Storm* are for epic scale and to heighten the impact of action sequences. Therefore, the same masking device can be deployed for different rupturing purposes that are equally dependent upon both auteuristic and subsequent generic needs.

In *Broken Blossoms*, the mask serves to reaffirm Lucy's hopeless plight and lonely existence. In *Orphans of the Storm* the masking serves to heighten dramatic tension. The rupturing effect is the same — the visual frame is altered horizontally, but the author may subjugate the rupturing device for generic ends. Brownlow's reference to Gance's ability to "orchestrate" cinematic moments is applicable to Griffith here. Twice during *Orphans of the Storm*, Griffith uses the masking technique, but both for rupturing effects: to re-attenuate the viewer's gaze (orchestrate) and to spectacularize a scene. The first masking scene comes as "the Mob" begins to revolt against the "ancient wrongs" (Illustration 1.5).

Illustration 1.5

Illustration 1.6

The change in the aspect ratio of the inner (masked) framing here suggests what will later

be know simply as "masked widescreen," where cinematographers compose within the camera's

"safe action area" knowing the extraneous compositional elements will be (theoretically) masked

during exhibition. Griffith's use of the mask not only ensures the proper theatrical presentation

of the image (the same cannot be said often of modern masked widescreen or anamorphic

theatrical processes) but also provides spectacle and guides the spectator to follow screen

direction from left to right. How does this experimental, physical rupture serve the melodramatic

destruction of the family? Griffith has spent the majority of screen time showing the pathetic

plight of Henriette and Louise in standard vertical compositions via two-shots or close-ups. The

spatial differentiation of this rupturous masking is powerful. Griffith uses the close-up as an

intimate and character-alignment device. When presented with the short-screened framing of "the Mob," the orchestrated experiences of both awe and fear of the crowd is evident.

Griffith uses the horizontal masking two more times before the last-minute rescue from the guillotine at the film's conclusion. Griffith shows the horizontal framing as Henriette is led to the guillotine platform before the gathering peasant crowd. Interestingly, Griffith chooses not to show the peasant crowd gathered in the horizontal mask, but rather the military processional.

 Illustration 1.7

Up until this point, Griffith has used the horizontal mask only in long shot and usually to show scale. The physical rupture signifies the spatial reconfiguration that colonizes and collapses the vertical axes. However, the next use of the horizontal mask is an insert cut. Griffith cuts from the guillotine processional that is transporting Henreitte to the military drum corps. This cut is significant in that Griffith uses this cut not for the scale and/or screen direction but as attention to a detail in the *mise-en-scene* and for compositional flair. While the rupturing "widescreen" shots of Lucy in *Broken Blossoms* serve the purpose of exhibiting her isolation amid her desolate surroundings, and the "widescreen" shots thus far in *Orphans of the Storm* show scale combined with orchestrating screen direction, the cut to the drum corps is merely for detail. A key difference here is that Griffith could have used an iris in any of the aforementioned sequences

but chose to elongate the composition instead. Certainly Griffith and Bitzer realized the

"inflexible" qualities of the vertically oriented Academy Ratio frame and sought to exploit what

it was least capable of providing — elongated and rectilinear proportions.

Illustration 1.8

This cut to the drumming corps also serves as a link to Griffith's parallel editing rescue

sequence. As the drummers begin their drum rolls, Henriette is positioned on the guillotine, and

the cuts come in faster succession to heighten the dramatic pace as Danton and his men race to

save her. This cut is interesting because Griffith showed the drum corps before but did not dote

on them as in this shot. As aforementioned, this shot is anomalous in the respect that it is

essentially a close-up compared to Griffith's earlier uses of the framing strategy. This shot of the

drum corps does not serve the same purpose as Griffith's previous uses of the horizontal framing

and is thus a troubling example on which to conclude our discussion. However, even though this

final example of Griffith's use of the "widescreen" horizontal framing does not align with his

previous use of the technique, it does support the claim herein that regardless of camera distance

(close-up, landscape) or camera characteristics (angle or movement), Griffith's use of the

horizontal mask within his generic narratives serves the purpose of physically rupturing the

visual field and thus redirecting the viewer's gaze. Griffith exploits the widescreen mask to build tension for the climax at the guillotine: Griffith foreshadows the horrors of the guillotine by disembodying the drummers. Their faces are "cut off" via the horizontal mask and this depersonalization is attributable to Griffith's auteuristic flair and desire for heightened melodramatic climax.

As will become apparent throughout this project, the examples cited and analyzed form a larger argument; physical/stylistic ruptures are deviations from established stylistic and aesthetic traditions. Griffith chooses to horizontally stretch framings in *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm* to transcend the "inflexible" Academy Ratio frame. This exploiting of the traditional serves Griffith in two ways: a) it provides visually different manifestations of traditional material and set-ups and b) by elongating the frame and compressing its vertical axis, Griffith constricts the viewer's gaze. Thus, Griffith has enhanced the melodramatic effects of his narrative by further isolating the protagonists and exaggerating their solitude. Further, he colonizes the vertical axis of the image area and deprives the viewer of access to what has traditionally been available screen area.

Buster Keaton

While Griffith is known for his narrative development associated with the filmic melodrama, Buster Keaton is the silent comedian *par excellence*. Widescreen critics have seldom examined the generic manifestations associated with the widening of the frame; that is, while critics may have addressed widescreen genre films, few critics have ever questioned how does widescreen uniquely nuance and expand or repel the existing genre formulas? Certainly, the silent era filmmakers being discussed here have not historically been associated with widescreen aesthetics (with the exception of Gance), but all are genre filmmakers *par excellence*. While

Griffith's lateral compositions do lend themselves to discussions of physical ruptures and subsequent arguments of melodrama and the epic, Keaton does not use such maskings, but rather resists them to focus upon his comedic talents. How does Keaton use "widescreen" strategies within the generic framework of comedy? Where does Keaton use these strategies — to isolate a character or to showcase *mise-en-scene*?

Keaton's ruptured frame is not the physical rupture of Griffith (or Gance). Rather, Keaton's physical and stylistic ruptures foreground the possibility that widescreen poetics were present in the Academy Ratio but remained latent. In Keaton's work, the dual traits of viewer redirection and violation of frame space are present and therefore significant in Keaton as are the initial investigation of how widescreen techniques may inform the comedic genre in the silent era with an auteur at the helm.

Buster Keaton's career had already peaked before the coming of sound, which was roughly two decades before widescreen formats were implemented.[8] The "great stoneface" is a master of both spatial and emotional humor, and his filmmaking reveals even more with regard to proponents of the aesthetics of widescreen from critics such as Bazin, Barr and Bordwell. While his athleticism and grace are without peer, Keaton's framing and *mise-en-scene* are the vehicles by which the spectator gains access to the genius of Keaton's efforts. Keaton often uses the landscape long shot because it allows the viewer to see simultaneously all the relevant variables in a gag. Further, the use of the landscape shot provides a number of stylistic ruptures that can be seen as breaks from previous silent comedy traditions.

Keaton notes that his style *relies* upon the long shot: "For a real effect and to convince people that it's on the level, do it on the level. No faking. Move the camera back and take it all in

---

[8] Keaton continued to make films throughout the sound era, but critics and scholars alike consider his finest works to be those produced by Joseph Schenck prior to sound.

one shot" (Kerr, 1975, 124). Most of Keaton's masterpieces make extensive use of densely composed, long (landscape) shots. Think only of the cross-country motorbike ride in *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), the epic chase scenes where Keaton is pursued by boulders in *Seven Chances* (1925), and the human ladder that spans several stories of buildings in *Neighbors* (1921). All of these sequences rely upon Keaton's composition in both width and depth *and* the use of the long shot. Every quadrant of Keaton's compositions includes some key element of the gag. By resisting montage and the use of close-ups to showcase Keaton's physical talents and derring-do, Keaton's use of the long shot within silent comedy is a rupture of stylistic convention and one that can and should be read as an auteuristic trait. Keaton uses the long shot within comedic structures to verify the danger he has put himself in. Keaton's use of the long shot therefore is a device by which his comedic oeuvre can be evaluated; Keaton's use of the device enables his authority to be writ large upon his texts. Keaton's tremendous talents hinge upon two elements: Keaton's diminutive size and his ability to convey his slight stature in relation to his surroundings. Thus, Keaton's use of the long shot as an authorial device, simultaneously defines his comedic cinematic style and provides a framework for analysis of Keaton's work as a "precursor" of widescreen style. Just as Griffith uses devices such as the letterboxing mask to exaggerate melodramatic "situations," thereby endowing such devices with more melodramatic punch because they carry authorial weight, Keaton uses the long shot as a defining characteristic not only of authorial style but also to differentiate his comedic efforts from those of his silent era peers.

One sticking point of widescreen criticism is that its critics contend that pre-widescreen film relied upon montage and insert shots to assemble narrative and direct the viewer's attention. Noel Carroll (1990) recognizes that Keatonian aesthetics hinge on the filmmaker's affinity for

the distant long shot. These distant long shots are crucial to many of Keaton's most famous sequences, and most occur years before the heyday of deep-focus cinematography of the latter 1930s and 1940s that gives way to widescreen in the 1950s. These distant long shots represent stylistic ruptures because Keaton resists the cutting style of other silent comedy peers and chooses to showcase his physical talents via the long shot. Of these long shots, Carroll writes "the spectator is meant to see and to take note of [all] the relevant regions" (125). This assessment of the long shot aesthetic within Keaton's oeuvre seems very similar to Bazin's (1953) argument that widescreen allows "freedom of participation" and extends cinema's "ability to reveal aspects of phenomenal reality"(10).

Carroll further unpacks the importance of the long (landscape) shot more by stating that Keaton's "long shots vivify the action by establishing that the action performed in the fictional context literally encompasses many of the same risks to life and limb that the represented act entails off-screen"(126). This use of the long shot is evidentiary for the stunts and/or gags, as competing rivals would often utilize montage to deploy their gags. Further, this consistent use of the long shot provides the verisimilitude that widescreen critics hail as a unique potentiality of the wider frame with fewer cuts, etc. Carroll presses an "authenticity theory" with regard to Keaton's use of the long shot and states that Keaton's use of the long shot cannot be simply targeted upon the gags because this restricted notion "cannot account for [its] use … time and again in scenes where there are no risks or stunts."(126) This distinction suggests Keaton's use of the long shot is a stylistic rupture for narrative purposes. Carroll's analysis of Keaton's long shot is limited to a discussion of its use in the feature-length *The General* (1927). Carroll even goes so far as to argue that the long shot is the "primary formal strategy" of organization within the film. (126) I would like to appropriate a portion of Carroll's argument for an examination of

Keaton's films, *The High Sign* (1921) and two features, *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924) and *Our Hospitality* (1923).

Like the Griffith examples, the aesthetics under consideration with Keaton are not the entire palette of formal elements (close-ups, landscape, angles and camera movement), but simply that of the landscape shot. Unlike the Griffith examples, Keaton's visual poetics do not necessarily rely upon physical ruptures (masking) or insert shots. Keaton's ruptures resist cutting gags into multiple shots and instead show them in landscape, long shot. These Keatonian aesthetics anticipate the widescreen aesthetics proffered by Bazin and Barr, thereby creating a disruption to the conventional style and use of devices in silent comedy. Whereas both Griffith and Gance physically rupture the frame's literal geometry, Keaton's unifying long shot serves as a link to the widescreen aesthetics that filmmakers normalize in the 1950s. Keaton's affinity for the long shot is novel insomuch as it repels silent comedy generic conventions for gag deployment.

In addition, Keaton's physical comedy is a comedy of space: that is, Keaton's dependence upon the long shot is narratively feasible because Keaton's stunts rely upon what Carroll calls the "authenticity theory." As Carroll has noted, Keaton's use of the long shot is an overall filmic strategy used throughout the various texts, and Carroll even suggests that the use of long shots throughout can unify whole filmic texts such as *The General*. I am suggesting even more that Keaton's long shot is an auteuristic convention that serves on the one hand to unify his texts – gags and narratives alike – but also to rupture previous paradigms by *not* cutting during a stunt. However, as we will see with *The High Sign* (1921), Keaton's stylistic ruptures do occasionally use physical ruptures within the frame, much the same as Griffith and Gance.

The High Sign (1921) is a fairly representative Keaton narrative where Keaton has been mistaken for both an assassin and a bodyguard and must rely on his otherworldly athleticism to save the day. The sequence discussed here deals with a chase in which the cleverly named gang, the Blinking Buzzards, is pursuing Keaton. Keaton is mindful of the spectator and considerate of the aesthetically jarring aspects of viewing multiple lines of action simultaneously. Therefore the narrative action follows Keaton as he skillfully and deftly moves from room to room in this booby-trapped mansion.

A long shot (in a vertical aspect ratio, no less) reveals a cutaway set with two rooms aligned on a vertical axis.

 Illustration 1.9

At the very least, the "alert" spectator here must perform an "active reading" of a vertical screen, a novelty to be sure. In any event, there are simultaneous lines of narrative action (both of which involve Buster running from his adversaries, Buzzard and Tiny) taking place concurrently on upper and lower floors, each commanding the spectator's attention or more precisely the redirection of the viewer's gaze. Keaton then pulls back to a longer shot and reveals a cutaway set with four rooms.
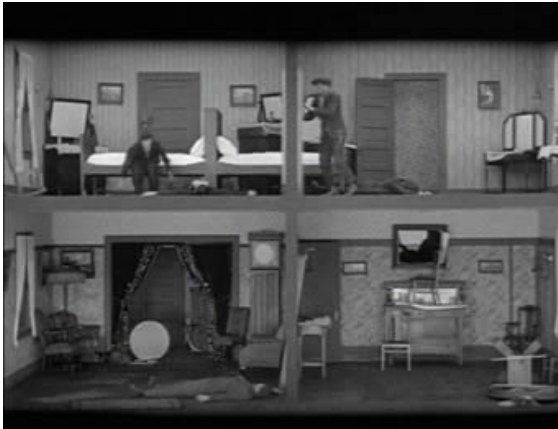
Illustration 1.10

An "alert" viewer must now divide his/her attention into four quadrants and follow four multiple

lines of action. While Keaton has multiplied the *mise-en-scene* by four, he directs the action even

in long shot by keeping the viewer's gaze fixed upon his diminutive feature acrobatically

maneuvering throughout the house. Keaton's use of the quadrant screen in long shot is seemingly

a forerunner to later *auteurs* such as Jacque Tati (Shneller apartment sequence in *Playtime*

(1967)) and Mike Figgis (*Timecode* (2000) features four separate quadrants of action taking

place simultaneously). Multi-image sequences and their relation to widescreen are examined

more in depth in chapter four with a selection of films from 1968.

In neither the two-room vertical set-up, nor the four-room quadrant set-up does Keaton

cut to a close-up in *The High Sign*. Therefore, Keaton is relying upon the spectator to follow

lighting-fast, multiple lines of action *without the intervention of montage*. That is, Keaton trusts

the spectator to read the visual text and to consume "actively" the various gags without being

explicitly directed as to *where* to look. This example displays Keaton's technical choice of

staging his gags in depth and filming them in long shot, which allows the pre-widescreen viewer

agency and participation in the gags. As we will further see with Keaton, if widescreen cinema in

the 1950s is an aesthetic *progression* from the Academy ratio, and as such it somehow relays its narratives in a more "natural and unforced" manner that encourages "greater physical involvement," we must locate its advantage elsewhere other than the lessened use of montage and/or the increase of long shot. Gerald Mast (1973) argues that Keaton's use of "far shot" is an attempt by the filmmaker to reveal the "interplay between man and nature" (130-131). Mast states that Keaton's recurring theme, the "little man juxtaposed with big universe," might well sum up the assessment of Keatonian widescreen aesthetics[9]. Keaton's use of long shot and fewer edits reveal the smallness of the actor and the grandiosity of his surroundings. Finally, Keaton's use of the long shot within *The High Sign* is a stylistic rupture of both *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. Keaton's set design creates the need for re-direction (not to mention the geometric quadrants) similar to that of Griffith's horizontal mask. Whereas Griffith's horizontal masks usually have precursory cuts, Keaton resists cutting, but rather allows the viewer to struggle to follow the action within the quadrant framing.

Keaton's Link to Widescreen "Norms"

In a survey of the prevailing scholarship with regard to widescreen aesthetics, Bazin, Perkins and Barr detail how widescreen tells narrative differently from the previous Academy Ratio – greater emphasis on space, resistance to montage and more fluid camera movement. These writers suggest that these transitions are teleological progressions in film style. The argument goes that if the screen space more closely mimics the horizontal space of human perception, it achieves a greater approximation of authentic human experience.

---

[9] Mast's comment about Keaton's *mise-en-scene* is almost verbatim to that of Gunning describing Griffith's visual style in certain films as the "juxtaposition of human form against the monumental form of nature."(235)

Central to both Perkins' and Barr's discussion of widescreen aesthetics is the valise sequence from Preminger's *River of No Return*. A useful comparison of Perkins's and Barr's critique of the floating valise in *River of No Return* can be seen in Keaton's *Our Hospitality*. Keaton and his lover have been chased into a river with crushing rapids and a swift current. Buster has fallen out of his boat, and thus is left to display his soaring talents alone in the water. Contrast the panned long shot/long take in *Our Hospitality* with the widescreen sequence *par excellence* (according to Perkins/Barr) from *River of No Return*: The spectator watches Keaton float violently downstream, avoiding rapids and certain death. However, Keaton does not allow for what Barr says is the "traditional method" by drawing attention to himself floating downstream and making his "significance unmistakable by cutting in close-ups." Keaton stylistically ruptures by *not cutting* and films in one long shot, panning downstream. As he grows ever smaller in the current, Keaton's tiny figure is juxtaposed to the immensity of nature (Preminger uses the comparison of man vs. nature to spectacularize widescreen's proportions as we will see in the next chapter).

Keaton's aesthetic style tells us that he is not concerned with directing a viewer's attention (or rupturing) with insert cuts to show emotion; Keaton's "stoneface" would never allow such manipulation and is itself a stylistic rupture of acting. Keaton's poetics reveal the process, very much the way Preminger's lack of cuts to the valise does.

Illustration 1.11

Illustration 1.12

Illustration 1.13

Illustration 1.14

Illustration 1.15

Illustration 1.16

Barr claims that the pre-widescreen era filmmakers such as Keaton were constrained by

the Academy ratio format, but I find these two sequences — one Academy ratio and one

CinemaScope — to have virtually the same framing, camera distance and lack of cutting. While

Keaton perhaps did not cut the scene because he regarded such inserts as "fakes" and would

devalue his gag, nonetheless his technical choice mirrors that of Preminger's sequence.[10] Both

---

[10] An obvious criticism is that Preminger "plays" off the foreground vs. background action
whereas Keaton's visuals allow the viewer to focus upon Keaton. This valid criticism equates the

sequences involve "participation" on the part of the viewer to follow on-screen action. However, in both films technical experiments regarding cuts and focal length were made, to say nothing of blocking. Both films demand the viewer's attention to shots composed in depth, without resorting to the use of insert shots that disrupt and harness one's perception. Both Keaton's and Preminger's experimental stylistic rupture in their respective scenes have similar goals – to resist cutting and therefore authenticate the experience through stystlic means.

Keaton and Preminger rely upon the same cutting style (or lack of it) for these river sequences. Critics have historically claimed that widescreen films encouraged longer takes, but history also shows that widescreen films absorbed the cutting styles of the classical style. David Bordwell (1985) writes that:

> CinemaScope, many felt, would call for a revision of norms of staging and cutting. CinemaScope would eliminate close-ups, slow down cutting, decrease depth of field, reduce camera movements, and increase the distortion of wide-angle lenses. . . . although initially the cutting rate of widescreen films slowed somewhat, very soon a widescreen film enjoyed the same range of options available in the standard format. (199-200)

In this light, the aesthetic considerations regarding *River of No Return* are not necessarily grounded in some "new form of spectatorship" that widescreen critics advocate but are rooted in the auteurist, stylistic choices deployed by a select few pre-widescreen filmmakers such as Keaton.

---

two narrative trajectories of the films, but Keaton's oeuvre is filled with his being in precarious and dangerous situations where he is the focus in long shot. Preminger's narrative follows several characters as they progress through their own "wilderness" in search of "civilization."

A final observation on Keaton's utilization of Barr's "alert" spectator in the pre-widescreen era can be found in two sequences in *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924). When trying to outwit one of his many opponents, Buster finds himself trapped on a rooftop with a villain escaping two stories below in an automobile. Not to be thwarted, Buster elegantly glides down to the ground on a railroad crossing arm down to the unsuspecting villain's open sedan.

Illustration 1.17

This scene is significant not only for Keaton's fearless grace and courage but also for the multiple lines of action taking place. The screen is spatially divided and adheres to the "authenticity theory" by *not* cutting. While not physically ruptured as in *The High Sign* via a cutaway set, Keaton's stylistic rupture here is via composition. The telephone pole provides the symmetrical divider separating Keaton and his villain. The "alert" spectator must watch as Keaton paces back and forth on the rooftop pondering his action, while the villain is entering and starting his automobile. Keaton's long shot division of the two actions requires the spectator to follow action both high and low, each progressing toward the middle (both actors in the car). Thus, when Keaton takes his graceful fall into the backseat, the spectator is rewarded for having pursued both lines of narrative progress. Walter Kerr posits a notion with regard to Keaton's

concern for "the integrity of the frame" (1975, 123). Kerr asserts that Keaton, unlike Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin, would not allow cutting "to replace the recording function of the camera, [the camera and editing] must not *create* the happening" (123).

This example is further evidence that Barr's "alert spectator" is not a byproduct of widescreen cinema and its lack of cutting. In attempting to reassemble Keaton's technical choices in this sequence (or in any of the examples discussed), it is obvious that Keaton could have cut this sequence differently and created different, less subtle meanings. Barr's claim is that pre-widescreen film relies upon cuts to direct the viewer's attention within the image. While Keaton may have suggested that cuts were "faking," he nonetheless is employing stystlic choices and thus aesthetic creations that Barr claims are proprietary to widescreen filmmaking. Therefore, if we are to espouse the differences between filmmaking before and after widescreen's absorption, then we must locate those differences elsewhere.

Both Griffith and Keaton use and employ such "widescreen" aesthetics as masking and long shots in landscapes and both are in service of the narrative. While Griffith's phsycial ruptures of screen shape and space function as either a means of isolating characters or showing the epic nature of rebellion mobs, Keaton's use of the long shot is generically motivated by his devotion to his craft and abilities. Whereas Griffith wants to control the spectator's gaze and focus it via the "short screen" of the horizontal mask, Keaton directs the spectator by *not* cutting away when dangerous situations climax. Both are experimental ruptures that require different types of direction on the part of the viewer. Griffith's horizontal mask is a phsycial rupture and Keaton's stylistic rupture relies upon the long shot for "authenticity."

Abel Gance

In the final section, my discussion of Able Gance's *Napoleon* is both a departure (and progression) from the poetics of both Griffith and Keaton. Griffith and Keaton are visionary filmmakers experimenting with physical and stylistic ruptures to create grandeur and spectacle. Gance, on the other hand does not want simple, physical ruptures of frame geometry, or even evidentiary cinematic/stylistic ruptures to convince his audience of his authenticity. Gance wants a new cinema altogether; one which cannot be constrained by the Academy Ratio or conventional theatrical exhibition.

To pronounce Gance as a "precursor" of widescreen is at best an understatement. To say that Abel Gance is responsible for the widescreen revolution of the 1950s is also not inaccurate. Professor Henri Chretien attended the premiere of *Napoleon* at the Theatre National de l'Opera in Paris on April 7, 1927. Like the rest of the attendees, Chretien was amazed at the use of the triptych (multiple screens which required expanded width of viewing area) sequences at the film's conclusion. However, Chretien saw the immediate technical problems inherent in multiple cameras and multiple projectors (there was even a projection problem at the premiere). Chretien developed the Hypergonar anamorphic lens in 1927 and offered it to various studios within the French film industry[11]. In 1953, 20th Century Fox purchased the rights to Chretien's anamorphic lens and christened it CinemaScope. (Brownlow, 1983, 159)

As with any analysis of formalist aesthetics, the critic must examine the historical conditions, expectations and/or conventions under which new aesthetic and technical devices are introduced. Gance certainly realized the commercial limitations of the Polyvision system. In fact, Paramount had been in talks with Gance about the device and concluded that the system was too

---

[11] Two 1929 films— *La Merveilleuse Vie Jeanne d-Arc* and *Construire un feu* were shot with Chretien's Hypergonar lens in France, but no surviving prints are available.

costly.[12] Gance's vision, however, was for cinematic experimentation and not (simply) product differentiation. Brownlow (1983) writes, "a simple panoramic vision was not the sole aim of Gance's device. He wanted extend the emotional and psychological range of montage, and to compare and contrast images across the three screens."(132) The extension of "range" across three screens that expand from the initial Academy Ratio format is the very embodiment of a physical rupture: the standard format of the Academy Ratio was simply deemed as too confining for the type of epic imagery Gance felt the story called for. This expansion/division of the frame is an authorial device used to implicate Gance as narrator and to re-inscribe his cinematic worldview. Such physical ruptures of the frame as auteurist devices that point to the author are the very hallmarks of Gance's contribution in *Napoleon*. As evidenced by Griffith and other epic filmmakers, long running times that span many diegetic years are prerequisites of the epic film. Gance realized that to expand the concept of what epic filmmaking could be and to accurately depict the scale of the story's protagonist and situations, he needed a device or technique to vivify his textual imagery.

In Griffith's experiments with physical ruptures, the director certainly wants a feeling of expanded visual and physical space and a simultaneous realization of the reduction of the human figure. Similarly, Keaton's stylistic ruptures — whether a small figure ping-ponging throughout a booby-trapped mansion, drifting along in the current or floating down to Earth on a railroad arm — all speak to Carroll's authenticity theory as well as the realization of Keaton's small man versus large environment. Gance simply needs more visual space to tell an epic story and experiments with a physical rupture to accomplish this end. All three filmmakers realize that to

---

[12] Paramount did however introduce the wide-gauge Magnafilm process in 1929.

enact new visual poetics requires experimenting with the geometry of the film frame and therefore rupturing systematized continuity conventions.

In an interview with Kevin Brownlow, Gance comments upon the genesis of the Polyvision sequence:

> I felt a lack of space in certain scenes, that the images were too small. Even the large images were too small for me. … I had the idea of extending the screen. I vaguely thought that if I had one camera looking right, one forward, one left, then I'd have a vast panorama. I realized from the very outset that here was a new alphabet for the cinema. (Brownlow, 1983, 131-132; *Cinema Europe*, 2005)

Gance experimented with this "new alphabet" and produced an innovative aesthetic language for the filmic event of *Napoleon*.[13] While Griffith and Keaton primarily repurpose landscape long shots to deploy their "widescreen" aesthetics, Gance's goal was not a "simple panorama" but rather to create and experimental dialectic between images of various focal lengths. Gance alternately uses the Polyvision system to display an epic panorama or two long shots as book ends to a central medium long shot. Gance's "new alphabet" includes a wider canvas upon which to compose, but also increases the functionality and aesthetic choices available to the filmmaker. If Gance chooses to simply expand his compositions for wider panoramas to show scope and scale, then the Polyvision system allows for such visual and pictorial expansion (literally). In any of these combinations, Gance's experimental use of

---

[13] Ironically, this analysis is confined to those versions available on home video options such as VHS or DVD. As with CinemaScope and other widescreen processes considered within this project, the DVD presentation of *Napoleon* 's triptych sequence is letterboxed and therefore shrunk. While this effect is certainly the opposite of what Gance hoped to overcome in his "lack of space," the reduction of image size does not prohibit the aesthetic analysis of technique that concerns this project.

Polyvision is the very definition of a physical rupture (especially in its proper exhibition format).

Similar to Griffith's experiments that served to challenge Bitzer, and Keaton's "authenticating"

long shot," Gance's goal of re-attenuating the viewer's gaze by altering and/or manipulating the

filmic frame attains the rupturing effect he describes as a "new alphabet."

 Illustration 1.18

Gance's physical ruptures fit rather succinctly into a typology of choices. Often Gance

chooses to alternate between shots of varying focal length and spatial placement, thus creating an

alternative to traditional montage – a horizontal linear montage – without cutting.

 Illustration 1.19

Gance's "new alphabet" provides multiple points of focus within the triptych panorama.

Note, however that Gance's three individual narrative units are all in the standard Academy

Ratio. Thus, even though Gance is creating new compositions by multiplying the visual field of

narrative space, he is ultimately constrained to the compositional possibilities allowed by 4:3

aspect ratio for each individual panel. As Brownlow states, Gance is able in this configuration to

compose the three screens "into one central action and two framing actions" (559). Within the

Polyvision sequence Gance experiments with three compositional strategies: 1) a unified

panorama across the screen; 2) compositions that are book ended or 3) three disparate frames

altogether.[14]

1) **Illustration 1.20**

2) **Illustration 1.21**

3) **Illustration 1.22**

While Gance employs a variety of framing strategies among the three panels, for the

majority of the triptych sequence Gance centralizes the most important action, and the center

---

[14] These 3 compositional set-ups are by no means exhaustive, but rather descriptive of Gance's tendencies with regard to compositional arrangement among the 3 separate panels. These frame grabs are meant to be representative of the three distinct set-ups, but it should be repeated that the compositions within the panels vary quite a bit in the final 17 minutes.

panel is also where intertitles appear during the sequence, further evidence that Gance has

centered a spectator's focus and viewing strategy.[15]

Illustration1.23

Illustration 1.24

Aside from the obvious grandeur of the overall composition, how does Gance use these

new framing strategies to rupture in comparison to Griffith and Keaton? Griffith uses the

horizontal mask either to accentuate a character's isolation or to spectacularize an epic action

sequence. Keaton uses the long shot to "authenticate" his virtuosity and physical skills, while

simultaneously flaunting aspects of *mise-en-scene* and set design (four-quadrant set, railroad

arm, etc). Gance's desires for the Polyvision sequence of *Napoleon* are those of both Griffith and

Keaton but multiplied by three and with the benefit of montage *within* a panorama composition.

Napoleon's generic heritage is that of both biopic and epic, and therefore Gance is able to draw

on a rich tradition of generic conventions and narrative paradigms to inform his visual style.

---

[15] One sequence does feature intertitles spread across all three panels.

However, Gance's utilization (and invention) of new technology sets him apart from those who come before him, to a certain extent. That said, Gance's framing strategies in the final 17 minutes of *Napoleon* do have a great deal in common with those used by Griffith and Keaton.

Since Gance's experimental widescreen aesthetics represent a prototypical use of the physical rupture, I would like to attend to Gance's three Polyvision set-ups in more detail. In framing set-up 1, Gance showcases the expansive possibilities of the Polyvision system. By utilizing such panoramic potentialities, Gance echoes the choices of both Griffith and Keaton who both desired a greater expanse of space to show their characters in relation to their surroundings (albeit for different generic ends). Gance's display of visual sweep and scale foreshadows the "sword and sandal" epics of the 1950s and 1960s shot in CinemaScope or other widescreen processes. However, in set-ups 2 and 3, Gance is creating visual strategies proprietary to the Polyvision system and *Napoleon*.

Both set-up 2 and 3 show Gance's experimental brilliance in terms of composition, revelation of character knowledge and emotional and moral engagement of the spectator. Set-up 2 uses contextual compositional strategies to maximize visual impact. Gance focuses a tight close-up of Napoleon (Albert Dieudonne) in the centralized panel, but this middle composition of the general is book-ended by clouds, thus contextualizing the military leader as something godlike. The contextual elements of this composition (clouds) are not localized to the overall section of the conference in Albegna. Rather, the associations of this compositional strategy among the three panels allow Gance to show his star in close-up and centered and also to contextualize the grandeur of the character Napoleon visually without breaking the close-up shot. In this way, Gance combines the separate respective physical and stylistic ruptures of Griffith

and Keaton. Gance's simultaneous desire for spectacle and yet resistance to cutting lead to a synergistic display of the ruptures offered by both Griffith and Keaton.

Early CinemaScope directors use a similar strategy in the early 1950s as they struggle to fill the "new" horizontality of the wide frame. David Bordwell (1997) writes "one tactic … specific to CinemaScope was the effort to block off sides of the image with props or patches of darkness. Another was to use … 'inner frames,' which broke the picture format into chunks that were more readily grasped" (242). Certainly Bordwell's points are valid to early CinemaScope visual style, but Gance is using similar compositional poetics here in set-ups 2 and 3 some 26 years before CinemaScope. Essentially, Gance is able to achieve a kind of diopter lens effect within these set-ups. Certain areas (single panels) are in sharp close-up, while other panels use compositions that are in long shot. Set-up 2 is similar to Set-up 1 in that it relies upon the contextuality of all three frames. The centralized pane is book ended by the outer frames that serve as parenthetical visual material. The central frame is exactly that; it is the central composition of narrative material and is supported, literally and narratively, by the outer frames.

Camera Set-up 3 is perhaps the most disparate and striking use of rupture of Gance's Polyvision sequence. In this set-up, Gance is able to show three distinct compositions that contextually and narratively coincide and complement one another but also function as stand-alone narrative units. Consider the following composition in set-up 3.

Illustration 1.25

Gance has trained the spectator after some 13 minutes of Polyvision viewing to rely upon the central frame for the most salient narrative information (of course, the center panel was the *only* frame for the previous 205 minutes of running time). Napoleon is in a tight close-up framing, but this time he is bordered not by two similar compositions to serve as parenthetical support as in set-up 2. In set-up 3 Gance bookends the central frame with two panels that feature dense compositions of narrative importance but which also require repeated redirection of the viewer's gaze. The outer panels cycle through a series of superimpositions to create chaotic compositions that reflect the inner thoughts of Napoleon even as the battle swirls around him. Initially the sequence suggests artistic and compositional bravura simply for the effect of astonishment and spectacle. Gance accomplishes both aims but also elevates the entire sequence with a greater depth of character knowledge. Ultimately, Gance's experimental physical rupture of the geometry of the frame amounts to a simultaneous horizontal montage. Rather than viewing images one after another, Gance supplies a series of horizontally harmonized images that are to be read at once as both text and context.

Gance's triad of compositional strategies in the widescreen format foreshadows the coming of new widescreen norms. Gance "orchestrates" the Polyvision format in unique ways that suggest widescreen filmmaking necessitates different aesthetic strategies to compensate for the change in formal dimensions. Gance uses the Polyvision format to isolate the character of Napoleon and alternately to display the panoramic grandeur of battle sequences. These strategies are experimental forebearers of the stylistic ruptures that occur in the films of 1930 and the 'Scope era of the 1950s. Because Abel Gance is among the first to experiment with widescreen processes, the examination of his stylistic and physical ruptures to the frame are significant.

Gance uses the width of the frame with a variety of strategies to achieve different goals. Gance alternately foregrounds the panoramic possibilities of multi-image set-ups or isolates individual compositions to create multiple views across the width of the frame. The choice to use the expanse of the wide frame for a single composition to segment the frame into more manageable and modular units is a familiar refrain throughout this project. Due to widescreen's horizontality and therefore lower vertical scale, filmmakers will choose either to string *mise-en-scene* elements along the Y axis, or compartmentalize the wide frame's lateral orientation with smaller portions. The choice to exploit the entire width of the frame with one, uninterrupted composition or to fracture the wide frame into smaller components will persist as an experimental bellwether for widescreen aesthetics throughout this project.[16]

What do these separate silent era experiments with ruptures suggest about pre-widescreen aesthetics? First and foremost, filmmakers in the silent era of the Academy Ratio conduct trials with non-standard framing strategies. Griffith uses the "short screening" mask to isolate characters or spectacularize certain sequences; Keaton uses the long shot and resists montage to "authenticate" his the brilliance and danger of his gags. Gance uses the expansion of the screen in the Polyvision sequence as an epic climax to an ambitious story of one diminutive military leader. All three filmmakers subjugate the screen's formal properties in order to rupture the film frame's conventional properties. Second, in addition to rupturing the "inflexible" frame, the filmmakers dualistically are able to inform the viewer of important character and environmental knowledge. Gance expands the palette and range of what Griffith and Keaton had already done using more traditional cinematic means. Gance's use of the three-paneled Polyvision system is

---

[16] John Belton notes that although *Napoleon* was screened in America, MGM eliminated the Polyvision sequences. Therefore, while widescreen films from a variety of American studios initially "debut" in 1930, Gance's influence upon the visual style of such films could not have been significant.

the spectacular springboard from which Chretien's Hypergonar and ultimately CinemaScope leap. Third, the compositional strategies employed by Gance in set-ups 2 and 3 will not be seen again in a wide format until the ruptures of 1967 discussed in Chapter 4. Gance's poetics within the triptych sequence are technological bravura to be sure, but these stylistic flourishes serve auteurist goals.

Are Griffith, Keaton and Gance the only filmmakers to use such "widescreen" poetics as physical and stylistic ruptures in the silent era? With the exception of Gance, other filmmakers probably did employ similar tactics to those of Griffith and Keaton to explore some generic and/or development within the Academy Ratio. However, these three auteurs have established reputations in the film canon as not only innovators of style but also of genre. Griffith's exploitation of the letterbox, horizontal masks is motivated foremost by his experimental nature to disrupt the frame. Griffith's devotion to the melodramatic formula provides for both the character isolation and visual spectacle that such physical ruptures allow. Griffith's experimentation ultimately serves generic ends. Keaton's long shot and resistance to montage serves the purpose of comedic narrative distribution, but also what Noel Carroll calls the "authentication" of Keatonian physicality of gags. To be sure, other silent era film comedians used long shots and resisted montage to deploy their gags. Keaton uniquely allows for so many of his narratives to be stylistically ruptured via the long shot and resists the cut so often for comedic effect that his choices must be regarded as both auteurist signature and disruptive to generic norms for cutting to gags in silent comdey. Finally, Abel Gance is perhaps more responsible for the ruptures any widescreen revolution (regardless of historic era) than any person or aesthetic shift that is chronicled in this project. Gance's vision of a greater expanse of screen is however motivated not simply by a desire for "a panorama" but to disrupt the

conventional film frame by "orchestrating" various narrative and character developments with the Polyvision process. The orchestration among the three separate panels appear alternately as either: a horizontal, linear montage; a sweeping panorama; or a central frame that is book ended by parenthetical and supplementary narrative content. Gance's expanded screen area is really a larger palette upon which the filmmaker is able to delve deeper into the character's (Napoleon's) motivations and desires, which ultimately serves the generic purposes of the biopic and the epic.

Chapter 2:
The Big Trail*, *The Bat Whispers
and the 'invention' of widescreen style in 1930

The close-up will be done away with because the medium shot of the players will be large enough to show their expressions without thrusting enormous countenances registering gargantuan passion or shedding tears the size of marbles into the very faces of the spectator. — Campbell MacCullough (*Motion Picture*, June 1930, 108)

I know that I shall find it difficult … to return to the cramped proportions of out present-day standard film. … From my experience with 70 millimeter cinematography on *The Big Trail* I can confidently say that the wider film's not only the coming medium for such great pictures, but that it will undoubtedly become the favored one for all types of picture. It marks a definite advance in motion picture technique. — Arthur Edeson, ASC (1930, 8)

Thus widescreen remained more of a novelty than a norm, even though Grandeur and other wide-film processes avoided the gimmicky, image-expansion techniques … it did transform the established spectator-screen relationship. — John Belton (1992, 51)

Nineteen thirty was a watershed for widescreen filmmaking. Fox Film Company, MGM and Warner Bros. were all developing experimental systems for the apparently impending switch to a widescreen standard. The uncertainty brought about by such a technical transition made for difficult decisions among both producers and technicians. *Motion Picture News* (May 10, 1930) magazine reported that "practically all technical lab development was brought to a halt until definite action is agreed upon by all the producers" with regard to the new aspect ratio/film stock standards. (27) Eventually, the SMPE (re)decided in 1932 to restore the 1.33:1 Academy ratio as the standard. In the transitional years between 1927-1932, the studios experimented with numerous formats, processes and film stocks[17]. The discussion here will be limited to the experimental ruptures found in Fox's *The Big Trail* (1930) and United Artists' *The Bat Whispers* (1930).

What makes these particular wide film trials noteworthy is that both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* were shot in both wide and Academy ratios *simultaneously*.[18] This process of concurrent production with multiple formats had recently been deemed necessary with the advent of sound filmmaking where multiple versions of films were produced in various languages to facilitate distribution to overseas ancillary markets. *The Big Trail* was filmed in two cinematographic formats, but it was also shot (with different casts) in at least 4 other languages to compensate for the European markets Hollywood relied so heavily upon in the silent era. (Crafton, 1997, 428-429)

---

[17] For a full examination of the technical machinations of this period see James Limbacher's *Four Aspects of the Film* (1978) and Leo Enticknap's *Moving Image Technology* (2005).
[18] While there were approximately 15-20 other "widescreen" films produced in the early 1930s, the two texts examined represent the unique options of viewing both widescreen and Academy versions and interrogating the differences in visual style.

Certainly the need for product differentiation in addition to the protection of investment was crucial to Fox's and United Artists' thinking. As wide films had few exhibition opportunities at this time, it is in the producers' best interests to minimize risk and produce 35mm versions of these "test" films to insure widespread exhibition opportunities. In fact, scholars such as Rick Mitchell (1987) and John Belton (1992) have noted that only first-run theaters in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles could show 70/65mm films in 1930. The concerns of this project however are not the exhibition opportunities (or lack thereof) for such films, but the result that wide versions were produced side-by-side with Academy ratio versions. An analysis of visual style (close ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement) represented by both versions of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* is fruitful in determining specifically of how wide films ruptured Academy Ratio era norms of both *mise-en-scene* and cinematography.

The experimental and stylistic ruptures present in the wide versions of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* are revealed in comparison to their "safe" 1.33:1 aspect ratio versions. This unique moment of concurrent production offers several lines of inquiry with regard to historical widescreen poetics. What experimental stylistic ruptures (in terms of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement) occur to accommodate the expanded horizontal frame? In side-by-side comparisons, how do the wide versions stylistically differ from their Academy Ratio counterparts, and what accounts for these differences? Are the stylistic adaptations the result of authorship and/or generic contracts? The "test" films of 1930 reveal the initial possibilities of the widescreen film style that reach fruition in the 1950s when widescreen exhibition is a new physical norm rather than a fleeting experiment.

The analysis of the two films (and four versions) in this chapter reveals several stylistic rupturing strategies of early wide filmmaking that hold true for wide films even through the

1950s. First, the wide versions of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* use fewer cuts within the wider horizontal field. Cinematographers such as Arthur Edeson and William Stull suggest that widescreen's horizontal parameters challenge traditional camera set-ups from the Academy Ratio paradigm, and fewer cuts in widescreen films show an early resistance to continuity editing conventions. Because the wider frame is geometrically and spatially distinct from the Academy Ratio, traditional cutting strategies must be stylistically adapted in experimental ways. Close-ups are reduced to medium shots, and conversational set-ups therefore do not alternate between singles but rather play out in medium two shots. Subsequently, the challenge to alternating singles in conventional shot-reverse shot strategies results in actions playing out in fewer cuts. This conversion of close-ups to medium shots is considered a hallmark of widescreen's "debut" in the 1950s, but analysis of both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* reveals that this strategy was well trod in widescreen's earliest films.

Second, early widescreen filmmakers experiment with a fairly simple formal adaptation, but one that stylistically ruptures traditional production practices from pre-production planning and set construction through post-production editing — lower camera heights. The lower camera within the wide versions of both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* represents a departure from the Academy Ratio paradigm of filmmaking and exposes a number of secondary experimental adaptations. When cinematographers Arthur Edeson (*The Big Trail*) and Joseph Planck (*The Bat Whispers*) frame their scenes with lower heights, certain widescreen traits become apparent, specifically their challenge to traditional Academy Ratio-era blocking strategies, camera movement and camera angles. Additionally, the lower camera heights (which also lead to fewer cuts) prescribe other adaptations of traditional filmmaking trends such as lower overall set heights and lighting strategies that are more lateral as opposed to deep and/or vertical. The

enumeration and analysis of the stylistic ruptures present in the wide versions of *The Big Trail*

and *The Bat Whispers* evidence points plotted in the development of new formal "norms" of

visual style in widescreen filmmaking's heyday — the 1950s.

The Big Trail and The Bat Whispers

      The Big Trail is a Raoul Walsh western starring John Wayne (in his first leading role),

and the 70mm Grandeur version of the film was photographed by noted cinematographer Arthur

Edeson, A.S.C. (*All Quiet on the Western Front, Frankenstein, The Maltese Falcon,*

Casablanca) for Fox. Edeson's 70mm compositions and camera set-ups differ significantly

(fewer close-ups, lateral staging, little camera movement, etc.) from those of the Academy

version of the film shot by Lucien N. Androit. Ironically, Edeson (with Gregg Toland) shot the

original silent version of *The Bat* (1926), which is the predecessor of the other multiple-format

film discussed in this chapter, *The Bat Whispers*. *The Bat Whispers* is also shot by two different

cinematographers simultaneously (Ray June/35mm and Robert H. Planck/70 mm), but the

compositions and camera set-ups do not exemplify the experimental disparity of *The Big Trail*'s

dual formats. The aesthetic techniques in both films reveal what norms might look like for wide

films in the 1950s, and these test cases of 1930 provide an underreported link in how early

widescreen filmmakers experiment and adapt the use of close-ups, landscape shots, angles, and

camera movement.

      A textual comparison between films shot in two versions is not as clear-cut as it may first

appear. By limiting formal considerations to close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and camera

movement, the task is narrowed, but certain questions remain. For instance, if Androit chooses to

frame a scene in the Academy version of *The Big Trail* in a medium close-up and Edeson

follows suit, does this mean that Edeson is shooting for the same representative meaning or that

the focal capabilities of the Grandeur lens simply will not allow him to get any closer? Similarly, if June chooses to frame a shallow set in a master long shot in the Academy Ratio version of *The Bat Whispers*, but subsequently cuts to close-ups, does this mean that Planck must do the same? How then are we to differentiate what are aesthetic choices by the filmmakers and what are technical/logistical necessities? By examining the texts as they are presented on screen, the stylistic ruptures represented in the two versions of both films are apparent. The pre-production of both films favor the wide versions in the production process; that is, preference is given to the wide film frame in all areas of *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. Therefore, one stylistic rupture can be said to occur in the pre-production phase — the designing of sets, lighting schemes, etc., required for both versions of both films give preference to the wide version and its non-normative characteristics.

The Big Trail

Arthur Edeson's (1930) remarks regarding the Grandeur (70mm) version of *The Big Trail* in *America Cinematographer* sound strikingly similar to those offered by widescreen critics after the introduction of CinemaScope in the 1950s. The later suggest that longer takes and fewer edits will result in the "fin du montage" and a new style of formal visual strategies. Edeson not only espouses these sentiments in 1930 but comments upon the formal differences of the wide versions from that of Lucien Androit's Academy Ratio version. Edeson states:

In working on such a picture as "The Big Trail," 70 millimeter is a tremendously important aid for the epic sweep of the picture demands that it be painted against a great canvas. Grandeur gives us such a canvas to work with, and enable us to make the background play its part in the picture. … The background thus plays a vitally important role in the picture – a role which can only be brought out completely by being shown as 70 millimeter film can show it.

Lucien Androit … did a superb piece of work, but the medium with which he was working could not begin capture the vast sweep of the story and its background as did the Grandeur. Working in 35mm film, he was simply unable to dramatize the backgrounds as did the larger film, for in 35 mm he could not attempt to adequately show both the vast backgrounds and the intimate foreground action in a single shot as the Grandeur cameras can. (1930, 9)

Edeson believes the Grandeur version of the film is superior because of its aesthetic "advantages" over the Academy version. The Grandeur version is visually superior to Edeson because it captures the "epic sweep" of the narrative and the 70mm version allows "vast backgrounds and the intimate foreground action in a single shot." Edeson goes out of his way to list the deficiencies of the Academy version and suggests stylistic differences between the 70mm and 35mm versions. By stating that Androit's 35mm version is "simply unable to dramatize" visual material with the same impact that Grandeur does, Edeson asserts that Grandeur necessitates ruptures to conventional Academy Ratio practices of the Master shot and subsequent edits. Based upon Edeson's *ex post facto* comments, there are a number of ways in which the two versions can be seen as divergent and typify the changes that the shift to widescreen warrant – 1) lower camera heights, 2) lower set construction, 3) lateral blocking (as opposed to deep and vertical placement of actors), and finally fewer overall edits as a cumulative result of these factors.

In a Feburary 1930 *American Cinematographer* article criticizing the usefulness of the Granduer 70mm process, cinematographer William Stull's (1930) remarks echo those of Edeson but announce even more specifically the stylistic ruptures necessary for widescreen. Stull writes:

Viewed from a practical viewpoint, the Granduer proportions (2.10:1) offer many

advantages to all concerned. The director can film his spectacular scenes or stage dancing

numbers to their best advantage, with fewer cuts – and no need of close-ups. The cameraman has greater scope in his composition, and considerable advantages in his lighting. For instance, the present disproportionately high sets necessitated by the more nearly square picture have made such things as backlighting increasingly difficult. … Similarly, the art directors are confronted with grave problems in the design and artistic ornamentation of the higher sets. … In Grandeur, all of these problems are reduced. … The cinematographer's task is lightened inasmuch as the sets do not have to be made nearly so high, allowing the back-lightings to strike at more effective and natural angles. (43)

While Edeson may simply be stating that his Grandeur version is superior to that of Androit's Academy version of *The Big Trail* and thus possibly becoming part of the promotional machine for Grandeur and Fox, Stull has no such impetus. Both cinematographers echo what widescreen critics recognize as the hallmarks of wide filmmaking in the 1950s — fewer cuts within horizontally composed frames, complete with bravura camera movement.

Edeson and Stull's comments propose an interesting set of binaries. If wide filmmakers have a choice between cutting into close-up *or* shooting in long shot, the wide filmmaker will opt not to cut because early widescreen filmmakers believed that close-ups were no longer needed. Historically, in the Academy ratio, the first camera set-up of a scene is usually a Master long shot to establish space and screen direction. The subsequent coverage of the action is divided into closer framed cuts that maintain screen direction and hypothetically will drive the action with tempo in post-production editing. *The Big Trail* opposes this paradigm, according to both Edeson's and Stull's assessment of the new technology's aesthetic demands. Wide filmmakers,

they suggest, establish a scene with a wider Master shot from a similar focal length (with different lenses) as the Academy ratio. Edeson writes:

> … the 70 millimeter camera must use a lens of approximately double the focal length of the lens used to make a corresponding 35 mm. shot. Or, reversing the example, when the cameraman uses a lens of a given focal length, the standard cameraman must use a lens of approximately half that size to make his corresponding shot. The shortest focal-length lens that I used during the making of *The Big Trail* was 50 mm. … When I used a fifty on a shot, the standard cameraman would use a twenty-five to produce a corresponding shot on his smaller film; when his shot required a fifty, mine would demand a four inch, and so on. In this picture, though the majority of the scenes were duplicated shot for shot, in each size of film, as nearly as was possible, the Grandeur version, being considered the most important, received the greater attention. So it was the requirements of the 70 millimeter cameras that dictated the lenses to be used, the set-ups, action, and all such matters. (1930, 8)

However, because the 70mm film format allows filmmakers to shoot scenes "to their best advantage … with fewer cuts – and no need of close-ups," set-ups need not be thought of in terms of Master shot and coverage, but rather as a beginning camera position and the progression via camera movement and/or actor positioning throughout the scene.

To clarify, I am not asserting (and neither do Edeson or Stull) that wide filmmaking eliminates close-ups nor does it preclude the process of coverage from various camera positions and focal lengths. However, as a textual analysis of both versions of *The Big Trail* will reveal, Androit's and Edeson's versions differ significantly with regard to their camera set-ups, framings and length of takes. Edeson also states that the Grandeur version was considered "most

important" and received "greater attention … it was the requirements of the 70 millimeter cameras that dictated the lenses to be used, the set-ups, action, and all such matters" on both versions of *The Big Trail*. (8) Therefore, while the 35mm version of *The Big Trail* is framed in the aspect ratio (1.37:1) that most prints of *The Big Trail* will be exhibited in, the Grandeur version dictated how the shoot proceeded. This distinction is significant for a variety of reasons.

First, the Academy ratio version (according to both Edeson and Stull) requires more attention to both camera and lighting set-ups in order to accommodate the "disproportionately high" sets. As will be apparent throughout the analysis, close-ups of featured characters are lit with traditional glamour lighting in the Academy version, but not so in the Grandeur version. In some ways, this comparison makes the Grandeur version a more democratic viewing experience (as Bazin and Barr suggest) because the spectator is not necessarily visually cued where to look within the wider frame. Second, because the Grandeur version's compositions are horizontal rather than vertical, compositions are not composed in depth (foreground to background) so much as they are arranged (center-left-right) across its width. To summarize, the disparities between the versions in *The Big Trail* are evident in the resistance to cutting due to lower camera height and the lateral blocking of actors. Because of the wider lateral scope of the Grandeur version, set heights and lighting strategies are also of significance.

A comparison of the different opening sequences reveals that the Academy ratio version is more vertically composed with a higher camera angle. This composition gives way to a series of closer framings, and the deeper focus of the Academy Ratio 35mm lens supplies a greater depth of field. Further, the 35mm version reframes by panning twice within the sequence while the Grandeur version has fewer cuts, no camera movement and no focal lengths closer than a medium shot. In the opening sequence, the wagon train that will be trekking west to Oregon is

seen readying for the journey. A variety of tasks are taking place – women washing clothes, men checking wagon equipment, etc. The group does not have a reliable guide for their journey, but young Breck Coleman (John Wayne) will soon be engaged to escort them. Coleman offers to help the pioneers not only because he knows the land they will be traversing, but also because he suspects that two of the "roughnecks" traveling with the caravan are trappers who killed a buddy of his. Coleman's reason for leading the wagon train is not out of honor, but out of a desire for what he calls "frontier justice."

A number of disparities are apparent between these opening sequences. First, Edeson's Grandeur compositions lack the depth of field of Androit's. This lack of visual depth may be a result of the inferiority of the Grandeur lens. Second, while Androit's camera provides a variety of stylized angles, Edeson seems (understandably) reticent to shoot anything much higher than eye level as the "short screen" of the Grandeur aspect ratio may bottom out due to its lack of vertical depth. Androit's angles of approach accentuate the angles manifest within the *mise-en-scene*, whereas Edeson's compositions appear fairly flat with the actors strung out along a "clothesline."

Illustration 2.1

Illustration 2.2

Illustration 2.3

Illustration 2.4

Illustration 2.5

Illustration 2.6

    As will happen throughout the Academy version, Androit chose to crop a figure out of

the book-ended composition (Illustration 2.6). The woman on the left is chopping wood (missing

from Edeson's composition altogether (Illustration 2.5)) and enters and leaves the corner of the

frame with her chopping action. Like a pan-and-scan re-composition of the VHS era, Androit

leaves the edge of the washtub in frame at bottom right, while Edeson's blocking features the

lady and her washtub prominently in the foreground. This stylistic rupture is not only due to the

available framing area, but also of camera height. Edeson's lower camera height becomes a new

norm for widescreen aesthetics, as is further evidenced in later examinations of 'Scope films of

the 1950s. As evidenced throughout this project, the binary of horizontal vs. vertical is apparent

in this comparison of opening sequences. Edeson's widescreen version relies upon lateral scope,

"clothesline" blocking strategies and a lower camera. Androit's Academy Ratio version is more vertical and chooses to frame tighter compositions with a greater variety of angles, but at the expense of more lateral visuals.

An experimental resistance to close-ups in early widescreen is apparent shortly after the opening sequence. John Wayne (in his first starring role) debuts without a close-up in the Grandeur version. While Breck Coleman (John Wayne) is centered on screen and atop a horse in both versions, the actor that will become an iconic signifier of the Western genre is not highlighted in the Granduer version as he is in the tighter, closer Academy framing.

Illustration 2.7

Illustration 2.8

This lack of a close-up even with regard to the star of the film (and later of the genre) is emblematic of what Campbell MacCullough asserts in *Motion Picture* (June 1930) in the epigram that begins this chapter. MacCullough writes that the medium shot will be large enough for the new style of movie houses being built to accommodate proper sound acoustics for the newly implemented "talkies." MacCullough suggests:

> The ordinary screen figure in a long shot is probably two or three feet tall. In a medium shot or close-up, it reaches six to ten feet. In a wide film, the figure may reach a height of eighteen feet. (109)

The question raised by MacCullough's suggestions point to an adaptation of stylistic ruptures (the need for close-ups) to temporary physical norms (larger screens). Perhaps Edeson frames his wide compositions to accommodate movie houses and not simply because of technological limitations of the Grandeur lens. In a discussion of widescreen historical poetics leading up to anamorphic composition, Cynthia Contreras (1989) notes that "one of the determining factors in the sideways spread of the screen seems to have been the structure of the theaters themselves and considerations for the audience members seated under the balcony, whose vertical vision would be impaired by any extra height" (9). In this way, these stylistic ruptures (the lack of close-ups, etc.) are both a) pre-meditated as progressions by Edeson and Stull and b) necessary to adapt to impending new norms of exhibition practices that ultimately will not be realized until the 1950s.

In an essay describing the intersection of theatrical architecture and exhibition, William Paul (1996) argues "wide gauge filmmaking powerfully changed the existing relationship

between image and theatrical space in a manner that had consequences for conventional stylistic

practices" (150). In his examination of the two versions of *The Big Trail*, Paul states that:

> The Grandeur print seems a radically different film because its shooting style departs
>
> from other films of the period, with images much denser and the camera much less
>
> directional, often to the point that you occasionally have to search through the image in a
>
> given scene in order to find the speaker. (151)

As Paul suggests, the *mise-en-scene* of the Grandeur version is noticeably distinct from

that of the Academy version with regard to camera set-ups, angles and focal lengths. The lack of

a close-up for the introduction of Breck Coleman is a significant break with conventional

Hollywood continuity practices. Paul's notion of the spectator having to "search the image"

certainly echoes Bazin, Perkins and Barr's reactions to CinemaScope some two decades later

with regard to the "fun du montage." The transition of close-ups in favor of more visual material

in medium-long shots remains a norm for widescreen's second "debut" in the CinemaScope era

of the1950s.

Apart from exhibition considerations on the part of the filmmakers, the comparison of

Breck's introduction between the Grandeur and 35mm versions is significant for other reasons.

The long shot from the Grandeur version is composed horizontally from a slightly high angle.

Viewers are not only scanning the width of the frame but are also looking down. Breck is the

highest figure positioned in the frame, but the composition is still egalitarian in that spectators

may choose to focus on Windy Bill (Russ Powell) and his harem blocked on the left of the shot.

This lateral blocking along the width of the frame is a challenge to the vertically-dense and

deeply composed visual strategies of the Academy Ratio era. Barry Salt (1985) notes that "in the

case of *The Big Trail*, it seems to me that the wide film version is superior to the ordinary 35mm

versions. This is not because he compositions are especially well adapted to the wide film ratio

most of the time … but because the outer edges of the wide frame include extra background

action in many scenes" (209). The wide version of *The Big Trail* may not be "superior" as Salt

claims, but certainly Edeson is experimenting with stylistic ruptures by including "extra

background" at the frame's edges.

     Throughout this project, we find widescreen filmmakers experimenting with the "outer

edges" dilemma posed by lateral framing; does one utilize and exploit the distinct and unique

trait of the wide frame or compose what will become known as the "safe action area" of the

Academy Ratio frame? Early widescreen filmmakers tend to exploit framings that span the width

of the frame such as Edeson does here with Breck and Windy Bill. Preminger and other

filmmakers of the 'Scope era extend this tradition as will be discussed in a later chapter.

     The Grandeur version resists not only close-ups, but also cutting in general. Edeson and

other early widescreen filmmakers saw the new medium as the "fin du montage" decades before

Bazin makes similar claims. After Breck's introduction, he speaks to Windy Bill about the

hardships of the Oregon Trail and why he has come on board for the job — to locate the two

trappers that killed his friend.

     While the Grandeur version does cut to a tighter shot of Windy Bill, it is not as severe a

cut and reframing as that of the Academy version. Windy Bill is visually present in the Grandeur

version before Breck speaks to him, therefore the eyeline match to Windy Bill maintains spatial

coherence. The 35mm version, however, accomplishes this via montage; Windy Bill is

understood to be offscreen left because that is the direction in which Breck speaks, and the

following cut reveals Windy Bill speaking back to Breck offcreen right. This sequence

demonstrates the filmmaker's use of experimental stylistic ruptures that violate traditional uses

of the close-up, lateral framing and functionalizing the "outer edges" in the wide frame.

Illustration 2.9

Illustration 2.10

I'd like to press this idea of lateral framings and lack of close-ups a bit further.

Recall Androit's opening sequence framing that was reminiscent of the pan-and-scan

recomposing of the VHS film-to-video transfer process; Androit's framing seems to have been

arbitrarily cropped, thereby lopping off actors' figures in the process. This lack of close-ups in

favor of lateral framings which exploit the "outer edges" is further evidenced in a scene in

Wellmore's trading post. Breck agrees to lead a wagon train when he suspects Red Flack

(Tyrone Power, Sr.) and Lopez (Charles Stevens) of murdering a fellow wilderness scout. Breck

enters Wellmore's (William V. Mong) trading post and discusses the details of the job with

Wellmore and Red enters shortly thereafter. This sequence yields 4 separate camera set-ups and

7 edits in the Grandeur version as opposed to 7 camera set-ups and 9 edits in the Academy ratio.

Illustration 2.11

Illustration 2.12

Illustration 2.13

Illustration 2.14

Illustration 2.15

Illustration 2.16

Illustration 2.17

Illustration 2.18

Illustration 2.19

Illustration 2.20

Illustration 2.21

Illustration 2.22

Illustration 2.23

Illustration 2.24

Illustration 2.25

Illustration 2.26

The first discrepancy immediately noticeable between the two versions here is the

aforementioned lack of cuts to close-up in the Grandeur version. This stylistic rupture represents

an experiment on the part of Edeson. The cinematographer does not cut to a close-up (or even

provide coverage) because close-ups are indicative of the "cramped proportions" of the Academy

Ratio, and Edeson views the widescreen of Grandeur as a stylistic development that no longer

favors close-ups. Androit's compositions lack the horizontal sweep that Edeson references when

he states that Androit "could not attempt to adequately show both the vast backgrounds and the

intimate foreground action in a single shot as the Grandeur cameras can" (9). There is

significance here in Edeson's assertions; the Granduer version (and widescreen overall) requires

fewer set-ups and fewer cuts. Edeson acknowledges that the camera set-ups and compositional

considerations for both versions were dictated by the "most important" Grandeur version. Therefore, one would imagine the Grandeur format to be more desirable for both film production personnel and studio executives as fewer set-ups generally translate to a more efficient shoot. This final assertion is one that will be more apparent in the following chapter concerning "Norms" of the CinemaScope era. Suffice to say that fewer set-ups are needed for wider, shorter sets, and thus less production time is needed. Additionally, the time required for changing set-ups between shots declines with widescreen because lighting schemes are less complex with shorter (but wider) sets.

There are more glaring distinctions in the *mise-en-scene* between the two versions at the meeting at Wellmore's. For instance, Androit's compositions lack the lateral scope of Edeson's, but feature higher camera angles. This challenges Stull's comments regarding vertical set designs; if the Grandeur frame requires less vertical design from the art department and lighting technicians, perhaps the 70mm sets require *more* lateral set dressing and décor to fill the frame. Edeson's compositions remain in medium or long shot, whereas Androit cuts to close-up in the 35mm version. Evident here is Edeson's assertion (along with Bazin and Barr) that the wider frame does not need to surrender its space to a close-up, or even MacCullough's and Paul's comments with regard to exhibition considerations and relative figure heights on screen. With characters in close-up as Breck and Red are in Androit's version, a spectator has less agency with regard as to where they may look. The figures are even morally opposed based upon both screen directionality and space (Breck is good/faces right, while Red is evil/faces left). This moral alignment via continuity editing is lost in Edeson's subtler version. This sequence exemplifies many traits of widescreen vs. Academy Ratio that will continue throughout this project and will certainly be at the forefront of the following section with regard to norms of the

'Scope era in the 1950s. Widescreen practice favors medium shots instead of close-ups and lateral framings with lower camera heights. These stylistic ruptures lead to more lateral set design, and subtle changes in editing tropes and traditions.

One final sequence in *The Big Trail* displays what I feel is exemplary of the stylistic ruptures between the 35mm and 70mm versions. The wagon train river crossing in Westerns functions not only on a generic level but also as a spectacular set piece designed to showcase the unique attributes of the Grandeur process. Thus far, the Academy version requires tighter framings, more edits and lacks horizontal scope. How do the versions compare when not shooting conversation scenes and/or tight clusters of screen figures but visually fetishizing the landscape as Westerns uniquely can?

In the river crossing sequence, Androit's 35mm version is bound not only to generic tropes but also to those of the Western serial. Edeson displays the overall vista of the tragic and treacherous river crossing, but Androit focuses on faces and particular figures. Androit shoots individual portraits of the tragic unfolding of events, and Edeson documents the overall scope.

Illustration 2.27

Illustration 2.28

Illustration 2.29

Illustration 2.30

Perhaps most interesting when comparing the two different versions of the river crossing

is when Androit and Edeson choose to either tilt or pan respectively. To include more visual

data, Androit must tilt and slightly reframe like a human's motion of looking at an object up and

down by tilting the head down and then up.

Illustration 2.31

Illustration 2.32

Conversely, Edeson's format necessitates a pan from right to left to amass more visual

data. This action is much more akin to a person scanning an image from right to left by rotating

one's neck from right to left.

Illustration 2.33

Illustration 2.34

What are we to make of these differences in visual style between the two versions of *The Big Trail*? If narrative content is not an issue, that is, if the sequences under question are narratively similar, then what visually stylistic differences are manifest between the 35mm and 70mm versions? Overall, Edeson resists shooting close-ups because he deemed them unnecessary in the Grandeur process. The lack of close-ups and insert cuts in the widescreen version essentially eliminate the attention to detailed and nuanced performative elements such as facial expressions of both stars and extras in the Academy Ratio version. By not featuring Breck Coleman in close-up when he is first introduced, Edeson's visual style essentially creates a trope of widescreen filmmaking — details that are not emphasized but are democratically presented

equally with all other screen elements. Such a lack of doting on details influences camera set-ups and even set design.

Early widescreen filmmakers such as Edeson eschew the close-up and deem it as a stylistic convention that is passé. Both Edeson and Stull argue that this resistance to the close-up is both purposeful and intentional. As for the remaining elements of the typology which frames this project, only landscapes and camera angles seem to be prudent to this discussion, since neither Androit nor Edeson move the camera as the widescreen filmmakers of the 1950s and beyond will. As diligently as Edeson resists the close-up, he seems to foreground the landscape shot as often as possible. Essentially, this discussion returns us to the binary of a) master/long shot in Grandeur and b) the master shot to coverage within the Academy version. This is really a comparison between the landscape (70mm) and the portrait (35mm). The very format of the Grandeur process lends itself toward more horizontal compositions. This "short screen" is elongated parallel to the horizon and is metaphorically bound to the generic Western binary of wilderness vs. civilization. The wilderness sprawls horizontally with a reach that is seemingly endless in the 70mm format. The vertical compositions within the 35mm are more suited to the vertical geometries of city landscapes with the vertical high-rise buildings that restrict views of the heavens. A portrait is much more intimate and is bound more to the vertical consumption of detail. Spectators read the face and gestures of the nuanced performance within the portrait compositions that are absent and/or unnecessary within the landscape.

Camera angles within this framework can also be read in terms of binary oppositions. The "flat" compositions of the Grandeur version of *The Big Trail* reify the "clothesline" aesthetic of early silent films as discussed by both Barry Salt (1985) and David Bordwell (1997). The Grandeur version of *The Big Trail* features camera angles that are positioned perpendicular to the

actors during conversations and dialogue scenes. Androit's Academy version tends to place his camera at slightly oblique angles perhaps to foreground the depth of field or simply to provide a slightly more stylized composition. In any event, Edeson's and Androit's framings of actors speaking represent a different manifestation of the wilderness vs. civilization dialectic — experimental uses of widescreen vs. the refined tradition of Academy Ratio shooting style. The experimental framings of Edeson regress to the "clothesline" framings of the early silent era in an attempt to grapple with the demands of the new technology. Edeson questions Androit's technique and besmirches the Academy frame stating that it can "not attempt to adequately show both the vast backgrounds and the intimate foreground action in a single shot as the Grandeur cameras can" (9). In truth, however, the Academy version utilizes both fore and backgrounds in more dynamic ways than does the Grandeur version. The "short screen" becomes flat via Edeson's perpendicular framings, and the top of the frame restricts compositional tropes available to Androit as the opening sequence shows.

The widescreen version of *The Big Trail* suggests subtle trends that will continually be updated and challenged throughout widescreen's second "debut" in the 1950s and beyond. Edeson's use of widescreen in his version of *The Big Trail* eliminates close-ups in favor of medium shots. He composes laterally to exploit the "outer edges" that the Academy Ratio lacks. Additionally, lower camera heights in the widescreen version of *The Big Trail* dictate lower, wider set construction and restrict edits that would normally serve Academy Ratio cutting strategies.

The Bat Whispers

While *The Big Trail* represents an experimental spectacularization of the well-established Western genre with its accompanying tropes, *The Bat Whispers* is a sequel to a successful silent

film, *The Bat* (1927). Additionally, *The Big Trail* was Fox's foray into the wide-film market in

an effort to beat their studio competitors to the technological and exhibition punch. Under the

sponsorship of United Artists and Joseph M. Schenck, *The Bat Whispers*' director Roland West

financed the Magnifilm[19] (65mm) widescreen process himself and even paid for the expensive

camera equipment from his own coffers (Price and Turner, 1986). In an *American*

Cinematographer article, authors Price and Turner contend that three versions of *The Bat*

Whispers were produced during the seven-week shoot – a 35mm version for wide release, a

foreign version "made up of out-takes" and the Magnifilm (65mm) version all of which run 85

minutes. As aforementioned, *The Bat* is the original, silent film that *The Bat Whispers* follows in

the sound era and in a wider format, and *The Bat* features the camera work of Arthur Edeson and

Gregg Toland, not to mention the art direction of William Cameron Menzies.

In *The Big Trail*, Edeson and Walsh experimented with stylistic ruptures of camera

height, lateral blocking and a resistance to montage. These adaptations of film style also

impacted issues of set construction, lighting schemes and editing strategies. The wide version of

The Bat Whispers differs from its Academy Ratio counterpart in similar but subtler ways. The

Magnifilm version of *The Bat Whispers* relies upon lower camera heights and more lateral

blocking, but whereas Edeson was resistant to camera movement, the filmmakers of *The Bat*

Whispers are not. Roland West and his 65mm cinematographer Robert H. Planck recognize that

the wide version cannot rely upon edits to structure scenes, and therefore manipulates the camera

in sometimes bravura fashion, foreshadowing how Preminger and Tashlin will use widescreen in

the 1950s. While neither 35mm cinematographer Ray June nor Planck wrote explicit articles for

---

[19] Not to be confused with Paramount's Magnafilm 56mm process. The latter's name was based
upon Paramount's earlier uses of the "enlarged screen" process, Magnascope. For more on
Magnascope, see Belton, 1992, 36-38.

technical manuals such as *American Cinematographer* in the way that Edeson did for *The Big Trail*, technical scholars have examined their work with regard to historical poetics.

Ian Conrich (2004) claims that *The Bat* (and by extension its sequel *The Bat Whispers*) falls under the rubric of films that strive for "a form of Gothic horror … tales of haunted houses and uncanny environments … which mix the chills with comedy and created periods devoid of dialogue to allow passages to build suspense" (47). Conrich's argument is based upon Universal's "horror-spectaculars," but I will expand it for the discussion herein of the two versions of *The Bat Whispers*. Certainly of interest here is the use of close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement, and generic considerations are also of significance. How are the stylistic ruptures manifested within the visual style, and how do they differ between the 35mm and 65mm versions of *The Bat Whispers*? Does Planck resist close-ups and accentuate the "outer edges" as Edeson does in *The Big Trail*, or does he "add nothing to the version shot on normal 35mm film," as Barry Salt (1985) suggests? (209) Salt further claims that Planck's wide version of *The Bat Whispers* "fuzzes out" the sides of its compositions "with layers of increasingly heavy black gauzing … the only effective part of the image is restricted to an aspect ratio similar to that of the ordinary Academy aperture, and all the significant action takes place in this area" (209).

Gary Johnson (2004) states:

June occasionally employed close-ups as dramatic punctuation in the 35mm version, but Planck almost never uses close-ups … Planck doesn't seem committed to the widescreen format. Many of the scenes are framed as if they were shot for 35mm – with blackness obscuring the left and right edges. … Little differences … suggest that more care was

taken while filming the 65mm version; however June's superior use of the camera makes many scenes more effective in the 35mm version.

(http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue09/reviews/batwhispers/text.htm)

Both Salt's and Johnson's suppositions with regard to the visual style of the two disparate versions of *The Bat Whispers* echoes the concerns voiced by both Edeson and Stull in reference to the Grandeur process. Johnson noted that "more care was taken while filming the 65mm version" and that Planck resists close-ups may simply allude to the same issues Edeson, Stull, MacCullough and Paul address with regard to the relative height of a figure on screen. Certainly both June and Planck confront similar challenges as those of Edeson and Andriot when faced with filming sets that are constructed for both vertical compositions in addition to those that are more horizontal. When Johnson states that Planck's compositions sometimes obscure the "left and right edges" with darkened lighting, perhaps Planck is simply trying to overcome the lighting challenges Stull discussed. Perhaps *The Bat Whispers* budget does not allow for the extravagance of separate lighting schemes and technicians that *The Big Trail* was afforded or perhaps Planck thought that darkened edges enhanced the generic "old, dark house" atmosphere. I believe the latter is more likely.

Price and Turner (1986) note that West funded the Magnifilm process from his own pocket, so it seems logical that he would feature his special project by showcasing its *mise-en-scene* capabilities. After all, why would a filmmaker fund a technology he is not willing to foreground as an attraction? Therefore, while Johnson sees Planck resisting close-ups and obscuring left and right frame edges because he lacks "commitment to the widescreen process," I see West and Planck enacting new poetics that serves as the stylistic rupture point between the

two versions. Specifically, the filmmakers move the wide camera more often than in *The Big Trail* but still find that a lower camera suits the wide process.

In a September 1988 article in *American Cinematographer*, author Scott MacQueen states that "the widescreen version plays very much like [the] junior version … West uses fewer close-ups, substituting two-shots more compositionally suited to the 2:1 frame" (37). While MacQueen echoes Johnson's critique of Planck's visual style choices, MacQueen simultaneously reinforces my assertion that Planck is developing new visual poetics to accommodate the new format and form a rupturing counterpoint to the 35mm version.

If Edeson, Stull and MacCullough are correct in their assertions with regard to widescreen's new poetics – no need of close-ups, greater interaction between foreground and background with fewer cuts, medium shots that play like close-ups in exhibition houses – then Salt, Johnson and MacQueen are shortsighted in their dismissal of Planck's technique. Planck's compositions do not mirror those of June, because Planck has roughly 35% more horizontal screen area to account for than does his Academy ratio cohort. Therefore, Planck's compositions and visual style, as with Edeson on *The Big Trail*, must change and create new compositional strategies with regard to close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement. The textual analysis of visual style comparing the versions of *The Bat Whispers* bears out this point.

The opening frames reveal the different compositional strategies employed by both Planck and June respectively. The film opens with a city sidewalk in front of the police station with a newspaper boy yelling out the latest headlines. The text quickly dives into a crime mystery that revolves around the fiendish killer, The Bat. While Planck's sidewalk vista encompasses more horizontal area than does June's, June's vertical *mise-en-scene* allows for the important narrative revelation of place — the police station. In addition, there is a disparity here

between camera angles. Planck's camera is placed lower to the ground or at least appears parallel to the horizon (although slightly higher). Due to the verticality of the Academy ratio frame June's camera angle is considerably higher and has a more severe downward tilt. As for character identification and character screen height, Planck's composition observes the paperboy approaching the policeman at the left third of the frame, but June's verticality betrays him in this particular framing strategy. Recalling William Paul's critique that the viewer must "occasionally … search the [Grandeur process] image in a given scene in order to find the speaker," June's framing here requires as much of the viewer of the 35mm version. Examples such as these reify the need to examine the stylistic ruptures *between* the versions of both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*.

Illustration 2.39

Illustration 2.40

Like the opening sequences of *The Big Trail*, the aesthetic disparities between the two versions are specifically foregrounded by the filmmakers. The wide version is framed plan American and is actually *closer* than the Academy Ratio version. This will happen often throughout *The Bat Whispers* and is one of the more revelatory ideas with regard to early widescreen films: lower framings actually allow for closer master shots, and therefore the transition to a two-shot via camera movement is not disruptive. This at least hints at widescreen's association with bravura and fluid camera movement as noted by both Bazin and Barr in the 'Scope era. This position is counterintuitive, but the analysis bears it out: lower but *closer* cameras are an early attempt to normalize widescreen poetics. This trend is further developed by Preminger *et al.* as we will see in the next chapter.

Later, The Bat is in pursuit of a necklace that Mr. Bell (Richard Tucker) possesses. When the Bat leaves a threatening note warning Mr. Bell of his intentions, the disparity between the two formats is apparent. Both Planck and June dolly in behind Mr. Bell, but June must advance considerably closer to fill the frame with the same amount of detail as Planck's 65mm version.
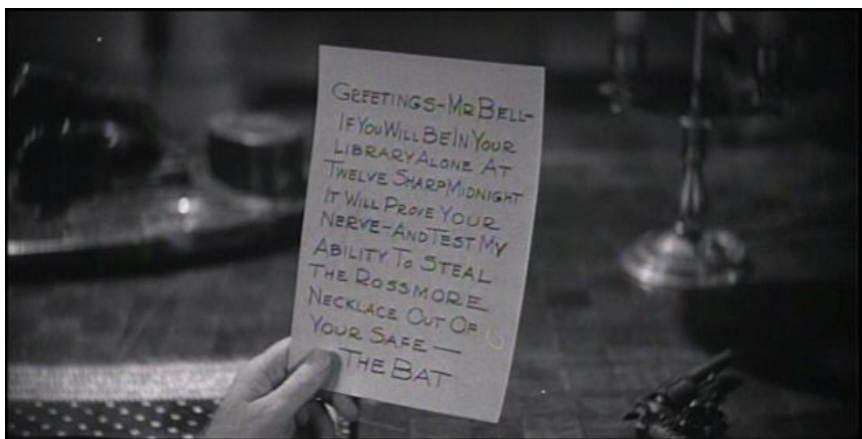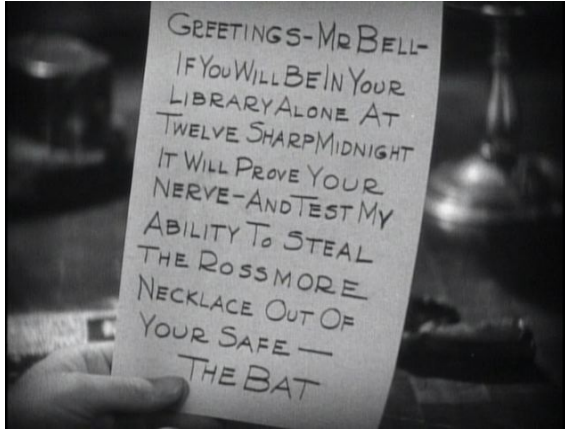

Illustration 2.41

Illustration 2.42

This framing displays several things. First, it affirms Edeson's, Stull's, MacCullough's and Paul's argument with regard to the height of figures on screen. Planck's format does not necessitate the need for the note to fill 50% of the screen area to be legible. Here is a significant and underreported area of discussion for widescreen poetics: landscape vs. portrait. The obvious spatial differentiation between wide and Academy Ratio films is the binary of horizontal vs. vertical. As with Breck Coleman's introduction atop the horse in *The Big Trail*, here Planck uses widescreen's elongated lateral canvas to convey more narrative and visual material than June can. Specifically, Planck has room for the more intelligible placement of the gun Mr. Bell possesses as protection from the Bat. While June's composition includes the gun, it is tucked behind the note and out of focus. June must *choose* a unifying graphic element to dominate the screen area (either the clock *or* gun), whereas the stylistic rupture of the 65mm frame allows both to be given equal weight.

The landscape vs. portrait comparison points toward a larger *mise-en-scene* trend that will continue to be developed in the 'Scope era: *mise-en-scene* that accentuates the lateral visual field of the wide frame. Certainly, Mr. Bell could have read this note in front of a mirror, dresser, fireplace or some other vertical structure, but because both shoots are dictated by the wide

version, the filmmakers chose the horizontal element of the desk. The lower camera height of widescreen filmmaking often dictate lateral compositions simply because they are lower to the horizon.

This dialectical difference of landscape vs. portrait is exacerbated in the next camera set-up that functions entirely upon the narrative dissemination of the deadline and the reification of the gun's presence. Again, June must *choose* a unifying graphic element to dominate the screen area (either the clock *or* gun), whereas the stylistic rupture of the 65mm frame allows Planck to give weight to both equally. Planck's landscaped medium shot actually conveys more visual information than does June's portrait close-up. This is useful because The Bat's note indicates that Mr. Bell is in danger and therefore the equal weighting of the gun serves to reify the need for self-defense. Of note also is the discrepancy in camera angle. Planck's camera is positioned at a slight tilt to convey the necessary POV of Mr. Bell, and Planck's *mise-en-scene* creates a dramatic angle because the corner of the table creates tension within the frame. June's framing is simply flat and carries little depth and certainly none of the geometric tension displayed in the 65mm version.

Illustration 2.43

Illustration 2.44

The remainder of this sequence is further evidence of choices necessitated by the landscape vs. portrait comparison and how both set design and construction are affected. Mr. Bell rises from his desk and both versions reveal the reverse shot of Bell's study. Widescreen literature has long suggested that long shots and the lack of close-ups are the harbingers of widescreen's early shortcomings. However, it is June's 35mm version that necessitates a pull back to fit the verticality of the *mise-en-scene* into the frame. Planck's 65mm composition appears balanced and again looks to be on an angle parallel to the horizon, whereas June's camera is eye-level.

Illustration 2.45

Illustration 2.46

Early wide films tend to position the camera at roughly waist level of the actors, whereas 35mm versions tend to be framed at eye level. Perhaps this is to forge a more verisimilar viewing strategy as films are viewed while *seated* in a theater. If this is the case, then it is further evidence of a stylistic rupture influencing new physical norms. In any event, lower cameras dictate lateral compositions and horizontal *mise-en-scene* in disparate ways from the vertical Academy Ratio.

The verticality of set design in the 35mm version bears this out. While the sconces on the wall are not true lighting sources, they are objects that June must account for within his composition while Planck's visuals are inclusive. A final note with regard to this sequence is its similar to the sequence in *The Big Trail* at Wellmore's trading post. After the Bat kills Mr. Bell, the police rush in. Planck and June treat the matter in two shots, but there is a disparity in the narrative information presented.

Illustration 2.47

Illustration 2.48

Illustration 2.49

Illustration 2.50

This example displays the same traits as the scene at Wellmore's trading post in *The Big Trail*. The Magnifilm version requires fewer edits and simply uses re-framing pans to accommodate mobile blocking strategies. The stylistic rupture of Planck's 65mm compositions allow for the actors to enter at extreme left and cross to extreme right with only a pan of the camera. June employs edits and closer framings to achieve a similar effect, and his composition lacks the inclusion of the butler altogether (which is confusing as he appears in the next shot).

Planck's *mise-en-scene* and cinematography more closely follow the classical continuity style that desires to never lose the spectator. June's compositions seem not only to lack "commitment," (as Johnson asserts of Planck's compositions) but also visual and continuity coherence as evidenced by the seemingly magical appearance of the butler. The contrast in visual strategy here represents an idea that I think is clearly present in the comparisons from *The Big Trail*: early widescreen filmmakers stylistically rupture by lateralizing their compositions and maintaining lower-than-normal camera heights. Planck strings actors across the width of the frame (Edeson did this in *The Big Trail,* and in the CinemaScope era studio heads encourage this practice) to foreground the unique properties of the wide frame — its landscape attributes over the verticality and portraiture of the Academy Ratio. Lower camera heights and lateral

compositions facilitate continuity cutting within the camera; fewer cuts are necessary because the camera can simply pan or track to take in the new blocking positions or move to accommodate actors' movements.

How does this differ from the Academy ratio framings in both films examined? The answer again is the horizontal vs. vertical dialectic. The wide frame requires fewer cuts because cuts *usually* occur to follow action and/or change perspective and *usually* to follow actions/perspectives between actors. In his essay "The Power of Movies" Noel Carroll (1996) argues that film's unique artistic properties are that of "scaling, bracketing and indexing" (85). Carroll is really unpacking the editing strategies of camera coverage within scenes. Carroll writes:

> When the camera is moved forward, it not only indexes and places brackets around the objects in front of it; it also changes their scale. … Scaling is … a lever for directing attention. Enlarging the screen size of an object generally has the force of stating that this object, or gestalt of objects, is the important item to attend to at this moment in the movie. (85)

Carroll's terms are of use here insomuch as they can be applied to wide films treatment of scenes in contrast to those of Academy ratio treatments. The above examples from Mr. Bell's office show that the scaling and bracketing of Planck's composition require less overall effort on the part of the filmmakers because the scaling and bracketing requires fewer cuts; Planck simply follows the horizon and reframes. June must cut and dramatically re-scale and re-bracket to follow the same action.

The formal differences manifest between the 35mm and Magnifilm versions of *The Bat Whispers* are variations of both *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. In the wide version of *The*

Bat Whispers, Planck's wider long shot allows for fewer cuts and usually operates at a waist level camera height. The "short screen" actually allows more legible narrative dissemination and supports generic tropes within the formal filmic elements. Perhaps more so than in *The Big Trail*, June's vertical Academy Ratio version suffers in comparison to the widescreen version. June's compositions and the subsequent editing strategies seem forced and antiquated when compared with Planck's fluid compositions and camera movements that are less intrusive and convey more narrative material.

Overall, *The Bat Whispers* reinscribes and develops the emerging widescreen trends of *The Big Trail* — lower camera heights that affect *mise-en-scene* from set design and construction to lighting strategies. This "landscaping" by the widescreen Magnifilm version asserts itself in subtle ways. The examples of the street fronting the police station, the desk in Mr. Bell's office and the police's pursuit of The Bat into that office all suggest that early widescreen filmmakers accentuate the horizontal proportions of shots with lower cameras and lateral blockings. Certainly, these trends continue and are further nuanced in the 'Scope era analyzed in the following chapter, but the case studies of both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* indicate that the visual strategies observed by Bazin, Perkins, and Barr in the 'Scope era actually began in widescreen's initial "debut" in the immediately post-sound era.

It is important to note that while widescreen is accused of being many things — an attraction, only useful for "snakes and funerals," lacking the intimacy of the Academy Ratio, etc. — early uses of widescreen processes do not display such characteristics. It seems that many of widescreen's supposed anecdotal attributes suffer from a lack of reference. In other words, the canonical widescreen films of the 1950s — *The Robe, River of No Return, Rebel Without a Cause*, etc. — can only be gauged on what they might have looked like in the Academy Ratio,

and such imagined aesthetics are too speculative to provide grounds for concrete observations and normative declarations. The analysis of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* prominently displays observable differences between two versions of the same film. Both embody the landscape vs. portrait dichotomy and the differences between versions can be summarized easily and specifically.

First, early widescreen filmmakers use lower cameras to accentuate the landscape-ness of the elongated frame. This lower camera height affects set design and lighting strategies but also requires new trends of cutting and blocking, and Preminger *et al.* continue to develop and nuance these stylistic ruptures in the 1950s. Second, the wide versions of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* feature horizontally situated *mise-en-scene* dictated by the lower camera height and (obviously) the elongated visual field. *The Big Trail* features wagon train round-ups, river crossings and medium two-shot conversations to accentuate and justify the lower, lateral compositions, and *The Bat Whispers* displays street scenes, desks and stagey interior scenes to accomplish the same goal. Finally, early widescreen affects editing strategies but is not limited to the higher ASL trajectory that is often cited in the widescreen literature by Salt or Bordwell. Widescreen necessitates fewer cuts because conversation sequences and scenes with multiple actors speaking need not be broken into singles.

This chapter has more closely examined the experimental predecessors of widescreen aesthetics that become norms in the CinemaScope era. Analyzing these early uses of widescreen provides causal and historical links to a longer trend of widescreen shifts with regard to film style. By observing in both *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* such characteristics as lower cameras, elongated *mise-en-scene* and adjusted lighting schemes, and overall horizontal image construction, we can appreciate the fact that the physical and stylistic ruptures regarded as the

hallmarks of widescreen have a longer and more complex history than previously considered. The early widescreen films of 1930 enrich and foreshadow the norms that will develop in widescreen's next debut.

Ch. 3:
Emerging stylistic norms in CinemaScope:
Genre and authorship in the films of Preminger, Ray, Tashlin and Sirk

Mostly everyone shooting in 'Scope used conventional ideas about giving compositions lateral balance , including use of standard compositional ratios for the lateral divisions between objects of interest and the edges of the screen. — Barry Salt (1985, 247)

The director will learn to sometimes assert the entire surface of the screen, to activate it by his zest, to play a diverse and tight game there – instead of staking out the poles of the drama, to create zones of silence, surfaces of repose, or provocative gaps, knowing ruptures … he will discover the beauty of empty spots, of open and free spaces through which the wind glides; he will unburden the image, no longer fearing holes or imbalances, and will multiply compositional violations the better to obey the truths of cinema. — Jacques Rivette (1954, 48)

You can now visualize your scenes in their entirety … and not be cramped by thinking of them in terms of "cuts," "dissolves," "close-ups" and "inserts." A director no longer will have to worry about cutting down a scene of enormous scope to fit the narrow limits of the old-style camera. — Jean Negulesco (1953, 176)

With a little adjustment and with some help from the supply companies and the professional associations, widescreen filmmaking offered only trended changes in the classical style. — David Bordwell (1985, 364)

Story-telling on the screen is given a new dimension by CinemaScope and our production experts have achieved marvelous results in quickly developing new techniques for the making of CinemaScope pictures and adding richly to their impact. — Spyros P. Skouras, president of 20th Century Fox (1953, 150)

Our actors now can move without fear of moving out of focus. Relatively they've been moving in handcuffs and leg irons and so has everything else on the screen, from jet planes to alley cats. CinemaScope is an Emancipation Proclamation on the sound stages. Like all freedoms it must be exercised soberly and intelligently. — Darryl F. Zanuck, vice president in charge of production, 20th Century Fox (1953, 157)

This litany of epigrams — ranging from industrial mavens and filmmakers to film scholars and critics — suggests a variety of possible experiments with regard to widescreen "norms" after 1952. Obviously, opinions of widescreen's experimental history are widely contested. What all of these accounts (even in their full forms) lacks is an exacting typology of what specific stylistic breaks occur with the "debut" of widescreen and CinemaScope.

For studio executives like Skouros and Zanuck, widescreen presented new exhibition opportunities (physical norms) and subsequent box office boosts in an era when television, urban flight, the Baby Boom and a list of other diversions were sapping the film industry's profits.

Critics such as Barry Salt and Jacques Rivette suggest different significance for the importance of widescreen; the former states that widescreen filmmaking in the 1950s is primarily a technological shift deployed by an industry desperate for profit boosts. Rivette, in the spirit of Andre Bazin, sees the aesthetic verisimilitude that widescreen offers filmmakers and audiences alike. Finally, the director Jean Negulesco echoes the sentiments of Arthur Edeson and William Stull as he stresses the freedom and new aesthetic and technical possibilities requisite with widescreen's wider frame.

There is very little common ground with regard to what widescreen signified stylistically when it "debuted" in 1953. In light of stylistic experiments, the CinemaScope films differ from those of the silent era and the films of 1930. Both of those cases were experimental uses of widescreen aesthetics as novelty and spectacle first; post-1952 cinema features widescreen as a norm of exhibition, and therefore the production and stylistic practices must adapt and stabilize. The following questions are structuring guides for this chapter, and they are narrowly posed with the four case study films — *River of No Return*, *Bigger than Life*, *The Girl Can't Help It* and *The Tarnished Angels* — and their respective *auteurs* and generic formulas in mind: Does the "medium shot as close-up norm" of 1930 persist in the 'Scope era? Are the lower camera heights of Edeson and Planck a stylistic progression from the Academy Ratio era? How significant is the role of genre in the case study films of the 1950s? Finally, how do the physical/stylistic ruptures of the 'Scope era films suggest filmmakers adapting to the new physical norm of a wider frame?

As we observed in the previous chapter, early widescreen can be categorized as lower cameras negotiating a landscape vs. portrait relationship that leads to fewer overall cuts. What impact do these revelations have for the norms that emerge in the 1950s when widescreen is not

an alternate version but the new norm? How do the experimental uses of physical/stylistic ruptures play out for the physical/stylistic norms in the 1950s? Do auteurs such as Preminger, Tashlin, Ray and Sirk refunctionalize their visual signatures for the planimetric frame of the CinemaScope era? Do they forge other stylistic norms to accommodate the "new" physical norms with the coming of CinemaScope?

The goal of this chapter is to examine auteurist films from the 1950s and determine what norms emerge in light of the new aesthetic challenges that widescreen presents. Unlike the case studies of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*, the films examined herein are not gimmicky test cases designed for product differentiation and roadshow exhibition possibilities. Rather, in 1953 20th Century Fox debuted CinemaScope,[20] and a new era of filmmaking and exhibition practices were born (as with sound, the other studios followed suit). As mentioned throughout this project, I do not wish to examine industrial practices with regard to technological developments of lens characteristics, exhibition practices or advertising strategies, which all contributed to CinemaScope and widescreen's ultimate success. James Limbacher (1978), Barry Salt (1985), James Spellerberg (1985), Richard Hincha (1985), John Belton (1992) and Leo Enticknap (2005) among others have attended to these angles satisfactorily.

This chapter observes how influential auteurs Otto Preminger, Nicholas Ray, Frank Tashlin and Douglas Sirk experimented with widescreen aesthetics with regard to close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement. By observing the use of these aesthetic choices within *River of No Return, Bigger Than Life, The Girl Can't Help It* and *The Tarnished Angels*, the canonical thinking with regard to widescreen's influence — longer takes, more lateral framing,

---

[20] In 1953 with its debut of CinemaScope, Fox also announced that henceforth all Fox films would be shot in CinemaScope.

fewer close-ups — is expanded and nuanced in informative and beneficial ways[21]. The choice of films does require a bit of unpacking; while the selections are generally made in terms of availability in home video formats with original theatrical ratios, there is also a desire to catch these auteurs at metamorphic stages with regard to widescreen aesthetics. These films are among the directors' initial forays into the wide frame (with a few exceptions) and thus provide opportunity to examine what experiments these visually expressive studio directors use to stage genre films and what are the aesthetic results in terms of visual style. The goal of this chapter is to provide a more nuanced and thickly described history of widescreen aesthetics and what norms emerge in the "early" widescreen years.

Judging from the epigrams that begin this chapter and the scholarly literature with regard to widescreen, it is safe to say that exactly what constitutes widescreen's "special potentialities" is subject to debate. This chapter (and the meta-goal of the entire project) seeks to expound upon the scholarly work of those aforementioned, and also to specify how widescreen films of the 1950s normalize the use of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement. Further, how do these filmmakers experiment with physical/stylistic ruptures to accommodate the new physical norms of exhibition? What norms emerge from this era of stylistic experimentation? Suffice to say that once the CinemaScope era is ushered in, the unique experiences presented by the likes of Abel Gance, Raoul Walsh and other early widescreen pioneers have normalized into standardized widescreen exhibition practices.[22]

---

[21] The "canon" of widescreen criticism that I refer to here is chiefly the scholarship of Bazin (1954), Barr (1963), Salt (1985), Bordwell (1985 and 1997) and Belton (1992).

[22] I am not suggesting that differences and inaccurate projection practices did not exist in the 1950s CinemaScope era, but rather that unlike the roadshow exhibition opportunities afforded Abel Gance, Raoul Walsh and Roland West, theatrical exhibition changed purposefully to accommodate widescreen projection.

For the most part, the structure of this chapter will be a chronological progression through the films in question with regard to use of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement. First, Otto Preminger approaches widescreen filmmaking with a style similar to his Academy Ratio films. Preminger relies upon bravura camera movement and staging in depth, but resists close-ups (in 1954) and instead favors the medium shot as a new norm. Nicholas Ray moves the camera only when trying to accomplish some "justification" for the widescreen; that is, Ray moves the camera only when the elongation of the movement accentuates the wide frame. Unlike Preminger, Ray does feature close-ups and even extreme close-ups. The analysis here suggests that Ray's tight framings serve more generic purposes than forging new stylistic norms. Perhaps the most experimental of the auteurs in this chapter, Frank Tashlin uses the wide frame as a reflexive tool for deploying sight gags. Whether having a protagonist physically alter the frame in a direct address monologue, or redoubling the CinemaScope frame with other similarly proportioned objects (jukeboxes, windows, etc.) in the *mise-en-scene*, Tashlin mocks and mines the widescreen frame for gags often comparing it to the smaller Academy Ratio/TV proportions. Finally, Douglas Sirk (like Preminger) moves the camera with great virtuostic style but resists close-ups and favors medium shots. Sirk's lighting strategies do suggest boldness within the wide frame (in black and white, no less) that may also push for some new stylistic norms. All of the directors continue with a camera that is generally lower than the Academy Ratio era. The lower camera is an underanalyzed reason for the reported trend of higher ASLs within the early 'Scope era.

While the new norms of exhibition had mostly stabilized the need for physical ruptures like those of Griffith and Gance, the stylistic ruptures within the physically normalized wider frame remain underexamined. In an effort to contextualize how and where physical/stylistic

ruptures happen within the films analyzed, this analysis sets some analytical boundaries and/or framing mechanisms.

The early 1950s and the shift to widescreen was a time in which a subtle dance occurs between new technologies and the subsequent aesthetic strategies that "debut" simultaneously. A dialectic emerged between the stylistic ruptures/physical norms of the Academy Ratio screen and the new CinemaScope frame. In addition the newly widened frame was also a physical rupture to the home television screen that was then governed by the Academy Ratio dimensions. CinemaScope was marketed as something *different from* the "old" screen and/or television, and the impetus is therefore very strong for the early CinemaScope-era filmmakers to make use of the unique framing possibilities in ways that rupture the Academy Ratio's potentialities. For this reason, I focus on the use of close-ups, landscape shots, camera angles and movement that occur with the opening sequences, interior conversation set-ups, outdoor vistas and complex camera movements (defined as more than a tilt or pan). Why limit this examination of film style to these narrow parameters? First and foremost, to provide an operational methodology of inquiry by which all films can be evaluated equally. Opening sequences are an obvious place for filmmakers to set the new parameters by which widescreen poetics will operate, and create a kind of primacy effect to prepare the spectator for innovative viewing strategies. Interior scenes rely upon close-ups, but practitioners and scholars alike have suggested that widescreen "progresses" beyond the need for close-ups so an interrogation of the texts is warranted. Due to the elongated width of the CinemaScope frame, canted or extreme camera angles were said anecdotally to be jarring to audiences, and camera movement is reportedly minimized in early Scope films because scenes can be taken in by long shot. By establishing these ground rules, this analysis will focus narrowly upon both aesthetic and narrative aspects present in all the films

analyzed regardless of generic implications. Additionally, this structuring allows for consistency of analysis across the board and not simply doting upon scenes of "attraction" or spectacle, like those of the silent era.

Finally, a focus of this project is the intersection of authorship, genre and the manifestation of the author's "voice" within standard generic formulas. This chapter highlights the works of well-known and visually expressive auteurs working within stabilized generic vehicles, i.e, the Western, melodrama and comedy. According to Bordwell (1985), directors establish their narrative voice throughout their oeuvre by a systematic use of devices and techniques that vivify their narrative and visual style. Preminger is known for his affinity for the long shot, long takes and fluid camera movement. Ray's visual style often features "shocks" such as sudden extreme close-ups to heighten the emotional impact of scenes or to destabilize a well-trod generic formula. Tashlin's films rely upon the director's use of sight gags, the mocking of TV, sexual innuendo and a brash and vivid, cartoon-esque *mise-en-scene*. Finally, Douglas Sirk's melodramatic formulas often feature complex camera work filled with Expressionist lighting schemes, mirrored surfaces and graceful camera moves. All of these signatures are established and proprietary uses of devices and techniques that point to their individual authors throughout their respective filmographies. How do these filmmakers adapt/rupture these codified and distinguishing traits of their visual style to the new physical norm presented by CinemaScope? What interplay is present among issues of generic formula, authorial voice and the need for differentiation and foregrounding of the CineamScope frame? In short, do these directors continue to apply the same techniques in the same manner as they had in the Academy Ratio frame, or do they experiment within the new CinemaScope proportions and forge new norms to signify their presence and fulfill generic aims?

River of No Return (1954)

As aforementioned numerous times in this project, the critical reaction to *River of No Return* is widely regarded (right or wrong) as the cornerstone of widescreen aesthetics. This illustrious honor resides not so much with the film itself, but within the critical and scholarly readings of the text. V.F. Perkins, Charles Barr and David Bordwell (among others) suggest that *River of No Return* embodies widescreen's "special potentialities" (though each scholar does so with admittedly different emphasis). A re-reading of the film here has at least two goals: 1) a focused and precise analysis of the film's use of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movements and 2) to expand on the previous scholarly literature. An examination of the opening sequence reveals stylistic ruptures from the Academy Ratio era in Preminger's use of landscapes and camera movements.

Specifically, Preminger uses widescreen in several ways. First, Preminger is known for his stylish and complex camera movement with long takes in both widescreen and Academy Ratio formats. Preminger uses the wide frame to accentuate the wide format's horizontal and diagonal properties via both *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. Preminger may block actors at the edges of the frame or arrange a rifle-shooting lesson that follows the rectilinear frame's orientation. Second, Preminger avoids close-ups because (like Edeson, Stull and MacCullough) he considers them to be antiquities of the Academy Ratio era, instead he uses the stylistic rupture of medium shots. Third, the camera is lower and thus ASLs rise, lighting strategies adjust and compositions tend to be planimetric. The realization of these stylistic ruptures is apparent in *River of No Return*'s opening sequences, interior conversations, outdoor vistas and complex camera moves.

The initial four minutes of screen time recalls that of John Wayne's initial appearance in the *The Big Trail*; Preminger does not seem to be "overly impressed" with Robert Mitchum's opening "star shots." Preminger rather sells the beauty and vastness of the West (Canada's Jasper and Banff National Parks) in a series of sweeping vistas that serve to contexualize the spatial attributes and demarcations throughout the film.

Illustration 3.1

Illustration 3.2

Illustration 3.3

The initial long shot is balanced with Matt Calder (Robert Mitchum) opposite the tree he is cutting down with an axe. A number of issues are worth unpacking within this opening shot. First, at issue is the notion that widescreen films, and more specifically, anamorphic widescreen films tend to block either actors or props at the far edges of the screen to accentuate the film frame (Salt, 1985, 247; Bordwell, 1997, 239-241). In *River of No Return*, Preminger foregrounds the frame's dimensions, but does so to equate man with nature (and perhaps fulfilling the Western generic trope of man conquering nature), as Matt is of equal stature to the tree he is felling. This may in fact fulfill what Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar (1968) call widescreen's "ability to preserve 'distance' between characters while keeping them both in close up" (292). Second, Preminger blocks the shot in a way that the viewer's attention/ screen direction is pulled across from left to right as we watch the tree fall. For these arrangements, Reisz and Millar further suggest that "widescreen is particularly suited to diagonal or horizontal compositions" (1968, 285), and certainly this visual strategy is consistent throughout *River of No Return*. Preminger then slowly tilts up, and Matt walks into a medium close-up (albeit an off-center one). By justifying Matt at flush left, Preminger is again establishing a visual balance between man and nature (represented by the airiness of the composition).

Matt then crosses left to right while Preminger pans, and then steps down out of the frame as Preminger tilts and stops on a distant expanse of Western landscape. Again, Preminger establishes the generic Western ebb and flow of man vs. nature and on second pass allows nature the upper hand. Further, while much criticism of CinemaScope has focused upon its poor focus problems and shallow depth of field (Belton, 1992, 143-145), here Preminger seems to have no problem keeping both close focal planes and distant ones clearly and sharply in focus. In seeming contradiction to Belton's and other scholars' assertions, Reisz and Millar claim that

because "wide screen encourages more complex patterns of plotting both laterally and in depth … it is the virtue of the wide screen to allow greater complexity and depth within the shot" (1968, 292). Finally, Preminger balances the medium close-up (as close a framing of any in the film) and the extreme long shot via a combination of camera movement and actor blocking. This last aesthetic trend – camera movement in conjunction with blocking – is known to be a defining trait of Preminger both before and after the coming of widescreen. *River of No Return*'s cinematographer Joseph La Shelle (ASC) worked previously with Preminger on both *Laura* (1944) and *Fallen Angel* (1945), both which are noted as exemplary of the *film noir* cycle and also for their graceful long takes and fluid camera movement. Therefore, while Preminger and La Shelle are not braving new ground in terms of aesthetic strategies per se with *River of No Return*, they are laying the groundwork of "norms" with regard to widescreen filmmaking. This difference here is where Preminger may cut to a close-up in *Laura* (*film noirs* often accentuate action via cuts or harsh angles), here he allows Matt to walk into a medium close-up but is not "overly impressed" and does not announce its significance.

The next shots of the opening sequence reveal Preminger's awareness of the novelty of the wide frame. The case can also be made that Preminger is simply fulfilling the long-standing generic trope of the Western to allow the scenic vistas to dominate the visual field. Preminger continues to film no closer than medium shot and centers the action around camera movement. Preminger continues to pull the viewer's attention across the width of the frame via either blocking or subtle camera movements.

Illustration 3.4

Illustration 3.5

Illustration 3.6

Preminger blocks Matt's character entering screen left and continuing to center frame and then retreating thus drawing our attention to the depth of the composition by guiding our gaze across the width of the landscape. In all cases, the generic Western tradition is in play as Preminger consistently opposes man and nature in a long shot, thus signifying man's smallness in comparison with the vast West. Thematically, Preminger uses the opening sequences to vivify the interaction of Bordwell's concept of a "relation of systems" (1985, 6). Preminger's authorship is realized in the use of the long shot to equivocate the smallness of man to the

enormity of the natural and rugged Western vista. The long shot is the device by which

Preminger inscribes this theme throughout the film. If Preminger uses the device of long shot to

capture the essence and magnitude of the Western landscape in these outdoor vistas, how will he

adapt his preference for long shot when shooting interiors or photographing dialogue scenes that

usually call for intimacy? While Reisz and Millar (1968) note that Preminger "treads warily in

the interiors," we will observe shortly that Preminger nuances his long shot with a careful

interplay of foreground and background action. (283)

Also of interest here (and in the previous examples) is the notion of compositional

balance in anamorphic films posited by Marshall Deutelbaum (2003). Deutelbaum argues that

the anamorphic frame tends to be composed as a quartered and/or modular visual field.

Deutelbaum bases his assertions upon principles of graphic design and the analysis of 100

anamorphic films released between 1953-1965. While I do not agree with all of Deutelbaum's

assessments with regard to widescreen composition, Preminger's blocking in *River of No Return*

does tend toward the geometrically segmented screen. However, Preminger does seem to block

the anamorphic aspect ratio of CinemaScope not in quarters, but in thirds.[23] Much like Breck

Coleman's arrival in *The Big Trail*, as Matt enters Tent City searching for his son, Preminger

does not announce his significance with a close-up but rather allows the viewer to differentiate

Matt as being the tallest figure on screen (Illustrations 3.8-3.9). An elaborate and bravura camera

move follows Matt as he rides into town from screen right. Preminger keeps the camera at Matt's

eye level, and thus is slightly higher than the surrounding extras. Like the long shot to show the

breadth and expanse of the West, Preminger's authorship is also bound to the fluid camera and

---

[23] David Bordwell and I have discussed this same phenomenon via email (11/11/05). Bordwell
felt strongly at one time that anamorphic compositions and blocking tended toward 5-section
schemes, but has since reconsidered.

resists cutting throughout his oeuvre. Bazin's (1956) remarked with regard to Anthony Mann's Westerns that when the "camera pans, it breathes" and the same can be said of Preminger's camera movement within *River of No Return*. (165) The fluid camera not only informs Preminger as auteur but also vivifies the instability of Tent City and the wilderness it represents. Preminger's dynamic camera cannot be tamed (contrary to Reisz and Millar's argument) even when constricted to interiors as we will soon observe inside the gambling tent.

Following Matt's entrance into Tent City, Preminger tracks right to left as Matt passes and ultimately turns his back to the camera, again riding into the depth of the frame. A match cut picks up Matt as he rides in from screen left (and far afield) into a two-shot (a reframing tilt and push-in accommodates Matt's dismount) with The Minister (Arthur Shields).

Illustration 3.8

In evidence here is not only Deutelbaum's notion of geometric segmentation but also a visual element underreported with regard to widescreen aesthetics — competing visual planes of action. Matt is a pioneer homesteader and has previously abandoned his son, Mark, with whom he is now trying to reunite. All the while that Matt and the Minister are discussing the spiritual and cultural shortcomings of the expansion town. The Minister says he "expected to find a small trading post, and instead, Sodom and Gomorrah." At this cue, comically in the background a

river-crossing carriage filled with cabaret girls becomes stuck on the riverbank, a metaphor for

Tent City's wallowing in the mud of progress and excess. Preminger cues attention to the

background plane of action because both players turn from their long shot, centered framing and

gaze even more deeply into the background at the farcical circumstances of the river crossing. In

The Big Trail, the river crossing is used for its generic power; these crossings were where many

wagon trains and Western pioneers were thwarted by the difficult and rugged conditions of the

Western frontier. Here, Preminger uses the generic tropes for comic effect and to punctuate the

risqué and morally vacant attitudes that embody the wilderness vs. civilization conflict.

Preminger also plays between foreground and background here with a river crossing to set up the

famous river incident with Kay's valise that happens later in the film. By guiding the viewer

between planes of action within the scene, Preminger's narrational voice is firmly adapted to the

stylistic breaks that widescreen represents; Preminger realizes that the widescreen necessitates

adaptive strategies to negotiate its enormous breadth and therefore the director relies upon

staging in depth and competing planes of action to accentuate the new format's shape.

Illustration 3.9

Again, Preminger does not seem "overly impressed" enough that this action warrants a

cut, but rather provides additional visual material (and comic relief) to the otherwise status quo

two-shot. However, when the two-shot dialogue has concluded, Preminger's craning camera

rises and pans left to follow the Minister and Matt ascending the stairs into the gambling hall.

Matt stops to converse (again like Breck Coleman in *The Big Trail*) with the trading post owner

about the whereabouts of his son, Mark. The trading post owner tells Matt that the boy is in Tent

City, but was abandoned by the man that dropped him off and is "probably walking around here.

Lost." Of significance here is that Preminger allows for some pulled focus, further

differentiating between foreground and rear with a diagonal blocking strategy to create some

tension within the wide frame. Preminger's shift to a shallower depth of field is significant for a

few reasons.

Illustration 3.10

First, unlike the previous exchange with The Minister, Preminger does not keep the

background activity in sharp focus, and instead wants to create an enclave of intimacy for Matt

to ascertain Mark's whereabouts. Second, by allowing Matt to stand at an angle and below the

trading post proprietor, Preminger further creates tension within the composition to convey the

harshness of the Western wilderness; a child is lost in an expansion town and the trading post

owner could not care less. The West is no place for a child, and if he is lost in the cacophony of

activity that Preminger has staged in the background, well that is what happens in wild, expansion towns as the Minister suggested: people get lost.

Both of these sequences embody Preminger's norms of early widescreen: large airy compositions (that "breathe") at no closer than medium shot with fluid camera movement across the width of the screen. Preminger often composes not in a clothesline fashion, as some scholars have suggested, but rather in depth with a lower camera. Finally, as Preminger guides the spectator through Matt's arrival without cutting into close-up, the camera finally settles into a medium two-shot of Matt and the Minister. While Ray, Tashlin and to some extent Sirk will "justify" the wide frame by centering objects or actors, Preminger uses the expanse of the rectilinear frame in a naturalistic form via the lower and mobile camera.

A discussion of widescreen and *River of No Return* inevitably involves a recounting of the canonical raft sequence in which Kay's valise falls into the river without Preminger cutting in. I have already discussed Buster Keaton's similar sequence in *Our Hospitality*, and scholars consistently return to the raft sequence in *River of No Return*. Reisz and Millar (1968) remark that Preminger's "refusal to cut to a close-up of the bag results in a more discreet treatment of the events. … Since the cut is in a sense an artificial device which draws attention in turn to the formal rather than the content, the fewer cuts there are the more 'natural' and spontaneous will appear" (283). David Bordwell (1985) targets another sequence (after the raft sequence) to point to different narrative strategies Preminger deploys in a type of question and answer paradigm. To further interrogate the generic and stylistic devices Preminger's authorship relies upon, I would like to address the sequence immediately *prior* to the raft sequence and examine it with regard to the aesthetic strategies Preminger is utilizing in a) indoor conversation set-ups and subsequently b) outdoor vistas. These consecutive sequences illustrate Preminger's use of innovative strategies

to cope with widescreen — resistance to close-ups, lower overall camera and carving the screen into geometrically equivalent segments — with regard to widescreen staging.

In the first sequence, an indoor conversation set-up between Matt and son Mark (Tommy Rettig) begins with a knee-level camera and the interior of Matt and Mark's log cabin.

Illustration 3.11

Of note here are issues that recall Arthur Edeson and William Stull's commentary with regard to the stylistic innovations and adaptive lighting strategies with the wide frame. The upper areas of the interior are realistically lit (the eaves of the house provide shade), but essentially provide a kind of masking via *mise-en-scene*. The screen is sectioned into thirds: the left edge of the doorframe forms one third; the right edge door frame to Mark's back is the second and the remaining middle section comprises the final third. This segmentation of the wide frame is a stylistic rupture because the relative distance is consistent throughout the scene and Preminger never cuts to a closer shot, but lowers the camera even further to table level and pushes in to a medium two-shot of Matt and Mark (Illustration 3.12).

Illustration 3.12

Preminger's attempt to create a diagonal between them is significant; as Reisz and Millar (1968) state, "widescreen is particularly suited to diagonal or horizontal compositions" (285). Preminger strives again for the interplay of foreground and background as he has done previously with Matt and the wilderness, the conversation with The Minister and the trading post owner. By blocking Mark slightly ahead of Matt, Preminger attempts to provide a somewhat deep focus composition with the diagonal staging that is once again divided into thirds. This blocking strategy reinforces narrative elements being played out in the scene between Matt and Mark. After being reunited in Tent City, Mark questions why his father chose to name him Mark. Matt explains that Mark follows Matt(hew) in the Bible and therefore, "you follow me." While Preminger is creating a father/son hierarchy of authority, he is granting Mark equal weight by placing his smaller body closer in the foreground. As with Matt's conversation with the trading post owner, Preminger has framed a background element (the doorway) in soft focus, but it serves as a light source that may attract a wandering viewer's eye. This is especially likely being that the center of the frame is a blackened and charred fireplace that is devoid of light. This medium two-shot is the closest framing Preminger allows within *River of No Return*.

In the Academy Ratio, this sequence would almost certainly go beyond the master shot and the subsequent push-in to medium two shot into alternating singles in a shot-reverse shot

strategy. Preminger's authorship is highlighted because he allows this interplay of conversation to volley across the table without intrusion from the camera or cuts. Preminger's narrator voice lies in his refusal to cut and make one character the focus of the scene. Preminger forces the viewer to weigh both players equally and (as with the wilderness, The Minister and the trading post owner) therefore to assert the democracy of the widescreen frame. Much as the opening sequences and Matt's discussion with the Minister, Preminger provides action (the conversation) across the width of the frame. The stylistic ruptures in both sequences — a lower and mobile camera, segmented screen form, adaptive lighting strategies and a resistance to centering and cuts — suggest that Preminger is in fact forging new stylistic norms in the widescreen era.

As seen with *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* these stylistic ruptures effectively neuter the Classical Hollywood Cinema's glamour calling card – the close-up. Without the close-up's visualization of perpendicular facial emotions and motivated lighting schemes, both Matt and Mark are democratically equated within the shot. This balance of actors across the frame's width speaks to the differences that emerge throughout this chapter as directors struggle to cope with the wide frame's demands upon their Academy Ratio-honed skills. Widescreen cinema is more than a subtle adaptation for these early practitioners when one considers the drop in camera height, the changes in lighting scheme and shooting set-ups, not to mention the adaptive compositional techniques (geometric segmentations).

Illustration 3.13

After Matt and Mark conclude their conversation, they retreat outside for shooting practice. An analogue to this sequence can be found in George Stevens' *Shane* (1953). Recall that when Shane (Alan Ladd) teaches Joey (Brandon DeWilde) to shoot, Stevens structures the sequence in shot/reverse shot pattern while cutting to Joey's look of amazement. Preminger's outdoor vista sequence frames Matt and Mark with a pan before settling at (Matt's) knee-level into a two-shot (Illustration 3.14). This sequence illustrates concretely what Preminger saw as widescreen's progression beyond sequences like the one from *Shane*; the lack of cuts allows for naturalistic flow of action across the screen. The entire sequence is dependent upon the camera's lower than Academy Ratio height.

Illustration 3.14

Of significance in this sequence is the action across the frame without the intervention of edits. Matt shoots the branch of a barren tree that is far right in the frame, thus accentuating the firing across two-thirds of the frame's width. To compare to the Academy Ratio era (like *Shane*), this sequence would most likely be broken into multiple shots: 1) Mark selects a branch 2) a close-up, reverse shot from branch to confirm spatial position and selection 3) Matt fires the gun, 2) close-up of the branch being hit, 3) a reaction shot from Mark and 4) a return to Matt. The camera level is lower than typical in a pre-1953 film while the visual composition is divided neatly into thirds. This sequence is actually *one* shot.

Preminger begins with a match cut on the outside of the cabin as Matt and Mark walk out and pans right to accommodate their movement. Preminger's skill with the wide format is only showcased when he stops the pan briefly for Matt to ask Mark which tree he should shoot. When Mark states his answer, Preminger then pans slightly more right to reveal the barren tree that Matt ultimately shoots. Rather than relying upon revelatory edits to move the action along, Preminger simply withholds relevant information based upon the demarcation of the frame lines. This presents a challenge to those who have said that Preminger relies upon the viewer to take notice of what action is taking place within the frame as Preminger clearly strings the viewer along and reveals relevant visual information only when necessary for action.[24] To restate, rather than a series of revelatory cuts that provide both spatial and geographic confirmation, Preminger chooses to use the dimensions of the frame, subtle camera movement and blocking to achieve a similar, though not equivalent effect.

---

[24] Bordwell (1985, "Widescreen") notes a similar incredulity at "Preminger's objectivity" in a later scene in the cabin involving Matt's "missing rifle." Bordwell states that such strategies — withholding vital narrative details within the *mise-en-scene* — are not "the work of a director who works as if he did not know how the scene was going to end" as earlier widescreen critics had suggested. (23)

The final movement of this sequence occurs when Matt hands the gun to Mark in an effort to teach him proper gun etiquette (which also fulfills the Western trope of mastery of tools). Just before Mark shoots, Native Americans convey smoke signals over a mountain peak to Matt and Mark's extreme left and then answer over another mountain top in the direction Matt and Mark have been shooting. Here Preminger cannot accomplish (or does not) the same fluidity of camera movement as he uses in the gun-shooting sequence. While the first camera move is a dynamic pan and tilt to an extreme angle, the angle is really only at shoulder height, and appears dramatic because the camera is so much lower in Preminger's widescreen framing paradigm. These frame grabs begin after the camera has swung dramatically left and tilted to an over-the-shoulder POV from behind Matt.

Illustration 3.15

Illustration 3.16

Illustration 3.17

Illustration 3.18

Just prior to this sequence, Preminger revealed distant details (the shooting target tree) within the frame and eschewed traditional editing practices of the Academy Ratio era. Here, however, Preminger reverts to a straight editing technique of eyeline matches that are rhythmically cut as they would be in a standard pre-widescreen film. Therefore, while his experimentation with stylistic ruptures in interior conversation scenes are emblematic of his preference for the long take, Preminger does not always afford outdoor vistas the same treatment. Certainly Preminger could have photographed this sequence with the same strategy as the opening outdoor vistas with a series of pans and other camera moves that accentuate the negative space available in the widescreen frame. Clearly, Preminger is relying upon the centrality of framing and eyeline matches of continuity editing here so this "fire on the mountain" sequence reveals that while Preminger is experimenting with new stylistic ruptures, his palette is not completely free of pre-widescreen aesthetic traditions.

The final example from *River of No Return* centers once again upon Preminger's complex camera movements. The sequence occurs earlier in the film and is a more dramatic version of the much-lauded rafting sequence where Kay (Marilyn Monroe) loses her valise. This sequence takes place in Tent City and inside of the gambling hall featuring Kay's burlesque show, and its narrative significance is that for the first time in the film, both stars are together in the same diegetic space.

Matt circles around the Kay's stage as she performs, and Preminger goes to great lengths to avoid cutting the shot. As with the rafting scene, little effort is put forth (i.e. insert edits to signify place or importance) to reveal Matt within the shot. The viewer is simply led by the movement of the camera that coincides with Matt's movement around the stage. The complete sequence has two cuts, and begins with Mark walking through the gambling hall and switching off with Kay as she takes the stage (Illustrations 3.19-3.20).

Illustration 3.19

Illustration 3.20

This initial camera movement, a pan left with a slight craning movement represents the anchored reference point for the entire sequence. The camera never crosses the plane of the stage, and the horizontal edge of the stage serves as the axis of action. While the sequence does pierce the vertical space of the action, the camera movement is essentially a very long horizontal observation of a staged burlesque show. This sequence is evidentiary of Preminger's commitment to lateral widescreen composition and instilling new norms, perhaps embodying John Belton's (1985) assertion that the CinemaScope format itself is foregrounded as the "star" in the early CinemaScope period. (42) Rather than break this sequence up into Mark's action and Kay's action and Matt's action separately, Preminger instead allows the camera to range about the gambling hall, but never centering any one object. A goal of this chapter is to examine where and how established auteurs choose to inscribe their own personal stylistic signatures within the newly widened frame. Opening sequences seem fairly obvious given that directors would want to establish a kind of primacy for stylistic imprints that will be developed throughout the film. Interior dialogue sequences present a challenge for widescreen set-ups that would be separated into shot/reverse shot edits in the Academy Ratio and Preminger has shown his preference for the medium two-shot long take. Complex, fluid camera moves have always been a stylistic signature of Preminger's, therefore this scene featuring Kay's burlesque show serves as a "wow" moment not only for CinemaScope, but for Preminger to showcase a signature, stylistic device within the widescreen frame.

As Kay takes the stage (Illustration 3.21), Preminger follows with a reframing pan right, and when Kay hits her mark on stage, Preminger begins to crane in and settles into an airy medium long shot, with Kay's guitar providing visual tension to the negative space of the framing (Illustration 3.23).

Illustration 3.21

Illustration 3.22

Illustration 3.23

Preminger's waist-level shot of Kay's "horizontal walk" accentuates the sexuality of the burlesque show in general, and that of Marilyn Monroe in particular.[25] While Preminger's framing motivation is twofold (narrative coherence and selling Kay's sexuality), the framing Preminger settles into suggests the cut that follows to Matt, who is offscreen right.

---

[25] For a more complete enumeration of the "horizontal walk" and Marilyn Monroe, see Lisa Cohen. "The Horizontal Walk: Marilyn Monroe, CinemaScope and Sexuality," <u>Yale Journal of Criticism</u>, Vol. 11(1), Spring 1998, 259-288.

Illustration 3.24

This single cut begins a sequence that deserves the acclaim of the often-cited raft sequence later in the film. Matt circles the stage and exchanges two glances with Kay and Preminger's camera follows with a floating and fluid crane shot. Again, if this were a pre-widescreen film, these glances would certainly elicit close-ups and eyeline matches, but Preminger is not "overly impressed" by the courtship ritual and allows the viewer to observe the glances by the cues of the camera's movement.

As Matt leaves the gambling table, he circles around the back of the stage, and Preminger's camera cranes up and left (Illustration 3.25). While Kay is in the foreground, Matt is clearly in focus and perhaps requires more attention because he is (again) a moving item in the background plane. Matt's movement pulls our attention horizontally across the width of the frame. Preminger bisects the blocking strategy with Matt at far left and Kay at far right (Illustrations 3.26-3.27).

Illustration 3.25

Illustration 3.26

Illustration 3.27

This entire shot requires little more than a reframing pan or a craning up. While no cuts

are used, Preminger does vary his framing distance by dollying in/out, allowing Kay to achieve a

medium shot (with Matt behind and to the left) without re-blocking. David Bordwell (2002)

argues that moving the camera (and not the actors) in conjunction with airy compositions in the

anamorphic frame is part and parcel of the New Hollywood generation of the 1970s (19-20, 25),

but Preminger accomplishes these same goals in 1954. By moving his camera rather than cutting,

Preminger is fulfilling the silent era prophecies of Edeson and Stull and additionally foregrounding the CinemaScope format as the true "star" of this sequence.

Preminger's moving camera is apparent in his pre-widescreen films, so the new physical norm of the anamorphic frame cannot be the sole experimental impetus for his bravura camera movement. Preminger's stylistic ruptures with widescreen fulfill generic tropes. The grandness of the opening sequence, the hectic and bustling background planes of action in Tent City (civilization), and the movement of the camera to accommodate (and provide) spatial breadth all feed the generic needs of the Western. The Western centers upon the binary of wilderness vs. civilization, and Preminger's framing and camera movement provide visual affirmation for this dialectic conflict. By framing interior conversation set-ups with little camera movement, but in relatively tight blocking strategies, Preminger is providing the solace of the civilized interior spaces that represent cultural and technological progression and triumph over the wilderness. Concurrently, the frenetic rear planes of action in *River of No Return* suggest the resistance of the wilderness to be tamed. Further, action of all kinds in Tent City is hectic and therefore provides the impetus for Preminger to move the camera and manipulate action between foreground and background. This action is in stark contrast to the sequences at Matt's cabin in the wilderness where conversations play out in long takes with a static and lower camera, or allow actions like gunfire to be handled with a simple pan. While these stylistic ruptures of traditional Academy Ratio norms are significant, norms are not predicated on one film or one auteur, and therefore we must withhold global assertions of new normalized aesthetic strategies until the remaining films have been observed. However, we can observe Preminger using a few innovative, stylistic strategies for widescreen filmmaking in *River of No Return*.

First, Preminger moves the camera in a creative and fluid manner. Of course, Preminger did this in his pre-widescreen oeuvre as well, so Preminger's widescreen camera movement is simply more lateral in CinemaScope. Matt's entrance into Tent City, the shooting lesson and Kay's burlesque show all exemplify Preminger's horizontality of both composition and camera movement. Second, Preminger modifies Academy Ratio norms by composing the wide frame in geometrically segmented strategies. As Abel Gance displayed in *Napoleon* and Tashlin does (as we will see later in this chapter), Preminger realizes that the wide frame elicits change from the deep-focus, vertical compositions of the Academy Ratio and therefore divides the CinemaScope frame into manageable segments. Like Gance, Preminger chooses to compose in smaller geometric configurations within the "inflexible" frame. Finally, Preminger eschews the close-up for the medium shot. All of these stylistic transitions offer what David Bordwell (2006) terms "occasions for innovation" (173); these stylistic ruptures displayed by Preminger in *River of No Return* are results of a lower camera. A camera that is lower to the horizon moves laterally, and Preminger believes (like Edeson and Stull in 1930) that widescreen eliminates the need for close-ups.

Bigger than Life (1956)

Nicholas Ray is considered by some scholars to be even more progressive than Otto Preminger in his use of the widescreen format in the early 1950s. While Ray is not at the heart of the seminal essay by Charles Barr, the author admires Ray's technique within the wide frame, calling it "completely natural and unforced" (1963, 10-11). Barr further asserts that Ray was able to achieve "greater physical involvement" by revealing a "more vivid sense of space" within the CinemaScope frame. (11) Geoff Andrew (2004) writes "no director … has used the unwieldy format of the CinemaScope frame so expressively or beautifully as did Ray" (19-20). As with

Barr, Andrew admires Ray's technique and proffers that Ray is doing *something different* and superior to that of his peers working within the Scope frame. However, like Barr, Andrew stops short of a detailed textual analysis thereby revealing *specifically* what Ray's technique is comprised of and how it functions within the film.

Bernard Eisenschitz (1993) adds that Ray's technique within the Scope frame (and in *Bigger than Life*) specifically reverts to "cinema's classical tradition, Ray lets the characters and their relationships predominate, signified through looks, attitudes and gestures as much as through events" (279). Eisneschitz seems to be suggesting, in opposition to the opinions of Barr and Andrew, that Ray does not explore the greater space with the newly widened frame, but rather treats the new frame as something to be "reverted" to the Academy Ratio framings and strategies. David Bordwell (1997) supports this assertion with regard to *Bigger than Life*. Citing Rivette, Bordwell states that Ray's *mise-en-scene* in *Bigger than Life* is sometimes "diagrammatic" and would be the "hallmark of the 'age of *metteurs en scene*'" (241). Bordwell sees Ray's staging strategies in *Bigger than Life* as lateral compositions that lack imagination and forcefully fetishize the novelty of frame width. This echoes Barr's assertion in what he calls "a good working rule for Scope: if you notice it, it's bad. Or more reasonably: you don't have to notice it for it to be good" (1963, 9). Such conditions — impressionistic and nebulous though they may be — are excellent starting points for a more thorough examination of Ray's technique as deployed with *Bigger than Life*.

Widescreen aesthetics and CinemaScope aesthetics in general (for this chapter) have not gone underexamined insomuch as they are under-defined. The goal of this chapter is to analyze and describe exactly what textual techniques are being developed (or refunctionalized) to cope with Scope. The first section covering *River of No Return* in some fashion was required given the

preponderence of material that springs from both Perkins' and Barr's initial writings with regard to the film. While Ray has considerable attention allocated to him by scholars, there is little written with regard to Ray's visual poetics in the CinemaScope era.

Bigger than Life is an interesting text because of its conflicted generic status. One could easily assert that *Bigger than Life* is Ray's follow-up (and adult version) of the social problem film *Rebel without a Cause* (1954). Certainly, *Bigger than Life* would fit many definitions of the social problem film, but one could also argue that the film is a domestic melodrama and even further a medical melodrama. While the generic status of *Bigger than Life* may be contestable or hybrid, I will consider it a domestic melodrama; that is, a genre owing much to the examination of home and family life and the stresses and afflictions it produces. Thomas Elsaesser (1987) writes that the melodrama, and particularly the Hollywood melodrama from 1940-63, uses such visual strategies as "emotional shock-tactics" to heighten the dramatic punch by re-inscribing the impotence of the characters. (44) Elsaesser claims that the domestic melodrama "in the 40s and 50s is perhaps the most highly elaborated, complex mode of cinematic signification that the American cinema has ever produced, because of the restricted scope for external action determined by the subject, and because everything, as Sirk said, happens 'inside'" (52). Elsaesser focuses particularly upon the elements of music, *mise-en-scene* and "colour and widescreen" as the aesthetic sites where this "complex mode of cinematic signification" occurs (52). In short, Elsaesser observes that while melodrama features moments of emotional shock to exacerbate the inability of the characters to enact change to their plights, it is within the aesthetic filmic elements — authorially signifying devices — that such signification is realized.

Elsaesser specifically names widescreen as a reason that melodramatic texts of the period were heightened to new levels. The author claims that because melodrama can justifiably be said

to be more about *mise-en-scene* than "intellectual content," that widescreen and color vivify the experiential and "emotional shock tactics." Elsaesser does not outline specifically how widescreen (or color) accomplishes such goals. This project adds to Elsaesser's criticism by clearly explicating how widescreen is a useful tool for auteurs making melodramatic texts. Both Ray and Sirk announce and inscribe their authorship in heightened ways within the CinemaScope frame.

Scholars have regarded CinemaScope's benefits as associated with spectacle and more specifically suited to outdoor spectacle. How, then does Ray utilize the wide frame within the interiority of the home life of an educator who has become addicted to cortisone? As with *River of No Return*, the analysis here will examine close-ups, landscapes, angles and camera movement and specifically how these techniques are used in the opening sequence, interior conversational set-ups, outdoor vistas and with complex camera movements. Because of the melodramatic goals, of keen interest within this analysis is how Ray chooses to: a) represent domestic and/or interior spaces and b) how they inform character psychology in the CinemaScope frame.

Nicholas Ray's use of the CinemaScope frame differs from that of Preminger in several ways. First, Ray uses extreme close-ups beginning with the opening sequence and again throughout the film. Second, while Ray's camera is lower, the director tends to move the camera only in novel ways as if to "justify" the CinemaScope screen's width. Whereas Preminger displays subtle but complex camera movements, Ray's seem forced and gimmicky. Third, Ray does not hold the belief of Preminger (and Edeson and Stull) that two-shots are the new norm for widescreen conversation sequences. Ray breaks his conversation sequences into familiar shot-reverse shot patterns that Preminger *et al.* seem to regard as belonging to the Academy Ratio era. Finally, Ray occasionally composes shots in thirds, but more often than not, Ray bisects the

Scope frame into two almost square units. Also, unlike Preminger, Ray centers single figures in the 'Scope frame that creates awkward compositions that seem to float in book-ended negative space.

In both of the westerns considered in this project (*The Big Trail* and *River of No Return*), the opening sequences foreground the wide, open expanses that widescreen seems tailor-made to present. For the post-credit sequence of *Bigger than Life*, Nicholas Ray thrusts the viewer into the confined and mentally unstable mind of Ed Avery (James Mason). Ray begins with a "push in" in order to uncomfortably shoehorn the lateral width of the CinemaScope frame into the small and interior spaces of Ed's life in the grip of addiction. Ray's push-in to Ed's psyche signifies that unlike the long shots and airy visuals of *River of No Return*, *Bigger than Life* will shoot close to its protagonist and force the audience to experience his pain and suffering in tight close-ups. In an interview with Ray for *Cahiers du Cinema*, Charles Bitsch (1958) asserts that his technique is a stylistic signature throughout Ray's filmography by suggesting to Ray that, "one gets the impression that to shoot a scene you [Ray] work in the following way: you start filming it in long shot and then you make cutaways" (123). Ray responded by claiming that he approached each film as a type of organic process tailored to the subject and dictated by the actors. Certainly, most studio era directors begin with Master shots and then shoot for coverage, but Ray's use of widescreen is innovative in that he cuts in closer than any other director chronicled in this chapter. This choice is indicative not only of his use of the device of a close-up, but also inscribes his directorial signature within the generic vehicle.

Many of the *Cahiers* critics note that Ray's defining feature throughout his films is his ability to subvert generic works like the domestic melodrama (*Bigger than Life*, *Rebel without a Cause*) or even the western (*The Lusty Men*, *Johnny Guitar, The True Story of Jesse James*) by

using what Jacques Rivette (1953) calls Ray's "aesthetic value of surprise" and his knowledge "that beauty has a duty to astonish" (104). Rivette notes that Ray usually achieves this surprise by his use of "dramatic close-ups" and thereby asserts his directorial sense into the action in the opposite way that Preminger does; Preminger allows for action to take place in long shot while the camera observes details from a distance and gives the viewer a democratic freedom, while Ray (and later Sirk) thrusts the viewer into his characters' nightmarish situations at close range. Rivette notes that Ray's narratives, regardless of genre follow this structure:

> Everything [in Ray's films] always proceeds from a simple situation where two or three people encounter some elementary and fundamental concepts of life. And the real struggle takes place in only one of them, against the interior demon of violence, or of a more secret sin, which seems linked to man and his solitude. (1953, 105)

Geoff Andrew (2004) suggests that Ray's work found great favor with the *Cahiers* critics because Ray's themes and style aligned with European emigrant directors such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk, Alfred Hitchcock and Otto Preminger that "cast a detached and critical eye over the mores of their adopted country" (9). Ray's films, according to Andrew, feature:

> A pessimistic, yet oddly romantic account of the violence, alienation and confusion that he seems to have felt were the inevitable concomitants of rampant individualism trapped within a culture devoted to conformism and materialism. … His misguided, lonely victims of a callous and complacent society are followed in close-up; it is the world around them that is presented as corrupt, maligned and in need of moral re-education. … [There are] several recurring thematic elements in his films: the pressures and deceptions

of family life; the equivocal function of drink (or drugs) as social lubricant and evil and

as private panacea ... (9)

If Ray's defining characteristics then are the shock of close-ups within narrative

situations that feature (usually) a solitary group of characters facing some internal turmoil of

moral weight, then how does Ray adapt these signature elements within CinemaScope and

Bigger than Life? Unlike Preminger who never approaches a close-up in *River of No Return*

because Westerns are about open wilderness and man's confrontation of those large, open

spaces, Ray hurls the viewer into uncomfortably close quarters with the protagonists. Ray's very

point of doing so is to encourage the viewer's squeamishness at the close proximity of the

characters' pain and anguish.

In *Bigger than Life*, Ed develops a life-threatening condition brought about by the

stresses of modern domestic life. His teaching job does not provide sufficient income, and thus

he moonlights as a taxi dispatcher. Ed does not reveal this to his wife and the stress and shame

ultimately result in a terminal medical condition that only the new "miracle drug" cortisone can

cure. Ed's drug abuse quickly spirals into a violent psychosis as he verbally berates his wife Lou

(Barbara Rush) and attempts to kill his young son Ritchie (Christopher Olsen), whom he finds

lazy and unwilling to work at his studies and sports. Ed's "secret sin" is that of the overreacher;

Ed wants to excel at everything that the conservative ideology of America in the 1950s purports

to provide: stable job, blissfully comfortable home life and the raising of children. Therefore,

while Ray begins with a long shot to establish that from a distance, Ed's life is status quo. The

subsequent push-in to extreme close-up shatters this notion and reveals Ed's dark existence and

addiction.

Bigger than Life's opening sequence begins with an extreme long shot that is pushed in to a centered composition framing the school where Ed teaches. The centered composition of the schoolhouse spilling forth children from its doors sets up Ed's psychological predicament; Ed is trapped and cannot escape the confines of the school and his responsibilities. This opening shot suggests the framing strategy of geometric segmentation. More often than not Ray and cinematographer Joe MacDonald actually compose shots that are bifurcated with perfect symmetry.

Illustration 3.28

Illustration 3.29

Illustration 3.30

After the credits, Ray shows Ed staying late working to help a young student. A whip pan begins the true opening scene suggests generic implications as Ray has "pushed in" to Ed's life, and now a sudden whoosh of the camera apes Ed's spiraling life and lack of agency. Of particular interest is the tightness of the framing of Ed. (Illustrations 3.31-3.32).

Illustration 3.31

Illustration 3.32

Ray's opening shot of Ed frames closer than Preminger allowed in the entire film of *River of No Return*. Interiority and psychological motivation are significant generic and narrative impetuses for this framing strategy, because Ray's text is wholly about the inner workings of Ed's psychosis, and therefore a closer framing is demanded. Also, Ray's authorship is manifest within this "shocking" thrust into Ed's visage and the whip pan is a stylistic device used to vivify Ed's frantic state. The following shot is not a true neck-to-forehead close-up but reveals as close a framing as any director of the initial CinemaScope era allows.

Illustration 3.33

Ray is following continuity editing rules of match cuts here. Beginning with Ed's quivering hand clutching his neck in close-up, Ray doesn't allow the viewer to question the significance of the visuals (as Preminger does) but thrusts Ed's psychological state upon them. Ray's framing and montage leave no room for airy visuals that might allow a viewer to roam the image searching for significance. Ray is staging and shooting in the realm of melodrama and appeals to the emotions by showing the trembling hand clutching the neck and the anguish upon Ed's face in the match shot. Further, Ray "surprises" the viewer with both speed and the aforementioned closeness of the shot. Domestic melodramas are about many things — family, betrayal, broken dreams, children — but speed is generally the enemy of such proceedings. The

goal of the domestic melodrama is to depict the slow and agonizing inner death of the individual suffering the unbearable pain of the status quo. Ray uses the whip pan, the push-in and the close-up to shock the viewer and by doing so announces himself as a narrator that intends to emotionally wrench the narrative to exploit its emotional expressive capabilities with such devices and techniques.

Next, Ray appears to be following Preminger's strategy with regard to the handling of interior dialogue scenes. Preminger begins with a master shot and moves into a two-shot on several occasions, thereby stylistically rupturing the previous paradigm because the wide frame does not require the next logical step forward to shot/reverse shot. Ray clings to the paradigm of continuity editing leftover from the Academy Ratio era. Ray frames Ed and his student as book ends for a dialogue scene and then breaks down into centered singles before ending the sequence with the original book ended two-shot. While Preminger experiments with the geometry of the 'Scope frame, Ray simply shoots the interior dialogue scene as one would in a standard Academy Ratio set-up.

Illustration 3.34

Illustration 3.35

Illustration 3.36

Illustration 3.37

The continuation of this scene is indicative of Ray's experimentation with widescreen.

After the student leaves, a fellow teacher enters from the extreme right of the frame. A slight re-

framing pan right is necessary to include her in the composition (Illustration 3.38). The

experimental nature of this shot suggests that the newly wide frame presents new compositional

problems that directors and cinematographers must overcome with subtle but unmotivated

camera moves. Nonetheless, Ray blocks this scene in a bookend strategy but then pushes in to a symmetrical two shot (Illustration 3.39).

Illustration 3.38

Illustration 3.39

This tendency to divide a composition directly down the middle is a recurring visual tactic throughout *Bigger than Life*. Ray and MacDonald seem comfortable breaking the wide and rectangular frame into essentially two Academy Ratio frames. This may be seen as Ray's experimental attempt to normalize and adjust to the new format: break the new frame down into familiar and compose-able parts as Gance did with Polyvision. The opening sequence of *Bigger than Life* displays that Ray's widescreen framing choices include close-ups, centered singles and shot/reverse shot. Ray is not so much forging new norms as he is shoehorning the Academy Ratio tropes into the elongated CinemaScope frame.

Because *Bigger than Life* is a domestic melodrama, there is a preponderance of interior conversational set-ups from which to choose. A particularly striking use of *mise-en-scene* occurs as Ed is depriving Ritchie of food so that he will "concentrate" on sports and arithmetic, respectively. Ritchie's resistance to conform to Ed's cortisone-induced mania can be read as Ray's "alienation and confusion" produced by the consensus ideology of the 1950s. Ritchie cannot hope to live up to Ed's impossibly high standards, and ironically Ed's violence toward Ritchie flows from his dissatisfaction with (and medication of) his own inability to have agency over anything in his own life. Thus, Ed dominates over Ritchie and Lou because they are the displaced, local manifestations of Ed's loss of control. In this scene, Ed towers over Ritchie from behind and Ray's low-key lighting provides an Expressionist, almost Hitchcockian, *mise-en-scene*. Like Preminger's interior dialogue scene (curiously also a father-son discussion[26]), Ray has framed a very low two-shot pointed toward the ceiling thereby increasing Ed's looming presence over Ritchie (Illustration 3.40).

Illustration 3.40

---

[26] The differences between the two films are not entirely generic, but in fact, mostly authorial. Preminger's films seem to always conclude their narratives with some uplifting moral answers to the questions posed — *River of No Return* ends with Matt's full reunification with Mark and their relationship is healed of its trauma. Ray's narrative spins full tilt as Ed tries to kill Ritchie and bully Lou until he ends in a hospital bed with an oppressive (but somewhat uplifting) conclusion.

Ray's composition again divides the widescreen into a symmetrical framing, which effectively functions as two separate Academy Ratio compositions. The off-center, low-key lighting scheme complicates the composition to striking effect, and Ray resists a tighter framing to accommodate the lighting effect. Therefore, while Ritchie appears in the foreground, he is not closer (nor larger) in frame than Ed. As Lou enters through the door trying to persuade Ed to allow Ritchie to eat dinner (these sessions have made them 2 hours late and they missed lunch altogether), MacDonald reframes with a right pan (Illustration 3.41). The new composition is again symmetrical and thus easily divided. This division carries narrative weight as well since Ed and Lou are at odds about how to deal with Ritchie and Lou sides with her son (both narratively and compositionally) and Ray lights the scene with the shadow dividing them. The composition metaphorically represents the growing rift between Ed and Lou as Ed's cortisone addiction is spiraling into madness.

Illustration 3.41

Ray's widescreen norms — lower camera, symmetrical composition and centralized figures — are apparent throughout the exchange. When Lou leaves the room (told by Ed that Ritchie will eat when he correctly answers the questions), Ed crosses in front of Ritchie and Ray

cuts to reveal his whereabouts in a single. Because Ray frames tighter than any other director

chronicled in this chapter, his centralized use of singles is significant. Where Preminger uses a

mobile camera to motivate viewer interest, Ray plants his actors in the center of the screen. This

practice of centering figures in compositions will be economically motivated in the 1960s and

beyond when widescreen films are being sold to televison and later to home video outlets, but no

such economic imperative was present in 1956. Douglas Sirk told Jon Halliday (1997) that he

was "required to shoot so that the film [*Sign of the Pagan*, 1954] would fit both the new

CinemaScope screen and the old-size screen. You had one camera and one lens, but you had to

stage it so that it would fit both screens" (117). Perhaps Ray was given the same edict, but this

seems contradictory to Fox's assertions that no non-CinemaScope films would be produced after

1952. In any event, Ray often uses centered singles in *Bigger than Life* rather than compositions

that exploit the breadth of the CinemaScope frame.

Illustration 3.42

Illustration 3.43

Ed soon notices that it is time for his cortisone (over) dose and leaves. As he leaves, Lou

enters and brings Ritchie a glass of milk. After a re-establishing two-shot, Ray cuts to a closer

framing of Ritchie and Lou in a medium two-shot (Illustrations 3.43-3.44).

Illustration 3.44

Ray groups his figures closer and more centralized in the frame than Preminger does in

River of No Return, and like Preminger, the generic motivation of this framing is clear. Not only

is Ritchie framed tighter with Lou (suggesting safety and shelter with his mother), but the

composition is still lower than normal. Ray is showing that Ritchie's world is more secure and

stable when his mother is around but volatile when Ed is present. Earlier when Ed met with the

student in the classroom, Ray divided the sequence into alternating singles, but here Ray

experiments with the two-shot to show the unity of mother and child. Further, this interior conversation sequence is unique in the film. Ray usually breaks conversations into shot-reverse set-ups (as a subsequent example will show). Therefore, while there are stylistic norms emerging with widescreen in its years — lower camera, geometrically segmented framings, innovative lighting schemes, etc. — generic service to the narrative is always of utmost concern to filmmakers. While Ray tends to show Ed as separate from students, his wife, his child, etc., to show his isolated and decaying mental state, Ray shows the unity of mother and child to further reify the fracture in the family unit in as an "us against *him*" strategy.

The outdoor vista within the melodrama seems prima facie to be a conflict of goals. Domestic melodramas usually center on interiority and psychological motivation of characters within repressive familial or doomed romantic relationships. These concepts are usually expressed via *mise-en-scene* as interior architecture and/or framing strategies and suggest the entrapping confines of the domestic spaces and the restricted options of the players. Thus far in *Bigger than Life*, Ray has approached widescreen framings in a traditional manner, with a generic emphasis upon interiors. Sometimes, Ray will centralize figures and at other times he will bookend and geometrically segment his compositions. Once outdoors, however, Ray "surprises" and "shocks" viewers by exploiting the dimensions of Scope. *Bigger than Life*'s outdoor scene is strikingly similar to the shooting lesson in *River of No Return.* Leon Shamroy, cinematographer on *The Robe* (1953), describes a similarly framed scene:

> A Roman archer in the left foreground pulls his bow and sends an arrow into the heart of actor Dean Jagger standing with Richard Burton and Victor Mature, 75 yards away. Yet the audience sees all of this in virtual close-up — the arrow leaving, the arrow traveling, the arrow hitting its target, the pain of surprise on the actor's face, the actor falling. On

any other film medium this cavalcade of action would have required a half-dozen different camera set-ups and a half-dozen confusing film cuts. We did this in one smoothly flowing, life-like scene, thanks to … CinemaScope. (178)

Such sequences in *Bigger than Life*, *River of No Return* and *The Robe* seem to strive for spectacle and novelty.[27] Note however that Shamroy is suggesting that cuts in such set-ups are now "confusing." This connotation strikes me as another stylistic rupture that Bazin might echo. In pre-1953 films, the rigorous continuity editing system emerged to assist films in being both (narratively and fiscally) economical and logical. One of the experiments of the 'Scope era with regard to stylistic ruptures then is how to avoid cutting yet still maintain narrative clarity.

In Ray's rendering of this outdoor scene, Ed is high on cortisone and is humiliating Ritchie in a game of catch football. Ray and MacDonald go to great (focal) lengths to achieve the toss and catch in one continuous shot. Much like *River of No Return*'s scene in which Matt teaches Mark to shoot, Ray wants to capture the diagonal action in a single take. Not only does this echo Keaton's "authenticating" long shot, but also Reisz and Millar's (1968) assertion that widescreen allows for horizontal and diagonal framings in superior ways. (285) Ray's outdoor vista has no stylistic precedent anywhere else in the film, and seems to be Scope for Scope's sake. Recall that Ray prefers tighter shots to airy blockings, centralized or bisected compositions to thirds and quarters, and maintains a lower camera throughout. However, outside of push-ins, Ray's camera is relatively stationary and relies upon cuts for action and changes of camera set-

---

[27] Sequences like these could possibly emerge at the demands of the studio heads. There are well-known anecdotes of studio heads leaning on directors to pull the action across the screen in what Shamroy calls a "calvacade of action" without newly deemed "confusing" cuts. For one example from Darryl Zanuck, see Belton (1992, 198).

up. Therefore the football sequence is noteworthy because Ray seems to "justify" the breadth of the wide frame.

The sequence begins with establishing shots that determine an axis of action along which Ritchie will run (Illustration 3.45). Two cuts occur to heighten the action and give closer views or perhaps to create a verisimilar POV of the football action (Illustration 3.46). The sequence begins with Ritchie playing center and hiking the ball to Ed. A cut shows Ed's POV of Ritchie and then Ray returns to the original framing that now becomes a dolly out at great speed to accommodate Ritchie's running for the pass, which Ritchie ultimately drops, fueling Ed's disappointment and rage (Illustration 3.47-3.49).

Illustration 3.45

Illustration 3.46

Illustration 3.47

Illustration 3.48

Illustration 3.49

Illustration 3.50

With this outdoor vista, Ray creates a centered "Scope sequence" that draws attention to itself (Charles Barr's definition of a use of 'Scope to be avoided). However, because of the narrative context and the speed at which Ed's deterioration into addiction and madness is occurring, this sequence is not disruptive but rather serves the overall narrative and generic goals. Immediately after this sequence, Ed berates Ritchie for "flinching" and not trying hard enough, much to Lou's dismay as she looks on from the kitchen. Ray experiments with 'Scope's parameters in the outdoor sequences, and this is also an exemplary case of a complex camera move. Unlike Preminger (and Sirk later), Ray does not often move the camera in bravura style, and this is perhaps due to the fact that Ray often is shooting interior scenes and uses close-ups to convey emotions. However, as auteur critics of Ray have noted, the director took great pleasure in shocking his audiences with unabashed style and technique with unmotivated flourishes such as this.

Ray does move the camera to avoid "confusing" cuts in one interior sequence when friend and fellow educator Wally (Walter Matthau) comes to speak with Lou after an outburst by Ed at school. Ray begins the sequence with a traditional Master shot to establish space and then trades singles, very much in the Academy Ratio era tradition of continuity editing (Illustrations 3.51-3.53).

Illustration 3.51

Illustration 3.52

Illustration 3.53

Ray returns to the familiar framing of singles with centralized blocking. Whereas

Preminger features conversational set-ups in medium two-shots and is comfortable with a mobile

and fluid camera, Ray reverts to the Academy Ratio era strategy of static shot/reverse shot

editing with singles. This set-up and sequence details that experimental uses of widescreen are

not uniform, and early widescreen is a time of transition and trial. Wally then crosses to sit

beside Lou and Ray reframes with a pan and pausing briefly before Lou rises (reframed with a

tilt) and crosses right to left, thus pulling the viewer's attention across the screen (Illustrations

3.54-3.55).

Illustration 3.54

Illustration 3.55

Illustration 3.56

The movement thus far has been minimal and essentially reframes to accommodate actors' progression throughout various blocking marks. When Ed comes home, the motif of accelerated speed recurs, and the camera begins to dolly in and out to accommodate the movement of the actors. This is Ray's strategy to film the cliché of "walking on eggshells" when Ed is around. The camera becomes mobile and fluid. These movements metaphorically equate to Lou's discomfort and the instability of the Avery household in general (Illustrations 3.57-3.59).

This pacing back and forth signifies Lou's destabilized world, and as will be evident in Sirk's CinemaScope compositions, Ray uses the frame as a cage from which Ed's tortured family cannot escape to heighten the generic impact.

Illustration 3.57

Illustration 3.58

Illustration 3.59

Ray never devotes a close-up in the film to anyone other than Ed. Even when Wally and Lou are discussing Ed's psychosis, Ray does not allow the audience the access of the close-up.

Again, Ray is asserting his narrator's voice by offering his visual stylistic strategy for a domestic melodrama in CinemaScope; Ed the psychotic warrants close-ups to increase the viewer's uncomfortable proximity to the madness, while Ed's targets (family, schoolchildren, peers) are huddled together in the frame in multiple combinations but from a distance no closer than medium shot.

Establishing widescreen norms based solely upon Nicholas Ray's visual strategies in this one film, or Preminger 's in *River of No Return* is not possible. However, when looking at Preminger and Ray together, we begin to understand certain tropes of widescreen aesthetics that emerge from influential auteurs. Preminger's stylistic ruptures feature no close-ups but rather favor the two-shot and bravura camera movement. Ray does not avoid the close-up but continues to cut two-shots into singles, and stylistically ruptures outdoor vistas to justify the 'Scope framings. What conclusions can be reached about early widescreen norms thus far? First, Preminger uses widescreen as a mobile, lateral and flexible canvas. He segments his compositions laterally but does not use close-ups, instead relying upon long takes in medium two-shots. Ray favors centralized blockings for singles and bisected compositions for multiple blocking strategies. Both directors lower the overall camera height, but Ray uses close-ups for Ed and moves the camera only when generically motivated or for Scope "justification" sequences like the catch football dolly move.

These two early widescreen directors face a set of binaries that mirror the choices between the Academy Ratio paradigm and the emerging stylistic ruptures of widescreen. The binaries can be listed as follows:

Compositions:	centralized vs. geometrically segmented
Blocking:	centralized vs. bookended

Closest framing:	medium two shot vs. close-up
Camera mobility:	fluid and lateral vs. static with moments of Scope "justification"

These binaries represent only a sampling of the choices for widescreen filmmakers in the Scope era, but these choices are central to the emerging visual stylistic ruptures of early widescreen poetics. While these choices provide the critic with a selection of devices by which an auteur's stylistic palette can be evaluated, these trends demand further inspection and closer evaluation in more films and different genres.

The Girl Can't Help It (1956)

Mark Rappaport (1994) writes this with regard to Frank Tashlin's *mise-en-scene* in CinemaScope:

> CinemaScope was seen as a device to enhance dramatic films. Comedy is comedy. If it's funny, it'll play. If not, it dies, regardless of the shape or size of the screen. Even in CinemaScope, comedy maintains the standard equation: visual or verbal gags plus actors divided by timing = yocks. Most comedies made in CinemaScope are just *wider* than their standard counterparts. Of course, they involve less cutting, and in composition, are much closer to that of stage comedy. But in terms of what one sees in the frame, there was very little attempt to explore the potential of the new format. … But of those who directed comedy, only Frank Tashlin added another element — the utilization of the size of the screen itself as the visual gag or a component of the humor. (71)

Rappaport makes several different points that warrant further analysis. First, he makes the argument that CinemaScope (and widescreen in general) is a format for drama, not comedy. The

author also proffers that widescreen "enhances" dramatic films just by its very presence. There is no evidence of this in terms of production trends during the Scope era, and nothing exists to support this assertion in the widescreen literature.[28] However, the films examined by this project and previous scholars do lend credibility to Rappaport's assertion; when one thinks of CinemaScope era films, one does not initially conjure up visions of comedy.

Second, Rappaport states that CinemaScope comedies are simply "wider" than the Academy Ratio films before them. The director concludes that CinemaScope comedies are closer to stage comedy; that is, the action is drawn across the width of the visual field much as we have seen in *River of No Return* and *Bigger than Life*, not to mention *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*. Finally, Rappaport claims that "only" Tashlin uses the Scope frame as a gag delivery device. While other comedic directors may have made comedies within the Scope frame, Tashlin experiments with the Scope frame as part of the comedic arsenal. In short, Rappaport brings to light assertions with regard to widescreen that this project heretofore has not addressed in such a straightforward light: what kind of films are CinemaScope "worthy" in the initial years of the format's introduction? If these are the "sword and sandal" epics (*The Robe*) or films that highlight outdoor vistas and sprawling scenery (*River of No Return*), what happens to the slapstick film based on visual gags? What of the comedic film that takes place largely indoors and involves the use of the comic actor's body? How does 'Scope used by comedy directors to vivify the corporeal action of bodies or to encourage the dialogue of comedy? Specifically, how does a comedic visual stylist like Frank Tashlin use the wide screen to build comic action in

---

[28] John Belton (1985) offers that the CinemaScope process *itself* became the star for Fox executives regardless of narrative content: "CinemaScope replaced contract performers and free-agent actor producers as the 'star' of all Fox pictures. The story of Fox's conversion to CinemaScope from this perspective is the story of the grooming and packaging of a new star." (42)

opening sequences, interior dialogue scenes, outdoor vistas and with complex camera moves? Admittedly, the latter two of this list do not immediately lend themselves to comedy, but as with Buster Keaton's "authenticating" long shot examined in chapter two, we will examine here how a comedic director like Tashlin appropriates his Academy Ratio style to the wide screen. Even further, Tashlin uses the CinemaScope frame as the "star" of many of his jokes.

Tashlin's biography (and filmography) is unique even by Classical Hollywood standards. Tashlin is considered to be among the very few animation directors to transition to live-action filmmaking in the Classical Hollywood era. In addition to being a panel cartoonist and comic strip writer, Tashlin worked for Hal Roach studios writing gags for Charley Chase, Laurel and Hardy and Our Gang. Leonard Maltin (1987) claims that Tashlin is the original proponent of self-reflexivity within the Warner Bros./Looney Tunes group. Regardless of whether this statement is accurate, reflexivity is rampant in Tashlin's texts and the Scope frame is often a key element in the gag. Obviously, this hints at Charles Barr's notion that if you notice the novelty of the widescreen frame, then it's not good. Tashlin's reflexivity announced in his foregounding of the Scope frame repeatedly throughout his widescreen films is a device or technique that points to the author. As will be more fully addressed shortly, Tashlin channels fellow Termite Terrace alum Chuck Jones's reflexive masterpiece *Duck Amuck* (1953) often by referring to his own authorship. Tashlin lets the audience know immediately that his authorship extends not only to a penchant for the long shot or long take as does Preminger, or to thrust the viewer in to the pain of the protagonist in close-up as with Ray, but rather that the very shape of the frame is within his command and he will re-arrange it like a jigsaw puzzle just for laughs. As Ed Sikov (1994) notes with regard to Tashlin's animation background and its influence upon his visual style, "on a formal level … *anything* can occur as long as it can be drawn" (180). Tashlin's films

are "fun" Scope films to watch simply because Tashlin is a visual gag writer and the widescreen frame provides him more horizontal real estate to ply his trade.

Tashlin experiments with the CinemaScope frame in several ways that differ from those previously seen in either Preminger or Ray. First, Tashlin uses the screen's dimensions for reflexive gags. The opening sequence of single shots throughout attest to Tashlin's mocking of the widescreen frame. For Tashlin, an auteurist device is his self-conscious visual commentary with regard to the wide frame itself. Tashlin recognizes the hoopla and marketing that accompany CinemaScope's introduction, and just as Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng or any other cartoon gag writer might, Tashlin uses the visual canvas as a palette for reflexive "yocks." Second, while Tashlin often reflexively and self-consciously comments upon the expansive nature of the new physical norms, the director uses what I will term "redoubling" in his *mise-en-scene* to exaggerate the wide screen's dimensions from the Academy Ratio form. Tashlin redoubles by composing his *mise-en-scene* to constantly reflect the relative smallness of the Academy Ratio frame (and television) within his Scope compositions. Sikov (1994) notes Tashlin's disdain for the Academy Ratio/TV proportions when he writes:

> Images bear meaning in their content, but they also project meaning through their form, and it is on this level that Tashlin's compulsive criticism of television is sharpest. … Unlike comic books and billboards, which may (and in Tashlin's world always do) have a graphic beauty that accompanies their puerile giddiness, television is small-scale, banal, and unattractive in image quality. (197)

I would like to push Sikov's observations even further; for Tashlin, televison is "banal and unattractive" *because* it is "small-scale." Tashlin's redoubling is a stylistic rupture that

allows the director to compose smaller frames within the large expanse of the 2.35:1 aspect ratio of CinemaScope. Preminger bookends his compositions, and Ray bisects the Scope frame for essentially two Academy Ratio sections, but Tashlin's redoubling does something more. By masking portions of the Scope frame down to either mimic Academy Ratio proportions or mimic Scope's parameters, Tashlin both recalls and refutes the smallness of the previous era's screen shape. Third, Tashlin does not use close-ups (he favors medium shots) and features an almost static camera. Therefore, Tashlin's widescreen poetics approximate the "stage" aesthetics more than Rappaport might imagine.

The opening sequence of *The Girl Can't Help It* is very similar to the opening sequences of *River of No Return* and *Bigger than Life* with regard to generic significance. *River of No Return* opens with man vs. wilderness and *Bigger than Life* begins with the "push-in" to Ed's life and a close-up of his pain. *The Girl Can't Help It* begins with a highly self-reflexive moment. Tashlin uses the formal dimensions of the CinemaScope frame as a gag. Tashlin takes great delight in contrasting the CinemaScope frame's width to the narrow Academy Ratio in compositional strategies and in highly reflexive goofs like the opening sequence. To begin *The Girl Can't Help It*, Tom Ewell emerges in long shot and directly addresses the audience. Ewell announces that the "character" he plays is an agent and that this is "a film about music." Tashlin centers Ewell in a cartoonish *mise-en-scene* of floating instruments with a glossy floor. Ewell then thumps the sides of the matted screen allowing them to open wider after announcing "this motion picture was photographed in the grandeur of CinemaScope" (Illustrations 3.60-3.62).

Illustration 3.60

Illustration 3.61

Illustration 3.62

Within the first minute of screen time the CinemaScope frame has been refunctionalized and physically ruptured for a gag. In generic terms, Tashlin establishes that comedic efforts will not be confined to standard verbal set-ups and delivery of punchlines, but rather that the very shape of the medium is fair game. Tashlin draws upon his reflexive days at the Termite Terrace on the Warner Bros. lot and begins with an aspect ratio somewhat analogous to the Academy Ratio and then "opens" the frame to reveal the "grandeur" of the Scope frame (an interesting

choice of words given that Grandeur was a Fox widescreen format as is CinemaScope). Tashlin

physically ruptures the old frame into the new, and this experiment allows Tashlin to transgress

old norms (restricted staging) and replace them with new visual strategies.

By using Ewell the person and not the persona of Tom Miller (his character), Tashlin

creates a new narrative experience for the new kind of cinema. In this new cinematic form, the

frame varies in aspect ratio size, actors address the audience directly (Tashlin returns to this

rupturing element famously in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*) and authorial intervention is

clearly in play. Reflexivity will become more prevalent as Tashlin winks slyly to his cartooning

pal Chuck Jones and the infamous *Duck Amuck* (1953). Ewell continues (*a la* Daffy Duck) that

not only is this film in the "grandeur of CinemaScope" but also in "gorgeous, lifelike color by

Deluxe." As with Daffy Duck, when Ewell first states this, nothing happens; he remains in black

and white. Ewell (*a la* Daffy Duck) raises then his voice at some offscreen, unseen auteur and

restates loudly "GORGEOUS, LIFELIKE COLOR BY DELUXE!" Only then does the

cinematography transition to color. (Illustration 3.64)

Illustration 3.63

Illustration 3.64

Tashlin transitions to a medium long shot of Ewell with a match on action cut and in a final homage to his colleague Jones and *Duck Amuck*, Ewell says slyly out of the side of his mouth, "Some days, you wonder who's minding the store."

Illustration 3.65

Furthering the strategy of reflexivity, Tashlin dollies out and pans right as Ewell proclaims that "this picture is about music. Not the music of long ago, but the music that expresses the culture, the refinement and the polite grace of the present day." On the last syllable of the last word, a dolly back and pan right has framed a jukebox that lights up and begins to play the title song by Bobby Troup and (a la *Duck Amuck*) drowns out the words of Ewell.

Illustration 3.66

Illustration 3.67

The blaring, driving rock'n'roll on the jukebox signifies Tashlin's theme of the sight gag in the Scope frame. Tashlin's *mise-en-scene* is cartoon-esque and conveys a certain absurdist quality. Like Daffy Duck, Ewell is seemingly the straight man subjected to the abusive sight gags of Tashlin. Tashlin and (*The Robe*'s) cinematographer Leon Shamroy, ASC, do not allow their protagonist the same luxury as Jones does Daffy — the satisfaction of knowing his torturer. Rather, Tashlin and Shamroy pan right away from Ewell (still talking) and dolly in to the jukebox and its glass front that happens to ape the spatial proportions of the CinemaScope frame. The mocking and matching of the CinemaScope frame is one of Tashlin's stylistic rupturing strategies (Illustration 3.70); because the very format is fodder for comedy, there are no limits in how it might be trivialized.

Illustration 3.68

Illustration 3.69

Illustration 3.70

Tashlin and Shamroy allow the camera no closer than medium shot in the opening

sequence, but this distance of camera serves the generic purposes of comedy *a la* Buster Keaton

and the long shot. The landscape/long shot allows Tashlin to deploy 1) the frame expansion gag,

and 2) the free-ranging dolly in and away from Ewell toward the jukebox and its 'Scope

proportions. Tashlin defines how this film will be read because all *mise-en-scene* is fair game for

comedy. The dimensions of the frame provide a fluid canvas for Tashlin's experiments with physical and stylistic ruptures. In the opening sequence, Tashlin redoubles twice for a laugh; once with the reflexive frame expansion and again by dollying in to the jukebox with Scope dimensions.

The mocking of the 'Scope frame is also a physical and stylistic rupture for interior conversation set-ups in *The Girl Can't Help It*. Unlike the interiors of Preminger and Ray, Tashlin uses insert shots that function as eyeline match cuts, but the gags rely on the mocking of the old Academy Ratio frame within the 'Scope frame.

For the interior conversation set-ups, Tom Miller (Ewell) is summoned to Fats Marty Murdock's (Edmond O'Brien) penthouse. Fats Marty (say it fast to get the joke) is trying to "revive" Miller's career by subtly blackmailing him into representing Marty's moll and budding singer/performer, Jerri Jordan (Jayne Mansfield). Murdock is viewing one of Jerri's performances in his home theater projection room when Miller enters. Marty says that he likes to "watch old movies at home. It's like TV without all the commercials." Tashlin returns time and again to the physical rupture of redoubling the CinemaScope screen shape (*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* and *Bachelor Flat)*; the physical rupture for Tashlin is its difference from the pre-1952/TV aspect ratio and how it plays in landscape/long shot. Tashlin blocks both actors and the projection screen in Academy/TV aspect ratio set-ups within the Scope frame. The first example comes as Miller enters Marty's projection room (Illustration 3.71).

Illustration 3.71

This example shows that while Tashlin does mask the sides of the CinemaScope image to create focal points within the wide frame, the number of times he does so in this film (and this scene) cannot be ignored. The redoubling of the Academy Ratio proportions or alternately the Scope framing can be seen as Tashlin's attempt to normalize the lateral dimensions of the wide frame. In this sequence, Tashlin redoubles the Academy Ratio proportions by masking with *mise-en-scene* elements (curtains, projection screen, projection booth) no fewer than five times. Other scholars (Belton, 1992, 199; Bordwell, 1997, 242) have noted early widescreen auteurs' use of masking elements within the *mise-en-scene* to subtly tame the width of the frame. No auteur associated with such masking strategies used the elongated *mise-en-scene* of the Scope frame as a punchline to mock television as does Tashlin. While previous scholars note that auteurs mask the wide frame to more easily manage its width, Tashlin fetishizes and revels in Scope's width as antithesis to television.

Tashlin frames no closer than medium shot and controls the viewer's gaze by blocking off the sides of the composition to restrict interest to only Tom. Tom crosses the projection room to join Marty on the sofa and watch Jerri's performance on the projected screen. As with Preminger and Ray, Tashlin shows the two seated in a medium length two-shot with eyeline match cuts toward Jerri on the screen.

Illustration 3.72

Illustration 3.73

Tashlin apes the Academy Ratio but also centers the composition by matting the outer portions of the composition. Tashlin's motivation for this framing strategy and thus the gag is the old Academy Ratio. Tashlin is thumbing his nose at the "old" dimensions by showing how restrictive they are in the Scope frame. Tashlin furthers this point by cutting periodically to a long shot from the rear of the sofa to show the expanse of not only the set and *mise-en-scene*, but of how truly small the Academy Ratio projection is within the Scope frame (albeit an exaggeration).

Illustration 3.74

Several subsequent framings reveal Tashlin's tongue-in-cheek rendering of the Academy

Ratio within the anamorphic visual field (Illustrations 3.75-3.76).

Illustration 3.75

Illustration 3.76

For the actual conversational exchange between Tom and Marty, Tashlin is more comfortable with Preminger's strategy of a medium two-shot rather than Ray's shot-reverse shot. Tashlin allows the conversation to play out in a long take with the actors free to roam laterally without "confusing" cuts. Tom and Marty begin this discussion on the couch but soon move to the bar. Tashlin re-frames slightly throughout the exchange, but never moves close than medium shot and usually frames Tom and Marty *plan American* (Illustrations 3.77-3.79).

Illustration 3.77

Illustration 3.78

Illustration 3.79

Tashlin allows the horizontal framing to provide enough space within which the actors may move freely. The content of this discussion concerns Marty critiquing Tom's past (he was once a well-to-do agent but couldn't stay away from women or booze), and Tom challenges Marty, thereby impressing the gangster. The aggressive escalation of this exchange is served well by Tashlin's resistance to cutting. Recall that Shamroy deemed cuts as "confusing" in CinemaScope, therefore artificially creating tension. Tashlin's resistance to cutting this sequence and allowing the actors to move freely heightens the drama of what might happen. By not cutting, Tashlin actually reinforces the visual strength of a sequence. Obviously, there are other benefits to not cutting a scene into numerous set-ups: chiefly, the economic use of time and resources. As aforementioned, by not cutting a scene but rather letting it play out in longer takes with a lower camera, directors could (hypothetically) shoot more pages per day on set. Certainly there would fewer camera set-ups, fewer lighting adjustments, fewer blocking rehearsals and by extension fewer takes.

Tashlin ends the sequence by returning Tom and Marty to the couch and again aping the Academy Ratio proportions within newsreel footage of Marty's run-ins with the authorities (Illustration 3.80). Tashlin begins and ends the sequence by redoubling the Academy Ratio proportions and masking *mise-en-scene* elements within the wide frame. Tashlin's sight gags at

the expense of the CinemaScope frame at once oppose and enrich the notion that early widescreen filmmakers mask the sides of the frame for more manageable compositions. Tashlin redoubles his compositions in CinemaScope to mock the dimensions for laughs. Therefore, the generic impetus of these framing strategies should not be underestimated. Recall that Tashlin opens the films by mocking the proportions of CinemaScope and continues this strategy throughout the film in a variety of ways and camera set-ups.

Illustration 3.80

For the outdoor vista sequence, Tashlin uses a variety of set-ups but surprisingly does not draw attraction to the frame width, nor does Tashlin deploy any sight gags based on the frame's dimensions.

To recall Gary Johnson's (2004) phrasing, Tashlin does not seem committed to CinemaScope outdoors. Without interior *mise-en-scene* to redouble the frame for gags, Tashlin seems at a loss for framing. Tashlin's dominant strategy throughout *The Girl Can't Help It* is to exploit the wide frame for gags, so when the *mise-en-scene* does not allow for such set-ups, Tashlin's compositions lack the flair shown in the opening sequence and the interior

conversation set-up. For the outdoor vista, Tom and Jerri[29] drive to meet Fats or so Tom thinks.

Jerri stops along the beach for a picnic. The generic impulse driving this sequence is that Tom is

attracted to Jerri, yet obviously he cannot act on these impulses due to his agreement with (and

fear of) Fats Marty the gangster. Without *mise-en-scene* elements to block and mock the

CinemaScope frame, Tashlin chooses to accentuate the beach's and the car's horizontality with

landscape/long shots (Illustrations 3.81-3.83).

Illustration 3.81

Illustration 3.82

---

[29] The character names are yet another cartoon reference. Tom and Jerry have been a cartoon comic duo in some form since 1931 (Maltin, 1987, 201).

Illustration 3.83

Tashlin relies upon the strong horizontal lines of both the shoreline and the automobile and, of course, a lower camera. Tashlin needs a sight gag and without interior *mise-en-scene* elements to redouble and to stylistically rupture, Tashlin uses negative space, an airy composition and Jayne Masfield's well-known physical attributes. Throughout the film, the girl is, of course, Jerri, and what she "can't help" is Jayne Mansfield's sexual allure. Therefore, Tashlin chooses to exploit Jerri's sexuality for a gag using the wide frame's lateral proportions. Jerri reveals that she's going to get "undressed," and after she returns (in a swimsuit) Tom's attraction is obvious because of Tashlin's framing (Illustration 3.84).

Illustration 3.84

Preminger and Ray use outdoor vistas for stylistic ruptures in Scope framings; Tashlin uses the frame simply as a gag delivery system. Tom's observance of Jerri's figure features Tashlin composing the frame in thirds with the far right third essentially relegated to negative space. One could even imagine that this negative space functions for viewers to assume Tom's position and bend even further to the left in order to observe Jerri more.[30] As the pair transition to the beach for a picnic, Tashlin uses standard issue shot-reverse shot framings to accommodate their conversation. These medium shots accentuate diagonal and horizontal shoreline compositions (Illustrations 3.85-3.87).

Illustration 3.85

Illustration 3.86

---

[30] This notion of framing to stimulate some response in the audience is borne out of an anecdote told by William Fraker, ASC, in *Visions of Light* (1992) with regard to Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). Polanski often framed shots off center to encourage the audience to shift one way or another in order to try and "see around" what Polanski had blocked. It seems obvious that Tashlin might well utilize Mansfield's sexuality in this way.

Illustration 3.87

Even though this outdoor vista sequence does not provide Tashlin's usual arsenal of sight gags based upon the Scope dimensions, it does uphold Tashlin's committed use of the medium shot as a new stylistic norm for singles in lieu of a close-up. Tashlin, like Ray, centers single objects in the CinemaScope frame. Certainly Tashlin centers a majority of his interior compositions, and the dominant gag throughout *The Girl Can't Help It* is the redoubling of the Academy Ratio frame or compositions that ape the CinemaScope frame itself. In either case (and with Tom's single on the beach), Tashlin centralizes elements within the CinemaScope frame to create focal points.[31]

Much like Ray, Tashlin is not known for his bravura camera movement. Tashlin allows his *mise-en-scene* and comedic compositions to provide visual interest. The most camera movement in the film occurs with two dolly shots that function as moving two-shots with Tom and Marty. As Tom and Marty discuss Jerri's career, Tashlin and Shamroy dolly back and allow the actors to move forward freely never getting closer than a medium shot.

---

[31] This trend will develop and progress in the late 1960s as directors begin to experiment with geometrically segmenting the frame into fractured shapes. Further, the technique of centering will gain prominence as directors in the home video era begin to shoot in the safe-action area that limits the amount of composition lost in film-to-video pan and scan transfers.

Illustration 3.87

Illustration 3.88

Illustration 3.89

Tashlin's generic comedy is not one based on the movement of the camera, but rather on the dynamic *mise-en-scene* elements within his composition because of his background as an animator and comic strip artist (each frame must be drawn and then moved to create action). Like Preminger, Tashlin's experimental widescreen *mise-en-scene* does not frame tighter than a medium shot on an actor. Tashlin uses the shape of the Scope frame as a redoubling gag device

both observed within this section and in other examples of Tashlin's Scope-esque framing

strategy (Illustrations 3.90-3.92).

Illustration 3.90

Illustration 3.91

Illustration 3.92

Tashlin physically ruptures the Scope frame with Academy Ratio-like compositions that

parody television's compact frame. Tashlin's experimental widescreen style at times fails to

accentuate the width of the Scope frame because he does not shoot closer than medium shot and infrequently moves the camera. However, Tashlin experiments by aping the Academy/TV dimensions within the Scope frame. While Tashlin does not move the camera with the admittedly rare expertise and grace of Preminger and avoids the close-ups that Ray deploys, Tashlin enacts new stylistic norms with his playful *mise-en-scene*. Tashlin's background in animation foregrounds his reflexive uses of the Scope frame and its generic uses in *The Girl Can't Help It*.

The Tarnished Angels (1958)

     The Tarnished Angels is a curious choice for a discussion of Douglas Sirk's visual style. Because *The Tarnished Angels* is Sirk's fifth CinemaScope (2.35:1) film, it provides an excellent stylistic and *mise-en-scene* comparison to the other Scope films analyzed. Sirk's stylistic tropes are well reported throughout the scholarly literature (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985, 78-82;Klinger, 1994) — Expressionist lighting, reflective surfaces, frames within frames — all of which usually serve as subversive melodramatic and generic visual aids. Among the directors examined in this chapter, perhaps none has received more attention than Sirk with regard to visual style and its relation to genre. However, as with Preminger, Ray and Tashlin, little of this literature addresses Sirk's use of widescreen in this transitional time during the 1950s (when many of Sirk's masterpieces appear). *The Tarnished Angels* is also of interest because Sirk shot the film in black and white.[32] Therefore, issues of *mise-en-scene* within the Scope frame are of interest in ways that the previous films cannot claim. In this way, *The Tarnished Angels* is a significant widescreen film because of the special considerations demanded by black and white cinematography given that color is the new norm in the 1950s. (Bordwell et al, 1985, 357)

---

[32] Sirk told Jon Halliday (1997) that he was forced to shoot *The Tarnished Angels* in black and white because "they [Universal] didn't trust the picture." (139)

The Tarnished Angels is melodrama focused squarely upon psychological interiority and the inability of the protagonists to escape their situations. Roger Shumann (Robert Stack) is a WWI flying ace who has been reduced to a stunt plane pilot, and Burke Devlin (Rock Hudson) is a reporter trying to discover "whatever became of" the flying ace. Shumann's wife, LaVerne (Dorothy Malone) is depicted as a dissatisfied and trapped woman; confined by the Shumanns' vagabond existence and frustrated by her desire for Devlin. Devlin, too, feels passionately about LaVerne, but does not dare act on those impulses. Ultimately, Devlin's encouragement of LaVerne to find a life for herself, beyond that of mother, wife and professional stunt woman, results in anguish and pain for all concerned; Devlin cannot possess LaVerne, and when LaVerne is stricken with grief at Roger's fiery death she must move on.

Throughout this dissertation, we have seen how melodrama has unique manifestations in widescreen aesthetics. Griffith uses the letterbox mask in his films to at once suffocate the heroine and exacerbate the futility of her plight in a world that is against her. Ray uses the widescreen as a larger canvas to magnify the tragedy of his protagonists and to show them at close range. For Elsaesser, the melodrama in this era hinges upon "the discrepancy of seeming and being, of intention and result, [and] registers as a perplexing frustration, and an ever-increasing gap opens between the emotions and the reality they seek to reach" (67). What more appropriate canvas has cinema had to exploit and fetishize this "ever-increasing gap" than the "grandeur of CinemaScope?" Widescreen within the melodrama serves the opposite function that it does in the Western; the latter allows for open spaces to be marveled at, while melodrama "happens inside." In melodramatic narratives, the grandiose CinemaScope frame magnifies the ugliness of characters' stifled existence.

In her excellent survey of the many meanings of Sirk films, Barbara Klinger (1994) summarizes much of the canonical literature with regard to Sirk's use of stylistic devices. Curiously, apart from Jean-Luc Godard's observance of Sirk's "tame compositions and frenzied CinemaScope," very little scholarly attention has been devoted to the use of widescreen in this auteur most studied for his *mise-en-scene*. (4) While the *Cahiers* authors can be attributed as the "discoverers" of Sirk, they could not agree upon what function Sirk's stylistics served. Klinger writes:

> *Cahiers* critics were attracted to the excessiveness and artifice of Sirk's style. There is no unanimity, however, as to what the vertiginous visual displays mean, attesting to the heterogeneity of *Cahiers* perspectives. Marcorelles judges the *mise-en-scene* as devoid of substance, Moullet praises it as self-reflexive, Truffaut considers it an expression of modernity, and Godard revels in its exuberant unconventionality. (4)

These overviews of the melodramatic form and Sirk's place within the canon foreground the lack of attention to his widescreen poetics. This section has the goal of broadening Sirkian criticism to include his noted attention to *mise-en-scene*, Expressionist lighting schemes, etc., and to interrogate how these authorial signatures function within the CinemaScope frame.

Like the directors of the opening sequences of the previous films chronicled, Sirk asserts visual motifs that signify his narrating voice in *The Tarnished Angels* immediately. Of all the films examined within this chapter, *The Tarnished Angels* has the most complex and mobile camerawork. Irving Glassberg, ASC, and Sirk do not allow for static camera shots and therefore framings are always in motion. Sirk's fluid camera is significant given the generic demands of Sirkian melodrama. Sirk's melodramas usually require framing that exploits interiors to create the claustrophobic blocking schemes and *mise-en-scene* that suffocate the protagonists. Sirk is

closer to Preminger's mobile camera than Ray's or Tashlin's static strategy, yet Sirk is unique

among the directors addressed within this chapter in that he varies camera height significantly

throughout the film. Preminger, Ray and Tashlin move the camera laterally, but Sirk moves with

fluid crane shots both vertically and horizontally with equal grace. Sirk's strategy for framing

conversations is difficult to calculate because throughout *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk alternates

between medium two-shots and singles in shot/reverse shot for conversation set-ups.

Foreshadowing what David Bordwell (2002, 2006) terms the "walk-and-talk" strategy of the

New Hollywood with the advent of the Steadicam and other gyroscopically balanced camera

mounts, Sirk structures conversation scenes around complex camera moves that seldom settle in

a fixed position. These camera movements are both lateral and vertical but often stop in singles

or medium two-shots.

Overall, Sirk's dominant stylistic mode for normalizing the CinemaScope frame is a

mobile and fluid camera with mostly medium and landscape shots but few close-ups. Finally,

Sirk favors Ray's and Tashlin's strategy of centering single figures or objects in the

CinemaScope frame, but also favors an overall geometric segmentation (usually thirds) for

compositions. The centralized compositions seem foreign to the bravura film style used

throughout the film and again suggest that while norms are developing, directors in the early

CinemaScope period occasionally lapse into Academy Ratio set-ups.

Unlike *River of No Return*'s opening sequence where Matt is contrasted to the vast

wilderness, Sirk's protagonists pace like caged animals within the "frenzied CinemaScope"

frame. The opening complex camera move indicates the speed and mobility of the air show

setting, but ultimately confines and frustrates the players. Sirk moves the camera with

tremendous style and ease, but rarely moves in closer than medium shot and does not settle into any one set-up for long.

     The Tarnished Angels opens with a moving, fluid camera in a high angle compared to what we've encountered thus far in the early CinemaScope era. Devlin is at an airfield scouring for Shumann, and Sirk and Glassberg create a complex crane shot that begins high and lowers briefly to waist height before sinking lower and tilting up (Illustrations 3.93-3.95). As Devlin searches the airfield, he quickly encounters some of the locals picking on Shumann's (alleged) son Jack (*Bigger than Life*'s Christopher Olsen).

Illustration 3.93

Illustration 3.94

Illustration 3.95

Note that even the transitional stages of this crane shot obey the rule of thirds and geometrically segment the frame into smaller, more manageable modules. The pause at the conclusion of the crane shot is a dynamic arrangement that balances composition and geometric segmentation — both well-known Sirkian framing strategies (Illustration 3.95). Sirk quickly cuts to Devlin observing Jack's ribbing by the locals.
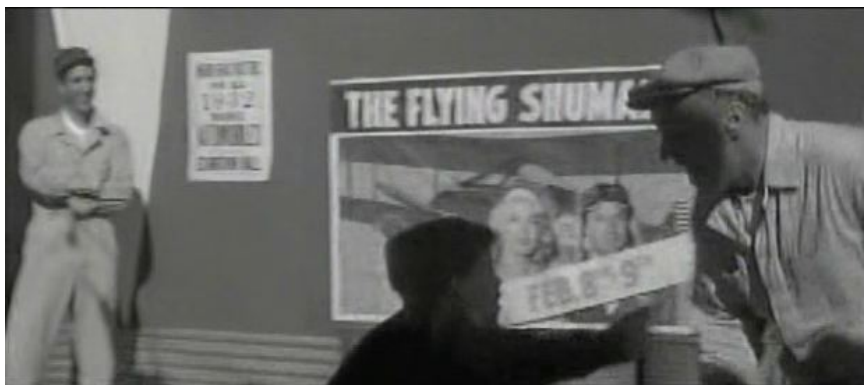

Illustration 3.96

Illustration 3.97

Illustration 3.98

There are several points of interest in this sequence. First, the opening several minutes of *The Tarnished Angels* feature the fastest cutting of any Scope film analyzed in this chapter. Perhaps Sirk is priming the viewer for the action-based melodrama that is to come. Certainly there is much flying, fast-edit action within *The Tarnished Angels* as will later be observed, and Sirk is establishing immediately that this film will progress at a quick clip. Second, when Jack is harassed by local bullies, Sirk quickly cuts from an establishing medium-long shot to an extreme close-up of Jack's anguished and angry face (Illustration 3.97). Sirk is asserting the melodramatic tropes that Ray played out in *Bigger than Life*. This is ultimately a story of the inner torment of a family on the outskirts of society, and Jack is simply the first casualty. Therefore, Sirk frames Jack closer than any other director thus far has framed any actor. Like Ritchie in *Bigger than Life*, Jack's childhood suffering is the ultimate tragedy of the narrative,

and Sirk frames it very close to convey his pain for the viewer. Further, the mobile camera functions throughout the film as a metaphor for the roaming and trapped nature of the players.

Taken together, these first two uses of visual style posit Sirk's underlying dynamic — grand and complex camera movement to project and accentuate the action, combined with tight, claustrophobic shots which frame protagonists who are paralyzed by regret, despair and anguish. In *The Tarnished Angels*, Sirk suggests that new stylistic norms have progressed five years into the Scope era as the camera is more mobile and comes closer to characters to reveal emotions. Also of note in this sequence is that Sirk is committed to the rule of thirds. Recall that Preminger favors various geometric segmentations and Ray is most comfortable with bisecting the CinemaScope frame. Sirk flows up and down both the X and Y axes with a fluid camera and composes his frames with attention to segmentation, and these subdivisions rely upon a generic component. Ray's bisected compositions suggested the stark division Ed's addiction created between him and his family. Sirk's geometric segmentation is synecdocal for the claustrophobic and constrained world the Sirkian characters inhabit.

The sequence finishes with Devlin defending Jack against the bullying locals and then placing the child on his shoulders (Illustrations 3.99-3.101). With this action, Sirk and Glassberg launch a second complex camera move only minutes into the film.

Illustration 3.99

Illustration 3.100

Illustration 3.101

The second sequence of complex camera movement conveys a significant amount of narrative information again in a predecessor to the "walk and talk" strategy. Jack is allegedly Shumann's son, and the fight with the locals was about the possibility of Jack *not* being Shumann's son. Like Preminger, Sirk's camera movement and placement is not just flashy virtuosity but is functional. Additionally we learn about Shumann's accomplishments as a fighter pilot and that Jack, at 9 years old, does not know what a bicycle is but can fly a plane, suggesting further that the Shumanns' tale is one of the outsider's plight. Note that all of the compositions represented by the frame captures adhere to the rule of thirds, but vary greatly in terms of camera height and angle. Sirk's style with CinemaScope is the most dynamic stylistically of any film chronicled thus for in this project. Sirk is establishing new norms for CinemaScope that will fuse with what Bordwell (2006) calls a "stylish style" in the New Hollywood. (115) This "stylish

style" operates with a deep knowledge of previous norms and seeks to expand them as a showcase for auteuristic flair. Sirk is five years into the CinemaScope era and understands that close-ups are seldom used, cameras are lower, compositions are lateral and are geometrically segmented. Sirk fleshes out these parameters by moving the camera with excessive style both vertically and horizontally, not to mention experimenting with extreme angles.

Illustration 3.102

Illustration 3.103

Illustration 3.104

Sirk, like Ray (but not Preminger and Tashlin), does not begin the text with an "attraction" that foregrounds the Scope frame. Rather, Sirk chooses to accentuate the wide frame not in reflexive ways but in *flexible* ways. This bears a bit of explanation. Like Preminger, Sirk moves the camera along both horizontal and vertical axes because the Scope frame tends to yield lower camera framings that necessitate more vertical reframings. The horizontal movement utilizes the obvious spatial advances of the Scope dimensions. Therefore, Sirk's fluid camera moves within the opening minutes here in *The Tarnished Angels* are stylistic ruptures in the sense of technical proficiency; the Scope frame is no longer a hindrance to camera movement, because auteurs have discovered ways to utilize its benefits.[33] The stylistic rupture here is not unlike the ones used by Edeson or Planck; the filmmakers here are not inventing new camera techniques or technology but rather are experimenting with CinemaScope to discover its full benefits visually and stylistically.

The opening sequence concludes with Jack and Devlin seated on empty bleachers in a strikingly geometric use of *mise-en-scene* by Sirk. Sirk then cuts to a medium two-shot (again) of a discussion between the child and the adult.

Illustration 3.105

---

[33] Certainly there is no greater example of this trend with regard to opening shots than Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* also released in 1958. The film is not included within this study because of Welles' unstable studio relationships and sporadic output of films within the era.

Sirk allows this framing to serve as the close-up and does not switch to shot-reverse shot, nor does he divide the conversation up into alternating singles. It is significant that while Sirk has no reservation about fluid and complex camera movement, he chooses to use a close-up only once, and then during a comparatively fast-cut fight sequence on Jack. Like Preminger, Sirk chooses to begin with a stylistic flourish to announce the speed of the narrative and the emphasis upon visual excess. Sirk moves the camera with bravura style and does not hesitate to maneuver along both the X and Y axes with fast cutting and geometric segmentation. Sirk does not shy away from a mobile camera as Ray and Tashlin do. Further, Sirk's use of a "walk and talk" aesthetic seems to be pushing the boundaries of what can be considered normative stylistic uses of widescreen in the early CinemaScope era. Sirk does not frame any dialogue sequences any closer than medium and those framings tend to have dynamic visual tension accentuating the negative space around the speaker.

For the interior conversation sequence, Sirk reverts to more standard shot/reverse shot cutting style but experiments with an auteurist flair. Sirk's camera tends to roam throughout the sequence and features the Sirkian signature of reflective surfaces and sexual tension between forbidden lovers. Devlin has invited the Shumann family and their mechanic to stay in his apartment while he profiles them for a story. A conversation ensues between Shumaan's wife LaVerne (Dorothy Malone) and Devlin, and Sirk uses an Expressionistic, low-key lighting strategy for the sequence. Sirk begins with a medium two-shot that periodically reframes vertically to accommodate CinemaScope's lower camera levels. The director allows the sequence to play out in a fairly standard shot-reverse shot set-up, while Sirkian Expressionist lighting and blocking schemes carry additional generic weight within the exchange. Sirk blocks LaVerne in a sexually suggestive and reclined fashion in the initial shot of the sequence

(Illustration 3.106). The framing here suggests Jean Negulesco's blocking of a prone Marilyn Monroe in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) or Ray's opening sequence of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) with James Dean sprawled drunk across the width of the Scope frame.

Illustration 3.106

Illustration 3.107

Where those earlier Scope directors might choose to exploit the Scope dimensions, Sirk quickly cuts to a closer framing of LaVerne and then breaks the sequence into floating, mobile singles. Sirk chooses to center singles, but the mobile camera remains low throughout the sequence. Sirk's use of low-key lighting suggests the sinister underbelly of what LaVerne is revealing. LaVerne ran away with Shumann after seeing his face on a war bond poster, and it arrested her development as a person and a woman (she's never read another book since then and didn't even finish *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, which Devlin has on his bookshelf). The Cather book is a

leitmotif is that carries additional generic weight as the book concerns the plight of an immigrant family's difficult life (and specifically the daughter Antonia) in Nebraska as told through the eyes of protagonist/narrator Jim Burden. This book's metaphorical relationship within *The Tarnished Angels* works on several levels. First, the film is the story of outcasts being told by an émigré filmmaker, and Sirk's heavy-handed melodramatic touches are often regarded as Sirk's criticism of an affluent American lifestyle the filmmaker finds lacking in psychological depth. Additionally, one cannot simply evaluate Sirk's choice of aesthetics (low-key lighting, mobile camera, etc.) without considering Sirk's German Expressionist roots and how they have impacted his craft.

The lighting scheme in this scene is generically motivated. The melodramatic paradigm plays out via the subtext of the Expressionist low-key lit scene and LaVerne's sexuality is flaunted in her blocking. The cut to LaVerne's single does not strictly follow geometric segmentation (Preminger) or symmetry (Ray and Tashlin), but rather blocks LaVerne slightly off-center and in medium close-up. A cut to the very mobile Devlin displays Sirk's signature use of reflective surfaces (Illustration 3.108).

Illustration 3.108

Sirk's resistance to the rule of thirds is a stylistic rupture and can further be seen as Devlin is balanced symmetrically with the reflective, mirror-topped dresser. Once Devlin has secured the liquor bottle that he and LaVerne will consume, Sirk returns to the shot-reverse shot paradigm but does not settle there for long. Sirk's normalizing tendency throughout *The Tarnished Angels* is to keep moving the camera. Where Preminger or Tashlin might allow long takes, Sirk experiments with CinemaScope by moving the camera rapidly and often. Sirk does not use a static camera in CinemaScope long shot where a vast composition is to be pondered; Sirk keeps the camera low and moving at all times. Of course, the generic importance of this strategy is that the players are trapped in their lives. The roving camera, especially within the tight confines of the Devlin's apartment, suggest both Devlin and LaVerne are caged animals pacing back and forth, restless and powerless in their frustration.

Illustration 3.109

Illustration 3.110

Illustration 3.111

Illustration 3.112

It is significant that Sirk again chooses to move the camera no closer than medium shot and frames the singles slightly askew of center, suggesting the generic import of the unknowable and mysterious past of LaVerne and Devlin's growing desire for her. The low-key lighting strategy also serves this end as Sirk experiments with lighting strategies (in black and white, no less) more than any other director evaluated in this chapter. The framings and lighting schemes suggest that while Sirk is keenly aware of the spatial composition of his shots, he uses *mise-en-scene* elements to reveal psychological characteristics and further the generic purposes of melodrama.

The sequence ends significantly as LaVerne's steps into the clichéd *film noir* shot of the *femme fatale* framed by Venetian blinds (Illustrations 3.113-3.114). Sirk frames both Devlin and LaVerne according to geometric segmentation of the wide frame and composes LaVerne's single

not in close-up, but a medium shot that is slightly left of center; it also exudes LaVerne's sexuality. Central to virtually every framing in *The Tarnished Angels* is the reliance upon geometric segmentation and more specifically, a rule of thirds. Beginning with Gance and continuing through Preminger, Ray, Tashlin and now Sirk, composers of the wide frame very often do not use the wide panoramic expanse for full sequences, but usually just for establishing shots. Early widescreen filmmakers — *The Tarnished Angels* is a mere five years into the CinemaScope era — try to break the wide frame into manageable components that can stand as individual vertical panes. Sirk composes virtually every frame within *The Tarnished Angels* with regard to thirds.

Illustration 3.113

Illustration 3.114

The final shots of this long interior conversation sequence end with LaVerne and Devlin undressing and retiring to their separate beds in a medium two-shot conversation set-up. Sirk again relies on the rule of the thirds and frames the two-shot at medium distance. This sequence simultaneously serves the generic ends of melodrama and widescreen aesthetics. Sirk accentuates the horizontality of the frame in this final shot to exploit the melodramatic endgame of longing and suffering in silence that LaVerne and Devlin retire to their separate but oh-so-close beds.

Illustration 3.115

What is most significant about this interior conversation set-up is the mobility not only of the actors but also the camera. Conversation set-ups throughout *The Tarnished Angels* rarely rest in shot/reverse shot for long. Sirk's characters (like Preminger's but not Ray's or Tashlin's) stand up and maneuver around the other characters while the camera dollies and reframes in fluid fashion. Sirk's characters are tortured. Very often they are tortured by their own choices, but frequently they are victims because they *lack* choices. Therefore, the brooding and smoldering desire that exists just below their surfaces is realized via Sirk's *mise-en-scene* and camerawork. This motif is apparent throughout Sirk's oeuvre, and Sirk saw a particular parallel in *The Tarnished Angels* as a continuation of the frustrated lovers in *Written on the Wind* (1956). In an

interview with Jon Halliday (1997), Sirk even calls *The Tarnished Angels* a "follow-up picture" to *Written on the Wind*:

> *The Tarnished Angels* grew out of *Written*. You had the same pair of characters seeking their identity in the follow-up picture; the same mood of desperation, drinking, and doubting the values of life, and at the same time almost hysterically trying to grasp them, grasping the wind. Both pictures are studies of failure. Of people who can't make a success of their lives. (133)

Sirk, ironically, uses the vast CinemaScope frame to show the confined nature of the characters. While the CinemaScope frame is a wider canvas in *The Tarnished Angels* than that of *Written on the Wind* (1.85:1), Sirk vivifies the melodramatic plight of the players by giving them the freedom of flight in their airshows, but constricting them internally, visually and thus, emotionally.

Sirk's exterior sequences are novel in the Scope era due to the amount of action and sheer volume of cuts. This speaks more to the genre hybridity of *The Tarnished Angels* rather than Sirk's cutting style; *The Tarnished Angels* is at once a melodrama and action film. The outdoor sequence examined here concludes the film after Roger has perished in an aerial race and LaVerne and Jack are boarding a plane and leaving Devlin. The sequence features standard cutting strategies, but Sirk blocks the entire sequence around the strong horizontal element of an airplane wing. Ultimately, Sirk relents and blocks the scene horizontally after resisting such strategies throughout the entire film.

Illustration 3.117

Illustration 3.117

Illustration 3.118

The above frame captures represent Sirk's indexing, continuity editing style. The Master shot defines the horizontality of the blocking and cuts to a medium three-shot and finally to a medium two shot of Devlin and LaVerne. Sirk follows the standard cutting style of the Classical Hollywood era for such a sequence but stops short of alternating singles of LaVerne and Devlin. The horizontal wing and flowing flags in the background serve as *mise-en-scene* metaphors of

the aerial subplot the viewer has witnessed throughout the film. Sirk finally gives way, it seems, to the impetus of star power and its emotional melodramatic currency with the final alternating medium close two-shots of Devlin and LaVerne as they realize their relationship is not to be. Like so many Sirkian characters they must suffer alone. For the entire film, Sirk frames Devlin and LaVerne as separate singles, thus reifying their separate and "single" nature. Ironically, by this point in the film, LaVerne *is* single after Roger's death, therefore Sirk grouping them as a couple in this shot conveys additional anguish. Their single-ness is at the heart of their unrequited love, and Sirk has reaffirmed this loneliness throughout the film via single shots. The airiness of the CinemaScope has exaggerated their single-ness for the film's entirety and now those airy singles are replaced with balanced two-shots (Illustrations 3.119-3.121).

Illustration 3.119

Illustration 3.120

Illustration 3.121

The final frame capture displays a tighter blocking of the thwarted lovers as Devlin offers LaVerne his copy of Cather's book, somehow suggesting that perhaps LaVerne will prosper elsewhere in her new life free from her vagabond existence as the wife of aerial racer. A significant feature of this sequence is that unlike Preminger, Ray and (to a lesser degree) Tashlin, Sirk has not foregrounded Scope's attraction possibilities of the grand vista or "gimmick" framings. While the horizontal wing does provide both a lateral staging component and as a symbolic reminder of the film's relation to all things aerial, Sirk does not allow this set piece to overwhelm the melodramatic situation of LaVerne and Devlin's repressed affection.

As aforementioned with regard to Sirk, the filmmaker is not abashed about moving the camera, but only does so when it serves generic purposes. In *The Tarnished Angels,* the low and mobile camera features geometrically segmented compositions that picture the actors as trapped via the *mise-en-scene*. Unlike Preminger who moves the camera with balletic blocking of his actors, Sirk moves the camera with sweeping grace (as in the opening sequences), but his moves are more generically influenced. *The Tarnished Angels* is a film concerning the excessive physical mobility of characters (in airplanes and life) who remain emotionally stagnant. Therefore, Sirk's bravura camera moves serve the end of reinforcing the hurried lifestyle of the protagonists, yet they seem to be tossed about by the camera's movement as if in one of the

Shumanns' turbulent aircraft. A complex camera move in *The Tarnished Angels* that represents this (beyond the opening sequence) is a meeting Devlin has with his editor at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

One can imagine this sequence in the Academy Ratio format and the amount of edits and different camera set-ups that would be necessary. Think only of the screwball comedies *The Front Page* (1931), *His Girl Friday* (1940) or *Meet John Doe* (1941). The frenetic pace and zany action in those films serve the generic need for comedic and cinematic speed that is the hallmark of screwball comedies. Further, their pace is well-suited to the boxy shape of the Academy Ratio. It is difficult to imagine the screwball heroines of the aforementioned films ping-ponging about the CinemaScope frame. Sirk's generic aim is not fast-paced comedy but rather brooding and escalating tension within the elongated cage of the Scope frame.

This complex sequence mirrors Preminger's gambling hall sequence in *River of No Return* except that Sirk does not cut this bravura move at all. While temporal pace is what screwball comedies set in newsrooms tried to capture, Sirk is capturing the physical pacing of his dormant players, and Devlin in particular. Sirk moves the action from screen right to left and pierces the vertical depth of the CinemaScope frame as Devlin and his editor maneuver to avoid each other. Devlin's editor thinks that his "flying gypsies" story is second-rate news. The editor would prefer that Devlin cover a local politician instead. Therefore, like the other character relationships throughout the film, Sirk's mobile camera serves the generic purposes of watching these two men argue and verbally spar, while Devlin's desires (to cover the Shumanns and therefore be in LaVerne's proximity) are not valued by his editor. Devlin's editor crosses in front of him to screen left and Devlin pursues only to have the editor cross him again back to center with Devlin at left (Illustrations 3.123-3.132).

Illustration 3.123

Illustration 3.124

Illustration 3.125

Illustration 3.126

Illustration 3.127

Illustration 3.128

Illustration 3.129

Illustration 3.130

Illustration 3.131

Illustration 3.132

Devlin's pursuit of his editor is a familiar one to anyone who has ever seen a newspaper film or worked in a newsroom[34]. Devlin's passionate plea to work on the air show story is met with great resistance as the editor labels the participants of the air show (the Shumanns included) as "flying gypsies" that come from "hunger." The speed of this sequence reflects the speed of the newsroom and the editorial gate keeping being negotiated. Sirk's camera is lower than in the Academy Ratio to accommodate the horizontality of the set, but also not to cut off the actors' heads by the camera's topline. Sirk frequently uses swish pans in this sequence that are causally linked to the editor's mobile blocking. These swish pans (also seen with Jack's fight in the opening sequence) are Sirkian stylistic ruptures in widescreen. The "early" days of Scope are

---

[34] This sequence might even be read as Sirk's tribute to the life of newspaper workers. Sirk's father was a newspaperman and Sirk, himself, worked at the same newspaper as his father while living in Hamburg, Germany.

rich with tales of editors and cinematographers alike who feared cutting or moving too quickly would jar the audience.[35] Sirk's swish pans within this sequence are experiments with wide frame aesthetics to accentuate speed. The fluid camera illustrates above all that Devlin is not only "trapped" within his tenuous relationship to LaVerne, but he is also trapped by a career and boss that does not allow him freedom. Sirk's *mise-en-scene* whether in the opening sequences, interior conversations, outdoor vistas or complex camera moves always serves his generic vehicles.

What can be summarized from Sirk's use of CinemaScope in *The Tarnished Angels* some five years into the era of widescreen as a new physical norm? Sirk's use of close ups, and a roaming, lower camera suggest a progression from the earlier manifestations of Scope poetics. Sirk does use close-ups, but uses them sparingly and then only to heighten action-oriented, emotional moments like Jack's fight. As with Ray, Sirk uses this close-up in the opening sequence as if to generically thrust the viewer into the emotional torrent of the Shumanns' existence.

Sirk uses an extremely mobile and lower camera to accentuate the restless state of the characters in *The Tarnished Angels.* Sirk uses an early version of the "walk and talk" strategy in Scope and does so to startling effect. The characters and camera are incredibly active in their blockings across a variety of situations — opening sequence, interior conversations, etc. — whereas Ray or Tashlin needed some Scope "justification" moment of novelty to move the camera an inch. In shooting conversation scenes, Sirk is difficult to pin down on his use of singles as he alternates between using singles or two-shots. For the romantic subplot that builds between Devlin and LaVerne, the generic motivation is to show them usually in singles and at

---

[35] For a detailed analysis of average shot lengths and how they change in the CinemaScope era, see Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985, 361-362) and Salt (1985, 246-247).

long last group them as a united two-shot in the final sequence when LaVerne boards the plane. Contrast this to the interior conversation when they are struggling to keep up with each other in Devlin's apartment.

Sirk is strikingly similar to Preminger in his visual style in Cinemascope. This is not surprising as the directors share a similar cultural and technical background from their previous cinematic careers in Germany. Both directors move the camera with great flash, but do not allow the style to become excessive or extraneous to the narrative. Preminger allows the wilderness of *River of No Return* to stretch and expand as the real star of the proceedings that often dwarfs the figures in its presence. Sirk allows the wide-open spaces of the airfields throughout *The Tarnished Angels* to provide airspace for his actors to roam but boxes them in enough to assure they cannot escape.

Summary

The goal of this chapter has been to examine four early Scope films being made by influential directors and how they may suggest aesthetic ruptures from the Academy Ratio era. Admittedly, this sample is small and leaves room for expansion and development. However, it is worth reviewing which physical and stylistic ruptures are present within these films, and how might they be categorized as experimental to accommodate the new physical norms of the CinemaScope frame.

First and perhaps most obvious is our observation that the wide frame offers the possibility of looser staging of both actors and *mise-en-scene*. Of the *auteurs* examined, not one uses the type of tight blocking or crowded frame that was standard in the Academy Ratio era. One could argue that this is simply a foregrounding of the wide frame, as studio heads often urged, to spread the actors out as if on a clothesline to accentuate Scope's difference. Certainly

this argument has merit, but consider *River of No Return*'s gambling hall scene and Sirk's editorial office scene. Preminger's fluid camera and the blocking of actors utilize both width and depth, and Sirk's frenetic pace is exaggerated by the speed of camera movement and blocking changes. This point also resurrects the issues that Edeson and Stull addressed with regard to the early widescreen films of 1930. Whether we are considering *River of No Return* or *The Tarnished Angels*, the bravura camera movement and horizontal staging within them require different lighting schemes and elongated (and vertically shorter) sets. Widescreen film style has a domino effect as it impacts set design that impacts lighting design and acting positions, etc. Therefore, while scholars of the past have focused upon shot lengths and lens characteristics, they have missed a fundamental issue with regard to widescreen. The pre-production phase *before shooting begins* is where widescreen's physical and stylistic ruptures occur. This concept of pre-production ruptures that affect later profilmic events is a separate argument that is beyond the scope of this project. However, it must be acknowledged that issues of shortened set height and elongated set width demand innovative lighting designs to accommodate the new spatial considerations of *mise-en-scene* in the Scope era, and the realization that pre-production strategies were perhaps more altered than even visual style strategies is an interesting notion that demands deeper investigation.

Second, because of these changes in the pre-production phase, the shooting of the film requires stylistic ruptures as well. Throughout the films examined (beginning with *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*), one constant rings true: lower camera height. The lowered camera in widescreen films is an important reason for longer shot lengths and more horizontal staging in the films examined. Both of these long-standing widescreen "norms" evolve out of a lower

camera height that results from the aforementioned issues of set design. If sets are vertically shorter but wider, the camera must be placed at lower levels than in the Academy Ratio era.

Shorter but wider sets require a lower but wider field of vision that is provided by the CinemaScope frame. Therefore, while Academy Ratio films have more vertical space within which to work and it follows that the subsequent different angles provide more opportunity to cut for coverage. Also, when the camera is at waist level (as the Scope cameras considered here are), all staging appears to be horizontal because the horizon — the camera's bottom line — has effectively been lowered. A camera that sits at eye level (as in Academy Ratio films) naturally provides a deeper field of vision and more vertically deep composition. Additionally, the lower camera placement within Scope films actually requires *less* camera movement than in the Academy Ratio era. How can this be? Consider the logical and spatial implications of the wider frame shooting a lower and more elongated set. Sets do not require as much depth because the camera frame is wider and lower, not deeper because it is higher. Because the frame is wider it must sit lower and therefore horizontal design is more necessary than is vertical and/or deep design.

It is an oft-reported tendency of the Scope era that shot length increased with the advent of the wider frame. The common ascription for this is that the large CinemaScope theaters necessitated longer takes so that viewers could fully scan the image in front of them and not miss any important details. Further, editors and filmmakers also reported that the rupturing effect of rapid edits in the wide frame was disruptive not only to the narrative but also the viewers with the new physical norms of CinemaScope theaters (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985, 361; Cook, 1990, 494-495). This argument is even favored by Edeson, Stull and MacCullough with regard to the early wide films of 1930. Another answer emerges if we examine the argument of

longer average shot lengths (ASL) in light of the aforementioned physical and stylistic ruptures of set design and *mise-en-scene* and their effects upon camera height.

Longer ASLs in the Scope era do not result *solely* from editors and filmmakers considering the effects of the wider frame on viewers. Longer ASLs result from lower cameras facilitating longer takes. Virtually all of the camera set-ups discussed in this chapter involve the stylistic rupture of lower camera height than was the case in the Academy Ratio era. Lower cameras allow for longer takes because the action moves horizontally via the actors blocking marks and reframing pans (or other movements). Longer takes (and thus longer ASLs) result from lower camera positions and shorter wider sets. The options of coverage are limited because of the *mise-en-scene* changes and thus the linearity of composition and scenes evolves in a similar fashion. Essentially the argument is this: Academy Ratio films have the benefit of operating equally along the vertical/horizontal axis, therefore providing great opportunity to cut. These cuts represent a change in perspective that editors and filmmakers alike must negotiate for the viewer. The Scope era has a lower camera and therefore does not change visual perspective as often as the Academy Ratio era camera. Longer takes and thus longer ASLs are simply a result of a lower camera that necessitates fewer changes in perspective.

What other stylistic norms arise in the first few years of the Scope era? Perhaps the most common rupture from the Academy Ratio era is that of the two-shot replacing shot/reverse shot. Again, a production phase element (physical rupture) is responsible for a stylistic effect. The wider frame necessitates (at least with early Scope filmmakers) a lower camera and shorter vertical space with regard to *mise-en-scene*. Therefore, a two-shot is more advantageous to filmmakers and also affects how we evaluate the earlier argument with regard to higher ASLs. Most cuts within films result from the conversation set-ups and the constant re-inscribing of

spatial relationships between actors and their environments. Wide films do not necessitate the master shot, medium shot, shot-reverse shot strategy of the Academy Ratio era. Typically in these four films (although Ray is somewhat of an exception), wide filmmakers in the early Scope era (and in the 1930 films as well) will begin with a master shot and cut (or push in) to a two-shot and allow the conversation to play out. This lack of extra cuts again is facilitated by the lower sets and lower camera with a wider field of vision. This physical/stylistic rupture of traditional film style from the Academy Ratio era further addresses the question of the lack of close-ups in the early Scope era.

The experimental use of widescreen aesthetics and how they play out in the early Scope era can be summarized thusly: less frequent use of shot/reverse shot editing within Scope films speaks to the lack of close-ups in the early Scope era. Fewer singles are a result of fewer shot/reverse shot set-ups. Obviously, if there are fewer opportunities for singles, there are fewer opportunities for close-ups. Nowhere is this foregrounded more than in the opening sequences and conversation set-ups. Preminger virtually refuses to shoot close-ups of bona fide matinee idols Robert Mitchum and Marilyn Monroe, and Frank Tashlin seldom frames Jayne Mansfield closer than medium shot. Only Nicholas Ray brings the camera close to Ed. Ray's use of the close-up in *Bigger than Life* can be read as the need for extreme emotionality or to show the horrors of addiction.[36] Again this issue is more correctly placed in the pre-production phase. Certainly there is some merit to the fact that early CinemaScope lenses bulged in the middle and could not focus multiple planes of vision closer than six feet. Filmmakers would almost certainly

---

[36] One could also argue for Ray's use of close-ups with Mason because the actor also served as executive producer of *Bigger than Life*. Kevin Sweeney (1999) notes that Mason thought *Bigger than Life* was a commercial flop *because of CinemaScope.* The actor is quoted as saying that the widescreen process, in concert with DeLuxe color, "had a way of making all films look like very cheap colour advertisements from magazines." The failure of *Bigger than Life* at the domestic box office doomed Mason's career as a producer at 20th Century Fox. (27)

know this before production began and could experiment accordingly. The reason for fewer

close-ups is the same as the reason for longer takes and longer ASLs: lower camera height and

wider field of vision. The close-up is uniquely suited for the Academy Ratio frame and therefore

the blocking strategies that emerge/rupture in the later Scope films — frames within frames, as

with Sirk in 1958 — re-invigorate and re-incorporate the use of the close-up.

At the midpoint of this chapter, I used a chart to show a few of the binary choices that

early Scope filmmakers faced and how they dealt with such challenges. At the conclusion of this

chapter, it is useful to revisit and update the chart with all directors considered.

Compositions:	centralized vs. geometrically segmented
Blocking:	centralized vs. bookended
Closest framing:	medium two shot vs. close-up
Camera mobility:	fluid and lateral vs. static with moments of Scope "justification"
Camera height:	lower overall vs. Academy Ratio era
Reflexivity:	Tashlin mocks proportions vs. others approach cautiously

This chapter essentially fills a gap that exists with regard to widescreen scholarship —

how do studio auteurs experiment with CinemaScope early on? By examining close-ups,

landscapes, camera angles and movement and by considering how these aesthetic components

are experimented with opening sequences, interior conversations, outdoor vistas and within

complex camera moves, a few trends emerge. Obviously lower camera heights lead to the

aforementioned stylistic ruptures that limit close-ups in lieu of the preference for the medium or

long shot. These stylistic ruptures seem particularly analogous to Keaton's authenticating long shot. However, where Keaton "authenticates" his gags with the long shot, the landscape shot in early CinemaScope films perhaps justifies the wider proportions. Certainly the wider frame lends itself to the ease of two-shot conversation scenes, and thus the stylistic rupture becomes the stylistic norm of fewer close-ups and longer takes dictated by lower camera heights that need less movement and/or cuts for coverage. It is difficult to assert that the mobile camera of Preminger and Sirk are new stylistic norms because Tashlin almost never moves the camera, and Ray hesitates to do so unless motivated by some Scope "justification" shot like the football throwing sequence.

This chapter chronicles and describes several instances where auteurs are conducting experimental aesthetic trials with the newly wide format. Preminger seems most comfortable moving the camera, but occasionally lapses into Academy Ratio era strategies such as the smoke signals sequence. However, the gambling hall and Matt's arrival at Tent City also suggest that the lower camera height provides a distinct mobility, albeit one with greater distance from the actors. Ray and Tashlin use the wide frame in a restricted way, but this may also owe to the generic codes each auteur must fulfill. The interiors of both Ray's melodrama and Tashlin's comedy seemingly inhibit dynamic camera moves (although Sirk's melodramatic palette is served well by the camera's activity). Ultimately the argument of generalizable widescreen aesthetics cannot proceed past the stylistic ruptures already identified — lower sets, lower camera, medium shots for close-ups, etc. Beyond these assertions, the critic is faced with issues of auteur and genre that require case-by-case analysis, as has been done here.

The experiments of this early widescreen era provide useful and significant pieces of the widescreen aesthetics tapestry. Aesthetics do not exist in a vacuum nor do they emerge/rupture

fully formed. As David Bordwell (1997) writes, "a technique does not rise and fall, reach fruition and decay. There are only prevalent and secondary norms … these stylistic phenomena are driven by human aims and ingenuity. … There are no laws of stylistic history, no grand narratives unfolding according to a single principle" (260-261). Bordwell's suggestion for the critic to guard against the lure of attempting to categorize and prescribe concrete stylistic norms is one well heeded. The films examined here provide a more fully developed, but not exhaustive, analysis of the intersection of auteur, genre and widescreen poetics in the early CinemaScope years.

Chapter 4: Experiments, 1968 and the fractured screen

I would like to have a frame you can expand to fit the scene. Now if I were out doing a western and we had a panoramic shot, mountains and vistas, I'd like Panavision. However, in a city like New York with skyscrapers, I'd like to have a somewhat taller frame, so that I wouldn't have to cut off the size of the buildings. — James Wong Howe, ASC (Rainsberger, 1981)

The new physical norms of widescreen exhibition encouraged the development of new stylistic norms associated with the 'Scope era *auteurs* Preminger, Ray, Tashlin and Sirk. In the history of film style, ruptures fall away or are normalized when they are no longer transgressive. Techniques such as we have seen in the "norms" chapter became appropriated and adopted by filmmakers. Therefore, as the wide film shifted to physically normative status (exhibition), a history of film style should ask what experiments with the wide frame can re-inscribe the novelty and uniqueness of Griffith, Gance and Edeson? In other words, if the new physical norms of exhibition with CinemaScope (and other formats) in the 1950s have been industrialized, how can filmmakers continue to experiment with physical and stylistic ruptures of the wide frame? Do they continue to be generically motivated, and if so, how do the physical and stylistic ruptures manifest themselves?

This chapter answers these questions by maintaining the previous chapters' focus upon the typology of close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and camera movement, but the ruptures discussed in this chapter are both physical and stylistic strategies that involve the synergy of pre-

production, production and post-production experiments. Similar to the case of Gance, the ruptures discussed in this chapter feature filmmakers who foreground and exploit the widescreen shape in unique and novel ways. Some of the main questions governing this project are how and when do filmmakers use physical/stylistic ruptures with widescreen, and do they permeate an entire film or are they momentary? The films analyzed within this chapter specifically focus upon two films from 1968 that feature physical ruptures similar to those used by Griffith and Gance. Why do these physical ruptures appear in 1968, and what does their emergence tell us about widescreen aesthetics?

The use of multi-image panels emerges in the late 1960s and is curiously prevalent in two films from 1968, *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Both films use a multiple image aesthetic to either distribute different lines of narrative trajectory and vantage points simultaneously (like Gance) or simply as moments of visual spectacle. The latter is self-explanatory while the former is both a physical and stylistic rupture of the Classical Hollywood Cinema technique of coverage (multiple takes of one scene from an assortment of camera angles). This technique is usually employed to give the filmmakers a choice in post-production, but within these texts the multi-image experiment gives *the viewer* a choice of which visual narrative to follow. This last aspect of viewer attention is perhaps most significant with regard to the multi-paneling filmic rupture.

Both Marshall Deutelbaum (2003) and David Bordwell (2004) argue that one way to understand the strategy of widescreen composition is through segmentation. The argument goes that widescreen filmmakers can better manage the wide frame by dividing its width into imaginary thirds or quarters and then compose horizontally by segment. The multi-image films of 1968 take this notion a step further. These films actually divide the frame width into

geometric fragments of visual real estate. Curiously, as crime dramas both films significantly exploit the wide screen for maximum generic impact. *The Boston Strangler*'s use of multi-paneling reflects Albert DeSalvo's (Tony Curtis) fractured psyche, but Fleischer uses the technique to a) disorient the audience, thus strengthening generic goals for a crime film and b) to withhold the revelation of DeSalvo's likeness until midway through the film. These two narrative aims are supported by Fleischer's use of multi-image panels to expand the generic conventions of assembling evidence, trailing suspects, following leads, etc. Fleischer presents a multiplicity of occurrences during a crime investigation to enrich the viewer's experience of what police work is like in such a terrorizing case.

Director Norman Jewison uses the puzzle piece aspect ratios in *The Thomas Crown Affair* to subtend the crime narrative of cat and mouse being played between thieves and police. The filmmakers use the wide frame in creative ways not by focusing upon its great width but by divvying up its geometric possibilities. The multi-image films of 1968 suggest new forms of widescreen experimentation; Richard Fleischer and Norman Jewison in effect ask why use the width of the wide screen for one unifed shot or image when you can divide the wide frame into multiple images for a compounded effect?

Why is 1968 a watershed year for the multiple-panel technique? The experimental widescreen films of 1930 were launched for reasons of product differentiation and also in an effort to leapfrog the competition. If Fox could be "first" in launching the widescreen film in 1930, perhaps it could corner the market the way that Warner Bros. (initially) did with the transition to sound. A similar argument can be made for the debut of CinemaScope in 1953. A variety of factors conspired to keep patrons away from the theaters in the early 1950s — television, suburbanization, the HUAC hearings, etc. — and the industry needed a gimmick. The

novelty of widescreen caught on and, as demonstrated by the previous chapter, contributed to changes in film style. This, however, does not account for the multi-panel process ruptures that occur in the1960s.

This query involves an eclectic unpacking of influences within the decade of the 1960s and slightly beyond. Essentially the experimental use of multi-paneling in 1968 involves simultaneity: the simultaneous witnessing of multiple points of view occurring concurrently within the filmic frame. While there can be numerous answers for why these multi-image sequences occur when they do in film history, ultimately these films represent the experimental choices and use of devices by auteurs — just as Griffith or Gance had done before — seeking to expand the generic and narrative possibilities. One explanation for the physical ruptures enacted within *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* is that the films represent mediated zeitgeists foregrounding the changing political, social and cultural upheaval taking place in the United States in the 1960s. The assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr., and RFK, the Civil Rights Movement, the Sexual Revolution, the Feminist Movement, the ongoing Cold War and the Vietnam War all contribute to the tumultuous metamorphoses the American culture was undergoing in 1968. The visual experimentation exemplified by both *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* could be viewed as by-products of the overall experimentation within the cultural, artistic and sexual arenas of the late 1960s as well. Throughout the decade, revolutions such as the introduction of the birth control pill, the "war on poverty" and new sonic horizons in popular music provide ample evidence of the experimental nature of the decade. Virtually all of the changes alluded to above have the goals of representation, agency and

voice.[37] The late 1960s is often considered the jumping off point for designations of the New Hollywood. While transitions in distribution tactics, the dissolution of the Production Code Administration and changing corporate structures within studios all contribute to changes in film content and style, the overall experimental ethos of the cultural climate provides the lasting visual impressions of the age.

This greatly simplified rendering of the social/cultural/political climate of the 1960s does not hold up when the texts are analyzed. The texts studied within this chapter are experimental uses of widescreen that fracture visual perspective in an effort to incorporate multiple points of view. This democratizing of the film frame is popular and transcendent during this era because the climate producing these texts demands that multiple voices be heard and seen. In this way *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* operate not only as generic crime vehicles but also as socially significant textual documents of equality and the liberation from a unilateral perspective.

While this project is not a strict chronological history of film style, but rather case studies in widescreen film style at certain moments in film history, are certain throughlines evident in the ruptures of 1968? The "inventions" of Griffith and Keaton actually provide a kind of roadmap for the films of 1930 and the "norms" of the 1950s Scope era. Griffith deploys the widescreen mask in times of either spectacle or to foreground some horizontal compositional elements that the Academy Ratio lacked. Keaton's unifying long shot aesthetic provides a blueprint that filmmakers from Raoul Walsh and Roland West to Otto Preminger and Douglas

---

[37] An excellent summary and outline of the tumultuous 1960s and how film captured these upheavals can be found in Paul Monaco's The Sixties: 1960-1969. History of the American Cinema (Vol. 8), Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. For a more culturally and politically situated overview of the 1960s, Todd Gitlin's The Sixties : Years of Hope, Days of Rage. New York: Bantam, 1993, is also excellent.

Sirk use in their widescreen texts. By 1968, the stylistic norms of the Scope films have been appropriated (lower camera and set height, close-ups as medium shots, etc.), and widescreen films are now physical norms both industrially (production) and exhibitionally (presentation). While the multi-image style of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* have not yet become norms, such techniques were the harbingers of changes that occur in cinematic technique in the years following these films' release.

The case studies of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* are significant because they offer the possibility of experimental observation via supporting documents. Trade publications like *The American Cinematographer* provide documentation of how the pre-production, production and post-production of these experimental texts proceeded. These supporting texts provide valuable documentation as to how the experimental uses of the widescreen aesthetics were conceived and for what narrative and generic purposes.

Beyond the two primary texts analyzed, several later films such as *JFK* (1991), *Timecode* (2000) use multi-image techniques in similar ways to convey multiple streams of narrative simultaneously. The link to Gance here is obvious. Gance uses simultaneous montage in the climax of *Napoleon* because the director felt that the narrative demanded visual innovation to portray his vision accurately. The filmmakers chronicled in this chapter espouse similar reasons for using multi-image techniques, but their reasons differ slightly from those of Gance. Obviously, Gance was proposing new physical and stylistic ruptures for his Polyvison sequence. In 1968 and the films that follow, the new physical norms are in place since widescreen's industrial adoption in the 1950s. These filmmakers experiment with compositional strategies to fracture and multiply the possibilities of widescreen composition in an age of experimentation.

The Boston Strangler

An accurate detailing of the cinematic techniques within *The Boston Strangler* involves a bit of backstory with regard to director Richard Fleischer. Fleischer had seen multi-paneling in Prague in 1942 in a theater called *Laterna Magica* and was so in awe of this process that he brought the show to New York's Carnegie Hall for an exhibition in 1944. Barry Salt (1985) notes that the probable inspiration of the sudden onset of multi-image sequences in films in the late 1960s was the "various forms of special multiple projection systems shown at International Exposition in Montreal" (EXPO '67) (261). The film *A Place to Stand* (1967) at EXPO '67 initially struck Fleischer. The text is essentially a non-narrative, promotional proto-music video for the Ontario province, but the director was intrigued by the possibility of multi-paneling within a *narrative* film format. Why would Fleischer choose a technique used for non-narrative means that could potentially be confusing in disseminating narrative goals and cues? Herein lies Fleischer's narrative voice and the importance afforded throughout this project of auteurs and their use of devices and/or techniques to push stylistic film innovation. Like the many auteurs studied throughout this project, Fleischer uses an experimental technique or device to strengthen and nuance an existing generic formula, thus foregrounding his presence within a well-known cinematic structure.

Like Gance some four decades prior, Fleischer realized that shooting *The Boston Strangler* in multi-panel would limit editing to certain degree. As evidenced in the long takes of *auteurs* from previous chapters, a lack of cuts (stylistic rupture) can heighten the narrative tension and simultaneously exploit a "new" film experience with regard to exhibition (physical norm). Where Gance expanded and multiplied his screens for both simultaneous montage and

spectacle, Fleischer reduced and subdivided *The Boston Strangler*'s film canvas. Fleischer

(1969) believed that the multi-panel technique encouraged:

> simultaneous action — many actions or more than one action, happening simultaneously
>
> on the screen, or within the same time in the story so that you don't have to cut back and
>
> forth in a conventional manner from one action to the other. You can show them both
>
> together. … For example, it is employed in place of a conventional montage … the
>
> secret of making it work is not to put too much information into any one panel or to try to
>
> tell a complete story in any one segment. (Fleischer *et al.,* 202-203)

The director argues a variety of points that require expansion. Fleischer claims that his

vision for *The Boston Strangler* necessitated a new format to be accurately portrayed. In

formalist terms, the dominant within *The Boston Strangler* narrative framework is that of

suspense. David Bordwell (1985, "Narration") cites Meir Sternberg's definition of suspense as

the "anticipating and weighing the probabilities of future events" (37). Bordwell further posits

that suspense functions as a key ingredient to the viewer forming and testing hypotheses about

film narratives and how they will proceed. Bordwell argues that such schema are particularly

salient during detective stories because "of all genres, [it] places the most emphasis upon

curiosity about prior events. … The detective tale offers the story of an investigation, and what

the perceiver wants to know is not only 'who did it' but how the detective's future actions will

bring the solution to light" (38). In *The Boston Strangler*, Fleischer generates and heightens

suspense via the multi-paneling technique as the police, the victims and killer are shown

simultaneously within the same image area but occupying different segments within the

widescreen frame. Therefore the generic trope of cat and mouse between the police and criminal

enables the suspense and terror to be ratcheted up because the police are looking *for* the killer as the viewer *watches* the killer torture his victims simultaneously. Second, Fleischer uses the multi-panel format within the widescreen aspect ratio instead of using the Academy Ratio norms of montage, and this stylistic rupture is an experiment in the foregrounding of widescreen aesthetics. Rather than trying to adapt the "old" conventions of the square screen, Fleischer geometrically fractures and ruptures the Panavision (2.35:1) frame like a jigsaw puzzle.

I am not suggesting here that Fleischer has done away with montage any more than Gance did in *Napoleon*. Unlike Gance's 17-minute *denouement*, Fleischer's multi-paneling is not a climax, but rather a device to *avoid* linear montage because montage is univocal. While the very technique of montage involves a variety of images compressed in space and time, even the most creative and dialectic uses of montage operate on a linear look-at-this-now-look-at-this model. The multi-panel rupture is not used to convey too much narrative information because it is a restrictive process in terms of shot length. Therefore, unlike Preminger's or Sirk's use of the widescreen frame where a viewer might scan an image to locate the relevant information, Fleischer's multi-paneling domesticates the wide frame by sectioning its width into manageable units that can be controlled. Production and visuals designer Fred Harpman states that Fleischer was overtly aware of the widescreen aspect ratio's ability to "lose" a viewer's interest in horizontal compositions:

> Fundamentally, he [Fleischer] doesn't like the anamorphic aspect ratio with its wide, narrow frame. He feels strongly that it is for many scenes, just too wide … He said to me "Sometimes when you're telling an intimate story of two people you simply don't need that wide of a screen. It's like with a painting or a picture, you don't take a frame and match the picture to the frame. You match the frame to the picture. Sometimes the

painting is small and that's all the frame has to be. If you have an intimate scene of two people, there's no reason for the full wide screen. … Let's not let this wide-screen proportion dictate anything. It's just a field of operation" (Fleischer *et al.,* 1969, 204-205).

Much like the discussion of Frank Tashlin's use of the CinemaScope frame as a gag delivery device by "redoubling" and mocking the shape of its proportions, Fleischer is making a case here (as does Howe in this chapter's epigram) that certain genres are best-suited to certain cinematic shapes. Perhaps this is why when we anecdotally speak of widescreen, the discussion does not immediately turn to the likes of melodrama or comedy, but rather to Westerns, musicals or science-fiction. Fleischer uses the multi-image sequencing of events to not confine the narrative to the offices of the detectives, the crime scenes or the interrogations, but rather to show all occurring at once so that the viewer is faced with the fact that these crimes are not isolated events, but rather are simultaneously happening throughout Boston.

To realize Fleischer's vision for the stylistic devices in *The Boston Strangler*, Harpman's job was to create a "panel plot" for the film. Thus, following Fleischer's mandate, Harpman created "frames for the pictures" and the production crew followed these panels in the same way that dialogue was dictated by the shooting script. An example of what these "panel plots" looked like (from *The Boston Strangler* DVD special feature, *AMC Backstory: The Boston Strangler*) attests again to the importance of pre-production with regard to the ruptures in widescreen films (Illustration 4.1)

Illustration 4.1

In some ways, this panel plot is similar to storyboarding scenes. However, the unique shooting style of *The Boston Strangler* necessitated such a geometric operation because of the complex matting involved in both the cinematography and later in the editing. Fleischer along with Harpman, director of photography Richard H. Kline, ASC, and editor Marion Rothman had to plan each physically rupturing multi-panel sequence in advance and assure that each piece of the production puzzle fit snugly within its post-production whole.

In the above frame capture from the film's "production Bible," note the assignments and designations of "M-24," "M-28" and so on. These markings are coordinates within the grid system designed by L.B. Abbott (special photographic effects) and followed by the entire crew. Essentially, Abbott designed a grid system at the "pre-planning stage" that plots points along the horizontal and vertical axes of the Panavision rectangle (Fleischer *et al.,* 1969, 241). The plotted points demarcate the "panels" where matted shots filmed by Kline are later inserted/assembled by Rothman. Like those of *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*, the physical/stylistic ruptures

present in the finished film text begin in pre-production and affect every link in the production chain.

Director of photography Kline discusses the shooting process like this:

We would shoot full-frame, with the area in dead center that would be matted for a panel later on and moved to the area of the frame where it was designed to be. … Occasionally, instead of shooting a panel scene framed at dead center, we would position the subject in its precise matte position at the right or left and pan toward the center – or vice versa. … In the full-frame scene that was on the screen just before the transition to a multi-image sequence, I would usually set a composition that had a huge, bold framing piece in the foreground, with generally no light on it at all. This framing piece would be positioned to match precisely so that it would become a panel or part of one as we went into the multi-image montage. In the exteriors, for example, we used the bold trunk of a tree in the foreground, the side of a car, a fire hydrant, a mailbox, whatever form we could find to fill one side of the frame, outlining an area that would eventually become a panel. Sometimes we would use the linear elements of a full-frame scene as a compositional base for panels coming up in the next scene. (Fleischer *et al.,* 1969, 228, 238-239)

Kline discusses a variety of topics within the above citation, but most significant is the concept of composition. As Kline states, the compositions within the initial shoot are simply placeholders in the image capture process. In fact, Kline's discussion of *The Boston Strangler* shoot sounds more like a modern, motion-capture or green screen shoot of the digital cinema era than an analog 35mm shoot from almost four decades past.

There are many analogies between *The Boston Strangler* and the digital mo-cap shoots of today. First and most significant, Kline composes with an eye for post-production. By shooting images full frame but knowing that only certain areas of the image will be retained involves an upheaval in the cinematographic paradigm.[38] Second, Kline does not use bold compositional elements in the foreground to "justify" the width of the widescreen aspect ratio as previous stylistic ruptures might have, but rather uses the foreground figures as graphic anchors for the launch of the multi-image sequences. This process involves the concept of colonization that will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter. Briefly, the process of colonization occurs within the filmic frame when areas are masked to create focal points within the frame.

The Boston Strangler production crew details that every decision made with regard to the multi-image process was to achieve a smooth flow from panel to panel. This is both analogous — and a challenge — to continuity editing techniques that came of age very early in the Classical Hollywood era. For example, the technique of shot-reverse shot is useful on a number of levels. First, it allows directors and editors freedom in terms of coverage. The second take may be better than the seventh, but the options and subtle nuances allow editors to assemble the raw footage puzzle in the most powerful way. Second, by shooting a conversation sequence with alternating single set-ups, the actors' time can be controlled more economically. If Box Office Star A is being paid $20 million for six weeks of shooting, getting her close-up dialogue scenes "right" is of utmost importance for both crew and box office. Finally, continuity editing techniques like shot-reverse shot allow for a kind of shorthand for editors. Being able to alternate shots without regard to lighting or blocking changes simplifies the job of assembling a narrative in a coherent fashion. The multi-image, physical ruptures challenge continuity editing paradigms

---

[38] The lineage of 1968's ruptures in the digital era will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

beginning with the new "norms" of the 1950s Scope era, and again in 1968 with *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair.*

In writing about the transtextual transformation that occurs in adapting a comic book to a television show, Greg Smith (1999) details a similar process with regard to shot transitions. Smith argues that *The Maxx* television program (MTV, 1995) utilizes the "comic-ness" of its animated background by deploying "the most noticeable advantage comic books have over television … a variably sized and shaped frame" (35). Smith contends that the television show's lineage from the printed page is the concept of varying panel size within the "invariant frame" of the 1.33:1 aspect ratio television screen. (41) "The limitation which kept television from exploring the broader use of frames-within-the-frame was not a technical one, but a conceptual one." Television and film producers did not lack the capacity to produce varied panel sizes within the "invariant frame" of either television or film, but simply "lacked a conceptual model for how and why they should use this ability"(41).

Smith's inquiries echo Fleischer's concerns about using the multi-image process for *The Boston Strangler*. Fleischer realizes that the multi-image technique "has great applicability to some subjects, but not *all* subjects. … If it has no real value to the film other than as a flashy technique, then it can only hurt the film" (1968, 204). Smith and Fleischer are arguing similar points but from different angles. Smith's *ex post facto* reading of the *The Maxx* recognizes the transtextual poaching of comics' aesthetics within the television adaptation. Fleischer, on the other hand, saw that the story of the manhunt for DeSalvo required a visual rendering to vivify the multitude of operations occurring simultaneously — the killings, the investigation, the interrogations, the anxious Boston residents, etc. — decides upon the multi-image technique he saw years before in Prague and Montreal.

Smith further argues that *The Maxx*'s television rendering uses the multi-image panel technique to recreate comics' aesthetic of simultaneously occurring actions. In detailing the editing process with *The Boston Strangler*, editor Marion Rothman states: "It is not the selection of the significant action, but how to get from one group of panels to the next group of panels. You cannot simply make direct cuts. You have to achieve a *flow* of smooth panel transitions. You must preserve a pleasing design, while considering where the eye is going to go within the frame" (Fleischer *et al.,* 1969, 240). Rothman, Fleischer, Kline and Harpman all realize that the multi-image process is a break not only from continuity editing practices but also from standard filmmaking practices. While the multi-image process is a momentary physical *and* stylistic rupture, it is a dominant structure that is pervasive from pre-production all the way to post-production. This discussion of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* is important with regard to the history and criticism of widescreen aesthetics because no longer must the action be bound to the elongated and cumbersome frame dimensions. Within these films, the wide screen is a "field of operation" and does not "dictate anything," as Fleischer desired.

The physical/stylistic ruptures of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* do not use the wide format as a rectangular canvas to be filled with elongated set design and lateral blocking. These films use the widescreen frame as a cinematic *tabla rasa*. The fractured images comprise a geometric puzzle that simultaneously anchors other graphic elements. While there are extended sequences of traditional filmmaking, these sequences serve only as placeholders for the multi-image panels to come. While the rapid progression of images are graphically matched, the panels do not change within the total frame area, but instead they appropriate segments of the overall frame over and over again with disappearing and shape-shifting panels. In some ways, watching the multi-image sequences of *The Boston Strangler* is similar to watching a horizontal

game of Tetris.[39] The viewer is constantly being directed within the image to the changing status

of images. Additionally, the viewer must work not only to keep up with the rapid-fire

progression of images and shapes but also to note their position within both the widescreen

frame and filmic narrative.

As aforementioned, the role of genre is of primary importance in *The Boston Strangler*

and the multi-image technique heightens the generic formula. The suspense is produced by the

pursuit, near misses, ultimate capture and interrogation of DeSalvo. Fleischer (1969) states:

One great challenge … evolved from the fact that the suspense you normally have in a

"murder film" does not exist in *The Boston Strangler*, because – first of all, you know who did it

right from the start and secondly, you know that there's going to be a series of murders. So there

is no great surprise in discovering another murder. … I concluded that what I would have to play

for would be the anticipation and suspense. I used the split screen to enhance both of those

elements. (203)

Fleischer uses the generic impetus to inform and dictate how and when the multi-image

process is deployed. This generic fueling of film style is important in the multi-image process

because Fleischer states the technique must be used cautiously and is not for all genres. This

recalls Ed Sikov's assertion that Tashlin's primary use of the CinemaScope frame functions as a

gag delivery device, and that the content of imagery is sometimes secondary to their formal

properties. In other words, certain shapes of the cinematic frame (like Tetris pieces) fit certain

genres in ways that move beyond issues of *mise-en-scene*. Fleischer's fracturing of the frame in

---

[39] Tetris is a computer game involving a sequence of falling *tetromino* pieces that the user must first place into a desired position and subsequently pack into an increasingly dense rectangular array. As gameplay progresses, filled horizontal rows on the gameboard are cleared, allowing pieces above that row to drop by the height of one square. Gameplay stops when the next piece can no longer successfully enter the congested playing field.

The Boston Strangler informs its generic formula by modifying the traditional method of montage where one thing happens after another in the classical Hollywood narrative tradition that Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) have called "the winding corridor" (37).

Fleischer does not use the multi-image technique throughout the film, but rather chooses his moments when the device heightens the viewer's perception of the multiplicity of perspectives. Fleischer, like Gance before him, uses the multi-image sequencing in two, consistent ways that can be termed: the killer and the investigation. First, Fleischer allows the viewer to watch the crimes occur from a variety of vantage points, both objective and subjective, therefore not privileging the victim or the killer. This resistance to a preferred point of view serves to heighten and maintain suspense, because not only is the viewer anxious toward the content of the imagery, but the formal properties of the multi-image compositions create tension by demanding that the viewer constantly re-direct their attention to various and changing shapes within the frame. Second, Fleischer shows multiple happenings in the investigation simultaneously. These sequences feature the detectives examining the victims, interrogating suspects, following leads and ultimately catching the killer. Both of these strategies for deploying the multi-image sequences end altogether when DeSalvo is caught. Therefore, it can be summarized that Fleischer used the multi-image compositions to enhance and propel existing generic tropes (suspense and the piecing together of an investigation) with regard to the crime thriller and/or detective narrative. This is evident because once DeSalvo is caught, the director does not return to the technique for the film's remainder.

Fleischer and the crew of *The Boston Strangler* use the multi-image technique in an early investigation sequence after a body has been discovered and the police are covering multiple leads. A police captain is briefing his charges that the investigation is to focus upon "known sex

offenders. The people you'd usually ignore. The peepers, men's room queens, the exhibitionists,

subway jostlers, the dirty word specialists." The litany of possible suspect types serves not only

to enhance the depraved nature of the crimes committed, but also to anticipate the nebulous and

imprecise police strategy for catching the killer. The scene that follows therefore has been

primed by the laundry list of possible suspects that may be observed. Fleischer realizes that the

investigation involves the following of leads and tailing of suspects. This process is of primary

generic importance, and therefore rather than show this process in a "one thing after another"

editing strategy, he chose to magnify and amplify the anxiousness and desperateness of the

proceedings by showing multiple events simultaneously. Notice how the sequence begins with

Kline anchoring the viewer to a central figure that is book ended and then masked much like

Gance or Tashlin. (Illustrations 4.2-4.8)

Illustration 4.2

Illustration 4.3

Illustration 4.4
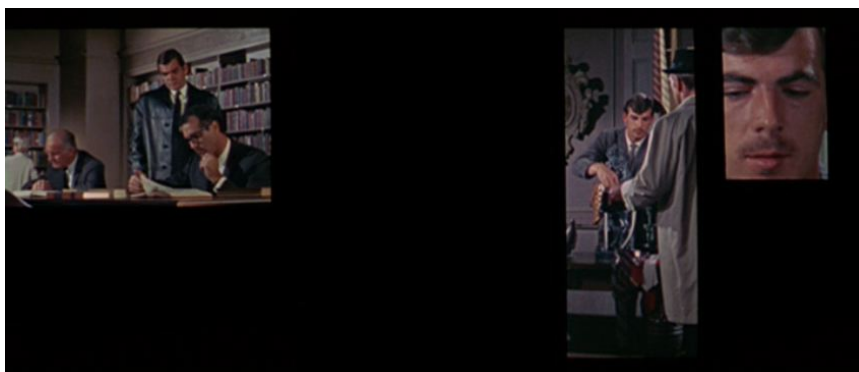

Illustration 4.5

Illustration 4.6

Illustration 4.7

Illustration 4.8

These frame captures represent only a portion of the overall sequence, but since these sequences last for several minutes and feature up to 12 panels within the Panavision frame, a brief detailing of technique and narrative strategy will suffice. As aforementioned, Fleischer begins with a centered composition that serves as an anchor point for the launch of the multi-image sequence (Illustration 4.2). The sequence then divides the image into uniform thirds before fracturing and rupturing into more disparate and negatively spaced shapes. While this technique is initially off-putting and harried, Fleischer and Rothman maintain continuity by following conventional editing strategies within the fractured frame.

Note the final three screen captures represent compositions that are anchored at both poles of the Panavision frame. This sequencing of images enacts the concept of coverage, but the physical rupture of the frame requires some redirection of the viewer's gaze. The vertical panel at right essentially splits and divides into a shot-reverse shot strategy broken into two, vertically stacked squares. The difference here is that rather than using a progression from master/establishing shot to a two shot and then alternating singles, the multi-image process allows for panel changes within only a portion of the "invariant" Panavision frame. The experimentation of Fleischer *et al.* is inseparably tied to the physical and geometric rupturing of the frame space and simultaneous montage. Rather than show a linear *succession* of images,

Fleischer shows a multitude of actions occurring simultaneously within the widescreen Panavision frame. Whereas Gance, Walsh and other widescreen filmmakers experimented with emphasizing the width and breadth of the wide frame, Fleischer tests the viability of shattering the single rectilinear image into multiple micro-narrative units.

A later sequence follows a second murder and revolves around another translation of Kline's anchoring, graphic placeholders. Here Kline starts with a high camera long shot hovering above a wrought-iron fence. Kline slowly lowers the camera frame until the bars of the iron fence become graphic frames that inaugurate the multi-image sequence. As with most of the multi-image sequences in *The Boston Strangler*, a multi-voice audio track adds to the cacophonous display of imagery. This particular sequence depicts numerous women in a state of utter panic throughout the city. Fleischer visually apes the terror and anxiousness of the women by fracturing the screen into multiple panels that are constantly changing shape and position. These alternating shapes and sizes of visual narrative units serve as a generic metaphor for the elusiveness of the killer and the kind of fear that has gripped Boston.

As with the previous example in the police station, the filmmakers begin with an visual anchor before physically rupturing the wide screen frame into five vertical panes. This example provides further evidence of Fleischer's belief that the widescreen frame is uniquely useful for composing with multiple images. Like Gance, Fleischer believes that telling multiple narratives simultaneously is the best use of the wide frame within certain generic structures. Fleischer privileges only certain moments throughout the film to use the multi-image sequences, and stops using the technique once he feels it has served its generic usefulness (after DeSalvo is caught).

Illustration 4.9

Illustration 4.10

Illustration 4.11

Illustration 4.12

Illustration 4.13

Illustration 4.14

Illustration 4.15

The graphically consistent anchors supplied by the full frame compositions facilitate the transition to the rupturing multi-image sequences. Fleischer notes that if this technique is used as novelty or attraction, then it quickly ceases to be functional in terms of narrative delivery. Gance's overall goal in *Napoleon*'s Polyvision sequence was not to create "a simple panoramic vision" but rather to "extend the emotional and psychological range of montage, and to compare and contrast images across the three screens" (Brownlow, 1983, 132).

Gance not only wanted a knockout *denouement* but also a format that was worthy of his subject. Gance realized that conventional montage was "one thing after another" in a linear and sequential arrangement of images. The filmmaker wanted *simultaneity* to accent the physical rupture and for the culmination of the general's career to be experienced as the confluence of planning, dreams and goals. Gance's technique of Polyvision works as a physical rupture by expanding the screen and creating a series of simultaneous, multiple images. Polyvision aesthetics work on a second, more important level with regard to *The Boston Strangler*. Gance's use of the multiple images simultaneously and continuously across the screen resists standard montage and is therefore a stylistic rupture as well. The question throughout this project is not so much a question of *how* widescreen techniques work (although the how of widescreen is significant) but *when* and *why* they are deployed.

As aforementioned, Fleischer uses the multi-image process to heighten generic goals throughout the film by using the technique for the killer and the investigation. These generically motivated uses of the technique can be expanded to examine exactly *how* Fleischer vivifies the simultaneous action in two recurring visual strategies: 1) to convey multiple lines of action occurring simultaneously (the investigation and the fence sequence are examples) and 2) to use multi-camera coverage, thereby heightening tension and interest in a particular sequence. The latter category is perhaps the most significant experimental use of the multi-image process in *The Boston Strangler*. For example, in a sequence where detectives arrive at a crime scene and a crowd has gathered, Fleischer chooses not to cut in a parallel editing paradigm but rather to show simultaneous action occurring throughout the set. This experiment with widescreen aesthetics is both a physical and stylistic rupture and achieves the goal of simultaneous coverage without cutting. The effect is one of multiple perspectives and vantage points within the same location.
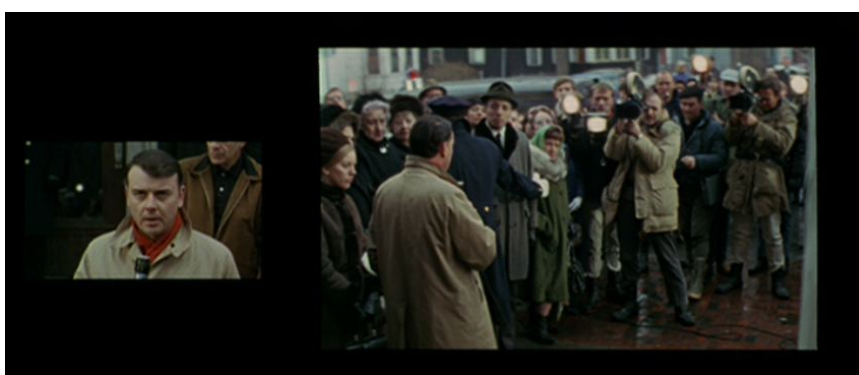
Illustration 4.16

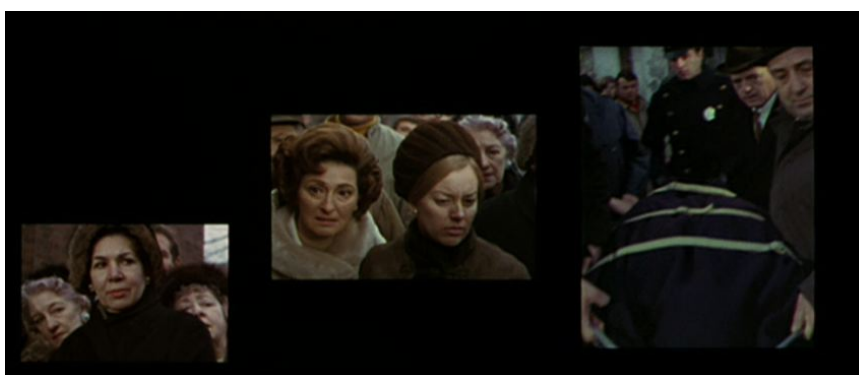**Illustration 4.17**

Illustration 4.18

Illustration 4.19

Illustration 4.20

Fleischer and Kline begin this experiment with a long shot of the media frenzy that surrounds the site of the latest murder (Illustration 4.16). Fleischer transitions to a multi-image technique not to show various investigations around the city as with the first two examples but rather to show coverage of one area *in toto* (Illustrations 4.17-4.18). Therefore the choice of *which* shot to use is no longer necessary. All shots around the scene are useful as they provide more information. Certainly we can imagine a traditional Academy Ratio (or even pre-1968 widescreen) structure to this scene. The long shot of the cameramen would then cut to the talking head reporter and cut to the crowd. A cut would then show the body on the stretcher being loaded into the ambulance with cuts for reaction shots. In the multi-image sequence all of these shots occur simultaneously. The director has made an important narrative decision both for himself as the auteur and for the viewer — Fleischer has surrendered control. The use of montage to control the viewer's gaze is regarded as one of the reasons for the arrival of film authorship in the early 1900s. A director's ability to choose *what* to show a viewer and, more importantly *when,* is a cornerstone of authorship. (Gunning, 1991)

For example, Griffith, Eisenstein and Hitchcock are all regarded as masters of montage. They are all regarded equally as masters at controlling their images to extract certain tensions at particular times from the viewer. Fleischer chooses *not to choose* to direct the viewer's gaze

within these multi-image sequences and by doing so empowers the narrative punch of *The Boston Strangler*. The multi-image experiment in *The Boston Strangler* represents the metaphorical loss of control of the city of Boston in the grip of DeSalvo. This technique can in fact be said to be synecdocal for the cultural mood of the late 1960s, a time filled with cultural, social and political upheaval. While this line of logic is tempting, we must remember that the auteur has chosen specifically how the imagery will be composed within the fractured compositions. Therefore, while Fleischer may in fact be creating a metaphor for the turmoil of the times, Fleischer's narrative voice governs how this narrative unfolds and any metaphorical understanding of this genre film must take into consideration the craftsmanship of the director.

While Fleischer often carves up the interior of the Panavision frame into various shapes without privileging any one in particular, the "invariant" frame is also used to naturalize the very medium it was launched to combat: television. Recall that Tashlin would alternately redouble the CinemaScope frame by either recreating the CinemaScope shape within compositions or reflexively mock the smallness of the Academy Ratio/TV proportions. For this sequence, Fleischer chooses to naturalize the TV proportions by expanding TV images to fit Panavision's dimensions. Fleischer uses the Panavision frame in a reflexive way (though not mockingly as Tashlin does) when Detective John S. Bottomly (Henry Fonda) is interviewed on a nightly news program. As Bottomly is introduced, he appears via satellite on a screen behind an anchorman (Illustration 4.21). The TV shape of Bottomly's television frame is not even the shape of the Academy Ratio (4:3). Fleischer appropriates TV's proportions into the Panavision aspect ratio thereby naturalizing and normalizing the widescreen frame even in a television context (Illustration 4.22).

The naturalization of the TV image to cinematic proportions occurs here in several ways. First, Fleischer creates a horizontal, geometrically segmented composition for the newscast set. By adapting a television news program's formal properties to ape the width of the Panavision frame, Fleischer is re-formatting what the TV image lacks — width. Why does Fleischer — who up until this point has taken considerable effort to fracture and fragment the screen for generic punch — equate television and cinema by presenting them with equivocal formal properties?

Illustration 4.21

Illustration 4.22

Whereas Tashlin chose such moments for reflexive comedy and to mock the smallness of the Academy Ratio/TV frame, Fleischer naturalizes the TV sequence by expanding the TV image to fit the Panavision frame and transitioning to black and white.

The novelty of this use of the widescreen frame is that Fleischer fills the narrative of *The Boston Strangler* with Academy Ratio television screens. The town of Boston is gripped in fear

and everyone stays glued to their television. The potential victims, the police and even DeSalvo himself are constantly in front of their televisions.[40] The choice to frame Bottomly in the Panavision aspect ratio (and in black and white) is suspect, because Bottomly is a part of the filmic narrative, not an image on a television screen. Participants on television screens in *The Boston Strangler* are not knowable in the filmic narrative. They are part of the world that is beyond control and literally cannot be accessed or affected in any way. The viewer, like many tragedies of the 1960s, must simply watch helplessly what happens on a TV screen. Fleischer and Kline chose to frame Bottomly in a frame that is now normalized as being "movie" shape and leaves the television screens in the native Academy Ratio proportions.

Richard Fleischer experiments with the multiple-image technique throughout *The Boston Strangler* for a variety of widescreen, aesthetic strategies. First and most importantly, Fleischer uses the technique to inscribe his narrative voice within a generic formula. Fleischer waited to find a story "worthy" of the multi-image compositions he had seen in both Prague and Montreal. As chronicled in the *American Cinematographer*, Fleischer and his crew took great pains to deploy innovative narrative and stylistic strategies in *The Boston Strangler*.

Following generic aims, Fleischer used the suspense and detective aspects of this crime narrative to deploy devices and techniques that simultaneously avoid montage and supplies coverage by exploiting and experimenting with the wide frame. Both goals facilitate concurrency and somehow aid in the investigation that is taking place but also reveal that the killer is still at large. This sort of omniscience is striking in ways that parallel editing is not. Crosscutting heightens tension by delaying revelatory visual information between cuts. Cuts occur, and the

---

[40] The first glance of Albert DeSalvo (Tony Curtis) occurs in long shot as DeSalvo is watching the funeral procession of John F. Kennedy. DeSalvo becomes disturbed by the proceedings, leaves his wife and children and goes out to commit two murders. The influence of the televised proceedings on DeSalvo is unmistakable.

viewer must watch what is shown. The multi-image sequences in *The Boston Strangler* provide

various vantage points in both time and space and thus create a twofold tension in the viewer; a)

overabundance and b) the impulse to try and see it all. The added generic benefit of suspense is

generated because things are not happening *one after another* but rather they are all happening at

once in the multi-panel sequences.

The Thomas Crown Affair

Richard Fleischer saw the multi-image technique in Prague some two decades before he

found a narrative "worthy" of its use. Fleischer and his production crews worked intimately at

every stage of the filmmaking process to achieve physical ruptures of the filmic frame and

stylistically rupture editing and framing conventions. *The Thomas Crown Affair* is also an

example of physical and stylistic ruptures but for different reasons. Unlike *The Boston

Strangler*'s pre-production, in which physical and stylistic ruptures were planned experiments,

the shoot for *The Thomas Crown Affair* did not begin as with plans to experiment with multi-

image sequences.

Pablo Ferro (mostly known for his main title sequences in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *To Die

For, L.A. Confidential*) was brought on board after principal photography was finished and post-

production editing had begun. Director Jewison and editor Hal Ashby were having difficulty

cutting the film's overall running time. For the final cut, Ashby suggested Ferro use multiple

screens to present actions simultaneously and thereby reduce cuts (and running time) but not

filmic action.[41] (Hendriks, 2000) In this way, the multiple-image sequences in *The Thomas*

---

[41] Ferro worked on a multi-image sequence and campaign for Calgon displayed at the 1964
World's Fair in New York City. The twin themes of the exposition, "Man's Achievements in an
Expanding Universe" and "A Millennium of Progress" heralded the potentials of science and
technology. (Hendricks, 2000)

Crown Affair, like those in *The Boston Strangler*, present simultaneity but for different goals. *The Boston Strangler* sequences were *conceived* as a multi-image narrative to enhance generic goals in an exciting and fresh way. *The Thomas Crown Affair* uses the technique *ex post facto* by hiring a graphic artist to trim running time. In other words, *The Thomas Crown Affair*'s usage of the multi-image technique is used for exactly the reason that Richard Fleischer said it should *not* be used — as an attraction. Ferro's use of the technique amounts to a last-minute salvage job for a film that is too long. By incorporating second unit footage or additional coverage into the multiple panels within the rectangular Panavision (1.85:1) frame, Ferro "squeezes" more footage into the film without inflating the running time.

The argument can be made that the uses of multi-image in *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* are negligible. Both films feature multi-image techniques and both are physical and stylistic ruptures within the widescreen frame. This project focuses closely upon not only the use of widescreen aesthetics but tries to elucidate the generic and narrative impetuses of such stylistic breaks. In an *American Cinematographer* article with Haskell Wexler detailing the cinematographic processes involved in shooting *The Thomas Crown Affair*, nowhere is there *mention* of the multi-image process, because Wexler was unaware that the process was going to be used (Lightman, 1968).

The contrast between Wexler's detailing of the shoot for *The Thomas Crown Affair* and Kline *et al.*'s recounting of *The Boston Strangler* production brings to bear the differences in the filmic manifestations of the multi-image ruptures. Simply stated, *The Boston Strangler*'s use of the process is integrated, fluid and narratively informative, while *The Thomas Crown Affair*'s use of the process is an attraction and is analogous to Ferro's other work as a director of quickly cut commercials and title sequences.

Ferro produced the multi-image sequences *ex post facto* to trim running time, and the uses of the multi-image within *The Thomas Crown Affair* are montage sequences that display stylized shots of a duplicate image. The grid formations in *The Thomas Crown Affair* feature up to 54 images (as opposed to a maximum of 12 in *The Boston Strangler*), and the number of images within the Panavision frame in *The Thomas Crown Affair* is significant. As *The Boston Strangler* is framed in a 2.35:1 aspect ratio and allows a maximum of 12 images in any multi-image sequence, the filmmakers of *The Boston Strangler* realized that readability of more than 12 images within the wide frame was unlikely. *The Thomas Crown Affair* uses 4 1/2 times as many images within the smaller 1.85:1 aspect ratio Panavision frame. Thus, the aim is not readability and narrative dissemination but rather attraction and the compression of imagery to trim running time.

The Thomas Crown Affair is essentially a bank heist investigation film, and the narrative impetus for the multi-image technique is generically motivated to show multiple occurrences simultaneously. The technique is deployed only five times over the course of the film. In comparison with *The Boston Strangler* it is apparent that the multi-image process does not function narratively in *The Thomas Crown Affair* but as excess.[42] The multi-image panels within *The Thomas Crown Affair* essentially show duplicated visual material in a grid layout. For example, when Thomas Crown (Steve McQueen) is coordinating the bank robbery and telling the robbers the plan is a "go," Ferro uses the grid-like layout to show phone calls between no more than two protagonists at a time (Illustrations 4.23-4.26).

---

[42] Kristin Thompson details the concept of "excessive" narrative material in her article, "The concept of cinematic excess" In Narrative/Apparatus/Ideology, (Ed.) Philip Rosen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 130-142.
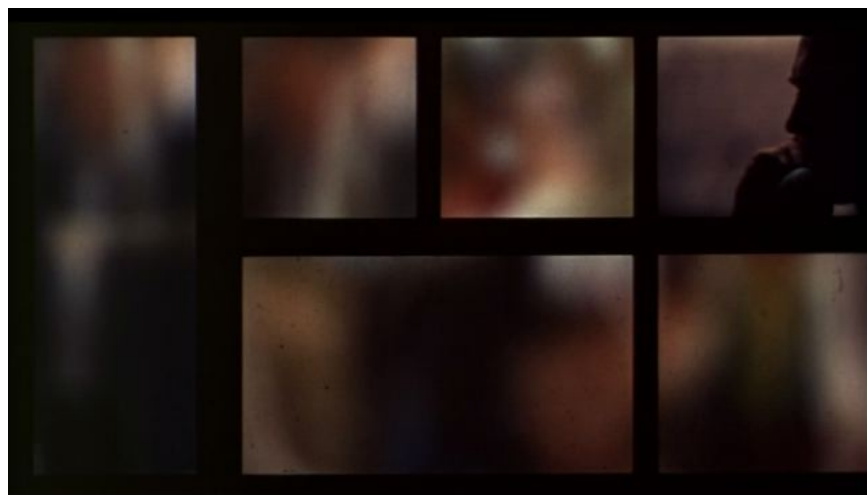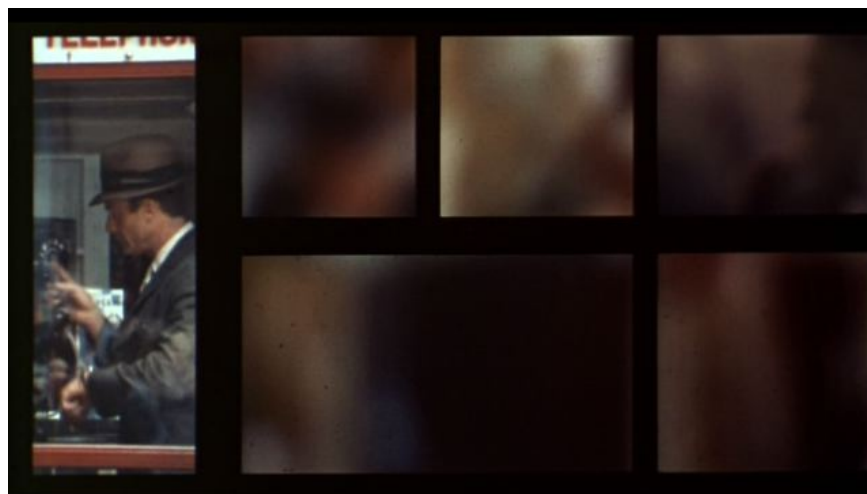
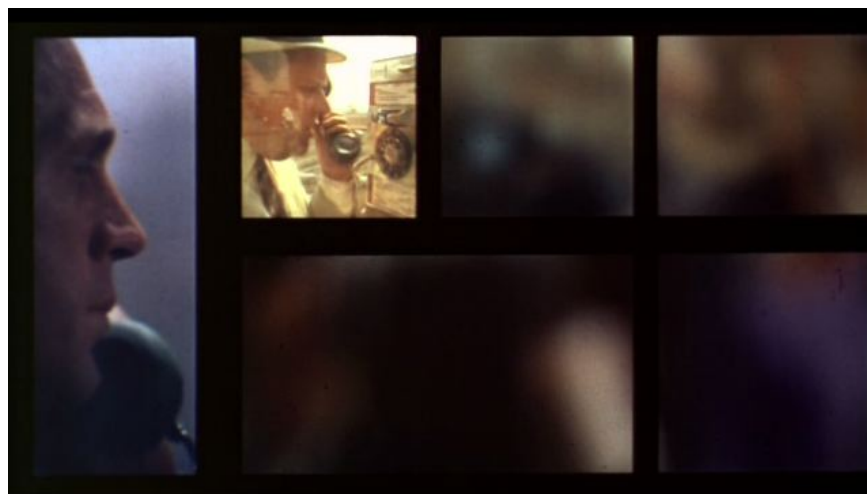**Illustration 4.23**

Illustration 4.24

Illustration 4.25

Illustration 4.26

It is apparent that the racked focus panels are simply blocking mechanisms to guide the viewer toward the significant (in focus) portions of the grid (Illustrations 4.24-4.26). In this way, Ferro realizes that the wide frame can be a horizontal canvas upon which to compose experimental arrangements. Both experimental uses of the multi-image technique reflect the upheavals of the late 1960s. Where Fleischer chose to utilize coverage of multiple occurrences and show them simultaneously without privileging any particular one, Ferro fractures his compositions to unify a singular image. The use of mixed images — in focus and not, long lenses and wide angles, etc. — all speak to an experimental age and unprecedented stylistic ruptures with widescreen.

Also, Ferro uses the multi-image space in a way not featured in *The Boston Strangler* that again suggests not narrative goals, but compressing extraneous footage into a format that does not sacrifice running time. Ferro often uses multiple panels to show a duplicate image, either as a fractured whole or in a stylized collage (Illustration 4.27).

Illustration 4.27

This is a very different use of the physical and stylistic ruptures used in *The Boston Strangler*. In *The Boston Strangler*, Fleischer *et al.* use the process for narrative conveyance and to build tension by showing the loss of control. The loss of control represented by the simultaneous and non-privileged vertical panels in *The Boston Strangler* show many actions that are beyond both the police's and society's control. Even *The Boston Strangler*'s voice-over tracks are integrated with the multiple panels to convey the frenzy and fright that engulfed Boston. The multi-image sequences in *The Thomas Crown Affair* feature the musical compositions of jazz composer Michel Legrand. The music tracks simply play over the multi-image sequences and therefore the viewer simply looks and listens, but there is very little narrative content to retain.

Perhaps the best illustration of Ferro's use of the multi-image technique and its lack of narrative conveyance comes in the famous polo match scene. An insurance agent, Vickie Anderson (Faye Dunaway), pursues the ultra-rich and suave Crown to a polo match. Anderson hopes to size up Crown and figure out what makes the elusive playboy tick. To convey both the speed and varying angles of attack implicit within the polo match, Wexler employed up to five

cameras including chest and saddle-mounted cameras and an Eyemo buried in the ground. The multitude of cameras created a preponderance of coverage that Wexler believed would be a linear montage. Thus, when charged with "tightening up" the running time, Ferro had multiple takes to work with, and by deploying the grid system, Ferro is able to display more footage but use less overall running time. Again, Ferro's grid images are not to be read as much as they are to be experienced as part of the simultaneous montage (Illustrations 4.28-4.32).
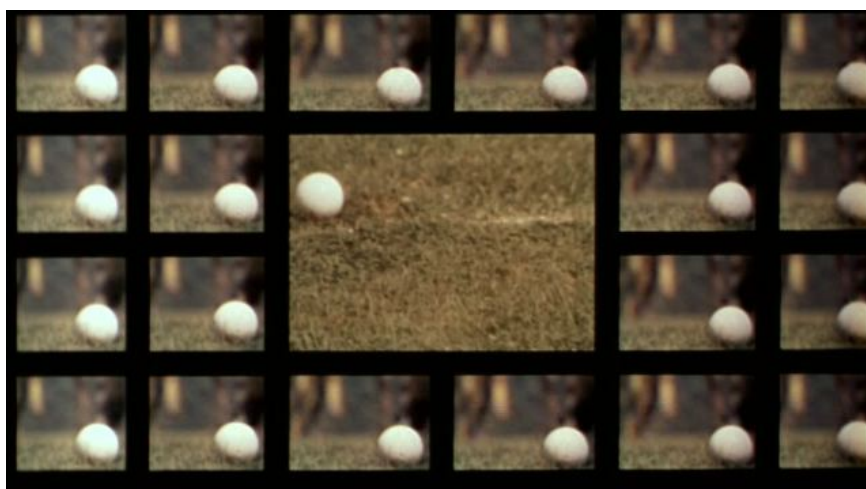

Illustration 4.28

Illustration 4.29

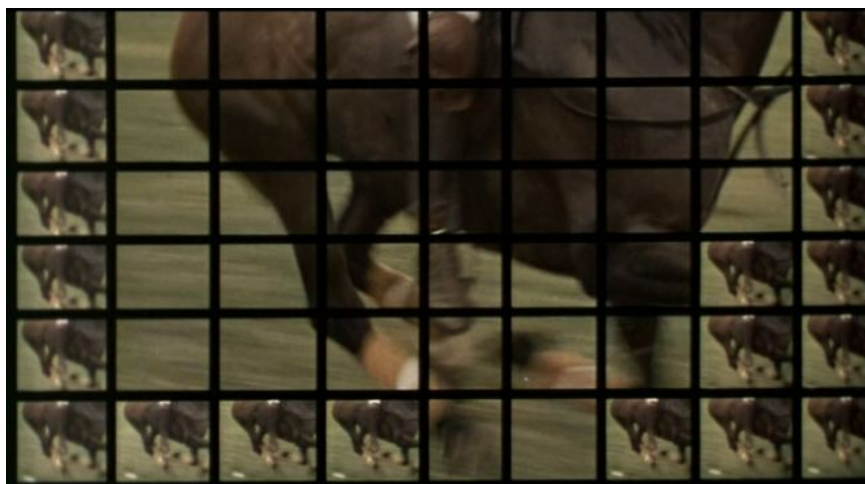**Illustration 4.30**

Illustration 4.31

Illustration 4.32

Recalling Eisensteinian montage sequences, the polo match grid sequences convey the overall speed of the match. The goal is not necessarily to read individual shots but rather to experience speed and juxtaposition for the desired effect. Ferro uses the grid-like multi-image panels to reduce running time and therefore the assembly of multiple shots within the Panavision rectangle is a stopgap measure. In *The Boston Strangler*, Fleischer's use of the multi-image technique is designed to surrender control. The viewer is free to look at any of the panels, though guided by certain anchor points. The multi-image sequences in *The Thomas Crown Affair* do not guide the eye; they create simultaneous montage situations that are simply experiential. These sequences embody the experimental age of their creation.

These two films represent two possibilities (but are not exhaustive) for fracturing the wide screen into fragmented, individual units. On the one hand, Fleischer fragments the wide screen into legible panels with speaking characters and narrative information is conveyed that propels the investigation forward. Fleischer avoids using the widescreen multi-image technique simply as spectacle; on the contrary, Fleischer realizes that the wide screen provides a unique lateral canvas that can be fractured into experimental and innovative visual schemes. Pablo Ferro uses the multi-image technique in *The Thomas Crown Affair* as spectacle and to reduce running time. Ferro's graphic artist background serves to create visual spectacle that is to be experienced and marveled at, but Ferro's job did not entail the distribution of narrative kernels. For Fleischer, the multiple image technique presents a unique function for the wide screen. The elongated Panavision frame provides a canvas much like a comic book that can be shattered and re-composed into many shapes and variations, but not simply for spectacle. Ferro uses the wide screen as a shatter-able canvas as well, but for different ends. Ferro needed to reduce running time and mask the fact that he was doing so. By spectacularizing his multi-image compositions,

many of which strain legibility, Ferro's reasons for using the multi-image technique differs from the goals of Gance or Fleischer.

Both *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* represent a period in film history in which filmmakers experimented with widescreen dimensions as foregrounded subject; the very dimensions of the film frame are exploited. These filmmakers argue textually a similar point made by Greg Smith (1999). With regard to the television adaptation of the comic book *The Maxx*, Smith asks, "Why can't we have frames taller than they are wide? Why are we limited to rectilinear frames? Why not circular frames, irregularly shaped frames, overlapping frames? Why not multiple frames" (35)? Smith argues the physical and stylistic ruptures that occur in *The Maxx* (and ostensibly in *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*) represent "limited exceptions" that "do not overturn the filmic and televisual norm of a standard frame which is wider than it is tall, which keeps the expressive capacity of the television/film frame relatively unexplored" (36). These physical and stylistic ruptures occur throughout widescreen's film history, and the ruptures discussed throughout this project are somewhat glacial in their development. Another example of the multi-image process occurs fittingly some 22 years later with Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000).

Fleischer *et al.* use the multi-panel process more uniformly and methodically in *The Boston Strangler* than does Ferro in *The Thomas Crown Affair*. The former represents a careful and thorough implementation of an experimental technique, whereas the latter seems to be more about spectacle. Figgis's *Timecode* owes more to *The Boston Strangler*'s overall narrative use of the technique than *The Thomas Crown Affair*'s momentary uses, yet there are certain reflexive moments within Figgis' text. *Timecode* takes place in real time and features four digitally shot, one-take scenes presented in a quadrant format within a 1.85:1 aspect ratio frame. Figgis (an

amateur musician) "composed" the script for *Timecode* on sheet music paper in string quartet format (one line for each of the four plot actions) where each bar equals one minute of screen time. Figgis composed the musical score and is featured on the saxophone.

As with Fleischer *et al.,* Figgis wanted to create a new filmic experience within the "invariant" frame. What Figgis hoped to achieve within this quadrant-based, single take format was some sort of new exhibition and viewer experience like Fleischer and Jewison in 1968 or Buster Keaton in *The High Sign* in 1924. Four dialogue tracks play simultaneously in addition to a score. Originally, Figgis was going to mix the audio live in screenings, but this was short lived for obvious reasons. The film is more or less improvised, and the four camera operators were equipped with synchronized watches during the 15 total takes. The action within the film features overlapping narratives and thus makes the narrative all the more exciting/confusing.

Timecode is the first American studio film shot entirely on digital video. One of the reasons for Figgis using the new format is that unlike film, which is limited to roughly 10-minute takes, DV cameras use no stock and therefore can shoot up to 2 hours uninterrupted. Therefore, like Fleischer *et al.*, Figgis chose deliberately to challenge traditional filmmaking models from pre-production planning all the way through sound mixing. The result is a quadrant-based visual experiment that is virtually unique in film history. The physically ruptured, "invariant" frame is segmented into four quadrants, and like Fleischer, Figgis does not choose to direct the viewer's gaze at any particular panel.[43]

---

[43] Figgis does use the audio track to "guide" the viewer to actors speaking, but very often multiple actors in separate quadrants are speaking simultaneously.

Illustration 4.33

In discussing the narrative implications of *Timecode*'s multiple panels, Marilyn Fabe

(2004) offers conflicting insights into this challenging text. Fabe initially argues points similar to

what I have argued about *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Fabe states,

"because of the spatial, as opposed to linear, montage in *Timecode*, we get to 'edit' what we see

ourselves" (234). Fabe's textual analysis and viewing experience of *Timecode* recalls the

conflicted responses to widescreen's initial debut. The author vacillates on *Timecode*'s

experimental success with regard to novelty vs. narrative. Fabe argues, "by allowing us to

observe multiple elements of the plot simultaneously, the novelty of the film's experimental form

is always something of a distraction, taking precedence over our absorption in the narrative and

identification with the characters" (236). Later Fabe offers contradictory assertions when she

writes, "*Timecode* also has an intriguing aesthetic dimension. At times we can forget all together

about the plot and focus on the fascinating effects of seeing multiple actions taking place

simultaneously in real time" (237). Ultimately, like the early widescreen critics, Fabe reverts to

the fact that *Timecode*'s novel aesthetic presentation is inextricable from its narrative. "In

Timecode the viewer is free to decide which of the four quadrants to watch and in which order.

… What is important is that we are given a choice" (238). Certainly Figgis' experimental

quadrant-based narrative is stretching the limits of what is legible and can be assimilated into

mainstream practice.

There are many examples of multi-image selections in post-1968 texts from *Wall Street*

(1987) to *Sideways* (2004) to the television series *24*. Occasionally, a director like Oliver Stone

will acknowledge that the *Wall Street* multi-image simultaneous montage was his desire to "pay

homage to the old '60s movies with the square blocks. I love it. It also accentuates the hurry, the

speed of Wall Street. And montages like this hadn't been done in a while" (*Wall Street* DVD

commentary). Stone admits that not only did he wish to recall the "old '60s movies" but that the

simultaneous montage served the generic function of accelerated action. Like *Timecode*'s generic

need to vivify the multiple facets of a production studio and its interconnecting parts and players,

Stone physically ruptures the "invariant" frame to foreground the cacophony of stock trading

(Illustration 4.34).

Illustration 4.34

There are other examples of multi-screening in post-1968 films, and perhaps the most cited example is 1970's *Woodstock*. Again, the generic use of the device is as important as its implementation. The editors aimed to present the two warring sides (the counterculture vs. the establishment) of the 1960s cultural upheaval by showing them simultaneously in split-screen. The device also functioned much in the way that Pablo Ferro used multi-image in *The Thomas Crown Affair* — the insertion of excess footage to trim running time. Most notably, director Brian DePalma has shown great affinity for the split-screen process and usually deploys the effect for some generic end, such as to depict split personality characters or to present some psychotic interlude. Most recently, director Hans Canosa filmed the entire romantic dramedy *Conversations with Other Women* (2005) in split-screen. Like Fleischer, Canosa wanted the story, about two characters who meet at a wedding reception and share a one-night stand while pondering their life's romantic mistakes, to not privilege one narrative trajectory (Illustration 4.35). As the tagline for the film states, "there are two sides to every love story," and Canosa aimed to show that each deserves equal weight in a way that the director believed continuity editing could not represent.

Illustration 4.35

These examples are by-products of and fallout from the multi-image processes discussed with regard to *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Both films used the

technique for generic ends and in place of traditional montage. In this way, the arguments made early on about widescreen's resistance to montage (long takes framed in long shot with mobile actors) are applicable. However, the fly in the ointment is that the wide screen must be tamed (via segmented, manageable parts) before it can be the site of resistant and re-composed montage.

When filmmakers fracture the horizontal expanse of the wide screen, it breaks the cycle of being the "invariant" frame and becomes an elongated palette. The geometric possibilities are numerous as evidenced in the very different physical and stylistic ruptures of *The Boston Strangler*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Timecode* and other cited examples. The experimental uses analyzed here chronicle widescreen's unique aesthetic possibilities. The lengthened visual palette of widescreen provides a horizontal composing area in which while the frame itself is "invariant," stylistic ruptures serve as useful examples of experimental widescreen aesthetics.

Throughout this project, one prevailing research question concerns whether there are widescreen moments, or whether filmmakers can utilize the width of the wide frame throughout a feature film? Certainly the above examples trend toward widescreen moments of physical and stylistic rupture sandwiched between dominant stretches of full screen compositions. What then are we to make of films that vary their aspect ratio size only once throughout the course of the film? Films like *Superman* (1978), *The Right Stuff* (1983), *JFK* (1991), *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), *Galaxy Quest* (1999) and Disney's animated feature *Brother Bear* (2003) begin in an aspect ratio that is very close to that of television or the old Academy Ratio. At significant events in the course of the narrative, the screen space expands to fill the entire frame rather than colonizing only a small portion. For example, in Robert Redford's *The Horse Whisperer*, Annie (Kristin Scott Thomas) and Grace (Scarlett Johansson) leave the constricting confines of New

York and travel West to Montana to seek the help of "horse whisperer" Tom Booker (Robert

Redford). The progression from East to West, civilization to wilderness, garden to desert is

always both implicitly and explicitly foregrounded within Western genre films. Redford and

cinematographer Robert Richardson (Stone's cinematographer on *Wall Street*) represent this

dichotomy in Annie and Grace's journey by expanding the aspect ratio, but not to the "extreme"

of *The Boston Strangler*, *The Thomas Crown Affair* or even *Timecode*. A similar case can be

made for Stone's controversial film *JFK* (1991). Stone begins with an Academy Ratio

composition floating in a matted 2.35:1 aspect ratio. Note that Stone does not use the Academy

Ratio proportions as fodder for reflexive mocking as Tashlin might, but does later naturalize

TV's proportions for the wide screen. Stone uses the television ratio as a metaphor for a brief

political/history lesson beginning with the end of President Eisenhower's administration and

transitioning to JFK's (Illustration 4.36).

Illustration 4.36

The montage mixes archival and fiction footage that is the source of many criticisms of

Stone's reflexive history films.[44] Stone stays with the Academy Ratio within the 2.35:1 aspect

ratio until the assassination occurs. Significantly, Stone then opens up the full 2.35:1 width and

---

[44] For a survey of the many different scholarly assumptions with regard to *JFK*, see The
persistence of history: Cinema, television and the modern event,(Ed.) Vivian Sobchack, New
York: Routledge, 1996.

stretches the familiar Zapruder footage. By altering the Zapruder footage, Stone enacts the same naturalizing techniques of both Tashlin and Fleischer. Tashlin often redoubles his compositions to reveal the disparity in size between the television and widescreen film frames. Similarly, Fleischer alters Det. Bottomly's television image by adapting it to widescreen film proportions. Stone transitions from the TV aspect ratio of the archival/fiction footage to that of the film proper. However, by stretching the Zapruder film to the 2.35:1 aspect ratio dimensions, Stone alters the historical verisimilitude implicit within the Zapruder film (Illustration 4.37). This example represents a concept that will be discussed at greater length in the final chapter, but warrants a brief description here. Fleischer's and Stone's denaturalization of Academy Ratio/TV proportions represent an attempt to re-assert widescreen's importance as the visual exemplar of cinema. Both directors use TV footage and denaturalize the Academy Ratio proportions by expanding the images to cinematic proportions. By reconfiguring the proportions of the TV images, both directors are asserting widescreen cinema's shape as something that has become representative of cinema in and of itself. For Fleischer and Stone (and for comedic purposes, Tashlin), the wide screen associated with cinema embodies the possibility of re-shaping and re-purposing the natural world to suit generic and even ahistorical ends. Ultimately, both directors are re-writing historical events and denaturalize the TV news "documentary" footage they are displaying by altering its formal properties to appropriate cinematic proportions.

Illustration 4.37

What are we to make of these films that use the widescreen format to fracture and rupture, expand and contract, colonize and foreground the very dimensions of the widescreen frame? Where does this technique reside within the overall scheme of widescreen's progression? First, physical and stylistic ruptures that are pre-planned as those of *The Boston Strangler* alter the very production process by creating new strategies of widescreen composition. Fleischer wanted to enact multiple narrative elements simultaneously in *The Boston Strangler*, and a new filmmaking paradigm was necessary. Fleischer desired a format and narrative worthy of the multi-screen process he had seen in both Prague and at the International Exposition in Montreal (EXPO '67). *The Boston Strangler* fit those criteria, and Fleischer *et al.* created a revolutionary widescreen film technique. Additionally, *The Boston Strangler*'s use of the multi-image process enhances the generic punch of the crime drama and detective narrative.

Second, Fleischer experiments with the multi-image widescreen process in significant ways to deploy narrative. By offering the viewer multiple choices of what to look at and offering multiple vantage points throughout the film, Fleischer creates a democratized film watching experience. Figgis guides the viewer to certain quadrants in *Timecode* via the soundtrack, but Fleischer's soundtrack and dialogue are just as fractured as the images. In this way, Fleischer surrenders partial control over his authorship and allows the viewer to follow the panels that are

most interesting. Because Fleischer *et al.* specifically constructed *The Boston Strangler* as multi-image segments beginning in pre-production, the overall effect is very different from that of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Ferro's use of multi-image panels within *The Thomas Crown Affair* is more closely attraction or spectacle with very little narrative transference. Ferro's 11th hour deployment of simultaneous montage to trim run time is the obvious culprit for the spectacular use of the technique, but the two films use the technique for different ends.

Third, the concept of simultaneous montage appears at various intervals throughout this project from *Napoleon* to *The Boston Strangler* to *Timecode.* Simultaneous montage is a unique potentiality of widescreen because the binary of full frame vs. multi-frame must be negotiated. All the films in this chapter (with the exception of *Timecode*) alternate between uses of full frame and multi-images within the "invariant" frame. Therefore, when and why the multi-frame process is deployed is of key interest. With *The Boston Strangler*, the multi-image sequences are enacted when the investigation is generically foregrounded. Actions occurring simultaneously heighten both suspense and drama, not to mention the physical and stylistic ruptures of mapping multiple panels that move and shift shape. *The Thomas Crown Affair* uses the multi-image technique for simultaneous montage and attraction, but not narrative.

Finally, the physical and stylistic widescreen ruptures chronicled throughout this project occur at intervals divided sometimes by decades. Gance's *Napoleon* occurs in 1927, and widescreen does not "debut" until 1953 with CinemaScope. Not until 1968 do multi-image processes appear and then they lie dormant until *Timecode* in 2000. As Bordwell suggests, the widescreen experiments of Gance, Fleischer and Figgis cannot be easily mapped because "these stylistic phenomena are driven by human aims and ingenuity" (260-261). By rupturing the "invariant" frame, these filmmakers enact their authorship by divvying up the screen into

manageable segments. Though these experimental techniques have not normalized to sustain feature-length narrative (yet), the expansion/contraction of aspect ratios evident in *The Horse Whisperer* and *JFK*, the split-screening of *Woodstock* and multi-image sequences in television's *24* are evidence that filmmakers desire to make the "invariant" frame shape dynamic from within. By fracturing and rupturing the interior dimensions of the wide frame, new and intriguing aesthetics are possible.

Chapter 5:
New Media, digitextuality and widescreen

If everything is manufactured [in digital texts], then everything must be considered. —

Katherine Sarafian, producer at Pixar Animation Studios (2003, 222)

At the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Atlanta in 2004, I presented an earlier draft of Chapter One. After the presentation, one question struck me as particularly simple to the point of being brilliant. To paraphrase the query, the session member asked, "Why don't you just look at widescreen films that have been panned-and-scanned and see what's missing?" While there are obvious problems with this notion — authorial control, video release, modified aspect ratio, etc. — the thought seemed to simplify my goal. One of the purposes of this project is to enumerate and describe the aesthetic differences between widescreen films and Academy Ratio films. Beginning with the silent era and progressing through the experiments of 1930, the norms of the 1950s 'Scope era and on to multi-image fractured frames of 1968, the question persists: what stylistic differences can be seen between Academy Ratio and widescreen films? The answers provided thus far in case studies seem always to necessitate a caveat or a "yes, but what about …"

The silent era films of Griffith, Keaton and Gance stand in stark relief against their peers. Clearly the filmmakers aimed for product differentiation that vicariously fulfilled the objectives of authorial distinction and generic extension. The "experimental" films of 1930 seem to be the technological hedging of bets that the transition to sound bred into the industry. Similar claims can be made for the norms announced by the 'Scope films of the 1950s and the multi-image

panels of 1968, all of which bring us back to product differentiation. However, this project demonstrates that throughout all of these transitions and experimental instances, new aesthetic strategies arise to cope with the technological breaches of traditional filmmaking tropes. Finally, then one must ask, well then what comes after film?

In 2005, filmmaking has not died off and continues to drive multi-national corporate ventures that use theatrical distribution and exhibition as launching points for franchises and brands that extend the original filmic texts into various ancillary spin-offs such as video-on-demand (VOD) or other home video options (VHS, DVD). The question now is no longer limited to what differences exist between widescreen and Academy Ratio *films*, but what aesthetic strategies are appropriated from traditional widescreen filmmaking in digitextual forms such as computer mediated texts and digital films? How do these texts appropriate widescreen aesthetics in their use of close-ups, landscape shots, camera angles and movement? Most importantly, how do content providers navigate the production of widescreen texts that are being viewed on 4:3 television and computer monitors?

In a podcast from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Guy Gadney (2005) discussed the services his company (Bigpond.com) delivers to larger numbers of the Australian audience. Gadney draws attention to the blurring line between live video on broadband and TV but points to much higher levels of "synchronized interactivity" via broadband. One of Gadney's examples of the heightened experience his online content producer provides is widescreen.

> We've just made a move to widescreen. … Rather than just having a little box on the Internet which everyone is used to peering into and thinking "Oh, that's a bit of a lousy experience, but hey it's the Internet," we said no, we're not going to do that. We want every piece of video to be shot, encoded and put up in widescreen. … To the user, what

they see is something more televisual. … Just by making that psychological move …

away from existing paradigms on the Internet … we were very easily able to change

something into an experience which was very much more cinematographic. ("Broadband

futures" podcast, 9/7/2005)

Gadney points to the interactive nature of online content production, but he seems

particularly excited about the transition to widescreen and speaks of it in glowing terms. For

Gadney, the encoding of video into a widescreen format (via letterbox masking) equates

television and cinema. The logic here is that by appropriating cinematic aspect ratios — i.e.,

widescreen — other formats are elevated to a higher-brow visual look. In an article discussing

the rise of the DVD format and its subsequent "home theater" aficionados, James Kendrick

(2005) argues a similar cause with regard to aspect ratio snobbery. The author examines

discussions of DVD aspect ratios on the Home Theater Forum (hometheaterforum.com) and

notes that home theater enthusiasts view modified aspect ratio (MAR) DVD releases as

violations of "the artistic integrity of the films," and "an insult to cinematic art … a subversion of

the use for which the format was intended" (60-61). Kendrick continues that for these DVD

proselytizers of original aspect ratios (OAR) "there is only one way a film can be presented, and

that is in the aspect ratio in which the film was originally presented in theaters" (61). Any

manipulations of the OAR are considered bastardizations and cultivate derogatory rhetoric such

as the naming of the "full screen" format (1.33:1) as "fool screen." The cineastes Kendrick

describes consider knowledge of OARs as cultural capital that they can lord over the non-

initiated, run-of-the-mill video store patrons. The larger point being made here, but not explicitly

expressed, is that post-1953, widescreen implicitly means cinema. The "black bars" of

letterboxing carry some transtextual meaning that denotes a cinematic and thus higher-brow experience.

This chapter examines how these widescreen filmmaking strategies have become implicit in both online advertising and web-based film series. [45] The online texts analyzed use letterboxing techniques in an effort to reproduce cinematic qualities and thus present their products in terms of high-brow consumption strategies. Further, many video games, regardless if they are of first-person shooter or sport genres, deploy cutscenes or "cinematics."[46] These techniques ape cinematic tropes in order to blend (or mask altogether) the transition between transtextual choices such as video games based upon films or televised sports. Because online content faces many challenges — different operating systems, monitor sizes, screen resolutions, and monitor widths, not to mention download speeds — it seems that content producers want to achieve MIVI (Maximum Instantaneous Visual Impact) and the panache of letterboxing by colonizing monitor space. (Garfield, 1992, 77) By colonization, I assert that the shift in aspect ratio and its demarcating effect within screen space requires some visual shift on the part of the viewer. Colonization occurs when Academy Ratio proportions are transformed without input from the viewer[47] into a letterboxed or widescreen visual field. This transformation is what Griffith sought from his horizontal masking techniques: to narrow the viewable field to focus a viewer's attention to a particular area. Colonization is significant in that previously discussed widescreen techniques involve the lateral segmentation of the elongated, widescreen frame (geometric segmentation of Preminger, Sirk, etc., or the multi-image jigsaw puzzles of Fleischer,

---

[45] An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Taking a wider view: The widescreen aesthetic in online advertising," in *Journal of New Media and Culture*, 3.1, Winter 2005. Online at: http://www.nmediac.net/winter2004/cossar.html

[46] Colonization in video games, such as cutscenes of cinematics, can be turned off by entering a game's preferences menu. To do so obviously requires a recognition that such a transformation has occurred, and thus colonization is still relevant.

Jewison, etc.), where this process shrinks viewable vertical area. Computer workspace is colonized by the video game or online ad interface — the letterbox masking isolates the workspace portion of the monitor from the letterboxed portion that video game and ad producers want viewers to consume. Why would advertisers and online content producers be willing to sacrifice such valuable visual real estate?

In a discussion of the aesthetics of computer window size, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2002) submit that a windowed environment does not attempt to unify any point of view. (33) I submit that by segregating areas of monitor space via letterboxing, content producers narrow the viewable monitor area in an effort to present a focal point, in much the same way as Formalist montage editing directs spectators' gaze. By re-drawing the frame boundaries within a monitor's visual field, online content producers focus a user's attention to that which has been colonized and segregated. This phenomenon is easily observed in the above examples of both Gadney's transition to widescreen for Bigpond content, and to a lesser degree in Kendrick's elucidation of the aspect ratio wars fought by home theater buffs.

Additionally, video game producers provide cutscenes (or cinematics) at the beginning of gaming narratives and periodically throughout the gaming experience to deliver narrative. Sports games utilize the letterboxed view when something extraordinary — a shot or play — is worthy of spectatorship. The 4:3 monitor view collapses to a letterbox view, and the participant simply becomes the spectator.

New media providers use the widescreen cache associated with letterboxing to cue participation or spectatorship. The letterboxing of ads not only employs the colonization of monitor real estate, but also signifies a cultural consumption strategy associated with cinema.[48]

---

[48] Kendrick (2005) summarizes this point very well as he adapts Pierre Bordieu's "manifested preferences" to the argument of home video format "wars" (63).

In addition, video game and other online content providers use the letterbox aesthetic to cue players/viewers when it is appropriate to participate and when to simply watch and consume. These new media directions offer the ontological possibilities associated with digital convergence not in terms of technology but in light of aesthetics. While the CinemaScope films of the 1950s could only be consumed in their intended aspect ratio in a CinemaScope theater, online films or letterboxed video games colonize and convert any monitor's format into the desired aspect ratio.

The end of this chapter concerns the unique example of Pixar Animation Studios. Pixar is an intriguing example of the "new media Hollywood" in a variety of ways, but is of interest here with regard to their digital recomposition of films for video release. Pixar recomposes each film it produces for home video outlets. While most films shot in the CinemaScope aspect ratio of 2.35:1 must undergo significant aesthetic metamorphoses before they are released into home video formats as "fool screen," Pixar's texts are digital blanks. The *mise-en-scene* of a Pixar film exists only in digital form. There is no soundstage or cinematographer to consult with regard to framing aesthetics. Digital mattes are composed in both formats from the first storyboard with the home-video release in mind. With Pixar, the culmination of this project has come full circle. Pixar's dual format digital production is the digitextual solution to the problem (which aspect ratio will succeed?) faced by *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers* in 1930.

Why would media content producers and specifically advertisers use letterbox techniques for media such as television and online content when they will most likely be viewed in a 4:3 aspect ratio monitor? Media producers of such ads confess that the goal is to make "their work more 'cinematic' . . . with the look and feel of a feature film" (Vagoni, 11/08/99, 49). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2002) deem such poaching as remediation. The process of

remediation occurs when one medium is represented via another medium and the authors suggest this process is "the defining characteristic of the new digital media" (45). If this is true, then digital content producers like Guy Gadney of Bigpond use the physical and stylistic rupturing characteristics of widescreen itself as product differentiation.

Everything in the realm of new media is "remediated;" the aesthetic strategies from one medium are recycled into another. This is particularly salient with letterboxing as a production device in the online advertising campaigns. A brief analysis of two online advertising campaigns observe the use of widescreen strategies similar to those previously observed in film case studies. Ads from BMW Films ("Star") and Buick ("Tiger Trap") feature widescreen aesthetics via letterboxing, and Buick's "Tiger Trap" even uses a multi-screen technique reminiscent of the 1968 case studies that is becoming more frequent in new media texts. Both campaigns were launched on the Internet and both are long-form (6-8 minutes) cinematic ads. They are useful texts to examine because unlike their 30-second and minute-long counterparts, they have the added benefit of having already captured their audience, and therefore the letterboxing device cannot be reduced to merely an attention grabber.

In "CinemaScope: Before and After," Charles Barr (1963) argues that widescreen cinema challenges spectators to be "alert," but should strive for a "gradation of emphasis" regarding its implementation. (11) Barr contends that widescreen cinema (specifically CinemaScope) offers the possibility of "greater physical involvement" for the spectator and a "more vivid sense of space" (4). Essentially, Barr's essay reifies the notions that Andre Bazin put forth regarding the "myth of total cinema" — widescreen cinema allows for fewer edits, and thus longer takes, which Bazin and Barr claim allows for the spectator's deeper perceptual submersion within the visual narrative. Observations throughout the case studies in this project suggest that experiments

with lower set heights dictate lower camera levels which influence camera movement and may encourage few edits. Barr further explains that in widescreen "peripheral vision orients us and makes the experience so vivid . . . this power was there even in the 1:1.33 image, but for the most part remained latent" (11). It is important to note here that Barr (and Bazin) is speaking exclusively of the new physical norms of widescreen theatrical exhibition. The expansion of screen area for the CinemaScope theatrical experience was a new physical norm, and it contrasts nicely with the stylistic ruptures involved in producing online texts in widescreen-esque formats like letterbox. Essentially, what Barr saw as stylistic ruptures to adapt to physical norms occurs in reverse with new media widescreen texts; online content prodcuers contract and colonize screen area (physical rupture) to create a focal point in the 4:3 monitor. In any event, Barr isolates one of the primary claims of most widescreen critics: the larger screen area of a theatrically projected, CinemaScope film encouraged audiences to perform new viewing practices.

The questions posed by Gadney and Kendrick amount to new media updates of the queries put forward by Bazin and Barr to analog film production and exhibition; what (and how) does widescreen *mean* in digital and online formats? If Barr's assertion that the widening of the frame in fact results in "greater physical involvement" and encourages viewers to "interpret" and/or "read the shot," then widescreen's deployment by the online content producers makes perfect sense. However, Barr also contends that the hallmark of widescreen images is a more open frame with a "greater . . . impression of depth" and an image that is "more vivid, and involves us more directly." Barr claims that this power was either not present in the Academy ratio or "remained latent." If the 4:3 image does not allow for "greater physical involvement," then the TV advertising industry is compelled to colonize and letterbox material to provide a

focal point to market their wares. This is a moot point because letterboxing on television was not popularized until Woody Allen secured a contractual agreement with United Artists in 1985 which gave him control over the video versions of his work, and Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) was the first home video released in the letterbox format. (Belton, 1992) Allen's historical and cultural associations with the wider frame are of importance as we continue to examine the cultural capital with which letterboxed media is endowed.

Television, the Academy Ratio and letterboxing

In a critique of a Mercedes-Benz television spot *Advertising Age* critic Bob Garfield (1992) remarks that "foreign-film and Woody Allen buffs will recognize . . . the letterbox technique" used in the production. Garfield asserts notes that Mercedes' reason for "fiddling with the frame" is "Maximum Instantaneous Visual Impact (MIVI)" (77). This notion of MIVI is certainly not a new concept in advertising, but it is a useful framework by which to examine the use of letterboxing where none is warranted. Allen and "foreign filmmakers" became associated with letterboxing because of a desire to control the visual integrity of their creations.[49] Thus, the cultural capital associated with Allen and "foreign films" is also associated with their visual style, and furthermore their desire to maintain that style regardless of media format, i.e, film-to-video transfer.

When films made after 1952 were initially licensed for broadcast on television, they were panned and scanned, which Belton (1994) and Steve Neale (1998) argue essentially amounts to a "recomposition" of the frame's content. (270; 131) In this process, the widescreen negatives is panned and/or scanned horizontally or re-edited with essential pieces of content lost completely. The irony of this process is that widescreen formats are introduced to combat television (among

---

[49] For a more nuanced and thorough history of home video letterboxing in various formats from Laserdisc to DVD see Belton (1992), Brain Winston (1998) and Kendrick (2005).

other box-office deterrents) but aesthetically are dismembered and "subverted" to accommodate the Academy Ratio proportions of television screens. This film-to-video process and the underlying aesthetic changes that occur are the site of another ironic twist later in this chapter in the examination of Pixar's "recomposed" films for video release.

One of the initial ways of challenging the horrors of panning and scanning was to release films in a letterbox form. Letterboxing shrinks the image and fills the "lost" vertical real estate with black bars above and below the image to preserve the film's OAR within a reduced screen area. Letterboxing achieves MIVI, product differentiation and cultural significance simultaneously. How? Advertisers lease visual space and/or airtime. By letterboxing texts, advertisers give away valuable visual real estate in an effort to mimic the look of letterboxed films. Whereas Allen and "foreign films" sacrifice coverage of the total image surface on television to *preserve* a films' artistic integrity and composition, advertisers and other media producers "remediate" their spots by using letterboxing techniques for differentiation of product and association with high-brow cinema. As Garfield's observes, "commercials [on TV] have no such imperative" to use letterboxing, but rather it is an authorial *choice* to achieve MIVI by mimicking widescreen cinematic proportions.

Letterboxed content begins with film-to-video transfers that are proprietary to television. However, when this process of letterboxing is appropriated (remediated) to non-proprietary formats such as online media, the process of letterboxing *itself* has meaning. What does letterboxed content in formats with "no such imperative" mean, and how is this accomplished aesthetically? Does it follow normative trends for close-ups, landscapes, camera angles and movement or does it remediate other mediated strategies?

A first consideration is a new media text's *mise-en-scene* and how it changes in a letterboxed frame. Letterboxed texts manipulate spatial relationships, and their subsequent reading when widescreen space is composed *for* a native Academy ratio space. Once the "initial" attention is achieved (MIVI), viewers are left with content that has different, unwarranted aspect ratio. For example, more than likely your computer monitor or television screen presents a 4:3 aspect ratio. Therefore, like letterboxed films on VHS or DVD, available monitor space is masked often without input from the consumer. An authorial choice to constrict and ration available monitor space is deployed. A consumer has a choice (often unbeknownst to them) between a widescreen or full screen format for a film or video, and this is especially true with the proliferation of DVD formats that often offer both formats on a single disc.[50] Consumers then may *choose* how much monitor (TV or computer) space they are willing to "sacrifice" for viewing the text.

Texts *created* as letterboxed often do offer such a aesthetic olive branch; the decision to colonize monitor space has been made by the media producers and consumers must view the matted content.[51] Specifically for online texts such as BMW Films and Buick, audiences have sought out their ads in cyberspace rather than having been snared by MIVI or some other broadcast attention grabber. Media producers suggest that "letterboxing simply works better

---

[50] Initially, the laserdisc formats were among the only home video outlets to offer consumers releases in their original aspect ratios. The Criterion Collection in particular only releases films in their OAR as a matter of principle (see Kendrick, James. "What is the Criterion? The Criterion Collection as an archive of Film as Culture," Journal of Film and Video, 55.2-3 (Summer-Fall 2001): 124-39). DVD formats increasingly offer consumers a choice of either a "widescreen" or "fullscreen" version separately, or with both formats packaged into one "flipper" disc. For further reading on laserdisc technologies, see Winston, Brian. *Media Technology and Society: A History: From the telegraph to the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 126-143.

[51] Increasingly as Internet browsers and their dependent plug-ins become more sophisticated, there are media viewers which strip away the black bars from a letterboxed AVI or MPEG file allowing viewers to consume the text in a long, horizontal window. This chapter does not account for such applications, but rather only applies to letterboxed content as the black bars serve as the colonizing lines of demarcation in the monitor's surface space.

from the standpoint of cropping the images in the frame and creating a sense of . . . 'visual tension'" (Vagoni, 1999, 48-50). Advertisers use of the letterboxing device allows "[a] spot to exhibit compositional possibilities that the regular TV [format] would not have provided" (Vagoni, 1999, 48-50). This "visual tension" and the resulting "compositional possibilities" are what I have termed "colonization" with regard to the visual image. In sum, content producers take a nod from the cultural capital associated with letterboxed films, and "remediate" this aesthetic tradition by appropriating a consumer's screen space.

If we establish the fact that ad producers use letterboxing to colonize monitor area to create a focal point, then we are back to the question of meaning. If we accept that letterboxing, because of its lineage from Allen, "foreign films" and cinema in general, denotes "highbrow notions of artistic merit and dramatic impact" we need to examine *how* these concepts are delivered. (Vagoni, 11/08/99, 48-50) The notion of "visual tension" is a significant one because both the BMW Films' spots and Buick's ad rely upon the stylized, formatted space for aesthetic reasons. By poaching this cinematic visual style, the ads are equated with cinematic formats, and by association the advertisers create the visual link between their products and previous consumption of other media (cinema) with similar aesthetic characteristics.

French New Wave director and longtime *Cahiers du Cinema* critic Francois Truffaut admits such intentions with his decision to film *The 400 Blows* (1959) in widescreen (Dyaliscope, 2.35:1). As one of the progenitors of the "foreign film" caché associated with letterboxing, Truffaut says "I had the rather naive feeling that the film would look more professional, more stylized [in widescreen]; it would not be completely naturalistic" (Davis, 1993, 30-34). The "more professional" and "stylized" look of widescreen that creates a suspension of "naturalism" (32) is similarly a useful tool for advertisers who appropriate the

letterbox format for similar effect and appeal to Bourdieu's enculturated "manifested preferences" (Kendrick, 2005, 63). For Bourdieu, the acquisition of certain tastes is inextricably bound with the classification of where one ranks in the social hierarchy, and ultimately to power and class.

BMW and Buick want nothing more than for their brands to appear as "professional" and "stylized" as possible, and the notion of suspended realism is the idealized goal of much advertising. Advertisers expect consumers to "buy in" to their constructed ad worlds, as will be discussed in more detail with regard to the textual analysis of both "Star" and "Tiger Trap." The spots have the added dimension of celebrity as Madonna and Tiger Woods star in the BMW Films and Buick spots respectively. The suspension of naturalism — the viewing of Madonna and Tiger Woods performing *for* consumers — becomes important in the reception of the narrative, but only after the denaturalization and colonization of a monitor's *mise-en-scene* is achieved via letterboxing.

Video gaming aesthetics

A range of options may account for advertisers' use of letterboxing with regard to online ads. First, MIVI's goal is the re-direction of the viewer's gaze. The ads analyzed here reside online and are therefore sought out *by the consumer* so MIVI is not a sufficient reason alone. Second, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and letterboxing's association with the "highbrow artistic merit" of quality films is significant. "Manifested preferences" cannot solely explain why advertisers willingly surrender so much vital and expensive visual real estate. Finally, consumers usually view these letterboxed ads on traditional 4:3 monitors via either television or computer monitors. Here is where online content providers stake their claim.

Content producers need to achieve MIVI and employ the panache of letterboxing to colonize monitor space and create a focal point. Lev Manovich (2001) suggests the need for creating a focal point within new media screen space. Manovich writes that "rather than showing a single image, a computer screen typically displays a number of coexisting windows. … No single window dominates the viewer's attention" (97). The multi-windowed, new media environments of modern computer graphical user interfaces need physically ruptured visual spaces before any one focal point can be privileged over any other. The democratization of multiple windows echoes the issues Fleischer *et al.* encountered with *The Boston Strangler* and therefore experimented with multi-image sequences to demarcate individual panels.

In a discussion of the aesthetics of computer window size, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2002) submit that a:

windowed interface does not attempt to unify the space around any one point of view. Instead, each text window defines its own verbal, each graphic window its own visual, point of view. Windows may change scale quickly and radically, expanding to fill the screen or shrinking to the size of an icon. … [The user] oscillates wildly between manipulating the windows and examining their contents … (33)

Both Manovich and Bolter and Grusin suggest that a windowed environment by design cannot unify any point of view. New media content producers colonize monitor space and blacking out certain areas and thus create a focal hub. By re-drawing the frame boundaries within a monitor's visual field, content producers focus a user's attention to that which has been colonized and segregated. Because a user may "oscillate wildly" from window to window, the

letterboxed window collapses and segregates what appears onscreen. Video game manufacturers have faced similar challenges and deployed colonizing widescreen aesthetics for other reasons.

Gaming, cut-scenes and letterboxing

If a player of EA Sports' *PGA Championship* video arcade game "hits" an extraordinary golf "shot," the game's aspect ratio physically ruptures from traditional Academy Ratio proportions (4:3) to widescreen dimensions, and more specifically to a letterboxed view. The full-screen, 4:3 visual field is squeezed vertically to focus the gamer's attention to a specific area within the gaming interface. The physical rupture of the colonized visual field re-directs the gamer's gaze, and "cinematic" flourishes accompany the colonization such as an aural heartbeat pounding and slow-motion graphics to further enhance the exceptional quality of the "shot." With this "cut-scene," EA Sports visually exclaims to the viewer that active participation is not warranted while the letterboxed content occurs. By deploying a letterboxed view, a role change for the gamer signals a shift from participatory to spectatorial.

Cut-scenes are narrative events often signified by a shift in composition of the visual space; an alteration of the frame's *mise-en-scene*. The widescreen aesthetics of letterboxing occurs when something extraordinary is taking place and viewers should observe. Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska (2002) note that the collapse to letterboxing at specific times during game play may cue players to stop participating/gaming and simply watch. King and Kryzwinska state "the move into gameplay from cut-scenes . . . [is] typically presented in a letterbox format to create a 'cinematic' effect. … the change in aspect ratio marks a movement from introductory exposition to the development of the specific narrative events to be depicted in the film" (17). These so-called "cinematics" are visual cues that cue players' reactions during game play. The colonization that occurs when the gaming interfaced becomes letterboxed signals to gamers to

stop playing and observe narrative as a cinematic experience. These cues are not always appreciated or even understood. These frame grabs from *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* convey the colonizing changes in interface from participatory gaming (left) to observational cutscene complete with subtitles (Illustration 5.1).

Illustration 5.1

In a review of EA Sports' *NHL 2002*, Dan James Kricke (6/25/02) notes his dislike for the letterboxing because of its disempowering potential for the gamer. Kricke writes:

> For instance, if you've got a breakaway, the game might switch to a letterbox screen, the announcers will fade out and the camera will lean in right behind your player. While this looks extremely cool, it is horribly distracting. Similarly, there is a big save[52] camera that replays a big save made in that same letterbox fashion. Again, while these options might be terrific if you are just watching a game, they are quite awful to actually play with. (http://www.gamepartisan.com/sony/reviews/index.php?view=38)

Letterboxing via cutscenes encourages observational spectatorship rather than participatory play. Computer monitors traditionally are used for working, not watching. The

---

[52] A "save" in hockey is a shot on goal that the goalie stops or "saves."

letterbox/widescreen aesthetic physically ruptures the workspace into a leisure space. The shift in

aspect ratio cues the viewer that a different experience is now taking place. Viewers recognize

the letterbox aesthetic as remediated film viewing and are cued via the aspect ratio shift to now

consume, rather than participate. I am not suggesting that consumers of cinematic cutscenes

have no choice with regard to active or passive consuming, but rather that new media producers

physically rupture monitor space to colonize and collapse viewable area to signal users a shift in

behavior is warranted.[53] By prompting viewers to consume via the letterboxing physical rupture,

advertisers achieve far more than MIVI or simply the colonization of monitor space; they attempt

to cue consumption.

Screen space in *Star* and *Tiger Trap*

The use of letterboxing is a physically rupturing technique, but also one that signifies a

shift to consumption. These elements are further problematized when viewed upon a computer

monitor. Woody Allen chose to letterbox his films for video release in recognition of the fact that

television monitor space must be reconfigured (physical rupture) to retain the composition and

visual style of his films. By letterboxing their ads, both BMW and Buick are striving to retain

their look regardless of monitor shape and size. Additionally, one must recognize that viewing

these ads on a computer monitor with competing windows further posits the necessity of

consumption and the desire to create a focal point with a physical rupture. Regardless of

---

[53] Again, I am not suggesting that by employing cut-scenes or simply by the use of letterboxing, that content producers have found a "magic bullet" to cue viewers to consume. Rather, such alteration of the visual field is significant in video games and the texts under questions also trade on this premise. Finally, I am not refuting Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" essay in which he posits that in the consumption of texts, "if no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no consumption. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (128). I am simply arguing that gamers and online consumers are cued via their previous consumptions of "cinematics." Here I am suggesting the role of intertextuality rather than the total lack of choice. For further reading, see Hall, Stuart 'Encoding/decoding'. In *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*
(Ed.): Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies,
1972-79, London: Hutchinson, ([1973] 1980): pp. 128-38

operating system, the ads appear as widescreen windows among the other windows and/or other applications on a computer desktop. When viewing online widescreen texts, the colonization of the vertical axis delimited by the letterbox format is immediate. The black bars denote not only the image field of the ad but also serve as spatial demarcation separating the ad window from others on the desktop (Illustration 5.2).
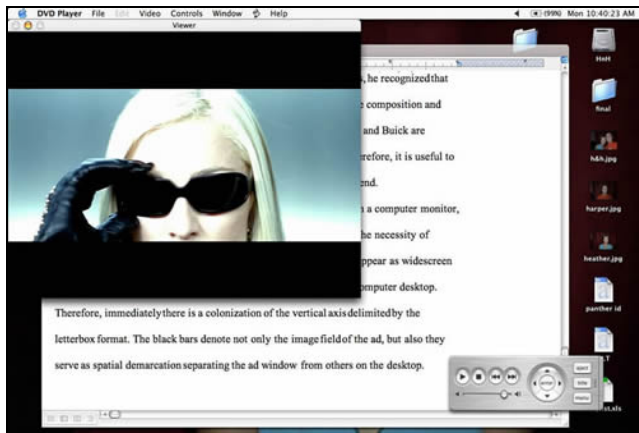

Illustration 5.2

Beyond the aesthetics of window size on a computer's desktop (an Apple Powerbook (16:9) for Illustration 5.2), one must consider notions of aesthetic framing and composition to differentiate widescreen aspect ratios from the 4:3 format. Letterboxed formats on traditional 4:3 monitors are physical ruptures designed to exploit and colonize space. As evidenced throughout this project, widescreen composition involves different framing strategies from that of the 4:3 ratio. Griffith's letterboxed mattes created focal points within the Academy Ratio frame and heighten generic significance by colonizing the protagonist's environment. Abel Gance and Richard Fleischer use multi-image panels in *Napoleon* and *The Boston Strangler* to avoid coverage and convey multiple points of simultaneous action. Charles Barr (1963) notes that directors using CinemaScope allow their compositions to "encourage participation" on the part

of the spectator. Like Greg Smith's (1999) argument about the "invariant frame," Marshall

Deutelbaum (2003) asserts that though the "photographed elements constantly change; the frame

is unchanging" in many anamorphic widescreen films (73). The choice of letterboxing for the

ads analyzed is a decision to colonize space and maximize cues for consumption via the

"cinematic" treatment of online content. A frame from BMW Films *Star* displays the strategy to

vertically collapse the native 4:3 monitor area to mimic cinematic proportions.

Illustration 5.3

The landscape, long shot spreads actors across the width of the frame and maximizes

frontality. Like Breck Coleman (John Wayne) in *The Big Trail,* Superstar (Madonna) is centered

in the frame, but the horizontal blocking of the composition does not privilege her celebrity.

Tiger Trap relies upon framing strategies reminiscent of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas*

Crown Affair. Both films carved the widescreen aspect ratio into smaller, modular pieces that

functioned as separate narrative panels. These panels could either function independently of one

another (*The Boston Strangler*) or redouble the main action by redundantly reproducing multiple

sizes and shapes of a few shots. Buick's ad focuses on Tiger Woods confronting unsuspecting

golfers and then challenging them to exchange golf shots with him. The closest shot to the target

wins a Buick SUV. While there are many appeals within the text to "manifested preferences"

with regard to consumption and notions of branding and celebrity, I am chiefly concerned with

the ad's visual style and its use of widescreen. Like BMW Films' *Star*, Buick's *Tiger Trap* relies

upon the landscape long shot to emphasize the horizontality of the framing.

 Illustration 5.4

Actors are arranged across the horizontal axis of the frame, and depth of field is

expressively de-emphasized. Frontality and cinematography within *Tiger Trap* is specifically

foregrounded as spectacle because the shoot was shot in a guerilla style with camera operators

"hidden" to catch the golfers' "true" reactions. Like Gance and Fleischer, the Buick spot efforts

to present multiple actions simultaneously via the use of multiscreening (Illustrations 5.5-5.6).

Illustration 5.5

Illustration 5.6

Both ads rely upon reflexivity as an identification strategy, but the Buick spot is more

self-reflexive for a variety of reasons.[54] Woods acknowledges the camera through direct address

(echoing Tashlin's Tom Ewell), and grants the spectator foreknowledge of the plan (to challenge

the "unsuspecting" golfers to a competition for a Buick). Therefore, unlike the more pure

scopophilic spectacle of *Star*, the Buick ad actually involves a certain level of narrative

assemblage on the part of the viewer. In terms of the video gaming aesthetic where the letterbox

discourages participation, the Buick ad encourages participation via both the narrative (Tiger's

address) and the visual style (multiscreening). The multiscreening further segregates *Tiger Trap*

---

[54] For a comprehensive discussion of self-reflexivity in media, see Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

from other monitor windows and bifurcates the colonized space. These new media producers recognize the lack of differentiation within a two-dimensional, windowed environment and use the physical ruptures of letterboxing and multiscreening to "trap" viewers within demarcated areas upon which to focus and consume.

Both ads reorient their spectators by deploying a letterbox aesthetic to colonize monitor space and create a barrier between the ad content and the other available software applications on the computer screen's desktop. These physical ruptures command control and demarcate desktop space in an attempt to harness the spectator's attention within an unfocused multi-windowed interface.

While the experimental nature of widescreen aesthetics in cinema is well established at this point, trials with widescreen aspect ratios in new media environments seem to be just beginning. Gamer Kricke finds the letterbox aesthetic discouraging of interactivity in game play, while King and Kryzwinska noted the importance of cutscenes in terms of cueing gamers when participation is warranted. There is no *physical* participation with either *Star* or *Tiger Trap* (aside from locating the URL and downloading the content), a physical rupture occurs via the shift in aspect ratio. This demarcating effect from other software and/or windows on the computer screen requires viewers to redirect their gaze, and in this way mimics the choices of Griffith, Gance and other widescreen filmmakers who experiment with physical ruptures. The colonization of monitor space embodies the binaries of work vs. leisure and productivity vs. consumption. The colonization of computer workspace by video game or online ad interfaces isolates the workspace portion of the monitor from the letterboxed. The consumption portion is physically ruptured to privilege the areas video game and ad producers want viewers to consume.

In this age of digital media convergence, online letterboxed media content that is designed for consumption on a computer monitor's desktop is an intriguing and significant concept. As our television screens slowly become our computer screens and vice versa, notions of screen space and how media outlets compete for our attention is both more salient and aesthetically experimental. The textual analyses of both *Star* and *Tiger Trap* demonstrate that letterboxed ad content means more than simply MIVI. By colonizing monitor space, new media producers physically rupture viewing areas to provide focal points in an unfocused media-rich environment.

Bazin prophesied that the "fin du montage" in widescreen films would create a new kind of cinematic experience — one where the filmmakers did not guide the spectator's gaze, but rather viewers were liberated and free to roam about the wide visual field. New media content authors mimic widescreen aesthetic choices for quite opposite reasons. Filmmakers and video distributors have long understood the importance of retaining control of the visual frame regardless of display format. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that advertising and video games have adopted such strategies to attempt to guide consumers' attention. More significant but subsequently more nebulous is the binary of active vs. passive consumption and the use of letterboxing to encourage one state over the other. When online content producers present a colonized visual field, they are attempting to engage consumers' visual attention. Video gamers actively participate during the course of game play, but cut-scenes cue gamers with physical ruptures of screen space to drop their controllers (literally surrendering control) and consume the "cinematics." Advertisers have a mode of production (colonizing physical rupture) by which they may cue viewers *when* to consume by controlling the visual fields we gaze upon. Content producers understand that letterboxed visuals mean *something* different than traditional 4:3

ratios, and analyzing these examples provide cursory steps in evaluating how those meanings are visually communicated.

Pixar, digital filmmaking and the end of widescreen

New media content producers use cinematic tropes to endow their texts with filmic significance and activate notions of highbrow experiences. A hallmark of online and digital textual creations is the tremendous aesthetic freedom and manipulability of *mise-en-scene*. This final section addresses a few significant experiments with physical and stylistic ruptures of digital filmmaking in contrast to traditional analog production. Pixar's animated, digitextual creations provide an excellent case study for the possibilities of digital tools and how they affect and influence widescreen aesthetic choices.

In a discussion of analog vs. digital filmmaking traditions, Stephen Prince (2004) outlines several key factors that delineate these separate schools. First, analog cinema is a "photo-mechanical" medium that creates "its images arising from chemistry, darkroom and processing lab(s)" that are then "fixed in analog form on a celluloid surface" and exhibited. (25) Katherine Sarafian (2003), a producer at Pixar Animation Studios, notes that the artist's toolbox has undergone a distinctive change with the advent of digital filmmaking choices, and therefore the workflow progression must be factored into the production equation as well. Digital filmmakers, and animators in particular, do not use the same workflow production processes as did the analog cinema producers for the majority of the 20th century. Traditional analog filmmakers rely upon a division of labor and hierarchy of processes. Obviously, there is the progression from pre-production throughout production and then finally to post-production and distribution. Within this workflow model, a variety of various artists and laborers are needed to perform various tasks at various times. Producers, directors and screenwriters must communicate a range of visions for

aesthetic and economic concerns before a production shoot can begin, not to mention the coordination of talent that must be secured. When the production process actually begins, artisans from lighting technicians to set dressers, cinematographers and the like must be employed and managed to produce usable footage. Then the editor and producer/director must oversee the post-production elements that may vary from special effects work to editing to digital compositing. As detailed in early chapters, widescreen both physically and stylistically ruptures this workflow model in a traditional analog production. The all-digital creations of Pixar provide (even necessitate) filmmakers to be experimental with previous analog paradigms.

Pixar's artists produce digital texts without human actors (except voice-overs) and that represent a paradigmatic shift from traditional filmmaking techniques. There is no celluloid, camera, lighting or soundstage. The digital toolbox of Pixar artists is comprised of hard drives, keyboards, mice, stylus pens, digital shot recorders, playback monitors and earphones, in addition to various proprietary software packages such as Renderman.

In a discussion of cinema within the context of digital technologies, Lev Manovich (2001) writes "as traditional film technology is universally being replaced with digital technology, the logic of the filmmaking process is being redefined" (300). Specifically with regard to workflow, Manovich argues "in traditional filmmaking, editing and special effects were strictly separate activities" (301). Digital cinema and animation in particular recontextualizes the notion of production and workflow and thus leads to new physical and stylistic norms. As Manovich asserts, "production just becomes the first stage of post-production" when digitextual workflows are incorporated. (303)

These differences in workflow lead to differences in production possibilities. This project focuses upon aesthetic ruptures and resulting norms. The "Norms" chapter presents several

filmmakers facing physical and stylistic challenges presented by the introduction of widescreen

processes (physical norm). For example, when Nicholas Ray and cinematographer Joe

MacDonald compose a scene for *Bigger than Life*, they must undertake a variety of tasks. Ray

and MacDonald must first consult upon the composition of the shots that will then dictate

lighting, set dressing, camera movement, etc. Then both Ray and MacDonald must actually shoot

the scene all the while managing actors, technicians etc., until the scene has been satisfactorily

captured on film. The two must then oversee the development of rushes, examine them and if no

pick-ups are necessary, the film will then be processed at a lab and be sent back to the

filmmakers for screening. This final process represents the last time a studio director like Ray

would actually "touch" the film before prints were made and distributed for exhibition. Once in

the realm of exhibition (never mind the futuristic possibilities of home video, TV, etc.), Ray and

MacDonald have little control over the integrity of their creation. The very process of

analog/traditional filmmaking splinters with multiple variables introduced throughout the process

that may impact the final cut. Pixar Animation Studios follows a very different production

workflow model.

Pixar's digitally animated films represent new filmmaking workflows with regard to

production schedules, resources, divisions of labor, etc. The question now is how are widescreen

processes affected with regard to such revolutionary production strategies? Pixar's video release

of *A Bug's Life* (1998) provides an excellent case study.

The epigraph of this chapter speaks to the conceptual shift in digital filmmaking that

Pixar's texts represent. Sarafian observes that everything must be created in Pixar's digital

worlds. The implications for widescreen within such a shift are revealing. Pixar's productions

begin as digital blanks, and following ideas of James Wong Howe, Richard Fleischer and Greg

Smith, the "invariant" shape of the screen is flexible and alterable. *A Bug's Life* is Disney's

(Pixar's distributor from 1998 until 2005) first animated feature release on DVD, and the

production staff at Pixar made a significant choice with regard to aspect ratio. Pixar's staff chose

to "reframe" *A Bug's Life* for home video release in full frame (1.33:1) by "adapting" the OAR

(2.35:1). The reframing process is uncommon in film history, and it shares a lineage to the pan-

and-scan debacles discussed in the previous section.

In the early days of home video (not to mention early television broadcasts of widescreen

texts), VHS-formatted releases of films were panned and scanned to accommodate the width of

the filmic text to the narrow television frame. This process involves a flying spot scanner that

projects a target onto the filmic image (a "spot"), and pans and scans accordingly as that spot

moves. As noted by John Belton, the pan and scan process essentially is a recomposing of filmic

text, because "extraneous" footage would be scanned over or often cropped out completely.

Pixar's reframing project presents one alternative to such destructive — and what Kendrick's

home theater enthusiasts call "subversive" — video transfer processes. (2005, 61)

Realizing that their widescreen compositions would suffer on "fool" frame releases,

Pixar's production team decided to "reframe" the film using four processes: restaging, frame

height adjustments, cropping and scanning. These processes warrant a bit of explanation, but the

concept is clear: with digital filmmaking tools, Pixar's artists control the recomposition of their

product in the video transfer process and control any compositional changes. The process of

video transfer usually flows from film to video. The digital process includes yet another step

from digital to film to video. For Pixar, the loss of quality is unnecessary because the process can

simply be digital to digital with the DVD format. Therefore, Pixar produced two versions of *A*

Bug's Life for home video release; each version is controlled and created by Pixar's production team and therefore retains the original integrity of composition, framing, etc.

Bill Kinder, editorial supervisor of *A Bug's Life*, says "the reframing project is Pixar's way of solving the filmmaker's riddle 'how do you fit a rectangular peg in a square hole'" (*A Bug's Life* DVD, 1998)? In essence, *A Bug's Life* dual format release represents a full circle return to the "Invention" films of 1930.[55] Textual examples from the different versions of *A Bug's Life* illuminate the differences possible in dual formats when production is controlled by the filmmakers and not a third party.

The four reframing processes in *A Bug's Life* provide answers to the anecdotal query that begins this chapter. If one examines films produced in dual formats (as in the "Invention" chapter), the aesthetic disparities between the two prove are revelatory with regard to widescreen poetics, framing strategies, etc. Pixar's initial "reframing" process is to restage. In restaging, characters and their accouterment are moved closer together in the frame. This stage is exemplary of the infinite possibilities of digital filmmaking and animation in particular. Pixar's filmmakers have infinite control and flexibility within the frame. While a widescreen composition may lend itself to more airy blockings and negative space, full frame compositions necessitate more intimate compositions. As demonstrated in the examples from *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*, the disparity of blocking within the frame is apparent between the formats.

Upon initial inspection, the full frame version of *A Bug's Life* seems to simply have been "zoomed" in. However, a careful analysis of perspectival balance yields not so subtle differences

---

[55] Certain "traditional" filmmakers like Gus Van Sant are now experimenting with shooting films in two formats given digital filmmaking's ease of aspect ratio shifts. Van Sant's films *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005) were all shot full frame (open matte), but the DVD releases feature matted widescreen versions as well.

in restaging. Note the obvious curvature of the leaf and how it provides redoubling and masking to create a focal point within the wide frame. The masked composition above the leaf is essentially all that remains in the full frame version (Illustration 5.7). This two-tiered compositional strategy of restaging represents Pixar's digitally updated version of the analog problem faced by *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*. Rather than re-shoot entire films in multiple formats (and with multiple actors in the case of *The Big Trail*) Pixar's filmmakers can simply frame for both formats simultaneously.

Illustration 5.7

Arthur Edeson's Grandeur compositions in *The Big Trail* tend to be perpendicular during conversations and dialogue scenes, while Lucien Androit's Academy version has the camera at slightly oblique angles to foreground the depth of field or simply to provide a slightly more stylized composition. The Pixar filmmakers are following similar aesthetic edicts here with their restaging shots originally composed for widescreen. Also, as with Edeson on *The Big Trail* and Robert Planck on *The Bat Whispers*, the widescreen (theatrical) version takes precedence over the full frame version and therefore dictates initial *mise-en-scene* decisions.

Illustration 5.8

The above frame capture not only evidences the reframing process and restaging, but are also exemplary of Pixar's second process of reframing for the Academy Ratio release — frame height (Illustration 5.8). The process of frame height is the most significant example of what this project aims to examine: the aesthetic differences between widescreen and Academy Ratio films. The process of frame height keeps the original 2.35:1 frame intact but *adds new artwork to the top and bottom of the frame to fill vacant areas*. Thus, the wide frame necessitates the elongation of the frame and therefore more lateral artwork and shorter frame heights. Pixar artists then use the wide frame as a template, and in concert with restaging, they also verticalize the frame to fill the now taller composition area.

Certainly this example echoes Edeson and Stull's comments with regard to vertical sets and lighting trends associated with Academy Ratio films. William Stull's (1930) comments (from Chapter 2) equally apply to both the case studies of 1930 and Pixar's frame height adjustments for *A Bug's Life*. Stull observes:

> the present disproportionately high sets necessitated by the more nearly square picture have made such things as backlighting increasingly difficult. … Similarly, the art directors are confronted with grave problems in the design and artistic ornamentation of the higher sets. … In Grandeur, all of these problems are reduced. … The

cinematographer's task is lightened inasmuch as the sets do not have to be made nearly

so high, allowing the back-lightings to strike at more effective and natural angles. (43)

Illustration 5.9

Note the additional sand striations that extend downward into the foreground and the

upper tree and sky sections that were added for the full frame release (Illustration 5.9). Certainly

the argument can be waged that while a cameraman may have greater *lateral* scope within the

wide frame, he certainly lacks *vertical* scope. This example embodies the essential question

posed by this project: what do widescreen content producers lose or gain by elongating the

horizontal axis of the frame at the expense of vertical area? The widescreen composition at the

left on Illustration 5.9 can only be said to be more cinematic than the full frame composition

because of its shape. The Academy Ratio composition on the right actually contains more visual

information (though framed more closely) because of its additional frame height.

The final two processes of Pixar's reframing methods are the crop and the scan. The crop

occurs much as a still image is re-composed in either a darkroom or in digital editing software.

The image is cropped when the left, right or both edges of the frame are truncated with no

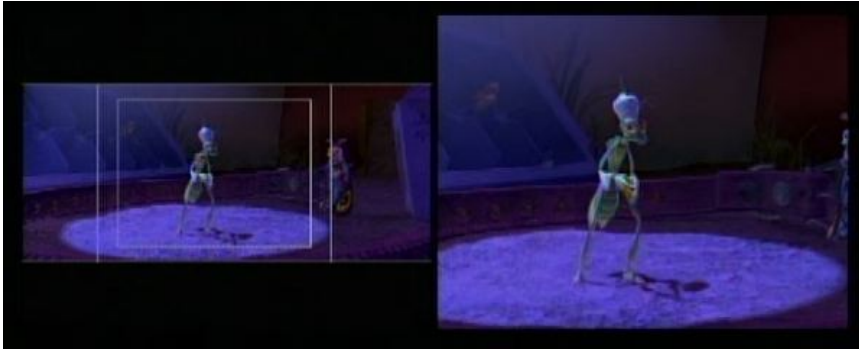camera movement. A scan accomplishes the same feat but does so with a lateral movement (Illustration 5.10).

Illustration 5.10

The final two processes are similar to the recompositions of a traditional pan and scan process, but no third party does the panning and scanning. Pixar's authors retain control the image's integrity.

The Pixar reframing process is unique and its importance to this project is significant because it represents the realization of a full circle in widescreen experimentation. Images that are composed laterally as opposed to vertically exhibit distinct textual, compositional and aesthetic strategies. This project has explored a number of traditional analog filmmaking decisions and strategies to incorporate widescreen aesthetics into traditional Academy Ratio tropes, but Pixar reduces the differences to a set of "either-or" processes. Compositions that are composed for the wide screen must undergo: 1) a restaging of graphical elements 2) an adjustment in frame height to compensate for the geometric changes in proportions or 3) portions of the image must simply be truncated altogether. Differences in widescreen and Academy Ratio proportions can be summarized: elements that are strung out along the wider staging area in a widescreen format must be compressed for the full frame; sets and lighting must be manipulated

to compensate for the additional vertical frame space required in the full frame; and when all else fails, portions of the widescreen image must simply be sacrificed and lopped off to accommodate the more narrow but more vertical full frame.

The aesthetic flexibility of digital media represents a culmination of the discussions throughout this project. New media aesthetics can be likened to an artistic palette of choices. The palette metaphor is pervasive in many graphics programs because of its adaptability. Once users know and understand the concept of the metaphorical choice menu (the pallete), then the pallete's refunctionalization for many programs is simplified. The flexibility of the Pixar texts recognizes that with a few adjustments, new media texts can be both full screen and widescreen simultaneously. Whereas Edeson and Planck faced decisions of staging, lighting, etc., and how compositions would ultimately be affected, digital filmmaking tools erase the dilemma of choice: all options are infinitely flexible. Digital texts do not face the choice of either widescreen or full screen, but must negotiate both simultaneously. Therefore, as the Pixar examples display, *mise-en-scene* issues are left open for maximum flexibility. Whereas Preminger or Ray might string a group of actors or actions across the width of the CinemaScope frame to "justify" the new format's width, new media texts can both foreground the width of the 2.35:1 theatrical aspect ratio release, but restage, recompose and alter frame height to better suit the Academy Ratio, home video version.

What do such revelations mean for the queries posed throughout this project and particularly with regard to the new media and digitexts discussed in this chapter? New media and digitexts do have certain hallmarks. First, new media content producers ape the cinematics of traditional filmmaking to associate their texts with higher brow consumables. Through the process of colonization, new media content producers provide focal points within a computer

mediated interface, and these physical ruptures of screen space from full frame to widescreen may cue viewers when to consume and when to participate. The cinematic letterboxing of texts where there is "no imperative" speaks to the power and clout of the wide frame and its associated formal aesthetic properties. Other cinematic techniques associated with widescreen filmmaking — lateral compositions and multiple-image screens like those of *Star* and *Tiger Trap* — further endow the new media texts with filmic attributes, thus fulfilling the new media producers' goal of referencing cinematic film texts.

Pixar's example is at once fascinating and flummoxing. Pixar's four-phase process of reframing (particularly the processes of restaging and frame height) seems to be a touchstone for this project that signals a progression of ultimate flexibility for the "inflexible" frame. The final two processes of crop and scan, however, demonstrate that widescreen aesthetics can always be sacrificed to a full frame physical norm of televisions and computer monitors.[56] The experimental physical ruptures of the letterboxed online media content seem fairly analogous to those ruptures of Griffith, Gance or Fleischer in their attempts to reshape the Academy Ratio format. Pixar's reframing processes for home video formats physically ruptures the original cinematic text. The role of authorship is significant because, in an effort to retain the integrity of the original text and utilize the infinite flexibility of new media textual palettes, Pixar's authors control the physical and stylistic rupturing processes of restage, frame height, crop and scan.

---

[56] This "norm" is slowly changing as HDTV and widescreen aspect ratio computer monitors continue to be ushered in. Apple Computer even goes so far as to suggest that its Cinema Display monitors offer verisimilar possibilities that are not feasible with traditional 4:3 monitors. Apple's online store claims "the widescreen Apple Cinema Display line offers a natural format for arranging documents the way your brain processes them — longer wide than high. So you can easily fit palettes, timelines, extra windows and more right in your viewing area" (http://store.apple.com/1-800-MY-APPLE/WebObjects/AppleStore.woa/72203/wo/kD5CRLLdnjaw29JaIel1c5T4Hiz/0.SLID?nclm=Apple Displays&mco=91A92F05).

With the non-imperative uses of letterboxing and Pixar's digitexts, widescreen aesthetics have come full circle. Griffith, Keaton and Gance use physical and stylistic rupturing formal elements to enact widescreen aesthetics when there is "no such imperative." The "experimental" films of 1930 clearly display aesthetic and stylistic differences between early widescreen and Academy Ratio films, while 'Scope filmmakers of the 1950s struggle with various physically and stylistically rupturing strategies to adapt to new physical norms. In some ways, the physical ruptures of the multi-image compositions of *The Boston Strangler* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* and others have given way to colonization of new media monitors and screens. As can be surmised from the entirety of this project, the concept of rupture, as its name implies, is an evolving element of analysis. This is in keeping with film style itself. While deep focus cinematography and synchronous sound recording disrupted filmmaking style for a time (not to mention color processes, telephoto lenses and a myriad of other technological and stylistic "progressions"), adjustments were soon made in both production strategies and film style. In this way, the physical and stylistic ruptures of widescreen film style and their evidentiary lineage of the new media digitexts are fleeting. They serve as norms for a time until some new physical, stylistic or technological rupture takes their place and demands a recounting of what has transpired.

Conclusion

As a mass-market product, DVD might move away from widescreen formats toward which most viewers are assumed to be hostile. … Where the balance of all these new developments might lie in the near future remains open to question, and with it the precise implications for the use of, and composition within, wider formats in the cinema.

— Geoff King (2002, 23-24)

The goal at the outset of this project was two-fold: to expand the widescreen literature in useful ways and to address and enumerate specific, aesthetic differences between widescreen and Academy Ratio texts. As with any longitudinal and historical project, some answers have emerged while many more questions have been raised. My goal was not to have all the answers but rather to discern what questions should be asked about widescreen.

By focusing upon the intersection of aesthetics, auteur and genre, this project broadens the expanse and penetration of widescreen literature beyond lens characteristics, film gauge issues, exhibition strategies and other foci that sometimes underanalyze stylistic innovation. Issues of technological development are useful, but with widescreen in particular, scholars at times overlook the screen image in pursuit of industrial and economic causes. By focusing this project squarely upon aesthetic attributes of close ups, landscapes, camera movement and angles enacted within the case studies throughout widescreen's various histories, this project provides specific instances of how exactly widescreen differentiates from Academy Ratio strategies. Broadly, the initial users of widescreen in 1930 avoided the close-up as too extreme of a departure. The avoidance of close-ups in early widescreen films, as Edeson, Stull and MacCullough foretold, is most likely due to the fact that the cinematographers believed that medium-long shots were sufficient for the expanded screen. In the early CinemaScope period,

only Nicholas Ray uses the close-up with any regularity of the directors examined, and in *Bigger than Life*'s case, the close-up is generically motivated to exacerbate the pains of addiction and represents an auteurist signature.

Landscape shots are what widescreen really does best. Certainly, the various formats are formatted to accommodate lateral compositions and movement, but this project shows that lower camera height is responsible for changes in *mise-en-scene*, blocking and camera movement. Certainly, directors of both the 1930 films and the early CinemaScope era compose shots to accentuate the horizontality of the new format. However, the influence of a lower camera within this shooting strategy cannot be overestimated. Think of the opening sequence of *The Big Trail*. Edeson's composition is more lateral to fill the width of the Grandeur frame, but a lower camera reduces camera movement because most *mise-en-scene* elements have been lowered and elongated to accommodate a wider horizontal field of vision. The lower camera encourages landscape shots not just for master shots or moments of visual spectacle, but because the horizon of the camera has been effectively lowered by pre-production construction of sets and complementary lighting schemes. The infrequency of extra-ordinary camera angles in both the films of 1930 and the early CinemaScope era is also indebted to the stylistic rupture of lowered camera height. If cameras are lower, and the *mise-en-scene* elements have been considered in pre-production to accommodate a more lateral compositional strategy, then oblique angles that were *de rigueur* in the deep-focus heyday of the 1940s are obviously not a choice in the early widescreen stylistic palette. When one thinks of widescreen films before the New Hollywood, the stylistic ruptures that come to mind do not include Dutch or canted angles. For this reason, a film like Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) is the progenitor of what Bordwell calls a "stylish style" in the New Hollywood era. *Touch of Evil* is exceptional in its stylistic bravura, and

therefore is an anomaly. Most early widescreen directors keep the camera low and move laterally.

In the early years under examination, camera movement generally is minimal and with certain directors like Ray and Tashlin, the camera virtually is planted for most scenes. Preminger and Sirk come from a more mobile and stylistically brash tradition even before widescreen, so it not a surprise that they continue such trends. Sirk, however, pushes the stylistic envelope as far as any director considered throughout this project. The stylistic grace of Sirk's opening sequence would not look out of place (excepting the black and white film stock) in any big budget action thriller of the modern era. Again, a lower camera is the underreported element in the widescreen literature with regard to limited camera movement in early widescreen films. The lower camera makes virtually any camera movement vertical, and early widescreen filmmakers wanted to emphasize the horizontality of the format.

Additionally, by broadening the scope of widescreen aesthetics to be inclusive of issues of genre and authorship this project fills vacancies in previously neglected aspects of widescreen literature. Further, by focusing and fracturing the discussion of widescreen aesthetics upon ruptures of both the physical frame and the formal elements of style, this project facilitates not only the discussion of widescreen aesthetics but provides a rubric for engaging aesthetic shifts in mediated texts. The final chapter looks at recent developments in widescreen aesthetics and how such formal elements are affected by the use of digital technologies. In digital forms, widescreen formats can have intrinsic meanings (i.e., they "look" like cinema) as evidenced by video game cinematics or "Star" and "Tiger Trap. Alternately, widescreen formal properties that are digitally based have become malleable; aspect ratios can be recomposed, restaged, etc., to lessen the effects of home video transfer processes on original theatrical ratios.

The concept of rupture shifts throughout this project as the demands upon it shift. Early on with the silent era of Griffith, Keaton and Gance, ruptures are established as either physical or stylistic. This simplified analytical structure provides ample room for growth and expansion in terms of analysis and nomenclature. Whereas scholars like Bazin and Barr understandably struggle with such difficult attributes of "objective recording of the phenomenal world" and a "gradation of emphasis" in widescreen's infancy, the concept of rupture and its divisions add specificity to the lexicon of textual analysis. Ruptures locate specific breaks with previous traditions of aesthetic composition, angle or movement. The physical rupture is the manifestation of the break; it precisely pinpoints a fracture from the previous model of representation. For example, Griffith and Bitzer film the vast majority of *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm* in the standard format of the Academy Ratio. For certain instances of momentary and phenomenological heightening that announce their authorial voice, the filmmakers break with the previous aesthetic forms to rupture physically the "invariant frame." By breaking with the previous traditions, both melodramatic and auteurist, the filmmakers progress the aesthetic possibilities of framing action. The syntagmatic, physical ruptures locate a lack of "scope" in Academy Ratio proportions. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in *Napoleon* and Gance's Polyvision *coup de grace*.

Gance realizes that by tripling the width of his composition that new aesthetic strategies were possible. Gance's three disparate and striking set-ups fully express the impact of the Polyvision format. Within these various mutations, Gance alternately composes across the width of the rectilinear frame, or divides the format into interdependent triads. Gance establishes new possibilities for the proportions of the visual field of action in addition to supplementing generic tropes. At certain points in film history, physical and stylistic ruptures predicate the emergence

of new physical and stylistic norms. The physical and stylistic ruptures embodied by Griffith and Gance or Edeson and Planck are physically normalized in the 1950s with the "debut" of various widescreen processes.

This project differs significantly from that of scholars such as Salt (1985) and Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) who argue that changes in filmmaking style often result from shifts introduced by (technologically-based) special interest firms.[57] This project does not seek to dispute that argument but to expand it to include a more fully developed vision that includes considerations of authorship, genre and aesthetics. The case studies of *Broken Blossoms*, *The Bat Whispers* and *The Boston Strangler* suggest shifts in widescreen filmmaking styles with little influence from special interest firms. Physical and stylistic ruptures cane be seen in widescreen aesthetics as attacks on the "invariant frame." Griffith, Gance and Fleischer elongate the visual field to provide a geometric tapestry to segment and fracture for generic ends. From Griffith to Gance and Edeson to Fleischer *et al.*, the filmmakers' goal is not one solely of technological implementation but usually one of generic heightening. This ultimate revelation is salient in a variety of ways in the history of widescreen poetics.

First, Griffith, Keaton and Gance deploy widescreen aesthetics where no technological shift or transgression dictates such a change. The deployment of such aesthetics should be viewed as auteurist and/or generically motivated. By pronouncing the Academy Ratio format as constraining and subsequently rupturing the "inflexible frame" in a variety of ways, these filmmakers anticipate the physical and stylistic norms of widescreen aesthetic strategies.

Second, Arthur Edeson, William Stull and Campbell MacCullough pronounce a variety of shifts implicit early in widescreen filmmaking's first debut. These early widescreen pioneers

---

[57] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson also regard product differentiation as being a key for stylistic and technological change in American film history.

recognize that filmmakers and production designers must account for issues such as set height and contingent lighting designs. The case studies bear out further stylistic ruptures such as lower camera heights that influence cutting strategies and camera movement. In this light, the widescreen films of 1930 anticipate the coming of the Scope era filmmaking shifts of the 1950s. In both instances, filmmakers forge new stylistic norms to accommodate the new physical norms of elongated frame width and narrowing frame height. For example, lower camera height dictates fewer cuts thereby rupturing editing paradigms in the process.

Third, the colonization of the "invariant" frame applies to filmmakers ranging from Gance and Fleischer to Oliver Stone and online content producers in texts like *Star* and *Tiger Trap* and video game producers. The physical rupturing of the "inflexible" frame recalls Fleischer's dictum that multi-image technique should be used sparingly. "You don't take a frame and match the picture to the frame," observes Fleischer. "You match the frame to the picture. Sometimes the painting is small and that's all the frame has to be" (Fleischer *et al.,* 1969, 204-205). Griffith understood this in the silent era and elongated the frame to show Lucy's desperate isolation in *Broken Blossoms*. Fleischer fractures Albert de Salvo's visual field to project his fragmented psyche, and filmmakers often colonize and segregate areas of the visual field. Sometimes, as with Griffith and Gance, this colonization is a spectacularizing of the protagonist's world to heighten the generic narrative punch. In new media arenas from online content to video games, advertisers and other content producers segment the Academy frame to guide attention in a workspace (computer monitor) that has no logical focal point or to remediate and appropriate previous traditions of representation.

While this project seeks to broaden the literature of widescreen poetics, there are numerous directions that inquiries into the aesthetics of widescreen may progress that are beyond

its purview and scope herein. For example, the alliance between digital technologies and widescreen receives too little attention. Consumer-based digital cameras all feature a "letterboxed" framing device that allows for even amateur filmmakers to shoot "cinematic" aspect ratios. When undergraduate production students ask me to view their projects, the vast majority of them are letterboxed simply for the sake of invoking the "cinematic" clout attendant to such dimensions. While this is certainly a quest for MIVI and to colonize the frame, the notion of high-brow appeal suggests an avenue for further research. One of the highlights of this project is the use of widescreen, cinematic aesthetics such as letterboxing to endow texts with the "look" of cinema and that "look" equals widescreen. Further research is warranted to theorize what such stylistic strategies are hoping to accomplish.

Second, more analysis is needed for the pre-widescreen (pre-1952) era with regard to aesthetics. Between 1929 and 1930, some 11 features (not to mention 2 shorts and newsreel footage) were shot on negatives larger than the Academy Ratio. (Mitchell, 1987) These films represent further inquires into widescreen aesthetics, questions of authorship and different genres beyond those addressed in *The Big Trail* and *The Bat Whispers*. These early texts should be considered the "holy grail" in terms of widescreen poetics because they were produced simply to exploit the formal possibilities of the elongated frame. Such texts should allow scholars to become even more prescriptive about what exactly constitutes the aesthetic ruptures of the widescreen framing strategies.

Third, there is much room for expansion in the areas of widescreen analysis with regard to genre and authorship. Certainly auteurs such as Preminger, Ray, Tashlin and Sirk are important widescreen auteurs, but they represent the elite of Hollywood filmmaking traditions. Many *metteurs en scene* within the studio system struggled to adapt to the changes in aesthetics

as much (if not more) as the auteurs chronicled. Such directors would likely not have the freedom to experiment as did the likes of Preminger *et al.* Further research into such areas should expand aesthetic analysis with regard to widescreen and authorship.

Fourth, the goal of this project was to label widescreen aesthetics as procedural attributes; that is, what do widescreen films do uniquely and consistenly, and how should these attributes be interrogated? Not surprisingly, this goal was unattainable yet yielded useful and significant progressions of research. However, while widescreen aesthetics cannot be said to be prescriptive, the case studies of this project describe the aesthetic strategies of certain widescreen texts, but perhaps the most significant point brought here is that widescreen is *not* prescriptive. While widescreen does fulfill some of the promises offered by both scholars and filmmakers alike, this project shows that widescreen's lineage is richer and more diverse than previously thought. Widescreen is not all long takes, pumped up ASLs, "fin du montage" or many of the other long-standing prescriptions with regard to its aesthetics. Widescreen poetics are diverse and nebulous, and therefore the binaries of physical and stylistic, rupture and norm are useful. The aesthetics of widescreen texts do exhibit *some* normative trends — lower camera height, medium two-shots instead of close-ups, lateral camera movement and elongated lighting schemes for lower overall sets — but are more often moving targets that resist prescriptive declarations. Historical aesthetic trends should be viewed more often in light of pre-production ruptures. The shifts in production strategies (lower set heights and lower, horizontal lighting schemes) result in lower camera heights and further stylistic ruptures of *mise-en-scene*.

An interesting line of inquiry that fell outside the purview of this project is the compositional strategy of centering. Scholars and industry practitioners alike have noted that since the advent of home video, filmmakers most often face the unfortunate aesthetic pitfall of

"shooting for the box" or filming widescreen texts with the knowledge that they will be panned and scanned for television. Camera and video monitors are outfitted with "safe action areas" so that widescreen aspect ratios can be composed with "airy" strategies that centralize figures onscreen while leaving negative space to fill the wider aspect ratios. An interesting line of thought with regard to centering and the early widescreen filmmakers would build on William Paul's analysis of theater architecture. The early widescreen filmmakers did not have to "shoot for the box" but rather had to fill the physically ruptured exhibition halls that had been retrofitted with enormous wider movie screens. An obvious strategy for accommodating new widescreen moviegoers would be to center most action because a) that would be the most visible part of the screen for all patrons given the balconies and new, lateral seating architecture and b) patrons had been accustomed to viewing a centralized, Academy Ratio screen for some 50 years of cinematic history. With regard to this last point and pre-1952 theater architecture, centralized compositions were the only compositions patrons had ever experienced.

Finally, widescreen poetics date back to the silent era and extend forward into the frontiers of digitexts. Such aesthetic shifts span the gamut of technological impetuses, auteuristic imprints and generic needs. Widescreen texts cannot be limited to one historical era and/or to attendant prescriptive "norms" of what widescreen films look like. Such goals pursue the moving targets of aesthetic shifts and technological transitions. The new frontier of widescreen possibilities lies not only in digitexts such as the ones discussed within this project but in the farthest reaches of transtextuality. Video games, online digital films and other "cinematic" texts represent new potentialities for widescreen inquiries. It is growing more difficult to discern where cutscenes originate from; does *Doom* the film ape *Doom* the video game, or is it drawing on previous game-based films for its aesthetic strategies? Does *The Matrix*'s many transtextual

manifestations — video games, comic books, graphic novels, traditional and/or online films — strive for the cinematic caché associated with widescreen, or are the producers simply defining an easily adaptable and transferable stylistic look?

These queries are just a sampling of possible new directions for widescreen scholarship. Certainly home video markets have upped the ante for widescreen poetics. Most DVDs now feature widescreen and full screen versions of films, and more films from studio libraries are being released in their original theatrical aspect ratio. Conversely, many OAR-formatted DVDs feature MAR "making of" supplements. Films being released exclusively in OAR formats (presumably to appease Kendrick's home theater enthusiasts) "violate" and "subvert" their own texts with MAR supplements from the film. In this light, 2006 is a wonderful time to be analyzing widescreen aesthetics that span a variety of mediated texts. Widescreen aesthetic strategies permeate virtually every mediated form of visual entertainment from widescreen televisions and computer monitors; to portable widescreen DVD players and widescreen home theater projectors; to personal digital assistants (PDA) and personal video game devices such as Sony's PlayStation Portable (PSP).

The aesthetic shifts evident in these horizontally situated media devices attest to the cinematic allure of widescreen dimensions. Further research is needed to explore how these new media(ted) widescreen outlets affect consumers and content producers alike. It is my opinion that

the most valuable line of research to pursue investigates the very dimensions of the film frame. The shift to CinemaScope in 1953 is well documented as a multivocal, industrial decision. The case studies herein suggest that factors beyond industrial and product differentiation were at play long before the switch. All of the case studies featured — beginning with the silent era through the early talkies, from the Scope era to the ruptured multi-image films of 1968, and finally to the digitexts of the new media era — suggest a resistance to or limitations within the Academy Ratio proportions. Films in the traditional photo-mechanical era of cinema's first century often had to accommodate their dimensions based upon exhibition issues with projectionists, placement and size of optical soundtrack on the negative (early sound films such as Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) were shot with a 1.19:1 aspect ratio) or other manipulations of the frame size and shape. Filmmakers often adapted their visual strategies based upon technological or other such imperatives that were thrust upon them. Such multivalent issues within and on the periphery of filmmaking history create new directions of research for scholars.

With this project, I have resisted attempts to globally pronounce what aesthetics and widescreen "mean" (or even what such statements *could* mean), because for every rule there are immediate exceptions. Such analysis and pronouncements fire at moving targets, and if there is any "definite" with film style, it is constant change and adaptation. In this way, this project benefits from its narrow scope. By focusing on a few films and examining the visual strategies with regard to widescreen and aesthetics, very narrow arguments emerge.

Works Cited

A Bug's Life Collector's Edition DVD Special Features, Dir. John Lasseter, Walt Disney
        Home Video, 1998.

Andrew, Geoff. The films of Nicholas Ray. London: British Film Institute, 2004.

Balio, Tino. (Ed.) Hollywood in the Age of Television. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

Barr, Charles. "CinemaScope: Before and After," Film Quarterly 16, no. 4 (Summer
1963).

Bazin, André. "Will CinemaScope Save the Cinema?" Esprit, 12, no. 10-11 (October-
        November 1953); reprinted in Velvet Light Trap, no.21 (Summer 1985), 9-14.

Bazin, André. "Fin du Montage." Cahiers du Cinema. no. 31(January 1954); reprinted in
        Velvet Light Trap, no.21 (Summer 1985), 14-15.

Bazin, André. "Beauty of a Western." Cahiers du Cinema, no. 55 (January 1956);
        translated in Cahiers du cinéma, the 1950s : neo-realism, Hollywood, new wave. (Ed.)
        Jim Hillier, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Bazin, André. "The Evolution of the language of cinema." In Film Theory and Criticism,
        6th Ed., (Eds.) Braudy, Leo and Gerald Mast, New York: Oxford University Press,
        2004, 41-53.

Belton, John. Cinema Stylists. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983.

Belton, John. "CinemaScope: The economics of technology." Velvet Light
        Trap, no.21 (Summer 1985), 35-43.

Belton, John. Widescreen Cinema. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Belton, John. American Cinema/American Culture. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994.

"Big producers expected to accept 70mm as standard wide film size." *Motion Picture
        News*, May 10, 1930, 27.

Bitsch, Charles. "Entretien avec Nicholas Ray." *Cahiers du Cinema* 89, November 1958,
        Translated in Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave.
        (Ed.) Jim Hillier, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Bogdanovich, Peter. Who the devil made it? New York, Knopf Press. 1997.

Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. Remediation: Understanding New Media.
        Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Bordwell, David. Narration in the Fiction Film. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 199-200.

Bordwell, David. "Widescreen Aesthetics and Mise En Scene Criticism," *Velvet Light Trap*, no.21 (Summer 1985), 118-125.

Bordwell, David. On the History of Film Style. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Bordwell, David. "Intensified continuity: Visual style in the contemporary American film," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55(3), Spring 2002, 16-28.

Bordwell, David. "Schema and Revison: Staging and Composition in Early CinemaScope," In Le CinémaScope Entre art et industrie. (Ed.) Jean-Jacques Meusy, Paris: AFRHC, 2004, 217-232.

Bordwell, David. The Way Hollywood tells it: Story and style in modern movies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Brownlow, Kevin. The Parade's Gone By. New York: Knopf Press, 1968.

Brownlow, Kevin. Napoleon: Abel Gance's Classic Film. London: Jonathan Cape Publishers, 1983.

Carroll, Noel. "Buster Keaton, The General and Visible Intelligibility." In Close Viewings: An Anthology of new criticism. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1990.

Carroll, Noel. Theorizing the Moving Image. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996.

Cinema Europe: The Other Hollywood, Disc 2. Dir: Kevin Brownlow, Dan Carter, David Gill and Michael Winterbottom. Photoplay Productions, Ltd., 1996.

Conrich, Ian. "Before sound:Universal, silent cinema and the last of the horror-Spectaculars," 40-58. In The Horror Film, Stephen Prince (Ed.), Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2004.

Contreras, Cynthia. "The elements of anamorphic composition: Two case studies." Ph.D. Diss., City University of New York, 1989.

Contreras, Cynthia. In Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the visual arts and cinema

of China and Japan. (Eds.) Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. pg. 241-261.

Cook, David. A History of Narrative Film, 2nd Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1990.

Crafton, Donald. The Talkies: American Cinema's conversion to sound 1926-1931. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Davis, Helene Laroche. "Reminiscing about Shoot the Piano Player." Cineaste. Mar93, Vol. 19(4), 30-34

Deutelbaum, Marshall. "Basic principles of anamorphic composition." Film History, Vol. 15, 2003, 72-80.

Eallonardo v. MGM, Case No. BC 286950, SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES, December 20, 2004.

Edeson, Arthur. "Wide Film Cinematography." American Cinematographer, Sept. 1930, 8-9, 21.

Eisenschitz, Bernard. Nicholas Ray: An American Journey. London; Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1990.

Eisenstein, Sergei. Film Essays and a lecture. New York, Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970.

Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the family melodrama." In Home is where the heart is: Studies in melodrama and the woman's film. (Ed.) Christine Gledhill, London: British Film Institute, 1987.

Enticknap, Leo. Moving Image Technology. London; Wallflower Press, 2005.

Eyman, Scott. Five American Cinematographers: Interviews with Karl Struss, Joseph Ruttenberg, James Wong Howe, Linlwood Dunn and William H. Clothier. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987.

Fabe, Marilyn. Closely watched films: An introduction to the art of narrative film technique. Berkeley; University of California Press, 2004.

Fear, Ralph G. "Wide Image on Standard Film." American Cinematographer, August 1929. 17, 44.

Fleischer, Richard; Harpman, Fred; Kline, Richard H.; Rothman, Marion; Abbott, L.B. "Multiple-image technique for The Boston Strangler." American Cinematographer. Vol. 50(2), February 1969, 202-205, 228,238,245.

Frumkes, Roy. "Wide films on laser disc." <u>Films in Review</u>, Vol. 42 (5/6), June 1991, 162-172.

Gadney, Guy. "Broadband futures." podcast, LAMP, Australian Film Television and Radio School, 9/7/2005.

Garfield, Bob. "Innovation boxes out effective approach in Mercedes-Benz ads." <u>Advertising Age</u>. 5/11/92, Vol. 63(19), 77.

Giannetti, Louis. <u>Masters of the Hollywood Cinema</u>. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Gunning, Tom. <u>D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph</u>. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Halliday, Jon. <u>Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday</u>. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1997.

Hendriks, Barbara. "Pablo Ferro: Master of his universe." Uscreative.com e-zine, 2000.

Henkel, Guido. "Pixar: Changing the face of an industry." Dvdreview.com, 4/12/99, www.dvdreview.com/html/dvd_review_-_pixar_interviews.shtml

Higham, Charles, and Joel Greenberg. <u>The Celluloid Muse</u>. London: Angus and Robertson, Ltd., 1969

Hincha, Richard. "Selling CinemaScope: 1953-1956." <u>Velvet Light Trap</u>, no.21 (Summer 1985): 44-53

Houston, Penelope. "The Great Blank Page." <u>Sight and Sound</u>, no. 37, April 1968.

Jacoblellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197 [1964].

Johnson, Gary. The Bat Whispers. DVD Review. Images Journal, 9. [http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue09/reviews/batwhispers/text.htm],2/2/ 2004.

Kendrick, James. "Aspect Ratios and Joe Six-Packs: Home Theater Enthusiasts Battle to Legitimize the DVD Experience." <u>Velvet Light Trap</u>, No. 56, Fall 2005, 58-70.

Kerr, Walter. <u>The Silent Clowns</u>. New York: Knopf Press. 1975.

King, Geoff. <u>New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction</u>. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

King, Geoff and Tanya Kryzwinska. <u>Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces</u>. New York: Wallflower Press. 2002.

Klinger, Barbara. <u>Melodrama and meaning: history, culture, and the films of Douglas Sirk</u>. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Koszarski, Richard. <u>An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915-1928</u>. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990.

Kricke, Dan James. (06/25/2002). *NHL 2002* review. http://www.gamepartisan.com/sony/reviews/index.php?view=38

Lightman, Herb. "The Boston location filming of *The Thomas Crown Affair*," <u>American Cinematographer</u>, October 1968, Vol. 49(10), 740-743, 770-771, 786-787, 793-795.

Limbacher, James. <u>Four aspects of the film</u>. New York; Arno Press, 1978.

MacCullough, Campbell. "High, wide and handsome." <u>Motion Picture</u>, Vol. 39 (5), June 1930, 70-72, 109-112.

Macqueen, Scott. "A gathering of Bats." <u>American Cinematographer</u>, September 1988, Vol. 69(9), 34-40.

Maltin, Leonard. <u>Of Mice and Magic: A history of animated cartoons</u>. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Manovich, Lev. <u>The Language of New Media</u>. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001.

Millick, Jim. "An interview with director James Cameron." <u>The Perfect Vision</u>, Volume 4, Issue 14, Summer 1992.

Mitchell, Rick. "History of Wide screen formats." <u>American Cinematographer</u>, Vol. 68(5), 1987. 36-42.

Neale, Steve. "Widescreen composition in the age of television." In <u>Contemporary Hollywood Cinema</u>, (Eds.) Steve Neale and Murray Smith, London: Routledge, 1998, 130-141.

Negulesco, Jean. "New Medium – New Methods." In <u>New Screen Techniques</u>, (Ed.) Martin Quigley, Jr., New York, Quigley Publishing Co., 1953, 174-176.

Paul, William. "Screening space: Architecture, technology, and the motion picture screen." <u>Michigan Quarterly Review</u>, 35(1), Winter 1996, 143-173.

Perkins, V.F. "River of No Return," <u>Movie</u> no. 2 (September 1962).

Pratt, David. "Widescreen box office performance to 1959." <u>Velvet Light Trap</u>, no.21 (Summer 1985), 65-66.

Price, Michael H. and George E. Turner. "Remembering how *The Bat Whispers*."
<u>American Cinematographer</u>, March 1986, Vol. 67(3), 34-43.

Prince, Stephen. "The emergence of filmic artifacts: Cinema and cinematography in the
digital era." <u>Film Quarterly</u>, 57(3), 2004, 24-33.

Rainsberger, Todd. <u>James Wong Howe/cinematographer</u>, San Diego, Calif.: A. S. Barnes,
1981.

Rappaport, M. "Tashlin, *Bachelor Flat* and CinemaScope." In <u>Frank Tashlin</u>, (Ed.)
Roger Garcia, British Film Institute, 1994, 71-74.

Reisz, Karel and Gavin Millar. <u>The technique of film edting</u>. New York: Hastings House
Publishing, 1968.

Rivette, Jacques. "L'age des metteurs en scene." <u>Cahiers du Cinema</u>, no. 31 (January
1954). In <u>Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave</u>. (Ed.)
Jim Hillier, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Rivette, Jacques. "De l'invention." <u>Cahiers du Cinema</u>, no. 27 (October 1953). In <u>Cahiers
du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave</u>. (Ed.) Jim Hillier,
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Salt, Barry. <u>Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis</u>. 2nd Ed., London: Starwood
Press, 1992.

Sarafian, Katherine. "Flashing digital animations: Pixar's digital aesthetic." In <u>New Media:
Theories and practices of digitextuality</u>, (Eds.) Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, New
York, Routlege, 2003.

Schatz, Thomas. <u>Boom or Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s</u>. Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1997.

Shamroy, Leon. "Filming 'The Robe.'" In <u>New Screen Techniques</u>, (Ed.)
Martin Quigley, Jr., New York, Quigley Publishing Co., 1953, 177-180.

Simmon, Scott. <u>The Films of D.W. Griffith</u>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1993.

Singer, Ben. <u>Melodrama and Modernity: Early sensational cinema and its contexts</u>.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Skouras, Spyros P. "The importance of CinemaScope." In <u>New Screen Techniques</u>, (Ed.)
Martin Quigley, Jr., New York, Quigley Publishing Co., 1953, 148-153.

Smith, Greg M. "Shaping The Maxx: Adapting the comic frame to television."
    Animation Journal, 8.1, Fall 1999, 32-53.

Spellerberg, James. "CinemaScope and ideology. Velvet Light
    Trap, no.21 (Summer 1985): 26-34.

Stull, William. "Seventy Millimetres." American Cinematographer, February
    1930. 9, 42-43

Sweeney, Kevin. James Mason: A bio-bibliography. London: Greenwood Press, 1997.

"The Horse Whisperer: About the Production." Film Scouts, LLC. Online at:
http://www.filmscouts.com/scripts/matinee.cfm?Film=hor-whi&File=productn

Truffaut, Francois. "En avoir en plein la vue." Cahiers du Cinema, no. 25(July 1953): 22-
    3. In Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave. (Ed.) Jim
    Hillier, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Vagoni, Anthony. "Out of the box." Advertising Age. Vol. 70(46), 11/08/99, 48-50.

Valley, Richard. DVD liner notes from *The Bat Whispers*. Dir: Roland West. Image
    Entertainment, 1990.

Wells, Paul. The horror genre: From Beelzebub to Blair witch. Wallflower Press: London,
    2000.

Winston, Brian. Media technology and society : a history from the telegraph to the
    Internet. New York : Routledge, 1998.

Wood, Robin. Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan. Columbia University Press: New
    York, 1986.

Young, Jeff. Kazan - The Master Director Discusses His Films: Interviews with Elia
    Kazan. New York; Newmarket Press, 1999.

Zanuck, Darryl F. "CinemaScope in Production." In New Screen Techniques, (Ed.)
    Martin Quigley, Jr., New York, Quigley Publishing Co., 1953, 155-157.

A Selective Filmography

Contempt. 1963. Compagnia Cinematografica Champion, Les Films Concordia, Rome Paris Films. Director: Jean-Luc Godard.

Broken Blossoms, or the Yellow Man and the Girl. 1919. Paramount. Director: D.W. Griffith.

Orphans of the Storm. 1921. United Artists. Director: D.W. Griffith.

The High Sign. 1921. Metro Pictures. Director: Edward F. Cline, Buster Keaton.

Sherlock Jr. 1924. Metro Pictures. Director: Buster Keaton.

Our Hospitality. 1923. Metro Pictures. Director: John G. Blystone, Buster Keaton.

Napoleon. 1927. Films Abel Gance, Société générale des films, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Director: Abel Gance.

The Bat Whispers. 1930. United Artists. Director: Roland West.

The Big Trail. 1930. 20th Century Fox. Director: Raoul Walsh.

River of No Return. 1954. 20th Century Fox. Director: Otto Preminger.

Rebel without a Cause. 1955. Warner Bros. Director: Nicholas Ray.

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? 1956. 20th Century Fox. Director: Frank Tashlin.

Bigger than Life. 1956. 20th Century Fox. Director: Nicholas Ray.

The Girl Can't Help It. 1956. 20th Century Fox. Director: Frank Tashlin.

The Tarnished Angels. 1958. Universal. Director: Douglas Sirk.

The Boston Strangler. 1968. 20th Century Fox. Director: Richard Fleischer.

The Thomas Crown Affair. 1968. MGM/UA. Director: Norman Jewison.

Wall Street. 1987. 20th Century Fox. Director: Oliver Stone.

A Bug's Life. 1998. Walt Disney Pictures. Director: John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton.

Timecode. 2000. ColumbiaTriStar. Director: Mike Figgis.

Conversations with Other Women. 2005. Hart Sharp Video. Director: Hans Canosa.