Organized Clutter

The Precise Composition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*

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ABSTRACT

Because received opinion holds that the introduction of widescreen filmmaking presented directors with problems of mise-en-scène that they had to overcome, most discussions of CinemaScope composition focus on exceptional films that illustrate the ways especially adept directors organized the space in front of the camera to cope with these problems. This emphasis on the films of auteurs necessarily marginalizes the ordinary CinemaScope film as compositionally insignificant. My essay is not director-oriented. It does not entirely attribute either the composition of images or the blocking or disposition of actors to the director. Rather, it demonstrates that composition and blocking in CinemaScope films posed no problems because when the first films went into production the rules for both were already well-defined and embodies in the pair of grids that guided the design of a film's sets. The underlying compositional clarity of the apparently cluttered sets in *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) illustrates the central importance of set design to widescreen composition.

In *Giant: George Stevens, A Life on Film*, writer and former television critic Marilyn Ann Moss describes how the director initially resisted filming *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959) in the widescreen CinemaScope format. As Moss explains, "Never a fan of the process, Stevens was convinced that its huge proportions would destroy the sense of intimacy he wanted" (246). The director's son, George Stevens Jr., told Moss how his father, unable to overcome the studio's commitment to CinemaScope, decided to create the claustrophobic feeling he deemed necessary despite being saddled with the unavoidable widescreen format. According to Stevens Jr., "the horizontal inclusiveness of the lens was the problem; so much more is in the frame. So Stevens designed beams and uprights into the set that could be used in framing" (246-247).

Whatever influence Stevens may have had on the film's set designs, the fact is that they were actually designed by production designers Lyle Wheeler and George W. Davis, with the set's furnishings decided upon by set decorators Walter M. Scott and Stuart A. Reiss. The quartet's work earned them an Academy Award for Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Black-and-White. In this analysis, I examine the precision of their work more closely in order to highlight its importance in establishing the film's visual composition, as well as the positioning of the actors. While both of these matters usually are attributed entirely to decisions made by a film's director, my argument radically asserts that much of what is usually attributed to the director is dictated by the set's design.

Consider, for example, this frame from the film in which Anne Frank (Millie Perkins) first sees the room that will be hers for the two years she spends in hiding from the Nazis (Fig. 1).

Ignore the specific details for the moment and see the image as a two-dimensional pattern of light and dark. Like all photographic images, the frame is at one and the same time a flat two-dimensional pattern of light and dark, and a three-dimensional illusion of space. Thus, the image of Anne's room might be described more abstractly as a series of light and dark vertical sections or panels of varying widths and textures,

Fig. 1 | The cluttered room that will become Anne's bedroom, 00:14:26. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1959.

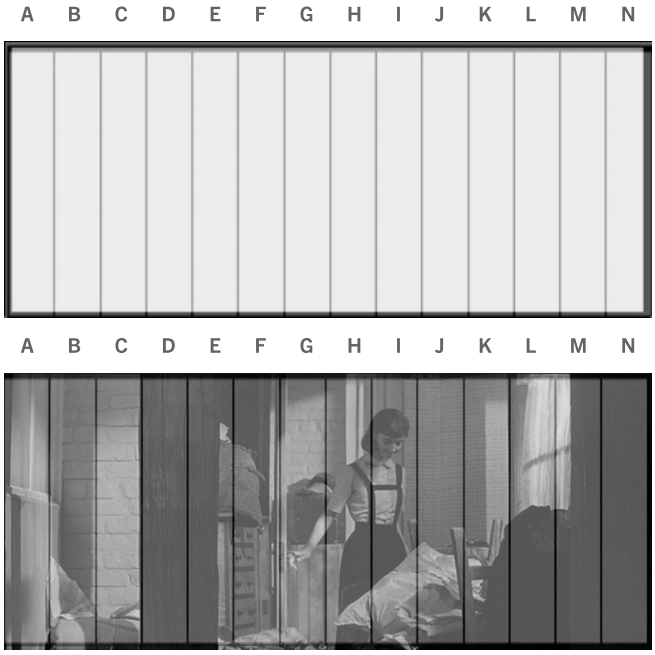

Fig. 2 | The overlaid grid reveals the image's orderly composition, 00:14:26. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1959.

labelled A to N. While there is an overall balance of light and dark in the frame, there seems to be little other order, logic, or pattern to their arrangement. Indeed, the sections appear as much a hodge-podge jumble as the realistic details of the cluttered room.

Furthermore, there is reason to consider the image of the set as if it were the final drawing of the design. As Lyle Wheeler, longtime head of Twentieth Century-Fox's Art Department, told art and architecture historian Beverly Heisner in *Hollywood Art*, "The art director was the one who said what went into the construction of the set and his design had to be followed exactly by the crew and the set dressers. No liberties were taken with the art director's design" (203). Viewed this way, one can discern that the placement of apparently jumbled items was guided initially by a grid divided into fourteen equal sections. Overlaying such a grid upon the frame reveals the underlying order of the image's composition. The grid's lines coincide with lines in the image at the edges of objects or at the places where one texture or shade of light or dark meets a contrasting pattern or value (Fig. 2). Columns J and K to the right of Anne do not immediately appear to fit this pattern and they coincide with the legs of an overturned chair. Between Columns G and H, the dividing line over Anne's outstretched arm hides the line it coincides with—it is created by the space between the slats of the crate visible below her arm.

A second grid based upon the rabatment of the frame was also used to structure the set's design. Rabatment, known to artists since the time of Giotto as a guide to composition within a rectangle, uses a line equal in length to the end of a rectangle to construct squares (A–B and D–E) at either end of the rectangle. The process leaves a vertical rectangle, shaded here a darker grey for emphasis between the squares (Fig. 3).[1]

In addition to shading the central vertical rectangle, I have added midlines and diagonals to the squares and rabatted grid overlaid on the frame from the film (Fig. 4).

The edges of the vertical rectangle coincide with the edge of the door Anne holds open and the line in the background hidden behind her head. The rabatted grid is often

1 I provide an explanation of rabatment and its uses in CinemaScope films in, "'Why Does It Look Like This?' A Visual Primer of Early CinemaScope Composition." *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* no. 9 (2021): 75-82. warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/whydoesitlooklikethis_v04.pdf

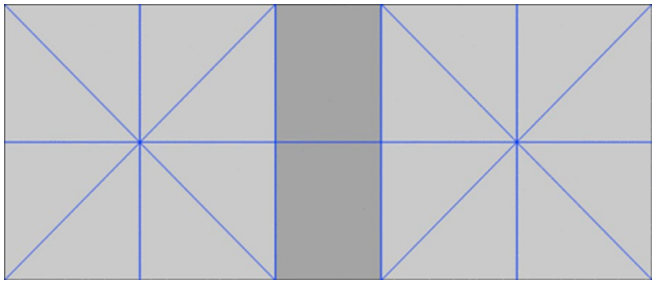

Fig. 3 | The inscribed squares created by rabatment of the CinemaScope frame with a rectangle between them

Fig. 4 | The rabatted frame overlaid upon the image, 00:14:26. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1959.

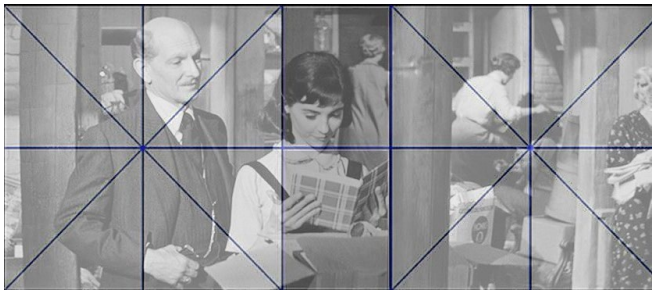

Fig. 5 | Otto Frank gives Anne a diary, 00:25:40. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1959.

used to determine the position of actors. A single actor usually occupies or overlaps the vertical rectangle, as Anne does here. If present, a second actor would be positioned on or close to the vertical midline of either square, as in this shot of Anne (in the vertical rectangle) with her father, Otto Frank (Joseph Schildkraut), positioned on the midline of the left square (Fig. 5).

I want to emphasize that the two grids I have described are used consistently throughout the film to compose the design of the sets and the disposition of actors. Together, they define the composition of the film's images. In this regard, what I have described in this particular set is typical of what of any analyst would discover in the film's other sets, as well. The example is typical, not unique.

This speculative attempt to discern in this single frame the progress of the set's design from initial sketch to built set suggests how more intricate planning was involved in the film's set design than the simple idea that the director "designed beams and uprights into the set that could be used in framing." Indeed, it is the precise composition of the set's design that actually determines the camera's position; no other position could capture the composition designed into the set. A greater awareness of the function of set design offers insights into film production, thereby allowing audiences to recognize the central importance of set designers to a film's overall visual logic. ▪

WORKS CITED

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