

FAMU
Academy of the Performing Arts in Prague

Faculty of Cinematography

“The Effects of Widescreen on the Aesthetic of the Film Image”

By
Lourenço Sasseti Corrêa

Master of Fine Arts, Cinematography CINKK
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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to explore in what way the implementation of widescreen technology affected the way films are made and perceived. Today, widescreen techniques are widespread across the whole audiovisual world but it was not always so; the shift that occurred in the early 1950's to promote the prevalent use of such techniques marked an important change for filmmakers, not only technologically but aesthetically speaking. Looking at film as a storytelling medium, the image's dimensions, the frame in which the film is contained bears tremendous influence upon the story told and the goal is to understand how each of the different practices that make up the art of filmmaking – the director's staging, the cinematographer's photography, the editor's montage – are influenced by this seemingly simple transformation. As a starting point, the text will focus on a portion of history of certain technologies and importantly, the socio-economic climate surrounding Hollywood at the time of the first mainstream widescreen presentations, and how the technique came to be promoted and spread. Further, it will mostly delve on aesthetic discussions, in which different subjects will be looked at in the light of the widescreen – backed by numerous examples from various films, particularly from the first two decades of widescreen cinema – and the technique will be compared to older methods, of which it is an offspring. Finally, it will be put in context with the modern digital age and the place it might have in the future of the cinema industry.

Table of Contents

- Abstract.....	i
- Table of Contents.....	ii
- Introduction.....	1
- History and Technology.....	6
- The Advent of Widescreen: Cinerama.....	12
- CinemaScope.....	16
- An Emerging Aesthetic: CinemaScope's technical problems and <i>The Robe</i>	19
- Staging the Widescreen Film.....	34
- Cinematography: Directing the Eye and Composition.....	48
- The Long Take and Widescreen: Otto Preminger's <i>River of No Return</i>	69
- Editing Widescreen pictures.....	78
- The Close-up in Widescreen.....	86
- Portraying Characters.....	95
- The Shape of the Screen Today: Old formats, large formats and the digital age of 16:9.....	102
- Conclusion.....	106
- Bibliography.....	109

‘Enter the dream-house, brothers and sisters’ wrote the poet¹.

Films were born at the exposition. The brothers Lumière, George Méliès and others were magicians, “dream-manufacturers” that demonstrated the wonder of the moving image, throwing people out of their seats gasping with a simple image of a train arriving at a station. Since then the cinema has undergone endless transformations and re-evaluations; the objective however never changed: to transport people into an alternative world, placing them row after row in front of a screen where the world will be projected, revealed to them. As movies evolved, stepping out of the “circus tent” into a massively produced storytelling and research medium – an art, essentially – an aesthetic emerged, confined inside a rectangle with a ratio of 1.33:1. At the same time as filmmaking flourished into a successful industry, the technological aspects behind it evolved and so did the aesthetic; sound came into play, and color – each technical achievement opening the door for new stories and new visuals, all religiously contained along 4 perforations of a 35mm negative. In the early 1950’s, seeing the “dream industry” threatened by a critical loss of audience, Hollywood played its trump card: to change the shape of the frame. Widescreen was thus established as a desperate move by the film industry to attract audiences into the cinema again, triggering a sort of re-invention of the aesthetic. Just as the birth of cinema itself, the widescreen too was born “at the funfair”; firstly, as a sort of laboratory research piece, experimented with as early as the first movie projections and exhibited in much the same way, at technology fairs and such events; later taken and commercialized by Hollywood, the film industry’s vanguard of technological excellence and advance. Threatened by the general tendency for more participative entertainment, the cinema needed to provide the spectacle that a theme park attraction would provide and so the 1950’s opened an era of promotion of technological “wonders”, when the theatre would become a place to be shocked once again, like in its pioneering days.

¹ Cecil Day Lewis (1938), *Newsreel*

The critics and filmmakers that praised the widescreen at the time of its mainstream breakthrough stressed the power of the new frame of involving the spectator more than the classical 1.33/7:1 academy ratio², giving ‘the viewer a feeling of being surrounded by the action and, therefore, participating in it.’³ Many critics and filmmakers, notably André Bazin and his *Cahiers du Cinéma* disciples, have since followed this school of thought that the wide frame freed the filmmaker of limitations imposed by the small size of the traditional frame and that it was closer to the “reality” depicted, making the spectator more involved – ‘you feel you are actually witnessing an event, rather than watching at a picture of it.’⁴ Lowell Thomas, one of the key figures in the promotion of the Cinerama format said ‘from the beginning (...) pictures have been restricted in space. (...) Conventional motion pictures are confined to a narrow screen... Movies are like looking through a keyhole.’⁵ The early widescreen enthusiasts promoted the medium’s ability to present images beyond the frame, to provide an experience that approximated ‘very nearly the scope of normal vision’⁶. On the other hand, many were unsupportive of the shift to widescreen, particularly filmmakers accustomed to working with the classical frame that were forced to adapt to the new trend. David Bordwell quotes Howard Hawks: ‘We have spent a lifetime (...) learning how to compel the public to concentrate on [a] single thing. Now we have something that works in exactly the opposite way, and I don’t like it very much.’⁷ The widescreen created a chasm, a division among the film industry. The fact remains that better or not than the classical academy format, its

² When sound was introduced, the 1.33:1 (silent aperture) aspect ratio was slightly cropped to 1.37:1, due to the extra space needed on the film print for the soundtrack, which ran alongside the picture on the edge of the film. When the classical academy aspect ratio will be referred to in the text, it will be accepted that it concerns either a 1.33:1 or a 1.37:1 frame, since this slight difference does not in any way affect the aesthetic of the work mentioned.

³ Leon Shamroy A.S.C. in Quigley, *New Screen Techniques*, p.178

⁴ Ibid, p.177

⁵ in Belton, p. 1

⁶ Ibid, p.1

⁷ in *Poetics of Cinema*, p.302

implementation triggered an aesthetic transformation that ultimately led to our modern perception of what an image at the cinema should look like.

Although it is fair to say that Widescreen came about as the natural progression of a developing art form, it was the socio-economical issues of the time that pushed it out of the realm of experimentation and turned it into what is essentially the standard today; it was not a creative but an economical choice, imposed most of the time on the filmmakers who at first were skeptical of its qualities. It would take a while for directors and cinematographers to use the medium to its full potential; first they had to learn. If an evolution of a widescreen aesthetic is to be considered, one can start by looking at the learning curve and how the inexperience and the studios determination to sell the new product influenced the artists behind the camera.

Widescreen movies did not create a film language particular to them, nor did they utterly change the way movies are conceived. They did however have an effect on our perception and this is where an aesthetic discussion must start. Films in widescreen did not get rid of the constraints imposed by the frame, they simply changed the frame and as a result, transformed the way in which we perceive what is on the screen. Still today, films are in essence “like looking through a keyhole”; the widescreen changed the shape of the keyhole. Consequently, what we see through it, the world on the screen is automatically transformed. The shift to widescreen would eventually have a considerable effect on all of the filmmaking process, challenging and bearing its mark on all the practices involved in the construction of a film: from the cinematography to the *mise-en-scène*, editing and even sound. To study the rise of an aesthetic trend, one has to look not only at the new method but also at the old ones and how they relate to one another. Importantly, despite the numerous discourses about the

narrowness and constraints of the 1.33:1, the aesthetic of widescreen movies has its origin in the academy format. Film language is the driving force of any film aesthetic and although the cinema evolved immensely since its birth, chiefly because of the scientific progress behind the art, the language has changed little; today, stories on the screen are told in much the same way as they always were. An important notion in considering an aesthetic of widescreen is its relationship to the 4:3 aesthetic of the past, how it is mainly an adaptation of the old methods to the new format and how that format affects the conventions established nearly half a century before, what it brings, what it takes away; how is our perception of a story affected by the frame in which it is contained?

Although the widescreen dimensions gave filmmakers creative possibilities that were not easily achievable within the academy aspect ratio of 1.33/7:1, the latter had its own strengths, qualities that in turn do not apply to widescreen imagery. ‘In any medium, style is formed by a pattern of decisions’⁸; Cinema aesthetics rely on a combination of many factors, the frame dimension (or aspect ratio) being only one of those. In exploring and discussing one aspect ratio or the other, one should perhaps not compare them as more or less effective tools, but simply how they differently shape the aesthetic of the work in question and, more interestingly, how they can be combined with the remaining tools to create a more or less engaging cinematic experience.

Lastly, the term “widescreen” is a vague notion. There are countless widescreen formats and brands from different parts of the world, covering more or less wide aspect ratios from the still used 1.66:1 to the extremely wide 2.76:1, with names as extravagant as Polyvision or SuperPanorama 70, passing through dozens of brands ending in ‘Scope. The

⁸ Perkins, p.56

bottom line is that there are three ways of producing widescreen images with diverse results, all still at use today: by use of anamorphic lenses that squeeze a wide image into a conventional 35mm frame for acquisition and de-squeeze it for projection; by use of a hard matte: composing the picture for a final frame – different than that of the full gate – with a corresponding ground-glass in the camera, and by matting the projector to fit the desired final aspect ratio; and finally, by exposing a lesser area of the negative such as happens with 3-perf and 2-perf camera systems – where instead of exposing the conventional image height of 4-perforations, the camera exposes an image with a higher width to height ratio, corresponding to the pull down, without the need of special optical equipment. For the sake of the argument, to explore an aesthetic of widescreen it will be useful to focus on a particular aspect ratio over another and so it is adequate that the case be built around films shot in the 2.35:1 aspect ratio or wider; these represent the most significant difference when compared to the academy ratio, added to the fact that the 2.35:1 CinemaScope format was without a doubt the most influential of the widescreen systems.

History and Technology

The 35mm format and the aspect ratio of 1.33:1 (4:3) developed by W.K.L. Dickson⁹ in the late 1880's were mere coincidental choices that happened to be practical both aesthetically and economically. Decided upon during the production of the Kinetograph, the first motion picture camera, Dickson used an existing norm: Eastman flexible-base film, which was 70mm sized film. Dickson concluded that by cutting it in half, the image reproduced was of satisfactory enough quality 'for a credible illusion of reality' and since it was exactly half the size of the extant film, the same roll could provide double the amount of film and so was a cheaper option.¹⁰ The 35mm format was born. Since the advent of the projection of moving images to an audience in 1895 with Lumière's Cinematograph, it was clear to the early pioneers that motion pictures were a phenomenon to be seized. In order to create an industry, make it viable economically, standards were necessary. Thomas Edison and George Eastman put forward their inventions and through patents controlled the cameras (Edison) and the film (Eastman). 'Through their combined efforts as patent-holders, Edison and others used their license agreements with producers, distributors (...) and exhibitors to establish these standards in the film industry during the crucial period of its initial growth'.¹¹ Today, a century later, 35mm is still a photographic standard all over the world.

Experiments with widescreen exist since the very beginnings of motion pictures but it was not until the mid to late 1920's, about the same time as the conversion to sound, that widescreen and large format systems were being developed as a possible new medium to be used at an industry level. But non-standard methods and economical crisis in America rapidly

⁹ William Kennedy Dickson: assistant to Thomas Edison and inventor of the Kinetograph, 'the first motion picture camera that used strips of flexible celluloid film' and the Kinetoscope which was 'the peephole device which displayed the films' (Belton, p. 15). Dickson developed the 35mm motion picture standard and the use of the 4:3 (1.33:1) aspect ratio.

¹⁰ Belton, p. 19

¹¹ Ibid, p. 23

put a brake to this short-lived first wave of widescreen systems. Still, a few memorable moments are worth mentioning. Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) was shot in the French Polyvision format, a three-camera/three-projector set-up – an ancestor of Cinerama. Gance allegedly wanted Napoleon's visual world to be as grand as the man himself and although he did use it for the representation of wide sceneries, most of it was for the ability to show three separate images at the same time as an alternative to montage. But the film was shown in Europe in its original 'triptych' format 'in only a handful of theatres and then only for limited runs (...), for its American release, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (...) eliminated the triptychs.' *Napoléon*'s example is enough to understand that a similar system, requiring three times the equipment to capture and project, was not here to stay. Furthermore, 'after several years of attempting to distribute the original version, both Gance and his producers went bankrupt.'¹² It is comprehensible; film theatres were not ready for such presentations and with the release of *The Jazz Singer*¹³ in the same year in the United States, theatres knew they would have to invest in a transition to sound sooner or later if they wanted to remain in business so the additional novelty of a wider image was out of the question. The introduction of sound was a major factor for American studios that argued that new films with sound 'demanded equal improvement in visual reproduction.'¹⁴ Around 1929, Hollywood tried to market widescreen systems such as Fox Grandeur (20th Century Fox) and Magnafilm (Paramount) as a package that could be acquired by theatres with the conversion to sound. 'The thinking was that while the industry was absorbing the huge capital outlay needed to convert to sound (...), widescreen could be introduced for comparatively little extra.' This view was not generally supported among the film industry, and it was ultimately abandoned as a norm after the 1929 Wall Street crash. Although Hollywood was not directly hit, the Great Depression put a halt to

¹² Belton, p.39

¹³ *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first feature film to make use of synchronized sound.

¹⁴ Enticknap, p.54

technological investments within the industry and to ‘virtually everything else which was not essential to the core business of film production and exhibition.’ Sound however, was well on its way; studios had committed to it and many theatres had already updated their facilities to accommodate “talkies” – it had become essential. ‘Too much money had been spent and too many boats had been burnt for the industry to back out.’ Other than the economic crisis, not meeting Standards was a key issue for the failure of an earlier widescreen proposal. Fox Grandeur was a 70mm system that ran at 20 f/s – Fox required the manufacture of special cameras and projectors – and Magnafilm used a 56mm process.¹⁵ These violated the 35mm norm and that was reason enough for their failure. The transition to optical soundtrack on film was completely compatible with long established production and presentation conventions and so did not suffer similar issues. As the 1930’s began, sound and colour would be added to the filmmaker’s creative palette¹⁶; and even though the country was deep into the Depression and World War II burst at the end of the decade, ‘American motion pictures enjoyed a remarkably privileged economic status’¹⁷. Widescreen however, was out of the equation.

It is necessary to turn to the socio-cultural and economic climate leading up to the 1950’s in the United States to understand how widescreen finally saw the light of day as a necessary measure for the film industry to take. This step was essentially an economic one – only later can we speak of aesthetics. The decision to implement widescreen as a standard had nothing to do with an “art of cinema”; rather it was a desperate move by the industry to save the future of movies – or more precisely the movie business.

¹⁵ Enticknap, p. 55

¹⁶ Three-strip Technicolor was implemented in the late 1930’s – the last big revolution before widescreen made its ultimate appearance. The first film to be released in full three-strip Technicolor was Walt Disney’s *Silly Symphonies* cartoon *Flowers and Trees* (1932).

¹⁷ Belton, p.67

The 1930's and 40's, marked by the Great Depression and World War II, led to a complete re-assessment of American people's way of life in the post-war years. Hollywood did not substantially suffer from either the Depression or the War; audiences actually grew during the War years – 'from 80 million in 1940 to 85 million in 1941-44 (...) rising to 90 million in 1945' (average weekly attendance) and remaining that way until the end of the decade. It was the aftermath of these troubled times that struck the film industry hard, as the country flourished again into the second half of the 20th Century. In 1950, the weekly attendance in cinemas was down to 60 million a week and kept plunging.¹⁸ Hollywood would never truly recover.

'It was not so much changes within the film industry that deprived it of its former audiences as it was change within a society as a whole.'¹⁹ In effect, the only direct blow Hollywood suffered in the early post-war years was the Paramount Decision²⁰ in 1946, which according to weekly attendances did not affect movie-going habits. What did empty theatre palaces out was the important change of habits of the population after the War. During World War II, due to an increase of working hours, income augmented at the same time as consumer goods suffered a deficit. Consequently, 'Americans saved rather than spent their incomes'²¹. With the War over, work hours shrunk back to normal but income kept rising and, rather than spending money on movies, people bought houses and cars and moved out of the city into the suburbs. Cars enabled Americans to go elsewhere for the holidays – more than half of the population 'went away for vacation' in 1957. Additionally, owning a car enabled people to travel to work, which meant they could live further from the city, further from the theatres.

¹⁸ Belton, p. 69-70

¹⁹ Ibid, p.71

²⁰ The Paramount decision was the result of an anti-trust lawsuit led against the Hollywood "Big Five" to put a halt to the major studios' monopoly over film distribution. It is considered to have been the first step towards the fall of the Hollywood studio system, and the beginning of the end of the "Golden Era".

²¹ Belton, p.71

From 1948 until 1958, 11 out of the 13 million homes built were situated in the suburbs.²² Indeed the post-war demographic phenomenon of suburbia is a crucial reason for the drop in theatre attendance as moving out of the city transformed people's free time and their leisure activities.

With the migration to the suburbs, the "new home" was turned into a 'technological, domestic paradise' and became the centre of people's lives outside of work. People owned washing machines and refrigerators – 'labour saving appliances' that would give them more free time. Free time was spent at home gardening, barbequing, among friends and family. 'People sat, socialized and ate'. Above all, came the 'domestic appliance par excellence': the Television. Although the rise of Television is not the only reason for movie attendance to drop, the threat it posed to film-going is obvious: People could now consume moving pictures at home. In 1946, 8000 Americans owned a Television; this almost doubled to 14.000 sets in 1948. After a decade, in 1956, there were about 35 million and by the end of the 1950's, '90 percent of American homes boasted television sets'.²³ As well as the TV phenomenon, the suburbs witnessed the post-World War II baby boom, which alone robbed 'the movies of a significant portion of their most loyal patrons, men and women under the age of thirty'. Having to raise children considerably influenced young adults' spare time, which now had to be spent in family. As a result, people spent more time watching Television, going to playgrounds and public places. As they moved to the suburbs, owning cars, living a family life, Americans were of course more prone to 'outdoor leisure-time activities' like fishing, hiking, going to the beach or visiting National Parks; as Belton points out, 'they left behind traditional forms of entertainment, such as the theatre and the motion picture, and sought out new recreational

²² Belton, p.72

²³ Ibid, p.73

enterprises'.²⁴ The movies were clearly being “left behind” as the American way of life evolved. If the country had suffered its depression 20 years before, the film industry was suffering it now. It was time for Hollywood to counter-attack; it was time for Widescreen.

More so than with colour and sound, the early 50's saw Hollywood publicists becoming the “champions” of a new era where audiences would once again fill theatres every week. But as much as the publicity seemed more exciting than the films themselves, likewise the golden era was reaching its end and box office receipts continued to plunge despite the novelty. Its goal was very clear, but Widescreen did not save the movies – attendance kept declining reaching only 40 million per week in 1960²⁵ – less than half than during the War – and never again reached the numbers of the 1930's and 40's. It did however trigger an aesthetic revolution, and whether individual processes were successful or not, it transformed our notion of what a cinematic image is.

²⁴ Belton, p.74

²⁵ Ibid, p.70

The advent of Widescreen: Cinerama

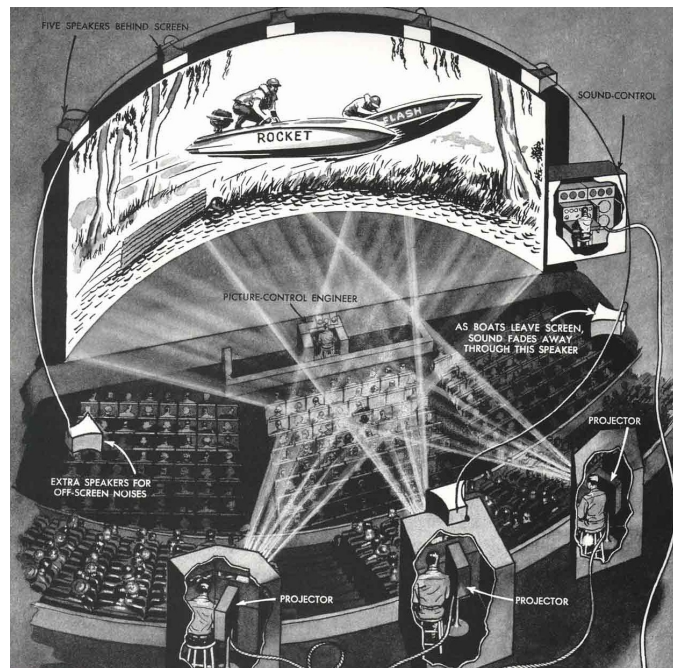


Fig. 1: Cinerama projection

Film industrialists took a firm position that if the cinema was to survive, ‘movies had to become more participatory; the movie theatre had to become the equivalent of an amusement park.’²⁶ On the 30th of September 1952, *This is Cinerama* opened at the New York Broadway Theatre. Invented by a Hollywood scientist and a Broadway producer – Fred Waller and Mike Todd – Cinerama was a three-camera, three-projector system using 35mm film and a 6-perforation pull-down at the speed of 26 frames per second. The footage was acquired using three linked cameras with three lenses ‘set at 48 degrees to one another’ and projected through three projectors positioned in a criss-cross manner (as shown in Fig. 1) on to a very curved screen producing an image with an ‘angle of view of 146 by 55 degrees, nearly approximating the angle of view of human vision’.²⁷ Cinerama was sold with focus neither on stories or stars, but on ‘audience involvement. (...) Publicity photos literalized this promise [of participation], superimposing images of delighted spectators in their theater seats

²⁶ Belton, p.84

²⁷ Ibid, p.99

onto scenes from the film.’²⁸ Cinerama as a format (from production to exhibition) was used mainly in the making of travelogues. *This is Cinerama* is essentially a tour of various places and events in America and Europe. The film figures a rollercoaster ride, images shot over the Niagara Falls, gondola rides in Venice, a bullfight in Spain as well as performances of Haendel’s *Messiah* and *Aida*. It finishes with aerial shots of various places in the United States in a final sequence called “America the Beautiful”.²⁹ Subsequent films made in the process such as *Cinerama Holiday* (1955) and *Seven Wonders of the World* (1956) used the same formula of the travel film. *This is Cinerama* was extremely successful. Budgeted at 1 million dollars, it grossed more than 32 million dollars.³⁰ ‘Both audiences and critics raved about the new process’ and ‘for the first time in its history, *The New York Times* ran a story about film on the front page, celebrating the opening of Cinerama as the start of a new era in motion picture exhibition.’³¹ They were right, only Cinerama was not the format that secured this phenomenon as the driver of a new era for the cinema.

However successful it might have been when it appeared, Cinerama was plagued by technical and economical problems that ultimately overshadowed its success. The system speaks for itself; it employed three synchronized filmstrips projected on three projectors simultaneously, with a separate sound track being reproduced in synchronization. Firstly, Cinerama was not standard, not only in that it used three different strips of film, but also each frame was six perforations high instead of four and the film ran at 26 frames per second. It necessitated ‘more than three and a half times as much negative film as a standard 35mm production (...) and a fourth strip (...), carrying the stereo soundtrack, was required at the distribution and exhibition stages.’ Three times more equipment meant three times the

²⁸ Belton, p.98

²⁹ Ibid, p.89

³⁰ Ibid, p. 99

³¹ Ibid, p. 103

expense and theatre exhibition was very costly, even compared to the production. Seventeen projectionists were needed at the Broadway Theatre in New York for a Cinerama screening and the working costs of the show made up for 50% of the total box office gross. Added to that, to install the system in a cinema cost from 75 to 140 thousand dollars and seats had to be sacrificed for the fitting of extra projector booths and the necessary separate sound booth.³² Moreover, the complex three-image nature of the system posed several aesthetic problems. The most apparent was the visible boundary between “panels” (as the single constituting parts were called), which must have been a highly distractive artefact. This was a problem for cinematographers who ‘struggled to compose shots in such a way as to help conceal them.’ The projectionists had to take constant care and ‘encountered difficulty in keeping the horizontal lines straight’ and the side projectors were even more problematic because of ‘lateral synchronization’. Moreover, because of the bulbs in the projectors, image brightness varied from panel to panel.³³ Also problematic for the photography were the extremely limited wide lenses and the fact that such a wide angle of view greatly restricted the use of lighting as a dramatic tool, ‘backlighting techniques were impossible to implement across the expanse of three images’ and so filmmakers had to recur to either completely natural light or a very flat approach, not given to the way lighting plays a dramatic role in a story.³⁴ The fact that Cinerama required such high expenses to produce unsatisfactory results is reason enough for it to have failed as a medium. As Belton puts it, ‘Cinerama virtually leaped from the laboratory to the Broadway Theatre’, it was too imperfect and did little to adapt to the established norms of film production and exhibition.³⁵ Nevertheless, ‘[Cinerama] established the market for widescreen and proved that the principle was an economically viable one’³⁶.

³² Belton, p.106-107

³³ Ibid, p.109

³⁴ Ibid, p.95

³⁵ Ibid, p.113

³⁶ Enticknap, p.57

The compliance to standards has been crucial to the success of the film industry, and the simple violation of the established norm is enough for a process to fail. Sound and colour were innovations that adapted to the existing conventions and only survived as techniques – and so became aesthetically significant – because they met the technological requirements. If Widescreen was to become a norm and an aesthetic was to be born, it had to do the same.

Other than conforming to technological principles, the widescreen could not have become a norm without the fundamental reason why films exist: stories. This is why Cinerama will not be taken into account when considering an aesthetic of widescreen. The format only used the travelogue as its favoured mode of presentation because of the exceptionally limited nature of the technology, which arguably impeded it of being used in a narrative way – crucial for the development of a film aesthetic. Full three-strip Cinerama was only used twice for narrative films: *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* and *How the West was Won*, both in 1962. Publicists chose to ignore the problem, by promoting the “experience”: ‘Plot (...) is replaced by audience involvement – there is something that makes the excitement of going places and participating in an adventure more than enough’.³⁷ This is true in an amusement park, and even then other tricks are used such as moving chairs. It is not enough in the cinema. Cinerama was a medium for publicists; the Hollywood majors would not bet on such a limited and expensive process to continue their storytelling legacy. It is possible that, had the three-projector system continued, the craze would have died down fast as audiences crave for stories and not necessarily for “participation”. At any rate, stories are what involve us in the movies – *Lawrence of Arabia* (70mm, widescreen) is still thrilling today on a TV monitor in our living room, and so is *Citizen Kane* (35mm, academy ratio). Stories are always what attracted us to the cinema, widescreen or not. Accordingly, Cinerama needed to re-invent itself to be suitable for narrative films, and the original process died in the

³⁷ Quoted in Belton, p.95

early 1960's and was replaced by other systems, notably Ultra Panavision, a single strip anamorphic 70mm format. Still today, original Cinerama theatres are used for large format exhibitions of certain films.

CinemaScope

The Cinerama experiment not only made it clear that the industry needed a comparable system if it was to draw audiences back to theatres, it also confirmed that if the widescreen was to have any chance of survival, it needed to conform to the long established standards of film production and exhibition; standards that enabled cinema to become a mass-producing industry in the beginning of the Century. In 1952, 20th Century Fox released CinemaScope, the “modern miracle you see without glasses”. ‘Unlike Cinerama, which (...) underwent little adaptation to meet the requirements of current motion picture production, distribution and exhibition practices’, CinemaScope was created at the heart of the industry’s ‘highly competitive, often chaotic marketplace’.³⁸ Its strength as a technology that proposed to revolutionize the look of motion pictures was the conformity to decades-old industry standards. CinemaScope was a 35mm anamorphic process running at the standard speed of 24 frames per second. Instead of the need for special cameras and special projection techniques, the widescreen was achieved with an anamorphic element attached to the lens to squeeze a wide image – twice as wide as the academy 1.33/7:1 – onto the 4-perf, 35mm frame. In projection, a similar anamorphic lens un-squeezed the image to produce a final projected aspect ratio of 2.66:1 on an enormous 64 by 24 foot curved screen. Because of the magnetic stereophonic soundtrack attached to the film, the aspect ratio had to be reduced to 2.55:1 (the

³⁸ Belton, p.113

dimensions of the first CinemaScope films) and with the later employment of optical sound, it was further reduced to 2.35:1 – today what most consider the typical widescreen ratio.

Although it was introduced and made viable by 20th Century Fox, the technology itself was not invented at Hollywood. Anamorphic optics were developed in the 1920's by the French professor Henri Chrétien who created a lens he baptized the Hypergonar, 'a taking and projection lens which compressed a wide horizontal angle of view onto 35mm film.' Chrétien's initial idea was the possibility to project pictures on a large, cross-shaped theatre screen that, as well as show a classic 1.33:1 image, could present a 'panoramic 2.66:1 image and a 1:2.66 tall image.'³⁹ Chrétien saw a potential market for his invention in the film industry, which coincidentally was experimenting with its first widescreen attempts at about the same time. The original Hypergonar lens was used for parts of *Construire un Feu* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1927), *La Femme et le Rossignol* (André Hugon, 1929) and *La Merveilleuse Vie de Jeanne d'Arc* (Marco de Gastyne, 1929). In 1928, the French scientist entered negotiations with Paramount and other American studios but did not manage to spark real interest in his invention.⁴⁰ The technology was more than adequate for motion picture production like envisioned by Chrétien; however, the industry was not ready to accept the widescreen tide just yet and Professor Chrétien had to wait for another two decades to sell his invention to Hollywood. CinemaScope is in fact Chrétien's creation, brought forward to the industry's frontline by a Hollywood major at a time when the film business needed it the most. As André Bazin pointed out in 1953, 'Cinerama, which is little more than Abel Gance's triple screen, and CinemaScope, which was invented twenty-five years ago by Professor Chrétien, seem

³⁹ Belton, p.40

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.43

viable all of a sudden because of the interest that America has shown in them now that the moviemaking business is in decline.’⁴¹

After the Cinerama phenomenon, the major studios entered a sort of “widescreen race”, each fighting for the acquisition or development of a process that would provide for a comparable experience to that of the triple screen. 20th Century Fox executives, threatened to be taken over by stockholders, quickly set themselves ahead of the race and, after months of negotiations made a deal with Henri Chrétien in February 1953 for the acquisition of his Hypergonar lenses; only one day before the French professor was in turn contacted by Warner Brothers. Chrétien’s patents had expired by this time and were available to the public but this is where Fox secured its success at acquiring an anamorphic format first: they agreed with Chrétien to use *his* lenses, instead of the rights to the patent for a subsequent design of their own. In the same month as the Chrétien deal, Fox started principal photography on its first CinemaScope productions.⁴²

Even before securing Chrétien’s Hypergonar, 20th Century Fox made the announcement that all its subsequent films would be made in CinemaScope.⁴³ Fox was the first one but for the other majors, the race was not over. However, Scope proved the better of most; MGM, which allegedly had been doing research into a similar system, ‘in the interest of uniformity’ allied with Fox ‘in making available one system to production and exhibition.’⁴⁴ Warner Bros, after a failed deal with Zeiss to produce anamorphic lenses, signed with Fox to make pictures in CinemaScope. United Artists, Disney, Columbia, all expressed their interest in producing films in anamorphic Scope. Only Paramount resisted and eventually developed its own successful widescreen format: VistaVision, a large format that used a 35mm negative

⁴¹ *Will CinemaScope Save the Cinema?*, in *The Velvet Light Trap* n°21, Summer 1985, p.9

⁴² Belton, pp.117-122

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.119

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 123

exposed horizontally yielding an 8-perf sized frame, reduced in printing to the conventionally sized 4-perf 35mm to produce a very sharp, almost grain-less image with an aspect ratio of 1.66:1.⁴⁵ Although not an anamorphic format, the original VistaVision image was larger, more defined than an anamorphic picture, and theatres were able to exhibit it without the major enlargements to fit the enormous Scope films; in this way Paramount arguably secured its position in the widescreen world without surrendering to Fox's own brand.



Fig. 2: Advertisement for *The Robe* (1953)

An emerging aesthetic: CinemaScope's technical issues and *The Robe* (1953)

‘In all the arts, to be sure, progress depends upon technique’ says Bazin⁴⁶. The development of an aesthetic in any art is deeply rooted within the arts limitations. Although publicity makes no mention of it, and critics were mostly positive about the widescreen phenomenon, the first years of CinemaScope were above all underlined by the processes technical restrictions. As a result, the emergent aesthetic was highly influenced by the

⁴⁵ Belton, pp.122-127

⁴⁶ *Will CinemaScope save the Cinema?*, p.9

technological problems the medium yielded; in a way it arose as a way to deal with them. The technology was young and imperfect and filmmakers had to learn how to use the still very limited equipment and this greatly affected the way in which the first Scope films were shot and staged. This explains the short lifespan of the CinemaScope brand (before the issues were solved and the more flexible Panavision format was released). However, Scope was marketed as a spectacle not to be missed and like with Cinerama, emphasis was put rather on the dimension of the screen and the stereophonic sound than on the stories and stars to attract audiences into the theatres. This also led to a specific visual approach by the filmmakers, encouraged by the studios to accentuate the widescreen in their staging and camera positioning, not to mention the studios' preference for stories of an epic-nature, stories that called for large amounts of extras, crowds to fill the screen.

The first CinemaScope film to be released was *The Robe* in 1953, directed by Henry Koster and photographed by Leon Shamroy. By looking at the film's publicity (Fig. 2) 20th Century Fox's efforts to promote its new "miracle you can see without glasses" rather than the movie are clear. The effort proved fruitful – *The Robe* received Oscar nominations for best picture and best colour cinematography and was the highest grossing movie of the decade, making '\$25 million worldwide'.⁴⁷ Yet, everyone did not share the excitement; Belton quotes Paramount's chairman at the time, who 'insisted that Fox's emphasis on technology had blinded it to its chief responsibility, which was to make good movies.'⁴⁸ Simply looking at the poster, one can conclude that *The Robe* was made in awe of its own process; arguably the studios and filmmakers trusted too much in the "spectacular" nature of the widescreen to create an impact. Despite its initial success, *The Robe* is only remembered as the first CinemaScope release; the direct reason for its success was the format. The *Time Out* film

⁴⁷ Bordwell (2007), p. 288

⁴⁸ *Widescreen Cinema*, p.124

guide's review reads: 'turgid direction (...) is married to creaky dialogue and stiff performances to render this of purely historical interest.'⁴⁹ Truly, of historical interest it is; films like *The Robe* marked a change, and it is revealing to look at it as made under the shadow of the technological wonder of CinemaScope, before going into an analysis of the aesthetic changes brought the widescreen over the whole process of filmmaking.

'*The Robe* (...), and innumerable other Scope items look lumbering and archaic, largely because of constraints built into the first wave of technology'⁵⁰ – "largely" but not exclusively. Watching it today, it is evident *The Robe* relies on the supposedly inherent spectacle of CinemaScope and thus still clings on to Cinerama's "theme park essence"; it is still a "show" – watching it on a smaller screen, without the breadth of a large curved screen, the film is essentially two and a half hours of ensemble shots that, if not for a few exceptions, struggle to keep your attention. Nonetheless, its impact at the time is undeniable. *This is Cinerama* or even Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895) had a tremendous effect upon its contemporary audiences, but they are quite tedious bits of film once watched outside of their initial contexts. These were made to be a spectacle, something extraordinary, easily relatable to the theme park attraction or the fair. Disneyland's 4-D attraction *Honey I Shrank the Audience*⁵¹ is perhaps as memorable and spectacular than any 3-D film since the recent impact of *Avatar* (2010), which propelled 3-D cinema into the mainstream of the film industry. 3-D is suited for theme parks, and has entertained audiences for decades long before it developed its own production/distribution standard. Today, conventional narrative movies in 3 dimensions enjoy worldwide success but their survival is questionable. Just like *The Robe* suffers from its reliance on the novelty, narrative 3-D cinema suffers from the fact that it brings the movies back too close to the spectacle, to the fairground where the cinema was

⁴⁹ Thompson, in *Time Out's Film Guide 2007*, p. 979

⁵⁰ Bordwell (2007), p.290

⁵¹ Opened first in the United States in 1994.

born – bringing attention away from the core that is the narrative and its characters. This separation of the medium of film from the notion of spectacle is essential for the birth of an aesthetic and the progress of a narrative cinematic art. *The Robe* also suffers from the technical limitations of the equipment at the time, and the filmmakers' inexperience with it, but these are unrelated to its narrative content; we only need to look at other early CinemaScope films like *A Star is Born* (1954) or *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), or even turn to silent movies to realize that emotions on the screen or simply gripping stories are not made void by technological limitations, but rather depend on the filmmaker's decision making, its use of the medium's advantages as well as its limitations to tell a story.

As Belton puts it, 'even though CinemaScope remained associated with classical narrative films, it introduced a level of visual spectacle that often threatened to overwhelm the narrative.'⁵² Perhaps it would be more indicated to say that the filmmaker's reliance on the "visual spectacle" as something inherent to the medium "threatened to overwhelm the narrative". *The Robe* is such a film, it is clear only by looking at its promotion campaign. Advertising for *The Robe* was essentially a campaign promoting CinemaScope, and not only in the United States. In this German poster (Fig. 3) note the exaggeration of the curved screen and the robe reaching out into the room. The audience is not so much encouraged to watch the new biblical epic story with Richard Burton and Jean Simmons, but rather to witness the "miracle" of the immense curved screen.

⁵² *Widescreen Cinema*, p.194



Fig. 3: German poster for *The Robe*

Just like its advertising campaign, *The Robe* can be seen as an exhibit of the CinemaScope technology, which would explain the little effort put into the narrative. Nonetheless, the aesthetic revolution starts here, and to comprehend its growth, one must start here too. The film opens with the 20th Century Fox fanfare over a red theatre curtain and then gives way to the “presents a CinemaScope picture” title – already showing the emphasis on technology, isolating it before the movie’s title and credits. After the credits, the curtains open directly on to the first shot of the film, a very wide high angle of a Roman square. The intention could not be more obvious; the red curtain physically opens, reminding us of music halls and stage shows, not only intensifying that moment when audiences first watched the spectacle of the CinemaScope but also emphasising the size and width of the screen with the horizontal movement of the curtains, and the very wide shot, impressing the audience before a story even starts. *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953), the second CinemaScope picture to be released features an even more exaggerated display of this device. Like *The Robe*, the film opens on a curtain with the words “A CinemaScope picture”; the curtain slides open on a wide shot of an orchestra performing a concert. The camera moves in, tracks to the side and moves back out, cuts to various angles on the musicians. For more than 5 minutes we are watching the orchestra perform until the music is over and the maestro turns

to the camera and takes a bow. It is a sort of overture but instead of the usual title screen with the film's main soundtrack, it presents the actual concert. It is pure gratuitous spectacle, exhibiting the technology just for the sake of showing, shouting out to the public that CinemaScope can both bring the audience into a concert hall to enjoy a grand stereophonic spectacle – similar to Cinerama's travelogue experiences – and provide a classic, intimate film story. Today, watching it at home, in our living rooms on our Television screen we notice the ridicule of this device. Just like *This is Cinerama*, it cannot survive past an initial craze for spectacular giant screens and we realise that emotion in the theatre is not achieved this way; what the cinema truly lives off is not spectacle but stories; the stories are enough.





Fig. 4: *The Robe*'s market sequence: Galio's encounters with Demetrius, Diana and Caligula.

The Robe's director Henry Koster praises the CinemaScope's ability to show 'great crowd scenes' and 'the blessing of being almost constantly in close-up – and close-ups not of a single person, but of two, three or half a dozen simultaneously.' Describing his approach to a certain scene, he says: 'I placed my camera in a central spot and forgot about it.'⁵³ *The Robe*'s first sequence (Fig. 4), the slave market, displays this aesthetic quite clearly and can be used to exemplify Koster's directorial approach as a whole. Tribune Galio (Richard Burton) walks about in the market while merchants sell their "products", a great crowd filling up the frame from edge to edge at all times. Each of the protagonist's three encounters with the secondary characters – Demetrius (Victor Mature), Galio's future slave turned friend; Diana (Jean Simmons), his love interest; Caligula (Jay Robinson), the antagonist – is shown in an ensemble shot, the whole action played out before the camera, which does not move or highlight one character or another – 'placed in a central spot and forgot about', as if the scene was happening on a stage. The three encounters do not contrast noticeably with one another; the shot size is always approximately the same. Perhaps the scene between Galio and Diana is approached as a slightly more intimate meeting, with a less crowded frame, emphasising the two soon-to-be lovers and for the first time employing an instance of shot-reverse-shot. Nevertheless, most of their interaction is played in a two shot, the edges of frame always

⁵³ in Quigley, p.17

filled in a way that will attract the viewer's eye (if nothing else because of the colour contrasts): the stiff guard, his blue tunic against the yellow edge of the curtain; the blue-green tent pole and the legionnaires' red helmets. Darryl F. Zanuck's⁵⁴ claim that CinemaScope films should 'take full advantage of the scope, size and physical action'⁵⁵, added to *The Robe*'s publicity above all promoting CinemaScope, makes it clear that the aforementioned aesthetic was not so much a directorial decision encouraged by the narrative, but arguably born out of the need to promote the new format and keep the audience at all times conscious of the breadth of the screen.

The articles dedicated to *The Robe* in Quigley's *New Screen Techniques* manifest excitement and a sense of newfound freedom from the filmmakers – 'Now, more than ever before in motion pictures, he [the director] has room in which to work'⁵⁶. But the film itself tells another story; its aesthetic is driven as much by the need to promote the wide screen, as it is a way to deal with the numerous technical restrictions of the medium at the time. However enthusiastic Koster's statements may be, according to Bordwell, Quigley's book, 'a string of articles signed by the craftsmen (but probably authored by the publicists) sought to turn the system's limitations into advantages.'⁵⁷ Bordwell points to Koster's problem solving attitude rather than his enthusiasm: 'if we kept actors in the same spot, the focus was all right.'⁵⁸ These are not words of excitement; it goes to show that Koster did not have so much "room in which to work," and it would explain why *The Robe* feels so static and the shots little varied. In effect, *The Robe*'s production was beset by the CinemaScope's numerous technical issues and, having to deal with them for the first time, the filmmakers opted for an approach that was

⁵⁴ Darryl F. Zanuck, 20th Century Fox head of production from 1944 to 1956, was an important figure in the promotion of CinemaScope and the shift to widescreen.

⁵⁵ in Bordwell (2007), p.287

⁵⁶ in Quigley, p.171

⁵⁷ *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 292

⁵⁸ Henry Koster in Bordwell (2007), p. 291

essentially a way around the problems. This approach led to the birth of a widescreen aesthetic, as the equipment bettered and filmmakers became more experienced with it.

The first CinemaScope lenses consisted of a spherical prime lens with an anamorphic attachment in front – the company Bausch & Lomb, using the Chrétien formula, later made these combinations into a single unit. Other than requiring a substantially increased amount of light, the lens and the attachment had to be focused separately, which would explain the reluctance by the filmmaker to rely on camera moves, instead opting for a stage-like approach in which the action progresses horizontally and not in depth. Depth of field was not ideal and overall, the lenses gave best results when the camera was placed further away from the scene, which justifies the over-use of the ensemble shot in *The Robe* and the avoidance of the close-up, even when this is necessary. Two scenes where Galio is affected by the robe's touch, after Jesus' crucifixion and when he returns to Palestine lack the tracking shot or cut getting us closer to the Roman tribune as the touch of the cloth throws him in a state of agony; instead they rely on shots showing the whole action without discrimination of a specific detail, and Richard Burton's theatrical fits of pain. The lack of the cut or tracking shot in these scenes make us somewhat confused as to what is happening, Burton's screams are not convincing and there is no shift in the visual language to show us that something is happening to the character, that he is beginning to change after the touch of Jesus' robe against his skin. At the time of production, Fox had at their disposal only a handful of Chrétien formula lenses, which they distributed across several productions. *The Robe* was shot entirely on a single 50mm lens, which further constricted the filmmaker to one place.

Moreover, early anamorphic lenses – independently of the developer – were far from perfect and presented various distortions. The most noticeable issue was the uneven compression across the horizontal axis, added to uneven magnification, which made characters at the edge of frame appear thinner out of proportion and figures at the centre

appear swollen, giving them what Bordwell calls “CinemaScope mumps”⁵⁹. The squeeze variations across the screen would be more perceptible if the camera moved, so tracking shots were unadvised. In turn, the “mumps” became more evident the closer the actor was to the camera, so the convention was established quickly that in CinemaScope, close-ups were to be avoided. For this reason, *The Robe* and subsequent CinemaScope productions make little use of the close-up. Furthermore, an actor in a close-up was more likely to catch the “mumps” if he was in centre-frame so another convention arose: placing faces off-centred, leaving the other half empty or with a foreground or background; so framed an actor’s face would be less likely swollen by the lens’s distortion. Victor Mature’s off-centred close-up as he looks up at an unseen Jesus on the cross, perhaps the closest shot in *The Robe*, proves that close-ups in CinemaScope are not so ineffective after all – even with the earliest, most limited equipment there was a need and place for them – yet the rest of the movie seems to avoid them religiously.

⁵⁹ *Poetics of Cinema*, p.288



Fig. 5: Anamorphic lens aberrations in *The Robe*

Fig. 5 exemplifies the issues caused by lens aberrations in CinemaScope films. In the first example we notice the limited depth of field, the critical loss of quality and lens astigmatism towards the edges in the out-of-focus areas – clearly noticeable on the far right where the legionnaire is standing. Then there is the uneven squeeze across the horizontal axis; the two protagonists clearly suffer from the “mumps”, especially Jean Simmons who stands in centre frame and appears distinctively swollen. On the other hand, figures on the far edges of the screen appear slightly pinched which renders the swell on central figures further noticeable. This particular issue is more discernible in the second example; Jean Simmons, close to the right edge of the frame appears oddly thin, especially since she is set against Richard Burton, who in this case is rendered more naturally. The barrel distortion of the lens is also visible in the columns towards the edges of the frame and it further distorts Simmons’ figure. The depth of field problem is also present, the lens being unable to focus on the whole

scene, leaving Richard Burton slightly unfocused; focusing on a subject further away from the camera is a solution, as the overall depth of field in the shot is acceptable except for Burton who stands closest to the lens.

The optical problems associated with CinemaScope did not go unnoticed; ‘audiences didn’t seem to mind the flaws, but the professional community boiled with complaints about anamorphic widescreen.’⁶⁰ A format that would cause such primitive problems such as actors having bloated faces in close-ups and uneven, short depth of field restricting camera movement and depth was not welcome in a Hollywood cinema whose aesthetic had successfully relied on those devices for half a century. In 1955, cinematographer Charles G. Clarke wrote his *Photographic Techniques of CinemaScope Pictures*. Published by 20th Century Fox, Clarke provided a ‘guide for shooting’ in a format that ‘needed more defending’⁶¹ and described various solutions for common problems: use the over-the-shoulder shot for close-ups, spread action horizontally, work at high exposure levels to maximize depth-of-field and light with higher contrast to preserve image sharpness. However, the pamphlet-like text, which aimed at dismantling misconceptions about the anamorphic widescreen and gave advice for a “safe” use of Scope, was most likely just another move by Fox to promote its own brand and convince the industry of its value with claims such as ‘there is no longer any reason to doubt that they [CinemaScope pictures] are, here to stay or that other competitive methods will supersede them’⁶² and ‘theatre attendance has been recaptured since the advent of CinemaScope pictures’⁶³.

⁶⁰ Bordwell (2007), p.292

⁶¹ Ibid, p.293

⁶² Clarke, p.13

⁶³ Ibid, p.12



Fig. 6: The final pursuit in *The Robe*

Clarke mentions the common human ‘reluctance to accept new ideas’⁶⁴. This “reluctance”, in an industry used to old methods, made the technical issues of the widescreen seem more serious than they really were. Although the filmmakers had to deal with countless problems, the general ineffectiveness of a particular piece cannot be blamed on the technology. *The Robe* is not all constricted mise-en-scène, lens aberrations and out of focus shots; it manages to use the CinemaScope format effectively at times, showing scenes in a way that had not been done in the past on the square format. In some instances, one could say that Koster even goes so far as to ignore the technical issues that seem to drive most of the film’s mise-en-scène, yielding scenes with added impact; A shot of running horses (Fig. 6), spread across the widescreen during the final horse-carriage pursuit sticks to mind. Though *The Robe* mostly shows the constraints of the medium – the filmmaker pushed into a corner by the need to show off the technology – Koster and Shamroy understood they were working with a format that provided films with a new type of visual impact.

CinemaScope films might have been filled with lens aberrations and depth of field problems, but in no instance does it prove a distraction for the audience, which only asks to be taken into the world of the story – in other ways than through a gigantic curved screen. *A Star*

⁶⁴ Clarke, p.1

is Born (George Cukor, 1954), *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957) to a certain extent all suffer the same technical issues caused by the equipment's imperfections. Nonetheless all three are considered landmarks of filmmaking, still praised today and able to move modern audiences with their stories and characters, even if do they appear swollen in a few close-ups. If *The Robe* cannot boast such a significant place in the history of cinema, it is mainly due to the filmmakers' reliance on the widescreen as a then unseen participative spectacle, and the corner he was pushed into following the general reservations towards the medium's capabilities; which combined make the film a poor effort, 'of purely historical interest'.

'CinemaScope didn't catch on as quickly as sound, or as widely as color, but the emergence of the format signalled that widescreen film was here to stay.'⁶⁵ It was the advent of CinemaScope that finally opened the door to a new aesthetic and assured the widescreen its stability and importance as a medium henceforth to be used for what always made cinema such an influential medium: storytelling. Nevertheless, despite the craze of the early 1950's, CinemaScope itself was not long lived. Other widescreen formats were proving their stability compared to the problem-stricken Scope, namely VistaVision. Although large format shooting continued to be an exception, 70mm releases such as films shot in the MGM Camera 65 system yielded unsurpassed results. By the end of the decade, CinemaScope was ultimately substituted by the Panavision format. Panavision's lenses contained the anamorphic element at the rear of the lens, providing 'increased sharpness and light-gathering power' and most of the optical problems were corrected, particularly the astigmatism and the uneven compression across the image; the "Scope mumps", the facial distortion of actors shot up-close, was gone. Developed for MGM Camera 65, which became Ultra Panavision 70 in the 1960's, Panavision anamorphic lenses were used on an increasing number of productions until *Ben-*

⁶⁵ Bordwell (2007), p.282

Hur (William Wyler, 1959), whose success ‘secured the company’s reputation.’⁶⁶ Panavision freed the Scope format – the 2.35:1 image – of many of its restrictions and the format still bears the Panavision brand today. CinemaScope died as Panavision was born; its technology however, the anamorphic optics, Professor Chrétien’s invention, survived and continued being a popular and important tool for filmmakers until this day. The fact is, whatever brand names a process may bear, the widescreen ultimately became the film industry’s standard of today; CinemaScope was the spark. Only since ‘Scope can we consider a widescreen aesthetic as the format progressively elevated the technology out of the field of sheer spectacle into that of an industry standard. In other words, it became a way to tell stories on the screen.

⁶⁶ Bordwell (2007), p.288-9

Staging the Widescreen film.

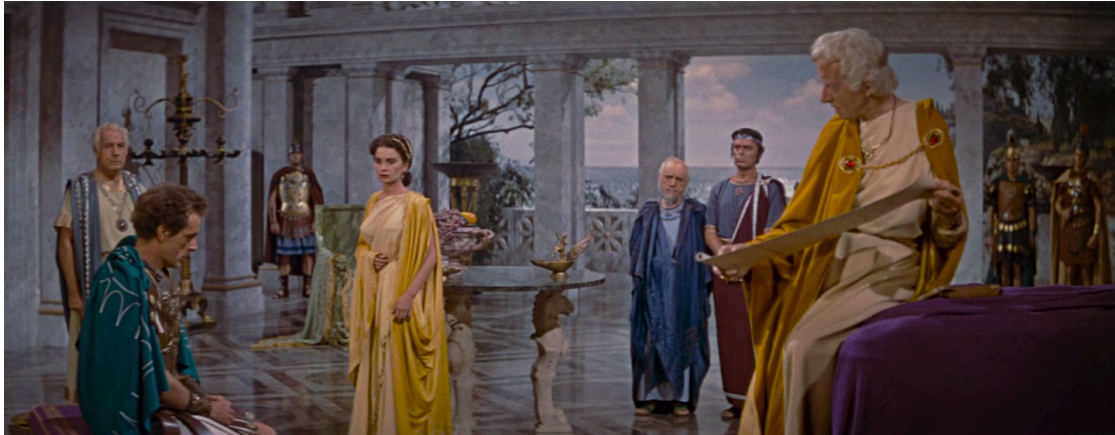


Fig. 7: “Clothesline” staging in *The Robe*

Scenes that were staged for a square format must be staged differently now that the screen is twice as wide. However, upon examining how the staging evolved from one format to the other, it is apparent that methods and stylistic choices adapted to the width rather than changed, and that widescreen did not entirely advance new methods exclusive to the format. ‘Faced with the new technology, most artists try to fit tools to familiar traditions and work routines.’⁶⁷ In truth, the aesthetic is born mostly out of adapting known methods to the new shape of the screen – the same is true to the introduction of sound not changing visual storytelling devices established in silent filmmaking. In fact, the widescreen pushed directors to re-invent themselves, to sort of start at the beginning again. In doing so new possibilities arise as different filmmakers with different styles take risks and gain maturity within the medium.

The most prevalent approach to staging in widescreen films, and the most immediately noticeable, is what Bordwell calls “clothesline staging”. Filmmakers would often spread the action to encompass the whole breadth of the frame thus amplifying the horizontal dimension

⁶⁷ Bordwell (2013) *CinemaScope: The modern miracle you see without glasses*, Video Lecture.

of the image – the real novelty of the widescreen. Darryl F. Zanuck encouraged directors to use the full width of the screen, to ‘keep people spread out’ so the public would fully experience the novelty.⁶⁸ *The Robe* uses this style extensively (Fig. 7), the characters almost always kept on a full shot and the blocking usually progresses horizontally, across the same focus plane.



Fig. 8: Clothesline staging in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955)

Fig. 8 is a classic example of “clothesline” staging. At the same time as using the full width of the screen, it tells the story visually and dramatically. The group of youngsters is looking down the cliff where their friend’s car crashed. The main character is highlighted in the shot, the colour as well as the composition directing our eye towards him and his reaction as he realizes the other guy didn’t make it.

Director George Cukor protested: ‘I don’t know how the hell to direct people in a row. Nobody stands in rows!’⁶⁹ “Standing in rows” is an exaggeration; it is likely that during the CinemaScope years, the technical limitations and the studios’ desire to take advantage of the width of the screen pushed certain filmmakers into a corner – naturally they recurred to the most basic staging methods when facing difficulties – and so it is assumed when shooting in widescreen, the director was restricted to staging the action in a flat, theatrical way; in a

⁶⁸ Ward, p.106

⁶⁹ in Bordwell (2007), p. 300

“row”. However, the medium was more flexible than that; when faced with different examples, one concludes that the one factor that drives the aesthetic, more than the technological reach of any format, is the narrative and how the filmmaker uses his tools. Cukor complains but his *A Star is Born* (1954) remains an important milestone in the *mise-en-scène* aesthetic of widescreen. Even though Warner Bros imposed CinemaScope on Cukor – to compete with other productions – the film proves that the technical restrictions do not necessarily have a negative influence on the aesthetic; more readily it benefits from the widescreen. The film is filled with long takes that evolve from wide sceneries into closer exchanges between the characters, preserving the intimate nature of certain scenes without a want for close-ups; and surprisingly, it happens that Cukor’s characters do “stand in rows” often and very naturally after all.



Fig. 9: Staging and widescreen in *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954)

This shot (Fig. 9) is a long take starting close at the mirror; the make-up artists examine Judy Garland’s face, thinking what to do with her. They realise “it’s the nose!” and move away from her and the camera tracks back into a relatively wide clothesline composition. The main make-up man lets out a loud sigh, the camera moves further back and

the shot evolves into an even wider shot as the three men move away to a secluded corner of the room to further discuss, while Garland tries to overhear them and we get to see her worried expression on the mirror, which remains centred at all times. The width of the screen is fully used in each of the three parts of the sequence and they all transmit different information, therefore developing the story. The magnifying glass is worth putting forward, as it provides an extreme close-up of her features as the men are examining them; there is no need to cut and Cukor extracts a little humour out of the shot, at the same time showing what the scene is about – her face. A similar device is used in a much wider shot later in the film (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Esther (Judy Garland) receives an Oscar in *A Star is Born*

In this scene Judy Garland receives an academy award and as she gives her acceptance speech, a screen on the right side of the frame shows an image of her. The image on the screen closes in on her and suddenly we perceive a TV camera on the left side, approaching her. By the end of the shot, we see her face reasonably close on the TV screen, while the shot is still framing the whole stage and the audience. Perhaps the device brings attention to her emotional state even more than if the classical cut would have been employed. This is the work of a director who didn't want to shoot people "in rows" and who is evidently looking for a diverse approach to express the story in widescreen. The scene is a culmination for the main character; how to deal with it without having her in the middle of the screen, simply framed

by people in the foreground? This example truly shows the development of a *mise-en-scène* aesthetic; the scene could not have been shot this way with any other format, it lives off the widescreen. Decidedly, Cukor went around the problems that the CinemaScope seemed to pose for him and the result is a film that survives the test of time better than several other early widescreen movies.



Fig. 11: *Klute* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971)

As time passed and anamorphic cinematography became perfected, notably since the advent of Panavision, the carefully composed “clothesline” shot became less and less frequent especially in the 1970’s, where direction and camerawork became relatively free of conventions. Nonetheless it did not die. Figs. 11 and 12 are more modern examples of “clothesline” staging, more abstract perhaps and at the same time more natural than the carefully organized scenes from the 50’s.



Fig. 12: *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974)

Like above mentioned, however encouraged the first widescreen filmmakers were to stage their pictures in “clothesline” ensembles, the method was not born in the 1950’s. In truth, silent films were already being staged horizontally (Fig. 13). If a horizontal staging is more apparent on a wider format, it is because ‘a very wide horizontal screen emphasises scenic display’⁷⁰ and so it is easy to misidentify the method as being exclusive to the wider screen. What the widescreen does, because of the prominence of the horizontal dimension is to call attention to the theatrical nature of certain staging practices and so, the shift to the format pushed filmmakers to use the techniques more creatively. The result can be seen in examples like *A Star is Born*, which despite Cukor’s complaints shows an inventive use of the “clothesline staging”.

⁷⁰ Kohler, p. 122



Fig. 13: Lateral staging in *Die Nibelungen* (Fritz Lang, 1924) and *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931)

One cannot say that lateral staging is more effective in widescreen than in academy ratio, nor the opposite; this is true of any practice in any screen format. Both screen ratios are rich in their own possibilities of combining different methods and styles – the vision of the filmmaker has always been the deciding factor in that sense. Aesthetics evolve out of their predecessors. *Citizen Kane* might have popularized the use of deep focus cinematography, but film scenes were being staged in depth as early as *Nosferatu* and Orson Welles himself chose that approach after watching John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). Likewise, CinemaScope or widescreen in general did not create new forms of staging for the camera, unachievable without the width. Many approaches that use the widescreen at the service of the narrative can be traced back to the Academy aspect ratio. To analyse a development, identify what the widescreen brings – or takes away – to the *mise-en-scène*, is fundamental for a study of its aesthetics; In what way does the staging benefit from the width and how does it become in widescreen compared to how it might have been in the square format.

In any aspect ratio, spatial relationships are an important aspect of the *mise-en-scène*, which is inevitably influenced by the shape of the screen. The large horizontal dimension of the widescreen gives the filmmaker more space to stage the characters across the same frame,

according to their relationship in the story. It is fair to assume that the possibilities for telling the story visually – through the positioning of characters across the screen – are improved, simply because there is more space for the people to move. The coming together of two characters might be enhanced or downplayed by an empty vastness around them; the conflict between two people may be highlighted with a great gap between them; a character isolated opposite a group of people may represent this character's conflict or situation. Where characters stand in relation to each other and the camera is a fundamental characteristic of visual storytelling; as the screen dimension changes, this important part of the staging is unavoidably affected.



Fig. 14: Spatial relationships in *Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annakin, 1965)

Taking an example from the particularly wide Ultra Panavision 70 format⁷¹, Fig. 14 shows a common arrangement of characters within a scene. The extremely wide frame allows the camera to be at an acceptable distance for both the subjects and the environment but above all, it provides the space to divide the characters within the shot in such a way as to tell the story. In *Battle of the Bulge* (1965), American Coronel Kiley (on the right of the screen) keeps suspecting the Germans will launch an attack even though it is widespread belief that they are

⁷¹ Ultra Panavision 70 and MGM Camera 65: brands of Panavision's anamorphic 70mm format. The system used 65mm negative and the lenses provided a 1.25x anamorphic compression. Projected on 70mm print with an aspect ratio of 2.76:1

weakened and vulnerable. In this scene, Kiley's superiors Colonel Pritchard and the General (on the left) argue with him over the improbability of the Americans suffering a German attack and question his military experience. Visual conflict is crucial in this situation where characters are all "on the same side"; they are all one unit: the Americans, fighting against a common enemy: the Germans. Within this unit, the protagonist Kiley (Henry Fonda) is convinced against everyone else's opinion that there is imminent danger and tries to warn his fellow officers, who keep pushing him back with arguments and reasons for the contrary. In the army, a soldier must follow orders and not question his superior officers. In this backdrop, when the soldier's opinions conflict with his superiors, he is not strictly at liberty to act upon it. This situation calls for a visual representation of the conflict; in this image the distance between the characters bears great narrative significance. The General (Robert Ryan) and Colonel Prichard (Dana Andrews) form a visual unit on the left of frame, a unit that carries great visual weight. Not only are they close together, creating a sort of visual stability, they are also supported by the shape of the tree in the background and the red flag to the extreme left – a dominant in the picture, unique and complementary in colour to the rest of the image: The officers are backed by the flag, they make the decisions, they are in charge. On the other side of the desk, across the screen is Kiley: the opposing unit, somewhat framed between the lamp and edge of the screen, with little visual weight compared to the left portion of the scene, but he is nonetheless strong in its verticality, as is his character with his convictions. The width of the screen gives these two units more space for each to "breathe" and so calls attention to their contrast, their visual relationship – therefore to the characters' relationship, the conflict between them. The simple positioning of the actors and the furniture in the space tells the whole story of the scene in one image, the widescreen being used to create spatial distance and give different weight to different visual elements across the frame, equating to the drama being played before the audience.

Moderating distances and depicting spatial relationships is of course not new to widescreen, being almost the core of *mise-en-scène* for the cinema. The widescreen is efficient for it allows for many elements to be included in the frame, each of them liable to be used to accentuate a certain part of the space or the position of a certain character in relation to the others. Furthermore, it allows to stage characters far apart still keeping them relatively close to the camera, with long empty spaces between each other, which some might condemn as being unrealistic but in truth can be a powerful dramatic visual tool. Nonetheless, distance was as important and equally achievable using the Academy ratio and sometimes, a smaller frame allowing for smaller distances between characters could yield greater tension or drama.

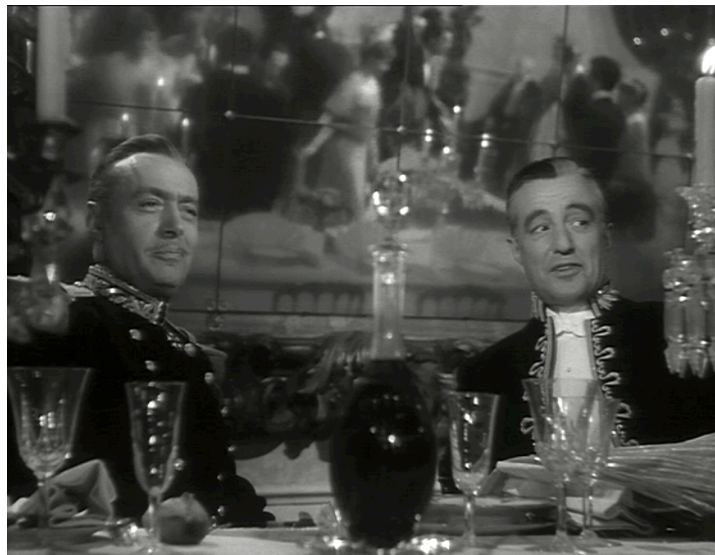


Fig. 15: Spatial relationship in *Madame De...* (Max Ophüls, 1953)

Fig. 15 not only shows how versatile the 4:3 aspect ratio can be, it is also a great example of how it can be used to create distance, even without a screen that is twice as wide. Max Ophüls' *Madame De...* (1953) is set in Paris, among the aristocracy of the *Belle Époque*; a milieu in which one was expected to keep a respectable social appearance, even against personal motivations. At the same time, it was usual for married men and women to have affairs, as long as the marriage's public image remained unstained. At a graphic level, this environment can compare to the army of *Battle of the Bulge*: ideal for the creation of visual

conflict through spatial relationships between characters that must keep their quarrels to themselves. General André (Charles Boyer) is married to Louise (Danielle Darieux), the film's protagonist. She is in love with the Baron Donatti (Vittorio De Sica) and struggles to keep it a secret from her husband. The General however does not pretend not to know, but for him it is important to preserve a reputable image even though their marriage is, in his own words, "only superficially superficial". Superficiality is a primary theme in *Madame De...* Suffice it to say that the development of the plot is driven by the journey of two diamond earrings; the characters only take real action when the earrings are concerned, leading to their estrangement and the final duel between the General and Donatti. The scene depicted in Fig. 15 is the first time the General and Donatti are together on screen. The moment before, we learn they know each other well. In this scene, they are discussing Louise as they watch her dancing with another man. The General encourages Donatti to befriend her in his teasing manner but warns him against her "outrageous coquetry". They laugh and are friendly, but we know as much as they that there is a competition between them. Dramatically, their relationship leads to the gunfight at the end; visually, they are already duelling in this first shared scene. Since their dialogue and friendliness are deceitful, it is up to the *mise-en-scène* to show the truth, the staging clearly pointing out to the men's conflict. Both are kept against the edges of the frame, the General on the far left, Donatti on the right; being so staged, with the wine jar in the middle – a prominent shape drawing a clear line between them – our eye constantly jumps across the frame, from one side to the other. This simple direction of the audience's gaze tells the whole story between the characters and prepares us: these two men will become enemies (if they are not already). Enemies covered in social obligations and so acting like friends, but the image and the staging do not lie – contrarily to all characters in the film. One can argue that such visual approach would be enhanced by the widescreen because it can provide for more distance between subjects, but in this case it would have damaged the

effect. On a widescreen, using the edges of frame in the same way would have been impossible in this scene. Since the superficial apparent closeness between people is a central theme of the movie, the fact that the two men are physically close is defining. The frame not allowing for such a large gap, they sit close together; nevertheless our eye cannot help but to show us the reality behind the masks – the conflict – ping-ponging between the General and Donatti. As well as the strong horizontal dimension of the image, the mirror behind them is noteworthy. They talk about Louise as she dances on the floor that is reflecting in the mirror, adding great depth to the image and completing the visual story: The General and Donatti, Louise (the mirror) in between. The Academy aspect ratio does not seem so limited after all in *Madame De...* Max Ophüls' aesthetic depends on the space contained within the 1.37:1 frame and at no point yearns for the singularities of the widescreen.



Fig. 16: *Mise-en-scène* from Academy ratio to Widescreen

From Top: *Lawrence of Arabia* (D. Lean, 1962), *Citizen Kane* (O. Welles, 1941),
Gun Crazy (J. H. Lewis, 1950) and *Fistful of Dollars* (S. Leone, 1964).

It is clear upon exploring the subject that despite the transformation of the image, the widescreen owes its staging mostly to the Academy ratio and is not necessarily closer to the theatre because of its “clothesline” approach. By following traditions long established, filmmakers applied their styles and visual approaches to the wider screen thus creating the

new *mise-en-scène* aesthetic, evolved from its ancestors. Some of the most memorable widescreen films owe much of their aesthetic to the medium, but similar *mise-en-scène* can be found in countless examples from the square format; comparing them, it is clear that common staging practices were not abandoned (Fig. 16). Rather, the widescreen proved a new way to look at the same stage; the space of the scene did not change, only the eye looking at it. Films and their aesthetic owe less to their screen format than to the filmmaker's decision-making. As time passes and the cinema ages, with many different formats available, one must recognize the fact that the size of the image itself plays a role in the storytelling and so becomes a crucial part of the *mise-en-scène* and the storytelling.

Cinematography: Directing the eye and composition

‘It’s not made for men. It is made for snakes and funerals.’ Thus replies Fritz Lang when Michel Piccoli tells him how he likes CinemaScope in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963). Furthermore, Howard Hawks stated ‘if the CinemaScope size had been any good, painters would have used it more – they’ve been at it longer than we have.’⁷² Both these filmmakers were already veterans by the time widescreen made its appearance; their sceptical opinions of the format are comprehensible. But as we will see they were not entirely on the right track. Lang’s statement is a quote from another director’s film, but suffices to say that Lang plays himself in *Le Mépris* and that most of his films are shot in the academy ratio, with the exception of one or two examples. As for painters not using it, it is a simplistic argument, as there are numerous examples of paintings that prove that the widescreen proportions are not so inadequate for visual representation or storytelling. One immediate example of a scene depicted extensively in painting in such a way applicable to the subject is the last supper.



Fig. 17: Leonardo Da Vinci (1495-1498), *The Last Supper*. Milano: Santa Maria delle Grazie

⁷² in Bordwell (2007), p.292

Considering Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495-98) (Fig. 17), it is hardly likely that filmmakers working in widescreen did not look at such works for inspiration. Da Vinci clearly separates the arches from the scene and if we crop the image at the ceiling, we are left with about a 2:1 frame, essentially the same proportions as in a 'Scope picture. Moreover, the characters are positioned in such a way that probably influenced certain "clothesline" compositions. Many film directors have staged this scene. Pier Paolo Pasolini shoots a replica of the *Last Supper* as the wedding in *Mamma Roma* (1962), although it is probably more of a reference to Domenico Ghirlandaio's depiction of the scene (1480). In its Criterion Collection release, *Mamma Roma* is presented in a 1.85:1 aspect ratio, although it is likely that its original ratio is 1.66:1, very common in Europe. The 1.66:1 aspect ratio is a versatile format and proportionally, perhaps the best choice as it nears the golden ratio of 1.6180.

Nicholas Ray shot the scene in widescreen in *King of Kings* (1961) only utilizing a different strategy, perhaps modernizing it slightly, composing it not only horizontally but also vertically and framing it from a high angle highlighting the three-sided shape of the table, the cross shape that is recurrently shown in great width throughout the film – the aspect ratio becoming essential to the story (Fig. 18).



Fig. 18: The last supper in *King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray, 1961)

Looking at paintings from different centuries and artistic movements, we can see that painters did make use of similar proportions to that of widescreen or “staged” their paintings in ways that can reminisce a widescreen approach to image composition, thus proving that it does have its visual weight as a proportion, as a frame in which a story can be told visually, and appropriate for more than just “snakes and funerals”.



Leonardo Da Vinci (circa 1472-1475), *Annunciation*. Florence: Uffizi



Vittore Carpaccio (1502), *St. George and the Dragon*. Venice: Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni



Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1568), *The Parable of the Blind*. Naples: Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte



Edward Hopper (1942), *Nighthawks*. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago

Because of the tendency to keep the camera further back and the recurrent use of wide shots, the widescreen was photographically demanding. This permitted a progress of sorts in the way films were photographed and perhaps helped establish the notion of the cinematographer as a storyteller. Indeed if the director chooses a wider approach, with the action spread across the screen and possibly using long takes, there still needs to be a work of selection. The spectator's eye needs to be guided, and it is the cinematographer's role to ensure that we know where to look. As noted by Bordwell, 'directors were particularly

worried about directing attention in the Scope frame⁷³. In the above mentioned last supper from *King of Kings* (Fig. 18) both composition and colour or tone lead our eye to the main character. He is centred, all three lines of the table lead to him and his robe is the brightest point of the image. Dramatically, he is the central figure in the scene, and so it is imperative that he fulfils the same position visually, as it in fact does. The scene shows Nicholas Ray's architectural sensibility and how he relied on the camera angle and the cinematography to complement his staging. The compositions are never cramped or confusing and the visuals play a dramatic part. Perhaps this is a reason why his work has a significant modern facet for the time.



Fig. 19: directing the eye in the frame. *King of Kings* (1961)

Light has been one of the most important tools used to direct the viewer's eye towards a specific subject in the frame since the earliest days of the cinema. In widescreen it is no different and if one agrees that on a wide format there is an additional need to direct the audience's eye, the technique becomes all the more relevant. In Fig. 19 we look where we look mainly because of the light and colour contrasts. The frame is overall underexposed and

⁷³ *The Poetics of Cinema*, pp.302-3

mostly red and brown in colour, with predominating shadows. The main focus is the queen who appears bright and coloured with a complementary green and a white highlight. It is a development from the constrained aesthetic of *The Robe*, in which subjects are placed across the same plane, but emphasis is seldom given to one or the other through light or colour, often resulting in a flat imagery. This shot is not staged in-depth, nor is the subject unnaturally close to the camera or the scene a complex sequence. It is simply a static shot, staged in a classic “clothesline” way. It is the light and colour that add considerable depth to an otherwise dull shot; the servants and guards always present in the palaces are still there but our attention does not divert to them, being focused on the dominant queen, the subject of the shot.



Fig. 20: Red colour attracting the eye to anticipate the story in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)

Taking a step further from guiding our eye so it doesn't wander aimlessly around the frame, is what Nicholas Ray does in *Rebel Without a Cause*, keeping the shots wide and using

the full width of the image, at the same time as directing our eye to specific subjects and using the composition in order to anticipate the narrative which is about to begin – telling us the story in a visual way before it unfolds in actions and dialogues. Fig. 20 is the fourth shot of the film. We only know that Jim (James Dean) is the protagonist, as the film opens on him, hence our natural focus on his actions. At the police station, as he gets pulled in to the counter to empty his pockets and for the officer to sign in his arrest, we see a vivid red shape in the background; our eyes keep being distracted by the saturated colour. The policeman pushes Jim against a wall and the shape takes form into Judy (Natalie Wood), dressed in a bright red coat. Our gaze sets upon her, and shifts back and forth from her to the protagonist as she hastily turns her head away not to be recognized. Simply by dressing her in an extremely saturated colour that contrasts with all the rest of the environment, Ray calls our attention to Judy. Her appearance provokes a visual disturbance (her look away from Jim causes an emotional reaction from the audience) and from the subsequent shot and the scene that follows, centred on her, we are given a confirmation that she holds an important role in the narrative and her side of the story can begin; eventually she and Jim will fall in love. When we first watch the film we do not know that, and so the red coat simply introduces her presence in the back of our minds. Upon watching the film a second time, the moment our eye is unconsciously attracted by her first apparition, the whole story of these two youngsters in love is reflected on that one image, the whole drama on the swift turning of her head.



Fig. 21: Visual storytelling in *Rebel Without a Cause*

The visual anticipation of the story works just as well in Fig. 20. In this case, the composition across the whole width of the CinemaScope screen is chiefly the vehicle of the emotion. The camera tracks away from Jim, leaving him on the right edge of the frame and centres on Plato (Sal Mineo), at the same time including Judy, now known to us, at the far left. *Rebel Without a Cause* centres on the triangle relationship between Jim, Plato and Judy. In this shot, their story is already being visually told to us. Our eye jumps from Jim, the protagonist standing farther away, with slightly more frame space around him, to Plato, to Judy. In here, Judy and Plato represent sort of a visual unit; our gaze is mainly focused on Jim but before even the main plot starts it is clear who his associates, his allies will be in his teenage struggle against the weak parental authority. The image prepares us for the story simply by composing the scene in this way, our eye being attracted to all three subjects, one at a time in the larger frame prior to their individual scenes that reveal each of the three's stories before they get connected and the three together become a unit, stronger than each individual.

Not all filmmakers seemed to share Nicholas Ray's sensibility for the use of lighting, framing and colour to direct the audience's eye. Bordwell quotes Fred Zinneman who complained about having to come up with 'large foreground pieces to hide at least one-third

of the screen'⁷⁴ in order to concentrate the audience's gaze on what is really important on the enormous screen. However, using the foreground to narrow down the frame and direct the eye is not necessarily a bad approach like Zinneman seems to think and it can be a powerful vehicle of visual drama if used in correlation with the story, as any device should. At that level, the widescreen offers countless possibilities, it is up to the filmmaker to use them effectively and not blame the format for its peculiarities.



Fig. 22: Widescreen Composition and story in *East of Eden* (1955)

This kind of imagery (Fig. 22) from *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955) wouldn't have worked nearly as well or not at all in the academy aspect ratio. The stairs occupy the near entirety of the picture, the couple being cornered to the side. The framing with the line of the rail gives the shot a certain abstraction, but the diagonal directs us very accurately to the couple and keeps the focus on them all throughout. As well as the photographic role it plays, it is essential that the diagonal trapping the couple fulfil a narrative effect. First of all, their love has been a forbidden one until that moment. In this scene, Abra (Julie Harris) tries to convince Cal (James Dean) to go into the bedroom (the lit door behind them) where Cal's father lies paralysed so father and son can finally forgive each other. Cal is a character besieged by the world and alienated from people around him, especially his father. He gets

⁷⁴ in Bordwell (2007), p. 303

himself more and more trapped as he tries to be accepted by others and make up for his own mistakes. Only in the very last moment of the film does he achieve his redemption next to his father and this is the scene before that. Abra acts as a link between the estranged father and son. Here, feeling lost and cornered, Cal gets a last push from Abra who tells him to stop crying and “go in there! Talk to him, before it’s too late.”



Fig. 23: Frame occlusion in *Klute* (A. J. Pakula, 1971)

Alan J. Pakula’s *Klute*’s (1971) visuals rely often on the purposefully exaggerated occlusion of most of the frame in order to show characters under a certain light (Fig. 23). Bree (Jane Fonda) is being set-up by someone but does not know it yet. She is a call girl trying to get away from the business but because she keeps getting rejected at modelling and acting agencies she constantly goes back to it for the money. The only time she is in control is when she “leads men by the noses and gets a lot of money from them”; other than that she admits that she has no control over her life. She is desirable and manipulative but lonely and afraid (afraid of the dark in her apartment, afraid of being followed and of strange phone calls at night). Klute (Donald Sutherland) is a cop investigating a disappearance of a man who supposedly paid for her services in the past and wrote her obscene letters. In this scene (Fig. 23), Bree explains to Klute (the dark mass obscuring most of the frame) how the police harassed her with questions about the missing man and “caged” her. She desperately raises

her voice saying “I don’t know him!” and she tells of how a client tried to kill her once. A character that is as three-dimensional and complete as this one needs a visual approach to complement the narrative on screen. In here, the occlusion of two thirds of the screen tells it all; not only the pressure of the questions, but the pressure of her whole inner conflict of not being in control, of wanting to get away but can’t is expressed in this way of framing her. The composition does not lie about her; there is no way out of that little corner at the edge of the frame like she finds no escape from her out-of-control life. Additionally, even though she might not know it yet, she is being set up by an invisible enemy that will only reveal himself to her by the end of the film. Her whole character’s history revolves around the concept of being trapped in a life she does not want, trapped by the police, trapped by her stalker and living in paranoia. Here, the occlusion of the image is not a device used to call attention on the subject in an overly-wide frame that will distract the audience otherwise; it is a pure storytelling device, full of abstraction, that serves the dark tone of the narrative and is key in the development of a visual identity for the character. This is composition as a story-carrying element of the film, it proves that a widescreen aesthetic is not necessarily a product of the limitations and the awkwardness of the format, but has its own unique possibilities that in the square ratio would have to be achieved in a completely different way, particular to the 4:3. In the cinema of the 1970’s, the medium undergoing a sort of liberation from conventions, one finds many such creative uses of certain devices that, a decade before would have been deemed as inconveniences, in this case forced by the width of the screen.

Composition is undeniably the biggest and most visible transformation brought upon the moving image by the widescreen format. Cinema is a visual medium and so the shape of the image has an immediate effect on the storytelling, changing the point-of-view through which the audience witnesses the events on screen. With the advent of widescreen,

cameramen must learn to use a predominant horizontal dimension that was non-existent in the Academy ratio. Conversely, in 4:3 filmmakers had at their disposal a vertical dimension that the widescreen does not provide. Where is the issue? Were filmmakers to frame only horizontal subjects and situations like Lang's "snakes and funerals"? What happens to vertical subjects like cathedrals or... a standing person? Kohler censors the widescreen for this very reason, maintaining that 'deliberately to employ a vast horizontal one [frame] for interpretative work of which the primary subject is man, a vertical figure, seems plainly foolhardy.'⁷⁵ In the 1950's, certain films even contain "visual jokes" (Fig. 24) mocking the extreme nature of the CinemaScope frame and the compositional issues it causes for the representation of certain realities on film.



Fig. 24: CinemaScope visual joke. *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (Richard Sale, 1955)

Kohler's article *The Big Screens* was written in 1955, only two years after the introduction of CinemaScope and *The Robe*, a time when critics as much as filmmakers were divided on the subject. Despite the fact that some of the most interesting instances of widescreen filmmaking were seen in those first years of the 1950's, the technology was still at a developing stage. Articles like Kohler's that show a thoroughly sceptical view of the

⁷⁵ *The Big Screens*, p.123

widescreen process may seem outdated but they help us understand how a simple change in screen dimensions sent a shockwave across the film world.



Fig. 25: Landscape and Horizontality. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

The widescreen is commonly associated with the epic, set in large exteriors living up to the width of the screen. The landscape shot in widescreen has become a sort of archetype but not without reason. The reason is the horizon. In fact we naturally associate the widescreen with great vistas and exteriors simply because the horizon line appears horizontal to us and on screen provides a strong line with which to compose using a format that emphasizes horizontals. The vastness of the desert of *Lawrence of Arabia* (Fig. 25) would not have been reproducible in any other way; how else to tell the story of T. E. Lawrence's great achievements and voyages across the openness of the Sahara desert? A horizontal line that links all elements across a horizontal image provides for a comfortable widescreen composition and that is why landscapes work well in the format and hence are opted for. However, exactly because the width of the screen emphasises the horizontal dimension, it can be used to exploit the contrast between horizontal and vertical.



Fig. 26: Verticality in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (John Schlesinger, 1967)

By framing an extremely vertical subject with an extremely horizontal screen (Fig. 26), the result is an image with unique visual strength and perhaps a certain contradictory aspect, which the audience may associate to the character depicted or the scene taking place. Kohler calls it “foolhardy”, the use of a horizontal “strip” to portray stories about men, but exploring widescreen compositions we can see that the format often finds its unique strength precisely in the contrast of the horizontal frame with the verticality of man and his world. Such an accentuated contrast between horizontal and vertical is impossible on the Academy ratio, all dimensions being relatively balanced. Of course, the square format can provide a contrast of directions but this has to be seen in the subject, the frame itself not yielding any predominant dimension complementing the subject’s direction.

The shape of the widescreen requires an approach to composition wherein the horizontal dimension of the frame is inherently predominant, while the academy ratio allows for the filmmaker to focus on one or the other. Even when the subjects are essentially vertical, the horizontal aspect takes over and images are either read across the screen or, like in the above example where a dominant vertical line is introduced, because of the ever-present width the prevalent effect is the contrast between directions. By comparing similar uses of verticals in academy and widescreen aspect ratios one concludes that, while the 4:3 image can focus exclusively on vertical movements and directions, the widescreen takes mostly

advantage of the width it provides, and so the filmmaker must take into account the horizontality of the screen in his approach to composing a picture.

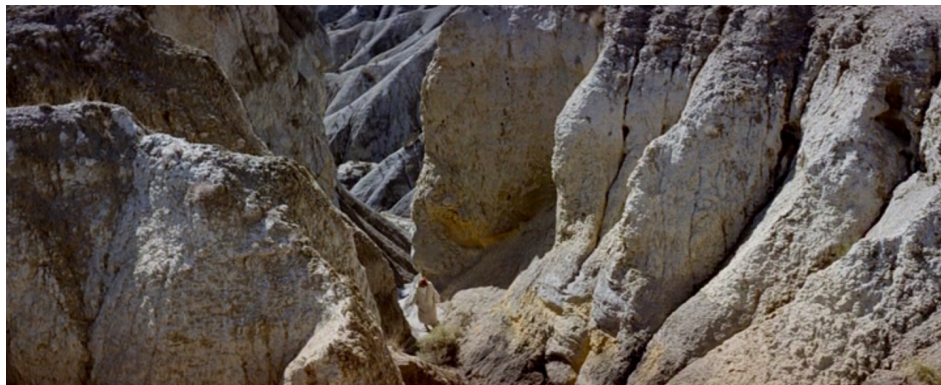


(Top) Fig. 27: *Die Nibelungen* (1924)

(Bottom) Fig. 28: *The Lord of the Rings* (2001)

This shot from *Die Nibelungen* (Fig. 27) exemplifies the strong use of verticals as an effective compositional approach to the academy ratio. The tall trees stand like infinite pillars, their top lost in blackness. The hero is tiny compared to the trees, the framing calling attention to their height. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (P. Jackson, 2001) we find a very similar situation (Fig. 28), the academy ratio giving way to the widescreen and the tall trees replaced by immense carved columns of stone. The heroes once again appear as a minute spot, lost in the enormous stone hall. Both images are really the same shot, telling a very similar story with a slightly different vision. While in *Die Nibelungen* the framing is

used to accentuate the enormous height of the trees (vertical), thus expressing the enormity of the world through the vertical dimension emphasised in the 4:3 ratio, in *The Lord of the Rings* the same feeling is expressed this time using the width (horizontal) to stress the vastness of the hall, at the same time providing the contrast between the vertical pillars and horizontal shape of the image. The characters appear small, lost in a maze of stone just like Siegfried is lost in the immensity of the forest. Siegfried is framed at ground level, the height of the trees – unattainable from our viewing position – being the key element of the shot. On the other hand, the fellowship is framed from a high angle, reducing them to a minuscule circle of light amid the wide dark hall; the high angle reduces the sensation of height of the pillars and so the feeling of enormity comes chiefly from the width and the depth. In both cases, through the framing we espy characters that are surrounded by the magnitude of a world they must brave to get to their goals and perhaps there is the feeling of forces at work greater than the protagonists in the tallness of the trees and the vastness of the hall.



(Top) Fig. 29: *Die Nibelungen*

(Bottom) Fig. 30: *King of Kings*

Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* is really a landmark in the expressive use of the frame and its dimensions to serve the narrative. In this image (Fig. 29) Siegfried follows Alberich into his underground world where the Nibelungs dwell. The vertical dimension is stressed once again; the characters ascend a path, a narrow chasm between the rocks leading to a magical world, the moon at the top of the frame only accentuating the vertical path our eyes, like the hero, must follow. In *King of Kings* (Fig. 30) Jesus follows a similar path through the desert. He too is small in frame and like Siegfried, surrounded by an otherworldly scenery. In the first example, it is the path that is emphasised with the frame, the verticality and narrowness showing us a passage into a different world – Siegfried's journey is changing course, it is evolving. In the latter, the rocks in the foreground gain a much heavier presence because of the screen's width. Although the canyon is a pronounced vertical shape and the rocks also create vertical lines, both leading our eye to the character, the width allows for the

frame to be filled with the rocky structures and attention is brought to them and subsequently to the loneliness of the character's ordeal. In *Die Nibelungen* the vertical direction is everything, the audience's eye follows the path up to the shiny moon, and rests back down on the hero. The rocks are strong in their verticality, reaching to the top of the frame and providing a narrow frame in which the hero progresses upwards. In *King of Kings*, the frame is mainly composed of vertical lines, but because of the width our eye is attracted to the sides, the rocks that seem impassable have a stronger presence because they occupy most of the wide image and not because they shoot up like in the first example. Again, the widescreen brings forth the vastness and mass of the rocky country as opposed to the narrow height of the canyon in *Die Nibelungen*, reaching the moon. In both cases the emotion is the same: both Jesus and Siegfried must cross the rough landscape to reach the next level of their journey, one alone through the desert for forty days and nights of fast before returning to the world as the Saviour, the other following his destiny to become a great king.

Since the academy ratio does have a more balanced dimensional quality than the widescreen, although it might tend to accentuate verticals it also enables the filmmaker to focus on the horizontal aspect of the image – in other words, the widescreen did not originate horizontally predominant compositions just like it did not trigger the invention of horizontally oriented staging techniques (the so-called “clothesline staging”).



Fig. 31: Horizontality in *Seven Samurai* (1954)

Akira Kurosawa's imagery relies as much on verticals as it does on horizontals in both academy and widescreen ratios. *Seven Samurai* (1954) was shot in the 1.37:1 ratio but it features many of the staging and composition practices that have been so firmly attributed to widescreen cinematography since its emergence (Fig. 31). How to create a horizontal predominance without the aggressiveness of the widescreen frame? In the first instance, the wooden beam in the foreground greatly helps the audience to read the image horizontally, from left to right following the inclination of the beam and the characters' gazes. This element of set design added to the characters' backs cut by the edge of the frame helps the viewer concentrate on their inner space, the closed circle of men (the group of samurai is as important or more as any of them as individuals). In the second example, by placing the camera very far from the subject and spreading the action across the width of the screen, the shot achieves its emotion through the horizontality of the composition. Other than the fact it could have been closer to the action, the widescreen would probably not have brought anything new to the scene.



Fig. 32: Dimensional balance of the Academy ratio exploited in *Seven Samurai*.

Hence we understand that the Academy aspect ratio is a more orthodox format in terms of composition because it provides a visual balance between vertical and horizontal dimensions. The filmmaker can choose to focus on one or the other, or both. Fig. 32 shows how a scene can take full advantage of the frame's dimensions. Verticals, horizontals and diagonals all come into play for a visually compelling way to tell the story. Compositionally, the widescreen cannot part with its inherent horizontality, therefore the width is emphasised almost automatically and the filmmaker must find a way to use it to tell the story, make it indispensable for the aesthetic of the work.

From a composition point of view, the extreme shape of the widescreen might mean that it is less flexible a format than the 4:3 but it provides for something that arguably played an important role in the progressive liberation of film aesthetics from classical conventions: abstraction.



Fig. 33: Abstract composition in *Klute* (A. J. Pakula, 1971)

According to Bordwell, the widescreen encouraged a more abstract approach to framing. The CinemaScope frame is but a narrow strip taken from a classical square image. When looked at from this perspective, the widescreen enables for a ‘pure pictorial dynamic’⁷⁶ that the academy ratio does not provide. There is no question that due to its extreme horizontal dimension, a 2.35:1 image of a scene provides a much more subjective view than a 4:3 rendition of the same reality. Fig. 33 shows the antagonist of the film. It is not clear whom he really is from the beginning of the story, but his isolated office in which he shuts himself to listen to the protagonist’s taped voice, framed in strange compositions that turn the space into a clutter of shapes and contrasting shades (of which he seems to be a part of and is not separated from), hint at the enigmatic nature of his character and thus what is really going on in the narrative, that he is hiding something. Other than being expressed through the setting – an office on a top floor looking over the city – the seclusion is expressed through the abstract composition that concentrates on shapes and puts forth the “cropping” quality of the widescreen and distorts the space. In this perspective, the academy aspect ratio offers a much more objective compositional nature. Such a ‘purely pictorial’ approach is truly facilitated by

⁷⁶ *CinemaScope: the Modern Miracle you see Without Glasses.* (Video lecture)

the use of anamorphic cinematography, which in itself is a distortion of reality to achieve a pictorial representation.

The long take and widescreen: Otto Preminger's *River of No Return*.

CinemaScope contemporary critics regarded *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954) as *the* manifestation of the widescreen's power of reducing artificiality and expressionism by the avoidance of montage. The argument goes that the wide frame can leave the audience to notice (or not) elements within a shot but these are not imposed on the viewer with a cut, which calls for a more participative audience. Critics generally praise Otto Preminger for his 'neutrality of style'⁷⁷; the filmmaker himself thinks it best 'when you don't notice the director'⁷⁸. Upon looking at Preminger's films one sees that there is generally little over-emphasis on the elements, that the events are filmed as they happen. This can be observed in the very cited raft scene where Marilyn Monroe drops her suitcase in the river. Independently of the fact that Preminger's directional approach is helped by the widescreen, *River of No Return* generally shows a very effective use of the then new medium not only in avoiding the cut, but combining it with editing as discussed further, and using its possibilities for showing the character in its environment and his relationships with other characters.

The "raft scene" is a great example of the possibilities brought by CinemaScope to long takes, the same would not be easily achievable, if not at all, in the classical frame and the effect would be quite different if editing were used instead of an uninterrupted shot.

⁷⁷ Bordwell, in *The Velvet Light Trap*, p. 20

⁷⁸ Interview: *Otto Preminger – New York 72*, by André S. Labarthe (Cinéma Cinémas, 1986)



Fig. 34.1

As she is getting helped off the stranded raft, Kay (Marilyn Monroe) drops her belongings in the river (Fig. 34.1). The suitcase goes off frame as she shouts “My things!” (Fig. 34.2). As the couple reaches the shore (Fig. 34.3) the suitcase is reframed, and can be seen in the background to the right for a while, floating off screen as they meet Matt (Robert Mitchum) (Fig. 34.4). Instead of reframing the group, the camera leaves the open space after the suitcase disappears and soon enough Mark (Tommy Rettig), Matt’s son, fills the missing gap in the composition (Fig. 34.5). After a moment Kay and the child leave frame and Harry (Rory Calhoun) and Matt walk behind them while talking, the camera following them in a two-shot. At that moment the suitcase is reframed a second time (Fig. 34.6) way out in the background and the camera frames past it following the characters.



Fig. 34.2



Fig. 34.3



Fig. 34.4



Fig. 34.5



Fig. 34.6

As Kay gets off the raft her belongings drift away expressing the imminent change in the character. Her saloon singer past behind her (the suitcase floating away), her new life is about to start as she meets with Matt on the river shore. Her old life – or part of it, note the guitar of the same colour as the suitcase still in her hand at all times – drifts away with the current. The title of the film expresses this feeling enough, *No Return*. Far from being an unimportant detail, there is no emphasis through editing on Kay's suitcase, to the extent that some of the viewer's may not even notice it after it first exits the frame. However, because other factors come into play that express the importance of that particular element, one can argue that it is still deliberate as a cut would be. It is not true that the bag is not underlined like claimed by Charles Barr who writes that 'the spectator is "free" to notice the bundle'. He mentions the traditional montage method in which there would be an insert of the suitcase falling in the water, 'in this case we would gather that the bundle is meaningful *because* it is picked out for us. In Preminger's film, the process is reversed: we pick it out *because* it is meaningful. The emphasis arises organically out of the whole action. It is not imposed.'⁷⁹ In his statement Barr is arguably overlooking the power that different filmmaking techniques – or image making in general – can exercise upon the viewer. The audience *is* left to notice the bag *if they wish*, but one just needs to look at it to understand that it is simply accentuated in a different way, and as deliberately. One does not notice the bundle because of its significance but rather because of a set of photographic effects. It is emphasised through the way it is shown, just like it would be with editing. Certainly it is less "on purpose", subtler than cutting to a single separate shot would be, and since the film employs a more fluid style paired with the widescreen, it is the right approach. Action in film does not call out attention to one element or another on its own, it is more likely *the way* action is shown and organized that

⁷⁹ Barr, pp.11-12

emphasises some things and discards others. Cinema relies on the selection of emphasis; what is highlighted and what is not is the main question the filmmaker asks himself in every field of the subject. Barr seems to omit the fact that “not cutting” does not mean “not draw attention to”. The suitcase is a crucial element for the narrative, it is a sort of inciting event for Kay’s imminent change; our gaze *is* drawn to it in order to mark that change. The point is to explore how it is done, in this case how the suitcase is emphasized without a cut, why our eye *will* look at the suitcase no matter what, considering the options offered by the width of the screen.

The screen is fully used at all times in the raft scene. The composition speaks and tells the story. Firstly, the suitcase is highlighted by the composition. When it falls in the river in the first place, there is a slight but abrupt pan adjusting to it and from this point on, the frame is always kept open on the right side. Note that the suitcase is seen moving sideways, along the horizontal axis, the dimension above all accentuated by the width of the screen, which also calls attention to it floating away. As the couple walks to the shore, the camera frames them slightly off to the left, giving more emphasis on the re-appearance of the suitcase on the right. As the camera tracks back, opening the space considerably, Matt appears from left of frame and the group is still offset to the left as the suitcase exits frame once more. No adjustment, the composition keeps a space on the right that comes to be taken by Mark. The composition and staging is always drawing attention to the right side of frame, where the suitcase was, where it went. If there were nothing, the unbalanced frame would be uncomfortable to look at but this way, our gaze is directed to the dead space and encounters the yellow suitcase. This approach yields the same emphasis on the subject as a deliberate cut to the insert would. Additionally, the suitcase is reframed twice, like if reminding us that Kay lost her affairs and they are now being taken by the river, away from her. Another factor that directs our gaze to the floating bundle is the colour contrast. Purely an expression of the importance of the

cinematography and the production design, the complementary contrast of the yellow suitcase against the blue water has great visual weight. Our eye is attracted to such contrasts and for the filmmaker using long takes and ensemble shots, its manipulation is an essential tool in directing the eye in the colour widescreen image. Moreover, Marilyn's shout: "My things!" and the action are rather theatrical and a cut to an insert would allow for only partial showing of the action of dropping the suitcase, hence avoiding the theatricality. It shows that the scripted dialogue and the acting also point our attention to the suitcase, especially since we see the action uninterrupted. This all goes to show how a simple detail can be controlled in a long widescreen take – and the repercussions the technique has on every field, not just editing, ranging from the *mise-en-scène* to the cinematography.

Another method made possible by the widescreen and used by Preminger to enrich his long take aesthetic, is 'the delineation of cause and effect simultaneously.' Referring to the widescreen, Leon Shamroy claims that 'no longer must the cinematographer cut from one bit of action, showing cause, to another bit of action showing effect. In one big scene the CinemaScope camera shows both.'⁸⁰ This is not always the most effective approach, nor it substitutes the impact a cut may have where it is needed, but it can provide a particularly engaging experience depending on the narrative.

⁸⁰ Quigley, p.178



Fig. 35: Cause and effect in *The Robe*.

Koster and Shamroy use this device in *The Robe* (Fig. 35); as the villagers are gathering in a meeting, a legionnaire appears on a balcony in the foreground, at the extreme edge of the image. He shoots an arrow that travels the whole length of the widescreen and lands on the village elder's chest, provoking an upheaval and the old man's death. The composition and the depth are very effective; even though the equipment was extremely limited, the filmmaker achieves a more than acceptable shot staged in-depth, the arrow's direction and the shadow of the house directing us to the target – the old man. The arrow shoots, we can see it crossing the enormous frame and hitting the man in the distance; and then the problems begin. The reaction of the village elder is somewhat delayed; there is a clear break in his acting, which suppresses the tension created by the composition. Moreover, after going through lengths to avoid the edit, the filmmaker cuts to the man after he's been hit and his reaction repeats slightly, further suppressing the "realism" and annulling the notion of 'cause and effect simultaneously'; the cut is not avoided, it is moved to a later beat and so it does not completely accomplish the effect.



Fig. 36: Cause and effect in *River of No Return*

Preminger shows a similar situation (Fig. 36). Matt takes his son Mark out to show him he can ‘shoot anything you see’. Mark tells him to hit a branch in the distance. As Matt aims his rifle, the camera pans and we see a dead white tree across the screen, in the distance. Matt shoots and a branch is blown off the tree. The shot holds, it is the child’s turn to shoot. Matt helps him aim the rifle correctly but sees something off-screen. “We may need to save that bullet”, warns Matt as the camera tracks and pans around him and we see a cloud of smoke rising from the top of the hill. The shooting has exposed them, they are no longer safe.

Preminger manages this scene in an uninterrupted take, using the cause and effect not only to enhance the experience of the widescreen and maintaining the continuity of time – the branch being an insignificant bit of action, cutting to it would arguably have broken the story’s rhythm – but takes it a step further, by panning to the smoke on the hill. There are two “causes and effects” in the same take: the rifle and the tree, and as a result, the smoke – the Indian’s signal. Instead of gratuitously showing off the width of the screen, it is an important moment as Matt is distracted by his son’s education and makes his position known to the Indians who will soon attack the house. With the long-take aesthetic that dominates the whole film, Preminger finds a clever way to put forward the width of the screen without sacrificing his story or its visual identity.

Editing widescreen pictures

In an article for *Cahiers du Cinéma* called *Fin du Montage* (The End of Montage), André Bazin wrote that ‘even better than depth of field, it [CinemaScope] has come ultimately to destroy montage as the major element of cinematic discourse. Montage, in which some have mistakenly wanted to see the essence of cinema, is in fact relative to the exiguity of the classical image, condemning the director to the fragmentation of reality.’⁸¹ Furthermore, Charles Barr, in his influential article on CinemaScope defends the same idea that widescreen greatly defies the established ideas of montage as the fundamental quality of the cinematic art. He criticizes the Kuleshov effect claiming that ‘if the same effect was difficult to achieve with sound, and then CinemaScope, that must prove that they were a bad thing.’⁸² It is essential to note from the beginning that the advent of widescreen (or that of sound before it) does not revoke already established and efficient ways of telling stories on film, namely editing. Barr’s statement is evidently one-sided. Sound and the wide frame do not suppress any effect achievable through montage; in fact they are entirely unrelated. They are simply different tools and it would be more exact to say that the widescreen offers new possibilities that many times *can* eliminate the need to cut but editing still remains an essential storytelling device. *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is a sound picture and had it been shot in ‘Scope, the shower scene would have kept all its impact and had the editing not been present, even in the widest, biggest of screens, the scene would have lost the intensity that made it into such a memorable moment of cinema. Arguably the grandest Cinerama presentation would not involve us, the audience, as much as that short scene does on the smallest of screens.

V.F. Perkins argues that ‘devices which are necessitated by one set of mechanical limitations become optional, but not unusable, when those limitations are removed. (...)

⁸¹ In *The Velvet Light Trap* n°21, Summer 1985, p.14

⁸² *CinemaScope: Before and After*, in *Film Quarterly* vol.16 n°4, 1963

Cinemascope and the other wide-screen systems did not (...) deprive film-makers of the resources of editing.’ The fact that cutting did become less necessary at times, made it into a more significant aesthetic choice than when it was driven by technical limitations. The widescreen’s smaller dependability on the editing ‘gave added weight to passages of staccato cutting’⁸³. Maurice Schérer (Eric Rohmer) writes: ‘I am not aware that montage effects are henceforth to be condemned. The new process brings more than it takes away.’⁸⁴

Editing was used as a means of expression as early as Edwin S. Porter’s *Great Train Robbery* (1911) and was greatly developed since, most prominently by Sergei Eisenstein. It was the essence of all of Eisenstein’s work and for him, contrary to Bazin, “the essence of cinema”. But filmmakers in the silent days, because of many technical limitations – not only the size of the frame – were dependent on cutting together various pieces of film to create a whole. It is a characteristic of the cinema that technological advancement enables a wider range of expressive choices, allowing for the development of an aesthetic. Robert Bresson writes ‘sound cinema invented silence’⁸⁵, and in the same way when editing became less indispensable because longer takes and a wider view were now possible, it also became more perceptible and expressive when used. But again, this was not born with the widescreen. Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) is a great example of how long takes and cutting can work together to maximize involvement and tension (‘in one word emotions’⁸⁶). In the film, we feel more anxious because of the illusion of the continuous take but an abrupt cut to a reaction of James Stewart when the young killer denies that he strangled a chicken, startling us, makes us aware of his dangerous presence. It is one of very few cuts in the film not restricted by magazine length limitations but motivated by the emotion of the moment. Even where he intends to

⁸³ *Film as Film*, p.56

⁸⁴ *Vertus Cardinales du Cinemascope* (1954), In Hillier (1985) p.281

⁸⁵ Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, p. 50

⁸⁶ Samuel Fuller in *Pierrot le Fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965): ‘A film is like a battleground. There’s love, hate, action, violence, death. In one word, emotions.’

create the illusion of one continuous take he cannot get away from the emotional impact and the shifts in rhythm that cutting can produce. This is very lucid filmmaking, aware of all the tools at hand, striving for emotion rather than “reality”. *Rope*’s original aspect ratio is 1.33:1. If nothing else, the film proves that the academy ratio is not necessarily restricted with regards to editing. Until today, few films use the long take like *Rope* and Hitchcock did not seem to be limited by the screen size, nor did he seem to need a wider frame. In *River of No Return* Matt and his son are usually framed in a two-shot, they are always close enough because the width allows for it but they are framed as such because it shows their condition of a reunited father and son. Conversely, when Matt and Kay get to know each other, the two-shots give way to classical shot-reverse shot. Although Otto Preminger denies the concept of style, this shift is fundamentally a stylistic choice showing us the gradual closeness between the two characters – the narrative demands the cut. Since the editing is not indispensable, the widescreen enabling for very close 2-shots, it is exactly the use of it, the distinction it creates in contrast with the long takes that tells the audience that their relationship is growing and changing, that they are beginning to fall in love.

With the elimination of necessity, comes the need to justify artistic decisions. Where a cut is not needed, if it is there it usually triggers a reaction from the audience and, becoming a vehicle of style, requires a sort of responsibility from the filmmaker. Stanley Kubrick for example, often uses these stylistic devices. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) there are many instances, the most famous of which is probably the jump cut on the bone before it is pulled against gravity into the atmosphere and “becomes” a space weapon, orbiting around a planet millions of years after the previous shot. Being purely a stylistic choice, this cut is not necessary, but it creates rhythm, elicits attention and is somewhat justified by the next cut that jumps centuries in time – giving these few seconds of film great impact upon the viewer.



Fig. 37



Fig. 38

In one of the film's first dialogue scenes in the space station, there is an establishing shot in which characters introduce themselves and sit down at a table (Fig. 37). Before any meaningful exchange takes place, the camera cuts along the same axis to an almost identical shot (Fig. 38), simply omitting the heads of the two women on the edges of the frame. This cut on the axis creates a jump in our attention. The conversation proceeds until the Russian doctor asks some questions he is not supposed to ask, triggering tension in the scene and stirring up our curiosity about the main character and the scenes to come. One would argue that the cut is intended to get us closer to the protagonist but the widescreen already enables us to be reasonably close in the first shot and the size of the shot does not change substantially enough. In an aspect ratio of 1.33/7:1, the camera would need to be so far back to frame the

whole group, that a cut or movement would be obligatory in order to get closer. The first shot could have easily been held with camera movement, closing in the scene, but the effect would not be the same. In the academy ratio, cutting for emotion would still be possible, by leaving the edit for the moment when the direction of the scene shifts, or with a movement that would attain a closer position by the time the scene reaches a certain point. Kubrick introduces the jump that stirs a sort of awkwardness before the scene's real shift and when the conversation changes into a more significant and tense dialogue, the emotion is already there, "in the back of our heads" and the cut justified.

Although this is not exclusive to Widescreen, these effects became more noticeable since the advent of the wider frame exactly because it liberated the editing of its obligatory role, a consequence of the narrowness of the academy ratio. Note that it is essentially the depth of focus and the width that give us the sense of space in both of Kubrick's frames. The edit only compresses the horizontal plane; it appears as a touch of style – also fulfilling the classical need to get closer to the character. It goes to show that since widescreen appeared, editing might have gained a new purpose, although one can see its similar use in the classical frame. The lack of its necessity – as pointed out by critics – calls for its attention and thus it becomes a highly expressive device at the hands of the filmmaker, provided its use is justified by the situation and the whole style of the work in which it is inserted in. Beyond the editing, one can see how the wide frame enriches the atmosphere of the scene. The characters are staged in a way that the eye travels across the frame, centred on the main character and the depth of the corridor is immense and emphasized by the width of the image, which itself is emphasized by the use of a very wide lens. This is only possible with a wide aspect ratio, justifying the frame as an essential element of this particular film.

Charles Barr criticises Eisenstein's use of montage in *Strike* (1925), where shots of workers being killed intercut with pictures of cattle being slaughtered. Barr condemns this

approach because ‘there is no real freedom of association (...) and there is only one correct solution.’⁸⁷ Although considered a staple in the appreciation of widescreen, Barr’s article seems to get stuck in the denigration of montage traditions to somehow justify that widescreen is a better format than the academy square ratio because it renders editing unnecessary as a dramatic tool. Note that Eisenstein’s method discussed has got nothing to do with the limitations of the 1.33/7:1. Moreover, as already pointed out Barr praises Otto Preminger’s way to “leave it up to the audience to notice” Kay’s bundle in *River of no Return* but he ignores all the other effects that make us become aware of it. Noticed or not, the fact that Kay is becoming a new character, leaving the old one behind her back (represented by the bag taken by the river) is not up to us to freely interpret, it *is* the path taken by the character, the “only correct solution”.

Back to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001* and an example where an idea is imposed on the audience through cutting, keeping us all the more involved (Fig. 39). After being exposed to the strange black monolith, the monkey finds that he can use a bone as a weapon. As he strikes an animal’s old carcass with increasing sway, a cut shows us a few frames of a tapir being violently hurled onto the floor and cuts back to the ape’s face. He seems to scream, the bone firmly in his hand as he crushes a skull with all his newfound strength.

⁸⁷ *CinemaScope: Before and After*, p. 12



Fig. 39: Montage in *2001: A Space Odyssey*

How else could this scene have been shown? Surely the scene could have held on the first image and, like Barr states, leave the rest up to the audience's interpretation and *maybe* we would understand that the ape will eat meat from now on. But would that be enough? Would we be as involved as viewers without the cutting? Portrayed like this – in a way that owes much not only to Eisenstein but silent films in general – the idea is imposed on us, as it should be in order to express the breadth of the primate's discovery, the great jump he has just taken, one that will influence all human life on earth after him and that will ultimately enable Man to reach the infinity of space (the central theme of the film). The cut to the tapir – a pure

“Eisensteinian” device – is essential for the narrative and subsequently the audience’s experience. It is totally independent from the widescreen, and “genuine freedom of association” or not, this is the pinnacle of cinematic expression: widescreen photography, montage and music, all coming together in a precise construction that not only meticulously develops the narrative, but stirs our senses and assures our connection with what we are watching.

The Close-Up in Widescreen



Once Upon a Time in the West (Sergio Leone, 1968)

*“What Pulled me into shooting close-ups,
was when I shifted to the widescreen format”*

– Steven Spielberg⁸⁸

The first filmmakers to shoot in the widescreen format avoided the use of close-ups. There were several reasons. These were mainly technical: in early anamorphic films, the lenses aberrations were more visible on the actor’s face when shot up close – Bordwell’s ‘CinemaScope mumps’ – and often with the earliest anamorphic equipment the cameraman could not focus a shot so close. But there were also aesthetic reasons. Many considered the widescreen to give a close enough view at all times, eliminating the need to cut to a close-up, a tendency praised by the Bazin school of critics who strived for “reality” on the screen. For them, one of the great strengths of the medium was that it managed to show actors up close without losing the surroundings, allowing for longer takes, which were more realistic and necessitating fewer cuts. Producers were of course in favour of this approach – fewer close-

⁸⁸ in Bordwell (2007), p.323

ups meant fewer camera set-ups, which meant less time and money spent. It goes to show the influence producers may have had in the aesthetic of early widescreen films. ‘Closeups are more dramatic than ever. But they’re not as necessary as before, because the screen is so large and intimate that most characters will be in frequent closeup anyway.’⁸⁹ Leon Shamroy defends the added drama of the widescreen close-up, but *The Robe* (shot by Shamroy) arguably lacks close-ups and in many instances, loses the potential drama to the “spectacle” of wider shots. Shamroy and Koster, the first widescreen filmmakers make little use of the widescreen’s “freedom” in that sense. Similarly to montage as a dramatic and not compulsory tool, close-ups are more striking *because* they are not as needed – sometimes they are most evoking when they are not needed – not to mention how big they are on the screen if the camera only frames the face. V. F. Perkins’ concept of “flexibility” as artistic freedom applies here too. Here again, the emergence of widescreen does not overcome the use of close-ups as a method; if before, a cut to a close-up was required because of the frame’s restraints (sometimes independently of the emotion), now a cut to an extreme close-up can be used for purely dramatic reasons. It is not because the character’s features are already visible that cutting closer should be avoided, like discussed in the example from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In general, classical film language avoids these “unnecessary” cuts, preserving the flow of the editing so it is invisible. In this sense the widescreen contributed to free the aesthetic from methods that are so-called “text-book”, or perhaps it required the filmmaker to write a “new text book”, which is true of any change brought by technological improvements in the medium and apparent if we look at how the aesthetic evolves from *The Robe* (1953), to *East of Eden* (1955), to *Fistful of Dollars* (1964) in one decade.

⁸⁹ Shamroy, *New Screen Techniques*, p.180

The use of the close-up in widescreen proves that the ‘norms of earlier decades were not so much overthrown as adjusted’⁹⁰. It shows how an aesthetic, although new, can and perhaps should be built on the blocks already set by older aesthetics – namely that of silent films in this case, which boast a much more precise visual approach to the themes depicted than modern movies. According to Bordwell, in the wider frame, a conventional mid-shot becomes a close-up and a close-up becomes an extreme close-up.⁹¹ This truly leads to an understanding of how the aesthetic evolves, rather than the approach of earlier filmmakers, in awe of the novelty, like Shamroy whose view that actors are now in constant close up completely represses the widescreen’s capabilities. Of course, just like the aesthetic itself, critical approaches evolve as the technology evolves. Shamroy had to deal with the heavy distortions of the Bausch and Lomb lenses and it is easy to condemn today that we have perfected optics that produce nearly flawless images; criticism must consider these facts, they play a part in the evolution of film aesthetics.

Thinking of Close-ups in widescreen, one filmmaker immediately comes to mind: Sergio Leone. Collaborating with cinematographer Tonino Delli Colli, Leone provides us with some of the richest uses of the widescreen and the format cannot be analysed without mentioning him. Particularly, Leone’s films epitomize the use of the extreme close up in widescreen, an undeniable staple among generations of filmmakers until today. Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960’s owe much of their great visual weight to the widescreen and the same methods shunned in earlier films: close-ups and fast cutting. With Perkins’ “flexibility” in mind, Sergio Leone showed us the extent to which the widescreen is supple and full of dramatic options for the filmmaker – Extreme close ups cut with very wide shots staged in depth as well as laterally, long montages of faces and eyes and hands getting ready

⁹⁰ Bordwell (2007), p.323

⁹¹ *Poetics of Cinema*, p.323

to pull a gun out of a holster. But Leone was not the first one. In the same genre, Samuel Fuller gave us a fairly stylized use of CinemaScope as early as 1957 with *Forty Guns*. In one scene (Fig. 40), the main character approaches an enemy to disarm him. From a medium close-up of the actor walking, it cuts on the axis to an extreme close-up of his eyes. It intercuts with a fairly wide point of view of what he sees, tracking in as it cuts back and forth with the eyes. As the cutting accelerates, the eyes look down at a close up of the enemy's gun. Another cut, the main character grabs his own gun and the scene ends in a wide shot of the confrontation, the hero disarming his young opponent.



Fig. 40: Extreme close-up and fast cutting in *Forty Guns*

This use of close-ups and fast cutting, alternating with wide shots, was rare in 1950's CinemaScope movies. It is important to mention that this was the year of the release of the Panavision anamorphic format. The lenses had deeper depth of field and fewer aberrations; they did not distort the subject so much. In *Forty Guns*' first ten minutes we can see how this technical improvement immediately gave certain filmmakers the possibility to push the aesthetic further into new, more daring and dynamic ground. The spectator's involvement in this scene is surely enhanced by the wider screen but it is the dramatic use of the frame that makes for audience involvement, the screen size alone does not overpower the cinematic language – the play between the wide shots and the extreme close-ups and the rhythm is what keeps us on edge. Today's cinema tends to be relatively stripped of all these devices in favour of a greater realism – hence the extensive use of handheld camerawork and long takes in contemporary films and the common omission of the carefully composed close up to some extent. Realism and expression do not always go together and different trends in cinema strive for either one or the other. Critics argued that by reducing the use of montage, CinemaScope films would present a heightened realism. Because of this and other reasons, the close-up appeared significantly less when CinemaScope transformed the industry. It is true that close-ups were so frequently used in the way they were in the past because of the academy frame's limited size, but silent films are anything but aesthetically limited, even if they use a smaller palette of tools. What would *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (C. T. Dreyer, 1928) be without the expressionist close ups of Maria Falconetti? Should a film strive for reality or expression? Could Dreyer have shot the film differently, had it been in widescreen, and keep the same level of emotion? The close ups would have been as important. Should we assume that in widescreen close-ups are 'not as necessary as before'? Whatever the answer, it does not depend on the size of the frame like Shamroy claims. What makes for an accomplished aesthetic is how each of the screen and shot sizes applies to what it is showing. How does it

become an indispensable element of a film? How does it evolve from one aspect ratio to the other? Silent films were already using the frame's dimensions with a storytelling purpose, and the same must be done in widescreen, using a different dimension – independently from the size of the frame.

Sergio Leone's *Dollars* Trilogy is shot on the Italian Techniscope⁹² format. Leone's use of the 2.35:1 aspect ratio was highly influential and certainly pushed the aesthetic forward into modernity. Along with the widescreen, Leone's visual approach is very much based on the two devices discussed before: Close-ups and fast cutting, as well as a rich use of lateral and deep staged wide shots. Additionally, he 'and others recovered the one-point-per-shot style of [Ernst] Lubitsch or Harold Lloyd'⁹³ a precise approach seen commonly in silent movies but rather lost today and very effective when close-ups are used. Leone and such directors revived the use of the close-up by making it an extreme close-up in widescreen, in a way that it 'blew up details and created quasi abstract compositions.'⁹⁴

⁹² Techniscope: A 35mm, two-perforation pull-down, non-anamorphic format. Because it uses half the amount of film used with CinemaScope (4-perforation anamorphic), and produces an image with the same 2.35:1 aspect ratio, it is an economical way of producing widescreen films.

⁹³ Bordwell (2007), p. 322

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 320



Fig. 41: Montage of extreme close-ups in *Fistful of Dollars* (S. Leone, 1964)

Looking at *Forty Guns* side by side with *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), it is clear that they share one and the same aesthetic. The climax of *Fistful of Dollars* between Clint Eastwood and Gian Maria Volonte (Fig. 41) is a montage of close-ups and inserts, intercut together. Clint Eastwood's Eyes looking at Volonte's eyes; Volonte loads his rifle, Eastwood loads his pistol. This is a lot closer to silent cinema than what we are used to seeing, mainly because of the extreme closeness which emphasises exactly that which each shot is showing, fragments the space and gives it a curious illustrative side that heightens the emotion of the scene. If Cinema is a visual medium, then this is a good example of its graphic power. This is not particular to widescreen; many silent filmmakers and directors such as Robert Bresson fragment their stories in much the same way.



Fig. 42: Bounty hunters and their target. Close-up montage in *For a Few Dollars More* (1965)

Leone goes even further in *For a Few Dollars More* (1965). The scene that sets the two main characters' goals is composed exclusively of fast cut close-ups (Fig. 42). There is no set-up of the scene, no spatial reference. A man hammers a warrant on a wall. Ensues a montage of faces and eyes, a duel of cuts, from the characters to the painted face of the antagonist on the warrant, all to the sound of guns firing. Some of these shots are a split second long, a few frames only; it is almost impossible to count how many times it really cuts back and forth. This montage comes after the introductory sequences of the two characters and the antagonist; it sets the triangle constituting the core conflict of the film.

Using this aesthetic, Sergio Leone re-defined the Western imagery (a genre that exists since the very origins of filmmaking) – very wide “Kurosawa-esque” shots intercut with immense sweaty faces and squinting eyes. It is accepted that the widescreen is great for wide-angle sceneries and big spaces, but looking at these extreme close-ups from *Forty Guns* and *Fistful of Dollars*, we can see that it is in fact very indicated for the use of fast-cut montage of

close-ups, for a fragmented depiction of the world. It adds dynamism and magnitude to the whole; the fragments simply need to be composed differently, 'adapted' to the wider screen. All in all, these movies help proving the flexibility of the widescreen, especially as the technologies evolved through the 1960's; the filmmaker has now the possibility to use, as Bordwell puts it, 'nearly all the items on the menu'⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ *Poetics of Cinema*, p.321

Portraying Characters

Another aspect to consider in any given aspect ratio is how the frame plays a role in portraying characters. It is obviously different from the academy ratio to the widescreen but it can work in a similar way in both formats – proving once more that the format does not change the language, but adjusts to it. In any case, the framing of a character must be in accordance to whom that character is and what he does, the role he occupies in the narrative. It is important to begin with silent movies as they relied on the image almost exclusively to illustrate the characters and events, and filmmakers from the silent era show a very articulate and precise use of the academy frame's dimensions.

A prominent example in the academy aspect ratio is once again Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924). Figs. 43, 44 and 45 show three different single shots of three main characters of *Die Nibelungen*; Siegfried (Fig. 43) the hero, Hagen (Fig. 44), antagonist and killer of Siegfried, and Kriemhild (Fig. 45) Siegfried's loved one. In all these examples the frame plays an important role in depicting each character.



From Top Left - Fig. 43: *Siegfried*; Fig. 44: *Hagen*; Fig. 45: *Kriemhild*

Fig. 43 is Siegfried's introduction in the film. The arm following the gaze of the character and the slight low angle accentuate the vertical dimension, which is already emphasised naturally by the frame. This is the first time we see the hero, while he is forging his sword and smoke rises about him. From the action and especially the framing we immediately know what type of man he is – fearless and strong. He will become invincible after bathing in the dragon's blood but the idea of invincibility is already present in this frame. Lang only has the academy square shape to provide these emotions, and of course the lighting is doing the same thing but the vertical dimension of the 1.33 is the chief component here, as in all the film. The same goes for Figs. 44 and 45. The shot of Hagen (Fig. 44) is a great example of how the frame can be deliberately manipulated to portray a character – this example belongs to the classical frame but the same is true in widescreen. All through *Die*

Nibelungen, Hagen's helmet is stressed by framing him with more headroom than all the others, we often see him, his face near the bottom of frame and the helmet occupying most of the space. The use of the image's vertical dimension to portray this character is undeniable. He *is* the helmet – the object defines the character. It is his status of knight that makes him a man. Along with the dark tones (he is always dressed in black) and his make up, the frame tells his whole story in one single image. When the title cards appear, the dialogues only confirm to us who he is. We know by looking at him – the dark clothes, the wings of his helmet more present than his face, the way he is portrayed – that he is a villain, an enemy of the hero, yet the filmmaker has done nothing but frame him in a particular way and dress him in dark clothes – contrasting with Siegfried and Kriemhild who appear in light colours. When the story unfolds and he becomes Siegfried's killer, in the back of our minds he already fulfilled that role from the beginning. In Kriemhild's shot (Fig. 45), also the first time we see her in the film, her long braids intensify her already very vertical posture, which gives her a sort of stability, permanence, aided by the fact she is bleeding off the bottom of the frame. She has a lot of weight in this shot; it defines her character – she bears the strength and stability that she represents in the story. The second volume of *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhilds Rache* (Kriemhild's Revenge) tells of her avenging her lover, where she triumphs over Siegfried's murderers. In here, at the beginning of the story, she is a pillar, her big eyes drawing us to her and the vertical lines, the braids and patterns on her dress always leading to the eyes. Our gaze never leaves the same trajectory: down and up, down and up, always ending up on her eyes.

Going back to Sergio Leone and widescreen, we can see a similar use of the frame in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), this time using the horizontal dimension of the screen. Looking at the first shot of the hero and the first shot of the villain, we see they are very

similar shots with slight but significant differences and we can look at them using the same approach as with the previous example in the academy ratio.



Top: Fig. 46: The hero
Bottom: Fig. 47: The Villain

In Fig. 46 the camera is set at eye level and the frame is tilted slightly up, losing the chin to emphasize the hero's hat. His hat is white and curled, and appears as a reasonably straight horizontal line across the frame. It gives the face a lot of visual weight and so weight as a character. In Fig. 47 the character also has great visual weight, the effect achieved in a similar way by the filmmaker. In here, the camera is slightly lower than his eyes. The same happens where the chin is cut off to accommodate the hat, which this time is black and rather than a straight horizontal, is sort of an enveloping shape filling the frame with a huge black shadow. Comparing it to the first shot, it is clear who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist. If an audience member would walk in the theatre in this moment, and the first thing he saw was this frame of Henry Fonda, he would know that he is looking at a villain. Just like in the example from *Die Nibelungen*, these two almost identical shots, tell

completely different stories and both use the heightened horizontal dimension of the frame – the hats – to portray the characters. In both Lang and Leone the frame is allowed to speak; in this way Sergio Leone is essentially a child of the silent filmmakers, telling his stories by visual means and often recurring to a more expressionist approach, so fundamental in the early cinema and today more and more neglected.

It is accepted that the widescreen brings a more pronounced attention to the environment around the character than the square academy frame; that being so, the ever-present environment too must play a part in portraying characters on screen. The “Leone close-up” being applicable to a limited amount of situations and to a very specific aesthetic only, using the environment to portray the character’s inner self can be a very expressive alternative now that the width of the screen allows for framing both the character and his surroundings without substantial loss of information on either side.



Fig. 48: The Character and his environment in *East of Eden* (1955)

Fig. 48 shows two very different shots of the same character at different stages of his story. The first example clearly evokes a sort of anguish. The character is framed at the bottom of the image, his feet cut off. Visually the environment looms over him, like his thoughts that haunt him. The setting is chaotic, lines that go against each other in every direction: the train going into the distance, the perpendicular lines on the roof of the train, the vertical and horizontal poles of the scaffold, the electricity poles, a train and a mine in the distance, the red light, the green trees, the grey smoke. In the midst of this confusion is the character, left to a corner at the bottom of frame. He is the dominant element in the picture – our gaze is focused on him – but is oppressed by the visual complexity of the environment and is ultimately a part of the whole. Cal (James Dean), misunderstood by his father who privileges his other son Aaron, tries to get in touch with his mother whom he was led to believe was dead, and understand why she left. This way of showing the main character describes well his struggle as a confused young man, lonely and turned against his whole

world, trying to understand the reason for his suffering. The second example transmits a completely different feeling, visibly one of happiness and harmony felt by the character. Cal is centred in the picture, in the middle of the planted fields, the long parallel lines that get lost in the distance. The frame is much more soothing than in the previous example, more clearly organized and compositionally comfortable and Cal seems to be a part of the organized arrangement of the elements. The straightforwardness of the composition – held by the simple lines that fan out from a distant vanishing point to meet the camera – expresses Cal's inner state. The feeling comes solely from the composition and the character's placement within, he is even wearing the same colours as before – he is the same Cal, only looks at the world differently, feels like he may have a place in it after all. Contrasting with the first image, this frame shows a phase of harmony for the character; Cal who at the beginning felt abandoned and overwhelmed by his surroundings is now one with his purpose (and the landscape): determined to succeed in helping his father with his business.

Be it on an extreme close-up, or a wide shot that reveals the character as much as his surroundings, the widescreen frame does not necessarily favour spectacle over character. As a frame it has its limits and it might tend to reveal too much of the environment but it can serve the character's inner motivations as much as the academy aspect ratio before it with its numerous close-ups. Once more, the film language is what directs the whole; the transformation of the frame did not bring any changes at a “grammatical” level – a close-up does not become obsolete – but equally to giving us a new point of view from which to witness the staged narrative before us, influencing the arrangement of the elements within the frame, it also provides a newly shaped window looking at the personalities on screen. Certain filmmakers proved it to be a truly flexible medium as shown by Sergio Leone's duels in close-up and Elia Kazan's intimate character struggles in wide shots, both depending on the widescreen for the strength of their visual narratives.

The shape of the screen today: old formats, large formats and the digital age of 16:9

As film aesthetics evolved into the XXI Century, it is clear that great technological revolutions like the advent of sound, colour and widescreen – that happened all in the space of two decades – suffered some sort of stagnation. In what relates to the shape of the screen and production/exhibition standards, the industry has settled since the shift to widescreen. The second half of the XXth Century can be described as a period of technological perfecting rather than aesthetic changes. The most important technical innovations since the 1960's are without doubt ones in the realm of visual and special effects and computer generated imagery, as well as the introduction of the Digital Intermediate and later digital acquisition/exhibition. But all these did not alter the way films are perceived at the same level as the coming of sound or widescreen did; VFX and CGI techniques did give filmmakers the possibilities to show and tell certain stories in a more refined and convincing way (example landmarks are *Star Wars* (G. Lucas, 1977), *The Terminator* (J. Cameron, 1984), *Jurassic Park* (S. Spielberg, 1993)) and enabled what you might call a “visual narrative revolution” – made possible the type of stories that dominate Hollywood output since the advent of the Blockbuster in the 1970's. Today, in 2016 the film industry is already witnessing what will most probably remain the biggest technological revolution of the Century: Digital; one that will undoubtedly influence any aesthetic development the cinema might undergo in the coming decades, be that a return to old methods, or the implementation of yet newer formats, more spectacular and involving than the 1950's CinemaScope enthusiasts could dream of; and although the shift to widescreen has had one of the biggest effects as of yet in the general aesthetic of films and Television today, it remains to be seen what place it will occupy in the future.

Even though Widescreen became prevalent past the initial craze of the 1950's, after the CinemaScope brand died and Panavision ensured the solidity of the anamorphic format, it was clear that audiences would never again fill theatres like they had in the 1940's.

Nevertheless, the implementation of widescreen marked a shift, and the technique is today dominant across the whole of the film industry as the standard way of presenting content at the cinema. Since the 1960's, most films released in the cinema – with some increasingly rare exceptions – are in some form of widescreen. The industry seems to have settled for the now called Academy Flat 1.85:1 ratio, while the Panavision format, so-called anamorphic scope remains a standard at the 2.40:1 aspect ratio. It is undeniable that the film industry surrendered to the widescreen; today the term “widescreen film” is almost a pleonasm as almost all content that we consume essentially comes in a wide form, including television which has switched to the 16:9 or 1.78:1 format since the advent of digital broadcasting.

What of the original 35mm academy aspect ratio, the 1.33/7:1? Having the widescreen as norm, many filmmakers, especially in the last decades, recur to the old format as a stylistic choice, a different aesthetic approach. *Ida* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2013) and *Saul Fia* (László Nemes, 2015) were both extremely successful films shot and presented in the 4:3 aspect ratio and for an audience largely accustomed to widescreen imagery, they can be considered innovative. The fact is, that what was once considered outdated and limited is now coming back to the mainstream as an alternative, particularly in Europe. When an audience falls into a habit, any break of that habit will be considered as something “new”, even if it is an old method abandoned half a century before. 1.33:1 films today stand out as an attractive stylistic approach to visual storytelling. The exact same phenomenon is seen today in the music industry, with the recent rise in popularity of the vinyl and the video-game industry with the online commercialization of antiquated MS-DOS games for modern platforms.

Furthermore, the possibilities of the digital age provide the filmmaker with the ability to mix aspect ratios and create a quite uniquely modern aesthetic; the most popular example being probably that of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014), in which the flashbacks that constitute the narrative's core are presented in 4:3, and the story's present time

is shown in widescreen 2.40:1. Canadian director Xavier Dolan goes even further into experimentation with *Mommy* (2015), the first commercially released film shot in a 1:1 aspect ratio. At one point, the main character actually interacts with the frame by literally opening up the ratio with his arms and triggering a sequence in 1.85:1. These unorthodox uses of image dimensions in feature filmmaking might signify the arrival of a new era in film aesthetics, directly influenced by the arrival of digital.

More prominent than the creative use of aspect ratios is the recent revival of the large format. Going into the third decade of the XXI Century, one system stands out: IMAX. In today's age of fast 3-D spectacle, few commercial feature films present such a heightened visual experience as the IMAX sequences in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), shot on 65mm film and shown on the system's original format of 15-perforation 1.43:1, very close to the 1.33:1 classical academy ratio, only projected on 20 meter high screens. The nearly abandoned practice of 70mm projection has perhaps found its modern equivalent in the IMAX format, although its high cost still limits its use at a production level. Developed in the 1970's and originally 'confined to the genres of documentary, travelogue and music video', thanks to digital technology, since the early 2000's it has been a common practice to blow up 35mm sized images to fit IMAX projection for theatre distribution.⁹⁶ Equipping IMAX cinemas with 3D technology has only helped putting forward a demand for it. IMAX is still not in full use in mainstream filmmaking from acquisition to distribution but cases like *The Hateful Eight* (Q. Tarantino, 2016), shot on the ageing Ultra Panavision 70 format, and the recent manufacture of 65mm sized digital sensors might point at a large format revolution taking hold of the industry in the near future, triggered by a familiar need for yet more image quality and spectacle. There is no doubt that if there is in fact a new aesthetic revolution, it will be directly linked to the switch to digital filmmaking and broadcasting, which has brought the

⁹⁶ Enticknap, p. 72

cinema and television aesthetics closer together, but gives the general audience a need for more resolved, high quality images. At the same time as 4K and even 8K Television is fast becoming a reality for consumers, large format systems will keep delivering the “exclusive” heightened spectacle that attracts audiences into cinema theatres.

But if the classic academy aspect ratio is making its appearance once more, and the large format is gaining in popularity and demand, what then, happened to the widescreen as it was born in the 1950’s? The answer can be summed up in a word and a ratio: multiplex and 16:9. The 1980’s saw the rise of the multiplexes, cinema houses that, ‘instead of containing one large auditorium seating 1,000 or more, was subdivided into several smaller ones, some housing as few as 50’⁹⁷. As a result of this economic move, screens became smaller and smaller. This had repercussions on widescreen exhibition, particularly on the anamorphic Scope format, as the curved “miracle mirror screen” was abandoned and widescreen films ceased to be projected on gigantic 60-foot screens designed solely for that purpose. Today the average screen is designed to accommodate various aspect ratios, the standard being 1.85:1; a Scope film will, if anything, appear smaller on a modern multiplex. On a screen that accommodates a 1.85:1 image, a 2.40:1 projection will appear as a strip, with black bars on top and bottom since the screen retains the same width on both aspect ratios. Special venues exist like the Cinerama Dome in Los Angeles with its 86 feet wide screen and IMAX theatres are increasingly present in multiplexes across the world, but they remain used for only a handful of films. Conclusively, it is acceptable to say that, despite widescreen standardization, Scope widescreen has decreased in size and so lost its “spectacle” facet to become a purely aesthetic element, the epitome of what is considered to be a “cinematic image” today.

⁹⁷ Enticknap, p.154

In 2016, cinema and television aesthetics are closer than ever. The main reason is the arrival of digital technology for both acquisition and exhibition for cinema and broadcasting for television. The digital age rhymes with the 16:9 aspect ratio, essentially a widescreen format. Before its implementation, 4:3 had become synonymous with television while narrative feature films were the realm of the widescreen spectacle. Today, audiovisual content is absorbed in countless different environments and devices, television being at the top of the list with Internet based content quickly catching up. The switch to digital enabled these to provide attractive high quality motion picture content for the average consumer. Cinema has always been promoted and regarded as providing the definitive audiovisual experience; the cutting edge technology associated with its progress has grown at the heart of this aspiration for excellence. The television being a derivative of cinema, it is only natural that it fights to preserve its audience by means comparable to Hollywood's move to widescreen. 'There is a striking similarity between the commercial considerations involved in the introduction of film widescreen in the 1950s and the national politics and commercial debate to establish TV widescreen transmissions in the 1990s.'⁹⁸ A simple switch to digital broadcasting is not enough; the customer needs "new" content. 'A "fresh look" to re-brand an old product is, in this case, to change the shape of the screen'⁹⁹, to alter its aesthetic. Television is now essentially a widescreen medium; furthermore, the generalization of digital audiovisual acquisition enabled much of the same technological means to be employed in the production of both cinema and television contents. Is this a threat to modern cinema? Since the line between film and television aesthetics is progressively blurred, will the cinema need to "re-brand" itself once again? It has been discussed that the recent popularity of the large format,

⁹⁸ Ward, p. 90

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.92

not to mention the rise of 3-D (both in the cinema and on home video) and the recent advances in the realm of virtual reality, is probably a direct consequence of the digital shift and the availability of extremely high quality audiovisual content to the average consumer. It is possible that in order to survive, films as they were born in the silent days – a 3-dimensional world reproduced on a two-dimensional plane – are left with the large format, which today, among the countless platforms available arguably still provides the ultimate visual experience. French cinematographer Geroges Lechaptois points out that ‘the cameras are the same for films and TV series, often the cinematographers too. What remains for the cinema image? Perhaps large formats.’¹⁰⁰

Although reactions to the 16:9 unification were mainly positive, it was not met with enthusiasm overall, especially among the professional community. Victor Kemper, twice president of the ASC (1993-96, 1999-2001) complained that ‘there is a rich artistic heritage of some 40 years of widescreen Hollywood films, which would be compromised with a 16:9 or 1.78:1 aspect ratio’¹⁰¹. The ASC supported that an aspect ratio of 2:1 would be an ‘acceptable compromise between artistic purity and commercial realism’¹⁰². The fact is that upon settling on one standard, all other techniques, especially ones from the past, will be affected for better or worse. A 2:1 screen ratio would be even more inadequate for the reproduction of 4:3 images than the 16:9, and just like we cannot ignore 40 years of widescreen cinema history, we cannot forget half a century of films in the 1.33:1 ratio, or 50 years of archived television content in 4:3. The chiefly economic push towards unification of screen shapes pushes the medium of film into an aesthetic corner, just like forcing the widescreen on filmmakers did in the 1950’s. On the other hand, unification means that there is a stronger chance that the work

¹⁰⁰ *Alexa 65, première*. Interview with Rebecca Zlotowski and Georges Lechaptois. *Cahiers du Cinéma* n°719, February 2016, p.18

¹⁰¹ In Ward, p. 100

¹⁰² Ibid, p.100

of the filmmaker will be seen as intended in all different platforms, which is arguably the biggest challenge today. It is inevitable that new technologies are decided upon and old ones become obsolete, which ultimately bears effect on the aesthetic of works of art; but in a medium where compatibility is key, the past cannot be pushed completely aside for the future; the heritage of a century of filmmaking must be taken into account in the choice of a universal format. All in all, it is the industry's economic strategies – what made it into an industry in the first place – that define the shape of the future of moving images; it is the business that defines the shape of the screen.

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