
CINEMATIC CONTAINERS

Aspect Ratio and Creative Filmmaking

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Cinematic Containers: Aspect Ratio and Creative Filmmaking

Abstract

This research project investigates the creative implementations of aspect ratio in contemporary films. Specifically, it examines aspect ratio's creative role in film narrative and aesthetics. Aspect ratio has traditionally been viewed as the standardised proportions of the cinematic frame and is not expected to contribute to the content of the film itself. However, with the rise of digital technology, the aspect ratio is no longer standardised but has been given the opportunity to contribute in a creative role.

The research project is implemented using two forms: a written exegesis and a short film. The written thesis focuses on three contemporary films and their creative use of the aspect ratio. The short film places the aspect ratio into creative use to demonstrate how it can be used to tell a story. With these two approaches, the project aims to understand the creative role of aspect ratio from a creative filmmaking standpoint.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Cinematic Containers: Aspect Ratio and Creative Filmmaking

Introduction

The aspect ratio, which is defined as the proportional relationship of the width and height of an image, can refer to the format in which the image was shot or the format of the projected image. In cinema, the aspect ratio has traditionally been defined as the proportion of the cinematic frame. From the Academy Ratio of early cinema to the Golden Age of Hollywood and the introduction of widescreen in the 1950s, the proportion of the cinematic frame has not typically been expected to perform any creative roles beyond simply presenting the content of the film itself.

Filmmakers of these time periods had to contend with a limited amount of aspect ratios, ratios that are standardised and provided by the studios. For example, the short and feature length films of D. W. Griffith showcase his skills in composing shots that work narratively within the confines of the Academy Ratio. Similarly, films such as Cecil B Demille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) stretched the aesthetic possibilities of the widescreen ratio with epic landscapes and elaborate, concentrated visual compositions.

Today, with the popularization of digital technology, the proportions of the cinematic frame have proliferated. Furthermore, mobile devices and related production and viewing platforms have introduced new techniques and styles of image composition. Consequently, aspect ratio standards have loosened and the role of aspect ratio has extended from just being a proportion of the frame to a creative choice.

Namely, digital technology has enabled for the pronounced use of aspect ratio as a creative contributor to the film's aesthetics, themes, narrative and structure. In recent films, the usage of aspect ratio is distinct and evident, as well as linked to the meaning of the film. In 2017's *Spider-Man Homecoming*, the 9:16 portrait format that is typically used in mobile phones, emphasises the young Peter Parker's point of view as well as provides a "ground level look" to his everyman's journey from schoolyard shenanigans to superhero battles. Comparatively, HBO Films' cycling mockumentary *Tour De Pharmacy* (2017) activates the aspect ratio to simulate a specific moment in time. With the 4:3 aspect ratio, the film creates a visual time effect that takes the viewer to the 1980s and the time of VHS recordings.

This recent creative implosion of aspect ratio aligns with Steven Shaviro's (2016) claims of post-cinema. New digital technologies and devices open new possibilities in cinema. Attributes of filmmaking such as narrative continuity are constantly challenged and reordered. Similarly, aspect ratio in the age of post-cinema is subject to change and experimentation.

My project intends to investigate the creative use of aspect ratio in contemporary cinema. In particular, I will explore its implementation in cinematic narratives as well as aesthetic expression. In doing so, I ask how the aspect ratio contributes to cinematic construction of time, space and character. This will be executed through close analysis of three contemporary films as well as a short film production.¹

The first chapter focuses on the creation of intimacy in Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* (2014). The film uses the 1:1 perfect square ratio to create a sense of closeness without the use of close-ups and thus offers an emotional charge through aspect ratio. In the second chapter, the analysis focuses on Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). In the film, the presentation of time is supported by three different aspect ratios that serve as time capsules, contributing to the film's historical narrative. In the third and final chapter, the emphasis will be on the construction of cinematic space in Guy Ritchie's *The Man From U.N.C.L.E* (2015). The film uses multiple split-screens in its montage sequences to create visual momentum and to exhibit the progression of action and consequence in the same frame. This accelerates the narrative with smaller shifting and moving frames creating dynamic visual patterns within a widescreen aspect ratio.

The creative component of my thesis responds to the issues explored in the written exegesis. The short film I have made uses three different aspect ratios, specifically the 1:1, 4:3 and the 16:9 widescreen, to tell a post-apocalyptic story of a man who discovers that the world he knows and lives in is not what it seems. The aspect ratio morphs as his knowledge of the world grows. The use of three aspect ratios is intended to show the passing of narrative time, signify character development and indicate the visual consistency of space.

¹ My short film 'Tony' is viewable on vimeo (password is: canOn): <https://vimeo.com/241838989>

Literature Review

This research project is positioned within the fields of film studies and creative practice. Its key purpose is to examine how aspect ratio serves cinema beyond a standardised presentation and production format. As such, aspect ratio has not been the topic of much scholarly research. This literature review will cover aspect ratio through its related areas of study. Specifically, the literature review is divided into four sections, each responding to a different facet of the aspect ratio. These are visual culture, film history, aesthetic techniques, and digital technology.

Visual Cultures: Ways of Seeing

The aspect ratio belongs in a long tradition of visual culture that harkens back to the first standardised presentation formats. An example of this is Leon Battista Alberti's perspectival grid that serves as a window to the world. The window, however, is not part of the image but it is what *presents* the image. The actual subject is seen through it:

"First of all, on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen" (Alberti 1972, 55).

In *De Pictura*, Alberti explains how single point perspective is achieved through mathematics and geometry (Alberti 1972, 55).² The painting achieves realism through geometric execution and positioning of the viewer. These mathematical proportions, as Friedberg suggests, create a "representational space of perspective" and the "frame of the picture plane" (Friedberg 2009, 38). The window presents the reality of the painting, similar to how aspect ratio is used to present content on screen.³

In Alberti's window, the mathematical calculations put the viewer at the centre where they look at the painting as if they were viewing a scenery through a window. John Berger detects a transition in the viewer's position from painting to cinema. While paintings were

² "Then I establish a point in the rectangle wherever I wish; and as it occupies the place where the centric ray strikes, I shall call this the centric point. The suitable position for this centric point is no higher from the baseline than the height of the man to be represented in the painting, for in this way both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane" (Alberti 1972, 55)

³ Friedberg also reminds us that the window is inherently "mathematical, reliant on a rectangular aperture that was to hold the two-dimensional plane of the picture" (2009, 40). This form of controlled cinematic technological presentation bears a slight resemblance to Foucault's examination of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. While the panopticon enforces the gaze of the jailer, providing him or her with "omnipotent voyeurism", the film spectator's visual omnipotence is an imaginary one; the spectator's perspective is one of multiple in play during a film presentation. (Friedberg 1993, 20).

tailored to the viewer's perspective, the viewer being the "centre of the world" (Berger 2008, 18), the cinema, on the other hand, "demonstrated that there was no centre" (ibid.). The perspective of the viewer is just one of many perspectives that are in play, the "visible is in constant flux" and "the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all around the object (or person) depicted." (ibid.). With the visible in constant flux, there can be multiple views ways of seeing.

Berger's claim assists in demonstrating how visual culture has metamorphosed from a fixed viewer position in Alberti's perspectival grid to multiple ways of seeing in cinema. This multiplicity of possible viewpoints can be activated in creative filmmaking. Therefore, the thesis uses the idea of multiple ways of seeing to theorize the aspect ratio and show how this multiplicity is implemented in cinema.

Film History: Changes in Aspect Ratio

Heath mentions that unlike painting, where "its proportions are relatively free", film is limited to a small amount of ratios (Heath 1976, 82). Cinema is more uniform in its production and presentation formats as compared to painting, where frame sizes can vary considerably. Cinema's handful of aspect ratios suggests consistent usage until the introduction of the next format.

Contrary to the present day situation, changes in aspect ratio were typically based on economic reasons. In the early days of cinema, Thomas Edison, in his attempt to get as much use of precious film stock, split his film strips into 35mm stock. This led to industry wide standardisation of Academy Ratio (MacGowan 1956, 119).

Much of the early history of cinema was dominated by this format, otherwise known as the 4:3 which was eventually adopted by television. By the 1950s, television had taken away much of cinema's attendances, as box office sales dropped from 80 million in 1947 to 50 million by 1952 (MacGowan 1956, 110). In order to draw audiences back into the theatre, studios used widescreen to offer "spectacle and scale" on a larger screen (Contreras 1989, 15).⁴ This puts economic interests at the core of aspect ratio transition. It also suggests that aspect ratio was not a creative choice on the part of the filmmaker. Rather, it was the producers and studios that decided (Contreras 1989, 15).⁵ Filmmakers adapted to the standardised aspect ratio of the time period, not the other way around. MacGowan and

⁴ Widescreen aspect ratios had existed before and during the Great Depression but their use was resisted (Contreras 1989, 13).

⁵ As studio heads made decisions, even high profile filmmakers had to adapt. According to Thomas, while making *To Catch a Thief* (1955), Hitchcock was frustrated with VistaVision's inability to adequately capture closeups, which was a trade-off for its increased length of image (Thomas 2009, 87).

Contreras show how aspect ratio usage was determined by the economic forces of the studio system.

Hence, with the aspect ratio not being a choice, the creativity of the filmmaker was bound by the limitations of the standardised aspect ratio format: filmmakers had to creatively work with the ratio that was chosen by the producers and studios. The thesis aims to show that there is now an alternate form of creativity, one that is bound to the filmmakers' ability to choose the aspect ratio they will work with.

Aesthetic techniques

Adaptation to a specific aspect ratio sometimes resulted in aesthetic innovation. For example, Jacques Aumont (1990) shows how D.W. Griffith maximised the 1:33 Academy Ratio in *An Unseen Enemy* (1912). In the short film, Griffith uses the entire frame to convey the story, creating a cinematic grammar within the confines of a standardised format (Aumont 1990, 354). Through actor positioning and the mise-en-scene, Griffith emphasised vertical compositions within the confines of the Academy Ratio.

Aumont acknowledges Griffith's mastery of the mise-en-scene, "the framing, the placing of actors, their gestures". His scholarship works for my research in three ways. Firstly, it gives a historical analysis of how aspect ratio was used in the early years of film. Secondly, Aumont's description of the frame in Griffith allows me to expand on the creative uses of aspect ratio. Thirdly, the linking of the frame to the mise-en-scene enables a discussion on aspect ratio's role in creating the narrative world of the film. Although the aspect ratio is not addressed directly, Aumont's study provides the language I need for my analysis. Aumont's analysis connects the technologically determined format that is the aspect ratio to the cinematic frame and mise-en-scene.

Mise-en-scene's origins are in theatre, where it is defined as the 'system' of organising meaning in a stage production (Pavis 2012, 4). In film studies, although scholars have paid attention to the framing of the image in their discussions of mise-en-scene, the aspect ratio is not among the key components but still plays a significant part in organising meaning of a scene. For example, David Bordwell's definition only includes the setting, lighting, make up, costume and performance (Bordwell & Thompson 2004, 179). This is a gap in scholarship that my project intends to fill, particularly in relation to contemporary cinema and auteurist sensibilities.

This involves defining the aspect ratio as the director's choice. This relates to Barr's discussion of the director selecting or staging his "reality" (Barr 1963, 8). Bordwell's 'auteur's trademark' echoes this, as it describes the elements that make a director's personal style. Bordwell mentions that through their use of recurring techniques directors can distinguish themselves and make their films fit into a body of work. The examples Bordwell cites are from a technical or visual stand point: Truffaut and Ophuls for the pan-

and-zoom and tracking shots, Fellini's parade scenes and Bergman's theatre-like performances (Bordwell 1985, 211). The concept of "auteur trademark" is important to the project, as it allows me to define aspect ratio as an aesthetic technique that identifies a director's style.

More precisely, different aspect ratios have different aesthetic rules. While the Academy Ratio has compositions that emphasise vertical lines, the widescreen foregrounds horizontal lines (Barr 1963, 9). Cossar notes that the shift to widescreen in the 1950s also meant fewer cuts and contrasts with the Academy Ratio's heavy reliance on "portraits", vertically composed shots (Cossar 2009, 4-5).

Moreover, different themes require different aspect ratios. In his discussion of capturing architecture on film, Sergei Eisenstein argues that the widescreen format is not adequate because it does not capture the vertical orientation of buildings. He states that the 1:1 perfect square, where vertical and horizontal tendencies are of equal consideration, suits the topic better (Eisenstein, 1988, 209). Eisenstein champions creative choice, filmmakers selecting their aspect ratios according to the needs of the film to create the appropriate way seeing.

Digital technology

Digital technology has allowed for aspect ratio to contribute more creatively to cinema. As noted by Cossar, "new media directions" in relation to digital convergence create not just technological possibilities, but also aesthetic ones (Cossar 2009, 6). Cossar notes that while widescreen Cinemascope films can only be consumed in their intended aspect ratio, online films and videogames do not share this limitation, and can change aspect ratio format to fit the desired monitor format.

Miriam Ross (2014) mentions how a vertically emphasized aspect ratio, such as the portrait mode of a phone camera, can enforce a filmmaker's "personal touch" as well as increase the authenticity of the content within the aspect ratio. The personal touch of a filmmaker and authenticity of content can also be evident in how digital technology allows for the use of multiple aspect ratios in the same work. Friedberg echoes this in her claim that due to the destandardisation of aspect ratio and the proliferation of multiple content platforms, applications, devices and screen sizes, there is no standardised visual "hegemony" (Friedberg 2009, 7).

With no consistent standardised frame size, multiple frames on big and small devices compete for our attention in a terrain that is rapidly shifting. This lack of standardisation in digital technology means that aspect ratio has become a creative choice, and thus, as mentioned previously, provides a different form of creativity, a form that is not bound to the standardised aspect ratios of the studios. Filmmakers are now less restricted by studio and economic mandates, creating a different, distinctly post-cinematic aesthetic. And thus,

this research project seeks to examine how, with the lack of a standardised visual hegemony, aspect ratio is deployed creatively in contemporary cinema.

Methodology

My methodology involves two core approaches. The first method is close aesthetic analysis. I will examine three contemporary films that use three different aspect ratios and see how each film uses the aspect ratio creatively in tandem with character, time and space. My analysis will be assisted by scholars whose work explores film aesthetics, such as Jacques Aumont (1990, 354) and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2004, 179) and their respective definitions of the *mise-en-scène*. In addition, Cynthia Contreras's approach to *cinemascope* will serve my analysis. As noted by Contreras: "In order to more clearly define the qualities of widescreen composition, one must, of course, look to the films themselves and closely observe the compositional problem-solving, decision-making process at work" (Contreras 1989, 3). By using this methodological framework the project explores the creative choices that are made in the production of the chosen films.

The films chosen are, in the order of analysis: Xavier Dolan's family drama *Mommy* (2014), which makes use of the 1:1 aspect ratio to develop and magnify the dramatic actions of its characters. Secondly, I will analyse Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and how its use of the Academy Ratio, 2.40:1 and 1.85:1 aspect ratios create "time capsule" narratives that function as signifiers of a specific time period in the narrative. Finally, I will break down how widescreen cinematic space is manipulated through the use of split-screen, and how it contributes to the narrative in Guy Ritchie's 2015 spy action film, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

In addition to the close analysis, I will also deploy the method of creative practice. The reason for doing so is to uncover new ways in which aspect ratio can be used by a filmmaker. As Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett describe, the practitioner-researcher can interpret and record with an insider's perspective and gain the opportunity to create a "neonarrative", a narrative that is different or richer than the ones that came before (Bolt & Barrett, 2010, 127). Therefore, by putting myself in the role of the filmmaker, creative practice as research methodology allows me to discover and reinterpret aspect ratio intimately and create a new narrative that is comparatively different from the texts of the past. These two methodological approaches complement each other through theoretical analysis and creative practice, and thus enable understanding the significance of the contemporary uses of aspect ratio.

Chapter 1

The Perfect Square: Intimacy in *Mommy*

Xavier Dolan's body of work is known for its dramatic focus on several themes. Specifically, his films deal with the ideas of "adolescence, maternity, homophobia and transsexualism" (Hazelton 2016). With 2014's *Mommy*, Dolan takes focus on the former two, as the film charts the tumultuous lives of Die (Anne Dorval) and her son Steve (Antoine-Oliver Pilon) and their friendship with their neighbour, Kyla (Suzanne Clement) in the tempestuous drama.

Dolan has previously manipulated the aspect ratio, but his use of aspect ratio in *Mommy* stands out not just in his oeuvre but also against the films of his contemporaries. The use of the 1:1 aspect ratio in *Mommy* is thematic and part of the characters' dramatic development. Setting *Mommy* apart from the films of his contemporaries or even his previous work.⁶

With *Mommy*, Dolan uses the aspect ratio to facilitate the exploration of the characters' intimate and volatile lives. Dolan states of his intention to use the perfect square to accentuate intimacy in the characterization: "All the close-ups were much more strikingly and privately intimate than the 1.85:1 or 2.39:1 [ratios] we're used to" (Hazelton 2014).

While aspect ratios such as the Academy Ratio, the 4:3 and the widescreen aspect ratio have been more frequently used in the past, the 1:1 aspect ratio is not a widely used aspect ratio within the cinematic form.⁷ Dolan describes in a separate interview that the perfect square 1:1 allowed for a more focused narrative that removes all "distractions" on the left and right of the screen. By setting the narrative within a perfect square, much of the horizontal space and distractions are removed. This results in a narrative that has an increased emphasis on a centralized image. Such a creative choice means that any negotiations of space come from the centralized composition and the depth of the image rather than from its sides.

Dolan's use of the perfect square recalls of how Griffith would cope with the Academy Ratio in 1912's *An Unseen Enemy*, positioning his actors either on the left or right of the frame to make full use of the aspect ratio. Or in the case of *Broken Blossoms*, where he implements a horizontal mask in the Limehouse District sequence to enforce a horizontal viewing emphasis (Cossar 2007, 45). In that particular sequence in *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith minimizes the space at the top and bottom of the frame and thus enforces a narrative

⁶ This is unlike the chronological and structural implementations of Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and Dolan's previous film, *Laurence Anyways* (2012), where he uses the 4:3 to emphasize the 1980s setting (Hazelton 2016).

⁷ The usage of the 1:1 aspect ratio is "unusual" (Debruge 2014). Instead, the perfect square ratio's popularization lies in digital technology, such as its use in the social media application Instagram.

perspective, one that brings attention to what lies within the horizontal frame and field of view (Figure 1). As noted by Cossar, Griffith narrows Lucy's vertical world to "accentuate the horizontality of mise-en-scene" she is in (Cossar 2007, 1).



Figure 1

Griffith uses the horizontal mask as it provides a visual scale of objects, creating a sense of enormity that contrasts with the actor's smaller person and exaggerates the "tension" of the moment created in the frame (Cossar 2007, 2). The limiting of the image in *Broken Blossoms* is to juxtapose the smaller scale of the actors with the larger, more domineering scale of the landscape to highlight the hopelessness of the character's situation.

Dolan's approach to the 1:1 has similar intentions, albeit he takes advantage of the centrality of the 1:1 ratio to enforce a different perspective, to highlight the intimacy of the characters and their relationships to each other. Instead of emphasizing the environment in comparison to the character's smaller figure, like in Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, Dolan uses the perfect square to do the inverse. Using the perfect square, Dolan makes the characters larger than life, while scaling them against the smaller and more constraint background, hence producing a different perspective.

With the loosening of aspect ratio standardisation, the potential for multiple perspectives has now increased. In times of standardisation, the mise-en-scene of films is restricted to what the ratio can contain, the Academy Ratio and the popularizing of widescreen both have aesthetic and perspectival requirements for filmmakers to cope with. Cossar notes that, with the Academy Ratio, cinema was specifically a "portrait only" operation and in post-1952, the widescreen resulted in landscape compositions (Cossar 2009, 5). But with the proliferation of digital technology, there are more aspect ratios to work with and thus,

different creative and aesthetic composition options for directors beyond the vertical and the horizontal.

The aspect ratio's purpose in *Mommy* therefore is slightly different to previous time periods in film history. Berger notes of how the role of paintings has transitioned as works of art become reproducible, "they can, theoretically, be used by anybody" (Berger 2008, 29). Therefore, as if something like aspect ratio can now be used by anybody, it can also come to mean different things and perspectives, and in this particular case, Dolan uses the 1:1 aspect ratio as part of the structure of emotion in the narrative.

The 1:1 aspect ratio is now being used differently and while it is smaller as a visual container compared to the Academy Ratio and the widescreen ratios, we do not see less. Instead, the 1:1 aspect ratio is part of a visual structure that allows us to see differently, it summons a different feeling and perspective. In *Mommy*, the narrow mise-en-scene reveals and summons the characters and their emotions. By limiting horizontal space, the human figure and posture is magnified.

The opening scene where Die is let go from her workplace defines how the perfect square ratio is used by Dolan in *Mommy*. With little to no background and horizontal space, Die and her manager are framed in an almost portraiture format. Visual information on the sides is restricted but the narrative focus on the conversation between the characters and their respective facial expressions is heightened. By restricting the frame to the characters, the aspect ratio magnifies the drama that the characters themselves are embroiled in (Figure 2).

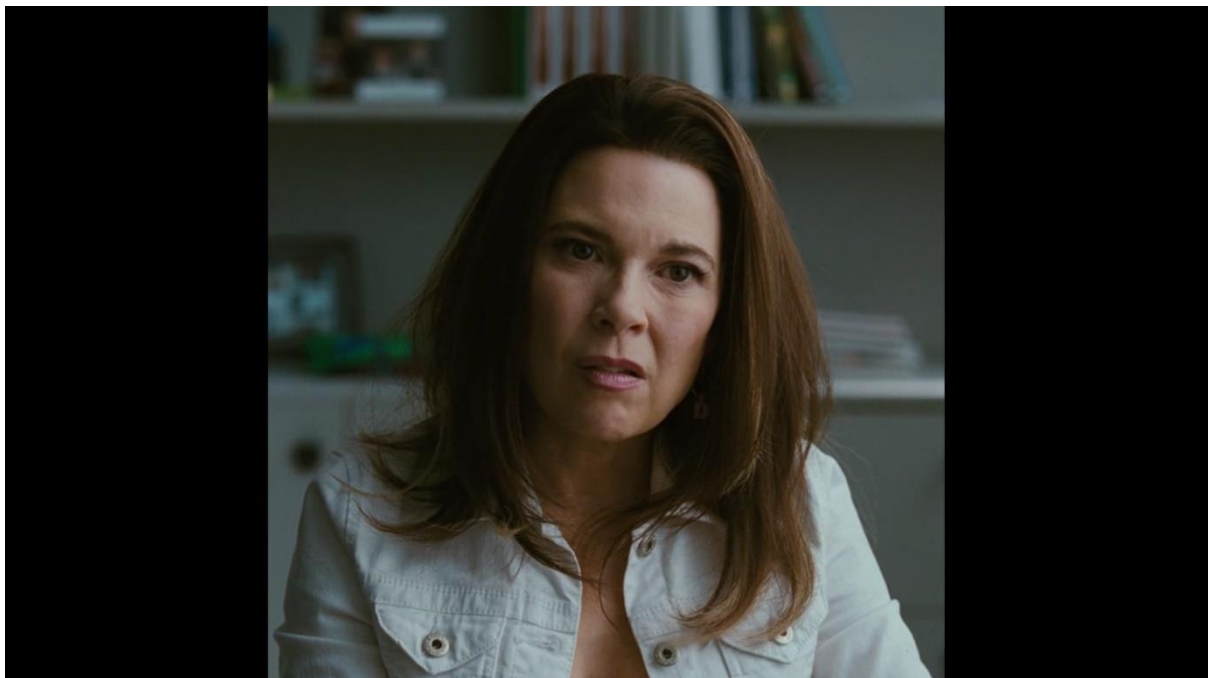


Figure 2

This relates to the use of close-ups in cinema. According to Mary Ann Doane, the close up has been used to connect intimacy and interiority with the "authority of the monumental"

(2003, 109). The close up, according to Doane, presents an intimate look at a character or an object but at the same time, the close up also signifies something of momentous importance, either to the narrative or the themes of the film. Deleuze also make note of how the close-up has to ability to reduce the world of the film into a single image (Deleuze 1986, 96).⁸ Which is to state that the close-up does not ‘tear away’ from the world of the film but rather, it reduces the cinematic world to a single image of narrative or thematic importance, magnifying its existence regardless of its position in space and time. As a technique, the close-up is, as Balazs asserts, an “art of emphasis” (Balasz 2010, 39). The emphasis allows the showcasing of “the minute atoms of life”, the miniscule but important details of a narrative (Balazs 2010, 38).

The close-up emphasizes rather than separates and allows for the smallest events in a narrative or a document to be put under a microscope, magnified and turned into a large event. The entirety of *Mommy*’s narrative only revolves around three characters and their relationships but with the close-up effect, their arguments, their dinner table conversations become monumental in nature and also reveal more than what we usually see.

Balazs further elaborates that the close-up offers a different, more intangible perspective to cinema, especially if the close-up is composed of the human face; it reveals not just spatial significance but also the intangible, such as emotions and thoughts (Balazs 2010, 101).⁹ Balazs’ definition of the close-up strips away spatial considerations and creates a perspective that goes beyond the visible composition. The close up does away with space in order to visualize thought and emotion; we see things that are not contained in space. Balazs goes even further and claims that the close-up can photograph the “unconscious” emotions that characters betray (Balazs 2010, 103).

Quite literally, we see things differently in a close-up where character emotion and thoughts are accentuated. Most significantly, Balazs iterates that the close-up is a method with which the director “guides the audience’s gaze” (Balasz 2010, 38). In *Mommy*, Dolan deploys the perfect square ratio to close the frame, achieving the effects of the close-up without going up close in proximity to his subjects. The square frame gives a form of dramatic magnification to the characters and with large black bars on both sides of the frame, the intimacy is accentuated by reducing all other elements from the screen, we only see the subject or subjects in the frame and nothing more.

⁸ “The close-up does not tear away its object from a set of which it would form part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates” (Balasz 1986, 96).

⁹ “Confronted by a face, we no longer find ourselves in a space at all. A new dimension opens before our eyes: physiognomy. The position of the eyes in the top half of the face, the mouth below; wrinkles now to the right, now to the left- none of this now retains its spatial significance. For what we see is merely a single expression. We see emotions and thoughts. We see something that does not exist in space” (Balazs 2010, 101).

Balazs also notes of the close-up's influence on editing. Especially when the close-up effect is followed by another shot utilizing the same effect, leading to a "rapid to-and-fro motion" and enabling the action and the story to "develop in a deeper dimension" (Balazs 2010, 109). This is witnessed in *Mommy* during the scene before the "Wonderwall" song sequence, when Steve successfully persuades Kyla to continue tutoring him, all the while both are standing in the middle of the road. The use of close-ups of their faces, hands and over the shoulder shots enables the action to move faster, we do not see everything, we see only what we need to see. Wide shots are used but due to the 1:1 ratio, they are compressed and focused on the two characters. Therefore, prioritising the development of the story and the relationship between Steve and Kyla.

As noted by Peter Bradshaw in his review of *Mommy* in *The Guardian*, the ratio restricts other factors such as the "horizon" as well as other attributes of the mise-en-scene and trades this limited visual scope for "compressed emotional power: a painful squeezing" (Bradshaw 2015). Bradshaw notices that through the structure's limited visual scope, it magnifies the emotional core of the film, allowing Dolan to capture intangible, the emotional and feelings of the narrative.

This magnification of emotional events in the film also generates mood and atmosphere for the film. As Balazs mentions, "a close-up of the eyes irradiates more soul than the entire body in long shot" (Balazs 2010, 44).¹⁰ Balazs is suggesting that the close-up can effect the atmosphere of the film and its tone, through intangible feelings of the characters. Through the volatile and tense mood from the tightly composed shots, the world of *Mommy* as created by Dolan is one of tempestuous emotion and volatility, every single facial expression or smile and body movement is amplified.

Balazs mentions that while the mood of an individual cannot be grasped in its totality in a lone image, some expressive close-ups of a person's gaze can provide a subjective image of the world, one that is "illuminated by feeling" (Balazs 2010, 44). Hence, *Mommy*'s narrative, through its application of the perfect square and its use of the close-up effect magnification, intends for us to view the film through the emotional moods and feelings it creates.

Dolan's use of the 1:1 and the effects of the close-up also have post-cinematic implications. In two key scenes, *Mommy*'s aspect ratio enlarges to widescreen to signify the character's happiness and freedom from emotional turmoil (Figure 3). This changes the film's aesthetic rules from a centralized composition to a wider, traditional widescreen composition. This means that *Mommy* has two different aesthetic rules, each one for a specific mood and emotion, both working in a "structure of feeling".

¹⁰ Balazs continues: "it is the director's task is to discover the eyes of a landscape. Only in close-ups of these details will he grasp the soul of the totality: its mood" (Balazs 2010, 44).



Figure 3

Originally coined by Raymond Williams, a structure of feeling is a “cultural hypothesis” that attempts to understand and analyse the cultural and affective elements in a particular generation and period (Williams 1977, 132). Due to its nature, it is a hypothesis that is suited for analysing art and literature.¹¹ However, Shaviro’s definition of a structure of feeling is, to his own admission, different. He emphasizes the effects of the structures of feeling rather than their causes and explanations (2010, 2). Shaviro notes that he is more interested in how recent films and video express their narratives through “sound and image” in a “free-floating sensibility” that is akin to our own society (2010, 2). This means that films as structures of feeling are “machines of generating affect” (Shaviro 2010, 3).¹²

Some films generate affect through emotions, which is the case with *Mommy*. *Mommy*’s method of working with the aspect ratio and the effects of the close-up recall the structure of feeling that is found in soap operas, with its dramatic flourishes and bristling emotions. As Ien Ang notes of the American soap opera *Dallas*, the show’s narrative, like most of its genre is presented in dialogue: “dialogue is *the* narrative instrument of soap opera” (Ang 1982, 73). This is an important claim, as *Mommy* replicates this soap operatic trait throughout the film, using dialogue to further the narrative and character development. Dialogue reflects each characters’ emotional state, their desires and fears, which, as Ang would highlight is a similar approach to how soap operas operate narrative: “Each spoken word reflects the

¹¹ As Raymond Williams would describe, art and literature’s affective impact cannot be judged through systems or institutions. It is “(a structure) one of feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restrains and tones” (Williams 1979, 159).

¹² “But they are also productive, in the sense that they do not *represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them. Films and music videos, like other media works, are *machines for generating affect*” (Shaviro 2010, 3)

subjective inner world of a character – his or her desires, fears, moral preferences, etc.” (Ang 1982, 73).

In terms of the mise-en-scene, *Dallas* uses its opulent setting to create a sense of claustrophobia where hysteria can explode at any given time in a closed community setting of the show (Ang 1982, 78).¹³ *Mommy* similarly creates a sense of claustrophobia in its mise-en-scene, although it is not one of contrasts but of tightness. With the perfect square, the characters are boxed in, but the result is the same; hysterics can happen at any time, shouting matches or emotional breakdowns are regular occurrences in the film.

However, while the dialogue provides narrative and characterization momentum, it is not the only instrument in a soap opera’s structure of feeling. Ang also cautions that characters do not always say what they mean, relying on the actor’s performance and facial expressions to carry the thematic essence, and the constant use of close-ups that are held for few seconds towards the end of every scene also help telegraph the emotions that are in play in the scene (Ang 1982, 73). These different methods, the held close ups, the dialogue, the actors’ facial expressions all produce what Ang calls the “tragic structure of feeling” (Ang 1982, 73). *Mommy*’s emphasis on bringing attention to the character’s faces and figures are soap operatic in their effect. Faces and figures being the only thing literally in frame, every emotional conflict is further magnified.

In addition to the magnification of emotion, there is a narrative similarity with Dolan’s use of the close-up effect with the soap opera’s use of close-ups. Multiple times in the film, the close-up effect of the 1:1 ratio is utilized to show emotional conflict but rarely is the emotional conflict ever resolved between Die, Steve and Kyla, and even if it is, it will only be for a brief fleeting moment. The close-up effect is used to bring to attention the ultimately futile attempts of the characters trying to control their lives, this is echoed by Ang in her analysis of the close-up in soap opera, the technique is “melodramatic” and emphasizes that the characters do not have control of their lives due to “contradictions of human society” (Ang 1982, 74).

Therefore, through the implementation of the 1:1 aspect ratio among the other instruments of the film’s structure of feeling such as the usage of soap opera narrative techniques, Dolan creates a narrative structure of feeling that brings focus to the characters and the emotions that they experience. He showcases that, with a different aspect ratio, things that are captured on camera are seen and shown differently, and the director, in this case Dolan, can use the ratio as a magnification tool to highlight important parts of the narrative, such as emotion and can allow us to witness what is usually intangible.

¹³ The show is dominated with luxurious and spacious locations, providing a sense of optimism that greatly contrasts with the deeply pessimistic world of *Dallas* and the soap opera genre (Ang 1982, 78).

In my short film project, I activated the 1:1 aspect ratio to emphasise the limited understanding the protagonist, Tony, has of his world. The 1:1 ratio is a constraint, an isolated prison that works thematically with the sequence in showing that Tony is one of the last survivors of humanity. Narratively, the use of the 1:1 ratio allows the film to centralise and magnify the dramatic and emotional elements of the scenes, such as Dr Gibson's interrogation of Tony and Tony's attempted suicide, and increase their emotional impact.

Chapter 2

Time Capsules: The Academy Ratio in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

The Grand Budapest Hotel is the 9th film in the career of director Wes Anderson. In the film, Anderson displays his distinctive cinematic style using “symmetrical compositions, swish pans, snap zooms, and speed changes” (Pizzello 2012, 18). Out of his entire oeuvre, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* arguably best showcases Anderson’s portrayal of cinematic and narrative time through the use of one particular arena of filmmaking, the aspect ratio.

Throughout his career, Anderson has toyed with different aspect ratios. *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic of Steve Zissou* (2004) were filmed in 2.35:1 and *Bottle Rocket* (1996), *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) in 1.85:1. The creative use of aspect ratio is what Bordwell would consider an authorial signature that highlights Anderson’s style.

Anderson’s use of aspect ratio stands in contrasts to how filmmakers in previous eras of film history would contend with aspect ratio.¹⁴ In the past, aspect ratio was a format that directors were obliged to use, it was not in their position to select their aspect ratios. This is not to imply that there was no creativity, it is simply a different form of creativity compared to the freedom of aspect ratio choice in post-cinematic times.

This is exemplified in the documentary *Visions of Light* (1992), that shows how before widescreen aspect ratios were introduced, films were composed in a squarish format. After the 1950s, filmmakers began to gradually take advantage of the breadth of the image and composed their shots according to how wide the proportions of the frame were. Here, creativity came in the form of working with the limitations of the standardised aspect ratios. Once the widescreen aspect ratios were standardised, filmmakers started composing horizontally, rather than vertically. Depending on the aspect ratio’s size limitation, filmmakers had to work with and maximise its visual potential.

Jacques Aumont shows in his analysis of D.W. Griffith’s *An Unseen Enemy* (1912) how Griffith maximised the then standard 1.33:1 Academy Ratio. *An Unseen Enemy* is a short film about two sisters (played by Lillian and Dorothy Gish) trapped in a room by their maid and a

¹⁴ Whereas Griffith adapted to and developed his cinematic style in relation to a predetermined aspect ratio, the Academy Ratio was a conscious creative choice for *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Seitz 2013, 324). This is evident also in Anderson’s previous film, *Moonrise Kingdom*, where the aspect ratio 1:85:1 was chosen to complement the mise-en-scene. Robert Yeoman, the cinematographer of *Moonrise Kingdom*, notes that Anderson chose the 1.85:1 ratio as it suited the locations of the film (Pizzello 2012, 20).

burglar. Aumont cites this as an example of “communication from one frame to another”, it is communication of what is in frame to what is outside of it (1990, 354).

The characters are placed either on the extreme left or right of the frame, especially when they are communicating by telephone (Figure 4 and 5). According to Aumont, this creates a mode of storytelling that is different from classical use of continuity (1990, 354). The positioning of actors and the placing of the telephone create a form of narrative flow and continuity. We see the sisters on the phone with their brother on the right of the screen. The brother picks up the phone and talks to them on the left of the screen.



Figure 4



Figure 5

This use of figure placement, sisters in distress on the right, then cutting to the shot of their brother, both frames through a phone and communicating beyond the frame, was at that time a pioneering cinematic technique. Although Aumont does not discuss the aspect ratio specifically, rather focusing on the mise-en-scene, his argument is implicitly linked to the ways in which aspect ratio contributed to the development of cinematic narrative in the early years of film. His analysis shows how the mathematical and technological parameters of the Academy Ratio played into the constitution of narrative continuity.

In the 21st century, the use of Academy Ratio has transitioned from a standardised format to a realm of artistic experimentation. In Wes Anderson's cinema, this has to do with his distinct portrayal of time and continuity. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* tells the story of M. Gustave, the charismatic concierge of the eponymous Grand Budapest Hotel, and the adventures and exploits in his lifetime. The story is told from the point of view of the hotel's former lobby boy, Zero Moustafa, through three different narratives, each representing different time periods of the hotel's history. To differentiate the three different timelines, Anderson uses three distinct aspect ratios: the aforementioned Academy Ratio for the 1930s timeline, and two widescreen ratios, the 1.85:1 for the late 1980s and the 2.40:1 for the 1960s timeline. All three ratios are part of a nonlinear narrative that constantly shifts between the timelines.

David Bordwell's argues that non-diegetic elements can enforce themselves on the diegetic world of the film: "It suggests that something—narration, presentation, narrator, camera, author, filmmaker, or whatever—stands "outside" the diegetic realm and produces meaning in relation to it" (Bordwell 1991, 183). In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the three aspect ratios while non-diegetic, still influence the creation and perception of the three timelines.

Aumont's description of Griffith adapting to the aspect ratio is about working with given limits: Griffith frames his actors and mise-en-scene to cope with the constraints of Academy Ratio. If the Academy Ratio was the standard from the discovery of film to the 1930s and the widescreen aspect ratio dominant from mid-20th century onwards, then the digital 21st century cinematic frame is one that goes beyond the continuity and boundary of classical cinematic framing. According to Steven Shaviro, in "post-continuity" film, the rules of continuity are used opportunistically and occasionally, rather than adhered to structurally. Shaviro insists that narrative is not abandoned but rather articulated in a space and time that is not considered classical. Space and time have become "relativized or unhinged" (Shaviro 2016, 58).

Post-continuity materializes in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* in the form of a disjointed visual continuity. With the use of three different aspect ratios for three different timelines, the film unhinges time from rules of continuity and presents it as relativised and linked to the history of cinematic presentation. An example of this can be found in the Academy Ratio sequence, which is in complete contrast to the cinematic style of the other timelines shot on variations of widescreen, in 2.40:1 and 1.85:1. The timeline is set in the 1930s and the visuals have a strong emphasis on vertical lines emphasised by the academy ratio as well as the pillars, windows, doors and ornate walls. In Gustave's introductory sequence, the camera tracks through the angular, symmetrical and vertically constructed hallway accentuating emotion in close-ups and maximising movement in wide shots. When Gustave has tea with Madame D, the conversation between the two characters plays out within the rigid vertical lines of the mise-en-scene (Figure 6).



Figure 6

This vertical mise-en-scene is attempting to work with the Academy Ratio and more importantly, grounds the timeline in the history of film itself, thus shifting aspect ratio from its technological base to that of an aesthetic reproduction of actual 1930s films. The aspect ratio in the film, thus, becomes a literal sign of the times.

This is a considerably different approach to classical continuity, which Shaviro describes as follows: "space is a fixed and rigid container, which remains the same no matter what goes on in the narrative; and time flows linearly, and at a uniform rate, even when the film's chronology is scrambled by flashbacks" (Shaviro 2016, 60). In contrast to a uniform time, the film offers distinct blocks of time that obey their own visual rules. The containers have become time capsules.

The time capsules extend to the other two timelines and also change the visual styles significantly, such as the 2.35:1 extreme widescreen that is used to indicate the 1960s timeline. The wider screen visually takes advantage of what the 1930s timeline cannot use, namely, the width of the screen. For example, during a conversation between the young author (played by Jude Law) the older Zero Moustafa (played by F. Murray Abraham), they are positioned in either the extreme right or extreme left of the screen, leaving much of the space to be filled by prominent horizontal lines, such as the brick walls. Even the bathtubs they are in provide strong horizontal visual emphasis (Figure 7, 8).



Figure 7



Figure 8

The 1980s narrative uses another widescreen ratio, the 1.85:1. While only taking up a small portion of the film's runtime, the 1985 widescreen 1.85:1 segment with the author (played by Tom Wilkinson) is visually composed with more prominent horizontal lines and considerably more production design detail. As the author sits at his desk, speaking to the camera, the widescreen accommodates bookshelves in the background and the long table in the foreground (Figure 9).



Figure 9

These different timelines within one narrative presents an extremely modular narrative. According to Kristen Daly, filmmakers can now construct cinematic events that are different from classical narratives and use repetition and rearranging events (Daly 2017, 158).¹⁵ Modular narrative changes the traditional linear narrative into a nonlinear one, and this narrative structure creates different narrative cause and effect. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the three aspect ratios serve three different modules of time and the nonlinearity of the narrative is recognisable by how the narrative cuts between different aspect ratios. In addition, the nonlinear narrative allows for a different approach to chronology. Anderson bookends the film with the latest timeline, the 1980s 1.85:1 ratio and progressively moves backwards in time, to the 1960s timeline, where both the young author and the older Zero Moustafa discuss about M. Gustave. As they do, the narrative moves backwards to chronicling M. Gustave's exploits through the 1930s Academy Ratio timeline, before moving forward in time in the final act, where M. Gustave's fate is finally revealed by Moustafa in the 1960s timeline, ending Gustave's character arc.

In addition, this time capsule narrative serves another important thematic purpose in the film's use of time: simulating and referencing film history. As noted by David Denby in his review of the film:

"The film is, finally, not so much a recapture of lost time as a history of the way we have felt about lost time. Anderson and his cinematographer, Robert Yeoman, shot the various periods in different aspect ratios, as if to evoke earlier phases of filmmaking" (Denby, 2014).

Denby's review posits Anderson's use of the aspect ratio as one that works deep into the thematic root of the story. Anderson's auteurist implementation of aspect ratio, while noticeable, serves the themes and narrative of the film. This evoking of earlier phases of filmmaking is as much aesthetic play of space as it is thematic and narrative progression of time, to show how the craft of filmmaking has changed as the characters grow through time and how the surrounding mise-en-scene changes, like the character arcs.

The three aspect ratios serve as creative indications of particular time periods and respective visual considerations. The Academy Ratio, formerly relegated to the past as the proportional standardisation of frame size, is now repurposed as a sign of time for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Therefore, aspect ratio is now much closer aligned to the frame as a creative choice. With digital technology and the proliferation of different aspect ratio formats, the aspect ratio has become material for the filmmaker to work with.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Progressive filmmakers are assembling cinematic events in new and expanded ways fundamentally different from classic conceptions of narrative: rearranging pieces in a chronological order, utilizing repetition, and designing non-traditional structures of causation" (Daly 2017, 158).

¹⁶ Aspect ratio's creative usage shares its fate with several artforms of the past. As John Berger notes, of the art of painting, that in the age of "pictorial reproduction", its meaning has changed, from something that can only be seen in one place and is fundamentally part of the building and architecture of which they were painted in (Berger 2008, 18). To Berger, the painting has become

By implementing the history of cinema as material for the director of the film to work with to create theme and meaning. Anderson uses three historical aspect ratios to serve a new narrative and story, allowing the history of cinema to repurpose its existence in the present. This use of the past for new narratives is what Ranciere calls a “fiction of memory” (Ranciere 2006, 168). *The Grand Budapest Hotel* creates its fiction from the past with aspect ratio, similar to Chris Marker’s use of archival footage in *The Last Bolshevik*. By using factual archival footage and old historical documents, Marker creates memories of that particular time period.

With each different timeline, we witness the passage of time unravel in the narrative of Anderson’s film, as we move from one timeline to another, the past existing in the present.¹⁷ This use of film history lies on the onus of the filmmaker, as Jacques Ranciere notes of the camera’s “passivity”, reliant on the “intelligence” of the filmmaker to manipulate it” (Ranciere 2001, 9). The camera itself is a passive mechanical apparatus. It is the filmmaker who provides the stylistic and creative sensibilities that grafts his or her perspective into the technological application, in this case, the camera.

This grafting could potentially lead to the changing of purpose of such technological applications. Aspect ratio works in discussion for auteurs and their recurring themes and techniques when it is the director himself or herself that is making the decisions. This is echoed by Barr: the “director selects or stages his ‘reality,’ and photographs it; we perceive the image, on the screen, in the course of the film” (Barr 1963, 8).

The director makes the decision to showcase the film’s narrative reality and presentation of time, and this decision also impacts how the image is perceived. Anderson’s film is distinctively post-continuous in its aesthetic sensibilities, using the technological past as a means to create a narrative present and manipulate the film’s time. As space and time are now “unhinged”, the narrative of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* uses the cinematic rules of the past opportunistically, serving the purpose of the director and the film itself.

In my film, the Academy Ratio comes into use at a crucial plot twist point. It is used to visually enlarge Tony’s world. As his world expands visually, he learns more about the world he inhabits. Similar to how space-time is “unhinged”, the change of aspect ratio as the narrative progress in my film project also negotiates space and time. In the case of the Academy Ratio, its slightly wider frame allowed me to shift the centralised compositions to a vertically emphasised composition. This change of visual dynamic with the aspect ratio is to bring attention to how Tony’s world is shifting.

“transmittable”, and adds that “when a painting is reproduced by a film camera it inevitably becomes material for the film-maker’s argument.” (Berger 2008, 26).

¹⁷ This is similar in execution with *The Last Bolshevik*, Ilona Hongisto mentions that *The Last Bolshevik*’s use of archival documents creates a “immanent” narrative where the past is used to show that time is “unfolding”, keeping the past very much alive but in a new fictional form, unfolding as the new cinematic present (2015, 28).

Chapter 3

Splitting the Split-screen: Kinetic Action in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

In his body of cinematic feature film work, Guy Ritchie has presented cinematic worlds that emphasize the dynamic and the non-linear. From the disjointed narrative and split-screen in *Snatch* (2000) to the frequent speed ramping in his *Sherlock Holmes* (2009 and 2011) adaptations, Ritchie has cultivated a distinct style of filmmaking with flashy, stylistic flourishes. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (2015) is Ritchie's first movie shot entirely on digital cameras, which makes it particularly ripe for examination in regards to creative uses of the aspect ratio in the digital age. Of particular interest is his distinctive use of split-screen, which began in *Snatch* and has evolved with the introduction of digital cameras (Pennington 2017)

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. is shot in widescreen and uses the technique of split-screen in several of the film's montages, while the use of split screen in widescreen is not new, the technique was commonly used in wider aspect ratios in the 1950s onward (Friedberg 2009, 203).¹⁸ Split-screen's popularizing in feature filmmaking coincided with the introduction of widescreen aspect ratio, which occurred also in the 1950s. This seem to suggest that the introduction of widescreen aspect ratio allowed for different and creative ways to manipulate the cinematic frame.

Brian De Palma continued this trend in the 1970s, transforming the larger canvas into a dual perspective cinematic narrative where split-screen frames were fitted into the larger widescreen image. De Palma's used this technique of images within images in *Dionysus in 69* (1969), shooting the two perspectives on 16mm handheld cameras and printing the footage side by side before using the split-screen technique in his subsequent films.¹⁹

Along with De Palma, John Frankenheimer collaborated with Saul Bass to implement the multi split-screen for his 1966 Formula One racing film *Grand Prix*. The result is dynamic race sequences that, due to the different geometric shapes and sizes of the split-screens, makes each race course visually distinct (Timmers 1999, 165). The use of multi-splitscreen is also evident in Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), but in this case, instead of giving sequences of narrative different aesthetics, it offers multiple "vantage points" to the audience to present multiple point of views simultaneously (Cossar 2007, 29).

¹⁸ Films such as Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's *Its Always Fair Weather* in 1955 and 1959's *Pillow Talk* by Michael Gordon use split-screen. Both are widescreen Cinemascope features. (Friedberg 2009, 203.)

¹⁹ De Palma also used split-screen in *Sisters* (1973), *Carrie* (1976) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980) (Schauer 2014, 98-99), making it a signature technique of his.

The use of widescreen aspect ratio to impose dynamic, moving multi frame perspectives serves, ironically, Bazin's "Fin du Montage". Bazin claims that the widescreen, with its use of wider frame proportions would "kill" the montage as the close up would be redundant in a widescreen that could capitalize on a larger frame for audiences to witness (Bazin 1953, 284).

Instead of killing the montage, widescreen accelerated it, with a larger cinematic canvas, the screen is able to accommodate multiple frames simultaneously and audiences can visually roam the screen. Widescreen broadens the visual scope of the frame, allowing viewers to pay attention to more narrative objects in the frame for example through multiple perspectives within a single frame. Neil Mitchell notes that split-screens draw attention from one vision to another within a single mise-en-scene, distancing the characters from one another through a border, but at the same time presenting multiple visions and perspectives (2013, 58).

In the case of De Palma, the dual frame split-screen allows for two perspectives, action and consequence, in the same frame. *Carrie* was shot on Panavision's 1.85:1 aspect ratio (IMDB 2017). De Palma adapts widescreen technology creatively particularly in the climax of the film, when Carrie wreaks havoc at her prom. The dual split screen technique allowed for more narrative information and the presentation of multiple points of view in a single image. On one side, we see Carrie's actions and on the other, the immediate devastation her actions resulted (Browning 2009, 42).

This literal split also has thematic value as when Carrie's psyche is "torn asunder", the screen symbolically fractures (Mitchell 2013, 58). Hence, De Palma's perspectival manipulation of the widescreen works on two levels. Narratively, it allows for two perspectives to exist in a single cinematic frame, which shows the immediate narrative effect of a character's actions. Thematically, the split-screen reinforces Carrie's psychological breakdown, as the character wreaks vengeance on her bullies (Figure 10).



Figure 10

The films of the past use of split-screen is foundational but is implemented considerably differently compared to *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* The key difference in film production in regards to the relationship between aspect ratio and split-screen does not lie in the filming process but rather, in the editing room. Prior to the invention of digital editing software, editing was done through a flatbed editor, before the industry switched to digital software in 1993 (Jones 1999).²⁰

In addition to being a less labour-intensive process, more importantly, digital editing allowed for more accessible filmmaking techniques to be used. Such as the splitting of a screen can go beyond two halves, with multiple images within a frame being a possibility. As noted by Anne Friedberg: “...with the representational possibilities of flat-screen digital video, the multiple-image, multiple frame, multiple-screen format has become an accessible new idiom” (2009, 219). Digital technology allowed the widescreen aspect ratio to serve as a master frame for multiple frames and images and also makes the technique much more accessible and less time and economically consuming to filmmakers.

Cohen also mentions the accessibility of digital editing and the opportunities it provides in redefining cinematic space, noting that digital nonlinear editing disrupts special continuity by giving the filmmaker opportunities to add effects like inserts, wipes or fades (Cohen 2014, 57).²¹

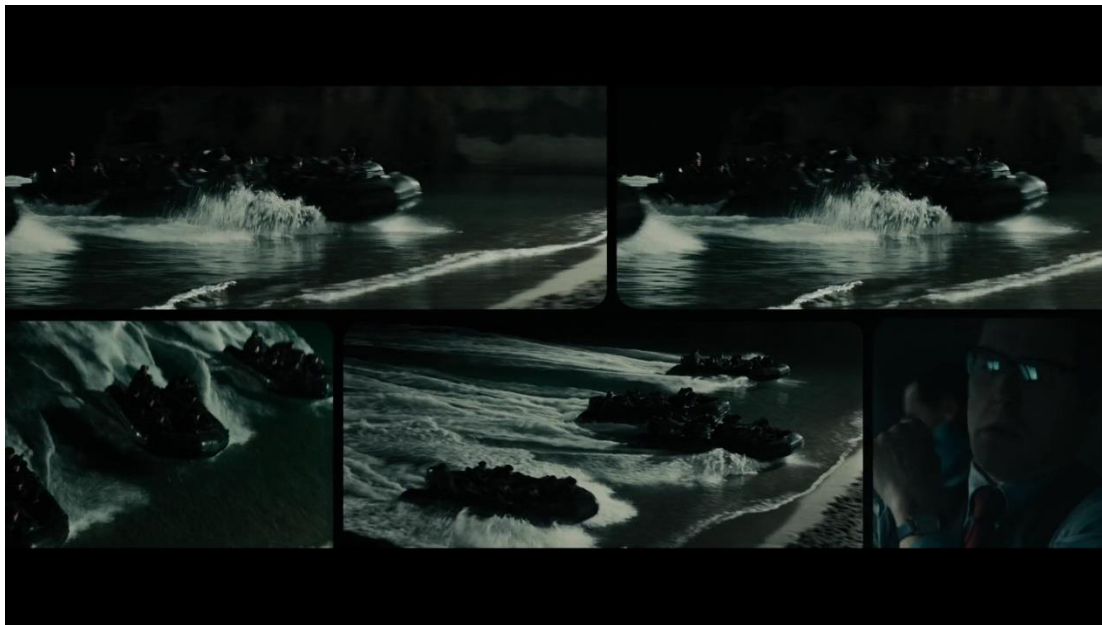
²⁰ Moviola, a manual flatbed editor was the industry standard, where the film is spliced and built from beginning to end (Jones, 1999). This however, changed in 1993, when the digital editing software Avid was standardised, editing became a less labour-intensive and much more convenient process (ibid.).

²¹ Cohen describes how digital editing has contributed to the spatial reorganization of split screen: “A digital nonlinear editing system enabled the deliberate play with the conventions of

Instead of dual static split screen, the split-screen in *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* is an example of what Cohen says is the redefinition of cinematic space through the disruption, shifting and reformation. Visually, the film's use of widescreen combines two or more smaller frames to create a kinetic montage that visually narrates the story's progression, with the widescreen aspect ratio serving as the master frame. The multiscreen effects of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* work differently from pre-digital, traditional use of aspect ratio in film like *Carrie*.

The frames are not static, and themselves also move, sync with the narrative momentum and also work in tandem with the movement within the smaller frames themselves, creating a visually dynamic sequence. Most importantly, the multiple frames within the widescreen aspect ratio show not just the action and its consequence, but also the progression of action to consequence. This is evident in the base infiltration scene in the finale, where Napoleon Solo and Ilya Kuryakin lead a military operation to storm the villain's base. Ritchie accelerates the scene's narrative by montage. We are not just shown the action and consequence of a particular action but also the accelerated process.

These multiple frames shift and replace each other, and take different shapes. Their movement creates a form of visual momentum for the narrative. Such as the boats landing to storm the base, where frame after frame of military boats are shown shifting from one end of the frame to the other to emphasise the numerical superiority of the attacking force (Figure 11). The implementing of multiple frames of military boats rushing through the sea is a great example of split-screen in a widescreen aspect ratio image.



spatiotemporal organization using split-screen, while digital effects disrupt space continuity by adding moving inserts or unusual wipes and fades" (Cohen 2014, 57).

Figure 11

In the scene, the widescreen aspect ratio and the split screen technique collaborate with the rest of the mise-en-scene. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson mention, the staging of mise-en-scene allows the various figures in a frame to “dynamize” and create “kinetic patterns” (2004, 198). With the wider aspect ratio, the figures are within multiple frames moving in unison and these multiple frames themselves also move, creating a lurching, unstoppable visual pattern that accelerates the narrative. Without the split-screen technique, the wider aspect ratio or the staging of the multiple frames, it would have taken a much longer time to presenting the narrative information.

Along with visual momentum, split-screen montage also offers a different perspective within the frame. An example of this, during the montage, rectangular frames in the split screen gives us a larger overall perspective of the action and overlapping these rectangular frames are circular shapes that simulate a sniper’s scope. The implementation recalls John Berger’s suggestion that in cinema, the perspective of the viewer is just one of the many perspectives that are in play. The “visible is in constant flux” and “the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all around the object (or person) depicted” (Berger 2008, 18). A single event, in this case the launching and execution of a military operation, is seen from not just the viewer’s point of view, but also from the various perspectives of those involved in the story.

Mitchell argues that the multiple split-screen “draws attention from one vision to another within a single mise-en-scene” (2013, 58). In the case of the multi-frame split-screen of Ritchie’s film, the widescreen aspect ratio accommodates the other factors of the mise-en-scene, such as the props and setting of the base infiltration, actor costumes, lighting and blocking, and presents more than one perspective of these different attributes. The use of the sniper’s scope overlapping two rectangular frames is a case of allowing aspect ratio, split screen technique and colour to work in tandem. The red tinted sniper scope roams around the screen in several shots. As the sniper takes out the guards, we get a first-person view of the sniper firing and the guard being hit by the shot. The use of multi-screen montage and multiple moving perspectives maximises the entire widescreen aspect ratio, and in doing so, also accelerates the story (Figure 12).



Figure 12

The use of split-screen has a much different relation to sound. While the visual widescreen multiscreen framing allows for more than one visual perspective in the cinematic space, the soundtrack enhances the overall experience in the widescreen image. As noted by Bordwell and Thompson, music is used to enhance the “film’s actions” (2004, 366), and is a cinematic convention and does not exist within the world of the story. In addition, sound could, as Bordwell and Thompson suggest, provide “sound perspective”. Which is the aural equivalent of “visual depth and volume” in the “visual perspective” of the cinematic visuals (2004, 370).

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. works with sound perspective, but not in terms of speech. During the montage sequence, the only diegetic sound that are involved are gunshots, the entire sequence starts and ends with diegetic gunshots, the sound of sniper fire is actually commencing the military operation and another volley of gunshots ends the montage.

Soon after the gunshots are heard, the soldiers are shown storming the base. There is no diegetic sound after the gunshot and all of the narrative information is presented visually with a musical score that heightens tension. The multiscreen technique works in tandem with the score, and it is most evident when the music ramps up in intensity and pace, drums are introduced, and to match this intensity, the multiple split-screens are increasingly fragmented. None of the frames have diegetic sound and the background musical score equalizes all the frames within the master frame, the music emphasizes the totality of the views made up of individual, smaller frames. The sum of the parts makes the whole.

The Man from U.N.C.L.E.’s use of split-screen very much sits into Guy Ritchie’s visual signature, having previously employed the same technique in *Snatch*. However with digital technology, both in terms of cameras and software, the split-screen technique is taken to a different level of dynamism. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* combines widescreen aspect ratio and

digital split-screen editing to accelerate the narrative and give multiple perspectives to a single event. Other filmmakers have also taken up to fuse widescreen aspect ratio and digital split-screen to further cinema's narrative potential, such as Edgar Wright and his work on *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* (2010), which also takes advantage of the widescreen aspect ratio to present cartoonish, hyperkinetic multiscreen action. Hyperkinetic visual patterns are not the only implementation though, Marc Webb in his 2009 feature film *500 Days of Summer*, uses split-screen and aspect ratio to present heartbreaking emotional drama.

As noted by Alexandre Astruc, who writes of the theory of the *camera stylo* in 1948, the auteur theory is concerned with the director as an individual, it is: "The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen" (Astruc 1948, 35). Astruc posits the director as the sole creative force behind a film, similar to the writer and his work.

If that is the case, Ritchie's manipulation of aspect ratio and split-screen does serve as an auteurist statement of creativity. In addition to Ritchie, several filmmakers such as Wright and Webb, have also used aspect ratio and multiscreen images to emphasize their story and themes. The camera pen responsibility lies beyond just the camera, with post-production now being an important function for the artist. The camera pen has more functions and settings than ever before.

For my short film project, the intention for widescreen is to once again shift the visual composition from the vertical of the Academy Ratio, to a more horizontal composition. This shift is for the third and final time to expand on Tony's world to its fullest. Whereas the 1:1 ratio heightens emotion and magnifies dramatic moments, and the 4:3 gives a more vertical aesthetic, the use of widescreen allows me to frame Tony in wider horizontal shots, making him look smaller. This is to highlight that as his world gets bigger, Tony's existence becomes more insignificant.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the project, both in thesis and short film form, I notice that the aspect ratio works similarly with other facets of the mise-en-scene, such as lighting, performance, costume, or the use of colour. Once activated as a creative contributor, it forms a major part of the narrative of the film because the aspect ratio's size dictates and affects how the rest of the mise-en-scene will look and how the narrative will be communicated.

The 1:1 aspect ratio sequence is an exercise of visual extremes. With its narrow field of vision, it requires creating visual compositions that include the use of depth of field and focus pulls to show multiple elements of the plot in one single frame. In my film, I took advantage of the depth of field to give an extreme visual composition to the shots. Depth of field shots resulted in multiple narrative elements in the same frame. In addition, the narrow aspect ratio creates a very centralised image due to a lack of any visual space on the sides. This meant that anything in the centre of the frame is emphasized with a close-up effect. So I had to take note of working with such a centralised composition that I do not emphasize the wrong objects and confuse the audience. The centralised alignment of the 1:1 ratio allowed me to focus on important plot points, such as the alarm going off and the timer hitting 12 hours, with extreme directness. The 1:1 ratio isolates these key elements and gives them a much stronger narrative emphasis.

Upon reflection, the centralised alignment and narrowness of the perfect square ratio required distinct but simple production design, especially for important props, in order to summon visual interest and at the same time not to confuse the viewer. The audience has to know what the props are the moment they see them: the button needs to look like a button, the timer needs to look like a timer, the alarm needs to look like an alarm. Due to the 1:1 ratio, we usually see these objects in isolation, which creates a visual grammar where each object signifies something.

The activation of the aspect ratio also affected location scouting. This was the case with the 4:3 aspect ratio. While the ratio is wider than the 1:1, it is still considerably narrow but wide enough to present the opportunity to play with the verticality of the image. This meant that I had to look for locations that had strong vertical lines, such as corridors that had pillars, doors, brick walls. I decided to emphasise the verticality of the 4:3 ratio to differentiate from the 1:1 sequence, which has a simpler visual grammar. I wanted to show that as the man in the film discovers more of his world, the visual considerations for each sequence change. As he learns more about his world, the aspect ratio gets wider and the visual compositions have more detail. By doing this, I simultaneously show the progression of time in the film as well as use the aspect ratio to contribute to character development.

Finally, whereas the 1:1 ratio gives an extremely centralized image and the 4:3 is vertical, the widescreen emphasises the horizontal and the vastness of the world as well as the

man's own insignificance. The widescreen ratio gave the crew and me more room to work with the left and right of the screen. Horizontal movement, such as the opening of the gate, or the man walking from one end of the frame to the other are shots that cannot be achieved to the fullest aesthetic effect with the other ratios, but they can be achieved with the widescreen.

Beyond technique, I also learnt how to use aspect ratio thematically. As a creative choice in the short film, the aspect ratio represents the protagonist Tony's knowledge of his world. Hence, each sequence has a specifically chosen aspect ratio tailored for the sequence. The film begins with the 1:1 aspect ratio, and this smaller aspect ratio fits into Tony's world view, where he does not know much about the world around him. Hence, the aspect ratio presents a much more limited way of seeing, one that is claustrophobic and hides the sides of the screen.

As the film progresses, Tony learns much more about his world. And thus, the widening aspect ratio matches his character growth. For the 4:3 sequence, Tony learns about who he really is, which is expressed with a slight widening of the frame from 1:1 ratio to 4:3. However, the slight widening also indicates that while Tony finds out more about himself, he still does not know much about the world around him. He is still bound by the aspect ratio.

With the third and final aspect ratio, the widescreen works thematically with the rest of the mise-en-scene. Tony has finally found out the truth about the world, and this is shown with the full breadth of the widescreen image. It should also be noted that in addition to choosing their aspect ratios, filmmakers can now move and morph them to suit the film's themes and narrative. In the final act, I implement this by allowing Tony to literally push the aspect ratio wide open, from 4:3 to widescreen. Thematically, this is to represent the individual agency Tony now has as a character. Therefore, the multiple aspect ratios not just affect the ways of seeing the aesthetics of the short film but also the ways the narratives and themes are understood. The aspect ratio shifts to accentuate not just the visual considerations of each aspect ratio sequence but also organise the thematic meaning within the narrative. Similar to how the mise-en-scene organises meaning in theatre,

What I learnt when making a short film with the creative use of aspect ratio is that every single facet of the production needs to be tailored to suit how you use the aspect ratio. Techniques of the mise-en-scene that can be used in one aspect ratio do not necessarily work with another ratio, and hence it is best to decide on the ratio one uses early in the production and how each of these ratios can contribute to the narrative and themes, in order to prepare accordingly.

Finally, working on this project gave me a better understanding of digital technology. There are now multiple aspect ratio formats and this proliferation has not only led to the de-standardisation of the proportions of the frame but also to the introduction of new techniques and styles to compose a shot. The short film is literally a product of digital

technology, as digital editing software allows the film to transition between aspect ratios and use these ratios to further improve the composition of the shot.

Therefore, by analysing the implementations of aspect ratio in the past and present, and by working with aspect ratio technically, digitally and creatively in the creation of a short film, the research project shows that aspect ratio has transformed the proportions of the frame into a creative choice. This is a choice that requires careful consideration in relation to other attributes of film production before it can be implemented successfully.

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