

THE POWER OF EYELINE

As noted in the campaign rally scene from *Citizen Kane* (Fig. 2.21a), an eyeline captured from below can impart power and stature to a subject, while an eyeline looking down diminishes the subject, as might be appropriate in an interrogation. With multiple actors, the eyeline helps orient the audience to the geography of a scene and the relative positions of the players. When shooting interviews or working with talent, we generally place the camera slightly below eye level. This imparts an air of respect and authority without it appearing heavily so.

SHOOTING THE LESS THAN PERFECT

The appropriate eyeline can de-emphasize shortcomings in an actor's face. A double chin or large nostrils, for example, are less noticeable with the camera set slightly above eye level. Conversely, a man self-conscious about his baldness might appreciate a lower angle eyeline that reduces the visibility of his naked pate.

Following are a few tips to handle potentially delicate issues:

- Are you shooting someone with an unusually long nose? Consider orienting him more frontally.
- Are you shooting someone with a broad, flat nose? Consider more of a profile.
- Are you shooting someone with a facial scar or disfigurement? Turn the imperfection away from camera. If this is not possible or in the case of a bad complexion overall, reduce camera detail level, use a supplemental diffusion filter, and/or light flatly to reduce texture and visibility.



FIGURE 2.25

Study closely your subject's features to determine a flattering perspective. This is excellent career advice!

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Whether working in traditional fine arts or video, the visual storyteller fights a constant struggle to represent the 3D world in a two-dimensional (2D) space. There are two principal ways to accomplish this goal – through use of perspective and texture. Usually, we want to maximize both.

The lonely highway converging to a point on the horizon is a classic example of linear perspective. Linear perspective helps guide the viewer's eye to essential story elements inside the frame. (Fig. 2.26)

Aerial perspective is gained from looking through multiple layers of atmosphere in distant landscapes. Owing to the high contrast and fine detail in such scenes, the use of aerial perspective is not practical for many shooters with prosumer cameras that lack dynamic range and are thus unable to satisfactorily capture the subtleties. (Fig. 2.27)

Besides linear and aerial perspectives to convey a heightened sense of 3Ds, the skilled shooter also usually strives to maximize texture in his subjects. This can often be achieved through supplemental lighting to produce a raking effect, or as in Fig. 2.28, by exploiting the natural quality and direction of the sun and shadows.



FIGURE 2.26

In most cases, the shooter seeks to maximize the illusion of a third dimension. This scene, photographed by the author while bicycling across the United States in 1971, conveys the story of a journey and highway that seem to have no end.



FIGURE 2.27

Aerial perspective seen through increasing layers of atmosphere is seldom used to advantage in low-cost video but is common in classical art and still photography.



FIGURE 2.28

This backlit scene with prominent shadows strongly communicates a 3D world.



FIGURE 2.29

The receding cobblestones in this Roman Street help lift my daughter from the 2D canvas.



FIGURE 2.30

Reducing texture in the skin is usually desirable when shooting close-ups of your favorite star. This can be achieved by soft lighting, appropriate lens diffusion, and/or enabling the reduced skin-detail feature in your camera [see Chapter 5].

WE ARE ALL LIARS AND CHEATS

As honest and scrupulous as we try to be, the successful video storyteller is frequently required to misrepresent reality. Skateboard shooters do this all the time, relying on the extreme wide-angle lens to increase the apparent height and speed of their subjects' leaps and tail grinds.

Years ago, I recall shooting (what was supposed to be) a hyperactive trading floor at a commodities exchange in Portugal. I've shot such locales before with traders clambering on their desks, shrieking quotes at the top of their lungs. This was definitely not the case in Lisbon where I found seven very sedate traders sitting around, sipping espressos, and discussing a recent soccer match.

Yet a paid assignment is a paid assignment, and I was obligated to tell the client's story, which included capturing in all its glory the wild excitement of what was supposed to be Europe's most vibrant trading floor.

So this is what I was thinking: first, I would forget wide coverage. Such a perspective would have only made the trading floor appear more deserted and devoid of activity. Clearly this was for a narrow field of view to compress the floor area and take best advantage of the few inert bodies I had at my disposal.



FIGURE 2.31

As a cheater-storyteller, the video shooter is often required to misrepresent reality. Through a combination of tight framing, use of a long lens, and abundant close-ups, this nearly deserted trading floor appears full of life.

Stacking one trader behind the other, I instantly created the impression (albeit a false one) that the hall was teeming with brokers. (Fig. 2.31) Of course, I still had to compel my laid-back cadre to wave their arms and bark a few orders, but that was easy. The main thing was framing the close-ups to the point of busting; these tight shots jammed with activity suggesting an unimaginable frenzy of buying and selling *outside* the frame. The viewer assumed from the hyperactive close-ups that the entire floor must be packed with riotous traders when of course quite the reverse was true. What a cheat! What a lie!

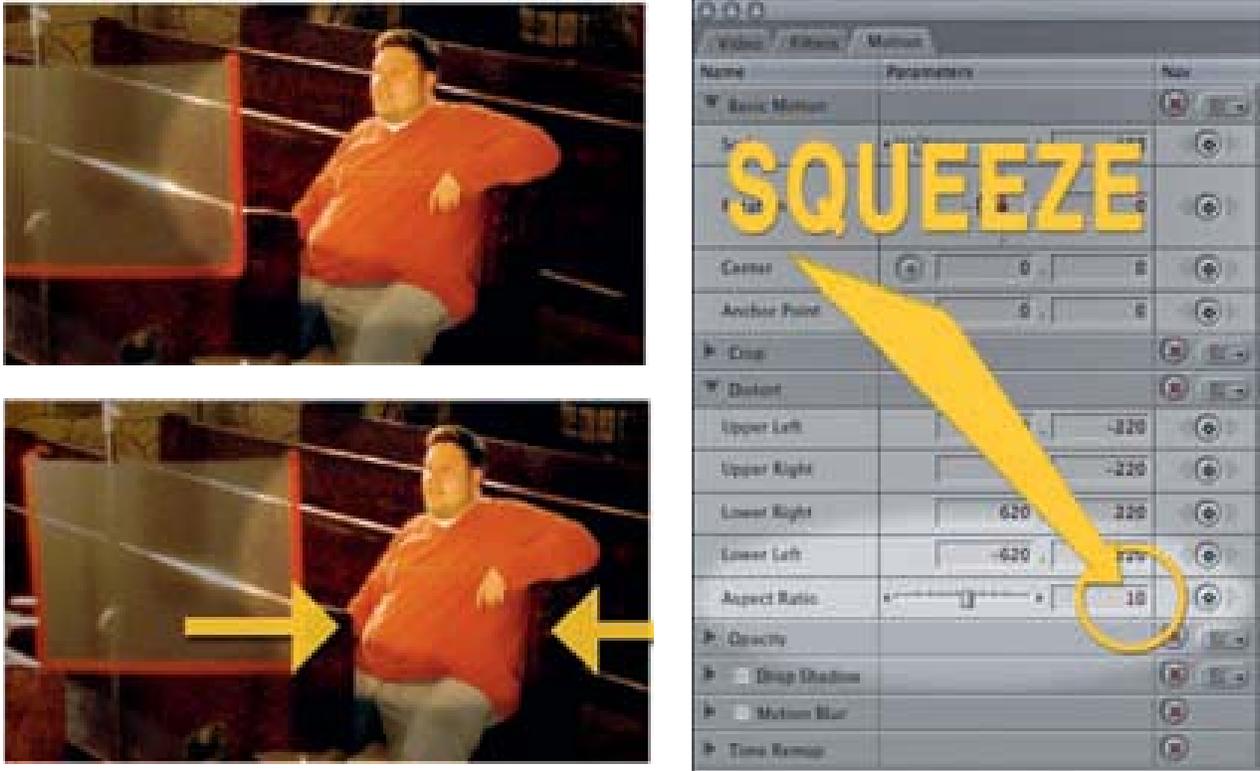
So there it is again: what is excluded from the frame is often more helpful to the story than what is actually in frame! *Exclude, exclude, exclude!*

SHOOTING THE ROTUND

Question: My boss thinks he looks fat on camera. Do you have any tried and true ways to make him look and feel thinner on camera? I can't shoot him above the waist or behind a desk all the time.

Barry B

One suggestion: Light in limbo. The less you show, the less you know! You can use a strong sidelight to hide half his shape. Keep it soft to de-emphasize any wrinkles and rolls. You can also add a slight vertical squeeze in your editing program. A few points in the right direction will often work wonders!

**FIGURE 2.32**

Shooting the rotund. Applying the squeeze. Hey, it's a lot quicker than Jenny Craig!

MAKE 'EM SUFFER

Like in any intimate relationship, it's a good idea to consider your loved one's needs. What does your viewer really want when seeing your images flicker across the screen? Most of all, he wants to be shown the world in a way he has not seen before and he is willing to work hard – very hard – to achieve it.

I recall interviewing the great photographer curmudgeon Ralph Steiner at his home in Vermont in 1973. Ralph was one of the twentieth century's great shooter storytellers, and his photographs, like his manner of speaking, were anything but boring. One afternoon, he clued me in to his secret:

"If you're just going to photograph a tree and do nothing more than walk outside, raise the camera to your eye and press the shutter, what's the point of photographing the tree? You'd be better off just telling me to go out and look at the tree!"

"Acquiring a unique perspective on the world is not easy. It's painful!" Ralph would bellow, his voice shaking with passion. "You have to *suffer*! Running around with a camera can be fun once in a while, but mostly it's just a lot of suffering."

**FIGURE 2.33**

Avoid like the plague medium shots at eye level! Such shots are boring and no wonder. They're what we normally see every day as we stroll down the street past the 7-Eleven or DMV office.

**FIGURE 2.35**

"Curves Ahead" (Photo of Gypsy Rose Lee by Ralph Steiner).

**FIGURE 2.37**

A shooter sometimes has to lie low—

**FIGURE 2.34**

Interesting angles help build intimacy by drawing the viewer into your visual story.

**FIGURE 2.36**

A bird's eye view can offer a unique perspective. This view is of Venice's San Marco Square.

**FIGURE 2.38**

—or get in the face of a recalcitrant subject and bear her wrath!

OBSCURE, HIDE, CONCEAL

This suffering notion is worth exploring because I truly believe the viewer wants to share our suffering. It's a noble thought, and it also happens to be true.

If you look at great cinematographers' work, you'll notice that they like to shoot through and around foreground objects. This helps direct the viewer's eye inside the frame and heighten the 3D illusion.

But what are we really doing by obscuring or completely concealing our subject at times, then revealing it, then maybe hiding it again? We're making the viewer *suffer*. We're skillfully, deliciously, *teasing* the viewer, defying him to figure out what the heck we're up to. Yes, point your viewer in the right direction. Yes, give him clear visual clues. But make it a point to obscure what you have in mind. Smoke, shadow, clever placement of foreground objects can all work, but however you do it, the key is not to make your viewer's job too easy. Make him wonder what you're up to and make him *suffer*, and he'll love you and your story for it.



FIGURE 2.39 Shooting through and around foreground objects can add a strong 3D sense and a touch of mystery to your compositions.



FIGURE 2.40 The nineteenth-century impressionists didn't make it easy for viewers and were greatly revered for it. Viewing a Van Gogh is an adventure! Try to instill a comparable challenge in your compositions.

JUST NOT TOO MUCH

While making viewers suffer is a noble and worthwhile goal, too much suffering can be counterproductive. Some shooters may express cerebral delight at alienating their audiences but most of us can ill afford such a result given the demands of earning a living and the nature of clients we are normally required to serve.

The successful shooter seeks to build intimacy with the viewer, while challenging him at the same time. We accomplish this primarily through close-ups, and by (1) placing less important objects out of focus, (2) cropping distracting elements out of frame, (3) attenuating the light falling on an object, or (4) de-emphasizing the offending object compositionally.



FIGURE 2.41

Selective focus isolates what is important in the frame and helps to pull the viewer's eye into the scene.

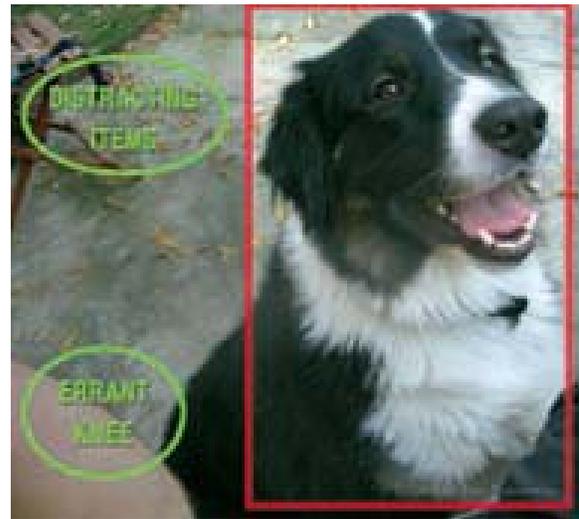


FIGURE 2.42

The cropping of distracting elements excludes what isn't helpful to your story.



FIGURE 2.43

The adept use of color and contrast can be integral to your visual story.



FIGURE 2.44

Strong compositions de-emphasize what is not essential. Here, my son's pointing finger gains weight in the frame while his mom (partially obscured) is compositionally reduced in importance.