

Your TV is Lying To You

THE PRINCIPLES OF
VISUAL 'TRUTH' IN MEDIA
PRODUCTION

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Reality TV may dominate the broadcast channels of late, and documentaries may rake in more dollars at the box office than the latest Hollywood comic book remake, but make no mistake: your TV is lying to you!

Frightening enough as this idea may be, you should also strap yourself in for a second disturbing truth: this is not a new development – your TV has always lied to you. There isn't now, nor has there ever been, any such thing as 'reality' in media production, whether for the small or large screen. Even the most earnest and intimate of documentaries is as false and unreal as any Hollywood fantasy epic.

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What is often misconstrued and taken for 'reality' should more correctly be labeled 'truth': the 'truth' of what a filmmaker can get an audience to believe. What visual and aural messages can the filmmaker deliver to an audience to coerce them into believing that what they are seeing is, in some way, shape or form, 'real'?

This idea, in turn, prompts a plethora of questions, beginning with 'What can you get an audience to believe?' To which, of course, the answer is... Anything.

The cinematic form (encompassing visual-based media of all types and screen sizes) has, in essence, a single core tenet: cinema is a construction. It is a deliberate series of choices, decisions and motivations, all combined to produce a product that prompts the viewer to feel or think in a very specific way. This isn't to say the product need be a heavy political documentary; even the coarsest of schmaltzy romantic comedies demands the viewer feel very specific emotions for specified characters and events. The cinema is an architecturally specific world where (no matter the genre) every bolt and screw has an effect, and, consciously or not, has direct impact on the 'truth' created. A 'truth' that has nothing to do with what is 'real' or f/actual.

Moreover, this constructed truth, which is as flexible and malleable as clay, doesn't just apply to narrative or creative decisions by directors and screenwriters, but is in fact rooted in the production process itself. The lies are built into the cinematic form from the dolly-grip up!

As an example, let's take one of the core principles of cinematography and editing: the 180 degree rule, a.k.a.

'crossing the line'. The 180 degree rule can be found on page 1 of any cinematographer's textbook. It is, in essence, a guiding principle for creating a spatial truth around the rather unnatural habit of cinema 'cutting' from camera-position to camera-position, in order to move the audience metaphysically and immediately through space.

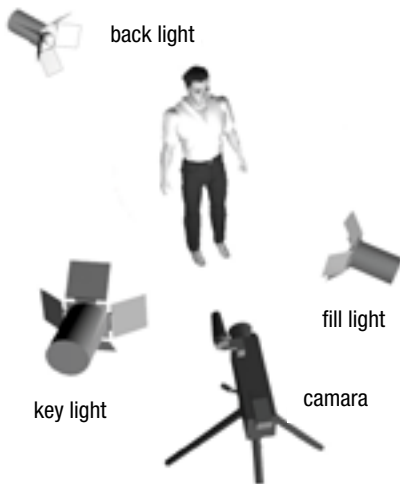


Simply put, the 180 degree rule says that in any scene involving two central subjects (more often than not a conversation between two actors) a line is drawn between the two to create a barrier for the camera. The camera should not 'cross the line', i.e. be edited so that two shots from opposite sides of the line are shown in the same scene.

Images 4–8 illustrate the effect of crossing the line in a basic two-person dialogue scene and so demonstrate the defiance of 'reality' in favour of 'visual truth'. When the line is crossed, and the images edited in sequence, the effect is to have the two actors appear to be facing in the same direction rather than looking at each other. Reality and truth collide.

The 'reality' of the scene is that the actors were not facing in the same direction, they were, in physical reality, facing each other squarely. But the shooting and editing of the sequence makes this 'physical reality' a problem. A false 'reality' of invisible guidelines and camera position rules has to be imposed and adhered to in order to create a visual 'truth'; a reality the viewer will accept.

This is an excellent example of constructed truth that has little to do with the reality of its shooting or creation. This example deals directly with the ideas of montage, the construction of tension and drama through cutting and sequencing, as championed by seminal Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. However, the construction of 'truth' divorced from 'reality' is as much a part of the *mise-en-scène* – the framing sensibilities of filmmaking composition



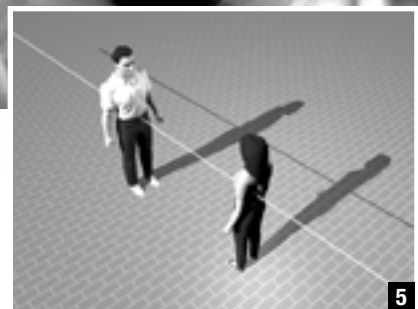
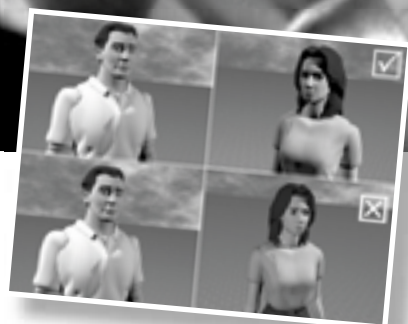
derived from traditional painting.

Obviously, the physical positioning of actors, objects and sets within the frame is central to the *mise-en-scène* but so too are light and sound. Here again the divorced nature of 'reality' and 'truth' can be seen. Most cinematic lighting is built around a three-point lighting array, a method of lighting a subject using three lighting sources: the key-light, fill-light and back-light.

The key-light (see image 2) generally represents the light 'source' of the scene, and is often related to the physicality of the set, e.g. a nearby window, an overhead light or a spotlight. In 'reality' a key-light is often the only light. Small indoor rooms often only have one light overhead, or a lamp on a table, or light through a single window. This may well be adequate lighting for 'reality' but it is no good at all for cinema. In fact, (rather ironically) single point lighting most often looks unnatural.

Cinematic lighting often involves two principles that seem quite opposed: the scene must look 'real', and the audience must accept that the light illuminating the subject is derived from a 'realistic' source. But at the same time, a single light source is rarely enough for the practicalities of filming; i.e., there must be enough light, and an actor's face cannot be obscured in shadow.

A single key-light might be 'realistic' for the scene but it won't illuminate the actor sufficiently for a good shot, or allow



the audience to see their face without the deep shadows that are caused by single light sources. Shadows of this sort create a very specific tone and atmosphere, and will inadvertently be imbued by the audience with some sort of significance because they appear 'unnatural'.

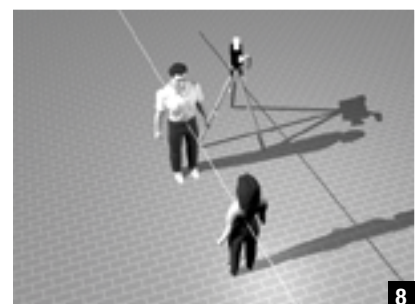


The irony is that while in 'reality' the world is not lit by three-point lighting arrays, on the screen anything that is not lit in a balanced way from multiple sources will appear as stylized, constructed, moody and deliberate. In other words, fake.



In this context, the back-light and fill-light serve as invisible lights. Invisible in the sense that they aim not to draw attention to themselves as real-world light sources, but exist for purely practical reasons to provide sufficient illumination, and to counterbalance the key-light.

In image 1, the opening scene from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) uses a very bright and dominant key-light that radiates from a large window, in almost glaring white brilliance, into an



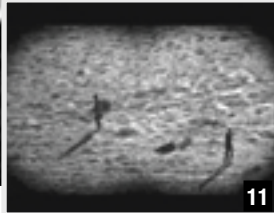


otherwise dark and smoky room. The close-up shows a man (soon to be revealed as a Replicant) with an obvious key-light emanating from the window. If this were a 'real' environment with just that single major light source, the subject's face would be almost totally cast in black shadow on the side not facing the light. It would be virtually impossible to make out detail in facial features, and it would achieve an effect like placing a flashlight under your chin around a campfire. Certainly this scene in *Blade Runner* is aiming for a particular *film noir* tone, but there is also the simple practicality of creating an environment where the actor's face can be clearly seen.

In this shot from *Blade Runner*, the balance between cinematic mood and the practicalities of lighting is achieved by using a low level fill-light on the opposite side of the actor to the window, to lift the near side of their face out of the dark without disturbing the natural direction of the visible light source in the room. In essence, this process is emulating reality for practical reasons that ultimately achieve a much stronger visual 'truth' for the audience.

The fill-light and back-light are the key elements of constructing a very particular tone without creating lighting scapes that are obviously false.

A good example of this is the use of back-lighting for the illumination of Hollywood stars, particularly women, in the black-and-white films of the 40s and 50s.



In the example from *Casablanca* (see image 3), Ingrid Bergman is shown in a typically flattering close-up. Apart from

letting out the focus ring to create a soft and complexion-friendly portrait, the most important aspect to this depiction of a female Hollywood star of eminent beauty and grace, is the precise and deliberate use of back-lighting.

In this shot, as with almost any shot of a female star from this period of cinema, Bergman is lit with a rather intense back-light positioned low and behind her head. The result is a virtual halo. Bergman's hair glows and shines, and the shadow cast by the back-light delivers to her the most impressively high and chiselled cheekbone in the history of cinema.

The key-lighting in this shot is still dominant from the front, clearly illuminating the face. The overt lighting from behind is not designed to be a key-light or to lead the audience to think that the light source is behind Bergman. Rather, the back-light is simply there to lie to the audience; to reinforce the image the Hollywood studio wants its starlets to have – that they are above mere mortals. Far-fetched? Only just, but the result is nonetheless apparent from this deliberate lighting construction. No other character in *Casablanca* is lit in this way; certainly not the male characters, who are depicted as dark, brooding heroes. The back-light has no place in the 'reality' of the scene, but it is central to the 'truth' being constructed, and necessary for the very deliberate emotive responses the filmmaker

wishes the audience to have towards the characters.

These same principles are just as relevant for the creation and use of sound in cinema. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) the pivotal scene where the young Michael Corleone steps into his father's shoes, and thus crosses the line into the gangster life, uses an extraordinary example of subtle, unrealistic (but none the less emotionally truthful) sound design.

As Michael retrieves the planted gun, with which he is to assassinate his enemies, from behind the toilet cistern (see image 10), the screeching sound of a train grinding to a halt blares into the scene. Michael hesitates to return to the restaurant. In this scene, and the scenes preceding it, there has been no suggestion that the restaurant is near, or somehow connected with, a railway. The addition of this sound effect (which comes not once but twice, louder still and right before Michael pulls the trigger) is purely an artificial addition to the dramatic tension of the scene. The sound conveys the turmoil in Michael's head and the choice he is about to make (the line he will cross from which he may never come back), emerging as an excellent example of an audio design choice that is not based in reality, but is included as a reinforcement of an emotional 'truth' the filmmaker wants the viewer to engage with.

The concepts of constructed 'cinematic truth' are tightly linked with the sensibilities of a widespread cinematic language that has been built up over the past century of cinema. This visual language is rarely articulated but is extraordinarily widespread in its cross-cultural understanding. What's more, it is rarely based on any sense of a tangible visual 'reality', but is inextricably linked to a visual *acceptance*. There is no better example than the use of POV (point-of-view) shots through a simulated pair of binoculars.

For the better part of a century of Western cinema, there has existed an international cinematic sign for a POV through binoculars: a hazy figure-8 type shape masking the cinematic frame.

In image 11, from David Fincher's *Seven* (1995), a helicopter shot shows the point-of-view of a person watching the events unfold beneath him through a pair of binoculars using the traditional figure-8 shape mask.

If you have ever looked through a pair of binoculars, you will know that it never looks like a figure-8! And yet we, as viewers, never question what the hell that figure-8 smudge is doing on our screen. Rather, we immediately draw upon our vocabulary of cinematic language to make the instant conclusion that we are looking through binoculars.

The symbolism of the figure-8 has no real-world reality, but in the constructed world of cinematic imaging this widely comprehended icon for binoculars taps into inescapable visual truths that we as viewers accept and process without question.

Cinematic thinking is, for the most part, guided by elements: the *mise-en-scène*, essentially the construction of meaning within the frame by composition; and montage, the construction of meaning *between* the frames through juxtaposition and sequence.

We've seen in the above examples how composition and arrangement within the frame builds a visual 'truth' that is divorced from reality. Montage and the creation of meaning through editing is just as powerful, if not more so, in exploiting 'cinematic truth'.

The principles of montage were first articulated by the Russian filmmakers and theorists Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov in the early part of the twentieth century. Their thinking centred on the idea that meaning is not inherent in the shot, but is created in the mind of the viewer based on a frame work delivered to them by the filmmaker.

Lev Kuleshov (image 9) illustrated this idea using a series of basic exercises, built around the three-shot sequence, to demonstrate the principle of montage to his students in the post-revolution USSR. The three-shot sequence is a core film technique used across all types of cinema, from live action to ani-

mation to documentary. The three-shot sequence consists of three individual framed shots shown in (usually) quick succession. The first shows a character looking off screen at some unseen action or event. The second shot shows the event or action that the character is witnessing. And the third shot, known as the reaction shot, shows the character's 'reaction' (usually a facial expression, but it may also be action or dialogue) to the event just witnessed.

In order to demonstrate the power of montage to create meaning, Kuleshov created two separate three-shot sequences. He used a very famous and respected Russian actor of the day called Mosjoukine, and filmed two shots of him. The first was a close-up of the actor looking off-screen with a blank expression. The second was an extreme close-up of the same expression. These two shots became the first shot and third (reaction) shot in both of the three shot sequences. For the second shot, representing the action that was drawing the actor's attention, Kuleshov spliced in non-related stock images. The first sequence used a shot displaying an injured and limping young girl as the second image. In the second sequence, the inserted second shot was a close-up of a bowl of soup. Kuleshov then displayed these two sequences to his students and recorded their comments.

The students viewing the first sequence with the injured girl commented on how the actor had effectively conveyed a sense of pity and sorrow towards the victim. For the second sequence, they remarked how vividly the actor had displayed a subtle sense of hunger, longing and poverty upon seeing the bowl of soup.

What this experiment demonstrated was what Sergei Eisenstein would later refer to as the third meaning. Unto themselves, the three shots carry little meaning; certainly there was nothing in the way of direction on the part of Kuleshov to the actor (or the bowl of soup for that matter). The actor had no knowledge of what he was meant to be seeing or how he should be reacting to it. The meaning of the sequence came

purely through the montage of the images. The third meaning is that which is created in the mind of the viewer, based on the relative and juxtaposed meanings of images placed in sequence. The third meaning is an element that doesn't exist physically, visibly or audibly within the *mise-en-scène*, but rather is constructed in the mind of the viewer. The actor existed, the soup existed, the injured girl existed, but it was only through montage that hunger and pity existed. This again reinforces the notion of visual truth. The simple 'reality' of the sequences that Kuleshov created was that there was no story, no character and no motivation. However, the 'truth' constructed for the viewer by the sequence was quite different: there was a particular story that elicited specific emotive responses.

The understanding and comprehension of cinematic 'truth' as distinct from 'reality' goes to the core of the constructed nature of cinematic media and its role as the dominant discourse in our culture. Moreover, it reminds us that cinema is, above all, a techno-cultural form: technological change results in direct cultural impact. You can't separate the art of cinema from the technology that creates it. Cinema is technology. To fully comprehend how we read, interpret and analyze cinematic form, and the mass media as a whole, we must have some understanding of the technical processes involved. To analyze film without a comprehension of the technical details is like reading only half the words on the page.

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