# 'Why Does It Look Like This?' A Visual Primer of Early CinemaScope Composition

A Hollywood studio would be unlikely to stake a major investment in a widescreen spectacle and leave the visual style to chance.
(Tashiro 1998: 52)

Thanks to CinemaScope, sets will play a more integrated part in the picture than ever before. Just as on the stage, width, not depth, will represent the typical setup.
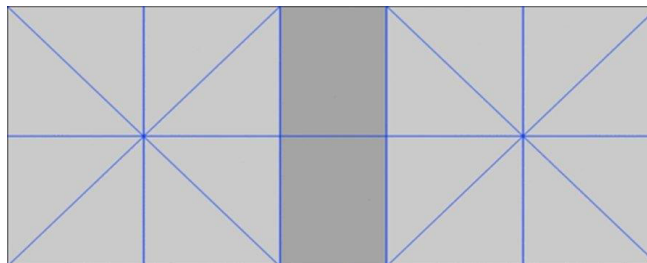Lyle Wheeler, Head, Twentieth Century-Fox Art Department (quoted in Anon 1953: 133)

Primers present the most basic elements of subjects. This essay is a visual primer that describes and makes visible the basic rules that organise the composition of early CinemaScope films. What follows, then, aims to answer the question posed in the essay's title: CinemaScope images look the way they do because from the time CinemaScope production began, filmmakers throughout the motion picture industry settled upon the same strategy of composition. Thus the illustrative examples I have chosen from the first year or so of CinemaScope production share the same basic compositional organization even though they come from different production companies and range among different genres.

Like most primers, this one begins with the simplest of illustrations, and then, progressively, presents more complex variations, until it concludes with a discussion of a sequence from a specific film, *The Girl Can't Help It* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1956; director; Frank Tashlin; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and Leland Fuller) that makes this underlying compositional logic explicit for dramatic purposes.

Normally, composition is thought of as part of a film's mise-en-scène, the conscious choice, usually made by the director, of positioning objects and actors within the frame. This essay radically relocates the genesis of CinemaScope composition to the set designers' use of an underlying grid to define the proportions of sets. Rather than something that directors arrange on a set in front of the camera, CinemaScope composition, then, is designed into the sets before they are even built. Set designers are the primary determiners of composition because they follow a well-established compositional strategy called rabatment.

Visual artists long ago recognised that within every rectangle – which is what the CinemaScope frame is – there are two implied squares. One need only rotate the shorter ends to construct the squares at either end of the rectangle. This process is called rabatment. Its aim is to provide a geometrical pattern whose guidance for the placement of objects and figures in a drawing or painting produces a unified, harmonious, and balanced composition. When both squares are constructed, as in the diagram below, the result is called a two square rabatment.



Consider how the design of the set in this frame from *Hell and High Water* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954; director: Samuel Fuller; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and Leland Fuller) has been constructed as a two square rabatment

in nearly its most elemental form. The central curtain, like the central section of the accompanying grid, separates the two rabatted squares. Conduits extend down the centreline of both squares in the frame, dividing them in half, just like the vertical lines dividing the squares in the diagram. Indeed, the conduit in the left square leads to a red light precisely at its centre. The curtain at the right of the frame fills half of the right square. Professor Denise Gerard (Bella Darvi) is positioned on the vertical midline of the right square. As examples from other films will illustrate, her position there is almost a rule in compositions based upon rabatment.
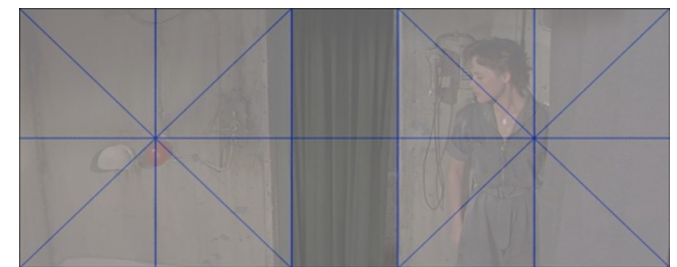




While CinemaScope sets appear plausibly realistic, like the submarine's cabin in *Hell and High Water*, one should not forget that they begin as two-dimensional designs, drawn to conform to the grid, then constructed to be photographed within a rectangular CinemaScope frame. The set determines the placement of the camera since capturing the frame's compositional balance on film requires that it be at the centre of the set. The examples that follow will illustrate that this requirement also determines the camera's positions during re-framings within a shot. With actors generally positioned on the mid-line of the rabatted squares or on its inner edge,

built sets limit both a director's positioning of actors, as well as a cinematographer's freedom to choose a camera setup.

The view from the terrace into the women's apartment in the Villa Eden in *Three Coins in the Fountain* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954; director: Jean Negulesco; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and John DeCuir) is also a two square rabatment. The central section between the squares is noteworthy because it is formed by details from two different planes. The door frame and pleat of café curtain that constitutes its left edge are in the *foreground*, while a column from the *background* forms its right edge. Reading the combination of foreground and background elements as being on the same plane highlights the flat two-dimensional basis of the image's three-dimensional illusion. (Also notice that two of the women are positioned on the midlines of the squares.)
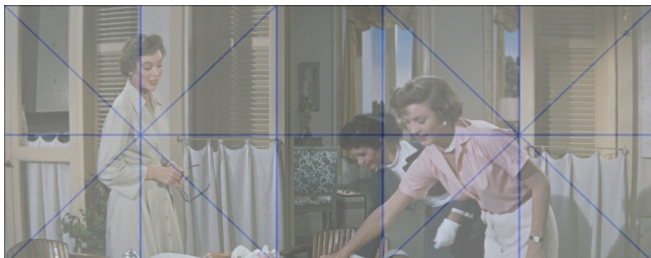




As one can see by comparing the details in this frame from *The Robe* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1953; director: Henry Koster; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and George W. Davis) with their equivalents in the diagram, this shot of the richly decorated interior in Senator Gallio's home is also a two square rabatment. As a three-dimensional illusion, the wall angles away from us, receding with the stairway into the depth at the upper right of the frame. Viewed this way,

it is a real space. At the same time, however, this is also a flat two-dimensional pattern of shapes whose underlying skeletal organisation has been determined by the geometrical division of the rectangular CinemaScope frame. The central section – defined by the door and nearby pillar – separates the frame into two equal squares. The width of this central section of the frame is precisely the same width as the darker section of the diagram.





The precise matching of realistic details to the pattern of a two square rabatment is quite common in early CinemaScope films. For example, while their ship rolls in heavy seas in this frame from *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (Walt Disney Productions, 1954; director: Richard Fleischer; production developed by Harper Goff), Ned Land (Kirk Douglas) leans nonchalantly against a funnel that separates the frame's two squares. Poles coincide with the centre of each square; Conseil (Peter Lorre) tightly grasps the left one. Here, too, his position, half way between the centre of the frame and its edge is determined more by the geometry of rabatment, than by the director.

The narrow central section in the diagram that separates the equally sized squares is a recognisable feature in sets whose design has been determined by a two square
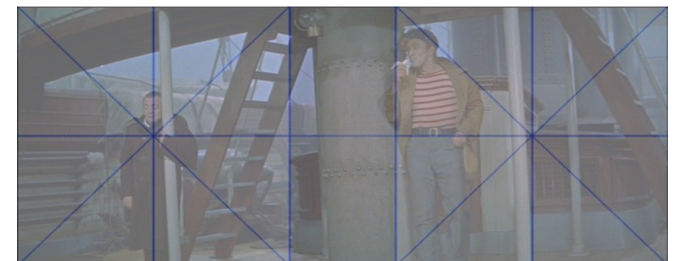




rabatment. However, it is not always as obvious as it is in the previous examples. It can be defined in any number of ways. It can be rendered less substantially, for example, by the panel of a sheer curtain, as in this frame where Elizabeth Burns (Lauren Bacall) looks out a hotel window in *Woman's World* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954; director: Jean Negulesco; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and Mark-Lee Kirk). Both she and the vertical window frame that balances her in the composition are situated on the midline of the squares. Even more minimally, the central section may be defined only in outline, as by the wall decoration in Fiona Campbell's (Cyd Charisse) kitchen in *Brigadoon* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp., 1954; director: Vincente Minnelli; production designers: Cedric Gibbons and Preston Ames). (Notice how the
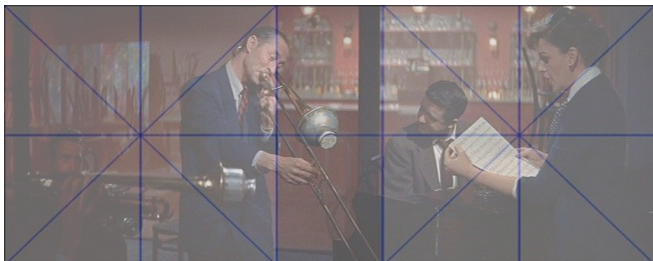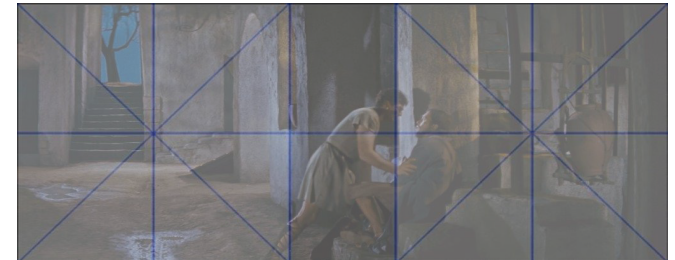
division of the squares into halves further defines the symmetry of the frame. Fiona's position at the edge of the central section is an alternate position for actors in a two square rabatment.) The central section is defined even more subtly by the position of the trombonist in *A Star is Born* (Warner Bros., 1954; director: George Cukor; production designers: Gene Allen, Malcolm Bert, and Lemuel Ayres). The composition is balanced additionally by the placement of a figure in each half of the two squares.

The continuing use of a two square rabatment to balance the frame from shot to shot during a sequence is illustrated by Demetrius' (Victor Mature) frantic night time search of Jerusalem for Jesus in *The Robe* to warn him that Pontius Pilate has ordered his arrest. It begins with the centred shot

of the doorway through which Demetrius leaves the baths where he has overheard the arrest order being discussed. It then continues through a series of streets and passage ways. Until he encounters a distraught man who turns out to Judas (Michael Ansara).Judas reveals his identity in a closer shot.

Judas then wanders off, leaving Demetrius shocked at the revelation that Jesus has already been betrayed to the Romans.

The extended use of a two square rabatment in this sequence, as well as the interior of Senator Gallio's home discussed above, demonstrate that filmmakers at Twentieth Century-Fox consciously understood how to use rabatment

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to organise the CinemaScope frame from the moment they innovated the format.

In addition to a two square rabatment, it is possible to inscribe only one square within a rectangle at either of its ends, thereby creating either a left or a right rabatment. This turns the rectangle into a square and a smaller rectangle. Generally the most important element within the frame is placed inside the square or on the interior line that defines it. Most clearly it can be done as a sharp delineation, as illustrated by the right rabatment in this frame from *Woman's World* in which Carol Talbot (Arlene Dahl) purposely arrives early at a reception so she will be its centre of attention. The unimportant decorative trim filling the rest of the frame accentuates the focus on her.



The same emphasis is true in this frame from *A Star is Born* where a curtain fills the entire left rabatment. The focus is increased by the curtain at the other end of the film frame filling what would be the right half of a square had one been
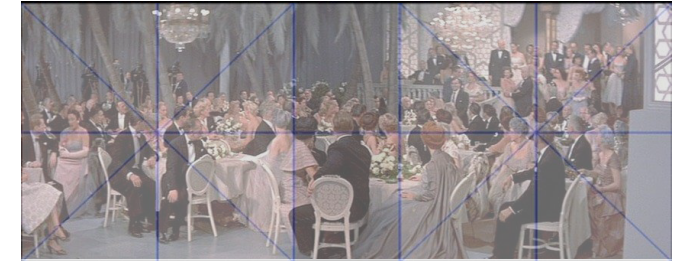


constructed at that end of the rectangle. Another frame from *A Star is Born* illustrates how what's omitted from a left rabatment can be defined more softly by filling the remainder of the frame with a rack of costumes. These three examples illustrate how one square rabatments can effectively focus audience attention by reducing what there is to look at within the frame.

The organisation of a frame with a single rabatment can be quite complex. Although the inner edge of the right rabatment in this film frame from *A Star is Born* is delineated by the slender trunk of a palm tree, it is the solid greys in the upper half of the frame that visually announces the separateness of the right rabatment's square. It is worth studying how colour functions in the shot. The entire lower half of the frame is a sprinkling of blacks, greys and flesh colours that differentiate it from most of the upper half of the frame. The woman in the grey dress in the foreground, positioned on the edge of the right square, acts as a hinge to hold the square to the rest of the lower frame. While everyone's eyes are fixed upon Norman Maine's (James Mason) entry in the Academy Awards banquet at the upper right, it is the curve of her grey dress, along with the flow of blacks, greys and flesh tones, that lead the viewers' eyes to him in the brightest section of the frame.

Tracking shots can maintain a rabatment from beginning to end. This lateral tracking shot from *Track of the Cat* (Wayne-Fellows Productions, Inc., 1954: director: William Wellman; production designer: Alfred Ybarra) begins as a right rabatment as it follows Arthur Briggs (William Hopper) making his way to the kitchen table for breakfast. The muzzles of the guns in the gun rack point to the curtain that constructs the interior side of the square. The camera maintains its
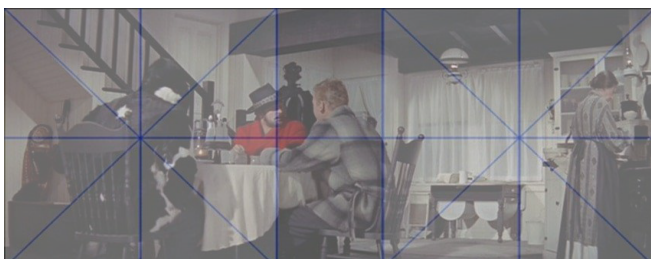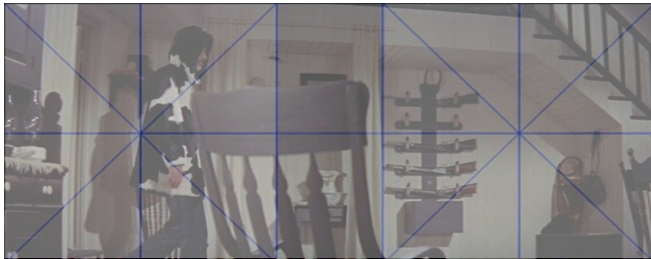
relative position to Alfred throughout the shot, so that when he reaches the table and sits down with his brothers, he is still at the left side of the frame. The re-framed shot concludes as it began with a right rabatment in which his mother prepares breakfast.

A leftward tracking shot across the entire interior of Sylvia's restaurant in *Black Widow* (Twentieth Century-Fox,

1954; director: Nunnally Johnson; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and Maurice Ransford) captures the expanse of the wide set by marking its limits with an initial right and a concluding left rabatment. It begins as a right rabatment as Sylvia (Mabel Albertson), standing by Ann (Hilda Simms), the hatcheck girl, greets Claire Amberly (Virginia Leith) and her brother, John (Skip Homeier), at her restaurant's front door. She asks Nancy Ordway (Peggy Ann Garner) to lead them leftward to a table where the shot ends in a left rabatment at the left side of the restaurant. The change from a right rabatment at the beginning of the shot to a left rabatment at its conclusion acknowledges the traverse from the limits of the right end of the set to the limits at its left end. Notice how the actors are positioned at the midlines of the squares and at the edges of the centre section.







A pan and track-in to the right across General Maitland's living room in *King of the Khyber Rifles* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954; director: Henry King; production designers Lyle Wheeler and Maurice Ransford), which takes in the width of the set, starts centred on one two square rabatment and ends on another after it follows Susan Maitland (Terry Moore) across the room, passing Lt. Heath (John Justin) in the process. At the conclusion of the shot, the actors are positioned on the midlines of the two squares.







Though rabatment provides a degree of standardisation, the ambiguous organisation of a pair of remarkably complex shots in *A Star is Born* illustrates how the underlying grid also lends itself to the construction of intricate compositions. At first glance, this frame of Norman Maine in front of a night court judge appears to be a right rabatment. The

flag defines the left edge of the right square. At second glance, however, there is the presence of the shadow cast by the flag to consider. Together with the flag, the shadow roughly outlines the central section of the frame. Thus there is reason to interpret the organisation of the frame as a two square rabatment. This interpretation is reinforced by the symmetrical positions of Norman and the Judge precisely on the midline of each square. This is a visual conundrum. Does the frame contain a right rabatment, or is the frame a two square rabatment? It is either or both, depending on how one interprets it.







Similarly, depending on how one reads it, this frame of Vicki Lester (Judy Garland) and Oliver Niles (Charles Bickford) in her dressing room may be either a left rabatment or a two square rabatment—or both. It depends on what one

makes of the vertical light at the left of her mirror. Considered one way, it is the vertical that defines the right edge of the empty left square. Considered together with the reflection continuous with it in the mirror, the light is part of the central section between two squares. Here, too, this perception is supported by the symmetrical positions of the light's reflection on the midline of the left square and Oliver Niles' position on the midline of the right square. Like the well-known rabbit and duck optical illusion, this frame, and the previous one, alternates between being a one or two square rabatment.



In *The Girl Can't Help It* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1956; director: Frank Tashlin; production designers: Lyle Wheeler and Leland Fuller), former gangster Marty 'Fats' Murdock (Edmund O'Brien) plans to marry his girlfriend, Jerri Jordan (Jayne Mansfield), as soon as publicist Tom Miller (Tom Ewell) launches her successful singing career. In the process of promoting Jerri, Miller has fallen in love with her. Worried that Marty might kill him if he finds out, Tom decides to treat Jerri in a strictly business-like manner. He takes her to a practice studio in order to make musical arrangements in her key. The practice room they rent has large sloping windows whose framework casts angular shadows on one wall. The set designers and director use the window, shadows, and a section of intervening wall to externalise the normally hidden grid of a two square rabatment to mirror the pair's changed relationship.

As one can see in the frame in which Jerri leans over the piano to talk with Tom, the angled space between them mimics the central section of the rabatment, but skewed to the left instead of presented vertically. In contrast to the unbroken horizontal line that transects the grid's two squares and central

section, here there is the discontinuity of the horizontal frame of the window and the horizontal barre behind Tom. Bent and disconnected, these visual equivalents of grid elements suggest the sudden disconnect between the couple. In place of the easy banter that had developed between them, Tom now addresses Jerri tersely, by her formal name, Georgiana.







The shadows cast in the background of the reverse shot of Tom after Jerri asks him to explain what has happened to change his behaviour toward her are curiously muddled. The reason for their uncertain pattern is explained in the shot that returns to Jerri: where the windows previously angled to the left, they now angle to right as though reflecting Jerri's

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perspective. Indeed, when she declares that she thought they were friends and positions herself closer to Tom, the new camera angle partly straightens the window frame. It is as if
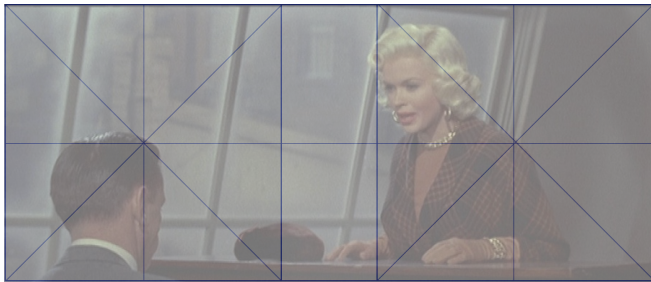


the background were responding to Jerri's hopes of restoring their relationship to what it had been. She suddenly realises, however, that Tom's silence is the result of his fear of Marty's jealous reaction to their closeness. This realisation propels Jerri across the room to the furthest she has been from Tom. And with her realisation, the windows and their shadows return to their original orientation.
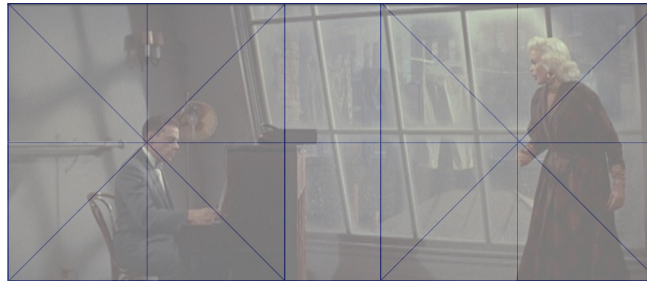


Taken together, these examples of the use of rabatment in the set design of eleven films from five different companies illustrate how widely and how well this compositional strategy was understood and applied throughout the industry during the first year or so of CinemaScope production. Because excerpts can be selective, it is important to emphasise that rabatment is used consistently throughout the films mentioned in this essay. Again and again, embodied in their set designs, its geometry guides composition, the placement of actors, and the positioning of the camera. The effects of rabatment explain why the early CinemaScope image looks as it does. In 'The Age of Metteurs en Scène', written largely in response to *The Robe*, Jacques Rivette termed that film's style 'ambiguous and confused' ([1954] 1986: 277). The continuing

two square rabatment in the shots of Demetrius' search for Jesus, however, demonstrates exactly the opposite. Indeed the recognition of how rabatment was used as the basis of rational composition in early CinemaScope films justifies a rethinking of CinemaScope composition in general and should encourage the search for other painterly strategies that were employed to define it.

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Marshall Deutelbaum is Professor Emeritus in English at Purdue University. This essay is part of his continuing research into widescreen composition. I want to express my appreciation to Kathrina Glitre and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*'s anonymous readers for the suggestions which clarified and strengthened my argument.

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