



# The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition

By Gustavo Mercado

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This is the only book that combines conceptual and practical instruction on creating polished and eloquent images for film and video with the technical know-how to achieve them.

Loaded with hundreds of full-color examples, *The Filmmaker's Eye* is a focused, easy-to-reference guide that shows you how to become a strong visual storyteller through smart, effective choices for your shots.

After a short introduction to basic principles, a variety of shots are deconstructed in the following format:

- Why It Works: an introduction to a particular type of shot
- How It Works: callouts point out exactly how the shot works the way it does-- the visual rules and technical aspects in action
- Technical Considerations: the equipment and techniques needed to get the shot.
- Breaking the Rules: examples where the "rules" are brilliant subverted

This book:

- Helps you make smart visual choices with this quick, focused, and visual guide to cinematic composition.
- Shows you how to master the rules, then break them.
- Includes examples and discussions from a range of international films.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

#### **Amazon Exclusive: A Letter from Gustavo Mercado on *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition***

Dear Amazon Readers,

Although there are other books out there that deal with the principles of visual composition, I always wanted to have a guide that specialized in the specific requirements that are inherent to the composition of shots intended for telling stories with moving images, also known as cinematic composition. The reason for the differentiation is simple: the composition of shots for movies has developed its own set of conventions, sometimes appropriating concepts from other art forms (like painting or still photography), but also creating its own aesthetic principles and visual language because of its unique characteristics (the fixed size of the frame, the movement of the subject and/or camera, the technology used to capture images, the way images are shown in conjunction with other images, etc.).

As you can probably guess, I never found such a guide, so I decided to write *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition* to fill the gap in this critical area of filmmaking. This book combines, for the first time, a specialized, focused guide to the most common and basic shots of the film vocabulary, from the extreme close up to the extreme long shot (also including chapters on the over the shoulder, macro, establishing, and moving camera shots). *The Filmmaker's Eye* examines the main aspects that make these shots work: the rules of cinematic composition used in their creation, the techniques and equipment necessary to implement them, and their most common narrative function as shown in examples from mainstream, independent, and world cinema. This approach allows you to understand not only why a particular shot type is usually composed in a certain way, but also how it is used to convey meaning and how to shoot it whether you are working on film or HD video.

It is my sincerest wish that this book will help deepen your understanding of cinematic composition, whether you are on a film shoot setting up your next shot, or just enjoying one of your favorite movies. Have fun!

--Gustavo Mercado

#### **Amazon Exclusive: Top Ten Tips from Gustavo Mercado to Improve Your Cinematic Compositions**

- Use a director's viewfinder, a still camera, or any other instrument that allows you to create a frame to see the world around you. Good compositions work not only because of what is included in the frame, but also because of what is left out of it. Using any device (even your hands) to create a frame will allow you to train your eye and better understand the visual relationships of the elements contained within it.
- Know what your lenses can and cannot do. The lens you choose can radically alter the visual relationships between elements in your frame; understanding how different lenses affect space, the look of your subjects, and the amount of light you can work with is fundamental if you want to have complete control over your images.
- Use depth of field as a creative element of your composition. Choosing what is in and out of focus is one of the most powerful ways to control the information contained in your frame, and therefore shape what an audience gets out of your compositions.

- Have a clear understanding behind the narrative function of your composition. A good storyteller knows how to emphasize certain moments in a story and details in a frame. It is imperative that you understand the dramatic purpose behind the moment you are capturing so that you can arrange the visual elements within the frame accordingly. Ask yourself: what do I want the audience to get out of this particular shot and how can I make it express that?
- Know the basic rules of composition and why they work. While this might seem obvious at first, the key here is not only to be familiar with the rules, but also to understand how and why they function, in essence, why did they become rules in the first place? Only when you know the concept behind the rule can you apply it in an expressive way.
- Learn how to break the rules. Every rule was created by individuals not following the rules; somebody decided to place a camera really close to a subject one day and gave birth to the close up. Of course, breaking the rules intelligently only works after you learn them (see previous tip)!
- Be familiar with the limitations and advantages of all your equipment. Creating visually compelling compositions requires not only your artistic insight, but also your technical skills. You may have an amazing composition in your mind's eye that gets completely undone by the time you shoot it because you were unaware your camera could not run at a particular frame rate, or you did not have enough lights to get the look you wanted.
- Keep in mind how each individual composition will function when juxtaposed with the rest of the images in your film, and be aware of how their interaction adds meaning as a whole. Whether you intend to or not, your story will have an image system at work, so you should have a plan for how every composition you create fits within this framework.
- Make it a habit to scan the entire frame before you roll camera. Even experienced directors of photography fall into the trap of getting so caught up by a single aspect of a composition that they forget to look at every visual element in the frame, often ruining what would have been beautiful shots.
- Do your research. I find it extremely helpful to create a portfolio of images in preparation for a project. It can include pictures taken from magazines, examples from still photography books, paintings, other films, and any other image that you feel captures the tone, mood, and visual palette you want to implement for your film.

## Review

**"Gustavo Mercado's beautiful book reveals the inner workings of the basic shots that create the cinematic experience. He reveals how visuals communicate to an audience. If you're a novice filmmaker or a seasoned professional, this book will broaden your visual horizons."** -Bruce Block, film producer, author of *The Visual Story*, and visual consultant whose credits include *The Holiday*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Stuart Little*, and *Pretty in Pink*

**"Mercado's book is a great resource for aspiring cinematographers. Using a brilliant selection of images, both classic and contemporary, he eloquently analyzes the conception and execution of a shot. Most important, he manages to explain how to achieve an aesthetically beautiful image, while giving equal weight to the powerful role of cinematography in portraying the characters and telling the story."** - Florian Ballhaus, cinematographer whose credits include *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Marley and Me*, *Flightplan*

**"From understanding shot types and how and why they work to visual rules, technical considerations, and when to break the rules, this packs in practical considerations that will prove key to any filmmaking collection."** - *Bookwatch*

**"While Mercado's book is perhaps more for people who are serious about filmmaking, it has helped**

me understand the importance of knowing all the different angles from which one might possibly frame the exact same moment of the story, and how to decide on the one that most perfectly aids the story." - *Christianity Today*

"This is one of those rare filmmaking books that delivers more than its title promises. *The Filmmaker's Eye* is about a lot more than just 'the rules of composition': it's a beautifully illustrated, systematic guide to the visual language of film." - *Learn About Film* ([www.learnaboutfilm.com](http://www.learnaboutfilm.com))

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**Jeannette Villalobos:**

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