**Breaking the Dictatorship of Closeups**

Denis Villeneuve, Gareth Edwards, and Worldbuilding with the Wide Shot in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

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**Declaration of Originality**

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Thanks to all of my friends, who have been a lifeline during the ups and downs of fourth year. Thanks to Tom Kennedy for his expert supervision.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the purpose of the wide shot in the worldbuilding of contemporary science fiction cinema. To this end, the works of two prominent figures in that area — Denis Villeneuve and Gareth Edwards — will be used as case studies to examine how the wide shot is used by two contemporary directors with similar taste but markedly different styles of filmmaking. The history and evolution of the wide shot and film grammar more broadly will also be investigated to support the two main case studies.

**Table of Contents**

## List of Figures

In order to discuss the wide shot's role in filmmaking, it is necessary to outline its changing, but ever-present relationship to the rest of film grammar. Film grammar is often thought of as a universal constant, a fact of existence; however for the purposes of this thesis it is much more useful to think of it as a set of working conventions, the legitimacy and meaning of which is continually reinforced, challenged, broken, and evolved by the filmmaking community. There are multiple schools of thought regarding how meaning is constructed in cinema. Every film student at some point will inevitably be taught the Kuleshov effect, where a shot of an actor with a blank expression is shown before a bowl of soup, a child, and a coffin. Writing about the Effect in *Cinema Journal*, Stephen Prince and Wayne Hensley posit that, "…nothing of the kind has really been proven in the usual scientific sense." They go on to describe that as the popular filmmaking legend goes, the audience's perception of the actor's non-existent performance in Shot A is indelibly shaped by the subject of Shot B, leading to Thought C — that in popular memory, "Audiences raved about the actor's sensitive projection of hunger, grief, and paternal joy, his subtle shifts of emotion depending on what he was looking at." (Prince & Hensley, 1992) The Effect as described is emblematic of one specific school of thought with regard to film grammar; that of montage. Kuleshov emphatically believed that the sequence and timing of shots was the superior method of conveying meaning in cinema, and that actors' performances were ancillary, if even necessary at all.

The reason for this explanation is that the definition and bounds of a wide shot, or any shot size varies greatly depending on context. Furthermore, the

meaning it conveys may be entirely present in the shot itself, or may be reliant on the context of the shots surrounding it. The convention of shot size in cinema is also entirely a construct; there is no single standard for what divides a medium shot from a wide, or a wide from an extreme wide. Thus, it is most useful to look at the wide shot not as an absolute standard, but a relative one — a wide shot is wide because it is significantly wider than the other shots in the scene, not because the characters appear a certain size in frame.

Because film grammar is not a universal constant but a continually reinforced and evolving set of conventions, it is necessary to analyse films on their own terms in order to truly unearth the intent behind their use of it. In essence, while there are broad conventions, it is always possible to find a film which breaks the rules successfully and establishes its own. It is useful to highlight films like *Rope* (1948, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), *Irreversible* (2002, dir. Gaspar Noé), *1917* (2019, dir. Sam Mendes), *Birdman* (2014, dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu), and *Boiling Point* (2021, dir. Philip Barantini), which all eschew traditional montage almost entirely by stylising their films as either single continuous long-takes, or as sequences of a limited number of long takes. In most of these cases, the camera must constantly be moving from subject to subject. While this could be argued as a recreation of montage by way of camera movement instead of cutting, it still requires the audience to process the information in a markedly different way, and resultant from this is a significant redefinition of film grammar in their minds. Along with this comes a redefinition of shot size, and a blurring of the lines between what constitutes a closeup, medium shot and wide. The notion of shot size, therefore, is inextricably tied to each individual

movie's idea of film grammar, and it is impossible to talk about the former in any depth without considering the latter. With all of the above in consideration, for the purposes of this essay "wide shot" refers to all shots which could generously be described as medium-wide, wide, extreme wide, or long shots. This thesis will first examine the history of the wide shot and its broader place within film grammar over the history of narrative cinema. Then, the works of two contemporary directors — Denis Villeneuve and Gareth Edwards — will be used as case studies to compare two styles of contemporary science fiction filmmaking which both overlap an diverge in their philosophy and technical approach.

# Chapter One | The Wide Shot and the History of Film Grammar

The wide shot is perhaps the oldest and simplest cinematic technique — as far as early cinema was concerned, the wide shot *was* cinema. At the start, there was no differentiating between shot sizes, as the standard practice was for the film to play out entirely in a static wide, making them closer to filmed plays than the cinema audiences know today. *Film Art: An Introduction* says, "The first films typically consisted of a single shot framing an action, usually at long-shot distance." (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2017) Film grammar has evolved from that point — it was only necessary to name and demarcate the wide shot once there were mid shots and closeups against which to compare them. There are many filmmakers who deserve a piece of the credit for advancing cinema editing towards the complex art it became during the early 20th century. For example, one of the earliest films to feature cuts between closeups and wide shots at all is *Grandma's Reading Glass*, which is attributed to George Albert Smith, but which was likely made in close collaboration with his wife Laura Bayley. (McKernan, 2016) However, as historical record would have it, the concept of continuity editing as we know it coalesced in the films of Edwin S. Porter and D.W. Griffith. Porter pioneered these techniques in *Life of an American Fireman* and *The Great Train Robbery*, and Griffith evolved them in longer narratives in the wildly racist but formally ambitious *Birth of a Nation*. According to *Film Art*, "Griffith made another creative choice that was unusual for the early 1910s: He concentrated on subtle changes in facial expression. To catch such nuances, he set up his camera closer to the action than did many of his contemporaries, framing his actors in medium long shot or medium shot". While continuity editing was used starting in the 1910s, shot

size was still limited by lens technology. A key technique developed early on was the use of unbalanced composition in wide shots to direct the viewer's attention and signal to them what may be about to happen next. *Film Art* says in relation to this, "The cinema of the 1910s offers intriguing examples. Very often a doorway in the back of the set allowed the director to show that new characters were entering the scene, but then figures closer to the camera had to be rearranged to permit a clear entrance. The result was a subtle unbalancing and rebalancing of the composition." (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2017) Bordwell et al go on to give an example from Yevgenii Bauer's *The Dying Swan*, in which a ballerina residing screen right admires herself in a new tiara received from an admirer, before her father enters from a door behind her and stands to her left, rebalancing the composition. The wide shot and its relationship to composition became ever more crucial with the growing popularity of deep-focus cinematography, as catalysed in the late 1930s by *Citizen Kane*. Technicolor was established and became widely used around this time, and it required far more light than black and white film. However, when black and white film was used on these much brighter sets, it allowed the filmmaker to close the aperture and produce a deep focus effect. In *Film Style & Technology: History & Analysis*, Barry Salt notes that on Citizen Kane, "…the apertures used throughout were

*Figure 1. Unbalancing and rebalancing composition in Yevgeni Bauer's* The Dying Swan (1917)

in the range from f/8 to f/16, and [Cinematographer Gregg] Toland claimed that lenses of only 24mm and 28mm focal lengths were used." (Salt, 1983) This created a depth of field ranging from between 2 feet and 4 feet to infinity. In *Film Art*, it is noted that, "…depth staging and deep-focus filming allowed [directors] to create striking compositions and to sustain scenes in longer takes." Thus, "The most famous deep-focus shots in *Citizen Kane* and other films tended to be fixed long takes with simple staging." (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2017)

**Widescreen**

With the increasing popularity of home television in the 1950's, cinema audiences were cannibalised and ticket sales dropped. To combat this, film studios began making bigger movies — those which demanded to be seen on the big screen. Perhaps the most significant way this manifested itself was in the transition away from shooting mostly in the relatively square 4:3 or 1.19:1 aspect ratios ("Academy Ratio"), which was similar to television. In order to give audiences an experience they couldn't get on their tiny square TVs, studios began shooting films in widescreen formats. This was achieved with various and divergent technical processes, and to varying degrees of success. With the size of the frame growing laterally to compete with television in the 1950s, films naturally became bigger in theme and scope too. A trend of big event pictures emerged, often historical epics, with the wide aspect ratio being used in combination with new techniques like helicopter shots to create stunning tableau landscape shots, or wide group shots of an ensemble dance

sequence in a musical. While opinions vary widely on the Oscars' ability to judge a film's quality, they tend to be a good indicator of where the commercial industry sits each year, and as a whole over a greater period of time. During the 50s and 60s, 9 of the 20 Best Picture winners were either epic war or historical films, or musicals. Across the two decades as well, there is a clear transition from 1.37:1 Academy Ratio to widescreen formats like 2:35:1 and 2.2:1. Henry Koster's 1953 film *The Robe* was the first film released to be shot with the CinemaScope process. However, it was perhaps Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955) which had the most groundbreaking impact — it used CinemaScope, and widescreen more generally, to create a small, intimate, and character-driven story, in contrast to the sweeping epics widescreen was known for. The widescreen format had been dismissed by many old-guard directors and cinematographers for being "only useful for filming snakes and trains" — various versions of this quote having been attributed most famously, though perhaps apocryphally, to Fritz Lang. According to Arthur Gavin, writing for the American Society of Cinematographers, Kazan chose Ted McCord as his cinematographer, partially because he hadn't worked CinemaScope before, and would therefore "…[not] have any preconceived notions about CinemaScope and colour. You won't be following formulas, but will be more inclined to use your imagination, to freely explore and create. And

*Figure 2. Ted McCord's innovative use of Dutch angles in widescreen,* East of Eden (1955)

that's the kind of photography I want for this highly dramatic and unusual story." (Gavin, 1955) And according to Gavin, this paid off — he describes the "striking artistry" of McCord's work being immediately apparent from the opening moments of the film. He goes on to say that, "Perhaps the most startling innovation is the way he tilted or angled the CinemaScope camera in order to achieve a more compelling composition when shooting the dramatic scene where the father is having a heart-to-heart talk with his troublesome son, Cal."

CinemaScope, 70mm, and other similar widescreen processes became the standard for how films looked during the 1950s and 60s, and widescreen in one form or another is now the dominant aspect ratio for almost all motion picture media. Films in 4:3 and other square ratios are now the exception as opposed to the rule; independent and art-house films like Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* and the work of Kelly Reichardt.

**IMAX**

The 21st century has seen another significant advancement in formats which has impacted the place of the wide shot in film grammar; that being the beginning of the use of IMAX to shoot parts of narrative feature films. The format was first developed in the late 1960s, and the first IMAX film, *Tiger Child*, was exhibited in 1971, with a runtime of only 17 minutes. Using the same 70mm film as TODD-AO and other 70mm formats, IMAX follows in the footsteps of VistaVision and runs the film through the camera horizontally instead of vertically, producing an image effectively three times the size —

larger than the negatives of most high-end medium format stills cameras. The downside of this format is that it is extremely impractical to shoot narrative films with; the cameras are very loud, making dialogue recording almost impossible, and a reel of film only produces only 3 minutes of footage, making it exorbitantly expensive too. As well as this, the physical size and weight of the film entail certain restrictions when it comes to exhibition. For all of these reasons, it was initially considered primarily a format for short documentaries. This is not to say that feature films were not exhibited on IMAX — they just weren't shot natively on the format, instead being upscaled from 35mm or other formats smaller than IMAX. Perhaps most notably, *Apollo 13* was released in IMAX in a version with a significantly shorter runtime than the original theatrical cut. This reduction was made to account for the sheer size and weight of the IMAX film reels, both in terms of the logistics of transporting them, and the space they took up in projection rooms.

*Figure 3. Heath Ledger's Joker is revealed in some of the first IMAX footage ever shot specially for a feature film,* The Dark Knight (2008)

However, things changed in 2008 with Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, which was the first feature film to shoot footage natively on IMAX (about 28 minutes of it). Nolan has shot increasing amounts of all of his subsequent films on IMAX since this point, with 2023's *Oppenheimer*, a three-hour film, being exhibited on IMAX prints which had a total length of 11 miles. While IMAX has a negative area three times that of 70mm, it's unique among new celluloid formats in that its primary purpose is not to produce a more widescreen image,

but simply more detail. Natively, the IMAX frame's aspect ratio is 1.43:1 — only a little wider than 4:3 Academy Ratio. This produces an interesting effect — in an interview in *American Cinematographer*, Nolan's cinematographer at the time, Wally Pfister, said "A 'normal' close-up is often way too big in IMAX — if you hold it for a while, the audience is going to be looking at one eye or the mouth. You have to back up a bit." As well as this, "IMAX protocol stipulates maintaining an enormous amount of headroom because in most theaters, seeing the top third of the screen requires craning one's neck." These principles provoked a dramatic shift in Nolan's filmmaking after he began using IMAX — earlier in his career he frequently framed primarily in tight shots of only one character at a time, and with shots rarely lasting more than a couple of seconds. Once he began using IMAX, however, there was a transition to much calmer, wider shots showing much more of the environment. Shots of a longer duration like this use scene geography much more effectively. (Willems, 2020) In this way, the IMAX format has had a significant effect on how film grammar is expressed in the films which use it. However, perhaps the most interesting part of the IMAX journey is *Oppenheimer*, a significant step which in many ways mirrors *East of Eden*'s place in the history of widescreen. Both represent a development in the use of their respective formats, and one which moves away from grand and epic filmmaking to close and intimate character studies. *East of Eden* moves away from the sweeping epics like *The Robe* and tells a family drama; *Oppenheimer* deviates from previous uses of IMAX in genre blockbusters like *Star Wars*, *Transformers* and *Mission Impossible*, and

uses the format to shoot an intimate historical drama mostly consisting of people talking in rooms. Curiously however, the awkwardness of IMAX closeups here is used deliberately. The eye-watering detail allows audience to grasp every subtle detail of Cillian Murphy and Robert Downey Jr's performances. When their faces fill the vast IMAX screen, it places the audience unavoidably and uncomfortably with them, forcing them to sit with the moral ambiguity inherent to the creation of the deadliest weapon in human history.

*Figure 4 Cillian Murphy captured on IMAX in* Oppenheimer (2023)

## Chapter Two | Denis Villeneuve and the Claustrophobia of the Vast

**Villeneuve's Voice**

The career of Denis Villeneuve is perhaps best analysed as a triptych. His first two features, *August 32nd on Earth* and *Maelstrom*, are indie dramas with absurdist elements. The plot of the former involves a platonic couple attempting to conceive a child in the desert, while the latter is narrated by a talking fish. After these two, Villeneuve took a break from filmmaking for eight years — he said later that his experiences with the first two had left him disillusioned. He returned in 2009 with *Polytechnique*, a documentary-style retelling of a school shooting which was a radical departure from his previous work. This begins the second panel of the triptych. Polytechnique and the four films that followed it, *Incendies*, *Prisoners*, *Enemy*, and *Sicario*, are all of a piece — while their subject matter is disparate, they are all grounded, realistic stories featuring characters facing cycles of violence, and the harsh reality of the worlds in which they live. Following *Sicario*, which was nominated for three Academy Awards and which was easily his most widely acclaimed film up until that point, Villeneuve's directorial style took another left turn — into science fiction. This started with 2016's *Arrival*, which was an even greater success than Sicario, being nominated for eight Oscars including Best Picture, and taking home the statuette for Best Sound Editing. From there, he directed *Blade Runner 2049* and the two *Dune* films of the 2020s. Though Villeneuve may have seismically shifted his genre of choice from grounded dramas and thrillers to sci fi, there is a clear throughline of directorial style between the second and third panels of the triptych. Villeneuve's camera and editing technique is patient and restrained, and occupies a form of realism which is

heightened, but never showy. He often employs long takes and shots where the camera pushes subtly in towards its subject. Wide shots are a staple of his work, too, and often play host to moments of sudden violence or conflict — this avoids sensationalising them, and makes them feel disquietingly matter-of-fact. They are also used by Villeneuve to place characters in their environment — this traps them there by showing their insignificance and vulnerability in the face of a vast but intricate landscape. This chapter will assess Villeneuve's filmmaking style through the lens of three of his films.

## Sicario

There is a shot in *Sicario* which serves as a prominent example of Villeneuve's partiality to wide shots. It occurs just under forty minutes into the film. At this point, Emily Blunt's Kate Macer, an FBI agent, has just completed her first operation under Josh Brolin's Matt Graver, who is the head of a joint task force and a CIA operative. The shot in question occurs directly after the climax of that operation — an explosive shootout on a bridge with civilians in the line of fire, during which Macer was forced to kill a member of the Mexican police. The task force arrive back at base, and Macer confronts Graver, disturbed at the Americans' trigger-happy conduct. Most of this entire scene takes place in a single, unmoving wide shot. In a conversation on Roger and James Deakins' podcast, Villeneuve said that he refused to

*Figure 5. Blunt and Brolin's performances are allowed to breath by a static wide shot in* Sicario (2015)

shoot any further coverage of the scene in the form of closeups or medium shots, “in case he was forced to use it” and that he feels in Hollywood there is a “dictatorship of the closeups.” (Villeneuve, 2020) He felt that the performance the film needed was there in that one shot, and so chose to use it. While the shot stands on its own as a contained scene, it’s worthwhile to look more deeply at its place in the wider narrative. From a structural point of view, the shot and scene represent the point between acts one and two of the film. It’s directly preceded by the main set-piece of act one, the shootout on the bridge, during which Kate first begins to question her role in the taskforce. In the turning point shot, she confronts her boss about it. The following scene moves away from her perspective, and shows us that Kate’s concerns may be well—founded; out of her sight, Graver and Benicio Del Toro’s Alejandro Gillick calmly but callously torture a prisoner for information. Gillick exchanges hushed, conspiratorial words with Rafael, another operative involved in the task force. Their air of quiet mutual understanding hints at the deeper layers of moral ambiguity underlying the operation, and the fact that there is more to it than the audience or Kate currently knows. The confrontation after the bridge shootout serves as the perfect shootout for two reasons; firstly, it’s a perfect example of Villeneuve’s restraint — he counters the verbal violence of Macer and Graver’s row by placing it in a wide shot, so that the performances speak for themselves. This also means that it acts as a breathing point between the frenetic gunfire-infused cutting of the shootout and the hushed, but deeply disturbing scenes of torture and conspiracy which occur directly afterwards in the base. This shot highlights Villeneuve’s directorial restraint and minimalism

in sticking to one static frame and allowing the acting to speak for itself. It is also an example of Villeneuve's signature use of the wide shot; to make characters vulnerable by showing them in relation to their environment and trapping them there. In the shot, Macer is framed against a barbed-wire fence, and boxed in by a military vehicle on one side and the corrugated-iron military building on the other. This creates a subtle frame-within-a-frame effect. Finally, the shot traps Macer and the audience simply by virtue of its runtime. Cinema audiences are used to a cut every two to three seconds, a fact emphasised by the shootout scene directly preceding this shot. Now, however, the audience is forced to sit uncomfortably with Macer as she confronts and is calmly rebuffed by Graver, in a shot which lasts an agonising seventy seconds.

**Arrival**

The second film which this chapter will analyse is *Arrival*. It's a film which, in generic terms, sits as the hardest of hard sci-fi, being a sci-fi film which is unabashedly concerned with confronting philosophical ideas above all else. To this end, it functions primarily as a deeply personal character study of its protagonist, linguist Louise Banks, and how her involvement in an effort to communicate with extraterrestrial beings reshapes her understanding of time. This surface-level change reflects a deeper shift in mindset, the emotional journey of the film. While *Arrival* does indeed use shot size and film grammar to build a world, in contrast to other science fiction films discussed here, the world being built largely is not an external physical or social world, but the internal world of Banks' emotions and her grief, which is the nexus around

which the more literal, physical worldbuilding revolves. There is a clear demarcation in the film between the apparent flashbacks (which are actually flashforwards) and the present tense of the story as it is told. The opening montage, is comprised almost entirely of closeups and extreme closeups. Writing in *Screen*, Tijana Mamula says, "Many of the shots are closeups, whose shallow, racking focus further underlines the physical interaction between mother and daughter." The lighting is extremely soft and primarily natural light or an emulation thereof. Vintage, imperfect lenses were used, and a wide aperture was used to create a softer, dreamier image with a very shallow depth of field. All of these choices emphasise the intimacy between Banks and her daughter Hannah. According to cinematographer Bradford Young, "It was pretty much, in Louise's house, all available light." (Cooke Optics, 2017) Mamula then goes on to say, "Once we step from the prologue to the ostensible present and begin to follow the story of the aliens' landing, the tone and look of *Arrival* change distinctly… Formally the prologue's closeups are replaced by medium and long shots, predominantly in deep focus." (Mamula, 2018) This emphasises Louise's loneliness and emotional detachment before the revelation she experiences once she begins to comprehend the Heptapods' language. Mamula goes on to posit that the film codes the humans' interaction with the Heptapod with cinema itself; the room within the spaceship in which they communicate resembles itself a cinema auditorium — "…the

*Figure 6 The close, intimate camerawork and soft lighting of the opening moments of* Arrival (2016)

portion of the Heptapods' spacecraft where Banks and her team meet with the aliens is of a cuboid shape, its walls black… At the far end of the cuboid, one whole wall is taken up by a bright screen, or window," Mamula describes the aliens emerging from the mist as "…evocative of many an image of dusty, smoky analogue film projection, they appear like a spectacle in black and white." In this way, Villeneuve implies that cinema itself represents a universal language capable of changing our minds and perspectives — much as we are keyed into Banks' emotional arc by his directorial choices.

**Blade Runner 2049**

In contrast to Arrival and by virtue of its setting, *Blade Runner 2049* must convey a complete physical and social world as well as the inner world of its protagonist. While this sequel picks up the reins from its predecessor in a manner which assures synergy of tone, theme and philosophy, Denis Villeneuve's direction of *2049* also differentiates itself significantly from the original in a few key ways. Perhaps the place where this makes itself most obvious is the city exterior aerial FX camerawork. In the original, Ridley Scott and Douglas Trumbull's FX camera is operatic and makes no pretence toward groundedness — a god's-eye view. *2049*, on the other hand, employs Villeneuve's signature minimalist style. It aims towards heightened naturalism, and primarily values staying with the characters. We may see sweeping shots of the city, but they are very clearly from the point of view of our protagonist K in his spinner.

One key shot to analyse depicts K walking away from Sapper Morton's house, which is engulfed in flames, after K destroys it on the orders of his superior, Joshi. This shot reinforces Villeneuve's partiality to wide shots which box in their protagonists — K is encroached on both sides, with the looming figure of his spinner screen right, and the inferno of Morton's house on the left. Behind him, the flames churn violently in what almost looks like slow motion. The confrontation in *Sicario*, while only one shot, takes up most of an entire scene. Thus, it was necessary to examine the full scenes which precede it, and their context to the story. This shot, however, is only one piece of a wider scene — a single word, in comparison to the near-complete sentence the one from *Sicario* represents. Directly preceding this wide shot is another wide shot, its reverse — though in contrast, the reverse shot is less claustrophobic and more expansive. It features K in the foreground, moving towards his spinner, which takes up far less screen space than in the shot which follows it. Finally, there is a dramatic contrast in tone between the shots. There is no evidence of the fire in the first shot, and despite the edit appearing to be a direct cut with no temporal alienation implied between the two shots, the sound of the flames cuts harshly in on the second shot. Here, sound leads; had the crackling of the fire played over both shots, it would have appeared a completely clean edit. Now, with the fire cutting in on the second shot both in sound and visuals, it appears that this is a very subtle match-cut. Directly before these two shots is an extreme closeup of a date carved on the bark of the dead tree at Morton's house, from under which K extracted the ossuary containing Rachael's bones. Later in the film, K is making his way to see Deckard in the ruins of Las Vegas,

*Figure 7 K is boxed in by his surroundings,* Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

in a sequence known for featuring some of the most recognisable expansive wide shots in the entire film. At the very beginning, we get one single shot of K walking against a background of only thick orange haze. From then on, the frame is absolutely dominated by a series of statues — nude female figures — in various stages of dilapidation. K is trapped between them, with the eerie silence and almost monochromatic colour palette adding to the anxiety.

When making *East of Eden*, Elia Kazan and Ted McCord sought to use the CinemaScope format in interesting ways. Instead of using the wideness of the aspect ratio to simply shoot jaw-dropping vistas, they populated the frames with people and objects. In an early scene, Anne, Kate's servant, is seen scrubbing the deck at the front of the house, framed between two pillars and with other objects surrounding her. Shortly after, Anne stands inside the house framed by a double doorway. James Dean's Cal is seen at the bar in Kate's brothel later, framed on all sides by both people and the geography of the room itself. This is a classic example of the "frame within a frame" technique, and by trapping his subjects with scene geography in wide shots, Villeneuve has continued that legacy.

## Chapter Three | Gareth Edwards and the Humanity of Scale

## The Digital Revolution, 21st Century Visual Effects and Independent Cinema

In *Cinema and Modernity*, John Orr says that, "…one of the great challenges for the modern cinema [is] how to capture that which is absent from human perception. If, as we suggested, the camera is somehow an analogue to the eye as a medium of perception, the innovating filmmaker must also capture what is not there…what exists beyond the perceptual horizon at any given moment." (Orr, 1993) Special visual effects, in all of their forms throughout the history of cinema, but never moreso than in the era of CGI and digital compositing, are perhaps the most literal manifestation of this philosophical conundrum. These technologies had been slowly advancing throughout the 1990s, but became truly domninant during the early 2000s.

Alongside this, and the beginning of IMAX's use in feature films as discussed in Chapter 1, the other major seachange which occurred during the 21st century has been the digital revolution. While there were a handful of early films shot entirely on digital video, notably *Windhorse* and *Vidocq*, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* was perhaps the most significant milestone in early digital cinema. This was because not only was it a major big-budget blockbuster which had been shot digitally, but with a specially-developed high-definition digital camera, which finally offered image quality to rival that of film. However, while digital cinematography had very much made itself known, it would be a further decade and a half before it would establish itself as the default way to shoot a movie. During the 2000s, various digital cinema workflows were tested on the market, to varying degrees of success. Sony

were the original progenitors of digital cinema with the HDW-F900, used for the *Star Wars* prequels. They went on to develop a wide variety of cinema cameras under their CineAlta line. However, their position was usurped by the release of first the Red One, in 2007, and then the Arri Alexa in 2010. In the first half of the 2010s, various cameras from those companies took over the market completely, and usurped celluloid's position as the dominant medium for cinematography. Sony have made a comeback in recent years, with their capable Venice camera proving its worth and splitting the Arri—Red duopoly. Digital cinema provoked many changes in workflow on film sets, but perhaps most importantly, it allowed the director and camera crew to see exactly what they were shooting, and it almost entirely eliminated the restriction physical celluloid imposes on how much footage one can shoot; now the limit was defined only by how much digital storage the production could afford. The concurrent proliferation of CGI and digital cinematography worked hand-in-hand; it is much easier to create visual effects for a piece of digital video than it is for film, as both assets being combined are digital. Furthermore, uncoupled from the physical requirements and the heft of celluloid, digital cinema cameras have been able to take a far more varied range of shapes and sizes compared to their analogue counterparts. This allowed manufacturers to create a much greater range of camera body styles, each purpose built for a different set of shooting circumstances. Small, light, and simple box-style cinema cameras allow use on drones, gimbals and remote heads. Bigger, heftier units offer more power to shoot at higher frame rates and better quality, while also providing anchor-weight for stability when used on the camera

operator's shoulder. This flexibility trickled down into inexpensive "pro-sumer" cameras, many of which were designed for stills photography but added incrementally powerful video capabilities to meet the demands of the market. This paved the way for the independent and microbudget film landscape of today. Indie director Shane Carruth shot his first feature, *Primer*, on 16mm film in 2004, but went on to shoot his second film, *Upstream Colour*, on a digital pro-sumer Panasonic Lumix GH2 camera in 2013. There is a storied history in contemporary independent cinema of filmmakers using budget-friendly but capable digital cameras to shoot feature films films which go on to see massive success — *Frances Ha* (2012, dir. Noah Baumbach), as well as episodes of *House MD* (2004—2012) have both been shot on the Canon 5D mark II camera, renowned for being the first full-frame DSLR capable of shooting 1080p HD video; *Tangerine* (2015, dir. Sean Baker) and *Unsane* (2018, dir. Steven Soderbergh) were both shot on variations of the iPhone. Part of this wave was Gareth Edwards, who shot his first feature film, *Monsters* (2010), on a Sony EX3 camcorder. Concurrent with the digital revolution was the rise of CGI and digital visual effects. Edwards was at the vanguard of both digital cinematography and the advent of CGI in the 2000s. While he wanted to be a director, he saw that CGI was the future of film and began teaching himself the techniques involved on a home computer. As a one—man team, he made himself in demand by significantly undercutting bigger visual effects companies on cost. When he eventually made his way into directing films, he did so with years of effects experience under his belt.

**Monsters**

Coming a decade after Attack of the Clones, the production of *Monsters* was made possible by the proliferation of digital cinema, and it would have been orders of magnitude more difficult to make a film like it in the age of celluloid. Edwards and his cast travelled through central America with a skeleton crew of filmmakers and two lead actors, using local people as supporting cast. Much of the film was improvised, and visual effects were largely completed by Edwards in his bedroom. The off-the-cuff nature of the filmmaking lends the picture a cinema-verité documentary style, working the creative limits imposed upon it to its advantage.

The film's worldbuilding makes extensive use of environmental storytelling; as the protagonists make their way through the infected zone, we see signs of human life in the form of dilapidated and overgrown buildings, and strange anachronisms like the corpse of a ship washed up in the vegetation on the steep banks of a river. What's crucial to the effectiveness of the worldbuilding here is that it becomes difficult to tell what has been added in by Edwards in post-production, and what is simply a strange or interesting sight he and his crew encountered during their travels and decided to integrate into the film. It's perhaps fitting given how his debut was shot that, for his most recent effort, *The Creator*, he returned to those roots and shot the entire film on the pro-sumer Sony FX3 camera.

**Conveying Scale**

Edwards has a certain eye for conveying scale in his films. When depicting a giant creature or object, be that the extraterrestrial creatures from *Monsters*, Godzilla, the Death Star, or the Nomad weapons satellite from The Creator, the edges are almost never in frame, as though the object is too big for the camera to capture all at once. Thus, often an object is revealed bit-by-bit over the course of several shots. On the rare occasion we do see the entire thing at once, it will usually be shrouded in atmospheric haze to convey how far away it is. Furthermore, Edwards almost always places smaller subjects, like humans, cars, or buildings in frame with the behemoth in question to give the viewer a reference point for its size. One shot in Rogue One starts on a TIE Fighter, contrasts its size to that of a Star Destroyer, and then contrasts that with the Death Star. The superweapon is so large in comparison that it takes up the entire background once it's revealed, resembling a vast wall of grey industrialism. *Monsters* takes this even further by not showing the creatures at all for large sections of the movie. This synthesises the theory of scale with a technique often cited by horror filmmakers; often what the filmmaker doesn't show is as important as what they do — the horror we can imagine is more powerful than anything we can see. *Monsters* uses this technique not only to build the idea of the creatures in the mind of the audience, but to create a synthesis of mild horror and wonder. They are frequently talked about and described by the protagonists and the supporting cast, combined with brief glimpses at them. Even when they are seen, it's often just their tentacles. When eventually they're shown in full for an extended shot, we're looking up

at them, framed against the canopy of an abandoned gas station as reference for their size.

### *Rogue One*

Due to the success of *Monsters*, Edwards was hired to direct the 2014 adaptation of Godzilla, and after that, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. While *Monsters* was filmed in the run-and-gun style of filmmaking to the extreme, Godzilla and *Rogue One* were the opposite; tent-pole blockbusters costing upwards of a hundred million dollars, and filmed traditionally. *Rogue One*, specifically, cost between 200 and 280 million, making it the 41st most expensive film ever made, adjusted for inflation. (Reid, 2023) (Wikipedia, 2025) However, the throughline with all of these films is Edwards' unmatched eye for blocking and physical geography. His films are all sci fi blockbusters — whether they have the budget for it or not. *Monsters* achieves blockbuster-like scale within a social realist technical philosophy through its framing and clever, efficient use of visual effects. When directing tentpole projects, Edwards used his years of experience painstakingly crafting visual effects shots to capture the best footage possible on set. During a keynote at SXSW, Edwards said of a short film he made before *Monsters*, "[I] tried to do everything I'd learned from visual effects but apply it to film, and it was the most liberating thing I've ever done in my life… if you've got a camera and you make a mistake with composition, you've wasted like five seconds, if you make a mistake on the computer while you're doing a visual effects shot, you've wasted at least a day. It becomes this really painful way to learn about composition and light and

dark… suddenly you've got a camera in your hand and you can instantly find the shot." (Edwards, 2017)

Writing in Film Quarterly, Kristen Whissel says that, "Precisely because verticality automatically implies the intersection of two opposed forces—gravity and the force required to overcome it—it is an ideal technique for visualizing power. Verticality thereby facilitates a rather literal naturalization of culture in which the operation and effects of (social, economic, military) power are mapped onto the laws of space and time." (Whissel, 2006) *Rogue One* makes extensive and effective use of this principle throughout. Analysing the film in Journal of Popular Film and Television in his article *Rogue One: A US Imperialism Story*, Fielding Montgomery builds on Whissel's analysis, applying it to the framing of the Death Star in *Rogue One* — "After firing the Death Star's beam at the Holy City, several shots show the destruction from the ground contrasted with views of the destruction from aboard the Death Star (through a viewing screen)… *Rogue One*, then, takes the idea of detached warfare and moves it into the age of drone warfare and instant media…warfare was already detached during the Vietnam War, it is clear that drone warfare and 24/7 media coverage have made it even more detached… The very framing of the shot aboard the Death Star—viewing the destruction of an entire city through a video display—is eerily similar to the view given to drone pilots through their video screen as they strike a target." (Montgomery, 2020) The contrasting views of, "complete destruction being wrought by the Death Star's weakest firing capacity," are equally interesting to analyse, however — "Thus, the Death Star has an overwhelming power because of its ultimate vertical placement

beyond the atmosphere. This is part of what makes the image of the Death Star looming over the planet Scarif in the final battle so terrifying. To the Rebels, it is seemingly untouchable." This entire element of the film is possible due to Edwards' keen eye for scale in his wide shots. The Death Star is allowed to look truly massive and imposing in ways which were seldom thought of in the original Star Wars trilogy. It is striking that throughout the original trilogy, the audience never sees either of the two Death Stars from the point of view of their imminent victims on the ground. In fact, shots of it from the point of view of any planets' surface are vanishingly rare — it's mostly seen in space from the point of view of other spacecraft. *Rogue One* is focused on the time during and directly after the completion of the Death Star's construction. Our primary antagonist is the project's leader, weapons developer Orson Krennic. In the film's opening moments, he forcefully recruits the scientist Galen Erso, father of our protagonist Jyn. Then, throughout the film we observe his ruthless ambition and determination to not only realise the project, but to have his achievements recognised by the Empire. During this phase, the weapon is being used not to destroy whole planets, but tested instead to simply wipe out cities. As a result of this, the audience is counterintuitively privy to a greater, more visceral articulation of the sheer terror of its capabilities. An entire planet being wiped out is far past the scale of human comprehension — one can only observe the destruction from afar. Destroy a city, however, and there are witnesses, survivors — people who can recount the horror after the fact. By placing our characters in the cities during the attacks, Edwards' camera becomes that witness. The sheer fact that when a city, not a planet, is the

target, there remains solid ground from which to observe the horror unfold, has a significant impact on the audience's connection to it. There are two landmark uses of the weapon over the course of the film, once on the holy city of Jedha at the end of the first act, and then again at the climax of the film on Scarif. Both times, the film uses striking cinematography and visual effects to show the Death Star at its most imposing, frightening, and beautiful. Shortly before the first attack on Jedha, it's seen in orbit — here Edwards makes use his eye for scale, whereby it's very often cut off at the edge of frame. As well as this, it, a human-made object, is shown in the same frame as the celestial body of Jedha — this reference point shows the audience just how massive it is. Then, just before it fires, it is shown from the surface of the planet blocking out the sun and causing an eclipse. Not only does this add further to the aforementioned conveying of scale, but the change in lighting conditions means that the atom-bomb-esque explosion of the city burns all the brighter.

Perhaps the most cinematically interesting part of our antagonist Krennic's journey through the film is its end, which comes during the second landmark use of the Death Star, at the climax. By this point, Krennic has ventured down from  to the planet's surface to confront Jyn Erso, who has retrieved the Death Star plans and is attempting to transmit them to the rebel fleet in orbit. As the rebels manage to take down the planetary shield keeping the transmission from getting through, the Empire arrives in the form of the Death Star. We then get a simple but very powerful series of shots. (Fig. 1) Though there are shots

between the four shown below, they are the most important in that beat of the story.

In the first, we see Krennic struggle to get up from where he lies prone on the platform atop the communications tower, revealing he has survived Cassian Andor's blaster bolt. The second is a reverse, and possibly the most pivotal

*Figure 8: Krennic's end,* Rogue One: A Star Wars Story

shot of the entire film. It's a wide over-the-shoulder of Krennic's point of view — he sees the Death Star, a weapon to the development of which he has dedicated his life, pointing directly at him — the barrel of his own gun. The concave dish from which the weapon's energy beams are emitted resembles a malevolent eye from this perspective, and this is reinforced further as the weapon rotates subtly, giving the impression of a head turning to look briefly at something of little importance. The weapon fires. We cut briefly back to the same shot of Krennic, and that's the last we see of him — we next see an extreme wide of the Death Star's beam utterly obliterating the top of the communications tower, and Krennic with it. This demonstrates the Empire's callousness. One is only useful to a fascist regime like it for so long, and once

that time has passed, it will mow you down without a second's thought. The separation provided to the cut to an extreme wide not only emphasises this impersonality on the part of the Empire, but also isolates us from Krennic and communicates that ultimately he is getting his narrative comeuppance.

It is clear from these examples that Gareth Edwards loves to make films with a sense of scale; ones which feature giant creatures and objects which represent existential threats. However, this scale serves not to alienate his human characters, but to emphasise their humanity — as they are dwarfed, so is their vulnerability expressed. Staring into the eye of the Death Star, both Jyn and Krennic's true selves are revealed — while both meet their end, Krennic leaves the world forgotten by the empire whose deadliest weapon he helped create, while Jyn does so in the knowledge that she's started the chain of events which will lead to the rebellion's victory.

## Conclusion

The initial inspiration for this thesis was the interview Denis Villeneuve gave on Roger and James Deakins' podcast, where he extols a love of the wide shot, and criticizes what he sees as Hollywood's dictatorship of closeups. The confrontation in Sicario, which he mentions in the interview, was one of the first texts analysed. However, it became clearer and clearer that it is impossible to analyse the wide shot on its own. What defines a wide shot is entirely contextual, and based not only on the shot sizes being used in the individual scene, but throughout the film in question. It is necessary, then, to analyse the entirety of film grammar to serve as a reference point for the place the wide shot holds in that canon.

Villeneuve and Edwards both use the wide shot to humanise their characters, but they reach that conclusion in widely varying ways. Villeneuve portrays the world as a cruel, thoughtless maze, placing his characters in the midst of it. In his wide shots, his characters are framed by their environments, which become a visual and spatial prison. K is dwarfed by towering behemoth of Los Angeles, underscoring his search for identity, an environment which is claustrophobic despite its vastness. Louise Banks is trapped by the will of military leaders who don't understand the work of communicating with the Heptapods as she does, one chess piece on a board of fragile international relationships which could come crashing down with the slightest disturbance. And Kate Macer is a federal agent trying to make the world a better place but increasingly realising the corruption deeply ingrained on all sides.

Edwards, on the other hand, breathes new life into already existing artifacts of popular culture and popular ideas — be those the iconography of *Star Wars* or *Godzilla*, the idea of giant monsters in his titular debut, or robot overlords in *The Creator*. Creating scale and using it to drive story through the depiction of giant things of one kind or another is practically his signature style in a nutshell. This blockbuster sensibility which, on the surface would appear to be more low-brow or "blockbuster" than Villeneuve's, in reality simply serves a different purpose — while Villeneuve's films are often dark and coldly beautiful, but ultimately human, Edwards' are equally human but come from a place of  powerfully straightforward empathy — in *Monsters*, Andrew and Sam are two souls thrown together by circumstance who find an unexpected connection, and in *Rogue One*, Jyn Erso is the disillusioned offspring of both the Empire and the Rebellion who, after refusing to choose a side for much of her adult life, finally does the right thing and comes to sacrifice everything for that cause.

These two directors have dramatically different modes of operation and stylistic techniques, but reduce their key concerns to their barest essentials and they ultimately desire the same thing — to exemplify and create a deep connection to the humanity and vulnerability of their characters. Both use wide shots as part of this effort —while Villeneuve uses subtle frames-within-frames them to box his characters in and create a sense of confusion and hopelessness, the epic scale Edwards creates generates empathy for the characters through our perception of their insignificance in the face of something much bigger than themselves.

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