

A woman with short blonde hair and red lipstick is looking upwards. The background is dark with warm, out-of-focus lights. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a blue-tinted graphic of a film camera and a clapperboard. The clapperboard has white text and markings, including 'PROB. NO.', 'SCENE', 'TAKE', 'ROLL', and 'SOUND'.

PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION

WITH JIM SOTO

What is Photographic Composition?

Composition, as a science of assembly, is very important in all creative activity. It is a key aspect of good art. Composing an image means arranging elements within it in a way that suits the core idea or goal of your work best. Arranging elements is done by moving the objects or subjects. Good composition requires good balance.





Composition is a way of guiding the viewer's eye towards the most important elements of your work, sometimes – in a very specific order. Good composition can help make a masterpiece even out of the duller objects and subjects in the plainest of environments.

Inversely, a bad composition can ruin a shot, despite how interesting the subject may be. A poorly judged composition is also not something you can fix easily. That's why giving your choice of composition some thought before capturing an image is a step of great importance.



What is the Goal?

It is said that a good composition is one that is most pleasant to the eye. Consequently, the goal of good composition should be showing your subject or object in an aesthetically pleasing manner. But such opinion is not universal.



Charlize Theron as the Queen in *Snow White* (2012).



Charlize Theron as Aileen Wuornos in Monster (2003).

Others believe that not every work of art should be beautiful to the viewer. Some artists try to express different, stronger ideas and their subject, as well as composition choices help achieve that. For example, if an artist wants the viewer to feel uncomfortable or nervous, he will choose a composition that is least “natural” and come up with something unexpected and shocking.

A good example of such work is war videography, where photojournalists try to help the viewer feel how terrifying and destructive war is. On the other hand, an artist may portray war victims in a very flattering and disturbingly beautiful way. By doing so, he would emphasize war's ugly nature in a grotesque and sarcastic manner. So, in the end, the goal of a good composition is to help express an artist's idea.



Elements of Photographic Composition

Good composition is a key element of good photographs yet is something that is hard to define.

Instead of looking at composition as a set of 'rules' to follow –view it as a set of ingredients that can be taken out of the pantry and used to make a great 'meal' (photograph).

The key is to remember that as a chef rarely uses all the ingredients at their disposal in any dish – that a photographer rarely uses all of the elements of composition in the making of an image.

Following are five elements of composition that should be considered. They're not 'rules' – just things to think about when setting up a shot.

Patterns

A pattern is a repeated form or design. There are patterns all around us if we only learn to see them. Emphasizing and highlighting these patterns can lead to striking shots – as can high lighting when patterns are broken.



Symmetry

Symmetry is the quality of something that has two sides or halves that are the same or very close in size, shape, and position. It has balanced proportions.

A symmetrical shot with strong composition and a good point of interest lead to striking images.



Texture

The feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface or a substance is called texture. Images are a two dimensional thing yet with the clever use of 'texture' they can come alive and become almost three dimensional. Texture particularly comes into play when light hits objects at interesting angles.



Depth of Field

The depth of field that you select when taking an image will drastically impact the composition of an image.

It can isolate a subject from its background and foreground (by using a shallow depth of field) or it can put the same subject in context by revealing it's surrounds with a larger depth of field. This element will be explored in depth later.



Lines

Lines can be powerful elements in an image. They can draw the eye to key focal points in a shot and impact the 'feel' of an image. Diagonal, Horizontal, Vertical and Converging lines; all impact images differently and should be spotted while framing a shot and then utilized to strengthen it.

These are only some of the elements of composition one must consider. There are more.



Shot Descriptions / Camera Movements



There is a convention in the film industry which assigns names and guidelines to common types of shots, framing and picture composition.

The standard 25 shot descriptions / camera movements are:

1. Full shot
2. Medium shot
3. Close-up shot
4. Depth shot
5. Low angle
6. High angle
7. Eye level
8. Overhead
9. Dutch angle
10. POV shot
11. Panning
12. Tilting
13. Dolly shot
14. Trucking
15. Tracking
16. Hand held
17. Deep focus
18. Shallow focus
19. Rack focus
20. Wide angle lens
21. Telephoto lens
22. Normal/Standard lens
23. Zoom shot
24. Boom shot
25. Over The Shoulder (OTS)

The Rule of Division of Thirds

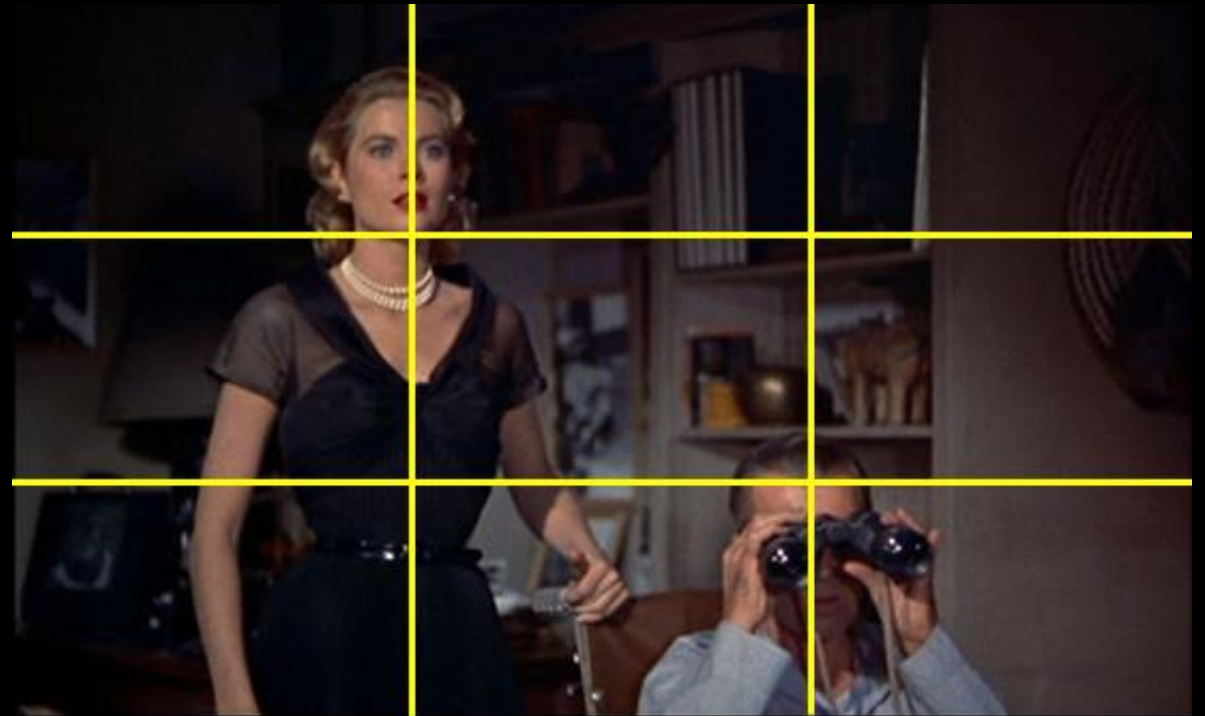


The rule or division of thirds is one of the main “rules” which applies to the process of composing visual images in art and photography and stems from the theory that an image is most pleasing when its subjects or regions are composed along imaginary lines which divide the image into thirds — both vertically and horizontally. This creates reference points which act as guides for framing the image.

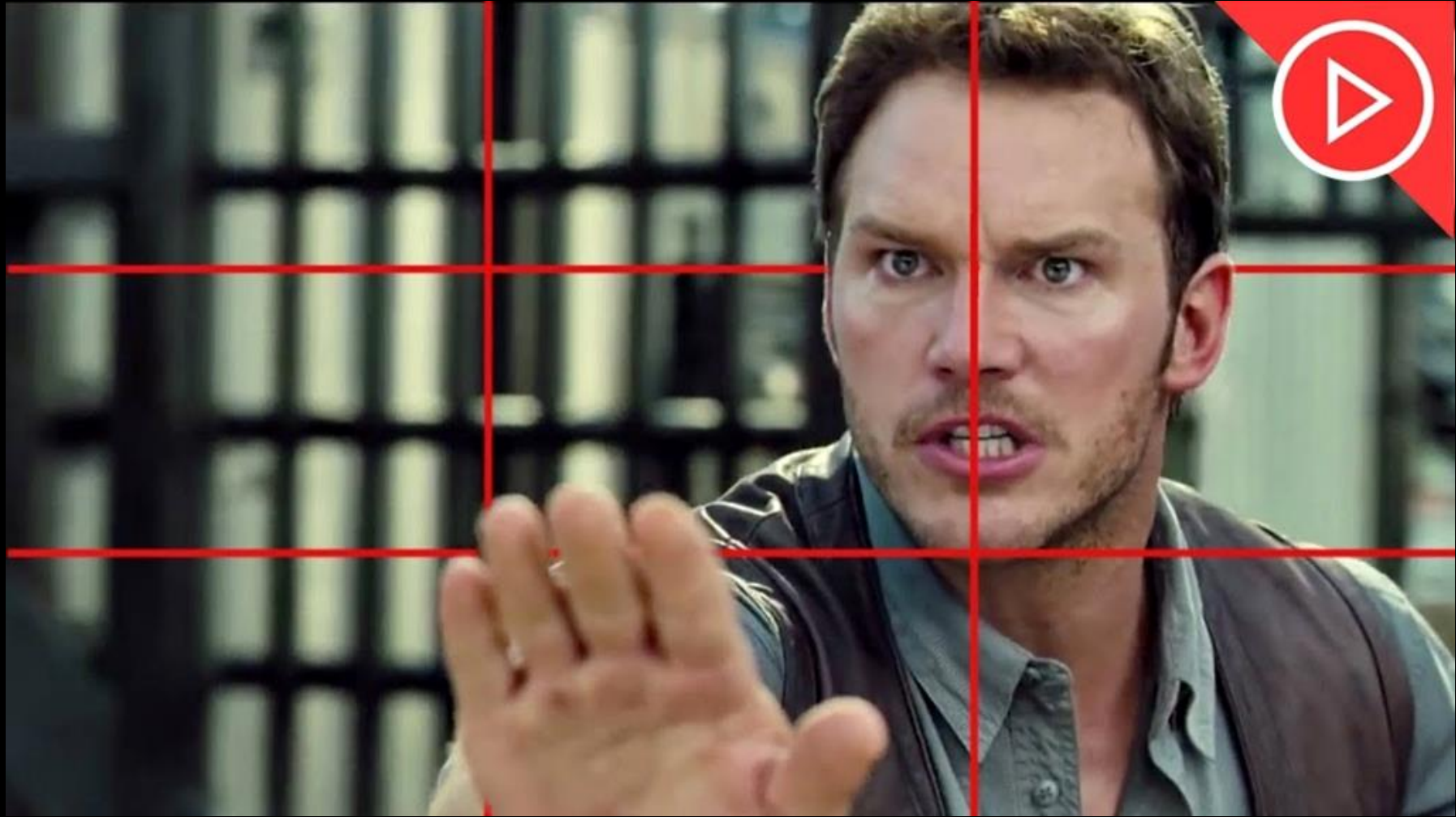
The rule proposes that an image should be imagined as divided into nine equal parts by two equally-spaced horizontal lines and two equally-spaced vertical lines, and that important compositional elements should be placed along these lines or their intersections. This rule is all about creating the right aesthetic trade-offs. It often creates a sense of balance — without making the image appear too static — and a sense of complexity — without making the image look too busy.



Is it necessary to perfectly align everything with the thirds of an image? No— it's just a guideline. What's most important is that your main subject or region isn't always in the direct middle of the frame. In most "people shots", the main line of interest is the line going through the eyes. The eye line is where the actor looks when being filmed in a single shot. In this shot, the eyes are placed approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way down the frame.



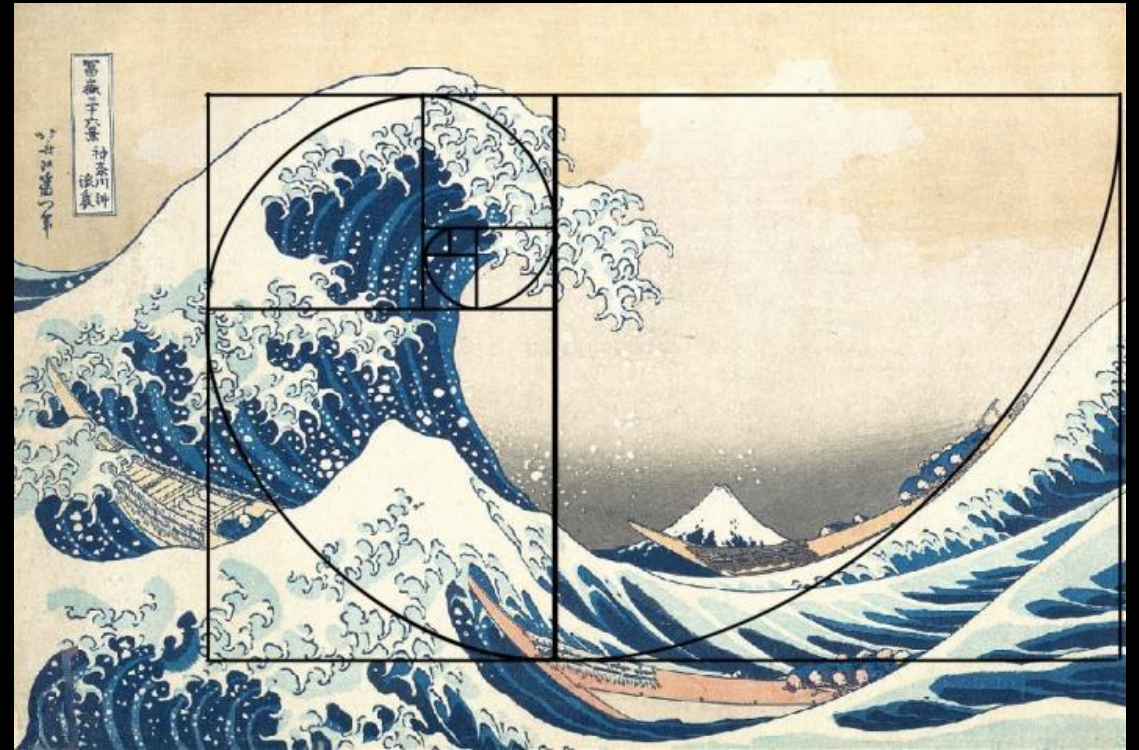
Example of Rule of Thirds in a *Rear Window* (1954).

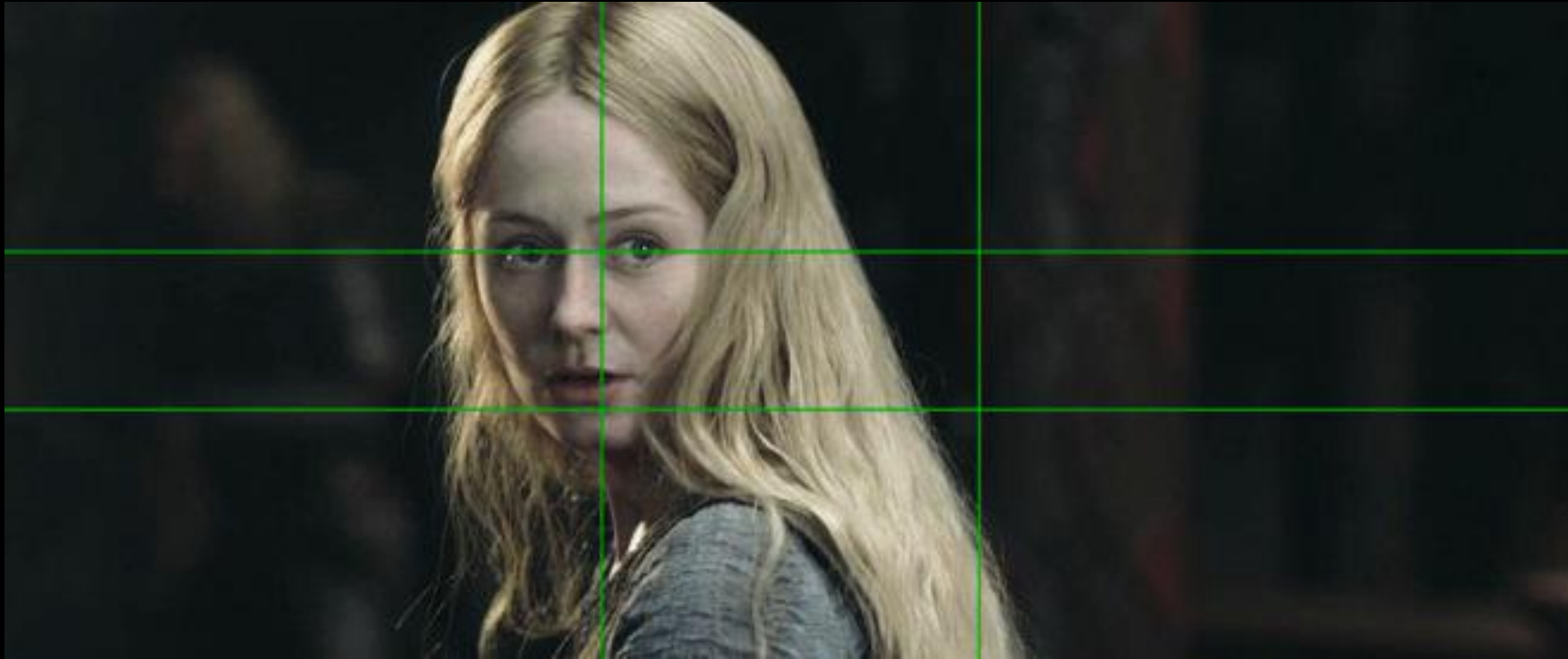


In Jurassic World (2015) the framing is used to guide the viewer's attention.

The Golden Ratio

The golden ratio is a composition guide. Some people call it the Fibonacci spiral, golden spiral, phi grid, divine proportion, or the golden mean. Famous art pieces such as the Mona Lisa and Under the Wave off Kanagawa (right) also follow its rules. The golden ratio is 1.618:1, and it is based on the spirals seen in all of nature, from DNA to ocean waves.

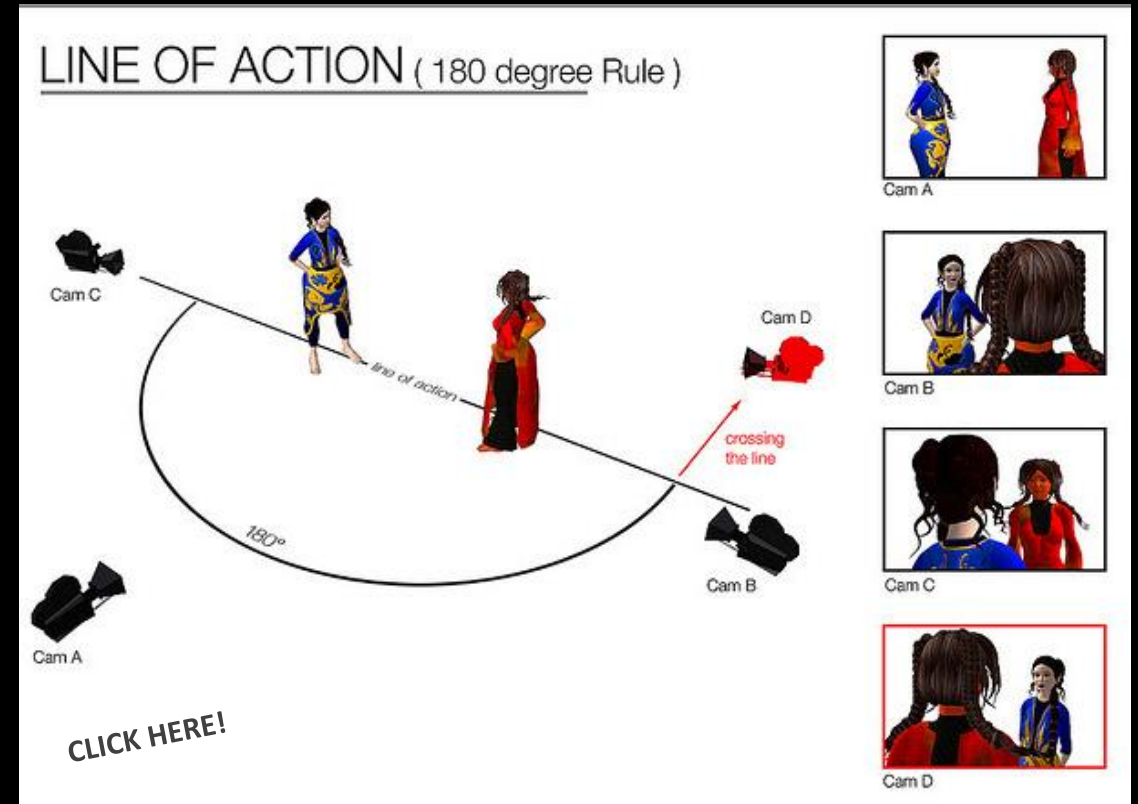




The Golden Ratio (or Phi grid) is obtained by dividing the frame with a ratio of 1.61803:1 between the lateral and central columns, drawing 2 horizontal and 2 vertical lines, which will form 9 rectangles, as in the rule of thirds. The Rule of Thirds is a simplified version of the Golden Ratio. Here's an example from TLOTR: The Two Towers (2002).

The 180° Rule

The 180° rule is a cinematic rule that states that two characters in a scene should maintain the same left/right relationship to one another. When the camera passes over the invisible axis connecting the two subjects, it is called crossing the line and the shot becomes what is called a reverse angle. Reversing the angle is thought to be disorienting and distracting from the intent of a scene.





Here's another example of how the 180° rule was used in a scene of Life of Pi (2013) by Ang Lee.

RESHOOT

1. What is photographic composition? What is its goal?
2. Which are the five elements of photographic composition?
3. Draw three images showing different camera angles and label each one (you can use stick people, if you can't draw well).
4. List five camera movements.
5. What does the theory of the division of thirds propose?
6. What is the relationship between the Rule of thirds and the Golden Ratio/Phi Grid?
7. What could happen to the audience if you neglect the 180° rule?



Next:

PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPOSURE

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