



THE POETRY
FILMMAKER'S
HANDBOOK

by
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and
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Commissioned by Apples and Snakes

"Poetry 'n' motion."

WHAT IS POETRY FILM?

po-et-ry

noun

1. the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated thought.*

film

noun

1. a sequence of consecutive pictures of objects photographed in motion by a specially designed camera and thrown on a screen by a projector in such rapid succession as to give the illusion of natural movement.

po-et-ry film

noun

1. um... well, you know, it's... ah... whatever you like, really. It's just words, and pictures, you know? Yeah.

*this may not describe your poetry, but go with us on this.

SERIOUSLY THOUGH, WHAT IS IT?

It can be a short film based on a poem
or
a collage of sounds and images designed to illustrate or
enhance a poem
or
it can be a simple filmed performance or reading of a poem
or
a collaboration between a filmmaker and a poet
or
or two hours of incoherent screaming with
a limerick at the end

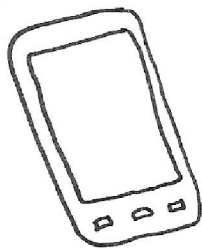
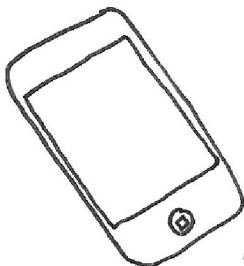
IT'S JUST ANOTHER WAY OF EXPRESSING YOURSELF.

AND IF YOU HAVE ONE OF THESE:



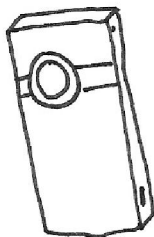
(it's a camcorder.
they are hard to
draw!)

OR ONE OF THESE:



(other, better drawn
mobile phones are
available)

OR ONE OF THESE:



(this is a flip camera.
other, better drawn
etc...)

THEN THERE'S NOTHING STOPPING YOU! GO MAKE A FILM!

OK, SO WHAT'S THIS

ZINE FOR?

If you've got a camera, and can switch it on, you're pretty much ready to make a film. What we're trying to do with this zine is to take you through some of the basic fundamentals of filmmaking, not so much from a technical point of view, but more in terms of how you can use them to create or enhance meaning in your poetry films.

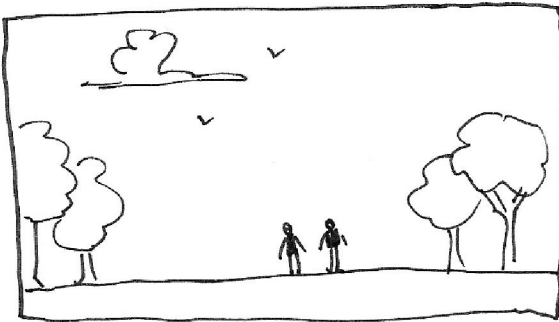
We're definitely NOT saying: put your camera HERE, point it OVER THERE and wiggle it JUST SO and your film will be BRILLIANT.

We're asking: if you did THIS, then what would happen? What might the effect be? And we don't even want you to answer; there won't be a test at the end. Do what you want. See if we care.

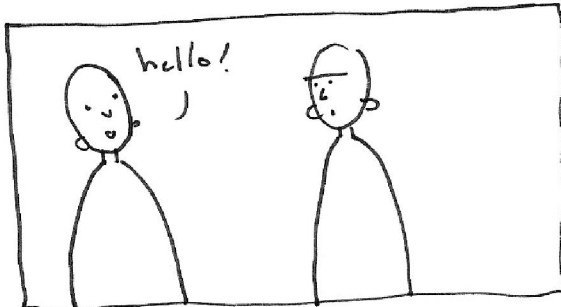


* that's not even a real word, but it's still a pretty good pun.

BASIC SHOT TYPES



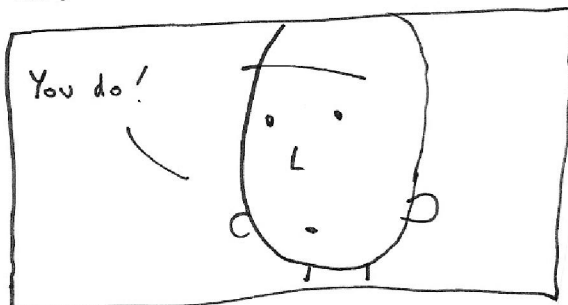
EXTREME WIDE SHOT
or ESTABLISHING SHOT
Used to establish a location or setting, to tell the audience where the scene is taking place.



MEDIUM SHOT
Frames your subject from head to waist and is usually used for dialogue scenes or to show some detail of action.



MEDIUM CLOSE-UP
Head and shoulders. Focussing in on a single figure.



CLOSE-UP
Concentrates on the face, or some other important detail such as a hand or a carrot. Shows very little background.

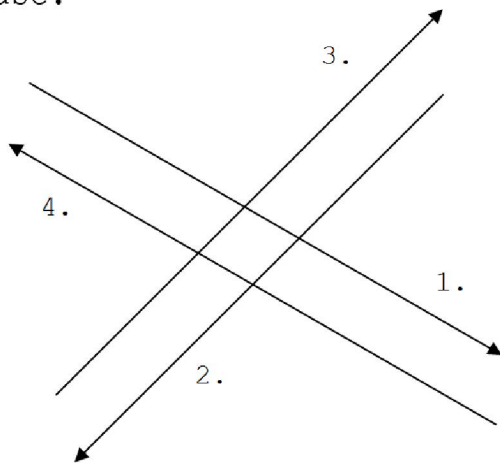


EXTREME CLOSE UP
eg. if it's a face, would only show the mouth or eyes, no background at all. Allows the subject to convey emotion using very little movement.

CAMERA MOVES

Think of camera moves as having meaning. A long, still shot might convey calm and safety, while handheld, jerky movements can suggest danger, urgency or the fact that if you're filming while hungover, you might want to borrow a tripod.

There are more subtle, almost sub-conscious indicators you can use:



Camera moves: direction of move vs relative difficulty of move

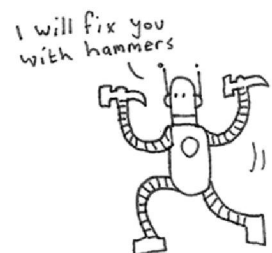
1. Easiest
2. Less Easy
3. Hard
4. Hardest

WHY? Because gravity aids a downward movement, and we read from right to left. So a camera move from top left to bottom right might subconsciously suggest that EVERYTHING IS OK!, while a move from bottom right to top left, working as it does against gravity and our natural reading direction, might suggest that EVERYTHING IS WRONG AND AWFUL AND JUST PLAIN HARD WORK. BAH!

ps This can also relate to movement within a frame - if your subject enters from the left - that's an easy move for the eye to follow. From the right - there's a bit of resistance.



Often heroes will enter from the left, while villains and misunderstood-but-still-dangerous robots will emerge from the right.

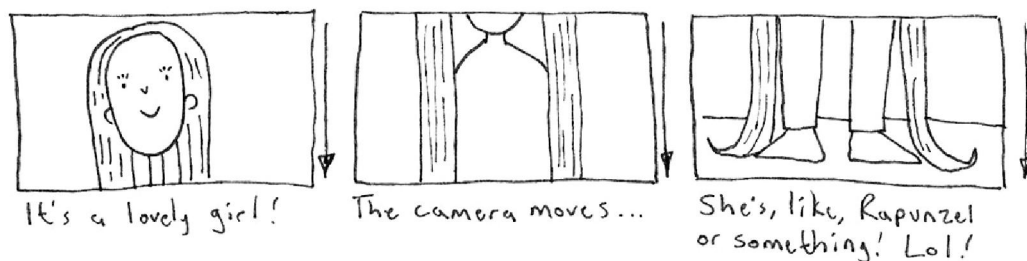
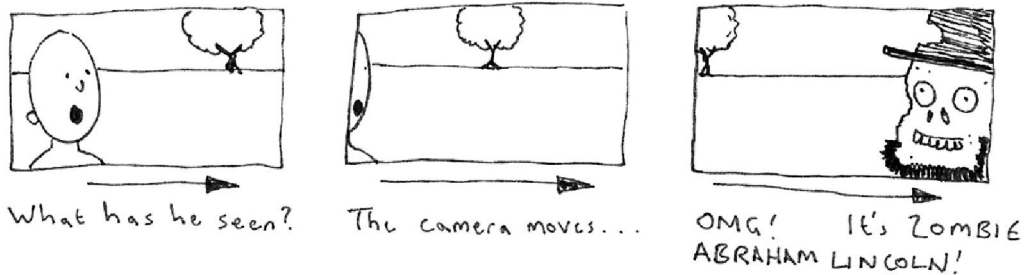


BASIC CAMERA MOVES.

PAN/TILT: If you stand on the spot and move your camera from left to right or right to left (or both), that is **PANNING**.

If you stand on the same spot and move your camera up and down, that is **TILTING**. But **WHY DO THIS?**

You might tilt, pan or track the camera to **REVEAL** a subject or object thus building suspense and anticipation.



ZOOM: in and out, using the zoom controls on your camera which gives the illusion of moving the camera closer or further away (note: because the eye cannot do this, many filmmakers avoid zooming).

DOLLY: The camera is mounted on a cart which travels along tracks for a very smooth movement. It looks sweet but can be time consuming, and proper dolly kits are pricey. You can find DIY instructions to build your own on the internet.

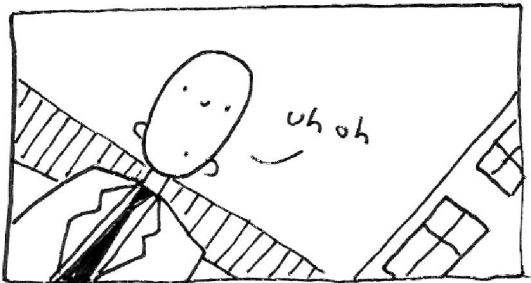
FOLLOW/TRACKING SHOT: Any sort of shot when you are holding the camera and you physically follow the subject at a more or less constant distance. Tracking shots can be intimate - as you move with your subject, never letting them out of your sight or any further away from you, this can evoke a sense of collusion with the subject: an interesting effect, especially if she's doing something a bit, you know, evil or whatever.

CAMERA ANGLES

The angle of your camera can also convey meaning and emotion.



Straight on: it's uninflected, normal, verticals are vertical, horizontals are horizontal. Today will be a good day.



Wonky, or "dutch": Everything is wrong somehow. Something bad is going to happen. Maybe The Riddler is going to jump out or something.



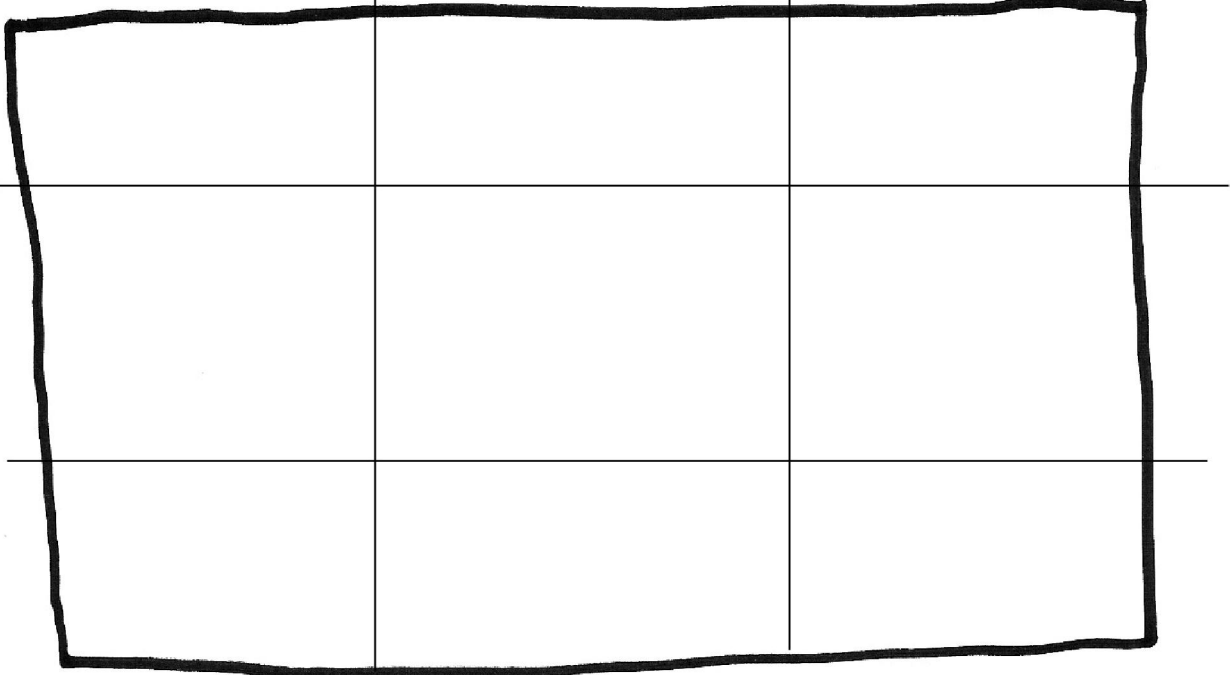
If your camera looks up at a subject, this imparts power and high status to that person or thing.



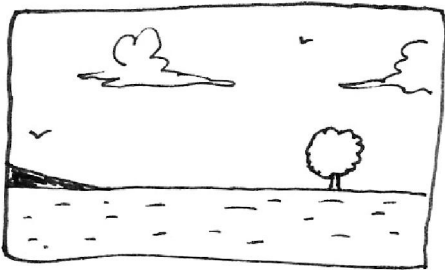
A high angle on a subject can do the opposite, removing power and status. We are literally looking down on him.

THE RULE OF THIRDS*

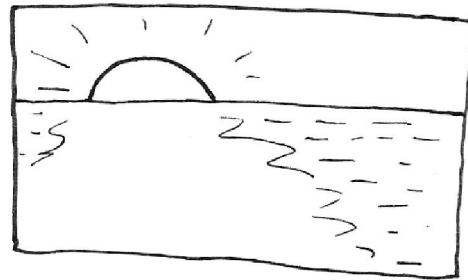
* not a rule at all - but it works! As a general rule...



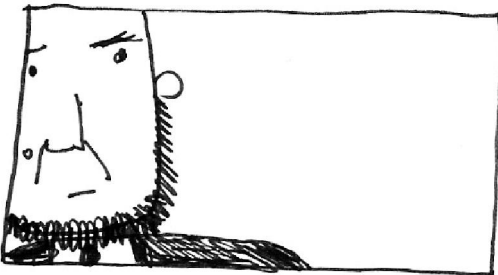
A simple way of creating pleasing compositions is to imagine the screen is split into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. Fill the frame by one or two thirds - bingo! Instant loveliness!



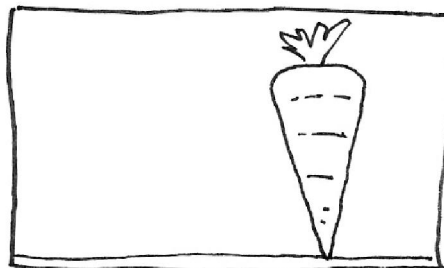
The landscape fills the bottom third of frame. Nice!



The sea occupies the bottom two thirds of frame, while the setting sun is in the left third. Sweet!

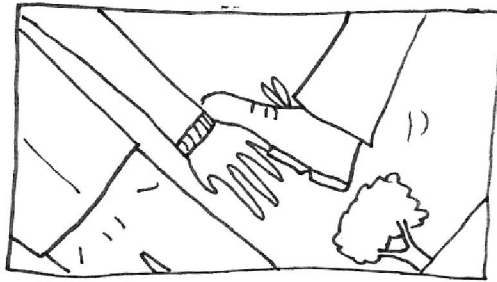


Abe Lincoln fills the left third of frame. Powerful!

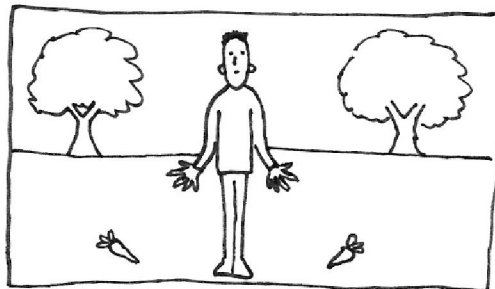


The giant carrot occupies the left third of the frame. Baffling!

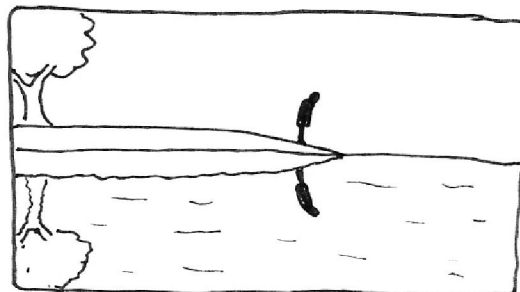
But what happens when you decide to ignore or subvert the rule (not a rule) of thirds?



A chaotic and confusing composition evokes, well, chaos and confusion.



A symmetrical composition suggests order, but it's often an unnatural, stagey or man-made order.

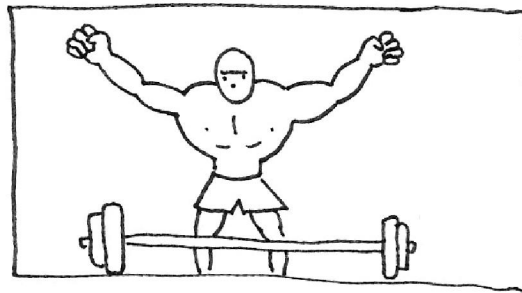


Here the subject is the reflection, so the symmetry of this composition enhances and highlights the subject.

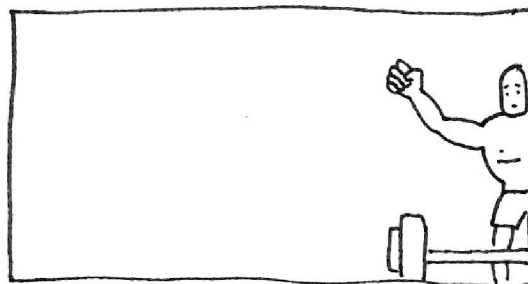
Play around: if you think it looks good, or meaningful, use it!

MORE COMPOSITION STUFF:

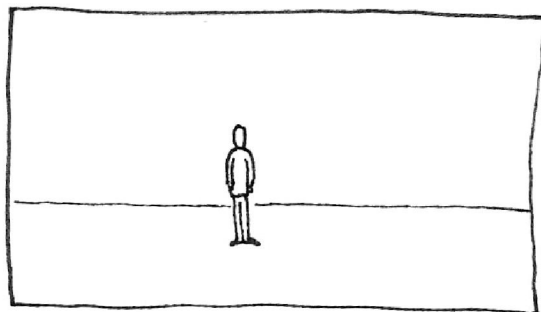
Balance within your frame can suggest confidence and assuredness.



Whereas imbalance can be a sign of tension or bad things to come.



If your subject is quite small in the frame, this might suggest feelings of loneliness, alienation, insignificance.

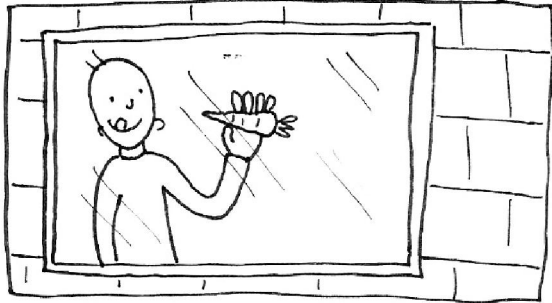


Hitchcock often said that subjects should be given prominence according to how important they were in the scene.

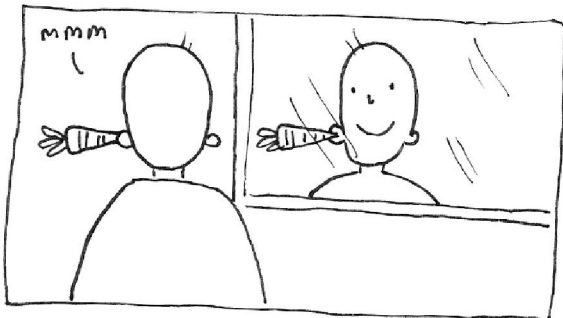


PLACING YOUR CAMERA

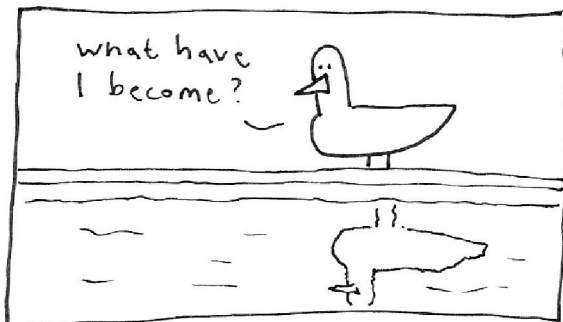
Consider the potential of the locations available to you. Can the setting, and the positioning of the camera within that setting, add further meaning to your work?



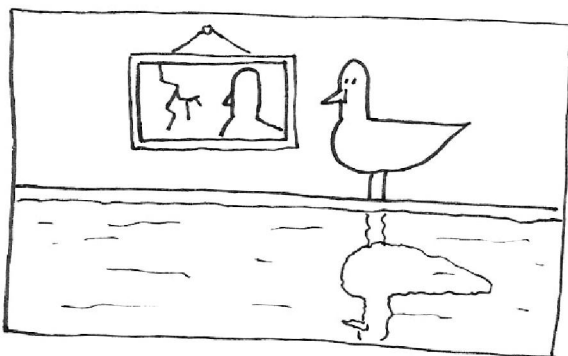
Looking in through a window can suggest that we are prying voyeuristically into the life and privacy of the subject



We might place the same subject in front of a mirror, to suggest a hidden agenda perhaps, or another story hidden behind the surface.



Water can play a similar role. Is this a moment of self-reflection? Are there secrets beneath the surface? Or another world to be discovered? Or is it just a duck?



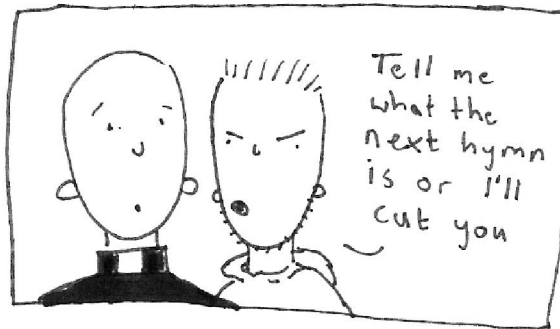
Playing further, here there are two reflections. Is the subject two-faced, duplicitous? Can she be trusted? The mirror is cracked. What does it all mean? DO NOT TRUST THIS DUCK.

POETIC TOOLS - VISUAL TOOLS

Why not see if you can create a visual language by adapting the tools you use to create poetry?

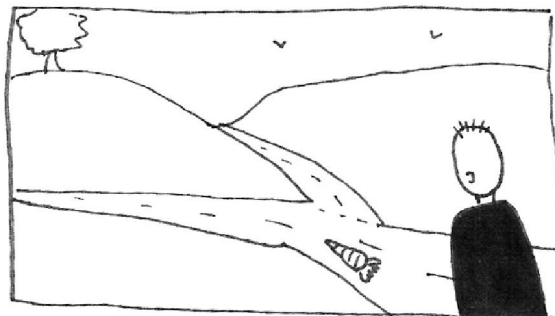
RHYTHM

Your film might be edited using fast, hard cuts, suggesting excitement or confusion, like an episode of 24, or long, lingering shots suggesting calm or peace, like an episode of Songs of Praise. Or a mix of both.



METAPHOR/SIMILE

This fork in the road suggests choices to be made. The carrot symbolises vitamin C and good night vision.



HYPERBOLE/LITOTES

Is your poem about something mildly irritating? Contrast it with images of armageddon, see where it gets you.



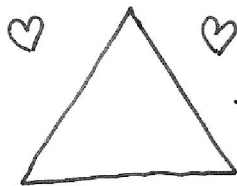
And so on... what might the visual equivalent of rhyme, alliteration, metonymy or a refrain be?

SHAPES

Circles, squares, triangles, lines, sort of wibbly blancmange shapes with little legs... all of these can be used as potent symbols (except for the last one).

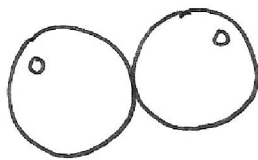
What will they symbolise? It's up to you.

TRIANGLES are often used as a **really clever** visual metaphor for a love triangle.

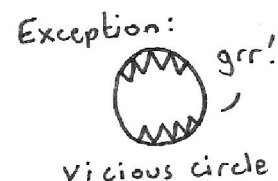


The circle is so soft and loving, but the square is solid and dependable. Which should I choose? I love them both equilaterally!

But they can also symbolise fear, or pain, or if it has a hat and legs, they can symbolise a fear of Mr Rush.

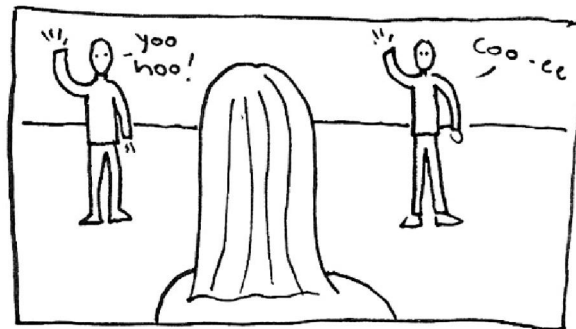
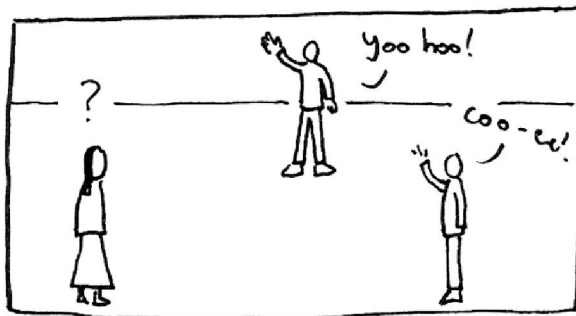


Circles are often used to symbolise comfort, safety and femininity. Can't think why.

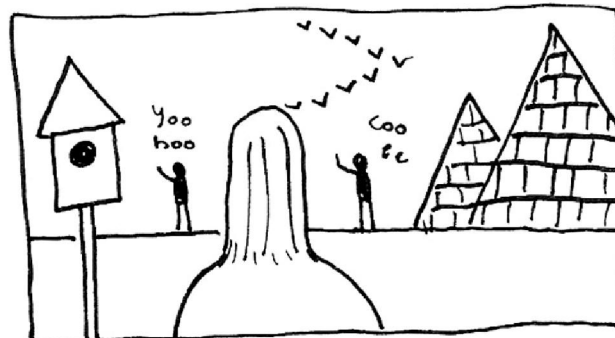


BUT! You can create your own visual language. Be aware of precedent and convention, but do not be afraid to subvert it.

So taking the triangle example, there is more than one way to arrange your shot to invoke the idea of a love triangle:



And, of course, it is always possible to take symbolism too far:

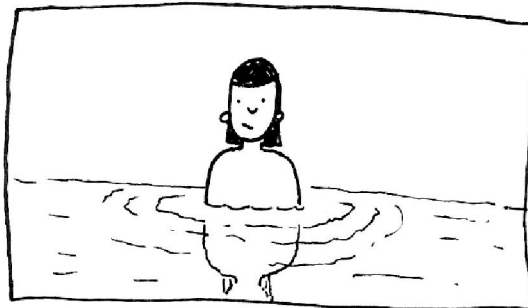


COLOURS

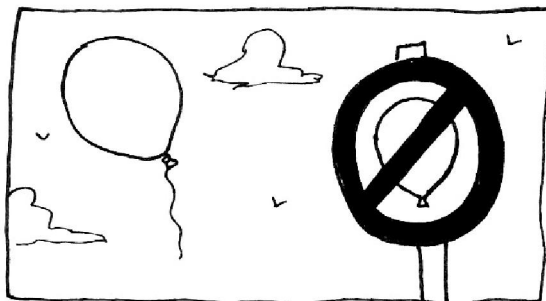
Colour can be an incredibly useful tool. Colour can suggest mood, emotion, tone and highlight meaning in your film.



Reds and oranges can add drama, passion, warmth and, you know, fireyness to your film.



Blues and greens are calmer, cooler and often wetter.



Note: avoid red balloons if you can. A lot of filmmakers seem to have noticed that they can symbolise all kinds of things so they're a bit of a cliché. Also if you have 99 of them you could inadvertently set off World War Three so THINK ON.

DRAMATIC IRONY

While you could choose images which illustrate the meaning of your poem, you may find that this renders the idea of using images a bit pointless: you are showing AND telling. Why not kill the author instead? Or at least give the author a good kicking and leave them bleeding in an alleyway somewhere? You can undermine your poem, or open up new interpretations, by, for example, juxtaposing a joyful poem with unhappy images.



"O lovely beamy sunny sun

You are
lonely

"Another super day's begun



"You warm me like a kitten's tum"

AARGH! COGNITIVE DISSONANCE! AN INFINITY OF INTERPRETATION!

WORDS vs PICTURES! FIGHT! FIGHT!

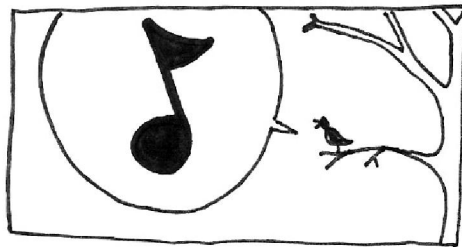
MUSIC AND SOUND

You may think that film is primarily a visual medium, but sound is incredibly important, and a well-thought-out soundtrack can take your film to a whole new level.

If you are recording your poem to act as the soundtrack, use the best mic you can beg, borrow or buy - it'll be worth it.

The same goes for recording sound while you film.

Once you've got your soundtrack - why not play around? How does it work if you take all the natural sound away? What if you isolate one element and ramp it up?



As for music, we would advise against using copyrighted tunes, because the last thing you need is YouTube taking down your video, or Lady Gaga turning up at your door at 3am demanding royalties. She's such a pest!

But think about how music might work either with or against the meaning of your poem.

Imagine one of Shakespeare's sonnets being recited over a bit of tasteful harpsichord twiddling. It fits, but is it a bit... blah? How would it work over a scary industrial techno track? What would it MEAN? I dunno, but it would make you think. I think.

Free sound effects and ambience: freesound.org

Free music: freeplaymusic.com

JAMES AND LAURA SHOOT

A POETRY FILM

In this next bit we're each going to storyboard a film based on a poem. We've chosen "I Am" by John Clare.

I am: yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am, and live with shadows tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest - that I loved the best -
Are strange - nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept;
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below - above the vaulted sky.

Blimey. I hope he's ok.

JAMES DOES "I AM"

OK, well I'll tell you up front that I tend not to storyboard very much, it can be a really useful tool, but I'm lazy and impatient, and I'm usually confident I'll be able to work out the best shots once I'm on location. This is not necessarily true. In fact, the more prep you do before shooting, the better, but like I say: lazy. Anyway, for the purposes of this exercise I'll make an exception just for you.

Looking at the poem, it seems to me to be about a sad, lonely man. Great. So that, to me, says: "mobile disco DJ".

So now I'm thinking, what if it was a wedding-style DJ just reciting the poem? Would that be fun? Entertaining? Would it undercut the solemnity of the language? While simultaneously contemporising the emotional tone of the piece? I'm going to answer either "yes!" or "dunno but it's worth a shot" to all those questions. So I think that's the way we'll go.

Now I'm thinking: it's three verses long. Can we get a bit of variety of location into the film? Verse one can be set in some kind of village hall, and our poet is spinning the platters. I see him as overweight, dressed in t-shirt and waistcoat and unfashionable jeans. I like him! Where else could we put this dude? Doing karaoke! Yes! And then we could maybe have the words going along the bottom of the screen with a bouncing ball jauntily marking time. Genius! I'm a bloody genius! Now what about verse three?

How about we see our man at work? In... in a call centre! He's longing for a better life - let's have him gazing out of the window as he recites the poem in one of those headmic things they wear. I think that will be just the ticket!

Let's draw it out!

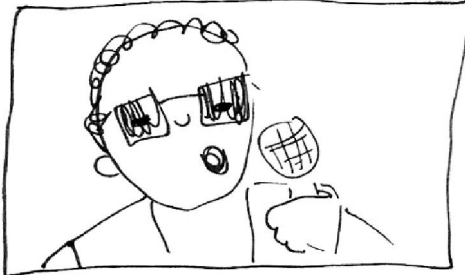
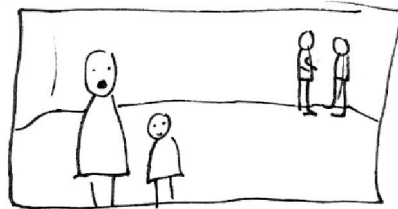


TRACK SLOWLY IN THROUGH HALL

POSSIBLE CUTAWAYS TO THE DANCERS STARING.



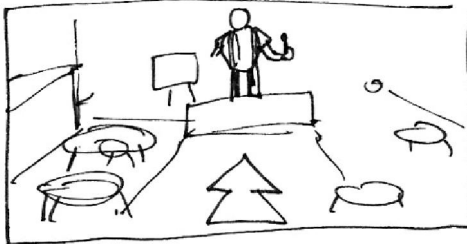
KEEP TRACKING UNTIL



CLOSE UP. STOP. He declaims into the mic.

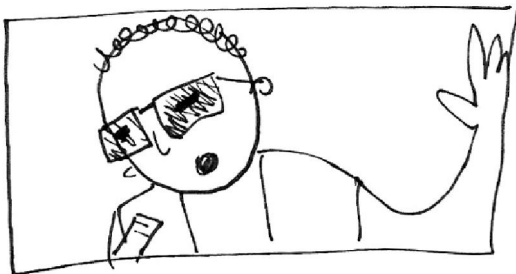
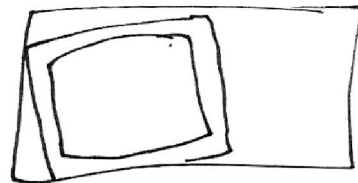
(Fade out after verse?)

Poss. cutaways to monitor showing "lyrics"



Fade in:

TRACK IN AGAIN THROUGH PUB



He performs the verse like he's Elvis doing the American trilogy. Camera catches every expression and bead of sweat.

Fade out!

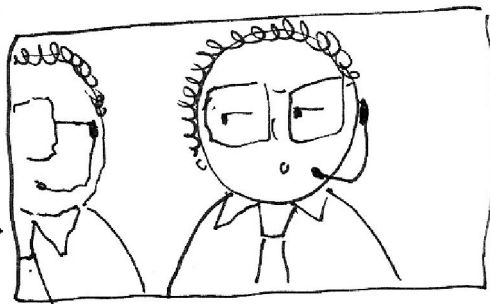


Push through call centre office



Til we find HIM.
He speaks the third verse
into his headmic.

reflection
in
window



Cutaway to outside the window



High angle on HIM lying in
grass.

So there's my storyboard. Awful, isn't it? It's scruffy, and badly-drawn. But I think it contains enough information to remind me what I want to shoot, and to show anybody who's going to help me what I'm going to need in terms of location, costume, props etc, and what shots I'm going to need to get to create the finished film.

Which is all a storyboard needs to do.

And also: now I've drawn it out, I have a solid plan A, which means that if i have any other mad ideas during the shoot, I can try them out knowing that I always have my original plan to fall back on.

JOB DONE!

LAURA DOES "I AM"

Unlike James, I like to storyboard a LOT. In fact, it hasn't been unknown for me to have over 70 pages of drawings for a three-minute film. Insane, I know. I like to explore my options and to think about what different kinds of imagery can add to the emotions I'm trying to convey or the story I want to tell.

I begin by sketching out my initial ideas and then move to Google to explore photographs and images on websites like 'Flickr'. Then I add magazine cuttings and screen grabs from films into the mix, pulling out elements that I think create the moods and emotions that I'm trying to achieve and sticking them to large bits of paper.

Then, with lots of thoughts, ideas and images swishing around my head, I grab a clean piece of paper and begin my storyboard. And this doesn't mean that I draw in any kind of order (if only...). Instead, I allow my mind to roam freely and draw out images as they pop into my head. Then, when I have ideas for a good portion of the film, I either draw them out again sequentially (sensible), or grab a pair of scissors and start trying to cut out and reorder 70+ pages of scribble (not sensible).

Like James, I can't draw (well, I can draw a good stickman), and when it comes to the shoot, my drawings act as a guide rather than a rigid plan. So many factors come into play during the shoot - other people in your team inputting their ideas; things in the location that you didn't consider and just need to incorporate in some way; divine inspiration; lack of time to get everything you wanted, making it necessary to come up with a new composition on the spot that incorporates ALL of your brilliant ideas at the same time; and sometimes just the fact that you can't draw in perspective and whatever you thought you were doing on the paper definitely can't happen in the real world.

I've spared you the seventy pages. Instead, I've collaged together some sketches and images that came to mind when I read the poem. Imagine the words being narrated over this sequence of images.

I've also included a fair bit of text - if I can't draw something, I often resort to expressing what I would like to achieve in words, to create a written storyboard. If you're not a strong drawer, it can really help!

stanza 1

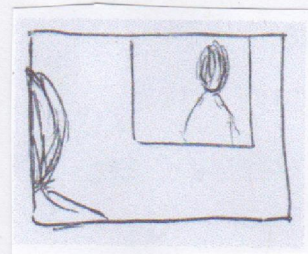
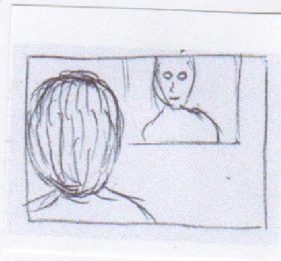
To me, this stanza is about being and not being simultaneously. Half of his face is in shadow to represent this conflict.



Positioned behind the man's head, the camera slowly turns with him, as he looks through windows and doors to another world. In the outside world people are enjoying themselves, oblivious to his existence. The glass is a dividing force and a symbol for this moment of quiet reflection.

The door acts as a symbol for a portal to another world: a world he isn't a part of.

At the same time, the circular movement suggests that the man is stuck in a vicious circle, no longer moving forwards.



The camera reaches a mirror, an object suggesting self-reflection, and pauses. We remain behind the man's head, further emphasizing his detachment and isolation.

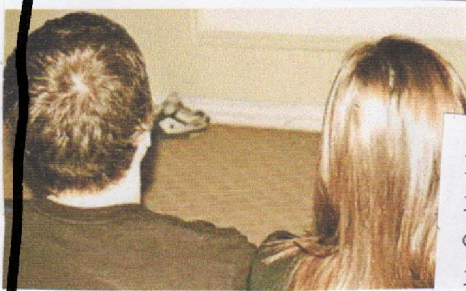
The camera remains rooted to the spot - a sad observer - as he turns and leaves. The act of walking away suggests defeat and arouses sympathy.

Stanza 2



Here, the crowd has its back to the camera.

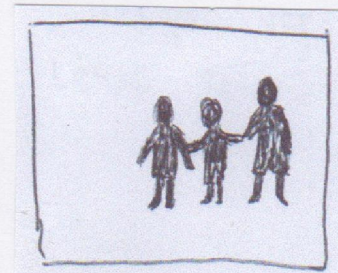
This suggests strangers and a faceless world.



I will move from the crowd to this image, to reiterate the idea of being ignored or overlooked. With fewer people in a closed and intimate environment, the rejection feels more personal.

Stanza 3

Shadows can be very effective. As the people walk further away they become shadows - no more than memories or remnants of a friendship.



The camera is stationary here - stuck in the moment as they continue to move forwards away from him. Again, you might want to think about placing the narrator in the foreground, watching them as they go.



The candles move out of focus, suggesting that the narrator has lost hope. His metaphorical world is moving out of focus and the way forward is no longer clear.

The candles may be blown out one at a time. The lights are being slowly extinguished until only he remains.

Or, alternatively, the lights are catching fire as he becomes indignant.



COFFEE AND ITS MAKING

Tim Marshall made a film. Here's how.

The inspiration for the film of 'Coffee' came from the same place as the story itself: that acute anxiety of body and mind that grips me every time I drink too much coffee, usually on a Saturday morning. I didn't want to present the action/narrative of the story literally in the film. Rather, I wanted to represent that over-caffeinated feeling of inertia on a knife's edge. I decided that this jerky sensation would best be conveyed through rapid, choppy editing and repetition.

As with most substance abuse and addiction, it seems to me that the sensations achieved often appear like a sideshow to the main event of the ritual, the process: that activity that takes up time and attention and distracts us for a few minutes from the emptiness of existence, lending us some temporary purpose. In the story, coffee is presented as 'life punctuation', a liquid tape measure with which to gauge the day, a cause and an effect of the other day's activities, and essentially a process in which to get lost.

I zeroed in on the themes/threads I wanted to represent in the film as anxiety/tension, ritual and repetition. I decided to document the coffee making process but warp it and repeatedly chop/slice it to lend an added sense of tension and urgency. To achieve this, I extended certain aspects of the process: I filmed adding far more beans to the grinder than I actually needed, I shook the grinder for longer than I usually would etc. This way, I aimed to represent the fact that the character made many pots of coffee, but also that he was 'lost' in the ritual and its repetition. To increase this sense of time dilation/disruption, I overlapped and inter-cut consecutive processes so that the next one began to appear before the last one had finished. Into this mix I cut images of 'coffee iconography' such as the pot and the cup. In these shots, I tended to slowly zoom in on say, the coffee pot so that it grows and looms ever larger for the viewer.

The only time the narrative of the story is intentionally represented in the film at the time of speaking is the final shot of the empty coffee pot. This occurred to me at the time of filming and was purely a quick way to tie it up.

The final piece of the puzzle to achieve the sense of anxiety and tension I wanted came from the music. I wanted something that would mirror the chopiness of the editing, and I think the tune I chose works just right.

In terms of practicality, I kept it simple for the filming. I had discovered while making another short film that consistency of lighting can be very important. As such, I drew the curtains in my house and illuminated every shot with the same desk lamp, which had a rolled up piece of kitchen foil attached to it to better channel and focus the light. I checked each shot before recording and repositioned the lamp as necessary.

For the backdrop, I knew I wanted a plain white wall. I didn't want anything to distract from the coffee itself and became quite obsessive about ensuring absolutely nothing else was even slightly caught in the side of the shot. Where a human presence was needed in a shot to press a button or drink the coffee, I tried to make it as neutral and un-invasive as possible. Every shot was supposed to be about the coffee.

The editing process was messy and involved a lot of coffee and cigarettes. I took the time to watch and re-watch and then watch again each sequence. This way I would nip and finely slice individual shots to attempt to get a nice rhythm to the edit, and get it all as tight as possible.



Find "Coffee" at www.kinginkcollective.co.uk

A WORD FROM THE WORD BIRD

Mixing the art forms of film and poetry together is a 'MUST' in my book for every poet.

Like performance poetry, it creates a new life from the words you write on paper.

It was quite a revelation to find I could produce a film I feel extremely proud of in just one day.

The journey I took in finding the visual images I used was as magical and exhilarating as being a child on a treasure hunt. And then adding the words to it was like placing the last piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

'Broken Wing' is the first poetry film I have made, and I hope it will not be the last.

For anyone who may be interested in giving it a go, my one bit of advice is...

'Don't think about it. Just do it!'

Northern poet Sky Hawkins, 'The Word Bird', recently made her first poetry film "Broken Wing". You can find it on her site <http://www.the-word-bird.com>

ONE LAST THING: WHY?

Why? Keep that question in your head at all times. Why am I doing this? Why am I moving the camera? Why am I shooting from this angle? Why all the carrots? Why? Why?

It's useful to know why you're making a particular decision, and why you're following or breaking convention. And by constantly questioning in this way, sometimes you can discover new layers of meaning and significance in your work.

And by asking yourself why you'll find that every element of your film is motivated and the result will be a film with depth and layers of meaning. And possibly more carrots than most.

It's all about exploring ways of communicating your ideas in diverse, meaningful, surprising, visual and entertaining ways.

NOW GO MAKE A FILM.

Why?

Why not?

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS?

James Harris is a comedy writer, performer, animator and film maker based in the North East of England.

He's written/made stuff for the BBC (Shooting Stars, Comedy Shuffle, Scallywagga, Fresh Animation On 3, Spacehopper, Teethgrinder, Parsons and Naylor's Pull Out Sections), Channel 4 (4mations), Dave (Totally Viral) and ITV (Cobravision).

He is the co-creator of The Story of Grass zine, which Bob Mortimer likes and everybody else just kind of tolerates.

Find his stuff at ramshacklecharm.com.

Laura Degnan is an emerging writer/director working in film and theatre and is represented by MacFarlane Chard Associates. Laura has worked in development roles at Kudos Film and TV, RS Productions and the BBC.

She recently wrote and directed a teaser for her debut feature 'Mockingbird', and a music video for The Guillemots. In 2010 she wrote and directed short film 'Between You and Me' as part of the UK Film Council and Northern Film and Media's 'Digital Shorts Scheme'. Her earlier film 'Blind Eye' was funded as part of the 2009 scheme and screened in the official selection at the Palm Springs Shortfest.

Laura set up Writers' Block in 2010 to support creative talent in the North East region.

Find her at writersblockne.com.

THE POETRY
FILMMAKER'S
HANDBOOK

Apples and Snakes is England's leading organisation supporting performance poetry and spoken word.

This zine is designed to help poets broaden their creative practice and increase their audience through the use of visual and digital media.

For more information on our work, please visit www.applesandsnakes.org

