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To all my mentors and instructors for the past three years.

To Sigmund Trageton And Margreth Pollestad.

# Translating a script into visuals: Director's role



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## **Section 1: Introduction**

Directors are the visionaries who take a story and bring it to life. This process starts from an idea that is developed from the paper to the screen. The question is then what directors can do to take those steps. What do they have to take into consideration in order to design and plan the visual solution to a written story in a way that is not only eye-catching but also enhances the storytelling and the ideas it wants to explore?

The main goal of this study is to cover the role of the director or instructor in this process, particularly when the script is less action-heavy. The research problem is how can a director translate their dialogue-driven script into interesting visuals. To do this this study will analyse the film dramaturgy applied in examples in comparison to the original scripts. This research will provide inspiration for how I can direct my bachelor movie “The Bubbles” that I have also written. The techniques explored can be used to turn my dialogue-heavy script into visual storytelling. The analysis will be based on theory and knowledge from other sources, including some from the bachelor’s own curriculum.

## **Section 2: Theory**

### The role of a movie director

An occupational movie director is essentially an instructor. It is the person who instructs a film crew on how to produce a film. Though some believe directing is mainly about instructing the actors and their performances and others who believe it's about how to film the performance. Generally directors can and should overlook every part of the mise-en-scène, a term that means the visual structure and style of all the contents of a frame. This includes the actors and their performances, but also their accessories and costumes, the lighting, the set décor and the props, the photography and the camerawork (Gibbs, 2002, p. 5). And to have a grip on the contents a director has to understand every step of the process, being the most informed about everything including beyond-the-frame information (Murch, 2001, p. 19). That is why some of the most famous directors are known for commanding over a production in every aspect. Hitchcock, for example, was the type of director “no actor will question”, an “own producer” and “knew more about technique than the technicians” (Truffaut, 2017, p. 15). An effective director has to take charge and be in control to assure quality of production and that the idea is visualised.

There are different ways directors can approach directing and filming of a script. Some recreate each word as they are written in a way to bring the whole work to life. Others pick moments of it they can work with if they think it might suit a visual narrative best. This is called dramatic construction. Most importantly, as the unifying force in the filming process the director should be able to acknowledge the way all the other roles, such as cinematographers, production designers, editors, etc., approach storytelling. To know the talents they are working with and what their crafts can achieve. And then use this to illustrate the consistent sole message the director wants to bring out of the story (Markham, 2020, pp. 1-3).

## **Section 3: Visual language**

A production almost never aims to just reproduce a script in the most literal and realistic way, there is often an attempt to add visual texture (Brown, 2016, p. 7). And for this there needs to be a sense of style that the director decides on. Style is how the way you tell a story in order to evoke a feeling and reinforce what the story is about (Lumet, 1996, p. 50). This requires an understanding of dramaturgy, which is the way you compose and build up a story onto a stage or set. How is the story set up and how does each scene contribute to this arc

development? (Toreg, 2011, pp. 85-86). Once these story beats are established and laid out the director is then in charge of choosing and controlling the elements of visual language that can best bring forth the story ideas.

The main basic visual components are space (the one which appears on camera and the screen itself), line, shape, tone (in terms of brightness), color, movement and rhythm (also through editing). All of these can dramatically affect the fundamental building blocks of a film by affecting the way the viewer feels while watching. And since most of these are not easily able to be changed in post-production the director has to plan and choose every component wisely and deliberately to create their ideal visual message (Block, 2008, pp. 2-4). This is the basis of the concept of cinematography and audiovisual storytelling.

Cinematography is the use of photography, aka the visuals, to communicate and emphasise action and emotion (Brown, 2016, p. 2). It helps build the world beyond the descriptive words of a script into a living, breathing environment. This is done with the use of techniques that create visual structure and intensity (Block, 2008, p. 7). Techniques like lighting, contrast and perspective. Lighting as an expressive method to not just light up a set but also set tone as visual metaphor. For example, general bright lighting can bring warmth but even deeper symbolise innocence, joy and good defeating evil. And dark lighting can then logically communicate discomfort, tension, fear and evil. However, when a bright light is used amongst darkness it can create a contrast that can symbolise uncertainty and conflict, especially moral (Brown, 2016, pp. 48-51). Action and movements are also showed through different perspectives to communicate depth and mood. Deep space, long lines, differences between the planes (foreground, midground and background), movement and shot composition all create an illusion of depth and world immersion on a flat screen. They can also be used to communicate ideas. For example, a camera that is tilted up on an actor with objects and sets leading lines upwards make the subject of the frame seem bigger and more powerful (Block, 2008, pp. 15-24). The rule of thirds is also useful for composition. It is the theory of dividing a frame into a grid of 9 blocks (thirds) and wherever they intersect within the frame is a natural point of focus for the audience. In other words it is where the human eye is naturally drawn to, especially because of being used to film language. This rule helps directors and cinematographers decide where to place things and actors and how to shoot the scene. It is especially useful for placing important points like actors' eyes and objects in shallow depth of field focus (Brown, 2016, pp. 25-6). The audio part of storytelling, including sound design and music, also adds more layers of context as a narrative device,

though for this study visuals are the main focus. All of these elements laid out together create a synergy of audiovisual storytelling.

However when translating a story from written work it is important to understand how it is told originally. If the story is meant to be understood linearly or if it breaks rules of typical storytelling, are the characters' motivations clear, what is the mood, etc. The script and therefore the scriptwriter must understand the fundamental aspect of a good film story is that it must be possible to be made visual (McKee, 2014, p. 18). And having a director who is also contributing to or is the main writer helps make that idea-to-reality transition because they will have experience and an overall vision ready.

#### **Section 4: Method**

To explore the research problem this study will analyse the visual techniques used in shots and scenes of 2 films that are thematically similar to "The Bubbles" (dialogue-heavy, balance between dark and comedic, philosophical, psychological). It is also important to note that the directors were also the writers of the screenplays for these films. Don't Look Up is by Adam McKay with some story contribution by David Sirota. And Marriage Story is solely by Noah Baumbach. So they had more control and forethought for a vision from the beginning. The final cuts will be compared to the original script descriptions and their directorial and cinematographic decisions analysed using knowledge from the theories and concepts studied. These include the use of shot composition, perspective, camerawork, color and lighting, etc. The analysis will also search for the link between scene and script message and the intent of director choices of contents in the frame.

#### **Section 5: Analysis**

##### **Don't Look Up (2021)**

This film is most similar to my own bachelor film as it is about disillusioned people and the power of conspiracy theories and brain washing. The script has its main characters, scientists Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky discover a comet headed to Earth and spend most of the runtime trying to reveal the truth about the end of the world to others. The film is therefore very tense and tries to create a sense of urgency even if there is only dialogue happening and is shot to represent that feeling.

In one of the first scenes soon after the discovery of the comet Randall tries to contact NASA headquarters. The original script's dialogue here is a bit longer than the final cut. When the

woman who they speak to, Dr. Calder answers the phone she says 3 lines, including a long one before Randall responds, director and the editor decided to cut down and make Randall interrupt her. Probably to make the scene flow faster and feel more urgent. As they inform her about what they found Dr. Calder tries to get into contact with an expert and calls someone from a department Kate had never even heard of.

**From script**

Data and pictures are on the computer screen in front of Dr. Calder. Dr. Calder takes a look.

DR. CALDER

Okay... Hmm...Okay... You've definitely found something large here... But I'm no expert on comets.

(beat)

Let me get Doctor Oglethorpe on the line. Please hold.

INT. SUBARU TELESCOPE - SAME TIME

RANDALL

I'm on hold... He's calling a Doctor Oglethorpe. Who is that?

Kate on her phone.

KATE

Dr. Oglethorpe: the head of the Planetary Defense Coordination Office in Washington DC.

(and then)

Is that a real place?

EXT. GOVERNMENT OFFICE BUILDINGS, WASHINGTON DC - MORNING

L/3 "THE PLANETARY DEFENSE COORDINATION OFFICE (YES, IT'S A REAL PLACE)

It is not specified in the script but considering the context and satirical tone of the overall film every character is meant to take in the news in an unconcerned way. Randall and Kate have to stress how serious the situation is. So the script description does not mention performance but the actors are directed this way. To emphasise this the lighting of the NASA headquarters is warm and almost flat with wide angles and smooth camera movements. This is a big stylistic difference to how Randall and Kate are lit. During their first few scenes in their office they are bathed in harsh cold blue light with orange glow from their desk to complement the darkness. The more stressed out they get with this news the more they are lit with strong key

lighting creating shadows and contrast on their face. The camera is also tighter in on their faces in claustrophobic close-ups that emphasise how nervous they are.



And when Kate is wondering if the department they mentioned is even real and Randall starts to slowly panic he goes out of focus as it shifts to her. This could be not just to show Kate who is talking but to show Randall losing focus himself with fear. The screen then freezes to inform the audience with colourful text that the place is real and shows an animated graphic of their logo. The fun tone is clearly part of the film's satirical themes of showing little concern for serious things and how people don't take science seriously. Technically it also makes the rhythm of the scenes, even the dialogue, unpredictable to make it more interesting to watch.

As all the characters realise how bad the situation is the script gives hints of moments for pause for the information to sink in for the audience. This is also the director writing himself opportunities for mood setting.

**From script**

DR. OGLETHORPE

And it's roughly 5 to 10 kilometers wide. Which means...

RANDALL

...Isn't that an extinction level event?

A terrifying silence hits the room.

The dialogue lines trailing off are meant to represent the characters coming to the awful realisation. And the description of the terrifying silence is another hint for how the scene should be directed. In the actual film the camera that has gotten shakier and shakier as the scene got more tense is now pretty unstable and so close to the characters' faces we mostly only see their eyes and sometimes not even in focus. This really shows the way the fear and panic is taking over them. Even they try to recollect themselves and come up with a plan, which in the script is just written as dialogue, the camera steps back to give the actors



breathing room but remains shaking and not entirely in focus. We also get a close-up of Randall's hands that are holding each other very tight, which is not described in the script.

The scene also deviates from the script which is just Randall and the other two scientists arguing back and forth. But instead in the final cut it is the scientists on the other end of the call continuing to talk whilst Randall has a panick attack and Kate dissociates while he tries to ask over and over if this is real. One of the scientists even walks into the elevator doors, almost not noticing. Also the inside of the elevator is green. So the scientist technically walks out from a warm lit corridor into a cold lit small room with the green glow making him look sick. The scene is overall very frantic and cold and even has jumpcuts like to the plane the characters will board on in the next scene, making the timeline feel like it's collapsing. It really shows off the impact of the inciting incident of the plot more strongly than in the script.

Similar techniques are used throughout the film to show the same difference between Randall and Kate's emotional state and that of the other characters who don't take them seriously. A good example is when they meet the president. The script describes her in a negative way as someone who is clearly incompetent and dismissive.

<b>From script</b>
Randall, his leg moving nervously, Dr. Oglethorpe and Kate sit in the Oval Office across from PRESIDENT JANIE ORLEAN, 60s. President Orlean has bright blonde statement hair, remnants of a Long Island accent and behind her dozens of copies of her best selling "HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MONEY EVEN WHEN YOU HAVE NONE."

In the scene we don't actually see Randall's legs moving because the camera remains tightly close-up on his face most of the time. But the actor is directed to show extreme nervousness and tremble a lot. We also get a close-up of his shaky hands barely holding his notebook and that is immediately contrasted by steady shots of the presidential office's décor including a golden eagle staring aggressively. When it cuts back to a nervous Kate we get the idea that she is feeling intimidated by the room. We also get a close-up of the president brushing the comet's picture not even looking at it and also of her noisy and flashy bracelets while she brushes her hair. She is not showing any nervousness unlike the scientists. This is another thing which is not from the script but an extension of the idea the opening of the scene sets up of her being vain and unbothered. The president is also lit very brightly with strong

backlighting from the “sun” and her bright red suit makes her stand out as a more powerful character compared to the scientists who are wearing very cold and neutral colours and lit weaker. The longer the scene goes on the more the handheld camera shakes with Randall while the camera on the President and her advisor remains smooth and wide showing their distance and lack of concern. As Randall talks about how serious the comet news the camera pans very slowly around him, indicating importance to what he’s saying. Meanwhile Kate is shown through extreme close-ups of her face and still feet to show how dissociated she is from the moment.



Another interaction that is mainly dialogue, but focuses on Kate instead is after she meets a looter named Yule who she bonds with. During a scene where she is watching the stars with him the script does not describe it explicitly, but at this point Kate has found him a person she can finally relax with. So the directing cue for the actress here is to look relaxed and seem like she is having fun. The scene is shot at night so they are surrounded by blue light but there is a strong warm orange light on their faces to show they are not concerned with the intense fear the film has focused on so far. Instead they are just having a calm, but deep conversation about their beliefs.

<b>From script</b>
<p style="text-align: center;">KATE You believe in God?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">YULE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">My parents are evangelicals. So yeah... I guess I do. Even though I hate them. I don't go around advertising it though. I mean, don't tell anyone.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">KATE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">It's okay. I won't. It's actually kind of sweet.</p>

The camera follows the conversation back and forth between them at one point from a low angle to make the audience feel as if they are lying down with them. Although the script does not describe where they are in much detail, it just says “roof” a long establishing shot also

shows that the actors are placed on a mattress on top of crates. The set is built, shaped and lit to make it seem as if they are coming out of the void of darkness below them. The square line composition also emphasises this perspective. In a way maybe symbolising how distant and far above they are from the chaos and fear the rest of the world is going through, being able to get philosophical and give the film a break to breathe.



Similarly during the final scene with the protagonists they experience their last minutes together, in a brightly and warmly lit dining room making the moment seem intimate and almost bittersweet even though the script is describing their gruesome death.

<b>From script</b>
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BOOM. We go SLO MO as the room collapses and disintegrates.
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Mid shots of the characters are filmed in a smooth pan and zoom combination due to the slow-motion but also showing a break from the shaky camera. The characters finally let go of their fears and accepted death and the actors are directed accordingly. Randal is shown calm and Kate seems to almost be smiling. Though the special effects show the house disintegrating from the impact and flames it all just surrounds them. This is a case of shot composition and the overall mise-èn-scene being used to frame chaos around the characters but leaving them intact for long enough to focus in on their performance. Until the sudden cut to the explosion engulfing everything before cutting to complete darkness and silence before the final sequence. A mood setting detail not described in the script and clearly chosen after to make the final sequence in space have a bigger impact.



## Marriage Story (2019)

Marriage Story is about two people getting divorced after having built a life together. So the film does not have any real action and it is mainly about the process of divorce and how much the two, Charlie and Nicole suffer from it. The script has mostly talking and characters going through legal procedures, but the context of what they are saying is the main point of the film. Especially the emotional build-up. Therefore visually the film sticks to a consistent and minimalistic filmmaking approach that relies on sentimentality and symbolism.

The film script opens with the two protagonists describing each other in voiceover for what we later find out is a therapy session. The dialogue is filled with comments that are both positive and negative, describing the characters in detail from each others' perspectives.

From script
CHARLIE (V.O.) What I love about Nicole...
INT. THEATER. MANHATTAN. DAY Nicole, early 30's, appears out of the dark.
CHARLIE (V.O.) She makes people feel comfortable about even embarrassing things. We remain CLOSE on her face in shadow. She's still very serious.

This opening is meant to show that these are characters who care about each other and have deep and intimate history with each other. Nicole “appearing out of the dark” is actually her coming out of the shadows onto a stage as a performer, but since the audience does not know this about her yet it just makes her look mysterious and interesting. And throughout the film we see Charlie and Nicole have fallen out so much they spend a good amount of time trying to uncover the mystery of how that happened and what happened to the versions of each other they used to know and love. So, this opening is both an introduction as well as an extension of that concept of going through idealised past memories and trying to understand how they became the present version. Throughout this montage we see various shots of Nicole being the joyous and messy but fun person Charlie used to see her as. It is filmed with high key lighting where the back lighting gives Nicole a halo effect, making both her and the memory seem happy. We also see shots of objects like her cups of tea she never drinks. They are described to appear in the script but filmed in a way that brings the idea of this

romanticisation to mind. The camera is handheld like it is first person perspective and it lingers on each object to make the audience feel like they are really inside these memories, living them with the characters. To emphasise how happy and innocent those memories are the props often include their son's toys or his art, like in the quick montage of the teacups. Sometimes there are changes from the script too. Like when the script describes a photo of Nicole and her mother and sister in front of a Hollywood home. The prop in the final film ended up just being a normal picture of them together, but it is enough to show that they are very close.



Even though this is a film about divorce the writer/director still makes it sentimental to show that it is not just about bitter anger in the present but also about the good moments of the past. So to showcase this the filmmaking is almost romantic. It mostly has a bright, warm glow through many scenes (it's also often sunny outside), a soft look with vibrant colours and perspective-based camerawork. The film does not look the same throughout though. During one of the many scenes where they have a disagreement the discussion starts as usual as normal conversation that slowly turns sour. This time they discuss about Nicole's TV performance. The scene starts out being lit very warmly, but Charlie and Nicole are almost always framed either far apart from one another in long shots or alone within mids and close-ups. It shows their distance and how cold their relationship feels now. The script does not describe camera movement, it is a cinematography and directing decision. At one point Charlie does not want to comment on Nicole's TV show pilot because he says he never watches TV, but Nicole sees that that is not true.

<b>From script</b>
NICOLE You don't think it's bad, do you?
CHARLIE (hesitates)

I don't ever watch TV so, you know, I can't tell...  
Nicole glances over at the TV which is on.

NICOLE

Uh huh.

Though the script does not say it explicitly we can tell from subtext that this makes her feel Charlie dismisses what she does. To portray this and from her point of view the scene is filmed by panning the camera from her to the TV and back as she thinks for a moment and says "Uh huh.". Which the actress is directed to do with a clearly annoyed look. The conversation then gets more passive-aggressive and cold until Nicole goes to bed, but as soon as she is out of his sight into the corridor she is bathed by darker and colder lighting as she starts crying. The script describes her as crying all the way to her bed, but there is subtext as to why she is crying. Having written the script knowing that is because of how distant they have become the director can then know to make the production crew show this in the lighting, camerawork and performance.



The courtroom scene is another effective use of perspective, shot composition and lighting to create conflict and tension in this scene of only characters sitting and occasionally standing and talking. Although Nicole and Charlie try to avoid it they end up going to court. This scene is heavily anticipated and dreaded by the characters because it's a point of no return in destroying their friendship.

In this scene the script describes Charlie and Nicole as sitting with their lawyers far away from each other which is common sense in a court session, but there is also a clear need to portray the growing emotional distance between them. So to show this the scene starts by leaving Charlie and Nicole at the furthest point of the frame, just out of focus and with line composition framing their lawyers higher up and falling on an intersection point of the rule of thirds grid. This brings attention to the lawyers since Charlie and Nicole don't have much of



a say in their own trial and have to let the lawyers speak for them. But at the same time it also makes them seem distant and emotionally shut down. The lighting in the courthouse is very bright and we see that when there are close-ups of Charlie and Nicole because the ceiling lights create harsh backlighting for their heads. No longer creating a soft halo effect, but almost like a spotlight instead. It is symbolising how both of their lives and smallest mistakes are being exposed in the court.



Things only continue to get worse when Jay reveals Nicole's alcohol consumption, framing her as an alcoholic which clearly upsets and angers Nicole since she confided that in Charlie. In the scene we get a close-up of her looking up as she hears this, shocked. We see Charlie in the background first, looking reflective then it cuts to close-up of Charlie looking over at an out of focus Nicole in the background and then down again. The camera focal shifts to Nicole who shakes her head, looking upset. This translates the single line from the script that instead described Nicole just staring at Charlie into simple but emotionally complex cinematography.

<b>From script</b>
Jay sits back down. Nicole stares at Charlie who looks humiliated.

Even though Nicole is the one who was put under a spotlight, it is Charlie who feels bad for breaking her trust. This moment symbolises a catalyst of its downfall in the second act, leading to the climax of the story in the next scene where they argue privately.

The climax is shot in an even simpler way. In the script the scene is almost entirely dialogue, with some descriptions for performance that indicate the scene is meant to get chaotic.

**From script**

Nicole stamps her feet and shakes her fists like a child having a tantrum.

NICOLE

I can't believe I have to know you FOREVER!

CHARLIE

You're fucking insane!

Charlie raises his arm and punches the wall. The cheap drywall cracks and chips.

CHARLIE

And you're fucking winning.

It is filmed using mostly handheld camera that follow the two back and forth in Charlie's almost empty living room in his LA rented house. Since there is so little in props and costume to look at, and few descriptions in the script the scene has to focus entirely on the performance and dialogue, but it becomes so heated that it just goes back and forth from mids to close-ups and remains intense. The handheld camerawork is mostly smooth and not very noticeable until the actors get very aggressive with each other. It helps create tension and make the audience be forced to experience the scene from the characters' perspectives, as if they are in the argument too.

When Charlie finally breaks the script describes it as the "vitriol has taken its toll" which means not just for this scene but for the whole plot so far. Nicole comforts him and the two are finally framed close to each other even in their mid shots for the first time since the start of the film. Bathed by the warm light coming from the window, similar to how they were filmed in earlier scenes, showing their remaining affection for each other or for the relationship they once had.





## Section 6: Conclusion

To summarise: this study has found through analysis that even scripts that focus mostly on dialogue can be translated into more complex storytelling through visual language. This is especially true of the example films where the director was also the writer and aware of the vision and subtext behind the script that they wanted to bring forward. This allowed them to supervise productions that made use of intentional choices of camerawork (including angles and movement), shot composition, lining, perspective, lighting, color, costume, set design and cues for the actors' performances to emphasise the main script ideas but also its subtext. These included contrast between light and dark, cold and warm, calm and shaky, close and distant, etc. All to portray the mood and tone as well as the emotional changes that the plot points and scene beats would cause on the characters. As a result, the films manage to frame scenes of just conversation and make them feel as intense as the characters would experience them and in turn help the audience share that feeling. All in all, the examples clearly offer effective ideas that can be used in my bachelor film and by other projects that focus on dialogue and character interaction.

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