

Star Wars and the 180 Rule

How does the 'grammar' of a film determine the way its story is told? Giles Gough takes the familiar convention of the 180° rule, and explains how it can be used to create new meanings.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi has attracted no shortage of attention since its release in December 2017. Yet one area that has been largely ignored is the film's grammar; the stylistic choices that make up the look of the film. This article will examine the use of the 180° rule to change a certain narrative trope, and the implications of that change. It's important to mention that this article will contain mild spoilers. However, if you haven't seen the film by this point, you are probably not the kind of person who will be bothered by them!

Let's start with a quick introduction to the concept of the 180° rule. When films moved from being simply one continuous shot to many shots from different angles being cut and pasted together, film editing was conceived and with it, a growing number of rules. In conjunction with the cinematographer, film is constructed by shooting footage from a number of angles, which the editor then cuts together in a consistent style. As Bordwell and Thompson put it in *Film Art: An Introduction*:

'The basic purpose of the continuity system is to create a smooth flow from shot to shot.'

In simple terms, when shooting a scene, a filmmaker using the continuity editing style will make sure the colour and lighting is consistent from shot to shot, events will occur sequentially from action to reaction, and that the main action on screen will be framed within the centre of the shot. One slightly more complicated element of continuity editing is the 180° rule.

The 180° rule

The 180° rule (or as it is sometimes called, 'the axis of action' or the 'centre line') is something you will have seen all the time but are rarely conscious of. According to Bordwell and Thompson:

'The scene's action, a person walking, two people conversing, a car racing along a road is assumed to take place along a discernible, predictable line.'

The 180° rule means that the camera can only be put on one side of this line. Let's take the example of a boy and a girl talking whilst facing each other. If we draw an imaginary line between those two people, it doesn't really matter which side of that line we place camera so long as we stay on that side for the whole scene. This is so that when filming them, their positions remain consistent in relation to each other. If we imagine the girl on the left and the boy on the right, the camera angles need to

reflect that, with the girl appearing on the left hand side of the screen and the boy appearing on the right. If we were to break this rule with the angle on one of them, we could end up with both of them being on the same side of the screen, which is spatially confusing for an audience. This technique has been used so many times that most viewers will not even be aware of it; and yet the 180° rule is used quite conspicuously in *The Last Jedi*.

The idea of a 'psychic rapport', that is, a telepathic connection between two individuals is a staple trope of the sci-fi and fantasy genres. It is used between Arwen and Aragorn in *Lord of The Rings*, between Jean Grey and Professor Xavier to heart-breaking effect at the end of *X-men 2* and it is also a part of the *Star Wars* universe.

The rule and the *Star Wars* franchise

Distinct from telepathy, where the character is able to read anyone's mind, a psychic rapport in *Star Wars* is called a Force Bond – where two force-sensitive people are capable of sensing each other's presence, thoughts or emotional pain. This is exhibited between Luke & Leia towards the end of *Empire Strikes Back*. Luke hangs in jeopardy upside down from an antenna beneath cloud city. He is in the centre of the frame, he closes his eyes and whilst facing to the left and whispers 'Leia'. We then cut away to the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon*, where Leia is sitting. She is in the centre of the frame, looking into the middle distance, slightly to the right. There is no attempt by the director to suggest there's a spatial relationship between the two. This is not the case in *The Last Jedi*.

Within the first hour of the film, we see the first evidence of a psychic rapport between Rey and Kylo Ren, but it is not like anything we have seen before. The director, Rian Johnson, aims to show us that the two of them can actually physically see each other. Sometimes this is reflected in the dialogue, such as when Rey asks Kylo if he can put a shirt on, but it is predominantly shown through the angles and the editing. Johnson creates an invisible line between the two characters, even though they are not even on the same planet, and he then slavishly sticks to the 180° rule. Rey is consistently shown as being on the right hand side of the screen looking left and Kylo Ren is always shown as being on the left looking right. When Rey begins to move away from him, moving further to the right, Kylo follows her. Sightlines are also consistent throughout, with Rey always looking slightly up and to the left, to account for the fact that Kylo is taller than her. The only time this is reversed is when Rey has run up the entry ramp to the *Millennium Falcon*, and Kylo, again in a separate location, is looking up at her.

So why is this interesting? Well, what's fascinating about this stylistic choice is that by using the 180° rule with two characters that are not actually in the same place, Johnson is drawing attention to its artificiality. It is a technique that most audiences would not be aware of under normal circumstances, and here it's highlighted. We know that the filmmakers have had to work harder here to recreate this effect because these two scenes will have been filmed weeks or months apart. We are completely sold on the concept of two people having a conversation across space because a traditional technique is being used in a novel way. The sheer novelty of this change in style is worthy of comment as well.

Stylistic changes

A film's stylistic choices can become as memorable and beloved as what we actually see on-screen. One example is the way the films, to some extent or other, use wipe transitions as a way of moving from one scene to the next. Another stylistic choice is the *Star Wars* way of representing a psychic connection; characters typically stare intently off into the middle distance and softly whisper each other's names. This is a technique we see used in both the original and the prequel trilogy. The

interesting thing here is how, like poetry, a film's style can reflect its content. We have seen an example of how a psychic rapport works between Luke and Leia, whereas Kylo and Rey's connection shows us a variation on this trope. What is communicated between the two characters in this film is more clear and articulate, possibly suggesting that Kylo and Rey, two otherwise unconnected individuals, have a strong connection – one much stronger than the Skywalker twins. This stylistic change is indicative of a broader sea-change within the Star Wars franchise.

This change has been brought about through necessity. Disney bought the Star Wars franchise from George Lucas in 2012 for an eye-watering 4.05 billion dollars. If there is going to be a new Star Wars film released every year, which one imagines is what Disney are hoping for, then we will have to reconsider what constitutes a Star Wars film. We have begun to see this with the introduction of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which made the stylistic choice to abandon the franchise's iconic opening text-crawl as a means to deliver exposition. With Rian Johnson being given the green light to start developing his own trilogy of films set in the Star Wars galaxy but separate to the Skywalker saga, we can expect to see even more narrative and stylistic changes: a thought that fills fans' hearts with joy and terror in roughly equal measure.

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This article first appeared in *MediaMagazine* 64, April 2018.

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