



## The aesthetic of visual composition in the french horror film "martyrs" produced in 2008

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### KEYWORDS

*Visual Aesthetic  
Composition  
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### ABSTRACT

Film is one of the entertainment media watched by many people around the world. France, with a history of filmmaking that has existed for hundreds of years, presents visual and narrative films that are very popular in various countries around the world, one of which is a horror genre film titled "Martyrs" produced in 2008. It is interesting to delve further into the application of several important scenes in the visual aesthetics of the film titled "Martyrs" as presented in writing and research regarding composition. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, The research data was gathered through a focus group discussion involving film lecturers and visual communication design lecturers, who discussed the implementation of each selected scene in the film, which involves repeatedly watching the French film titled "Martyrs," as well as reviewing literature from journals and film theories. The visual analysis focuses on the composition balance, both symmetrical and asymmetrical, in each important frame of the film. The research concludes that the purpose of applying symmetrical and asymmetrical visual composition balance in the film "Martyrs" is demonstrated in an important scene of the film, which was produced in 2008 and remains visually relevant for audiences in 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

The history of world cinematography began in the late 19th century when film-making technology was first discovered. In 1895, Louis Lumière presented the first film titled "L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat" (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station) to the public. This marked the early milestone for the modern film industry. In the early 20th century, cinematography rapidly developed worldwide. Hollywood, United States, became the dominant center for film production. Silent films like "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) by D.W. Griffith became popular and brought significant innovations in film-making techniques. The 1920s and 1930s are considered the golden age of Hollywood, with classic films like "Casablanca" (1942) and "Gone with the Wind" (1939) becoming iconic. Film technology continued to evolve with the introduction of color and sound. Over the following decades, cinematography expanded globally with the emergence of various cinematic movements. Examples include neorealism in Italy, Nouvelle Vague in France, and Bollywood cinema in India. The role of composition in films has not been widely discussed in research. Technically, it certainly carries different meanings (Mariska, 2024). This study seeks to demonstrate this



through an exploration of visual aesthetics and composition in horror films. In the field of Visual Communication Design, visuals serve as the primary medium for conveying messages and imparting meaning to the audience. Visual elements such as color, shape, and composition are strategically designed to create effective and profound communication (Mahatmi and Medyasepti 2024). The meaning conveyed through visuals is not limited to aesthetics alone but also encompasses emotional, psychological, and cultural aspects that can influence audience perception (Hendiawan et al. 2015). With a strong understanding of design principles, visuals can become a universal language that bridges ideas and messages between designers and their audiences. Visuals act as a medium of application, enabling visual readers to understand what is intended to be communicated. This concept is also evident in films (Fitri et al. 2023). In the modern era, digital technology has drastically changed the landscape of cinematography. Digital film production and online distribution have become more common (Prasetyo 2021a), providing greater opportunities for individuals to create and watch films independently. With its rich and diverse history, cinematography remains one of the most influential and captivating forms of art in global culture. France, consistent in its focus on cinematographic art activities, has been among the countries actively contributing to the global film production scene.

This research analyzes the extent of visual aesthetics in French horror films from the perspective of Indonesians. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that studies the concepts of beauty, art, and artistic judgment. It involves an understanding of what makes something visually or sensorily beautiful or appealing, as well as how beauty is perceived and enjoyed by humans. Visual messages refer to communication conveyed through visual elements such as images, colors, shapes, and composition. In the context of film or other visual media, visual messages can effectively convey information, emotions, or concepts to the audience without using words. Visual messages can create atmosphere, highlight specific themes, or evoke emotional reactions from viewers (Sidhartani, Elements, and Composition 2010). The importance of visual messages lies in their ability to convey information quickly and powerfully, often surpassing what can be achieved with words alone. In film production, visual messages are an integral part of shaping narrative and creating an engaging cinematic experience for the audience (Prasetyo, 2022). In horror films, visual aesthetics can be shaped through the application of composition based on the point of interest captured within the visual frame, aiming to convey meaning or messages to the audience (Prasetyo, Ahmad, and Sanjaya 2024). The research data was collected through a focus group discussion involving film lecturers and visual communication design lecturers. They discussed the implementation of each selected scene in the film and conducted repeated viewings of the specified scenes for analysis.

Aesthetics also considers the role of subjectivity and cultural context in the assessment of beauty, as well as the relationship between beauty and moral or social values. In the context of art, aesthetics aids in exploring the meaning and value of artworks, as well as understanding the aesthetic experience produced by interactions with those artworks (Yoyon 2020). Film as an entertainment medium is a form of art used to convey stories, emotions, and experiences to the audience through moving images and sound (M.Ali Mursid Alfathoni and Dani Manesah 2020). As an entertainment medium, film has the main purpose of entertaining and captivating the audience, inviting them into the world created by the director and filmmakers. Films can provide deep experiences, evoke emotions, and offer a variety of entertainment, ranging from tension in action movies to joy (Mudjiono 2011). Furthermore, films can also serve as a means to convey messages, advocate for social issues, or inspire viewers. With various genres and diverse styles, films have a universal appeal that can be enjoyed by people from all walks of life around the world (Haquu 2022). Aesthetics in film refers to the visual and artistic aspects used to create an aesthetic experience for the audience. This includes various elements such as lighting, color scheme, framing, composition of images, use of visual symbolism, as well as editing techniques and cinematography. Film aesthetics also involve an understanding of how

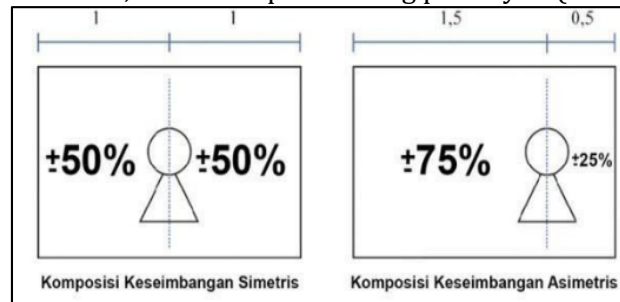
these elements are used to evoke a particular atmosphere, communicate emotions, and visually enhance the film's narrative (Kitsopanidou and Thévenin 2024). By carefully utilizing aesthetics, filmmakers can create works that are not only visually captivating but also profound in their impact on the audience. Technically placing the point of interest in the right visual composition provides a specific purpose in creating moving visuals in a film. Of course, the purpose is to tell the film so that it is easier for the audience to understand, and to give a certain impression.

Indonesia as a developing country is a nation with a population of 278 million people, and it is evidenced that 9.3 percent of Indonesians watch local films, while 8.2 percent watch foreign films (Kumparan HITS 2020). One of the most popular genres in Indonesia is horror films. Therefore, it is interesting to conduct a visual aesthetic analysis of one of the best films from France directed by Pascal Laugier titled *Martyrs*, produced in 2008, which is a controversial and intense film and is considered to be a challenging and disturbing horror film. This research will further discuss the analysis of visual aesthetics through the composition of camera shots from the perspective of the audience. Where French horror films are one of the best references in the world of cinematography industry, recognizing its long history (Bey-Rozet 2021). Sometimes, the story and visual presentation in a film need to be interpreted in an unusual way, controversial elements in visuals evoke excessive emotions from each viewer, and eventually will be widely discussed by people. Far from it, it is important to look at a film at the end of its story when the film is finished, because a good film will provide a deep message and impression in the form of story values that are captured by the audience in the conclusion after watching it in its entirety (Angga and Prima 2022).

## **2. Method**

The research employs a qualitative descriptive method, gathering data through observation and focus group discussions on the research subject, which involves repeatedly watching the French film titled "*Martyrs*," as well as reviewing literature from journals and film theories. Film is essentially the art of recording moving images presented visually and audibly. Film fulfills the entertainment imagination for the general audience, creating beauty in establishing the atmosphere of the storyline that can influence the emotions and visual mood of the audience. Designing a film requires skillful collaboration from many parties led by a film director. The horror film genre requires in-depth research to play with the audience's emotions visually in an aesthetic manner (Sima Prajahita, Mustikawati, and Rino Pungkiawan 2023), Bringing forth sadness, fear, happiness, and tension, where all of these are a complete package of the horror genre. Visual composition refers to how visual elements such as color, shape, line, texture, and space are arranged or organized in a visual artwork, such as a painting, photograph, or film (Sanjaya, 2023). The goal of visual composition is to create balance, harmony, and visual interest that convey a message or emotion to the audience or viewers. In the context of film, visual composition involves arranging visual elements such as framing, lighting, background, and scene setup to create an atmosphere that aligns with the narrative purpose of the film. By employing appropriate principles of visual composition, film directors can influence the audience's perception and emotions, enhance visual appeal, and reinforce the messages conveyed through the visual medium. Based on the experience of visual observers in capturing impressions and messages in films that are discussed together in focus group discussions, it will provide a variety of opinions regarding visual composition. A film titled "*Martyrs*, 2008" has presented an unusual visual composition at that time, and it remains intriguing to watch even now in 2024. This means the director's success in creating visual composition is still highly interesting to discuss and applied as a learning for future film production design. Visual composition in both film and photography can be said to be similar (Prasetyo 2021b). However, the capturing of images is presented in a static manner in photography, whereas in film, the visual presentation is dynamic through moving images (Prasetyo, 2021). Camera angle composition refers to the way in which the camera's angle of

view is chosen and arranged to create the desired visual effect in a film scene or video production (Andersson 2015). The choice of camera angle can influence how the audience perceives the scene, characters, and atmosphere being portrayed (Zevri, 2022).



**Fig 1.** Theory of Balanced Composition (Prasetyo and Everlin 2022)

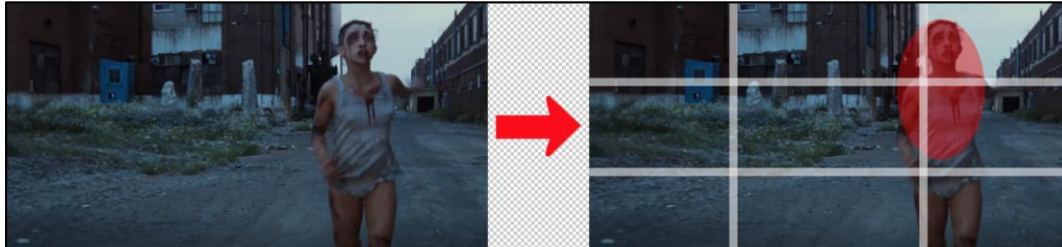
Fig 1, According to Helen Kantilaftis (2014), the balance composition in visual camera capture consists of two, namely symmetrical composition and asymmetrical composition. Symmetrical balance is achieved when both sides of the visuals have equal weight, while asymmetrical balance is informal balance where both sides of the visuals may not appear symmetrical but visually have equal weight (Prasetyo 2021b). The determination of composition in camera shots is one of the crucial aspects in capturing moving images (Zevri, 2022). Asimetris balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds is the positioning of the main subject at one-third of the frame, it is a principle in visual art that refers to a composition rule that helps create aesthetically pleasing and visually appealing artwork. This principle is based on mathematical proportions considered pleasing to the human eye. It can be applied in various visual mediums, including photography, painting, graphic arts, and film. Whereas symmetrical balance composition is the positioning of the main subject right in the middle of the frame (Everlin, 2022). Therefore, the aesthetics of visual balance composition are expected to have an impact on the message and impression that filmmakers want to convey to the audience. Audiences will find the visuals presented interesting depending on each viewer's perception while watching the film. Horror genre films generally feature scenes that are tense and surprising, engaging viewers in the emotions presented in the film. Horror films aim to evoke tension, fear, and dread in their audience through the use of elements such as eerie stories, frightening visual imagery, and chilling sound effects. The visual horror in horror films refers to the use of cinematic techniques to create frightening images, such as dark lighting, eerie settings, gruesome prosthetic makeup on characters, and the use of special effects to depict tense and horrifying scenes. The purpose of this visual horror is to increase tension and strengthen the viewing experience of horror films for the audience.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The synopsis of the film "Martyrs" (2008) follows the tragic story of a woman named Lucie, who has experienced traumatic events since childhood after being tortured and brutally abused for years by unknown individuals. After successfully escaping her torment, Lucie is transferred to an orphanage, where she befriends Anna, another girl who understands the trauma Lucie has endured. Several years later, Lucie grows up and decides to seek revenge against the people who tortured and abused her. With Anna's help, they embark on a series of murders targeting the family suspected of being responsible for Lucie's past torment. However, as Lucie and Anna enter the final house they are targeting, they uncover the horrifying truth behind Lucie's torture. They discover that the family is involved in sadistic experiments aimed at uncovering the mystery of life after death by torturing their victims to extreme limits. In their journey to uncover this gruesome truth, Lucie and Anna become trapped in a cycle of violence and seemingly endless suffering. The film presents themes of violence, suffering, and existential confusion, delivering them in a dark, chilling, and relentless manner.

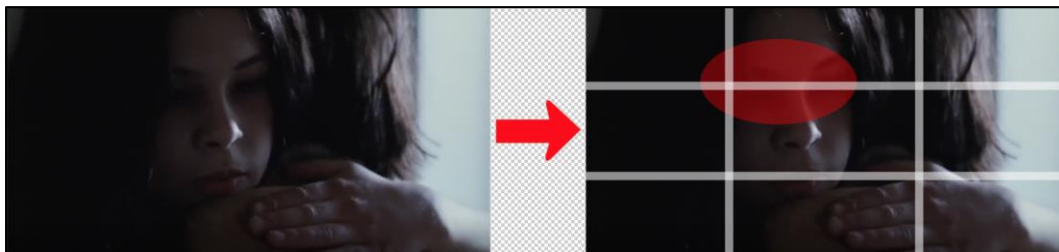


Fig 2, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The left side of the frame depicts the background of a building as the location of this scene, and the right side of the frame is the subject running away from the building, serving as the point of interest in this frame.



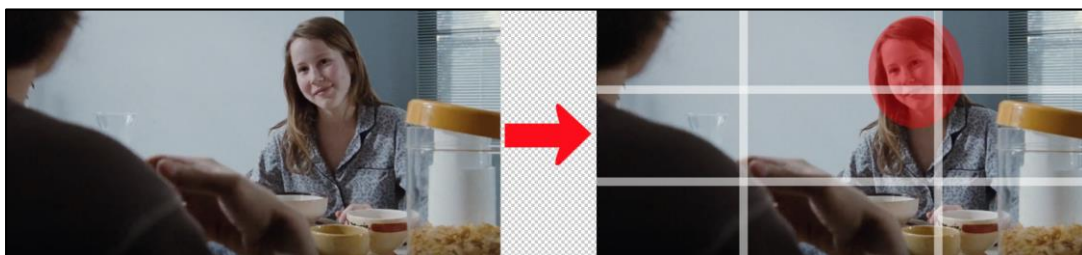
**Fig 2.** Timecode 00:00:44

In Fig 3, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The left side of the frame depicts the subject as the point of interest, and the right side of the frame shows the subject facing away from the camera as the conversational partner being embraced in the dialogue of this scene.



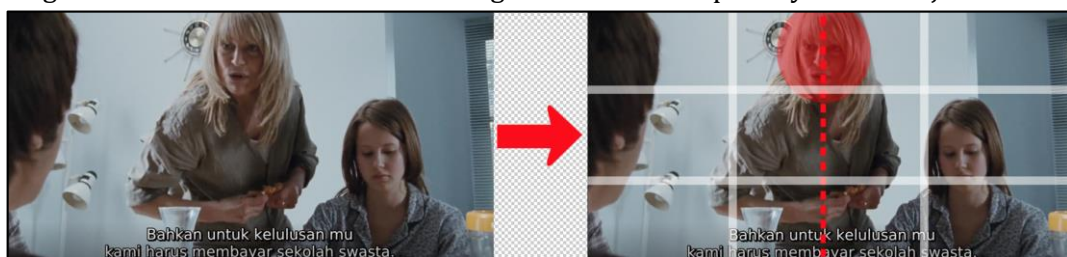
**Fig 3.** Timecode 00:05:57

. Fig 4, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The left side of the frame depicts the conversational partner in the dialogue scene with their back to the camera, and the right side of the frame shows the main subject as the point of interest, displaying a smiling face engaged in conversation.



**Fig 4.** Timecode 00:10:05

Fig 5, It shows a symmetrical balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The subject as the point of interest is positioned right in the middle of the frame and becomes the center of attention for the audience, showing the main subject, namely the mother, speaking to her two children. The left and right sides are occupied by other subjects.



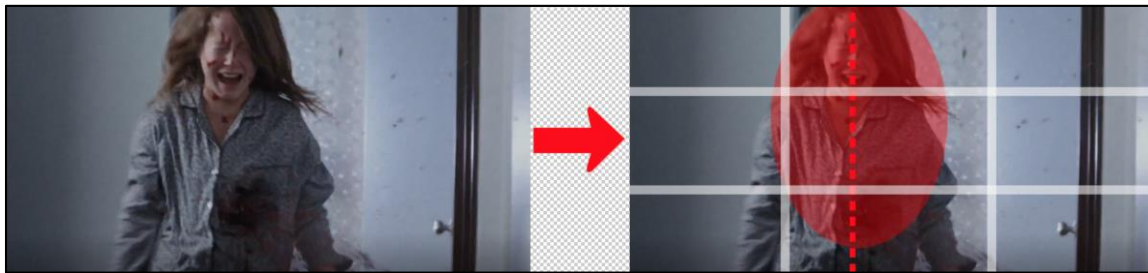
**Fig 5.** Timecode 00:11:00

Fig 6, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The left side of the frame shows negative space with an empty background, and the right side features the main subject as the point of interest, capturing the attention of the audience, displaying the expression before the murder occurs on herself.



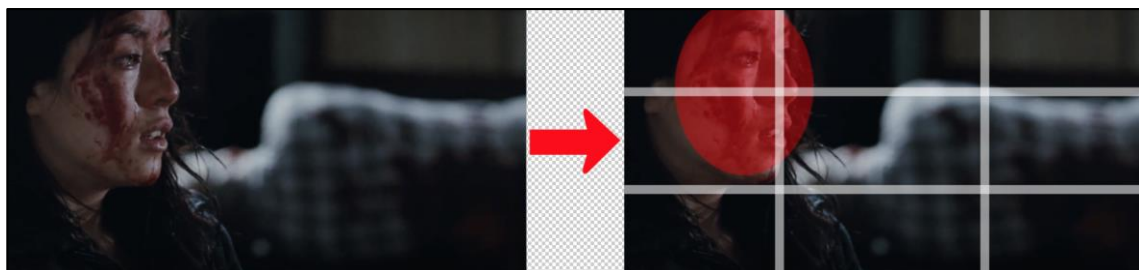
**Fig 6.** Timecode 00:11:57

Fig 7, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the golden rule. The main subject as the point of interest displays the half-body shot of a girl in an expression of fear and running before the murder occurs, showcasing the visual clarity from facial expression to running activity. With the background being the interior of a room in a house.



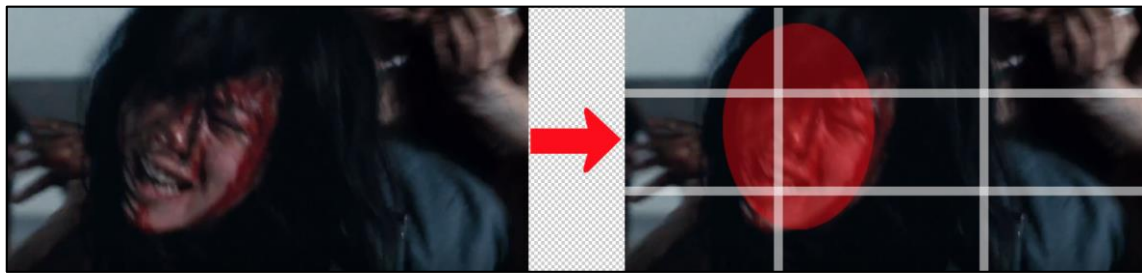
**Fig 7.** Timecode 00:13:57

Fig 8, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject as the point of interest displays a half-body shot of a girl in an expression of fear and running before the murder occurs, showcasing the visual clarity from facial expression to running activity. With the background being the interior of a room in a house.



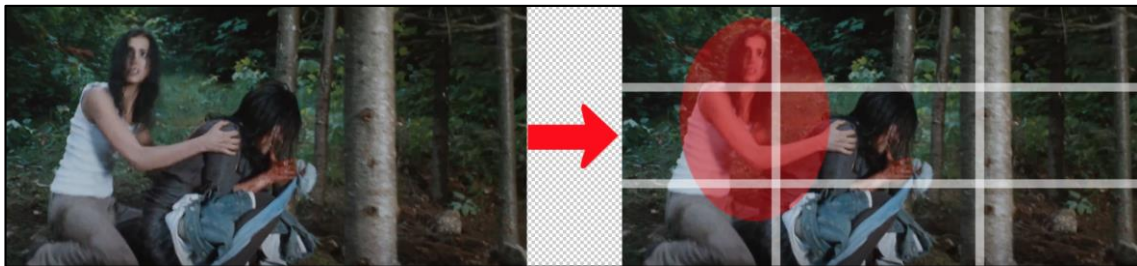
**Fig 8.** Timecode 00:16:15

In Fig 9, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject as the point of interest displays Lucie in a torture scene, with a pained expression on her face. The right side of the frame depicts a stabbing scene with a sharp weapon, showing the situation directly at the moment of the scene in this frame.



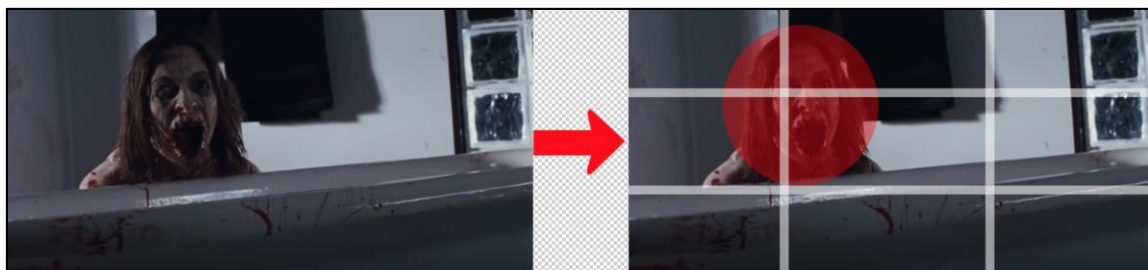
**Fig 9.** Timecode 00:19:13

Fig 10, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject as the point of interest depicts Anna coming to help Lucie, and in the middle of the frame, there is Lucie whose face is not visible, in a condition of pain due to torture.



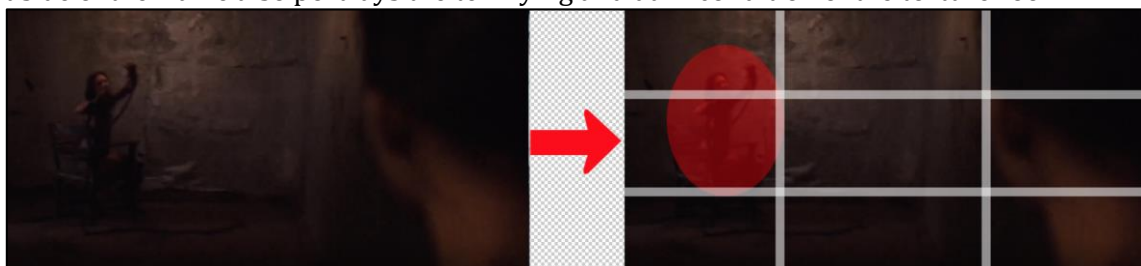
**Fig 10.** Timecode 00:22:39

Fig 11, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject as the point of interest depicts a humanoid figure resembling a monster seen with an expression of screaming and fear. The right side of the frame shows the background inside the bathroom as the place where the torture occurs.



**Fig 11.** Timecode 00:31:56

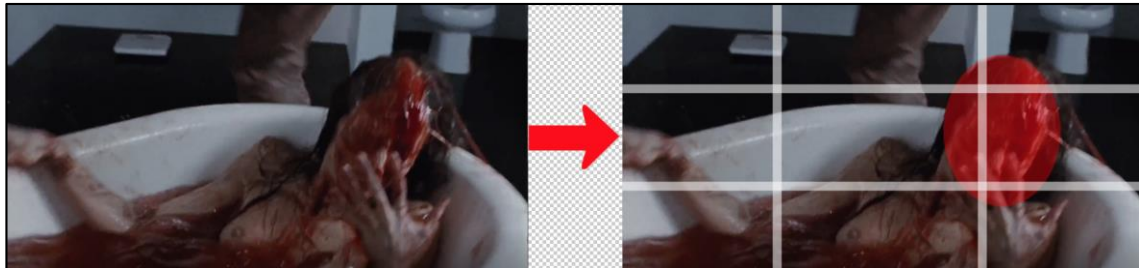
Fig 12, It's a flashback scene in the film that shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject as the point of interest depicts a humanoid figure seeking help and trapped inside a room in an old building. However, on the right side of the frame, the main character of the film, Lucie, who is still very young, appears helpless to assist and must quickly run out of the building to save herself. The emptiness on the left side of the frame also portrays the terrifying and dark condition of the torture room.



**Fig 12.** Timecode 00:35:15

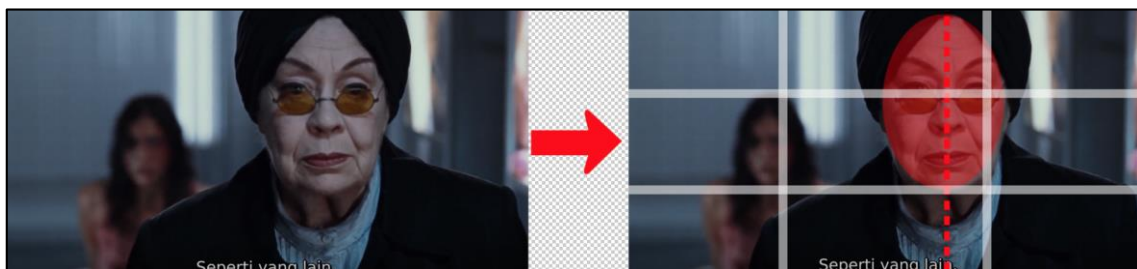


Fig 13, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject on the right side of the frame, as the point of interest, depicts a human figure who is a victim of torture with a terrifying visual that resembles a real scene, causing a horrifying effect for viewers. The left side of the frame depicts the background condition of the bathroom bathtub room, showing that this incident occurs in the bathroom



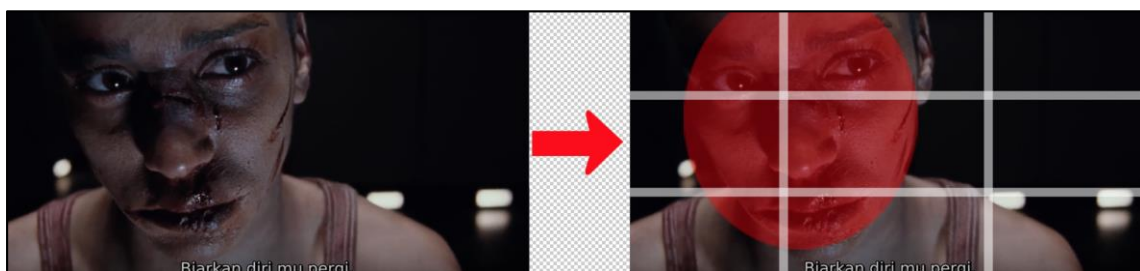
**Fig 13.** Timecode 00:55:09

Fig 14, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the Golden Rule. The main subject on the right side of the frame, as the point of interest, depicts the antagonist character named Mademoiselle, as the leader of the cult. On the left side of the frame, it shows a blurred distant image of the main character named Anna.



**Fig 14.** Timecode 01:01:39

Fig 15, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject on the left side of the frame, as the point of interest, shows Anna's face zoomed in, appearing full of torture wounds. On the right side of the frame, it shows the dark room condition where Anna is confined and tortured.



**Fig 15.** Timecode 01:20:06

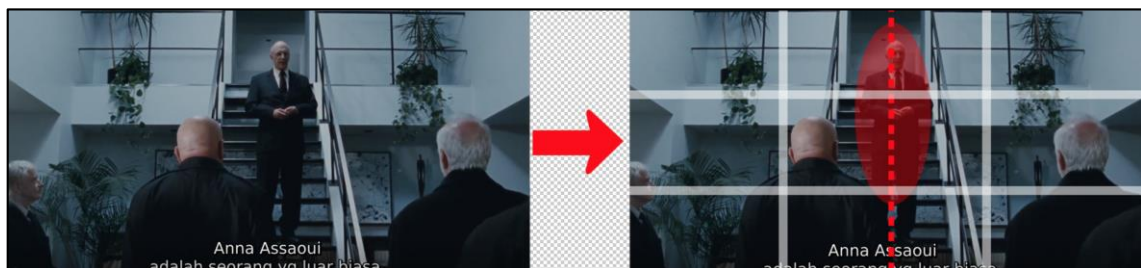
Figure 16, It shows an asymmetric balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The main subject on the right side of the frame, as the point of interest, shows the facial expression of Mademoiselle, who looks surprised after hearing Anna's story about seeing another world after being tortured and being between life and death. The left side of the frame shows the interlocutor, Anne, whispering into Mademoiselle's ear.





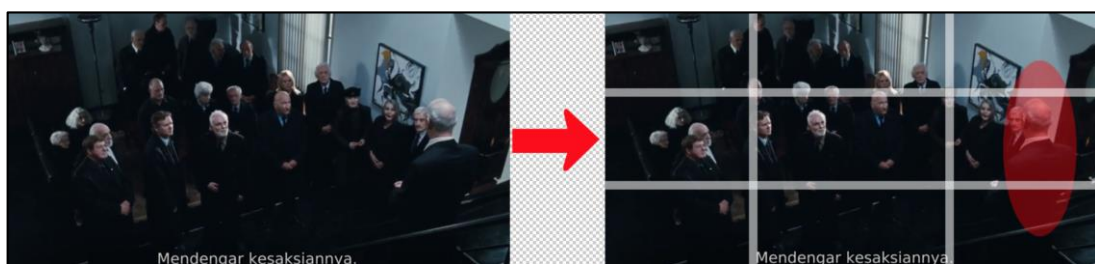
**Fig 16.** Timecode 01:31:26

Fig 17, Towards the final scene of the film, it shows a symmetrical balance composition with the main subject precisely positioned in the middle, which is an old man making an announcement in front of many people at a gathering. Symmetrical arrangement is created to provide balance on the left and right sides with the background being the left and right sides of the stairs, and the point of interest slightly elevated in the middle of the stairs.



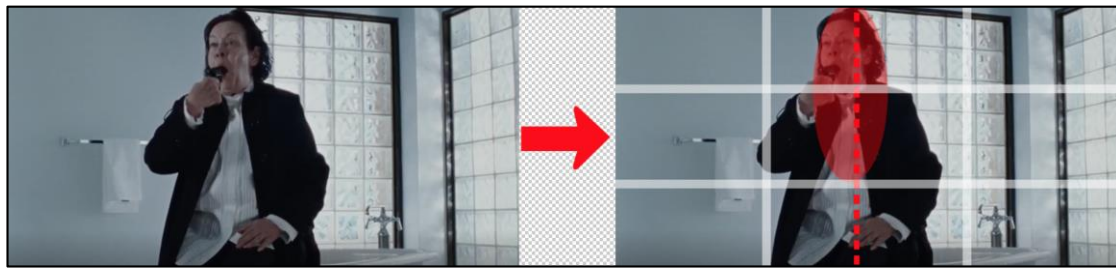
**Fig 17.** Timecode 01:32:57

In Fig 18, It shows an asymmetrical balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds. The point of interest is located on the right side of the frame as the focal point, while giving an important announcement amidst the community, stating that Anna has seen life after death. On the left side of the frame, it shows many people gathered in a room inside the house in front of the stairs.



**Fig 18.** Timecode 01:33:45

Figure 19, It shows a composition with symmetrical balance by applying the rule of symmetry because the main subject, Mademoiselle, as the point of interest, is right in the center of the frame. Mademoiselle's character, who at the end of the story commits suicide without hesitation after hearing Anna's story about life after death. Surely, the climax at the end of the film "Martyrs" leaves an impression and message that is not explicitly stated in the story, but as viewers, we each have our own perspective on interpreting this film. The message and impression at the end of the film are very intriguing, and this is one of the reasons why the film is packaged so well in terms of a simple plot, yet it turns out not to be easily predictable by the audience.



**Fig 19.** Timecode 01:35:07

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted on the film "Martyrs" produced in 2008, it turns out that this film provides many surprises in every scene displayed with interesting compositions in both symmetrical and asymmetrical balance. In symmetrical balance, the film's narrative portrays a visually rigid and formal presentation to capture the audience's attention, and this is presented at the climax of the story as a beautiful conclusion. Meanwhile, in asymmetrical balance composition with the application of the rule of thirds, it shows the subject as the point of interest along with the background nuances in each frame as location indicators, to provide the audience with an understanding of the setting. The composition of asymmetrical balance with the application of the Golden Rule is also not much different, still showing the situation about the background that is still visible. The film "Martyrs," 2018 consistently applies asymmetrical balance with the application of the rule of thirds, often used in capturing facial expressions of fear, tension, pain, sadness, and surprise, to invite the audience to feel what is happening in the tense and terrifying scenes in the horror genre film. This film has the uniqueness of not using too many visual editing elements, but rather applying visual composition, acting, and perfectly beautiful makeup for a film produced in 2008, even still comfortable to watch in 2024. This proves that producing a horror film can even look realistic without using excessive visual editing effects, as evidenced by the French horror film "Martyrs" produced 16 years ago. In further research, this research can be continued by applying other film theory approaches with different genres, so that more references regarding visual composition in films can be presented in written form. In terms of visual composition in developing the technical application of visual composition in film genres other than horror films, this will open up many variations in composition in the technical shooting of films.

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