

UNCOMPOSED

**UNCONVENTIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION IN THE CINEMA AND
TELEVISION DRAMA GENRE**

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ABSTRACT

The rules of composition for cinematography are an entrenched system of mathematical frame division that have remained unquestioned since the advent of the cinema medium. The rules have become convention to a point that, when broken, the result appears radical and stark to both critics and viewers. This article explores several of the leading examples of unconventional composition in the contemporary cinema and television drama genre, including, Tom Hooper's *The King's Speech* (2010) and *The Danish Girl* (2015), and, briefly, the television series *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015). The author compares the use of composition in these media to the use of it by the painters Edward Hopper and Vilhelm Hammershøi suggesting that the industrialisation of cinema has restricted the ability of filmmakers to experiment with the form.

Key Words: Cinematography, Composition, Framing, Rule of Thirds, Conventional Composition, Unconventional Composition, Cinema, Television

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

How to compose a frame in filmmaking was one of the first lessons I was taught during my undergraduate study. Indeed, many of the widely used filmmaking textbooks in university courses such as the seminal text *Cinematography: Theory and Practice* (Brown, 2012) outline the rules of composition in their first chapter;

Selecting the frame is the fundamental act of filmmaking; as film-makers we must direct the audience's attention: "look here, now look at this, now over here..." Choosing the frame is a matter of conveying the story, but it is also a question of composition, rhythm, and perspective. (Brown, 2012, p. 4)

As Brown has pointed out, and as I will argue in this article, composition is a matter of conveying the story. However, despite Brown's assertion, the vast majority of cinema and television narratives do not make use of composition for this objective. Composition is stepped in a long history of rules and convention, which, when broken attract the ire of many who understand it in terms of binary opposites, that is, a 'right way' and a 'wrong way'. Amongst the most common facets of composition, such as lead room, vanishing point and leading lines, is the 'rule of thirds' first established by John Thomas Smith in his 1797 book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*.

Analogous to this "Rule of Thirds", (if I may be allowed so to call it) I have presumed to think, in connecting or in breaking the various lines of a picture, it would likewise be a good rule to do it, in general, by a similar scheme of proportion; for example, in a design of landscape, to determine the sky at about two-third; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two... [I] shall conclude this general proportion of two and one to be the most picturesque medium in all cases [sic]... (Smith, 1797, p. 16)

Smith's work as a painter and engraver are not well known today, and indeed the rule he first wrote about has all but disappeared from fine-art painting. This rule survives, however, in photography and cinematography. Possibly due to the process of filmmaking becoming an industrialised art form during the Golden Age of Hollywood (or the Studio System) — a period stretching from the introduction of sound in filmmaking to the years following World War Two roughly encapsulating 1927 through to 1949 — the rules of cinematography, especially those rules that deal with composition, became entrenched:

Since the birth of the motion camera in the 1880s, a great deal has been established on what is considered right and wrong camera work in the business. Principles and guidelines were formulated through time since movies became the most popular visual art at the end of the 1800s. (Bordwell quoted in Håkansson, 2013, p.1)

Figures 1 and 2 show an example of a conventional cinema frame obeying the rule of thirds. A composition such as this, and others in cinema and television that obey this rule, are so common and conventional that it is a rare and striking thing to discover a frame that disobeys it.



Figure 1. This screen-grab from *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015) shows a balanced frame following the rule of thirds. As is explored later in this article this is a rare example from director Tom Hooper's oeuvre.

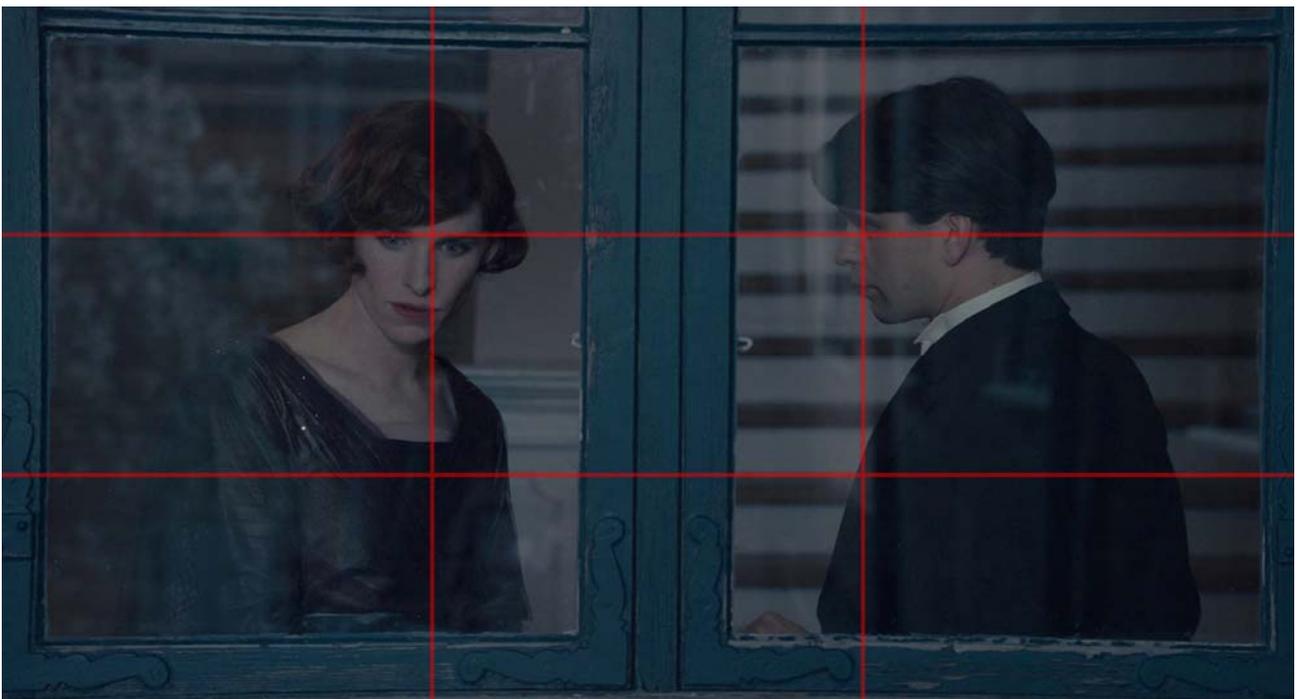


Figure 2. The exact same screen-grab as seen in figure 1 shows this composition overlaid with thirds lines dividing the frame into nine equal parts and showing points of interest at the intersecting lines such as the eyes of the characters.

The exceptions to this rule appear only in lower-budget cinema, usually in support of unconventional narratives and what has become known as prestige television - high budgeted dramatic television more closely related to cinema than traditional television drama. Various television networks in Britain have produced a number of dramas over the last eight years that display unconventional compositions. Dramas such as *Luther* (2010), *Broadchurch* (2013), and more recently *Kiri* (Lyn, 2018), are among the more notable of these. Despite claims of originality in composition (Marcks, 2016), *Mr. Robot* (2015) is possibly the only American television drama thus far to display similarly unconventional compositions. There are many examples in the history of world cinema of such unconventional compositions, however the most notable of these in recent years is work by British director Tom Hooper such as *The King's Speech* (Hooper, 2010) and, *The Danish Girl* (Hooper, 2015). Through an analysis of composition in these aforementioned cinema and television narratives this article will show that the directors' and cinematographers' choices were driven by a desire to use compositional form to reflect the content of the narratives, specifically, the inner-dialogue of otherwise reticent characters. This analysis will also link the frames of these dramas to the fine-art painters Edward Hopper and Vilhelm Hammershøi who have either influenced the cinematography in these films directly or displayed an indirect link to their use of compositional form.

SECTION TWO: THE RULE BREAKERS

As is the case for photography or fine-art painting, the viewer of cinema or television is guided to that view point via the eyes of the director and cinematographer, the authors of the image.

At each particular moment of any given scene, the position of the camera is a point in time and space from where the Invisible Imaginary Ubiquitous Winged Witness, the observer of the action, implies a specific point of view. It is from this spot where the audience views the story, from where the Witness prompts the audience to feel sympathy for one character over another. (Nicholson, 2010)

Steven Katz (1991, p. 267) identifies the first person subjective, the third person restricted and the omniscient point of view as the three main narrative points of view in cinema. The first person subjective point of view occurs when the viewer sees the story through the eyes of a character as in a point-of-view shot, where the camera's lens is the character's eyes. However, narrative films are mostly a combination of third person restricted and omniscient points of view. According to Katz's paradigm, the difference between these two points of view is that the omniscient point of view offers the audience access to the thoughts of characters through flashbacks, voiceover narration and similar devices, whereas restricted third person is just that, restricted to the narrative's time and place. Within this third person restricted point of view there are many choices the director can make as to how to present the character. This decision as to how to present the character within a composition is relatable to the dichotomy of form and content where the content informs the form, or in this case, the character, or the character's internal dialogue and emotion, informs the frame. As stated in the introduction, for the majority of cinema and television drama, composition is conventional and formulaic and is therefore not necessarily reflective of character emotion but rather of the conventional rules for 'good composition', such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, and vanishing point. Thus, few contemporary filmmakers working in the drama genre are using composition as a tool of storytelling, communication or artistic form creation. Composition is not synonymous with everything a camera does, such as the movement of a smooth dolly as opposed to a frenetic handheld movement. Composition refers to the placement of objects and subjects within the frame with a specific focus on the rules of composition as outlined in the introduction rather than the use of wide or telephoto lenses, or moving versus static frames.

Luther (2010), *Broadchurch* (2013) and *Kiri* (Lyn, 2018) are three of the most notable British television dramas to use unconventional compositions (Figures 3 and 4). However, there is almost no academic or critical literature on these programs' cinematography and composition. These three dramas are certainly screen narratives to be included in a study of unconventional composition, yet to this point they have not attracted interest from scholars or film critics. The American television drama *Mr. Robot* (2015), is written about widely as are the three most recent films of director Tom Hooper, *The King's Speech* (2010), *Les Misérables* (2012), and, *The Danish Girl* (2015).



Figure 3. Detective Inspector Luther (Idris Alba) is often unconventionally composed during moments of crisis in the BBC Television drama series *Luther* ("Luther," 2010). In this frame the character's eyes are placed on the lower thirds horizontal rather than the upper thirds horizontal (also known as the eye line). Also, Luther is looking out of frame rather than across it. The empty space to his right, or behind him, is conventionally placed in the direction of the character's gaze; leaving empty space between the character and what they are looking at. This composition is suggestive of the weight of bureaucracy bearing down on him.



Figure 4. Social Worker Miriam (Sarah Lancashire) is also often unconventionally composed during moments of crisis in the Channel 4 drama series *Kiri* (Lyn, 2018). In this frame the character Miriam is centre framed but placed on the lower thirds horizontal and thus diminished in the frame; suggesting a feeling of smallness in this context.

British director Tom Hooper has had a meteoric rise, beginning with his first feature film *Red Dust* (2004). For his third film, the critically acclaimed *The King's Speech* (2010), Hooper won an Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Direction. The film was nominated for twelve Oscars, more than any other film that year, and won four. *The King's Speech* tells the true story of the second son of King George V, Prince Albert, Duke of York, who experienced a crippling stammer which made public speaking difficult. Following his brother's abdication Prince Albert would become King George VI. Prior to his coronation, however, he began treatment for his stammer with Lionel Logue, a non-medically trained speech defects therapist. Cinematographer Danny Cohen, BSC (British Society of Cinematographers accredited), directed the photography for *The King's Speech* and was nominated for an Academy Award for his work. This film shows the most overt use of unconventional composition of any of Hooper's films, either before or after. As film critic Kate Bellmore observes, the cinematography in *The King's Speech* "is far from typical, specifically the recurrent, exaggerated uses of lead room (or looking room)" (Bellmore, 2011, para 1). Bellmore identifies an example of correct but exaggerated lead room in the film's opening sequence as Prince Albert, or Bertie (Colin Firth) as he is affectionately known to family and friends, prepares to deliver a speech at Wembley Stadium. As Bertie waits to ascend a flight of stairs toward the microphone, he rests against a white brick wall. From the top of the stairs, a man calls for him. Cutting back to Bertie, the camera captures him still leaning against the white wall, trapped and defeated, compelled to speak in public despite his obvious fear and trepidation, all the while looking up at the man calling. Bertie, however, is at the bottom-right of the frame; the rest of the space is vacant. Although exaggerated, this is a common, easily

understood use of lead room. The vacant space is symbolically filled with the action of the man calling for Bertie; the space leads the audience's attention to action happening outside of the frame and yet influencing it (Bellmore, 2011). In addition to this exaggerated use of lead room Bertie is also placed on the lower thirds horizontal. So, although the lead room is exaggerated but correct, the eyes are not placed on the upper thirds horizontal according to the rule of thirds.



Figure 5. Bertie (Colin Firth) is waiting to give his first speech in the opening scene of *The King's Speech* (2010).

In contrast, a scene which exhibits both unconventional uses of lead room and head room occurs when Bertie has his first session with therapist Lionel Logue. In the shot (figure 5) Bertie is located in the bottom-left of the frame and the wall takes up the majority of the space. The lead room is to the right, but there is absolutely nothing and no one toward the right commanding attention. On first viewing the frame, and the film's composition generally, the compositions may seem an aesthetic style designed to make the film more visually striking. Yet, the (un)lead room is far from meaningless; the unconventionality of these frames visually communicate the unconventionality of the entire narrative (Bellmore, 2011). During a Director's Guild of America (DGA) symposium Hooper stated that he wanted the negative space around Colin Firth to visually represent the painful emptiness Bertie feels when stuttering;— those awkward, hanging pauses that torture someone just trying to express themselves (Baumgartner, 2011). This scene, in its entirety, visually suggests the discomfort between Logue and Bertie, by framing them in starkly contrasting and disparate, compositions. As their relationship grows throughout the film, the compositions grow more conventional and therefore comfortable for the viewer. Indeed, as cinematographer Danny Cohen, BSC puts it;

If somebody is looking off-screen to the right, you'd normally put them in the left of frame, leaving space on the right — that's what is generally conceived as a comfortable image," explains Cohen. "But if you put that same face very close to the right-hand side of the frame, it

feels kind of jagged. It's not an easy watch, and putting people in uncomfortable positions worked for this story. (Oppenheimer, 2010, p. 22)



Figure 6. Bertie (Colin Firth) is discussing his stammer with therapist Lionel Logue. Logue is sitting directly in front of Bertie, however, the composition shows empty space behind Bertie rather than toward the other character as is conventional (*The King's Speech*, Hooper 2010).

This excessively wide frame (figure 6) that makes Firth look distant, does in fact do a fine job of communicating to the viewer the mindset of the character in this scene. This frame can be compared with the paintings of the American artist Edward Hopper, likewise well known for his depictions of lonely individuals in his depression era paintings. Bertie's stammer isolates him in an awkward lonely world where he struggles to connect with those around him; especially his public. So too, the characters in Edward Hopper's paintings are lonely individuals isolated in their environments. The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes Hopper's style as "clearly outlined forms in strongly defined lighting, a cropped composition with an almost "cinematic" viewpoint, and a mood of eerie stillness," ("Edward Hopper (1882-1967)," MoMa). This approach is evident in *New York Movie* (Hopper, 1939) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Edward Hopper's *New York Movie* depicts this bored, and perhaps lonely, usherette separate from the entertainment of the theatre (Hopper, 1939).

The usherette in this painting is on the edge of the frame, far from the right vertical thirds line, just as she is on the edge of this film watching community. Seemingly the focus of this frame, the centre of the image, is a large column. However, this architectural and structural device separates these two opposing worlds, just as the column itself has a detailed, ornate and richer side, and a plain side.

Behind the apparent simplicity of Hopper's paintings lies great complexity and depth. The lack of details invites the spectator to complete the image by speculating on past and impending events, on the relationships between the characters, and on the desires and anxieties provoked by our own need to examine these characters' lives. (Peacock, 2017)

This statement could also be applied to Hooper and Cohen's compositions in *The King's Speech* (2010), however, due to the cinema narrative's capacity for more expansive story telling the characters' lives are examined and presented to the viewer over time. This depiction of loneliness, introspection and uncomfortableness slowly disappears over the length of the story finishing on a familiar and conventional

composition for the film's final frame, one that communicates a sense of normality and control for the life of the new King; a conclusion and happy ending.



Figure 8. Bertie (Colin Firth) greets his public following his successful radio broadcast in this conventional composition; *The King's Speech* (2010).

It is perhaps the restriction of a still, single frame, a composition, that drives paintings generally, and Hopper's work specifically, to utilise composition in all its power to help depict the feelings and themes present within the narrative encapsulated in his paintings. Perhaps the absence of this restriction in filmmaking and television narratives have led to an over reliance on content and also stylistic options of form, other than composition, to tell the story. This, however, has not prevented Hooper from utilising the technique in his films. The depiction of loneliness and isolation is a theme that continues to be represented in his films through composition amongst other techniques of cinematography. Likewise, there are links explored in the next section of this article between Hooper's *The Danish Girl* (2015) and the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi.

SECTION THREE: HOOPER AND HAMMERSHØI

The excessive head room and incorrect (or opposing) lead room presented in *The King's Speech* (2010) is also a technique Hooper and Cohen applied to their most recent film *The Danish Girl* (2015). The film tells the true story of landscape artist Einar Wegener and his identification as a woman, and eventual sexual reassignment surgery, to become Lili Elbe. The film is based on the novel of the same name by author David

Ebershoff, though it has been criticised widely as inaccurate to the lives of Wegener/Elbe and his wife, the portrait artist Gerda Wegener. Hooper and Cohen are less overt with the use of their unconventional compositions in this film utilising the technique only during a few specific dramatic moments in the narrative, such as in figure 9 where Wegener/Elbe feels out of place amongst men, or, the moment of first encounter in figure 10 when Wegener/Elbe is approached by Henrik who is seeking a romantic relationship.



Figure 9. Einar Wegener (later to become Lili Elbe and played by actor Eddie Redmayne) is discussing his paintings with other men and feeling distinctly out of place as is reflected in the composition of this shot, *The Danish Girl* (2015).



Figure 10. Lili Elbe (Eddie Redmayne) is romantically approached by Henrik (Ben Whishaw) in his first outing as a female (*The Danish Girl*, Hopper 2015).

Hooper and Cohen both referenced Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (see figure 12) for the colour palette, set design and composition in this film. Cohen notes that “he painted people in rooms, often from a back or side view — never flat-on,” (Dillon, 2016, p. 84). This can be seen most clearly in figure 11 which shows Wegener/Elbe by herself prior to her sexual reassignment surgery.



Figure 11. Lili Elbe (Eddie Redmayne) is waiting in a bare lonely flat. This scene precedes her sexual reassignment surgery and is greatly influenced by the paintings of Hammershøi (*The Danish Girl*, Hopper 2015).



Figure 12. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor*, depicts an unknown woman (likely the painter's wife, Ida) from behind. (1901).

Hammershøi is widely known for his unconventional compositions where he puts the subject on the edge of the canvas and usually paints them from behind or the side - a view rarely seen and seemingly counterintuitive in portraiture. The New York Times described Hammershøi as a painter of tranquil rooms and wrote about *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor*:

Reading metaphorically, this picture suggests a choice for the viewer. The door might lead out into the light of divine reason; or your attention might move left toward a kind of inwardness embodied by the meditative woman. Hammershøi seems stuck at the threshold of alternative modes of consciousness, paralyzed by existential uncertainty, and that gives his paintings a smoldering psychology of doubtful hesitancy. His rooms are not so tranquil after all (Johnson, 2015).

This commentary could as easily be applied to the frame in figure 11 and thus shows the extent to which the filmmakers referenced this artist, but also, as shown for *The King's Speech* (2010), the continued use of composition as a stylistic form informed by content in Tom Hooper's films.

Hammershøi himself claimed in 1907 that there was nothing more important than the lines in his paintings, only to be followed by the light in his scale of importance — without a mention at all for people, (Stanska, 2016). Some critics have also suggested that there is no narrative behind his paintings at all and that, in fact, the subjects within in them (quite often his wife Ida) are only situated within the frame to be used as a balance for good composition. However, no matter how little detail is in the painting it is impossible for the viewer to disregard any possibility for narrative. The viewer would perhaps wonder at the woman in the frame, what is she doing, what is she thinking, who is she? Again, due to the possibilities of narrative cinema we are provided with those answers.

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

There are many excellent examples of compositions in the cinema and television drama genres which are drawn on for the use of educational and instructional texts in filmmaking practice. However, similar to other conventions such as three point lighting, it behoves the authors of these texts and the instructors in the film schools to consider the so called 'rules' of composition as a set of conventions to be taught, and if necessary, to be broken. The rule of thirds, for instance, was a rule first written about in 1797 by engraver and painter John Thomas Smith who was seeking to improve his own composition through a system of convention. In narrative cinema today, the director and cinematographer should consider, as well they might when considering lighting or set design, how composition might best describe the character's internal dialogue to the viewer. Rules can halt inquiry and so perhaps the rule of thirds should be called, simply, the composition of thirds; one of many possible compositional options for filmmakers. Due to a lack of different, unconventional, compositions in narrative cinema and television, filmmakers could turn to painters, as many have done in the past, for colour palette or lighting quality, to reference composition. Painters have generally been more free and less rule bound in their use of composition; perhaps because of the nature of their art form as still frame compared to the multitudinous art form of cinema narrative, both in relation to its ability to develop story and character over time but also its ability to utilise arts other than the cinematographic such as music or sound design to help tell that story. It is also likely due to the industrialisation of the filmmaking workforce that many parts of the practice of filmmaking became rule bound and procedural, developing prescriptive design answers to narratives, and therefore not encouraging the same kind of experimentation that a sole artist can.

The television drama *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015) is the only American television drama currently using unconventional compositions. The filmmakers, and some journalists, have erroneously reported that they are the only television drama using this kind of compositional technique (Marcks, 2016).

Mr. Robot composes its shots like nothing else on television today. Fitting for a show about those occupying society's technological substrata, Mr. Robot's characters are often placed at the very bottom of the frame. This leaves massive amounts of headroom that suggests a great weight hanging over their heads, and echoes their isolation: When they're talking right to each other, they seem alone. In more conventional filmmaking, conversations are cut with the characters looking at each other from opposite ends of the frame, leaving what's known as "leading room" between their faces that helps convey the physical space they occupy. Mr. Robot inverts the norm by "shortsighting" the characters, positioning their faces at the edge of the frame closest toward the person to whom they're speaking (Collins, 2015).

Tod Campbell, ASC, (American Society of Cinematographers accredited) discusses the quandary of how to portray the main character of this story, Elliot, to the audience as he is not a character who shares personal insight through dialogue. Composition became one of the key tools used by the filmmakers to communicate Elliot's state of mind in a given scene. However, the idea of unconventional composition seemed so radical to the cinematographer that he became scared for his future on the project.

It's a heavy cocktail of unconventional approaches, so much so that when Campbell started out... he was scared he'd lose his job over it. "Because USA was a new network for me, and their history is a different, brighter type of storytelling and photography, I was really nervous," he says. "They ultimately became very supportive, of course" (Collins, 2015).

Hopefully these unconventional compositions become more conventional as more narrative cinema and television, such as those discussed in this article, are produced that challenge the rules and conventions. The educational texts can take examples from these films and add these to their chapters on composition suggesting that there are other options when thinking about how to frame a character. This way the next generation of cinematographers and directors can be assured of the freedom to experiment with composition as another tool in their arsenal for storytelling.

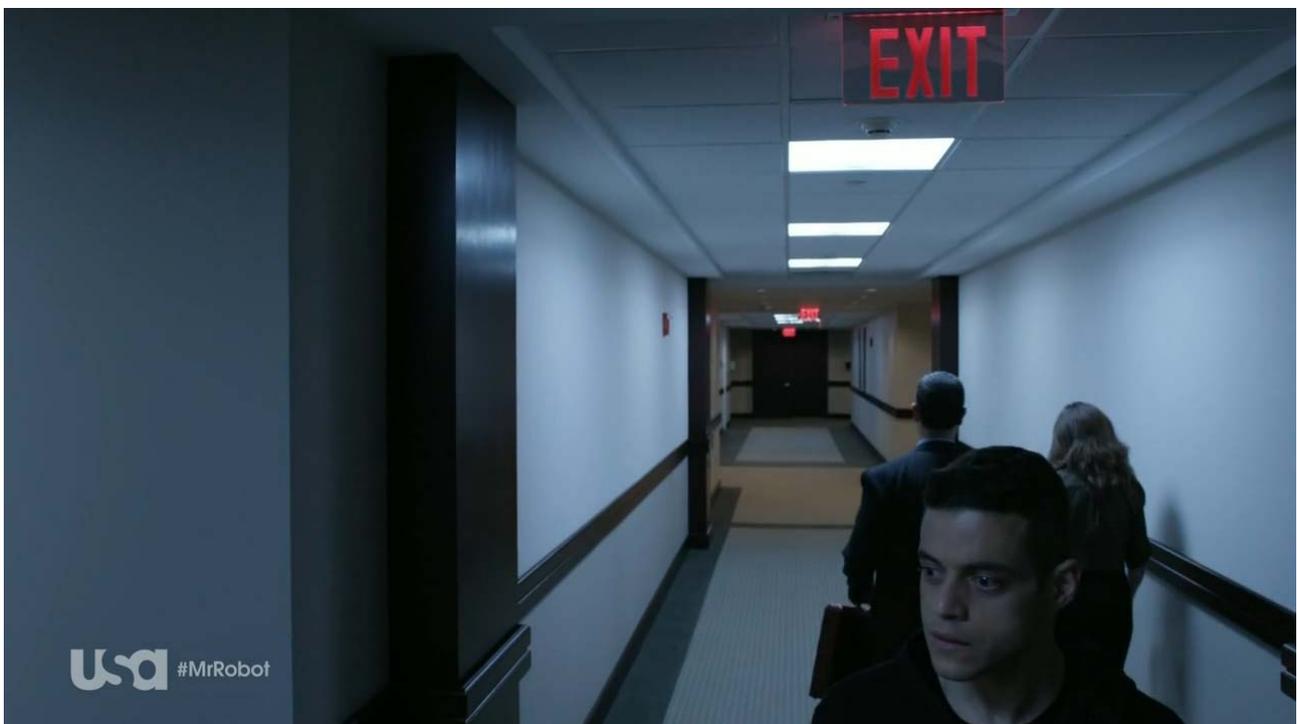


Figure 13. Elliot (Rami Malek) composed to the extreme bottom right of this frame in the unnerving television drama *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015)

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