

**LEFT OR RIGHT?
DIRECTING LATERAL
MOVEMENT IN FILM**

by
Lubomir Kocka

Series in Cinema and Culture



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Dürer, Albrecht (1511-1513) *Kaiser Karl der Große*. [Painting]. Germanisches National Museum, Nuremberg.

PREFACE

PROLOGUE

“Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

Michelangelo Buonarroti

The periods between the films I directed were always the most creative ones. I may have been dreadfully bored, but creative ideas flowed like a river. Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not lazy. I did not enjoy those periods of doing nothing. I did not adopt the theory that laziness makes people productive, a theory which is now backed up by science. How could boredom foster creativity?

I believe those periods of doing nothing enabled me to be better connected to my curiosity. Curiosity sparks wonder, and wonder brought me to think more about what I will do with my life. I began to apply different concepts from seemingly unrelated fields to my personal view of laterality, and came up with a directional concept of laterality.

Most people believe their actions are rational and objective. Artists are sensory human beings, acting emotionally, sometimes with cognitive deficiency. Film students are not trained like law students, who assume that thinking rationally, logically and analytically will help them set aside their existing biases. Implicit attitudes and beliefs form cognitive biases. Take introspection illusion, when we are convinced that our own beliefs are right. Cognitive biases influence our thinking and acting in ways that we are unaware of. However, I try to make my decision-making as rational and objective as possible. I try to base my judgments on a logical analysis of the facts as presented in this book. When postulating a statement, I try to consider the facts that I had access to.

A widespread and fundamental assumption of directional bias in Western culture is rightward bias. That means the preference for movement is oriented rightwards. This can be considered as an example of confirmation bias, one that has a pretty good probability of being true. But no one can accuse me of not seeking disconfirming evidence for my own ideas, or that I was choosing only examples that work for my ideas, cherry-picking studies that may be or look legitimate although suspiciously coincidental.

It's tough to prove you are right without seeming like you're bragging, but this book, without a doubt, validates the original hypothesis of the directional concept of laterality: There is a specific meaning behind lateral movement of a character

across the screen. There is a specific meaning behind which side of the screen a character occupies, and positioning characters in a film shot creates relationships between them, externalizing the interiority of a character, and moving the story forward. Regardless of narrative structure, laterality can reveal backstory, manifest a character's memories or dreams, and modify time perception.

The idea to expand a short chapter from my first book *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Vernon Press, 2018) into a full book is in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the complexity of these issues. My decision to cover not only mainstream cinema but also independent cinema, LGBTQ cinema and porn cinema is a logical progression of those original ideas.

A note on usage: English is missing a gender-neutral, third-person pronoun that could be used in place of “he” or “she” when a situation refers to a person whose gender isn't known, or the usage is not gender-specific, or gender is irrelevant. In order to avoid the risk of calling attention to gender, I have decided to use the pronoun form “he” in situations where I am talking about a performer, an actor, or a director.

LUBOMIR KOCKA: TOWARDS A CONSCIOUS LATERALITY

BY PETER RELIC

There are two sides to a film frame, the left and the right. Like an argument or an affair, these sides depend on each another for tension, definition, and meaning.

In this book, *Left or Right? Directing Lateral Movement in Film*, author Lubomir Kocka studies the importance of these sides, examining their interdependence from psychological, emotional, cultural, and historical perspectives.

A native of Žilina, Slovakia (in former Czechoslovakia), currently a professor of film and television at Savannah College of Art and Design (Savannah, Georgia, U.S.A.), Kocka has written a book distinct in its intentions and achievements. Part philosophical treatise, part technical guidebook, *Left or Right? Directing Lateral Movement in Film* is the work of a creator and educator who has dedicated his life to the art of storytelling.

While the 1960s films of Czech directors Milos Forman, Ivan Passer, Jaromil Jires et al. comprise the Czechoslovak New Wave, Kocka's work as a director—coming roughly a generation afterward—places him in the previously uncategorized Slovak No Wave. His 1992 feature *Od rána do úsvitu* ("From morning till dawn"), a production of Slovenska Televizia Bratislava, remains largely unseen in the west and was only available to this viewer via a degraded transfer.

Od rána do úsvitu concerns a classical conductor named Bartosevic, who is obsessed with Mahler to the exclusion of paying attention to his wife. A bus accident, a determined surgeon, and a mysterious videotape all play key roles in the narrative, the videotape creating a film-within-a-film wherein Kocka addresses the performative act of filmmaking itself.

In one crucial scene, Bartosevic opens a door, looming large as he dominates the left side of the frame. He is followed by a younger conductor. As the two descend a spiral staircase, debating the nature of perfection, the effects of laterality are heightened and distorted, the conductor's twisting descent into darkness shadowed by his rival. When they emerge into the light at the bottom of the stairs, the pair have switched places: the handsome rival now on the stronger left side of the frame as a spent-looking Bartosevic sputters opposite, his overlong overcoat seemingly tugging him further rightward into obsolescence.

Readers of this book may never have the good fortune to see Kocka's earlier films. Yet knowing that Kocka has explored and deployed laterality to great effect in his own work heightens the relevance of the book itself.

As Kocka wrote in his previous book *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Vernon Press, 2018): "Directing is a painstaking process of translating your vision into film. You will be more likely satisfied with your directing if you feel in control of your directorial choices." These choices include the important one presented in the title of this book: *Left or right?*

That Kocka demurs from speaking conclusively on his investigations may unsettle some readers; more adventurous creators will enthusiastically pick up the baton, following the author's urge to see what personal explorations may reveal. As his previous book put it: "The best films still remain unmade."

Films, yes, as well as paintings, video games, theater, and graphic novels. As Kocka emphasizes, laterality applies to all visual media, not just cinema. Any art that is staged or framed can engage laterality as a narrative strategy.

One example is the front cover of *The Joshua Tree*, the breakthrough 1987 album by the Irish rock band U2. Art director Stephen Averill framed the photograph by Anton Corbijn with strict attention to the implications of laterality. The four band members are grouped close together to the extreme left of the frame, as the desolate, majestic vista spreads out behind them. The image evokes the American frontier, histrionic self-regard, and a sort of grimy heroism. Averill was intentionally referencing the work of directors Sergio Leone and John Ford¹, who both deployed left-right laterality to serve symbolic and narrative purposes in their films. These aspects all relate to the hero's journey, which Kocka addresses in this book.

Last but not least, the book engages the moment, exploring how laterality can elevate the stories of traditionally underrepresented groups. An exceptional, chapter-length contribution by filmmaker and critic Steve Stanley on LGBTQ+ cinema is worthy of special attention.

This book will change the way creators create. Yet its purpose is not to replace intuition with book learning. Kocka wants visual artists to understand laterality and its implications while continuing to work from the intuitive wellspring that gives birth to breakthrough art.

Now let the laterality flow.

Peter Relic
Savannah, GA 2020

Peter Relic is a former film and music critic at Rolling Stone.

Notes

¹ Mike Mattler. "Where the Trees Have No Name: Steve Averill on Designing the Artwork for U2's The Joshua Tree." *The Sound Bard*. August 2, 2015. <http://www.soundbard.com/soundbard/where-the-trees-have-no-name-steve-averill-on-designing-the-artwork-for-u2s-the-joshua-tree/>.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lubomir Kocka is a Slovak-American director, screenwriter, professor, and producer. He has had a substantial career as a film and television director both inside the studio system and independently. He has directed nine feature films, thirteen television dramas, and seven TV series and miniseries. He is also the author and co-author of several feature-length screenplays that were produced.

In addition to his directing credits, Kocka is an acclaimed film educator with 17 years' teaching experience at the university level in Europe (Czechoslovakia and France) and 18 years in the U.S.A. He is currently a professor of film and television at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia. He has taught at SCAD since 2002.

Kocka's book *Directing the Narrative and Shot Design: The Art and Craft of Directing* (Vernon Press, 2018) is both distillation and amplification of his life in cinema. The book incorporates references to directors ranging from Bernardo Bertolucci and Jean-Luc Godard to Christopher Nolan and Damien Chazelle, as well as to his own films. The 445-page book contains over 1,000 photographs and schematic illustrations, providing detailed insights into the art and craft of directing. The book was adopted by a number of film schools around the world as a textbook.

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