



Breaking the 180-Degree Rule in Staging to Create Visual Chaos and Tension: A Directorial Analysis of the Short Film *Derita Penunggu Rumah*

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Abstract. This research explores the use of breaking the 180-degree rule as a directorial strategy to build visual chaos and tension in the short film *Derita Penunggu Rumah*, a supernatural comedy. Focusing on the climax scene, the research investigates how spatial disorientation can be achieved through deliberate staging rather than relying solely on camera movement or angle. The creative decision to violate the 180-degree rule was designed to evoke discomfort, emotional confusion, and narrative intensity during moments of conflict. Primary data includes both the short film *Derita Penunggu Rumah* itself and literature on film directing, particularly those discussing spatial composition and staging. The study uses qualitative analysis of shot composition, character positioning, and screen direction to reveal how staging can shape the emotional perception of a scene. Findings show that visual chaos and tension are not exclusively dependent on dynamic cinematography but can also be effectively constructed through intentional disruptions in staging. When such techniques are applied purposefully and in alignment with the film's narrative vision, they enhance the psychological engagement of the audience. This study contributes to the understanding of directorial choices as creative tools to manipulate audience perception and emotion.

Keywords: directing, 180-degree rule, staging, tension, chaos, film *Derita Penunggu Rumah*

1 INTRODUCTION

Film integrates creative and technical elements. Directors are responsible for both narrative development and visualizing how the story is perceived. Rea & Irving (2015) state that directors need creative vision and leadership to coordinate departments and realize their vision. To maintain naturalism, *mise-en-scène* components must be managed. Staging is critical for visual clarity and spatial continuity. Parawangsa & Sitepu (2024) state that effective staging maintains spatial logic and scene naturalness, while

Block (2007) notes that the 180-degree rule is integral to spatial continuity and compositional balance.

Nevertheless, many contemporary directors deliberately break the 180-degree rule to achieve specific effects, such as tension, disorientation, or visual chaos. This technique is prevalent in action, thriller, and horror films, and has been employed by directors such as Stanley Kubrick, Gaspar Noé, and Edgar Wright to intensify the audience's emotional experience. Deliberate violation of the axis is now regarded as an aesthetic strategy rather than a technical error, capable of producing a significant psychological impact.

Film directing significantly influences audience perception, particularly through the organization of visual space and screen direction. A fundamental principle of film grammar, the 180-degree rule, maintains spatial continuity by ensuring consistent screen direction between characters and the camera (Filmmaker Academy, 2021). This rule enables audiences to understand character relationships, movement, and orientation within a scene, thereby supporting narrative coherence and visual clarity.

Contemporary filmmaking increasingly challenges and expands upon the 180-degree rule. Rather than adhering strictly to spatial continuity, filmmakers may intentionally violate the rule to produce emotional and psychological effects. Such violations can disrupt viewer orientation, resulting in visual chaos and heightened tension (Şimşek et al., 2025). These effects are particularly relevant in genres such as horror and suspense, where disorientation intensifies audience engagement and emotional response. Previous studies on the 180-degree rule have primarily examined camera movement, shot composition, and editing techniques, while offering limited attention to staging and actor blocking as sources of spatial disruption. Most existing research conceptualizes axis violation as a cinematographic or editing technique, rather than as a deliberate directorial strategy achieved through staging decisions (Filmmaker Academy, 2021). This gap limits understanding of how directors manipulate spatial continuity through performance, positioning, and movement within the frame.

This study addresses this gap by investigating staging-based axis violation in the short film *Derita Penunggu Rumah*. Specifically, it analyzes how deliberate breaches of the 180-degree rule through character blocking and spatial arrangement generate visual chaos and tension. By focusing on staging rather than camera movement, this research provides a distinct perspective on screen direction and broadens the discussion of axis violation within directing practices.

The objective of this study is to position staging-based axis violations as intentional directorial strategies rather than technical errors or stylistic irregularities, and to analyze their impact on audience perception. In doing so, the study aims to provide theoretical insights and practical implications for filmmakers seeking to use spatial disruption to evoke emotional responses. This research seeks to broaden the discourse on film directing and visual storytelling by demonstrating how purposeful staging decisions can achieve specific narrative and emotional effects.

2 RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine the application of the 180-degree rule in film directing. The analysis focuses on the ways in which staging

and actor blocking contribute to spatial disruption and the creation of visual chaos and tension within cinematic scenes. The primary unit of analysis is the climax scene of the short film *Derita Penunggu Rumah*. This scene is deliberately selected as it represents the peak of emotional intensity and spatial complexity, where axis violations are most prominent and significantly influence audience perception. Focusing on this segment enables the study to capture the most critical application of staging-based spatial disruption.

A shot-by-shot qualitative spatial analysis is applied to examine staging, screen direction, and viewer perception. Each shot is analyzed for (1) character blocking and staging, assessing how actor positioning and movement establish or disrupt the axis of action; (2) axis alignment and violation, identifying instances where staging, rather than camera movement, breaks the 180-degree rule; and (3) spectator effect, evaluating perceptual impact, particularly in relation to visual chaos and tension. The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, the selected scene is segmented into individual shots for detailed observation. Second, each shot is coded according to three analytical aspects: blocking, axis condition, and spectator effect. Third, the coded data are interpreted using relevant theories of film grammar, screen direction, and viewer cognition to establish the relationship between staging decisions and audience response.

Visual chaos is defined as a disruption of spatial continuity that causes viewer disorientation. Tension refers to psychological unease resulting from uncertainty in screen direction and character position. These definitions are used throughout the analysis. This study notes limitations despite its systematic approach. As a qualitative analysis, interpretation of staging and audience perception is subjective and does not include empirical audience data. Future research may add audience-based methods to validate perceptual effects found here.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 180 Degree Rule

Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier (2020) identifies the 180-degree rule as an essential tool for directors to control visual orientation within a scene, whether characters are engaged in dialogue or moving through space. This rule underpins staging and editing practices that maintain spatial continuity and prevent visual confusion for the audience. By keeping the camera on one side of the line of action, the spatial relationships between characters or objects remain consistent and comprehensible.

The line of action refers to an imaginary axis connecting two characters or primary elements within a scene. For instance, if character A appears on the left side of the frame and character B on the right, the line of action extends between them. To preserve staging consistency, the camera must remain on one side of this axis during filming. Consequently, subsequent shots should maintain character A on the left facing right, and character B on the right facing left. This approach ensures continuity in both the direction of gaze and character positioning, preventing abrupt shifts in spatial orientation for the audience.

Bordwell et al. (2024) emphasise that the 180-degree rule constitutes a fundamental principle of continuity editing. This rule supplies essential spatial orientation cues between characters or objects, thereby maintaining clear visual relationships. Adherence to this rule ensures that the audience retains context and does not experience confusion, as the positions and directions of characters' gazes remain consistent across consecutive shots.

Block (2007) asserts that the 180-degree rule is a foundational principle of spatial continuity, ensuring that scenes maintain a consistent orientation for viewers. Violating this imaginary axis can result in 'jumping the line,' where the camera shifts to the opposite side of the line of action, thereby reversing the left-right positions of characters. Such a shift can disorient the audience by abruptly altering the perceived spatial layout. Nevertheless, Block notes that the 180-degree rule is not absolute; directors may intentionally break it to generate confusion or tension as a deliberate creative strategy.

Block (2007) further associates the concept of chaos with staging, suggesting that chaos emerges when the compositional balance within the frame is disrupted, such as through uncontrolled character movements lacking clear direction. When these movements obscure spatial orientation, the 180-degree rule is effectively violated. As a result, the audience loses a stable visual reference, leading to a perception of chaos within the composition.

Consistent with this perspective, Stork (2013) introduces the concept of Chaos Cinema to describe a trend in contemporary filmmaking, particularly in action genres, where traditional cinematic principles such as the 180-degree rule are frequently disregarded. According to Stork, Chaos Cinema deprioritises clear lines of action in favor of generating a strong emotional impact. His analysis of modern films reveals that many intentionally break the 180-degree rule, often resulting in audience disorientation and confusion.

Lannom (2025) identifies several films, such as *The Shining*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Do the Right Thing*, *American Beauty*, *25th Hour*, and *Hulk*, that intentionally violate the 180-degree rule. These examples demonstrate that breaking the linear axis can serve as a legitimate visual strategy to intensify the viewing experience, despite the potential risk of disrupting the audience's spatial orientation.

Ascher & Pincus (2012) contend that violating the 180-degree rule can confuse viewers and disrupt their perception of character relationships. To mitigate abrupt transitions, some directors employ neutral shots, positioned centrally or outside the line of action, as a bridge before establishing a new axis. Wood (2004) further supports this approach, noting that visual, psychological, and narrative chaos can be instrumental in generating tension, particularly within cinematic frameworks influenced by Hitchcock. Thus, deliberate violations of the 180-degree rule can contribute to tension when integrated thoughtfully within a defined aesthetic and dramatic context.

3.2 Staging

Bordwell et al. (2024) identify staging as a component of *mise en scène*, defined as the arrangement of characters and objects within cinematic space to generate meaning and support the narrative. Staging enables directors to guide the audience's attention toward

significant story elements, communicate character relationships through positioning and blocking, and collaborate with cinematographers to produce visual compositions that are both aesthetically pleasing and narratively significant. Staging therefore determines not only “who stands where,” but also how the audience interprets the scene's relationships, focal points, and dynamics.

Block (2007) supports Bordwell and Thompson's perspective by emphasizing that staging regulates the spatial relationships among characters, objects, and other components of *mise en scène*. Staging encompasses more than character placement; it also involves camera movement, frame composition, and additional visual elements that collectively construct a scene. By organizing space and movement, the director shapes visual rhythm and directs the audience's gaze, while preserving coherence Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier (2020) presents a similar perspective but places greater emphasis on the psychological function of staging. He argues that staging extends beyond visual aesthetics to include the director's role in positioning characters and the camera to build tension or evoke psychological responses in the film. Staging is therefore significant because it guides character movement, thereby clarifying relationships and emotions for the audience. and emotions for the audience.

Fur Rabiger further contends that carefully designed character movements communicate feelings, motivations, and conflicts within the narrative. The manner in which characters move, approach or distance themselves, face one another, or turn away provides supplementary information that is not always conveyed through dialogue. These movements influence the audience's understanding of the situation and the characters' responses to conflict. Consequently, staging serves as a primary tool for directors to shape the audience's emotional experience and underscore the dramatic significance of a scene.

3.3 Suspense

According to Kenworthy (2012), the theory of suspense emphasises the importance of information, time, and space in building anxiety in the audience. Hitchcock explains that suspense arises when the audience is aware of a threat that the characters are not yet aware of, thus creating an information gap that causes anxiety. Bordwell et al. (2024) assert that suspense can arise from physical or psychological threats, conveyed through spatial arrangements and the rhythm of information delivery.

Lehmann (2017) states that suspense can be created through spatial manipulation, including the placement of characters in the foreground and background, shot duration, and camera movements that withhold or reveal information. Wang & Wang (2020) also show that visual chaos and changes in spatial identity in films can strengthen the audience's emotional response. Breaking the 180-degree rule can heighten the scene's intensity by inducing disorientation in the audience.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Staging-Based Axis Violation and Spatial Disruption

Analysis of the climax scene in *Derita Penunggu Rumah* reveals a deliberate violation of the 180-degree rule, achieved through staging rather than camera movement. The spatial axis is initially established using conventional shot-reverse-shot composition, which allows the audience to clearly perceive the relationship between characters. As the scene develops, actor blocking crosses the established axis of action, thereby disrupting spatial continuity.

This staging decision produces a perceptual shift in which the audience can no longer rely on consistent screen direction—the arrangement of elements onscreen from shot to shot—to interpret spatial orientation, defined as the positioning of characters and objects relative to one another. Crossing the axis, which occurs when actors or the camera move across the imaginary dividing line in the scene, generates visual inconsistency and contributes to visual chaos, understood as the disruption of expected visual order. This phenomenon aligns with theories of film grammar, which emphasize the importance of spatial continuity—the logical arrangement of space—in maintaining viewer comprehension. When spatial continuity is intentionally disrupted, viewers experience disorientation and must actively reconstruct spatial relationships within the scene (Brine, n.d.).

Conventional axis violation is typically achieved by repositioning the camera. In this scene, however, disruption arises primarily from character blocking. The actors move along the axis within a continuous spatial setup, with minimal changes in camera position. This demonstrates that staging alone can control screen direction and indicates that spatial continuity depends not only on cinematography but also on directorial decisions regarding performance and movement.

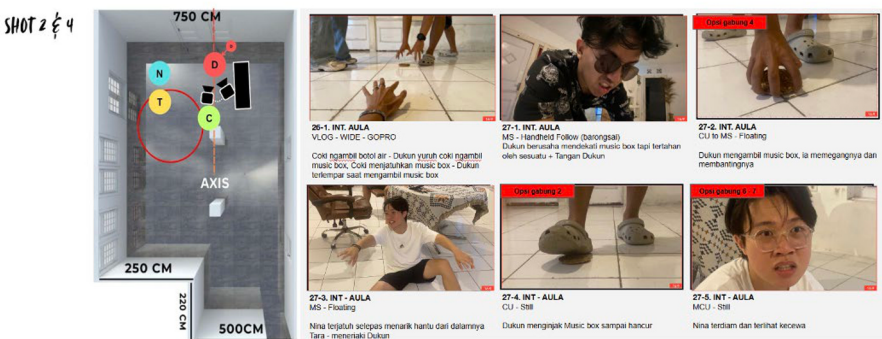


Figure 1. Floorplan & Shot List scene 26-27 (Personal Documentation)

At this stage, the analysis focuses on the violation of the 180-degree rule in the staging of scene 27 (Figure 1). This scene was chosen because it is uniquely positioned as the climax, where Nina's realization of betrayal and her intense emotional transformation occur, shifting from a hopeful ghost to an angry, scary figure. Selecting this scene allows for a vivid illustration of how breaking the 180-degree rule enhances narrative tension and chaos, effectively impacting both characters and audience. The writer/director consciously breaks the 180-degree rule from shot 2 to shot 16 to convey this tension and chaos felt by the characters and the audience. The analysis is divided into two main sequences of scenes: when Nina's music box is destroyed, and when Nina is disappointed again by Mister Misteri.

4.2 Staging-Based Axis Violation and Spatial Disruption

Analysis of the climax scene in *Derita Penunggu Rumah* reveals a deliberate violation of the 180-degree rule, achieved through staging rather than camera movement. The spatial axis is initially established using a conventional shot-reverse-shot structure, enabling the audience to form a stable understanding of spatial relationships between characters (Kocka, 2019). This early visual consistency serves as a baseline, allowing viewers to construct a clear mental map of the scene.



Figure 2. Still Shot 2-9
(Personal Documentation)

As the sequence progresses, spatial stability deteriorates due to changes in actor blocking. Characters gradually move across the established axis of action without corresponding adjustments in camera position, disrupting spatial continuity (Kocka, 2019). This shift is subtle yet significant: although the camera appears to maintain continuity, the internal spatial logic of the scene is altered through performance and positioning. As a result, the audience can no longer rely on consistent screen direction—the arrangement of visual elements from shot to shot—to interpret spatial orientation, which refers to the relative positioning of characters and objects within the frame (Figure 2).

A concrete example of this disruption occurs during the confrontation in the climax scene. The spatial axis is initially established when the main character faces the opposing figure in a left-to-right screen direction, creating a stable visual orientation. As the interaction intensifies, the character shifts laterally across the frame, crossing the established axis while the camera remains stationary (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020). In the subsequent shot, the same character appears on the opposite side of the frame but maintains a similar facing direction, resulting in a reversal of perceived screen direction. This creates a perceptual contradiction: the visual composition appears continuous, yet the spatial logic has changed. This inconsistency produces visual instability, contributing to what can be defined as visual chaos, or the breakdown of expected spatial order within the scene.

The camera remains relatively static and provides no explicit cues to indicate a spatial shift. This lack of visual guidance intensifies the ambiguity of the disruption, as the inconsistency is embedded within staging rather than presented through overt cinematic techniques. Furthermore, the disruption unfolds progressively throughout the scene rather than a single abrupt break. This gradual crossing of the axis through successive blocking decisions prevents viewers from immediately recognizing the source of spatial inconsistency, thereby prolonging disorientation.

Consequently, spatial disruption functions not only as a visual phenomenon but also as a temporal strategy that develops over the course of the sequence (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020). Overall, this analysis demonstrates that staging-based axis violation serves as a deliberate directorial strategy to destabilize spatial orientation. By embedding axis disruption within actor movement rather than camera manipulation, the director creates a more implicit and psychologically engaging form of visual disturbance. This finding reinforces the argument that spatial continuity in film is not solely governed by cinematography but is equally constructed through staging decisions that influence how audiences perceive and interpret space.

4.3 Tension as a Psychological Response

Spatial disorientation caused by staging-based axis violation is instrumental in generating tension during the climax of *Derita Penunggu Rumah*. Disrupting the 180-degree axis through character blocking destabilises the scene's spatial logic and compels viewers to reassess the relative positions of characters (Kachkovski et al., 2019). This disruption increases cognitive effort, as audiences cannot rely on consistent screen direction to interpret spatial relationships (Şimşek et al., 2025). As a result, perceptual instability manifests as psychological unease, serving as a fundamental element in the construction of tension.

This mechanism is exemplified in a shot from the climax sequence where a character moves laterally across the frame, crossing the established axis of action without a corresponding camera repositioning. In the preceding shot, the character is positioned on the left side of the frame facing right, establishing a stable screen direction. In the following shot, due to staging-based repositioning, the same character appears on the opposite side of the frame while maintaining a similar orientation. This shift disrupts the viewer's internal spatial mapping, as the expected continuity of screen direction is broken. Consequently, the audience experiences momentary confusion regarding the character's position, direction, or relational orientation to others in the scene.

The effect intensifies due to the absence of explicit visual cues indicating spatial transition. Conventional axis violation typically employs camera movement to signal shifts in perspective (Kachkovski et al., 2019). In this instance, staging introduces a more subtle discontinuity. The camera remains stationary while the actor's movement alters the spatial logic. This subtle inconsistency prompts viewers to reconstruct the spatial arrangement, increasing cognitive load, and reinforcing disorientation.

Within the film's horror context, this perceptual instability directly contributes to the creation of tension (Cheng et al., 2023). As viewers attempt to maintain a coherent understanding of spatial relationships, unpredictability emerges, preventing anticipation of character interactions or movements, and thereby heightening suspense. Instead of relying on conventional horror techniques such as sound design or lighting, the scene generates tension through manipulation of spatial continuity. This approach supports Armstrong and Cutting's (2022) argument that disruptions in visual continuity can significantly influence audience perception by increasing uncertainty and attentional engagement.

This example demonstrates that tension in *Derita Penunggu Rumah* arises not only from narrative conflict but is also actively constructed through staging decisions that disrupt spatial orientation. The deliberate use of axis violation through actor blocking transforms spatial inconsistency into a psychological device, reinforcing the director's role in shaping audience experience beyond conventional cinematic techniques (Chang, 2012).



Figure 3. Still Shot 2-9
(Personal Documentation)

4.4 Staging-Based Axis Violation as a Directorial Strategy

This study demonstrates that axis violations resulting from staging are not simply technical errors or stylistic irregularities. Instead, they function as deliberate directorial strategies that shape audience perception and emotional response. Through the control of actor movement and spatial arrangement within the frame, directors can intentionally disrupt visual continuity to elicit specific psychological effects, such as disorientation and tension (Kashaka, 2025).

An illustrative example of this strategy appears in the climactic confrontation scene described in the manuscript. Initially, the spatial axis is established through stable character positioning, enabling the audience to comprehend the relational orientation between the main character and the opposing figure. As the scene intensifies, the director introduces gradual shifts in blocking, with the main character moving laterally across the frame and crossing the established axis without corresponding camera repositioning (Kachkovski et al., 2019). In the following shot, the character appears on the opposite side of the frame while maintaining a similar facing direction, resulting in a reversal of perceived screen direction (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2020). This shift is intentional and carefully staged to destabilize the viewer's spatial understanding at a critical emotional moment in the narrative.

This example demonstrates that staging-based axis violations are integrated into the storytelling process rather than serving as isolated visual devices. The spatial disruption occurs at a moment of heightened narrative tension, reinforcing the emotional conflict within the scene (Bente et al., 2022). By aligning spatial instability with narrative escalation, the director transforms axis violation into an expressive tool that enhances audience engagement (Cutting, 2016). In this context, the breakdown of spatial continuity functions as a mechanism for generating meaning rather than disrupting it.

This perspective expands upon the conventional 180-degree rule, which states that the camera should remain on one side of an imaginary axis between two characters to maintain consistent screen direction. Traditionally, this guideline has been considered within the context of cinematographic practice. While camera placement and editing are essential for spatial coherence, this study demonstrates that staging—the placement and movement of actors—also plays a critical role in constructing screen direction and shaping viewer perception (Filmmaker Academy, 2021). Through thoughtful blocking decisions, directors can control spatial orientation without moving the camera, thereby expanding the expressive potential of film directing.

The use of staging-based axis violations in *Derita Penunggu Rumah* demonstrates that directing encompasses more than visual composition; it involves orchestrating the audience's experience. Deliberate spatial misalignment prompts viewers to engage more actively, resolving perceptual inconsistencies as they interpret the narrative (Kashaka, 2025). This combination of cognitive and emotional engagement intensifies the viewing experience. Ultimately, staging-based axis violation constitutes a strategic directorial approach in which spatial disruption is intentionally designed to influence audience perception and emotional response. By reframing from axis violation as a deliberate strategy rather than a technical error, this study broadens the understanding of how film meaning emerges from the interaction of staging, perception, and narrative.

5 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that directors may intentionally violate the 180-degree rule through staging and actor blocking, rather than relying solely on camera movements or editing. Analysis of the climax in *Derita Penunggu Rumah* reveals that spatial disruption can be achieved within the frame through actor movement, thereby challenging the notion that screen direction is primarily a cinematographic concern. The findings indicate that staging-based axis violations disrupt spatial continuity, resulting in visual chaos and perceptual disorientation. This disruption increases cognitive load and compels viewers to reconstruct spatial relationships within the scene. Consequently, this perceptual instability directly contributes to the emergence of tension, positioning spatial manipulation as a central mechanism in shaping audience emotion.

Furthermore, this study establishes that staging-based axis violation is not merely a technical or stylistic choice but is integrated into the narrative structure during moments of heightened emotional intensity. By embedding spatial disruption within the storytelling process, directing extends beyond visual composition to encompass the orchestration of audience perception through spatial and performative control, thereby further aligning directorial intent with narrative progression. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to film studies by broadening the discussion of the 180-degree rule beyond cinematography, emphasizing the significance of staging in constructing screen direction and cinematic meaning.

In practice, the findings suggest that filmmakers can employ blocking and spatial arrangements as expressive tools to generate disorientation and tension, rather than relying solely on camera techniques. However, this study is limited by its qualitative approach and the lack of empirical data on audience reception. Future research should incorporate audience-based methods to further validate the perceptual effects identified and to examine staging-based axis violations across various genres and film contexts.

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