

From Stage to Screen

From From Stage to Screen: A Theatre Actor's Guide to Working on Camera, by Bill Britten, (Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2014)

Understanding the Lens - The Doughnut

When we look at people, we look at their eyes. As soon as babies can focus, they look at people's eyes. Even dogs and cats, it's said even rats, look at people's eyes to read their intentions. So as soon as you appear on screen, this is where the audience will be looking. Making your performance available to the audience means making sure they have access to your eyes. And this means keeping your gaze primarily in the area around the camera.

However, you are probably also aware that you should never look straight at the camera unless explicitly told to by the director. The reason for this is simple: it breaks the fourth wall. One of the illusions of the screen is that we, the audience, can watch a character from very close up without them knowing we're there. As soon as the character looks down the lens, it feels as though they are looking directly at us and therefore the illusion is shattered.

So this gives us a ring-shaped area around the camera that respects the taboo of not looking directly at the audience but in which the eyes – the windows to the soul – remain accessible. I call this area 'the doughnut' and working within it is the key to powerful screen acting.



The 'Doughnut'

During much of your time on screen you probably won't need to give any thought as to where you direct your eyes because your – the character's – attention is on some external stimulus, for example, another character, a sunset, a car that's backfired, someone in the distance, etc. Off-screen characters will be positioned by the director or camera operator so

your eyes can be seen, and with things that are not actually physically there, you'll probably be told where to look. (If not, ask.)
But there will also be moments when your attention is on internal stimuli – you're just thinking.



Looking down the lens – breaking the fourth wall.



Within the doughnut – windows to the soul open.



Outside the doughnut – windows to the soul closed.

Most commonly, this will be when you're in a dialogue with another character and you break eye contact to consider what's just been said or think how to respond (remember, working on camera is about re acting as much as acting). Unless you, or the director, choose that the audience should not have access to your inner world (and this is a perfectly

legitimate artistic choice), you should be looking roughly between the inner and outer circles of the doughnut because outside this area, it does not matter how profound or intense your emotion, the audience has no access to it and they are simply witnessing somebody having an experience they cannot share.

It's impossible to be precise about how large the doughnut is. It will depend on the lighting, the depth of the actors' eye sockets, their brow prominence and several other factors that you cannot control. It's also not a straightforward question of being in or out. Rather, as you look further away from the camera, your eyes become less accessible until, eventually, we cannot see anything meaningful in them.

Rather than working within the doughnut as a purely mechanical technique, the best way to think about it is to couple it with the desire to share your experience with the audience and look in the vicinity of the camera. And, by the way, 'the doughnut' is not a term that's in standard use within the industry. So don't expect someone else to understand what you mean by it unless they've been a student of mine (*Bill Britten*) or have read this book.

TRY IT:

What follows is the first of a number of exercises to explore how to use eye movement on camera. Film yourself, or ideally get someone to do each one and play it back. If you don't have access to something that will record, you can do the exercises anyway – designate an object as an imaginary camera and try to notice what happens to your eyes.

1. Think of something about which you feel strongly and improvise a bit of a rant about it. If you have a friend who's willing to be on the receiving end, then great. But if you don't, then tell an imaginary person. You'll very likely find that you break eye contact at times as you think of what to say next or pause for breath.

2. Try it again, but see if you can keep your eyes within the doughnut. In playback you'll see how much more accessible your inner world is.

Eye movement

I've already argued that the movement of our eyes reflects our inner thoughts and emotions and I want to return to the observation that, in life, our attention is either out there, in an external sense – seeking information – or inside – processing and reflecting. Specifically the *in here* bit is often accompanied by our gazing into the middle distance. These are the moments when, sitting on a train, we find ourselves staring into the lap of the person opposite us. We are not really looking at them. Mentally we're miles away.

Sometimes, as we're doing this, our eyes move involuntarily. It seems this helps us reflect. For example, if you watch somebody who is thinking through possible courses of action, you will often see their eyes flit from side to side.

To really understand this process think of the actor either 'sharing' or 'showing'.

For an example, if the actor is relating their hopes and aspirations, their eyes will automatically move appropriately. This is 'being real' – the actor is living *truthfully* in their imaginary circumstances and their eye movements will be completely natural – and won't need directing. All that needs keeping a check on is that these natural eye movements remain within the doughnut.

TRY IT:

Film yourself going through each of the following scenarios in your mind. Place the camera slightly to one side so you're not looking down the lens. Start by looking ahead and commit yourself to imagining the situation as fully as possible, letting your gaze go where it wants to. After you've done them in order, watch the footage back and observe what your eyes do. You might also want to go back and try each one with your eyes deliberately looking to the side and/or up or down and see whether certain movements make things easier or harder.

1. Remember a lovely moment from your childhood. Identify where you were, what happened and how it made you feel.
2. Recall an occasion when you felt upset about something and where you were at that time. What did you see and hear and what happened?
3. Recall the voice of your mother or someone significant from your childhood. Try to hear the tones of the voice and how you respond to them.
4. Imagine your phone rings and you hear your favourite movie star introducing him/herself and asking you to come and meet him/her for a part in their next film. How do you feel? What do you say to them?

You will probably find that your eyes naturally move as you imagine or remember. And you may see that depending on where your gaze goes, your inner world becomes more or less visible.

Do the exercise again and explore different eye movements. If some of them lead your eyes to travel downwards or away from the camera, try simultaneously allowing your eyes to move naturally, but within the range of the doughnut.

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