

# “You’re Tearing Me Apart”: Deconstructing Mise-en-Scène in *Rebel Without A Cause*

Jason Lee Guthrie  
Samford University

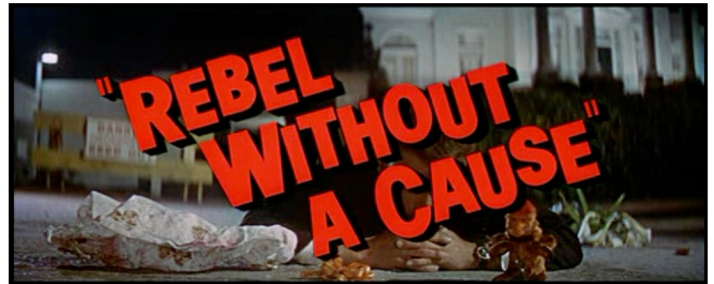
This paper was presented at the 2019 International Summit of the  
Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association  
March 21-23, 2019

<https://doi.org/10.25101/19.13>

## Abstract

Mise-en-scène describes the placement of all characters and objects within the scope of the camera’s lens. Stylistically, it can be used to describe the director’s “eye,” all that they choose to reveal, or conceal, within a shot. It refers to such specific elements as props, position, posture, point-of-view, camera angle, color, and lighting. When skillfully employed the effect can be dramatic, intensely emotional, captivating, and even iconic. Director Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) is considered to be a preeminent example of exceptional mise-en-scène. As one of the truly iconic American films of its era, *Rebel* relies heavily on character development, superb acting, and storytelling to further its plot. Much of the storytelling is done through the use of mise-en-scène. A deconstruction of this technique is useful for both theoretical and pedagogical applications in the study of film.

Keywords: film studies, mise-en-scène, auteur studies, cinema studies, *Rebel Without A Cause*, Nicholas Ray



Mise-en-scène, French for “setting in the scene,” is a term used to describe the placement of all characters and objects within the scope of the camera’s lens (Prunes 2002). Stylistically, it can be used to describe the director’s “eye,” all that they choose to reveal, or conceal, within a shot. It refers to such specific elements as props, position, posture, point-of-view, camera angle, color, and lighting. Mise-en-scène describes the “language of film;” everything that the film medium has at its disposal, and that it uses to tell a story (Considine 1996). When skillfully employed the effect can be dramatic, intensely emotional, captivating, and even iconic.

Director Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) is widely considered to be a preeminent example of exceptional mise-en-scène. As one of the truly iconic American films of its era, *Rebel* relies heavily on character development, superb acting, and storytelling to further its plot. Much of the storytelling is done through the use of mise-en-scène. The film follows a day in the life of Jim Stark, masterfully portrayed by James Dean. Stark is a troubled teen, regularly in trouble with the law, and is constantly moved from town to town by his parents. The film opens with Jim getting taken to the police station, where we are introduced to the two other principal characters, Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Sal Mineo).

*Rebel* goes on to chronicle Jim’s first day at a new school. A trip to the Planetarium finds Jim already at odds with his new classmates, and he is challenged to a knife fight by Buzz (Corey Allen), the leader of a local gang. The knife fight ends, but Buzz challenges Jim further, culminating in

## Behind the Scenes: James Dean



One of the most promising actors of the 1950s, James Dean died tragically in a car accident only three days before his most memorable film, “Rebel Without A Cause,” was released (Slocum 2005, p. 12). Although it was a terrible blow to the artistic community in Hollywood, there is no doubt that it contributed greatly to the original, and continued, interest in the film. James Dean played major roles in two other films, “East of Eden” (1955) and “Giant” (1956), before he died at the age of 24.

a “chickie-run”. The challenge is to race two cars towards the end of a cliff, and the first to jump out of the vehicle is considered “chicken”. Tragedy strikes when Buzz finds his sleeve caught on the handle of the door, and is not able to get out in time, plummeting to his death. Jim drives a distraught Judy and Plato back to his home and confronts his parents with what has happened. They disagree on the way to handle the situation, and Jim storms out. After finding Judy, he takes her to an abandoned mansion, where Plato joins them. Members of Buzz’s gang, who believe that Jim has told the police about Buzz’s death, follow them. A scuffle occurs, Plato draws a gun, and eventually takes refuge back in the nearby Planetarium. Officers arrive on the scene while Jim and Judy go in after Plato and convince him to come out. The film ends as Plato is hastily shot by one of the Policemen, and a weeping Jim hunches over his body. In a final, hopeful note, the events of the day bring a measure of reconciliation between Jim and his parents as his father places his coat on Jim in a sign of love, protection, and acceptance.

To study mise-en-scène in this movie, it is helpful to focus

on a few key scenes and analyze both how the director employs technique within these scenes and how they relate to the film as a whole. This study will consider the film’s introduction, the opening scene at Police Headquarters, the knife fight scene, the scene of an argument between Jim and his parents, and the final scene that takes place in an abandoned mansion and the Planetarium. While mise-en-scène is employed throughout this movie, these scenes are especially illustrative of the technique, and this justifies their inclusion at the expense of other scenes that could have been chosen.

## Scene 1: Introduction

Director Nicholas Ray has written of film that it is “...a medium in which the image and not the word has the final impact” (Slocum 2005, 27). Certainly this is true in his work on *Rebel Without A Cause*. From the very beginning, we are introduced to the movie’s star, Jim Stark, and signaled that he will be an interesting and peculiar character. As an intoxicated Jim lies down in the street to play with a toy monkey, the camera “lies down” as well. We are on his level; we are invited to enter into his world.

Essayist Susan White writes, “Ray’s mise-en-scène and cinematography, particularly...in the film’s early scenes, prime the viewer...to sympathize with Jim...” (Slocum 2005, 59). We are also introduced to a character that is no longer a boy, but not yet a man. The particular choice of

## Behind the Scenes: Introduction



At the outset, “Rebel Without A Cause” was not high on the Warner Bros. priority list, and it was scheduled to be filmed in black and white. When several scenes had to be redone in color, some budget cuts had to be made, including dramatically shortening the introduction. Originally, it featured Buzz and the gang senselessly beating a man carrying home Christmas gifts. The toy monkey was one of these gifts, and only after the gang had moved on were we introduced to Jim Stark. The gang violence scene was cut, but the monkey remained, and it is adapted cleverly into the film. (Baer 1999)

using a toy monkey as a prop has somewhat of a Hollywood history, but its inclusion in the final edit signals that ultimately the director felt it carried some meaning, and it is used here to symbolize the coming of age struggle that Jim is experiencing.



As the title and opening credits roll, the text color is bright red, a color that will become a motif in this film. A “motif,” according to Merriam-Webster, is “(1) a usually recurring salient thematic element (as in the arts); especially: a dominant idea or central theme. 2) a single or repeated design or color.” Motifs are common in *Rebel*, and the director frequently uses *mise-en-scène* to highlight them. The screen-covering dominance of the opening text (such as in the picture at the beginning of this article) is obvious. Yet, there are numerous times that motif is reiterated in the film through a slow zoom, a lingering pause, or by choice of props. We see this here in the introduction as the red hat of the toy monkey matches the text color. This motif will continue into the next scene, where we will also be introduced to other creative ways in which the director employs the language of film.

## Scene 2: Juvenile Delinquents

In these early moments, Jim has been picked up for public drunkenness and taken to the Police Station. Here, he will meet the film’s two other principal characters for the first time. We are first signaled that Judy will be a significant part of the film by her full-length red jacket, a continuation



of the red motif. Even though they do not speak, on-camera time, camera placement, and inventive shots let the viewer know there will be a certain tension in the relationship between Jim and Judy. This is particularly highlighted by the way the shots are filmed through the large glass windows that surround the offices in the station. *Rebel* Writer Stewart Stern conducted his research for the film at the precinct that is featured in the movie. Speaking of Nicholas Ray he says, “Nick loved the way that the reception part of the juvenile office was laid out—with the booths and glass windows—so you could see the other people through the windows, and he wanted me to exploit that setting to develop the relationships of the characters” (Baer 1999). The effect is executed beautifully in the final version of the film as evidenced by these two photographs (see above).

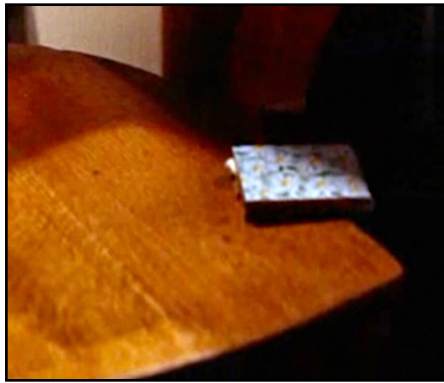
Another signature that this film, and indeed its director’s work in general, are known for are close, cluttered scenes. Several times the camera zooms in, almost uncomfortably close, and every frame is packed with visual information. Essayist George M. Wilson writes, “The cinematic style... of *Rebel* emphasizes the severe constriction and oppressive clutter... these people move within. Although this is a motif that runs through... several scenes later on, it defines structure that... the opening scene at the police station is used to diagram” (Slocum 2005, 113). This scene sets the stage for the rest of the film, and it will be alluded to often in subsequent sequences.

“You’re tearing me apart!” A classic line, and a classic example of close framing in *Rebel Without a Cause*.



Props come into play here in a heavy, yet tender, way. After her conversation with the officer, Judy leaves her compact behind on the chair. The slow zoom of the camera upon it as she leaves signals that it is meant to be an important symbol. When Jim is brought in, he finds it and sheepishly hides it in his coat. The prop is intended to carry meaning, judging from the camera focus it is given, but the interpretation can be open ended. This particular compact is flowery and girlish, perhaps a last vestige of Judy’s carefree child-

hood. Later, during the “Blade Game,” Judy checks her make-up in the mirror of another compact, and does not seem to like the way she looks. It is only after Jim returns her favorite treasure that she is able to be comfort-



able again in her own skin. One possible reading is that this signifies a lack of self-confidence that is bolstered in her by seeing herself “the way Jim does”. It is a small touch, but many times that is what *mise-en-scène* is all about, and its use here adds depth and meaning to the film in an inventive way.

### Scene 3: The Blade Game

Besides the “chickie-run,” the knife fight scene is perhaps one of *Rebel’s* most memorable. Jim has just finished a field trip to the Planetarium on the first day of school, and he is already in trouble with Buzz, the



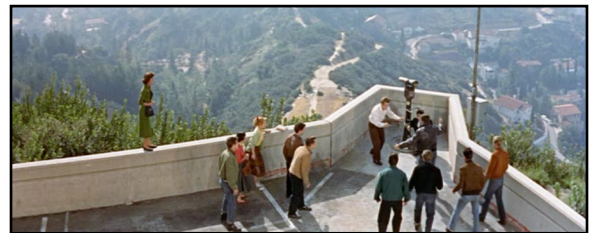
leader of a local gang. Buzz decides to antagonize Jim by letting the air out of his tires with a knife. Though Jim tries to resist, he is eventually forced into the fight by the constant goading of Buzz and the gang. James Dean’s use of posture here is remarkable— he literally looks like a caged animal backed into a corner. This creates believability and sympathy with the viewer. On the other hand, Buzz’s posture is nonchalant; he is obviously just in this for kicks. Buzz’s toying with Jim eventually leads to Jim being the reluctant winner of the game, and the stark differences in their posture underscore the differences in their personalities.

The film and its director do an excellent job of conveying action and suspense in this scene in a time when they had significantly fewer tools at their disposal to do so than modern filmmakers. With the advent of non-linear editing systems, the quick cuts and multiple camera angles in this scene would be rather easy, but it was certainly a complicated piece in its time. It took an entire crew a full day of filming for this five- minute sequence (Rathgeb 2004). The camera switches back and forth often, and from many different angles. Especially in the extreme low angles, the viewer

is given the distinct feeling that they are “in the action”. The scene’s end effect is rather absorbing, and its enthralling quality is primarily due to point-of-view and *mise-en-scène*.

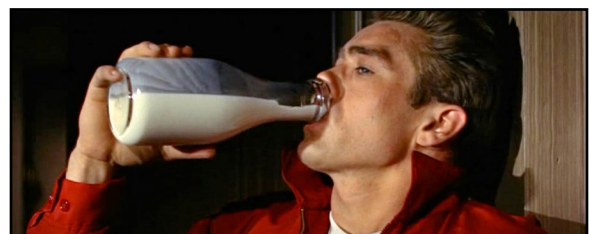
Judy is a mysterious, if not mythic, figure in this film. Just as this was reiterated by her first appearance in red and the peculiar prop placement of her compact, so too her status is emphasized by her placement within several frames of this scene. As Buzz’s gang surrounds Jim’s car, the camera pauses on her, and she seductively sidles along the vehicle, even posing for Jim briefly against his open window. She situates herself atop the car’s hood, all the time maintaining eye contact with him. She checks the aforementioned compact and talks with the other girls, but she is always the center of attention, the center of the camera’s eye.

As the knife fight begins, she is shown briefly climbing up the ledge, and in the most panoramic of the shots, she is perched behind and above the others as she looks on anxiously. This is another example of a scene with intended, albeit ambiguous, meaning. Is she Juno or Aphrodite, peering from Olympus to see what the fate of these two mortal combatants will be? In many ways, they are fighting for her affection. Is it meant to emphasize her singularity or aloofness and, if so, why is she right back in the thick of the crowd at the end of the scene? This is one of mysteries in *Rebel Without A Cause* that are largely left to the viewer to interpret. One of the beauties of *mise-en-scène* technique comes from the way that it so closely mirrors painting. Just as many paintings are intended to be subject to viewer interpretation, *mise-en-scène* allows a skillful director to let the audience both find the story within a film, and to find their own story within it as well.



### Scene 4: Mother’s Milk and Father’s Failures

There are several scenes that feature strife between Jim and his parents, but perhaps none more poignantly than the one that ensues upon his late night return from the “chickie-run”. For the second time, he is shown thirstily gulping from a carafe of milk, and holding its cool bottle against



his head. This is intended to be a child-like metaphor, harkening back to infancy and breast-feeding. The milk bottle as prop continues into the next part of the scene as Jim, in his signature red windbreaker, hopelessly lies down on the family's red couch. The red motif is nearly overstated here, and as the camera zooms in, nearly the entire screen is full of "Warner-Color" red. The viewer is signaled this will be a truly climactic scene, and they will soon find out why.

There is some wonderful camera work throughout this scene. As the camera has fully zoomed on Jim's upside-down face, the point-of-view changes, and we, quite literally, see things from his perspective. In a Hitchcockesque move, we see the camera upside down and turning with the mother as she comes down the stairs and rushes over to Jim. It skillfully mirrors the upside-down feeling of Jim's world, and his desperate attempt to grab a hold of something firm and unchangeable. It also serves to set the viewer, ever so slightly on edge, an effect that will be magnified in the final part of this sequence.



In this masterfully worked portrayal, *Rebel Without a Cause* conveys all the tension, drama, and agony that are tearing this family apart. As Jim talks of going to the Police with what has happened, the underlying tensions between his parents surface. The mother is quick to assume the "high ground" at the top of the stairs. Jim parks at the foot, torn between her and his father, who is some distance back in the lowest position of the three. The camera tilts, ever so slightly, and it seems as if Jim's Mother actually has to crouch to stay within the frame. The viewer is set on edge

### Behind the Scenes: Visual Irony



Here, we see Jim's Father (Jim Backus) dressed in a feminine apron, as Jim asks him, "Do you know what it means to be a man?" The irony of this statement is portrayed visually, an excellent example of mise-en-scène.

by the intermittent repetition of this slightly off-balance shot. Without this framing, the scene might turn into a rather long and boorish argument that is a mere prelude to the final act. However, with this inventive staging, it becomes a centerpiece of the movie, and certainly of any discussion of mise-en-scène within it.



### Scene 5: Home Sweet Home/Conclusion

The final scene takes place over several different landscapes, and includes cutaways to both Buzz's gang and Jim's parents in cars on the way to meet them. Here, many of the motifs that have spun their thread throughout the fabric of this film are tied together and introduced to new ones. Jim still dons the red windbreaker, his signature color. Plato, we will come to find out, peculiarly wears one red and one blue sock. We are also introduced to a three-pronged candlestick, a prop that figures heavily into the final sequence. It is lit, and first carried, by Plato. He eventually lays it down and, as Jim and Judy sneak away, they each take one of the candles, further emphasizing their symbolic nature. The viewer understands unquestionably that these are the three "lights" of the film.



**The three  
“lights”**

takes cover in the nearby woods. Jim, and then Judy, chase after him. The two are shown several times in passionate embraces against the backdrop of nature. This is a continuation of an earlier motif, in which a strong symbolic portrayal can be drawn between Jim and Judy to Adam and Eve. In “The Blind Run,” an early story line developed by Ray for the film, the female lead was named “Eve” (Rathgeb, 2004).



A particularly artistic aspect of the use of the candlestick is the way the director uses lighting techniques to highlight it. When Plato first lights it and stands up, Jim and Judy are spotlighted in a beautiful way. In reality, threecandles could not have quite such a profound effect on the lighting, but hyperbole is part of the language of film as well. Several times in ensuing shots, poetic license is taken with the lighting, and the viewer understands these as effects of the candlelight. This creates the sense of illusion and suspension of reality that many viewers seek in the experience of movie watching, and the way the director uses the movie frame to tell this story is the way this effect is created.

A major theme of this film is the makeshift family that Jim, Judy, and Plato create as a way to both escape and substitute for their own lack of familial intimacy. This thread is displayed in many shots in this scene. Jim chronically has his head cradled in Judy’s lap, and they are both affectionate towards Plato. Jim, the Father, and Judy, the Mother, look down on their surrogate son with parental love and pity. In the beginning of the film, as Jim meets Plato for the first time, Plato is cold and Jim offers him his jacket. Stewart Stern describes the jacket as, “...a talisman of protection” (Baer 1999). Jim lays it over him, just as he and Judy leave to be alone. The motif and symbolism of the jacket will be further brought home in the final moments of the film.

As the scene continues, Buzz’s Gang intrudes, and attempt to bully Plato. Plato turns desperate and eventually draws a gun, wounding one of the gang, and in his desperation even shoots at Jim. The Police arrive on the scene, and Plato

They are intended to be viewed as the archetypal couple, and the director taps into symbolic language going deep into the collective human subconscious to portray it. There is a sharp distinction drawn between the security and intimacy Jim and Judy experience here in nature and the cold, stark reality of the Planetarium in which Plato seeks refuge. In many ways, this can be seen as a commentary on the human condition that these post-WWII teens find themselves in. Ever increasing knowledge and information has, for the first time, supplanted the “garden” of cultural and religious heritage that has been man’s comfort since pre-history. Yet the only true intimacy, togetherness, and love to be found is still in that garden. The scientific fortress to which Plato runs to hide is no security at all, a point which the viewer will tragically soon find out.

Jim and Judy make a mad and daring dash to go in after Plato as more officers arrive on the scene. Jim eventually coaxes Plato out, in part by offering him his jacket. Plato asks “Can I keep it?” and Jim agrees. Further emphasizing the “jacket as protection” motif, it is the confidence he finds in this trade that gives Plato the strength to come out “into the light”. Jim brokers a deal with the Police, and he instructs them to turn off their floodlights because it is “too bright”. As morning awakens over the Planetarium scene, the lighting used in the film serves to depict one of its central themes: the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil, light and dark. In a final comment on this theme, a policeman notices Plato’s gun and turns the floodlights on full as Jim yells, “too much light!” Plato is tragically shot and killed, and the implication is obvious.

### Behind the Scenes: The “Auteur”



The term *Auteur*, French for “Author,” comes from the same cinematic school of thought that gives us the idea of *mise-en-scène* (Prunes 2002). Nicholas Ray was highly regarded as one of the greatest American Auteurs, and this is certainly evident in *Rebel Without A Cause*. A trademark of many European Auteurs was to appear briefly in their own films. As *Rebel* closes, a mysterious figure with a briefcase walks toward the Planetarium, and the actor is actually Ray himself (Baer 1999).

The three “lights” in this film are constantly looking to their parents to learn what it means to “live in the light,” to be a part of the light and the good. Jim voices it plainly once when he asks his Father, “What does it mean to be a man?” Too much light too quickly, though, is dangerous; harsh light kills. Children cannot grow and thrive in only the harsh light of rebuke and discipline, they need the warm glow of candlelit intimacy to be nourished and nurtured. It is a deep, symbolic reference, and one that would not be nearly as an effective part of this film left to aural interpretation alone. Through the cumulative use of props, lighting, and point-of-view, Director Nicholas Ray employs the full vanguard of *mise-en-scène* techniques to convey his meaning. Skillful perhaps to the point of genius, this is the stuff that mythology is made of, and the masterful use of film language in *Rebel Without A Cause* is one of the reasons this film has become the mythic classic that it is.

### Conclusion

The symbolism of the jacket is concluded poignantly as Jim zips up his own red jacket, now worn by the deceased Plato, in a motion similar to the closing of a body bag. His Father—no longer distant, absent, and ineffectual—has told



Jim that he will “...try to be as strong as you want me to be”. He demonstrates this by placing his own jacket over Jim, thus symbolizing his acceptance and the promise of future commitment to his son.

In a last ambiguous iteration of the red motif, Plato is featured wearing one red and one blue sock. Perhaps this is meant to symbolize his presence in two different worlds. The red motif figures heavily in this film, and certainly one valid interpretation is that it is the color of life, the color of youth, and the color of passion. In the original film, it served a practical purpose by highlighting the star, James Dean, and other key elements by covering them in the brightest hue of the Warner-Color spectrum. However, red as a color has been charged with meaning throughout human history, and it certainly invites the viewers to apply their own religious, cultural, and philosophical pretexts. There is no doubt that its continued and featured presence is a conscious choice by the film’s director, whether there is an absolute meaning or not.



A seminal film that defined a generation, a genre, and a director, *Rebel* towers like a giant out of Hollywood’s past, and has exerted a vast and rich influence on the industry today. Time, taste, and techniques have changed, but the timeless principles upon which films such as these were made have not. The use of language unique to the medium of film is a major part of *Rebel’s* ability to affect, change, and entertain us. *Mise-en-scène* is the art of the use of this language, and its stunning employment in *Rebel Without A Cause* makes the film a true work of art.



**The final poignant moments  
of *Rebel Without A Cause*.**

## References

- Baer, William. 1999. "On 'Rebel Without A Cause,' A Conversation With Stewart Stern." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 38, no. 4: 580-604.
- Considine, David. 1996. "Teaching With Motion Pictures: Film and Language Arts." *Telemedium: The Journal of Media Literacy*, 42, no. 1: 5-19.
- Filmsite.org. n.d. "Greatest Films - The Best Movies in Cinematic History." *Filmsite.org* Accessed March 30, 2010. <http://www.filmsite.org/search-results.html>.
- IMDB. n.d. "Rebel Without a Cause (1955)." *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. Accessed March 30, 2010. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048545/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048545/?ref_=nv_sr_1?ref_=nv_sr_1).
- Merriam-Webster. n.d. "Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online." *Merriam-Webster Online*. Accessed March 30, 2010. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.
- Prunes, Mariano, Michael Raine, and Mary Litch. August 27, 2002. "Basic Terms. *Film Analysis*." Accessed March 30, 2010. [classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/html-files/basic-terms.htm](http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/html-files/basic-terms.htm).
- Prunes, Mariano, Michael Raine, and Mary Litch. August 27, 2002. "Mise-en-scene. *Film Analysis*." Accessed March 30, 2010. [classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/html-files/mise-en-scene.htm](http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/html-files/mise-en-scene.htm).
- Rathgeb, Douglas L. 2004. *The Making Of Rebel Without A Cause*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company.
- Ray, Nicholas, director. 1955. *Rebel Without A Cause* (motion picture). USA: Warner Home Video.
- Simmons, Jerold. 1995. "The Censoring of Rebel Without a Cause." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, no. 2: 56-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1995.9943689>.
- Slocum, J. David, ed. 2005. *Rebel Without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork* (SUNY Series, *Horizons of Cinema*). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Thomas, Sam, ed. 1986. *Best American Screenplays: First Series - Complete Screenplays*. New York: Crown Publishers.

**Jason Lee Guthrie** is a media historian interested in the intersections of creativity and economics, with specific interests in the music business and intellectual property law. Dr. Guthrie is an Assistant Professor at Samford University.





**40**.Years  
**MEIEA**<sup>®</sup>  
www.meiea.org  
est. 1979

**PROCEEDINGS**  
OF THE  
**2019 INTERNATIONAL SUMMIT**  
OF THE  
**MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT**  
**INDUSTRY EDUCATORS**  
**ASSOCIATION**



**– NASHVILLE –**  
**2019**

March 21 – 23, 2019 • Belmont University • Nashville