FRAMES AND IMAGES

With very few exceptions, every film is made up of hundreds of different shots. Each one contributes a specific meaning to the film.

Everything within the frame of the image is selected for its meaning, from the colour of an actress's dress to the pattern on the wallpaper. In addition, the distance, height and angle of the camera all add meaning to the frame. We can never speak about the camera 'recording' what is in front of it. By its very action, the camera wrenches fragments of reality from their place in our world and translates them to celluloid or DV. It denatures, changes and adds meaning to what is before it.

The action staged in front of the camera is known as the pro-filmic event. This becomes cinematic only when we consider how the shot has changed the material. When we connect those images together in a sequence – the grammar of film, for want of a better term – further meaning is added, providing a context that adds meaning outside the image (we'll look at this in Chapter 6).

Film language has no distinctive grammar and its vocabulary is heavily reliant on context for its meaning. Every shot is chosen from an infinite number of possible framings, compositions and arrangements. When directors and cinematographers shoot, they draw on their experience with images for their targets.

Glossary

Abstract: To remove (like a dental abstraction) for scrutiny; a concern with form rather than content (as in abstract art).

The Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein called the shot the basic unit of film. For him, a shot was a cell in a bigger organism, a construction he called 'montage'.

Perspective

The shot has its own vocabulary, one reliant on contexts of narrative and editing for meaning. Nevertheless, images can be read like words. Different shot angles, heights and types have their own established meanings derived from their use in thousands of films made over the last century or so.

The camera has several properties that transform and **abstract** the material depicted in front of the camera:

- Distance: The distance of the shot in relation to the actor or object being filmed.

- Height: The physical height of the camera in relation to the actor or object being filmed.

- Angle: The angle of the camera from the scene being filmed.

- Depth of field (focus): Sometimes the camera will only have shallow focus, with the background indistinct and out of focus (shot with a long lens) alternatively it can show everything in focus (deep focus with a short or wide-angle lens).

- Movement: Using a number of methods, from tilting the camera to moving it physically on tracks or a crane, moving the camera adds dramatic effect or simply avoids the need to cut.

Story and plot

Story and plot might seem the same but they are actually two different, but interrelated objects. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, the story is the linear sequence of events in the film while plot is the visual treatment of the story.

Story is composed of inferred events (things unseen but referred to in the story) and explicitly presented events.

Plot is composed of the same explicitly presented events and also added non-diegetic material (for example, the opening credits, sound, camera angles, editing and so on).

These two overlap and can't be broken apart – it is impossible to have a film story without those non-diegetic, narrational devices that present the story to the audience visually and structurally.

Whose eyes?

Every shot can be described in one of two ways: objective or subjective.

The majority of shots are objective. They show the viewer things in an 'impossible' way, giving them a godlike view of the events they are witnessing. Objectivity is about being detached and unobtrusive; documentary film-makers often attempt to be as objective as possible so as not to interfere with their subjects. Since someone has to choose where to put the camera, how to frame the shot and where to put the actors, objectivity is really an illusion. However, we still refer to these shots as objective.

Shots can also be subjective. Subjective shots show us the world from the perspective (the point of view or POV) of a character or object in the film.

In the opening scene of *Psycho* (1960), Alfred Hitchcock uses subjective shots from the point of view of the main character to portray her desire for power in her relationship with the married man with whom she is having an affair. The subjective shots depict her wish to become a subject with power, rather than just the 'other woman'. Hitchcock also uses POV shots from the perspective of a bundle of money, the true subject of the thriller. Atypically, he includes no subjective shots from the perspective of the man in this scene, who is weak willed and dominated by his father. Hitchcock here uses POV shots to give us a subtle sense of power in the scene, as well as to set up the narrative.

Recommended reading

Film Art: An Introduction (1979) by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson is an in-depth and detailed analysis of film form and narrative systems. It provides the basis for some of the most used terminology in film studies.

> To me style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body. Both go together, they can't be separated.

Jean-Luc Godard, film-maker

Proscenium: A theatre stage or space that has a frame or arch as its main feature. Cinema still has very close links with theatre, and the camera frame was initially conceived as like a proscenium arch, as a window on the world. You will still see films shot in this style, such as Susan Stroman's stagey adaptation of *The Producers* (2005).

Diegesis: The fictional story world within the film, the sum of on-screen and off-screen space. Any object within the diegesis is diegetic, while anything in the film but not in its fictional world is non-diegetic (such as the score, credits and so on).

All shots have distance, height and level of some sort. For example, most shots of people are taken at eye level, but the camera's positioning can be manipulated for artistic or dramatic effect. Many shot types have long-established uses and meanings, although this is always bound to the context of the narrative. However, this does not always run according to rule and directors might exploit shots for the opposite or ironic effect.

Angles

Camera angle is normally split into three types:

- **Straight-on:** the camera is pointed straight at its subject. This can often be referred to as 'frontality'. Silent cinema was often frontal, with performers acting direct to camera, as though the audience was watching a theatre play in a **proscenium**.
- **Low angles:** the camera is positioned below the subject, looking up. Low angles can often suggest a powerful subject who looms over us.
- **High angles:** the camera position above the subject, looking down on them. High angles are often used to make the audience feel superior to whatever they are watching. Higher angles could also suggest voyeuristically intruding on a scene.

As mentioned above, directors do not always run true to form, and Orson Welles uses some of the lowest angles in *Citizen Kane* (1941), shot from a pit specially dug for the camera, at Kane's lowest point after an election defeat. Kane looms large over us, literally, although he is powerless.

The height of the camera works similarly. A low camera height can produce a low angle, although not necessarily. The Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu always shot characters at eye level no matter who he was shooting. The height was lower for children and babies. This often had the effect of making characters, unusually, speak directly into the camera during conversations. Although direct address by characters often reminds us we're watching a film, Ozu's style of shooting puts us right into the heart of the action.

On-screen/off-screen space

The camera can only depict what is in front of it; this is obviously on-screen space. Technically, the camera cannot present space to us because any 'space' in the image is an illusion of framing, lighting and the arrangement of actors and setting. We relate what we see on-screen to our understanding of our own reality to create a believable picture of the world on-screen, which we refer to as the diegetic space (the **diegesis**, the fictional story world).

In addition, renowned American film critic Noël Burch identified six zones of off-screen space:

- Left of the frame.
- Right of the frame.
- Top of the frame.
- Bottom of the frame.
- The back of the frame, usually filled with scenery or a location.
- The front of the frame, the 'fourth wall' which divides the diegetic space from the audience. Many film-makers choose to break this 'wall' by making characters address the audience directly to remind us we're watching a film rather than a 'slice of life'.

There are several ways in which off-screen space can be implied for the viewer:

- It can be spoken about in dialogue: characters can speak about other places the viewer can't see, this might be just across the road or a distant planet.
- A character or object can leave the frame, if we see a character leave frame right, we have to assume there is more space there: they can't just disappear!
- A character might glance at a character or an object outside the frame. Again, we have to assume something is there for them to look at.
- Just as characters can leave the frame, they can also re-enter, again implying a space beyond that which the viewer can see.
- On-screen sound is the most common method by which the audience is made to understand that there is a space beyond the camera's vision. Although it might have been added in post-production, it is diegetic sound emanating from a space within our story's world. Sound can suggest a 360° space (we'll look at this more in the next chapter).

Recommended viewing

Take a look at the opening of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974); he chooses to begin with a long high-angle telephoto shot that scours a crowd for a couple talking about a murder. Think about how the height of the shot gives us a feeling of power, but also how sound is used to make us unsure of what we're looking for.

Watch the end sequence of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (dir: Sergio Leone 1966) and try to see how Leone uses different shot distances to build the tension toward a climax. Also look at how he gives us a view of the psychology of the characters in close-up.

Shot distances are often dependent on the narrative, genre and overall style of the film. Depending on the context, shot types can have different meanings, although an audience would still expect to see a close-up for an important piece of dialogue or a character's reaction. It is important to show significant details to make the narrative work.

I'm ready for my close-up now

We can roughly identify each shot by their distance and the ways in which they present setting and characters:

Extreme long shot (XLS): often used in Westerns or sci-fi films, the XLS shows us massive backgrounds and tiny, often insignificant people. Stanley Kubrick uses massive XLS in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to show just how insignificant the human race is against the infinite expanses of the universe.

Long shot (LS): human figures are more distinct, but background is still very visible. Musicals, martial arts and action films often use lots of long shots to let us see the action.

Medium long shot (MLS): the human figure is framed from around the knees upwards. French critics refer to this shot as the *plan américain* (American shot).

Medium close-up (MCU): individuals framed from the waist upwards. This is one of the most typical shots in television, which, due to its greater intimacy over the cinema screen, often avoids big close-up shots.

Close-up (CU): generally emphasises individual details such as faces, hands, feet, small objects. CUs are regularly used to give the viewer an insight into significant narrative details: important character reactions, a significant item (like a key being secretly hidden in someone's pocket) or to stress the importance of a line of dialogue.

Extreme close-up (XCU): isolates very small details such as eyes, lips, details of small objects. Sergio Leone loved to shoot XCUs of eyes in his Westerns.

Camera level

The camera's level can also be changed to add additional meaning to the image. Canted, angled, images were popular in film noir to suggest the world losing control. After the Second World War, the US was rapidly changing, especially for men, and film noir portrayed this anxiety, often with unusual camera levels, dark lighting and moody, rain-slicked streets.

Of course, the reverse could also be true: the level of the camera might also be manipulated to make slanted objects appear flat. In *The Bed Sitting Room* (1969), Richard Lester shoots two characters attempting to drink from a can that pours upwards. Only when the scene cuts to a wider shot does the viewer understand that they are upside down. The initial shot portrays the absurdity of the situation and exposes the futile endeavours of the individuals trapped in this post-apocalyptic world.

Composition and power

The screen is generally assumed to be split into three portions. The middle of the screen is generally held to be the most powerful. If a character or object is framed centrally, they are given power over what is in the margins of the screen.

Again, the opposite is also true. In *Taxi Driver* (dir: Martin Scorsese 1976), the protagonist Travis is often framed in the margins of screen. This signals his own social marginality as a person on the edge. Sometimes Scorsese leaves Travis off-screen altogether to remind the viewer of his powerlessness, the very thing that leads to his shocking act of violence at the end of the film. All of the clues are visual, and added by camera style, rather than explained to us in **exposition**.

EXERCISE

Combining shots
Select a five- to ten-minute sequence of any film. Try to break it down shot-by-shot. What types of shots does it use? What meanings do they contribute to what is depicted within the frame?

Distance, height and framing > **Shot distances** > Mise en scène

Camera movement is one of the unique opportunities available to film over other art forms. In the early days of cinema, the camera was often static. It started to move during the silent era, but became static and theatrical when sound was introduced due to the bulky cameras. Since that time, cameras have become lighter and more manageable for camera operators to move, granting cinema an important dynamism and fluidity.

Panning, tilting and moving the camera

While camera movement can add speed and movement to the image, it can also counteract the need to edit a sequence together. The camera will reframe without cutting. A longer take might begin in close-up, move out to a wide shot and finish on a two-shot by reframing. This could be achieved by cutting, but by moving the camera, the director can suggest a much more unified and coherent sense of space within the frame of the camera, instead of constructing it afterwards through editing.

There are numerous ways in which the camera can move:

- **Pan (panorama):** the camera can pan left and right, as though turning its head on a horizontal plane.
- **Tilt:** the camera tilts up and down on a vertical line.
- **Tracking (dolly or trucking) shot:** the camera is fixed on a track, which can be laid in any direction.
- **Steadicam:** the camera is strapped to the camera operator using a special mount which produces smooth, floating shots that are more flexible than tracking shots. Stanley Kubrick used this to considerable effect in *The Shining* (1980) to suggest a fluid, disembodied presence following Danny's tricycle.
- **Hand-held:** similar to the Steadicam shot, but with a shaky effect that is often associated with a documentary-style realism or with the subjective POV of a character. The technique has also been used for horror films that claim to be composed of 'found footage', like *The Blair Witch Project* (dir: Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999) or *Diary of the Dead* (dir: George A. Romero 2007).
- **Crane (also helicopter or airplane) shot:** mounting the camera to a crane can produce stunning shots from a great height, either to look down on diminished characters or to show scenery.

Frames and images

Simulated camera moves

Not all camera movement moves the camera; sometimes this can just be simulated:

- **Zoom:** a lens fitted to the camera allows the operator to change the focal length and alter the dimension of the image. For example, Robert Altman always shot with a telephoto lens to allow him to pick out significant detail in crowd scenes without letting his actors know. The speed of a zoom can also signify meaning, for example a fast zoom into the face of the villain in a martial arts film can be exciting, while a slow fade out from a character can be melancholic or sad.

- **Reverse zoom:** this is a special technique first used by Alfred Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (1958). It is achieved by tracking toward a character while simultaneously zooming out, changing focal length and making the background stretch into the distance. Hitchcock used it to suggest Scottie's vertigo, while Steven Spielberg uses the technique in *Jaws* (1975) to show Chief Brody's sudden realisation of another shark attack.

Camera movement

Camera movement is important in action films, where cuts can be made dynamic by jarring movement together. Normally a camera movement should be continuous across cuts, but directors can use jarring movement in opposite directions to produce impact and jar the viewer's senses. Geoff King has called these 'impact aesthetics'. They are used throughout *The Bourne Supremacy* (dir: Paul Greengrass 2004), especially where shaky hand-held close-ups are cut together jarringly.

Furthermore, because camera movement can suggest a much more realistic image of space, film-makers often use camera movement in conjunction with long takes to suggest a continuous space. For example, Jean-Luc Godard used very long hand-held tracking shots of Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg in *Breathless* (1959) to create a unified sense of space, something he then disrupted with the use of jump cuts (we'll consider this in more detail in Chapter 6).

Logistically difficult but often stunning, the long take is one of cinema's most impressive features.

Duration

Not to be confused with long shots, the long take is a sequence of long duration. According to David Bordwell, the average shot length (ASL) in contemporary cinema is around 4–6 seconds, compared to 8–11 prior to 1960. A long take, however, could last up to around ten minutes – the length of a reel of film. In the era of digital video, this is becoming longer and longer; Alexander Sukurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) consists of just one shot spanning over 90 minutes and more than 200 years of Russian history.

The long take makes time in the image meet real time so that the diegetic time is the same as the discourse time (the time it takes to tell the story). Normally film-makers can contract or expand time to speed up events or to delay a climax; a good example is the 60-second countdown in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (dir: Nicholas Meyer 1982), which takes more than two minutes!

André Bazin

André Bazin is probably the most significant film critic who ever lived. He co-founded the influential film journal *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* and helped promote the auteur theory, which stated that the director should be thought of as a film's author as they shape the visual treatment of the material. He also inspired many of the directors of the French Nouvelle Vague who wrote for *Cahiers*, many of whom, including François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Eric Rohmer, put Bazin's critical ideas onto the screen.

Bazin's most notable contribution was as a theorist of realism. He favoured long takes, shot in increased depth of field; whole sequences shot in single takes with every detail in focus. He claimed these 'sequence shots' were:

- More realistic – editing could only present reality a little more forcefully, creating false drama.

- More ambiguous – they allowed the viewer's eyes to wander, to pick out important information for themselves rather than have it made obvious via close-ups.

- More like looking at reality – Bazin thought anything that made the film image more like looking at real life was a good thing.

Frames and images

Time

Time can also be manipulated in several ways:

- Fast motion: the camera can run at slower than 24 frames per second (fps) to produce faster motion on playback; this is also known as 'under-cranking'.
- Slow motion: the camera is run at more than 24 fps to produce smooth slow motion, often up to around 2000 fps, which is becoming popular in sports broadcasting to scrutinise the action closely; also known as 'over-cranking'.
- Slow-motion effects can also be produced by duplicating individual frames; this produces a less fluid, jerkier slow motion.

Manipulating time in the image can be very effective. Slow motion can mythologise action, as in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), or emphasise simple moments, such as a close-up of two hands briefly touching in Hal Hartley's *Flirt* (1995).

Fast motion can often be used to make slow movements flow more realistically in 'real time': combined with long takes this can produce realist and spectacular effects. For example, Prachya Pinkaew includes a four-minute single-take sequence in *The Warrior King* (2005) that avoids cutting. This assures the viewer that no stunt doubles were used and the action was continuous, although it would have been filmed with slower action which is under-cranked. This realist effect reinforces the impact of the action for the audience.

Digital systems are now providing even more manipulations of time for impact. Take a look at how Zach Snyder compresses and expands time in *300* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009) to emphasise the impact of violence, while the Wachowski brothers pioneered 'bullet time' in *The Matrix* (1999) to suggest the possibility of manipulating time in the computer-generated world of the matrix. Like the film-maker, the characters become able to manipulate time and space in their constructed world.

Recommended viewing

Watch the climactic gun battle in *The Wild Bunch* (dir: Sam Peckinpah 1969). Think about what the use of slow motion adds to the sequence: is this a celebration of violence? A mythology for the passing of the West? A bullet ballet?

Visual devices

The film-maker has a host of visual devices to narrate a story. Every shot is selected from an infinite number of unused options, each of which could bring a subtle or significant difference of meaning to a sequence.

The image is never simply produced to look interesting or entertaining, but to present a specific image of space, time and narrative meaning.

Cine-literacy is a matter of reading films, just as one reads a book by understanding its language and grammar. If you are planning to make and use images, then you must be cine-literate.

You must be able to identify and describe shots as well as being able to critically show what those techniques mean and how they contribute to a film beyond the basics of the narrative. After all, this is the narration itself; you wouldn't read a book without thinking about the author's word choices and use of grammar.

EXERCISE

The long take
Think about your favourite long take. Now try to work out how you could present the same sequence with multiple shots and editing. Would this add extra meaning to the sequence? How would the meanings of the sequence change?