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Some Basic Material for an Introduction to the Moving Image

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WHAT IS A SHOT?

A single, uninterrupted piece of film of a certain length . . .

What length might that be?

Uh, the length of the shot.

Thank you for that helpful piece of information.

Seriously, a shot is as long as the director (and/or the editor) choose to make it. In some avant-garde films, a shot may – literally – be only one frame long, that is, $1/24^{\text{th}}$ of a second. In a 35mm film, it can be as long as ten minutes, the length of the film magazine the camera can accommodate.

In the brave new world of high-definition video and its successors, theoretically there is no limit to the length of a shot, as long as you don't overflow the capacity of the hard drive on which you are storing the digital file. In his 2002 film *Russian Ark*, Alexander Sokurov created a 99-minute long film that consists of a single shot.

What makes the shot so important?

That's a little complicated. Briefly, it is the smallest unit of film, sort of like the atom in Newtonian physics. (Of course, in post-Einsteinian physics there are subatomic particles and so on that do not obey Newton's laws, but there really isn't an equivalent in film since a single frame could be a shot.)

So in constructing a film, you start with a single shot and go on from there. I could go into a long song-and-dance about film as a language system – and I will sometime soon – but for the moment let's just say that a shot is a complete statement in way that spoken and written language have no equivalent of.

For example, in the Lumiere one-shot film, "Train Arriving at the Station at Le Ciotat" you aren't merely seeing "Train arrives at station." You are seeing hundreds, maybe thousands of details; it's a complete statement many paragraphs long that would probably begin, "It is a summer afternoon in Le Ciotat in 1895. We are on a train station platform and running diagonally across the screen we see the train tracks, roughly bisecting the image . . ." and so on, to include the description of all the dozens of people we see getting on and off the train, etc. Real language doesn't begin with such a statement.

Okay, so that's one of the things that a shot isn't. What is it and why does it matter?

The key thing here is in our original definition: "A single, uninterrupted piece of film."

That simple fact carries a lot of weight. Whether the shot is a static one or filled with complicated camera movement, whether it's an extreme close-up (love the mascara on that eyelash, don't change a thing) or an extreme long-shot ("in space, no one can see your house"), it is uninterrupted and self-contained. In other words, there is no break in space or in time; we experience the space/time relationship as complete, intact unity. As long as the shot lasts, the space and time it depicts has an integrity all its own.

When the filmmaker cuts (or dissolves or fades out or uses another transitional effect that ends the shot), whatever follows, even if in the fictional world it's supposed to be the very next thing that happens in the very same space, it *isn't*. When a shot ends, you have a discontinuity with the next shot. We'll come back to that problem shortly.

There is at least one more important fact to remember about a single shot: it is the delivery vehicle for the single most important item in any filmmaker's toolbox: *mise-en-scene*.

WHAT IS MISE-EN-SCENE?

- From the French theater term literally meaning “place on stage.”
- All the expressive elements a filmmaker places on-screen to communicate to the audience
- This includes four general areas: 1) the setting; 2) costume and make-up (including props); 3) Lighting; and 4) Staging, i.e., the movement and placement of actors, figures, animals, objects within the frame.

ELEMENTS OF MISE-EN-SCENE

Setting – the elements that depict time period, space and place:

- Setting is an active element in film. Think of how a science-fiction film can use an unfamiliar landscape to create a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. Conversely, think of the comfort we derive from a cozy living room set filled with well-worn but beloved objects.
- A director may choose a familiar, already existing location – say, Mount Rushmore – precisely because it is at least seemingly familiar. But if the director is Alfred Hitchcock. . . hoo boy.
- Or a director may choose to shoot in a studio in order to have complete control over the visual environment, right down to the patter of rain on the pavement.
- Setting also includes props, which a skillful director can use to create an emotional tie that will resonate powerfully for an audience. (“Put down the knife, kid, or I’ll shoot the teddy bear!”)

Costume and Make-Up – What does a character's appearance tell us about her character?

- Never underestimate the expressive power of costume. Wouldn't *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) be rather a different film if Dorothy spent the whole movie chasing after a pair of beige Air Jordans instead of the ruby slippers? Think about the dress-up aspects of imposture in *The Lonely Villa*. The entire plot of *Jezebel* (1937) hinges on Bette Davis outraging society by wearing a scarlet evening gown to an important ball.
- And while we're on the subject of Bette Davis, think how important the contrast is in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Between her dead-white, clownlike make-up and Joan Crawford's more realistic, but no less stylized appearance.
- There are three key elements of costume – and these could also apply to aspects of setting – that are worth considering, 1) color; 2) texture; and 3) movement.
- Personal props are also an element of costuming. When we *The Searchers* in a few weeks, notice how John Ford works out a complex system of guns, hats and holsters to indicate a spectrum of relations of the characters to White and Indian societies.

Lighting – more than just making sure you can see the actors. . .

- Contrasts of light and dark within the frame can direct our eye to specific elements of the mise-en-scene or set up comparisons – the cool, blue light of a television screen reflected in a corner may suggest the isolation of the character who is bathed in it. In Robert Altman’s *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the warm, golden light of the interiors of a small frontier town are a stark contrast to the snowy exteriors with their mist and cold blue-white palette.
- Lighting can convey or amplify textures, or affect our perception of shapes or distance.
- Four significant elements to consider in lighting: 1) quality, i.e., the relative intensity (the harshness or softness) of the light; 2) direction, i.e., where is the light coming from and how does it affect our perception of the objects on-screen; 3) quantity, i.e., how many light sources are there in the shot; and 4) color.

Staging, including figure movement and expression – where is everyone in relation to the other elements on-screen (including the frame), and in relation to the camera?

- One of the most important ways that a filmmaker can convey meaning, thought, feelings. The look on Charlie Chaplin's face when he first sees Edna Purviance in *The Immigrant*. The way that Cary Grant points accusingly at the corrupt sheriff in *His Girl Friday*, part of an entire choreography of gestures in that film. The way that the pioneers are dwarfed by the arid desert of Monument Valley at key moments in *The Searchers*. The headlong rush through the forest by the thief in *Rashomon*, matched by a camera movement at once exhilarating and unnerving.
- Movement creates kinetic patterns, sometimes expressing something, sometimes just aesthetically satisfying. That pairing of actor running and camera rushing at key moments in *Rashomon* could be read either way.
- Relationships in space, depicted by the way that a director frames characters, may reflect emotional currents in that scene or power relationships. When we get to *His Girl Friday*, watch how Howard Hawks groups Grant, Roz Russell and Ralph Bellamy when the three are at lunch.
- And who is off-screen? Why?

SIX ZONES OF OFF-SCREEN SPACE

TOP OF THE SCREEN

OFF SCREEN LEFT

OFF SCREEN RIGHT

BOTTOM THE SCREEN

But where are the other two?

Behind the camera

Behind the horizon/set

Things to keep in mind about on-screen/off-screen space:

- What do we know that the characters don't?
- What do the characters know that we don't (yet)?
- How do characters get on and off screen?
- Does the way the filmmaker handles the on/off dialectic suggest that there is a continuity between the world we see and the rest of the world?
- Conversely, does it suggest that there is no "world" beyond what we can see on-camera?

SO MUCH FOR A SINGLE SHOT!
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I PUT THIS PIECE OF
FILM NEXT TO THIS ONE?

That is to say, when I attach one shot to another? Obviously, it depends on the two shots. Regardless of the relationship between the two shots as outlined below, this much is always true: when a shot ends and another one begins, **there is a break in real time and real space.**

- What is their relationship to one another **spatially**? Are we moving from a very shallow space to a very deep space? Watch the opening sequence of Citizen Kane three classes from now, and you can see what that juxtaposition can do. (Of course, Welles is trying to confuse the audience, there are ways of making that change more smoothly.)

- What is their **chromatic** relationship? Is one shot very dark the other very light? If it's a color film, are moving from a bright, hard primary color to a pastel or to another bright primary?

- What is the **graphic** relationship between the two shots? In “The Lonely Villa” there is moment when Griffith cuts from a shot of the father on the phone in the hotel -- he is standing on the right and gesture with his right arm extended, a look of horror on his face – to a shot of the mother in the parlor, in the exact same place in the frame, holding the telephone in the same manner, gesturing with her right handed extended in the same place in the frame, the same gesture and a similar facial expression. Compare that to the many times that Wiene cuts (in *Caligari*) from one jagged angle of rooftops to another that is almost a reverse diagonal. Big difference, huh?

- What is the **temporal** relationship between the shots, i.e. the relationship in time? And how are the shots linked, because that will affect our perception of time passing? Is this a cut, a dissolve (two shots overlapping), a fade out/fade in, a wipe? The cut implies a continuity in time (although in reality there is a break), but the other transitions suggest a more significant period has elapsed between the two shots. (But we will see Welles play with that in *Kane*.)

- What is the **rhythmic** relationship between the shots? Are we moving from a shot with rapid movement in the frame to one with little or no movement? From a brief shot (only a second or two) to a long take of a couple of minutes duration? Is the rhythm speeding up (as in the chase at the end of “Lonely Villa”) or perhaps slowing down as in the hunt for Cesare in Caligari, which sort of dribbles away when he dies? You will probably need three or four shots in succession to grasp the rhythm of the sequence; two shots don’t exactly make a rhythm.