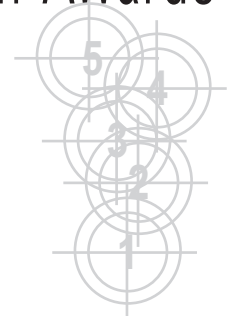


The Language of Film

The 2004 Robin Anderson Film Awards



THE DIRECTOR'S USE OF FILM LANGUAGE

1. Basic Vocabulary

Understanding the sequencing and ordering of shots is paramount to filmmaking. It is foundation that conveys meaning to an audience. Through understanding the language of film, the director can appropriately use filming to fit specific context and criteria. The director can address conventions and recognise genres in an effective manner.

- a. FRAME - the single image in the series on a length of film or on a video tape.
- b. SHOT - a number of frames which have or will be taken in one uninterrupted filming of the camera. There is no restriction on length, e.g., 1 second, 1 minute, 4 minutes, etc.
- c. SEQUENCE / SCENE - the main way the film is divided. This is one of the most important aspects for consideration in film making. The sequence of shots develops an idea or constructs a narrative.
- d. STAGE / EPISODE - this is the composed of a number of sequences linked by time, subject, setting. You can think of a sequence as a paragraph and a episode as a chapter.

2. Camera Position (Shot)

- a. EXTREME LONG SHOT (XLS) - a shot that reveals a great exposure. This creates a series of isolation.
- b. LONG SHOT (LS) - a shot taken with the camera at considerable distance from the subject.

Some Uses - establish the setting, indicate size or expanse. Often used to provide information about the setting.

- c. MEDIUM SHOT (MS) - a shot taken with the camera closer to the subject but not so close as to exclude some of the surroundings.

Some Uses - observation of the subject without involvement, suggest an attitude of neutrality or detachment.

- d. CLOSE-UP (CU) - a shot taken with the camera close to the subject.

Some Uses - show details, create emphasis to the character, establish feeling of intimacy with the subject.

- e. EXTREME CLOSE-UP (XCU) or BIG CLOSE UP (BCU) - a shot taken with the camera extremely close to the subject. Some feature of the subject fills the frame. In relation to the human body - this may be the eyes or mouth.

Some Uses – focus of attention on some feature, creation of shock or surprise which generates suspense.

3. Camera Angle

- a. NORMAL ANGLE (NA) - camera parallel to the ground at eye level. The camera acts literally like an eye.

Main Use – establish “natural” viewpoint, especially as a point of comparison with other angles that are used in sequence.

- b. LOW ANGLE (LA) - the shot is taken with the camera below the level of the subject.

Some Uses - emphasise strength or size of the subject, create a feeling of awe and superiority of the subject.

- c. HIGH ANGLE (HA) - the shot is taken with the camera above eye level.

Some Uses - indicate smallness or weakness of the subject.

- d. TILTED ANGLE (TA) - the shot is taken with the camera out of vertical alignment with the subject.

Some Uses - indicates perceptual or emotional change within the action.

4. **Camera Movement**

- a. PAN - horizontal rotation of the camera across a subject or following a moving subject.

Some Uses - indicate or emphasise breadth or length, increase scope of a shot, create suspense.

- b. ZIP-PAN - horizontal rotation of the camera at a speed sufficient to blur the image.

Some Uses - indicate a transition between shots/sequences, create an impression of speed.

- c. TILT / DUTCH TILT - vertical rotation of camera up/down a subject or following a rising/falling subject.

Some Uses - indicate height or depth, increase scope of a shot, create suspense.

- d. CRANE - the camera is so mounted that it can move on all planes.

Some Uses - suggest a feeling of detachment, indicate termination.

- e. TRACK, ZOOM - actual or apparent movement of the camera towards or away from the subject, or following a moving subject.

Some Uses - providing a record of continuous movement, gradual focus of attention on detail, or movement from detail to general view.

- f. DOLLY - This is when the camera moves along with the action. The camera can move on tracks but a cheap alternative is using a skateboard or trolley.

- g. STEADY CAM - This allows the smooth movement of a hand held camera. The steady camera can move in very inaccessible places.

5. **Camera View**

- a. FRAMING - composition of objects within the rectangular boundaries of the frame. Provides information to the audience. Size and placement of the actors and objects is paramount.

Some Uses - concentration of attention, indication of significance, creation of suspense or surprise by exclusion of the centre of interest.

- b. FOCUS - definition of the image.

Some Uses - sharply defined image for harshness or reality, blurred image or image edges for fantasy or flashback or perceptual and emotional abnormality, distorted for horror or for perceptual and emotional abnormality. Pull focus from one object to another.

- c. LIGHTING - intensity and angle of light on the subject.

Some Uses - heighten suspense, create a mood, provide an external reflection of a character's feelings. Low key is often used for suspense or mystery, high key for gaiety or excitement, "natural" for immediacy or warmth.

- d. SUBJECTIVE VIEWPOINT - the camera adopts the viewpoint of a character.

Some Uses - total viewer involvement, through camera movement the suggestion of giddiness, falling, etc.

- e. OBJECTIVE VIEWPOINT - the camera adopts the viewpoint of an observer.

Some Uses - statement and narrative, crossing the line of action.

FILM TECHNIQUES

1. **Transitions**

- a. CUTTING/EDITING - the film or video is cut into segments and these segments are selected and then arranged in the order which best suits the director's purpose. Selection and arrangement are partly determined by the need for 'economical visual description' to construct a specific feel for the film.

- b. PACE AND RHYTHM - the shots/sequences may be cut to various lengths so that they run for varying amounts of time. A number of brief shots can be used to create an impression of, e.g., excitement or joy. The use of longer shots can create an impression, e.g., of gloom, sadness, etc. By arranging the shots in terms of pace, the director achieves the

larger rhythmical movements of the film.

- c. **RELATIONSHIPS** - the arrangement of shots also determines the flow and direction of the "story". In a well-made film, one is usually unaware of the normal cuts because of the linking effects of dialogue, incident, etc. However, one is, and should be, aware of the juxtapositions of shots when this has a special purpose and contributes information over and above.

Some uses of relational cutting:

- (i) **CONTRAST** - each of two shots may add to the appreciation and understanding of the other through their vivid contrast.
- (ii) **SIMULTANEITY** - two (or more) connected or related stories may be developed simultaneously by cutting from a sequence of one to a sequence of another. Although the stories may be separate, each sequence may directly or indirectly comment on the other. Most users of this technique gradually merge the stories as the film concludes.
- (iii) **PARALLELISM** - shots may be juxtaposed to indicate things happening simultaneously and directly connected. This may best be illustrated by the "heroine-in-danger-cut-to-hero-coming-to-the-rescue-cliché" of many westerns.
- (iv) **IMAGERY** - shots may also be juxtaposed to state a film simile or metaphor. Eisenstein, an early Russian director, was fond of this technique and, e.g. juxtaposed a shot of a vain man and a shot of a strutting peacock. This technique may be used for symbolism by repeated insertions of shots of some object, e.g. water, snow, fire, etc.
- (v) **CONTINUITY** - the shots are structured to convey a unity within the time and place of the film. Shots need to be structured to allow a fluidity with the action of the work.

2. **Time**

- a. **CHRONOLOGY** - a director often wishes to indicate a change in chronological time. He may wish to signal a move backwards or forwards in time. If a director wishes to signal a change he may make use of the:
- (i) **DISSOLVE** - one picture gradually merges

into the next.

- (ii) **FADE** - one shot fades into darkness or white and the next emerges from darkness or white.
 - (iii) **JUMP-CUT** - the two shots are linked by some visual or aural feature.
 - (iv) **CROSS-CUT** - the two shots are linked by situation, e.g. scoring the try, spectator reaction.
 - (v) **PAN** - especially the zip-pan, evokes a sense of movement and suddenness.
 - (vi) **FOCUS** - one shot moves out of focus and the next begins out of focus and gradually moves into focus.
 - (vii) **ZOOM** - zoom into large clean-up-zoom out to show subject in new surroundings or with different features. (NB Be sparing with the zoom. In fact a golden rule is to never use the zoom.)
- b. **PHYSICAL TIME** - directors may also alter physical time by using the fact that the moving image is a mechanically - produced illusion.
- (i) **ACCELERATED MOTION** - they may accelerate motion for creating excitement and revealing an event which is compressed into a few moments.
 - (ii) **SLOW MOTION** - by slowing action, a director may create greater fluidity of movement, an atmosphere of tension and fantasy. Slow motion is also useful for very shaky hand held film to make it appear more fluid.
 - (iii) **REVERSED MOTION** - this effect is used mainly for comic effects or for trick effects such as a man being hit by a car.
 - (iv) **FROZEN MOTION** - this gives the appearance of stopping the action and can be quite effective especially when the sound track provides a contrast of continued story development.
- c. **DRAMATIC TIME** - this is created through the craft of editing. The term refers to the compression or expansion of chronological time to suit the needs of the story. Most films compress time but, within films, time is often expanded. (Note the fight scene in the Matrix freezes an action that takes seconds in real time. This is referred to as bullet speed time.)

d. PSYCHOLOGICAL TIME - the director may use certain techniques to produce in the viewer a subjective, emotional impression of the duration of time. By using quick cutting, loud or lively music and dynamic composition of images he can induce exhilaration, laughter, excitement, horror, dismay. The pace of the editing, coupled with framing, lighting and sound provided the basis to impact on the empathy of the audience as they view the film.

3. **Sound**

Little needs to be said about the aural features of film as these will probably be more generally familiar. However, the following points should be noted:

- a. The director may select from the following types - natural, dialogue, music, sound effects.
- b. Quite often, a director may decide to link shots or sequences by sound. This is called "cutting on sound" as distinct from "cutting on action". The sound track provides a tempo that effects edits that will be made on this beat.
- f. One of the most important stylistic considerations concerning the director's use of sound is the way in which the sound is related to the image.

Think how the sound may create:

- i. tension within the scenes
- ii. emphasise a key point within a scene