

# Help for Writing about Film:

## How to describe "a shot"?

**I. Mise-en-scene.** "Mise-en-scene" refers to all the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: the setting and props, lighting, costumes and make-up, and the behavior of the figures (actors, animated characters, etc.)

(1) Setting: Does the action take place in an already existing locale? Does it take place in a historically reconstructed site, or a deliberately fantastic site? Are there particular props that assume importance in the film?

(2) Costume and make-up: Do the costumes seem "authentic," period dress, or are they stylized so as to draw attention to their graphic qualities? What do the changes of costumes reveal about the characters changing through them? Does the make-up aim for "realism" (i.e. with women seeming to wear the street cosmetics currently in fashion, or seeming to wear no makeup at all), or does it call attention to certain attributes and features?

(3) Lighting:

- Lighting *quality*: how intense is the illumination? ("Hard" lighting creates clearly defined shadows; "soft" lighting creates a diffused illumination.)
- The *direction* of lighting: where does the light come from, and where does it hit the figures on the screen? Is it *frontal lighting* (coming from in front of the image, often eliminating shadows, and creating a fairly flat-looking image)? Is it *sidelighting* (coming from the side of the figure, often used to sculpt characters' features)? Is it *backlighting* (coming from behind the figure, often creating silhouettes)? Is it *underlighting* (coming from below the subject; think horror films like *The Blair Witch Project*)? Is it *top lighting* (coming from above the subject)?
- *Source* of lighting: Does the overall lighting design create brighter and darker areas (*high-key lighting*)? Or does it create stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows (*low-key lighting*)?
- Lighting *color*: Is the filmmaker using a color filter to suggest a different texture of light (i.e. orange for candlelight)? Or are they using a whiter light?

(4) Acting technique:

- Is the performance more or less *individualized*—i.e., does it strive to capture a particular person, or does it try to capture a broader, more anonymous type (i.e., the wisecracking waitress, the gruff but loveable boss)? And does it seem more or less *stylized*—i.e., are the actors keeping their emotions in reserve, or are they using their faces and bodies as obvious registers of affect (sweating, giggling, exploding at the camera)?

- How does the acting relate to the overall frame of the shot? Does a close-up draw attention to the features of the actor's face? Does the camera's distance make us focus on broader movements of the body?

(5) Space and mise-en-scene:

- *Movement*: are there objects or characters onscreen which draw our attention because they are in motion?
- *Color differences*: is the director exploiting principles of color contrast to shape our sense of screen space? (i.e. bright colors on a subdued background to draw your eye, or dull colors in a limited palette so that the viewer is drawn to make finer distinctions between, say, the shades of brown)
- *Compositional balance*: are the right and left halves of the screen in balance? Is the frame centered on a human body? Or are figures massed to one side?

**II. Cinematography.** "Cinematography" is the general term for all the manipulations of the film strip by the camera in the shooting phase of the film and by the laboratory in the developing phase of the film

(1) Perspective relations: The difference between the eye and the camera is that photographic lenses may be changed, and each type of lens will render perspective in different ways. Here are some ways that the lens can be manipulated.

- *The lens: focal length*. The focal length of the lens alters the magnification, depth and scale of things in the image. Here are three types of lenses:

- (1) The *short-focal-length, or wide-angle, lens*. Wide-angle lenses exaggerate the depth of the field, the distance between foreground and background. As a result, they also make figures moving to or from the camera seem to cover ground faster.
- (2) The *middle-focal-length, or normal, lens*. The "normal" lens seeks to avoid noticeable perspective distortion. Foreground and background should seem neither stretched apart (wide-angle) or squashed together (telephoto).
- (3) The *long-focal-length, or telephoto, lens*. The telephoto lens reduces cues for depth and volume. (Think of the telephoto shots of a baseball pitcher taken from the umpire position: they make catcher, batter, and pitcher look unnaturally close to one another.) Characters shot by a telephoto lens will seem to cover ground more slowly.

When directors *zoom* on the visual field, they are changing their lens's focal length in mid-shot. Sometimes the zoom is used to substitute for moving the camera forward or backward.

- *The lens: depth of field and focus*. Depth of field is the range of distances before the lens within which objects can be photographed in sharp focus. Generally, a director decides to focus either on the foreground, the middle ground, or on the distance.

"*Deep focus*" – a common technique starting in the 1940s and 1950s – keeps all planes of the image in sharp focus. (Steven Spielberg is a fan of deep focus, as were Orson Welles and Sam Fuller.)

*Racking focus*, or pulling focus, is the technique where the filmmaker changes focus in mid-shot – for instance, by beginning with a focus on an object close to the lens, and then rack-focusing so that an object in the distance springs into crisp focus.

(2) Framing: What is our vantage-point onto the material in the image? Where is the camera positioned relative to the action of the events? Is the camera inhabiting a character's line of vision – what is called a *point-of-view shot*? How does the frame control what we're able to see, and what we have to guess at offscreen?

- *Camera angle*: Are we looking *straight-on* at the objects? Are we in a *high-angle* shot, looking down on them? Are in a *low-angle* shot, looking up at the framed material?

- *Camera level*: Is the framing level (i.e. with the horizontal edges of the frame perpendicular to vertical objects in the frame)? Or is the camera being *canted* at an angle?

- *Camera height*: Are we at eye-level with the actors? Are we above eye-level, or are we closer to the ground?

- *Camera distance*: Are we seeing an *extreme long shot*, where the human figure is barely visible? Are we in a *medium shot*, where the human body is framed from the waist up? Are we in a *medium close-up*, where the body is framed from the chest up? Or are we in *close-up*, focusing on just the head, hands, feet, or a small object?

- *Mobile framing*: "Mobile framing" means that within the confines of the image we see, the framing of the object changes. The mobile frame thus produces changes of camera height, distance, angle, or level *within* the shot. Mobile framing is also known as *camera movement*, of which there are several broad types:

- (1) The *pan* movement rotates the camera on a vertical axis. On screen, the pan gives the impression of a frame horizontally scanning space.
- (2) The *tilt* movement rotates the camera on a horizontal axis. It is as if the camera's "head" were swiveling up or down.
- (3) The *tracking*, or *dolly*, shot has the camera changing position, traveling in any direction along the ground, forward, backward, circularly, diagonally, or from side to side.
- (4) The *crane shot* has the camera moving above ground level. Typically, it rises or descends, often thanks to a mechanical arm which lifts and lowers it.

Cameras do not have to be mounted on tripods or dollies. Camera movement can also be controlled by a *Steadicam* – a camera attached to the operator's body by

means of a brace. The Steadicam operator can walk with the camera, guiding the framing through minimal hand movements, and can produce complicated mobile shots of great smoothness – for instance, following a character up a flight of stairs in hot pursuit.

Sometimes directors do not want smooth camera movements – in which case they may use a *hand-held camera* to get a bumpy, jiggling image. This technique became more common in the late-1950s with the growth of the *cinéma-verité* documentary.

*Note: there are many basic aspects of film not covered above – editing, sound, principles of narrative or story-telling, and the larger question of style, for starters. But the categories listed above should give you a good start as you break down how a scene in a film achieves its desired effect.*