



THINKING FILM

thinking FILM

FILM LANGUAGE

CINEMATOGRAPHY

In the early days of cinema, filmmakers used a single camera to film an event, with the camera fixed in one position, shooting a single long shot of what was happening in front of the camera. So the viewer experienced the whole film (normally a couple of minutes in length) from only one point of view (or perspective). Cinematography is the art and craft of the camera itself, in terms of its position and choice of shot type to film a scene and how this contributes to making meaning in the film.

As the technology of filmmaking developed (different types of lenses, ability to make and show longer films) an **aesthetic**, or aesthetic style, developed that mirrored the way in which we actually see things. For example; we walk into a room. Initially we look at everything in the room but, if we are looking for one particular person, we will slowly focus on individual people and things within the room until we find something that attracts our attention – the person or object we are looking for.

Filmmakers developed a way to reproduce this effect by introducing a number of different shot types into how they filmed a scene. They might use a close-up, to really focus attention on one person or object, they might use a medium shot to show two people in conversation. They would still use a long shot to establish where action was taking place. They moved the camera around the scene, showing different perspectives on what is happening. The camera itself could move, from a static position- up and down or side-to-side - or physically move (up and down, or side to side).

These technical and aesthetic developments went hand-in-hand with the editing process – putting two pieces of film together. You will explore this in more detail in the section on editing.

Different types of shots create different types of impact on the viewer and help guide the viewer through the story. We are shown where events happen, what is important in each location. Close-up shots on faces can help show emotion and reaction to what is happening.

So the two key elements to cinematography are the **framing of a shot** (what is included in the cinematic space, what we see on screen) and the **movement of the camera**.



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Filmmakers define shot types in this way:

Framing

extreme close-up (XCU) A small object or part of an object shown large (a speaking mouth, a telephone receiver; frame 1). This often shows a plot-relevant object - a piece of jewellery, a telephone number on an envelope, a character's eyes at a moment of high tension

close-up, close shot (CU) Full view of, typically, a human face

medium shot (MS) A view of the upper half of a person's body, showing his or her bodily stance

American shot (AS) A three-quarter view of a person, showing her or him from the knees up (frame 4)

full shot (FS) A full view of a person, e.g., A person standing and talking on the phone

long shot (LS) Typically this will be of a landscape, a view of a house or street. Normally this will establish where the action is taking place and is sometimes also known as an establishing shot

extreme long shot (XLS) A view from a considerable distance (e.g. the skyline of a city). If we can see people then they will merely be small specks in the landscape

Camera movement

pan The camera surveys a scene by turning around its vertical or horizontal axis

tilt The camera moves up or down from a fixed axis

tracking shot/pulling shot The camera follows (tracks) or precedes (pulls) an object that is in motion itself

push in, pull back The camera moves in on or away from a stationary object



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zoom The camera moves in on or away from an object by smoothly extending or shortening its focal length

crane shot The camera is mounted on a crane moves up or down at a distance above ground level

Points of view

As well as determining what type of shot fits the particular action, the cinematographer also needs to think about how to present a particular piece of action to the viewer. How will the viewer be positioned within the action? From whose point of view will they see what is happening, be it a conversation or a piece of high-tension action. Will the viewer see things from the perspective of one character or a number of characters? (achieved by repositioning a camera to give a different perspective on what is happening). Will they see different people's reactions to what is happening?

For example, when two characters in conversation are we always shown the speaker or do we sometimes only see the reaction of the person who is being spoken to? (A reaction shot).

The cinematographer decides on the most appropriate shot for a specific action so that it tells the story in a way that the audience understands the significance of that specific action.

Cinematographers also have to think about how the shot needs to link to the shot that will follow. Often a particular piece of action might be shot in a number of different ways (close-ups, medium shots and from different angles) so that when the editing process begins there are more options for the editor when it comes to finally putting the scene together.

We started this section discussing the way in which camera framing and movement somehow reflects the ways in which we see the world. However, we rarely see things in extreme close-up and our vision rarely cuts from one point of view to another. In a conversation with someone we only ever see the person that we are talking to.

However, we accept the conventions of camera framing and movement as part of the ways in which films tell their story and create their filmic world. We read the film as a film, not as reality.