

Cinematography: Types of shot (i)

Cinematography (the **framing** and **design of shots**) encompasses a range of processes and techniques that come together to give the film its visual look and convey messages and values.

The director will have a vision of what they want the film to look like, and during **pre-production** the **cinematographer** will make dozens of decisions in order to create this vision and reality.

The five key areas of cinematography are:

- shot types and camera angles (from which viewpoint we see the camera)
- camera movement (how the camera moves around the action)
- lighting (how the shot is lit)
- colour (how colour is used to communicate additional information)
- composition (the way people and objects are placed within the shot).

Other aspects to be considered are:

- **film stock:** 16mm, 35mm, 70mm, 3D, IMAX (although, today, shooting digitally is the primary method)
- **aspect ratio:** the standard ratios in use are 2.35:1 or 1.85:1. 2.35:1 is usually used for action/blockbusters, 1.85:1 for character-led films. 4:3 was the standard until the 1950s
- **frame rate:** the standard is 24 **frames per second (fps)**, but there have been 48fps and 120fps releases.

Types of shot

Most scenes/sequences are made up of a series of **shots**, showing the action from different angles and points of view.

The most regularly used shot types are as follows.

Extreme long shot (ELS) or establishing shot

Filmed from a very long way away, an extreme long shot will often be a view of an exterior location. It is often used as an establishing shot to show a panoramic view of where the film is set. Such shots are the cinematographer's equivalent of a landscape painting: full of shape and hue but with little precise detail, although usually just enough to provide clues to the film's genre and setting.



Extreme long shot (ELS; *Blade Runner*, Scott, 1982)

Pre-production: the period prior to filming, where key decisions are made, including securing funding, selecting actors and creative personnel, choosing locations, building sets, designing costumes, and determining the film's aesthetic, and planning the production schedule.

Cinematographer: responsible for the look of the film; in charge of the camera technique and translates the director's vision onto the screen, advising the director on camera angles, lighting and special effects.

Film stock: the type of film used to shoot the film on.

Aspect ratio: the shape of the image; this affects the composition of the shots. The first aspect ratio used was 4:3; the first number refers to the width of the screen and the second to the height. Therefore, for every 4 inches in width, there will be 3 inches height.

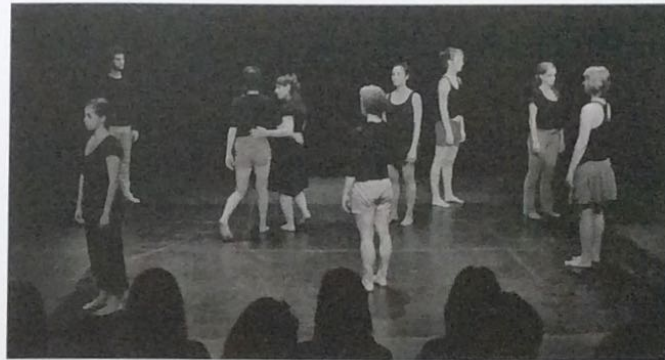
Frames per second (fps): the frame rate, or the speed that individual frames are projected to give the illusion of movement.

Shot: used to mean different aspects of the filmmaking process.

- For the cinematographer a **shot** is from the moment the camera starts rolling (action) to the end (cut).
- For the editor a **shot** is continuous scene or sequences between two cuts or edits.
- Refers to the process of shooting a film, e.g. 'we shot four minutes of screen time today'.
- There are different types of **shot**, which refer to the distance between the camera and the subject.

Long shot (LS)

A long shot clearly features the main character or characters, but will also offer a fair amount of background. This shot is useful for showing us who the central characters in the scene are and where it is set.



Long shot (LS; *Frances Ha*, Baumbach, 2012)

Medium-long shot (MLS)

A medium-long shot focuses on the main part of the characters, but probably cuts them off at the knees. It can be comfortably used to show two figures walking, talking, dancing, etc.

IA Independent Activity

Consider the directors of the films you are studying. What do you know about their body of work? Watch some of the films again. Is their visual and aural style consistent from film to film? If so, which elements remain the same?



Medium-long shot (MLS; *Fish Tank*, Arnold, 2009)

Medium shot (MS) or midshot

A medium shot, or midshot, shows a character's upper body, arms and head. If there are two figures they will have to be quite close to each other in order to fit them both in the shot. This sort of shot therefore implies a certain intimacy between characters and between the characters and the viewers.



Medium shot (MS; *Shaun of the Dead*, Wright, 2004)

- Q** When you are assessing a shot, look at the amount of the subject you can see in it. Can you only see their eyes, their full body or are they just a distant figure? What do you learn about the characters and the setting from these different shot types?

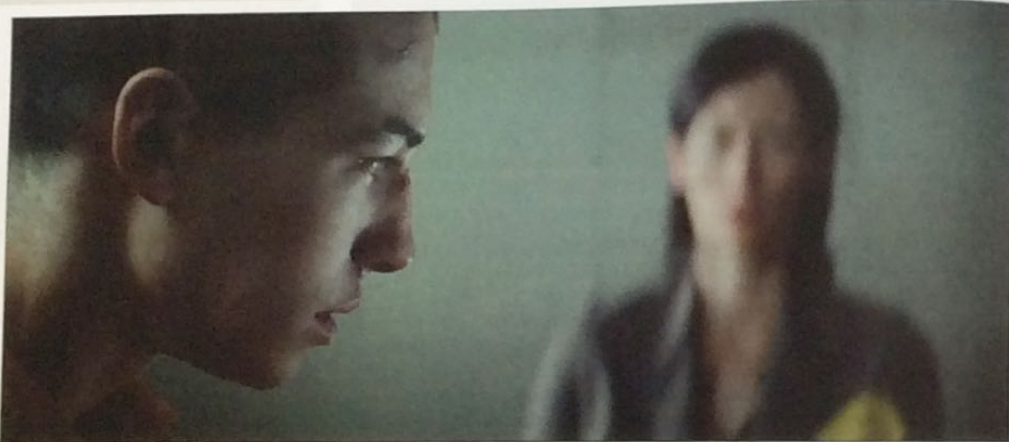
Cinematography: Types of shot (ii)

Two-shot

A two-shot shows two characters who are not necessarily side-by-side, but are clearly the two central characters in a scene. Their proximity and the framing of the shot are indicators of the characters' relationship. They can be placed in the **foreground (FG)** or the **background (BG)**, and the **depth of field** can be adjusted to highlight and draw focus of one element of the image over another.

Foreground (FG): people, objects or action closest to the camera.

Background (BG): in contrast to the FG, the depth of field is altered by the cinematographer, which can add further meaning.

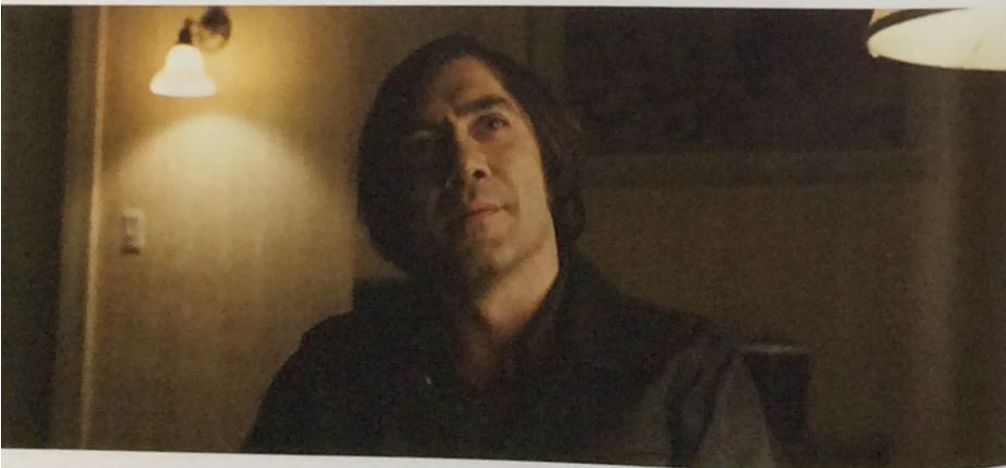


Two-shot (*We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Ramsay, 2011)

Medium close-up (MCU)

A medium close-up (MCU) is used to direct the viewer's attention entirely onto one character by focusing on their head and shoulders. This shot is used to deliver powerful/emotional lines of dialogue or for more nuanced facial expressions.

A medium close-up (MCU; *No Country for Old Men*, Coen Brothers, 2008)



Close-up (CU)

A close-up is perhaps the most important shot in the development of cinematography and the moment that the power is taken away from the viewer. The director is drawing attention to where they want you focus.

This is a shot where the whole of the actor's face fills the full frame while showing their emotions, delivering key lines or simply showing their best side.

In shots that don't involve actors, close-ups give the viewer the opportunity to have a good look at one particular detail, which could be part of the unravelling of the narrative or to help create a mood.



Close-ups (CUs; *Inception*, Nolan, 2010)

Extreme close-up (ECU)

Extreme close-ups (ECUs) get you almost too close to an actor, allowing the viewer into the character's intimate space to reveal detail or emotions that would go unnoticed.

Developments in macro-photography have enabled extreme close-ups of individual flecks of colour in an actor's iris or something reflected in them.



Extreme close-up (ECU; *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Ramsay, 2011)

+ Further information

Deep focus shot has a great **depth of field** from front to back, with the foreground, middle ground and background ALL remaining in sharp focus. The placement of objects or actors in the plane of vision allows for the manipulation of size and scale. If an object in the foreground looms larger than anything else in the frame then this is likely to be of greater importance.



We Need to Talk About Kevin (Ramsay, 2011)

The opposite is **shallow focus**, where the small depth field has one plane in focus (i.e. the foreground) and the background out of focus. The eye will be drawn to the object or actor in the foreground that is in sharp focus, rather than blurred image in the background



Inception (Nolan, 2010)

Depth of field: the distance between the nearest and furthest objects in a scene that are in sharp focus in a shot.

Cinematography: Camera angles and perspectives

A camera angle is simply the angle from which the camera 'sees' the subject. There are several angles, all of which provide different effects.

Aerial shot

An aerial is often used as an establishing shot or at the opening of a film. It offers a bird's-eye view, swooping over a landscape. An aerial shot is designed to be impressive and is best used at the beginning of a film, before the characters and narrative have been established. If used later on, it could remind the audience they are watching a film and break the 'spell'.

Overhead shot

This shot is literally taken from up high – looking down. Again, it is most frequently used as an establishing shot to set the scene. Although the shot begins as an overhead, it will often move down and inwards towards the characters – drawing the viewer quite literally into the story.

Eye-level shot

An eye-level shot is taken using the most natural camera angle. The eye-level chosen will usually be that of the dominant character, this helps you identify with them, as though you are seeing the world as the character sees it.



Eye-level shot (*Shaun of the Dead*, Wright, 2004)

Over-the-shoulder shot

Usually used to shoot a conversation, the camera is positioned behind one of the characters, taking in their shoulder, while filming the other.

Over-the-shoulder shot (*Fish Tank*, Arnold, 2009)



Aerial shot (*Apocalypse Now*, Coppola, 1979)



Overhead shot (*The Lady from Shanghai*, Welles, 1947)

High-angle shot

A high-angle shot is usually taken from just above head-height. Using this shot is a good way of making someone look small and insignificant, simply because we are looking down on them. However, not all high-angle shots serve this purpose.

Low-angle shot

Simply by setting the camera lower than eye-level and looking up at the subject, a low-angle shot can be employed to make a character (or object) dominate the frame, making them more threatening or heroic.

Objective

With an objective camera angle you are viewing the scene through the eye of an unseen observer. The viewpoint doesn't belong to any of the characters; therefore it can be seen as impersonal.



Objective shot (*Fish Tank*, Arnold, 2009)

Subjective

With a subjective camera angle (also known as a **point-of-view (POV) shot**) the viewer is placed in the action either as an active participant or by trading place with a character. This is typically used when the camera replaces the viewpoint of a character looking at someone from afar. In a horror film it could indicate the killer stalking their victim, or it can be used when one character is admiring another.



Subjective or point-of-view (POV) shot (*House of Flying Daggers*, Yimou, 2004)



High-angle shot (*We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Ramsay, 2011)



Low-angle shot (*City of God*, Meirelles, 2002)

IA Independent Activity

Watch a scene from any film and note how the camera angles help shape your view of characters or spaces.

Cinematography: Camera movements

If the angle of view in the shot is to change without there being an edit, the camera has to move. This can be done in several ways.

Fixed axis

When a camera is attached to a fixed axis it stays rooted to the spot but can turn to follow the action, as when used in:

- a **pan**: when the camera moves from left to right or vice versa. This technique is used to follow a person as they walk across a room or to swing from one part of the frame to another
- a **whip pan**: uses the same movement as a pan but at speed; however, its increased speed often blurs the image
- a **tilt** is when the camera moves its lens up or down. This type of shot may be used to look slowly upwards at a building – thereby emphasising how tall it is.

Shifting axis

When the whole camera moves it is said to have a shifting axis. This type of shot is used when the camera needs to move in a very precise direction. There are different methods for moving the camera:

- **Dolly shot**: the camera is mounted on a wheeled platform called a 'dolly', which is used to move the camera through a space in a relatively straight line. The dolly's wheels have tyres for smooth movement and it can only be used on very flat surfaces.
- **Tracking shot**: the dolly is mounted on a track, which has been laid out in a specific route through the action, and follows a subject from behind, alongside or in front.

Zoom

A zoom isn't an actual camera movement as such, but it does create the illusion of movement by starting off viewing its subject from a distance then zooming in (using a lens with a variable focus length) to look at a small part of it in much greater detail or vice versa. A **crash zoom** is the same movement but quicker.

Camera movements



Crane shot

A crane shot is when the camera is mounted on a crane or boom arm and is lowered, raised or swung sideways – like a vertical tracking shot. By using a crane, you can move the camera around the action from one level to another.

Originally, a camera operator would sit at the top of the crane, along with the camera. Nowadays, cameras can be controlled remotely via drones, lightweight/manoeuvrable boom arms and cranes. A camera can now travel up the outside of a wall and pass through a half-open window with very little effort, where once that would have required the building of a special wall that could be pulled apart instantly to let the camera and camera operator pass through.

Hand-held

In the early days of filmmaking when films were made on lightweight 16mm film stock, it was easy to pick up a camera and film hand-held.

The image (right) is from *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929) and shows how filmmakers during the silent film period could film without the restrictions that sound brought about.

With the introduction of 35mm and sound, cameras became more difficult to manoeuvre, so it wasn't until the 1950s that professional cameras were made small enough to carry that hand-held camerawork could once again be considered.

Initially, documentary filmmakers used hand-held cameras, as this created a sense of reality – it reminds the viewer of home movies that are also usually hand-held – with shaky photography, shifting focus and off-kilter framing. This style became known as **cinéma vérité**.

A camera operator holding a camera can follow the action wherever it goes, creating an immediate 'this is real-life' feel. With hand-held technology, it is possible to film in the most cramped conditions or from the most oblique angles. If you want an incredibly low-level shot, just lie on the floor with your hand-held camera and film from there.

In the late 1950s, fiction filmmakers borrowed this approach to filmmaking, including a group of young French film critics turned directors, who became known as the **French New Wave**. Their influence has had an impact on films' visual styles, particularly for more intimate 'indie' movies, such as *Frances Ha* (Baumbach, 2012).

Steadicam

The year 1975 saw the introduction of the Steadicam camera (invented by Garrett Brown). A Steadicam is a type of camera mount that uses weights and counter-balances to keep a camera level, even while hand-held. The Steadicam operator can keep the camera steady for a tracking shot, or can gently move the camera up and down, to create a floating effect, which generates a sense of unease.

Case study: *Victoria* (Schipper, 2015): hand-held

Victoria, a 2 hour 20 minutes German crime thriller, follows in real time, in one long take, a Spanish woman, Victoria, as she becomes embroiled in the criminal activities of a group of young German men. Director Sebastian Schipper and his small crew led by

cinematographer Sturla Brandth Grøvlen filmed the same action on successive nights, before settling on one full take to use – there are no edits. This ambitious film project was only feasible with advances in digital technology and hand-held cameras.



Hand-held (*Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov, 1929)

Further information

French New Wave

In the late 1950s emerged a group of French filmmakers, many of whom were writing for French film journals including *Cahiers du Cinema*. Starved of foreign films during and immediately after World War II, when film import restrictions were lifted in the early 1950s were lifted, they absorbed themselves in films of the Hollywood Golden Age. As a consequence, their films are full of artistic references to other films. Films considered part of the French New Wave were renowned for being shot hand-held, using natural lighting on the streets. The performance style was natural, often improvised, by a youthful cast. They were concerned with how the film was shot and edited, rather than the story itself, and through their experimentations with editing and shooting they re-invented narrative techniques. The key period of this film movement was 1958–1968, and directors associated with French New Wave are François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Louis Malle and Claude Chabrol. This movement has inspired and influenced many American film directors including Quentin Tarantino, who named his production company A Band Apart after Godard's film *Bande à part* (1964).