
Setting the Tone – The Connection between Emotion and Camera Angles in Video Production

Lisa Ehn

lisaehn@kth.se
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm

Siyana Ivanova

siyanai@kth.se
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm

Linus Tegelmo

tegelmo@kth.se
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm

ABSTRACT

Camera angles can add a lot of information to a film by establishing a mood, expressing an emotion, setting expectations, or nonverbally conveying crucial information about characters, places, and relationships. In this short study, we reproduced a scene from the 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* in six variants shot in six different ways: the original level camera angle, a Dutch angle, a low and a high angle, a closeup, and a rear angle with a handheld camera. We recruited 11 participants of varying age and gender to view these clips and answer a set of questions about them; some of the questions used the Geneva Emotion Wheel, while others were open-ended and allowed a free-form response. The study found that while the chosen emotions on GEW vary widely and were indicated to be weak, participants attributed some emotional valence to the purposefully neutral clip when asked to talk about it in their own words, showing a degree of connection between camera angles as an isolated filmmaking technique and a noticeable difference in emotional perception.

KEYWORDS

emotion, camera angle, video, video production

INTRODUCTION

Camera angles can be a powerful tool of expression in filmmaking, from conveying information about the characters and their relationships, to setting a mood for the entire scene. They may affect audiences' emotional perception of what they are watching and set their expectations for the story. In this study, we aim to explore camera angles as a tool of guiding viewers' emotions and find out how they may affect the perception of the feelings in a scene. To do this, we chose a short clip from Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), and recreated the scene in six different camera angles, including a reproduction of the original. In this paper, we present the results of showing the videos to a group of participants and administering a questionnaire to evaluate their emotional perception of the scene at the different angles.

BACKGROUND

Camera angles' in filmmaking can enhance the narrative, the theme, and the overall mood in a film. In many cases it is used to engage the audience into a character from a new perspective. It can be used to further bond with a character on a psychological and/or philosophical level (Kindem & Musburger, 2005). Below we will look deeper on some previous research made on camera angles and their connection to emotions.

Related Work

Peracchio and Meyers-Levy (2005) find in their research on stylistic properties of ad pictures, that a high, downward-looking camera angle may impact a relatively negative feeling (like weakness) or a fairly positive one (like neutralness). Which feeling is imparted they state depends on which concept is more accessible (Peracchio & Meyer-Levy, 2005). In a thesis from 2010, Ilonka Maathuis investigates the influence of camera angles on viewers' opinion of objects. A high and low camera angle was combined with a negative or positive message with the hypothesis that these would have different effects on the feelings evoked by objects. Based on the work by Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, Maathuis assumes a high camera angle to bring a more negative feeling of weakness and harmlessness to the object, and a low camera angle to bring the opposite: a positive feeling of strength and impressiveness (2010). Her study shows however that no effects of camera angle were found. Maathuis' thesis focuses more on the object and message accompanying it, while our project will primarily investigate the camera angles.

In a report by Gross & Levenson (1995), a study was conducted to bring forth a set of video clips enticing specific emotions amongst its viewers. The study started off by analysing 250 clips from films supplied by various sources. From the analysis, a set of 78 clips were selected on the basis that they would most likely efficiently evoke a specific emotion. The clips were then displayed to a total

of 494 undergraduates split into 31 groups. Each group got to see approximately 10 out of the 78 clips. After viewing each clip, a self-assessment form was meant to be filled in by the participants. The form consisted of 16 items, corresponding 16 different emotions (amusement, anger, arousal, confusion, contempt, contentment, disgust, embarrassment, fear, happiness, interest, pain, relief, sadness, surprise and tension). Each item had a scale to be filled in, from 0 to 8. 0 meant *did not feel even the slightest bit of emotion* and 8 meant *most you have ever felt in your life*. The viewers were also asked if they had seen the clip before or not. The results were then later on thoroughly analysed through a multi-layered analysis, eventually narrowing down the 78 clips to 16 clips conveying 8 different emotions, two clips per emotion. We used this report as a source of inspiration while shaping our own project. Instead of searching for specific emotions in different scenes and clips like Gross & Levenson, we instead aimed to find out whether the camera angles could influence the conveyed emotion of the same scene.

Chantal Akerman (1950-2015) and *Jeanne Dielman* (1975)

Chantal Akerman was a film director, screenwriter, and film professor. The film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* premiered at the Cannes film festival in 1975 and is considered one of her greatest works and a break through for minimalist and feminist cinema (Labuza, 2015). *Jeanne Dielman* has an uncomplicated plot where we follow three days in the life of a widow who spends her time cleaning, cooking, eating, shopping, talking to her son, and making ends meet by satisfying the sexual needs of men. The film has a transmutation of “dead time” into existential drama where nothing happens except the extraordinary fact that nothing happens (Sterritt, 2016).

METHODS

For this study, we recruited 11 participants between the ages of 20 and 61 and with varying gender identities (male, female, and nonbinary). The participants watched a sequence of videos and then answered questions about them in an online form. We chose to use a short clip from *Jeanne Dielman*. The clip, which is 36 seconds long, shows a woman walking into a kitchen, lifting the lid of a pot, transferring the potatoes contained inside into a strainer, straining them well, and then putting them back into the pot before walking out of frame with the strainer. We chose this particular snippet due to the fact that out of context, it contains next to no emotional information: it simply shows a person performing a common kitchen activity. The reason for this is that we aimed to verify whether the camera angle itself had an effect on how emotion in the video is perceived by the audience. More specifically, if the scene had had a definite emotional valence, we would not be able to attribute any results to the camera angle only. For our purposes, we reshot the scene with the original camera setup (as a reference), then proceeded to shoot five more versions of it with different camera angles, discussed

in detail below. The videos were then shown to our participants, who completed a questionnaire about their emotional experience of the footage afterwards.

Camera Angles

We chose to work with five different camera angles and a reproduction of the existing scene. The reproduction was set up to be as close as possible to the original footage, including the main objects present in the scene and the level camera. For the other angles, we chose a Dutch angle, a low and a high angle, an extreme close-up, and a rear angle of the scene. The Dutch angle was chosen due to its emotional expressiveness; we theorised that since it has been in use in a variety of movies to indicate uneasiness or that something is not right (an obvious example would be *Mission Impossible*), this feeling may emerge in our scene as well. The low and high angles were selected as obvious alterations to the original setup, which would be easy for the participants to notice and reflect upon. Additionally, as mentioned, a high angle can bring a negative feeling such as weakness (Peracchio & Meyer-Levy, 2005) while a low angle may bring the opposite, a positive feeling of strength or impressiveness (Maathuis, 2010). These camera angles may also emphasize power dynamics between characters where the low angle shots can signal superiority or feelings of fear and dread, while a high angle shot usually creates a feeling of inferiority or “looking down” on the subject (Studio Binder, n.d.). The high angle shot may also make a character seem powerless or vulnerable but can be used in many more situations (Studio Binder, n.d.).

The extreme close-up, like the Dutch angle, is a common cinematographic technique used in emotionally salient moments (think of their appearance in *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* or *Les Misérables*). We thought this could be an interesting angle to include, as it is usually associated with intense feelings, while our scene is very neutral (purposefully so). Finally, we also chose to shoot the scene as seen from the back of the actor - a rear angle - while inching the camera forward as the action goes on. This was done with feelings of creepiness - almost horror-like - in mind, as the subject seems vulnerable and unaware of the observer’s gaze.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three parts: information about the participant (age and gender), the video clips, and questions about emotional perception. The clips are presented in sequence at first, see Appendix A, in order to reveal to the participants from the start that they will be watching the same scene in several variations. This is done to prevent people changing their approach to answering the questions after viewing one video, filling out the form, and only then finding out that there are more clips of similar content. To avoid the sequence of the clips having any effect on the results, we created four versions of this section of the form, varying the order in each of them. Four participants received Form 1, another four - Form 2, and the final three - Form 3. After viewing all videos, the participants

were presented with the final section of the questionnaire, containing the evaluation of how they perceived the emotional valence of the scenes. All questions were mandatory to fill in, apart from the “other comments” question. The questions are included below.

What would you say is the emotion this clip tried to convey?

In this question, we asked the participant to fill in which emotions the assigned clip conveyed. The set of emotions they could choose from, where the emotions taken from the Geneva Emotion Wheel. The set of emotions can be found in Appendix B.

How strong was the emotion?

In this question, we wanted the participants to articulate the strength of the felt emotions they had chosen in the previous question. The scale followed the guidelines of the Geneva Emotion Wheel, which has a scale going from 1 to 5 where 1 represents “not strong” and 5 represents “very strong”, see Appendix B. The strength is meant to portray whether the participants had a greater sensation of said emotion, or if the emotion could possibly have been forced since answering an emotion was mandatory in the previous question.

Can you comment more generally on the impression this clip made on you?

This question was meant to give the participants an opportunity to expand on their perception of the previously displayed clip and to give a glimpse of their thought process.

How do you think the making of the clip affected the conveyed emotion?

Here we asked them to consider and expand even further on how they think the production of the clip influenced the way they perceived the clip. It was to see whether they had an understanding of camera angles or if they picked up on something else.

Any other comments?

An open space for any additional comments on the participants’ experience.

The Geneva Emotion Wheel

The Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW) is an instrument to measure emotional reactions to objects, situations, and events. It is theoretically derived and empirically tested. The wheel consists of emotion families arranged on high or low control/power, negative or positive valence (Swiss Center for Affective Sciences, n.d). We used the GEW as a reference to list emotions in our evaluation questionnaire.

RESULTS

Emotions Assigned to the Clips

The participants assigned a variable set of emotions to each video clip. Even in the case of the video that got the smallest number of emotions assigned to it - the high angle - that number was still eight. The reproduction of the scene received 12 different evaluations, and all others received 10 each. As

Setting the Tone – The Connection between Emotion and Camera Angles in Video Production

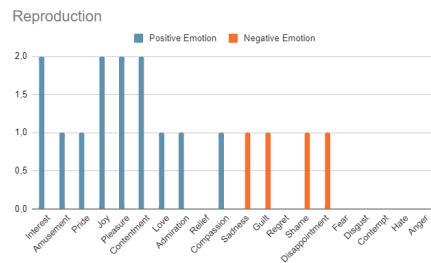


Figure 1: Responses from the Reproduction video

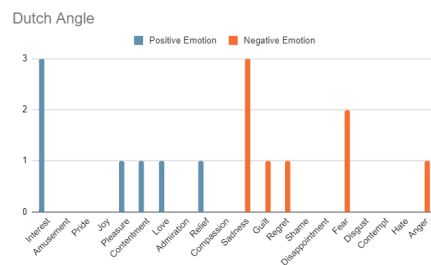


Figure 2: Responses from the Dutch Angle video

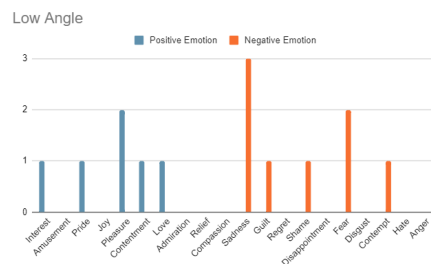


Figure 3: Responses from the Low Angle video

shown in the graphs in Figure 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6., some of the videos received a more positive or more negative response overall. For example, the reproduction video was mostly marked as conveying positive emotions, while the close-up was primarily viewed as negative. Some of the videos, such as the Dutch angle, received a relatively even spread of positive and negative emotions. The emotions ascribed to the video in each case were also often in strong conflict with one another, e.g. for the rear angle, two participants indicated that it conveys joy, while another two chose fear. This comes to show that in isolation, the camera angle is up to individual interpretation and does not carry any significant emotional information in a universal or even common manner. The closest the answers come to agreement is in the case of the close-up, where three answers picked shame and an equal number chose guilt - arguably, two related emotions. However, four other responses indicated that the conveyed emotion was sadness, so the most we can draw as a conclusion is that the contextless close-up of a person's face and some potatoes caused people some discomfort and/or gave off a negative feeling.

Overall, if we were to base our judgment on the results from emotion assignment using GEW, we would conclude that in isolation, the camera angle does not indicate emotion enough for an audience to give them a unified impression of the emotions portrayed in the scene. The lack of any other source of emotional information meant the camera angle did not interact with any other filmmaking techniques (which would usually be the case when one is viewing a movie), and it is possible that this was simply somewhat strange and confusing. It bears mention that participants included other emotions that were not on the GEW list in the free responses (especially since we had not included the option of “no emotion was conveyed” in the checkboxes they could choose from). We discuss this in more detail further on, as well as the fact that the free-response questions provided a lot more in terms of descriptive reports of emotion than the first part of the form, showing that when this more complete data is available, a bigger effect of camera angle on emotional perception is noticeable.

Strength of The Assigned Emotions

As seen in the graphs in Figure 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 (the number of responses on the Y axis and emotion strength on the X axis), the strength of the emotions indicated in the form tended to be low with some notable exceptions. In the cases of the reproduction, the Dutch angle, and the low angle, the ratings were decisively low: most around the 1 and 2 marks on our 5-point scale where 1 was “least intense emotion” and 5 was “most intense.” This adds up to half of the videos shown to the participants, showing a general apathy towards them. In the case of the high angle and the rear angle, the ratings were slightly higher, mostly 2:s and 3:s for the rear and even 4:s for the high angle (the rest, however, were low ratings).

The case where the strength of emotion was indicated to be higher was the close-up shot. This video stood out in the free-response comments as well (discussed further on), which is unsurprising

Setting the Tone – The Connection between Emotion and Camera Angles in Video Production

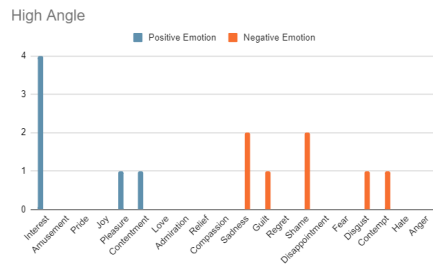


Figure 4: Responses from the High Angle video

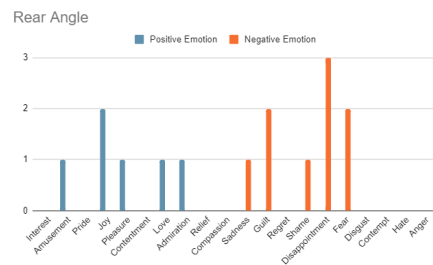


Figure 5: Responses from the Rear Angle video

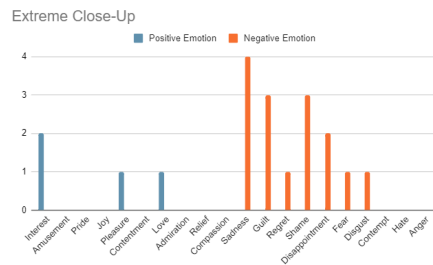


Figure 6: Responses from the Extreme Close-up video

as it is the only one where the camera does not look onto the subject from a single view. There is editing, cuts, and a person's face up close in the video, which distinguishes it sharply from the other ones. It is difficult to say whether the effect came solely from the moments when the camera was focused on the actor's face or on the potatoes in the pot, or those bits interacted with the fact that this video, unlike all the others, was edited and featured cuts and establishing shots. We conclude that the general attitude the participants showed in the emotion strength section was moderately apathetic, except in the case of the close-up video. While there were some videos where a positive or negative tilt could be noticed (such as the reproduction, which was assigned more positive emotions than negative), there were also others (such as the Dutch angle) which received a relatively even spread between positive and negative responses.

Free-form Comments from the Participants

The participants were asked three free response questions, detailed in the Method section. When it came to answers to the first one of these questions, impressions of the clips were almost as diverse as the assigned emotions. Very few people answered question three, which asked about any additional comments, and so we do not analyse it in detail. We begin by discussing the reproduction of the original scene, which served as our "control" video. Some responses indicated that the reproduction felt negative: "I got the impression that the girl hates her life," while others were opposite: "For me it felt very calm", "[She] seems happy with the potatoes." One person commented that this angle was the most emotionless one, while another claimed that clearly not much thought was put into the camera work. One respondent flat out refused to try to pin down an impression, and lastly, one participant felt bored and noted that the potatoes looked undercooked.

On the second question, inquiring about how the making of the video affected its emotional content, participants were a little more united in their responses. There were four responses which commented on the angle specifically, calling it "steady," theorising that the level view takes emotion away and is "uninterested," and (differing from the rest) remarking that it evokes "order and dignity." The rest of the responses indicated that those participants thought the making of the clip had no effect on the emotions in it or that the action was simply shown to the viewer without further elaboration.

Overall, the reproduction video received discordant responses to the free-form questions, which is consistent with the results we observed from the GEW scale where this was the video that received the highest number of different emotion assignments. It is possible to ascribe this to the neutrality of this particular angle, since the participants point out the "uninterested" camera specifically, but we cannot say for certain that this was not a cumulative effect of both the angle and the general lack of emotion in the video.

Next we summarise the responses to the free-form questions for the actively different angles. For the Dutch angle, we received two comments on the first question saying that the video seemed to be

Setting the Tone – The Connection between Emotion and Camera Angles in Video Production

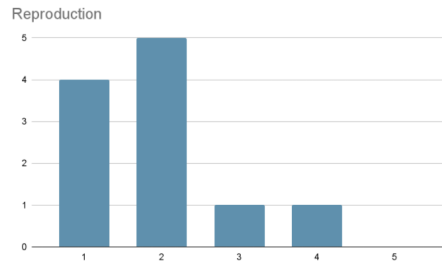


Figure 7: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the Reproduction video

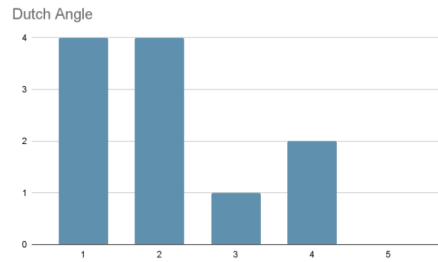


Figure 8: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the Dutch Angle video

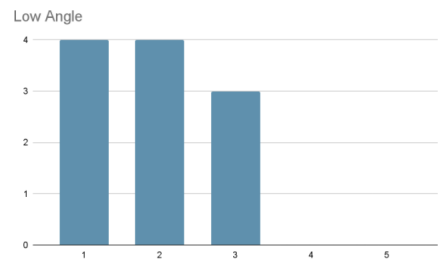


Figure 9: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the Low Angle video

the same as the others, two diametrically opposed opinions: one saying the video conveyed interest and the other claiming it conveyed boredom, and two similar responses indicating that the video inspired uneasiness or a feeling of being watched. The answers to the second question indicated that almost everybody had noticed that the difference with the other videos is the tilt of the camera. In the end, only 2 of the 11 participants chose something close to the conventional interpretation of a Dutch angle.

When it came to the low angle, several responses to the first question indicated that people thought the video was neutral (“no impression,” “food is ready”). However, a few respondents indicated that they thought the conveyed feeling was one of inferiority, fear, “feeling like an ant” or “being a sad puppy looking up.” These very expressive phrases indicated that some people perceived the low angle as actually having an effect on the emotion of the scene - one that is consistent with the literature (mentioned in the subsection “Camera Angles”). This is in contrast with the low strength of the varying emotions the participants indicated when compelled to use the GEW, suggesting that when given the opportunity to use their own words, people did see some emotional content in the camera angles themselves. The second question showed that almost everyone noticed the angle and pinpointed it as the source of the impressions they cited in question one. The impressions of the high angle were roughly split into two camps: five people found it some variation of neutral (“boring,” “stale,” “no impression”) and most of the remaining participants said that the clip gave “an overview” or a feeling of being the observer which could have something to do with the fact that most surveillance and CCTV footage is shot from above in a fashion very similar to this video. In the second question, the participants who felt they were getting an overview of the scene said that the camera angle gave them a “full view” that showed “all details.” The rest commented that the angle was detached and disinterested.

The close-up video received the most comments and interest. Participants were taken aback by the lack of emotion in the video, presumably due to the usual context in which close-ups on a character’s face are utilized in filmmaking - to put the focus on the actor’s emotional facial expressions (examples include *The Godfather*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and many more). Three other responses pinpointed the expression of the actor as “sad,” while two said the video felt more personal and was more dynamic and interesting. Another noted that there was a lot of editing in this video as opposed to the others. While filling out the form, two of the participants verbally commented that they were more interested in this video, since it contained editing and establishing shots as well as the close-ups on the actor’s face and on the pot of potatoes - it was “different,” unlike the rest which were “all kind of the same.” The responses to the second question for this video almost universally focused on “details” being visible and the “emotionless face” of the actor. One participant directly talked about being confused by this video because they were used to close-ups being used to show emotions, which were not present in this scene. Overall, it seems that while people were interested in the break in the “routine” of seeing

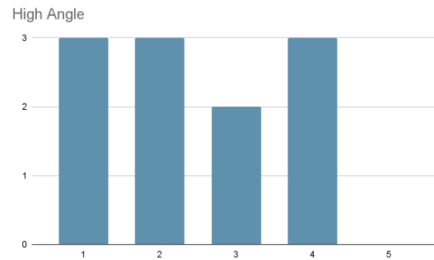


Figure 10: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the High Angle video

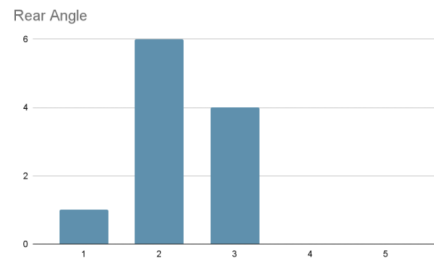


Figure 11: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the Rear Angle video

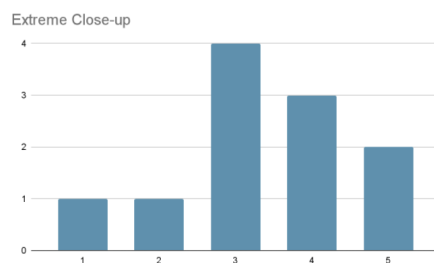


Figure 12: Strength of the conveyed emotions in the Extreme Close-up video

stable shots one after another, they were also confused by the use of a very emotional technique in a context where nothing else indicated a particular emotion (except in the cases where a fairly neutral expression was interpreted as sad by some).

The video with the rear angle - which was shot with a handheld camera from the back - received varied responses to question one. One participant was still disinterested and one felt the camera person must be intoxicated, while the rest mostly focused on the fact that the “action” i.e. what the actor was doing with her hands was not visible - it was “hidden,” a “bad angle,” the focus was “not on the action.” One participant disagreed with the rest, saying that the video felt “homey.” The responses to the second question commented on the scene being “poorly shot,” “shaky,” and focusing on the actor’s movements rather than what is going on in the kitchen. However, three of the participants indicated that the camera angle made the video “creepy” and that the actor was being “stalked,” giving the impression of a “private” moment being invaded. These three responses are congruent with what we expected when we included this shot in the experiment, however the ones just commenting on the lack of visibility were not something we were anticipating.

Overall, we found that when given the freedom to use their own words to describe emotion, participants gave more specific answers containing very expressive words and phrases such as “feeling like an ant” and “stalking.” This was in contrast to the same participants’ responses on the GEW and strength of emotion scale. It seems that allowing more flexibility in answers gave participants the opportunity to process the scene on their own terms and talk about the emotional content they perceived in it in more depth. This leads us to believe that free responses gave us a better picture of the actual effects of camera angles than did the GEW part of the questionnaire. Finally, we must note that one participant’s free responses were not included, as they cypasted the same answers to every question. Another participant, who was not excluded from consideration but is worth mentioning, just indicated “guilt and shame” as the prevailing emotions for every single video in their responses to the first question. As a whole, most participants engaged with the free-response questions and talked about the variety of emotions they perceived in the videos.

DISCUSSION

After the study had been concluded, we analyzed the responses and were able to conclude that there was room for improvement in how the videos were presented to an audience. Many participants found the study to be “boring” due to the fact that they had to rewatch the same scene over and over again with just the camera angles changing between each clip. While this is not usually a big concern, in a study about emotion, having the overwhelming feeling be boredom can overshadow the emotional experience the participants are having otherwise. The element of surprise went away after watching the first two or three videos, when the participants realized that they would watch the same scene over and over again. We presented it this way to remove other factors such as believing they would

only watch and rate one video before finishing the study and setting the expectations straight away. Our initial hypothesis was that the length of the videos (approximately 35-40 seconds) would add up to about 3 minutes of content and be easily digested by the participants. This proved however to be inaccurate based on the feedback we received. For future projects, it could be helpful to instead structure it by informing the user that they will see several videos of the same scene but they only have to digest one video at a time before answering questions on that same video. This might make the whole process easier to follow and less “boring,” thus avoiding other emotional experiences being overshadowed by feeling disinterested. It would also keep each video fresh in the participants mind while answering the questions, without the need to rewatch it again in order to answer to the fullest possible extent.

Another way the study could have been altered would be by conducting a qualitative study to complement the quantitative data. This could, for example, be done through interviews or focus groups. These might result in different outcomes due to affording the respondents more freedom in how they phrase and express their emotions but in such a study. One should however be aware of the risk of the participants in a focus group influencing each other and the risk of follow-up questions affecting the outcome of answers from an interview. We did not do qualitative research in this study due to time limitations and the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. However, the fact that we got so much more detailed and expressive responses in the free answer questions points to that being a more effective way of getting people to accurately describe their emotional perception of the videos. Therefore we list this as a limitation to our study, and would recommend interviews as a method in further research instead.

Potential future work for this form of study could be to change the concept of a neutral scene to one with a fixed emotion attached to it. By having an emotion attached to the scene, it would be interesting to see if the emotional perception of a viewer would change if the camera angles changed. It would also be interesting to observe the interaction between a variety of filmmaking techniques in a single video as this might be a more complete reflection of reality, as the experience of the average film viewer would be determined by a plethora of approaches and methods in combination, instead of just one of them at a time.

CONCLUSION

As discussed, the outcome of this study had several components to it: firstly, the apathy and divided opinions in the former part of the survey, failing to strongly associate the individual influence of the camera angle with how videos were emotionally perceived; and secondly, the evidence for some degree of connection between camera angles as an isolated technique in the latter portion, when participants were allowed to choose their own way of talking about their emotions regarding the videos. In the second case, we have noted a difference in the self-reported emotional perception of the

differently angled videos, as participants attributed emotional qualities to the deliberately neutral scene. We conclude that further research on this topic would be beneficial, especially if it employs more open-ended approaches to gathering information from the participants and investigates camera angles not only in isolation, but in interaction with other filmmaking techniques, in the ways they are usually encountered in real life.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Setting the Tone: Videos

We now ask you to watch the set of videos you find below before proceeding to the next page.

T S1

Titta se...

Dela

Titta på

YouTube

T S2

Titta se...

Dela

Titta på

YouTube

T S3

Titta se...

Dela

Titta på

YouTube

T S4

Titta se...

Dela

Titta på

YouTube

T S5

Titta se...

Dela

Titta på

YouTube

T S6

Titta på


YouTube

Appendix B

Setting the Tone: Questions

In the following 6 sections we ask you to answer some questions relating to the videos on the previous page. You can re-watch the videos how many times as you would like.

T S1



How strong was the emotion?

1

2

3

4

5

Not strong

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Very strong

Can you comment more generally on the impression this clip made on you? *

Ditt svar

How do you think the making of the clip affected the conveyed emotion? *

Ditt svar

Any other comments?

Ditt svar

What would you say is the emotion this clip tried to convey? *

☐ Contempt

☐ Relief

☐ Regret

☐ Interest

☐ Pleasure

☐ Love

☐ Disappointment

☐ Joy

☐ Hate

☐ Amusement

☐ Disgust

☐ Guilt

☐ Fear

☐ Shame

☐ Admiration

☐ Sadness

☐ Contentment

☐ Anger

☐ Pride

☐ Compassion