

FILM STUDIES

An Introduction

Ed Sikov

Second Edition

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Publishers Since 1893

NEW YORK CHICHESTER, WEST SUSSEX

cup.columbia.edu

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E-ISBN 978-0-231-55156-4

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sikov, Ed, author.

Title: Film studies : an introduction / Ed Sikov.

Description: Second edition. | New York : Columbia University Press, [2020] | Series: Film and culture series | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020001950 (print) | LCCN 2020001951 (ebook) | ISBN 9780231195928 (cloth) | ISBN 9780231195935 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Motion pictures.

Classification: LCC PN1994 .S535 2020 (print) | LCC PN1994 (ebook) | DDC 791.43—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020001950>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020001951>

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Cover images: TCD / Prod.DB / Alamy Stock Photo

INTRODUCTION

REPRESENTATION AND REALITY

Consider the word **REPRESENTATION** (see glossary). What does it mean—and what technology does it take—to represent real people or physical objects on film? These are two of the basic questions in film studies. The dictionary defines the verb *to represent* as “to stand for; to symbolize; to indicate or communicate by signs or symbols.” That’s all well and good as far as it goes. But in the first one hundred years of motion pictures, the signs and symbols onscreen were almost always *real* before they ended up as signs and symbols on movie screens.

We **take** for granted certain things about painting and literature, chief among them that the objects and people depicted in paint or described in words do not necessarily have a physical reality. You can paint a picture of a woman without using a model or even without having a specific real woman in your mind. You can paint landscapes you’ve never actually seen, and in fact you don’t have to paint any real objects at all. Your painting can be entirely nonrepresentational—just splashes of color or streaks of black paint. And bear in mind that all works of art, in addition to being representations, are also real things themselves. The woman Leonardo da Vinci painted against a mysterious landscape may or

may not have existed, but the painting commonly known as the *Mona Lisa* is certainly a real, material object.

In literature, too, writers describe cities that never existed and people who never lived. But on film—at least **narrative** films like the ones you’re going to learn about in this book—directors have to have something real to photograph. Now, with the increased use of digital and computer-generated imagery (CGI), of course, things are changing in that regard, but that’s a subject for a later chapter. For the time being, consider the fact that in classical world cinema, in all but a few very rare cases, directors had to have something real to photograph with a film camera. A filmmaker could conceivably take a strip of **CELLULOID**—the plastic material that film is made of—and draw on it or paint it or dig scratches into its surface; experimental filmmakers have been known to use celluloid as a kind of canvas for nonrepresentational art. But otherwise a filmmaker must photograph real people and things. They may be actors wearing makeup and costumes, but they’re still real human beings. These actors may be walking through constructed **sets**, but these sets have a physical reality; walls that look like stone may actually be made of painted wood, but *they are still real, material walls*.

Even animated films are photographed: artists paint a series of **ANIMATION CELS**, and then each cel is photographed. The physical reality of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—the Walt Disney movie, not the Victor Hugo novel—is not the character of Quasimodo, nor is it an actor playing Quasimodo, but rather the elaborate, colorful, stylized drawings that had to be photographed, processed, and run through a projector to make them move. Those drawings have a physical reality, and Disney animators are masters at making them seem doubly real through shading, layering, and other means of creating a sense of depth.

Let’s approach this issue another way. If Picasso, Warhol, and Rembrandt each painted a portrait of the same person, most educated people would immediately understand that the result would be three very different-looking paintings. We recognize that a painting’s meaning is at least partly a matter of its **FORM**—the shape and structure of the art work. Even if three painters from the same

general culture in the same general period painted the same person—say, Rembrandt, Hals, and Vermeer—we would see three different views of that person—three very different paintings.

The same holds true in literature. If, say, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Chuck Palahniuk all described the same person, we would end up reading three diverse pieces of prose. They'd all be written in English, and they'd be describing the same individual, but they simply wouldn't *read* the same. Some details may be similar, but each writer would describe those details differently using different words and sentence structures. And because the form would be different in each case, we would take away from the writing three different impressions—three ways of thinking and expressing and feeling.

But photography, particularly motion picture photography, appears on the surface to be of a different order. You take a real thing, and you photograph it. You take an event and you film it. And unless you monkey with the camera or the film processing and do all kinds of things to deliberately call attention to your presence as the filmmaker, if you and your friend and her friend and her friend's friend all filmed the same event, you would all come up with similar looking films—or so you might assume.

This book will show you how and why each of your films would be different and why those differences matter to the art form. You will learn to see the ways in which filmmakers express ideas and emotions with their cameras.

For example, let's say that three aspiring directors—all from the University of Pittsburgh—decide to film what they each consider to be a characteristic **scene** at a major league baseball game. The three film students head over to PNC Park with nothing but small video cameras, and they don't leave their seats in the right field grandstand. Ethan is planning to use his footage in the **ROMANTIC COMEDY** he's making based on a guy he knows who is obsessed with one of the Pirates' infielders. Ethan's friend, Shin Lae, is making a drama about a little boy with autism who loves baseball. And Shin Lae's friend, Sanjana, hasn't yet figured out what her **story** will be let

alone how she will develop it, but she already knows that she wants to include random shots taken at a baseball game.

When the Pirates' Luis Cruz hits a foul ball into the stands, the three filmmakers each have their cameras running. It's the same moment in time, the same foul ball, but the three young directors see the event from three different perspectives. Ethan wants to show the whole action from beginning to end in a continuous [shot](#), so just before the windup he frames the pitcher, batter, and catcher in the same image so he can show the ball move from mound to plate to air and, eventually, thanks to his ability to move the camera he's holding, the ball finds its way into a fan's bare fist. His built-in microphone picks up the sharp crack of the bat connecting with the ball, the crowd's initial roar of expectation, the collective groan of disappointment when the ball crosses the foul line, and finally a quick burst of distant applause at the fan's catch.

Shin Lae, on the other hand, cares more about the boisterous reaction of a group of Cub Scouts nearby than she does about the particular batter or the events of the game itself. When she notices that the pitcher is about to wind up, she points her camera not at either the pitcher or the batter but instead at the scouts, who are a few rows above her. She simply records the boys' shouts and facial expressions, which range from eagerness to glee to disappointment and finally to envy as the fan successfully nabs the ball. Sanjana, meanwhile, has not been paying attention to the baseball game at all. (She hates sports and has only agreed to come along in order to film things.) While Ethan and Shin Lae get increasingly wrapped up by the game, Sanjana has become fascinated by a group of shirtless, heavily tattooed, and increasingly drunk bikers to her right. She has already filmed a security guard telling them to quiet down, but something about this group of urban outlaws appeals to her—particularly the fattest, hairiest one. She aims her camera on him and him alone and just films him sitting there, yelling, drinking, swearing, and—eventually—raising his hairy paw and nabbing Luis Cruz's foul ball to the cheers of the crowd. She tilts her camera up slightly to keep his head from leaving the image, and tilts it back down when the crowd stops cheering and the biker takes his seat again.

Same game + same scene + same action = three different films. Why? Because each filmmaker has made a series of choices, and each of those choices has artistic, expressive consequences.

This is one of the key aesthetic issues of cinema studies—learning to see that an apparently unmediated event is in fact a mediated work of art. At first glance, we tend not to see the mediation involved in the cinema; we don't see the *art*. All we see—at first—is a representation of the physical reality of what has been photographed. And in a strange paradox, classical American filmmaking is saddled with the notion that it's purely artificial. The lighting tends to be idealized, the actors' faces are idealized by makeup, the settings are sometimes idealized.... Just to describe something as “a Hollywood vision of life” is to say that it's phony. The objects and people in Hollywood films are thus too real and too fake, all at the same time. How can we make sense of this?

CHAPTER 1

MISE-EN-SCENE: WITHIN THE IMAGE

WHAT IS MISE-EN-SCENE?

Film studies deals with the problems of reality and representation by making an initial assumption and proceeding logically from it. This assumption is that all representations have meaning. The term **MISE-EN-SCENE** (*also mise-en-scène*) describes the primary feature of cinematic representation. Mise-en-scene is the first step in understanding how films produce and reflect meaning. It's a term taken from the French, and it means *that which has been put into the scene* or *put onstage*. Everything—literally everything—in the filmed image is described by the term *mise-en-scene*: it's the expressive totality of what you see in a single film image. Mise-en-scene consists of *all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior (meaning actors, their gestures, and their facial expressions)*. In addition, *mise-en-scene* includes the camera's actions and angles and the **cinematography**, which simply means photography for motion pictures. Since *everything* in the filmed image comes under the heading of mise-en-scene, the term's definition is a mouthful, so a shorter definition is this: *Mise-en-scene is the totality of expressive content within the image*. Film studies assumes that everything within the image has expressive meanings. By analyzing mise-en-scene, we begin to see what those meanings might be.

The term *mise-en-scene* was first used in the theater to describe the staging of an action. A theater director takes a script, written and

printed on the page, and makes each scene come alive on a stage with a particular set of actors, a unique set design, a certain style of lighting, and so on. The script says that a scene is set in, say, a suburban living room. Okay, you're the director, and your task is to create a suburban living room scene on stage and make it work not as an interchangeable, indistinguishable suburban living room, but as the specific living room of the particular suburban characters the playwright has described on the page—characters you are trying to bring to life onstage. The same holds true in the cinema: the director starts from scratch and stages the scene for the camera, and every element of the resulting image has expressive meaning. Even when a film is shot on [LOCATION](#)—at a preexisting, real place—the director has chosen that location for its expressive value.

It's important to note that *mise-en-scene* *does not* have anything to do with whether a given scene is “realistic” or not. As in the theater, film studies doesn't judge *mise-en-scene* by how closely it mimics the world we live in. Just as a theater director might want to create a thoroughly warped suburban living room set with oversized furniture and distorted walls and bizarrely shaped doors in order to express her feeling that the characters who live in this house are crazy, so a film director creates *mise-en-scene* according to the impression he or she wishes to create. Sometimes *mise-en-scene* is relatively realistic looking, and sometimes it isn't.

Here's the first shot of a hypothetical film we're making: we see a man standing up against a wall. The wall is made of ... what? Wood? Concrete? Bricks? Let's say bricks. Some of the bricks are chipped. The wall is ... what color? White? No, let's say it's red. It's a new wall. No, it's an old wall, and some graffiti has been painted on it, but even the graffiti is old and faded. Is it indoors or outdoors? Day or night? We'll go with outdoors in the afternoon. The man is ... what? Short? No, he's tall. And he's wearing ... what? A uniform—a blue uniform. With a badge.

Bear in mind, nothing has happened yet in our film—we just have a policeman standing against a wall. But the more *mise-en-scene* details we add, the more visual information we give to our audience, and the more precise our audience's emotional response will be to

the image we are showing them. But also bear in mind the difference between written prose and filmed image. As readers, you have just been presented with all of these details in verbal form, so necessarily you've gotten the information sequentially. With a film image, we seem to see it all at once. Nothing is isolated the way things are in this written description. With film, we take in all the visual information quickly, *and we do so without being aware that we're taking it in*. As it happens, studies of human perception have proven that we actually take in visual information sequentially as well, though a great deal more speedily than we do written information. Moreover, filmmakers find ways of directing our gaze to specific areas in the image by manipulating compositions, colors, areas of focus, and so on. By examining each of these aspects of cinema, film studies attempts to wake us up to what's in front of us onscreen—to make us all more conscious of what we're seeing and why.

To continue with our example of mise-en-scene: the man is handsome in a Brad Pitt sort of way. He's a white guy. In his late thirties. But he's got a black eye. And there's a trace of blood on his lower lip.

So we've got a cop and a wall and some stage blood, and we film him with a motion picture or video camera. Nothing has happened by chance here; we, the filmmakers, have made a series of artistic decisions even before we have turned on the camera. Even if we happen to have just stumbled upon this good-looking cop with a black eye standing against a brick wall and bleeding from the mouth, it's our decision not only to film him but to use that footage in our film. If we decide to use the footage, we have made an expressive statement with it. And we have done so with only one shot that's maybe six seconds long. This is the power of mise-en-scene.

What's our next shot? A body lying nearby? An empty street? Another cop? A giant slimy alien? All of these things are possible, and all of them are going to give our audience even more information about the first shot. Subsequent shots stand in relation to the first shot, and by the time you get to the tenth or twentieth or hundredth shot, the sheer amount of expressive information—the content of individual shots, and the relationships from shot to shot—is

staggering. But we're getting ahead of ourselves; this is the subject of [chapter 4](#).

THE SHOT

By the way: what is a SHOT? *A shot is the basic element of filmmaking—a piece of film run through the camera, exposed, and developed; an uninterrupted run of the camera; or an uninterrupted image on film.* That's it: you turn the camera on, you let it run, you turn it off, and the result—provided that you have remembered to put film in the camera—is a shot. It's an unedited shot, but it's a shot nonetheless. It's the basic building block of the movies.

Despite the use of the word *scene* in the term *mise-en-scene*, *mise-en-scene* describes the content not only of a [sequence](#) of shots but of an individual shot. A shot is a unit of length or duration—a minimal unit of dramatic material; a scene is a longer unit *usually* consisting of several shots or more.

Even at the basic level of a single shot, *mise-en-scene* yields meaning. The first shot of an important character is itself important in this regard. Here's an example: Imagine that you are going to film a murder movie, and you need to introduce your audience to a woman who is going to be killed later on in the film. What does the first shot of this woman look like? What does *she* look like? Because of the expressive importance of *mise-en-scene*, every detail matters. Every detail is a statement of meaning, whether you want it to be or not. (These are precisely the questions Alfred Hitchcock faced when he made his groundbreaking 1960 film, *Psycho*.) Is she pretty? *What does that mean?* What is she wearing? *What does that mean?* If she's really attractive and wearing something skimpy—well, are you saying she deserves to be killed? What if she's actually quite ugly—what are you saying there? Do you want your audience to like her or dislike her? It's your choice—you're the director. So what signals are you going to send to your audience to get that emotion across? Let's say you're going to put something on the wall behind her. And it's ... a big stuffed bird. No, it's ... a pair of Texas longhorns. No, it's ... a broken mirror. No, it's a crucifix. Or maybe it's just a big empty wall.

Each of these props adds meaning to the shot, as does the absence of props and decorative elements.

This is why *mise-en-scene* is important: it tells us something above and beyond the event itself. Again: *mise-en-scene is the totality of expressive content within the image*. And every detail has a meaningful consequence.

Let's say you're filming a shot outdoors and a bird flies into the camera's field of vision and out the other side. Suddenly, a completely accidental event is in your movie. Do you keep it? Do you use that shot, or do you film another one? Your film is going to be slightly different whichever TAKE you choose. (A *take* is a single recording of a shot. If the director doesn't like something that occurs in Take 1, she may run the shot again by calling out "Take 2"—and again and again—"Take 22"—"Take 35"—"Take 59"—until she is ready to call "print!") If you're making the kind of film in which everything is formally strict and controlled, then you probably don't want the bird. If however you're trying to capture a kind of random and unpredictable quality, then your little bird accident is perfect. When film students discuss your work, they'll be talking about the bird—the significance of random events of nature, perhaps even the symbolism of flight. That bird is now part of your film's *mise-en-scene*, and it's expressing something—whether you want it to or not. Whether critics or audiences at the multiplex specifically notice it or not, *it's there*. It's a part of the art work. It's in the film, and therefore it has expressive meaning.

Here's an example from a real film called *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a 1953 musical comedy starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. There's a scene in which Jane Russell performs a musical number with a crew of athletes on the American Olympic team. The number was supposed to end with a couple of the muscle boys diving over Jane Russell's shoulders as she sits by the side of a swimming pool. As it turned out, however, one of the actors accidentally kicked her in the head as he attempted to dive over her into the pool. With the camera still running, the film's glamorous [star](#) got knocked violently into the water and came up looking like the proverbial drowned rat. It was obviously an accident. But the director,

Howard Hawks, decided to use that take instead of any of the accident-free retakes he and his choreographer subsequently filmed. Something about the accident appealed to Hawks's sensibility: it expressed something visually about sex and sex roles and gender and animosity and the failure of romance. There's a sudden and shocking shift in mise-en-scene, as Jane Russell goes from being the classically made-up Hollywood movie star in a carefully composed shot to being dunked in a pool and coming up sputtering for air, her hair all matted down, and improvising the end of the song. Hawks liked that version better; it said what he wanted to say, even though it happened entirely by chance. The shot, initially a mistake, took on expressive meaning through its inclusion in the film.

SUBJECT-CAMERA DISTANCE—WHY IT MATTERS

At the end of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), an aging star turns to her director and utters the famous line, "I'm ready for my [close-up](#)." But what exactly is a close-up? Or a [long shot](#)? And why do these terms matter?

One way directors have of providing expressive shading to each shot they film is to vary the distance between the camera and the subject being filmed. Every rule has its exceptions, of course, but in general, the closer the camera is to the subject, the more emotional weight the subject gains. (To be more precise, it's really a matter of how close the camera's lens makes the subject seem to be; this is because a camera's lens may bring the subject closer optically even when the camera is physically far away from the subject. See the glossary's definition of [TELEPHOTO LENS](#) for clarification.) If we see an empty living room and hear the sound of a telephone ringing on the [soundtrack](#) but we can't immediately find the telephone onscreen, the call may seem relatively unimportant. But if the director quickly cuts to a CLOSE-UP of the telephone, suddenly the phone call assumes great significance. Because the director has moved the camera close to it, the phone—once lost in the living room set—becomes not only isolated within the room but enormous on the screen.

A close-up is a shot that isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large. A close-up of a human being is generally of that person's face. An **extreme close-up** might be of the person's eyes—or mouth—or nose—or any element isolated at very close range in the image.

Other subject-camera-distance terms are also simple and self-explanatory. A **MEDIUM SHOT** appears to be taken from a medium distance; in terms of the human body, it's from the waist up. A **THREE-QUARTER SHOT** takes in the human body from just below the knees; a **FULL SHOT** is of the entire human body. A **LONG SHOT** appears to be taken from a long distance. Remember: lenses are able to create the illusion of distance or closeness. A director could conceivably use a *telephoto lens* on a camera that is rather distant from the subject and still create a close-up. The actual physical position of the camera at the time of the filming isn't the issue—it's what the image looks like onscreen that matters. The critical task is not to try to determine where the camera was actually placed during filming, or whether a telephoto lens was used to create the shot, but rather to begin to notice the *expressive* results of subject-camera distance onscreen.

There are gradations. You can have **medium close-ups**, taken from the chest up; **extreme long shots**, which show the object or person at a vast distance surrounded by a great amount of the surrounding space. If, at the end of a western, the final shot of the film is an extreme long shot of an outlaw riding off alone into the desert, the director may be using the shot to convey the character's isolation from civilization, his solitude; we would see him in the far distance surrounded by miles of empty desert. Imagine how different we would feel about this character if, instead of seeing him in extreme long shot, we saw his weather-beaten face in close-up as the final image of the film. We would be emotionally as well as physically closer to him at that moment because we would be able to read into his face the emotions he was feeling. His subtlest expressions—a slightly raised eyebrow, a tensing of the mouth—would fill the screen.

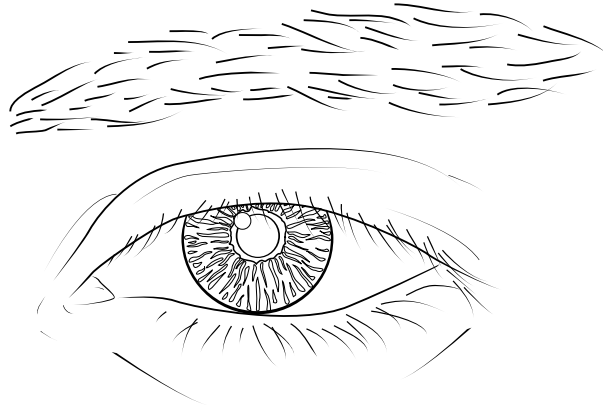


FIGURE 1.1 Extreme close-up: a single eye dominates the image.

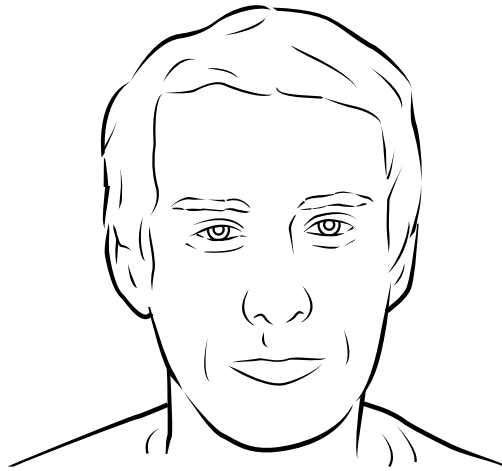


FIGURE 1.2 Close-up: the character's face fills most of the screen.

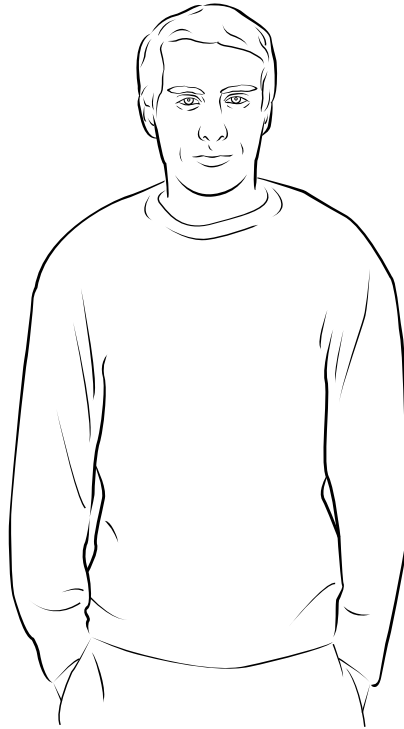


FIGURE 1.3 Medium shot: the character appears from the waist up.

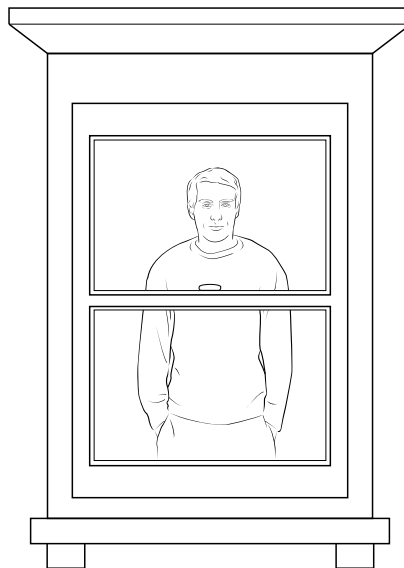


FIGURE 1.4 Long shot: because the camera has moved back even further, the character now appears in a complete spatial context.



FIGURE 1.5 Extreme long shot: the camera is now very far away from the character, thereby dwarfing him onscreen. What are the emotionally expressive qualities of each of these illustrations (figs. 1.1 through 1.5)?

Here's a final observation on subject-camera distance: Each film establishes its own shot scale, just as each filmmaker establishes his or her own style. Whereas Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941) employs an extreme close-up of Kane's lips as he says the key word, "Rosebud," Howard Hawks would never push his camera so close to a character's mouth and isolate it in that way. The Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer shot his masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) almost entirely in close-ups; as a result, what would be a long shot for Dreyer might be a medium shot for John Ford or Billy Wilder. If we begin with the idea that the human body is generally the measure for subject-camera distance, then the concept's relativity becomes clear: a close-up is only a close-up *in relation to something else*—the whole body, for example. The same holds true for objects and landscape elements. In short, we must appreciate the fact that subject-camera distances are relative both within individual films—the sequence in *Citizen Kane* that includes the extreme close-up of Kane uttering "Rosebud" begins with an equally extreme long shot of his mansion—and from film to film: Dreyer's close-ups differ in scale from those used by Ford or Wilder.

CAMERA ANGLE

In addition to subject-camera distance, directors employ different camera angles to provide expressive content to the subjects they film. When directors simply want to film a person or room or landscape from an angle that seems unobtrusive and normal (whatever the word *normal* actually means), they place the camera at the level of an adult's eyes, which is to say five or six feet off the ground when the characters are standing, lower when they are seated. This, not surprisingly, is called an **EYE-LEVEL SHOT**.

When the director shoots his or her subjects from below, the result is a **LOW-ANGLE SHOT**; with a low-angle shot, the camera is in effect looking up at the subject. And when he or she shoots the subject from above, the result is a **HIGH-ANGLE SHOT**; the camera is looking down. An extreme overhead shot, taken seemingly from the sky or ceiling and looking straight down on the subject, is known as a **BIRD'S-EYE VIEW**.

The terms *close-up*, *low-angle shot*, *extreme long shot*, and others assume that the camera is facing the subject squarely, and for the most part shots in feature films are indeed taken straight-on. But a camera can **tilt** laterally on its axis, too. When the camera tilts horizontally and/or vertically it's called a **DUTCH TILT** or a **canted angle**.



FIGURE 1.6 Eye-level shot: the camera places us at the character's height—we're equals.



FIGURE 1.7 Low-angle shot: we're looking up at her; low-angle shots sometimes aggrandize the shot's subject.



FIGURE 1.8 High-angle shot: we're looking down at her now; this type of shot may suggest a certain superiority over a character.



FIGURE 1.9 Bird's-eye shot: this shot is taken from the highest possible angle. What might be the expressive consequences of this shot?



FIGURE 1.10 Dutch tilt (or canted angle) shot: the camera is not on its normal horizontal or vertical axes, and the resulting image is off-kilter; Dutch tilts are sometimes used to suggest a character's unbalanced mental state.

Of everything you read in this book, the opposite also may be true at times, since every attempt to define a phenomenon necessarily reduces it by ignoring some of the quirks that make films continually interesting. There's a fine line to tread between providing a useful basic definition that you want and need and alerting you to complications or outright contradictions that qualify the definition. This is certainly true with any discussion of the expressive tendencies of low-angle and high-angle shots. Typically, directors use low-angle shots to aggrandize their subjects. After all, "to look up to someone" means that you admire that person. And high-angle shots, because they look down on the subject, are often used to subtly criticize the subject by making him or her seem slightly diminished, or to distance an audience emotionally from the character. At times, a camera angle can in fact distort the object onscreen. By foreshortening an object, for example, a very high angle shot does make an object or person appear smaller, while a very low angle can do the opposite.

But these are just broad tendencies, and as always, the effect of a particular camera angle depends on the context in which it appears. Film scholars can point to hundreds of examples in classical cinema in which a high- or low-angle shot produces an unexpected effect. In *Citizen Kane*, for instance, Welles chooses to film his central character in a low-angle shot at precisely the moment of his greatest humiliation, and a technical device that is often

employed to signal admiration achieves exactly the opposite effect by making Kane look clumsy and too big for his surroundings, and therefore more pitiable and pathetic.



FIGURE 1.11 Two-shot: the definition is self-explanatory, but note the equalizing quality of this type of shot; these two characters have the same visual weight in a single shot.



FIGURE 1.12 Three-shot: the two-shot's socially balanced quality expands to include a third person, but note the greater subject-camera distance that goes along with it in this example.



FIGURE 1.13 Master shot: the whole set—in this case, a dining room—and all the characters are taken in by this type of shot.

Shots can also be defined by the number of people in the image. Were a director to call for a close-up of his protagonist, the assumption would be that a single face would dominate the screen. When a director sets up a **TWO-SHOT**, he or she creates a shot in which two people appear, generally in medium distance or closer, though of course there can be two-shots of a couple or other type of pair walking that would reveal more of their lower bodies. The point is that two-shots are dominated spatially by two people, making them ideal for conversations.

A **THREE-SHOT**, of course, contains three people—not three people surrounded by a crowd, but three people who are framed in such a way as to constitute a distinct group.

Finally, a **MASTER SHOT** is a shot taken from a long distance that includes as much of the set or location as possible as well all the characters in the scene. For example, a scene set in a dining room could be filmed in master shot if the camera was placed so that it captured the whole dining table, at least two of the four walls, all of the people sitting around the table, and maybe the bottom of a chandelier hanging over the table. The director could run the entire scene from beginning to end and, later, intercut close-ups, two-shots, and three-shots for visual variation and dramatic emphasis.

SPACE AND TIME ON FILM

Like dance and theater, film is an art of both space and time. Choreographers move their dancers around a stage for a given amount of time, and so do theater directors with their actors. But a dance can run slower or faster some nights, especially if it isn't connected to a piece of music. And if the actors in a play skip some of their lines or even talk faster than usual in a given performance, the play can run shorter some nights than others.

But a 110-minute film will be a 110-minute film every time it is screened, whether on the silver screen at a multiplex or on a standard-speed DVD player in your living room. This is because sound film runs at a standard **24 frames per second**, and it does so *not only through the camera when each shot is individually filmed but*

also through the projector when it is played in a theater. In the early days of cinema, camera operators cranked the film through their cameras by hand at a speed hovering as close as possible between 16 and 18 frames per second. If camera operators wanted to speed actions up onscreen, they would UNDERCRANK, or crank slower: fewer frames would be filmed per second, so when that footage was run through a standard projector at a standard speed, the action would appear to speed up. If they wanted to create a slow-motion effect, they would do the opposite: they would OVERCRANK, or crank faster, causing the projector to slow the movement down when the shot was projected. In short, [undercranking](#) produces fast motion, while [overcranking](#) produces slow motion.

The introduction of [SYNCHRONIZED SOUND](#) FILM—characters being seen and heard speaking at the same time onscreen—in the late 1920s meant that the IMAGE TRACKS and the SOUNDTRACKS had to be both recorded and projected at the same speed so as to avoid distortion. 24 frames per second was the standard speed that the industry chose. You'll learn more about sound technology in [chapter 5](#). And although videotape—unlike film's celluloid—is not divided into individual frames, the same principle applies: video's electromagnetic tape is recorded at the same speed at which it is transmitted and screened. A 60-minute video will always run 60 minutes—no more, no less.

There is a philosophical point to film's technical apprehension of time. Unlike any other art form, motion pictures capture a seemingly exact sense of real time passing. As the great Hollywood actor James Stewart once described it, motion pictures are like “pieces of time.” Then again, a distinction must be made between **real time**, the kind measured by clocks, and **reel time**—the pieces of time that, for example, Spike Lee manipulated by [editing](#) to create *Malcolm X*, a film that covers the central events of a 39-year-old man's life in 202 minutes.

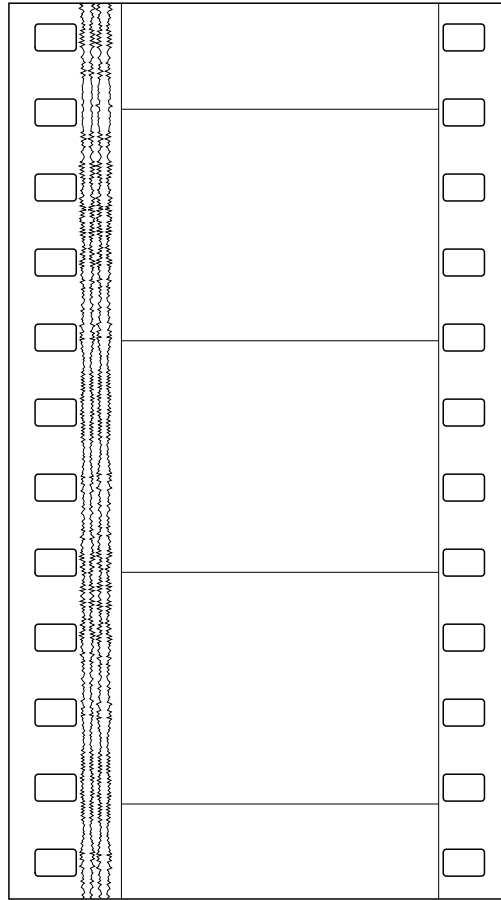


FIGURE 1.14 A strip of celluloid, divided by frames, with the soundtrack running vertically down the left alongside the image frames.

One familiar complication, of course, is that when films are shown on television they are often **LEXICONED** to fit them into a time slot and squeeze in more commercials. **Lexiconning** involves speeding up the standard 24 frames per second by a matter of mere hundredths of a **frame** per second to as much as one frame per second, which may shorten the film by as much as 6 or 7 percent of its total running time. Also note the familiar warning that accompanies movies on TV: “Viewer discretion is advised. The following film has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit this screen and edited to run in the time slot allotted and for content.” People who love films hate this Procrustean process. (Procrustes was a mythical king who had a bed to which he strapped and tortured his victims. Those who were too short for the bed were stretched to fit it, and those too tall had their heads and legs chopped off.) Would an art

gallery trim the top, bottom, and sides of a painting just so it would fit into a preexisting frame?

COMPOSITION

One confusing aspect of film studies terminology is that the word **FRAME** has two distinct meanings. The first, described above, refers to each individual rectangle on which a single image is photographed as the strip of celluloid runs through a projector. That's what we're talking about when we say that film is recorded and projected at 24 *frames* per second: 24 of those little rectangles are first filled with photographic images when they are exposed to light through a lens, and then these frames are projected at the same speed onto a screen.

But the word *frame* also describes the borders of the image onscreen—the rectangular frame of darkness on the screen that defines the edge of the image the way a picture frame defines a framed painting or photograph. Sometimes, in theaters, the screen's frame will be further defined by curtains or other [masking](#). Your television set's frame is the metal or plastic edge that surrounds the glass screen. In fact, you can make three-quarters of a frame as you sit reading this book simply by holding your hands in front of you, palms out, and bringing your thumbs together. The top of this handmade frame is open, but you can get a good sense of why the frame is an important artistic concept in the cinema just by looking around your room and framing various objects or even yourself in a mirror.

Note that your literally handmade frame is more or less a square if you keep your thumbs together. Now create a wider rectangle by touching your right forefinger to your left thumb and vice versa. See how this framing changes the way the room looks. And be aware of the subject-camera distance and camera angle of the imaginary shots you create. Ask yourself why certain “shots” look better than others. Do you find that you have a taste for oblique angle close-ups, for example, or do you see the world more at eye level?

The precise arrangements of objects and characters within the frame—the picture-frame kind of frame—is called COMPOSITION. Each time you moved your handmade frame, you created a new composition, even if you didn't move any objects around on your desk or ask your roommate to move further away.

As in painting, composition is a crucial element of filmmaking. In fact, composition is a painterly term. (Few if any art critics ever refer to the *mise-en-scene* of a painting.) Composition means the relationship of lines, volumes, masses, and shapes *at a single instant* in a representation. Composition is relatively static, though few elements remain truly motionless in a motion picture; *mise-en-scene* is more dynamic. *Mise-en-scene* is the relation of everything in the shot to everything else in the shot *over the course of the shot*, though sometimes film critics can extend their discussion of compositional consistency to individual spaces represented in the film and even over the course of the entire film. One could write a great paper on any of these diverse *mise-en-scenes*, paying particular attention to their compositional elements: the courtyard in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), the bar's basement in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Rick's Café in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), or Sal's Pizzeria in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

Like a painter, a director's particular arrangement of shapes, masses, vectors, characters' bodies, textures, lighting, and so on within each film image is one of the cornerstones of his or her cinematic style. Think again of the bird that flew into the hypothetical shot described above. That example was not only an instance of meaning being produced unintentionally; it was an instance of compositional change as well. Here's a related example: If a director had taken several hours to set up a landscape shot with an eye toward a strict, static composition—a western butte on the left seen at sunset with a flock of sheep standing more or less still at closer distance on the right, and a ranch hand on a horse in near distance at more or less precisely the center of the image—and suddenly one of the sheep bolted away from the herd and went running across the camera's field of vision, that director may insist on a [RETAKE](#) with the

errant sheep safely put away in a faraway pen. Why? Because he considered his composition ruined. Then again, another director might use the take with the running sheep because she might see its sudden, rapid, *lateral* movement across the screen as a beneficial if accidental addition to her composition.

Adding to the problems of cinematic composition is the fact that motion pictures are (clearly) all about *motion*, so to a certain extent almost every composition is fluid: people move, the wind blows things around, cars speed by, and the camera itself may move. Moreover, as you will learn in [chapter 4](#), shots are connected to other shots in a process called EDITING, and the composition of one shot ought to have something to do not only with the shot that follows it but with the shot that precedes it.

One final concept in this introductory chapter: the shape of the image. Conceivably, movies could be round, couldn't they? Indeed, Thomas Edison's first films *were* round. Obviously films aren't round anymore.¹ They take the form of rectangles of various widths. The term [ASPECT RATIO](#) describes the precise relation of the width of the rectangular image to its height. Historically, aspect ratios are problematic. The silent aspect ratio was actually 1.33:1, a slightly wide rectangle, the width of the image being one and one third the size of its height. Making matters more confusing, the film industry standard—the so-called [ACADEMY RATIO](#) (named after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the group that gives the Oscars, and that instituted the standard ratio in 1932)—is often referred to as being 1.33:1, but in actual fact the Academy ratio is 1.37:1—a very slightly wider rectangle than that of silent films.

All Hollywood films after 1932 were made with the standard Academy aspect ratio of 1.37:1—that is, until the 1950s, when various [widescreen](#) technologies were developed as a way of competing with television. But again, that's the subject of a later chapter.

1. One exception is the IMAX Dome or OMNIMAX system, which projects a rounded (but not circular) image on a tilted dome.

STUDY GUIDE: ANALYZING THE SHOT

You will learn through the course of reading this book that film is a complicated art form with many technical and expressive aspects, and one of the key problems in analyzing motion pictures is that their images are in fact in motion. So to simplify things here at the beginning of the course, try the following exercise:

Get a videotape or DVD of a feature film from any period in film history. In fact, if possible, get one you've already seen and enjoyed. Fast forward to any point you choose, and then freeze-frame the image.

You are now looking at a single frame of a single shot. What do you notice about its mise-en-scene? Properly speaking, since this is a static image, a single frame, you are being asked to notice elements of its **composition** rather than the totality of expressive content in an entire shot. Remember what mise-en-scene means: *all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior (meaning actors, their gestures, and their facial expressions)*. And composition: *the relationship of lines, volumes, masses, and shapes at a single instant*. Composition is relatively static; mise-en-scene is dynamic.

Your assignment is to notice the various compositional elements in the image. Write them down in the form of a list, and be as descriptive as possible. (Instead of saying simply "Julia Roberts," for instance, describe in detail what Julia Roberts looks like—the color of her hair, the color and style of her costume, and so on.) Describe the room or the landscape in terms of its colors. How well lit is the room or outdoors space? Is it day, night, dusk, or dawn? What kind of furniture is in the room, or what landscape elements are in the image?

Is the shot taken at eye level or low angle? Is it a close-up or a long shot? Is there anything you notice about the composition?

Put all of your observations into words, and be as clear as possible.

Here is an example, drawn from *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999—Chapter 9, minute 21:54):

- Close-up, eye-level
- Man, about 30 years old, blandly handsome
- Dark hair
- Top of gray suit jacket
- White collar of dress shirt
- Man is centered on the screen
- Top part of head **cut** out of image
- Airplane interior

Blue seat with white headrest
Man in focus; background out of focus
Blue curtains center-left of image in background
Bright curved windows on right in background
Aspect ratio—wide rectangle
Man in row behind, out of focus—no other people
Light on forehead and nose of man in close-up
Eyes in shadow
Dark circles under eyes
He is staring straight ahead



FIGURE 1.15 The unnamed narrator (Edward Norton) of *Fight Club* (1999) (frame enlargement).

WRITING ABOUT THE IMAGE

The first step in writing about film is to translate the content of film images into words using the new technical vocabulary you are learning. So your first writing assignment is a simple one: take the detailed description of the shot you created above and turn it into a coherent paragraph. Don't worry about forming a thesis statement or making any sort of argument. Forget about assigning meanings to what you see onscreen or discussing the symbolism of anything. Concentrate instead on creating a single paragraph of prose that succeeds in translating an image into words. Spell-check your work when you are finished. If your word-processing application's dictionary does not contain some of the technical terms you have used, add them (after consulting the glossary at the back of this book to make sure you have spelled them correctly to begin with).

Here's an example using the above list of compositional elements from the *Fight Club* image:

The image is a close-up of a blandly handsome man who appears to be about thirty years old. He has dark hair with a conservative, businessman-type haircut. We can see the shoulders of his gray, conservative suit jacket and the white collar of his dress shirt. The man is centered on the screen; the very top part of his head is cut out by the frame. The image shows the interior of an

airplane. The man is seated on a blue seat with his face framed by a white strip of material that serves as a headrest. The man is in crisp focus, but the background is out of focus. Still, we can clearly see some blue curtains in the center-left of the image, with some bright curved airplane windows on the far right in the background. The curtains match the blue of the seat; the windows, appearing white, match the headrest. The aspect ratio is that of a fairly wide rectangle. There is another man in the image—he is seated in the row behind the man in close-up—but he is the only other person in the image. The man in close-up has a bright light shining on his forehead and nose, but his eyes are notably in shadow, although we can clearly see dark circles under his eyes, indicating tiredness and a lack of sleep. The man is staring straight ahead.

CHAPTER 2

MISE-EN-SCENE: CAMERA MOVEMENT

MOBILE FRAMING

Motion pictures share a number of formal elements with other arts. The shape of a particular painting is essentially its aspect ratio—the ratio of width to height of the image—and the composition and lighting effects created by the painter play a central role in that painting’s meaning, as does the distance between the artist and his or her subject. (A portrait might be the equivalent of a close-up; a landscape is usually a long shot or an extreme long shot.) The term *mise-en-scene* is derived from the theater: the arrangement and appearance of a play’s sets and props, its characters’ gestures and dialogue and costumes, the STORY and PLOT—all come together toward an expressive goal, just as in motion pictures. Novels, too, have stories and plots that can (and should) be analyzed for meaning.

Film offers something unique: MOBILE FRAMING. In the first chapter of *Film Studies*, we made an assumption that turns out to be false: that the camera is static. All the definitions and examples implied that characters and objects move within the frame, but the framing stays the same within each shot. In fact, this is not the case at all. The camera can move from side to side, up and down, backward and forward, all of the above, and more. Editing from shot to shot or scene to scene changes the position of the spectator from shot to shot or scene to scene, but camera movement shifts the spectator’s position *within the shot*.

No other art form is able to accomplish this feat. In painting, Cubism plays with the idea of expressing multiple perspectives of a single subject, but Cubist paintings inevitably and necessarily have an immobile frame owing to the nature of painting as an art form. Similarly, one can walk around a sculpture, but the sculpture remains on its pedestal. A particularly dynamic sculpture may *suggest* movement, and in fact some sculptures have motors that make parts of them move, but they still remain essentially in place. A rotating stage may shift from one scene to another in the theater, but the audience does not itself experience the sensation of movement.

Film and video are different. Films offer shifting positions and perspectives. Shots aren't limited in terms of subject-camera distance or angle of view. A single shot may begin from a position so high off the ground no human being could achieve it unaided by a machine or a structure and proceed to lower itself to the level of a person, travel on the ground for a while, look around, follow a certain character, change direction and follow another character for a while, or maybe follow *no* particular character at all and go out on its own, thereby revealing a sense of spatial coherence and expressive fluidity that no static shot could ever achieve. Camera movement is an especially significant aspect of mise-en-scene.

TYPES OF CAMERA MOVEMENT

How does film studies describe various kinds of camera movements? First, when the camera itself is stationary but pivots on its axis from side to side, it's called a **PAN**. If the camera is stationary but tilts up and down, it's called a **TILT** (or a **VERTICAL PAN**). Both of these camera movements are like moving your head but not your body: you can take in a whole panorama without taking a single step simply by turning your head from side to side (a pan) or nodding up and down (a tilt). By panning and tilting, the camera reveals more space without itself moving from its fixed position on the ground—which is to say on a tripod or other supporting device. You can create the effect of a pan and a tilt right now simply by moving your head.

As you can see, you can take in large expanses of the room you're in without getting up from your seat. But you're still grounded; you're stuck in the same place. But just as you can get up and walk around, the camera itself can move. Camera movement is one of the most beautiful and yet underappreciated effects in any art form. However much we take it for granted, movement through space on film can be extraordinarily graceful. And by its movement alone, a camera reveals much more than simply the space through which it moves. It can express emotions.

The simplest way of moving a camera is to place it on a moving object, such as a car or a train or a ship. That's called a [MOVING SHOT](#). The camera can also be placed on its own mobile device. When the camera moves parallel to the ground, it's called a [TRACKING SHOT](#) or a [DOLLY](#). If it moves up and down through space it's called a [CRANE](#). For a *crane shot*, the camera is mounted on a kind of cherry-picker, which enables it to rise very high up in the air—to ascend from ground level into the sky or descend from the sky to ground level.

With both of these devices, tracking shots and cranes, the camera moves physically through space. In classical Hollywood filmmaking, crews used to mount actual tracks on the ceiling or the floor, thus ensuring that the camera would move in a very smooth and precise fashion (hence the term *tracking shot*). Actors being filmed in tracking shots would therefore sometimes have to play their scenes squarely on the tracks, and when they walked they had to make sure to lift their legs high enough to clear the railroad ties that held the tracks in place. More often, cameras were—and still are—mounted on wheels, or dollies, thus enabling them to move freely in a variety of directions: forward and backward, sideward, diagonally, or around in a circle.

In the 1960s, technology developed to the point at which the size and weight of a motion picture camera, which had formerly been large and cumbersome, was reduced so much that a [camera operator](#) could actually carry the camera while filming. These are called **hand-held cameras**, which create HAND-HELD SHOTS. In any number of '60s (and later) films, directors used hand-held shots as a [convention](#) of realism—the jerkiness of hand-held shots seemed to

suggest an unmediated reality, a lack of intervention between camera and subject. Audiences still tend to read hand-held shots that way: witness *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which depends on the shakiness of the camera work to convey the homemade quality of the filmmaker-characters' attempt to document the supernatural. In fact, of course, a [hand-held shot](#) isn't any more "realistic" than any other kind of shot. It is a stylistic convention—a visual sign that people still read as expressing heightened realism.

In a still later development, cameras are now able to be mounted on an [apparatus](#) called a [STEADICAM](#), which fits onto a camera operator's body (via a vest) in such a way that when he or she walks, the effect is that of very smooth movement, as opposed to a hand-held camera that records every bump in every step.

Finally, there's a kind of fake movement, an impression of movement that isn't really the result of a moving camera but rather of a particular kind of lens. That's called a [ZOOM](#). With a zoom, the camera operator creates *the impression* of movement by shifting the focal length of the lens from wide angle to telephoto or from telephoto to wide angle, *but the camera itself does not move*. Zoom lenses are also known as *varifocal lenses*. A zoom is therefore a kind of artificial movement. There is no *real* movement with a zoom, just an enlargement or magnification of the image as the lens shifts from wide-angle to telephoto or the opposite, a demagnification, as it shifts from telephoto to wide-angle.

In other words, a zoom has two extremes—telephoto and wide angle. The telephoto range tends to make space seem flatter, while the wide-angle range (like any [WIDE-ANGLE LENS](#)) enhances the sense of depth.

Please note: when you say or write "zoom," you should specifically mean "*zoom*." Be careful not to describe a shot by saying or writing "the director zooms forward" unless you are convinced that the director actually used a zoom lens to achieve the impression of camera movement. Granted, it can be difficult for beginners to appreciate the difference in appearance between a tracking shot and a zoom. One way of differentiating between the two is that a forward tracking shot actually penetrates space whereas a zoom forward (or

zoom in) has a certain flatness to it—an increasing lack of depth owing to the shift from the wide-angle range to the telephoto range.

One way of understanding the difference in visual effect between a tracking shot and a zoom is to realize that film creates the illusion of a three-dimensional world—height, width, *and depth*—on a two-dimensional screen. We're usually fooled into perceiving depth where there is none. A forward tracking shot enhances this illusion of depth; the camera passes through space as it moves forward, and the resulting image re-creates that spatial penetration. A forward zoom, in contrast, does nothing to alleviate the screen's actual flatness. The camera doesn't move with a forward zoom, so we perceive the resulting image as being seemingly flatter than usual. In fact, the image is *always* flat. Forward zooms just do nothing to make us think it isn't. (In a *zoom out*—a zoom that begins in the telephoto range and ends in wide-angle—the flatness of the telephoto gives way to the sense of depth created by the wide-angle.)

Finally, filmmakers and film scholars alike make a distinction between **MOTIVATED AND UNMOTIVATED CAMERA MOVEMENTS**. It's the film's characters who determine whether the movement is motivated or not. For example, if a character begins to walk to the left and the camera tracks with her, the camera movement is considered to be *motivated*. If the character stands perfectly still but the camera tracks forward toward her, it's *unmotivated*. This is a useful distinction to the extent that it defines the characters' world as being separate and distinct from the filmmaker's commentary on that world. *Motivated camera movements are those that are prompted by the characters and events in the film; unmotivated camera movements are those that pertain to the filmmaker's commentary on characters and events.* At the same time, the term *unmotivated* is a poor choice of words to describe a filmmaker's expressive, artistic choices. There's a motive there, after all. It's just that of the director, not that of a character.

EDITING WITHIN THE SHOT

No matter whether a given camera movement is called motivated or unmotivated, all camera movement, like all editing, is a matter of human decision-making. In fact, an extended camera movement may function in much the same way as editing. They are each a way of selecting, arranging, and presenting information in a sequential manner to the audience.

Imagine a film that begins with a crane shot of a movie marquee that contains the name of the film's location. Let's say it's the Reseda Theater in Reseda, California. Without [cutting](#), the camera pans left and cranes down to street level just as a large car pulls up at a nightclub across the street; using a Steadicam, the camera operator continues the shot by following the driver of the car and his girlfriend as they get out of the car and are greeted by the nightclub manager, who follows them inside the nightclub, where—still in the same shot—the man and woman are led to a booth, where they sit and place an order for drinks. The shot continues even further as the camera operator follows the nightclub manager as he says hello to a club-goer wearing an out-of-style western shirt, then returns to the couple at the booth just as a woman on roller skates appears and engages them in a brief conversation. This lengthy camera movement is neither solely unmotivated nor solely motivated; it contains elements of both.

Film buffs will recognize this as the opening shot of Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997). But even if you have not seen the film, you can appreciate the degree of planning and skill required in creating a shot of this extraordinary duration. A single actor flubbing a line or sneezing would have ruined the take, as would an [EXTRA](#)—an actor who has no lines in a crowd scene—bumping into the Steadicam operator. Notice also the amount of *selection* involved in executing the shot. First we see the marquee; then we see the car; then we see the couple in the car; then we see the nightclub manager ... It's a kind of *editing within the shot*—an arrangement and sequential presentation of discrete pieces of information within a single shot.

The first shot of *Boogie Nights*—and any such shot—is called a [LONG TAKE](#), meaning that the shot continues without a cut for an

unusually long time. The director of *Boogie Nights* could easily have carved up his opening sequence into individual shots—of the marquee, the car, the driver, his girlfriend, the nightclub manager, and so on—but he chose to unify both space and time by filming it in one continuous take—a *long take*. (If you have seen the film, or when you see the film, ask yourself what Anderson's long take expresses in terms of the overall theme of his movie.) This particular long take lasts for almost three minutes. Another famous long take, the opening shot of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), lasts for about four minutes. But it's important to note that long takes are like subject-camera distances in that they are defined relatively, so in an otherwise highly cut movie a shot lasting thirty or forty seconds could be considered a long take in the context of that particular film.

A single shot may serve, somewhat paradoxically, as its own sequence or scene; the term for this is a [SEQUENCE SHOT](#). The opening of Hawks's *Scarface* (1932) is a classic example of a sequence shot; the shot chronicles the last minutes in the life of a mobster. Hawks begins with a low-angle shot of a streetlamp atop a street sign; the names of the streets are set perpendicular to each other to form the first of the many X shapes that appear throughout the film whenever anybody is about to get rubbed out. The camera tracks back as the light dims and goes out, tilts down, and pans right past a milk delivery man to reveal a man with an apron coming out of a private club doorway and yawning and stretching. The camera then tracks laterally right—seemingly through the exterior wall of the club—through the lobby, and into the ballroom, where the aproned man begins to clean up after what has evidently been a wild party. He removes streamers from the many potted palms that define the foreground as the camera continues to track and pan right. The man stops sweeping for a moment, and as the camera tracks forward, he reaches down and pulls a white brassiere out of the pile of streamers that litters the floor. (It certainly was a wild party.) As the man examines the bra, Hawks continues to track right and forward to reveal three men seated at a table set amid streamers hanging from the rafters; the man in the middle, a portly fellow called Big Louie, is wearing a paper party crown. The camera remains stationary as the

three men converse for a few moments, after which the men get up from the table; Hawks tracks left with them as they move in that direction. After the two other men depart offscreen left, the camera remains on Big Louie, who walks toward the right; the camera tracks with him as he moves through the ballroom and into a telephone booth. He begins to place his call, and the camera stays motionless for a few seconds before tracking forward and then to the right to reveal the ominous silhouette of a man, who strolls in the direction of Big Louie; the camera tracks left with him as he walks; he is calmly whistling an opera aria. The camera stops on a frosted glass partition; the shadow of the man is framed by the partition as the man reaches into his pocket and pulls out a gun. “Hello, Louie,” the man remarks before firing three times. Still in shadow, he wipes the gun off with a handkerchief and throws it on the floor. The man turns and leaves as Hawks tracks and pans left to reveal the body of Big Louie on the floor. The shot is still not over: the aproned man from the beginning of the sequence shot enters the image from the left. He stares at Louie’s dead body, removes his apron, throws it in a closet, dons his hat and jacket, and runs left toward the door as Hawks completes the shot by tracking and panning left and slightly forward before ending with a **DISSOLVE** to the next scene. The shot is three and a half minutes long.

What makes this a sequence shot is that the single shot comprises the entire scene. The next shot takes place in an entirely different setting—that of a newspaper office, where editors debate the content of the headline announcing the killing. The lengthy opening shot of *Boogie Nights*, in contrast, does not contain the entire scene, which continues with more shots of the nightclub interior.

SPACE AND MOVEMENT

We are accustomed to thinking only about the content of each film image we see—the material actually onscreen. But if mise-en-scene, editing, and camera movement are all matters of decision-making, of

selection, then it stands to reason that the information a director *leaves out* of the image is worth considering as well.

The film theorist Noël Burch has defined six zones of **offscreen space**:

1. *offscreen right*
2. *offscreen left*
3. *offscreen top*
4. *offscreen bottom*
5. *behind the set*
6. *behind the camera*

Imagine a medium shot of a woman, an aging actress, seated at a banquet table. We see her face and upper body; we see part of the table in front of her; we see an empty glass on the table. She reaches for something offscreen right, and when she brings her hand back into the image she is grasping a liquor bottle. She pours a few slugs of booze into the empty glass. Then, a hand enters the image (also from offscreen right); in the hand is a bottle of water. The actress bats the hand away before the otherwise unseen tablemate gets the opportunity to pour any water into the actress's liquor glass. The actress is casually but clearly refusing to have her drink watered down, and this action—together with the subtle smirk on the actress's face—establishes her character with great expressive efficiency.

This shot—which introduces Bette Davis's character in Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950)—emphasizes the first of Burch's offscreen spaces: *offscreen right*. Although the director has framed the film's star in such a way as to emphasize her presence (he might have chosen instead to begin with a long shot of Davis seated at the same table surrounded by many other people and therefore not featured onscreen as an individual), he nevertheless indicates that someone else is sitting next to her. We naturally understand that the hand isn't disembodied. We assume that the space of the action continues beyond the frame—that there is a whole person there.

Audiences make similar assumptions about the other three spaces that border the image—*offscreen left*, *offscreen top*, and *offscreen bottom*. The director does not need to show these spaces to us directly for us to assume that they exist. And these four offscreen spaces are inevitably *diegetic*; in other words, they pertain to the world of the film's story. (See [chapter 6](#) for a more complete discussion of the concept of *diegesis*.)

The other two offscreen spaces are important to consider, if only briefly, for the theoretical questions they raise. It's rare in narrative cinema for a director to move his or her camera behind the set, but it's conceivable. Such a shot would reveal that the set, which we have taken to be real, is in fact artificial—we might see the wooden supports holding up the walls, the lighting stands and a lot of electrical cords, the outer walls of the soundstage, and so on—and as such the shot would call attention to the fictional nature of what we've been seeing until that point in the film. That recognition is, of course, something that classical Hollywood cinema avoids. And because it does not have to do with the world of the film's story, the space behind the set is *nondiegetic*.

The sixth zone of offscreen space exists only in the imagination. We *know* that there is real space behind the camera, but the camera can never record it. Just as we don't have eyes in the back of our heads, so the camera can never have a separate lens that records the space behind itself. Only a second camera recording the first camera could record that space, but the space behind the second camera—the offscreen space Burch defines as being *behind the camera*—would be equally impossible for the second camera to record. Clearly, this impossible-to-record space is *nondiegetic*. It doesn't have to do with the film's fictional story but instead exists only in the world of the real people who are making the movie.

Individual shots could record the first five of Burch's offscreen spaces. Using the *All About Eve* example, the director could conceivably have cut from Bette Davis's character, the actress Margo Channing, to a shot of her tablemate to the left, her tablemate to the right, her legs under the table, the space above her head, and a final shot of the space behind the banquet room set. But by *moving*

the camera, a director can actually reveal all five of the possible-to-record spaces in a single shot. By panning left and right, he could have shown us the spaces on either side of the character. By tilting up and down, he would have shown us the floor and the ceiling (or lack thereof—most sets have no ceiling so as to accommodate overhead lighting equipment). And by tracking laterally, then forward and around the walls of the banquet hall, he could have revealed the space behind the set. (Admittedly, following the logic of the impossible space behind the camera, none of the offscreen spaces can ever be recorded *as long as they are truly offscreen spaces*, but that's a subject for an upper-level film theory course to pursue.)

In short, mobile framing enables a director to unify diverse spaces within an individual shot. Even the tiniest, most minute readjustment, or [REFRAMING](#), reveals and maintains spatial continuity from image to image without cutting. At the end of *City Lights*, which is analyzed in more detail in [chapter 4](#), the director, Charles Chaplin, begins one shot by centering on the two characters' intertwined hands, then reframes the image to center on the Tramp's face and the flower he holds. What is key in this case, and in most cases of reframing, is the onscreen gesture or look or facial expression that the director wishes to emphasize. If a character moves her head slightly to the right in a close-up, for instance, it's likely that the director will reframe the shot by moving the camera slightly to the right so that part of her face will not be cut off by the original framing.

Ultimately, camera movement—like any other film technique—is about expressivity. There is no right or wrong way to film anything. Some directors, like Sergei Eisenstein, tend to carve the world up into individual static shots and edit it back together again, though even the famous “Odessa Steps” sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* contains several camera movements. Other directors, like F. W. Murnau and Max Ophüls are known for their elegant moving-camera work. Their films certainly contain static shots that are edited together, but as directors their style highlights camera movements rather than editing effects. Still others—the majority of contemporary filmmakers, in fact—like Paul Thomas Anderson, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, and others—choose to film certain scenes in the form of

long takes with elaborate camera movements while others take the form of more rapidly cut sequences.

STUDY GUIDE: ANALYZING CAMERA MOVEMENT

To learn how to analyze camera movement, one must first be *aware* of camera movement. So get a DVD copy of your favorite movie, find a scene you know already, and watch it closely, this time paying particular attention to the camera movements it contains.

1. Pause the DVD after every camera movement you notice. If you are feeling particularly ambitious, write down each movement as you notice it.
2. Ask yourself the following questions after every pause:
 - (A) What type of camera movement just occurred? Was it a single kind of movement (for example: a pan right, or a tilt down), or was it a combination of different types (a simultaneous crane down and pan left)?
 - (B) What was the apparent motivation behind the movement? Did the camera move along with a character? Did it move away from a character? Or did it move seemingly on its own, without regard to a particular character?
 - (C) To what does the movement draw your attention?
 - (D) What ideas or emotions might it express by maintaining spatial unity?
 - (E) As an aside, consider the offscreen spaces of each image and the assumptions you make about them.
3. Notice how often you are pausing the film—how often the camera moves. Is there a pattern of camera movements within the scene? For example, is there a series of tracking shots, or a series of pans? Is there any rhythm created by the way the camera moves?
4. Based solely on this particular scene (and bear in mind that the scene you choose may not be representative of the whole film), would you say that the director favors camera movements over cutting? Can you begin to perceive the director's overall style in this individual scene, or is it too soon to make such a generalization?

WRITING ABOUT CAMERA MOVEMENT

Given all these different terms and theoretical notions, how do you describe on a practical level the camera movements you see onscreen? It's not difficult; it just takes practice. The more familiar you become with the terminology, the easier it will be to describe and analyze what you notice.

"The camera tracks forward," "the camera tracks back," "the camera tracks laterally," and so on: just describe what you see using the technical terms at your command. "The camera cranes up." "The camera cranes down." "The camera

cranes up, pans to the left, tilts down, cranes down, and tracks forward ... ” and on and on. However the camera moves, that’s how you describe it. It makes for more precise analytical writing to write, “The camera tracks forward” or “the camera pans left,” rather than fumbling around with “we go ahead” or “we go backwards” or “we turn and see ... ”

Be aware that cameras track *with* or *away from* characters. Here’s an example from a Warner Bros. animated cartoon: “The camera tracks to the right *with* Elmer Fudd as Elmer tracks his prey, the ‘wascally wabbit.’” (Yes, there are tracking shots in animated cartoons. Even though the camera that records each [animation](#) cel does not literally move, animators create *the effect* of all the different kinds of camera movements described in this chapter.)

What follows is a reasonably detailed description of the opening shot of *Boogie Nights*. Bear in mind that this description concentrates on camera movements. A full analysis of the shot would include many more details about mise-en-scene elements such as lighting, set design, color, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior, not to mention dialogue, music, and other sound effects, not to mention what it all adds up to in terms of meaning:

The first shot of *Boogie Nights* begins as a long shot of a movie marquee announcing that the film playing in the theater is titled *Boogie Nights*; the marquee fills the horizontal image, its shape echoing the film’s widescreen aspect ratio of 2.40:1. The camera cranes slightly forward, pans slightly left, and rotates clockwise to reveal in an oblique angle the name of the theater—the Reseda. Just as the name “Reseda” fills the image horizontally, the camera reverses the direction of its movement: it now rotates counterclockwise and cranes down to reveal some people exiting the theater and walking under the marquee. The camera continues its movement by craning down and panning rather rapidly to the left just as a car moves forward on the street next to the theater. The camera continues to pan left and crane down—at one moment, the car, now traveling from right to left across the image, fills the screen—until it is at ground level.

Owing to the camera having panned, the car is now facing away from the camera. As a subtitle appears—“San Fernando Valley 1977”—the car makes a left turn and pulls up in front of a nightclub with a gaudy neon sign that reads: “Hot Traxx.” The camera tracks forward on the street toward the car; the camera operator is evidently using a Steadicam, because the movement is very smooth.

A crowd has gathered in front of the entrance to the club. The driver gets out of the car and raises his arm in a greeting gesture but is momentarily cut out of the image because the camera is moving rapidly forward toward the club’s entrance. The camera continues to track forward until it singles out the nightclub manager, who [rushes](#) forward and to the left of the image with his arms outstretched.

In a very rapid movement, the camera circles around the nightclub manager and pans left to reveal the moment at which the manager reaches the driver and his girlfriend, who has also gotten out of the car (an action we only assume has occurred, because we have not actually seen it).

The camera then tracks backward, and the three characters follow the camera as it backs into the doorway of the nightclub, through the small entrance hall, and into the club, at which point the camera makes a left turn; this allows the characters to pass the camera, and as they continue to walk they make a left turn

as they head away from it. The camera operator reframes the image with a slight pan left as the characters make a similar adjustment in their direction. For a few seconds, the image is a three-shot of the characters walking away from the camera in silhouette.

The characters then turn right and head toward an as-yet-unseen booth; their destination is revealed in dialogue. The driver and his girlfriend continue walking away, but the manager stops, and the camera stops with him; as he walks back in the direction from which he came, the camera reverses its direction and tracks backward. When he turns toward the left of the image, the camera pans left and tracks forward, following him. He gestures toward the left side of the image, and the camera quickly pans left to reveal a waiter dressed in a striped white shirt and turning away from the camera. The waiter begins to walk toward the back of the club, but the camera quickly pans right away from him and returns to the manager, who is now walking toward the camera while the camera tracks backward.

The manager turns toward his left as he walks, and the camera pauses to allow him to pass it; he then walks away from the camera, and the camera follows him through a crowd of people. He jumps up on the dance floor and greets a man who is dancing there.

The camera follows the manager onto the dance floor and then begins to circle the group of people to whom the manager is speaking: the dancing man, who is white; a woman; and a black man wearing a western shirt. The camera travels in two full 360-degree turns before panning and tracking left, following the waiter in the white shirt, who is walking left in the distance and carrying a tray of drinks.

The camera tracks rapidly left and then slightly forward around some tables full of people and slows down when it nears the driver and his girlfriend, now seated at their booth; the driver is on the left, his girlfriend is roughly in the center of the image, and the waiter is slightly to the right. The couple says something to the waiter, who turns and begins to walk away. The camera follows him for a moment or two, cutting the couple briefly out of the image, but then a young blonde woman on roller skates enters the image from the background. As she passes the waiter, the camera changes direction and begins to track backward until it is more or less at the same position it took during the exchange with the waiter. The woman on skates stops at the table and begins a conversation with the driver and his girlfriend. But the camera is restless and begins to track forward and around the woman on skates. At one moment, the driver's girlfriend is alone in the image in medium shot facing at a three-quarter angle to the left.

The camera then tracks backward and pans to the left to form what is essentially the reverse angle to the one that first captured the waiter and the couple and was repeated with the woman on skates and the couple: now the woman on skates stands just to the left of center, the driver sits in the center, and his girlfriend sits on the right.¹

The woman on skates makes a hopping gesture and turns and skates away from the camera, but the camera quickly follows her. She turns left; the camera pans left with her. The camera tracks left as she skates in that direction, after which she turns and skates toward the background. The camera tracks forward, following her, until she disappears into the crowd in the center of the image. But

the camera continues to track forward and pan to the left to reveal a young man wearing a white shirt. The camera finally stops moving as the young man, seen in medium close-up, gazes toward the left.

Cut! The first shot of *Boogie Nights* terminates here.

1. For a definition of the term *reverse angle*, see SHOT/REVERSE-SHOT PATTERN in the glossary.