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Camera Work: Shot Language

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This month's *Camera Work* is about the naming of shots: what's a long shot, what's a closeup, and why should you care, anyway? When I began this piece I thought, hey, I can almost write this in my sleep--just round 'em up, brand 'em, and ride on outta here.

No such luck, for reasons we'll see in a moment; but first, a word about why we need shot names in the first place.

That word is *brevity*. Things have precise names so that we don't have to describe them at length every time we talk about them. A hardware store clerk will probably know what you mean by "one of those doohickeys made of thick wire bent in a U with one straight side and one wavy side that you stick through a hole in a rod or bolt to keep it in place," but it's a lot quicker if you just ask for a clevis pin.

In the same way, if a movie director says, "I want to see the actor's whole body, with some space around it, okay? But not too small to make out details," that description takes up a lot more precious production time than "Gimme a long shot." So the need to give clear names to shots is evident.

But before we start doing that, we'd better define *shot* itself. In video, a shot is not a needle in the backside or the explosive launch of a bullet or the first half of a boilermaker. In moving visual media, *shot* has two meanings. First, a shot is a single tape or film recording, from camera start to camera stop. Though not the shortest visual unit (frames and individual fields are briefer), a shot is a video's shortest narrative element.

But it's the second video meaning of the word that concerns us here: a shot is a particular way of displaying information on the screen. Shots have labels that refer to the camera's *distance* (medium shot, closeup), its *height* (high angle, worm's eye), its *lens* (wide-angle, telephoto), its *function* (establishing shot, insert), or even its *population* (single, two shot).

As you might suspect, directors and videographers often hang labels on shots in combinations ("Let's go to a high, wide-angle two shot"), so the whole business can get, well, complicated.

What makes it doubly confusing is that there's no universal agreement on either the types of shots or the names applied to them.

Tower of Babel

Knowing that this was true, I decided to check the shot descriptions I've always used against the names the standard reference works prefer. If I couldn't get universal agreement, I could at least report the best authorities.

Guess what: there aren't any best authorities. I consulted irreproachable sources from the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom. I collated lists from the very different worlds of film and TV. I compared up-to- date publications with the classic textbook *The Five Cs of Cinematography* by Joseph V. Mascelli, ASC, which uses the terminology of golden age Hollywood. I checked *The Complete Guide to Standard Script Formats*, which is to screenplay composition what Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is to other writing. My conclusion? Nobody agrees with anybody else; there is no standard terminology for shot descriptions.

What to do? Well, I don't want to get pushy here, but I earned a master's in film production from UCLA and I've made industrial films and videos in and around Hollywood for decades. So I'll stick with the shot descriptions I learned, on the theory that they probably won't be worse than anybody else's. That means that if you already use shot descriptions, you're probably going to disagree with some of my terms, and, as we'll see in a bit, that's perfectly okay.

Through a Lens, Widely

Let's start in an area where everyone does agree (almost): shot descriptions that express the type of lens used. Of course that means *wide angle, normal*, and *telephoto*. Directors and videographers ask for these shots by name in order to specify the perspective that each lens type delivers. (See figure 1.)

Because wide-angle lenses exaggerate apparent depth, they're great for fights, chases, and general action scenes. People and vehicles barrel toward (or away from) the camera at exhilarating speeds. In *Terminator II*, for instance, when Arnold Schwarzenegger has destroyed the 18-wheeler menacing the boy he's protecting, the two of them roar away from the camera so fast that their motorcycle seems to cover 200 feet in the first second. It doesn't, of course; the extreme wide-angle shot just makes it look that way.

"*Normal* angle shot" is a phantom term because professionals rarely use it. If the director doesn't ask for wide angle or telephoto, the videographer usually assumes that the lens angle is normal. We include it here only for completeness.

But *telephoto shot* is another matter. A director will call for a telephoto shot when she or he wants to compress apparent depth, exaggerate background details or paint a stylized composition.

The opposite of wide-angle lenses, telephoto lenses squeeze the depth out the image. Remember the commercial of several bumper-to-bumper cars weaving in and out as they roll toward the camera? In reality they weren't bumper-to-bumper at all. The cars performed their intricate ballet a safe distance apart, but the telephoto lens compressed that distance out of the image.

In reducing depth, telephoto lenses increase the apparent size of distant objects. If your heroine lies tied to the railroad tracks, you want to shoot the onrushing train with a telephoto lens, which will enlarge it to a much more menacing size as it chuffs inexorably toward the camera.

Finally, by flattening out the image's perspective, telephoto lenses call attention the screen itself as a flat canvas on which the videographer creates pleasing compositions. Returning to car commercials, how often have you seen the product snaking back and forth down the screen as it follows a ribbon of rural road--a ribbon stacked up on your monitor by a telephoto lens?

Incidentally, this is where people start disagreeing about terminology. Some folks (mainly in textbooks) call telephotos "narrow-angle lenses" to achieve symmetry with the opposite term "wide-angle." But saying "narrow-angle lens" to a media professional would be like calling the prow of a ship "the pointy end." Here's a hot tip: don't.

How High is High?

Check out figure 2 and you'll see the next type of shot descriptor: height. It's very common to label a shot by the height of the camera in relationship to its subject. Since angles can be hard to visualize when you read about them, let's use a clock face instead. In what follows, imagine the camera positions on an arc from twelve to six, with the subject at the center of the dial.

With the camera spotted anywhere between twelve and perhaps one o'clock, the result is a *bird's eye angle*. Often taken from planes or helicopters, bird's eye shots are great for panoramic views that establish the geography of the action. But they are less useful for showing details of that action because the perspective is so extreme. (An exception to this is the *insert* shot, which presents small details, often from a very high angle. We'll talk about inserts shortly.)

Between 1:30 and 3:00 on the clock face, the camera produces a *high angle*. With respect to human faces, a high angle is any shot made with the lens above eye level. A videomaker will often choose a high angle to subordinate the subject. Literally "looking down" on the subject, the camera puts him or her in a lower and hence weaker position.

At three o'clock, the camera shoots a *neutral angle*. This is so plain that it's not worth further discussion, but it's interesting to note that unlike the analogous "normal lens," the phrase "neutral angle" is very commonly used in film and video production.

Onward and downward to *low angle*, which results from a camera position between three and perhaps 4:30. As you probably suspect, the psychological effect of a low angle is opposite that of a high angle. Shooting upward at the subject imbues it with power and authority. Look carefully at movie and TV scenes between two characters and you'll see how common it is for the director to underline the relationship between them by using a high angle for one and a low angle for the other.

With *worm's-eye* angle (between five and six o'clock) we reach another area of non-standard vocabulary. Some people say "ultra-low angle" instead. Whatever you call it, a worm's-eye angle is very useful for dynamic action (especially in combination with a wide-angle lens). Shooting the buffalo hunt in *Dances with Wolves*, for example, the cinematographer created worm's-eye shots by burying a camera in a pit and having the great beasts thunder directly over it.

When, exactly, does a bird's eye become high or a high become neutral or a neutral low? It's a judgement call. Shot descriptions are not scientifically precise, as we're about see in terms based on distance.

How Long is Long?

The most widespread type of shot description expresses camera-to-subject distance. As you can see from figure 3, that distance refers to a standing human being.

In an *extreme long shot*, humans are tiny figures in vast spaces. In a *long shot* they are close enough to see clearly, and yet their standing height is generally half the frame height or less. A *full shot* shows (but of course) the full height of the subject, with little or no head and foot room.

A so-called *loose single* cuts the subject at the knees. Not surprisingly, many people use the term "knee shot" instead. Loose singles appear often in TV work as substitutes for full shots because they get closer to the subject while still showing action.

Which brings up a related point about wide shots in video programs: use them sparingly. Monitor screens are fairly small and TV resolution is relatively low. In regular VHS, for example, a person in extreme long shot is an unrecognizable blur.

If you do need a very long shot as, say, an establishing shot (about which, see below), here's a trick to help defeat the effects of low resolution. Start the sequence with a closer shot of your subject, dressed in a distinctive color, if practical, and only then cut to the long shot. Seeing the same color on the tiny figure, the viewers will relate it to the subject of the closer shot.

Closing In

The images most at home in video are close shots, as shown in Figure 4. The *medium shot* (sometimes called a "waist shot") and *head-and-shoulders closeup* are the angles of choice for newscasters, talk show hosts, itinerant pundits (of whom we have a minor plague just now), and other TV talking heads.

We sometimes call the head-and-shoulders shot a "chest shot" because it displays a sizable length of frontage, while the plain-vanilla *closeup* shows only a bit of shoulder. In a *big* (or *tight*) *closeup*, which Hollywood used to call a "choker," the subject's head is slightly too large to fit on the screen. When framing a big closeup, be sure you cut off the top of the subject's head, rather than the chin. For obscure psychological reasons, viewers are subconsciously bothered when they can't see all of the subject's mouth.

Of course, when you get to the magnification of an *extreme closeup*, you have no choice but to frame off the mouth. Like extreme long shots, extreme closeups are best used sparingly. Why? Because this point of view is inherently unnatural: in real life, we never get this close to people unless we're about to kiss them or perform first aid on their eye. Use this angle once in a while and it can be shockingly effective. Use it just a bit more often and it quickly become corny.

We started by saying that these image sizes are gauged by reference to a standing human. So how do you describe a shot of a horse or a grasshopper? There's no consensus whatever on that one. For me, if the horse or the grasshopper fills the frame, it's a full shot, regardless of the difference in size. Others name the shot according to the amount of room that would be necessary if a human were standing in it. Take your pick.

Named on Purpose

Some shots have names that relate to the job they do in the video program, which often makes them self- explanatory. Some of the more important ones are the *establishing shot*, which introduces the viewer to the environment in which a scene is about to take place. A *reaction shot* reveals the response of a character to something done or said. A *reverse* lets the audience see the point of view opposite that of the main one.

An *insert* is a close shot of some detail of the action--a hand pulling a pistol from a drawer, perhaps, or the text of a letter. Inserts got their name because they are often shot after the principal photography on a sequence for insertion later in editing. Some people refer to them as *cut-ins* or *cutaways* instead.

Finally, the purpose of an *over-the-shoulder* shot is to show the spatial relationship between two people while concentrating on one of them. Over-the-shoulder shots are also useful because one subject's mouth is invisible. That means you can easily edit, retime, or replace that person's dialogue without worrying about syncing sound to lips.

Whatchamacallem

So there's a quick survey of shot descriptions, organized by lens type, camera height, camera distance, and purpose. Though we've included some alternate terms, we've only hinted at the wide variety of names people use to label shots.

Since that's the case, how do you decide on which names to use? As usual, sturdy common sense comes to the rescue: as long as you and your production associates all use the same terminology, who cares whether it matches that of other people? If you already have a full repertory of descriptive names, stick to it. If you're new to the game but

beginning to work with other professionals, listen for the local terms and adopt them. If you're starting out more or less on your own, you might as well adopt the terms in this column. They are pretty standard, and after all, you've already taken the trouble to review them.

Good shooting!