

## 42.341 ABBREVIATED GLOSSARY OF FILM TERMS

*Please make yourself familiar with this list of important terms. Technical quizzes will require you to demonstrate understanding of critical concepts. The definitions include commentary on the terms beyond simple definitions, so read through the entire glossary, then refer back to it as necessary throughout the course.*

**AUTEUR** French for "author". Used by critics writing for *Cahiers du cinema* and other journals to indicate the figure, usually the director, who stamped a film with his/her own "personality". Opposed to "metteurs en scene" who merely transcribed a work achieved in another medium into film. The concept allowed critics to evaluate highly works of American genre cinema that were otherwise dismissed in favor of the developing European art cinema.

**DIEGESIS** The diegesis includes objects, events, spaces and the characters that inhabit them, including things, actions, and attitudes not explicitly presented in the film but inferred by the audience. That audience constructs a diegetic world from the material presented in a narrative film. Some films make it impossible to construct a coherent diegetic world, for example *Last Year at Marienbad* (L'année dernière à Marienbad, Alan Resnais, 1961) or even contain no diegesis at all but deal only with the formal properties of film, for instance *Mothlight* (Stan Brakhage, 1963). The "diegetic world" of the documentary is usually taken to be simply the world, but some drama documentaries test that assumption such as *Land Without Bread* (Las Hurdes, Luis Buñuel, 1932).

Different media have different forms of diegesis. *Henry V* (Lawrence Olivier, England, 1944) starts with a long crane shot across a detailed model landscape of 16th century London. Over the course of its narrative, the film shifts its diegetic register from the presentational form of the Elizabethan theater to the representational form of mainstream narrative cinema.

**EDITING** The joining together of clips of film into a single filmstrip. The cut is a simple edit but there are many other possible ways to transition from one shot to another. (See separate section on Editing in this glossary.)

**GENRES** Types of film recognized by audiences and/or producers, sometimes retrospectively. These types are distinguished by narrative or stylistic conventions, or merely by their discursive organization in influential criticism. Genres are made necessary by high volume industrial production, for example in the mainstream cinema of the U.S.A and Japan. (e.g. Thriller/Detective, Horror, Western, Musical)

**MISE-EN-SCENE** All the things that are "put in the scene": the setting, the decor, the lighting, the costumes, the performance etc. Narrative films often manipulate the elements of mise-en-scene, such as decor, costume, and acting to intensify or undermine the ostensible significance of a particular scene. (See separate section on mise-en-scene in this glossary.)

**STORY / PLOT** Story refers to all the audience infers about the events that occur in the diegesis on the basis of what they are shown by the plot -- the events that are directly presented in the film. The order, duration, and setting of those events, as well as the relation between them, all constitute elements of the plot. Story is always more extensive than plot even in the most straightforward drama but certain genres, such as the film noir and the thriller, manipulate the relationship of story and plot for dramatic purposes. A film such as *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) forces its audience to continually reconstruct the story told in a temporally convoluted plot.

**SCENE / SEQUENCE** A scene is a segment of a narrative film that usually takes place in a single time and place, often with the same characters. Sometimes a single scene may contain two lines of action, occurring in different spaces or even different times, that are related by means of crosscutting. Scene and sequence can usually be used interchangeably, though the latter term can also refer to a longer segment of film that does not obey the spatial and temporal unities of a single scene. For example, a montage sequence that shows in a few shots a process that occurs over a period of time. (See separate section on Editing in this glossary.)

**SHOT** A single stream of images, uninterrupted by editing. The shot can use a static or a mobile framing, a standard or a non-standard frame rate, but it must be continuous. The shot is one of the basic units of cinema yet has always been subject to manipulation, for example stop-motion cinematography or superimposition. In contemporary cinema, with the use of computer graphics and sequences built-up from a series of still frames (e.g. *The Matrix*), the boundaries of the shot are increasingly being challenged. (See separate section on cinematography in this glossary.)

### MISE-EN-SCENE

**DÉCOR** An important element of "putting in the scene" is décor, the objects contained in and the setting of a scene. Décor can be used to amplify character emotion or the dominant mood of a film.

**LIGHTING** The intensity, direction, and quality of lighting have a profound effect on the way an image is perceived. Light affects the way colors are rendered, both in terms of hue and depth, and can focus attention on particular elements of the

composition. Much like movement in the cinema, the history of lighting technology is intrinsically linked to the history of film style. Most mainstream films rely on the three-point lighting style, and its genre variations. Other films, for example documentaries and realist cinema, rely on natural light to create a sense of authenticity.

**SPACE** The representation of space affects the reading of a film. Depth, proximity, size and proportions of the places and objects in a film can be manipulated through camera placement and lenses, lighting, decor, effectively determining mood or relationships between elements in the diegetic world.

**OFFSCREEN SPACE** Space that exists in the diegesis but that is not visible in the frame. Offscreen space becomes significant when the viewer's attention is called to an event or presence in the diegesis that is not visible in the frame. Offscreen space is commonly exploited for suspense in horror and thriller films.

**COSTUME** Costume simply refers to the clothes that characters wear. Costume in narrative cinema is used to signify character, or advertise particular fashions, or to make clear distinctions between characters.

**ACTING** There is enormous historical and cultural variation in performance styles in the cinema. Early melodramatic styles, clearly indebted to the 19th century theater, gave way in Western cinema to a relatively naturalistic style. There are many alternatives to the dominant style: the kabuki-influenced performances of kyu-geki Japanese period films, the use of non-professional actors in Italian neorealism, the typage of silent Soviet Cinema, the improvisatory practices of directors like John Cassavettes or Eric Rohmer, the slapstick comedy of Laurel and Hardy, or the deadpan of Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati, not to mention the exuberant histrionics of Bollywood films.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY

**COLOR** Early films were shot in black and white but the cinema soon included color images. These images were initially painted or stenciled onto the film but by the 1930s filmmakers were able to include color sequences in their films. Apart from the added realism or glamour that a color image could provide, color is also used to create aesthetic patterns and to establish character or emotion in narrative cinema.

**CONTRAST** The ratio of dark to light in an image. If the difference between the light and dark areas is large, the image is said to be "high contrast". If the difference is small, it is referred to as "low contrast". Most films use low contrast to achieve a more naturalistic lighting. High contrast is usually associated with the low key lighting of dark scenes in genres such as the horror film and the film noir. A common cliché is to use contrast between light and dark to distinguish between good and evil. The use of contrast in a scene may draw on racist or sexist connotations.

**DEEP FOCUS** Like deep space, deep focus involves staging an event on film such that significant elements occupy widely separated planes in the image. Unlike deep space, deep focus requires that elements at very different depths of the image both be in focus.

**SHALLOW FOCUS** A restricted depth of field, which keeps only one plane in sharp focus; the opposite of deep focus. Used to direct the viewer's attention to one element of a scene. Shallow focus is very common in close-up. Shallow focus suggests psychological introspection, since a character appears as oblivious to the world around her/him. It is therefore commonly employed in genres such as the melodrama, where the actions and thoughts of an individual prevail over everything else.

**RATE** A typical sound film is shot at a frame rate of 24 frames per second. If the number of frames exposed in each second is increased, the action will seem to move more slowly than normal when it is played back. Conversely, the fewer the number of frames exposed each second, the more rapid the resulting action appears to be. The extreme case of frame rate manipulation is stop-motion, when the camera takes only one frame then the subject is manipulated or allowed to change before taking another frame.

**ZOOM SHOT** The zoom shot uses a lens with several elements that allows the filmmaker to change the focal length of the lens (see telephoto shot) while the shot is in progress. We seem to move toward or away from the subject, while the quality of the image changes from that of a shorter to a longer lens, or vice versa. The change in apparent distance from the subject is similar to the crane or tracking shots, but changes in depth of field and apparent size is quite different. Zooms are commonly used at the beginning of a scene, or even a film, to introduce an object or character by focusing on it.

**FRAMING** In one sense, cinema is an art of selection. The edges of the image create a "frame" that includes or excludes aspects of what occurs in front of the camera -- the "profilmic event". The expressive qualities of framing include the angle of the camera to the object, the aspect ratio of the projected image, the relationship between camera and object, and the association of camera with character.

**ANGLE OF FRAMING** Many films are shot with a camera that appears to be at approximately the same height as its subject. However, it is possible to film from a position that is significantly lower or higher than the dominant element of the shot. In that case, the image is described as low angle or high angle respectively. Angle of framing can be used to indicate the relation between a character and the camera's point of view. Or can simply be used to create striking visual compositions.

**LEVEL OF FRAMING** Not only the angle from which a camera films but the height can also be a significant element in a film. A low-level camera is placed close to the ground whereas a high-level camera would be placed above the typical perspective shown in the cinema. Camera level is used to signify sympathy for characters who occupy particular levels in the image, or just to create pleasurable compositions. Camera level is obviously used to a greater advantage when the difference in height between objects or characters is greater. "Eye-level" framing reads as neutral.

**CANTED FRAMING** Canted Framing is a view in which the frame is not level; either the right or left side is lower than the other, causing objects in the scene to appear slanted out of an upright position. Canted framings are used to create an impression of chaos and instability. They are therefore associated with the frantic rhythms of action films, music videos and animation.

**FOLLOWING SHOT** A shot with framing that shifts to keep a moving figure onscreen. A following shot combines a camera movement, like panning, tracking, tilting or craning, with the specific function of directing our attention to a character or object as he/she/it moves inside the frame.

**REFRAMING** Short panning or tilting movements to adjust for the figures' movements, keeping them onscreen or centered. An important technique of continuity editing, thanks to its unobtrusive nature. The characters' actions take precedence over the camera movements.

**POINT-OF-VIEW SHOT** A shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character's eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking. Horror films and thrillers often use POV shots to suggest a menacing and unseen presence in the scene. Films that use many point-of-view shots tend toward dynamic and non-naturalistic style. POV is one of the means by which audiences are encouraged to identify with characters. However, it is actually a relatively rare technique: identificatory mechanisms rely more on sympathetic character and the flow of narrative information than on simple optical affiliation.

**FRAMING SCALE** If the same object were filmed at different shot scales it would often signify quite differently. Shot scale can foster intimacy with a character, or conversely, it can swallow the character in its environment. **Framing scales are not universal, but rather established in relationship with other frames from the same film. Framing scales are usually drawn in relationship to the human figure but this can be misleading since a frame need not include people.**

**EXTREME LONG SHOT** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is very small; a building, landscape, or crowd of people will fill the screen. Usually the first or last shots of a sequence, they can also function as establishing shots.

**LONG SHOT** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is small; a standing human figure would appear nearly the height of the screen. It makes for a relatively stable shot that can accommodate movement without reframing. It is therefore commonly used in genres where a full body action is to be seen in its entirety, for instance Hollywood Musicals or 1970s Martial Arts films. Another advantage of the long shot is that it allows a character and her/his surroundings to be shown in a single frame.

**MEDIUM LONG SHOT** Framing such that an object four or five feet high would fill most of the screen vertically. Also called *plain américain*, given its recurrence in the Western genre, where it was important to keep a cowboy's weapon in the image.

**MEDIUM CLOSE-UP** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is fairly large; a human figure seen from the chest up would fill most of the screen. Another common shot scale.

**CLOSE-UP** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is relatively large. In a close-up a person's head, or some other similarly sized object, would fill the frame.

**EXTREME CLOSE-UP** A framing in which the scale of the object shown is very large; most commonly, a small object or a part of the body usually shot with a zoom lens. Again, faces are the most recurrent images in extreme close-ups.

**MOVEMENT** There are many ways to move a camera: in fluid long takes, rapid and confusing motions, etc. that establish the rhythm and point of view of a scene.

**HANDHELD CAMERA, STEADY CAM** The use of the camera operator's body as a camera support, either holding it by hand or using a gyroscopic stabilizer and a harness. Newsreel and wartime camera operators favored smaller cameras

such as the Eclair that were quickly adopted by documentarist and avant-garde filmmakers, notably the *cinéma vérité* movement of the 1950s and 1960s. They were also used by young filmmakers since they were cheap and lent the images a greater feeling of spontaneity. At the time this challenge to prevailing standards was perceived as anti-cinematic but eventually it came to be accepted as a style. Whereas hand held cameras give a film an unstable, jerky feel, they also allows for a greater degree of movement and flexibility than bulkier standard cameras --at a fraction of the cost. Filmmakers now are experimenting with digital video in a similar way. Gyroscopically stabilized "steadicams" were invented in the 1970s and made it possible to create smooth "tracking" shots without cumbersome equipment. More recently, they are extensively used in music videos and in the films of the Dogme movement, such as Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (Denmark, 2000) and its counterparts, such as Daniel Myrick's and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (USA, 1999). Ironically, while today's steadicams allow for a fairly stable image, Lars Von Trier and his acolytes prefer to exacerbate the jerkiness and instability traditionally associated with these cameras as a marker of visceral authorial intervention. In fact, combining steadicam shooting with aggressive reframings and jump cuts, or even by shooting on low definition formats, Dogme and other radical filmmaking movements attempt to create a new cinematic look as further away as possible from mainstream Hollywood.

**PAN** A camera movement with the camera body turning to the right or left. On the screen, it produces a mobile framing that scans the space horizontally. A pan directly and immediately connects two places or characters, thus making us aware of their proximity. The speed at which a pan occurs can be exploited for different dramatic purposes. For instance, two characters may be having a conversation in a room, and after several minutes, the camera might pan and reveal a third person was also present, thus changing the whole implication of the scene.

**TILT** A camera movement with the camera body swiveling upward or downward on a stationary support. It produces a mobile framing that scans the space vertically. Its function is similar to that of pans and tracking shots, albeit on a vertical axis. A tilt usually also implies a change in the angle of framing; lastly, a tilt is also a means of gradually uncovering offscreen space. This can be exploited for suspense, since a sense of anticipation grows in the viewer as the camera movement forces her/his attention in a precise direction, yet never knowing when it will stop, nor what will be found there.

**TRACKING SHOT** A mobile framing that travels through space forward, backward, or laterally. See also crane shot, pan, and tilt. A tracking shot usually follows a character or object as it moves along the screen. Contrary to the pan, which mimics a turning head, a tracking shot physically accompanies the entire range of movement. It therefore creates a closer affinity with the character or object moving, since the spectator is not just watching him/her moving, but moving with him/her. A standard tracking shot, as it was devised in the Classical Studio filmmaking, consisted in placing the camera on a wheeled support called a dolly, and moving it along rails or tracks to ensure the smoothness of movement associated with the continuity editing style. As cameras became lighter and steadier, tracking shots became more flexible and creative: bicycles, wheelchairs, roller skates, and many ingenious wheeled artifacts augmented the range of movement of tracking shots.

## EDITING

**EDITING STYLES** The patterned use of transitions, matches and duration can be identified as a cinematic style. Editing styles are usually associated with historical moments, technological developments, or national schools.

**CONTINUITY EDITING** A system of cutting to maintain continuous and clear narrative action. Continuity editing relies upon matching screen direction, position, and temporal relations from shot to shot. The film supports the viewer's assumption that space and time are contiguous between successive shots. Also, the diegesis is more readily understood when directions on the screen match directions in the world of the film. The "180° rule" dictates that the camera should stay in one of the areas on either side of the axis of action (an imaginary line drawn between the two major dramatic elements in a scene, usually two characters). By following this rule the filmmaker ensures that each character occupies a consistent area of the frame, helping the audience to understand the layout of the scene. This sense of a consistent space is reinforced by the use of techniques such as the eyeline match or match on action. In the Hollywood continuity editing system the angle of the camera axis to the axis of action usually changes by more than 30 ° between two shots, for example in a conversation scene rendered as a series of shot/reverse shots. The 180° line is not usually crossed unless the transition is smoothed by a POV shot or a reestablishing shot.

**MONTAGE** 1. A synonym for editing. 2. An approach to editing developed by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s such as Pudovkin, Vertov and Eisenstein; it emphasizes dynamic, often discontinuous, relationships between shots and the juxtaposition of images to create ideas not present in either shot by itself. Sergei Eisenstein, in particular, developed a complex theory of montage that included montage within the shot, between sound and image, multiple levels of overtones, as well as in the conflict between two shots. Soviet Montage proved to be influential around the world for commercial as well as avant-garde filmmakers. [e.g. In a famous sequence from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1973), shots of Michael attending his son's baptism are intercut with the brutal killings of his rivals. Rather than stressing the temporal simultaneity of the events (it is highly unlikely that all of the New York Mafia heads can be caught

off guard at exactly the same time!), the montage suggests Michael's dual nature and commitment to both his "families", as well as his ability to gain acceptance into both on their own terms -- through religion and violence.

**ELLIPTICAL EDITING** Shot transitions that omit parts of an event, causing an ellipsis in plot and story duration.

**EDITING: TRANSITIONS** The shot is defined by editing but editing also works to join shots together. There are many ways of effecting that transition, some more evident than others. In the analytical tradition, editing serves to establish space and lead the viewer to the most salient aspects of a scene. In the classical continuity style, editing techniques avoid drawing attention to themselves.

**CROSSCUTTING, aka PARALLEL EDITING** Editing that alternates shots of two or more lines of action occurring in different places, usually simultaneously. The two actions are therefore linked, associating the characters from both lines of action.

**CUT-IN, CUT AWAY** An instantaneous shift from a distant framing to a closer view of some portion of the same space, and vice versa.

**DISSOLVE** A transition between two shots during which the first image gradually disappears while the second image gradually appears; for a moment the two images blend in superimposition. Dissolves can be used as a fairly straightforward editing device to link any two scenes, or in more creative ways, for instance to suggest hallucinatory states.

**JUMP CUT** An elliptical cut that appears to be an interruption of a single shot. Either the figures seem to change instantly against a constant background, or the background changes instantly while the figures remain constant. See also elliptical editing, steadicam. Jump cuts are anathema to Classical Hollywood continuity editing, but feature prominently in avant-garde and radical filmmaking. When the French Nouvelle Vague films of the 1960s made jump cuts an essential part of their playful, modern outlook, many directors from around the globe started to use jump cuts --either creatively or in a last ditch attempt to become "hip". More recently, jump cuts are more commonly associated with music videos, video or alternative filmmaking. Jump cuts are used expressively, to suggest the ruminations or ambivalences of a character, or of his/her everyday life, but they are also a clear signifier of rupture with mainstream film storytelling. Rather than presenting a film as a perfectly self-contained story that seamlessly unfold in front of us, jump cuts are like utterances that reveal both the artificiality and the difficulties of telling such a story.

**ESTABLISHING SHOT/REESTABLISHING SHOT** A shot, usually involving a distant framing, that shows the spatial relations among the important figures, objects, and setting in a scene. Usually, the first few shots in a scene are establishing shots, as they introduces us to a location and the space relationships inside it.

**SHOT/REVERSE SHOT** Two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. In continuity editing, characters in one framing usually look left, in the other framing, right. Over-the-shoulder framings are common in shot/reverse-shot editing. Shot / reverse shots are one of the most firmly established conventions in cinema, and they are usually linked through the equally persuasive eyeline matches.

**SUPERIMPOSITION** The exposure of more than one image on the same film strip. Unlike a dissolve, a superimposition does not signify a transition from one scene to another. The technique was often used to allow the same performer to appear simultaneously as two characters on the screen to express subjective or intoxicated vision, or simply to introduce a narrative element from another part of the diegetic world into the scene.

**WIPE** A transition between shots in which a line passes across the screen, eliminating the first shot as it goes and replacing it with the next one. A very dynamic and noticeable transition, it is usually employed in action or adventure films. It often suggests a brief temporal ellipsis and a direct connection between the two images. As other transition devices, like the whip pan, wipes became fashionable at a specific historical time (the 1950s and 1960s), so much so as to become stylistic markers of the film of the period.

**EDITING: MATCHES** Editing matches refer to those techniques that join as well as divide two shots by making some form of connection between them. That connection can be inferred from the situation portrayed in the scene (for example, eyeline match) or can be of a purely optical nature (graphic match).

**EYELINE MATCH** A cut obeying the axis of action principle, in which the first shot shows a person off in one direction and the second shows a nearby space containing what he or she sees. If the person looks left, the following shot should imply that the looker is offscreen right. Eyeline matches can be a very persuasive tool to construct space in a film, real or imagined.

**GRAPHIC MATCH** Two successive shots joined so as to create a strong similarity of compositional elements (e.g., color, shape). Used in transparent continuity styles to smooth the transition between two shots. Graphic matches can also be used to make metaphorical associations.

**MATCH ON ACTION** A cut that splices two different views of the same action together at the same moment in the movement, making it seem to continue uninterrupted. Quite logically, these characteristics make it one of the most common transitions in the continuity style. A match on action adds variety and dynamism to a scene, since it conveys two movements: the one that actually takes place on screen, and an implied one by the viewer, since her/his position is shifted.

**EDITING: DURATION** Only since the introduction of editing to the cinema at the turn of the 20th century has not-editing become an option. The decision to extend a shot can be as significant as the decision to cut it. Editing can affect the experience of time in the cinema by creating a gap between screen time and diegetic time (Montage and overlapping editing) or by establishing a fast or slow rhythm for the scene.

**LONG TAKE, aka PLAN-SEQUENCE** A shot that continues for an unusually lengthy time before the transition to the next shot. The average length per shot differs greatly for different times and places, but most contemporary films tend to have faster editing rates. In general lines, any shot above one minute can be considered a long take. Unless shot at a fixed angle, with a fixed camera and no movement, long takes are extremely hard to shoot. They have to be choreographed and rehearsed to the last detail, since any error would make it necessary to start all over again from scratch. Sophisticated long takes such as the opening of Robert Altman's *The Player* (USA, 1992), which includes all kinds of camera movements and zooms, are often seen as auteuristic marks of virtuosity. Aside from the challenge of shooting in real time, long takes decisively influence a film's rhythm. Depending on how much movement is included, a long take can make a film tense, stagnant and spellbinding, or daring, flowing and carefree.

**RHYTHM** The perceived rate and regularity of sounds, series of shots, and movements within the shots. Rhythmic factors include beat (or pulse), accent (or stress), and tempo (or pace). Rhythm is one of the essential features of a film, for it decisively contributes to its mood and overall impression on the spectator. It is also one of the most complex to analyze, since it is achieved through the combination of mise-en-scene, cinematography, sound and editing. Indeed, rhythm can be understood as the final balance all of the elements of a film. Rhythm is, almost by definition, intrinsically related to music and sound. Some of the most striking examples of the use of music as a film's driving force occur in the (endlessly imitated) spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, which were written in close collaboration with composer Ennio Morricone. In fact, sometimes the music would be composed first and then a scene that fitted that rhythm would be shot, thus reversing the customary order.

*This Glossary has been adapted with permission from Yale University's Film Studies program, and was originally authored by Mariano Prunes, Michael Raine, and Mary Litch. Visit the Yale Film Studies Website at <http://classes.yale.edu/film-analysis/>. Revision © 2010 Paula Haines, University of Massachusetts Lowell*