

# FILM TERMS: A VISUAL GRAMMAR

## SHOTS

A **shot** is what is recorded between the time a camera starts and the time it stops, that is, between the director's call for "action" and his call to "cut." Perhaps the average shot is 10 seconds (very rarely a fraction of a second, and usually not more than 15 or so seconds). The average film is about an hour and a half, with about 600 shots. A rare exception, Alfred Hitchcock's *Birds* uses 1,360 shots.

Three common shots are (1) a **long shot** or **establishing shot** that shows the main object at a considerable distance from the camera and thus presents it in relation to its general surroundings (captured soldiers seen across a prison yard as they march in); (2) a **medium shot** that shows the object in relation to its immediate surroundings (a couple of soldiers, from the knees up, with the prison yard wall behind them); (3) a **close-up** or **tight shot** that shows only the main object, or perhaps only a part of the main object (a soldier's face, or his bleeding feet, or the look in his eyes).

While taking a shot, the camera can move. It can swing to the right or left while its base remains fixed (a **pan**); up or down while fixed on its axis (a **tilt**), forward or backward (a **traveling shot**), or in and out and up and down fastened to a movable mechanical device (a **dolly shot**, a **crane shot**, or a **trucking shot**).

In an action sequence, the camera may follow the moving character, a technique called **tracking**. The fairly recent invention of the **zoom** lens enables the camera to change its focus fluidly, so it can approach a detail up close while remaining fixed in place.

Much will depend upon the angle from which the shots are made. If the camera is above the subject (a **high angle shot**), looking down on figures, it will dwarf them, perhaps even reduce them to crawling insects, making them pitiful, vulnerable, or contemptible. The higher the angle, the more likely it is to suggest a God's-eye view of entrapped people. If the camera is below (a **low angle shot**), close to the ground and looking up, thereby showing figures against the sky, it may give them added dignity or power.

## SEQUENCES

A group of related scenes -- such as the three scenes of soldiers mentioned above -- is a **sequence**, though a sequence is more likely to have thirty scenes rather than just three. A sequence corresponds roughly to a chapter in a novel, the shots being sentences, and the scenes being paragraphs.

Within a sequence, the transitions normally are made by **straight cuts**. A strip of film is spliced to another, resulting in an immediate transfer from one scene to the next. For

example, an audience is hardly aware of a **jump cut**, such a transition from a long shot of a character to a medium shot of him, or from a close-up of a speaker to a close-up of his listener. Many “jumps” create emphasis though the viewer notices disjunction not actual cuts. To make the audience aware of a change from one shot to the next, the director uses obvious dividing shots, just as an author may emphasize a change by beginning a paragraph or a new chapter.

Several techniques can be used between sequences to emphasize the change: the **dissolve**, the **fade**, the **wipe**, and the **iris**. The **dissolve** literally dissolves one scene while a new scene appears to emerge from beneath it. There is even a moment when we get a blur of both scenes. In the **fade (-out or -in)** the screen grows darker until black, or lighter until the new scene is fully visible. The **wipe**, looks sort of like a windshield wiper crossing the screen, wiping off the first scene and revealing the next. An **iris (-in or -out)** shows a scene, appearing or disappearing from a circle in the center of the screen.

## **EDITING**

The process of editing deserves special consideration, for it is the soul of the filmmaker’s art. A typical film is made up of many separate sequences, all put together during editing sessions. Until the shots are assembled, we don’t have a film -- we merely have footage. V. I. Pudovkin, author of *Film Technique*, put it this way: “The film is not shot, but built up from the separate strips of celluloid that are its raw material.”

In the simplest kind of editing, the film tells a story from the best viewpoints. That is, sometimes from long shots, sometimes from medium shots, sometimes from close-ups. In a more complex film, **intercutting** may edit together two parallel sequences. For example, a **flashback** is created by cutting back and forth between scenes from the present and the past. Additionally, intercutting scenes that occur simultaneously in different places can show a totally new point of view or increase dramatic tension. Relationships can be conveyed by contrast (shots of starvation cut in with shots of gluttony), by symbolism (shots of a rose blooming cut in with shots of a couple falling in love), and by **leitmotif** (the repetition of the shot to emphasize recurring conflict or theme, like “redrum” in *The Shining*).

Of course, more than just telling a story happens when scenes are juxtaposed. These contrasting scenes also reveal theme and create mood and atmosphere. Shots, when placed together, add up to more than the sum of the parts, because each shot affects and is affected by all the others. This process of building the emotion of the film by quick cuts is called **montage**.