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# INTRODUCTION TO CINEMATIC DEVICES



# A N G L E S

Critically acclaimed cinematographer Conrad Hall (*Cool Hand Luke*, *American Beauty*) once declared, "cinematography is infinite in its possibilities". While young filmmakers might be constantly confronted with their limitations—whether in terms of money, time, or even moral support for their filmmaking ventures—Hall's words remind us that we should always feel free to think big (or think “infinite”, to be more accurate) when it comes to our use of cinematic devices.

There's no denying it: endless variations of the major cinematic devices exist. The most driven and detail-oriented young filmmakers will undoubtedly find themselves wanting to experiment with these options, but in order to play with any of these choices, we need to begin by pouring over the handful of fundamentals—here, in terms of angle—around which all of the variations exist.

This section of Chapter 1 features stills from British director Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later*: one of the smartest and most powerful “zombie” films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## LOW ANGLE



When a director shoots an object or subject from below, we're presented with a **low angle**. People, places, or things shot from this angle typically convey power/authority and dominance. Moreover, size and strength can be exaggerated by this angle.

This still features the character Frank from *28 Days Later*—he's introduced as a sort of *deus ex machine* (or unexpected, last-minute savior figure) in riot gear for the protagonists (who are currently on the run from a group of monsters). The intimidation this costume lends Frank is only reinforced by the **low angle** from which Boyle shoots here.

## EYE-LEVEL ANGLE



Like the medium shot (which we will explore in the “Frames” section below), the **eye-level angle** often carries no immediate or obvious symbolic significance.

In short, the eye level angle is “neutral”. Directors regularly use **eye-level** shots because they allow the audience to see actors' facial expressions and body language as well as a fair amount of contextual information (such as location, important, nearby objects, other actors, etc.).

Here the protagonist, Jim, awakes at the film's opening only to find himself confused and completely alone in the heart of London.



# A N G L E S

## H I G H A N G L E



In this early scene from *28 Days Later*, Boyle uses a **high angle** to accomplish two important points: the shot not only gives us an idea of how immense the hospital is, but also suggests that Jim is overwhelmed and somewhat powerless in the face of what was clearly (thanks to the **high angle** shot) a messy, hasty, and possibly even violent evacuation.

Thus, as with the eye-level angle, a **high angle** shot can provide practical or necessary context about the environment; this shot also happens to come loaded with suggestions about how Jim—and possibly even humanity as a whole—is a very tiny, vulnerable subject.

## D U T C H A N G L E



A **“Dutch” or canted angle** is created by tilting a camera slightly—the image we see appears sideways as a result; in turn, the **Dutch angle** can create a sense of uneasiness (or “tension”) in the viewer—here, Boyle uses the angle to foreshadow the upcoming attack that Jim and Selena will face.

Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* is credited with one of the first usages of the Dutch angle; the angle was widely used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to depict madness, unrest, the exotic, and disorientation in German (Deutsch) Expressionist films, hence its name.

As with any cinematic device, it’s important to remember the angles chosen by a cinematographer or director are chosen for practical and/or symbolic reasons.

Akira Kurosawa, a Japanese director whose cinematography is almost universally revered by critics, had this to say of his choices regarding angles in *Ran*, an epic period piece set in 17<sup>th</sup> century, shogun ruled Japan:

“...if [I had] panned the camera one inch to the left, the Sony factory would be sitting there exposed, and if [I had] panned an inch to the right, we would see the airport—neither of which belonged in a period [piece].”  
(from Sidney Lumet’s *Making Movies*)

Thus, as we continue to move through the significance of the fundamental cinematic devices, it’s essential to acknowledge how the decisions made by filmmakers can be motivated by limitations on set as well as a grander, meaningful message that the author wants to share.



# F O C U S

**F**ocus is one of the most powerful means of guiding an audience’s attention to a particular subject or object in a scene; however, it’s also one of the most challenging cinematic devices to use effectively, as it can overpower a scene, or even make it disorienting to watch.

What’s more is that you and I—as users of quality but (compared to Hollywood-standard equipment) limited camcorders—have most likely come to understand focus as simply zooming in or zooming out. Professional cinematographers do utilize this sort of focus technique (under the moniker “rack focus”), but they also purposely blur lenses at times for various reasons, or use the “deep focus” that Orson Welles and Gregg Toland popularized in *Citizen Kane* to create complex, rich scenes that are heavily layered with action and meaning.

This section of Chapter 1 features stills from Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*, which won the Oscar for Best Cinematography in 2011.

## D E E P F O C U S



**Deep focus** allows all of the objects in the foreground as well as those in the background to remain in focus.

The most visionary directors use it to draw attention to the complexities of main characters within a film. Here Nolan’s use of **deep focus** during the famous “zero gravity” scene emphasizes the off-kilter status of Arthur’s mind in the “dreamworld” as he fights off an adversary.

Orson Welles’ famous use of this technique is analyzed on the following page.

## R A C K F O C U S



Imagine a scene from a film where the character is in focus in the background of a shot. He is nervous and pacing. Suddenly the phone rings. The character goes out of focus and the phone in the foreground is now in focus. We know this call is important. The director of this scene used **rack focus** to force viewers to direct their attention where he or she wanted them to look.

Above, in a scene between Cobb (left) and Fischer (right), Nolan uses **rack focus** to sharpen Fischer’s image as he threatens to shoot himself.



# F O C U S

## SOFT FOCUS



A director can film his or her subject(s) just ever-so-slightly out of focus, which creates a texture called **soft focus**. Actresses used to insist on this type of focus for their close-ups (mainly because this trick made them more photogenic). It is common to see **soft focus** in romantic films to help create a lighter mood, but it can also be used to blur an image slightly to convey uncertainty or confusion—perhaps regarding a character’s intentions or even his/her grip on reality itself (as Nolan does above for Dom and Mal Cobb’s “dreamworld” in *Inception*).

## DEPTH OF FIELD



**Depth of field** is the distance between the nearest and farthest objects or points in a scene that appear acceptably sharp or crisp.

In cinematography, a large DOF is often called deep focus, and a small DOF is often called shallow focus; in the still above, Cobb’s spinning top “totem” is surrounded by both a blurred foreground and background.

The top and bottom points on the totem would serve as the outline(s) or boundaries for the somewhat shallow DOF.

## FOCUS ARCHETYPE: *CITIZEN KANE*



The still above is perhaps the most famous use of **deep focus**. Near the beginning of Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, Kane’s mother makes arrangements to ship Kane off to a boarding school. She also decides deny him access to his massive inheritance until he turns 25.

The **deep focus** here emphasizes the control the mother has over everyone in the scene—the father and lawyer simply respond to her decisions, while the young Kane plays outside, unaware of the proceedings. Note how small and trapped he looks within the window frame as his mother signs off.



# F O C U S : S H A P E S

## CIRCULAR



Circular-based arrangements in a frame are defined by curves, conical shapes, swerving figures, etc. Traditionally, circular shapes are associated with completion or wholeness, cycles (i.e. of life, nature, etc.), and paradoxes. They may also be tethered to more negative themes such as frustration, disorientation, and even madness.

One of the more ingenious symbols within *Inception* is the “top” totem used by Dom Cobb (DiCaprio). He uses it to determine if he has in fact left the artificial dreamworld or not; when he spins the top and it eventually tumbles off of its axis, Cobb knows he has re-entered reality.

## LINEAR



Linear shapes are defined by their straight edges—and thus may come in the form of squares, rectangles, trapezoids, etc. Generally, linear shapes are associated with clarity, logical or rational thought, uniformity, etc.; a character framed by straight, sure lines might be, accordingly, a highly rational, practical one.

At times, directors will blend linear patterns with circular or triangular ones to add complexity to a scene; the still above demonstrates how the scientific / medical inception process has led to a circular, distorted event that complicates the Arthur’s dream-scape mission. The very linear hallway literally begins to rotate on a curve.

## TRIANGULAR



Triangular-based shapes are often rooted more in three points than three lines. It is particularly effective in producing tension—a tug of war-esque motif in which one character or object is pulled between two other characters/objects.

During several scenes in *Inception*, Dom (DiCaprio) is pulled between reality (represented by Ellen Page’s character) and his crumbling but magnetic dreamworld (represented by Marion Cotillard’s character). Here, Ariadne (Page) attempts to prevent Dom from being lured back into the dreamworld permanently by Mal (Cotillard), who Cobb sometimes visits Mal via an elevator within the dream.



# F R A M E S

Martin Scorsese (*Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, *Hugo*), when asked how he defined cinema, responded that “Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's [outside of it].” Although his answer might initially strike us as a very simple one, it underscores the incredible significance that a director’s framing choices have on a film’s impact.

Like a picture frame encloses a photograph or painting, a cinematic frame encloses the image on a movie screen. And while critical analysis of how various directors and cinematographers use frames is essential for a film studies class, it’s also important to remember that any elongated analysis of a frame forces us to actually *stop* watching the film: a work of art that is by definition a work in perpetual motion. In short, while it might be tempting—and even sometimes necessary—to pause a scene and run a fine-toothed comb over the elements within a frame, viewers do well to not lose sight of the fact that filmmakers meant us to watch and be affected by a *motion* picture.

This section of Chapter 1 features stills from P.T. Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*.

## C L O S E - U P S H O T



The **close-up** is often used to draw the audience’s attention to what might otherwise look insignificant. A **close-up** on a single teardrop falling from a character’s eye might, for instance, magnify the audience’s awareness of that character’s pain.

This frame can also allow the director to signal a change in a character’s mentality or behavior; in the screenshot above, Anderson uses the **close-up** to emphasize that Daniel Plainview has begun his transformation from a merely ambitious man into a somewhat demonic one—a detail that might have gone unnoticed if he was filmed in a farther-off shot.

## M E D I U M S H O T



The **medium shot** is the most common and most natural shot. Unlike the wide and close shots, the **medium shot** does not necessarily “suggest” anything special or significant about the objects/characters on screen, and thus is sometimes referred to as a “neutral shot”.

Moreover, the **medium shot** can show more setting and context than a close-up can, and thus allows audiences to see both an actor’s facial expressions *and* body language. The still above renders Daniel Plainview’s descent into animal-like or Neanderthal behavior clear (as he crushes the skull of his nemesis, Eli, with a bowling pin that looks suspiciously like a caveman’s club).



# F R A M E S

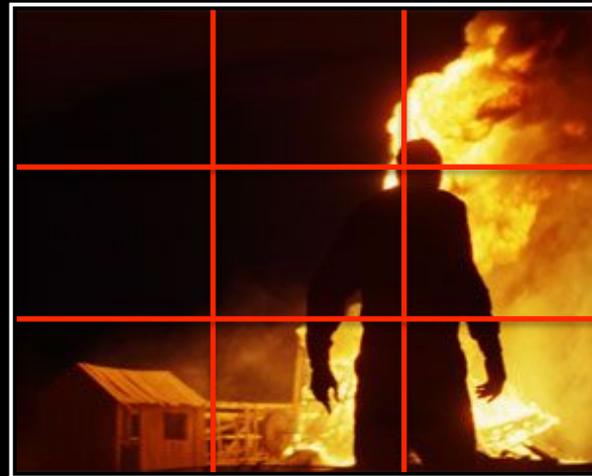
## W I D E S H O T



This shot can “set-up” a scene by revealing where the film’s characters are. Perhaps more importantly, the **wide shot** (otherwise known as the **long** or **far shot**) allows the director to suggest how a character is separated from or connected to other people, places, things within the frame.

Here, the emptiness of Eli’s very theatrical religious practices are emphasized (note the negative-space cross and bare altar) as is Eli’s current dominance over Daniel—who he has strong-armed into publicly confessing his sins.

## T H E R U L E O F T H I R D S



The “**rule of thirds**” is one of the most fundamental aspects of cinematography (and photography for that matter). The red grid that has been superimposed over the above still splits it, both vertically and horizontally, into perfect thirds.

The first recorded use of the term comes from J.T. Smith’s *Remarks on Rural Scenery* (1797), in which he insists that aligning a subject with the intersecting points (seen above) creates more tension and interest in the composition than simply centering the subject (in the second vertical column) would.

Although infinite variants of the aforementioned framing techniques exist, it’s worth briefly exploring two of the most commonly used variants. Note how the new, re-cropped **extreme close-up** (of Daniel Plainview’s face) and the **extreme wide shot** (of Eli and Daniel in the church) only further emphasize the symbolism in the originals.

## E X T R E M E C L O S E - U P S H O T



## E X T R E M E W I D E S H O T





# L I G H T I N G

Marie Windsor, an actress known in the film industry as “The Queen of the Bs” for her numerous roles in shadowy detective films and B movies, once famously declared, “I didn't know I was doing *film noir*, I thought they were [just] detective stories with low lighting!”

Windsor’s declaration here illustrates just how important lighting can be when used effectively; in the case of *film noir*, the lighting design was instrumental in helping directors define a *whole new sub-genre* of film (see Chapter 3 for an introduction to the *film noir*).

Lighting, in addition to playing a key role in setting the mood of a scene, is closely bound to the colors that dominate the screen (and, in turn, affect our feelings about what’s going on in the film). Take Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* for example; Nolan used camera lenses tinted blue to make scenes shot in natural light appear colder than they normally would.

This section of Chapter 1 features stills from Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy.

## HIGH-KEY LIGHTING



Distinguished by its brightness, openness, and lack of shadows or contrasts between light and dark, **high-key lighting** allows a director to convey lots of information about an environment.

Moreover, on a symbolic level, it allows a director to suggest that a character (such as Gandalf in the above frame from *The Lord of The Rings*) is heroic, innocent, good, or even holy.

## NATURAL LIGHTING



When lighting is even and balanced throughout a shot, it might best be described as **natural lighting**. Most television programs are shot with this sort of lighting to convey a “normal” or “everyday” environment.

At times, natural lighting is used to complicate a character’s role in a film. Take the above still of Gollum; the natural light that surrounds him echoes his change in behavior—that is, from a creature willing to murder the hobbits for the Ring to one willing to share his food with them.



# L I G H T I N G

## LOW-KEY LIGHTING



**Low-key lighting** involves an emphasis on darkness—more specifically it features thick shadows broken up by pools or patches of bright light.

Directors employ this lighting to create a mood of suspicion, mystery, and/or danger about the characters on screen; throughout Jackson's trilogy, it's used to make the dark Lord Sauron's Black Riders especially menacing. Psychologically speaking, an audience's inability to actually see characters in the sort of extreme low-key depicted above may even provoke fear or anxiety.

## SIDE LIGHTING



When a director wants to depict a character as evil, mysterious, morally ambiguous, and/or conflicted, he or she will often utilize **side lighting** to help accomplish this.

This technique is particularly dramatic, as a perfect balance of darkness/shadows and light (over a character's face or body) rarely occurs naturally.

This still of Frodo from *The Fellowship of The Ring* clearly uses side lighting to draw the audience's attention to the beginning of his struggle with the Ring.

## BOTTOM LIGHTING



In a sense, **bottom lighting** is the professional application of the “flashlight-under-the chin” trick that people use when telling ghost stories around a campfire. And just as the flashlight somehow makes these storytellers look ominous and frightening, so does professional bottom lighting color characters as sinister or threatening.

Throughout the Rings trilogy, Jackson often used **bottom** or low-key lighting to signal when Gollum's dark side re-emerged.



# L I G H T I N G

## REMBRANDT LIGHTING



**Rembrandt lighting** is a variation of **low-key lighting**; it consists of light-pools that emphasize key/symbolically rich parts of a scene. The Italian painter Caravaggio (famous for “David Showing Goliath’s Head” and “The Kiss of Judas”) developed this type of lighting, which artists refer to as *chiaroscuro*.

Directors employ this lighting to achieve a heightened dramatization. Jennifer Van Sijll, author of *Cinematic Storytelling*, declares that “it is often reserved for pivotal scenes expressing key philosophical questions of good and evil, life and death” (196).

## MOTIVATED LIGHTING



**Motivated light** refers to any light source within a scene that fits organically into said scene. A chandelier, for instance, would be considered a source of motivated light in a scene set in a dining room.

In some cases, the actual source of the light (i.e. a highway lamppost, a reading lamp, etc.) could be off-screen—it would nonetheless be considered **motivated** light.

In the still above, Gandalf’s dragon-shaped firework sheds light on Bilbo’s 111st birthday party.

## UNMOTIVATED LIGHTING



**Unmotivated light** refers to any source of light that originates from an unnatural source. Because this sort of light can suggest that a character (presumably the one bathed in light by this unusual source) has been identified as a special or perhaps even holy figure.

In the scene above, the elf-queen Galadriel prepares her mirror (which allows Frodo to glimpse into his future) and begins to glow with a supernatural light—emphasizing her mystical role in the narrative.



# M I S E - E N - S C E N E

In his text *Movies and Methods*, film scholar Brian Henderson refers to “mise-en-scene” (pronounced as *meez-ahn-sen*) as the great “undefined term” of cinema.

However, it might be more accurate to speak of the French term as a one whose definition is hotly contested by film scholars—some argue that it refers to the emotional weight of a scene, while others adhere to a more literal translation of the phrase: “[things] put in the scene”.

This text leans towards the latter interpretation of the term—that is, as a means of referencing all significant physical objects in a scene, including the actors’ costumes, background scenery, make-up, props, etc.

This section of Chapter 1 features stills from Matthew Weiner’s *Mad Men*: a television program whose highly detailed approach towards *mise-en-scene* has earned Weiner a reputation as a visual genius and a props-driven storyteller...as well as a fanatic and an exacting taskmaster for AMC’s props department.

## B A C K G R O U N D



Thoughtful filmmakers shape a set to accentuate themes within the script. For instance, the set design behind Roger Sterling—a senior partner of the advertising firm featured in *Mad Men*—underscores a major theme of the season: adults’ lack of control over their own lives, regardless of their financial or professional stature.

It’s no surprise that the script and background explicitly work together in this scene, in which Sterling admits to a client that he feels as though he’s being “sucked in” to the optical illusion created by the painting.

## C O S T U M E S



The costume design on *Mad Men* is notable for two things: first, lead designer Janie Bryant meticulously studied the fashion of the 1960s in order to accurately re-create the era on screen. Secondly, Bryant regularly collaborates with the show’s writers to ensure that the characters’ clothes accentuate their roles in the story. To be sure, *clothing* tells the story when Don Draper, *Mad Men*’s main character, is shown rifling through a drawer of identical dress shirts; in short, Don’s role as a fraud or “performer” is emphasized when we learn he has what amounts to an actor’s wardrobe always on hand.



# M I S E - E N - S C E N E

## M A K E - U P



**Make-up**, like costumes, can be used to cement or reinforce the heart of a character. Case in point, Heath Ledger's uneven, haphazard-looking make-up as The Joker (*The Dark Knight*) mirrored the chaos and frantic energy of the character.

While some might say that Betty Draper's **make-up** only renders her model-like looks somehow more perfect, that is, in a sense, the point; here Mrs. Draper looks perfect in the worst sense of the word—her pale skin, icy blue eyes, and neatly applied lipstick leave her looking a bit inhuman and cold.

## P R O P S



Formally referred to as “theatrical property,” **props** refers to any significant objects in the foreground or background of a scene. The most famous props in cinematic history are famous precisely because they embody a major, gripping theme within a film: think of how the One Ring's beauty draws an audience's eyes to it (much like Sauron's own covetous eyes are drawn).

The water in the *Mad Men* ad above depicts Don as a man halfway to drowning. Oddly enough, this single “prop” frames the entire series—five seasons worth of scripts—to date.

## ARCHETYPE: *MAD MEN*



In this promotional still for Season Five, *mise-en-scene* rules the day—the medium frame and natural lighting allow us to focus on the dense set design.

Like any good advertisement, this scene almost demands that we stop and take a closer look at it—the arrangement is simply eye-catching, and in that sense is successful. Moreover, the mannequins above reinforce major themes of the series (lust, voyeurism, modern humans' struggles with identity, and oddly inhuman interactions between humans) in a powerful, visceral way.



# SOUND DESIGN

Although soundtracks—along with sound effects and crisp dialogue—are now considered to be integral to the quality of a film, sound itself was once a major source of anxiety for filmmakers. Alfred Hitchcock once lamented that “silent pictures were the purest form of cinema...to me, one of the cardinal sins for a scriptwriter...is to say ‘We can cover that by a line of dialogue.’ Dialogue should simply be...something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms.”

Yet Hitchcock did eventually embrace sound; he lavishly praised Bernard Herrmann, *Psycho*'s composer, for his chilling score to the film. Hitchcock ultimately confessed that "33% of the effect of *Psycho* was due to the music." Undoubtedly, soundtracks are essential for shaping an audience's reaction to what's on screen. Contemporary horror films use shrill music to foreshadow grisly attack scenes, while the infamous American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) commercials utilize somber music to elicit their audience's sympathy—and ideally their financial support—for abused animals.

## DIEGETIC



**Diegetic sound** can be summarized as sounds audible to both the audience and the characters' within a scene. The sounds in this group include, but are not limited to, the following: dialogue between characters and naturally occurring sounds (*i.e.* footsteps, closing doors, street noise, etc.).

In the still above, Eli, a crooked preacher, and Daniel Plainview face off in the famous “I drink your milkshake!” scene from *There Will Be Blood*; their conversation would be classified, of course, as **diegetic sound**.

## NON-DIEGETIC



**Non-diegetic sound** is any sound whose source is neither visible on the screen nor has been implied to be present in the action. Included in this category would be narrator's commentary, sound effects, mood music, and laugh tracks, etc.

Pictured above is Hans Zimmer, a composer whose name is synonymous with epic Hollywood scores. The soundscapes he has composed for films such as *Driving Miss Daisy*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Inception* would be classified as **non-diegetic sound**.