

Film Glossary—129 Terms You Need to Know (most you already do)

180-Degree Rule

Continuity editing convention that prevents confusing changes in screen direction

Aerial Shot

A shot usually taken from a plane or helicopter

Allegory

A symbolic technique in which stylized characters and situations represent rather obvious ideas, such as *Justice*, *Death*, *Religion*, *Society*, and so on

Ambient Light

Light having the appearance of coming from the sun or moon; natural, available light that is not enhanced in any way

Ambient Sound

Natural background noise on television, film, or radio

Archetype

An original model or type after which similar things are patterned. Archetypes can be well-known story patterns, universal experiences or personality types. Myths, fairy tales, genres, etc. are generally archetypal.

Aspect Ratio

The relationship between the height and width of a projected frame

Auteur Theory

The theory emphasizes the director as the major creator of film art, stamping the material with his or her own personal vision and style

Available Light

Natural sunlight or artificial light not supplemented by specialized film lighting equipment

Backlighting

When the lights for a shot derive from the rear of the set, thus throwing the foreground figures into semidarkness or silhouette

Blocking

The movements of the actors within a given playing area

Camera Angle

The direction from which the camera looks at its subject – low or high, left or right, straight or canted.

Canted Frame (also referred to as Dutch Angle, Oblique Angle, or Tilt Shot)

Camera is tilted so that the left or right side is higher; used for disorientating effects

CGI

Computer-generated images: animations and superimposed graphics created with a computer, often extremely realistic and almost indistinguishable from live action filming.

Character Arc

The development of a character in response to the events in a story

Cinematographer

The person responsible for camera and lighting. Often referred to as the *director of photography* or simply *DP*.

Classic Narrative

The narrative form of many Hollywood films in which events are organized into a cause-and-effect relationship. The story begins in a state of equilibrium, moves to a state of disequilibrium, and ends with a new equilibrium.

Closed Forms (or Closed Frames)

A framing technique in which the image seems complete and composed within the boundaries of the screen

Close-up Shot

The subject fills the frame of the camera shot. Most commonly used to describe a shot of a person's face, but may also be used for other icons, such as a hand or a gun.

Conflict

A narrative device in which a character or characters have to overcome opposition. Conflict may be with other characters, with natural or artificial obstacles, or with elements of the character him/herself.

Continuity Editing

Sometimes referred to as "invisible" or "academic" editing, this is the unobtrusive style of editing developed by Hollywood that is still the basis of most commercial productions. The basis of continuity editing is to cut on action so that the whole sequence looks natural.

Conventions

Elements of plot, character, *mise en scène* and other aspects of film language that are associated with particular genres and styles; for example, the cut from extreme close up to extreme long shot is a convention of the Spaghetti Western. The sophisticated urban setting is a convention of romantic comedy.

Coverage

Extra shots of a scene that can be used to bridge transitions in case the planned footage fails to edit as planned

Crane Shot

Shot taken from a crane-mounted camera

Crosscutting

Cuts repeatedly between two different locations or two characters/objects in motion suggesting that they are taking place at the same time

Cut

The most common form of edit: one shot replaces another without any transitional effect

Cut-away

A shot of any length, showing something that is in visible range of the preceding shot, but which did not appear in it, and is not part of a cause-and-effect sequence; for example, a MS of a character sitting, looking at a campfire could be followed by a cut-away to the moon. However, if the character were shown looking at the sky, this would create an eyeline match, not a cut-away.

Cut-in

Used for similar reasons to the cut-away. A close-up shot of an object or other small part of the preceding shot. This is used to draw attention to the significance of the object, or sometimes as a way of avoiding a jump cut.

Deep Focus

Everything, far and near, is in focus

Depth of Field

The extent to which images are in and/or out of focus, according to their distance from the camera

Detached Shadow

The shadow cast by a figure or an object; characteristic of low-key lighting

Diegesis

The world of the story; for example, diegetic time is time as it is experienced by the characters, rather than the audience

Diegetic/Non-Diegetic Sound

Diegetic sound is that which appears to come from a recognizable source within the narrative world of a film, radio or television text. Non-diegetic sound is that which appears to come from a source unconnected to the narrative world of a text. An example of nondiegetic sound would be a film musical score. Diegetic sound would be the sound of crashing waves on cliffs or birdsong, even though these may be added in post production.

Dissolve

An edit where one image gradually replaces the other, sometimes called a cross-fade; usually used to create a relationship between the two images, or to suggest the passage of time.

Dolly

A mobile mount for a camera, used for tracking or crane shots

Dominant or Dominant Contrast

That area of the film image that compels the viewer's most immediate attention, usually because of a prominent visual contrast

Dominant and Subordinate Screen Position

Traditionally, in Western cinema, the upper and left hand portions of the screen are stronger; the lower and right hand portions are weaker.

Dubbing

A process whereby sound is added to film. This may take the form of adding music or additional sound to dialogue, or it may refer to the addition of an entire soundtrack, including dialogue.

Equilibrium/Disequilibrium/Dénouement

Most stories begin in a state of balance (equilibrium); for example that the world of the story is in its normal state. The normal state may not be happy, but it is as everyone expects it to be. Equilibrium is disrupted by an external force, leading to a state of imbalance (disequilibrium). The characters work to achieve equilibrium again, this, when it appears, creates a new state of balance, which may be different from the balance that existed at the start. This is the dénouement.

Editing

Cutting raw footage and joining it up into a coherent whole

Ellipsis

Omitting segments of time, ranging from seconds to years

Establishing Shot

Shot, usually wide, showing the audience where events take place and the main physical arrangement of the scene. Usually, but not always, it is the first thing we see.

Extreme Close-Up

A detailed view of an object or person. An extreme close-up of an actor generally includes only his or her eyes or mouth

Extreme Long Shot

A panoramic view of an exterior location...usually an establishing shot

Eye-level Shot

The placement of the camera approximately five to six feet from the ground

Eyeline Shot

Shot that reveals what a character in the preceding shot is looking at

Fast editing

Also called quick cuts or fast cutting; constructing a scene from a large number of short edits

Fill Light

Secondary lights that are used to augment the key light. Fill lights soften the harshness of the key light, revealing details that would otherwise be obscured in shadow

Film Language

The assembled collection of visual and auditory signals used to convey messages to the audience

Film Stock

The actual film on which the image is registered

Flashback/Flash Forwards

Break in chronology, presenting events that are out of the diegetic time sequence

Film Noir

A genre characterized by low-key lighting and urban crime stories

Foley

The creation of appropriate sounds for onscreen events using a variety of natural sound sources; for example, a melon for the stabbing sounds in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (USA, 1960)

Formal composition

Style of framing that places the subject of a shot centre frame and usually facing the camera

Formalism

A style of filmmaking in which aesthetic forms take precedence over the subject matter as content. Formalists are often lyrical, self-consciously heightening their style to call attention to it as a value for its own sake.

Frame

As a noun, this refers to the single area on a strip of film that holds a single image (or a single still image on video). As a verb, it means to adjust the position of the camera or to adjust the camera lens to compose the required image. An image can be framed to construct a close-up shot, long shot or medium shot.

Framing

Creating a composed moving image by including or excluding particular details within the frame

Gel

A filter placed over a light to change its color

Genre

The classification of any media text into a category or type, for example: news, horror, documentary, soap opera and so on. Genres tend to have identifiable codes and conventions that have developed over time and for which audiences may have developed particular expectations. Media texts that are a mixture of more than one genre are called "generic hybrids."

Handheld Shot

The camera is held in the operator's hands

High Angle

The camera looks down on its subject from a high point, often to make the subject seem disempowered

High Contrast

A style of lighting emphasizing harsh shafts and dramatic streaks of lights and darks. Often used in thrillers and melodramas.

High-key Lighting

Conventional lighting used for entertainment films, bright and largely free from detached shadow. Used mostly in comedies, musicals, and light entertainment films.

Hollywood Studio System

The highly controlled system of film production that operated in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s

Icon/Iconography

Often used interchangeably with symbol/symbolism, an icon is a visual image that has significant meaning within the genre; for example, in Westerns, icons include horses, cactuses, saloon doors and so on.

Irony

The communication of two messages: an obvious surface message and a subtext that often undermines the surface message

Jump Cut

An abrupt transition between shots, sometimes deliberate, which is disorienting in terms of the continuity of space and time

Key Light

The main source of illumination for a shot

Kinetic Camerawork

Moving the camera around to create a sense of energy and action

Long Shot

The camera is far away from its subject, roughly corresponding to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch in the live theater

Loose Framing

The mise-en-scène is so spaciouly distributed that the people photographed have considerable freedom of movement

Low Angle Shot

The camera looks up at the subject, usually making it look larger and more powerful

Low-key Lighting

A style of lighting that emphasizes diffused shadows and pools of light, used mostly for noir, thrillers

Macro Analysis

Discussion of the larger patterns in a film, such as narrative and genre

Master Shot/Master Angle

Also called a 'safety shot'. The whole scene is filmed from one angle, which is then mixed with singles, close-ups, two shots etc.

Match Cut

An edit that draws attention to the visual similarity between two scenes

Match on Action

A continuity editing technique in which two shots are cut together to make the movement of a figure seem uninterrupted

Medium shot/Mid-shot

The subject is of moderate size within the frame, eg, a figure from the waist upwards

Micro Analysis

The analysis of cinematography, mise en scène, editing, sound and SFX in a sequence

Mise-en-scène

Literally, everything that is "put in the scene", or put in the frame to be photographed (appropriate to the time and era portrayed). This usually includes production design, set, location, actors, costumes, make-up, gesture, proxemics and blocking, extras, props, use of color, contrast and filter. Lighting is often included within mise-en-scène. Camera shot composition, framing, angle and movement are also sometimes referred to as mise-en-shot.

Montage

Transitional sequences of rapidly edited images, used to suggest the lapse of time or the passing of events. In Europe, montage means the art of editing.

Motif

Any technique, object, or thematic idea that's systematically repeated throughout a film

Narrative

The way in which a plot or story is told, by whom and in what order. Flashbacks, flash forwards and ellipsis may be used as narrative devices.

Narrative Device

Any technique used to create story – conflict, action codes and so on

Open Forms (or Open Frames)

A framing technique that forces the viewer to imagine what is happening outside the frame, for example, if a character moves in and out of the frame, or if a voice is heard off-screen. Open forms tend to look less composed and orderly than closed frames.

Overexposure

Allowing too much light into the camera while filming, usually having the effect of washing out the image

Over-the Shoulder Shot

Usually a medium shot of two people, with the camera placed just behind the shoulder of a character, directed at the face of the opposite character

Pan

The movement of the camera left and right around a vertical axis

Pedestal Shot

This is another **movement of the camera** in space, this time along the y-axis. The same situations mentioned with the **tilt** movements above could be applied to the pedestal shot, except that instead of pivoting up and down to view the range of areas in the shot, the **camera actually moves** (rather than rotating) up and down from the bottom point to the top, or the opposite.

Plot

The aspects of the story visibly and audibly present for an audience

Point-of-View Shot

A camera angle that represents what a character sees

Post-production

The period and the processes that come between the completion of principal photography and the completed film or program. This includes the editing of a film or program, along with titles, graphics, special effects and so on.

Pre-production

The entire range of preparations that takes place before a film or television program can begin shooting.

Production

The practical process of planning and making a film

Prop

An object used by an actor during his/her performance

Pull-out

Pulling a camera back to take in a wider field of vision

Push-in

Pushing a camera in closer to the subject; not to be confused with a zoom, which is a lens movement

Rack Focus

Shifting the focus from the background to the foreground, or visa versa

Reaction Shot

A cut to a shot of a character's reaction to the contents of the preceding shot

Realism

The dominant mode of representation in television, mainstream films and print. The term usually implies that the media text attempts to represent an external reality: a film or television program is "realistic" because it gives the impression that it accurately reproduces that part of the real world to which it is referring. However, the concept is much more complex than this brief definition. One suggestion is to think of "realisms" rather than realism.

Real Time

When the duration of the narrative matches the screen time

Reveal

A shot or edit that reveals an object or person

Reverse Angle Shot

A shot showing a point of view about 180 degrees to the previous one; for example, for an eye-line or shot-reverse-shot dialogue sequence. The camera is placed opposite its original position

Reverse Tracking

The camera moves backwards, usually followed by the subject

Rising Shot

The camera tracks upwards

Score

Music created to accompany a film

Search Up

When the camera introduces a character by starting at his/her feet and tilting or rising upwards

Selective Focus

When one plane is picked out through sharp focus, for example, foreground, middle ground, or background

Semiotics

The study of film, or any text, as a system of signs that are read and interpreted by an audience

Sequence Shot

A lengthy shot, usually involving complex staging and camera movements

Set

The place of a scene – either artificially created on a sound stage, or on location

Sound Stage

A studio building in which sets can be constructed for production. Includes facilities for the recording of synchronous sound.

Soundtrack

All sound heard on a film including the score, songs, dialogue, and effects

Stab

A sudden burst of music; usually used to highlight or create drama in a sequence

Steadicam

A handheld camera balanced to avoid unnecessary shakiness

Stereotype

A character that conforms to a narrow and fixed idea of a particular social group

Style

The "look" of a media text; its surface appearance. It can be recognized by the use of color, mise-en-scène, lighting, music, camera angle, movement, framing, dialogue, editing and so on.

Subgenre

A definable variant on a genre; for example, *The Dirty Dozen*, (Robert Aldrich, USA, 1967) belongs to a subgenre of the war film: the suicide mission movie.

Subsidiary Contrast

A subordinated element of the film image, complementing or contrasting with the dominant contrast

Symbol/Symbolism

An image or sound with a specific meaning that is communicated to the audience

Three-point lighting

The use of a key light (the main source of illumination), a fill light (less intense, generally placed opposite the key), and a backlight (used to separate the foreground elements from the setting, creating a sense of depth) in the filming of a scene: the commonest lighting system used in Hollywood.

Tight Framing

Usually in close shots. The mise-en-scène is so carefully balanced and harmonized that the people photographed have little or no freedom or movement

Tilt

The vertical movement of the camera around a horizontal axis

Tracking Shot

A shot in which the camera itself is in motion, usually along a horizontal plane

Traveling Shot

A tracking shot following a subject in motion

Vehicle Shot

A shot taken from a moving vehicle

Voiceover

The non-diegetic voice of a character usually used to comment on the story

Whip Pan

The very quick horizontal movement of the camera around a vertical axis. These fast moves blur the image, and are sometimes used for trick edits.

Wide Shot

A shot using a lens that takes in a wider visual field than usual – often used to film exteriors

Zoom

A lens movement that enlarges or magnifies the subject of a shot