

The Film Shot, Camera Angles and Movement

As we know from watching movies, the angle at which a character is shot in a film can dramatically affect how we perceive that character. Film directors often choose to shoot characters using different angles in order to make an authorial comment on the role and importance of that person in the film.

There are five basic camera angles used to shoot scenes in a film. The angles are determined by where the camera is placed.

For the **Bird's-Eye View**, the camera is placed above the subject, looking down toward the subject and the ground. This kind of shot can seem disorienting because it is rarely the way audiences themselves see the world. Because of this, directors often use the bird's-eye view when they want to make some kind of dramatic comment on a character or scene. In Gilles MacKinnon's *Regeneration* (1997), an incredible bird's-eye shot of a World War I battlefield is used to open the movie. The effect of this shot is to suggest the madness of war and the brutality it inflicts on soldiers.

The **High Angle**, looking downwards, tends to draw attention to the importance of the environment or setting for a scene. High angle shots also tend to make characters look small and are often used by directors to symbolically suggest insignificance or withering authority.

The **Eye-Level** shot is the most common angle seen in movies. Scenes are shot at roughly the same level as an observer would see the scene. These are not terribly dramatic shots but are used to photograph scenes that explain story development.

The **Low Angle**, looking upwards, has the opposite effect of a high angle shot. It tends to focus attention on the size and significance of a character or object. Often directors will use this kind of shot to symbolically announce the power and authority of one of their characters without literally telling the audience this information. For instance, in *Star Wars* the first time the audience meets Darth Vader, he is shot from a low angle to immediately announce his role as the arch villain in the story. In Ridley Scott's classic science fiction movie *Blade Runner* (1982), the building occupied by the Tyrel Corporation is shot from a low angle to suggest the ominous power of the people who reside within.

The **Oblique Angle** is shot by literally tilting the camera frame. It can be used to suggest a sense of "crookedness" and anxiety, or, in the case of some television news shows and music video programs, a sense of playfulness.

The use of these different angles can create point of view shots where the camera is placed in such a way as to represent or reproduce a character's perspective on an

environment or event. The camera effectively acts as the character's eyes, and so point of view shots are often used to create empathy with a character.

It should be noted that some directors, like the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, use only eye-level shots in their films. Ozu argued that using anything but straight-on shots implied a value judgment by the director against the characters. Ozu wanted to let his characters reveal themselves, with all their strengths and weaknesses, and allow audiences to make up their own minds based on the simple portrayal presented.

Camera Movement

Cameras are moved for a number of reasons and in many complex combinations of ways. Movements can alter the audience's sense of time, speed and space, follow action or characters, reveal information that was previously offscreen, concentrate the audience's attention on specific details and emphasise a point of view shot.

Movement of the Camera on a Tripod

These movements are the equivalent of moving your head up, down, to the left or to the right. As a result, these are often used to contribute to creating a point of view shot.

The **pan** turns the camera to the left or right, focusing attention on an object or subject being followed. The pan is also commonly used to survey surroundings, revealing what is beyond the confines of the original frame and to place characters or objects more firmly within their environment.

The **tilt** pivots the camera upwards or downwards, often to survey surroundings, and frequently mimics the sight of the character in point of view shots.

Very small tilts and pans are used to keep a subject in the desired part of the frame as he/she makes small movements. This is known as **reframing**. Often unnoticeable at first, reframing is most easily spotted by looking at the corner of the frame.

The **Zoom** doesn't really move the camera at all, it simply enlarges or reduces the proportion of the frame taken up by a person or object. In doing so, the zoom can focus attention on a particular detail, but over-use of the zoom is often distracting. A good use of a zoom might occur during a documentary interview, between actual shots, so that you have different frame sizes to cut to and create some visual variety.

Movement of the Camera, Camera Fittings and Operator

These movements are the equivalent of travelling through a set or location and create a greater sense of action, affecting the pacing of a film and the audience's appreciation of time, speed and space.

In a **tracking** (or trucking) shot the camera moves to the left or right, often on a pre-laid track or on a specially designed truck. Tracking shots are conventionally used to follow movements across a frame, often moving parallel to characters, and can help to involve the audience in characters' actions and discussions.

A **dolly** is the movement of the camera towards or from an object or subject. Dollies are often used in point of view shots to give the audience the impression of approaching someone or something with the character. The dolly in creates a sense of moving towards an object. In contrast — though they look very similar at first glance — when zooming in on an object, by simply enlarging part of a frame, the object seems to be propelling itself towards the camera.

In **crane** and **helicopter** shots the camera and mounting are free from the ground and can be manoeuvred quite precisely. Crane shots have traditionally been used at the start of films to move into the action, drawing the audience with it, and at the end of films to draw the audience out of intimate relationships with characters, returning them to their wider environment. Crane and helicopter shots can survey wide areas and create an extreme sense of movement, again affecting the audience's sense of time and space.

With **handheld** shots the camera is carried by the operator, often creating an uneven movement. These shots allows the operator to follow action very closely, creating a greater sense of immediacy for the audience, and may mimic the movement of a character in point of view shots. Due to its traditional use in documentary filmmaking (with no time to set up tracks etc. when reacting to a live event), the use of handheld camera shots in a fiction film can create a sense of "reality" about what is being filmed. A common visual metaphor in movies is also created by handheld cameras creating a shaking, trembling effect in horror films.

A **Steadicam** is a camera is placed in a harness worn by the camera operator which "suspends" the camera in such a way as to remove the jerkiness of handheld shots as the operator moves across the ground. Like handheld shots, the Steadicam allows characters to be followed through complex surroundings, but it creates a floating sensation, often providing an eerie or dreamlike effect.