

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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12. The Visual Language of Cinema

Film operates much like a language — it has its own grammatical rules and means of construction, much of which you (and your audience) will already understand on a subconscious level. As a result, the audience will have a set of expectations about your work, many of which they will be completely unaware of. Mark Forsyth illustrates the extent of this unconscious expectation thus:

adjectives in English absolutely have to be in this order: opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose Noun. So, you can have a lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife. But if you mess with that word order in the slightest, you'll sound like a maniac. It's an odd thing that every English speaker uses that list, but almost none of us could write it out. And as size comes before colour, green great dragons can't exist.¹

In much the same way, audiences expect films to be constructed in ways they can instinctively understand, utilising conventions and visual cues that trigger emotions and sub-textual understandings. An audience may not be able to articulate the grammatical rules they expect an author to follow, but that will not stop them from being disappointed, or distracted, when these are ignored. Self-aware ironic use and subversion of the rules certainly has its place, but the ability to break them effectively is a rare skill. This chapter summarises some of the medium's most important conventions and grammatical expectations, which you can employ in your own work to communicate, in a purely visual manner, ideas, themes, and subtexts to your audience.

1 Mark Forsyth, *The Elements of Eloquence* (London: Icon Books, 2013), p. 39.

Frame Rate

24fps is the frame rate your audience expects. This frame rate is much lower than the human eye is capable of recognising, with emerging mediums, such as video games, regularly employing frame rates of 60fps and above. However, audiences have become so conditioned to expect 24fps in cinematic productions that frame rates other than this can disorientate them, or create the impression of perceived video inferiority. Perhaps the best example of this occurred in 2012 with the release of Peter Jackson's first film in *The Hobbit* trilogy, as discussed in chapter eight. When shooting your own work, aim to shoot at 24fps wherever possible.

Vulnerability, Strength, and Significance through Camera Angles

The relationship between your subject and your camera can be used to communicate important ideas about the subject to your audience. Placing your camera so that it is perpendicular to your subject will create a neutral image perspective, but shooting from a low or high angle can communicate strength or vulnerability. From a low angle, the audience is forced to perceive the subject from a diminutive perspective or, if at a very low angle with the camera close to the ground, from the perspective of a child. As a result, the subject takes on power within the frame, as see in Figure 38.²

Conversely, high-angle shots convey vulnerability. By looking down at a subject, the camera emulates physical height, forcing the audience to view the subject from the perspective of an adult or parent.³ The resultant vulnerability is quickly conveyed to the audience, as seen in Figure 39.

In Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), the relationship between characters and their physical surroundings, achieved through careful

2 Yoriko Hirose, Alan Kennedy, and Benjamin W. Tatler, 'Perception and Memory Across Viewpoint Changes in Moving Images', *Journal of Vision* 10:4 (2010), 1–19; Andreas M. Baranowski, 'Effect of Camera Angle on Perception Trust and Attractiveness', *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 31:1 (2017), 1–11.

3 Ibid.

framing and positioning of the camera, frequently shapes how the audience relates to the characters. When the eponymous Charles F. Kane delivers his political speeches in *Citizen Kane*, the camera sits at an angle (a Dutch angle), which reflects his increasingly off-kilter world view. Dutch angles involve angling the camera so that the horizon-line of any given shot is no longer horizontal. Dutch angles were used extensively in the live-action *Batman* television show (1966–1968) to depict the similarly off-centre worldview of its villains.⁴ Whilst the 1960s *Batman* show was awash with garish colour palettes, *Citizen Kane* compounded this effect by using shadows to obscure its characters and, thus, their motivations (Batman's deliciously campy villains were never shy about sharing theirs). The position of the camera relative to the subject, and their overall visibility to the audience, were thus able to communicate a significant amount of information to audiences. Rarely are *Citizen Kane* and *Batman* (1966–1968) compared from a filmmaking perspective, but in their use of camera angles at least, they share more in common than one might initially imagine.

There are many ways you can communicate information to your audience by carefully considering the camera's relationship to your subject. By pulling the camera back, the significance of the individual diminishes as they are given less and less on-screen space to occupy. In the above examples, subjects were clearly identifiable. Pulling the camera far enough back, however, can have a devastating impact upon the audience's ability to relate to any person within a frame.⁵ Leni Riefenstahl took this to an extreme in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) with wide shots in which all individuality was lost. Masses, not personalities (the Nazi leadership aside), mattered in Riefenstahl's chilling portrait of power and obedience; the significance of the individual rendered utterly meaningless by the power of the collective and their insignificance within the frame (Figure 40).⁶

4 It is worth noting that the much more recent Batman-themed television show, *Gotham* (2014–2019) repeats the use of Dutch angles whenever the show portrays Arkham Asylum, in a neat homage to its 1960s predecessor.

5 Sonja Schenk and Ben Long, *The Digital Filmmaking Handbook* (Los Angeles: Foreign Films Publishing, 2017), pp. 219–21.

6 For an insight in Riefenstahl and her Nazi-era films, see Alan Marcus, 'Reappraising Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*', *Film Studies* 4 (2004), 75–86.



Fig. 38. The low-angle shot replicates the perspective of a child looking up at an adult, implying strength in the subject.



Fig. 39. The high-angle shot, which replicates the perspective of an adult looking down upon a child, implies vulnerability.

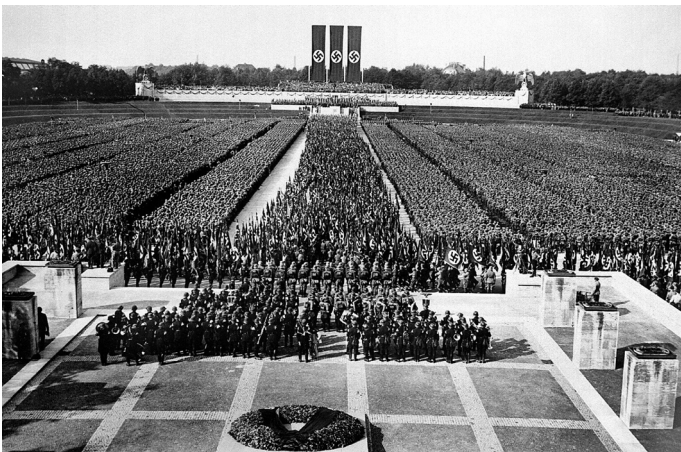


Fig. 40. From *Triumph of the Will* (1935), directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1:02:55–1:08:02).

Wide Shots, Close-Ups, Mid-Shots

Welles and Riefenstahl both demonstrate the power of the wide shot. Riefenstahl used them to obliterate individuality and to create a sense of vast scale. In Welles's hands, they emphasise individuality through careful, precise compositional placement. Typically, however, wide shots are more functional in nature, serving primarily to establish physical context. A film that takes place in New York, for example, would benefit from wide shots that show the city's iconic skyline. Such shots serve to establish a spatial context for an audience and are therefore an important part of most productions. In terms of communicating the thoughts and emotions of a subject, however, the mid-shot and the close-up are of particular importance to the filmmaker-scholar.



Fig. 41. A close-up will allow your audience to read subtle facial expressions and micro gestures not otherwise evident in mid-shots (and certainly not in wide shots).

A mid-shot (typically encompassing a subject from at least the top of their head down to their lower abdomen) helps to provide a broad overview of a person's body language. Conversely, a close-up (which focuses almost all attention on the subject's face and/or eyes) helps to reveal a person's emotional state by laying bare otherwise imperceptible changes in their facial expressions. The mere act of cutting to a close-up tells the audience that they need to begin paying greater attention to the subject's internal emotional state — often expressed through their eyes. In a documentary, a subject might talk directly to the camera but a cut from a mid-shot to a close-up would focus attention on the emotional

dimension of their discourse.⁷ This is helpful in moments of candour or complete vulnerability.

This requires forethought on the part of the filmmaker-scholar, however. Before an interview is conducted, they must anticipate if/when their camera should move closer to their subject. In some instances, this may require running more than one camera at a time; alternatively, filmmakers can ask their subject to repeat an answer, adjusting the camera setup as necessary between takes. These three shots (wide, mid, close) each serve a different intellectual purpose. Wide shots are about context (or placing a subject in context). Mid-shots provide detail about a subject, allowing audiences to read their body language. Close-ups are about connecting an audience with a subject on a deeper, more emotional level. If the mid-shot is about body language, the close-up is about micro gestures. Once your camera is set up and recording footage, remain aware of the type of shot you are recording, weighing it against the content you are capturing. If you are engaged in an interview and the discussion becomes more personal or emotional, it may be appropriate to switch from a mid-shot to a close-up.

Aspect Ratios



Fig. 42. The standard 16:9 aspect ratio will fill the entirety of a modern widescreen television.

7 Mercado, *The Filmmaker's Eye*, 29–70.

Aspect ratios can have a powerful impact on how we interpret what we see on screen. Often unnoticed by audiences, aspect ratios (and changes between them) can serve as powerful visual cues. The 4:3 Academy ratio, for instance, is most closely associated with films from the golden era of Hollywood and its use can evoke a feeling of nostalgia. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), director Wes Anderson cuts between the modern 16:9 (widescreen) aspect ratio for scenes set in the current day, and the 4:3 aspect for scenes that occurred in the 1930s. This subtle change likely went unnoticed by most members of the audience, but nonetheless served to signal important information to them.

As most modern cameras capture footage in the 16:9 aspect ratio (which fills a standard widescreen television), this is the ratio that feels most comfortable for documentary footage. Most documentarians do not alter their aspect ratio; as a result, audiences have come to expect such films to be presented in 16:9. However, the use of, for example, the 4:3 ratio may be viable should the filmmaker-scholar wish to evoke the period in which this was the standard cinema ratio. In addition, the use of the more cinematic 21:9 aspect ratio may be appropriate when the filmmaker-scholar wishes to evoke the feeling of modern cinema. This ratio creates a narrower field of view and is a common feature of modern content creation. Using such an aspect ratio for the entirety of a documentary may, however, prove distracting to audiences. Just as the 4:3 aspect ratio is closely associated with media from the first half of the twentieth century, the 21:9 aspect ratio is closely associated with drama and big-budget blockbusters. The 16:9 ratio, in contrast, is the ratio that feels most familiar to viewers of documentary content.⁸

Most cameras will shoot only in the 16:9 aspect ratio. In order to accomplish a 4:3 or 21:9 look, it will be necessary to frame shots with these aspect ratios in mind. Strips of card can be attached to the digital display on one's camera (being very careful not to cause permanent damage to your device) to create a 4:3- or 21:9-proportioned viewfinder. This will allow the camera operator to compose shots suitable for these aspect ratios. The camera will still capture standard 16:9 footage, but the addition of simple black bars (along the top of one's footage, or down the side) in post-production will produce a fair approximation of the desired aspect ratio.

8 Harper Cossar, 'The Shape of New Media: Aspect Ratios, and Digitextuality', *Journal of Film and Video* 61:4 (2009), 3–16.



Fig. 43. The 4:3 aspect ratio tends to evoke the era of early Hollywood. This aspect ratio is useful for generating a sense of nostalgia.



Fig. 44. A 21:9 aspect ratio is common in modern cinema. This aspect ratio is useful in evoking the sense of hyper-reality that so often accompanies modern films.