

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CAMERA SHOTS: A DETERMINANT FOR AUDIENCE PERCEPTION OF FILM IMAGES

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Abstract

In the beginning was the camera, a humongous invention that captured images from a static position. The size, weight and challenges of this new invention were a great impediment for movement of the camera from one position to the next when recording images on a film strip. The cinema audience of that period was no different from a theatre audience who watched the performance sitting front row center. David Wark Griffith was the first American film director to move the audience into the scene on the screen by using a series of connecting shots, camera set up and viewpoints to tell the audience, “look here, look there” so as to affect them in a face-to-face encounter with a character on the screen. To get the audience involved on the screen is the most dramatic and interesting approach to telling a visual story. This paper brings to the fore some of the cinematic elements which filmmakers use to consciously direct the audience attention as well as get them involved as active participants in a scene. In summary, the paper establishes that camera shots are the most effective way to tell a visual story which entice and fascinate the audience to get themselves involved in the cinematic action. In this way we can justify the appellation of film as a universal language understood by all and sundry. The paper finally recommends that filmmakers should acquire the knowledge and imbibe the use of these cinematic elements so as to impact and achieve effective visual communication with the audience.

Keywords: Shots, Viewpoint, Perspective, Camera Angle, Cinematic Elements

Introduction

Film is a powerful medium of communication. Like the print media, film is regarded as text for reading by viewers and critics. The major role of cinema or film in the society is to inform, educate and entertain. However, as a business venture, film may be seen as a commodity, produced and

marketed by a specific industry as pleasure; as entertainment and enjoyment as well as a communicative system. In order to achieve the above objectives, filmmakers consciously pay attention to the creative presentation of visual narratives to their audience in order to capture their attention as well as fulfill the popular axiom that film is a universal visual medium. As a cultural product, film influences our social and political values. Film is universally acknowledged as a popular medium of entertainment and one's knowledge of film analysis increases his enjoyment, appreciation and understanding of the way film uses images or shots to tell a compelling story. The camera is one of the most vital equipment used in film production. Motion picture cameras have lenses which are similar to the human eye in many respects but there is one important difference. The human eye is selective, focusing on what it wants to see, overlooking many details and unimportant distractions. The camera however, sees everything and those distracting elements will show up in your picture unless care is taken while composing the shots. It is therefore, very necessary to select and organize framing to get the best result. There are several approaches to consider for arranging the mis-en-scene which is the visual theme of everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement such as sets, props, actors, lighting, costumes and composition based on framing, balance, rhythm, proportion and symmetry. In this way, the filmmaker uses the camera to show the audience things from different viewpoints and perspectives.

Watching a film is quite different from watching a stage performance. Caldwell explains that;

When watching a play, we see events on a fixed stage from a stationary seat; from the same position. However, when viewing a film, we are placed in a different position relative to the action each time one shot finishes and another one begins. For every shot in a film, the cinematographer has to decide on the angle, level, height and distance of the camera in relation to the subject filmed (59).

Similarly, in assessing the way filmmakers engage viewers with images on the screen, Bennet, Boyd- Bowman, Mercer and Woollacott rightly observed that;

As a complex form of language speaking to us from particular sites and which we freely consent and pay to listen and see; film deploys certain strategies and processes to involve us, to make us enjoy certain shots, images, sounds, music which produce moments of

secrecy and revelation, tension and resolution, loss and jubilation (197).

This paper has attempted to highlight and explain those technical elements of film production that filmmakers employ to captivate and direct the viewer's attention and get them involved with the visual narratives on screen.

Camera Angles and View point.

The camera angle otherwise known as view point is the angle subtended at the lens by the main subject in the picture area. When a character is photographed at the eye level position, it shows people the way we would expect to see them in real life. Psychologically we feel that we are seeing eye-to-eye with that person as this type of shot encourages and engages the viewer to identify with the subject on the screen as if he is a part of the scene. Whereas the high angle shot with the camera pointed from a high elevation looking down a character denotes submissiveness, humiliation, vulnerability, powerless or being beaten down; a low angle shot with the camera looking up enhances the character's stature as big, powerful, imposing, menacing, authoritative or dominant. In this later context, the view point is said to be high, low, near or distant. Several camera angles and view point abound for use by the cinematographer but this obviously depends on how the film director wants to present the subject matter to the audience. The straight angle or eye level camera placement for example at the height or eye-level of the actor could also be considered as the audience objective view of the actor. Films are usually shot with the camera placed at the eye-level of characters. This corresponds to the manner and natural way we humans see things in real life either from a sitting or standing position. Meyers-Levy & Peracchio (1992) relied on research by several authors (Kraft 1987; Mandell and Shaw 1973; Tiemens 1970) in their assumption that when an object is photographed from a low angle, so it seems that the viewer would seem to be looking up at it, the object was judged more positively (eg. larger, stronger, bolder) than when the same object was photographed from a high angle. When the object appeared to be at the eye level, viewer's judgments were in between the two extremes.

When the camera is positioned high above looking down at a subject it is called a high angle shot. The high angle camera position produces a dramatic effect of intimidation. It communicates an impression of the person being belittled denigrated, vulnerable, powerless, threatened,

insignificance or inferiority, it also creates the impression that the character is weak and lower in status. The high angle shot is very ideal in the portrayal of a convict as he is being sentenced to jail by a judge in a court of law. The low angle shot on the other hand is achieved when a camera is positioned to film the actor from below. By this position of the camera, the audience appears to be looking up at the character. This camera angle gives the impression of one who is powerful, one with great authority as the character appears dominating and overwhelming, prestigious and threatening. Low angle shots of a judge passing sentence on a convict, shots of Idi Amin in the film “*The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*” (1981) and Adolf Hitler in “*Life of Adolf Hitler*” (1961) define the essence of this camera position. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda made sure that Hitler though a homunculus was photographed from low camera angle position to give him that look of a giant, a symbol of power, authority and strength.

The camera angle is one of the most powerful technique which enables the film maker to express the emotion and psychological content of a scene. The position of the camera determines the area and viewpoint of the lens. The use of subjective camera angle which allows the action to be seen through the eye of one of the character is another effective means of expressing the state of mind of a character. Using the subjective angle as the eyes of the audience makes the spectator a participant, and the filmmaker evokes the spectator’s emotions through his involvement in the action. Mascelli postulates that;

The subjective camera films from a personal viewpoint. The audience participates in the screen action as a personal experience. The viewer is placed in the picture, either on his own as an active participant, or by trading places with a person in the picture when anyone in the scene looks directly into the camera lens- thus establishing a performance – viewer eye – to – eye relationship (14).

Point – of – view (POV)

Point-of-view shots put the audience right into the mind of the character creating the impression to the audience that what the camera is seeing is what the audience sees from the point-of-view of the character. Mascelli explains that;

A point-of-view shot is as close as an objective shot can approach a subjective shot – and still remain objective. The camera is positioned at the side of the subjective player – whose viewpoint is being

depicted – so that the audience is given the impression that they are standing check-to-check with the off-screen player. He sees the event from the player's viewpoint as if standing alongside him (22).

The subjective point-of-view shots involve the audience move intimately with event than do objective scenes. The mood of the shot will depend largely on camera placement. In general, shots looking up to full face; give a strong image and shots looking down a weak image. Marnier has noted that;

The viewpoint selected by the director is an important dramatic tool at his disposal. The angle which we look at characters in a motion picture is itself a significant part of the narrative since it is capable of describing the importance of a character; his relationship with others in the scene; his state of mind or his immediate intention (115).

The camera angle determines both the audience point of view and the area covered in the shot. It also heightens the dramatic visualization of the story. It is an established fact that the subjective camera angle impacts on the viewer by transporting him from his seat into the scene on the screen thus associating oneself with what is happening in the film. This effect on the audience is actualized by carefully editing the various shots taken from different viewpoints during production.

Lighting

Lighting is one of the elements of cinematography that enables the cameraman to compose shots that would add psychological impact, create the correct mood in a scene and to draw the attention of the audience. The main purpose of lighting is not just to provide enough illumination for the camera to register images. Motion picture lighting can be invaluable in setting the mood and effectively illuminating the subjects to their best advantage, but it must be carefully thought out and planned before the shooting begins. It is very important to creatively demonstrate how, where and when to give objects in the scene dimension with modeled lighting so as to provide character and emotional key to each scene through the use of lighting. The filmmaker and an artist use lighting in the same way to get the desired colour and tone: to express mood and to create an atmosphere, to reveal the character of a person, to unify the structure of his painting, and to create a surface reality through a sense of depth. Lighting can create a mysterious effect, boringly dull and characterless. It enables the camera lens to see and record an image; it is also a major contributory factor to audience's responses. Roberts explains that,

Generally speaking, the filmmaker will use dark illumination to establish a somber, tragic mood; bright illumination to establish a happy, gay atmosphere, or any variation of these two extremes to fit a variety of moods. Such uses of light will invest the scene with emotional tone that will affect the spectator and evoke in him the proper feeling for appreciation and understanding of the filmmaker's purpose (61).

Different types of lighting could be used to achieve the above depending on the subject matter. The following are commonly used lighting techniques in filmmaking: Low key lighting, high key lighting, the key fill and back light. Depending on the light intensity and the lens aperture there are some instances whereby the cameraman would like to shift the attention of the audience from one character to the other. This is achieved by a technique known as "split focus" or differential focus. The use of this facility of a lens enables the main subject to be shown in sharp focus against an out-of-focus background. This technique enables the cameraman to draw the attention of the audience as he gets involved with the action taking place on the screen as Marnier warns that,

The device is seen most frequently in commercials and if one derives the use of such technique from its commercial application, there is a danger that pulling focus will appear a meaningless gimmick. Pulling focus, like any other technical context must have its motivation within the context of the film. It has to be part of the dramatic structure without distracting the audience by its petty or unusual effect (108).

The eyes of the audience are directed to a particular actor on the screen when the cinematographer shifts emphasis from actor A to actor B, or isolates an individual in a crowd by using a long focal length lens. SivaSamy (2017), points out that "Cinematography" is not a result of instincts or coincidental spontaneity, much forethought goes behind choosing the kind of shot angles, camera movement and lighting. These which comprise a cinematographer's bag of tricks go a long way in controlling what the viewers watch.

Filmmaking offers great scope for usage of one's power of imagination and this manifest in the composition of shots. The basic shots employed in filmmaking are; Extreme long Shot (ELS) Long Shots (LS). The extreme long shot is an extremely wide angle shot filmed from a high vantage point, an establishing shot which depicts the vastness of a setting;

revealing the setting or the geography of the locale where the action takes place. Mascelli explains further that,

Such massive shots set the scene for what follows by putting the audience in the proper mood and providing them with the over-all picture before introducing characters and establishing the story line... whenever possible, extreme long shots should be filmed to open up the picture on a grand scale and capture the audience interest from the start (25-26).

The extreme long shot covers a vast area of landscape similar to a shot of a city taken at a great distance. This shot establishes a setting that orientates the audience before moving into the successive shots to create new scenes. Aerial shots like the extreme long shot covers a vast area which give the audience a bird's eye view of the action; these shots are either taken from a helicopter, plane or a drone fitted with a camera. The medium shot (MS) displays a natural distance between people and the camera. In the case of a human being, it includes the head and shoulders as well as the upper chest. Here, the viewer's emotional response is neutral, yet part of the scene, but only an observer.

The Close-up shot

It is the close-up shot that draws the attention of the viewer to a specific area of interest in a picture. The close-up shot is more intimate than other shots because the expressions and emotions of an actor are more visible and affecting and is meant to engage the character in a direct and personal manner. A relationship between the character and the audience becomes more intimate and impacting. Cardwell (2010) outlines the significance of the close-up shot stating that;

Close-ups also create drama and tension by giving single objects and small movements a lot of importance. In the final shootout in Sergio Leone's "*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*", there are multiple close-ups of the guns hanging off the men's belts with their hands hovering above them. This highlights how much the character's lives rest on how quickly they can draw their guns.

Here the audience is transported to the screen as they sit at the edge of their seats wondering what happens next at such an intense moment. It is the close-up shot that does the magic by bringing the viewer and the character on the screen into interactive relationship. According to Mascelli,

The close-up may transport the viewer into the scene; eliminate all non-essentials, for the movement and isolate whatever significant incident should receive narrative emphasis. A properly chosen, expertly filmed, effectively edited close-up can add dramatic impact and visuals clarity to the event. Close-ups are among the most powerful story telling devices available to the filmmaker (173).

With a close-up shot, the subject dominates the screen as the shot covers the subject from head to shoulders. This shot enables the audience to establish a more personal intimate connection with the subject on the screen. Sharples (1971) collaborates that the close-up shot enables the filmmaker to exercise complete control over what the spectator will see; excluding all the essential and concentrating the spectator's attention on the one vital element. In essence, the close-up shot derives its power not only from what it shows but also what it excludes.

The impact of shots in film editing

A complete edited film ready for showing is cut together using the following basic shot types: extreme close-up, big close-up, close-up, medium close-up, medium shot, medium long shot, long shot, very long shot, extreme long shot, two-shot and over-the-shoulder shot. All these shots engage and affect the viewers in several ways as deem fit by the film director. When people walk around, their viewpoints and what they see is constantly changing in a similar way we experience change of shots on the screen when watching a movie. Besides giving the story a smooth flow, editing cuts made in a film engage the viewers and guide their perceptions and emotions. A cut to a new angle is not just to maintain the viewer's interest but to also point out objects of interest as well as what in the scene is important and to tell a story. The object of editing is to show the development of the scene by guiding the attention of the spectator now to one, then to the other separate shot elements. According to Braudy and Cohen (8-9),

The lens of the camera replaces the eyes of the observer and the changes of angle of camera – directed now on one detail, now on another – must be subject to the same conditions as those of the eyes of the observer. The film technician, in order to secure the greatest clarity, emphasis and vividness, shoots the scene in separate pieces and, joining them and showing them, directs the attention of the spectator to the separate elements compelling him to see as the attentive observer saw.

The above view expressed by Braudy and Cohen underscores the manner in which film editing can stir up the emotions of the audience when watching a film. The basic significance of constructive editing is to build scenes from separate shots of which each concentrates the attention of the spectator only on the elements important to the action. From the foregoing, one can again see the intended symbolism and psychological impacts each element of cinematography possesses. The camera and the viewer trade places as the camera's viewpoint becomes a viewer.

Conclusion

This paper has striven to enumerate, highlight and explain the various cinematic elements at the disposal of the film director and camera operator to engage the attention of the viewers to what takes place on the screen. The effectiveness of the visual language of film in communicating with the viewers is encapsulated in the way different types of shots are used to express meaning and affect people. The choice of camera angles or viewpoints chosen to shoot a subject becomes the most effective tool of communication as visuals engaged the audience in the narrative process. This paper encourages the creative use of these elements as they do not only enhance the various compelling narratives that entertain, educate and inform but also are a great way of continuous improvement upon the ways filmmakers visually hold their audience spell bound.

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