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Teaching through images: meanings and aesthetics

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Abstract

Images have become a fundamental component of contemporary communication, education and audiovisual culture, functioning not merely as representations of reality but as systems through which meaning, emotion and aesthetic experience are constructed. This article examines the educational, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of visual language, with particular attention to photography, cinema and television. Drawing on contributions from semiology, communication theory and film studies, it argues that the image is never entirely neutral: framing, composition, perspective and technical choices shape the message conveyed by the producer, while interpretation also depends on the cultural and cognitive background of the viewer. The article subsequently explores the practical grammar of visual language through the principal types of shots and their narrative functions, including long shots, wide shots, medium shots, American shots and close-ups. Particular attention is also devoted to camera movements, notably panning, tracking shots and zooming, and to their role in organising space and time, directing attention, conveying emotion and strengthening narrative continuity. The analysis highlights the close relationship between technical mastery, meaning and aesthetics in audiovisual production. It concludes that

teaching filmmaking and audiovisual techniques should move beyond purely technical instruction by incorporating semiotic, sociological, psychological and artistic perspectives. Such an interdisciplinary approach is increasingly important in a rapidly transforming audiovisual environment shaped by artificial intelligence, virtual reality and evolving production technologies.

Keywords: Visual language; Image; Audiovisual education; Film aesthetics; Semiotics; Cinematography; Camera movements; Visual storytelling.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that images hold significant symbolic value. Hence the widely used saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. This notion, which cuts across cultures and societies, highlights the crucial role that images play in human communication, whether at an individual or collective level. Indeed, this is not merely a metaphor but rather a reality that has been firmly established since the invention of photography, more than two centuries ago.¹

Beyond their original purpose, which was to faithfully reproduce reality through visual and graphic images, these have taken on a central role at the heart of modern societies; particularly in the age of social media, where they play an

¹ The invention of the first camera can be traced back to 1816, thanks to Nicéphore Niépce, a French inventor, who produced the first images using a camera obscura fitted with paper sensitised with silver chloride. However, these images were not fixed, meaning they faded quickly. It was not until 1826 or 1827 that Niépce produced his famous photograph entitled 'View

from the Window at Le Gras'. In 1839, Louis Daguerre took a step forward by inventing the daguerreotype, which is often regarded as the first camera designed for commercial use.

essential role in the creation of new, often virtual, identities. This has significantly altered the way individuals and organisations are represented, enabling everyone to create and manage their digital identity online.²

It seems superfluous to emphasise the importance of photography and its role in modern societies, as this has become so self-evident that there is no longer any need for further debate. Photography is an effective means of communication and knowledge transfer, as well as a means of creating shared meanings. Roland Barthes made it clear as early as 1961 that ‘press photography is a message’.³ Furthermore, it brings a unique dimension to the educational and cognitive experience. There have been numerous examples of this over the decades, indeed over the centuries. As early as the 17th century, the Czech educationalist J. A. Komenský (known as Comenius) advocated the use of images in teaching: ‘if we wish to impart to pupils a sound knowledge of things, we must appeal directly to sight and sensory perception’⁴.

He thus viewed the image as a ‘teaching aid’, recognising the expressive potential of visual media.⁵

This is hardly surprising, given that scientific research shows that the human mind finds it easier to process an image than written text. Indeed, the brain is extremely efficient at recognising objects within a visual scene. It takes less than 200 ms to detect a face or a familiar place, and this requires no effort whatsoever.⁶

With the advent of cinema and television, the image gained further momentum by developing its own language: visual language.

Like spoken language, this visual language plays a key role for individuals and societies, fulfilling, amongst other things, two functions: to communicate – that is, to give meaning to existence and to things – and to create beauty through specific forms and compositions.

Mastering this language necessarily involves understanding technical tools such as the rules of filming and editing, but it also enables one to go beyond this aspect to address a broader one: that of creating meaning and spectacle.

In this article, we shall explore the fundamental techniques of this visual language by proposing educational approaches to filming and editing techniques. The focus will not be solely on technical aspects, but also on an editorial dimension that links the image to its meaning and message. As Marshall McLuhan so aptly put it nearly eighty years ago: ‘The medium is the message.’⁷

This approach will lead us to study the fundamental elements of visual language that characterise both journalistic genres in television and fictional genres in cinema, focusing on image composition, sound, lighting, set design...

1. The image: meaning and interpretation

The emergence of the image was not merely a technical advance; it has had an impact on all areas of modern life, and particularly on communication and entertainment. Far from being a mere technical development, this emergence was accompanied by a philosophical debate on its nature and essence.

The idea that the image is a mere reflection of reality has not stood up to serious studies proving that, as a choice made by the person who captured it, the image can be neither neutral nor objective. Like any choice, it cannot be separated from the subjectivity of its ‘author’ who may be a director, a cameraman, a journalist or even an amateur photographer.

This debate on the objectivity of the image is a very old one. It is worth recalling that Plato was the first to explore, in a philosophical reflection, the relationship between art and the scientific understanding of things. For him, ‘An image must under no circumstances reproduce all the qualities of that

² Mimeche, W., Fallery, B. and Rodhain, F., ‘Construction of digital identity on social media’. *Management des technologies organisationnelles*, 2015, No. 4(1), 63–76. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-management-des-technologies-organisationnelles-2015-1-page-63?lang=fr>.

³ Roland Barthe, ‘The Photographic Message’, *Communications*, 1961, pp. 127–138, https://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1961_num_1_1_921?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ Catherine Muller, ‘Photography: a tool for communication in language classrooms’, *Research and Pedagogical Practices in Languages*, Vol. XXXI No. 1 | 2012, 10–27.

https://journals.openedition.org/apliut/2224?utm_source=chatgpt.com#tocto2n1

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marti, S. (2016). Understanding the brain circuits involved in visual attention and their importance in radiology. *Hegel*, No. 3(3), 303–308. <https://doi.org/10.3917/heg.063.0303>.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, 1964

which it imitates, if it is to remain an image (8). Consequently, images 'do not in any way possess the same characteristics as the originals they imitate, and if an image were ever perfect, it would then cease to be a mere image of an object and become an identical duplicate of it'.⁹

Thus, according to Plato, imitation leads to the production of objects that possess only the appearance of the imitated objects and which therefore function as substitutes for the originals. Furthermore, the intrinsic nature of the image itself means that it constitutes a 'second dimension of reality' and not reality as such.

When Plato categorically asserted that an image could under no circumstances reflect the truth, he was referring to the drawings that people created at the time using limited tools. These drawings were either imitations of nature or the product of human imagination. At that time, the camera had not yet been invented and the rules of photography had not yet been established.

Otherwise, his assertion would have been even more incisive, given that filming relies on an interplay of revelation and concealment. Indeed, what the camera reveals is only a tiny fraction of reality, whilst what it conceals may be vaster, more complex and even capable of completely distorting the truth.

Furthermore, the viewer's interpretation of this image varies according to their intellectual and cultural background, as well as their cognitive abilities.

This discrepancy between reality and the image means that the meaning conveyed by the image is linked to interpretation and remains open to interpretations that are not necessarily identical, particularly when it comes to a sequence of images forming a film, a documentary or a news report.

How does a film director, or a journalist working on a news report or a documentary, choose the shots, camera angles and camera movements? No one can claim that these choices are guided solely by professional considerations. This observation holds true not only for a feature film, which naturally conveys a very specific message, but also for a documentary or even a television report, which is supposed to 'reflect reality'.

Let us conduct an experiment that is almost trivial but which helps us to understand this 'ideological' aspect of the image. If ten journalists are tasked with producing ten reports on the same subject, we will end up with ten different productions. Although these reports deal with the same subject, the angles of approach vary, which is reflected in the choice of images, interviewees, and even in the script and commentary.

These differences become even more pronounced when media outlets have differing or even contradictory editorial stances. For example, a television report on rising prices will be handled in a fundamentally different way depending on whether the media outlet supports or opposes the government.

Even in the absence of editorial differences, mastery of the craft (filming techniques, the use of images, etc.) is directly reflected in the choice of images, angles, sequences and atmosphere... The result is that, just as it is possible to achieve different flavours using the same ingredients depending on the chef, it is also possible to produce different, even contrasting, outcomes despite using the same images.

In other words, an image is never a mere reflection of reality. Quite the contrary: it constitutes a construction from the perspective of the sender (director, cameraman or journalist), whilst representing an interpretation from the perspective of the receiver (television viewers or an audience going to the cinema to watch a film). It is thus a tool that is at once technical, aesthetic and symbolic, reflecting not only professional choices but also ideological orientations and aesthetic trends.

This symbolic aspect of the image was the subject of early study by a variety of disciplines such as sociology, psychology and social psychology, but the most significant contribution in this regard is to be found in semiological studies. Admittedly, the field of linguistics formed the cornerstone of the development of semiological studies. However, even for the founding fathers of this discipline, notably Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), semiology is a vast scientific field of which linguistics is but one element.¹⁰

With the technical advances that have placed the image at the centre of modes of communication, Roland Barthes, in the

⁸ Mouriki, Alexandra, 'The Cognitive Dimension of Art: Aesthetic and Educational Value', in *The International Journal of Learning Annual Review**, January 2011, 18(1):1–12. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291931605_The_Cognitive_Dimension_of_Art_Aesthetic_and_Educational_Value

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Payot, Lausanne, 1916

1960s, laid the foundations for the semiology of the image by borrowing its fundamental concepts from linguistics.¹¹

Indeed, semiology, defined as ‘the science of signs in social life’¹², regards the image as a system of meaning. Roland Barthes’s contribution is of particular importance, as in his work **Rhetoric of the Image**¹³ he proposes a distinction between three levels of meaning:

- Denotative meaning: what the image objectively represents;
- Connotative meaning: the cultural or emotional implications evoked by the image;
- The linguistic message: the text accompanying the image, often used in the media for illustrative purposes.¹⁴

In his book **Rhetoric of the Image**, Barthes illustrates that visual elements (colours, shapes, composition) are not ‘neutral’ but rather convey underlying ideas and values.¹⁵ For example, the colour red may evoke passion, whilst white may signify innocence... and so on. This type of analysis is particularly relevant in the field of cinema (and television), where colour and framing form an integral part of the narrative.

The meaning of an image is thus defined, essentially, by its referential value.¹⁶ It is generally through comparison with a set of images (to which the subject of study may be linked by a certain degree of resemblance) that the analyst manages to elucidate, ‘in essence’, some of the image’s hidden messages.¹⁷

Thus, the semiology of the image is a formative activity that encourages the observation of visual qualities and latent meanings, which are heavily dependent on a vast body of cultural data—what Umberto Eco terms the ‘Encyclopaedia’—and whose semantic organisation and functioning he endeavours to describe.¹⁸

Our article does not seek to focus on the semiology or semiotics of the image, but the contribution of these two

disciplines provides a conceptual framework that aids in understanding the visual language based on the signs and symbols generated by the image.

Admittedly, the filming and editing techniques discussed in our article have developed over the decades, drawing primarily on the ‘common sense’ approach; however, approaches within the semiology of the image have paved the way for this ‘common sense’ to take on a scientific and academic form.

It is through this marriage of technique and complex reflection that relevant studies have emerged, such as Christiane Metz’s book **Essays on Meaning in Cinema**¹⁹, which applies the methods of semiology to cinema to analyse the structure and meaning of films.

2. The significance of shots

The theories mentioned above are not merely abstract ideas. On the contrary, they find concrete application in all television and film productions. For this reason, filming and editing techniques form an integral part of the curriculum at journalism and film schools, which are expected to teach their students (future journalists, directors or technicians) not only the technical aspects of visual language but also its semiological and philosophical dimensions relating to the meaning and significance of the image, with the aim of mastering the tools needed to produce work that conveys both meaning and aesthetic appeal.

These techniques are designed, on the one hand, to master the optimal use of image values and sizes, where each value carries a meaning and has an impact on the viewer’s interaction; and, on the other hand, to ensure skilful handling of camera movement, which, beyond its aesthetic dimension, is often associated with specific messages intended by the director or cameramen (Chapter 2-2). The aim is to master the techniques of visual storytelling in order to create a story that is fluid, comprehensible and engaging.

¹¹ Roland Barthes. ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’. In: **Communications**, 4, 1964. **Semiological Research**. pp. 40–51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1964.1027>
www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1964_num_4_1_1027

¹² F. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, op. cit.

¹³ Roland Barthes. ‘The Rhetoric of the Image’. In: *Communications*, 4, *Semiological Research*. pp. 40–51. 1964. Op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Hénault, A. ‘Image and Text from a Semiotic Perspective’. **Le français aujourd’hui**, no. 161(2), 11–20. 2008. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lfa.161.0011>.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Christiane Metz, *Essays on Meaning in Cinema*, Klincksieck, Aesthetics Series, 2013, 1st edition 1968

We start from the following observation: in a film, as in a documentary or even a news report, the story is told through a succession of images, sounds and, at times, commentary. The image is the central element in any audiovisual production, to the extent that the creation of a film is simply inconceivable without images accompanied by sound. Furthermore, a film is ultimately a story told through images and sounds. This statement also holds true, on a much smaller scale, for a television report. Hence the importance of making optimal use of the camera and mastering editing techniques so that the visual narrative flows at a good pace.

In this context, the framing of the shots constitutes an essential element of visual language, to the extent that the choice of these frames and the way in which a director uses them can make all the difference between one production and another.

- **Long shot:**

The long shot shows a location, a landscape or a scene in its entirety, thereby establishing the spatial and temporal context of a scene. It allows the viewer to visualise the entire environment, creating a context around the action. Its aim is therefore to contextualise the event within its spatial and temporal framework.

In a long shot, characters are sometimes visible, but they are very small, almost as if they were dwarfed by the scene. A long shot must be long enough to convey all the information the director wishes to convey to the viewer. Bordwell and Thompson emphasise that the long shot is crucial for situating the viewer within the narrative space.²⁰

In both cinema and television, filmmakers often choose to begin a film, a news report or a new sequence with a long shot in order to prepare the viewer by placing them within the spatial and temporal context in which the events unfold. This shot can also be used at the end of a sequence to show one last time where the action is taking place before cutting to a new location. In this case, the wide shot no longer really serves to provide information to the viewer, but rather to give them a breather and to create a break.

- **Characteristics of the long shot:**

There are three key characteristics of a wide shot:

- It presents a very expansive frame, often as wide as possible.
- Human activity is not the main focus of a wide shot; it is generally less important than the setting itself.
- Its role is to provide context and answer two key questions: where and when is the action taking place?

- **Usage:**

- **To introduce a location:** Often placed at the start of a scene to situate the characters and provide visual information about the context.

Example: A view of a city to introduce the story, which takes place in that city.

- **To emphasise a general atmosphere or emotion:** the wide shot can convey a sense of loneliness, wonder or chaos by showing a vast expanse.

Example: An aerial view of Gaza, completely destroyed after the war.

- **To show spatial dynamics:** to forge a link between the character(s) and their environment.

Example: A dried-up river or riverside dwellers desperately searching for water, to show the relationship between the character and their dead river.

²⁰ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. *Film Art: An Introduction*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2008.



Example: 'Game of Thrones': Panoramic views of castles and landscapes enhance immersion in the fantasy world.

- **Wide shot:**

As with the long shot, the wide shot shows a scene in its entirety and emphasises the spatial and temporal context in which the scene takes place, but with one key difference from the long shot: it includes both the characters and the environment surrounding them. In a wide shot, the action is clearly visible, and the human figures are not 'lost' in the background, unlike in a long shot. The context is, in this case, depicted on a human scale.

- **Characteristics of the wide shot:**

1. **Wide frame:** The setting occupies a large part of the frame, often taking up more space than the characters.
2. **Presence of human activity:** As well as revealing the location, the setting and the atmosphere... we learn more about the characters: where are they going, what are they doing, who are they?
3. **It shows where the action is taking place,** providing information about the location, the era and the atmosphere.

- **Uses:**

This shot is an essential tool in visual storytelling. It is particularly used to anchor the action in a location, convey a mood, and establish spatial relationships whilst offering perspective and depth.

- It sets the action in its context: describing the space, of course, but also beginning to show the action.

- It creates an atmosphere and conveys the mood associated with a scene.
- It shows the relationship between subjects and their surroundings: characters and objects are visible, but their interaction with the setting is emphasised.
- Many directors begin a film or a new sequence with a wide shot to provide information and prepare the audience for the action.
- It can also be used at the end of a sequence to show one last time where the action is taking place before moving on to a new location. In this case, the wide shot is not used to inform the viewer, but rather to give them a moment's respite and create a pause.

Examples:



In **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962), wide shots of the desert create an atmosphere of vastness and isolation.

- **Medium shot:**

The medium shot is a framing technique in cinema where the character is generally filmed in full, from head to toe, whilst including part of the surrounding environment; this method is considered fundamental to the visual language of cinema and proves to be a key element in storytelling and cinematic aesthetics; by emphasising the character and their actions within their spatial environment, it is often used to introduce a character or illustrate a specific interaction within its context. Generally speaking, the medium shot is used to

explain the relationship between characters, conveying their physical movements and behavioural motivations.²¹

This shot is regarded as a framing technique that strikes a balance between the long shot, which situates the action within its setting, and the close-up, which focuses on details and emotions, as it allows the character to be clearly identified whilst retaining a meaningful view of their immediate surroundings.²²

- **Characteristics:**

- Medium shot: Unlike the long shot, which emphasises space, and the close-up, which focuses on emotion, the medium shot strikes a balance between the two.
- Ideal for dialogue and interactions: it strikes a balance between the two, as it allows two interacting characters to be framed whilst capturing their expressions and movements. The viewer can observe the character's movements and physical demeanour.²³
- It emphasises body language: Viewers can observe the character's gestures and body posture, which enriches the visual narrative.²⁴
- The medium shot helps to distinguish a character from their surroundings by highlighting their physical features and the way they carry themselves.
- The most commonly adopted approach is the classic one, which places the horizon at the character's eye level, in accordance with the rule of thirds.

Example:



*Oliwia Dabrowska in *Schindler's List*, 1993. – Source: Universal*

• **American shot:**

Framing the character from the head to the knees. It was called the **'American shot'** because of its association with Westerns, where the revolver – an essential element of the scene – needed to be highlighted. To achieve this, it was necessary to frame the character down to the knees.



*American shot in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

Source: <https://screenrant.com/good-bad-ugly-movie-clint-eastwood-civil-war-accuracy-expert/>

²¹ Bei Wang. Revisiting melodramatic modes in Chinese cinema from 1979 to 2019: a politics of Emotion. Art and Art History. Panthéon-Sorbonne University – Paris I, 2023. p. 301

²² Bordwell & Thompson, op. cit.

²³ Monaco, J. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond*. Oxford University Press. 2009

²⁴ Ibid



*In the original *Maverick*, Navy pilot Iceman (Val Kilmer) faces off against his rival Maverick (Tom Cruise). More than three decades later*

Source: Paramount Pictures

- **Close-up:**

Definition:

As the name suggests, a close-up brings the viewer closer to the character to provide more detail about them. The shot is framed in such a way that the character is very close to the viewer, without this proximity completely obscuring the setting or the action taking place. The focus in a close-up is on the character's actions, on what they say or do, whilst also highlighting their body and gestures. Elements of the set also appear in the background.²⁵

There are two types of close-up shots.

The **head-and-shoulders close-up** and the **chest close-up**:

The **waist-up close-up** frames the characters at waist level. The emphasis is on the character and what they are saying or doing, whilst still showing their body. Some elements of the set are still visible in the background to provide context.

The **chest close-up** highlights the character's expression whilst including their immediate surroundings.²⁶ It is perceived as more intimate by the viewer. It frames the characters slightly below the armpits. The focus is no longer

on the upper part of the character's body but on their face. The aim is clearly to understand the character's intentions and psychology.

Examples:



**The Godfather*: The director uses close-ups for dialogue scenes, whilst subtly incorporating the dark surroundings of the characters.*



*Chest shot – the film *Titanic**

- **Close-up:**

A close-up is a framing technique that highlights a specific element, such as a bodily detail – often the face – or a key object in the scene. This type of shot is often used to convey emotions intensely in order to capture the audience's attention and heighten the drama of a sequence.

Generally speaking, close-ups and close-range shots reveal the characters' facial expressions, depicting their personalities and psychological states.²⁷

²⁵ <https://www.cinecreatis.net/lexique/plan-rapproche/>

²⁶ Salt, Barry, **Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis** (Perfect Paperback – December 2009)

²⁷ Bei Wang, *Revisiting Melodramatic Modes in Chinese Cinema from 1979 to 2019: A Politics of Emotion*. Art and Art History. Panthéon-Sorbonne University – Paris I, 2023. p. 301

The close-up is often used to capture intense emotions: fear, sadness, joy or anger. According to Arnheim (1957), the close-up ‘**eliminates all distractions and forces the viewer to focus exclusively on the character’s emotion**’.²⁸

As Jean Mitry pointed out: “The close-up alters the drama through the impression of proximity. Pain is within reach. The close-up limits and directs attention. It compels me, as an indicator of emotion. I have neither the right nor the means to be distracted... It is a sensitive anchor, a solid knot, a relay, a mysterious transformer from which all good and all evil may spring. It looks like an idea.”²⁹

It thus helps to create suspense. Hence its widespread use in thrillers and horror films.

Example:



*A close-up from the Korean film *Old Boy*. It shows the madness taking hold of the main character following his imprisonment.*

Camera Movements in Cinema: Characteristics, Use and Narrative Role

Narrative in a film or documentary relies heavily on camera movements. The choice of these movements is not left to chance; it must be planned to serve the symbolic and visual

aspects of the film. In other words, each camera movement is used to convey the visual perception of the narrative structure, or to highlight the aesthetics of the work – or even both at the same time.

Thus, the director may use these movements to depict a scene that a static shot cannot convey clearly, or to direct the viewer’s attention towards a specific element of the visual scene being presented. Added to this are aesthetic considerations, which also play a role in the choice of camera movements. However, it should be emphasised that these aesthetic considerations must under no circumstances be at the expense of meaning or become a distracting element that could compromise the overall understanding of the cinematic work.

In this chapter, we will focus on the classification of camera movements, their functions and their roles in the construction of a narrative.

3. The Main Camera Movements and Their Characteristics

3.1. The Pan

A pan is a camera movement that involves rotating the camera around its axis of rotation. To facilitate this movement, the camera may be mounted on a tripod, or on a Steadicam for certain types of pans.

A distinction is generally made between:

- Horizontal pan: the camera moves sideways, from left to right or from right to left.
- Vertical pan: the camera moves up and down or vice versa.

Aesthetic and narrative uses of panning:

- **Revealing space:**

Panning is a highly informative shot when it comes to conveying a sense of scale, space and location. According to Bordwell and Thompson, panning is frequently used to ensure visual continuity without resorting to editing, thereby preserving the spatio-temporal unity of a scene.³⁰

²⁸ Arnheim, R. *Film as Art*. University of California Press, 1957
http://adambrothnek.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Arnheim_Rudolf_Film_as_Art.pdf

²⁹ MITRY, Jean, *Aesthetics and Psychology of Cinema*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2001 [1990], pp. 108–109

³⁰ Bordwell and Thompson, **Film Art: An Introduction**, 2010, op. cit.

It is often used to present a space in order to situate events within their spatial contexts. In this way, it facilitates a smooth transition between different parts of the space whilst maintaining visual continuity to reinforce the sense of realism in the work, as mentioned by André Bazin in his book **What is Cinema? **, published in 1958.³¹

It also serves to introduce a setting and allow the viewer to immerse themselves in the film's environment. Examples: the density of a crowd in a square – the size of a step – a giant billboard...

- **Following an object or a character:**

The tracking shot can be used to follow a character or a vehicle moving, generally slowly, through the setting whilst ensuring the action flows smoothly. Indeed, it is a common technique in chase scenes and scenes involving dialogue whilst in motion.

- **Establishing the relationship between two elements:**

A pan shot allows you to establish a relationship between two elements. Examples: from the viewer towards the projection screen, from the audience towards the speaker...

- **Creating an atmosphere of suspense**

The use of a pan can help to gradually reveal important information, thereby creating a sense of surprise or suspense. Example: in the 1958 feature film **Vertigo**, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, the camera performs a slow pan to highlight the protagonist's mounting tension and reinforce his anxiety in the face of the void.

3.2. The Travelling Shot: A Camera Movement in the Service of Cinematic Narrative

The tracking shot is a camera movement that features prominently in film productions. From the very first films, it has been used as a technique to enrich the visual sequence and lend rhythm to the narrative.³²

The Lumière brothers frequently employed this technique in their silent films to lend a sense of realism to their cinematic works. Today, this technique is widely used in the language of

cinema and is employed in both fiction films and documentaries.³³

There is no doubt that this technique adds aesthetic value, but its significance goes far beyond that, as it plays an essential role in the narrative and even in the overall emotional impact of the film. According to Bordwell and Thompson, the tracking shot is a powerful tool for enhancing the viewer's immersion, creating a sense of fluidity and dynamism.³⁴

For this reason, the tracking shot is regarded as a 'subjective' shot, the use of which is dictated by the director's perspective and artistic and narrative choices.

Technically, a tracking shot can be achieved using various methods:

- **Rails:** the camera is mounted on a dolly that moves along rails. This technique is often used in large-scale productions requiring substantial budgets.
- **The Steadicam:** this technique has become accessible thanks to the revolution in information and communication technology, which has led to the widespread availability of such equipment at affordable prices. It consists of a camera carried by an operator using a stabilising harness, allowing for smooth and immersive movements.
- **Drones or cranes:** used for aerial or vertical shots, lending a spectacular sense of scale to the scene.
- **Shoulder-mounted:** when the cameraman rests the camera on their shoulders or holds it by hand whilst moving.

The Functions of the Tracking Shot in Cinema

- **Creating Visual Dynamics**

One of the aims of the tracking shot is to direct the viewer's attention towards the specific element the director wishes to highlight, whilst offering a perspective on the space in which the plot unfolds.

*In *Vertigo* (1958), Alfred Hitchcock chose the 'reverse tracking shot' effect (a forward zoom combined with a*

³¹ André Bazin, **What is Cinema?** Cerf, Paris, 1960

³² Guy Gauthier, *The Documentary: Another Form of Cinema* (4th edition). Armand Colin Cinema, 2011

³³ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2008). **Film Art: An Introduction**. McGraw-Hill. Op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid

backward tracking shot) to illustrate the main character's sense of vertigo and anxiety.³⁵

- **Engaging the viewer in the film**

In a documentary film, tracking shots are frequently used to lend greater credibility and add a sense of realism to the work. It is, in fact, a tool for drawing the viewer into the story.

- **Structuring Space and Time**

One of the main roles of the tracking shot is the gradual revelation of the scene that makes up the space where events unfold, or even the event itself.

*For example, in the film *The Godfather* (1990), director Martin Scorsese opts for a slow tracking shot that follows the characters. Through this movement, the viewer gradually discovers the hierarchy of the individuals and their position within the criminal organisation.*

In documentary film, the tracking shot plays an essential role by condensing information relating to time and space in a way that is close to reality, without requiring complex editing. *For example, a lateral tracking shot across Gaza – a city almost completely destroyed by the Israeli army – can convey the scale of a catastrophe without the need for verbal commentary.*

The zoom: the illusion of ‘movement’

When we talk about zooming, we are not referring to an actual camera movement but rather to a ‘movement effect’. The viewer has the impression of watching a camera move, accompanied by the same effects produced by any other movement. In reality, however, it is an optical process that allows a distant object to be brought closer or a nearby object to be pushed further away without moving the camera. The fact that zooming is categorised as a camera movement is simply due to the final result of this optical process, which resembles a camera movement.

Zooming relies on **changing the focal length** of the lens, which allows the image of a subject to be enlarged (zoom in) or reduced (zoom out) without changing the position of the camera.

There are two types of zoom:

- **Zoom in:** The subject appears to move closer and become larger on screen.
- **Zoom out:** The subject appears to move further away.

Zooming in:

A close-up is frequently used to draw the viewer's attention to a specific detail, whether it be a character whose emotions are intensifying, a key element that plays a decisive role, or simply a way of gaining an intimate insight into a protagonist.

This is why this technique is frequently used in horror films to build tension. For example: *a motionless silhouette in the shadows... The camera slowly zooms in on it. This movement serves to heighten anxiety and suspense, as the viewer does not know what will happen to the silhouette – whether it will attack or disappear – but the sense of unease is very much present.*

*This famous effect, immortalised by Alfred Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (1958), has since become a classic of suspense (Deleuze, 1983).*

*Example: In *Jaws* (1975), Steven Spielberg uses a zoom-in combined with a tracking shot backwards on Chief Brody as he realises a shark is attacking. The result: an expression of shock and terror, almost giving the impression that the world is closing in on him.*

The Zoom Out: Creating Distance and Revelation

The zoom out is the exact opposite of the zoom in: it involves moving away from the subject or object being filmed, creating both physical and narrative distance from the viewer. Unlike the ‘zoom in’ which seeks to intensify a specific emotion by moving closer to the subject being filmed in order to amplify it visually and emotionally, the retreat of the image in the zoom out establishes a distance between the viewer and the object or character being filmed.

Indeed, this is not merely a technical effect, but rather a form of visual storytelling, where the image tells the story just as much as the dialogue.³⁶

At times, the use of this technique can evoke a sense of loneliness, as if a character were abandoned in the vastness of the setting. It also serves to create an element of surprise, as

³⁵ Kavin, B. **How Movies Work**. University of California Press, 1992

³⁶ Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. Op. cit.

moving away from the subject reveals other elements that may be of major importance to the narrative.

The effect of zooming depends on the speed and intensity of the change in focal length. A **fast zoom** can be used to create a sense of surprise for the viewer, whilst a **slow zoom** establishes a more subtle and contemplative atmosphere.³⁷

In the field of documentary filmmaking, the use of zooming can be regarded as both a powerful and controversial tool. It can be used to highlight a key detail or to establish a sense of closeness to a subject.³⁸ However, excessive use of this technique could be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate the viewer's gaze, thereby influencing their interpretation of the images.

Conclusion

Straddling the line between craft and creativity, the role of the image in any cinematic or television work is particularly crucial for creating meaning and aesthetic appeal. On the one hand, the use of the image (filming and editing, etc.) is based on a set of rules and codes that form a sort of grammar of visual language. Mastery of this grammar is essential to ensure effective and fluid communication. On the other hand, the image lies at the crossroads of perspectives, experimentation and innovation, which helps to avoid repetition and imitation. A widely held adage in the world of cinema and audiovisual media goes: 'Master the rules like a professional and transcend them like an artist.' This adage is not an invitation to break the rules, but rather to understand them in depth so as to utilise them creatively. Technique must serve the artistic vision and not be a constraint that limits creativity. To this end, beyond the technical rules that are essential to any educational experience, the teaching of filmmaking techniques must incorporate this creative aspect, which necessarily involves studying the meaning of the image and its aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. This can only be achieved by broadening image-related courses to include fields within the humanities, notably semiotics, sociology, psychology and art in general. Only this interdisciplinary approach, which transcends the boundaries that have long separated the technical from the meaningful, will enable us to train specialists capable of meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing sector. The rise of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, high-performance cameras and post-production software is opening up new prospects but also posing numerous challenges, to the extent that the roles of several professions in the field are being called into question. Admittedly, we are living through a period of uncertainty! No

one can claim to be able to predict what the audiovisual sector will look like in 10 years' time, given the accelerating pace of the AI revolution, but one thing is certain: these uncertain times bring unprecedented opportunities and also require a constant re-evaluation of practices and aesthetics.

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³⁷ Kavin, B. **How Movies Work**. University of California Press. Op. cit.

³⁸ Nichols, B. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press. 2010

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