

# Cinematic Storytelling

This handout is a compilation of notes from the timeless book *Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know* by Jennifer Van Sijll (2005). Even though we have probably seen these conventions used hundreds of times in Hollywood films, many of us lack the awareness and vocabulary to identify the types of techniques used to create the shots in a movie sequence. This handout is a crash course to enable you to create more effective storyboards by revealing many of the techniques at your disposal to tell your story.

## Thoughts on filmmaking

*"I can pick up a screenplay and flip through the pages. If all I see is dialog, dialog, dialog, I won't even read it. I don't care how good the dialog is -- it's a moving picture. It has to move all the time... It's not the stage. A movie audience doesn't have the patience to sit and learn a lesson..."*

-- Robert Evans, "The Biggest Mistake Writers Make"

*"In many of the films now being made, there is very little cinema; they are mostly what I call 'photographs of people talking.' When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialog only when it's impossible to do otherwise... It is essential... to rely more on the visual than on the dialog. Whichever way you choose to stage the action, your main concern is to hold the audience's fullest attention."* -- Alfred Hitchcock

Famous silent movies like *The Great Train Robbery* and *Metropolis* had to use non-dialog techniques to carry character and plot. Titles cards were used when explanations were necessary, but always as a last resort. There are more engaging ways to tell the story than through title cards.

Camera placement, lighting, composition, motion, and editing were relied on as the primary storytellers. Cinematic tools like the camera were not just used to record the scene. Instead, they were responsible for advancing plot and character.

Cinematic storytelling manipulates our emotions, revealing character and plot without our immediate knowledge. Review the first ten minutes of *ET*. The setup is completely cinematic. Not a word of dialog. Yet any eight year-old can tell you who the bad guys are and why.

The first part of the director's job is knowing what the audience should be feeling, and when. The second part is harnessing the tools to get them there.

Famous Directors worth studying include Fritz Lang, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Jane Campion, Tim Burton, the Coen Brothers, Luc Besson, James Cameron, and the Wachowski Brothers. For these directors, a shot isn't considered unless it advances plot or character. There are no throwaways.

## Movement in Space

❑ **Horizontal movement (X-axis):** Characters who enter from camera left are generally perceived as the “good guy.” Conversely, the antagonist usually enters from the right. The theory is that the eye moves comfortably from left to right as this mimics reading (in most languages). Subconsciously, we begin to make positive inferences characters who move in this direction. The eyes are less experienced in moving the opposite direction and are therefore less comfortable. The subtle irritant directs audiences to see the character negatively.

When these two forces are aimed at each other, we naturally anticipate some kind of collision. Ex: Opening scene of *Strangers on a Train*: By using screen direction to graphically suggest a pending collision, the film has set up conflict and character, and peaked our fears -- all in under a minute.

❑ **Vertical Movement (Y-axis):** Moving an object down the screen appears easy as it is aided by gravity. Moving an object up the screen will appear difficult because it is assumed it will be resisted by gravity.

When an object runs along an axis in a straight line, and moves at a fixed speed, we automatically assume that the “good” destination is somewhere along the trajectory. Staying on track is a deep-felt virtue. Detouring or being sidetracked has negative connotations. Children's fables are filled with mishaps that occur when characters venture away from established routes. Ex: Opening scene of *Strangers on a Train*. The metaphor is also a succinct synopsis of the plot: What happens to a good man when his path is suddenly diverted?

❑ **Diagonals (XY-Axes):** Move down along a diagonal seems easy, and once the motion starts, it may even feel hard to stop. The right-to-left ascent is the most difficult of all screen directions: It goes against the reading eye and works against gravity as well. It will feel like a tough journey.

❑ **Z-Axis:** Objects closer to the lens appear bigger than similar objects that are farther away from the lens. This is particularly apparent when using a wide-angle lens. For example, when characters move from the foreground to the background their height is diminished more quickly than expected. When they return to the foreground they seem to leap towards the camera, becoming larger, faster than the eye expects. The reverse is true with a telephoto lens. This optical property

as a character moves within the frame can affect the character's size relative to other characters within the frame.

## Grabbing Attention

The eye responds to visual stimuli like brightness, color, size, shape, motion, speed, and direction.

❑ **Lighting:** Objects that are brightly lit tend to attract our attention, even if they are background elements. So make sure important characters are well-lit. What's unimportant can be left in darkness to minimize distractions.

❑ **Imbalance and Balance:** Asymmetry and contrast attract attention. If there are two apples and one orange on the table, we're immediately intrigued.

❑ **Rack Focus:** Also called Pull Focus, it allows you to redirect the audience's attention from one object to another. We tend to want to look at the part of the frame that is in focus. The rack focus effect requires a shallow depth-of-field and is often used to suddenly reveal an important plot point. Ex: In *The Graduate*, Mrs. Robinson is revealed as the answer to Elaine's question by suddenly being pulled into focus. It also externalizes Elaine's confusion by waiting for her moment of recognition to pull her back into focus.

❑ **Orientation:** When the basic rules of orientation are broken, they draw attention to themselves. Consequently when they are used, they need to mean something. Introducing a character upside-down, for example, clearly breaks the rules. Seeing an extreme close-up, such as an eye, is similarly disorienting. A disorienting shot should intentionally disorient. If done carefully, it can externalize a character's inner world. Ex: *Apocalypse Now* opening.

❑ **Contrast:** While not limited to visuals, contrasts tend to stick with the viewer: Poor vs. rich; light vs. dark; good vs. evil; organic vs. geometric; civilized vs. untamed; passive vs. aggressive.

## Editing Techniques

To Vsevolod Pudovkin (1920s), the purposeful use of editing could guide the viewer's emotional response. The editor's single most important job is "the psychological guidance of the spectator."

❑ **Straight Cut:** Most cuts do not need a transition. However, for connected scenes, it is often effective to "cut on the action" to make the context of the second clip apparent to the viewer. Ex: If you shot a baseball player from two different angles, end the first clip in mid-swing and continue

the swing in the second clip. Further, it is common for audio of the following clip to be heard before the visual cut follows (called a **J-cut**). Ex: If one character asks a question, edit the audio response to start before we “turn our head” to see who is speaking.

❑ **Dissolves**: Softens a cut. Often used to show passage of time. Links two ideas together by blending one image into another. Ex: *Citizen Kane* opening. Implies no one shot could have encompassed the massive estate.

❑ **Montage**: An assembly of quick cuts, perhaps disconnected in time or place, that combine to form a larger idea. A montage is frequently used to convey passage of time, coming of age, or emotional transition. Ex: *Adaptation* opening scene depicts protagonist’s historical and philosophical continuum and the impossible standard against which he will evaluate the meaning of this life.

❑ **Intercutting (cross-cutting)**: occurs when two scenes are presented by cutting back and forth between them. This creates a sense of two actions occurring simultaneously in two locations.

❑ **Split Screen**: runs two shots side-by-side within a single frame. Creates idea of simultaneous action. Ex: *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* whistle scene. Suggests the imminent physical proximity of the victim to the assassin by having the two share the frame.

❑ **Smash Cut**: Jar the audience with a sudden and unexpected change in image or sound. Wide shot to close-up. Fast moving shot to static shot. Ex: A surreal dream sequence cuts abruptly to the sound and close-up of an alarm clock blaring.

❑ **Mise-en-Scène**: Originally means “putting in the scene.” Now it means action plays out in front of a continually running camera. New compositions are created through blocking, lens zooms, and camera movement instead of cutting. Scene is shot in real time as an uninterrupted take that will stand on its own without editing. Ex: *Psycho* shower scene aftermath. Technique appears to return us to normalcy, but content sabotages any sense of relief. Ex: *Touch of Evil* opening.

## Manipulating Time

❑ **Expanding Time**: Milking the scene through overlapping action. Time is slowed down to externalize character’s emotion. Adds suspense without dialog, leaving the audience to fear what might lie ahead. Ex: As a character counts to 3, stretch each interval with detail and reaction shots to show what is happening simultaneously during the count.

❑ **Slo-Motion:** Visually suggest two states of consciousness by contrasting it to real time. Show how character sees the world when in the midst of a traumatic or euphoric event. When slo-mo coupled with POV, it can greatly increase audience sympathy. Ex: *Raging Bull* boxing scene.

❑ **Fast-Motion (Time Compression):** often used for comedy, but can be effective in drama. Ex: *Requiem for a Dream*: speeded-up action underscores doctor's inattention and inevitability of Sara's descent.

❑ **Flashback:** Fill the audience in on important backstory. The key to whether a flashback works is whether the flashback moves the plot forward. If it puts the film artificially on hold or is aesthetically hackneyed, the audience will reject it.

❑ **Flashforward:** typically assisted with a slow dissolve to prepare the audience for a time change.

❑ **Freeze Frame:** By freezing the moment like a photograph, the image takes on an iconic air and the audience is cued to take special notice of the content. Ex: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*: Rather than see their beloved characters die, they are frozen and live forever. Though we may suspect what will happen next, we won't ever know. It protects them from time.

## Sound Effects

Outside of a musical score, movies rely on three kinds of sound to tell their stories: dialog, narrator voiceover, sound effects. Sound effects add layers of meaning to a film that are hard to achieve in other ways. They can intentionally draw attention to themselves, or be manipulated with stealth. They can also be tagged to specific events or characters.

❑ **Realistic Sound (Diegetic):** Sound that is organic to a scene is called diegetic sound. Ex: *ET*: Sound of keys is coded as the sound of the approaching antagonists. By including a sound tag, audience can judge how close antagonist is to victim, regardless of whether they appear on screen. Forces audience to participate, mimicking action of the victim, listening for sound clues.

❑ **Expressive Sound (Diegetic; outer world):** Organic to scene but altered for dramatic effect. Hum of a mosquito. A phone's ring that gets louder and louder. Can have the effect of making us fear for the protagonist for what awaits.

❑ **Surreal Sound (Meta-Diegetic; inner world):** internal thoughts, nightmares, dreams. Ex: Postcard accompanied by sounds of ocean. Laughter of children from a flashback of school.

❑ **External Sound (Non-Diegetic):** can give additional meaning to a scene. Ex: Church bell as inmate walks down death row, even though there is not a church for miles.

- \* Sound effects can be used as a prop or plot point.
- \* Don't have to match with picture.
- \* Can be a character's signature, or remind us of event.
- \* Two sound effects can be placed side by side and generate a new idea.

## Music

❑ **Lyrics as Narrator:** can act as inner thoughts of character. Can establish theme, conflict, and mood. Audience expects lyrics to be significant. Especially when they are placed at beginning of film, "the most expensive real-estate" in a movie. **For CS2C, do not use copyrighted music.**

❑ **Symbolic Use of Music:** The idea of the music itself. Ex: *Shawshank Redemption*: hearing the music fuels Red's most significant turning point. He knows something inside him has crossed over, and he can't go back. The music acts as a catalyst for change.

## Scene Transitions

Movement between end of one scene and the beginning of another. Each transition presents opportunity to convey story information by virtue of how the scenes are cut together. Scenes can be cut with no intentional reference or constructed to add a story element. A matching transition is one way to exploit this opportunity. Essentially, a matching transition "matches" the outgoing shot with the incoming shot. This can also be done with sound.

❑ **Visual Match-Cut (Graphic Similarity):** can be based on similarity of content, graphics, shape, motion, size, graphics, color. Move story along based on juxtaposition of two images. Dissolves between images can also be used. Externalize ideas about theme, motivation, passage of time. Ex: *2001: A Space Odyssey* spinning bone is matched to space ship, and we travel from prehistoric man to space era, a huge flashforward. Ex: *All That Jazz*: One dancer's movement is continued by another. Suggests passage of time and interchangeability of dancers.

❑ **Visual Match-Cut (Idea):** Cut or visual metaphor answers a question. Ex: *Harold and Maude* psychiatrist session. Giant wrecking ball answers questions about feelings for mom. Ex: *Requiem for a Dream* jail bars: Sara and Tyrone united by drugs, each in own prison.

❑ **Matching Audio Segue:** An audio dissolve, sometimes used to mask an important event. Ex: *Fatal Attraction*: Tea kettle masks sound of screams, and is silenced just in time. *Sorry, Wrong Number*: screeching train masks screams.

❑ **Audio Bridge:** an outgoing sound from one scene continues over a new shot; used to connect the two scenes aurally. Ex: *Apocalypse Now* opening: sound of helicopter blades is laid over image of spinning ceiling fan, taking us inside Captain Willard's mind. Ex: *Citizen Kane* Christmas scene: Compression of time by connecting two periods with a greeting. Twenty years pass.

## Camera Lenses

❑ **Wide-Angle lens (or zoomed out):** delivers great depth-of-field to an image. Each character can inhabit own horizontal plane. Ex: *Citizen Kane* flashback: three planes: mother signing, father looking angry, Kane playing and literally placed outside the decision making. Movements toward or away from camera seem exaggerated.

❑ **Wide-Angle (Vistas and Establishing Shots):** naturally suited for exterior shots. Able to place huge distance between objects to mirror state of relationship.

❑ **Telephoto (or zoomed in):** Compresses space, making objects appear in same plane. Shallow depth-of-field throws objects out of focus. Ex: *The Graduate* race against clock. Running doesn't seem to gain him distance, creating suspense.

**Fisheye:** The shorter the focal length, the more linear distortion. Prop Lenses within the Scene (Fisheye, reflection): Ex: *Citizen Kane*: See reflection in ornament.

**Objects:** Shooting through stained glass or water alters photographic properties. Ex: *Dances with Wolves*: Distorted view through glass adds historical authority and creates sense of distorted POV.

## Camera Position

❑ **Close-Up (CU):** includes head and shoulders of subject. "Close shot" may refer to person or object. "Close-up" usually refers to a person. The closer we get to a character, the more sympathy we are likely to feel. The close-up can also be used to evoke fear or revulsion when the audience is forced to be in close proximity to a character already established as a hated antagonist.

- ❑ **Extreme Close-Up (ECU):** Draws attention to an object by making it larger-than-life, such as an eye, bullet, or other detail.
  
- ❑ **Over-the-Shoulder (OTS):** Camera is placed behind the shoulder of a character, and their head and shoulders are seen in the foreground and used as a framing device. Most often a second character is the subject of interest. OTS can suggest relationship: tension, intimacy, desire, hatred, imprisonment, conspiracy. Ex: *The Piano*: object of her attention is piano left behind on the beach. What is exaggerated is the physical distance between them.
  
- ❑ **Point-of-View (POV):** Placed at eye level of character so audience sees what the character sees. Gives exaggerated sense of intimacy with the character. Translates to sympathy of fear, depending on whose POV we are experiencing. It should not be randomly used. Ex: *Halloween*: By coding the character with a unique camera shot, John Carpenter was able to flashforward fifteen years and immediately re-establish the character's identity without dialog or any other visual assistance.
  
- ❑ **High-Angle:** camera is placed above a subject with lens pointing down. Makes the subject appear small and vulnerable.
  
- ❑ **Low-Angle:** camera is placed below the subject and lens is pointing up. Subject appears larger-than-life. Transfers power to the subject, making it appear to dominate. Ex: *ET*: view of tall redwoods and trucks contributes to our sense of ET's vulnerability.
  
- ❑ **Hi-Lo Combined:** Ex: *Psycho* motel: Intercut to show POV of hunter and hunted.

## Camera Motion

- ❑ **Static shot:** locked down on tripod. Stillness makes it easy to compare similar shots.
  
- ❑ **Handheld:** the bumpier the shot, the more instability can be suggested. Often exaggerated by juxtaposing with smooth or locked down shot.
  
- ❑ **Pan:** Camera pivots along horizontal plane. Ex: *Dances with Wolves* opening. Seeing the primitive instruments through Dunbar's POV, we understand his decision not to have the amputation.
  
- ❑ **Tilt-Up / Tilt-Down:** Used as a reveal or moving close-up. Directs attention to details that audience may not otherwise notice. Ex: Revealing a new heroic or sexy character.

- ❑ **Rotation:** Disorienting effect. Works as a metaphor characterizing tone of the sequence. Rotation indicates changeover from normal to surreal. Ex: *Apocalypse Now* opening.
- ❑ **Tracking:** camera is mounted on dolly and glides along tracks, which can form a linear or curved pattern. Ex: *American Beauty* opening tracking shot of jury as a reveal. *Fatal Attraction*: reveals two faces of Dan's character. Camera movement parallels outer and inner self. Ex: *Reservoir Dogs*: despite giving us feeling of having insider knowledge through circular tracking, we actually have completely misread the scene.
- ❑ **Push-In, Pull-Out:** Causing view to narrow (also called Track-In) or widen (also called Push-Out, Pull-Back, Widen-Out). Often used in combination to get in and out of locations or for dramatic comparison. Ex: Zoom in to TV in one home, zoom out of TV in another home.
- ❑ **Crane:** High-angle can create omniscient quality. Effortless ability to reveal "secrets" and pertinent events. Ex: *Touch of Evil* opening.
- ❑ **Steadicam:** Dream like floating quality. Ex: *Goodfellas*; *Rocky* stairs scene; *The Shining*.

## Lighting

- ❑ **Rembrandt Lighting:** intentionally contrasts light and dark. High contrast lighting (*chiaroscuro*) is often reserved for *film noir* or pivotal scenes expressing key philosophical questions of good and evil, life and death.
- ❑ **TV Lighting:** or Sitcom lighting, is conventionally bright, flat, and shadowless. Ex: *Natural Born Killers* flashback: takes a known medium and turns it upside down.
- ❑ **Candlelight:** flatters the face, smoothes the skins, adds a warm tone. Suggests romance, festivities, harmony, pre-twentieth century. Ex: *American Beauty* dinner scene: exploits properties associated with candlelight to show how far from idealized life the family has traveled.
- ❑ **Motivated Lighting:** refers to any light that would naturally exist in the world depicted in the frame. The source of light can be the desk lamp, or a lamp post that shines light from above a character, but is not itself depicted in the scene.
- ❑ **Unmotivated Light:** The source of light cannot be logically explained, but can put a spotlight on an important element, or give the scene a religious quality. Ex: *The Professional* peephole scene: Characterizing a professional assassin as a positive moral force is a difficult job.

❑ **Motion:** Ex: *ET*: moving light represents an approaching antagonist. *Psycho*: fear stems from being disoriented. When we first see the swinging light bulb, we don't know what we're seeing.

## Props

❑ **Props:** Externalizes character or represents important ideas in the movie, and each can be returned to. Ex: *Barton Fink* squeaky bed, sealed window, typewriter, paper pad, pencil, postcard. *Raging Bull*: when his paranoia is set off, TV goes haywire to illustrate changing mental state.

❑ **Repurposing Props:** Change can be shown through recurring props, and we can measure where we are in a film by the changes in the meaning of the prop. Mining props from earlier scenes is powerful. Ex: *Bound*: garden clippers used to punish, threaten, and then escape, representing shift in power. Ex: *Out of Africa* closing: removes white gloves from servant Juma.

❑ **Coding Character:** Used to identify character's persona. Ex: wardrobe colors in *Three Women*: Later used to externalize theft of another character's persona. Ex: *Bound* professions: earrings for seduction vs earrings as functional silver lockpicks.

❑ **Contrast:** through color, or wardrobe, or vehicles. Ex: *Harold and Maude*: hearse, limo, railway car differentiate characters.

## Environment and Location

❑ **Things that move:** rain, snow, wind, lightning can comment on a scene

❑ **Things that make sounds:** hailstorm can drown out an important clue or draw attention to it. Sound can creep into a scene or land with a bang. Running through puddles in a long dark alley.

❑ **Things that add peril:** nature as sanctuary or source of destruction. It can give life or take it away with ease. Ex: Two men in a desert wasteland fighting over a water canteen

❑ **Moving Locations:** Road trip movies especially adept at using changing landscape to externalize conflict and character.