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# Photography



DreamWorks/Amblin Entertainment/Paramount Pictures

*People inscribe their histories, beliefs, attitudes, desires  
and dreams in the images they make.*

—ROBERT HUGHES, ART CRITIC

**O**verview The three styles of film: realism, classicism, and formalism. Three broad types of cinema: documentaries, fiction films, and avant-garde movies. The signified and the signifier: how form shapes content in movies. Subject matter plus treatment equal content. The shots: apparent distance of the camera from the subject. The angles: looking up, down, or at eye level. Lighting styles: high key, low key, high contrast. The symbolism of light and darkness. Color symbolism. How lenses distort the subject matter: telephotos, wide-angle, and standard lenses. Filtered reality: more distortions. Special effects. The cinematographer: the film director's main visual collaborator.

## REALISM AND FORMALISM



Even before 1900, movies began to develop in two major directions: the **realistic** and the **formalistic**. In the mid-1890s in France, the Lumière brothers delighted audiences with their short movies dealing with everyday occurrences. Such films as *The Arrival of a Train* (4–4a) fascinated viewers precisely because they seemed to capture the flux and spontaneity of events as they were viewed in real life. At about the same time, Georges Méliès was creating a number of fantasy films that emphasized purely imagined events. Such movies as *A Trip to the Moon* (4–4b) were typical mixtures of whimsical narrative and trick photography. In many respects, the Lumières can be regarded as the founders of the realist tradition of cinema, and Méliès of the formalist tradition.

Realism and formalism are general rather than absolute terms. When used to suggest a tendency toward either polarity, such labels can be helpful, but in the end they're just labels. Few films are exclusively formalist in style, and fewer yet are completely realist. There is also an important difference between realism and reality, although this distinction is often forgotten. Realism is a particular *style*, whereas physical reality is the source of all the raw materials of film, both realistic and formalistic. Virtually all movie directors go to the photographable world for their subject matter, but what they do with this material—how they shape and manipulate it—is what determines their stylistic emphasis.

Generally speaking, realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion. In photographing objects and events, the filmmaker tries to suggest the richness of life itself. Both realist and formalist film directors must select (and hence, emphasize) certain details from the chaotic sprawl of reality. But the element of selectivity in realistic films is less obvious. Realists, in short, try to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated, an objective mirror of the actual world. Formalists, on the other hand, make no such pretense. They deliberately stylize and distort their raw materials so that no one would mistake a manipulated image of an object or event for the real thing. The stylization calls attention to itself: It's part of the show.

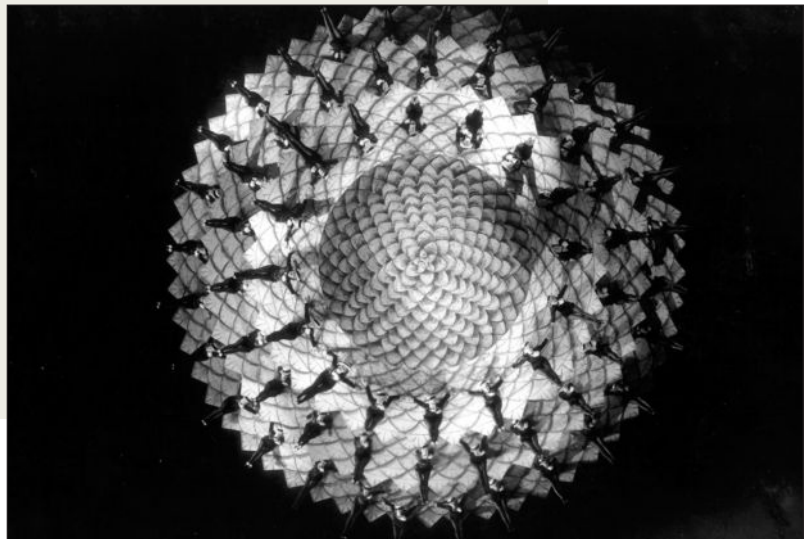
**1-1a. *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (U.S.A., 2003), directed by Peter Weir.** (Twentieth Century Fox/Universal Studios/Miramax Films)

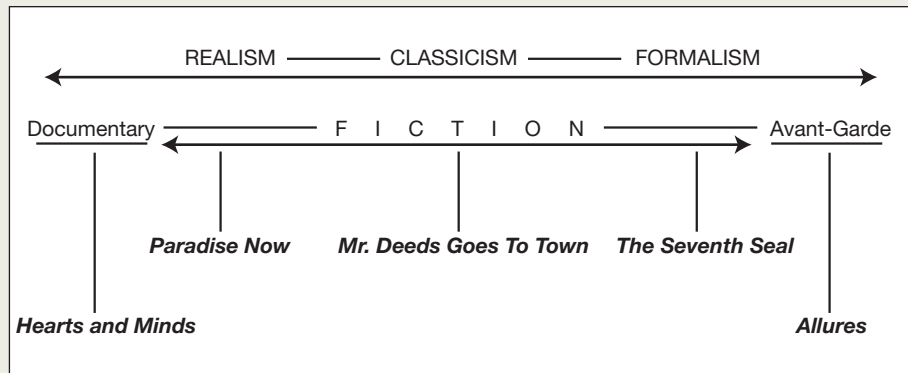


**Realism and Formalism.** Critics and theorists have championed film as the most realistic of all the arts in capturing how an experience actually looks and sounds, like this thrilling recreation of a ferocious battle at sea during the Napoleonic Wars. A stage director would have to suggest the battle symbolically, with stylized lighting and off-stage sound effects. A novelist would have to recreate the event with words, a painter with pigments brushstroked onto a flat canvas. But a film director can create the event with much greater credibility by plunging the camera (a proxy for us) in the middle of the most terrifying ordeals without actually putting us in harm's way. In short, film realism is more like "being there" than any other artistic medium or any other style of presentation. Audiences can experience the thrills without facing any of the dangers. As early as 1910, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy realized that this fledgling new art form would surpass the magnificent achievements of 19th century literary realism: "This little clinking contraption with the revolving handle will make a revolution in our life—in the life of writers. It is a direct attack on the old methods of literary art. This swift change of scene, this blending of emotion and experience—it is much better than the heavy, long-drawn-out kind of writing to which we are accustomed. It is closer to life."

*Dames* presents us with another type of experience entirely. The choreographies of Busby Berkeley are triumphs of artifice, far removed from the real world. Depression-weary audiences flocked to movies like this precisely to get away from everyday reality. They wanted magic and enchantment, not reminders of their real-life problems. Berkeley's style was the most formalized of all choreographers. He liberated the camera from the narrow confines of the proscenium arch, soaring overhead, even swirling amongst the dancers, and juxtaposing shots from a variety of vantage points throughout the musical numbers. He often photographed his dancers from unusual angles, like this **bird's-eye shot**. Sometimes he didn't even bother using dancers at all, preferring a uniform contingent of good-looking young women who are used primarily as semi-abstract visual units, like bits of glass in a shifting kaleidoscope of formal patterns. Audiences were enchanted.

**1-1b. *Dames* (U.S.A., 1934), choreographed by Busby Berkeley, directed by Ray Enright.** (Warner Bros.)





### 1–2. Classification chart of styles and types of film.

Critics and scholars categorize movies according to a variety of criteria. Two of the most common methods of classification are by style and by type. The three principal styles—realism, classicism, and formalism—might be regarded as a continuous spectrum of possibilities, rather than airtight categories. Similarly, the three types of movies—documentaries, fiction, and **avant-garde** films—are also terms of convenience, for they often overlap. Realistic films like *Paradise Now* (1–4) can shade into the documentary. Formalist movies like *The Seventh Seal* (1–6) have a personal quality suggesting the traditional domain of the avant-garde. Most fiction films, especially those produced in America, tend to conform to the **classical paradigm**. Classical cinema can be viewed as an intermediate style that avoids the extremes of realism and formalism—though most movies in the classical form lean toward one or the other style.

We rarely notice the style in a realistic movie because the artist tends to be self-effacing, invisible. Such filmmakers are more concerned with *what's* being shown rather than how it's manipulated. The camera is used conservatively. It's essentially a recording mechanism that reproduces the surface of tangible objects with as little commentary as possible. Some realists aim for a rough look in their images, one that doesn't prettify the materials with a self-conscious beauty of form. "If it's too pretty, it's false," is an implicit assumption. A high premium is placed on simplicity, spontaneity, and directness. This is not to suggest that these movies lack artistry, however, for at its best, the realistic cinema specializes in art that conceals art.

Formalist movies are stylistically flamboyant. Their directors are concerned with expressing their subjective experience of reality, not how other people might see it. Formalists are often referred to as **expressionists**, because their self-expression is at least as important as the subject matter itself. Expressionists are often concerned with spiritual and psychological truths, which they feel can be conveyed best by distorting the surface of the material world. The camera is used as a method of commenting on the subject matter, a way of emphasizing its essential rather than its objective nature. Formalist movies have a high degree of manipulation, a stylization of reality.



Most realists would claim that their major concern is with *content* rather than *form* or technique. The subject matter is always supreme, and anything that distracts from the content is viewed with suspicion. In its most extreme form, the realistic cinema tends toward documentary, with its emphasis on photographing actual events and people (1–3). The formalist cinema, on the other hand, tends to emphasize technique and expressiveness. The most extreme example of this style of filmmaking is found in the avant-garde cinema (1–7).

1–3. *Hearts and Minds* (U.S.A., 1975), directed by Peter Davis.

The emotional impact of a documentary image usually derives from its truth rather than its beauty. Davis's indictment of America's devastation of Vietnam consists primarily of TV news-reel footage. This photo shows some Vietnamese children running from an accidental bombing raid on their community, their clothes literally burned off their bodies by napalm. "First they bomb as much as they please," a Vietnamese observes, "then they film it." It was images such as these that eventually turned the majority of Americans against the war. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, Third World filmmakers, have pointed out, "Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes, or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something that the System finds indigestible." Paradoxically, in no country except the United States would such self-damning footage be allowed on the public airwaves—which are controlled, or at least regulated, by governments. No other country has a First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of expression. (Warner Bros.)



Some of these movies are totally abstract; pure forms (that is, nonrepresentational colors, lines, and shapes) constitute the only content. Most fiction films fall somewhere between these two extremes, in a mode critics refer to as **classical cinema (1–5)**.

Even the terms *form* and *content* aren't as clear-cut as they may sometimes seem. As the filmmaker and author Vladimir Nilsen pointed out: "A photograph is by no means a complete and whole reflection of reality: the photographic picture represents only one or another selection from the sum of physical attributes of the object photographed." The form of a shot—the way in which a subject is photographed—is its true content, not necessarily what the subject is perceived to be in reality. The communications theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that the content of one medium is actually another medium. For example, a photograph (visual image) depicting a man eating an apple (taste) involves two different mediums: Each communicates information—content—in a different way. A verbal description of the photograph of the man eating the apple would



**1–4. *Paradise Now* (Palestinian Territories, 2005), with Kais Nashef and Ali Suliman, directed by Hany Abu-Assad.**

In most realistic films, there is a close correspondence of the images to everyday reality. This criterion of value necessarily involves a comparison between the internal world of the movie with the external milieu that the filmmaker has chosen to explore. The realistic cinema tends to deal with people from the lower social echelons and often explores moral issues. The artist rarely intrudes on the materials, however, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Realism tends to emphasize the basic experiences of life. It is a style that excels in making us feel the humanity of others. Beauty of form is often sacrificed to capture the texture of reality as it's ordinarily perceived. Realistic images often seem unmanipulated, haphazard in their design. They frequently convey an intimate snapshot quality—people caught unawares. Generally, the story materials are loosely organized and include many details that don't necessarily forward the plot but are offered for their own sake, to heighten the sense of authenticity. *Paradise Now* is about the final hours of two Palestinian auto mechanics, friends since childhood, who have volunteered to be suicide bombers. Here they are being wired up with explosives before crossing over to their target in Israel. Like most realistic movies, the motto of this film might well be: "This is the way things really are." (Warner Independent Pictures)

involve yet another medium (language), which communicates information in yet another manner. In each case, the precise information is determined by the medium, although superficially all three have the same content.

In literature, the naive separation of form and content is called “the heresy of paraphrase.” For example, the content of *Hamlet* can be found in a college outline, yet no one would seriously suggest that the play and outline are the same “except in form.” To paraphrase artistic information is inevitably to change its content as well as its form. Artistry can never be gauged by subject matter alone. The manner of its presentation—its forms—is the true content of paintings, literature, and plays. The same applies to movies.

The great French critic André Bazin noted, “One way of understanding better what a film is trying to say is to know how it is saying it.” The American

1–5. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (U.S.A., 1936), with Gary Cooper (with tuba), directed by Frank Capra.

Classical cinema avoids the extremes of realism and formalism in favor of a slightly stylized presentation that has at least a surface plausibility. Movies in this form are often handsomely mounted, but the style rarely calls attention to itself. The images are determined by their relevance to the story and characters, rather than a desire for authenticity or formal beauty alone. The implicit ideal is a functional, invisible style: The pictorial elements are subordinated to the presentation of characters in action. Classical cinema is story oriented. The narrative line is seldom allowed to wander, nor is it broken up by authorial intrusions. A high premium is placed on the entertainment value of the story, which is often shaped to conform to the conventions of a popular genre. Often the characters are played by stars rather than unknown players, and their roles are sometimes tailored to showcase their personal charms. The human materials are paramount in the classical cinema. The characters are generally appealing and slightly romanticized. The audience is encouraged to identify with their values and goals. (Columbia Pictures)



critic Herman G. Weinberg expressed the matter succinctly: “The way a story is told is part of that story. You can tell the same story badly or well; you can also tell it well enough or magnificently. It depends on who is telling the story.”

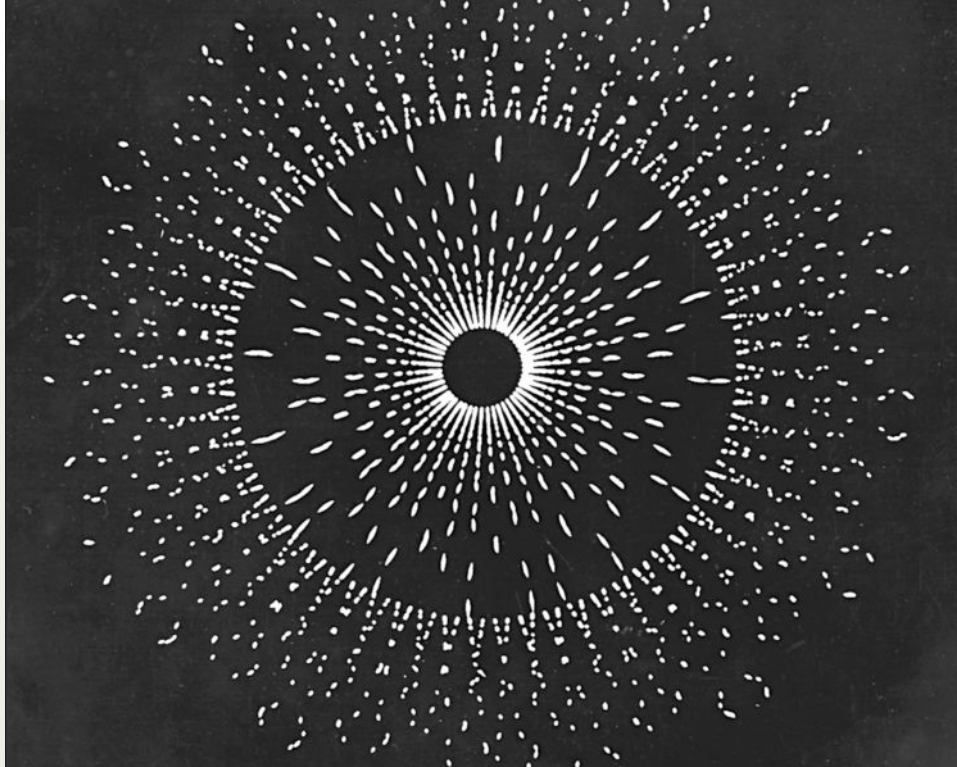
*Realism* and *realistic* are much overtaxed terms, both in life and in movies. We use these terms to express so many different ideas. For example, people often praise the “realism” of the boxing matches in *Raging Bull*. What they really mean is that these scenes are powerful, intense, and vivid. These traits owe very little to realism as a style. In fact, the boxing matches are extremely stylized. The images are often photographed in dreamy slow motion, with lyrical crane shots, weird accompanying sound effects (like hissing sounds and jungle screams), staccato editing in both the images and the sound. True, the subject matter is based on actual life—the brief boxing career of the American

**1–6.** *The Seventh Seal* (Sweden, 1957), with Bengt Ekerot and Max von Sydow, cinematography by Gunnar Fischer, directed by Ingmar Bergman.

The formalist cinema is largely a director’s cinema: We’re often aware of the personality of the filmmaker. There is a high degree of manipulation in the narrative materials, and the visual presentation is stylized. The story is exploited as a vehicle for the filmmaker’s personal obsessions. Formalists are not much concerned with how realistic their images are, but with their beauty or power. The most artificial genres—musicals, sci-fi, fantasy films—are generally classified as formalist. Most movies of this sort deal with extraordinary characters and events—such as this mortal game of chess between a medieval knight and the figure of Death. This style of cinema excels in dealing with ideas—political, religious, philosophical—and is often the chosen medium of propagandistic artists. Its texture is densely symbolic: Feelings are expressed through forms, like the dramatic high-contrast lighting of this shot. Most of the great stylists of the cinema are formalists. (Janus Films)







1-7. *Allures* (U.S.A., 1961), directed by Jordan Belson.

In the avant-garde cinema, subject matter is often suppressed in favor of abstraction and an emphasis on formal beauty for its own sake. Like many artists in this idiom, Belson began as a painter and was attracted to film because of its temporal and kinetic dimensions. He was strongly influenced by such European avant-garde artists as Hans Richter, who championed the “absolute film”—a graphic cinema of pure forms divorced from a recognizable subject matter. Belson’s works are inspired by philosophical concepts derived primarily from Oriental religions. For example, this image could represent a stylized eyeball, or it could be seen as a Mandala design, the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the universe. But these are essentially private sources and are rarely presented explicitly in films themselves. Form is the true content of Belson’s movies. His animated images are mostly geometrical shapes, dissolving and contracting circles of light, and kinetic swirls. His patterns expand, congeal, flicker, and split off into other shapes, only to re-form and explode again, like a spectacular fireworks display. It is a cinema of uncompromising self-expression—personal, often inaccessible, and iconoclastic. *(Pyramid Films)*

middleweight champion of the 1940s, Jake La Motta. But the stylistic treatment of these biographical materials is extravagantly subjective (1-8a). At the opposite extreme, the special effects in *Constantine* (1-8b) are so uncannily realistic that we would swear they were real if we didn’t know better.

Form and content are best used as relative terms. They are useful concepts for temporarily isolating specific aspects of a movie for the purposes of closer examination. Such a separation is artificial, of course, yet this technique can yield more detailed insights into the work of art as a whole.



**1-8a.** *Raging Bull* (U.S.A., 1980), with Robert De Niro, directed by Martin Scorsese. (United Artists)

Realism and formalism are best used as *stylistic* terms rather than terms to describe the nature of the subject matter. For example, although the story of *Raging Bull* is based on actual events, the boxing matches in the film are stylized. In this photo, the badly bruised Jake La Motta resembles an agonized warrior, crucified against the ropes of the ring. The camera floats toward him in lyrical slow motion while the soft focus obliterates his consciousness of the arena.

In *Constantine*, on the other hand, the special effects are so realistic they almost convince us that the impossible is possible. Based on the comic book *Hellblazer*, the film contains many scenes of supernatural events. In this episode, for example, the protagonist travels to hell, just beneath the landscape of Los Angeles, a place inhabited by demons and angels. In short, it's quite possible to present fantasy materials in a realistic style. It's equally possible to present reality-based materials in an expressionistic style.

**1-8b.** *Constantine* (U.S.A., 2005), with Keanu Reeves, directed by Francis Lawrence. (Warner Bros.)



## THE SHOTS



The **shots** are defined by the amount of subject matter that's included within the **frame** of the screen. In actual practice, however, shot designations vary considerably. A **medium shot** for one director might be considered a **close-up** by another. Furthermore, the longer the shot, the less precise are the designations. In general, shots are determined on the basis of how much of the human figure is in view. The shot is not necessarily defined by the distance between the camera and the object photographed, for in some instances certain lenses distort distances. For example, a **telephoto lens** can produce a close-up on the screen, yet the camera in such shots is generally quite distant from the subject matter.

Although there are many different kinds of shots in the cinema, most of them are subsumed under the six basic categories: (1) the **extreme long shot**, (2) the **long shot**, (3) the **full shot**, (4) the medium shot, (5) the close-up, and (6) the **extreme close-up**. The **deep-focus shot** is usually a variation of the long shot (1–9b).

The *extreme long shot* is taken from a great distance, sometimes as far as a quarter of a mile away. It's almost always an exterior shot and shows much of the locale. Extreme long shots also serve as spatial frames of reference for the closer shots and for this reason are sometimes called **establishing shots**. If people are included in extreme long shots, they usually appear as mere specks on the screen (1–9a). The most effective use of these shots is often found in **epic** films, where locale plays an important role: westerns, war films, samurai films, and historical movies.

The *long shot* (1–9b) is perhaps the most complex in the cinema, and the term itself one of the most imprecise. Usually, long-shot ranges correspond approximately to the distance between the audience and the stage in the live theater. The closest range within this category is the *full shot*, which just barely includes the human body in full, with the head near the top of the frame and the feet near the bottom.

The *medium shot* contains a figure from the knees or waist up. A functional shot, it's useful for shooting exposition scenes, for carrying movement, and for dialogue. There are several variations of the medium shot. The *two-shot* contains two figures from the waist up (1–10). The **three-shot** contains three figures; beyond three, the shot tends to become a full shot, unless the other figures are in the background. The **over-the-shoulder shot** usually contains two figures, one with part of his or her back to the camera, the other facing the camera.

The *close-up* shows very little if any locale and concentrates on a relatively small object—the human face, for example. Because the close-up magnifies the size of an object, it tends to elevate the importance of things, often suggesting a symbolic significance. The *extreme close-up* is a variation of this shot. Thus, instead of a face, the extreme close-up might show only a person's eyes or mouth (1–11).





**1-9a.** *The Polar Express* (U.S.A., 2004), directed by Robert Zemeckis.

In this traveling extreme long shot, the camera swirls out in space as the fragile train puffs and strains and chugs up a steep mountain top. Shots from this distance reduce human beings to grainlike specks of light in a cosmic landscape. (Warner Bros.)

**1-9b.** *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (U.S.A., 1994), with Robert De Niro (under wraps) and Kenneth Branagh, directed by Branagh.

The long shot encompasses roughly the same amount of space as the staging area of a large theater. Setting can dominate characters unless they're located near the foreground. Lighting a long shot is usually costly, time consuming, and labor intensive, especially if it's in deep focus, like this shot. The laboratory had to be moody and scary, yet still sufficiently clear to enable us to see back into the "depth" of the set. Note how the lighting is layered, punctuated with patches of gloom and accusatory shafts of light from above. To complicate matters, whenever a director cuts to closer shots, the lighting has to be adjusted accordingly so that the transitions between cuts appear smooth and unobtrusive. Anyone who has ever visited a movie set knows that people are waiting most of the time—usually for the director of photography (D.P.) to announce that the lighting is finally ready and the scene can now be photographed. (TriStar Pictures)







**1-10.** *Almost Famous* (U.S.A., 2000), with Patrick Fugit and Kate Hudson, written and directed by Cameron Crowe.

Above all, the medium shot is the shot of the couple, romantic or otherwise. Generally, two-shots have a split focus rather than a single dominant: The bifurcated composition usually emphasizes equality, two people sharing the same intimate space. The medium two-shot reigns supreme in such genres as romantic comedies, love stories, and buddy films.

*(DreamWorks Pictures)*

**1-11.** *War of the Worlds* (U.S.A., 2005), with Tom Cruise, directed by Steven Spielberg.

The closer the shot, the more intense the emotion. In this extreme close-up, for example, the terrified protagonist is cornered like a trapped animal. The blurred, throbbing red light in the background is like a molten eruption on the surface of the image, an apt symbol of his emotional meltdown.

*(DreamWorks/Amblin Entertainment/Paramount Pictures)*



The *deep-focus shot* is usually a long shot consisting of a number of focal distances and photographed in depth (1-9b). Sometimes called a *wide-angle shot* because it requires a **wide-angle lens** to photograph, this type of shot captures objects at close, medium, and long ranges simultaneously, all of them in sharp focus. The objects in a deep-focus shot are carefully arranged in a succession of planes. By using this layering technique, the director can guide the viewer's eye from one distance to another. Generally, the eye travels from a close range to a medium to a long.

## THE ANGLES



The **angle** from which an object is photographed can often serve as an authorial commentary on the subject matter. If the angle is slight, it can serve as a subtle form of emotional coloration. If the angle is extreme, it can represent the major meaning of an image. The angle is determined by where the *camera* is placed, not the subject photographed. A picture of a person photographed from a high angle actually suggests an opposite interpretation from an image of the same person photographed from a low angle. The subject matter can be identical in the two images, yet the information we derive from both clearly shows that the form is the content, the content the form.

Film realists tend to avoid extreme angles. Most of their scenes are photographed from eye level, roughly five to six feet off the ground—approximately the way an actual observer might view a scene. Usually these directors attempt to capture the clearest view of an object. **Eye-level shots** are seldom intrinsically dramatic, because they tend to be the norm. Virtually all directors use some eye-level shots, especially in routine exposition scenes.

Formalist directors are not always concerned with the clearest image of an object, but with the image that best captures its essential nature. Extreme angles involve distortions. Yet many filmmakers feel that by distorting the surface realism of an object, a greater truth is achieved—a symbolic truth. Both realist and formalist directors know that the viewer tends to identify with the camera's lens. The realist wishes to make the audience forget that there's a camera at all. The formalist is constantly calling attention to it.

There are five basic angles in the cinema: (1) the bird's-eye view, (2) the high angle, (3) the eye-level shot, (4) the low angle, and (5) the oblique angle. As in the case of shot designations, there are many intermediate kinds of angles. For example, there can be a considerable difference between a low and extreme low angle—although usually, of course, such differences tend to be matters of degree. Generally speaking, the more extreme the angle, the more distracting and conspicuous it is in terms of the subject matter being photographed.

The *bird's-eye view* is perhaps the most disorienting angle of all, for it involves photographing a scene from directly overhead (1-12b). Because we seldom view events from this perspective, the subject matter of such shots might initially seem unrecognizable and abstract. For this reason, filmmakers tend to

**1-12a.** *Bonnie and Clyde* (U.S.A., 1967), with Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, directed by Arthur Penn.

High angles tend to make people look powerless, trapped. The higher the angle, the more it tends to imply fatality. The camera's angle can be inferred by the background of a shot: High angles usually show the ground or floor; low angles the sky or ceiling. Because we tend to associate light with safety, high-key lighting is generally nonthreatening and reassuring. But not always. We have been socially conditioned to believe that danger lurks in darkness, so when a traumatic assault takes place in broad daylight, as in this scene from *Bonnie and Clyde*, the effect is doubly scary because it's so unexpected. (Warner Bros.)



**1-12b.** *The Ring Two* (U.S.A., 2005), with Naomi Watts, directed by Hideo Nakata.

The birds-eye angle positions the camera directly above the subject, looking downward. This shot from *The Ring Two* reduces the character to utter helplessness: She's totally vulnerable and dominated from above. (DreamWorks Pictures)







**1–13a.** *Halloween: The Curse of Michael Myers* (U.S.A., 1995), with George Wilbur, directed by Joe Chappelle.

Low angles can make characters seem threatening and powerful, for they loom above the camera—and us—like towering giants. We are collapsed in a position of maximum vulnerability—pinned to the ground, dominated. (*Dimension Films*)

**1–13b.** *Batman Begins* (U.S.A., 2005), with Christian Bale, directed by Christopher Nolan.

The photo from *Batman Begins* is an extreme low-angle shot, taken from the ground floor of a multistoried building. Batman descends from above, like an ebony-winged god from the heavens. As in most extreme angles, the content of the shot is transformed into an almost abstract design, forcing us to adjust our spatial orientation. This shot is deliberately meant to be disorienting. (*Warner Bros.*)





avoid this type of camera **setup**. In certain contexts, however, this angle can be highly expressive. In effect, bird's-eye shots permit us to hover above a scene like all-powerful gods. The people photographed seem antlike and insignificant.

Ordinary *high-angle shots* are not so extreme, and therefore not so disorienting. The camera is placed on a **crane**, or some natural high promontory, but the sense of spectator omnipotence is not overwhelming. High angles give a viewer a sense of a general overview, but not necessarily one implying destiny or fate. High angles reduce the height of the objects photographed and usually include the ground or floor as background. Movement is slowed down: This angle tends to be ineffective for conveying a sense of speed, useful for suggesting tediousness. The importance of setting or environment is increased: The locale often seems to swallow people. High angles reduce the importance of a subject. A person seems harmless and insignificant photographed from above. This angle is also effective for conveying a character's self-contempt.

1–14. *How Green Was My Valley* (U.S.A., 1941), cinematography by Arthur Miller, directed by John Ford.

*Lyricism* is a vague but indispensable critical term emphasizing emotional intensity and a sensuous richness of expression. Derived from the word *lyre*, a harplike stringed instrument, lyricism is most often associated with music and poetry. Lyricism in movies also suggests a rhapsodic exuberance. Though lyrical qualities can be independent of subject matter, at its best, lyricism is a stylistic externalization of the scene's emotional content. John Ford was one of the supreme masters of the big studio era, a visual lyricist of the first rank. He disliked overt emotions in his movies. He preferred conveying feelings through forms. Stylized lighting effects and formal compositions such as this invariably embody intense emotions. "Pictures, not words, should tell the story," Ford insisted. (Twentieth Century Fox)





1–15. *12 Angry Men* (U.S.A., 1957), with (standing, left to right) E.G. Marshall, Henry Fonda, and Lee J. Cobb, directed by Sidney Lumet.

Sidney Lumet has always been a director who's acutely aware of how technique can shape content. He insists that technique should be the servant of content. Most of this movie takes place in the confined quarters of a jury room, as twelve male jurors try to come to a decision about a murder trial. "As the picture unfolded," Lumet has written, "I wanted the room to seem smaller and smaller." As the conflict between the jurors grows more intense, Lumet shifted to increasingly longer lenses, thus reinforcing the sense of entrapment. His strategy also included a gradual shift in angles:

I shot the first third of the movie above eye level, and then, by lowering the camera, shot the second third at eye level, and the last third from below eye level. In that way, toward the end, the ceiling began to appear. Not only were the walls closing in, the ceiling was as well. The sense of increasing claustrophobia did a lot to raise the tension of the last part of the movie.

See also *Making Movies*, by Sidney Lumet (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), one of the best practical discussions of how big budget movies are actually made, including the commercial as well as artistic issues involved. (*United Artists*)

Some filmmakers avoid angles because they're too manipulative and judgmental. In the movies of the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, the camera is usually placed four feet from the floor—as if an observer were viewing the events seated Japanese style. Ozu treated his characters as equals; his approach discourages us from viewing them either condescendingly or sentimentally. For the most part, they are ordinary people, decent and conscientious. But Ozu lets them reveal themselves. He believed that value judgments are implied through the use of angles, and he kept his camera neutral and dispassionate. Eye-level shots permit us to make up our own minds about what kind of people are being presented.

*Low angles* have the opposite effect of high. They increase height and thus are useful for suggesting verticality. More practically, they increase a short

actor's height. Motion is speeded up, and in scenes of violence especially, low angles capture a sense of confusion. Environment is usually minimized in low angles, and often the sky or a ceiling is the only background. Psychologically, low angles heighten the importance of a subject. The figure looms threateningly over the spectator, who is made to feel insecure and dominated. A person photographed from below inspires fear and awe (1–13). For this reason, low angles are often used in propaganda films or in scenes depicting heroism.

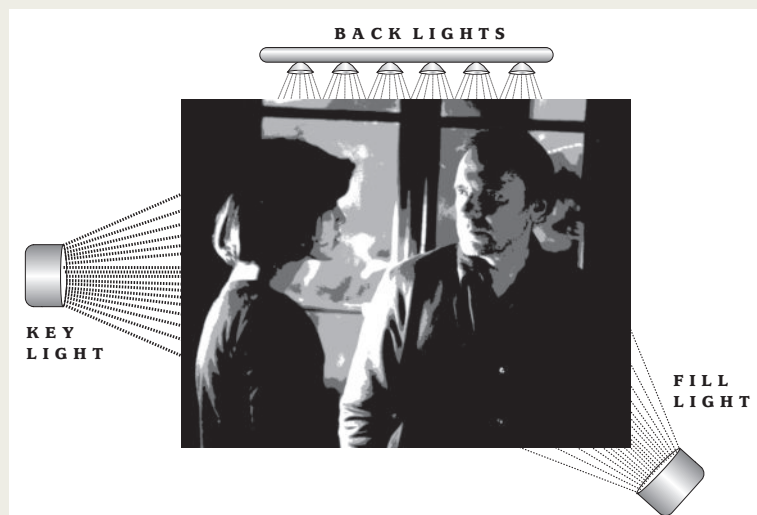
An *oblique angle* involves a lateral tilt of the camera. When the image is projected, the horizon is skewed. Characters photographed at an oblique angle will look as though they're about to fall to one side. This angle is sometimes used for **point-of-view shots**—to suggest the imbalance of a drunk, for example. Psychologically, oblique angles suggest tension, transition, and impending movement. The natural horizontal and vertical lines of a scene are converted into unstable diagonals. Oblique angles are not used often, for they can disorient a viewer. In scenes depicting violence, however, they can be effective in capturing precisely this sense of visual anxiety.

## LIGHT AND DARK



Generally speaking, the **cinematographer** (who is also known as the director of photography, or D.P.) is responsible for arranging and controlling the lighting of a film and the quality of the photography. Usually the cinematographer executes the specific or general instructions of the director. The illumination of most movies is seldom a casual matter, for lights can be used with pinpoint accuracy. Through the use of spotlights, which are highly selective in their focus and intensity, a director can guide the viewer's eyes to any area of the photographed image. Motion picture lighting is seldom static, for even the slightest movement of the camera or the subject can cause the lighting to shift. Movies take so long to complete, primarily because of the enormous complexities involved in lighting each new shot. The cinematographer must make allowances for every movement within a continuous **take**. Each different color, shape, and texture reflects or absorbs differing amounts of light. If an image is photographed in depth, an even greater complication is involved, for the lighting must also be in depth.

There are a number of different styles of lighting. Usually designated as a lighting *key*, the style is geared to the theme and mood of a film, as well as its **genre**. Comedies and musicals, for example, tend to be lit in **high key**, with bright, even illumination and few conspicuous shadows. Tragedies and melodramas are usually lit in **high contrast**, with harsh shafts of lights and dramatic streaks of blackness. Mysteries, thrillers, and gangster films are generally in **low key**, with diffused shadows and atmospheric pools of light (1–16). Each lighting key is only an approximation, and some images consist of a combination of lighting styles—a low-key background with a few high-contrast elements in the foreground, for example. Movies shot in studios are generally more stylized



1–16. *Red* (France/Poland/Switzerland, 1994), with Irene Jacob and Jean-Louis Trintignant, cinematography by Piotr Sobocinski, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski.

During the Hollywood big studio era, cinematographers developed the technique of **three-point lighting**, which is still widely practiced throughout the world. With three-point lighting, the **key light** is the primary source of illumination. This light creates the **dominant** of an image—that area that first attracts our eye because it contains the most compelling contrast, usually of light and shadow. Generally, the dominant is also the area of greatest dramatic interest, the shot’s focal point of action, either physical or psychological. **Fill lights**, which are less intense than the key, soften the harshness of the main light source, revealing subsidiary details that would otherwise be hidden by shadow. The **backlights** separate the foreground figures from their setting, heightening the illusion of three-dimensional depth in the image. Three-point methods tend to be most expressive with low-key lighting such as this. On the other hand, when a shot is bathed with high-key illumination, the three sources of light are more equally distributed over the surface of the image, and hence are more bland photographically. (Miramax Films)



and theatrical, whereas location photography tends to use available illumination, with a more natural style of lighting.

Lights and darks have had symbolic connotations since the dawn of humanity. The Bible is filled with light–dark symbolism. Rembrandt and Caravaggio used light–dark contrasts for psychological purposes as well. In general, artists have used darkness to suggest fear, evil, the unknown. Light usually suggests security, virtue, truth, joy. Because of these conventional symbolic associations, some filmmakers deliberately reverse light–dark expectations (1–12a). Hitchcock’s movies attempt to jolt viewers by exposing their shallow sense of security. He staged many of his most violent scenes in the glaring light.

Lighting can be used realistically or expressionistically. The realist tends to favor **available lighting**, at least in exterior scenes. Even out of doors, however, most filmmakers use some lamps and reflectors, either to augment the natural light or, on bright days, to soften the harsh contrasts produced by the sun. With the aid of special **lenses** and more light-sensitive film stocks, some directors have managed to dispense with artificial lighting completely. Available lighting tends to produce a documentary look in the film image, a grainy texture, and an absence of tonal balance. For interior shots, realists tend to prefer images with an obvious light source—a window or a lamp. Or they often use a diffused kind of lighting with no artificial, strong contrasts. In short, the realist doesn’t use conspicuous lighting unless its source is dictated by the context.

Formalists use light less literally. They are guided by its symbolic implications and will often stress these qualities by deliberately distorting natural light patterns. A face lighted from below almost always appears sinister, even if the actor assumes a totally neutral expression. Similarly, an obstruction placed in front of a light source can assume frightening implications, for it tends to threaten our sense of safety. On the other hand, in some contexts, especially in exterior shots, a silhouette effect can be soft and romantic.

When a face is obviously lighted from above, a certain angelic quality, known as the halo effect, is the result. “Spiritual” lighting of this type tends to border on the cliché, however. **Backlighting**, which is a kind of semisilhouetting, is soft and ethereal. Love scenes are often photographed with a halo effect around the heads of the lovers to give them a romantic aura. Backlighting is especially evocative when used to highlight blonde hair (1–20a).

Through the use of spotlights, an image can be composed of violent contrasts of lights and darks. The surface of such images seems disfigured, torn up. The formalist director uses such severe contrasts for psychological and thematic purposes (1–18).

By deliberately permitting too much light to enter the aperture of the camera, a filmmaker can overexpose an image—producing a glaring flood of light over the entire surface of the picture. **Overexposure** has been most effectively used in nightmare and fantasy sequences. Sometimes this technique can suggest a kind of horrible publicity, a sense of emotional exaggeration.



**1-17a.** *Double Indemnity* (U.S.A., 1944), with Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, directed by Billy Wilder.

*Film noir* (literally, black cinema) is a style defined primarily in terms of light—or the lack of it. This style typified a variety of American genres in the 1940s and early 1950s. Noir is a world of night and shadows. Its milieu is almost exclusively urban. The style is profuse in images of dark streets, cigarette smoke swirling in dimly lit cocktail lounges, and symbols of fragility, such as windowpanes, sheer clothing, glasses, and mirrors. Motifs of entrapment abound: alleys, tunnels, subways, elevators, and train cars. Often the settings are locations of transience, like cheap rented rooms, piers, bus terminals, and railroad yards. The images are rich in sensuous textures, like neon-lit streets, windshields streaked with mud, and shafts of light streaming through windows of lonely rooms. Characters are imprisoned behind ornate lattices, grillwork, drifting fog and smoke. Visual designs

emphasize harsh lighting contrasts, jagged shapes, and violated surfaces. The tone of film noir is fatalistic and paranoid. It's suffused with pessimism, emphasizing the darker aspects of the human condition. Its themes characteristically revolve around violence, lust, greed, betrayal, and depravity. (Paramount Pictures)

**1-17b.** *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (U.S.A., 2005), with Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer, written and directed by Shane Black.

Film noir has remained popular even up to the present, though often with a revisionist twist. *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, for example, contains the requisite noir lighting style, the seamy Los Angeles milieu of crime and deception, the fatalistic voice-over narration, and an occasional corpse that needs to be discreetly disposed of. The revisionist angle is the film's black comedy, including the private eye Perry van Shrike (Kilmer), AKA "Gay Perry," who's ruthless, tough, and—you guessed it—gay. (Warner Brothers)





**1-18.** *The Return of the Jedi Special Edition* (U.S.A., 1997), directed by Richard Marquand. High-contrast lighting is aggressively theatrical, infusing the photographed materials with a sense of tension and visual anguish. This dueling sequence is rendered more dynamic by the jagged knife blades of light that pierce the pervasive darkness. High-contrast lighting is typical of such genres as crime films, melodramas, thrillers, and mysteries. The lack of light in such movies symbolizes the unknown, deceptive surfaces, evil itself. (LucasFilm, Ltd.)

**1-19.** *The Man Who Wasn't There* (U.S.A., 2001), with James Gandolfini, written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen.

Set in 1949, this movie is in black and white rather than in color, a tribute to the post-World War II style of film noir. As the Coen brothers pointed out, the setting and story are indebted to the world of James M. Cain, the author of the novel, *Double Indemnity*. Cinematographer Roger Deakins said: "I love black and white—it can be very expressive. Color can sometimes make things too pretty." Usually Deakins used only a few large light sources, sometimes from unusual positions, to heighten the sleazy milieu of crime, sexual infidelity, and mendacity. Note how the lighting from below in this shot produces a creepy effect: This is not a man you'd want to do business with. (USA Films)







**1-20a.** *Braveheart* (U.S.A., 1995), with Sophie Marceau and Mel Gibson, directed by Gibson. (Paramount Pictures)

Art historians often distinguish between a “painterly” and a “linear” style, a distinction that’s also useful in the photographic arts. A **painterly** style is soft-edged, sensuous, and romantic, best typified by the Impressionist landscapes of Claude Monet and the voluptuous figure paintings of Pierre Auguste Renoir. Line is deemphasized: Colors and textures shimmer in a hazily defined, radiantly illuminated environment. On the other hand, a **linear** style emphasizes drawing, sharply defined edges, and the supremacy of line over color and texture. In the field of painting, a linear style typifies such artists as Sandro Botticelli and the French classicist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres.

Movies can also be photographed in a painterly or linear style, depending on the lighting, the lenses, and filters. The shot from *Braveheart* might almost have been painted by Renoir. Cinematographer John Toll used soft focus lenses and warm “natural” backlighting (creating a halo effect around the characters’ heads) to produce an intensely romantic lyricism. Wyler’s post-World War II masterpiece, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, was photographed by the great Gregg Toland. Its linear style is austere, deglamourized, shot in razor-sharp deep-focus. It was a style suited to the times. The postwar era was a period of disillusionment, sober reevaluations, and very few sentimental illusions. The high-key cinematography is polished, to be sure, but it’s also simple, matter-of-fact, the invisible servant of a serious subject matter.

**1-20b.** *The Best Years of Our Lives* (U.S.A., 1946), with Harold Russell, Teresa Wright, Dana Andrews, Myrna Loy, Hoagy Carmichael (standing), and Fredric March; directed by William Wyler. (RKO).







Color in film didn't become commercially widespread until the 1940s. There were many experiments in color before this period, however. Some of Méliès's movies, for example, were painted by hand in assembly line fashion, with each painter responsible for coloring a minute area of the filmstrip. The original version of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was printed on various tinted stocks to suggest different moods: The burning of Atlanta was tinted red, the night scenes blue, the exterior love scenes pale yellow.

Sophisticated film color was developed in the 1930s, but for many years a major problem was its tendency to prettify everything. If color enhanced a sense of beauty—in a musical or a historical extravaganza—the effects were often appropriate. Thus, the best feature films of the early years of color were usually those with artificial or exotic settings. Realistic dramas were thought to be unsuitable vehicles for color. The earliest color processes tended also to emphasize garishness, and often special consultants had to be called in to tone down the color schemes of costumes, makeup, and decor.

Furthermore, each color process tended to specialize in a certain base hue—red, blue, or yellow, usually—whereas other colors of the spectrum were somewhat distorted. It was well into the 1950s before these problems were resolved. Compared with the subtle color perceptions of the human eye, however, and despite the apparent precision of most present-day color processing, cinematic color is still a relatively crude approximation.

The most famous color films tend to be expressionistic. Michelangelo Antonioni's attitude was fairly typical: "It is necessary to intervene in a color film, to take away the usual reality and replace it with the reality of the moment." In *Red Desert* (photographed by Carlo Di Palma), Antonioni spray-painted natural locales to emphasize internal psychological states. Industrial wastes, river pollution, marshes, and large stretches of terrain were painted gray to suggest the ugliness of contemporary industrial society and the heroine's drab, wasted existence. Whenever red appears in the movie, it suggests sexual passion. Yet the red—like the loveless sexuality—is an ineffective coverup of the pervasive gray.

Color tends to be a subconscious element in film. It's strongly emotional in its appeal, expressive and atmospheric rather than intellectual. Psychologists have discovered that most people actively attempt to interpret the lines of a composition, but they tend to accept color passively, permitting it to suggest moods rather than objects. Lines are associated with nouns; color with adjectives. Line is sometimes thought to be masculine; color feminine. Both lines and colors suggest meanings, then, but in somewhat different ways.

Since earliest times, visual artists have used color for symbolic purposes. Color symbolism is probably culturally acquired, though its implications are surprisingly similar in otherwise differing societies. In general, cool colors (blue, green, violet) tend to suggest tranquility, aloofness, and serenity. Cool colors also have a tendency to recede in an image. Warm colors (red, yellow, orange) suggest aggressiveness, violence, and stimulation. They tend to come forward in most images.



**1-21a. *American Beauty* (U.S.A., 1999), with Kevin Spacey and Mena Suvari, directed by Sam Mendes.**

Red is a color that's often linked with sex, but the dramatic context determines whether the red (and the sex) is seductive or repellent. In this film, the unhappily married protagonist (Spacey) escapes the banality of his suburban hell by fantasizing about a flirtatious teenager

(Suvari), a friend of his daughter. He often imagines her nude, covered with red rose petals—a startling metaphor of his fiercely aroused sexuality, his reawakening manhood. (*DreamWorks Pictures*)

**1-21b. *Savage Nights* (France, 1993), with Cyril Collard and Romane Bohringer, directed by Collard.**

But red is also the color of danger. Of violence. Of blood. Blood is a major transmitter of HIV, a precursor of AIDS. This movie explores the sadomasochistic behavior of an HIV-positive bisexual (Collard) who has unprotected sex with two lovers, including Bohringer. Maybe she's color blind. (*Gramercy Pictures*)







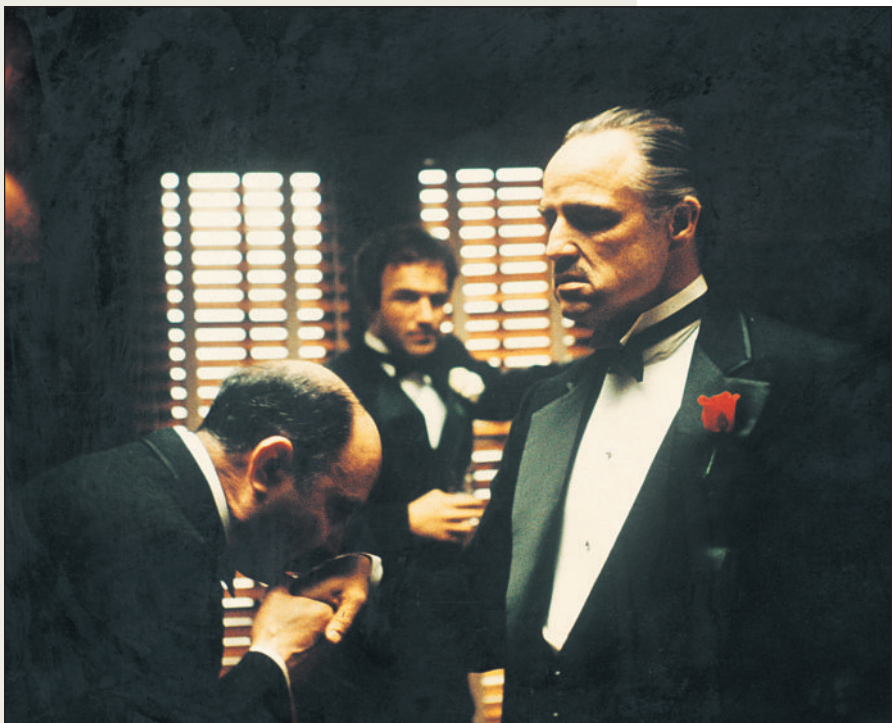
**1-22a.** *The Age of Innocence* (U.S.A., 1993), with Michelle Pfeiffer and Daniel Day-Lewis, directed by Martin Scorsese.

Bright colors tend to be cheerful, so directors often desaturate them, especially if the subject matter is sober or grim. Based on the great American novel by Edith Wharton, this movie explores a forbidden love among New York's upper crust in the 1870s. The film's images seem almost washed in sepia, like faded photos. The colors are tastefully subdued, correct, almost repressed, reflecting the conservative values of the society itself. (Columbia Pictures)

**1-22b.** *The Godfather* (U.S.A., 1972), with Marlon Brando (red rose), directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

*The Godfather* was photographed by the great Gordon Willis, who is famous for his low-key lighting magic. The colors are not only subdued, they're suffocating in airless dark rooms. In this shadowy world, only an occasional wisp of color is allowed to escape—a vibrant red rose, pale yellow light filtering discreetly through the blinds, a few splotches of mottled flesh tones. The rest is darkness. (Paramount Pictures)

*continued* ►





1-22c. *Life Is Beautiful* (Italy, 1998), with Roberto Benigni, directed by Benigni.

This movie begins as a slapstick comedy, and the colors are warm and sunny, typical of Mediterranean settings. But as the Nazi Holocaust spreads southward, our hero, an Italian Jew (Benigni), is arrested and shipped to a German concentration camp by rail (pictured). The colors begin to pale. Once inside the death camp, virtually all the color is drained from the images. Only a few faded flickers of skin tones occasionally punctuate the ashen pallor of the camp and its prisoners.

(Miramax Films)

Black-and-white photography in a color film is sometimes used for symbolic purposes. Some filmmakers alternate whole episodes in black and white with entire sequences in color. The problem with this technique is its corny symbolism. The jolting black-and-white sequences are too obviously “significant” in the most arty sense. A more effective variation is simply not to use too much color, to let black and white predominate. In De Sica’s *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, which is set in Fascist Italy, the early portions of the movie are richly resplendent in shimmering golds, reds, and almost every shade of green. As political repression becomes more brutal, these colors almost imperceptibly begin to wash out, until near the end of the film the images are dominated by whites, blacks, and blue-grays. A similar technique is used in *Life Is Beautiful* (1-22c).

In the 1980s, a new computer technology was developed, allowing black-and-white movies to be “colorized”—a process that provoked a howl of protest from most film artists and critics. The colorized versions of some genres, like period films, musicals, and other forms of light entertainment, are not damaged too seriously by this process, but the technique is a disaster in carefully photographed black-and-white films, like *Citizen Kane*, with its **film noir** lighting style and brilliant deep-focus photography (see Chapter 12, “Synthesis: *Citizen Kane*”).

Colorization also throws off the compositional balance of some shots, creating new **dominants**. In the shot from *Dark Victory* (1-23c), for example, the dominant is Brent’s blue suit, which is irrelevant to the dramatic context. In the original black-and-white version, Davis is the dominant, her dark outfit contrasting with the white fireplace that frames her figure. Distracting visual dominants undercut the dramatic impact of such scenes. We keep thinking Brent’s suit *must* be important. It is, but only to the computer.



**1-23a.** *johns* (U.S.A., 1996), with David Arquette and Lukas Haas, directed by Scott Silver.

Color clichés. In order to avoid being predictable, imaginative filmmakers often torpedo popular stereotypes by using color antiromantically. Movies set in Hollywood usually emphasize its lush glamour, but *johns* explores the world of two street prostitutes (pictured) as they crisscross the dusty side streets of an unfamiliar Hollywood, bleached under the scorching sun. This is not the Tinseltown of tourist brochures but the real-life boulevard of broken dreams. In this photo, the predominant color is white—hot, glaring, pitiless. Note the almost total absence of green vegetation. (First Look Pictures)



**1-23b.** *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Britain, 1994), with Andie MacDowell and Hugh Grant, directed by Mike Newell.

This romantic comedy goes to extreme lengths to avoid being sappy and sentimental. Hence this weird concluding scene of love triumphant at last, which takes place in a cold London downpour, blue with shivers and shudders and chill. (Gramercy Pictures)

**1-23c.** *Dark Victory* (U.S.A., 1939), with Bette Davis and George Brent, directed by Edmund Goulding, “colorized” by Turner Entertainment. “Tell me the truth now. Do you think this suit is *too* blue? Not blue enough?” (Warner Bros./Turner Entertainment)



## LENSES, FILTERS AND STOCKS

Because the camera's lens is a crude mechanism compared to the human eye, some of the most striking effects in a movie image can be achieved through the distortions of the photographic process itself. Especially with regard to size and distance, the camera lens doesn't make mental adjustments but records things literally. For example, whatever is placed closest to the camera's lens will appear larger than an object at a greater distance. Hence, a coffee cup can totally obliterate a human being if the cup is in front of the lens and the human is standing at long-shot range.

Realist filmmakers tend to use normal, or standard, lenses to produce a minimum of distortion. These lenses photograph subjects more or less as they are perceived by the human eye. Formalist filmmakers often prefer lenses and **filters** that intensify given qualities and suppress others. Cloud formations, for example, can be exaggerated threateningly or softly diffused, depending on what kind of lens or filter is used. Different shapes, colors, and lighting intensities can be radically altered through the use of specific optical modifiers. There are literally dozens of different lenses, but most of them are subsumed under three major categories: those in the standard (nondistorted) range, the telephoto lenses, and the wide angles.

1-24. *Starman* (U.S.A., 1984), with Karen Allen and Jeff Bridges, directed by John Carpenter. Not every shot in a movie is photographed in the same style. Many of the earlier portions of this sci-fi film are photographed in a plain, functional style. After the earthling protagonist (Allen) falls in love with an appealing and hunky alien (Bridges), the photographic style becomes more romantic. The city's lights are etherealized by the shimmering **soft-focus** photography. The halo effect around the lovers' heads reinforces the air of enchantment. The gently falling snowflakes conspire to enhance the magical moment. These aren't just lovers, these are soul mates. (Columbia Pictures)





**1–25a. *Aliens* (U.S.A., 1986),**

*with Sigourney Weaver and Carrie Henn, directed by James Cameron.*

Although the futuristic setting of this sci-fi film contains some supernatural elements, it uses color in a rigorously “realistic” manner. *Aliens* is a testosterone world of cold, hard surfaces, heavy-metal technology, and blue-gray fluorescence. This is not a place for children and other gentle creatures. The colors are radically muted, mostly military tans and drab earth colors. Only the red filter adds a note of alarm and urgency. (Twentieth Century Fox)



**1–25b. *The Dancer Upstairs* (U.S.A./Spain, 2003),**

*with Javier Bardem and Juan Diego Botto, directed by John Malkovich.*

The blue filter in this detective thriller is used to cool down the Latin American locale and to lend the story a sinister air, a sense of pervasive sadness. (Fox Searchlight)



The *telephoto lens* is often used to get close-ups of objects from extreme distances. For example, no cinematographer is likely to want to get close enough to a lion to photograph a close-up with a standard lens. In cases such as these, the telephoto is used, thus guaranteeing the safety of the cinematographer while still producing the necessary close-up. Telephotos also allow cinematographers to work discreetly. In crowded city locations, for example, passersby are likely to stare at a movie camera. The telephoto permits the cinematographer to remain hidden—in a truck, for example—while he or she shoots close shots through a windshield or window. In effect, the lens works like a telescope, and because of its long focal length, it is sometimes called a *long lens*.

Telephoto lenses produce a number of side effects that are sometimes exploited by directors for symbolic use. Most long lenses are in sharp focus on one distance plane only. Objects placed before or beyond that distance blur, go out of focus—an expressive technique, especially to the formalist filmmaker (1–26a). The longer the lens, the more sensitive it is to distances; in the case of extremely long lenses, objects placed a mere few inches away from the selected focal plane can be out of focus. This deliberate blurring of planes in the background, foreground, or both can produce some striking photographic and atmospheric effects.

The focal distance of long lenses can usually be adjusted while shooting, and thus, the director is able to neutralize planes and guide the viewer's eye to various distances in a sequence—a technique called **rack focusing**, or **selective focusing**. In *The Graduate*, director Mike Nichols used a slight focus shift instead of a cut when he wanted the viewer to look first at the young heroine, who then blurs out of focus, then at her mother, who is standing a few feet off in a doorway. The focus-shifting technique suggests a cause–effect relationship and parallels the heroine's sudden realization that her boyfriend's secret mistress is her own mother. In *The French Connection*, William Friedkin used selective focus in a sequence showing a criminal under surveillance. He remains in sharp focus while the city crowds of his environment are an undifferentiated blur. At strategic moments in the sequence, Friedkin shifts the focus plane from the criminal to the dogged detective who is tailing him in the crowd.

Long lenses also flatten images, decreasing the sense of distance between depth planes. Two people standing yards apart might look inches away when photographed with a telephoto lens. With very long lenses, distance planes are so compressed that the image can resemble a flat surface of abstract patterns. When anything moves toward or away from the camera in such shots, the mobile object doesn't seem to be moving at all. In *Marathon Man*, the hero (Dustin Hoffman) runs desperately toward the camera, but because of the flattening of the long lens, he seems almost to be running in place rather than moving toward his destination.

The *wide-angle lenses*, also called **short lenses**, have short focal lengths and wide angles of view. These are the lenses used in deep-focus shots, for they preserve a sharpness of focus on virtually all distance planes. The distortions involved in short lenses are both linear and spatial. The wider the angle, the



more lines and shapes tend to warp, especially at the edges of the image. Distances between various depth planes are also exaggerated with these lenses: Two people standing a foot away from each other can appear yards apart in a wide-angle image, like the side rearview mirror of an auto.

Movement toward or away from the camera is exaggerated when photographed with a short lens. Two or three ordinary steps can seem like unhumanly lengthy strides—an effective technique when a director wants to emphasize a character's strength, dominance, or ruthlessness. The fish-eye lens is the most extreme wide-angle modifier. It creates such severe distortions that the lateral portions of the screen seem reflected in a sphere, as though we were looking through a crystal ball.

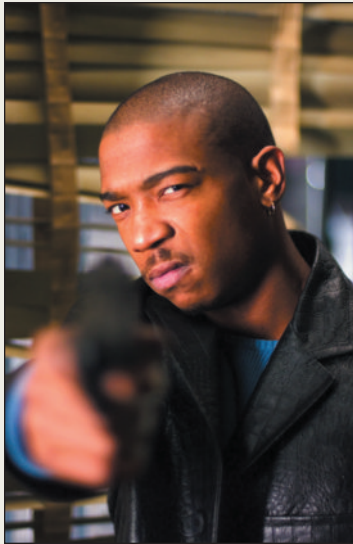
Lenses and filters can be used for purely cosmetic purposes—to make an actor or actress taller, slimmer, younger, or older. Josef von Sternberg sometimes covered his lens with a translucent silk stocking to give his images a gauzy, romantic aura. A few glamour actresses beyond a certain age even had clauses in their contracts stipulating that only beautifying soft-focus lenses could be used for their close-ups. These optical modifiers eliminate small facial wrinkles and skin blemishes.

There are even more filters than there are lenses. Some trap light and refract it in such a way as to produce a diamondlike sparkle in the image. Many filters are used to suppress or heighten certain colors. Color filters can be especially striking in exterior scenes. Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (photographed by Vilmos Zsigmond) uses green and blue filters for many of the exterior scenes, yellow and orange for interiors. These filters emphasize the bitter cold of the winter setting and the communal warmth of the rooms inside the primitive buildings.

Though there are a number of different kinds of film stocks, most of them fall within the two basic categories: fast and slow. **Fast stock** is highly sensitive to light and in some cases can register images with no illumination except what's available on location, even in nighttime sequences (1–27). **Slow stock** is relatively insensitive to light and requires as much as ten times more illumination than fast stocks. Traditionally, slow stocks are capable of capturing colors precisely, without washing them out.

Fast stocks are commonly associated with documentary movies, for with their great sensitivity to light, these stocks can reproduce images of events while they're actually occurring. The documentarist is able to photograph people and places without having to set up cumbersome lights. Because of this light sensitivity, fast stocks produce a grainy image in which lines tend to be fuzzy and colors tend to wash out. In a black-and-white film, lights and darks contrast sharply and many variations of gray can be lost.

Ordinarily, technical considerations such as these would have no place in a book of this sort, but the choice of stock can produce considerable psychological and aesthetic differences in a movie. Since the early 1960s, many fiction filmmakers have switched to fast stocks to give their images a documentary sense of urgency.



**1-26. Six Degrees of Exaggeration.**

The lens of each of these six shots provides a commentary on the relationship of the characters to their surroundings.

**1-26a. *Assault on Precinct 13* (U.S.A., 2004), with Ja Rule, directed by Jean-François Richet.**

Some telephoto lenses are so precise they can focus on a thin slice of action that's only a few inches deep. Note how the gun and Ja Rule's hand are radically blurred. So is the background behind him. Our eyes are forced to concentrate on the face of the character during a decisive moment of his life. *(Rogue Pictures Release)*



**1-26b. *Cinderella Man* (U.S.A., 2005), with Russell Crowe and Renée Zellweger, directed by Ron Howard.**

Telephoto lenses are often used to enhance the lyrical potential of an image. In this shot, the blurry background renders it supremely irrelevant to what matters most to these characters—each other. The telephoto lens, in effect, is a silent declaration of their total devotion. *(Universal Studios)*



**1-26c. *Dark Blue* (U.S.A., 2003), with Michael Michele and Ving Rhames, directed by Ron Shelton.**

A high-ranking police officer must break off his adulterous affair with his lover, a policewoman who is his subordinate. The lens forces us to focus on his feelings, while she is nearly obliterated by the soft focus, hardly worthy of our notice. If Shelton wanted to emphasize her feelings, Rhames would be in soft focus, and she in sharp. If the director wanted to stress the equality of their emotions, he would have used a wide angle lens, thus rendering them both in sharp focus. *(United Artists)*

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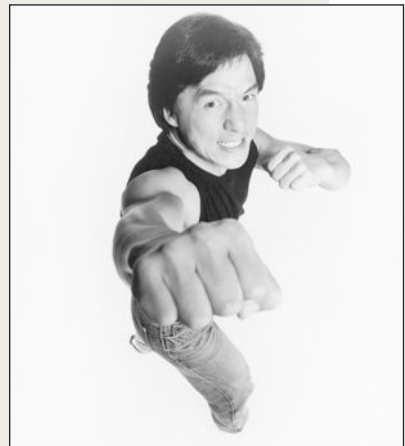
**1–26d.** *Schindler's List* (U.S.A., 1993), with Liam Neeson (outstretched arms), directed by Steven Spielberg.

Wide-angle lenses are used whenever deep-focus photography is called for. Objects a few feet from the lens as well as those in the “depth” of the background are in equal focus, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the visual planes. This movie deals with a German industrialist (Neeson) who saved the lives of hundreds of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. Because deep focus allows for the repetition of visual motifs into infinity, Spielberg is able to suggest that Jews all over Europe were being herded in a similar manner, but their fate was not so lucky as Schindler's Jews. (Universal Pictures)



**1–26e.** *Publicity photo of Rumble in the Bronx* (U.S.A., 1996), with Jackie Chan, directed by Stanley Tong.

Extreme wide-angle lenses exaggerate distances between depth planes, a useful symbolic technique. As distorted by the wide-angle lens, Chan's fist is nearly as large as his head and his feet seem to be standing in another county. (New Line Cinema)



**1–26f.** *A Cinderella Story* (U.S.A., 2004), with Hillary Duff and Chad Michael Murray, directed by Mark Rosman.

Check out the lights in the background. A shrewdly chosen filter makes them look blurry, floating dreamily like woozy fireflies. Do we need to hear the dialogue to know that these two are falling for each other? Do we need to be told that the movie is a romantic comedy? The filtered photography says it all. (Warner Bros./Gaylord Films)





1-27. *Kids* (U.S.A., 1995), with Yakira Peguero and Leo Fitzpatrick, directed by Larry Clark. Fast film stocks are highly sensitive to light and can record images with no additional illumination except what's available on a set or location—even at night. These stocks tend to produce harsh light–dark contrasts, an absence of details, and images so grainy that they can appear more painterly than linear. Fast stocks are especially effective in fiction films that purport to be realistic and documentarylike, such as this controversial depiction of some urban teenagers and their high-risk sexual practices—AIDS waiting to happen. (Excalibur Films)

## SPECIAL EFFECTS

If William Shakespeare were alive today, he would be enthralled by the ability of computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create fantastic, brave new worlds, where the magical is commonplace. This digital technology, perfected in the 1990s, has revolutionized special effects. Although it's very expensive, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars for only a few minutes of screen time, eventually CGI will save film producers millions.

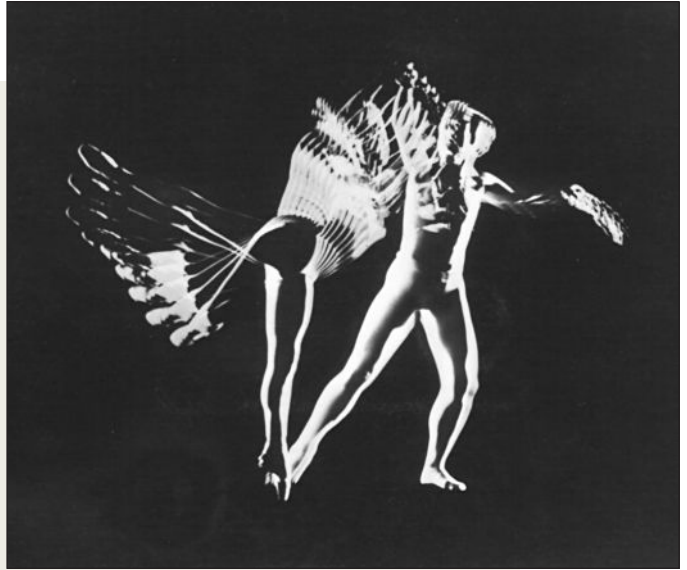
In the past, whole scenes often had to be reshot because of technical glitches. For example, if a modern building or auto appeared in a period film, the scene had to be recut or even rephotographed. Today, such details can be removed digitally. So can a microphone that accidentally dips into the frame. Even sweat on an actor's face can be effaced by an F/X technician.

Computer-generated images can be stored for future use, when they can be digitally altered with new costumes, new backgrounds or foregrounds, or with a totally different atmosphere, as in the magical landscapes in *The Lord of*



**1-28. *Pas De Deux* (Canada, 1968),**  
*directed by Norman McLaren.*

Prior to the perfection of computer generated imagery, filmmakers relied primarily on a machine called the optical printer to create most special effects (or F/X, to use the industry lingo). For example, this film used a technique called chronophotography, in which the movements of two dancers are staggered and overlaid to produce a stroboscopic effect: As the dancers move, they leave a ghostly imprint on the screen, a haunting visual poetry. Today, the optical printer is virtually obsolete and has been replaced by digital and computer technologies. *(National Film Board of Canada)*



**1-29. *The Matrix* (U.S.A., 1999),** *with Keanu Reeves and Hugo Weaving, written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski.*

A winner of four Academy Awards for technical achievement, *The Matrix*, the first installment of a sci-fi trilogy (1999–2003), was choreographed by the Hong Kong martial arts maven, Yuen Wo Ping. The special effects supervisor was John Gaeta. The trilogy is profuse in gravity-defying stunts like people floating and hovering in the air, running up walls, moving in slow-motion, and levitation fighting. In one scene, a battle is “frozen” while the camera swings around it. The F/X team also devised a technique called “bullet time,” in which characters dodge gunfire in super-slow-motion vacuums. *The Matrix* trilogy is a veritable cornucopia of influences, including comic books, Hong Kong kung fu films, western action films, Eastern mysticism, fairy tales, video games, Japanese *anime* (animation), cyberpunk, computer games, and traditional science fiction movies like *Blade Runner*. The entire enterprise was the brainchild of the Wachowski brothers, who maintained a remarkably unified vision of what they wanted the trilogy to look like. The cast and crew made frequent jokes that the brothers seem joined at the brain. Said actor Keanu Reeves: “They’re one of the most sensitive people I’ve ever met.” *(Warner Bros.)*





**1–30a.** *Multiplicity* (U.S.A., 1996), with (from left to right) Michael Keaton, Michael Keaton, Michael Keaton, and Michael Keaton; directed by Harold Ramis.

The American cinema has always been on the cutting edge of film technology, especially in the area of special effects. Computer-generated images have allowed filmmakers to create fantasy worlds of the utmost realism. In *Multiplicity*, for example, Keaton plays a man who has lost his wife and his job, and must clone himself in order to function effectively. Computer artist Dan Madsen created a film reality that obviously has no counterpart in the outside physical world. Critic Stephen Prince has observed that such technological advancements as computer-generated images have radically undermined the traditional distinctions between realism and formalism in film theory. See Stephen Prince, “True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory,” in *Film Quarterly* (Spring, 1996). (Columbia Pictures)

**1–30b.** Publicity photo of actress Naomi Watts and director Peter Jackson behind the scenes of *King Kong* (U.S.A., 2005).

Naomi Watts’s most important costar, a 25-foot-tall, 8,000-pound silverback gorilla, was nonexistent. He was created with special effects, yet seems extraordinarily lifelike, almost human.



Kong was begotten by computers and blue-screen technology, produced by Weta Digital, Ltd. Joe Letteri, the visual effects supervisor, explained: “We created a system that’s based on emotional states. It depends on us figuring out all the muscles of the face and understanding the correspondence between a human facial system and a gorilla facial system. What that allows us to do is to look at how muscles work together to create believable expressions.” The results were both fantastic and startlingly real—see Figure 11–24b. (Universal Studios)

*the Rings* trilogy. In fact, physical sets don't even have to be constructed in some instances, since images containing the sets can be created on a computer.

Even realistic movies can benefit from this technology. In *Forrest Gump*, a handful of extras were digitally expanded into a cast of thousands. In the ultra-realistic Holocaust drama, *The Pianist*, the events take place during the World War II era, yet director Roman Polanski used CGI for several scenes—the bombed-out ruins of a city street, a character falling from a tall building, aircraft streaking across the skies.

Traditional animation, with its time-consuming, hand-drawn cel images, is being replaced by computers, which produce images that are created digitally, not *à mano*. CGI has produced a new “look” in animation, less detailed, more sculptural, more *plastique*—like the streamlined images of *Shrek* (3-29b), *The Polar Express* (3-27c), and *The Incredibles* (3-28d).

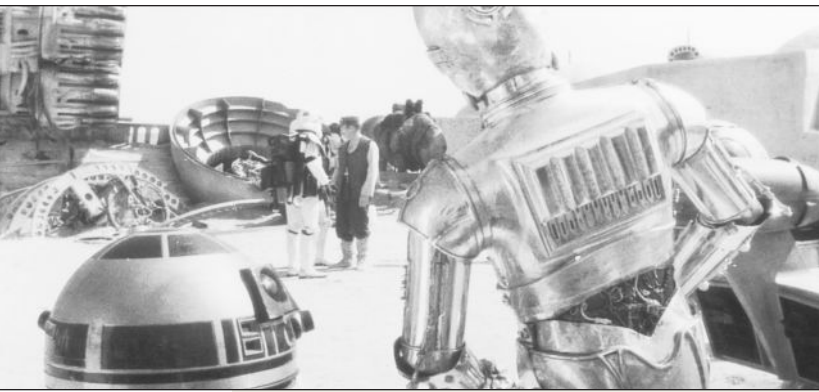
Acting has also been affected by this technology, though not usually in a positive way. In *Star Wars*, for example, actors often performed in front of F/X bluescreens rather than with other actors, who were later digitally added to the shot by computer technicians. Some critics have complained that such acting is often cold and mechanical, with none of the human subtleties that can be found in scenes where performers are actually interacting.

Digital editing is also much easier than traditional methods. Instead of handling a physical filmstrip and making actual cuts, modern editors need only to press a button to cut from one shot to another.

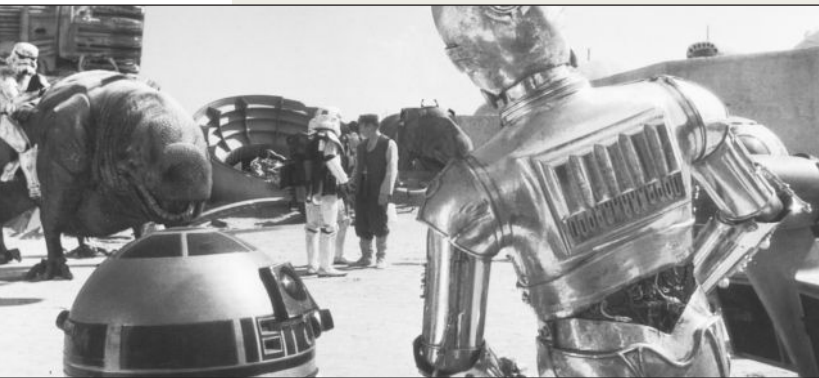
In addition, CGI technology will eventually make film distribution and exhibition cheaper. Today, film prints can cost up to \$2,000 apiece. A mainstream American movie can be shown simultaneously on 2,000 screens, costing \$4 million just for the cost of prints. In the future, movies will be stored on digital disks, like a DVD, and will cost only a few dollars to manufacture. Distributors will also save on shipping fees. Instead of the heavy reels of traditional movies, costing thousands of dollars to ship by bus, plane, or rail, in the future, a lightweight disk will be sent to movie theaters for only a few dollars. Projection equipment will basically consist of a commercial DVD machine, not the cumbersome, expensive, mechanical projectors that have dominated film exhibition for over 100 years.

The biggest danger of this technology, of course, is that it will fall into the hands of moneygrubbing hacks with the artistic sensibilities of gnats. It's already happened. The world's screens are dominated by soulless movies full of sound and fury, signifying nothing: pointless chases, explosions, gratuitous violence, explosions, lots of speed, explosions, and just for good measure, more explosions. The story is usually predictable, the acting bereft of nuance, the sentiments banal. But the special effects are impeccable. In short, film artists interested in F/X materials need to be just as talented as artists in any other style or genre or technology. It's what they do with the technology artistically that counts, not the technology per se.





**1-31a.** *Star Wars* (U.S.A., 1977), written and directed by George Lucas. (Twentieth Century Fox)



**1-31b.** *Star Wars Special Edition* (U.S.A., 1997).

George Lucas's company, Industrial Light & Magic, is still the largest and boldest innovator in the special effects arena. For its 20th anniversary Special Edition, his *Star Wars Trilogy* was remastered digitally. For example, because his budget was limited and special effects were comparatively simple in the original film, the spaceport Mos Eisley was necessarily modest (**a**). In the remastered version (**b**), Mos Eisley is larger and more bustling. The F/X team added new creatures, droids, and characters, making the setting more crowded and dangerous than the original. (Lucasfilm Ltd. and Twentieth Century Fox)



**1-31c.** *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones* (U.S.A., 2002), written and directed by George Lucas.

By the time Lucas made *Attack of the Clones*, he had gone totally digital. He is an enthusiastic champion of the new technology, believing that film will soon be obsolete: "Film has been around for 100 years," he has said, "and no matter what you do, you're going to run celluloid through a bunch of gears. It's gotten more sophisticated over the years, but it'll never get much more than what it is right now. With digital, we're at the very bottom of the medium. This is as bad as it's ever going to be. This is like 1895. In 25, 30 years, it's going to be amazing."

See also Stephen Prince, "The Emergence of Filmic Artifacts: Cinema and Cinematography in the Digital Era," in *Film Quarterly* (Spring 2004). (Lucasfilm Ltd.)

## THE CINEMATOPHAGER

The cinema is a collaborative enterprise, the result of the combined efforts of many artists, technicians, and businesspeople. Because the contributions of these individuals vary from film to film, it's hard to determine who's responsible for what in a movie. Most sophisticated viewers agree that the director is generally the dominant artist in the best movies. The principal collaborators—actors, writers, cinematographers—perform according to the director's unifying sensibility. But directorial dominance is an act of faith. Many films are stamped by the personalities of others—a prestigious **star**, for example, or a skillful editor who manages to make sense out of a director's botched **footage**.

Cinematographers sometimes chuckle sardonically when a director's visual style is praised by critics. Some directors don't even bother looking through the viewfinder and leave such matters as composition, angles, and lenses up to the cinematographer. When directors ignore these important formal elements, they throw away some of their most expressive pictorial opportunities and function more like stage directors, who are concerned with dramatic rather than visual values—that is, with the script and the acting rather than the photographic quality of the image itself.

### 1-32. Twentieth Century Fox publicity photo of Marilyn Monroe (1953).

Cinematographers often comment that the camera “likes” certain individuals and “doesn't like” others, even though these others might be good-looking people in real life. Highly photogenic performers like Marilyn Monroe are rarely uncomfortable in front of the camera. Indeed, they often play to it, ensnaring our attention. Photographer Richard Avedon said of Marilyn, “She understood photography, and she also understood what makes a great photograph—not the technique, but the content. She was more comfortable in front of the camera than away from it.” Philippe Halsman went even further, pointing out that her open mouth and frequently open décolletage were frankly invitational: “She would try to seduce the camera as if it were a human being. . . . She knew that the camera lens was not just a glass eye but a symbol of the eyes of millions of men, so the camera stimulated her strongly.” *(Twentieth Century Fox)*





1–33. *The Emigrants* (Sweden, 1972), with Liv Ullmann and Max von Sydow, photographed and directed by Jan Troell.

If we were to view a scene similar to this in real life, we would probably concentrate most of our attention on the people in the wagon. But there are considerable differences between reality and cinematic realism. Realism is an artistic style. In selecting materials from the chaotic sprawl of reality, the realist filmmaker necessarily eliminates some details and emphasizes others into a structured hierarchy of visual significance. For example, the stone wall in the foreground of this shot occupies more space than the humans. Visually, this dominance suggests that the rocks are more important than the people. The unyielding stone wall symbolizes divisiveness and exclusion—ideas that are appropriate to the dramatic context. If the wall were irrelevant to the theme, Troell would have eliminated it and selected other details from the copiousness of reality—details that would be more pertinent to the dramatic context. (Warner Bros.)

On the other hand, a few cinematographers have been praised for their artistry when in fact the effectiveness of a film's images is largely due to the director's pictorial skills. Hitchcock provided individual frame drawings for most of the shots in his films, a technique called **storyboarding**. His cinematographers framed up according to Hitchcock's precise sketches. Hence, when Hitchcock claimed that he never looked through the viewfinder, he meant that he assumed his cinematographer had followed instructions.

Sweeping statements about the role of the cinematographer are impossible to make, for it varies widely from film to film and from director to director. In actual practice, virtually all cinematographers agree that the style of the photography should be geared to the story, theme, and mood of the film. William Daniels had a prestigious reputation as a glamour photographer at MGM and



for many years was known as “Greta Garbo’s cameraman.” Yet Daniels also shot Erich von Stroheim’s harshly realistic *Greed*, and the cinematographer won an Academy Award for his work in Jules Dassin’s *Naked City*, which is virtually a semidocumentary.

During the big-studio era, most cinematographers believed that the aesthetic elements of a film should be maximized—beautiful pictures with beautiful people was the goal. Today such views are considered rigid and doctrinaire. Sometimes images are even coarsened if such a technique is considered appropriate to the dramatic materials. For example, Vilmos Zsigmond, who photographed *Deliverance*, didn’t want the rugged forest setting to appear too pretty because beautiful visuals would contradict the Darwinian theme of the film. He wanted to capture what Tennyson described as “nature red in tooth and claw.” Accordingly, Zsigmond shot on overcast days as much as possible to eliminate the bright blue skies. He also avoided reflections in the water because they tend to make nature look cheerful and inviting. “You don’t make beautiful compositions just for the sake of making compositions,” cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs has insisted. Content always determines form; form should be the embodiment of content.

“Many times, what you don’t see is much more effective than what you do see,” Gordon Willis has noted. Willis is arguably the most respected of all American cinematographers, a specialist in low-key lighting styles. He photographed all three of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* films—which many traditionalists consider too dark. But Willis was aiming for poetry, not realism. Most of the interior scenes were very dark to suggest an atmosphere of evil and secrecy. A time-honored convention is to make sure an actor’s eyes are always visible, but here too, Willis thought the mafia don (Marlon Brando) would seem more sinister if we *couldn’t* see his eyes, at least while conducting “business” (1–22b).

Willis’s preference for low levels of light has been enormously influential in the contemporary cinema. Unfortunately, many filmmakers today regard low-key lighting as intrinsically more “serious” and “artistic,” whatever the subject matter. These needlessly dark movies are often impenetrably obscure when shown on the television screen in VCR or DVD formats. Conscientious filmmakers often supervise the transfer from film to video because each medium requires different lighting intensities. Generally, low-key images must be lightened for video and DVD.

Some film directors are totally ignorant of the technology of the camera and leave such matters entirely to the cinematographer. Other filmmakers are very sophisticated in the art of the camera. For example, Sidney Lumet, who is best known for directing such realistic New York City dramas as *12 Angry Men*, *The Pawnbroker*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *Serpico*, always makes what he calls a “lens chart” or a “lens plot.” In Lumet’s *Prince of the City*, for instance, the story centers on a Serpicolike undercover cop who is gathering information on police corruption. Lumet used no “normal” lenses in the movie, only extreme telephotos and wide-angle lenses, because he wanted to create an atmosphere of

distrust and paranoia. He wanted the space to be distorted, untrustworthy. “The lens tells the story,” Lumet explained, even though superficially the film’s style is gritty and realistic.

There are some great movies that are photographed competently, but without distinction. Realist directors are especially likely to prefer an unobtrusive style. Many of the works of Luis Buñuel, for example, can only be described as “professional” in their cinematography. Buñuel was rarely interested in formal beauty—except occasionally to mock it. Rollie Totheroh, who photographed most of Chaplin’s works, merely set up his camera and let Chaplin the actor take over. Photographically speaking, there are few memorable shots

**1–34a.** *This Is Elvis* (U.S.A., 1981), with Elvis Presley, directed by Malcolm Leo and others.

Documentaries are often photographed on the run. Cinematographers don’t usually have a chance to augment the lighting, but have to capture the images as best they can under conditions that are almost totally uncontrolled. Many documentaries are photographed with handheld cameras for maximum portability and with fast film stocks, which can register images using only ambient light. The images are valued not for their formal beauty, which is usually negligible (or nonexistent), but for their authenticity and spontaneity. Such images offer us privileged moments of intimacy that are all the more powerful because they’re not faked. They’re the real thing. (Warner Bros.)



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**1-34b. *Traffic* (U.S.A., 2000),  
directed by Steven Soderbergh.**

This movie was shot like a documentary. Director Soderbergh handled the hand-held camera himself, using mostly available light and shooting quickly, as though he were a TV cameraman. The multiple narratives allow us to see the events from several perspectives: a state supreme court justice (Michael Douglas) is appointed to investigate the drug trade, only to discover that his own daughter (Erika Christensen) is an addict (top). A Mexican drug lord is imprisoned, and his pregnant suburban wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones) takes over the business, aided by a sleazy lawyer (Dennis Quaid) (middle). DEA law enforcement officials (Luis Guzman, left, and Don Cheadle, right) confront a high-level drug trafficker (Miguel Ferrer, center) and soon-to-be informer (bottom). Each story has a distinct “look”—a combination of color, filtration, saturation, and contrast, so that the viewer is able to know which story is now on screen. Said Soderbergh: “From the beginning, I wanted this film to feel like it was happening in front of you, which demands a certain aesthetic that doesn’t feel slick and doesn’t feel polished. There is a difference between something that looks caught and something that looks staged. I didn’t want it to be self-consciously sloppy or unkempt, but I wanted it to feel like I was chasing it, that I was finding it as it happened.” (*USA Films*)







1–35a. *Muriel's Wedding* (Australia, 1995), with Toni Collette (with flowers), directed by P. J. Hogan. (Miramax Films)



1–35b. *Soldier* (U.S.A., 1998), with Jason Scott Lee and Kurt Russell, cinematography by David Tattersall, directed by Paul Anderson. (Warner Bros and Morgan Creek Productions)

Cinematography is very important, but it usually can't make or break a movie—only make it better or worse. For example, the low-budget *Muriel's Wedding* was shot mostly on location using available lighting. The photography is adequate, but nothing more. In this shot, for instance, the protagonist (Collette) has the key light on her, but the background is too busy and the depth layers of the image are compressed into an undifferentiated messy blur. Nonetheless, the movie was an international hit and was widely praised by critics, thanks to Collette's endearing performance, a funny script, and Hogan's exuberant direction. No one complained about the lackluster photography.

On the other hand, the cinematography of *Soldier* is ravishing—bold, theatrical, richly textured. Note how the lighted rain (rain has to be illuminated or it won't show up on screen) provides the setting with a dreamlike fish-tank atmosphere. The stylized lighting heightens the outer rim of the men's torsos, emphasizing their sculptural eroticism. This shot alone must have taken many hours to set up. But the movie was a failure, both with the public and with most

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1-35c. *Days of Heaven*  
(U.S.A., 1978), written and  
directed by Terrence Malick.  
(A Paramount Picture)



critics. In short, not all beautifully photographed movies are great. And not all great movies are beautifully photographed. Many of them—especially realistic films—are plain and straightforward. Realists often don't *want* you to notice the photography. They want you to concentrate on *what's* being photographed, not on *how* it's being photographed.

Perhaps an ideal synthesis is found in a movie like *Days of Heaven*. Malick's powerful allegory of human frailty and corruption is written in a spare, poetic idiom. The actors are also first-rate, playing people who are needy and touching in their doomed vulnerability. The film was photographed by Nestor Almendros, who won a well-deserved Oscar for his cinematography. The story is set in the early twentieth century in a lonely wheat-growing region of Texas. Malick wanted the setting to suggest a lush Garden of Eden, a lost paradise. Almendros suggested that virtually the entire movie could be shot during the "magic hour." This is a term used by photographers to denote dusk, roughly the last hour of the day before the sun yields to night. During this fleeting interlude, shadows are soft and elongated, people are lit from the side rather than from above, rimmed with a golden halo, and the entire landscape is bathed in a luminous glow. Naturally, shooting one hour a day was expensive and time-consuming. But they got what they wanted: Whether focusing on a close-up of a locust munching on a stalk of wheat, or an extreme long shot of a rural sunset, the images are rapturous in their lyricism. We feel a sense of poignant loss when the characters must leave this land of milk and honey.

in his films. What makes the images compelling is the genius of Chaplin's acting. This photographic austerity—some would consider it poverty—is especially apparent in those rare scenes when Chaplin is off camera.

But there are far more films in which the *only* interesting or artistic quality is the cinematography. For every great work like Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once*, Leon Shamroy had to photograph four or five bombs of the ilk of *Snow White and the Three Stooges*. Lee Garmes photographed several of von Sternberg's

visually opulent films, but he also was required to shoot *My Friend Irma Goes West*, a piece of garbage.

In this chapter, we've been concerned with visual images largely as they relate to the art and technology of cinematography. But the camera must have materials to photograph—objects, people, settings. Through the manipulation of these materials, the director is able to convey a multitude of ideas and emotions spatially. This arrangement of objects in space is referred to as a director's *mise en scène*—the subject of the following chapter.

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