



KELLY GORDON BRINE

THE ART OF CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

A VISUAL GUIDE TO PLANNING
SHOTS, CUTS AND TRANSITIONS

The Art of Cinematic Storytelling

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*A Visual Guide to Planning Shots,
Cuts, and Transitions*

Kelly Gordon Brine

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For Malle, James, and Eric.

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Introduction

Film has the almost magical ability of being able to create the illusion of three-dimensional action on a flat screen. For more than 100 years audiences have been entranced by film's vivid depiction of events both real and imagined. Even though film's storytelling capabilities have long surpassed those of other art forms, advancements continue to be made. Breakthroughs in computer graphics and motion capture continually expand film's storytelling power by augmenting live action and by creating extraordinarily convincing animated worlds.

Films interweave sound and images in elaborate ways. While dialogue, sound effects, and music all contribute immensely, it's the images that are at the heart of film storytelling. The effectiveness of film's visual storytelling powers is based on four elements. The first and most magical of these is the fact that still images that are shown rapidly create the illusion of realistic three-dimensionality and fluid motion, as suggested by the illustration in Figure 0.1.

The second element of film's visual magic relies on the fact that viewers instinctively find connections and meaning in juxtaposed shots. An example illustrates this: imagine a shot of appetizing food that is immediately followed by a boy's close-up as he looks at something just off-screen. Viewers immediately understand the story: the boy is (1) near the food, (2) looking at it, and (3) he finds it just as appealing as we do. These inferences are made even though the food and the boy do not appear together at the same time or in the same shot. A juxtaposition such as this one has the surprising ability to convey story information that is not contained in either of the individual images. It creates a story because viewers' minds draw inferences and project their own thoughts, desires, and emotions into the characters on the screen by connecting the dots from shot to shot.

The third element of film's visual magic is the way in which shot design can create storytelling "spin." This is achieved by the choice of the camera's position, the careful framing of the action, and the artful choreography of the movement of the camera and the actors. The shots that are created can tell different stories and evoke very different emotions in viewers depending on the choices that are made. This gives filmmakers great storytelling power.

The fourth element of film's visual magic is the way in which time and space can be manipulated through shot design and editing. Virtually every film tells its story in a series of scenes that show action occurring at various times in a number of settings. Time can be made to move forward or backward between scenes, and time can be compressed or expanded both within and between scenes. When this is skillfully done, viewers do not find it distracting or artificial. Stories that take place over days or years and in many locations can be condensed into an hour or two and still seem

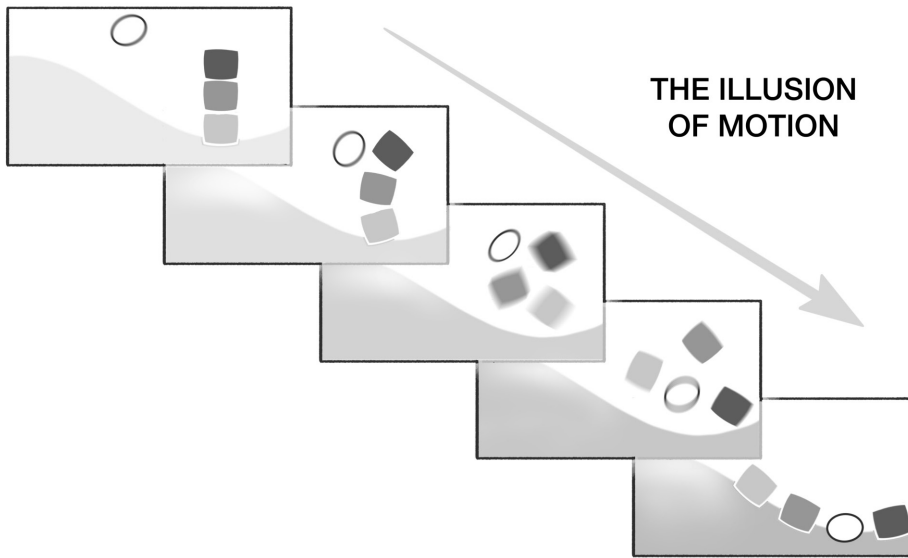


Figure 0.1 When related images are shown at a rate faster than five frames per second, the human mind perceives motion.

natural. Distance can also be compressed, and characters can be made to travel great distances in a matter of seconds in order to keep the story moving at an exciting pace.

These four elements of film's visual magic provide filmmakers with great storytelling potential. But while film's magic is powerful, if it isn't understood and controlled it can work against good storytelling. This book's aim is to present techniques that will help an aspiring filmmaker control film's visual storytelling power.

The Craft of Visual Storytelling

Every story introduces characters and situations, reveals backstory, creates problems and conflicts for the characters, and then shows how the characters deal with them. Good writing and performances are essential ingredients of a compelling movie, but the story will fall short of its potential if the visual storytelling is not well designed. This is because films are primarily stories told in pictures: even with the sound turned off, a movie's images usually make it fairly clear what's going on.

A large part of a director's job is to use visual storytelling techniques to present story information visually and to manipulate viewers' thoughts and emotions using visual means. Every action shown in a film can convey a range of meanings and elicit a range of emotions depending on how it is shot and edited. For example, a character walking down a street can be shot to seem either safe or threatened simply by

changing the camera's angles and motion. Some of these film techniques are obvious, such as the dramatic effect of a close-up, while others are more subtle. Every director must learn the full range of these techniques to master the craft of visual storytelling.

Writing, acting, cinematography, and editing are interdependent. A filmmaker ties these elements together. A director is responsible for the “big picture” view of the storytelling that spans every shot and every scene. Experienced directors have a storytelling plan in mind that is both broad and detailed, and it guides them in the design of virtually every shot and cut.

How the Author Learned about Visual Storytelling

I've learned about film storytelling from over 200 directors through my work as a storyboard artist. Early in my career I was fortunate to work with and learn from Norman Jewison, Haskell Wexler, Michael Moore, Carl Reiner, Jim Sheridan, Peter Pau, and Billie August. The directors I work with are often screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, or actors as well as being directors, and I've learned from their varied approaches to visual storytelling. In this book I've tried to organize, describe and illustrate what I believe are the most important ideas and techniques of visual storytelling in film. Figure 0.2 is a montage of storyboard panels I have drawn for professional directors.

Camera Positions Make a Dramatic Difference

Directors must spend time brainstorming how best to bring scenes to life. What they're doing is imagining how the action should be staged, what the camera angles and shot sizes should be, and how the pieces of several shots will be cut together. A director's early consideration of staging and shooting requirements for the ideal storytelling of a scene can greatly assist the locations manager in finding suitable locations. Once locations have been found a director will spend time imagining where the action will take place and where the camera should be positioned to best tell the story.

To illustrate the importance of camera placement, let's imagine several ways to begin a scene in which a prisoner is alone in a prison cell. We'll look at several ways the camera can be positioned and moved, and consider the storytelling effect of each.

Where do we place the camera? A natural starting point is to use a wide shot. In a prison this probably means placing the camera in the hallway (Figure 0.3). This is an establishing shot, and it introduces the setting of the scene and places the prisoner in context. This shot is very descriptive of the setting but says little about the prisoner. It does not cause viewers to feel much empathy or curiosity about the prisoner. Our wide shot is a little boring because nothing in the shot is moving, and in such cases

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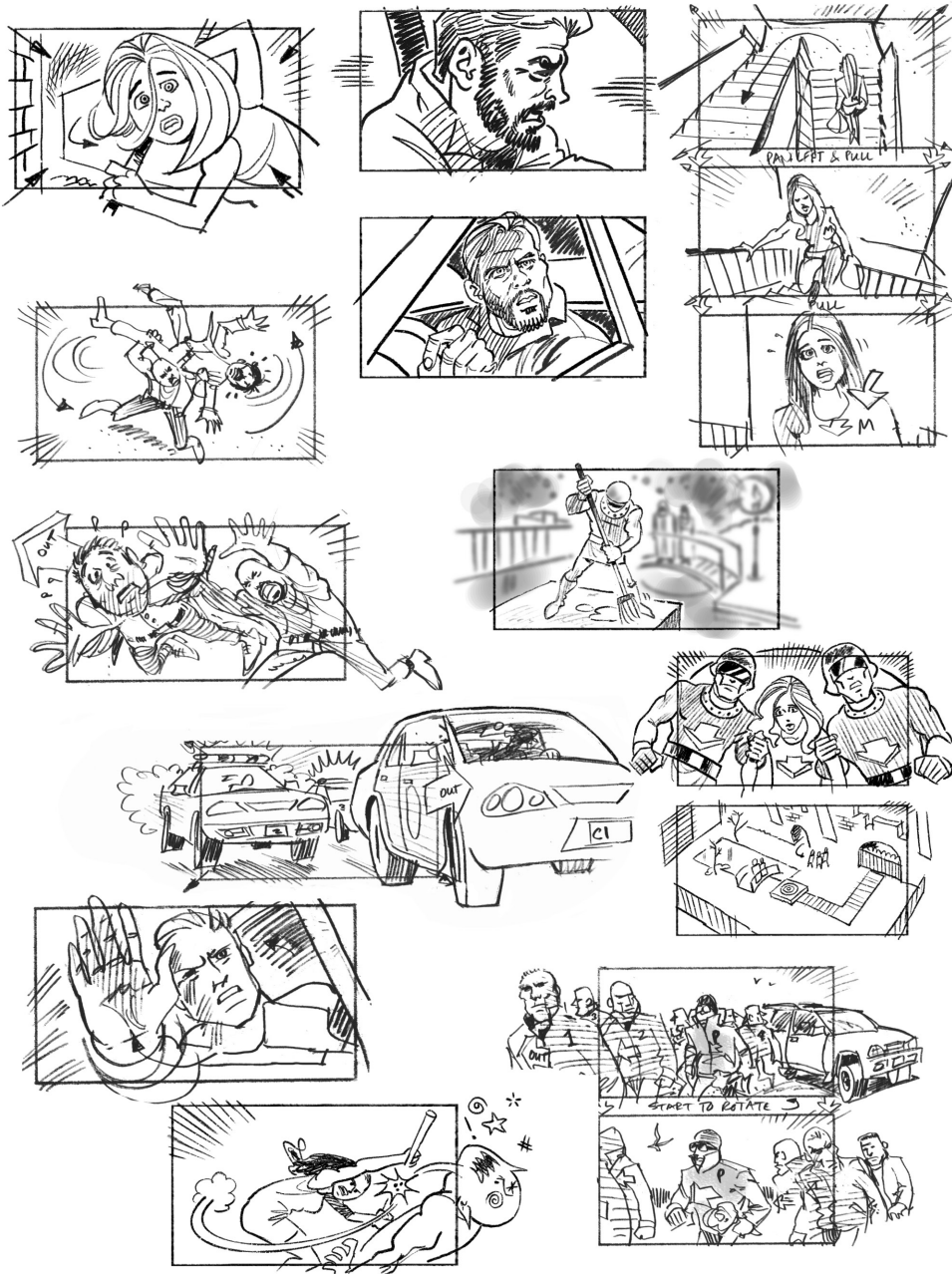


Figure 0.2 These are examples of storyboards drawn by the author for various television productions.

the camera is often moved slowly sideways to create visual interest from the camera's changing perspective. Such camera movement will also create a feeling of suspense.

Suppose our scene starts instead with a close shot of the prisoner as seen from the hallway (Figure 0.4). We see him in more detail and with fewer distractions, and we

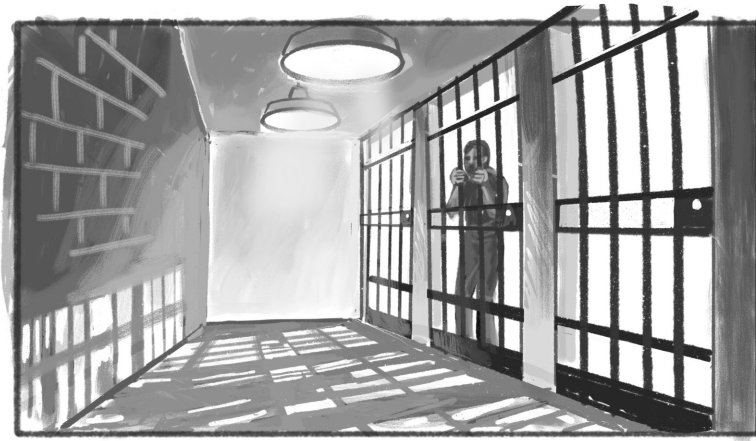


Figure 0.3 A wide shot can establish a setting and a mood, and here it puts the prisoner in context. It does not tell us much about the prisoner himself, or create empathy for him.

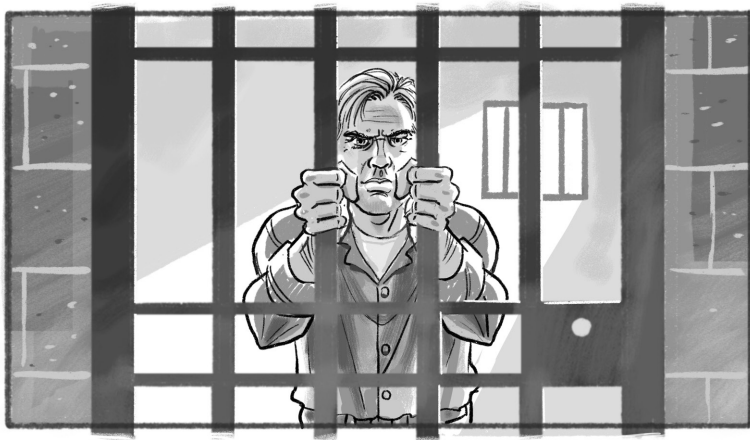


Figure 0.4 Close shots make viewers think about characters' thoughts and feelings because they dominate the image. Symmetrical shot design can suggest permanence.

start to infer things about his character as we get to know him. But the bars between us emphasize the fact that he's a prisoner: we feel some psychological distance from him because we are outside the cell, while he's inside. If we choose this shot to begin our scene instead of a wide shot, we sacrifice the details of the setting, the spatial

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depth of the hallway, and the mood of the jail. Note that this shot has a symmetrical composition, which typically suggests permanence, and may be fitting because it suggests that the prisoner will not be free any time soon.

A high-angle shot of the prisoner as he stands behind the bars makes him seem hopeless (Figure 0.5). High-angle shots are often used to make a character seem weak, helpless, confused, or lost. By keeping the camera outside the prisoner's cell for this shot, the director makes viewers feel more detachment than they would if the camera were in the cell with him.

If the prisoner is shown holding the bars in a low-angle shot, we feel that he is defiant. Low-angle shots are often used to make a character seem stronger (Figure 0.6). A low-angle shot such as this starts our scene dramatically. One common reason to begin a scene with a close shot of a character is to create a story link to the character we've cut from. Depending on what took place in the preceding scene, viewers will interpret this visual link as one character thinking about, being oblivious to, or deceiving the other.

Another option is to start our scene with a slow panning shot that scans across some items in the cell that say something about the character (Figure 0.7). Does the cell look lived in, with photos taped to the wall and a collection of books? Are the days recorded as scratches on the wall? By the time the pan finds the prisoner, viewers already know something about his life. Starting a scene in a new setting without a character in the shot, and panning to find the character, is a commonly used transition to a new scene. The choice of placing the camera in the cell with the



Figure 0.5 A high-angle shot can be used to make a character seem weak, trapped, vulnerable, or hopeless. Placing the camera outside the cell makes viewers feel more indifferent than they would if the camera were inside the cell with him.



Figure 0.6 Low-angle shots can be used to make a character seem strong, confident, defiant, or threatening.

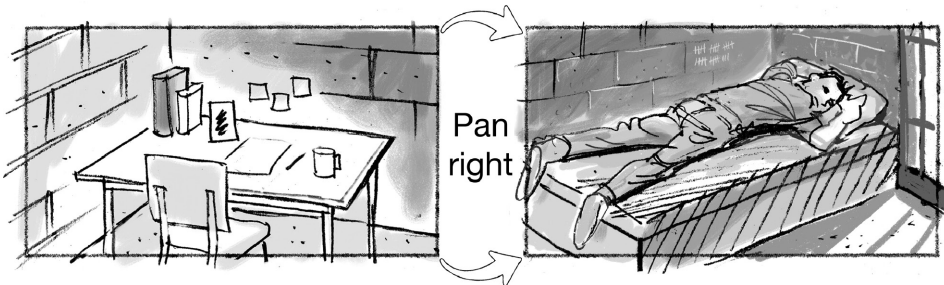


Figure 0.7 Being in the same space as a character makes viewers feel more empathy. Beginning a scene with a pan provides information about the setting and the story before the camera finds the character.

prisoner makes the storytelling more subjective. Viewers empathize with the prisoner because we feel that we are in this cell too.

Our scene could begin close on the prisoner's hands: perhaps he is holding a letter or his dinner tray (Figure 0.8). The shot now tilts up to the prisoner's face. If he's eating, the tilt could follow his spoon upward. Such shots create empathy in viewers because they are close to the character, they emphasize what the character is doing, and they exclude distractions.

Another idea for starting this scene is to begin with a shot that is angled so that the horizon is not level: this is a canted shot. Canted shots make viewers feel uneasy, and this feeling is projected into the character as psychological tension. Here it suggests

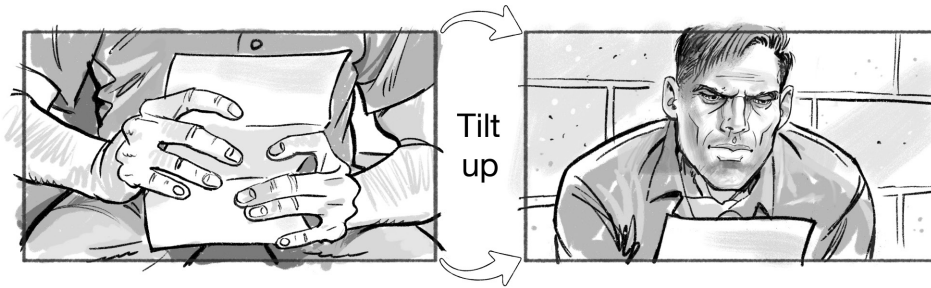


Figure 0.8 A tilt up from a character's hands to his face makes viewers think about his activity, thoughts, and feelings, and begin to experience events with him.

that the prisoner's mental state is boredom, anger, or frustration. The effect of the cant can be heightened by combining it with a focus change (Figure 0.9). The shot begins with the bars in focus and the prisoner blurry, and as the prisoner is brought into focus the bars become blurry. We are made to feel that time is moving slowly in this prison cell.

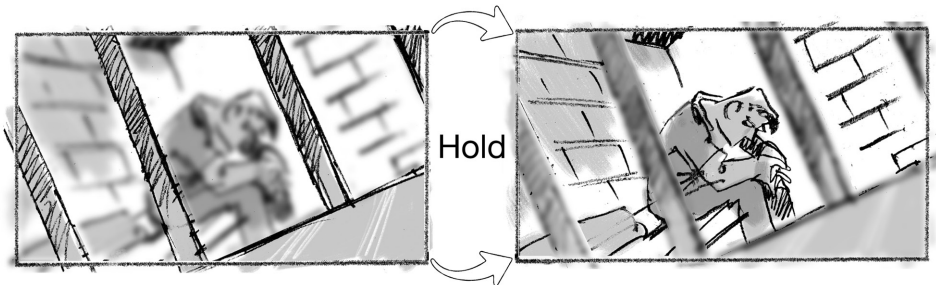


Figure 0.9 A canted shot has a horizon that is not level because the camera is leaning to one side. This creates unease in viewers, and it often suggests a character's negative mental state or foreshadows an unfortunate event.

Another approach to beginning our scene is to use a high-angle shot taken from within the prisoner's cell. This makes him seem caged and his situation seem hopeless (Figure 0.10). Because we are also in the cell we share his despair. A cut to a closer shot at or just below the prisoner's eye level would take us further into his thoughts and feelings.

Our scene could begin with an intense close-up of the prisoner. If we already know he's in prison from an earlier scene, a close-up will make us project our own thoughts and feelings about imprisonment into him, even if his expression is neutral (Figure 0.11). If we don't yet know where he is we may be surprised when the second shot of the scene shows us, or when the camera pulls out to reveal where he is. This may be



Figure 0.10 A high-angle shot taken from within the cell makes us feel we are prisoners too, and thus we feel the prisoner's loss of freedom more intensely.



Figure 0.11 A close-up is the most intense and subjective shot. It makes us share a character's thoughts and feelings. Slowly pushing the camera closer heightens this effect.

done to surprise viewers for either a comedic or dramatic reason. Any close-up can be intensified by slowly pushing the camera closer. This makes viewers feel what a character is experiencing even more deeply.

These examples of various ways to start a prison scene illustrate the storytelling potential that is available simply from choosing where to place the camera. Naturally there are further shot possibilities beyond the ones illustrated. For example, we could

tilt down from the ceiling to find the prisoner. Or tilt up from his feet. Or dolly sideways in the hallway close to the bars so they cross the screen until the camera finds the prisoner. The scene could begin with a montage of images such as a dirty dripping tap, the photos on the wall, the barred window, or a fly crawling on a dirty dish. These shots could be followed by a wide shot of the prisoner. The prisoner could step into a shot or roll over in his bed to reveal his face. What's important is to think of a number of possibilities and then choose the ones that seems best for the story, both at each moment and within a sequence of shots.

Reading a scene and visualizing possible ways of shooting it can be both fun and challenging. For each idea that you imagine, you must play the role of your film's first audience. You have to gauge how each proposed sequence of shots affects you, and you can assume that it will have similar effects on viewers. It's important not to be too critical of your ideas at first or you risk discarding something that might be effective with just a little modification. Once you've settled on a plan for the visual storytelling of a scene, it can be saved by using a shot list, by drawing a map, or by creating a simple storyboard. The job of brainstorming and previsualizing shots and sequences is a key part of directing, and it gets easier through practice and by learning more technique.

The Best Direction Is Invisible

This book introduces the craft of visual storytelling in a simple and practical way, without reference to film history. What you learn here has wide application in film, animation, and game design. The techniques described here for designing shots, cuts, and transitions are ones that we have all seen thousands of times in movies and TV shows. A filmmaker who knows these techniques can select the best ones for the drama at every moment. A director's visual style is the result of these many choices.

This book is unusual in that it looks at the meaning and emotional effects of the most common types of shots, cuts, and transitions. It contains practical advice on the basics of shooting common actions and situations in ways that serve various storytelling objectives. This book also shows how to keep time, space, and motion clear. It does not investigate other important artistic and technical areas of filmmaking, including writing, casting, coaching actors, camera technology, lighting, sound, set design, and budgeting, which are all explored in other books. This book focuses on visual storytelling.

Some new directors find it tempting to create "long takes" and other complex and novel shots. I believe that what is most valuable to learn at the beginning are the simple and common types of shots, cuts, and transitions that are the building blocks of the storytelling of most scenes. Some new directors believe it's important to break film "rules" in an effort to show their originality. I believe that a shot or cut that breaks with convention works best when it is done to support a dramatic moment in a story. Breaking rules for no dramatic purpose distracts from the story being told.

A director should never get in the way of the story! It's ironic that the more skillfully a film is directed, the less viewers think about how it was directed. That's the meaning of "The best direction is invisible."

Learning More about Film Storytelling

Unfortunately most jobs in film and television won't help you learn much about directing and editing. The scenes and shots are not created in story order, and therefore an observer has no idea how the shots will be cut together to tell a story. An easy and effective way to study directing, editing, and visual storytelling is by watching scenes from movies with the sound turned off. This allows you to study the shots, cuts, and transitions without being swept up in the story. You'll probably have to watch a scene several times to gain a thorough understanding of it. As you watch, you should ask yourself questions about the design of the shots, cuts, and transitions, the staging of the action, and the camera movement in order to understand how they work together to tell the film's story visually.

Making your own short films is a great way to learn, to be creative, and to put theory into practice. Making your own films will also increase your insight into the techniques of the directors whose films you watch, because you will now have a deeper understanding of the storytelling problems they faced and how they solved them. By absorbing as much as you can from others, and by experimenting and solving the problems you encounter as you make your own films, the more skilled you will become as a film storyteller. Your films will become more polished, more interesting, and more compelling!

1

Seven Film Storytelling Essentials

This chapter introduces seven key concepts of visual storytelling that can give an aspiring filmmaker a quick start. We'll begin with explanations of a few film terms, and other terms will be introduced as needed. The glossary provides a quick reference to all the terms used in this book.

A *scene* consists of a single time and place where one part of a story takes place, such as an office or a park. A *setting* can mean the general time and place of an entire story, but more often it's the specific time and place of one scene.

Locations are places away from the studio that are used as settings for scenes. Locations are typically modified to some degree to suit the needs of a story. Scenes are also often shot in rooms and other environments that are specially built in a studio to save money or because suitable locations don't exist. The term *set* is used to refer to any place at a location or in a studio where a scene is shot. One location may contain several sets, such as the interior and the exterior of a restaurant.

A *shot* is a continuous recording of the story's action taken over several seconds or minutes. Often several *takes* are made of a single shot while attempting to create the best one possible. With guidance from the director, an editor evaluates, selects, trims, and sequences the hundreds of shots that have been created into a single movie. A single shot is often divided into several separate pieces that are then combined with pieces of other shots into one continuous sequence. The total amount of footage that is shot is typically several times what's needed because the bad takes and much of the overlapping footage are discarded.

A video camera may be *static*, which means not moving at all. The camera may be *stationary* but pan or tilt as needed, or it may move dynamically as it *travels* in any direction in space. A type of shot that is used very often is a *point of view* (POV); it's what a character in a scene is looking at as recorded from a camera position close to where that character is. (Sometimes the camera's position is *cheated* to a slightly different angle if this creates a better shot.)

Left and *right* describe the two general directions in which a character may be looking or moving *as seen by the camera*. For editing purposes it's normally only the *general* left or right screen direction of a look or a movement that's important, not the exact angle.

Cuts are the hundreds of times in a film when the currently playing shot is suddenly replaced by a different shot that continues the story (Figure 1.1). Cuts can be quite abrupt, especially when the story continues in a new setting. The techniques of *continuity editing* are used to make cuts less jolting and maintain clarity of time and space. A *transition* is any in-camera or editing-room technique that helps make a change in time or place less abrupt or confusing.

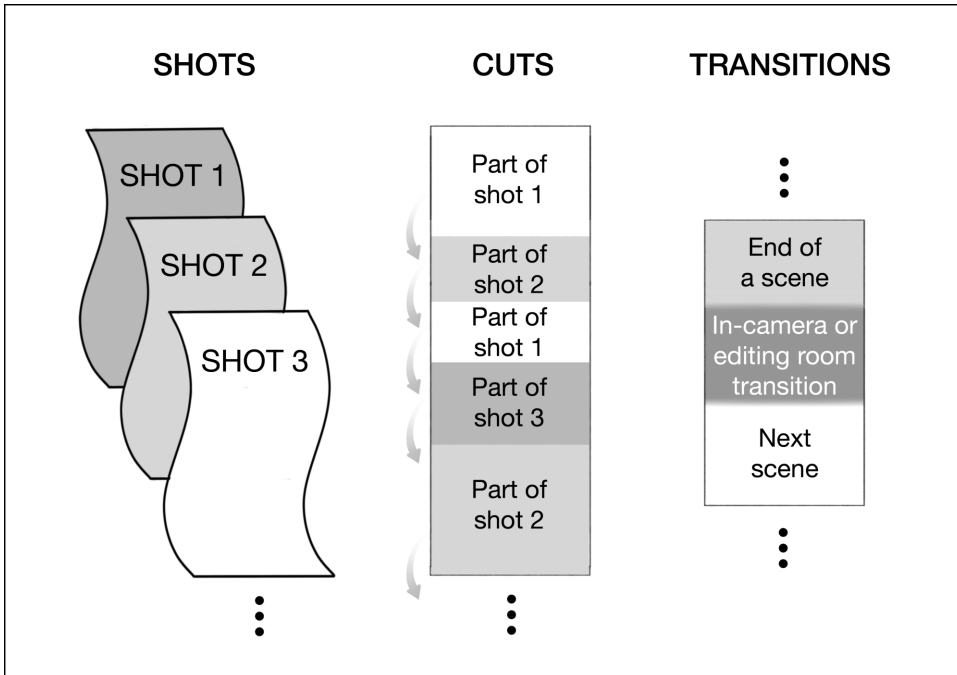


Figure 1.1 Shots cover the action from various angles, usually with considerable overlap. Selected pieces of shots are cut together into storytelling sequences. Transitions include both editing-room effects such as dissolves and in-camera techniques such as tilting down from the sky.

Adding Meaning through Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is placing two things close together, and in film it describes playing two shots in succession. Juxtaposition often creates new meaning that is not contained in the individual shots, much as words joined in a sentence create meanings that go beyond their individual meanings. When we see a sequence of images, we instinctively create a story in our mind that unites them. As the events of a story unfold we project our thoughts and emotional reactions into the characters we see.

Juxtapositions are very effective at eliciting empathy in viewers. If an image of something meaningful is followed by a close-up of a character, we project our own reaction to the image into the character that we now see, even if that character is expressionless (Figure 1.2). This phenomenon is named the *Kuleshov Effect* after the Russian filmmaker who first demonstrated it on film.

Juxtaposition can add other meanings in addition to empathy. Juxtapositions continue the events of a story and illustrate characters' reactions, but they can also add humor or ironic commentary, or underscore a character's emotional state. A shot of a sad character followed by a shot of the wind blowing fallen leaves or a shot of embers in a fireplace accentuates the character's sadness. Scenes also often begin

JUXTAPOSITIONS CREATE MEANING

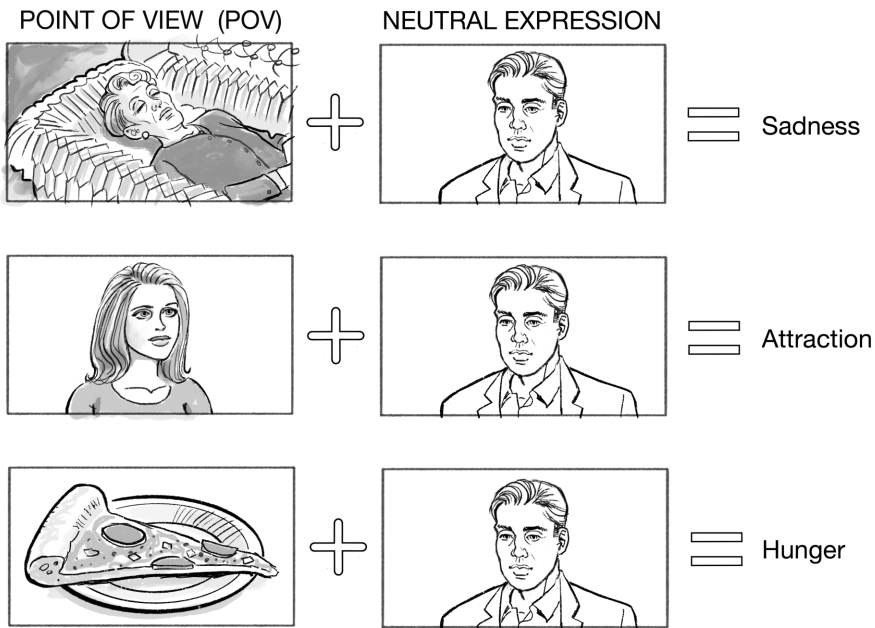


Figure 1.2 Viewers react to every image, and they will project their emotional reactions into a character who is seen in a juxtaposed shot, even if that character is expressionless.

with an image of a person, place, or thing that was just referenced directly or indirectly in the previous scene, creating a story link between scenes.

Thinking about possible juxtapositions early in the planning of a film can identify the shots that are needed to create them. A good example of a juxtaposition that connects two scenes is that of a shot of a boy throwing a football that is followed by a shot of the boy as an adult catching a football and running for a touchdown in a professional game. With a single cut viewers can be made to imagine the years of training, practice, and effort that have turned him into a professional! Effective juxtapositions add another dimension of meaning beyond the literal action that they show.

Telling the Story in a Series of Beats

A *dramatic beat* or *story beat* is the smallest division of the story in a film or a play. Anything that viewers hear or see that provides information that moves the story forward is a story beat. Every shot shows one or more beats. Shots are designed to highlight the beats by directing viewers' eyes to what's important to the story

at each moment and to show this information with the right emphasis. As a sequence of shots guides viewers' attention, a well-told story unfolds one beat at a time.

It can be helpful to make a list of the beats in a scene on a “beat sheet” prior to visualizing the shots. The script contains most of the story beats, but some aren't mentioned. For instance, the script might not describe a character's “business,” such as making coffee during a kitchen scene, and the script may not note the importance of seeing the nonverbal reactions of characters and bystanders. The script also won't describe such details as characters turning their heads, a close-up of raindrops splashing in a puddle, a hand turning a doorknob, or the fact that a scene has to start with a time transition because it's now hours later in the story. Having a list of important beats helps make sure that no essential shots are missed.

Clarity and Composition

Each shot should be designed to illustrate its beat clearly. Being clear doesn't mean revealing who the murderer is in the first scene, or otherwise spoiling the story's mystery and suspense. It means knowing precisely what story beat has to be communicated, and designing the shot to show that beat in the best way possible. Sometimes a shot shows just a single beat, while at other times it might show two or more in succession. A cut is made when there's a better angle to show the next beat.

The images that convey these beats should be well composed and artistically lit, even if the subject matter is a dingy alley or a murder victim. The subject of a shot can be obscured by shadows, fog, or rain, but the shot must still be attractively lit and composed. The shot size that's chosen has to suit the story beat: wider shots emphasize context, while tighter framing isolates the subject, accentuates it, and is more likely to stir viewers' emotions. A useful rule of thumb is that a good composition usually has a pattern that is both simple and strong.

The Order of the Story Beats

The order that story beats are presented to viewers is important to the storytelling. As an example, imagine these three shots: a wide shot of a girl walking in the forest, a shot of a wolf, and a close-up of the girl. If the first shot we see shows the girl walking, we have no reason to worry about her and there is no suspense. If the next two shots are the wolf and the girl's close-up, we experience the girl's encounter with the wolf along with her, and we share her surprise and fear.

The beats could be reordered to present the shot of the wolf *before* the wide shot of the girl walking. This immediately creates suspense because we know that the wolf is a threat to anyone who is nearby. When we first see the girl walking, we feel suspense

because we know the wolf is nearby. When we see the girl's close-up we understand immediately that she sees the wolf. In this simple example we can see that the order of the story beats can be critical to the storytelling.

Whose Scene Is It?

Usually one character is the focus of a scene: this character is sometimes described as “driving the scene” dramatically. A scene is often said to “belong to” a specific character. This character is not necessarily the most active or the one with the most lines, but may instead be mainly observing events and reacting to events. The character whose scene it is may be the parent or the child, the boss or the employee, the assailant or the victim, the pursuer or the pursued, the good guy or the bad guy. Each scene should be presented from the point of view of the character whose scene it is, and fortunately the script usually makes this clear. The reason it's important to identify the character that a scene belongs to is because this character must be favored by the camera.

Two Versions of the Same Simple Scene

Here's a simple scene: an assassin arrives at an office, shoots a businessman, and leaves. This description of the scene does not say whether viewers should experience these events from the assassin's POV or his victim's, but this is a crucial question. Normally it is clear from the context of the larger story in the full script which POV is the best choice. Although the action described is simple, there are still several beats to this scene. This action could be shown in a single wide shot or a panning shot that swings left and right as needed, but the result would not be dramatic. It would not allow us to live these events through one character, which is more interesting and more exciting than action that is seen by a witness at some distance. It's essential to good storytelling to design shots that tell the story in a way that makes a scene belong dramatically to the character who is most important in that scene.

Suppose it seems best that this scene belong dramatically to the assassin. We might begin the story with a shot of elevator doors opening to reveal the assassin. He steps out, and we follow him down the hall to an office door. We're accompanying the assassin and this feels exciting. Perhaps we see the assassin ready his gun before entering. We now either enter the office with him, or we cut inside to see the door open and reveal him. Next we cut to the killer's POV of the shocked businessman at his desk. The assassin fires and the businessman is hit. We follow the killer out the door, or we are already in the hall and we lead him for a moment and then let him exit close to the camera. This scene is the assassin's because the camera is with him

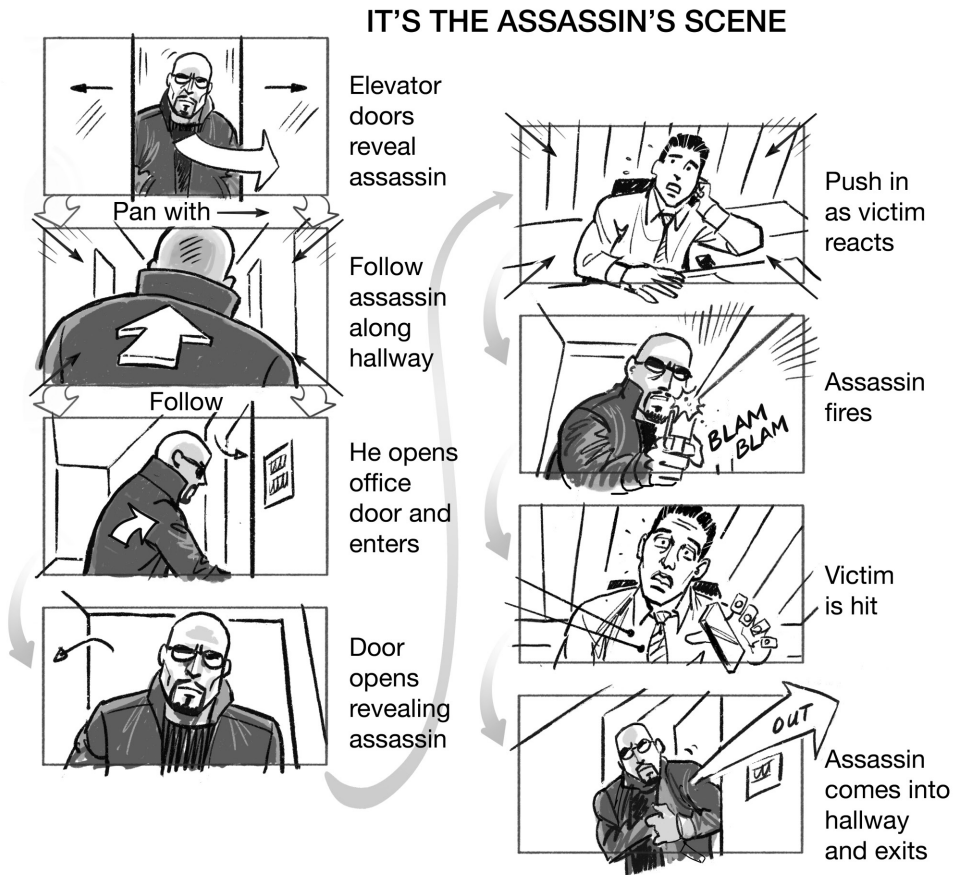


Figure 1.3 In this storyboard a short assassination scene is visualized as being from the point of view of the assassin.

as he arrives, it shows him in tighter shots, it shows his POV, and it leaves with him. This plan is storyboarded in Figure 1.3.

What if this is the businessman's scene, as shown in Figure 1.4? We could start with a shot of the unsuspecting businessman as he finishes a phone call, sits down, and resumes his work. Now we hear the door open, and as the businessman looks up we cut to his POV of the door opening and the assassin coming in and firing at him. We see the businessman as he's hit and as he slumps in his chair.

If we had wanted suspense instead of surprise, we could have cut briefly to the hallway earlier to show the elevator doors opening and the assassin stepping out. Then we could have returned to the businessman, and we would feel suspense as we await the assassin's arrival. Of course for this to work, we would have to know that the man in the elevator is an assassin. Note that the action is essentially the same in both of these versions, yet the storytelling is quite different.

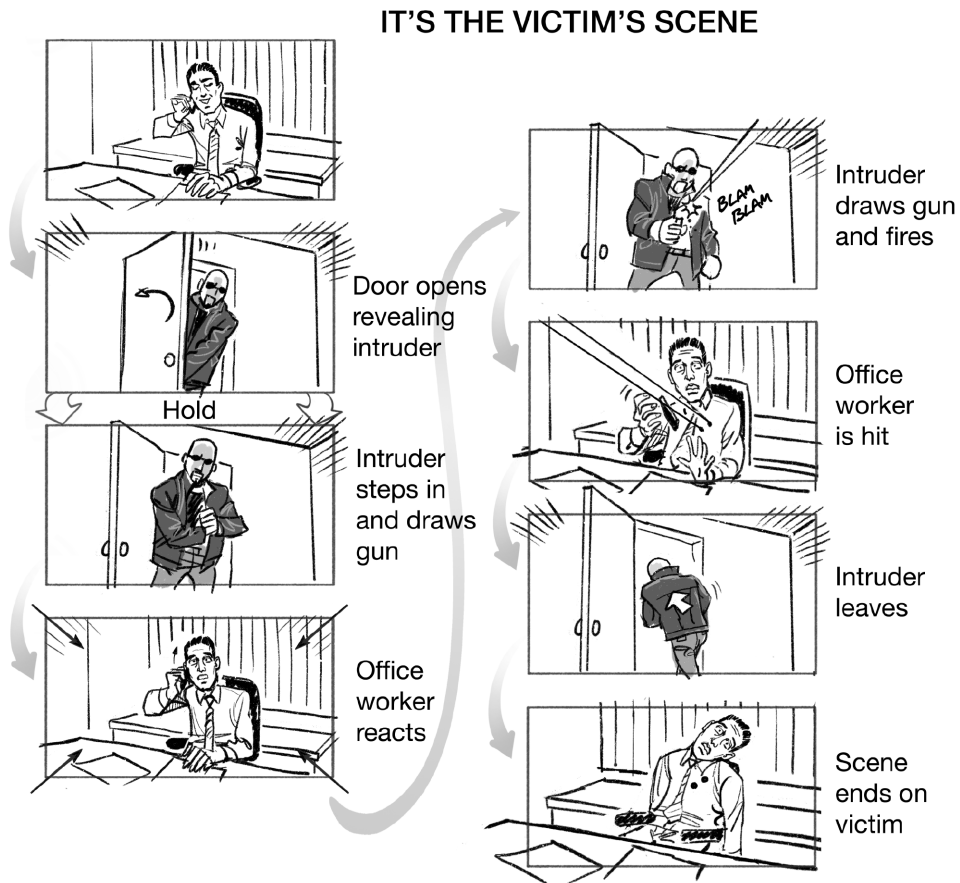


Figure 1.4 In this storyboard the same scene presented in Figure 1.3 is now visualized and storyboarded from the point of view of the victim.

Putting the Audience Where the Story Is

When theatergoers watch a play from their chosen seats, their angle on the action never changes. Film is very different because viewers can be positioned anywhere for each shot. Filmmakers take advantage of this by being selective about the angle from which viewers see the action in every shot. A key part of a director's job is to choose camera positions that will make viewers experience thoughts and feelings that will advance the story.

Emphasis and Visual Interest

A scene typically builds to a climax. In general the best way to support the drama graphically is to start with wide shots and gradually introduce tighter shots as the

drama progresses. This introduces the setting and the characters early, and as events build to the climax of a scene, the important characters appear in tighter shots. Closer shots make viewers identify more with the experience of a character while excluding distractions in the surroundings. Of course not every scene has to start wide and end in close-ups, but having this template in mind is a good starting point. You can make exceptions when you feel it helps the storytelling.

How screen images affect our thoughts and emotions parallels our reactions to what happens around us in life. These general observations are helpful rules of thumb when deciding where to put the camera:

- What's close to us seems important.
- Close shots emphasize a character's action and psychology, while wide shots emphasize the setting (Figure 1.5).
- What we look up at seems important and powerful.
- What we look down on seems less important and weaker.

Objectivity and Subjectivity

Objective shots are ones that portray events in a detached way. They show us the action from the point of view of an observer who is not participating in the scene's action. Wide shots, shots in which the camera is stationary, and shots that are not at the eye level of the characters are generally more objective shots. *Subjective* shots make us experience events with a character, and share the character's thoughts and emotions (Figure 1.6). A close-up isolates a character from the setting and from other characters and is the most subjective type of shot. To create subjective shots of a moving character, the camera must travel with the character.

The degree of subjectivity of a shot reflects how we experience what we see in life. When we watch someone at a distance we tend to feel detached, but when we



Wide shots are about the setting



Close shots are about the character

Figure 1.5 Wide shots emphasize the setting, while close shots emphasize a character's actions and psychology.

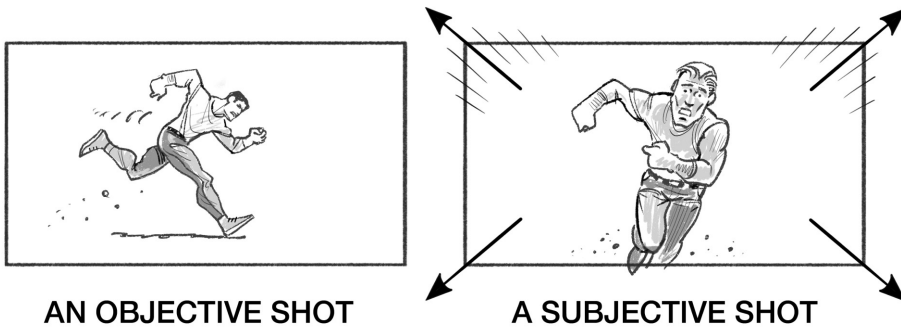


Figure 1.6 Objective shots are wide, do not move with the character, and do not show the character's point of view. Subjective shots are close, move with the character, and show the world through the character's eyes.

accompany someone who is going somewhere, we feel connected to that person. We often share the person's thoughts and feelings during the trip. In a film a character's action can always be shot objectively or subjectively. The most subjective coverage in a scene is generally given to the character who drives the scene dramatically.

Tie-Up Shots

A tie-up shot helps us understand and be immersed in the space that two characters (or a character and an object) are in. This makes events seem more real and dramatic. For instance, if a shot of a man is followed by a shot of a bear in what appears to be the same setting, we assume they are near each other. But our reaction to the action is not as strong if we don't see them together in the same shot. A shot over the shoulder of the man to the bear ties them together convincingly and makes the bear seem more threatening (Figure 1.7).

Making Shots Exciting and Immersive through Movement

Action and visual changes are exciting, and scenes without them can be boring. These are ways that movement is used to make shots more exciting and immersive, and they are illustrated in Figure 1.8:

- A moving character (including one who is entering or exiting a shot) is more interesting than a stationary one.
- Movement toward the camera is the most exciting direction.

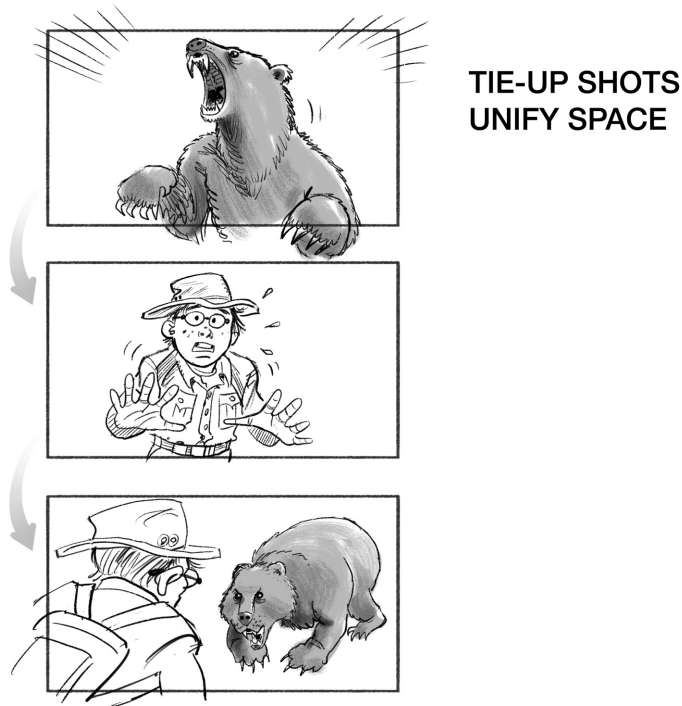


Figure 1.7 A tie-up shot unites two characters or objects in the same physical space. This makes a scene seem more real and dramatic than would be possible by using only juxtaposed shots that show things separately.

- Extras or vehicles crossing the foreground and background make a shot seem more real and exciting.
- The camera can push closer to a character for dramatic emphasis.
- A character or vehicle's action seems more exciting when the camera moves with it because we feel that we are on the trip too.
- Wide shots can be made more interesting, suspenseful, and immersive by moving the camera slowly sideways.

Making Cuts Smoother

A cut is an instantaneous change from one image to another. The cut can be unexpected and abrupt. Fortunately, cuts can be made less noticeable. Perhaps the best cutting points occur when someone or something exits the frame, a door closes, someone looks off-screen, or when something big happens such as a splash, an explosion, or something hits the ground. Motivated cuts, cutting on action, and using

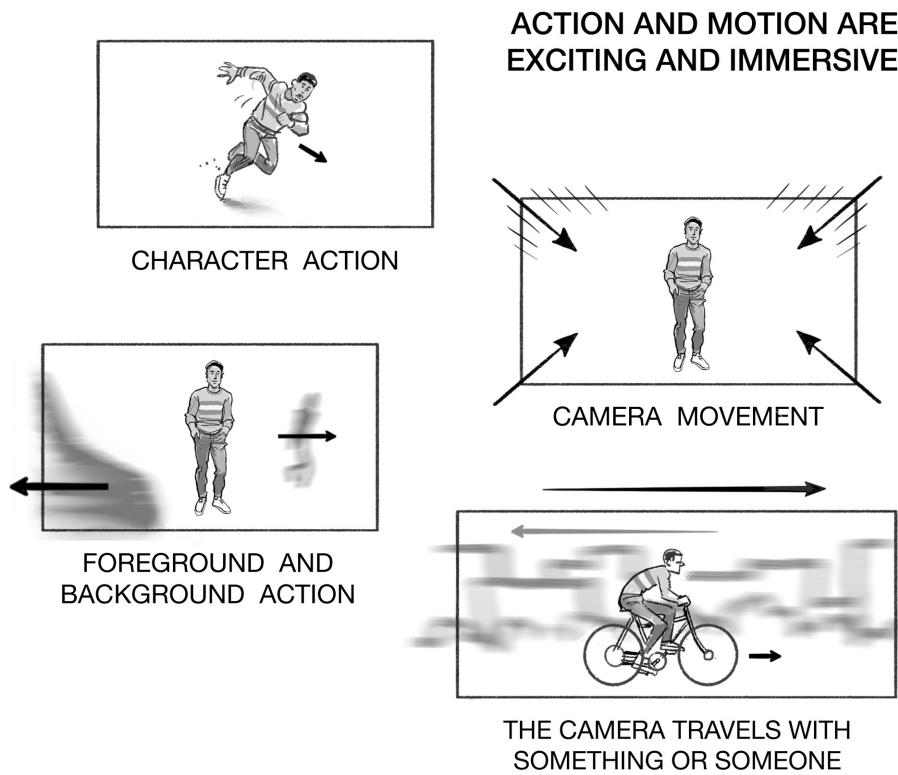


Figure 1.8 A shot can be made more cinematic, immersive and exciting by having the characters move, having the camera move, or having both move.

compositional instability as a distraction are three common ways to make cuts seem smoother and more natural.

Motivated Cuts

Cuts are less noticeable when the story makes viewers want to see something that can't be seen in the current shot. Cuts made to satisfy the audience's curiosity are called *motivated cuts*. The motivation can be created in several ways. A character looking off-screen motivates a cut to find out what the person is looking at. An off-screen noise, such as a voice or the sound of a door opening, makes viewers curious, and a cut can satisfy their curiosity. When a character exits, we often want to see a new shot that shows where the character is going. Any direct or indirect verbal or visual reference to a person or a place can motivate a cut to what was referenced.

Prelapped music, sound effects, or dialogue that comes in advance of the arrival of the next scene makes viewers interested in seeing the new setting. A dramatic

motivation occurs when something very significant occurs and viewers want to see its consequences, including how the characters in the scene are reacting. The dramatic event could be anything from an explosion to someone's startling confession.

Cutting on Action That Can Bridge Two Shots

An action that spans two shots makes a cut less noticeable. We might see someone approach a door, open it, and start to step through; the following shot shows the character coming through the doorway on the other side. Action can bridge a cut from a wide to a closer shot at a new angle. Cutting on action can be done when a character sits down, stands up, raises a glass, lights a cigarette, or turns to look in a new direction. About one-third of the action occurs in the first shot, and the second shot shows the remaining two-thirds. Actors usually repeat the entire action for each shot, because this *overlapping action* is more likely to cut smoothly. Cutting on action is often used for punches: the cut to a new angle accentuates the violence while masking the fact that no contact was made (Figure 1.9).

A weaker but still effective way to use action to help hide a cut is to cut at the moment a character performs a small action. Some examples of small actions are slight movements of a character's eyes, head, or hands, or an object being picked up or put down. In this case the action is completed in the first shot, and the shot that follows is of a different subject in the same scene or a new scene.



Figure 1.9 Cutting on action makes a cut less noticeable. The action links the two shots and distracts attention from the abruptness of the cut.

Using Stable and Unstable Compositions

A shot can be compositionally stable or unstable. In a stable composition the subject of the shot maintains its size and position within the frame. Viewers prefer pleasing compositions over unattractive ones, and they also prefer stable compositions over unstable ones.

The subject of any shot is normally stable in its position in the composition at some point during the shot, while other objects in the shot may appear to move within the frame. The subject of a shot naturally appears stable when the subject and the camera are not moving, but it will also appear stable if both the subject and the camera are synchronized in their movement (Figure 1.10).

An unstable composition is one that is changing rapidly, usually because of motion. An object may be moving into, out of, or across the frame, and this compositional instability is what makes entrances and exits such good cutting points

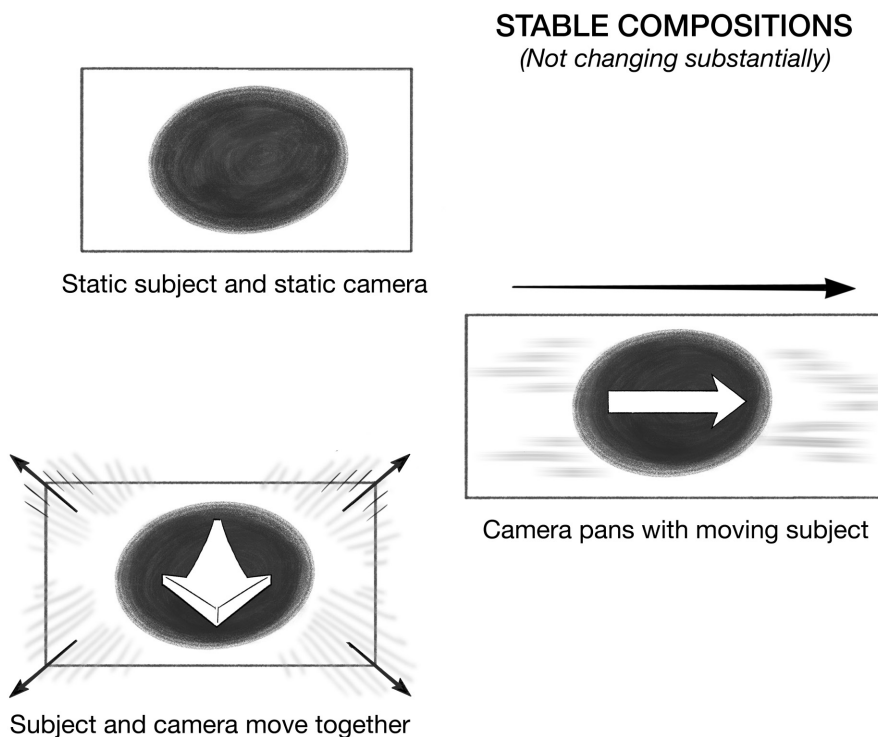


Figure 1.10 A composition is stable when the subject maintains its size and position and the composition is largely unchanging. The subject and the camera may both be stationary, or the subject and the camera may be synchronized.