

## **The Department of English**

RAJA N.L. KHAN WOMEN'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)  
Midnapore, West Bengal

Course material- 1

on

## **Techniques of Cinematography**

(General Introduction)



A medium shot from French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965)

For

**SEC (English Hons.)**

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**Paper- SEC 2 (*Film Studies*)**

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## **Techniques of Cinematography**

(Film Studies- Unit II: Part 1)

Imagine yourself in a dark hall, reclining on a comfortable chair and forgetting all about your boring life. You find yourself transported to a world that you have never visited before, but feel so familiar, so real. Yes, you are in a cinema house, surrounded by a bunch of complete strangers having a shared experience of similar emotions. That is what cinema can do to us, and that is why we end up loving cinema, i.e. watching a film, as we love to articulate it. This said, there is hardly a human soul in the face of the earth who might display detectable aversion towards this brilliant form of storytelling.

Cinema or film is very much alive, like life. It undergoes a smooth flow throughout the entire duration stipulated for it, whispering lightly in the ears of the audience, at times shouting at the top of its voice, and at other times making the audience feel one with itself. A cinema lets you experience real life circumstance, full of emotional interplays, inviting you to participate in it, ringing passions in you, passions that were both active and dormant, while your real life is nowhere close to it. Cinema, therefore, is considered to be a very powerful tool in influencing and reshaping human mind, and justifiably too, considering the intensity and significance of the effect it creates in human life.

However, being a language of expression, cinema is all about communication, the way the storyteller communicates with the audience. The effectiveness of a film depends heavily on the extent to which it is capable of moving the audience. All the languages around the world use grammar as the basic tool to establish its operation, and are governed by its principles. Similarly, cinema also employs certain exquisite tools that are absolutely indispensable in its making. Cinematography is sure to be one of them, and is justly considered to be the heart of cinema.

Cinematography is the art of storytelling through visual manifestations that captures movement with the application of sensors. In short, Cinematography is the appropriation

of visual storytelling. Primarily focused on the visual elements on the screen, cinematography is the science of implementing cinematographic techniques to record bodies and objects in motion and using it as required in creating visual expressions. Cinematography juggles with multiple technicalities involving light, exposure, depth of field, angles and frames, proper equipment and sound to create an audio-visual experience that would speak to the audience and leave an impression. Cinematography takes up a humongous role when we consider the effectiveness of each of the scenes in manipulating human emotions while also making perfect sense, contributing to the progress of the storytelling. However, the language of cinema is different. It does not concern itself only about what is being shown, but emphasizes on how they are being shown. The camera placement and the exploitation of different angles hugely influences the numerous emotions growing in the audience and bring out the passions buried in the hidden tunnels of one's psyche. Cinematography is also largely responsible in controlling the perspectives of the viewers, directing it in the line of the storyteller's perspective.

Cinematography is also instrumental in creating the narrative a visual delight that is supposed to please the audience and appeal to their senses. This it does by employing various techniques that will be discussed below.

### **Panning of the camera**

Panning, extensively used in film making, is derived from the word 'panorama' which is used to mean a wider view that is beyond the natural expanse of human gaze. It is something that happens every day in our life. Human gaze has a limited scope and cannot take in anything that is beyond its periphery. Therefore, we are forced to turn our head to include anything that was outside our field of vision. Therefore, pivoting horizontally left or right is what we call panning. Coming into play in cinematography, panning is a device at the disposal of the director and the cinematographer that, through horizontal movements, gradually incorporates images off the screen into the screen space. This

technique is implemented by keeping the camera fixed at one location and moving its field of view to either its left or its right.

### **Zooming**

In this technique the camera is kept static at one particular position and a zoom lens is used to gradually magnify or de-magnify the center of an image smoothly. The shot is taken in such a way that the audience is made to believe that the camera is moving towards the subject, or away from it, which does not happen in the reality. In this kind of shot, without actually moving the camera physically, the point of focus brought closer or pushed further away from its original position in the screen space. This shot is generally used to emphasize the importance of a certain subject or situation. The technical terms used in this regard are “Zoom-in” and “Zoom-out”.

### **Flashback**

As a transitional device, flashback is quite effectively used by the storyteller to achieve a movement back in time during the course of the narrative. From the present context in the story, in one particular point of time, when the narrative is interjected by a scene from the past, somewhere back in time, we call it a flashback. This device is used extravagantly to relate the present situation with the past occurrence or to enlighten the audience about things that has happened earlier in the life of the characters. In cinematography, it is also referred to as ‘analepsis’.

### **Fade In and Fade Out**

Fade in and Fade out are two visual effects that are governed by similar principles. This is also a transitional device employed during the process of editing. When the image appearing on the screen is seen gradually melting into a black screen and disappears completely, we call it ‘Fade out’. Similarly, when the black screen is gradually illuminated and an image appears on it, we call it ‘Fade in’.

## Close-up



A close-up from Rikwik Ghatak's 1960 film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*)



Close-up from Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's *Brink of Life* (1958)

One of the very popular shots in filming, close-up is specifically used to bring out the strong display of emotions and passion that surface in the countenance of the characters. Without being concerned about the broader scene, the close-up is a shot that takes keen interest in details associated with the subject it captures. In this kind of shot, a person's face or any significant body part is captured in a tight frame that lasts for a considerable time, allowing the audience to examine the minute details of the subject that the frame portrays. The scope of a close-up generally ranges from head to neck of the subject.

## Long shot



A long shot from Satyajit Ray's 1955 movie *Pather Panchali*



A long shot from Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960)

These are shots that are very common in filming and are usually accomplished by using a wide angle lens. It does not concentrate entirely on one subject but situates it in the context of the subject's surroundings. Close and minute details about any human subject in the frame are rendered insignificant; whereas his presence in the frame is validated by the surroundings. In the long shots, the surroundings assume a certain degree of importance.

## Reverse shot

This particular technique of cinematography is mostly used in dialogue scenes where two characters are apparently facing each other. The frame, at first focusses on the speaker, when the listener is assumed to be positioned opposite him. The very next frame focusses on the listener might be listening quietly without interjections or replying back with his own dialogues and has become the speaker. The next frame again resembles the first one and focusses on the first speaker. This technique is very effective when the characters are meant to be shown looking at each other. In reverse shot, the frames are moved to and fro in quick successions.

### References and suggestions for further reading:

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2. Arijon, Daniel. *Grammar of the Film Language*. Silman-James Press, 1976.
3. Malkiewickz, Kris J. & M. David Mullen. *Cinematography*. Simon & Schuster, 1992.
4. Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*. Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford, 2000.
5. Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers: Massachusetts, 2000.
6. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinematic\\_techniques](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinematic_techniques)
7. <https://www.adorama.com/alc/14-basic-cinematography-techniques-for-better-cinematic-shots>
8. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/film-101-what-is-cinematography-and-what-does-a-cinematographer-do#what-is-cinematography>



**Note:**

The following link will direct you to a YouTube video that might be helpful in understanding some of these techniques through demonstrations.

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/film-101-what-is-cinematography-and-what-does-a-cinematographer-do#what-is-cinematography>