BASIC CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

I set out to write this book because I wanted to reach beyond the basic cinematic elements that many filmmaking books describe. One of the best ways to learn about these constructs is to watch as many movies as you can. Unfortunately, not everyone who's interested in filmmaking can dedicate that kind of time to the process. This book simplifies the ordeal by compiling the most common and distinct filmmaking techniques taken from hundreds of films.

It can't hurt to go over the basics before we arrive at the next "plateau" of cinematic techniques. I have attempted to provide methods for conceptualizing each element — a way of visualizing what the technique actually looks like. Visualization skills should allow you to look at the world around you in a new, cinematic context. This new sight is similar to what artists see when they start to recognize lines and colors in the world, allowing them to create abstract representations of reality.

A NOTE ON CRAFT

The American film industry is not exactly renowned for its focus on craft. It's a business-oriented machine, where often the realities of cold hard cash outweigh the desires of individual filmmakers to stretch the boundaries of film with unique and interesting ideas. If you do ever manage to secure the financing for a film of your own, you might have only one good chance to demonstrate your skills as a filmmaker. So be prepared.

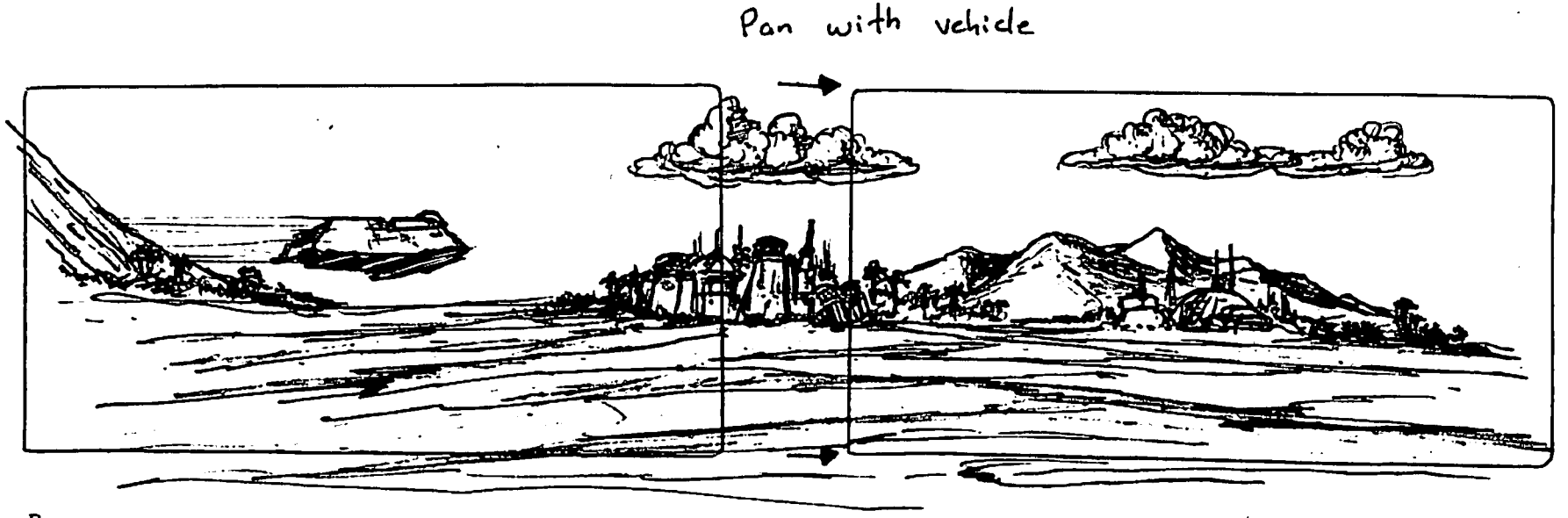
PAN

What does it look like?

Pan is the horizontal axis of camera movement. When the camera pans, it turns left and right. To conceptualize a *Pan*, stare straight ahead and turn your head to the left and to the right. *Panning* is commonly used to look across a very wide panorama that doesn't fit within the camera frame — a landscape, for example. This technique can be used within a scene to follow characters or vehicles as they move around. This is known as re-framing the shot.

Where can I see it?

In Zulu, the camera *Pans* across a seemingly endless line of Zulus on a hill, toward the British waiting in the foreground. Robert Redford is discovered at the bar with a simple *Pan* in The Way We Were.



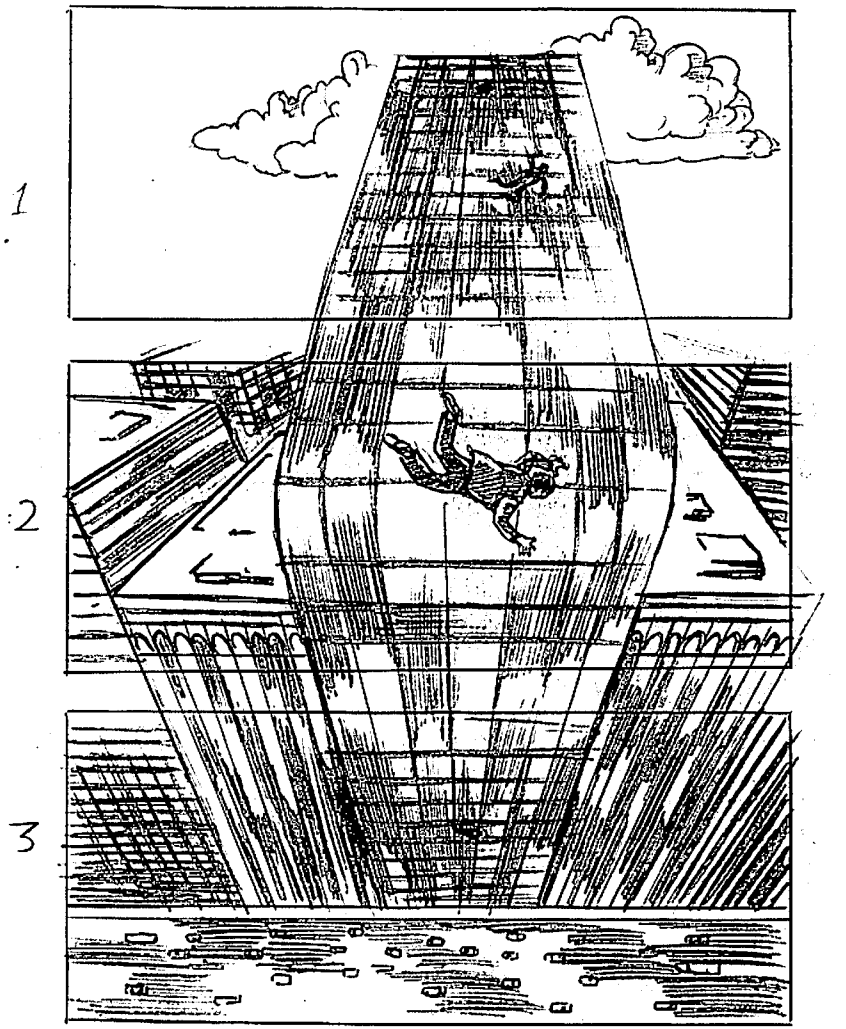
Pan

TILT

What does it look like?

Tilt is the vertical axis of camera movement. When the camera tilts, it pivots up and down. *Tilting* is commonly used to look over tall objects such as a cathedral or an office building.

To conceptualize a *Tilt*, stare straight ahead and pivot your head to look up and down. Like the Pan, this technique is used within a scene to follow characters in motion — known as re-framing the shot.

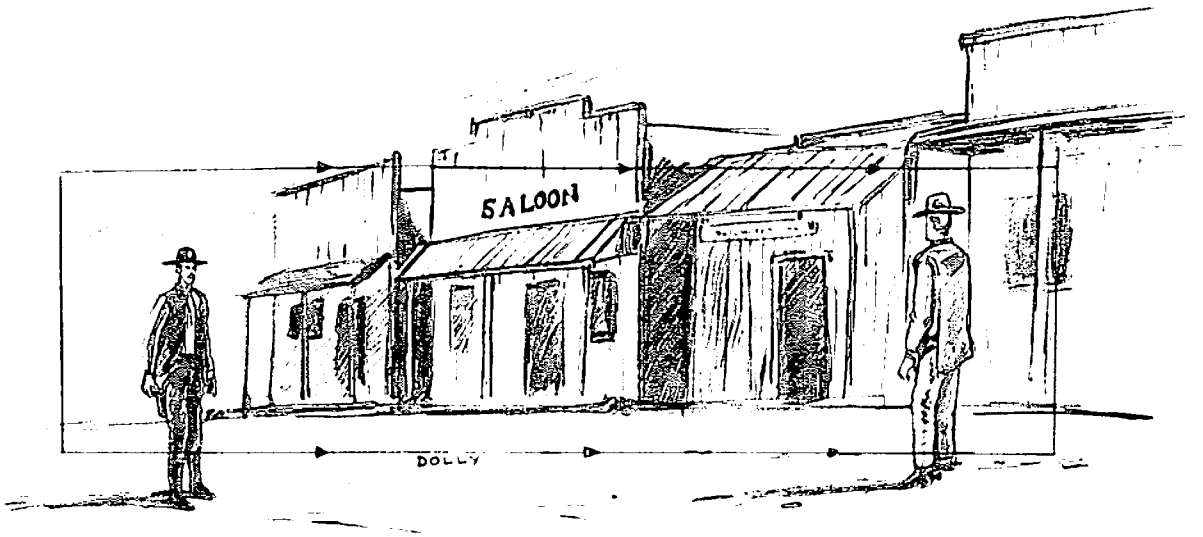


Tilt

DOLLY, TRACKING SHOT

What does it look like?

Also known as a "Tracking Shot," *Dolly* is a very natural technique — the camera simply moves horizontally through space. The energy of this technique is similar to a person walking or riding on a moving platform — a wheelchair, for example. To conceptualize a *Dolly*, turn your head toward what you are interested in. Then walk forward and watch the world go by. This is how a *Dolly* movement looks to an audience.



Dolly

Dolly movements may or may not use an actual dolly. Generally some kind of platform with wheels, the dolly moves along tracks that determine the direction of movement. Tracks must be used because pushing the platform over uneven ground results in shaky and erratic camera movement. The Steadicam is an alternative device that allows a camera to be carried, without experiencing the bumps and jiggles usually associated with handheld camera work. This makes the camera appear to be "floating" through the air. If a camera operator has a steady grip, handheld cameras can create dolly-like movements as well.

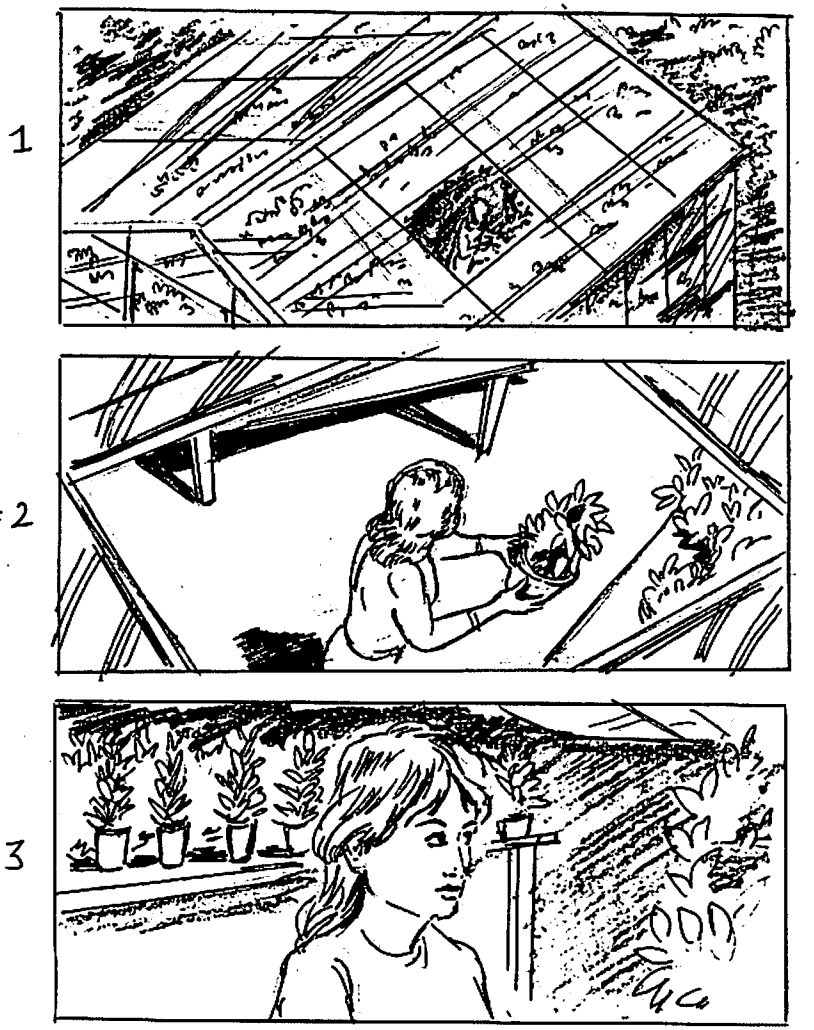
MECHANICAL

What does it look like?

Mechanical techniques include the use of devices that allow filmmakers to create unique and interesting camera movements. These are easier to conceptualize when we can move as the camera does — which is possible if a device has a platform that we can sit or stand on.

Cranes and Jibs are the most common examples of mechanical devices. Each of these devices has a mechanical "arm" on which the camera is mounted. This arm hinges on a pivot that frees the camera to move through space, allowing the creation of sweeping, dramatic camera movements.

There are many other specialized mechanical devices available. Each device creates a unique type of motion that alters the audience's perception of a film in some special way.



Crane Sequence

PULL FOCUS

What does it look like?

Pulling Focus is considered a natural camera technique. The camera lens operates similarly to the way our vision functions. Our eyes continually alter focus whenever we look at objects at alternating distances in our field of view.

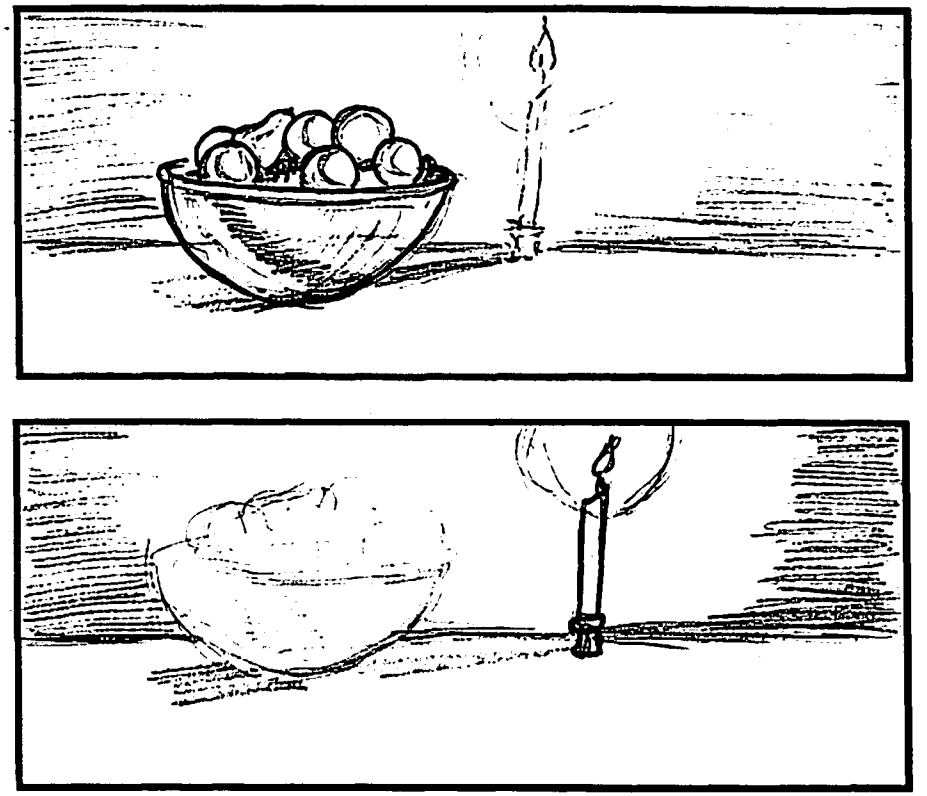
We can either be focused on something close to us or on something far away. Since we generally don't have the ability to focus on both at the same time, our eyes must *Pull Focus* to compensate.

When making a film, *Pulling Focus* is often necessary because most camera lenses don't keep the entire scene in focus. As the camera pans, tilts, and dollies, a crew member called a "focus puller" will adjust the focus to match whatever the camera is looking at and to compensate as actors move through the scene.

To conceptualize this technique, consciously focus on objects at different depths as you look around.

Where can I see it?

In Apocalypto, the camera shows a man being chased, then quickly *Pulls Focus* to reveal the group of men chasing him.



Pull Focus

ZOOM

What does it look like?

The focal length of a camera lens determines the distance that the camera can "see." Zoom lenses allow the focal length to be gradually changed. With a *Zoom*, the frame may transition from a wide shot to a close-up without ever moving the camera.

The *Zoom* is considered an unnatural technique because our eyes aren't able to incrementally change their focal length. Because of this, *Zooms* are often used for effect.

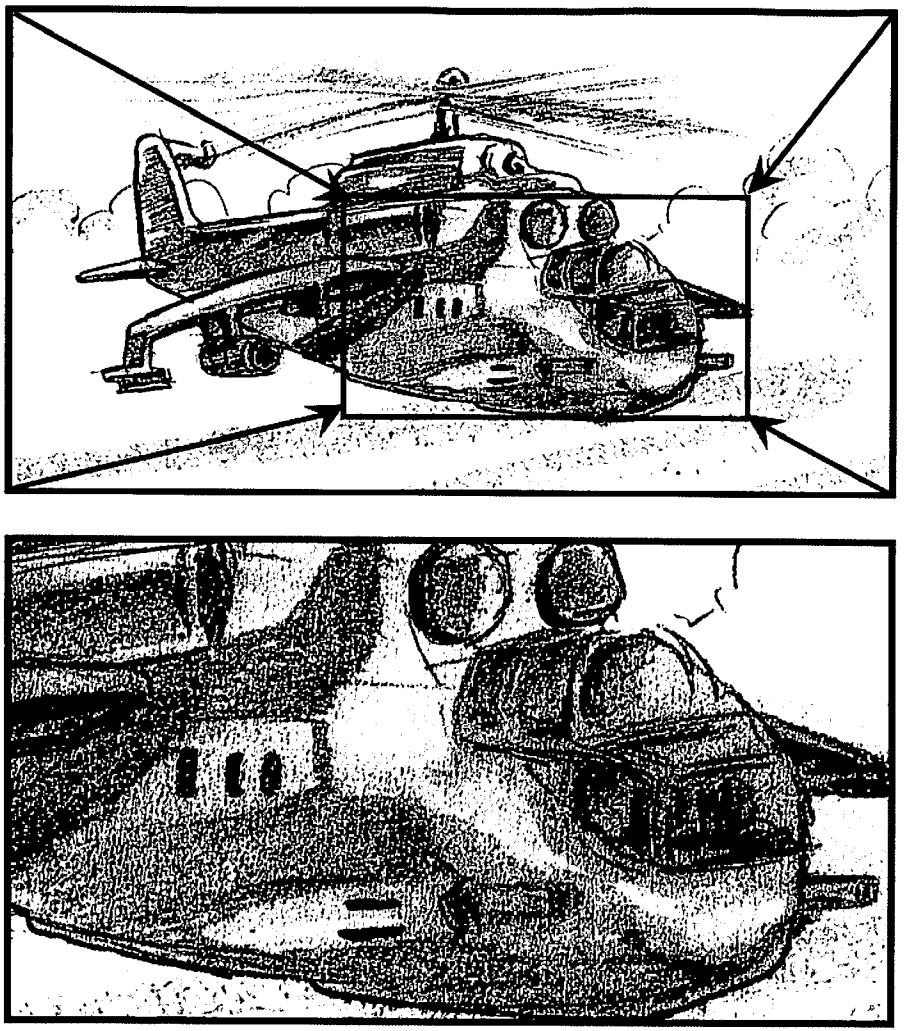
A very slow *Zoom* can be a subtle alternative to a dolly movement in locations where there is no room to rig a dolly and track. A very fast *Zoom* — a whip zoom — can be used to draw attention to objects in a scene.

Where can I see it?

Fluttering *Zooms* are used in G.I. Jane during action sequences. Fluttering *Zooms* are also used in Opera, in conjunction with the sound of a heart beating. The camera *Zooms* in toward and out from still photographs in Soylent Green.

In Zatoichi, an emphatic whip zoom shows a samurai's face as he's told his rival's name.

The Color of Money uses both fast and slow zooms in many scenes. The Wild Bunch showcases many different kinds of zooms — slow, fast, short, extended, zoom in, and zoom out.



Zoom

TRANSITION

What does it look like?

A *Transition* is any method for switching from one image or "frame" to another.

The simplest of all *Transitions* is the cut. A cut may appear almost seamless to the audience, or it may be used to create harsh jumps in time and space.

Dissolves are very common in movies. A dissolve layers a new image over the old one, gradually increasing the new image's opacity until the transition is complete. Dissolves create a "soft" *Transition*.

Fades slowly change to an image from a colored screen or from an image to a color. The fade color is usually black, but not exclusively. For example: fading to white frequently shows some kind of "explosive" *Transition*. A fade to red could induce the imagery of blood; or blue of the ocean. Fades often begin and end scenes.

Effects *Transitions* use a special effect to transform one image into another. Examples of effects *Transitions* include wipes, page turns, vertical blinds, and morphing. Effects *Transitions* may be accomplished with specialized equipment such as an optical printer, or with a computer.

Where can I see it?

Several horizontal wipe *Transitions* are used in Red Beard.

Effects *Transitions* give Star Wars the feel of an old science fiction B-movie. At the end of Jacob's Ladder, the scenery fades to white as Jacob ascends into heaven with his son.

MONTAGE

What does it look like?

What is *Montage*? There are at least a few recognizable definitions for the word. The most common of these is: a specific sequence of images in a film, usually without words and often set to music. For clarity I choose to call this the "Montage Sequence." Many films use this technique to express the passage of time or a sequence of events with little or no dialogue.

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, a montage is "the combination of elements of different pictures, esp. photographic." If we go by this definition, then a montage is simply a series of images — like the cuts in a film. Therefore, every film is an example of montage.

Perhaps the most unique description of montage can be found in the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the forefathers of modern film theory. Eisenstein said that montage can be seen in films, and that its essence can be seen everywhere — in writing, in music, in art. Eisenstein's definition of montage allows for a broader definition — the collection of "elements" that build something — the tastes, sights, sounds, textures, and smells. Because film is purely an audio-visual medium, film montage is based on building up structures that affect the visual and aural senses.

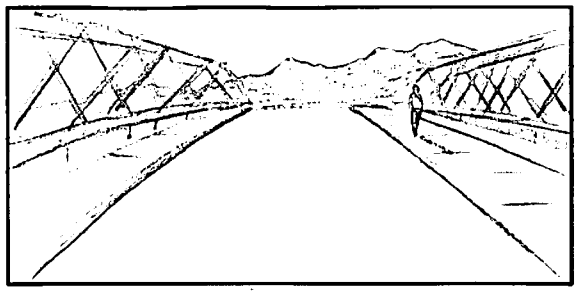
Even though montage is a very important aspect of film, it can be detrimental if not used correctly. André Bazin, a respected French film critic, argued that the lack of montage can actually be beneficial for certain types of films. The reduction of splicing and cutting in a film gives the audience a more realistic perception of the story's time and space. Without montage, a director cannot cut away to hide falsehoods and mistakes.

Where can I see it?

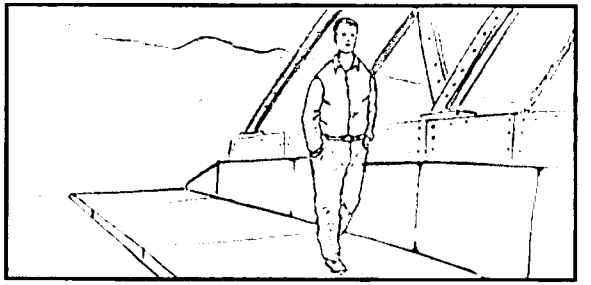
In Babel, *Montage* is used when Cate Blanchett's injured character is transported by helicopter to a hospital. The entire sequence is shown entirely with images. No dialogue is used.

FRAMING TERMS

Common terms used to frame objects within a scene are generally applied to actors, but can refer to inanimate objects as well. Examples are: a close-up of a phone or an extreme close-up of a coin slot. A director will often capture a collection of master shots, medium shots, and close-ups to provide a variety of footage during editing.



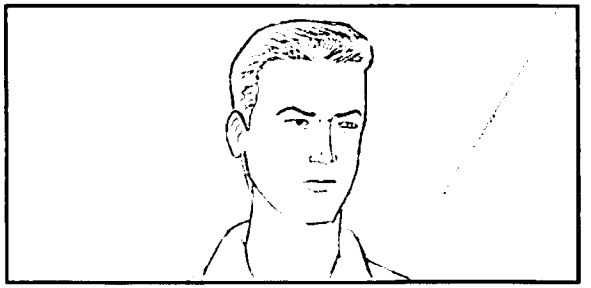
Master/Establishing Shot



Full Shot

Medium Shot

Medium Close-up



Close-up

Extreme Close-up

EXERCISES

• **Pick some of your favorite movies and watch them again.** Instead of watching them for the story, concentrate on the basic techniques the director uses, such as pan, tilt, dolly, mechanical, pull focus, and zoom.

• **Watch for different types of transitions.** Keep an eye out for cuts, fades, dissolves, and wipes. If you have the capability, slow the playback to observe quick transitions in slow motion.

• **Learn about montage.** There are many good books on the subject, including the works of Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin. Montage is a fundamental element of cinema. By exploring this technique, you'll greatly expand your knowledge and your ability to comprehend how films are made.

• **Seek out montage.** Not only will you see montage in movies, but you'll discover that it's a fundamental aspect of art, music, and other fields of creation. Observe how smaller components are combined to create the collection of elements that an audience enjoys.

• **Watch for close-ups, establishing shots, extreme close-ups.** Observe how the director changes the meaning of a shot by the way he frames actors or objects in a scene.