



TWO SHOT THEORY IN FILM STUDIES

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With filmmaking technology becoming much cheaper and even more prolific, the need for teaching both production and editing techniques at all levels of education is increasingly important. Unfortunately there is no standard teaching method or even any recognition for one of the most commonly recognized and copied devices used for narrative construction in almost all types of films. Previously called continuity editing, this paper redefines the concept in terms of two shots. Then creates a vocabulary for discussion and briefly analyzes some common editing techniques.

Keywords: Two shot, Picture size, Continuity editing.

Introduction

Two Shot Theory is a new, comprehensive term used to describe an editing process which is heavily reliant upon camera work in a narrative setting. The introduction of new terminology for discussing this type of film editing is necessary because of the contradictions and false starts in current teaching methods which are mainly focused on shooting techniques. Sometimes referred to as continuity editing, teachers of film try hard to explain concepts which were developed experimentally over the entire course of film history. Since filmmakers copy other filmmakers, their experiments, over time, become practiced theory. Generally, film students have not watched many of the films which contain the earliest examples of these major innovations in film theory, yet they have seen many derivative works which use the theory at differing degrees of success. This paper proposes to accumulate the terms used in describing these types of works and put them into a context which doesn't contradict other editing theories or shooting techniques [1]. Traditionally, very little has been written for the novice about how to edit footage in these types of sequences but it ends up being discussed prominently during critiques of a student's work, again at varying degrees of formal recognition. Therefore a jargon of terms needs to be established before any discussion of editing choices can begin. As films are being made by younger and younger students, this is a perfect opportunity to encourage a system of analysis and discussion which makes the topics involved clearer and easier for the student to understand so that future growth can take a rapid pace. This paper aims to clarify this terminology in a comprehensive manner for the sake of creating a method for teaching introductory classes in film studies.

The Problem with Terminology

In terms of a single piece of footage, a two shot is simply a picture with two people in it [2], however there are many different picture sizes and camera angles that are used to take two shots [3]. This leads to confusion when discussing the various functions of each particular type of shot and their relationship to the greater whole of an edited scene. Furthermore, terms like three-shot and one-shot have no true descriptive function in this method, even though there may be shots which contain three people or a single

actor in a typical two shot sequence. Without the foreknowledge that different types of two shots are to be strung together in an edited sequence, common terms such as long shots and close ups lose any functionality. The simplest way to get students started with the possibilities of choices for camera angles is to have them shoot a scene where two people are talking to each other. Then a productive discussion can take place which should include the concepts of an establishing shot, dominant shots, then first and third person perspectives.

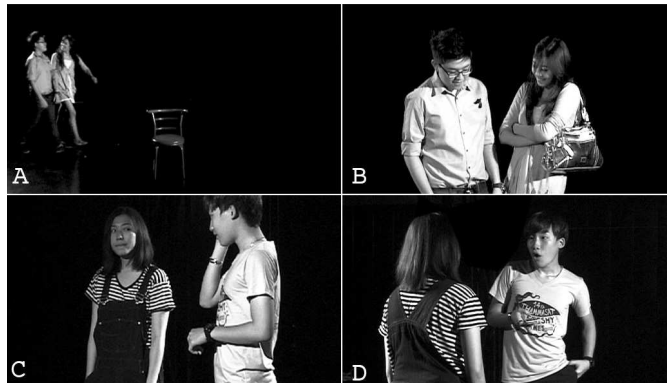


Fig. 1 Different kinds of two-shots: (A) an establishing shot from the director's point of view, (B) an evenly weighted medium two-shot, (C) a dominant two-shot emphasizing the expression of the actress over the actor, (D) an over the shoulder medium shot.

The Terminology We Have

Picture size and camera angles are the main syntax used to describe two shots and their function in a scene. The descriptive picture sizes are the long shot (LS), medium-long shot (MLS), medium shot (MS), medium-close up (MCU), close up (CU) and extreme close up (XCU). These terms, however, are usually taught in conjunction with only one actor in the frame, confusing students in the application of picture size terminology because in their edited sequence they will use mainly shots containing two (or more) people who relate together in a spacial setting. The terminology of picture size is important to help describe the type of two shot to be used in a dialog sequence, however it is insufficient to fully describe how the shots actually function with respect to each other.



Fig. 2 Picture sizes: A long shot (left) is any picture that captures the entire body of the actor from head to toe. There are many possible different sizes for long shots. A medium shot (middle) cuts the actor at the lower torso or waist, while a close up (right) cuts the actor slightly below the shoulders.

Terms inherently recognized in a shot reverse shot sequence (SRS) are over the shoulder shots (OTS) and point of view shots (POV). The terms only briefly touch on the concept of camera height and when first taught to students tend to restrict their choice of available camera angles for any given scene. The position of the camera adds a functionality to each shot which is dependent upon its perspective. There is very little terminology used to refer to these camera positions in this type of setting, and what is used is inadequate to cover the many different functions and relationships of the different picture sizes used. For

example, a medium sized two shot could emphasize one character over another from a low angle, or it could be shot from the same angle but have only one character framed on the right in a close up looking off screen. It is the camera placement, along with the framing, that specifically sets the function of each picture in its relationship to the others. Placement choices can be made based upon decisions which take into account the height of one actor over another, which actor to emphasize in the scene, creating a stylistic look, or even a distorted perspective.

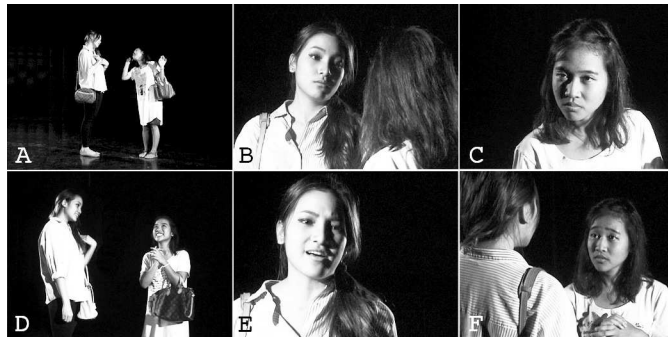


Fig. 3 A simple SRS combines different types of two shots: (A) ES from the director's point of view, (B) OTS (a third-person perspective), (C) POV (from the perspective of the other actress, also a reverse shot), (D) MLS from the director's point of view, (E) POV (the other actress' point of view), (F) OTS from the reverse angle. Notice that the POV shots (C and E) only contain one actress, hence they have a first-person perspective but they are still considered two shots because of framing and function within the overall scene.

Very early films used a camera position which mimicked the position of an audience member watching the action on a stage. Soon after that, filmmakers realized that by moving the camera they could better define the three dimensional space they were representing. Then soon after that, they realized that by putting the camera behind one actor, and then the other, this space could be defined by the relationship between the characters. This created a reverse shot which was also a reaction shot that preserved the physical distance between the characters.

The placement of the camera, first behind one actor and then the other, creates reverse shots. Whether or not there is part of another actor in the frame simply creates a first or third person perspective for the viewer. Here, point of view refers to what one actor sees. In a SRS it is the face of the other actor. Hence the other actor's close up framed on the appropriate side of the screen. When only one actor is in the frame, the point of view of actor A is the CU of actor B. Vice versa, the close up of actor A is the POV of actor B. Actor A is always on the left, and actor B is always on the right. In a POV shot, the viewer is looking through the eyes of one of the characters. Borrowing a term from literature, it is a first person perspective. To create the sense, for the viewer, of eaves dropping on a conversation, choose a reverse shot which shows some part of the other actor. The most commonly used angle is called an over the shoulder shot (OTS) but part of an arm, hip or leg will work to create a third person perspective for the viewer. This reinforces the idea that OTS is a term which doesn't function well when teaching about filmmaking.

Other types of shots typically used in SRS sequences are the insert shot and the cut away. If a filmmaker wishes to show something an actor is holding, wearing, or otherwise inside the action taking place, cutting to it would be called an insert. When an editor has many different types of camera angles and picture sizes of the same scene to choose from, he may cut from a master shot (LS) to a closer medium shot. This is also called an insert. In an OTS, if actor A was to look away from actor B, and look at something else, her point of view would be a LS or CU of something else. Since the picture to be shown is away from the main action (the dialog taking place), this is called a cut away.

To increase the descriptiveness of two shot terminology, the introduction of dominant shots becomes necessary. Instead of using the director's point of view, which is a straight-on LS, the camera is moved to one side or the other, making the face of one actor more fully visible than the other. This has the effect of making one actor more prominent in the frame and therefore having increased importance to the storyline. The choice to have one actor visually dominate the other is a mandatory yet subjective choice in the interpretation of the script. Without emphasizing one of the actors, the delivery of dialog remains even between the two characters and the scene falls flat [4]. Dominant shots are analyzed further at the end of the next section.

Function of the Camera Angle and Picture Size

When the camera is placed on such an angle as to create a dominant shot, a change in the picture size can be the difference between that picture functioning as a dominant shot, an OTS or a POV.



Fig. 4 From the same camera angle, a change in picture size creates a dominant shot, an OTS and a POV, respectively.

OTS is the best term available to describe a particular camera position, yet is something of a misnomer. The height of the camera is as important to the function of the shot as is the camera angle. Sometimes it is required to be lower than the actors eye height, sometimes higher, resulting in shots that don't always look over-the-shoulder of the other actor. Without describing both the picture size and the camera angle, students are left without guidelines when shooting. Furthermore the requirements in volumetric cutting demand that the space between the actors seems constant between edits.

The concept of screen direction is an added component to picture size because of the need to place one actor on the left and the other actor on the right. This placement maintains continuity throughout the cutting together of these different types of two shots. This concept is usually introduced to students via the 180° rule [5]. The rule of one-hundred and eighty degrees is a floor plan of a scene which describes the position of both the actors and the various camera angles.

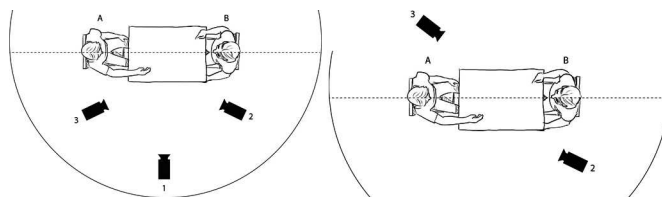


Fig. 5 The 180° rule. (Left image) actor A is on the left and actor B is on the right in all three camera positions. Crossing the line (right image) results in an incorrect placement of the actor for camera no. 3. Here both actors would be on the left side of the screen.

Crossing the line made by this rule will result in an incorrect screen direction. For this technique to be successful, students are taught to create an establishing shot (ES), which defines an actor to be placed on the left side and one to be placed on the right side. A typical ES is usually a very wide shot which

shows all the actors and all of the setting for a particular scene. This is most easily taught using a camera angle which mimics what an audience member would see when sitting in the middle of a theater watching a play, a director's point of view. By shooting an establishing shot which captures the entire set with both actors, the screen direction for the entire scene is set up, and can not be violated unless the viewer physically sees one actor cross to the other side of the screen in another LS or MS. This new shot becomes another establishing shot which is called a re-establishing shot (RES). All this is very confusing for students at first. By considering left and right placement on the screen, the emphases of one character in a dominant LS, and the camera position, students can very quickly create footage for a scene with dialog. The instructor can then begin teaching the editing techniques which will string these shots together for a balanced external composition.

One basic rule of editing motion pictures states, do not to cut between two different shots of the same picture size. But this rule becomes problematic when cutting dialog because of the need to cut back and forth between shots of a similar size.

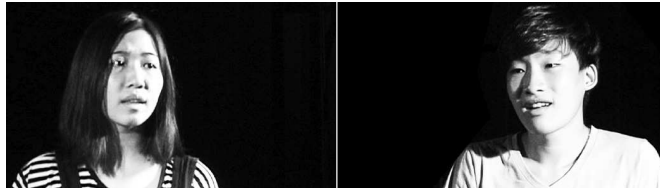


Fig. 6 Cutting between two shots of the same picture size (CU) violates one of the first rules of editing which is taught to film students, yet it is sometimes necessary for a dialog sequence. Here two opposing POV shots are shown.

However, if the figures are on opposite sides of the screen, maintaining screen direction from the 180° rule, this type of editing can work, although it produces hard, awkward cuts. To understand this editing rule, in this context, students must be taught about emphasis. Since one actor must dominate a particular scene, that actor should receive the CU while the other actor remains farther away. As long as the picture size doesn't violate the space between the actors, which was set in the ES, the technique works.



Fig. 7 Conscious choices in picture size help reduce editing errors. Here (left) an OTS frames the actress in a CU. On the right, the actor is framed in an XCU. The picture size changes between cuts and the emphasis is on the male character.

When students begin to understand the difference between POV shots and OTS shots, a discussion of dominant shots should then take place.

The main difference between a POV and an OTS is the difference in first and third person perspective [6]. In the above figure (left picture), the view feels like a spectator watching the conversation, because the view seems to be looking over the shoulder of the actor. For the POV shot (the right picture) the viewer actually has the same view as the actress, a first person perspective. POV shots are more engaging for the audience when set up properly, as they create direct associations with the feelings of that now invisible character.

To create the perfect SRS sequence a filmmaker must first decide who is most important to the scene and why. This is a subjective choice based on an interpretation of the dialog for the scene, in the context of the entire film. Once the dominant actor is chosen, there will be no need for a director's point of view. A MLS dominant shot will suffice to start the scene and the camera may get closer for emphases as the scene progresses, saving the POV (of that dominate actor) for the most important part of the dialog.

Eye-height vs. Eye-line

Until the invention of video in the 1970s, the vast majority of films produced were fiction works with their stories being the most important element in their construction [7]. This narrative language was developed, over time, informally by experimentation.

The different screen sizes of the different formats of film throughout film history may have been a hinderance towards the development of a more comprehensive idea of screen direction as the square formats seemed to require placing an actor in the center of the screen, while the rectangular formats allowed for placing opposing characters on the extreme left or right. Using the square format encouraged an attention to eye-line, giving the audience cues to where an off screen actor was located.



Fig. 8 Frame captures from Akira Kurosawa's "Ikiru" (1952), all subjects are placed near the center of the frame and looking off screen toward another character.

The more rectangular formats, being wider and hence showing more, may have encouraged the use of two shots. The eye-line inherently becomes part of the shot because actors naturally look at each other when engaged in dialog in a two shot. This line was eventually extended beyond the actors for more advanced camera placement. Imagine the POV shots in a film where an elephant converses with an ant. Eye-line is another concept which is poorly understood at all levels of production. In its most basic form it refers to a line extending from the eyes of an actor in a POV or CU shot looking off screen at where the audience expects the other actor to be. However, another use maintains the distance between to characters in a physical setting.

As each shot in an SRS sequence needs to be motivated by the actor who will dominate the scene. Choosing camera angles also means choosing a camera height. For a more complex analysis, we can use the example of a giant talking to a mouse. By connecting the eyes of both characters, and extending that line beyond both, we can interpolate the camera position which will give the proper perspective for each character's POV, OTS or dominant shot: looking up at the giant and down on the mouse. This technique is especially useful in cartoons and movies which rely heavily on special effects.

For narrative films it is a good idea to choose the height of the camera based on the height of the eyes of the actor who will dominate the scene, but here attention must be paid to how the film will be watched. Feature films screened in theaters typically use an eye-height which is lower than the actors eyes because the audience themselves are looking up at the screen. As the projection screen is larger than life,

this added dimension of looking up at the actors works well for an audience already required to look up at the picture. On the other hand, most modern films are viewed on a television or computer monitor where the viewer looks directly on. The effect of a low camera angle is wasted here, as it produces a distorted perspective. For television and YouTube viewing, and exact eye-height match may work better.

Editing the Footage

When students have acquired their footage and are ready to assemble their stories, teachers then have the opportunity to teach many different editing rules and techniques. The concept of external vs. internal composition becomes relevant to the work in progress. External composition compares how the length and weight of different shots work together in a sequence, while internal composition analyzes the effectiveness of the placement of characters within a single shot. Teaching about split edits and synchronization of sound also enters into the conversation, helping students of film choose in and out frames in a very specific manner. Shooting for an option in the edit, creates opportunities for discussions on why and where to use a particular shot as well as lessons in continuity and matches on action.

Using the terminology described previously, a common language exists to increase understand on many levels: the emotional relationship between the characters and the way the audience will relate to these characters are both artistic decisions involved when interpreting the script. Spatial relationships and visual artistic concerns are also easily talked about. When student inadvertently copy what they are used to watching, it is easier for teachers to make suggestions as to what may be a better framing for a specific purpose, or even begin a discussion on motivations.

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