

## **Blocking and choreographing action: coverage**

### Advantages and disadvantages

Coverage involves shooting a scene from several camera angles with each of these differing set ups covering most, if not all, of the scene. Coverage dominates in the filming of dialogue scenes because this blocking technique means that the dramatic emphasis of a scene can be controlled in editing:

- The best of an actor's performance can be selected and other material dropped.
- The feeling and emotion of a scene can be shifted by choices in editing.
- If the pace of a scene is too fast or too slow in relation to the whole drama this can be adjusted.

There are specific benefits in deciding to shoot coverage. It is very hard for a director to always correctly judge the pace and emotion of a scene while shooting, because the stresses and strains of production distort perception. A director can feel confident because a crew is working well and therefore feel that every set up is good, or the director may feel despondent because the morale of the crew is low and the director feels discouraged about the set ups accordingly. In the ebb and flow of energy and morale during production it can be difficult to assess how a scene will play to an audience, so well shot coverage gives a good chance of success.

### Disadvantages

If the director is inexperienced and can't design and plan set ups which cover most of the scene and if the director can't block performers to work within those set ups the shot material will end up being merely bits and pieces that can only be roughly cobbled together during the editing process. The key to success in shooting coverage is to plan, rehearse and shoot set ups that cover most, if not all, of the action of the scene.

Other disadvantages are as follows:

- Set ups with poor visual continuity may be interesting in themselves, but in editing the framings will look like separate chunks of disjoint action and most of the material will be unusable, because it simply won't edit.
- If set ups don't adequately cover a scene the performances will be stilted or uneven, because it is very difficult to get the same pace and flow when performing set ups which start and stop at arbitrary points in a scene
- Without careful attention to continuity of action, dialogue and props the overlapping set ups won't cut together and all the advantages of shooting coverage are lost.
- Shooting coverage is a skilled discipline. It needs a competent director, cast and crew

### Success in shooting coverage

Shooting coverage requires careful and proper use of the rules of visual continuity for editing and some aspects of this system are set out below. **See also:** *The continuity system* in this study guide

Reversals are matching shots that are mirror images in terms of framing. These can be shots framing two or more people, close ups, mid shots, wide shots or long shots. The pair of set ups illustrated below are correctly framed over the shoulder reversals.



While there may seem like little difference between the set ups illustrated above and the set ups illustrated below. Those below are not correctly framed in terms of being over the shoulder reversals



Although the immediate differences appear to be slight between the two sets of framings they are different to the extent that the framings in the lower pair are not mirror images and the positioning of the figures is closer and further apart in the different frames. For an audience seeing these differences there would be an unconscious confusion and an irritation. The shots are not the same, but what is the significance of this in terms of narrative? If there is no dramatic purpose to this idiosyncratic framing then the differences are merely a distraction: a mistake.



The pair of set ups illustrated above are not reversals even though they are both close ups. The framings above could however be successfully used for shooting coverage,

because their framings are plainly different and the audience will not make any attempt to compare them as similar, each is quite definitely distinct.

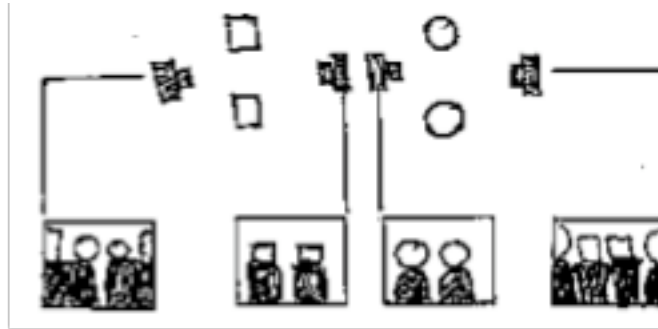
In terms of framing the rules for shooting over the shoulder reversals is simple. Either framings should be reversals, they match and mirror each other, or they should be distinctly different. When shooting reversals the composition and lens angle must be standardized. A failure to observe the mirror-matching rule will be perceived as sloppy and amateurish by the audience. In production this rule even extends to ensure that people who are different heights and different builds are framed as mirror images in reversals unless the drama of the story necessitates that the shot reveals that a one person is bigger or taller than the other. Altering the framing of a shot or the lens angle between two set ups without any clear intention just acts as interference in telling the story.

When a director blocks to shoot coverage it means that a set up will cover most of a scene and may be intercut during editing with several other set ups. This means that set ups must be standardized and reversals are one very important part of this. In practice coverage neutralizes the importance of the composition through the standardization of framing. With coverage it is not possible to frame set ups for one specific part of a scene if they are going to run the entire length of the scene.

The most common problem in shooting reversals is lack of attention and inexperience. The camera is set up and the zoom adjusted until the shot is framed as desired. Then for the next set up the camera is repositioned, the level of the camera slightly tilted to adjust for the height of the performer and the zoom adjusted to give apparently the same framing, but these two simple adjustments; a slight tilt and a small change in lens angle, mean that the resulting pair will cut awkwardly. Another fault related to minor adjusting is when filming takes place in a small location; the camera operator simply films the same scene from different positions fitting in the camera wherever possible. Once again lens angle is changed and while the characters haven't moved their positions in the room the framings for reversal are wrong. The solution is to move the positions of the performers in a small location, so that the shot is correctly framed as the audience will see it.

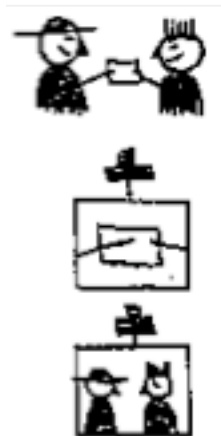
There are certainly occasions when a director and cinematographer will choose to use uneven framing to create unease, tensions or uncertainty, but this will be a deliberate choice at a certain point in the narrative. It should never be due to poor technical control.

Internals and externals: Set ups can be framed to be either apparently within the space between the performers, or outside the space between the performers, as externals or internals. In the example below there are two pairs of reversals, one pair is external and one pair is internal.



The importance of internals and externals is first of all dramatic, since the tendency of these options is to make a spectator feel that they are participating in a scene, because of internals, or observing a scene from outside, because of externals. These two simple options give the director a very powerful tool for controlling the audience's point of view in the story.

Two very useful shots to help give coverage a more dynamic and dramatic edge are inserts and cutaways. Inserts cut in on a detail in the scene and this can be done in three ways. The close up can be framed so it is exactly on the axis of the lens of the wide shot. This, like other continuity rules is clear: if the set ups are meant to share the same lens axis this must be precise; the framing of the two set ups will stay exactly as if it were on a line from the centre of the lens in the wide shot to the centre of the lens in the close shot. Any minor adjustments in framing will only provide an irritating jump. The diagram below shows an insert framed on the axis of the lens in the wide shot.



If the close up is not on the axis of the lens it must be completely distinct. Such a close up can be confusing, because an audience may not be clear what the close up is showing. If, for instance, during an edited scene of two people conversing, the shot cuts to a close up of a pocket, whose pocket is it? When framing off-axis the insert needs to be very clearly motivated by action. For example: In the wide shot the character reaches into their back pocket. Cut to close up: Hand goes into back pocket and brings out the wallet. This kind of insert is a very strong cut, because it so clearly details action, but it must be clearly motivated to have a dramatic, rather than a confusing effect. The third method for motivating a close up is to use an eye-line match. In the diagram below the character looks at their watch and the next set up

frames their point of view of the watch in close up. This usually works very well, but sometimes performers are too brief in their look and because of this the insert shot which should be motivated by the actor's look is difficult to edit. The director should make sure that the actor's look is clear and definite when the set up framing the actor is taken if the shot or it will not be useable to create an editing point for an insert.



Cutaways are the opposite of an insert. A cutaway shows something that is not part of the main action of the scene. For example: Two people are at a racetrack having a conversation and the shots cuts away to the race that is underway. Using cutaways is another very effective dramatic tool for a scene, because cutaways can be aggressive, or sensual, or ironic, and a good director will constantly be thinking of ways to use effective cutaways to help define and delineate a scene.

The power and potential of both inserts and cutaways should be highly appreciated. They can both add considerably to what might otherwise be a rather pedestrian coverage scene.

If continuity is not maintained then shooting coverage becomes a waste of effort, because the set ups will not cut together effectively. Instead of the editor being able to make creative choices in the editing process it will become a struggle to find matching material, which drastically limits the shots available. Set ups that are interestingly composed and well performed will prove impossible to use if they lack visual continuity for editing. Having to discard set ups during editing because they won't cut in terms of visual continuity, because the reversals and eye-lines don't match is very poor practice indeed.

The production team needs to work well for continuity to be maintained. There must be a script supervisor to ensure continuity is properly kept and set ups must be run with the concentration and skill that maintaining continuity requires. A crew operating without a clear structure, or good working practices, are bound to damage a production because they won't be able to keep continuity.

Storyboarding: For an inexperienced director and crew the range of demands placed by the continuity system can seem overwhelming. Dialogue, action, costume, props, sound and visual continuity all have to be maintained and it is here that storyboarding proves an invaluable tool, because the issues related to visual continuity in each scene and each set up can be checked in the calm of preproduction rather than under pressure on the set during shooting. It is also for this reason that storyboarding cannot

be effective when a director works in isolation. At a minimum in the production team, the director, the script supervisor and the camera operator must understand and be able to work to the requirements of visual continuity for editing.

Of course the rules of continuity don't always have to be observed and they may often be flaunted to create deliberate tensions, uncertainties or confusion. The horror genre specializes in creating uncertain and undefined space and the same is often true of action and suspense scenes, but simply ignoring the requirements of continuity is not an option. The experienced director is not challenged by the rules of continuity, but uses them as a tool to help create clear dramatic action.

The easiest way to direct coverage is to have the performers move, reach their marks and then start their dialogue. Simple moves will not involve actors walking and talking at the same time. For example: two people are standing at a bar conversing. This dialogue can be covered using any simple combination of reversals. The two people then move out of shot and move into another shot to sit at a table. The performers have moved and repositioned to keep the scene from going stale, and becoming visually uninteresting but once they are sitting down and static a simple set of reversals covers the dialogue. When blocking in this way there is no complex movement within a pair of matching set ups. With this simple approach to blocking it's a case of getting the characters to their marks and then shooting a number of set ups to act as coverage.

This approach to coverage, actors delivering the dialogues when they are still does provide the material necessary for continuity editing, but such a static approach will certainly become boring over the course of a long production. For an inexperienced production team it's a question of balancing their ability to keep continuity with the way the director wishes to block the action and the need to keep the film visually interesting. Everyone on set is in some way involved in keeping continuity, so creating complex blocking cannot simply be forced through by the director who simply expects good results: The performers, the director, the script supervisor, the cinematographer and the camera operator all have to have the level of skill necessary to meet the continuity demands placed on the production due to the difficulty presented by the blocking. Just because the director understands the continuity won't make it successful on the set.

Shooting coverage without storyboarding: On an inexperienced crew when keeping even basic continuity requires a great deal of effort the blocking has to be simple and the performers have to accept this simplicity and acknowledge the restraints of the storyboard, but once the director and crew have the knowledge and experience to feel confident in shooting coverage then preproduction storyboarding can be dispensed with and this allows performers and director a great deal of freedom to work creatively on a scene during rehearsals. In an experienced production team, rather than working to pre-planned set ups, the director and the performers can decide in rehearsals on their motivations for movement, how they wish to physically interact, how they want to position themselves, etc. Then once rehearsals are finished it is possible to work out an instant shooting plan through a simple shot list, rather than having to rely on a number of carefully storyboarded set ups which have been determined in preproduction. This open approach to blocking and interpreting a scene is possible because the system of shooting offered by coverage means that an experienced

production team will know how to control continuity so that the set ups used to cover a scene will produce material that can be successfully and creatively edited.

## **Blocking and choreographing action: shot by shot scenes**

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

Shot by shot blocking is simply shooting a scene in a series of set ups which will be edited together one after the other with each set up having little overlap. This is unlike coverage where set ups will almost always overlap and cover the same action.

#### **Advantages**

The advantages of shot by shot is the ability to frame expressively with each set up in the scene being carefully designed for its specific dramatic effect. Coverage does not allow this because its set ups must follow regular patterns such as reversals and therefore be rather predictable.

Shot by shot blocking is ideally suited to action sequences; fights, shoot outs, car chases, etc., where each piece of action can be framed in a dramatic way through the choice of camera position, camera movement and lens angle. Shot by shot technique also allows for careful concentration on special FX and stunts, because this kind of set up can be carefully designed to make sure the results appear believable to the audience and also, that these set ups can be safely performed. If coverage was used for special FX and stunts then there might be a need to perform the same stunt action several times when in fact it could not be exactly repeated for continuity purposes. For example; falls, or explosions would differ each time they took place. Of course very expensive stunts or Special FX may well be covered using several cameras simultaneously, but this builds a very high cost into filming a scene and would only be applicable to very high budget productions.

#### **Disadvantages**

The need for a large number of set ups for a scene produces a very slow shooting rate. While single set up scenes and shooting coverage can produce a lot of material per set up, shot by shot blocking might only produce a few seconds of material for a set up which took the same time to plan, rehearse and shoot as a single set up covering an entire scene.

In allowing for the dramatic framing which shot by shot makes possible the need for continuity is not lost, but increased:

Continuity of lighting from set up to set up needs to be maintained and if the camera is dramatically changing position, set ups may well need to be re-lit to ensure continuity of lighting is maintained.

Continuity of sound will not be possible to maintain during shooting, especially where there are stunts and Special FX, which will not sound 'realistic' when they are being recorded, so that in the editing of a shot by shot scene the soundtrack will usually have to be built up from scratch, requiring extra effort and attention during post-production.

Continuity of props, dialogue, costume and make up can be severely challenged when a scene may take several days to shoot and is broken up into very small elements. Precise attention to detail is necessary to be sure that set ups won't be unusable



through poor continuity. A top class production team is required for such accurate continuity

Visual Continuity has to be maintained. Shot by shot blocking allows for a great deal of manipulation of space and time; trains can be made to appear as if they are rushing at excessive speed, or a shoot out can be elongated into heightened suspense as two gun fighters reach for the same weapon, etc. In these circumstances knowing what will and won't work in terms is related to the director's knowledge of visual continuity and their production experience. Excellent storyboarding is obviously vital for complex shot by shot sequences.

To try and offer a rule of thumb when preparing shot by shot blocking: always keep visual continuity for editing from set up to set up. If visual continuity is going to be broken be sure this is deliberate and this is done because the set up offers an intentional dramatic emphasis.

As a general guide: when moving from set up to set up the continuity of screen direction and eye line will be maintained, but the consistency offered by matching reversals will be discarded in favor of more dramatic compositions.

Shot by shot blocking presents a particular challenge for dialogue scenes as this kind of set up is particularly disruptive to someone wishing to give a sustained and detailed performance. It is for this reason that this approach to blocking is favored in the action scene where the needs for subtle performance may be minimal. If a dialogue scene is blocked using shot by shot it is essential that the performers are robust and experienced enough to sustain this kind of disruption. Some feature film and television adverts solve this problem by having so many set ups covering a scene that one entire set up may only be used for a brief shot in the final edit, but this is a choice which is open to very very few professional productions because of the high costs and the production time that detailed shot by shot entails.

The ability of the director, cast and crew needs to be carefully assessed before taking up the challenge of shot by shot, because if one or two set up are failures then the entire scene may be ruined, because there is no coverage available to solve any problems.

The need for time and money and experience are the drawbacks to using shot by shot blocking and the advantage is a cornucopia of expressive choices. In good shot by shot direction each new set up will carry the emotion and intention of the scene and in poor shot by shot the cutting may be intense, the angles ever- changing, but the effect on the audience will be soporific. Just because a scene has a large number of set ups and frantic editing does not make it more successful in dramatic terms.

### **Success on the set**

The staging of shot by shot scenes can be extremely simple or extremely complex.

At its simplest the performer will go through the action required by a scene. For example; a character will get into a car and to break this down into shot by shot blocking the performer will merely go through the same action again and again with every changing set up covering a different part of the action. The level of complexity of shooting such a scene depends on the demands on the storyboard and the difficulty of achieving this. If the planned set ups require cranes, tracks, zooms, pans, the building of cut away cars and the re-lighting of the scene for changing set ups the work involved in the scene will substantially increase. Further complexity may be added if the performer can't simply perform the action, but has to move faster or slower, or in different ways to make the set up works as intended.

On a small scale production with limited time and perhaps limited experience there is therefore only a limited scope for shot by shot blocking. As with single shots success lies in good preproduction storyboarding, but if this preplanning proves unattainable on the set the director and the production team must be ready to be adaptable to keep the shooting moving forward.

It important to stress that shot by shot is not done simply done to create a highly edited scene. If all that is needed to show someone getting into a car is one set up, that is enough, if it requires twenty set ups for dramatic purposes, then that many set ups can be justifiable.

### **Crib Sheet: Shot by Shot and Psychological Realism**

A scene can be broken down into small elements and each element shot as a specific set up. This is shot by shot blocking, which has its merits and its problems:

**Shot by Shot can work well because:** This blocking technique produces very carefully crafted shots that can be dynamic and dramatic when edited together. Shot by shot matches the predominant contemporary style and taste for fast action with a lot of cuts per scene. Shot by shot allows set ups to be designed for special FX on set such as dangerous stunts or events; explosions, crashes, injuries, etc. and for S/FX in post-production such as CGI. These features make shot by shot the chosen option for contemporary actions scene and for scenes where the information is primarily visual, such as adverts.

**Shot by shot is a failure when:** Set ups do not match because of poor continuity and so they will not edit together. The performance of the actors is broken up by the demands of shot by shot so that they cannot play their scene effectively and their performance is damaged; stilted, artificial and lacking dramatic credibility.

**To successfully shoot shot by shot:** You need a good understanding of all aspects of continuity. You need to use shot by shot on suitable scenes. You need to spend the time planning your set ups for shot by shot by making storyboards and shot lists to ensure continuity. You need the necessary time in production to be able to shoot all the set ups you have planned. You need to ensure that actors are not worn out by multiple takes

and their performance is not undermined by the demands of shot by shot. You need to ensure that sound FX and wild tracks are available when editing shot by shot material so that continuity of sound is maintained.

### **Psychological Realism**

Psychological realism is a very special type of shot by shot blocking that gives the audience the impression that they are directly experiencing what a character in the scene is thinking or feeling. The steps to achieve this are very specific:

During the course of a scene the editing moves to a close up of a character in order to establish that the next shot will show their point of view. At this moment the sound of the scene shifts and establishes a sound that matches through the manipulation of diegetic sound and sometimes expressive music the emotions and feelings of the character. The audience will be keyed into this moment to some extent by what is already happening in the scene. The point of view shot will then make use of some sort of camera or lighting technique; slow motion, shaking, craning, tracking, flickering etc.. that creates a visual sensation that emphasises how the character is experiencing this moment in the scene. The audience take their visual experience of this shot to match the emotional experience of the character in the scene. The point of view shot will then be followed by a shot of the character where the audience will see the character in a shot using a camera technique; slow motion, shaking, craning, tracking, flickering etc.. that reinforces the audience's connection of the emotional effect of the shot to the inner perception of the character. To move back from the psychological realism to an objective view of the scene, a shot will show another element of the story and re-establish 'natural' sound.

The simplest example of shooting psychological realism might well be that of a person on a roller coaster ride and use the following sequence of set ups: Establishing shot of roller coaster travelling at speed. Close up on a character on the roller coaster; The sound of the roller coaster is very much louder than in the establishing shot, there is also a scream. The point of view shot shows a rushing, frantically shaking shot of the roller coaster travelling down a ferocious drop. The next shot cuts to a frantically shaking shot of the character in the roller coaster with a roar of sound mixed in with the sound of roller coaster itself. A long shot of the roller coaster shows the ride going round its circuit and 'natural' sound returns.

Blocking and choreographing action: shot by shot scenes

### **Techniques to enhance blocking, camerawork and sound**

When planning set ups there are a number of techniques, use of camera and use of sound that can add dramatic effect.

#### **Change of image size**

Sudden changes of image size from long shot to extreme close up, or vice versa can be very dramatic. They can also be used to cover dangerous action like punches. Cuts directly along the axis of the lens are very sudden.

#### **Big cut/Shock cut**

Besides a change of image size an extreme change of camera position can create a sense of jump and extremity that enhances a scene. It can also mask dangerous action. The big cut/shock cut can even break the 180 degree/continuity line if this will be dramatically effective.

#### **Screen sections**

In the horror film or thriller film where a character may be under menace or threat, the screen sections can be used to create a sense that there is a space for a character on the who is not actually there. This type of deliberate mis-framing manipulates the audience's unconscious understanding of the conventions of the continuity system. They know what the correct framings should be, so when there is a mis-framing that creates an unconscious unease.

#### **Movement out of frame and into frame**

Breaking an action into a sequence of shots where characters or other events move out of frame and then into frame on the next cut is very dynamic and makes it possible to stage dangerous action effectively.

#### **Open framing**

Framing can create the sense that what is shown is all that exists in the drama and that might be called a closed framing. For example closed framing can isolate a person and make them look alone in the crowd. For action and horror scenes a sense of things happening outside the frame or danger or threat existing nearby can be achieved through opening framing. In open framing the cropping of objects in the frame is clipped so that there is a sense that there is space just outside the frame. Characters can move in and out of frame. This 'untidiness' is a useful approach to creating tension.

#### **The creeping camera/ The following camera**

The slowly tracking camera or the camera that follows a character, or even moves into empty space can suggest a menacing off screen presence.

#### **Tracking, panning, zooming,**

Fast tracks towards dramatic action or reactions, pans with and against the action. Fast pans, whip pans, zooms and snap zooms can all increase the intensity of what is happening. They can also increase the sense of realism in a scene.

**Focusing**

Snap focus, or a sudden change of focus can add to action by highlighting an event. In horror and suspense out of focus elements in the foreground or background can create unease.

**Use of lenses**

Wide angle lenses create distortion and heighten perspective. This distortion can add to the emotional reaction of a person in terror and make their objective seem farther away than it is. Long lenses flatten elements that are on different planes. The apparent nearness of a person to a dangerous event can be enhanced with a long lens.

**Undercranking/Fast motion and Overcranking/Slow motion**

A slight increase in the speed in terms of the action that is being filmed can make it appear more dynamic, furious, or aggressive. The use of this technique when noticeable is laughable, but it is still discretely used. Slow motion suspends and delays a moment it can hold an audience's emotions and build them. It can show them details they would otherwise miss. The use of slow motion has to be very specific or it will simply slow down the pace of the story and add nothing dramatic.

**Holding and bouncing**

Many edits can be approached two ways. The action being shown can be completed and held. This holding will allow the audience to react emotionally and fully and understand the action. Cutting on the bounce finishes before the action is complete and pushes the pace and the story forward. Good editing will present a scene and stories where there is a suitable mixture of holding and bouncing.

**Loss of sound**

Loud sudden and expressive sound can make an image more powerful. For instance the clash of blades during a swordfight. It can be just as effective to lose the sound at key moments, because it creates an emotional effect like a held breathe, a sudden pause.

**Distorted sound: Artificial sound/expressive sound**

Sound can often move well beyond what is realistic, because an audience is concentrating on the story and the visuals. A piano playing somewhere in a building while the new tenants move into their apartment can add eeriness that 'natural' sound might not. A dangerous machine might have animal sound added to the engine noise. Sound design is a very important element of making a scene as effective and dramatic as possible.

## **Blocking and choreographing action: single set up scenes**

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

One way to block a scene is to shoot it using a single set up. This blocking technique is a sometimes called 'editing in camera', because the staging and choreographing which produces a single set up scene replaces the need for post-production editing and therefore this 'editing in camera' is appropriate. The technique is also known as 'long takes' and sometimes 'plan sequence'.

### **Advantages**

There are several advantages in using a single set up to cover a scene.

The single set up scene is economical in terms of time and therefore money, because only one set up is required for the scene. Even if the single take is complex it will still produce more finished footage in less time than several set ups covering the same action from different angles. The use of a single set up for a scene also reduces editing time, making it a very effective budgeting tool and for this reason it is a favorite with low budget productions.

When a scene is shot using coverage, involving a number of camera set ups, the actors have to control and repeat their performance quite precisely to prevent continuity problems. In a single set up scene the performers' need to make their marks and the camera needs to be carefully choreographed, but the performers can perform more freely during a take knowing that they will not have to repeat the same actions for set ups covering the scene from different angles to allow for editing.

There are several cinema directors with particularly good reputations for working well with performers and they often use a single set up for a scene. These directors would include: Jean Renoir, Orson Welles and Martin Scorsese. What this link between an 'actor's director' and single set up blocking reveals is that a good director will choose to work with and trust performers rather than trying to control them and the single set up scene gives the performers a special opportunity to show their talent. The skills of the performers help make the reputation of the director.

Inexperienced director's can benefit from using single set up scenes because, 'what you see is what you get'. The performance the director sees in the single set up is not going to be altered by editing. It is easier to judge the pace, quality of performance and the overall effectiveness of a scene if an inexperienced director does not have to imagine how the set ups will appear when they are edited.

### **Disadvantages**

There are some disadvantages and problems in using a single set up to shoot a scene:

If the single set up does not work well within the film as a whole there is little or no way to change it apart from cutting off chunks at the beginning or the end of the shot. It requires confidence and skill to rely on a single set up scene to work well within a story.

If a drama is shot in a series of long single set up scenes the pace may become stodgy and the story loses dramatic emphasis. This can be due to the lack of change in the use of camera angles and because the absence of cutting makes the audience feel that the tone of the story is somewhat predictable. With a good director and a good script this is not necessarily true; Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* was shot using single set ups with each take running ten minutes in length and Woody Allen uses a large amount of single set up scenes so that the comedy can flow freely and also because his films are low budget productions which need to be shot quickly.

In the television soap the single set up scene can be used, because of the need to shoot a lot of material very quickly and the short snappy scenes of the soap opera suit this treatment. However in the 'quality' television drama the single set up scene is avoided and scenes are usually covered from several angles. Coverage is used for television drama because these programmes have to fit specific time slots; eleven minutes between adverts, etc. Also, television production is producer controlled and this control can be exercised in the editing if multiple set ups are used. Also, productions may need to be re-edited due to broadcast policy and further re-editing may also take place when different versions of a programme are prepared for screening in countries around the globe. In the television drama frequent use of the single set up scene is rarely an option open to a director, because the single set up scene severely limits the options in the editing stage.

### **How to successfully design and stage single set up scenes**

The primary rule is simplicity:

- Keep the camera movement simple and repeatable and move the performers. It is easier to get people to move intricately rather than a camera and its crew.
- Use a simple panning shot, or a single straight track.

The options for framing and blocking in the single set up scene are numerous. If the camera is simply static performers can:

- Move away or towards the lens
- Change sides in the frame
- Move into and out of frame and across the frame

If camera movement is added:

- The camera can reveal and frame a range of spaces with a variety of backgrounds and compositions
- The camera can reveal performers
- The camera can move with performers or away from performers

- The camera can participate in the action
- The camera can comment on and tell the story by leading the audience towards a certain viewpoint. For example by allowing the spectator to see one character's private reaction.

A director will find this procedure useful when planning and storyboarding long single set ups:

Draw out a simple overhead diagram, a basic map of the performance space, Choose a spot for the camera to be positioned. Choose the angle of the lens and through imaginary camera movements and which follow the performers' movements work through the possible options for framing and choreographing the shot.

Planning the single set up just on paper is one option, but this creative process can be made three dimensional by using some small miniature figures to acts as the performers and then they are actually moved around in front of an imaginary camera. Trial and error will eventually produce a result where the drama can unfold in front of a single set up. If getting the framing with a single lens angle proves difficult this is an occasion when an adjusting zoom can prove highly effective.

The warning for preproduction planning is that if set ups are very complex in terms of camera and choreographing it may be difficult, if not impossible to successfully stage them on the set. As a rule keep the camera movement to a simple movement. For dramatic effect move the performers in decisive ways; into and out of shot and from the foreground to the background. The single set up scene offers a great deal of variety if properly designed and many scenes can be successfully covered using this type of blocking.

The biggest potential problem in rehearsing a long, complex set up is the possibility that the performers will be forced into such a rigid and precise pattern of movement that they will become worn out in rehearsal and as consequence produce a tired, stilted and unconvincing performance. Similarly, if a single set up is designed to be overly-exact the camera crew will never be able to achieve the necessary precision in performing the shot and frustration will set in. In practice if the director has the skill to thoughtfully design a long single set up then the actors' movements will be fairly straight forward and the choreographing of the set up will match the dramatic intention of the scene. In these circumstances, when the director takes care not to become too fussy or complex, the performers and the camera crew will be able to work well with the necessary blocking and they will not find it a restriction.

In order to avoid problems during rehearsals and filming an inexperienced director's attempts at the single set up scene should be kept as simple as possible. Any overly complex, impossible to rehearse shot, evidences poor direction: if the performers can't make the required marks to match the camera it is the director's fault and the director should adjust the set up if this begins to occur. The procedure for running a single set up scene on the set should be as follows:



The performers and the director develop how the scene will be played in relation to the set up in the storyboard. Nothing is finalized before this stage.

The camera is placed in the approximate position for the storyboarded set up and the scene is simply walked through until the choreographing and continuity is clear. The director should not expect to finalize and fix the camera position or the performers' marks during the first stage of this process, because it is during this rehearsal period that the director and performers can usefully improve and develop the scene and putting down marks at the very start will only hinder the rehearsals and even slow down the shooting time, because marks will change and the performers and the camera crew will become unclear as to what blocking and marks have finally been decided. The director when agreeing to the performers' wishes will be quietly bearing in mind that the scene is to be recorded in a single set up, but this will be done subtly and not be used to confine the performers' own interpretation of the scene.

There is a trade-off to be made between the performers' suggestions for staging the scene and the pre-planning of the set up. A good director will balance these without conflict and a weak director should always bear in mind that a poor performance will badly damage a production, while a simplified set up may make little difference to the overall film. The director will, in most circumstances, favor the performers' wishes if rehearsing the scene proves difficult.

During the initial on set rehearsals for a single set up the camera operator and the cinematographer may well be observing and considering how the single set up will work, but the camera operator and cinematographer do not decide how a scene should be played. The camera operator will be considering which lens angle and which camera position will be best for the scene, but will never be the person who tries to control the blocking of a scene. The production team are working to support the director and the performers, not to confine them. If it turns out that the performers' ideas are completely unusable for the planned set up the director will either guide them back to the original plan for the set up, or devise a new set up.

### **Crib sheet for shooting single set up scenes**

Single set ups are used to shoot scenes using a single long-take set up. They can be complex or simple. They are a fast and efficient ways to cover a scene and save time in production. For this reason they are often favored by low-budget filmmakers.

Single set ups simplify continuity for a scene because there is no need for the director to break a scene down into separate set ups that overlap and therefore need to match in terms of continuity of action, props and dialogue.

Single set up scenes can be dynamic, complex and may require a high degree of skill. They allow actors to show off their talents, because actors can change their performance for each take.

There are three approaches to single set ups with a growing level of difficulty at each stage:

**One:** Keep the camera movement simple; completely static, or a simple pan or track, and then move the actors rather than the camera. It is easier for a person to move and change direction in a complex path than a camera.

**Two:** Use complex camera movements; twisting, curving, following, panning, tilting, etc., but keep the movements of the actors simple; standing, walking, etc.

**Three:** Use complex camera movements and complex actors' movements where both camera and actors need to be highly choreographed and co-ordinated.

Plan your set up in advance of shooting using a floor plan of the location and small models for the actors and the camera positions.

Plan the scene in a rehearsal prior to shooting where the actors, or stand-ins for the actors, and a camera operator work slowly through the scene and the camera positions. This will take time and effort.

Do not try to prepare a long single set up on a production day with a full crew in attendance as it results in time being wasted and having a large crew standing around doing nothing is often frustrating for them.

What the director needs to identify for a successful single set up are the **key frames** for each part of the shot. These are the framings that match the camera position to the actor's positions in relation to the action and the dialogue at key parts of the scene. These can then be noted on the script so that the set up as practiced on paper or in rehearsals can be reproduced on set. A good single set up will clearly show the action and reactions of the actors in the scene; it will help tell the story. It will control the pace and dynamism of the story because single set ups are expressive; they can be frantic, formal, stately, chaotic etc., depending on the camerawork used.

On set single set ups will be prepared by actors slowly walking through the action and dialogue for the scene with the camera movements being made at the same time and marks being put down for the positions of the camera and actors for the key frames. It is important to note that keeping the camera movement simple and moving the actors

is the first level of skill for shooting single set ups. If a set up too complex for the skill of the actors or the crew it will fail.

A single set up scene will be a success if:

- It is properly planned in advance and the key frames identified.
- If it is planned within the skills and experience of the cast and crew.
- If the camera operator is competent, concentrated and prepared.

Single set ups will fail:

- If they are only imagined in the mind of the director and there is no physical planning or rehearsal for the set up.
- If the set up is too complex for the camera operator and the cast to perform.
- If actors do not know their lines and their performance of the scene breaks down during the shooting of a long take, then the planned set up will fail.

## **Blocking and choreographing action: film direction and film style**

### **Introduction**

The previous sections on blocking and choreographing action clearly set out three methods of blocking; *Coverage*, *Shot by shot* and *Single set up scenes*. These approaches may seem to be merely practical solutions to the filming of action and dialogue, but each one has its own historical development and its own use within the cinema and television industries. Each method of blocking can be related to a style of production which might be categorized as either Mainstream, Cult, Art House, Independent or Social Realist and when one considers the options for choreographing action in relation to these different types of production one can see how practical techniques become related to a specific style of direction, with directors choosing to block action as the style of production and the type of dictates.

This section on film direction, and film style, sets out the basics of the historical relation between blocking and film style. No style of blocking is exclusive to any particular type of production, Mainstream cinema can use single set ups, shot by shot and coverage, but there are general codes and conventions of film style which are created by the ways in which the action is staged and shot by the director for different types of story within different production systems. The importance of understanding this historical context is to clarify how strongly production conventions influence a professional director and the methods they will use to block and choreograph a production.

### **Coverage: the studio system**

The studio system instituted the ubiquitous use of coverage to ensure that productions were shot in a consistent and disciplined way. This type of blocking was used in conjunction with particular styles of set design and costume design and reinforced by conventions in script and performance which all contribute to what is recognizably the studio style of Hollywood and European cinema from the 1920's to the late 1940's.

The film *Casablanca* would be a premiere example of the dominance of coverage in the studio era.

### **The stylistics of the studio system were as follows:**

In the studio system script was derived from theatrical dialogue. The dialogue carried the clear conscious ideas of the characters. The subtext comes from the emphasis given in delivering lines and the facial reactions. Performers stand and converse, any sense of the vernacular is created by the use of superficial accents rather than actual vocabulary or regional accent.

Performance was controllable and repeatable for continuity: relying on the face and voice for expression and reaction rather than gesture and movements. This style is once again linked to a theatrical performance style; standing and talking.

Lighting was designed to make the central characters, the stars, as appealing and attractive as possible and often used the standard formula of three-point lighting. In lighting a scene for mood and atmosphere it was the background that was controlled

by adding ominous shadows or sunlight from windows. The performers however were kept glamorous and good looking whatever the setting of the scene.

Framing followed a functional system which suited coverage; wide shot, close up etc. The framing was rarely changed to match the mood of a scene. Camera angle and lens angle were kept consistent for using coverage. Independent camera movement was rarely used. The camera stayed with the performers.

Editing was functional, with the cutting moving from character to character as they spoke in order to unfold the drama. The editing was motivated by the characters' interaction. The editing stayed with the performers.

As with the lighting design, costume design was made as appealing as possible. Stars were glamorous and well dressed even when the characters they played might not have possessed such fabulous clothes.

Set design was functional and linked by social codes; a mansion for the rich, a hovel for the poor, etc. But sets were rarely designed to display the internal psychological state of the characters who inhabited them.

### **The studio system as a production system**

The classical studio system was producer-led and the director filmed a script shooting coverage to a set standard of quality. There were A grade directors and B grade directors and personnel were effectively interchangeable between productions. A director might direct a Western then a romantic comedy. The design of a film in all aspects, including the style of direction, was centralized by the control of the producer whose methods would conform to studio practices.

The technique of direction to match the need for a high level of output was coverage, which also, vitally, allowed for the careful control of lighting, performance and costume, with the selection of the best takes and the use of editing to follow each performer as required. The continuity of the filming had to be excellent which required the static talking performance. The voice and the face were the key to acting success in the studio era. Stars dominated in the studio system and the system served the stars.

In essence the classic narrative cinema technique was about making films attractive, maintaining stylistic coherence, maintaining control at all times and producing a narrative which was easy to read and enjoy.

The handful of directors who are noted and studied for their specific directorial style were able to achieve this status because of their ability to direct financially successful films, which in turn led to them obtaining a substantial degree of directorial autonomy. Film directors such as Hawks, Ford and Wyler are often used as examples of directors who were successful enough in the studio system to gain directorial control so that their films show specific characteristics of style. However they are the exception to the rule and stand somewhat apart from the studio system; where most directors remain effectively anonymous. For instance, Michael Curtiz, was a top director at Warner Brothers, directing over fifty features, but he is not noted for any particular directorial style. Today's television directors are for the most part anonymous, and this was how

the studio system functioned: the vast majority of directors worked to the style of the studio system.

### **Coverage: contemporary television drama**

In the contemporary television drama the influence of the studio system is still exceedingly strong. The main change has been a shift from the glamour of the studio system to a more naturalistic, but still attractive style of production.

Script has moved to a greater naturalism, but still retains the use of dialogue to convey clear conscious ideas. Standing and talking is still the norm. The apparent naturalism TV drama stems from the setting of dramas in 'real' situations; the hospital, the police station, the court, etc.

### **These are the stylistics of contemporary television drama:**

**Performance.** Still relying on face and voice, like the studio system, with gestures and setting becoming more naturalistic. The performance is carefully controlled to meet the demands of continuity editing using coverage as the primary blocking technique.

**Lighting.** Still designed to be attractive for the performers, but again given a more naturalistic tone. In the studio system beautiful people were made handsome, glamorous and sensual, while in contemporary television ordinary people are made appealing and attractive.

**Framing.** Still following the methods created during the studio system and not used expressively in contemporary television.

**Editing.** Still following the methods created during the studio system and not used expressively.

**Costume.** Still attractive, but again more naturalistic. Costume is neat, tidy and clean, rather than fashionable and exclusive.

**Set design.** Still attractive, but again more naturalistic. Sets only very rarely used in a psychologically expressive way.

In television drama the blocking technique of coverage has been maintained as this allows dramas to be cut to match the time slots, broadcast policy and the re-editing of programmes for global markets. In the television industry centralized producer/editor control is ubiquitous as in the classical studio system, but in terms of television production style there has been an aesthetic shift towards an apparent, but still pleasing naturalism. This naturalism is reinforced by the subject choice of crime dramas and period costume dramas as subject matter which both make use of a recognizable social milieu.

Potential, alternative styles for television drama such as psychological realism, or social realism are extremely rare. In amongst the thousands upon thousands of hours of television dramas that have been made there have been perhaps only a handful of directors who have developed any form of recognizable individual style. Most

prominent among these few would be, in the UK, Mike Leigh, who moved from theatre to film bringing his own style and working methods. There are also, again in the UK, Ken Loach and Alan Clark, two distinctive television directors and they owe their recognizable style to a foundation in social realism rather than mainstream drama production.

The contemporary television industry functions very much like the classic studio system: the director works to the norms and practices of the industry and as part of a team.

### **Coverage: sitcom and soap opera**

The use of masters and coverage not only dominates in the 'quality' television drama, but also in other television formats.

The sitcom is easily recognizable as offering the same form of drama as stage comedy and classic studio film comedy. Performance is fast paced, with highly rehearsed, snappy dialogue. The sitcom is of course actually performed as a piece of live theatre in front of a studio audience. The use of the multi-camera studio produces coverage which can easily be intercut.

The sitcom in its setting and blocking is very strongly related to the practices of the theatrical stage because the director records the action from a set of basic camera positions which always stay on one side of the drama: as if it were being shot through a proscenium arch. In the sitcom the potential for crossing the line, or shot by shot blocking is not an option for the director.

### **The contemporary television soap**

The main TV soaps presents an issue-based social drama which uses coverage, or a simple single set up for a scene in order to retain an unobtrusive and functional style of framing and editing. Lighting, costume design, set design and performance are all made 'authentic' by an apparently specific cultural and ethnic setting, this ethnicity being indicated by naturalistic performances and domestic settings. The gloss of the studio system is not suitable for the soap opera, but those soaps with a more utopian aspect still retain the cleanliness and wholesomeness which is associated with the early studio system.

### **Shot by shot and film style: the cartoon and the action movie**

The classic studio feature film and the contemporary television drama depend almost exclusively on the use of coverage. While the contemporary feature film, with the action movie as its dominant form, can afford to make use of the dynamic qualities of shot by shot blocking.

When looking for the origins of this shift in the shot by shot style of the action from the standardized coverage of classic studio system it might seem unlikely that the cartoon studio of Walt Disney would be the first purveyor of this movement towards individually staged and carefully planned set ups, but it is precisely because drawn cartoons can frame shots from any angle and create astonishing camera movements at the same cost as any other type of shot, which means that the cartoon feature film,

from its inception with Snow White, was able to block scenes in ways that live action films of the same period could not.

The blocking used in the cartoon feature films of the 1940's and 1950's is only now being matched in the live action feature film of today, because the production technology for live action is now also able to perform the same sort of complex set ups, as drawn animation, but the cost of using this new technology is astoundingly high. With the average budget for an action movie reaching 100 million dollars and this sum being an understood by the film industry as an acceptable budget for an intended blockbuster. This much money means that an action scene lasting five minutes can have three hundred edits and take weeks to shoot, while a film for television has thirty days to shoot and must produce ninety minutes of footage with two hundred set ups.

Also, of course the live action film and the cartoon movie have now converged with live action being only one part of the final image with most of the image produced digitally through CGI.

### **Shot by shot and the high style**

Shot by shot, in designing each set up as a single dramatic element, means that a lot of investment will be made in lighting, costume and set design. These will be vitally important elements of the drama and the set ups will be want to exploit the potential for visual design as much as possible. This type of filmmaking has been identified as the high style of drama where it is not primarily people standing, talking and reacting which carries most of the drama of a film, instead it is the visual image which carries as much of the emotion of the scene as the performers

By using the high style of detailed shot by shot blocking this type of filmmaking becomes more like fashion photography, or advertising, where every element of the image is designed to fit the overall impression. Television drama cannot achieve this, because it does not have the budget for such a comprehensive and detailed control of all aspects of production. With the high style of production the director now works to ensure that that design elements of a film are shown to the audience as much as the performers. The use of shot by shot and the high style stems from advertising, where gloss and quick cutting are the norm.

### **The role of the director in the high budget feature film**

Through the use of shot by shot blocking, elaborate sets, sophisticated costume design, complex special FX and stunts, the contemporary feature film retains its unique position as a premium media product. In these circumstances the director is only one key member of the production team with the production designer and the cinematographer taking on a great deal of the responsibility for the overall look and style of a film. Given the prestige of many directors and the lack of public recognition accorded to production designers and cinematographer it is ironic that in a Hollywood film shot today if the production designer goes ill and cannot work the production company will receive twice as much compensation from their insurers than if the director were to fall ill for the same time. This indicates how important production design has become. Also, today, the feature film director will rarely control the special FX and these will usually be prepared through a specialized company with the director



left to handle the potentially more mundane task of providing live action and dialogue set ups which will be used by the Special FX team in digital post-production.

In looking for films where the high style emerged *Star Wars* indicates the key shifts in production practices, because this series of relies heavily on production design and special effect. In the 1970's the action movies of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg brought the shot by shot blocking of the cartoon feature film to the live action feature film and this has become the dominant type of direction for mainstream high budget cinema.

### **Psychological realism and film style**

Psychological realism involves a calculated distortion and control of sets, framing and lighting with editing emphasizing a single character's point of view. Here shot by shot blocking becomes an important technique since it allows for an individual framing for each set up rather than returning repeatedly to familiar reversals and functional camera angles. The table below identifies the key elements of psychological realism

#### **Psychological Realism - Expressionism**

Psychological experience

Participation: use of point of view

Distorted lighting and framing

Unmotivated camera: expressive movements

Expressive framing: close ups and movement

Stylized blocking: turning, twisting, tracking

Expressive editing: jarring continuity and jump cuts

Within the action movie, the thriller and the horror film there is obviously a great deal of scope for the use of psychological realism to heighten the experience and present a psychological state, but surprisingly few productions make extensive use of this style of blocking. This may well be because it falls outside the tradition of the Hollywood feature film where the narrative is constructed as a realist form with audiences given the perception that the film is an objective, if fictionalized, representation of events. Maintaining believability, no matter how outlandish the plot, is a measure of success in mainstream filmmaking: if the script calls for a character to jump fifty feet and land safely the director's job is to make this appear believable on the screen. The realist style of the mainstream narrative is in most cases supported by an apparent realist, objective style of filmmaking and psychological realism would undermine this authenticity.

The tradition in cinema of psychological realism historically stems from the German studio system of the 1920's which was strongly influenced by expressionism in theatre

and fine art. There was no such influence in Hollywood and when German émigré directors such as Fritz Lang moved to Hollywood they worked stylistically within the aesthetic parameters of the studio system.

The only enduring, minor, stylistic influence of expressionism in the American cinema is in the genre of Film Noir, which uses distortion to create a heightened menace, but this is only partly psychological realism, because this menace is created mainly through lighting and setting to create a reality which the protagonists inhabit, rather than the distortion being depicted as a character's specific point of view.

Most of the camera work and editing in Film Noir retains the studio practice of coverage to block action. It is also important to note that Film Noirs were low budget productions and as such could make stylistic forays outside the dominant style of studio filmmaking with its glossy production values.

### **Psychological realism: key directors**

During the classical studio period only Alfred Hitchcock made frequent use of psychological realism. His use of this type of blocking may well be due to his early work at the German UFA film studios and when he moved from Europe to work in Hollywood he brought with him his established reputation and his expressionist influenced style. In terms of film history Hitchcock is so isolated in his use of psychological realism that this type of direction is often taken to be a style individual to Hitchcock, so that what might be seen and understood as psychological realism is frequently identified as Hitchcockian technique.

Martin Scorsese is the only contemporary director who has built strongly upon the use of psychological realism and to a lesser extent Spielberg, Oliver Stone and Spike Lee make use of this approach. Scorsese's use of psychological realism may have been aided by his early experience as an editor, which gave him the necessary knowledge and confidence to know how set ups would work at the editing stage and in going on from being an editor to working as a director he was able to successfully stage shot by shot set ups from the start of his career. Crucially his first films were low budget independent productions which gave him the opportunity to use and refine this type of blocking on the set rather than working under the control of a studio producer where coverage would have been predominant.

It is through familiarity with the blocking used primarily by Hitchcock and Scorsese that the potential for psychological realism can be studied.

### **The single set up scene: directors in the mainstream**

The single set up scene gives a director two things: total control of the final result, because there can be no editing of the scene and the opportunity to show their skills at designing and achieving a whole scene in one long, single, complex set up.

Using the long take to display the verve and panache of the director was demonstrated by Orson Welles, who is another example, like Hitchcock, of someone coming to Hollywood with an established reputation and because of this being given directorial control over his projects. Given his émigré status Hitchcock was also able to work with the long take on several productions. The impetus of these directors has meant that working in long takes is one way to establish an individual reputation as a director and contemporary audiences are keyed in by reviewers to notice and appreciate this type of set up.

In the contemporary mainstream directors use the single take to show off their skill and to display the technology at their command. The ability of set ups to pass across roads, through crowds, along corridors, down stairs, under floorboards and up walls all adds to the enjoyment offered by spectacle of Hollywood cinema.

### **The single set up scene: independent, low budget, art house, cult**

The Art House cinema of the 1960's and 1970's had its basis in the exhibition of films made outside of mainstream studio production. These would usually be European films with directors working in a comparatively low budget environment outside of large scale studio production. Some of these directors exploited the single set up scene for aesthetic rather than economic reasons. In the thirties and forties Jean Renoir often used the long single set up to favour the performer and Max Ophüls used the long take within the melodrama genre. In the sixties Antonioni and Fellini used extravagant single set ups and the French directors of the New Wave, Truffaut, Godard and Rohmer all used the single set up to cover scenes as a resistance to Hollywood production methods and as a naturalistic style of blocking.

During the sixties in America John Cassavetes used long takes like Renoir to favour his performers and Martin Scorsese beginning his career under the aegis of Cassavetes and also under the influence of European directors took the extravagant single take into the mainstream.

From this briefest of outlines of the range of directors using this type of blocking it is plain that the single take has had a significant influence on the work of many directors and its use can be followed from the thirties to the present day in both European and American Cinema. Paul Thomas Anderson's films *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights* follow the tradition of using long single set ups for character-based drama.

Directors to look at for single set ups: Jean Renoir, Max Ophüls, Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Brian de Palma, Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Spike Lee, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Paul Thomas Anderson, Michael Haneke.

### **Social realism and film style: an alternative to studio practice**

The only film style which is not heavily dependent upon the historical influence of the classic studio system is Social Realism. This is because it is a style developed as an alternative to the mainstream, primarily through the Italian Neo-Realist films and Social Realism has strong stylistic links with documentary practice. Its aim is to produce an unobtrusive naturalism and to do this:

- Editing is kept to a minimum, because it implies editorial control, especially emotional manipulation of the audience.
- Single shots are simple, often static and only very rarely expressive through movement and distortion.
- Coverage is only used in a simple pragmatic way with one or two set ups per scene at most.
- Psychological realism is not used. Scenes are shot from the point of view of an observer.
- Script, costume, casting and direction are all designed to be naturalistic.

All in all social realism aims to be as stylistically neutral as possible.

Claims are made that social realism can represent a more authentic practice than the mainstream because it offers:

- An alternative to the dominance of the studio system
- A form potentially responsive and representative of social issues
- A basis for the formation of national and culturally specific cinemas

These claims can be sustained to some degree and the idea of a socially centered rather than an industry-based entertainment cinema is the appeal of this style of filmmaking. Equally, no style of filmmaking can make any intrinsic claim to show reality more authentically than any other form. Every form of cinema is a representation.

The stylistic aims of social realist cinema are:

### **Social Realism - Naturalism**

Neutral observation

Non-participation: audience as observer

Undistorted lighting and framing

Motivated camera: stays with performers

Conventional framing: mid-shot and wide shots

Pragmatic blocking: walking and talking

Functional framing: two shots, singles, mid-shots

### **Designing the style of an individual production**

The relation between blocking and film style will almost always be understood by any professional practicing director without much resort to theorizing or the consideration of historical specificity. In simple terms each industry has its own production norms and directors work within these norms.

The previous sections on types of blocking and film style may well have made it appear that the design of all films is determined by the industrial and historical context, but there is a stylistic span within these parameters and much work still needs to be done by the director in developing the style of an individual production. More importantly each film tells a specific story and this can either well told or badly told in relation to how it is directed a successful film uses blocking successfully to tell the story even if that blocking is limited by the production system that the director works in.

The difficulty of creating any decisive criteria for designing the style of a film is that any project may be successfully designed in many ways and design in itself is essentially about making a set of choices between different elements. There is no absolutely right choice. For instance; when designing a period film the director may choose to adopt the framing style of photographs, or paintings of that period, or instead may compose set ups in a thoroughly contemporary way. What decides a choice like this may well be the way the director feels the script needs to be blocked; either for the dramatic effect of the contemporary blocking or because of the need to maintain an imitation of period composition. Design and style are all about making a set of choices and on any production and these choices effect:

- Script
- Performance
- Lighting
- Framing
- Editing
- Costume
- Set design

If you are designing a high gloss, high style production, or a social realist drama the stylistic choices in each of the categories of script, performance, lighting, framing, editing, costume and set design will be different and a production is more likely to be successful if each of these areas is adequately considered. No element in the design of a film can be taken too much for granted and success is often linked to making a simple set of coherent choices in order to create a sustained look and feel for a production. If a director and a cinematographer were to choose any lens angle they thought suited the particular scene they were working on the end result would be a production using a hodge podge of lenses and no set pattern to guide the audience. The same is true of blocking a mish-mash of coverage, shot by shot and single set up would be a stylistic mess.

Deciding on the lenses to be used and the type of composition and blocking are all necessary if a production is to be stylistically coherent in visual terms.

### **Influences on the style of an individual production**

The influences which will affect the choices in designing a production are due to:

The use of pre-existent codes and genre conventions; films covering the same kind of subject matter will indicate how a type of plot is usually designed and directed.

The blending and the reformulating of narrative conventions, stereotypes and styles is part of the process of creating a new and unique production, which is at the same time familiar to audiences and easy to follow. For example; a contemporary comedy may well be recognisable as a 'screwball romantic comedy' therefore offering the fun and pleasure associated with this sort of film, but contemporary discourses in relation to such topics as gender, sexuality, class and race, have changed and therefore effect how the film is constructed. For example in the classic studio era sex between non-married couples could only be tangentially alluded to, but in a contemporary film a non-married couple may well have sex, but this will not be given an explicit 'sex scene', because it is still considered an unsuitable ingredient of the romantic comedy. The design of a production is changed and recombined to suit changing social expectations and norms. Today's audiences cringe at the diffused, golden lighting, the depiction of romantic sex that was the norm in the 1970's. Styles of lighting and blocking change from era to era.

From cinema the influences on designing a film will come from:

- The classic studio systems in the USA, Germany, France and Italy.
- Contemporary cinema on a global basis with the increasing influence of Asian cinema on the mainstream.

More specifically the stylistic influences of cinema can be set out so that they include: the expressionism of Film Noir and the stylistic saturation of Melodrama.

Naturalism is the opposing influence to expressionism with links with Social Realism, Neo-Realism, Poetic Humanism, and the 'gritty' style of some crime and domestic dramas.

Also, today, cinema is now drawing more and more heavily on television for material and turning an original small scale domestic production into a global product.

From outside film and television there are obviously other influences on the design of screen production from:

- Theatre
- Literature
- Painting
- Fashion
- Advertising
- Photojournalism
- Documentary filmmaking
- Avant-Garde filmmaking
- The music industry
- Computer games

Without doubt the potential influences on the design of a particular film can come from a huge span of cultural products, but quite often the eventual design choices may be straightforward; they will follow production norms. A television director will usually shoot coverage with a pleasing and attractive style of lighting and costume and it will be rare that a television director will choose poorly lit drama documentary type set ups. The influence of cultural products on film production is reduced by the standards and style of production that operate within the industry. The stylistically daring film or television production is a rare and unusual item.

This rather patchy overview of the issues involved in designing a production are to indicate, above all else, that blocking has a history, that it is linked to styles of realism and style of realism are linked to types of story. A director working within a particular system may be aware of other potential stylistics choices, but will not go against the production norms of their own particular industry: it is easy to spot the visual difference between a European and an American film.

To be a good director is necessary to be in control of choices in terms of blocking and if a production makes something daring possible this can be pursued with confidence and flair. While standard direction is good enough for standard productions there is still room for creativity and innovation on particular projects.

