

NOTES ON

THE GRAMMAR OF TELEVISION

by

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INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the 20th Century, television has come to take precedence over the printed word as a means of mass communication in western society. But in the same way as there is linguistic grammar, the pictures that appear on our television screens depend on a body of rules, principles and guidelines. However, with the expansion of television outlets, there is a danger that standards of quality could deteriorate.

It is said that the camera does not lie. It does, of course. It conveys its own - often distorted - representation of reality. Nonetheless, with correct use of the 'grammar of television', the producer can create the 'suspension of disbelief' in the mind of the viewer. This applies to all forms of television from drama to documentary.

A programme starts with an eye-catching opening sequence in order to hook the viewer. After that, one picture has to follow another.

PICTURE TRANSITIONS

There are four basic ways of proceeding from one shot to another :

1. THE CUT
2. THE MIX, or DISSOLVE
3. THE WIPE
4. THE FADE TO AND FROM BLACK

There is also a hybrid : THE INSET

Note that all shots have their own natural length, and the pace, or rhythm, used to move from one shot to the next, in a sequence, usually depends on the kind of subject being covered.

SHOT SIZES AND CAMERA MOVEMENTS

BCU = Big close-up
CU = Close-up
MCU = Medium close-up
MS = Mid-shot (also sometimes : 'half-shot')
MLS = Medium long shot
LS = Long shot (also sometimes WA = Wide angle)
VLS = Very long shot

(See next page for illustrations of above)

Also :

GV - General view (This means whole object in frame)
Single shot, 2 shot, 3 shot, 4 shot etc.....up to 'Group shot'
LA - Low angle (written : 2S, 3S, 4S etc.)
HA - High angle

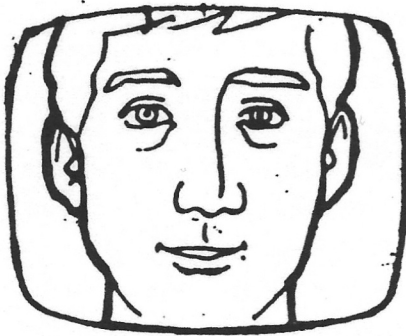
Static

Pan - swivelling camera left or right
Tilt - up or down
Zoom - in or out
Crab - movement sideways
Track - movement forward or backward
Elevate - camera rising
Depress - camera descending

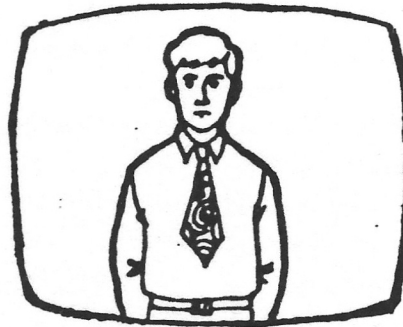
Also :

POV - Point of view (As if through eyes of an observer)
O/S - camera looking over someone's shoulder

SHOT SIZES



BIG CLOSE-UP
B.C.U.



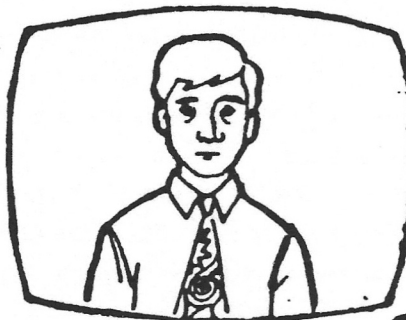
MIDSHOT
M.S.



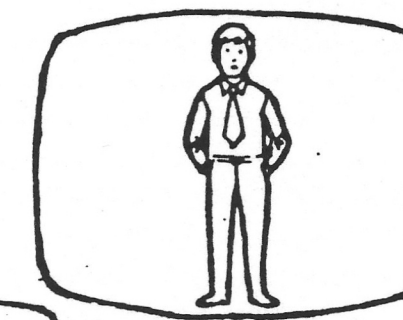
CLOSE-UP
C.U.



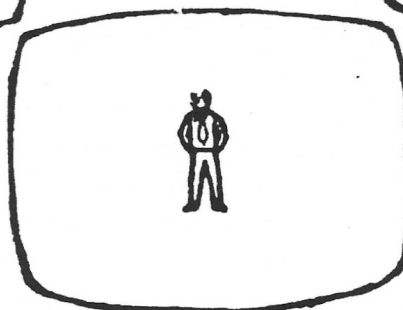
MEDIUM
LONG
SHOT
M.L.S.



MEDIUM CLOSE-
UP
M.C.U.



LONG SHOT
L.S.



VERY LONG SHOT
V.L.S.

When a programme is being directed it is possible to work more quickly and accurately by describing the pictures that are required in a form of code or shorthand. A total of seven different sizes of shots are illustrated ranging from the Very Long Shot to the Big Close Up.

In practice it is possible to define five of these seven shots very accurately, but the two extremes, i.e. the BCU and the VLS tend to be 'as directed' shots.

THE HICCOUGH

The hiccough is a disturbance caused by faulty shooting or editing, which usually draws attention to the fact that there is a camera between the viewer and the action.

AVOID THE FOLLOWING :

Microphone in shot.

Strobing clothes - i.e. tight stripes or checks.

People waving or looking at camera.

Poor framing. Keep eyes $\frac{2}{3}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ the way up screen. Leave breathing, talking, walking etc. space.

Strange things apparently growing out of people's heads.

Keystone effect - usually tall buildings like churches.

Non-horizontal sea - unless moving on a boat, of course.

Bumpy or jerky camera movements.

Panning shots that are either too quick or too long. Pans, tracks and zooms are better if motivated.

Too many zooms in and out - especially within a short space of time.... usually a 'buffer' is inserted between pans, tracks and zooms - either as a separate shot or as a decent static hold before the camera starts off again.

Zooming out while someone is talking - it looks as if we are losing interest. (Zooming in is perfectly alright).

Restless camera work - and restless editing.

Cutting into or out of a developing shot after it has started or before it has finished. (Not really applicable to sport or similar). Also avoid cutting too tightly to beginning or end of a developing shot.

DO :

Choose the moment of cut carefully - especially on shots showing continuous movement. There are 25 frames to choose from every second. Be careful editing street/traffic shots. Prominent, moving vehicles can appear to do a vanishing act when you cut away from them; a car just entering frame when you cut makes the eye flicker and so produces a bad cut.

A good trick is to cut on the 'natural wipe' provided by a passing lorry or bus.

Take care when cutting together shots with skylines at different heights... interpose shots with no horizons, and use mixes where appropriate.

Take special care when editing architectural shots together - they can often appear to jump. This happens when strong....and prominent...lines or features only change their position in frame slightly in ensuing shots.

Beware the 'jump cut', which is usually caused by removing speech or action in order to shorten it, from a continuous shot. It should usually be covered by a 'cutaway' shot, either of a person (interviewer) listening or other relevant visual material - e.g. what is being talked about, or onlookers etc.

Other disturbing edits occur when there are cuts between :

nearly identical shots of different subjects;

nearly identical sizes of the same subject from both the same or a different angle;

a 2 shot with the alternative 2 shot when three people are in a row - the person in the middle will appear to jump from one side of the screen to the other.

NEVER CROSS THE LINE ! Choose your axis : a car, train, bike, walker etc. should always continue to move either right to left or left to right in any given sequence (unless you see them change direction in vision...or wish to convey an impression of disorientation!).

When two people are talking, the eyeline between them is the axis. Always keep to one side of this axis, otherwise the participants will appear either to be talking to themselves or in the opposite direction from the person they are supposed to be talking to. Confusion and horror will reign supreme!

THE INTERVIEW

SINGLE LIVE CAMERA SET-UP :

Start on MCU presenter;
as presenter turns to interviewee
widen to 2 shot, zoom in to
MCU interviewee.



Fig 1

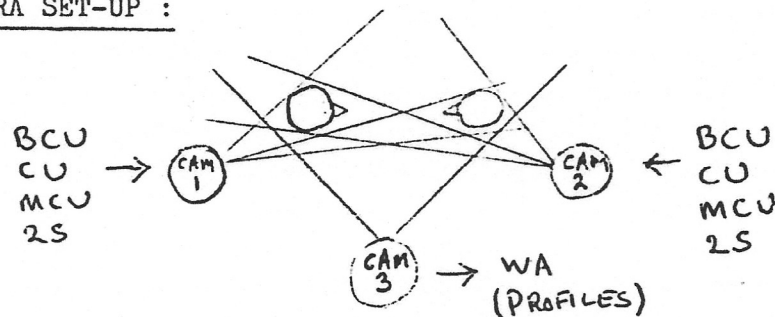


Fig 2



Fig 3

2/3 LIVE CAMERA SET-UP :



SINGLE CAMERA RECORDING/FILMING :

You reproduce your choice from the shots above. But as you can only shoot in one direction at a time, you shoot one after another. Make sure you shoot plenty of 'noddies' and 2 shots to help in the edit. Most of the questions asked first time round should be repeated in vision by the interviewer (make sure the eyeline is complementary to the interviewee's). These 'repeats' or 'cutaway questions' allow the interviewer to re-phrase the questions if desired, and allow you to edit out all questions and answers not required - as well as shortening previous answer.

The advantage of shooting an interview this way is that it can be edited down easily, and when using a camera on location, the pictures tend to be more attractive and appropriate than in the studio. You can even do your interview on the move, using exactly the same system of shooting. Sometimes you can join together two different-sized shots of the interviewee to cut out some of his words or lose a question and keep the answer.

You can, of course, record an interview in the studio with two or three cameras, then record extra 'noddies' and repeated questions from interviewer. But if you have already vision-mixed the interview as for live, it can be tricky.

SCRIPTWRITING

The timing of the duration of commentary is based on 3 words per second.

It is difficult for the eye and the ear to take in two pieces of conflicting information at the same time.

You can either write a script and shoot to it, or construct a 'storyboard' (synopsis), shoot with that as a guide and then write the commentary to the finally edited sequence or programme.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES :

1. The words must fit the pictures.
2. Do not describe what is in the picture - add to it.
3. Do not describe in any length what the viewer cannot see or hear.
4. Be simple and clear - the viewer only hears it once.
5. Do not over-write - 'wall-to-wall' commentary becomes painful.
6. Explain any initials or acronyms at least once.
7. Avoid cliches 'like the plague'!

THE USE OF MUSIC

Music must be used carefully, not just as 'audible wallpaper'. It can have great power if used wisely, as it targets itself directly at people's emotions.

Like commentary, use it to add meaning to the pictures. It can often say more than commentary could.

It is usually a good idea to signpost viewers towards what effect you want them to feel from the music.

You must fit the music to the pictures (or vice versa), and any commentary must not be so out of keeping as to fight the feel of the music.

THE NEWS, CURRENT AFFAIRS AND DOCUMENTARIES

Respectively there is greater production control over shooting and editing of material. Documentaries, of course, can be extremely artistic.

Television news is now the most important vehicle for disseminating news in the western world.

The News interprets real events, but is, curiously, presented as entertainment, with musical opening titles and newsreaders who are personalities.

News must have pictures to go with the words, and so many events are arranged with television news pictures in mind - news conferences, demonstrations etc. Many of the visuals used in the News, however, are easily obtained : arrivals of heads of state, ministers walking into No. 10 Downing Street etc. Much of the news consists of this kind of shot, along with a lot of 'wallpaper shots'. There is surprisingly little in the way of news actually being made. Graphics have now come to the rescue and animated graphic captions attractively make up for the lack of hard news shots, and clarify statements and numerical information.

Journalists and News Editors select stories that they consider to be newsworthy according to their assumptions about what news actually is... and they tidy up what is often messy, unclear reality into neat little packages.

Current affairs and documentary programmes convey deeper information than the news, and can expand on different views held by people. But by their nature, they like to promote controversy and confrontation. It is an undeniable fact that the television screen encourages an emphasis on personalities rather than issues. This whole area of television has influenced society and events on many occasions.

It is, perhaps, ironic that the News Headlines at the beginning of The News mimics the eye scanning the front page of a newspaper.

CONCLUSION

If televisual grammar is maintained, the medium will not get in the way of the message. But if the viewer is disturbed or distracted, he or she may choose to go out and do some gardening.

Paul Smith