





A portrait of Steven Spielberg, an older man with white hair and glasses, wearing a brown leather jacket. He is pointing his right index finger directly at the camera. The background is a dark, warm-toned, out-of-focus interior.

Steven Spielberg
Director, *Jurassic Park*

Film Shots Visual Semiotics & The Language of Moving Images



Terminology & Approaches



Se-mi-ot-ics

- **Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 -1913) Swiss** and **Charles Sanders Peirce (US)** The co-founders of 20th-century linguistics and semiotics.
- **RESEARCH:** “Proto-European Languages” = Latin, Ancient Greek and Sanskrit ...searching for baseline commonalities in structure, syntax, development, meanings...
- **MAJOR QUESTION #1:** Is there a SYSTEMATIC STRUCTURE to each individual language (and meaning making) and can that structure be mapped out?
- **MAJOR QUESTION #2:** Is there a SCIENCE which can be developed and applied to language and linguistic meaning making?
- **Semiotics** (also called *semiotic studies*)
Refers to the study of **meaning-making via signs and symbols**; the study of sign processes (*semiosis*) and **meaningful** communication using signs and symbols.



Christian Metz

Film Theory + Visual Film Language/Codes



“A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand . . .”

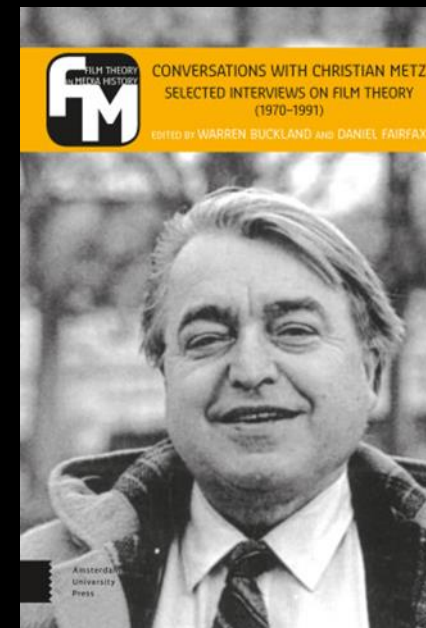
Film semiotics = **Film Language** (Christian Metz -1970s France) Understanding the various elements which contribute to the VISUAL composition of film, TV, and video productions.

The MAJOR SEMIOTIC “Channels” for film

1. Visual Composition/use (Still photos)
2. Visual Composition/use (moving images)
3. Graphics-Illustrations
4. Text/Titles
5. Edited/Sequences
6. **Computer Generated Imagery (CGI)

▷ **PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**(emotion/drama)

▷ **STORY ADVANCEMENT**



VISUAL Composition

The Arrangement and PRIORITIZATION of objects within a FRAME

Considerations:

- ➔ **Size/Proximity**
(relative to the frame and other objects w/in the frame)
- ➔ **Rule of Thirds + Look Room**
- ➔ **Sight lines**
- ➔ **Placements**
 - ➔ **Foreground**
 - ➔ **Middle Ground**
 - ➔ **Background**
- ➔ **Focus/Depth of Field**
- ➔ **WALLPAPERING**



VISUAL Composition

The Arrangement and PRIORITIZATION of objects within a FRAME



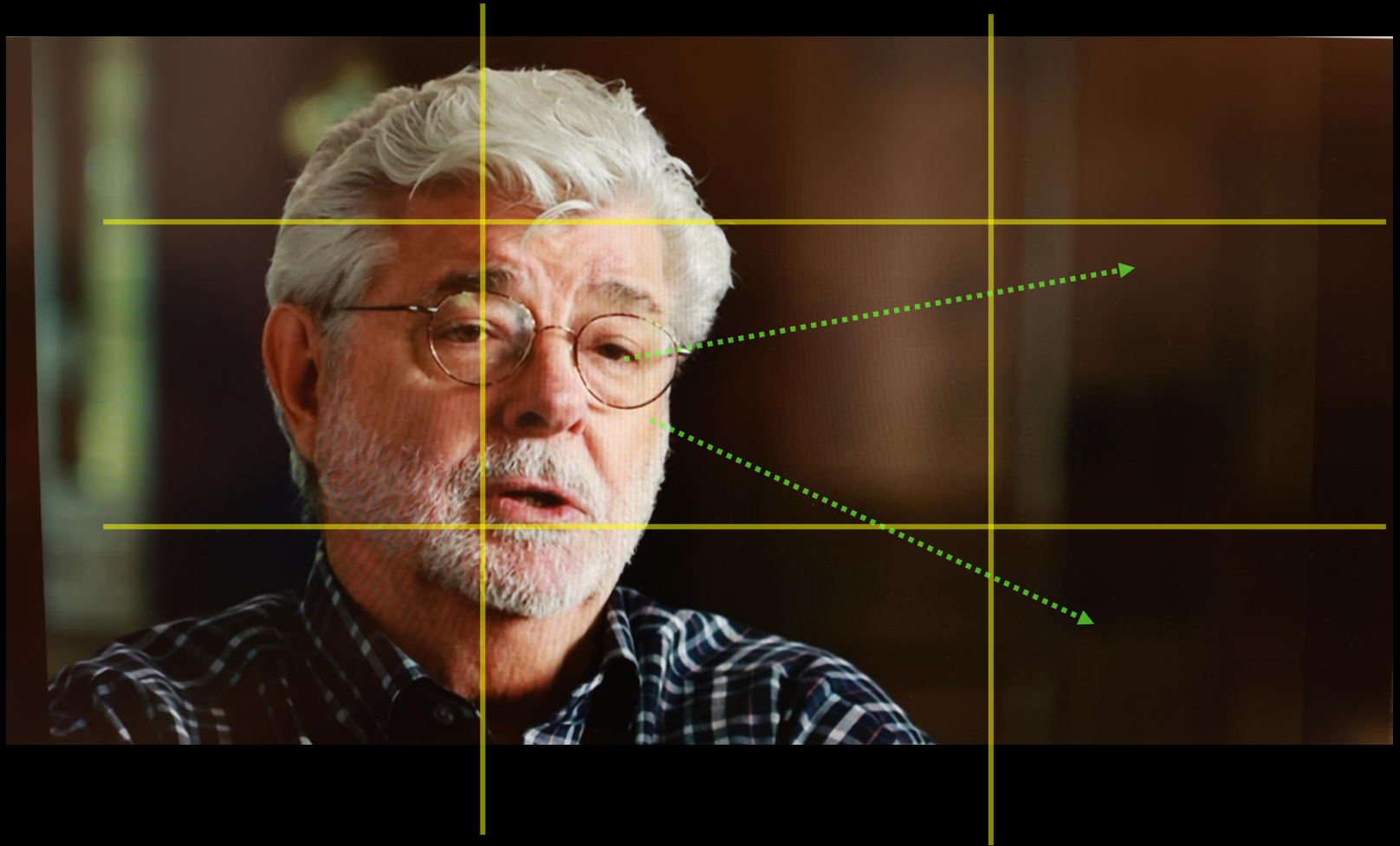
VISUAL Composition

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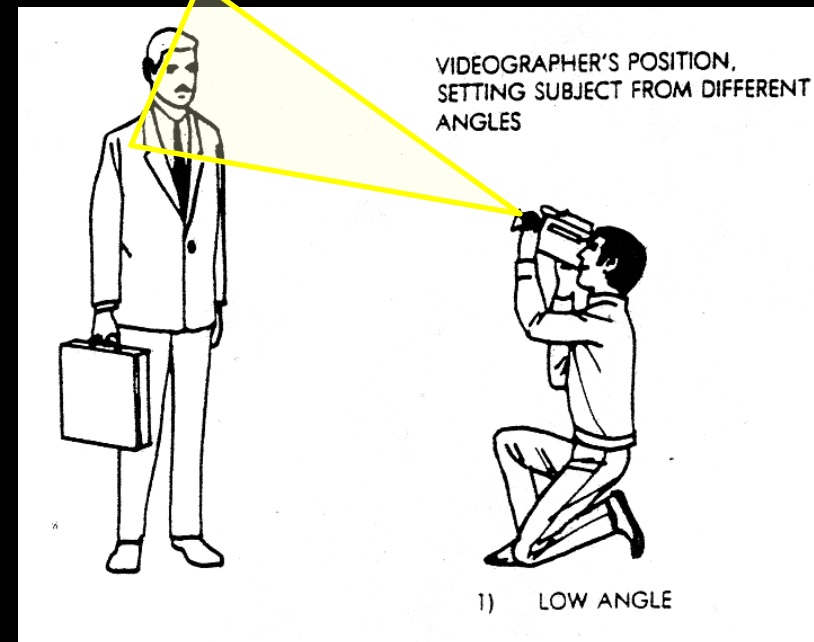
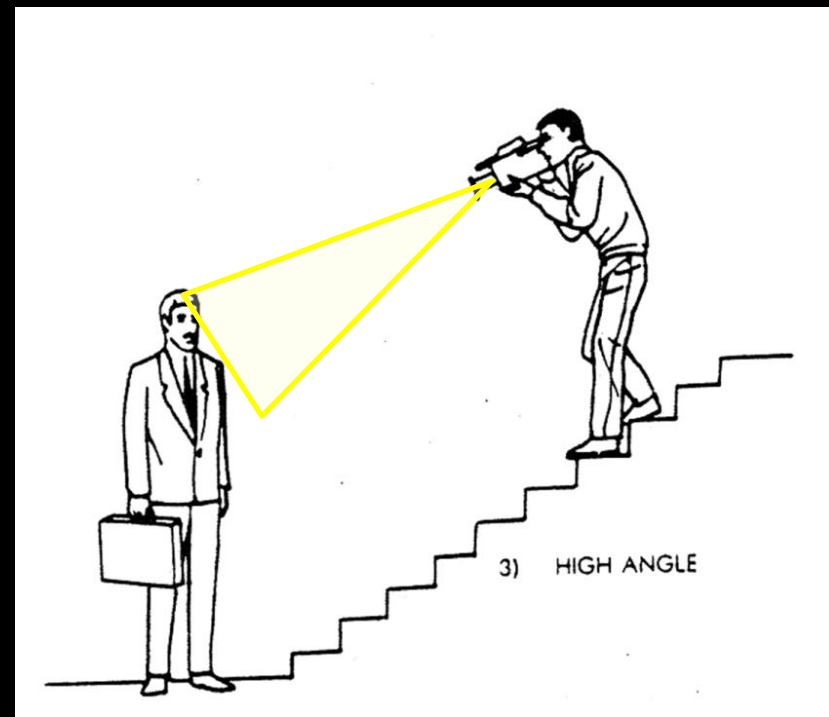
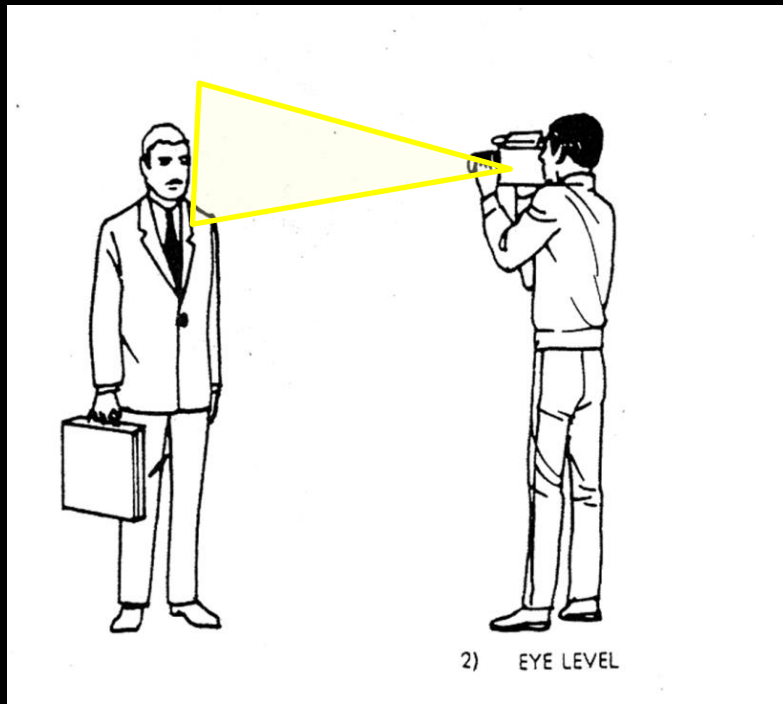


SHOT ANGLES

Camera Position & Camera Angles

(Relative to the subject being filmed)

- Low Angle (LA) ↗
- High Angle (HA) ↘
- Eye Level (EL) →



ESTABLISHING SHOTS

Establishing Shots (ES)

Establishing shots (usually wide or long shots) are important for the development of a film and each new scene. The following aspects/elements are connected to establishing shots.

1. **WHERE AM I? Space/Place/Setting** →

Establishing shots set the place. Enough visual information needs to be provided to establish approximately **where** we are situated—location/geography.

2. **WHAT TIME IS IT?** → Establishing shots set the **TIME**. That includes HISTORICAL, SEASONAL, WEEK, DAY/NIGHT.

3. **HOW DO I FEEL? Emotion-Tone-MOOD**.

Establishing shots set the tone and mood for the project.

4. **Artistic or Aesthetic STYLE?** Color Saturation vs. black and white; Sepia tone, film grain, scratches, stylized lighting...

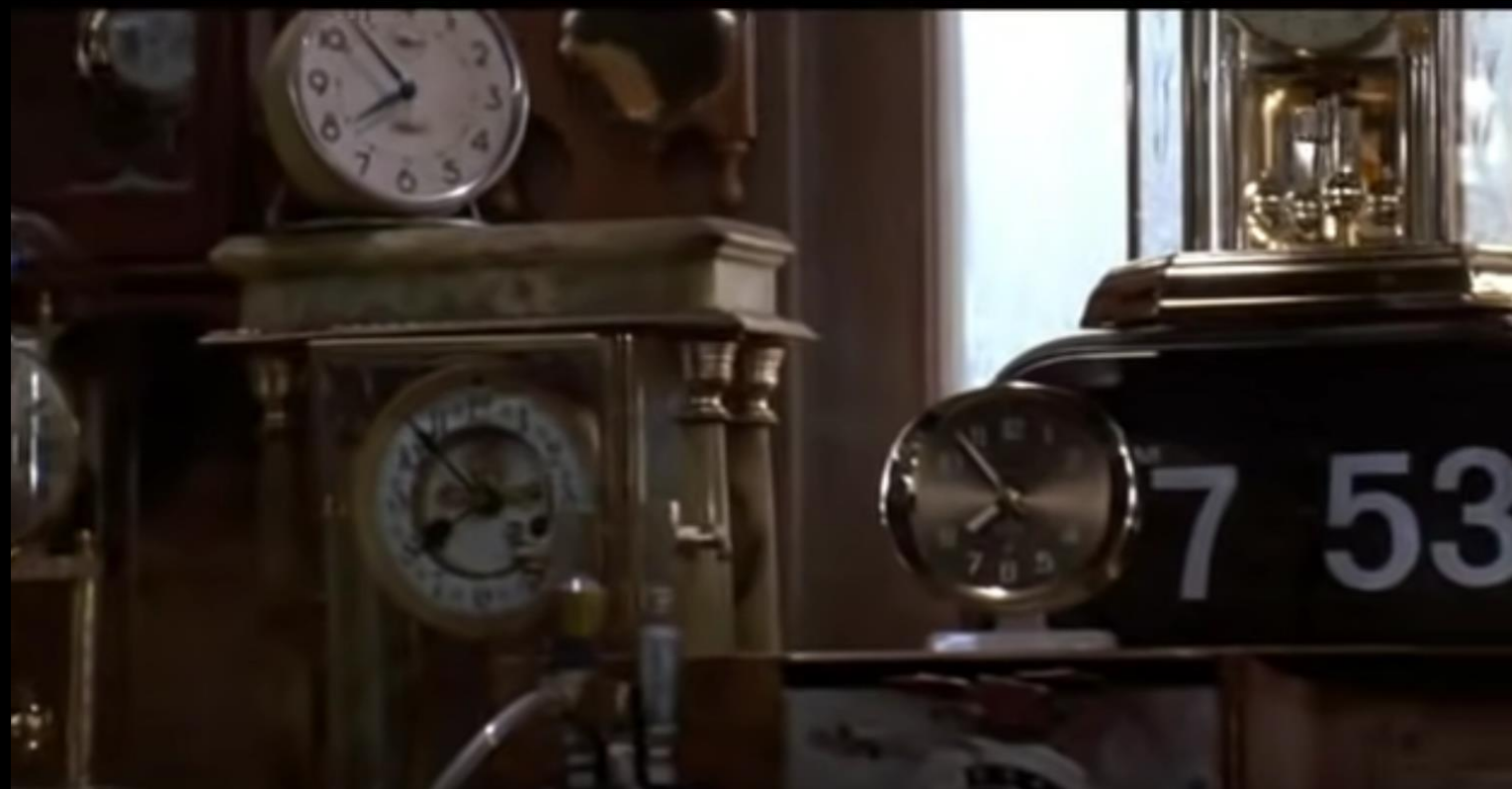
5. **STORY EXPECTATION(S) – ANTICIPATION(S)** of the likely story to unfold. Most viewers develop a series of **PREDICTIONS** or **expectations** or about what is to come.



FORMULA SHOTS → Establishing shots are frequently **FORMULAIC**. They are **easily RECOGNIZABLE** (QUICKLY). They include recognizable and frequently **ICONIC** cityscapes, landscapes, building shots, streets, bridges, airports, farm fields, mountains which set the stage quickly.











THE WIDE ANGLE SHOT

The Wide Angle Shot (WA)

- **Larger Perspective Shot** → A wide angle shot generally frames an "overview" of a visual scene.
- Once you can **see a person's entire body** you are generally into the realm of a wide angle shot.
- **About PEOPLE in a PARTICULAR PLACE** → long/wide shots are usually about people in a particular PLACE.
- **FOCAL CUES** → Sight lines, camera angles, and focused lighting provide the focal cues for WIDE ANGLE SHOTS.



Jim Broadbent (Prof Slughorn) & Emma Watson (Hermione Granger): *Harry Potter*

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Types of Wide Angle Shots (WA)

- Medium wide angle
- vs.
- Long/Wide Angle Shot



TWISTER! Bill Paxton and Hellen Hunt



The Wide ANGLE SHOT for MOVEMENT & ACTION SEQUENCES



Meryl Streep, Christine Baranski, Julie Walters:
Mamma Mia



Emma Stone & Ryan Gosling
and



Zendaya and Zac Efron:
The Greatest Showman

Types of Wide Angle Shots (WA)



THE MEDIUM SHOT

Medium Shot (MS)

- **Head and Torso** → A medium shot generally frames **the entire head and mid-torso**. Once you can see a person's entire body you are generally into the realm of a wide shot.
- **"Conversational" Intimacy** → The medium shot provides a comfortable feeling for a conversation. It allows you to see a person's face and upper body features. You get to know them without invading their space.
- **Work horse shot** → The medium shot is your bread and butter shot. It's versatile and it's used **A LOT** in film and TV.
- **Diagonal Perspective** allows for foreground-middle ground-background.
- **WALLPAPERING!**
Wallpapering refers to the staging of important objects or artifacts in the nearground or background which contribute to the story.



Karen Allen:
Raiders of the Lost Arc



Christian Bale: *Dark Knight*



Robert Downey Jr: *Iron Man*

Medium Shots (different angles and perspectives)



Daniel Day Lewis: *There Will Be Blood*



Ryan Gosling: *La La Land*



Kerri Russell: *Waitress*

Medium Shot (MS)



Jean Bolte



Low Angle Medium Shot Interview (MS)



Two Shot Side-by-Side (MEDIUM Shot)

- **Shoulder/Head** → As the name implies, the over-the-shoulder-shot is generally of a person, but includes a portion (shoulder and head) of the person with whom he/she is speaking.
- **Conversation shots** → Over the shoulder shots are frequently used as "conversation" shots between two or more people. They are used extensively in TV productions (crime, dramas, sitcoms, courtroom, period pieces).
- **Relationship** → Over the shoulder shots establish are about relationships and interactions between t people.



Low Angle Over the Shoulder Shot (MEDIUM OSS)

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Rainn Wilson + Ellen Page: *Juno*

Over the Shoulder Shot (MEDIUM OSS)



Close-up Shot (CU)

- **Filling the Frame**--The person or subject fills the camera frame. Frequently, facial close-ups will cut off part of a person's head and only show you the lower 2/3rds of their face (the expressive part).

Bruce Willis: *Die Hard*



- **Psychologically Involved and MORE Intense**--Close-ups are more emotionally POWERFUL!

- **Detail**--Close-ups allow you to concentrate on DETAILS and emotional reactions.

- **Insert Shots/Reaction**--Close-ups work really well as insert or reaction shots or other kinds of illustrative shots to add texture and detail to your story.



Heath Ledger: *The Dark Knight*

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Close-up Shot (CU)



THE POV SHOT

Point of View Shots (POV)

- **Two/three shot Sequence**--The POV shot is actually a **2 shot sequence**.
 - i. It involves a set shot of a person doing something or looking at something
 - ii. a second shot which **DETAILS** what they are looking at.
- **Empathetic Viewpoint**--You are suddenly "becoming" the person and thereby actually seeing through their eyes.
- **Detail**--POV shots imply pointed detail. They're intended to **FORCE** you to look with some detail at a visual seen. Often POV shots are used when a main character is staring at a seen, trying to make sense of what is going on.
- **Optical Devices serve as CATALYSTS**--Binoculars, Telescopes, Cameras, Windows, phones, and mirrors often serve as good tools for POVs



Shot 1: Jimmy Stewart: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*



Shot 2: Followed by what Jimmy Stewart sees through his rear window

Point of View Shots (POV)

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Luke Wilson: *Royal Tennenbaums*
(Wes Anderson)

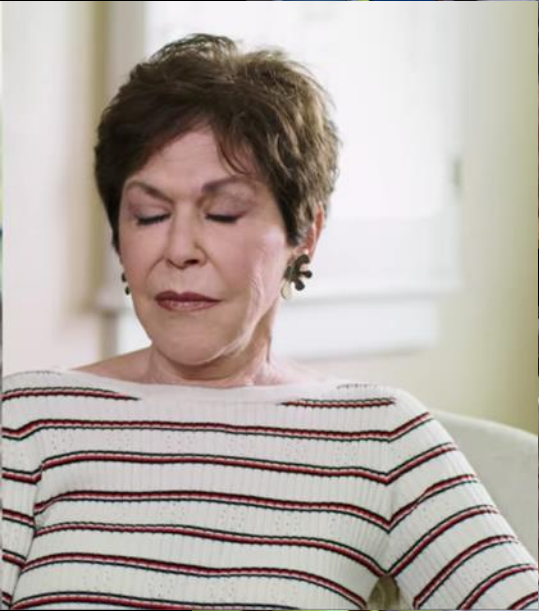


Point of View Shots (POV)

- **Empathetic Viewpoint**—You are suddenly "becoming" the person and thereby actually seeing through their eyes.



Split Screen CUs



Extreme Close-up (ECU)

- Proximity (within arms length)
- Intense Emotion
- Quick Reaction
- Subtle Response



Silence of the Lambs
Anthony Hopkins (Dr. Hannibal Lecter)

Toy Story - Tom Hanks (Woody)



Psycho Janet Leigh (Marion Crane)



Extreme Close-up (ECU)



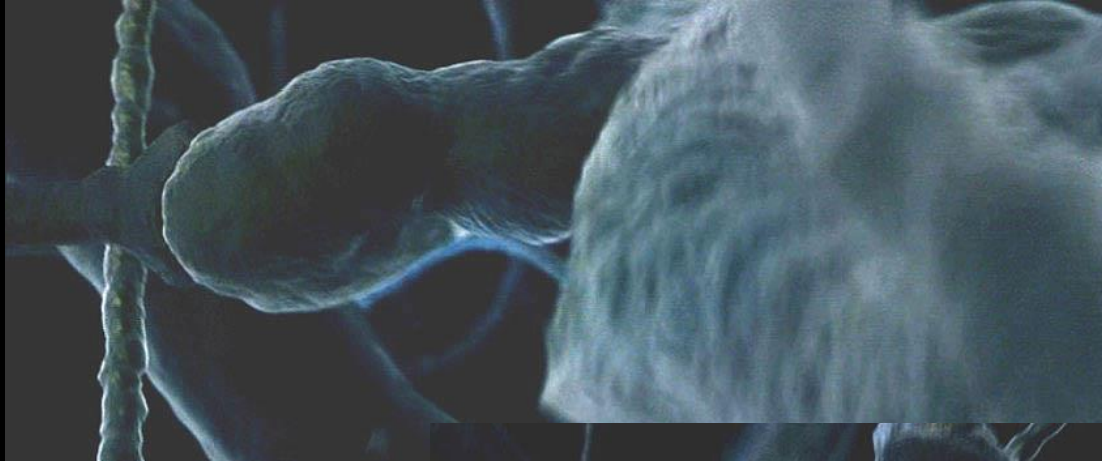
Abigail Breslin: *Little Miss Sunshine*



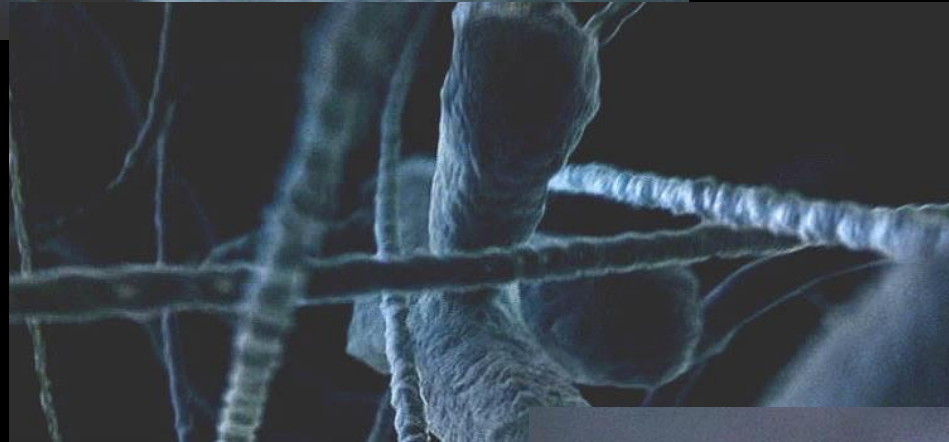
Daniel Radcliffe : *Harry Potter*



Macro Extreme Close-up (CGI- Computer Generated Imagery)



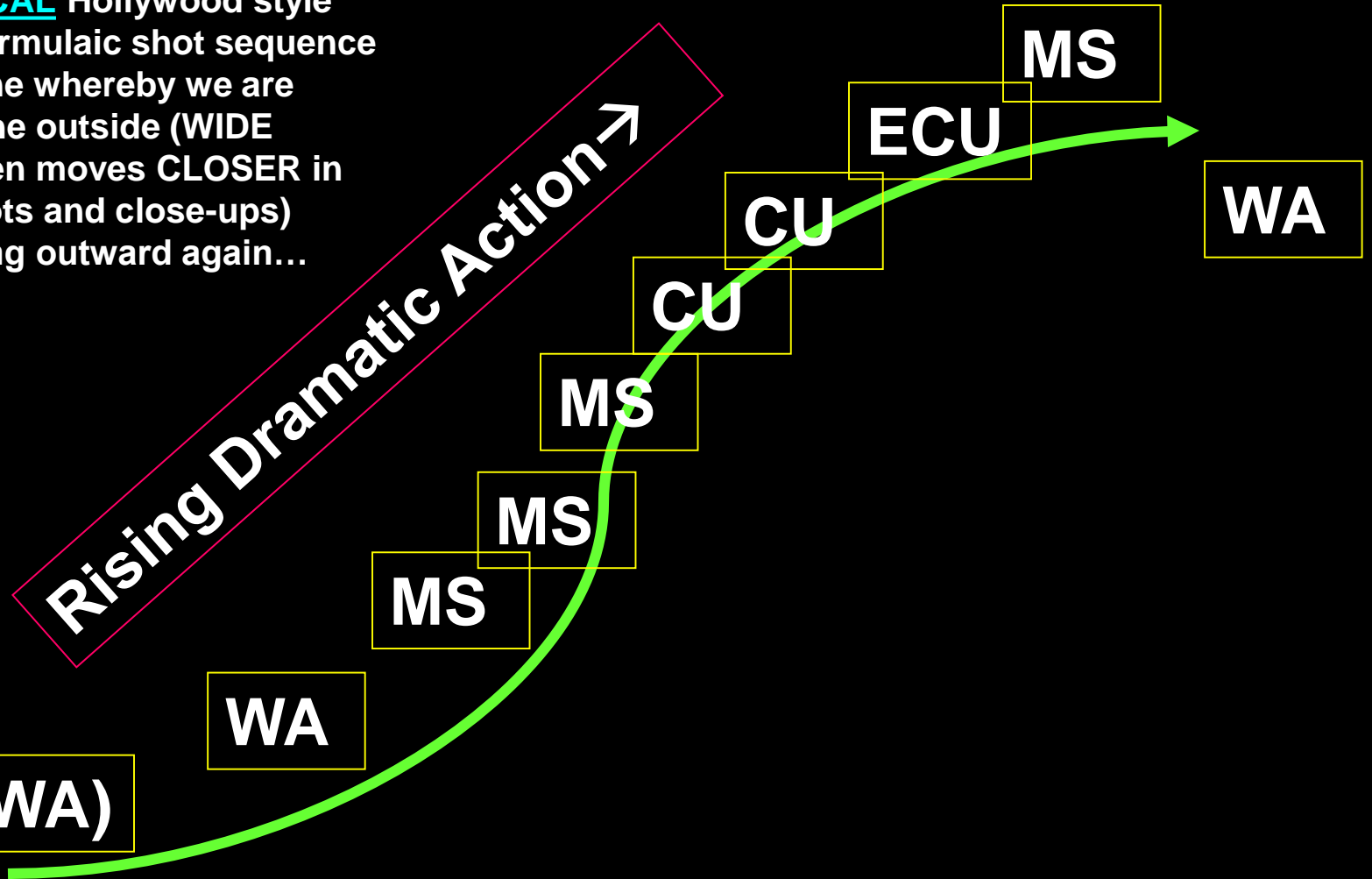
[Brad Pitt: Fight Club Intro \(Dir David Fincher\)](#)



SEQUENCING of Shots

The Classical Hollywood Style

The CLASSICAL Hollywood style refers to a formulaic shot sequence within a scene whereby we are taken from the outside (WIDE ANGLES) then moves CLOSER in (medium shots and close-ups) before moving outward again...



Film Shot COMPOSITION should lead to...

→ PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT (emotion/drama)

→ STORY ADVANCEMENT

EVERY single shot should:

- 1. VISUALLY well COMPOSED with INTENTION!**
- 2. Have a **psychological/emotional** impact in mind.**
- 3. Reveal DETAILS about a **character**, **scene**, or **event**.**
- 4. **ADVANCE** your story (**PLOT PROGRESSION**) in some way.**
- 5. **THINK IN SHOT SEQUENCES**→**Work-horse shots**.**
Not every shot needs to be extremely dramatic. Many shots are “work-horse” shots. They function to propel the larger story.