Lesson - 1
Language of Cinema
- Visual Language, Cinematography, Visual Universe

- Ms. Juhee Prasad
Doon University,
Dehradun

Introduction

Before delving into the nitty-gritty of film theory and film studies it is pertinent to first understand the various constituents of cinema. How is this beautiful, wonderful world of cinema created? What are the various visual and aural elements that come together and how do they help in weaving mesmerising stories that enthral one and all. We will be looking at all these questions and figure out answers to them in Unit 1.

Unit I- Language Of Cinema, constitutes a series of eight video lectures. In this unit we will be talking about the language of cinema, its grammar and its syntax. At this point, you might be wondering how is it that cinema has a language or what is meant by language of cinema. Hold on to that thought as we'll be taking it up in a coming pages. In Unit 1, we will also be talking about the basic concepts of visuals in cinema. We will discuss how visuals for a film are conceived, developed and brought to life on the screens. The concept of editing, how it came into cinema and the consequent impact it had on storytelling, is another key aspect that will be taken up in this unit. Next we'll also discuss sound - how was sound introduced into cinema and how it impacted the cinema as we see it today. Finally we will talk about the history of cinema. We will trace the history of cinema from the early era to the time when studio system started gaining momentum in Hollywood.

In this chapter, we will concentrate solely on the visual language of cinema. We will discuss a key term - cinematography - a very important tool with any cinematographer or director. We will be looking at answering questions like - What is cinematography? What does it entail? The famous Five C's of Cinematography as outlined by Joseph Mascelli - an acclaimed and renowned cinematographer of his times - will also be touched upon in this chapter. Finally we will talk about the concept of visual universe. Any film that you watch,
is set in its own universe. How is it that this kind of a universe is created? What does this concept of the visual universe encompass? How do you sustain it throughout the entire film?

**Objectives**

To develop a clear understanding of the following:

- Concept of ‘language’ of cinema
- Vocabulary available to the filmmaker
- Grammar and syntax of cinema
- Compositional principles that govern a frame to convey meaning
- Nuances of creating meaning and subtext visually

By the end of this chapter you will gain an understanding about the concept of the language of cinema, you will become aware of the rich vocabulary that is available to a filmmaker as well as the grammar and syntax of cinema. You will learn compositional principles that govern the frame and allow a director to convey meaning and create text and subtext visually.

**Visual Language**

So, what is meant by Language of Cinema? To understand this let us first look at how cinema is a tool for communication. The earliest films were nothing but simple recordings of actual events that had happened in real life. These films were known as actualities. As the world of filmmaking evolved, filmmakers started to experiment and the fiction film was born. A vast majority of films that are consumed today are fiction films. These films tell stories that are ripe with emotions, drama and action. It is this communication that makes cinema a communication tool. Not just this, cinema also informs the audience about the world, about the cultures of different communities and countries. For example, when someone sitting in, let's say, UK is watching a film made in India, he or she becomes aware of what it is that India might be about, since a film made in India will of course have a lot of concepts and actions that are very local or that are true only to India. Therefore, it can safely be said that cinema is a communication tool as it allows for film directors to narrate stories and reach a vast audience across the globe.

Any tool of communication has a set of rules that govern its use. Let's take the example of English. It has 26 alphabets. Guided by its rules, we combine these alphabets together to form words and then these words to form sentences that help us to get our message across to the
other person. The same concept applies to cinema as well. Because cinema is a means of communication, it too has a language of its own. This language of cinema has developed and evolved for over more than a hundred years. Let us now look at what it is and how is it that this language is learnt or how it is put to use to tell a story.

As established earlier, cinema has a language of its own. All the different shots, the colours, the camera movements, the kind of sound that is used, the music - all these elements can be said to be the alphabets of cinema. How these alphabets are put together or how is it that these various elements are put together or the kind of guidelines that govern the use of these various elements to tell a story, can be said to be the grammar or the syntax of the cinematic language. There are also certain conventions (you might be aware of some), both regional as well as global that are used constantly in the cinematic language. What are these conventions? Conventions are nothing but the various minute things that you have been able to observe throughout your viewings of the different kinds of films and associate a specific meaning to them. Conventions are established norms or tools which when put to use communicate a very precise meaning to the viewer. For example, in order to communicate the passage of time, the director might employ the age-old convention of showing the setting sun slowly fading-out. This automatically would communicate to the audience that the day is coming to an end or perhaps something new is going to begin. Another example which is very typical to Indian cinema is when the audience sees a young boy running. The close-up shot of his feet as he is running, dissolves into a close-up shot of an adult person and the audience assumes that the boy has now grown up into an adult. This is possible because the audience has been fed this convention over the decades and it has come to mean something very specific.

The two video clips that are part of the video lecture, are both cinematic conventions that have a universal meaning. In the first clip, the moment the camera starts to pan, the audience knows that the boy is going to grow up into an adult. In the second example, the close-up shot of the feet is followed by another close-up shot to reveal that the boy is all grown up now. These are just two examples of the numerous conventions, including thunderstorms and lightening when something bad is going to happen, or the use of fire/flames to allude to physical intimacy etc. And this is how cinematic conventions work - the audience is used to watching certain visuals that always communicate a very specific meaning.
Cinematography

Cinematography - you must have come across this term before. So, what does this term mean? The term cinematography actually comes from two Greek words - kinema which means motion or movement and graphein which means to write, therefore cinematography means 'writing with motion'. The key term here is the word motion, because it is the moving images that make cinema different from photography. (You may be aware that cinema came to develop after photography. Photography is the art of still images while cinema is moving images.) It is important to understand that cinematography is not just about picking up the camera, pointing it at an event and recording it. It is much more than that and requires a great amount of planning on account of the director or the director of photography or cinematographer, where they take abstract ideas, that exist in a person's mind or are perhaps on a piece of paper and convert them into visuals. These visuals convey emotions or values, or various tones and many other forms of intangible or nonverbal forms of communication. So it is very important that you understand that cinematography is not just a simple term, it is not just about picking up the camera and shooting. It refers to any and every visual element in a film. Anything that you see in the frame in a film is pre-planned and is part of the cinematography.

At the heart of it, cinematography is a creative and highly technical skill. It is creative because as a cinematographer, one has to be able to use all the visual elements available to tell a story and technical because one needs to know exactly how to work with the equipment to be able to tell that story.

Cinematic Techniques

There are a range of methods and techniques that are used to create and add multiple layers of meaning in an apparently simple visual. Any cinema is not just about the story, it always has different layers of meaning that can be an oblique comment on the society. Various methods and techniques are used to add meaning as well as subtext to any film. These techniques can be clubbed under cinematic techniques.

Frame

Let us begin by discussing the smallest unit of a film - a single frame. To give you an idea, a single photograph that you click is one frame. Why is this frame so important? Because a
film is a collection of thousands of frames. As mentioned earlier, cinema is moving images. And how are these moving images created? Imagine a flipbook where various individual drawings are drawn on individual papers. When they are flicked rapidly, the drawings appear to be in motion. **Flipbook**

The same concept applies to cinema as well. There are lots of frames that come together and are shown in rapid succession and thus create the illusion of motion. Therefore it is very important to understand why or how a single frame is constructed. A frame conveys visual information. This information is something that the director has placed deliberately in the frame. Nothing in a frame is unintentional or by chance. The next time you go and watch any film, pay careful attention to every element that you see in the frame because everything that you see has been deliberately decided upon and placed by the director. This is because the director intends for a very specific message to be communicated through to the audience. The director through various visual elements, through the use of grammar and syntax of cinema, directs the gaze of the audience or directs the attention of the audience to specific events or objects or persons, so that the audience can look at what the director wants them to in order to tell their story. The director does this by using various cinematic tools, one of which is the frame. Be conscious and observant when watching a film because you will realize that the director actually tells you where to look what to look at and also in what order. All these things the director is able to communicate in one single frame. So, a frame is able to communicate meaning, mood, tone, atmosphere, as well as subtext of a film.

To understand the significance of a frame, observe **Image 1**. It is a still from the 1959 Guru Dutt film **Kagaz Ke Phool**. Upon looking at the frame, there is a lot of information that the viewer perceives. Of course, there is the look on the actor's face but what shapes the overall takeaway is also the kind of lighting that has been used. The poignant look on the actor's face is reinforced by the high-contrast, uni-directional lighting and helps convey meaning to the viewer. It is a single frame, just a garb from the film, yet it is able to communicate to the viewer different levels.

For a director, a frame is basically a compositional choice that is exercised by them to tell the viewers exactly what to look at. The director selects and emphasizes what visual elements should be focused and brought to the attention of the viewer. Various visual composition principles come together and work in a single frame to bring what you see in front of you.
The 5 C's of Cinematography

The 5 C's of Cinematography is a 1965 book and talks of five concepts that are very essential to cinematography as outlined by Joseph Mascelli. Mascelli was a highly acclaimed cinematographer who shot various documentaries and films during World War II. Later he moved on to shooting fiction films as well. The book has been in publication for more than 50 years now but even today it is a go-to book for a student of film studies or for a person who wants to practice cinematography. The 5 C's outlined by Joseph Mascelli are (i) camera angles (ii) continuity (iii) cutting (iv) close-ups and (v) composition.

Let us now delve a little deeper into what these 5 C's are and what they constitute.

(i) Camera Angles

A camera angle refers to the position of the camera vis-a-vis the subject. It answers the question, 'Where will the camera be positioned with regards to the subject?'. Will the camera be directly in front of the subject? Will the camera be on top or will the camera probably be on the side? All these different camera positions are known as camera angles and make a marked difference in the kind of perception that the audience will have.

Image 1. Still from Kaagaz Ke Phool (1959), courtesy Ultra
The camera angle determines the viewpoint for the audience. It is important to understand that the camera always takes the place of the audience. So whatever the camera is viewing, becomes the viewpoint of the audience. This is something that the director needs to keep in mind while deciding the composition of a frame. There is a huge range of camera angles that is available to a director but which one to choose will depend on the kind of message or the kind of emotion the director wants to develop or the director wants as a response from the audience. While discussing camera angles, Mascelli stresses that the use of varied but relevant camera angles is very important because it makes the story impactful. Imagine watching a film where the entire film is shot from one camera angle. You may not realize it but what happens is that the audience becomes bored of having to look at images from the same camera angle. In order to make your story impactful it is important to have different and varied kinds of camera angles in the film.

Image 2 shows the famous Bollywood villain, Mogambo from the 1987 film Mr. India. Observe the camera angle. This kind of a camera angle is known as a low angle shot. It makes the subject appear larger than life. It is important to note here that this is the first time the character of Mogambo appears on-screen in the film. Therefore, the first impression for the audience, without them realizing, of course subconsciously, is that Mogambo is a powerful villain. This is how the character of Mogambo is built - by not saying anything but by a single camera angle.
Next time you watch a film, keenly observe the camera angles and the impact those camera angles have on your perception of characters or situations. Different kinds of camera angles include top angle, low angle, eye-level and dutch-tilt.

(ii) Continuity

The second C of cinematography as outlined by Joseph Mascelli is **continuity**. Continuity is a simple concept. What it means is that whenever the director is telling a story, the story should appear smooth and continuous without any jumps. It should have a logical flow and there should be no haphazardness. Understood simply, continuity is all about making sure that the events in the story flow in a chronological order. So there is a beginning, a middle and an end. In order to achieve continuity, one must try to keep the images as close to reality or as close to real-life action as possible. This is advice from Joseph Mascelli for someone who wants to study or practice cinematography. Another thing mentioned by Mascelli is that nothing in the frame should distract the viewer from the story as that would lead to a break in continuity. No element in the composition should call attention to itself when it shouldn't because then that it breaks the illusion of the universe of the film and thus the continuity breaks.

Mascelli also stresses on the concept of **cinematic time** and **cinematic space**. You may have watched a lot of films. Sometimes the period of time that the story of a film covers may stretch a number of years [e.g. Karan Arjun (1995)] while at other times the story may be limited to just day or a couple of days [e.g. A Wednesday (2008)]. However the duration of the film-watching experience will be limited to anywhere between 1 hour to 3 hours. This compressed time is known as cinematic time, also sometimes referred to as **reel time** (as opposed to **real time**). Caution must be taken that when compressing real time events to cinematic time, narrative continuity is maintained at all times. The timeline of the events should not be jumbled [unless expressly designed by the director as such. e.g Memento (2000)]. So a past event should not be narrated later and vice-versa.

Moving on to cinematic space. (refer to video lecture 19:07-19:49).

Mascelli refers to continuity as 'purely common sense in coordinated action'. Therefore, if common sense is applied while shooting (and editing), continuity is maintained. It is a very important concept that should always be borne in mind while shooting.
(iii) Cutting

The third C as described by Joseph Mascelli in the 5 Cs of Cinematography is cutting. Cutting refers to the editing of a scene or a film. It is the post-production process of organising various shots in such a way that together they tell a coherent story. At any time the cutting of a film needs to be smooth as well as maintain continuity. One might wonder, since editing is a post-production process, how does it fit into the components of cinematography? Except that it does. Mascelli explains that editorial consideration is a must during the production process. This is so because editing is done on material that has already been shot. The editor cannot edit two shots together smoothly, if they have not been shot keeping editing in mind. At any point of time during the production, the DOP and director need to shoot material that offers enough cine choice to the editor.

(iv) Close-up

The next component in the 5 Cs of Cinematography is close-ups. A close-up is a very tight shot or a very tight framing of any object. Here specifically, we are referring to the close-up with reference to the human face. Mascelli stresses on the importance of this shot size its different varieties. It is important we understand that close-up as a shot-size is something that is unique to the film medium. It is so because before the development of the film medium, people would go to watch plays, they would go to theatres, ballets and opera. In these spaces the audience was always on a fixed spot with regards to the theatre. Whatever action was taking place on stage would be visible to the audience from a fixed angle. They could not go closer to the stage to get a closer look or a better look. It was with the development of the film that different shot sizes could be experimented with. Therefore the concept or tool of close-up became unique to cinema.

It is important that a director uses the close-up for maximum impact. This shot-size helps in isolating and bringing narrative emphasis to significant events or actions that are taking place in a frame. It can also be used to eliminate anything that is not required or anything that does not require the attention of the audience. Therefore with a close-up the director is eliminating everything that is not required, all the information that is unwanted. Close-ups are also used to provide dramatic impact as well as for visual clarity. Another reason for employing a close-up is that it increases the involvement of the audience in the film as it brings the audience closer to the characters. The audience would quickly lose interest in a film that comprises only of wide shots as the finer details would be lost and the audience would feel
disconnected from the action. A close-up builds on that connection and therefore making it an effective story storytelling tool.

Image 3 is an example of a close-up from the film Mr. India. The close-up offers a closer look at Mogambo's hand placed on the globe. What this close-up tells about the character is that perhaps this person is someone who wants to dominate the world or someone who is in a very strong position. So even before a single world has been uttered by Mogambo, the audience can already feel that he is a strong and powerful character. This is possible because the director decided to draw the attention of the audience to a details through the use of a close-up shot.

(v) Composition

The next component in the 5 C's of cinematography is composition. Joseph Mascelli refers to composition as 'the arrangement of pictorial elements in a frame to form a unified or harmonious whole'. It deals with how different visual elements in a frame are put together with regards to each other how they interact with each other. At any point of time the composition should be decided upon to garner a favourable reaction from the audience. Favourable does not mean that the audience 'likes' the frame, it means that the audience is able to react in exactly the same way that the director wants it to react. Composition has a psychological impact on the audience. Certain colours, textures, the placement of characters in a frame; all these pictorial elements can help the director in evoking very specific emotions
in the audience. Therefore, the director has to be aware of how to play on the psychology of the audience. One advice that Joseph Mascelli gives when he is talking about composition is 'keep it simple'. It does not mean that there should be just a few visual elements framed in a simple manner. No. By 'keep it simple' Mascelli means that you should be able to stick to what the story wants to tell not bring in a lot of other references or do not over-complicate your material. Only frame material in your composition that is desirable or that you think is required to tell the story.

To understand the 5 Cs with a video example, refer to the video lecture - 25:19-27:55.

**Visual Grammar - Shot Sizes**

While disusing the 5 Cs of Cinematography, we had discussed the term close-up. It was mentioned that a close-up is a kind of a shot size and that there are various shot sizes that are available to a director. These shot sizes are:

- (i) Extreme Long Shot or the ELS
- (ii) Long Shot or LS
- (iii) Mid-Long Shot or MLS
- (iv) Mid Shot or MS
- (v) Mid Close-up or MCU
- (vi) Close-up or CU
- (vii) Extreme Close-up or ECU

Let us now look at what is the relevance of these shot sizes and under what circumstances they are put to use.

**i) Extreme Long Shot**

Also known as the ELS or the Extreme Wide Shot, it is a very wide shot of any setting or location. It is used to establish the location where the action of a particular scene or a particular film is taking place. Think of all the films that you've watched and you will realize that, most of the times, whenever something new is to be established a scene changes, it is the extreme wide shot that is used. It gives the audience a sense of the space, the entire setting is visible while the human figure/character only feebly visible. This extreme long shot establishes the location for the audience. It tells the audience that this is the place where the
action is going to take place. Mostly, this shot is used in the beginning of a film or as stated earlier, in the beginning of a new scene.

Image 4. Still from The Good, The Bad and the Ugly (1966) by MGM Studios

Image 5. Still from Star Wars: Force Awakens (2015), by Lucas Film Ltd

Image 4 and 5 are examples of the ELS. Image 4 shows how in an ELS the human figure is diminutive as a large area is covered by the camera. Refer to video lecture (29:38-30:07).

(ii) Long Shot

The long shot also known as LS or wide shot moves a little closer to the character than the ELS. So is shows the full body of the character but still gives the audience a good sense of the environment that this particular character is in. This shot size orients the audience towards the relationship between the character and the place. It can be both exterior shot or an interior shot.
Images 6 and 7 are examples of the LS. Refer to video lecture (31:35-32:08).

(iii) Mid-Long Shot

The *mid-long shot* or the *MLS* captures the human figure from the head to just below the knee. This shot-size moves the audience a little more close to the character as compared to the LS. This shot-size is also known as a *cowboy shot* because this kind of a composition was first used in the western (genre) films as it was able to move relatively closer to the character as well as capture the gun that is hanging at the side of the cowboy, without the shot being too wide. This shot-size offers the audience a closer look at the character. The details of the costume, the gestures or movements of the character become more visible and clear while the
details of location begin to lessen. This shot size is utilised show interaction between characters.

Images 8 and 9 are examples of the MLS. Refer to video lecture (33:52-34:16).

(iv) Mid Shot

The next shot-size is the *mid shot* or the medium shot also known as a waist shot. It is so known because this kind of a composition frames the human figure from the head to just below the waist. It shows greater detail. The facial expression start to become clearer, the audience begins to concentrate more on the person rather than the surroundings. Lesser of the surroundings is visible as the character itself takes prominence. This shot can be both an exterior shot or an interior shot. An exterior shot is one which has been shot outside the limits of four walls whereas an interior shot is shot within the confines of four walls.
Images 10 and 11 are examples of the mid shot.

(v) Mid Close-up

The mid close-up or MCU is also known as a bust shot. This shot brings the audience close still to the character while the details of the surroundings are lost further. This is one of the most used shots in cinema and television because this is the kind of shot-size that is very natural to a human being. This shot size is similar to one's field of vision while standing close and having a conversation with a friend. This exact shot composition in a cinematic frame is known as a mid close-up. It frames the human figure from head to just to between the shoulders and anywhere between the belt line i.e. between the waist and the shoulders. It is a good shot-size to show conversations between two characters as it shows the interaction and the expressions or reactions clearly. The surroundings are even more drowned and it can be both an exterior shot.
Images 12 and 13 are examples of the MCU. Refer video lecture (37:02-37:17)

(vi) Close-up or CU

The close-up or CU is also known as the headshot because it basically shows the head or face of the character. The close-up is used to build intimacy between the audience and the character on-screen or to showcase intimacy between characters. The close-up evokes a strong emotional response from the audience. It brings the entire focus of the audience on the character's face, there is nothing else visible. There is hardly any background visible and therefore the audience is fully concentrated only on the character. This shot can be both an exterior shot or an interior shot.
Images 14 and 15 are examples of the close-up shot. Refer video lecture (38:36-38:46).

(vii) Extreme Close-up

The extreme close-up or ECU or XCU, as it is known, is a shot-size that is to be used sparingly. Suppose you are talking to a person and that person stands extremely close to you. Eventually, you will begin to feel uncomfortable. The ECU, if not used wisely, can have the same effect on the audience. Which is the reason you will not find many close-up shots in a film, unless of course, it is by intention. This shot-size is reserved for very dramatic effect since it can bring focus to very specific detail. It can be used to build suspense or to create tension or to instil a sense of apprehension in the audience. In the case of the face, the ECU can be used for focusing on the eyes or the mouth. ECU is also used on inanimate objects and not just the human face. Extreme close-ups are a wonderful tool but they should be used sparingly.
Images 16 and 17 are examples of the extreme close-up. Refer to video lecture (40:16-40:55)

**Visual Universe**

Creating the *visual universe* for a film involves the creation of a visual world for the characters of a film that they inhabit. To make this clearer think of film *Star Wars* films. The narrative of the film is based on a situation that does not exist in real life. Therefore, the filmmakers have to create a visual world that does justice to the story of the film and is as per its requirements. Everything that you see (or hear) in the *Star War* films is used to create their visual universe. It includes costumes, the set design, locations. Everything that you see onscreen is to create the visual universe of the film, the universe in which the characters of the film reside. A coherent visual universe helps the audience to perceive the story, to orient themselves as to what the story is all about or where it is based. Once they have an understanding of the film's universe, the audience can also understand the characters better.
Every film has a definite and identifiable universe in which it exists. This universe can be defined by time, it can also be defined by space and by all visual elements that you see in it. Therefore, the locations, the set, the wardrobes - they all are part of the visual universe and all of this is captured through cinematography.

The director and cinematographer, through discussion and consultation decide what will be visible in the frame. All the visual elements are interrelated and work together to create the final look of the film.

To understand the concept of visual universe with an example, refer to video lecture (42:55-44:45)