

# The Syntax of Film: A Glossary

Second Edition (2009)

Compiled and edited by Mark Bischoff and Ulrike Ordon

Contents	Page
Distance [Einstellungsgröße]	2
Angle [Kameraperspektive]	3
Point of View [Szenenauflösung]	4
Movement [Kamerabewegung]	5
Focus [Schärfe/Brennweite]	5
Camera Speed [Aufnahmegeschwindigkeit]	6
Units [Einheiten]	7
Editing [Montage]	7
Punctuation [Übergänge]	8
Lighting [Lichtführung]	9
Color [Farbgebung]	9
Sound [Ton]	10
Writing [Vorlagen]	10
Works Cited	12

Note to the digital edition:

The references in brackets (↗) at the end of the entries lead to

- an enlarged view of a movie still (↗ enlarge),
- a diagram that explains/illustrates the term (↗ diagram),
- a sample from an actual production (↗ sample), or
- an extract from a movie (↗ title).

## Distance [Einstellungsgröße]

**extreme long shot [weit].** (abbreviated ELS or XLS) A wide-angle SHOT providing a bird's-eye view of a vast area. Usually a static shot filmed from a high vantage point, it is most often used to establish the geography of an area or to suggest wide open spaces. (↗ enlarge)



**long shot [Totale].** (abbreviated LS) A broad view of objects or action of principal interest. The SHOT requires a wide angle of photography and a SCENE in depth. The camera is positioned at a distance that allows general recognition of the subject matter at the expense of detail. When used to identify a setting and establish the background for subsequent detail it is known as an ESTABLISHING SHOT. (↗ enlarge)



**medium shot [Halbtotale].** (abbreviated MS) An intermediate SHOT between a CLOSE-UP and a LONG SHOT. As with most camera angles, this shot cannot be described with mathematical precision. Generally speaking, it would cover the full figure of a man or a small group of men with a small portion of background showing. (↗ enlarge)



**close shot [nah].** (abbreviated CS) A SHOT closer than a MEDIUM SHOT but not as tight as a CLOSE-UP. When the subject is a person, he or she is framed from the top of the head to the waist. When it is an object, the shot is relative to the size of that object. (↗ enlarge)



**close-up [groß].** (abbreviated CU) A SHOT taken from a short distance or through a telephoto lens which brings to the screen a magnified, detailed part of a person or an object. A close-up of a person, for example, might show only his head, a shot of a car's interior might reveal just the steering wheel. A close-up is used to draw attention to a significant detail to clarify a point, designate a meaning, or heighten the dramatic impact of a film's plot. (↗ enlarge)



**extreme close-up [Detail].** (abbreviated ECU or XCU) A very tight CLOSE-UP shot that greatly magnifies a tiny object or shows a magnified view of part of an object or a person, such as a SHOT of a face featuring only the eyes, nose, and mouth. Also called "detail shot" and, less frequently, "big close-up." Extreme close-ups are useful for showing small objects in detail, but beyond this obvious utility they may be used effectively for dramatic impact or meaningful emphasis. (↗ enlarge)



## Angle [Kameraperspektive]

**eye-level shot [Normalsicht].** Provides a normal viewpoint and is usually shot from a height of four to six feet, with no distortion of vertical lines. The eye level of the performer, not the cameraman, determines camera height, and is especially crucial in CLOSE-UP shots. Because of normal viewpoint, the eye-level shot is considered useful in establishing situations and providing audiences with a frame of reference. (↗ enlarge)



**high-angle shot [Obersicht/extreme O.: Vogelperspektive].** A SHOT taken from an elevated position looking down on the subject or the action. (↗ enlarge)



**low-angle shot [Untersicht/extreme U.: Froschperspektive].** A SHOT taken from a low camera setup with the camera tilted upward. Often used for dramatic impact because it makes people and objects seem tall and overpowering. (↗ enlarge)



## Point of View [Szenenauflösung]

**establishing shot [einführende Einstellung].** A SHOT, usually a LONG SHOT or a full shot at the beginning of a SEQUENCE, which establishes the location, setting, and mood of the action. It provides the audience with an initial visual orientation, enabling it to see the interrelationship between the general setting and the detailed action in subsequent SCENES. (↗ *Carrie*)

**over-the-shoulder shot [Über-die-Schulter].** A common SHOT in dialogue scenes in which the subject is viewed from an angle just over the shoulder of another performer. (↗ enlarge)



**reverse-(angle) shot [Gegenschuss/Gegen-Einstellung].** A SHOT taken from an angle opposite the one from which the preceding shot has been taken. The reverse angle technique is frequently employed in dialogue scenes to provide the editor with alternate facial shots of the actors speaking. (↗ enlarge)



**shot/reverse shot (angle/reverse angle) [Schuss-Gegenschuss-Verfahren].** Editing SHOTS of two people in conversation to conform to the 180-DEGREE RULE. (↗ *Heat*)

**180-degree rule [180-Grad-Regel].** An editing rule dictating that the camera must remain on one side of the subject(s)' eye-line or line-of-action when shooting a SCENE. This allows smooth cutting between SHOTS because spatial relationships and directions of movement are consistent. (↗ diagram)

**reaction shot [Reaktions-Einstellung].** A CLOSE SHOT of a person (or persons) reacting to something that is said or done off scene or in a previous SHOT. A reaction shot may be used as a standard continuity device, such as cutting from one player speaking to another who is reacting to his words, or as a CUTAWAY device, such as cutting from the main action in a boxing ring to the reaction of a spectator in the audience, then returning to the main action. (↗ *Jaws*)

**point-of-view (POV) shot [subjektive Kamera].** A SHOT filmed at such a camera angle that an object or an action appears to be seen from a particular actor's viewpoint. This is usually accomplished by placing the camera alongside the player (or at a spot he would have occupied if he were present on the set) from whose viewpoint the SCENE is shot. Other players look at the point designated as the player's position (or at the player, if he is present) but not into the lens. (↗ *Strange Days*)

## Movement [Kamerabewegung]

**pan [horizontaler Schwenk].** A camera movement on a horizontal plane from one part of a SCENE to another. A contraction of "panorama" or "panoramic," the term is sometimes used to describe any pivotal movement of the camera. (↗ *The Straight Story*)

**roll [Rollen].** Movement of the camera around the axis that runs longitudinally from the lens to the subject. (↗ *Apocalypse Now*) (↗ *The Talented Mr. Ripley*)

**tilt [vertikaler Schwenk].** The pivotal movement of a camera in a vertical plane. In a tilt shot, the camera is moved up (tilt up) or down (tilt down), in contrast to a PAN shot, in which the camera is moved horizontally. (↗ *Gladiator*) (↗ *12 Angry Men*)

**tracking shot [Kamerafahrt].** (also trucking shot, traveling shot, dolly shot) A SHOT in which a camera—mounted on tracks, on a vehicle, or on a dolly—moves forward, backward, or sideways, to follow the action and the movements of performers. The camera is said to "track in" when moving closer to the subject and to "track out" when moving away from the subject. (↗ *GoodFellas*)

**zoom [Zoom].** The real or apparent effect of camera movement toward or away from a subject during a single continuous SHOT. In animation, the effect is achieved by moving the camera in relation to the animation stand. In live-action cinematography, however, it is usually achieved by means of the zoom lens, with the camera remaining stationary. The camera operator is said to be "zooming in" when he brings the subject closer to view and to be "zooming out" or "zooming back" when he withdraws farther from the image. In its broadest sense, the term "zoom shot" is used interchangeably with a TRACKING SHOT or dolly shot. (↗ *Don't Look Now*)

## Focus [Schärfe/Brennweite]

**focus plane [Schärfenebene].** The plane in the SCENE being photographed upon which the lens is focused.

## Camera Speed [Aufnahmegeschwindigkeit]

### deep focus [weiter Schärfentiefebereich].

Sharp definition of all objects in front of a camera, both far and near, in the same SHOT. (↗ enlarge)



### shallow focus [enger Schärfentiefebereich]. A

technique that is used to create a shallow FOCUS PLANE, usually to direct the attention of the viewer to the subject or action in that plane. (↗ enlarge)



**follow focus [Schärfenanpassung].** Focus is continuously adjusted during a SHOT in order to keep a subject in focus. This becomes necessary whenever camera movement or subject movement causes a subject to move out of the FOCUS PLANE. (↗ *In the Mood for Love*)

**rack focus [Schärfenverlagerung].** A technique that uses SHALLOW FOCUS to direct the attention of the viewer forcibly from one subject to another. Focus is pulled, or changed, to shift the FOCUS PLANE, often rapidly, sometimes several times within the SHOT. (↗ 24) (↗ *The Color of Money*)

## Camera Speed [Aufnahmegeschwindigkeit]

**accelerated motion [Zeitraffer].** A technical effect that makes people or objects appear to be moving at a faster-than-normal rate during projection. Popularly known as “fast motion,” it is achieved by running the camera at a slower rate than the standard 24 frames per second. Accelerated motion has been used for comic effect since the early days of film but it also has been widely used to speed up the pace of action and adventure films. (↗ *Zazie dans le Métro*)

**slow motion [Zeitlupe].** An effect resulting from running film through a camera at faster-than-normal speed. When the film is projected at the standard rate of speed, action on the screen seems slowed down. Slow motion has been widely used for artistic effect, to create a romantic aura or stress a moment in time. (↗ *Terminator 2*)

**freeze frame [Standbild].** The effect of repeatedly printing a single frame so that the action seems to freeze on the screen into still-like motionlessness. The process can be used to lengthen a SCENE, to highlight a point, or for sheer dramatic effect. In its broadest sense it can be seen as a PUNCTUATION device. (↗ *Les Choses de la Vie*)

## Units [Einheiten]

**shot [Einstellung].** A single continuous take, filmed in a single session from one camera setup. The basic grammatical unit of the language of film, a shot may range from a single frame taken from a fixed position to a setup involving complex camera movement.

**scene [Szene].** In the strictest sense, a section of a motion picture which is unified as to time and place. It is made up from a series of SHOTS of varying angles and is usually filmed in one session. As a unit of film language, the scene is larger than a shot and smaller than a SEQUENCE. The term “scene” is also often used broadly and loosely to describe any distinct unit of a film, such as a take, a shot, or a sequence.

**sequence [Sequenz].** A number of SCENES linked together by time, location, or narrative continuity to form a unified episode in a motion picture. It is often likened to a chapter in a book, the scene being the equivalent of a paragraph and the SHOT the equivalent of a sentence. Traditionally, but not necessarily, a sequence begins with a FADE-IN and ends with a FADE-OUT or some other optical transitional device.

## Editing [Montage]

Editing is the process of selecting and assembling various motion picture SHOTS and sound tracks into a coherent whole. “Continuity” editing in narrative filmmaking is used to condense time and space as well as to emphasize story elements, structuring the narrative material so that patterns of meaning are created. Since editing is a very complex concept that cannot be described exhaustively in a glossary, the following section only contains a selection of typical editing techniques.

**cross-cutting [Parallelmontage].** The technique of intercutting two independent SEQUENCES to and fro in the course of editing so that a relationship is established between the parallel actions. Cross cutting is the key to tension building in chase scenes, with emphasis shifting back and forth from pursuer to pursued. (↗ *Ascenseur pour l’Echafaud*)

**cutaway [Zwischenschnitt].** A SHOT of an action or object related to but not an immediate part of a principal SCENE. It is designed to draw attention from the main action temporarily or to comment on it as an aside. Technically, it is a useful device for the editor in bridging a time lapse or in avoiding a JUMP CUT. (↗ *Clerks*)

**insert [Insert].** A SHOT, usually a CLOSE-UP or EXTREME CLOSE-UP, intercut within a SCENE to help explain the action, emphasize a point, or facilitate continuity. A typical insert may consist of a close-up shot of a newspaper item, a hand holding a gun, or a clock on a wall. (↗ *The Jazz Singer*)

**flashback [Rückblende].** A SCENE in a motion picture representing an earlier event than the one currently being depicted. The flashback is a useful narrative device that allows a screenwriter a degree of flexibility in the temporal structure of his plot. It may relate an event that occurred before the main story began or retrogress in time to depict a portion of the main story not previously shown. (↗ *Titanic*) (↗ *Marathon Man*)

**flashforward [Vorausblende].** The opposite of FLASHBACK. A SCENE in a motion picture representing an event that is expected, projected, or imagined to occur later than the one currently depicted. This narrative device has been employed less frequently than the

## Punctuation [Übergänge]

FLASHBACK but can be quite useful in the futuristic structure of science fiction stories or in depicting the hopes and dreams of a character. (↗ *Gladiator*)

**jump cut [Sprungschnitt]**. A noticeable abrupt movement of a subject on the screen, resulting either from cutting out a section of film from the middle of a SHOT and joining the remaining ends together, or from stopping the camera, moving closer to the subject, and beginning to film again without changing the angle. Either way, a man seen walking across a room would seem to be jumping abruptly from one position to another rather than walking smoothly. Traditionally, such breaks in continuity and smooth transition have been considered intolerable, but some modern filmmakers employ jump cuts freely and deliberately. (↗ *A Bout de Souffle*)

**match cut**. A CUT in which two disparate SCENES are linked by the repetition of an action or a form. (↗ *2001: A Space Odyssey*)

**overlap [Überlappen]**. The extension of action, DIALOGUE, music, or SOUND EFFECTS from one SCENE into the next (or vice versa) to allow smooth transition and uninterrupted continuity. (↗ *Traffic*)

**split screen [geteilter Bildschirm]**. An effect SHOT in which two or more different images appear on the same frame. (↗ *Timecode*)

## Punctuation [Übergänge]

Ways of linking SHOTS:

**cut [Schnitt]**. Abrupt transition from one SCENE to another without using an optical effect such as a DISSOLVE, a WIPE, or a FADE.

**dissolve [Überblendung]**. A screen effect of gradually fusing one SHOT into another. It is achieved by the overlapping of two lengths of film so that, as the last frames of the first shot gradually darken or fade out, they are blended with the opening frames of the next SCENE which gradually brighten or fade in. The effect on the screen is that of one scene seeming to melt into another. (↗ *The Man Who Knew Too Much*)

**fade-in/fade-out [Aufblende/Abblende]**. An optical effect that causes a SCENE to emerge gradually on the screen from complete blackness (fade-in), or a bright image to dim gradually into blackness (fade-out). The fade is a transitional device that usually signifies a distinct break in a film's continuity, indicating a change in time, location, or subject matter. (↗ *Sunset Blvd.*)

**focus-in/focus-out [Fokussieren/Defokussieren]**. A punctuation device that makes the image gradually come into or go out of focus. (↗ *Les Choses de la Vie*) (↗ *Father of the Bride*)

**iris-in/iris-out [Irisblende]**. A transition effect, now seldom used, made in the camera by varying the aperture to or from zero, or by an optical printer. In the iris-in, sometimes also known as "circle-in," the image first appears in the middle of the screen as a pinpoint circle of light surrounded by black. The circle increases gradually in size until the picture fills the entire screen. The iris-out, also known as "circle-out," reverses the procedure; the picture, at first occupying the entire screen, diminishes in size until it becomes a pinpoint circle and the frame is turned completely black. (↗ *A Bout de Souffle*)



**wipe [Wischblende].** A transitional effect in which a SCENE gradually erases and replaces another as if it were wiping it off the screen. Wipes are achieved optically and may appear in a variety of forms. The edge line may be straight or jagged, sharp or soft, and may proceed horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. A wipe of an irregular geometric shape is known as an “explosion wipe” or “burst wipe.” Wipes were used abundantly in silent films, but because of their overly dramatic impact they lost much of their attraction as film audiences became more sophisticated. (↗ *The Man Who Knew Too Much*)

## Lighting [Lichtführung]

In film production lighting is the art and craft of artificially illuminating a set to achieve a desired photographic image. The choice and pattern of lighting setups are crucial in determining the texture, “look,” and mood of a particular film.

**key light [Führungslicht].** The principal and dominant source of light used in illuminating a motion picture set. It determines the tone and mood of a SCENE and is therefore established first by the director of photography, who later builds around it the fill light and other compensating sources of illumination, such as the cross light and back light. (↗ diagram)

### high key lighting [starke Grundausleuchtung].

A lighting arrangement designed to produce an overall light tone in a SCENE. The use of a high level of illumination emphasizes the lighter tones of the gray scale at the expense of the darker ones and results in a picture with a low lighting contrast, often suggesting brightness or cheerfulness. (↗ enlarge)



### low key lighting [geringe Grundausleuchtung].

The effect of keeping a SCENE or the tonal range of the subjects in a scene predominantly at the dark end of the gray scale. Low-key lighting utilizes dim illumination and deep shadows to produce a “dense” atmosphere and mysterious, dramatic effects. (↗ enlarge)



## Color [Farbgebung]

Color has its own inherent value of weight and direction that influences the perception of the image.

**black and white [schwarzweiß].** Type of film that was mainly used before COLOR film stock became widely available in the 1950s. Since the ‘60s it has almost exclusively been used for artistic effect.

## Sound [Ton]

**color [Farbe].** Film stock that has almost entirely replaced BLACK AND WHITE since the 1960s, with a few exceptions for artistic effect.

**color dominance [Farbdominanz].** A technique in COLOR cinematography that highlights certain objects or entire SCENES by means of changing color values. (↗ *Traffic*)

## Sound [Ton]

**sound image relations [Bild-Ton-Verhältnis].** Sounds (MUSIC, SPEECH, NOISE) can originate within the fictive world (intradiegetic) or come from outside this world (extradiegetic). In the first case the source may be visible (on screen) or invisible (off screen). (↗ *Weekend*)

**parallel sound [parallele Anordnung von Bild- und Tonelementen].** Sound that matches its accompanying image. (↗ *Spirits of the Dead*)

**contrapuntal sound [kontrapunktische Anordnung von Bild- und Tonelementen].** Sound that is used in counterpoint to the image. (↗ *Spirits of the Dead*)

**dialogue/speech [Dialog/Sprache].** In a film, all spoken lines. Since the cinema is essentially a visual medium, dialogue is, or should be, used more sparingly than in the theater, supplementing action rather than substituting for it.

**dialogue track [Dialogspur/-aufnahme].** Sound track carrying the DIALOGUE portion of a film, as distinguished from music or SOUND EFFECTS. The separate tracks are eventually combined in the mix.

**music track [Musikspur/-aufnahme].** A sound track containing the musical SCORE of a film, as distinguished from the tracks for DIALOGUE and SOUND EFFECTS. All tracks are eventually blended into a single sound track in the process of the mix.

**score [Partitur].** A musical composition written as an accompaniment to a motion picture or another dramatic presentation. Even before films acquired a voice, producers recognized the potential power of music to change the mood of a SCENE and enhance the emotional impact of an entire production.

**sound effects/noise [Toneffekte/Geräusche].** Natural or artificially created sounds, other than SPEECH or music, that become part of a motion picture's sound track. Such sounds (a gun popping, a door slamming, a glass breaking, thunder rolling, etc.) are recorded during filming or separately (sound not recorded synchronously with film is known as "wild sound") or borrowed from a library of stock sound effects.

**voice over [Off-Stimme].** (abbreviated V.O. or v/o) Narration or DIALOGUE spoken by a person not seen on the screen at the time his or her voice is heard. (↗ *Manhattan*)

## Writing [Vorlagen]

**screenplay [Drehbuch].** (also called script and scenario) The written text upon which a film production is based. Screenplays are usually presented in a format similar to that of a stage play, with DIALOGUE and directions alternating. Documentary and industrial films are presented in a two-column format, with the left column containing camera directions and the right column DIALOGUE, narration, music, and SOUND EFFECTS. The latter format is preferred by most European filmmakers for feature films as well as for documentaries. (↗ sample)

**storyboard [Aufnahmeplan]**. A layout of sketches, drawings, or still photographs in continuity which outlines the main action and the narrative progression of a SEQUENCE or an entire film. Storyboards are widely used in planning animation films and in the presentation of proposed TV commercials to prospective clients. Some feature film directors who like to prepare their SCENES carefully in advance of production also use this technique. (↗ sample)

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(↗ Complete list of works cited for the digital edition)