

20 SHOTS

Ian Wall

ABSTRACT

For the last 20 years I have been moderating students' practical work and one thing still remains patently clear. They know what they want to film but are not sure how to go about it. How do you convey exactly what you want to convey through a shot? How do you edit shots together to make the impact that you desire? And how do we make our students think about the endless possibilities of the filmic shot? This workshop will look at the idea of the camera frame – how you actually decide on what type of shot you can film (the aesthetic possibility). Through an exercise which combines both shooting and editing material, delegates explored the visual possibilities with regard to the selection of possible shots and different ways of editing these shots together.

IDEA FOR THE 20 SHOTS

The idea for the 20 Shots exercise came about following a summer of moderating students' AS and A2 Moving Image coursework. What became obvious by the ninety-third video was that most of the students were not aware of the aesthetics of either shot framing or editing. Three-minute opening sequences of 'Thrillers' were all too often fifteen-second blocks of shots that, while in a basic sense told the story, failed to involve the viewer in that story. In writing terms, there were '...and then, and then, and then...' stories. Students rarely seemed to consider how they could use different shots and the rhythm of editing to visually engage the viewer and build up tension. All too often the zoom button on the camera and the transition effects menu on the editing suite seemed to be their only way of trying to visually enhance their story. Blinded by technology rather than visually thinking was their sole 'aesthetic' approach.

If we are looking to develop a creative use within the technology that we have available to us in the classroom then we need to consider the touchstones of communication, within the medium of communication, before the actual technology we use to communicate. The word comes before the pen; the thought comes before the story. Looking comes before the paintbrush; the intention comes before the framing. Thought, intention, choice and decision eventually lead to what we read on a page or see on a screen. And there are the key motivators for us as creators – be it of a poem, story, essay or film.

- What do I want to communicate?
- Why do I want to communicate this idea?
- How do I want to communicate?
- Why do I choose this shot/this word to communicate the previous decision?

The workshop, therefore, attempted to raise these issues.

The title of the workshop – 20 Shots – indicates what they were asked to do with the camera. Working in pairs, each delegate was required to film twenty different shots of their partner. One group member filmed their partner sitting in one location. The other member filmed their partner walking towards that location. Each shot had to last ten seconds. To stress the importance of a steady, static shot, fifteen of their shots had to have the camera on a tripod. The use of the zoom button was forbidden! Thus, the delegates had to accept the fact that if they wanted a close-up of their partner's eyes then they had to invade their partner's personal space and move the camera. The delegates needed to carefully think, after the first seven or eight shots, about where they would go next. Close-up, medium and long shots had been filmed. Now what to do? Most delegates realised that shooting through (windows, banisters, bushes etc.) followed by shooting from above or below the subject, as well as positioning the camera at different angles to their subject, gave them additional shots.

With their shots completed and uploaded into iMovie, delegates' were given a piece of music and then, using their twenty shots, edited the two sets of shots together to create a piece which fitted in with the mood of the music. Whilst concentrating on the rhythm of the music, delegates also had to consider the length of each shot within the sequence as well as the effect created by placing one shot next to another (montage) and how tension could be created through editing.

Placing these two exercises next to each other allowed delegates to realise that the quality of their editing depended on the quality and variety of the shots that they had filmed. Their ability to frame a shot (the visual aesthetic) gave them more scope within the edit (the aesthetic of emotion). Hopefully the workshop will have also led delegates to see that the most creative of filmmaking lies in the editing process.

As the Oscar®-winning film editor Walter Murch says:

'Underlying these considerations is the central preoccupation of a film editor, which should be to put himself/herself in place of the audience. What are the audiences going to be thinking at any particular moment? Where are they going to be looking? What do you want them to think about? What do they need to think about? And, of course, what do you want them to feel?'

Walter Murch, In the Blink of an Eye, pg 21

Most important of all was the experience of 'playing' with filmic aesthetics. Delegates were forbidden to use the zoom button on the camera during their filming. If they wanted a close-up then they needed to get 'close up'. In the editing process, use of transitions was forbidden. Their major concern was the length of the shot and the relationship between one shot and another. The aesthetic triumphed over the technology!

REFERENCES

Murch, W., In the Blink of an Eye (Second Edition), Silman James Press, 2001

Ian Wall started teaching at London Comprehensive School, Holland Park, where he held the posts of Head of English, Head of Film and Media and Deputy Head of Humanities Faculty. In 1986 Ian founded Film Education where, as Director, he is in charge of developing educational policy and ideas for publications, events, CD-DVD ROMs and television programmes. Film Education has become increasingly involved with digital resources and the use of digital video in education. Ian and the Film Education team have recently been awarded their second BAFTA for their Recollections interactive resource. In conjunction with Jane Dickson (Director of Digital Media at Film Education) he has developed a number of INSET modules dealing with the use of digital video within education.

Ian Wall is a founder member of the European Association for Audio Visual Media Educators, was a member of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Film Education Working Party and has served as a jury member for the BAFTA Children's Drama Award.