Shot Size Narration in the Mobile Media Era: Characteristics and Evolution

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Abstract

The world has embraced the mobile media era, with mobile phones now deemed indispensable in people's lives. In public spaces, such as subway stations or cafes, it is ubiquitous to witness individuals engrossed in their mobile phones and tablets, while books were once the primary pastime for time-killing. The evolution of mobile media and mobile networks has revolutionized the way we perceive and create images. Shot size categorization stands as a vital component within the language of visual representation. The narrative essence of shot size classification has taken on fresh attributes in the mobile era, evolving in sync with contemporary trends into a novel form.

Keywords: shot size, mobile media, narration, vertical screen

1. Introduction

1.1 The Emergence of the Mobile Media Era

The mobile media era signifies a period marked by the pervasive influence of mobile technology and the widespread utilization of mobile devices, instigating profound transformations in the realms of media, communication, and information accessibility. The Internet has traversed the epochs of Web 1.0, characterized by content presentation, through Web 2.0, distinguished by interaction, to the present Web 3.0 era, featuring social media prominence. The ascent of mobile media has significantly broadened the horizons of Internet development. With the ubiquity of mobile media devices such as smartphones and tablet computers, we can now readily share information in regions where mobile Internet has been embraced. The rise of the mobile media era owes its success to the prevalence of mobile electronic gadgets, the maturation of mobile Internet infrastructure, and the establishment of multimedia platforms. This transformation exerts a considerable influence on image transmission modes, viewing paradigms, content creation, and various other facets.

1.2 Definition and Types of Shot Size

Shot size division emerged as a response to the liberation of the camera from the static, theater-style fixed-point photography prevalent in early cinematography. This shift transformed filmmaking from a unit of continuous action into a unit of individual lens frames, effectively breaking free from theatrical constraints and pioneering a multi-scenic, multi-shot, and scene-sequencing narrative technique.

(Zhouxinxia, 2011) During the early days of cinema, the camera remained static in a single position for shooting. When the subject's longitudinal movement within the frame was limited, the overall composition of the film underwent minimal change. Additionally, due to the nascent state of montage art at the time, most films were structured with scenes as the primary segmentation units. Consequently, audiences viewed these films as if attending a stage play, adopting a passive spectatorship. Much akin to watching surveillance footage today, the emotional resonance of these early films with the audience was comparatively subdued.

As film art techniques advanced, shot size narration has emerged as a pivotal narrative tool in cinema. Pioneers like D.W. Griffith, in his film *The Birth of a Nation*, exhibited a refined skill in utilizing distinct shot sizes to convey the narrative. Rather than coalescing these elements – squirrels, carefree girls, and black schemers – into a single frame, he adeptly presented them in different shots and shot sizes, showcasing their individual significance. Now, let's examine the benefits of such editing in films. Firstly, scene division reduces the duration of individual shots, resulting in a clearer presentation of narrative content and focal points within a single shot. Secondly, the use of divided lenses involves the reconfiguration of film and television space and time. Even though the three subjects in the story may not share the same shot, the director artfully engenders a sense of coexisting space, essentially "creating" spatial connections. This innovation also opens up new possibilities for subsequent film and television productions. During Kurishov's era, the art of film had advanced to the point where it was feasible to seamlessly blend images captured at disparate moments and locations, creating the illusion of a cohesive time and space—a concept epitomized by Kurishov's pioneering creative geography experiment. Moreover, the introduction of scene separation profoundly engaged the audience's emotional connection to the film. The split shot makes people feel more compact and emotional than the same shots, which also makes the film narrative rise from the simple narrative level to the emotional level.

Two primary factors influence shot size in film and television imagery. The first factor is object distance, signifying the physical space between the camera and the subject, often referred to as the shooting distance. The second factor is focal length, which modifies the visual perspective of the image by adjusting the length of the camera's focal segment. It's essential to note that the majority of films center around human narrative subjects, making humans the standard for distinguishing shot sizes in film and television. After extensive practical exploration and summarization, filmmakers have categorized shot sizes into five main types. As the language of film and television has evolved, these original five shot sizes categories have expanded to include Wide Shot (WS), Full Shot (FS), Medium Full Shot, Medium Close-up shot and Close-up (CU).
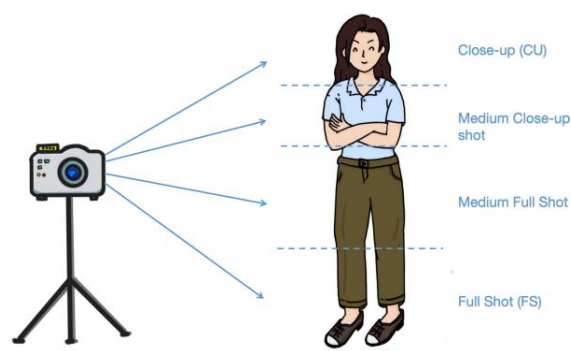

Figure 1. Main shot sizes in the film

As shown in the above figure, if the proportion of people in the picture is less than 1/2 of the picture frame, it is a wide shot, which means to show the shot size of the people in a long distance. If the characters occupy the whole area of the picture, it is a full shot, which means to take a panorama of the characters. The shot size above the knee is medium full shot. The view around the chest is a medium close-up shot. The description above the shoulder or a certain detail of the character is a close-up shot size.

2. Characteristics of Shot Size Narration

2.1 Application of Shot Size Classification in Narration

The change of shot size brings about the change of viewpoint. When watching the film, the viewing distance between the audience and the screen is usually fixed. This is almost the same in the era of mobile media. When we watch videos on mobile phones, we also keep a relatively stable distance from mobile phones according to our habits. When the physical distance remains constant, altering the shot size

can enhance the audience's comprehension of the film's content. Consider, for instance, a scenario where the director intends to draw the audience's attention to a crucial piece of evidence left behind by the murderer at the crime scene, such as an inadvertently dropped button. In such cases, the director typically employs a close-up shot to emphasize the significance of the button. Different shot size serve distinct roles in the narrative, each contributing uniquely to the storytelling process.

The extensive wide shot encompasses a relatively wide viewing span with a considerable depth of field. The content information in the picture is rather vague, which is suitable for representing environmental information. Given the necessity of maintaining a substantial distance from the subject during long-range shots, the capacity to depict characters is comparatively limited among the five primary shot sizes. Consequently, the long-range view possesses the weakest narrative prowess, and it is typically employed at the outset and conclusion of a narrative to evoke a mood or establish context.

A full shot in film serves a multifaceted role. It not only captures the entirety of a character's actions but also provides context about both the character and the surrounding environment. The full shot shot size is an indispensable element in film, often used to establish positioning between characters or between characters and their surroundings. When the narrative introduces new scene information, altering the spatial relationships among characters or prompting new character actions, the full shot becomes crucial for reintroducing the space-time dynamics of the evolving storyline.

Incorporating a medium full shot in the narrative draws the audience's focus closer to the characters. While environmental details are omitted, the spatial range of the characters' activities remains distinctly visible. Consequently, the medium shot is frequently employed to depict a character's expansive actions, such as running, jumping, or moving to a specific location.

Medium close-up shots exclusively frame the character's upper body, enhancing their visual presence, emotions, and expressions. This camera angle is a popular choice for character dialogue shot sizes. Close-ups are often paired with a shallow depth of field, creating a visual effect where everything except the subject appears out of focus, resulting in an engaging "intense gaze" effect on the audience.

Close-ups serve as a primary tool to accentuate and underscore narrative intricacies, enriching the visual storytelling by offering more information and skillfully directing the viewer's focus. The use of close-up shots is inherently subjective and at the director's discretion. As previously mentioned, without the director's deliberate choice to feature a close-up of, let's say, a button, it would remain inconspicuous amid the chaos of a crime scene, eluding the audience's attention even if it were present in a full shot, given its diminutive size.

2.2 The Diversity of Mobile Media Shot Sizes

We commonly refer to the relationship between a picture's width and height as the aspect ratio or picture ratio. In the early days of cinema, the standard aspect ratio was 1.33:1, a format endorsed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Early television screens were designed to adhere to this 4:3 format. With the advent of digital technology, images started to expand horizontally within the visual space to better align with the broader horizontal field of human vision. Through the integration of various format standards, the conventional picture aspect ratio gradually gave way to the 16:9 format, and today, the prevalent cinematic aspect ratio stands at 2.35:1. The classification of shot size based on narrative is closely tied to the prevailing film formats, specifically those with a wider width than length. The evolution of mobile media has disrupted the longstanding horizontal image format that had persisted for over a century. In particular, the rise of user-generated short videos on mobile platforms has fundamentally transformed the image format, shifting it from a horizontal to a vertical orientation. This shift to vertical screens necessitates distinct composition techniques compared to horizontal screens, resulting in a significant alteration in shot size narrative. The lack of uniform industry standards for mobile phone images, owing to technical constraints in mobile device media, stands in contrast to the standardized format seen in the film industry. With the proliferation of user-generated short videos, we've witnessed a growing divergence in genre utilization. This can be attributed to the varying aspect ratios across different mobile phone brands, as well as the non-professional

nature of the creators themselves, which contributes to the non-standardized use of aspect ratios.

The ubiquity of digital technology has revolutionized the landscape of image production and dissemination. Historically, filmmaking necessitated specialized equipment and skilled professionals. However, today, users can effortlessly capture images using their mobile phones. The widespread use of handheld photography and stabilizers has not only enhanced the depth of narrative within shot sizes but also facilitated swift and seamless transitions within the same shot. In certain instances, perspective shifts during shooting can be seamlessly executed. Furthermore, in post-production, advancements in digital imaging technology allow for the integration of multiple shots into a single, extensive image. This capability, in turn, bestows a broader and more varied visual spectrum to mobile media scenes, offering a multitude of perspectives and experiences.

2.3 Virtual Shot Size

A virtual shot size, often referred to as a virtual world or virtual environment, is a digital representation that may range from entirely fictitious to highly realistic, mirroring the real world. On widely used mobile social media platforms, users are offered an array of special effects services. These services enable users to manipulate their own images using advanced digital technology. For instance, on TikTok, users can modify the backdrop for their characters or introduce virtual props, allowing for creative image composition.

The primary hallmark of classifying virtual shot size lies in their interactivity. In VR videos, users have the power to alter the video content by physically moving around in their real surroundings and adjusting their mobile phone's orientation. This shift in shot size classification narrative content places the viewer in control, subverting the traditional dynamics of image playback and reception where the viewer becomes an active participant. This interaction now allows the aesthetic subject to influence both the expression and content of the aesthetic object.

3. The Evolution of Shot Size Narration

3.1 Evolution of Shot Size Narration: Transitioning from Traditional to Mobile Media

The shift from traditional to mobile media has brought about a transformation in shot size narration. To begin, the advancement of digital mobile technology has altered the viewing habits. A survey conducted by Unruly, a British social video marketing agency, revealed that 53% of mobile phone users prefer watching videos vertically, as opposed to turning their phones horizontally. Furthermore, 34% of respondents reported actively locking their mobile phones in a vertical screen orientation. (Yao Pirong, 2012)

According to the Internet trend report by venture capitalist Mary Meeker, in 2010, the audience allocated just 5% of their time to viewing vertical videos, a figure that surged to 29% by 2015. (Zhoukui & Jinluya, 2018) Today, when viewing short videos, hardly anyone opts to tilt their mobile phones sideways. It's a transformation early film artists could hardly have foreseen — a significant shift in image creation driven by the adaptation to mobile phone usage habits. Despite our natural preference for horizontal visuals, the vertical screen state offers a more ergonomic experience when using mobile phones (as holding a phone horizontally often necessitates both hands). In the end, the convenience of single-handed phone operation prevailed over visual tradition, ushering in the rise of the vertical screen format.

The evolution of vertical screen images has directly catalyzed a shift in shot size types. Regardless of the specific shot size, the horizontal space is constrained, resulting in a compression of environmental information when the physical area remains the same.

Figure 2. Composition comparison of horizontal and vertical screens

As depicted in Figure 2, the image on the left represents a horizontal screen. Beyond the central subject, the surroundings and environment come into view. The character stands amidst a vacant forest with no other individuals nearby, imbuing the image with an overarching sense of loneliness and desolation. The character occupies approximately one-quarter to one-third of the horizontal space. On the right, we have a vertical screen image where the characters nearly occupy the entire horizontal space, while environmental details are minimized. The narrative emphasis of this image lies primarily in character portrayal. Additionally, due to the screen size constraints of mobile phones, viewers may struggle to discern intricate details in expansive long shots. Consequently, the frequency of employing such wide-angle shot sizes has dwindled, with medium full shots, medium close-up shot, and close-ups emerging as more suitable choices for mobile media content.

Furthermore, in the vertical screen orientation, the aesthetic gap between the audience and the image is reduced. This reduction occurs through both a physical proximity, as well as a narrative closeness. In the vertical format, the picture's compositional center tends to be more centralized, with environmental details excluded, thereby highlighting the characters within the frame. This accentuates the narrative focus and visual impact, making it simpler for the audience to establish a psychological closeness to the image's content. In the age of mobile media, the shift is evident: shot size have transitioned from big shot size classification to small shot size classification, video narratives have evolved from being objectively presented to subjectively experienced, and audiences have transformed from passive spectators to active participants.

3.2 The Impact of Mobile Media on Narrative Modes

Shot size categorization plays a pivotal role in film narration, as the amalgamation of various shot size classifications yields diverse narrative impacts. Directors harness these categories to communicate personal emotions, thematic nuances, and plot developments.

In traditional media, when shot sizes are categorized based on their narrative function, they can typically be classified into three categories. The first category is the establishing shot, predominantly comprised of wide and full shots, serving the purpose of conveying information about the scene's time, location, environment, and character relationships within the story. The second category is the action shot, typically composed of medium full hots, medium close-ups, and close-ups. It primarily serves to capture and showcase actions, expressions, intricate details, and more. The third type is the rendered picture, that is, the empty lens, which plays the role of hint, rendering, symbol, exaggeration, metaphor and emphasis on the narrative subject and theme. (Meeker M, 2015) In the era of mobile media, shot size segmentation diminishes the emotional connection to the environment in narrative while amplifying the interaction of characters' emotions. The use of close range shot sizes emphasizes the inner feelings and personal characteristics of the characters. This shift has led to the evolution of the narrative function of shot size segmentation, expanding from three categories to four. The first type is rendering, mainly the wide shot. Unlike in traditional media, the main purpose of rendering a picture is to show the environment. The picture can have a subject or an empty lens. The second category is action pictures, mainly full and medium full shots. The full shot pays more

attention to the direction of movement, and the medium full shot focuses more on the upper limb movement. The third type is the expression picture, usually medium close-up, which is the most used shot size in mobile media, used for character dialogue, expression description and so on. The fourth type is to emphasize the picture, which usually uses close-up to explain something.

Shot size narration has also progressed in the fusion of shots. In traditional television and cinema, shot size separation narratives commonly follow a sequential structure. The classic narrative approach involves initially employing a wide shot to introduce environmental elements, followed by using a full shot to capture the characters within that setting. Subsequently, medium full shot and medium close-up are utilized to advance the plot's development. In the early films, the sequence of vision wide shot—full shot—medium full shot—medium shot—close-up was almost followed to narrate step by step. In contemporary visual media, owing to the increased pace of viewing, we witness a form of shot size transition known as "jump cuts," where non-adjacent, consecutive shot size groups are linked to establish the narrative tempo of the image. In popular commercial films, it is usually connected across one shot size, such as full shot—medium full shot or medium full shot—close-up, and the more extreme is the combination of wide shot—close-up, which we call two-level lens combination. Significant visual alterations within a shot size can generate a more pronounced impact and serve to captivate the audience's attention. This narrative technique finds extensive application in documentaries and commercial advertisements.

In the age of mobile media, there is a tendency to interconnect shot size groups that share a common theme in the narrative. For example, the combination of medium close-up shot with other medium close-up shot, a practice that is relatively rare in traditional films. Traditionally, joining similar shot sizes of the same subject together could create a visual discontinuity for the audience, and this narrative method was generally reserved for cumulative montage sequences.

In the age of mobile media, video playback times have significantly shortened, as seen in platforms like TikTok, where videos are limited to just 15 seconds. This shift has led to a more fragmented approach to shot size narration. Shot size transitions no longer strictly adhere to the constraints of time, space, and logic continuity. Furthermore, the reduction in narrative space within each shot size has not only led to a similarity in the field of view but has also limited the scope for subject angle variations. Instead, there is a noticeable increase in the frequency of shot transitions. For instance, in traditional movies, there's typically a shot transition every 1-2 sentences within approximately 20 words. However, in the mobile media era, particularly in short videos, the shot transition rate rises to approximately 3-5 times. This heightened shot size-switching frequency significantly streamlines the narrative content of individual shot sizes and accelerates the overall pacing of the film.

3.3 Redefinition of Narrative Authenticity

James A. Cameron, a famous American director, said, "the art and technology of visual entertainment image production are undergoing a revolution, which has brought such profound changes to the way we produce films and other visual media programs that we can only describe it with the emergence of a digital Renaissance." (Thomas A Ohannian & Michael Phillips, 1998) The evolution of digital technology has eroded the distinctions between visual reality, challenging the concept that "seeing is believing" in shot size separation's narrative embodiment. During the era of classic film theory, scholars, including Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, were champions of the "realist film theory." They maintained that the fundamental tenet of film aesthetics lay in its ability to faithfully reproduce the authentic semblance of objects and reality. During the era of traditional filmmaking, the visuals captured on film were preserved through exposure, aligning with Bazin's view that the essence of cinema lay in recording real-life moments, akin to a mummy complex. However, in today's digital and mobile technology-driven landscape, the conventional definition of reality has been shattered. Contemporary digital advancements enable the virtualization of images through computer technology, sometimes achieving a heightened level of realism compared to real-life shot sizes. This shift necessitates a reevaluation and redefinition of the concept of "reality" in the ontology of film images. The authenticity within shot size transitions in storytelling isn't

grounded in real life but in the realm of art. Virtual narration can give rise to an array of characters, worlds, and visual effects, sometimes even evoking stronger emotional responses through its heightened realism. Meanwhile, the emergence of short videos, born out of the unique characteristics of mobile media communication, has introduced a greater degree of fragmentation in shot connections. This has resulted in a reduced cohesion between the temporal and spatial aspects of shot size narration, distancing the relationship between image time and space from real-world time and space. It presents a virtual image narrative time and space that relies on audience interpretation and is constructed in the later stages of engagement.

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