

The Angles

The **angle** from which an object is photographed can often serve as an authorial commentary on the subject matter. If the angle is slight, it can serve as a subtle form of emotional coloration. If the angle is extreme, it can represent the major meaning of an image. The angle is determined by where the *camera* is placed, not the subject photographed. A picture of a person photographed from a high angle actually suggests an opposite interpretation from an image of the same person photographed from a low angle. The subject matter can be identical in the two images, yet the information we derive from both clearly shows that the form is the content, the content the form.

Film realists tend to avoid extreme angles. Most of their scenes are photographed from eye level, roughly five to six feet off the ground—approximately the way an actual observer might view a scene. Usually these directors attempt to capture the clearest view of an object. **Eye-level shots** are seldom intrinsically dramatic, because they tend to be the norm. Virtually all directors use some eye-level shots, especially in routine exposition scenes.

Formalist directors are not always concerned with the clearest image of an object, but with the image that best captures its essential nature. Extreme angles involve distortions. Yet many filmmakers feel that by distorting the surface realism of an object, a greater truth is achieved—a symbolic truth. Both realist and formalist directors know that the viewer tends to identify with the camera's lens. The realist wishes to make the audience forget that there's a camera at all. The formalist is constantly calling attention to it.

There are five basic angles in the cinema: (1) the bird's-eye view, (2) the high angle, (3) the eye-level shot, (4) the low angle, and (5) the oblique angle. As in the case of shot

1-12a *Bonnie and Clyde (U.S.A., 1967)*, with Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, directed by Arthur Penn.

High angles tend to make people look powerless, trapped. The higher the angle, the more it tends to imply fatality. The camera's angle can be inferred by the background of a shot: High angles usually show the ground or floor; low angles the sky or ceiling. Because we tend to associate light with safety, high-key lighting is generally nonthreatening and reassuring. But not always. We have been socially conditioned to believe that danger lurks in darkness, so when a traumatic assault takes place in broad daylight, as in this scene from *Bonnie and Clyde*, the effect is doubly scary because it's so unexpected. (Warner Bros.)





1-12b *The Lives of Others (Germany, 2006)*, with Sebastian Koch and Martina Gedeck, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmark.

The bird's-eye angle positions the camera directly above the subject matter, looking downward. This Oscar-winning movie is set in Communist East Germany during the 1980s. A surveillance expert spies on the lives of a playwright (Koch) and his actress girlfriend (Sieland) to gather evidence against them as enemies of the state. Note how this angle, with its fatalistic implications, seems to pin the characters down like specimen insects, rendering them vulnerable and dominated from above. (*Sony Pictures Classics*)

designations, there are many intermediate kinds of angles. For example, there can be a considerable difference between a low and extreme low angle—although usually, of course, such differences tend to be matters of degree. Generally speaking, the more extreme the angle, the more distracting and conspicuous it is in terms of the subject matter being photographed.

The *bird's-eye view* is perhaps the most disorienting angle of all, for it involves photographing a scene from directly overhead (1-12b). Because we seldom view events from this perspective, the subject matter of such shots might initially seem unrecognizable and abstract. For this reason, filmmakers tend to avoid this type of camera setup. In certain contexts, however, this angle can be highly expressive. In effect, bird's-eye shots permit us to hover above a scene like all-powerful gods. The people photographed seem vulnerable and insignificant.

Ordinary *high-angle shots* are not so extreme, and therefore not so disorienting. The camera is placed on a crane, or some natural high promontory, but the sense of spectator omnipotence is not overwhelming. High angles give a viewer a sense of a general overview, but not necessarily one implying destiny or fate. High angles reduce the height of the objects photographed and usually include the ground or floor as background. Movement is slowed down: This angle tends to be ineffective for conveying a sense of speed, useful for suggesting tediousness. The importance of setting or environment is increased: The locale often seems to swallow people. High angles reduce the importance of a subject. A person seems harmless and insignificant photographed from above. This angle is also effective for conveying a character's self-contempt.

Some filmmakers avoid angles because they're too manipulative and judgmental. In the movies of the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, the camera is usually placed four feet from the

1-13a *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (U.S.A., 2006), with R. Lee Ermey, directed by Jonathan Liebesman.

Low angles can make characters seem threatening and powerful, for they loom above the camera—and us—like towering giants. We are collapsed in a position of maximum vulnerability—pinned to the ground, dominated. The feeling of menace is reinforced in this shot by the closed form of the composition, the drained color, and the sinister backlighting, throwing the character's face in shadow. The image might almost be entitled: No Exit. (*New Line Cinema*)



1-13b *Batman Begins* (U.S.A., 2005), with Christian Bale, directed by Christopher Nolan.

The photo from *Batman Begins* is an extreme low-angle shot, taken from the ground floor of a multistoried building. Batman descends from above, like an ebony-winged god from the heavens. As in most extreme angles, the content of the shot is transformed into an almost abstract design, forcing us to adjust our spatial orientation. This shot is deliberately meant to be disorienting. (*Warner Bros.*)



floor—as if an observer were viewing the events seated Japanese style. Ozu treated his characters as equals; his approach discourages us from viewing them either condescendingly or sentimentally. For the most part, they are ordinary people, decent and conscientious. But Ozu lets them reveal themselves. He believed that value judgments are implied through the use of angles, and he kept his camera neutral and dispassionate. Eye-level shots permit us to make up our own minds about what kind of people are being presented.

Low angles have the opposite effect of high. They increase height and thus are useful for suggesting verticality. More practically, they increase a short actor's height. Motion is speeded up, and in scenes of violence especially, low angles capture a sense of confusion.

1-14 *How Green Was My Valley (U.S.A., 1941)*, cinematography by Arthur Miller, directed by John Ford.

Lyricism is a vague but indispensable critical term emphasizing emotional intensity and a sensuous richness of expression. Derived from the word *lyre*, a harplike stringed instrument, lyricism is most often associated with music and poetry. Lyricism in movies also suggests a rhapsodic exuberance. Though lyrical qualities can be independent of subject matter, at its best, lyricism is a stylistic externalization of the scene's emotional content. John Ford was one of the supreme masters of the big studio era, a visual lyricist of the first rank. He disliked overt emotions in his movies. He preferred conveying feelings through forms. Stylized lighting effects and formal compositions such as this invariably embody intense emotions. "Pictures, not words, should tell the story," Ford insisted. (*Twentieth Century Fox*)



Environment is usually minimized in low angles, and often the sky or a ceiling is the only background. Psychologically, low angles heighten the importance of a subject. The figure looms threateningly over the spectator, who is made to feel insecure and dominated. A person photographed from below inspires fear and awe (1-13). For this reason, low angles are often used in propaganda films or in scenes depicting heroism.

An *oblique angle* involves a lateral tilt of the camera (1-15b). When the image is projected, the horizon is skewed. Characters photographed at an oblique angle will look as though they're about to fall to one side. This angle is sometimes used for **point-of-view shots**—to suggest the imbalance of a drunk, for example. Psychologically, oblique angles suggest tension, transition, and impending movement. The natural horizontal and vertical lines of a scene are converted into unstable diagonals. Oblique angles are not used often, for they can disorient a viewer. In scenes depicting violence, however, they can be effective in capturing precisely this sense of visual anxiety.



1-15a **12 Angry Men**
(U.S.A., 1957), with
(standing, left to right)
E. G. Marshall, Henry
Fonda, and Lee J. Cobb,
directed by Sidney Lumet.

Sidney Lumet has always been a director who's acutely aware of how technique can shape content. He insists that technique should be the servant of content. Most of this movie takes place in the confined quarters of a jury room, as twelve male jurors try to come to a decision about a murder trial. "As the picture unfolded," Lumet has written, "I wanted the room to seem smaller and smaller." As the conflict between the jurors grows more intense, Lumet shifted to in-

creasingly longer lenses, thus reinforcing the sense of entrapment. His strategy also included a gradual shift in angles:

I shot the first third of the movie above eye level, and then, by lowering the camera, shot the second third at eye level, and the last third from below eye level. In that way, toward the end, the ceiling began to appear. Not only were the walls closing in, the ceiling was as well. The sense of increasing claustrophobia did a lot to raise the tension of the last part of the movie.

See also *Making Movies*, by Sidney Lumet (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), one of the best practical discussions of how big budget movies are actually made, including the commercial as well as artistic issues involved. (*United Artists*)

1-15b **The Island** (U.S.A., 2005), with Scarlett Johansson,
directed by Michael Bay.

Oblique angles, sometimes called "Dutch tilt" shots, photograph the subject with the camera leaning to the left or right. In this shot, for example, the left-leaning camera converts the vertical post (and Johansson's body) into tense diagonal shapes, thus emphasizing the urgency of the terrified runner. (*DreamWorks and Warner Bros.*)

