



# ANGLING *the* CAMERA

The cinematographer, or director of photography, has an extremely complex and challenging job. He or she must translate the ideas of the director and the writer onto film. The cinematographer must know how to use the camera to capture the images in the most effective way possible, and consider lighting, composition, camera moves and angles, different types of film, lenses and cameras, use of color, etc., when filming each shot. In composing a shot, the cinematographer must consider how each image relates to the images that came before it, and how it will relate to those that will follow it. Most shots are filmed several times to ensure that the end result will be just right. Each of these filming segments is called a “take.” The resulting takes are edited together to create the film’s sequence of action that, in turn, moves the story forward.

For 1998, *Saving Private Ryan* won the Academy Award for cinematography. Pick a film you would like to see that was recognized for achievement in cinematography (an outstanding example is *Citizen Kane*, honored in 1941). As you watch the film, try to focus on the details of the images. For example, think about the angles of different shots. The cinematographer can convey a great deal simply by changing the angle of the camera: A shot taken from above can make a figure seem small or insignificant; one taken from below can make a figure seem larger, important, and even menacing. Use of a hand-held camera can give a feeling of intimacy and reality to a scene. Select one scene from the film and complete the following (use the other side of this sheet if necessary):

Title of film: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the tone of the scene, and how does the camera placement and movement contribute to it?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Is the camera placed higher, lower, or on the same level as the actors, and how does the placement make you feel about the characters? Are some characters treated differently than others by the camera placement?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Does the camera move a great deal, or is it fixed, with the action moving within a fixed frame?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now, let’s take a closer look. View the film again, but this time turn the sound down so you can focus more easily on what you see. Watch how transitions are made visually from one scene to another, and look for other special camera techniques. How many of the following could you identify in your film?

- ★ Slow motion
- ★ Tracking shot
- ★ Soft focus
- ★ Zoom shot
- ★ Aerial shot
- ★ Shallow focus
- ★ Deep focus
- ★ Pan

Now, think about a scene in the film that you could present differently. What characters are involved in the scene? Briefly describe what happens: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How would you place the camera relative to the characters to let the audience in on your feelings about them? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What objects are included in the scene? Would the camera treat some of them with the same importance as the characters? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How and why will your scene differ from the original scene? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

On another sheet of paper, make rough sketches that show the sequence of action in the original scene and then in your revised scene. Pay particular attention to the relationship between the camera, the characters and the action. Annotate your sketches with notes about the camera placement and movement you will use and the meaning you intend to convey with each.

## SOME CAMERA TECHNIQUES

**Aerial shot:** A shot taken from the air, as from an airplane, helicopter, balloon, etc., or a high-angle shot from a camera mounted on a crane.

**Deep focus:** The photographic technique of keeping the entire image—no matter how far from the camera—in sharp focus. This allows action to occur at different distances in the same scene. The opposite technique, known as *shallow focus*, uses a small depth of field to create a shallow focal plane. It is often used to direct the viewer’s attention to something specific.

**Pan:** A broad horizontal camera movement on a fixed camera mount. A *swish pan* is a very fast panoramic movement of the camera, resulting in a blurred image, that sometimes is used as a transition between scenes.

**Slow motion:** A shot that makes people or objects appear to be moving more slowly than normal. This is achieved by moving film through the camera more quickly when filming but projecting it at a normal speed.

**Soft focus:** Reducing the sharpness of the image by changing the lens or by placing material such as gauze between the lens and the object being photographed.

**Tracking shot:** A shot in which the camera moves from one point to another—either sideways, in, or out. This is also known as a *traveling shot*.