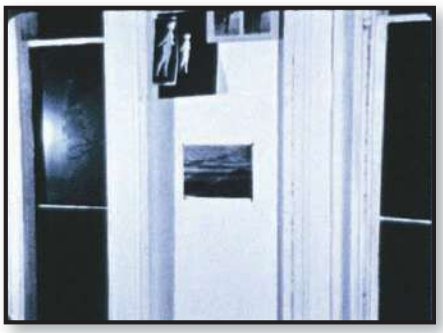
**5.201** The Germans realize that Maréchal and Rosenthal have crossed over into Switzerland.

**5.202** Renoir pans to the right across the invisible border . . .

**5.203** . . . to reveal the two escapees, tiny dots in the huge landscape.

**5.201–5.203** Border crossing in *Grand Illusion.*

**5.204**



**5.205**

**5.206**

**5.204–5.206** The spasmodic space of *Wavelength.* Early in the film, much of the apartment is visible (5.204). Near the end, the abrupt zoom-ins have made the distant wall visible (5.205). A fallen body can be glimpsed at the bottom of the frame, but the zoom-ins will soon eliminate it from the frame (5.206).

This revelation is secondary to the experience of watching the halting zoom change the space of the room, and watching a stylistic pattern curb our narrative appetite.

*Grand Illusion* and *Wavelength* illustrate, in different ways, how frame mobility can shape our perception of a film's space and time. Renoir motivated his style of frame mobility by narrative form, while Snow made the technique the principal formal concern, motivating other aspects of the film.

## Duration of the Image: The Long Take

Throughout this chapter, we've seen that the decisions that filmmakers make about cinematography affect both space and time. The range of photographic tonalities, the shot's perspective relations, and the position of the camera are largely matters of space. But other possibilities, like speed of motion and mobile framing, have consequences for time too. The last area of choice and control we consider involves time in an especially intriguing way.

One popular YouTube genre is the so-called lipdub, in which a group of performers, usually students, lip-sync a pop song. Usually these videos feature lengthy camera movements within a single shot. There is a certain pride in choreographing all the "singers" with the moving camera in the two or three minutes that the song takes. Cutting would be easier, but there'd be less sense of virtuosity, less of a wow factor.

The lipdub phenomenon reflects one constant factor across the history of film art: the idea that there's something to be gained by letting a shot run long. But how

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We connect the video genre of the lipdub to traditions of long-take filming in "2-4-6-8, whose lipdub do we appreciate?"

5.207

5.208

**5.207–5.208** Compressing screen duration within a single shot. A shot in *The Only Son* moves from night (5.207) to morning (5.208).

long, and why? Jean-Luc Godard asks the question explicitly. "The only great problem with cinema seems to me, more and more with each film, when and why to start a shot and when and why to end it." What guides a director in deciding how long to let a shot last?

## Real Time Is . . . What?

When people talk about filming something in "real time," they often imply that the shot is recording actual duration. Usually it is. If we film a runner taking three seconds to clear a hurdle, our projected film will typically consume three seconds. But the filmmaker can choose to override real duration. As we've already seen, screen duration can be manipulated through slow or fast motion. Less obviously, narrative films don't always let us equate screen duration with story duration, even within a single shot.

As Chapter 3 pointed out (p. 80), story duration usually differs from plot duration, and both are affected by film techniques that shape screen time. You can compress story duration within a single shot. Here's an example from Yasujiro Ozu's *The Only Son.*

It is well past midnight, and we have just seen a family awake and talking. The shot shows a dim corner of the family's apartment, but eventually the light changes. By the end of the shot, morning has come **(5.207, 5.208).** This transitional shot consumes about a minute of screen time, but that plainly isn't the "real time" of the story action. The story action takes at least five hours. Thanks to cues of lighting, setting, and sound, the sustained shot has condensed a story duration of several hours into a minute or so on the screen.

Other films use tracking movements to compress longer passages of time in a continuous shot. This sort of condensation has become easier with digital postproduction **(5.209, 5.210).** The final shot of *Signs* moves away from an autumn view through a window and through a room, to reveal a winter landscape outside another window. Months of story time have passed during the tracking movement.

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We discuss artistic aspects of the long take in "Harry Potter treated with gravity" and "*Birdman*: Following Riggan's orders."

## Functions of the Long Take

We can ask Godard's question a different way: How long should a shot last? Shot durations have varied somewhat over history. Early cinema (1895–1905) tended to rely on fairly lengthy shots, since each film often consisted of only one shot. With the emergence of continuity editing in the period 1905–1916, shots became shorter. From the late 1910s to the early 1920s, an American film would have an average shot length of about 5 seconds. After the coming of sound, the average stretched to about 10 seconds. But in the mid-1930s, directors in several countries began to experiment with very lengthy shots. The intricate camera movements in *Grand Illusion,* from 1935, are good examples. Renoir and his peers showed that unusually lengthy shots—**long takes,** as they're called—represented a powerful creative resource.

A *long take* is not the same as a *long shot,* which refers to the apparent distance between camera and object. As we saw in examining film production (pp. 22–23),

5.209

5.210

**5.209–5.210** Camera movement through the seasons. In Roger Michell's *Notting Hill,* the protagonist's walk through the Portobello street market moves through autumn (5.209), then winter (5.210). Eventually the shot ends with spring.

a *take* is one run of the camera that records a single shot. To prevent ambiguity, we call a protracted shot a long take rather than a long shot.

In the films of Jean Renoir, Kenji Mizoguchi, Orson Welles, Carl Dreyer, Miklós Jancsó, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Bèla Tarr, a shot may go on for several minutes. One shot in Andy Warhol's *My Hustler* runs for about 30 minutes and constitutes much of the film's second half **(5.211).** It would be impossible to appreciate the artistry of these films without considering what the long take contributes to form and style.

Usually, we can regard the long take as an alternative to a series of shots. The director may choose between presenting a scene in long takes and presenting it in several shorter shots. When an entire scene is rendered in only one shot, the long take is sometimes called a *sequence shot,* a translation of the French term *plan-séquence.* In any film, most filmmakers mix edited scenes with scenes handled in long takes. This allows the filmmaker to bring out specific values in particular scenes, or to associate certain aspects of narrative or nonnarrative form with the different stylistic options.

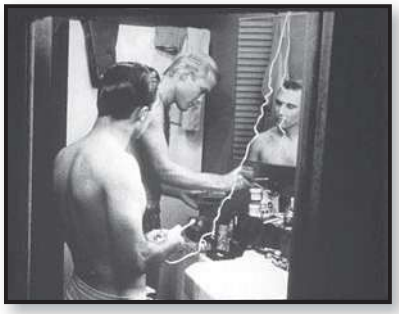
A vivid instance occurs in Steve McQueen's *Hunger,* based on a hunger strike in a prison in Northern Ireland. Most of the scenes, including violent confrontations between prisoners and guards, consist of several shots. At this point, Bobby Sands, the main character, seems only one prisoner among many. Roughly halfway through the film, the plot starts to focus on him and we begin to understand his motives and plans. The key scene begins with a shot lasting nearly 18 minutes, a balanced view of Sands and an old friend who visits him **(5.212).** There is no camera movement. The effect is to rivet the viewer on the character's dialogue during a turning point in the action.

Alternatively, the filmmaker may decide to build the entire film out of long takes. Hitchcock's *Rope* is famous for containing only 11 shots, most running between 4 and 10 minutes. Similarly, each scene in *Winterwind, Red Psalm,* and other films by Miklós Jancsó consists of a single shot. In such cases, the long take becomes a large-scale part of a film.

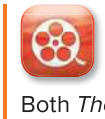
In a long-take movie, editing can have great force. After a seven- or eight-minute shot, an elliptical cut can prove quite disorienting. Gus van Sant's *Elephant* traces events around a high school shooting rampage, and it presents most scenes in very long takes following students through the hallways. Moreover, *Elephant*'s plot doesn't present the events in chronological order. The narration flashes back to show other school days, the boys' lives at home, and their preparations for the killings. So when a cut interrupts a long take, the audience must reflect for a moment to determine how the new shot fits into story chronology. The effect of the editing is unusually harsh, because the cuts tend to break the smooth rhythm of the sustained traveling shots **(5.213–5.215).**

Could a feature-length movie consist of one long take? Many directors have dreamed of it, but the lengths of film reels were a constraint. A 35mm camera reel typically runs for only 11 minutes, so Hitchcock sought to hide some of *Rope*'s obligatory cuts. Extended 16mm reels of the type Warhol used in *My Hustler* (5.211) can run up to 30 minutes. With digital video, however, it is possible to shoot for hours on a single tape or file, and the Russian director Aleksander Sokurov seized this opportunity in *Russian Ark.* The film consists of a single shot nearly 90 minutes long, as the camera follows over 2,000 actors in period costume through St. Petersburg's immense Winter Palace. *Russian Ark* takes us through several eras of Russian history, culminating in a stupendous ballroom dance and a crowd drifting off into a wintry night **(5.216–5.218).**

Thanks to digital postproduction, a long take can be even longer. Software can blend shots undetectably, so that *Birdman; Or, The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance* could present an apparently continuous shot that lasts over 100 minutes on the screen.



**5.211** The long take and narrative form. A long take in *My Hustler* captures the seductive exchange of two gay men as they groom themselves in a bathroom.



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Both *There Will Be Blood* and *The Most Beautiful* contain subtle staging in two unmoving long takes. We compare them in "Hands (and faces) across the table."

**5.212** The long take to mark a turning point. Backlighting and a lengthy, static shot in *Hunger* place us at a distance from Bobby Sands and his visitor. The director's stylistic choice allows us to concentrate on their words, which provide important exposition about the planned hunger strike.

5.213

5.214

5.215

**5.213–5.215** Discontinuous editing interrupts a long take. In a shot lasting two minutes, the camera follows Michelle into the library, where she starts reshelving books (5.123). Many of the long takes in *Elephant* frame the walking characters from behind. This conceals their facial expressions from us and emphasizes the school environment. Michelle turns as we hear a rifle being cocked (5.214). We expect a reverse shot to reveal the shooter. Instead, we get a flashback to earlier that day when the two boys showered together before going to school on their deadly mission (5.215).

5.216

5.217

**5.216–5.218** *Russian Ark* and the long take. In *Russian Ark,* one episode takes place in the palace theater, with Catherine the Great pronouncing the rehearsal satisfactory (5.216). An hour or so later, still within the same shot, hundreds of aristocrats and officers descend a staircase toward the impending devastation of the Russian Revolution (5.217). Crew members moved through the Hermitage Museum, filming with a digital camera mounted on a Steadicam (5.218). Sokurov rehearsed *Russian Ark* for several months and completed the take used in the film on the fourth try. Today, a shot like this could be assembled out of several takes blended in postproduction, as in *Snake Eyes* or *Birdman*.

5.218

## The Long Take and the Mobile Frame

The static long take in *Hunger* is unusual; most long takes, like those in *Elephant, Russian Ark,* and *Birdman* (and in DIY lipdubs), rely on camera movement. Panning, tracking, craning, or zooming can be used to present continually changing vantage points that are comparable in some ways to the shifts of view supplied by editing.

**5.219** The long take begins with Omocha and the businessman seated. The camera follows her as . . .

**5.220** . . . she moves to the opposite end of the room . . .

**5.221** . . . and sits at a small table facing him.

**5.222** A second phase of the shot begins as she begins to appeal to his sympathy and he moves to the table . . .

**5.223** . . . and sits down to console her.

**5.224** Finally, the camera moves into a tighter shot as she sits beside him and he succumbs to her advances.

**5.219–5.224** *Sisters of Gion*: The long take marks stages of the action.

Very often, frame mobility breaks the long-take shot into smaller units. In Mizoguchi's *Sisters of Gion,* one long take shows a young woman, Omocha, luring a businessman into becoming her patron **(5.219–5.224).** Though there is no cutting, the camera and figure movements demarcate important stages of the scene's action.

As in this example, long takes tend to be framed in medium or long shots rather than close-ups. The camera takes us through a fairly dense visual field, and the spectator has more opportunity to scan the shot for particular points of interest. This is recognized by Steven Spielberg, a director who has occasionally exploited lengthy takes:

> I'd love to see directors start trusting the audience to be the film editor with their eyes, the way you are sometimes with a stage play, where the audience selects who they would choose to look at while a scene is being played. . . . There's so much cutting and so many close-ups being shot today I think directly as an influence from television.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the arrangement of the mise-en-scene can guide our scanning of the frame. Accordingly, a director may choose to put editing aside and let a gradually unfolding long take steer us from one information-packed frame to another. This is what happens in *Sisters of Gion*, as the camera movement follows Omocha's seduction of the businessman.

The example from *Sisters of Gion* illustrates another important feature of the long take. Mizoguchi's shot reveals a complete internal logic—a beginning, middle, and end. As part of a film, the long take can have its own formal pattern, its own development, its own trajectory and shape. Suspense may develop; we start to ask how the shot will continue and when it will end.

The classic example of how the long take can constitute a formal pattern in its own right is the opening sequence of Welles's *Touch of Evil* **(5.225–5.236).** This opening shot makes plain some basic features of the long take. It offers an

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Mizoguchi, a master of staging, became famous for his elegant long takes. We consider his style in "Mizoguchi: Secrets of the exquisite image."

**5.225** The opening shot begins with a close-up of a hand setting the timer of a bomb.

**5.226** The camera tracks immediately right to follow first the shadow . . .

**5.227** . . . and then the figure of an unknown assassin planting the bomb in a car.

**5.228** The camera then cranes up to a high angle as the assassin flees and the victims arrive and set out in the car.

**5.229** As the camera rounds the corner, it rejoins the car. A reverse tracking shot keeps it in frame.

**5.230** The car passes Vargas and his wife, Susan, and the camera starts to follow them, losing the car and tracking diagonally backward with the couple through the crowd.

**5.231** The camera tracks backward until both the occupants of the car and Susan and Vargas meet again.

**5.232** The camera remains in one place to let the brief scene with the border guard play out.

**5.233** After tracking left with the car, the camera catches up with Susan and Vargas and tracks forward toward them . . .

**5.234** . . . bringing them into medium shot as they begin to kiss.

**5.235** Their embrace is interrupted by the offscreen sound of an explosion, and they turn to look leftward.

**5.236** The next shot zooms in to show the car in flames.

**5.225–5.236** *Touch of Evil*: The virtuoso moving long take.

alternative to building the sequence out of many shots, and it stresses the cut that finally comes (occurring at the sound of the explosion of the car).

The shot has its own internal pattern of development. We expect that the bomb shown at the beginning will explode at some point, and we wait for that explosion through the long take. The shot establishes the geography of the scene, the border between Mexico and the United States. The camera movement, alternately picking up the car and the walking couple, weaves together two lines of narrative cause and effect that intersect at the border station. Vargas and Susan are thus drawn into the action involving the bombing. Our expectation is fulfilled when the end of the shot coincides with the explosion (offscreen) of the bomb. The shot has guided our response by taking us through a suspenseful development.

The long take can present, in a single chunk of time, a complex pattern of events moving toward a goal, and this ability shows that shot duration can be as important to the image as photographic qualities and framing are.

## SUMMARY

The film shot is a complex unit. By controlling mise-en-scene, the filmmaker fills the image with material, arranging setting, lighting, costume, and staging within the formal context of the total film. Similarly, the shot is shaped by the cinematographic options we've been examining.

Those options bear on photographic qualities: tonality, speed of motion, and the varieties of perspective created by lens lengths, depth of field, and special effects. The filmmaker can also reckon in the aspect ratio and decide how the image is framed. Other creative choices involve varying camera placement—the angle, level, height, and distance at which we see the subject. The filmmaker can decide to move the frame in a host of ways, and can choose to exploit the long take with or without camera movement.

The array of choices is dazzling, and as with mise-en-scene, decision making is at the center of film artistry. Forced to choose one way or another, the filmmaker pursues options that will give the viewer a specific experience—and perhaps also challenge the filmmaker's skills. In turn, the choices that are made can coalesce into a pattern, the style of that particular film.

You can sensitize yourself to cinematographic options in much the same way that you worked on mise-en-scene. Trace the progress of a single technique, such as camera distance, through an entire scene. Notice when a shot begins and ends, observing how a long take may function to shape the film's form. Watch for camera movements, especially those that follow the action (since those are usually the hardest to notice). Once you notice cinematographic qualities, you can move to an understanding of their various functions within the sequence and the film as a whole.

Film art offers still other possibilities for choice and control. Chapter 4 and this chapter focused on the shot. The filmmaker may also juxtapose one shot with another through editing, and that's the subject of Chapter 6.