



Sid and Nancy. Alex Cox, 1986.

long shot

The long shot includes characters in their entirety in the frame, along with a large portion of the surrounding area. While there can be a main subject in a long shot, the perspective is too remote to see emotional detail on the face. This shot concentrates on the body and what it reveals. Like **extreme long shots**, long shots are commonly used as **establishing shots**, placed at the beginning of scenes to let the audience know where the action that follows will take place. Sometimes, long shots are also placed at the end of a scene, usually with a composition that conveys a different dramatic tone from the one established at the beginning of the scene, marking a change in the emotion or outlook of a character. Like **medium shots**, the composition of long shots can be made to: emphasize a character while neglecting the space around them, emphasize the space over the character, or to establish a special connection between a character and the space around them. The wide **field of view** of long shots also makes them ideal for **emblematic shots** (shots that convey complex, associative ideas by the arrangement of visual elements in the frame). The size of this shot also works well for **group shots**, providing enough room in the frame to imply power dynamics between characters. Because the long shot can contain many details and visual elements, it is normally kept longer on the screen than other shots that have less information. This extra duration gives the audience enough time to register everything there is to see. Used in conjunction with medium shots, **medium close ups**, and **close ups**, long shots are also commonly used to gradually increase the emotional involvement of the audience, by, for instance, covering a scene with long shots and medium shots until something important takes place, at which point medium close ups and close ups are used. Alternatively, since long shots

are not ideal to showcase the facial expressions of a character, they can also be used to limit the emotional involvement of the audience, preventing them from seeing emotional cues they would normally get with a close up or a medium close up.

Alex Cox's biopic *Sid and Nancy* (1986), a film that follows the mutually destructive relationship that existed between Sex Pistols' bassist Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) and an American groupie, Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb), features long shots that consistently place them amidst the drugs, alcohol, violence, and filth that permeated their world. In the example on the opposite page, a mesmerizing long shot (also a perfect example of an emblematic shot) that perfectly captures the alternate nature of their punk rock lifestyle and romance, they are shown semi-silhouetted in a filthy alley, kissing lovingly as garbage rains down in slow motion. The composition places them against a gap between buildings which makes them stand out in the frame, emphasizing the contradiction between their actions (a loving kiss) and the setting. Not surprisingly, this arresting image was also used in one of the promotional posters for the film.

This visually stunning long shot from Alex Cox's Sid and Nancy (1986) makes a powerful statement about the unorthodox relationship that existed between punk rocker Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) and his girlfriend Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb).

long shot



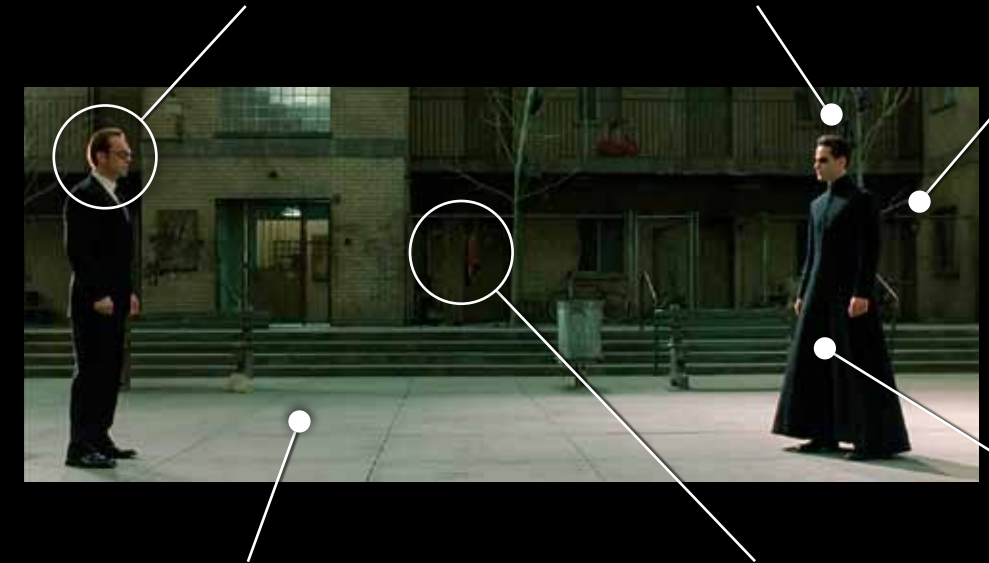
why it works

In addition to conveying relationships between characters and their surrounding area, the long shot can be used to suggest narrative and thematic dynamics between characters, through their placement and relative scale in the composition. The wide area covered by this shot makes compositional guidelines like Hitchcock's rule, balanced and unbalanced frames, and the compression/expansion of space along the z axis, particularly helpful in establishing these relationships.

In this long shot from Lana and Andy Wachowski's *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), an impending fight between Neo, (Keanu Reeves) a man prophesied to liberate humanity from the rule of intelligent machines, and Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), a program that polices the virtual reality called "The Matrix," is suggested by their placement in the composition as a duel of equally matched opponents, increasing the tension and dramatic impact of the scene.

Lighting was manipulated so that both characters have a backlight that separates from the background to make them stand out in the composition. This is a very common practice designed to guide the viewer's gaze toward the most important area in the frame, usually a character.

The amount of headroom in this composition is correct for a shot this size; increasingly tighter framings should have increasingly smaller amounts of headroom (as seen in the medium close up and close up chapters). Alternatively, headroom can also be purposely exaggerated or removed altogether to make a narrative point about a character.



Characters were not placed in the frame according to the rule of thirds; instead, they were placed unusually close to the edges of the frame, emphasizing the empty space between them while almost completely removing the space behind them. This placement in the composition implies they can only move toward each other, foreshadowing their imminent fight.

The framing of this shot shows both characters taking up the same amount of room in the frame, suggesting that they are evenly matched; this is a typical implementation of Hitchcock's rule. Their placement in the frame also creates a balanced composition, further emphasizing their equal power, increasing the tension and suspense of the scene.

The composition of this shot has only two layers of depth: the foreground where the characters are placed, and the background. The lack of a third layer creates a somewhat flat composition, visually restricting character movement to the x axis of the frame, toward each other and conflict. The use of a closed framing also reinforces their lack of options by excluding off-screen space.

The background is a couple of f-stops darker than the characters in the foreground, making them the focal points of the composition and ensuring that the audience's attention will be on them. This is a very common lighting strategy whether the shot is indoors or outdoors, day or night.

technical considerations

lenses

Like all wide **field of view** shots, the long shot can establish a relationship between a character and the surrounding area, adding emotional or dramatic content that might be explicitly addressed in the narrative or implicitly suggested solely through the composition of the shot. Because of this, the choice of **focal length** can have a dramatic impact in the way the audience makes visual connections between character and location. A **wide angle lens**, for instance, can distort perspective to make the surrounding area appear to be larger and more distant than it is, visually disconnecting a character from it. Conversely, a **telephoto lens** can bring the background behind a character uncomfortably close, establishing a strong visual connection between them. Keep in mind that if the long shot is taken indoors, you might not have enough room to use a telephoto lens, because of the extreme **camera to subject distance** you need to include the entire character in the frame. Whichever lens you choose, remember that the connections the audience will make between character and location will also be greatly influenced by where you place the character in the composition of the frame; this placement and the focal length you choose should complement, and not work against, each other.

format

The longer camera to subject distances needed to include a character in his entirety in the frame exacerbate the problems inherent in achieving a shallow depth of field with the smaller lenses of most consumer and prosumer **SD** and **HD** cameras. It will be virtually impossible to get a soft background while shooting with these formats at these distances, even with a wide open aperture. One option is to get a **35mm lens adapter kit**, which can let you use regular 35mm SLR lenses in front of the native lens of your camera. Unfortunately, compensating for the light the adapter will cut can

be more difficult with this type of shot, since you will have to light a much larger area than in tighter shots. Film formats have the inherent advantage of making it easier to achieve shallower depths of field because of their larger lenses, although for the same reasons it is more difficult to achieve deeper depths of field in 35mm than in the **16mm** film format.

lighting

Another way to control the visual relationships between characters and location in a long shot is to restrict the amount of detail that can be seen in the background by controlling the **depth of field**; this is best accomplished through the aperture of your lens, which can be manipulated if you have control over the lighting and the sensitivity of your shooting format. One strategy is to reduce the distance between camera and subject as much as possible while still including the subject's entire body (otherwise it would not be considered a long shot) coupled with a large aperture and a telephoto lens. If shooting outdoors in sunlight, you will have to use **ND filtration** to block enough light to use a large aperture. If you are shooting indoors with artificial light and want a deep depth of field, be prepared to have a lot of lights so that you can use the smaller apertures to achieve it. Note the shallow depth of field in the example from *Sid and Nancy*, where the subjects are closer to the camera while still in a long shot, versus the deep depth of field in the example from Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2005) on the opposite page, where the subjects are farther away from the camera. Lighting is also especially important to make the subject stand out in the composition so that the audience's gaze is directed toward it. The convention is to light subjects so that they are brighter than the surrounding area, although sometimes the same effect can be achieved by silhouetting them instead, making sure the surrounding area is brighter, as seen in the *Sid and Nancy* example.

breaking the rules



The distance necessary to include characters in their entirety makes the long shot less than ideal to showcase nuances of behavior and emotion through facial expressions, which sometimes can be exploited to add suspense and tension to a scene. Michael Haneke's appropriately titled *Hidden* (2005), follows the story of Georges (Daniel Auteuil), a TV personality who suddenly gets stalked and harassed by someone he assumes is tied to a transgression he committed as a child. In this long shot, the final image from the film, we see his son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky) chatting with the son of the man who might have been behind the harassment (Walid Afkir). The cluttered *mise en scène* makes it hard to notice them at first, and later difficult to see the exact nature of their relationship, preventing the audience from unraveling the mystery and getting narrative closure, a recurrent technique used throughout this film.