A Glossary of Film Terms

ROLES

**producer** the business executive who brings together the various artists, technicians, subcontractors and financiers required for the film to be made, then during production oversees the film’s schedules, costs and contracts.

**director** the film’s chief artistic co-ordinator or authority, responsible for blocking the camera and cast (i.e. deciding where they move) and eliciting (designing, drawing out) their performances, and for bringing in the film on time and within budget; usually oversees everything and often responsible for everything appearing on-screen.

**cinematographer (director of photography)** the artist and technician responsible for the film’s lighting and photography, an expert with lights, lenses, cameras, film stocks, and photographic processes who designs and tests different effects until they match the director’s intentions for the film, then oversees the actual shooting.

**art director (production designer)** the artist who selects or designs the sets, settings, locations, and props seen in the film, in accordance with the film’s visual style.

**editor** the person who receives work prints of the film’s takes, logs them, cuts and splices the preferred takes into a rough cut, then with director trims shots and reconstructs sequences until a desired “final cut” of the work print has emerged.

climactic structure plot construction based on a single problem or issue posed at the outset, developed through conflict and complication in a “rising” action, climaxed irreversibly near the end, and resolved or fully comprehended after the climax, the structure assumed by virtually all drama and storytelling in the Western world for the past three thousand years.

**climax** that moment or scene near the end of a dramatic action when conflicting characters or forces confront each other, whatever is at issue becomes fully known, and whatever will come of it is finally determined, sometimes called the “obligatory scene.”

**obligatory scene** a work’s anticipated climax, the pay-off for all earlier uncertainties and tensions, when plot issues are finally settled one way or another (also called *denouement* or *resolution*).

**closure** a sense of finality felt as the action ends, with the plot problem resolved, other issues adequately settled, and the outcome of the characters’ supposed lives thereafter sufficiently predictable; recently some uncertainty in these matters has become acceptable.

FILMING

**continuity** ensuring that the details of a scene (e.g. hair style and length, clothing details, prop positions) match and make sense when moving from one shot to another.

**tracking shot** the camera moving smoothly on tracks, or dollies towards, but more commonly alongside, whatever it sees; while whatever it sees may also be moving.

**dolly** a camera platform on wheels, sometimes with a small crane as well, for slow rolling shots toward, away from, or alongside whatever is being photographed.

**crane shot** a shot displaying a flowing or floating movement up and across short distances, apparently liberated from gravity, the camera mounted on a crane.

**shot** a take, the film from a single continuous, uninterrupted run of the camera.

**sequence** the spliced shots and scenes making up a single significant dramatic unit.

**cut** the spliced place between two frames where one shot ends abruptly and another begins; also the director’s call to the crew to shop shooting.

**symbol** any thing or act seen to model, present or represent the meaning of its own larger
location a place some distance from the studio which looks suitable for exterior scenes, or, if especially authentic, for interior scenes as well.

steadicam a hand-held camera that allows the operator to take relatively smooth shots while moving along with the action.

PHOTOGRAPHY incl. ANGLES, SHOTS etc.
close-up a shot made with a camera position or lens setting filling the screen with the image of any object the size of a human face or smaller, generating strong viewer attentiveness and feelings of intimacy

medium shot a shot made with the camera seemingly near what it sees but not close to it, familiar but not intimate, showing a human figure from the waist up.

long shot a shot made with the camera some distance from the object viewed, showing at least a human form fully visible (head to toe) within the frame but sometimes showing a wide panorama seen by a camera even further away.

high-angle shot a shot made with the camera looking down, as if superior to what it sees.

low-angle shot a shot made with the camera looking up, as if the viewer were awed or cowed by what is seen.

pan a camera’s horizontal pivot across a panorama or wide scene while otherwise immobile on a tripod, creating the impression of a head turning deliberately to inspect a field of vision.

zoom a lens which can be adjusted from “wide angle” to “telephoto” and can therefore allow the viewer to seem to move closer or further away from an object without the camera actually moving.

POV or subjective shot a shot from the point of view of or line of sight of a character, the camera seeing what the character supposedly sees.

reaction shot usually a quick insert shot or cutaway in medium shot or close-up, showing how a key character or a group of people are reacting to whatever we have just seen, often to suggest how we should react.

establishing shot a long shot giving an overview of the scene so the audience is not confused about what is happening and where.

key light lighting which selectively illuminates from the front various prominent features of the image, such as faces or hands, and provides the reflected gleam in an actor’s eye.

high-key (realistic) lighting lighting style in which all parts of the set and the screen are relatively evenly lit, suggesting a familiar world containing few surprises or mysteries.

low-key (expressionistic) lighting lighting with strongly contrasted areas of light and shadow, often with one feature of the image lit from one side or below and the rest dark, creating a sense of lurking mystery (called low-key because the key light is turned ‘low’ or ‘off’).

SOUND
ambient sound “live” background sounds creating the illusion that we are seeing and hearing a real world, such as the sounds of distant birds or cars, supposedly incidental but in fact functioning to enhance the drama

wild (live) sound sound actually recorded while the shot is made, often of poor quality and unusable if recorded outdoors on location but serving nevertheless as a guide for dubbing and editing, and as a reminder of dramatic intentions.

background music off-screen, extra-diegetic (= outside the “reality” of the film story) music heard during the film, not originating within the action but accompanying that action in order to heighten its dramatic power.

dubbing replacing sounds, voices, or languages on the sound track with others thought preferable, though maintaining their synchronicity (synch) with the image as far a possible.

out-of-synch sound not properly synchronised with the image.

sound effects the “SFX” and sounds mixed onto the sound track, created to “accompany” various images as if they were originated by those images.

CUTTING and EDITING
master shot in classical editing, a medium or long shot of a complete continuous action, later broken up with insert shots, cutaways, match-cutting, cross cutting, and so forth. (Remember that in classical filming, only one camera is used, and a conversation between two characters may be filmed three times, one after another – an overall view, a view of the first character’s face and lastly a view on the second character’s face. These are then edited together in what the editor and director think is the most effective way.

associational flashback a character’s recollection
gesture or word in the present seems similar to something remembered from the past.  

dissolve a noticeable fading of one shot while another superimposed on it grows stronger and finally replaces it, quick or slow, the earlier shot seeming to dissolve into the later, signifying a change of time or place without loss of the action’s momentum or meaning.

cross-cut an edit cutting from one action to another simultaneous action somewhere else.

match cut an edit maintaining a sense of smooth, continuing acting from shot to shot, even though the second shot is from a different camera position.

cutaway a shot briefly interrupting one action to provide a glimpse of another also taking place.

montage the French term for editing, referring to any extraordinary or exceptionally artful sequence of shots, and also to the art of editing such a sequence.

splicing the process of sticking pieces of film together by using tape or glue; (the final version will be photographed by the laboratory onto one continuous film, without splices).

continuity ensuring that the details of a scene (e.g. hair style and length, clothing details, prop positions) match and make sense when moving from one shot to another.

Two of the main sources for these definitions are:
