

THE SCENE COVERAGE CRASH COURSE

By Elia Thier



If you're gutsy enough to try to direct a film without ever having directed before, below is everything you really need to know to pull that off. Of course you can spend a life your tool - kit as a director, but with the info below, you're equipped to create a professional-looking shoot.

This article will include visual examples from *Judo Girl*, a short I directed in 2010, produced by Sandy Chase and Huriyyah Muhammad, performed and choreographed by Cara Parmigiani and Sandy Chase, and photographed by David Daniel.

Here Goes!

MASTER SHOT & INSERTS

That's it. That's your crash course. That is ALL you really need to know. The vast majority of scenes are made up of one master shot and a bunch of inserts.

What is a master shot? A master shot can mean two different things:

THE WIDE MASTER SHOT

A master shot can mean a wide shot that captures the entire scene and all of the characters in it from beginning to end. It's like placing a camera in front of a stage and letting the drama unfold.

The master shot ensures that the entire story is captured on camera, so you don't end up with any story holes when you go to edit.

If a scene is very long and complicated, you may need to plan two master shots. Perhaps you'll have a wide shot capturing one side of the room, and another wide master shot capturing everything that happens on the other side of the room.

Conventionally, people shoot their master first, then punch in to get their inserts. That often makes sense, but not always. If your actors are pumped and giving amazing performances, you may want to start with the close-ups, capture those intimate and powerful performances while they're happening, and only then move to your wide master.

If you're an experienced director and know that you'll use the master for only a few beats in the beginning of the scene and/or its ending, you may want to forgo shooting the entire scene in a master and just shoot those moments that you know you'll use.

It's a gamble because you won't have a master to fall on that covers the entire story, but I've done this often and have not run into problems.

Regardless, I never ever make actors go through very big, emotional sequences in a master. Not fair to them. If there's a segment that I know will involve crying or some other big drama, I have them hold off until we're punching in and getting close coverage.

* If you use the term "coverage" on set, people will assume you know your stuff. And if you use the term "punch in" – woah! Everyone will be way impressed by how much of a pro you are. They'll be like: She said "let's punch in" after we shot the master. She must be a pro!"

THE MOVING MASTER SHOT

A master shot can also refer to a choreographed moving shot in which a camera on a track (or a Steadicam) follows the entire action beginning to end. These types of complex-looking shots can actually be quite simple and add tremendous production value while economizing your shoot. They're economical because you may need few to no additional shots to supplement your master. You can get everything you need with one such moving master shot.

A DP once told me that in TV world, if a production runs out of time, it's not unusual for the director to "hose it down." Hosing it down means the camera gets placed on a Steadicam and the camera operator just follows the action beginning to end with no additional shots.

At the end of this lesson, I offer some examples from one of my own shoots and will highlight examples of simple moving masters that really spiced up our production value even though they were mega easy to execute. The examples at the end of this lesson will take the mystery out of all this and demonstrate just how simple and easy a moving master can be.

INSERTS

Once you've covered your scene with a master shot, you can embellish it with inserts. By inserts, I mean all the details you'll capture on camera that you can cut to taste to supplement your master shot.

For example: Let's say we are covering a scene of two friends talking in the park. You might capture their dialogue with a wide master that shows them sitting on their picnic blanket and having their conversation. The master will show them both as well as their environment, orienting the audience while covering the entire scene.

Your inserts might include a tighter medium shot of the two people on the blanket. Another set of inserts might include a close-up of each of the two friends. Then you might decide that you want a tight close-up on one of the characters because the story is from their perspective and they just received some important news. Perhaps you also add an insert showing a close-up of one of their hands fidgeting with some paper to show their nervousness, etc.

As long as you have a master, the story is covered.

The inserts are where you get to be creative and figure out what you want to be able to cut to from the master for added "coverage" of the scene.

Planning your "inserts" is also where you get to be both creative and economical about your shoot. Let's say we're covering a family get-together. There are eight characters in the room. Here we have infinite possibilities when it comes to inserts.

FEW TIPS ON CHOOSING INSERTS

1) PERSPECTIVE

Whose perspective is the story from? Let's say "Lisa" is your main character. We will align the audience with her perspective by getting her close-ups rather than everyone else's. We might also choose inserts based on what she's looking at. If she's looking at Sam and David with envy, we'll grab a 2-shot of Sam and David talking to each other, but skip Uncle Harold who is irrelevant to her story even though he's also at the party.

(Yes, you guessed it. A 2-shot means two people occupy the shot. A 3-shot is a shot of three people, etc.)

Maybe we'll get a medium shot of Uncle Harold but only when he delivers his funny one-liner. We won't make the actors go through the entire scene while we're pointing the camera at Uncle Harold. And we'll make sure his single shot is a medium and not a close-up, so he doesn't compete with Lisa's close-up. Lisa's shots will be the tightest (i.e., closest) because that's the character we want the audience to relate to.

2) RELATIONSHIPS

Which relationships are important? If this party scene is really about Lisa's relationship with her brother Sam, you will definitely want an insert of her and Sam in a 2-shot. But we shan't bother with a 2-shot of Lisa and Uncle Harold.

If, however, Lisa is jealous of the bond between Sam and David we'll create a 2-shot of Sam and David, to highlight what the party looks like from her perspective. In fact, if we show Sam and David in a 2-shot and Lisa in a single shot, we will feel Lisa's isolation.

All of this is intuitive, and you may find yourself doing that anyway. But it's good to note and understand that in addition to the script, the inserts you choose tell a story, so you want to choose those inserts that capture and serve what the script is trying to do.

3) HOW CLOSE: ASSIGNING SIGNIFICANCE

How tight an insert on a character, and when we choose to be tight in on a character, will highlight which characters are important, how important they are, and which moments are particularly important.

I had an acting teacher who always said: “If everything is important then nothing is important.” Choose your tighter shots based on what kind of significance you want to assign to what, who, and when.

If you know that Lisa will be distraught when Sam announces that he’s leaving town and moving in with cousin David in Seattle, you may want to save Lisa’s big close-up for that moment. Or maybe you hold off on her biggest close-up until the moment she finally finds the courage to tell Sam how much he means to her.

Choosing you big close-ups frugally also means that you won’t waste the crew’s and actors’ energy by shooting the entire scene in a big close-up on Lisa. Just plan to shoot the portion of the scene that you know you’ll want in a big close-up. Some directors do run through the entire scene with every insert that they shoot. It can make sense to do that so you have lots to work with in the edit, but I find that less is often more. You gain more by saving your crew’s and actors’ energy and just getting what you actually need. (Your editor will thank you as well.)

Tip: I touched on this above but it’s important to clarify: the writing and performances are the most important part of any film. Not the fancy shots. So if your actor’s eyes are welling up, abandon your plan and punch in on that big close-up. Get that in the can and then go back to your plan. Plan and modify everything you do around your actors.

What they do is the most important thing that’s happening on set. What you do as a director and what your cinematographer does is not important – the two of you, and the entire crew for that matter, are only there to capture what the actors do.

So if the actor is welling up and having a big moment, but your cinematographer is really keen on changing the lens or adjusting the lights for the best possible image, pinch really hard and say in no uncertain terms: roll the camera. (OK, maybe not pinch them. But talk to them when the moment has passed to explain that the performance is more important than how pretty the image is.)

4) ORDER OF INFORMATION

What order you show your shots in is part of your storytelling.

For example, you may want to keep your audience a little bit disoriented by starting a scene with a bunch of closer inserts, before pulling out and showing that the two people are on a picnic blanket at the park.

I often show the wide master shot only at the very end of the scene. This way, each shot reveals new visual information about the space we're in and keeps the audience more engaged. You don't want the audience working hard, but you want them engaged. If you can pull off shooting and then cutting a scene in such a way that every shot reveals new visual information that they hadn't already seen, you're a winner.

Particularly with shorter scenes, this is often possible to do and very worthwhile.

RECAP

Most scenes require this simple recipe: master shot + inserts.

Trust your instincts. Enjoy making mistakes. It can be enjoyable and beneficial to get all sorts of input from your DP, but ultimately, you're the director and the buck stops with you. Trust your own thinking and respect the itch: Let your inspiration of what a scene should look like trump anything else. Trust your inspired instincts as to how a scene should be covered. And when no inspiration comes to you, you can always rely on the tried and true recipe of MASTER SHOT + INSERTS.

EXAMPLES FROM JUDO GIRL

Below are examples of three scenes from a short I directed called *Judo Girl*.

EXAMPLE 1: MASTER + INSERTS

In this example, I shot a fight scene between JULES (in white) and JOE (in blue).



The image above is a wide master. It covers the entire fight and everything that was going on around it. Because it's a long scene and the schedule allowed, I got three master shots of this fight, making the space more dimensional, and one even wider master from a balcony above that gave us a bird's-eye view of the fight. It's rare to get three masters on an indie shoot; the vast majority of scenes require just one master. I indulged!



NOW COME THE INSERTS

This insert is a tighter shot of the fight, so we could get a better and more intimate look at the struggle between the characters. I ended up shooting the fight using four different angles and shot sizes, which gave me a lot to work with in the edit.



I saved the close-up for the most heightened moment of the fight, in which Jules is being choked and it looks like she's going to lose. Capturing only this choking moment with a close-up cues the audience that this is the turning point in the fight. This also made it possible to prolong the choke by cutting from the medium to the close-up so that the choke goes on longer on screen than it did in real life and the audience has more time to wince.



REACTION SHOTS: A TYPE OF INSERT

I made sure to grab a few inserts of what's called "reaction shots": showing the other players watching and reacting to the fight.



I saved the "single shots" for the two characters that Jules has a significant relationship with: her coach, and her best friend Ben. By showing only them in single shots, their significance to the story was highlighted.

It also made it look like their reaction to the fight was more emotional than the guys in the 3-shot.

EXAMPLE 2: THE MOVING MASTER

The following scene was covered with one, simple, master shot on a track that begins wide and ends on an intimate close-up. The scene begins with a conventional wide master as Jules runs towards Alex for information.



The camera then slowly pushes towards them, keeping the scene visually interesting and ending on a more intimate 2-shot just as Jules receives important information and has an emotional reaction.



Alex then leaves the scene, and the camera continues to push in while panning over to Jules, ending on her close-up as she takes in the information she just received. By showing her close-up and not Alex's, the audience experiences the story from her perspective.



So I end up with a wide, a medium, and a close-up, hitting the emotional beats of the story properly and focusing on Jules's perspective, and all this with one simple tracking master. No inserts necessary. A moving master doesn't need to be all that complicated. A shot as simple to execute as this one saves you oodles of time on set by cutting down on the number of shots (i.e., saves you money), while raising production value through the roof. Everyone's happy.

EXAMPLE 3: SIMPLE MOVING MASTER + INSERTS

This master began as a wide shot of Jules at the sink, establishing the kitchen.



The “fancy” moving master was nothing more than a simple pan. No tracking. The camera panned from Jules at the sink to the table where she joins her mother. This kept the scene visually more interesting by adding new information: first we see kitchen, then we see that there’s a mother in it. Very easy to execute and it looks like a million bucks.



I then supplemented this winning master with two simple inserts: a close-up of Jules and a close-up of her mother:



Enjoy planning your shoot! Remember to trust and respect whatever inspired vision you may have. If there are sections that you can't figure out how to cover, revert to the good ol' tried and true: master + inserts. No need for fancy storyboards. Diagrams are optional. You always have the option to just write a shot list: Wide master of Jules and Mom. Close-up of Jules. Close-up of Mom.

Woody Guthrie, one of the most significant figures in American folk music, used to say that any songwriter who uses more than three chords to write a song is just showing off. There are all sorts of fancy thingies that can go into planning shots, and it's good to know them, but if you know three chords, you have infinite possibilities.

I do recommend planning your shots in advance, even if the plan is simple. The more you plan in advance, the more flexibility you'll have on the set to eliminate unnecessary shots and find shots right on the day that you might not have thought of in advance.

On a low-budget film, plan to shoot roughly 10-20 shots a day. (About 4-8 script pages a day.) If you have a super fast and experienced DP, you can get away with more.

Have fun!



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