Understanding Single Camera Formats

By Michael Gomersall

Using single camera formats is a popular way of making media such as film, video, TV and advertisements. A single camera is used to take a variety of individual camera shots and angles and then the camera is moved and reset to get new shots and angles. Shots can include close ups, which can show the emotions of a character, long shots (to establish a location for example) as well as a variety of other types of shots which I will look at later. Lighting can be changed in order to create a different mood or to fit in with the scene. Single camera productions film scenes that have the same location together then move on to another back drop and then edit the scenes together to create the story. This technique saves time as the producer and crew only have to visit and set up for the location one time. This can be useful for when a location is expensive to

get to or difficult to set up (for example see long shot pic of battle scene from Lord of the Rings-Return of the King). In this film the battle scene was filmed in New Zealand and used hundreds of extras so it would make sense to film all of the scenes at the same time.

Another example is in the sit com , 'Episodes.' The show is set in Los Angeles, however most of the filming is done in London on set as it is cheaper. Throughout the series there is a hiking scene where two characters walk together and discuss events. All these scenes for the series would have been shot at the same time, perhaps changing clothes, hair etc. In the story it looks like a character has moved to one location and then to another and back again (they would have a walk in each episode) so the audience gets a sense of time or an order in which the story is happening.

Formats

Single camera techniques are used in various formats and genres. They were used originally in Hollywood in the 1910's. Today single camera techniques are used extensively in a wide range of formats including series, serials and single dramas as well as genres including, crime, comedy, soap operas, period dramas and drama documentaries

Series – A series is a recurring TV show with set characters and set locations although they can go off on location as well. Audiences often build up relationships with characters in the programme and feel as if they know them.

Episodes will start with an intro often a theme tune and a series of images and the show can be structured for ads. Some of these sitcoms are multi camera because it cuts down on extra takes and allows the show to be edited from all the different cameras. There are less takes and also it can be filmed in front of a studio audience and get the laughter track. Examples of multi camera series are 'That 70's Show' ' and 'Friends'. Multi camera shows use simple cinematography. In Friends they are mostly medium shots on the actors and the sets mixed in with establishing shots and rarely closeups. They would use single camera shots when they are on location.

Multi cameras were used for sitcoms in the 50's but in the 60's shows like 'The Munsters', 'Bewitched' and 'The Brady Bunch' started to use single camera techniques. These were used to give a feature film style and widen the scope of the different kinds of shots that could be used.   Single camera shows are very popular and include 'The Inbetweeners, 'Peep Show', 'Malcolm in the Middle' and 'Community.' In single camera shows cinematography can be whatever the director wants it to be so it is much more flexible. Examples of common shots include shot reverse shots, close-ups, point of view, medium but can include a range of others such as birds –eye view and moving shots. Shows like Sherlock for example are great examples to show off all the techniques that can be used in single camera formats.

Example of a shot -reverse shot technique from The Inbetweeners. It is also an over the shoulder shot which can be used with a body double e.g if the actor is needed elsewhere or if they are talking to themselves (like Lindsay Lohan in the Parent Trap)

This wide shot is being used to establish surroundings as the boys drive into Thorpe Park.

This medium shot from the Inbetweeners shows Jay talking to other characters in this shot but the other actors do not need to be present during the filming of the shot.

In Peep Show the single camera is used in a special way with every shot in the show being a point of view (POV shot) either from a main character, a side character or even a random passerby on the street. This gives Peep Show cinematography a distinct style.

Serials
Serials generally have longer episodes and can go on for multiple seasons. Examples include, 'Breaking Bad', 'American Horror Story' and 'Doctor Who'. Most serials are shot in a single camera format and are shot like films. Serials can use a wide variety of shots to create the narrative to engage the audience. For example, close ups, wideshots, tracking shots, panning and zooming.

Single Drama - A single drama is a one off show with the average run time of 90 minutes, this is why they are usually referred to as 'TV movies'. Single dramas used to be around more common than they are now. Single dramas often address topical issues. A single drama would use movie style film making techniques but would not have the same budget.

Genre
Crime - A crime drama follows characters such as police, FBI, forensics, or even criminals. An example of a crime drama is 'Criminal Minds'. This is an American crime drama about FBI agents that analyse criminals. There are 7 people and they all bring their own expertise to the table. The techniques used in this show include dark lighting, lots of close up shots, hand held cameras and fast editing to create the atmosphere of the programme.
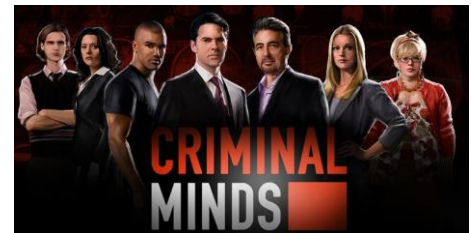
Period - A period drama is a TV show or a film which is set in a earlier time period. It can show an audience what a time period is like as well as being about romance and relationships. There is a lot of mise en scene of old sets and old costumes that would be similar to those of the time. Period drama fully immerses the viewers and gives them a sense of escapism. Examples could be Downton Abbey. Close up and medium shots can be used to show off costumes and props. Long shots and panning can be used to establish location. The lighting can be used to create a realistic reflection of the period. Background music can be used too.

Drama-doc– This is a film or TV show that's based on true events and these are presented in a dramatized format. Examples of drama docs include, 'In the Name of the Father', 'The Social Network' and 'Micro-men'. The single camera formats would be light on special effects as they are based on fact and would use normal movie cinematography techniques.
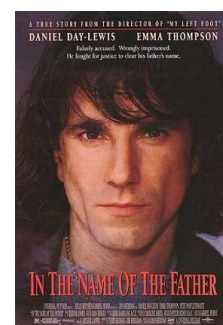
Soap Opera – A soap opera is a television or drama serial dealing typically with daily events in the lives of the same group of characters. A soap opera will usually have an average run time of 22 minutes with the exception of special episodes. Multi cameras with mostly medium shots with close-ups and establishing shots mixed in are used in Coronation Street and Eastenders.
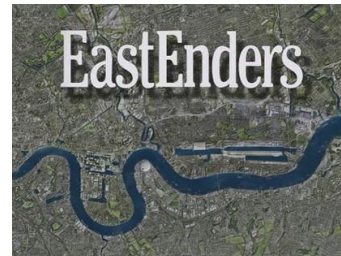
Comedy

I have talked about comedy series and looked at the differences between the multi cam and the single cam. The multi cam is more like a theatre piece and works well with the actors on screen chemistry, and would need a lot of editing whereas the single cam sitcom (like Modern Family)can work like a film with smooth transitions and conversations can flow even though only a single camera is being used. Comedy programmes like Michael McIntyre, Graham Norton and Allan Carr use multicam as they are filmed live in front of an audience and are unscripted. This means that there would not usually be many retakes.

Narrative Structures

So when making a single camera production there are various types of narrative structure. Stories can be linear or non-linear. A linear narrative tells a story starting from one point and finishing at another and the story moves forward in time (thus it's linear). The 'Hunger Games' movies are examples of a linear narrative. Linear films have a beginning, a middle and an end and so it is easy for the audience to follow the story. Disney films generally use a linear narrative as they are simple and aimed at children.

Non-linear narratives move back and forward in time. Things a character might know might not be revealed to an audience until later through a flashback. Lost is a good example of a non-linear serial because of its extensive use of flashbacks and flash forwards. Flashbacks show a scene before what is currently happening in the story, usually because the character is remembering it.

Narrative structures can also be realist or anti-realist. Realist narrative shows a story that could be happening in the real world without any fantastical elements. Friends and The Inbetweeners are examples of a realist narrative. Doctor Who and Misfits are anti-realist as they feature science fiction and special powers that don't exist in the real world.

Narrative structures can have open or closed endings. A closed ending leaves the audience satisfied as everything gets resolved. Open endings make the viewer come up with their own interpretation of what happened or what will happen next and it is a good method of making the audience engage and think about the show for longer. An example of closed endings would be Disney films like the Little Mermaid or The Hunchback of Notre Dame. An example of an open ending film is NEDS when 2 characters get left in a car in a lion safari park and then walk into the lion park together holding hands so the audience can decide what happens next.

Technical Aspects

Camera
The camera is the most important tool for a TV or film producer. A camera is like an artificial eye which takes a large number of pictures every second which can be played back and viewed. The camera can take a wide variety of shots (which are the language of film) such as long, wide, medium, close up, point of view, over the shoulder, tracking, panning and zooming depending on what the producer is showing and how they want to show it. Cameras can be used on a tripod, a dolly or hand held.

Lighting
Lighting is an important feature to create atmosphere and ambience. The use of light can influence the meaning of a shot like villains can be shadowed or silhouetted (back lighted). Underlighting can be used to light across a character form.

THREE-POINT LIGHTING

The standard is the three point lighting which has a key light, a fill light and a back light and is useful for lighting up closeups as it removes shadows. Other types of lighting include high key lighting which can create upbeat and colourful cinematography commonly used in sitcoms and comedies. Low key lighting uses a single light which can cast shadows over features.

HIGH KEY LIGHTING

Hard lighting is bright harsh key lights that create harsh shadows and soft lighting is where light is diffused through a filter giving the subject a romantic aspect.

LOW KEY LIGHTING

SOFT LIGHTING

HARD LIGHTING
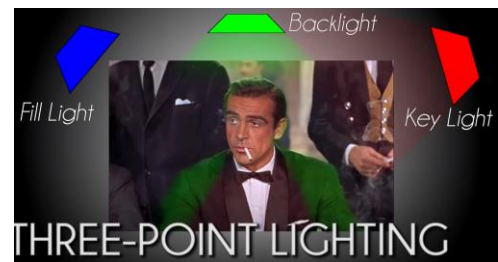
Sound
Sound is used to enhance media production and is divided into diegetic sound and non-diegetic sound.

Diegetic sound: Diegetic sound is sound that the characters and the audience can hear. It can also be called "literal" or "actual sound". Diegetic sound includes people talking to each other or their voices in general. Sounds made by objects in the story like a car engine or brakes squealing in a car chase. Source music if the characters are playing in a band for example, background sounds like a dog barking or clink of plates being washed or music coming from devices like a radio or ipod.

Non-diegetic sound: Non-diegetic sound comes from a source outside the story and can be heard by audience but not by characters in the story . So its source isn't visible on the screen and it isn't part of the action. It is also known as "non-literal" or "commentary sound". Examples would include a narrator, the Voice of God, a sound effect which may be added for dramatic tension, mood music or a film score. Non-diegetic sound helps create mood and atmosphere.

Editing: Editing is the process of selecting, organising, correcting and condensing audio and visual content in order to create a particular product. There are loads of editing techniques that can be used. These include transitioning between scenes such as wipe and dissolve, using montages, establishing shots, cross cutting and jump cuts to name a few. Editing helps the story make sense and to look and sound in a particular way.

Scripting: Scripting is writing out what characters are going to say and the directions of what is happening in the story.

Building a Scene: Building a scene is about considering what needs to go into the scene to make it authentic. Period pieces might include particular costumes and props. Location and backdrop is important. Establishing shots can be used.

Building a Story: Building a story is about getting to know characters and the time and place of the story over time. In media you are showing a story rather than telling a story so you build it up over the film or through the different episodes. In Doctor Who there are always little teasers throughout the episodes which build up into a story. Doctor Who also has a huge story built up as it has been on air for so long and its fans are very hard core in knowing about the 'Who-niverse'.
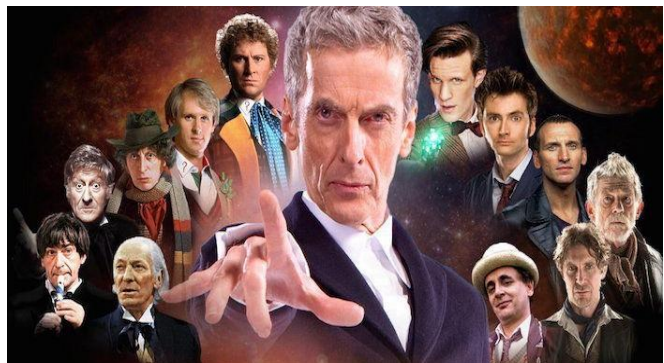
Audience Profiling
When producers create a show they need to think about who the target audience will be the specific product. Knowing your audience is important and can include

things like their age, gender, class, where they live, their interests, what their job is, what other programmes they like as well as lots of other things about them.

Social Status
A common way of profiling an audience is on demographics. This defines the adult population on what their job is and breaks audiences into 6 groups labelling them with a letter code to describe their social status and income. (See table).

A	Higher management, bankers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals
B	Middle management, teachers, creative and media people eg graphic designers etc
C1	Office supervisors, junior managers, nurses, specialist clerical staff - white collar
C2	Skilled manual workers, plumbers, builders - blue collar
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers
E	Unemployed, students, pensioners, casual workers

Lifestyle
Another way of profiling audiences are their current or aspirational lifestyle. Examples of different profiles might include students, people who like travelling, people who like to keep fit and healthy, people who are into technology, people who are very sociable or who would like to be popular. Different shows are aimed at different audiences.

Geographic
Geographic location is another way of profiling audiences. Some media products are regional aimed at a specific geographical audience. BBC do regional programmes like news, current affairs and comedies that appeal to local audiences. Other shows like Friends and Sponge Bob have a huge geographical audience and are popular all round the world.

Mode of Address
Mode of address is how a media product talks to its audience. Like for example the BBC news uses a formal mode of address as news is serious business. Anchors dress formally, use formal language and the production usually moves between the studio and location. Russell Howard's Good News is more informal, jokey and is to entertain as well as inform.

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