

Camera Angles and Movement of Sergio Leone: Tavern Scene, Once Upon a Time in the West

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Here are my notes and images for your reading pleasure, on the analysis of Sergio Leone's "tavern scene" in [Once upon a time in the west](#). You can find the original videos here:

- YouTube: <https://youtu.be/rHlkX8XTJRQ>
- Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/194199601>

This is a quintessential Sergio Leone scene – has all his signature techniques.

- Scene length: 13:35 minutes.
- Total number of shots: 152
- ASL (Average Shot Length): 5.36 seconds.

What's the major goal of this scene?

We were already introduced to Harmonica in the opening scene, and we know he's a killer. We also know he's the hero.

In this scene we are introduced to the second lead, Cheyenne, who is a dangerous outlaw in his own right. This scene is really a *flirtation* between these two dangerous men.

Both men had to develop a respect for each other and tacitly decide to become friends. This was the goal.

Production design

The attention to detail is phenomenal. Sergio Leone really researched the hell out of life in America before making his Westerns.

Notice the holes between the wooden rafters and pillars that allow for dappled light to fall wherever Leone wants to draw the eye:



Then you notice the various nooks and crannies people can hide in. You can see how Leone has strategically placed people in unlikely places:



This is one of his signature techniques, the layering of elements from foreground to background to create depth and richness in his compositions.

The three “acts”

In this scene we have a beginning, middle and end:

- Act One: Jill’s entry
- Act Two: Cheyenne is freed of his handcuffs
- Act Three: Information shared between Cheyenne and Harmonica

The musical theme or Leitmotif

Cheyenne’s entry is similar to Tuco’s entry in [The Good, Bad and the Ugly](#). In short, it’s an ugly entry. It is also accompanied by Cheyenne’s musical theme – a really important technique of Leone’s style. Each main character has a separate musical theme or leitmotif.

The music is simple enough to hum, but is strong enough to remember and drive an emotional response. It's NOT meant to take a backseat, but to influence your feelings.

Delivering information

Leone milks this technique. The objective is to give out information to the audience in the very last moment, for two reasons:

1. It is information the audience is anxiously curious (which Leone created in the first place!) to know.
2. It is information that will come as a delightful surprise!

An example of the latter is with Cheyenne's handcuffs. Leone could have revealed that in the very first shot, but he doesn't.

An example of the first are all the character reveals. They pop into frame or turn around to face us. Another example is Harmonica's music, which builds anxiety in us, until his face is finally revealed (again) to us.

Cut on the look

The minor characters look around, and this is extremely important. One way to look at these close

ups is as if they are fillers, shots to draw out the tension. On the other hand, the more important reason for these reaction shots is that they tell us how to feel.



And we are not aware of the manipulation. Should we be concerned, happy or what? The close ups tell us how to react, and sets up the events coming next.

Also, Leone uses the cut on the look to drive the story forward. Here's how it works:

- An actor is looking one way, then
- He looks another way
- We cut to what he is looking at

How Leone frames close ups

Leone chops off a little bit of the top or forehead while allowing space under the chin:



The “Jack in the box” entry

Many characters pop into the frame, from all sides. This is a signature technique of Leone’s to introduce his characters into a “situation”. He hardly uses it for the first reveal of a major character.

But it works great as an element of surprise. You’re watching the background, and suddenly this head pops into frame and now all your neurons are firing!

Shots used by Leone

Leone uses only four basic kinds of shots in the entire scene. When you come to think of it, it's nothing but the Hollywood system of

- Masters/Long shots
- Mid shots
- Close ups, and
- Over the shoulder shots (OTS)



Here's the percentage of shots used (approximately):

- Long shots: 33%
- Close ups: 38%
- OTS: 21%
- Mid shots: 8%

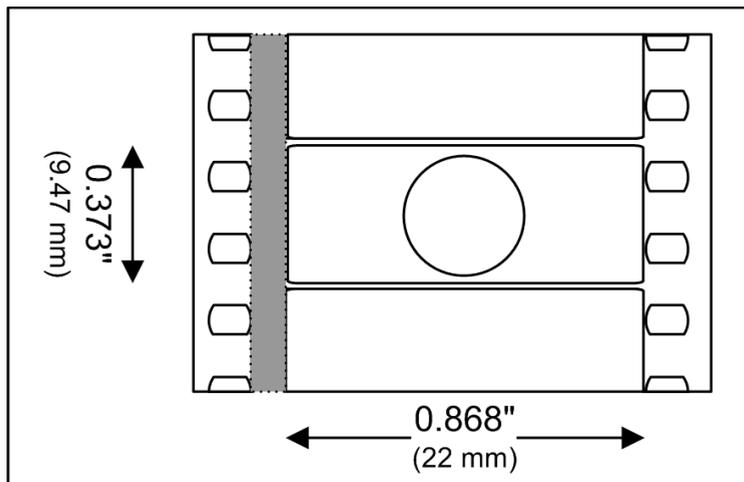
Leone's style is the use of extreme close ups cut jarringly with long shots. When viewed on a big screen the impact is tremendous.

He uses Hitchcock's advice on shot size – the most important thing is also the biggest thing in the shot.

Camera and format

Once upon a time in the West was shot on a Mitchell BNC in Techniscope. Like all of Leone's masterpieces, the audio was recorded completely in post. All ADR.

Techniscope is not an anamorphic format; you use spherical lenses to an aspect ratio of 2.33:1 that is then cropped to 2.39:1 for release:



It's 2-perf and the dimensions of the film size are 22mm x 9.47mm, which is similar to Super 35mm cropped to 2.39:1.

Techniscope is different from cinemascope in that it uses spherical lenses, so you won't see oval bokeh or blue lens flares. You also don't get distortions on faces, which is how Leone was able to get those extreme close ups. Leone mostly used zoom lenses, and wanted sharpness and a lot of depth of field. He might have used the Angenieux 25-250mm f/3.2, though I'm not sure. There are production images where multiple cameras with different lenses are shown, so I'm pretty sure they used primes as well.

Editing

Leone shot a lot of takes and was a perfectionist.

Camera angles are an important part of the editing process, since Leone already knows how it's going to be edited even before he shoots.

There is a visual richness in that he uses all kinds of shots always. Usually in this manner:

- Establishing shots and movements are in long shot
- Close ups when we are only concerned with the character's reaction or dialogue

- Over the shoulder shots when there's a confrontation: The barman's attempt at flirtation is a confrontation, and so are the other two OTS shots in the scene
- Mid shots for many reasons, some aesthetic (like the three shots at the end); others as closer establishing shots when a long shot would be too far away.

The pacing of the edit varies dramatically from long shots to a rapid volley of close ups or action shots. There are no rapid camera movements (everything's a pan/tilt, dolly or zoom). When there's need for suspense he draws out the shot for maximum impact.

It is often said Leone was more interested in the things people did before a fight than the actual fight itself. And the way Cheyenne deals with the man with the gun is a great example of this.

Even with editing he always tried to reveal new information with every shot. Here are some interesting numbers How many shots do each character have?

1. Harmonica - 39 shots,
2. Cheyenne - 65 shots. It's clear the scene was his vehicle.

3. The barman - 41 shots. He's the anchor – the only witness to the entire scene.
4. Sam - 13 shots, but he vanishes completely when we are in the right side of the tavern.

Other than Harmonica and Cheyenne, only Sam drinks in this tavern. I don't know if that's a coincidence, but it is certainly interesting.

Non-diegetic sounds

The word “diegesis” have confusing definitions. In this case, a diegetic sound is one that follows the action. E.g., a person picks up a gun and shoots, and you hear the shot. This is diegetic sound.

On the other hand, the person is deep in thought, and we hear a gunshot. That is non-diegetic sound.

The importance of this sound is you can add richness to your scene by introducing the sound of an object or event that adds to the production value – but you don't have the budget or time to actually shoot it. E.g., the scuffle before Cheyenne's entry is a full action event. Just by using non-diegetic sounds, Leone not only increased the mystery of it but also used it to increase our estimation of Cheyenne. That was some scrap!

Of course, just to make clear, in this movie Leone *could* have shot that action scene. It was his choice not to.

Camera movement

Leone uses a combination of dolly and zoom to move around the scene. The zooms are usually hidden along with movement.

In this close up of Cheyenne walking, he uses parallax between the foreground and background elements to create dynamism. Almost as if Cheyenne is a caged animal.

Other times Leone uses camera movement to just reframe the space the actors are in. An example of this is how Sam moves from between Jill and the barman in a longer three shot that comes closer and becomes another three shot.

Lighting

Lighting was definitely complex. Sergio Leone loves depth, so Tonino Delli Colli, the cinematographer has to pump in a lot of hard direct light to give these characters grit.

The lighting would have definitely kept everyone on their toes, because the fixtures were very close to wood. A simple top light system is used for the set.

When the men are wearing hats, the light moves to the side or the bottom. There's definitely also a lot of fill light.

For me the highlight of the cinematography is the use of shadows to frame the action, and to keep the tavern's secrets safe until it's time to reveal them.



I love this close up, because the guy on the right is in shadow and perfectly encapsulates Cheyenne's face, and Jill is on the left balancing the composition and light.

The flying lamp reveal has to be my favorite shot of this scene:



I'm not an expert, but I consider this scene, the tavern scene, one of the best examples of Leone's mastery over the cinematic medium.

Cast and crew

- Cheyenne - Jason Robards
- Jill - Claudia Cardinale
- Harmonica - Charles Bronson
- Barman - Lionel Stander
- Sam, the Coachman - Paolo Stoppa

Cinematography by Tonino Delli Colli
Directed by Sergio Leone

Interesting trivia! Story by

- Dario Argento, and
- Bernardo Bertolucci