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The Dialectic of Realism and Surrealism in Long Take Films

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Abstract: *In recent years, the use of long take images in films has sparked heated discussions. Taking Chinese-language films as an example, the long take shots in rookie director Bi Gan's "Kaili Blues" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night" are used to create dreamlike effects, while the various long take shots in films by renowned director Jia Zhangke are used to create and record reality. These different uses of long take shots have made the "ontology" of the shot uncertain, and different uses of long take shots have different effects, even producing a great sense of opposition. This article will discuss the history, application methods, and dialectic of long take shots from the perspective of film history.*

Keywords: *film history, long take, author's film, film theory, New Cinema Studies*

1. Introduction

The true allure of cinema resides in its capacity to capture reality and infuse emotions into narratives. Nonetheless, as filmmaking techniques evolve, movies inevitably deviate from strict realism. The introduction of montage has fragmented the essence of long takes, creating a dichotomy between "truth" and artifice. However, the utilization of long takes does not preclude the integration of montage; certain films adeptly intertwine the two. Furthermore, the progression of long takes must seek commonalities while embracing their distinctiveness. The visual impact of long takes in art-house cinema enhances the viewing experience and garners recognition at esteemed film festivals. Throughout the history of cinema, the evolution of long takes has been a process of amalgamation and assimilation, foreshadowing a promising future in which new forms of long takes will continue to shape the exploration of filmmaking.

Therefore, in the realm of cinematography featuring long takes, the dialectic between realism and surrealism becomes the focal point of our exploration. Through this dialectical viewpoint, we aspire to provide intellectual support for the future development of long take filmmaking. As elucidated within this essay, long takes are not mere reproductions of reality, but rather conduits of emotions and a resonance between the audience and the cinematic realm. With elegant imagery, intricate compositions, and unforgettable narratives merging harmoniously, the future of long takes will propel the exploration of cinematic art, offering audiences deeper and more exhilarating viewing experiences.

2. Manuscript Preparation

2.1 Definition of Long Take

What exactly is a long take? Currently, there exists no unequivocal definition for this particular term. While some argue that a shot surpassing the ten-second mark can be categorized as a long take, others beg to differ, asserting that ten seconds is too brief and that only shots lasting over a minute should warrant this classification. However, what if a film (or image) is merely ten seconds in duration? Does this single shot encompass the entirety of the film (or image) and thus qualify as a long take? Consequently, it can be deduced that the length of a shot should not solely be determined by its duration, but rather by its very essence.

The conceptual foundation of the long take is believed to have stemmed from the views of renowned French film critic André Bazin, wherein he placed great emphasis on cinema as a form of "realistic art." This emphasis centers on the medium's ability to capture and present reality itself. Accordingly, the long

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take often involves employing a camera to capture as much as feasible within a specific timeframe and spatial range. To achieve this, deep-focus lenses are frequently utilized, enabling the seamless continuity of time and space, all while accentuating the visual clarity of the foreground and background.[1]

As Bazin eloquently articulated in his appraisal of Nanook of the North, the pioneering documentary acknowledged in the annals of film history: "Within the renowned sequence, wherein the hunter, the ice hole, and the seal coexist harmoniously within the frame, Flaherty, owing to the implicit temporal connotations of 'montage,' finds himself compelled to illuminate the backdrop of anticipation... The narrative technique employed within the realms of realism aesthetics seeks to elucidate the inherent interconnectedness of events."[2]

From this elucidation, one can discern Bazin's interpretation of the long take as "capturing reality in an unfragmented manner, devoid of montage, through a seamless and uninterrupted sequence of shots."

Nevertheless, the esteemed scholar of Chinese cinema, Zhou Chuanji, presents an alternative perspective. He posits that "the very essence of film lies in its ability to capture the movement of light and sound waves...Thus, movement serves as the fundamental element of film. In essence, the invention of film and television can be seen as a form of bionics, a means to emulate the functions of human eyes and ears, without which the replication of light and sound waves would remain imperceptible. Such inventions authentically mimic the primary structural characteristics of the human eye (and subsequently, the human ear): lenses, microphones, albeit with certain variations... We may assert that film is a contraption designed to institute illusions of motion; it fabricates genuine illusions, but not reality itself. This is achieved through the intermittent 1/24-second progression of light and shadow, creating an appearance of motion. In actuality, it is common knowledge that there is no movement occurring on the screen; each frame remains static. The perception of movement emerges as the audience discerns the ever-changing images as representations of the same object being photographed. The omitted portion between two frames is mentally compensated by the viewers, relying on their accumulated life experiences. Hence, it becomes evident that the visual imagery captured on the screen does not conclude within its confines, but rather finds completion within the minds of the audience (as a psychological process)."[3]

In accordance with Zhou Chuanji's viewpoint, the bedrock of film language resides in the realm of illusion, an extraordinary phenomenon devised by the human eye. Consequently, the long take, too, falls under the purview of this captivating illusion.

Consequently, these divergent perspectives have given rise to a schism in the theoretical delineation of the long take. In truth, throughout history, filmmakers have employed the long take in diverse manners, each unique in its execution and intention.

2.2 The use of authentic long shots

The official birth year of cinema is considered to be 1895, marked by the release of "La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon" and "L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat" by the Lumière brothers in France. These short films depicted the everyday lives of people during that time, showcasing a remarkable sense of realism. During this era, the concept of "montage," or editing, had yet to be developed, and thus a single continuous lens was typically employed. Consequently, this type of lens attribute can be referred to as a long shot. In fact, the majority of early films in cinematic history were characterized by long shots. Initially, the purpose of filmmaking was simply to document events or capture the thrill of this new medium's emergence, without a real emphasis on storytelling. Therefore, at that time, the long shot was primarily viewed as a means of recording reality. However, the landscape of cinema swiftly evolved. The Lumière brothers' film "L'arroseur arrosé" ("Watering the Gardener"), although still a long shot, showcases the emergence of narrative elements. In this film, we witness a gardener watering flowers in a garden with a hose. As he does so, a mischievous boy passes by and steps on the hose, halting the water flow. The gardener, perplexed, bends down to inspect the water pipe, and in that moment, the boy quickly moves away. As a result, the gardener is sprayed with water, while the boy beams with satisfaction. Enraged, the gardener chases and scolds the boy before resuming his gardening duties. Although this short film remains in the domain of long shots, we can clearly discern the presence of performance elements. The essence of the shot has transcended mere reality, beginning to evoke emotions and entertain its audience. In this particular film, the humorous essence begins to venture into the realm of "illusion."

In "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots" produced by Edison Studio in 1895, for the first time, the method of stopping and reshooting was used to simulate the execution scene of Queen Mary being

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headed by an owl, and the scene and consciousness of editing appeared for the first time. [4]

In 1902, American Edwin S. Porter first tried to use cross editing in his film "Life of an American Fireman",[5] in the realm of filmmaking, notable directors such as the "Magician" Georges Méliès and the "Father of American Film" D.W. Griffith revolutionized the audio-visual techniques used in movies, almost inventing an entire repertoire. However, as soon as the audience became aware of the emotive potential of montage, the prominence of long shots quickly diminished.

Why did this happen? Firstly, the art of editing helps circumvent certain technical challenges, particularly in capturing action scenes such as martial arts sequences. When shooting a scene with a fixed camera position and a long lens, unless it involves genuine combat or actors trained extensively in martial arts, the outcome often falls short of expectation. This could render the whole scene awkward, potentially reducing it to a mere farce. However, through swift and skillful montage editing, transitioning seamlessly from the whole to the intricacies of its parts and vice versa, a compelling audio-visual effect can be achieved. This not only elevates the film's artistic quality but also ensures a more secure return on the commercial investment. Consequently, with the advent of montage, long shots assumed the role of a niche element, reserved for artistic expression that truly embodies its essence.

Long shots find extensive usage in documentaries and art films due to their inherent authenticity. Wang Bing's "Tie Xi District" serves as a fitting example, commencing with a long shot featuring a car journeying from the urban to the industrial area, and a train slowly making its way towards its destination. Shot from a first-person perspective, with the camera mounted on the locomotive, viewers are immediately drawn in by the raw realism captured in the film's opening seconds. The long shot creates an experience akin to immersive virtual reality gaming. An intriguing phenomenon occurs in games when the human eye fixates on a moving image for an extended duration, culminating in an "illusionary effect." This concept of "illusion" differs from the deliberate artistic illusions crafted by directors. Scientific in nature, it stems from the human body's own sensory organs, while the visual composition in films, as described by Mr. Zhou Chuanji, consists of "illusions." However, in the case of long-shot imagery, where the creative intent lies in rendering a sense of heightened reality through induced illusions, we, as an audience, are engrossed in the experience. I prefer to term this as a "vertiginous sensation." Various camera angles, including fixed shots, provide a panoramic view of the dilapidated industrial zone in Shenyang, captivating us with its unadulterated beauty. Through the power of the long shot, we find ourselves laughing at the sparse words exchanged among the workers, experiencing a poignant sadness as they sing, and being deeply moved by the bond between father and son. All these emotions and connections are brought to life through the genuine impact offered by the long lens.

In the realm of art films, one cannot overlook the seminal work "I am Cuba", crafted by Soviet Georgian director Mikhail Kalatozov in 1964. This film holds a significant place in cinematic history, known for its abundant utilization of long shots and evocative editing techniques, accompanied by poetic lines of dialogue, ultimately resulting in what is often referred to as a "poetic film." As early as 1927, American director F.W. Murnau had pioneered classic poetic films like "Sunrise," yet "I am Cuba" achieved poetic effects by intertwining a compelling narrative, psychological montage editing, and masterful manipulation of light and shadow within the camera lens. Within this masterpiece, the film deliberately downplays the significance of the plot, instead, offering a rich tapestry of emotional layers, utilizing the coherency and authenticity of long shots and the intoxicating effect of prolonged observation to deliver a plot that exudes poetry and stirs deep emotions. Simultaneously, the film endeavours to retain a sense of tangible reality, anchoring its artistic aspirations within the realms of plausibility.This film is aided by the Soviet Union, in order to celebrate the victory of the Cuban Revolution, a film jointly produced by Mosfilm and the Cuban Art and Film Industry Council (ICAIC). [6] The film opens with a striking long shot of a field of reeds, accompanied by a narration that extols the magnificence of this land. As the camera glides along its course, our senses are awakened, evoking empathy and a profound connection. The Earth is symbolically likened to a nurturing mother, reflecting both the Cuban people's nostalgia and their deep love for their homeland. Subsequently, the storyline delves into the arrogance and corruption of capitalism, employing a remarkable complexity in the arrangement of long shots – it is pertinent to note that long shots do not remain static or unchanging. One might wonder if there are films that incorporate such intricate long shot sequences. Fortunately, such a film exists; for instance, "Empire" in 1965. While most long shots featured in the film are in motion, their movements are astoundingly intricate, bordering on the ostentatious. Notably, there is a scene wherein the film commences from the rooftop of a building, revealing the decadent lives of landlords and capitalists. The camera then descends from the rooftop, moving towards the edge of a pool and even submerges into the water, as if peering through the eyes of the audience. Through the captivating effect of vertigo, the viewers genuinely experience and develop an aversion towards these capitalists, effectively fulfilling the

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film's purpose of political propaganda. As the revolution unfolds, the composition of the long shot evolves. In our conventional visual comprehension, we expect movie frames to be stable and rectilinear without any obliqueness. However, as the parade crowds fill the sky and revolutionary propaganda papers blanket the atmosphere, the camera's viewfinder frame begins to tilt, resulting in a deliberately irregular composition. This audio-visual effect instills feelings of unease among the audience, effectively reflecting the turbulent psychological landscape of the era – the oppressive government has provoked public wrath, and its imminent downfall looms. Ultimately, the film reaches its crescendo through the power of the long shot, adeptly fulfilling both its political objectives and artistic expression. In this film, the director utilizes long shots not to induce a sense of illusory enchantment or mystique, but rather as a means to uphold authenticity. As the Communists themselves are atheists, the movie necessitates grounding in reality. From a documentary perspective, the film unfolds with careful precision, showcasing the director's mastery of the craft. However, it is through the collaboration with long shots that the film truly attains its remarkable success.

Indeed, there are films that seamlessly blend documentary realism with artistic craftsmanship. One notable example is the renowned work "Xiao Wu" by acclaimed Chinese director Jia Zhang-ke, a film that artfully weaves together a narrative rooted in realism with the deliberate utilization of long shots. It portrays the marginalized individuals who find themselves adrift, uncertain of their purpose or path. Time eludes them, offering no respite for contemplation, leaving them with no choice but to succumb to a life of crime. Throughout the movie, numerous scenes possess a distinctly documentary-like quality, as Jia Zhang-ke trains his camera on the quaint town of Fenyang in Shanxi, capturing every facet of its stark authenticity. Through the deliberate use of long shots, we fervently accompany the protagonist on his meandering journey. For instance, in the bathhouse scene, we witness Xiaowu undressing, his entire being laid bare before our eyes, a bold and audacious shot. He then ventures into the pool and begins to sing, the camera captures his profound sense of despair, his aimless actions mirroring a sudden outburst of aimless wandering. The camera becomes his companion, mirroring his quest to find the singer Hu Meimei. Upon hearing that she is at home, Xiaowu ventures there, and both sit on the bed. Meimei sings a song by Faye Wong, then known as Wang Jingwen, and as they share this poignant moment, the camera remains steadfast, without a single cut. In that frozen instant, the air feels still, as if trapped within a fleeting dream. Grounded in a palpable sense of reality, the audience becomes immersed in the protagonist's profoundest sense of despair and helplessness, reaching a climactic pinnacle in the film. The denouement possesses an ethereal quality, as Xiao Wu is apprehended for theft. Handcuffed on the side of a street, onlookers curiously observe him. This long shot alternates between Xiao Wu's subjective perspective and the subjective perspectives of the passersby. Through this interplay of perspectives, the emotional core of the character reaches an explosive culmination. It is not merely a state of despair, but rather a profound journey that allows the audience to witness the complete transformation of a character, from the establishment of their identity to its ultimate destruction. Without the evocative power of long shots, this effect could not be achieved. Jia Zhang-ke's subsequent films often employ similar long shot techniques, exemplified by the indoor scene in "Ash is Purest White," wherein Qiaoqiao and Binbin meet once again.

Undoubtedly, the authenticity conveyed through long shots offers a remarkable means of expression for documentaries and films that encapsulate the essence of their respective eras. However, as with all things, there are multiple sides to consider. As the medium of cinema continues to evolve, a cohort of visionary filmmakers have harnessed the enchanting potential of the long shot to craft a series of truly mesmerizing films imbued with a touch of magic.

2.3 The Surreal Significance of Long Shots

The long shot, as the earliest manifestation of filmmaking, embodied a sense of truth and authenticity, devoid of any semblance of deceit. From an artistic standpoint, it also elicited a sense of "illusion," captivating the viewer through the mesmerizing effect brought about by prolonged fixation on the screen. Recognizing this unique quality, several auteurs renowned for their Author Films skillfully leverage the power of long shots to convey a greater depth of meaning within their cinematic works.

Let us begin by examining the film "Touch of Evil," directed by the renowned American filmmaker Orson Welles in 1958. Welles, an illustrious figure in the world of cinema, helms feature films that, while occasionally drawing inspiration from real events, ultimately remain fictional narratives crafted to engage and captivate audiences. As such, when a feature film director employs long shots as a storytelling device, it may deviate from the strict definition of "authenticity."

In the opening moments of the film, Welles employs a profound long shot lasting over three minutes,

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meticulously choreographing the sequence with multiple shifts in visual focus. It commences by presenting a man ominously clutching a time bomb, accompanied by the tension-evoking audio backdrop of a counting-down clock—a nod to the suspense-filled "Bomb Theory" often associated with the esteemed American horror filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock. As the scene progresses, we witness the individual planting the bomb inside a car, which then springs to life as the camera ascends into the sky, navigating its way through the bustling cityscape. The film's soundscape abruptly transforms into a lively and vibrant ambiance, intertwined with the iconic sound of 1950s American jazz, fostering an atmosphere of relaxation and vivacity, all while harboring concealed malevolence.

The camera deftly weaves its way through vertical and horizontal movements, alternating between close-ups and panoramic shots. The initial encounter between the film's protagonists and the vehicle carrying the bomb takes place within the customs entry area—an inherently tense setting. This convergence of events within the frame heightens the suspense even further. Just as the protagonists are on the verge of a romantic embrace, the long shot abruptly concludes with the explosion of the car. A montage follows, transitioning into a handheld shot as the hero races towards the scene of the accident, accentuating a sense of instability and chaos. Orson Welles exhibits exceptional prowess in manipulating the language of audiovisual storytelling. Through the meticulous use of long shot sequencing, he initially guides us on a journey of investigation and exploration, only to subvert our expectations by skillfully altering the focal points and seamlessly integrating multiple narrative threads, thereby heightening the tension throughout the film.

If we were to isolate this particular scene and transform it into a standalone short film, its intensity and caliber would undoubtedly be exhilarating. Under Welles' directorial finesse, the long shot transcends its conventional role, becoming a multifaceted and profoundly meaningful device, elevating the overall illusionary quality of the film.

The long shots employed by the Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos exhibit an unparalleled level of sophistication. Films such as "Eternity and One Day" and "The Odyssey" , are characterized by expansive and uninterrupted long shots. Angelopoulos' mastery of this technique is such that the viewer is not consciously aware of the existence of these long shots. Here, we venture briefly into the realm of metaphysics. In the aforementioned films, the use of long shots is perceivable and presents a palpable "solidity" that may unsettle some viewers. Take, for instance, the intentional "staging" evident in the long shot of the film "1917," where the deliberate use of a Steadicam draws attention to the technique itself. In contrast, Angelopoulos integrates his long shots seamlessly with the emotional narrative. Their presence is wholly imperceptible. Angelopoulos' visuals encapsulate the distinct aesthetic sensibilities of European cinema. Each scene is enveloped in a mist, while the interplay of lighting and architectural colors, in collaboration with Angelopoulos, resembles an exquisite oil painting. Angelopoulos' films often revolve around the themes of loss and rediscovery. Through his work, one experiences the ebb and flow of emotions, the transience of time, and a profound exploration of the human soul. Of equal significance is Angelopoulos' penchant for incorporating surreal elements within the framework of his long shots. Yet, this surrealism does not rely on visual effects engendered by technological wizardry. Rather, it is an amalgamation of textual and visual artistry, skillfully woven together through the manipulation of lens and character arrangement. Angelopoulos harnesses the hypnotic capabilities of long shots to imbue his films with a sense of enchantment, exploiting the unique characteristics that the technique offers. Symbolism also assumes a substantial role in Angelopoulos' works. The still and contemplative adults in "Landscape in the Fog," the juxtaposition between a wedding, a deceased horse, and innocent children, and the metaphorical portrayal of a girl who loses her innocence through a brutal rape — all of these profound layers of meaning are intricately intertwined within the framework of Angelopoulos' long shots, taking the utilization of this technique to new heights.

As previously mentioned, the emerging Chinese director Bi Gan also exhibits skillful use of long shots. In his renowned film "Kaili Blues" ,there is a mesmerizing 40-minute long take, and his later work "Long Day's Journey Into Night" features an ambitious 60-minute long shot following financial support. Bi Gan openly professes his admiration for the Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (Андрей Арсеньевич Тарковский), who is well-known for employing extensive long shots in his works. However, Tarkovsky's approach to long shots aligns more closely with Bi Gan's. They seamlessly integrate emotions within the shots, concealing them within the imagery. Tarkovsky's "Stalker" (Сталкер) exemplifies this poetic and divine quality throughout, even though he is not primarily considered a long shot filmmaker due to the presence of fast-cut shots, such as the soldier scene in the first half of the film. Nevertheless, the second half features more long shots. It is worth noting that long shots possess a sense of "suffocation and anticipation," enabling the audience to become deeply immersed in the emotions portrayed. Bi Gan's creative method offers a slightly distinct perspective. While his long shots may

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appear somewhat "awkward" when compared to Tarkovsky's, it is understandable considering the inclusion of anti-shake special effects, a reasonable choice given the limitations of resources. As Bi Gan's second feature film showcases technical advancements, the long shots become more refined and complete, although some movement is still discernible. However, Bi Gan demonstrates notable innovation within the narrative realm. This may mark the first instance of a Chinese film director embracing elements of magical realism. Unlike the debut works of many new Chinese directors, which often explore social themes, Bi Gan expresses his personal thoughts and dreams, rendering his approach quite distinctive among his peers. He prioritizes self-expression without concerning himself with external factors. Born in 1989, this aspect could symbolize a new era of comprehensive self-reflection and personalized expression among Chinese directors. With an increasing number of audio-visual language films infused with individual styles, it comes as no surprise that Japanese film critics refer to Bi Gan as the leader of the "eighth generation of directors."

In "Kaili Blues," Bi Gan skillfully employs a captivating 40-minute long take to not only conclude the film's narrative within an autonomous closed loop, but also to establish evocative settings independent of the main story. This continuous shot evokes a wandering through Pingliang Village, reminiscent of a "Dangmai" expedition where the boundaries between past, present, and future coalesce. Simultaneously, a tapestry of fantastical imagery emerges, including people counting hats, barbershops glimpsing dolphins, and the enchanting rendition of "Little Jasmine" at the village entrance. The seamless integration of poetic narration and visual language in this scene reaches the zenith of magical expression.

In "Long Day's Journey Into Night," the movement within the long shot becomes more intricate, delving beyond earthly realms and traversing the expanse of the sky and depths of the earth. The inclusion of aerial camera shots adds a further layer of dimension to this exploration. "Unfinished Regret" complements and expands upon these themes, offering a rich expression of the extraordinary.

The utilization of the long shot represents a transformative turning point for the auteur-director, transcending the confines of reality and immersing the viewer in a realm imbued with surreal and enchanting qualities. The collision between these two distinct modes of expression within the long shot technique creates a vibrant and fiery fusion.

3. Conclusions

Contrast and Convergence Between Realism and Dreaminess——In essence, the implementation of the long shot yields diverse flavors for different directors, ultimately leading to a profound question: Is the long shot a portrayal of reality or an embodiment of the unreal? Perhaps, it is imperative to approach this inquiry with a dialectical perspective, recognizing that dualistic thinking does not suffice when examining cinematic matters.

At the beginning of the birth of the long shot, it was indeed for recording, because at that time, the narrative technique of montage had not yet been invented, so directors generally used the lens to record the social situation at that time, which was also the original function of the image.[7] However, the true enchantment of cinema lies in its ability to capture reality, enabling the infusion of emotions into the storytelling process. Consequently, films inevitably deviate from strict authenticity. With the advent of montage, the long shot was fragmented, as filmmakers could employ the art of editing to manipulate audio-visual elements and evoke emotional responses from the audience. Thus, the essence of the long shot became divided between the "real" and the fabricated, burdening its traditional role.

In truth, the utilization of long shots does not imply the exclusion of montage techniques. For instance, in "Beauty of History," the long-shot sequences are meticulously crafted, resembling a form of visual montage. Moreover, even if the editing points within long shots are perceptible, such as in "1917," it does not negate their qualification as legitimate long takes. The employment of long shots possesses a magical quality in the hands of certain directors, breathing new life into this technique. Furthermore, montage, in a broader sense, encompasses all aspects of shot sequencing and sound composition.

In truth, these two characteristics can harmoniously coexist. Take, for instance, the aforementioned film "I Am Cuba," which possesses both a documentary nature and a captivating artistic essence, imbued with an ethereal quality. Therefore, the future development of long-shot filmmaking in the course of history must seek commonalities while embracing its inherent distinctions, evolving hand in hand. This is because the utilization of long shots in feature films yields exceptional visual effects, often garnering recognition and accolades in the technical categories at various film festivals, elevating the cinematic experience to a heightened level.

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Observing the trajectory of film history, it becomes evident that the development of long shots has been a process of amalgamation and absorption, gradually merging together. Thus, regardless of whether long shots represent the "real" or the "dream," as long as filmmakers continue to employ them, the evolution of the long shot will undoubtedly assume newer forms in the future journey of cinematic exploration.

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