

Creating and Executing Concept Shots

Concept shots are larger than normal shots that generally require a bit more planning. They can involve 100s of extras and take days to shoot, but they really aren't dictated by length, size, scope, or anything else. In my mind, these are shots that simply stand out for their ability to tell a large part of the story and are different from simply **master** and **coverage** shots.

As a Steadicam operator who has been lucky enough to be involved in more than a few of these (when I was on ER, we would accomplish what most people would consider a concept shot on a daily basis), I have been able to reach a point where figuring them out, working out the kinks, and even in some cases designing them on my own, has become second nature. Basically, it's like anything else that's tough (learning to drive a stick shift, avoiding land wars in Asia) - do it long enough and often enough, and what seemed impossible becomes normal.

How it Begins

There is no specific way one begins with a concept shot but, generally speaking, it starts inside the mind of a director, or in some cases a DP, and our job as operators is to extract that information and turn it into a real-world scenario. When someone in one of these positions says, "Hey wouldn't I be cool if...?" start paying attention, because your job is about to get very interesting. Inside the director's mind, she doesn't need to consider how wide a hallway is or where the camera will go, or how we will miss a full wall of mirrors, or rather see it but not see ourselves, but we do because that's our job. So, like everything else in this industry, the first place we start is with story. How will this shot be used to tell/propel the story? Understand the script, understand the characters, understand camera movement and how it can be used to tell the story, and the rest begins to fall into place. What is the shot trying to say? What is the best tool that can be used to tell this story? Are the physics of what is being asked even possible and if they aren't, what is a good alternative that has not been thought of yet? The bottom line is our job is to take their vision, 'science the shit out of it' and offer up a real-world physical application as to how we can accomplish the essence of what is being described (or hopefully exactly what is being described) within the parameters of what we know to be possible as an operator (with a nod to lighting, sound, and every other department at the same time).

Prep

The interesting thing about a huge concept shot, even something like the [West Wing shot from 5 Votes Down](#), which covers a lot of distance, has multiple characters, multiple story points, multiple cues and a whole mess of issues to overcome, is that, as an operator, you approach it **exactly** the way you would a lockoff shot. The shots are more complicated,

but the process is the same. For starters I walk through the shot and figure out where will I be, where will the boom be, where will the 1st AC be, where will the grips be. Next, I generally look for the possible problems – is there a window or mirror that will be a reflection problem, is there a part of the set I can't see, is there a physical space that is going to be a problem, and one by one, I come up with various ideas on how to solve these issues that won't dramatically change (or hopefully change in any way) the shot that has been designed.

Once I've figured out how to conquer the problems that arise, I start to build on the shot and look for possible opportunities, all of which revolve around storytelling. The fire has been contained, now watch it grow while keeping it under control. How can I bridge different parts of the shot together in a seamless way? Is there a visual story point I can reveal in the background that will come back around later which just creates a more well thought out shot? If there is a mirror, can I hit it in just such a way as to see someone not in my shot who we will be seeing in a few minutes? For a good operator, these kinds of shots offer a myriad of opportunities, most of which are hidden in the details, but which end up creating a better way to tell the story.

And yes, you guessed it, when you are looking for these opportunities, it comes down to story. Know the story as well as you possibly can and these opportunities will present themselves. And remember, some of them may not even be glaringly obvious when accomplished but for that small handful of people who notice them, especially the director and the DP, it's proof positive that you are a valued member of the team, and it keeps your head in the game at the same time - so win-win! I can't tell you how many times I have come back to dock my Steadicam and a DP or a Director has been excited that I caught some piece of business in the background when in fact it's something I did specifically because I felt it would be of value. **Pro Tip:** It's always better to let them think they found that than point out that you did (ha).

Working with the Crew

Larger shots often require a lot more out of the crew and so they have to be heavily involved with the dance that happens in them. **Steadicam, cranes, gimbals, dolly shots** all require a tremendous amount of people, and, as an operator, you have to conduct this group as a single entity and think about/help out with everyone else's job. It goes without saying that when creating these shots, we need to consider the needs of the focus puller and the dolly grip/crane operator. But a good operator also pre-thinks for the sound department, what their issues might be, for the first AD (think cueing), background, and the second AD, even wardrobe (you realize that a certain character is going to get really wet when a gag happens because they will be so close to a fountain so you give a heads up to wardrobe). Mind you, this does not mean you are responsible for how they do their job, or that you are doing it for them, but, as an operator, we are often privy to information

about shots ahead of the rest of the train, and the more we can give people a heads-up on what their issues might be, the better prepared they can be. This is key to having a good team working together towards a common goal and, as an operator, I would expect no less from the rest of the team. A side benefit is that when you have their backs, they have yours. I can't tell you how many times I've run to the bathroom and come back to have the boom-op whisper in my ear that a light has been hung and it's going to throw a shadow when I walk through it.

Set Up and Rehearsal

This of course all varies depending on the show, the crew, the cast and so much more. The bottom line is the more time you have with the shot – in your head, on paper, in the real world – before committing it to film, the better it is going to come out, because you will have worked out the kinks. Sometimes this is possible and sometimes it isn't, so you get very good at fixing things on the fly. Some operators like to rehearse entire large shots over and over and some prefer to break them up into pieces so they can save their energy (if it's handheld, Steadicam, or gimbal work) or if on the dolly, saving your dolly grip! It really varies by situation and often, like with the West Wing shot, a simple walk through without camera will be enough so that your energy can be saved for when it's really needed. The key though is to not have any surprises on the day, (there will be) and if (when) they arise, be ready with your problem-solving skills to quickly reinterpret them as opportunities and use them to create a better shot. Remember, when the shot is done and in the can, that's the shot, not what was originally in someone's head, and if that serves the story and is essentially what the director asked for, you've done your job well.

Execution

Now it's time to commit the shot to celluloid (yes, I will never give up on the film analogies for the sake of digital... we make films, not digitals). You've done your homework, you've worked out the kinks, you've found all your opportunities, and now it's time to put the pedal to the metal. Let's assume take one works and you get through it. Great. Congrats. You've done your job well (if not, well, fix the problems). Give yourself a pat on the back and get to work because the *real* work has just started. Now that shot that has been in everyone's head is a reality and it's your job to keep polishing it. Personally, if I can, I like to take the time between takes to walk back through the shot physically (or, if that isn't possible, mentally) and find places for improvement. Is this something I can make better? If there is a place to create a better storytelling point, who needs to know besides me? Can an actor help out? Can a background person do something that helps? Do I need to let my focus puller or dolly grip know something specific I will be doing differently? The boom-op? The special FX person? For me it's always about shaping and shifting the shot to make it better, but anytime I change what I am going to see or do, I need to let the rest of the team know or else it puts them in a tough position. A

good team will adjust on the fly, will be glad to have the information and be part of the process. You may be controlling that camera but it's always best to remember that you are not the central character in this dance but a cog in the larger wheel. If any cog gets caught, the machine dies.

One final note. Concept shots don't have to be complicated. On the movie *St Vincent*, the director had a very specific complicated final shot for the movie and we were struggling with the physics of the location and how to pull it off. In talking it through, I mentioned that I didn't understand what the final shot was saying about the character. It turned out it was more about the *idea* of how the movie should end than part of the storytelling. I suggested a locked off camera on a sand bag and letting our actor, Bill Murray, just make up anything he wanted to do within the frame and running through one 400-foot mag of film so that it would run while the credits played. Since it wasn't hard to do, and not a lot of film, the director decided to give it a shot [and that is exactly what ends the film](#). No hardcore design, no moving parts, just a camera and a sandbag, and it's as much of a concept shot as any long walk and talk ever was.