Shot Analysis: Dissecting Wall-E

The Extreme Wide Shot

Now, you may not find the term 'extreme wide shot' in any film making books, but I think 'wide shot' has too many variables. Therefore I'm breaking up wide shots into 'extreme wide shot, 'long shot' and 'full shot' (you may not find that term in any book either).

They're all wide. They can all be used as establishing (or re-establishing) shots. You don't have to use all of them all the time. How wide you need to go will be determined by the story you're trying to tell.

It's all relative, and it will all be explained soon.

All of these 'wide shots' have one thing in common - they are answering the same question: "Where are we?"

This is the first question you generally want to answer for your audience. Now, I'm not saying a wide shot has to be the first shot. But it should be pretty darn close to first. Again, it depends on the story and if there is something you're trying to hide from the audience on purpose.

But I'm going to keep it pretty basic for these lessons. So I'm saying, give your audience a wide shot very close to the beginning.

Or in the case of Wall-E, the first five minutes of your film. That's right. Except for one sequence where we see Wall-E scooping up the garbage, almost all of the shots in the first five minutes are 'extreme wide shots'.
Why?

Because of the story they're trying to tell us. The shot tells the story and here's what these shots are telling us.

Above: "Space. Gotcha. We're in space. Space is big."

"Earth. Cool. This story is told on Earth."

"Big city. That's a big city alright. Lots and lots of big buildings. Must be tons of people living in that big city with all those big buildings. Pretty foggy too."


"Wait a minute. Those buildings look a little weird. Yes, there are some real buildings, but the others look all jagged. Like stacks upon stacks of…something. Why does it look so gloomy?"

"Wow. It looks like those 'buildings' are made from piles and piles of garbage. Look at them all!"

"It's piles of garbage alright. Oh look! Something's moving way down there. I'm going to go out on a limb and guess it's Wall-E because, you know, I saw the movie trailer and all."
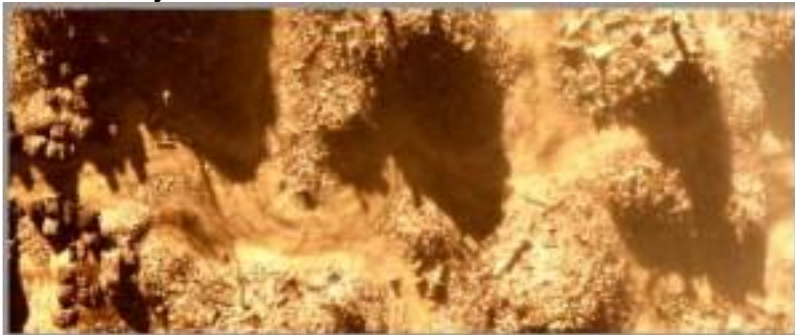
"This big city looks abandoned. He's driving around this big city and it doesn't look like there's anyone else here. Is there?"

"Ugh, big box store. This place got overrun with those big ass stores, right? Buy, buy, buy."

"Buy n Large. I get it. They own the gas stations? One big business owns them too, huh?"

"Holy moly! Looks like that one company took over the whole city! Think this happened just in this city?"

"Is there anyone else here? Wall-E keeps on driving along and there doesn't seem to be anyone else here. Looks like there's lots of other robots just like him all broken down."

"Nothing is moving. It looks like everything has stopped working, except Wall-E?"

"Abandoned. We saw the video screens and this big, vast place is totally abandoned except for the robots. Is Wall-E the last one?"

Get it?

This particular story has to tell us all these things. And the best way to achieve it, is with all of these 'extreme wide shots'.

It's a story with a 'big picture' to lay out for us. And they drive it home. Over and over. We have to get that.

And we do.

Now as I said, it's all relative. Would you need to show space, earth and all of these really wide shots of the city to tell a story about ants? I mean, that takes place on earth too doesn't it?

No. You don't.

Because we take that as a given. Unless aliens are coming down, it's probably useless to tell that story with shots of earth. The widest shot you may ever need for a story about insects is a park. And that's fine. It's all your story needs to establish that world.

But Wall-E is about earth. It's about the whole damn planet. And space.

So it's necessary.

All of those shots answer the question "where are we?" over and over again. Because we, as the audience, have to slowly realize the scope of it all. And that takes some time. It really eases us into the story.

Here's another great little sequence that shows us just how much work Wall-E has been doing over the years. All the other robots have conked out. But our little guy is still at it.

Seeing him start a brand new 'building' really shows us just how long he's been working cleaning up the place.

The use of dissolves between the shots and seeing the shadows change, lets us see a typical work day for him.

I'll leave you with this last 'extreme wide shot'. It comes after all the action of him scrambling to get away from the fire blast and the landing. We figured out it's a spaceship. And there are fairly wide shots before this of the ship's blasters.

But giving us this one very long shot gives us the big picture. We want to see the whole ship.

"Wow. It's big."

Don't be afraid of the really wide shots. You may not need to use as many as Wall-E did to tell your story. But use them to answer the question every audience member wants answered:

"Where are we?"

The Long Shot

So if the extreme wide shot answers the question, "where are we?", what does the long shot do?

While the long shot can answer that question too, I feel it's making more of a statement. That statement being:
"Oh, there they are."

If you look at the extreme wide shots, Wall-E is in some of those shots. And when you watch the movie you can see him.

But those shots aren't really establishing Wall-E himself. They are showing us the big picture.

With the long shot, you're not establishing the 'world' so much as establishing the character(s) in that world. So the audience finds themselves saying, "Oh, there they are."

This is a good thing. The audience always wants to know where everything and everybody is.

"Hey, there's Wall-E in his house. Look at all the stuff he has."

"Oh look, there he is at the base of the spaceship."

"There's Eve stretching out her arms and flying around."

"Whoa! Eve just shot at Wall-E!!"

"There's Eve searching and searching."

"Oh, there's Wall-E watching Eve through the tire."

Is this an extreme wide shot of Eve? Or a long shot of the ship exploding?

I choose ship exploding. This shot is no longer about Eve, it's about the ship. So this is a long shot of the ship.

This one too. Is this a close-up of the shelf? Or a long shot of the cockroach inside the Twinkie? In Wall-E's world, it's a close-up, but in the cockroach's, it's a long shot. I choose long shot for this one because at this moment, it's all about the little cockroach.

"There he is, inside the Twinkie!"

"Look, Wall-E has brought the 'sleeping Eve' outside."

"Aww, Wall-E is protecting 'sleeping Eve' from the rain."

"And he's taken her on a sludgy boat ride. Isn't that sweet?"

"Oh look, he's brought her to that bench to watch the sunset."

Yes, all my little quotes are super-obvious.
After the fact.

But when you're faced with the blank page, this is what you need to say to yourself. Then show that to the audience with the appropriate shot.

If we need to see the big picture, the world where it's taking place, we'll go with an extreme wide shot. When we need to see the characters and what they are doing, the long shot works great.

Too wide and we can't see the 'who'. Too close and we can't see the 'where'.

The long shot gives us both.

"Oh, there they are."

The Full Shot

So what's the difference between the full shot and the extreme wide shot and long shot? It's even closer.

How close? I define it as a full body shot of a character. There will be some space above and below them inside the frame. No part of them is cut off (unless they are behind an object).

The extreme wide shot was all about the environment. It told us the big picture of where this story is taking place. The long shot had the perfect balance between 'where' and 'who'. It gave us a closer look at who the story is about and where they are in their environment.

In the full shot, the environment (or the 'where') falls much more by the wayside. This shot is all about the 'who'. This shot wants us to look at our characters. It's the 'big picture' of just that character (or characters).

We should already know where they are by the time we get to a full shot. So this shot isn't about Wall-E inside his house. It's says:

"Watch me watch TV."

"Look at me recharging myself with the sun."

"Look, I'm spying on Eve."

I've split this up into three panels because it involves a camera move. It's Wall-E's P.O.V. (point of view) of Eve while he is spying on her. It gives a great reveal of Eve:

"Look, there's a floating pod of some kind."

"Oh wait, look! It's another robot."

You can see how this shot gives the character some breathing space. They have room to move or stretch or dance while it still keeps them as the main focus.

Here's an example of being hidden by an object, but I still consider it a full shot. If you removed the object, you would still see all of Wall-E.

"Yup, I'm still spying on her. I can't help myself."

And shots can be combined by putting someone in the foreground and someone in the background. This is a full shot of Wall-E but quite a long shot of Eve. We are aware of Eve, but our focus is really on Wall-E.

"Oh SHIT! Did you see that? Did you see how I almost got blasted to bits??"

"Look at me search and search with my cool scanner ray."

And the full shot has room for two characters sometimes. You still see the full bodies of both of them.

"You see me pointing my blaster at this little guy? Do ya?"

"Look what I found! Isn't it pretty?"

"Look at Eve's blue beam taking the plant away from Wall-E."

"Look at me. I'm cute too!"

As mentioned before, it's all relative. In Wall-E's world this would be an extreme close-up. In the cockroach's world, it's a full shot.

"Aw, shucks. Look at Wall-E holding 'sleeping Eve's' hand. He seems so happy."

You see how I never mention anything about where they are? Because for this shot is doesn't matter. It's all about the characters. We should already know where they are, so don't forget to use those wider shots to show us that.

But to draw our attention to them, get a little closer. Use those full shots to give us the 'big picture' of your characters.

And give them the attention they deserve to tell us their story.

"Look at me."

The Medium Shot

We're now at the medium shot. It is a very common, widely used and let's face it, pretty self-explanatory shot.

If a full shot is a full body shot of a character, then the medium shot is about a three-quarter to one-half shot of a character. Meaning you will have the full head in the shot and it will end anywhere between the ribs and below the butt. Or thereabouts.

There's actually not a lot to say about this shot. It is what it is. I consider it a 'work horse' shot. It has a million uses and is usually never a bad choice.

So what does this shot say?
"I'm gonna show you something."

It's when you need to get a little closer. A little more intimate with the character, but not too intimate.

The background is not important. It should have already been established and we know where we are. It's all about the character and when they are doing.

It's also great for when you don't need to see their feet. Which makes it an awesome 'cheat shot' for animation. Why animate a walk cycle if you don't need to? Just pan the background.
I love a good storyboarding cheat.

The medium shot is your trustworthy friend. It will never betray you and will always be there for you.

Let's see what these shots are going to tell us. Sometimes, it's not rocket science.

"I'm lifting my arm and reaching out."

It doesn't have to be dramatic or exciting. What is Eve going to show us?

"Watch me turn my head. I'm looking around."

"See the glow all over me from the rocketship taking off."

"Yes, I see my ship taking off. It's all good."

Changing your camera angles just adds to the usefulness of this shot. You still have room to add in some crucial background elements if you need them.

"See me peeking out. I'm not afraid, but cautious."

"Watch me light up this light bulb all by myself. Cool, huh?"

Yes, this one was a toss up. But just a little too much of Wall-E was cut off to be a full shot here. So I'm putting it in the 'medium shot' category.

"I'm holding these wires and going to try give Eve a jump start."

"I'm staring up at the sky. I'm listening to my music."

It's more involved with your character than the full shot but not as much as the close-up (next week).
The medium shot is a great 'staple shot'.

It's the dried pasta of shots. Keep it around, pull it out whenever you need it, add whatever you like to it and it will always feed you.

Pretty simple, but supremely useful.

"I'm gonna show you something."

The Close-Up:

The close-up is an 'information giver'. An 'emotion teller'. A 'look at this-er'.

But to really sum up what this shot says, it would be:
"This is important."

When framing a character, the close-up is usually the full head (some of the top can be cropped off), the neck and a certain amount of shoulder showing. The way NOT to frame a close-up is just a full head and no neck.

This gives you a 'head in a box' look and it ain't pretty.
You can crop closer, but that is an extreme close-up, which we'll go over in a minute.

This shot is all about the subject, be it character or object. It's telling us something. It's showing us something. Something important. Use it wisely.

Let's take a closer look at the close-up.

"Look, I collect stuff and put it in here."

When combined with camera movement and a focus change, this shot tells us what to look at.

"I'm staring at something off-camera."

"This is what I'm staring at. Look at that."

"I'm touching it gently. It's delicate."

"See this light. I can't grab it."

"I can be threatening. Don't mess with me."

"Hot!"

"I'm capable of emotion. Watch me laugh."

"See my wipers wipe away the dust. Cool, huh?"

"I see him, he sees me, you see us."

"I'm fixing the videotape."

"I'm watching my movie intently. I see them hold hands."

"This plant is causing me to react. What's happening?"

"Watch my eyes."

The close-up is much more intimate than the previous shots we've looked at.

We can smell the character.
We can get inside their head.

It's taking a step closer to someone and them whispering something to you.

It tells us the important stuff we need to know to understand the story.

If the audience needs to see something, grab them by the nose and drag them to see it with the close-up.

"This is important."

The Extreme Close-Up:

We know the Close-Up is very intimate. It's all about getting very up close and personal with your character or subject matter.

So you'd think with the Extreme Close-Up it would be super-duper-intimate, right?

Sometimes yes, and sometimes no.

It can be super intimate or it can just be a very useful information tool. It depends what you're showing and why. I find it to be much more of an information-teller myself. Because to me this shot says:
"You need to see this and ONLY this."

In this shot, nothing else matters but the subject matter. And it's usually going to be a particular part of that subject matter. Backgrounds are unimportant (or unrecognizable) in the Extreme Close-Up.

It's all about one particular thing. One particular part of your character. The eyes. A hand. The mouth.
This is when it can be a super-intimate shot.

Pair an Extreme Close-Up with a pair of eyes and a voice saying, "I love you." or of a mouth saying, "I hate you." and you've got yourself an intense moment there.

On the other hand, if you're showing an object, the Extreme Close-Up is a very effective information-giver. This is when you're really telling the audience, "You need to see this and ONLY this."

This is the one shot that can really save your butt in the 'don't lose your audience' department. Using this shot in the right place keeps your audience informed. It keeps them comfortable. They have all the information they need.

Let's take an even closer look at the Extreme Close-Up and what information the shot provides.

"Look, I press this button and to make the conveyor move."

"Hmm. Part spoon. Part fork. Which side?"

"Here's how I recharge."

"Ack! I squished you. Are you OK?"

"I'm pressing my little red record button."

"Ooo, shiny diamond ring in a little box."

"I'm mimicking the holding hands I see on my movie."

"See this cool little component."

"I'm reaching out. I won't hurt you."

"See this red light. See it? You better."

"I'm trying to hold Eve's hand like in the movie."

"Plant symbol equals REAL plant."

"I'm suddenly shutting down. You can see it by my eyes."

"This plant symbol is important. I've shut down and it's all that's left."

"You need to see this and ONLY this."

Wrap Up –
The Shot Tells the Story:

So let's analyze a full sequence and see what the shots are saying.

"Oh, there they are." Here we have a Long Shot. This is in the middle of montage-type sequence so it stays on these for a while.

It's showing Wall-E going through assorted objects in the junk pile. Lots of fun stuff going on here and nice little gags throughout.

"Oh, there they are." This shot was good for these because it's wide enough to see where he his and close enough to see Wall-E and his actions. The audience plays the observer. We're hiding out in the junk pile watching him.

"You need to see this and only this." Then, zoom! Right in for an Extreme Close-Up of the little box and the sparkling diamond ring. It's a nice break from the wider shots and you need to get this close to see the tiny object.

"I'm gonna show you something." Then it's on to the Medium Shot. Why? It's close enough so we still see the ring box and wide enough to see the upper body of Wall-E.

We need that room for when he tosses the ring and plays with the box. We don't need to go any wider.

"Look at me." It's all relative, remember? So this is a Full Shot on the cooler. It gives enough space around it for us to see the objects being thrown into it.

Too close and our eyes wouldn't catch them.

"Look at me." These could have been jump shots (because they're both Full Shots), but they work because they change the angle of the camera and the angle of the cooler. So it's cool.

"I'm gonna show you something." Now it gets a little closer for more tossing. Notice this 'cooler bit' is in three shots.

Three is the magic 'funny number'. He's been tossing many things into the cooler. The last one gets closer and drives it home. It makes it amusing.

"Look at me." Now we have a Full Shot of Wall-E. It serves to make us watch how precisely he places his blocks of trash row by row. We need to see his full body and his 'legs' for this.

"Look at me." Another Full Shot. It's important we see what he's holding, yet wide enough to get the action of the extinguisher going off. Works great.

"Oh, there they are." This Long Shot on the trash pile and the cooler gives lots of 'air' to see the extinguisher come flying in and out of shot.

It shows us he had no intention of getting it in the cooler.

"Where are we?" Finally! Now we have our Extreme Wide Shot. Like I said, there was one of these much earlier on. I just couldn't show it. It reminds us of 'where we are' like a good Extreme Wide Shot should.

"Oh, there they are." We've seen Wall-E working all day and now he gets to this refrigerator. We need the space to get the whole thing in because it's important.

"You need to see this and only this." Nice and close with an Extreme Close Up from inside the fridge. Very 'in our face'. Then the doors fall away to reveal the next shot.

"This is important." Which is a Close-Up of Wall-E. We see his eyes adjust and him stare off-screen. We get the sense something is up

"Oh, there they are." Now we're back wider. The timing of him staring and then approaching the fridge gets our curiosity up. What is in that fridge?

"This is important." Another Close-Up of Wall-E staring. Yes, this certainly feels important.

"You need to see this and only this." This shot changes from a Close-Up of Wall-E to an Extreme Close-Up of the plant. The change in focus makes it so, even though we still see him in the background. We really need to see this plant.

"Look at me." All relative again. Since nothing else enters the scene, I feel this is a Full Shot of the plant. Take it all in. We also need to be wide enough to see it's growing in a pile of earth.

"This is important." Another Close-Up. The plant is out of focus, so it's all about Wall-E and him staring. So many close shots definitely make us feel all of this is important.

"This is important." Wall-E scooping up the plant. At first we almost think he's going to crush it. But no. He's going to take it home, of course

.

"I'm gonna show you something." This shot was a toss up. It is close but because of the angle and Wall-E's arms, to me it feels like more like a Medium Shot. I guess "this is important" was getting redundant. But it still IS important. So yeah, it could be a Close-Up.

"This is important." Definitely important. Definitely a Close-Up. The gentle touch he gives the plant tells us so much about the human-ness of Wall-E. His instincts even tell him "this is important".

Remember: "The Shot Tells the Story."

Planning your shots is important and vital to the visual storytelling process. The type of shot you use should relate to what you want to show and tell the audience.