

# Haiku and Cinematic Technique

Allan Burns

-Frogpond 30.3

The vocabulary of cinematic technique can be used productively to analyze expressive effects in haiku. Both haiku and cinema are essentially imagistic, presenting images “objectively” without attempting to explain or interpret them. Because of this similarity, one can readily find in haiku fairly precise analogs for a number of cinematic techniques. Even though many haiku effects have been around much longer than cinema has, the language of cinema gives us a fresh and revealing way to talk about what happens in a haiku.

The two most fundamental cinematic techniques are mise-en-scène (“placing-in-the-scene”) and montage. The former signifies the composition of a single shot, including the arrangement of objects and camera movements. Montage is the opposite and complementary technique of cutting from one shot to the next.

Through its history, American haiku has tended to move from a style based on mise-en-scène to one based on montage. In the early years of the haiku movement, many poets, including such pioneers as Clement Hoyt, J. W. Hackett, and O. Mabson Southard, typically wrote “through-phrased” haiku fashioned as complete sentences that explore the details and implications of a single scene or “shot.”

Half of the minnows  
within this sunlit shallow  
are not really there.

(J. W. Hackett, *Haiku Poetry: Volume One*, 1968)

Splinters of moonlight  
glint on the broken windshield  
of the junkyard car  
(Eric Amann, *Cicada Voices*, 1983)

This technique can achieve remarkable effects, as the implied camera eye reveals more details of a scene (moonlight . . . broken windshield . . . junkyard) or that a first impression is illusory (half of the “minnows” are actually shadows of minnows). Today, however, this technique is largely out

of favor; instead, the overwhelming majority of contemporary haiku employ the montage technique of cutting from one image to another. Robert Spiess was perhaps among the first American haiku poets to utilize this technique—derived, of course, from Japanese haiku masters—consistently. In his classic collection *The Turtle's Ears* (1971), based on canoeing adventures in the Midwest, Spiess typically juxtaposes an image on shore with one on the water, often binding them together with complex sound patterns:

Lean-to of tin;  
a pintail on the river  
in the pelting rain

Because of the brevity of haiku, they can usually only manage a single cut and therefore cannot reproduce the effects of a cinematic montage sequence, involving many rapid cuts. It would take a more extended genre such as renku to approximate such effects. Haiku can, however, reproduce the effects of a variety of different types of expressive cinematic shots and cuts.

The establishing shot, for instance, is a device used to set the scene, in terms of location, time, and mood. In film, a famous landmark is sometimes used synecdochically to convey the necessary information about location succinctly: François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) opens with a shot of the Eiffel Tower, and Judy Irving's *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill* (2003) immediately presents the Golden Gate Bridge. Typically, such images appear in an extreme long shot, after which the camera can begin honing in on details, using a medium shot or a close-up. Haiku can function similarly, moving from an extreme long shot that situates the poem in spacetime to an extreme close-up that records a telling detail:

Sierra sunrise . . .  
pine needles sinking deeper  
in a patch of snow

(Christopher Herold, *A Path in the Garden*, 2000)

Often, because of the traditional importance of the kigo, haiku tend to emphasize a temporal setting without specifying a precise geographical location (a less important consideration in haiku than in film):

autumn twilight:  
the wreath on the door  
lifts in the wind(Nick Virgilio, *Selected Haiku*, 1988)

solstice dawn  
a flotilla of sea ducks  
turns eastward (Kirsty Karkow, *water poems*, 2005)

Another and rarer variant, creating a different sort of effect, is to cut from a specific detail to the establishing shot:

boulders  
just beneath the boat  
it's dawn  
(John Wills, *Reed Shadows*, 1987)

A match cut juxtaposes two images that share some striking similarity. David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) cuts from a lighted match being blown out to a desert sunrise, and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) cuts from a bone tossed into the air to a space station — encompassing in two images the entire history of human technology. Match cuts are common in haiku, although unlike in the film examples above haiku images will typically be understood to be visible from a single vantage point in spacetime:

pink sunset  
through each flamingo's stance  
another flamingo  
(an'ya, *haiku for a moonless night*, 2003) 130

summer stars  
the trumpet glinting  
from its case  
(Lenard D. Moore, *The Heron's Nest* 5.1, 2003)

steeping tea . . .  
I count the bags  
of raked leaves (Kirsty Karkow, *Modern Haiku* 36.3, 2005)

Note how sometimes, as in the first example above, the first member of the matched pair also functions as an establishing shot.

Alfred Hitchcock introduced the aural match cut in his thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935) by cutting from a woman's scream to a train whistle. This technique has been widely imitated by subsequent filmmakers and can also be used as the basis for a haiku:

glissandos  
rippling from the strings  
wind from the sea  
(Elizabeth Searle Lamb, *Across the Windharp*, 1999)

A point of view shot or a subjective shot occurs when the camera reveals the perspective of a specific individual, involving the viewer in that individual's perceptions and frame of mind. Haiku can use the same technique to express emotions ranging from anxiety:

131

exploring the cave . . .  
my son's flashlight beam  
disappears ahead  
(Lee Gurga, *Fresh Scent*, 1998)

camping alone one star then many  
(Jim Kacian, *Frogpond* 29.2, 2006)

A more radical form of a subjective shot is a flashback, used extensively in films such as Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964). Flashbacks are rare in haiku, but they can be used to convey a Proustian connection between an image and lost time:

cold moon —  
a moment of hesitation to wonder:  
years ago

(John Stevenson, *The Heron's Nest*, 8.4, 2005)

A cut similar to a subjective shot that proceeds from an individual directly to what the individual sees is known as eyeline matching:

I lay down  
all the heavy packages —  
autumn moon (Patricia Donegan, *Without Warning*, 1990)

What might be considered the opposite technique, cutting from an object to a person's response to it, is known as a reaction shot:

summer sunset the photographer takes a step back  
(Marcus Larsson, *Frogpond* 29.3, 2006)

Haiku frequently juxtapose images and sounds, mirroring cinematic counterpoint between image and soundtrack; but because of the linear nature of writing, the effect still comes across like a cut rather than a simultaneous cinematic presentation of image and sound:

heat lightning  
the screams  
of mating raccoons  
(Wally Swist, *The Silence Between Us*, 2005)

faint stars . . .  
the cabby speaks  
of home  
(Timothy Hawkes, *The Heron's Nest* 5.12, 2003)

Haiku can also combine an image and commentary, creating an effect analogous to voiceover narration in cinema:

snowy night  
sometimes you can't be  
quiet enough  
(John Stevenson, *quiet enough*, 2004)  
133

In the right hands, the counterpoint between image and statement can avoid redundancy and be used artfully, as in Terence Malick's film *Days of Heaven* (1978) or in Stevenson's haiku.

Some haiku create effects that can perhaps best be conceptualized not as cuts but as approximations of camera movements. A tilt occurs when the camera eye pivots on a vertical plane, moving either up:

rows of corn  
stretch to the horizon . . .  
sun on the thunderhead  
(Lee Gurga, *Fresh Scent*, 1998)

or down:

weathered bridge  
everything but the moon  
drifting downstream  
(Rick Tarquinio, *The Heron's Nest* 6.8, 2004)

The complementary motion of moving the camera along the horizontal plane is known as a pan. Its expressive uses range from showing something occurring next to something else:

flag-covered coffin:  
the shadow of the bugler  
slips into the grave  
(Nick Virgilio, *Selected Haiku*, 1988)

to revealing the full extent or trajectory of an object:

the broken harp string curving  
into sunlight  
(Elizabeth Searle Lamb, *Across the Windharp*, 1999)

A tracking shot occurs when the camera is moved forward, backward, or sideways. Nick Avis approximates such an effect in a single-line haiku that seems to move forward through a barren forest, coming to rest on a colorful contrasting image:

deep inside the faded wood a scarlet maple  
(*bending with the wind*, 1993)

In a zoom, an object is brought closer to view to reveal telling details:

the goose droppings spattered on spring grass full of spring grass  
(D. Claire Gallagher, *Modern Haiku*, 33.2)

It is also possible to zoom out from something, moving from a detail to a broader, more revealing perspective:

The white of her neck  
as she lifts her hair for me  
to undo her dress.  
(Bernard Lionel Einbond, *Haiku Magazine* 2.3, 1968)

A related technique is a rack focus, in which the focus shifts within a single stationary shot from one object to another, often redirecting a viewer's attention from something in the foreground to something in the background. John Wills approximates this effect in the following haiku:

keep out sign  
but the violets keep on

going  
(*Reed Shadows*, 1987)

A long take occurs when the point of view simply lingers on an image and records a slowly unfolding event in a single shot:

A wisp of spring cloud  
drifting apart from the rest . . .  
slowly evaporates  
(TomTico, *SpringMorningSun*, 1998)

the mirror fogs,  
a name written long ago  
faintly reappears  
(Rod Willmot, *Sayings for the Invisible*, 1988)

Haiku sometimes imitate even more complex cinematic effects, such as time-lapse photography, in which events recorded over a long period of time are compressed, making processes such as the blooming of a flower into rapid, dramatic events:

lily:  
out of the water . . .  
out of itself  
(Nick Virgilio, *Selected Haiku*, 1988)

winter moon  
taking all night to cross  
so small a pond (Ken Hurm, *Frogpond* 12.1, 1989)

Tracking shots, zooms, rack focus, long takes, and time-lapse effects bring us out of montage back to the realm of mise-en-scène, demonstrating the many possibilities inherent in this latter technique. Haiku conceptualized as utilizing tilts or pans would also belong in this category.

Some film directors are associated principally with montage (Sergei Eisenstein, Alain Resnais) and others with mise-en-scène (Max Ophüls, Kenji Mizoguchi); the truth, however, is that all cinema employs both techniques. Likewise, both occur in classic Japanese haiku. Consider, for



instance, these mise-en-scène haiku by Buson (translated by Takafumi Saito and William R. Nelson, *1,020 Haiku in Translation*, 2006)<sup>2</sup>:

Against the sunset  
Swallows  
Returning home.

Chisels of a stone mason  
Cooled  
In the clear spring water.

Although haiku and film are very different arts in many obvious and essential respects, the correspondence between certain cinematic and haiku techniques is striking.<sup>3</sup> I can't pretend to have exhausted all the possible parallels. My main point has been simply to demonstrate how the technical vocabulary of cinema can be used to analyze haiku effects with a fair degree of precision, allowing writers and readers to be even more acutely conscious of the manifold possibilities of haiku expression.

---

## Endnotes

1 The subject of haiku's influence on film is significant but beyond the scope of this article. The celebrated Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), for instance, spoke Japanese and used haiku as a model for his theories of montage.

2 Although these haiku do not have internal cuts, both end with the kireji (or cutting word) "kana," which according to William J. Higginson "indicates an author's wonder at the object, scene, or event" (*The Haiku Handbook*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985, p. 291).

3 Haiku is obviously more "democratic" than cinema, in that it requires only pen(cil) and paper, not expensive (and unwieldy) film equipment.